

*Liber Amicorum*

**MAURICE  
CARUANA  
CURRAN**

Guardian of Heritage and Justice

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Tributes from friends

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*Din l-Art Helwa*

## **MAURICE CARUANA CURRAN**

Guardian of Heritage and Justice

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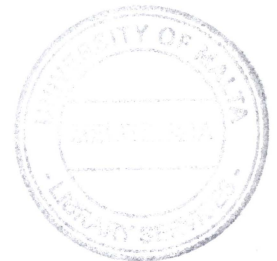
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Text for the captions: Simone Mizzi.

# 1990-1991

The first year of the project was spent on the development of the methodology and the collection of data. The initial phase involved a series of pilot studies to determine the most appropriate methods for data collection and analysis.

The second year was dedicated to the collection of data from a large number of subjects. This phase was characterized by a high degree of variability in the data, which required the use of advanced statistical techniques for analysis.

The third year was spent on the analysis of the data and the development of the final report. This phase involved a detailed examination of the results and the identification of the key findings of the study.

The final year of the project was spent on the dissemination of the results and the completion of the final report. This phase involved the preparation of a series of papers and the presentation of the results at a number of conferences.

The project has been a success in many respects. It has provided a valuable insight into the nature of the phenomenon being studied and has identified a number of key areas for further research.

The results of the project have been widely cited in the literature and have provided a solid foundation for a number of subsequent studies. The project has also provided a number of valuable lessons for the field of research.

The project has been a pleasure to work on and it has been a privilege to have been part of a team that has achieved so much. I would like to thank all those who have supported the project and who have made it possible to complete this work.

The project has been a success in many respects. It has provided a valuable insight into the nature of the phenomenon being studied and has identified a number of key areas for further research.

# Contents

Acknowledgements	5
Tabula Commemorantium	11
Judge Maurice Caruana Curran (1918–2015) UOM, D.Litt., (Hon. Causa), LL.D., BA	15
Foreword † Prosper Cardinal Grech OSA	19
Prologue – memories from a drawer Simone Mizzi	23
1918–1967	30

## Up Close and Personal

A light (and not so light) side of Maurice Victor Aquilina	51
In memory and praise of Judge Maurice Caruana Curran Nicholas de Piro	57
Called to serve his country Norbert Ellul-Vincenti	61
Maurice Caruana Curran as I remember him Albert Ganado	65
Uncle Maurice Austin Gatt	71
Memories John Mamo	75
Conversations with Maurice Peter Vassallo	83
Drama and Maurice Caruana Curran Paul Xuereb	89

## Of Justice ... and Heritage

Maurice – a source of inspiration Carmel A. Agius	97
<i>Lowell vs Caruana</i> – a leading restatement of administrative law Kevin Aquilina	103
Maurice Caruana Curran – first Chancellor of the re-founded University of Malta David J. Attard	107
The price for the rule of law Austin Bencini	113
Maurice Caruana Curran – a meteor of searing brightness Giovanni Bonello	119
The Lord Denning of Malta Tonio Borg	125
The Double Jeopardy Principle revisited Joseph A. Filletti	131
Caruana Curran's Legacy Henry Frendo	137
On bright colours, our <i>patrimonju</i> and our Denning Michael Frendo	141
Maurice Caruana Curran – my mentor Joseph Galea Debono	145
Maurice Caruana Curran – a friend Joseph Micallef Stafrace	151
An extraordinary personality in the service of Justice Ugo Mifsud Bonnici	157
Maurice Caruana Curran – a man for all seasons David Scicluna	163
Another side of Maurice Francis Zammit Dimech	169

## Of Heritage and the Environment

1965–1980	176
Judge Maurice Caruana Curran – one of my mentors Evarist Bartolo	187
The Hal Millieri frescoes and Maurice Caruana Curran Anthony Bonanno	191
Maurice Caruana Curran Mario Buhagiar	199
A paeon for Maurice Richard England	207
Judge Maurice Caruana Curran – a mentor and inspiring friend James Evans	217
The Whitmore Report of 1829 on the state of Coastal Defence Posts around the Maltese Islands Stanley Farrugia Randon	223
From Museums Department to Heritage Malta Louis Galea	229
The calling – a tribute to Maurice Caruana Curran Martin Galea	235
Europa Nostra thoughts dedicated to Maurice – an early European Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović	239
Maurice Caruana Curran – the man Martin L.A. Scicluna	249
Maurice Caruana Curran – his legacy Ray Vassallo	255
Working with Teenagers' Din l-Art Ħelwa in the late 1960s Roger Vella Bonavita	261
The Msida Bastion and Ta' Braxia cemeteries Alexander Norton Welsh	269
Coda	277
Maurice Caruana Curran – the legacy lives on Maria Grazia Cassar, Executive President Din l-Art Ħelwa	279



# Inspired by Maurice Caruana Curran

The border and I 285  
Philip Farrugia Randon

---

1977–2015 289

A selection of poems by  
Maurice Caruana Curran 323

Contributors 335

## Tabula Commemorantium

Judge Carmel **Agius**, Siġġiewi

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# The Hal Millieri frescoes and Maurice Caruana Curran

