

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2020

Artistic Philanthropy and Women's Emancipation in Early Twentieth-Century Italy, in the Life and the Work of Romeyne Robert and Carolina Amari

Ruggero Ranieri

Romeyne Robert and Uguccione Sorbello Foundation, roger.ranieri@tiscali.it

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

Ranieri, Ruggero, "Artistic Philanthropy and Women's Emancipation in Early Twentieth-Century Italy, in the Life and the Work of Romeyne Robert and Carolina Amari" (2020). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1192.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1192>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Artistic Philanthropy and Women's Emancipation in Early Twentieth-Century Italy, in the Life and the Work of Romeyne Robert and Carolina Amari

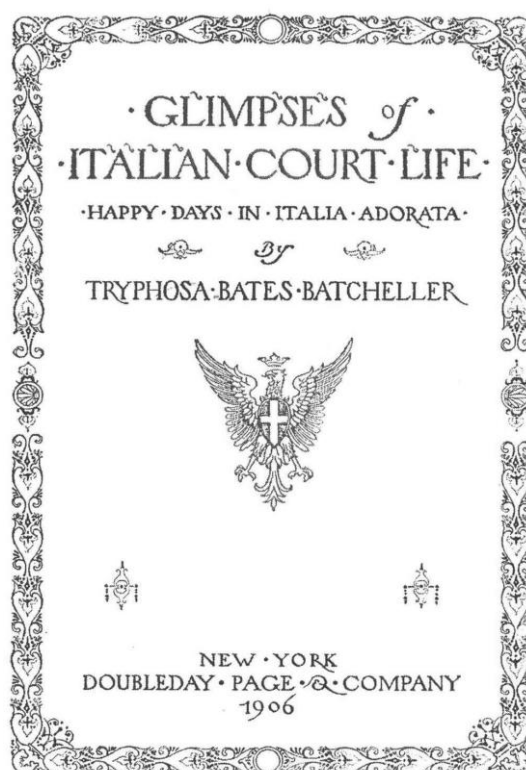
Ruggero Ranieri

roger.ranieri@fiscali.it

Tryphosa B. Bates Batcheller, a young American writer and socialite, visited the premises of Industrie Femminili Italiane in Rome in the winter of 1905. The creation of Industrie Femminili Italiane was the culmination of a process starting around 1870, soon after the unification of Italy, consisting in the revival of handicraft skills in embroidery, textile and lace making deeply embedded in the popular culture of a variety of Italian localities. It was fostered by the patronage and initiative of a number of enlightened upper class women, encouraged by members of the Royal family. It was, clearly, inspired by the taste for neo-medieval and neo-Renaissance motives sparked by the Arts and Crafts movement across Europe and the United States. Finally, it fitted with the new awareness of the issue of female emancipation, being designed to provide working women, often of peasant extraction, an avenue towards professional and personal advancement. All these threads: philanthropy, the revival of the decorative arts, women's emancipation are inextricably woven together.

Coming back to Mrs Bates Batcheller she commented on the leading role among the patrons of the Industrie Femminili Italiane of three American women: "Here are three of the most energetic workers of this society (the Countess Brazzà, the Marchesa De Viti de Marco, the Marchesa di Sorbello) all bearing long and noble Italian names ... who are an honour to womanhood, for the energy and ability they have shown in advancing the condition of women in the country which they have adopted as their own."¹

¹ Tryphosa B. Bates Batcheller, *Glimpses of Italian Court Life. Happy Days in Italia Adorata* (Delhi, India: Facsimile Publisher, 2013), quote 319 and more widely 299-320. On the Industrie Femminili Italiane see, among many others, Ivana Palomba, *L'arte ricamata. Uno strumento di emancipazione femminile nell'opera di Carolina Amari* (Maniago, Pordenone: Le arti tessili, s. d. [2008]), 17-64.



Title page of the volume by Triphosa Bates Batcheller

In fact the three ladies mentioned were only a few among the American women involved. Looking at the biography of my grandmother, Romeyne Robert (1877-1951), I will try here to speculate briefly on their particular contribution.²

Romeyne belonged to an upper middle class family from Germantown near Philadelphia. She was well educated and interested in music and the arts. Her New York friend and writer Natalie Smith Dana, in her autobiography, "Young in New York", published in 1963 describes their intellectual friendship in their years of growing up in an increasingly prosperous and enlightened East Coast America. Romeyne, travelling widely in Europe, particularly in Germany, France and Italy had come to speak four languages; she painted and had a musical talent. Apparently she was not interested in finding a suitable husband, rather in developing her own career. In fact, she did marry an Italian Marquis, meeting him, apparently by chance, at a theatre performance in Rome.³

