

## Italian Canadiana

# Mantoan, Diego. Lionello Perera: An Italian Banker and Patron in New York

Paul Baxa

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Volume 38, numéro 1, printemps 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111803ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v38i1.43417>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Baxa, P. (2024). Compte rendu de [Mantoan, Diego. Lionello Perera: An Italian Banker and Patron in New York]. *Italian Canadiana*, 38(1), 108–110.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v38i1.43417>

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**Mantoan, Diego. *Lionello Perera: An Italian Banker and Patron in New York*. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2023. Pp. 219 + 67 illustrations. ISBN 978-1-64889-575-3 (paperback) US\$80.**

Lionello Perera has been a largely forgotten and obscure figure in Italian-American history. Diego Mantoan, an art historian who teaches at the University of Palermo, aims to make Perera more well known in this largely sympathetic biography. Given access to family archives via one of Perera's grandchildren, Mantoan paints a picture of the Italian-American community in New York through this Venetian banker who emigrate to the United States in the late nineteenth century. Significantly, Perera did not emigrate through economic need – unlike most Italian immigrants – but due to a job opportunity offered by his uncle who had started the first Italian-American bank in the 1860s.

Rather than give a chronological biography of Perera, Mantoan chooses to divide his book into the main activities of his protagonist. They are banker, philanthropist, patron, and representative of the Italian-American community. Born and raised in Venice, Perera hailed from an Italian-Jewish family of Sephardic ancestry. Following in the family tradition of banking, Perera was an early graduate of the University of Venice's business program at Ca' Foscari. His uncle, Salvatore Cantoni, had immigrated to America in the 1860s where he established a successful bank that catered to the growing Italian-American community. In the 1890s, Cantoni convinced his recently graduated nephew to come and work for him. Combing through the family papers and contemporary news reports, Mantoan suggests that there was a sense of urgency in Cantoni's request as he was enveloped in a potential scandal involving an extramarital affair that jeopardized the future of his bank. Hoping to keep the bank out of the hands of his sons-in-law, who were not Italian, Cantoni tapped Lionello as his successor.

Mantoan's account of Lionello's business, which he inherited from Cantoni after his uncle's sudden death, gives us a glimpse into the wild world of early-twentieth-century banking. Despite the lack of business records, Mantoan uses contemporary press accounts to demonstrate Perera's success in building on his uncle's bank to the point of opening a second branch in Harlem. In the buildup to the Wall Street Crash of 1929, Perera's bank was not immune to the alternating fortunes of the largely unregulated world of American banking. In 1926, there was a run on the bank, which forced Perera to directly intervene by hauling thousands of dollars of cash bills across town

to placate panicking customers. After this near disaster, Perera worked with the Giannini bankers of the West Coast on a merger that eventually led to the creation of the Bank of America, only for it to be lost in a hostile takeover bid by Citibank founder Charles Mitchell, one of the architects of the Wall Street Crash in 1929.

After these events, Perera retired and spent the rest of his life focusing on philanthropy and patronage. During the First World War, Perera had been the Italian-American representative for the Italian Red Cross. Mantoan references some articles written by Perera about his activities in the journal *Il Carroccio*. These are some of the very few writings of Perera. Making up for the lack of written sources, Mantoan uses his powers as an art historian to get at the intimate Perera through his art collection and a description of his home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Designed by Harry Allan Jacobs, the townhome is in the Art Deco style, reflecting Perera's modernist tastes. Using photographs from the family archives, Mantoan examines the six paintings by the Venetian artist Pietro Longhi in the house's sitting room. The placing of these paintings, which depict scenes from eighteenth-century Venice, are not accidental, according to Mantoan. Rather, they give us the most accurate glimpse into Perera's values and outlook. Mantoan admits that some of this analysis is a stretch. Yet this exercise in inference reveals Perera's passion for *Italianità* and the contribution that Italian immigrants could make to America. It was in this parlour that Perera's love for the arts was on full display and where he entertained guests, especially from the world of music. A frequent visitor was Arturo Toscanini, who ended up becoming close friends with Lionello and his wife. They shared not only a love for music but also a commitment to anti-fascism.

Politics is the focus of the book's final section. As a promoter of Italian culture, Perera found himself in a difficult spot in the 1920s with the rise of Mussolini's regime in Italy. Like the rest of the community, Perera found himself under pressure from two sides after the First World War. In the United States, Italian Americans faced a rising tide of anti-immigrant feeling. At the same time, pressure from their native country came in the form of Mussolini's regime and its propaganda, which aimed to make the diaspora pro-fascist. A convinced supporter of American democracy, Perera rejected fascism, a view that became firmer when Mussolini passed the Racial Laws in 1938, a fact that ended Perera's annual visits to Italy. Tragically, his family in Italy would suffer through the Holocaust with one of Perera's sisters perishing in Auschwitz. Struggling to navigate these tensions, Perera took refuge in his friendship

with the Italian-American politician Fiorello La Guardia, who became mayor of New York City in 1934. La Guardia shared Perera's Italian-Sephardic Jewish heritage and firm democratic beliefs.

Mantoan has written a valuable book that brings to light the story of an obscure but important figure in America's Italian community. Paradoxically, Perera remains a somewhat distant figure in the book. This is due to the lack of written sources from Perera and the loss of his banking company's records. Using inference and speculation, which Mantoan admits by his use of the word "probable" on several occasions, the book never really penetrates Perera's personality. Oddly, Mantoan does not make much use of the few written sources, such as his articles in *Il Carroccio* or the few letters at his disposal. In the final chapter, Mantoan references an important letter dictated by Perera to his wife regarding rising antisemitism in Italy. For reasons that are unclear, Mantoan does not directly quote from the letter except for a passage written by Perera's wife. Nor does he reproduce it among the other documents illustrated in the book. Despite these shortcomings, there is much to be gained from Mantoan's book and, hopefully, it will serve to inspire other biographies of less-well-known shapers of the Italian-American community.

PAUL BAXA

*Ave Maria University*