

## THE DISCOVERY OF MALTA: NATURE, CULTURE AND ETHNICITY IN 19TH CENTURY PAINTING (REVIEW ARTICLE)

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The publication of 'The International Dictionary of Artists who painted Malta' by Nicholas de Piro (Malta, 1988) deserves our warmest welcome. Here for the first time in a lavish presentation are grouped a large number of paintings produced by the most varied artists and dilettanti (both Maltese and foreign) depicting Malta over a considerable time period, but mainly from the 19th century. This is the type of coffee-table book likely to grace the salons of the most varied of people ranging from the declining aristocracy to the most arriviste bourgeois. That it can have such a catholic appeal must be attributed to two factors: many are interested in their own historical culture, indeed there is much here to reinforce the wildest secret fantasies of many Maltese about the nature of their island and their society, although it is certainly not a visual equivalent of a Brantôme. Second, this publication is a tangible manifestation of a culture which is presented as fundamentally European yet quaintly exotic, a preview if you like, of themes which reemerge in contemporary tourist literature.

Yet the publication is remarkable for another reason. It offers rich possibilities for research, specifically in the way Malta and its society have been presented across time by both foreign and local artists. It enables us to examine the main themes identified by artists (and authors) as representing that distinctive 'sense of place', and it enables us, too, to conduct an excavation of ideologies, of dominant images of the island and its people. Indeed we need to examine how a certain image of Malta was *discovered* and *created* across time, and I want to compare that image to another Mediterranean society, Greece. In both societies European (especially N. European) perceptions of what constituted the essence of 'Greekness' or 'Malteseness' was decisively influenced by certain dominant concerns in N. Europe such as neo-Classicism, Romanticism, and Orientalism often within a framework of colonialism. What these N. European visitors 'discovered' in these two societies, and in effect what they created, went on to shape and influence how the local intelligentsia and elite viewed their own culture.

### Painting and Identity

Any perusal of this book, or indeed of any book of paintings by foreign artists on Italy and even more so on Greece and that flexible category the 'Orient', will readily indicate that paintings are rarely 'photographic representations' of how life 'really was'. Paintings are constructed according to the dominant concerns of the age and in this respect one could perhaps suggest that the sub-title of the book could be 'The changing construction of identity in Malta'.

I use the word 'identity' with a purpose. Painting fixes things, it constructs an image of the world produced by a determinate artist for a determinate public. In the post-

Renaissance world, and *a fortiori* in the 19th and 20th centuries painters produce commodities in a ready-made form (in contrast to the Renaissance, cf. Baxandall 1988) to be bought and sold on the market. It is precisely this commodity-market nexus which implies a *transaction of identity*. The artist produces an image of the world (whatever that may be) and the public is required to 'identify' with it, i.e. to relate that image to their experience.

The artist and the public are thus engaged in a transaction of images—the painter supplying a physical image which requires some degree of identification *with*, and *by*, the public. I do not want to dwell long on this huge topic, but it seems clear that in a most basic sense this encapsulates part of the complex relationship between the artist and the public. Clearly, there are many examples of artists whose visions were not identified with by the public, and others who enjoyed huge popularity in their lifetimes, but whose works are now considered minor. Perhaps the most emblematic of the former is Van Gogh who never sold a picture in his life and whose work now fetches the highest price for any painter.

Reproductions of Van Gogh's pictures, especially that ubiquitous work, the 'Sunflowers', now hang in countless homes from Alaska to the Antipodes. The irony is that Van Gogh's work is now identified by a huge mass public (many of whom rarely visit museums) as the most *personal* and *intimate* of modern, and indeed all, art. In the process Van Gogh himself has become semi-mythicized; like his paintings he is known by his first name, which is how he signed his work.

The most economically unsuccessful of painters, the one who never in effect produced a *commodity*, has become the most precious, costly and ultimate status symbol. The apotheosis of Van Gogh as the ultimate symbol of commoditization (who can hope to own a Van Gogh?), is ultimately a parable of the modern stock-exchange. His paintings are like penny shares which nobody wanted, but which have risen in value to astronomical proportions. Even the notion of 'value' (i.e. of calculability) is subverted and collapses the distinction that appears to exist between two polar extremes. His works have moved from the 'price-less' category (i.e. no price because nobody bought them) to the 'priceless' category (because a price, once paid for his work is immediately rendered obsolete—as is often joked: 'if you have to ask the price you cannot afford it'). Paradoxically his paintings have now assumed their original status as objects: previously nobody owned the originals because nobody wanted them; nowadays nobody can hope to own an original permanently because everybody aspires to own them in spite of their numerous reproductions. The myth of Van Gogh, man and work, where one immediately recalls the other, has become one of the most powerful parables of the 20th century—that of the Stock Exchange: price always keeps ahead of desire and unlimited desires means unlimited prices. Desire, as Simmel suggested, not production; as Marx said, is the fuel of the economy.

The interesting thing is that were some of the most famous works of Van Gogh like the 'Sunflowers' (sold recently for £24 million) or 'Irises' (sold for £30 million), destroyed, the world would not necessarily be 'poorer'. The image is after all indelibly etched on the collective consciousness of millions of people and is readily available in every poster or postcard shop. Few ever see the original work and its loss would be analgous to the abandonment of the Gold Standard in 1919. The painting has become a *symbol of itself*, and is stored in the vaults of a Japanese *insurance* company—a clear proof and a telling reminder not only of the token value of money (and hence its inherent 'worthlessness'), but also that an insurance company which *pays out* money to claimants should choose to store part of its wealth in the ultimate symbol of desire and hence of pricelessness, i.e. of calculability.

Something similar cannot perhaps be said for the paintings depicted in the 'International Dictionary of artists who painted Malta'. Their destruction or loss would clearly be a great catastrophe. But let us, for the sake of argument, pose this question; were such a 'cultural revolution' to take place, would that alter the way artists would subsequently 'see' the island, and by extension, the wider public? I think not; indeed it is highly likely that many artists, and the public, would continue to view the island, its environment, its people, and its image of the past, in ways not radically different to those contained in this book. This is because such paintings contain a certain way of experiencing and talking about the island and its people and it is to this that I now turn.

### Visions of Malta and Greece

Malta, like Greece, enters the modern world in the late 18th, early 19th centuries. In 1798 Napoleon takes Malta; in 1814 the island becomes a British Crown Colony. In 1821 the Greeks revolt against the Turks, the Great Powers (France, England) are drawn into the struggle by the sentiment of public opinion, and a separate kingdom is established under the 18 year old Bavarian Otto in 1833. The revolt of the Greeks set European public opinion aflame; the Greeks came to represent the flag of liberty and democracy against Oriental despotism, and the descendents of the Ancient Hellenes who had given the light of Democracy to the West. Shelley had proclaimed 'we are all Greeks . . . our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece'. Consequently the light of Democracy had to be returned to its birthplace, and the struggle assumed the nuances of a new Crusade in European Philhellene eyes. In his *Note sur la Grece* (1825) Chateaubriand wrote: 'Will our century watch hordes of savages extinguish civilization at its rebirth on the tomb of a people who civilized the world? Will Christendom calmly allow Turks to strangle Christians? And will the Legitimate Monarchs of Europe shamelessly permit their sacred name to be given a tyranny which could have reddened the Tiber?'

