



tradizioni

NEWSLETTER OF THE ITALIAN FOLK ART FEDERATION OF AMERICA

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Lionel Bottari and Blaise Panizzi send greetings for a blessed holiday season
in true Italian tradition ... *alla zampognari!*



AN ITALIAN CHRISTMAS

by Lionel Bottari, originally published in *Fra Noi*, Chicago, Illinois



Like so many things, Italians invented Christmas. That's right. Even though Christ was born in a little village in Israel, his birthday was not celebrated until 300 years later when Christianity became acceptable to our Roman forebears.

The Christians of that period had gone through a great deal of hard times, suffering numerous persecutions, and the fear was always present that another of the many Roman religions would win over the next emperor. The church fathers wisely began to incorporate the popular holidays of the time into their own religion, and December 25, the feast day of Mithras, was chosen as the day that the birth of Christ would be celebrated.

Symbolically, this time of the Winter Solstice, when the days began to get longer again, was a logical time to celebrate the birth of Christ and the beginning of a new era. They also realized that the celebration of the Saturnalia also took place at this time with its traditions of parties, gatherings of the extended families, elaborate lighting of candles, and exchanges of gifts.

No Italian Christmas is complete without the *presepio*, or Nativity scene, which can be seen in miniature and in full size. The grandest of them all is usually in Rome, at the Piazza Navona, an elongated oval which, in Roman times, had been a track for racing chariots. The railway workers typically construct this extravaganza, perhaps in atonement for all the times they overcharged travelers at another piazza, Santa Maria Novella.

The height of this art form was reached in Naples in the 18th century. There, Neapolitan artists created completely realistic scenes that spilled out from the little mangers at their centers into elaborate environs with street scenes, marching bands, and the inevitable *Zampognari*, or bagpipers.

The Nativity scene can be found everywhere, and it enjoys such popularity as a folk art that some businesses depend on it for their income. Nativity plays are acted out in many parts of Italy, and dramatic depictions of the birth of Christ are common in the churches at this time, complete with kings, shepherds, and sometimes even sheep.

In Rome, the beginning of the Christ-

mas holiday starts out with a bang. Four large muzzle-loading cannons on the Castel Sant'Angelo (Hadrian's Tomb) are fired off in all directions just at dusk on Christmas Eve, and the rush is on to find a seat for the feasting before the Midnight Mass.

Christmas could never have happened without the Christ Child who is depicted in many ways. In Rome, at the Church of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli, the *Santo Bambino*, a crowned and bejeweled wooden statue, is taken out during the Christmas Mass and ceremoniously placed in the small Nativity scene on a large stage in the church.

Then, a parade of Roman children ascends to the platform with him in order to recite or sing during the whole holiday season.



As early as November 15, the real shepherds, the *Zampognari*, start to show up in the major cities of Italy. These humble bagpipers have been around since Roman times and were once common in all of Italy, inspiring such Northerners as Antonio Vivaldi to lift their melodies into such famous pieces as his *Four Seasons*.

Today they are quite rare in Italy, as the drive to emulate the styles of America and Northern Europe has incorporated the pipers, in some minds, with the bad memories of poverty of the past. In their place, tapes and CDs of their music are being sold, and the latest is a videotape of *Zampognari* playing.

The most important Christmas carol is a gift of the bagpipers: *Tu Scendi dalle Stelle* (You Came Down from the Stars), which was composed during the 18th century by Alfonso Liguori, a priest who put the words to a *pastorale* of the *Zampognari*. The first verse is as follows:

*Tu scendi dalle stelle
O Re del Cielo.
E vieni in una grotta
Al freddo, al gelo, [bis]
O Bambino, mio Divino,
Io Ti vedo qui tremar.
O Dio Beato!
Ah! Quanto Ti costò
L'avermi amato. [bis]*

The translation is as follows: "You come down from the stars, O King of the skies, and arrive in a grotto, in the cold freezing. O Bambino, my Divine One, I see You trembling. Dear God! How much it cost You to have loved me."

For those of you who are interested, recordings of this and other Italian Christmas music are available in many major cities from businesses advertising "Italian records and tapes."

As usual, I saved the best for last. What would *Natale* be without the food? It isn't quite like the holiday in America, as Italian Christmas meals are usually meatless, and feasting begins at sundown on Christmas Eve.

