

# SCHOOL FOR SIGHTSEERS

## TOPOGRAPHICAL ARTISTS IN MALTA 1800-50

By ANNE CROSTHWAIT

RECENT exhibitions have made fashionable pictures of places visited by 19th-century travellers to the Levant. Malta, by then a British colony, was on their route and a quarantine station for their return. Edward Lear went on several occasions, and did over 300 drawings there. David Roberts, on his return from Egypt in 1839, spent some time in the Lazaretto and left watercolours of his quarters, as did the French artist, de Chacaton. Gifted amateurs, too, stationed on the island, or residing there for reasons of health or pleasure, painted views of their houses and gardens.

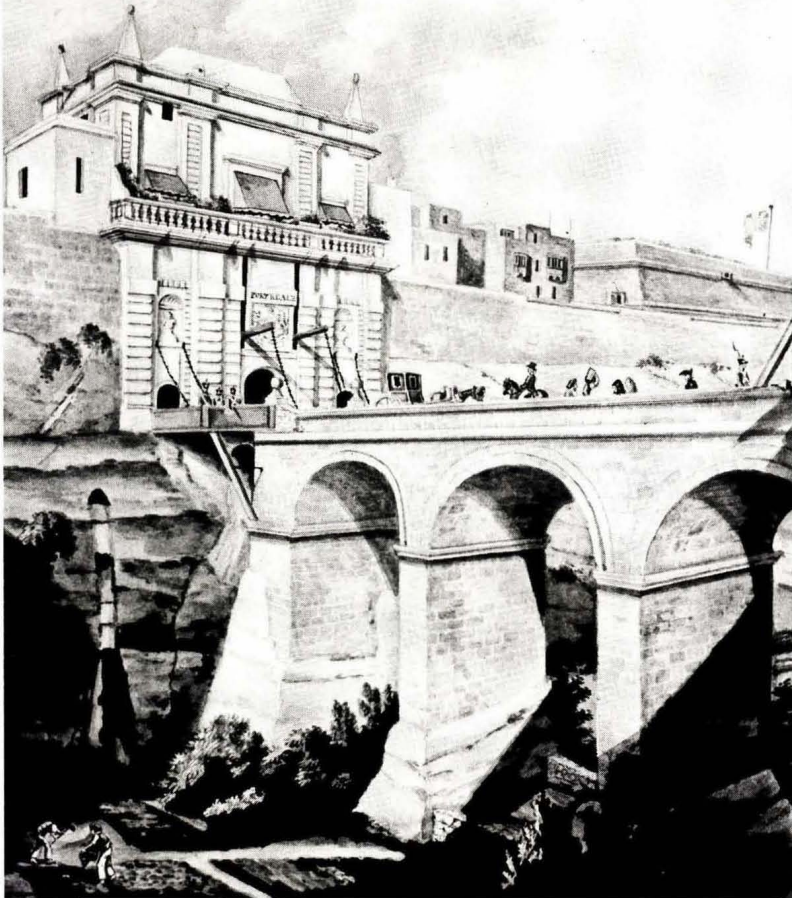
Residents and visitors alike requested souvenirs of the picturesque Maltese landscape, the grand fortifications in lovely golden stone, the elegant city of Valletta, the prehistoric temples, scenes of village life, costumes, and the busy harbours. A school of Maltese scenic painters grew up in response to this demand.

Before Piétro-Paolo Caruana (1793-1852) introduced the process of lithography to Malta in 1828, the Maltese scene was illustrated in oils, watercolours and drawings. Little research has been done outside Malta into the social and economic backgrounds of these artists, and there seem to be few family records. Despite the ready-made market in Malta, we know that some of them travelled through the Mediterranean, working in France, Italy, Great Britain, the Balkans and the Middle East. Their works have mostly remained in private hands rather than in catalogued collections.

