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## HERITAGE MALTA ART COLLECTIONS AND MEMORIES OF POLAND CONSERVED IN MALTA

*This paper is dedicated to **Michael John Stroud** (24 February 1948 - 9 December 2013), the first ever appointed Curator of the Palace Armoury in the Grand Master's Palace, Valletta (1990-2009). Known amongst us, his friends, as Mike, he was to us, two younger generations of Curators, a cultural father, master and mentor in many aspects and fields dealt within this paper. This very first paper written by us after his death is a promise that we shall never forget him in our work, memory and prayers.*

Malta's vast artistic patrimony is highly indebted to the legacy endowed by the Order of St. John known as the Order of Malta throughout their 268-year rule of the islands between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This artistic legacy is made up of various genres and typologies most of which are curated and displayed within the collections of Heritage Malta.<sup>1</sup> Among these, one can easily distinguish the three main branches that made up the Order of St. John and the way it used to function as an institution back in its ruling heyday. The Order was principally founded as a hospitaller movement whose main function was to take care of the sick and moribund, starting off with their first hospital in Jerusalem where they took care of the pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. The second branch was monastic. This meant that its members had to follow the vows of obedience, celibacy and chastity as in other established monastic orders of the time. However, the changing times and customs of the Order itself, led to certain liberties among its members with regards to these vows. The ecclesiastical side of the Order, however, was even more important; one monument evident to this is the Conventual Church of St. John the Baptist in Valletta, which was decorated by the Order and its members with immense riches commissioned to artists, then rated among the best in the Catholic world of mainland Europe. The Papal protection over the Order as well as the continuous collaboration with other Catholic sovereigns and monarchs further strengthened the Order's relevance and position on the complicated European chess-board.

The third branch, however, which evolved quite early within the Order's formation, was that of being a military order. With the lapse of time, this faction was further amplified by the Order as an institution and also by its very members in arming themselves with the latest military technology at that time to protect themselves against the ever-increasing attacks mainly by their primary enemy: the Ottoman Turks. During the Order's early years in Malta, it sought to well defend its territory against another expulsion by the Ottomans as had happened earlier at their previous abode, Rhodes in 1522-1523. As soon as the Order laid foot in Malta in 1530, the Order began to defend the main island's defence posts by repairing those few old defensive structures as well as by building new fortifications. Apart from this, soldiers were recruited from mainland Europe as part of their army while new weapons were ordered and occasionally donated by monarchs as a sign of gratitude for the Order's efforts against Europe's common enemy in defence of the Catholic faith. One such consignment was sent by King Henry VIII of England to Grand Master Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle Adam (1521-1534) in 1530, which included a set of nineteen identical artillery

pieces emblazoned with both monarch's and grand master's coat of arms,<sup>2</sup> and a consignment of smaller arms which possibly included the gonne shield still on display in the Palace Armoury.<sup>3</sup>

The Knights of the Order of St. John were from the oldest and most aristocratic European families. Coming over to Malta, each individual knight brought along with him not just his Roman Catholic doctrine, spirit and zeal, but also a baggage of fine tastes in architecture, in fine and decorative arts he had acquired in his own homestead and country as well as a good amount of sense for *bon vivant*.

As was prevalent in mainland Europe, anything that was ordered or sponsored by a grand master, bailiff or common knight, sported his emblazoned coat of arms, motto, image or a combination of these three. To this very day, albeit after over two hundred years since the Order left Malta, notwithstanding the ravages of time, warfare (namely the 1798-1800 and 1940-1945 conflicts) or pure negligence and ignorance mainly after the Second World War reconstruction and the subsequent "progress," there still seems to be hardly a corner in the Maltese Archipelago where the Order's mark cannot be noticed. Main roads, rural landscaping, village cores and the cities founded during the Order's stay in Malta full of grand architectural masterpieces such as parish churches, palaces, hospitals, inns and fortifications are testimony to the Order's glorious past and munificence in Malta (fig. 1).

With the course of time, most of what used to furnish such buildings, with the exception of parish churches and a few stately homes, has unfortunately ended up dispersed in Maltese households and museums and also abroad. Two main factors make 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-centuries' decorative Maltese art works interesting enough to be yearned for. Because the military order of the Knights of St. John was also a monastic and hospitaller order, works of art were emblazoned with the coat of arms of either the Order itself, the grand master or an individual knight, which made them cherished for their high artistic appeal, valued by collectors. Such an attestation of ownership resulted in a legendary aura around all the possessions of the Order or its members, testifying to their glorious past.

The second main factor contributing to the special value of these works is that the native Maltese population then, as now, was relatively small. Artists and artisans were very few and in great demand to the extent that they could hardly cope with all the commissions from various wealthy patrons for the embellishment of their buildings. The list of patrons was topped by the Order. Apart from the needs of the grand master himself with a choice to embellish and furnish three main palaces (fig. 2), other ranked knights followed suit, as did Malta's government institutions of that time, such as courts of law, hospitals, customs, etc., not to mention the Church in Malta, headed by the bishop with close ties to the inquisitor, together with parish priests, clergymen, as well as parish churches buildings (fig. 3) and confraternities with tens of their filial churches, monasteries and other pious institutions. The Maltese nobility and the oversized middle class, mainly affluent merchant and corsair families (fig. 4) likewise had large amounts of properties, and many of them were richly decorated, for evidently all of those owners were, like the Order and the Church, obsessed with the Baroque *horror vacui* in all fields of the arts.

