







Fig. 1  
*View of Bigbi.*  
(Gennadius Library, Athens)

# Joannes Gennadius and his collection of Maltese watercolours

Arnold Cassola uncovers an interesting selection of watercolours in a library in Athens

Joannes Gennadius 'was born in Athens in 1844, the son of the erudite Georgios Gennadius and Artemis Benizelou, studied at the English-language Protestant College of Malta and the Lyceum of Christos Vaphas in Athens and then sought a commercial career in London.'<sup>1</sup> Joannes's father died in 1854, when Joannes was ten years old. At this point in his life, Joannes was taken under the custody of John Henry Hill (1791–1882), an American missionary who ensured that the young Joannes received an excellent educational formation at the Protestant College of Malta.<sup>2</sup>

This means that Joannes must have come to Malta around 1854–1855, aged 10–11, and possibly stayed there until the age of 13 (1857). Indeed, the Protestant College of Malta catered for boys from the age of 8 at school level and from the age of 15 at college level.<sup>3</sup> In Malta, they could receive a 'more complete education, with the view to becoming teachers themselves.'<sup>4</sup> However, in reality, the students eventually found 'a readier and more immediate employment as interpreters, or in commerce and other avocations',<sup>5</sup> as was eventually to be the case with Joannes.

Arnold Cassola, academic and politician, is a professor at the University of Malta and has also been invited as guest lecturer in many foreign universities. He is the author/editor of numerous books on the history, literature, language and culture of Malta, Maltese migration in Sicily, the cultural relationship between Malta and Italy, as well as of books on Green politics in Malta and Europe. In his latest book, *Süleyman the Magnificent and Malta 1565*, Cassola utilizes exclusively primary Ottoman sources (1564–1566), supplemented by contemporary evidence based on Balbi di Correggio's 1568 diary in Spanish, to recount the 1565 Great Siege of Malta in a different way, i.e. from Süleyman the Magnificent's perspective.



Fig. 2-3  
Two untitled drawings of the Grand Harbour.  
(Gennadius Library, Athens)

I am assuming that Joannes did not attend the Malta Protestant College after 1857 because Joannes's name is not to be found in the list of students for the years 1857–1858 given in the eighth report of the Malta Protestant College, which focuses on those years.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace the earlier reports on the Malta Protestant College, which would have provided information on the students enrolled at the College in previous years.

What is certain is that, after leaving Malta, he first attended the Lyceum in Athens, where he concluded his studies. By 1862, when he was 18 years old, he had moved to London to start his commercial career. It is therefore quite

plausible that Gennadius studied in Malta between 1854/55 and 1857, before continuing his studies in Athens from 1857/58 to 1862.

### The Gennadius Library

The Gennadius Library, a treasure trove of books, manuscripts, archives, and works of art documenting the heritage of Hellenism since the end of antiquity, is housed in a stately marble building on the slopes of Mount Lycabettus. It was named 'Gennadeion' in





