

Paris Mar 1 paper - draft
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February 25, 2006

Tragedy to triumph: Depicting migration in Italian art 1880-1920

Please note: Label information in bold and the accompanying single-spaced comments will appear on Power Point slides. This will not be read as part of the talk.

During the period 1880-1920, millions of Italians left their birth country for greater economic opportunities abroad. I am, in fact, a descendent of Italian migrants from this period and, like many other US citizens, was raised with strong, positive sense of Italian character (*italianità*).¹ I chose to metaphorically return to the old country through my scholarship in order to understand the place left behind and the identity carried to the new home country. In this talk, I examine two different approaches to visualizing emigration and consider the strategic roles of gender played in both approaches. I invite this gathering of gender and migration specialists to consider how those who stayed in Italy came to terms with those who left.

Many visual documents from the period -- paintings, sculptures, prints and photographs -- construct an iconic and well-received narrative of movement away from the Italian motherland that emphasized a feminized longing and loss. Even today, this visual myth remains viable. We often see works made and published at the turn of the last century employed to illustrate the time when many millions of residents left the new nation-state. One set of works about departure, Umberto Boccioni's 1911 *Stati d'animo* series, frequently illustrates the radical modernisms of Italian Futurism but these works never serve to represent the great Italian diaspora. In Boccioni's images, the representation of migration is complex, multi-layered and shifts from the general to the

personal. Emotional states are defined through masculine bodies rather a descriptive female figure. Movement is positive, dynamic, rapid and is not a one-way trip. Futurism called for a violent rupture with the past but long-term departure from Italy was not the solution. Umberto Boccioni took on thinking about departures and arrivals.

For the most part, artists rendered the migration narratives in *verismo sociale*, a figurative style that embraced clarity and emphasized sentimentality. *Verismo sociale* crossed media and the approach manifests itself in painting, sculpture, photography and mass media prints that reached a wide variety of viewers. In the period 1880-1900, the many players in end-of-the-century visual culture established a formulaic myth of migration that placed women – especially mothers and children – in the foreground to convey the pathos of deracination from the home soil. The formula contradicts the overwhelmingly male migration before 1900 when more than three-quarters of Italian immigrants were men and shies from representing the returning migrant. It does, however, establish the conventional and comfortable strategy of employing female figures to convey the emotional components, especially longing and loss.

Figure 1: Genoa, emigrants embarking on the “Scrivia.” Drawing from life by G. Amato & A. Della Valle. From *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 48, 1884

Figure 2: Egisto Ferroni, (1835-1912), *Torna il Babbo (Papa Returns)*, 1883, oil on canvas, 137 x 87 cm, Rome: Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna

In the first set of images (figures 1 & 2), presented in the early 1880s, the visuals for the migration myth had not yet been firmly established but the gender distinction is explicit. In the 1884 drawing from the popular periodical *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, the artistic team Amato and Della Valle depict a largely male crowd of emigrants dressed in clothing common to artisans and agricultural workers. In the middleground, men with

their baggage are funneled onto the waiting ship powered by steam and sail. Though the ship promises power and dynamism, it rests. The movement of migration is slow and ponderous; one figure arrives, many sit atop the worldly goods waiting with quiet resignation, then, in the distance, figures rise to form a mass in a glacial procession on to the ship. Moving away from the *terra firma*, that physical fact of the Italian *patria*, takes place through stages, roughly three as I have described, and the tenor of each stage suggested by the posture of bodies. Quiet gestures convey muffled emotion; two small female figures within the human tapestry do show gestures suggestive of impatience and distress but emotion does not drive this work.

On the other side of the screen and at an opposite pole, the painter Egisto Ferroni presents a piece of the migration story that vanishes from later depictions: the jubilant return. In the 1883 *Torna il Babbo*, a smiling, rosy, healthy young woman raises her bambini to witness Papa returning home; the sufficiently plump toddler raises a hand to wave. Consistently contextualized in Italian literature as a migration tale, this work informs the viewer about the returning father through the title but not through his presence. Ferroni employed an often-used and well-received strategy of allowing the viewer to imagine the unseen actors of a drama. In this work, that strategy also helps the artist avoid any visual description of emotion or success in the male figure. The health of the small family is sufficient to convey prosperity; the happiness and health of mother and children is, perhaps, Papa's success. Today's scholars document the female head of household managing the family, doing day-to-day decision-making and putting to use the money sent from abroad.ⁱⁱ Changes in the traditional female role have no place in this image; mother physically, bodily supports her children as she did when pregnant and

while breast-feeding but there is no evidence of all her other work and accomplishments. She remains safely within *status quo* conceptions of the female biological destiny.

