

Obituaries

Armando Baldinelli - Mosaic master who was energised by Africa

By Chris Barron

ARMANDO Baldinelli, who has died in Johannesburg at the age of 93, brought mosaic art to South Africa after his arrival in the country from Italy in 1953.

His mosaics were commissioned for numerous public buildings around South Africa, including Johannesburg's Hyde Park shopping centre where he completed an imposing 9x3m mosaic in the cinema area; Johannesburg International Airport; the old Transvaal Provincial Administration building in Pretoria; the old Natal Provincial Administration building in Pietermaritzburg; the foyer of Addington Hospital in Durban; and the Military Academy at Saldanha Bay.

He also did mosaics and designed stained-glass windows for churches such as the Catholic Seminary in Pretoria, for which he did The Stations of the Cross, St George's Presbyterian Church in Johannesburg and St David's Anglican Church in Pietermaritzburg.

Baldinelli was a versatile artist who also did charcoal drawings, oil paintings (including an enormous one for the State Theatre in Pretoria), watercolours, stone paintings, wood engravings and frescoes, many of which are in galleries and private and corporate collections in Rome, Florence, Milan, Bologna, Venice, New York, London, Tokyo and South Africa.

Baldinelli was born in the Italian city of Ancona on September 13 1908. He began his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome when he was 17, and continued at the Bologna Lyceum and the School of Advanced Arts in Modena.

By 30 he had become a regular participant in the Venice Biennale and had exhibited in Berlin, Budapest and cities throughout Italy.

He saw active service in World War 2. He became a captain and was leaving for the Russian front (where half the Italian army had been slaughtered) when the war ended.

Afterwards he travelled and exhibited extensively in Europe, the US and the Far East.

By the 1950s, his wife, Gianna, had died (at the age of 26), and he had become disaffected by the increasingly turbulent state of affairs in post-war Italy where the rise in popularity of the communists was not the least of his concerns. A friend who was managing the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg suggested he visit South Africa. He fell in love with the country and with indications that there'd be a good market for his work, he decided to stay.

Baldinelli based himself initially in the Carlton, where he used his bathroom as a studio until his friend encouraged him to move on.

After staying at the Orange Grove Hotel, which had become a focal point for a budding community of expat Italian artists such as Eduardo Villa and Pino Cattaneo, Baldinelli built a home and studio for himself in Oaklands where he lived (with his daughter who died in 1981) and worked until he died.

He was an artist of international repute when he came to South Africa and there are those who feel he would have become one of the world's greats if he had stayed closer to where it was all happening, artistically. Nevertheless, he stayed in touch by travelling extensively and lived for short periods in the 1960s in New York and Japan.

From the artistic centres of the First World, South Africa in the 1950s may have been viewed as a backwater but, in fact, far from dulling Baldinelli's creativity, his move gave it a terrific boost.

A relatively conservative artist before his arrival, his work almost conscientiously reflecting the post-Cubist influences he'd absorbed as a youth, and his major claim to distinction (certainly no mean one) being his technical accomplishment, after his arrival he seemed a new man.

Stimulated by the sunlight and an African landscape more exciting and untamed than anything he was used to - and also, perhaps, by his distance from the expectations of Europe - Baldinelli cast aside the conventions which had held his creativity in check and began to experiment with new forms and techniques, unorthodox materials and new ways of shaping and combining them into his art. Instead of sticking to the traditional way of doing mosaics, with small uniform blocks of stone, he began incorporating bits of bottles and shells. His goal was total freedom of expression.

He was the first artist of substance in South Africa to create assemblages, transforming "found objects", whatever came to hand, including bits of glass, driftwood and old motorcar parts, into art.

As abstract and fantastical as his work became, there was nothing reckless, unthinking or uninformed about it. "Between reality and the canvas something goes through my soul and that is the quality that people should see below the surface of the paintings," he once explained.

And if some observers were non-plussed by his work, he was certainly never short of commissions.

Baldinelli was a small, gregarious man with boundless energy. He was driven by a relentless hunger to transform his passion into art as directly as possible, and an equally relentless appetite for popular recognition.

Baldinelli never remarried, but bachelorhood had its compensations. His eye for young, beautiful women was legendary. The female form, along with the South African landscape, was his greatest source of inspiration and its rounded shapes are evident in most of his work.

His nudes were always popular and not long before his death someone came out from London just to buy a couple.

Baldinelli is survived by his granddaughter, Laura.