

## NATIONAL

# Defined by their tattoos

Two researchers have unearthed fascinating descriptions of passport applicants from a century ago

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Described as having a firm mouth and chestnut hair, Vittorio Galea would probably not have stood out from other 19-year-olds of his time.

The features that truly identified him though, back in 1917, were an image of the Holy Trinity tattooed on his chest, images of St John and the Virgin Mary on his right arm, and initials on his left forearm.

This is the detailed description of him, listed as a 'special peculiarity', to be found on his passport application – one of many thousands – held by the National Archives of Malta.

At a time when photos had not yet been introduced to passports, people's tattoos, scars or physical deformities were documented to help visually identify the holders.

Another passport applicant had St George on horseback tattooed on his right forearm, and the Virgin Mary and a Scotch soldier on his left forearm.

These beautiful details were very often crossed out and replaced by a concise entry on the issued document. A stark example is Galea's, which reads: 'Tattooed on arm'.

Georgina Portelli and Pierre Portelli, two researchers who are documenting tattooing in Malta from the 18th to 20th century, said they had been "lucky" to be able to compile these descriptions from the original applications preserved at the archives.

According to their ongoing research, tattoos of saints, anchors, crossed hands and hearts were trending in the early 1900s.

The tattooing profession was even recognised in a 1926 Maltese passport: J Seguna, 29, was listed as a tattoo artist.

Although there are no references to tattooed women on passport documents, the Portellis came across descriptions of crosses, initials and hearts in early 20th century prison records.

The two are basing their research on archival documents, community sourcing and oral history. The project is called *Rel-Ink Indelible Narratives* and



Photos on passports only started being introduced in 1915: Robert Biasini Stagno from Sliema and Liliana Darmanin, born in Crete and residing in Bormla.



they will soon publish their findings in a book with the support of the Malta Book Fund.

The project kicked off in 2017 by documenting local tattoo designs and artefacts that had not previously been accessible to researchers or the public.

It soon transpired that the documentation of tattoos to identify a traveller was common in other countries. The Portellis traced 28-year-old Paolo Camilleri, who, according to his 1922 passport had a "tattoo in both hands", to 1916 Marseille.

He had travelled there on his way to Tunis to buy items to be imported into Malta. According to Marseille documents, the trader sported a tattoo of St Paul on one arm and that of the Virgin Mary on the other.

Tens of thousands of passport applications at the national archives shed light on the ethnic and class diversity of Maltese, English and other British subjects who lived in Malta in the 19th and 20th century and needed to travel.

Passports started being issued in Malta at the turn of the 19th century, and until 1964, the document was a British one.

For around a century, it did not include a photo of its bearer. Instead, it listed a series of descriptions such as facial features, build, complexion... and 'special peculiarities', including tattoos, Leonard Callus from the National Archives of Malta told *The Sunday Times*.

Photos only started being introduced in 1915 after a German spy managed to enter the UK

Date of presentation

DESCRIPTION OF APPLICANT.

Age *19 years*

Profession *Coal labourer*

Maiden name and place and date of birth of widow or married woman travelling singly

Height *five* feet *three* inches

Forehead *Medium*

Eyes *Brown*

Nose *Normal medium*

Mouth *Normal firm*

Chin *Pointed square*

Colour of Hair *Chestnut*

Complexion *Dark*

Face *Oval*

Any special peculiarities *Tattoo: Holy Trinity on breast St. John and Virgin Mary on right arm and initials on left forearm*

DESCRIPTION OF WIFE OF APPLICANT IF INCLUDED ON THE PASSPORT.

Names in full

Age *Tattooed on arm*

Profession

Place and date of birth

Maiden name

Height feet inches

Under the age 16 if to be included on the Passport.

Descriptions of passport applicants often highlighted their tattoos. PHOTOS: PIERRE PORTELLI/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Any special peculiarities *Tattoo: St. George on horseback on right forearm; Virgin Mary and Scotch soldier on left forearm.*

unnoticed using a British passport, Callus explained.

The introduction of photos in the document provided another layer of detail: the way the appli-

cants did their hair or dressed up reflected their class and social standing, while their signature – or a cross – illustrated their level of literacy.