

Dowries and Foreign Influences in Fashion and Taste in Nineteenth-Century Malta

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Women of all classes were expected to bring a dowry to their marriage, the size of which depended on the wealth of the families¹. Dowry agreements generally contained items such as furniture, clothing, jewellery, and various paraphernalia which were considered to be essential for the good running of the household. These legal records not only provide important markers that help identify the different social classes and their presumed wealth, but also the impact which foreign influences had on local fashion and taste. The scrutiny of 9 notarial registers pertaining to 6 notaries and spanning from 1831 to 1869², provide the basis for exploring such influences in nineteenth-century Malta, placing particular focus on jewellery³.

Augusta Pulis and Olga Tagliaferro - two women of considerable wealth

When in 1868 the widow Augusta Pulis decided to re-marry her personal riches were many and varied. Reading through the long list of possessions one comes across an array of items which range from lavish town houses to one-

¹ J. Abela, *The alla Maltese marriage regime and its implications on women's property rights in the sixteenth century*, in *Non Omins Moriar, Essays in memory of Dun Gwann Azzopardi*, eds. P. Caruana Dingli-M. Gauci, Malta 2022, pp. 197-222.

² The sample chosen was the following; NAV (Notarial Archives Valletta) R364/1 Salvatore Carmelo Mizzi (1831-1839); R117/29 Antonio Giacomo Calleja (1832); R117/44 (1847); R251/13 Paolo Falzon (1844); R436/36 Tommaso Carmelo Sciortino (Jan1846 - June 1846); R32/24 Giorgio Locano (1860); R348/30 Antonio Micallef (1856), R348/60 (1868), R348/61 (1869).

³ Although clothing and textiles possessed an economic value which made them important reserves of wealth, it is not the scope of this study to consider them when discussing fashion trends in the interest of conciseness. The topic is studied by C. Tonna, *Society Fashion in Malta. The Portrait Photography of Leandro Preziosi (1830-1860)*, Malta 2022. For the international context of jewellery in Nineteenth-Century Malta see R. Cruciata, *Gli anni maltesi dell'incisore in pietre dure e preziose Michele Laudicina senior (1762-1832)*, in "OADI. Rivista dell'Osservatorio per le Arti Decorative in Italia", a 14 n. 28, dicembre 2023, <https://www.oadirivista.it/2023/12/29/roberta-cruciata/>.

roomed property, and from french-styled furniture⁴ to napkins from America⁵. Of notable mention are the following items; a number of oil paintings, two of which were believed to be the work of the French artist Antoine Favray (1706-1798)⁶, a rich library containing books in both Italian and English, a «Boisselot»⁷ (*sic*) piano which on its own was valued at forty *scudi*⁸, items of silverware and porcelain used for banqueting and tea tables⁹, and, not the least, the widow's jewellery pieces boasting precious gemstones which were encrusted in diverse styles¹⁰.

Augusta's future husband, Eteivoldo Agostino Ferro, a commercial clerk by profession, must have had a keen interest in music since from his part he promised to bring to the marriage a whole set of musical instruments of Italian, French, and English make. Among these were three Gagliani string instruments, one of which was specifically referred to as being a much prized «*violino, Galliani [sic] padre con cassa*»¹¹. These refer to the famous Neapolitan family of luthiers that stretch back to the seventeenth century¹². One may safely state that the groom's music repertoire compared well

⁴ For a history of the evolution of furniture styles in Malta see: *Antique Furniture in Malta*, ed. J. Manduca, Malta 2002.

⁵ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, pp. 2064-2110.

⁶ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2092. S. Degiorgio-E. Fiorentino, *Antoine Favray (1706-1798): A French Artist in Rome, Malta and Constantinople*, Malta 2004.

⁷ Louis Constantin Boisselot (1809-1850) was the most active piano builder in a dynasty of instrument makers, publishers, and composers. See *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 2nd ed., Oxford 2015 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.L2275202> [Accessed 14 January 2024].

⁸ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, f. 2092. 12 *scudi* were equivalent to £1. For a comparison with wages in Malta during the nineteenth century see P. Caruana Galizia, *Strategic colonies and economic development: real wages in Cyprus, Gibraltar, and Malta, 1836-1913*, in *Economic History Review*, Vol. 68 No. 4 (2015), pp. 1250-1276.

