

Melitensia Curios

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Textile Printing in Malta: The Edgar Parnis Collection at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

The use of non-paper media in different printing processes has a long history. The rapid dissemination of movable type printing in Europe between the second half of the fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth centuries also witnessed the experimentation and eventual gradual use of such media as different types of animal skins and of fabrics for letterpress printing, as well as for the reproduction of imagery and designs. Among the earliest references to the printing of imagery on textile was a commission carried out by an Italian printer, dated 22nd April 1574, for a hundred images on paper and the same amount on textile. The early use of such non-paper media included the printing of cartographic material, this given the ease of storage and greater durability that such materials offered.¹

Printing on textiles and skins in Malta

There is no known reference or indeed any material evidence for the utilization of textiles and skins as a print medium during the first phase of Maltese printing, between 1642 and around 1656 when printing in Malta came to an end due to censorship issues between the Grand Master and the Inquisition. The re-establishment of printing on the island in late June 1756 in the form of a state-owned monopoly was, however, soon to result in the production of the earliest such examples.

The first-known instance of local printing on fabric took place in late 1756 itself, when two copies of the Indult of the Crusade for Grand Master Pinto's personal use are known to have been printed on white silk.² Valued at two scudi, the Grand Master's specimens were by far the most expensive and they continued to be produced down to the expulsion of the Order in 1798, though not necessarily always on fabric.

Early typeset material, similarly printed locally on silk, included a *Stabat Mater* prayer from 1770. Five hundred copies of this folio-size, single-sheet item were printed on paper. An unknown quantity was also, however, printed in quarto format on silk.³ Adulatory poetical pieces in honour of the ruling Grand Master were also occasionally printed on silk.

The printing of both religious and secular imagery on non-paper media was also undertaken, again rather occasionally.⁴ In 1761, 330 images of the Virgin of Good Counsel were printed on silk, besides another 700 that were printed on paper. These were commissioned by the Augustinian friars of Valletta.⁵ Scapulars bearing the effigy



Fig. 1
In praise of Maria Passeri.

of the Virgin of Mount Carmel and of the Immaculate Conception were likewise produced locally on silk in 1767, being commissioned by the respective confraternities.⁶

The production of secular imagery on a non-paper medium is limited to just one known example. In 1773, a print portrait of the newly elected Grand Master Francesco Ximenez de Texada was produced by the Maltese press. While the number of portraits printed on paper was not recorded, the records of the printing press state that sixty examples of Ximenez's portrait were printed on silk.⁷ Only two contemporary copperplate engraved portraits of Ximenez are known: one by the Maltese engraver Francesco Zimelli and the other by Domenico Cunego of Rome.⁸ Either of the two may have been the one printed also on silk; however the fact that the Cunego plate was intended to be part of the entire set of copperplate engravings of all the Grand Masters makes it more likely that it was the Zimelli plate that was used for the printing of the sixty silk portraits.⁹

A characteristic of these early examples of silk printing was the fact that they all consisted of more costly limited luxury editions of the same item that was printed – usually in a much larger quantity – in the standard paper format. With so few instances of silk printing and with such limited print runs it is little wonder that eighteenth-century Maltese silk printing specimens are exceedingly rare and no example is known in Maltese public collections.

Different types of animal skins were occasionally also utilized for the printing of religious imagery. Immaculate Conception imagery was thus printed in 1765 and 1766, with print runs of 300 and 800 copies respectively.¹⁰ All known commissions for the printing of scapulars (*abitini*, hence the Maltese word *labtu*) of various Marian devotions were produced on skin – often consisting of Morocco or chamois leather – with only two instances when scapulars were printed on silk.¹¹ This is understandable given the fact that scapulars were intended to be worn on the person, usually hung around the neck, and thus a more durable material than paper was required.

