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Crossing Cultures

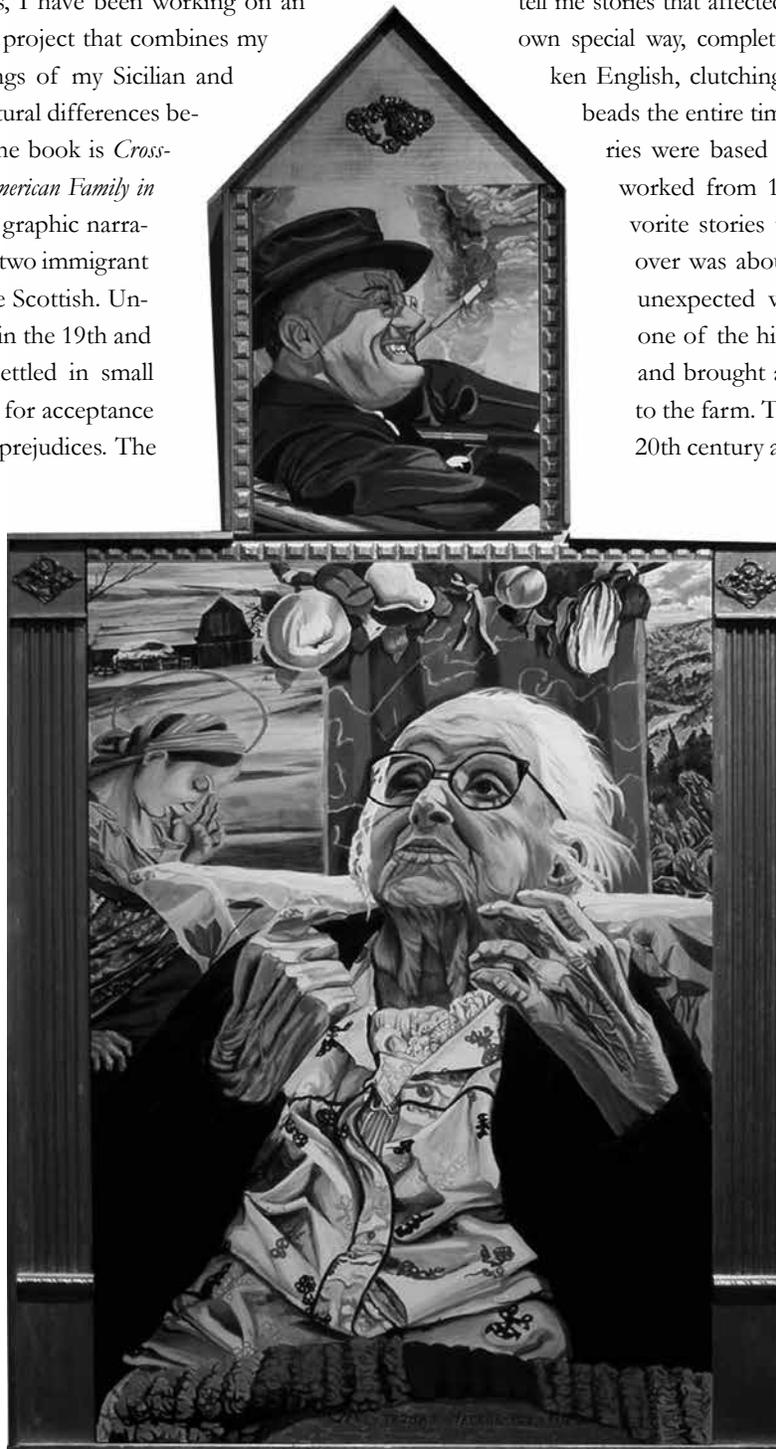
BY THOMAS J. MACPHERSON

For the past eight years, I have been working on an interdisciplinary book project that combines my egg tempera portrait paintings of my Sicilian and Scottish relatives and the cultural differences between them. The name of the book is *Crossing Cultures: A Sicilian and American Family in Western New York*, and it is a graphic narrative spanning generations of two immigrant families: one Sicilian and one Scottish. Unlike most Italian immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries, my family settled in small town America and struggled for acceptance while confronted with local prejudices. The research evolves around my Sicilian grandmother Calogera, the matriarch of the family, who was born in Sicily in 1893. I went to live with her and became immersed in the culture that her parents brought with them from the old country. However, along the way on the road to assimilation, much of our culture was lost due to the importance my family placed on fitting in and becoming American. As fortune had it, my research uncovered an oral history and many cultural beliefs that my grandmother shared with me as I grew up.

On Sunday afternoons after mass, I would listen to Grandma

tell me stories that affected her life. They were told in her own special way, complete with hand gestures and broken English, clutching her rosary and fingering the beads the entire time she talked. Many of the stories were based on life on the farm that they worked from 1915 to 1939. One of her favorite stories that she liked to tell over and over was about when the Gypsies made an unexpected visit to the farm. Apparently, one of the hired men got into a tough spot and brought a touch of drama and intrigue to the farm. Throughout the first part of the 20th century and even up through the 1960s,

groups of Gypsies would descend on the small towns in Western New York. Sicilians in particular were suspicious of them, probably due to unsavory encounters in the Old World, and so they were on their guard to protect their property, and in some cases, protect their families against kidnapping. As soon as a Gypsy was spotted walking the streets of town, word would spread like wildfire, and then everyone would be ever vigilant. One of my favorite stories that she told over and over was the story of when the Gypsies tried to kidnap the hired man. Grandma was making supper one day when



La Mia Vita, 2011. Egg tempera on panel. Photo courtesy of the author.



