

Eclecticism in the decorative arts in Malta: assimilation, variety and cosmopolitanism in the works of Nicola Zammit (1815-1899)

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The works of Nicola Zammit are an artistically important chapter in the story of the ecclesiastical decorative arts in late nineteenth-century Malta¹. Zammit was something of a polymath who in 1885 was described as «*lustrò ed ornamento del paese*»². He was one of Malta's finest minds and impressively gifted: a medical doctor, architect, designer, art critic, philosopher, editor and writer. He was especially an extraordinary designer, producing works of particular sophistication. The connection with the Church had started with his designs for numerous architectural alterations and accretions to several of Malta's extant ecclesiastical structures³. These, like his decorative designs, employ a wide spectrum of styles. His 1878 design for the marble and bronze decoration for the Rosary transept of the Valletta Dominicans, epitomises the artist's elegant and creative eclectic qualities. As a result of his creative genius, Zammit came to command particular respect in Maltese society. He was thus Malta's participant in the *Esposizione Vaticana*, for which he submitted an unspecified work in silver⁴, obtaining a silver medal⁵.

The pluralism of styles across Europe and Malta

The extensive interest in diverse historical and exotic styles is one of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century design and the decorative arts - an attitude which is crystallised by Victorian England⁶ - but present throughout the continent.

¹ M. Sagona, *The ecclesiastical decorative arts in Malta 1850-1900: Style and Ornament*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Malta, 2014, pp. 133-153.

² "L'Ordine", 28 January 1885, no. 1815, p. 3.

³ Such as the façades of Siġġiewi parish church (1862), Floriana parish church (c. 1884), and St Paul's Shipwreck church, Valletta (c. 1885).

⁴ "L'Esposizione Vaticana Illustrata", no. 66, Rome 1889, p. 528.

⁵ "Il Portafoglio Maltese", 18 April 1889, p. 2.

⁶ M. Snodin-J. Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Victorian Britain 1837-1901*, London 2004, p. 39.

Such an eclectic interest was experienced in previous centuries⁷, but it became entrenched in design attitudes throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. This pluralism of styles is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the exhibits presented at the Great Exhibition of London of 1851⁸. Style in Victorian England was essentially based on the principle of synthesis whereby artists and designers could amalgamate different sources and bring them together in a new way. The organised analysis of different styles was much aided by such landmark publications as *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones (1809-74) of 1856, and the establishment of synthetic eclecticism in design theory, as expounded by Gottfried Semper (1803-79)⁹. The attitude of cataloguing specimens of decoration from different historical periods, cultures and civilisations and presenting them as a huge menu to the artistic world was taken up by others outside England, such as *L'Ornement Polychrome* published in 1869 by Albert-Charles-Auguste Racinet (1825-93)¹⁰. The plethora of available styles can also be seen in a whole range of furniture and artefacts produced in other European nations, in particular France¹¹.

The Catholic Church was not oblivious to the waves of Eclecticism. Many liturgical *objets d'art* and items of church furniture produced in Catholic Europe reflect the synthesis of different styles, and can be appreciated all over, from England to Sicily¹². Examples exhibited in the *Esposizione Vaticana* of 1887-88 - an international exhibition of ecclesiastical artefacts from all over the Catholic world - are a case in point and the Vatican collections are replete with such works. Eclecticism is also very clear in the artefacts in the *Sacrario Apostolico* of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, mostly produced in the late nineteenth century. Chalices, ciboria, processional and papal crosses, tiaras and chasubles, combine medieval traits with classical passages, Gothic with Renaissance, the sixteenth with the seventeenth century; some are purely revivalist, others show blends and

⁷ S. Jervis, *High Victorian Design*, London 1983, pp. 8-11.

⁸ N. Pevsner, *High Victorian Design: A study of the exhibits of 1851*, London 1951.

⁹ S. Jervis, *High Victorian Design*, p. 9.

¹⁰ P. Thornton, *Form and Decoration: Innovation in the Decorative Arts 1470-1870*, United Kingdom 1998, pp. 209-210.

¹¹ Such as various works at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris: *Masterpieces of the Museum of Decorative arts, Paris*, ed. B. Salmon, Paris 2006.

