

ANTONIO BUHAGIAR (1906-98) WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE DECORATIVE ARTS IN MALTA*

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It is amply clear that one of the wealthiest fields of artistic production in the Maltese Islands is that of the decorative arts. Since at least Late Medieval times, the decorative arts have existed side by side with the other fields of the visual and fine arts, and have thrived together with painting, sculpture, and architecture. The History of Art in Malta is essentially dominated by the ecclesiastical field and it is exactly within this context that the decorative arts flourished with particular force: liturgical *objets d'art*, church furniture, embroideries for liturgical vestments and related paraphernalia, processional items, works of purely decorative and ornamental nature in stucco, wood, stone, marble, bronze or any other metals. In spite of all this existent wealth, they have been, however, largely overlooked, and have been little studied and published.¹

In an attempt to rectify this state of affairs, on the encouragement of Professor Mario Buhagiar, research on this rich, but extremely complex, branch of the arts was started by the present author in the late 1990s and

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1. Especially in the writings of Mario Buhagiar with a special emphasis on Late Medieval Malta. Vide, for example, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 2005, among others. Other recent writings, such as J. Debono, *Art and Artisans in St John's and Other Churches in the Maltese Islands c. 1650-1800* Malta 2005, and J.A. Briffa, *Pietro Paolo Troisi (1696-1750): A Maltese Baroque Artist*, Malta 2009, are slowly creating a more informed picture.

has already been the subject of an undergraduate² and a postgraduate dissertation.³ The road towards a full understanding and analysis of the situation is still long but considerable improvement has been registered, particularly on the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, when one of the most important chapters in the field of the ecclesiastical decorative arts was written.

This period is characterised by an impressive amount of decorative works that were being commissioned for Malta's numerous churches that, at the time, were undergoing significant extensions, remodelling and decorative programmes. This field also received particular impetus through the tradition of producing new works of art on the occasion of the village festa. This brought about, in the faithful, a new sense of belonging to their parish church and, therefore, many were eager to donate money for the production of such works of art which, sometimes, were quite expensive. These factors, together with other social and economic ones peculiar to the Maltese Islands, generated a huge, unprecedented demand for all types of liturgical *objets d'art*, church furniture and other decorative works in all kinds of materials, including precious metals and wood.⁴

Indeed, for a small place like Malta, the amount of artists, designers, sculptors and craftsmen working in this area is staggering, even though, as expected in such a considerable production, quality fluctuated. The style for these works for churches was eclectic, with a particular emphasis on the baroque tradition that has remained so important in Malta. At face value, one would be inclined to see this as anachronistic if this field is compared with the *avant-garde* movements which were rocking the foundations of art-making in Europe during this period. However, a comparison with the type of work that was being produced for many churches in Europe, especially in Italy, shows that most Maltese designers were quite consonant with what was happening on the continent. In certain circumstances, prestigious firms were even proud to include works by Maltese artists in their catalogue of products.⁵

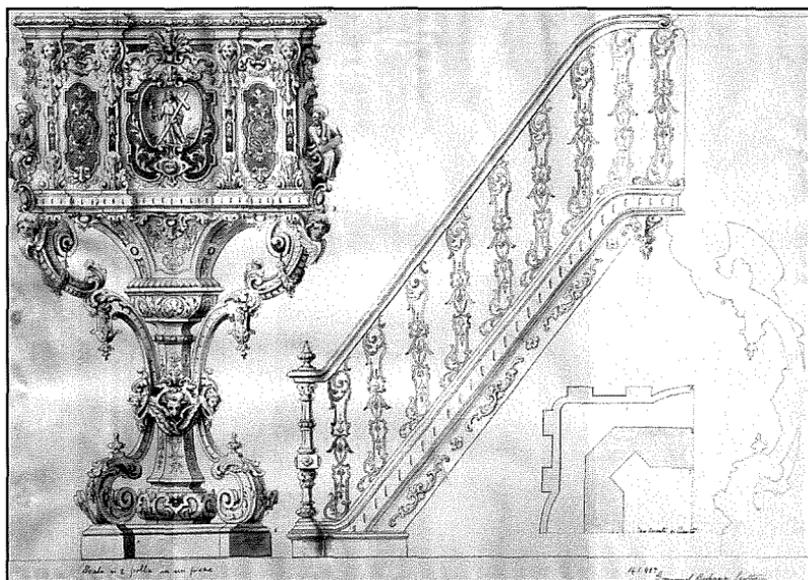
In the first half of the twentieth century, the most prolific of all the designers and wood sculptors around Malta was Emanuele Buhagiar (1876-1962), Antonio's father. Emanuele was born in Vittoriosa, the city which has

2. M. Sagona, *The Designs of Abram Gatt, Francesco Saverio Sciortino, Emanuele Buhagiar and Giuseppe Galea for the Churches of Gozo*, unpublished BA(Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta 1999.

