

MARITIME VOTIVE PAINTINGS IN MALTESE CHURCHES

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Long before the advent of Christendom man had already learned to bargain with the gods for their protection. "Sacer paries indicat votiva tabula me suspendisse uvida vestimenta deo potenti maris"¹. From this same religious practice among the Greeks Cicero argues for the ancient belief in the concern and compassion of the deities towards human beings in dire situations². Illustrations of this human conviction in divine intervention are found as early as in Homer³.

Beseeking the gods for assistance with promises of offerings or sacrifices was also common among the Romans⁴. Unlike the Greek mentality, however, these vows among the Romans assumed rather a collegial nature; the community, or some one on behalf of the community publicly made the conditional promise to the deity, and the community, as such, was the one responsible for the fulfilment of the vow.

These historical data sufficiently demonstrate the human belief in divine concern for human welfare, the divine commiseration towards human anguish and suffering, and the intervention of the divine power in time of need.

1. *Odes*, Bk I, *Ode V, to Pyrrha*, *The Complete Works of Horace*, Philadelphia, 1894, p.9.
2. *De Natura Deorum Ad Brutum*, Liber II, cap. 37, 89, *M. Tullii Ciceronis Opera Omnia*, ed. Carolus Fridericus Augustus Nobbe, Lipsiae, 1850, pp. 1135-1136: "At Diagoras, quum Samothraciam venisset, Atheos ille qui dicitur, atque ei quidam amicus, "Tu, qui deos putas humana negligere, nonne animadvertis ex tot tabulis pictis, quam multi votis vim tempestatis effugerint in portumque salvi pervenerint?" Ita fit, inquit; illi enim nusquam picti sunt, qui naufragia fecerunt in marique perierunt. Idemque, quum ei naviganti vectores, adversa tempestate timidi et perterriti, dicerent non iniuria sibi illud accidere, qui illum in eandem navem recepissent, ostendit eis in eodem cursu multas alias laborantes quaesivitque, num etiam in iis navibus Diagoram vehi crederent".
3. See for example *Iliad* VI, 274, *et sq*; VII, 82-84; XXIII, 144-148; *Odyssey*, XII *et sq*; XVII, 50 *et sq*.
4. *Historicorum Romanorum Principis Libri Omnes Superstites*, cura Francisco Modio et Jani Gruteri, Francofurti ad Moenum, 1628, Liber IV, 25, p.78; Liber V, 21, pp. 97-98; Liber X, 19, p. 185; Liber XXII, 10, p. 223; Liber XXVII, 25, p. 326; Liber XXX, 27, pp. 382-383; Liber XXXVI, 2, p. 463; Liber XL, 37, p. 547; Liber XLI, 21, p.560; Liber XLII, 28, p. 571

The Theology of Votive Offering

Needless to say, there is a theology behind this religious phenomenon. Forcellini Aegidius and Furlanetto Josephus define votive offerings as follows: “Votiva tabella, quae ex voto Deorum aris, vel simulacris suspenditur in testimonium accepti beneficii”⁵. Thus, the nature of a votive offering is human appreciation manifested in a physical manner for God’s intervention in a critical situation. This amical relationship between God and the human being, as it is expected, appears more pronounced in the Judeo-Christian religion in which the humaneness of God is much more perceived and endorsed, and which finds its full expression in the *unio hypostatica*. The image of God as a loving, caring and giving God was advocated and assured by the Lord Himself: “and how much more are you worth than the birds⁶”. He even taught us to call God our Father⁷.

The term “votive” derives from the latin *vovere* meaning to vow. Prior to further development of the theme, however, it must be made clear that a “votive offering” does not necessarily indicate the fulfilment of a vow. The consecration may have been made by way of thanksgiving rather than in consequence of a vow. Crutches, helmets, and a huge variety of items hanging on the walls of our sanctuaries exhibit merely human gratitude towards divine protection. A distinction into two types of “votive offerings” was made already by the Greeks, as we learn from Plato: “and women especially, and men too, when they are sick or in danger, or in any sort of difficulty, or again on their receiving any good fortune, have a way of consecrating the occasion, offering up prayers and sacrifices, and promising statues to gods, demigods, and sons of gods⁸. A classical example of this kind of “votive offering” may be considered the case of Noah who is said to have built an altar and sacrificed animals to Yahweh for being preserved from destruction⁹. In this context, the “votive offering” assumes the significance of a vow, since, as Plato says, the person upon receiving the good news makes a promise to express his gratitude in a concrete manner. This promise however, was made without previous expectation of a condition imposed on God. What happened previously as a result of divine

5. *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*, Tom. IV. Patavii, 1831, v. *votivus*, p. 718.

6. Lk. 12: 24; Mt. 6: 26.

7. Mt. 6: 9.

8. *The Dialogues...*, Bk. X, 909, vol. IV, p. 422.

9. Gen 8: 20.

magnanimity is not considered to be the cause, but an occasion for the promising, a presupposition for the emitting of the vow. A “votive offering”, if fulfilled in this manner demonstrates simply appreciation and devotion by the recipient of God’s benevolence – “quod gratum et jucundum est”.

In many instances a “votive offering” bears a *sigla* indication itself to be the fulfilment of a vow. In ancient Roman consecrations the *sigla* read V.S.L.M. (votum solvit lubens merito), whereas in much modern Christian ones the *sigla* V.F.G.A. (votum fecit gratiamque accepit) is found. This means that the “votive offering” itself constitutes the object of the vow – “melius bonum”. It seems incumbent that a brief theological presentation on the nature of the vow be given. In spite of some minor nuances found in definitions of vow given by theologians, the concept is substantially maintained in all of them. Classical definition of vow is the following: “Promissio deliberata, et voluntario Deo facta de meliori bono¹⁰”. With simplicity and clarity Saint Thomas Aquinas synthetizes the doctrine of vow in the following manner: “a vow denotes a binding to do or omit some particular thing¹¹”. It is a promise which is “the outcome from a purpose of doing something¹²”, and this something “is said to be about a better good¹³”. The conceptualization of vow is therefore twofold: absolute and conditional.

The *sigla*, V.F.G.A.¹⁴, contains in synthesis the theological understanding of a conditional vow: the donor, finding himself in a serious predicament, resorted to the divine benevolence, and bound himself conditionally to the performance of a good work; his prayers were heard, “gratiam accepit”; the votive offering attests to it. In some votive paintings the *sigla*, “*ex voto*”, is found instead, which has the same meaning¹⁵. There might be consecrations where the *sigla* is missing.

10. FERRARIS F. LUCIUS, *Prompta Bibliotheca Canonica, Juridica, Moralis, Theologica, etc.*, Tomus VII, Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1863, v. *votum*, n. 2, col. 1311; cf. ALBERICUS DE ROSATE BERGOMENSIS, *Dictionarium Iuris tam Civilis, quam Canonici*, Venetiis, 1573, v. *Votum*, p. 862: “Votum est testificatio quaedam promissionis spontaneae quae Deo fit...alii vero sic diffiniunt: votum est conceptio melioris propositi firmata.”

