



A Maltese Lady of the lower class

Ghonnella: A British-styled allegory for twentieth-century Malta

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The well-known allegory for Malta - Melita - represents a female warrior dressed in military attire, sporting the eight-pointed cross of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. Inspired by the iconography of Minerva, the Roman Goddess of war, and the complementary Christian allegory of Fortitude, Melita has undergone subtle changes in representation and stance yet kept true to its origins. Indeed, Melita is more representative of the Order of St John and its connection to Malta than to the land which constitutes Malta's own territory, but it was somehow assimilated possibly due to the strong links that bind Malta's identity with the history of the Order of St John.¹ Melita does not adopt traditional costume to stand for identity as in the case of 'Revolutionary Rumania' by Constantin Daniel Rosenthal (1820-1851) or 'Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi' by Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863); both works by artists from the Romantic movement (Plates 1-2). Instead, it highlights the military and later also the maritime strategic potential of the island and its staunchly Catholic tradition that define the identity of the land and its inhabitants (Plate 3).

Malta's national costume is usually considered to be the *ghonnella* or faldetta; a particular woman's head dress and shawl, or hooded cloak, unique to the Maltese islands.² Its historic origins remain elusive and does not relate to Melita except for gender. Travellers and historians equally commented on similarities between the *ghonnella* and oriental fashion dress, Sicilian, Spanish and Southern European costume.³ The earliest visual record of its use dates back to the early years of the Order of St John in Malta.⁴ Travellers then oftentimes defined *ghonnella* as a curiosity, with some remarking that it made women look like ghosts.⁵

Description apart, this very particular garb belonged to and was in use by what visitors to early modern Malta defined as a North African ethnic population having a complexion and spoken language similar to North Africans.⁶ Indeed, with the advent of the British in Malta, officially recognised and endorsed in 1814, Malta became part of its Empire and the colonial quests to educate and civilise were thus introduced. Travellers visiting Malta still describe the locals and their distinctive costume, but one particular description is most telling in terms of the civilising quests of Empire. In his widely reprinted 1838 *Description of Malta and Gozo*, John Percy Badger (1815-1888) describes the *ghonnella* as a 'civilised mutation of a barbarous appendage' which had become 'one of the neatest head dresses among the costumes of Europe'.⁷ Badger's cultural baggage, including his vocation as an Anglican missionary and his interest in



Plate 1:
'Revolutionary Rumania'
by Constantin Daniel
Rosenthal (1820-1851)

Plate 2 (left):
'Greece on the Ruins of
Missolonghi' by Eugene
Delacroix (1798-1863)



Plate 3:
Melita depicted on a
£1 stamp designed by
Edward Caruana Dingli
issued in 1922

Opposite: Attributed
to Giorgio Pullicino, 'A
Maltese Lady of the lower
class', watercolour, Mrs
Gibson Craig Album,
NMFA Inv. 16441-2

Plate 4:
Pietro Paolo Caruana,
'Hawker Selling Mirrors
and Wicker Baskets',
Costumi di Malta,
coloured lithographs,
1829, NMFA Inv. 30885-6



Oriental Studies, are clearly legible in his description. More than representing a distinctive local identity rooted in time, the *ghonnella* is, for Badger, a primitive dress turned into a costume for the civilised. Badger had, at such an early stage of the British colonial presence in Malta, identified the cultural object to best represent the civilising quests of Empire.

Badger's comments postdate the publication of the earliest known lithographs featuring Maltese costumes by a few years. The album *Costumi di Malta* by Pietro Paolo Caruana (1793-1852), published around 1829, includes

ten lithographs describing street hawkers selling diverse products and produce; two particular lithographs include an upper middle class female customer wearing the *ghonnella* (Plate 4).⁸ The primary focus is undoubtedly not on the *ghonnella* as an object of curiosity. Indeed, this is one of the earliest instances when the *ghonnella* features within an ethnographic context; a clear shift from the eighteenth century representations of the *ghonnella* by the French artist Antoine de Favray (1706-1798), which do not in any way feature locals in traditional garb (Plate 5). Indeed, the eighteenth century associates the *ghonnella* with the upper middle classes, the local nobility and the entourage of the Order of St John. The nineteenth century, instead, rethinks the *ghonnella* as an ethnic garb alongside the recognised grouping of traditional Maltese costume.

