

A Brief History of Doorknobs and Door Knockers in Malta

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ABSTRACT

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<p>This study gathers information on doorknobs and door knockers in Malta. They are part of our everyday art culture and have a story to tell, shedding more light on the residents, traditions, and history of our unique gem cities. Other information on how doorknobs and door knockers originate and develop over time, what materials are used, whether made locally or imported and how these relate to the door and the portal is also included.</p> <p>Data is gathered mainly by means of semi-structured interviews with two different artisans, a bronzesmith and a blacksmith, thus focusing on bronze and wrought iron. However, secondary interviews with other persons knowledgeable in this field are also carried out. This data is supplemented with research from books, academic journals, articles, and archives. For this research, illustrative material is collected.</p> <p>As a result, it is observed that the form-making and decorating of door knockers in bronze is still done the traditional way, using the Lost Wax Technique, while with wrought iron, metal is hammered using the same tools. Door knockers are still produced in both materials to embellish different buildings.</p> <p>However, our strategic position resulted in door knockers being influenced by various cultures. The need for more information about their age and manufacturers was due to artisans needing to apply their stamp on the finished product.</p> <p>Today a sustainable approach is being met with buying of local recycled metal. In addition, contemporary designs are being introduced.</p> <p>Both artisans emphasised that this could be a dying craft if nothing is done. Youngsters show an interest in these trades; however, today this is not a thriving business which can provide sufficient income to support today's lifestyles.</p>	
Keywords: Doorknobs, doorknockers, Malta, doors, symbolism, history	

Declaration of Authenticity

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Ms Graziella Bencini

31st January 2023
Date


Student's Signature

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

The aim of this study is to research further the subject of the doorknobs and door knockers that, even today, continue to decorate our doors. Even though the original function of door knockers, which had evolved from door handles, diminished following the invention of the doorbells in the early 19th century, what started off as a simple design feature, in time developed into applied art. Nowadays, we may think that these artistic pieces serve only to embellish our streets, but a lot of door knockers still continue to serve people and have a significant meaning to their homeowners. Some of them have been lost, while others are exhibited in various museums around the world, such a doorknocker pertaining to important families like the Medici, Gradenigo and Grimani families.

Research Aim, Objectives and Hypothesis or Question

This research aims to portray what messages these families wished to convey through their doorknobs and door knockers and will present information on how these originated and developed over time, the materials used, their relation to the door and the portal, as well as any traditions attached to them. Furthermore, the use of interviews seeks to convey whether these are still relative to today's world.

For this long essay the Harvard-Anglia 2008 referencing version has been utilised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Doorknobs and Door knockers – Origins & Uses

A doorknob comes as a knob or handle, used mainly to open - or close, - the door wing more easily, while the door knocker, known as a 'habbata' in Maltese, is a practical way of announcing your presence to the homeowners. The door knocker is composed of two main parts, the swinging striker fixed to a door mounted plate which varies in shape, size and decor, and the metal plate fixed to the door which protects the door when the striker hits.

The origin of door knockers is not well documented. Willow & Stone trace their origins to ancient Greece, a theory that is supported by the discovery, in the early 1920s, of a set of four bronze lion head door knockers in Jerusalem on the site that hosted the first hospital of the Order of St John from 1080 to 1187 CE (Fig 1). In 2016, a research team from the 'Bearers of the Cross' project found, through a study with the University of Birmingham, similar objects elsewhere pertaining to Roman times, probably dating between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. Interesting to note that these were made of Bronze, meaning that the below pictured bronze door knockers could be about 2000 years old (Weetch, 2016).



Figure 1 - Bronze doorknockers (<http://www.bearersofthecross.org.uk/mystery-bronze-lion-heads-museum-order-st-john/>)

Materials

Over time, doorknobs have been manufactured from different materials, including wood, ceramic, glass, plastic, and different types of metals, with ceramic, bronze, brass, and wrought iron being the most popular materials used for traditional Maltese doorknobs and door knockers.



<https://www.facebook.com/Maltadoorknockers/>

Wrought iron was a common feature in the Roman era but seemed to have also been used in the 17th and 18th century during the baroque era in gates and railings especially in Britain.

Locally, there are references to master craftsmen in wrought iron, as early as the late 16th century. These were so admired that they were often called to act as witnesses at baptisms. Towards the beginning of the 19th century several Maltese noble families like the Sciclunas, Stricklands and Milanesis, commissioned many of the major works. The census of 1871 lists 37 blacksmiths and by 1931 the census listed 54 (Catania & Magro, 2006) (Bajada, 2019) and interestingly, the village of Naxxar is highly known for the number of blacksmiths. However, the industrial revolution in the mid-19th century brought with it a rise in the use of cast iron and thus wrought iron took on a secondary role (Catania & Magro, 2006) (Bajada, 2019).

