

**J & A CAMPI LOOKING GLASS MANUFACTURERS,  
GLASS BEVELLERS, WOODCARVERS, FRAMEMAKERS  
AND GILDERS, MELBOURNE 1853–1900**

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Napoleon's occupation of Italy had a dramatic effect. The Emperor confiscated common and church lands to distribute among his supporters. But following his defeat in 1815, industrial demand plummeted, so a number of skilled Italians emigrated, some to Britain and even Australia.

Italian strolling artists had been present in Britain since at least 1700. The most famous legacy of Italian street theatre is Mr Punch (Punchinello), and by 1820 Italian players had become a feature of London street life, more visible than the Italian artisans.

From the 1820s to 1851, England attracted 4,000 Italian immigrants, half of them living in London.<sup>1</sup> Most came from the valleys around Lombardy, particularly Como. Como produced skilled glass artisans making barometer tubes or grinding and beveling lenses for precision instruments. Others specialised in plaster work, especially figures, wood carving and gilding.

The centre of the Italian community in Britain from the 19th century to today is 'Little Italy', situated between Clerkenwell, Holborn and Spitalfields in London. As their numbers and competition grew, Italians spread to northern England, Wales and Scotland but never in great numbers. The Italian Consul General in Liverpool in 1891 said that the majority of the 80–100 Italians in the city were organ grinders and street sellers of ice-cream and plaster statues. Manchester's 500–600 Italians included terrazzo specialists, plasterers and modellers working on the prestigious new town hall. In Sheffield, 100–150 Italians made cutlery.

Carlo Brentani (1817–1853) was born in Cadenabbia on the shores of Lake Como. He was tried with Lawrence Cetta for theft in York on 23 October 1834, convicted and sentenced to seven years' transportation, all spent in Tasmania.<sup>2</sup> On completing his sentence he sailed for Sydney. Within three years he had anglicised his name to Charles, become a Melbourne burgess in 1847 and naturalised on 7 December 1849, "as a result of wishing to purchase land from which he was prevented by being an alien." Described as "a wide awake genius", he was in partnership with Joseph Forrester, the ex-convict Tasmanian silversmith. The first gold discovered in Victoria was brought into their jewellery shop in 1849.

1. Lucio Sponza, *Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-century Britain: Realities and Images*.

2. Douglas Wilkie, "The Life and Death of Charles Brentani", *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol 87 no 1, June 2016.



Plate 1. View of 122 Russell Street Melbourne. Campi's factory is in the left foreground. Photograph c 1874–86. Image Courtesy of State Library of Victoria H2011. 16/13.

On the death of his father, as the eldest son Carlo inherited the family hotel lived in by his mother in his birthplace on Lake Como and patronised by the likes of Byron and Shelley. He died on 15 July 1853 having acquired two shops, 12 houses, a hotel and four blocks of land in Melbourne.

In 1979 I purchased a pair of Backler portraits of members of a local family from the Goulburn jewellers Zantis. They bore to the rear the trade label of (Guiliano) Lawrence Cetta, a frame maker practising his craft in Sydney. By 1840 Cetta was advertising in Sydney<sup>3</sup>

L. CETTA, Carver and Gilder, Looking Glass and Picture Frame maker.  
Barometers and Thermometers made and repaired on the shortest notice.  
Old Glass re-silvered, &c. George-street South, Opposite the Hay Market.

Lawrence (or Laurence) was joined by his brother Julian, who arrived in 1847 together with John Bernasconi, who in turn was joined in 1855 by his brother Benedetto, formerly a frame maker in Red Lion Street Clerkenwell, London. Joseph Corti arrived in 1852.<sup>4</sup>

During the early 1840s, Brentani travelled to Sydney to join his compatriot Lawrence Cetta, a barometer- and looking-glass-maker. This was hardly surprising as they had been tried together for theft in York in 1834, both having moved from Como to Sheffield to work in the silver and cutlery trade. The gang included his brother Joseph and Ferdinando Riva, also from Como, a thermometer and barometer maker who fenced the goods. All were convicted and sent to Australia. Joseph soon drank himself to death but the others served their time, Cetta in NSW, Riva and Brentani in Tasmania.