Following the granting of Freedom of the Press in January 1839 and the resulting proliferation of private printing presses on the island, the use of textiles and skins for printing became more widespread. Technological advances, notably lithography, started to be applied also

where non-paper media were used. This in turn contributed to a reduction of costs which made the printing on textiles more widespread. Parochial and other festive events, theatre programmes, celebrations of national importance, the personal achievements of the rich and prominent as well as advertisement material became the main typologies of non-paper printed matter. As always, the quality of the end product varied from the mediocre to the impressive. Two surviving examples of the latter consist of theatre programmes for performances held in honour of the Dowager Queen Adelaide during her visit to Malta. The first is dated 7th January 1839 and it advertised a vocal and instrumental concert by Giovanni Le Brun.¹² The second was held on 14th March for the performance of Giovanni Pacini's opera *I Fidanzati*, with Carlo Leonardis as *primo basso cantante*.¹³ The programmes

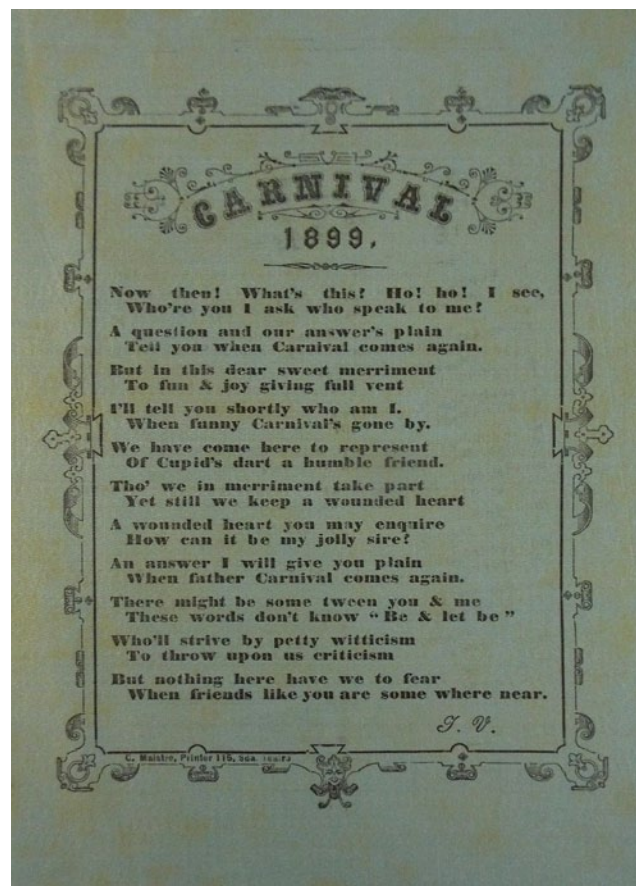


Fig. 2
The 1899 Carnival poem on blue silk, printed by Maistre of Valletta.

1904

CARRECALE 1904

Scendo propizia a stendere il mio velo
Sulla terra poichè sen parte 'l sole,
Brillan le stelle nel lontano cielo,
Come ninfe ammagliate alle carole.

Sazî d'occulte gioje in sullo stelo
Pieganò crisantemi, fresie, e viole;
Amor veleggia ardito col suo telo,
All' idillio di tacite parole.

L'innamorato cuor palpita e aspetta
Il suo gemello, e punto dal desio
Il mio calare sospirando affretta.

Sono l'amica in fecondar l'obblio
Della perduta speme, e l'illusione,
La Nette son che impera la ragione.

X.

Tip. E. LOMBARDI Str. Marina via Misla 17—Siena.

were printed on blue and beige silk respectively. Both lack the printer's name, however typographic and general stylistic similarities indicate that they were printed at the same press. Each was decorated with an elaborate floral border design in gold thread woven in a different pattern. The commemoration of landmark events continued to be characterized by the printing of such luxury pieces. Thus, to give one example, the detailed programme of horse and mule races held on 22nd May 1944 in honour of Mgr Michael Gonzi's assumption of the archbishopric of Malta was printed on white silk.¹⁴

