



Lasting First Impressions

Amanda Jenkins

One of the things that I noticed when I first visited Malta in 2019 was its art. From MUŻA, the incredible National Art Museum in Valletta to the many galleries across the island, art seems to be celebrated here and what a special thing that is. Public sculptures and art installations can be seen in many villages and public spaces and friends who visit me here from the UK comment on this too.

Art tastes here, as everywhere, are rightly eclectic and we were very fortunate recently to have been able to buy a collection of very small early 19th Century watercolour paintings depicting Maltese folklore figures. Two of the paintings are of women wearing traditional Ghonnella and the other four show men and women going about their working day, and how hard those days must have been sometimes. There is an egg vendor, a tomato picker, a strawberry seller and a mother and child. The detail in the costumes is simple but exquisite

and the paintings give us a glimpse of the clothing (the fabric, the colours, the texture, the design) of working people in Malta in the early 1800s.

Today, when so many of us routinely take photographs, future generations will know so much about us through the vast digital archives that we will each leave behind, and I think that our little folklore paintings which allow us a brief snapshot of a time long ago are all the more special because of this. The contrast of a digital image on a screen and the tangible smell and feel of an old painting could not be more marked. Crucially, with a painting that pre-dates photography, we are never quite sure what the subject really looked like and therein lies the magic. Through the simple detail of a lace handkerchief, a woven fruit basket, the buttons on a shirt and the toenails of bare feet, Maltese men and women look out to us through the tip of an artist's brush that was dipped in paint over 200 years ago and we have the privilege of imagining these people animated and in life just as they would have been.

And what would they have thought of us I wonder? Our fast-paced consumer lives, mass communication and a seemingly insatiable appetite for instant information. 'Digital detox' is marketed now whether in a café or a bookshop where we can come together without our phones to do things that until very recently, we did naturally at home, and looking at the folklore paintings, it isn't difficult to imagine the gentle stitcher of a dress or a jacket, sitting quietly in natural light with a needle and a thread and fabric in hand. The skills of the Maltese artisan which would once have been seen in every village are sadly becoming scarcer – as they are everywhere – and in a busy digital age, it seems even more important that we cherish and support those who continue these crafts and that we are mindful too to take time ourselves in order to slow down, to watch and to learn.

This time last year, I wrote about planning an inter-generational event whereby we could come



together, share skills and learn from each other. Surgery prevented this unfortunately but there will certainly be plans for an event along these lines over the coming year, so do please get in touch with us if you have any thoughts or suggestions. We have been extremely fortunate too in that the club has received some very generous donations of beautiful beads from women in Mellieħa. This made for two really lovely sessions in the spring where we made hanging decorations and bracelets and I'm pleased to say that we still have an ample bead supply to use so these will certainly be made use of in our future craft sessions! All of our activities are suitable for beginners and plans for the coming year include workshops on Slow Stitching, Kawandi Quilting and English Paper Piecing (Patchwork), all of which will be in addition to our usual sessions that will be themed around the changing seasons and Christmas. The idea of a regular 'open' session is also an option that we are considering. This would be a regular 'drop in' for people to meet up, bring their own piece of craft or stitching and spend a couple of hours relaxing, chatting and recharging (the Imperial Crafters maybe?) As always, our precious natural environment is paramount and all of our workshops use recycled, sustainable and/or donated resources. It would be so nice to see both familiar and new faces at the sessions that we run and going forward, in order to accommodate understandable work and family commitments, each activity that we put on will be offered on two different days: a Tuesday evening and a Saturday morning. People can then choose which session would be best for them. A safe and a warm welcome is guaranteed and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of

those who have continued to support us over the last year and to wish you all a very Happy Feast. I am truly thankful to have been able to spend time with local people who are so creative and enthusiastic and I look forward very much to crafting together again soon.



On a final note, I hope that you will permit the indulgence of quoting a few lines from Ellie Beck, an extraordinarily talented Australian writer, stitcher, artist and maker:

'In this world of ever-connected, always with a device in our hands or nearby, with way-too-easy access to knowing everything straight away we've lost sight of the small, tiny, delicate ways of life. The ways our ancestors sat each evening to stitch, mend, create, make with their hands. Fishermen mending their nets, mothers darning socks, children learning to stitch quilts out of worn out clothes. These were times in a family's day when they could connect back with each other, to share stories and experiences of their day. To sit together and pass on their knowledge ...'

Il-Festa t-Tajba!

Dates for the Diary:

Slow Stitched Designs – Tuesday 15 October (evening) or Saturday 19 October (morning)

Autumn Crafts – Tuesday 5 November (evening) or Saturday 9 November (morning)

Christmas Crafts – Tuesday 3 December (evening) or Saturday 7 December (morning)

For more details, or to book a place, please contact us on **79203322** or email on **info@imperialbandclub.com**

