

# TREASURES OF MALTA

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FPM   
FONDAZZJONI PATRIMONJ MALTIN

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Trapanese workshop, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Capezzale* featuring the Holy Family with Saints Ann and Joachim  
 (Private Collection, Malta / Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti is greatly saddened by the passing away of John Manduca, one of its founding fathers and the first editor of *Treasures of Malta*. John had been instrumental in 1994 in giving this cultural magazine the profile it still retains today. He edited, with exemplary passion, taste and competence, its first thirty-one issues, after which he passed the baton over to Paul Xuereb. He is now surely working on a special edition of *Treasures of Paradise*.

Our Foundation and editorial offices had to move from their historical spaces in Palazzo Bonici, formerly the foyer of the Manoel Theatre. We have found new accommodation in No. 163, Old Mint Street, Valletta, an antique corner palazzina. We are in the process of restoring and redecorating our new premises, which are not lacking in historical significance. During the rule of the knights of St John the property belonged to the Gambalina family of merchants, and it was in time acquired by the Manoel de Vilhena Foundation. That accounts for the fact that the premises are officially known as Casa Gambalina. The remarkable military architect of the Order, Francesco Marandon from Turin, may have been one of its illustrious tenants in the eighteenth century.

On the cultural front, the last months have been highly productive. Palazzo Falson in Mdina is staging an exquisite exhibition of Edward Lear's watercolours of Malta. This Victorian artist can rightly claim to have been Malta's most lyrical image-maker, seeing these islands through a poet's eyes, and giving a fugitive, ethereal dimension to the landscape that other artists never attempted. The exhibition will run up until the 4<sup>th</sup> January 2015. In parallel with the Mdina event, Patrimonju has published a lavish book by Prof. John Varriano illustrating most of Lear's known Malta scenes, together with a first-time transcription of Lear's Malta diaries, an indispensable accretion to Melitensia studies.

Patrimonju has also just published two other highly significant books: to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of our founder-president Maurice de Giorgio, over forty friends and academics came together to pay homage to this legendary father-figure of the Maltese cultural scene. The result, *A Timeless Gentleman*, is a vibrant volume crammed with new research and discoveries about Malta's heritage, exploring its history and mining its seemingly inexhaustible cultural seams. Malta of the spirit would have been that much poorer without Maurice de Giorgio.

Another recent publication under the aegis of Patrimonju is John Woods's *Xlendi and its Ancient Shipwrecks*. The first in a series of Palazzo Falson books, it links with the Gollcher memory, as Olof Gollcher left his mark as one of the earliest pioneers of scientific underwater archaeology. It documents the first explorations of the seabed below the killer Xlendi reefs, carried out in 1961 by a British services underwater team and students from Imperial College London. Their findings, together with their original photographic documentation in colour, make this volume a pleasure and a must.

To mark the beginning of its twenty-first year, *Treasures of Malta* is starting a new regular feature and a new set of inserts: the feature is 'Melitensia Curios' by Dr William Zammit, short insights into some ephemeral, unknown, antique publications related to Malta, and the inserts will feature rare maps of Malta from the Albert Ganado Collection.

Prominent in the Maltese cultural landscape is the new permanent exhibition of the works of Victor Pasmore recently opened in the Polverista building of the annexe to the Central Bank of Malta. Pasmore, a towering giant of British abstract art, spent a long segment of his creative life in Malta, where he died in 1998 aged 89. Many of his more stunning masterpieces were created in Malta, making him, with Sir Basil Spence, the most renowned expatriate artist to have enriched Malta's heritage since Caravaggio and Mattia Preti. Fittingly the Central Bank of Malta endorsed the initiative of having a permanent display of some of his works on view in the island he had adopted as his spiritual home.

A very Happy Christmas to all our readers, contributors, patrons, staff, advertisers and printers. And may the year 2015 be the fulfilment of their cultural dreams.

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# The Cover



Trapanese workshop, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Capezzale* featuring the Holy Family with Saints Ann and Joachim (Private Collection, Malta)

In the decorative arts, the *capezzale* is a devotional object in the form of a high-relief sculpture featuring a saint or religious scene originally intended to hang above a bed to protect the persons sleeping below it. This type of object and the execution of the work in a variety of materials, including coral, ivory, mother of pearl, tortoiseshell, silver filigree, turquoise stones and pearls so associated with Sicily, immediately points to a Trapanese origin. The collection of coral from the seas around Trapani originates from as early as the fifteenth century. It resulted in a flourishing industry emanating from Trapanese workshops of carved and worked coral mounted in highly ornate and figurative designs. This culminated in the unique style typical of the seventeenth century, whereby individually carved elements of coral were inserted into purposely cut gaps, using the *retroincastrò* technique, in gilt copper plaques to create high-relief sculptural decoration on chalices, devotional lamps, *capezzali*, jewellery and other decorative works.

By the eighteenth century the supply of the slow-growing coral was diminishing, and Trapanese workshops responded to this change by introducing other materials such as ivory, tortoiseshell and silver filigree in their works, thus enlivening further with texture and colour the appearance of these objets d'art. The technique of *retroincastrò* was supplanted by threading these individual elements onto the backing support, called *cucitura*. The present *capezzale*, which features the Holy Family and Saints Ann and Joachim underneath the central figure of God the Father and angels, whose figures are all individually sculpted in ivory in a late baroque idiom, shows just such characteristics, and is therefore datable to the early to mid-eighteenth century when these innovations in technique were coming to the fore.

Although the origin can, on stylistic grounds, be attributed with certainty to a Trapanese workshop of around the 1730s-1740s, it is unknown when the *capezzale* was brought to Malta and when it was placed in the later wooden glass-fronted frame which presently protects it. The *capezzale* is said to have originally belonged to a Maltese noble family and is presently conserved in a Maltese private collection. Works of this quality are rarely found and although there are a few seventeenth-century exceptional coral and copper gilt devotional works in Maltese church collections, the only other comparable *capezzale* dating to the same period as the one featured is presently in the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

Roberta Cruciatà