Figure 3: DOMENICO GHIDONI (1860-1920), *Gli Emmigranti*, 1890-1, bronze, Public statue in the gardens on Corso Magento, Brescia, Italy. Photo Camanini. Exhibited in plaster in the 1891 Milan Triennale where it won two prizes: the Premio Tandartini (for artists under 35) and the Premio Umberto.

A powerful example of the departure narrative is a figurative sculpture by Domenico Ghidoni. Ghidoni used a reductive figural group in the manner of Ferroni's *Torna il Babbo*. Two female figures conveyed his migration tale in his well-received work, *The Emigrants*, which won two awards when exhibited in 1891. The exhibition publication described the works as mother and daughter sitting on a bench with all their worldly belongings looking back to the shore as the ship leaves the harbor. For a reviewer of the day, the mother's look conveyed sadness and longing as she gazes toward the receding shore of the country she will never see again. The adolescent child nods in an awkward sleep, exhausted by the ordeal, but also innocent of the difficulties ahead. Even in our time, art historian Vincenzo Vicario (1994) finds the mother's face etched with the anxiety of waiting, the anguish of being far from the things she loves and preoccupied with the uncertain future.

Companion examples from the 1891 Triennale:

Figure 4 Giovanni Segantini, *Le due madri* (*The Two Mothers*), Milan

Figure 5 Gaetano Previati, *Maternità* (*Motherhood*), Banco Popolare de Novara

In the major 1891 Triennale art exhibition in Milan, the *verismo sociale* of *The Emigrants* joined Segantini's *Le due madri* and Previati's *Maternità* (*Motherhood*) which introduced Divisionism in Italy, in establishing the importance of mother and child as

important carriers of social meaning. In the case of *The Emigrants* feminization of the migrant experience permitted an acceptable outlet for, one, the tragic aspects of deracination – pulling away from the *terra firma* and *patria* – and, two, for conveying the vulnerability of the migrant. With the two female figures, Ghidoni could successfully communicate layers of emotion that viewers would find discomfiting in male figures, even though, to state again, the majority of the Italian migrants in the 1880s & 1890s were male. Ghidoni also feminized the work to be a social critique of the failings of the new Italian nation (formed from 1861-1870). The artist expected to awaken in viewers at the 1891 exhibit, most of whom were in a position of comfort, an awareness of tragic national loss.

Figure 6: Widely reproduced photograph by Jacob Riis, producer of *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890. The home of an Italian immigrant working as a ragpicker, 1888.

Figure 7: Lewis W. Hine, an Italian family arriving in New York. Labeled “Italian family looking for lost baggage.”

To underline how this visual strategy of depicting an Italian woman migrant with family continued to successfully define the pathos of migration, I am showing two familiar and widely reproduced photographs from the period. Like Guidoni, these two well-know social reformer-photographers published the tragedy of migration by essentializing the story to mother and family with a few evocative props. Jacob Riis in 1888 took this photograph showing the home of an Italian immigrant working as a ragpicker. He shows the woman holding a swaddled infant in her arms in imitation of the Madonna and Child set before the dirt, the rolled & tied bundles, scruffy yet barren corner. Riis reinterpreted the image as a drawing for his book *How the Other Half Lives*,

published in 1890, enlarging the space around the figures to make them seem more vulnerable.

Lewis Hine actually photographed a situation very common to travelers today – looking for lost luggage – and wrote that notation on the back of the print. Yet, the family group with the supporting mother in the center are posed facing the camera conveying more that it is they who are lost and not the baggage stacked in the background.

The next series of images populate the migration narrative with a larger cast of characters. Women, especially with children, dominate the images even when photography is the medium. All named artists are male.

Figure 8: Angiolo Tommasi (1858-1923), *Gli emigranti (The Emigrants)*, 1895, oil on canvas, 265 x 335 cm.

In 1896, the Italian State purchased this painting; the work joined the collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. Shortly after, with growing success, Tommasi followed many Italian emigrants to Buenos Aires where he worked for three years before returning to Florence. He was a founder, with composer Puccini, fellow painter Raffaello Gambogi and other artists, of the “Club La Bohème.”

This large scale painting by Tommasi, exhibited in 1895 and purchased by the Italian State in 1896, serves as an excellent example of the most frequently chosen way to represent the Italian migration. The work represents a mass of people waiting to board that recalls the drawing published in 1884. Though many ships line up in the background the ship of departure has yet to pull up to the dock. We recognize in the foreground several dozen figures arrayed by the artist in a variety of postures representing attitudes of waiting. Women, of all ages, are heavily represented; indeed, women are our entry into the work. We can trace a tableau of the stages of female life.

