

The Art and Architecture of Twentieth Century Gozo

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Introduction

In the course of the twentieth century, the small island of Gozo experienced major developments, both in the artistic and architectural fields. Extensive church patronage during the first half of the century and the rapid economic and industrial growth shortly after World War II, rendered the small island an enclave where interesting artistic and architectural experimentation took place. In addition to the ecclesiastical authorities, the local community and later the private sector, were also instrumental in bringing artists and architects to the island in an attempt to enrich it with painting, sculpture and imposing building projects. This paper, which summarises my Masters degree dissertation (Farrugia, 2009) aims to evaluate the art and architecture of twentieth century Gozo, keeping in mind the aspirations and the limitations of the community living on the small island.

Gozo at the Threshold of the Twentieth Century

Gozo's socio-economic, artistic and historical context must be studied within a wider perspective, considering the fact that most of the developments in Gozo were first experienced in Malta. Nineteenth century Maltese painting modified itself continuously, trying to capture the important developments occurring mostly in Rome. The Neo-classical, Purist and Nazarene attitudes were applied at large, but not all works reached the desired level. Gozo is fortunate to host some of the fine examples of the period. Michele Busuttil (1762-1831) was a leading figure yet the works of his son Salvatore (1798-1854) sometimes surpassed those of his master¹ as evidenced in the fine canvas of *St Gregory interceding with the Virgin for the Plague-Stricken* (1854), at the parish church of Kerċem. Meanwhile Giuseppe Hyzler (1793-1858), a chief promoter and contributor of the Nazarene artistic sensibility on the Maltese Islands, produced the

altarpiece of *St Ignatius of Loyola with the Virgin* (1833), at the Jesuit Retreat-House of the Virgin of Manresa in Gozo, which marks a culminating point in Maltese nineteenth century art history (Buhagiar, 1990[b]: 111). Apart from offering an important stylistic experience, this artistic landmark helps to identify the type of informed artistic patronage patterns present in Gozo during the period.

At the ebb of the nineteenth century the artistic situation was characterised by limited and low quality works including the purist paintings of Tommaso Madiona (1804-1864) and Antonio Falzon (1805-1865). A virtuoso Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930) soon began to be looked at as the healer of this artistic stagnation, especially because he was largely responsible for the ousting of the waning Nazarene and Purist academism. His artistic contribution together with the efforts of his Maltese contemporary, Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) revived the ailing situation of art in Malta in the second half of the nineteenth century.

From an architectural point of view, nineteenth century Gozo had little to offer. The Church of Our Lady of Lourdes at Mgarr (1888) by Emaunele Luigi Galizia (1830-1907) which stylistically followed the building of the Addolorata Cemetery Church (1861-1869) on Malta, was a major breakthrough in Gozitan architecture at that time.

Twentieth Century Church Architecture: Patronage Patterns and Traditional Church Building in Gozo

The widespread architectural activity in Gozo in the first half of the twentieth century was characterized by an inspiring church building programme, mainly derived from a deep-cultured religiosity which was fostered on the island. Small churches situated in remote areas were no longer suitable for a growing Gozitan population. The increase in the number of parishioners was brought to the attention of the

¹ Michele Busuttil's most important work in Gozo is the titular painting of the Assumption of the Virgin (1971) at the Gozo Cathedral.

ecclesiastical authorities who were quick to initiate new church building projects, in spite of great financial difficulties and regular work stoppage,

The traditional cruciform church plan, flanked by lateral domed chapels, remained the most common model throughout the modern period. In the choice of building material, the use of the local stone against concrete, persisted. Some of the most impressive building projects of the period included the enlargement of the Nadur Parish Church and the Ta' Pinu Church, the building of Ghajnsielem Parish Church and later the massive Rotunda Church at Xewkija. Local patrons and benefactors aspired for large buildings in order to emulate foreign structures. Religious pique, which had developed into a rivalry between parishes, also motivated such a grandiose architecture.

The renovation which took place on the old parish church of Nadur is remarkable. It was the architect Francesco Saverio Sciortino (1875-1958) himself who called for the preservation of the existing church, in spite of his criticism of the older structure. The architect eventually implemented his own idea, by transforming the old church into a 'Modern Renaissance' architectural masterpiece. The works by Sciortino instilled a sense of grandeur which



Francesco Saverio Sciortino - SS Peter and Paul Church, Nadur.

reflected the aspirations of the parish priest and his fast growing community (Thake-Hughes, 2005: 153).. The people not only wanted a larger church but a building which surpassed the architectural unevenness of some of the established neo-baroque churches in Malta and Gozo. The new components merged well with the former structure even though the two architectural ingredients pertained to different periods and styles.

