

# Studying the History of Lace Making

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## Introduction

This article deals mostly with two studies written by myself in connection with my studies at the University of Malta (Azzopardi; 2011; and Azzopardi, 2013). In these studies I trace the development of lace making in Malta and Gozo.

One important finding of my studies is that there have been several factors which contributed to the development of lace making in the Maltese Islands, giving it a particular and a distinctive character, distinguishable from other types of lace practised in nearby Mediterranean countries.

## Personal Experience

My interest in lace making started in my childhood years. In 1969, as a young teacher at the Primary School in Xagħra, Gozo, during the two-hour mid-day break, I used to join veteran teachers in preparing materials for the needlework and the housecraft classes. This involved tracing designs, borrowing patterns from magazines with instructions and demonstrating techniques, sometimes learnt from older Gozitan teachers.

In the vicinity of the school, weavers and spinners were then still very active in their workshop, making blankets out of sheep-wool, and from my classroom window I could watch clusters of lace makers working at their door-step in the nearby alley. A certain Miss Vena Sciberras who was in her last year of teaching before retiring, invited me over to her house, where she introduced me to her two spinster sisters one of whom was blind. The three of them were known in the village as excellent lace makers. As they were considering giving up lace work and shifting to coarse knitting, they offered me some fine lace pricking sheets, at the top of which was pinned a sample of matching worked lace, which was very finely made, and that, I felt, was worth treasuring. Later I got to know that the Sciberras sisters were

the daughters of the first entrepreneur who in 1909 was in charge of the lace school-factory at Xagħra known as *Casa Industriale*. This is just one example of how masterpieces of lace and lace designs could be discovered by chance. The work of the Sciberras sisters served as useful information for my theses.

In the 1970s, lace making in Gozo deteriorated very fast among the younger generation, as it was considered a craft suitable for older people who did not have much else to do. It was the time when rolls of original designs pillows and bobbins had started to be discarded. When in 1978 I returned to Xagħra as a teacher of lace making at the Gozo Girls' Trade School, I was shocked to see that the lace workshop was deprived of anything that was connected with lace, except for a cardboard box with about a dozen pillows standing inside, holding a jumble of threaded bobbins tangled over the pins of what seemed to have been simple edgings - a very sad welcome for me as a teacher of lace! This in spite of the fact that the out-going former lace teacher, Miss Stella Zerafa, was a proficient lace maker who came from a family of lace designers and teachers at Nadur, with a long tradition of making lace pillows, bobbins, winders and who invented tools to help facilitate hand-work. The unequipped lace workshop was an indication that interest in lace making had declined drastically, and the subject had completely lost its popularity with fourteen-year olds. These girls were keen on subjects such as sewing and machine knitting that prepared them for employment at the expanding wearing apparel and knitwear factories.

## Useful Information

In order to identify the factors that gave an identity to Maltese lace, I traced the craft as was locally practised way back in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. I explored the character of lace made in Malta during these early years by investigating the development of contemporary laces in



Lace for church vestment from late 19<sup>th</sup> century

Western Europe. Via the cotton trade, Malta had close connections with the main Mediterranean markets, especially with the ports of Naples and Genoa from where our lace is likely to have been descended. Indeed, Italian, French, Spanish and Flemish influences may all have contributed to a specific artistic culture which is rightly termed by the Maltese as ‘ours’

Lace pieces in the churches, as well as the National Archives and the National Library were the three main sources which provided important information for my studies. Additional information came from viewing surviving lace worn in Malta during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, owned by descendants of Maltese nobility. Studying contemporary portrait paintings of high dignitaries in the social, political and ecclesiastical spheres in Malta was also crucial in this regard. Useful information was also obtained from old laces which had been discarded to the back drawers as unattractive, outdated and old-fashioned.

