

ARCHITECTURE IN MALTA

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ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE KNIGHTS

In the year 1530 Emperor Charles V. of Aragon, through the intercession of Pope Clement VII, ceded these Islands to the Knights of St. John, previously known as Knights Hospitallers, who since the Eleventh Century when their Order was founded had been continually distinguishing themselves in the service of humanity and in the defence of the Christian religion.

This historic event had an immense effect upon the Architecture of these Islands. At first the Knights established themselves at Birgu and there they raised several buildings of the Renaissance style unpretentious in character; after the Great Siege of 1565, however, La Valette the Grand Master decided to build a new city, afterwards named Valetta, upon Mount Sciberras which commanded the harbours on either side as well as the country inland for a great distance. This decision marked the beginning of the great building era of this country.

MILITARY ARCHITECTURE

The Order being both military and monastic, Architecture during its rule progressed both in the line of fortifications as in the civil line, the latter comprising chiefly the municipal and the ecclesiastical branches. The masterpieces in the military branch of the Art are the enceintes or system of fortifications which protect Valetta and Floriana designed in different periods by famous Engineers such as Laparelli, Genga, Cassar and Floriani, and those which embrace the three cities on the other side of the Grand Harbour and isolate them so to say from the

rest of the country. Such defensive works are so extensive and elaborate that their observer, while feeling overawed by the masses, height and ever rising rows of ramparts, can only admire some small portion of them without correlating it to the whole unless he glances at their comprehensive plan and observes the relative positions of the Cavaliers, the Bastions, the Curtains, the Ditches, the Ravelins and the Counterscrapes all of which communicate with one another by bridges, tunnels or open protected passages.

From the artistic point of view the decorations are few in number but very effective; they occur principally in the curtains, which are the straight walls joining two projecting spear-shaped bastions in plan. In them a cable moulding intervenes between the battering wall and the embrasured parapet, and a couple of coats-of-arms are sometimes placed in convenient positions to catch the eye. The echaugettes or guardrooms perched at the top of the edge of every bastion and the gates at the entrances afforded the Engineers ample opportunity for a display of their taste and talent in appropriate architecture.

Porte des Bombes in the outer fortifications of Floriana is one of the most artistically successful amongst the famous gates in the defensive works of Malta. In it the fertile imagination of the designer has given the engaged columns the shape of guns on a background of rusticated courses, the whole supporting an entablature surmounted by an attic crowned by trophies and coats-of-arms. In later times the gate was doubled "*Ad majorem populi commoditatem*" and transformed to its present state which though not displeasing to the eye is not, from the artistic standpoint, an improvement over the old.

The fortifications protecting the three cities on the eastern side of the Grand Harbour are specimens of seventeenth and eighteenth century military architecture, the excellence of which few if any other towns in the world can boast. The inner lines protecting Birgu and Senglea individually are the oldest; the central enceinte round St. Margaret's Hill and enclosing the central enceinte round St. Margaret's Hill and enclosing Bormla, originally planned by the famous engineer

Firenzuola, were built next, while the outer enceinte composed of eight forts or bastions connected together by curtains and enclosing an extensive oval tract of ground were planned last in the time and at the expense of Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner by Valperga, another world famed Engineer.

Apart from the military merits of these lines of fortifications the Architectural Gateways at the centre of each curtain are likewise worthy of notice. The simplicity and effectiveness of their design composed of rusticated pilasters and counter-pillars on either side of the gateway with coats-of-arms surmounting the latter at the centre and with a crowning cornice supporting a balustrade and decorative flaming urns, is beyond all praise, and it is a pity that the out-of-the-way position of such gates renders faint any appeal for their proper preservation.

Forts such as St. Elmo, St. Angelo, Ricasoli and Manoel have also their merits not only from the military point of view but also for the architectural richness of their contained structures such as chapels, gateways and barracks, and it is not without regret that I am compelled by the tyranny of time to refrain from commenting upon them.

Isolated towers common throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are also to be found in different out of the way places in Malta on hills commanding important positions especially landing places. One of the most typical and picturesque of these towers is Fort St. Lucian in Marsaxlokk Bay. It consists of a two-storeyed square building with battering walls and with a tower at each angle having vertical sides and projecting parapets in the upper storey. The entrance to the tower was in the centre of this upper storey and on the side facing inland. It was originally reached by an external ramp or flight of steps on the top of which rested the loose end of the port-cullis when open.

