

An Uncharacteristic Success

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In her unstinting endeavours to research, promote and revive the art of lacemaking in Gozo, Gozitan renowned lace expert and teacher Dr Consiglia Azzopardi, who is also the co-ordinator of the Lacemaking Programme at UGC, traced bobbin lacemaking in Malta to the 16th and 17th centuries, describing the third quarter of the 19th century as ‘the glory days of lacemaking in Gozo’. This artisan trade contributed not so little towards the economic well-being of many large Gozitan families especially throughout the last decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century. For various reasons, interest in Maltese Lace declined in the post-war era. However, thanks to a number of initiatives amongst which



Paul Giordmaina - the man from Malta who learned lacemaking in Gozo.

the Lacemaking Programme at the UGC, the significance of lacemaking has in recent years been acknowledged as an important segment of our island’s artisan and artistic heritage that merits due attention in order that it may be conserved and preserved for future generations.

These initiatives have been supported by an encouraging number of students who have not only taken to their lace-making pillows to make doilies or lace borders, but have gone a step further into researching the subject.

The Lacemaker from Malta

The weekly channel crossing, rain or shine, did not and still does not deter a number of students hailing from Malta, to follow the Lacemaking Programme at the Gozo Campus. One such student was Paul Giordmaina, 54 years old from Rabat Malta living in St Paul’s Bay. He says that lacemaking had always fascinated him from a very young age and that was why five years ago, after listening to an interview with Consiglia Azzopardi on a radio programme, Paul decided to apply for the course. Since then he has never looked back.

Of course he found it difficult at first, especially to master the technique involved in handling the bobbins, turning them the right way and the right number of times. However, the hardest hurdle was his over-eagerness to see the product finished, if possible overnight, due to his ingrained tendency to finish that which he starts. But this is far from being a prerogative of making lace. Obviously he was also discouraged on seeing more experienced workers, sitting next to him, agilely moving through the design while he could still not fathom from where to start and where to go. Nonetheless he persevered and after about six months he started to get his first rewards. He managed to get used to the stitches and techniques and during his first year he got through the samples of the



One of Paul's first impressive works - the two metre round tablecloth that cost him tears to part with.

different stitches and basic design drawings, as entailed by the requisites of the programme.

Paul's Most Significant Works

In the summer recess he worked his first project – the border of a lace runner with simple stitches. From there he quickly passed on to other techniques characterising Gozo Lace such as the *festuni* and the Maltese cross. Paul describes the latter as an important emblem of Maltese lace and in fact he makes it a point to insert this authentic symbol in all the items he designs.

According to Dr Consiglia Azzopardi, arriving at this stage in this craft so prematurely was not an easy task, considering that before starting the course in Gozo Paul had never worked at bobbin lacemaking. He had tried his hands at *ganutell* some twelve years earlier, but, as he admits, he found lacemaking more challenging

and the end result more gratifying. Dr Azzopardi also emphasises that “every Saturday he would bring over from Malta not only the finished lace homework but also some season delicacies which he prided in cooking himself, to share with his classmates.”

Paul got through the three years of the programme under the constant guidance of his teacher and mentor. The theme chosen for Laceday 2010 was a pattern of a round tablecloth measuring about two metres in diameter based on an old pattern that knows its origins to the operations of ‘The House Industry’ (Casa Pia Industriale), promoted by Dun Giuseppe Diacono in Gozo more than 140 years ago. It presented the right challenge for Paul and, against his teacher’s advice, he started to work on it in the summer holidays. But he was soon to find out that it was not an easy job. Paul had just finished his second year and the pattern included stitches and steps that still needed to

be covered during the third year of the course.

These various stitches also comprised a repetition of the Maltese Cross for a hundred times and several clusters of *moski*. Furthermore, the cutting and adding of bobbin pairs within the pattern were challenges in themselves for any lace worker, but most of all for a novice. In addition it also involved working six singular pieces of different designs that, when sewn together, would form the two-metre

circular tablecloth which any houseproud person would yearn to possess. Another remarkable feat was that of working the tablecloth in rayon silk. Working lace with such thread is an added hassle, because very quickly it unwinds and the bobbins keep spinning down to the floor instead of lying securely on the pillow!



Front of finished cape - different shades of silk thread worked with 280 pairs of bobbins.

It took Paul about seven months to finish the coveted tablecloth and in addition he still needed to work the pieces required by the course programme. This splendid tablecloth was first exhibited during Laceday of that year. He also presented it for the competition at 'Casa Rocca Piccola' and won a well merited first prize. Paul eventually sold the table cloth but he admits that he cried when he handed it over to the purchaser.

Laceday at the UGC

'Laceday' organised on campus on an annual basis, is considered as an important day for the organisers and the participants of the Lacemaking Programme at UGC; it is an occasion for students to show their lace projects and portfolios. Every year a new design is prepared and working instructions are explained during a lecture. The theme chosen for the following year was a 'Cape-Collar', another design inspired by Diacono. This time the challenges were even greater because Paul tackled the 30cm wide pattern by working it in one piece using no less than 280 pairs of bobbins (five hundred and sixty bobbins in all!) Paul did not only accomplish this target in the dreaded rayon silk but he also used two colours, working the flowers in black over a beige ground. This inspiring work, earning him another merited prize in the annual lace event held at Casa Rocca



At the annual Laceday on Gozo Campus.

Piccola, is now permanently exhibited in a private lace museum at l-Ixtabi, in Għarb, Gozo.

