

# The Ecclesiastical Decorative Arts in the Maltese Islands

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The development of the ecclesiastical decorative arts in the Maltese Islands is one of those fields of artistic practice, which, so far, had not yet received any scholarly and academic attention. As a result, the story of church decoration in the Maltese Islands, albeit of utmost importance in the holistic understanding of artistic endeavour in Malta, has been almost totally ignored. Over the ages, since the re-Christianisation of the Maltese Islands in the thirteenth century, church decoration has proved to be one of the keystones of art in Malta. Together with painting, sculpture, and architecture, the decorative arts played a seminal role in the embellishment of the numerous places of worship that dot the islands.

Many items of church furniture dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth century show that important works were present before the advent of the Knights Hospitallers. The latter gave a new impetus to church decoration and during the eighteenth century, in particular, artistic activity in this field thrived. This drive for church decoration was once more in full force in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when many churches underwent substantial physical alterations and a large amount of church furniture and liturgical *objets d'art* were commissioned to embellish the sacred spaces. This period was extremely fertile in this production. It is impressive that in a small place like Malta, a large amount of artists and craftsmen designed and produced works of a considerable artistic quality. This production takes a higher dimension when one takes into account the hardship that was, at times, present.

My Master's degree thesis has aimed to partially fill a void that has been for long overdue. It is a continuation on my undergraduate research which had discussed the most important designers of church furniture and decoration in Gozo in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> This study focuses on the oeuvre of Emanuele Buhagiar who was one of Malta's most important designers of church furniture and liturgical *objets d'art*.

Born in Vittoriosa in 1876, Emanuele Buhagiar received his artistic training entirely in Malta. The painters Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) and Giuseppe Bonnici (1835-1900), together with the sculptors Aristide Bonnici (1851-1888) and Vincenzo Cardona (active late nineteenth/early twentieth century) were among his mentors. Emanuele Buhagiar embarked on his artistic career at a very early age and his first documented works date before his marriage in 1898 to Ersilia Cali, the niece of the influential painter Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930). During his long artistic life, he invented and produced numerous works. His first *bottega* was situated in Vittoriosa but in 1906 he left his native city for good and subsequently put up residence and workshop in Tarxien and Paola. By the time of his death in 1962, almost every church in Malta had commissioned one or more works by the artist.

Numerous works, including all types of church decoration and furniture, were produced by a large number of designers. Inevitably, the large number of designers obviously meant that artistic quality fluctuated. Emanuele Buhagiar's works, together with those of his artistic rival Abram Gatt (1863-1944), single themselves out for their invention and artistic quality. A

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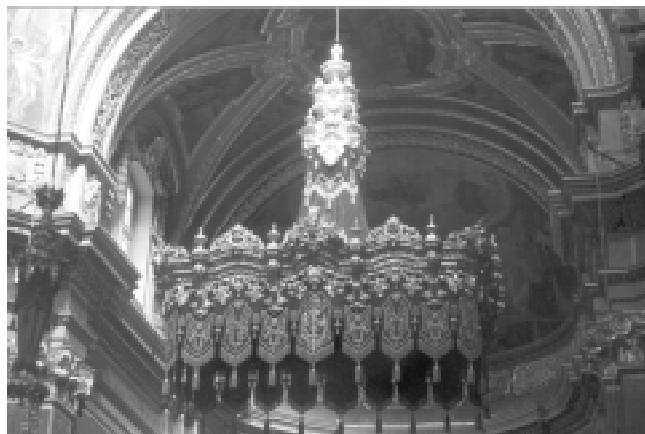
<sup>1</sup>Mark Sagona, *The Designs of Abram Gatt, Francesco Saverio Sciortino, Emanuele Buhagiar and Giuseppe Galea for the Churches of Gozo*, unpublished B.A. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta 1999.

comparison between Buhagiar's output and that of other important artists working in this field shows that he was one of the most prolific artists of his time. Buhagiar was also the last significant exponent of the wood intarsia technique, which had come down from generation to generation since the time of the Knights.

The present study, besides evaluating the contribution of Emanuele Buhagiar in an art-historical and critical sense, discusses his oeuvre in conjunction with other designers working during his time. Particular importance is given to Buhagiar's relationship with Abram Gatt. Buhagiar realised several works on designs by Gatt, becoming influenced from the style of the latter. The thesis also evaluates Buhagiar's works of art in the light of the peculiar and unique Maltese context at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the dominating role of religion and the celebration of the village *fešta*. The feasts of the patron saints and secondary saints started to be celebrated on a larger scale and, as a result, people were keener to commission new works of art for the embellishment of the church on the great annual occasion. Research has shown that Buhagiar was especially popular in the southern districts of the island, where he kept his workshop. In fact, during the *fešta* days, some churches, such as the parish churches of Gudja and Qrendi, are veritable museums of works by the artist. The thesis also presents some of the new material which was unearthed on various artists, designers and craftsmen active in Malta at the time, and whose opus is still relatively obscure.

