



Two Place stop Call Home: Rome and New York

Judith Harris (July 08, 2016)



The first installment of a series about a new breed of Italians. Technically they are neither emigrants nor expats, for—as Ambassador Varricchio remarks in this issue—“they carry a return ticket.” you might half-jokingly call them frequent flyers, defined as they are by easy mobility. Indeed they are the new Italian citizens of the world. Artists, professionals, students and entrepreneurs who straddle two worlds.

Meet a couple for all seasons and two countries. American graphic artist Claudia Palmira Acunto and Italian photographer Mauro Benedetti have been based in Rome for the past decade. The two were married in Rome in 2008 in the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels and Martyrs, followed by a reception at the Casina Valadier in Villa Borghese.



For a while they managed to return to the U.S. four times a year every year. But after their son Ludovico entered pre-school last September in the Prati quarter of Rome, making more than two month-long visits a year to New York became impossible.

However well integrated into Italian life she is (and she is), Claudia still works on a New York schedule with a New Yorker's attitude. For her, this is a plus: "Here in Rome things don't happen at the same fast pace as in New York, but on the other hand, living here has given me the opportunity to pursue many different projects in addition to my design career," she told me when we met in Rome for this interview.

Exploring the urban landscape

Photographs by husband Mauro Benedetti, who was born in Palermo and moved to Rome at age 13, have appeared in one-man and group showings in both New York and Rome. His multiple interests have taken him eastward to Israel and Palestine and, in America, to the Southwest.

Speaking of the photo exhibition of his works held early this year at Rome's Cafe Alfredo e Lia on Via Giovanni Bettolo, Benedetti said that, "In both the Eternal City and 'the City' [New York], I spend countless hours exploring the urban landscape through the lens of my camera.

I am fortunate to call both of these extraordinary places my home, and the background settings for my passion of photography."

"From their main streets, with their symbols, to the most remote and least known corners, these two worlds offer my camera countless sequences of stories as well as special moments; on any street, people, emotion, and unexpected moments of beauty are always just around the corner." From Italy to new york and back and forth Palmira was born in Bronxville, New York, and studied at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts.

Her family background is half Italian—her grandfather, Stephen B. Acunto, 99, was a noted boxer and college boxing coach. Her great- grandparents on her father's side emigrated from Abruzzo, Lipari and Sant'Abbondio on Lago Maggiore.

From childhood Claudia, with her parents, Steve and Carole Haarmann Acunto of Park Hill, Yonkers, NY, was a regular visitor to Italy—to Pescasseroli in the Abruzzo, as well as to Milan and to Rome.

"I came to like Rome so much that I decided to take a sabbatical leave from my job as art director at an advertising agency in New York to live in Rome a year. And then I liked it so much that I stayed on. The city is simply full of surprises, there is so much to discover!" Claudia is best known as a designer for websites, including for the luxury chain of Bulgari Hotels, and for magazines and books. She is also a practicing artist, creating collages and, most recently, a series of round paintings in mixed media of varying sizes she calls "halos." (For a sampler, see: www.claudia.palmira.com).

So many projects Together the talented team also organize photography workshops. "We show people how to photograph the city of Rome: where to stand and, most importantly, where and how to look." (To see Mauro Benedetti and some of his current workshop participants as they explore Rome, see: maurobenphoto.com. The video on the site is in Italian, but his workshops and photo tours of Rome are also held in English.)

Future projects include expanding their workshops to embrace a more spiritual element via creation of a special website that pairs teachers and students in a broad range of workshop topics. The idea behind this is that, as Italy transforms and adapts to the digital world, many people are becoming hungry to learn new techniques and new subjects; this project will match students with the more



knowledgeable," said Claudia.

The site, slated to be functional in the autumn, will be called www.romeworkshop.com. Another forward-looking project, Claudia explains, is to be called "Awakening the Authentic Self." "We hope to attract people who are seekers -- that is, interested in self-development, who will have a vision of their lives. I myself have always sought to learn new things." These workshops will be held in the picturesque coastal Tuscan region known as the Maremma, near the small hilltop town of Magliano, which is overlooked by an amazingly tall medieval tower.

Claudia has also been active as vice president of the Italian Academy Foundation, Inc., founded in 1947 and chaired by her father, Steve, founder and president of the CINN Group, which has interests in publishing, insurance, real estate and entertainment.

The goal of the Academy Foundation is to bring Italian culture to the U.S. and especially to the world of New York. Claudia curates a quarterly magazine for the Foundation called the Italian Journal (now visible on line as italianjournal.it), which covers everything from food to ne art to Caravaggio. Steve Acunto is also chairman of La Scuola d'Italia New York. He is, in addition, a trustee of John Cabot University in Rome and Honorary Vice Consul of Italy in Westchester.

Italian citizens of the world

So the Eternal City and "the City" come together in the life of Mauro and Claudia, in their love, as well as in their continuous search for beauty in both cities. They embody the new Italian citizens of the world. As does little Ludovico, who, by the way, is featured on the cover of this issue of i-ItalyNY! He's a lively Roman kid with a New York attitude... not to mention an Abruzzese grandfather and an American grandmother awaiting him in Yonkers.

* Rome-based American expat Judith Harris has worked for major American, English and Italian newspapers, TV and radio stations for forty years. She has written a weekly column for i-Italy.org since its inception.

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