

AUGUSTO LORENZINI: ITALIAN ARTIST DECORATOR IN VICTORIAN SYDNEY

by Megan Martin

Megan Martin is the librarian for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and is co-curator of an exhibition about Augusto Lorenzini that will open at Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney in June 2001. This article is an extract from her essay for the exhibition catalogue. The book is due for publication in May 2001. Enquiries can be made to the Museum of Sydney Shop on 02-9251 5988.

On a Saturday morning in March 1995 the deceased estate of a woman named Winn Albury went under the hammer in the rooms of Sydney auctioneers Hamilton & Miller. The auctioneers knew quite a lot about Winn Albury. She was a first-cousin of Henry Lawson, had studied art at East Sydney Technical College, travelled to the United States in the 1920s and had worked as a commercial artist in Sacramento, California, before returning to Sydney in the 1930s.

Mixed-up with Winn's work was a large volume of material by Augusto Lorenzini. Only a few people present at the auction knew anything at all about this man. Two were private collectors. One owned a Lorenzini watercolour and the other owned an oil. Both paintings had been shown at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in late 1993 in an exhibition called *The Italian connection: Italian artists in 19th century Australia*. The catalogue for that show had identified Lorenzini as an artist and creator of mural art decorations active in Sydney from 1884 until 1894.¹

Both collectors bought other Lorenzini items at the Hamilton & Miller auction, among which were ceiling and wall designs for the 1888-9 Centennial Hall of the Sydney Town Hall. A couple of dealers present also recognized Lorenzini's name and bought pieces, including some large painted panels. But much of the material, together with bundles of Winn Albury's commercial work, slipped through this auction unappreciated. Some of it later reappeared at another auction. Over the following twelve months or so the material was further dispersed through salerooms and dealers. Then one particularly important bundle came to light from the damp depths of a locked trunk. This bundle included large sepia photographs of the ballroom of a mansion called *Chatsworth* at Potts Point — long-since demolished. The photographs were taken by leading Sydney

photographer Charles Bayliss and carried an inscription that identified 'A. Lorenzini' as the decorator of the ballroom.

The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales acquired this bundle in mid-1998, set out to acquire other parts of the dispersed Lorenzini archive and began the process of recovering the reputation of Signor Augusto Lorenzini, Italian artist decorator in Victorian Sydney.

Augusto Leopoldo Francesco Lorenzini was born on 3 August 1852 in Rome, son of Giovacchino Lorenzini, engineer, and Santa Tinbastari. At the age of 21 he married 18 year-old Maria Boleta in Rome.² He must have already completed his education and some sort of art training by the time of his marriage but there are few clues to the nature of this training: a loose-leaf treatise on perspective drawing published in Rome in 1861, collections of engravings of Italian landscapes and ruins, profiles of architectural ornaments and engravings of decorative panels in an Italian Renaissance style, all of which perhaps served as text-books and were found among his papers. There are also four torn drawings inscribed 'Tempera by Fratelli Zuccary nel Palazzo de Principe Gaetani at Rome traced by A. Lorenzini in the year 1875'.

Lorenzini spent some time in Paris in the late 1870s before moving to London, where he is listed in the London Post Office Directory for 1880 as a decorative artist and in the 1881 English census as a professor of decorative fine art, living in Newman Street off Oxford Street. He took on some specialist commissions for Thomas Bates & Co, a firm that traded under the sign of 'Housepainters, Decorators, and Paper Hanging Manufacturers' Specialities; Copies of wall decorations of Ancient Pompeii', according to James Ross Anderson, a decorator who worked for the same firm. Bates & Co. was noted for its

success in gaining commissions from England's landed gentry. The firm's senior staff, said Anderson, 'wore frock coats and tall hats' and were treated as 'skilled gentlemen decorators'. Less talented tradesmen referred to them as 'bally silver-tailed painters'. Lorenzini was known among the staff of Bates & Co. as 'Tangerini', almost certainly a reference to red hair.³



