

LA DOTE: PREPARING FOR A FAMILY

The importance of the dowry in the Australian Italian family

by Maria Tence and Elizabeth Triarico

This essay was written for the Italian Historical Society within the context of the Australian Family Project. The project was a unique collaboration of twenty Victorian institutions who presented separate exhibitions on the Australian family and published a book reflecting the ideas and themes of the exhibitions (The Australian Family: Images and Essays, edited by Anna Epstein, Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 1998). The Italian Historical Society's exhibition by the same title of this essay was presented at the Immigration Museum in November 1998.

The dowry was, and in some societies continues to be, a part of the formalisation process marking the union between man and woman. As well as being an important element in kinship relationships, it provided the material foundation for the establishment of a new family. It was also seen as a tangible expression of the cultural importance placed on the need for family life and the necessity for adequate preparation to be made.

Generally, the dowry reflected the social status of the giver – usually the woman's family – but some items transmitted specific regional customs, familial values and family history that were handed down from mother to daughter. Largely modelled on Roman marriage customs, the dowry tradition was practised across many cultures and classes and endorsed legally in many pre-nineteenth-century European countries such as France, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Portugal and Macedonia.

According to the Roman model, the dowry consisted of three main elements: money and/or land; furniture; and linens. It could also include jewellery. Some scholars assert that a woman's virginity was also an important part of her dowry. While women were traditionally responsible for preparing the linen, the male heads of the respective families negotiated the terms, value and quantity of the other material expected in a dowry.

The only part of the dowry tradition practised by Italians in Australia today is the provision of the linen ware. Its history has been lost through the centuries – those who practise it today are largely ignorant of its ancient purposes.

The dowry in Italy

La dote or the dowry has been a part of Italian social custom since ancient times. In the tradi-

tional patriarchal Italian culture, the birth of a male child was seen as pivotal to the continuity of the family line. However, it was with the birth of a female child that preparation for a new family began. Italian mothers could become preoccupied with the provision of a dowry well before the birth of a daughter, especially with the linen which formed the *corredo* or trousseau. The preparation of a *corredo* invariably involved many family women, as the textile for its production had to be grown, treated, and woven.



*The processing of hemp for the *corredo* often involved three generations of women: grandmother, daughter and niece. This photograph was taken at Arten, Belluno, in 1914. The photographer is also depicted. Source: Canapa e Lana, Comunità Montana Feltrina, Centro per la Documentazione della Cultura Popolare, Quaderno n.2, Feltre 1984.*

In pre-industrial Italy and in other European agrarian societies, the home and providing for the family were the focus of women's lives. A woman's worth was measured by her resourcefulness and productivity, her ingenuity and creative ability. The skills a woman brought with her to a marriage were highly valued. In partic-

ular, a woman's competence in handcrafts contributed to the social and economic well-being of the family. Women were also prized for their ability to manage a successful household. This included all aspects of food production; the ability to understand the use of herbal remedies – acting as the family doctor; understanding seasonal sowing and harvesting; managing household expenses; working raw materials for domestic linens and clothing; acting as mediator in family disputes; and coordinating and contributing to family and community celebrations.

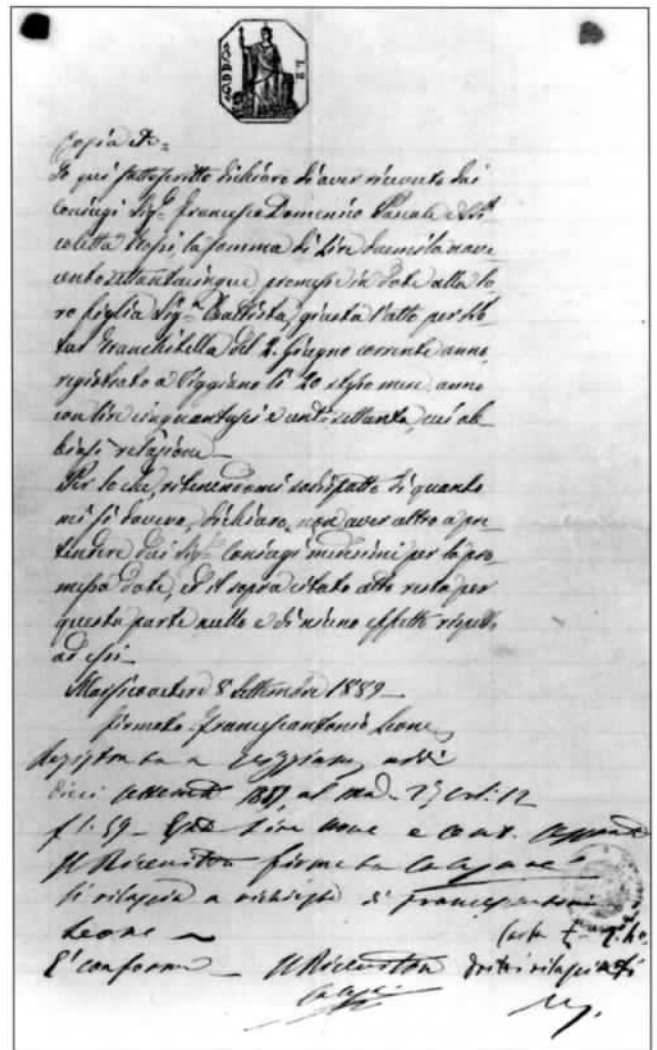
Women were also responsible for upholding family honour and were the custodians of cultural traditions. Each member of the family had clear responsibilities and duties to ensure the survival of the family unit. Daughters were expected to stay at home and help the family (and maintain their virginity) until their elders decided it was time for them to establish their own families. In order to become productive wives and mothers and to improve their marriage prospects, girls received embroidery and dressmaking tuition at a very tender age. They were sent to classes run by professional dressmakers (usually older women or spinsters) and by convents where they not only learned necessary embroidery and needlework skills but also received religious instruction.