Throughout his life, Buhagiar designed a whole array of items including antependia, sanctuary lamps, candlesticks, pedestals, reliquaries, monstrance thrones, missal covers, altar cruets, thuribles, altar canopies, processional crosses and lanterns. The majority were generally sculpted in wood and later water-gilt. In the case that the *objet d'art* would have been destined to be manufactured in silver, the artist nonetheless produced a full-scale wooden *modello*. A typical example is the silver antependium which adorns the high altar of the Tarxien Parish Church during the titular feast of the village.

Buhagiar also produced designs which were produced in embroidery such as sacred vestments, tabernacle covers, altar-cloths and processional banners. His set of pontifical vestments for the parish church at Luqa are artistically the most important of their kind in twentieth century Malta. Other important contributions in this field include the tabernacle cover for the high altar at Safi Parish Church and the altar cloth on the altar of the Virgin of the Rosary at Tarxien Parish Church.



**Plate 1** Emanuele Buhagiar, *Altar Canopy*, c.1929, Parish Church of St Catherine, Zejtun.

Buhagiar's stylistic timbre is characterised by the Maltese love for the baroque idiom and draws on the ornate and profuse style which appears in various works of the eighteenth century. In the typical eclectic fashion of the period, the principal baroque syntax is sprinkled with other stylistic influences. Among these influences, there are Gothic revival elements and other ornamental vocabulary which was in popular usage in late nineteenth century England. Many of his works, such as the massive altar canopy at the Zejtun Parish Church [**Plate 1**], show an authentic love for decoration and a constant quest for originality. On Gozo, his most representative work is the organ balcony at St George's Basilica in Victoria.

Buhagiar's popularity is intimately linked with the various predelle for titular statues, which he produced for many churches in Malta, such as those for Gudja, Zabbar, Dingli and Attard [**Plate 2**] parish churches. He became much sought after for this kind of work and during his career he produced no less than twelve statue predelle.

These are very rich in artistic and sculptural content, and also employ high quality craftsmanship. The Buhagiar predella generally makes use of different types of wood together with fine wood-inlaid and ebony panels. These create a wonderful play of chromatic values, texture and contrasts. His first work in this genre, the predella for the titular statue of the Immaculate Conception at Cospicua Parish Church, set the standards in this item of church furniture for the following decades in Malta.



**Plate 2** Emanuele Buhagiar, *Predella for Titular Statue, 1925, Parish Church of the Assumption, Attard.*

This thesis has brought to light many works of art by Emanuele Buhagiar for the first time. Painstaking research, conducted in church archives and in private collections on a span of three years, has unearthed a very considerable number of designs which the artist produced in preparation for his commissions. These were usually produced in pen and wash, but pencil and charcoal also recur. The fact that the major part of these designs are signed and dated, have enabled the construction of the artist's chronological oeuvre, which is very difficult to ascertain where the decorative arts are concerned.

This post-graduate study has thrown substantial new light on this little known artist, filling a lacuna in the study of the ecclesiastical decorative arts in the Maltese Islands at the turn of the twentieth century. It has also contributed towards the full and holistic understanding of the exciting story of Maltese Art in general. However, it has also clearly shown the extensive amount of academic research that remains to be done so that the full story of church decoration in Malta and Gozo is woven into a one, coherent whole.

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### A Set of Five New Bells

These five bells rang their most important *mota* on Friday afternoon, 23 September 1864, when news reached Gozo that on 16 September, Pope Pius IX had established Gozo and Comino as a separate diocese and declared the old Matrice the Cathedral of the new diocese. These were rung for the last time at twelve noon on Pentecost Sunday, 8 June 2003. On 5 and 13 July 2003, they were lowered down from the Cathedral belfry for the last time.

The five new bells reached Gozo from Leicestershire on 31 July 2003 and were blessed by Bishop Nikol Cauchi of Gozo in a solemn ceremony held at Pjazza Savina, Rabat, on 2 August. The bells are named, from the smallest to the largest, *Aloysia, Pavla, Iosepha-Francisca, Ursula, and Maria Assumpta*. Their weight ranges from the 310 kg of the smallest to the 4275 kg of the largest, and their diameter from 800 mm to 1955 mm.

Each bell is decorated with a set of ornate canons bearing six cherubs, and a garland of English roses round the waist. The titular effigy of the Assumption and an inscription recording their blessing is embossed upon the largest bell, whilst Saint Ursula and Pope Pius IX are embossed on the second largest.

### Conclusion

The five old bells from the Knights' *Ferreria*, after a much needed rehabilitation, have been hung as a tourist attraction within the arched recess in front of the entry to the Cathedral crypt in Triq Bieb l-Imdina. They will continue to be rung on very special occasions to announce far and wide a message of good tidings.