

Art

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The earliest artistic manifestations in Malta date to prehistoric times. This is testified by a rich archaeological heritage consisting of a variety of decorated clay and stone artifacts and a series of impressive megalithic structures. The potter's craft developed into an expression of cultural vitality materialised through a series of patterns and decorations that reflect successive aesthetic requirements. The *Impressed Ware* of the early neolithic farmers of the *Għar Dalam* phase (5000-4500 B.C.) was superseded by the prosaic forms of the *Grey Skorba* phase (4500-4400 B.C.) and enlivened by a bright red slip in the course of the so called *Red Skorba* phase (4400-4100 B.C.). Meanwhile man discovered the art of modelling anthropomorphic figurines. However it was during the *Temple Period* (4100-2500 B.C.) that prehistoric man in Malta poured forth an extraordinary civilising energy that took the contours of greatness.

Beside the master potter there developed a race of builders and stone carvers whose inspired daring and skill are vouched for by the monumental temples of Ġgantija, Mnajdra, Haġar Qim, Tarxien and a string of less known sites. Buildings that are reputedly amongst the finest and oldest stone edifices in the world. Here the sculptor carved into the soft globigerina limestone uncanny abstract and figurative relieves and statuettes in the round that vie with the best of modern art. In the hallowed underground environment of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum architecture and stone carving were fused into a single act whilst complex spirals, executed in red ochre, testify inherent painterly practices.

The succeeding Bronze Age people built, at Borg in-Nadur, the earliest fortifications

in Malta and produced a number of stylised flat terracotta figures and decorated their pottery with an ornate sharp geometrical motif.

The eclectic Phoenicians made their first appearance in Malta some time round the year 700 B.C. With their trading wares they brought new customs and fashions. At Tas-Silg, near Marsaxlokk, they erected a sanctuary in honour of the goddess Astartes. With time Malta's link with the Punic world, particularly Carthage, grew closer. Personal jewellery, amulets, ornaments and a few surviving architectural remains betray the egyptianizing forms favoured by this Semitic people. The impressive baked clay anthropomorphic sarcophagus found at Għar Barka near Rabat dating to the fifth century B.C., is illustrative of Egyptian influence. On the other hand a few imported bowls found in tombs, the typology of certain locally manufactured pottery and a pair of marble candelabra, with Greek and Punic inscriptions dedicated to Herakles-Melqart, indicate some form of contact with the Greek world.

In 218 B.C. Rome conquered the Maltese Islands from the Carthaginians. Roman rule was to last some six hundred years. Notwithstanding its provinciality and relative isolation there is evidence of lively artistic activity in Malta. Excavations carried out in 1881, at Rabat, revealed fragments of the rich mosaic pavements of a patrician town house. Dating to the first century A.D. these mosaics are composed in the refined *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* techniques and show a high degree of workmanship. The Roman baths at Ghajn Tuffieħa were likewise embellished with mosaics. Architectural

fragments confirm the former existence of lavish buildings. The tombstone of a musician and comedian and other archaeological evidence indicate that Roman Malta had its own theatre. Notable amongst the extant statuary of the period are the portrait bust of *Antonia the Younger* and the head of *Emperor Claudius*. Cicero in his prosecution against Caius Verres describes the latter's pillage of works of art from the temple of Astartes, which by then had been rededicated to Juno, her Roman counterpart.

Christianity made its first appearance during the Roman domination. Traces of early Christian art are evident in underground cemeteries called Catacombs. Fragments of murals, graffiti and carvings stand witness to the desire of translating into visual forms the prayers of the faithful and the Christian message of eternal life. Unfortunately most of these works are now in a dilapidated state and consequently their artistic evaluation is difficult and problematic. However, their quality appears to range from the purely naive carvings of the Hal Resqun Catacombs to the ornate sophisticated forms noticed in the decorations at the Abbatija tad-Dejr and Salina Bay Catacombs. Tracts and traces of wall paintings are still visible in St Agatha's Catacombs at Rabat.

The vestiges of an early Christian basilica and baptistery, uncovered at Tas-Silg, and the above mentioned Catacombs are remnants of palaeochristian artistic practices. On the other hand a few tombstones – of which the elegant *Maimuna's Stone* is the best known example – a silver ring, and some bits of pottery, is all we have to attest to the presence of Islamic art and crafts within the Maltese Islands.

As Mario Buhagiar rightly points out in his authoritative *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands* no painting, excluding fragments extant in Christian catacombs, can be dated to before the late Middle Ages. A common Maltese Mediaeval

practice was the use of underground cavities as dwellings and churches. One of the earliest paintings in Malta is the late thirteenth century image of the *Virgin and Child* in the rock-cut sanctuary at Melleħa. Of special interest is the *Crucifixion and Annunciation*, probably dating to the fourteenth century from the apse of the crypt adjoining the Abbatija Tad-Dejr catacombs now removed and exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts. These and other surviving troglodyte murals, notably those in St Agatha's Crypt at Rabat, betray the iconography and formal hieratic composition of the Siculo-Byzantinesque School. Pertaining to the same tradition but dating to the late fifteenth century are the frescoes adorning the wayside chapel of the *Annunciation* at Hal Millieri near Żurrieq.

