

A 'new' fountain for the Marina waterfront



TERESA VELLA

For millennia, the image of a fountain with running water was one essential marker of a town or city that served its citizens well, and which welcomed strangers to quench their thirst at its gateways and squares. With the new spurt of urban design introduced during the Renaissance, fountains gained an added significance, one that proclaimed the greatness of their city by means of the artistic or decorative sculpture gracing the basin.

In Malta, fountains gained the status of a new art form with Alof de Wignacourt's investment in transporting water to Valletta, a feat that was crowned by a magnificent three-tiered fountain in Piazza San Giorgio (St George's Square) and another baroque marvel in the form of the Marina fountain, surmounted by one of Malta's finest Renaissance sculptures, the bronze Neptune.

Other fountains were installed along the Rabat-to-Valletta aqueduct, and at the city's main routes and squares. Most of these fountains were essentially troughs, yet all revealed an attention to design, even if their curved form was in some instances the only indication of the baroque desire for beauty, along with the Wignacourt escutcheon proclaiming the Grand Master's liberality towards his subjects – a reminder of the timeless pact by rulers to govern the ruled wisely and liberally.

The fountains in Valletta were regularly maintained, while periodically engineers would be engaged by the Order of St John to

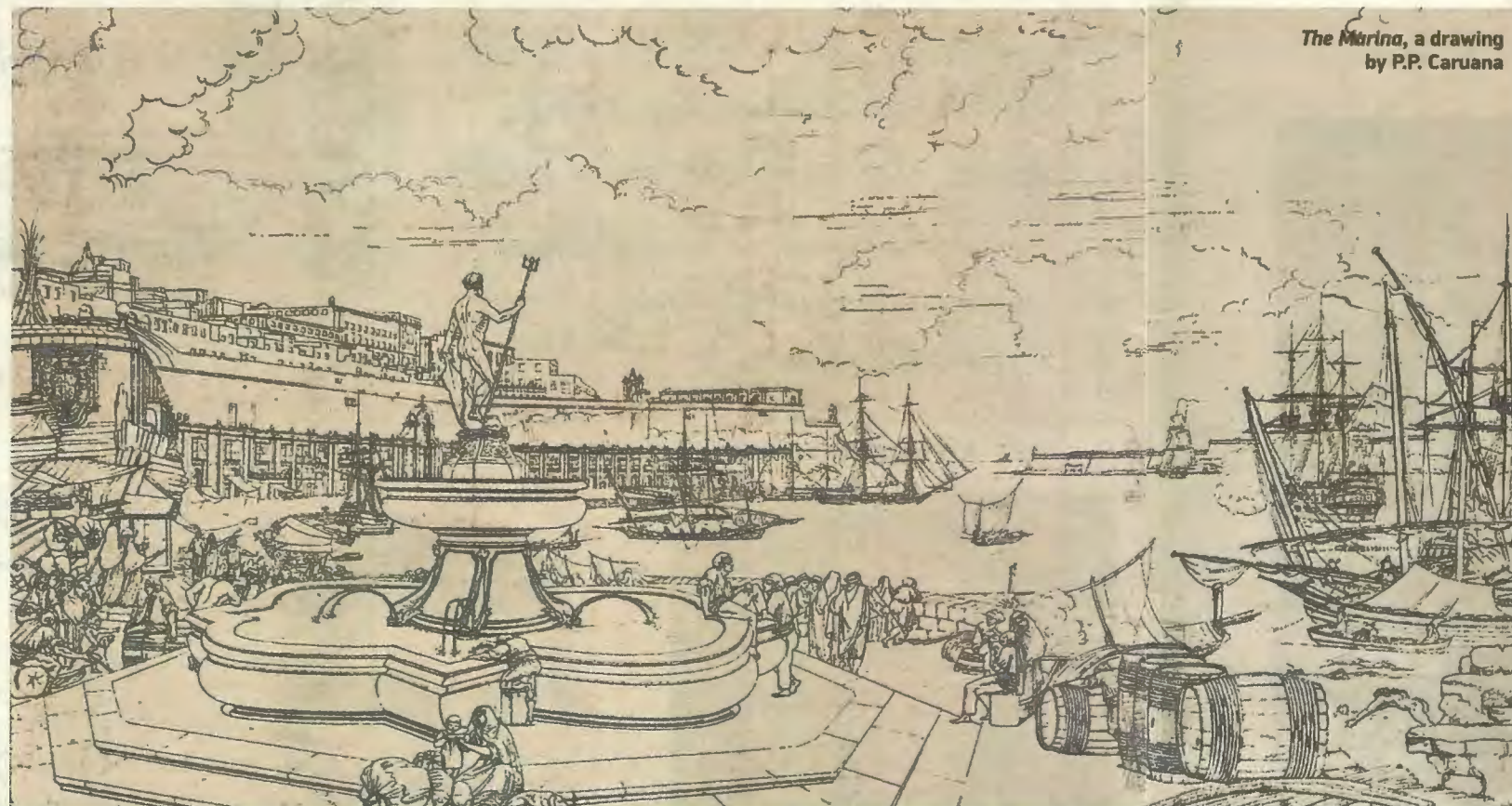
assess their state and draw up reports with recommendations. The best-known of such reports are found in the National Library of Malta; these are the *Poncet Album*, written and compiled in the first half of the 17th century, and the more expansive survey by Romano Carapecchia, written in 1723 for Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena.