Motherhood engages at least three women: pregnancy, nursing A young woman, head uncovered, earring visible, looks toward the crowd and leans back on her right hand.

She is the only female in the foreground, including the little girl, who does not draw her hands in towards her body. Most female hands are busy and occupied. The Madonna Lactans, toward the center of the picture, curls down to the baby she nurses. Closest to the viewer, a woman of middle age turns away from the crowd towards the viewer, head in hand, a weary troubled expression on her face. To the right nearly in isolation to the rest of the figures, an old woman seems to withdraw under her heavy veil and gazes at her clenched hands. Mirroring the old woman is a little girl also dressed in dark clothes, her head scarf tied back, hands clasped for contemplation; she stands apart but not separated as she falls into line with a family looking out towards the ships. After a visual pause, there is a young pregnant in proximity to man eating from a plate (and he shows no interest in sharing with her.) At the expectant mother's feet is a woman whose face is obscured by the head scarf and an older boy. Near them sits a woman in one of my favorite poses: she is involved in an activity that goes on between her legs.

Most of the men stand. One broad-shouldered fellow in the middle has his hat at a jaunty angle, coat hooked on his shoulder, feet apart; his large hands confidently held behind him are at the very center of the picture – a contrast to all the women curling in over their hands. Some in the background move baggage. Many chat, discuss. Others sleep. Energy and dynamism are absent from this scene.

Repeatedly, women and children have been placed centrally in the departure narrative as if the true tragedy was the great attrition of children, child-bearers and nurturers rather than men seeking better wages. The strategy of women and children first opened the door for sentiment; directors of still images tugged on heart-strings and

moisten eyes as directors of movies would do when creating “tear-jerkers.” The following works follow the pattern.

Figure 9 Raffaello Gambogi, *Gli emigranti (The Emigrants)*, 1895, oil on canvas, 150.5 x 197 cm.

In 1896 this painting won a prize and was donated by the artist to the Museo Civico Giovanni Fattori of Livorno. Gambogi, student of Fattori, became honorary professor of the Accademia di Belle Arti of Florence. Gambogi, like Tommasi, was a founder of “Club La Bohème.”

Figure 10: The odyssey of the emigrants. Cover of *L’Attualità*, no.20, 1896

Figures 11 & 12: Anonymous. Naples, emigrants waiting for embarkation, end of 19th C.

Figure 13: Alfred Stieglitz, *Steerage*, famously misread 1907 image of Italians in steerage leaving New York City to return to Europe. From *Camera Work*, no. 34. Photogravure.

The final work, a well-known Stieglitz photograph, is an interesting case. Since the migration story as departure FROM Italy has been so well-established, this work is frequently misread. Though the ship, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, was going to Europe rather than away, the image is consistently used to show Italians sailing from Italy to New York City. The photograph, for example, was reproduced to illustrate emigration from Italy in *Italia Moderna: Imaagini e storia di un’identità nazionale*, Vol. I: *Dall’unità al nuovo secolo*, Milan: Electa, 1982. Stieglitz described being riveted by the abstract elements of this tableau: ladders, drawbridge, a round straw hat, funnel, lines from suspenders, iron machinery. However, both the title, *Steerage*, and the interesting folds of white cloth guide the viewer right to the cluster of women and children who are separated from the mass of male gazes above.

Photographs could also be a different carrier of social meaning that circulated not in magazines nor in major art exhibitions but passed along kinship lines and paths of

friendship. The “souvenir” or remembering photograph conveyed a different migration story, that of the Italian man at work abroad. Face forward, feet squarely planted on the ground, sturdy men show themselves at work – real or play-acted.

Figure 14 Italian woodcutters & charcoal burners in the Mato Grosso in Brazil, around 1890

Figure 15 The three Nardini brothers pose in “gaucho” costume for a souvenir photo to be sent to Italy, 1900

Figure 16 Photograph labeled Pietro Raffaelli’s greengrocery in the United States, 1900

Figure 17 Photograph of my grandmother’s older brother in front of his barbershop which, according to family legend, he owned.

In contrast to the patient waiting, the resigned acceptance of the slow movement from shore to sea, these family photographs represented strength and pride, often the pride of ownership -- images of success passed across the ocean and down through family hands of family as markers of accomplishment.