These towers in Malta and elsewhere served as models to the apparently fortified castles of the nobles which were the most sumptuous buildings to be found among hills and fields in the country. Verdala Palace beyond Mdina and Selmun

Tower in the north-western side of the Island are two of the best examples of the kind and their architecture is a combination of robustness with artistic feelings. In Selmun Palace, it may be observed, the towers at the angles start from ground level, the entrance is at the ground floor and an open balustraded balcony surrounds the building; a third storey is added to the angles, and features of the seventeenth century architecture decorate all the openings and culminate in the belfry over the axis of the façade.

These semifortified castles were in turn the model of country villas in which the military aspect of the buildings gradually faded away.

CIVIC ARCHITECTURE

Having examined specimens of the military and semi-military architecture in the Island we may now turn our attention first to the municipal and then to the ecclesiastical buildings of the Order most of which were raised in the new City.

In Valetta one of the earliest buildings was the Magisterial Palace, the official residence of the Grand Master, to-day the Governor's Palace. The site first chosen for it was the one now occupied by the Auberge de Castile, but Grand Master Del Monte who succeeded La Valette preferred the present site which besides being the most level was also the most central and dominated all its surroundings with the exception of the countryside. The Palace occupies a large space containing two rectangular courts surrounded by arcaded galleries around which are contained the State apartments and the private rooms. The Hall of St. Michael and St. George with its throne flanked by composite columns elevated over a dais, with its gilded panelled soffit and historical wall paintings, forms one of the principal attractions of the interior.

The external decoration of the Palace is simple and severe well becoming the official seat of a monastic order and in keeping with the style prevalent in the early days of its construction. The effect of its architecture is imposing, and the plane wall

surface intervening between the long simple cornice under the roof balustrade and the cornices of the windows in the upper floor provides a repose for the eye which more than anything else enhances the grandeur of the building. The two portals flanked by rusticated columns surmounted by an entablature which supports the open balconies are, at least one of them, later additions. So also are the covered balconies in the angles which are supported by artistic consoles displaying a variety of coats-of-arms and other decorations.

Each of the seven languages into which the Order was divided had built a separate Inn or Auberge for the convenience and activities of its members and for the residence of its junior members. Most of these Auberges were first raised late in the 16th Century by Gerolamo Cassar, the famous Maltese Architect and Engineer, who was responsible also for the construction of the Conventual Church of St. John and the Magisterial Palace. Cassar never lost sight of the fact that the buildings raised by the Order had, in keeping with its mission, to be simple and dignified in appearance, imposing and severe in character. Although there exists no documents to show the architecture of those Auberges before they were rebuilt in a later and less austere period, yet it is reasonable to suppose, from the style everywhere adopted by Cassar, that they were not very different in appearance from the Auberge d'Aragon erected by him in 1571.

About this time artists in Europe started becoming weary of the definite rules established in the Renaissance period and new manifestations were gradually evolving a somewhat capricious style — later termed Baroque — which the previous art of Michelangelo and his pupils had furnished with forms and ideas. This style flourished in Italy and other countries between 1580 and 1760 or thereabout, a period which coincided with an era in which the Knights in Malta who were divided in Languages or Nationalities vied with one another in raising new imposing buildings at their own expense. These buildings were consequently decorated in the prevailing style and several

structures of the early period which appeared too sober in character were pulled down and rebuilt with more pretentious grandeur late in the seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries during or after the time the Baroque in other countries had reached its apogee.

In the year 1680 Grand Master Gregorio Carafa rebuilt a good part of the Auberge d'Italie which resulted in a very dignified and stately astylar palace. The robustness of its angular pillars, made up of alternating diamond pointed and furrowed quoins, the imposing rusticated central portal surmounted by a combination of trophies and other ornaments in marble round the bust of the Grand Master, the studied disposition of the openings, and the bold, if somewhat low down cornice, point to a work of some experienced and notable architect whose name in connexion with this building has not been transmitted to posterity.