Andrea Vassallo (1856-1928) adopted a similar concept to the Ta' Pinu church, where the old chapel became the eastern extension of the new church. The church attracted numerous benefactors and the project soon turned into a national cause. Its popularity is greatly indebted to the mystical experience of two peasants, Francesco Portelli and Carmela Grima, who claimed to have had revelations from the Virgin in a small rural church known by the name of Ta' Pinu in 1883. The new church was expected to exude a sense of spirituality and mysticism. Andrea Vassallo produced detailed plans around April 1919² and he was later assisted by his architect son Edwin A. Vassallo (1891-1941) who in the case of the Ta' Pinu church signed the plans himself. Based on a Latin shaped cross, Ta' Pinu Church was erected in one of the most idyllic Gozitan rural settings. The architect produced a harmonious building renowned for its finish and fine detailing. The revivalist architectural style adopted by Andrea Vassallo, who was at the time Malta's leading architect, was a natural choice since the architect had already been meticulously applying the Romantic (style) in earlier building examples.

The Ta' Pinu church has a marked resemblance to the stereotyped Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Tripoli (Buhagiar, 1989: 1545), in which both edifices pointed towards northern Italian Neo Lombardo-Romanesque examples. Even more significant was the architect's ability to balance the delicate relationship between architecture and decoration (Buhagiar, 1990: 43). The interior decorative programme was the work of the Gozitan artist Wistin Camilleri (1885-1975).

² All plans which were signed by the architect's son Edwin A. Vassallo were eventually published as a memento to the church's benefactors. Meanwhile, despite the fact that Edwin A. Vassallo is known to have been his father's assistant in his old age, he could not have taken supervision of works at Ta' Pinu Church after his father's death in 1928, since he was at the time a Government Minister. Personal meeting with Victor Vella-Muscat 21st January, 2008. Certainly he took over his father's practice on his death designing among others the parish church of Birzebbuga. Verbal communication with Prof. M. Buhagiar, 16th July, 2009.

In 1921 works soon started on another massive church building in Ġhajnsielem. Prior to the 1950's the Ġhajnsielem parishioners had a relatively small church (Zerafa, 1989: 40). The new church plan was entrusted to Gozitan born architect Ugo Mallia (1887-1964). Efforts were made by the present author to unearth further light on the architect's life and architectural career, yet there were no crucial discoveries, possibly because of the architect's introvert personality.³

Mallia submitted a design for a Neo-Gothic church. The parish record book at Ġhajnsielem "Liber Cronologico" states that the new church should be an exact copy to that in Loreto (*Liber Cronologico*, G.H.P.A: 14). Yet when looked at closely, the Gothic style of the Ġhajnsielem church and that of the church of Loreto do not really correspond. Although mention was not made to the small Lourdes church at Mġarr, the latter was without doubt a clear reference to Mallia's project. The architect was the first among Maltese architects to make use of indigenous Maltese late medieval architectural idiosyncrasies in his buildings (Buhagiar, 1990 [a]: 44). It is disappointing to note that such characteristics employed by the architect at St Agatha Mother house in Rabat, Malta, are evidently missing at Ġhajnsielem. Based on a Latin cross, the Ġhajnsielem church has a buttressed main nave, while the exterior is characteristically pronounced with elongated forms giving a great sense of verticality to the church. The dramatic impression marked by the sheer scale of the interior is impressive and markedly different from the baroque interiors of other churches in Malta.

Not the same destiny was reserved for the old parish church of Xewkija. The local community was demanding the dismantling of the old church, which was of considerable artistic and architectural interest, after several attempts were made to enlarge it. Work on the new church started in November 1951 on plans drawn up by architect Ġużè Damato (1886-1963) who was at the time the most sought after architect for church building. Before Damato, Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) had submitted the first designs for the church in 1949 (Azzopardi, 2006: 96). For unknown reasons the plans drawn



Vincenzo Bonello, St John the Baptist Church, sketch front elevation, Xewkija.

up by Bonello, which in comparison to Damato's work should have been by far more interesting and original, were not chosen.

The church was designed to appeal to popular taste. In a letter sent by archpriest Dun Ġużèpp Grech to his community, it was stated that the new church would be constructed with a rotunda design on a modified Baroque style according to the desires of the parishioners. It was thus evident that architect Damato had no other option but to commit himself to an already chosen design. Structure and size was perhaps the only great challenge, otherwise the Rotunda church adopted the same principles of Baldassare Longhena's (1598-1682) church of S. Maria della Salute in Venice.

Stylistic Considerations and Twentieth Century Art in the Churches of Gozo

During the twentieth century the Maltese scenario remained largely dominated by the local church. Gozitan ecclesiastics maintained a high profile

³ Apart from the new Ġhajnsielem parish church, Mallia also worked on the Sannat parish church cupola and the rebuilding of the Qala parish church western façade.



Lazzaro Pisani, *The Fall of Simon the Wizard*, Nadur Parish Church.

and their leading roles often resulted in a number of artistic commissions. Painters, sculptors and decorators were sought after and brought over from Malta and Italy to accomplish a number of tasks requested by ecclesiastics and patrons. The amount of work was outstanding and the fact that more than thirteen churches were decorated in a relatively short period of time, demonstrates the great aspiring attitude of local patrons, architects and artists.

