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ITALIAN-CANADIAN ARTISTS LUIGI NASATO AND GIOVANNI GEROMETTA AND THE INDIGENOUS IMAGES IN THEIR MOSAIC MURALS

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Summary: In addition to presenting a general appreciation of the lives and artistic contributions of Luigi Nasato and Giovanni Gerometta, this article, which is based on live interviews, photographic and written documents, and the artists' sketches and maquettes, discusses four original mosaic murals designed and executed by the two Italian Canadians in the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s for public buildings in Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec City. The works treat themes of Indigenous life, multiculturalism, communication, and marine transportation. All depict Indigenous figures and demonstrate how the traditional art form of mosaic became a vehicle for Canadian content, even if no profound knowledge of Native Canadians or their culture is demonstrated or could have been, given the political and social landscape of Canada then and even now.

The ancient art of mosaic is generally associated with other parts of the world, perhaps most notably the Italian cities of Ravenna, Venice, and Aquileia. In Canada, too, many admirable mosaics are to be found, not only in the intricately patterned marble flooring that graces early twentieth-century buildings across the country, but also in artistic murals, usually made of vitreous smalti tesserae and often integrated into architectural structures, both public and private, secular and religious. My research to date¹ has identified approximately 200 such mosaic artworks. Sadly, not all have survived. But even those that have fallen to the blows of sledgehammers are often still known to us through photographs and other forms of documentation, such as the artists' drawings.

¹ My publications on mosaics in Canada include the following comprehensive studies, almost all accompanied by colour reproductions of some of the artworks described: "Il contributo," "Beautifying the City," "From Friuli," and "The Contribution." Other articles on specific works are cited below.

The first period to witness the production of fine artistic mosaic murals in Canada and by Canadians, chiefly Italian Canadians, was the 1930s, when the Connolly Marble, Mosaic & Tile Company of Toronto, employing Italian-Canadian workers, several of whom were soon to become partners and eventually owners of the firm, decorated the vaulted ceiling in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto.² A particularly prolific period for mosaic artwork ensued in the 1960s, when Catholic churches were being restructured after Vatican Council II, and when the arrival of a fresh cohort of artisans from Italy after the Second World War made it once again a viable business operation.³ At this time, the Connolly Company – now run by the De Carli family, principally brothers Remo and Olvino, and also Antonio – established the Conn-Arts Studio subsidiary specializing in artistic mosaics. The Studio was responsible for approximately thirty-five large mosaic artwork projects prepared for sites in Ontario, Alberta, and elsewhere in English-speaking Canada, right up to the mid-1980s when operations ceased. In Quebec, the enormous mosaic project in the Basilica of Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré was first assigned to a mosaicist from the Friuli region, beginning in 1939 and elaborated by him for another four decades. Generally speaking, over the past forty years since the 1980s, the few Italian-Canadian mosaicists who have managed to continue working in the field, including the two artists featured here, one in Ontario, the other in Quebec, tended to work independently as freelancers, receiving occasional commissions for murals. Happily, the Ontario-based artist continued to work in the field until his death in 2014, and his Quebec-based counterpart has remained active to this day.

Having brought their more classical and traditional Italian training in art and mosaics with them to Canada, Italian-Canadian artisans made the production of mosaics possible, generally using the reverse method.⁴ But their skills were also applied more widely as they adapted to the new Canadian environment. In spite of the obstacles encountered, such as the short-lived

² My articles on the ROM mosaic – namely, “The Mosaic Ceiling” and “Unity in Diversity” – include information on the companies responsible for executing this and other mosaic artwork in the first half of the twentieth century. Important research on the entrepreneurship of Italian mosaic and terrazzo craftsmen in North America is being carried out by Dr. Javier P. Grossutti of the University of Padova. See Grossutti, “From Guild Artisans to Entrepreneurs.”

³ See Pugliese, “Beautifying the City.”

⁴ Mosaic techniques are described in the manual by Farneti, *Glossario tecnico-storico del mosaico*.

nature of full-time work in the field after their arrival, when opportunity did arise for the fortunate among them to receive commissions for mosaics, and even when they were assigned conventional themes – in churches, for example – they were often granted considerable freedom to innovate. This extended from the adoption of more modern styles of design and novel techniques of execution, such as the use of rustic textured surfaces, to the introduction of previously unheard-of subjects, as exemplified by themes treated in mosaic by our two artists in some of their works – namely, the production of pasta and the production of maple syrup. The unique artworks they often fashioned include the murals being analyzed here.

Of the approximately 200 known mosaic artworks scattered across Canada, four, all to be found in public buildings, may be singled out as displaying Indigenous elements.⁵ Albeit few in number, they still serve to illustrate how the traditional medium became a vehicle for Canadian content, even if, as must be acknowledged, no particularly profound knowledge of Native culture is demonstrated or could have been, given the political and social landscape of Canada then and even now. These four murals, all quite original, were designed and executed by the two Italian Canadians presented here, who began as employees of various companies, large and small, and eventually became independent artists.

Before discussing the two artists and their works – especially the murals treating Indigenous themes – it must be noted that mosaic artwork is frequently the result of a collaborative effort involving many parties: first, an individual, company, or institution commissioning the work; then, an art director who oversees the project for a company or a priest for his church; the artist who actually designs the piece, prepares the sketches and colour maquette, and usually the full-size cartoons, too; the artisans who devise the

⁵ The ROM ceiling has not been included in this discussion. The representation of the cultures of the world includes a symbol of North American Indigenous culture, but it is not specifically Canadian. It was executed by Italian Canadian mosaicists, as has been demonstrated, and is believed to have been designed by the first museum director, Charles Trick Currelly (see articles cited above). Similarly, a figure carrying a rifle and wearing a fringed suede jacket in the centennial fountain mural in Prince George, British Columbia, is not necessarily identifiable as an Indigenous figure. The work was executed by Italian-Canadian mosaic worker Gino Lenarduzzi (Domanins, Pordenone, 1914–Squamish, BC, 2003) and was designed by Canadian artists Gwen Boyle and Naomi Patterson. See the brief description and photo in “Il contributo,” 159, 163; “From Friuli,” 39; and “The Contribution,” 136.

means to execute the design by selecting and hand-cutting the tesserae to achieve the best effects offered by the destined site and the lighting at that location; and eventually, the installers tasked with affixing the segments to the wall, especially if they have been prepared off-site in a studio using the reverse method. In cases where an independent artist rather than a company designer also has the role of executing the work as mosaicist and even installing it on site, a signature might appear in the mural itself and authorship is thus acknowledged. Where a group of individuals with different roles, rather than a solo artist-mosaicist, is involved and no signature appears, there can be uncertainty as to the correct attributions. It is fortunate that, in many instances, as exemplified by the murals discussed here, substantial documentation is available. The original designs – from the pencil sketches to the preparatory colour maquettes – have been preserved and, together with other materials and evidence such as photographs, live interviews, and written documents, they enable researchers to verify the facts and determine the contribution of each collaborator, at times calling for erroneous information previously circulated to be revised.

Only one mural listed below, the earliest, deals with Indigenous themes in a relatively elaborate and focused fashion, whereas the other three present Indigenous figures in a more marginal way. All four were intended to decorate architectural structures, namely a hospital, two commercial buildings, and a church, and are located in Edmonton, Montreal, Quebec City, and Toronto, respectively. All date from the 1960s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, with the first and the fourth in the list – that is, the earliest and the most recent – by Luigi Nasato, and the second and third by Giovanni Gerometta. Both artists came to Canada from Italy as adults. Nasato had studied at an art institute in Venice, while Gerometta studied at the school of mosaics in Spilimbergo in the Friuli region and later in Quebec. Their works being analyzed here are the following:

1. The mid-1960s mural in the entrance to the Charles Camshell Hospital in Edmonton, now being converted into a residential condominium. The original design, by Luigi Nasato, was modified by art director Alexander von Svoboda, and then executed by Nasato and fellow mosaic workers at the Conn-Arts Studio.
2. The mural titled *Communication interstellaire* (1987) in the lobby of the Téléport, now the CTV building in Montreal.

Designed and executed by Giovanni Gerometta, the mural is no longer to be found, having been covered over or completely destroyed.

3. The mural titled *Synergie portuaire* in the Customs House of the Port of Quebec, Quebec City (1989), both designed and executed by Giovanni Gerometta.
4. The mural depicting the procession toward the statue of Mary, Mother of the Church, in St. John Bosco Roman Catholic Church, Toronto (completed in 1999). It was designed by Luigi Nasato and executed by him together with mosaicist Mario Della Rossa.

The four mosaic murals being examined here for their Indigenous content are by two Italian-Canadian mosaic artists who both designed and contributed to, or were even solely responsible for, the execution of the works. This article aims not only to discuss the murals but also to highlight the overall experience and contribution made by the two artists, who deserve more recognition than has been accorded them to date.

The Artists and Their Murals

Luigi Nasato (Istrana, Treviso, 1924–Toronto 2014)

Luigi Nasato (fig. 1)⁶ was born in 1924 in the town of Istrana, Treviso, in the Veneto region of Italy. His love of art earned him the nickname *penei* (or, in standard Italian, *pennelli*, that is, “paintbrushes”) among his fellow townsmen, perhaps because he was always seen painting wherever he could find a suitable surface. His family recognized his artistic vocation early on but, given their limited resources, had to make considerable sacrifices in order for him to be able to further his education. Luigi attended the State Institute of Art (*Istituto d’Arte Governativo con Magistero Professionale*) in Venice where, after an unavoidable interruption in his studies during the war years, he received his teaching diploma in 1948 with a concentration in painting and the decorative arts. Two academic papers written by him during his student years

⁶ Many tributes to Nasato were published by Riccardo Masini in the artist’s native region late in his career and also at the time of his death: e.g., Masini, *Istrana*, 558–562, 715, 746–747; “Luigi Nasato: artista nel mondo”; and “Ci ha lasciato.”

remain among his papers.⁷ They are indicative of his formal preparation and early interests. The thesis he submitted for his Venetian diploma dealt with late mediaeval architectural frescoes, and an earlier brief essay from 1946 treated the classical spirit of early Renaissance architecture.⁸

As for his own artistic output, in his early years in Italy, Luigi sketched portraits of some family members. Often lacking appropriate materials, he notoriously also resorted to drawing on the walls of his father's barn. Quite admirably committed to the artistic heritage of his hometown, he completed the installation of Istrana's monument to fallen soldiers and painted a fresco on it. Furthermore, he drew up accurate studies on the artistic contents and neglected structure of the local eighteenth-century Villa Lattes, now a museum. For the rest of his life, even after leaving Italy for faraway destinations, he not only felt great nostalgia for his place of birth (asking relatives to let him and his wife hear the ringing of the church bells in the town during their holiday telephone calls, for instance) but also continued to express deep concern for the conservation of the works of art and architecture located there. On his return trips to his hometown, he would visit the artistic sites – namely, the church and villa – and then notify local authorities as to the repairs required. Among his papers, there is a draft of one report on the state of disrepair (“stato di degrado”) of the Oratorio or Chiesetta di S. Elisabetta. After Nasato decried the neglect that he had observed and denounced the botched attempts at repair by persons he deemed “destructive unskilled workers” (“mestieranti rovinatutto”), the Chapel of St. Elizabeth was actually restored through the mediation of his hometown friend, the journalist Riccardo Masini, with whom Luigi kept up regular postal correspondence for years. The 2007 report addressed to Masini displays what a knowledgeable artist he was: he describes each element and identifies the style of the work in question, names the artist to whom it was attributed, and points out details of the damage caused by humidity, and the type and extent of restoration required. He also sent to the same addressee a list and some photographs of works of art that he had seen

⁷ Nasato's rich collection of personal papers was consulted while they were still in the possession of the artist and, more thoroughly, after his death, when the papers were administered by family members, most notably daughters Silvia Nasato Eisner and Rosalba Nasato Stragier, to whom sincere thanks are extended for their invaluable collaboration. Copies of many papers and photographs are in a private collection.

⁸ These two academic papers bear the following titles: “Le facciate dipinte di Treviso del XII secolo. Origine della decorazione a fasce e a finte tappezzerie” (1948) and “Lo spirito dell'architettura del '400 nei suoi rapporti con l'arte classica” (1946).

in Villa Lattes during his 1950 visit and that had since vanished from the site. The draft of his letter, dated 13 April 2007, refers to the unidentified “vandals” (“vandali”) likely responsible for the disappearance of the paintings.

In the year 2000, Nasato made a major personal contribution to the artistic patrimony of his town when he restored and added mosaic decoration to the monument to fallen soldiers.⁹ The pertinent documents that he kept about this project show how the mosaic was prepared in Canada using the indirect reverse method and shipped to Italy, where it was installed over the fresco he had painted on the monument fifty years earlier. This is a rather unusual transaction, given that ordinarily this sort of international collaboration moved in the opposite direction: mosaic works were generally prepared in Italy and shipped to locations in Canada,¹⁰ not from Canada to Italy, as in this case.

Of course, the greater part of Nasato’s life was spent abroad, not in Italy. After graduating from the Art Institute in the city of Venice in the post-war period, and after working for a brief period as a designer in the nearby Felix ceramics factory in Fossalunga, just 4.4 kilometres from Istrana, at the age of twenty-seven he felt compelled to emigrate, hoping to be able to earn a livelihood as an artist elsewhere. He left Italy for South America on 24 July 1951 on the steamship *Giovanna Costa*, arriving in Argentina on 20 August. After working in a ceramics factory in Buenos Aires for a few years (1951–54), he established the Ceramica Hanacoer company in partnership with three colleagues.¹¹ It proved to be a short-lived and unprofitable enterprise, however, operating only from 1954 to 1959. Some ceramic items produced then have been preserved by the family.

Luigi married his hometown sweetheart Elena Fantin by proxy in July of 1954. Shortly thereafter, in January 1955, she joined him in Argentina, where their first daughter Silvia was born in 1957. With his family, Luigi decided to migrate once again to seek a better life, this time to Canada, where he arrived on 22 November 1959, settling in Toronto. Here he was to be greatly affected for most of his working life by the anxiety of uncertainty resulting from the

⁹ The work is announced in several articles published in Italy: Riccardo M[asini], “Monumento ai caduti” and “Monumento ai caduti rifatto.”

¹⁰ For example, mosaic replicas of sections of the famous Aquileia flooring can be found in Vancouver City Hall, and of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in a Toronto church. They are documented in Pugliese, “Il contributo,” 163 and 139, respectively.

¹¹ “Hanacoer” is an anagram based on the first letters of the surnames of the four partners, the second syllable, “na,” representing Nasato.

need to change jobs frequently. In some notes, written later in life as he prepared to tell his personal story, he describes his work experience as hard, precarious, and requiring him to leave family and his beloved homeland and literally “jump” from one place to another.¹² Commenting on the difficulties of immigration, at the end of a draft of a letter addressed to the Chamber of Commerce of Treviso in the mid-1990s, Nasato cites from memory, and with slight negligible inaccuracies, Dante’s famous verses describing the bitter experience of exile: “come sa di sale / lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle / lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale” (*Paradiso* 17:58–60) (“how savoureth of salt / The bread of others, and how hard a road / The going down and up another’s stairs,” in Longfellow’s translation). The final version of his letter to the Camera di Commercio, a copy of which was obtained in early 2003 from the receiving office in Treviso by then research assistant Cindy Mark, was dated 6 July 1995. Written from Istrana during a visit there, when he was without all his notes and data, the letter ends with an abbreviated form of the quotation but is followed by a more positive reflection, also found in the draft, to the effect that the quotation from Dante describes every migrant’s experience, “with all its twists and turns, sacrifices borne in order to bring our [i.e. Italian] culture and contribute to the growth of the young nations that have welcomed us [in his case, Argentina and Canada].”¹³ His concern for social issues, such as the plight of immigrants like himself, is reflected in the fact that he kept in his private collection a number of clippings from the *Corriere canadese* newspaper about Italians in Canada, as well as items from other publications dealing with immigration to Australia and the myth of America.¹⁴

The details of Nasato’s numerous places of employment in Canada are known to us¹⁵ not only through personal interviews – conducted on several

¹² “Lavoro duro e spesso precario, vita di sacrifici e di solitudine lontano dalla famiglia e dalla realtà amata della proprio terra. / Sono saltatore [sic] da un lavoro all’altro.” Copies of his notes cited here and throughout this article are in a private collection. Here and henceforth, all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹³ “con tutte le sue pieghe e risvolti, i sacrifici sostenuti per portare la nostra cultura e fare grandi le giovani nazioni che ci hanno accolto.”