In contrast to the previous representations, I bring into consideration a series of Futurist works. It is very hard for me to summarize the role of Italian Futurism in European and Western culture as I see Futurism not as monolithic but as rich with variations, contradictions, nuances and a movement that energized women as well as the well-known Futurist men. However, to visually encapsulate the headline media image of Futurism, I have chosen two works.

Figure 18 Giacomo Balla, *Boccioni’s Fist*, 1915, original tempera on paper, private collection.

Figure 19 Umberto Boccioni, *Futurist Evening*, caricature, 1911, pen and ink.

First, is the near abstraction created by the oldest of the original Futurist artists, Giacomo Balla who lived and worked in Rome. F.T. Marinetti, the founder of Futurism,

employed this image as a logo for his Futurist stationery. Balla made this bright, bold emblem of dynamic force as an interpretation of his former student and fellow Futurist Umberto Boccioni and named the work *Boccioni's Fist*. With some guidance, you can discover the human figure racing forward with outstretched fist: a symbol of pugnacious speed and energy. Boccioni penned the second image as a caricature of an infamous Futurist evening in Milan, a simultaneous riot of noise, declamations, insults and disorienting images. Waking up a somnambulant people was a prime goal of the group.

First, I show two versions of Boccioni's *Stati d'animo* series: one a set of finished drawings; the other, the finished paintings that traveled in exhibition to Paris, London, Berlin and elsewhere in 1912-1914. I'll pause to allow for a shift in viewing.

BOCCIONI'S FIRST VERSION, in finished drawings

Figure 20 Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Gli addii (States of Mind: The Farewells)*, 1911, charcoal & chalk on paper, 58.4 x 86.4 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

Figure 21: Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Quelli che vanno (States of Mind: Those Who Go)*, 1911, charcoal & chalk on paper, 58.4 x 86.4 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

Figure 22: Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Quelli che restano (States of Mind: Those Who Stay)*, 1911, charcoal & chalk on paper, 58.4 x 86.4 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

BOCCIONI'S SECOND VERSION, in finished oil paintings

Figure 23: Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Gli addii (States of Mind: The Farewells)*, 1911, oil on canvas, 70.8 cm x 96.2 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

Translation from the 1912 London catalogue:

1. LEAVE-TAKING: In the midst of the confusion of departure, the mingled concrete and abstract sensations are translated into force-lines and rhythms of quasi-musical harmony: Mark the undulating lines and chords made-up of the combination of figures and objects. The prominent elements, such as the number of the engine, its profile shown in the upper part of the picture, its wind-cutting fore-part in the center, symbolic of parting, indicate the features of the scene that remain indelibly impressed upon the mind.

Figure 24: Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Quelli che vanno (States of Mind: Those Who Go)*, 1911, oil on canvas, 70.8 cm x 96.2 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

Translation from the 1912 London catalogue:

2. THOSE WHO ARE GOING AWAY: Their state of mind is represented by the oblique lines on the left. The color indicates the sensation of loneliness, anguish, dazed confusion, which

is further illustrated by the faces carried away by the smoke and the violence of speed. One may also distinguish mangled telegraph posts and fragments of the landscape through which the train has passed.

Figure 25: Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo: Quelli che restano* (*States of Mind: Those Who Stay*), 1911, oil on canvas , 70.8 cm x 96.2 cm, NY: The Museum of Modern Art

Translation from the 1912 London catalogue:

3. THOSE WHO REMAIN BEHIND: The perpendicular lines indicate their depressed condition and their infinite sadness dragging everything down towards the earth. The mathematically spiritualized silhouettes render the distressing melancholy of the soul of those who are left behind.

Boccioni was overwhelmingly proud of the stunning effect he felt these works had on Parisian viewers. He boasted in a letter to his friend Nino Barbantini:

The entire battle took its character from my *States of Mind* which are being talked about in all the literary and artistic centers in Paris. The French are dumbfounded that in a little provincial city something could be said that leaves them speechless... these three states of mind have sufficed to point out a new path. (February 12, 1912 letter)ⁱⁱⁱ

Four years later and shortly before his accidental death falling from a horse, he again stated his confidence in the *Stati d'animo* trio of paintings in an article in *Gli Avvenimenti*.

The immediate impact of viewing these works is the dominance of line, a formal element, that suggests movement and mood – what Boccioni called *stati d'animo* form and *stati d'animo* color. In both versions, *Those Who Go* streak off away behind red beam of light of steam locomotive that pulls the train. What appears as anxiety, perhaps, even fright in the earlier drawing becomes multiple views of five sleeping heads rushed and rocked in a mechanical womb. Lonely, perhaps, but not alone, they chose speed for their journey.

