

CEDRIC GALEA PIROTTA, ONE OF THE MALTESE STAMP DESIGNERS¹

Joseph C Camilleri

From time to time, a set of stamps is issued by MaltaPost featuring designs by Cedric Galea Pirotta. Cedric started his ‘career’ with MaltaPost in 2010 with a series dedicated to national treasures. This set featured the Azure Window (17c), the Blue Grotto (51c), Ta’ Ċenċ (67c), and the islet of Filfla (€1.16). Since then he has produced 15 sets (2010-2015). In such a short span of time, he managed to create designs which were issued, as joint ventures, by MaltaPost with foreign postal authorities – Iceland in 2011 and Curacao two years later.

Personal details:-

Born: 11th January, 1971.

Locality: Naxxar.

Status: Married to Denise (2001) and fathered a son Matthew (b.2004).

Employment: SITA Inc.

Art background

He was born in a family of four (three boys and a girl). His father passed away when he was still a young boy. His family gave great importance to art. He told me “Art was always in my blood (on both sides of my parents) but never took it seriously due to studies..” Although, he never studied art formally he sat for his Art O-level examination in Form 3 and passed it with flying colours. He started reading for a degree in engineering but decided to call it a day since it was not the “... the line I was after.” He started creating art making his own clipart. “It is here, where I started using pen and ink and this ended being my favourite medium. As time went by, I started taking part in collective exhibitions and then in solos.”

Questions:-

1. Your first stamp designs which appeared on stamps were issued in 2010. It was the first of the annual series ‘Treasures of Malta’. This set depicted four natural treasures. MaltaPost have then invited you to design all the other Treasures of Malta series. Was it difficult for you to start his ‘career’ with MaltaPost? Can you kindly explain how a set of stamps is planned and designed?

¹ The 2016 stamps designed by Mr Galea Pirotta are not included in this interview.

Difficulty in designing a set is three fold:

- a. It has to be liked and accepted by MaltaPost
- b. It has to be interesting and possibly contain information for a philatelist
- c. As an artist, I have to like the output

MaltaPost comes up with an idea for a stamp set and the artist then works on this idea to produce visuals. These are filtered and work starts on the actual paintings thereafter. The process has a lot of homework from the artist's point of view. One has to work in a given area (due to stamp size ratio), certain areas need to be clear as space for value and other information which has to be printed on the image. The painting has to be done to scale (44x31 stamps typically are worked on a x10 scale). Artist must also keep in mind that the painting will be blown up for posters, but also shrunk down for the actual stamp. Hence, the definition must be kept throughout all stages.

2. Your designs were used to depict two buses sets. Each stamp featured one particular route bus with its characteristic colours as well as a landmark. Who decided these landmarks? The first buses set earned you a reward. Can you kindly elaborate on this reward?

This set was first going to depict only the vehicle itself but then, I proposed we could relate this to a Maltese background. Most backgrounds were chosen historically – hence according to the route followed. Others were depicted in relation to the locality.

With regards to the reward – this was a total surprise to me. I later got to learn that MaltaPost takes part in various “philatelic competitions” abroad- exposing their product worldwide. I was informed by MaltaPost of this honour – Best Theme Award.

It is worthwhile to mention that the Isle of Man issued two sets of stamps about Manx buses. The first set was issued on the 2nd June, 1999 and the second one on the 15th July, 2015. Both sets had the same illustrator – the world renowned automotive history artist Peter Hearsey. The first set illustrations depict the buses in its full glory with some people. There were no background scenes. The buses seem to be 19th century graphic illustrations.

When the second buses set was issued, illustrations showed both the buses as well as a historical landmark. This meant that what Cedric Galea Pirotta have created for MaltaPost, had influenced an international automotive history artist. In the second set each Manx bus was given a landmark. The only difference between Cedric Galea Pirotta's and Peter Hearsey's stamp illustrations is that the Maltese buses are part and parcel of the environment while the buses of the Isle Of Man have buildings in their architectural/graphical glory.

3. In 2012, an eighty-eight stamp set was issued by MaltaPost featuring Operational

Pedestal ships. Preparing an eighty-eight stamps design is not an easy task. How many hours of work were dedicated to this set? What sort of research did you go through?

I have no idea of the number of hours I put in for this set but it was a massive challenge. The biggest amount of work was carried out in research (mostly at archives of Maritime Museum and also online). Since this was a historical event, whatever was depicted had to be historically correct. Vessels were often recycled and modified during the Second World War. So the version had to portray the right time frame.

