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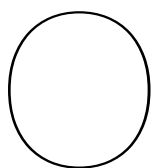
PROF. MARIO BUHAGIAR

Scholarship, Legacy, and the Making of a Discipline

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*The recent exhibition held at the start of the year at the University of Malta Library offered more than a retrospective of an individual scholar's career. Over three years, **Prof. Mario Buhagiar** donated select publications from his personal archive to the Library, capturing the formation of art history as a discipline and a department within the local educational setting. To explore this donated archive is to witness the birth of a discipline.*



Over a career spanning several decades at the University of Malta, Prof. Mario Buhagiar established himself as one of the foremost scholars of Early Christian and medieval Maltese art and archaeology. His work is characterised by a meticulous engagement with material evidence, combined with a deep sensitivity to the cultural and devotional contexts in which that material was produced and experienced. In the early 1970s, at a time when the study of Malta's early heritage was still consolidating its methodological footing, Buhagiar's research provided both structure and direction.

A significant dimension of his intellectual formation was his period of study in London, an achievement that, given the circumstances of the early 1980s, required both determination and foresight. This experience proved formative, not only in shaping his methodological approach but also in enabling him to establish a network of scholarly contacts abroad. These connections would remain important throughout his career, situating his work within a broader international discourse and ensuring that Maltese art history was not developed in isolation but in dialogue with wider academic currents.

Buhagiar's publications remain essential points of reference. Works

on early Christian catacombs, medieval churches, and the visual culture of devotion in Malta not only documented sites and objects but also framed them within broader Mediterranean and historical narratives. In doing so, Buhagiar contributed to repositioning Malta from a peripheral case study to an active participant in the region's artistic and cultural exchanges.

TEACHER, MENTOR, PRESENCE

Yet his legacy cannot be measured solely through his publications. Within UM's Department of Art and Art History in the Faculty of Arts, established in 1987, he played a crucial role in shaping generations of students, many of whom have gone on to contribute to academia, heritage institutions, and the cultural sector more broadly. His teaching was rigorous and exacting, but also deeply committed. He instilled in his students a respect for evidence, a discipline of close observation, and an awareness of the historical layers embedded within the Maltese landscape.

For those of us fortunate enough to know him personally, Buhagiar's presence was equally formative. I still remember entering his office as a younger scholar, carrying questions that felt tangled and uncertain. He would listen quietly, often with that familiar measured pause, before responding with clarity that made

complexity seem navigable. What remains with me most is not only his immense knowledge, but his generosity with it. He had the rare gift of making one feel that scholarship was a shared endeavour rather than a guarded territory. For many students and colleagues, those moments of encouragement carried lasting weight.

Buhagiar belonged to a generation of scholars for whom research was not simply a professional activity, but a vocation. Conversations with him often moved seamlessly between the specific and the expansive: from the analysis of a single architectural detail to reflections on the *longue durée* of Mediterranean history. This ability to situate the local within a wider intellectual horizon remains one of the defining features of his scholarship.

THE ARCHIVE AS INTELLECTUAL TESTAMENT

The recent donation of his personal archive to the UM Library further underscores the significance of his work. This collection, comprising books, offprints, research notes, photographs, and unpublished material, represents not only a repository of information but also a record of a scholar's intellectual journey. It invites future researchers to engage not just with his conclusions but also with the processes and questions that underpinned them. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to reflect on the formation of art history as a discipline ➤



Prof. Mario Buhagiar and a sample of the publications he donated to the UM Library Archive

in Malta, and on the intellectual and institutional frameworks that have shaped it over the past decades.

Buhagiar's work reflects a moment in Maltese art history when the discipline was negotiating its identity. In many respects, he laid its foundations single-handedly, establishing lines of inquiry and standards of scholarship where few precedents existed. This was no small achievement. His work demonstrates a careful balance between empirical documentation and interpretative ambition. While firmly grounded in the material realities of sites and objects, it consistently gestures towards larger questions of cultural continuity, influence, and transformation. In this respect, his scholarship continues to provide a framework within which new research can position itself, whether in agreement or in critical dialogue.

For many of us working in the field today, Buhagiar's influence is therefore both direct and indirect. It is present in the sources we consult, the questions we ask, and the standards

we apply to our own work. It is also evident in the continued scholarly output of his colleagues, students, and successors, whose publications and research, in different ways, extend and respond to the intellectual foundations he helped to establish.

LEGACY AND CONTINUATION

To celebrate Buhagiar's life and work is not simply to look back, but to recognise the ongoing relevance of his contribution. His scholarship helped shape a field that continues to grow in scope and complexity, and his legacy endures in the intellectual and institutional structures that support it.

In this sense, the exhibition does not mark an endpoint, but rather a continuation. It affirms the value of sustained, rigorous engagement with Malta's past, and reminds us that the study of art and heritage is, at its core, a cumulative endeavour, one in which each generation builds upon the work of those who came before. Over the course of a long and distinguished

career, Buhagiar exemplified this principle with remarkable consistency and dedication. It is perhaps fitting to recall a quotation he himself was fond of invoking, often attributed to Mark Twain: 'I did not have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.' In many ways, this reflects not only the care and precision that underpinned Buhagiar's scholarship but also the intellectual generosity with which he approached his field, leaving behind a body of work whose depth continues to reward careful reading. 

The Department of Art and Art History at the University of Malta has a profound appreciation and respect for Prof. Mario Buhagiar and for a lifetime dedicated to scholarship, teaching, and the advancement of Maltese cultural heritage. His contribution to the discipline, to the University, and to generations of students remains enduring and deeply valued.

Mario was utterly dedicated to his study tours, come rain or shine. We were often fortunate with the weather, though not always. I remember one particular visit to Capodimonte when it was raining heavily. The whole group instinctively gathered under shelter some distance away from the building. Mario, however, dressed in his unmistakable yellow anorak, marched straight in front of the façade and began delivering his explanation as though the weather did not exist. He was completely determined to carry on regardless, speaking passionately about the building's history and architecture while rain poured around him. What amused us even more was that he became visibly irritated that the rest of us were not standing closer to hear him properly. That was Mario: utterly committed, unstoppable once he began teaching, and expecting everyone else to share the same level of enthusiasm.

For someone so exceptionally intelligent, Mario could also be wonderfully absent-minded. He could effortlessly recall the most obscure dates, historical events, or details about works of art, yet somehow forget the simplest personal things. During another study tour, his wife Liliana realised she had left her cardigan in their hotel room just before we were due to leave on the coach. Mario immediately volunteered to fetch it for her. The cardigan, however, was inside a locked suitcase, and the code was their wedding anniversary. After quite some time had passed and Mario had still not returned, I went upstairs to see whether something had happened. With complete seriousness, he explained that he simply could not remember the date of their wedding anniversary. I went back downstairs to ask Liliana for the code, and eventually Mario reappeared triumphantly carrying the cardigan. When he came back down to the hotel lobby, everyone burst into applause and cheers. It became one of those moments we never stopped laughing about.

– Rev. John Baptist (Gino) Gauci