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# Costanza Di Capua Di Capua (December 17, 1912 - May 5, 2008)

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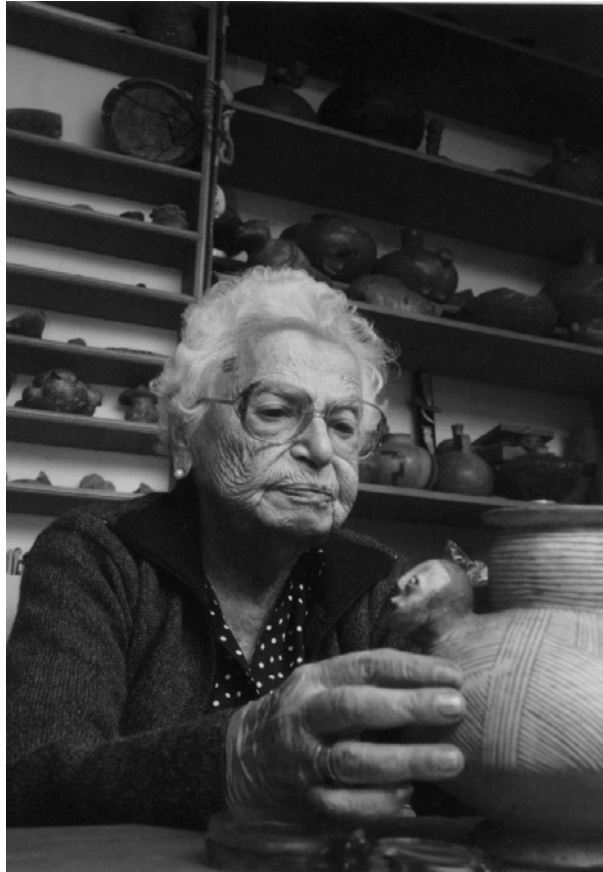
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COSTANZA DI CAPUA DI CAPUA ( DECEMBER 17, 1912 - MAY 5, 2008)

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*Costanza Di Capua examines a pot in her collection. Portrait by Jacob Blickenstaff (2006).*

Costanza Di Capua died unexpectedly in her Quito home in the early morning of May 5, 2008, at the age of 95. She was a dear friend of mine for over thirty years. We met when the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, called me and asked if I would guide a visitor from Ecuador. No one there knew anything at all about that

country and I had, at least, been there once! The visitor was Costanza. We spent the day together, looking at the displays, including type collections from Cerro Narrío, some materials from the Caribbean littoral, plus the usual flotsam that ends up in museum corners, going out to lunch, and talking all day. After that we met whenever she and her husband Alberto

came to San Francisco to visit their son, and I stayed with them many times in Quito, when I was doing archaeological research in Ecuador. We talked, argued, and gossiped, and had a wonderful time. Speaking with Costanza brought a breath of fresh air. She did not look at life like most of my academic friends do; she pursued her interests out of her own passion. Talking with Costanza was always stimulating, often a revelation, and sometimes, many times, I was far out of my depth.

As Frank Salomon, another old friend has said (personal communication, September 2008):

Yes, it's true, conversations with Costanza were like no other conversations. To the end (we last met less than a year before her death) her focus and tenacity were absolutely strict. You had to be one hundred percent awake to take part in those conversations! But at the same time she was intellectually generous. The last thing she gave me was her paper on the place of Dante in Italian Jewish tradition, which I enjoyed mightily as I read it on a bus bumping down to Saraguro. She was a living outcrop of the very best of pre-WW II European humanism, setting an example that very few people now know how to follow. But we are trying.

Costanza Di Capua was born in Rome, to an old Italian Jewish family. She attended school there, gaining an excellent education with an emphasis on Latin, Greek, philosophy, and literature. She was awarded a Ph.D. in Modern Languages in 1935 from the Università "La Sapienza". Her doctoral dissertation is titled *Joseph Roth, Kafka, Brod, and Judaism*. Costanza spoke Italian, Spanish, French, and English fluently, although she preferred to write and to present talks in either Italian or Spanish.

