

A Pictorial Archive waiting to be Discovered

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Introduction

The recent publications by *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti* of photograph collections, inspired me to put pen to paper about a pictorial archive which has remained undisclosed up to this day. The archive which contains mostly different formats of negative plates has been organised into a number of categories according to the subject. They mostly cover a span of forty years from the beginning of the 1950s till the late 1990s.

The pictorial archive features photos of Gozo which show the island in its pristine state. Some of them recorded the earliest stages of development of some of the projects being undertaken at the time, bringing into contrast the metamorphosis of the Gozitan landscape. The man behind these pictures is the Xagħra born, Joseph Camilleri, a

teacher by profession.

The unfolding archive of Camilleri, makes him one of the most prolific photographers of the early middle of the 20th century. A lot of what Camilleri photographed no longer exists. It is merely a record of what once was. Instinctively he was following the art of photography in the footsteps of his predecessors, the brothers Michael and Angelo Farrugia (*Tal-Badiku*), both natives of Xagħra.

The first sounds of camera clicking in my life were always associated with church events in Xagħra during my childhood. It was a familiar image to see a flash with every click. Later on I got to know that the sounds and flashes came from Camilleri's camera.



Xagħra ridge with unspoilt slopes leading to Ramla bay with the hard stone pathway clearly visible. 1955.



A mule drawn cart with a farmer riding on its shaft passing by a dovotional niche. Xaghra, 1970.

Camilleri's Young Days

Camilleri, a friendly, energetic person, hails from a family of school teachers. His young days were instantly characterised with his interest and curiosity about anything which came across his way. His father, Vincent, and his paternal uncle, Francis, the latter the headmaster of the village school and founder of the Xaghra Victory band, were dedicated teachers and keen at practical things. It was through the former's coincidental personal contact with the Maltese renowned photographer, Paul Cassar, which encouraged Camilleri to delve into the art of photography towards the middle of the 1940s.

Encounter with Paul Cassar

Cassar's image was familiar with Camilleri when the former used to turn up at Vincent Camilleri's home to take professional photos of a number of individuals from Xaghra during Cassar's stay in Gozo as a refugee in Ghajnsielem. Vincent used to keep a record of the bookings for Cassar for whoever wished to have a picture taken. On the other hand Cassar endeavoured to keep his

photography business alive as he had a large family of eleven children to feed.

Following the cessation of the war, Cassar packed his photographic equipment and returned to Malta with his family and opened a studio in Birkirkara. Notwithstanding his departure from Gozo, Cassar kept in contact with Vincent Camilleri to the extent that the latter would take pictures of clients at home and send them to Cassar's studio for printing.

Vincent's son, Joseph, became very interested in photography. On noticing Joseph's keen interest in the art of photography, Cassar insisted on instructing him in the process of photography printing which he did in 1952.

From then on Joseph Camilleri became "trigger happy" not of sport guns but of the photographic camera. He bought his first photo camera ZEISS IKON SUPER IKONTA using 120 roll film. He started to roam around his native village corners and beyond. At the end of the day, Camilleri would return home and lock himself in his dark room to develop his photos.

Camilleri's Photography

On establishing his matrimonial home in 1959 in Racecourse Street, Xagħra, one of the front rooms was converted into a studio by day with a drop down curtain as a backdrop. This followed the trend particularly in small towns, where a visit to the photographer's studio was traditionally an obligatory accompaniment to certain solemn moments in life, in particular weddings, first holy communion and confirmation. It is difficult to pick out just one example from this exhaustive repetitive genre, the only aim of which was to please the client. One recognises Camilleri's work because it bears his trade name at the back and sometimes embossed at the lower end of the photo: "Victory photo studio, Xagħra – Gozo" and "Photo J. Camilleri, Xagħra – Gozo."

On one occasion Camilleri's zest for photography landed him in trouble. On 6th September, 1959, while taking photos at the Xagħra square in connection with the village festa, he was arrested

by the police and his photo camera confiscated. The incident revolved around some disturbances among a group of people at the village square. However, Camilleri was soon released and had his camera returned to him still loaded with the film.

His trade was in popular demand to the extent that Camilleri bought a number of photographic cameras. One of his cameras was of the large-format plate encased in wood with bellows. It produced a large sheet of film with big negatives that gave very high-quality images. This was followed by a series of reflex cameras. These were unobtrusive and quiet – ideal for his spontaneous shots. Because of popular demand Camilleri ventured into the movie picture by purchasing a movie camera std.8 in 1961. Using this camera, he succeeded to register a number of events in Gozo including the natural disaster caused by a severe storm at Mgarr on 12th December, 1967, the reels of which movie were shown on air through the national Maltese television station.



The threshing of hay with the old mechanical wooden encased machinery. Next to Manresa House, Victoria. C.1960



The great storm which wrought havoc on the Maltese Islands on 12 December, 1967. Mġarr harbour

Camilleri accumulated a great repertoire of picture documents over the span of forty years. His home archive contains a wide array of subjects, including picture groups, religious events, street life as well as documentary and candid pictures. Rumaging through Camilleri's pictorial archive of important events, I stumbled upon quaint everyday situations which form part of the traditional and cultural ways of the place where the pictures were shot. Although Camilleri was mostly commissioned to shoot special occasions, he nevertheless took the initiative to register pictorially many daily occurrences. He realised that the success of a candid photo largely depended on his creative input and upon his critical eye. It is a striking composition, a humouristic element or an unusual subject which renders the pictures very interesting.

It was through years of experience and success in the field of photography which made Camilleri a fine photographer particularly in black and white pictures. Some of his works have a number of elements which make them striking to the eye of the viewer. Much of the appeal of Camilleri's photography comes from the knowledge that

the style of the photo is determined by the photographer himself. While style is a very personal element in a fine art photo, Camilleri was often influenced by the traditions and changing landscape developments he experienced during his lifetime. His photos showed subjects which were usually ignored.

Documentary Photography

Camilleri's own work has also resulted in a series of images which can be labelled as



The laying of stone foundations at Tal-Hamri housing estate, Xewkija. C.1975



The commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Our Lady's apparition at Lourdes at the open air chapel beneath the Lourdes church at Mġarr. 1958.

documentary photography. Such subjects present accurate records of past events.

Coupled to the genre of photography, Camilleri's archive boasts of a number of short movies. Out of his own initiative, Camilleri shot movies of a number of events which occurred in Gozo. He surmised that such movie records would serve as a pictorial document for future

generations. In fact on watching Camilleri's movies one would be surprised by the intensive shots of particular situations at different stages of the reel. Scenery, streetscapes, landscapes, buildings and human activity start to unfold before one's eyes. Persons from all walks of life, since gone, come to life. Unfortunately some of these are now beyond recognition if not utterly destroyed.

Dr. Aaron Attard-Hili is a lawyer by profession. He is a full time Judicial Assistant at the Gozo courts of law. He is also a researcher in local history and is a contributor of a number of articles of historical interest in local papers and publications.

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