

Italy Cradle of Culture, but do Italians Care? Yes

Judith Harris (January 11, 2017)



A new ISTAT report shocked many here for its showing that one out of every five Italians never, ever reads a newspaper or a book, or attends a cultural event of any kind. On the other hand, it means that four out of five Italians do participate in the nation's vibrant cultural life, beginning with museums.

A new report compiled by the national statistics-gathering agency ISTAT shocked many here for its showing that one out of every five Italians never, ever reads a newspaper or a book, or attends a cultural event of any kind, whether an art exhibition, a movie, concert, soccer match in a stadium or even a night out dancing. Fact is, however, that the figures are less distressing than at first sight. The actual percentage of those who dodge any form of cultural participation is 18.5% (and hence slightly fewer than one out of five).

Even so, this figure means that more than four out of five Italians do participate in the nation's cultural life. Cultural consumption and participation are actually fairly difficult to measure. In Italy the



data comes from counting attendance (how many museum entries, concert and theater tickets sold, etc.) as well as calculating actual participative activities, as in reading books and magazines.

Perhaps the most encouraging news is that the number of visitors to the 4,740 Italian national public, local and private museums and monuments continues to break records, thanks in part to the many Sundays and holidays when free entry is offered. The total number of visitors for 2014 was 40.7 million, with the largest number in the Lazio Region around Rome, 18.5 million, followed by the Campania and Tuscan Regions, each with 6.5 million visitors. The following year, 2015, the figure rose again, with 43 million visitors whose tickets earned \$163 million, according the Culture Minister Dario Franceschini, who also has pointed out that this trend toward an increase in museum attendance is in contrast with negative trends in other countries. "These resources will be entirely devolved to the museums according to a system that rewards the best management and at the same time guarantees the smaller realities," he said. Franceschini has also broken with the bureaucratic tradition of appointing managers from within the system, by naming outsiders, including non-Italians.

In addition, by comparison with the previous year, those Italians who read at least one book rose from 40.5% in 2013 to 41.4% in 2014 to 42% during 2015. The number of moviegoers similarly rose from 49.7% in 2014 to 52% in 2015; two years before this the figure had sagged by almost 8% so this revival is important. On the other hand, the bad news is that those who have no cultural participation whatsoever tend to be from the Italian South (28.6%) with the curious exception of Sardinia, perhaps a result of its Piedmontese heritage. The South also shows a particularly low female participation in the national culture, by contrast with the North, where female participation is 10% higher than that of the men.

Not surprisingly, newspaper readership is waning, down 3.2% in just one year. However, this is actually fairly positive by comparison with the United States where, according to Pew research covering the same year as the ISTAT report, weekday newspaper circulation fell by 7%, more than twice the drop in Italy, while U.S. print media advertising revenue sank by 8%. Whereas it is assumed that reading news on line compensates for the decline in hard copy newspaper reading, this is a fallacy, at least in the U.S., since only 5% read the news on solely on their desktop; another 5% on a mobile phone; and 7% on both. Even digital advertising revenue declined.

Why has museum attendance surged so dramatically? One reason is that, under Minister Franceschini, a campaign has been launched to encourage the public. Art historian and former museum director Salvatore Settis, on the other hand, criticizes the new management trend for its bringing a "visible disinvestment on the part of the territorial Superintendencies, which have ever fewer personnel and resources" while required to handle more administrative responsibilities.

The museum, in short, is not the whole story because, as Settis points out, the peculiarity of Italy's entire territory is the capillary diffusion of its culture throughout the land, "the perfect osmosis between the 'small' and the 'large,' between the museum and the city."

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