Giuseppe Cali was the first to use a particular artistic language, yet at the same time respecting the desires of local church patrons. Indeed Cali brought a certain transformation and despite the fact that his works in Gozo lacked his early artistic impulsivity, they still left a deep impact. The powerful figure of St Andrew (1882), beautifully done in contrapposto, at the old parish church of Ghajnsielem, and the large apse painting of the Nativity of the Virgin at Xaghra parish church are some of the better works by Cali in Gozo.

Meanwhile, Lazzaro Pisani whose works reflect his classical training, was a valid competitor to Cali. Pisani strived to establish his own artistic identity even though his efforts were often overshadowed by the superior quality of Cali's work (Fiorentino, 1988: 265). Pisani's artistic debut in Gozo was quite successful. His entire ceiling decoration of the Nadur parish church is in fact recognized as his masterpiece. The different stages of St Peter and St Paul's lives are expressed in contrasting poses, complex compositions and skilful chromatic approach.

Despite having been trained by Giuseppe Cali, artists of the next generation who worked in Gozo, including Giuseppe Cali's son Ramiro Cali (1881-1945), Robert Caruana Dingli (1882-1940) and Gianni Vella (1885-1977) produced low quality works and of lesser merit (Buhagiar, 1990 [b]: 117-118). Robert Caruana Dingli was highly



Giuseppe Briffa, *The Baptism of St Augustine*, Augustinian Priory Church, Rabat.

sought after in Gozo and he could have filled the vacuum resulting from Cali's eventual retirement. Unfortunately however in a number of instances, Caruana Dingli's works for Gozo failed miserably. However, Caruana Dingli and Vella made the first serious attempts at introducing modern aesthetics in sacred art. It was a time when Art Nouveau and Impressionism were gaining significant esteem.

Cali's realism and the emphasis on flatness and simplicity, replaced the hefty works which characterised nineteenth century painting. Giuseppe Briffa's (1901-1988) paintings went even further in this regard. Already in 1934 the artist established links with Gozo when he painted two important paintings which represented *The Baptism of St Augustine* and *St Augustine Giving the Rules to His Order*, for the Augustinian priory church in Rabat. Stylistically Briffa adopted simple forms while greater significance was given to brilliant colours. His uncomplicated and straight-forward work successfully merged the conflicting demands of members of the clergy. Briffa's works for Gozo are impressive both in their colourful execution and composition.

Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) had in the meantime built a reputation as a leading artist in the field of ecclesiastical art. The artist in fact showed an unparalleled artistic vigour and although sacred art was not his preferred genre, he managed to transmit his modernistic approach even in his religious paintings. His oeuvre embraces a number of works in Gozo, especially his brilliant canvases for the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary. Cremona's ecclesiastical work shows great affinity with the work of Anton Inglott, whose artistic development could have seriously challenged the Baroque tradition had he not died so young in 1945 (Cutajar, 1991: 74). Briffa and Cremona's rich contribution marked the first stirrings of modern art in Gozo, and they paved the way for subsequent developments in ecclesiastical art.

In spite of the great social changes brought about by World War II, patronage in Gozo during the second half of the twentieth century was still connected to the church. Hints of progress mostly within the secular sphere took place by emergent Maltese artists on mainland Malta. The artistic situation in Gozo of the 1960's was altogether different. Paul Camilleri



Emvin Cremona, *Annunciation*, Ta' Pinu Church, Għarb.

Cauchi (b.1940) had built a strong reputation and his works were to be found in practically every church in Gozo, while he enjoyed the full backing and the admiration of most ecclesiastics. Within an artistic historical context, his religious works fall into a melancholic nostalgia. What is interesting however is that his artistic idiosyncrasies corresponded to the common tastes of the local patrons and this explained his great popularity.

Meanwhile Austin Camilleri (b.1972), nephew of Paul Camilleri Cauchi, challenged what may be called the "artistic institutionalization" within ecclesiastical circles. His earliest modern stirrings had already been perceived in the *Via Crucis* (late 1990s) series which he produced for the Gozo Cathedral. His works are strikingly original and they do not betray any formal language. Camilleri's transformation of religious art into modern sacred imagery resulted in the impressive dome of the Santa Luċija church in Kerċem. Certainly the artist



Silvio Galimberti, *Death of St Joseph*, Fontana Parish Church.

wanted to break away from established schematic models.⁴

Italian Artists

During the twentieth century, Gozo also witnessed the work of Italian artists. As early as 1906, a set of two paintings by Attilio Palombi (1860-1913), representing St Peter and St Paul were inaugurated at the Collegiate Basilica of St George, Rabat. The set may not be the first, but from this date onwards a group of Italian artists were busy decorating prominent spaces in local churches. The presence

of Virginio Monti (1852-1942), Palombi and Gian Battista Conti (1878-1971) in Gozo, failed to enthuse, but their shared efforts had particular characteristics. Their chromatic schemes reveal a Purist attitude while their obvious stylization signifies an important break with old-fashioned styles which were highly popular during the period.

