Istituto per la Storia del Risorgimento Italiano
Borsa di studio – bando 2024, prot. 4217/2024

Nota di sintesi del progetto di ricerca

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Titolo: *The Reinterpretation of Myths, Symbols, and Ethnohistories in the Iconography of the Italian Risorgimento: An Ethnosymbolic Perspective* (La reinterpretazione di miti, simboli ed etnostorie nell'iconografia del Risorgimento italiano: una prospettiva etnosimbolista)

Il progetto analizza l'iconografia risorgimentale come spazio di risignificazione di miti e narrazioni etnoculturali e ne indaga il ruolo nella costruzione dell'identità nazionale italiana. Nella prospettiva etnosimbolista, la ricerca si concentra su figure come l'Italia turrita e la cornucopia, a partire dalla loro codificazione nell'*Iconologia* di Cesare Ripa, per ricostruire in che modo immagini di origine premoderna siano state rielaborate, anche sotto l'influsso del Romanticismo, in simboli di unità, abbondanza e riscatto nazionale. Il lavoro prende inoltre in esame i miti delle origini e delle "età dell'oro", propone un confronto con l'iconografia nazionale francese dell'Ottocento e considera la reinterpretazione di questi simboli da parte dei nazionalismi italiani del Novecento. Le fonti comprendono materiale iconografico, trattatistica rinascimentale, carteggi e documenti relativi a cerimonie e programmi visivi ufficiali.

Summary of the research project

Dr María Alicia Cusinato

Title: *The Reinterpretation of Myths, Symbols, and Ethnohistories in the Iconography of the Italian Risorgimento: An Ethnosymbolic Perspective*

The project analyses the iconography of the Risorgimento as a space for the re-signification of myths and ethnocultural narratives, and examines its role in the construction of Italian national identity. From an ethnosymbolic perspective, the research focuses on figures such as Italia turrita and the cornucopia, starting from their codification in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, in order to reconstruct how images of pre-modern origin were reworked, partly under the influence of Romanticism, into symbols of national unity, abundance and redemption. The study also examines myths of origin and of "golden ages", offers a comparison with nineteenth-century French national iconography, and considers how these symbols were reinterpreted by twentieth-century Italian nationalisms. The sources include iconographic material, Renaissance treatises, correspondence, and documents relating to official ceremonies and visual programmes.

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The Reinterpretation of Myths, Symbols, and Ethnohistories in the Iconography of the Italian Risorgimento: An Ethnosymbolic Perspective

1. Introduction

The ethnosymbolic approach provides a key framework for understanding the nation as a historically and culturally constructed community, rooted in traditions, myths, and symbols transmitted over time (Armstrong, 1982; Hutchinson, 2013; Smith, 1986, 1998, 2009). This theoretical perspective highlights that national identity is not merely a modern or political phenomenon (Anderson, 1983; Breuilly, 1993; Gellner, 1983) but a construct deeply embedded in *ethnocultural* values. These values connect members of a community to a shared past and project a collective destiny (Smith, 2009: 36). Central to this process are symbols and myths, which, as integral elements of cultural systems (Smith, 2007), catalyze historical changes and facilitate the internalization of national values (Geertz, 1973).

Although images and visual arts have played a crucial role in nationalist movements, their analysis as components of national symbols remains limited (Leoussi, 2004). The ethnosymbolic approach advocates for the study of the evolution of symbols over time —*la longue durée*— acknowledging their capacity to acquire a degree of "relative independence" and transcend the circumstances of their creation (Smith, 1986, 1998). Symbols and myths —including their religious dimensions— as integral elements of cultural systems (Smith, 2007; Weber, 1984) enable communities to establish meaningful connections with their past, legitimizing their continuity into the present and future (Smith, 1991).

Identity discourses are deeply linked to the historical emergence of nations, with nationalisms playing a central role in consolidating the notion of a "community of destiny." While this concept has been questioned by perspectives that consider it a strategic and manipulative construction (Calhoun, 1997; Verdery, 1999; Malesevic, 2006), the ethnosymbolic framework interprets it as a phenomenon anchored in pre-existing cultural elements. Within this context, national art is not merely an elite invention but a modernization of pre-existing *ethnic* cultures. It transforms symbols and myths into visual representations that serve as tools for integration and social cohesion, translating the abstract concept of the "nation" into tangible and emotional experiences that connect communities to their historical and cultural roots (Leoussi, 2004; Smith, 1991).

