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LINO BOR

LIFE&WELLBEING HISTORY





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,

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



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 a small church, not far from Marsa, was first taken out in procession amid the anticipation and fervour of area were being deprived of their the parishioners and devotees. The spiritual needs. statue was sculpted by Valletta-born Azzopardi argued that during the artist George Borg (1906-1983) wintry season when weather condiwhose artistic vision and technical tions did not favour "attendance to bravura prevailed over competition Mass, they cou d not hear the bells and secured the commission.

early Christian saint and martyr St destination". He concluded the peti-Sebastian, who is credited with a spe- tion by expressing his desire to build cial ability to intercede against the a filial church next to the statue of St plague, is rooted in the 16th century. Sebastian sculpted in local stone by decision, deeming Nevertheless, direct reference to a Francesco and Gerolamo Fabri in great devotional resurgence is made 1815. The statue was erected in exin the first decades of the 19th cen- voto honouring the saint who was tury, when in May 1813, the inhabi- believed to have interceded and tants faced the vilest bubonic epi- curbed the 1813 epidemic. During population succumbed to the disease. tion of a new church dedicated to St

and population. The inland marsh the filial church dedicated to St Sebas- joy of the townspeople and at least a period of eight months.

the Marsa area was drying out and mental title on July 14, 1893, and fervour and celebration. no longer constituted a hazard to the becoming a vice-parish on June 19, 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 since the inhabitants living in the

ringing, and rain and mud made it gild the statue. In Qormi, the veneration of the very difficult for them to reach their Borg publicly

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 denounced this the intervention to be a mockery"

(colloquially termed maremma) of tian advanced in obtaining its sacra- once a year it tours the town amid

It was therefore natural that some months after attaining the coveted status of parish, on July 22, 1936, Fr art at the Regia Accademia di Belle 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 under Giuseppe Duca (1871-1948) and to be covered in full by the faithful.

Psaila added that he had taken the liberty to approach two emerging Maltese sculptors, Vincent Apap mentor. At the same school, Borg won (1909-2003) and George Borg (1906- a scholarship to Rome for modelling. 1983) who, prior to the submission, handed in on the same day together with the written application.

in charge of evaluating the applica- distinguished himself by winning Soon after he won the commission, tions on behalf of the ecclesiastical the prestigious Calderon Prize. Borg set out to find a suitable tree ioned in typical classical propor- and gild the statue. Borg publicly (1912-1944) did the paint job, and the where he lectures Art, History of Art and authorities voted in favour of Borg's work and claimed that the artistic became familiar with the artistic Hannibal Scicluna (1880-1981), direcqualities manifested in the bozzetto trends prevailing at the time, when tor of Museums and librarian at the from the traditional iconographic were "nettamente superiori" (clearly the turn-of-the-century Renaissance National Library, a yellow pine tree depiction of St Sebastian, that of a on June 11, 1940, Malta suffered World superior) to the one modelled by Revival was evolving into a stern, trunk measuring 52 feet squared was handsome youth tied to a post or tree War II air strikes and any alteration to Apap. Upon hearing the news, Fr monumental and classical Fascist acquired from the Malta Dockyard and pierced by arrows. Instead, the the sculpture was postponed. During Psaila lost no time in securing the attitude. Still fresh from this and was delivered to Borg's studio at artist opted for Donatellesque idiosyn- the war the statue was secured and show that 17 per cent of the town's granted permission for the construction are repositories of life-size procestion to Borg. In a private encounter (with these new ideas and 51, St Christopher's Street, Valletta. crasies, referring to the statue of St sealed off behind a stone wall after and labour. Regardless, on July 2, tions and exhibitions, including The sional statues. This sculptural reper- deed, both parties agreed that the styles), Borg set out to produce a Borg took more than two years George niched in the façade of the being packed with straw to avoid bomb toire spans centuries of artistic activation artist was to be paid the sum of £160 period of revival and growth in During the late 19th century and ity by renowned Maltese and foreign (equivalent to about €11,300 today) ment. He also aimed to beat off com- academic discipline is palpable (original preserved in Bargello Thankfully, the statue of St Sebast-Qormi, both as regards its economy the first decades of the 20th century, sculptors. The effigy is the pride and and the work was to be completed in petition from abroad, particularly in his sculptural interpretation. Museum, Florence), with which ian was spared from the Nazis' fury year that the effigy of the saint toured Work of Antoine Camilleri (1922-

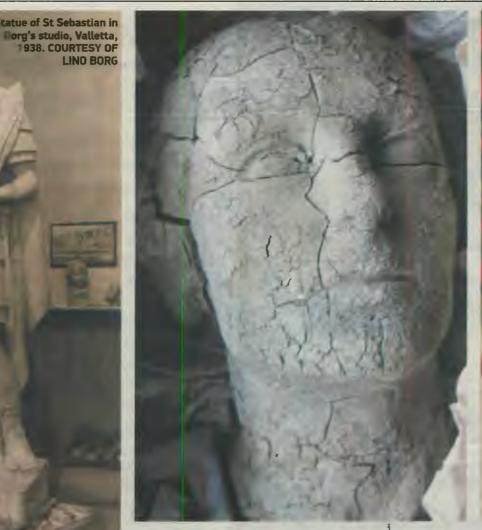
Borg secured the commission only two years after his return from Rome in 1934 where he had spent four intensive years perfecting his Arti. At the time, Borg was regarded as one of Malta's up-and-coming artistic talents, a breath of fresh air amid the lingering local baroque stylistic stagnation.

Borg started his artistic tuition pursued it further at the Malta Government School of Art, with Prof. Antonio Micallef (1883-1957) as his

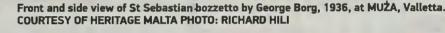
In the Eternal City, Borg trained had furnished the applicant with under a series of distinguished protwo bozzettos showcasing their fessors, among them the wellrespective idea and vision for the known Angelo Zanelli (1879-1942), undertaking. The bozzettos were the sculptor who oversaw the frieze adorning L'Altare dell Patria. Concut rently, Borg followed courses at the parishes looked overseas to commis-On August 22, 1936, a committee British Academy of Arts where he sion their processional statues.

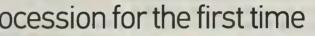
> statue that fitted within this develop- to accomplish his project. His rigid Church of Orsanmichele in Florence blast from damaging the structure. France, considering that some where the minutest details, the Borg's St Sebastian shares the same but ironically it did not escape the the town as its jewel in the crown. 2005); and The Benefits of Art.

aller a hurr / nr



Clay head model for statue of St Sebastian (destroyed), 1937.







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 connois seurs 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 pre-Furthermore, Borg chose to depart intervention to be a mockery.

The controversy was suspended as

history of the saint, the symbols of serving for posterity the effigy in its attentions of those who felt Borg's his martyrdom, and above all, the natural wooden state, the parishioners masterpiece needed improvement. and head of the Art Department at De figure of a deified human fash- unanimously agreed to polychromate Żejtun-born artist Toussaint Busuttil During his years in Rome, Borg trunk to fit his purposes. Thanks to Sir tions are meticulously rendered. denounced this decision, deeming the Mallia and Xuereb firm of Valletta was entrusted with the gilding.

plaster applied to the wood masked all

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