

FROM SIMONETTI TO RUBBO: Italian Art and Artists in late nineteenth century Sydney

by Francesca Musicò

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In 1899, the Italian sculptor Achille Simonetti was described in *The Australasian Art Review* as being 'possessed of a sound Italian training and saturated with the spirit of classic sculpture'.² Simonetti's academic and classical training epitomises the qualities of refinement and sophistication in European art so esteemed by sculpture enthusiasts of the upper and middle classes in late nineteenth century Sydney. Sydney residents harboured an inferiority complex regarding Europe, especially as some outsiders still viewed Sydney as a remote former penal colony. Italian artists in Sydney greatly influenced contemporary attitudes to art. Also significant is the part played by patrons of the arts and their motives for commissioning artworks.

Italian paintings and statuary had been imported to Australia since the 1850s. The prestige of Italian art is mirrored in the fact that so many of the Sydney elite on tours to Europe had portraits painted or sculpted whilst in Rome and Florence. An artist who catered for this type of clientele was the painter Alessandro Capalti. His commissions included portraits for prominent Australian households such as the Macarthur family. He was also chosen by institutions such as the University of Sydney as the preferred artist for official portraits of office bearers and chancellors including Edward Deas Thomson and James Macarthur. The university also commissioned several sculptural works from Italy, including a bust of Thomson by Odoardo Fontacchiotti, a bust of Peter Nicol Russell by G. Benzoni, and the statue of William Charles Wentworth by Pietro Tenerani. These works are located today in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney.

Italian statuary was imported in abundance from the 1880s onwards, due in large part to the successful display of artworks – usually copies of antiquity or Renaissance masters – in the Italian Court [pavilion] of the 1879 Sydney

International Exhibition. Many of these Italian sculptures were imported specifically for the Botanic Gardens and other government buildings in Sydney, by Italian agents Oscar Meyer and Job Hanson. Both had a long association providing Italian statuary for the Government of New South Wales.⁴ One of their most ardent patrons was Sir Henry Parkes; a transaction is documented in a letter from Job Hanson to Parkes in 1881: *I arr'd in Italy ten days ago ... I have bought eight statues as follows all really good things Charity 5ft, Venis[sic] by Canova...*⁵ When Parkes' art collection was auctioned in 1883, a large proportion of the artworks were of Italian origin.⁶



Italian copy of Canova's Boxers. This one is The Boxer Kreugas, 1880s, Botanic Gardens, Sydney. Photo F.A. Musicò.

Giovanni Fontana, an Italian sculptor based in London, received many commissions from the Government of New South Wales as well as prominent Sydney residents, because of his flair for detail.⁷ Many art lovers of the period considered detail, rather than creativity or individuality, as the true essence of art. This was also suggested in the fact that the Government was still importing works from Fontana's London studio even when sculptors, such as Achille Simonetti, were living and working in Sydney. However, Fontana did spend some time in Sydney. His studio in London was patronised by the Prince of Wales and many Australian dignitaries and officials. Fontana executed the statue of Rev. Dunmore Lang in Wynyard Park and the three statues for the vestibules of the Chief Secretary's Building.



Giovanni Fontana, *La Sonnambula*, marble 165cm, Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales.

By mid 1870s, the demand for supreme Italian artworks was such that Italian artists began to settle in Sydney, among them painter Giulio Anivitti (1850-1881) and sculptor Achille Simonetti (1838-1900), both classically trained at the prestigious *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome – Simonetti by his father Luigi and Anivitti by Alessandro Capalti. When the New South Wales

Academy of Art Training School was established in 1875, Simonetti and Anivitti were the first instructors to be appointed.⁸ It is significant that the Academy turned to European instructors. The Academy's idea was to transplant the European classical disciplines of art to Australia.

