

# Lacemaking in Malta

CONSIGLIA AZZOPARDI

## Introduction

The technique of producing 'lace' made its debut in Northern Italy, at the turn of the sixteenth century. This involved the weaving of threads by means of either needles or bobbins or both, according to a drawn pattern.

Merchants travelling across Europe carried the craft to the north as far as Scandinavia. Flanders, specialising in the manufacture of flax and linen and its spinning (sometimes as fine as the human hair), skillfully adapted the patterns to its industry, aiming at producing masterpieces that remained unparalleled to the present day.

When it reached the Mediterranean, lacemaking utilised a rather coarser thread made out of cotton, wool and silk, creating a different style of lace, although produced by the same basic stitches as the fine lace worked in Northern Europe.

During the seventeenth century, Maltese merchants travelled to the Iberian Peninsula with cotton goods. On their way they called at important ports such as Genoa in Italy, Marseilles in France and Barcelona in Spain, and picked up lace pieces that fetched good prices at the markets there. These merchants brought samples back home, and this enabled Maltese people to study the techniques, materials and tools used.

This eventually developed into know-how of the fascinating craft in Malta, where the product greatly appealed to the Maltese people especially females and children. No wonder that lacemaking in Malta bears striking resemblance to that of Genoa in style, to the Torchon lace made in France, and to the Catalanian in technique!

## Boom in Silk Lace

Mid-eighteenth century Europe witnessed a boom in the silk industry, when not only luxurious silk fabric textiles were produced, but also silk thread

in white, cream and black colours, intended for embroidery, weaving, and lacemaking. Although much of the silk required for the home consumption in exotic costumes worn by Maltese nobility, well-to-do merchants and elaborate church vestments, was imported mainly from Sicily, yet silk spinners, weavers and dyers had professionally established themselves in Malta. As a result lace started to be manufactured in Malta.



Towards mid-nineteenth century silk lace made in Malta was remodelled by the combined efforts of Lady Hamilton Chichester and Lady Sarah Austin who worked together to revive what remained of the craft by providing new patterns that appealed to the contemporary market. The Great Exhibition of London which took place repeatedly in the decades of the second half of the century, promoted both 'Blondes' and 'White Thread Lace' as Maltese Lace, utilizing the motif of the 'Eight-Pointed Cross' by the Order of St John in every piece of lace, as if to hallmark its identity. "Blondes" was destined to remain synonymous with Maltese lace well into the twentieth century and indeed up to the present times, through the production of innumerable pieces as collars, shawls, stoles, hooded capes and whole garments.

## Linen Maltese Lace

Thread Laces have been popular with most peasant lacemakers at all times, as these did not need as much care and pampering as the delicate silk which was so easily ruined even by strong daylight and dust in the atmosphere. So when in the last years of the nineteenth century the old methods of the seventeenth century returned in fashion, the local lacemakers utilised flax thread to produce tablecloths, bed covers, curtains and towels. The patterns that were used for silk could also be used for working with linen. As a result there was a revival in lacemaking at this time and the ‘Malta Industries Association’ was established. The association promoted lacework made with imported Irish linen thread and developed an export market to the British Isles.

Several schools were founded to instruct girls and young women how to make lace. One such important school was established at the Casa Industriale of Gozo, an orphanage run by the nuns under the patronage of Dun Guzepp Diacono in 1897. Besides providing teachers for the subject, Diacono continuously supplied the house with newly adapted patterns for the thread available and the product was used to supply the shop operating at the same orphanage.

Up to the third quarter of the twentieth century rows of lacemakers all along the road sitting with their face to the wall was a common scene in Gozo, attracting on-looker tourists. These lacemakers would proudly show up their finished laces hoping to sell it there and then, adding a few shillings to their husbands’ income. Lace merchants were found in all the villages of Gozo, who after negotiating a good price for lace products, often in exchange for food and clothing, they would travel every week to the shops at Valletta and at the port area in Malta from where lace items were resold or exported. These merchants fared quite well in the dealing in lace products that was being produced in great amounts on in Gozo, where the craft seems to have been more deeply rooted.

Unfortunately, with the opening-up of factories in the 1960s, most young women gave up their lacemaking, and often destroyed traditional patterns and tools of the craft, including pillows and bobbins,

and went to seek more profitable jobs outside home. They had very little time, if any, to exercise the craft. School offering lacemaking classes to girls were also on the decline, and the last school closed down in the 1990s.

Fortunately some interest remained in lacemaking and lacemaking was introduced as a subject in the Gozo School of Art, catering not only for schoolgirls but also for adults who were still interested to learn the craft.

Lacemaking classes in both Malta and Gozo are today conducted at MCAST and other Adult Training Schools especially during evening sessions, and various short courses are organised by Local Councils in various localities.

The Lacemaking Programme at University Gozo Centre was set up in the middle of the nineteen nineties. Initially craft classes were offered. Eventually the programme was given permission by the University of Malta to offer a Diploma course in ‘Lace Studies’.

The Malta Lace Guild was set up in June 2000 with the aim of bringing together all those interested in the art of lace; this is being achieved by the quarterly magazine published in both languages – English and Maltese. Other small groups meet regularly at central places where lace experiences are shared

The ‘Koperattiva Ghawdxija tal-Bizzilla u Artigjanat’ does its best to maintain the high standard of genuine Maltese lace to supply of the local market, and to satisfy the demand for lace tailored to order. Today one does not see many lacemakers sitting at their doorstep any more, because these prefer to sit behind closed doors, protected from the high volume of traffic on our streets.

On the International side OIDFA promotes the running of lace exhibitions by the organisation of an International Congress of lace every two years in any lacemaking country. Besides providing an opportunity to display Malta lace the lace congress gives a chance to Maltese and Gozitan lacemakers to interact with lacemakers from all over the world.

Consiglia Azzopardi is the co-ordinator of the Lace Making Programme at the University Gozo Centre..