² On the life and work of Romeyne Robert see: Ruggero Ranieri, "Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello imprenditrice americana e le origini della scuola di ricamo e di merletto" in *I talenti femminili alle origini dell'imprenditoria umbra. Atti del Convegno* (Perugia: Provincia di Perugia, 2013), 25-33; Enrico Speranza, *Le ricamatrici di Perugia*, in *L'Annuario del Lavoro 2018*, ed. Massimo Mascini, (S.l.: Il diario del Lavoro edizioni, 2018) 293-296; Maria Luciana Buseghin, "L'opera e la figura di Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello", in *Ricami della Bell'Epoca. La Scuola di Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello 1904-1934*, ed. Gianfranco Tortorelli (Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 1996), 27-47; Louise Ambler, "Revival and Reform: The Impetus for the Embroidery Enterprise of Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello", in *The House Museum of the Palazzo Sorbello in Perugia*, ed. Helen Rees Leahy (Perugia: Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello Foundation, 2010), 82-90.

³ Nathalie Dana, *Young in New York: A Memoir of a Victorian Girlhood*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 171-184 and 194-196.



Romeyne Robert as a young woman, Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive

As soon as she settled down in the family estate in Umbria, she struck a close partnership with the sisters Francesca and Carolina Amari, who were among the leading textile artists and designers. On one side, Romeyne sought inspiration to create innovative patterns of embroidery culminating in the successful Punto Umbro or Sorbello; on the other, she trained and organized the women of the family estate of Pischello, turning them into the skilled workforce of a laboratory, which, at its peak around 1910, employed over a hundred. Also Romeyne worked tirelessly to bring to life many other textile communities across Umbria, selecting and categorizing their specific patterns into distinct, well-defined Schools, which she were then brought together in a cooperative by the name of Arti Decorative Italiane. Finally, she was active in marketing the products of her own and other schools, carrying their samples to a number of international exhibitions, fostering contacts with the United States.



Women at work for the Scuola Ricami Ranieri di Sorbello (Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive)



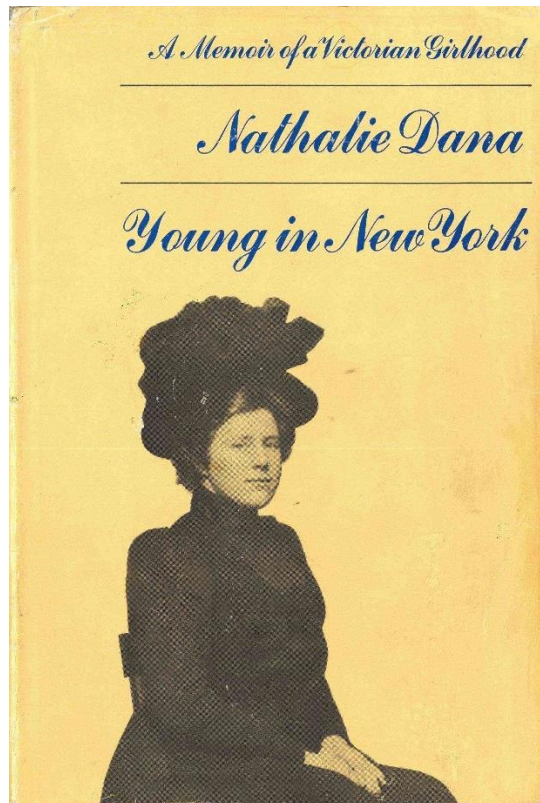
Villa on the Pischello estate, Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive



Punto Umbro or Sorbello, Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive

The work of Romeyne can best be understood by relating it in the first place to progressive ideas generated across the Atlantic at the beginning of the new century focused on new role for women, on the importance of the arts, on progressive methods of education – Romeyne was friendly with the educator Maria Montessori and pioneered her methods in a small country school created on the family estate.⁴

⁴ See Claudia Pazzini, “La nursery di Gertrude Weatherhead a Palazzo Sorbello: un esempio di puericultura moderna nel primo Novecento”, in *Governanti e istitutrici tra Ottocento e Novecento Ruolo sociale e immagini letterarie / Governess and tutors in the 19th and 20th Centuries Social Role and Literary Images. Atti del convegno, Perugia, 24-25 maggio 2019*, eds. Isabella Nardi and Antonella Valoroso (Bologna: Pendragon, 2020), 27-48; Maria Luciana Buseghin, “La rete sociopedagogica di Alice Hallgarten Franchetti tra femminismo, istitutrici e maestre: Malwida von Meysenbug, Felicitas Buchner e Mary Douglas Hamilton”, in *Governanti e istitutrici*, 107-138.