Coal was needed for this technique of working with metal. Towards the end of the 19th century coal was imported from Britain by C Bajada & Son and according to Antoine Bajada, one of the directors of the company, demand was so high that men seemed like a colony of ants carrying coal from the ships from 4 am till sunset. Blacksmiths used coal imported from Wales known as 'Ta' Cardiff' which produced a large flame which progressed to a low burn (Spiteri, 2011) (Galea, 1972). Strolling through the narrow streets of Naxxar, the pounding of the hammer on the anvil could not go unnoticed at the time. Today, coal is still imported, albeit in minimal amounts, for local foundries and for blacksmiths who still use the traditional forges with coal.

On the other hand, bronze is considered to be the best material for art casting because of its flexibility and the way it allows details to be perfected when it comes to finishings. A surface finish called patina is created to give bronze a colour.

The foundry of the Order of St John, which was located where one today finds Palazzo Buttigieg Francia in Valletta, produced canons, body armour, arms, and bells, with the latter at times being melted to become cannons. However this foundry also produced other things such as the two bronze statues, representing St Peter and St Paul which adorn the doors of the Mdina Cathedral, which were cast by renowned founders, brothers Luca and Mederico Menville (circa 1695-1720). Brothers Gioacchino and Francesco Trigance were the last in line of notable founders. When the Order left Malta in 1798, the foundry was subsequently closed.

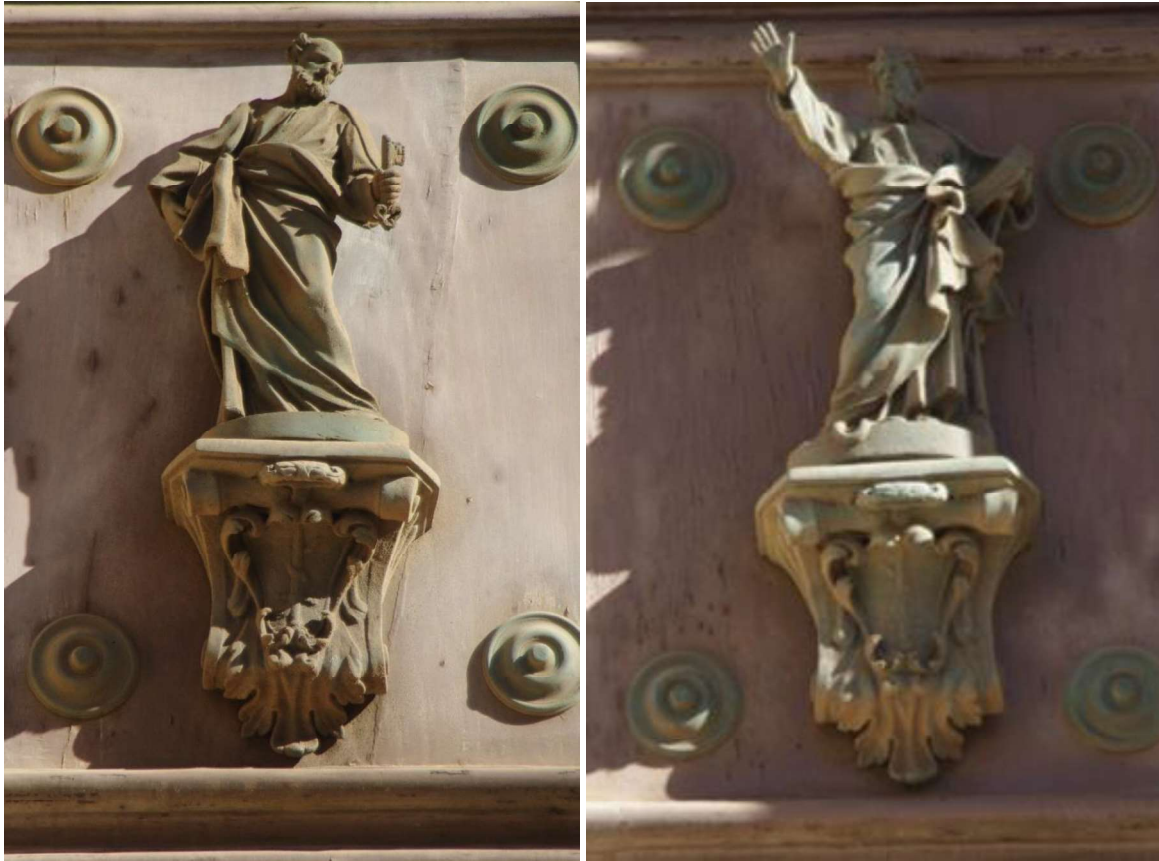


Figure 2 – Bronze statues on the main door of Mdina Metropolitan Cathedral by S Friggieri

