

recalling the memories of an haute couturière: madame serini – a journey from fiume to melbourne

by
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ASTRID HABAN-BEER IS A FOURTH YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. SHE IS COMPLETING HER LAW AND ARTS DEGREES, MAJORING IN SPANISH AND HISTORY. ASTRID COMPLETED AN INTERNSHIP WITH THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN 2003 AS PART OF THE HISTORY IN THE FIELD COMPONENT OF HER COURSE. SHE IS HEAVILY INVOLVED IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, CONDUCTING A SUCCESSFUL WOMENS' PROGRAM IN CARLTON AND VOLUNTEERING AT EMERGENCY SERVICES RELIEF. ASTRID WILL SOON BE LEAVING FOR BOGOTA, COLOMBIA, TO INTERN WITH THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, FURTHERING HER EXPERIENCE IN HER CHOSEN FIELD OF HUMAN RIGHTS LAW.

When Irredenta Itala Serini arrived at Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre, in northern Victoria, in January 1950, she asked her husband: 'Why is everyone looking at me?' The answer was obvious: the sheer elegance of Itala, well dressed and exquisitely presented, was dissonant with the harsh new surroundings of her Australian introduction. This stylish lady did not belong at Bonegilla, and as she frankly affirms 'This place, it was awful. We did not belong here'.¹ Itala, her husband Guerrino and their two young children were given one large room to share, with dorm-style beds for three months. Bonegilla, on the shores of Lake Hume near Wodonga, was the first home for over 320,000 migrants in the post Second World War period.² Many of the migrants who passed through Bonegilla went on to establish themselves in the Australian community. Itala Serini was one such migrant. Her impact upon the fashion world in Australia could not have been imagined from the simple surroundings in which she and her family found themselves in 1950.

The story of Madame Serini, as she has always been known in Australia, is quite incredible, and her personal history is a reflection of changing times, changing attitudes and challenge in a new country. Madame Serini was an haute couturière - a designer and dressmaker of high quality fashion.

Irredenta Itala Serini (nee Marietti) was born in 1918 in Fiume, which was then a

part of Italy. From the age of fourteen, Itala was trained in the art of fashion design and dressmaking by Miss Bobeyshek, a Viennese cutter and dressmaker. Her father, Antonio Marietti, was a renowned sculptor. He was also a fervent patriot, so much so that he named his daughter Irredenta Itala, which translated may be read as 'unredeemed Italy', a reminder that his beloved city of Fiume was still in foreign hands when she was born. Madame Serini believes that artistic creativity was in her family's blood. In a sense, she was always destined to 'create'. Her two sisters, Gaby and Carmen were both musically talented and sang opera on radio.

Madame Serini is healthy, and vivacious. She is a stalwart of elegance, a doyenne of fashion and a living legend in the Melbourne fashion world.

LIFE IN ITALY

Madame Serini moved worlds away from her home in Fiume, first in 1947 to Milan for three years, before ultimately boarding a ship in 1950 with her husband and young family to seek security, prosperity and education for the children in Australia. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Fiume and surrounding parts of Istria and Dalmatia, were ceded to Yugoslavia. The citizens of these areas were forced to adopt the new Yugoslav nationality or leave the country. Thousands of Italians left behind everything they owned and sought refuge in Italy, before emigrating to the Americas and Australia.

The Serini family chose to live with Itala's sister Gaby in Milan for the interim period while deciding their future. Milan adored Madame Serini, and she became well renowned as a seamstress of fine clothing. In her three short years, she worked from home as a designer and dressmaker. Her work was often commissioned by the exclusive House of Lecomte and within a short period she became known to many high society ladies in Milan who would engage her dressmaking services. Madame Lecomte had offered her the opportunity to take over her salon in Milan. However, Madame Serini's financial circumstances at the time rendered it impossible.

Despite her success in Milan, Itala and her husband, Guerrino, decided to emigrate

¹ Madame Serini, oral history interview by Luciana Katsalidis, 1987, Italian Historical Society Oral Histories Collection.

