

Photographic archives and the European Union agenda:  
interview with Malta's national archivist during  
Malta's Presidency of the European Union

Os arquivos fotográficos e a agenda da União Europeia:  
entrevista ao diretor dos Arquivos Nacionais de Malta durante a presidência  
maltesa da União Europeia

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**Abstract:** interview with Charles J. Farrugia, realized by e-mail between march and June of 2017.

**Keywords:** Charles J. Farrugia; European Union; Malta; National Archives of Malta; photography and archives.

**Resumo:** entrevista a Charles J. Farrugia, realizada por e-mail entre março e junho de 2017.

**Palavras-chave:** Arquivos Nacionais de Malta; Charles J. Farrugia; fotografia e arquivos; Malta; União Europeia.

The European Union (EU) has a system of six-month rotation whereby each Member State holds the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which is the main governing body of the EU. Malta is leading its first term in such a role spanning from 1 January to 30 June 2017. Such an opportunity often stimulates the various sectors and this is the case with the archives domain in Malta during the Presidency. The National Archives of Malta is responsible to organise four high level meetings and support three others. Heading the organisation team is Dr. Charles J. Farrugia, Malta's national archivist. He is not a new face to the sector and has worked in archives for the last twenty-eight years, eighteen of which leading the national archives. He also has the organisational experience of the highly successful CITRA conference held in 2009. That event welcomed in Malta 251 archivists from 91 countries. But the Presidency is different. It spans over six months and includes a high dose of policy formulation. We decided to interview Dr. Farrugia on what is the relevance of all this activity to the Maltese archives sector, in particular photographic holdings and services.

André Porto Ancona Lopez (AL) — What is, in your opinion, the importance of photographic material on archives in general?

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Charles J. Farrugia<sup>1</sup> (CF) — The traditional view we archivists took was that archives are all the same, whatever the form or medium. What we viewed as important was the information they yield. The last decades have forced the archival profession to appreciate that photographic records pose big challenges on two fronts. The first is the management of them in terms of archival description and the physical custody. The second challenge is the way the public interacts differently with written records as opposed to photographic records. The latter have more appeal, speak an international language and are in higher demand by both academics, general public and various industries. Thus, I am seeing a transition whereby more attention is shifting towards photographic archives. Social media has also helped to render photographic archives much more visible.

AL — How does the Presidency of the EU work and how relevant is it to the archives sector in your country?

CF — The Presidency of the EU is an excellent opportunity for each Member State of the EU to have a bigger say in the agenda of the organisation. It also provides a showcase of the country in question as a large number of meetings are held in that country. These range from the Heads of Government meetings, to several Ministerial meetings, to hundreds of experts' group and associations' or sectoral meetings. Not all events are organised in the country holding the presidency. Many meetings are held in Brussels. Thus, the event poses not only political but also administrative challenges. It serves also as a stimulus for public administration to rise to the occasion and involve itself more in the policy formulation and implementation, not only locally, but at European level.

AL — Which archives related meetings will you be hosting?

CF — Meetings range from project related to political to administrative and academic. We will start with the Archives Portal Europe Country Managers meeting on 26 April. This will be followed by two high level meetings: the 22<sup>nd</sup> European Archives Experts' Group (EAG) and the 35<sup>th</sup> European Board of National Archivists (EBNA). The first is advising the EU on policies in the archives sector while the second brings together all directors of EU national archives. It has become a tradition that on the last day of EBNA the Assembly of Associates of the Archives Portal Foundation (AoA) convenes. The Archives Portal Europe (APE) is a successful project that managed to provide a central European access points to more than

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256 million archival descriptions from 6935 archival institutions ([www.archivesportaleurope.eu](http://www.archivesportaleurope.eu)). I am proud to say that Malta was one of the six founding members of this project and thus we were from day one at the table of negotiations: dreaming, thinking, designing, bidding for funding and later implementing.

AL — And in terms of photographic material?

CF — Photographic holdings occupy a central role in the APE. A large chunk of photographic material from the National Archives of Malta is already uploaded on the portal and can be found through the search engine (<https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/search/-/s/n>). Although the portal includes also descriptions only items, the items holding digital objects are widely sought after. During the month of May, we will shift our focus on conservation and digitisation. What was once the chapel of the Santo Spirito hospital has been adequately decorated with archival artefacts to welcome the meeting of the European Heads of Conservation. Till now this is a rather informal grouping of professionals but they do represent and bring to the table the challenges conservators working in European archives face. One of the topics for the Malta meeting is the effects of iron gall ink on paper and how the photographic depiction of these items can also be affected if preservation or conservation interventions are not taken in hand.