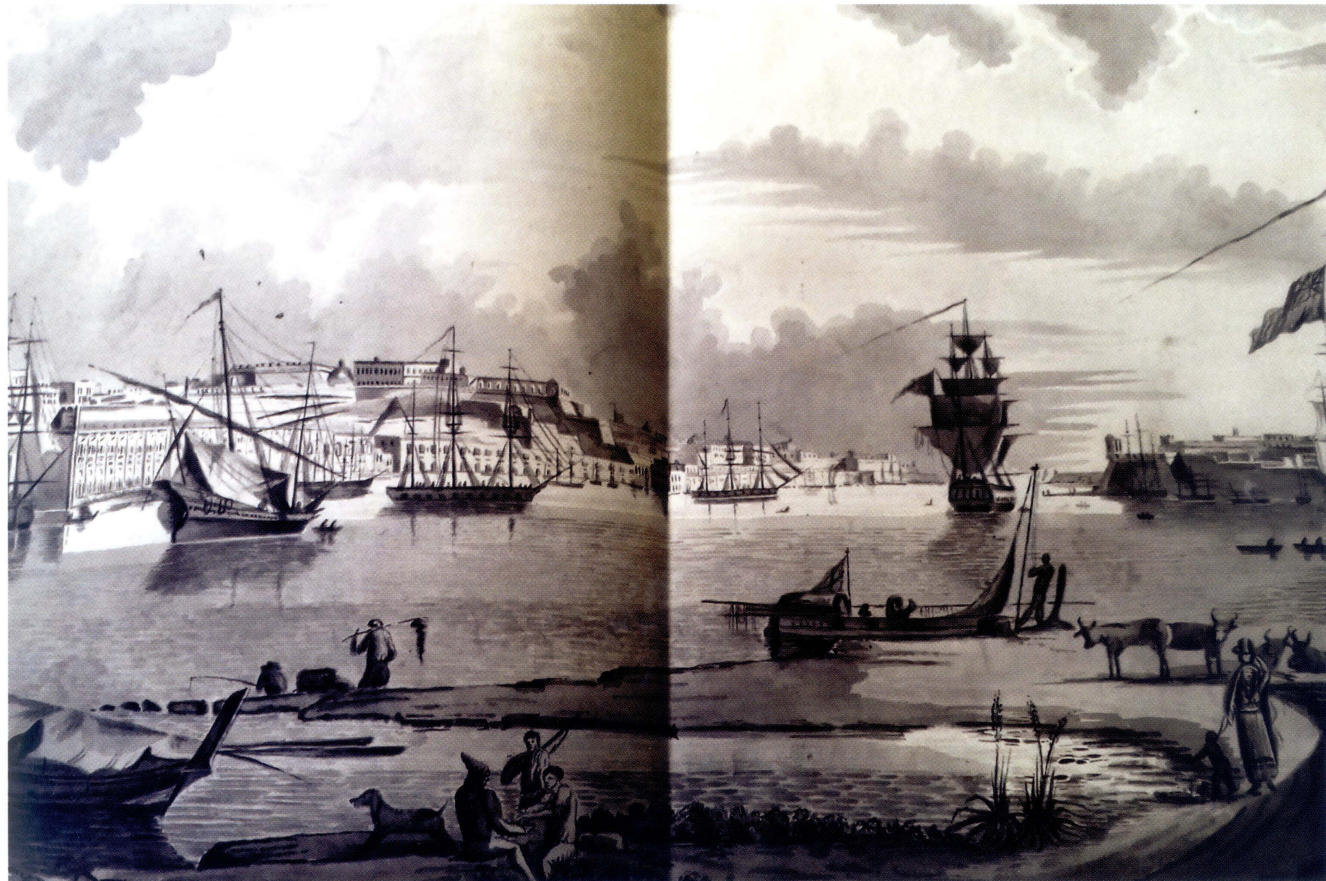
pious memory of the founder's father, George Gennadius (1786–1854) but it is equally a memorial to the founder himself, Joannes Gennadius (1844–1932), for the library that he created is a fitting symbol of his whole career. A diplomat, scholar, and bibliophile, he was always motivated first and foremost by a passionate devotion to Greece.

The core of the collection consists of John Gennadius's 26,000-book personal library, which he formally offered to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens to house and maintain in 1922. The conditions of the deed of gift were that the collection would

be housed separately, that it would remain in Greece, and that the Library would be available to the scholars of all nations. The Carnegie Corporation generously undertook to provide the building and the Greek government provided a site adjacent to the American and British Schools.<sup>7</sup>

### The Scrapbooks

Today, the number of books at the Gennadius Library has increased, and totals over 115,000 volumes. Amongst





below and opposite: Fig. 4-7  
 Untitled watercolour; *Wignacourt Water Tower*;  
*Ricasoli point in a calm*; St Paul's Street, Valletta (detail).  
 (Gennadius Library, Athens)



the holdings, one finds 116 volumes of scrapbooks which Joannes Gennadius scrupulously put together in the course of his lifetime.

The scrapbooks of Joannes Gennadius are one of the most important collections of the Gennadius library, because they contain invaluable information for the history of modern Greece. In his scrapbooks, Gennadius collected photos and other ephemera (clippings from newspapers and books, engravings, printed matter, broadsides, invitations and many other materials). The 116 volumes of the scrapbooks focus on diverse topics: historical, topographical, archaeological, ethnological (costumes), architectural, art historical, history of the book, journalistic as well as the Gennadius family. Each volume consists on average of 60-70 pages of large size.<sup>8</sup>

In reality, the scrapbooks do not only concern the history of Greece. In fact, one of these scrapbook volumes, the one catalogued as Scrapbook Φ 57, contains a number of watercolour drawings that are of great interest to the Maltese.

