

CHEV.

EMVIN CREMONA

DOYEN OF MALTA

STAMP DESIGNERS

by

NICK A. CUTAJAR

CHEV. EMVIN CREMONA — DOYEN OF MALTA STAMP DESIGNERS *

by NICK A. CUTAJAR

One hundred and seventy different original stamp designs within the space of twenty years, excluding the artwork for a host of other stamps, that is the output of Chevalier Emanuel Vincent Cremona, the doyen of Malta stamp designers. Stamps are, however, only a sideline constituting a relatively minor aspect of his artistic achievements as church decoration, stage scenery, interior decor, book covers, carnival floats, trade fair stands, exhibition booths and every other form of art have all been treated with devotion and zeal by Chevalier Cremona who is also considered as one of Europe's most talented stamp designers. Of all his artistic activities, stamp designing stands out supreme, making him known all over the world. Chev. Cremona's designs are best defined as a reflection of his deep sense of patriotism.

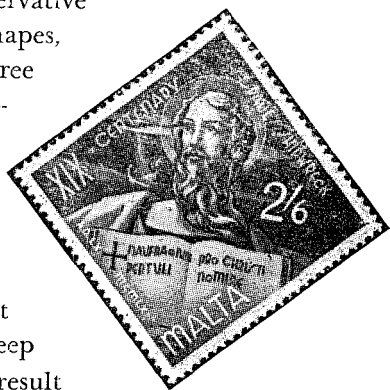
He was born in Valletta on the 27th May, 1919, and at an early age his artistic tendencies became apparent. When he was only sixteen, he held his first public exhibition, when his works were included in the Malta Art Association Exhibition of 1935. That same year, he enrolled as a student at the Government School of Art. In 1938 he was admitted at the Regia Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. During his stay in Rome, he exhibited at the "Mostra Prelitoriale" meriting favourable comments from critics like Jacobbi. One of his works on display in this exhibition was purchased by the Ministro dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni. On his return to Malta, he held a one-man exhibition at the "Ellis Studio", presenting thirty oil paintings, four water-colours and six pen and ink drawings, most of which had been executed during his sojourn in Rome, where he became attached to the Modern Art Movement.



When war broke out, in 1941, Chev. Cremona was conscripted with the King's Own Malta Regiment. His artistic talents were soon utilized in camouflage effects. In his military career, Chev. Cremona reached the grade of an intelligence sergeant but his war experiences became very useful in later years when he exploited them in portraying the anguish and destruction of the war in his very first stamp designs commemorating the granting of the George Cross to the Maltese people. Between 1943 and 1945, he took part in several exhibitions and it is opined by critics that the end of the war saw the end of the young artist. After the war, Chev. Cremona bloomed into a formidable mature artist.

In 1945, he was awarded the "Mrs Schembri Bequest", a scholarship for two years at the famous Slade School College of the University of London, under Professor Randolph Schwabe. Two years later, Chev. Cremona proceeded to Paris, where he was admitted to yet another famous school, "L'Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts". The experience he gained overseas during these years sealed his passport to fame, becoming master in his own right. At this stage of his career, he had established and perfected his style, best described as 'symbolic impressionism', more concerned with the spiritual and psyche of the subject than its natural contours. On his return to his Island home, he was employed as a teacher of painting at the Government School of Art, a post he resigned in 1959.

In 1958, Chev. Cremona exhibited at the XXIX Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia and one of his works, "Composizione", was reproduced on the official exhibition catalogue. In 1959, Emvin, his characteristic coined abbreviation of his first names, was entrusted with the decorations on the occasion of the Nineteenth Centenary Celebration of the Shipwreck of St. Paul in Malta. His efforts were considered "unique in their grandeur, elegance, originality of concept and mystical effluence" culminating in a set of six stamps, released on the 9th February, 1960. This set was a challenge (as indeed, every design for him is) and while retaining a mystical aura, he freed himself of the conservative form of stamps and produced three diamond shapes, coming to terms with tradition by including three vertical shaped designs. The result was an exceptionally fine set, attracting world acclaim and the award of the "Union Mondiale Saint Gabriel" for the best stamp with a religious motif. Chev. Cremona himself admitted to me that he becomes very much involved emotionally and psychologically on his work. At times he is also tormented while he searches deep into the spirit of the subject in hand and as a result the "mental concept of the subject takes precedence over the recognizable natural forms".