In the Catholic tradition, women who entered convents were also expected to bring a dowry – which consisted of personal and communal linens and a purse of money, the amount of which was stipulated by each convent or order. Contrary to the provisions of the conventional dowry, the entire dowry remained with the convent when a nun left her order. It is believed that much of the wealth generated through nuns' dowries was spent on religious artworks by the Catholic church. However, there were also convents that accepted daughters from poor families who relinquished them to convent life because they were unable to provide them with an appropriate dowry.

The notion of family in Italian culture was preserved through religious doctrine and strict social codes. This resulted in the creation of specific civil laws which sanctified family solidarity. In five hundred years of Italian civil law, little changed in the statutes for the creation and provision of a dowry. It was not until 1968, that the Italian civil code governing family law and the provision of a dowry was abolished.

As early as the eleventh century these laws had ensured the birthright of a family's patrimony to the first-born son over that of daughters. However, they also ensured that daughters received a portion of the family's wealth. The purpose of the *constituendam dotem*, the dowry law, in putting a monetary value on each item in the dowry was to bar any further claim to family's assets by the daughter on her future husband.

The dowry thus came to be seen as a pre-nuptial agreement or marriage contract in which the intending couple signed the receipt of goods listed. This exercise was witnessed by their fathers performed by an authorised actuary. The *documento dotale* – dowry document – was then officially registered and executed. A comparison of registered dowry documents of 1458 and one of 1963 shows very little had changed in the items listed, apart from the terminology and economic valuations.



This document, signed and dated in Marsicovetere on 8 September 1889, refers to a monetary payment made to the groom Francescantonio Leone as stipulated in the dowry document of his bride Battista Pascale.

Wealthy families used to add supplementary clauses which guaranteed that in the case of the dissolution of the marriage there would be no further claims on the estate of the woman's family. (Divorce was not allowed but dissolution was, for sexual non-performance, infertility or death). It was not unusual for the agreement to stipulate that the husband would only 'manage or administer the properties transferred to the daughter and was eligible to gain only the *usufrutto* – income – they generated'. This ensured that if the daughter died or the marriage was dissolved, the properties would return to the woman's family or be inherited by her children.

In order to *fare una bella figura* – to save face – and increase marriage prospects for daughters by providing dowries, poor and landless families often incurred massive debts which took many years to repay. Why it was believed that the daughters should not become a drain on the resources of her new family, it was acknowledged that the dowry became a burden on all classes of society. However, the tradition was so widely accepted that it penetrated the very heart of social ideology of the time and was seen as a regulating force in society. The dowry was considered so vital to the marriage prospects of women, that in many Italian kingdoms, trusts and charitable funds were established to provide dowries for destitute or fatherless girls.

The Italian dowry in Australia

These powerful notions of the sanctity of the family and the custom of the dowry were brought to Australia by Italians who came here during the period of mass migration after World War Two. For some tradition took on even greater importance in the alien land, while others abandoned elements of their cultural heritage as irrelevant, oppressive and ancient, and welcomed the opportunity to start afresh in a new country.

The lives of Italian immigrant women changed markedly from those they had known. With the expanding economy of the post-war period and the emergence of feminism, women began to leave their traditional roles in the home and move into the paid work force. Some accumulated wealth and were no longer dependent on the family.

An interesting irony emerged from the story of Italian migrant women employed in the expanding Australian labour force of the 1950s to the 1980s. Thousands of these women were highly

respected as seamstresses and specialist needle-craft workers by the Australian textile and fashion industry – but they were no longer able to devote time to the traditional crafts which were essential for the production of a daughter's *corredo*.



Linen bath towel, woven and embroidered by Lucia Marturano in Sicily in the 1920s in the age of 12. It was handed down to her Australian-born granddaughter Lusiana.

