# Chev. Emvin Cremona's
# Christmas stamp designs

by
Joseph C Camilleri

Malta achieved statehood in September 1964. Four sets of stamps were issued during that year, but only one after Independence. This was a Christmas set, the first Maltese Christmas set, which ever reached the Maltese postal counters.

There are several reasons which made the Maltese postal authority decide to start an annual seasonal greetings set. In those days, Christmas sets were considered to be a novelty. The postal authority was doing its best to achieve fame for its stamps, as these were considered to be a source of income. Christmas stamps were already introduced in the local philatelic scene by two immigrate countries. Australia started its Christmas sets in 1957 while the USA five years later. These stamps reached Malta through the annual Christmas greeting cards mail. Moreover, the Vatican issued its first Christmas set in 1959. Many members of the local clergy collected such stamps. These might have created a pressure on the Maltese postal authority to start issuing a yearly Christmas set. The 1964 Independence opened new doors. Decisions started to be taken at local level.

## The first Christmas set 3rd November 1964



On the 3rd November, 1964 a set of three stamps were issued showing the Holy Family in the company of shepherds. These figures were set in an Italian style crib.

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A white star filled the sky. The stamps had the same design but they were printed in different colours. The low value had bright purple, the middle value had bright blue, while the highest value had deep bluish-green. All stamps included gold, a characteristic of the stamp designer – Chev Emvin Cremona. (1) These were printed in photogravure by De La Rue. (2)

This set has several features which indicated the influence of the first Vatican Christmas sets (1959-1960) (3). These Vatican sets depicted one nativity scene. Each set consisted of three values, and each value has one particular colour, making it easier for the Vatican postal authority workers to distinguish a particular stamp from the rest. Moreover, the set was issued before the end of the special greeting cards postal rates, making the local people buy such stamps for their Christmas mail. However, the set was issued before the end of the special greeting cards postal rates, making the local people buy such stamps for their Christmas mail.

This set is a very important issue. It introduced a novelty which is still kept alive, year in, year out. From 1964 to 2014, a Christmas set was always included in the philatelic stamp programmes. From 1964 to 1979, these Christmas stamps were always designed by Chev. Emvin Cremona. After the death of Anton Inglot, Chev. Emvin Cremona dominated the religious artistic scene, thanks to the support of Mgr. Coleiro, a member of the Maltese clergy who exercised quite an influence at the Maltese Curia. Cremona started his stamp design career with the 1957 George Cross Award set. This set featured two war scenes and an emblematic figure of Malta against the George Cross medal (4). These designs were successful. The way Cremona adopted the monarch's head became popular with the British Commonwealth postal authorities. The designs showed that the artist involved himself in a great deal of research. They were simple but included strong colours. Moreover, throughout Cremona's stamp design career, before Independence, the artist started to create new stamp shapes. A case in point is the XIX centenary of St Paul's Shipwreck, which was issued on the eve of this saint's liturgical day – 9th February, 1960 (5).

## Cremona's artistic contribution

From 1964 to 1979, Cremona created sixteen Christmas sets. The first Christmas stamp designs development consisted of a traditional nativity scene in different colours – the Vatican stamp style. Another development in the Cremona Christmas stamp designs was the introduction of the triptychs. These stamps started to be printed on two different types of sheets – a traditional stamp sheet featuring the same value and another sheet depicting the triptychs. The third development was the introduction of the miniature sheets. Stamps started to be printed in the traditional stamp sheets as well as on miniature sheets. The final development, in Christmas stamp design was the introduction of different stamp shapes involving

the traditional British style set.

Cremona did his utmost to offer creative designs making them typical his. Gold is a common feature in most designs but it was kept aside with the introduction of stamps featuring works of art. Cremona gave great importance to 'stars' in these Christmas designs. At first he started depicting stars in one colour, and then they started to be printed in different colours. Stars became so important that they developed into the main theme in some Christmas sets.