In view of the above, may also be possible that, in exceptional cases, door knockers may have also been cast by Maltese bell founders, but we have found no official evidence which supports this thesis. In 1854, Salvatore and his son Giuliano Cauchi seem to have established a foundry in Ghajn Dwieli. The more renowned Giuliano, known as Ġulju Cauchi, was the last of a line of Maltese bell founders, which trade unfortunately died with him (Grima, 2015).

The Influence of Architecture on Door Knockers

There is a connection between the form of door knockers and the architectural style of door portals. In fact, when in the Middle Ages gothic architecture flourished, hammered metal door knockers with tense lines and artistic forms were what fulfilled the requirements. Iron railings, door fittings and handles were also included.



Figure 4 -Gothic Style doorknocker, Mdina- Photos by Sandra Friggieri

Figure5-Irondoorknocker (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Door_knocker#/media/File:Door_Knocker_MET_cdi55-61-32ab.jpg)

In the 14th century malleable iron hammers appeared, and the form of door knockers made with the gothic style became more geometrical, with motifs being borrowed from the local flora (Trofimova, 2010).

In the 15th century, during the Renaissance period, craftsmen offered their services as architects, sculptors, artists, and jewellers. They focused their creative work on ancient roman architecture inspired by monuments around Italy. Several bronze masters came from the school of casters in Padua, founded by Donatello, with the largest workshop being in Venice. In addition to monuments, these masters created small bronze items, resulting in the production of knockers during this time turning into an artistic industry. These craftsmen used the common 'lost wax' casting technique.

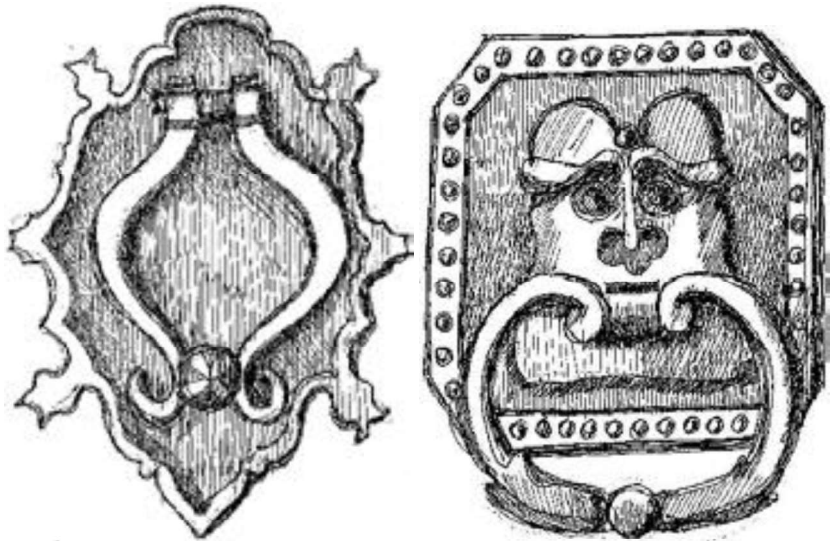


Figure6-Renaissance doorknocker in Toulouse ,France(Photo by FredericNeupont)

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Door_knocker#/media/File:Assezat-heurtoir.jpg)

Figure 7 -15th century door knockers called a Cartouche (Trofimova, 2010)

The above door knockers are called a cartouche. This is mainly a decoration in the form of a junction box.

Grotesque and erotic symbols started to be observed. Common motifs found were the vine, acanthus leaves and curls, the so-called whiskers and seashells.

The 16th century was the best time to produce door knockers because sculpturally decorated portals were being created. The demand increased drastically, and sketch designs were used to increase production. (Trofimova, 2010)