¹⁴ Nasato’s interest in current affairs is demonstrated by the fact that, in one draft, he refers to the complexity and corruption of Italian politics and quotes the poet-philosopher Leopardi. In another, dated May 1981, he comments on inflation and the cost of living.

¹⁵ Information on Nasato has been gathered mainly from several interviews with him (the first in 2002) and from the documents in his collection that were consulted more recently, including not only the written autobiographical profile that he prepared in 1995,

occasions by myself and in the company of colleague Dr. Angelo Principe and, later, with research assistant Cindy Mark¹⁶ – but also by his own writing. On two separate occasions, when he was nominated for awards in his hometown and home province in Italy, Nasato was asked to submit documentation to Riccardo Masini, his supporter in Istrana. In spite of some initial reluctance stemming from his natural modesty (he claimed that his works speak for themselves), and after some urging from his family, as he states in the 8 November 1995 draft, he did pen an official biographical account of his work experience and also several lists of his employers, even including the hourly or weekly pay he received from them. This included a catalogue and some photographs of his contribution to an impressive number of mosaic murals and other artistic works prepared for churches and public buildings from the 1960s onward. One list was addressed to the Chamber of Commerce of Treviso for the award in recognition of his accomplishments in Canada and Argentina (“Fedeltà al Lavoro e [...] Progresso Economico”). More details and some photographs of his accomplishments were collected and submitted to Masini later in 2007, and again for an exhibition of his works held in his hometown in 2013, and finally for the 2014 award from the Veneto Region for persons originally from the area who distinguished themselves abroad (“Regione del Veneto Premio Eccellenze Venete nel Mondo”). Unable at this point in his life to attend the ceremony in person, he appointed Angelo Fantin, his brother-in-law in Istrana, to receive the award for him.

After Nasato’s death late that same year, the trunk that he had taken with him when he first left his hometown was returned to Istrana. He had

in connection with an award he was to receive from the Camera di Commercio of Treviso, but also the album (with commentary) titled *In Loving Memory of Luigi Eugenio Nasato, November 20, 1924–December 18, 2014*, prepared after the artist’s death by daughter Silvia Nasato Eisner in September 2020. The latter “photobook,” as she terms it, constitutes a very useful source of information and features photos illustrating Nasato’s personal and professional life and works – something that the artist himself had planned, as an undated draft of a letter of his to Masini indicates, but that he had never managed to complete. It includes photographs of Nasato’s early works produced in Italy (mainly family portraits), along with some sketches from the first years of emigration he spent in Argentina. The photobook consists of 102 unnumbered pages plus three pages of inserts (62a, 62b, 62c); however, for the references made to it here, numbers – beginning with the title page – have been added and are given in parentheses in the body of the text.

¹⁶ A recording is available of the interview he granted to colleague Dr. Angelo Principe and me on 3 December 2002. Another of my several visits to him took place, in the company of research assistant Cindy Mark, on 24 July 2003.

restored it and decorated it with the coats of arms of Treviso. In it were his paintbrushes and some of the tubes of paint leftover from his active days. Emblematic of the life and contribution of this artist, known as *penei*, who had emigrated from the town, the *baule* (trunk) is now a museum piece preserved quite appropriately in Villa Lattes, which was the architectural jewel of the area¹⁷ and the focus of much of Luigi's loving attention as an art connoisseur and art restorer.

The Nasato Papers (York University Archive)

Except for the trunk, which was returned to its point of departure in Italy, all Nasato's documents have been gathered by his daughters, Silvia Nasato Eisner and Rosalba Nasato Stragier, and donated to the Clara Thomas Archives at York University, where they constitute the Fonds F 0675. A 179-page inventory of the collection is available on the archive's website.

The Nasato Fonds consist of a wealth of hand-written, type-written, printed, artistic, and photographic materials, including his thesis, the brief academic papers mentioned above, and drafts (often multiple) of his personal correspondence and of his autobiographical accounts, together with original pencil sketches of some of the artworks he designed, colour maquettes for some of his mosaics, original paintings and reproductions, and photographs of some of his own works, as well as mosaics by other artists in Canada, the United States, and Italy (e.g., the mosaics in the Basilica of Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec by fellow Italian Canadian Walter Del Mistro [Maniago, Pordenone, 1912–Quebec City 2003], photographed by Nasato in 1997, as his annotation on the reverse of the photographs indicates). The collection even includes invoices for the purchase of materials for various mosaic projects from the well-known suppliers Mario Donà of Spilimbergo and Angelo Orsoni of Venice.

Not all the early sketches and preparatory work for Nasato's artistic works (which covered various genres including painting, ceramics, and mosaics) are to be found in the York University archive, because, as he stated himself – in a letter to Riccardo Masini date 19 March 2012, preserved in Masini's private collection¹⁸ – often the maquettes for mosaics were kept by

¹⁷ Masini, "Una storia in un baule." A photo of the trunk is included in daughter Silvia's photobook (101).

¹⁸ Thanks go to Riccardo Masini for providing copies of the Nasato letters currently in his possession.

the companies that employed him and were eventually discarded. Referring to the works that he had personally executed, he comments as follows: “The designs have probably been lost.”¹⁹ However, some of the drawings that Nasato did manage to keep and that are now housed in the York University archive have been most useful in efforts to prove his authorship of works that were completed but never attributed publicly to him. On page 35 of the “photobook” that she prepared in 2020 to document her father’s life story, daughter Silvia laments the fact that Nasato did not receive credit for works he designed for companies, which he would certainly not have been allowed to sign. Recently, she was able to identify a mosaic portrait of Pope Paul VI, now held by the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, as an artifact designed by Luigi when he was in the employ of Conn-Arts Studio.²⁰

An explanation for the work’s current home in the archdiocese may be related to the fate of another religious mosaic emanating from the Connolly Company – that is, the portrait of St. John the Baptist. Designed, as we now know, by a fellow worker at Connolly – namely, Luigi Olerni (born in Sesto al Reghena, Pordenone, in 1935 and still a resident of the town), who still has in his possession in Italy the original colour sketch that he had prepared years ago in Toronto – it was originally commissioned and kept by Remo De Carli, the company president. In fact, this image of St. John the Baptist had served as the logo of the company and Remo had had his official portrait taken by the famous photographer Cavouk holding the very same mosaic portrait.²¹ Several years ago, a then surviving De Carli family member (more precisely, Mary, widow of Olvino De Carli and sister-in-law of the late Remo De Carli) donated this mosaic to what was then the more broadly multicultural Museum of Civilization (now the Museum of History) in Ottawa. At the height of the Connolly Company in the 1960s, Remo, the eldest De Carli brother and head of the company, enjoyed close ties with influential members of the Church hierarchy. It is reasonable to assume that, in addition to encouraging the installation of mosaic artwork in the churches, he would also have commissioned from one of his employees, in this case Nasato, a portrait of Paul VI, who was pope at the time (1963 to 1978). It is most probable that, when the company finally ceased operations in the 1980s after Remo’s untimely death in 1972, the papal mosaic portrait prepared by Nasato, and now finally identified by his daughter, was donated to the Church.

¹⁹ “I disegni si possono considerare dispersi.”

²⁰ The identification is announced in an archdiocese blog, “Record of the Week.”

²¹ The photograph by Onnig Cavoukian is held in a private collection.

Employment and Some Artistic Works

On the basis of materials in the Nasato collection, now housed in the York University archive (and on copies of some of those materials held in a private collection), it is possible to retrace Nasato's artistic journey with considerable certainty. In spite of some slight variations, the lists of places of employment indicate that in Canada he first worked for a few brief months in 1959–60 as a mosaicist for Egidio De Spirt's Italian Mosaic and Marble Company. Subsequently, as designing artist for Conn-Arts Studio (1960–65) and one of its mosaic craftsmen during the period when the Connolly Company enjoyed remarkable success, he was responsible for important works such as a portion of the mosaics for the church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Toronto, after the departure of the original artist Vittorio Corsaletti (Fano, Pesaro-Urbino, 1924–2012).²² For the same company, and drawing inspiration from the famous mosaics in Ravenna, Nasato designed the jewelled cross and blue starred panels behind the altar of St. Anne's Anglican Church,²³ as well as a delightful large mural (6.1 by 2.4 metres in size) that hangs in an industrial building, originally the headquarters of the ROMI pasta factory in the North York district of Toronto, depicting various stages of the production of pasta, to mention just two of his outstanding works.²⁴

After leaving Conn-Arts, Nasato found employment for a few years with De Montfort Studios (1966–69), a company run by Joseph Cushing, who had previously been the sales representative for the Connolly Company before Alexander von Svoboda was appointed Conn-Arts art director. For De Montfort, which received contracts to modify the interior structure of Catholic churches after Vatican Council II, Nasato designed altars and painted and restored statues and stations of the cross in religious and other institutions

²² On Corsaletti, see Pugliese, "Beautifying the City," 96–100.

²³ Dendy and Kilbourn mention the "marvelous" blue and gold colours of the mosaics installed in St. Anne's Anglican Church during the 1960 renovation in *Toronto Observed*, 189. The mosaic work was later completed by von Svoboda, who is believed to have varied the thickness of the tesserae in order to render it less smooth and traditional and to give it a more rustic and lively appearance. The mosaic is mentioned briefly in my previous articles, including "Il contributo," 142. Cindy Mark's later assessment of the Ravenna-inspired mosaics in St. Anne's Anglican Church has proven most helpful, as have the photographs she provided.

²⁴ A detailed analysis of the ROMI mural is included in Pugliese, "Beautifying the City," 107–108, with reproductions on page 102. Unfortunately, it has been painted over by the current owner of the building.

throughout Ontario, carrying out similar work in the United States, too. During the academic year 1968–69, he enrolled in an evening course on architecture and building construction at Central Technical School in Toronto and won a prize “for his academic performance,” as daughter Silvia reports (photobook, 29). The course was to serve him well on the occasions when he was asked to carry out tasks involving not only individual art pieces and decoration but also architectural structures. From 1969 to 1974, the aerospace manufacturer McDonnell Douglas Canada Ltd. employed Nasato as an illustrator. One of his interesting designs from this period, preserved in his files and dated 1970, features the tools of the artist, namely an easel and paint brushes, drawn in modernist style (photobook, 37). In 1974, he was hired for a few brief months as a commercial artist for the provincial Ministries of Transportation and Communications where, unfortunately, as daughter Silvia recounted to me in a telephone call on 23 January 2015, and as is recorded in the photobook (37), he faced discrimination and derogatory name-calling for being Italian.

The last and perhaps happier stage of his official employment (1974–89), before his retirement at age 65 in 1989, was with four different companies, including Selfa Arts Studio, run by two friends Antonio Selva and Giovanni Fanton, who had contracts for work on private and public buildings as well as churches and who assigned to him ceramic decoration, among other tasks. By far the most felicitous, though, was the late period of his official pre-retirement working days, when he was employed as a creative artist for Classic Moulding Inc., a company that from 1981 to 1990 was to provide him with the opportunity to execute impressive restorative work on a major cultural venue in Toronto, as will be explained below.

For an extended period during his working life in Canada and continuing into retirement, Luigi also worked independently as a freelance designer of mosaics and restorer of works of art, including statues. He and mosaicist partner Mario Della Rossa (see information below) set up a small company called Lux Art Studio. Together, from 1984 until Nasato’s death, they worked part-time on some important projects. As indicated by financial records, such as the invoices kept by Nasato, they purchased mosaic tiles from Olvino De Carli in October 1985 after the closing of the Connolly Company and used these for their small independent jobs. In the fall of 2002, OMNI Television News presented a report, prepared by journalists Laura Albanese and Vincenzo Somma and titled “L’arte del mosaico a Toronto” (Mosaic Art in

Toronto), featuring Nasato and Della Rossa at the time when they were producing and installing mosaic flooring depicting the shepherd and his flock in St. Clare of Assisi Church in Woodbridge, an area to the north of Toronto that is home to a large population of Italian Canadians. It is the church in which his funeral was to take place just a few years later.

In late 2011 and early 2012, Nasato sent more photos of his religious works to Masini, who used them to prepare an exhibition in his hometown of Istrana in 2013. Surprised by the unexpected event, in a draft letter of 6 March 2013 addressed to the journalist, Nasato expresses his gratitude to his friend and also to Reverend Siro Zorzi, who granted permission for the exhibition to be held in the church. Modest about his production, Nasato had pointed out in a 19 March 2012 draft that the photos he was sending were generally of small works, that the colour reproduction was not necessarily good, and that he did not have photos of all that he had produced. Missing, most notably, were images of the large murals, for example. Not owning a camera at the time and not thinking it important, he had not photographed what he had designed for Conn-Arts Studio. He was, nevertheless, proud to be able to provide photos of his designs for the elaborate fresco and oil paintings of the twelve apostles (and other works) in St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church at 182 Sixth Street in west-end Toronto, work done either in 1963 – as he states in the draft of his autobiographical report, while still in the employ of Conn-Arts – or perhaps after beginning to work for De Montfort studios in 1965 – as the note in the photobook (36) indicates. Since the church is not mentioned in the official list of De Montfort projects found among his papers, one may even deduce that it was carried out independently.

It should be noted, nonetheless, that in spite of his modesty and seeming hesitancy to boast of his accomplishments, Luigi spoke of his current artistic projects in practically every one of the many letters he wrote to family and friends in Italy, even when the main topic being discussed was family matters. As the key statement in his 2014 *Toronto Star* obituary reads, “Luigi’s passion in life was his art.”²⁵ Indeed, he was to continue designing and executing mosaics practically to the very end of his life. Although some of these have been mentioned in my earlier articles and, in a few instances, even analyzed briefly, as in the case of the ROMI pasta production and St. John Bosco Church procession murals, my more recent consultation of his papers has made possible a much deeper understanding of the artist and his works.

²⁵ “Luigi Nasato [obituary],” GT 9.

A careful reading and collating of his autograph writings, which have been preserved in his personal collection, enable us now to deduce and reconstruct his ideas about art.

Nasato's Views on Art

It is significant that the photographic exhibition held in Nasato's hometown in 2013 was hosted in a church setting and focussed on his contribution to the field of sacred art.²⁶ A devout person throughout his life, Nasato speaks repeatedly of his strong Catholic faith. This is true of the autobiographical account he prepared in 1995 for the Treviso Chamber of Commerce, for example. He loved religious art in particular and, on his return trips to Italy, sought out artworks to view, especially those located in churches in the Italian cities and regions he visited, including Rome and the Veneto.²⁷ In addition to many books on art in general, and sacred art in particular, his personal collection²⁸ included religious pamphlets and newspaper clippings about several priests, more specifically those who had been involved either in promoting mosaics as onetime mosaicists themselves (as in the case of Reverend Mario De Giusti) or in commissioning them for their churches (as Reverend John Borean had done).²⁹ As for his own artistic activity in Canada, Nasato derived great satisfaction from collaborating on structural and decorative projects for churches, first with the Connolly firm and then with De Montfort Studios. For the latter he contributed beautiful designs and won praise from owner Joseph Cushing's daughter Kathy (Kathryn). In a letter of 2001, she addressed Nasato as follows: "You are, I think[,] a very humble Man. So I can and shall say it for You. You have made the world a far more beautiful place, Mr. Nasato, for having be[en] here."³⁰ After Cushing's death, Nasato's daughter Silvia wrote to Kathy on 21 March 2004, stressing the friendship between Joe and Luigi: "They shared with each other their fears and their hopes bonded by

²⁶ Masini, "Istrana, mostra fotografica."

