

REVIVING *the*
GHONNELLA
with PROJECT
TRACtion
(*Tradition in Action*)

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Traditional outfits paint a picture of an older time, and through each stitch, every piece of fabric, and every colourful design embedded in the garment, they hold the beliefs, history, and heritage of a unique place and time in our world. But how can traditional costumes be revived and revamped to fit contemporary styles and modern cultures?

**A woman wearing the Ghonnella
Image courtesy of Project TRACtion**

Project TRACtion (Tradition in Action) aims to share the relevance and importance of traditional costumes with the international community. UM, the University of Helsinki, and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) St Angelas College in Sligo, Ireland have embarked on a two-year journey to preserve their national heritage and encourage creative thinking and interpretation of how traditional outfits could be adapted for the contemporary world.

Each institution will focus on a particular garment that acts as a living manifestation of their country's traditions and culture. At the University of Helsinki, the focus will be on the colourfully embroidered designs of traditional Finnish folk costumes, whilst ATU St Angelas College will study the delicate varieties of lace that embellish Ireland's traditional clothing. Here in Malta, Dr Lorraine Portelli, senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education, and her team are leading the TRACtion project and aim to bring one of Malta's most treasured cultural garments back to the forefront: the għonnella.

THE GĦONNELLA

The għonnella is a garment that epitomises Malta's heritage and history. This traditional headdress framed the faces of Maltese women from as early as the 16th century, though the

exact origins of the għonnella remain a mystery. The wide-brimmed cape of the għonnella has a rich history in Maltese folklore; from a covering of religious piety to a protective garment that warded off unwanted advances from occupying French troops, there are numerous legends about the għonnella that reflect Malta's history.

Worn over the head like a shawl or cloak, the għonnella was stiffened with cardboard and whalebone. It was particularly effective in capturing the cool breezes of the Maltese Islands during summers. The garment encompassed almost all of the wearer's body, leaving just the wearer's face to be seen. The large, round frame and silky fabric of the għonnella would be effortlessly handled and manoeuvred by the women who would wear them.

The għonnella was a common staple in Maltese society up until the mid-20th century and was so popular that it was worn by most women on the island. However, following World War II, Malta began to modernise, and the għonnella fell out of popularity, disappearing almost entirely from the streets of Malta by the 1970s.

Today, the għonnella lives only in memory and photographs and in legends and stories that have persisted for generations. However, its intricate design and historical relevance make the għonnella an invaluable element of the past that inspires and informs the present and future of Maltese fashion and design. ➤



The lead project coordinator of TRACtion, Dr Lorraine Portelli, during a research visit on the Ghonnella at Casa Rocca Piccola, Valletta
Image courtesy of Project TRACtion

REINTRODUCING THE GHONNELLA

With the aim of bringing more awareness to the għonnella, Project TRACtion will hold various events and initiatives where the għonnella can be appreciated on a deeper and more creative level. These events will target different audiences, from younger students, to fashion designers and instructors, to anyone around the globe who wants to learn about the għonnella's unique history. Participants will be able to explore the textures, textiles, and fabrics used to form these costumes, with a detailed focus on creation, interpretation, and innovation.

Online workshops will also be held, where people from different backgrounds can learn about the għonnella, its construction, and its importance to Malta. To make the għonnella even more accessible, digitised scans and a 3D virtual mannequin will be available online for people outside our islands to learn about Malta's most distinctive and traditional garment. Through these collaborations, the għonnella will be introduced to new audiences, and Maltese fashion and heritage will be revitalised and projected on a global scale.

Project TRACtion will also help introduce the għonnella to younger generations by visiting three Maltese schools and teaching students about the heritage and history of the garment. Students, regardless of gender, can even try on a għonnella and experience what it is like to wear, walk, and live in this garment. After students have learned about the unique history of the għonnella, a competition will be held where students can create their own interpretation of the għonnella, connecting with the past while thinking creatively to assemble

their own ideas of how the għonnella would be constructed in modern times.

Students will be encouraged to think sustainably, using different media, fabrics, textiles, and materials to construct their innovations. An exhibition will also take place in June 2024 at the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu, which will showcase these creative deconstructions and interpretations of the għonnella. Through this competition and exhibition, the għonnella will be reintroduced to the Maltese public and transformed in a way that reflects contemporary culture while still drawing inspiration from the past.

Even though the għonnella exists now only in museums, galleries, paintings, and scarce pictures, Project TRACtion has brought this representation of Maltese history back to the forefront, allowing global society to get a glimpse of our past and the chance to transform the għonnella to fit the taste and talent of the present. Through Project TRACtion, the għonnella lives on, and the unique reconstructions birthed from this initiative will shine a light on the progression of Malta while connecting us to our rich heritage. 📖

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