

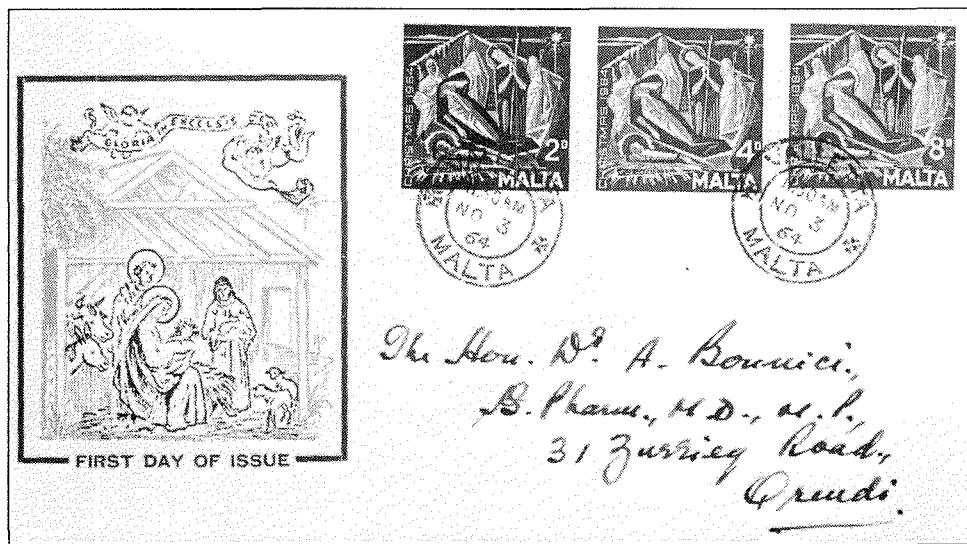
# THE CHRISTMAS STAMP ISSUES OF MALTA

Dr John H. Mercieca, MOM, D.Sc. (Hon Causa), DDS

The annual Christmas set of stamps, which was issued by the Malta Postal Administration for the first time ever in 1964 and which was designed by the well-known artist Chev. Emvin Cremona, knows its origin to a letter from a Belgian catholic canon, who in 1963 wrote to the Postal Administration proposing the issue of an annual set of stamps to celebrate Christmas. It appears that this prelate had also communicated his idea of propagating philatelically the feast of the Nativity of Christ to other postal administrations as well.

This letter was referred to the Stamp Advisory Board of the Malta Post Office, who at one of its meetings earnestly discussed the submitted proposal and unanimously agreed to accept it and put it into effect by recommending the issue of this set to the then Minister of Posts.

At that period quite a number of postal administrations throughout the world had introduced the issue of a Christmas set of stamps in their respective stamp-issuing programme and we find that in those early years Christmas stamps became very popular and a widely-collected thematic section of philately.



The Malta Postal Administration which has just issued its thirty-second consecutive Christmas set since 1964, is in fact one of the relatively few post offices which have kept alive the tradition of the issue of these stamps, as after

the passing of five or six years after they were first issued the original popularity dwindled considerably with collectors.

Notwithstanding the fact that the great majority of these sets, very appropriately depict the traditional Nativity scenes we find that in some of the 32 sets of Malta the different artists which from time to time have designed one or more of these sets have departed from the portrayal of the popular Nativity scene of the Holy Family and have depicted local folkloristic scenes manifestly related to the Christmas celebrations and period.

Thus we find that as the subject of his second Christmas set of 1965, Cremona chose the adoration of the Three Kings: Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar — presenting their gifts to the newly-born infant Jesus. Again in his 1968 original pentagon-shaped set of three stamps, he depicted the star of Bethlehem and Angel waking shepherds on the 1d stamp; Mary, Joseph and shepherd watching over a cradle on the 8d stamp; while on the highest denomination of the 1s 4d the artists portrayed the Three Wise Men who had come from the East to pay their homage to the infant Jesus and again the star of Bethlehem.

