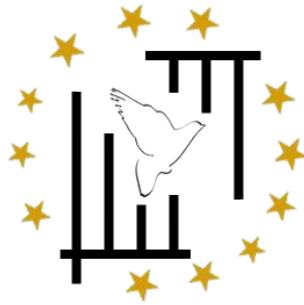


**ASSEDEL**



**Association Européenne  
pour la Défense des Droits et des Libertés**

ASSEDEL, 11 Rue de Bruxelles  
67000 Strasbourg, France, [www.assedel.org](http://www.assedel.org) info@assedel.org

## **Labour, Precariousness, and the Future of Italy's Art Workers**

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# **Labour, Precariousness, and the Future of Italy's Art Workers**

**A report by Cecilia Invernizzi and Sofia Girardelli**

International Workers' Day, celebrated on 1 May, is a worldwide occasion to appreciate the victorious battles that have been fought for the rights of workers, as well as to address what is yet to be achieved to ensure dignity and equality for everybody in the workplace.

In Italy, where this occasion is grandly celebrated with manifestations and public initiatives, it can also serve as a moment of reflection on the current conditions of one of the country's most emblematic yet overlooked economic sectors: the arts. In fact, while constituting a major source of attractiveness as well as revenue, many workers in the field face considerable struggles to reach stability, proper compensation, and institutional support in times of need.

Social and economic factors, as well as unprecedented developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid advancements of artificial intelligence, are all key elements in understanding the precarious conditions of this segment of the workforce. National and European public policies, in turn, contribute to enforcing structural barriers, but can also improve working conditions and favour sustainable development, as an overarching effort to uphold workers' rights as human rights.

## I. Introduction: A holiday born from struggle

The date for International Workers' Day is chosen in commemoration of two events, both of which occurred at the end of the 19th century in Chicago. Firstly, on May 1st, 1867, the 8-hour working day was officially ratified as State law in Illinois. Secondly, on that same day in 1886, workers on strike, demanding for the law to be extended to all US States, clashed with the police. Violence reached a peak three days later, on May 4th, when an anarchist group detonated a bomb during a protest, injuring policemen who responded by opening fire on the crowd. As an act of punishment against the perpetrators, seven anarchists were sentenced to the death penalty. Protests ensued at an international level, as workers from all across the Western world sided with the victims and celebrated May 1st as a milestone for labour rights: an occurrence that has been inherited by present times<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of Italy, the celebration traces back to the 1880s, when the dock workers of Livorno, Tuscany, went on strike and attacked US ships anchored in the harbour to protest against the death sentences of 1886. Over time, it underwent some modifications: for example, in the Fascist era it was anticipated to be April 21st to coincide with the "Birth of Rome" celebrations, as an effort to suppress left-leaning and anti-government public displays.

Finally, since 1990, apart from the usual manifestations, the occasion has been enriched with a great concert in Rome, organized by the most influential national trade unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL). Here, musicians from the mainstream and underground Italian scenes collaborate in an almost day-long show, sometimes with the participation of international guests<sup>2</sup>.

The centrality of live music in this programme illustrates the importance of the arts as a component of Italy's national identity. At the same time, the concert provides a space for public discourse on the structural inequalities that hinder those who work in the cultural sector. Performances are accompanied by speeches from the musicians themselves, as well as politicians and trade unionists, who denounce the funding cuts and policy failures that threaten the livelihoods of thousands of cultural workers<sup>3</sup>. To understand the current state of these workers, it is necessary to examine both the public policies that shape their conditions and the deeper structural forces that produce precariousness in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Studenti.it, *Festa del lavoro 1 maggio: significato e storia della festa dei lavoratori* (2026). Available at: <https://www.studenti.it/storia-del-1-maggio-festa-dei-lavoratori.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Il Post, Breve storia del "Concertone" del 1 maggio (2025). Available at: <https://www.ilpost.it/2025/05/01/concerto-primo-maggio-storia/>

## II: Mapping the cultural ecosystem

Before analysing policy, it is fundamental to clearly define the art sector in question: in fact, it is a complex and evolving ecosystem that includes visual arts, music, performance, literature, cinema and cultural heritage. These disciplines do not exist in isolation, but circulate within an interconnected system of planning, production and distribution.

While it is often assumed that the art market revolves solely around artists, in reality it relies on an extensive network of professionals, including managers, curators, scenographers, producers, technicians, organizers, agents, and communication specialists.