11. *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 88, art. 1, Resp., loc. cit., p.1567

12. *Ibid.*

13. *ibid.*, art. 2, Resp., loc. cit., p. 1568.

14. A votive painting at Zabbar Sanctuary, dated 1631, gives the full latin phrase, whereas another at Tal-Ħerba church, donated by two sailors, Romanono and Domenico Gaffiero, dated February 9, 1832, the same phrase given in Italian: “Voto Fatto e la Grazia Avuta”.

15. This *sigla* is not found in any votive paintings still in existence in Malta.

But a votive painting is still recognizable by the figure of a Madonna or of a Saint sitting snugly on soft clouds usually in the left hand top corner or in the centre top region. There are others in which the *sigla* or a holy image is missing. These nevertheless retain full credibility for the simple fact that they are located in a church among the other votive offerings.

In votive paintings found in Malta two Italian nomenclatures were commonly used. In some instances one finds written the phrase, “voto fatto” (a vow was made), other times, “voto promesso” (a vow was promised). These two phrases should not prompt any theological speculation on their specific meaning and distinction; they are different expressions signifying the same thing: the phrase, “voto fatto”, refers to the act of promising; the phrase, “voto promesso”, denotes the object of the vow which is the votive offering itself.

Maltese Heritage Illustrated in Pictures

Malta, like other countries around the Mediterranean basin, has its unwritten religious history recorded in the numerous votive offerings found in many of its churches. The present study is only concerned with *ex voto* paintings that form part of the maritime heritage of the past three centuries. These paintings outnumber by a large margin the other votive offerings dealing with medical cases or other human tragedies. Around the turn of this century, however, their numbers diminished substantially due to the decrease of the merchantile business of Maltese owners. On the other hand there was an increase in votive paintings of other sundry topics¹⁶.

This study is based on some 400 paintings from twenty-one churches¹⁷; their dates vary from 1620 to 1930. these paintings are not

16. The only recent maritime votive paintings are found in “Ta’ Pinu” church, Gozo, usually dealing with Gozo boats – “Tal-Latini”.
17. The said churches are the following: the sanctuary at Mellieħa, the sanctuary museum at Zabbar, “Tal-Ħerba” church at Birkirkara, “Tal-Mensija” church at San Gwann, “Tal-Ħilas” church at Qormi, “Tal-Mirakli” church at Lija, “Tal-Providenza” church at Siġġiewi, “Tal-Ħniena” church at Qrendi, “Tad-Dwal” church Wied il-Għajn, “Ta’ Duna” church at Rabat, “Tal-Isperanza” church at Mosta, “Santu Kristu” church at Għaxaq, “Ir-Redentur” at Senglea, parish church Zurrieq, “San Katald” church at Rabat, parish church Attard, Wignacourt museum at Rabat. “Ta’ Pinu” church in Gozo. It is worth noting that the majority of these paintings are found in small rural churches. The “Tal-Ħerba” church, at Birkirkara, which enshrines 180 of such paintings deserves particular mention. The Mellieħa sanctuary is rich in pictures dealing with 19th century maritime episodes. The collection would have been by

by any stretch of the imagination masterpieces of art. Nevertheless, they present a unique repertoire of Maltese maritime activity, culture, and folk art. The great interest of such paintings lies in their iconographic record of the evolution of ships during the last three centuries. The interest of historians in these paintings is minimal; yet it is indeed amazing how such paintings of modest artistic value can bring out in clear contrast certain aspects of life at sea and interesting technical data of ships.

Votive Paintings as Testimony of Christian Faith among the Maltese.

The earliest known votive paintings are believed to be those found in Naples at "Madonna dell' Arco", which go back to the second half of the sixteenth century. By this time the Council of Trent (1545-63) had revitalized the popular Marian cult. Marian devotion was further enhanced soon after with the institution of the Feast of "Our Lady of the Holy Rosary" to commemorate the victory of the Christian forces over the Ottoman Empire at sea – the battle of Lepanto on October 7, 1571. Votive paintings which bear testimony to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, by far exceed others dedicated to other Saints and the Souls in Purgatory.

The earliest Maltese *ex voto* painting, which came to our attention, dates 1631, and belongs to the Zabbar collection¹⁸. It is a composite picture showing the mutiny of Christian slaves on a Moslem "fregata" at Sfax on the Barbary coast, and their subsequent escape to freedom chased by four Moslem ships. It is worth pointing out another votive painting at "Tal-Ħniena" church in Qrendi. Although it bears no date and no inscription, the "Capitana", or flagship of the galley squadron

far larger had it not been for the 1930 Liturgical Reform on account of which hundreds of paintings were removed from the side altars of parish churches to leave them in their simplest form of exterior attention and cult. Thus many such paintings were discarded in some damp place, and corroded beyond repair. This explains why votive paintings are found in small rural churches and not in parish churches and other prominent churches in cities.

18. The "Madonna della Flotta" in the Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta, depicts the victory of the Christian World over the Ottoman Empire, and although it is not classified as an *ex voto* painting, it has all the necessary ingredients to be considered as one. As it bears the colours of Grand Master Verdala, it could be dated somewhere between 1582 and 1595.

of the Order of Saint John which is seen in the said picture, is painted red. This means that the painting must be dated prior to 1625 which was the year when the “Capitana” changed colour, and was painted black thereafter¹⁹.

The religious spirit of the period is evident in the paintings under discussion. In surveying the administration of the navy of the Order, one is bound to acknowledge that Catholic faith and religious practices played an important part in the daily life aboard the ships. This religious atmosphere could not but exercise a strong influence on the minds of many Maltese youngsters who found employment with the navy in different capacities. The paintings attest to this religious heritage. Phrases like “*miracolo grande della Beata Vergine*”, “*miracolosamente liberati*” certainly inspire a deep and genuine faith in Divine mercy.

Each painting evokes a miraculous event which meant the survival of its donor²⁰. The deep trust of the Maltese in the intervention of the Blessed Mother in time of need is lucidly attested. The pictures may be crude and simplistic, yet they remain a perennial testimony to the Marian cult in the Maltese Islands during and after the period of the Knights of Malta. The Madonna appears in these paintings under different titles, such as “Our Lady of Sorrows”, “Our Lady of the Holy Rosary”, “Our Lady of Mount Carmel”, “Immaculate Conception”, “The Annunciation”, “Our Lady of Trapani²¹”, “Our Lady of the Light²²”.