Besides the fountains installed by Wignacourt by 1613, new fountains continued to be added to Valletta's streetscapes, as the urban core kept being modernised by successive grand masters. For example, recent research has shown the beginnings of the first Valletta market, which included a fountain at the centre of its courtyard.

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Another fountain can now be added to the repertoire of Valletta's watery landmarks, one that for a long time has been hidden in plain sight.

In 1713, at the height of his magistracy, Grand Master Ramon Perellos built an impressive range of warehouses on the Marina waterfront, to service the growing trade to the city.



The Marina, a drawing by P.P. Caruana

These were no mere sheds, but a panoramic array of baroque facades to a number of well-sized stores, and to disguise other shallow ones. This was needed owing to the nature of the area between the bastions on the waterfront.

At the centre of the gently curving range of baroque facades there stood the chapel of Our Saviour, with its highly-raised altar intended for Mass to be seen and heard by those in quarantine on the ships in harbour. The baroque ensemble was designed by Romano Carapecchia, who excelled in civic architecture and introduced a new aesthetic to the military gateways and structures designed by engineers.

Just as the centre of the warehouse array was marked by the

chapel, so were the ends marked by other structures. To the distant right, just beneath the Lower Barrakka, Carapecchia also designed the quarantine building known as *Il-Barrieria* which once served for the quarantine of incoming travellers as well as for the disinfection of goods. At the Marina end on the left, Carapecchia designed another fountain in marble, one that stood in the shadow of the magnificent Neptune.

The Perellos fountain was no less attentively designed than that below the sculpture of the sea god; appropriately enough Carapecchia's design was based on a marine theme, portraying two mythical sea-creatures – a triton, offspring of Neptune on the left, and a nereid on the right, flanking

the Perellos's coat of arms between them.

In 1853, the waterfront was shorn of the chapel and screen facades which were nested between the ends of Sta Lucia Curtain. Another casualty of the transformation of the Marina was the removal of the Perellos fountain. As with the bronze Neptune, which was removed from the Marina fountain, the Carapecchia high relief was relocated to the lower courtyard of the Governor's Palace.

Two pictorial sources by different hands prove the original location of the high-relief Carapecchia fountain. The first is a drawing attributed to Pietro Paolo Caruana and which is housed in the Maritime Museum. The drawing gives an expansive view of the Perellos waterfront and Marina.

To the left of the foreground it includes the relief sculpture affixed to the curved rusticated wall linking the waterfront to Ta' Liesse Hill and upwards towards the then Del Monte Gateway to Valletta. Below the sculpture is a mélange of makeshift market stalls which hide the lower part of the curved wall and the fountain basin.

In his drawing, Caruana paid great attention to the details of the relief sculpture and all the features he included are still found in the sculpture today. The sculpture included a single spout, hidden within the anthropomorphic features below the escutcheon.

The spout is still visible to anyone standing at the fountain in the Palace courtyard, though it no longer spews water as it once did.

However, the now redundant water feature provides added material evidence that the high-relief sculpture was once an integral part of the Carapecchia fountain.

Another visual reference to the fountain is found in an engraving based on a drawing by Benucci, dating to 1823. The engraving contains enough features to confirm that it represents the Carapecchia sculpture, although the original drawing may have missed some details, such as the crown above the sea-shell, instead of which the engraver placed a pair of wings.

"The removal of both the Neptune fountain and the Perellos fountain from the Marina denuded the waterfront, and diminished the proud welcome it once gave to visitors setting foot on Malta"

Another source supplements this discovery with related information on the Palace courtyard and its embellishment with the Neptune sculpture. A watercolour in a private collection painted between 1856 and 1859, shows that Neptune has not yet been placed in its current location in the Palace courtyard, but can be seen set back under the courtyard loggia.

