

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND PICTURE FRAME MAKING IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AUSTRALIA: LAWRENCE CETTA AND THE QUICK PROFIT

by Elizabeth Cant

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Like silversmiths, professional picture frame makers supplied what was, in 1830s Australia, a luxury item. They required a combination of a sufficient population of professional artists — and, in the second half of the nineteenth century, photographers — with the building of permanent homes and increasing wealth to provide a market for their product. Such conditions began to occur in Sydney and Hobart Town by the mid 1830s, in Launceston by the early 1840s and in Adelaide and Port Phillip by the late 1840s.

Lawrence Cetta, the first Italian emigrant professional picture frame maker, had arrived in Sydney at least by the end of 1842. He alone of the picture frame makers, British and European, realised a potential market for his product existed in the other Australian colonies. He established his factory and clientele in Sydney and then proceeded to make contacts further afield. A decade later he left Australia.

Cetta was born in 1803 near Como, Italy, into a family of picture frame and looking glass makers. As was the tradition of this artisan class, he emigrated to England and thence to Australia. Arriving in Sydney, he is recorded as entering into a partnership with another frame maker, T. E. Hughes, by January 1843.¹ This partnership lasted until April 1845; after this he worked alone.²

He married Jane Ellis in 1846 and lived at 57 George Street from 1845/46 to 1850/51. His business prospered to the point that two brothers, Julian and Peter arrived from London to provide assistance on 11 August 1846 and in October 1850 respectively. They also must have lived at 57 George Street as Julian is recorded as living there from 1851. Both maintained the Sydney business whilst Lawrence and Jane spent the first half of 1851 travelling to London and Europe. This high degree of activity suggests that Cetta may also have made picture frame mouldings for the local trade.

Whilst in Sydney, Lawrence Cetta ran a thriving inter-colonial export business³ which began in November 1844 with a shipment of one case labelled *Cetta* to Port Phillip and continued with shipments in January and February of the following year, each of a single case labelled *Cetta & Hughes*. Thereafter all shipments were in the name of *Cetta* only. There were sixty-four shipments over the next eight years, each consisting of an average of fifteen cases of mainly looking glasses, the last being in November, 1852.⁴ The destinations varied but were mainly to Port Phillip (forty-five), Launceston (nine), where there was apparently little competition for looking glasses from the local picture frame maker William Wilson who had arrived in 1842; Adelaide (eight), where the first professional frame maker David Culley only arrived late in 1849; and Geelong (four). There was one shipment to Port Fairy and also a single shipment to Hobart in 1845 where the local frame maker Robin Vaughan Hood, firmly established there since 1833, would have provided vigorous resistance to Cetta's intrusion. The artist Joseph Fowles, in his *Sydney in 1848*, was prompted to write:

Opposite the Royal Hotel is Mr. Cetta's Picture Frame and Looking Glass Manufactory from whence all the neighbouring colonies are almost exclusively supplied: the Carving and Gilding executed at this establishment is of the highest order and merits the extensive patronage it receives.⁵

Cetta applied for naturalisation and this was granted on 31 December, 1852. In February he, his wife and a Miss Cetta sailed for Le Havre from Sydney via Melbourne and there is no further record of him.

This departure was surprisingly abrupt, considering his recent naturalisation, although his initial aim on emigrating had always been to make a profit and return to live in style in Italy. His eventual

departure was certainly related to the unexpected discovery of gold in the colony of Victoria in 1851. He was, no doubt, aware that the increasing wealth of that colony would attract a large number of picture frame and looking glass makers and

cause the subsequent demise of his inter-colonial export business — an event that did not occur until 1855.⁶

A more likely explanation for his abrupt departure concerned the fashionability of his wares. At home in Sydney he faced increased competition from two new arrivals, Edwin Baldwin and another Italian, John Bernasconi, who had established their businesses by the early 1850s.⁷

The picture frames common in Sydney from the 1830s to the early 1860s were three variants of the *ogee* (S-shaped) profile, the basic shape being a broad *ogee* rising to the top edge and leading to a back *scotia* (half circle concave). These variants were consecutive in time with only short periods of overlap and showed increasingly rich ornamentation.

