By Armando Delicato

During the first half of the 20th Century, Detroit was one of the fastest growing cities in the United States.

The tremendous growth of the automobile industry fueled the rush to Detroit by immigrants and native Americans alike. This growth led to a big increase in construction to serve the rapidly growing population.

Among the tens of thousands of Italian Americans that came to Detroit during these years were many who became involved in the construction industry. While Italian muscle built the infrastructure and buildings in the city, some Italians also were critical to the design as well.

Italy has always nurtured great artistic and creative minds. Many craftsmen and artists came to America and contributed to the ‘finer things of life’ here. Among them was Corrado Parducci. Born in Buti, near Pisa in Italy, he was the middle child of 13 children. He and his father immigrated to America when he was 4 years old leaving the rest of the family behind. They settled in New York where he was soon put into a Catholic orphanage when his father found that he couldn’t raise a child on his own.

When his mother and siblings arrived from Italy in 1906, he finally was able to experience normal family life in New York’s Little Italy.

With the assistance of philanthropic American benefactors, his talent in the arts was discovered in elementary school and a scholarship led to a boarding school of the arts in New York City where he developed his artistic talent in sculpture. Despite the scholarship, however, family needs dictated that he quit school and go to work to support his family.

As a young adult, he worked for an architectural firm in New York where he learned his particular skill of bas relief, a process where sculpture is part of a wall as opposed to free standing. During this time he developed his skill by working with other talented sculptors.

During the building boom of the 1920s, the architectural firm of Albert Kahn was designing many of the important industrial and commercial buildings in Detroit. He became acquainted with Corrado Parducci in New York and persuaded him to come to Detroit to work on bank buildings downtown. Parducci agreed to come temporarily, but his work was so popular that he finally relocated his family to the city and spent the rest of his career designing for a number of firms in his new home town.

Corrado Parducci was a multi-talented artist whose work is found throughout southeastern Michigan and the United States. Many of the most outstanding buildings of the region highlight the beautiful work of this Italian American genius.

In downtown Detroit, the Guardian, Penobscot and Buhl buildings all are adorned with bas reliefs designed by Parducci. The Fisher Building, the Detroit Water Department in southwest Detroit as well as churches such as Shrine of the Little Flower and St. Aloysius also include exterior and interior works by this great artist.

The great Parducci was prolific during the boom years of Detroit’s growth. During the Great Depression, construction came to a halt but he continued to work on a number of Catholic churches in southeast Michigan.

By the end of World War II, architectural tastes changed and the International Style of architecture became dominant: plain walls of glass and unadorned stone. Nevertheless, Parducci continued to create until his death in 1981. In 1980, he created his last bas relief for the New York State Senate Building in Albany. In all, Corrado Parducci created upwards of 600 works of art. No one knows exactly how many works he created because he didn’t sign his work, believing that art, not the artist, should be the focus of his creations.

Italian Americans have made many contributions to their ‘new’ country in all fields of endeavor. In every case, an eye for beauty and quality has guided them in their ventures. Detroit is fortunate to have many examples of artistic works created by Italians.

Italian Americans should feel great pride when viewing the works of their creative compatriots who have contributed so much to American culture.

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