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# Defining Art in the Gozo International Contemporary Arts Festival

*Rachel Syka*

## *Abstract*

This chapter explores the role of identity, place, and origin of the artists in the Gozo International Contemporary Arts Festival in Gozo, Malta. Based on research conducted in July 2010 for a summer field school in sociocultural anthropology, I draw on conversations with several of the artists showing their work, as well as interactions with local organizing officials, arts instructors, and Gozitan artists and craftspeople not directly involved in the exhibit. I argue that the event is a space in which central questions of Gozitan identity are actively addressed and negotiated, focusing particularly on the manner in which the international artists participating in the festival construct both conceptual and visual images of Gozo and Malta. I suggest that the origin of the artist, in tandem with the purpose and medium of their artwork, plays a major role in how the work is incorporated into the exhibit. Framed in part as a cosmopolitan attraction alongside the historical sites of the island, the exhibition acknowledges the increasingly global nature of Gozo. Ultimately, I aim to address questions pertinent to postcolonial identity and tourism on Gozo and Malta. How is the island viewed by visitors from abroad? What cultural resources is it assumed to possess (or lack)? How do Gozitan artists interact with and respond to such expectations through events like the Arts Festival?

This chapter explores definitions of art and the inclusion and exclusion of certain artists in the first Gozo International Contemporary Arts Festival in Gozo, Malta, in the summer of 2010. Based on research undertaken for three weeks in July for a field school in sociocultural anthropology, I draw on conversations with Gozitan artists, international artists who had come to Gozo to make and exhibit their work, and local organizing officials affiliated with the arts.<sup>1</sup> Within the context of tourism, which is the thriving industry on Gozo, I argue that the selection of artists exhibiting their work at this event was determined in part by varying definitions of what constitutes “art” and the artists’ claimed or perceived proximity to the “global art scene.” By proximity, I refer to the degree to which a given artist’s work aligns with the modern, individualistic, and personally expressive goals and means of Western-focused “art for arts’ sake,” or “fine art.”

Malta, located south of Sicily and northeast of Tunisia in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, gained independence from Britain in 1965 and European Union membership in 2004. Gozo, the smaller of the two inhabited islands in the Maltese archipelago, is separated from the main island of Malta by a thirty-minute ferry ride. With a population of about thirty thousand, Gozo is characterized as more rural than Malta, with a comparatively relaxed pace of life.

The International Arts Festival, which was slated to become an annual event, was held in the Citadel in Victoria, the main town in the center of the island. The remains of the original fortified city, the Citadel (or Citadella) now functions as both historical attraction and cultural center for visitors. It houses the Gozo Cathedral, several museums, various shops, and a Maltese restaurant. The space hosts events throughout the year, including concerts and reenactments, and boasts an impressive view of the island from its place atop a hill in the town center. For the portion used to exhibit the works in the

International Arts Festival, the wall hangings, altars, and other features typically present in the Citadel's hallways were left in place, with art pieces arranged around them. Admission to the festival was free.

Through my conversations with several of the participants in the Arts Festival about the presence of arts and crafts on the island and the nature of their own work, I noticed a distinction between the perspectives of those coming to Gozo from the global circuit and other artists that I met on the island who were not included in the activities of the festival. Foreign artists' assumptions about what could be considered adequate arts resources (education, exposure overseas, events, etc.), along with different expectations regarding function, purpose, and style, distanced groups of foreign and Gozitan artists from one another. Ultimately, this helped to exclude several Gozitan artists' pieces from display in the International Arts Festival.

