

Migrants: Art, Artists, Materials and Ideas Crossing Borders



Edited by Lucy Wrapson, Victoria Sutcliffe,
Sally Woodcock and Spike Bucklow

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in association with the Hamilton Kerr Institute,
University of Cambridge

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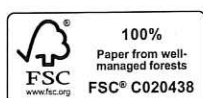
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Italian artisans of marble mosaic in the United Kingdom: migrants as conveyors of skills and knowledge from a transnational perspective¹

Javier P. Grossutti

ABSTRACT This paper highlights the migration experience of a highly specialised group of artisans in the field of marble mosaic and terrazzo flooring. The majority of marble mosaic and terrazzo artisans who arrived in the UK from the 1870s onwards came from the northeastern Italian region of Friuli, and boasted an ancient family tradition dating back to late sixteenth-century Venice. In the Lagoon city, and later in the UK, the art of terrazzo was basically monopolised by these craftsmen – indeed many artisans established their own mosaic and terrazzo companies, an entrepreneurial tendency that might be explained in the light of this ancestral tradition. Their contribution to the destination society was noteworthy: major buildings in London and elsewhere in the UK were embellished with marble mosaic and terrazzo flooring by Italian artisans. The UK also represented a point of departure: between the 1870s and early 1900s, many Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers reached the US and Australia having worked in the British job market.

Introduction

In this paper migrants are presented as conduits for the transfer of skills, ideas, techniques, methods of production, material culture and knowledge. The case of Italian artisans in the field of marble mosaic and terrazzo flooring offers interesting insight into a group of migrant craftsmen who are credited with the transplantation and diffusion in the United Kingdom of an aesthetic heritage typical of sixteenth-century Venice. Moreover, the Italian marble mosaic and terrazzo workers' experiences shed new light on ethnic entrepreneurs catering not only to their ethnic group but to the community at large:

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the name of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished.
Who raised it up so many times?

The lyrics of Bertold Brecht's poem *Questions from A Worker Who Reads* (Brecht 1976: 252) centre on works whose makers are anonymous. Similarly, we might pose the questions: who executed the Manchester Town Hall marble mosaic floor? Who made the marble mosaic floorings of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum in Kensington and in the entrance to the National Portrait Gallery? While marble mosaic floors remain vivid and visible works of art embellishing these and many other British buildings, the migration experiences of the artisans who executed them, and the story of their lengthy transnational journey as carriers of an intangible culture (the craft of executing marble mosaic and terrazzo floors), are all but unknown. To paraphrase the comment made by Frank Thistlethwaite, who examined the migration of artisan potters from Staffordshire to America, 'if we can trace the potters, we can trace the industry' (Thistlethwaite 1958: 265), if we seek out the marble mosaic and terrazzo

flooring in British buildings we can trace a community of Italian marble mosaic and terrazzo workers. Venetian artisans or simply Italian craftsmen have been credited with laying many of these marble mosaic floors. Tracking back the lost names and the migrant experiences of these artisans sheds light on the diffusion of marble mosaic flooring in the UK.² As stated by Colin Holmes in his seminal volume *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*: 'we need to know more about the contributions which specific immigrant or minority groups have made to British society' (Holmes 1978: 19).

'After the fashion of the artisans in the middle ages': early mosaic workers in the UK

Mosaics have traditionally been formed by hand-setting small pieces of stone, marble, ceramic or glass (known as tesserae) in a decorative pattern applied to floor and/or wall surfaces over a coat of adhesive. Of Venetian origin, the term 'terrazzo' is broadly used to designate almost any kind of interior flooring surface made with bits of marble or stone. Also known as *pavimento alla veneziana* and *seminato*, the chips of marble and/or stone are either randomly scattered or arranged to form both simple linear patterns and more elaborate figures on a lime, and later cement, matrix. Terrazzo stone paving, very common in Venice, is regarded as simpler than mosaic floors, although both are made with marble and pebbles of various colours and require polishing (Gray and Childe 1943: 112–18; Crovato 1999: 53–79; Farneti 2001: 155). This paper focuses exclusively on these floorings, both of which are laid in a monolithic form, that is to say marble mosaic and terrazzo flooring laid directly on the ground. Care should be taken not to confuse them with mosaic and encaustic tile pavements manufactured as early as the 1830s by the well-known English firms of Minton & Co., Maw & Co., William B. Simpson & Sons, Doulton and other potteries. While mosaics and encaustic tiles were produced industrially and then installed on site by tilers (Pearson 2005: 28), the artisanal manufacture and application of glass and marble mosaics involved greater craftsmanship and labour. Some marble mosaic pavement manufacturers operating in

London and across the UK simultaneously executed glass mosaic, but this aspect of the industry is not discussed in this paper.

In Britain, Italian marble mosaic artisans followed the so-called 'indirect method' first developed in France in the 1860s by mosaic master craftsman Gian Domenico Facchina, who was born in the northeastern Italian region of Friuli. The work, which was executed in the studio, entailed setting the tesserae upside down on a temporary paper base previously cut into sections. The mosaic was then easily shipped to its destination and installed *in situ*, both on walls and floors. This technique of prefabrication, probably used as early as the Graeco-Roman era, was a cheaper method of manufacturing mosaic and devised in order to meet higher production demands. In addition, the 'indirect method' meant that the designer, maker and layer of the mosaic did not necessarily need to be the same person, increasing labour division within the trade: Italian craftsmen were only responsible for making, laying and polishing the mosaics, while designs were carried out by other workers not generally from Italy.