Foreign artists and artisans were thus brought over from abroad to satisfy the lust for anything which could be turned into artistic form and shape whatever the material, from architects to bell founders and silversmiths. Most of those artists and artisans eventually settled in Malta, some even brought other members of their families or friends of the same or similar professions, and ultimately became Maltese, some of them married into Maltese artistic families. Both their offspring and apprentices eventually produced items which, although hearken to the continental European artistic language, are purely Maltese in their spirit and detail. Still, the number of produced artworks, and more so of these that have survived, is much smaller than in other European countries, thus Maltese works are highly sought after and expensive. It is suffice to compare the prices of Maltese furniture and silver items sold at London auctions with British and continental items of the same period.

Naval exploits of the Order, the seat of which was defended by a formidable island fortress, brought fame to the knights. Museums and collectors, both of Maltese origin and foreign ones,

have been looking for the Order's heyday mementoes in the form of armour, paintings, furniture, silver, majolica, naval artefacts and coins. Heritage Malta has the fortune to be a custodian of the most significant, largest and most varied collections of works of arts and objects from the Malta period of the Order of St. John. This collection, discussed here on the select examples, being the evidence of both the Maltese and European history of the period, constitute the essence of the Maltese identity. Below, there are presented brief descriptions of select items by type to illustrate the wide and varied spectrum of the subject in question.

## ARMS & ARMOUR

Housed in the Magisterial Palace<sup>4</sup> in Valletta, the Palace Armoury is one of the most evident examples of the military faction of the Order of St. John. It was founded in 1604<sup>5</sup> in the aftermath of traumatic events suffered by the Order during the Great Siege of 1565 in Malta by the Ottomans and of constant threat of their attacks. This, along with the construction of the fortified city of Valletta and commissioning of several bronze artillery pieces, testify to the main preoccupation of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (1601-1622) and his immediate successors to well equip themselves and Malta in case of attack.

A very interesting piece in the Palace Armoury collection predates the 1565 siege. This is a breastplate and backplate showing fine workmanship (fig. 5). It is probably of German manufacture dating to ca. 1540. The breastplate is of a half-sphere form and has a laminated single splint. The two pieces are finely decorated with etched engraving with bands of acanthus scrolls intertwined with putti, angels, serpents with the heads of horse, winged creatures and cornucopias. Proudly shown on the chest is the Christian iconography of the Virgin holding the Child Jesus. The Virgin stands on a crescent moon and is surrounded by a radiant mandorla. The work is typical of the German style of etching for 16<sup>th</sup>-century prints. On the right side of the breastplate there are two holes which indicate that the armour was fitted with a lance-rest and was worn as part of a full cavalry suit of armour.<sup>6</sup>

Among the relics of the Great Siege, the Palace Armoury boasts of a large amount of standard-issue armour dating from the 1560s, which was used to fully equip the Maltese infantry and cavalry armies. What exists today is only a fraction of what was originally accounted for in period inventories. Apart from this collection, the armoury contains highly decorative armours deposited by knights of the Order on their demise according to the Order's regulations. Among these are three pieces that once formed part of a whole suit of armour (fig. 6). The breastplate, backplate and the falling buffe or detachable bevor are attributed to Grand Master Jean de Valette (1557-1568), who distinguished himself by outstanding leadership during the siege of 1565. Of special interest is the breastplate which has a central band with the representation of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order, holding the Holy Lamb. Below there is the de Valette family armorial shield. It must be noted that the shield is not quartered like that of a grand master. Instead, it has a chief with the arms of the Order surmounting the de Valette shield. This clearly indicates that the owner was still a bailiff of the Order of St. John at the time of commission of this piece.<sup>7</sup>

Another important item at the Palace Armoury is a full armour known as the "Armour of the Grand Commander Jean-Jacques de Verdelin" (fig. 7), made at an anonymous Milanese workshop ca. 1580. This is also called the "Verdelin armour" because the commander is wearing this very armour on his full-length portrait. There is, however, engraved on the plume holder an Italian noble family coat of arms which is totally different to Verdelin's. The armour is decorated with typical broad ornamental gold bands alternating with plain polished steel areas that were originally blue. The etched bands are enriched with paraphernalia of pieces of armour and weapons, while narrower bands are filled with running foliage. On the breastplate and backplate as well as on the front and rear of both pauldrons, and tassets, a volute terminates in medallions enclosing classical profile heads. The armour is associated also with Grand Master Alof de Wignacout whose portrait in this armour by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio is displayed in the Louvre in Paris.<sup>8</sup>