This is the first time that part of the fine collection of topographical prints, drawings and watercolours, belonging to the Museum of the Order of St John, has been on show. Some date from the days of the Knights of St John—these include gouache views of Valletta by Joseph Goupy, engraved around 1760 by



1—MALTESE PEASANTS IN SUNDAY DRESS. By Charles Brocktorff (1775-1850). (Left) 2—BROCKTORFF'S WATERCOLOUR OF PORT REALE, VALLETTA, 1819. From the exhibition at the Pennybank Gallery, St John's Square, London EC1, until October 26



Benoist, works by Milcent, Basset and Chéreau, and aquatints from Jean Houel's *Voyage Pittoresque de Sicile, Lipari et Malte* of 1787 (Fig 4). But the exhibition concentrates on 19th-century artists and, in particular, on the Schranz and Brocktorff families.

The earliest recorded lithographed views of Malta were published in Munich in 1826 by P. Lacroix, from drawings by Filippo Benucci and Anton Schranz. The exhibition shows an engraving after a painting by Benucci, dated 1818, of a charming garden in the Bastions of Valletta. Benucci helped Count Saverio Marchese (d. 1833) to form the collection which is now the basis of the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, and is important because it includes works by the Schranz family and other local 19th-century artists.

Anton Schranz the Elder was born in Bavaria about 1770 and went to Minorca. He may have been taught by the Italian-Minorcan landscape artist Joseph Chiesa. He painted seascapes in oils of the British navy in Port Mahon about 1798 and, in a sense, followed the fleet to Malta where he portrayed a number of His Majesty's ships from about 1816. He died there in 1839.

His sons, Giovanni, Anton and Giuseppe, born in Minorca, all fine watercolourists, travelled through the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Giovanni (1794-1882) worked mainly in Malta, painting oils and watercolours of shipping, landscapes, local characters, houses and gardens (COUNTRY LIFE, March 22, 1979). Anton accompanied Lord Castlereagh to Egypt and Syria in 1841, and illustrated his *Journey to Damascus* (1847). Giuseppe worked in Greece, Turkey and Egypt. His sepia drawings of temples are reproduced as engravings in *Ancient and Modern Egypt* by the Rev. M. Russell. The Schranz family rarely signed their work. Together the brothers set up a lithographic business in Valletta after 1828. Examples of their views are on show. They were rivalled only by the Brocktorff family, their competitors in the lithographic trade.

In contrast with the lyrical, romantic quality of many Schranz paintings, the Brocktorff work

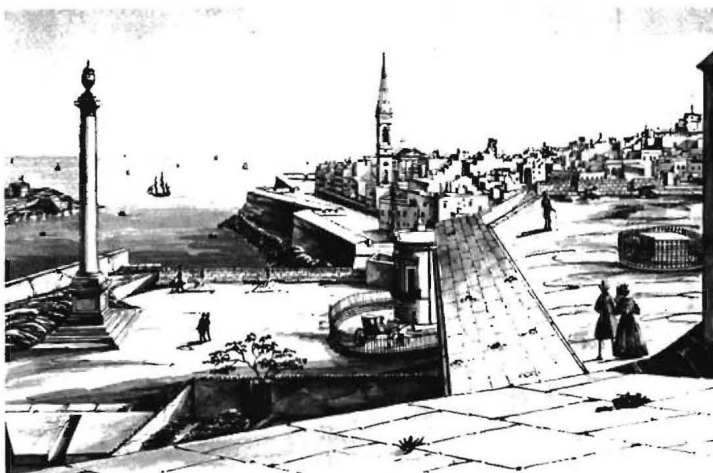
is representational and linear. The appeal for the visitor must have been the attention to detail, the importance attached to settings, the extreme accuracy with which costumes and customs are depicted. In the Schranz views the figures are dull and incidental. Those of the Brocktorff family—though often wooden and crudely drawn—are always witty.

Charles Brocktorff (1775-1850) was an officer in the King's German Legion, who resigned his commission in 1809 to settle in Valletta. On show is an album of 23 watercolours done by him. The Port Reale, Valletta, signed and dated 1819, is certainly the earliest in the collection (Fig 2). In the same series there are interiors of the Grand Master's Palace, views of St John's Co-Cathedral and of the library. Other watercolours include interiors of the cathedral, notably the Chapel of the Langue de Castille, signed and dated 1825. The Chapel of the Langue de France exists in the Valletta Library collection, showing the only neo-Classical tomb in the cathedral: that of the brother of Louis-Philippe of France, Vicomte de Beaujolais, who died in Malta in 1808.