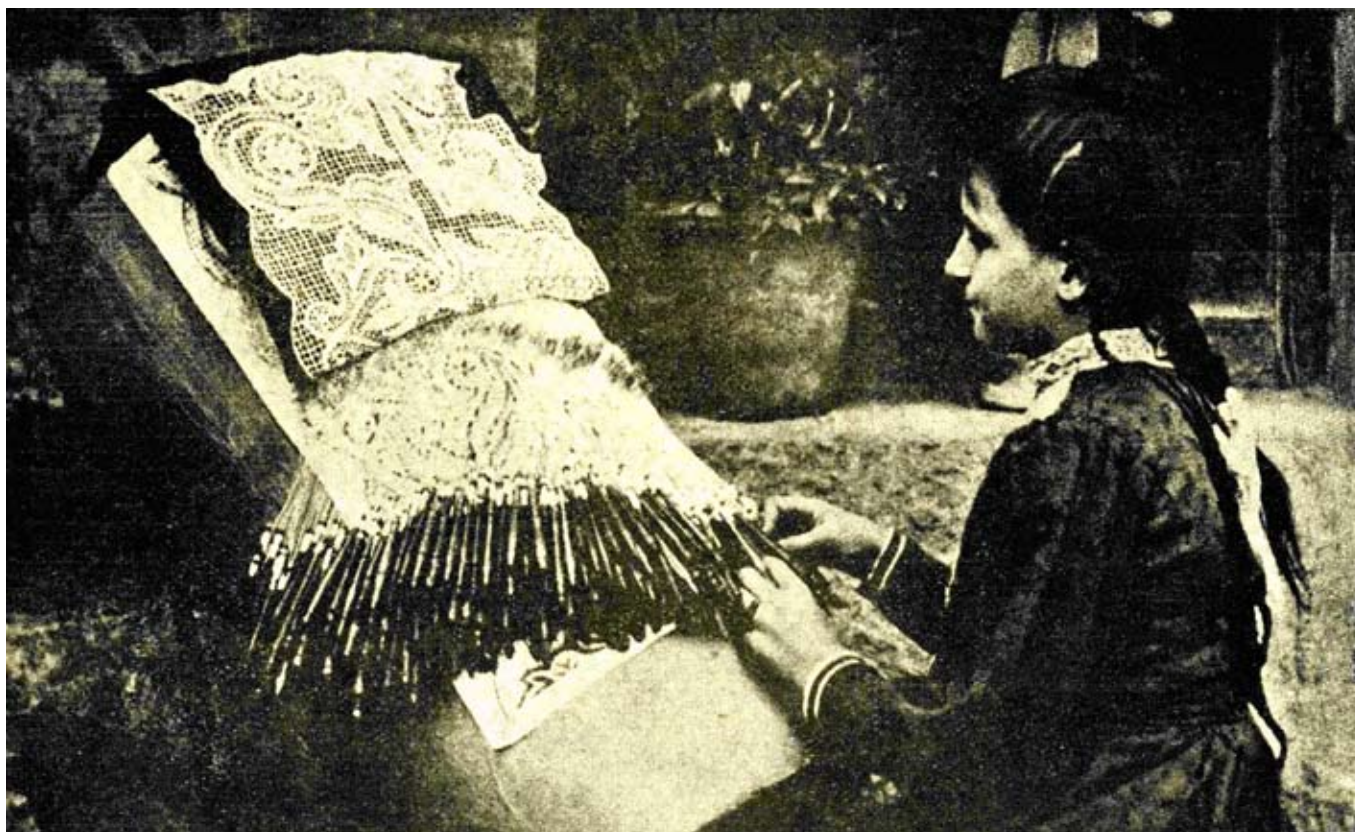
Many lace pieces must have been imported by merchants tracking along the Mediterranean lace markets. But imported lace served as a model from which local artisans copied various patterns and techniques. This is most clearly evident in the works by Antoine de Favray (1706 – 1798), the French artist working in Malta for the Grand Master and the Order, who moved in the high circles of nobility and leading merchants. In his painting *Maltese Ladies Paying A Visit*, Favray confirms that the nobility not only wore lace but also worked it! While Favray documented lace making in Valletta, the historian Giann Piet Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712 – 1770), documented the existence of lace making in Gozo, stating as well that the tradition had been practised for many years (*minn żmien żemżem*).

The lace story was greatly affected by the political events that led the Maltese Islands to pass from under the Order of St John, the French, the British and beyond, influenced by demographic patterns and social classes. The church also had an influence in lace making by promoting lace education as well as by rendering lace making as a means of reducing unemployment and as a means of income. The church also fostered an interest in lace as this was used in ecclesiastical vestments.

Philanthropists settling in Malta contributed to the rediscovery of lace and its development in line with European fashions, thus attracting royal interest in Maltese Lace. Some lace historians accredit the revival of lace making to the support of British philanthropists who settled in Malta in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Revival of Lace as an Industry**

The research carried out by myself led to the discovery that the revival of the industry took place in Gozo, as an immediate result of Genoese lace workers who settled in Malta as political refugees during the *Risorgimento*. The theory that the Bishop’s Conservatory in Gozo housed early lace teaching efforts was confirmed by studying the early lace styles promoted by Canon Salvatore



Young lace making student at *Casa Industriale*, Xaghra, Gozo c.1895

Bondi`. Dun Giuseppe Diacono, who was the only writer to document the history and development of the lace technique as it developed in Gozo, wrote the names of the first lace promoters, artists, teachers and merchants who succeeded in producing lace masterpieces, containing the typical Maltese cross and the borrowed wheat-ears stitch, which they named *Moski*. Experiments at simplifying the technique led to successive stages of development in Maltese lace making. It appears that lace making was always subject to the economic situations mainly as a substitute to the decaying weaving and spinning industry.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, national and international lace exhibitions indicate that Maltese lace, which was mainly produced in Gozo, was acclaimed for its richness in design and exquisite execution.