²⁷ This information is included in the draft of a letter to a friend dated 12 December 2004.

²⁸ There is a photo of Nasato with his book collection on page 57 of the photobook.

²⁹ Information on Mario De Giusti (San Giovanni di Casarsa 1937–Toronto 2000) and Toronto-born Gian Lucio (John) Borean is included in Pugliese, "Il contributo." Their origin or background in Friuli may account in part for their attachment to the regional tradition of mosaic art.

³⁰ Punctuation and other revisions have been added to the original wording.

their history, their roles as spouses and parents and their *love of the art that defined their faith visually* [italics mine].” This well-crafted phrase in Silvia’s characterization captures Nasato’s deep-felt commitment to expressing his religious faith through art.

In fact, Nasato referred to his personal views on art, in quasi-theological terms, as “my artistic creed” (“il mio credo artistico”). The phrase occurs in at least two drafts of a letter/report on his own work addressed in November 1995 to Reverend Nazareno Coccia, who had commissioned Nasato and his partner to decorate the parish church of St. John Bosco, and had in all likelihood requested the protagonist’s written commentary on the artistic project, too. The text he was asked to write gave Nasato the opportunity to describe the mosaic panels he had designed for the church, including the third mural to be analyzed in this paper. From his self-commentary and other documents, including his autobiographical account, many details emerge regarding his ideas on art in general, on the mosaic medium in particular, and even on the professional experience of an Italian Canadian in the context of the art world in Canada.

Although, in his autobiographical report, Nasato claims to be “a mere artisan” (“un modesto artigiano”), on many occasions he speaks with great pride of the artwork he produced over thirty-five years. In connection with his employment with Conn-Art Studio as designer of many mosaic projects, and executor of the same with the assistance of the other mosaicists working for the firm, he comments in the same document on the versatility and adaptability required of artists who, as he points out, were regularly charged with producing designs in both traditional and modern styles, for different functions, and in diverse media. His explanation reads as follows: “When one works for an art studio here in Canada, one has to be well prepared in order to be able to produce decorative projects that are the most diverse and heterogeneous for churches, cemeteries, chapels, theatres, private and government buildings.”³¹ It is noteworthy that again, as he had done when decrying the precarious nature of his employment history, he goes on to describe having to “jump” from one style to another and from one medium to another, using a verb that perhaps suggests the challenges involved:

³¹ “Quando si lavora in uno studio d’arte qui in Canada bisogna essere preparati nell’ eseguire progetti decorativi i più diversi ed eterogenei per chiese-cimiteri-cappelle-teatri-edifici privati o governativi.”

One certainly had to *jump* [italics mine] from one style to another, from the Byzantine, so to speak, to the Egyptian, to the classical, Baroque, rococò, to the modern and abstract, according to the demands of the person commissioning the work. Then [one had to be prepared] if the work was in mosaic, oil, fresco or etching, or was for stained glass or for a marble or sand sculpture. One has to have an eclectic sensibility.³²

Among his papers is a file, which he had labelled “Disegni miei” (My designs), containing many sketches that illustrate how he personally had experimented with different styles. The variety of completed works in his repertory also testifies to his versatility and successful eclecticism. He produced excellent designs in more modern abstract styles for the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton/Burlington and for many churches including St. Wilfrid’s in Toronto, and yet he professed to be a classical artist and preferred representational realism. In the draft of the report addressed to Father Nazareno, he states that, for the Baptism of Christ mural, he adhered to “the realistic current” (“la linea realistica”), convinced as he was that it was “the only path leading to the *salvation* [italics mine] of painting in these times of confusion and the dismantling of the great tradition” (“l’unica strada che riconduca alla *salvezza* [italics mine] della pittura in questi tempi di confusione e di disfacimento della grande tradizione”).

As the wording of his statement demonstrates, his artistic approach, consisting of an inclination toward realism and a preference for figurative styles, is also formulated in quasi-religious terms and is directly connected to Christian teachings. In the observations that he recorded in another sheet of his notes, he states that “Art interprets truth” (“L’arte è l’interpretazione del vero”). “What the Gospel teaches with words, art announces to us and brings to life for us with colour” (“Ciò che il Vangelo ci dice con la parola, l’arte ce l’annuncia con i colori e ce lo rende presente”). The belief that realistic representational art conveys truth – that is, religious truth – is echoed in a second-hand report on Nasato’s ideas on art provided by Reverend Coccia himself in a letter, dated 22 November 1999, recommending Nasato to the Associazione

³² “Certo è che si doveva *saltare* [italics mine] da uno stile all’altro, dal bizantino per così dire, all’egiziano, al classico, al barocco, al rococò, al moderno, all’astratto, secondo le richieste del committente. Poi se il lavoro era a mosaico, a olio, ad affresco a graffito, o per una vetrata artistica o per una scultura in marmo o in sabbia. Bisogna avere una sensibilità eclettica.”

Trevisani nel Mondo for his award. The prelate cites what Nasato used to say in their live conversations: “Nature is still my teacher [...]; I adhere to the naturalist current” (“La Natura è ancora la maestra per me [...]; io mi attengo alla linea naturalista”). Father Nazareno expresses his approval for this approach, since, as he maintains, classical styles are more easily understood by the people and realistic expression in sacred art becomes a direct form of catechism for the faithful.

Father Nazareno also claimed that Nasato’s adherence to nature was in tune with the modern need to protect the environment. Indeed, many of Nasato’s works, such as his depiction of butterflies in watercolour and birds in ceramic, from the 1950s (photographs of them are reproduced in the photo-book, 18), illustrate his interest in the beautiful creatures living in the natural world. For him they were likely reflections of the divine.

While admiring Nasato’s adherence to realism and the natural in his mosaics, the pastor also recognized Nasato’s versatility and openness to new styles, pointing out the artist’s skill in adapting the values of classical art to modern times: “He softens the features of classical art and adapts them to the modern mode of thought” (“I valori dell’arte classica li ammorbidisce e li accosta alla mentalità moderna”). In a draft for his report to Father Nazareno, Nasato himself stated quite categorically that “tradition does not mean repetition but rather the continuity of development” (“Tradizione non significa ripetizione ma continuità di sviluppo”), a principle that he applied in his own work.

In his reference letter for Nasato, Father Nazareno, who had supervised him as he prepared the mosaic murals for his church, also paints a vivid picture of the artist at work. He notes what he had the opportunity to observe firsthand:

I watch the artist as he concentrates on the design: his fingers holding first the pencil and paintbrush and then the tesserae [...], which are carefully selected, polished or textured, seem to be playing on a keyboard of harmonies that penetrate the most intimate part of the spirit. The mosaics are a fascinating magic created by Nasato, a practising believer who makes no mystery of his religious convictions.³³

³³ “Osservo l’artista quando si concentra sul disegno: le dita sulla matita e sul pennello prima e poi sulle tesserae [...] pensate, levigate o sfumate, [...] sembrano come giocare

This verbal portrait provided by Father Nazareno reveals the high degree of care and deliberation with which Nasato designed and executed his works as he faced technical challenges and also took advantage of the vast possibilities presented by the mosaic medium. In a draft of a letter addressed to Domenico Nasato, president of the Associazione Trevisani nel Mondo, dated 22 November 1999, he includes a report on his important project for Father Nazareno's church. In it he speaks of the demands made on the mosaic artist, the first being the considerable amount of time and patience required, especially when the depiction of human figures is involved.³⁴

In the document about the St. John Bosco Church artwork, addressed directly to the parish priest, Nasato provides a basic definition of mosaic art and an explanation of its chief technical aspects:

Now, we ask ourselves, what is mosaic? Mosaic is a form of painting; one actually paints with stone rather than with oil or fresco; one plays with light and its refraction in the thousands of coloured tesserae tiles. It offers vast expressive possibilities and it is clearly understood that this art form is neither easy nor rapid, but how it is free, expressive and wonderfully "human" in its inevitable imperfections as it melds the ancient and the new. The mosaicists of the Byzantine period and then throughout the Middle Ages claimed to be humble reproducers on earth of the beauty of Heaven and it is with this spirit that they worked.³⁵

su una tastiera di armonie che penetrano nell'intimo dello spirito. È un incanto il fascino del mosaico del Nasato un credente e praticante che non fa mistero delle sue convinzioni religiose."

³⁴ The passage in the document reads: "As you know, mosaic work requires a great deal of time and patience" ("Come tu lo sai il lavoro del mosaico richiede molto tempo e pazienza"). In another version of the draft, he adds, "especially when figures are involved" ("specialmente quando si tratta di figure").

³⁵ "Ora chiedamoci, cos'è il mosaico? Il mosaico è pittura: si dipinge veramente con la pietra anziché con l'olio o l'affresco, si gioca con la luce ed il suo rifrangersi nelle mille tessere colorate. Offre delle eccezionali possibilità di espressione e si capisce come questa forma d'arte non sia né facile né veloce, ma come sia libera, espressiva, meravigliosamente 'Umana' nelle sue inevitabili imperfezioni nella sua fusione di antico e di nuovo. I mosaicisti del periodo bizantino e poi lungo tutto il medioevo si dicevano umili riproduttori in terra delle bellezze del Cielo e con questo spirito lavoravano."

Nasato opens this lengthy explanation with a simple but fundamental definition based on the material used in mosaic but then proceeds to highlight the possibilities that the art form offers through the free selection of a myriad of colours and the skillful utilization of light. In an earlier draft of his report, he also refers to the rustic technique, which he describes as the variation in height of the tesserae tiles designed to create an iridescent effect when the light shining on them is refracted, similar to water splashing against a rock. It was a technique, he explains, that he had adopted in a segment of the baptistery mural, combining it in other sections with more traditional stylistic elements. Emblematic of the variety found in humankind and the world, the effects created, he argues, will arouse emotions and have the desired instructional effect in the case of religious works.

Nasato's fundamentally religious view of the world and creation, reinforced by the commissions he frequently received to create works for religious institutions, may explain why several pages of his drafts focus on the requirements of sacred art in particular. He must have reflected at length upon the question of how to express spirituality visually. His statements on this topic are especially insightful: "The subject of sacred art is a delicate one, because it involves consideration not only of the function of art to express the mystery and experience of faith (a longstanding problem) but also awareness of the crisis of religion that permeates our culture today."³⁶ In Nasato's view, it is not a question of simply following tradition, or expressing one's personal religiosity. Sacred art must rather be updated by taking the specific context into account; it must "express, through the subjective experience of the artist, the community's experience of faith. This is also a cultural experience and a social experience of life in a global sense. It is a historical experience."³⁷ In this definition, one can see how, for this Italian-Canadian artist, the Canadian context inevitably becomes part of the artistic expression of religious sentiment. He claims to have sought to link art to the cult of the Virgin, "to give form to the community's and the generally ethnic experience of faith" ("dar forma all'esperienza comunitaria ed etnica di fede") – a statement that will be highly relevant for the second of his murals analyzed below.

³⁶ "Tema delicato quello dell'arte Sacra, perché impegna non solo sulla funzione dell'arte di esprimere il mistero e l'esperienza di fede (problema di sempre) ma anche sulla crisi del sacro che oggi attraversa la nostra cultura."

³⁷ "esprimere, mediante l'esperienza soggettiva dell'artista, l'esperienza comunitaria di fede. La quale è anche esperienza culturale e sociale esperienza di vita nel senso globale, esperienza storica."

Nasato was concerned about art criticism, too. His views are expounded at the end of a note about the nineteenth-century saint, Giovanni Bosco, and his revolutionary role in the Catholic Church – information that he must have researched for the project – when he formulates a statement, according to which, “Art uses the language of emotions” (“L’Arte ha per suo linguaggio quello appunto delle emozioni”). Believing that art arouses the intended emotions, and thus speaks for itself and is instructional, Nasato felt that there was no need for official critics and interpreters. In the document for Father Nazareno, he claims quite adamantly that “Art does not need many explanations; it has always spoken on its own. And so the painter, in order to determine the worth of his works on the aesthetic level, has one means only; namely to learn what the people think. And when I say people, I mean the humble folk, not the critics who are only too often hampered by prejudices etc etc.”³⁸ It seems the opinion and approval of the people was all that mattered to him.

In fact, the mosaics in St. John Bosco Church had met with the admiration of the visitors to the church and, in his self-assessment report on the project, Nasato stressed a final but equally important tenet of his artistic faith. Obviously thinking of its material durability, he stresses that mosaic is an art medium that is intended to be long-lasting and of enduring value. He firmly believed and repeated the view that it was a time-defying technical artistic form meant to “survive throughout the ages” (“tecnica del mosaico, tecnica che sfiderà i secoli”). He expresses the hope that these specific projects, which transmit God’s message and were made possible through the commission that he and his associate had received from Reverend Nazareno Coccia, “will be preserved with loving care, for future generations” (“siano tenute con amorosa cura, per le generazioni future”). Fortunately, his works, many of which have been documented in my previous articles, were to last, even if those of others were to be entirely demolished or smothered with plaster (fig. 2).

Given his passion for mosaic and for art in general, it is not surprising that Nasato expressed concern for his own legacy, just as he had expressed

³⁸ “L’Arte non ha bisogno di tante spiegazioni, ha sempre parlato da sé. Così il pittore per conoscere quanto valgono veramente sul piano estetico le sue opere ha solo un mezzo; quello di sapere che cosa pensa la gente. E quando dico gente, intendo dire la gente umile, non i critici che sono troppo spesso legati da pregiudizi ecc. ecc.” In another version of the draft, the last phrase is longer and reads literally, “prejudices, cliques and closed circles” (“pregiudizi, clan e consorterie”), an implied denunciation perhaps of rigid theories or narrowly exclusive attitudes.

concern for the preservation of works of art in his hometown, with careful reporting of the damage wrought over time, followed by his eventual success in having the needed repairs and restorations carried out. Furthermore, his contributions in the area of restoration extended to his adopted home city of Toronto and not only in religious institutions, as shall now be discussed.

Nasato's Contribution to Artistic Restoration in Canada

In Canada, a substantial portion of Nasato's restoration activity during his years of employment was directed toward mosaics and statues, as well as some structural designing for marble installations, in churches. When he was nominated for the Treviso Chamber of Commerce award in 1995, his candidacy was supported by letters of recommendation sent by persons who were familiar with him or had actually commissioned such works from him, including Reverend John Iverinci and especially Monsignor Giuseppe Sbrocchi. The latter spoke highly of Nasato's contribution to various Toronto-area churches – more precisely, his restoration work in the Church of San Nicola on St. Clair Avenue, artwork in Our Lady of the Airways in Mississauga, and mosaics and other artistic additions in St. Wilfrid's Church and St. John Bosco Church in the city.

But perhaps the most notable phase of Nasato's achievements in the field of art restoration, and the one that gave him the most satisfaction, occurred late in his career during the years 1980–89 while he was employed by Classic Mouldings. As mould maker and creative artist for this company, which was owned by Salvatore and Natalina Mittica, Nasato came to play a major role in an important project in the history of the city of Toronto – namely, the government-sponsored and award-winning restoration of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres, carried out from 1984 to 1989.