In the 1969 set, when for the first time the additional low surcharge of 5d, spread over the three stamps in aid of local charities was introduced, the designs chosen by Cremona were peasants playing tambourines and bagpipes on the

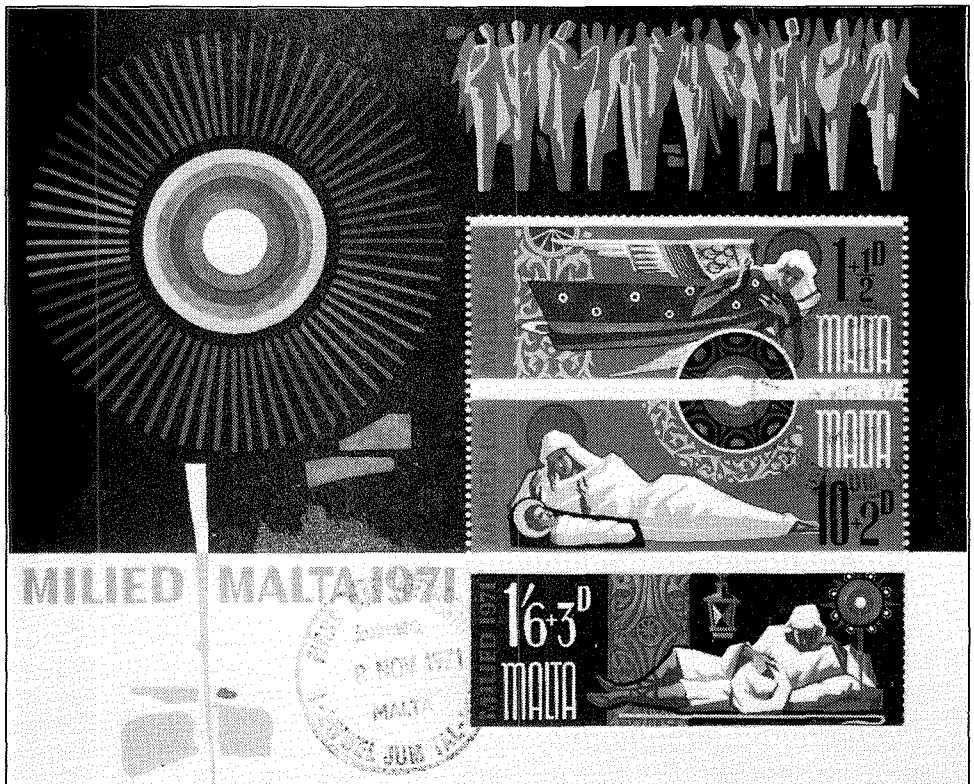


1d+1d stamp; angels playing trumpet and harp on the 5d+1d stamp; while on the top value of 1s6d+3d singing choir boys were depicted. A novelty in this issue was that in addition to the stamps being issued in sheets of 60, the three stamps were also issued se-tenant to form a triptych.

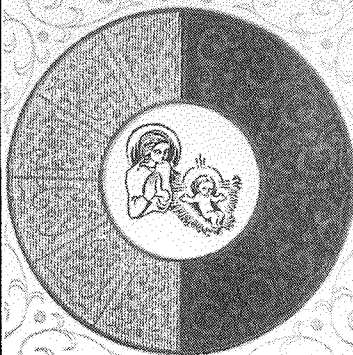
For the 1970 issue Cremona chose Carol Singers, a church and star for the lowest 1d+1d denomination; church, star and angel with infant for the middle 10d+2d stamp while for the highest denomination of 1s6d+3d a church, star and nativity scene was used.