AL — So, in your opinion, the digital agenda plays a very important role on photographic policies on archives?

CF — In today's world one cannot discuss archives without a focus on the digital disruption. One of the leading European initiatives when it comes to electronic and digital archives is the Document Lifecycle Management Forum (DLM). The DLM Forum is a community of public archives and interested parties from across government, commercial, academic and voluntary sectors who are active in information governance, including archives, records, document and information lifecycle management. It was founded by the European Commission and first met in 1996. Today it is a not-for-profit foundation providing industry specifications, participating in activities and serving members from all over Europe and the rest of the world ([www.dlmforum.eu](http://www.dlmforum.eu)). For this we have reached a deal with the Augustinian Priory in Rabat, a wonderful historical building a block away from the head office of the national archives, and three interesting cultural attractions in the nearby old town Mdina for the breakout sessions. One of the working groups within DLM is the Digital Archiving Standards Group (DAS) which is also planned to meet in Malta on 10 May. As one of the participants in DLM plays a leading role in the records management company Preservica, we took the opportunity to organise a specialised presentation by Anne Keen to records officers in public administration. ([www.preservica.com](http://www.preservica.com)).

AL — As I understand Malta, led by the National Archives, is being very collaborative on this kind of initiatives. Could you point more examples?

CF — Another international project of high repute in the domain is Europeana. This portal's mission is "to transform the world with culture! We want to build on Europe's rich heritage and make it easier for people to use, whether for work, for learning or just for fun" (<http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en>). The managing board of European showed interest in holding a conference in Malta to discuss the highly topical theme 'Migration and Culture: how can our past educate our present'. In all these event, we are working not only on the logistics – our role is not that of a DMC. We are taking the opportunity to showcase the local successes, preoccupations and challenges in the sector. In this particular meeting that we decided to hold in one of our pre-historical sites – Ħaġar Qim. Dra. Maria Pisani from the University of Malta will showcase the work she does through the Integra Foundation. (<https://integrafoundation.org/>). Event these organisations will showcase to what extent photography will feature as useful tools in their projects. During the last weeks of the Presidency in June we have been asked by our Ministry for Foreign Affairs to support in the content and logistics of the European Expert Group on Diplomatic and Foreign Affairs Archives (EuDIA) meeting. The second day of this event will be hosted entirely at the National Archives in Rabat and two interesting visits in other archives in Mdina are also being coordinated by the National Archives. The event will be a showcase of Maltese diplomatic archives and the national television station will produce a feature showcasing visual images about the theme. As you can see it is a tall order of events that pose big logistical challenges. But I am lucky to be surrounded by a team of young professionals who are ready for the challenge.

AL — Are the agendas for the meetings decided by Malta or by the EU?

CF — It depends on the type of meeting. There are meetings that are co-Chaired between the host country and the EU Commission. In such cases the agenda is decided to follow an extensive consultation process. Such is the case of the EAG. For this year's meeting three core themes were chosen. These are: (a) the development of a code of practice for Archivists for the better implementation of the New Data Protection Regulation; (b) *e-archiving* and its challenges for the sector; c. how can the archives sector influence the EU. The topics were decided during the previous meeting held in Bratislava, the country that held the presidency prior to Malta. However, in other meetings the host has almost the full say in setting the agenda. The EBNA will meet on 28 April. For that meeting the decision by the National Archives of Malta was to focus entirely on Memory and Archives. The sessions will focus on local issues and international projects that have to do with the concept of memory. During the session dealing with Malta the flagship project will be a highly interesting and challenging project called Memorja.

This is the Maltese word for memory and the project aims to create an audio, visual and sound archive for Malta with the main aim of preserving not only the memory of the State but that of the people<sup>2</sup>. The agenda for the conservators' centers aims two themes: the creation a first line of conservation policy and the challenging processes of dealing with iron gall ink in holdings. Even in this meeting, the choice of themes reaches a nice balance between the European needs as discussed in previous meetings of this body and the conservation priorities of the host country.

AL — Are photographic archives on the agenda of any of the meetings?