Plate 5:
'The Visit' by Antoine
Favray (1706-1798), NMFA



An allegory

The *ghonnella's* distinctiveness undoubtedly singles it out as the ideal candidate for identity representation as a unique cultural value. This leads to a concerted focus on its representation, oftentimes singling it out from the rest of its context. Visuals of *ghonnella* do not remain merely descriptive but take on a representational value, which is the essence of allegorical figures. One particular picture by Charles Frederick

de Brocktorff (1782-1850) hints at the potential of the *ghonnella* to become an allegory of Malta. The image, captioned 'A Maltese lady in the faldetta, waiting before the Harbour Master's garden', shows the *ghonnella* carried by a young female (Plate 6). She stands prominently in the middle ground with the fortification lines of Valletta and Upper Barrakka Gardens in the background. Brocktorff also adds complementary figures in both foreground and middle ground, but nothing detracts attention from the centrally placed *ghonnella*. Landscape and figure are juxtaposed against each other with each adding meaning to the other, highlighting the binding uniqueness of dress and landscape as an identity value.

This early attempt at an allegory of Malta featuring the *ghonnella* was probably not intentional. The image still qualifies as a narrative proper, much like the other images from the same set to which it belongs which, yet again, respond to the consumer needs of the typical British visitor to the islands.⁹ Its importance within the historical and ethnographic representation of the unique characteristics of the Maltese islands may have led Brocktorff to give it more visual prominence in comparison to the others. Indeed, the *ghonnella*'s importance is aptly highlighted, but the seeds are nonetheless sown and mature decades later when the *ghonnella* is chosen to promote Malta at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley (Plate 7). The site for the Maltese pavilion was close to the South Africa, East Africa, Hong Kong, Ceylon and Nigerian pavilions, suggesting Malta's ranking and classification within the British Empire. The contents of the Malta pavilion featured the Order of St John and recalled 'the fortresses that her knights of St John were wont to occupy in the age of chivalry.'¹⁰ The visuals and illustrations which publicised the Malta Pavilion were prepared by none other than the Maltese artist Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950), President of the Arts Section within the purposely instituted Exhibition Committee, whose poster visuals to promote Malta at Wembley also won first, second and third prize.¹¹ Blatant conflict of interest apart,



Plate 6:
'A Maltese lady in the faldetta, waiting before the Harbour Master's garden' by Charles Frederick de Brocktorff (1775-1850)

Caruana Dingli's input is overwhelmingly recognised by the establishment of the day, suggesting a clear understanding of the political programme behind Malta's participation at Wembley. The Order of St John is used to assert the European legacy and historic relevance of the Maltese islands at Wembley in contrast to the colonial pavilions representing non-European cultures sited close by. Cultural distinctiveness is also promoted through the ethnic, not least thanks to the *ghonnella*.

The three winning entries, all by Caruana Dingli, are a synthesis of culture-politics

Plate 7:
The Malta Pavilion for the 1924 Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London



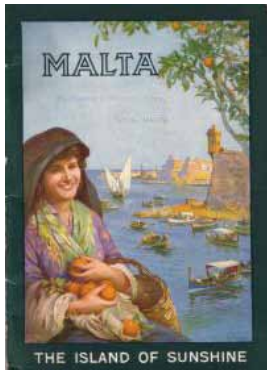


Plate 8:
Front cover for 'Malta -
The Island of Sunshine'
featuring 'The Orange
Seller'.