The emergence of Philhellenism had a number of implications which are relevant for this paper. First, European interest in Greece was stimulated by the emergence of neo-classicism and the lure of antiquity. As Tsigakou points out 'what European artists and their clients really wanted . . . were images that revealed the scenery of the imagined classical Greek world, a world that was mythologized according to their expectations. Once again it was the formalized, literary past, not the present, that was the attraction of Greece' (1981: 28–29). Yet the attraction of Greece underwent a number of subtle transformations across time. Initially this was manifested in a concern with landscape, usually rendered in a Claude mode, and with classical ruins. Later, Byron's death stimulated a genre of heroic romanticism such as in the works of Delacroix. Greek warriors now fought Turks in classical ruins, defending them with a heroism worthy of their ancestors such as Leonidas; although as Tsigakou points out European artists appear to have been moved more by the tragedies of the revolution than by its accomplishments. Finally, after the establishment of the Greek Kingdom, artists increasingly concerned themselves with pastoral scenes, with ordinary 'country' folk and their costumes. Greece was on the route to the Orient, indeed it was part-Oriental; the people were 'oriental', the architecture 'Western'. By the 1850's Europeans had shifted their interest from classical myth and legend to the Bible. Finally, by the late 19th century, a new image of ancient Hellas emerged—that of perpetual holiday. Works by artists as J. L. Gerome, Lord Leighton and Alma Tadema presented daily scenes of young semi-nude men and women cavorting in theatrical poses.

The inclusion of Malta within the British Empire had far-reaching implications on the local artistic scene in ways not dissimilar to the creation of the Greek State. Under the Knights, Malta was an independent polity, a city-state with complex multiplex links to Continental Europe and the term 'colony' can hardly be applicable ('colony' of what?). Under the British, Malta became a satellite of a distant metropolitan centre, progressively developed as a staging post on the sea route to India, rather than as a part of Continental Europe or indeed the Mediterranean. This was the first 'proper' colonialism Malta had experienced probably since Roman times, because colonialism implies ultimately a distinction between the culture, religion, and language of the subject peoples and the dominant ruling group, usually having its centre of power elsewhere, and the extraction of surpluses to the metropolis. Single-stranded links to Britain and other parts of its non-European Empire increasingly replaced the multiplex previous links between Malta and Sicily, Spain, France, Italy and Germany, as well as north Africa.

Colonialism impinged directly upon the local artistic scene. To begin with local artists now had to travel *abroad* to study, rather than as in the past, being apprenticed *at home* to visiting European artists who often *settled* in the island for long periods (such as Caravaggio, Mattia Preti, etc.). The previous system had perhaps encouraged a more symbiotic working-out of influences and acculturation; the new system encouraged a jackdaw mentality. Once exposed to the heady wine of external influences in the Metropolis, Maltese artists often uncritically inbibed new ideas and perspectives sometimes on the basis of an inferiority complex which was hardly surprising given that they were not masters of their own destinies.

Secondly, the *content* of paintings began to change. As Buhagiar points out the British actively encouraged a move away from the Baroque to neo-Classicism through a strategic use of patronage (scholarships, etc.): 'The anti-Baroque movement received the tacit approval of the British administrators who naturally found Neo-Classicism more congenial to their Anglo-Saxon temperament and religious orientation than the South European, Roman Catholic Baroque of the previous century' (1987: 160). Yet neo-classicism in art came to Malta not from Britain but from Italy and ultimately from France, although neo-classical architecture was built under British patronage. And neo-classicism did not take strong roots in Maltese art, for it soon gave way to Romanticism often of a very spiritualized N. European type as among the Nazzarenes and Hyzler.

Two implications of the movement away from the Baroque were a gradual disengagement from religious art, and the rise of the painting as a finished commodity to be placed in a ready form on the market. The two were related. To be sure religious commissions were still important and could crown an artist's claim to public recognition, but paintings of the Virgin or portraits of the Prince were not the only avenues available for self-expression. Of the 27 illustrations selected by Buhagiar to represent 19th century art in Malta, 16 deal with secular subjects whilst only 11 deal with religious ones. The growth of a market, not only among the rising local bourgeoisie, but also visitors from overseas, undoubtedly contributed to this development, and landscapes were particularly important.

In this paper I am concerned exclusively with secular art of the 19th and early 20th centuries. What vision did artists bring to bear upon secular themes? How did they construct their pictures and what did they depict? These are some of the questions I wish to pose, and I am also interested in the *influences* such visions had on the Maltese way of seeing things. For, there seems little doubt that 19th century secular art in Malta, especially those dealing with 'Maltese themes', influenced the indigeneous local perception of the island, its society and environment, and can be said to have contributed to the 'manufacture of tradition'.

If we examine the paintings depicted in the de Piro book a number of common themes emerge. To begin, with, and this is a major difference with depictions of Greece, there are few archaeological ruins. This turns out to be a marked difference between 19th and mid-20th century art in Malta.<sup>1</sup> But what is immediately striking is that *hardly any* 19th century artists (Maltese and Foreign) appear to have painted the numerous archaeological ruins which liberally dot the landscape. Indeed, this is one of the remarkable differences between the somewhat more intellectually curious 18th century and the 19th century. In the 18th century, especially influenced by the growing rationalist and *philosophe* tradition, antiquities were given much attention. Jean Houel's *Voyage Pittoresque des Isles de Sicilie, de Malte et de Lipari* (Paris, 1782–1789, in 4 volumes) excluded Valletta and the three cities altogether and concentrated on antiquities (Ġgantija), mythology (Calypso's Cave) and folklore (Fungus rock) (Dyer 1984: 10). But generally in the 19th century under the dull hand of topographic artists from military backgrounds, interest in antiquities declined, although Dyer gives an illustration of the Ġgantija Temple in Gozo painted the early part of the 19th century probably by a local artist. Henry Parke (1790–1830) appears to have been one of the few artists who painted a temple in 1822. (de Piro; p. 153, ill. 5). Whilst this absence may be due to the particular tastes and sensibilities of the compiler of the 'International Dictionary', nevertheless we have to take the lack of depiction of ruins as significant. Given the N. European concern with antiquities, as evidenced by Lord Elgin's 'saving' of the marbles wrenched from the Parthenon's frieze for 'posterity', this absence is odd. It is made even odder by the fact that the temples are now considered practically *emblematic* of Malta by both Maltese and foreign artists.