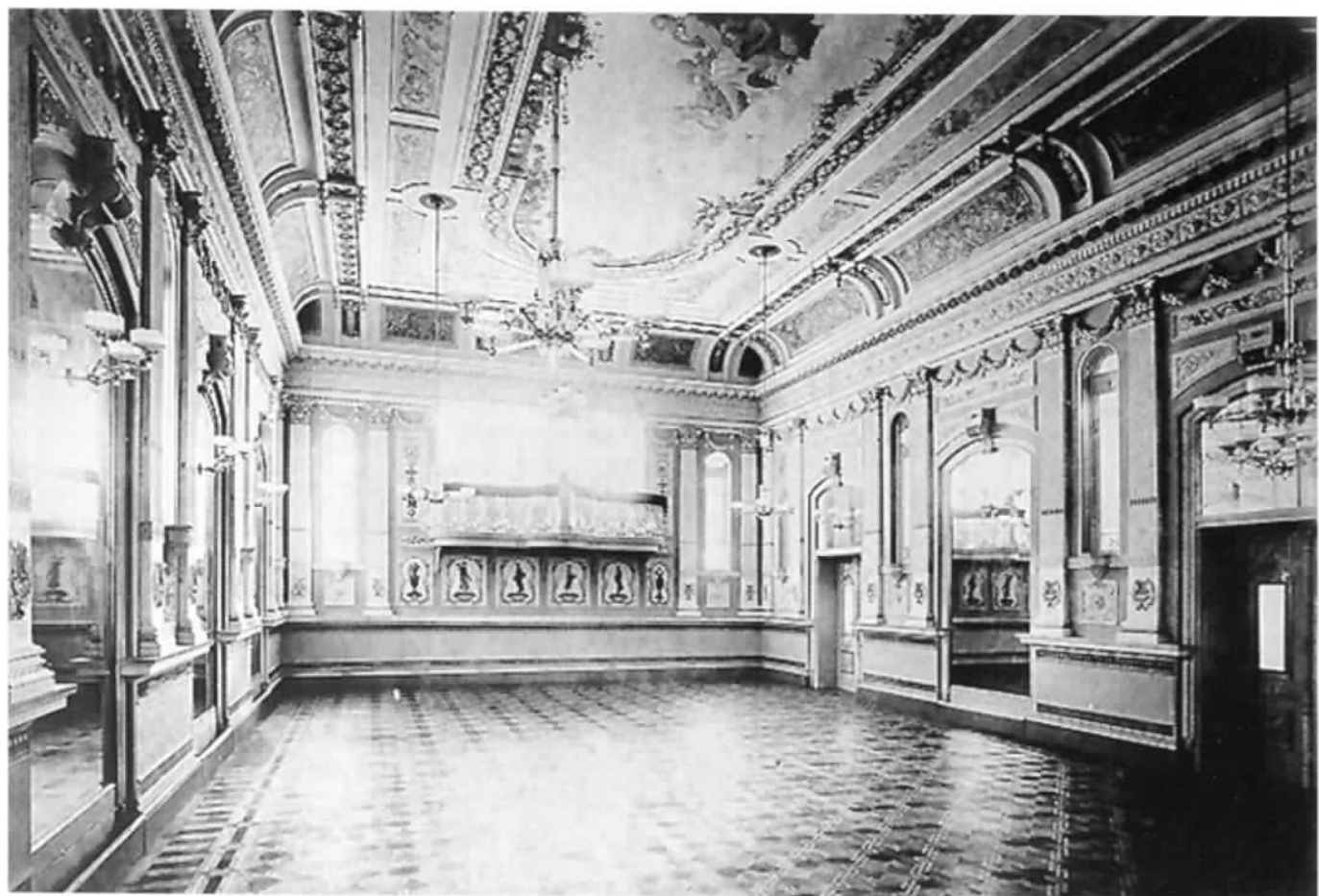
Augusto Lorenzini, 1852-1921.
From an album of photographs of exhibitors at the Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888. VPRS 840/3. Reproduced with the permission of the Keeper of Public Records.