19. The Zabbar collection claims two votive paintings older than the one just quoted. A caption to one of these paintings reads that it was an offering after the successful expedition against Goletta in the Barbary coast in 1535. This *ex voto* would have been the oldest one on the island, if the topography did not reveal clearly Bichieri, near Alexandria, in Egypt, and not Goletta or its vicinity, which is in Tunis. Another painting is supposed to belong to the year 1565. No inscription or date accompanies the scenario. Ettore Rossi, an expert in matters dealing with the navy of the Order is credited with having read the wording on the main top sail which enabled him to associate the Galleon with the one caught and brought to Malta just before the Great Siege in 1565. Except for the authority of this author there remains little hope of reaching a decisive conclusion on its date.
20. A similar case is that of Biondo falling overboard on December 14, 1811, whose picture is found in the Zabbar collection, and that of Giovanni Albanese on the Bombard, “La Concezione”, on March 13, 1800.
21. “Our Lady of Lampedusa” is a replica of “Our Lady of Trapani”. In the Maltese collection there are only few references to the “Madonna di Trapani”, and this image always appears in conjunction with other titles of the Madonna locally known.
22. This devotion, which was strongly upheld by the Maltese during these centuries, has now died out.

The Virgin Mary is sometimes painted simply with a veil on her head, but on various occasions she is depicted crowned, or with stars round her head. There are instances where the Blessed Virgin is presented under various titles on the same votive painting, a fact which reveals at what ebb stood the catechesis of the general populace at the time.

Next to the Blessed Mother, but very much less, comes the devotion to the Souls in Purgatory; and these often appear in the company of the Madonna. Saints too, are depicted together with the Blessed Virgin. We know only of two Saints, St. Joseph and St. Catherine, who stand alone in a painting at Zurrieq parish church, which is dated March 10, 1791.

Strange as it might seem, very few *ex voto* paintings carry the image of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The Lord is presented crowned with thorns (*Ecce Homo*), carrying the cross, crucified, or risen with the cross in hand. Theologically speaking, this scanty presentation of the Lord can be explained that an invocation, hence the votive offering, is addressed to the Almighty through the intercession of a Saint. To this it must be added that the Blessed Virgin is always depicted holding the Child in her arms.

A unique picture donated by Valenti Meilach to the Tal-Ħerba church depicts the donor sitting under the poop awning of a *speronara* holding the picture of Our Lady and encouraging the crew to implore the intercession of the Blessed Mary. The *speronara* on which Valenti was travelling, was caught in a fiery tempest on March 18, 1791, between Malta and Sicily. The *speronara* was the usual means of transportation between Malta and the Italian peninsula throughout the year. It took this boat the length of a night to cross the 90 km. trip, and she took off under cover of darkness for fear of pirates. Frail as it was, the *speronara* was forever exposed to either the brutality of the sea, or the rapacity of the pirate²³. It was a custom that crew and passengers would say the rosary and recite prayers to Our Lady during the crossing. It is no wonder then, that this type of boat is so often depicted in votive paintings.

A votive painting was not necessarily donated by the person who was

23. The *speronara* was a fine sailor, relatively cheap to build and withstood rough weather reasonably well. It remained the cheapest means of transportation to Italy or North Africa. It carried small quantities of merchandise as well.

caught in a critical situation. It could have been a relative or a close friend who made the vow on behalf of the person concerned to ensure that he would have a safe trip home, as Horace did for a sage return home of Julius Florus by offering a heifer – “*votiva juvenca pascitur in vestrum reditum*²⁴”. Fear and anguish struck those who embarked at sea as well as those who remained home. In such paintings this fact is evidence when a woman is seen kneeling in prayer to the Madonna with an inset of a ship struggling in a tempest, or a father praying for his son as in the case of an *ex voto* at the “Tal-Mensija” church.

There are instances where copies of the same incident are found in different churches. The “*polacca-chebec*”, christianised “Gesù-Gioseppe-Maria”, flying the red ensign for the year 1802, is seen at the Mellieħa sanctuary and the “Tal-Ħerba” church, Birkirkara. The one at Mellieħa carries the initials M.G., while the other bears no signature. This duplicate of the incident can have dual explanation: it was either the fact that the vows were made by the same person or persons to the Madonna under different titles, or it was the case of two different persons caught in the same perilous situation who each separately of the other, made a vow to the Blessed Virgin. This latter, in fact, was the case when the galleys of the Order were caught in a tempest off the shores of Trapani on the night between May 9th and 10th, 1745. Captain Fra Ignazio Solaro, of the galley “Sant’ Ursola”, opted for the miraculous crucifix at Senglea church, whereas captain Fra. D. Silvio Vincentini, of the magisterial galley, sought the intercession of “Tal-Ħniena Madonna” at Qrendi, and the crew of the galley “San Luigi” consecrated an offering to “Our Lady of Graces” at Zabbar.

The same ship is also seen in different *ex voto* recording different incidents. In the “Tal-Ħerba” church there are two paintings featuring the same ship in two different situations. The ship was the British bombard, “Sposa Amorosa”. One picture illustrates the bombard being at the mercy of a fierce storm in 1828 off the Barbary coast. The other records another tempest which struck the ship on the night between January 21st and 22nd, 1834. The bombard is seen adrift without fore top mast heading toward the Barbary coast. In both circumstances the captain, Giovanni Caruana, and the crew were preserved from perishing at sea *per miracolo* of the “Tal-Ħerba” Madonna.

Pertinent to the subject is the question of superstition which is

24. *Epistles of Horace*, Bk I, Ep. III, *To Julius Florus*.

common among sea-farers. The Knights of Malta always named their ships after a Saint or a title of the Blessed Virgin Mary²⁵. This tradition was passed on to local ship-owners and even to present day fishermen. Yet the good, old eye, *oculus*, which goes far back to the Phoenicians and Greeks²⁶, was painted on Maltese small crafts in order to counteract the evil eye. This "eye" was located on the moustache section of the bows both port and starboard of the *speronara*, "Tal-pass" boat, and fishing crafts of all kinds. The *oculus* is still seen on Maltese boats of any type²⁷, and is taken to be supposedly ornamental. Thus one is expected to encounter the "*oculus*" also in votive paintings. Of the 400 paintings surveyed we know of only one instance where the *oculus* is painted on a boat. In the same collection a unique picture holds one's attention and curiosity; besides the image of the Madonna and of a soul in purgatory, a horrible sea-dragon dominates the central part of the portrait ready to gobble up a "*speronara*"²⁸.

Votive Paintings: A Pictorial of Human Suffering.

History books delight in the lives of monarchs, and of political, military, and religious leaders. The collection of votive paintings in Malta and elsewhere, tell the story of those who in the eyes of the powerful and of the intelligentsia were of little significance.