⁹ For a study of the influence of European silverware on the Maltese art of silversmithing, see: A. Apap Bologna, *The Silver of Malta*, Malta 1995; Eadem, *Maltese Neoclassical silver at the turn of the nineteenth century*, in *International Perspectives on the Decorative Arts: Nineteenth-century Malta*, ed. M. Sagona, Malta 2021, pp. 25-35. See also Roberta Cruciatà's studies: *Intrecci preziosi Arti Decorative Siciliane a Malta 1565-1798*, Palermo 2016; *Riflessioni sull'apporto artistico degli orafi e argentieri napoletani a Malta nel Seicento*, in "Napoli Nobilissima Rivista di Arti, Filologia e Storia", fascicolo III/settembre-dicembre, Napoli 2019, pp. 60-63; *Silver from Catania for Malta in the early nineteenth century*, in *International Perspectives ...*, 2021, pp. 48-59; *Sicilian silver in Malta: an eighteenth century ciborium in Mdina*, in "The Burlington Magazine", January 2023, vol. 165, no. 1438, pp. 42-49.

¹⁰ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, pp. 2086-2098.

¹¹ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, pp. 2105-2106.

¹² Alessandro Gagliano (1665-1732) was the first in this family of violin makers. C. Beare, *Gagliano*, 2001 <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.10479> [Accessed 13 January 2024].

with that of any seasoned music lover across Europe since it comprised works from Verdi, Rossini, Bellini, Mozart, and Beethoven amongst others¹³.

Etelvoldo's silver, gold, and diamond collection was also quite noteworthy¹⁴. It included items such as brooches studded with diamonds, locket -amongst which was one «*con Croce di smalto Bianco et catena*» (Fig. 1)¹⁵ - and a variety of rings, including one that was embellished with a cartouche¹⁶. The latter reflects the Egyptomania prevalent at the time which «captured the imagination of the French and charmed England and Ireland during the Regency era of the early nineteenth century, particularly in architecture, the decorative arts and jewelry»¹⁷. A particular item in the groom's possession which mirrors the influence of contemporary European trends of wearing jewellery that conveyed a message¹⁸ relates to an unidentified piece of jewellery bearing the interlaced symbolic element of the three virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity¹⁹.

Another notable dowry was that given to Olga Tagliaferro, daughter of the rich Valletta businessman of Genoese origin, Girolamo Tagliaferro. In the early nineteenth century, the Tagliaferro family operated an insurance company and, by 1812, they opened their own private bank²⁰. Olga's match was none oth-



Fig. 1. Late 19th century, *Maltese cross locket pendant* (Courtesy: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).

¹³ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2106.

¹⁴ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, pp. 2099-2103.

¹⁵ The images reproduced throughout the paper do not show the actual pieces quoted from the documents, but are used to suggest what they would have looked like.

¹⁶ The term cartouche comes from the French soldiers who were present in large numbers in Egypt during Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian Campaign. The symbols depicted in pharaonic ruins for them looked like the powder cartridges of their rifles (*cartouches de poudre* in French)

¹⁷ Retrieved from <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/fashion/jewelry-egyptian-revival.html>> [Accessed on 29 January 2024].

¹⁸ R. Cruciata, *Gioielli sentimentali nella società siciliana del Secondo Ottocento*, *infra*.

¹⁹ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2102. During this period, jewels were also designed around the cross, anchor and heart which represented faith, hope and charity. P. Hinks, *Nineteenth Century Jewellery*, London 1975, p. 37. Another example of this type is «*un orologio con catena ed un medaglione con lettera S. in piccoli diamanti*». NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 172.

²⁰ Olga eventually became the sole heiress to the Tagliaferro Banking House. For more information on the establishment of the Genoese Tagliaferro family in Malta in the 1800s, see: <<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2023-04-02/newspaper-lifestyleculture/Part-1-Malta-Maritime-History-B-Tagliaferro>>

er than the Contino Alfredo Sant Fournier (1840-1903)²¹, a Lieutenant in the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery and son of Count Lazzaro Sant Fournier (1813-1898)²² and the late Countess Adelaide Sant²³. Thus, following her marriage to the Contino, apart from her rich estate, Olga could now climb a step further in society and claim the title of nobility²⁴. The donated lands, buildings, furniture and furnishings, clothes, and other paraphernalia, not only mirror the extravagant lifestyle of both these families, but also the influence of foreign trends on local taste and fashion. This is projected through the mention of items such as the «*servizio d'argento con smalto manifattura di Russia*»²⁵, and, as shall be discussed, through exquisite pieces of jewellery²⁶.