At first, the themes were usual traditional nativity scenes – the Nativity, the arrival of the Magi, the shepherds' story and the Holy Family. The Annunciation and the Flight to Egypt were excluded. From 1969 Maltese Christmas features started to be introduced – crib figures, a choir, local buildings and Christmas street lights. All these folkloristic Christmas themes, made the Cremona's Christmas stamp designs more interesting and they were welcomed by philatelists.
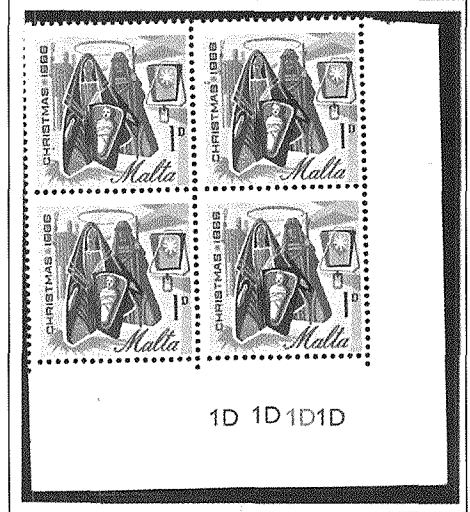
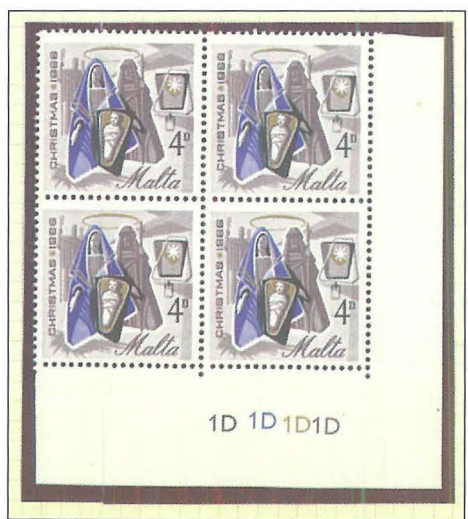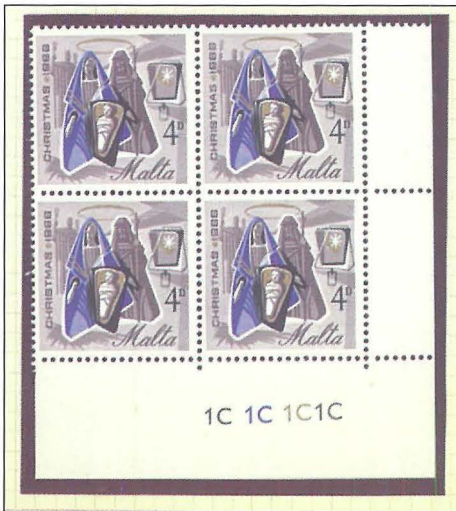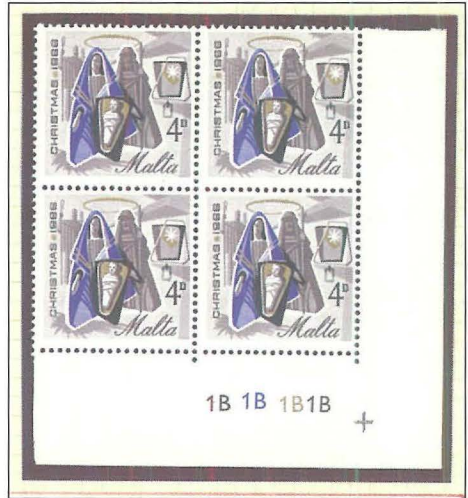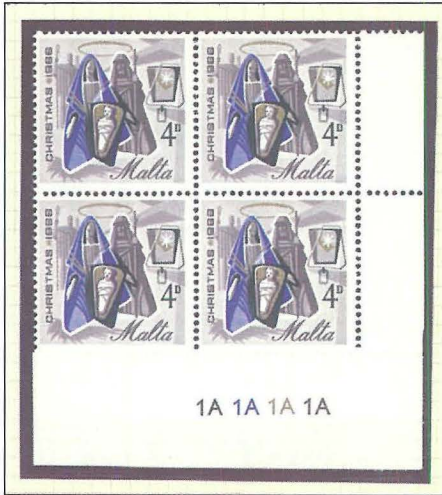## The first development – the Vatican style stamps