In 1744 Grand Master Pinto rebuilt the Auberge de Castile and Leon at a time when the vigorous and emphatic qualities of the Baroque were giving way to lightness and fragile grace. The result was stupendous both in external effect as in the internal grandeur of its courts, vestibules and monumental staircase. The façade consists in two slightly recessed wings, each containing three exquisitely decorated windows in appropriate panels at every storey, and in a central protruding block having in the ground floor a round headed portal elevated over a pyramidal flight of steps, and flanked by columns. These support a cornice which upholds a central bust of Pinto having a background of trophies creeping up with particular grace round the overlying central large window and ending on either side of a coat-of-arms of the Grand Master. This central block is adorned by pilasters as are also the angles of the building. The palace ends in an imposing cornice supported by graceful brackets and crowned over the centre by two large coats-of-arms immersed in other trophies over an architectural background. This Auberge was built by the famous Maltese Architect Cachia but shows traces of Spanish influence.

Shortly after the completion of the Auberge de Castile in 1748 the rebuilding of another stately palace was taken in hand at the expense of Grand Master Pinto. This was the Castellania, then the Law Courts, now the head office of the Medical and Health Department in Merchants Street and St. John Street. As in the Auberge d'Italie the façade consisted of two main storeys the lower comprising also the mezzanine floor with square windows. The relative height of the two storeys is more satisfactory and a great improvement on that of the Auberge d'Italie. The central portal decorated with recessed pilasters supports a balcony and is superimposed by another portal surmounted by a broken pediment and adorned with inscriptions and marble statues of Truth and Justice and other allegorical figures. The main cornice as in the Auberge de Castile is supported by brackets and is rounded in the centre both as a finial and to provide space for the upper part of the group of statuary already mentioned.

The Castellania was designed and erected by Architect Zerafa and was completed after his death by Engineer Giuseppe Bonnici who was the Architect of the Custom House and of the Church of Saint Barbara in Kingsway.

Much could be said about the architecture of the other Auberges and Municipal Buildings raised under the rule of the Knights in Valetta but time permits only a brief reference to the last though by no means the least in artistic merits of all the public buildings erected by the Order. I allude to the Royal Public Library, whose beauty is enhanced by the open space in its forefront which provides an excellent point of view to its admirers. Its façade in two main storeys has in the ground floor an exquisitely decorated arcade with five arches flanked by engaged columns except in the central one where isolated columns support a stone balcony. The first floor is adorned with binate Ionic pilasters alternating with pedimented windows each surmounted by an elliptical opening fringed by a wreath ornament which appears to be hanging from the architrave in the centre of every bay. The beautiful main cornice is sur-

mounted by a perfectly balanced and well proportioned balustrade covered in the centre by a pediment which crowns a very satisfactory architectural composition round the door leading to the balcony. In details of ornament it suggests an influence of French decorative art. The Architect was Stefano Ittar.

PRIVATE ARCHITECTURE

It would be a serious omission on my part if I were to-day to ignore the beautiful and varied architecture that still exists, especially in Valetta, in private buildings raised during the rule of the Order. In many of these examples the main features both in the interior as in the exterior provide a display of taste and art worthy of high praise. It is extremely desirable that an album of measured drawings or at least of photographs of such rapidly disappearing structures and of their component parts be compiled without delay. The illustration shows the staircase of the Admiralty House in South Street, Valetta, which house was originally built in the 16th Century but was re-erected in the style in vogue in the 18th Century while everywhere in Europe much importance was being given to the staircase, in contrast to the time in which the Magisterial Palace and the first Auberges were erected when a spiral stairs often sufficed for communication between the different storeys of even the most sumptuous buildings of the period.

ECCLESIASTIC ARCHITECTURE

Having dealt rather summarily with the military architecture and with the Municipal and the Private sections of the Civil Architecture, I will now pass to the Ecclesiastical Monuments raised by the Order.

Naturally the Conventual Church of St. John which epitomizes the life and history of the Order in Malta occupies first place in our consideration. Its construction was commenced at a time when the tendency towards the Baroque Art had just started to develop. Simple and sober though St. John's may appear it is undoubtedly the grandest and most striking of

Cassar's works. The appropriateness of its Architecture to a Military and Monastic Order cannot be improved upon and there hardly is one architectural detail which does not serve to enhance the function which it is intended to perform. In the façade the two towers at the sides uplifting spired belfries are decorated at the angles with Doric Pilasters. No entablature separates the ground storey from the one overlying it but the same mouldings of the capitals of the pilasters are continued in a string course round the towers. This original motive is repeated with unique success in the interior where a similar string course is made to take the place of the cornice. Between the two towers the façade in recess has its portal surmounted by a balcony supported by brackets and by a couple of sturdy columns. This balcony from which incidentally the election of the Grand Master was announced, is placed within an archivault in the upper part of the façade which is itself crowned by a simple pediment bearing the eight-pointed cross of the Order over its apex.