Book cover of the volume by Natalie Dana

Secondly Romeyne's Italian experience was inspired by the movement of the Settlement Houses on the East Coast. It is not a coincidence that it was the same Carolina Amari who, during her stay in the United States, set up embroidery classes for young immigrant women. With the sponsorship of prominent personalities in the Italian American community, such as Miss Florence Colgate and Gino Speranza, she created the New York *Scuola di Industrie Italiane* in 1908.⁵

Thirdly, there is clearly in Romeyne an entrepreneurial fervour, which set her apart from the prevalent Italian culture of her time, at least in high social circles. This she had inherited from her own family—her grandfather Christopher Robert having made a fortune as a trader had then spent most of it in philanthropic initiatives in the Middle East.

The Ranieri di Sorbello School of Embroidery and the Cooperativa Arti Decorative Italiane lasted well over thirty years. They gradually came to a close, when both my grandmother and Carolina Amari had reached old age and were confronted with the difficult trading environment of the 1930s which made sales to the US nearly impossible.

⁵ See Palomba, *L'arte ricamata*, 127-132; Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, *Creating New Citizens: Art and Handicraft in New York and Boston Settlement Houses, 1900-1943*, Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art in the Graduate Division of the University of (California, Berkeley: Summer 2016), 83 ff.



Carolina Amari (1866-1942), Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive

In one of her last letters Romeyne told her sons to display her collection as a set of museum pieces, entitling the collection to Carolina Amari, whose creativity and untiring commitment she valued enormously. A small embroidery room in the House Museum of Palazzo Sorbello in Perugia now attracts many visitors. A number of pieces from the Ranieri di Sorbello Embroidery School are now held by the Cooper Hewitt Museum, which also holds pieces of the *Arti Decorative Italiane* and by the *Scuola di Industrie Italiane*. The MFA in Boston holds an important sampling of embroideries by Carolina and Francesca Amari.⁶

The legacy of Romeyne is far from dead, given the interest of many women, often the descendants of the workers in her School, in keeping up the textile and embroidery local tradition in Umbria.

⁶ See the holdings of the Ranieri di Sorbello Embroidery School at the Cooper Hewitt Museum at <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/people/18050595/>. The Museum also holds textiles of the *Arti Decorative Italiane* see at <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/people/18537131/>



Romeyne in her old age, Fondazione Ranieri di Sorbello Archive



Romeyne Room in the Palazzo Sorbello in Perugia

Bibliography

- Ambler, Louise. "Revival and Reform: The Impetus for the Embroidery Enterprise of Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello". In Helen Rees Leahy (ed.) *The House Museum of the Palazzo Sorbello in Perugia*, 82-90. Perugia: Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello Foundation, 2010.
- Bates Batcheller, Tryphosa B. *Glimpses of Italian Court Life. Happy Days in Italia Adorata*. Delhi, India: Facsimile Publisher, 2013 [1st published 1906].
- Buseghin, Maria Luciana. *Alice Hallgarten Franchetti. Un modello di donna e di imprenditrice nell'Italia tra '800 e '900*. Selci-Lama, Perugia: Pliniana, 2013.
- , "L'opera e la figura di Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello". In Gianfranco Tortorelli (ed.) *Ricami della Bell'Epoca. La Scuola di Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello 1904-1934*, 27-47. Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 1996.
- Carson, Mina. *Settlement Folk. Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement 1885-1930*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Dana, Nathalie. *Young in New York: A Memoir of a Victorian Girlhood*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963.
- Exhibition of Italian and Other Lace Lent by Signorina Carolina Amari*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1906.
- Greenwold, Diana Jocelyn. *Creating New Citizens: Art and Handicraft in New York and Boston Settlement Houses, 1900-1943*. Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley: Summer 2016.
- Kaplan, Wendy. "The Art that is Life". *The Arts and Crafts movement in America 1875-1920, Museum of Fine Arts Boston*. Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1987.
- Palomba, Ivana. *L'arte ricamata. Uno strumento di emancipazione femminile nell'opera di Carolina Amari*. Maniago, Pordenone: Le arti tessili, s. d. [2008].
- Pavoni, Rosanna, ed. *Reviving the Renaissance. The use and abuse of the past in nineteenth century Italian art and decoration*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1997.
- Ranieri, Ruggero. "Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello imprenditrice americana e le origini della scuola di ricamo e di merletto". In *I talenti femminili alle origini dell'imprenditoria umbra. Atti del Convegno*, 25-33. Perugia: Provincia di Perugia, 2013.
- Speranza, Enrico. *Le ricamatrici di Perugia*. In Massimo Mascini (ed.) *L'Annuario del Lavoro 2018*, 293-296. S.l.: Il diario del Lavoro edizioni, 2018.
- Tortorelli, Gianfranco, ed. *Ricami della Bell'Epoca. La Scuola di Romeyne Robert Ranieri di Sorbello 1904-1934*. Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 1996.