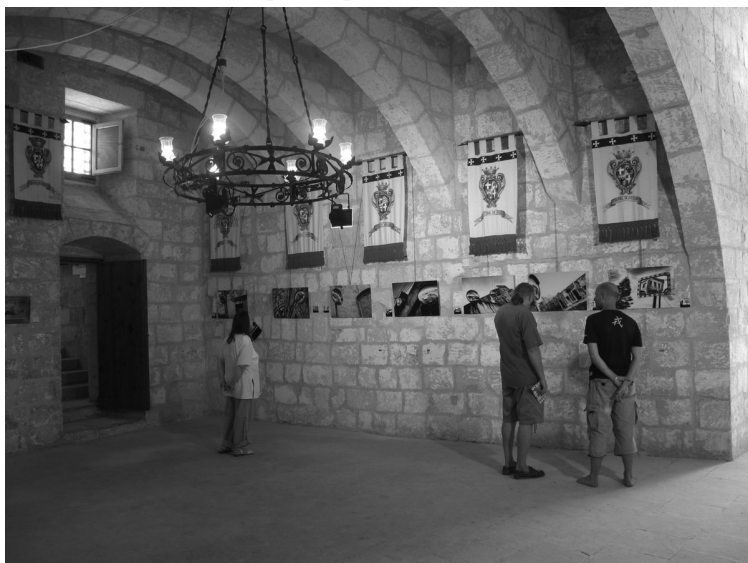
### International Artists

The International Contemporary Arts Festival was envisioned and organized by French digital photographer, painter, and sculptor Raphael Labro.<sup>2</sup> He had moved to the island with his family several years before, describing the area as a kind of paradise with limestone beaches and quaint towns, distinct from busy metropolitan areas elsewhere in Europe. Although Raphael had organized numerous private exhibitions since moving to Gozo, this was his first large-scale event that included artists from abroad. Moving to the island as an established artist, Raphael made it clear that he wished to bring the ethos of a more international art perspective to Gozo.

When I spoke with several of the exhibitors in the Arts Festival, Raphael's view of Gozo was described as a potential crux for the artistic world—because it was located at the center of the Mediterranean, Raphael wished to make Gozo what he described as the “center of the art world” as well. While Malta's geographic location has been

perhaps its greatest point of interest throughout history, Gozo itself has only recently been exposed to many globalizing influences: two shopping malls, one containing the first McDonald's for the island, had opened several years before my visit. Although tourism is the main industry throughout Malta, Gozo in particular remains a place with a distinctly local way of life. Because of this, Raphael's agenda to make the island the "center of the art world" through the International Contemporary Arts Festival had little to do with Gozo's own cosmopolitanism.

The title of the event evokes the idea of Gozo as a global place, yet this was a more accurate description of the festival itself. Many of the artists exhibiting their work were Raphael's friends and acquaintances, including artists from Peru, France, Bulgaria, Japan, Germany, Macedonia, and Gozo and Malta. Some were foreign residents living on Malta and Gozo, several were local artists, and many flew in from overseas to participate.



Photograph 7.1. Marc Bartolo welcomes visitors to his *Mirozo* exhibit at the Gozo International Contemporary Arts Festival, July 19, 2010. (Photograph by author)

Marc Bartolo, a photographer from Canada who now works out of Germany, was one such exhibitor who had traveled to Gozo for the festival (photograph 7.1). I spoke with him as he looked after the gallery in which his pieces were displayed. The series he exhibited, *Mirozo*, featured digitally manipulated images of the ubiquitous traffic mirrors on the island (hence the title for, “mirror + Gozo”). Reflected in the mirrors were features of buildings and the Gozitan landscape that were historical, iconic, or paradoxical in nature.

Marc stands in an interesting relationship to Gozo, however—although he was raised abroad and works in the global art circuit of fashion and fine art photography, his father is Gozitan. Thus, he claimed a certain familiarity with and ownership of Gozo as a place, implying a level of Gozitan identity. It seemed that his choice of subject matter was in part a revisiting of childhood experiences on the island, which perhaps explains his focus on the characteristic details of the streets.

The inclusion of the work of Dana Krantz, a German glass artist, provides another interesting example of the way in which international artists were selected for the festival. Although her primary medium is glass-painting, she now mostly produces jewelry and beads, selling mainly to tourists. Dana learned glasswork by studying at a school in Germany for three years and decided to move to Gozo after having visited on holiday as a child. Because the cost of renting a space for both a studio and a shop were less expensive on Gozo, it was more feasible for her to start her own business there rather than in Germany, where it would have been prohibitively expensive.

I spoke with Dana one afternoon in her studio and shop near the main square in Victoria. At the time, I was interested in distinctions between arts and crafts on Gozo, and Dana noted that she would personally classify her work as a craft. Nevertheless, she was grouped into the community of artists in the International Arts Festival, in

part because of a preexisting connection to Raphael and her identity as an artist with an international background.