Sporadic instances have also shown an unparalleled stylistic formation such as Domenico Bruschi's (1840-1910) large ceiling canvas, *Allegory of the Church* (1880), for the main sacristy at the Gozo Cathedral. The painting posed some difficulties and it is not the best work by Bruschi, but it still remains an interesting work (Buhagiar, 2004: 108). His art has shown great interests in Liberty and Pre-Raphaelite styles and the mentioned painting also exhibits such stylistic characteristics.

Of interest is Silvio Galimberti's (b.1878-?) *Death of St Joseph* (1906), for the parish church of Fontana. The painting is his only work for Gozo and it is the most interesting sacred canvas within the context of twentieth century foreign art on the island.⁵ Galimberti's work shows an important understanding of contemporary stylistic developments and for that reason the work failed to please the local people. The several attempts which were made to replace it unfortunately reveal the vernacular tastes of the local community. The Italian artistic presence practically disappeared during the World War II. Mario Caffaro Rore (1910-2001) was probably the only Italian artist who kept a connection with the church and private entities in Gozo during the last decades of the twentieth century. The present author was indeed fortunate to have arrived at Ta' Pinu Church just minutes after the actual discovery of Mario Caffaro Rore's two large cartoon paintings, *The Visitation* and *The Nativity*, commissioned for the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary and which were later translated into mosaics.⁶

⁴ Notwithstanding the importance of this work, there should have been a better handling and more respect by all stakeholders in treating already existing work by artists before taking further initiatives. For the sake of documentation it is important to note that, the dome of St Lucy Church had been earlier decorated with guilt stucco by Joseph Sagona (2005: 50-51) in 1992. Unfortunately, the new painting scheme by Camilleri did not follow Sagona's plans and thus the previous decorative scheme was scraped and lost forever.

⁵ Silvio Galimberti presumably produced only two paintings for Maltese patrons. Besides the Fontana altarpiece, Galimberti produced a painting representing the *Sacred Heart* (1948) for the parish church of St Andrew, Hal Luqa. The painting is signed S. Galimberti at the lower right hand side. As Christian Attard (1999: 76-77) suggests, the Fontana painting must be a copy of another work by the artist himself in the chapel of Belgium at the Roman church of San Gioacchino in Prati, executed in 1903. The Gozitan altarpiece was paid for by the Gozitan Judge Giuseppe Cremona.

⁶ The discovery of the cartoons was made in June 2008, in the sacristy of the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary.

Sculpture

The sculptural scenario during the same period did not experience radical shifts. Contrary to what happened in painting, sculpture and decoration was, generally speaking, the work of Maltese and Gozitan artists. The occasional work of Italian sculptors and decorators did not leave significant impact. Yet sculptor and decorator Carlo Pisi (1897-1979) inspired a number of local church patrons and his works are found in prominent church places. His artistic oeuvre draws on the classical aesthetic. Other Italian figures, such as Pio Cellini (1863-1930), left an important contribution as far as the decorative arts are concerned.⁷

The great works of Antonio Sciortino (1879-1947) had already eliminated the excessive Baroque nuance by opting for less theatrical poses and applying a rather classical stylization. His artistic distinctiveness was embraced by his fellow students such as George Borg (1906-1983) and Vincent Apap (1909-2003). Yet within the Gozitan ecclesiastical context, the move towards a modernistic establishment was not yet possible. Wistin Camilleri was perhaps the leader in the religious sculptural field in Gozo and his works were very popular. His most significant work is the large decorative programme at Ta' Pinu Sanctuary (1936-1941) which achieves a harmonious relationship with the architectural idiosyncrasies of Andrea Vassallo's architecture.⁸ Among other works, Wistin's artistic career is largely represented by the production of village feast statuary. The legacy of Wistin Camilleri was kept strong by members of his family whose services were sought after by many patrons during the last three decades of the twentieth century. During this period, the church in Gozo started losing some of the earlier patronage establishments but the remaining work was mostly entrusted to Alfred Camilleri Cauchi (b.1943), brother of Paul Camilleri Cauchi and son of Wistin Camilleri. Alfred Camilleri Cauchi was the person who managed to satisfy the



Mario Caffaro Rore, *The Nativity*, Ta' Pinu Church, Gharb.

artistic tastes of the locals. Very much akin to his brother in painting, the artist's sculptural oeuvre, which is mostly religious, reflects his preference for the traditional and anachronistic styles. His compositions are often inflated by exaggerated poses and dramatic movements, highly reminiscent of Baroque models.