Three reasons can be advanced for this absence. The first is that most foreign artists were in passage to the East and rarely stopped for long periods to paint the island beyond Valletta's environs. The second more significant reason is that these ruins did not form part of the classical tradition—they are, after all, *neolithic* and megalithic, hardly able to stimulate the imaginations of Europeans brought up on *literary* works such as Homer, Pausanias, etc. In fact, on one level, the neolithic, being associated with the emergence of agriculture, has far stronger connections with the Middle East. This leads on to a further point: the programme of the ruling elites in most countries during this period was the establishment of the nation state. The ideology of nation-state building requires continuity but also discreteness or separation. Ruins from the past that do not conform with the notion of a discrete, separate localized culture, but instead emphasize exchange and contact with neighbouring lands are difficult to place within the constructed history of the nation state. Indeed on one level they may even *subvert* the notion of the historical continuity and discrete identity of the culture of the nation state. Megalithic culture never fitted in with the historical project of the nation state because it transcended 'national' boundaries and was based on exchange and the movement of peoples.

This may help explain not just why foreign artists did not paint ruins, but also why local artists did not do so. Such ruins *never became a symbol of nationhood* in the same way as Greek temples did, at least for a long time. Indeed Greek temples became a symbol for the modern Greek State *because* they fitted in with the historical project of the west which was to cast itself as the heir of classical culture as a 'moral success story', as E. Wolf (1982; 5), has aptly put it. Archaeology was still in its infancy, but 'nationhood' in Malta in the popular 19th century imagination and to a certain extent even nowadays, began with *Christianity* and *literacy*. The advent of St. Paul is particularly emblematic not only because the 'history' of the Maltese people can be said to 'begin' from this 'date', but also because it marks out the Maltese as a distinct and 'chosen' people, having been

selected by divine Providence to become Christians before the rest of Europe. But because Christianity has been taken to be one of the most potent symbols of ethnicity, it acted as a barrier to a fuller identification with, and understanding of the pre-Christian period. Indeed such an identification with pagan origins was positively dangerous, and in the popular unconscious the reference in the Acts of the Apostles is often interpreted to mean that the Maltese were always proto-Christian. It needed just one or at most two miracles to convince the inhabitants of the error of their pagan ways. The Cypriots were perhaps craftier. When St. Paul landed there they promptly tied him to a column (which any Cypriot will smilingly indicate to a visitor) and gave him 39 lashes of the whip. They thus maintained a sentimental link to their Hellenic tradition and adopted the new-fangled religion with a decent show of resistance.

Furthermore even where archaeological ruins were depicted in Malta, they were rarely peopled as in paintings of Greece. Clearly it would be difficult to people Hagar Qim with characters from a pre-literate neolithic past in contrast to Greek heroes in Greek temples; the latter are after all referred to in literature. But what is even more striking is that there are no peasant girls or goatherds cavorting among the ruins, much as appeared in paintings of Greece in the mid-19th century. Nor can I find any picture of St. Paul among neolithic temples which would have been a 'logical' solution to the problem of depiction of the Saint in a local context. Instead the ruins are mute testimonies of an unknown silent past with very little connection to contemporary realities.

Finally, it is clear that growing commoditization in art, the demands for pictures of the Grand Harbour, by tourists, and naval men who would have probably seen just Valletta and stayed there, also discouraged representation of antiquities.

This is not to suggest that the rural is not depicted in 19th century painting, although it is by far overshadowed by depictions of the urban; it is rather that the rural *did not encompass antiquity* in any significant form. The Maltese initially could not trace their descent in an unbroken line from the temple-builders because Christianity intervened,<sup>2</sup> and also because the *models* that guided the construction of national histories in Europe had themselves shied away from dealing with the megalithic period precisely because it was so subversive of the categories such models were predicated upon, as well as the fact that they could not be used by the ruling elites to legitimate their position within society. As I shall try to show there are certain patterns in the depiction of the rural, which have continued to influence Maltese perceptions, both in painting and in the popular imagination. One of these is the identification of the wayside chapel in the countryside with devout countrymen and women outside (e.g. de Piro; p. 121, ill. 4) [my illustration 1].

Another interesting peculiarity is that throughout most of the 19th century there appear to have been few depictions of the Great Siege by the Ottoman Turks in 1565 which could have been metaphors or allegories for national heroism. Whilst depictions of the Great Siege were common in earlier periods, especially under the Knights, they appear rather less frequently in the 19th century. The distance of time can hardly be posited as a sufficient reason. After all, European and Greek artists were busily painting ancient Greek heroes as allegories for contemporary aspirations to nationhood and freedom. This is made further peculiar by the fact that in popular guide books to Malta as well as in histories written in English, and doubtlessly too in the popular imagination, the Great Siege is uniformly presented as a glorious episode. One reason for this absence may be that there is little popular identification with the departed Knights. It took close on 100 years after the Knight's departure for G. Cali to produce a picture of the Great Siege and it is a painting of the corsair Dragut expiring! The painting, done in a rich orientalist style, is a powerful

work and the artist's sympathies clearly lie with the anti-hero. It is a subversive work which may perhaps explain why it is in the Museum of Fine Art's reserve collection.<sup>3</sup>

Nineteenth century painting in Malta seems significant for the absence of any overt concern with aspiring nationhood, although further studies may well reveal hidden tensions in the work of several artists, including Cafi who certainly expressed the cultural aspirations of a largely Italianate bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup> It is also true that the Maltese as a people and as individuals increasingly become the *subjects* of paintings, often asserting themselves in them. Yet it is important to examine what *was* depicted and *how* it was done, rather than what was not (archaeological ruins, historical recreations, etc.). What identities were presented in the mass of paintings produced in the 19th century?

Let us begin with an overall impression of the illustrations contained in the 'International Directory', initially suspending differences between local and foreign artists significant though they are. The initial impression that comes to mind is that Malta is presented overall as a picturesque quaint world, yet cosmopolitan, semi-Italianate, generally urban (but the urban is significant), quaintly religious but not fanatical, and generally romantic old-world. In fact the most residing collective mental image of the book is that of a semi-recognizable romantic old world which is almost within our grasp and which to a certain extent, it is implicitly suggested, is still with us. Part of this effect is of course due to the large number of paintings by foreigners, which also suggests that they *liked* the place enough to paint some pretty pictures. There is a hint of proto-tourism here: as far back as a century ago, foreigners visited the island, loved it, and painted it, much as the Malta Government hopes tourists will continue coming to support the economy. There are differences, naturally, between the way foreigners and Maltese painted—in their choice, subject matter, manner of depiction and even angles. This is significant and I want to return to this later.