CF — I would say that indirectly yes, on all meetings. While there is no specific meeting that will deal solely with photographic archives as a main theme, one can safely say that most themes, in some way, are relevant to archivists in charge of photographic holdings. Photographic holdings pose great challenges in terms of protection of both copyright and the information embedded in them about living persons. Central themes of the main conferences will be issues of data protection and copyright. The EU will soon activate a new data protection regulation ([http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/reform/files/regulation\\_oj\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/reform/files/regulation_oj_en.pdf)). Even *e-archiving*, which is top on the agenda of the Malta meetings, poses great challenges, which are highly augmented when the records in question are of a photographic nature. Apart from these themes that relate to photographic archives in an indirect rather than direct manner, photographic archives will feature prominently in the presentation about the project Memorja. This project does not discriminate between the medium but focuses on preserving the message. Apart from this, photographic archives are intrinsically linked with all the other topics under discussion. At the moment, there are big debates at EU level about finding fair and reasonable methods to give the widest possible access to patrons, yet preserve copyright where it exists. We are actively involved in this and have built collaboration with Malta's leading photographic archives. The Ellis archives is a classical example of a world-class collection that still needs to be enjoyed by wider strata of local and international audiences. Apart from the glass plates, this collection consists of a very rich set of documents listing all the correspondence Richard Ellis<sup>3</sup> was involved in documenting commissions, procurement of supplies, financial records etc. Most of these pose challenging problems due to the type of paper they are written on and the ink used. A topic such as 'iron gall ink' is more than relevant in such a scenario.

AL — What do you target to achieve throughout Malta's Presidency specifically for the photographic archives sector?

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, see: Farrugia (2008).

<sup>3</sup> A visual essay about the Richard Ellis archive was previously published by Charles Farrugia and Ian Ellis (2016).

CF — Although a small country, Malta is renowned for its past successes as a place where people meet and come up with solutions for challenging scenarios. Malta featured as way back as 1945 with a highly important meeting before the Yalta conference. It also featured with a high-level encounter between Bush and Gorbachev in 1989. There were also international contributions with Malta's proposals at the UN, in particular the Law of the Seas proposal in 1967. I am very proud to recall also that even in the field of archives, the Universal Declaration of Archives was agreed in principle during the Annual General Meeting at St. Julians in Malta, in 2009. This was then followed by full endorsement at the Annual General Meeting in Oslo.

AL — And for nowadays?

CF — Our expectations this time around are not as ambitious, as even the way the EU operates is completely different from the institutions mentioned above. However, we are hoping to broker new collaborative aspects and see tangible development in terms of the way archivists adopt to new data protection obligations and the way conservator's priorities their conservation treatments. Another target is to create new synergies between the efforts of digital platforms such as APE and Europeana and local stake holders. Migration is a hotly debated topic in Malta. However, it is often debated from a political rather than archival dimension. Who is documenting the migratory movement? What is happening to the thousands of images taken by the armies, police forces, non-governmental organisations and the migrant communities themselves? What is ending up in public archival repositories? Are we documenting these tragedies or successes for future generations? Malta is surely well-placed to act for such debates.

AL — Are there any other initiatives in the pipeline apart from the EU Presidency-related ones that have to do with photographic archives?

CF — Well, I am sure that all these meetings will leave us rather exhausted by the end of June. However, from experience, we do know that after Summer we will be looking at further challenges. Plans have already started to host in Malta a seminar organised jointly with the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers. The theme of that event planned for October is "Imagining Imperialism". The target is to offer Malta as another discussion platform for British Commonwealth scholars to discuss how imperialism has been depicted visually in our archives. If I can reveal another plan, I can announce that the Richard Ellis Archives is already on board for this event.

AL — In your opinion, does the real treatment received by photographic material in and from EU archives do justice to the importance of the medium?

CF — The preparation for the meetings mentioned in this interview introduced me to several specialists, some coming from other domains such as audio-visual



organisations. What I noticed is that a lot of project briefs are including a mixture of media. Allow me to mention a case. I just attended to an interesting presentation by Professor Frederik Kaplan and Dra. Isabella di Lenardo. They are promoting the Time Machine Project (<http://timemachineproject.eu/>). The aim of this project is the setting up of a unique archiving and calculation infrastructure that will make it possible to structure, analyse and model data from the past, and realign it with the present to allow a glimpse into the future. Thus, one can link the list of censuses of the past with three dimensional maps from various centuries. These big projects are making all of us aware of the importance of photographic archives. There are centres of excellence like the one of Girona that are opening up to support other archives and share their expertise. Thus, I would say that the importance is acknowledged. What is still challenging is identifying the funding to maintain some of these archives yet keeping the concept of access to all working side by side.

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