

Emvin Cremona and Rome: A Lasting Influence¹

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Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) was among the foremost Maltese painters of the twentieth century, soon becoming a formidable name in the fields of landscape, church decoration and, later, stamp-design and abstract painting. He developed extensively his initial encounters with Modernism in Rome in the light of his artistic development and also of subsequent dramatic circumstances in Malta. Following two decades of Impressionistic landscape painting and some of the first manifestations of abstraction in Malta, his art took a dramatic turn in 1960 in reaction to the grave politico-religious crisis that dominated events at the time. This artistic development will be the main subject of this paper.

Cremona was born on 27 May, 1919.² Up to 1936, and during a period of mounting tension between Britain and Italy over Malta, he attended the Italian-funded *Istituto Umberto I* school in Valletta.³ He later recalled having joined some form of Fascist youth organisation around that time.⁴ Probably in this context he first visited Rome on an organised excursion in 1933.⁵ In 1935 he entered the Malta School of Art in Valletta, in company with Willie Apap,⁶ (1918-1970) Anton Inglott (1915-1945),⁷ Esprit Barthet (1919-1999)⁸ and Victor Diacono (b.1915),⁹ among others.¹⁰ In 1937 he was awarded the Second Prize in the competition for a cover for the Overseas Journal of Education.¹¹ Writing to congratulate him, Edward Caruana Dingli, Principal of the School, stated that "*The fact that this prize has been awarded to you in, a competition in which hundreds of other students from Great Britain and the British Empire have taken part is something to be proud of*".¹²

Cremona used to participate in group painting sessions in the countryside, sometimes in company with Caruana Dingli. These would have been occasions for him to practise painting scenes *en plein air*, and prepared him for his later work in Rome, where he was to excel in this field. In 1937 he came third in the Government scholarship examination for painting, after Apap and Inglott.¹³ This factor necessitated that he find alternative sources of funding to study in Rome. Cremona however, stating much later that British art was not particularly admired at the time, claimed that, until after the War, they had not been helped by the British. He also claimed that he and other 'working class' students necessarily needed support to advance, and that they found this support from Italy.¹⁴

As with some other Maltese artists, Cremona, too, participated, by designing a (somewhat Futuristic) postcard, in the flourish of artistic activity generated by the 1938 Diocesan Congress held to mark the anniversary of the Eucharistic Congress of 1913.¹⁵ On 10 August, 1938, Cremona, stating that he had studied drawing and painting at the Government School of Art, and that he had also been enrolled in the pre-military course at the *Regia Scuola Umberto I*, requested admission to the following academic year of study, 1938-1939, at the *Accademia di Belle Arti*, of Rome.¹⁶ (Fig. 1) In September he exhibited his works at Ellis Studios in Kingsway in Valletta¹⁷ and, in October, applied to join the first year of the painting course in Rome. He stated that he had attended the Academy of Arts in Malta for three years and that he *did not belong to the Jewish race, while professing the Roman Catholic religion*.¹⁸ This humiliating conformity with the shameful and recently introduced *Leggi Razziali*, designed to exclude Jews from Italian public life, is also found in the applications by Anton Inglott and Victor Diacono to join the *Accademia*. The *Leggi Razziali* of 1938 – strongly instigated by Nazi Germany – also indirectly affected Maltese students as they did many other persons, particularly those of Jewish descent, against whom they were mainly intended. By Cremona's time, application forms by Maltese art students to the *Accademia di Belle Arti* begin to take a servile, accommodating stance in declaring that they did not belong to the Jewish race, through either of their parents. What is to be observed is that these young artists, would have gone through the mill of four or five years' hard study at the Malta School of Arts, accompanied by personal and financial sacrifices, in order to compete for, and actually win, a scholarship to specialize in art at the *Accademia*. Accordingly, they do not seem to have been prepared to let a seemingly internal matter of Italian politics get in their way to obtaining their *Diploma di Licenza*. Their attitude, as with countless other young foreigners in Italy at the time, is to be seen as a curious mix of lack of correct information on, or indifference to, the implications of these infamous Racial Laws, in a climate of overwhelming State propaganda. They might have been urged explicitly to state that they were Aryans and not of Jewish blood, besides being of the Roman Catholic Religion, either by their superiors in Malta as a way of compromising with a regrettable state of affairs in a foreign country, and later, on admission to the Academy, by their superiors in Rome in order to reach and maintain a *modus vivendi* with things as they were.

On 16 February, 1939 Caruana Dingli again wrote to Cremona, to congratulate him on having passed his admission examinations to the *Regia Accademia*. He said he felt sure Cremona would do honour to himself and to his School,



Fig. 1. Accademia di Belle Arti application.



Fig. 2. Piazza di Spagna, Rome.

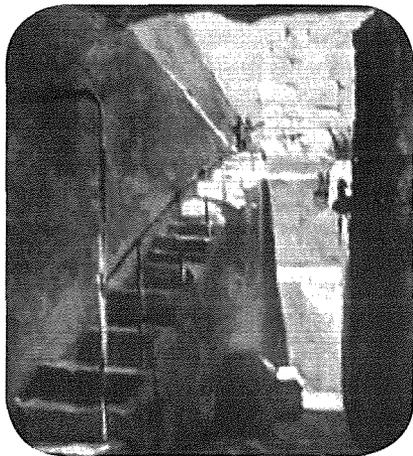


Fig. 3. Roman Cistern.