The farm horse that dragged Grandma, 1920s. Photo courtesy of the author.

she heard their dog barking. Grandma knew it had different barks for different situations, so she was able to tell if friends or if strangers were coming down the driveway. This bark was an angry bark, so she ran out of the house and saw the dog bolting out toward the road where she saw a carload of Gypsies trying to stuff the hired man into the back seat of their car. Grandma rang the dinner bell and Grandpa came running from the barn, saw what was happening, and ran toward the car. The dog had reached the Gypsies by this time and started biting them, and the hired man broke loose and ran toward the house. Since the Gypsies saw Grandpa running toward them and had the dog biting them, they took off in the car. Grandma said that their dog saved the hired man's life.

I asked, "Why were they trying to kidnap the hired man?" She replied, "That's what Gypsies do!" Her statement is a reflection of Grandma sticking to her convictions and beliefs from long ago and indicates that she was also not above holding onto stereotypes.

Another one of her favorite stories focused on the hardships they encountered. During the winter months, the only way they could get around was by horse and sleigh, since the town did not plow their road. One Sunday after they got home

from church, Grandma was holding the reins of the horse while Grandpa was unhitching it. Something spooked the horse, and it took off running through the fields with Grandma still holding onto the reins, bouncing up and down behind the horse as it fled. Grandpa and the kids chased after them, and after about a mile, the horse came to halt. When Grandpa and the kids saw them from the distance, Grandma was just lying on the ground. My aunt who was listening to the story told me that they thought she was dead, because she was just lying there and not moving a muscle. The next day she was so bruised and sore that she couldn't get out of bed to make breakfast, but she managed to get up later in the day to help out around the house. When I asked her why she held onto the reins and allowed herself to be dragged, as opposed to just letting the horse go, her response was, "He was the only horse we had. We would have been goners!"

Grandma was not the only person in our family who held onto the superstitions of Sicilian culture. Her sister Mary (Petrina) and brother-in-law Tony were also believers in the secret powers of the unknown that no one really understood, nor could they completely control. Grandma, Great-Aunt Mary, and Great-Uncle Tony represented a link to the culture and way of life

in Sicily. Grandma's brothers assimilated into American culture very quickly, mostly because they were men and had many more opportunities to become professionals and to move up the social ladder, even though they were Sicilian. But Grandma and Great-Aunt Mary remained *contadini* (peasants), steeped in southern Italian culture with their gender holding them back. Both factors conspired to keep them in very traditional roles as women. Grandma and Great-Aunt Mary, along with Great-Uncle Tony, carried with them a glimpse back in time to the life of the *contadini*, except in this country they were able to improve their circumstances and live a (generally) better life. They never totally integrated into American society, but were always in a world between two cultures. They watched television, rode in cars, and modernized their houses, but still clung to many Old World Italian beliefs, such as the idea that there was magic in religion and religion in magic.

There is a long tradition of blessing rituals, ancient pagan beliefs, and magical practices in southern Italy. Along with the cult of the saint, the immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy) brought their occult beliefs and practices with them. Emigration could not help a person escape from the power of witches. Events and tragic circumstances that affected their lives, that even the police, the priest, or a doctor could not cure, required the help of a *strega* (a female magician) or *stregone* (male magician) to remove the evil eye, or *mal'occhio*. The evil eye could be a curse that a bad witch or an enemy casts upon someone, or one could be possessed by evil spirits just by walking down the street. When an evil spirit is cast out, *streghe* do not destroy it, but just send the evil spirit on its journey, and unload its evil on the rest of the world. To Americans, this appeared to be a ridiculous response to the events of life, but to the Sicilians, this was the only way they knew to how cope with unexplainable events. Each crisis was faced with the support and love of family and *paesani* (fellow Italian countrymen) and increased the sense of community.



The Marriage of Mary and Tony, 2012. Egg tempera on panel. Photo courtesy of the author.

It was through the experience of these traditions that I was exposed to the Italian side of our culture. My cousin Mike Cinquino told me the story how Great-Uncle Tony's sister, who everyone called Aunt Mananna (her real name was Marianna), performed the evil eye removal ritual on him. He had been sick for three days and was not getting any better, so Aunt Mananna did the ritual, and the next day he was "cured" and felt fine. This impressed him so much that he never forgot it.

I also experienced this belief in Italian folk medicine firsthand. I suffer from a foot malaise that I have had since I was very young, called dyshidrotic eczema. When I was 13, I had a bout that was so bad that my feet became infected to the point that I couldn't walk. At the time, doctors could not figure out what was wrong with them, so I suffered through frequent periods where my feet really bothered me. Great-Aunt Mary was very concerned, and one evening talked to my

mother about taking me to an Italian folk doctor or *stregone*.

