



Exhibition

*From Ore to God:
Giuseppe Moretti's
Sculptures and the
Italian Migrant
Experience in the
Birmingham District*

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
Religion(s) and Cultural Production(s)
of the Italian Diaspora(s)
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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the state of Alabama, the so called *Heart of Dixie*, hosted the second largest Italian community in the American South outside of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Michael Toumey, *The first geological map of Alabama*, 1849. In addition to the coal and iron ore found in central Alabama, this map depicts resources such as Sylacauga marble, petroleum and natural gas, and even a few gold mines.

First settled in Mobile, where they were employed mainly in the cotton industry, most Italians were attracted by a rapidly growing city, whose economy was based on ore mining and would soon become the Steel City of the South. Birmingham, Alabama, saw its population rise to 132.000 in 1910, and became the main economic and financial hub of the state, thus earning itself the nickname of *Magic City*.

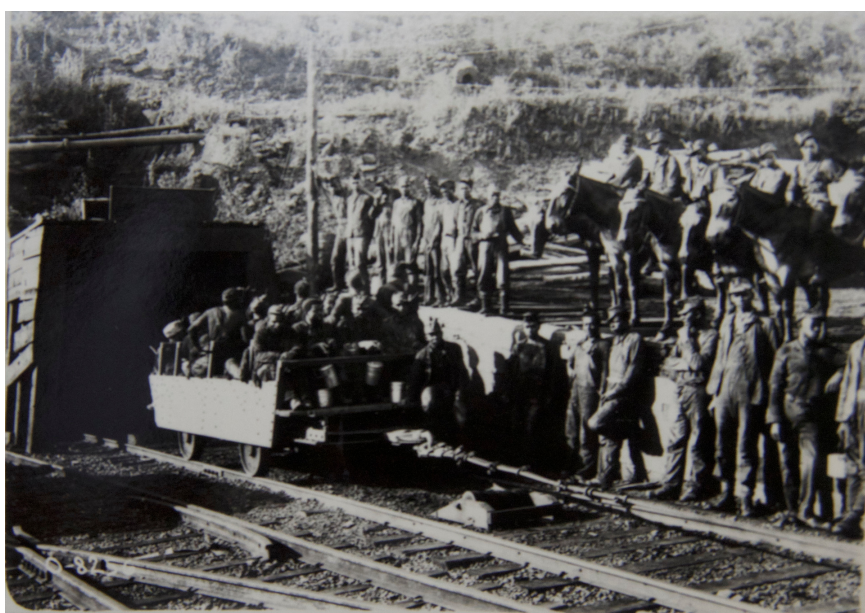


At the beginning of the twentieth century, a small community of Italians settled in Birmingham. Their integration was not easy. The state of Alabama was geographically at the hearth of the seven confederate states that believed in slavery as common social and work practice. In this context, the very first Italian settlers of the area were often excluded from the migrants of "desirable white race" and were confined to shantytowns located nearby the main mining sites, such as Bessemer, Ensley, and Thomas.



Furnace of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company, Ensley, Alabama, 1906.

Most of these workers were sent to the mines owned by Tennessee Coal & Iron Company (TCI), while some others were employed by the Republic Iron and Steel Co. In the mines, had to endure backbreaking shifts of 10-12 hours per day, being paid around 15 cents per hour. The women took care of the household and would enter the economic frame only at a later stage, once their families open a shop or a grocery store.



Miners waiting to start their shift in West Blocton, Alabama, circa 1906.
Photo courtesy of Samford University Library, Special Collections.

A rather large Italian community settled around the mining site of West Blocton at the turn of the century. Most of these people moved to Birmingham around 1922 once the pits were closed. A few years before, a *Little Italy* had been established in *The Hollow*, a small stripe of hillside land situated right next to the iron ore mines. The members of this community had to endure numerous acts of open hostility both from the whites and the African Americans. The sound of the word *dago* soon became eerily familiar for the Italian immigrants.



Picture of West Blocton, AL, early twentieth century. The suburb is often referred to as *Dago Town* in coeval newspapers. Photo courtesy of Samford University Library, Special Collections.



The poor hygienic conditions in which Italian immigrants were forced to live are documented by State surveys. Photo courtesy of Samford University Library, Special Collections.



Entrance to workers' accommodation. West Blocton, Alabama, circa 1910.
Photo courtesy of Samford University Library, Special Collections.



Sleeping quarters. West Blocton, Alabama, circa 1910.
Photo courtesy of Samford University Library, Special Collections.

