



MALTA

Land of Sea

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE
EDITED BY SANDRO DEBONO

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Study of a Woman

Antoine Favray (1706–98)

Pencil and sanguine on paper

355 x 245 mm

MUŻA – Mużew Nazzjonali

tal-Arti (Heritage Malta)

Inv. no. 14939-40

French by nationality, Antoine de Favray (1706–98) was Maltese by choice of residence. This sketch portrays a Maltese lady whose pose is similar to that of other Maltese ladies the artist depicted in the intimacy of their home. Like most of his female subjects, this lady too belonged to 'elite' society. On viewing this portrait, the natural question that comes to mind: Is Favray's intention to discuss or challenge sexual norms of his time by presenting scenes of women dressed in the intimacy of their homes?

By the time this portrait was executed, female sexuality had started to be discovered and women were on the threshold of claiming an independent existence. This element of female emancipation was manifested publicly in Malta a few months after Favray's death. In June 1798, the Republican French forces occupied Malta until 1800. After this period, the life of women in Malta was never to be the same again.

The seventeenth century had introduced concepts of sexual prohibitions. In the process, eroticism was no longer linked to touch but slowly made its way into the domain of the visual. Sexuality and human nakedness started to represent moral concerns. By the eighteenth century, it was becoming even more difficult for artists to represent the naked human body on canvas without infringing moral norms. The approach towards sexuality was not much different between the Catholic south and the Protestant north. Furthermore, sexual customs and rules of etiquette were no different in Malta from those in France.

Women's sexual desires started to become hidden all the more, while the sexual differences between men and women gradually became more pronounced. For the first time, Europe concurrently witnessed what, in later centuries, would be defined as adult material, as well as the first signs of sexual constraints.

Decency became an imperative. Clothing had an important part to play in this new world that was taking shape. Females, more than males, started to conceal their bodies. Having parts of the body exposed started to be considered as a form of indecency or better, a sexual provocation, and eroticism played its part. Garments contributed a great deal to this new element of femininity.

In terms of dress code, Malta went through this revolution in silence. In fact, the French envoy Nicola de Nicolai attested to a totally different dress code for Maltese ladies in the sixteenth century. They had no problems to wear see-through attire back then. Breasts were visible and markedly exposed. This visual representation of such Maltese women by Nicolai brought about the general and wrong supposition that these women were either courtesans or, worse, prostitutes.

This code was still in use in the following century. A recent painting purchased by Heritage Malta, a work by Mattia Preti, expresses this concept well. This is part of a large canvas by Preti showing the scene Apelles painting Alexander the Great's lover, Pampepe, in a revealing dress. The sitter could have easily been a noble lady.

A century later, Favray gave us a number of portraits of Maltese women which show that revealing attire had gone out of fashion. By this time Maltese women had gone through an evolution. Women in Malta, as in the rest of the Mediterranean and the known world, covered their head. From biblical times, women were expected to cover their head and, in different modes and cultures, did so right through most of the twentieth century. However, at one point, this custom went through an evolution. Women not only continued to cover their head with what is known as *ghonnella* or *faldetta* but by the eighteenth century started to wear a veil underneath. The *ghonnella* was a sort of long black cape. The rich had it in heavy silk while that of the poor, known as *culqana*, was made of coarser and cheap fabric. But both covered the female body completely. No woman, rich or poor, would dare go out in public without some sort of over-garment that covered her body from head to toe.

Many of Favray's paintings featuring Maltese women without the *ghonnella* who were portrayed in the comfort of their home with their forearm visibly bare. Favray must have had access to the inner sanctum of the Maltese home, including those areas within the house where no male outsider was allowed to enter. In fact, most of Favray's paintings exclude the presence of men. His works seek to express the female domain, to the extent that, in a number of his paintings, Favray attests the presence of the boudoir in the homes of the Maltese elite. The boudoir was more than a bedroom. In truth, it was a beautifully decorated room used by ladies for sleeping, dressing, relaxing and entertaining. Clearly, Favray was a trusted painter to express the intimacy of such a chamber. As a foreigner he must have been present or had knowledge of, what today, may appear as an oriental custom, as unlike in Paris, this room in Malta was exclusively reserved for women. In the case of this *mezzo busto* study, the setting is missing but there should be no doubt that the lady was meant to be at her home.

Like the rest of Favray's paintings, this portrait cannot be considered erotic. Perhaps, it may have appeared a little bit poignant and pensive for the time. Favray appears to be rediscovering the feminine aspects of this Maltese sitter and wanted to depict her in a way normally concealed from the public eye. As his portraits were intended to be hung at home, the women would be painted in the garments that they were expected to wear indoors, that is without the *ghonnella* and exposing part of the human body, in this particular case, the forearms, which were covered up outside. For this reason, this sort of image, made by pencil on cream paper, could have easily qualified as an erotic or provocative portrait for the

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time. The sitter may even have appeared as a libertine – to borrow a word used by the Marquis De Sade, a contemporary of Favray's.

Yet, a closer inspection reveals that the head of this model is still covered. She is wearing a veil, which at the time was usually worn under the *ghonnella*. Thus, even in the intimacy of her home, and in particular if she was in someone else's house, a woman still kept her head covered. In an extremely intelligent way, Favray is leaving it up to the viewer to decide whether this portrait is one of a libertine or otherwise.

From an anatomical point of view, Favray is highlighting the female features according to the way medical science perceived sex and gender differences in his times. His model is here expressing a sense of hierarchical deference, which is governed by a sexual charm, radiating a feeling of hidden warmth. According to Sciberras, this has been achieved by having this half-length image penciled 'in a momentary reflection, as if captured in slow transient movement'. The way the artist captured such a moment of intimacy is rare in Maltese eighteenth-century art, but it is this sensual element which makes this work a true product of Favray's age.

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