Some will still observe the ancient custom of fasting all that day, while the ladies of the house go all out to prepare the evening meal. Fish is the preferred main course, and eel is one of the favorites, being prepared in dozens of different ways.

White wines and spumante are served. Naturally, the *primo e secondo* form is followed, with *antipasti*, soups or pasta, then the main course with fried vegetable, beans, and salad. Then come cheeses, fruits, sweets, and coffee. Once the body has been prepared, it's the soul's turn, so it's on to the church for Midnight Mass.

Christmas Day is not traditionally a day for giving in Italy, except for one great group of miracle workers - the *mamme* and the *nonne* (mothers and grandmothers). Once again, they out-do Santa Claus with their wonderful *tortellini in brodo*, other handmade soups and pastas, wonderful main courses and *cornuti*, cookies and other kinds of *biscotti*.

Some sweets are store-bought. The *panettone* is served, originally *il pane d'Antonio* (Anthony's bread), which a southern Italian baker invented in Milan centuries ago.

Other candied fruit, nut, and nougat goodies are also readily devoured, such as the Siense *panforte* and the pan-Italian *torrone*.

If you are unfamiliar with these, you owe it to yourself (and your ancestors) to get down to your Italian food store early and get some.

So, *buon appetito e buon Natale!*

PANETTONE

Preparing *panettone* from scratch can be a lengthy process, so it's true that most people these days purchase a commercial brand of their favorite Christmas breads at the local bakery. Also, there are probably as many recipes for *panettone* as there are Italian *nonne*! However, if you'd like to experience the fragrance of yeast and fruits scenting your own kitchen, here is one recipe for *panettone*. ~JSC

2 envelopes dry yeast
1/3 c lukewarm water
5 c flour
1 c butter, melted and
cooled to lukewarm
9 egg yolks
2/3 c orange-flower water **,
heated to lukewarm



2/3 c sugar
1/2 t salt
1 t vanilla
1 T honey
3/4 c seedless currants or raisins
3/4 c chopped glazed fruits
1 T butter
1 egg, beaten

Soften yeast in the lukewarm water. Blend this mixture into 1-1/4 c of the flour. Shape the dough into a ball and set it in a lightly buttered bowl. Cover bowl loosely and let dough rise in a warm place, free of drafts, for 30 minutes. Punch down the dough and work the remaining flour into it, along with the melted butter, egg yolks, orange-flower water, sugar, salt, vanilla, and honey. Steadily knead dough until it is very smooth, about 15 minutes. Spread dough into a square and sprinkle raisins and glazed fruits over the whole surface. Fold dough in half and half again. Knead the dough for five minutes to distribute the fruit evenly throughout. Shape dough into a ball, return it to the buttered bowl, and let it rise again, loosely covered, for 30 minutes. Punch down the dough, divide it into 3 equal pieces and form each into a ball. Place each in a lightly buttered round baking dish, 8" in diameter and 3" deep. Cover pans loosely and let dough rise until double in bulk, about 1 to 1-1/2 hours.

Preheat oven to 375°. Cut a cross in the top of each piece of risen dough and place 1 t of butter on each. Brush the tops with beaten egg. Set pans staggered (on 2 shelves if necessary, but not one directly over another) in the pre-heated oven and bake for 45 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center can be withdrawn clean. Remove loaves from pans and set them aside on racks to cool.

** NOTE: If orange-flower water is not available in your supermarket, try an Italian-foods specialty store, a health food store, or a pharmacy.

ABOUT LA BEFANA

by Alessandra Belloni

One of the most beautiful traditions that I remember growing up in Italy is La notte della Befana (The Night of the Epiphany) which falls on January 5th. On that night, my brother, sister and I (and all Italian children) used to look up into the sky to see if the Good Old Witch was flying across the sky on her broom, with her bag and stockings full of presents or coal. As much as we loved La Befana, we were afraid of her, thinking she would punish us if we had been bad, because she knew everything. On that night we could not sleep, and we listened for noises in the kitchen, since she used to come through the chimney, and leave gifts for the good children and coal for the bad ones. On the morning of January 6th we ran to the kitchen to find beautiful presents and, sometimes, coal. That day was for us much more important than Christmas Day, because it was full of magic in the air, created by the mystical and magical Good Old Witch. In fact, I loved the Befana so much, that I continued to believe in her until I was ten years old, and all my schoolmates were making fun of me. I regret the day that I stopped believing in the Befana because the magic was gone, and a tradition was lost in my name. Growing up was not so much fun after all.

