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Giuseppe Versino

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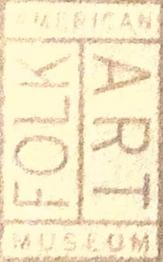
American Folk Art Museum

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American Folk Art Museum
New York

WHEN THE CURTAIN NEVER COMES DOWN

Performance Art and the Alter Ego

Essay and entries by
Valérie Rousseau

Foreword by
Anne-Imelda Radice

With contributions by
Mario del Curto
Beate Echols
Savine Faupin
Gustavo Giacosa
Stefan Hartmaier
Thomas J. Lax
Gianluigi Mangiapane
Martin Mangold

Judith McWillie
Viviane Morin
Hans Ulrich Obrist
Ricardo Resende
Thomas Röske
Lisa Spindler
Michel Thévoz

GIUSEPPE VERSINO

(1882–1963, Italy)

“The patient affected by early dementia, Mr. G. Versino, admitted at the psychiatric hospital in Collegno, is in charge of everyday cleaning. He, after using rags, washes them, then frays them, and finally shapes drawstrings in order to weave his clothes together. The weight of this dress, which he always wears, both in summer and wintertime, is ninety-five pounds. It will take him about one month to make his dress.” This note was probably written by Professor Antonio Marro (see Giorgio Colombo, *La Scienza Infelice*, 1975), and is associated with two photographs of Giuseppe Versino, who was a patient at the psychiatric hospital in Collegno, Italy (in the Piedmont area close to Turin) in the early twentieth century. In these pictures, Versino is wearing some of his handmade attire. For a long time, this represented the only information known about the artist and his creations.

The “clothing monument,” as it was named by Colombo, was made with red, cream, and blue cotton strips woven together, and comprised one long tunic and a short one, a pair of pants, and a scarf, along with a pair of boots; today the costume is housed at the Cesare Lombroso Museum of Criminal Anthropology of the University of Turin. An additional clothing monument is kept at the university’s Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography and consists of a long tunic, a short tunic, a pair of pants, two hats, a bag, and a pair of boots.

Versino’s creations were recovered by Antonio Marro, medical manager of the psychiatric hospitals in Turin and Collegno and assistant to psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso at the cabinet of forensic medicine. Marro gave them to Lombroso, founder of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and to his son, Giovanni, who studied with Lombroso, in 1926. Marro was effectively influenced, like many other psychiatrists at that time, by Lombroso’s interpretation of the connection between madness and artistic production. As a consequence he started to show interest in the objects his patients created, which were often made with recyclable materials, not only for their aesthetic value but for their scientific meaning: they could be used as evidence for Lombroso’s theories on criminality, genius, and madness. This type of work would be reevaluated in



the context of Heidelberg's clinical psychiatric studies in 1920 and by artist Jean Dubuffet's definition of *art brut* in 1945.

No specific references to these clothes have been found in either Lombroso's documents or in those written by Antonio or Giovanni Marro. The lack of documentation does not permit us to trace Versino's life back within the psychiatric hospital or to examine the causes that drove him to create those works. Thanks to recent research carried out at the archive of the former psychiatric hospital in Collegno, however, Versino's medical records have been found. Although they make no reference to his artistic production, it is possible to confirm his first name, Giuseppe, and to determine that he was born in Giaveno, Turin, on October 10, 1882, and died in the same town on April 10, 1963. Versino was hospitalized for the first time for schizophrenia in Collegno, where he was treated by Antonio Marro in 1902. Over the following years, he was in and out of the hospital many times until 1913. This is the last record we have concerning his hospitalization. Gianluigi Mangiapane

Above and page 119: Giuseppe Versino, *Dress* (detail above), early twentieth century, cotton and woven rags, 57 1/4 x 43 1/4 x 19 3/4 in., Museo di Antropologia Criminale Cesare Lombroso, Turin, Italy, I-01R0178462

Following page: Giuseppe Versino, *Shirt, Trousers, and Boots*, early twentieth century, cotton and woven rags, shirt, 32 3/8 x 31 1/2 x 13 1/4 in., trousers, 41 3/4 x 20 1/2 x 9 1/2 in., boots 13 x 15 1/4 x 13 3/8 in., Museo di Antropologia Criminale Cesare Lombroso, Turin, Italy, 2-01R0178462, 1.2-01R0178462, and 1.4-01R0178462