

THE PARAGON CAFÉ, KATOOMBA.

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Abstract:

In 2016 the Paragon Café in Katoomba will celebrate its centenary. During its first thirty years, the Simos family created an institution which stood out among the Greek cafés of Australia for its stylishness and flair. Its Art Deco features, the work of distinguished and well-chosen architects, designers and artists, have survived with unusual integrity in three downstairs salons. But as well as its public face, the Paragon has a contrasting industrial space upstairs, where for eighty years its renowned chocolates have been manufactured and its baking accomplished. Much of this early machinery, imported from the world's best suppliers, is still upstairs, though no longer all *in situ*. It is this combination of Art Deco public space with industrial archaeology which gives the Paragon exceptionally high significance.

Key Words: Paragon, Café, Restaurant, Art Deco, Simos, Blue Mountains

INTRODUCTION

The Upper Mountains are well supplied with icons both of the natural environment and of the European built environment. The built environment from the later nineteenth century onwards relates overwhelmingly to the tourist industry: the railway which brought city-dwellers up from the plain for holidays, the hotels and guest-houses, the cafés and restaurants and the homes of those who serviced the visitors. Among these places of heritage significance, one particular café stands out.

The Paragon Café in Katoomba was presciently named by Zacharias Simos in 1916 (Simos 1916). There are many Greek cafés in New South Wales, forming an important heritage genre. But no other surviving Greek café in the state has comparable stylishness, integrity and wealth of aesthetic and industrial heritage.

The Paragon dates from quite near the beginning of a new phenomenon in Australian cities and country towns, the Greek café. Although the Greek diaspora,

especially to America and Australia, had begun early in the nineteenth century, it had gained momentum only from the 1870s: over the following century over three million Greeks, both men and women, emigrated. The primary reason for many leaving their homeland in the late nineteenth century was economic, exacerbated by a sharp decline in the price of staple exports such as figs and currants and the wholesale replacement in some places of olive-groves by vineyards. But political problems with the Ottoman Empire and a degree of racial exclusion within Greece and its islands were also significant (Tamis 2003, pp.16-17).

A number of these late Victorian and Edwardian émigrés from Greece, often with experience of the United States as well, direct or indirect, created a new café experience in cities and towns throughout Australia. The Greek café has been described by Leonard Janiszewski as 'essentially an evolutionary amalgam' of the Greek coffee-house and the American oyster saloon and soda parlour with the familiar fare of the existing British-Australian steak-house (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2002, pp.14-18). That is to say, the Greek café was Greek enough, but was intelligently multicultural in attracting and retaining an Australian clientele.

There were a few areas of Greece which supplied a remarkably large proportion of successful migrants to the antipodes. Three quite small islands, Kastellorizo close to Turkey, Ithaca in the Ionian Islands to the west of Greece and Kythera to the south, were the origin of over 40% of all Australian-Greeks in the earlier twentieth century (Tsounis 1975, p.22).

The Kytherans in particular built on the success of their fellow islanders, the Kominos brothers, Athanasios and Ioannis, who had pioneered the Greek fish shop and oyster bar in Sydney in the 1870s and 1880s. After the death of Athanasios in 1897, his brother, now called John Comino, developed a chain of premises, both wholesale and retail, to sell oysters and other seafood both along the coast and in many

country towns, including Katoomba (Turnbull and Valiotis 2001, pp.19 & 21). The family grew and throughout the first half of 1912 two Comino brothers published advertisements for their Cosmopolitan Café in Katoomba. They described their new café as ‘The Palate Pleaser’, as ‘The Epicures’ Rendezvous’ and as ‘The Paragon of Mountain Restaurants’ (Figure 1; Comino Bros. (1912a to 1912b)). The café was called the Cosmopolitan, but it was also a paragon of its kind.



Figure 1. Advertisement for the Comino brothers’ Cosmopolitan Café in Katoomba (Comino Bros. 1912a).