It is an interesting fact that, among the Italians, the figure of Santa Claus is an old woman. Even though the celebration represents the Three Kings



bringing gifts to the Baby Jesus, this tradition is of pre-Christian and oriental origin. The Gnostics adopted this day used by the Egyptians to celebrate the winter solstice as the Day that Jesus saw the Light (the star that guided the three kings). The name Epiphania in Greek means apparition.

La Befana is always represented as an ugly but good witch with a broom, funny and tricky, since she gives coal to bad children. In some parts of Italy, at the end of her feast, she is symbolically burned (a puppet of the old witch is set on fire in the woods). La Befana is connected with the passage of one year to the next, and she symbolizes the survival of an archaic female figure, symbol of Mother Nature who comes to the end of her cycle, who gives gifts, like seeds,

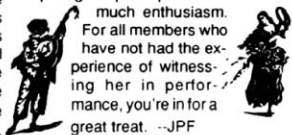
through which she will come back to life in the spring as young Mother Nature. When she is burned, she gives coal which is the energy of the earth that keeps us warm.

Like the moon, also a symbol of the Great Mother, she dies becoming black, to be reborn as the virgin crescent, the same way the Befana dies to be reborn as a young maiden.

i Giullari di Piazza

We are very happy to announce that Alessandra, director of *i Giullari di Piazza*, will be conducting workshops at our 1997 IFAFA conference to be held in Buffalo, NY. She will share her talents in the fields of dance and the proper method of playing the tambourine and other percussion instruments. Members who are familiar with Alessandra's work are anticipating her participation with much enthusiasm.

For all members who have not had the experience of witnessing her in performance, you're in for a great treat. ~JPF



QUANNO NASCETTE NINNO

A Sicilian Christmas Carol

Andante

Quan - no na-scet-te Nin - no a Bet-te-lem - me, E -
 ra not - te e pa - re - a mie - zo jour -
 no. Ma - je le stel - le lu-ste-re e bel - le, se ve -
 det - te-ro ac-cu - si. La chiù lu - cen - te Jet -
 te a chiam-mà li Ma - gi in O - ri - en - te

This little gem was brought to our attention six years ago. While playing the melody line, we noted the similarity to an old favorite, *Tu scendi dalle stelle*. These Christmas carols are to be played in a drone fashion which suggests bagpipe accompaniment. We therefore stress the importance of very emphatic accents on beats one and four in a measure. Try it, we guarantee you'll like it.

-JPF

The following English version, which can be sung to the same tune, was translated in 1904 by Dr. Theodore Baker.

When Christ our Lord
 was born at Bethlehem afar,
 Although 'twas night, there
 shone as bright as noon, a star,
 Never so brightly,
 never so whitely,
 Shone the stars as on that
 night! The brightest star went
 Away to call the Wise Men
 from the Orient.

Originally, the *ceppo* was truly a Yule log, which was chosen with great care. Months before Christmas, families would search the woods for the largest, heaviest log they could find, as we might search for the perfect Christmas tree.

On Christmas Eve, all the children of the family were gathered around the fireplace and blindfolded. Each child, beginning with the eldest, would recite a *sermone*, a verse of poetry which he or she had written for the Christ Child. When the children had finished, the blindfolds were removed and each child would find a pile of small gifts which the Christ Child had brought, in thanks for the *sermoni*. In some parts of Italy, the children would tap the *ceppo* with a stick and ask for the gifts they hoped to receive. Then the *ceppo* would be lit.

Legend said that the log must be kept burning from Christmas Eve until the Epiphany because the Virgin Mary would enter the homes of the humble at night while people sleep to warm her newborn baby before the blazing log.

Over the years, the *ceppo* has evolved into a decoration, just as people in northern Europe and in America will decorate with Christmas trees. The present-day *ceppo* is made up of three shelves, formed in the shape of a three-sided pyramid. The bottom, largest shelf usually displays a *presepio*, or manger scene, representing the Gift of God: his Son, Jesus. The second shelf holds fruits, herbs, nuts, and other symbols of the Gifts of the Earth. The uppermost shelf is filled with small presents, representing the Gifts of Man. On the point at the top of the pyramid rests a pineapple, the symbol of hospitality. At each point of the triangular shelves, a white candle is inserted and lit, three candles at each level, representing God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit: the Light of the World.