Emvin Cremona, the artist who between 1964 and 1979 was responsible for the design of the first 16 consecutive Christmas sets of Malta, in 1971 chose the large quadrilateral format for the year's Christmas set of three stamps which he once again repeated in the 1972 and 1973. These three colourful attractive sets were also issued in a suitably designed souvenir sheet which also happened to be the first three consecutive souvenir sheets ever issued by the Malta Postal Administration.

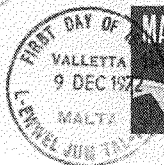
The 1971 set and souvenir sheet were the last Christmas stamps to be issued in sterling currency while with the introduction of decimal currency in Malta in 1972 the Christmas set and Souvenir Sheet of that year were the first to be issued in decimal currency.



-EWWEL JUM TAL-HRUG — MILIED  
 IRST DAY OF ISSUE — CHRISTMAS



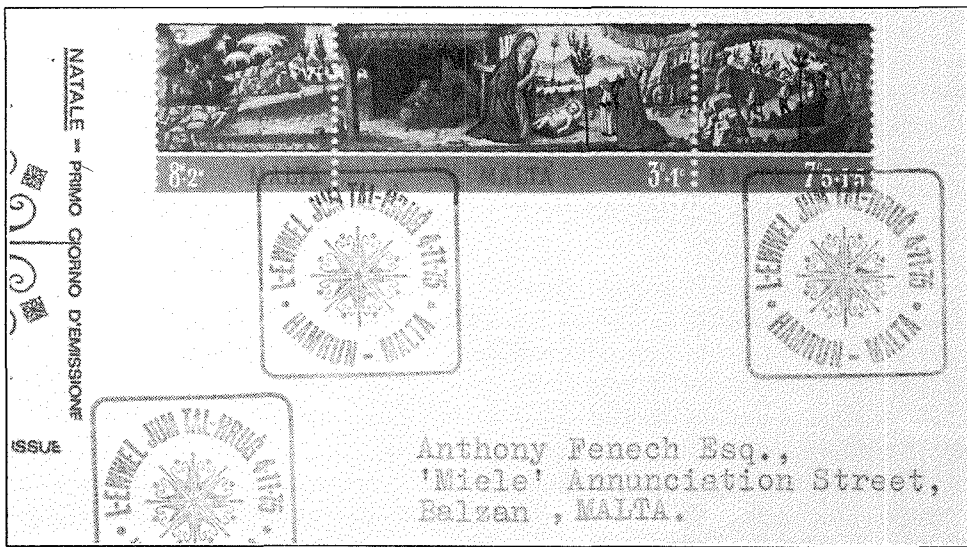
PRIMO GIORNO D'EMISSIONE  
 NATALE

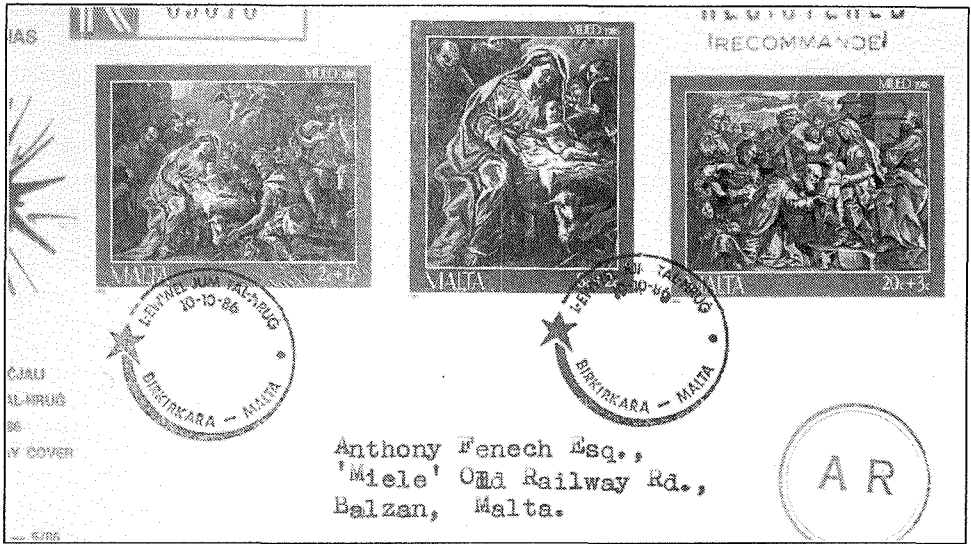


Once again shepherds and Magi with gifts and Nativity star were the subjects chosen by Cremona for the four small-sized 1974 Christmas set.