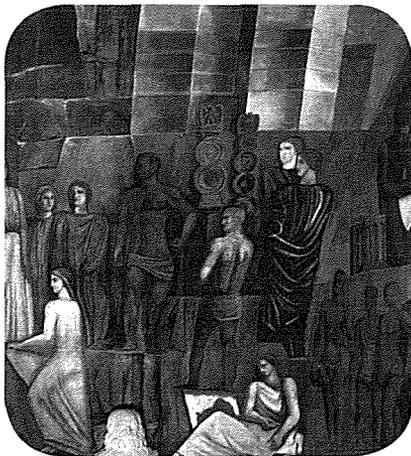


Fig. 4. Mario Sironi. Detail from the Università 'La Sapienza'.

working assiduously with zeal and intelligence. As regards the study of decoration, Cremona was to follow the same advice that his Head had given to Inglott, and which was also applicable to him. Students who studied in Rome apparently concentrated on a single figure while neglecting group compositions, analogous backgrounds and the open air. This, Caruana Dingli felt, was very necessary and should take place at least after the first two years at the Academy.¹⁹ In that same month, together with Carmelo Borg Pisani,²⁰ he exhibited at the *Prelittorali d'Arte* exhibition in Rome.²¹

Cremona was especially close to Anton Inglott, ever since their student days in Malta. In Rome they frequently painted outdoors in each other's company, in fact examples exist of works that had obviously been painted or drawn while the artists were sitting practically side by side. They also shared lodgings, and sometimes painted each other, or the interior of their apartment. In 1939 Cremona participated in the twenty-fifth Exhibition of the Malta Art Amateur Association with four paintings.²²

The literary magazine *Collezione Melitensia III Estate* featured an illustration of the *Piazza di Spagna* by Cremona with the commentary:

*"Il giovanissimo Emmanuele Vincenzo Cremona, sebbene non abbia ancora completato i suoi studi a Roma dove egli segue il corso di quella R. Accademia di Belle Arti, e' gia' artista per la sicura vocazione e per le qualita' tecniche gia' acquistate. Il suo genuino istinto pittorico gli ha permesso di tradurre la realta' secondando una sua interna visione: pittura succosa la sua che rispetta l'evidenza e la saldezza dei volumi"*²³

Cremona's two related paintings of hawkers' umbrellas at *Piazza di Spagna* (Fig. 2) illustrate his commitment to painting that was, quite perceptively, departing from mere topographical description, while cautiously approaching a form of abstraction. Warm, ochre and pastel tones are utilised for atmospheric and decorative effect while the artist's attention is mainly directed to the subtle geometrical arrangements obtained by the two different viewpoints used in these paintings. Thus the solidity of pillars and flights of steps alternates with the precariousness suggested by swaying, white sun-umbrellas and the rickety stalls bearing all kinds of colourful fish seen from above. In the *Collezione Melitensia* version of *Piazza Di Spagna*, a significant factor is the strong interplay of light and shadow that models the painting into a rich, though restrained, variety of tones of brown.

Cremona's *Tiber Scene* utilises the solid mass of the arch of a stone bridge in the background to anchor a composition that could easily have become excessively formless on account of the strong element of reflections on the river surface. This device is also used by the placement of the two boats, drying their nets, which are moored in the foreground. An effective compositional device is the placement of the two diagonal lines of the reddish rods that unite the two poles of the picture, although they are actually many metres apart across the water.

On 7 December, 1939, Cremona, while again stating that he was of Aryan race, and belonging to the Roman Catholic religion, registered for admission into the second year, 1939-1940. Next to his signature, he wrote "*godo di una borsa di studio del governo Italiano*".²⁴ This reference to an Italian government scholarship points to alternative support eventually conceded to him to make up for his missed opportunity for the British Government scholarship, and renewed in view of his impressive achievements at the *Accademia*. The fact that he was an old student of the *Umberto Primo* must have also worked in his favour with the Italian Consulate.

Probably prior to the winter of 1940²⁵ Cremona exhibited some of his most recent paintings at Valletta.²⁶ Carlo Liberto, writing as *Er Binocolo*, wrote about Cremona, giving a pen-portrait of his characteristic working and business habits as well as his dandyish appearance. His success from an early age was also remarked on:

"Pittore "enfant prodige". D'inverno studia a Roma, quindi noi lo vediamo solo d'estate: pantaloni bianchissimi, giacca color terra battuta, capelli sacramentalmente lunghi impiestrati di brillantina, fronte ampia, bocca dall'eterno sorriso. Lavora, lavora, lavora. A ottobre, prima di tornarsene a Roma, espone da Ellis. Vende. Incassa. Compra il biglietto e... addio. L'anno dopo come sopra. "Fior di banana : ogni anno c'e' una mostra di Cremona/e tutti quei lavori ch' egli espone / riscuotono successo e ammirazione"²⁷

In the same edition a reproduction of the *Cisterne Romane at Ta' Kaççatura*, Birzebbugia (fig. 3) was published, accompanied by a commentary:

"Il giovanissimo pittore, con sensibilita' di artista maturo, ha qui' saputo trarre motivo di bellezza da pochi nudi gradini scavati in un abbandonato cisterno romano. Una visione semplice e rude espressa con linguaggio preciso e sicuro."

The *Roman Cistern* is an impressive exercise in abstraction of form. The critic for the publication in question significantly notes that the artist was able to elicit "*elements of beauty*" demonstrating that appreciation of pictorial art had already moved substantially from Nineteenth century

aesthetic canons that concentrated so heavily on literal and unswerving truth to outside appearances. The reservoir's volumes are awesome, suggestive and picturesque, considering its relatively small dimensions compared to those in Rome and Constantinople. The absence of any human presence, vegetation, elements of landscape or other trappings of a conventional view painting made this an ideal subject for the artist. His yearning for artistic development appears already to have begun to lead him gradually towards an intelligent simplification of masses through modelling by light and shade. This trait was fully developed by Cremona later in his career, culminating in full abstraction.