² Bonegilla migrant Centre Heritage Park, accessed at www.majorprojects.vic.gov.au on 6 November 2nd 2003.

to Australia, with their young children Anna Maria (Nucci) and Marcello Romano. Milan was still recovering from the Second World War and, as the family was forced to abandon everything they had in Fiume, it was difficult to maintain the same living standards which they once enjoyed there. They also felt they could not abuse the generosity of Itala's sister, who had given them two rooms in the house. Nor could they afford to rent an apartment in the same area where the *crème de la crème* of Milan's society lived and from which came her customers. Emigration was the only possible solution.

AUSTRALIA

After a stay of three long months at Bonegilla, the Serini family went to Hobart, Tasmania. In Hobart, they had heard about Claudio Alcorso who owned a textile factory in partnership with Paul Sonnino. Both had arrived in Australia in 1938 to escape from Mussolini's fascist regime. However, at the outbreak of the Second World War they were interned and spent a long period at Loveday Internment Camp in South Australia. After the War, the two partners established Silk and Textile Printers Limited, which was to become a very successful business. Meeting Alcorso was to have an influential impact on Madame Serini's life.

Madame Serini remembers the introduction with Alcorso and her appearance with some amusement: she was 'very elegant, with a Prince of Wales skirt, a red three-quarter jacket, flared at the back, crocodile grey shoes, matching leather buttons and gloves'.³ Mr Alcorso was surprised at such elegance, and did not think Madame Serini was suited to factory work. She was asked if she could create designs for silk printing fabric and soon after she was offered a job.

Claudio's wife, Diana, saw the potential in Itala to become a leading fashion designer and offered to accommodate the Serini family on the ground floor of her mother-in-law's house at Sandy Bay in Hobart. Diana and Mrs Sonnino soon introduced her to the wealthiest ladies in town. Within a short time, Madame Serini was able to build a reputation as the most sought-after designer and dressmaker in Hobart. After one year, when her command of the English language had improved, she opened Itala Salon at 7 Elizabeth Street, Hobart. The

fashion parades of her collection were a 'must see' event. Her daughter Nucci and her sister Carmen - whom she had sponsored to emigrate and join them in Hobart in 1953 - were her favourite models.

One of her loyal clients was Mrs Turnbull, wife of the Minister for Health, Mr John Turnbull.⁴ Mrs Turnbull asked Madame Serini, 'why are you spending your talent here? Go to Melbourne!'. Mrs Turnbull wrote a letter of introduction for Madame Serini. This event was the catalyst to change the scale of Madame Serini's success. She flew to Melbourne with her husband and the letter of introduction. The task ahead of making an impression on the fashion world was daunting. She started at the bottom end of Collins Street - the heart of fine fashion and shopping in Melbourne - and called into every quality ladies' clothing store in an attempt to have her work accepted. Finally, a friendly manager of one store perceptively suggested that she 'go to this door'. The boutique he was alluding to was Le Louvre, at 74 Collins Street, one of Melbourne's best known fashion houses which opened in 1922 and still operates today. Owner Lilian Wightman gave Madame Serini the opportunity to show her one of her creations and was so impressed that she ordered two on the spot. With a bundle of emerald green and ruby red silk in their hand, the Serini family returned to Hobart where the Itala Salon was continuing to provide for the 'darlings' of Hobart society.

Mr Serini returned to Melbourne to hand deliver the dresses which his wife had made for Le Louvre. Lilian Wightman then convinced the Serinis to 'sell everything and come over'. In December 1953, they moved to Melbourne. Wightman asked Madame Serini for exclusive rights to sell her creations. From her Middle Brighton apartment, Madame Serini designed and made the exclusive dresses that were worn by the highest echelon of Melbourne society. In this early stage, she designed many gowns for the Royal visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 which were sold to the public by Wightman in her salon.

