

The story of Malta University Drawing School (1800-1925)



HILARY SPITERI

When Malta became a British Protectorate, the Consiglio Popolare Maltese elected Rear-Admiral Alexander Ball (1757-1809) as Civil Commissioner (1799-1801) to oversee the administration and to restore all the institutions that were in abeyance during the French blockade. Education was one of the first items on the British agenda. Ball set in motion the process to establish an academic body called the 'Malta University of Literature' to address the educational needs of the Maltese population.

Canon Francesco Saverio Caruana, one of the major Maltese players in the new political landscape and possibly the shrewdest, hoped to milk his connection with Ball to attain the prestigious and influential position he coveted, that of Bishop of Malta. However, Ball had other plans for Caruana and instead he was appointed Rector of the Malta University of Literature on October 26, 1800, which entitled him to an annual remuneration of 400 Maltese scudi. The Collegio (Old University Building, Valletta), originally run by the Jesuits and later by the Knights, was chosen to house the Malta University of Literature.

Caruana's diocesan ambitions had to be deferred for the time being (he was elected Bishop in 1831 and served until his death in 1847). The newly appointed rector found an expression for his love for the arts and paved the way for the first officially-recognised Drawing

School, also referred to as Pictoria Artis Schola, Scuola del Disegno and Drawing Academy. Caruana's vision fostered the Classical artistic sensibility which was already dominating Europe.

He was influenced by the Neoclassical and Romantic artistic trends being promoted in renowned academies in France, Britain and Italy. For the first time in Maltese history, artistic tuition was institutionalised, thus moving away from the artist's studio (bottega) that numerous artists would enter as apprentices, doing humble tasks until they proved themselves talented enough to learn the art of their masters.

The British not only marked a sea-change in Malta's political establishment but also a shift towards a different artistic taste. They backed the setting up of the Drawing School to promote a neoclassical artistic sensibility. Caruana was instrumental in facilitating the formation of a professional and dedicated environment not only for students who wanted to further their studies in the fine arts but also for those looking for training in technical drawing skills for industrial trades requiring technical/mechanical draughtsmanship, which had just been introduced by the British in Malta in the harbour region. Caruana was greatly admired and respected for his pioneering promotion of the arts to higher levels.

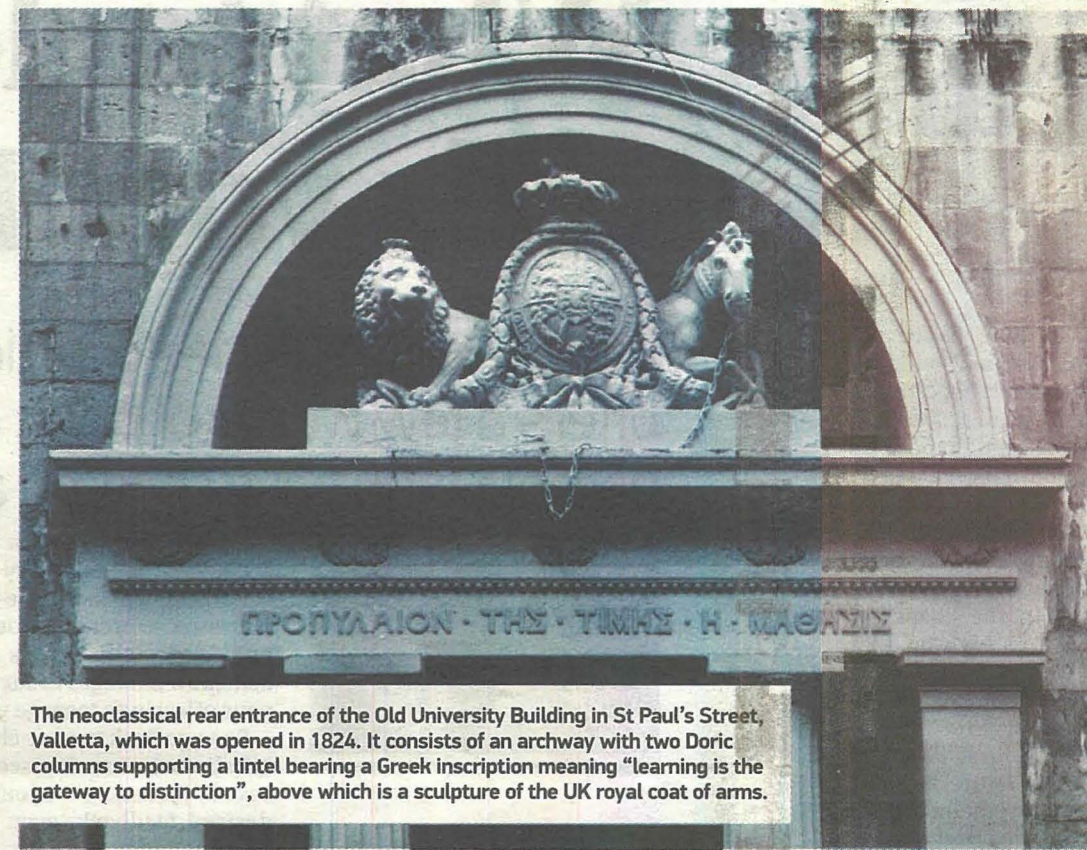
Caruana appointed Michele Busuttill (1762-1831) as the first Professore del Disegno. He was selected after being considered the only painter "fu eccellente nel disegno" and skilled enough to carry out several notable commissions. Busuttill was listed 14th in a list of professors in various branches of learning published by Ball in the Piano dell'Università degli Studi di Malta (1800).