Comino’s Cosmopolitan Café was a two-storey building on Main Street, Katoomba. This was the original line of the Great Western Highway and is now called Bathurst Road. The new café was shrewdly sited in the commercial development close to the railway station. Katoomba had only begun to take its present shape in the early 1880s, when the large land-holding of James Henry Neale, acquired in 1877 and 1878, was sold and sub-divided (Figure 2). Neale was a master butcher and Sydney politician, who had been a member of the Legislative Assembly from 1864 until 1874. He bought portions of land at Katoomba partly as a speculation, partly to build himself a country retreat. His fine house called *Froma* was the first private residence, where the Cultural Centre now stands (Woods 1997, p.79).

It was Neale’s successor, Frederick Clissold, who effectively created the modern street system. Parke, Katoomba and Lurline Streets ran north-south. The southern edge was defined by Waratah Street, running east-west, while the Great Western Highway and the railway defined the northern limit (Figure 2).

Frederick Clissold, who was the critical catalyst for change, had made his fortune as a fellmonger in Newtown and a woolwasher in Canterbury in the late 1860s and had lived in some style in Ashfield at *Mountjoy*. After retiring to England to restore his health in the late 1870s, Clissold returned to New

South Wales and became a wealthy property dealer in the 1880s, with a famous stable of race-horses (Coupe 1988, pp.79-81). Although Katoomba was only one of his many short-term investments, Clissold is the real founder of Katoomba’s central business district which was so dependant on the two long parallel streets, Katoomba and Lurline. There was an increasing concentration of commercial premises and tourist facilities within Clissold’s rectangle, with many churches and places of entertainment, as the 78 allotments created in 1881 were, over two decades, purchased and developed.

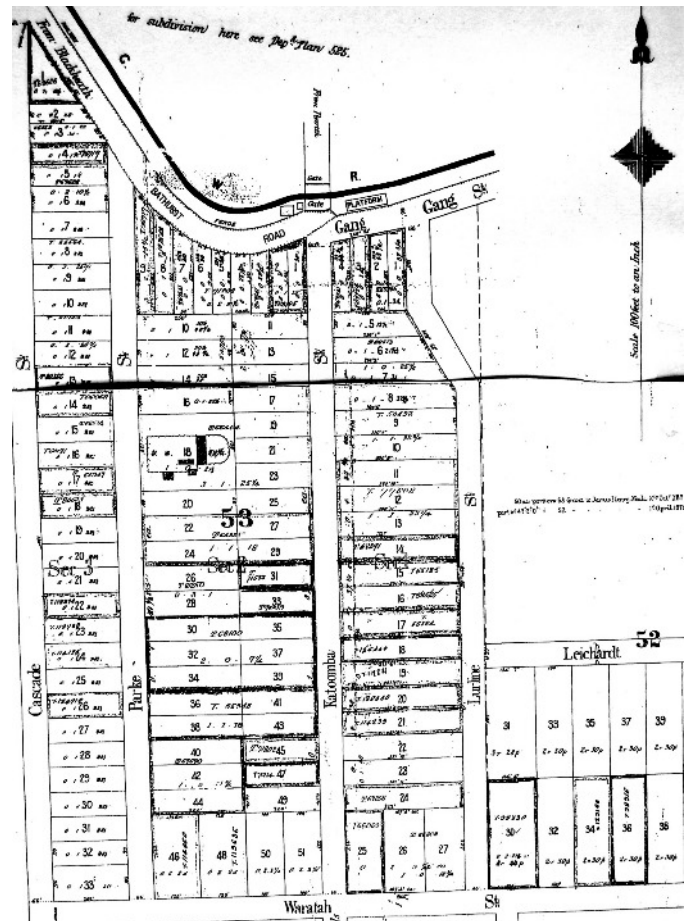


Figure 2. Sub-division of J.H. Neale’s estate in Katoomba, 1881. The streets are already named. (Department of Lands 1881).

But there was still a lot of free space in Katoomba when the Comino brothers opened the Cosmopolitan Café. A marvellous photograph of the partially developed town, published in 1907, was taken from the most spectacular of the early consolidations, the Carrington Hotel (Figure 3).