### Gozitan Artists

In addition to the international artists, I also spoke with many Gozitan artists. Two of my main contacts were sculptor Paul Aquilina and painter Manuel Farrugia; both are active in producing materials for display during village *festas*, the annual celebration of Catholic patron saints (photograph 7.2). Every village or town in Malta has a patron saint, and in the case of larger locales, there are often saints for different districts or neighborhoods. The various *festas* (also referred to as “feasts”) are staggered throughout the summer months, and each aims to put on a celebration more opulent than their neighbors’. Festivities include a series of street processions, fireworks, religious events, and plenty of eating, drinking, and socializing in the streets.

Paul was the very first artist on Gozo that I was introduced to; I met his mother through their family shop in Victoria that sells “religious articles,” or small images and statuettes of saints to decorate the home. While asking her about the pieces in the shop (which were mostly made in Spain, Italy, and China), I inquired about the brightly painted statues I had seen lining the streets in preparation for the Saint George (San Gorg) feast. Hearing my question, she began to laugh—by coincidence, her son was one of several makers still producing these *fešta* pieces throughout Gozo and Malta.

She described her son’s interest in sculpture as a passion beginning in childhood. When I expressed a desire to speak with him, she suggested that I see his studio and offered to take me there, insisting that I really needed to see the statues and his workspace in order to understand his art. She told me that it is impossible to learn the artistic abilities that her son has “from a book.” Rather, one must be

born with the deep emotional connection and personal beliefs that, as she explained, allowed Paul to bring the images of festa saints into the physical world.



Photograph 7.2. Festa banner with center painting by Manuel Farrugia at the St. Gregory (San Girgor) festa in the town of Kercem, Gozo, July 10, 2010. (Photograph by author)

When I visited Paul's studio and spoke with him later, he often emphasized the self-taught nature of his sculpting abilities; this was a particular point of pride for him (photograph 7.3). He grew up admiring the statues of festa and wanted to reproduce the deep, personal connection he had with the experiences of growing up and living on Gozo. Indeed, his work and role as an artist were intimately



tioned to the yearly cycles of festa, and at the time, he was hurrying to complete a commission featuring three figures to be picked up for display on Malta. As I looked at the busts shaped in clay amongst the plaster mixes and wire frames in his hot, dusty studio, I was struck by the detailed, expressive faces that spoke to the undeniable talent of their maker.



Photograph 7.3. Work-in-progress statues in Paul Aquilina's workshop, July 14, 2010. (Photograph by author)

It was through Paul that I met Manuel, who on occasion helps Paul paint his statues, especially when he is rushing to finish a commission. Although they differ in age (Manuel is in his early twenties, while Paul is older), they are good friends and remarked that when they are together, they constantly discuss art. Manuel, like Paul, works on commission to produce portraits of saints for festas throughout Gozo and Malta, although his medium is different: he works in oils, painting large images on canvases that are set into banners marking the procession routes. Working out of a basement

studio at his parents' house in Victoria, he was also commuting to Malta for school (and art courses, in particular) several times per week. Manuel strives to make his paintings unique by using original poses sketched from his own photos; his friends and family have all been incorporated into the basis of his many pieces. Even though he creates images on commission according to his clients' expectations, he often includes tiny details from the original human portrait as a mark of his own distinction.

While discussing his work at his studio one afternoon, Manuel emphasized the need to travel beyond Gozo for further training. Early on, he took courses at the Wistin Camilleri Gozo Centre for Art & Crafts, Gozo's main source for arts education. However, he quickly felt he had surpassed the basic skills taught at the school and preferred to improve on his own before deciding to make the expensive and time-consuming commute to Malta. He spoke specifically about figure drawing classes, which he was attending at the time in order to improve his knowledge of human anatomy.

Although Manuel explained that schools on the main island provide more offerings than the Centre on Gozo, he said that training abroad is even more desirable. However, it seemed to be financially unattainable for him at the time—he almost had an opportunity to study art in Italy, but the government grant he had received fell through. He seemed frustrated by his inability to expand his resources further and expressed a desire to paint portraits and images of his own conception, free from the expectations of clients or the necessary imagery that accompanies festa saints. Nevertheless, he maintained a steady stream of festa commissions, often taking on projects from former teachers and older artists who could not accept every portrait they were asked to paint. He used the opportunities from commissions to practice his technique and sought to improve through classes available domestically and by reading and studying on his own.

Both Paul and Manuel base their livelihoods on their passion for producing works of art; however, they remained outside the circle of artists included in the International Contemporary Arts Festival. They were aware that the exhibit was currently on display, yet neither had gone to see it at the time that I spoke with them.