He received an annual remuneration of 200 Maltese scudi, which was equivalent to that of Dr Ludovico Abela (Professor of Medicine) and Dr Carlo Azzopardi (Professor of Mathematics and Physics). Professors of Italian and Latin only received an annual salary of 150 Maltese scudi each.

The Drawing School opened its doors to students in 1800 and students could enrol from the ages of 12 to 13. Notwithstanding the school's limited resources, students were rigorously trained on a tailor-made curriculum reflecting those followed in foreign academies, especially that of the Academy of St Luke in Rome, where Busuttill had attended in 1780 and distinguished himself in various concours. Following their master's instructions, students were all immersed in the tactile and meticulous imitation of the various parts of the human figure (from plaster casts), mainly of the head, first its contours and later with indications of chiaroscuro.

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One of the earliest mentions of the Drawing School, dated November 5, 1801, refers to its master teacher and Caruana's standing with the British rulers. Military engineer Sir Charles William Pasley (1780-1861) toured the newly established academy and noted in his diary: "Burgoyne and myself go to the College... a drawing academy. The master [Busuttill], extremely civil... showed us his principal drawings. About 20 boys



The neoclassical rear entrance of the Old University Building in St Paul's Street, Valletta, which was opened in 1824. It consists of an archway with two Doric columns supporting a lintel bearing a Greek inscription meaning "learning is the gateway to distinction", above which is a sculpture of the UK royal coat of arms.

employed copying drawings or models and discovered great genius... This [Drawing School] was instituted since we had the island. He [Busuttill] is employed in a drawing of Sir Alexander Ball entering Valletta after its surrender, received by the Bishop and by a priest, Caruana, head of the College - a man of talents."

Caruana's original proposal was to set up three distinct classes for drawing, painting, and sculpture and architecture. But Caruana's original plans were thwarted and instead the school offered four levels of classes in only one discipline: painting.

Despite these shortcomings in the Drawing School's breadth of curriculum in its initial years, it gained swift popularity and the number of students attending the classes increased. In fact, in November 1803, Caruana appointed Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851) as assistant professor of drawing to Busuttill with the annual salary of 200 Maltese scudi (equivalent to £16.6). In 1823, Pullicino earned £24; in 1824 he earned £20 due to cost-cutting measures in the public sector; in 1832, following the death of Busuttill, Pullicino earned £25.

Pullicino was an asset to the school. He set about widening its programme of studies by introducing a course in architecture. In fact, Pullicino is listed as professor of drawing and architecture.

In contrast with European academies, the Drawing School in Malta lacked a course in the study of the nude (Scuola del Nudo). The study of the live model was considered indispensable in other countries, and students were encouraged to undertake this discipline with great seriousness. In Malta, it took Caruana, Busuttill and Pullicino 11 years to introduce this discipline.

In a letter dated October 1811 to Civil Commissioner Hildebrand Oakes (1754-1822), Caruana, as rector, not only appeals for the introduction of an Accademia sul Naturale but also sheds light on the ongoing artistic training offered at the Drawing School. He said that, as in foreign academies, students were familiar with techniques such as imitating various prints, gessi (plaster casts) and old master paintings, in life-size and reduced size, in pen and ink, and oils. This confirmed that the study from life-size plaster casts had been practised since the school's inception under Ball's administration (trovasi già da tempo).