On gaining their freedom, they commenced in business together. By December 1851 Charles Brentani was possibly the largest individual gold dealer in Melbourne, with 10% of the market. His younger brother Paolo (Paul) arrived in 1853, going to the goldfields with Raffaello Carboni.

In the 1850s, one of the first free families of Italian master craftsmen from Lombardy migrated to Victoria. They were to supply the public buildings and the houses of the rich and famous in Marvellous Melbourne with large, silvered, bevelled, glass-plate mirrors contained in fine carved and or gilded wooden frames, combining in their workshops the Italian skills of glass-working, woodcarving, plaster work and gilding.

One can only speculate but I suggest that this was not by chance, but at the urging of the connections of Brentani, Riva or Cetta that Giovanni (John) Battista Campi, the first of two brothers, arrived in Melbourne in 1852 on the *Earl of Derby*. Angelo followed him in the following year in the *Mobile*. The Campi brothers soon became established as the only skilled men who could silver clear plates of mirror glass in the infant colony. They commenced in business together in 1853,<sup>5</sup> advertising in the Melbourne papers from 1858<sup>6</sup> as J & A Campi, 122 Russell Street (Plate 1), where this difficult and dangerous mercurial process took place.

John seems to have retired from the partnership in 1871, having returned between 1858 and the mid 1860s to Italy where his first son Achille was born, leaving Angelo to continue on until he died from consumption in 1873 with no direct family.

3. *Australasian Chronicle* 21 Apr 1840 p 3. Cetta was soon in partnership with Thomas Hughes as Cetta & Hughes, as advertisements style the firm from *Sydney Herald* 1 Jul 1840 p 3 until the partnership was dissolved on 26 Feb 1845, *SMH* 26 Feb 1845 p 3.

4. Roslyn Maguire, "The Fine Art of Framing, Cetta, Bernasconi and Corti" *Australian Antique Collector* January– June 1986. In *Sydney in 1848*, Joseph Fowles wrote: "Opposite the Royal Hotel is Mr Cetta's Picture Frame and Looking Glass Manufactory from whence all the neighboring 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. *Victoria and its Metropolis Past and Present*, vol IIb p 596, or 1854 according to *Weekly Times* 6 Aug 1870 p 10.

6. *Argus* 22 Sep 1858.

A third brother Abbondio Campi (c1839–96)<sup>7</sup> (Plate 2) joined the family business having emigrated from London in 1860 on the *General Whindpen*. In 1868 he became a partner and was the future driving force in the business until nearly the end of the century. The firm always retained its Russell Street factory, while opening a retail outlet in 1870 at 16 Collins Street.

According to family sources,<sup>8</sup> Abbondio became the sole proprietor in 1874 but was later joined by his nephew Achille, eldest son of John, who had returned to Italy with his family. Achille became the second generation to work in the family business, which changed its name to A&A Campi, continuing at the same address until the turn of the century.

Disaster struck with the Melbourne property crash of 1892. In 1894 Achille left the business under a cloud, leaving Abbondio to pay out all the creditors in full. On his death what remained of the business was run by his two sons, Angelo a glass silverer and Achille a glass polisher, the eldest boys of his 11 surviving children. Abbondio left the substantial sum of nearly £14,000 to his widow.

The firm was sufficiently advanced to exhibit in the 1861 Victorian Exhibition held in Melbourne:

419. A Large Glass, Silvered in the Colony, and Frame made of Colonial Fancy Woods.<sup>9</sup>

These exhibits were due to be forwarded to London for the International Exhibition of 1862, but it is not certain that this large, expensive and fragile mirror was in fact sent.

A new series of advertisements with a line drawing illustrating one of the firm's framed gilt wood mirrors (Plate 3) appears in some Victorian newspapers from in March 1866.<sup>10</sup> The skill base that kept the firm in the forefront of this complex and dangerous process was the mastery of the art of silvering with mercury and bevelling the large clear glass plates they imported from England.

