

THE SOVEREIGN MILITARY ORDER OF MALTA

(S.M.O.M.)

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The origin of the Order dates back to the 10th Century, when some of the Merchants from Amalfi (Italy) founded a 'hospital' in Jerusalem to take care of the weary and tired pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. Then, under the leadership of Raimondo De Podio (its first Grand Master) it became a Military Order, intimately linked with a number of victories and military occurrences until 1291 when it was forced to leave the Holy Land and take refuge in Limassal Cyprus. In 1310 it moved over to Rhodes where it settled for the next two centuries.

In 1522, however, it was forced to surrender to Suleiman (the Magnificent) and after a short stay at Viterbo, Charles V of Spain leased the Islands of Malta to the Knights.

Settlement in Malta was effected in 1530 and remained uninterrupted up to 1798 when the Order was again forced to leave by an all conquering and greedy Napoleon.

Partial disbandment followed, but in 1814 what remained of the Knights, took up a temporary seat in Catania (Sicily), whence in 1834 they transferred to Rome where they took up their present residence.

Unlike its predecessors, the S.M.O.M. is today a purely a non belligerent body totally dedicated to deeds of philanthropic nature. Its activities revolving around such work, have given rise to the establishment of Blood Banks, and the free administration of medicine to the poor and needy.

The main seat of the Order is nowadays in Rome in Via Dei Condotti with its substation at the Aventino (one of the Hills of Rome). In other parts of the world, the S.M.O.M. runs clinics whose functions of a merciful nature have already been referred to.

In Malta, the year 1968 saw the opening of both a seat (of an Ambassadorial nature) in St. John's Cavalier, and of a blood clinic in St. Ursula Street, Valletta. To help in its fund raising drive the Order issues for the present, two to three sets of stamps every year. The value tablet of these is based on the old coinage system of *Grani*, *Tari* and *Scudi*.

Worthwhile noting that all the issues (though limited in number) have been printed by that London Firm of International Fame: Messrs. Thomas de la Rue. Besides, to add to the seriousness of these emissions, every sheet has a serial number. Unfortunately such stamps are not given official recognition by the U.P.U.

It is thus a real pity to one and all, that the stamps of the Order have not been officially recognised by the Italian Government, as valid for postal purposes. This factor would certainly have afforded a greater degree of income to be distributed to those in need. Perhaps this would have not been too much out of place, considering the fact that the S.M.O.M. in 1966 had reached agreement with the Italian Authorities on the Attainment of International Status, an Independent Body fully autonomous both in its Headquarters and its branches overseas. It has a deputation with the U.N.O. (O.M.S.) and keeps diplomatic relations with more than 35 countries.

Up to the time of writing, the series of stamps of the Order is 9 sets, all highly artistic, full of meaning and in short, a model of philatelic delight.

Following the Magisterial Decree on the 20th May, 1966, the S.M.O.M. started the running of a postal service valid throughout its "territories" by emitting the first set on the 15th November of the same year. It consisted of nine stamps, portraying Coats-of-Arms, Insigna and reproductions of famous works of art.

Then on the 15th May of the following year, the second set, also of nine stamps was placed for circulation. Each stamp depicted a flag of one of the langues of the Order Castille, Germany, Provence, Aragon, England, Alvernia, France and Italy, while the ninth showed the two flags of the Order in general.

The third set was issued on the 15th November of the same year and depicted four (one of each value) different works of art figuring the bust of St. John the Baptist (Patron Saint of the Order) by Tiziano, Donatello, Pinturicchio and Botticelli.

On the 5th March 1968, another set of 4 stamps came out. It represented maps showing the different seats of the Order: on the 5 Grani Jerusalem and Cyprus, Rhodes on the 15th Grani, Malta on the 2 Tari and Rome on the 1 Scudo.

The fifth set was issued on the 5th October 1968 and showed six different Galleons of the Order, one for each denomination. It was only fair that these vessels should have been represented, as during the 16th and 17th Century, the most powerful fleet in the Mediterranean was that of the Order of St. John, which had inflicted quite a number of defeats on the Turkish Navy — the pride of the Ottoman Empire, the terror of Christendom.

The last of the 1968 issues was a Christmas one, coming out on the 2nd December, also in miniature sheets. It consisted of three values, the 10 Grani showing the Annunciation, the $\frac{1}{2}$ Scudo portraying the actual Nativity Scene, and the 1 Tari describing the Adoration by the Magi. The

designs are a faithful reproduction of the invaluable 17th Century Flemish Tapestry, found in the museum of St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta.

The 1969 issue on the 2nd May, reproduced 18th and 19th Century Military Uniforms worn by the 'Top Brass' of the Order. The 4 Grani, an Artillery Officer of the 18th Century; the 6 Grani, an Infantry Officer of the 'Falconieri' 18th Century; the 10 Grani, an Officer of the Marines 18th Century; the 2 Tari, a Professed Knight of the 18th Century; and the 1 Scudo, a 19th Century 'Commendatore', a sort of a high ranking Administrative Officer.

The second 1969 issue on October 5th, featured the busts of six of the most internationally known Grand Masters. The 4 Grani showed G. M. Pinto, the 5 Grani De Vilhena, the 6 Grani Caraffa, the 25 Grani L'Isle Adam, the 1 Tari La Valette and the 1 Scudo Raymondo du Puy.

THE S.M.O.M. STAMPS

All printed by Messrs. De La Rue, London.

1966 (November 15): Coats-of-Arms, No Watermark, Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$ Nos. 1 - 9.

1967 (May 15): Langue Flags, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$, Nos. 10 - 18.

1967 (November 15): St. John Baptist, Malta Cross Wmk, Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$, Nos. 19 - 22.

1968 (March 5): Seats of the Order, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$, Nos. 23 - 26.

1968 (October 5): Galleons of the Order, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$ for the horizontal, and vice versa for vertical, Nos. 27 - 32.

1968 (December 2): Christmas, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$ (vert.), $13\frac{1}{2}$ (horiz.), Nos. 33 - 35.

1969 (May 5): Military Uniforms, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$, Nos. 36 - 40.

1969 (October 5): Prominent Grand Masters, Malta Cross Wmk., Perf. 13 by $12\frac{1}{2}$, Nos. 41 - 46.