Far from being an irrational or transient phenomenon, nationalisms (Hutchinson, 1987, 2005; Smith, 1986, 1998) are conceived as dynamic movements that articulate a shared symbolic repertoire —with religious resonances such as the "chosen people"— generating a "collective consciousness" aimed at consolidating national identity (Smith, 2007; Hutchinson, 2000).

During the height of European nationalism, art was imbued with a "moral historicism," idealizing historical figures and episodes, transforming them into symbols of cohesion and mobilization (Smith, 2013). This process allowed national imagery to not only represent a collective memory but also modernize ethnic solidarities, integrating them into legitimizing narratives (Leoussi, 2004). Much like musical compositions inspired by folkloric motifs, visual representations captured the cultural essence of communities, fostering a sense of unity that transcended social and regional divisions (Brincker & Leoussi, 2018).

The Italian *Risorgimento* exemplifies how historical myths and symbols were reinterpreted to construct a cohesive national identity. Emerging in the context of the Congress of Vienna (1815), the *Risorgimento* sought not only territorial unification and emancipation from Austrian domination but

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also the consolidation of a national narrative grounded in a foundational myth. This myth linked Italy to a glorious past —from Classical Rome to the Renaissance (Stradaioli, 2019). Figures such as Donna Italia and the cornucopia, inspired by visual traditions described by Cesare Ripa, were re-signified to project values of unity and redemption, becoming enduring symbols of cultural cohesion and regeneration (Smith, 1991; Stradaioli, 2019).

Romanticism played a crucial role in shaping national iconographies. This philosophical and aesthetic movement enabled historical myths and ideals of heroism to transform into symbols of cohesion, particularly through representations of heroic figures and emblematic landscapes (Leoussi, 1990). Works such as *Il bacio* [The Kiss] by the Italian painter Francesco Hayez fused personal emotions with national ideals, reinforcing imagery that evoked collective sacrifice and belonging (Stradaioli, 2019). Female figures such as Italia Turrita, initially associated with fertility and protection, were reinterpreted as heroic expressions of struggle and redemption (Leoussi, 2004). These visual representations, promoted by nationalist elites, connected cultural traditions with modern demands, becoming essential tools for cultural cohesion.

Ultimately, the *Risorgimento*'s ability to consolidate an Italian national identity lay in its capacity to integrate ethnocultural traditions with the demands of a modern political project. Through art, literature, and iconography, a national imaginary was created that deeply resonated with the population —achieving, in Weberian terms, adequacy at the level of meaning (Smith, 1995). This symbolic process not only defined the Italian nation's sense of self but also laid the foundation for its continuity as a cultural and political community in the centuries to come.

In the 20th century, Italian nationalisms reinterpreted the myths of the *Risorgimento* to align with their own political and expansionist agendas. The myth of Roman greatness, for instance, was re-signified to emphasize the continuity between Imperial Rome and a modern Italy with aspirations of global power (Marcattili, 2020). Similarly, the cornucopia, a symbol of prosperity during the *Risorgimento*, took on an expansionist character, representing the wealth that Italy sought to extract from its colonies. This re-signification not only transformed the original ideals of the *Risorgimento* but also highlighted a tension between the liberal principles and the imperialist ambitions of 20th-century nationalisms.

2. Aims

General Aim

To analyze the iconography of the Italian *Risorgimento* as a medium for the symbolic re-signification of myths and ethnocultural narratives, and its role in the construction of Italian national identity.

Specific Aims

- Analyze the re-signification of ancient symbols in the *Risorgimento*: Examine how emblematic figures such as Italia Turrita and the cornucopia, as described by Cesare Ripa, were reinterpreted to embody national values such as unity, abundance, and heroism during the Risorgimental period.
- Investigate the integration of myths of ancestry into iconography: Study the myths of origin and the "golden ages" employed in 19th-century Italy, evaluating their historical origins and their materialization in visual representations and public ceremonies of the *Risorgimento*.

