

A palace befitting a magnificent city

George Cini



Lionello Spada: Detail from Encounter at Ascalon prior to the miracle of Ismeria. Painting at the Committee's Room. Photo from the book Palace Of The Grand Masters In Valletta by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti and others courtesy of Miranda Publications.

Few people are aware, perhaps, that the Magisterial Palace, also known as the President's Palace, in Valletta had a most humble beginning.

That humble beginning is described by Quentin Hughes in his book the Building Of Malta During The Period Of The Knights Of St John Of Jerusalem 1530-1795.

"In 1569, Eustachio del Monte," Prof. Hughes wrote, "began to build himself a house in the centre of the new city of Valletta, acting on the instructions of his uncle, the Grand Master Pietro del Monte..."

"The Council of the Order discussed the provision of a new Magisterial Palace for the new city and chose a site on a high point in the southern corner, where the Auberge de Castille et Leon was later built".

The house Eustachio built was "a simple structure of wood with a dry stone wall to shelter it from the sun". The Grand Master liked the site so much that he persuaded the Council of the Order to buy it in order to convert it into a magisterial palace.

Like most of the buildings in Valletta built by the knights of St John, the austere façade often hides a sea of riches inside.

The Magisterial Palace is no exception both as regards decor and architecture not to mention the superb works of art found inside, some of which are quite awesome, such as the set of Gobelin tapestries donated by Grand Master Roman Perellos (1697-1720).

The tapestries show animated scenes from the West Indies incorporating lush tropical vegetation and exotic flora and fauna. They hang in the smaller Council Chamber which, until 1976, served as the House of Representatives.

The exquisite beauty of these tapestries can be seen in great detail in an interactive CD called The Palace Valletta-Malta that will be launched by President Eddie Fenech Adami tomorrow at the palace itself.

The CD features other treasures inside the palace including the series of paintings by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio of the Great Siege of 1565 and other works by Lionello Spada, Nicolò Nasini and Antoine Favray among others. D'Aleccio painted the visual diary of the conflict only 11 years after the Great Siege was lifted.

Other treasures include an impressive collection of arms and cannon with a substantial part of the armoury dating from the Great Siege itself.

Lino Bugeja, who compiled the text and coordinated the CD, said when interviewed: "After flirting with my native town, Vittoriosa, a flirtation that led to the birth of two tomes on that town's history, culture and architecture, and an interactive CD, I have fallen in love with Valletta.

"This relationship has so far produced two CDs, the first on the National Library and now this one on the Magisterial Palace."

Both CDs have been produced through funds from Unesco.

The Maltese national commission for Unesco, chaired by Charles Farrugia, promotes educational programmes on the cultural heritage of these islands. Prof. Farrugia is the general editor of the CD, which was designed by Seasus Ltd.

The CD, a copy of which will be given to all schools, will be for sale at leading bookshops.
