

# SEAMEN SEALORE AND FRANCESCO ZAHRA

by ANGELO DOUGALL

Earlier this year, an exhibition of works by the famous Maltese painter-architect Francesco Zahra (1710-1773), was organised by the Friends of the Cathedral Museum at Mdina; it has stimulated polemics and arguments about the artist. Among the many paintings, drawings and architectural designs exhibited, of particular interest is unquestionably his self-portrait, (Cat. No. 27), a piece worth commenting about, because of a specific detail, noticeable to a folklore student. Well, folklore is folklore, and therefore calls for no scholarly requirements of documents or for provenance, as the research material of folklore is folklore itself, and provenance is sought from nowhere else, but the folks themselves. It is indeed a pity that in contemporary writings and critique, references to folklore, folk-tales, anecdotes, legends and customs are a' la mode, left out and poohpooed as if shameful, or taboo for such sources to be quoted from; this render writings unnecessarily colourless and boring. It is the aim of folklorists and folklore students, to study, record, document, compare, verify, analyse and classify all available material possible. This curious self-portrait by that giant of Maltese Art, could, at least be analysed from a folklore angle.

Zahra was born at Senglea, a small city rich and steeped in sealore, and everything imaginable connected with maritime art, trade, craft, traditions, customs, legends, and maritime history. He grew up and lived for many years of his adult life in that maritime city; visiting later in life as we could imagine, his respected and beloved parents, grandparents, relatives, friends,

admirers and patrons. A legend about him, still circulating firmly in pre-war Senglea, says that he sailed away, and lived, at least for a short while, in Naples, and also that he was a sea captain. On examining this curious self-portrait, it seems to convey some special message about himself, and surely it is not difficult to grasp; it is too evident in one particular detail and is easier to understand than any documented material, a letter, a scribbled note, a journal entry or even a diary. But this evidence could only be pointed out through knowledge of sealore and seamen's customs.

The Earing Zahra's self portrait has been done at a very odd three-quarters angle, specifically to show his left ear. One could notice a small earring with a bluish-green gemstone ornament, possibly a turquoise. Another self-portrait so ably brought to public attention by Mr. E. Fiorentino, shows the artist reclining, as a hardy seaman among the shipwrecked crowd, in 'The Shipwreck of St. Paul', the altarpiece in the church of San Pawl tat-Targa, at Naxxar, (Cat.No.14). However, in the altarpiece, the artist is seen in full, right side profile showing no earring in his right earlobe. In both paintings he is seen as a good-natured, self-confident young man, clean-shaven, sensitive, bald, full of life and love for it, and a rather scrutinous person. But I would rather comment on the smaller self-portrait (Cat.No.27) in a private collection, which incidentally has got a replica in the Fine Arts Museum. In this painting the painter intentionally emphasizes his message; obviously he is telling us that he is a right-handed artist, and painting the Colosseum in Rome; he is wearing a cold-weather brown 'kaboza', and more, he is proudly showing an earring on his left ear-lobe, an ornate one, but not too ostentatious, however, it is not the plain gold earring normally donned by ordinary seamen. The turquoise could be the lucky gemstone of the Sagittarius born

(Remember 15); it seems that the stone is surrounded by tiny pearls which are considered lucky for sailors to wear. His ornate ring signifies that he has got some higher rank than an ordinary seaman.

Ancient Custom Seamen the world over, shared the same beliefs and superstitions; and there has been an ancient custom among seamen, sailors and fisherfolk, Maltese included, to have their left earlobe pierced, and to don a small, gold ring. It was the professional trade-label of that hardy breed that plied the ocean waves, and the earing was regarded as a talisman against drowning. The belief was, that should the boat founder, a guardian angel will help the hapless sailor afloat, holding him by his golden earing. It was this earing that seafolk were proud of showing, regarding themselves as a special race apart. It was until quite recently that this special privilege pertained only to that race of old salt; unlike nowadays when we notice such an ornament worn by young punks, hippies, landlubbers and other unworthies of the citizenship of Neptune's realm. The seamen's custom of wearing an earing on the left-side ear, was quite universal. During my early years in London(U.K.), in the early fifties, a young fellow-worker, an ex-fisherman from Cornwall, donned a small, hardly noticable gold earing on his left earlobe; he told me it is a custom among Cornish sailors, seamen and fishermen, and added that the same belief is held among them as to the one held among Maltese seafaring people. Perhaps the belief stems from mediaeval origin, and perhaps too, it superseded a far more ancient custom from pre-classical times.

Senglea Marina From time immemorial, it was a sort of ritual in the social way of life in Senglea, and a traditional custom for the citizens of that city to enjoy the leasurly 'passiggata' along its lovely marina during the cool summer evenings.

At that romantin 'ix-Xatt', one could get refreshed by the summer evening's breeze, while chatting about business and trade, indulging in town gossip, mingling with the hardy sailors, captains, slaves fisherfolk and bonavoglie against the magnificent backdrop of the Grand Harbour; Also observing the carousing sailors in the many taverns along the marina, and enjoy an occasional fireworks display for which Senglea was then famous. It used to be a very busy creek in those days, full of tartanas, feluccas, galleys, galliots, speronaras and a host of other marine craft at anchor. One had to be too much of a landlubber were one to resist such a strong sea fever, and a temptation to be lured, some tome or another, to jump on one of those boats at anchor and sail away for adventure or for a short trip abroad. For Francesco to visit Italy, the Mecca of artists and art lovers, surely must have been too great a temptation to resist.

Pictures are worth a thousand words, so the chinese proverb goes. One day, not too far, I am sure, some relative document will come to light and prove the sea adventure and connection between Zahra's left earring in his self-portrait and the Senglean legends about him. Our sea customs and sealore die hard, and are part of Malta's rich folklore heritage.

