



VINCENTIUS
JUDEX
IN MAGNA CURIA
ET IN SUPREMO



BONAVITA J.U.D.
REGIUS
APPELLATIONUM
CONSILIO JUSTITIÆ

The Special Collections Dept of the University of Malta Library receives a donation of prints and portraits from Dr Roger Vella Bonavita

by Mary Samut-Tagliaferro

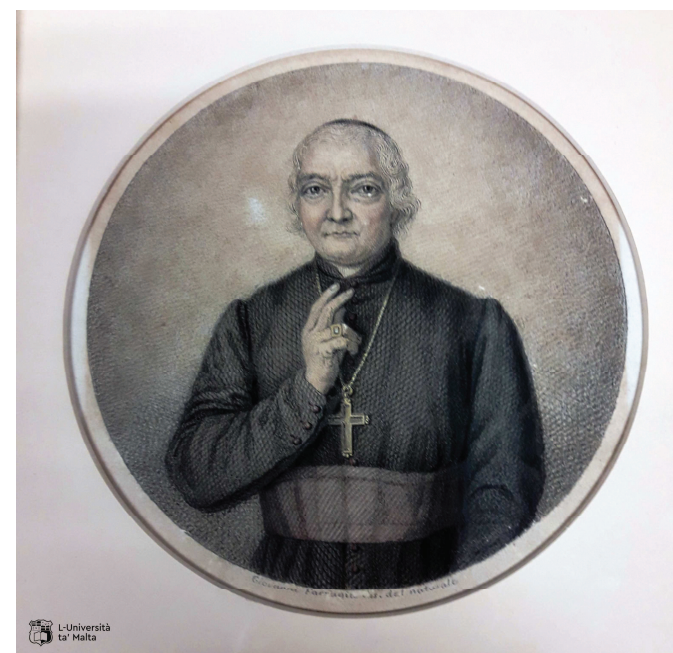


In January of this year the Special Collections Department of the UM Library received with grateful thanks from Dr Roger Vella Bonavita a donation made up of five items, all of which pertain to the visual arts.

Amongst the works donated are two portraits of notable family members hailing from both the Vella and the Bonavita lines respectively. These are: a fine print with accompanying caption, of Amabile Vella (1777-1831) who was Vice-Chancellor of the Order of St. John. The work is inscribed at the bottom, "Botuini?" and is executed in Ferrara. Following the loss of Malta to the French the Order moved to Messina and Catania and temporarily resided also in Ferrara, where a Convent of the Order was located and where this drawing was executed. In 1834 the Order permanently transferred its headquarters to Rome. But by this time Comm. Amabile Vella had died. He died in Ferrara on 27th May 1831 and is buried in the church of St. John the Baptist in Ferrara (Curmi p.72).

Bust-length portrait of Comm. Fr. Amabile Vella Vice-Chancellor of the Order of St. John (1777-1831), ca. 20 x 16 cm. Provenance: *Casa Bonavita*, Attard, Malta. © University Malta Library

The other family portrait is a contemporary watercolour of the Maltese jurist Vincenzo Bonavita* (1752-1829) whose distinguished career, as notes Ganado, straddled three different historical periods: The Order of St John (appointed Judge and Assessor of the Tribunal of the *Consolato del Mare* in August 1797), the French (appointed Judge of the Civil Court in June 1798) and, following a period when he was out of grace due to his strong pro-French sympathies, the British (appointed one of his Majesty's Judges in May 1814) (p. 424). In this anonymous watercolour, a bewigged Judge Vincenzo Bonavita robed in black is portrayed, possibly in the courthouse, seated on a red damask chair at a desk with a quill in hand and is captured in the act of writing. Everything attests to his high social standing including the silver calling bell strategically placed on his desk. The Bonavita coat-of-arms is displayed in the inscription located below which reads: *Vincentius Bonavita J.U.D. Judex Regius. In Magna Curia Appellationum et in Supremo Consilio Iustitiæ*. Another portrait of Judge Vincenzo Bonavita, (recently restored), hangs on the wall of the Malta Chamber of Advocates (*Il-Kamra tal-Avukati*) located in the Law Courts, Valletta but this portrait is in oils (ToM 2018 p.7).