This is a romantic place; even some of the bombing and war scenes are quite colourful, almost 'pretty'. Some look like fireworks, and *festas* and bombings sometimes merge indistinguishably into each other. It is also romantic in that no slums are depicted. Deprivation is not the property of the urban environment, although poverty (especially of clothing) is certainly depicted for the countryside. There is also very little reference to political events. One 20th century painting depicts the *Sette Giugno* riots/uprising (significantly known by its Italian name) now a semi-mythical event (becoming a symbol of anti-colonialism to the Left and an example of mob anarchy to Conservatives). Yet were it not for the title it would be difficult to appreciate that the painting is supposed to represent political *agitation*. A mass of people are visible from *behind* (it could actually look like a *Festa*), there is a mass of hats (the ultimate symbol of civility and *civiltà*) and the men (and *one* woman) are grouped beneath the Statue of Queen Victoria!<sup>5</sup>

In the 19th century a number of oppositions were established according to an implicit grammar which contributed to the construction of identity and which retain their potency to this day. Whilst the urban is presented as grand, ordered, civilized, nature is generally presented as minute and domesticated, and identified by the two symbols of the countryside—the peasant and the wayside chapel. Perhaps the most symptomatic of the former is Arthur Diehl's picture of a Valletta street (de Piro; p. 80, ill. 1) [my illustration 2] of the 1890's. In it all the essential ingredients of the urban landscape are reproduced and these have gone on to influence not only Maltese perceptions of the past, but also probably the aspirations of Maltese regarding what is considered to be an *ideal* Maltese culture. The street is spotless, there is absolutely no dirt or rubbish (i.e. matter out of place), all the men, women and children are in European clothing (an unlikely possibility for the period);

indeed all the men wear hats, suits, waistcoats, ties, and the women wear bonnets, frilly dresses and carry parasols. A lady flower seller sitting on the steps, holding up a bunch of flowers, delivers the *coup de grace* to this pretty, somewhat impossible, picture of civility, order, elegance and charmed urbanity.

Images of nature likewise possess distinctive features although generally the urban (especially Valletta) predominates in 19th century art. An examination of guidebooks is instructive here. Much of the literature produced in the late 19th, early 20th century was designed to introduce English speaking readers, both military and civilian, to the charms of the island. In an age prior to the full-scale use of photography heavy use was made of paintings to illustrate various aspects of local identity. Indeed it is instructive that the emergence of photography perhaps coincides with a *decline* in the overall number of guidebooks to the island, primarily because painting can lend itself to a more romantic treatment. One popular history and guidebook which had a wide circulation both in Malta and Great Britain was *Malta* by Frederick Ryan containing a large number of illustrations by Vittorio Boron (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910). Although it dates from a slightly later period when a certain image of Malta had already been established, an examination of the themes selected by the author and painter to illustrate the identity of Malta is instructive, especially when compared to Houel's book produced over a century earlier.

I have grouped together the themes dealt with in the illustrations:

	Assorted	Antiquities	Strictly 'Folkloric'	Urban	Rural	Semi-Urban	Religious
Number (Ryan)	—	1	2	7	4	3	3
%	—	5	10	35	20	15	15
Number (Houel)	2	10	4	—	2	—	—
%	11	55.5	22	—	11	—	—

Table 1: Comparison of the Distribution of Themes illustrated in Ryan's *Malta* (1910) and Houel's *Voyage Pittoresque* (1792–1789).

Some explanation on the categories utilized would be useful here. By 'Folkloric' is meant popular, non-religious and distinctive themes; likewise 'Religious' includes strictly formal celebrations (processions, etc.). It is clear that not only has there been a radical shift in emphasis from antiquities and the 'folklore' to the urban, but also that by the early 20th century the urban predominates. It is the urban that increasingly becomes the *site* of folklore, and its transposition. Indeed all urban depictions are of Valletta, which corresponds to the quintessential concept of a city—walled, organized, rational, multiplex and modern relationships. Yet an urban way of life was certainly being experienced in the countryside then; money, new ideologies, exchange, politics and new styles of life were far from absent in the villages. Instead we get a timeless unchanging countryside, a type of Redfield 'Little Tradition' versus the 'Big Tradition' of the towns, a situation far from the case in the Mediterranean where, as Julio Caro Baroja (1963) has pointed out, the town and country have been interacting for millennia.

Furthermore, there are certain 'cues' which the author and illustrator in the Ryan book intend the viewer to pick up. Some of these have worked their way into popular Maltese conceptions of their own country and their own society. These are:

(i) Whilst Valletta is the essence of the urban, all rural elements are of the sister isles of Gozo and Comino. In this case the paintings are of a 'total nature', i.e. with no sign of man and his works. Indeed so pervasive has this view become, that Gozo is now held to be representative of Malta in an earlier more virginal age. Gozitan culture is now held up as an aboriginal Maltese culture which somehow entered a time-wrap (even nowadays the Post Office franks letters with the caption: *Gozo: The Island where time stood still*—clearly directed at the tourist market). Various gems in the Ryan book bring out this manufacture of rural identity, e.g. 'The peasantry is noted for its strength' (sic) suggesting an inherent almost genetic property of country folk, and conveniently bypassing the fact that by the time this text was written the 'peasantry' had largely ceased to exist as a distinct social group.

(ii) Urban areas themselves are stratified according to place. Whilst central areas are more 'European', peripheral areas are more 'rustic'. Thus 'Piazza Reale' has no goats, whereas a 'Fountain in a Popular Quarter' has goats, boys and women carrying baskets on their heads. Notice too how one is known by its Italian name, the other by a generic English title; meaning it could be anywhere, i.e. everywhere except the 'Piazza Reale'.

(iii) 'Folkloric' elements are all associated with women, specifically the *Faldetta*. Indeed the *Faldetta* becomes almost emblematic of folklore (because it is immediately recognizable by foreigners) and it is used in very distinctive ways. Indeed by the late 18th century the *faldetta* was already being presented by Vincenzo Fenech as an 'ancien costume Maltais' (de Piro; p. 92, ill. 1) [my illustration 3].

#### **Identities in a Colonial Framework**

In the 'International Dictionary of artists who have painted Malta', Nicholas de Piro has done us a great service. By grouping together such a disparate set of artists from the excellent to the mediocre, both local and foreign, he has provided us with raw data with which it should be possible to analyse how certain residing images of Malta and its society were constructed. In a very direct way the value of the book is enhanced precisely because he has not stuck to the well-known or even professional artists, but has cast his net wider to encompass those artists who would probably not merit much attention on aesthetic merits. Indeed it is precisely the 'plebianness' of these images which constitutes their value for many appear 'ordinary', which of course conceals their interest. By going beyond the innovative artists and focussing on the average artist *en passant*, we should be better able to understand how popular conceptions were reflected in, and formed by, such art.

We now need to go beyond the overall impression of the book and analyse differences in perceptions between foreign artists and Maltese artists, and between foreign artists themselves. Having done this it should be possible to analyse how some of these images, especially formed by foreign artists, went on to influence Maltese conceptions of what constitutes the identity of their island, as well as resistance to it.