Some of the plaster models from the early 19th century original plaster casts may still be preserved among the collection housed at the Malta School of Art at 106, Casa Brunet, Old Bakery Street, Valletta.

Additionally, the letter proposes a pedagogical programme for a life-drawing class that was to be held daily for up to two hours during the late hours of the day, under the tutors' strict supervision. This would necessitate the procurement of oil for lamps and the hiring of a model and a classroom.

The Drawing School's academic progressed both in terms of attendance and talent. In fact, in a despatch dated October 1, 1811, Caruana claims that from 1802 to 1804 the students who excelled in English, Arabic, Italian and drawing were awarded prizes amounting to 100 Maltese scudi as per a notice issued by civil commissioner Charles Cameron on March 28 1802. In the same despatch, he also expresses his disappointment that

between 1804 and 1811, the expense of procuring of prizes for the Humanities was shouldered by the teachers who forked out the sum of 60 to 70 Maltese scudi annually.

Nonetheless, Caruana's determination to give scholarships to the most promising students attending the Drawing School bore fruit. In 1814, his political influence and perseverance were efficacious, and four students attending the Drawing School were granted scholarships by the then Governor of Malta, Sir Thomas Maitland (1760-1824). This provision encouraged the administration of the Drawing School to aim for high standards, and proficient students could further their studies in Rome and return to Malta as fully fledged artists.

By 1834, Pullicino and P.P. Caruana conducted school sessions, in their private studios, in Valletta. Caruana held his lessons from 8am to 10am at 98, Strada Britannica, and Pullicino from 3pm to 5pm at 117, Strada San Paolo. Probably this move was necessitated by the Anglo-Maltese Bank's demand to expand its operations and occupy more space due to its ever-growing activity. The bank started operations on June 23, 1809, in the Commercial Rooms (Le Stanze), on the ground floor of the Malta University of Literature Buildings and it is likely that it encroached on the Drawing School. However, in 1836, Canon Dr Emmanuele Rosignaud, rector between 1834 and 1841, forwarded a petition to Governor of Malta Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby instructing the Collector of Land Revenue to provide an alternative accommodation where the bank - which at the time was "occupying two large rooms" - could be housed, so that the Drawing School would be reinstated within University precincts.

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Bellanti's appointment was a breath of fresh air for the fine arts in Malta. In 1862, under his direction, the Drawing School introduced three complementary disciplines: perspective, drawing from the human figure, and the study of light and shade. Later, in 1863, Bellanti introduced a fourth class focusing on the study of landscape drawing. Bellanti retired with a pension in 1877, after having obtained six months' sick leave due to his declining health.

On May 28, 1878, a teacher at the Primary Division, Giuseppe Calleja (1828-1915) was promoted to Teacher of Drawing at the Valletta Lyceum. This position was a coveted one, so much so that even Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930), at that time, had applied for the post. Calleja's remuneration was that of £100 per annum. Despite his artistic limitations and Nazarene aesthetic preferences, Calleja was set to "facilitare l'inclinazione del discepolo, e tenerlo lontano dagli scogli e dai falsi sistemi, usati sovente da maestri poco conoscitori dell'essenza delle belle arti."

In the 1880s, Calleja enlarged the collection of teaching resources at the Lyceum. In fact, during a cultural tour in Turin, Italy, he requested the help of Prof. Cavallero, director of the Istituto Industriale e Professionale, to acquire essential drawing equipment which he saw being used during his