The avowed *St Luke Madonna* in the Cathedral at Mdina is a beautiful and refined Byzantinesque panel whose sophisticated execution suggests Sienese and International Gothic influences. Similar artistic traits appear in the superb *Virgin of Mercy with SS. Paul and Augustine* now in the sacresty of the Augustinian Church at Rabat. This was originally a polyptych of which a fourth panel, depicting St Catherine, also survives. Another altarpiece dating to the middle of the fifteenth century and of which four panels are still extant is to be found in the parish church of St George at Qormi. The central scene represents an extraordinary *Lamentation*. Here the painter conveys, through the emaciated body of Christ and the intense doleful expressions of Mary and her companions, a heavy atmosphere charged with strong emotional piety and pathos. The entire pictorial complex which includes St George, St Gregory and a Crucifix encompass Byzantine spirituality with International Gothic narrative zest.

The splendid *St Paul Polyptych*, now at the Cathedral Museum, was the former reredos of the Cathedral Church. It is a work of great beauty attributable to the

circle of the Catalan painter Luis Borassa (1360-1426). Nothing is known of its early history but given the subject and iconography it must have been purposely commissioned for Malta. The central panel, representing St Paul in Majesty, is surrounded by ten other smaller panels. Significantly one of the scenes recounts the apostle's shipwreck in Malta. Notwithstanding the loss of its original framework and the damage brought about by the passage of time it still has the power to arrest and impress the beholder.

Throughout the Middle Ages Malta received its artistic stimulus via the nearby larger island of Sicily. The 'Messina' painters, for instance, introduced innovative late fifteenth and early sixteenth century modes. Antonio de Saliba (1466-1535) and Salvo d'Antonio (active 1493-1526) had intimate family links with Antonello da Messina (c. 1430-1479) and their art is closely related to that of the great Renaissance master. Both artists received Maltese commissions. Antonio de Saliba executed in 1517 an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria de Gesù at Rabat whilst Salvo d'Antonio produced, in 1505, a polyptych for the Benedictine Nuns of Mdina. One other Sicilian painter active in Malta just prior to the coming of the Order of St John was the Syracusan Alessandro Patavino, or Padovano, who from 1520 to 1521 was engaged in decorating the ceiling of the old Cathedral Church of Mdina. In 1529 Patavino was still receiving occasional commissions from the Cathedral Chapter.

The advent of the Knights of St John in 1530 signified the beginning of a new era. Up to the time the Cathedral at Mdina had been the principal artistic hub of the Maltese archipelago. The Knights shifted attention first to the harbour town of Birgu and later to the new city of Valletta. With them they brought from Rhodes their archives and many of their artistic treasures. These included the precious twelfth century Byzantine icon of the *Madonna of Damascus* now extant in the

Greek Catholic Church of Valletta and a set of French illuminated choral books commissioned in 1521 by Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam.

In the wake of the Order of St John there came a large group of retainers and followers including skilled craftsmen. One was a certain Nicola Caccialepre who in 1535 carved a marble stoup for the chapel of Santo Spirito Hospital. The influential Sicilian sculptor Antonello Gagini (1478/79-1536) had in 1504 produced a fine marble *Madonna and Child* for the Franciscan Church of Santa Maria di Gesù at Rabat. Now at the demise of Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam in 1535 the same artist was commissioned to execute the funeral effigy of the Grand Master. Another work generally attributed to Gagini or his workshop is the fine marble Baptismal Font in the Cathedral at Mdina.

Artistic links with Sicily continued through the early years of the Order's rule. In 1551 Can. Giuseppe Manduca commissioned an altarpiece for the Chapel of St Agatha in Mdina from an unknown painter of Sicilian extraction or training. Thus sifted late Renaissance models percolated into Malta receiving, in the process, a local mannerist twist that resulted in the admixture of retardataire and innovative features. This is very much in evidence in the remaining fragments of the *Last Judgement* in the Church of Bir Miftuħ at Gudja. The 1546 *Santa Scholastica* altarpiece, now in the Monastery dedicated to that Saint at Vittoriosa, is illustrative of the whimsical artistic currents then effecting the Maltese Islands.

Giovanni Maria Abela is one of the earliest recorded Maltese painters. Only one certain painting by his hand is known to have survived the ravage of time. The picture represents the *Virgin of the Rosary surrounded by the Holy Mysteries*. This is a painting, signed and dated 1591, which originally graced the church of Siggiewi and is now on permanent display at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina. A similar

altarpiece, dated 1595, at Naxxar is also generally ascribed to Abela. Both works represent a fair indication of the charms and limits of contemporary local painters.

On the 28 March, 1566 Grand Master Jean Parisot de La Vallette solemnly laid the foundation stone of the fortified city that still bears his name. The city's layout and defences were set by the Italian military engineer Francesco Lapparelli (1521-1570). However it was the Maltese military engineer and architect Geronimo Cassar (1520-1586) who supervised the actual construction of the new city and was responsible for the design of its principal buildings. One of the first edifices to be erected in Valletta was the Magisterial Palace. Here the Italian Matteo Perez D'Aleccio (1547-1616) decorated the throne room or 'Sala del Maggior Consiglio' with an impressive series of frescoes that recount the heroic defence of Malta at the time of the Great Siege of 1565. For the new Conventual Church Perez D'Aleccio executed the large *Baptism of Christ* to serve as its main altarpiece. For the Collegiate Church of St Paul he produced the vast *Shipwreck of St Paul* which established the Apostle's Maltese iconography. Mattia Perez D'Aleccio eventually left Malta and after spending some time in Rome and Seville migrated to Peru where he set up shop in Lima. Other late mannerist painters whose works can be admired in Malta include Antonio Catalano il Vecchio (1560-1606), Francesco Potenzano (c.1540-1599), Giovanni Battista Riccio (1537-1627), Daniele da Monteleone (active 1600-1622) and Filippo Paladini (c.1544-1616).