In 1961, he was created Knight of the Pontifical Military Order of St. Sylvester and in 1963 he was awarded a gold medal by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce for artistic achievements. During that same year, he was commissioned by the Malta Government to execute a painting for presentation to the United Nations Organization, New York, and another Cremona canvas was presented to the International Labour Organization, Geneva, in 1969.

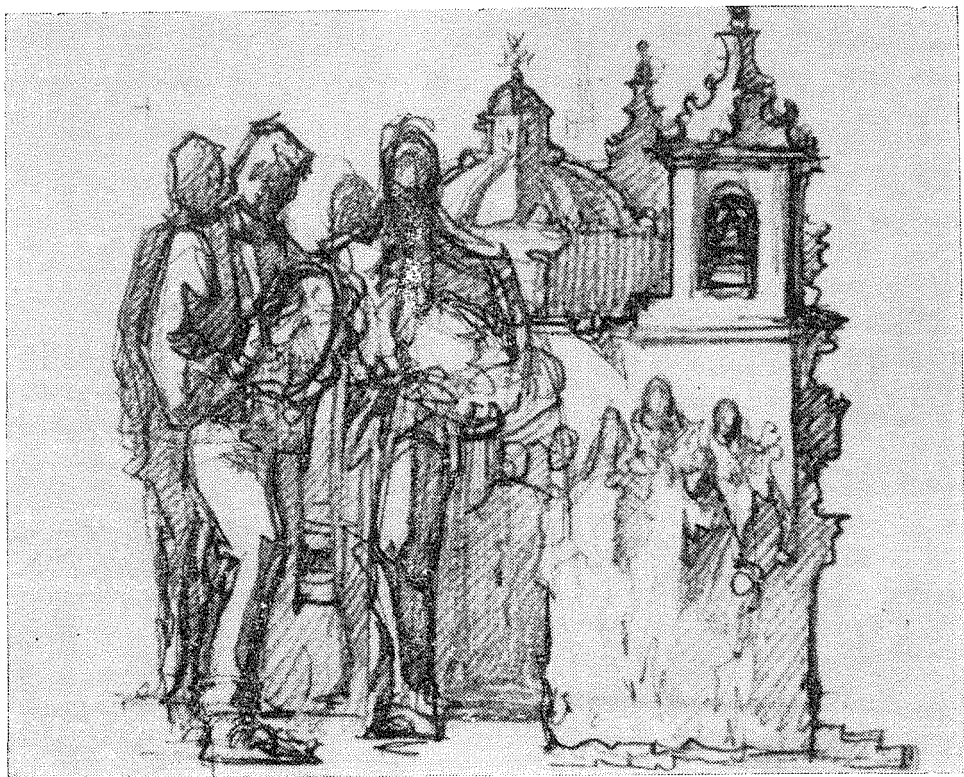
Meanwhile, Chev. Cremona had been entrusted exclusively with the preparation of the designs for Maltese postage stamps, his first appearing in 1957. In 1964, his designs for various sets attracted worldwide acclaim. Malta, that year, hosted two medical congresses, the Anti-Brucellosis Congress and the First European Congress of Catholic Doctors. To commemorate the Anti-Brucellosis Congress, Malta issued a set of two stamps, one featuring the portraits of the two pioneer research workers into the disease, namely Sir David Bruce and Dr Themistocles Zammit, and the other showed laboratory equipment and a Maltese goat. Three attractive stamps were also issued to mark the First European Congress of Catholic Doctors. The three designs of this set depicted subjects which were reminiscent of the Order of the Knights of St. John and their hospitaller role.



During the same year, 1964, Malta gained its independence and Chev. Cremona was commissioned to design a series of stamps to commemorate this important event in the history of the Maltese Islands. He produced a set of three different designs, that will remain a monument to his deep sense of patriotism. Their simplicity and symbolism continue to fascinate collectors and evoke high sentiments of patriotism. Chev. Cremona himself says of this set, that he wanted it to be simple yet meaningful, worthy of the event it had to pay homage to.