London and elsewhere in the UK had never been the most popular destination for Friulian migrants. Before the First World War, the vast majority comprised masons, brick kiln workers and farm labourers who every year moved seasonally from Friuli to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, but only rarely crossed the Channel. The few who travelled to London and then onto other cities in England and Scotland were mosaic and terrazzo workers from the hamlets of Sequals, Fanna, Orgnese and Cavasso Nuovo in the Alpine foothills of western Friuli (Della Pozza 1934: 43–5; 1982: 89–103). The mosaic and terrazzo artisans from these few villages chose the yet-to-be-exploited UK job market seeking better economic conditions and higher profits. The first documented mosaic workers from Friuli arrived in London in the 1870s from Paris where they had already been working, rather than directly from Italy (Grossutti 2014: 104). Among the earliest was a native of Sequals, Pietro Mazziol (b. 6 October 1850) later known as Mazzioli.³ According to the memoirs of the Mazzioli family, he arrived in London in 1875.⁴ Pietro had worked in Paris with his relative Giovanni Battista Mazziol (b. 21 September 1828) who, together with fellow Sequals native Gian Domenico Facchina, made the mosaics of the Palais Garnier opera house. From the beginning



Figure 1 Pietro Mazzioli, his wife Antonietta Lizier, and their son Louis, London 1888 (Peter Mazzioli Archive, Sequals).

of the 1860s, Giovanni Battista and mosaic worker Angelo Del Turco, also from Sequals, ran a mosaic company at 170 Rue Saint Dominique (Sageret 1866: 974). At the end of the 1870s the *Entreprise Générale de Dallages en Mosaique Vénitienne et Romaine Mazzioli et Del Turco*, then owned by Jean Mazzioli, Giovanni Battista's son, and a certain Chauvret, opened a branch in London. Their office in the borough of Westminster at 23 Gresse Street, Rathbone Place was run by Pietro Mazzioli, a relative of Jean's (Sageret 1880: 1551), who died prematurely in London on 14 March 1896 (Figure 1).

The Mazziolis were descendants of the sixteenth-century Master Bortolomio de Mazzuoli, also known as Bartolomeo Mazziol. Bortolomio belonged to the group of marble mosaic and terrazzo artisans from Friuli who, on 9 February 1583, were given permission to establish a guild by the Venetian Council of Ten.⁵ The guild's purpose was to replace individual marble mosaic and terrazzo artisans with teams of organised workers who had to conform strictly to societal and professional rules. The *terazzeri*, as terrazzo

workers were called, many of whom were immigrants, were regarded as true artists and covetously handed the secrets of their craft down from father to son in closely knit family-run businesses for centuries (Sammartini 2000: 20). In fact, from the late sixteenth century onwards, the art of terrazzo was virtually the monopoly of craftsmen from the Alpine foothill areas of Friuli who, like other Friulian migrants, arrived in Venice. At that time, this was the most important migrant destination (both temporary and permanent) for Friulian workers, attracted by the many different opportunities offered by the city's job market: in late sixteenth-century Venice, the most commonly found names of the terrazzo and marble mosaic masters from Sequals and Solimbergo included Mazzioli, Pellarin, Crovatto, Carnera, Cristofoli, Odorico, Del Turco, Foscatto, Mora, Mander, Patrizio and Pasquali (Caniato and Dal Borgo 1990: 155–7; Colledani and Perfetti 1994). Over the years the expanding Venetian terrazzo and marble mosaic flooring industry required a growing number of workers, initiating a process by which those who were already employed in this sector enrolled family members and friends on whom they could depend to train and learn the trade of working in terrazzo and marble mosaic flooring. Therefore the marble mosaic and terrazzo trade, first in Venice and later abroad, drew mainly on male workers hailing from Sequals and the nearby Alpine foothill towns of western Friuli.

The story of Pietro Mazzioli, who established a small mosaic company in London around 1887,⁶ epitomises the family, work and migration experiences of the majority of Italian marble mosaic artisans who arrived in the UK from the 1870s onwards, when Italians from Friuli controlled the British marble mosaic trade. Before the First World War, Mazzioli and the mosaic workers he had brought to London from Friuli made mosaics for the high altar in St George's Cathedral in Southwark and for the old Scotland Yard, Baltic Exchange and Leicester Square Dental Hospital buildings.⁷

Despite this noticeable contribution made by Italian artisans, the marble industrialist William Henry Burke (1836/37–1908) claimed that he was responsible for introducing and spreading modern mosaic to England at the beginning of the 1870s:

It is true that the writer of this paper was the first to cause mosaic pavements to be adopted in Great

Britain, and that ... a fashion was quickly set, so that within a very few years the areas laid were to be reckoned by tens of thousands of feet (between 1872 and 1880 the writer's firm put down nearly a million superficial feet), but it is certain that if he had not taken the narrative someone else would; his only merit is that he saw the time was ripe, he seized the occasion with enthusiasm, and gave velocity to a movement that had already begun. The Italians, at that time engaged in this industry, were wholly lacking education ...; all they knew about making mosaic came from observation and self teaching (Burke c.1890: 9–10).

He then pointed out that:

The men who engaged in this art, now, however, less of an art than a craft, came from villages in the neighbourhood of the town of Udine ... These men travelled from one Italian city to another, practicing their craft much after the fashion of the artisans in the middle ages (Burke c.1890: 7).

Burke conceded that the ancient Roman marble mosaic flooring, which he scrutinised during his trips to Italy, had greatly influenced the development of the marble mosaic industry in the UK (Burke c.1890: 10). In the early 1840s it is very likely that a number of British architects were aware of the quality and characteristics of terrazzo flooring: in 1836 the Venetian painter Giuseppe Borsato was invited to become an honorary member and correspondent of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). At that time Borsato had sent RIBA a study he had carried out (in Italian) regarding the construction method of Venetian pavements known as 'terrazzi'⁸

In 1872, Burke and Co.'s headquarters were at 17 Newman Street in London, a few hundred metres away from the English branch of the firm of Mazzioli & Del Turco. Even though the owner was an Englishman, the firm took inspiration from Italian works and had an Italian workforce of craftsmen from Friuli. The celebratory book dedicated to The Garfield Memorial in Cleveland, which features interior mosaics executed by Burke & Co., states that Messrs. Burke of London, Paris and New York 'keep employed a large force of Italian mosaicists' (Garfield National Memorial Association c.1894: 10).