The painter Filippo Paladini reached Malta chained to a bench of a Tuscan galley in 1588. The previous year he had been condemned to row in a galley for his involvement in a violent fight in Florence. However the then reigning Grand Master Hugues De Loubenx Verdale interceded on his behalf and secured his release and services. The Grand Master soon had him working on the decorations of Verdala

Castle and in the Magisterial Palace at Valletta where he frescoed the Palace Chapel and painted its main altarpiece. His splendid *St James*, in the Church of that saint in Valletta, is an explicit and superb example of Mannerist pictorial art.

Amadeo Perugino painted in 1617 the venerable but mediocre altarpiece of *Our Lady of Ta' Pinu* in Gozo. Compared to this pedestrian work Vincenzo Baiata's *Madonna and Child* of 1611, formerly at Tal-Virtù Chapel and now in the Collegio Wignacourt Museum, appears as a veritable tour de force. Clearly influenced by Filippo Paladini it is a handsome painting whose execution and chromatic values are in the best tradition of late Italian Mannerism. Paladini's art was to have a lingering influence on painting in Malta. Filippo Dingli's attractive canvas, dated 1660, of the *Magdalene* at Madliena harks back to the style introduced by the master at the start of the century.

∟The Conventual Church of St John, built by Geronimo Cassar, rapidly became a focal centre of art in Malta. It was the main Church of the Knights of St John and the Order and its members vied in its embellishment. Round 1608 the great Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) painted for the Oratory of St John his momentous *Beheading of St John* and for the Chapel of Italy the magnificent *St Jerome*. Caravaggio's triumphant stay in Malta was short-lived for his pesky spirit landed him in trouble and he was imprisoned. Somehow he eluded his guards and made his escape from Fort St Angelo only to die shortly after at Porto Ercole in Italy. Amongst the canvases Caravaggio executed in Malta is the well known 'Louvre' portrait of Grand Master Alof De Wignacourt accompanied by a page and wearing the Verdalin suit of armour. Caravaggio's revolutionary dramatic realism, tonal values and extraordinary interplay of light and shade turned him into one of the most influential and important European painters of all time.

In Malta the influence of Caravaggio was particularly felt by a painter called Cassarino to whom a number of generally mediocre and inferior paintings have been attributed on stylistic grounds. This enigmatic painter was first identified by the late Dr J.A. Cauchi when his signature was uncovered during the cleaning and restoration of a *St Sebastian tended by the Holy Women* belonging to the Church of St John. The figures appear to emerge from within sombre Caravaggesque tonalities highlighted by flashes of a warm brown light that picks up salient details and accentuates the drama enacted in the painting. However Cassarino's mannered and rigid execution falls short of respectable artistic standards. Notwithstanding a mystifying effort to equate him with a certain Giulio Felici, Cassarino's enigmatic personality still remains a moot point.

Bartolomeo Garagona's (1584-1641) *Deposition*, dated 1627, in the Cathedral sacresty at Mdina, is saturated by Caravaggesque tonal values. However its pathos and expressive religious intensity recalls late Spanish Gothic models. Garagona, who hailed from Senglea, also engaged himself in architectural projects. Fra Lucas Garnier (active 1650-1700) and Gaspare Formica (d.1647) were foreign painters active in Malta. Fra Garnier was a French member of the Order of St John. His works were competently executed but lack the lustre of the real master. His enormous altarpiece of *St Theresa* at Cospicua communicates the peculiar sensation that it is the product of a well exercised dilettante. Gaspare Formica is said to have originated from Piacenza. His works are usually charged with queer unreal chromatic values and contain monumentally conceived figures who are seemingly conscious of the beholder's presence. His talents, however, defaulted through a dearth of originality and his compositions are brazen adaptations of other people's ideas. A case in point is his bizarre *Holy Family* of 1626, in the convent

of the Friar Minors of Valletta, which he lifted direct from Luca Cambiaso.

Mario Minniti (1577-1640), Pietro Novelli (1603-1647), Giovanni Battista Caracciolo (1578-1635) and Jusepe Ribera (1591-1652) either worked in Malta or executed their Maltese commissions abroad. As a matter of fact there was a constant flow of fine paintings coming into Malta from overseas. Guido Reni (1575-1642) is not known to have visited Malta and yet his *Christ Holding the Cross*, formerly in the Grand Master's Palace and now in the National Museum of Fine Arts, must have reached Malta at the time. Very active in this respect were some of the Knights themselves. In 1653 Jacques De Cordon D'Evieu, Ambassador of the Order of St John to the Holy See, commissioned his portrait in Rome from Pierre Mignard (1612-1695). The painting was eventually sent to Malta and incorporated into the Palace Collection. At one time it hung at San Anton's Palace from where it was transferred to the National Museum of Fine Arts.