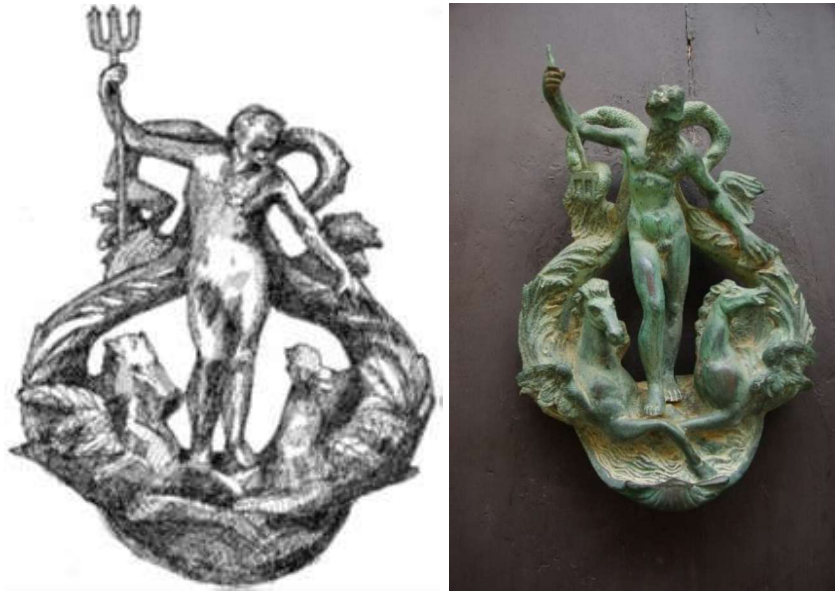


Figure 8 –“Doorknocker with the Neptune Figure -16th century. Workshop of Alessandro Vittoria, Italy. (Trofimova, 2010) and Mesquita Street, Mdina. Photo by Sandra Friggieri

By the 17th century, masters from three different workshops started to be involved in the production of bronze items. The sculptor made the model, the bronze caster made the casting, and the gilder finished the gold plating using the mercurial method. The latter applied mercury and gold, and then exposed the object to heat so as to vaporize the mercury and leave the gold behind in a thin layer. The decoration, that originally was focused on the immovable part, now also involved the movable part of the knocker.

With the introduction of Rococo architecture also known as Late Baroque or Rocaille, the shells motif could be seen on every ornamental object. Moreover, other types of curls, inspired by forms of waves running to the coast, became popular.



Figure 9 – “The habitual lion of the door knocker of the XVII century is decorated with an ornamental curl that reminds contours of the wave running to the coast” (Trofimova, 2010) and a similar doorknocker in Mdina, Photo by Sandra Friggieri

Symbolism

In Christian art symbolism the ‘scallop shell’ represents birth, creation, and salvation. It was used to sprinkle baptismal waters and therefore holds an association with baptismal fonts. A fine example of this is the majestic marble altarpiece at St John’s Co Cathedral depicting the baptism of Christ.



<https://themaritimeexplorer.ca/2021/11/18/saint-john-co-cathedral/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Maltadoorknockers/>

However, door knockers with shell motifs can also mean superstition. Seashells which have shapes, normally replicating the male or female genital organs, are believed to have life-bearing properties as well as giving protection.

However, the most common form of door knocker remains the form of a ring. Since megalithic art, the ring or spiral is a symbol of eternity, with the ring or spiral movement portraying integrity, unity, and the marriage bond, thus providing a symbolic safeguard to the house.



Door knockers in the form of a ring were also used for churches and were called 'shelter-knockers' or Rings of Mercy. The making of some such knockers is rather notable. The door knockers of the Cathedral Church of Durham for example have holes instead of eyes, which permit light from within the church to be seen by the devotees walking in the direction of the Cathedral.

Figure 10 - Figure of a ring. Photo by Sandra Friggieri



<https://shortfinals.org/2011/07/01/sanctuary-knocker-durham-cathedral> ; <https://thetravelbunny.com/a-morning-valletta-malta/>

Door knockers in the form of figures of lions having a ring in the mouth are also quite common. In ancient times, in the Mediterranean world lions, were reputed to be the guardians of water resources. That is why the ring can be a vivid symbol of water circulation in the Universe since, for our ancestors, the circulation of water meant the mechanism and the function of the whole world.