While painting several commonplace subjects purely for their pictorial appeal, Cremona was not remain immune to the lure of the more historical landmarks of Rome. A number of views exist, some painted quite close to the artists' quarter, and include the *Piazza Del Popolo*, *Porta Flaminia* from *Trinita' dei Monti*, the *Foro Romano*, *Piazza San Pietro* and *Trinita' dei Monti*. He must also have been aware that there would be a fair demand for them in Malta at his exhibitions. In fact several patrons with a marked pro-Italian outlook acquired his paintings, which however also went to some appreciative British collectors resident in Malta. These pictures show the artist confidently tackling subjects that involved large architectural groupings. Although accurate observation was something he had been rigorously trained for, this was not, in these works, essential for its own sake. It is clear that Cremona steered well away from any Expressionistic distortions of the urban landscape as certain artists of the Scuola di Via Cavour stream of the *Scuola Romana* like Mario Mafai and Scipione, practised at the time. But then their motivations were not merely artistic: an element of protest against officially-promoted, conventional styles of art in Rome was a constant undercurrent in their work. Cremona concentrated instead on the subtleties of light which was generally more diffused than what he had been used to in Malta, and which thus brought out the mellowness of colours that was such a trademark of the Tonalist stream in Italian painting at that time, and to which he appears to have been naturally receptive.

There is a varied stylistic mix that makes up the collection of influences which appear in Cremona's work. It is clear that, during his stay in Rome, and even much later, he was well aware of the suffocating influence which Italy's domination by the Fascist party exerted on art and culture. In this respect it is understandable that he too could not but succumb to these artistic currents, to some extent, as most others did, at the time.

The Fascist ideology, as with the Communist creed elsewhere, laid great stress on the formative effect of official propaganda forcefully transmitted by public art especially murals, scenographic decorations, architecture and other forms of mass media.²⁸ *L'Arte del Regime*, as this art was generically known in Italy, cannot be clearly defined, unless by virtue of the amount of its political content. While generally overstated and melodramatic, it also showed an uneasy symbiosis with Rationalist and other Modernist trends although these were never really favoured by the regime. Some art of this period, irrespective of its content, was marked by discipline and harmony (Fig. 4) while, in a few cases, artists succumbed to unspeakable vulgarity. This kind of art was promoted in art academies²⁹ and could also be found all over Italy, in public spaces, exhibitions, books, posters and the like. Considering that some of Italy's best artists were involved, it is unlikely that Cremona would have been immune to its easy appeal. At the same time, various Modernist currents were permitted to exhibit in Italy, as in the *Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia*, the world's greatest modern art exhibition, which Cremona may have visited in 1938, and where he too was eventually to exhibit in 1958.

Mario Sironi was the most prominent artist working in Italy within the parameters of Fascist art.³⁰ He began as a Futurist painter and served in the First World War. His art is nearly always grave and monumental, rich in texture and archetypal imagery. While simultaneously practising as an easel painter, and participating in many major exhibitions, he was also responsible for designing huge, propagandist mural paintings and mosaics for numerous important public buildings. Inspired by Mussolini's concept of *Romanita'*, his public art symbolised, on one hand, the martial achievements and glories of ancient Rome while also extolling the Virgilian pastoral beauties of traditional life in Italy. His works also glorified Mussolini's achievements in Italy and the empire, technology being alternately stressed or ignored and understated in the iconography used, depending on the programmatic needs of the work in question. Among Sironi's most celebrated works were much of the design and decorations for the commemorative *Mostra Della Rivoluzione Fascista*, the mural paintings at the Aula Magna of the University of Rome, 'La Sapienza'.

Following Italy's defeat in the War, Sironi became a bitter and disillusioned man. He remained a believer in Fascism throughout his life, claiming that its ideals had been betrayed. He was initially ostracised in the post-War climate but was soon rehabilitated. His reputation eventually recovered and he has enjoyed uninterrupted prestige in the history of Italian art, being found in every Italian museum and important private collection.

In Rome, the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* was conceived as a lasting testimonial to the sacrifices and achievements of Italian Fascism from 1914. It had been inaugurated by Mussolini at the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* on 28 October 1932. The exhibition ran for two whole years and attracted over 2,800,000 visitors.³¹ It is still considered today to have been the peak of Fascist propaganda events, both for its artistic level and its content which demonstrated a strong martyrological slant. The *Mostra*, while not intending "to take historical re-evocation as a goal in itself" aimed at collecting the "most important and significant relics, photographs, pamphlets, autographs, artifacts, newspapers and publications" in order to create something "that will be deeply felt by the people in their souls, thirsting for light, love and drama".³² Its layout proceeded through twenty-three rooms that featured key issues of each year of Fascism from the First World War, ending in the *Sala del Duce* and *Sacrario dei Martiri*. The exhibition achieved extremely impressive and effective results through the poignancy of the exhibits and theatricity of their display, presented by some of the leading artists of the time.

Another major exhibition held in Rome, during Cremona's stay in that city, was the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* on the anniversary of the birth of the Emperor Augustus. This was organised at the express wishes of the Duce himself and inaugurated by him on 23 September 1937. The exhibition consisted of faithful replicas of Roman works of sculpture from all over the Mediterranean world and elsewhere, and was ultimately intended to be absorbed into the Museum of the Empire.³³ Among the great number of exhibits some works of Roman art from Malta were also included, and the significance of this fact would not have been lost on most of the Maltese visitors to the exhibition. These would have been closely drawn to Italian culture and conscious of the great cultural tug-of-war being waged by the British Government with Italy over this delicate question. The wide scope of the *Mostra Augustea* ranged from military and naval activity, legislation, architecture, public health, commerce, literature and art. It was eulogised as having been a natural prerequisite of the greatness of Rome of the Caesars, reborn during the *Risorgimento* and, in its Imperial apotheosis during the Fascist era, through the Duce's own impulse and vision.

After a decade of continuous tension, war finally broke out between England and Germany in the summer of 1939 while the Maltese art students were in Malta for their holidays. This momentous and untimely event suddenly and completely upset their plans for proper study in Rome. Most of them had had little direct and willing involvement in Italian politics, apart from occasionally

doing as the Romans did. Previously they had been welcomed and feted in Italy as theoretically belonging to an unredeemed territory of the Greater Italy. They now suddenly realised that, as British subjects, they would probably be considered to be undesirable aliens – and risk internment – should Italy fulfil its long bluff and enter the war on the side of the Axis. Italy initially held back from direct involvement, as if watching to see which way things would swing. However Mussolini had, by then, flirted too closely with Hitler for years not to be drawn into the struggle in turn.

