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Italian Folk Dancers Return to the Italian Center

The Italian Cultural Society would like to announce that as we prepare to open our cultural programs over the coming months, our Italian Folk dance troupes are already back in practice at the Center.

BALLIAMO! ADULT DANCE TROUPE:

Balliamo! adult folk dance troupe is *holding newcomer classes at 6PM on Wednesdays at the Italian Center.* They're also back to regular practice for upcoming performances scheduled for the coming year.

For information on their classes and practices or to schedule an event, contact Irene Brown at balliamodancers@comcast.net

THE BAMBINI DANCERS CHILDREN'S DANCE TROUPE:

The children's **Bambini** folk dance troupe is reorganizing after a year off. **They'll be holding dance practices at the Italian Center again and are looking for new dancers to join in.**

If you would like to have your child enroll in the Bambini dance program and help carry on the dance traditions of their Italian heritage contact Diana Quilici at email: *bellachicca44@yahoo.com*.

CLICK HERE TO WATCH BAMBINI CHILDREN'S FOLK DANCERS

If you have questions or would like information about the Italian Cultural Society or the Carmichael Italian Center please contact Executive Director Bill Cerruti by phone (916-482-5900) or email (italy1@surewest.net)

Or VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT *WWW.ITALIANCENTER.NET* FOR MORE INFORMATION.

Three Cal-Italians Worth Knowing

by Bob Masullo

You can't "get your kicks on Route 66" any more because, save for a few minor stretches, the famed highway no longer exists.

But one still can get *calci italiani* (Italian kicks) "when you take that California trip" by seeking out the works of a trio of remarkable artists -- *Beniamino Bufano (1890-1970)*, *Baldassare Forestiere (1879-1946)* and *Sabato Rodia (1879-1965)* -- that can be found in diverse parts of the Golden State.

All three had their origins in the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy) but did the bulk of their work -- and died -- in California, ironically, the only American state in which southern Italians and their descendants are outnumbered by Italics whose roots lie north of Rome.

Beniamino Bufano

Beniamino Bufano, the only one of the artists to formally study art, was born in San Felè, near Potenza in the *regione* of Basilicata, the arch of "The Boot," circa 1890 (the exact date is in dispute). He immigrated to New York as a child in 1902 and moved to San Francisco in his teens. There he created numerous monumental sculptures, the majority of which emphasize peace, saints and animals and are noted for their smooth, rounded shapes and their dramatic mediums -- ceramic, stone, and stainless steel.

Most can be found in public places in San Francisco and surrounding areas. Quite a few feature St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of San Francisco (and Italy), and a favorite of Bufano, a not-very-religious, animal-loving master of modern art.

Bufano, who died in San Francisco on Aug. 18, 1970, at (approximately) age 80, is remembered for his controversial, pacifist stands as well as his art. According to one story he showed his opposition to World War I in a dramatic fashion. Having accidentally cut off his right index finger -- "my trigger finger," he called it – Bufano sent it to President Woodrow Wilson along with a nasty note protesting the United States' entry in the war.

BELOW PHOTOS: The Artist, Beniamino Bufano (L) and his work, "St. Francis" (R)

Baldassare Forestiere

Baldassare Forestiere came to the United States when he was 21. Born on July 8, 1879, in Filari, an agricultural hamlet that no longer exists, in the *regione* of Sicilia (Sicily), near Messina, in the northeast corner of the island, he first spent a couple of years in New York digging its nascent subway system.

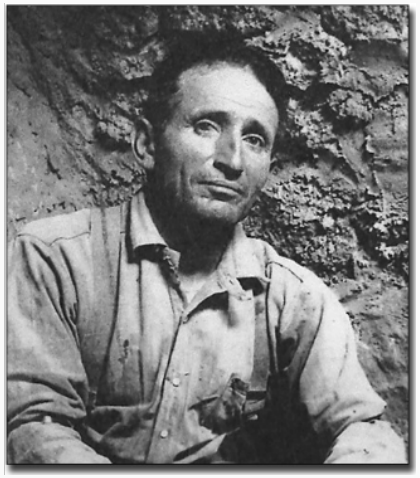
Then he moved to Fresno. On its periphery he bought 700 acres with the intention of growing citrus trees, possibly in a desire to outdo his father, a prosperous farmer in Sicily with whom he did not get along. Unfortunately, “Baldi," as his American friends called him (because they could not pronounce Baldassare, not because he lacked hair), found most of the land was hardpan. Hardpan is a rock-like soil better suited for tumbleweeds than oranges.

Not easily discouraged, he decided to build a European-style resort on the grounds. Since Fresno (like Sacramento) frequently tops 100 degrees during the summer and air conditioning was not an option when he began (circa 1906), he decided to build it underground where it naturally was cooler. Forestiere spent 40 years digging it mostly with basic tools. Memories of Italian catacombs and subway-building in New York provided his inspiration.

The strong-willed Sicilian did not live long enough to finish his dream but when he died, on Nov. 10, 1946, at age 67, he had completed some 90 rooms, courtyards and passage halls.

Today the Forestiere Underground Gardens, still owned by members of Forestiere’s extended family, is one of California's more interesting and unusual tourist attractions.