One of the Gozitan artists whose work was included in the International Arts Festival was George Vella, the owner of a painting supply and framing shop in Victoria. Raphael, the festival organizer, met George when he bought supplies from George's store upon first moving to Gozo, and he later approached George about exhibiting his work. George showed me a painting and two terra cotta busts that he had done, kept in the back room of his shop. With managing his business in order to support his growing family, however, he had no time to produce work of his own on a regular basis. The three terra cotta pieces on display in the International Arts Festival seemed to be the result of Raphael's encouragement; they had elemental themes and resembled masks or wall hangings, beautifully shaped and smoothly sculpted. Tellingly, the pieces that George showed me in the back room of his shop were of a decidedly religious nature—depictions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. When left to his own creative devices, George seemed to gravitate toward the familiar imagery of the church, much in the same way that Paul (the festa sculptor) developed his sense of artistry at festas throughout his early life.

### Other Artists and Arts Affiliates

Several of my other contacts were art instructors and local officials working with organizations related to the arts. I spoke with Kevin Sciberras, of the Culture Office for the Ministry for Gozo, at his office off one of the main squares in Victoria. The Culture Office's role is to "promote, organize and enhance cultural activities on the

Island of Gozo,” as well as to work with local art galleries, church-affiliated band clubs, theatres, and other groups.<sup>3</sup> With the activities of festa artists, craftspeople making and selling their work to tourists, the Gozo Centre for Art & Crafts, and other events, Kevin described the arts scene on Gozo as “very vibrant,” especially for such a small island. He also viewed the internationally informed Arts Festival in the Citadel as an attractive event to encourage tourists to visit the island, alongside the island’s appealing historic sites and sunny beaches.

Kevin and the Culture Office put me in touch with Joseph Attard, director of the Wistin Camilleri Gozo Centre for Art & Crafts. As the major arts education resource on the island, the school offers a number of courses in a variety of mediums, including painting, ceramics, stained glass, and silverwork. I was also able to talk with Justin Falzon, a Gozitan painter with experience abroad who now teaches at the Centre for Art & Crafts, during my meeting at the school. Speaking about the goals of the Centre, Joseph emphasized the attainment of “professionalism” in the arts. While he acknowledged that achieving this was not possible for all students, he repeatedly invoked the desirability of such a status. Producing professional artists whose abilities could compete with those of artists abroad seemed to be an imperative that he, as the director, advocated.

Justin, a painting teacher at the center who had studied in Italy and the United States, expressed the need for increased educational resources for artists on Gozo and Malta. When I asked both Joseph and Justin about the *décor* of festa (they knew Paul, Manuel, and the other festa artists), they cited having to conform to a set of expected imagery in the depiction of religious subjects as artistically limiting. This mentality was echoed by several of the international artists of the Arts Festival in the Citadel; several people referred to festa sculptures as if they were less creative than their own work.

Joseph, Justin, and the other Centre affiliates that I spoke with more briefly represent an interesting position distinct from either the international artists on Gozo or their Gozitan counterparts. They inhabit a space between the local and the international; they are Gozitan, and yet they tapped into a wider, more global “fine arts” sensibility.

At the time that I visited the Centre for Art & Crafts, Joseph and the other officials were working on a press release announcing the first nude figure drawing class to be offered at the school. Joseph, Justin, and another former director (who remained involved after his retirement) described the resistance to the class from older, conservative members of the community with exasperation. Justin seemed especially frustrated. All three framed the community’s conservatism partly in terms of a sense of religious modesty.

While the Gozitan artists and teachers at the Centre for Art & Crafts echoed the view of the international artists of the International Contemporary Arts Festival—namely, that the “art scene” and its resources on Gozo were inadequate—their perspective was far more complex. At once thoroughly Gozitan, and yet connected to a view of art that originated beyond Gozo, they also understood intimately the significance of festa (one of the other teachers I was introduced to made pedestals for festa statues in addition to teaching at the school). Even though aspects of traditional, Catholic culture on Malta and Gozo conflicted with their more global ideas of art, they were working within their own home communities to improve the resources that they thought should be available to artists locally.

By contrast, the international artists on Gozo, with little understanding of, or connection to the traditions of festa, tended to see only the limitations of the arts community on the island without knowledge of the long-standing artistic traditions of festa.