The latter half of the 1930s was a tense time for Italian Jews. Mussolini enacted a series of anti-Semitic laws that made it difficult for Jews to earn a living, get an education, or even, eventually, to move safely in the streets. Costanza met her cousin, Alberto Di Capua, in 1938, shortly before Alberto emigrated to Ecuador. Alberto then proposed to his cousin by mail and she sailed alone to Ecuador to marry him in 1940. They set up housekeeping in a home in Calle Juan Rodríguez in the Amazonas district of Quito, then called Calle de las Casas Rojas because the houses had red roofs and fronts that imitated brick. Costanza lived in this house with Alberto to the end of both their lives. It was here that their three children, Ana Rosa, Marco, and Alejandro were born.

Alberto had begun a pharmaceutical business, Laboratorios Industriales Farmacéuticos Ecuatorianos (LIFE), which soon grew to prosperity and importance. Costanza was a homemaker, somewhat at loose ends in this new land, and she threw herself into family life.

Costanza was extremely fond of music and the cultural life of Quito in the 1940s and '50s was not all that great. She got her relatives to give her phonograph records of classical music for her birthdays and anniversaries. Every Sunday she had her friends over to listen to music.

Costanza became an Ecuadorian citizen in 1951 and, as her children grew and started school, she began to enter into cultural and community affairs. She was instrumental in establishing the first Jewish temple in Quito during the 1950s and, in the 1960s, was the intellectual leader and whip of a group of citizens who established the Quito Philharmonic Orchestra. She remained active in temple and cultural affairs until her death.

In 1959, her children nearly grown, she began to collect Ecuadorian precolumbian art.

She was immediately attracted to the topic and became interested in iconography, so she began to study anthropology. This eventually resulted in a number of her most widely read and appreciated publications. Her interest led her into a long friendship, and an active collaboration, with Hernán Crespo Toral in the founding of the Museo del Banco Central del Ecuador as the national museum of archaeology, anthropology, and history.

She also turned to the wonders of her new city. She was sensitive to the baroque because of her exposure to it in her native land. When she went to Quito she became interested in the Quito baroque. Because she was not a Roman Catholic, she had a certain detachment and her works are free of the stultifying religiosity of many studies of church art and architecture. Her interest resulted in a small bilingual guidebook published in 1965, *Quito Colonial*. This was the first work of its type ever published in Ecuador and this book, coupled with Costanza's other efforts, was important in the establishment, in 1978, of the colonial quarter as one of UNESCO's Heritage of Humanity sites.

Their children grown, Alberto and Costanza traveled to the United States and Europe with some frequency on both business and family affairs and then, when Alberto retired and his health started to fail, they took numerous cruises. However Costanza (out of Alberto's hearing) referred to these vacations as "another 2 weeks on the Love Boat". She found them boring, but gladly went because it was a way her beloved Alberto could take a vacation.

Alberto died in 1997. Costanza, who had kept him alive for the last decade of his life by sheer force of will, was devastated. However, she was pulled from the excesses of mourning by the need to catalogue Alberto's (and her) books and paintings and by the desire to preserve her own freedom of action. Her children, worried

about her apparently declining health (a reaction to the death of her Alberto and to the years of worry and work that had gone into making the end of his life as pleasant as possible), wanted her to move to a high-rise apartment. The Amazonas district had become a tourist area and most of the houses on Juan Rodríguez were now hotels or worse. A rough element had moved in and Costanza said she often let transvestite prostitutes hide from the police in the garden. Homosexuality was illegal, and very heavily punished in Ecuador at the time. Costanza, who was a practical as well as a worldly person, did not approve. Costanza really didn't want to leave the house where she and Alberto had spent their lives together and, fortunately, her grandson Eduardo Kohn Di Capua, was in Ecuador, using his Nona's house as a home base while he did his field research in anthropology in the Amazon region. Eduardo worked out a system whereby, when he wasn't there, Costanza had a nurse-companion at night as well as a secretary-companion most days. Because there were also servants in the house, this was enough to ensure her safety and well-being. Also, her son and grandchildren in Quito, as well as Ana Rosa's children visited her frequently, as did many other people.

Costanza was nearly blind and very deaf for the last decade of her life, but it did not slow her down a bit. Costanza was an indefatigable traveler, visiting her children and grandchildren in the United States and her old home and friends and family in Italy and Europe. At 90, her son Marco being stationed in Delhi, she traveled to India. Marco had visited Benares and described to his mother the sun rising over the Ganges. Costanza, whose interest in Dante was always phenomenal, remembered that, for Dante, Jerusalem was the center of the earth, and the sun rose in Benares and set at Gibraltar. So she had to go to India to see the sun rising for herself!