The occurrence of modern painting and sculpture in Gozitan churches appeared during the last decade of the twentieth century. Mention was already made to Austin Camilleri. The sculptures of Gozitan artist John Grima (b.1967) have presented an interesting modernistic ethos and this is especially recorded in his beautiful rendering of the bronze doors for St George Basilica in Victoria. The years which followed saw interesting developments in artistic styles; yet artists who were engaged in the ecclesiastical circles never reached full stylistic liberty in their sacred productions.

⁷ Pio Cellini was the foremost foreign decorator in Gozo and he designed and worked the stucco decoration at the Collegiate Basilica of Nadur and the silver pedestal for the titular statue of the Bambina at Xaghra, among other work. For a comprehensive study about the ecclesiastical decorative arts in the Maltese Islands see Sagona 1999 and Sagona 2003.

⁸ The author succeeded in documenting important volumes of bozzetti and too scale drawings of this decorative programme. Interesting is the fact that besides Wistin's bozzetti a number of other designs which are signed G.B exist. It is probable that Wistin Camilleri was aware of these designs and possibly also made use of them. Camilleri's designs share similar characteristics with those signed G.B. So far, no documentary evidence has been found confirming the identity of the artist who only signed his initials. One is tempted to attribute these designs to George Borg who was also working for the Ta' Pinu church during the same period.

Non-Ecclesiastical Architecture during the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

The birth of the Modern Movement in architecture was a logical step forward in the shaping up of a defined knowledge of what had been progressively taking place during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

Form and function became imperative in the development of modern rational architecture. Unlike the early modern idealistic architecture of the avant-garde works by Walter Adolph Gropius (1883-1969), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and Le Corbusier's (1887-1965) early purist works, the earliest of modern architectural work in Malta was more likely influenced by the romanticised and to a certain extent anachronistic movement of *Art Nouveau* (1893-1914) which was crystallized in Malta by the sophisticated eclectic works of Andrea Vassallo, Giuseppe Psaila (1891-1960) and Gustavo R. Vincenti (1888-1974) (Thake, 2009: 16).

Gozo of the 1920's was still relatively a rural settlement and traces of such influences are hard to find. The situation changed completely after World War II and Gozo soon turned into an island of architectural experimentation. An intense building programme especially in the educational sector was started, and so was the beginning of the modern movement on the island. A major reorganization in the Maltese educational laws took place in 1946 and Ordinance No. II [1946]: *for making the Primary Education of Children Compulsory upon their Parents and Guardians* [which followed the British Education Act of 1944]; led to drastic changes in the setting up of educational programmes and in terms



Joseph Huntingford, *Qala Primary School*, Qala.

of infrastructure (*Government Gazette*, 1/02/1946: Ordinance No. II).

At this point it is imperative to mention two chief contributors of post-war modernism in Britain, whose architectural influences reached Maltese soil. British architects Alison (1928-1993) and Peter Smithson (1923-2003) famously applied the post-purist Corbusian discourse in their so-called New Brutalist architecture. Their schools, houses and workplace projects captured the essence of their progressive architectural style, which sought to exploit the mass-produced materials and recalled the aesthetic purity of their masters. Hunstanton School in Norfolk (1954) was one such brilliant example which clearly explained their architectural manifesto.

Maltese architect Joseph Huntingford's (1926-1994) yearnings to establish a new identity coincided with or reflected the international artistic style which was at that time undergoing a major transformation. The work of the Smithson couple was a definite influence on Huntingford's modern schools in Gozo. The surge towards a contemporary modernist approach had been already propagated in post-war works by Joseph Borg Grech (b.1929), Joseph Spiteri (b.1934) and Renato La Ferla (b.1926). Their contribution was the first real breakthrough in architectural style in Malta.

Being assigned the post of architect in the Department of Public Works in Gozo between 1951 and 1961, Huntingford was given full architectural liberty. Some of his best examples today were unscrupulously tempered with or even destroyed. The Qala Primary School (1960) is the crowning example of Huntingford's architectural adventure and the project was considered a monument of International Style in Malta.⁹ The building was in fact unique in that, for once, on the Maltese Islands there was a real contemporary structure in line with the architectural advancements happening

⁹ It is recorded that the new Qala school was pompously inaugurated so much so that HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh who was on a state visit in Malta was invited for the occasion which happened on the 27th of April, 1960 (Buttigieg, 1980: 14-18).

Julio Lafuente, *Ta' Ċenċ Cliff Hanging Hotel*,
(Photo Courtesy of Julio Lafuente)



in Europe. Other school examples such as those of Ġhajnsielem, Ġharb and San Lawrenz clearly show Huntingford's modern architectural characteristics. The departure of Joseph Huntingford from Gozo's architectural scene meant that the island faced an architectural deficit.