The second half of the seventeenth century was dominated by the presence in Malta of Mattia Preti (1613-1699). Preti's magnificent brand of Baroque resulted from the interpolation of his Neapolitan and Caravaggesque formation with his attraction to the splendid chromatic qualities of Venetian painting. A brilliant draughtsman, his productions mirror a strong and overpowering artistic personality. In 1661 he started work on the ceiling decorations of St John's Church. It was Preti who converted this building's erstwhile unassuming interior into a dazzling Baroque scenario. Preti did not limit his *oeuvre* to the Conventual Church. In the course of thirty years Preti continued to work in Malta producing countless paintings for both local and foreign patrons.

Mattia Preti's influence was all-pervasive and his paintings are encountered all over the Maltese archipelago. He had several followers, assistants and imitators whose

often meek output fell short of the master's high standards. Preti's pupils included the Spanish Knight Don Pedro Nunez De Villavicencio (1640-1698), best remembered as a lifelong friend of Murillo, who in 1668 painted the altarpiece of *St Philip Neri* for the Church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo at Senglea.

Notwithstanding the presence of Mattia Preti the painters Giuseppe D'Arena (1633-1719) and Stefano Erardi (1630-1716) kept a busy workshop and enjoyed a certain amount of prestige. Invariably prompted by the art of the great master their personality were not, however, entirely stifled and managed to steer along parallel artistic courses. Their paintings can be admired in almost every Maltese parish. Both painters received the privilege of painting a picture for the Conventual Church of St John. The former painted the lunette of *St Sebastian before the Pope* in the Chapel of Auvergne whilst the latter did *The Adoration of the Magi* in the Chapel of Germany. Generally D'Arena's compositions tend to be studiously schematic and derivative but he had the ability, on occasions, to impress and rise above average. Erardi was not shy to plagiarise or emulate the work of other masters but his fine articulated compositions are fluid and grand. Alessio Erardi (1617-1727) was the son of Stefano. He was a worthy artist who deserves to be better appreciated. His *Virgin of the Rosary* in the Parish Church of Lija is truly impressive.

In 1693 an earthquake struck Sicily and the Maltese Islands. The Old Cathedral and other mediaeval buildings at Mdina were either destroyed or severely damaged. This gave the excuse to the Cathedral Chapter to embark on the already envisaged plan to erect a new Cathedral. The task of designing and building the new Cathedral was assigned to architect Lorenzo Gafà (1630-1704). This imposing well proportioned building epitomises the sober elegant sculptural quality of Malta's baroque architecture. The skyline and

physical character of the country is governed by the baroque imprint left by ingenious Maltese architects and stonemasons, too numerous to enumerate, whose clever use of the local building medium is truly admirable. Romano Carapecchia, on the other hand, came from Rome in 1706 and was not Maltese. Yet, through his ingratiating and elegant form of baroque Carapecchia transformed the face of Valletta giving it its present urbane stamp.

In the realm of sculpture Melchiorre Gafà (1635-1667) stands out at a par with the greatest Italian sculptors of the time. He was the brother of Lorenzo Gafà and his talents must have been nurtured through the direct handling of Malta's soft limestone. Unfortunately he died an untimely death in Rome and his works in Malta are few. The Italian Giuseppe Mazzuoli (1644-1725) followed Melchiorre Gafà's design in his impressive *Baptism of Christ* at the Conventual Church. Maltese ecclesiastic and domestic baroque architecture were enriched with refined sculptural motifs by mostly anonymous local stone carvers. This important aspect of Malta's art has, unfortunately, never been properly studied and only a couple of names such as Pietro Felici (1669-1743) and Paola Zahra (1685-1447) are still vaguely remembered.

In concomitance with baroque taste the interiors of stately houses become showy and elaborate. Nicolo Nasoni (1691-1773) was invited to Malta to paint the soffits above the corridors in the Magisterial Palace at Valletta. He decorated the Chancery's main hall, some of the rooms at the Verdala Castle, the Grand Masters' Crypt at St John and possibly the entrance hall of the Auberge De Provence. Judging from a painted ceiling inside 'Palazzo Spinola' at No.9 Frederick Street, Valletta it seems that Nasoni was also engaged in the decorations of private residences. These decorations usually consisted of *tromp-l'oeil* architectural compositions, with open skies, foliage and floral devices

and make-belief medallions and sculptures. The Messinese Antonio Manoel produced, round 1793, the well known "fake" dome in the Cathedral of Gozo. This form of decorative art was carried on into the nineteenth century by the Maltese painter Antonaci Grech. The fashion was revived at the turn of the present century when painters such as Filippo Venuti (fl.1880-1906) were engaged to decorate the homes of the emergent well to do classes.

Gian Nicola Buhagiar (1698-1752) and Francesco Vincenzo Zahra (1710-1773) were two outstanding eighteenth century Maltese artistic personalities. Both of them were sons of gifted stone carvers and must have received the first artistic notions from their respective fathers. They worked mostly for the Ecclesiastical establishment painting grand compositions full of movements and articulated figures. Although they operated within the same environment, kept separate workshops and possibly competed for the same type of commissions, their personal relations appeared to have been cordial. At Żejtun they were respectively commissioned to paint, in a sort of friendly competition, the corresponding transepts apses of the Parish Church of St Catherine. Of the two painters Zahra clearly emerges as the more dynamic and forceful. Zahra was also a successful and highly competent portrait painter.

