

Why ‘Lace Studies’ at Academic Level?

CONSIGLIA AZZOPARDI

Introduction

One may wonder why ‘lace’ can be considered a subject of study at a high academic level. Some may mock the idea; the issue may be considered by some as degrading and not befitting university studies of our times where all is enwrapped in computerised technology.

General Perception about Maltese Lace

Internationally, very little has been documented

so far by lace historians about Maltese lace. Their reference has been brief, simply stating that a certain Lady Hamilton Chichester had in 1833 brought about some Genoese lace teachers to teach the craft to the natives, causing Maltese lace to grow into an important secondary lace of mid-nineteenth century.

Such a short paragraph would be incorporated with other Mediterranean needle or bobbin laces of Greece, Cyprus, Sicily and Tenerife. In the past, local reporters have considered the Maltese Islands

to be rich in lace and honey, from which many important visitors both civil and ecclesiastical have benefited and enjoyed presents. Many believe that Maltese lace has long stopped being made and the young generation hardly accept it has ever existed. This very modest discretion does not reflect the true image of the lace manufacture that has taken place on our islands when, even in our days, so much lace is displayed in our churches especially during the village feasts and other ceremonies. Neither does it tell of the masterpieces stored away as family heirlooms, which lay awaiting study and evaluation.

Being brought up in a real lace environment of a Gozo village, from where the addiction to the craft has been stimulated, and having had a long teaching experience in the subject, it became quite logical that I would take up studies and research the history of the lace made by our technique called ‘Maltese’. It was not an easy task to scrape through church archives, libraries and family collections to



Princess Elizabeth and Duke Philip on their visit to Gozo in 1952 watching a lace maker at tax-Xelina – Sannat.



Maria Saliba, expert lace maker at Munxar, working typically on her door-step on a summer's afternoon.

trace roots and elicit information. Interviewing the last persons involved with the craft and its trade was very interesting and challenging - some unhappily passing away before giving me the chance to return for further details. Most prominent among these was the late Bishop Nichol Cauchi of Gozo.

New Discoveries

Contrary to what we presently know about the characteristics of Maltese lace, there is not only one type but five styles, using more than the unique *trajbu* pillow to which we are accustomed. However, all styles correspond to the cultural events that have happened during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. In the same manner that the language problem addressed in the Maltese Islands during this period effected the education, politics, religion and culture of Malta, so did it influence all aspects of Maltese lace. In fact each of the different styles was a reflection of the historical, political, economic and artistic demands of the time. It may be said that each style has its own history, its own technique, and its artists creating variant tastes. Though loosely organised, lace artists and lace merchants alike were very alert to changes of fashion and kept abreast with the demands of their time.

These diversities in style seem to have perished over the decades, but one thing remains certain - the tradition in technique has remained sound and intact. With the amount of knowledge that we at present have about making Maltese lace, it is enough to trace back any old techniques. We can now classify surviving designs into distinctive categories, state which thread is best suited for which patterns, and discern the purpose of lace use. For example in the past we never made distinction between patterns best worked in silk or in linen – we used to think it was the same. Now, it is possible to enjoy the benefit derived out of results when patterns have been tested over the years by lace experts. This of course was accompanied by good lace artists who developed their understanding of lace construction to produce masterpieces in designs reflecting architecture and sculpture. Unfortunately these artists disappeared and although we have surviving lace pieces and surviving lace patterns there are no traces left of lace artists.

Diploma in Lace Studies

The Lace-making Programme opened at the University of Malta Gozo Centre in 1996. Certificate courses took place on a part-time basis every Saturday spread over four years. From this evolved the Diploma in Lace Studies under the Islands and Small States Institute. At present eight students are following the diploma with lectures, taking place during evening sessions, in History of Art, History of Lace, Design, Conservation, Lace in Costumes and Vestments, Needle lace in the Small Islands of Europe and Basic principles of Management and Economics. A project of practical bobbin lace and pattern drawing takes place during the summer.

Such topics were chosen because of their importance in relation with reviving the teaching of Maltese lace on an academic level as is deemed necessary in our times. However both students and lecturers suggested that topics should be expanded so that more time would be devoted to learning techniques. In the past, these techniques were automatically learnt at home but nowadays they have been eliminated from the new life-style led by families. Consequently something has to be done to create a space in the new system of education embraced by all, where traditional lace culture can be transmitted to the younger generation.



Participants of the Diploma in Lace Studies at UGC, with Consiglia Azzopardi, during their project session - summer 2011.

Urgent Need

Having concluded the history of Maltese lace during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it may be said that lace craft has lain buried in transition only beneath the surface but its roots are very much still alive. It means that if not left to decay they can be injected back to life. And this could be done through properly channelling its teaching into the 21st century.

Unlike teenage students, who have the tendency to shun from lace making in favour of sport and dancing, there is enough interest in grown-up students at university, especially those studying tourism and art. If this natural resource is properly utilised it would be of great benefit in favour of Maltese lace.

An effort to preserve the culture of Maltese lace would be the setting up of a place which exhibits a collection of traditional lace artefacts. Such a place will provide the young generation with a vision of the amount and quality of the work executed in this field during the past centuries. This will be

an incentive for the more artistic ones to use this inherited resource and apply it to their creative future.

It is worth investing money and precious human resources while there is still time, and not just sit back and watch this wonderful art die out and perish for ever.

References

- Levey, S.M. (1990). *Lace: a History*. UK: Maney Publishing.
- Palliser, B. (1984). *History of Lace*. New York: Dover Publications.

Consiglia Azzopardi is the Coordinator of the Lace Making Programme at the University Gozo Campus.