Many of the girls who worked for Serini were of Italian origin. She was known as the 'Italian on Collins Street.' At the Le Louvre she was the *premiere*,⁵ but she continued

³ Madame Serini, oral history interview by Astrid Haban-Beer, 3 November 2003, Italian Historical Society Oral History Collection.

⁴ Reginald John David Turnbull, State Minister for Health, Tasmania (1948-1959)

⁵ *Première*: the designer and dressmaker in charge.

to worked from home. Given the extent of the business, and the increasing prosperity, the family moved to a large house in Munga Road, Toorak. Soon after, Wightman told Madame Serini that it was too expensive for her to work outside the boutique and asked her to move with some of her workers into the workshop of Le Louvre in Collins Street.

Ten years after arriving in Australia, and at a prosperous level of success in the Melbourne fashion industry, Madame Serini decided to return to Italy to visit her family and study the European fashions of the time. Her daughter, Nucci, accompanied her. It was to be a highly significant decision in her career: she was to be gone six months, but returned after four, only to find, to her dismay, that in her absence her position at Le Louvre had been taken over by a Sydney designer. This was an indication of the incredibly competitive nature of the world of fashion. Madame Serini says she always respected Lilian Wightman as a businesswoman, and respected her sense of timeless style. The event could have meant the end for Madame Serini but became a trigger for bigger successes resulting in the establishment in 1959 of her own salon: Madame Serini Haute Couture at 484 Toorak Road, Toorak, Melbourne's most exclusive suburb.

The Italian Consul-General, Marchese Giorgio Serafini, officially opened the salon. Madame Serini advertised widely in newspapers all over the country to build up her personal reputation and used her accreditation as the former *première* of Le Louvre to help her establish a loyal clientele. The women who bought her clothes from Le Louvre never knew that Madame Serini had made them until she had her own salon.

Madame Serini travelled widely around Australia doing promotions and personal fittings and newspaper displays. Her name became synonymous with 'the best of the best' European-style high fashion. She was invited to participate in charity events for many hospitals around the country. One of the biggest events was for the Women's and Children's Hospital in Adelaide, in 1971. Sir Robert Helpman flew in from San Francisco specifically to open the event, which coincided with the Adelaide Arts Festival. Madame Serini was asked to present a fashion show for the appeal. She frankly admits that the charity events had no financial rewards for her. She championed social causes and was happy

to see her clothes being promoted and admired in the community. Her daughter, Nucci, continued to be one of her models and she often called upon Italian girls to model her dresses, further emphasising the role of Italian-Australians in the fashion industry. Madame Serini remembers Liz Scarborough and Diana Masters as being among her favourite models.

The salon's heyday was in the early 1970s. People liked to 'dress-up' and there was a market for handmade personally tailored clothes. Lamentably, the trends against high fashion - the punk style, the street fashions and the 'no-rules' fashion of jeans and denim - were to threaten the classic style which was so integral to the Serini design. In her own words:
'Denim...these jeans, they ended true fashion...there is no more elegance in dressing.'
The salon was closed in 1979, after twenty-two years of success. Madame Serini however continued to work from home for a restricted clientele.

THE BUSINESSWOMAN

Madame Serini *prima facie* would appear to have faced many obstacles in her path to success. Her status as an immigrant and a woman, without a wide local support network, should have worked against her. Indeed, in any other industry it would have. Furthermore, Madame Serini was widowed in 1968, when her husband died of a heart attack at age fifty. She still had Nucci and Marcello to care for. As a single mother as well, she continued to reap success in her industry. Despite worldwide women's liberation movements, the presence of a woman as a leader of her industry, and manager of her own business, would have been rare at the time. However, the fashion industry worked differently. There was nothing 'masculine' about Madame Serini's approach to management or business. When asked if she was a shrewd businesswoman, Madame Serini exclaimed *'I don't think any Latin woman could be shrewd.'*⁶

Her experience with Lilian Wightman did perhaps toughen her to the business world, but for Madame Serini, it was always about the clothes themselves. She never was 'mainstream' in her taste. She adhered to 'real style' and believes that quality is a significant factor in style. Her fabrics were all sourced from Europe, mainly Italy and France. Even the linings of her garments were in quality materials such as silk. While

⁶ Madame Serini, oral history interview by Astrid Haban-Beer, 13th November 2003.