In an area of a few square centimetres the picture telescopes all the tragedy and dramatic effects of a sea voyage. A variety of disasters are encountered in these paintings but the common scene is that of a mighty hurricane which splits open a ship, and naked bodies of people swimming frantically away from the debris. Floating oars indicate how helpless a boat could be, and worse still when a rudder is seen floating away. In one of the pictures a crew awaits the impact of an approaching

25. Patron Saints of ships of the Order, which we came across, are "Santa Maria", "La Concezione", St. Anne, St. Roque, St. Paul, St. Genevieve, St. Anthony, St. Rosalia, St. John the Baptist, St. Francis de Paul, St. Louis King of France, St. Blase, St. Joseph, St. Catherine, St. George, St. Bonaventure, St. Lawrence.
26. Cf. *The Plays of Aristophanes*, Ed. by John Hookham Frere, London, s.d., *The Acharnians*, p. 9 (Dicaeopolis): "an eye for the head of a ship!"; cf. footnote.
27. These are the "luzzu", "kajjik", "felukka", "firilla", and "dghajsa tal-Latini"
28. Unfortunately this painting carries no date or inscription, but it certainly belongs to the period of the Order.

water spout. An inscription in another reads that four persons died, another broke his leg, and the rest of the crew were saved. A pathetic scene is presented in a picture bearing the date June 28, 1793 (?), at the "Tal-Ħerba" sanctuary. In the moon light naked bodies are seen floating around. In the background a ship and a small boat move slowly around picking up survivors. A similar story is recorded at the Mellieħa sanctuary where a Maltese brig comes to the rescue of a Greek boat in difficulty, and two caiques are pulling the crew out of the water. One *ex voto* tells the story of two brothers who remained adrift on a caique four days before they were picked up. In another picture a non-swimmer holds on to a flag staff which is held in the mouth of his mate swimming to safety. A votive painting at the Mellieħa sanctuary, dated November 13, 1822, gives a realistic picture of how seven members of the crew were saved. One is holding on to a floating barrel; another stands right up to the main flag-staff the third survivor is on the fore yard and well placed while the other three mates are all on the jib boom. The seventh member cannot, however, be traced. We know of two paintings which deal with women at sea. Catarina Mizzi made a vow to the "Tal-Ħilas" Madonna when she was caught in a storm on April 4, 1841. Another woman is seen drowning in an *ex voto* at the Mellieħa sanctuary, bearing the year 1875. We also come across the story of Giovanni Mifsud and his family and other passengers thanking the Madonna of Mellieħa for coming to their aid in a tempest off the coast of Liverpool, on March 18, 1842. It is quite understandable that in a severe storm the first to go overboard to lighten the ship are cargo and cattle. Many votive paintings show this incident in order to convey an idea of the severity of the storm.

When the good, old anchors hold fast to the bottom of the sea a ship may toss and swivel in rough sea, but still overcome the ordeal. When the anchors cannot hold any longer, a ship is compelled to put to sea for fear of shallow water or shore. This is brought out magnificently in various pictures. Emergency sails are used and oars are shipped in. The collection of "Tal-Ħerba" offers an instance where Francesco Cuelio is seen with a pickaxe cutting down the main mast and shrouds to lighten the ship in a storm which struck in 1812.

An examination of the dates on these marine votive paintings clearly demonstrates that the majority of mishaps, because of rough sea, occur between the months of October and March. This time of year coincides almost exactly with the period declared by the Order of St. John as not fit for sailing. February and October claim most of the sinister storms.

This does not mean that other months are free from the caprice of Neptune. An *ex voto* records a north westerly tempest near Bona in North Africa on April 18, 1847. In the Gulf of Venice, on May 6, 1808, the wind was strong enough to dismast a "*palandra*". On June 13, 1871, a hurricane hit Tripoli which almost foundered the British brig schooner, "*Cometa Doniti*". An English vessel with five Maltese seamen on board was caught in a severe storm and grounded on August 10, 1811. All these incidents are illustrated in votive paintings.

A more imminent menace than the sea itself were the corsairs who pestered shipping in the Mediterranean down to 1843²⁹. The *speronara*, in particular, was an easy prey since it was unarmed, and constantly plying Mediterranean harbours. This is the reason why in votive paintings it is the boat mostly seen chased by a pirate ship. There was also a period when bandits from Calabria infested the area around Malta and Sicily; many fell under their fierce arrogance. The worst enemy for a boat, which relied exclusively on sails, was a total drop of the wind, which caused the boat to stand still for hours on end. It was an ideal chance for a swift rowing pirate boat to attack. An *ex voto* at the "Tal-Herba" church narrates the story of two Capuchin Friars who embarked on their voyage on April 1, 1799, were captured by Algerian corsairs, and ransomed from slavery on February 2, 1801. The boat of Giuseppe Grima was overloaded with tunny fish when on June 18, 1779, a sea-hawk appeared on the horizon, but Grima managed to escape. June, July and August were the months when pirates, bandits and Moslem ships usually infested the waters, and attacked small fishing villages. Deserters and renegades were also a menace on land and sea. They could be a serious threat when they organised themselves in groups. However, they were not as common as the corsair. We know, in fact, of only one incident recorded at the Mellieha sanctuary³⁰.

Fire on board was an enemy at home. Its destructive force was forever the preoccupation of the sailor especially in the days when the full structure of the ship was timber. The Order of St. John took serious precautions in this matter since most of its ships were always armed for battle³¹. A painting at the "Tal-Mensija" church makes a

29. The last of the piracy dynasty were the Algerians who were blasted out of their stronghold by the British navy in 1830.
30. The story is told of two fishermen who were attacked by seven deserting soldiers. They lost their boat at bayonette point, but managed to escape. A few days later they got their *speronara* back because the deserters were apprehended.
31. This topic is discussed in another study which, still awaits publication.

spectacular impression. In the picture, a British first rate is a total loss; men are leaving the ship by all conceivable means. Next to the fire, seamen dreaded lightning strokes. In one of the scenes a crooked red arrow representing lightning, topples off a man from the main yard.

Pestilence and contagion may also strike at sea. It is well known in history that plagues traveled by boat from one end of the globe to the other. In the Code of Grand Master De Vilhena, laws were issued regarding quarantine which threatened capital punishment for their non observance – “sotto pena della Vita Naturale a’ Contraventori³²”. In the Mellieha collection there is a picture which tells a similar story. The scene is that of a ship moored in the harbour of Alexandria. Death is seen under the guise of a woman dressed in black with a scie in hand, hovering, with a menacing look at the harbour.

A unique but macabre scene is presented in a painting belonging to “Tal-Ħerba” collection, and dated March 29, 1840. It seems that Michael Cachia in the company of British sailors penetrated too far inland in an African coast. They fell in the hands of a multitude of natives. The sailors appear stripped naked, and three of them beheaded, their heads hanging downward between coconut trees while the natives drink their dripping blood. The other five, including Cachia, who is kneeling down in prayer, are waiting for the same fate. The natives are wearing a sort of baggy trousers and are armed with a kind of short lance. The British ship is seen at a distance. No information is given as to the location of the incident, and to how Michael, and perhaps the others as well, managed to escape.