One major difference between British and other foreign artists is that the former 'naturally' appear to have concentrated on the Grand Harbour and Valletta. Imperial interests were undoubtedly influential here. It appears that continental artists, especially those coming from liberal, *philosophe*, and rationalist backgrounds were generally more interested in those presumed sources of the nationalist Geist: the countryfolk (e.g. in the works of Sebastian Ittar,

de Piro, p. 122) [my illustration 4]. It is hard to escape from the overall impression garnered from the numerous British artists that this is a pretty colony, 'western' in its urban architecture but 'oriental' in its customs, people, and clothes. The further away from Valletta the more 'oriental' it becomes. This is why Valletta is often selected as the siting of urbanity, but once having set the scene an oriental element is introduced through the people, clothing and especially *hats*. The type of headdress gives a strong clue to the overall impression the artist wishes to create. Nowhere is this perhaps brought out more clearly than in the work entitled 'Ta Liesse', by Thomas Brabazon Aylmer (de Piro; p. 15, ill. 5) [my illustration 5] in Valletta, an area which attracted the attentions of numerous artists.

That the artist should have chosen this location is significant. For this was a market, a *souk*, and therefore likely to contain people from various origins. In fact, were it not for the unmistakable church dome in the background and the fortifications, the picture could well have been situated in the Middle East, which is probably the atmosphere the artist wished to convey. For all the men are wearing a Moroccan *burnous* and quite a few are wearing red black-tassled *fez* hats (produced in Tunis). Some men are also wearing the black baggy trousers which draw in tightly below the knee and worn in Ottoman controlled areas such as Crete and Cyprus (where they are known as the *vrika*). Costumes in Malta were already undergoing a transformation. Casar Pullicino observes: 'by the middle of the 19th century Maltese costume had began to shed its ancient characteristics and made rapid strides towards complete Europeanisation. Indeed the process had started well before the Order's exit from these Islands' (Cassar Pullicino 1966: 151).

This orientalist element is repeated in a number of other works, in the work of C. F. Gordon Cumming (de Piro; p. 112, ill. 1) [my illustration 6] and of W. A. Delamotte (de Piro; p. 75, ill. 4, 5) [my illustration 7]. In the latter's works the figures in the foreground look positively Greek in one (wearing the *fustanella*—skirt, short waistcoat, and red sash across the waist which held the sword or pistol); in the other the figures are now clothed in the N. African *burnous*! The paintings are identical (indeed they are hardly recognizable as Malta except for the emblematic fortifications), merely the costumes on the figures have changed, but the costumes are not Maltese.

There are three 'morals' to be drawn from these examples. First, it is clear that many foreign, especially British, artists actively searched for orientalist themes when depicting Malta, even to the extent of distorting experience. Second, we should be cautious in treating such material as historical and representative data. That they are historically significant is indubitable, but they indicate more what artists wanted to discover and see, rather than of the objects of their attention—the people and the society. Third, the category of the 'oriental' changes to suit the exigencies of the moment. In one painting it is Greek, in another it is north African. Similar practices occurred in Greece and the Middle East.

But why should artists have been concerned with orientalist themes? One answer comes from E. Said (1978) who suggests that this was an aspect of power relations. By casting non-Europeans in the category 'oriental' and by filling it with the 'exotic' and 'simple folk', Northern Europeans maintained their cultural hegemony and superiority over such areas and legitimated the colonial enterprise. In other words Orientalism is an aspect of colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

That the image of colonialism is contained implicitly and explicitly in the paintings emerges not merely from the preponderance of the Grand Harbour as the most residing image of the island, but also from the depiction of ships, men of war, etc. It emerges also from the depiction of the people themselves. For example it is usually foreign (especially British) artists who chose to depict both foreigners and Maltese together;<sup>7</sup> Maltese artists generally preferred to exclude outsiders altogether from their images (such as in the works of Albert and Giorgio Pullicino; Giovanni Schranz and Salvatore Busuttill). When Maltese artists such as C. F. de Brocktorff

include British officials in their paintings there is less mystification and idealization. In 'Sir Hildebrand Oakes' (de Piro; p. 33, ill. 8) [my illustration 8], the figure of the Governor is huddled, almost hidden, in a carriage; there is little *gravitas*, in fact the effect is almost comic.

Yet when British artists chose to portray both Maltese and outsiders together in the same canvas, it was often according to an implicit 'grammar' and a clear hierarchy. The British are always presented in a uniform and the Maltese are usually presented as peasants, often picturesque peasants. This is particularly strong in the paintings by those individuals, usually clergymen whose perspective was usually wider than military men. Missionaries were an important part of the colonial enterprise in areas such as W. Africa and the Pacific though less so in Malta and Cyprus. In Rev. Jones' picture 'Maltese Folk' (de Piro; p. 124, ill. 2) [my illustration 9], the artist has deliberately chosen to depict 'sons of the earth' as representative of the true essence of the ethnos. In many of these pictures, though not in this one, the peasant men wear shoes, the peasant women go barefoot. What the artist has subtly done is to equate men with the public urban world, that of culture, and women with the private rural world, that of nature. For the presence or absence of shoes in Malta as in most Mediterranean societies even nowadays implicitly defines a situation as formal-public or informal-private. (Herzfeld; 1986). You may go around the village in slippers and shop, as many Maltese, Greek, Cypriot women do nowadays, but when you do something formal such as visiting the Church, you change to formal foot attire. This is not a recent phenomenon. In a delightful and extremely perceptive set of observations, an Arab visitor of the 19th century had already noted this phenomenon:

'When they (i.e. the Maltese) return home, however, they put on the most ragged clothes they have. Rich and poor, men and women are alike in this'. (Cachia 1966: 233). Yet this painting and many others collapse, this distinction producing a timeless decontextualized imagery. Indeed shoes are a *metonymic* device as the Arab observer noted: 'As for (village) women, such as own a pair of shoes wear it only in the city, and do so proudly. Once out of the city, they carry them under the arm' (Cachia, *ibid.*, 232). Continuing along this line he noted: 'A woman who wears good clothes at home is often considered a show-off. If you should call on a Maltese, he will not be ashamed to say, 'Wait a little; my wife is changing in order to come and meet you'. Among these women there are some who stay barefoot at home, yet when they go out on Sunday they wear silk stockings and silk gloves and adorn themselves as gaudily as can be, for-contrary to the English who, here, always maintain the same appearance, the Maltese deck themselves at least times as splendidly as possible' (*ibid.*, 233).

Included in this observation are a number of themes. The Maltese maintain a formal/public vs informal/private distinction to a much greater extent than the British who were mostly Colonial Officials, a fact which could hardly have been missed by British observers. Yet interestingly the role of shoes and clothing as a *metonymic* device is given a new more ideological significance in these paintings.