BELOW PHOTOS: The Artist, Baldassare Forestiere (L) and the Underground Gardens (R)



Sabato Rodia

Sabato Rodia was born on Feb. 12, 1879 (the same year as Forestiere), in Serino, near Napoli (Naples), in the *regione* of Campania. He came to America at age 15 and lived in Pennsylvania, Washington state, Texas and northern California, before settling in southern California -- in the Watts section of Los Angeles. There he said he wanted to do "something big."

And he did.

Over 33 years -- 1921 to 1954 -- he single-handedly built a series of towers and related structures, 17 in all. They are made of steel rebar and a mixture of concrete and wire mesh with the main parts covered in porcelain, tile, and glass scraps that he found in junkyards and along railroad tracks. He built the towers in the evenings, after working a full day as a tile mason, and on weekends and holidays. He never took a vacation from the towers during those years. Neighbors thought he was crazy, but loveable.

The “Watts Towers,” arguably the tallest structures in the world built by a single individual, are now enclosed in the Simon Rodia State Historic Park. The tallest of the towers is just inches under 100 feet in height.

The towers are considered simultaneous examples of outstanding outsider art, vernacular architecture and Italian-American naïve art. Noted architect–designer Buckminster Fuller said Rodia “ranks with the greatest builders and sculptors of all history.”

When Simon (or Sam), as Anglos called him, completed the towers in 1954 he gave them to a neighbor and moved to Martinez, in northern California, to be near relatives. He died there 11 years later, on July 17 1965, at age 86. He never went back to see his masterpiece, despite repeated invitations from art critics and historians.

Although the years ***Bufano, Forestiere and Rodia*** lived in California overlapped there is scant evidence that they ever met or even knew of one another. That's not surprising since Forestiere lived 200 miles south of Bufano, and Rodia lived 200 miles south of Forestiere.

Nevertheless, that "fine Italian hand" is evident in all their works. Italophiles, as well as anyone interested in unique – and beautiful -- art, should visit them.

When You Go...

BUFANO'S SCULPTURES are in many places in and near San Francisco, so you will have to do some travel planning first. I would strongly recommend visiting the Valencia Gardens Housing Project in the Mission District, where a large collection of his works majestically decorate the main courtyard. His “Peace” statue in the Fort Mason complex and his “St. Francis” statue at Fisherman’s Wharf also are in the “not to miss” category. But there are many, many more. Just Google “Benny Bufano” and you will get scores of ideas. Best of all, since they are in public places, there is no charge for visiting any of Bufano's art.

FORESTIERE'S UNDERGROUND GARDENS are at 5021 W. Shaw Ave., Fresno, two blocks east of Highway 99 (at the Shaw Avenue exit in the northwest corner of the city). General admission is $21. Visitors go through the gardens in small groups. **Reservations are mandatory.** Telephone: (559) 271-0734; **www.undergroundgardens.com .**

RODIA'S WATTS TOWERS (officially the "Watts Towers and Art Center in the Simon Rodia State Historic Park") are at 1761-1765 E. 107th Street, in south-central Los Angeles. In a sense they are always open for viewing and free because they are outdoors and tall. But if you want to get into the fenced-in grounds and get an up-close look at the works you must take a tour given only Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. General admission is $7. Tour guides walk visitors through the structures and share history and folklore of the towers. Telephone: (213) 847-4646; www.wattstowers.us.

BOB MASULLO is a retired newspaper journalist. For many years he was an arts and entertainment critic for The Sacramento Bee. A founding member of the Sacramento Italian Cultural Society, he lives in Sacramento with his wife, Eileen.

VIDEO RECIPE:
Foccaccia, A National Food of Italy
by Diana Quilici

FOCACCIA : A National Food of Italy

Focaccia is a rustic country flat bread and one of Italy's early national dishes. It comes in many variations but the classic is ***Focaccia all 'olio,*** drizzled with olive oil. But there are many varieties of toppings and they vary from region to region, city to city. Sometimes they are seasoned with rosemary, sage, onions and olives, rock salt, herbs of the countryside, cheese from herds that graze neighboring pastures or tomatoes, even seafood and nuts. They can be baked soft or crisp, thick or thin. In northern Italy focaccia plays a role as fast food and is served at cafes and bakeries.

It is one of the oldest and most popular foods of Liguria along with pesto and farinata. Focaccia is closely associated with the northern region of Liguria and is found in the many tiny towns of the Italian Riviera. Its true home is Genoa, capital of Liguria. which is to focaccia what Naples is to Pizza. The making of focacce in Liguria is considered an art and Ligurians love their Focaccia. *BUON APPETTITO!*

Focaccia is popular in Northern California; Italian immigrants from northern Italy, primarily from the area around Genoa in the region of Liguria, settled in large numbers in northern California beginning with the Gold Rush of the 1850's. These early bands of Genovesi established themselves in the fishing, fruit and vegetable, wine, lumbering, agricultural and banking industries in the early development of California. Some of the largest Ligurian Clubs in the world are located in northern California. They brought their recipes with them and dishes like polenta and focaccia are commonplace.

VIDEO RECIPE: Foccaccia
Presented by Diana Quilici

For more information about the Italian legacy in northern California, click the button below to read the article, "Nostra Storia...Finding the Mother Lode".

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT *WWW.ITALIANCENTER.NET* FOR MORE ARTICLES AND INFORMATION ABOUT ITALIAN HISTORY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.

Click to Read 'Nostra Storia...Finding The Mother Lode"

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