The Carrington, re-named after the governor who visited in 1886, took up a great deal of space. But during the period from the 1890s up to the First World War, the whole area around the great hotel was developed. This was all quite close to the railway station, along Katoomba, Parke, Lurline and Main



Figure 5. First advertisement for the Paragon, 15 September 1916 (Simos 1916).

He instantly made a speciality of ‘late suppers’ to attract patrons of the various shows and dances in Katoomba, while for those who stayed quietly at home he offered to deliver fresh lobsters and oysters anywhere in the Mountains (Simos 1916).

Is the name he chose an index of Greekness? Certainly the names of Greek cafés in Australia were often derived from their owner’s homeland. There are lots of cafes called the Acropolis or the Parthenon or the Marathon (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2002, p.15). The Comino brothers had described their café in Katoomba as the ‘paragon of Mountain restaurants’ but they had not named it the Paragon. They called it the Cosmopolitan, which gives nothing away at all (Figure 1).

The name Paragon was not unusual as a name of a catering establishment as well as a puff about its quality, but it did not have an exclusively Greek connection. There were Paragon hotels and cafés in Sydney (Anonymous 1916, col.2) and in country towns such as Mudgee (Anonymous 1915) and Helensburgh (Nathan 1919). The cinema in Leura at that time was run by Paragon Picture Proprietary and the printery in Katoomba, just across the road from the Paragon Café, was the Paragon Printing Works (Gilbert 1916; Buchanan 1919). Most people assume that Paragon is a Greek name and indeed there is a classical Greek word *παράγων*, but ironically it means ‘misleading’, where something can easily be mistaken for something similar (like false gold). The English meaning of ‘a model of excellence’ comes from Old French. So Zac Simos, like the Cominos, was not playing the ethnic card when he chose the name of his Paragon Café and Oyster Palace.

Simos did not try to name his café in any American style either, although he was advertising from the outset his ‘American fountain drinks’ (Simos 1916), following the example, in particular, of the Anglo-American Company, founded in Sydney by three young American-Greeks in 1912. The First World War saw the triumph of the American soda bar, recreated in Australia by Greek migrants (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2002, p.15). Simos was quick to join the trend.

Elsewhere in the state there were lots of Greek cafes which chose American names, such as the Californian or the Golden Gate or the Monterey (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2002, p.15). In Bathurst Road, Katoomba, just round the corner from the Paragon, G.D. Comino had leased Thomas Trimbell’s refreshment room at nos. 90-92 and opened the Acropolis café in 1917, but in 1919 Comino changed the name to Niagara with the ‘latest model Iceless Soda Fountain’. When the Poulos brothers, James and Peter, bought the lease and then, in March 1922, the freehold, they continued to use the exact wording of Comino’s advertisement (Comino 1918; Comino 1919; Simos 1922; Katoomba Rate Assessment books). The Niagara still enjoys its American name today and is still a flourishing restaurant, although its interior fittings have been much altered.



Figure 6. Advertisement for the Paragon as a Sundae and Candy Shop (Simos 1921).

Simos was a significantly early exponent of American-style soda drinks with fancy flavours. In 1918 he fell foul of the law for combining raspberry syrup (imported from America) with too much sodium benzoate, but survived the fine of £2, about

\$150 today (Anonymous 1918a). When he advertised for young girls as shop assistants in 1918 and 1919, he described the café temptingly as a ‘soda fountain’ (Anonymous 1918b; Anonymous 1919).

The description was manipulated skilfully. In 1921 the Paragon was advertised as a ‘Sundae and Candy Shop’ (Figure 6). Although he was still only the lessee, Simos extended the size of the main room, the one familiar to us all today and opened a private room behind for private suppers and other functions. His advertisement for that appeared in the *Blue Mountain Echo* in 1922 immediately below the Poulos Brothers’ advert for the Niagara (Simos 1922). Simos and the Poulos family remained good friends, although the Paragon and the Niagara were keen rivals.

Simos worked hard at publicity. In 1922 there was a long article in the local paper, probably written by himself, which presented the Paragon as

“... the acme of good taste and modern ideas presented by an enterprising proprietary that believes in nothing but the best”.

