

RUSCONI'S MARBLE MASTERPIECE

– Kent Henderson

During my recent trip to Wee Jasper for the Book Launch thereat, I took Andy Spate's advice (as I often do) and called in *en route* to the Visitor's Centre at Gundagai. Of course, Gundagai is well known for the famous 'Dog on the Tuckerbox' (of which more shortly), and several iconic songs such as 'The Road to Gundagai'.

What is less well known, perhaps, is Rusconi's Marble Masterpiece – which is housed in the said Visitor's Centre. One pays four dollars, which gains you entry to the side room containing the Masterpiece, and the audio commentary that accompanies it.

The Rusconi Marble Masterpiece is a miniature cathedral (or maybe a palace). Rusconi, who lived most of his life in Gundagai, also sculptured the model for the 'Dog on the Tuckerbox'. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* online gives a concise summary of Rusconi's life:

Francis (Frank) Philip Rusconi (1874-1964) was a monumental mason. He was born on 20 August 1874 at Bell's Creek, near Braidwood, New South Wales, fourth child of Peter Rusconi, Swiss goldminer and monumental mason, and his Australian wife Mary, née McCarthy. After Frank's mother died in 1878, his father took the children to Switzerland to be looked after by his sister.

Aged 15 Frank was apprenticed to the marble trade at Verquinto, Italy. On completing his apprenticeship at Neuchâtel, Switzerland, he became foreman and 'foreman interpreter' with Renard, Fèvre & Co. of Paris and Conblanchien, working in France, Italy and England.

Returning to New South Wales in 1901, Rusconi discovered and opened the Borenore marble quarries near Orange, which he worked with his father and brother Joe. The marble became very popular, the red being used in public buildings such as Central Railway Station, Sydney, while the blue, containing fossilized corals, was a very rich marble for ornaments and furnishings.

Settling at Gundagai in 1905, Rusconi established a monumental masonry business. His tombstones and funerary monuments were of excellent quality in material and workmanship, often quite conventional in design. His early sentimental and charming Edwardian female figures involved more creativity and skill.

Signed tombstones are at Gundagai, Orange, Cudal and Galong cemeteries; the largest and most dramatic is a pair of seven metre high, white marble monuments to the Ryan family at Galong, each incorporating four life-size female figures representing Faith, Hope, Memory and Grief. Other notable works are the two war memorials at Gundagai and the marble altar in Tumut Catholic church.

By 1909 Rusconi had begun collecting different marbles from all parts of the State, using them in his 'marble masterpiece', an elaborately detailed four foot high model of an imaginary Baroque Italian palace set in a formal square and consisting of 20,948 pieces from twenty different marble varieties. After working on it at night for twenty-eight years, he completed it in 1938. He also made a detailed miniature marble model of the altar at St. Marie's Cathedral outside Paris, on which he had worked in youth, and carved objects from the Borenore marbles, including inkstands, ashtrays, paperweights, brooches and a large rose-bowl.

The bronze sculpture of the 'Dog on the Tuckerbox', erected five miles (eight kilometers) from Gundagai in 1933, is Rusconi's best-known work, but bronze was not his medium. Although he lost the sight of his right eye in 1922, he continued working into old age. When too crippled with arthritis to carve marble, he made small plaster souvenirs of the 'Dog on the Tuckerbox' for tourists. Survived by his wife and their three sons and daughter, he died at Cootamundra on 21 May 1964 and was buried in the Catholic section of Gundagai cemetery.

So! It is absolutely wonderful – and undoubtedly the most magnificent main-made 'karst feature' in Australia! If you happen to be passing Gundagai, it is not to be missed – call in!



Rusconi's Marble Masterpiece
in the Gundagai Visitor's Centre.