The second half of the eighteenth century saw the establishment in Malta of the French painter Antoine Favray (1706-1798). He just about became an "official" painter to the Order of St John and through his art he presided over its decadence, reflected in the flamboyant elegance of his portraits. In addition he painted attractive altarpieces of which the admirable *Annunciation* in the Cathedral Museum is a fine example. His charming *Maltese Ladies Paying a Visit* in the National Museum of Fine Arts is emblematic of a fashionable rococo genre that recorded the last vestiges of a vanishing era.

The year 1798 was a watershed and a turning point in the history of the Maltese Islands. The Knights were ignominiously expelled from Malta by the French who were, in their turn, ousted by the British. The new century was inaugurated by a change in status and political regime. British rule remained in vigour up to the attainment of Independence in 1964.

Shortly after taking control of the Maltese Islands Captain Alexander John Ball, the Civil Commissioner, re-established the University of Malta which had been closed by the French. The new Rector of the University, Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847), then founded an Art Class which was incorporated in the Faculty of Architecture. The painter Michele Busuttil (1770-1828) was appointed Professor of Drawing. So it happened that this late Baroque artist became the mentor of the new upcoming generation of Maltese painters.

Towards the close of the eighteenth century Giuseppe Grech (1757-1787) was the most promising Maltese artistic element but his untimely death, whilst studying in Rome, impeded him from acting as a link bridging the passage of art in Malta from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. However although Busuttil dominated the artistic scene he was not the only painter active at the time. Due consideration should be given to Gaetano Calleja who was commissioned by the 'Università', that is the municipal government, to paint the portrait of King George III now at the Palace in Valletta. Antonaci Grech, brother of Giuseppe Grech, supplemented the income derived from his interior decorations by paintings watercolour Malta views and militiamen.

The exuberant and eloquent Baroque style has left an indelible mark over the Maltese Islands. It is an essential feature of the archipelago's physiognomy and culture. Yet nineteenth century Malta experienced a virulent reaction against the Baroque movement and its manifestations.

The anti-Baroque reaction was essentially

two pronged. 'Neo-classical ideals', expounded by antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelman (1717-1768), which ostensibly promoted a return to Greek Classical art and architecture was favoured by Malta's new rulers and a section of the local cultured elite. The 'Purist' and 'Nazarene' movements, which promoted a form of Christian art purified from what were considered to be pagan incrustations, was promoted by the Church and the more conservative Catholic intellectuals.

The former is best exemplified in architecture and in some instances in sculpture whilst the latter is best manifested in religious painting. To this must be added an infill of romantic Gothic revival in the form of a few pseudo Gothic Chapels and houses with a marked British accent.

Official preferences are clearly manifested in public monuments and buildings. Ball's Memorial at the Lower Baracca, the portico at the Main Guard, Bighi Naval Hospital and the main entrance to the old University building at Valletta have a definite classical appearance. An important promoter of this style was Col. George Whitmore (1775-1862) of the Royal Engineers who was in charge of the Public Works Department. Certain Maltese gentlemen also developed a liking for Neoclassicism. Sir Agostino Portelli, for instance, introduced doric columns and related architectural features in his Villa at Kalkara. Certainly the most pompous Neoclassical building in Malta is the Mosta Parish Church designed by George Grognet De Vasse (1774-1862).

However the prevailing taste of the populace remained essentially Baroque. Proof of this are the many processional statues produced by sacred image makers and sculptors such as the refined Mariano Gerada (1770-1823) and the ever popular Carlo Darmanin (1825-1905). Illustrative of the artistic dichotomy then existing in the arts is the oeuvre of sculptor Vincenzo Dimech (1768-1831). On the one hand he

executed, in collaboration with his cousin Ferdinando Dimech (d.1840), the explicit Neoclassical *Monument to Judge Joseph Nicholas Zammit* erected at the Upper Baracca Gardens in 1824. On the other hand he was the author of the exquisite baroque stone *Annunciation* that still grace the parvis outside the Balzan Parish Church.

Topographical views of Malta and its harbour have always enjoyed a certain amount of favour. In 1749 Alberto Pullicino painted a series of views for the Chevalier De Turgot. In the course of the nineteenth century the genre became increasingly popular. Louis Taffien (1811-1866), the various members of the Schranz and Brockdorff families, Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851), and Michele Bellanti (1807-1883) were specialists in the genre who made it their metier and main source of revenue. Others like Nicolas Cammillieri (c.1773-1860) and the elusive G. D'Esposito concentrated in ship-portraiture which they sold to seafarers and ship-owners.

Through the good offices of Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana a scholarship was established by Government to permit promising young artists to further their studies in Rome. Pietro Paolo Caruana (1794-1852) and Giuseppe Hyzler (1793-1858) were amongst the first to benefit from this scheme. In Rome they soon absorbed the lessons imparted by the Purists and Nazarene painters.

Pietro Paolo Caruana eventually succeeded Michele Busuttill as Professor at the Art Class. He enjoyed a special relationship with his mentor Tommaso Minardi who, as head of the 'Accademia di San Luca', was the foremost influential artist in Rome. Caruana received important church and state commissions. His ecclesiastical works include the altarpiece of the *Visitation* in the Dominican Church in Valletta, and that of the *Immaculate Conception* in the Collegiate Church at Cospicua. In 1823 he executed the monumental canvasses of *St George* and

St Michael purposely commissioned by Governor Thomas Maitland for the Palace throne room. Caruana also pioneered the art of lithography in Malta. His son Raffaele (1820-1886) was also a talented though less successful painter.