## Defining Art: Foreign Standards and Local Talent

While some Gozitan artists were struggling to reconcile the expectations of a view of “art” defined elsewhere with the traditions and practices of their local communities, the international artists of the Contemporary Arts Festival frequently brought their own conception of “Gozitanness” or “Malteseness” to the island and, interestingly, incorporated it into their work.

The most poignant example of this I encountered was a strange coincidence that came up in a conversation with Marc (the photographer) and Dana (the German glass artist). While I was chatting with Dana in her shop, Marc dropped by to tell her, excitedly, that he had “found the perfect model” for his “Venus of Malta photo shoot.” Several of the most popular historical attractions in Malta include Neolithic statues of “fertility goddesses” found throughout the archipelago, similar to the famous Venus of Willendorf; the most prominent of these is referred to as the “Venus of Malta.” In fact, these figures were a popular theme in the art of the International Contemporary Arts Festival. Raphael and others had created paintings and other works depicting “Venus of Malta” figures in reference to the history and culture of the islands. Yet these works did not appear to reflect an authentically Maltese or Gozitan experience in that they shared no similarities in style with festa artwork or other local cultural imagery. Malta and Gozo may have been the subject being explored in these pieces, but their conception was clearly informed by a more pan-European or global “fine art” aesthetic.

For his photo shoot, Marc wanted to create a photograph of a nude woman at the edge of one of Gozo’s characteristic limestone beaches, but it seemed as though he had trouble finding a model for the image he had in mind. As he described the woman he had just met, we realized that she was, in fact, one of the directors of my field school—a Scottish woman with long, blonde hair and blue eyes.

While the photo-shoot never actually materialized, I found Marc's vision of the "perfect" Venus of Malta fascinating—her fair complexion perfectly matched a classically Eurocentric notion of beauty befitting a "Venus" figure, yet she was completely unlike the dark-haired, olive-skinned people that actually populate Malta and Gozo. It was clear that Marc was comfortable interacting with people from abroad while on the island, but I speculated that he had made little effort to approach Maltese women in his search for a model.

The preconceptions about art and its aesthetic, technical, and functional standards that enabled this interaction to take place also created the dividing line between artists included within the International Contemporary Arts Festival and those left outside of its exhibits. While the Arts Festival was based initially on Raphael's own network of international artists and those he had met since moving to Gozo, assumptions about the religious artworks for festa and Gozo's artistic communities also worked to distance artists like Paul and Manuel, with their depictions of saints, from the activities of the international artists (photograph 7.4).



Photograph 7.4. Manuel painting a commissioned piece in his studio in Victoria, Gozo, July 22, 2010. (Photograph by author)

Many of the international artists criticized the skills of local artists based on a lack of “proper” or “official” arts training, both directly and indirectly. It was frequently implied that little artistic vision and minimal technical skills were required to reproduce the imagery of Catholic saints (an opinion strongly contrasting my own observations while visiting Paul’s workshop and Manuel’s studio). Not only were the art courses and training available on the island considered inadequate compared to standards abroad, but also foreign artists often distinguished their work in ways that contained negative opinions about the talent required to create pieces for display in festas.

While I was speaking to one person, she gestured toward a festa statue in the street and told me that some Maltese people would point to that and say it was “really good art.” She then shrugged and said, “It depends on what you call art.” When I asked her about the “art scene” on Gozo, she also insisted that there was not much of an arts community. She said that anyone who had “held a brush in their hand” or “taken an art class for two weeks” considered themselves an artist. However, this person had also considered enrolling in a goldsmithing class at the School of Art & Crafts to learn some basics to incorporate into her work. Nevertheless, she implied that the school was not a legitimate source of rigorous arts education beyond a basic, introductory level and left much to be desired compared to training she had undertaken elsewhere.

Several of the local artists echoed the viewpoint that the education and exhibition opportunities for artists were limited on Gozo. While this may seem paradoxical, I suggest that Manuel, Joseph Attard, Justin Falzon, and others expressed this perspective in part because of their own exposure to outside views of art that connected them to expectations of the international mainstream. And unlike the visiting or expatriate foreign artists, they are intimately connected to



their Gozitan communities. For Manuel, this means that pursuing a passion for painting manifests as a career in painting festa banners; for Justin and Joseph, it means actively striving to improve available art classes on the island through teaching and administrative work at the Centre for Art & Crafts.