Symbols of Christmas in Italy: IL CEPPO



Ceppo built and displayed yearly by Anna Maria Fiori of Pittsburgh, PA.

MEET OUR ITALIAN FOLK TROUPES

We are very pleased to introduce this new segment of *Tradizioni*. You will soon be receiving a questionnaire that, once completed and returned, will give us an overall picture of your group. We intend to edit this information and return to you a finished article for your approval. This capsulated version of your group will then be included in a future issue of *Tradizioni*. Originally brainstormed by Jackie Capurro, our typesetter from San José, we think this portion of our publication will serve not only to acquaint groups with each other but will provide information about other groups that you could possibly draw from. It is important, however, that we all cooperate and return these letters to Jackie. We also decided that Jackie's group should be the first to be highlighted in order to demonstrate the tone that will be set in presenting our groups to the membership. --JPF

Il Quartiere Italiano, San Francisco Bay Area, California

Il Quartiere Italiano (IQ) was founded in 1972 at California State University, Hayward, as a college club under the guidance of Dr. Yole Correa-Zoli, our Italian professor. She encouraged us to encompass not only language, but also Italian music, cuisine, literature, folk culture, and dancing. We not only dramatized Italian plays on campus, but learned and performed a few folk dances introducing various regions of Italy for a San Francisco Italian television program hosted by Silvana Marsetti.

Our group has gone through many "incarnations." From a beginning of four couples we have had as many as 25 members and as few as four! During the "lean" times, we've persisted and we feel that every member through the years has come away with a feeling of camaraderie and a better understanding for, and appreciation of, our Italian heritage. Maria Alioto, one of our dancers, is currently conducting our latest recruiting drive.

Having separated from the college and incorporated as a non-profit educational corporation in the early 1980's, we are now self-governed and self-supporting. A board of directors, including President, Secretary and Treasurer, takes care of business while I serve as artistic director and choreographer. Fees are charged for performances, although we grant occasional benefit shows.

We currently consist of a dozen dancers. Having no separate children's group to pull from, three sons of members (Patrick Capurro-14, Nick Brigante-13, and Matthew Capurro-12) are currently dancing with the adult group. We decided if we couldn't find enough men to dance in the troupe, we'd have to grow our own!!

Having performed most of the dances from Elba Farabegoli Gurzau's book, *Folk Dance, Costumes and Customs of Italy*, we have also researched dances and costumes through correspondence and visits with folk troupes in Italy. They have sent us videotapes, films, and audiocassettes upon which much of the IQ repertoire has been built. In 1991, my family, and Linda Coda Brigante and her family, traveled to northern Italy and met with a folk troupe in Lecco on Lago di Como. Our current repertoire includes more than 35 dances representative of all but five of Italy's twenty regions.



Our troupe has performed throughout the state of California and in Nevada. We have had many odd adventures on the road, from "attacks" by wild frogs late at night outside a Sacramento hotel, to the need for one of our dancers to sleep in the hotel bathtub in Reno because he couldn't tolerate the snoring of his roommates! And one of our female dancers once danced right out of her underslip during a performance for the 50th Wedding Anniversary celebration of an older Italian couple, and the elderly gentleman honoree considered

Il Quartiere Italiano

that the highlight of the show!

One of our favorite experiences, however, has to be our appearance in a Hollywood movie that was filmed at a winery outside of San José. The film was about an Italian immigrant (Giancarlo Giannini) who, finally owning a piece of his own land in America at the turn of the century, was forced off the land and later murdered by a railroad baron (Dennis Hopper) who wanted to build tracks through the winery. The immigrant's son (Eric Roberts) later seeks vengeance.

You probably never saw the film, *Blood Red*. It previewed for about one week, but it died a quick death, possibly because the plot centered more on the son's blood-and-guts vengeance than on the evocative beauty of the father's dreams for his son. The movie did eventually come out on video, though, and we have a — very rare — copy!

Our assistance had been requested for a scene in the film during which Giannini's character receives his American citizenship, and lively Italian dancing ensues at a huge celebration at the winery. We choreographed the dancing and actually taught tarantella steps to the stars of the film and about 30 extras. Six of our dancers (Bill and Terry Ritelli, Jeannie Ingrassia, Paul Gamba, and my husband Joe and I) were also costumed to dance in the film and to sing a lovely Sicilian waltz tune, *Quannu ti vitti*, written by Carmine and Itala Coppola (parents of Francis Ford Coppola). We met Carmine and chatted with him between takes, and he gave us permission to use the song in our performances.