This period started in 1964 and ended three years later (1966). The theme of the first set was the Nativity scene. This was replaced by the arrival of the Magi in 1965 (printed by the Dutch firm of Johannes Enchedè en Zonen (6) and the Holy Family in the following year. Mackay describes this set as:

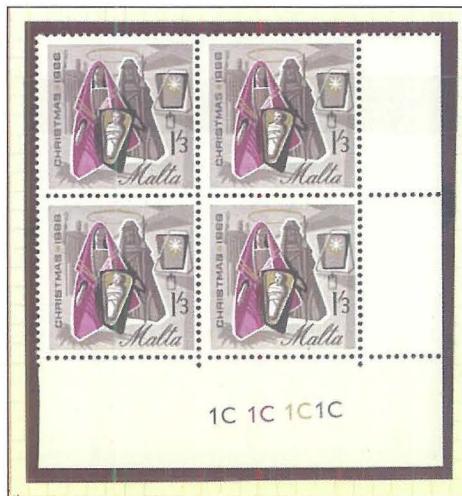## The Third issue 7th October 1966
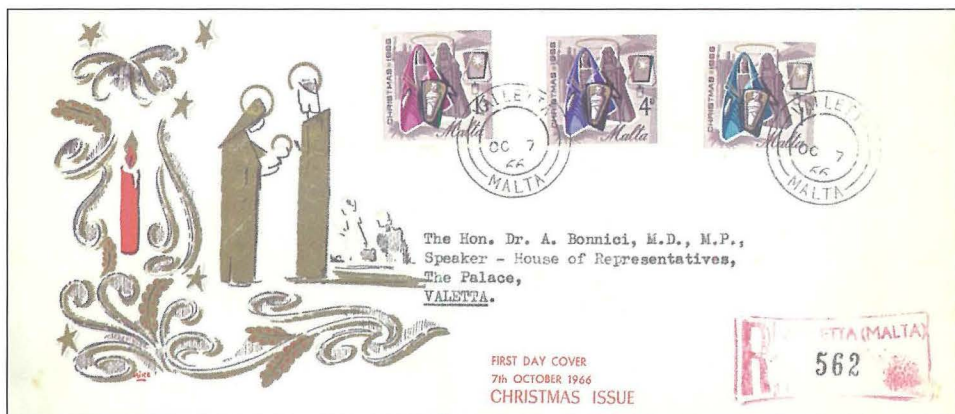


" …Cremona adopted a modernistic interpretation of the Adoration of the Shepherds." (7) These stamps were printed again by De La Rue (8). All stamps had their own particular colours but gold became a central colour, as it makes stamp designs look classical and modern at the same time. The 'stars' had always one colour and they were always secondary in importance.

1A 1A 1A 1A

1B 1B 1B1B

1C 1C 1C1C

1D 1D 1D1D

1A 1A 1A 1A



1B 1B 1B1B



1C 1C 1C1C



1D 1D 1D1D

1A 1A 1A 1A



1B 1B 1B1B



1C 1C 1C1C



1D 1D 1D1D
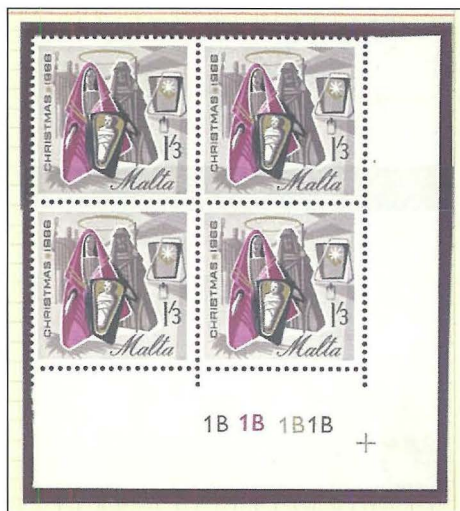
# The second development – the triptychs
## 20th October 1967



A new development started in 1967 when stamp designs started including a triptych, consisting of three different designs forming one large single design. The first triptych had several featured which made it unique. The stamp shapes were different. These were in the shape of trapezium. The central design had the Holy Family as the main theme in the middle value. Above this scene, there was a group formed by a Madonna, a child in a manger and an angel. On both sides of this group there were sets of angels.