4. A year later you designed a different type of set – wild animals. Your art features mostly scenes, urban scenes mostly. Was it a challenge to design two Maltese wild animals in their traditional habitat?

The challenge in this set was the time frame. I received a call at around noon from MaltaPost that they required a set of two stamps depicting two animals... for the following morning. MaltaPost suggested the surroundings for this set.

5. You designed two joint issues, one in 2011 (Malta/Iceland) and another one two years later (Malta/Curacao). This meant that your stamps are enriching foreign stamps collections. What are your comments?

I was very honoured with this offer – especially since I had also been chosen to depict the foreign scenes too. This meant that my style and work had also been accepted by the respective foreign postal authorities.

6. You designed five Grand Masters in 2014. Your designs were similar to those old popular Grand Masters engravings. This must have offered you limited space for imagination and interpretation. How did you feel designing in such ‘a straight jacket’?

Pen and ink is my favourite medium, so working on an etching-like product was second nature. It was not easy to find portraits of the remaining grandmasters. The other originals were Aubert de Vertot’s.

7. In 2013 you designed the annual prestigious PostEurop set. It featured two postal vans. What difficulties have you faced to feature these historical icons of Maltese postal history?

The vehicles were identified by MaltaPost. Research was done on these two manufacturers’ respective vehicles. Vans were modified accordingly as used by MaltaPost at the time. These modifications were obtained from old photos and books I managed to find.

8. Is there any theme which you dream to design for our local stamps?

A Christmas issue most probably is what comes first in mind

9. MaltaPost issues an annual Christmas set of stamps. So far you have not been given the opportunity to produce designs for such an issue. If you were invited to do so, would you accept?
Like all other sets, I am sure it will be a great challenge!
10. From time to time, PostEurop organizes competitions, as it did for the 2016 stamp issue – Think Green? Would you consider such a challenge?
I would love to accept.
11. Whenever you design a set of stamps, are you involved in designing the FDC envelope and its presentation pack?
No – I just produce the artwork.
12. Chev Emvin Cremona has created many interesting stamp designs for Malta in the 1960s and 1970s. These influenced the British approach to stamp designs – the monarch head. Do you find them inspiring?
Chev Cremona’s style (as answered in 16) did strike me when I was a little kid (probably because my dad also liked his style very much). I really liked his layout and style of depicting the theme.
13. Which foreign countries stamps do you consider as a source of inspiration?
I am not into philately per se that much – apart from their design, so I do not have any. I have never followed them either apart from checking the stamps that come with overseas mail for curiosity.
14. You were involved in 15 issues in such a short span of time. What are your experience with MaltaPost and with Printex Limited personnel?
Experience with MaltaPost personnel is great top down. I do my best to continue to provide what is required whenever it is asked from me. They trust my experience and graphic design background (which helps in planning a stamp keeping in mind the whole process). Through this growing process, I now know what they are after as soon as the idea for a set is conceived.
I have never worked with Printex directly as this is done by MaltaPost.
15. Have you ever collected stamps yourself?
Yes I did when I was very young. The set that struck me most was Emvin Cremona’s 1968 Christmas set – probably due to its innovative shape.
16. Do you encourage stamp collecting for your young son as well as for your nephews and nieces?
I have never tried it actually to be honest as he is not the “collector” type.
17. In your opinion what do philatelists expect from stamp designs?
Something innovative, something to look forward to (a collection spun over

different issues), singularity (sets that are not mass produced so that their rarity makes it more exciting to find and collect)

18. The test

Let's consider an imaginative situation: In 2016 our beloved capital city will have its 450th birthday. Suppose I am MaltaPost's philatelic manager and invite you to prepare a set of stamps marking this anniversary. What will you end up with? Will you have a close study to Cremona's 400th anniversary designs?

I believe that when one refers to works from previous artists' sets, he will end up focusing his ideas on that particular design and loses the ability to focus on new and fresh ideas. The idea of Cremona if I am not mistaken was based on the 4 main people related to the capital when it was built and an aerial view of the city. Integrating the same concept in a new set is not an option in my opinion – so I would work on something different.

The final result cannot just be drawn as this is usually a buildup of research and ideas. Perhaps, I might consider a collage or specific depict details from buildings in Valletta. Who knows?

Mr Galea Pirota thanks for offering me such a unique opportunity to be able to appreciate more your stamp designs. Let's hope we shall have more designs featuring the signature of Cedric Galea Pirota.

CGP – Thank you for your time and interest



May this Christmas
end the present year on a cheerful note
and make way for a fresh
and bright New Year.
Here's wishing you a Merry Christmas
and a Healthy 2022.