In 1883 the Lorenzini family left London for Sydney, arriving in September on the *SS Orient*.⁴ They found themselves in a city where a small number

of Italian artists had already made their mark. In 1875 painter Giulio Anivitti and sculptor Achille Simonetti had both been appointed instructors at the Art Training School newly-opened by the New South Wales Academy of Arts. The sculptor Giovanni Fontana made an extended visit to Sydney in 1879 when he exhibited work in the English Court at the Sydney International Exhibition. Another sculptor, Tommaso Sani, had exhibited in the Victorian Court at the Sydney International Exhibition and settled in Sydney in 1882 when Colonial Architect James Barnet engaged him to carve reliefs in the spandrels of the Pitt Street facade of the General Post Office.⁵ Giuseppe Ferrarini, a painter from Parma, had opened a studio in the Garden Palace in 1882.⁶

Lorenzini initially rented premises in Bourke Street, Surry Hills but by June 1884, when he became a member of the Art Society of New South Wales, he had relocated to Tommaso Sani's studio in Phillip Street.⁷ He had a flyer printed announcing his business under the banner: 'Signor Augusto Lorenzini, Italian artist decorator and general contractor, established in Rome, Paris, London and Sydney'. He declared that he had 'many years practical experience in Decorative Works in Italy, France, and England' and was 'now prepared to execute in the best possible manner, at moderate charges, Artistic and Plain Decorations, in all the different styles'. He could be consulted at his Phillip Street Studio 'or by appointment at any address in town or country' — a rather bold promise that was perhaps based on an assumption that country New South Wales was as accessible and wealthy as the English countryside. On receiving architects' plans and specifications, Signor A. Lorenzini would be 'pleased to submit Sketches for Artistic or Plain Decorations'.

Lorenzini was already engaged on a major commission, the decoration of the Potts Point mansion *Chatsworth*. This was the home of Charles James Roberts, publican and politician, and former Mayor of Sydney. In 1884 Roberts engaged the architectural partnership of Martin and Russell to extend the house itself, adding a billiard room and a ballroom. The original house was redecorated to harmonise with the additions. Lorenzini was responsible for the painted decoration of the main entrance hall and the new ballroom. The ballroom was formally opened with a grand ball on 1 September 1884. As the guests began arriving, Lorenzini and the architects presented



Chatsworth Ballroom, Potts Point Sydney. Designed by architects Martin & Russell and built in 1884 with painted ceilings and wall decorations by Augusto Lorenzini. Photographer Charles Bayliss.



Mrs Roberts with a golden key to the room — a small ceremonial moment which seems to confirm Lorenzini's status as a gentleman artist decorator.⁸

Lorenzini's *Chatsworth* success was quickly followed by a commercial commission, the decoration of the newly erected Gunsler's Café in Pitt Street near the General Post Office. Austrian-born John Ferdinand Gunsler was a legendary figure in nineteenth-century colonial catering circles. He had arrived in Melbourne in 1871 and opened the Café Gunsler in Collins Street in 1873. He sold out in 1879 for the huge sum of £26,000 and travelled to Europe and the United States before returning to Australia in 1883.⁹ Gunsler chose Sydney, a city with a poor reputation at that time for the quality of its hotels and restaurants, for his next big venture.¹⁰ His restaurant opened in November 1884 and occupied three floors, providing a gentleman's saloon with a bar and an oyster buffet, a ladies and gentleman's dining room, a ladies salon, a banqueting hall, and five small salons for private dinner parties and after-theatre suppers.

There is no detailed description of Lorenzini's decorations for Gunsler's Café. We have only the *Sydney Morning Herald's* observation that all of the public rooms had been 'decorated in a costly style, the ceilings and wall-panels being figured in oils with flowers, and sometimes classic groups' and the *Sydney Mail's* judgement that the schemes for the painted walls and ceilings throughout the building were 'good examples of chaste and tasteful decoration'. The *Daily Telegraph* was more impressed with the technical details of the fit-out of the kitchen. Even so, there can be no doubt that the press and public interest in this long-overdue 'high-class restaurant' served to further establish Lorenzini's reputation as a talented artist decorator.