While in Malta the Maltese students eagerly waited for developments in Italy, and thus had unavoidably to miss their admission examinations for their next year of study. However the authorities at the *Accademia* (following a request from one or more of them), allowed them to sit for their exam at a later session in order that they might resume their interrupted studies.³⁴ The *Accademia* was probably well aware of the psychological impact of the patronisingly generous favour it was about to grant.

As 1940 approached, Cremona now returned to Rome and who, as with several of his artist companions, was back at his studies, could not fail to realize that the political situation in Italy – and Rome in particular – was fast deteriorating. His position, therefore, was becoming somewhat ambivalent. As with all Maltese parents, Cremona's were very concerned at their son's increasingly precarious position as a potential enemy alien in Italy during wartime. Carlo Liberto, who at the time worked in the Consular section of the Italian Consulate in Malta - besides also being a good personal friend of the artist's – remembered the constant entreaties he received from Cremona's parents to speed his return from Rome:

"Quando si presentava l'entrata in guerra dell'Italia, il padre di Cremona veniva spesso in Consolato ad implorarmi di fare il possibile per far rimpatriare suo figlio da Roma. E con l'aiuto del Console Generale il problema era stato risolto."³⁵

Cremona accordingly returned to Malta with Inglott.³⁶

The Malta Art Amateur Association organised an art exhibition at the Palace Armoury in Valletta and inaugurated on 10 November, 1941 at the height of the war.³⁷ The exhibition included oil paintings and landscapes, watercolours, pencil and pen and ink drawings, photography, leatherwork, woodcarving, sculpture and modelling.³⁸ The characterisation in the portraits Cremona exhibited in the 'Professional' section, was favourably noted.³⁹ He also had a personal exhibition at the British Institute, then at the Auberge D'Aragon in Valletta, in 1943.⁴⁰

Once Emvin Cremona had been conscripted into the Allied war effort his conspicuous talents as an artist were not unnoticed, although he had to turn his hand to the most unlikely occupations. He is said to have been engaged in designing "*ingenious camouflage for gun-emplacements around the Maltese shores*".⁴¹ One feels, however, that he must have somewhat welcomed (or, at least, been resigned to) such unexpected uses of his talents as a good way of keeping in some form of painterly practice, besides also as very good therapy and release from the tensions of wartime. Cremona served in the army for four years and "*on several occasions (he) produced scenery and other artistic settings for E.N.S.A*".⁴² During the War, he was also commissioned to restore various heraldic emblems at the Main Guard in Palace Square, Valletta.⁴³ Whenever his rigid schedule permitted Cremona as with other artists also painted more appealing subjects showing sacred or everyday scenes, possibly to remind themselves and their audience, that the war would some day end, and they could start to rebuild their lives anew.

The Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce organised its Second Biennial Exhibition of Sacred Art at its premises in 1945, at the end of the war. Besides Cremona it also featured a good number of the painters and sculptors who had studied in Rome during the 1930's.⁴⁴ The Society, which had been one of the mainstays of art education and patronage in Malta for many decades, appears to have chosen precisely the theme of sacred art as an act of thanksgiving for the successful conclusion of the war. Cremona soon after took part in another exhibition held, under austere post-War conditions, by the M.A.A. at the Palace Armoury, in October 1945.⁴⁵

In 1945 and 1946 Cremona took the astute step of continuing his interrupted professional studies not in Rome, but in London.⁴⁶ This shift may not have taken place entirely by chance: it is likely that in the 'cultural purge' which took place in Malta after the War, the authorities may have urged a number of Maltese artists to look towards Britain as a new horizon where to seek advanced studies.⁴⁷ In London, where he studied at the renowned Slade School of Art, he found the students to be outstanding draughtsmen but indifferent colourists, who marvelled at his work. He also prepared himself for his first major church decoration, namely the continuation and conclusion of the cycle of paintings in Msida parish church which had been started by Anton Ingloft with his monumental *Death of St Joseph*, but which he had not lived to complete.⁴⁸ In London he would have had his first personal experience of a cultural climate far more up-to-date with current trends than Rome ever was.

Cremona stayed in Paris for a short period of a few months, studying at the *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts*. Although he had already felt its influences previously, the period spent with Jean Dupas, a famous painter and decorator from the *Art Deco* movement of the 1930's, further reinforced this attraction for stylisation.⁴⁹ Dupas' mannered style influenced Cremona for a brief period following his return to Malta, since it ran parallel with his attraction to Medievalizing trends he had shared with Inglott, and which appeared briefly in his sacred art. At the same time his stay in Paris clearly exposed Cremona to the most contemporary trends of abstraction then finally coming into their own.

The presence of Cav. Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969), as a major influence on the progress of Cremona's career, especially related to the Church, can be sensed throughout the 1960's. Bonello, a staunch Italophile and art-historian of international recognition, had been the founder of the Art Section of the Malta Museum.⁵⁰ He gave the collection a strong Latin, and particularly Italian, Baroque character as his form of passive cultural resistance to the British colonial – and Protestant – administration.⁵¹ Not surprisingly he was eventually dismissed by the Museum for alleged pro-Italian activities, which were never satisfactorily proven. Together with a large number of fellow pro-Italians, he was later interned in Malta in 1940 and exiled to Uganda in 1942 when his presence in Malta during wartime was officially considered to be too dangerous for public order.⁵² Although Bonello was a conservative in matters of art,⁵³ he was quite aware of modern developments in Italy, as his Rationalistic *Tribuna* during the 1938 Eucharistic Congress shows.⁵⁴ Bonello was never re-instated in his Museum post but made a living designing church architecture, furniture and decorations in a variety of antique styles, and is acknowledged as having been the main advisor on art to Archbishop Gonzi.

