

## ITALIAN ART IN SYDNEY: GUIDO ZULIANI AND PETER MELOCCO, TWO INTERWOVEN STORIES OF EMIGRATION AND ENTERPRISE

by  
Anne Reynolds

*Anne Reynolds is Associate Professor in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney. Anne is the author of a recent study of Italians in Leichhardt, A Thematic History of Italy-born in Leichhardt and the Leichhardt Municipality, commissioned by Leichhardt Council and funded by the Heritage Office of NSW. This is the fourth article based on this study published in the IHS Journal. The three previous articles were published in the July-December 2001 issue (Vol. 9, No. 2).*

**G**uido Zuliani was born on 22 June 1927 in Spilimbergo, near Udine in Northern Italy, a town known for its celebrated School of Mosaics, established in 1922 and drawing on a centuries' old local tradition in mosaic work. Emigrés from Spilimbergo transported these traditions throughout the Italian diaspora. From the age of fourteen, Guido Zuliani attended the School for two years, learning by day the practical skills of the craft of mosaic which involved the use of marble, enamel and coloured stones from the Tagliamento River at Spilimbergo. In the evenings, Guido followed design classes to learn the required theoretical skills. He also began attending classes conducted by the artist Umberto Martina who trained with Ettore Tito.

At the age of sixteen, Guido gave up mosaic work and devoted himself wholly to drawing and painting as a pupil of the master, Martina. He accompanied Martina to portrait sittings, and earned money from sketches and portraits completed between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. In 1948 Guido took part in an important exhibition of seven artists in Spilimbergo, reviewed by Franco Merli in the newspaper *Messaggero Veneto*, who noted that Zuliani '[p]ossiede la maestria delle forme ed il segreto delle realizzazioni efficaci' [has the consummate skill of the design and holds the secret of creating powerful works]. Rosetta De Marco was another artist from Spilimbergo in the exhibition.

Guido's emigration to Australia in 1948, at the age of twenty-one, was prompted by Peter Melocco who was in Italy to recruit craftsmen and artists for the family company, Melocco Pty. Ltd., based in Annandale, Sydney. Peter was impressed by Guido's works in an exhibition in Udine, for which Guido had also painted a large arras, hung at the entrance to the exhibition. Guido's sea passage to Sydney in late 1948 was financed by Peter Melocco.

Pietro (better known as Peter) Melocco was born in Toppo, near Udine in 1883.<sup>1</sup> The eldest of the three Melocco brothers, Peter arrived in Australia on 6 May 1908, with ten shillings in his pocket, inspired by a lantern slide show in New York of a booming construction industry in Sydney. At the age of ten, Peter had been sent from Italy to relatives in the building trades in New York. Trained as a mosaic artist at the Coopers Union technical college in New York, where he studied art and drawing, Peter rapidly established himself in the family business run by his uncles. Peter was involved in plaster, marble, mosaic and terrazzo work across the United States.

Before buying the building yard of Moodie Bros., Builders, at 1 Booth St., Annandale, which the business occupied from 1919 until 1960, Peter Melocco rented premises at 16 Regent Street, Redfern (1908-1911) and 37 Parramatta Road, Forest Lodge (1911-1919), opposite Sydney University, where the Melocco enterprise is referred to in the contemporary *Sand's Directory* as Mosaic Heraclite Paviers. During the time the company operated at 1 Booth Street, Annandale, the property, originally a series of iron-clad timber sheds, was significantly altered and expanded.

One of the earliest Melocco commissions was for a black and white marble mosaic at the entrance of the Kodak shop in George Street in the city. Another early commission was for St Mary's Cathedral, after the young Peter approached Cardinal Moran in 1910 with his design for the floor of the Chapel of Irish Saints and undercut by half the 1,000 pounds which the project might otherwise have cost. In these early days, Peter

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<sup>1</sup> Pietro Melocco died in Sydney in 1961. A recent website, compiled by members of the third generation of the family, which presents the history of the Melocco family is [www.virtualltour.com.au/melocco](http://www.virtualltour.com.au/melocco)



*Zuliani Studio, the second photographic studio established by Guido Zuliani, at 220a Norton Street Leichhardt. Photograph 1964. (photo: G. Zuliani archive).*

transported materials to the site by tram. Business on a larger scale was made possible in 1918 by the purchase of marble-cutting equipment from Anthony Hordern's.