Foreign Donors of Votive Paintings

The majority of maritime votive paintings were donated by local fishermen, sailors, and soldiers employed on the ships of the Order of St. John, or elsewhere, and by Maltese captains and crews, especially those who formed the backbone of the Maltese merchant navy in the nineteenth century. But there were foreign donors as well. Ragusan ships, French owners, Italian captains left their names written on such paintings. At the “Tal-Ħerba” church one finds two paintings donated by foreigners. The French Ship, “*Iranable Margerite*”, was hit by a strong

32. *Leggi, e Costituzione Prammaticali* – Fra D. Antonio Manoel De Vilhena, Malta, 1724, Tit. XVI, para. XXVIII, p. 80; cf. para. 39, 41, 42, 43, 45, 59, pp. 80-84.

storm on June 28, 1792. Worth noting in the painting is the white flag with the lilies hoisted, rather than the *Tricolor* of the Revolution. The Russian brig, "*Conte Heiden*", is seen in another picture dated April 4, 1834, which was donated by the captain, crew and passengers. At the Mellieħa collection one comes across an Austrian ship in an *ex voto*, dated December 20, 1800.

Only a few votive paintings donated by the Knights of Malta have survived. The Zabbar collection prides in having the greater part of these paintings. The famous German Knight, Fra Wolfgang Philip Guttenberg, Bailiff of Brandenburg, (1647-1733) left three artistic votive paintings in three different churches, at Mellieħa, Zabbar, and Qrendi. Paintings donated by the Knights serve as an excellent textbook of galley construction, rigging, and other historical data.

Escalation of Votive Paintings in the 19th Century

The bulk of maritime votive paintings belong to the nineteenth century. Two main historical data seem responsible for this fact: the efficiency, mastery, and superiority of the navy of the Order of St. John; and the flourishing of the Maltese merchantile navy in the first century of British rule.

There are comparatively few paintings of previous centuries dealing with ships of the Order. This accounts for the fact that the Knights knew well enough the hazards of the sea. In the history of the order its navy reached its peak of efficiency during its stay in Malta. The galley of the Order, known by friend and foe as the Maltese galley, was for three centuries, the terror of Moslem shipping. The Order could never have attained the mastery of the sea if it had not maintained harsh discipline on board its ships. This fact too protected men and boat from disasters resulting from negligence or carelessness. Moreover, the Order kept to the strict rules of the sailing season which normally started in May and ended in October. All other cruises were undertaken under strict precautions, kept to a minimum, and allowed only in case of necessity. It is worth noting that in votive paintings ships hoisting the flag of the Order were usually the *speronara*, *polacca*, and *tartana* – merchantmen owned and run by Maltese. These were unarmed, or ill-armed, and had to face all hazards in order to earn a living.

With the departure of the Knights from Malta merchant ships sprang

like mushrooms in the Grand Harbour. The British occupation served to stimulate the shares-type of ownership, and Maltese, individually or in corporations, invested in Maritime enterprises. "Tartanes", "polaccas", "speronaras", and "chebecs" were replaced by the fine brig of the British period. The brig was agile but stout enough to face the winter months. Apace with the growth of sea traffic increased, per consequence, the availability of human flesh as food for the fish, and of human market for the corsair. Thus one can understand why the brig is the ship commonly seen in the votive paintings of this period.

By the turn of the latter half of the nineteenth century the *ex voto* paintings dwindled down to just a few examples. The advent of steam round the 1830's brought a general run down of sailing ships. The four shipyards in the Grand Harbour all shut down by the 1870's. The era of steel and smoke had begun for Malta as well. It is evident that with floating steel life at sea became less hazardous. The last three votive paintings bear the dates 1909, 1911, and 1930, respectively, and all represent the Gozo boat, "Tal-Latini", – the last link with the silent boat of the past.

Inscriptions accompanying the Picture

The greatest difficulty in the study of this subject is the lack of documentation. In many instances the caption is cryptic, and therefore an arduous challenge to the investigator. An interpretation, and a conjectural one for that matter, can only be reached after years of research. It is indeed regrettable that fine examples of ship portraits are hard to identify due to lack of information. Wording, due to limited space, is at a minimum, which, after all, did not mean anything to the general illiterate public. Nevertheless, one still comes across paintings with a detailed story. Others opt for a line or two with emphasis on the name of the ship, donor, and date. Generally, the donor is satisfied with the inscription of his name and the year. There are others in which there is nothing other than the picture itself.

Ghost writing on inscriptions is not a rare thing in these votive paintings. This raises the question as to whether the inscription is faithful to the original. Oil and water colour transcriptions are noticed on many. Colour projection brings out the double writings which otherwise would not be deciphered by the naked eye. Some pen

inscriptions are totally obliterated through dampness. In some cases the cartouche or legend space is there but the writing is missing. In few exceptions the writing is on the back which has faded away due to adverse conditions. One panel in the "Tal-Mensija" has pen writing on the back giving details of the episode, but being hardly readable, the riddle of the *corvette* in the picture remains unsolved.

The language commonly adopted in these votive paintings is Italian³³. There are, however, exceptions. We know of one inscription in broken English, another in archaic Maltese, the third in Latin and the fourth in Italian and German to remind us of the nationality of the donor. The syntax and spelling in some leaves much to be desired. This is not to say that there are not others nicely written in good Italian, giving interesting tales in fairly exact details.

Topography of Marine Votive Paintings

Landmarks in a votive painting are of extreme importance since they pinpoint the locality of the disaster; they can, therefore, somehow compensate for the lack or the mediocrity of the inscription. Their inclusion enhances the picture with maps, coastal towers, volcanos, fortifications, mountains, sea-ports, islands and landscapes. In many instances, however, they are of little help. It happens that the topography usually drastically changes with the passage of time. It may also result that items were inserted at random, without the proper topographical skills. Be that as it may, despite their historical inaccuracy these landmarks help embellish the picture. Some painters were sensible enough to write the name of the landmark underneath it. Other data are also of great help. A flag bearing the crescent over a coastal tower or fortification, a nearby minaret, flat roofs are all indicative of Barbary regions, whereas slanting or gabled roofs, churches, gothic towers suggest Christian territory. Sometimes it is the inscription that helps clarify the landmark. This is true of a votive painting in the "Tal-Ħniena" collection. The landmark resembles a "De Redin" type of coastal tower, thus indicating the vicinity of Malta as the locality of the disaster. It is

33. The Knights of Malta adopted the Italian as their official language. The Codes of De Vilhena and of De Rohan, all documents and bans were written in Italian. The most important books on the history of the Order were written in this language. Italian remained the official language also under the British Rule. Down to the quite recent past it was still the language of the Courts and used in delivering panegyrics on a major feast in parishes.

From the inscription that we know that the incident happened near Capo Colonna. Some Knights, who donated an *ex voto*, were very exacting in having the landmarks corresponding meticulously to reality. The Zabbar collection possesses perhaps the best example of a bird's eye view of some Maltese coastal towers. The painting, dated December 18, 1790, shows clearly the towers of "Benghisa", "St. Lucian", "Zondadari", "Xropp il-Għagin", and "St. Thomas". As a norm however one cannot rely heavily on landmarks.