Anthony Bonanno

The cycle of frescoes of Hal Millieri constitutes a unique treasure-house of inestimable value in Malta's cultural heritage. Along with Din l-Art Helwa, the association founded and presided over by him for more than thirty years, Maurice Caruana Curran played a crucial role in the discovery and preservation of this treasure. His role in the discovery and initial measures for the restoration and valorisation of the Annunciation church and its frescoes are dealt with in other contributions in this volume. Because of word limit constraints, I shall also refrain from going into much detail about the excavation which was conducted by Tom Blagg, Anthony Luttrell and myself in the spring of 1977, the conclusion of which might, or might not, have contributed to the change of the state of health of the frescoes. My contribution will dwell on that episode in the history of Din l-Art Helwa's guardianship of the Annunciation Church of Hal Millieri concerning the urgent measures that needed to be taken to preserve this cycle of paintings after a serious alarm was raised on their deterioration. The solutions that were presented to the Association and the solutions it selected reflect the important and fundamental shift that took place at that time concerning the methodology of preservation of fresco painting from one of 'restoration' (including radical intervention) to the current one of 'conservation' (based on minimal intervention and reversibility).

## The background

Hal Millieri was one of a number of small villages in the Maltese countryside that had been deserted since the Middle Ages. Their distribution was the

subject of a study by the late Godfrey Wettinger (1975). The village was located on the flat, fertile plain some 100 m above sea level that still enjoys open views and is surrounded by the neighbouring villages of Żurrieq, Mqabba, Qrendi and Kirkop. Its location is marked physically by the existence of four small country churches of which two survive intact, one dedicated to St John (rebuilt after 1646) and the other to the Annunciation of Mary (rebuilt around the mid-15th century and incorporated within a high cemetery precinct), as well as a concentration of water cisterns around the same churches.

Its existence came to the surface for the first time in 1956 in a series of newspaper articles by Luret Cutajar which attracted the public attention to it (Luttrell 1976, 24). This was the situation in 1965, when Din l-Art Ħelwa was set up, and in 1970, when the church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri and the church of St Mary of Bir Miftuħ were given in trust by a public contract to Din l-Art Ħelwa for 150 years. In between those two dates, the youth section of Din l-Art Ħelwa was set up by George Serracino Inglott in 1967, and in 1968, under his direction, together with Mario Buhagiar, Roger and Judith Vella Bonavita, it conducted the clearance and tidying up of the abandoned Annunciation church and its precinct. The maintenance of the complex has since then been curated by Tony Mangion.

The set of fresco paintings inside the church were given a preliminary assessment by Gervase Mathew in an article titled "Schools of Painting in Medieval Malta" in the *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* in 1974. In that year, the Din l-Art Ħelwa trust raised funds to engage an Italian professional restorer of medieval paintings, Paola Zanolini, to restore the frescoes.

The first hint of an archaeological excavation as a *desideratum* was made in 1976 in the volume *Ħal Millieri: a Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings*, edited by Anthony Luttrell (1976, 13).

This is the point when I entered into the scene. I was already a member of the Council of Din l-Art Ħelwa and acquainted with Dr Anthony Luttrell, lecturer in Medieval History at the University of Malta, who asked me to join him and Tom Blagg from the University of Kent in Canterbury to conduct a short excavation expedition on the site of the Annunciation church.

## The excavation

This excavation lasted a whole month and took place in April 1977 with the generous moral and material support of the Ħal Millieri and Bir Miftuħ Trust and Din l-Art Ħelwa itself. It was co-directed by Tom Blagg and myself as archaeologists, but Tony Luttrell was deeply and closely involved as consultant historian and in providing administrative and logistical support throughout the operation. In the field, Tom Blagg supervised the digging inside the church of the Annunciation while I was responsible for the supervision of the excavation on the site of the demolished church of the Visitation attached to it on its north side.



Excavations at Ħal Millieri in 1977. Visit by the Hon. Miss Agatha Barbara, then Minister for Culture, later President of the Republic. In the background are all three excavators. From l. to r. Anthony Bonanno, Tom Blagg, Anthony Luttrell; in the foreground Francis Mallia, Director, Museums Department, Tancred Gouder, Curator of Archaeology at the National Museum of Malta. Photo courtesy of Professor Anthony Bonanno

The excavation under the floor of the Annunciation church was much more complex and rewarding. For the excavation to take place, the flagstones of the north half of the floor, as well as that of the whole apse on the east side, were removed after being meticulously photographed, numbered and drawn. Some fragments of fresco painted plaster were found, a major one in a burial backfill. It showed part of a haloed saint, probably the one from the missing panel destroyed when the door on the south side was opened. Other fragments did not fit with the existing cycle. They are thought to belong to the painted decoration of the earlier church whose foundations were discovered beneath the ones of the standing church.



Excavations at Hal Millieri 1977. One of seven intact skeletons unearthed from under the floor of the Annunciation Church. One of the skeletons belonged to a sixteen-year-old girl. Photo courtesy of Professor Anthony Bonanno

A few months after the conclusion of the excavation all the excavated trenches were backfilled. The floor inside the Annunciation church was re-laid in exactly the same position as before though the method used, involving the use of a substantial amount of water, might have provoked the negative reaction on the frescoes themselves soon after.