This entire framework does not run on creativity alone: it is shaped by structured governance and public intervention. Cultural policy plays a central role, as national, regional and local authorities work together to define how the art market and its diverse sectors operate.

### III (a). The institutional framework: National Policy

At the national level, Italian cultural policy is primarily shaped by the Ministry of Culture, supported by Regional Directorates for Museums and by the *Soprintendenze* (Superintendencies). Other ministries, including the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy and the Ministry of Education, also contribute. The Italian Parliament contributes through legislation on cultural heritage and the approval of the national budget<sup>4</sup>.

The constitutional foundation of this system is established by Article 9 of the Italian Constitution<sup>5</sup>, which assigns the Republic a dual task: to safeguard and promote the development of cultural heritage. This principle is reinforced through various national initiatives, such as support for UNESCO sites, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), the ArtBonus tax incentive scheme, and the *Fondo per la Cultura* (Cultural Fund).

Cultural policy in Italy partly falls under concurrent legislation: while the State sets fundamental principles, Regions are responsible for implementing initiatives at the territorial level. At the local level, provinces, metropolitan cities, and municipalities are responsible for the practical delivery of cultural services, from museums and events to urban cultural planning and community engagement.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministero della Cultura, *Sistema museale nazionale* (2018). Available at: <https://musei.cultura.gov.it/progetti/sistema-museale-nazionale>

<sup>5</sup> Italian Republic, *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana* (1948). Available at: [https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/Constituzione\\_della\\_Repubblica\\_italiana.pdf](https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/Constituzione_della_Repubblica_italiana.pdf)

Within this framework, Italy operates according to a mixed model of cultural funding. Funding for the arts and culture comes not only from the State but also from businesses, individual donors, foundations and other financial institutions. The Italian government supports cultural organisations on multiple levels, combining direct funding with indirect incentives.

### **III (b). The institutional framework: European Policy**

At the supranational level, the cultural sector is further influenced by the European Union, which contributes in shaping and promoting culture across EU countries through various initiatives and funding programmes<sup>6</sup>. Its main objectives include preserving Europe's cultural heritage, fostering favourable ecosystems for cultural and creative industries, and promoting cultural diversity. While cultural policy remains largely a prerogative of individual countries, the EU intervenes by addressing common challenges, particularly those linked to digital transformation and the changing models of cultural governance<sup>7</sup>.

The main instrument for EU cultural funding is the Creative Europe programme. Since 2014, it has supported projects that foster artistic collaboration across borders, strengthen cultural diversity, and enhance the economic potential of the sector. The programme is divided into two strands, Culture and MEDIA, alongside a cross-sectoral component that promotes innovation and collaboration across different cultural and creative fields.

Under the Culture strand, initiatives such as Culture Moves Europe focus specifically on cultural mobility in Europe and beyond. This initiative offers mobility grants for artists and cultural professionals working across a wide range of disciplines, including architecture, cultural heritage, design and fashion design, literature, music, performing arts and visual arts. Such grants support both individual projects and residency opportunities across 40 participating countries.

A concrete example of Creative Europe supporting a cultural project in Italy is the European Theatre Convention, which has funded several initiatives involving Italian theatres. One such

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *Culture moves Europe: How the EU promotes culture and creativity (2024)*. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/culture-moves-europe-how-eu-promotes-culture-and-creativity-2024-08-22\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/culture-moves-europe-how-eu-promotes-culture-and-creativity-2024-08-22_en)

<sup>7</sup> ICOM, *Code of Ethics for Museums (2017)*. Available at: <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

case is ERT-Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, a public performing arts institution which, thanks to EU funding, has been able to produce performances and access transnational networks. Even larger-scale initiatives can be mentioned, such as Matera European Capital of Culture 2019, supported by the EU's European Capitals of Culture framework. EU recognition, together with national and regional funding, enabled the city of Matera, in the Basilicata region, to develop an extensive programme of cultural production. This process also gifted the city with significant international visibility and long-term territorial impact.

Despite this extensive network of support, significant challenges persist, particularly when it comes to the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals. A notable attempt to address these obstacles is the 2023 European Parliament resolution on the status of the artist<sup>8</sup>, which highlights ongoing problems such as precarious employment, irregular income, and limited access to social protection. The resolution calls for stronger coordination at EU level, clearer definitions of employment status, measures to combat false self-employment, and improved standards for fair remuneration and mobility. Yet the gap between policy ambition and lived reality remains wide.