## The 8th November 1969
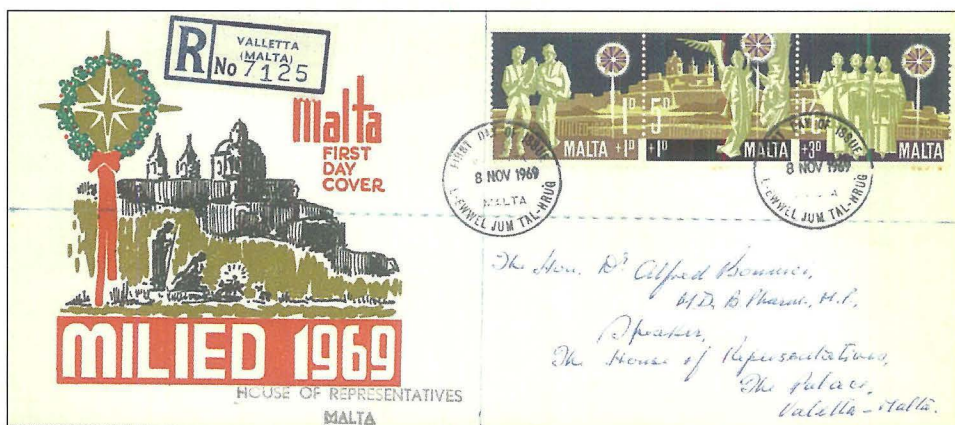


Set included another triptych. This had the Mdina cathedral and bastions as a background and each value had a characteristic local theme. The low value had the

musical crib figures; the middle value included two angels with the highest value a choir. This set started the surcharge tradition, as some stamp money was put aside for the local charities.

The triptych was also used by Cremona for the works of art Christmas designs. The opening of National Museum of Fine Arts made it possible for the Maltese to admire these treasures. As a reaction, two works of art were depicted on Christmas sets. The first a nativity scene within an 'European' environment, appeared on stamps in 1975 while a year later a more important work was featured on local Christmas stamps. This work showed the Madonna with Saints, a work by Domenico di Michelino (1417-1491). This work was donated by Mrs S. Zahra of New York from the collection of the late Rev. F. Agius (9)

Another original triptych was used in 1977. The crib figures scenes were printed in traditional stamp sheets as well as a triptych, one on top the other (10).

## The third development – the Miniature sheets

After the introduction of the triptych, Cremona made a step further by the introduction of miniature sheets in Maltese stamps. These were started in 1971 and kept being used for two further years.

## 8th November 1971

In the first miniature sheet we see a design spread over two stamps. An angel on top with a Madonna with a Child at the bottom. Further down, the highest value featured a shepherd. The rest of the miniature sheet included a star/flower design and a host of angels. The 1972 design included a 'baroque' circular design and another similar design on the top. The stamps featured three angels, two with a wing and the other with both
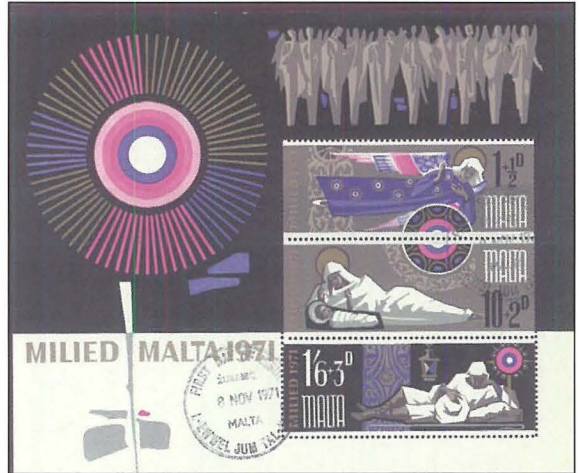