There were

“... dinkie little cubicles furnished in ... seductive style, where a ... pair can comfortably ensconce themselves ... after the dance or the pictures”

and in addition to the café, he opened a ‘dive’ (his expression) in the basement of the King’s Theatre and boasted that

“... the young fellow who doesn’t take his girleen to either place ought to make way for the chap who will” (Anonymous 1922).

In December 1924, just as the Poulos brothers had done two years earlier, Simos purchased the freehold of the property he was leasing from the former rector of St. Hilda’s and also acquired the adjacent shop, no.67, for almost £10,000, the equivalent of some \$600,000 today (Katoomba Rate Assessment Book).

Zac was a true entrepreneur. He leased no.67 as a health food shop to Mrs Palmer and continued to develop no.65 (Katoomba Rate Assessment Book). His brother George, who had joined him, was a master confectioner and Paragon chocolates quickly gained a fine reputation, which they have kept to this day. In the mid-1920s, the chocolates were manufactured in the basement of Soper Chambers on the other side of Katoomba Street (nos. 118-120) in a white-enamelled chamber of vaunted hygiene. This building had been erected in 1921 by Soper Brothers, the real estate agents, and Simos had at the same time purchased Soper’s previous premises next door and

continued to lease them out as a commercial investment (Katoomba Rate Assessment Books).

Simos used all modern means to promote the Paragon and its home-made products. Packaging was important and the Paragon style of box, still in use today, was already distinctive (Figure 7). Moreover, if one bought a pound of chocolates in 1925, one got half a pound of Peanut Brittle free. Made on the premises, the Peanut Brittle was advertised as ‘a dandy candy’ (Figure 8). Alternatively one could enjoy waffles made with the latest American recipe, bathed in genuine imported maple syrup (Anonymous 1925a).

There was an advance in sophistication in the 1920s. Where once Simos had advertised for a ‘young girl’, a ‘smart girl’ or a ‘young respectable girl’ to help in the Paragon, by 1925 he was seeking ‘two refined girls’ (Anonymous 1918b; Anonymous 1918c; Anonymous 1925b). In 1926 he was offering



Photo: Ian Jack 10 Dec. 2012 courtesy of Robyn Parker.

Figure 7. A box for 1 lb. (450 g) of chocolates, surviving from the Simos period.



Figure 8. Advertisement for the Paragon’s Peanut Brittle (Anonymous 1926c).

personalised Easter eggs, with the child's name impressed on the chocolate: the chocolate egg displayed in the Paragon window was claimed to be the largest in all of New South Wales (Anonymous 1926a).

All this promotion, together with the purchase of the freehold at the end of 1924, built up in 1926 to a massive make-over of the Paragon, at the cost of £5,000, some \$300,000 in modern money. The shopfitters used were Harry and Ernest Sidgreaves, then working out of Redfern (Lucas 1975). This family company is still in existence, still a major force in retail design (Anonymous n.d.). Under Sidgreaves, the main front room was doubled in length, with a new soda fountain constructed patriotically in Australian marble (Low 1991, p.77). Much of the glass shelving with its distinctive adjustable brackets remains in place today.

Aesthetic considerations were strong. For the main public room, Zac Simos ordered wall panels, 'artistic plaques' in white or cream, framed in gold (Anonymous 1926b). These panels were replaced in 1947, but the decorations and the style of the Paragon in 1926 were of an elegance which distinguished it from most of its rivals and more was to come.

The area just behind the Paragon bar is now a sort of hallway, but in 1926 it was an elegant private supper-room: this is why it has such fine period detailing like the surviving light fitting (Figure 9). And behind this supper room was a new change room for 'the girls' who worked in the café. Further back again was the kitchen, much as it is today (Anonymous 1926b). Upstairs was transformed at this time. The front section was fitted out for Zac Simos' own bachelor accommodation. There were three industrial sections to the rear. The machinery was largely imported: just



Photo: Ian Jack, 10 December 2012.

Figure 9. Art Deco light-fitting on the ceiling of the hallway behind the main saloon of the Paragon.