in British colonial Malta at the time (Plates 8, 9, 10). The winning entry, 'The Orange Seller', features an orange seller wearing colourful clothing and *ghonnella* over her head. The line of fortifications around the Grand Harbour serve as a backdrop with Fort St Angelo, by then officially renamed HMS St Angelo, and Senglea's sentry box or *gardjola* clearly visible. The young lady is the 'native' in British Imperial jargon, and the emphasis is on the produce of the land which is counterbalanced with references to its strategic and military significance. The third entry entitled 'Giant Neptune' represents a more overtly symbolical assemblage of iconic images juxtaposed, yet again, against a view of the Grand Harbour. Neptune, inspired by an early seventeenth century statue of Neptune standing in the then Governor's Palace (now The Palace, Valletta), stands tall and high over the Grand Harbour. The viewpoint roughly corresponds to Upper Barracca gardens, from where the church of Our Lady of Liesse is clearly visible. Neptune stands for the maritime and military vocation of the islands, also represented by a naval convoy, possibly referring to the Mediterranean fleet, sailing into harbour.

Caruana Dingli's visual of the *ghonnella*, the one which placed second, is perhaps the best example of an allegory for Malta featuring the *ghonnella* as its dominant feature. Similarities with Melita are undoubtedly easy to decipher; the *ghonnella* is centrally placed against a colourful sunset over the Grand Harbour. The belvedere at Upper Barracca Gardens is clearly visible in the background, and the hustle and bustle of the harbour is suggested by a small group of figures going about their business, which Caruana Dingli includes in the middle ground. The early traces of the characteristics of the *ghonnella* as an allegory are now fully developed, but the subject took time to mature and only reached its full political potential at this point in time. An early twentieth century photographic image features a young lady wearing an *ghonnella* with the entry to Grand Harbour in the background (Plate 11). This is probably a photomontage, with a studio image of the *ghonnella* mounted onto a view of the Grand Harbour shot from a point on the Floriana fortification lines. Caruana Dingli may have been conversant with such visuals, but his deliberate choice of an *ghonnella* in response to the

Plate 9 (left):
Front cover for 'Malta - The
Island of Sunshine and
History'

Plate 10 (right):
Front cover for the album
'Malta'



requirements of the then Maltese colonial establishment provides the necessary political endorsement to a personified allegory that had been in circulation for quite some time. All three winning entries feature on covers for literature advertising Malta.¹²

Għonnella as an allegory representing identity for the purpose of a marketing strategy did not survive the Second World War. In 1955, the Malta Government Tourism Board decided to re-brand and chose a poster design by Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) through public competition (Plate 12).¹³ The Grand Harbour is yet again the chosen backdrop albeit a highly stylised version, and boats, including the traditional *dghajsa*, still feature clearly. The *għonnella* does not, replaced instead by a young, sensual female in fashionable clothing. The *għonnella* does not qualify anymore as a branding tool for tourism marketing campaigns. Its potential to represent identity and nation is, nonetheless, taken up by modern artists. Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) is one of them – he is known to have produced numerous variants of the work under discussion (Plate 13). The *għonnella* is undoubtedly abstracted to its essential yet significant form, but instead of the Grand Harbour, Cremona opts to



Plate 11:
Early twentieth-century
photomontage featuring
a lady wearing the
Ghonnella with the
Grand Harbour in the
background

include a typical village core backdrop with the outline of a typical village church, complete with cupola and belfry. It is not the Grand Harbour which now represents Maltese identity but the typical village core rooted in ethnographic significance. It is the significance of religious tradition and its decisive influence on Malta's skyline that is invoked. The *għonnella* still invokes identity values, even though abstracted.