#### IV. The reality of precariousness

For the many thousands of Italians who work in the cultural sector, precariousness is a daily condition. At a first glance, the numbers portray a sector of significance: according to Eurostat data cited in the Ministry of Culture's 2025 *Minicifre della cultura* report, cultural workers in Italy numbered around 840.000 in 2024, representing approximately 3.5% of total national employment<sup>9</sup>. Yet this figure places Italy at the lower end of the European Union ranking, well below the EU average of 3.8%<sup>10</sup>. For a country that is often considered the most important in the world in terms of cultural influence, this gap is telling.

Moreover, according to the Symbola and Unioncamere's 2025 *Io sono Cultura* report, 36.5% of workers in Italy's cultural and creative sector are self-employed, compared to a national average of 21.2%<sup>11</sup>. This structural dependence on independent and freelance work limits the possibilities of collective bargaining and deepens the informal and precarious nature of employment in the field. Such a pattern constitutes a systemic fragility, which is characteristic of cultural and creative industries in southern European countries, of which Italy is a prime example.

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<sup>8</sup> European Parliament, *Status of the artist: better working conditions for artists and cultural workers* (2023). Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231117IPR12106/status-of-the-artist-better-working-conditions-for-artists-and-cultural-workers>

<sup>9</sup> Direzione generale Educazione, Ricerca e Istituti culturali, *Minicifre della cultura* (2025). Available at: [https://www.fondazione scuolapatrimonio.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Minicifre-della-cultura\\_edizione-2025.pdf](https://www.fondazione scuolapatrimonio.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Minicifre-della-cultura_edizione-2025.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Symbola and Unioncamere, *Io Sono Cultura* (2025). Available at: <https://symbola.net/ricerca/io-sono-cultura-2025/>

To this regard, the consequences are evident in earnings. According to data from sector surveys and trade union reports, many cultural professionals in Italy earn on average less than €12,000 per year, a figure that places them well below the poverty threshold and that has remained constantly low for decades<sup>12</sup>. Employment is predominantly project-based and intermittent, with few workers enjoying the kind of stable contracts that would grant access to standard social protections such as unemployment benefits, pension contributions, or paid sick leave.

These conditions are not distributed evenly across the country. According to *Minicifre della cultura* (2025), a third of all cultural sector workers are concentrated in the north-western regions of Italy, with 27% in central Italy and only 21% in the north-east, thus leaving the south and the islands significantly underrepresented<sup>13</sup>. Cultural workers in the Mezzogiorno face an array of disadvantages: weaker local cultural institutions, fewer opportunities for professional development, and greater distances from the decision-making centres that determine how public funds are allocated. Many are forced to migrate to cities such as Milan or Rome, or even abroad, in order to pursue a career.

Italy's public investment in culture has also come under sustained pressure. In recent years, cuts to the *Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo* (FUS), the principal instrument for funding live performance in Italy, have reduced the resources available to theatre companies, orchestras, and dance groups<sup>14</sup>. The cinema sector, too, has experienced budget reductions that have threatened the viability of smaller and independent productions. These cuts disproportionately affect workers in the most precarious positions, who are the first to lose income when funding decreases.

## V. The causes: a system designed for precariousness

What produces this chronic state of underpayment and instability? Claudia Fauzia, an Italian diversity and equality consultant, offers a structural rather than an individual answer: the system, she argues, is built to maintain precariousness<sup>15</sup>. The wages paid to cultural workers are not enough to live on, and many effectively perform what amounts to voluntary or heavily subsidised work, sustained by passion and the hope of future stability. However, this problem cannot be solved by simply refusing to accept bad conditions: those conditions are everywhere, and someone else will always accept them.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Manuela Rossetti, *Vogliamo tutt'altro: quando la crisi del settore è guidata da logiche di schieramento* (2025). Available at: <https://www.klpteatro.it/vogliamo-tuttaltro-assemblea-teatro-lavoratori-spettacolo>

<sup>15</sup> Claudia Fauzia, "Lo faccio perché ci credo." *E intanto non arrivi a fine mese* (2026). Available at: <https://claudiafauzia.substack.com/p/18-lo-faccio-perche-ci-credo-e-intanto>

Precariousness in the cultural sector, Fauzia argues, is not a collateral effect of the system but a function of it<sup>16</sup>. To keep those who shape culture in a state of material fragility is an efficient mechanism for rendering them politically and institutionally irrelevant. What takes place is a kind of selective professionalisation of dissent: public institutions finance cultural work just enough to legitimize it, but not enough to make it autonomous. The result is a class of highly skilled and creative workers who are structurally dependent on the State and on the goodwill of private patrons, and who therefore lack the independence to challenge the conditions imposed upon them.