In March 1885 Lorenzini exhibited four paintings in the annual exhibition of the Art Society of New South Wales. One of these entries, a portrait of 'Miss M. Lang', was probably of a local subject suggesting that Lorenzini supplemented his income from architectural commissions with smaller private commissions.¹¹ In the event, he was unhappy with the way that his works were hung by the Society and wrote a letter to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* detailing his complaint.¹² Although Lorenzini remained a member of the Society he did not exhibit with it again.

His energies were directed elsewhere. He had a plan to establish an 'Industrial Studio of Art' to provide art training for decorators. His plan was outlined in a four-page prospectus published in February 1886.¹³ He argued that 'one of the principal and most important parts that are absolutely necessary for the development and completion of all Art studies (especially when applied to Industry, which contains the highest and most lucrative branches of Art and difficult work), is the practical instruction or the real execution of work, which only to a very limited extent can be taught in Technical Schools'.

The problem as Lorenzini saw it was that there were only a few experienced decorative painters in the colony. Whereas in Europe pupils could 'easily be taught the practice of their studies' from any one of a number of 'practical professional men', in New South Wales only those who could afford to pay large premiums could enjoy such opportunities. Lorenzini saw his 'Practical Theoric Studio of Arts' both as a means of introducing young artists to industry and as a way of providing patrons with original art work from colonial artists instead of having to purchase European work 'done for exportation'.

Lorenzini placed an advertisement for his Industrial Studio of Arts in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in October 1886, inviting applications for admittance.¹⁴ He later told the Acting President of the Sydney Technical College that within a few days of publication of his prospectus, he had fifteen applicants to join the classes, but had to let the plan lapse because he could not find suitable premises at an affordable rent.¹⁵

Meanwhile he was involved in another commission connected to Charles Roberts, this time the painted decoration of the new Roberts Hotel on the corner of George and Market Streets. The Roberts family had kept a hotel called the Crown and Anchor on this site for more than forty years. The architects of the new five-storey hotel were Messrs Wardell and Vernon and it was presumably they who engaged Lorenzini to work on the wall and ceiling decorations.¹⁶ But it seems likely that Roberts was also involved in the commission, just as it was probably Roberts, as a commissioner for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886, who suggested to Lorenzini that he should exhibit two photographs of the *Chatsworth* ballroom in the photography class of the New South Wales Court (stand) at the exhibition.¹⁷



Series of three surviving designs for allegorical figures representing the four seasons. These were cartoons used by Augusto Lorenzini in the decoration of the Chatsworth Ballroom.

In 1888 he prepared a substantial exhibit for the New South Wales Court of the Centennial International Exhibition, which opened in Melbourne in July of that year. Lorenzini's entry included a collection of studies for art decoration, sketches for decorations and specimens of decorations.¹⁸ He may have submitted a scheme for the decoration of the exhibition building itself. It is known that competitive designs were invited for the decoration and a coloured design for a domed neo-classical building survives among Lorenzini's papers. Lorenzini was awarded a First Order of Merit for his 'mural art decorations'. The editor of *The Australasian Builder & Contractor's News* reported that news of the award would be welcomed by Lorenzini's many friends in Sydney.¹⁹

Lorenzini lost no time in having his letterhead reprinted, replacing 'established in Rome, Paris, London and Sydney' with 'First Order of Merit for Art Decorations, Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne'. He used his new stationery

on 14 January 1889 to write to the New South Wales Minister for Education about his plan to establish a 'Practical Theoric Studio of Arts'.²⁰ Lorenzini offered a critique of the existing evening classes in art instruction. These classes were, he said, 'useful as auxiliaries to intending tradesmen such as carpenters, masons, and the like' but were 'totally insufficient' to provide the necessary knowledge for those who wanted to make their future living as art decorators.

Among Lorenzini's papers there are just a few clues as to what he did while he waited for a response from the Minister. There is a design for decoration of the display pipes and case of an organ. It has been identified as the organ installed in a Wesleyan church in Oxley Road Hawthorn in Melbourne.²¹ The foundation stone for this church was laid in July 1888 and the church was completed in September 1889. Lorenzini was probably invited to prepare the design on the strength of his work for the Waverley Wesleyan church but it seems that the commission was never carried out.