Architecturally the interior is not less simple and imposing; it consists of one big arcaded nave covered by a slightly acute vault and flanked by a row of chapels on either side. Each of the Languages possessed one of these Chapels and consequently did its utmost to make it surpass those of the other in splendour. The architecture of the Reredos behind the altar of each Chapel forms a collection of Baroque artistic compositions difficult to surpass in originality and in beauty.

Appropriate bas-relief ornaments adorn in varying designs the front and sides of the pillars of the church as well as the panels in the wall. The rich marble tomb slabs covering the floor, the multi-coloured decorations, the magnificent sepulchral monuments and the painted soffit complete a whole which is as renowned for the Art it displays as it is for its unique history.

From the time St. John's was built till the end of the Eighteenth Century the work of the great masters in Italy and elsewhere continued to influence the Ecclesiastical Architecture of Malta. The architectonic motif of the exterior in most of the Churches was often worked out without much relation to the

interior. The façades are generally divided into two storeys decorated with pilasters or engaged columns, and the lower storey when made wider was related to the upper by floral decorations, heavy consoles and volutes. Internally the churches consisted at first of one barrel vaulted nave which more often than not was flanked by chapels. Later the plan developed into a Latin Cross with a Dome over the intersection of nave and transepts. Twin belfries one on either side of the façade took the place of the single more picturesque one and reduced the effectiveness of the Dome where there was one; every minor detail was however brought into harmony with the grandiose aspect and the splendour of the monument as a whole.

The Cathedral at Mdina which was raised towards the end of the 17th Century by the eminent Maltese Architect Lorenzo Gafà after the destruction by an earthquake of the former Cathedral is one of the finest specimens of the Architecture of the period and its dominating position at one corner of the Citadel, commanding a vast panorama around, enhances the beauty of one of the most picturesque views in the Island. Gafà raised several other churches amongst which are worthy of notice St. Lawrence's at Birgu and the Cathedral in Ghawdex which like its sister church in Malta constitutes one of the most beautiful landmarks. Matteo and Tommaso Dingli and other Maltese Architects raised many elegant parish churches in the Island; many of them were later tampered with most unsatisfactorily to provide more space for the faithful.

Besides the Chapels within St. John's, the Knights of almost every Language raised a small church in convenient positions not far from their respective Auberges. These small churches both internally and externally provided essays of their own with magnificent results. Pride of place in this set of Churches is to be assigned to St. James's in Merchants Street, a monument on an elliptical plan which is justly admired both for its composition and for the relation and proportion of its parts. It was built in 1710 by Giovanni Barbara who was noted

both as an Architect and as an Engineer. The elegant church of Casal Lija is another of his fine works.

The rule of the Order of St. John in Malta, which was responsible for so many world famous monuments was brought to an end in 1798 by Napoleon Bonaparte. The French remained in possession of these Islands for nearly two years; during this time the Maltese people were in open revolt and no work was done other than the pulling down or the smoothing of the coats-of-arms of the Order which decorated almost every important building whether ecclesiastical or lay, public or private.

RECENT ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE BRITISH RULE

The Islands then passed under the British and by the Treaty of Paris in 1814 they became definitely a dependency of His Britannic Majesty.

The repeal of the iniquitous French laws affecting the clergy and the re-instatement of religious endowments by the British once more kindled the enthusiasm of the people, innate in them since prehistoric times, for the raising of highly pretentious buildings as their places of worships.

The first of such buildings was the Rotunda of Mosta which Architect Giorgio Grongnet de Vassé designed in 1833 taking the Pantheon as a model. The dome of this Church is 118 feet in internal diameter and it is therefore one of the largest existing in the world. It rests over a massive cylindrical wall in the thickness of which eight apses or chapels are constructed. Over the apses rests the main cornice above which is the clerestory with sixteen windows; this in turn supports the hemispherical dome. The chapels are decorated with Corinthian engaged columns and coffered apses.

Externally the main entrance is reached through a pedimented portico of the Greek Ionic Order flanked by two square towers. Over the roundheaded windows of the Clerestory an Anthemion Ornament runs round the whole church just under the cornice above which the grand Dome springs. This great monument was raised almost entirely by voluntary labour by

men "Seeking no end to gain or praise to win, save that God's Glory might this temple fill".