Other works accomplished by Paul Giordmaina during the Certificate Course and based on his own designs include: two lampshades (with different designs on each side), a likeness of Żepp u Grezz, and a dress for an old wax figure of baby Jesus. Another achievement was the design and completion of a priest's alb, measuring 300cm x 40cm and made up of four intricately designed pieces including symbols, this time worked in linen thread. Such an intricate piece of lacework normally takes around twelve months to complete but Paul finished it in just under ten months. Obviously, together with the flounce, the alb required a set of matching cuffs and these were also finished in the stipulated time. Paul says he would do another one but admits he doesn't like repeating the same work, a fact which clearly reveals his creative and innovative nature.

Paul's 'Dream Come True'

And, like any other artist, Paul dreams of lace. That is how one day he dreamt of creating a lace



Maltese icons Żepp u Grezz in lace.



Detail from the priest's alb designed and worked by Paul.

Christmas tree. A few months later he actually completed this work which represents his latest masterpiece – a lace Christmas tree, one metre high topped by an exquisitely designed 60cm angel. The appreciation of this unique work shown through the composition of the design, producing three-dimensional figures and shapes as well as the mixing of different coloured threads, can assuredly be better appreciated if one is more technically informed and instructed in this sphere.

Through this impressive technique, Paul’s work gives life to a variety of Christmas icons such as a robin; a wrapped up present; a candle holder; Christmas crackers; an angel; a bell; holly leaves and berries; some of which can be spotted hung within their respective recesses. As if this hadn’t been enough, Paul also inserted a four-sided crib, mounted on a stand within the domed tree. Each side represents a different nativity scene, including that with the three wise men and the waiting camels under a palm tree.

Another noteworthy feature on Paul’s lace Christmas tree is the border running around the bottom of the tree-skirt; it consists of a row of green holly leaves interspersed with a myriad of red berries, which necessitated the threading and knotting of hundreds of little red glass beads!

The tree-top angel is a remarkable masterpiece in itself. In Paul’s own words it contains a *terremot*



The Christmas tree in lace with its unique baubles.



The red beaded tree-skirt and green holly border.

ta’ moski (a frightening number of *moski*). Working this type of stitch in the same design is greatly challenging since they need to be worked evenly along the pattern, so that they provide the appropriate effect in the end product. Gold inserts enrich this unique angel that constitutes a marvellous embellishment even on its own.





Front and back perspectives of the impressive angel - an artistic masterpiece in its own right.

Certainly more than one cherry on this wonderful iced cake, fruit of his imagination, which also lights up when the inserted lights are switched on. As one might say, Paul left no stone unturned in order to make his dream come true! Indeed fruit of hard work and determination.

Paul Giordmaina's Christmas tree was first exhibited at Malta Lace Day in October 2014. For its first Christmas, this unique work was also one of the exhibits included in the annual Christmas exhibition held at the Ministry for Gozo's Exhibition Hall.

It will definitely remain a treasured family jewel to be inherited by other Giordmaina generations. "This represents another milestone for me in this ongoing project that started a few years ago

thanks to the Lacemaking Programme offered at the University Gozo Campus. So I thank all those involved for having given me such an amazing opportunity."

Sharing Skills

Throughout the duration of the three-year course Paul rarely missed crossing over to Gozo for his lessons. And even though he finished his course, he still often visits the Gozo Campus, especially when he has some news or a new project to share with the lacemaking group. In fact he admits that he would willingly repeat the course all over again. Undoubtedly this time it would not be so painstakingly hard for him to master the proper handling of the bobbins and adjusting the right thread!

“My biggest satisfaction does not only come from having learned to work Maltese lace but most of all from the fact that I have learned to design my own patterns. This course encouraged me to discover my talents for lacemaking. It definitely enhanced my skills in executing the various techniques with the bobbins but above all it helped me to discover my creativity and enabled me to effectively design my own works besides working those of others. My determination in accomplishing what I set my mind to has also been a fundamental element in this achievement” says Paul, with more than a glint of satisfaction emanating from his eyes.

Paul never hesitates to share his skills at lacemaking with others, even with those who sceptically claim that this is characteristically ‘a woman’s job’. Such comments do not affect his enthusiasm for this new-found interest at this stage of his life. On the other hand there are others who genuinely admire his skills and ask him for advice when they see him nimbly going through the scores of pairs of bobbins on his pillow. In fact he has become quite an attraction at the various shows in which he participates, and he admits that he feels proud of his works, especially when these compete very well with works of established and more experienced lacemakers in Malta and Gozo.

Paul’s advice

Paul put forward some recommendations that certainly deserve to be aired, “The teaching of Lacemaking should be highly promoted because it would be a shameful pity for this important

aspect of our heritage to be left to die.

For me the Maltese Cross and *moski* represent true Maltese lace so they should constitute a fundamental element in the conservation of our inherited traditions. I wanted to be able to work the Maltese Cross from as early as my first lesson, but my teacher was right – I had to work my way up step by step until I could proudly master the technique, and that is how I faced my first challenge.

I don’t recall having seen, anywhere on the Maltese islands, a monument representing a lacemaker at work. Perhaps it would be more fitting for such a monument to be placed in a public spot on Gozo,” he ends up smilingly, perhaps already envisaging how this other dream could come true.

While congratulating Paul for his success, the UGC’s Lacemaking Programme may rightly claim that discovering exceptional students like Paul would surely augur well for the lacemaking industry in Malta. Primarily it would definitely facilitate the reinstatement and conservation of bobbin lacemaking as an important element of our islands’ heritage in the near future.

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