

# Peasant Costumes: Insights into Rural Life and Society

## An Exhibition Review

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*Peasant Costumes : Insights into Rural Life and Society* is a very interesting exhibition at the Exhibition Hall within the Ministry for Gozo, St Francis Square, Victoria. Open till the end of July, it provides visitors with precious snippets of the ordinary, yet incorrupt hard working rural population whose toil and simple life made drastic inwards in literature and the arts, particularly in the 19th century.

Daily life in early modern Maltese history was very much dependent on economic traits. Following the arrival of the Order of St John, daily life in the Maltese Islands was very much dependent on maritime activity and agriculture. The Grand Harbour area was centred on maritime activity which was fuelled by trade, industry, strategic importance and wartime replenishment to generate years of relative prosperity. The rest of the archipelago remained heavily reliant on agriculture, a characteristic which was perhaps bolder in Gozo where insular restraints left a major imprint on economy and life. Daily life on the sister island adhered to the rhythmic cycle of agriculture up to the mid-twentieth century, thereby explaining its pronounced rural character. This is a distinctive hallmark which Heritage Malta is currently interpreting for this year's edition of the increasingly prestigious temporary annual exhibition put forward by the Ministry for Gozo for the *Lejlet Lapsi -Notte Gozitana* event, thus renewing a solid collaboration towards national identity and culture.

This rural character is predominantly illustrated through a display of popular costumes as interpreted in their right ethnographic and historical context. Like all other forms of art, costumes reflect the society which produced them. The Ethnography Section within Heritage Malta



Exhibition poster.

houses a very significant textile collection of over 1,000 artefacts ranging from the nobility's refined aesthetic values based on French and Italian taste, the ecclesiastical need to spare no expenses for its most important sermons, the layman's need to feel important and the peasant's aesthetic approach based on traditional methods and functionality. In this exhibition, the peasants' attire is given the limelight.

The exhibition is not just a show of folk dress. Heritage Malta is presenting an ethnographic experience through an interactive display which heightens and illustrates all the concepts put



One of the pictures on display at the exhibition.

forward. This costume display is complemented by interpretation provisions highlighting the historic dimension and other artefacts of ethnographic and artistic relevance including a selection of the traditional implements used for spinning, weaving and dying, engravings, lithographs, watercolours and oil paintings. There is also a singular recreation of a domestic scene to give a holistic insight into rural life and society.

Very remarkable and perhaps still understudied are the techniques and methods used in the production of clothes. Some of the attire was produced in-house or at least had a very intimate tie with the rural world. Thus the production methods and techniques within the exhibition do not merely go into *newl* and *bizzilla* production with complementary loom and bobbin exhibits but can also delve into aspects

of cotton production, weaving patterns and dying techniques. This will in turn be of great help in the truthful production of replicas and offer an illuminating and unprecedented guide to the various re-enacting entities and folk groups that colour most of the Islands' cultural events. Much of the research and efforts behind this exhibition will be a useful input at the Folklore Museum in the *Gran Castello* which is currently being redesigned.

The seven costume sets exhibited are, in their majority, authentic pieces which have been complemented by historically accurate replicas of popular attire which, although not necessary exclusive, are very intimately tied to the rural world. These include the *kabozza*, the *terħa* and *ħorġa*, the typical waistcoat, the *qorq*, the *geżwira*, *ċulqana* and to a certain extent the *ġhonnella*, among others. An added attraction can undoubtedly be offered by lace which although generally not clad by the peasants, formed an integral part of their output and income, especially in Gozo.

In creating historically accurate replicas to fill the very few lacunae within the national collection and complement the seven authentic sets which are here being exhibited, the organisers availed themselves of the precious knowledge of Alda Bugeja who formed part of the Exhibition Technical and Scientific team. It is thanks to the passion and hard work of people like Alda that the weaving tradition still lives on. With the knowledge she



Part of a collection of prints on display at the exhibition.

inherited from four generations of weavers she is committed to continue preserving this valuable craft which she teaches within the Directorate for Lifelong Learning of the Education Department, and thanks to which she has been recognised on both national and international level. Particular care and attention was taken in reproducing historically accurate fabrics in all their processes, from the selection of cotton, to its spinning, dying in naturally time-honoured dyes, weaving and sewing according to researched studies. Where possible, threads pertaining far back to Alda's grandmother were used so as to add authenticity to this display.