To begin with a clergyman would not have been ignorant of the fact that in nationalist rhetoric women are often identified with the nation. Nationalism is a rhetoric of filiation and as J. Politi points out is the only male discourse which collapses gender differences: 'nationalist discourse is perhaps the only male discourse which collapses gender inequality and assigns to woman a principal role. In the nationalist code the female prototype combines both male and female virtues and becomes almost androgynous' (1988: 50). By equating women = the nation (in a 'raw' state) = nature, a rationale is subtly suggested for Colonialism by reference to its 'civilizing mission'. The function of British colonialism is therefore akin to that of a gardener, to transform 'nature' into 'culture', 'barbarism' into 'civilization'.<sup>8</sup> It is the gardener, however, who calls the shots. As the various contributors to the volume edited by Mallia Milanes (1988) point out, the British claimed that there was not a people 'so singularly unsuited to govern themselves' as the Maltese, a view applied to that other Mediterranean colony, Cyprus, where

a Deputy Governor wrote in 1929: 'the plain fact is that the Cypriot, taking him by and large, is by nature and descent unfitted in his present stage of development to exercise legislative functions' (quoted in Georghallides, 1965: 168).<sup>9</sup> It would be difficult to imagine any colonialist maintaining otherwise.

By the early 20th century most paintings by British artists appear to have shifted in focus. Whilst the Grand Harbour still managed to exercise the imagination of many, it was expatriate life that attracted interest, as in Mary Paterson's painting *At the Marsa* (de Piro; 154, ill. 2) [illustration 10]. A wider range of local themes also engaged attention, with a distinctly 'Italianate' element similarly to that recently captured in the film 'A room with a view'. Yet the paintings suggest that expatriate life was sufficiently complex and self-contained to treat the local environment as merely a colourful backdrop to endless teaparties. As early as 1910 Ryan had observed 'the fact remains that, with the exception of a few high officials, the two nationalities do not mix, and more's the pity' (1910: 157). Similar patterns occurred in Cyprus. The 1930 Governor Sir R. Storrs admitted that socially British rule had failed to win the hearts of the islanders: 'Some (officials) with African experience were unable to mix on friendly terms with educated Cypriots without seeming to themselves to sacrifice something of their position as members of the governing race. The wife of an officer excellent at his work, told me with pride on the eve of his transfer that they had been in Cyprus fourteen years, and never had a "native" inside their house ...' (1937: 476).

What about Maltese art during this period? Generally it can be said to indicate a greater concern with everyday realities; it is often less hierarchical, more egalitarian, less concerned with distinctions and sometimes has a remarkable freshness and wit. Some are positively frank and have a semi South-American 'magical realist' element to them. C. F. de Brocktorff's (1775–1850) work presents a remarkable set of sketches of daily life, ranging from 'De-lousing' to 'Playing Morra'. Tucked away in the corner of 'The Caless' (de Piro; p. 34, ill. 10) [my illustration 11] is a charming detail of a woman breastfeeding her child, and in another work, the 'Palace Ball' (de Piro; p. 35, ill. 11) [my illustration 12], the artist has a keen eye for social pretence and incongruity. Here in the centre an extremely broad, indeed fat lady comically gives us her back while being accompanied by a weedy-looking male. There is a very definite sense of humour, wit and *joie-de-vivre* in this artist's work. Luigi Brocktorff (de Piro; p. 37, ill. 2) [my illustration 13] also gives us one of the few illustrations of an *ghana* session showing the characteristic pose of raising the hands sideways to the head by the ear. Given the cultural resistance to *ghana* in Malta (Sant Cassia 1989), this is quite remarkable.

Certain art historians (e.g. Dominic Cutajar, 1987) have drawn attention to the division in Maltese art in the 19th century between the neo traditionalists, led by the Nazzarener, Hyzler, and the romantics who included the Schranzes, the Brockdorffs and Amadeo Preziosi. The latter often spent considerable periods in the Orient and Preziosi is perhaps the most well-known exponent of a very sensitive orientalism. It is therefore ironical that just at the same time foreign artists were romanticizing Malta, Maltese artists were doing the same further east. Why should they have done so? One reason may well have been that the dominant power of the orientalist vision conflicted with direct experience of their own home environment. Unable to fully pursue oriental themes within their own home society which they knew only too well, for knowledge necessarily implies a reduction in romanticism, they escaped to the east, to pursue an 'outside' view of other societies. But by moving East, they may have left the field open to others, many of whom came from further west, on steamships, men of war, etc. In time it was perhaps this image which became dominant, and the exotic ceased to be located *outside* the island, but *within* it, usually in the countryside. It is interesting that so dominant has this attitude become that few Maltese artists nowadays exhibit paintings of other societies in spite of the fact that many travel

widely and have spent considerable periods abroad. The 'exotic', the 'oriental' is now paradoxically imagined to be 'at home', but as far away from 'home' as possible, in the 'pre-industrial' countryside. So complete has this process been that few paintings are peopled. Instead there is the landscape, admittedly pretty, but literally lacking people and life, the most vibrant aspect of any culture. The viewer has conveniently merely to imagine himself within it.

### Conclusions

This paper has had three purposes. The first was to suggest that we must be cautious in treating many of the 19th century depictions of Malta in the de Piro book as historical documents, especially the ones by foreign artists. Clearly there are exceptions, but the moral is that 'realism' does not mean pure 'transcription' of what the eye 'sees'. There is in fact no such thing. Paintings are constructions, social products, organized according to a certain logic, grammar and ideology. The second purpose has been a modest exercise in 'deconstruction', an attempt to show how some of these pictures could be analysed. Ultimately it has been concerned with the iconography of domination and it has attempted to show the logic by which the symbols of urbanism, rurality, gender and ethnicity are connected at least in a crude form. Painting is not an abstract transparent medium; it is also about the ability to connect such symbols together, the potency of such symbols, and the power to impose your image of what constitutes 'reality', i.e. to define how the world is. Images of the urban equated as they are with order, colonialism, legitimacy and rationality are juxtaposed in certain ways with images of the rural connected with disorder, the *ethnos*, and nature. Men and women become metaphors for an-as-yet unredeemed (and often unarticulated) national consciousness.

The final purpose of this paper can only be briefly explored and it is related to both the resilience of certain categories and their circulation in contemporary society. Many of the images contained in the 'International Directory' have a particular resilience and are still peddled and circulated, even although their original *raison d'être* has disappeared. Fortifications are still identified with 'order', legitimacy and urbanity even if that order and legitimacy was colonial. Gozo is still identified with the quintessential 'rural', the 'picturesque', an aboriginal Malta, indeed even more so. The irony is that on a *per capita* basis Gozo is probably *more* connected with New York, Australia and Canada than Malta is, due to the large number of migrants there. A considerable proportion of the population of the New York suburbs of Astoria and Queens are Gozitans, and when you meet 'Maltese' on the Metropolitan their first question is 'What village *in Gozo* do you come from?'(!)