3. M. Sagona, *Emanuele Buhagiar (1876-1962): His Contribution to the Ecclesiastical Decorative Arts in the Maltese Islands*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Malta 2003.

4. The context is discussed in Sagona 2003, introduction.

5. As is the case with the firm Antonio Ghezzi of Milan. Discussed in Sagona 1999.



Pl. 1 Emanuele Buhagiar: design for a pulpit for Mosta Parish Church. Pencil, Ink, and Wash. (Private Collection)

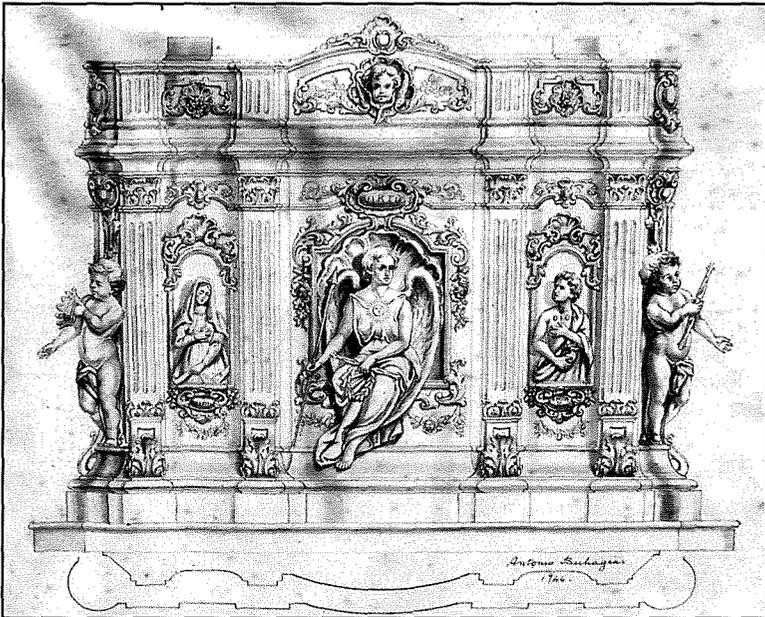
produced a considerable number of gifted craftsmen and artists, especially in the field of wood sculpture. Married into the Cali family (his wife Ersilia was Giuseppe Cali's niece, the daughter of Lorenzo), he was among the most artistically inventive designers of his day and, undoubtedly, one of the most gifted wood sculptors that Malta ever produced. Together with his artistic rival, Abram Gatt (1863-1944), he dominated the scene of the ecclesiastical decorative arts. Buhagiar, however, soon established himself as the more undisputed master of the wood-inlay tradition which he had learnt and inherited from Emmanuele Decelis, Malta's most important late nineteenth-century practitioner in the field. Emanuele Buhagiar's output, characterised by an identifiable profuse and unbridled Baroque language (**plate 1**) is very copious with almost 200 known works, some of which required a considerable long period of time to produce. This was particularly the case in statue plinths or *predelle* with which Buhagiar became intimately associated. Of these he produced ten to his own designs.⁶

It is within this backdrop and context that the figure of his son Antonio should be placed. To date, extremely little had been written about Antonio.

6. Such as those in the parish churches of Attard, Żabbar, Safi, Marsaxlokk and Dingli, discussed in detail in Sagona 2003.

I referred to his contribution strictly within the parameters of his father's opus in my MA thesis but, at the time, further elaboration went beyond the scope of that particular study. The artist's most important contribution was in the field of the ecclesiastical decorative arts, where he excelled as a designer and woodcarver and, after the death of his father, his skill in woodcarving was certainly unequalled in Malta.