While Simonetti went on to have a long career, Anivitti returned to Italy and died in 1881. During his stay in Sydney, Anivitti completed several portrait commissions for a number of institutions, including the University of Sydney. His most notable work was his 1875 award winning portrait of Charles Badham. Anivitti also made his name as a restorer, the university appointing him to repair several portraits in the Great Hall which had been water damaged. This is documented in a letter from Badham to William Macarthur:

I asked him (*Anivitti*) to make a general inspection of all the pictures and especially the two works of his old master Capalti...with the utmost care and skill he removed the varnish which had turned quite yellow in parts, not using any spirits but working with the tips of the fingers...⁹

This emphasises that Italian art was held in high esteem by prestigious institutions throughout Sydney. Moreover, this work, which ten years earlier would have been produced in Italy, was now being produced by Italian artists now resident in Sydney.

Italian sculptors in Sydney made their mark during the 1870s and 1880s when the city was experiencing a building boom created by the prosperity of the gold-rushes.¹⁰ The General Post Office, the Department of Lands building and the Colonial Secretary's building were all products of this boom. These buildings were especially lavish, and suitably qualified sculptors were in demand to decorate the sandstone façades.

Academic and conservative classical styles were the preferred subject matter of the Sydney elite. They considered themselves 'British' and classical works illustrating a civilised past confirmed their links to Europe. Classical sculpture was designated for the niches on the lavish Chief Secretary's Building in Bridge Street, built between 1877-1890. Simonetti was commissioned to complete five allegorical figures – *Mercy, Justice, Wisdom, Art, Science and Labour* – from 1877 to 1899.¹¹ A contemporary article referring to the sculpture *Justice* confirms that

this style of sculpture was adopted for its 'refining' quality, a *'work for which Sig. Simonetti is entitled to recognition by all who desire to see progress of art in this colony...'*¹²

It is interesting to observe that the *Governor Arthur Phillip Memorial*, a colossal figure and fountain in the Botanic Gardens, was commissioned by the Government of New South Wales to Achille Simonetti. Sculpted between 1888-1897, at a cost of fourteen thousand pounds, it was the most expensive statue ever produced in Sydney, a showpiece to the world, a measure of the city's sophistication. The nine year delay was due to the fact that Simonetti had to supervise bronze and marble castings in Italy, as no such facilities were available in Sydney.¹³ [See cover image]

The *Phillip* statue is uncompromising in its classicism. The government stipulated that the figure of Phillip was to be represented in regal navy uniform, supported by four 'heroic classic figures'.¹⁴ The artist had envisaged two of the four 'heroic figures' as classical and the other two as modern naturalistically modelled figures. However, in 1892 the government ordered Simonetti to complete all of the four figures in classical style, a decision initiated by high profile politicians and artists. Their reasons were best summed up in the government's Architects Minute Paper from 1893, as *'classic design is less likely to provoke hostile criticism than realistic'*.¹⁵ The 'heroic figures' resulted as *Navigation*, in which a classical Neptune was substituted, and *Commerce, Agriculture* (Ceres) and *Mining* represented by Ciclops/Vulcan.

The strong affinity for academic and classical work is suggested in the scandal surrounding Tommaso Sani's carvings on the Pitt Street side of the Sydney General Post Office. Unlike Simonetti and Anivitti, Sani came from a humble background and did not receive training from a prestigious art institute. Nineteenth century Italian realist sculptors, such as Vincenzo Gemito had influenced Sani greatly. Sani was commissioned by the McCredie Brothers, specifying architect James Barnett's design, to carve figures representing different professions, for example, banking and mining, in contemporary dress.

In April 1883, before the carving's completion, the Parliament of New South Wales debated the suitability of Sani's carvings, a debate which would last for eight years. The depiction of

everyday situations lay behind the controversy. Sani had turned away from ancient models as a source of subject matter and depicted working classes. These carvings were considered crass in comparison with the earlier sculptural embellishments of royalty which dotted the façade of the G.P.O. building. In particular they contrasted sharply with Giovanni Fontana's statue of a seated Queen Victoria in regal flowing dress which crowned the entrance of the building.