Meanwhile, Paul emphasized the self-taught nature of his sculpting abilities, occupying the furthest position from international influence. This is not to imply that he is in any way naïve or sheltered from international perspectives; rather, he is instead focused on the Maltese and Gozitan communities around him. His status as an artist is based upon the traditions of festa and therefore local, thoroughly *Gozitan*, definitions of art.

Another part of the distinction international artists made between local art and their own dealt with the subject matter and purpose of the work. Marc emphasized that his work was “about an emotional moment,” a very personal and fleeting experience. By contrast, he characterized festa décor as “functional.” This was a descriptive word that people often applied to the difference between objects of “craft” and objects of “art,” although most of the people that I successfully engaged this topic with were foreigners or Maltese and Gozitan artists and craftspeople who had lived abroad. Nevertheless, Marc qualifying the festa statues and banners as “functional” (in that they serve a decorative purpose for a community event) effectively distanced them from objects that reside in museums and galleries.

Paul and Manuel’s audiences are the communities of Gozo and Malta, rather than the elite, global network of museum-oriented “fine” art makers and critics. Thus, they were not in contact with Raphael and were not within the scope of those considered for the International Contemporary Arts Festival. This is illustrated interestingly in the case of George Vella’s pieces—those that Raphael encouraged him to exhibit in the International Arts Festival appealed to the

aesthetics and expressive philosophy of “art for art’s sake,” while his equally impressive sculptures and paintings of religious figures were left to the cluttered back room of his framing shop.

The assumptions of the international artists, as well as the frustrations of Justin and Joseph of the Centre for Art & Crafts, often rested on criticisms of the canon religious imagery of festa artwork. Yet the emphasis on reproducing familiar symbolism in festa-related work seemed to be more a question of style than a matter of stifling religious restrictions. Rather, notions of individualism, expressiveness, and innovation that come from a mainstream, foreign sense of “art” seemed to be more crucial in determining what works were considered art and what works were not for the purposes of the International Contemporary Arts Festival.

The expectation that art should express the individual rather than the collective, or be innovative rather than reiterative, belongs to an international perspective. Paul’s festa sculptures derive their meaning in part by communicating a set of established symbols affiliated with each saint; likewise, Manuel’s work does this in order to fulfill his clients’ expectations, even while he strives simultaneously to make their interpretation his own.

Paul also emphasized the importance of copying famous Maltese statues to learn about form or create reproductions to keep in the home. When I first met his mother in their family shop, she likened the practice of displaying images of saints to having pictures of your family nearby—a vital part of daily life. Paul’s pieces that depict Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and patron saints are reflective of the aesthetic, religious, and traditional values and experiences shared with his community. Yet these same pieces, informed by a Gozitan way of life, had no place in the International Contemporary Arts Festival’s definition of “art.”



Photograph 7.5. Festa procession carrying the statue of St. George (San Gorg) in Victoria, July 18, 2010. (Photograph by author)

By examining the ways in which the parameters of “art” were defined in the first Gozo International Contemporary Arts Festival, it is possible to glimpse a portion of the truly abundant activities of artists and artisans working and creating on Gozo and Malta. The tensions between global and local present in the international artists’ definitions of art, and the separation between local traditions and the activities of the International Contemporary Arts Festival, ultimately speak to broader dynamics of globalization occurring throughout the Maltese islands today.

Although many of the international artists coming to Gozo may overlook the images of saints in festa as gaudy or formulaic, perhaps it is Kevin Sciberras’ view of the “vibrant” arts scene on Gozo that includes room for the statues and banners of festa, as well as the photographs, sculptures, and paintings of the International Contemporary Arts Festival.

## Notes

1. This field school is run by Sam Janssen and Marc Vanlangendonck and affiliated with the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. For more information, visit <http://www.anthropologyfieldschool.org/>.
2. All names that appear in this chapter are used with the permission of the individual; for instances in which permission was not obtained, I have omitted the names entirely (no pseudonyms are used).
3. See [http://www.gozo.gov.mt/gozoportal/ministry\\_for\\_gozo/departments/dted/cultureoffice.aspx](http://www.gozo.gov.mt/gozoportal/ministry_for_gozo/departments/dted/cultureoffice.aspx), accessed June 1, 2012.