Peter's younger brothers, Antonio (Anthony or Tony) (1887-1948) and Galliano (Galli) (1897-1971) arrived in Sydney in 1910. Anthony had trained as a mosaic worker in Paris and he joined Peter in the business. Anthony was largely responsible for the execution of Peter's designs, as production manager for the finishing trades. He was also responsible for work that drew on the ancient Italian craft of *scagliola* [the making of fake marble] which the Meloccos introduced to Australia. Anthony was a skilled craftsman and a perfect foil for the design skills of this older brother. Galliano, younger by ten years than Anthony and, much later, a contributor to the company's fortunes, is remembered for his engineering skills. Galliano took an active role in the family business from 1926. One could say that each brother served a different function in the partnership. Broadly, Peter ran the business side and continued to contribute his significant creativity in design, Anthony specialised in production and Galliano managed the construction aspect, later taking part in the other two areas as well. Melocco's employed a mix of Australian- and Italian-born workers.

Working for Peter Melocco according to the terms of his two-year contract, Guido Zuliani began to repay the fare of 204 pounds at 2 pounds per week. In 1949 Guido's full weekly wage was 6 pounds and rent at his first boarding house in Stanmore, owned by Signora Rina Pesavento, was 2 pounds. Guido subsequently lived in Commonwealth Street, Surry Hills, with an Italian family. Surry Hills had been a focal point for Italy-born in Sydney since the 1920s, and it was known for cheap rates in the small terrace houses and boarding houses to which single men gravitated from the boats that arrived at nearby Woolloomoolloo. Surry Hills was one of the several inner-city suburbs where Italian immigrants, in the majority single men, were able to find rooms in houses where Italian was spoken. Later Guido moved to Moore Park Road, Surry Hills with another Italian family where he remained for two years before moving on to Strathfield.

In 1963 Guido went to live in Leichhardt, by that time the acknowledged centre of Italian retail commerce. Six years previously he had established at 276 Norton Street, Leichhardt his first photographic business, known to the Italian-born community of Sydney as Zuliani Studio. Photography was Guido's second, and most enduring, career. In the years of the postwar immigration boom, he was responsible for documenting many aspects of the individual

lives and the collective history of Italy-born in Sydney. Weddings, religious *feste*, the building and opening of the A.P.I.A. Club, the opening of the Marconi Club, visits by Italian celebrities, including many boxers and variety entertainers, and Italian community social events, including the Italian dances at the Paddington Town Hall and the Trocadero in George Street, were among the events he recorded. Many of Guido's photographs are seminal elements in family collections in Australia and Italy; many were featured in the local Italian-language press.



*Marble mosaic of a seventeenth century sailing ship. Detail of the Tasman's Map mosaic constructed by Melocco Bros. Pty Ltd in the vestibule of the State Library of New South Wales.*

Guido's career in photography developed spontaneously out of his love of society with fellow Italians. As a single, unattached immigrant who spoke little English, he was keen to establish himself economically in a foreign country. Photography was a potentially lucrative career, and it was also clearly linked to his artistic sensibilities. However, before this career got seriously underway in the 1950s, Guido's training at the Spilimbergo Mosaic School and as Martina's pupil made him a valuable asset in

Peter Melocco's plans for a new project at St Mary's Cathedral.

Guido's design and mosaic skills were used on a number of significant Melocco projects in Sydney over the two-year period of his contract, from February 1949. The first project was the new Interstate Booking Office at Sydney Central Station. Guido elaborated full-scale the designs for the mosaic floor and the decorative frieze which Peter Melocco, as master designer, gave him in draft, relying also on advice from the commissioning body about the railway themes to be depicted. The next contract which Guido worked on was the splendid mosaic floor in the main body of the crypt of St Mary's, outstanding for the beauty of its design, created principally by the inspired creativity of Peter Melocco, and remarkable also for the high quality of its execution. For the Cathedral crypt, Guido worked under Giulio Ciurletti, an Italian-born sculptor employed by Peter Melocco. Ciurletti was responsible for the marble mosaic floor around the altar, and he was in charge of the later work for the main floor, on which Guido and others, including Corrado Tassi, collaborated.

The Melocco legacy in Sydney is rich. Thankfully, many of its many and varied elements have survived, in particular in public buildings. The magnificent marble and terrazzo inlay floor in the vestibule of the N.S.W. State Library, featuring Tasman's map of Australia, belongs to 1941. As David Melocco has noted, much of this work was done at the factory and brought to the site in panels. This process was repeated for the much grander scale work in the crypt of St Mary's. The crypt sanctuary floor was completed between 1945 and 1948, and the main floor between 1950 and 1958. The work, commissioned by Cardinal Norman Gilroy, followed a design on which Peter Melocco collaborated with the Rev. Dr. W. Leonard of St. Patrick's Seminary, Manly. Major influences on the floor design were the Book of Kells, with its Celtic designs and motifs, as well as the floor of the Duomo of Siena. During the later work in the crypt, Peter became ill with Parkinson's disease and visited the site in a wheelchair.