From 1830 onwards a trend for precision is registered in the writing of a story beneath the portrait of the ship in question. The location of the ship is given with an annotation of latitude and longitude in degrees and minutes, rather than by the use of landmarks. Captains recorded their position on the compass even to three-letter points.

Points of Historical Interest revealed in the study of Votive Paintings.

Examination of these votive paintings reveals many maritime aspects which enhance their charm. The following points are a cross-section of what could be perused from these pictures, especially if they are professionally restored and interpreted accordingly:

1. a clear demonstration of the evolution of the Maltese *speronara*;
2. the evolution of the *bombarda* and *palandra* from warships to merchant ships;
3. the most popular merchant ship used by companies in Malta was the brig, and that used by local masters was the *speronara*;
4. the Maltese brig could sail with only a crew of eleven;
5. the *tartana* was still in use in 1847;
6. the *firilla* was the usual fisherman's boat, for sure, up to the year 1831;
7. there is one sole visual reference to the galley squadron of the Order when it was at its speak – eight galleys strong;
8. the position of the local *barcazza* secured off the counter, and the caïque always in the waist;
9. the actual position of the *felucca* on a galley³⁴;

34. Signal codes of the Order refer to a black *felucca* but to see it represented in an *ex voto* is more than a mere written document. The gilded *felucca* of the General of the galley squadron of the Order is represented in a contemporary model found in the Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta.

10. a good cross section of the Maltese mercantile navy in the 18th and 19th centuries;
 11. this survey helps to show also, apart from warships used by the Order of St. John (galley, galleot, third rates, galleons, corvettes, sixth rates, and some British men-of-war), an extensive repertoire of Maltese merchant ships: *pinco*, *polacca*, *chebec*, *speronara*, *tartana*, *trabaccolo*, *balanza*, *bombarda*, *palandra*, brig, *brigantine*, brig-schooner, schooner, bark, *marticana*, navi or three masted brig, *luzzu*, *Tal-Latini*, old Gozo boat, steam and sail, *polacca-chebec*, *firilla*, *fregate*³⁵;
 12. a demonstration of sail arrangements is given on various types of vessels;
 13. the study of these paintings solves the riddle of the use of the enigmatic *treo* or emergency sail on galleys when facing a severe storm, or forced to put to sea because of anchors failing to hold fast;
 14. sails are seen torn out in the middle by strong winds but still rigged in place by strong bolt-ropes;
 15. an illustration is presented of how the oars of a galley were shipped in during a storm;
 16. a picture shows a man tied by the waist adjusting the rudder of a *trabaccolo* in rough seas. This might mean nothing to the casual viewer; yet this fact indeed shows the helplessness of a vessel devoid of a rudder when hit by a storm³⁶;
 17. the jetsam of cargo and cattle is a common sight;
 18. these paintings furnish one with quite a long list of Maltese captains in the nineteenth century;
 19. it is indeed a novelty to realize the great numbers of Maltese employed as captains on British ships;
 20. a large variety of harbours frequented by Maltese ships is also encountered in this collection;
 21. a painting may also raise an insoluble question, as in the case of a panel at "Tal-Mensija" where the inscription does not relate to the illustration given;
 22. one obtains first-hand information of a composite picture – showing the same vessel or vessels in different parts of the panel. This type of presentation was in vogue in the seventeenth and
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35. More recent *ex voto* paintings show the great warships or steam vessels, but these fail to kindle the imagination as do the old wooden sailing ships.
 36. Another panel shows the same incident happening to a *speronara*, but this time the man in the water is held up by another mate heads down over the washboards who in turn is rigidly held by the ankles by two other sailors.

eighteenth centuries. A painting at the “Tal-Ħerba” church, dated March 1815, shows the same brig near Sicily, Malta and Zante³⁷.

The Painter and his Paintings

The painting of *ex voti* was considered a profession in itself, and the painter was called *madonnaro* – a term derivant of “Madonna”. The term itself vouchsafes to the habitual consecration of *ex voti* to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which on its part demonstrates the *consensus fidulium* in the thaumaturgical powers of the Blessed Virgin Mary. If not highly competent, these *Madonnari* showed nevertheless sufficient talent to reproduce the idea of their clients on canvas. The Maltese painters followed the same techniques as those in Venice, Naples, and other places round the Mediterranean. One may surmise that payment was settled beforehand. The finished product was then hanged personally by the donor in the sanctuary, presumably after having obtained permission from the “Kapillan”

The study of votive paintings by reason of the painter may be distinguished by two periods. The first period includes the entire period of the Order, the second comprises the subsequent era down to the last donation of a votive painting.

The first period is characterized by samples which are works of art. They deserve to be considered as nautical text-books, particularly of the galley with all its minute details. The Mellieħa sanctuary prides itself in a fine painting assigned to the Maltese painter Stefano Erardi. One must add the painting of “Madonna della Flotta” by Antonello Riccio now in the Fine Arts Museum in Valletta. There are other excellent works but certainly not of the calibre of these two. There must have been very efficient painters in the period of the Knights. Some *ex voto* paintings, especially those with a bird’s eye view effect, are indeed museum material. An artistic eye would greatly appreciate how a few storkes

37. This system of representing a vessel or fleet in different parts of the panel causes misinterpretations to casual examiners. This is evident in the case of a painting at Zabbar presumably representing the amassing of the Christian fleet at Messina before the Battle of Lepanto, 1571. This interpretation must be rejected for the simple reason that the “capitana” of the Order is seen painted black, and that custom was in use after 1625.

in red can show all the elegance and continuous flow of the lines of a galley in every conceivable position while in a storm. Besides their artistic value, these paintings cluster a wealth of historical data. The Zabbar and Qrendi collections hold most of these pictures.

The second period encompasses a large scale of artistry from pure and crude home-made paintings to highly professional paintings. In the lowest scale, the painter may be the donor himself, most probably a poor seaman who couldn't afford a professional painter. Such paintings are primitive, puerile, and crude, but to the point, effective and their ingenuity impresses. To this category belongs one found in the Mellieħa collection, dated October 13, 1872. Naive as this picture might appear, one acquires, at a glance, a whole scenario of human tragedy; the main mast and sail of a big British ship burning, and boats carrying the crew to safety.

Professional *madonnari*, belonging to the second period, usually had their initials on their product. Vincenzo Gonzi is rightfully considered as "il madonnaro", *per antonomasiam*, of the nineteenth century. None was as prolific and highly thought of as Gonzi. His works are found at the Mellieħa, Qrendi, Zabbar, Birkirkara, and Qormi sanctuaries. At the "Tal-Ħerba" church we find his name in full signed on a painting, dated October 27, 1846, and in another dated January 10, 1843, signed "Sre (signore) Gonzi Pitto. (-re)". In Vincenzo's works one finds many details incorporated in the picture and in the inscription. Gonzi found scope for dramatising an incident, and brings out all the horror and agonizing moments of a ship engulfed in a huge wave. A picture in Mellieħa sanctuary, dated December 28, 1832, shows how the artist visualized the drama: the main yard is broken in two and hanging down; the main top mast is in the water; rigging broken and slashing against the remaining ropes in place; jibs and stay sails flapping helplessly in the wind.