Figure 2 The entrepreneur Giovanni Mariutto, who established Diespeker & Co. Ltd., London late 1910s (photo: Mariutto Archive, London).

'Pavements [are] laid by Italian workmen' under English employment: marble mosaic craftsmen and entrepreneurs

The introduction to the UK of marble mosaic flooring around the early 1870s, and its widespread adoption in the building industry, is confirmed by the English concrete expert Henry Reid: 'The recent introduction of the mosaic pavement or tiling, composed of marble "tesserae" imbedded in cement [and laid in the monolithic form], has led to great changes in the treatment of halls, lobbies, and corridors in public and private buildings' (Reid 1879: 273). During the same period a few companies produced Portland cement concrete tiles, which competed against marble mosaic flooring to satisfy the tastes of the British market. Needless to say, Henry Reid backed the Portland cement tile industry: 'In the cement tiles produced by Messrs. J. and H. Patteson, of Manchester, all the advantages of the mosaic paving

are obtained at a much less cost, and in addition to that important advantage they are also more durable. Tiles of any size can be made by their method, and accurate colouring and form secured with the outmost certainty' (Reid 1879: 274). However, James and Henry Patteson of 96 Oxford Road, Manchester, executed marble mosaic flooring as well: in the early 1880s the firm 'were amongst the first to develop Marble and Mosaic Work' in the city according to the 1914 volume of *Whitaker's Red Book of Commerce or Who's Who in Business* (p. 750),⁹ which also listed among departmental staff 'Italian mosaic workers'.

Around 1881, the entrepreneurial brothers Giovanni Battista (Johann) and Luigi (Alois) Odorico from Sequals sent Giovanni Mariutto (Figure 2), one of their employees, to London. Mariutto was born in 1856 in Orgnese, a small village 6 km from Sequals, and worked for the Odorico brothers, who ran a mosaic and terrazzo company in Vienna and Frankfurt. Established in 1830, it employed around a hundred Friulian workers. Mariutto, who was probably accompanied by his manager Sigmund Diespeker, was charged with assessing the possibilities offered by the English market and, given the opportunity, of opening a branch in London. Instead, Diespeker and Mariutto decided to set up their own business in the mosaic flooring sector. The new firm, Diespeker & Co. Ltd.,¹⁰ was listed as parquet flooring manufacturers, stone and marble merchants and building material dealers.¹¹ In 1886, a branch of the Frankfurt-based Odorico company also opened in London.

In the early 1880s, alongside Diespeker and Burke & Co., another marble mosaic pavement manufacturer, Joseph Francis Ebner, operated from 51 Clerkenwell Road, opposite the Italian Church.¹² In an advertisement published in 1882, Ebner claimed that 'pavements [are] laid by Italian workmen'.¹³ Ten years later other companies joined the ranks of the marble mosaic pavement industry. The 1891 *Post Office London Trades Directory* listed the firms of John Bennett (19 and 20 Brunswick Mews, WC); Burke & Co.; Robert Davison (182 Marylebone Road, NW; works: 2, 4 & 5 Dorset Mews, NW); De Grelle, Houdret & Co. (130 London Wall, EC; works: 108 & 110 Tabernacle Street, E), owned by the Belgian entrepreneurs Charles De Grelle Rogier and Jules Houdret; Joseph F. Ebner; Mainzer & Kempthorne (18 Berners Street, W); and George Wright & Co. (155 Queen Victoria Street, EC). According to the

1895 *Post Office London Trades Directory*, apart from the additions of B. Ward & Co. (15 Great George Street, SW), and Webb & Co. (292 Euston Road, NW) producers of encaustic and geometrical tile and mosaic pavements, the London-based marble mosaic pavement companies of 1895 were the same as those of 1891. The construction industry was expanding, but Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers had not yet managed to create an independent network of companies: instead they carried out work mainly on behalf of English and a few foreign businesses. The process that led to the establishment of a solid network of mosaic and terrazzo firms owned by Italians in France, Austria, Germany and even in the United States appeared to be much faster than in the United Kingdom, or at least in London.

In January 1895, the business officer of the Italian Embassy in London, Cav. Giulio Silvestrelli, produced a report entitled 'La colonia italiana in Londra' (The Italian colony in London) in which he observed that 'many Italian labourers carry out mosaic flooring, which is becoming widespread across London, above all under English employment' (Silvestrelli 1895: 108).¹⁴ He listed five Italian retailers of glasswork and mosaics in the capital, whereas in the working-class neighbourhood of Holborn, the oldest Italian centre in London, there were 130 mosaic workers. In Holborn the Italians controlled the peripatetic trades with 1000 organ grinders and 2000 ice-cream, potato and chestnut sellers. The more recent Italian community of Soho, instead 'is to a large degree made up of cooks, waiters, kitchen and household assistants, couriers, teachers, artists, tailors, seamstresses, shop keepers, jewellers, restaurateurs and hoteliers' (Silvestrelli 1895: 105). The majority of the Italian community in London, therefore, was employed in catering and as peddlers, sectors with which Italians were stereotypically associated.¹⁵ The singularity of the mosaic and terrazzo workers' experiences resided in the fact that in the UK these artisans were working in the same trade they had carried out prior to emigrating while, with the exception of *figurinai* (makers of plaster of Paris statuettes), the majority of other, non-skilled, Italians entered into the catering and itinerant trades. The crucial point is that mosaicists and terrazzo workers did not supply just the Italian community, but the British population as a whole.