In order to leave the tiring life of the mines, the Italians of Birmingham started to work as fruit peddlers and vendors. They purchased property and most of them subsequently established very successful family run businesses, especially grocery stores (known as "Mom and Pop" stores). The lack of racial prejudices against African Americans allowed the Italians of the Birmingham District to climb the social ladder: offering credit to fellow discriminated people, who were often not allowed to buy goods in other white stores, Italian families could count on a steady and significant income.



Ensley, Alabama, 1937.

Even though they represented only less than 1% of the total population of the state of Alabama (2.160), the Italians of the Birmingham District thus prospered and gained a relevant role within the social fabrics of *Magic City*, now commonly called, after the exponential growth of its steel industry, as the Pittsburgh of the South.

A notable Italian arrived in Birmingham from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1923. Italian sculptor Giuseppe Moretti (1857-1935) had moved to the industrial hub of the Northeast in 1895 and resided there for almost thirty years.

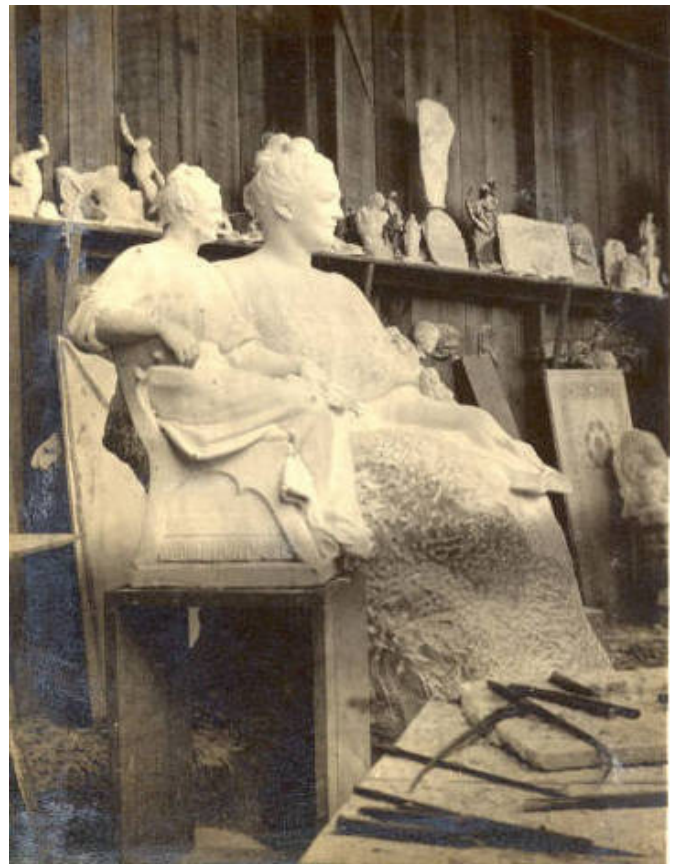


Giuseppe Moretti,
Black and white
portrait, 1912.



Giuseppe Moretti's home and
studio on Bigelow Avenue in
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1916.

Moretti's passion for marble, his favorite medium, started at the age of 9 in Siena and was life-long. Looking for an American substitute for the Carrara marble he was used to import at the beginning of his career in the US, Moretti visited the marble quarries around Sylacauga, Alabama, and when he saw the marble outcroppings of Talladega County, he immediately sought backing to purchase the land. Over a period of twenty years, Moretti invested in at least ten different marble companies to quarry and promote Alabama marble. The Talladega Marble Company, Moretti's first venture capital marble business founded in 1905, was perhaps his most elaborate marble complex.



Interior of Giuseppe Moretti's studio
in Talladega, Alabama, 1920s.

Geneva Mercer (1889 – 1984), a young Alabama artist, came into Moretti household in 1907, never to leave again until the death of both Giuseppe and Dorothea Moretti. Her letters and descriptions of their work and travels reveal a literary gift and the eye of an artist who sees every detail. Moretti and Mercer worked together as a creative unit. He did the designs in small sketches and Geneva would check the measurements and help translate them into large versions in clay or wax.



Giuseppe Moretti with his wife Dorothea and his student and associate Geneva Mercer. Mercer stands on the viewer's right.



Giuseppe Moretti's house in Sylacauga, Alabama, late 1920s.

Throughout his life, Moretti's love for classicism found its natural output in marble sculptures of religious theme. First in Siena, under the guidance of Tito Serocchi, and later at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence, Moretti learned to carve the marble directly with hammer and chisel, working from sketch so to have an "intimacy with the stone". He would then use this technique when carving his *Head of Christ* in Birmingham, in 1904.