A parliamentary board was established to assess the carvings and reported that they were *'far more to the unnatural and burlesque, than they do to the real'*.¹⁶ Sani's harshest critic was James Green (alias DeLibra) who wrote *'the bank clerk is more like a monkey than a man...the other, who is receiving the letter, with a neck like a bull's - is more utterly demented than Orphelia'*.¹⁷

The board sought the opinion of the famous English artist Sir Frederick Leighton. After viewing photographs of the carvings, the conservative Leighton commented *'I saw them with nothing more short of consternation, and I must fear, add disgust...'*¹⁸ After eight years of debate and many calls for the removal of the carvings it was eventually decided to leave them in tact. They have survived in their original position to the present.

While Italian sculptors dominated the period 1870-1890, Italian landscape painters were also active in Sydney during this time. Both Giuseppe Ferrarini from Parma, and Carmello Rolando from Florence, exhibited classic academic-style paintings. Ferrarini's work was deemed 'truthful' and 'harmonious'. His works, *Spring Double Bay* and *Sunset Botany*, were not daring but complied with conservative art techniques.¹⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* referred to Rolando's work as *'...coarse and conventional, and looks as if it were made only to sell'*.²⁰ Unfortunately, little information survives about these artists especially as the majority of Ferrarini's works were lost in the 1882 Garden Palace fire.

By the late 1880s the perception that the works of Italian artists were conservative changed. From this time, Italian painters had gained the reputation of being 'radical' and 'experimental'. Among them were Arturo Steffani, Girolamo Nerli and Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo. These artists were now experimenting with colour, subject matter and brushwork. Art was no longer cultivated and privileged, but bold and energetic.

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THE SYDNEY POST OFFICE CARVINGS.

IN spite of the perpetual protests of the press, the public, and experts and critics of all kinds, for the past seven years, and notwithstanding the recent Ministerial promises made in the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales that the outrageous sculptures in the spandrels of the first floor arcade of the Pitt-street front of the Sydney General Post Office should be removed forthwith, the Government of that colony have been weak enough to promise to allow a new discussion of this threshed-out subject to take place in Parliament a short time hence, and to defer

which, while the questions of design and treatment were advisedly passed over, several matters affecting the unsatisfactory technical execution were indicated. It was shown how difficult is always the architect's "selection of the various kinds of art workmen to give the finishing touches to the embodiment of his creation;" that as "architecture, with its attendant carving, depends for its effects upon the amount and disposition of the light and shade to a much greater extent than upon the arrangement of outline," the character given to it by practical men in various countries depends to no small extent upon "the angle of incidence of the sun's rays;" and that "in a narrow thoroughfare like Pitt-street, where the work can be only viewed from a few paces off, and with a powerful sun usually blazing upon it, the strong projections . . . not only destroy repose, but reduce the apparent size of the object, and so produce a sense of meanness; while the deep shadows

was first erected, its coarseness and vulgarity where the theme of very unfavourable comment with the art critics, who contrasted it (and very properly) with the delicate and pure "Palladian" of Sir Charles Barry's adjoining Reform Club and other buildings. Did the Pitt-street facade occupy the site of the Sydney Museum, or had Signor Sansi "given to the figure subjects the smallest amount of relief possible, and greatly reduced that upon the keystones, the identical design and forms now executed would have produced a very different effect upon the public mind." Now that the work is obscured by hardly more than the multiplicity of telegraph wires, there seems little that is useful or practical to add to these remarks. Aesthetic criticism on technical execution must necessarily vary according to individual taste and feeling. We have, like most other persons, our own opinion—and a very strong one—on the sculptures, and it differ



Sydney Post-Office Carvings.—(See Letterpress on this page.)