Cremona, who subsequently came to dominate the field of Church art, cautiously managed to introduce into Maltese church ceilings increasingly novel stylistic devices, most probably inspired by Mario Sironi's, and other, monumental propagandist murals which had been so prominent and influential during Cremona's Roman years. The substitution of machine guns, ploughshares and *fasci littori* by crosses and the palms of martyrdom, and the retention and development of monumental poses and broad compositions, made Cremona's bold, apparent, departure from the Baroque generally successful, since the differences between the two styles were not essentially that many. It is acknowledged that much had to be compromised to meet the suffocating demands of parish priests and patrons. Cremona's style was also successfully carried over into his parallel work in philately where he is even credited with introducing certain innovations.



Fig. 5. Piazza d el Plebiscito.

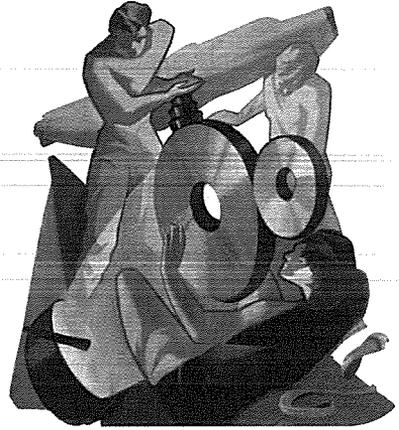


Fig. 6. Allegory of the Cinema.



Fig. 7. Knights' Hall decorations.

Sironi's monumentality and 'gravitas', together with decorative traits from certain other artists of the period, start appearing in Cremona's work already in the 1950's, in both figurative and abstract work, which Cremona largely pioneered in Malta. A painting of *Piazza del Plebiscito* in Naples (1949) is heavily charged with majestic character. (Fig. 5) The life-sized *Allegory of the Cinema*, c.1953, (Fig. 6) and the small *Baptism of Christ*, 1951, already show a clear tendency for angular composition and massive forms for which Sironi must have been one of the likelier inspirations. In 1949 Cremona, then Teacher of painting at the School of Art, was commissioned to create a number of painted decorations to cover certain War-damaged and unsightly areas of the Knights' Hall in Valletta, then functioning as a theatre. The artist engaged a number of his students,⁵⁵ included Joseph Caruana, Tony Pace, Louis Wirth and Helen Cavagna, to paint these panels to his designs. (Fig. 7) Several of these panels are recorded and show them to be allegories of the arts, including various symbols and attributes. Cremona borrowed certain motifs and stylistic traits from paintings by artists from the second wave of the Italian Futurist movement, the *Secondo Futurismo*. This movement, following the aerial battles of the First World War and simultaneously with Mussolini's African campaigns, also practised a panoramic interpretation of this dynamic style known as *Aeropittura*. There are references to a mural and installation by Enrico Prampolini for the *Mostra del Dopolavoro* of 1938 in Rome, (Fig. 8) another by Gino Severini for the same occasion, characterised by the easy legibility of the clearly identifiable, traditional subjects.

Since, already by the early Fifties, Cremona had clearly shown his versatility in both the fine and applied art, his graphic style was well in demand. He designed a number of covers for the annual Malta International Trade Fair, whose style again harks back to Italian artists whose work he had assimilated in his Roman years. (Fig. 9) These covers have a common trait of being treated either from a high viewpoint or of featuring their subject suspended and animated in thin air. Thus *Aeropittura* was again referred to for its adaptability to this particular artistic requirement. When a public competition was held in the early Fifties for a fountain outside Valletta, and which was eventually won by Vincent Apap, Cremona submitted at least three proposals, all having clearly pre-war Roman inspiration. (Fig. 10) One drawing, showing a high pylon covered with rows of hieratic figures in high relief, harks to a pre-War project by Sironi for a *Casa Littoria* (Fig. 11).

The Pauline Celebrations of 1960

The culmination of Cremona's Sironi-inspired style may be said to have been the numerous decorations and graphic works designed for the Pauline anniversary celebrations held in Malta in 1960. Some form of grand commemorative event would undoubtedly have been held to celebrate the coming of St Paul to Malta. However this occasion also neatly coincided with a moment of particularly acute ideological struggle between the Maltese Church and the Malta Labour Party. Besides several minor issues the wider bone of contention was whether post-War Malta should become a secular state, (restraining the Church within defined parameters) and thus join the 'modern' world, or retain her previous filial submission to the Church, even in matters arguably deemed to be of exclusively civil import. At the time of the McCarthyite hysteria in the United States of America, the threat of a Communist takeover of Malta was perceived to be imminent and Reds were believed to lurk under every pious Maltese bed.

In these Church-organized celebrations Cremona's art was omnipresent.⁵⁶ Its bold, indeed martial, character was perfectly suited both to the religious fervour and the tense political climate of the times. By 1960 the situation in Malta had changed forever. Similarly Sironian influences are apparent in Cremona's postage stamps, the cover for the official English-language programme of the Centenary (Fig. 12) (especially Sironi's poster for the *Mostra Della Rivoluzione Fascista* of 1932) (Fig. 13), a mural on the arrival of Count Roger who re-Christianized Malta in 1091, the illustrations for Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini's Pauline drama *L'Araldo di Cristo* of 1960, (fig. 14) the interior designs especially created for much of the Catholic Institute in Floriana, in the pre-War style which Cremona would be familiar with.

Ironically, Malta's main Pauline icon, the statue of St Paul by Melchiorre Caffa, created in Rome during a period of counter-Reformation triumphalism, shows the apostle preaching, not waging war. Not so with Cremona. The soaring figure of St Paul, sword in hand, accordingly appeared frequently in Cremona's art of this period, but never as boldly as in the front cover of the commemorative issue of the Church's newspaper *Lehen is-Sewwa* (The Voice Of Truth).⁵⁷ (Fig. 15) Graphically designed and majestically composed in cubistic, jagged lines and strident colours, this iconic image is straight out of a Sironi mural, and no less rousingly effective in its message. References to other probable sources as a cover to a Fascist youth manual, a Fascist party magazine, *Gerarchia*, (Fig. 16) and a postcard signed '*Tato*', (Fig. 17) (of which Mussolini personally endorsed the design), give the image added, and unambiguous, historical significance.