Giuseppe Hyzler (1793-1858), however, was probably the most influential Maltese artist of his age. He was the leading advocate of the Nazarene movement in Malta and was a personal friend of the German painter Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869). Hyzler became one of the determinant factors that fomented anti-baroque feelings in Malta. His artistic ideals lay in the middle ages, the Umbrian School particularly Perugino and the early Raphael. The emblematic *Our Lady of the Rosary* in the Dominican Church in Valletta and the titular painting in the Chapel of Manresa in Gozo are amongst Hyzler's finest works. The National Museum of Fine Arts has a fine self portrait depicted in 1821 in which he shows himself in the characteristic garb of the Nazarenes. His brother Vincenzo Hyzler (1813-1849) was an artist of great promise. Unfortunately his early demise cut short his career.

The despoliation of baroque carvings and decorations suffered by several Maltese churches are generally attributed to the influence exercised by Giuseppe Hyzler and his followers. Certainly he was responsible for the unhappy modifications carried out in 1838 to the Chapel of France in the Conventual Church of St John. However it is unfair to attribute to him the often senseless mutilations carried out in Churches in later times. Whatever his merits or demerits Giuseppe Hyzler was instrumental in shaping nineteenth century religious painting in Malta. It was through his intervention that important Maltese mediaeval panels and murals were saved from destruction or utter oblivion.

Giuseppe Calleja (1828-1915) was Hyzler's most assiduous and faithful disciple. He continued advocating the Nazarene and Purist philosophy right to

the end of his life. He produced a large number of altarpieces notable amongst which are the main altarpieces of Balzan Parish Church and that of the Franciscan Church of St Joseph in Rabat. Apart from Calleja other painters such as Tommaso Madiona (1803-1864), and Salvatore Micallef (1810-1891) continued to propagate the Nazarene style long after it had become stale and dated. Sadly, few if any of Hyzler's followers or imitators ever managed to rise above mediocrity.

Michele Bellanti (1807-1883) deserves to be singled out as one of the most original and talented painters in Malta at the time. His *Virgin of Mount Carmel* and *Elijah* are truly remarkable works. As already noted he was also a fine watercolourist and lithographer. Can. Giuseppe Bellanti (1787-1861), the Cathedral Dean, was his brother and was himself an amateur painter and art connoisseur.

Several foreign artists, mostly Italian, dominated Malta's artistic scene at the close of the century. Domenico Bruschi (1840-1910) was active in Malta in the 1880's. His most impressive Maltese painting is the large *Annunciation* in the Cathedral at Mdina which is dated 1886. Another Italian painter was Giovanni Gallucci (b.1815) from Ancona who was commissioned to paint the dome of the Cathedral. Francesco Grandi (1831-1891) produced a fine *Descent of the Holy Spirit* also in the Cathedral Church. Pietro Gagliardi (1809-1890), however, was to become the most successful and popular Italian painter in Malta. He was introduced into the local artistic scene by Canon Paolo Pullicino who commissioned him a *Madonna and Child* for the Philermos Chapel in St John's. Gagliardi's popularity grew to the extent that he came to entirely dominate religious paintings in Malta. Attilio Palombi (c.1860-1912), Eliodoro Coccoli (1880-1974), Virgilio Monti (1860-1940), Caffaro Rore (b.1910) and Giovanni Battista Conti (1880-1972) are some of the notable Italian artists who, from the second half of the nineteenth

century to the second half of this century, became household names in many Maltese parishes.

Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930) was the most forceful and acclaimed Maltese painter of his age and could not stomach what he considered to be unfair competition from Italian artists. He was born in Valletta of Neapolitan parents. His father was a musician and scenographer, his mother a soprano. He received his artistic training in Naples under Giuseppe Mancinelli (1813-1875) but was greatly attracted by the art of Domenico Morelli (1826-1901). Morelli's influence is clearly manifested in his *St Jerome* at the Sacro Cuor Church in Sliema. His strong personality and great facility with the brush saw no rivals. Avid for work he suffered no qualms in undercutting prices to insure he got commissions that would otherwise have gone to an Italian competitor. He was a fast and prolific painter and his productions encompass a very wide spectrum of subjects and genres. In the field of religious art he produced some of his most remarkable works, foremost amongst which is his splendid *Glory of St Francis* in the Valletta Church of that sañt.

Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) was some twelve years younger than Giuseppe Cali. He was a gifted painter who has left us some very fine works. However the quality of his productions tend to fluctuate. His moment of glory came when he collaborated with the sculptor Francis Xavier Sciortino (1875-1958) in the decoration of Nadur Parish Church in Gozo. An important decorative scheme, which alas was lost during World War II, was the ceiling decorations in the Dominican Church of Vittoriosa. The main altarpiece in St Ubaldesca Church at Paola is noteworthy for some of its painterly passages and the inclusion of figures in contemporary dress. Although aware of the various revolutionary trends effecting the arts abroad he remained the last of a breed of painters who owed their allegiance to

nineteenth century bourgeois academism marked by a strong dose of sentimentalism and melodrama.

In the wake of Giuseppe Cali's art there was his son Ramiro Cali (1882-1945). Less able than his father he was nonetheless a capable painter. Two of his largest canvases are the allegories of *Melita* and *Britannia*, on display in the Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa, which he painted for the Malta Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition held at Wemble Park, London in 1924. The contemporary Ġuże Duca (1871-1948) was a copious painter whose numerous altarpieces seldom rose above mediocrity.