Photo: State Library of NSW - PXA 975/18.

Figure 10. The Paragon's *chocolaterie* when the early machinery was still in use, c.1960.

like the soda fountain equipment downstairs, the upstairs equipment was strikingly cosmopolitan. The Simos family, headed by Zac, Mary and George the confectioner, took pains to acquire the best equipment available from Europe, America and Australia.

Upstairs at the Paragon today is a revelation. Few people have been aware that there was anything of heritage value upstairs. When a decade ago, I led a team which reviewed the heritage listings in the entire City of the Blue Mountains, we were not shown even the stairs going up. It is one of many benefits of Robyn Parker's stewardship of the café in the last few years that she instantly recognised how the survival of so much evidence for the Simos' bakery and *chocolaterie* gave the Paragon so much of its distinction. This survival adds substantially to the already commanding heritage significance of the building.

The earlier chocolate-making machinery and some of the baking equipment was unfortunately dismantled and stored in a short corridor upstairs about ten years ago, but we know what much of it looked like when it was in situ (Figure 10).

In 2013 a group from the committee of the Australian Society for the History of Engineering and Technology (ASHET) examined all this equipment. The assessment of its significance is still a work in progress, but it is clear that the rarity of such a collection of inter-war equipment in Australia gives the Paragon material impelling interest.

Of the three industrial sections on the upper storey, one was for refrigeration, where the ice-cream was made and stored. A huge, state-of-the-art refrigerator

was connected to the soda fountain to ensure that drinks were icy cool.

The second section was the new bakehouse, with tiled walls and floor. A new dumb waiter was installed to bring the cakes downstairs. This dumb waiter survives impressively intact although Council regulations prohibit its use (Figure 11). Critical pieces of baking machinery remain in store upstairs. Star Machinery of Alexandria and Small and Shattell Pty Ltd, Melbourne-based engineers who advertised on their notepaper in the 1930s that ‘*Our specialities are bread & pastrycooks, biscuit & confectionary machinery*’, along with Star Machinery of Alexandria, are among the few Australian firms patronised (Figure 12; Context 2012, p.5).

A major French/Swiss firm, Kustner Frères of Lyon, had been making baking equipment, among many



Photo: Ian Jack, 10 December 2012.

Figure 11. Dumb waiter in the upstairs bakery, intact but disused.



Photo: David Craddock 10 April 2013.

Figure 12. Name-plate of Small and Shattell Pty Ltd of Melbourne, c.1930s. Preserved on machinery upstairs in the Paragon.



Photo: David Craddock 10 April 2013.

Figure 13. One of the name-plates of Kustner Frères et Cie, based in Geneva and Paris, c.1930s. Preserved on machinery upstairs in the Paragon.

food products for the world for fifty years since the 1880s (Figure 13). There is also another piece of equipment from this firm when it was located not in Lyons but in Paris and Aubervilliers (de Senarcien n.d.). Kustner Frères, with their administrative headquarters in Geneva and Paris, published extensive catalogues between the wars promoting their *Matériel chocolat* (Kustner Frères n.d.). These were no doubt familiar to Zac Simos and his brother who transferred the Paragon chocolate factory from the basement of Soper Chambers, introducing a state-of-the-art forced-gas boiler and “... a draught of cold, dry air for cooling purposes” (Anonymous 1926b).

The original marble table-top in the *chocolaterie* survives *in situ* and shows the regular cuts made by the Paragon’s chocolate-makers over decades of use (Figure 14). The custom-made and very practical tray-compartments under the benches are still usable.

The principal confectionery equipment was made by the leading British firm of BCH (Figure 15). What became the major modern firm called fashionably

BCH had originated in the mid-nineteenth century in the separate work of William Brierley, Luke Collier and Thomas Hartley in the mid-nineteenth century. Luke Collier was a specialist confectioner from 1835; Brierley was a brass-founder, specialising in confectionery work from 1844 onwards; and Hartley was also an independent specialist in chocolate-making. The Brierley and Collier firms amalgamated in 1913 and this firm joined forces with the Hartley family in 1924. Operating out of Rochdale in England the Brierley-Collier-Hartley firm went from strength to strength and finally became BCH (Link4Life n.d.). Simos seems to have ordered this equipment from the firm in the decade after its final amalgamation of 1924.

