

---

# A Touch of Michelangelo

## New York's Veteran Contractor, Vincent Colletti, Likes Complicated Jobs and Has Done Special Projects From Boston to Florida— Including Ellis Island And a “Joint Venture” with Michelangelo on the Original “Pieta”



**W**hen Biagio Colletti immigrated from Italy in 1904, one of his first visions of America was the majestic buildings of Ellis Island—where thousands of immigrants were processed during the first four decades of this century. Little did Biagio know some 80 years later Ellis Island would be a sad ruin, with his own son playing an important role in its restoration as a national museum.

The company Biagio founded in 1919 is still in existence today as Vincent Colletti & Company, Inc., of Rye, New York. Vincent Colletti, his son, joined the firm in 1946 and has served as its president over the past 30 years. The company serves the greater New York City metropolitan area and has done work from Boston to Florida.

Such a project was the Ellis Island restoration, in which Colletti and a joint venture partner were selected in 1986 to perform the plastering work. Today the project is virtually complete, and Ellis Island will open its doors once again some time in 1990. When that day comes, Vincent Colletti will take special pride in the many challenges he overcame to complete a uniquely difficult work—and he will remember his father, who himself overcame many challenges after coming to Ellis Island more than 80 years ago.

**DIMENSIONS:** You have a personal family tie to Ellis Island?

**COLLETTI:** That's right. My father, Biagio, came through Ellis Island when he immigrated from Italy in 1904. He worked as a plasterer until he started the family business in 1919.

**DIMENSIONS:** So is that how you became interested in doing the Ellis Island restoration project?

**COLLETTI:** Well, the fact that Ellis Island is part of my family heritage certainly was a major motivation. Also, at the time, Ellis Island was the most important job in plastering in the entire United States. So getting the contract would be a real tribute to the company.

But actually, in a roundabout sort of way, our company's ability to bid and perform the project has more to do with my son than with my father.

**DIMENSIONS:** Really? Is your son in the company?

**COLLETTI:** No, he isn't. And that's why the company was properly positioned to perform the Ellis Island restoration. I agree with my son's reasons and have no disappointment about his pursuing other career interests. But because I have no family to follow me in the business, I don't have to worry so much about keeping our work at a certain volume.

I've been in the business since 1946, and I've been president—or at least in control of the company—for about 30

years. So today I'm scaling back our overall operations to concentrate on projects that are special challenges, and hold a real personal interest for me.

**DIMENSIONS:** Like the Ellis Island restoration project?

**COLLETTI:** Exactly. At one time, the company had a payroll of 400 employees. But now we're down to 12, with an annual average of about 25. This way, I can pick jobs more for the challenge and for the personal satisfaction I get from performing these types of jobs.

Ideally, the type of job I'm looking for is one where I can spend time studying the work. I especially like historical restoration work, because it's so fascinating to study the old methods, and such a tremendous challenge to duplicate them.

That's why Ellis Island was the perfect project. And the fact that it's also part of my family heritage, and meant a lot to my father, made it even better.

**DIMENSIONS:** So how did you get the Ellis Island job? Was it a competitive bidding situation, or a negotiated contract?

**COLLETTI:** The Ellis Island Foundation was spending about \$200 million on the restoration overall. Since the plastering work was so intricate and complex, they wanted to make sure any bidders were qualified to perform the



**The plans of the Grand Hall, Ellis Island, serve as a background for Vincent Colletti whose company now concentrates on the difficult, complex job. His company is still involved at Ellis Island.**

contract.

In 1986 the foundation asked my company to do one small room on a "mock-up" basis, as a trial. Some other contractors were invited to do the same. This acted as a prequalification procedure, so after our company satisfac-

torily finished the room we were invited to bid on the full contract.

**DIMENSIONS: And your company was low bidder?**

**COLLETTI:** Well, keep in mind that the job was an extremely big one. So we joint ventured with the Morrell-Brown company of New York City, who had also made a mock-up. They handled the day-to-day operations of the project, while I handled the management of the special situations and special problems that inevitably—and frequently—come up on a job of this nature.

As it turned out, the foundation didn't have all the bid documents ready in time, so they split the job into two packages. First, they got bids on the basement restoration, then later on the rest of the project. Fortunately, we were successful on both portions.

**DIMENSIONS: There must have been some special challenges in putting together your estimates for such a unique project.**

**COLLETTI:** We had to base our

**It's imitation caenstone that was used on the restoration at Ellis Island but the filled joints were real. Vincent Colletti's firm performed the entire wall finishing job.**

estimates on photographs in addition to plans and specs that showed the present condition of the building, and try to figure out how much was sound and how much had to be replaced or restored. Fortunately, we put unit prices in the contract, because we frequently found much more restoration work was required than was originally estimated.

Many times, we would go into a room thinking about 50 percent of the plaster cornices and other items had to be restored, and discovered the actual amount was about, say, 90 percent.

**DIMENSIONS:** Were the Ellis Island buildings in that poor a condition?

**COLLETTI:** The structures were built in the early 1900s, and occupied through the 1940s. But after Ellis Island was abandoned, the buildings were left completely open to the weather. By the time restoration work was begun in 1986, we had to contend with 40 years of rain, snow, wind, and birds.

**DIMENSIONS:** What exactly was the scope of the Ellis Island restoration project, the number of rooms and buildings you had to restore?

