

Australian Mosaics, Parts 1-4

In 2016 David Jack wrote four articles for Opus Oracle describing some significant figures in Australian mosaic history., including Mervyn Napier Waller, the Melocco Brothers, Harold Friedman

These four articles are reprinted here, with permission from the author

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS I



David holds a diploma in Art and Design. He worked on most of Harold Freedman's major murals and mosaics and in 1989 co-founded the Melbourne Mural Studio to undertake public art commissions. Skygarden, Chifley Plaza, Australia on Collins and Milkyway Dreaming mosaics are amongst some hundreds of projects.

David Jack kicks off this series of four articles on the history of Australian mosaics with a look at the early days .

The architectural use of mosaic in Australia was a response to a second renaissance of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the 1860s in Europe with the bringing of the arts into the everyday. The arts were accessible, at home and in the community. Mosaic was the perfect medium because of the possibility of its architectural durability. It could be sited almost anywhere.

The thinking of the day was that mosaic was a specialised Italian craft. Therefore to consider mosaic in an architectural setting in Australia the work would have to come from Italy or be created by Italians in Australia. England also, because of its cathedrals and the continuing expertise in the incredible architectural richness, had world renowned mosaic and stained glass studios.

St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne is home to a good example of English expertise in mosaic. Clayton and Bell Mosaic Company of London, which had previously created mosaics for the Albert Hall and Westminster Abbey created the altar area mosaics in 1891.



Detail of *The Crucifixion Watchers*, St Pauls Cathedral Melbourne, by Clayton and Bell Mosaic Company of London. The reredos (Altar Piece)

At the same time, the Australian Tessellated Tile Company in Mitcham, Melbourne was creating mosaic floor insets, amongst other things, well into the 1920s. They still survive as Walker Ceramics.



Peter Melocco in Sydney undertook major mosaic projects in Australia from the late 1920's. He has extensive works in St Mary's Cathedral and *The Tasman Map* mosaic and terrazzo at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. He and his brothers formed Melocco Brothers also undertaking many other mosaic and terrazzo commissions.

The Peter Molocco terrazzo and mosaic *Tasman Map* Mitchell Library, Sydney

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS I

Later, but parallel with the Melocco brothers, were two other Italian-trained mosaicists working in Sydney; Franco and Dennis Colussi, specialising in floor mosaics. Franco and his colleague Aldo Rossi would go on to create the massive pavement mosaic in the forecourt of the new Australian Parliament building, Canberra in granite from a painting by Michael Tjakamarra Nelson in the late 1980's.

Melbourne society artist Napier Waller who was a renowned painter, muralist and printmaker had returned from the First World War having lost his right arm; his drawing hand. He had retrained in England and began his career as an artist in Melbourne in the 1920s.

Napier's first mosaic for Perth University in 1931 is very significant because he brought fine art thinking and artistry to mosaic and demonstrated that he understood the very essence of placing an artwork into an architectural setting. Titled *The Five Lamps of Knowledge* there is a strong influence of the mosaics of Ravenna, in particular the 5th century works depicting Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora at the Basilica of San Vitale and the vast works of St Apollinare Nuovo.



Napier Waller's Great Hall with the cartoon for Australia's first major art mosaic

All of Napier's mosaic projects were created in the indirect method in Venetian smalti on brown paper and freighted in wooden boxes to the sites. This was the beginning of Angelo Orsoni's Venetian mosaic factory's long association with Australia.

Built in 1922, Napier's house is a classic example of the Arts and Crafts style. He designed the furniture and did many of the wall finishes. It was the location where some of his mosaics and all of the stained glass windows he and his first wife Christian, created. In fact, his lounge room was the first studio space utilised to create the early mosaics. The full-scale cartoon for the Five Lamps mosaic is still on the wall in his lounge room. The house is now managed by the government and most of it has been kept as it was in Waller's time.

Next time

*The first resurgence.
From the Flamboyant
Napier Waller to 1950s
mosaic scene*

David Jack

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS II



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David Jack continues this series of four articles on the history of Australian mosaics with a look at the first resurgence. From the Flamboyant Napier Waller to the 1950s mosaic scene.

The discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 laden with rich examples of highly developed and stylised artwork had a profound impact on the design world, Napier included. It certainly informed the emerging Art Deco movement. Napier Waller's influences from earlier styles and thinking can be easily traced back to the Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite movements.

In 1933 Napier Waller was commissioned to create a work on the Newspaper House façade in Collins Street, Melbourne. The theme *I'll put a Girdle Round about the Earth* celebrates, according to the author Nicholas Draffin, "a jubilant celebration of man's potential to use technological advances for both material and spiritual fulfillment".