In July 1900, the journal *La Riforma Sociale* published a series of articles on the Italians in England by Giuseppe Prato, an economist and historian. Prato revealed 'the lack of homogeneity in terms of composition, origin and background that divides the [Italian] colony into three clearly separate and distinct classes'; at the upper end of the colony were artists, wealthy merchants, business owners and industrialists, the class with the fewest members (Prato 1900: 692). At the lower levels of the Italian colony were the peddlers and buskers, 'bringing dishonour and scorn on our name' (Prato 1900: 698). Between the wealthier and more intellectual members of the community and the travellers and peddlers were the workers and the craftsmen 'whose numbers are rising and whose moral and material level is increasing by the day' (Prato 1900: 695). Above all, it was these workers and craftsmen who suffered the most the resistance and opposition from English workers and trade unions:

The fierce and relentless opposition of the trade unions, and diffidence on the part of the industrialists ... makes it almost impossible for Italians to find a job in those important sectors which fuel the United Kingdom's prosperity. However, a certain number of them have been employed, with quite advantageous conditions, in factories that are exclusively English, such as the important mechanic's workshops Maxim and Nordenfelt, or Sheffield's well-known cutlery works, as well as in companies run by local industrialists selling Italian products, such as makers of mosaics or Venetian paving (Prato 1900: 695-6).

Twenty years later, the American economist Robert F. Foerster agreed that the 'exclusionist spirit and rules of the English trade unions made all craftsmen unwelcome' (Foerster 1924: 205).

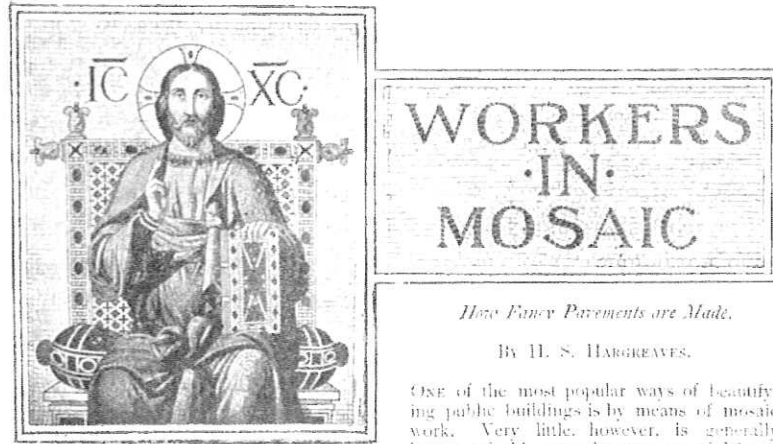
From London to the provinces and overseas: the United Kingdom as a point of departure

In the mosaic and terrazzo sector there was no such competition between the indigenous and migrant workforces by virtue of the unavailability of

these skills among the British workforce. In 1903, George Newman, Medical Officer of Health of the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury, a district north of the City of London, commented:

The mosaic work is, as a rule, marble mosaic ... It appears that there are practically no English mosaic workers, the whole work being in the hands of the Italians ... Such mosaic flooring is increasingly used for public offices and buildings, in corridors, lavatories, etc. One firm alone in central London employs 80 to 100 Italians in this process of flooring. The busy season is in the summer, much less work being done in winter. The work is not of course confined to London. Many of these Italian mosaic floor workers are sent into the provinces for longer or shorter periods (Newman 1904: 249).¹⁶

Indeed, London contractors sent artisans to other urban areas to affix precut designs and install mosaics. If these employees identified a possible market, they often remained in the city to open a local branch of the business or begin their own. Osvaldo Toffolo, from Fanna, arrived in London in 1904 to work as a floor layer in the booming mosaic and terrazzo industry. Osvaldo's London employer sent him to work on a contract in Hull, where he eventually established his own company in 1916.¹⁷ As in the case of Toffolo, the Italian mosaic workers who were already in London sponsored their fellow countrymen who operated in the trade in Germany, France and Austria to join them. This method secured a trustworthy, skilled labour force for marble mosaic firms and in turn, the most adventurous of these mosaic workers established companies of their own. The marked tendency of marble mosaic and terrazzo workers to become entrepreneurs over time might be explained in light of an established tradition that dates back to late sixteenth-century Venice: as a result of the guild system and the commercial activity that followed its break-up, the more talented and skilled terrazzo masters were encouraged to embrace entrepreneurship. In the case of marble mosaic and terrazzo workers, only a long-term analysis providing a historical reconstruction of the individual, familial and village migration patterns might highlight whether or not there was a predisposition to become an entrepreneur. The immigrant's tendency



work. By the courtesy of the Art Pavement and Decorations Co., Limited, I am enabled to place the reader in possession of many interesting facts concerning this industry.

Marble mosaic paving dates back to the Roman period, but this art was really derived from the Greeks, and the designs most approved at the present time are copies from actual work executed by the Romans. There is a beautiful specimen of a Roman mosaic pavement in the Guildhall Museum which was discovered 3ft. below the surface in Bucklersbury while digging the foundation for a new building.

It is, however, only within the last thirty years that mosaic has come into general use in England; and now it can claim to be one of the largest industries of the artistic paving trade. As an example of its progress, it may be mentioned that twenty years ago the Italian mosaic workmen in this country numbered only about twenty, but at the present time there are no fewer than 2000 employed. It is, in fact, essentially an Italian occupation, and the swarthy denizens of the sunny south hold a monopoly of it. This is ascribed to the fact that they are said to possess more patience than we Britons. It may be so, or it may not. English girls, however, are employed for the simpler stages of the work, and, I understand, exhibit much aptitude.

Very few persons when walking over an ordinary marble mosaic pavement have the smallest idea where all the coloured marbles come from, and I think they would be surprised to know that the productions of nearly every quarry in Europe has to be employed in making up the designs. Here is a list of some of the principal places:—

- Light red Italy
- Dark " "
- Brown " Belgium
- White Italy
- Green Ireland
- Black Belgium
- Cream South of France
- Yellow Italy
- Dove "

It is almost unnecessary to remark that a tremendous amount



The first process. A full-size design drawing.