The year 1964 was indeed one of the busiest years for Chev. Cremona as he also produced the designs of the first Christmas stamps issued by Malta. The stamps had a common design in Cremona's unique stylized human form. Ever since that year, Chev. Cremona has produced all the Maltese Christmas stamps. Over the years he has interpreted the Christmas theme in so many ways, that he is hardly paralleled by any one artist for one single stamp issuing authority. Every design has a dignified and mystic aura, combining modern thinking with the traditional. Chev. Cremona's creativity knowing no bounds, he has reserved

“Every design has a dignified and mystic aura, combining modern thinking with the traditional”



Original sketch of the detail (figure compositions)
of the 1c + 5m stamp of the Christmas 1978 Issue.



some of his experiments in stamp designing and format for the Christmas issue. His tendency to depart from the norm, resulted in shapes such as trapezia, pentagons triptychs and the inclusion of a composition within the Souvenir Sheets.



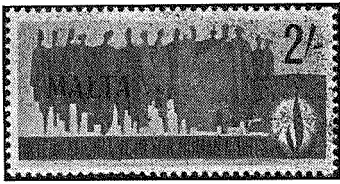
During the same year, he had been steadily working on a set of nineteen pictorial stamps for the definitive issue that was expected of the new independent state of Malta. The designs synthesised four milleniums of Maltese history and Chev. Cremona had at his disposal the wealth of art and culture in every form corresponding to definite periods in the long history of the Maltese nation. From the innumerable original sketches and drafts, emerged one of the most colourful and original definitive sets of the British Commonwealth. Once again his efforts attracted worldwide attention and his designs for this set were publicly exhibited at the Crown Agents stand at the Stanley Gibbons Catalogue Centenary Exhibition held in London's Festival Hall between the 17th and 20th February, 1965.

In 1973, Chev. Cremona was also responsible for yet another long series consisting of fifteen designs. While the 1965 definitive set was imaginatively conceived on a historical note, that of 1973 was more flamboyantly composed, colourful and contemporary, with history, culture, industry, folklore and tourism homogeneously integrated.

Going through some of his primary sketches and drafts, for various stamp designs, one cannot help observe the richness of ideas and interpretation of Cremona's mind. He is rarely satisfied with his work and is humble enough not

to comment on his achievements. His home, which he himself has designed and decorated in a homogeneous manner, contains the ingredients of a man for whom art is a plant, an old crumbling headless and handless statue, a rough stone, an elaborate contoured section of a tree trunk. All such things, unattractive to the common man, provide him with excitement. His inspiration stems from everyday life while the interpretation is purely Cremona, fresh and imaginative, delicate and original.

It is impossible to discuss each and every design of the stamps that bear his imprint. Each is a masterpiece by itself, and over the years, Cremona's stamps have reached a stage, when the name of his nation, "Malta", could easily be removed from the stamp layout and it would still be readily recognized as a Malta stamp.



When I asked Cremona which stamp he himself likes best, he avoided a direct reply but he disclosed to me that he is still fascinated by the 1968 set of three stamps issued to commemorate early the 6d stamp. Each design featured a gathering of people from different nations in a homogeneous group. Homogeneity for the man who has designed most of the stamps of modern Malta, is a very important consideration. The same basic concept of a homogeneous group crops up again years later in the Christmas issues between 1969 and 1971.

Philatelic writers and critics agree that for almost twenty years, Malta's unique stamps represent a homogeneous array of bold, imaginative and distinctive designs. This uniformity of style, unfortunately, cannot be always respected in future, for no other artist will ever manage to involve himself emotionally as Chev. Cremona. It can be stated that Chev. Emanuel Vincent Cremona has enlivened philately and raised a stamp designing to a miniature art form. He has made art of stamps.

This article was originally published in "IL NUOVO CORRIERE FILATELICO", No. 20, December 1978.

Publishers: "Società di Studi Filatelici e Storico Postale", Firenze.

Editor: Prof. Dr. Vito Salierno.

The article had a parallel translation in Italian published in the same edition.