There is yet another portrait among the items donated, which is remarkable not only for its fine quality but also for its distinguished sitter and for the well known artist who executed it "del naturale" that is from life. This is a small signed circular engraving of Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) shown frontally imparting the blessing. The work is executed by the "highly talented engraver" who hailed from Floriana, Giovanni Farrugia (1797-1861) who in his lifetime found it difficult, in spite of his talent, to eke out a decent living from his art (Ganado & Espinosa Rodriguez p.252). An inscription in pencil at the back of the frame reads: *Mgr Dun Sav[erio] Caruana ? Ves[cov]o di Malta lavoro del pittore Giov. Farrugia distinto pittore Maltese*. Both the sitter and the artist bear a close link to our *alma mater*.

Half-length circular portrait of Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) imparting the blessing, ca. 15 cm. Provenance: *Casa Bonavita*, Attard, Malta. © University Malta Library

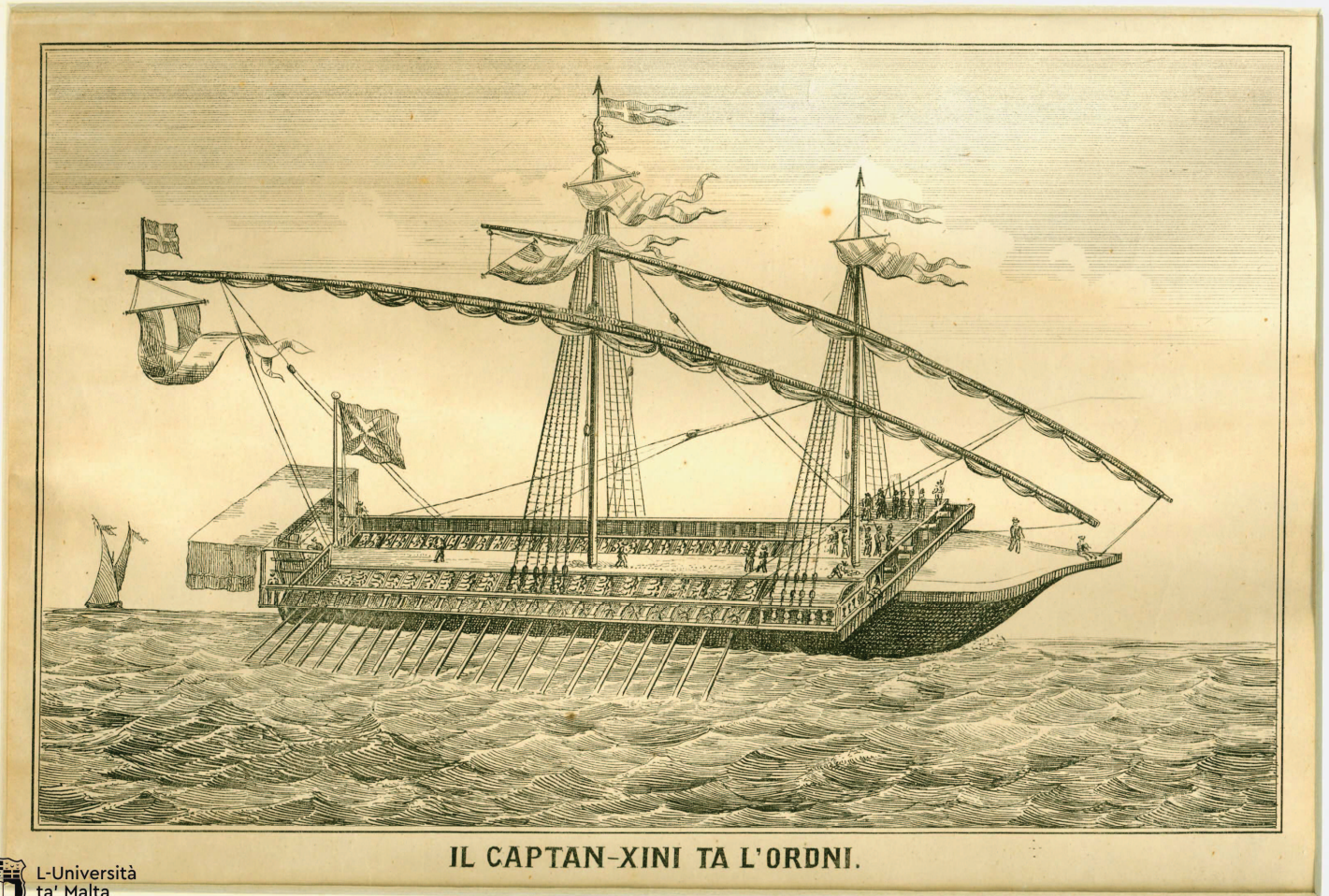
Canon (later Bishop) F.S. Caruana, who was himself actively involved in the insurrection against the French, was with the re-opening of the University in 1800 appointed University Rector by the first British Civil Commissioner Sir Alexander Ball. In Ball's letter of appointment signed 28th October 1800 he not only speaks of his abilities and talents when singling him out for this office but also makes reference to the valuable services to his country rendered by Canon F.S. Caruana during the peasant insurrection undertaken at great personal risk (*grande pericolo di vostra vita*) and sacrifice (AAM p.2). Shortly after his appointment, Canon F.S. Caruana established the University's School of Design under the tutorship of artist Michele Busuttil (1762-1831) who in 1803 was ably assisted in this endeavour by Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851) (AAM p.15). It is here at the school established by the sitter that the author of this portrait Giovanni Farrugia received his early artistic education prior to furthering his studies in Rome (Spiteri p.128). It is interesting to compare this engraving with the oil painting of Bishop F.S. Caruana after Pietro Paolo Caruana located at the Rectorate, University of Malta. In both instances the sitter is shown imparting a blessing upon the viewer.