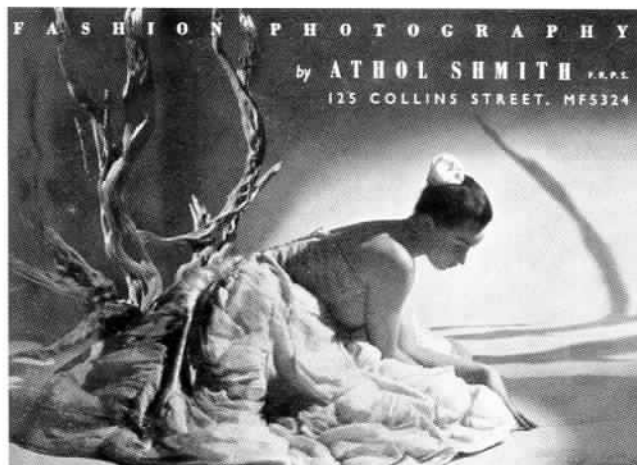
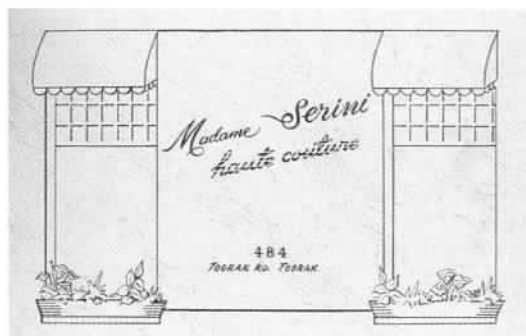
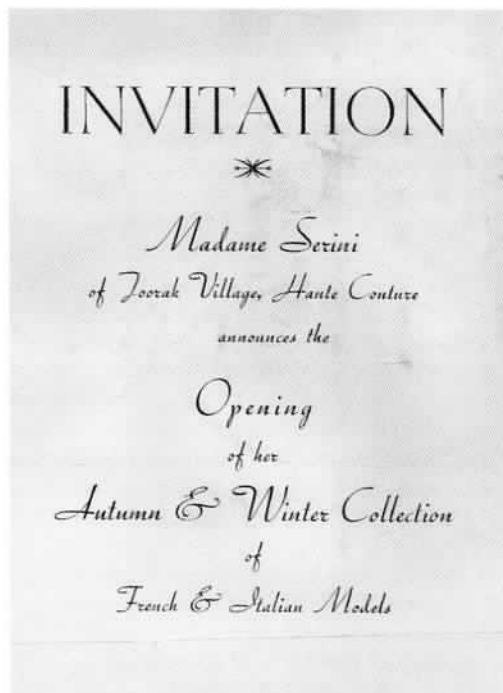
TOP LEFT Nucci Serini displaying a garment designed by her mother at the Serini studio in Hobart, c1953.

TOP RIGHT Invitation for one of Madame Serini's Autumn and Winter Collection.

MIDDLE Publicity card for the opening of Madame Serini fashion boutique, 1959.

BOTTOM LEFT Publicity brochure for Athol Smith, photographer, showing a garment created by Madame Serini, c1958.

BOTTOM RIGHT Publicity brochure for Ferraniacolor film, showing a garment created by Madame Serini when working as designer for Le Louvre boutique, c1958.