In the film, we danced with Giancarlo Giannini, Mary Stewart Masterson, Aldo Rey, and with an as-yet-undiscovered actress, the younger sister of the film's star, Eric — Julia Roberts! --JSC

BUONE FESTE NATALIZIE, DA "IL QUARTIERE ITALIANO"

Poesia Natività

La Notte di Natale

da Diego Valeri

Il Bimbo: Mamma, chi è che nella notte canta questo canto divino?

La Mamma: Caro, è una mamma poveretta e santa che culla il suo bambino.

Il Bimbo: Mamma, m'è parso di sentire un suono come di cennamella.

La Mamma: Sono i pastori, mio piccolo buono, che van dietro la stella.

Il Bimbo: Mamma, c'è un batter d'ali, un sussurrar di voci intorno ...

La Mamma: Son gli angeli discesi ad annunciare il benedetto giorno.

Il Bimbo: Mamma, il ciel si schiara e si colora come al levar del sole.

La Mamma: Splendono i cuor degli uomini: è l'aurora del giorno d'amore.

The Child: Mommy, who is it that sings this divine song in the night?

The Mom: Dear, it is a poor and holy mother who's rocking her child.

The Child: Mommy, I think I'm hearing a sound like bagpipes.

The Mom: It's the shepherds, my good little one, who follow the star.

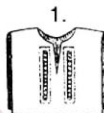
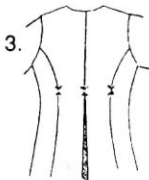
The Child: Mommy, there's a flapping of wings, a whisper of voices all around ...

The Mom: It's the angels, descending to announce the blessed day.

The Child: Mommy, the sky is clearing and coloring like the rising of the sun.

The Mom: The hearts of men are shining; it's the dawn of the day of love.

Regional Italian Folk Costumes



This is the first of a planned series of descriptions of folk costumes taken from the book, now out of print, Il Costume popolare in Italia, by Emma Calderini, published by Sperling & Kupfer, Milano. The book contains 200 color plates showing women's and men's costumes from each region of Italy. We plan to translate one or two descriptions in each issue of *Tradizioni*, as space permits, beginning, as the book does, in northern Italy and continuing south, then on to the islands of Sicilia and Sardegna. However, if you know the number of a specific colorplate, or would like a description of a costume from a particular city or region, please let us know and we'll try to honor requests as much as possible.

Unfortunately, the cost is prohibitive to display the costumes in color. So, if the name of the color appears [in brackets], it means that I have inserted the color that was used in the colorplate, and it may be that the color can be changed to the wearer's liking. However, when the original description includes the color of the item of clothing, it would be best to use that color.

We'll begin with a costume from Piemonte, the outfit of a country-woman from the town of Foppiano:

Short dickey [natural] ¹, without sleeves, that covers only the chest and the back, made of homespun linen and embroidered. Over this is worn a collar of [white] linen and lace, in tight folds. The skirt of the dress is of smooth black cloth, very full, attached to a vest, and gathered in back with tight folds. It is decorated at the bottom with three stripes of colored cloth [red, tan, & light blue] and multi-colored embroidery ². The top part is of white cloth edged with red wool. Apron of fancy [black] cotton, gathered in tight pleats, with bottom stripes like the skirt, and tied with ribbons of [multi-colored] striped cotton. The long jacket of fine black cloth has princess seams and an inverted pleat at the back ³. The coif, of coarse [white] linen, is embroidered and edged with bobbin lace. The hat is of black felt edged with violet velvet. Crocheted red woollen stockings. Black leather shoes.

--JSC

The purpose of the ITALIAN FOLK ART FEDERATION OF AMERICA (IFAFA) is to preserve and foster interest in Italian folk art; to research Italian folklore, traditions, customs, costumes, dances, songs, instruments, etc.; to act as a center for gathering, storing, and disseminating the information; and to bring together Italian folk performing groups and other interested individuals.

IFAFA is an outgrowth of the Italian Folk Art Project initiated at the Nationalities Service Center (NSC) of Philadelphia in 1977. With the assistance of NSC and the leadership and dedication of Cav. Elba Farabegoli Gurzau, IFAFA was incorporated May 7, 1979, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a non-profit cultural and educational organization.

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(send for application)

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