I'll put a Girdle Round about the Earth. Newspaper House Mosaic, Collins Street, Melbourne, 1933

Napier contended that "Mural art is a unit of architecture which, more than any other sort of art, reflects and is definitely linked to the life of the people". The confluence of art and architecture, creating something intentional and great, was as rare then as it is today.

Australian War Memorial – Hall of Memory - Canberra

In 1946 the art committee at the war memorial decided that the windows in the Hall of Memory would commemorate the First World War and the pendentives (the area between the windows) would focus on the Second World War picturing men and women of service; army, navy, airforce and women's services.

The four figures are heroic, strong and stylised, each with a powerful upward gaze that leads the viewer's eye to the heavenly dome.



Dome in the Hall of Memory
Australian War Memorial 1958

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS II

“Napier stood out in the monumental mosaic field because of his consistency, quality and the integrity he brought to the projects”

The concept for the dome, which is rich in symbolism, is based on eternal life and the ascent of the spirits of the fallen. The symbolic shapes towards the top are of spirits ascending, grouped into seven to represent the states of Australia. The basis of these forms comes from the Australian Military Forces' badge with its rising sun motif.

Orsoni's smalti factory in Venice supplied the mosaic material. Comprising about six million tesserae, each an irregular piece of coloured glass varying from 15 mm to 30 mm square, the size was graduated so that they were larger the further they were from the floor.

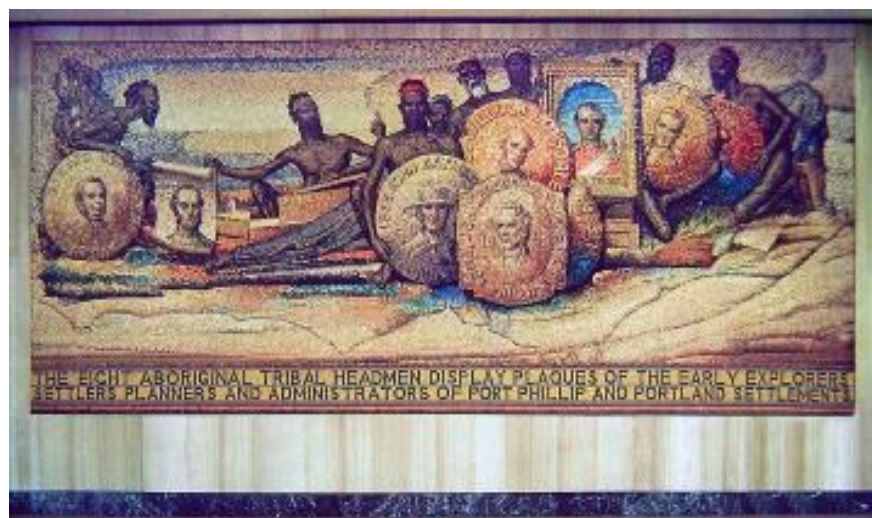
The mosaics were created from 1955 to 1958 in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. Students were found to work on it through Melbourne University. Up to ten people at a time worked on assembling the mosaics.



Airman Australian War Memorial Canberra 1958

Temple Court- Melbourne

Known as the 'lost mosaic' *The Eight Aboriginal Tribal Headmen* is currently hidden behind a retail fitout. It was commissioned in 1963 by an insurance company which had moved its headquarters to Temple Court, Collins Street, Melbourne.



The Eight Aboriginal Tribal Headmen Temple Court Collins Street Melbourne

The mosaic on a foyer wall was a bit of a departure in style, as it didn't fit the Art Deco or classic look of most of Napier's prior works. It is one of his smaller commissions, measuring six metres across by two metres deep. The work nevertheless still demonstrates the pure mosaic style he had developed.

"Achieving a gradation over a large plain area in smalti with all its lovely variations is quite a difficult thing to do."

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS II

Thematically Napier is looking at the foundation of Melbourne. The eight tribal headman are signatories to the John Batman Treaty and the plaques each are holding have portraits of the pioneering white settlers.

Prometheus, Monash House, Melbourne

The State Electricity Commission based at 15 William Street, Melbourne commissioned Napier Waller to create the mosaic foyer wall. He themed the concept to reflect the client's prime activity and it was to be Napier's final mosaic project.

Titled *Prometheus*, it is a wall of fire with earth and water and the release of energy. A quote from Aeschylus who wrote in 400 BCE is set into the mosaic. Reading "*Let then the Blazing Levin-flash be hurled*", it further reinforces the visual statement.