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Figure 3 Page 1 of the article 'Workers in mosaic: how fancy pavements are made' by H.S. Hargreaves, *The Royal Magazine*, October 1901.

toward self-employment induced by a blocked upward mobility in the host country does not fully explain the marble mosaic and terrazzo entrepreneurial experience – not only in the UK but also in other European countries.¹⁸

Between the 1870s and early 1900s, for Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers the UK represented

not only a destination, but also a point of departure. In 1870, Domenico Pasquali and an unknown fellow countryman, both from Sequals, were among the first mosaic workers recorded in America. Some years later, according to William Henry Burke, they were hired by the renowned New York-based Herter Brothers decoration firm (Burke c.1890:

10). Interestingly, Pasquali came to America from Liverpool, not from one of the more common emigration ports of Le Havre or Cherbourg in France. This, and the fact that Burke explicitly mentioned Pasquali in his account of marble mosaic pavements, could suggest that the former may have worked for the Burke company in London prior to his arrival in New York. Like Pasquali, other Italian mosaic workers headed for more distant destinations. In 1900, at the age of 15, Annibale De Marco from Fanna arrived in London. He was employed by the firm The Art Pavements & Decorations Ltd., where he was trained as a master of terrazzo, mosaic and granolithic flooring by his fellow countrymen.¹⁹ Ten years later, in 1909, Annibale decided to emigrate to Australia. In Sydney he worked for Melocco Brothers, a mosaic and terrazzo company owned by the brothers Pietro, Galliano and Antonio Melocco from Friuli. In 1912, Annibale left for Melbourne, determined to start his own business and in 1914 he brought over his brother Severino from London. Soon afterwards they established their own mosaic and terrazzo business, which later became the foremost company in the city.²⁰

Within the Italian marble mosaic flooring trade a kind of labour hierarchy reflected the distinctive local skills and deep-rooted work traditions of the Italian migrant workers. While the high-level workforce – the craftsmen – were mainly from Friuli, assistants and polishers, responsible for manually rubbing down and polishing the marble mosaic floors, came chiefly from other Italian areas, namely Piacenza and Parma in Emilia, the second most important district from where Italians working in Finsbury originated. In 1903, out of 1003 Italians in Finsbury, 263 came from the provinces of Parma and Piacenza, broadly employed as both asphalters and paviors (Newman 1904: 247).²¹ Interestingly, skilled and unskilled Italian labourers co-existed, carrying out different duties within the same industrial field.²²

At the turn of the century, the wages of Italian workers and craftsmen were in line with the salaries of local workers. The successful economic conditions achieved by Italian mosaic workers were largely a result of the organisational set-up of the trade's workforce: between 1900 and 1901, Italian and Friulian mosaic workers established the Società Operaia dei Mosaicisti (Mosaic Workers' Society) which, a year after it was founded, already boasted

over 120 members.²³ The Società was a mutual aid society, its main objective being the improvement of working conditions for its members.

'They are said to possess more patience than we Britons': mosaic, terrazzo and the (Italian) artisanal workforce

In an article published in 1901 (Figure 3), H.S. Hargreaves described mosaic work as 'one of the most popular ways of beautifying public buildings' in England, adding that 'Very little, however, is generally known of this art.' Hargreaves confirmed the recent spread of the mosaic trade, commenting that 'It is, however, only within the last thirty years that mosaic has come into general use in England; and now it can claim to be one of the largest industries of the artistic paving trade.' The author noted that around the 1880s:

the Italian mosaic workmen in this country numbered only about twenty, but at the present time there are no fewer than 2,000 employed. It is, in fact, essentially an Italian occupation, and the swarthy denizens of the sunny south hold a monopoly of it. This is ascribed to the fact that they are said to possess more patience than we Britons (Hargreaves 1901: 549).

Along with the rise of marble mosaic, the 1880s and 90s saw an increasing use of marble tesserae. In the early 1900s, Hargreaves observed that 'the quantity of marble tessera [sic] imported from Italy to England alone exceeds 10,000 tons a year, or 200,000 cwt sacks, sufficient to lay 500,000 square yards' (Hargreaves 1901: 551). As an example of its extensive use, Hargreaves cited the paving of Salisbury House on London Wall, at the time one of the largest office blocks ever erected in London, which required over 30,000,000 pieces of marble: 'The marble alone weighs 150 tons, and with the cement 250 tons' (Hargreaves 1901: 551). Italy was not the only source of marble tesserae – while most of the light and dark red, white, yellow and dove marbles came from Italy, brown and black were imported from Belgium, green marble originated from Ireland and cream