Artistic representation is another important interpretative tool for a better understanding of peasant dress and daily life. Of particular interest are depictions dating to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries where the mundane was increasingly assuming consideration and relevance as a main artistic and intellectual subject. Many a time dress assumed a significant role very much in demand by 19<sup>th</sup> century visitors who wanted a lasting memento of their visit to the Islands. It is in this light that one should value the various prints and watercolour albums – some of which still form part of our national collections particularly those at the National Library and the National Museum of Fine Arts, a representative sample of which features prominently in this exhibition. Artists like Jean Houel, Francesco Zimelli, Vincenzo Fenech, Pietro Paolo Caruana, Raffaele Caruana, Opizio

Guidotti, Michele Bellanti, Charles Frederick de Brocktorff, the Schranzes and Edward Caruana Dingli depicted a wide range of Maltese and Gozitan dress some of which directly refer to the rural world. Paintings, prints and watercolour representations offer an illuminating background to the artefacts on display.

This exhibition can also offer an opportunity to showcase the work which is currently being done towards a better appreciation and preservation of Heritage Malta's textile collection, the potential of which is increasingly being discovered. A re-evaluation and assessment project is being carried out with Heritage Malta's Institute of Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage. Among the main deliverables of this project are condition assessments of all the items in the collection, qualifying and quantifying which are the pieces that can be displayed and which are those that need treatment. In the process, the present inventory is being upgraded with technical details and improved photographic documentation and the most urgent pieces are being short listed for restoration. Storage is being improved with mounts that embellish the presentation and facilitate handling.

This is an important and much needed project that will help us understand the collection from conservational, artistic and historical perspectives. Not only will it improve storage and accessibility but it will also facilitate research towards a better understanding of the collection from a



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The Hon. Lawrence Gonzi,  
Prime Minister at the  
inauguration of the exhibition  
held as part of the Lejlet  
Lapsi - *Notte Gozitana* 2012  
event.



conservational and art historical perspective. It is only through this direction that exhibitions, such as the one on offer, can be set up, and this section within this display can provide a stimulating behind the scenes.

Among the main deliverables of this display is the increasingly esteemed catalogue whereby the interwoven themes proposed above will be dealt with in deserving length by various contributors. Godwin Vella sets the context and highlights the relevance of cotton cultivation and wool harvesting in rural Gozo, Claire Bonavia delves into the manufacturing methods and techniques, while Kenneth Cassar and Nicoline Sagone focus on aspects of artistic representation. Sandro Debono highlights the role played by the Faldetta in crafting the representation of a national identity and textile conservators Claire Bonavia and Jeannette Huy provide us with interesting behind the scenes of an ongoing re-evaluation and assessment project of the national textile collection. This publication by Heritage Malta is surely a reference work for the subject. Accompanying this initiative is a welcoming set of print reproductions from authentic watercolours by Francesco Zimelli.

These watercolours are finely executed with delicate tones and elegant strong confident lines to capture graceful depictions of “Contadina in Abito di Nozze”, “Contadina Gozitana”, “Contadino dell’

Isola del Gozo”, “Bottegaro Maltese in abito di festa”, “Marinara di Speronara Maltese”, and are surely a must have for the avid collector and the subject’s enthusiast alike. Parallel to these initiatives are two intrinsically linked publications namely *Methods for Storing Historic Costumes and Accessories* and a pattern book for the reproduction of folk costumes. Those interested in acquiring copies of said publications can do so from the Exhibition Hall at the Minsitry for Gozo during exhibition days and from Heritage Malta’s Gozo Area Office (Tel. No. 2156 4188) at the Citadel and the Inquisitor’s Palace in Vittoriosa (Tel. No. 2166 3731).

This exhibition, open up till the end of July, is not merely a display of folkloristic attire, but in line with the previous efforts, it also presents a cultural highlight relating to the rural dimension of Gozo which for centuries served as the island’s main breadwinning activity.

Kenneth Cassar (b.1985), studied History of Art at the University of Malta where he graduated in 2006. He currently forms part of Heritage Malta’s Ethnographic Section as curator for Costumes and Textiles and teaches art at the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce.