

Lace Day 2015

An Important Annual Event at the Gozo Campus

CONSIGLIA AZZOPARDI

Rather earlier than usual, the 2015 Lace Day, which was the 19th edition of the event, was held just before Easter, on Sunday 29th March 2015. As usual it was held at the University of Malta Gozo Campus (UGC) and organised by the “Lace-Making Programme” of the UGC.

Lace Day is an important event for Gozitan and Maltese lacemakers. It is also attended by a number of foreign lacemakers.

The organisers of Lace Day make it a point that during this event the public has the opportunity to see the creative work by the students attending lace making courses at the UGC. The students attending weekly classes not only learn the techniques of lace making, but also its history through written texts and through oral recollections.

Design Making

The Lace-Making Programme assigns major importance to design making, and in class, time is allotted to discussion about traditional designs discovered by students and their teacher in various localities. In previous times, as recorded in history from about 1840 when the lace industry was in its heyday, it was the job of artists established mainly in Rabat, Gozo to supply original designs. These were attractive enough to compete in lace markets abroad such as in England, France, Germany, and the Americas. The technique of reproducing and making extra copies of the original design was, usually, left in the hands of lace merchants and organisers of lace apprentices. The design would then pass on to the teacher or teacher and her assistants who were in charge of lace classes, as it was they who had to figure out how to go about it.

Some of these women showed great skill in such drawings and a knowledgeable lace maker would understand the quality of these lace designs. However in those days it was not socially accepted that females, especially those coming from the low working classes, would be considered as artists.

With the decline of the lace industry, the technique of originating lace designs was gradually abandoned; it has been forgotten decades ago, going back to more than half a century. This neglect is more seriously felt in our days because it has created a vacuum in the culture of Maltese Lace. The need to renovate this aspect of our lace heritage must be considered as urgent.

It is therefore a right step in this direction that this year, the students following their Advanced Level Certificate Course took it upon themselves to draw new patterns for the Gozo Lace Day. The idea originated when the students examined a large shawl of black silk which was donated to the course co-ordinator on being discarded because it seemed to be beyond repair. In addition it was filling the



EVENING DRESS C 1850

Maltese Lace, worked in white or black silk, became very popular as fashionable wear for special occasions during Victorian Times.

Timeline Photography
© Cavalcade



Cavalcade Lace business cards.



Working on a design.

drawers with black particles from the decaying silk. Fortunately, its owner was wise enough to pass it over for study instead of throwing it away. The time taken to piece back the shattered shawl to its original state was well worth the effort; in spite of missing patches, the students, guided by myself, succeeded in retrieving a fantastic design the likes of which I never witnessed before.

The idea continued to mature when one of the students brought a used bolero worked in a

combination of mechanical knitting and crochet. On studying its construction, it was agreed that a replica in lace would be possible to develop. Each student took a part of the bolero and traced flowers, foliage and ground stitches from the old shawl. The collective effort resulted in a design for a lace jacket which can easily be converted into a runner. The project was very successful even though this was the first design attempt of the five students who worked on this project.

Exposure of Maltese Lace in Australia

Each year, as part of the Lace Day programme, a guest speaker is invited to give a short talk, rather than a lecture, on any aspect related to Maltese Lace. The Lace Day talk is always very interesting for lace enthusiasts, although it is not normally of an academic nature.

This year the subject was “Exposure of Maltese Lace in Australia”. It resulted from my visit to Australia in July 2014 when attending an OIDFA Congress in Adelaide where a workshop in Maltese Lace was highly promoted. After Adelaide, I visited NSW where Ms Josephine Bigeni, working



Examining a shawl of black silk.



The author delivering a talk in Australia.

with the Maltese Community in Sydney, organised a second course in Maltese Lace.

A third course was organised by Ms Mary Farrugia for the Maltese Community in Melbourne. The topic chosen for the three courses was “Festuni”, a typical Gozo design adapted from the late 19th century. I chose three designs namely ‘Maltese Cross and Star’ in Adelaide, “Maltese Cross and Sun” in Sydney, and “Maltese Cross and Crown” in Melbourne. I worked the festuni in silk, a unique technique of lace tradition in Gozo.

A public lecture with the subject “Maltese Lace – A Craft, An Industry, An Art” was organised in Parkville, Victoria, on the initiative of the High Commissioner of Malta, Mr Joe Borg and of Prof. Maurice Cauchi, Chairman of Maltese Heritage Culture. Many of those who attended had travelled long distances. After the lecture some of them stopped to show me old pieces of lace they had treasured in Australia. I learned that some persons possessed Maltese lace worked by women who had emigrated to Australia and who had learnt the craft from their family in Gozo. Others possessed lace pieces received as presents from their family. Some lace pieces belonged

to high society such as the British Governors, Commissioners and Servicemen who had served in Malta prior to their posting in Australia. The collections of very special high quality Maltese lace, including blondes from the 1870s to 1930s discovered in museums and in private collections were really overwhelming. This topic surely merits to be included in addition to what is already known about the history of Maltese Lace.

Visiting Australia was an opportunity to witness the great exposure Maltese Lace still enjoys in the new homeland of so many Maltese and Gozitan emigrants.

Certificate Courses at UGC starting October 2015

In order to give a new structure to the existing Certificate Course held on Saturday mornings, it has been decided to change the format which has prevailed since its introduction in 1996.

Under the new structure, the three-year course will be divided in three parts namely the Beginners’ level, the Intermediate level and the Advanced



Exhibits of Maltese lace in Australia, at Parkville, Victoria.



A lace exhibit.

level. In this way students will be committed to one year at a time, and with the course complete and certificate awarded, they can opt to leave the course at the end of each year, and there will be no need to continue the subsequent level the following year. This flexibility will hopefully attract more young participants to join the courses as it helps them to organise time better between work and family. Another change is that a second course in Maltese Lace will be offered on Saturday afternoons.

Those who wish to apply are asked to do so by the closing date which is set for 30th September, although those who intend to apply are asked to send their application as early as possible to enable the Lace-making Programme to make the necessary arrangements in time.

Dr Consiglia Azzopardi is the coordinator of the Lace-Making Programme at the University Gozo Campus.