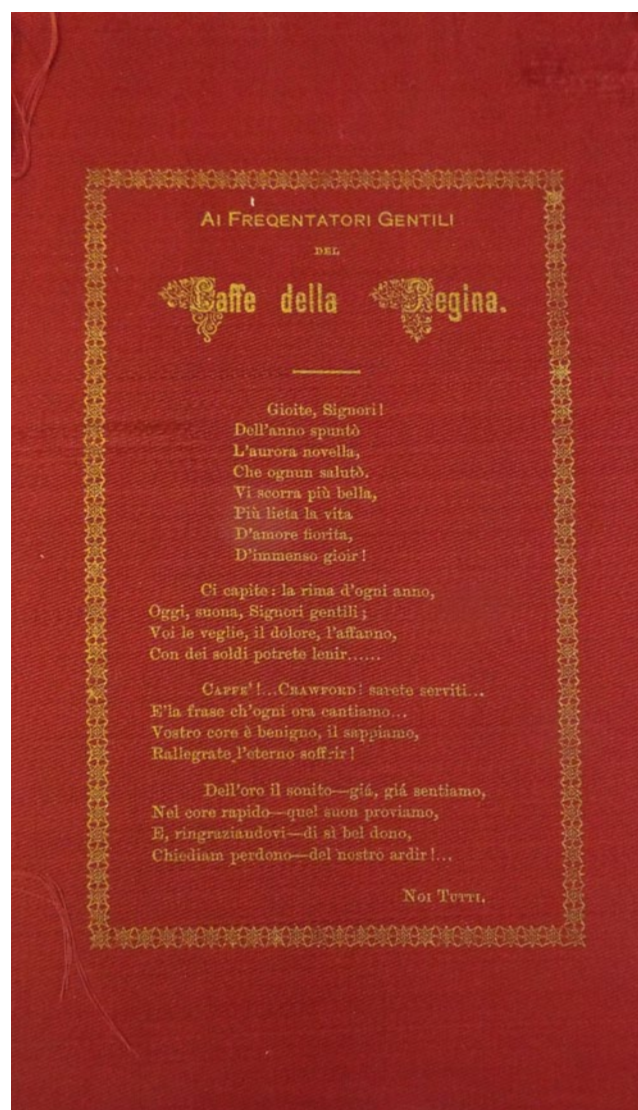
Magistrate Edgar Parnis and the Museum of Fine Arts collection

Among the leading keen collectors of Melitensia – and particularly of ephemera – during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was Magistrate Edgar Parnis. Researchers remain indebted towards Parnis for his generous donation of the bulk of the material he accumulated over the years to what was then The Royal Malta Library (from 1975 the National Library of Malta). Together with that formerly pertaining to Dr Louis Galea, his sizeable collection remains one of the largest ever donated by a single individual to the National Library. Quality-wise it is also impressive, containing some seriously rare editions often consisting of Melitensia material which would otherwise be totally lacking from the national collection. In 1916 a pamphlet about history of printing in Malta by Parnis was published posthumously.¹⁵

Besides his main bequest to the National Library, Magistrate Parnis is known to have donated other material to what was then the nascent Malta Museum. This comprised his collection of commemorative material printed on silk and other fabrics. This little-known gem is now kept in the reserve collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts and consists of sixteen pieces, produced between the last decade of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth centuries.¹⁶ The collection, even if modest, provides examples from the main subject categories for which material was printed on fabric. Thus, the theatre, Carnival, New Year revelry and religious celebrations are represented in the bequest. The collection has survived in a remarkably good condition, with only slight discolouration in a few examples. It is possible

that, at least in the case of some specimens, the item was also printed in a cheaper paper format. Providing the opening words of the items in the descriptive catalogue below may thus help to identify such paper-based versions held in public or private collections.

The collection contains five theatre-related silk printed pieces from the seasons 1898 and 1902 (items 1–5,



opposite: Fig. 3
Carnival 1904, printed by Lombardi of Sliema.

above: Fig. 4
The Caffè della Regina item.

below). The first three eulogized soprano Adelina Rizzini. The soprano had enjoyed an astounding success as Manon in the 2nd November 1897 opening gala performance of *Manon Lescaut* in the presence of Governor and Lady Fremantle. Her rendering of Mimi in *La Bohème*, performed on 8th March 1898 proved equally impressive. All three silk pieces commemorate the benefit night held in her honour on 12 April 1898. The items – two in Italian and one in English – were composed by anonymous admirers and lack an imprint.