Nasato's accomplishments, based on his special expertise, merit wide recognition. But, as research in the Archives of Toronto and the issues of progress reports on the restoration has proven, his contribution is not acknowledged anywhere – a fate common for artists and artisans like Nasato. One article in *The Newsletter of the Elgin Winter Garden Project* does refer, but only in generic terms, to the successive waves of immigrant craftsmen from Europe who had probably contributed to the early construction and decoration of the theatres.³⁹ Nasato is certainly one such person and, in spite

³⁹ See Young, "Profile."

of the lack of official acknowledgment, confirmation of his important role in the later restoration is now found among his papers in a letter written about him by his employer, Salvatore Mittica, who had been contracted to carry out the restoration of the extraordinary decorative elements in the Toronto theatrical venues.

Some background information on the theatres is warranted at this point if we are to understand fully not only the context but also the extent and significance of Nasato's work. An official account of the original 1913 construction and later restoration of these two opulent full-sized stacked theatres, built one above the other, is recorded in Doug Taylor's history of Toronto theatres.⁴⁰ A rare architectural structure, the only one of its kind that remains in operation in Canada today (or anywhere in the world, as has been claimed),⁴¹ it boasted many elegant features including "gilded plaster ornamentations" (33) on the ceilings and staircases. The lower theatre, named Loew's Yonge Street Theatre, originally used for vaudeville, became a movie house and was renamed Elgin in 1978, while still serving as a venue for the projection of cinema. After many years of abandonment, the two erstwhile opulent theatres, connected by a grand seven-storey staircase, were saved from demolition by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, which purchased it in 1981. Restoration began in 1987 under the supervision of Mandel Sprachman, a Toronto architect (1925–2002) who, like his father before him, specialized in the design of cinemas and theatres. The Elgin and Winter Garden complex was reopened on 15 December 1989, restored to its former glory.

In his 1995 autobiographical account, Nasato himself refers in general and seemingly modest terms to his role in the restoration project of the twin theatres. He does explain that he had always had a passion for sculpture ("la passione per la scultura") and how this project had given him a most welcome opportunity to display his skill as he worked on the ornamental plaster elements. He also believed that he had made a substantial contribution to the development of the Classic Moulding company ("un sostanziale contributo per lo sviluppo di questa compagnia"), which at the time was a relatively new

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Toronto Theatres*, 31–35. Other page references to the book are provided in parentheses in the body of the text.

⁴¹ An online information sheet on the project in the City of Toronto Archives claims that the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres are "the last remaining 'double-decker' theatres in the world." Reporters Tony Wong and Robert Crew, in their announcement titled "Winter Garden reopens, audience gives rave review," describe it as "the only fully intact, pre-World War I 'roof garden' theatre in the world."

enterprise. However, rather than detailing precisely what the work he had conducted for the restoration project had entailed, he hints teasingly that “the reference letter written on his behalf by his employer, company director Salvatore Mittica, would furnish the rest of the information” (“Il resto lo dirà la lettera di referenza che il direttore Salvatore Mittica ha voluto rilasciarmi”) (8). Nevertheless, Nasato does stress his commitment to the project when he mentions, however briefly, his careful, painstaking restoration of the ornate plaster detailing (“stucchi”) in the theatres and the “intricately interwoven patterns of flowers and leaves for the staircases and the ceilings” (“gli intricati grovigli di fiori e foglie per le scalinate e per i soffitti”). He also points out how he had worked “with meticulous patience” (“con pazienza da certosino”) on the reconstruction of the theatres, which required “radical restoration (“un radicale restauro”), adding that “we [referring in the plural to himself and his fellow contributors] were successful and won the applause of everyone” (“ci siamo riusciti veramente con l’applauso di tutti”) (9). Indeed, progress reports published during the various stages of the restoration spoke of the enthusiasm of all the participants. One unsigned article states that everyone involved “showed a commitment and dedication far beyond anyone’s expectations.”⁴² It is likely that no one was more committed and dedicated than Nasato. He too was aware of the success of the project and of the accolades it earned at the time, even in the public media. In one instance, a prominent journalist hailed the completed restoration as a veritable “miracle.”⁴³

As Nasato had announced, a more extensive and most laudatory evaluation of his work in particular emerges from the testimonial provided by his employer, Salvatore Mittica, president of Classic Mouldings. A copy of Mittica’s officially signed reference letter, stressing the excellence of Nasato’s work on the theatres, a precious document preserved among Nasato’s personal papers in a private collection, details his contribution in glowing terms. In it he discusses the artist’s talent and his remarkable ability to recreate the original, which was in ruins, and underscores how challenging and difficult the project was, involving as it did restoration to be carried out with the assistance of only very scant documentation. The contrast between the before

⁴² Titled “Twice in a Lifetime: Commemorating the Reopening of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres,” it appeared on the cover of *The Newsletter of the Elgin Winter Garden Project* in 1990.

⁴³ Filey, “Elegant Restoration a Miracle on Yonge,” appeared in the *Toronto Sun* in 1989.

and after images of the sculpted post at the bottom of the grand staircase is striking (fig. 3 and fig. 4).

The core of Mittica's assessment of the transformation wrought by Nasato reads as follows:

Luigi worked on one of the grandest restoration projects in this country: The Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre Restoration Project in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The historical opera boxes, soffit, proscenium and countless cornices and enrichments were recreated in the theatre to include even the weathering effects of time. The grand newel at the foot of the main stairway of the theatre was recreated by Luigi from a single historical photograph showing one view only of the intricate floral pattern encircling the rounded post. Luigi has lent his unique sensitivity, depth of experience, and wholehearted involvement to the creative side of every project with which he has worked.

This fine tribute should suffice to earn Luigi Nasato recognition in the history of the two Canadian theatres and in the history of important renovation work in the country, as well as for the two mosaic murals discussed in this paper for their Canadian – or more properly, Indigenous Canadian – content, namely the Camsell Hospital and St. John Bosco Church mosaics.

Mosaic Murals by Nasato Depicting Indigenous Figures

(i) The Mural for the Charles Camsell Indian Hospital (Edmonton)

One of the two works including Indigenous figures designed by Nasato, and the earliest of the four murals singled out for analysis in the present study, is located in the Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton, Alberta. The history of the facility is given in a 1985 publication, which explains that it was a new hospital for tuberculosis patients from the Indigenous communities. Built with federal government funds in the northwestern part of Edmonton in the 1960s, this hospital was built over several years, with the sod-turning in 1964, moving day in July 1967, and the official opening celebrated on 10 October 1967.⁴⁴ Named after a scientist who was a minister in the federal Canadian

⁴⁴ Dryden, Taylor, Beer, Bergmann, and Cogill, *The Charles Camsell Hospital 1945–1985*, 4, 49, 58. Page numbers for subsequent references are given in parentheses in the

government at the time, it was hailed by contemporaries as “one of the more notable successes in recent medical history” (ix). As was also noted in the preface to the historical account, the surrounding area at the time of the construction of the hospital was “for the most part, vacant land” (ix). In this institution, as we now know, patients were abused. The building is currently being converted into a residential condominium by architect Gene Dub, the present owner and developer. A search for unmarked graves on the site began in 2021 and has produced no evidence to date of human remains, as indicated by email communication from Dub dated 11 August 2022.

When the hospital was first constructed, a mosaic mural was installed in the entrance, which fortunately – and to his credit – is being preserved by Dub. A photograph of it is available on the Camsell website. Other photos, from around 2010, have kindly been provided by Dub and are reproduced here with his permission (fig. 5 and fig. 6).⁴⁵ According to the early physical description of the mural that was included in the 1985 publication and was based on information obtained from the Conn-Arts Studio art director, Alexander von Svoboda, “the mural is 28 feet long and 8 [feet] 6 [inches] high, a total of 238 square feet, weighing approximately four pounds per square foot. Calculated at 600 pieces of mosaic per square foot, a total of 112,200 pieces of hand cut and placed mosaic tesserae were used, forming a combination of white Carrara marble mosaic background and smalti mosaic” (ii).

According to Dub’s updates on the present state of the mural, provided to me in several email communications (23 and 24 August 2021, and 11 August 2022), the mural is at present “boarded up” – in order to protect it during construction of the condominium, one may surmise. It “is a little damaged but it is protected.” It has some “graffiti on it and some pieces are missing along the bottom,” but plans are “to restore it when the project’s interiors are underway” and to uncover it in October 2022 in preparation for a complete restoration.

The early story of the creation of the mural can be reconstructed in part on the basis of the scant data provided in the 1985 publication, which also reproduces an image of the mural on its cover. But much more is now known through the discovery of more documents. As is well known, this mosaic mural was prepared for the hospital entrance area by the Connolly Company of Toronto; von Svoboda, the art director of the company’s subsidiary,

body of the text.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to colleague Prof. Antonio Calcagno for his technological help with downloading the photographs and for his many other useful suggestions.

Conn-Arts Studio, was likely responsible for suggesting the theme. However, the actual original design for the mural was the work of Luigi Nasato, who was the company artist at the time and the creator of other mosaic murals produced by Connolly not only in the Toronto area but also in Edmonton, such as the panels depicting nursery rhymes in the Royal Victoria Hospital (1966)⁴⁶ and even, as Nasato claimed, the mural displaying symbols of various fields of learning in the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (1963).⁴⁷ The early sketches for the Camsell Hospital mural are to be found among the private papers of Luigi Nasato, who was the original artist. What also surfaced some years ago, and was reproduced in an earlier article of mine,⁴⁸ is the colour sketch of the final version of the work, now preserved in the personal collection of Luigi Olni, himself a former Conn-Arts employee and member of their team of mosaicists in the late 1950s and 1960s, involved in the execution of the work.

Luigi Olni, mentioned above in connection with the St. John the Baptist portrait in mosaic designed by him for the Connolly owners, was born in 1935 in Sesto al Reghena, now in the province of Pordenone. He had come to Canada in 1954 but returned to Italy in 1969, taking with him some materials that he had salvaged as they were being discarded by the company. In his notes, which he provided to me, Olni attributes the final modified design of the Camsell Hospital mural to von Svoboda. In early interviews, Nasato too had acknowledged that changes had subsequently been made, but that he himself had actually prepared the early designs for the mural. In his home studio on 24 July 2003, Nasato showed me and research assistant Cindy Mark his two pencil sketches for the mural. He explained, in answer to Cindy's questions, that von Svoboda had carried out research on the Indigenous peoples in the library and had suggested themes and indicated the

⁴⁶ Very brief notes on the Camsell and Royal Victoria murals are included in Pugliese, "Il contributo," 164.

⁴⁷ It was formerly attributed solely to von Svoboda in Pugliese, "Il contributo," 164. This instance of inaccurate information may perhaps be attributed to a photograph published with an unsigned brief caption in *The Edmonton Journal* in 1963. It presents the image of Art Director von Svoboda reclining on the mural as it lay flat on the floor, possibly just before installation. Several reports received claim that, as mosaic murals were being prepared, it was not unusual for the actual mosaicists to be asked to step aside so that official photographs could be taken. A detail of the mural is reproduced in Pugliese, "From Friuli," 40.

⁴⁸ Pugliese, "Il contributo," 159.

dimensions of the proposed work; Nasato had then proceeded to create the drawings. On the basis of this solid evidence, the authorship is now clear and the Camsell mural should be classified as a work by Nasato, subsequently revised by von Svoboda.

As for the details, the illustrations included here show that, in his early drawings for Camsell (fig. 7 and fig. 8), Nasato depicted a peace pipe ceremony on the left and a scene with Christians arriving to convert the Indigenous peoples on the right. The design includes manned canoes, two men seated with a peace pipe, animals, a teepee, an armed Native, a sailboat, and an Indigenous figure greeting a European man, each of the latter two identifiable by the clothing they wear. Although some of the small figures in the drawing probably constitute the artist's first embryonic sketches, it is clear that Nasato conceived of the mural as representing the arrival of Europeans, and as a portrayal of the first peoples encountered and the animals they hunted.

A comparison between Nasato's sketches and the definitive version of the mural reveals the modifications made by von Svoboda. The European figures are eliminated entirely and, consequently, the idea of a Christian mission is no longer suggested. On the other hand, an Inuit figure is added along with some decorative snowflakes and trees.⁴⁹ Of Nasato's design, the manned canoes and the animals are kept, even if rearranged, and more importantly, the peace pipe ceremony enacted by the two large figures of First Nations men, who are depicted in a seated position, is not only maintained but it becomes the central and focal scene of the entire mural in its definitive form.

The design appears to capture a fundamental aspect of Indigenous culture, namely, its peaceful co-existence with nature, as the view might have been conceived by an Italian-Canadian artist. Even if the elements of the scene are altogether stereotypical, the aim of the whole mural installed in a prominent location in the building may have been that of making the patients feel at home in the hospital, just as the nursery rhyme figures depicted in the children's pavilion of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Edmonton were probably intended by Nasato to provide comfort, or familiar narratives, to the young hospitalized patients.

The mural is an excellent illustration of how the ancient old-world genre of mosaics was adapted on Canadian soil. But the reality of the Camsell Hospital – and, possibly, of the grounds around it, too – indicates how uninformed

⁴⁹ It should be noted that Nasato had made ceramic figurines of Inuit persons. Two of them (one 9.5 centimetres and the other 11 centimetres in height) have been preserved by the family.

and ingenuous the original designers might have been, as undoubtedly most non-Indigenous Canadians were at the time and have continued to be until very recently.

(ii) Mosaic Murals in St. John Bosco Church (Toronto)

Another mural designed by Nasato, and perhaps more explicitly reflective of his personality and principles, was produced many years later, after the Connolly firm and some church renovation companies were no longer in operation. Together with a Spilimbergo-trained mosaicist and fellow employee at Connolly, named Mario Della Rossa (born in San Martino al Tagliamento, Pordenone, 1942; now residing in Toronto),⁵⁰ Luigi had set up the Lux Art Studio, a company that received commissions for small-scale mosaic work, mainly in churches in Toronto and Mississauga. One such example is the lunette bearing the image of the Madonna on the façade of Our Lady of Sorrows Church on Bloor Street West.⁵¹

Nasato's longtime partner deserves attention. A photo of Mario Della Rossa restoring the marble mosaic flooring of the Old City Hall of Toronto in December 1984, before Connolly closed down, appeared in a 1992 publication titled *Landed*.⁵² In another more recent photo (fig. 9), Della Rossa is seen demonstrating mosaic technique to myself and Dr. Principe, on the occasion of our interview with him on 19 January 2002. In addition to collaborating with Nasato, Della Rossa also produced a number of mosaic artifacts on his own. As well as providing restoration work and marble installations, he was also responsible for creating some original pieces for private individuals and institutions, like the stylized Madonna now on display in Villa Gambin, a long-term care facility that is part of the Friuli Centre in Woodbridge, on the outskirts of Toronto. His mosaic rendition of the Italian flag for the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy attracted considerable attention in late 2011, when it was presented to Friuli Terrace, a seniors apartment building in

⁵⁰ See unsigned notes about Mario Della Rossa on the back cover of a 2001 issue of *Il ferrarut*, in the caption to the image of the mural behind the altar of St. John Bosco Church. A brief profile is included in Pugliese, "Il contributo," 168–169, along with a photograph on page 155 of Della Rossa standing together with other Connolly workers in front of the company headquarters in 1966.

⁵¹ A brief unsigned notice about the work being prepared, including a photo of Mario showing the design for the lunette, is found in *Gnovis da Famee*.