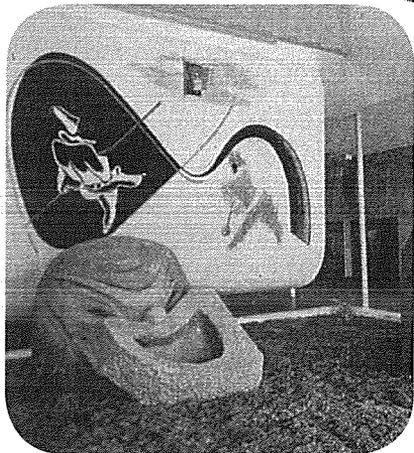
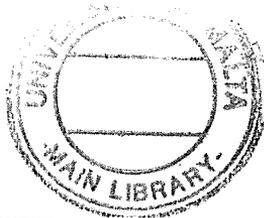


Fig. 8. Enrico Prampolini. Padiglione del Dopolavoro.



Fig. 9. Malta Trade Fair programme.

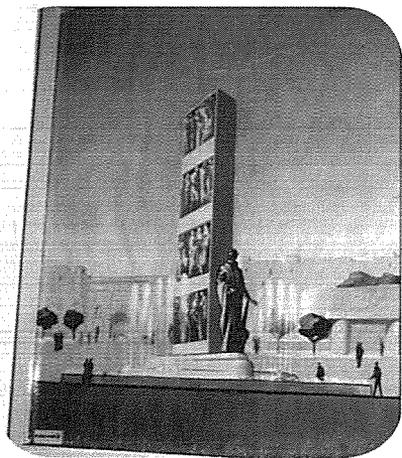


Fig. 10. City Gate Fountain project.

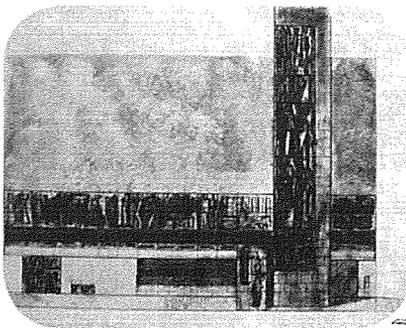


Fig. 11. Mario Sironi. Project for a Casa Littoria.

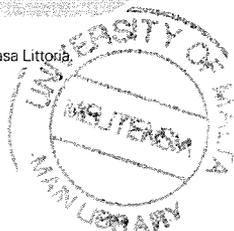




Fig. 12. St Paul's anniversary celebrations programme cover.



Fig. 13. Mario Sironi, Poster for the Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista.

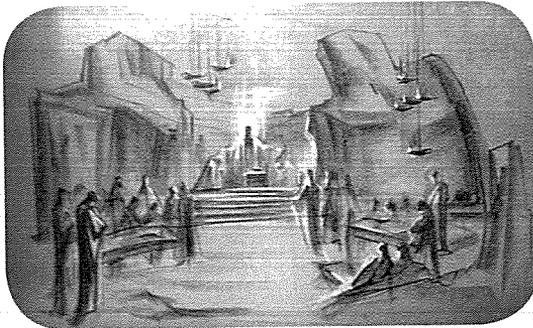


Fig. 14. Illustrations for V. M. Pellegrini's *L'Araldo d* (1).



Fig. 15. Cover for the special edition of the Lehen is-Sewwa.



Fig. 16. Mario Sironi, cover for Gerarchia, 1925.



Fig. 17. Postcard by 'Tato'.



Fig. 18. Madonna of Aviation-1965.



Fig. 19. Impasro abstract. H.S.B.C. Head Office.

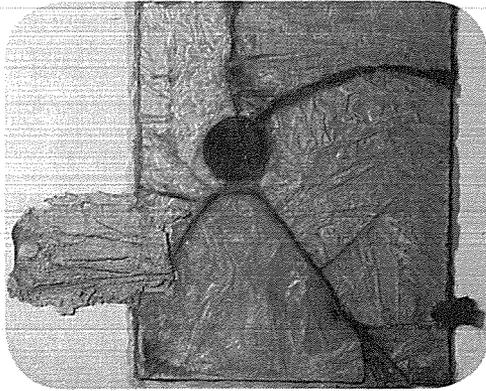


Fig. 20. Impasto M209.69. National Museum of Fine Arts.

Cremona's participation in the Pauline anniversary celebrations indelibly marked his decorative style, especially in the field of church painting which he came to dominate for the next two decades.⁵⁹ His geometrically abstracted figures remained to the fore while the previous Fascist influence, and martial poses, were suppressed, since the need for them was largely past. He adopted a more decorative approach using ingeniously invented orchestrations of colour, black and gold which held their own in the predominantly Baroque surroundings of Malta's churches. In fact, he frequently had to bend over backwards to accommodate the narrow, and generally uninformed, requirements of his patrons. It is clear that his genuine aspirations were to create a church art that was modern yet authentically devotional, while moving forward from the early days of his artistic partnership with Anton Inglott. (Fig. 18) Cremona's art for Maltese churches is among the very best of its kind, but it is not his best achievement, a fact he ruefully admitted.⁵⁹ Thankfully, he was simultaneously creating his 'Impasto' paintings and later his 'Broken Glass' collages. Apart from their many merits, the Impastos frequently have a marked commercial undercurrent, revealing itself in references to Malta's glorious past manifested in the period of the Knights of St John, the Church, as well as its folklore. The fact of their being created around the time of Malta's achievement of Independence, with the revived sense of national identity among artists, might justify this frequent reference to certain subjects. Cremona's technique in these pictures, probably developed simultaneously with related textural work by Antoine Camilleri, was the most adventurous seen in Malta. He used gravel, sand, plaster, glass and other materials integrated into his pictures but, although the technique was progressive, in line with *Arte Povera*, and contemporary trends, the atmosphere and content was generally conservative, and referred chromatically to Mario Sironi in its gravity and solemnity.