The Brilliant-Cut Diamond

A study by Francesca Balzan on jewellery in nineteenth-century Malta established that the nobility and the rich Maltese bourgeoisie tended to keep up with new trends which saw the brilliant-cut diamond take precedence over coloured stones²⁷. The results of the current study supplement these findings²⁸. In fact, a look inside Olga Tagliaferro's jewellery box reveals that the future bride could live up to her newly acquired noble status by adorning herself with precious pieces such as «*1 Croce con 16 Brillanti*», «*un anello con piccoli brillanti*», «*1 pajo [d'] orecchini con 2 brillanti e 12 piccole attorno*», and another pair of earrings styled with «*4 brillanti*»²⁹.

During the 1850s, hair jewellery was very popular for young ladies and, in

ro-e-Figli-6736250766]. [Accessed on 15 December 2023].

²¹ Count Alfredo Sant Fournier was President of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1901. M. Azzopardi, *The history of the Society's 100 years at Palazzo de La Salle*, in *Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, Malta: Genesis & Evolution*, eds. C. Miggiani-G. Zammit, Malta 2023, pp. 122-126: p. 124 Fig 1.

²² President of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, 1890-1893. See: M. Azzopardi, *The history...*, 2023, p. 124 Fig. 1.

²³ Her maiden surname was De Baroni Testaferrata Abela.

²⁴ For a study of the noble class in Malta, see: J. Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta. 1530-1800*, Malta 1980.

²⁵ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 116.

²⁶ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, pp. 105-179.

²⁷ F. Balzan, *Picturing Jewellery in 19th century Malta: The evidence from periodicals and contemporary writings*, in *Vanity, Profanity & Worship: Jewellery from the Maltese Islands*, ed. G. Bonello, Malta 2013, pp. 296-297, 39-65; P. Hinks, *Nineteenth...*, 1975, pp. 25-25

²⁸ See for example, NAV R126/39, 13 December 1732, f. 191, R251/13, 18 February 1846, f. 349v, R32/24, 29 December 1864, p. 312, R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 169.

²⁹ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 156.

line with contemporary fashion, Olga's dowry contained «*un fiore per testa con 37 brillanti*»³⁰ (Fig. 2). The custom and style of the time called for a central parting in the hair which also made an excellent frame for wearing «*una corona contenente brillanti e bozzetti 75 in tutto*»³¹. Such an item would have glistened all over with an array of closely set diamonds, these being particularly effective in reflecting the fire of the candlelight³².

The groom's great aunt was also keen on enriching the bride's diamond collection by donating, «*una collana con nove brillanti e sette topazi orientali*» costing £55, and, the most prized of all: «*un anello a rosetta con un brillante grande e dodici piccole*», which was valued at £185³³. Apart from these, Olga's future father-in-law gifted her with «*una spilla con crysaletti montata a forma di mezza luna con 17 brillanti*» (Fig. 3), «*un anello alla marchesa con 1 rubino e 6 diamanti*», and «*una collana con un topazio, Briolet*,³⁴ *due rubini doublet, perle e brillanti*g, all valued at £50 by the German Jeweller from Dresden, Hugo Plesch, who at the time was a resident in Valletta³⁵.



Fig. 2. Giorgio Bonavia, 1880, *Portrait of Marchesa Bugeja wearing star in her hair*, Santa Venera (Malta), Conservatorio Vincenzo Bugeja (Photo James Bianchi, Courtesy: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).

³⁰ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 156.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*. By way of comparison it may be noted that in 1869 the Archivist and Notary to Government received an annual salary of £200. See: https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/1869_chapter_M.pdf Civili Establishments M4. [Accessed 29 January 2024].

³⁴ The *briolette* was one of the popular early cut styles used for diamonds during the Georgian Period (1698-1830).

³⁵ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 156; 31 January 1869, ff. 152, 176-177. Hugo Plesch is said to have introduced in Malta the proliferation of diamonds set in silver flower motif brooches. F. Balzan, *Picturing...*, 2013, p. 54.