Sir Joseph Paxton's innovative design for the glass and cast iron Crystal Palace in London to house the Great Exhibition of 1851 could not have been constructed without James Hartley's invention of his "Rolled Glass Plate" at the Wear Glass Works in Sunderland. Hartley began the commercial manufacture of large sheets of flat clear glass in 1838.

Large glass sheets to be used in mirrors had to be polished flat to prevent distortion, making the large individual sheets expensive. The Campi brothers' claim to fame was that they could turn large sheets of clear flat polished imported



Plate 2. Abbondio Campi (c 1839–96), mirror manufacturer, c 1888. Photograph from an album of security identity portraits of members of the Victorian Court, Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888. Image courtesy State Library of Victoria H28190/121

7. Born in Rovellasca Lombardy in 1839, one of three brothers who came to Melbourne while their three sisters remained in Italy. In Melbourne on 13 Dec 1877 he married Mary Jane Sturrock (1853–1935), 6 sons and 5 daughters. Information Collingwood Historical Society 15 Jan 2016 and Kelly Townsend the Campi family historian.
8. Judith O'Callaghan "The Flemington Cup" National Gallery Victoria article on the Gallery website whose biographical information on Charles Brentani was provided by Sr. R Toohey RSCJ and Sr M. Toohey RSCJ, great grand-daughters of Charles Brentani.

9. *Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibition 1861*, Government Printer 1861 p 265.
10. *Argus* 3 Mar 1866 and subsequent editions.



Plate 3. Campi's display advertisement with line drawing of a mirror, *The Telegraph*, St Kilda, Prabran and South Yarra *Guardian*, 3 March 1866 p 6



Plate 4. Isaac Whitehead, composition gilded pier glass and table exhibited at the Australian Intercolonial Exhibition, Melbourne 1866/7. Collection of original photographs, J.B. Hawkins Antiques

glass, received bundled and boxed together for protection, into mirrors in Melbourne. As a result, importing large mirrors that could be easily damaged soon ceased.

The profits enabled Abbondio to invest in property speculation at Queens Parade, Clifton Hill and to purchase *Brompton House*, a two-storey, seven-roomed house with a balcony, from the woodworking Snowden family.

J&A Campi seemed to use only carved wood in their frames, leaving the making of cheaper cast composition borders to others such as Isaac Whitehead, to whom they presumably supplied the mirror glass (Plate 4). If a very special wooden frame was required, the Campis are recorded as using the services of the London firm of Viscardini, listed in the UK 1851 Census as frame makers in Brick Lane, Spitalfields. Three members of the Viscardini family are listed in the UK 1851 census as Looking Glass Frame Makers.<sup>11</sup>

11. Census, 1851, 41 Brick Lane, Christchurch Spitalfields, Middlesex, England. Household: Grinnepe Viscardini 56 Looking Glass Frame Maker; Baldisar Viscardini 19 Looking Glass Frame Maker; Giscan Viscardini 14 Looking Glass Frame Maker. The Viscardini family was originally from Mondello, in the Lombardy region of Italy. Giacomo [Joseph] Viscardini and two of his sons Baldassarre b. 1831 Italy and Giuseppe were all working in the carving, gilding, sculpting and cabinet making in London at least from 1841 onwards. Later they were living/working in Gough Street, and then Grays Inn Road Clerkenwell.

12. *Weekly Times* 6 Aug 1870 p 10.

13. *Weekly Times* 6 Aug 1870.

*The London Dead: stories from Cemeteries Crypts and Churchyards* gives a history of the Viscardinis. Baldassarre the 1859 revolutionary and cabinetmaker provides a possible connection with Raffaello Carboni of the Eureka Stockade, also a man dedicated to the cause of liberty. Carboni left Australia for Italy after the Eureka trial, possibly with Paolo Brentani, and joined the Risorgimento freedom fighters in 1856. William Edwards made a gold mounted sword presented to Garibaldi after the Second Italian War of Independence by the Italian community in Melbourne. Garibaldi freed Como in 1859 from the Austrians.