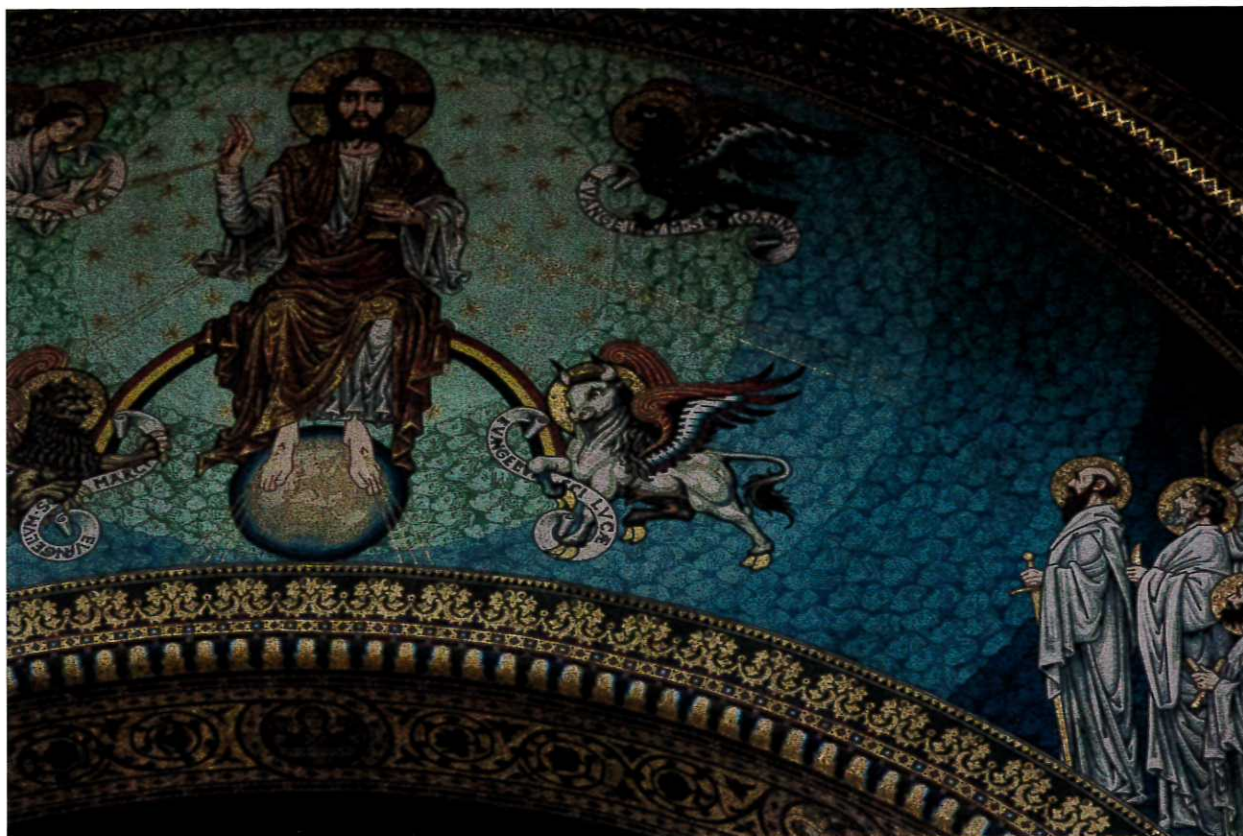


Figure 4 The mosaic in the Westminster Cathedral sanctuary arch executed by Filippo (Philip) Mariutto (son of the mosaic and terrazzo entrepreneur Giovanni) and Gian-Battista Maddalena between 1932 and 1933. Both Mariutto and Maddalena were born in Friuli and were working for Diespeker & Co. Ltd. (P. Rogers, *Reflections: The Westminster Cathedral Mosaics*, London, Westminster Cathedral, 2010, pp. 31–2) (photo © Steve Broomfield).

marble was brought from the south of France. The task of cutting the marble into small pieces was performed outside the UK, thereby lowering the cost of the mosaic:

At one time, when marble was scarce, and the tessera [sic] were cut by hand, mosaic work could be indulged in only by the very wealthy. But the importation of large quantities of material and the introduction of machinery have very considerably reduced prices. Cutting by hand is done only when special colours are required for rich ornamental work (Hargreaves 1900: 551).

Alongside marble mosaic, migrant craftsmen and materials, in the form of marble, made their way across borders as well.

An important aspect highlighted by Hargreaves' article in *The Royal Magazine* is the involvement of a female workforce in the marble mosaic industry: English girls 'are employed for the simpler stages of the work, and, I understand, exhibit much aptitude'

(Hargreaves 1901: 549). As part of the 'indirect method' process, girls were responsible for fitting and gluing the different coloured marble tesserae upside-down onto the drawing on the paper base:

It is here, of course, where patience is required. To give an idea what a trying task it is, I may mention that a 3ft. length of ordinary border, with a width of a little over a foot, requires 600 cubes of marble to complete it. Each one has to be picked out and stuck on. A smart girl can do three of these borders in a day (Hargreaves 1900: 550).²⁴

As Hargreaves acknowledged, Italian artisans contributed to the embellishment of major buildings in London and elsewhere with mosaics. Besides Salisbury House on London Wall, other important works carried out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by marble mosaic companies operating in London included the flooring of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum in Kensington and the entrance to the National Portrait Gallery;



Figure 5 Photograph taken in London in 1931 of a group of mosaic and terrazzo workers from Friuli at Diespeker & Co. Ltd. with the boxer Primo Carnera (in the centre), who was born in Sequals (Peter Mazzioli Archive, Sequals).

the ceiling mosaic in the lobby of the London Coliseum; the mosaic on the canopy of Westminster Cathedral (Figure 4); the floors of the Midland Bank building on Gracechurch Street; the foyer of the London Opera House (demolished in 1957); Queen's Hall (destroyed by German bombing in 1941); the London General Post Office; the Brigade of Guards' headquarters at Wellington Barracks; the Headland Hotel in Newquay, Cornwall; and a number of office buildings in the King's Cross area.²⁵

The first terrazzo floors were laid in the UK in the mid-1890s by the same Italian mosaic workers who had already been practising the marble mosaic trade for a number of years.²⁶ Terrazzo, however, would not gain acceptance for several decades. During these early years, terrazzo was adopted as a flooring material for public and apartment buildings. For example, the wards of the Derbyshire Royal Infirmary, which was opened on 7 July 1894, had

floors made of terrazzo, 'a species of marble mosaic; they were the first ward floors laid in this material in this country.'²⁷

In the first years of the 1900s, new terrazzo products were manufactured industrially by marble mosaic flooring firms such as Diespeker. 'Diespeker's Patent Ornamental Mosaic Staircases' were presented as 'very durable and low in price' in the advertisement the company published in *The Royal Institute of British Architects Kalendar* for November 1904. By the early 1900s terrazzo and marble mosaic precast units, consisting of panels prepared in factories and then installed on site as partition slabs, staircase steps, wall and floor tiles, table and counter tops and grave surrounds, were constructed in Diespeker's London factory at 57–60 Holborn Viaduct.²⁸ These innovative products adopted by some companies allowed the trade to expand progressively, while reducing the cost of marble mosaic



Figure 6 Diespeker & Co. Ltd.'s works at 36a–38 Graham Street, London in 2015 (photo © Steve Broomfield).

and terrazzo goods. The benefits of precast terrazzo encouraged its widespread application, including to floors, partitions, stairs, building facades, ceilings, columns, pillars and balconies.