With the demise of Giuseppe Cali and Lazzaro Pisani Maltese religious painting fell into the doldrums. The sculptor Antonio Sciortino (1879-1947) became Malta's most significant artistic personality. Sciortino spent a good part of his active life in Rome where he was director of the British Academy of Arts. Stylistically he was abreast with his time and many of his works show clear modernistic tendencies undeniably inspired by 'Art Nouveau' and 'Futuristic' obsessions with speed and movement. Highly respected and esteemed, he became a national celebrity. His impressionistic bronze *Les Gavroches* of 1907 at the Upper Baracca Gardens and his stupendous *Christ the King* at Floriana remain Malta's finest public monuments. Although he did execute some religious works his production was largely secular.

Francis Xavier Sciortino (1875-1958) was Antonio's brother. His talents as a sculptor were considerable and what we have of his in Malta is worthy of admiration. F.X. Sciortino travelled widely and in 1914 settled in Canada. In 1939 he returned to Malta but went back to Canada in 1954 where he died. Edward Galea (1893-1971) was one other gifted sculptor who migrated to Canada in search of work and recognition.

Abram Gatt (1863-1944) was a first rate practitioner of traditional 'papier mache'

devotional and processional statues and also provided numerous designs for church silver and furnishing. His only known painting is the attractive *Christ the King* which he did for the Domus Piux IX of Cospicua. The art of popular 'papier mache' devout sacred imagery was perpetrated by the prolific Gozitan Agostino Camilleri (1895-1979) and is now continued by the latter's son Alfred. Paul, another son of Agostino Camilleri, is currently sought for his conservative pseudo baroque church decorations.

In the mean time architecture had been going through various developments that reflect a combination of a traditional mentality and building methods with models or fashions imported from abroad. A fine instance is the remarkable Royal Naval Bakery at Vittoriosa designed by the British architect William Scamp (1791-1871) and built in the period 1842-1845. Giuseppe Bonavia (1821-1885) was the first ever Maltese architect to use the Gothic idiom. This was the Presbyterian Church of St Andrew in Valletta consecrated in 1856. The style became a fad with local anglophiles who introduced it in domestic architecture. Architect Emanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1907) took the mode to heart and used it in several projects including the Addolorata Cemetery and its Chapel.

At the turn of the century Modernistic trends gradually crept in domestic architecture. In the 1920's Art Nouveau found fertile grounds in the development of Sliema. A number of new houses at Birkirkara and Balzan also followed the fashion. Notwithstanding inherent beauty and elegance these buildings are now falling prey to speculators with disastrous consequences to the general environment and transmutation of Sliema.

After Giuseppe Cali and Lazzaro Pisani the painter Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950) became the premier Maltese painter of the pre-war period. A society painter *par excellence*, he excelled in portraiture, landscape and genre subjects

with a special Maltese flavour. In 1927 he was appointed head of the Government School of Art. Edward Caruana Dingli distinguished himself for his brilliant palette and great artistic technical abilities. Obscured by his brother's shadow, Robert Caruana Dingli (1882-1940) merits better recognition. He was an excellent illustrator and engraver and his paintings are often full of zest and vibrant life. Unlike his brother who hardly ever ventured into sacred art, Robert did produce a few Church paintings for Gozo.

Gianni Vella (1885-1977) was a prolific if somewhat uneven painter. For many years he dominated church painting in Malta and his works tend to be repetitive and stale. His easel paintings, however, are more satisfactory. They show his awareness of modernistic trends and reveal the artist free of the constraint of popular taste imposed on his church commissions.

Joseph A. Briffa (1901-1987) deserves to be remembered and revered as one of Malta's outstanding twentieth century masters. His command of the painting medium was complete and his handling of the brush was superb. His sacred productions are truly impressive, but so are his non religious works. His bozzetti are masterpieces of spontaneity and freshness. Briffa deserves to be properly studied and appreciated. Amongst his many works are the ceiling decorations of the Tal-Herba Church, the small Church of St Paul at Birkirkara and the dome of the Parish Church of St George at Qormi.

The years immediately preceding the second world war saw the formation of a group of remarkable Maltese artists. Most of them had received their artistic training at the Government School of Art under the brothers Caruana Dingli and had furthered their studies at the Regia Academia di Belle Arti in Rome. Here their guiding light was Prof. Carlo Siviero. However a few did go to England whilst the remarkable etcher and painter Carmel Mangion (b.1905), for instance, travelled to Paris and New York.

George Preca (1909-1984) returned to Malta on completing his studies in Italy but, after some disappointments, he opted to return to Rome where he worked and lived paying occasional visits to his native country. His little understood *Crucifixion* at Żejtun marks a departure from traditional formulas and paved the way towards a new form of religious artistic sensibility in Malta.

Anton Inglott (1915-1945) had a sensitive and deeply religious personality. He seemed destined to dominate Maltese painting but his untimely death kept him from enriching Malta's artistic heritage. Nonetheless he has left a respectful number of works that attest to his great artistic abilities. The large apse decoration in the Parish Church of Msida representing the Death of St Joseph can be considered as the epitome of Maltese sacred art.