## The conservation issue

This episode, unfolded over a long period of six years, involved contrasting opinions and often temporarily entrenched positions which reflect the general attitudes relating to restoration/conservation that remained prevalent in Malta and, indeed, in some countries, but not in others that were spearheading new approaches on the matter. In the final analysis, I can say that everyone involved acted and decided in good faith and in what they considered to be the best interest of the heritage concerned. Apart from the quiet and idyllic atmosphere of the landscape, the church of the Annunciation of Ħal Millieri is striking for its simple but spontaneous architecture. Its uniqueness, however, derives mostly from the cycle of fresco paintings that survived in surprisingly good condition, given the abandonment it had been subjected to, probably for centuries. Its architecture is quite rudimentary, even if quaint. The plan consists of a simple rectangular room with a semicircular apse at the east end; four diaphragm arches separate five bays and support a long and slightly pitched roof of slabs (*xorok*). The elevation is characterised by plain walls built of stone blocks with only the external face cut in straight regular rectangular lines (*xulliel*), the rest being of wet rubble. The pointed ogival arches are also of regularly cut ashlars. Worthy of note is the asymmetry of the main doorway on the west wall. The hood mould framing it is typical of late Medieval churches in Malta, like the one of Bir Miftuħ.

## The frescoes

The frescoes consisted mainly of a cycle of ten rectangular panels (two opposite each other in each bay) showing frontally placed saints (mostly males and one female) facing the spectator rigidly, each one holding a book in one hand, as if urging the congregation to dedicate some time to reading. The names of the saints are inscribed in Gothic letters near their respective heads. The compositions, against a black background and the framing lines, have been paralleled elsewhere overseas, especially in Sicily and southern Italy.

The larger panels, on either side of the main door, show St George on horseback, probably charging against the dragon. I have myself come across an intriguingly similar fresco representation of St George in the crypt of the cathedral of Trani in Puglia. Below the saints the remaining space above the seating stone benches was decorated with stylised hanging draperies, only one of which survives.

The Hal Millieri frescoes have been dated to the late 15th century and attributed by expert art historians to an anonymous painter belonging to a Sicilian or South Italian school working in an outdated Byzantine style (Bautier Bresc 1976).

The alarm was set off in 1985 by Dominic Cutajar, Curator of Fine Arts and a member of the Council of Din l-Art Ħelwa. In a letter addressed to the same Council he called its attention to a widespread efflorescence on the surface of the frescoes. Expert advice was sought. Architects advised ventilation while an established painter (and restorer) was asked to examine the frescoes and draw up a report. In it he advised in favour of detaching all the frescoes from the walls and relaying them on fibre glass and polystyrene supports before repositioning them to their original location. The Council commissioned the same painter to do the task and the first panel, that of St Leonard, was detached and placed on a polystyrene support, to the apparent satisfaction of all concerned.

Meanwhile, I received advice from two other Maltese experts in conservation that the *strappo* (or detachment) was no longer considered the thing to do unless the building supporting it was about to collapse or somehow destroyed or inundated. They quoted Cesare Brandi, the guru of the by then new emergent Italian school of thought regarding *restauro*, and other UNESCO experts. Based on this advice, and after much deliberation, Council decided to suspend the detachment process until further studies and monitoring of the micro-environment of the church and frescoes for a whole year was completed. Over the years, advances in the consolidation of deteriorating frescos have proved that this was the right move.

Meanwhile some emergency measures were undertaken, such as proper waterproofing of the roof, a thorough pointing of the exterior walls, and the removal of the cement-based plaster covering the areas below the surviving frescoes and its replacement with one bound with hydraulic lime. A 50 cm canal was also dug all around the external walls to further isolate the walls from the surrounding damp earth.

The monitoring was conducted by Ms Carmen Taliana as part of her degree dissertation, under the direction of Ms (now Professor) JoAnn Cassar. In the meantime the process of deterioration became apparent. Humidity from the ground containing salts was rising through capillary action along the walls. Whenever the relative humidity of the air inside the church was lowered, the salts at the surface of the walls crystallised, thus breaking the surface of the frescoes. It was this process that was to be arrested. The advice



was, therefore, to keep the relative humidity inside the church at a constant level. So all ventilation holes were blocked and entry to the church was controlled. Since then, no further alarms were raised and the situation has been generally under control. A further study was later commissioned in 1998 from members of the then Institute for Restoration Studies at Bighi. This was completed during my presidency of Din l-Art Ħelwa, which followed immediately after that of Judge Caruana Curran.

In this way Din l-Art Ħelwa saved a precious and unique artistic heritage without the fuss and glamour normally associated with drastic operations like detachment, and without any conspicuous display of consumption of financial resources. Needless to say, the upkeep of the structure of the church and the regular monitoring and maintenance of the paintings is not without its cost and Din l-Art Ħelwa has to constantly provide the necessary funds from its resources.

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