In a peculiar way the 'International Directory' is valuable because it demonstrates the resilience and the power of the rather trivializing images of the island which evolved in a colonial context but went on to influence the nature of art, and of popular conceptions in a post-colonial age. Indeed the image of Malta that emerges is not that far removed from the images peddled in contemporary tourist literature. This is not fortuitous and policy makers have implicitly reproduced that stereotype. Part of the problem is probably due to the fact that in societies made semi-peripheral by many years of colonialism the 'outside view' is seen as necessarily 'better', more 'potent' than the internal one. Even now paintings of Malta by foreign artists generally fetch higher prices than by local artists. I attribute this not to any necessary superiority in aesthetic merit, but rather to the potency attributed to the outside view. Even in the field of art-collecting, it seems, many Maltese prefer to be inverted tourists in their own land. Rather than buying tourist art in another country of that country, i.e. art done for foreigners, the ultimate commodity, they prefer to purchase paintings by *outsiders of their own country*, which is also art done for

'foreigners'. Most of these paintings, in fact correspond to an outside view, the picturesque, the emblematic, a landscape of symbols such as *luzzus*, (fishing boats) etc.

Indeed the dominance nowadays of topography and landscape in contemporary art collecting, is quite remarkable. Until recently most private art collections contained only a small percentage of landscapes, topographics, maps, etc., (usually something like only 10–15%); the rest were religious pictures, still-lives, biblical themes, battle scenes, etc. Nowadays few collect the latter; instead most self-respecting and respected bourgeois households collect landscapes, the older, but especially the 19th century, the better. I attribute this to three factors. First, these pictures which decorate countless rooms are statements of ethnicity, now defined in middle class terms less by reference to religion or language, but more by reference to place. What better to denote place than a map? Second, they contribute to the manufacture of tradition; a 19th century painting of the Grand Harbour denotes pedigree, history, tradition and continuity, especially to those aspiring to middle class status. Finally, it commemorates in a safe way the world we have lost. We may have progress, high rise apartment blocks, and all the paraphernalia of modern life, but the past is preserved safely in pictures, on walls, without threatening the present, often presented as containing progress which is inexorable and hence cannot conveniently be threatened.

The implications of this tension between the 'inside' and the 'outside' extend to other unexpected areas of social life. For example, the perennial debate over nudity on the beaches in Malta (and elsewhere such as Italy, Greece and Cyprus) is not perhaps so much about morality, i.e. religious morality, but about the *power* to define a situation and identity where 'liberated', 'mobile', 'wealthy' Northern Europeans divest themselves of clothing and expose themselves to the sun, whilst 'traditional' 'island-bound', 'poor' (because they need tourists) Southern Europeans 'conceal' themselves. The conundrum is made even more acute in Malta (as in Islamic societies) when faced with the overpowering strength of the West: if these people 'have little or no morality' by thus exposing themselves (or 'the wrong religion', to Muslims) how come they have a more advanced civilization, democracy, etc., which we all aspire to? How come 'they' have managed to 'advance' with little or no morality and 'we' have not done so in spite of our (good) morals? The solution or the vocabulary of justification is often then inverted: 'we' have not progressed because our morals have gone soft; 'they' have progressed *in spite* of their morals.

The tensions have been far from resolved in the area of art as in many other areas of social life. One of the hidden messages of the 'International Directory' is how a considerable number of Maltese artists have attempted to *resist*, in the 19th and the 20th centuries, the often trivializing effects of the production and circulation of pretty images of the island. In 'The Bull' by Isabelle Borg (de Piro; p. 27, ill.5) [my illustration 14] a huge, almost elegant, bull with 'female' horns contains within it two lovers, a clever example of a double 'parthenogenesis' (male giving birth, who is therefore the 'father'?) which also at the same time questions the validity of an analogous imagery, that of the 'Mother Goddess'. Parallel concerns emerge in Antoine Camilleri's 'Primeval Fantasy' (de Piro; p. 46, ill. 2) [my illustration 15] where the Mother Goddess is holding up a portrait (or is it a head?) of the artist. Is it a male head on the quintessential female (signifying that females have to adopt a 'male' discourse), is it the *process of representation* which is male, writing (male) versus speech (female), for writing/representation is more privileged than speech? The effect is deliciously ambiguous and the artist should have the last laugh. Humour and mockery is, after all, the weapon of the 'weak' against the 'powerful', a Mediterranean strategy reflected in its use of language. In Greek, just as in Maltese, the word '*yelaso*' has the same semantic range as '*tidhak*' which English does not capture in a single word, for it means 'to laugh', 'to mock', as well as 'to deceive'. But who can decipher the intentions of a discourse or a painting until it has been completed and run its course? In the Mediterranean where social life is an existential drama, things have never been clear-cut.

## Notes

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1. Indeed one main difference between 19th and 20th century Maltese art is that whereas the former concentrated on the 'urban' (i.e. Valletta, the capital), the latter concentrated on the 'rural' (i.e. the villages) and to a lesser extent on the temples, etc.
2. In contrast to Greece where there was an attempt in nationalist rhetoric to link up Christianity with the Hellenic tradition, although this was fraught with tension, cf. J. Politi, 1988, and M. Herzfeld, 1982.
3. The whole status of the Great Siege in historiography and in popular imagination deserves further study. The bypassing of the Great Siege in nationalist rhetoric is somewhat odd, even though it is celebrated in regattas and popular discourse (e.g. 'We beat the Turks'). Yet it never fully entered nationalist rhetoric as an opposition between Catholics/Maltese versus Non-Catholic/Outsiders which could have been applied to the British. One reason may well be that most history in the 19th century was written under British tutelage, and in popular discourse, derived from official history, the British are presented as the 'natural successors' to the Knights, but even 'better'. They thus become 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders'.
4. Part of the popularity of Cañi may well lie in the fact that he supplied nationalists with symbols of popular life which were profoundly not British. By contrast the pro-British segment appear to have had little symbols to identify with apart from imperial ones (battleships?). One line for further research could well lie in an examination of the cultural symbols of the two groups. This is as yet uncharted territory.
5. The role of hats is significant, for whereas hats were previously worn by the upper classes in the late 19th century, they became increasingly common in the inter-war period and in the immediate post-war period since when their use declined. The democratization of the hat as a symbol of gentility heralded the gradual breakdown of the class structure at least in forms of dress and apparel (cf. Miller Robinson, 1993).
6. I am simplifying Said's complex thesis here.
7. A notable exception is A. W. McFall (1862–1923) cf. de Piro; pp. 136–137, but then he spent a long time in the island.
8. As evidenced in that somewhat infuriating expression 'ghamluna nies' (i.e. 'they transformed us', literally 'into persons', i.e. 'civilized us').
9. It is significant that this same person wished to exclude lawyers, money lenders, etc., from qualification to sit on the Legislative Council in Cyprus, to be replaced by 'peasant-cultivators', the 'true Cypriots'.

