

# Bringing Art to the People

## IAM Exhibits the Work of Onorio Ruotolo, Founder of the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School

by Joseph Sciorra and Peter Vellon

Sculptor, critic, editor, author, poet, illustrator, cartoonist, teacher, Onorio Ruotolo was known as the “Rodin of Little Italy.” Ruotolo’s sculpture was a model of realist academic art, grounded in the classics yet with a prevailing concern for social justice. On March 9, 2004, the Italian American Museum opened the exhibition *The Art of Freedom: Onorio Ruotolo and the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School*, showcasing thirteen original works by Ruotolo donated by his son Lucio Ruotolo to the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in 1999.

Ruotolo was born on March 3, 1888, in Cervinara (province of Avellino), Campania, Italy, but grew up in Bagnoli Irpino where his father worked as an engineer. At the age of twelve, Ruotolo began his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Naples, where he studied for six years. He apprenticed for two years with the Neapolitan sculptor Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929). Ruotolo’s 1926 article “Vincenzo Gemito e la sublime follia del suo genio” (“Vincenzo Gemito and the Sublime Insanity of his Genius”) was internationally circulated and prompted the Italian government to rescue Gemito from public charges of insanity and his social seclusion.

Ruotolo sailed from Naples to the United States in January 1908. His motives for immigrating were two-fold: one, to escape military conscription; and two, the parents of the woman he wished to marry had refused his offer of marriage.

Soon after arriving, Ruotolo began a series of plaster busts depicting, in realistic fashion, immigrants and the destitute tenement dwellers of his adopted city: such as “The Paralytic” (1909); “Indigent” (1909); “The Drunkard” (1911); “Rose the Organ Grinder” (1914), among others. Among his better know pieces is the free-standing statue entitled “Doomed” also known as “The Condemned” (1917), which was Ruotolo’s protest against capital punishment and based on a death row prisoner at Sing-Sing. Writing in 1931, author John May observed, “While he worships the heroic his sympathies are with those whom life has maimed and oppressed.”

During World War I, the artist created a body of work that called attention to the horrors of war. “The Other Heroism” (1916); “The Tragedy of the Mines” (1916); “Red Cross” (1917); “Les Emurees,” also known as “Buried Alive” (1918); and “The Wishing Squad” (1916) brought attention to Ruotolo’s artistic and social vision. In *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity* (1995), Ilene Susan Fort writes that Ruotolo’s “rejection of ugliness in favor of the traditional notion of beauty suggests the pervasiveness of a nineteenth century romantic sensibility even in the treatment of the horrors of modern warfare.”

During this period, Ruotolo, along with poet-activist Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959), co-founded the short-lived progressive cultural magazine *Il Fuoco* in 1914. This “bimonthly magazine of art and struggle” was dissolved after a year because of an ideological disagreement between Ruotolo and Giovannitti about Italy’s entry into the war. Ruotolo later went on to create *Minosse*, a socio-literary publication.

Another aspect of Ruotolo’s composition



*The Art of Freedom: Onorio Ruotolo and the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School Exhibit at IAM*

was his creation of portraits of famous personages from the fields of art and politics. His works include Theodore Dreiser (1918), at the Washington National Portrait Gallery; Arturo Toscanini (1919), at La Guardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts; Enrico Caruso (1921), at the Metropolitan Opera House; Dante (1921); and Thomas Hart Benton (1940), among many others. His political portraits include that of Vladimir Lenin (1918); Eugene Debs (date unknown); and Giacomo Matteotti (1941), the Italian socialist leader assassinated by Fascists in 1924. Ruotolo also created a bust of Benito Mussolini (1932), currently located at the University of Bari, Italy. In her appreciation of the artist’s portraits, Francis Winwar wrote, “Posterity should see not so much the physical likeness of the sculptured, as the qualities that made the person worthy of perpetuation.”

During the 1920s, Ruotolo received commissions for mausoleums and memorials. The Wilson Memorial (1929) at the University of Virginia; the Paino Mausoleum, St. John’s Cemetery; “From Darkness to Light” and the Fusco Memorial, called “The Idyll of Death,” Woodlawn Cemetery; “The Pilgrimage of Life,” Paino and Ambrette Memorial, Calvary Cemetery; and the Calderone Family Mausoleum (1928), Greenfield Cemetery. In 1929, Ruotolo designed “The Mother Heroes,” a war memorial erected in Cervinara’s main piazza.

In December 1923, Ruotolo’s commitment to the arts and social justice inspired him to found and direct the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School at 288 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, off Avenue A and nearby Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The first of its kind in the country, the “Leonardo”—as it was affectionately called—was committed to providing free art instruction to young men and women from the working poor. According to the school’s yearbook, it was founded “without utilitarian or commercial aims... [and] it conducts its work without prejudice of race or religion, keeping its doors open to all who are eager to learn.” Initially, sessions were only held during the evening since most of the students were employed and working

drawing and painting, mural painting, cartooning, sculpture, wrought iron, wood carving, pottery, and ceramics, English and Italian literature, music, and drama, to name a few.

Ruotolo directed the Leonardo for two decades, mentoring numerous artists, including the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Ruotolo persuaded Noguchi to drop out of medical school at Columbia University and then offered him work in his studio so he could quit his restaurant job. Noguchi wrote, “I shall always be grateful to him and the Italian community in New York.” Ultimately, Noguchi felt confined by academic art at the Leonardo and noted, “everything I learned I had later to unlearn.”

Unfortunately, with the onset of World War II, contributions diminished significantly. Sources suggest that the school was evicted from its third and final location at 130 East 16<sup>th</sup> Street on April 28, 1942. Although the Leonardo’s tenure was just shy of twenty years, the noble and progressive ideals of its founder assured its substantial impact on the working class. To Onorio Ruotolo, it was the Leonardo that “diffused among the children of workers, the Light of Art.”

Impaired by a stroke, Ruotolo spent the last twenty years of his life writing and publishing poetry. His collections include *Nel fuoco del rimorso* (1949); *Il mio primo maestro: Poemetto* (c. 1948); *Convito d’amore: Poemetto* (1949); and *Accordi e dissonanze* (1958).

Beginning in 1930, Ruotolo disavowed his earlier political beliefs and even his associations. According to his son Lucio, “[H]e became increasingly to oppose all politics as manipulative and self-serving.” Ruotolo de-politicized the nature of his past friendships with Konrad Berkovici, Arturo Giovannitti, David Greenberg, Helen Keller, John Macy, Carlo Tresca, and others.

From 1950 to 1957, Ruotolo served as the educational director of the Shirtmakers Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The 78-year-old Onorio Ruotolo died of a heart ailment at his home at 20 Bank Street, Greenwich Village on December 18, 1966.

**Upcoming public programs to be held at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute:**

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 6PM: Italian photojournalist Angelo Marchese will present his book *Onorio Ruotolo: Un figlio dimenticato*. In Italian, with English translation. May 18<sup>th</sup>, 6PM: Visual artist B. Amore on “Walking in the Footsteps of Michelangelo”



*Two pieces by Ruotolo with a photograph of he and his students at the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School*