⁵² *Landed: A Pictorial Mosaic*, 100.

the same complex.⁵³ More recently, Mario Della Rossa's mosaic depiction of the Canadian flag for Canada Day on 1 July 2021 was published on the back cover of a magazine.⁵⁴

The Nasato–Della Rossa duo carried out a major church project in Toronto that included the most recent of the four mosaic murals containing Indigenous elements being analyzed in this paper – to wit, the depiction of a procession for the St. John Bosco Church. Measuring eight feet by eight feet,⁵⁵ it is the smallest in size of the group of four artworks being considered here, but it is one that has special meaning for the Canadian context. The mural is found on the interior wall on the right side of the church on Westmount Avenue in the Dufferin–Rogers Road area of the city. Commissioned by the parish priest, Reverend Nazareno Coccia (Spinetoli, Ascoli Piceno 1928–Toronto 2020),⁵⁶ for his originally Italian but by then multiethnic parish, the overall mosaic project included some smaller works in the vestibule of the church, with three major components: a central arched panel placed behind the altar and flanked on either side by portraits of the apostles; a scene in the baptistery depicting Christ being baptized by John the Baptist; and the mural of the procession on the right side of the presbytery. Begun in the mid-1980s and completed in 1999, the whole project was officially inaugurated at a mass on 24 October 1999, attended by Bishop Nicola De Angelis, who bestowed a special blessing on the elaborate artwork.⁵⁷

First-hand information on the realization of the mosaic project was recorded by the principals involved. Reverend Nazareno Coccia and artist Luigi Nasato gave interviews to journalists as well as to myself and assistant Cindy Mark, and both – the artist first and then the commissioning priest – also wrote about the project in private and official communications. All together, these testimonials, both oral and written, provide valuable information on

⁵³ See Be[llo], “Un mosaico per il 150o dell’Unità d’Italia.” Until recently, Della Rossa was an active member of the Golden Age Academy headquartered in the Columbus Centre in Toronto. See Bortoletto, “Golden Age Academy.”

⁵⁴ See “Opera musiva di Mario Della Rossa.”

⁵⁵ I wish to thank former research assistant Joe Ferrari for the data and photographs he provided for the mural.

⁵⁶ See the unsigned biographical entry, “Don Nazareno Coccia,” in *Dall’Italia al Nord America*.

⁵⁷ A draft of a letter addressed to Domenico Nasato, president of the Trevisani nel Mondo association and dated 22 November 1999, was clearly intended to provide an estimate of the cost of the work required for the monument to fallen soldiers in Italy. However, in it, the artist also speaks at length of the St. John Bosco Church mosaic.

the type of collaboration and intense consultation involved, the role played by each participant, the technical challenges that they faced and overcame, and also their insightful observations on the mosaics and personal assessments of their significance.

The written accounts by Nasato relating to the St. John Bosco Church mosaic project, and about the procession mural in particular, total approximately forty handwritten pages consisting of fourteen pages of drafts of a letter addressed to Bishop Nicola De Angelis, dated 27 (changed in the last draft to 26) April 1996; nineteen pages of drafts of a 1995 report provided to and probably requested, as in the case of the former one, by Father Nazareno; a lengthy paragraph in Nasato's autobiographical report submitted to the Camera di Commercio, Treviso, in the same year; and two personal letters to a relative and friend, respectively, in Italy.⁵⁸ Remarkably, this is the only artwork to which the artist devoted so much attention in his writing, not only because he was asked to write a commentary for the priest and the bishop but also because, with respect to other projects, he had greater input in all stages of the preparation and execution of these mosaics, and was personally engaged in the theme and its implications. Not simply acting upon instructions imposed upon him by the cleric commissioning the work, Nasato, together with Della Rossa, would seem to have been granted considerable spontaneity and freedom of expression in the creation of the works.

From the priceless testimonies that have come down to us we learn how Reverend Coccia established the general themes for the mosaics and offered constant guidance to the artists, but also sought their input, even if he appears to have vetoed some of their suggestions, as shall be explained below. Over the course of the ten years required to carry out the project, the trio – made up of the parish priest, the artist, and the fellow mosaicist – met numerous times, possibly hundreds, as they reported. Nasato was responsible for preparing the designs and cartoons and, together with his associate, executed the mosaics in the basement studio of what was Mario Della Rossa's home at the time, using materials from Venice. In the very final stage as well, they were both in charge of the installation of the murals. In a letter addressed to a cousin dated 1994, while work was underway, Nasato speaks of the "great amount of

⁵⁸ As indicated above, these drafts, along with all other documents, were consulted when they were still in his private collection, which is now housed in the York University archive.

time” (“tanto e tanto tempo”)⁵⁹ spent on the project. The deep commitment that he felt to it and his passion for its successful completion are reflected in his writing and rewriting of the descriptive document for Father Nazareno. In what appears to be the last of the nineteen pages of drafts for this report, Nasato speaks of the numerous meetings that the three of them held, their discussion of the themes, and also the frequent need felt to check the Bible, especially the New Testament, as he states in his 1996 letter/report addressed to Bishop De Angelis. In an undated personal letter to friend Fedele Bellaio in the province of Treviso, he also mentions that, while working on these mosaics, he occasionally visited public libraries and the Art Gallery, in order to keep himself intellectually fit (“per tenermi in allenamento intellettuale”). A large plaque in the church, evidently desired and approved by Reverend Coccia, gives full credit to the two artists⁶⁰ – a warranted form of acknowledgment and recognition not generally practised, as fairness should always have dictated, in the case of much mosaic artwork in Canada.

As he explained on numerous occasions, right from the outset, the parish priest had a clear purpose in commissioning the mosaics, which were meant to be much more than mere decorations. Father Nazareno stressed that, during his sermons, he often pointed to the figures depicted in the mosaics as illustrations of the doctrinal lessons he was attempting to impart. This intention is reported in a 1999 newspaper article, written at the time of the completion of the project, by journalist Mariella Gallelo. She describes Reverend Coccia as a lover of art, and quotes him on the subject of the pastoral purpose of the mosaics and other artistic pieces that had been installed in the church over the preceding decade, namely to teach the word of God to the faithful through images taken from the Bible and Gospel (“Lo scopo è stato di carattere pastorale, insegnare la parola di Dio ai fedeli attraverso le immagini della Bibbia e del Vangelo”).⁶¹ Two years later, in 2001, Reverend Coccia

⁵⁹ Letter from Rexdale, where the Nasato family resided, and dated 4 December 1994, addressed to Maria, probably cousin Maria Nasato.

⁶⁰ The plaque outlines the history of the church, lists its landmark events, and includes the following acknowledgement: “During the last decade of the millennium, under the spiritual direction of the pastor, Rev. Nazareno Coccia, the interior of the church was embellished by a number of unique mosaics created and designed by artist, Luigi Nasato, while the works were completed by the same and in collaboration with mosaicist Mario Della Rossa.”

⁶¹ Gallelo announces the inauguration of the completed work. I thank Dr. Paola Bernardini for having provided missing data for the bibliographical reference.

himself published several articles in the same Italian-language newspaper,⁶² providing information on the initial construction of the church as an Italian parish in 1961, when five houses on Westmount Avenue were demolished to make way for it. He also mentions that, during early renovations in the mid-1980s, he had commissioned the statue of the Madonna Mother of the Church, together with the large crucifix behind the altar, from an artist he calls Suor Angelica Balan of Rome.⁶³ Subsequently, the mosaic murals were added, partly in order to accompany and enhance the two sculptures.

Although not the largest of the three mosaic works in the church, the mural of the procession heading devoutly in the direction of the large statue of Mary Mother of the Church is the most innovative. It is simply mentioned or, at most, only briefly analyzed in my previous studies, but in the light of the carefully consulted written documents subsequently found among the artist's papers, the mural can now be understood and appreciated even more. Albeit originally intended to serve primarily as the background for the statue, which stands on a pedestal near the wall in front of the mural, it has acquired greater significance and, far from being a marginal aspect of this multimedia work, it has ultimately taken the spotlight. Admittedly, a section of the mural on the left side does serve as a backdrop. However, facing the technical challenge of integrating the free-standing statue and the flat mosaic on the wall behind it, the artist planned even this part of the work with great care. As he explains in the document addressed to Father Nazareno, the background to the statue was designed to act as a halo of light ranging in hue from white to yellow to orange to green with sparkling gold interspersed, appropriate for the divine figure placed in front of it. In his autobiographical report, he claimed to have, as a natural gift, a heightened sense of colour. The halo-like mosaic framing the Madonna bears out the truth of his claim.

But what stands out even more in his description of the work is the series of detailed observations about the right side of the mural, that is, the section that depicts the procession itself and the participants in it (fig. 10). He highlights the diversity of the figures of the faithful who are seen arriving in single file to adore the statue and he associates this with the multicultural reality of Canada. Even in his early autobiographical report, Nasato had referred to "the mosaic panel with a line of figures of different races heading

⁶² See two articles by Reverend Nazareno Coccia, "S. Giovanni Bosco" and "Cuori italiani a San Giovanni Bosco," published (with photos) in 2001.

⁶³ It has not been possible to identify this artist.

toward the Madonna” (“il pannello a mosaico con una fila di figure di diverse razze che vanno verso la Madonna”). In his official report for Father Nazareno, too, he speaks of the procession mosaic panel, in which “one sees the diverse human races” (“si vedono le varie razze umane”), a phrase that he also repeated in his 1996 report addressed to Bishop De Angelis. In her article, the journalist Gallelo also pointed out a few years later that Reverend Nazareno was keen on the theme of multiculturalism. In connection with the depiction of the procession, she cites his words on how “it represents a typical crowded Toronto street and an imagined family walking toward the Madonna” (“rappresenta una via qualunque di Toronto percorsa da una moltitudine di gente, una ipotetica famiglia che si reca a trovare la Madonna”). The journalist seems to echo the observations recorded by the artist himself when she notes that in the procession there are persons of various races, and of all ages – young, old, and babies, too.

The details that Nasato had provided about the figures participating in the procession are particularly important. In the report addressed to Father Nazareno, intended to explain his mosaic, as he states, for the benefit of the pastor and of the whole church community, he had specified that his design for the procession began with a family grouping consisting of three persons: a mother with an infant in her arms, that is, a human family similar to the divine Madonna with child, together with the father, all looking toward the statue of Our Lady, the man’s demeanour seeming to invoke her protection. In a later interview on 3 December 2002, Nasato had revealed that the models for the family grouping had actually been his colleague Mario Della Rossa, his daughter Silvia, and her young son, Matthew. In the written account, he elaborates further, pointing out – albeit with outdated designations – that, following the family of three, he had inserted “a small Chinese man, a redskin Indian, a negro, an Indian couple etc. and other figures” (“un piccolo cinese, un indiano pellirossa [sic], un negro, una coppia di indiani ecc e altre figure”). As far as the Indigenous figure is concerned, the original drawings of the procession mural have not survived, unfortunately, but the male figure with long hair and a headband with plumes, wearing what appears to be tan-coloured leather clothing with fringes, does recall almost exactly Nasato’s earlier sketches of Indigenous men for the Camsell mural. However stereotypical the Indigenous figure and the other images may be, their distinguishing features and the variety of the colours and shapes they bring, contribute to the overall emblematic scene, whose meaning the artist underscores. In the variants that emerge from a collation of the drafts of the text describing the scene,

we find the following observations: “These people form a mosaic, especially Canada, consisting of various ethnic groups, and the family is like a tessera in the global significance of this mosaic [punctuation added]” (“Questa gente forma un mosaico specialmente il Canada, composto da vari gruppi etnici e la famiglia è come una tessera nel valore globale di questo mosaico”). “For the Church the family is like a tessera of faith and communion in the global and polychromatic significance of this mosaic” (“La famiglia è per la Chiesa come una tessera di fede e di comunione nel valore globale e policromo di questo mosaico”). “A community of faith, consisting of various ethnic groups, are like so many polychromatic tesserae that form the great human mosaic of the Church of Christ” (“Una comunità di fede, composta da vari gruppi etnici, sono come tante tessere policrome che formano il grande mosaico umano della Chiesa di Cristo”).

Working through various laboured reformulations of his comment, he insightfully captures the idea of a cultural mosaic expressed in multicoloured tesserae that form a great human mosaic that is emblematic of the Christian Church and of the multiethnic Canadian context. Even if the forward-looking pastor, Reverend Coccia, may have been the one to suggest the general theme of multiculturalism, and the mural was originally intended to be a simple backdrop for the statue, Nasato is to be credited for having found the way not only to formulate it verbally but also mainly to express it visually in the mosaic medium, most effectively, through the organization of multiple figures and the arrangement of thousands of multi-coloured tesserae, and, moreover, to relate it to the Canadian context.⁶⁴

While the brilliantly conceived and successfully completed procession mural has won universal approval from both the church officials who commissioned it and the parishioners and visitors who have viewed it,⁶⁵ a similar multicultural design proposed by Nasato appears to have been rejected and was never executed.

⁶⁴ Nasato's sincere commitment to researching different ethnicities and their appearance and traditional clothing has been emphasized by his family.

⁶⁵ In the document addressed to Domenico Nasato cited above, the artist reported how favourably the St. John Bosco Church mosaics had been received: “Everyone was surprised and happy with this work because it has somewhat changed the appearance of the whole church” (“Tutti sono stati sorpresi e contenti di questo lavoro perché ha cambiato un po' l'aspetto di tutta la chiesa”).

(iii) Another Multicultural Design Containing an Indigenous Element, Proposed by Nasato for the St. John Bosco Church but Never Executed

Among Nasato's papers, there is a design for another work that, like the procession mural, is based on a multicultural theme and contains an Indigenous element. Given the overall layout and the constitutive elements, it would appear to have been intended for the location behind the altar and encircling the crucifix in the St. John Bosco Church, now occupied by the mosaic mural featuring the portraits of the apostles. The original sketch for the latter completed work has been preserved among the artist's papers. But the other sketch, which has also been preserved but has been overlooked, represents what must have been Nasato's earlier concept for the scene surrounding the crucifix, when the theme of multiculturalism had already been determined but before it was developed and expressed in the image of a procession including multiple ethnicities. Albeit not acceptable to the commissioning cleric, as we might surmise, given that it was not realized, the design in question, embryonic as it may be, is very telling and reveals Nasato's open-minded multiculturalism (fig. 11). In it, the clearly identifiable CN Tower and city skyline indicate that it is inspired by and represents Toronto. The central element is that of the existing cross, from which ten rays of light emanate, each ending with a circle labelled with a different religion, including Judaism, Sikh, and Aboriginal, the latter placed in the top right-hand corner of the design. This proposal by Nasato must have been considered too radical and not suitable for the Catholic Church. Subsequently, the mosaic circles featuring ten different religions were replaced with twelve circles portraying the apostles arranged in two vertical panels, one on either side of the crucifix. The CN Tower disappeared and the generic "Aboriginal" label was to be superseded in a new independent mural on the right side of the presbytery by the male figure in the procession already discussed above.

No written record exists explaining how Nasato formed this image of a Canadian Aboriginal man for his two murals in the Camsell Hospital and the St. John Bosco Church. The artist is no longer with us to be able to furnish an explanation. However, the thoughts he did record, and the life he lived, would seem to indicate his great humanity and special appreciation of the multiple ethnic groups making up Canada. Even the drawing that was set aside, but that he took care not to destroy, indicates how in spite of his strong Catholic faith, he was open to other religions and other cultures and how he associated this openness with the Canadian context in particular.

Nasato was not the only Italian-Canadian artist to include the occasional Indigenous figure in his mosaic murals. Another, who resides in Quebec, must also be given his due recognition. Still active, we are fortunate that he has also been able to comment on his inspiration for the portrayal of Indigenous figures, as shall be seen.

