



RELIGION ON MALTA STAMPS

Part II

by ANTHONY FENECH

Christmas Stamps

Since 1964 Chev. Cremona has been designing stylish and highly decorative Christmas stamps for Malta, the island of his birth. In fact fifteen Christmas sets comprising 48 stamps, three triptychs and three miniature sheets have been issued so far. The themes of the stamps are varied — most depicting Nativity scenes, including the adoration of the Magi, folkloristic musicians, Heavenly angels and choir boys associated with Christmas time and the star of Bethlehem. The 1969 triptych has as its background Mdina Cathedral and Bastions, whilst the 1970 stamps are scenes against a background of three Maltese Churches. The Nativity scene chosen for the 1975 stamps is adapted from the original by Maestro Alberto (XV-XVI Century) and the 1976 stamps ensemble are a reproduction of "The Madonna and The Saints" by Domenico Di Michellino, at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta. The 1977 Christmas stamps featured three figure compositions from the crib exhibited at the Discalced Carmelite Priory, Cospicua, Malta. The parishioners of Balzan are all eager to see the murals of their parish church finished by Chev. E.V. Cremona who when not designing stamps, is found high on a scaffolding within the dome of one or other of Malta's churches, producing yet another of the murals for which he has become renowned.

Churches

Churches depicted on Malta stamps are various and they provide a subject of immense scope for the thematic collector of religion on stamps. About twenty-one stamps issued by the Malta Post Office depict churches both in rural and urban areas as well as cathedrals. The 3d value of the 1938 and 1948 definitives, also the Royal Visit commemorative of 1954 presented an exterior view of St. John's Co-Cathedral, the Conventual Church of the Order of St. John. The 2/- definitive in the same series used from 1938 to 1956 depicted the Cathedral Church at Mdina, the old capital of Malta. The Cathedral was built in 1702(5) after an older church had been destroyed in an earthquake. It is worth mentioning here that this cathedral was floodlit during the celebrations marking the Silver Jubilee of King George V in 1935 and was an impressive sight for miles



around. This was the first example of floodlighting to achieve philatelic recognition.⁽⁶⁾ The 6d “French Occupation” stamp in the 1965 definitive series shows the facade of the Mdina Cathedral, where the main entrance once had the French emblems — “Phygian cap” and “fascines” — in the form of a medallion. This medallion is now in the Mdina Cathedral Museum.⁽⁷⁾ According to the contemporary Maltese architect Michael Ellul, the architecture on the facade shown on the stamp is one of the best examples of early Baroque art by Lorenzo Gafà in Malta.⁽⁸⁾ Two very popular stamps in the 1956 definitives were the 1d Victory Church skilfully reproduced from the original photograph and the 2d Mosta Church designed by the ingenious Maltese architect and engineer, Grognet de Vasse, in the nineteenth century. Both stamps were re-issued, a few years later, with Multiple Crown and Block CA watermark.

The one shilling value in the 1967 set commemorating the XV International Congress of History of Architecture shows sections of the facade of the Birkirkara Parish Church, typical of Renaissance Architecture. The interior of St. John’s Co-Cathedral, which according to Sir Walter Scott, “This is the most striking interior I have ever seen”, is depicted on the 5d value in the set issued in 1970 to mark the XIII Art Exhibition of the Council of Europe. The Sacristy door of the Cathedral Church at Mdina, representative of the Romanesque period, is depicted on the 3c value of the Europa set issued in 1974.

As has been referred to earlier, the 1970 Christmas stamps have Maltese churches in the background; even the 5c and £M1 definitives of 1973 show respectively fireworks against a Malta church, typical of Village Festas and an imaginary 18th/19th Century church signifying the deeply rooted Catholic religion of the Maltese people. ⁽⁹⁾

Two of Richard England’s set in the 1975 European Architectural Heritage Year show a silhouette of Mdina with the Cathedral dominating the scene and a typical Maltese village, with its magnificent Parish Church surrounded by characteristic houses.⁽¹⁰⁾ The 7c Europa stamp in the 1977 series, designed by George Fenech, shows “Ta’ l-Isperanza” countryside chapel, which according to Kilin was built in eleven months, between August 1760 and July 1761.⁽¹¹⁾

Our Lady

The Maltese have always had a strong devotion towards Our Lady, Mother of God, to whom most of the Maltese churches are dedicated and whose shrines and statues are venerated with great respect. In 1951 a set of three stamps was issued by the Malta Post Office to commemorate the VIIIth Centenary of the Scapular. The stamps, issued on July 12, were adapted from a painting in the Carmelite Basilica in Valletta. Barely three years later, exactly on September 8, 1954 another set of three stamps was issued, this time commemorating the Centenary of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, adapted from a reproduction of the Main Altarpiece of the Cospicua Collegiate Church.



The 2d value in the 1962 Great Siege Commemoration depicted the "Madonna Damascena" by Andrea Bresciano (Italian) "created" as an act of thanksgiving after the Siege of 1565.⁽¹²⁾ Two of the 1971 Religious Anniversaries stamps are reproductions of the statue of Our Lady of Victories venerated in the Senglea Collegiate Church.

As you can see, many Maltese stamps would find places in thematic collections featuring religion. Collecting Maltese stamps with religious significance is gaining ground and collections with the theme "Religion on Malta Stamps" have been awarded medals at local exhibitions and at Internationals as well.

REFERENCES:

- (5) Gibbons Stamp Monthly — September 1956.
- (6) Malta — "The Story of Malta and her Stamps" by James A. Mackay.
- (7) Gibbons Stamp Monthly — February 1965.
- (8) "Heritage of an Island — Malta — The Baroque" by Michael Ellul.
- (9) and (12) "Said Malta Catalogue — 1978."
- (10) "The Malta Stamp" — organ of the Philatelic Bureau, Malta Post Office.
- (11) "Kappelli u Knejjes žgħar" by M.C. Spiteri (Kilin).