***Għonnella* and identity representation**

The 1924 Wembley Exhibition coincides with efforts to reopen what was then known as the Malta Museum at the Auberge d'Italie, an Italianate palazzo originally in use as a hostel, administrative



Plate 12 (left):
1955 Poster design
for the Malta
Tourism Board by
Antoine Camilleri
(1922-2005)

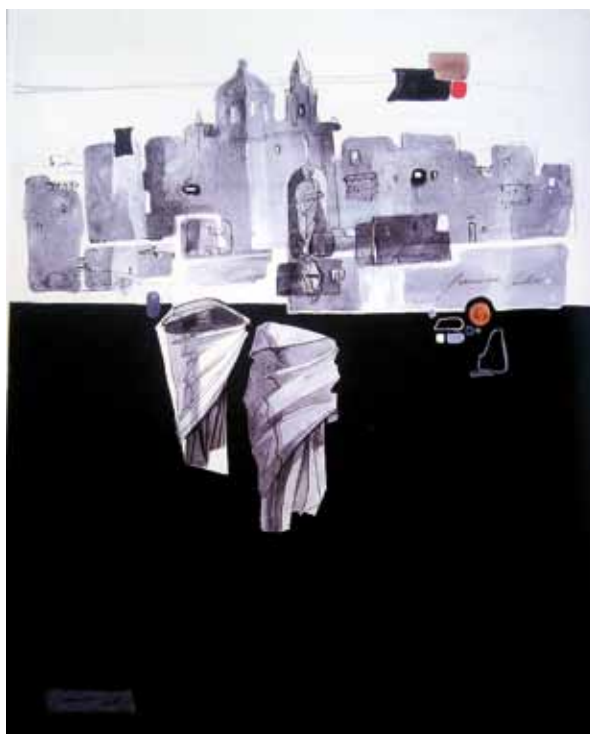


Plate 13 (right):
'Maltese
Landscape with
Ghonnella' (PCA)
by Emvin Cremona
(1919-1987)



Plate 14 (left):
'A street corner in Gozo'
from the album 'Malta'



Plate 15 (centre):
'Procession Passing St
John's Co-Cathedral' from
the album 'Malta'



Plate 16 (right):
'Section of Good Friday
Procession' from the
album 'Malta'

quarters and showcase for the Italian Knights of the Order of St John. Malta's museum was to feature a quadripartite classification of knowledge and related objects; one of these sections covered Fine Arts. The collection had to be built from scratch and the then curator Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) was left with all possible options regarding what to acquire and transfer. Visuals of *ghonnella* do feature but in almost all instances these were mostly part of a bigger collection of works. A drawing of a lady wearing an *ghonnella* by Antoine Favray is acquired as part of a large collection of drawings, including drawings by Mattia Preti (1613-1699) in 1933.¹⁴ Two watercolours of a lady wearing *ghonnella* were acquired later in 1958 as part of two collections of works on paper by Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851) and Francesco Zimelli (c.1748/49-1803) respectively.¹⁵ The National Museum of Fine Arts collection also holds albums by Michele Bellanti including 'Six Sketches in Malta' (1848) and 'Souvenir de Malte', chromolithographed by Leopoldo Brocktorff after original drawings by Michele Bellanti.¹⁶ The museum collection also includes lithographs by Caruana from two albums (1829, 1837), works by Michele Bellanti and other artists which prominently feature the *ghonnella*.¹⁷ In 2010 the National Museum of Fine Arts acquired the picture book album 'Malta'; a

second copy had been accessioned earlier in 2006 for the Inquisitor's Palace-National Museum of Ethnography Collection.¹⁸ These records suggest that the *ghonnella* was not a desired acquisition especially before the establishment of the National Museum of Fine Arts as a separate museum in 1974. The one value that may have inspired or promoted its acquisition was its ethnographic significance as part of a larger corpus of works, besides the fact that all three authors of these works were well known to local connoisseurs active on the art market.