In 1870 *The Weekly Times* profiled Campi's Pier-Glass Factory at 122 Russell Street, which employed 14 men turning out 4,000 pier glasses annually.

They import the best glass they can obtain for the purpose and their frames, excepting those which are manufactured on the premises are imported from the establishment of Viscardini, the celebrated carver and frame manufacturer, who has been successful in carrying off the prize medals at nearly all the great international exhibitions of Europe and America. The firm have, however, in their employment workmen capable of turning out work of the best quality when the frames required are so ornamental that importation becomes a question of chance as to damage or not.<sup>12</sup>

This association may have been formed through a London connection made before emigration between these two Italian families, for Baldassarre Viscardini (1830– 96) was roughly the same age as the two elder Campi brothers and in Italy the two families lived some 10 km apart.

In 1870 J & A Campi supplied four or possibly five large mirrors for the rooms attached to the newly opened Melbourne Town Hall, with one in particular bearing a specific mention "*Mayors reception room.... about 8ft. by 7ft. 6ins.*"<sup>13</sup>

In 1875 the catalogue of the Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition notes that Abbondio Campi of 122 Russell Street exhibited:

2068 A Mantelpiece Mirror, solid carved gilt frame and 2069 A Console table and Mirror to match, in solid carved gilt frame.

This description is expanded in a contemporary newspaper report:<sup>14</sup>

The sample which comes primarily under our notice is a pier glass and console table by Louis Musschialli of 102 Collins Street east, Melbourne, which gives great satisfaction to connoisseurs. The former is of enormous size and the framework is a piece of highly elaborate and well executed carving for it be understood that the material is wood not composition. It is in the main made up of open scroll and flower work and the wreaths surmounted by the Australian arms on each side of which are Australian aborigines and particularly well modelled cockatoos with outstretched wings. The inside rim of the frame is cut in the dog tooth pattern. The console table is of nearly equal excellence ...

Abbondio, on becoming the sole proprietor of J&A Campi, may have come to an agreement with Louis Musschiallito to leave the Campi's employment as their specialist wood carver and gilder to start an outside workshop of his own while still supplying them with frames.<sup>15</sup> Musschialli had been discharged from bankruptcy on 11 October 1867.

*The Australasian* continues:

Mr Campi has a fine solid carved wood gilt-framed mantelpiece mirror of much merit. The crowning ornament consists of birds pecking at a bouquet. He also has a console table standing 12ft. high and 6ft. wide of a similar design. In both dog tooth mouldings are liberally used. It is only fair to note that the silvering of the mirror is as good as need be as Mr Campi claims to be the originator in Australia of this particular industry. He has at the present time 10 to 12 men employed at his silvering tables. We come next to composition frames and in this regard the articles exhibited by Mr Isaac Whitehead of 87 Collins Street East Melbourne is very striking. It would seem that he has given to his productions in this direction some of the results of his studies as a painter of Australian pictures...<sup>16</sup>

"Dog tooth mouldings" are the key to attributing Melbourne mirrors of this date carved in wood to the Campi/Musschialli workshop. *Blackie's Modern Cyclopaedia* of 1899 illustrates an example of this dog tooth decoration, a specific and ancient design created by making a pyramid out of a cube (Plate 9).

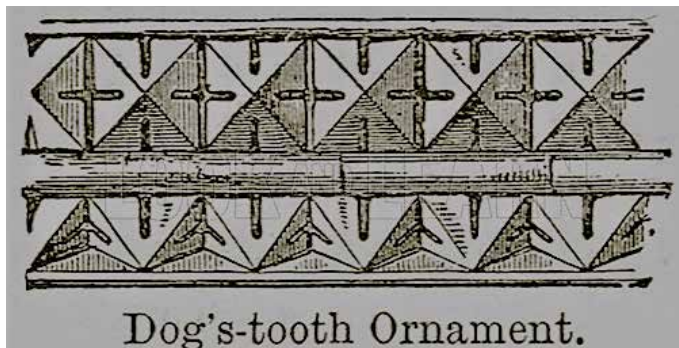


Plate 9. Dog's-tooth decoration in two forms, from *Blackie's Modern Cyclopaedia*, published 1899.

