

FACT SHEET

TRADES AND PROFESSIONS

'Learn a skill and fill the till'. Italian proverb.

Trades

The majority of migrants arriving in Australia in the late nineteenth and up to the middle of the twentieth century were skilled in trades as diverse as: hairdressing, figurine making, building and construction, retail and hospitality, musical instrument making, shoemaking, tailoring and embroidering. Many, like the tailor, photographer and musician Vincenzo Candela—who migrated in 1920—had several trades to fall back on; as did barbers, who had basic medical and dental skills, and women, who were trained from an early age as seamstresses and bookkeepers. Such a skills set ensured ready employment and enabled migrants to establish and run successful businesses either from home, as was the case for many women, or in the marketplace.

The building boom of the 1800s brought Italian stonemasons, sculptors, mosaicists and terrazzo pavers to Australia. They travelled the country creating paving, mosaics, statuary and facades for secular and religious buildings, and took on commissions for public gardens and infrastructure projects. Into the twentieth century, as areas of settlement expanded into the countryside, so too did the numbers of skilled Italian tradesmen increase, with many deciding to stay and establish businesses. Among them were terrazzo pavers like the Melocco Brothers, who opened their eponymously named Sydney company in 1908 and Melbourne's Beniamino Braida, who founded Federated Granolithic in 1927. The work of Italian stonemasons, terrazzo pavers and mosaicists can be seen on the floor of the Mitchell Library and the façade of the General Post Office in Sydney, the interior of St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne and the Canberra War Memorial.

The post-war building boom saw the establishment of some of the most successful Italian-Australian building and construction firms, including the Barro Group, the Grollo Group, Pioneer International, Transfield, as well as property and logistics operators Salta/Westgate Group and Schiavello, designers of furniture and office interiors.

In her book, *Mietta's family recipes*, restaurateur Mietta O'Donnell traces the development of the Italian hospitality industry in Australia from the 1850s onward. Among the hundreds of distinguished Italian restaurateurs are the Merlo family of Queensland, Melbourne's Grossi, Massoni and Triaca families and Beppi Polese and Maurizio Terzini of Sydney. For many years, families from the north of Italy and the Aeolian Islands dominated. Italian-Australians, such as Stefano Manfredi, Guy Grossi and Patrizia Simone continue to have a high profile in the hospitality industry. Chef Stefano De Pieri's award-winning restaurant Stefano's Cantina, in the Victorian country town of Mildura, attracts diners from across the nation. His ABC television program and book of the same name, *A gondola on the Murray*, have brought the regional cooking of Di Pieri's native Veneto to a wide Australian audience.

The initial success of Italian-Australian businesses hinged on several factors: many were family run and therefore benefited from the energy and commitment of both spouses and children, and they employed skilled *paesani* (people from the same

region) whose migration was often sponsored by the business and who in many cases were treated as part of the family.

Professions

Australia's unwillingness to recognise overseas qualifications made it an unpopular destination for Italian professionals. Nonetheless, from the 1850s a small number, skilled in the fields of architecture, engineering, viticulture, medicine and astronomy began trickling in. Their energy and expertise would, by the end of the nineteenth century, help transform their adopted home from a struggling settlement into the world's wealthiest nation.

Prolific sculptor and architect/builder Andrea Stombuco arrived in Australia in 1851 and devoted the following thirty years to designing and overseeing the construction of schools, meeting halls, churches, a synagogue, theatres and countless domestic buildings throughout Queensland, NSW and Victoria.

Angelo Tornaghi opened his business in Sydney in 1858, and quickly established himself as the colony's leading maker of measuring instruments from barometers, to clocks, compasses and gauges. His work survives today in the turret clocks of public buildings throughout NSW and in museum collections.

In the 1870s, viticulturists Romeo Bragato and Giovanni Battista Federli helped build the local wine industry and contributed to the establishment of viticultural colleges in NSW and Victoria. Italian-Australian wines were winning awards as early as 1864, when Fabrizio Crippa impressed judges at the Paris Wine exhibition with his Parma House Dry Red. By 1889, noted surgeon, vigneron and inventor Thomas Fiaschi was exporting gallons of wine to Europe from his Hawkesbury River winery, Tizzana.

From the 1850s onward, Italian doctors, nurses, midwives and chemists began practising in regional and metropolitan centres. Midwives Emilia Bellotti and Angela Borello respectively served the Italian-Australian community in Melbourne and the then remote canefarming district of Ingham in Queensland. In the twentieth century, Professor of Surgery Ivo Vellar and brothers Alfred and Frank Trinca became eminent specialists. In 1922, scientist, inventor and travel writer Dr Marie Bentivoglio became the first Australian woman to receive a scholarship to Oxford. Her research on crystallography in the 1940s contributed to the development of plastic film.

1876 saw the arrival of three young Tuscan friends Carlo Catani, Ettore Checchi and Pietro Baracchi. Catani, remembered today for his design of the elegant St Kilda foreshore, supervised the draining of swamps and the building of roads, bridges and dams throughout Victoria. The irrigation systems built by Checchi opened up the north of the state to farming. Baracchi was appointed Victorian Government Astronomer at the Melbourne Observatory in 1900 and for many years served as president of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science. It was Baracchi who selected Mt Stromlo as the site for the national observatory in 1911.

People of Italian origin established themselves in the law from the 1950s onward, among the most prominent being Justice Bernard Buongiorno, Brisbane District Court Judge Garry Forno, former Governor of Victoria and judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria Sir James Gobbo, and Angelo Vasta.

Trades and professions in the Italian Historical Society Collection

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

- Borsari Collection
- Candela Collection
- Del Monaco Collection
- Document Collection
- Fashion Collection
- Food Collection
- Library
- Newspaper Collection
- Opera Collection
- Oral History Collection
- Photographic Collection
- Santospirito 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
- The Arts

Further reading

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

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