Those Who Stay shows the least amount of change from the first version to the second. In the oil painting, the silhouettes of figures who stay have been “mathematically

spiritualized” with some Cubist-style fragmenting and dressed in turned around suits and overcoats. The lines falling like rain and the green-black colors, even the buildings that curve inward suggest the sadness and melancholy that previously was the realm of departing women migrants. These male bodies bear the burden of loss and longing.

The most profound change occurs in the lead work subtitled *The Farewells*. Though all of Boccioni’s *Stati d’animo* works merit closer attention, for our purpose today, I want to spend time with the two versions of *The Farewells*. The drawing shows curling, interlaced swirls of lines that encircle groups of figures. The figures experience a pulling apart that has always reminded me of horseshoe magnets and the force-lines created as they are pulled apart. Looking closely reveals generalized male and female heads. Men are distinguished mostly by hats: the soft felt hat of the *contadino*, the bowler, the fedora – all of which occur in departure images such as Tommasi’s *The Emigrants*. Women have sweeps of hair that curl into the undulating waves. Some groups forms loops with three sets of arms. Along the bottom single figures push off in the same direction as *Those Who Go*. Though sensation trumps storyline in this drawing, I believe Boccioni was fashioning a new interpretation of the many migrating Italians.

After a whirlwind tour of avant-garde art in Paris in the fall of 1911, Boccioni revised *The Farewells*. The most striking addition in the center of the image, and specifically noted in the 1912 catalogue, is the yellow-gold number of steam locomotive engine number 6943. I have spent a lot of time tracking down this engine which is the final engine of the 6900 group produced by the Breda locomotive factory in the years 1900-1906. By 1907, with the nationalization of the Italian railways into the Ferrovie Statali (began April 1905), the entire group was renumbered as the 6700 group. This

engine serves to locate the image in 1906; the features indelibly impressed on Boccioni's mind in that year was his travel abroad first to Paris then to Russia and finally a return to Italy. From his diaries, he writes about this period as one of breaking with his study with Balla in Rome to seek a more dynamic, challenging manner of art-making.

The multiple, fragmented images of locomotive engines cuts through the waves of color and smoke. The single red light that characterizes the front of the locomotive holds the center. On either side of the engine in sections of green and black, fragments of figures reveal themselves. On the viewer's left, a sequence of embracing figures can be read as mother and child. The most prominent one, at the end of the line, suggests an older boy breaking away from the maternal embrace. On the right hand side, to the far right, an older and younger figure, seemingly male, embrace. A much larger embracing couple is closer to the foreground. This embrace, perhaps with a pat on the back, is close, tight and not on the verge of breaking apart. The male-pattern baldness in both figures marks both as adult men.

Boccioni, in this painting, developed the metaphor of his coming of age as an artist. The journey was begun in 1906 by leaving student life in Rome, his family in Padua and embarking for foreign lands. Like engine number 6943, which was exhibited as a model of speed and Italian technology in Paris, Boccioni was poised to also show off Italian genius in Paris in the first months of 1912. Like the closely held two males figures, Boccioni embraced Futurism in 1910 and moved to adult bonding in a male dominated world. The poetic arrangement of fragmented images no longer clings to the sentimental, negative effects of Italian migration but separates out the transformative

power of international travel, especially for constructing an artist of the Italian avant-garde.

Another important point about the 6900 group of locomotive engines, they had an unusual design known as cab-forward with head-like form of the engineer's cabin at the very front and a second unit trailing behind. The resemblance to a mother cow and her baby earned all engines of this class the name "La Mucca" – the cow. The nurturing mother was transformed into the machine that propels the Futurist forward --- and can bring him rapidly back.

In the case of Boccioni and his *Stati d'animo* paintings, the travel continued as the Futurist artist and his art made a triumphant, and appropriately disruptive, tour of Europe. In the Futurist vision, the masculine, energized Italian artist leaves Italy not as a troubled migrant but as a bold and forward-moving Italian talent --- and he returns to the country of his birth as a conqueror and triumphant.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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ⁱ For example, in my classes at Syracuse University in the center of New York State, I can ask a lecture room of three hundred students “How many of you are Italian?” and a third or more of these third, fourth, fifth generation descendants of ancestors born in Italy will raise their hand. Colloquially, the more precise hyphenate terms, such as Italian-American, are not used in casual conversation.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Linda Reeder, *Widows in White: Migration and the Transformation of Rural Women, Sicily, 1880-1928*, University of Toronto Press, 2003; Caroline B. Bettrell, *Men Who Migrate, Women Who Wait: Population and History*, Princeton University, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation by Ester Coen, *Boccioni*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988, p.120.