

June 20, 2014 | By Inga Kiderra

## UC San Diego Names New Dean of Arts and Humanities

Cristina Della Coletta, a professor of Italian and an associate dean at the University of Virginia, has been appointed dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities at the University of California, San Diego. Effective Aug. 15, 2014, the appointment follows an extensive national search.

“With her cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural research and experience, Cristina Della Coletta is uniquely poised to lead a vibrant division at UC San Diego, especially as we embark on furthering our work as a public university – centered on students, focused on research and oriented to service,” said UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “I am confident her energy, her ideas and her considerable skills as a scholar and an administrator will enable the division, and UC San Diego as a whole, to reach new heights.”

A doctoral alumna of UCLA, Della Coletta will, as dean at UC San Diego, hold the Chancellor’s Associates Chair in Italian Literature.



*Courtesy Cristina Della Coletta*

Della Coletta is currently serving as associate dean of humanities and the arts in the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia, where she has been a faculty member since 1992. She has served as director of the undergraduate program in Italian and associate chair of the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, in addition to holding a number of other academic leadership roles within the college and university.

Della Coletta has been the recipient of numerous teaching awards and fellowships. And for the past decade, she has volunteered as a senior mentor to junior faculty in two UVA programs, one focused on excellence in diversity and the other on teaching.

She is also an award-winning author of three books, with research interests that include contemporary Italian literature, particularly historical fiction, film and cultural studies, women's studies, and the use of technology in the humanities.

“Cristina Della Coletta is an active, highly regarded scholar and a tested administrator,” said Suresh Subramani, executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at UC San Diego. “Her commitment to serving both students and faculty, and her collaborative style and pragmatic approaches to problem-solving, as well as her willingness to forge partnerships beyond her division, will serve us well as we begin the implementation of the campus’ strategic plan. I am delighted to welcome Cristina to the Academic Affairs leadership team.”

As dean of the UC San Diego Division of Arts and Humanities, Della Coletta will lead a dynamic and highly ranked academic division with more than 1,700 undergraduates, 450 graduate students, and faculty spanning six large academic departments – each with a full range of undergraduate and graduate programs and performance facilities. In addition, she will provide oversight to the Center for the Humanities, the Mandeville Center, the University Art Gallery and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination at UC San Diego, as well as lead divisional engagement with such affiliates as the La Jolla Playhouse and the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus.

“UC San Diego is a powerhouse – it’s such a vibrant university,” Della Coletta said. “What attracted me to the Division of Arts and Humanities, in particular, is what I see as a genuine desire to partner across departments and disciplines. That was of paramount importance to me. I also see innovative and creative interactions on the campus between the arts, humanities and sciences – connecting in ways that haven’t been explored before.”

Della Coletta was born in Venice, Italy. She began university in Venice and came to UCLA as an exchange student during her third year in college. It was then she decided not only to stay in the United States but also to pursue an academic career here.

“The residential experience – studying together, living together, growing up together – was enormously powerful,” Della Coletta said. “In the United States, the education model is student-centered and even research dynamos like UC San Diego are still absolutely devoted to the teaching and service missions.”

Della Coletta holds a Laurea in Lingue e Letterature straniere (French and North American) from the Università di Venezia, Italy, and a master’s degree in Italian from the University of Virginia. She earned her Ph.D. in Italian from UCLA in 1993.

She is the author of the books “When Stories Travel: Cross-Cultural Encounters Between Fiction and Film”; “World’s Fairs Italian-Style: The Great Expositions in Turin and Their Narratives,” which was awarded a prize by the Modern Language Association of America; and “Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction.”

Her more recent scholarly work has challenged traditional views on literature and film, with the latter form often seen as merely a transposition of the first. “No,” she says, “film, even when it’s an adaptation of a literary work, is a whole new creation. Adapting fiction into film is a transformative encounter that can take place not just across media but also across different cultures. I am especially interested in what happens when the translation of fiction into film involves writers, directors and audiences who belong to national, historical and cultural formations different from those of the adapted work. Stories can travel to really unexpected and interesting places when adapted into film by people of diverse cultures.”

The cross-cultural principles she applies in her research also animate her views on what she terms “diversities, in the plural.”

“I am deeply committed to diversities,” Della Coletta said. “Only by having a really diverse student, staff and faculty body can we achieve excellence in teaching and in scholarship and develop a truly inclusive community. There are different aspects and nuances to diversity. It is not a monolithic concept. In an increasingly interconnected world, multiple diversities need to be actively engaged with one another to develop mutual awareness and respect, and become part of a shared understanding of both unique circumstances and common humanity.”

Asked if she had a particular vision for the Division of Arts and Humanities, she said: “Yes, and it is one that should mesh with the make-up of UC San Diego and its strategic plan. The campus and the division already have a global footprint and we will continue to pursue scholarship and creative endeavors in line with our reputation. But I hope to be able to pursue this progress in a way that overcomes some perceived barriers – or fences – that have been conventionally viewed as dividing scholarship in humanities and the arts from traditionally scientific disciplines. My vision is to tackle the challenges that are commonly viewed as segregating the humanities from other fields of scholarship.”

Asked about these challenges, she said they are not unique to UC San Diego.

“Humanities and the arts are striving to find their own place in a cultural environment that, at least in the United States, sees STEM as preeminent,” Della Coletta said. “It is time to stop dividing – to stop acting as if these were traditional antagonists.

“The simplistic view is that arts and humanities create subjective experiences, and the sciences deliver facts. This opposition slights both the humanities and the sciences,” she said. “It is time to see these fields not as responding to dichotomous sets of disciplinary mandates, but, rather, as sister arts or dispositions – different yet interconnected ways of approaching knowledge and of being-in-the-world as partners and collaborators. We are contributors to the educational experience as a whole, and the path forward is one that imagines more capacious futures for the humanities, the arts and the sciences, together. Different disciplines offer different skills and different views on the world, but we have the ability at UC San Diego to have our students master all of these – to really create a whole individual and a holistic approach to knowledge.”

Moving to San Diego with Della Coletta will be her husband, Mike Thrift, an environmental lawyer, and their 15-year-old daughter, Stephanie, who, Della Coletta said, “will go to high school somewhere here and play lacrosse.” Son Alex, a college student, has decided to continue his studies at UVA.

Della Coletta is planning a whirlwind trip to Italy to visit family there before moving to San Diego and beginning her appointment in August.

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#### MEDIA CONTACT

**Inga Kiderra**, 858-822-0661, [ikiderra@ucsd.edu](mailto:ikiderra@ucsd.edu)

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