This dependency also has a clear geography. It concentrates in territories where communities and professional networks are especially fragile, the distance from decision-making centres is greatest, and cultural workers must ultimately leave in order to survive. What appears as individual precariousness is in reality a purposeful dispersion of competences. The appropriate response, Fauzia suggests, is to reframe the narrative: from individual shortcomings to collective responsibility. Building robust economic, organizational, and territorial structures around cultural work is essential to avoid surrendering to this system.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic made these underlying vulnerabilities even more evident. As Italian journalist Roberta Capozucca reported in the newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, because the culture world is a fragmented sector of small enterprises and freelancers, which nonetheless are essential to its survival, they are rarely accounted for in government emergency strategies<sup>17</sup>. In sum, the diversity of professional categories makes it complicated to construct a comprehensive system of legal and economic guarantees, and when crisis strikes, diversity becomes a liability. In fact, without unified associations capable of negotiating collectively, many categories of cultural workers are simply left out of relief measures. Visual artists, for instance, were excluded from the €600 bonus intended for all workers in the sector under the 2020 *Cura Italia* relief decree<sup>18</sup>. It is essential to recognize that, in mapping these omissions, translating that awareness into concrete policy action remains as urgent today as it was during the pandemic.

## **VI. The new frontier of Artificial Intelligence**

In recent times, a new and rapidly advancing threat has been added to the abovementioned structural vulnerabilities: artificial intelligence. AI is now becoming an infrastructure, a totally new system that is redefining the conditions of entertainment, communication, and visual and digital production.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Roberta Capozucca, *Professionisti del settore culturale, chi sopravviverà?* (2020). Available at: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/professionisti-settore-culturale-chi-sopravvivera-ADCiueO>

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

The first roles to be affected are predominantly technical<sup>19</sup>. Sound designers, colorists, and post-production specialists see their core competencies being absorbed by increasingly fast and precise softwares. Moreover, junior creatives and new generations are now entering a labour market where AI can generate images, videos and music at minimal cost and relatively high quality. For a sector already defined by low wages and precarious contracts, this represents a radical shift in the conditions of competition, for which neither workers nor public institutions are fully prepared<sup>20</sup>.

It must be recognized that the challenge posed by AI to cultural labour is political other than economic. In fact, if creative professions have historically offered a degree of autonomy and irreplaceability that more or less compensate for their material instability, now the erosion of that uniqueness at the hands of non-human production removes the little structural advantage cultural workers possessed. Without strong collective responses from trade unions, professional associations, and policymakers, the most vulnerable workers in the sector risk being completely cast aside just as demand for cultural content continues to grow.

## VII. Conclusion

Taken together, all the abovementioned challenges portray a sector in urgent need of coherent and comprehensive reform. The conditions of Italy's cultural workers must not be considered as a second-class concern: they safeguard a heritage that defines the country's identity and drives a significant share of its economic output. To treat their current state as the inevitable price of a vocation is both an ethical and strategic failure.

At the national level, concrete legislative action remains essential. In an interview with the French NGO ASSEDEL, Italian member of the Chamber of Deputies Valentina Grippo points to a set of specific priorities that require regulation: remuneration standards, access to *cassa integrazione* (wage supplementation schemes), and the mechanisms of the *assegno unico*, all of which must be addressed through national legislation. Past parliamentary sessions have produced budget amendments aimed at increasing resources for the *Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo*, a recognition that some professions in this sector are precarious not by accident but by their very nature, being tied to individual productions rather than permanent employment structures. This structural reality makes tailored policy solutions even more necessary.

However, the argument for reform goes beyond mere economic logic. European institutions must approach the protection of cultural workers from a different perspective: it must recognize that defending those who make art means defending human rights and the rights of European

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<sup>19</sup> Gianna Angelini, *L'impatto dell'AI nel design: svolta creativa e nuovi paradigmi* (2024). Available at: <https://www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/limpatto-dellai-nel-design-svolta-creativa-e-nuovi-paradigmi/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

citizens. This protection includes all those who benefit from culture: audiences, communities, future generations. To protect cultural workers is, in this sense, to protect a collective heritage, which belongs to society as a whole instead of a single industry.