G. BARRIS & Co., Eng.

the removal of these monstrous objects until the lawyers and undertakers in the House—necessarily such great authorities on art matters!—have signified their version of the people's will. In order that those of our readers who are unacquainted with these inartistic perpetrations may have some idea of what they are like, we here present an illustration of a portion of them—the subjects being "Banking," and "Post Office Business"—and we publish a complete criticism upon these works, written by *De Libra*. The criticism is divided into three heads, viz:—the style of treatment, the design, and the execution of the sculptures, the order of which is reversed in dealing with them:—

Firstly, the execution. On the 20th of April, 1883, a letter, by the author of these lines, on the subject of the Carvings, was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in

(as in the eyeballs) induce a feeling of fustiness and irritation." Mr. Barnet, the ex-Colonial Architect, in a report which has been published in the *Blue Book*, argued that "spandrel sculpture is invariably in the highest relief," forgetting, apparently, how large a space usually surrounds or faces the great churches and palaces of Continental Europe, and, moreover, how potent is the effect of bright and ever-present colour in toning down a possible exuberance of form, as compared with the depressing surroundings of our drab-hued street-fronts, which forcibly accentuate every such accident. To take two of his own examples—the Church of Santa Maria della Salute, at Venice, as well as Sansovino's Library of St. Mark's, is seen chiefly—the latter exclusively—from the Grand Canal, the Molo, and the Piazzetta San Marco; so that when thus viewed, the sculptures retire to their proper apparent projection, and assume precisely their intended degree of importance in the whole building. It is worthy of special note, as confirming these views, that the Carlton Club in London is an almost fac-simile reproduction by Sir Robert and Mr. Sydney Smirke, of the Ducal Library, Pall Mall, considerably wider than Pitt-street; but when the club

materially from that of the late Colonial Architect.

Secondly, the design. So thoroughly has the Colonial Architect's failure to express, through his allegorical realism, such "grandeur, nobility, or poetry" as may exist in our colonial achievements, avocations, or real life—so often has this been pointed out, that we are spared the necessity of commenting further on this aspect of the matter, and shall again, therefore, be somewhat technical. The heads of most of the figures might have been studied from the inmates of Gladesville or Calleh Park, so abnormal are they in type; but take the absurdly varying proportions that they bear to the bodies; observe the modelling of the hands and fingers in nearly every subject—resembling sometimes an inflated glove or a hosier's glove-form, sometimes a bundle of sausages or bananas, or so many pieces of firewood; look at the vicious stare of the girl at the banker's, the receding forehead of the young architect who embodies Art, the harlot-like leer of the telegram writer and the recipient of the letter, and the insane appearance of the professor of physics; note—how "Cider Cellars' Judge and Jury" aspect of the

Consult R. J. POULTON, Chemist, 77 Bourke-st. East, Melbourne. All Diseases Skillfully Treated Letters answered.



Arturo Steffani as depicted in *The Illustrated Sydney News*, 14th November 1889, p. 20. (Source State Reference Library, State Library of New South Wales).

Arturo Steffani was one of the earliest Italian landscape artists to work in Sydney and then briefly in Tasmania. Originally an opera singer, he arrived in Melbourne with Lazar's Italian Opera Troupe in 1877 but by the 1880s he had devoted himself to painting.²¹ By 1889 he was elected to the Council of the Art Society of New South Wales.²² He may have also been associated with the bohemian art movement in Sydney, given that he frequented the Mosman Bay Artist Camp.²³ George Collingridge, a fellow bohemian artist, described him 'as an impressionist in the best sense of the word – he paints what he sees without further enquiry and succeeds.'²⁴ Regretfully, Steffani seemed to fall into obscurity especially as a large proportion of his work is now lost.

The most influential artist of the period was Girolamo Pieri Ballati Nerli (1860-1926) who arrived in Melbourne in 1885 with fellow artist Ugo Catani.²⁵ Nerli's best known works include *The Voyagers* and *Wet Evening*. He worked in Sydney between 1886/7-1889, where he was promoted by fellow Italian Dr Tommaso Fiaschi. He returned to Sydney for a brief period between 1890 and 1899.²⁶ In 1892 Nerli painted at the artists camp at Mosman Bay with Steffani, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts. He then left for Samoa where he met and painted portraits for Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson.²⁷ After

this period Nerli spent most of his life teaching art in New Zealand. During his last visit to Sydney in 1899 he met and painted a portrait of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo, now unfortunately lost.