#### Scrapbook Φ 57

Scrapbook Φ 57 belongs to the subject category *Τοπιογραφία* [Topography] and was compiled by Joannes Gennadius. The box contains three folders of maps, plans, engravings, various illustrations, engravings on fabric, newspaper clippings, photographs, watercolour drawings and miscellaneous publications. The contents include 'T.1: Scrapbook of maps and views of Dalmatia, the Danube region, Black Sea, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia. 94 leaves -- T.2: Scrapbook of views in Malta, Sicily and S. Italy. 60 leaves -- T.3: Greek Orthodox churches in the West.'<sup>9</sup>







Fig. 8-11  
*Looking out of the Great Harbour during a Gregale; Fort Ricasoli;  
 Fort St Angelo View in Gregale; Ricasoli Point, Great Harbour,  
 during a Gregale.*  
 (Gennadius Library, Athens)



Indeed, the second of these folders numbers sixty-four pages in total and contains 209 illustrations, prints, drawings and so forth, and deals with various landscapes in Sicily, Greece, Italy, Turkey and Malta. There are twenty-one pages devoted to prints and watercolours of Malta and three pages to prints of the Ġgantija Temples in Gozo. The watercolour illustrations of Malta number eleven in all, two of which are in black and white. There is no indication at all of the artist of these paintings and indeed only five of them are given a title, written in pencil at the bottom of the drawings. Neither is the date of execution indicated. However, internal evidence

within folder nr. 2 points to a possible pre-1857 dating of these illustrations. Could this possibly, though not necessarily, imply that the paintings were acquired by the 12-13-year-old Joannes during his stay in Malta between 1854/55-1857?

#### The two black and white drawings

The two black and white watercolours, both untitled, present detailed views of Grand Harbour. The first being a view of the Cottonera side from Valletta, near the old *pixkerija* (fish



market), with Bighi seen on its promontory, whilst the second portrayed another view of the Cottonera side of the harbour, always seen from Valletta, with Fort St Angelo and Senglea in the foreground.

The artist's eye for minute detail is very evident. In the first aquarelle, apart from the obvious presence of ships, *dghajjes* and other vessels, typical of harbour scenes, the artist portrays people strolling on the quay, grilling fish, loading and unloading wares whilst a man and two women in *ghonnelli* are watching over their children seated on the quay at the water's edge; another man is riding a donkey in the direction of what was Del Monte Gate, today replaced by the Victoria Gate. In the second drawing the fine details highlight a hunter and his dog, two persons playing 'morra' or some other game, fishermen with their fishing rods, a couple and their child strolling along the sandy shore and cows on the foreshore, looking inquisitively at the artist.

A detail in the first drawing gives a definitive *ante quem* dating to these works. In fact, to the right of the whole scene, one can easily identify the statue of Neptune, which had been erected in the Valletta fish market in 1615 on the orders of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt. This statue was removed from its original place in the *pixkerija* in 1861 by Governor Le Marchand and transferred to the Grand Master's Palace courtyard in Valletta, where it is still to be found today. This means that these two drawings must have certainly been painted before 1861, thus reinforcing my original belief that they were acquired during young Joannes's stay in Malta.

### The nine coloured watercolours

Eight of the nine coloured watercolours are all of the same style, tone of colour and inspiration and therefore, I would say, attributable to the same artist. Three of them are untitled, but the other five are given the following titles in pencil at the bottom of each picture: *Ricasoli point in a calm*, *Fort St Angelo*

*View in Gregale*, *Looking out of the Great Harbour during a Gregale*, *Fort Ricasoli and Ricasoli Point, Great Harbour, during a Gregale*.

The first of the three untitled drawings portrays the *Wignacourt Water Tower*, built in the town of Floriana, suburb of Valletta, in 1615 by the architect from Bologna, Vittorio Bontadini, better known as Bontadino dei Bontadini. The second one is a *View of Bighi*, from across the harbour in Valletta. Bighi was the British Naval Hospital located in the village of Kalkara. Its foundation stone was laid on 23 March 1830 and it started operating in 1832. The third drawing consists of a view of the Marsa-Valletta side of Grand Harbour, comprising Pinto Wharf, as seen from the Cottonera side.

The recurrent theme in these eight drawings – with the exception of the *Wignacourt Water Tower* drawing – is that, together with the two black and white drawings, they all depict different facets of the Grand Harbour, in Malta. Gennadius must have been fascinated by the bustling human activity on the Valletta side of the port, which acted in symbiosis with the beauty of the monumental architecture on the opposite side and the mystery of nature and its elements, represented by the calm or choppy seas that separate the two sides of the natural harbour facing each other.

Unfortunately, a definite attribution of these eight colour gouaches to any particular artist is difficult as they are not signed, unless there is a signature on the back of the paintings. However, this would be impossible to access since the images are glued to the scrapbook folios. Judge Giovanni Bonello has suggested to me that the drawings could possibly be the work of the nineteenth-century Maltese artists Michele Bellanti (1807–1883) or one of the Schranz brothers. Indeed, views of the Grand Harbour, the Wignacourt aqueduct and the Bighi Hospital were popular motifs for Bellanti whilst Giovanni Schranz (1794–1882), a renowned naval painter, is more associated with depictions of the Grand Harbour.