a wing and a musical instrument. The final miniature sheet features a collection of Cremona's style stars and three stamps. These stamps featured heads of choir singers and organ pipes, the Madonna and a Babe and a star, while the highest value featured urban architectural features together with candles and musical instruments. All these sets had stamps printed in the traditional stamp sheets.

## The fourth development – the British traditional style sets

From time to time, Cremona designed traditional sets which the local philatelists were accustomed to. These sets included novelties. The 1968 set consisted of three values; each value had a different scene. The low value featured Cremona's favoured Christmas theme – angels. the adoration of the shepherds was in the middle value, while the highest value featured the arrival of the Magi. This set included three special features – the word Christmas was replaced by the Maltese word 'Milied', each value included a Cremona's style star and the stamps had a pentagon shape.

## 7th November 1970



Cremona introduced three churches – a countryside chapel, the Gharb Parish Church and the Mdina Cathedral. Each stamp design included angels and a bright white Cremona style star and three Maltese Christmas scenes – the Christmas Eve procession, the Nativity and the Shepherds' scenes.

## The second 'traditional' set was issued in 1974

Another traditional Christmas set was issued in 1974. This set consisted of four values. Each design had a Cremona multi-coloured star with gold trimmings. The story of the Nativity was spread over the four values. The fourth traditional set was issued in 1978. One big stamp design appeared on the highest value. This showed Christmas street lights. Three miniature scenes shared the design together with different Cremona style stars. These scenes, which are difficult to appreciate, depict a musical pair against a local baroque church, a host of angels and a choir.

| 10c | 20c |
|-----|-----|
| 1A 1A 1A 1A | |

| 60c | £M1·20 |
|-----|--------|
| 1A 1A 1A 1A | |

| 40c | 80c |
|-----|-----|
| 1A 1A 1A 1A | |

## The last traditional set was issued in 1979



| 42c5 | 85c |
|------|-----|

| 30c | 60c |
|-----|-----|

| 7c5 | 15c |
|-----|-----|

| 70c | £M1.40 |
|-----|--------|

This was Cremona's last Christmas stamp design. It showed two large frescoes which adorn the Annunciation Parish Church of Tarxien. These works of art were created by Giuseppe Cali. The set included four values, two featured one of the fresco's detail and the other two depicted the whole work of art. The art work of these stamps is simple and its simplicity makes this set, one of the leading Christmas stamp designs to be created on Maltese stamps.

Cremona used the Christmas stamps to show his expression of creativity. All the other stamps designs offered little space for such creativity. Christmas sets were a means to introduce novelties. Whether these novelties were inspired by the artist or

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whether by the stamp advisory board is a matter of research. Cremona left a heritage of stamp designs, such heritage reached a climax in these Christmas stamp designs. No wonder that James A. Mackay referred to these Christmas stamp designs and the introduction of the yearly Christmas sets in the philatelic programmes as: "An innovation, which proved immediately popular…" (11)

References:-

1. The J.B. Catalogue of Malta Stamps and Postal History, 2002 (16th edition), p22.
2. Mackay, J.A: Malta- The story of Malta and her stamps – A Collecta Handbook, Philatelic Publishers Limited, 1966. p 72.
3. Catalogo Unificato (volume standard) , 1978 p. 241 and 242.
4. Said Stamp Catalogue, 2008, Printwell Ltd p.30.
5. The J.B. Catalogue, 2002 op cit p 20.
6. Mackay, op cit, p 72.
7. op cit, p 72.
8. op cit, p72.
9. Cutajar, D., Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta, 1991, p9.
10. J.B. Catalogue, p 41.
11. Mackay, op cit. p 72.

Wishing our members a Holy Christmas and a prosperous New Year