

CART *as art*

by Erik Pappa

The iconic symbol of Sicilian craftsmanship and folklore, the Sicilian cart, takes center stage at a new exhibit appearing through Jan. 7, 2018, at the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles.

Two original Sicilian carretti — one representative of Palermo; the other, Catania — are on loan from the MUSCA Museum of Taormina and displayed along with dozens of other folk art and historic cart pieces. The 1950 Catania carretto is complemented with a horse's colorful harness, vestments and bridle.

"The carretti of Palermo and Catania are among the island's most revered," according to the exhibit. "...Palermo, Catania, Agrigento, Trapani, Castelvetro, and Ragusa are among the best-known producers of carretti, with each possessing its own distinct style."

Each cart is composed of about 60 pieces, all made by hand by numerous craftsmen. The cart's box is made of fir; the wheels, ash; other parts, beech. A blacksmith provides the metal pieces. Woodcarvers transform wheels and other surfaces into "historical figures, angels, gargoyles, flowers, fruit, and acanthus leaves," which are later painted. All this detail is rather fascinating and great fun to observe up close.

These horse- and donkey-drawn carts emerged in the early 1800s as a popular form of transportation. Their illustrations of historic events, literary works and religious themes helped to communicate ideas and a shared cultural heritage to a people who were often illiterate. Automobiles replaced carretti, but the carts never disappeared from the Sicilian imagination, said Marianna Gatto,

the museum director who curated and wrote the exhibit.

"Beyond their captivating aesthetics, carretti serve as an excellent instrument through which to understand Sicily and the Sicilian soul," Gatto said. "Countering centuries of conquest and heartache with color and optimism, the carretto siciliano is said to embody the Sicilian spirit." The museum "takes great pride in showcasing this cultural icon, and



(Photos courtesy of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles)

promoting understanding of Sicily itself, the island to which a great number of Italian Americans trace their ancestry."

The carretti exhibit, titled "The Sicilian Cart: History in Movement," is supplemented by ceramic Moorish heads (you'll love the story of how they came into existence), a Sicilian puppet theater ("opera dei pupi") with three marionettes, and ancient coins representing more than two millennia of the island's history with coins from the Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Spaniards and Bourbons, who banned the Sicilian flag.

An exhibit sponsor is Dolce & Gabbana. Domenico Dolce is a Sicilian native and D&G's high-end clothing collections are often strongly linked with Sicilian folklore, so you'll see some examples of that in the exhibit. You'll also



enjoy some surprising uses of the carretti from SMEG, an Italian luxury household appliance manufacturer, which collaborated with Dolce & Gabbana on a hand-painted refrigerator, toaster, blender and even a bicycle. Also on display: a 1939 children's book involving carretti called, "Piccolino."

The carretti exhibit is the first in the temporary exhibit space for the young museum and fills it out very nicely. If you haven't been to the museum, you will enjoy the main display hall with exhibits arranged chronologically around the

themes of Pioneers, Settlement, Dago!, Culture & Italians in Hollywood. Videos displayed on large glass walls capture the highlights and one may view tablets for more complete stories. Display cases round out the impressive storylines. In one room a door uncovered during restoration features a rectangular peephole that previously included a sliding panel. Through the aperture one could confirm someone's identity. A speakeasy operated there during Prohibition when the saloon downstairs was shuttered.

The museum (www.ItalianHall.org) is open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and is located in downtown Los Angeles. Entry is free, though donations are appreciated.