His Impasto abstracts, on the other hand, are in a class of their own, where he could work with complete autonomy. (Fig. 19) They relate to the international school best epitomised by Antoni Tapies and Alberto Burri who used burnt and torn plastics, textiles, junk and gravel in their paintings.⁶⁰ Cremona's pictures are the natural precursors to his greatest achievement, the 'Broken Glass' collage paintings, which took the Maltese art-world by storm in 1969. (Fig. 20) They revealed the breadth of his character: a believer who was also affected by the bleakness of the future of Mankind. While Cremona was, by then, a fully developed artist at the height of his maturity, the underlying linear organization and thematic gravity imbibed from Sironi can still be sensed. It survived in his work and adapted itself to changing stylistic circumstances,

retaining its grandiosity yet being masterfully assimilated into Cremona's most essential style at the culmination of his career.

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NOTES

- ¹ This lecture was delivered at the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* on 14th October and the *Casino Maltese* on 17th December, 2008.
- ² Baptismal certificate (26.9.1938), Parish Church of Porto Salvo, Valletta, *Accademia di Belle Arti, Roma*, 'arch., Cremona first cited in Dennis Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome, 1930-1940*, unpublished Master of Arts dissertation, (University of Malta, 1999).
- ³ See Carmel Farrugia, *Polluted Politics (Background to the deportation of Maltese Nationals in 1942)*, (Malta, 1995), 31.
- ⁴ Notes of Interview by Dominic Cutajar, 30th March, 1979.
- ⁵ Emmanuel Fiorentino, 'Ervin Cremona: a leading artist of the Twentieth century', *Treasures of Malta*, Summer, 1997.
- ⁶ On Willie Apap see Edward Sammut "Willie Apap, His Life and Times" in *Willie Apap:1918-1970*, Exhibition Catalogue, Friends of the Cathedral Museum, (Malta, 1984), Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome*; Emmanuel Fiorentino & Louis Grasso, *Willie Apap, 1918-1970*, (Malta, 1993); Dennis Vella, *Willie Apap, The Conspiracy Trial Drawings*, (Malta, 2005).
- ⁷ On Inglott see John Azzopardi, ed., *Anton Inglott, 1915-1945*, Friends of the Cathedral Museum, (Malta, 1988); Emmanuel Fiorentino, *Anton Inglott, 1915-1945, His Life and Work*, (Malta, 2002), Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome, 1930-1940*.
- ⁸ On Barthes see Mario Azzopardi, 'Esprit Barthes, L-Arti Tieghu', (Malta, 1973); Dennis Vella, *Esprit Barthes Portraits*, (Malta, 2000); Emmanuel Fiorentino, *Esprit Barthes, retrospective exhibition catalogue*, (Malta, 2001).
- ⁹ On Diacono see Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome, 1930-1940*; Joseph Paul Cassar, *The artistic life of Victor Diacono*, (University of Malta, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Dominic Cutajar, "Ervin Cremona", in V. Fenech, ed., in *Malta: Six Modern Artists*, (Malta, 1991), 73.
- ¹¹ Carmelo Attard Cassar, *Exhibition of Maltese Art at the British Institute*, (1946), 17.
- ¹² Letter by courtesy of Anna Azzopardi Cremona, c. 1995.
- ¹³ Cutajar, "Ervin Cremona", 73.
- ¹⁴ Verbal communication to Mr Laurence Mizzi, cited in L. Mizzi, *Ghall-holma ta' hajtu*, (Malta, 1983) 29.
- ¹⁵ Postcard made available by Judge Giovanni Bonello (13.2.1997) who states that a Maltese artist contemporary of Cremona, and who later emigrated to England, made this attribution. See G. Bonello, "An International Dictionary of Artists who painted Maltese Postcards", *The Sunday Times*, 18.10.1992, 33-36 and 25.10.1992, 39-41.
- ¹⁶ Application, (65, *Strada Saluto* [Battery Street] Valletta), *A.B.A.R. arch.* Cremona.
- ¹⁷ *Collezione Melitensia II, Estate 1939*, 33.
- ¹⁸ Application, (89, Via del Babuino, Roma), *A.B.A.R., arch.* Cremona.
- ¹⁹ Letter, (16.02.1939) *A.B.A.R. arch.* Cremona.
- ²⁰ On Borg Pisani see especially Mizzi, *ghall-holma ta' hajtu*, and *Il-Kaz Borg Pisani*, (Malta,2003) and Dennis Vella,

'Busts of Carmelo Borg Pisani discovered in Rome', *The Sunday Times*.

²¹ *Collezione Melitensia II, Estate 1939*, 34.

²² Malta Art Amateur Association Catalogue, 1939. On the M.A.A.A. see Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome, 1930-1940*.

²³ (The young Emmanuel Vincent Cremona, while still to complete his studies at the *Regia Accademia di Belle Arti*, is already an artist for his firm vocation and the technical skills at his command. His authentic pictorial instinct has allowed him to transform reality, following his inner vision. His is a luscious kind of painting that respects the evidence and solidity of volumes.) *Collezione Melitensia III Estate, 1939*, 28a.

²⁴ Application, (*Pensione Lombarda, Via Del Babuino 89*), A.B.A.R. arch. Cremona.

²⁵ *Collezione Melitensia II, Estate 1939*, 43.

²⁶ Carlo Liberto, letter to the author, 5.11.1993. The Consul General for Italy, Canino, had purchased a picture of *Boats at Marsaxlokk*.

²⁷ (An 'enfant prodige' painter. He studies in Rome in winter, so we only see him during summer: brilliant white trousers, an earth-coloured jacket, sacramentally long hair plastered with brillantine, wide forehead and a mouth with an eternal smile. He works, and works, and works. In October, prior to returning to Rome, he exhibits at Ellis. He sells, the money comes in, he buys his ticket and good bye. The following year, as with the one before. Banana flower, every year there is a Cremona exhibition and all those works he exhibits attract success and admiration.)
Collezione Melitensia, IV, Antologia, Inverno, 1940, 12a.