¹² R. Vadalà, *Gusto Eclettico e contaminazioni. Le Suppellettili del Duomo di Erice al tempo del Neostili*, in *Il Duomo di Erice tra Gotico e Neogotico*, atti della giornata di studi a cura di M. Vitella, Erice 2006, pp. 51-66. Other typically eclectic examples are also extant at the Brompton Oratory in London.

fusions. They eloquently reflect the decorative variety and richness which came to characterise the decorative arts in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The character of the ecclesiastical decorative arts in Malta at the time is further proof that the small Mediterranean island transcended its geographical limitations and location, and absorbed to a considerable extent the eclectic timbre of late nineteenth-century design across Europe. In Malta, it could be appreciated everywhere: on public buildings; on the exteriors and interiors of churches, but especially in the numerous decorative arts commissions and importations for the many churches of the islands. In spite of the fact that it is not exactly clear what knowledge Maltese designers had of the international scene, stylistic analysis points towards the existence of printed material and catalogues of international exhibitions, which were frequently discussed in the press. Nicola Zammit certainly had such knowledge, since apart from his travels abroad he also wrote an essay about the industry of Malta and Gozo in conjunction with Malta's participation in the international exhibition of Paris of 1867¹³. His international awareness is also reflected in his design inventions.

The design formula of Zammit

The works designed by Nicola Zammit show a significant assimilation of varied styles. His visually complex aesthetic is based on the rich and the extravagant, with an ornamental language which is significantly bold and abstracted. This sculptural and dynamic quality is also shared by his architectural works. The repertoire of Nicola Zammit can be described as cosmopolitan, resulting from a greater familiarity with the European scene and his wider intellectual and assimilating capabilities. His strong eclecticism should have also resulted from his familiarity with the great international exhibitions and deep knowledge of culture, crafts and industry which should have enhanced his appreciation of diverse artistic styles¹⁴. In fact, references to the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque can be detected in several of his works. Recent analysis has established that Zammit was also influenced by the coeval oeuvre of the Maltese designer Cesare Galdes (1822-90)¹⁵.

¹³ "Il Portafoglio Maltese", 13th April 1867, p. 3.

¹⁴ N. Zammit, *Malta and its Industries*, London 1886, p. 27 *et passim*.

¹⁵ M. Sagona, *The Ecclesiastical Decorative Arts...*, 2014, pp. 80-96.



Fig. 1. Nicola Zammit, designed 1874, *Altar Canopy*, gilt wood and gold-thread embroidery on red silk, Malta, Qormi, parish church of St George, courtesy of Charles Paul Azzopardi.

Zammit's style is very well summed up in four altar canopies which he designed throughout his career. Those at Mdina Cathedral and Cospicua parish church were both inaugurated in 1869, whilst those at the parish churches of St George at Qormi (Fig. 1) and St Nicholas, Siġġiewi are datable to around 1874 and 1880 respectively. Taken holistically, they represent the rich eclecticism which Zammit came to be known for. They integrate different kinds of ornament, generally of three kinds: architectural, foliated and figurative, and normally have a penchant for the employment of arches and pendant-pilasters. The most artistically

significant is the one at Qormi in which mouldings and pendants have been amalgamated with foliated ornament. Tripartite in composition, the central bay is given prominence by the superimposition of a segmental headed and broken pediment.

By the 1870s, Zammit's style acquired its maturity. He adopted those typical qualities which are readily associated with his artistic temperament, bearing a closer affinity to his architectural style. An interesting example of the artist's dramatic and peculiar eclecticism is the set of four silver lanterns which he designed in 1875 for the parish church of the Virgin of Graces, Żabbar, realised in 1878 by the silversmith Paolo Busuttill of Valletta¹⁶. The execution is unfortunately mediocre but they offer an excellent example of Zammit's style. The ornamentation is not without an oriental element, which is very straightforward in the little air ducts shaped like Islamic windows. Although it is difficult to point out specific sources of influence, the ornamental heaviness transmits the same spirit characteristic of Victorian England.