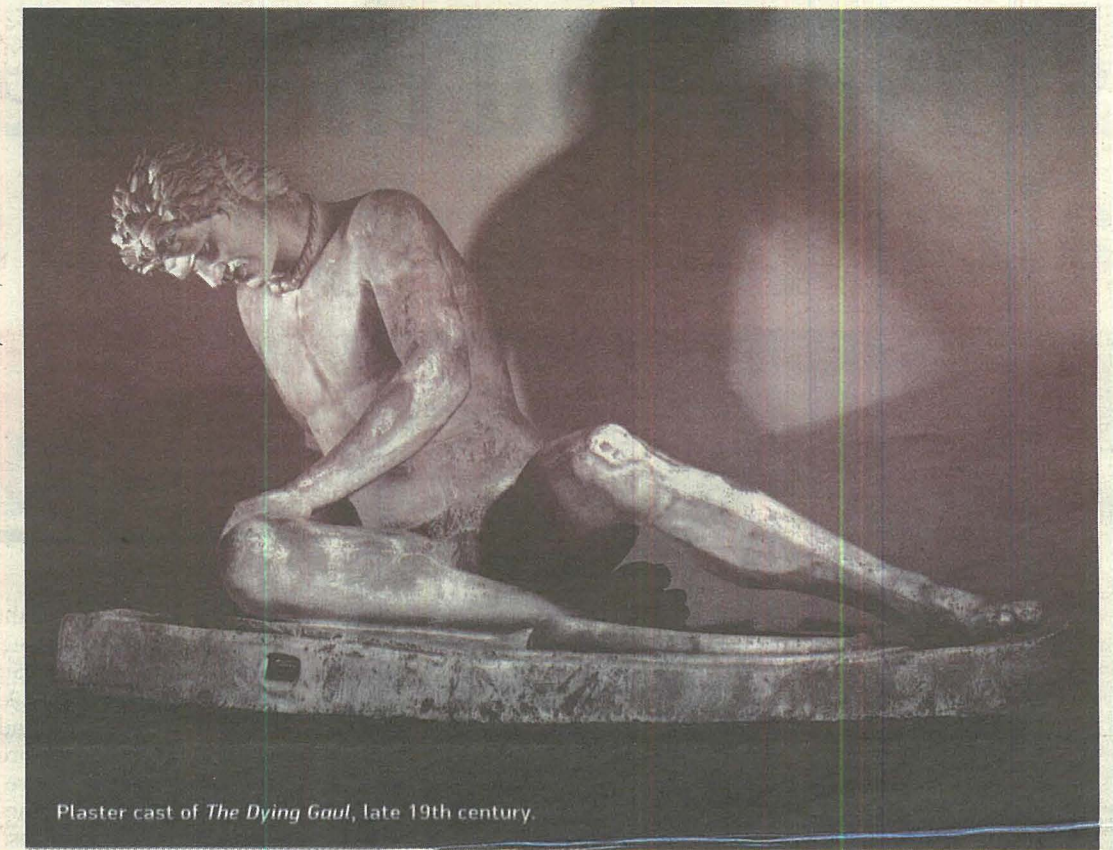
offering primary instruction, the Grammar Class and the Humanities School - into one general public school. In the new set-up, only one class of drawing, presumably reinstated in official premises, was registered, headed by Caruana, who took over from Pullicino on his retirement at the age of 60. As a result, Caruana's income doubled, amounting to £50 annually.

In 1852, Caruana's sudden death left the position vacant and he was temporarily succeeded by his son Raffaele (1820-1886) for a period of six months (April-November 1852). On December 1, R. Caruana was replaced by Michele Bellanti (1807-1883). In 1876 he was still teaching drawing at the Lyceum, enjoying a salary of £100, which included £10 extra as remuneration for evening classes.

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Letterhead template of Michele Gherardi, Formatore.



Plaster cast of *The Dying Gaul*, late 19th century

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On August 20, 1838, when a new Statuto Fondamentale was published, proposing a new educational system which was to include the following establishments: University of Literature, Lyceum, Biblioteca, Botanical Gardens, Anatomical Theatre and Primary Schools. In January 1839 the new plan brought about the demotion of the Drawing School from the University to the Lyceum. The Lyceum unified the three lower schools at the time - the class

offering primary instruction, the Grammar Class and the Humanities School - into one general public school. In the new set-up, only one class of drawing, presumably reinstated in official premises, was registered, headed by Caruana, who took over from Pullicino on his retirement at the age of 60. As a result, Caruana's income doubled, amounting to £50 annually.

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visit. Also, in February 1893 he corresponded with Mr Ceccarelli of Rome to obtain catalogues of manufacturers of plaster casts and ornaments being used by Italian technical schools. Presumably, the collection of plaster casts at the Old University Building in Valletta, bearing a copper plate embossed with the words "Ditta M. Gherardi Formatore, 56, Via Sistina, Roma" were acquired during this period (c.1893-1904).

Michele Gherardi was born in 1837 at Borgo Mazzano, Lucca, Italy, and by 1898 he described himself as "provider of plaster casts to the Ministry of Education in Italy and of various foreign governments". A selection from Gherardi's catalogue of plaster casts reached Malta, including seven bas-relief copies of the Parthenon Frieze, Apollo Belvedere, Vatican Discobolus, Dying Gaul and Vatican Hermes. In 1904, Gherardi is recorded to have moved his activity to new premises at Via Sistina 46a, Rome. He passed away that same year.