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Gown by
Le Louvre

CAPRI . . .
fashions loveliest fabric



Gown designed by Madame Serini of Toorak for the Gown of the Year
An 'Estacel' fibre fabric woven by
BRUCK MILLS exclusively for SAMUEL COURTAULDS

having a classic style, Madame Serini did make adventurous dresses, such as sheer-bodied and short-skirted styles. For the time, this would have been daring, but as an haute couturière, Madame Serini was able to create such designs with absolute taste.

Her philosophy was to establish a loyal and satisfied clientele, provide them with perfect service and nurture the relationship. It was ladies such as Lady Potter, Mrs John Turnbull and 'all the best women in Australia', who sourced their garments from Madame Serini. As an Italian immigrant, Madame Serini flourished in the business. In fashion, being Italian was an advantage. *No doubt, it was to my advantage...all the fashion in those days came from Italy and France...I was Italian*. In real terms, Madame Serini was fashion. She never denied her 'Italian-ness'. She used her knowledge of European fashion to influence her designs in Australia. As a woman, she felt like she was on an equal playing field. Her industry was a woman's industry, where trust, reputation and talent predicated success.

When asked how the industry perceived her, Madame Serini knows that she was highly regarded. She feels her peak was in the early 1970s when her salon Madame Serini's had been operational for over ten years, and the clientele had been long established. She came controversially



LEFT Publicity brochure for an entry in the Gown of the Year of 1967.

RIGHT A mannequin modelling a dress by Madame Serini, c1975.

second in the 1967 Gown of the Year Award, with Liz Scarborough as the model. Madame Serini was rightfully angered when her creation, a dress in orange taffeta, was not rewarded with first prize even though it was considered by most as the leader of the field. Such personal memories evoke strong memories of the disappointments and difficulties encountered in her fashion career in Melbourne.

Madame Serini was an astute woman who managed all affairs of the business, including publicity, public relations and costing. Of course, the substantial work of designing and making the dresses was also controlled by Madame Serini. She never contemplated opening a salon in another city. Her interstate clients were visited during her frequent trips around the country.

The competitors of the day were equally as expensive and renowned as Madame Serini. The market was competitive. Le Louvre still exists today as an appointment-only enterprise, and other Collins Street boutiques such as La Petite, Georges and Lucas also serviced the upper-class of Melbourne.

In the post-war period, fashion was booming in Melbourne. In a recent exhibition titled *'Swish: Fashionable Melbourne of the 1950s'* presented at the Ian Potter Centre: National Gallery of Victoria at Federation Square,

Fashion designer Madame Serini (third from left) with Sir Robert Helpman and six models at Adelaide airport, arriving for the opening of the Adelaide Arts Festival, during which some of Serini's creations were displayed for a charity benefit.



Melbourne, some dresses from Le Louvre were featured. Given the era, these designs would almost certainly have been created when Madame Serini was the *première* of Lil Wightman's prestigious salon. The exhibition shows that the fashion of the time reflected American and European influences, where colour became an important feature in the post-war attitude of new beginnings.

It is difficult to ascertain the impact Madame Serini has had upon the long term fashion schema of Melbourne. In her own time, she was a leader. But given that modern mainstream fashion revolves around practicality, comfort and economy, the haute couture of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s is almost dissonant with the attitudes of fashion. Fashion tends to reflect periods rather than individual designers. And today, like in Madame Serini's time, high fashion reflects movements in Europe. However, as an Italian designer in Australia, certainly Madame Serini was a pioneer.

Perhaps it was Madame Serini's attitude as well as her background that made her stand out. Given that her focus was fashion, her clothes sold themselves. It was only when the demand for high fashion decreased that it became unviable for Madame Serini's to remain open.

From her training as a young woman in Fiume, to the elegance of Milan and the salons of Melbourne, Madame Serini was always successful in the fashion industry. Her artistic talents, and devotion to quality renowned her as a couturière of note. As a businesswoman, nor her gender, nor her background impeded her, in fact they were elements in her success. From a post-war Italian migrant, to one of Australia's best designers and dressmakers, Madame Itala Serini personifies a story of persistence, courage and excellence.