

MIGRATING TOWERS: THE *GIGLI* OF NOLA AND BEYOND

Charles Mingus Youth Art Center – Watts Towers Arts Center, Los Angeles
SEPTEMBER 25, 2010 – JANUARY 2, 2011

Exhibition Curated by **Felice Ceparano**, Director, Museo Etnomusicale, I Gigli di Nola; **Katia Ballacchino**, Ph.D. Università di Roma, Sapienza.



Nola



Watts



New York

Origins of a Tradition. One version of a sacred narrative has it that Bishop Paulinus of Nola spared the son of a widow from being enslaved because she could not pay his ransom, by offering to take his place. He was taken to North Africa along with many other townspeople, and after spending many years in the service of the king of the Vandals, returned with his fellow citizens to Nola bearing shiploads of grain. Nolans greeted the returning captives with a procession of *gigli* (“lilies”: *giglio* singular; *gigli* plural).

The first record of a public commemoration of the bishop saint is from 1514, a thousand years after his death in the year 431. In time, the ceremony was transformed into a reenactment of the bishop’s safe return from slavery, with a procession of flowers, then candles, rudimentary carts, and finally tapered towers. Such spires reached heights of 25 meters (82 feet) during the 19th century, and so they have remained. A “boat” was added to symbolize the return of the Saint by sea. Supported on a 10 square-foot base, these obelisks weigh more than 2,700 pounds (= 25 *quintali*). The weight increases to approximately 4,300 pounds (40 *quintali*) with the addition of a musical band, instruments and amplifiers, carpenters, and the “festival master’s” family—all forming part of the *giglio* as it is “danced” through the streets.

These *gigli* have become complex architectural wooden structures constructed by local artisans, dressed in traditional decorative papier mâché, and featuring religious, historical or current news themes. The procession of the eight *gigli*, known by names that recall the historic local trade guilds and corporations, occurs in this precise order: green grocer (*ortolano*); sausage maker (*salumiere*); innkeeper (*bettoliere*); baker (*panettiere*); butcher (*beccaio*); shoemaker (*calzolaio*); blacksmith (*fabbro*) and tailor (*sarto*).

Beyond Nola: New York and Watts. The feast has migrated. For over a century, Italian Americans have reproduced the *giglio* in the New York City metropolitan area. Today, this annual tradition continues in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and East Harlem, Manhattan.

The Watts Towers dramatically recall the festive *gigli* of Nola, a town situated approximately 35 miles from Sabato Rodia's birthplace near Naples. Although he never mentioned the *gigli*, one may posit that he likely had seen them and that these "towers of memory" might have inspired his own artistic creation in Watts when he set out to do "something big." The first scholars to have posited such a connection between the towers in Nola and the towers in Watts, were Sheldon Posen and Daniel Ward, in an article entitled "Watts Towers and the Giglio Tradition" (*Folklife Annual*, Washington, D.C., 1985, pp. 143-157).



Photographs for this exhibition were provided by the Museo Etnomusicale, I Gigli di Nola, and photographs depicting *gigli* from the Nolan diaspora, from the Archivio della Contea Nolana, and Cono Corvino. *Special thanks to:* Luisa Del Giudice, **WATTS TOWERS COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE**, Project Coordinator, and Joseph Sciorra, John D. Calandra Institute for Italian American Studies (Queen's College, CUNY), for assistance with this exhibition.

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