The other two theatre specimens were produced in honour of soprano Maria Passeri, who stole the local theatrical scene during the 1901–2 season. She interpreted Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, performed on 9th November 1901.¹⁷ Both items, commemorating Passeri's performance on 18th April 1902 are identical but printed on different-coloured silk. They are

the only pieces in the collection to include a photographic reproduction of an individual.

Carnival is represented by six items in the collection. These span the decade 1894–1904 and were printed in differently coloured fabrics, mostly silk. All were printed anonymously in Italian, except for one of the two 1899 ones, which is in English. Interestingly, even though they cover a period of particularly high political tensions on the island, and during which Carnival was an ideal occasion to poke fun at political adversaries – notably the British colonial masters – no hint of political satire can be discerned in these pieces, rather in contrast with their paper-based counterparts. Thus, to give just one example of the latter, a single-sheet poem entitled *Anglomania* distributed during the 1897 Carnival, ridiculed the then rising trend of using English words and phrases instead of Maltese or Italian ones.¹⁸

At least three of the specimens were most likely produced and distributed by companies of Carnival troupes and floats. These consisted of the companies under the names *Pierrots* (1896 Carnival), *I Figli del Sole* (1899 Carnival) and *Le Margherite* (1902). Some of them feature the printer's name: Paolo Cutruffo of Valletta (items 6 and 10, below), C.[alisto] Maistre of Valletta (item 8, below) and E.[milio] Lombardi of Sliema (item 11, below).

Three items in the collection celebrate the coming of the New Year. One refers to the coming of 1896 (item 12, below) while the other is undated and dedicated to the patrons of the then fashionably popular Caffè Regina in what was then Piazza Regina right in the heart of Valletta (item 13, below). The brightly coloured *Strenna* (item 14, below) is similarly undated and bears no indication as to who was behind its publication.

Rather understandably, the two silk-printed pieces of a devotional nature were both printed in Maltese. Both are from 1908. One consists of prayers and lauds in honour of St Leonard of Noblac, patron saint of Ħal Kirkop, on the occasion of his feast day on 6th November, printed on red silk (item 15, below). The second consists of a poem dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria, patron saint of Żejtun, and printed on white silk on the occasion of the feast day held on 25th November. The poem is framed within an intricate gold design and topped by an effigy of the saint (item 16, below).



Fig. 5
Poem in Maltese in honour of St Catherine.

Catalogue of the Edgar Parnis Collection

Theatre

- 1 [Plain border with decorated corners] [Vignette showing a putto playing the harp] TO / SIGNORINA ADELINA RIZZINI / [Text of poem in English, starting:] *My words can't whisper* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] ONE OF THE ROWS. [Dated at bottom-left corner:] 12th April, 1898. Light-blue fabric; 273 x 170mm. Name of printer not given.
- 2 [Vignette showing a putto surrounded by a wreath] ALLA / VALOROSA E DISTINTA ARTISTA / Signorina Adelina Rizzini / NELLA SERA DELLA SUA BENEFICIATA / AL REGIO DI MALTA / 12 Aprile 1898. [Dividing line] [Text of poem in Italian and in two columns, starting:] *Natura ed Arte* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] PARIDE. Light-blue fabric; 280 x 228mm. Name of printer not given.
- 3 [Decorated border] To Signorina Adelina Rizzini / ON HER BENEFIT NIGHT / THEATRE ROYAL, / MALTA. [Dividing line] [Text of poem in English and in two columns, starting:] *Enchanting Nymph!* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] HELICON. [Dated at bottom-left corner:] 12th April, 1898. Light-pink fabric; 280 x 228mm. Name of printer not given.
- 4 [Decorated border] [Oval profile photo of the soprano] A / Maria Passeri / PRIMA DONNA SOPRANO / NEL REAL TEATRO / IL DI' 18 APRILE 1902 / SONETTO [Text of sonnet in Italian, starting:] *Te d'Euterpe gentil* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] A. D. [Printer's name at bottom-right corner outside border:] Tip. Mifsud, Str. S. Ursola No. 59. White fabric; 268 x 230mm.
- 5 Identical to above, but printed on reddish fabric.

