



Statue of St Sebastian by George Borg, created between 1936 and 1938, at St Sebastian parish church, Qormi. PHOTO: RICHARD HILI



The statue of St Sebastian touring the streets of Qormi in procession for the first time in 1944.



St George, Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi (Donatello) 1415-1417, Bargello Museum, Florence.



Statue of St Sebastian in Borg's studio, Valletta, 1938. COURTESY OF LINO BORG



Clay head model for statue of St Sebastian (destroyed), 1937. COURTESY OF LINO BORG



Front and side view of St Sebastian bozzetto by George Borg, 1936, at MUZA, Valletta. COURTESY OF HERITAGE MALTA PHOTO: RICHARD HILI

Celebrating the 75th anniversary since the statue of St Sebastian toured the streets of Qormi in procession for the first time

Qormi's statue of St Sebastian created by George Borg



HILARY SPITERI

On July 9, 1944, the newly sculpted wooden statue representing St Sebastian saw the light of day in the streets of Qormi. This year marks the 75th anniversary of when the effigy was first taken out in procession amid the anticipation and fervour of the parishioners and devotees. The statue was sculpted by Valletta-born artist George Borg (1906-1983), whose artistic vision and technical bravura prevailed over competition and secured the commission.

In Qormi, the veneration of the early Christian saint and martyr St Sebastian, who is credited with a special ability to intercede against the plague, is rooted in the 16th century. Nevertheless, direct reference to a great devotional resurgence is made in the first decades of the 19th century, when in May 1813, the inhabitants faced the vilest bubonic epidemic in the town's history. Records show that 17 per cent of the town's population succumbed to the disease.

Yet the 19th century marked a period of revival and growth in Qormi, both as regards its economy and population. The inland marsh

(colloquially termed *maremma*) of the Marsa area was drying out and no longer constituted a hazard to the inhabitants. The population started gradually shifting to the western area of the town which logistically was closer to the harbours, a prime site for the locals, the majority of whom worked and earned their daily income as stevedores.

In 1873, master mason Michele Angelo Azzopardi petitioned to the then Archbishop of Malta Mgr Gaetano Pace Forno (1809-1874) to build a small church, not far from Marsa, since the inhabitants living in the area were being deprived of their spiritual needs.

Azzopardi argued that during the wintry season when weather conditions did not favour "attendance to Mass, they could not hear the bells ringing, and rain and mud made it very difficult for them to reach their destination". He concluded the petition by expressing his desire to build a filial church next to the statue of St Sebastian sculpted in local stone by Francesco and Gerolamo Fabri in 1815. The statue was erected in ex voto honouring the saint who was believed to have interceded and curbed the 1813 epidemic. During that same year, Mgr Pace Forno granted permission for the construction of a new church dedicated to St Sebastian, and works started.

During the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, the filial church dedicated to St Sebas-

tian advanced in obtaining its sacramental title on July 14, 1893, and becoming a vice-parish on June 19, 1918. The final and most eagerly awaited title of parish church was officially bestowed on October 25, 1935, by Archbishop of Malta Mgr Dom Mauro Caruana (1867-1943). Fr Aloysius Psaila, the first parish priest of the newly elevated parish, took this community under his spiritual and juridical guidance on January 5, 1936.

"Parishioners unanimously agreed to polychromate and gild the statue. Borg publicly denounced this decision, deeming the intervention to be a mockery"

Parishes across Malta and Gozo are repositories of life-size processional statues. This sculptural repertoire spans centuries of artistic activity by renowned Maltese and foreign sculptors. The effigy is the pride and joy of the townspeople and at least

once a year it tours the town amid fervour and celebration.

It was therefore natural that some months after attaining the coveted status of parish, on July 22, 1936, Fr Psaila filed an application at the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana. On behalf of his parishioners he expressed his wish to commission a sculptor to produce a unique wooden sculpture honouring their titular saint – St Sebastian. He stated that the expenses were to be covered in full by the faithful.

Psaila added that he had taken the liberty to approach two emerging Maltese sculptors, Vincent Apap (1909-2003) and George Borg (1906-1983) who, prior to the submission, had furnished the applicant with two bozzettos showcasing their respective idea and vision for the undertaking. The bozzettos were handed in on the same day together with the written application.