Nerli had been influenced by several art movements, including the *Macchiaioli*, but mostly by the *Scapigliati* [ragged ones]. The *Scapigliati*, active in Milan between 1860-1870, were artists who 'aimed both in their art and in their general behaviour to defy complacent conformity'.²⁸ They were artists of everyday life and rebelled against a largely conservative art world. Because of this, critics noted that Nerli's work was characterised by artistic freedom.²⁹ DeLibra wrote that Nerli 'was the first to introduce to New South Wales the daring independence of Southern neo-Continentalism in its disregard of generally accepted trammel'.³⁰ While DeLibra loathed Tommaso Sani's contemporary sculptures, he seems to have liked Nerli's work which was in fact modern.

Nerli's most creative work was *Bacchanalian Orgie* depicting mythological nudes, drunken men and gaiety. Describing these works, *The Sydney Morning Herald* argued that 'we have from the first pointed out how original, how broad, how free from convention it was and yet what qualities of imagination, of colour, and of treatment it possessed'.³¹ The radical nature of works such as *Orgie*, is apparent when we consider that at the time figure painting in Australia was primarily concerned with 'popular and often sentimental scenes of colonial life'.³²



Girolamo Nerli, Portrait of a young woman, oil on canvas 30 x 45cm. Private Collection.

Antonio Salvatore Dattilo-Rubbo (1870-1955), another prominent Italian painter who arrived in Sydney in 1897, is best remembered today for establishing an art school there which was influential in shaping the careers of many Australian artists including Grace Cossington Smith and Roland Wakelin. Rubbo studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Naples under Domenico Morelli (1823-1901) a follower of the Neapolitan Macchiaiolian movement.³³ His paintings include *The Breadwinner*, *Poverty Makes Strange Bedfellows* and *The Veteran*. Themes of the hungry, the downtrodden and the elderly dominate his early works. No doubt, Rubbo had witnessed similar sights of poverty in his native Naples.



A photograph of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo from *The Red Funnel*, 1st October 1906, p. 214. (Source State Reference Library, State Library of New South Wales).

Rubbo became involved with the bohemian group associated with *The Bulletin* in the late 1890s. Photographs show him in bohemian attire with beret and pointed beard. Sydney had a bohemian artistic environment. Rubbo attended the *Brother Bushes Club* which was also frequented by the Lindsays. One member of this club

described Rubbo as 'a jovial Italian, who had just popped into Sydney unheralded, but his pictures pulled him into public recognition, and his merry personality pulled him into bohemian affections.'³⁴ Rubbo's long and established career really began in the twentieth century and flourished until his death in 1955.

The lives and works of Italian artists in mid to late nineteenth century Sydney provide avenues for understanding colonial views of art. Classical works were seen as bestowing on Sydney a long established past, something which it lacked. Examples such as the debate over Sani's carvings reveal that Sydney colonists were conservative art lovers. By the 1890s, Italian artworks were considered to be 'radical' and 'new' rather than classical and traditional. As well as making a significant contribution to Australian art, they were also active within the Italian political and cultural associations emerging in Sydney at the time.

