

Diana Garvin – Short Form Course Proposal

ITAL-UA 173: Prada, Vespa, Nutella: Contemporary Italian History through Design

Level: Beginner-Intermediate

Prerequisites: Reading knowledge of Italian is desirable, but by no means necessary.

Cross-listings: ARTH-UA-173, EURO-UA- 173, HIST-UA 173, MCC-GE 173

Notes: This interdisciplinary course, taught in English, serves as a gateway to attract undergraduate students into pursuing language and literature courses in the Italian Studies field by using iconic products to introduce Italian culture and history. Depending on departmental needs, this course could also be taught in Italian as “Prada, Vespa, Nutella, Storia: l’identità italiana attraverso le marche iconiche,” an introduction to Italian writing that takes material culture as its focus.

Course Description: If an object is “Made in Italy,” why use English phrasing? To investigate the relationship between artisanal tradition and commercial globalization, students analyze six case studies of iconic Italian brands: Prada, Vespa, San Pellegrino, Barilla, Ferrari, and a fifth brand of their choice. Examining the stories of these brands provides a tangible approach to Italy’s complex economic, legal, and political history. We focus primarily on the products themselves, asking, “Who crafts these objects, and for whom? How are they really used, and why?” Students study design evolution through pictorial, textual, and video representations to determine the socio-economic, gender, and racial categories evoked through advertising campaigns as well as the physical properties of squat jars of Nutella and soft-shouldered San Pellegrino bottles.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe how 6 iconic Italian brands synthesize aspects of Italian history
- Appreciate that object design functions as a material language
- Understand the relationship between economic conditions surrounding manufacturing and the object produced
- Interpret the significance of advertising campaigns and ensuing media controversy
- Evaluate the cultural significance of commercial relationships between Italy, the United States, and China
- Design an independent project analyzing the cultural significance of an Italian brand or product not covered in this course

Required Reading:

- Italian Design: 1870 to the Present by Penny Sparke
- Schiaparelli & Prada: Impossible Conversations by Andrew Bolton, Harold Koda and Judith Thurman
- The Ferrari Phenomenon: An Unconventional View of the World’s Most Charismatic Cars by Matt Stone and Luca del Monte
- Vespa by Valerio Boni

Reading Selections for Blackboard:

- Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies ed. Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry
- Barilla: 125 Years of Advertising and Communication vol. I-II ed. Giancarlo Gonizzi
- Gomorra by Roberto Saviano

Additional Books if taught in Italian:

- Made in Italy: Storia del design italiano di Renato de Fusco
- Gnam! Storia Sociale della Nutella di Gigi Padovani