G. Moretti, *Head of Christ*, 1904. Courtesy of Alabama Public Library, Archives Department. Moretti considered this to be his personal magnum opus and carved the bust by hand from Alabama marble. It is now on display at Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.



G. Moretti, *Madonna Enthroned*, 1920s.
Courtesy of Alabama Public Library,
Archives Department.



G. Moretti, *I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life*, 1930s.
Courtesy of Alabama Public Library, Archives Department.



G. Moretti, *Angel*, date unknown.
Courtesy of Alabama Public Library,
Archives Department.

Moretti carved a few angels and
angel-like figures throughout his life.
One of these would later be adorning
his tombstone in Sanremo, Italy.





G. Moretti, *Benedicite*, 1920s. Courtesy of Alabama Public Library, Archives Department.

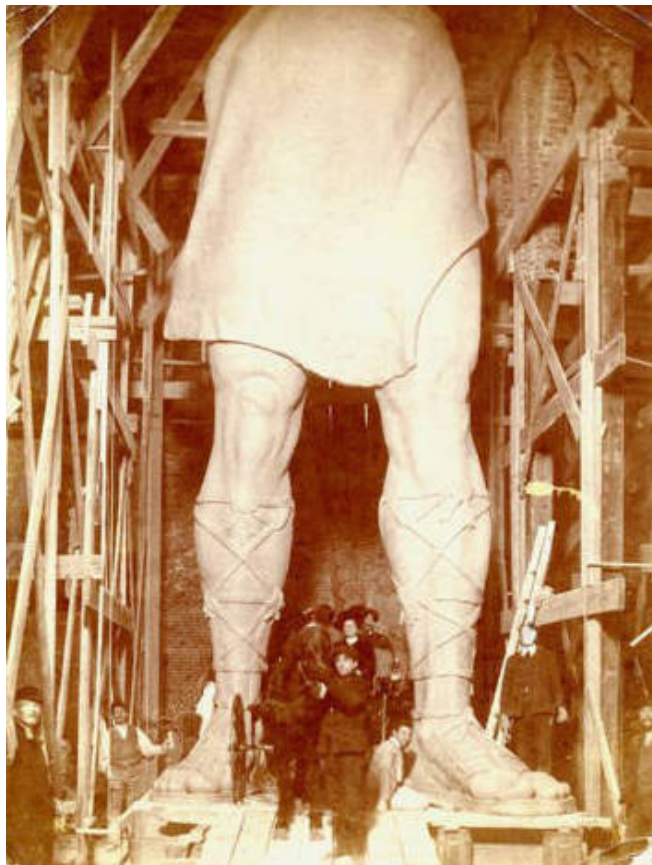
At the start of the twentieth century, Birmingham was a booming New South industrial center. With the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair approaching, journalist and promoter James MacKnight had the idea for an exhibit that could represent the Birmingham District's industrial might – a giant man of iron.



Armed with the support of the Commercial Club (today's Chamber of Commerce), MacKnight went looking for an artist to help realize his vision and found inspired Italian-born sculptor Giuseppe Moretti, who accepted the challenge to create a 56-foot statue of iron in a few short months. This would make Moretti's Vulcan the largest cast-iron statue in the world. A record that is still extant.

Giuseppe Moretti with a clay model of what would become Vulcan statue.

After Moretti's design was approved he moved ahead quickly, building a full-sized clay model in upper and lower halves from which plaster casts were created. He shipped the plaster pieces from New Jersey to Birmingham by rail and then traveled to Birmingham to oversee the casting. Due to the vast scale, short schedule and intricate detail, the casting process was one of the most challenging ever undertaken in the city.



Vulcan statue's full-size plaster cast in Giuseppe Moretti's studio.

Vulcan was cast from Sloss pig iron at Birmingham Steel and Iron Company. Foundry workers spent weeks on elaborate preparations, which included digging an enormous hole in the middle of the foundry floor to accommodate the large pieces. Around each piece, foundry workers built molds out of brick and loam (a sticky mixture of clay and sand). Then they baked the molds to harden them and finally assembled every piece around a core. The space in between was then filled with molten iron.



