

FACT SHEET

THE ARTS

'Victoria is the Italy of these Southern Seas, and, like Venice of old is destined to become the Nursing Mother of the Arts as well as the Mistress of Commerce.'

Governor Sir Henry Loch, 1886.

Performance arts

Italian opera and theatre companies from Milan, London, San Francisco, Bombay and South East Asia toured Australia from the 1840s. The visitors based themselves in Sydney or Melbourne for several years and thus exerted considerable influence on the development of opera, ballet and classical music in the colony. Singers Giulia Tamburini Coy, Lucia Baratti and Leonora Parodi Fabris decided to stay and build a life here, as did many others. Count Girolamo Carandini and his wife Mary opened the first opera and ballet school in Hobart in 1843. Five of their eight children toured with their mother. Daughters Rosina Palmer and Fanny Carandini, for whom Darwin's Fanny Bay is named, would become celebrated singers in their own right. When the combined Cagli-Pompei company finished their four year tour in the mid-1870s, conductor Alberto Zelman remained in Melbourne, where he went on to enjoy a long and distinguished career as a teacher and composer.

Paolo Giorza, the musical director of a San Francisco opera company which toured in the early 1870s, stayed on for a further ten years, taking on theatrical and official commissions such as the writing of the cantata for the opening of the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879. Also from that same company was Pietro Cecchi, the man who would become Dame Nellie Melba's first teacher and help propel her onto the international stage.

In 1871, Italian artists responded to an invitation from Bishop James Quinn of Brisbane to help build a cultural life in his diocese. Among the new arrivals were the Benvenuti family who are credited with being the pioneers of classical music in Brisbane. Towards the end of the century, musicians from Basilicata took popular music to the theatres, dance halls, salons and streets as they travelled around the country from Ballarat in Victoria to the Western Australian goldfields of Kalgoorlie and Boulder.

In 1906, violinist and conductor, Alberto Zelman junior, established the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Three years later and at the request of JC Williamson, the founder of the Sydney Philharmonic Society, Roberto Hazon, formed an Italian opera company for the Australian touring circuit. Little over a decade later, baritone Count Ercole Filippini and wife Anne were instrumental in the establishment of the South Australian Grand Opera Company and its equivalent in Western Australia.

The period of mass migration from the 1950s to the 1960s generated work within the Italian speaking community for Italian-Australian singers, musicians and actors, who performed in restaurants, clubs and community halls. During this period, the concert pianist Romola Constantino toured Europe and Australia.

The 1980s saw the development of a muscular Italian-Australian arts movement led by authors and playwrights Nino Randazzo, Teresa Crea, Renato Cuocolo and Armando Venero and by cross-cultural theatre companies like South Australia's award winning Doppio Teatro (now Parallelo). Much of their work, written in Italian,

dialect and migrant English, looked at the experience of living within two cultures. The groundbreaking theatre comedy *Wogs out of work*, which began its long running tour in 1987, took these issues to a large and diverse public. So too did the work of writers like Melina Marchetta, whose novel *Looking for Alibrandi*, later made into a film, focused on issues of identity for second and third generation Italian-Australians.

Italian-Australians have had a high profile in music, film and theatre since 1990. Violinist and Artistic Director of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Richard Tognetti, composed the soundtrack to the film *Master and Commander*. Contemporary singers Vanessa Amorosi, Tina Arena and Natalie Imbruglia have an international profile. Among the many Italian-Australians who have made their mark in film and theatre are comics Santo Cilauro and Vince Sorrenti, and actors Vince Colosimo, Carmelina Di Guglielmo, Anthony La Paglia, Maria Portesi and Greta Scacchi. Screenwriter/Directors include Jan Sardi and Fred Schepisi. In 1965, film director and stills photographer Giorgio Mangiamele stepped onto the world stage when his feature film *Clay* became one of the first Australian films to be selected for the Cannes International Film Festival.

Visual arts

The Premier of NSW, Sir Henry Parkes, was an enthusiastic supporter of Italian sculptors Achille Simonetti and Tommaso Sani. Simonetti arrived in Brisbane in 1872, possibly in response to an invitation from Bishop Quinn. In 1875, he took up a position as instructor of modelling at the New South Wales Academy of Art, where fellow Italian Giulio Anivitti had also been appointed teacher of drawing and painting. Simonetti quickly established himself as the foremost neoclassical portrait sculptor of his day. His most important public commission, executed between 1889 and 1897, is the Governor Arthur Phillip Memorial in the Sydney Botanic Gardens.

Unlike his celebrated and conservative peer Simonetti, realist sculptor Tommaso Sani was regularly pilloried in the press. Demands for the removal of what was at the time new and challenging work were commonplace. One of his most unpopular commissions survives on the façade of the Sydney General Post Office on Pitt Street. Also active during this period were fellow sculptors, Antonio Perugia and Giovanni Fontana.

The arrival of painter Girolamo Nerli and his friend Ugo Catani in 1885 had a marked impact on the group of young artists who would come to be known as the Heidelberg School. In 1885, together with Melbourne painters Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, they formed the Australian Artists' Association as a challenge to the conservative Victorian Academy. Also befriended by this group was Sydney painter and gold bullion embroiderer Sophie Steffanoni.

From 1898 onward, portrait and genre painter Antonio Dattilo Rubbo ran classes at his private art school in Sydney and from 1900 he also taught at the Royal Art Society of New South Wales. He is remembered as an inspiring teacher who introduced local artists to modernism and cubism. Among his students are some of the leading lights of Australian modernism: Grace Cossington Smith, Roy De Maistre, Donald Friend and Roland Wakelin. A passionate supporter of his students, Dattilo Rubbo famously challenged a committee member to a duel when the Royal Art Society refused to hang Wakelin's work.

After the Second World War, mass migration brought artists who would make their mark worldwide as painters, sculptors, printmakers and teachers: George Baldessin, Jon Cattapan, Bruno Leti, Patricia Piccinini, Wilma Tabacco and Salvatore Zofrea.

Italians have also made a contribution as patrons of the arts. One of the most prominent is Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, founder of construction and civil engineering firm Transfield. Belgiorno-Nettis, whose family has come to be known as the Australian Medici for their services to the arts, was responsible for establishing the Biennale of Sydney. Victoria's premier cultural event, the annual Melbourne International Arts Festival began life as the Spoleto Melbourne Festival of Three Worlds in 1986. The event was a joint initiative of the Italian Arts Festival, the then Victorian Ministry for the Arts and the Regional Government of Umbria.

The Arts in the Italian Historical Society Collection

You will find a range of publications, photographs, correspondence and other documents relating to the arts in the following collections:

- Candela Collection
- Del Monaco Collection
- Document Collection
- Fashion Collection
- Food Collection
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Opera Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection

See also the following Italian Historical Society Fact Sheets:

- Contribution of Women
- Italian migration 1850-1900
- Italian migration 1900-1945
- Italian migration 1945-1970
- Map: Australia
- Map: Italy
- Trades and Professions

Further reading

The resources listed below can be accessed at the Italian Historical Society.

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Audio-visual

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