

The Lace-Making Programme at the University Gozo Campus

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In 1992 the Gozo branch of the University of Malta decided to set up a programme to promote and support the study of Maltese lace.

From the beginning, the main aim of the programme has been to provide opportunities for learning about the traditional Maltese way of making lace, a craft that was fast dying out. In order to revive this skill and preserve it as an important part of our national heritage, academic courses were established to teach the historical, artistic and technical aspects of Maltese lace-making, in the context of related European lace techniques which in the past have influenced the local skill.

The Certificate Course

To join the Lace-Making Certificate Course no previous knowledge of the craft is required. The course is spread over three years – Introductory, Intermediate and Advanced – with four hours of tuition per week, normally on Saturday mornings. It introduces students not only to the actual practice of bobbin lace-making, but also to the history of Maltese lace, the recognition of machine lace imitations, the scientific knowledge of texture and colour of threads, as well as methods of designing lace for current use.

During the three-year course, students are given the opportunity to master the skill while specializing in particular



Certificate Course students discussing a piece of old black Maltese lace.

aspects of the technique, such as mounting lace to fabric, combining lace and embroidery, working with silk, copying a design from lace, designing church lace, and so on. By the end of the course, students are able to work individually on creative projects with a certain level of professionalism. This is a very popular course, with the majority of students coming over from Malta. By October 2012, forty-two students will have graduated from the course.

Diploma in Lace Studies

As a result of the success of the Certificate Course, the Diploma Course was created for those who wished to continue their studies. This course is spread over two years and, besides

Maltese lace, students now study the history of European lace, textiles in vestments and costumes, history of art, needle lace, and basic principles of economics, accounting and management. They are also expected to improve their skill of designing patterns for Maltese lace. The project session is held during the summer at the lace workshop, while all taught components take place at the University in Malta. By October 2012, we would have run two diploma courses, by which time there will be eighteen graduates.

Advanced Maltese Lace Class

The Advanced Maltese Lace Class was set up for those who, having acquired the necessary skill, would like to keep in touch with the Lace-Making Programme. The class lasts for

four hours, once a week, either as a morning or an evening session. Though the same for the whole class, the project is chosen after discussion at the beginning of the year. Students normally opt for a design which offers challenging features. Working with the best trained students as a team, one can better appreciate the value of such advanced-level lace projects.

Although the high quality of the items that come out of the advanced course is highly appreciated by all, there are only very few customers who are ready to buy them. Consequently they are made to be kept in the family or to be given as presents, and nothing like them will be found in souvenir or craft shops. The advanced level course also teaches students how to clean and restore old lace, prime examples of which are found in parish churches and private collections, as many lace relics from the past are actually being ruined by dilettantes.

Short Courses

Occasionally, short courses are held consisting of around twenty-four hours of tuition spread out over ten days. These courses focus on a particular aspect of the lace-making industry on the international market, which complements the local skill of bobbin lace-making. Usually these short courses take place in the summer, and lessons are held every day. Topics for past courses included stump-work, beading, bucks point, gold-work, tulle lace, sprang, spinning and dying threads and fabrics. Instructors have been invited from the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium and the Czech Republic.

Another popular short course in Maltese lace, also taking place over ten to twelve days, is the International Summer Course, which is held around the beginning of June. At this

A demonstration in progress at the University Gozo Campus.



time of year, the foreign students who come to Malta to experience the making of lace by the Maltese technique, have the opportunity of touring the Island and seeing the traditional lace in its natural environment, as it is displayed in village feasts.

Gozo Lace Co-Operative and Malta Lace Guild

The Lace Making Programme gave birth to two associations: the Gozo Lace Co-Operative in 1996 and the Malta Lace Guild in 2000. Both are run by students graduating from the Certificate, Diploma and Advanced classes. *Señer tal-Bizzilla* is a quarterly magazine published in Maltese and English by the Malta Lace Guild. It keeps its readers informed about national craft activities, as well as recording the history of lace in our times.

Annual Lace Day

Lace Day, held in spring, is an open-day where visitors can see what the Lace-Making Programme offers. In collaboration with the Co-Operative and the Lace Guild, as well as OIDFA (International Needle and Bobbin Lace Association), an array of Maltese lace in its present state is displayed. A new set of patterns for bobbin Maltese lace is inaugurated each year on this occasion, and all sorts of tools and materials are available for sale. Moreover, Lace Day serves to promote courses offered by the Lace-Making Programme.

Besides being of benefit to students, the Lace-Making Programme has contributed greatly to the research of the history of Maltese lace of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a short while the present writer intends to publish a book on the history of Maltese lace, which could be used as a text for the lace studies programme.



Some of the exhibits at the Lace Day. The Lace Day attracts many lacemakers from Malta and Gozo

In the past, Gozitans took up the craft and developed it as an economic activity because of the hardships experienced on the Island. Today, lace-making in Gozo is considered as an enrichment of the Island's cultural heritage, and the Lace-Making Programme is making an important contribution towards this.