For the 1975 Christmas set which was again issued in singles and triptych format, forming a composite design of 'The Nativity' by Maestro Alberto, Cremona chose a yet smaller format for the lowest denomination of 8m+2m and 7c5+1c5 the highest while for the central value of 3c+1c a large 50x23mm format was used.

The 1976 series of four stamps portrayed portions of the 'Madonna and Saints' famous painting by Domenico di Michelino on the three lower values 1c+5m, St





John the Baptist and St Michael; 5c+1c Madonna and Child; 7c+1c5 St Christopher and St Nicholas while the complete painting was portrayed on the highest 32x27mm denomination stamp. This painting which is to be found at the Fine Arts Museum in Valletta was donated by the late Mrs Salvina Zahra of New York in memory of her late brother the Rev. Francis Agius the original owner and who happens to be my late wife's eldest brother and a parish priest in Brooklyn, USA.

The 1977 set depicted Shepherds, the Nativity and the Flight into Egypt from a famous crib to be found at the St Theresa Church of Cospicua. This set was issued in singles as well as in a vertical triptych format.

In the 1978 set Cremona, as the great artist he surely was, wanted in a way to emerge from the use of designs, formats and colours of his previous 14 sets, thus he designed three lower values of the denominations 1c+5m, 5c+1c and 7c+1c5 depicting angels, carol singers and folk musicians and a large-size 58x23mm 11c+3c stamp comprising the designs of the three lower values, all in his favourite mauve and ochre colours, in order to give this set a new look and quite in contrast with his earlier sets, while at the same time giving a concrete proof of the high artistic creativity with which he was endowed.

The large-sized 1979 quadrilateral 4 values set portrays Nativity scenes by the renowned artist Giuseppe Cali for the Tarxien Parish Church. This set is, in my opinion and that of many other connoisseurs, one of the nicest and most attractive of all the Christmas sets issued so far and also the last of the 16 successive sets designed by the famous Maltese artist Emvin Cremona, who died on January 29, 1987 aged 63 years.

The 1980 set, comprising 3 elongated lower values and two large 47x38mm 12c+3c value were designed by Raymond Pitre and portrayed the Annunciation,

the Conception and the Nativity on the lower 3 values and the 3 designs comprised in the topmost value. The original designs of these stamps were taken from paintings by A Inglott, a promising young artist who died at an early age.

The 1981 set of 3 stamps – 2c+1c, 8c+2c and 20c+3c was designed by Tony Bugeja and depicted children and Nativity scene, Christmas Eve procession and preaching midnight sermon respectively.

The artist Joseph Mallia designed the 1982 set of three, again depicting scenes from the Nativity.

The 1983 set of three stamps was designed by Norbert Attard and were, in a way, different from the ordinary Nativity scenes on other stamps in that they were taken from old choir books at the St John's Cathedral Museum.

The three large-size 1984 Christmas stamps designed by Luciano Micallef portrayed religious subjects from paintings by Pietro and Rafel Caruana and depicted the 'Visitation' on the 2c+1c stamp; the Epiphany on the 8c+2c stamp while on the highest value the 20c+3c 'Jesus among the Doctors' was reproduced. The paintings reproduced on these three stamps are to be found at the Dominican Parish Church dedicated to Our Lady of Porto Salvo in Valletta.