It was clearly time to establish a dynasty and in 1929 Zac Simos went off to Europe. During this visit, he became engaged to Maria, the American-born daughter of café proprietors called Panaretos whom he chanced to meet on his own home island of Kythera when they were all on holiday. The Panaretos family visited their native island regularly. Mary was fifteen years younger than Zac: she was born in Maryland five weeks after Zac reached Australia. So it was not a question of childhood sweethearts reuniting on a romantic Greek island. The actual marriage did not take place on Kythera, moreover, and did not happen until June 1930 in the United States. Zac then returned to the Paragon with his bride (Braith 2014, p.1; Low 2005 p. 361).



Photo: David Craddock 10 April 2013.

Figure 14. Marble table-top in the *chocolaterie*, up stairs in the Paragon, displaying cutting marks and still in use.



Photo: David Craddock 10 April 2013.

Figure 15. Name-plate of BCH (Brierley Collier and Hartley), leading English manufacturers of chocolate-making machinery since the mid nineteenth century, c.1930s. Preserved on machinery upstairs in the Paragon.

Maria was known as Mary in Australia and became something of a legend in Katoomba, an indispensable contributor to the Paragon's continuing success. As a widow after 1976, when she was 64, Mary Simos managed the Paragon until 1987 (Braith 2014, p.2). Her American upbringing contributed to the complex influences evident in the way in which both America and Europe contributed to the Australian Greek café. Her influence is evident in the way in which Katoomba scenery was deftly worked into the packaging of Paragon products (Figure 16) and in the grandiloquent display panel which put the café on a plane with Caruso and Shakespeare (Figure 17).

Mary's influence is likely also to have been considerable in the further improvements made to the fabric of the Paragon in the 1930s and 1940s, changes which confirmed its iconic status.



Photo: Ian Jack 10 Dec. 2012 courtesy of Robyn Parker.

Figure 16. Box for half a pound of Paragon home-made biscuits, featuring the Orphan Rock, the Bridal Veil Falls and the Three Sisters.



Photo: Ian Jack, 10 December 2012.

Figure 18. The bar created by Henry Eli White in 1936 in the Blue Room.

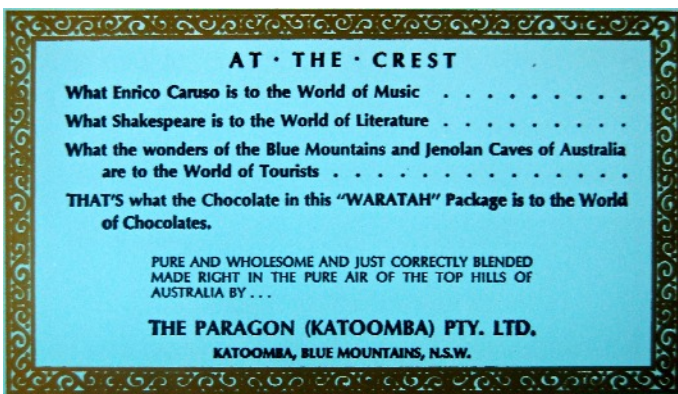


Photo: Ian Jack 10 Dec. 2012 courtesy of Robyn Parker.

Figure 17. A display card likening the pre-eminence of the Paragon's Waratah chocolate to the position of Caruso in singing and Shakespeare in writing.

Two important function rooms right at the back of the Paragon were created, the 'Banquet Hall' in 1934 and the 'Blue Room' in 1936, designed by the theatre architect Henry Eli White (Figure 18; Low 1991, p.77; Low 2005, p.361). White had also designed the Capitol in Sydney in the mid-1920s and the lavishly Art Deco State Theatre which had opened in 1929 (Thomas 1990, p.468). His smaller scale work at the Paragon was his last major achievement. The two private rooms for functions are remarkable today, not only for their décor, one pre-Columbian, the other 'ocean liner', but also for their very mood lighting.

