



## THE CHRISTMAS STAMPS OF MALTA

by  
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No other country has tackled the Christmas theme in a manner so dignified and interesting than the Island of Malta ever since its first Christmas set of 1964. And no other stamp designer has produced such a variety of designs on the Christmas theme, for so long for any one country than Malta's prolific artist, Chev. Emyv Cremona, who has been responsible for every issue on the subject ever since.



The first Christmas set of stamps of Malta were issued on November 3, 1964, (incidentally the first Malta issue following the attainment of Independence on September 21). The set consisted of three stamps, (2d, 4d and 8d) with a common design, printed in photogravure. The following year, Chev. E. Cremona produced a design used on the three values comprising the second Christmas issue, which were also produced in photogravure. While the design of the 1964 issue depicted the Nativity scene, that of 1965 depicted the Adoration of the Three Kings.



The third Christmas issue again consisting of three stamps (1d, 4d and 1/3) had a common design showing a stylized Nativity scene. This issue produced some quite interesting varieties, namely: (i) The Blindfold Virgin and Baby Jesus on the 4d value, the result of a colour shift of which only one sheet of 60 stamps has been recorded; (ii) the Gold omitted on the 1/3 value; (iii) one constant flaw known on all values.

The 1964-1966 period reflects very evidently Cremona's style and his artistic qualities: a style that is original as well as creative, stylized yet not pure abstract. In later years we see his style evolving into a unique symbolism, so far few stamp designers have managed to attain.

## Originality of Shape

Cremona's creativity knows no bounds and even in the art of the miniature he manages to put forward his impressions effectively. His creativity was best manifested in the 1967 and 1968 issues, when he originated shapes at the time unheard of in the world of stamps. The designs of the 1967 set were best treated in a triptych form since the three stamps illustrated a composite Nativity Scene (1d, 8d and 1/4). Each value was printed in the form of a trapezoid, that fitted into the triptych so perfectly that were it not for the perforation separating the stamps, another trapezoid (three stamps larger) results. The stamps were also available for sale printed singly in sheet form and in *tete-beche* position. Over 366,770 triptychs were sold of this issue. The only variety known on this issue takes the form of "white stars" as a result of the omission of the red.

An irregular pentagon shape was the offering in 1968. Apart from the originality of shape, the designs once again manifested the simplicity of lines in an almost geometric pattern of triangles, parallelograms, trapeziums and rectangles. The use of contrasting colours, particularly black as well as gold, is an important attribute in Cremona's work.

Unfortunately the shapes of the stamps were not comfortable to Post Office counter clerks, especially in the case of the 1968 issue as it was rather cumbersome to separate the stamps from their unique layout in the sheet. Who knows, we might have had more of these geometric promutations were it not for this difficulty.

The 1968 Christmas issue was a first for Malta: it was the first set of stamps inscribed in the Maltese Language. All subsequent Christmas issues were inscribed in the national language.

## Charity Surcharge

The 1969 Christmas set was yet another first for Malta: it was the first of the Island's stamps to be surcharged for Charity purposes. The stamps, 1d + 1d, 5d + 1d, 1/6 + 3d, were printed in triptych form and featured one continuous design with a background of the landscape of Mdina (the old Capital). The foreground had a purely local character, showing musicians with their folkloristic instruments, Heavenly Angels and Choir Boys.

In 1970, the local character was the basis for the designs of the Christmas set, with a return to a conventional size and shape. The stamps, 1d + 1/2d, 10d + 2d, 1/6 + 3d, against a background of Maltese Churches, depicted the Midnight Procession by small children with the statue of Baby Jesus, the Nativity Scene and a Choir, respectively.



### Miniature Sheets

Christmas stamps of Malta seem to be characterized by firsts, because the 1971 Christmas issue produced the first Souvenir Sheet ever issued by the Malta Post Office. Cremona developed further his style and designed three longish rectangular shapes with stylized designs showing an Angel auguring peace on the 1d + ½d, the Madonna and Child Jesus on the 10d + 2d, and a Shepherd on the 1/6 + 3d. The sale of this set on the first day of issue was exceptionally high for a Christmas issue, probably due to the high face value occasioned by the miniature sheet which accompanied the set.

The 1972 and 1973 Christmas issues were also accompanied by Miniature, or Souvenir Sheets. The 1972 set showed expressions on the Angel's face, related to particular moments in the Mystery of the Nativity. The set for the following year contained a modern rendering and interpretation. In 1972, Malta changed to a decimal system of currency, and thus the set was inscribed in this system; both the 1972 and 1973 sets had the values: 8m + 2m, 3c + 1c, 7c5 + 1c5. No other miniature sheets were issued after 1973 for the Christmas issue. Of particular artistic interest is the appearance of the "Star of Betlehem" on the period 1971-1973.

The "Star of Betlehem" was also the basis of the conventional 1974 four-value set. It is in fact an imaginary futuristic expression of the "Star" on each of the stamps, each of which illustrates in miniscule, a nativity scene in the bottom right hand corner.

### Paintings Reproduced

It has been the custom of several countries to reproduce famous paintings on their Christmas issues and Malta has only resorted to reproducing works of art recently. In fact only the 1975 and 1976 Christmas issues featured reproductions. The artwork was entrusted into the capable hands of Emvin Cremona.

The "Nativity" by Maestro Alberto (XV-XVI Century) was the subject of the 1975 issue. The painting was reproduced in full as one composite unit, perfectly and symmetrically separated into three stamps that form the triptych. The stamps were also available separately in sheets. The 3c + 1c stamp, the middle stamp of the triptych showing the Nativity, was voted into second place in the First International "Vote A Stamp" Contest organized by the Philatelic Society of Malta during 1976.

The following year, another famous painting entitled "Madonna And Saints" by Domenico de Michelino was selected to feature on the Christmas issue. This painting is almost square in shape and separation into three stamps to form a triptych was not a suitable idea. So, Emvin Cremona decided to reproduce integrally the painting on one single stamp, the 10c + 2c stamp, and then designing three other vertical sections, 1c + 5m, 5c + 1c, and 7c5 + 1c5, with the "Madonna and Child" as the middle stamp. The 10c + 2c and the 5c + 1c stamps were voted into first and second place respectively in the Second International "Vote A Stamp" Contest.

### The Christmas Crib — 1977 Issue

The Christmas Crib is so much part of the Maltese family during the Christmas period, that it comes as no surprise that Malta should dedicate a set of Christmas stamps to it. The crib is a characteristic of Christmas in Malta, and almost all families, especially if there are children, build one out of papier-machè with clay statuettes, representing Biblical figures. The statuettes are known locally as "pasturi". National and parochial competitions are held every year throughout the Maltese Islands.

The 1977 Christmas designs are actually based on papier-machè figures from the award-winning crib of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers of Cospicua, Malta. Originally built in 1960 and subsequently modified and enlarged over the years, the crib is essentially of Italian style and it attracts large crowds every December. A special feature of the crib is the ingenious use of light for water simulation and day and night effects, as well as continuous music.

The crib has won several prizes, including at least four times first prize in the National Contest. It is the work of three fathers, in papier-machè, and the figures or statuettes are not the originals, including the ones shown on the stamps, made in 1960, of which there are between 50 to 60 between biblical figures and cattle.

In conclusion, suffice it to say that indeed Malta's contribution to the Christmas theme has enabled a wide variety of subjects and designs that should enhance any collection of stamps on the Christmas Mystery.

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