Examples of Cetta's picture frames are extant. An empty frame dating from the Cetta & Hughes George St. period (October 1843 to April 1845) (fig. 1) and three frames surrounding portraits of the Sinclair family by the artist Joseph Backler, all with Cetta labels and dated 1846 (fig. 2) are identical and represent the first *ogee* variant. They are straight-sided frames with large corner cartouches flanked by flower and leaf tendrils. A feature of all the frames is the wide (two centimetres) sight edge moulding. The basic frame is unadorned unlike similar frames from the same period made in Launceston and Hobart, which showed the application of net, the nineteenth century substitute for the crosshatching of gesso in the eighteenth century. This particular variant was also popular in the English provinces (fig. 3) and copied a Rococo variant of the picture frames associated with the Bourbon Restoration in France (1815-1850).⁸

No example of Cetta's looking glasses appear to be available but one suspects that they, like his picture frames, were competent but already being superseded by new ornament. These new, more advanced decorations became available with the new arrivals and must have been evident by the end of 1852. Both Baldwin and Bernasconi went to gain prizes for their portrait frames when they were exhibited at the Australian Museum in Sydney in 1854 prior to the Paris International Exhibition in 1855⁹ (fig. 4, 5).

Lawrence Cetta's stay in Australia was shortened by the unexpected discovery of gold in Victoria. The real reason for his abrupt departure will never be known but a significant factor would



fig. 1a: Framemaker – Cetta & Hughes.



fig. 1b: Frame label of frame in figure 1a.

have been the advent of new decorations which eclipsed his own product. The naturalisation must have been undertaken in case he should ever decide to return to Australia.

NOTES

- ¹ Neville, R., 'Joseph Backler: Potrait painter to the not very rich & famous', *The Australian Antique Collector*, vol 46, June-Dec, 1983, pp 53; *Barbazon's New General Town Directory*, Sydney 1843.
- ² *Low's City of Sydney Directory 1847*. Cetta & Hughes King St. West, Sydney 1843; Cetta & Hughes 397 George St., Sydney October 1843-1845; Cetta 397 Goerge St. from April 1845.
- ³ *Sydney Morning Herald* Shipping News September 1842-February 1953.
- ⁴ Cant, E., *The Department of Paintings: the history of nineteenth century Australian picture frames*. M. A. Thesis, The Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1998, Appendix 10, pp 314.
- ⁵ Fowles, J., *Sydney in 1848*, reprinted 1973 Ure Smith and the National Trust of Australia (NSW), Sydney, pp 57.
- ⁶ Melbourne picture frame makers: 1851 Charles Huxtable & Co.; 1852 Huxtable & Co; 1853 Huxtable & Co., 1854 John Campi; 1855 Braché & Boldner, Henry Byrne, John Maclachan, Richard Foster Norton, John Campi.
- ⁷ R. Maguire, 'The Fine Art of Framing', *Australian Antique Collector*, vol.31, Jan-June 1986, pp46-47; K. Fahy & A. Simpson, *Australian Furniture; pictorial history and dictionary 1788-1938*, Sydney 1998, pp.21, 26.
- ⁸ Mitchell, P., Roberts, L. A. *History of European Picture Frames*, P. Mitchell Ltd. In assoc.with Merrell Holbertson Publishers, London, 1996, pp 49 fig. 34(e).
- ⁹ Fahy, K., Simpson, G., Simpson, A., *Nineteenth century Australian Furniture*, David Ell Press, Sydney, 1985.



fig. 2: Framemaker – Lawrence Cetta.



fig. 4: Framemaker – Edwin Baldwin.



fig. 3: Framemaker – Unknown.



fig. 5: Framemaker – John Bernasconi.