Second only to Vincenzo Gonzi is another popular painter known by his initials M.G.³⁸. It is worth pointing out a serious mistake in

38. One wonders if M.G. stands for Michele Gonzi who might have happened to be the father or relative of Vincenzo Gonzi. The dates of the paintings signed by M.G. range from the year 1795 and 1803. The works of Vincenzo appeared the first time in the vicinity of 1807, and his last in 1840's circa.

one of M.G.'s portraits, dated June 25, 1795, and located at the "Tal-Ħerba" church. According to the inscription, the artist should be showing three chebecs and two galleots (and not three third rates of the Order and two chebecs) which were chasing the small galleot of Nicola Genovese. This incident puts in jeopardy the historical liability of the artist in all his works, although this one fact may be taken as the odd *lapsus*.

Of the same calibre of M.G. we consider Nicolas Cammilleri of Maltese origin, although claimed by the Italians as "il raffinato acquerellista Italiano"³⁹. Cammilleri later in life settled in Marseilles. The artist worked for Maltese shipowners, and one can see the best ship portraits of the last sailing days in Malta at the Wickman collection at Zabbar. The "Tal-Ħerba" church claims a picture signed by this artist. This water colour, dated November 26, 1832, is an example of fine line drawing modelled in monochrome and wash with fine rigging lines of impeccable exactitude. This artist not always signed his works. We are of the opinion that some of his works are located in other places, especially in the "Tal-Ħerba" church and the Zabbar museum.

There is a slim chance that one could ever find the names of other *madonnari*. Among these anonymous artists some have really showed mastery of the panel. In the Tal-Ħerba church one comes across few initials: M.V. in a portrait dated February 18, 1831; F.A. in another, dated February 26, 1828; A.G. in a work, dated November 30, 1808; P.A., who exhibits artistic ability of superior quality in a dramatic scene of the English brig, "Rob Roy", which happened off the coast of Ireland, on January 21, 1840. A ghost signature, "A.B. fecit", is found on a cracked panel donated by captain Giovanni Bonnici, on April 2, 1837, at the "Tal-Mensija" church.

Even in painting an *ex voto* the artist was sometimes asked to change and correct his work.⁴⁰ Masts, for instance, were changed

39. Secchi. L. Guida al Museo Navale di Genova – Pegli. 1^a parte, La Marina a Vela. p. 23.

40. Worth mentioning is an *ex voto* found in the "Tal-Ħerba" church dated September 29, 1973. The back of the picture shows an unfinished painting of the galley, "Lascara". In spite of its decomposition due to the dampness, the picture is indeed a piece of art presenting a bird's eye view with a fine drawing of the "Capitana", "Vittoria".

from their initial position. This datum, *per se*, denotes historical reliability of the pictorial content. However, an expert eye is needed to decipher ghost outlines of masts or hulls from those intentionally made as part of a composite picture showing two different aspects of the disaster.

The Raw Material of Votive Paintings

The oldest votive paintings in Naples were executed on panel whereas in Malta the earliest ones were done on canvas, a medium most commonly found in churches. This material withstood the vicissitudes of time with excellent result. Panel was second to canvas in Maltese collections. Wood was also used for the purpose; however, wood is very susceptible to humidity, and cracks too easily. Water colour on paper was widely used after 1800. This medium is most adapted for fine rigging specialization. The best ship portraits by Cammilleri and others are those drawn on paper. One can easily understand that paper has to be protected with glass against its worst enemy, moisture. In one or two paintings cardboard was adopted, and protected with glass. The cheapest of all was sack cloth, material used by local farmers to carry their produce. It is coarse stuff which allows no delicate finishing. Its use certainly reveals the dire financial condition of the donor. A typical example of which is found at Mellieħa sanctuary, dated 1815.

We are not cognizant of any written norms regarding the size of the painting admissible in churches. However, there seems to have been a spontaneous acceptance of the principle of equipoise between the church and the size of the portrait. The pictures in the Żabbar collection are definitely larger than the ones at the "Tal-Ħerba" church since the Żabbar church, where the paintings were originally located, is by far larger than the "Tal-Ħerba" church. The average large *ex voto* at Żabbar measures approximately 60 X 80 cm., and there are, at least, three others even bigger. In the "Tal-Ħerba" church the average size of the picture is 30 X 40 cm., with the exception of a water colour of the "Capitana", "Vittoria", measuring 42 X 55 cm. These two churches were intentionally chosen for comparison since they are the most important and most representative in the field. The "Tal-Ħniena" collection compares well in size with that of Żabbar, while the Mellieħa sanctuary harbours a variety of sizes. In the Wignacourt Museum, at Rabat, one finds the two largest votive paintings on the island. The size of each runs circa 150 X 200 cm., but their provenance is somewhat

doubtful. All paintings are in rectangular form, and there must have been some foresight behind this format in order that space would not be wasted on the walls of these small churches.

The wood used in frames varies, depending on the financial resources of the donor. Some frames are made of plain wood painted black, dark brown, or yellow ochre, others are walnut sometimes fringed with a gilded moulding. In the Żabbar collection the old frames were replaced by new gilded ones which did not fit the austere aspect of the paintings. The frame is sometimes nailed to the wooden panel which helps to keep the cracked panel together, although the rust of the nail effects both frame and panel. Glass is found when water colour is involved. Fortunately enough, very few paintings have glass.

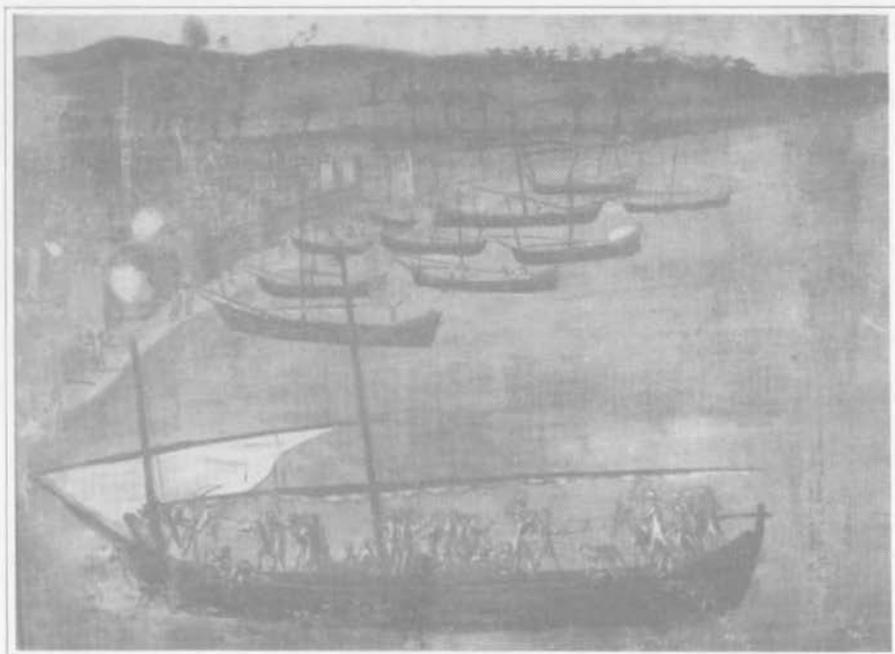
The Collection of Votive Paintings, a National Gem Ignored.