The next day I was told by Mom that Grandma, Great-Aunt Mary, and Great-Uncle Tony were going to take me to a doctor in the nearby city of Batavia. They were sure he could help my foot condition. Above all, I was not to tell my father anything about where I was going, because he wouldn't have understood and would have caused trouble. My parents were having marital problems at the time, and he was still living with us in an apartment in Grandma's house. My father was also trying to convert my sister and me to become Jehovah's Witnesses, which was just increasing the tension and stress in the house.

So off we drove, with Grandma and me in the back seat, to a part of Batavia that was not familiar to me. Finally, coming to a block with old houses, we stopped at a run-down apartment house and went up to the second floor. It was dark and smelled old. Great-Uncle Tony knocked on the door and a short little man with an aquiline nose let us inside. We sat in his living room with Grandma sitting next to me on the couch. I was thinking, "What kind of a doctor is this guy? This looks like his apartment, not a doctor's office." Then Grandma told me that this was the man who could help me. The four of them started talking in Sicilian, so I had no clue what they were talking about, but I got the feeling that the conversation centered around my foot condition. The old man told me in a heavy Italian accent that doctors haven't been able to help me because they are not treating the right thing and that there were demons causing the infections.

Since I was brought up not to be superstitious by my parents, I thought the man was crazy. He bragged to me about all of the amazing cures he had performed on people, like mending broken bones that wouldn't heal. He told me I had to believe that he could cure me, and then Great-Aunt Mary asked me to take off my shoes and socks. He looked at my feet for some

time, turning them over, looking between the toes. With great ceremony, he gave them the sign of the cross while reciting some prayers in Sicilian, and then, to my complete horror, started spitting on them. By summoning the proper saint through prayer and incantations for each specific malaise, healers used tears and saliva as a way of conquering evil forces. Since a *stregone* cannot exterminate a spell, he lets his saliva send the evil forces on to their next stop. He repeated this ritual several times on both feet, and then he was through. My first reaction was to jerk my feet back, which obviously annoyed the *stregone*. He chastised me for not believing in his powers and told me there would be no hope for me if I didn't change my attitude. Grandma paid him and we left.

I was totally stunned by what had happened. Nobody had mentally prepared me for this ordeal, and as a typical 13-year-old, I felt incredibly embarrassed. I was thankful none of my peers lived in Batavia, so I could sneak in and out of the building without being recognized.

My mother was not particularly superstitious and spent her life trying to be more American than Sicilian. So, in hindsight, when she agreed to let me go, I knew she had lost faith in traditional medicine, and as a last resort, put her faith into a blessing ritual, hoping for a miraculous cure. I went back three times before I was able to talk her out of making me go back. She agonized the entire week trying to figure out a way of telling Grandma. I told her to tell them that my feet have never felt or

looked better than they do now, so I must be cured. For years, Great-Aunt Mary would ask me how my feet were and, of course, I always said, "Great!" Then she would tell Grandma what a good thing they had done for me. I realized that what they did, they did out of love.

In a bit of irony several years later, I did have another bout of this foot ailment, and this time I actually did go to a foot specialist in Batavia. When I got to the office and saw the name on the door, I realized it was exactly the same name as the *stregone* I had gone to a few years earlier. When the doctor came in the examining room, I told him that when I was younger, my Grandma had taken me to see an old man with the same name in an effort to find a cure for my foot ailment. His face turned red and he looked embarrassed. Then he got testy and told me that, indeed, that was his father. In the end, he couldn't help me either. I guess the family had no cures for feet.

More examples of how my family coped with living in an inhospitable environment can be found in my book *Crossing Cultures*. Their journey tells of these and other story of hardships faced by a family at the boundaries of Italian and American cultures, and examines the intersection with German and Scottish Americans, as the family married out of the circle of Sicilian immigrants. Alongside the history of my Sicilian family is the MacPhersons' journey to assimilation, which is a story unto its own, an establishment of a dominant culture to which the new immigrants had

to conform. These character studies are a compelling blend of oral history, direct observation, family photographs, original egg tempera and oil portrait paintings, and far-reaching historical events that shaped their lives in the 19th and 20th centuries. ▼



Professor Tom MacPherson, Program Director, is an artist and Professor of Art at SUNY Geneseo, affiliated with the Art History Department. Thomas MacPherson received a BA from the State University of New York–College at Oswego in 1973 and an MFA from the University of South Carolina in 1976. He has been a Professor of Studio Art at the State University of New York–College at Geneseo since 1985 and attained the rank of professor in 2003. Professor MacPherson has been a practicing artist who has worked in a variety of media, including watercolor, egg tempera, oil, and all of the printmaking processes and drawing media including silver point. His watercolors and prints have been widely exhibited in international, national, and regional juried exhibitions where they have won awards. Since 2006, he has been working on a large research project that traces the path of immigration to America of his Scottish and Sicilian family through his artwork and literary endeavors. This series of installations has been exhibited nationally from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland to Syracuse University to the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in New York City.



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