Caruana Dingli's allegory of Malta featuring the *ghonnella* did not make it to the National Collection. However the Museums Department was presented with the opportunity to acquire the original watercolour paintings for the 'Malta' picture book in 1953.¹⁹ This picture book, featuring paintings of Malta-related subjects and views, was commissioned to Caruana Dingli in 1927 by a specially appointed propaganda sub-committee, answerable to the Malta Tourism Committee, and chaired by the staunch pro-British politician Sir Augustus Bartolo (1883-1937). The first director of the Museums Department, Sir Themistocles Zammit (1864-1935) also sat on this committee. The *ghonnella* also features in this assorted collection of Malta imagery

and the cover sums up the contents of the picture book.

This particular acquisition of Caruana Dingli works is one of those rare instances where a broad enough choice can indicate subjective trends and preferences, also dictated by the spirit of the times. In June 1953, the Antiquarians Messrs Thomas Vassallo of Valletta held public viewing of a set of works featuring in this album with the intention of attracting response and securing sales. Messrs Vassallo ended up far from satisfied with the feedback received, and decided to approach the museum authorities with a view to elicit possible acquisitions from the proposed list of works by Caruana Dingli.²⁰ The decision to acquire, communicated three months later, shortlists three works, namely 'A street corner in Gozo', 'Section of Good Friday Procession' and 'Procession passing St John's Co-Cathedral' (Plates 14, 15, 16).²¹ The selected works are all narrative. The best of the three, 'A street corner in Gozo', includes a figure wearing an *ghonnella*, but much like the other two, this is a purely narrative image with an overtly religious overtone. From the list of twenty nine works offered for sale, five had an overtly religious tinge; the National Museum acquired three of them. The list also included a picture entitled 'Maltese Lady wearing the National Headdress, the Faldetta' (Plate 17) which was not acquired, neither short-listed for acquisition. An issue with price is remote. Records suggest bargaining with a view to getting a good price, but this probably had little to do with the final choice of selected works. The picture featuring the *ghonnella* cost as much as the 'Procession passing St John's Co-Cathedral', which was one of three acquired pictures.²² The picture entitled 'A street corner in Gozo' is the only one which features an *ghonnella* but this only serves to complement the secretive and mysterious aura of the meandering streets and alleys of Victoria (Gozo) rather than describe what the *ghonnella* was and how it is worn.

The reasons for not short-listing 'Maltese Lady wearing the National Headdress, the Faldetta' may have been aesthetic; the



pose recalls an image of a Maltese Lady wearing *ghonnella* featuring on postcards (Plate 18). Caruana Dingli's female type also looks fashionable, sporting a grey shirt and bright yellow scarf underneath the *ghonnella*. More than Maltese, the young female looks oddly British, definitely foreign, and therefore potentially misleading for the purpose of representing identity. It is also significant that narrative is the overriding value on which the selection is based, perhaps even more important than the aesthetic merits of the works. The political overtones of this essentially colonial imagery might have, as yet, still been fresh in the mind of those calling the shots, perhaps enough not to take such work into consideration.

The *ghonnella* remains a steadfast symbol of the past; defined by the British as a

Plate 17:
'Maltese Lady wearing the National Headdress, the Faldetta' from the album 'Malta'



Plate 18:
1917 Postcard featuring a woman wearing the Ghonnella

Plate 19:
Frans Galea, 'Woman
wearing Ghonnella'
(1945-1994), NMFA



traditional garb and classified as part of Malta's ethnic heritage. It was rightly labelled as Malta's national costume, and adopted for tourism marketing strategies during the inter-war period. The imagery discussed suggests that the *ghonnella* was a much more powerful politico-cultural tool to be rightly considered as a personified allegory of Malta. To what extent this was recognised or not remains elusive; although short-lived, the *ghonnella* did get endorsed and promoted in terms of an icon representing identity much like Melita. The values that underlie the *ghonnella's* representation within the National Museum of Fine Arts Collection are by contrast essentially narrative or descriptive, intrinsically ethnographic and in any case only relatively aesthetic. One of these very few exceptions is a sculpture piece by the Maltese sculptor Frans Galea (1945-1994) entitled 'Woman in *Ghonnella*' (Plate 19). The piece was commissioned