The 1985 set of 3 stamps in the unusual denominations, depicted vertical designs showing details of a terracotta relief by the well-known Mosta-born artist Ganni Bonnici which were adapted by himself for portrayal on the stamps.

Three paintings by Giuseppe d'Arena showing Nativity scenes and the Epiphany formed the subject of the 1986 large-size Christmas stamps, prepared by the artist Luciano Micallef.

Nativity scenes from old ecclesiastical choir books were adapted by Richard J. Caruana for the three 1987 Christmas set.

Three original designs depicting a shepherd tending to his flock, a nativity scene and the flight to Egypt were used by Ray Gauci for the 1988 Christmas set.

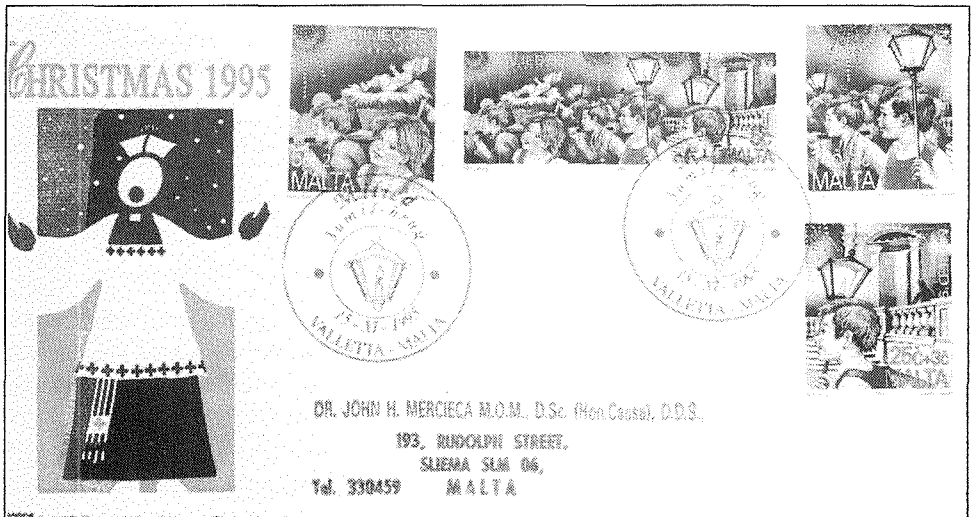
The 1989 set of three small-sized stamps by Joseph L. Mallia reproduced details of paintings at St John's Co-Cathedral while the 1990 set depicted scenes from a famous crib at Birkirkara and designed by the Ghaqda Hbieb il-Presepu.

While the 1992 set of three stamps was adapted by the Architect Lawrence Buttigieg from the paintings by Giuseppe Cali at the Mosta Parish Church, which was the subject of much controversy due to the unusual style of the design we find that the 1991, 1993 and 1994 and 1994 Christmas sets came from the hands of the artist Harry Borg. While all four sets by Harry Borg depicted original Christmas scenes, the idea of the traditional Maltese balcony decorated and illuminated was much liked and met with the approval of many philatelists and members of the general public alike.

And I conclude my article on the Christmas stamps of Malta with a positive note in that following repeated and persistent representations and submissions I have been making to the local Postal Administration since 1971 both inside and outside the Stamp Advisory Board to do away with the charity surcharge on the lowest denomination of the Christmas set in order that it be used on Christmas



mail, it was indeed a source of great satisfaction to me, that after all these years, my sound proposal was at long last accepted by the Minister of Transport, Communications and Technology and put into effect for the first time in 1994 when the charity surcharge was not chargeable on the 5c stamp (which represents the franking rate for local postage) of that year's four-stamp Christmas set.



The same policy has again been adopted for the 1995 Christmas set of four stamps, in which a 5c stamp without the charity surcharge has been issued. It is to be hoped that the postal authorities have finally seen the validity of my suggestion and that this now adopted policy will be a permanent one with regard to all future Christmas stamp issues.