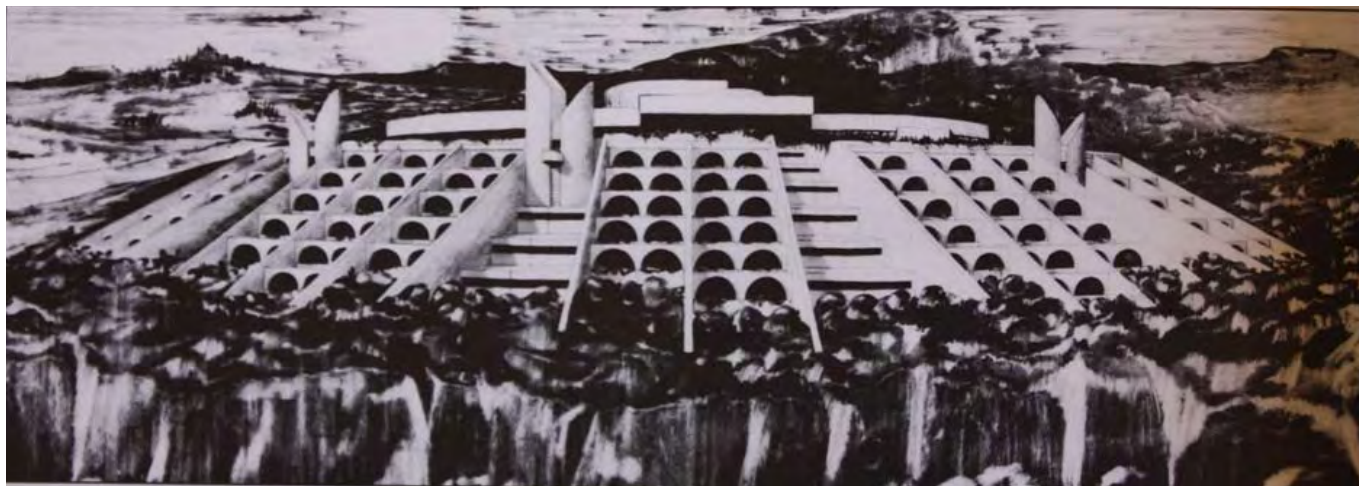
Meanwhile in 1967 Spanish architect in Rome, Julio Lafuente (b.1937) made a daring proposal for a hotel at Ta' Ċenċ, which was not actually built. Architecture during the period started to respond to an unprecedented increase in the tourism sector. The massive cliff-hanging hotel which would have included a series of man-made rock cuts, similar to marble cutting, in the stratum of Ta' Ċenċ cliffs, remained on the drawing-board. From a frontal view, the fourteen story building designed with such modern materials as concrete, iron and glass, seems literally appended to the cliff. Lafuente was inspired by the local traditional fishing industry, particularly by the fishing net known as 'nassa'. Although the building could have been an architectural attraction on its own, the nature of the project was not realistically feasible and its accomplishment could

have implied irreparable damages to this sensitive ecological site (Thake-Hughes, 2005: 191).

The European architectural situation of the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by the insurgence of two opposing movements: post-modernism and historicism. The concept of regionalism, involving the return to regional identities and closer to vernacular realities, was the latest preoccupation of European architecture. The competent use of modern sensibility blended with traditional Maltese typologies, crystallised in the work of Richard England (b.1937) who established himself as Malta's leading architect.¹⁰ Despite the fact that his contribution in Gozo remained mostly on paper, his influence still left an indelible mark. Villa Calypso (1966) at Ta' Ċenċ is presumably his earliest contribution in Gozo, yet the project remained a concept design since it never materialized. Richard England's choice fell on the organic and produced a building heavily inspired by the Maltese vernacular theme. Such architectural characteristics featured in design projects such as Hotel on Island of Gozo¹¹ (1980) and later in 1993 the proposed Hotel

¹⁰ Richard England's architectural manifesto can be summarized in the words of Charles Knevitt (1984: 33): "In spite of its kaleidoscopic past and role as island fortress for centuries, Malta has a uniqueness which the architect wishes firstly to preserve but then to reinforce by reinterpreting the past through the medium of relevant contemporary Regionalism".

¹¹ [sic] The title should possibly read *Hotel on the Island of Gozo*.



Richard England, *Hotel on Island of Gozo*.

Xlendi. The latter clearly unveils the architectural philosophy of ‘continuity within change.’

The vernacular aspect was widely practised later by architects Ray Demicoli (b.1952) and Edward Bencini in their prominent buildings of San Lawrenz Hotel (1992-1995) and L-Imgarr Hotel (late 1980’s-1992) respectively. Established within the same decade, the two large five-star hotel buildings share common stylistic influences and they group, under one complete establishment, various architectural traditions which were used in typical Maltese house settlements. Unfortunately such interesting examples have been tempered with or even pulled down to make space for new building projects.

The last two decades of the twentieth century were also marked by an increasing cultural gap between the general public and the Maltese architects. With the sudden increase in private dwellings and the influx of returned migrants in the 1980s, Gozitan architecture was riddled by inconsistencies and mere copying. To satisfy the whims of the general public, architects themselves, resorted to a hotchpotch of styles which, however, generated a resurgence of stone decoration (Felice, 1990: 22).