Incidentally, the Gennadius collection has three works by J. Schranz, these being *Le Bosphore et Constantinople*,



*dessinés d'après nature...* (Constantinople, c.1850), the undated *Panorama of the Bosphorus* and the likewise undated *Panorama du Bosphore*, published in Paris by J. Missirié. It would seem here that the Gennadius connection is with the second of the Schranz brothers, Giuseppe (Joseph) Schranz (1803–1853?), who in around 1835 had settled down in Istanbul.

On the other hand, the two black and white drawings are strongly reminiscent of the style adopted by Giovanni and Giuseppe's other brother, Antonio Schranz (1801–18??), in paintings like *Philae*, which is reproduced in the first volume of Frederick Stewart, Lord Castlereagh's *A Journey to Damascus* (1847). Antonio was a widely travelled artist and photographer, who eventually settled down in Cairo.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the description of Antonio Schranz's works by art critic Dominic Cutajar as 'overwhelming stage-sets', superbly unleashing 'forces of nature – turbulent seas'<sup>11</sup> seems to me to be a strong reference to the eight coloured gouaches described above. Was Gennadius in some way also connected to Antonio Schranz?

The ninth gouache is in a completely different style and depicts the procession held on the feast in honour of St Paul on 10 February. The scene is a fantasy of minute detail and a spectacle of chromatic splendour. The bird's-eye view of the whole procession defilé stretching from the top of St Paul's Street down to St Paul's Church, the elegant crowd lined up all along the street, the multi-coloured flags and standards hanging from the typical Maltese wooden balconies on both sides of the street, and the magnificent gothic-style temporary triumphal arch set up at the top of St Paul's Street, all contribute to giving a very realistic impression of the grandeur, the magnificence and the hustle and bustle that is associated with Malta's most important and celebrated Catholic feast in honour of its patron saint.

This last colour drawing goes a long way towards solving the mystery of authorship. In fact, Giovanni Bonello has pointed out to me that there exists a lithograph, printed by the Brocktorff firm. The Brocktorffs were a dynasty of artists

and lithographers, descending from Charles Frederick de Brocktorff (1775–1850), a German-Danish artist who had lived in Malta in the nineteenth century. This lithograph is clearly reproducing the Gennadius original. The lithograph, dated 1858, speaks volumes since it attributes the original to Giovanni Schranz.

Gennadius's connection with the Schranz family of artists is therefore indisputable. Which of the three brothers could have drawn the eight other watercolours? Not being well versed in art criticism, I willingly devolve the task of artistic attribution to the real experts.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Irini Solomonidi, Senior Librarian, Dr Eleftheria Daleziou, Reference Archivist/Historian, and the Gennadius Library staff for greatly facilitating my research work at the Library.

#### Notes

- 1 Marianna D. Christopoulos, 'Nineteenth-century America through the eyes of John Gennadius', in *The Historical Review*, Vol. XII (2015), 199–214; 201.
- 2 Ibid., 231.
- 3 Nicholas Pace, *Protestant Missionary Activity in Malta (1800–1850) and Catholic Reaction*, Dissertation presented to the Faculty of Theology, Malta, for a Degree in Licentiate in Sacred Theology (1988), 60.
- 4 [Adair Crawford], *Journal of a Deputation sent to the East by the Committee of the Malta Protestant College in 1849... by a Lay Member of the Committee, part I* (John Nisbet and Co, Berners-Street; Dublin: W. Curry and Son, Upper Sackville Street, 1854), 6.
- 5 William Tallack, *Malta under the Phoenicians, Knights and English* (A.W. Bennett, 5, Bishopgate Without, 1861), 234.
- 6 Anon, *The Eighth Report of the "Malta Protestant College", Established 1846, for the Education of the Natives of Central Asia, North Africa, and other Countries Bordering on the Mediterranean, 1857 and 1858* (Printed for the Committee, 1859).
- 7 <http://www.ascsa.edu.gr/index.php/gennadius/AboutUs>.
- 8 <http://www3.ascsa.edu.gr/gennadeion/>.
- 9 Gennadius catalogue.
- 10 John J. Schranz, 'The indefatigable Maltese artist Antonio Schranz', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 18 December 2016, 48–49.
- 11 John J. Schranz, 'Painting Travels of Four Schranz Artists', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 29 May 2016, 36.