In the early 1910s, and on the verge of the First World War, more marble mosaic pavement manufacturers devoted their work to producing terrazzo flooring. The company William B. Simpson & Sons was registered as producers of 'terrazzo pavements' in the 1910 *Post Office London Trades and Professional Directory*, and manufactured original ceramic, marble, Venetian glass and vitreous mosaics as well as encaustic tile pavements.²⁹ The 35-year-old firm of A.C.W. Hobman & Co. in South Bermondsey produced terrazzo staircases and Cliftonite, a registered product that was claimed to be 'cheaper than *terrazzo*, non-slippery, ornamental and durable'.³⁰

In the years following the First World War, demand for mosaic flooring tended to decrease mainly due to its excessive cost. However, the use of terrazzo floors did not reach its peak until between 1920 and 1930, when British architects became aware of its design potential. Moreover, the war delayed the introduction into Britain of a mechanical device for smoothing and polishing terrazzo, a laborious task previously done manually. From the second half of the 1920s, in London and elsewhere in the UK, the

use of smoothing machines made it possible to cover large areas at a relatively low cost, converting what used to be mainly the work of craftsmen into an industrial-scale operation.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the terrazzo sector did not feel the effects of the economic crisis. In an attempt to reduce high rates of unemployment, the British government funded the construction of public buildings such as hospitals, schools, housing, government offices, railway stations and barracks. As a result the terrazzo companies were barely able to keep up with demand. As had happened in the United States and Canada, terrazzo became popular in the UK due to the many advantages it offered: high standards of hygiene, a variety of colours and widespread applications. For example, in Cambridge, St John's College Baths, first opened in Michaelmas Term 1922, featured 'Italian terrazzo, a kind of marble set in cement, having proved to be the most effective material for cleaning purposes'.³¹

In the 1920s and 30s, The Art Pavements & Decorations and Diespeker & Co. stood out in the London mosaic and terrazzo market. The works manager of the former was Federico Pietro D'Agnolo, a mosaic worker from Fanna, who in 1923 was sent by his firm to Shanghai to execute mosaic panels in the neoclassical buildings of the

Hong Kong and Shanghai Banks (*Guida Generale degli Italiani in Gran Bretagna* 1939). Diespeker & Co., with branches in Birmingham, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast, was owned by the holding company Hollybush Trust Ltd. In 1924, the Trust put Joseph Mazzioli, Pietro's son who was born in London in 1891, in charge of Diespeker. Joseph became the works manager and shortly afterwards, by the beginning of the 1930s, the company had grown from around 25 employees in 1924 to over 400, most of whom were Friulian terrazzo workers (Figures 5 and 6). (Diespeker & Co. Ltd. 1931: 1).³²

In the 1930s, at least 600 Friulian terrazzo and marble mosaic workers were operating in London. Indeed, during the interwar period, the demand for specialised workers in the fast-expanding mosaic and terrazzo sector was not being satisfied by the local workforce. The restrictions on immigration adopted by the British government for certain groups of skilled foreign workers sparked protests from architects and construction company owners. In 1927, an article in the *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione* quoted the *Architect's Journal*, which pointed out the damage that such barriers had inflicted on the sector, particularly in the 'art of mosaics', which had almost 'disappeared in England because of a lack of Italian workers, who know the secret to this art'.³³ Following these heated protests, the Ministry for Employment agreed to allow a contingent of Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers to enter the UK on the condition that each of them taught their trade to an English apprentice. A large number of Friulian terrazzo workers therefore arrived in England between 1928 and 1930. The *Architect's Journal* stated that 'if this absurd system of restrictions had been in place in the past, England, which in all areas has drawn on the talent and initiative of Italians and other foreigners, would today still be in the Stone Age'.³⁴

Notes

1. This paper contains similar material by the same author previously published in *The Friulian Language: Identity, Migration, Culture*, R. Mucignat (ed.), 2014. Published with permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