The final stage in the remodelling of the public area of the Paragon was at the end of World War II, when the Danish sculptor, Otto Steen, was commissioned to carve a series of classical figures in alabaster to be attached to the maple-wood walls of the main café.

Steen is an interesting and under-rated artist. He had trained as a stone-carver in Copenhagen before he

migrated to Australia in 1927 at the age of 25. In Sydney he trained with Rayner Hoff at Sydney Technical College and from 1932 until 1935 he assisted Hoff with the sculptures in the ANZAC Memorial in Hyde Park (Hunt 1981, p.3; Sturgeon 1978, p.136; National Trust (n.d.)). In 1939 he sculpted the dramatic figure of the winged horse, Pegasus, high on the new Amalgamated Wireless Australia building in York Street, Sydney, and soon afterwards he produced the two life-size plaques of a mother and child on the frontage of the King George V Memorial Hospital in Camperdown (Jahn 1997, pp.138 & 150).

Steen's name has remained over-shadowed by his mentor, Rayner Hoff, but Henri van de Velde of *Everglades* knew about him, possibly through his Danish gardener, Paul Sorensen, and in the late 1930s commissioned Steen to do some of the most attractive work at his Leura estate. Steen produced a full-size bronze of a classical nude man in the porch of the Garden Theatre along with the Bacchus fountain nearby (Figure 19). In quite a different genre, Steen's first commission at *Everglades*, in 1936, had been a set of seven witty plaques on non-classical themes in the dining-room (Figure 20; Le Sueur 2000, p.26; signage at *Everglades*). Van de Velde, and Zac Simos too, would have been aware of the Art Deco reliefs of dancers with which Steen had just adorned the Trocadero, the spectacular *palais de dance* in George Street, Sydney, opened in April 1936 (Wotherspoon 2008; National Trust signage, *Everglades*).

The dozen alabaster friezes which Steen executed in low relief for the main dining area in the Paragon a decade later in 1947 continued the classical Greek themes and they are exceptionally fine (Braith 2014, p.2). The scenes include the judgment of Paris among



Photo: Ian Jack, 4 April 2014

Figure 19. The Bacchus fountain at Everglades, created by Otto Steen in 1938.



Photo: Ian Jack, 4 April 2014

Figure 20. Otto Steen's plaques on the dining-room wall at Everglades, 1936.



Photo: Ian Jack, 17 July 2014

Figure 21. Otto Steen's alabaster plaque of Icarus in flight, 1947. In the main saloon.



Photo: Ian Jack, 17 July 2014

Figure 22. Otto Steen's alabaster plaque of the judgment of Paris, 1947. In the main saloon.

the three jealous goddesses, a voluptuous Venus with her son Cupid, Pan with his pipes, a centaur and Icarus in flight (Figures 21 & 22).

The richness, style and integrity of the public rooms at the Paragon distinguish it among Greek cafés. The details are a rich resource for further study, while the scene upstairs possesses raw materials for industrial research. Although the chocolates made on the premises today emerge from more modern equipment, they are still sold in boxes decorated as they were eighty years ago by the Simos family. The sheer aesthetic of the artefact combines happily with its traditional design.

This combination of the industrial and practical with an impelling aesthetic is the true value of the

Paragon, the reason why 'Friends of the Paragon' are in process of formation, the reason why a determined attempt has been mounted to put it on the State Heritage Register. The Paragon is an exceptionally well preserved Art Deco café, full of rich associations with the broad genre of the Greek café outside Greece, a tribute to the good taste of Zac and Mary Simos, their architects, artists and interior designers, whose work is so legible today. The *chocolaterie* and bakery in the upper rooms give the café a different and highly significant dimension. The Paragon is a rare archaeological resource as well as a monument in the built environment of upper Katoomba Street, nestling comfortably under its flamboyant neighbour, the Carrington.

Acknowledgements

The help of Robyn Parker, Linsi Braith, David Craddock and Ian Arthur is gratefully acknowledged.

Abbreviations

n.d. no date

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