and acquired in the late 1980s, possibly also conceived as a trophy.²³ The function of the sculpture piece may have been the overriding value and *ghonnella* chosen for the purpose of representing identity. At face-value it stands for an abstract piece of sculpture representing *ghonnella*; a subject which may have inspired Galea. Knowing that it may have been conceived as a trophy underpins its potential at representing identity. The issue at stake is whether Galea's *Ghonnella*, and works produced by a few Maltese modern and contemporary artists, will remain one of the few instances when identity, let alone allegory, is represented through the visuals of costume.

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Mr Peter Bartolo Parnis

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- 2 For the purpose of this contribution the author opts to use the more traditional word *ghonnella* instead of *faldetta*. For a good introduction see Guzè Cassar Pullicino, 'Notes for a History of Maltese Costume', in Nicholas de Piro and Vicky Ann Cremona (eds), *Costume in Malta*, Malta, 1998, pp. 16-17.
- 3 Thomas Freller, 'Malta Africana or Malta Europeanana?' in *Costume in Malta* (1998), p. 45.
- 4 Carmel Cassar, 'Clothes, Status & Class; Symbols & Reality', in N. de Piro and V. A. Cremona (1998), 50-55.
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- 6 Thomas Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour*, Malta, 2009, pp. 403-10.
- 7 George Percy Badger, *Historical Guide to Malta and Gozo* (1869 edition), Malta, pp. 122, 124.
- 8 Albert Ganado, 'The Earliest Lithographs of Maltese Costumes – Produced in Malta by Pietro Paolo Caruana' in N. de Piro and V. A. Cremona (1998), pp. 106-11.
- 9 The set has been published in Theresa Vella, *Charles Fredrick Brocktorff – Watercolours of Malta at the National Library, Valletta*, Vol. II, Malta, 2008, pp. 37-38.
- 10 *British Empire Exhibition, 1924: Wembley, London, April-October: Handbook of general information*, London, 74.

- 11 Nadine Debattista Briffa, 'The Artistic Success of Edward Caruana Dingli – A Biography', in Various Authors, *Edward Caruana Dingli (1876 - 1950), Portraits, Views and Folkloristic Scenes*, Malta, 2010, pp. 15-16.
- 12 N. Debattista Briffa (2010), p. 24, footnotes 54, 55. The winning entry features as a cover for *Malta: The Island of Sunshine and History* published in 1924, and later in 1930 on the front cover of the brochure *Come to Malta*. The entry, which placed second, was chosen as cover for the publication *Malta - The Island of Sunshine*.
- 13 Joseph Paul Cassar, *Antoine Camilleri – His Life and Works (1922-2005)*, Malta, 2006, p. 94.
- 14 Museum Annual Report, 1933.
- 15 Museum Annual Report, 1958.
- 16 See William Zammit (ed.), *The Bellanti Family – Contributors to Art and Culture in Malta*, Malta, 2010.
- 17 For further details see the paper by Kenneth Cassar in this volume.
- 18 Accessioned when the undersigned was Senior Curator of Ethnography and Natural History and later Senior Curator of Arts and Palaces respectively.
- 19 Museums Department File 15/53, Paintings by Chev. E. Caruana Dingli. The history of the acquisition of these works is clearly documented in this file.
- 20 Museums Department File 15/53, letter dated 19 June 1953 at red 1.
- 21 Museums Department File 15/53, letter dated 9 September 1953 at red 7.
- 22 Museums Department File 15/53. See minute 5 dated 30 July 1953: 'In my opinion a sum of £140 is much above the value of the abovementioned works; in fact, £100 seems to me a fair and reasonable price'. £140 is the sum total of the price for the three selected works.
- 23 The author is indebted to Mr Lino Borg M.A. for his comments on this particular sculpture piece.