***Giovanni Gerometta (Sesto al Reghena, Pordenone, Italy, 1934 – now residing in Beaupré, Quebec)*⁶⁶**

Giovanni Gerometta is an extraordinary Italian-Canadian artist and mosaicist still living and working in Beaupré, Quebec. He was born in 1934 in the town of Sesto al Reghena, in the province of Pordenone, Italy. One of ten children, he stood out among his siblings for the artistic talent he displayed at an early age. He would have wished to become an architect but, given the restricted means of his family, he attended an *avviamento* vocational school for three years and then enrolled in the Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli in Spilimbergo, completing the four-year program in 1954. He excelled as a top student in his class and won several awards, as the records consulted in the school archive have proven, a fact which he modestly omits from his narration of his personal life story. Gerometta's life experience can be reconstructed and summarized, and his artistic production described and appreciated, on the basis of a wealth of materials from his private collection that he has made available – including photographs recording the different phases of the designing and composition of his works, and newspaper articles published by critics about his activities and his work – and also on the basis of an in-person interview in 2010, as well as more recent personal visits to Quebec to attend public events involving him. On one of these occasions in Beaupré, in November 2017, Gerometta launched his impressive 320-page trilingual autobiography, titled *La mia vita – la mia arte. My Life – My Artwork. Ma vie – mon oeuvre* (fig. 12).⁶⁷ Presented two months earlier in his hometown in Italy on

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Prof. Dario Brancato and the late Prof. Giovanna Panico for having made me aware of the work of Giovanni Gerometta many years ago.

⁶⁷ Page references to Gerometta's book are given in parentheses in the body of the text. My reviews of the volume have been published in *Quaderni d'italianistica* and *La cisilute* and were also presented in my paper, titled "Giovanni Gerometta: la sua arte e il suo libro," delivered to the Società Dante Québec at Université Laval, 10 April 2018. My earlier articles on mosaic artwork also deal briefly with Gerometta: "Il contributo," 152, 161; "From Friuli," 43–46.

23 September 2017, the voluminous publication constitutes a fundamental tool for understanding the remarkable life of this talented man and also for appreciating his exceptional artistic achievements, which can be readily reviewed by means of the unusually high number of fine, glossy reproductions included in the publication. It is worth noting, furthermore, that the plates included in the volume might have been double in number had Gerometta had in his possession photographs of all, and not just of approximately one half, of his actual total production.

In the published autobiography, the narrative text in French, Italian, and English explains that his three passions have been the visual arts, sports, and gastronomy. In fact, the different stages of his life cover all three fields. Consequently, as the author of the preface to the book states, Gerometta's hefty but single volume could well have been a trilogy.⁶⁸ In addition to the large dimensions of the book, and the notable diversity of subjects treated, all stemming from the multifaceted talents of the artist and the multifarious activities in which he has participated, equally engaging is the manner in which Gerometta details his own life and artworks and comments on art and human life in general, presenting everything within the all-encompassing frame of an immigrant's story. Many observations on the immigrant experience are interspersed throughout the book's pages, adding a strong human dimension to the life journey traced, beginning with his birth, early years, and schooling in the Italian region of Friuli and subsequently followed by migration to the new world.

Indeed, soon after receiving his diploma from the mosaic school in Spilimbergo in 1954, Gerometta prepared to leave for Canada. As he recalled during an interview, and as he also records in his book (54), his decision to migrate was in response to encouragement received from a Canadian delegation that had visited the school that year inviting students to come to Canada, where, it was claimed, skilled mosaic artisans were in high demand.⁶⁹ Convinced of the promise offered by this solicitation, Gerometta travelled with fellow townsman and Spilimbergo graduate, Luigi Olerni, on the steamship *Roma*, arriving in Halifax on 30 August 1954. Having studied French rather than English, contrary to many of his peers who came to Canada and

⁶⁸ Rossini, "Preface," 9.

⁶⁹ In a brief unsigned article titled "Giovanni Gerometta," which appeared in *The Mountain News*, it is stated that the group involved was a Canadian Trade Commission delegation. Attempts to investigate and clarify this event have not produced any results.

remained in Ontario, Gerometta chose instead to settle in Quebec. There he worked for several years (1954–56) with Walter Del Mistro (Maniago, Pordenone, 1912–Quebec City 2003).⁷⁰ Like Gerometta, but a generation earlier, Del Mistro too had been at the top of his class in Spilimbergo, and, at the time of Gerometta's arrival, was already well established in Canada and running his Del Mistro Vitraux et Mosaiques company. Gerometta assisted him with mosaic installations in many churches in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick, and even contributed to some parts of the vast mosaic project in the Basilica of Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré. Del Mistro had been sent to Canada to execute the project in 1939, stayed during the war years, and obtained permission to remain in the country permanently, continuing, at the behest of the priests in charge, to prepare, execute, and install mosaics on the ceiling, walls, and floor of the basilica for the next forty years. As Gerometta has explained, his own contribution to the decoration of the Basilica of Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré includes, for example, the mosaic capitals of the columns in the basilica.⁷¹ However, this collaboration with Del Mistro on mosaic projects was often only part-time and did not provide sufficient income. As a result, in order to make ends meet, Gerometta had to resort to seeking employment in the fields of construction and hospitality, too, working first in a restaurant owned by Del Mistro and then at the Château Frontenac in Quebec City. For a short time, he also worked in the Quebec capital city for the Paquet Company retail store.

When possibilities in the field of mosaic became increasingly scarce – a situation encountered by all mosaic workers from Italy in that period, causing them considerable disappointment, and Gerometta was no exception⁷² – he embarked on a new path. He learned to ski and worked for a brief time at a resort in Vermont, for example. Returning to Quebec, he eventually earned his living as a highly respected ski instructor for eleven years (1965–76) and was at the Mont-Ste-Anne ski resort in Beaupré, which he had helped found and develop, when the World Cup was held there in 1971. However, because

⁷⁰ On Del Mistro, see Principe and Pugliese, “Un mosaicista friulano à Québec.”

⁷¹ Reproductions of other works of his in the basilica are included in his book on pages 80–81.

⁷² One such mosaic worker, named Rinaldo Santarossa, wrote to the director of the school where he had trained, describing his unfortunate situation. His letters, which are preserved in the school archive in Spilimbergo, are published in Pugliese, “Il contributo,” 169–171. In his book, *I mosaicisti raccontano*, Battiston studies the mosaic trade and examines the problems faced by mosaicists.

of health problems caused by a heart attack at the early age of forty, he was forced to make another significant change in the direction of his life, but this time by returning to his first passion, art. The mid-1970s, and especially the year 1976, marked a new beginning for him. “I decided to quit my job at the mountain and return full-time to my brushes and mosaics” (96), he states in his autobiography. A 1973 newspaper article about him by Benoit Lavoie, titled “De la mosaïque au ski, du ski à la peinture,”⁷³ signalled the changing trajectory.

A part of Gerometta’s new life was dedicated to building a house for himself on a parcel of land that he had purchased in the Mont-Ste-Anne area of Beaupré that he knew well and loved dearly. An ideal location for his home, it was to become the site of his own art gallery, too. Construction of the complex was in itself a considerable feat that involved a first stage of erecting the basic structure practically with his own hands and then extending the building with several additions, one destined to house the gallery. The project was demanding and was realized over a long period of time spanning from 1976 to 2000. The whole process is amply documented in a full chapter of his book (106–115), with photographs of the initial building plans, too. In 2011, the now well-known building, a stunning tourist attraction, was featured together with its creator, Gerometta, on a television program called *Passions Maisons* by Alain Choquette, who highlighted its unusual features, and the fact that it had been built with recycled wood, stones from a local quarry, and other traditional materials typical of the area.

At the time that he decided to return to his original vocation – and in a new home of his own, largely built with the manpower of himself and some friends, and representing the architectural traditions of the countryside – Gerometta resumed his study of art with the painter Marius Dubois (Plessisville, Quebec, 1944–Sainte-Pétronille, Quebec, 2016) at the Musée du Québec, now called Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, in Quebec City. He frequented artists’ circles, began to produce paintings in all genres (landscapes, portraits, and still life), and exhibited his works on many occasions. Painting *en plein air* and later mainly in his studio, he produced rural Quebec landscapes, portraits of elderly men in Beaupré, self-portraits, winter scenes, still life, watercolours, and also, on his visits to Italy, scenes from Venice and his hometown. As he proceeded to paint, he was inspired by some of his favourite artists, including Modigliani and Klimt. After his visit to the

⁷³ Lavoie, “De la mosaïque au ski.”

McMichael Gallery near Toronto, in 1978 he painted a geometric landscape in imitation of Lauren Harris (181). But by the late 1970s, after some experimentation, he had developed his own recognizable modernist style characterized by circular geometric figures, round contours, and swirling movement. These features are evident in his mosaic works, too, the medium to which he has devoted most of his energy and on which he has focussed his talent in recent decades, at times even applying mosaic inserts in his paintings.

Since the mid-1970s, when he took up mosaic again with great passion, Gerometta has been able to dedicate himself full-time to art, and to make his livelihood with his production in painting and mosaic. Indeed, he appears to be the only Italian-Canadian artist, certainly among the many mosaicists who came to Canada from Spilimbergo in the mid-twentieth century, who has been able to attain such a status and the fulfilment of his youthful dreams. Moreover, working independently for the greater part of his career, he has had the right to sign all his creations proudly, earning full recognition for them.

Over the past fifty years, Gerometta has received commissions from corporations for mosaic murals in public buildings, especially in the province of Quebec, and he has also been commissioned by individuals to prepare works for their private collections in Canada and abroad (in Mexico, for example). Making use of the huge quantity of materials obtained from his early employer Del Mistro, when the latter retired, in the 1980s Gerometta produced works like *Les forces de la vie* (1989) for an insurance company in the Complexe de la Capitale in Quebec City. For this mural, which features the different stages of life, and suggests the protection offered by the family, he includes in his autobiography (266–267) reproductions of the preparatory colour sketch and even early photos of himself working on the mural or later photos taken standing in front of it (fig. 13), proudly claiming authorship in the stance. In the same decade he also prepared the two murals that have been included for detailed discussion in this paper. More recently, in 2008, applying the direct method in this case, he designed, executed, and installed on the exterior wall of a community building in Baie de Beauport a huge mosaic (2.13 by 6.7 metres in size) titled *Hymne aux saisons*, for the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec. As a well-established artist receiving requests from private collectors, in one instance in 2013, he produced a mural about a non-traditional but thoroughly Canadian topic, namely, the making of maple syrup. Titled *Autrefois les sucres* and measuring (81 centimetres by 203 centimetres), it consists of nine delightful scenes illustrating the stages

and elements required to produce this typically Canadian delicacy. It too is reproduced, along with the accompanying watercolour study, in the artist's autobiography (281).

Among the works that Gerometta continues to sell to enthusiastic admirers nowadays are charming portable mosaics in small formats that are prepared using the direct method and that, given their reduced dimensions, are more easily accommodated in private homes. A theme that Gerometta has been treating in recent works, and that dominates his creations, in the case of those of both small and large proportions, involves geese. For a public project that he completed as recently as 2020–21, a series of mosaic geese, arranged vertically and not bound by a frame, were installed at the entrance to the town of Beaupré (fig. 14 and fig. 15). In an interview recorded on the celebratory occasion, he explained to viewers that the wild birds shown in swirling movement and not limited by straight-line boundaries, represent freedom.

Unlike this celebration of freedom and the hymn to the four seasons in the Baie-St-Paul installation, both found in outdoor locations, most of his mosaic murals produced over the past four decades are on display inside public buildings where they are affixed to interior walls. Along with his paintings, they are owned by many museums, corporations, and private collectors. An impressive list of their names and locations appears in the artist's autobiography (312). Gerometta has also enjoyed many successful exhibitions of his works. These data, also included toward the end of the book (311–312), indicate thirty-two group exhibitions from 1973 to 2014, and eight solo exhibitions from 1973 to 1991, mainly across Canada. As mentioned above, in 1986 Gerometta opened his own art gallery in one of the extensions added to his house. Called Galerie d'art Mont-Ste-Anne, it aimed at first to exhibit works by other Quebec artists. It now showcases mainly his own works and is still run by Gerometta, together with his wife, Andrée Tremblay, whom he married in 1995, when he was sixty years old, as he lovingly narrates in a whole chapter of his book devoted to meeting his soul mate (132–139).

Gerometta's artistic production has received well-deserved recognition, frequent media coverage, and the attention of many art critics, especially in Quebec. In his book (313), there is a list of twenty-four newspapers, magazines, and television stations that have published or broadcast print or video reports about him and his work – in some cases on more than one occasion.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Important studies on Gerometta and his mosaic artwork include the articles by Legaré, Montas, Piette, Gentile, and Hamel. A brief profile of Gerometta appears in

Certainly more of a creative artist, rather than one involved in restoration work – although he has carried out this sort of work on murals in churches – his success as an expert mosaicist is illustrated by the fact that, as recently as 2010, Gerometta was called to Toronto to restore the 1930 mosaic lunette on the façade of the Blessed Sacrament Church on Yonge Street.

Gerometta's Views on His Own life and Life in General

The fact that Gerometta has written an exhaustive and frank autobiography – with many details about the happier as well as the less positive phases of his life, and the private as well as the public aspects of it – indicates not only his sharp memory but also his deep reflection on his personal experience, which he presents, more particularly, as that of an artist and immigrant. His observations as he retraces his itinerary are very telling. From the ups and downs of his life story, as he narrates it, a classic pattern emerges. In his journey, there is a hopeful beginning, but then a fall, followed by a new beginning in the mid-1970s.

Some of the details warrant a fuller examination. In spite of having grown up during the war years in Italy, he later dreamed of coming to work in Canada where he hoped he would become a prosperous mosaic artist, but soon after his arrival in this country, the impact of the actual reality of the situation was to cause him great disappointment. His subsequent career in the field of sport, satisfactory and successful as it was, came to an unfortunate halt when his health failed several times along the way, requiring heart bypass surgery in 1976 and hip replacements some years later. In spite of this difficult journey, these numerous obstacles have been overcome and he has fulfilled his aspiration to be able finally to dedicate himself exclusively to art, in good health. Having recovered from his medical challenges, he remains exceptionally youthful to this day, as he continues to follow an admirable regime of exercise and wholesome nutrition. His commentary on his mural *L'amour de la vie* (1989) for Laval Hospital in Quebec City, where he underwent life-restoring surgery (124), seems to express his philosophy of life, founded, as

Riel-Salvatore and Germanotta, "A Showcase of Italian-Canadian Artists." A video by director Roberto Zorfini, "Giovanni the Mosaicist," is available on YouTube, as is another interview with the artist. An unsigned notice about one of his early exhibitions, held in the Manuge Galleries in Halifax, appeared in *The Chronicle-Herald* and *The Mail-Star* in 1982, titled "Gerometta Works to be exhibited."

he explains in the caption to the mural, on hope, fitness, and good nutrition for psychological and physical health and happiness.

As he narrates in his richly illustrated autobiography, it has been an uphill battle for him, but he did finally attain his goal of becoming a full-time artist and especially a mosaic artist. Indeed, he is to be admired as a man from the Friulian plain who has conquered the steep mountains of the Canadian art world.

In spite of his success, his narration, which is followed by the reproductions of his works, ends with a thoughtful open question: If he had been able to pursue the arts exclusively throughout his life, he asks himself, “today, where would I be in my evolution as an artist?” (143). Even following the large section of the volume focused on his artworks and filled with beautiful illustrations (144–309), he adds a brief comment on his life story. The epilogue is subtitled “My Remaining Years.” In it his words continue to convey his great humanity, as he pens some final reflections, which appear to coincide with his more recent fascination with migratory birds. Their characteristic undulating shapes stretching beyond the borders of the frame (as displayed in some privately owned small mosaics and in the 2020–21 work for Beaupré) are self-reflections of himself viewed as a migrant far from his roots and family. The last words of the text by this artist, who has gone beyond the restrictions encountered and still yearns for freedom from the harsher restraints of reality, read as follows: “No matter where he or she lives, an immigrant will always remain an immigrant. The warm welcome I have always received in Quebec has never stopped me from remembering my native Italy” (316).