In the past, the *corredo*, a necessary component of the dowry, had been important for women because it allowed them to be creative and gave them a purpose. In Australia this need began to diminish and the *corredo* was provided from manufactured goods purchased from specialist retailers. Immigrant women were therefore less pre-occupied with the provision of their daughter's dowry than they themselves had been. The provision of the dowry was reduced to a generous supply of linen and whatever other material goods, land or money that parents could afford.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, a demand for high-quality imported Italian linen ware and manchester resulted in the establishment of specialist retailers known as emporiums. These large stores sold a wide array of *biancheria* – linen ware – from personal undergarments to elaborate and highly decorative lace ware for the bath, bed and table. The emphasis was on purchasing items that were beautiful but functional. These items were highly-prized because they were considered essential items in setting up a home and preparing for a family.



In post-war Italy, sewing classes were still an important part of a young woman's training for her future role as wife and mother. Here a group of young women from Varapodio, Calabria, are shown with their sewing teacher and some examples of their machine made embroidery. In 1956, when this picture was taken, sewing machines were being used to replace labour-intensive hand embroidery and sewing. Caterina Pisani, centre with checked dress, immigrated to Australia where she, like many others, used her sewing skills as a seamstress.



The interior of the Costanzo Emporium in Coburg c1969. Since the store opened in 1960 it has been a popular place for Italian women buying dowry items for themselves and their daughters. This was one of the first Italian emporiums in Melbourne which developed in response to the dowry tradition of Italian immigrants.

In the 1990s, second-generation Italian women, who are generally better educated and more career-orientated than their mothers, have again changed the idea of a *corredo*. Many daughters today have linen stacked away which they vow they will never use because they do not like it. A recent wedding supplement in the Australian-Italian newspaper *Il Globo*, recognised that, while the tradition of the dowry was no longer relevant, the *corredo* was still a popular custom. Although the quantity of items in a *corredo* has decreased, those now chosen are of the highest quality, reflecting personality and taste rather than necessity.

The woman no longer accumulates material solely to reflect her worth but collects for her own pleasure and use; she purchases a number of high quality functional pieces that will last a life time ... women no longer accumulate for the purpose of marriage but to acquire beautiful items, especially for the home. As a result of this the home is no longer seen as a prison, but a place where they feel safe and secure, and which reflects their taste in fashion.

An example of the generational shift in the significance of the dowry and the current emphasis placed on the *corredo* is evident in the story of Mrs Cannatella, who tells of her mother's dowry, her own dowry and her daughter's *corredo*.

Married in Sicily in the mid-1940s, Mrs Cannatella's dowry, consisted of land, furniture, quantities of wheat, oil and flour, a horse, a donkey – and a *corredo* of items she embroidered herself and some which were purchased by her family. These included six pairs of embroidered bed sheets, towels, underwear and night dresses. She recalls that her mother's *corredo* had been largely made up of items which she herself had hand woven and embroidered. Mrs Cannatella's daughter chose her own *corredo* and decided not to use but to keep the hand-made items as reminders of her family's history.

Today the provision of a dowry no longer exists in its traditional sense. However, parents still try to give their children a start towards establishing their own families by providing the down payment for a house or apartment, or by buying a block of land. The small amount of linen purchased for the *corredo* at the time of the wedding is limited to pieces the daughter will enjoy using. The hand-made items, now treasured family heir-looms, are regarded as symbols of skills and values of a bygone era.

With the mixing of cultural practices drawn from a multicultural Australia, the preparation for a family is seen today to be a shared responsibility. It is expected that both the bride's and the groom's parents will contribute and will stay involved, so that the couple receive continual support from both their families.

REFERENCES

- Bertelli, L. 1985, 'Italian Families' in *Ethnic Family Values in Australia*, Des Storer (ed), Institute of Family Studies, Prentice-Hall of Australia, 1985.
- Borrello, T. & Rauzi, P.G. 1981, *Il Velo Bianco. Saggio sulla dote matrimoniale della donna in un paese agricolo del Meridione*, Franco Angeli, Editore, Milano.
- Chamberlin, E.R. 1983, *The World of Renaissance in Italy*, George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Comaroff, J.L. (ed) 1980, (ed), *The Meaning of Marriage Payments*, Academic Press, New York.
- Fishburne Collier, J. 1988, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies*, Stanford University Press, California.
- Goldthwaite, R.A. 1993, *Wealth and the Demand of Art in Italy 1300-1600*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Klapisch-Zuber, C. 1985, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 'Oggi Sposi 1996', *Il Globo* newspaper, September 16, 1996.
- Muir, E. 1981, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- Penny, J. & Khoo, S.W. 1996, *Intermarriage, A Study of Migration and Integration*, BIMPR, AGPS, Canberra.
- Trambiah, S.J. 1973, *Bridewealth and Dowry*, Jack Goody, Cambridge University Press, London.
- Urlin, Ethel L. 1969, *A Short Story of Marriage*, Singing Tree Press, Detroit.
- Vasta, E. 1992, 'Italian Migrant Women', in *Australia's Italians: Culture and Community in a Changing Society*, Castles, S., Alcorso, C., Rando, G., Vasta, E. (eds), Allen & Unwin, Sydney.