The growing importance of Malta as a British Naval and Military Base and the consequent influx into the Island of a discreet number of administrators and of business men from England, the majority of whom belonged to the Church of England, caused a demand for the provision of suitable places of worship to meet their religious needs. Accordingly in 1839 Her Majesty the Dowager Queen Adelaide consort of William IV laid the first stone of the Collegiate Church of St. Paul, the first Anglican Church to be erected in Malta. This building has the form of a pseudo-peripteral hexastyle Roman Ionic Temple and is very elegant in form and highly finished in detail. By its side rises a graceful steeple to which Sir Christopher Wren's bell tower of St. Mary le Bow in London must have served as a model except in the spire.

As a result of the prosperity in the Island following the Crimean War and of the expanding culture of the people under British Rule many buildings of importance were raised in Valetta under the administration of Governor Sir Gaspard Le Marchant. The most famous of these is the Royal Opera House which was erected in 1861 in Kingsway upon designs of Edward Middleton Barry an English Architect well known for many good works in London including Covent Garden Theatre. It is, or rather it was, a sumptuous building of the modern classic style decorated in the outside by the Corinthian Order. It showed Palladian influence in arrangement of parts and French influence in ornamentation.

The late Chevalier Emmanuel Lewis Galizia, a Member of the Institute of Civil Engineers and a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, during his tenure of office of Director of Public Works, was the Architect of many conspicuous works in Malta; among them stands foremost the beautiful Addolorata Cemetery consecrated in 1869, and its picturesque Church of the Modern Gothic Style; the Gothic Church at Mġar, Ghawdex; and the Mahomedan Cemetery of the Decorated

Moresque Style, in recognition of the excellence of which Architect Galizia was in 1874 created Knight Mejedie by Sultan Abdul Aziz Khan.

Since that time other important buildings, such as Churches, Schools and Hospitals have been raised. Of these, three monuments erected since the end of the Great War are worthy of special mention. They are the Church "Ta Pinu" at Ghawdex in the Decorated Romanesque Style, designed and constructed by Architect André Vassallo and completed by Architect Godwin Galizia, son of the late Chevalier Galizia; the St. Luke's Hospital at Gwardamanga on the designs of Architects Adams, Holden and Pearson of London; and the just completed Romanesque Church of St. Gregory of Sliema by the same Architect Godwin Galizia, erected to a great extent by the munificence of His Grace the Archbishop Bishop Dom Maurus Caruana.

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I must now conclude by expressing the hope that notwithstanding the difficulties of the moment I have given you a fair idea not only of the charm and merit of the principal monuments that have been erected in these Islands from Prehistoric Times to the present day but also of their evolution to meet the changing religious, political and domestic needs of the inhabitants.

The fury displayed by the totalitarian enemy countries in their couple of thousand air raids have not as yet deprived us entirely of the best of our lithic patrimony, though several monuments of high artistic and historic value to which we were affectionately attached have been irreparably wrecked. Let us hope that under the protection of the Almighty, the continued bravery of our defenders, both English and Maltese, will avert further major disasters and that a victorious conclusion of the present struggle shall, as on previous occasions, be marked by a brilliant revival of Architecture in these Islands not unworthy of the glorious past.

ANCIENT ORIENTAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

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The average reader of the Old Testament inclines almost unconsciously to isolate the history of Israel from all external influence and to consider it as an independent unit in the vast and intricate web of events which make up the history of man. The history of Israel would then not only be marked off by a special divine providence, but all its events would be directly referred to a divine intervention independently of any consideration of the manifold historical factors which might have, in some way or other, influenced those events. Thus, the migration of Abraham from his native land to Canaan would be exclusively referred to the divine calling: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" (Gen 12,1). When the divine intervention is not apparent, the reader would content himself with leaving a particular historical event shrouded in mystery.

This is a gross misrepresentation of history. While not attempting in any way to minimize the rôle played by divine providence in the shaping of history in general, and especially of the history of Israel, we maintain that history must be regarded in the first place as a record of man's activity in its relation to his social, political, cultural, and religious environment. Man's activity, in whatever form it manifests itself, is the expression of his free will, because man is a free agent. Now it is a theological principle that God, in His intervention in human operations, never destroys the liberty of man. God directs man's actions, either directly or indirectly; He gives that natural or supernatural help which He deems it necessary for a determinate purpose, but He never encroaches on the