NOTES

- ¹ F.A. Musico, *Italian Art and Artists in Late Nineteenth Century Sydney*, B.A. (Hons.) Thesis, Department of History, University of Sydney, 1998.
- ² J.G.DeLibra, "The Fine Arts in Australasia", in *The Australasian Art Review*, 1 July 1899, p. 17.
- ³ For biographical details and artworks of some of these artists see: R. Maguire, *The Italian Connection - Italian Art in 19th Century Australia*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 1993 (Exhibition Catalogue).
- ⁴ Mr Oscar Meyer - Statement of Amounts Paid, 12 June 1890, Legislative Assembly in *Colonial Secretary's Office - Works of Art Purchased 1881-1925*, Archives Office of NSW, 4/980.3/1.
- ⁵ Job Hanson to Sir Henry Parkes, 26 August 1881, *Parkes Correspondence*, Vol. 47, CYA917, p. 194.
- ⁶ Bradley, Newton & Lamb Catalogue, *Sir Henry Parkes Collection of Art Treasures*, F. Cunninghame & Co, Sydney, 1883.
- ⁷ For information about Fontana's commissions see R. Maguire, "Henry Parkes, James Barnet and the Italian Sculptor of Sydney", *Australiana*, August 1993, pp. 68-71.
- ⁸ Minutes from the Council Meeting, 4th May 1875, *Art Academy of NSW Minute Book 1875*, Microfilm FM4/3113, Mitchell Library.
- ⁹ Charles Badham to William Macarthur, 21 April 1878, *James Macarthur Papers*, CYPOS 1004, pp. 249-251.
- ¹⁰ G. Sturgeon, *The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1978, p. 31.
- ¹¹ J. Lennon, *The Italian Connection - Public Sculpture in Victorian Sydney by Italo-Australian Sculptors - A Guide and Walking Tour*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 1993.
- ¹² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 1877, p. 5.

¹³ A. Simonetti to Principal Under Secretary, 12 October 1891, *Phillip Statue 1897 – Special Bundle*, Archives Office of NSW, 5/7545, p. 2.

¹⁴ Government Architect to Under Secretary for Public Works, 19 November 1891, p. 1.

¹⁵ Government Architect to Under Secretary for Public Works, Minute Papers, 18 February 1893, *Phillip Statue*, op.cit., p. 1.

¹⁶ Report of Board to the Hon. Secretary of Works, 6 February 1884, p. 2, in *Public Works Department – P.O. Carvings – Demands For Removal – Special Bundle*, 2/891 AONSW.

¹⁷ J.G. DeLibra, "The Employment of Sculpture in Architectural Decoration", *The Australasian Builder and Contractors News*, 4 October 1890, p. 241.

¹⁸ *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, 1885-6, Vol. 19, Series I, p. 1169.

¹⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1883, p. 8.

²⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 1887, p. 7.

²¹ *The Sydney Illustrated News*, 14 November 1889, p. 20

²² *Catalogue of the Art Society of NSW Exhibition, Autumn, 30 March 1889*, Gibbs Shallard & Co., Sydney, 1889, p. 1.

²³ For more information see *Bohemians in the Bush – The Artists' Camps of Mosman*, Art Gallery of NSW

Exhibition Catalogue, 1991.

²⁴ *Australian Art – A Monthly Magazine and Journal*, February 1888, p. 13.

²⁵ *Once a Month*, 1 January 1886, p. 72. One letter from Nerli, whilst in Melbourne – G.P. Nerli to Percy Spence, 28 December 1888, in *Rev. Oswald Bruce McCarthy Papers*, ML MSS 3974X 7-1224C (Mitchell Library, Sydney).

²⁶ *The Bulletin*, 1 December 1900, The Red Page.

²⁷ W. Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 243.

²⁸ J. Turner (ed.) *Dictionary of Art*, Grove, New York, 1996, Vol. 28, p. 34.

²⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 1887, p. 7.

³⁰ *The Australasian Art Review*, 1 June 1899, p. 23.

³¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1889, p. 5.

³² M. Dunn, "The Art of Girolamo Nerli", in P. Entwistle (et. al.), *Nerli – An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, 1988, p. 16.

³³ Rubbo's diploma can be sited in *Rubbo Papers*, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1933/1 in the Memorandum Book. (Mitchell Library).

³⁴ G.A. Taylor, *Those Were the Days*, Tyrell's Ltd., Sydney, 1918, pp. 94-96.



Rubbo's *The Breadwinner* 1905, from *The Red Funnel*, 1st October 1906, p.215. (Source State Reference Library, State Library of New South Wales).