Like Nasato, Gerometta too has reflected and left us written observations on art that are also worth reviewing, before we proceed to analyze two of his murals in particular.

Gerometta’s Ideas on Art

As has already been noted, after resuming life as an independent full-time artist and eventually an art gallery owner, too, Gerometta successfully developed a distinctive artistic style of his own. Whereas Nasato, compelled to work for various companies, had more limits placed on his creativity, given the need to respond to the demands placed on him from external sources, Gerometta has enjoyed considerably more autonomy and the freedom to experiment according to his own inspiration. Surpassing by far what he might have learned in Spilimbergo, and seeking inspiration from famous artists whose works

would influence his further development, his own personal style is now easily recognizable for the sinuosity of his designs. He explains this in his book when he states the following:

Over the course of this creative process, an ideology of simplicity evolved, notably through the expression of stylized oval shapes, evoking the origins of life. Often inspired by everyday scenes, my art is intended to express sensitivity and freshness. Each work of art is planned out, structured and always reworked. Whether it be a drawing, water colour, mosaic mural or silkscreen, each one represents a long undertaking. (143)

Other general reflections on how he has approached art are recorded in the volume where his comments focus on the two main artistic media he has cultivated, namely, painting and mosaic:

Painting. From my beginnings in art until today, my painting has reflected my pictorial expression and my artistic progress. After having worked with tempera and water colour in my studies at the Friuli Mosaic school in Spilimbergo, I started experimenting with oil during my first trip to Italy in 1961. I was curious to discover this medium of which I had little knowledge, with the exception of some experiments done at Lac-Beauport. Interacting with other artists, I learned to master the oil painting technique, and I adopted it. Still today, I remain fond of it. (145)

On the subject of mosaic, the artistic medium he first mastered in Italy and on which he has concentrated in more recent decades, he stresses that it has provided him – as Nasato had claimed in his own case – with a strong sense of colour, taught him how to conceive a work of art, and shown him the manner in which the treatment of a subject is achieved through the simplicity of forms,⁷⁵ all features that have influenced his painting, too, as he observes.

⁷⁵ The Italian version of the passage appears to convey his ideas most clearly: “Questo tipo d’arte mi ha dato un senso forte del colore, influenzando il mio stile e il modo di concepire le opere. La semplificazione delle forme e il trattamento del soggetto nella realizzazione dei miei mosaici hanno avuto anche un’influenza sulla mia pittura” (261).

At another point in his major publication, he speaks of the importance of drawing, which he first studied at the school of mosaicists in Friuli, Italy, and then pursued further in Quebec: “As the initial gesture in an artistic endeavor, drawing represents the immediate and the spontaneity of the moment as seen by the artist. My drawings have been the basis for my creation for over sixty years. Over time, I experimented and perfected the techniques of this art style, drawing in studio as well as outdoor[s]. My drawings stand behind many paintings executed in my studio” (291). In fact, in order to illustrate the creative process involved, he has chosen to include in his volume many of the original sketches for his works and has placed them alongside the image of each of the corresponding completed works that are featured.

The style that Gerometta has developed in his murals displays certain distinctive features, including multiple curved lines and embracing figures, as has been noted by the numerous critics who have analyzed his works. Lise Montas, for one, highlights the recurring shape of the forms adopted as being that of an egg,⁷⁶ whose significance can be readily appreciated. Indeed, on page 143 of his autobiography, Gerometta himself stresses the basic forms that underlie his works and he explains their meaning, to wit, “stylized oval shapes [that evoke] the origin of life” (“forme ovali stilizzate, [che evocano] l’origine della vita”). As depictions of human relations, the family nest, and expressions of love and happiness, he states that “[his] works are full of tenderness and wholesome youthfulness” (“le mie opere sono tutte tenerezza e freschezza”). These basic observations are fundamental to an appreciation of his work in general and may be kept in mind as we proceed to examine the two murals of his that are of special of interest for this study.

Two Mosaic Murals by Gerometta that Include Indigenous Figures

(i) *Communication interstellaire*, in the Téléport Building (Montreal)

Two of Gerometta’s murals, also reproduced in his book (263, 269), are the focus for the discussion that follows. Both were commissioned for public buildings in Quebec in the late 1980s, that is, in the interval between the two murals by Nasato from the 1960s and 1990s. The first of the two artworks by Gerometta analyzed here, the mural from 1987 titled *Communication interstellaire*, treats the theme of communications (fig. 16 and fig. 17). It was

⁷⁶ Montas, “Les oeuvres récentes de Giovanni Gerometta,” 129.

designed for and originally installed in the lobby of the Téléport building, located in Montreal at 1755 boulevard René Lévesque Est, which once housed the headquarters of cutting-edge technology companies (Telesat Canada, Bell Canada, and CTV network, Bell Media), and now the Bell sports network for Quebec. However, a visit to the location some years ago during the course of my research on mosaics, in order to view the work, proved futile, for even at that time the mural was no longer anywhere to be found. Its disappearance has disconcerted the artist, who claims to have devoted much effort to the project (email communication to me on 26 August 2021). This, like many other instances of the all-too-common disregard for mosaic artwork in Canada, is equally distressing to researchers aiming to record the contribution of Italian-Canadian artists. Either covered over or, as is more likely completely, destroyed, Gerometta's work on communications was probably removed at the time that the building was renovated some years ago.

Fortunately, the original mural can still be documented by means of photographic records preserved by Gerometta, all of which have been reproduced in his autobiographical monograph (262–263), where we find an image of the watercolour maquette, a photograph of the artist standing in front of his almost complete mural being executed in reverse, and another photograph of the completed work after it was installed, with the artist's signature and the date in the lower right section.

Shortly after its installation, the *Communication interstellaire* mural was analyzed in detail in a 1988 article by Jean-Paul Legaré, who announced completion of the mural, believing, rather ironically perhaps, given its unfortunate fate, that it marked what he signalled as the revival of the ancient art of mosaic. Legaré speaks of the preparation of the mosaic even from a physical point of view. He explains that Gerometta worked with the Téléport company in order to develop the communications theme for the mural and then dedicated four months to its creation. Approximately 100 square feet, or nine square metres, (290 centimetres by 290 centimetres) in size, it required the application of approximately 90,000 smalti tesserae which, as the critic reports, Gerometta carefully selected, cut, and pasted to the paper, and then cemented to the wall in the building. The basic materials utilized, as we know and as is reported in the article (63), were obtained from Gerometta's first employer, the earlier mosaicist and by then retired Walter Del Mistro.

As for its formal content, the mural consists of a series of scenes making up the bottom two thirds of the surface, with a large central figure stretching vertically to the top. Each of the many scenes represents a different form of

communication in its human form, including the smoke signals of Indigenous Americans, the amorous communication of lovers, the sign language of the deaf, and a courier who runs to deliver a message, with the culminating point on high depicting a much larger human figure reaching up to the planets for the conquest of space. As Legaré has observed, it is an original interpretation of the theme of communication that insists on the human aspect, with persons depicted in the act of communicating in different ways. This humanized representation can be even better appreciated, moreover, if it is compared to two other mosaic panels on the theme of communications designed by other artists and found in Ontario and Quebec, one abstract and the other technological, both rather cold and lacking the human dimension stressed instead by Gerometta. The massive mural, consisting of five panels, each measuring 1.5 by 7.6 metres, placed side by side high up on the façade of the Bell Canada building on Adelaide Street West in Toronto,⁷⁷ was designed in 1965 by well-known Canadian artist York Wilson (1907–1984) and executed by Luigi Nasato. It presents a sequence of abstract and difficult to decipher pictorial forms representing writing (depicted by means of ancient letters and signs), art (by cave drawings), music (by square notes and stylized drums), speaking (suggested by an open mouth amid sound waves), and finally telecommunication satellites. In that work, the different forms of communication are singled out synchronically according to genre. Similarly, in the small floor panels designed and executed in the 1960s for the vestibule of the Basilica of Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré on the theme of the arts and trades, Del Mistro stresses technological advances by means of images of modern instruments of communication used at that time in offices, namely a typewriter, a telephone, and a photocopier, but with no human presence.⁷⁸ The contrast between these two works and Gerometta's idea and depiction of communication is striking and points to the latter's marked humanized approach and to other differences as well.

In Gerometta's work, the scene of particular interest for this discussion appears in the upper section on the far left, that is, in the very first section that one encounters and reads when examining the work from left to right. It is in this section that an Indigenous element is to be found, illustrating communication through smoke signals and involving two persons, one in the foreground with his arm stretched out toward the smoke that rises in

⁷⁷ This mural is discussed in my articles, for example, "From Friuli," 30. See also K[ritzweiser], "Wilson Rings Bell with Mosaics," and "76 Adelaide' Opens."

⁷⁸ See Pugliese, "Il contributo," 157 and figure 9.

an S shape and another person visible behind the smoke, according to the description provided by the artist himself in an email communication of 18 September 2021. The figures are quite stylized and may not appear to bear features that are necessarily identifiable as Indigenous, but the smoke signals offer a definitely recognizable clue as to their identity. In reply to my question about his inspiration for the image, in an email communication dated 26 August 2021, Gerometta explained that it was his idea to treat the theme of the various forms of communication in Canada according to their chronological development. Beginning with earlier times, he thought of the exchange of messages by means of smoke signals used by the Indigenous peoples of the far west to announce the arrival of the invading white enemy. He introduced it in this manner because, during his youth in Italy after the Second World War, the first “cowboy” movies were being projected in his village and provided images that remained firmly in his mind. Even if having to resort to his early experience of watching films as a young man in Italy, meaning that he had no recent or direct contact or real knowledge of Indigenous peoples,⁷⁹ the artist must be credited with having highlighted in prime position the life and communication methods prevalent, in his view, in Aboriginal Canadian history.

(ii) *Synergie portuaire* in the Customs House, Port of Quebec

The second work by Gerometta of interest for the present discussion is the mural titled *Synergie portuaire* (fig. 18), which was installed in 1989 in the Customs House, located close to the St. Lawrence River, at 150 rue Dalhousie at the Port of Quebec. It is reproduced in the artist’s book (269) and is accompanied by the original pencil sketch and watercolour study for the mural (268), both of which are preserved in the artist’s private collection. Measuring 152 cm by 396 cm, the completed mural is still seen today in its originally designated location, in the entrance to the magnificent classically styled building from the nineteenth century, characterized by its colonnaded entrance. Installed as an addition 120 years after the impressive building’s construction, the mural appears to be intended to highlight the importance of what was actually the oldest port in Canada, and is still today the second largest in Quebec, next in size to that of Montreal. An important hub of commerce in earlier times, it retains an imposing presence and status that Gerometta clearly attempts to capture in his mural.

⁷⁹ Observations on this issue made by Dr. Matteo Leta were much appreciated.

The mosaic mural consists of a series of juxtaposed scenes representing trade, transportation, and the industries served by the port. As the two words of the title indicate, the port itself is the emblematic place where all these human activities converge, producing strength in synergy as the diverse elements come together, constituting great diversity and unified power that are underscored in the mural through the use of multiple strong and distinguishable colours to portray the various scenes.

In the sequence of juxtaposed scenes, once again Gerometta begins on the left with an Indigenous man in a canoe, recognizable by his long hair and traditional means of transportation, and representing, as the artist explains, the fur trade in colonial times. It is followed by transportation on land and sea, various industries (coal, wood, grain, paper), and more modern containers on ships. Water and the river, all-important for commerce, dominate in the depiction of the body of water stretching over the globe, a sphere which is placed in the centre of the mural. It is the vital element connecting places and enabling commerce and trade. In the depiction of the means of transportation, too, there is a progression from the canoe to sail ships, representing an older type of navigation to the more modern computerized form of navigation. Also notable here is the presence of human figures in practically every scene. There is even a person operating a computer, in the office of a shipping company, one may surmise. By contrast, no figures were to be found in Del Mistro's floor mosaic depicting modern technological office instruments, including a keyboard that was part of a typewriter.

In Gerometta's port mural, the circular forms typical of his general artistic style are seen here overlapping each other in continual motion, not in separate panels, as was the case in Wilson's separate and detached panels on communication. Arranged in a sort of progression, Gerometta's circular scenes serve to suggest not only movement and activity, but also the connectedness of one phase to the next in the development of maritime commerce.

Interestingly, a small glimpse of the classical columns that characterize the imposing façade of the Customs House's architectural structure is inserted discreetly in a small section of the mural in order to suggest the past as well as the present and future. Again, in this mural, as in the previous one, now lost, Gerometta's sense of history and a recognition of the place of the Indigenous peoples in that history is clear.

Conclusion

The murals by Nasato and Gerometta examined here have definite intrinsic aesthetic value as fine works of art in mosaic. Yet, the fact that even the most minuscule examples of what can be classified as Indigenous elements are to be identified in so few mosaic murals as these – that is, in only four out of the 200 in my research sample base – is indicative of the lack of a real, close, or extensive relationship between the Italian-Canadian community and its artists, on the one hand, and the Native people of Canada, on the other. Although the future, as one hopes, may bring about greater relations and even more artworks linking the two worlds, for the time being the paucity of data and very low number of mosaics featuring Indigenous images or references speaks for itself about the little knowledge and, to say the least, very scanty connections between the two cultures. This study does nothing to change that reality; it merely reinforces the truth of a problematic situation.

Information provided directly by Gerometta, the artist who is still active, and data gathered from documents written by the other artist, Luigi Nasato, or obtained from his descendants or other external evidence relating to his experience, do not lead us to believe that there might have been any direct contact between the artists and the Indigenous subjects they treated, either. Nothing in their respective lives, as recorded or reconstructed, would indicate otherwise. In their work, the artists merely reflect the situation in the community at large.⁸⁰

An objective examination of the four murals by the two artists featured here reveals that the treatment of the Indigenous subjects and the specific depictions of Native Canadians displayed in them – their features, their clothing, and their demeanour – are entirely stereotypical. In all fairness, though, it must be acknowledged that, in each case, the overall theme was imposed on the artist by the commissioning agent for a specific institution: (1) Indigenous culture for Camsell Hospital, (2) multicultural Toronto or Canada for St. John Bosco Church, (3) forms of communication for a media company, and finally (4) commerce in the traditionally important and

⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the previously unpublished work of David Della Rossa, son of the mosaicist discussed earlier in this paper, is quite remarkable. Drawing on his previous thesis research in Environmental Studies at York University, he compares and finds parallels between the traditional agricultural practices of the Native peoples of Canada to that of his ancestors from the Friuli region of Italy, whose customs from an earlier generation would be most familiar to him.

once-bustling Port of Quebec. One might well expect to find, as has been verified, a completely Indigenous scene in the first mural, a more marginal one in the second, and not necessarily anything remotely Indigenous in either the third or fourth works.

Both artists were commissioned to produce their respective murals and were assigned the themes to treat. Yet, as we have seen in the discussions above, both – at least for the second, third and fourth murals, if not for the first – were given considerable free rein and, in the solutions they found, have demonstrated their creativity and personal feelings. In the church mural by the artist Nasato, we find evidence of a profoundly felt attempt at inclusion and an altruistic stress on multiculturalism, indeed a great appreciation of modern Canadian culture. Even if the Indigenous figure is only one of many, it may appear to stand out somewhat from the crowd, but in truth is not given any sort of privileged position. This is true of Nasato's procession mural, which was executed, and even of his rejected design based on the idea of multiple religions. On the other hand, in both his murals, Gerometta has spontaneously chosen to include elements of Indigenous culture that cannot be interpreted as being necessarily dictated or required in a celebration of communication and commerce in the Canadian context. They appear, nevertheless, and in both cases on the left side, representing the very first of the sequences of scenes.