At the start of academic year 1894, Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) filled in the post of acting teacher of drawing at the Lyceum. In the meantime, documents reveal that a call for applications was published for the post of teacher of drawing at the Lyceum on an indefinite basis. Surprisingly, it was not Pisani (one of the applicants) who obtained the post but Giuseppe Cali, a long-time contender, who controversially (according to written documentation present in the Pisani bequest) filled the vacancy and replaced Calleja, who retired after 14 years of service. From 1915-1925, Cali was succeeded by Giuseppe Duca (1871-1948) as Teacher of Drawing at the Lyceum. He was promoted from the Cottonera Government Technical and Manual Schools, where he taught drawing (1891-1915).

Despite the Lyceum, artistic education in Malta was felt to be inadequate. The ever-growing concern that Malta was not able to didactically offer a sound artistic education is hinted in an article penned by A. Fabriani in a catalogue entitled *La XIII Esposizione d'Arte a Malta*. The article, published in

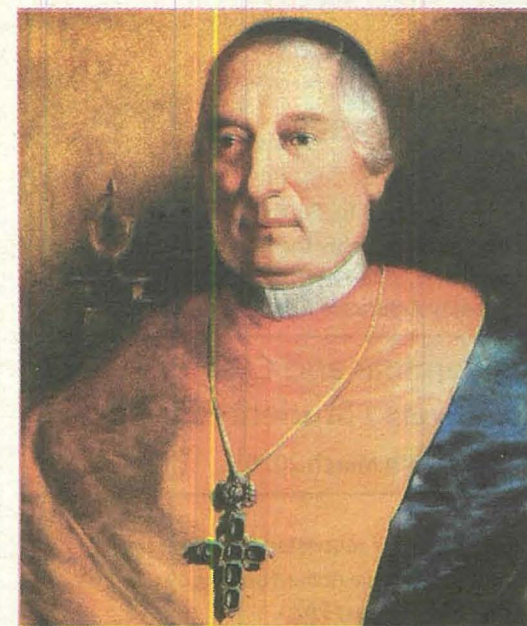
1925 by the Malta Amateur Association, voiced an alarming situation: "The exhibition affirms an urgent and unavoidable need, unless we want to disperse these seeds of ideal life that still exist in Malta, the establishment, we mean, of an art school which, having regard to all the resources and didactic material and valorise all the applied forms of art, giving together, the opportunity to the best and most gifted to walk the flowery streets of pure art. High ideals are at stake and economic interests are not unaccountable, and the authorities cannot worry about this."

Concurrently, the newly elected Maltese government, headed by Ugo Pasquale Mifsud (1889-1942) of the Nationalist Party, set in motion the necessary procedures for a newly reformed Malta Government School of Art. This institution was the brainchild of the then Minister of Education, Mgr Francesco Ferris, who resigned because of the language question, and was later realised by his successor Mgr Enrico Dandria (1892-1932) in 1926. The school was originally established in Casa Tessi, 106, Old Bakery Street, Valletta, and it was to serve as an art academy for Malta and substituted the small classes spread across the island. The newly established school was to cater for the challenging and ever-changing artistic identity of the islands in the new century.

Acknowledgements

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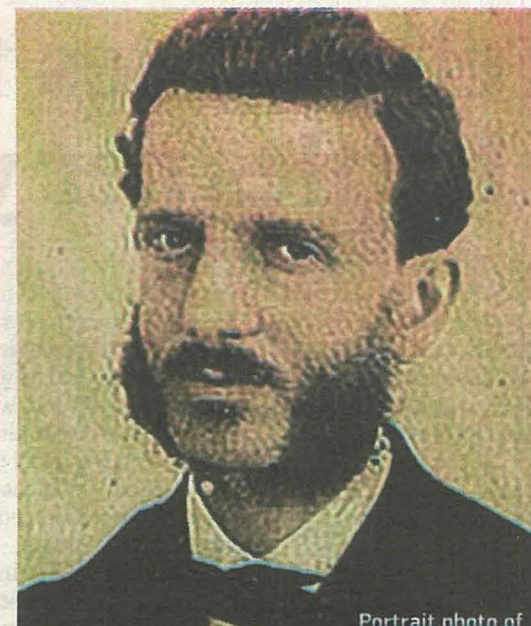
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Portrait of Archbishop Francesco Saverio Caruana by Pietro Paolo Caruana.



Self-portrait of Michele Busuttill, copy by E. Calleja. COURTESY OF HERITAGE MALTA



Portrait photo of Giuseppe Calleja.