At the Żabbar church one finds all the records of Knights, donors of *ex voto* paintings, duly entered and registered with cross references to the documents in the archives of the Order. This church, which was highly patronized by the Knights, always preserved documents in good shape. The "Tal-Hniena" sanctuary also had its own documentation of the paintings contained therein which has however, disappeared. There must have been some records in other sanctuaries whenever Knights presented an *ex voto*. The entry of an *ex voto* by an insignificant commoner was never worth recording.

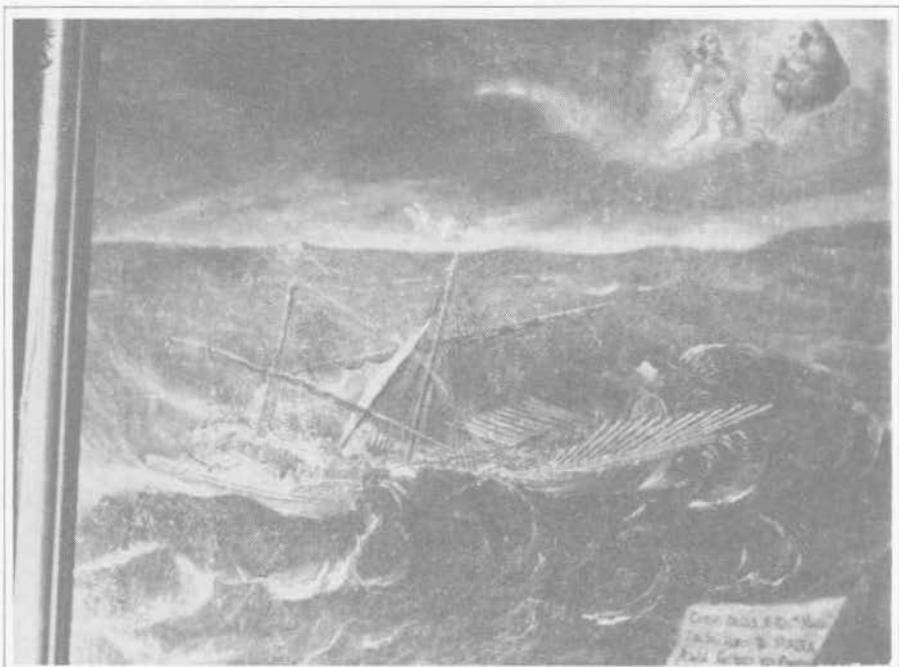
Hardly any interest has been shown in these cultural, social and religious sources of history. Votive paintings have always been treated as petty, antique items. Thus a complete catalogue of all votive paintings has never been formulated. One can only visualize vaguely in what deplorable a condition this national heritage happens to be. The extent of deterioration is beyond description because of this general disinterest and neglect. A catalogue of Marian paintings issued in 1949 lists an *ex voto* painting at Qrendi showing the galley squadron of the Order in a tempest. The full inscription was still readable at the time, but when the same picture was photographed in 1977, the wording was totally obliterated. Gunports of warships have totally disappeared beneath excessive paint-touching by pseudorestorers. Some ships, rigging and flags at Żabbar museum were transformed in grotesque caricatures of

the original works. Icons of the Madonna, dates, and inscriptions were cut off to suit a new frame. Many of these pictures are covered with dust and filth, candle droppings, and drops of whitewash. Casual comments on the artistic, historical and technical reliability of these paintings are derogatory. While the truth is that their importance rests on the visual documentation of the social, military, cultural and religious aspects of Maltese history. Only a history dilettante, fails to realize that in these pictures the ones who came before us, insignificant as they might have been in society, have a story to tell us: the hardships and perils they endured, the terror they experienced, the humiliation they lived, the tears they shed. An anthropologist visiting Malta remarked that he never expected such a fine and enormous collection on such a small island. Malta needs not envy Marseilles or Naples in quantity and quality of its precious collection.

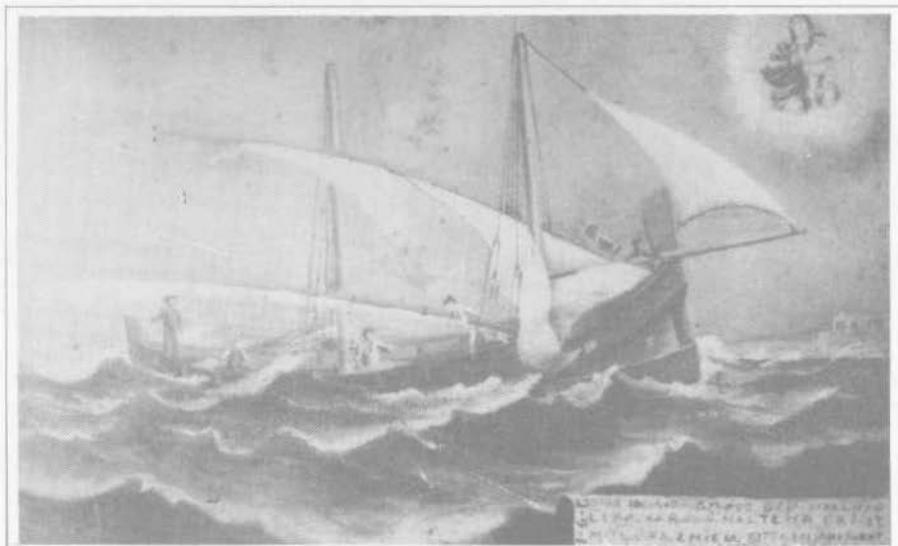
(Rev.) Andrew Cuschieri
and
Joseph Muscat



1. Sanctuary of the Virgin of Graces, Zabbar, *Maltese sailors escaping from captivity at sfax*, 1631.



2. Sanctuary of the Virgin of Graces, Zabbar. The "*Galera Magistrale S. Giovanni*" in a tempest off the island of Candia, 9 February 1704.



3. Sanctuary of the Virgin of Graces, Zabbar, *A Gozo-boat in rough sea*, 2 September 1911.