

## Lifestyle &amp; Culture

## Obsessive histories



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The practice of collections development and the founding years of the Malta National Collection of Paintings and Sculptures (1921-1936)

Many have oftentimes asked why the national collection misses out on key works by 20th century artists. Indeed, such a relatively young collection, established 100 years ago in 1920 has missed out on works of art that might have been well within Malta's reach. History is the main reason for this absence.

In February 1920, a then young politician by the name of Enrico Mizzi, proposed Auberge d'Italie as the ideal venue where to exhibit those paintings and works of art that the then inspector of fine arts, later founder of the fine arts section, Vincenzo Bonello, would bring together into a national collection. Contrary to this statement, what was later to be known as the Valletta Museum would not just showcase works of art. The Valletta Museum would become a history museum in its own right, strategically located in a historic building that would also subtly refer to Malta's historic and cultural ties with Italy. The 1932 museum guide book clearly spells out its ethos.

"The museum is so arranged as to give the visitor a practical demonstration of the physical features of the Maltese Islands, and their history ... foreign antiquities are kept apart so as not to get in any way confused with the antiquities found on the island."

As expected, the main emphasis in both display narrative and collections development initiatives explicitly focused on the history of the Order of St John. The 1932 guidebook describes the section dedicated to the Order of St John in a measure of detail too

"... many are the objects exhibited recording the two centuries of the domination of the knights of St John of Jerusalem, from their characteristic coinage to the sacred vestments emblazoned with their flaming escutcheons."

History would also be the major guiding value for the national collection of paintings and sculptures that Bonello would slowly but surely start to piece together and this would continue right up to its institution as an independent mu-



Main entrance to the history section at the old National Museum of Fine Arts (South Street). Circa 1970s.

seum institution proper in 1974. At that point in time a historic display narrating the story of the Order of St John was, yet again, to go on display at the lower basement of the National Museum of Fine Arts on South Street featuring suits of armour, galley models and silverware.

The defining values of the national collection of paintings and sculptures can be read and understood in the writings of the founder, Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969). Bonello's writings, yet again, speak for the historic imprint in his collections development policies. In a letter published on the *Bulletin* in March 1951, Bonello would claim that "... in the course of several years of research, (he had discovered) a number of important documents pertaining to the history of these islands and to art". In the 1931 edition of the museum *Bulletin*, Bonello does acknowledge the fact that "What has impressed every artistic achievement in Malta is undoubtedly XVIIth century Italian art. It is a well-known fact that if the vast exuberant field of the imposing 'seicento' were to be explored, Malta would emerge as an important milestone." In the previous edition

of the museum *Bulletin* (1929) he also confirms that "in forming the new picture gallery, this fact was purposely kept in mind, and pictures of this period, that are now no longer doomed to the prejudiced contempt of connoisseurs, were eagerly sought after". What makes his approach intrinsically historic is Bonello's views as informed through the lens of history, even in the case of works of art that he considers as having intrinsically artistic values. For instance, in April 1921, the minutes of the Antiquities committee take note of Bonello's decision to dismiss eight good quality paintings earmarked for export which "... had no connection to the history or with the archaeology of the island".

This obsession with the historic and with recovering a heritage lost to colonial ambition partly explains the lack of modern international masters in the national collection of paintings and sculptures. The possibilities of acquiring modern masters, including Italian contemporary artists, would have been seen through a prevalently subjective historic lens and the exceptions to this approach would prevalently

concern donations. Among the exceptions, we might single out a print by Italian artist Carlo Carra (1881-1966) donated to the national collection of paintings and sculptures in 1927. Another noteworthy exception would be Antonio Sciortino, whose *Nina de Vettina*, in part donated by Sciortino who only got paid for foundry works, was acquired in 1926.

Indeed, even in the case of modern and contemporary Maltese artists' acquisitions these would be registered much later in the late 1960s. Documents suggest that this, too, would be a matter of circumstances. The 1968 Museum Annual Report justifies this sudden interest in collecting works by modern Maltese artists as a reaction to the fact that "it would not be exaggerated to say that such works have disappeared from the local art market. I am referring, of course, to objects of a high artistic quality worthy to be acquired for the National Museum in order to serve as sources of spiritual enjoyment as well as for their cultural values". In response to this lack, "The museum, however, has secured several works by contemporary local artists".

The objective of the museum would have been in line with the ambition to script a history of art in Malta through the practice of collecting and conserving. As expected, Italy would be the yardstick to follow and the latest developments concerning the re-discovery of Baroque would present a golden opportunity to Bonello, poised to rethink what was being rediscovered and rethought into the logical and triumphant epitome of the Renaissance. With Malta's Baroque heritage as one of the island's strengths, and with the rich legacy of early modern Malta to recover, Bonello would best posit to align his collections development policies with the latest trends and developments in Italy. Works of art were readily available locally mostly due to lack of knowledge and those that were previously sold at a pittance abroad remained well within the reach of museum curators willing to introduce Baroque into their collections.

History has shaped the national collection of paintings and sculptures. It might be a foregone conclusion that this should have been the guiding value for collections development policies, mostly unwritten and sporadic, as introduced and implemented over time. It is also the foregone conclusion as to why modern 20th century masters are absent from the collection. Whether history and heritage should continue to be key guiding values, can and should be, beyond this contribution.

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Main facade of Auberge d'Italie following restoration works on the main facade completed in August 2017.



Main corridor at Auberge d'Italie when the building was the seat of the Valletta Museum. Circa 1930s.