The lack of artistic sensibility cannot be simply labelled as eclectic or post-modernist since none of the buildings really show a coherent application of styles within an inherent environment. The Classical and the Baroque influences regained momentum bringing to a halt a possible modern aesthetic that never really started in private residences in Gozo.

After the 1990s the need to preserve and re-adapt historic public and private buildings, architects

made considerable interventions yet kept the original buildings untouched by producing and inserting a modern structure within the fabric of the old buildings. Such an architectural movement of various stylistic nourishments has also prevailed on the island of Gozo. The Kenuna Tower at Nadur is one such fine example.

Modern and Contemporary Art in Gozo

The majority of the people in Gozo widely manifested their artistic opinions and from patronage patterns of the early twentieth century one can easily conclude that the representation of the sacred in art was held in high esteem and that it was the apex of artistic achievement. The situation however started to change gradually when it became evident that the aspirations of some Gozitan artists working in the second half of the twentieth century started to differ and move forward to a new artistic sensibility, which by this time had already reached its peak in major European cities.

The first real breakthrough to the introduction of a modern aesthetic in Malta was made by a group of local artists among whom Frank Portelli (1922-2004), Emvin Cremona, Esprit Barthet (1919-1999), Antoine Camilleri and later Gabriel Caruana (b.1929) and Toni Pace (1930-1989). These artists assimilated their ideas and modern concepts with the foundation of the so called Modern Art Circle (1952). They succeeded in weathering the negative reaction of the traditionalists. Malta’s Independence geared up an important artistic activity with most artists freeing themselves of the severe institutionalization which had been established by the Church.

The situation in Gozo was slightly different since the transformation to a non-religious based aesthetic took more time to establish. The works of Joseph Calleja (b.1924), [who left for Canada in 1958 - a great loss for Gozo]; Victor Spiteri (b.1945), Joe Xuereb (b.1954) and later Austin Camilleri and John Grima, came as a big surprise considering that they all originated from Gozo and all genuinely felt an inspiring drive for the modern aesthetic.

It is very difficult to speak of a Gozitan artistic identity at this stage, since attracted by the beautiful character of the island, a handful of Maltese and foreign artists decided to set up their homes and studios on Gozo, thus contributing to the island's cultural and artistic activity. Evelyn Gibbs (1905-1991), Julian Trevelyan (1910-1988), Mary Fedden (b.1915), Barbara Huxley (b.1931) Bridget McCrum (b.1934) and later Maltese artists Pawl Carbonaro (b.1948) and Norbert Attard (b.1951) are a case in point.¹²

Returning to the works of Gozitan artists, Joseph Calleja's whimsical artistic exuberance found inspiration in the Surrealist works of Juan Miró (1893-1983) and others, an aspect which brought him fame to the extent that he enjoys great respect in Canada. As an artist, he showed great talent

especially with his energetic productions of Kinetic art; an inspiring idiom which found no grounds in the Maltese islands. In the 1970s, Calleja expressed his uniqueness as an artist when he had relentlessly transformed already established movements, such as Alexander Calder's (1898-1976) mobiles and Jean Tinguely's (1925-1991) machine works, in a new personal way which culminated in the artistic exuberance of his Kinetic art.

Sharing similar artistic impulsivity, Victor Spiteri is very much a solitary person who has been diligently working in his Għarb and Valletta studios. In practice, Spiteri is a painter and a sculptor, yet he has consistently proved to be an excellent ceramist. No particular movement can be traced in his creations as the artist believes that his work was a natural development reflecting different stages of his artistic career. On seeing Victor Spiteri's work one is captured by a deep feeling of contrasting moods which diversify his artistic language which mostly points to an innate turbulent experience. His abstract paintings are a soul journey through the local townscapes and landscapes and they claim to be calm yet agitated with a great sense of colour and movement. His ceramic works and his sculptures made of found objects are even more compelling and deserve special recognition within



Joseph Calleja, *Spring Reverly*, P.C.C (Photo published in *Toronto Star*, June 1991, featuring art dealer Walter