### **The Glory Days of Lace Making**

The third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be considered as the glory days of lace making in Gozo. During this period large black silk shawls and Maltese blonde lace (made of silk thread) in white and ecru, were very popular, but yellow and

multi-coloured silk laces were produced as well. Among the masterpieces remaining on the island are those found in churches and in the possession of high-ranking church ministers – including bishops and monsigneurs. Commercial laces were exported, thus forming the bulk of Maltese trade until the turn of the century. Very rarely was lace worn by the same locals who made it, because finished lace was quickly exchanged with supplies for the daily running of the family or with gold jewellery for the girls' dowry.

The climax of lace development occurred during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a model school-factory was opened. It was meant to cater for the education of women and for the establishment of a system of industrial training for paid work at home. Dun Giuseppe Diacono, promoter of the House of Industry in Gozo, who was also a lace designer, took advantage of the export market by designing pieces in line with the fashion of the time. He left a legacy of original designs of Maltese Lace.

Blueprint designs were a new development in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting from the formation of

the Malta Industries Association led by Cecilia de Trafford, who was a key-player in lace making in Gozo.

Subsequently other prolific designers emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more masterpieces were produced, some ending in the possession of the British Royal family. The bulk of the lace produced during this period was exported.

The designs were usually rolled in scrolls and kept in drawers. Many such scrolls, unfortunately, were later burnt in bakeries with the furniture they were in. Most surviving lace from that period was that produced devotedly for the church, still proudly exhibited on the altars and during the yearly village-feast processions.

### **Importance of Public Memory**

The history of Maltese lace, as presented in my M.Phil and Ph.D. theses required piecing together knowledge from my own experience as practitioner and teacher of the craft, and as a

collector of public memory from older persons involved in lace making, who recalled their own experiences from years gone by.

The booklet *Bizzilli Li Jinhadmu F'Għawdex u F'Malta*, published in Valletta in 1920, written in rhetoric form and in the old Italianated style of the Maltese language, remains the basic source of reliable information about the history and technique of Maltese lace during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its author chose to remain anonymous. In addition, the booklet, was written in Maltese – considered as the 'kitchen language', and not in Italian, the official language of Malta in those days. The text consisted of a short patriotic history and simple code of instructions meant to be memorised by girls in their lace class.

When analysing the information contained in the booklet, and placing it within its appropriate timeframe, one may safely assume that the author was none other than Dun Giuzepp Diacono, the founder of the Gozo House of Industry in 1893. Very few original copies of this booklet have



Cetta Apap in her 90s talking of her experience at *Casa Industriale*, Gozo



The Hon. Anton Refalo attends Lace Day 2014 (Photo: MGOZ George Scerri)

survived, but there is a photocopy available at the National Public Library, Victoria, Gozo. Information is brief but precise and provides a wealth of information to researchers and lace historians. It certainly served as an important source of information for my thesis on documenting the development of Maltese lace during these last two centuries

The information contained in this booklet, presumably written by Diacono, was supplemented by additional information gathered during interviews with individuals who had close contact with the House of Industry. Prominent amongst these was Miss Maria D. Micallef, headmistress of the Girls' Grammar School in Gozo where I was a student and later a teacher. Micallef is the last surviving lace maker of Diacono's Casa Industriale, and she provided me with various patterns and lace tools which were used at the House of Industry. She also introduced me to

Diacono's catalogues of lace designs known as *Campionarii* and encouraged me to pursue the cause of reviving Gozo lace.

Turning over the pages of Diacono's *Campionarii* one realises that lace was produced in a much higher quantity at that time when compared to the present time. The growth of the lace industry was spectacular, and many lace makers could be seen outside working away at their doorsteps, in many places in Gozo.