There are several designs for painted decoration for the Centennial Hall, or main hall, of the Sydney Town Hall.

Lorenzini took steps to secure his future in another direction at this time, buying 20 acres of orchard land at Castle Hill.²² The Lorenzini family had lived in a modest timber cottage in Gipps Street Balmain for four or five years before moving to Waverley sometime in 1888. They probably moved to Castle Hill — Lorenzini always gave the address as Pennant Hills — within a few months of buying the land. A design for painted decoration for St Mary's Catholic Church at Concord which can be dated to early 1890 is stamped 'A. Lorenzini, postal address, Pennant Hills'.

Although Lorenzini had shifted his residence to Castle Hill, he maintained his studio in Phillip Street. Around this time Lorenzini formed a partnership with Giuseppe Anivitti, brother of the painter Giulio Anivitti who had died in Rome in 1881. They listed their partnership in Sands' Sydney Directory under the trade classification of 'Art decorators' and also 'Art galleries' but stayed in business for only two or three years, unable to survive the deepening economic depression of the 1890s. Lorenzini gave up the Phillip Street studio in 1894 and took more modest rooms at the Broadway end of George Street, in premises leased to oil and colour merchant Charles Fraenkel.²³

Fashions and tastes in interior decoration had changed by the time the economy had recovered. Grand houses that had once dazzled visitors with their gilded rooms fell into disrepair, were converted into boarding houses or were demolished. *Chatsworth*, the scene of Lorenzini's early triumph, became the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School. The girls weren't impressed by the painted finishes. One of them later wrote that *Chatsworth* 'had been very much over-decorated'. She revealed the changing tastes of her generation when she declared her preference for cedar woodwork 'untouched by paint'. For this girl and her friends the 'mythological figures of gods and goddesses upon the painted ceiling' were 'jarring decorations' which 'seemed in danger of coming to earth'.²⁴

Through the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century Lorenzini made his living partly from painting and partly from fruit growing. When he applied for a certificate of naturalization in September 1904 he described himself as an 'art decorator and orchardist'.²⁵

He had a brief moment in the spotlight in June 1908 when the Italian community in Sydney celebrated the Italian Fête of the Statute, or Constitution, with a ball at Paddington Town Hall. Lorenzini was responsible for the artistic decoration of the hall for the occasion. The ball was a splendid success and generated such a feeling of bonhomie that several of those involved in the event, including Lorenzini, decided to hold monthly meetings in the form of a lunch.²⁶

The good times didn't last. Early in 1914 Lorenzini was declared insolvent. He told the Registrar in Bankruptcy that his financial plight was caused by failure of business. Painting work was scarce and he had been unable to conduct a profitable fruit and vegetable growing business because the government had 'washed him out of his land by putting a road in a wrong position'. While the bankruptcy proceedings were taking place Lorenzini and his wife lived in Paddington, with his nephew Giulio Trudeau and Trudeau's wife Ersilia. They had arrived from Italy in 1905.

The Lorenzini family returned to the orchard and obscurity. In March 1917 the decorator J. Ross Anderson wrote about Lorenzini in one of a series of articles on 'the old hands' published in a trade journal called *The Australasian decorator and painter*. Anderson commented on the 'marked excellence' of Lorenzini's work and suggested that his skills had been poorly understood and ill-rewarded in New South Wales. He wrote in the past tense, observing that 'Signor Lorenzini was last heard of some years ago in Sydney running a market garden, finding this occupation more lucrative than painting historical pictures and house decorating. So much for high-class decorative work in Australia'.²⁷

Augusto Lorenzini died on 29 July 1921 at his home in Hastings Road, Castle Hill, probably from a heart attack.²⁸ He was found with a red handkerchief in one hand and a law book in the other and at first his wife Maria feared that he had committed suicide under pressure of a lawsuit. There was an inquest into the death, which the *Cumberland Argus & Fruitgrowers' Advocate* reported under the headline 'Danger of studying law books: a Castle Hill sensation'. But there was no sensation, just sorrow for a 'highly respectable man' who 'had always been on good terms with people'.²⁹

