

ARTS&ENTERTAINMENT ART

Focus on medieval art

An international conference being organised by the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Malta will see leading local and foreign scholars exploring and debating the dynamics of Mediterranean artistic interaction in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods. **Charlene Vella**, the brains behind the conference, talks about the growing interest in Medieval art and culture in the Mediterranean.

What prompted you to organise it and why the chosen theme?

The Mediterranean basin has always been known as the cradle of civilisation and a melting pot of cultures. In the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Mediterranean witnessed crusades, pilgrimages, the rise of several maritime powers and military orders.

Within this context, over the past months, there have been a number of significant calls for conferences that are taking place abroad especially in the UK, in Germany and in the US. From what I am gathering, there seems to be great hype about the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods and the Mediterranean, with topics ranging from frontier regions, crossing borders, and artist mobility, all of which happen to also be very relevant to Malta.

The aim is to create a forum for the discussion of original ongoing research that interprets art related to these periods produced anywhere in the Mediterranean that is taking place in the Central Mediterranean.

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Where was Malta, artistically, in the late Medieval period?

There exists a common notion that before the arrival of the Knights of the Order of St John in 1530, the Maltese Islands were bereft of any cultural and artistic legacy. This notion may have also been the result of Jean Quintin's (1500-1561) bleak report on the islands that was published in 1536. Renaissance sculptures and paintings had reached Malta from nearby Sicily as early as 1474.

The settling of the Hospitallers on Malta in 1530 only contributed to further enrichment of the island's artistic sophistication through the treasures they brought with them from Rhodes, and other works of art they commissioned upon settling in Birgu, their first conventual city on Malta.

One of the foreign speakers at this conference, Michele Bacci, will be discussing the dynamics of cultural and artistic Exchange in Hospitaller Rhodes between 1310 and 1522, a discussion which should engage quite a few people.



Salvo d'Antonio, detail of the Renaissance predella with Christ the Salvator Mundi with St Peter and St Paul.

What level of exchange exists between academics around the Mediterranean and Malta?

The level of exchange is very high and it is thanks to international conferences such as this one that we can keep nurturing this evolving discussion.

A case in point is the contact there exists between the History of Art Department at the University of Malta and the Archaeological Research Unit of the University of Cyprus, where I recently also had the opportunity to deliver a talk last January on the theme 'Malta in 1530 and the Hospitaller Legacy'.

My contacts with Cyprus and Cypriot academics started through my PhD tutor Donal Cooper (University of Cambridge) and a fellow student. Further contacts were established when I organised the University of Malta Faculty of Arts MA in Mediterranean Studies Study Tour to Cyprus in May of last year.

The list includes Simon Phillips, who works on islands and military orders and the Knights Hospitallers, and who has also co-edited a book with Emanuel Buttigieg, and Michalis Olympios who works on French Gothic in Cyprus.

So, as you can see, there is a lot of exchange of ideas happening between young academics from Malta and Cyprus. Such collaborations also help us understand some of Malta's medieval artefacts in a different light.

Surely such a conference must have attracted some interesting speakers?

We wanted a number of well-established experts who could create a prestigious platform for young researchers who have just completed their PhDs, like myself. I

know all of them and I have collaborated and attended seminars with them.

Besides Bacci, there is Kayoko Ichikawa with whom I started and completed my PhD at the University of Warwick. Whereas I focused on art in Renaissance Sicily, Venice and Malta, Kayoko focused on Trecento Sienese art. Mario Buhagiar and Keith Buhagiar, of course, need no introduction with the Maltese public – both are highly respected in this field.

The highlight of this conference will undoubtedly be professor Peter Humfrey, an authority on the art of Renaissance Venice and the external examiner for my PhD. He is the author of *Painting in Renaissance Venice* and *The altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*. A big international name for Renaissance art historical studies.

Both Bacci and Humfrey, our two keynote speakers, add prestige to the conference but also increase the level of exchange that is going to take place.

Will you be presenting a paper?

Yes, I am very happy to be giving my own contribution. My paper will focus on a Renaissance triptych in the Mdina Cathedral Museum Collection portraying the Madonna del Soccorso on the central panel. This triptych has in the past been attributed to Salvo d'Antonio or a close follower, but I propose that this triptych, that is heavily overpainted and requires urgent conservation and restoration, should be attributed to Salvo d'Antonio's cousin, Antonio de Saliba.

There are paintings by both these Renaissance Sicilian artists in Maltese collections. I will discuss the reasons why I do not agree with the established attribution.



Late 15th century fresco from a series of male and female saints portrayed in the church of Hal Millieri by an unknown local artist.

I am looking forward to seeing all those interested in the humanities and history of art in general, the movement of people in the Middle Ages across the Mediterranean, the exchange of artistic styles, the Medieval and Renaissance world, the Mediterranean and Malta.

The Dynamics of Mediterranean Artistic Interaction in the Late Medieval and Renaissance Periods will be held on March 9 at the Valletta University Campus between 2 and 7pm. Registration is available online <https://www.um.edu.mt/arts/historyart/form>. For more information, contact Dr Charlene Vella on charlene.vella@um.edu.mt.