Not long after, the Neptune was given a more prominent location



Detail from The Marina, by P.P. Caruana

within the open-air courtyard, presumably making way for the Perellos fountain. The relocation of the Perellos fountain and the moving forward of the Neptune in the courtyard have never been mentioned or recorded before.

The British period saw many changes to the city's infrastructure; its waterways were modified, and as a result, so were its fountains, though this was not documented in any systematic manner.

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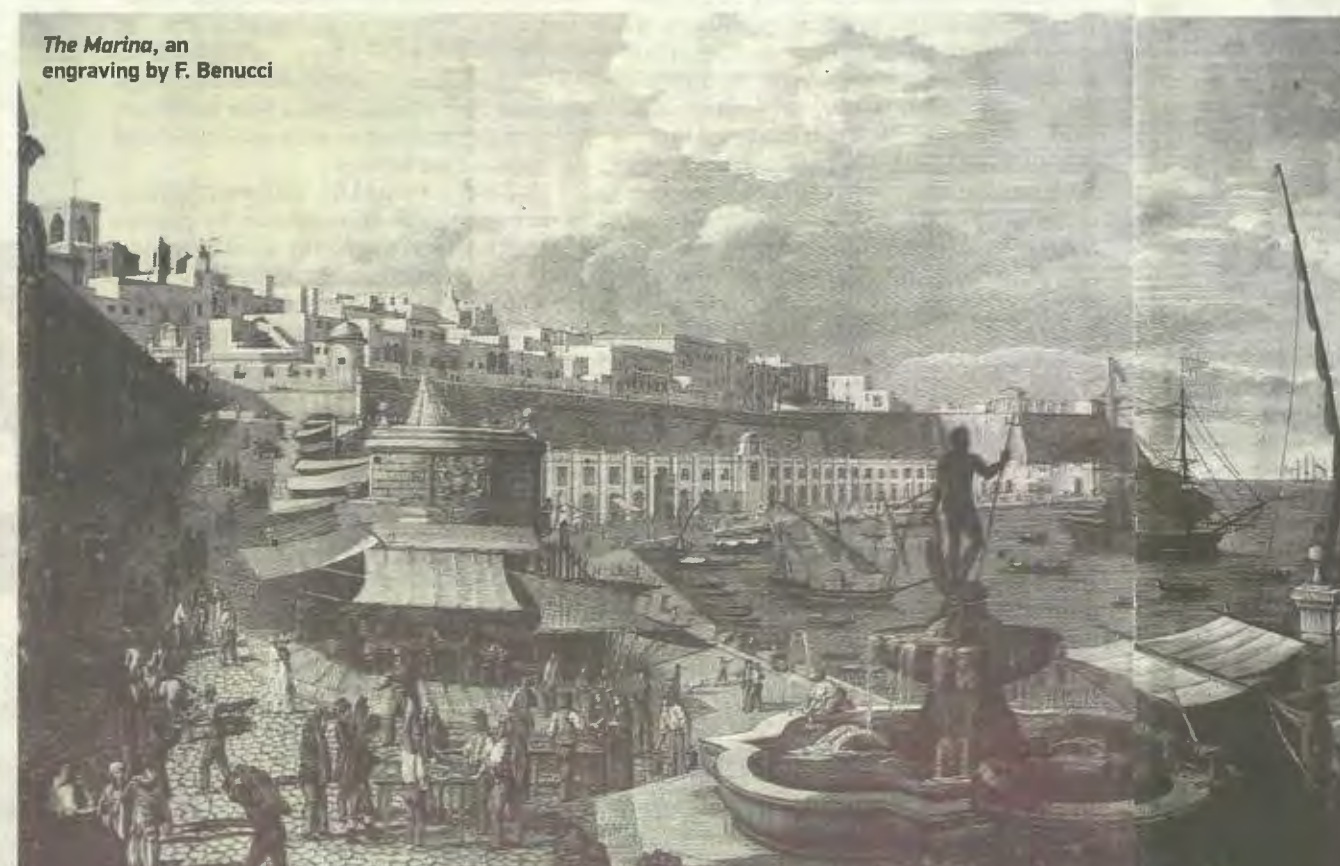
waterfront, and diminished the proud welcome it once gave to visitors setting foot on Malta. They were brought together again within the Palace courtyard, greatly enhancing the garden environment; however, their surroundings are a far cry from the scenographic vista of which they once formed an integral part.

Acknowledgements

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Detail of the 1856-59 watercolour, showing the Neptune fountain in the Palace courtyard loggia.



The Marina, an engraving by F. Benucci



Detail from F. Benucci's engraving showing the Perellos fountain, 1823



The Perellos fountain, now at the Palace