Carnival

- 6 [Decorative border on top and left sides] Alla Scienza. [Dividing line] [Text of sonnet in Italian, printed in gold and starting:] *Cessate o muse* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] R. P. [At bottom-left corner:] CARNEVALE 1894. [At bottom-right corner:] PAOLO CUTRUFFO, TIP. Black fabric; 200 x 155mm.
- 7 [Decorative border] PIERROTS [Dividing line] [Text of poem in Italian, starting:] *E' Carnevale!* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] A. C. [At bottom-left corner:] Carnevale, 1896. Light-blue fabric; 225 x 195mm. Name of printer not given.
- 8 [Decorative border] CARNIVAL / 1899. [Dividing line] [Text of poem in English, starting:] *Now then!* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] J. V. [At bottom-left corner outside border:] C. Maistre, Printer 115, Sda. Teatro Light-blue fabric; 230 x 160mm.
- 9 [Decorative border on sides and bottom] I FIGLI DEL SOLE [Dividing line] [Text of poem in English, starting:] *Allegrì e giulivi* [Signed along bottom:] SATELLITI CARNEVALESCHI. [At bottom-left corner:] 1899. White fabric; 235 x 175mm. Name of printer not given.
- 10 [Decorative vignettes on left side and at top-left and bottom-right corners] Il Carnevale / DEL 1902 / LE MARGHERITE. [Text of poem in Italian, starting:] *Brilla il Ciel* [At bottom-left corner:] PAOLO CUTRUFFO TIP. Red fabric; 220 x 180mm. Unsigned.
- 11 [Decorative border consisting of an architectural portal, with the date '1904' at its top] CARNEVALE 1904 [Text of sonnet in Italian, starting:] *Scendo propizia* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] X. [Along right side:] Tip. 'E. LOMBARDI' Str. Marina via Misida 17–Sliema. White fabric; 206 x 162mm.

New Year

- 12 AI GENTILI AVVENTORI / per l'anno del nostro Signore 1896. [Dividing line] [Text of poem in Italian and in two columns, starting:] *Signori gentilissimi* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] – I Camerieri – [At bottom-left corner:] L. V.
White fabric; 230 x 155mm. Name of printer not given.
- 13 [Decorative border] AI FREQUENTATORI GENTILI / DEL / Caffè della Regina. / [Text of poem in Italian, printed in gold and starting:] *Gioite, Signori!* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] NOI TUTTI.
Red fabric; 260 x 150mm. Undated. Name of printer not given.
- 14 STRENNA [Dividing line] [Text of poem in Italian, starting:] *A voi, Signori* [Signed at bottom-right corner:] R.
Red fabric; 228 x 178mm. Undated. Name of printer not given.

Religious celebrations

- 15 [Decorative border] TIFHIR U TALB / LILL / SAN LEONARDU ABBATI / APPOSTLU CBIR TA FRANZA / Fein bl'akkua pompa nghanlu it-Tifchira tal Meut Tighou / FIL CHNISIA PARROCCHIALI TA HAL CHIRCOP FIS-6 TA NOV: 1908 / DAN IT TIFHIR. [Text of poem in Maltese and in two columns and printed in gold] [At bottom-right corner:] GIUSEPPE SACCO. [At bottom-left corner:] NIHIL OBSTAT / Aloisius Can. Theol. Attard / Cens. Theol.
Red fabric; 370 x 260mm. Name of printer not given.
- 16 [Decorative border consisting of an architectural portal in gold] LIL GLORIOSA VERG'NI U MARTRI / SANTA CATERINA / FJUM IL FESTA TAHHA 25 TA NOVEM: 1908 [Text of poem in Maltese and in two columns, starting:] *Ifrah, ifrah* [At centre-bottom: wheel symbolizing the martyrdom of St Catherine in gold] [At bottom-right corner:] ALF. M. CARUANA. / ZEITUN [At bottom-left corner:] NIHIL OBSTAT / Die 20 Octobris 1908 / A. Can. Theol. Attard / Cens. Theol.
White fabric; 335 x 250mm. Name of printer not given.