On August 22, 1936, a committee in charge of evaluating the applications on behalf of the ecclesiastical authorities voted in favour of Borg's work and claimed that the artistic qualities manifested in the bozzetto were "nettamente superiori" (clearly superior) to the one modelled by Apap. Upon hearing the news, Fr Psaila lost no time in securing the commission to Borg. In a private deed, both parties agreed that the artist was to be paid the sum of £160 (equivalent to about €11,300 today) and the work was to be completed in a period of eight months.

Borg secured the commission only two years after his return from Rome in 1934 where he had spent four intensive years perfecting his art at the Regia Accademia di Belle Arti. At the time, Borg was regarded as one of Malta's up-and-coming artistic talents, a breath of fresh air amid the lingering local baroque stylistic stagnation.

Borg started his artistic tuition under Giuseppe Duca (1871-1948) and pursued it further at the Malta Government School of Art, with Prof. Antonio Micallef (1883-1957) as his mentor. At the same school, Borg won a scholarship to Rome for modelling.

In the Eternal City, Borg trained under a series of distinguished professors, among them the well-known Angelo Zanelli (1879-1942), the sculptor who oversaw the frieze adorning *L'Altare dell Patria*. Concurrently, Borg followed courses at the British Academy of Arts where he distinguished himself by winning the prestigious Calderon Prize.

During his years in Rome, Borg became familiar with the artistic trends prevailing at the time, when the turn-of-the-century Renaissance Revival was evolving into a stern, monumental and classical Fascist attitude. Still fresh from this encounter (with these new ideas and styles), Borg set out to produce a statue that fitted within this development. He also aimed to beat off competition from abroad, particularly France, considering that some

parishes looked overseas to commission their processional statues.

Soon after he won the commission, Borg set out to find a suitable tree trunk to fit his purposes. Thanks to Sir Hannibal Scicluna (1880-1981), director of Museums and librarian at the National Library, a yellow pine tree trunk measuring 52 feet squared was acquired from the Malta Dockyard and was delivered to Borg's studio at 51, St Christopher's Street, Valletta.

Borg took more than two years to accomplish his project. His rigid academic discipline is palpable in his sculptural interpretation where the minutest details, the



Portrait of George Borg by Anton Inglant, at MUZA, Valletta. COURTESY OF HERITAGE MALTA

Italian Renaissance influence. Borg carved out of wood a young Roman soldier with his head set in a frontal position while his body stands in a well-calculated contrapposto.

On December 18, 1938, Borg fulfilled his commission and the wooden statue left his studio in Valletta and was transported to Qormi. The effigy of the saint was well received by the parishioners. Accompanied by a marching band, the statue was carried high on people's shoulders and toured the town, in the proximity of the church of St Sebastian, until the sun set.

Enthusiasts, artists and connoisseurs visited the work of art and expressed awe and admiration. Praise published in the *Times of Malta* on Saturday, December 17, 1938, went as follows: "George Borg's latest work is a masterpiece effected on original lines... The statue is a remarkable and original work, different from the Church figures which abound in these islands and elsewhere... Notwithstanding the bulk of the figure, it is well balanced and perfect in every detail."

Following the 1938 festivities, to Borg's surprise, the statue was not preserved in the church. Instead it was housed in Fr Psaila's private residence. Of graver concern was that, in direct opposition to Borg's intention of preserving for posterity the effigy in its natural wooden state, the parishioners unanimously agreed to polychromate and gild the statue. Borg publicly denounced this decision, deeming the intervention to be a mockery.

The controversy was suspended as on June 11, 1940, Malta suffered World War II air strikes and any alteration to the sculpture was postponed. During the war the statue was secured and sealed off behind a stone wall after being packed with straw to avoid bomb blast from damaging the structure.

Thankfully, the statue of St Sebastian was spared from the Nazis' fury but ironically it did not escape the

attentions of those who felt Borg's masterpiece needed improvement. Zejtun-born artist Toussaint Busuttil (1912-1944) did the paint job, and the Mallia and Xuereb firm of Valletta was entrusted with the gilding.

Borg considered it the last nail in the coffin. The preparatory coats of plaster applied to the wood masked all the precise chisel marks on which Borg had expended so much artistry and labour. Regardless, on July 2, 1944, the statue was once more exhibited in St Sebastian's parish church, but it was not until July 9 of that same year that the effigy of the saint toured the town as its jewel in the crown.



Borg's studio at 51, St Christopher Street, Valletta. PHOTO: THE AUTHOR

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