14. *Australasian* 4 Sep 1875 p 4.

15. Philadelphia Exhibition catalogue p 98. The only Victorian exhibitors at the Philadelphia International Exhibition of 1876 were Musschialli with his pier glass and console (item 1168/69) and Alcock with his billiard table.

16. Whitehead was the specialist picture framer in 1870s Melbourne working in plaster rather than carved wood for artists such as von Guérard, specialising in plaster ferns for his mirror decoration.



No marked Campi/Musschialli mirror with or without a trade label is known to the writer. Three carved wood and gilded fireplace overmantel mirrors with their hallmark dog tooth mouldings used as a border all dating from c 1875 and originally purchased in Melbourne are to be found here at *Bentley* in Tasmania, purchased by me to suit the house which was built for the Cameron family in 1879 (Plates 5–8).

Two magnificent mirrors in the State Drawing Room at Government House Melbourne are a testament to the Campi family and their skills as plate glass silverers. Whitehead possibly supplied the frames, the finest to survive, as they are in part plaster. A contemporary newspaper notes that:

The two huge mirrors that look down upon those mantel pieces each 12 feet in height are of course by Campi...<sup>17</sup>

Abbondio exhibited at the 1880–81 Melbourne International Exhibition, which had a special pavilion for locally made carving and gilding with an emphasis on mirrors:

Superb pier glasses cover both the inside and the outside walls and the intermediate spaces are occupied by picture frames, mouldings etc ... One large mirror in gilt frame, artistically carved and painted bears the name of Mr A. Campi of Russell Street. The frame is carved in solid wood and gilded in water with double gold leaf. It is of noble proportions and of an elegant design.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition, the firm exhibited in “*Class 26. Crystal, Glass and Stained Glass. Exhibit No. 577 Campi A. 122 Russell Street Mirrors*” obtaining a first class award for mirrors. The surviving mirror, still in the family, is a testament to the Abbondio glass works and was, I suggest, the advertising sign mounted in bronze on his exhibition stand, as the firm moved away from pier glasses in wooden frames to art glass mirrors (Plate 10).

Plates 5-8. Three Abbondio Campi, Melbourne, dog's-tooth bordered mirrors in carved and gilded wood standing over the original marble fireplaces in the drawing, dining and principal bedroom at Bentley Tasmania, and a detail of the dog's tooth ornament on one.

17. *Geelong Advertiser* 22 Mar 1876 p 3.

18. *Argus* 9 Dec 1880 p 53.

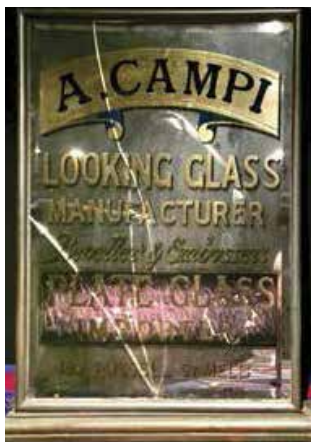


Plate 10. Bronze mounted advertising sign for A Campi.

The family had exhibited at all the major Melbourne exhibitions: 1861, 1866–7, 1875, 1880–1 and 1888. By 1888 they had worn down all the opposition to be the only remaining firm of mirror makers to exhibit but doubtless their plates were supplied to all the leading city retailers such as WH Rocke & Co.

In 1888, using the new silver nitrate process, Campi could produce glasses as large as 15 ft by 9 ft (4.57 x 2.74 m) using 16 hands all employed at Russell Street. About 50,000 feet (15,240 m) of looking glass was manufactured each year, of which between 25,000 and 30,000 feet (7,620 to 9.144 m) were bevelled into mirrors of all types.<sup>19</sup>

19. *Victoria and its Metropolis*, Vol. IIb, p.596.

With the death of Abbondio, the firm's stock was auctioned on 10 April 1897 by Craig Williamson and Thomas at a large discount of 74%, yet it would appear that in a limited way the firm continued.

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