Giulio Ciurletti supervised work at the Booth Street factory. Individual sections of the floor were prepared by pressing rubber onto the surface in which the design was cut by hand and prepared for subsequent sandblasting that created half-inch recesses for the mosaic fillers, including marble, *scagliola*, granite and enamel. Guido was often responsible for

drawing full-scale cartoons of designs which Peter Melocco created in draft and also for cutting designs in the rubber. Completed sections of the floor were assembled on site at Booth Street and, once checked for sizing, were transported to the Cathedral and definitively installed. The marble used by Melocco's was high quality, imported from all over the world. Some of the best Australian marble came from the area around Wombeyan Caves in N.S.W. It was soft and ideal for altars and walls, but unsuitable for floors or sculpture.

In 1949 Guido returned part-time to his first love, art, attending classes at the studio of Antonio Dattilo Rubbo in the city, where tuition was not prohibitively expensive. Guido stayed for one year but left with feelings of rejection. Dattilo Rubbo was sorry at his departure, but Tony La Spina told Guido that he was being called a "dago", and he left because of this. Guido returned some years later for a longer period, when the studio was run by Dattilo Rubbo's successor, Professor G.F. Bissietta, the professional name of Giuseppe Fontanelli.

One of Guido's first Sydney portraits, of the celebrated Domain speaker, P.E.J. Ireland, was completed in 1949 at the Dattilo Rubbo studio. Ireland was a model at the studio and he was paid two shillings by each of the students in the group. After exhibiting this painting at the Royal Easter Show art exhibition, Guido later sold it to the *Chianti* restaurant in Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, in exchange for food and wine. The restaurant—as it was later to be—was established first as a cafeteria or *mensa* by the Capuchin Friars for Italian immigrants, many of whom lived, as Guido then did, in boarding houses in the local area. This portrait was later sold for 250 pounds to a New Zealand collector. *Chianti*, as it came to be known, was passed on by the Capuchins, possibly in the early 1960s, to Frank Orsatti who reportedly gave the restaurant its name.

Pursuing painting and drawing part-time and working full-time for Melocco, Guido often worked additional hours in the hope of being able to return to Italy. This was not to be. He rapidly realised that it would be difficult to make a living out of art, in particular because of the language barrier. Guido learned English slowly but never felt comfortable with it. Always in contact with Italians, he worked long hours and did not have time to attend English classes. In 1950, Guido started

photography in a small way, beginning more or less by accident what was to become his principal career when he took photographs for a friend who was returning to Italy. He discovered that it was a way of earning extra money. By 1951, Guido was a full-time photographer. He still worked occasionally for Melocco's and managed to paint from time to time. Peter Melocco maintained an interest in Guido's art. Guido's portrait of Peter Melocco, painted from photographs, hangs in the *Fogolar Furlan* club in Lansvale.

Guido's first professional photographs of the early 1950s were taken at Fairfield and Bossley Park in outer south-western Sydney



*Guido Zuliani working on the pavement for St Mary's Cathedral crypt, pictured at Melocco Bros. factory, Annandale Sydney, 1951 (photo: G. Zuliani archive).*

where he travelled by train to take photographs on Saturdays for Italian farmers to send to family in Italy. Guido took shots of farmers working their land and, later in the day, of family groups gathered for formal portraits. In the early days, Guido worked as a photographer principally on weekends. By 1957 he had set up his first Leichhardt photographic studio, at 276 Norton Street, downstairs from where the fledgling A.P.I.A. sports association held meetings in the rented

premises occupied before the Frazer Street clubhouse was built. Guido's first photographic studio was in a rented house in Annandale, which he shared with a friend at a weekly rent of 4 pounds.

Guido decided to move his business to Leichhardt because of its strong connections with Italy-born, many of whom by that time had moved from the inner city and had chosen Leichhardt and adjacent suburbs as a more lasting place of residence. A.P.I.A., as it then was, was located in rented premises above Guido's first Norton Street studio. Lucchitti's grocery shop was next door, with a retail section at the front and wholesale section at the back. The commercial hub of Leichhardt, centred on Parramatta Road and the southern end of Norton Street, was already host to many Italian-run businesses. In addition, the church of St Fiacre's in Catherine Street, Leichhardt, which had been handed over by Cardinal Gilroy to Italian-American Capuchin Friars in 1946, was a major focus for Italy-born, with services, both religious and secular, provided by an Italian-speaking clergy.

Father Atanasio Gonelli, the Capuchin Friar, who celebrated in 2000 the fiftieth anniversary of his mission in Australia, spent many years at St Fiacre's. Guido came into contact with Fr Gonelli through taking photographs at weddings. Another church popular among Italians was located in Albion Street, Surry Hills where the Scalabrinian Fathers, following in Capuchin footsteps, carried out welfare and missionary work among Italian immigrants. The friars sent Guido work, and he occasionally took them in return to the *Moro* restaurant in Petersham and to the *Chianti*.