²⁸ See Tim Benton, Simonetta Fraquelli, Lutz Becker, Ester Coen and John Willett in David Britt, ed., *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1940*, (Thames and Hudson, 1995).

²⁹ Ferruccio Pasqui, *Scuole d'arte in Italia, Quaderni della Triennale*, (Hoepli, 1937), XV.

³⁰ See Emily Braun, ed, *Italian Art in the Twentieth Century*, (Prestel, 1989); Vittorio Sgarbi, *Mario Sironi: Gli anni della solitudine, 1940-1960*, (Mondadori, 2004).

³¹ See Maria Stone, "Staging Fascism: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28 (1993), 215-243, esp. 217-226 for the *Mostra's* design, (SAGE).

³² ACS, PNF, *direttorio - Ufficio Stralcio, busta 273, fac. 'Edoardo Alfieri'* cited in *ibid.*, 216.

³³ Foreword by Giulio Quirino Giglioli, Exhibition catalogue, *Mostra Augustea della Romanita'*, 2nd edition, xv, (Rome, 1937), Gift of Dr Goffredo Randon, (one of the many Maltese students in Rome at that time), to the Cathedral Museum, Mdina,. The front cover of this catalogue carries an annotation in pencil referring to Roman works of Maltese provenance.

³⁴ Letter from Rivosecchi to Carmelo Borg Pisani, (11.10.1939, XVII), A.B.A.R. *Fascicolo Anno Scolastico 1939 XVII-1940 XVIII*, cited in M.Ellul, *op. cit.*, 21.

³⁵ (When Italy appeared to be about to enter the War, Cremona's father frequently came to the Consulate to beg me to do what could be done to bring back his son from Rome. The problem was soon resolved with the help of the Consul General.) C. Liberto, letter to the author, 5.11.1993.

³⁶ Verbal communication from Mrs Mary Inglott.

³⁷ *T.O.M.* 10.11.1941, 3.

³⁸ "Art exhibition at the Palace", by E.P.R.D., *T.O.M.*, 14.11.1941, 3.

³⁹ John Lascelles, "Tribute to Maltese Art", Correspondence, *T.O.M.*, 3.12.1941, 2.

⁴⁰ D. Cutajar, E. Fiorentino, *op. cit.*, 273.

⁴¹ D.Cutajar, "Emvin Cremona", 74.

⁴² Attard Cassar, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁴³ Information kindly supplied by Capt. C. Adrian Strickland, K.M.

⁴⁴ *Sacred Art Exhibition, 1945*, Exhibition catalogue, the M.S.A.M.C., 1945.

⁴⁵ *Catalogue*, Malta Art Association, Malta, 1945, n.p. The exhibition was also reviewed on the *T.O.M.*, 11.10.1945, (reference kindly provided by Mr Dominic Cutajar).

⁴⁶ Edward Sammut, biographical outline, *Malta Cultural Institute* exhibition, 1952.

⁴⁷ Dominic Cutajar, 'A Travailed Ascent to Modernity,' in V. Mallia Milanese (ed.), *The British Colonial Experience, 1800-1964*, Mireva, 1988; D. Vella, *Maltese Artists in Rome, 1930-1940*, 269.

⁴⁸ Letter to Dr Edward Vassallo, 1946, private collection, Malta

⁴⁹ See Edward Lucie Smith, *Art Deco Painting*, Phaidon.

⁵⁰ On Bonello see especially Stephanie Vella, *Vincenzo Bonello as a pioneer in Maltese art history and criticism*, unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation, (University of Malta, 1997).

- ⁵¹ Dennis Vella, *The David Elyan donation of 'School Print' lithographs to the National Museum of Fine Arts, Malta*, (Malta, 2001).
- ⁵² Herbert Ganado, *Rajt' Malta Tinbidel*, Arturo Mercieca, *Le Mie Vicende*, 1947, Max Farrugia, *L-Internament u l-Eżifju Matul l-Ahhar Gwerra*, (Malta, 2007).
- ⁵³ See John Azzopardi, (ed.) *Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) Designer of ecclesiastical objets d'art and architectural works*, Wignacourt Museum, 2006.
- ⁵⁴ See *Primo Congresso Eucaristico Diocesano Maltese, Aprile 1939*, Commemorative programme *Tipografia Casa S. Giuseppe*, (Malta, 1939).
- ⁵⁵ V. M. Pellegrini, *La Crociata*, January, 1950.
- ⁵⁶ The official logogram of the event was however created by Frank Portelli who also designed part of the Pauline exhibition in the Catholic Institute.
- ⁵⁷ For the most recent study of the 'Maltese' iconography of St Paul see Guglielmo De Giovanni-Centelles, 'Elementi Mediteranei Nell' Iconografia Di San Paolo' in John Azzopardi (ed), *The Cult of Saint Paul in the Christian Churches and in the Maltese Tradition*, (Malta, 2006), 64, 65.
- ⁵⁸ Cremona's church painting is comprehensively discussed especially in Richard England, 'Ervin Cremona' in P. Serracino Inglott, (ed.), 1973; Dominic Cutajar, 'The art of Ervin Cremona', *Annual Report*, (Malta, 1985); D. Cutajar, *Malta: Six Modern Artists*; E. Fiorentino, 'Ervin Cremona: a leading artist of the Twentieth century', and Mark Sagona, 'Ervin Cremona (1919-1987) and the rise of modern sensibilities in Maltese sacred art' in *Treasures of Malta*, Summer, 2008.
- ⁵⁹ Dominic Cutajar, *Malta: Six Modern Artists*.
- ⁶⁰ Dennis Vella, *Antoine Camilleri: Pictures in Clay*, (Malta, 2008), 13.