Despite many honors from universities and institutes, Costanza never had an institutional affiliation, although she could have had one for the asking. She did not think of herself as a professional, but as a gifted and curious amateur. Considering that she was far more knowledgeable than many of my professional colleagues, and had a gift of insight into problems that was extremely penetrating, one wonders if an academic affiliation is really all that it is cracked up to be! Certainly, in Costanza's case it made no difference at all in the quality of her thought and her publications. Not being pushed to "publish or perish", she was free to mull over problems until she had resolved them to her own satisfaction. Her publications were limited, mainly by her own perfectionism and the fact that she was busy, as Patricia Netherly once said, "ruling the universe". However, she always viewed her family as first and herself as second and their needs or demands had priority, even though she frequently (at least to me) complained about never having time of her own to work on her projects. Then she would laugh and say, "well, my family needs me and my friends do too" and that was that. Costanza was a matriarch and not just of her own family. She looked after all sorts of visiting or passing scholars—archaeologists, historians, artists, writers, whoever. She had an active social life and was much involved in the archaeological, literary, and musical communities of Quito.

Costanza gave a great many talks, including, in her last year of life, several at the Museo del Banco Central, on iconographic themes dear to her heart. She also spoke to Italian groups in Quito and to other cultural institutions on a wide range of topics. Costanza was elected a member of the Institute of Andean Studies in Berkeley in 1979, where she presented a paper "Further Evidence of a Trophy Head Cult in Pre-Columbian Ecuador" at the annual meeting that year. This was an elaboration of her paper on trophy heads and head shrinking in Tolita

that she had published the year before. Other honors included official recognition by UNESCO in 2003 of her role in the preservation of colonial Quito. In 2005 the Municipio of Quito awarded her the medal of the Order of Barón de Carondelet for her cultural efforts, and the Government of Ecuador in 2006 bestowed upon her the Gold Medal for Civic and Cultural Merit. She was also presented an Italian decoration, the Order of a Cavalier of the Star of Italian Solidarity. On April 17, 2008 the Casa de la Música of Quito rendered homage to Costanza with a special concert in honor of her role in founding the Quito Philharmonic.

Costanza Di Capua is survived by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Her daughter, Ana Rosa Di Capua de Kohn of Princeton, New Jersey, has two children, Eduardo and Emma. Eduardo and his family live in Montreal. Eduardo has two sons, Benjamin and Lucas (the latter born after Costanza's death). Costanza's son Marco, the Embassy Energy Advisor for the United States' Ambassador in Beijing, and his wife Anne, have two daughters, Kathleen and Emily, who work and study in the United States. Alejandro, Costanza's other son, and his wife Cecilia Saco to live in Quito. Their three children, Daniela, Ana Gabriela, and Carlos Alberto, all study in Spain. Doña Costanza is also survived by a host of friends, all of whom mourn her and celebrate their good fortune at having known her.

One of these friends, Frank Salomon, recalls (personal communication, September 31, 2008):

. . . one of the last things she wrote (in 2006, I think) was an essay on the memory of Dante Alighieri among Italian Jews. It was really about many things besides Dante, being in truth a meditation on the humane symbiosis that Christianity and Judaism enjoyed in some parts of Italian history, and beyond that, implicitly, about

how Doña Costanza situated herself as a tolerant humanist who at the same time sympathized with sacred culture. A beautiful piece.

In addition Doña Costanza published a great many articles on cultural matters, reviews, letters to the editor, and short articles in Quito magazines and newspapers. Of these, the only one I know anything about is a long review of *The Mapmaker's Wife* which she was writing and sending to a Quito newspaper in 2005 in the hope of inspiring someone to translate this book, which is so pertinent to Ecuador, into Spanish.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

I am indebted to Marco Di Capua, Eduardo Kohn Di Capua, Frank Salomon, Ronald Lippi, and Patricia Netherly for help with this appreciation of the life of Doña Costanza. We hope she is busy, as usual, ruling the universe.

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#### Article about Costanza Di Capua

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*Costanza di Capua as a young woman in the kitchen of her house in Calle Juan Rodríguez. Costanza was a wonderful cook. Ronald Lippi swears that her rabbit and polenta was the best he has ever had. Many of us, including, I suspect, Alberto, would vote for her pasta dishes.*