Fig. 3. Mid to Late 19th century, *Crescent moon brooch* (Courtesy: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).



Fig. 4. Mid to Late 19th century, *Filigree pendant* (Courtesy: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).

Typical jewellery worn by the Maltese

Notarial deeds also give us an indication of the type of jewellery worn or owned by the populace at the time, with inherited or donated items possibly pointing towards earlier fashion trends. Although, just like clothes and furniture, jewellery styles circulating in Malta enjoyed their own local character, as already noted these also reflected similar fashion trends that were popular abroad and show Malta to be a microcosm of European civilization.

Typical jewellery items such as rings, brooches, earrings and necklaces, get a recurring mention in deeds. Among the most notably mentioned styles are articles of filigree³⁶ - a technique which reached its culmination in popularity, mastery of technique, and workmanship in the nineteenth century and became intrinsically tied to Maltese jewellery production³⁷. Filigree was also not too ex-

³⁶ See for example, NAV R364/1 (1831-1839), 24 July 1832, f. 78v; 31 December 1834, ff. 81v-82; 28 February 1834, f. 11; R32/24, 29 December 1864, pp. 311, 313; R348/60, 10 October 1868, pp. 2099-2100; R348/61, 31 January 1869, pp. 170-171.

³⁷ M. Azzopardi, *19th Century Maltese Filigree Jewellery*, BA (Hons) Dissertation, University of Malta 2009, pp.23-24. For some fine examples see *Vanity, Profanity...*, 2013, pp. 323-351.

pensive to produce due to its light weight, thus making it accessible to a broader section of the local market. Socio-cultural realities and fashion trends of the time dictated the production of diverse specimens, as is so well indicated in the documents under study. Here one finds items such as: «*anelli di filigrano*»³⁸, «*pendenti d'oro filigrano ultima moda*», «*una catinella d'oro filigrano di 6 palmi con croce fatta a sfera*»³⁹, and also filigree brooches «*fatti a Rosa*»⁴⁰(Fig. 4).

Jewellery embellished with pearls⁴¹ and coral⁴² was another regularly found item in nineteenth-century dowry lists. Coral was highly prized for its protective and medicinal qualities, which were said to ward off any form of evil or disease, especially to those most susceptible in society⁴³. Apart from its common use in the manufacture of religious items such as rosary beads⁴⁴, it was also styled in various other forms and worn copiously by both women and children⁴⁵. Among the list of coral jewellery one finds mentioned in the sample of documents being studied are the following examples: «*un paio di anelli orecchini d'oro con corallo*», «*una collana di corallo con sua croce di Corniola*», «*un paio di pendenti di corallo coi suoi bottoni, pure di corallo in camei*» and «*tre bottoni di corallo per camicie montati in oro*»⁴⁶.

The popular rose-cut diamond, which is also known as the “Antwerp”, “Holland”, or “Dutch rose”, is also represented in the dowries analysed and is referred to as «*rosa d'Olanda*» or «*diamanti Fiaminghe*»⁴⁷. It is found integrated into various styles amongst which one finds, «*un circhetto con Diamanti*

³⁸ NAV R364/1, 24 July 1832, f. 78v.

³⁹ NAV R364/1, 28 February 1834, f. 11.

⁴⁰ NAV R364/1, 31 December 1834, ff. 81v-82.

⁴¹ See for example NAV R364/1, 28 February 1834, f. 11; R32/24, 29 December 1864, pp. 311-312, 346; R348/61, 31 January 1869, pp. 159,177.

⁴² See for example NAV R364/1, 1831-1839; R 117/29, 23 July 1832, f. 445v; 29 December 1833, f. 88; R251, 18 February 1846, ff. 349-349v; R32/24, 29 December 1864, pp. 313-314, 348; R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2101, R348/61, 31 January 1869, pp. 157, 170.

⁴³ F. Balzan-A. Deidun, *Notes for a History of Coral Fishing and Coral Areefacts in Malta, in 60th Anniversary of the Malta Historical Society: A Commemoration*, Malta Historical Society, ed. J.F. Grima, Malta 2010, pp. 435-454; *Vanity, Profanity ...*, 2013, pp. 106-109.

⁴⁴ N. de Piro, *The Quality of Malta: Fashion and Taste in Private Collections*, Malta 2003, pp. 127, 129.