Another interesting volume of 21 watercolours in the Valletta Library is described on the cover as *Drawings of the Druidical Remains Discovered in the Island of Gozo Taken on the Spot in the Year 1820 by C. de Brocktorff*. The illustrations are accompanied by Brocktorff's comments on the clearing of this megalithic temple of Gigantija, the first to be uncovered on the Maltese islands.

The watercolours of Gigantija are enlivened by figures of great originality—in one the bucolic cleric, off-duty, is being greeted deferentially by a peasant, cap in hand; in another the archaeologist with a red umbrella surveys his assistant stretched out on some large rock. One drawing shows the local gentry out for a day's shooting; in another a sightseer arrives in a sedan chair (the artist is there too, with umbrella and sketching pad). He appears again in other settings—at Boschetto, up a tree observing the peasantry disporting themselves, leaning on a bastion overlooking Grand Harbour, and strolling in the Gardens of the Baracca.

It is not known whether any of these particular watercolours were ever lithographed, but there were many other Valletta scenes which appear as lithographs in the exhibition. Charles's sons joined him in the lithographic business, which also produced maps and vignettes to embellish writing paper. Luigi (1814-17) was the most



3—THE QUARANTINE HARBOUR. A watercolour by Luigi Taffien



4—AQUATINT FROM JEAN HOUEL'S VOYAGE PITTORESQUE



5—TYPICAL COUNTRYSIDE SCENE, ATTRIBUTED TO GIOVANNI SCHRANZ

illustrated Badger's *Description of Malta and Gozo* (1838), and the exhibition shows the album of his contributions to the *Penny Magazine*, dated 1845. He also travelled and worked in the Levant. Other sons were Federico, Giuseppe and Leopoldo.

An earlier guidebook, that of Periciuoli-Borzesi, published in 1830, recommends the traveller to visit the "Painting Studio and Lithography of Mr. Caruana . . . who uses his

utmost endeavours to render himself perfect in his art". This was the Piétro-Paolo who introduced lithography into Malta in 1828, when he published his volume of costumes and customs, and thereby brought the Maltese scene to a much wider public. He was an exact contemporary of Giovanni Schranz and one of a group of students of a School of Design created in 1800 as part of the University of Malta. This school was the imaginative idea of one man—Monsignor Saverio Caruana, the first rector appointed when the University was re-opened by the British Commissioner, Sir Alexander Ball.

The rector encouraged his students to visit foreign academies, especially that of St Luke's in Rome—where the first Maltese had studied sculpture in 1662. The new colonial government provided scholarships for many of these young artists. The first professor of drawing was Michele Busuttil (1760-1828), the professor of architecture Giorgio Pullicino (1780-1852).

He was responsible for the neo-Classical monument to Sir Alexander Ball erected in 1810. A drawing in pen and ink attributed to him (dated 1824) is in the Clerkenwell collection.

Sadly, there are no examples of Piétro-Paolo Caruana's work in Clerkenwell, nor of that of many of his contemporaries at the Rome Academy. Of these, Massimo Gauchi (1776-1858) worked as a lithographer in Britain, and drew portraits of William Banks of Kingston Lacy and of Giovanni Belzoni, explorer and adventurer—probably between 1815 and 1820 when they were both associated with Henry Salt, Consul-General to Egypt. Another, Giuseppe Hyzler (1793-1858), set up his own Academy in Valletta in 1822. Like Piétro-Paolo, he was a member in Rome of the Nazarene Brotherhood. Works by Michele Bellanti (1807-83) can be seen at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta.

There were many other minor contributors to the Maltese scene. "Pier-head" artists drew portraits of merchant ships at their captain's request. Fresco painters decorated town and country houses with

landscapes and figures. One of the last exhibits, a watercolour by Luigi Taffien (1811-66), shows the Quarantine Harbour in Valletta, the Anglican Cathedral erected by Queen Adelaide at her own expense in 1844 and the monument to Governor Sir Frederick Ponsonby (Fig 3). It was to Lady Emily Ponsonby that Piétro-Paolo Caruana dedicated his first album of lithographs in 1828.

Illustrations: 1, *Mary Attard*; 2-4, *Order of St John*.