The design features a central figurative element with the remainder of the space just simple gradated red. I say simple but in reality achieving a gradation over a large plain area in smalti with all its lovely variations is quite a difficult thing to do. The result is very powerful. The central figure is stylistically woven into a lyrical mosaic tapestry of flames.

Napier stood out in the monumental mosaic field because of his consistency, quality and the integrity he brought to the projects.



Prometheus
Foyer, Monash House Melbourne 1967

*Next issue we explore
Waller's legacy as
handed on to Harold
Freedman*

David Jack

<http://www.muralstudio.com.au/>

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS III



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David Jack continues this series of four articles on the history of Australian mosaics with a look at the career of Harold Freedman, mural and mosaic artist for the Victorian government with whom David worked for many years.

Harold Freedman's career as an artist began during the second World War when he was appointed as an official war artist for the Pacific Zone. Having studied under the well known muralist and mosaicist, Napier Waller at the Working Men's College, (now the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) Harold was introduced to large-scale work, such as painted murals and mosaics. This would eventually lead to the inspiration of large murals. In 1972, the Victorian government engaged Harold to undertake major painted and mosaic mural projects.

The Regional History of Geelong

The first was the *Regional History of Geelong*. Pretty new to mosaic Harold and his wife Heather headed off to Venice to visit the mosaic smalti manufacturer Angelo Orsoni and then went north to Spilimbergo to the key mosaic school in Italy, (Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli) for a much needed introduction to the medium.



The completed Geelong mosaic on the rear wall of the foyer of the Geelong Government Offices

A chronological timeline was developed from the historical material with recurring themes picked up which show the development of fashion, technology, the family, sport, the wars, transport, industry, and culture through the decades. The mosaic artwork was created with a painterly approach, basically painting with mosaic in a broad impressionist manner with a limited palette of hundreds instead of millions of colours.



*Australians at War
Second World War section
of the Geelong mosaic.*

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS III

"It would have taken years to cover the wall in smalti so Harold suggested a free-form mosaic meandering down the wall"

The Legend of Fire

in 1980 the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire brigade approached Harold about the possibility of creating a mosaic mural to cover a new concrete façade. The building had five levels of rough cast concrete brutalist architecture, it would have taken years to cover the wall in smalti so Harold suggested a free-form mosaic meandering down the wall. The *Legend of Fire* mosaic is probably the most widely known of Harold's murals because of its high profile location facing Albert Street in East Melbourne.



The completed Legend of Fire Mosaic on unveiling day 1982

It features the Greek story of fire being brought to Earth with an educational section across the bottom. Creating the mosaic took one and a half years with two fulltime mosaicists and some part timers. When the mosaic was unveiled, the street was closed, some historical vehicles paraded, the fire brigade band played and Harold was presented with a brass fireman's helmet. It doesn't get much better than that!

The Greats of Football

In 1984 the VFL (Victorian Football league) *The Greats of Football* mosaic began for the façade of the grandstand at Waverley Football Stadium, Melbourne. The concept celebrated the major ingredients of the game; the high mark, a hand pass and two styles of kicking portrayed by the large figures in the centre, which are very sculptural in appearance, reminiscent of Michaelangelo's David. Each of the twelve clubs then selected two great players from their past to be depicted.

With the concept created the oil painting cartoon could be created at a scale of one third. Once areas were painted I made a grid for that area with a fine cord and took a transparency (slide) with the grid as an overlay. The transparency was then projected on to the brown paper to which the mosaic would then be adhered and the projected image and grid aligned with the grid on the paper.

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS III

“Achieving a gradation over a large plain area in smalti with all its lovely variations is quite a difficult thing to do.”

The mosaic work was created in 1200mm sections as we then prefabricated the whole mural at the studio onto compressed concrete panels measuring 1200mm square with mounting brackets across the back. The whole process took some two years with most of the mosaic work undertaken by myself with Joe Attard assisting and the installation or offsetting on to the concrete panels undertaken by our now regular tiler, Tony Barrese.



The completed Legends of Football mosaic



Detail of the centre section of The Legends of the Football, these figures represent a significant moment in the Australian Rules game, that of the high mark

Rosati Restaurant

In 1986 Harold, myself, Joe and a team of others designed and created the floor and facade mosaics for the Rosati Restaurant in Melbourne's CBD. We had a team of people cutting down all sorts of tiles. Hundreds of metres of borders, hundreds of fans were created and a centrepiece made for the entry floor.



