

# Portrait of the artist as a publican



Mario Cellotto in the Palace Hotel foyer . . . 'My Venus is more perfectly proportioned' — Picture: NEIL DUNCAN

By BERWYN LEWIS

ONE enters Mario Cellotto's Palace Hotel in Broken Hill with reverence. Situated on the corner of Argent and Sulphide Streets, the hotel is a vast celebration of art-deco, neo-Italianate, post-Aboriginal, rococo postcard art.

Sandro Botticelli would be pleased with Mario Valentino Cellotto.

Born in Treviso, Italy, Mario, with only a postcard to guide him and no formal training in art, has painted the master's Birth of Venus on the vaulted ceiling of the hotel — and claims to have improved on it.

"Botticelli liked her fat, but I thought the hip was too big so I altered it. My Venus is more perfectly proportioned," Mario says.

Almost every flat surface of the 99-year-old Palace Hotel's 52 rooms has been transformed by Mario and his commissioned artist, Aboriginal painter Gordon Wine.

However, a lack of funds and a depressed mining industry

have brought Mario's Palace — a work in progress — to its knees. Mario has not heard of grants from the Visual Arts Board.

Once, debutantes danced with their partners in Mario's chandelier-encrusted ball-rooms. Once, newlyweds toasted each other beside the leaping Dionysian fountains flanked by Aboriginal hunters.

Hosts of honeymooners once gazed at ceilings that portray The Birth of Venus and kangaroos. Twenty-first birthday parties spilled through the banquet rooms, rumbaing and cha-cha-ing past statues of David, murals of Tom Roberts' colonial bush shacks and thundering waterfalls.

And once, diners in tuxedos tucked into buffets in the dining room with its stuffed emus, Corinthian columns, garlands of plastic flowers and arrangements of emu eggs, rocks and plastic ferns.

Mario says: "It's falling apart. People don't believe in

spending big money on weddings any more because marriages don't last. All the best weddings used to be here."

But as the Palace Hotel sighs around him, Mario hatches plans in his office — another visual experience with its mounted birds, animals, horns, Sepik River carvings and statues of hunters.

"In 1942 I went to the gallery in Florence," he says. "I saw Botticelli paintings for the first time. I started drawing that night. When World War II ended I knew I had the ability to draw, but I was too busy."

## Dream

Arriving in Broken Hill in 1949, where he started work as a tradesman, Mario bought his Palace in 1973, giving birth to his long-cherished dream.

In 1980, Mario was tired of the painting, so he advertised in a newspaper offering \$1000, food, accommodation and paint to someone who would finish his work.

Gordon Wine showed up on Mario's doorstep. He stayed more than four years and then, says Mario, "he went on walkabout".

Now Mario is repeating his offer: "\$1000, food, board and paint to someone who will fill in the oval spaces and copy the next painting."

The proposed painting is the work of an Italian artist, Zabateri, dubbed The Picnic by Mario. It depicts buxom beauties draped in robes reclining in a romantic landscape.

In Gordon Wine's murals, stock horses graze in Aboriginal Gardens of Eden, bikini-clad bathing beauties and nudes frolic beside the mulga, cowboys and Indians make campfires alongside clusters of grapes, signs directing patrons to toilets compete with herds of grazing buffalo and Banjo Paterson Snowy River homesteads in magnificent hues of ochre.

"Gordon Wine is terrific. I wish he'd come back."