This article about their murals has also been, in a sense, commissioned for a thematically predetermined issue of a journal. As a second-generation Italian Canadian myself with no knowledge of Native Canadian culture, my highlighting the four works, and even the stereotypical elements found in them relating to the Indigenous, may be viewed simply as part of the “symbolic gestures” that Canadian universities have been accused by Vancouver journalist Douglas Quan of making, gestures that are “superficial” and “surface-level.”⁸¹ The need exists for real dialogue and serious study in order to acquire, and to record artistically, a more profound appreciation and fact-based knowledge of our Indigenous neighbours and predecessors in Canada. Completing the composition of this article during the six days of the papal visit to the Indigenous peoples of Canada in July 2022 has made it an exercise with particular personal poignancy.

⁸¹ Quan, “How the ‘Indigenization’ of Canadian Universities Is Falling Flat.”

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Letters from Luigi Nasato addressed to Riccardo Masini.

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Discography

Luigi Nasato, interviewed by Olga Zorzi Pugliese and Angelo Principe, 3 December 2002. CD converted from original audio tape. Private collection.

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1. Company photograph of Luigi Nasato working as a mosaicist for Conn-Arts Studio in the early 1960s. Artist's private collection.



2. Luigi Nasato in his home studio in 2003. Photograph by research assistant Cindy Mark. Private collection.



3. Photograph of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre grand staircase newel in ruins. Artist's private collection.



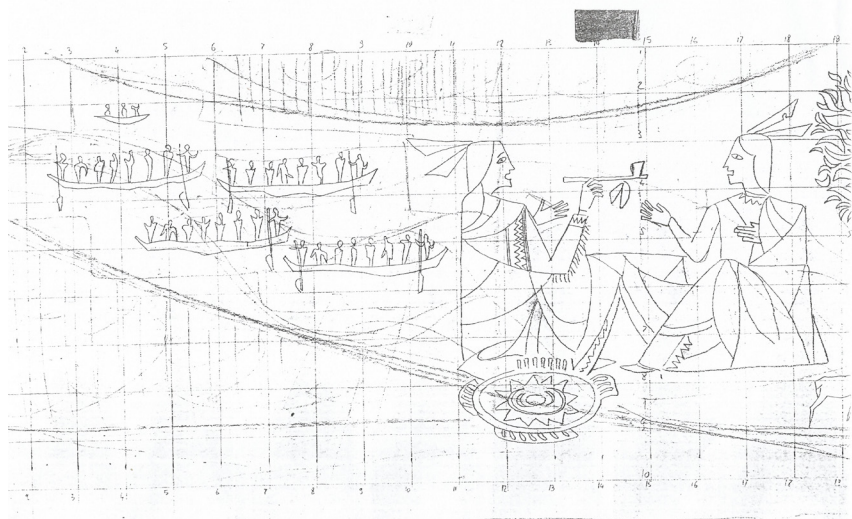
4. Elgin Theatre staircase newel as it is now after restoration by Luigi Nasato (<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=elgin+theatre+staircase>).



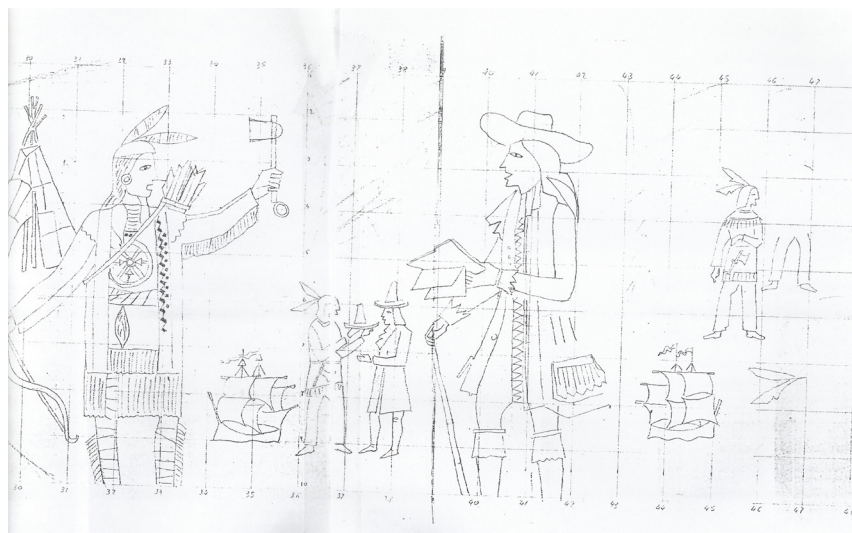
5. Camsell mural photograph from ca. 2010 showing the left side and centre section. Right side is not seen. Courtesy of architect Gene Dub, Edmonton.



6. Image of the Camsell mural in its entirety. Courtesy of architect Gene Dub, Edmonton.



7. Luigi Nasato drawings for the Camsell mural (left side). Artist's private collection.



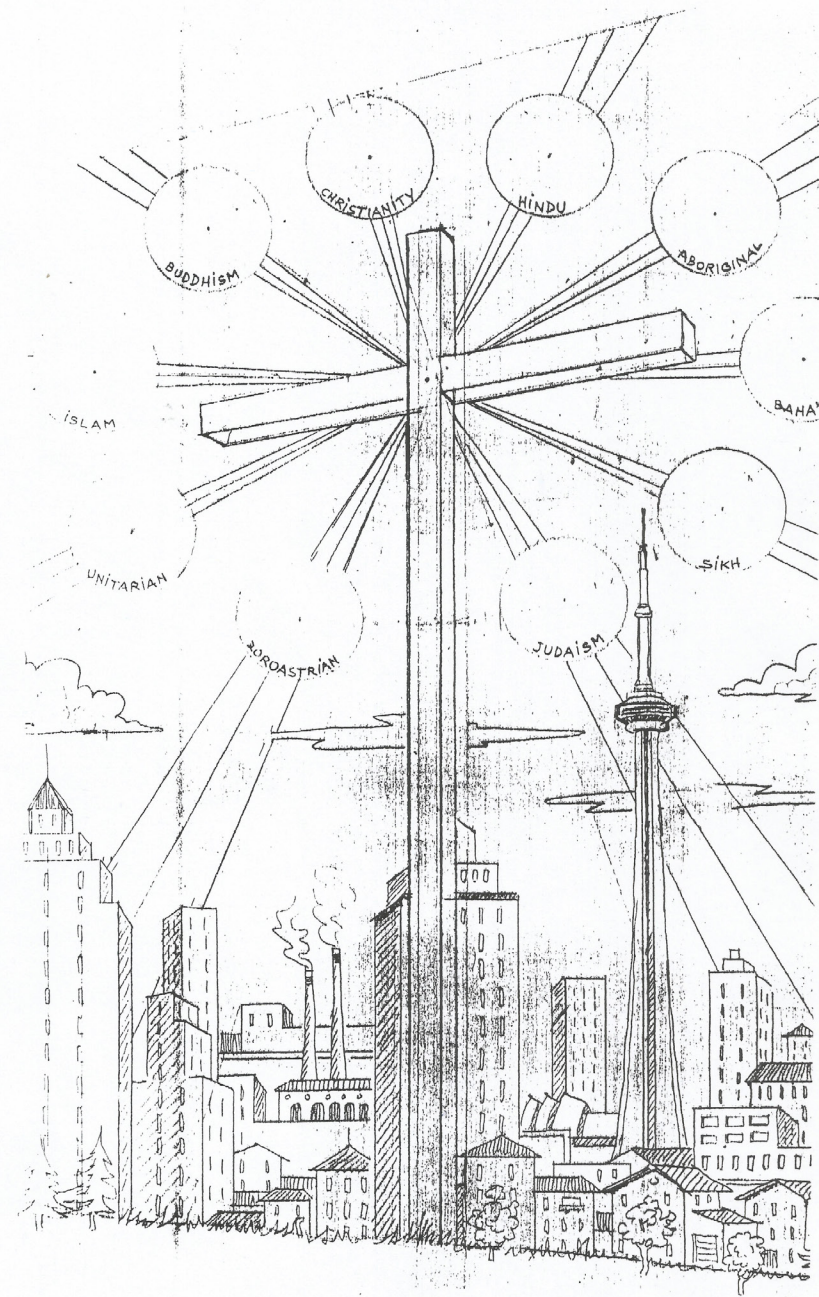
8. Luigi Nasato drawings for the Camsell mural (right side). Artist's private collection.



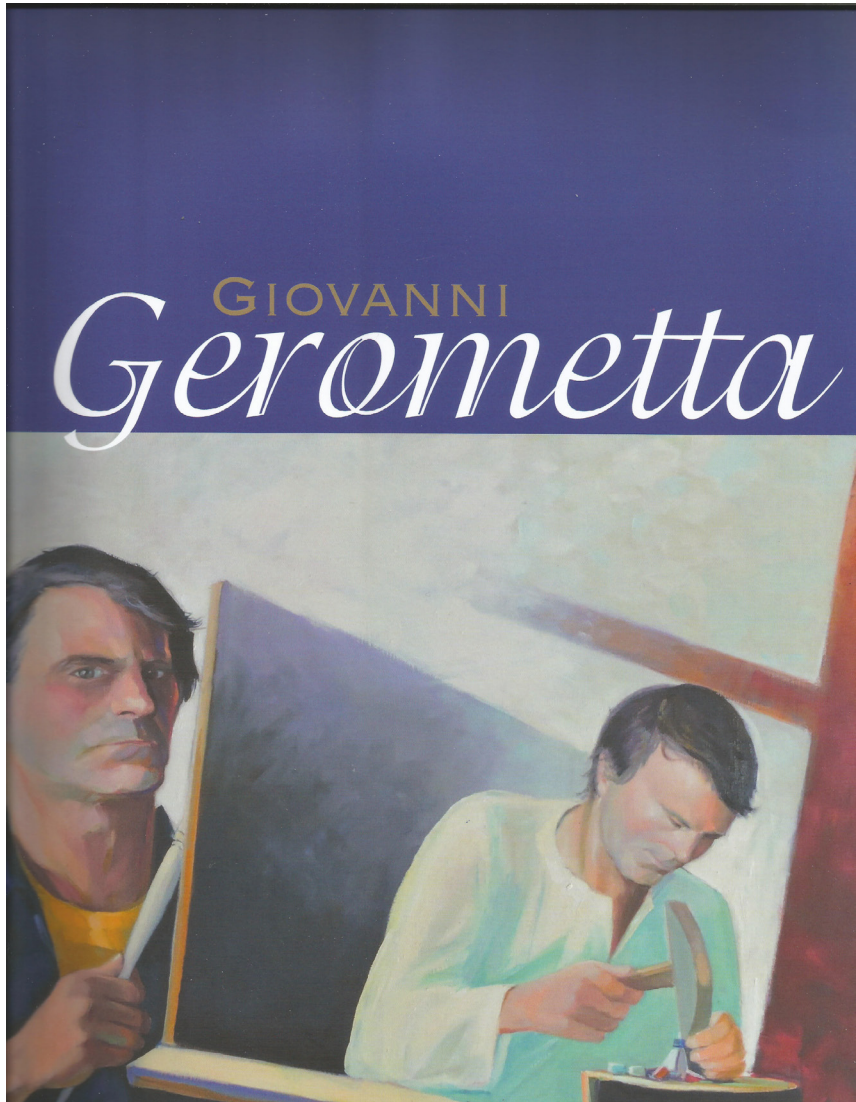
9. Mario Della Rossa demonstrating mosaic techniques in his home studio in 2002. Photograph by O.Z. Pugliese. Private collection.



10. Detail of the procession mural, St. John Bosco Church, Toronto. Photograph by research assistant Joe Ferrari. Private collection.



11. Early drawing by Luigi Nasato for the altar mural, St. John Bosco Church, Toronto. Artist's private collection.



12. Giovanni Gerometta, Self-portraits as painter and mosaic artist on the cover of his autobiography, *La mia vita – la mia arte. My Life – My Artwork. Ma vie – mon oeuvre.*



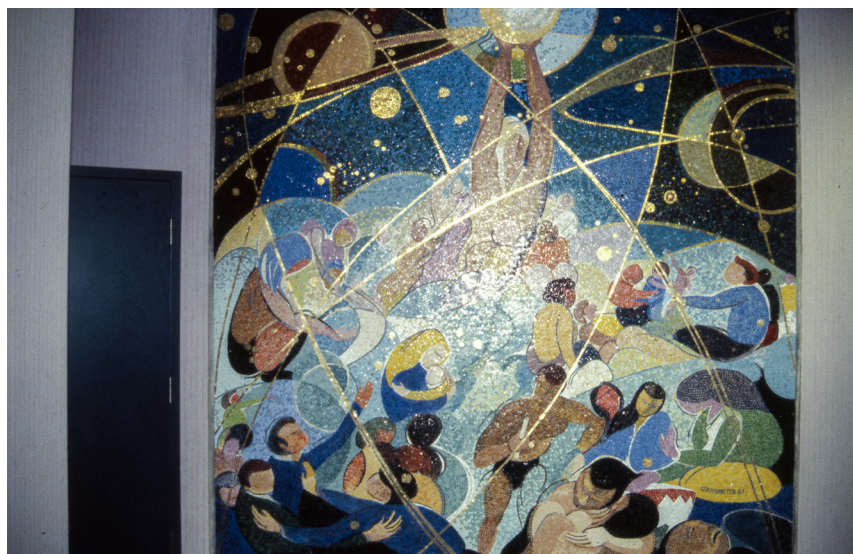
13. Giovanni Gerometta standing in front of *Les forces de la vie* (1989), Complexe de la Capitale, Quebec City. Photograph by O.Z. Pugliese, 2010. Private collection.



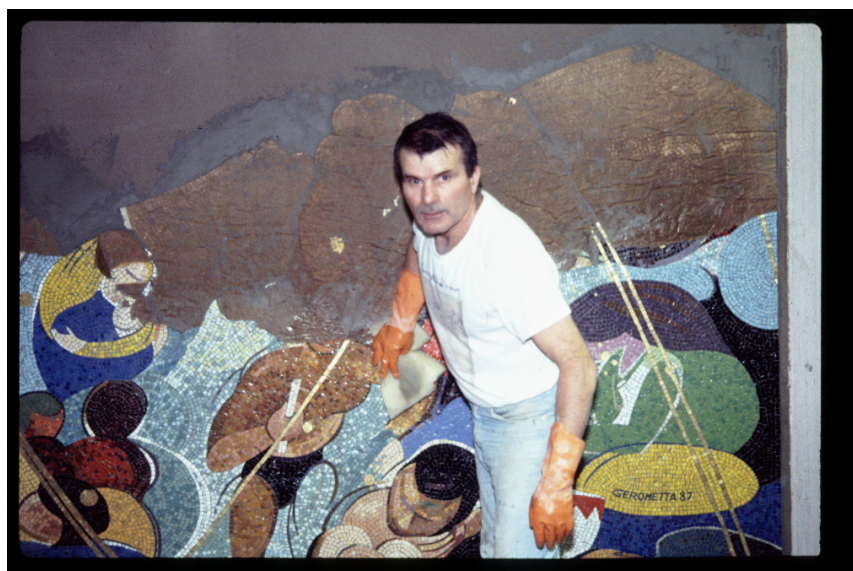
14. Giovanni Gerometta, *Liberté*, Ville de Beaupré (2020–21). Artist's private collection.



15. Detail of Giovanni Gerometta, *Liberté*.



16. Giovanni Gerometta, *Communication interstellaire* (1987), Téléport, Montreal. Artist's private collection.



17. Photograph of Giovanni Gerometta working on the Téléport mural. Artist's private collection.



18. Giovanni Gerometta, *Synergie portuaire* (1989), Customs House, Port of Quebec, Quebec City. Artist's private collection.