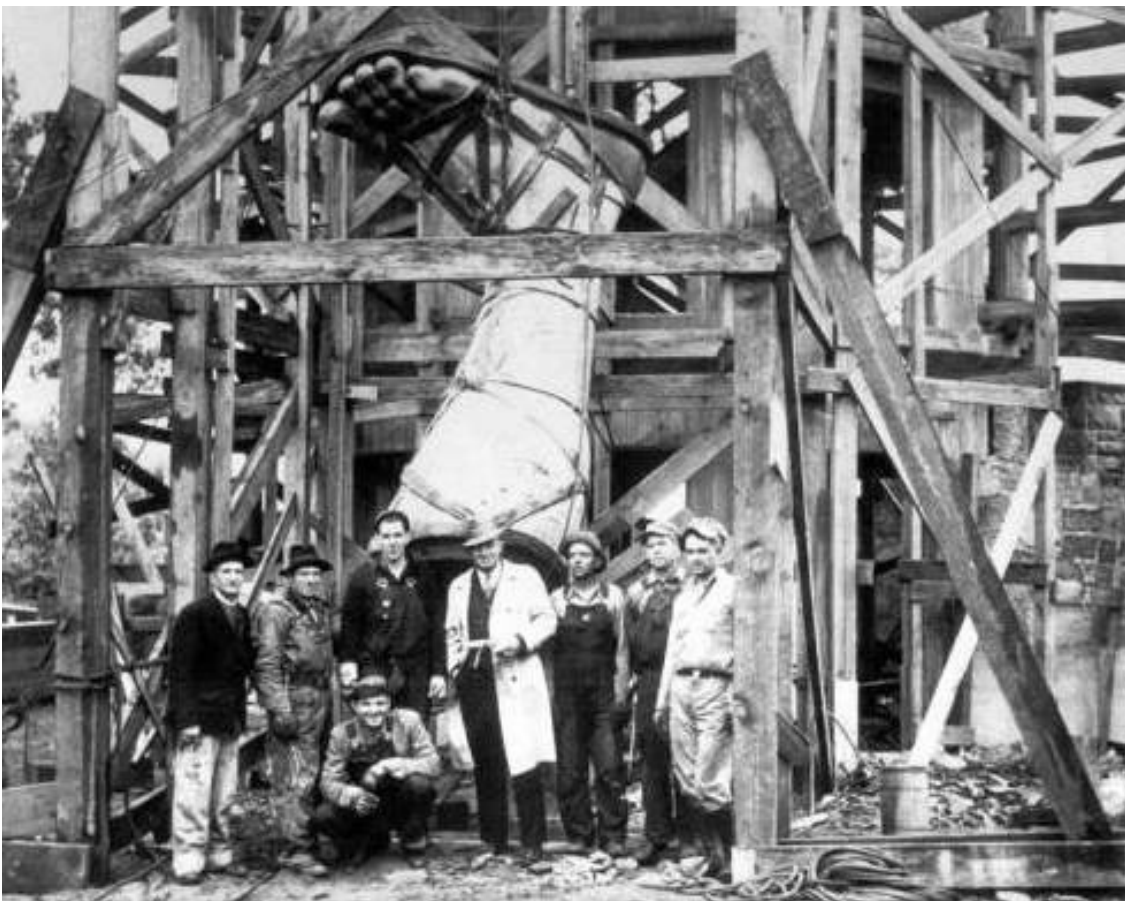
Hardworking Birminghamians cast the statue's parts in less than three months, working long hours every day and spending the nights at the factory in order to complete the job on time for the fair.

Workers posing with the full-scale Vulcan clay cast.

After the fair, Vulcan returned to Birmingham, and in October 1906, it was temporarily assembled at the Alabama State Fair Grounds with his arm on backwards, where he stood for the next thirty years. Moretti would later express his unhappiness for the disrespect shown to the statue, for he did not feel that it did justice to the model he had made. Moretti did not live to see his work put in a place of honor on Red Mountain overlooking Birmingham at Vulcan Park, which opened May 13, 1939.



Vulcan statue at the Alabama State Fair Grounds, Birmingham, Alabama, 1906.



Vulcan's leg being raised to the top of the pedestal at the newly built Vulcan Park atop of Red Mountain Park, Birmingham, Alabama.

In October 1999, a badly weathered Vulcan was removed from its pedestal to undergo an extensive restoration. By October 2001, the Vulcan Park Foundation had raised a sufficient amount of funds to start the project. The whole of Vulcan Park, once created with the vital contribution of Italian stone-cutters and masons, also underwent a major overhaul in 2002.



Vulcan as it looked like before being dismantled and renovated in 2001. The old tower on which the statue stood was also demolished in the process.

The statue was reinstated in 2003. In accordance to Giuseppe Moretti's original artistic intent it was positioned about 15 degrees east, so that the anvil and the base of the pedestal would be closer to his left side rather than behind him. A new hammer and a spearpoint were also cast. On June 23, 2003, about one year before his 100th birthday, the Roman god of fire and forge once again pointed to the horizon over Birmingham, a memento of the city's past and present economic strength, and a southern homage to the colossus's Italian "father".



The entrance to the newly built sandstone Vulcan tower.