2. The records of Italian mutual societies in London, such as the Mazzini Garibaldi Club (formerly The Society for the Progress of the Italian Working Classes in London) and Fratellanza Italiana Marconi Rossetti, are preserved at the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre. They are a very fruitful source when tracing names, places of origin and occupations of Italians who resided in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
3. The Population Register (Anagrafe) in the town of Sequals initially registered the surname as Mazziol, and later as Mazzioli to refer to the same family.
4. J. Mazzioli, *A Brief History of the Mosaic and Terrazzo Industry in the UK*, unpublished manuscript (n.d.).
5. 'Mariegiola de terrazzeri', c.1586. Museo Correr (Venice), MS Cl. IV 223 (13 September 1586).
6. After he relinquished responsibility for running the London branch of the *Entreprise Générale de Dallages en Mosaïque Vénitienne et Romaine Mazzioli et Del Turco*.
7. In addition, Gian Domenico Facchina's Parisian firm was placed in charge of the mosaics on the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London, designed by Sir William Richmond. See the speech delivered by the lawyer Fabio Mora, recorded in the 1906 memorial book *Sequals in Memoria di Gian Domenico Facchina*, Spilimbergo, Tipografia Menini, p. 12.
8. G. Borsato (before 1842), *Costruzione dei Terrazzi*, Royal Institute of British Architects, MS. SP/1/8/1, papers read at the general meeting, 1835–1858.
9. The Manchester Town Hall contains one of the most impressive marble mosaic floors in the UK, undertaken by 'Venetian craftsmen' according to Catherine Dewar, *Historic England*, in *Our Town Hall Project* video transcript: http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/500323/town_hall/7563/our_town_hall_project_video_transcript (accessed 26 September 2019). Referring to this remarkable artwork Henry Reid wrote that it 'may be considered one of the largest, the extent of corridors amounting to a total surface of some hundreds of square yards, at a high cost which indicates to a certain extent its superiority over the best mosaic tiles which could have been laid at half the price'. Reid seemed to be unaware of the use of the 'indirect method' in the marble mosaic industry: 'Such a pavement or flooring laid in the monolithic form as usually adopted, involves great delay in execution, owing to the necessity of putting each small piece in its place by hand while the operator is on his knees' (Reid 1879: 274).
10. At the beginning of the twentieth century Giovanni Mariutto became the sole owner of the firm Diespeker & Co.
11. *The Business Directory of London and Provincial and Foreign Trade Guide* 1884, London, J.S.C. Morris, pp. 105, 581, 744.

12. Joseph Francis Ebner was listed in *The Post Office London Trades and Professional Directory* for 1882 as a member of the London Hungarian Association. On Ebner see the company profile in *1914 Who's Who in Business* quoted in *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History*: https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/1914_Who's_Who_in_Business:_Company_E (accessed 26 September 2019). Clerkenwell hosted a large Italian community bonded together by St Peter's Italian Church (Besagni 2011: 12–14).
13. See <https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/File:Im1882POLon-Ebner.jpg> (accessed 20 September 2019).
14. All translations by the author.
15. In a series of articles dedicated to the street life of the London poor, the radical journalist Adolphe Smith and the photographer John Thomson highlighted the phenomenon of the (Italian) 'Halfpenny Ices' and the 'Italian Street Musicians': see Smith and Thomson 1877: 53–5, 85–8. For a comprehensive analysis of Italian migration to Britain and its perception in the nineteenth century see the detailed study by Sponza 1988.
16. On figures relating to the Italian population, occupations, residential patterns, sanitary conditions and relationships with English residents of Finsbury see George Newman's evidence in the 1903 *Report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration with Minutes of Evidence*, 2, London, Darling & Son, pp. 421–5. The report also includes evidence from the Rev. E. Canney, rector of St Peter's in Saffron Hill (Holborn), who pointed out that in the Saffron Hill area 'They [Italians] are all trades. There are a few skilled men who do mosaic work; picture frame and looking glass making, plaster work for ceilings, inlaid wood work, barometer and other scientific instrument making, but for the most part they are sellers in the streets, and people who go about with organs' (p. 429).
17. On Osvaldo Toffolo's entrepreneurial experience see 'Exploring Hull's Italian links through new Old Town exhibition', *HullLive*: <https://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/exploring-hulls-italian-links-through-1254799> (accessed 26 September 2019)
18. Remarkably, studies on Italian entrepreneurial experience in the UK are scarce and intermittent but for an example, see Palmer 1984. Palmer defines the term 'Britalian' as all persons of Italian origin in Britain who are not fully assimilated. See also Mars and Ward 1984 for a valuable account of ethnic business in Britain.
19. Granolithic flooring is made of cement and fine aggregate such as granite or other hard-wearing rocks. The term was particularly common in Australia to refer to terrazzo flooring, whereas the use of the word terrazzo was widespread in the UK.
20. Interview (by the author) with Dominic (Dom) John De Marco, Melbourne, 21 October 2014 (Pfeiffer-Hunt 2012).
21. According to Charles Booth, 'Among asphalte workers are a number of Italians, though it seems not so large a proportion as personal observation would lead one to suppose; the total number of them is said to be only from 10 to 15 per cent, of the men engaged in the work. It is only the actual work of laying the powder which is performed by Italians; the Englishman apparently cannot be induced to undertake this work, alleging, no doubt truthfully, that the heat brings the skin off his feet. We are assured, however, that the feet soon get hardened, and that it is the conservatism of the English working man which prevents him from trying this work. The Italians, however, are said to be extraordinarily willing and industrious, and so keen to increase their earnings that on Sunday many of them employ themselves in selling ice cream' (Booth 1903: 35).
22. This situation recurred between the two World Wars, when terrazzo craftsmen were predominantly Friulian, and polishers came from Parma and Piacenza: see Grossutti 2014: 117.
23. For the progress made by mosaic workers thanks to the actions of the Mosaic Workers' Society see Grossutti 2014: 111–14.
24. English girls were also engaged in the 'indirect method' adopted in the ceramic mosaic industry: see Furnival 1904: 542.
25. As described, for example, by Joseph Mazzioli in his unpublished memoir (cited in note 4).
26. In an advertisement, Mainzer & Co. Ltd. (formerly Mainzer & Kempthorne), which executed marble mosaic pavements for public buildings and churches, pointed out that the firm's staff of skilled mosaic workers laid marble *terrazzo* pavements as well: *Academy Architecture and Architectural Review*, 1899, 15: 153.
27. *Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers* 55(1): 500–501.
28. *The Royal Institute for British Architects Kalendar* 46.
29. *Post Office London Trades and Professional Directory*, part 2. London: Kelly's Directories Ltd., p. 1715.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *The Eagle* 43: 55.
32. P. Mazzioli, *History of Diespeker & Co. Ltd. at 38 Graham Street London*, unpublished manuscript (n.d.).
33. 'Emigrazione "intellettuale"', *Bollettino dell' Emigrazione* 10: 1555–62, p. 1561.
34. *Ibid.*

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