Illustrations kindly supplied by the author.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Italian connection: Italian artists in 19th century Australia*. National Trust of Australia (NSW) S.H. Ervin Gallery Sydney 24 September – 14 November 1993. Exhibition curator Roslyn Maguire
- ² National Archives of Australia naturalization papers for Augusto Lorenzini: A1/15 no. 1904/8160; New South Wales Registrar of births, deaths and marriages, death certificate for Augusto Lorenzini: no.15391 in 1921
- ³ J. Ross Anderson 'The old hands' in *The Australasian decorator and painter* 1 March 1917 pp.144-145
- ⁴ National Archives of Australia naturalization papers for Augusto Lorenzini: A1/15 no. 1904/8160
- ⁵ *The Italian connection: Italian artists in 19th century Australia*. National Trust of Australia (NSW) S.H. Ervin Gallery Sydney 24 September – 14 November 1993. Exhibition curator Roslyn Maguire; *The Italian connection: Italian artists in 19th century Australia. Seminar papers – 9th October 1993*. Roslyn Maguire editor, National Trust of Australia (NSW) S.H. Ervin Gallery Sydney
- ⁶ 'Destruction of the Garden Palace by fire' *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 September, 1882 p.7
- ⁷ Sands' Sydney Directories 1884, 1885; 'Art Society' *Sydney Morning Herald* 17 June 1884 p.3
- ⁸ *ibid* p.259
- ⁹ Entry for John Ferdinand Gunsler in *Australian men of mark* vol. II Sydney Charles Maxwell, 1889 Appendix p.33
- ¹⁰ 'Gunsler's Café, Pitt St.' *Illustrated Sydney News* 23 September 1884 pp.3, 20; 'Gunsler's Café' *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 November 1884 p.6; 'The Gunsler Café' *Daily Telegraph* 13 November 1884 p.5; 'Gunsler's Café' *The Sydney Mail* 6 December 1884 p.1146
- ¹¹ The sixth annual exhibition of the Art Society of New South Wales Catalogue Sydney, John Sands 1885 pp.20-22
- ¹² 'Art Society's exhibition... To the editor of the Herald' *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 March 1885 p.5
- ¹³ State Records NSW: Department of Technical Education correspondence files 10/14292.
- ¹⁴ 'Art and industry' *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 October 1886 p.3
- ¹⁵ State Records NSW: Department of Technical Education correspondence files 10/14292
- ¹⁶ 'City improvement – the Crown and Anchor building' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 1888 p.5
- ¹⁷ *New South Wales at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition* 1886 Sydney, Government Printer, 1886 p.45
- ¹⁸ *Centennial International Exhibition Melbourne, 1888: Catalogue of the exhibits in the New South Wales Court* Sydney, Government Printer, 1888 p.54
- ¹⁹ *The Australasian Builder & Contractor's News* 26 January 1889 p.93
- ²⁰ State Records NSW: Department of Technical Education correspondence files 10/14292
- ²¹ Identification made by organ historians Graeme Rushworth and John Maidment
- ²² New South Wales Land Titles Office: Old Systems conveyance book 421 no.809
- ²³ State Records NSW 10/23026 Insolvency file no.9592: Tommaso Sani
- ²⁴ *Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School 1895-1955* Sydney, SCEGGS 1958, pp.131-132
- ²⁵ National Archives of Australia naturalization papers for Augusto Lorenzini: A1/15 no. 1904/8160
- ²⁶ *L'Italo-Australiano*: 'Lo Statuto' 6 Giugno 1908 p.2, 'Il trionfo del Ballo' 13 Giugno 1908 p.2, 'Reunione mensile d'Italiano in Sydney' 20 Giugno 1908 p.2
- ²⁷ J. Ross Anderson *op cit*.
- ²⁸ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages: death certificate no.15391
- ²⁹ 'Danger of studying law books: a Castle Hill sensation' *The Cumberland Argus & Fruitgrowers' Advocate* 17 August 1921 p.1