⁴⁵ F. Balzan, *Picturing ...*, 2003, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁶ NAV, R364/1, 29 November 1833, f. 88.

⁴⁷ The first diamond cuts with multiple triangular facets were introduced in Antwerp in the sixteenth century. Prior to this the only cut was the table cut. Eventually, Antwerp became the primary cutting and diamond trading centre, hence the name. Retrieved from <https://www.berganza.com/feature-rose_cut_diamonds.html> [Accessed on 26 January 2024]. See also, Hinks, *Nineteenth...*, 1975, pp. 68-69.

Fiaminghe num[er]o 7»⁴⁸, «*un anello d'oro con rose d'Olanda*», «*due orecchini con rosa d'Olanda*»⁴⁹, and «*una spilla fattura con Rosa d'Olanda prim'acqua*»⁵⁰.

British influence

While the long rule of the Hospitaller Knights (1530-1798) and their conspicuous living introduced new trends in the decorative arts which were mainly influenced by Italian, Spanish, and French styles, British possession of the island during the nineteenth century meant that a Mediterranean community had to co-exist with an Anglo-Saxon culture. Although the early years of British rule saw only a handful of Maltese aristocrats interested in mingling with their colonial masters, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Malta's prosperity saw a rise in its middle-class due to their involvement in various business opportunities generated through contacts with the British⁵¹.

Perhaps, one of the most noticeable British influences on Maltese culture was the increase in popularity of the consumption of tea⁵². Porcelain and silver tableware listed in nineteenth-century dowries are highly reflective of this ever-increasing influence on local taste. In fact, during this period, dowries include more often items which are typical of nineteenth-century British fashion, such as the «*servizio per caffè e per te in porcellana riccamente dorato*», or the «*tettiera piccola d'argento*», or even still the sugar tongs described as «*molette per zucchero*»⁵³.

When referring to new influences on jewellery in Malta during the British period, Francesca Balzan argued that objects having a reference to the Classical past, like coral, cameos, 'lava' jewels and micro mosaics, seem to have been in demand, especially as tokens of the Grand Tour. Such items, either finished or to be incorporated in jewels, were imported from Italy, reflecting the long historical ties between the two countries⁵⁴. In the dowry lists analyzed these are randomly mentioned and include items such as, «*un Pajo pendenti di corallo con suo bottoni*

⁴⁸ NAV R117/29, (23 July 1832) f. 445v.

⁴⁹ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2101.

⁵⁰ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, p. 2089.

⁵¹ H. Frendo, *Maltese Colonial Identity: Latin Mediterranean or British Colony*, in *The British Colonial Experience. 1800-1964*, ed. V. Mallia-Milanes, Malta 1988, p. 186.

⁵² J. Farrugia, *Antique Maltese Domestic Silver*, Malta 1992, pp. 107-110. p. 51.

⁵³ NAV R348/60, 10 October 1868, ff. 2086, 2095. 2099.

⁵⁴ F. Balzan, *Picturing...*, 2013, pp. 40, 43.

*pure di corallo in cameo*⁵⁵, «*anello con cameo di corallo*»⁵⁶, «*una spilla con carbonchio d'oro*», «*una spilla Giove*»⁵⁷, «*spilla con mosaico Bizzantino*»⁵⁸, «*spilla con mosaico porpora*»⁵⁹, and a «*braccioletto d'oro con mosaico*»⁶⁰.

Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, it is to be noted that the scope of this research was to interpret foreign influences in fashion and taste in nineteenth-century Maltese society through the lens of legal sources. Malta, being well placed at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and serving as a base for the British Empire serves as a prime example of how cultural trends which were circulating in Europe and the Mediterranean often left an indelible impact on societies. The above documents are just a small sample of the wealth of information which may be derived from the proper exploration of Maltese notarial sources. It is hoped that these preliminary findings, which indicate that nineteenth-century foreign styles in fashion and taste were being adopted by the Maltese at a rapid pace, entice further studies which may take shape from innumerable other sources and overlays of time and place.

⁵⁵ NAV R364/1, 29 December 1833, f. 88.

⁵⁶ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 170.

⁵⁷ NAV R348/60, 10 December 1868, p. 2101.

⁵⁸ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 157.

⁵⁹ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 170.

⁶⁰ NAV R348/61, 31 January 1869, p. 159.