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- Explore the influence of Romanticism on Risorgimental iconography: Analyze how Romantic ideals, such as the return to nature and the celebration of authenticity, were reflected in the visual and symbolic representations of the *Risorgimento*.
- Compare with contemporary European iconographic traditions: Identify commonalities and divergences in the creation of national symbols through a comparative analysis of Italian and French 19th-century iconographies.
- Evaluate the re-interpretation of Risorgimental imagery in 20th-century Italian nationalism: Examine how the symbols and narratives of the *Risorgimento* were transformed to serve the political and cultural agendas of 20th-century Italian nationalist movements.

3. Hypothesis

The iconography of the Italian *Risorgimento* emerged as a national reinterpretation of a complex and ancient lithographic universe that included myths and traditions, incorporating figures such as Italia Turrita and the cornucopia and transforming them into symbols of national unity, abundance, and heroism. Influenced by Romanticism, this iconography articulated a narrative that legitimized the political project of Italian unification while also consolidating a "collective consciousness" capable of transcending the historical context of the 19th century. However, this re-signification of symbols was not static: their cultural autonomy allowed them to be reinterpreted and adapted by 20th-century nationalisms, demonstrating how art and visual symbols function as dynamic tools for the construction and perpetuation of national identities in changing political contexts.

4. Methodology

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach grounded in ethnosymbolic analysis, integrating cultural history and iconography to examine how the myths and visual symbols of the *Risorgimento* were re-signified to construct a national identity and how these narratives were subsequently reinterpreted in later contexts.

5. Source Analysis

Primary Sources

- Iconographic Material: A visual and semiotic analysis will be conducted, focusing on composition, narrative, and cultural resonance.
- Texts by Cesare Ripa: Iconologia and other Renaissance treatises.
- Historical Documents: Letters from key figures such as Mazzini and Garibaldi.
- Official Speeches and Visual Programs: Records of national ceremonies and political decrees related to the use of visual symbols will be used to contextualize the political and ideological frameworks in which these symbols were re-signified.

Secondary Sources

These will provide the theoretical framework for interpreting symbolic transformations and their cultural implications.

6. Tentative Timeline (1 Year)

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Months 1-3: Document Review and Source Compilation

- Conduct archival research at the *Museo Centrale del Risorgimento* (Rome) to gather manuscripts, correspondence, administrative documents, and key iconographic material.
- Review relevant primary and secondary sources, including Cesare Ripa's works and studies on *Risorgimento* iconography.

Months 4-6: Visual and Iconographic Analysis

- Perform semiotic and compositional analysis of iconic representations such as Italia Turrita and the cornucopia.
- Investigate the influence of Cesare Ripa's texts on the creation and re-signification of *Risorgimento* visual symbols.

Months 7-9: Contextualization and Theoretical Synthesis

- Contextualize the historical significance of the studied symbols within the framework of the Italian *Risorgimento*.
- Develop a robust theoretical framework that integrates iconographic findings with the ethnosymbolic approach, emphasizing the relationship between visual symbols and national narratives.

Months 10-12: Final Writing and Evaluation

- Systematize results and draft a final report integrating iconographic analyses and theoretical conclusions.
- Conduct a final review of the text to ensure coherence between objectives, hypotheses, and findings.

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Vatican Apostolic Library. Manuscripts and classical texts related to national art and Italian symbolism.

Possible Index

1. Detailed Introduction to the Iconography of the Italian Risorgimento and Its Cultural Impact
2. Key Concepts in the Reinterpretation of Myths and Symbols
3. The Role of *Ethnohistories* in Visual Representation
4. Methodologies for Ethnosymbolic Analysis
5. The Legacy of Romanticism in Iconography: Analyzing the return to nature and the pursuit of authenticity in the representation of landscapes and historical figures.
6. Regional Myths and Their Integration into Visual Narratives
7. Intersections Between Art, Politics, and Culture in the 19th Century
8. The Representation of Myth in the Iconography of the Risorgimento
9. National Symbols and Their Evolution in Risorgimento Art
10. Iconic Figures: The Cornucopia and the Personification of *Italia turrita*
11. The Impact of Iconography on the Construction of Italian Identity
12. Contemporary Reinterpretations of Risorgimento Iconography
13. Conclusions and Final Reflections

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