Willie Apap (1918-1970) spent most of his productive life abroad. He was a remarkable and versatile painter and his paintings bear the impression of a strong and original artistic personality. His *Woman taken into Adultery* at the Fine Arts Museum is a moving and powerful work that attests to the superlative level of Willie Apap's art. He was also a refined and accomplished portrait painter.

Whilst studying in Rome Willie Apap shared his apartment with Carmelo Borg Pisani (1914-1942) a Maltese painter of some promise whose blind Fascist ideals led him to an early and tragic death.

Emvin Cremona (1891-1987) was a great decorator and his artistic style bears a strong personal imprint. He did embellish many churches with vast decorative schemes and produced several altarpieces. Cremona engaged himself with equal elan in executing non-religious works of art. His innovative verve led him to experiment with new and unusual materials. His abstract and semi-abstract works bear a strong personal mark, as does his art in general, and deserve respect. The designs for his Malta stamps remain to date unsurpassed for their beauty and originality.

George Borg (1906-1983) can be considered as Antonio Sciortino's true successor. His command of the sculpture medium, especially modelling, was complete. His slow and fastidious manner of execution prolonged the completion of his works but the end result can only be described in superlative terms. His portraits are no mere likenesses for they pulsate with life and express incredible internal energy and power. His religious works are also invested with great sensibility and originality. Probably because of his introvert nature George Borg was not popular with the general public who tended to bypass him. Yet he stands like a giant amongst his contemporaries. The portraits of Dun Karm, Princess Poutiantine and many other works are pointers to the rare qualities of this sculptor.

Vincent Apap (b.1909), brother of Willie Apap, is an extrovert. A man of great technical ability and refined artistic sensibility he has great facility in modelling and producing works of art. He has received important commissions and produced the likeness of several famous personalities including members of the British Royal family and Sir Winston Churchill. The *Temptation of St Anthony* is one of his happy ventures into sacred art.

Joseph Kalleja (b.1898) is the current doyen of Malta's artistic community. His peculiarly mystic character made him experiment with the tortured forms of expressionism. His works are marked by great individuality and idiosyncrasy. Slightly older than Kalleja was the sculptor Ignatius Cefai (1894-1981) whose polished sensual figures have distinct Art Deco accent. Other equally valid sculptors of this generation include Emmanuel Borg Gauci (b.1911), Victor Diacono (b.1915), Joseph Galea (b.1910) and John Spiteri Sacco (b.1907).

Pertaining to a younger generation was the sculptor Edward Pirota (1938-1968) whose rising talents were squashed by a traffic accident. His works are not

numerous but what we have testify to the great possibilities this man possessed had he had the chance to develop his talents fully.

Our century has seen the rise of a number of remarkable watercolour painters. Joseph Galea (1905-1985) is perhaps the best remembered of the older generation for his name became a synonym with watercolour Malta views. The latter's son, Edwin Galea, proudly continues the family tradition but with a marked preference for ships and maritime historical scenes. The remarkable Giuseppe Cassar (b.1917) prefers the intimate narrow streets, nooks and corners of his island home with occasional ventures in the depiction of fishing boats and villages capturing in the process the sharp chromatic brilliance of Maltese light. John Martin Borg (b.1953) with his transparent atmosphere handles the medium with great dexterity and effect. The upcoming Debbie Caruana Dingli (b.1962) shows she is a worthy daughter of a family with a strong artistic tradition.

Giuseppe Arcidiacono (b.1908) must be singled out for he belongs to a class of his own. This extraordinary watercolourist handles the medium with incredible ease. His brushstrokes flow to the natural rhythm of water capturing refracted light that render his subjects direct and palpable. Arcidiacono's paintings never date for hidden in them is the secret of eternal youth.

The post war period saw a remarkable revival of the arts for a new generation of artists. Inspired by the innovative spirit of Modern and Contemporary art, they appeared to rebel against academic formalisms. Antoine Camilleri (b.1922) engaged in a continuous process of

introspection and experimentation; he has the power to crystallise the breathless energy of a cyclone into reflective stillness. Esprit Barthet (b.1919) is best known for his many portraits yet his female nudes and his studies of rooftops are landmarks in Maltese contemporary art. Alfred Chircop (b.1933) has ventured into a symphony of ever-changing ever-fresh abstract pure forms whose texture and chromatic values are delineated with the consummate hand of an old master. Harry Alden (b.1929) uses the hard edge technique to model his subjects and landscape through clean facets of pure colour. The sculptor Anton Agius (b.1933) releases the fantastic forms he discovers hidden in old and dead tree trunks. The extrovert Gabriel Caruana (b.1929) expresses his creative energy through the bizarre form and glazes of his incredibly beautiful ceramics. Richard England (b.1937) has injected new invigorating concepts into Maltese architecture. Other artists are Joseph Borg Xuereb (b.1928), Samuel Bugeja (b.1921), George Fenech (b.1926), and also John Bonnici, Joseph Mallia, Frank Portelli. Belonging to my own generation are Frans Galea, Lino Borg, Paul Carbonaro, Caesar Attard, Norbert Attard, Marco Cremona, Eman Grima, Salvu Mallia, Luciano Micallef, Raymond Pitre, Mary De Piro, Josette Caruana and Elizabeth Borg. Of course there are others whose passionate dedication to the arts continues to enrich Malta's variegated artistic firmament.

As the older generations of painters, sculptors and architects pass away, fledging new masters take their place. The test of time will select the chaff from the grain and the deserving will emerge to receive lasting recognition.

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