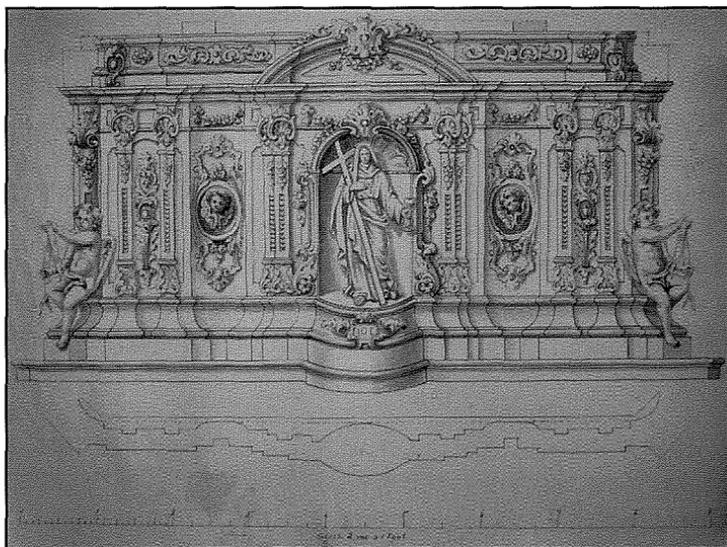
Born in Vittoriosa just before his father moved shop to Tarxien, Antonio was the natural heir to the rich and old tradition of wood sculpture that had thrived for years in this maritime city. Antonio's style was naturally indebted to that of his father but he possessed adequate artistic verve to evolve and elaborate a personal timbre that is distinctly different from Emanuele's. The ordered, academic restraint manifested in Antonio's works (**plate 2**) stands in great contrast to the capricious and extravagant, horror-vacui ethos established in his father's production. Furthermore, Antonio was considerably gifted for the depiction of the human figure, an asset that was immediately noted by his father and, therefore, the young Antonio was frequently employed on the figural passages of his father's works. This academic and figural dimension to his work can be explained through the



Pl. 2. Antonio Buhagiar: Design for the plinth for the Statue of St Helen, Birkirkara. Ink and Wash. (Private Collection)

conditioning influence of his maternal uncle, the great Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930), who was justifiably held in great reverence by him. Antonio was proud of the Cali lineage and his early works are signed, in fact, Buhagiar Cali. This academic disposition, to which he remained solidly attached throughout his life, was further consolidated through the tuition he received at the newly-opened School of Art in Valletta, particularly under Robert Caruana Dingli (1883-1940) and Antonio Micallef (1883-1957).

In the study of Emanuele Buhagiar's oeuvre, in fact, it has been noted that from around 1930 onwards, when he was at the height of his career and a fully-established master, Emanuele began to utilise the assistance of his son Antonio who, in fact, was responsible – to quote a few examples – for the drawings of the figural representations on the Safi and Żabbar titular statue *predelle*, the Żabbar organ balcony putto, the low relief of *The Annunciation* for the silver antependium at Tarxien parish church, the execution of the full-scale wooden models for the Qormi St George parish church main altar candlesticks. Other designs, moreover, show the collaboration of father and son. One example, in particular, is the unsigned



Pl. 3 Emanuele and Antonio Buhagiar: Design for the plinth of the Statue of St Helen, Birkirkara. Ink and Grey Wash. (Private Collection)

design for the statue *predella* of St Helen at Birkirkara: I am convinced that the ornamental passages are by Emanuele while the figural are by his son Antonio (plate 3). Other such passages also exist in signed works by

the father. After his father's death, Antonio remained the only notable practitioner of his father's tradition, even though not many commissions came his way.

The works which he carved, or which were realised after his designs and models, are highlighted in a publication by Professor Mario Buhagiar⁷ and a donation to the National Collection (**plate 4**). The donation included the full-scale drawing for the silver sanctuary lamp at the St Lawrence Collegiate Church at Vittoriosa, together with the drawing for an unexecuted



Pl. 4. Antonio Buhagiar: Design for the Silver Sanctuary Lamp for the Collegiate Church of St Lawrence, Vittoriosa. (Heritage Malta)

altar canopy intended for the same church. The works now form part of the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

They show an artist of considerable talent in the application and the invention of ornamental forms. He was definitely one of Malta's best twentieth-century designers. He was convinced that his true calling was in the field of design and wood sculpture. Indeed, it is for these works that he is primarily remembered. Antonio Buhagiar was very fortunate that his sketches, drawings and designs fell into good hands that could, and did, appreciate

and preserve them. Too much of our knowledge of various artists working in this field has been severely handicapped because their designs have been insensitively destroyed or left to perish, thus precluding a thorough understanding and analysis of their art.

7. M. Buhagiar, *Antonio Buhagiar 1906-1998 – Portrait of a Neglected Artist*, Malta 2008.