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1. Irton, Major (British) fl.19th century. *Musta*.



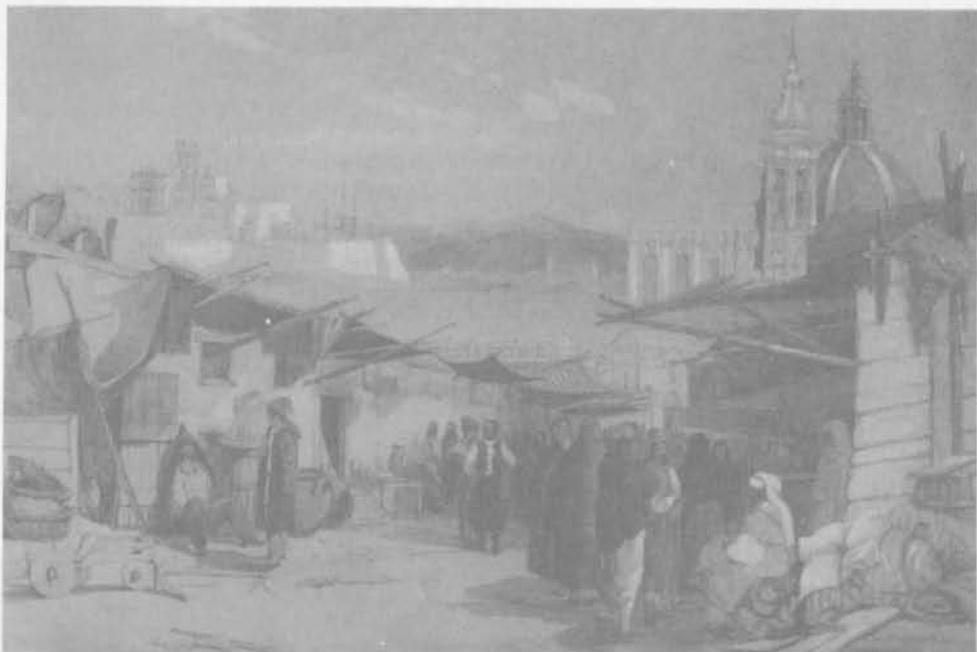
2. *Diehl, Arthur (British) fl. 1890s. Valletta Street.*



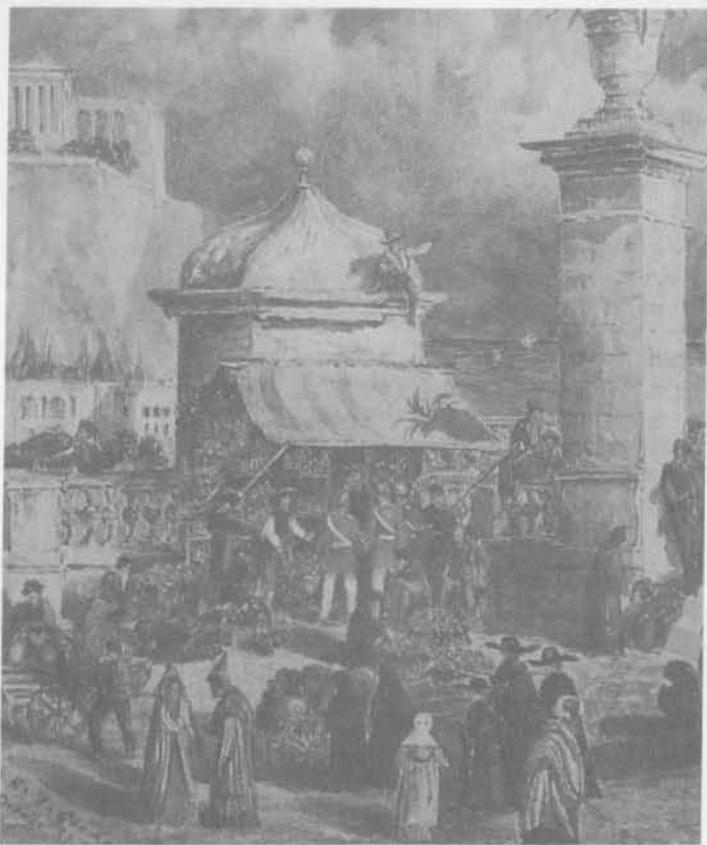
◀ 3. Fenech, Vincenzo (Maltese) late 18th/early 19th century. Maltese Lady with Servant and Slave.



4. Ittar, Sebastiano (Italian) before 1780–1847. Donna del Gozzo. ▶



5. *Aylmer, Thomas Brabazon (British) 1806–1856. Ta' Liesse.*



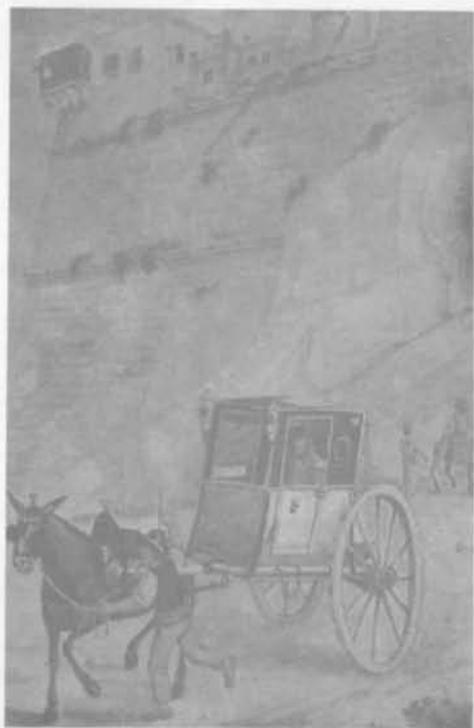
6. *Gordon, Cumming, C. F. (British) fl. 1870's. Fruit Market Valletta 1870.*



7a, b. *Delamotte, William Alfred (British of French parents) 1775–1863. Malta.*

(b)





▲  
8. Brocktorff, Charles Frederick de (Danish from Schleswig Holstein) 1775–1850, Sir Hildebrand Oakes.



▲  
10. Paterson, (Mary) Viola (British) 1899–1981, At the Marsa.

9. Jones, Rev. Calvert Richard (British) 1804–1877, Maltese folk. ▼





11. Brocktorff, Charles Frederick de (Danish from Schleswig Holstein) 1775–1850, *The Caless*.



12. Brocktorff, Charles Frederick de (Danish from Schleswig Holstein) 1775–1850, *Palace Ball*.



13. Brocktorff, Luigi (Maltese), *Ghanja*.



14. Borg, Isabelle (Maltese) b. 1959, *The Bull*.



15. *Camilleri, Antoine (Maltese) b. 1922, Primeval Fantasy.*