The Rosati Restaurant entrance mosaic floor feature, 1986

This was the last mosaic Harold created; it was a hugely important one to myself and Joe who would go on to create hundreds of other floor mosaics.

Next issue David tells us about the mosaics from his Melbourne Mural Studio up to 2016

David Jack

See more of David's work at <http://www.muralstudio.com.au/>

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS IV



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In the last of this series on mosaics in Australia, David Jack ponders the future of mosaic in public spaces.

In 1989, Joe Attard and I formed Melbourne Mural Studio (MMS) immediately commencing a major mosaic commission for the Skygarden corporate and retail centre in Sydney. This included a foyer floor mosaic and wall mosaic features, a ten metre across archway mosaic and a seven metre high foyer wall featuring the Maiden of Abundance. With a team of five people it was a significant statement as to what can be achieved creatively for a city building.



Skygarden entrance 1989, smalti. concepts by Public Art Squad

The studio's mandate was to make the built environment better, to add a dimension that people could actually relate to. What a thought! Over the last 25 years since then hundreds of projects have been undertaken all over Australia. We are still creating mosaic features for commercial and private settings, but there has been some cultural terrorism going on in various states of Australia.



Banksias, Chifley Plaza Food Court 1992. Smalti

What are we to make of the current cultural mores of our time as we see the trashing of the enriched cultural fabric of our cityscape in favour of nothing, yes nothing. Paper cut out patterns and cracked floors are seen as an appropriate interpretation of prior deco architecture that is being replaced. And when those paper cut out patterns and cracked floors are reinterpreted in ten years' time for the next fit out what will we get?

So what is valued in our cities' cultural fabric? Is it all just the 'now crisp' look? What would Melbourne be like without Flinders St Station, St Paul's Cathedral, the State Library, the Immigration Museum, Parliament House or the Block Arcade? They all showcase what was culturally expressible, and we love them now a hundred years after they were built.



*Tattersalls bistro
Three wall panels 1998
Smalti
concepts Mike Dodds*

Many of the major projects we were involved with have been destroyed or removed from their original setting over the last few years.

AUSTRALIAN MOSAICS IV

"What are we to make of the current cultural mores of our time as we see the trashing of the enriched cultural fabric of our city-scape...?"



*Australia on Collins main entrance 1991
Smalti*

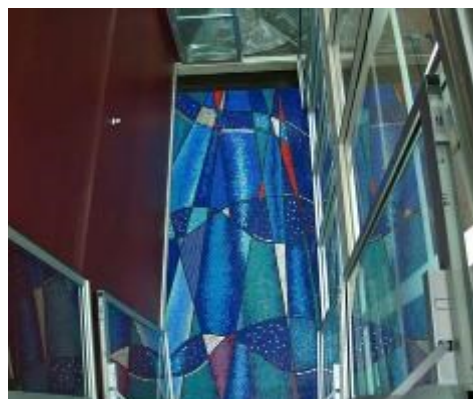
All gone without a word of protest or lament. Skygarden floor mosaics all gone. *The Archway* is sitting in a sculpture park in a town west of Orange waiting to be assembled. *The Maiden* is at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney having a repurposed life there. The Sydney Tattersall's Club, three wall mosaic panel still lifes all gone. Chifley Plaza Food Court - 20 floor mosaic inserts - all trashed.

In Melbourne the *100 Entertainers of the Century* 12 metre wall mosaic has been carefully removed and stored, waiting to be reinstated in a new location. Three floor mosaics from Australia on Collins were all trashed. We originally had seven mosaic works there.



*100 Entertainers of the Century 2006
Smalti. Concept Jamie Cooper*

I understand that any artworks in retail settings are subject to the cycle of refurbishing every decade or two. We like to think we bring a quality to the projects that the works should be able to be appreciated and last indefinitely. Some are able to be heritage listed which does seem to give the projects some sort of protection. Our 2010 Adelaide project is still in place, so that's one positive thing.



*Atrium floor mosaic Adelaide Apartments 2010
French glass and metal mosaic*

In 2011 former Federal Minister Peter Reith wrote "These murals and mosaics are both part of our history and a rich part of the cultural texture of Victoria. ... The State Government should consider reappointing a State Artist to promote the arts. ... An inventory of murals and mosaics should be compiled and efforts made to find those that may have gone missing from public buildings. And our tourist promotion bureau should compile a Melbourne walk for tourists to see our mosaics and murals. Through these measures, by encouraging the conservation of our heritage and by promoting the development of the

arts, governments both State and Federal, can work to encourage worthwhile job opportunities. it could deliver real benefits and ... provide rich rewards for individuals and our community"

David Jack

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