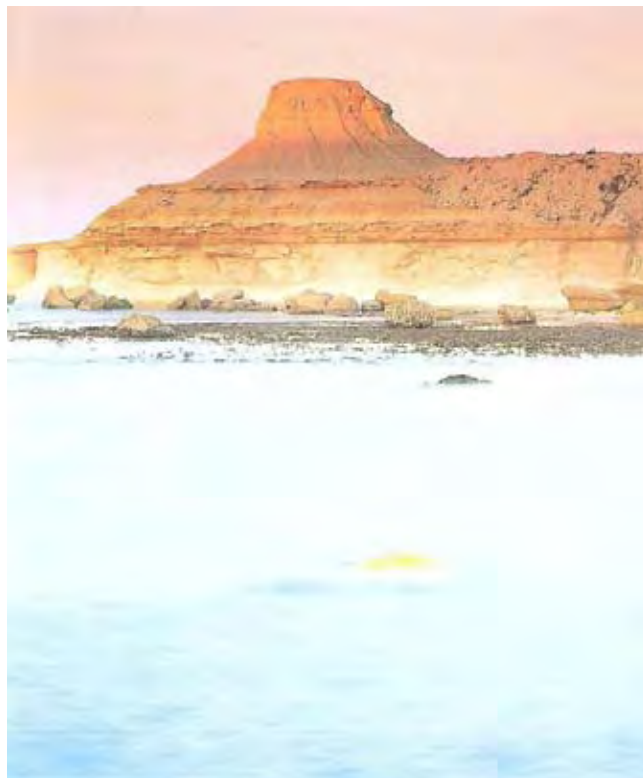
¹² In an interview with Richard England (3rd August, 2006), the architect mentions the importance of these foreign artists who brought a regeneration in the artistic spheres of Gozo. Prior to their arrival the island had a shortage of artists and they soon filled this important vacuum. Short biographies of some of the above foreign artists feature in De Piro, 2002.

the development stages of late twentieth century modern art works.

Meanwhile Joe Xuereb's artistic journey was at first humble and unassuming, possibly because his early mission was much more confined to an artisan approach rather than a real artistic life. Caught by the immediate beauty and voluptuous forms of the fertility goddess, the artist sought to make connections with his modern works and the earliest artistic forms of our ancestors. Embracing figures in an act of deep sensual and divine love; maternal love and affection; familial harmony and a series of introspective figures, make up some of his diverse compositions. Yet Joe Xuereb's uniqueness lies in his modern interpretation of Gozo's artistic myths and his perfectionist use of the local limestone, although sometimes it suggests a repetitive mood.

The aspect of authenticity is consumed with a high note in the works of Gozitan artists John Grima and Austin Camilleri. John Grima has wisely rediscovered Emvin Cremona and Frank Portelli's modern works, applying their stylistic peculiarities to his works - without letting himself into plagiarism - until he was finally carried away by his visibly personal modern artistic interpretation. His artistic impulsivity is later recorded in his translucent modern landscape and abstract works, which are considered an important breakthrough into the development of modern art in Gozo during the period. The very thin distinction among painting, sculpture and architecture becomes invisible as the artist merges the principles of these fundamental artistic practices into one coherent style. This is also attested by a number of sculptural monuments produced by the artist locally.

Austin Camilleri, the youngest of this generation of a family of Gozitan artists, has also been instrumental in the development of modern and contemporary art in Gozo at the end of the twentieth century. His art is constantly on the move, searching for new horizons in an art world which is significantly changing and proposing new idioms. Austin is a non-conformist who has been challenging the Gozitan society with his progressive unorthodox works since the early 1990s. The artist even rejected his earlier artistic



Austin Camilleri, *Stones*, City Gate, Valletta; Dingli Cliffs; Delimara; Xwejni, Gozo.

establishment and turned his art into complete abstraction. From 1993 -the year in which he introduced his abstracts in Gozo- onwards, Austin embarked on new projects which saw his artistic work wonder in uncompromising and unlimited directions.

Austin Camilleri was one of the first Maltese artists to pick the ephemeral language of Installation art, together with Raphael Vella (b.1967), Ray Pitre (b.1940), Norbert Attard and later Vince Briffa (b.1958) and Pierre Portelli (b.1961).¹³ Eventually in 1998 Camilleri put up the first solo installation exhibition SacredAustin which was held in the church of St James, Rabat, Gozo. The intention was provocative and yet it showed the artist's real artistic thoughts as he challenged the conservative socio-religious and cultural climate of Gozo. This exhibition was followed by another controversial open air exhibition *Stones* in 1999, which the artist set up around Malta and Gozo. His works have wielded a better understanding of the contemporary aesthetic, locally, so that even Gozo today enjoys the significant achievements of conceptual art.

¹³ In 1997 the *Robert Sammut Hall* welcomed an important exhibition called *Mediterrania* where artists such as Austin Camilleri, Raphael Vella, Ray Pitre and Norbert Attard exhibited the first series of installation art in Malta. Personal communication with the artist, 6th July, 2006.

Conclusion

This paper has described the major changes in artistic endeavours on the island of Gozo. It was shown that Gozitan art, particularly sacred art, was mostly conservative. However it still remains interesting and worthy of study, if for nothing else, because it reflects the cultural traits of the island. It was shown that in spite of such conservatism, a number of high quality works were produced.

This study gives a foretaste of a wider Gozitan reality in art and architecture which started in earnest during the last decades of the twentieth century, resulting in very interesting contemporary work. This indicates that Gozo is no longer isolated from the cultured and artistic developments occurring on Malta.

Although one cannot speak of a proper Gozitan identity, the diverse aspects of art and architecture which this study has described points to an emerging distinctiveness that can be admired in the works of Gozitan artists.

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