The last two items both happen to be lithographs but are unrelated in subject. One is of the jubilant reception given by the Maltese to the 1836 Royal Commissioners and is entitled at the bottom: *Accoglienza dai Maltesi fatta ai R Commissionari il di 26 Ottobre 1836*. The scene is set at the beginning of *Strade Reale* (today Republic Street) with the horse-drawn carriage bearing the Royal Commissioners having just ridden through the entrance to Valletta where they find themselves surrounded by cheering crowds of men, women, (some wearing the traditional Maltese *faldetta*), and children who line the street as far as the eye can see and who are shown excitedly welcoming their arrival with much cheering, dancing, waving of banners and doffing of hats as the carriage rides past. Some spectators are watching the revelry from their parked carriages. The pair of horses pulling the open carriage is shown bucking perhaps startled by the noisy reception of the welcoming crowd.



Another print of this scene exists but the location of the engraving differs in that the scene is set on the Palace Square Valletta corner with Old Theatre Street with the Grand Hotel, (today the Casino Maltese), as a backdrop. Apart from enquiring into the economic condition and the general administration of Malta, the Royal Commission of 1836 also dealt with education and its suggestions, embodied in the Fundamental Statute of 1838, also impacted on the University (RUM Calendar p.7).

The last item is a print of the heavily armed "capitana" or flagship of the Order of St. John's fleet which bears the words written in Maltese at the bottom: *Il-Captan-Xini ta L'Ordni*. This lithograph is similar to the one by Brocktorff found in the nineteenth century work by Pietru Pawl Castagna entitled, "Malta bil ghzejer tahha u li ghadda min ghaliha".



Capitana of the Order of St. John's fleet, ca. 18 x 26 cm. Provenance: *Casa Bonavita*, Attard, Malta. © University Malta Library

These five items will be added to the small collection of prints, drawings and portraits which the Library has in recent years acquired through donations and bequests and can be viewed in the Archives & Special Collections Department during the Department's opening hours. All are welcome.

Prior to your visit it is recommended that you contact the Department to book an appointment: Email: archives.lib@um.edu.mt ; tel: (+356) 2340 3057.

*The Bonavita's family archive, known as the "Bonavita Papers" was deposited by Captain John Bonavita RMA (Rtd.) with the University of Malta Library in 1969 and is currently being rehoused (ToM 1969 p.9).

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