A much less eccentric eclecticism can be seen in one of Zammit's most important projects: the set of gold-embroidered silver lamé liturgical apparel for the parish

¹⁶ The works are stamped with his mark and the number 22 for 1878.

church of the Immaculate Conception at Cospicua. These vestments should be singled out for their artistic importance within the long history of ecclesiastical vestments in the Maltese Islands. New documentation has revealed the mechanics and context of the commission and most importantly the maker of the vestments in Lyon: Joseph-Alphonse Henry (active 1867-1907)¹⁷, one of the famed names in the silk industry and the manufacture of liturgical apparels in France. This is of paramount importance since no name had been previously attached to the many commissions of embroidery known to have been produced in Lyon for Malta¹⁸. It also places the Maltese works on a new, international level.

The full apparel was received in Malta by the end of September 1877, for a total cost of an exorbitant £2000¹⁹. The quality of the embroidery measures to very high standards and is exceptionally thick so that the ornamental forms appear to be sculpted in relief. Obviously dictated by the medium, Zammit's ornamental language here is different from that witnessed in the Żabbar lanterns: here he limits his vocabulary to the acanthus form and its derivatives. The main celebrant's cope is a good example of the master's exuberance. Broad and powerful scrolls and large stylised leaves, roll and twist, overlap and turn throughout the available surface. The chasuble (Fig. 2) follows the same principles but the ornate, sinuous forms are interestingly attached to the geometrical boundaries of a central Greek cross which uses six-pointed stars in its terminations.



Fig. 2. Nicola Zammit and Joseph-Alphonse Henry, designed late 1860s, produced early 1870s, *Chasuble*, gold-thread embroidery on silver lamé, Malta, Cospicua, parish church of the Immaculate Conception, courtesy of Charles Paul Azzopardi.

¹⁷ B. Berthod- E. Hardouin-Fugier, *Paramentica: Tissus Lyonnais et Art Sacré 1800-1940*, Lyon 1992, p. 157. The kind collaboration and assistance of Vincent Cros, *Chargé d'Études Documentaires* at the *Musée de Tissus et des Arts Décoratifs de Lyon* is acknowledged in supplying material and information on Joseph-Alphonse Henry.

¹⁸ CPA (Cospicua Parish Archives), *Atti Capitolari 1875-77*, f. 153^r.

¹⁹ CPA, *Atti Capitolari 1875-1877*, f. 338^r, meeting of the 23rd September 1877.



Fig. 3. Nicola Zammit, Vincenzo Cardona and Roberto Cannataci Falzon, designed 1874, produced 1882, *Antependium*, parcel-gilt silver, Malta, Cospicua, parish church of the Immaculate Conception, courtesy of Abner Cassar.

Other fine specimens of Zammit's prolific designs are a number of *sopratovaglie* for various altars at the parish church of St George at Qormi. That for the high altar, for which the full-scale coloured drawing, dated 1884, has survived in the collection of the church, is particularly splendid and should be singled out²⁰. It follows and highlights Zammit's typology for *sopratovaglie* in which the centre of the composition is reserved for iconographical attributes. The work is remarkable for the type of foliage which Zammit invents. Thick, luscious, at once dynamic and decorative, the scrolls are looped in alternating directions while the leaves are injected with a capriciously curvilinear character.

Another important work designed by Zammit, in which the master applies the full variety of his visual language, is the parcel-gilt silver antependium for the high altar of Cospicua parish church (Fig. 3). One of Zammit's most representative works, it was produced by silversmith Roberto Cannataci Falzon (active 1863-late 1890s) in 1882²¹. In an advert on the Cannataci establishment in Birkirkara it is stated that Cannataci was working on models provided by the sculptor Vincenzo Cardona (active c.1880-c.1917). The drawing for the antependium was exhibited and discussed during a meeting held on the 24th March 1874²².

²⁰ M. Sagona, *Ornamental and decorative drawings for Malta 1600-1900: problems, reflections and insights*, in *Dibujo y ornamento: Trazas y dibujos de artes decorativas entre Portugal, España, Italia, Malta y Grecia*, ed. Sabina de Cavi, Rome 2015, pp. 486-487.

²¹ The work shows the maker's mark together with the assay mark of the Post-Maitland period and no. 26 for 1882.

²² CPA, *Atti Capitolari 1870-1880*.