In another interview, this time with Cetta Apap (1905 - 2007) from Qala, more information was obtained regarding the evolution of lace making in Gozo. She recollected her childhood training at the *Casa Industriale* first at Xaghra and later at Rabat. The vivid description of her experience revealed that there had been several stages of skill development in lace making, requiring different types of pillows for each particular work. In her

own words: *Kien hemm x'kull imhadda kbira daqs tentazzjoni!*<sup>2</sup>

This fits very well with Diacono's writing when referring to lace pillows: *Jigiu ucoll maghmulin imhadet xorta ohra ghax xoghol tal bizzilli. .... Actarx isiru bhal rombli uesghin xorta uahda ma tulhom collu; hecc jigiu maghmulin l'imhadet li fukhom jinhadmu il bizzilli li jeghdulhom tal balla u minn daun l'imhadet jisseihu tal balla..... Id-dar Industriali ghanda imhadet maghmulin xort'ohra li fukhom hadmet bizzilli.*<sup>3</sup>

Examples of extraordinary lace worked on these special pillows can be studied from surviving masterpieces, from which a few were selected for the purpose of my studies. Other examples survive in parish churches and can be seen displayed on the altars during the village festa. On beholding these masterpieces, one may be tempted to think that our very talented ancestors had plenty of time to practice this craft. In reality lace making was just one of many activities in the household, as alongside lace making, many women were involved in raising their family, performing daily housework and cooking, and sometimes even working in fields and on the farm, although chores were shared between different members of the household. Definitely it was not just job satisfaction that drove the lace makers to sit for long hours at their pillow, but also the substantial income that could be derived from such work. Even though prices were low, compared with what one would expect nowadays, many accepted to engage themselves in the constant repeating of the same patterns, as dictated by the business persons who ordered the lace work.

### **Lace in the Post-War Years**

The post-war years saw a rapid decline in lace making. Unemployment during the 1950s and 1960s led to a surge of mass emigration from

Malta and Gozo, mostly men at first and later entire families. Organised emigration contributed to the formation of small colonies of young Gozitans in the United Kingdom, Canada, United States and Australia.

Education in Malta at that time was not directed towards the preservation of traditional crafts. The last lace makers in Gozo had grown old or had died. Younger persons became attracted to other handicrafts, such as crochet and knitting – handmade or machine made – which were very quick to produce and yielded more income than the receding lace industry.

The real setback to the lace industry in Gozo was caused by industrialisation and the opening of textile factories during the 1970s. This, together with an increasing number of girls attending secondary schools, brought about a revolution in the life-style of Gozitan females, most of whom did not have much interest in lace making. With communications between the two islands improving, and with tertiary education promoted, the majority of Gozitan girls ended up studying at University and many undertook jobs in Malta.

### **Present Situation**

In 1989, the Gozo School of Art was opened in Għajnsielem and lace making was introduced as a main subject from the beginning. I was the teacher of lace at that school.

Many criticised the fact that lace was taught at a school of art, arguing that lace should not be considered as an art subject, but just as a craft. However very quickly the lace classes were crowded, with about half the school population attending these classes. It attracted adult females not only from Gozo but also foreign residents, and some crossed over from Malta for their weekly lesson.

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<sup>2</sup> Loosely translated "There were various large pillows".

<sup>3</sup> Loosely translated "Various types of pillows are used for lace making .. They are generally formed in the shape of a wide cylinder. ... ; the pillows for lace making called tal-balla are made in this way and this is why they are called tal-balla... the House of Industry possess other types of pillows for lace making."

The years I spent teaching lace at this school served as a good preparation for my thesis, as this kept me close to lace makers from all the localities of Gozo, and from all sectors of society. These included relatives of skilful lace makers, descendants of lace merchants and those who produced lace pieces for the church. Some had stories to tell, lace to show, experiences to relate, old patterns to ask about, curiosities about strange tools, and all kinds of lace-talk to discuss. Laces different churches were brought over for discussion about their care and the best way of cleaning or restoring them, and all this gave me plenty of ideas and information about stylistic designs and lace techniques.

Eventually the ‘Lace Making Programme’ was introduced at University of Malta Gozo Campus (UGC), where a certificate course was offered, under my tutorship and coordination. Besides the practical aspect of lace making, the course at the UGC, which is still being offered, also includes design and history of Maltese lace.

In 1997, students who finished the three-year certificate course decided to form a lace co-op, named ‘Koperattiva Għawdxija tal-Bizzilla u Artigjanat Limitata’. They also formed a Lace Guild in 2000. The Koperattiva supplies lace work to those who order this product, while the Lace Guild contributes to the literature on lace, organises lace events and also publishes a quarterly magazine in English and Maltese. These



A lace making lesson in progress.

two organisations promote lace making as a heritage art and produce high quality publications on lace making.

Many women, on retiring from their job, are returning to the traditional craft and are willingly facing the challenge of learning how to make it using traditional methods. With interest in lace making growing daily among middle-aged persons, the craft has the possibility of being revived to its former glory.

## References

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