**COLLETTI:** Our contract included restoring cornices and other plaster items in the stair towers, dormitories, great hall, theatres, baggage room, and railroad ticket office. That's just a few. The building itself is a three-story structure with east and west wings, and a basement underneath all.

It was our job to match the cornices in each area, which required many different molds and patterns. We had to test to see what was sound and what needed replacing, of anything that was still in place. Then when all the replacement work was done, we had everything 100 percent skim-coated with plaster after applying a bonding agent.

**DIMENSIONS:** There must have been many special challenges in this restoration work?

**COLLETTI:** You bet! And believe me, even though we did this job on a lump sum basis, it really should have



**"I especially like historical restoration work, because it's so fascinating to study the old methods, and such a tremendous challenge to duplicate them."**



been performed on a cost-plus arrangement.

For one thing, the Ellis Island job required a lot of special scaffolding. In fact, the situations were so specialized, we had to custom-build wood scaffolds the old-fashioned way—because that's the only way we could get the flexibility needed. And with 20- and 30-foot ceilings, we had to build a lot of cantilevers.

Something that was a constant challenge were all the delays. There were so many problems and change orders among all the trades, that many of the contractors either went bankrupt or were kicked off the job. In fact, I think most mechanical contractors that worked on the Ellis Island project went bankrupt!

All these disruptions made things extremely hard for us. In many cases, we had scaffolding up for a year to a year-and-a-half just waiting for the mechan-

ical contractor.

But one of my favorite challenges was duplicating a lost process for what's called "imitation caenstone" (pronounced cane-stone). It's a process that involves rubbing, sanding, and filling the joints after scoring, and it hasn't been done anywhere for at least 75 years.

I talked to people all over the country, but nobody really knew anything about imitation caenstone. My father was actually the best source of information, since he had worked with it around the turn of the century. But in the end, whether we exactly duplicated the process or not, we were able to duplicate the effect and the architect and owner were thrilled with the results.

**DIMENSIONS:** But despite all these challenges, which forced other contractors off the job, you were able to survive . . .

**COLLETTI:** Getting the Ellis Island restoration project was a privilege we didn't want to miss. So we went all out for the job, regardless of the money. That's been our attitude throughout, so we're prepared if the "profits" aren't exactly there.

After all, it's not often you get a chance to do the most important job in the whole country for your field. Or perhaps to rediscover a process lost for nearly a century.

**DIMENSIONS:** You must have come away with great respect for the old-time craftsman, after getting so close to their work.

**COLLETTI:** Yes. They had to do things the "hard way" compared to the equipment and materials we have today. But they produced results of truly lasting beauty.

**DIMENSIONS:** So are you finished now with the project?

**COLLETTI:** About 99 percent complete. We just have some clean-up work remaining. The Ellis Island buildings and museum are supposed to open early in 1990, though at this point I think the opening will be somewhat delayed.

**DIMENSIONS:** What did this project mean to you on a personal level? How will you feel on opening day, when Ellis Island once Spain starts bringing people through its doors?

**COLLETTI:** Over the years I've done a lot of unique projects. I



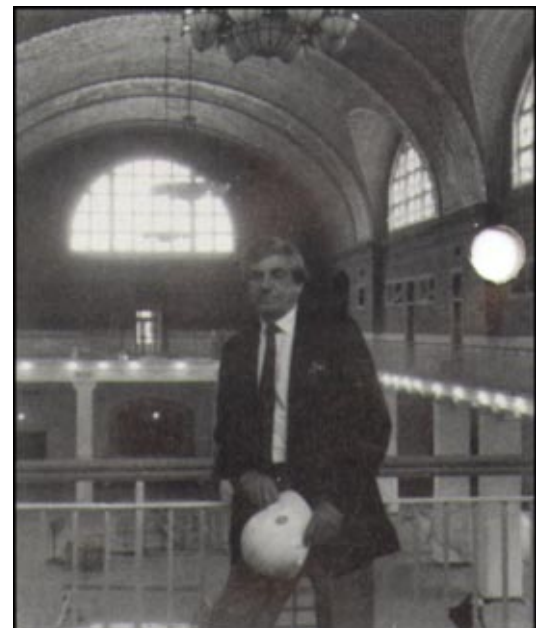
**A work of love. That's what Vincent Colletti called his company's contribution to Michaelangelo's Pieta statue. The Colletti firm did the base for the famous made when it appeared at the World's Fair in New York.**

plastered a Japanese-style stucco house for Nelson Rockefeller. I did the theater and dining hall at West Point Military Academy. Once I did a 400-foot-high wall with continuous stucco the entire height. And then there was the Belgian

Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair, where the company put up 127 buildings using 20,000 plaster casts.

At the World's Fair, I also worked on the Vatican Pavilion, and extended the existing base for a display of the

**Vincent Colletti is shown in the Great Hall, at Ellis Island. His company did much of the plastering work on the Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty projects.**



original "Pieta." so I can say I truly did a joint venture with Michelangelo. All in all, I've had a great career that's given me a lot of high points and great memories.

But the Ellis Island restoration is uniquely important. The immigrants that came through Ellis Island are part of our national heritage, and the personal heritage of millions of families throughout the United States.

Ellis Island and the immigrant experience is a big part of what made America great—their hard work, and sacrifice, and vision. Americans today need to keep that memory and that spirit alive, or we'll lose a part of our greatness. 