Notes

- For a recent in-depth study, A.D. Stijnman, *Engraving and Etching, 1400–2000* (GH Houten, 2012). See also Edmund Knecht's classic, *The Principles and Practice of Textile Printing* (London, 1912).
- A[rchive of the] O[rder of] M[alta] 2068, f.224v, records and expense of 2 scudi and 3 tari for 'due palmi di seta bianco preso da Maestro Giacchino Arena per la Bolla di Sua Altezza Serenissima'. The Maltese eighteenth-century *palma* was the equivalent of about 26 centimetres, which more or less equalled the size of a printed Indult of the Crusade.
- AOM 2051, f.4v. A specimen printed on paper has been identified in the Cathedral Museum Archives, bearing the title: *Al Crocefisso appassionato Figlio, alla Madre dolente appie'del tronco per liberarne dall'eterno esiglio ...* (Malta, 1770).
- For a study of religious and secular imagery printed in eighteenth-century Malta, William Zammit, 'The Communicative Role of Visual Media in Malta, 1700–98', in Toni Cortis, Thomas Freller and Lino Bugeja (eds), *Melitensium Amor: Festschrift in honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi* (Malta, 2002), 325–358.
- AOM 2042, f.4. The Augustinians of Valletta regularly commissioned the printing of images of the Virgin of Good Counsel.
- AOM 2048, f.6v.
- AOM 2054, p.19. A total of 1255 portraits were printed, of which sixty were on silk.
- On Zimelli, Albert Ganado, 'From Engraving to Lithography: Zimelli, Farrugia, Bellanti', in Maroma Camilleri and Theresa Vella (eds), *Celebratio Amicitiae: Essays in Honour of Giovanni Bonello* (Malta, 2006), 305–326.
- Examples of both the Zimelli and the Cunego engraved portraits of Ximenez on paper are known. A copy of the former is held in the Museum of the Order of St John, Clerkenwell, London, and was published by Julia Toffolo in *Image of a Knight: Portrait Prints and Drawings of the Knights of St. John in the Museum of the Order of St. John* (London, 1988), 33. Other copies are known in private collections in Malta. The same portrait plate, with some modifications, was also featured on a single-sheet theological thesis by Salvatore Imbert, printed in Malta in 1775 in 250 copies.
- AOM 2046, f.7 and 2047, f.3v respectively. In both instances they were commissioned by the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of Valletta.
- AOM 2048, f.6v, recording the printing of 180 scapulars of the Virgin of Mount Carmel and of 57 ones of the Immaculate Conception, all printed on silk.
- Held in Dr Albert Ganado's collection and reproduced in colour in William Zammit, *Printing in Malta, 1642–1839: its Cultural Role from Inception to the Granting of Freedom of the Press* (Malta, 2008), 383.
- Held in the Manoel Theatre collection and reproduced in colour in Paul Xuereb, *The Manoel Theatre: A Short History* (Malta, 1st ed., 1994), illustration 14.
- Item measures 38.5 x 28.5cm, and is held in Dr Albert Ganado's collection.
- Notes on the First Establishment, Development and Actual State of Printing Press in Malta by the late Magistrate Dr. E. Parnis* (Malta, Government Printing Office, 1916). Parnis had died on 7th January 1913. While much of the contents have now been superseded, the back cover of the pamphlet features a textual reproduction of the sonnet printed in Malta in 1756 celebrating the setting up of the printing press. The original was probably part of Parnis's collection, but no copy is known in Maltese public collections, with the only known one being held in a private collection in Malta. For a reproduction of the original sonnet, William Zammit, op. cit. (2008), 44.
- The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance received from Sandro Debono, Chief Curator, and from Bernadine Scicluna and Katya Micallef, Curators at the National Museum of Fine Arts, who allowed me access to reserve material, including this collection.
- On Rizzini's and Passeri's performances, Alfred G. Miceli, *L'Istorja ta' l-Opra f' Malta (1866–2000)* (Malta, 2001), 112–113, 123.
- From the author's collection. The seventh stanza ran as:
Cavalli, cricket / lawn e football; / quanto è maltese / scomparve at all.