By 1957 Leichhardt had a number of identifiable Italian commercial characteristics, besides those already noted. Cantarella and Lucchitti imported products from Italy. Cantarella then operated in Flood Street, Leichhardt. Parramatta Road, on the strip between Catherine and Norton Streets in particular, was a busy shopping area, especially on Saturdays, with a large number of Italian shops and Italian-born customers. Guido remembers that more Italian shops soon began to appear on Norton Street. Mezzapica's *pasticceria* at 130 Norton Street was established in 1952. Caffé Sport, at 2a Norton Street, the first Italian coffee shop in Leichhardt, was opened by Raffaello Raffaelli in 1956. In 2001, both businesses, still so named, have become icons of Italian retail commerce in Sydney.

Guido often frequented *Chianti*, with its convivial atmosphere and mix of people, some playing accordion and guitar. He suggested to Frank Orsatti the idea of hanging paintings for sale and decoration in the restaurant. The *Florentino* restaurant in Elizabeth Street in the city where Guido also ate, was a basement restaurant that had been under the proprietorship of Mario Faggion since 1932. Guido liked to sing: he was often asked for Italian songs, especially the songs of *emigranti*. In the period of the 1950s to the 1960s, there were relatively very few restaurants that served authentic Italian food. Well remembered are *Il Florentino*, *Le Tre Venezie* in Stanmore, *Chianti* in Surry Hills, *Miramare* and *Moro* on Parramatta Road, Petersham, and *La Veneziana* on the CBD fringe in East Sydney.

Guido worked as a photographer in restaurants in the evenings and afternoons. He often sold his art in exchange for restaurant food and wine. *Moro* was one of his favourite locales. It was owned from the latter 1950s by Luciano Franceschini who first came to Australia in 1956 as the principal chef of the Italian Olympic team. Guido convinced Luciano to hang his paintings, and art soon became a meal ticket. Guido preferred portrait painting, following the example of his first teacher, Martina.

In 1959, at the time of his marriage, Guido lived at Summer Hill. Later in 1962-1963, when he built the ground floor of 220a Norton Street, where he definitively established Zuliani Studio Pty. Ltd., a photographic studio with an attached residence, Guido borrowed funds from the Italian immigrant loan society, financed by the Italian government, as well as 1,000 pounds from a friend to buy the land. Guido became official photographer of the A.P. I.A. Club which, by the mid-1960s, was established in new premises in Frazer Street, Leichhardt. He documented in photographs the building of the new clubhouse, from the foundations up, and also took movies of events there. Success as a photographer enabled Guido by the later 1960s to dedicate more time to painting. On 28 November 1965 at the new A.P.I.A. Club, an exhibition of his art was opened by Professor Bissietta. Many of the more than thirty paintings and drawings exhibited were sold.

Guido was subsequently successful in having

work hung at the Archibald Prize exhibition, in 1971 and 1972. In 1971 he entered a portrait of the Italian-born artist, Ricardo Just, from Muggia near Trieste, who was at that time living in Sydney. For the 1972 Archibald Prize, Guido entered a portrait of the ex-State Premier, Jack Lang, who was by then well over ninety years of age. Guido had been introduced to Mr Lang by the journalist, Franco Battistessa. Lang sat for the portrait in Guido's Leichhardt studio over six two-hour sittings. Guido would collect Lang from his home in Auburn and, after sittings, drive him to his office in the city.

Guido's memories of the talented and highly skilled Italians who worked with him at Melocco's are mixed with more personal memories of photographs of farmers and their families and of early portraits, including his landlady, Signora Pesavento, P.E.J. Ireland, and Father Atanasio. Italian craft skills,

artistic traditions and culinary customs are interwoven themes of Guido's story in Australia. Melocco, Zuliani, Orsatti, Gonelli — these are just some of the names of Italians who made new lives and created their own history in Australia.

Guido Zuliani and Peter Melocco are two of the many Italians whose stories of migration and settlement inform us about the lived experience of Italian-Australians, their contribution to our collective life and their role in the fundamental transformations to the fabric and spirit of Australian society over the past hundred years. □

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The Melocco Brothers website can be consulted at <http://www.virtualtour.com.au/melocco>

The author of this article can be contacted at [anne.reynolds@italian.usyd.edu.au](mailto:anne.reynolds@italian.usyd.edu.au)



*Guido Zuliani at the door of his first photographic studio, at 276 Norton Street, Leichhardt, 1957 (photo: G. Zuliani archive).*