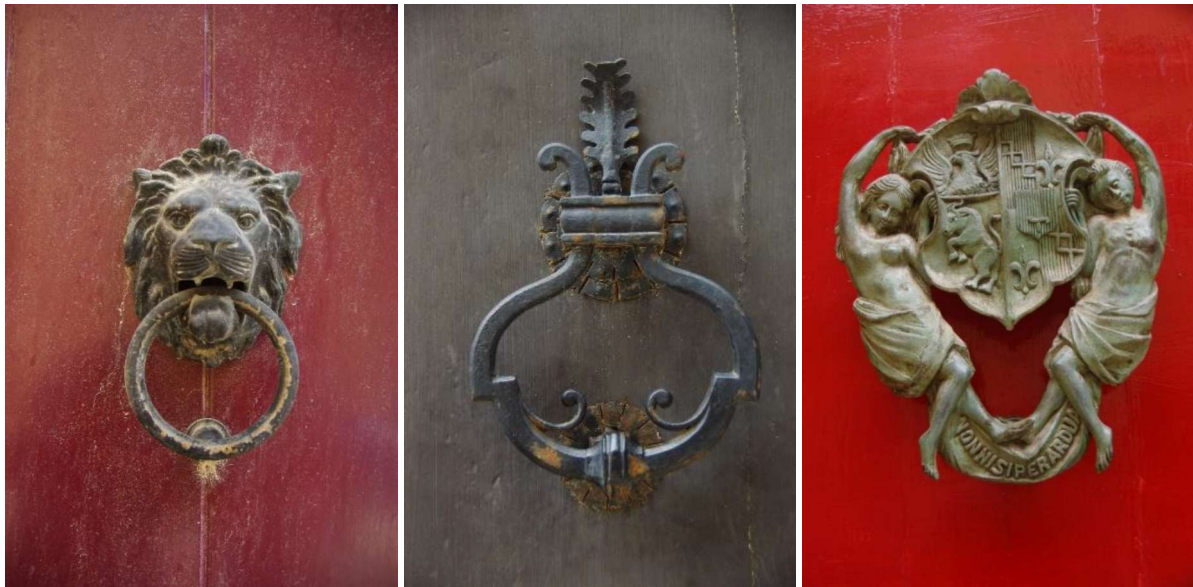


Figure 11 - Lion figure with a ring in the mouth. Photo by Sandra Friggieri

Figure 12 - Figure of a lyre. Photo by Sandra Friggieri

Figure 13 – Heraldic doorknocker Mdina. Photo by Sandra Friggieri.

Gradually door knockers acquired the figure of a lyre. This stringed instrument was used especially in ancient Greece and is a symbol of rhythmic sound of space, harmony, beauty and perfection, poetic inspiration, marriage devotion and love.

Later, besides representing symbolism, door knockers started to showcase information about its masters, their hobbies, job position, tastes, or the family coat of arms. (Trofimova, 2010), (Arseniev 2001).

The door always fulfilled an important function in the person's house, allowing the dweller to feel safe and protected. In ancient Rome, the god of doorways was Janus, and he protected all entrances and exits of private houses, temples, and gates of cities. Janus is described as having two faces turned in the opposite directions, one representing the past and the other the future, the transition from the known to the unknown. In his hand he holds a key to lock or unlock heavens' gate (Trofimova, 2010), (Benois, 2006).



Figure 14 - Janus - God of Doors, and the Arch of Janus, Rome (<http://www.andersonlock.com/blog/god-doors/>; <https://renatoprosciutto.com/arch-janus-rome-arco-giano>)

Superstitions

All throughout history, people have strived to protect themselves from evil, physical afflictions, mishaps, and bad luck. The most common form of superstition present in most cultures around the world is the “evil eye”. The evil eye, or the belief in the power of some individuals to cause harm to man, animals, or objects by merely looking at them, is very widespread, particularly in countries like Morocco, Libya, Malta, Sicily, and southern Italy. The same superstition provides for numerous and various ways to protect one’s property from the evil eye, with the most common being the use of apotropaic objects, symbols that repel the bad spirits or good luck charms. This method has been used by humans for thousands of years, and one can find cattle horns, eye symbols, hand symbols, animals, snakes, and stone guardians like gargoyles in many buildings. In Malta, especially in rural areas, one can even see bull horns on top of farmhouses to repel the evil eye. Gargoyles were also intended to symbolise 'guardianship' of the building and to keep evil spirits at bay. In the same way, stone guardians with these monstrous figureheads, called anthropomorphic symbols, seem to have been used on door knockers to ward off evil spirits from the house and from its owners.



Figure 14 - Cattle horn on doorknocker and gargoyle (photos by Sandra Friggieri)



Detail of the balcony of the Grandmaster Palace Valletta, and an apotropaic mask on a door in Milan

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/the-grandmasters-guardian.612172;>

<https://www.alamy.com/milan-italy-ironwork-a-door-decorated-with-the-engraving-of-an-apotropaic-image>

Apart from grotesque faces on door knockers, the author also noted the closed hand-shaped doorknocker, representing the graceful palm which Muslims know as 'Hands of Fatima', the youngest daughter of Prophet Mohammad who gave heirs to Mohammed, thus assuring the prophet's offspring, or what Jews call the 'Hands of Miriam' referring to the sister of Aaron and Moses. Door knockers of this design were used extensively throughout Spain during the Moorish occupation, and later on Portuguese doors, rendering these amulets almost universal.

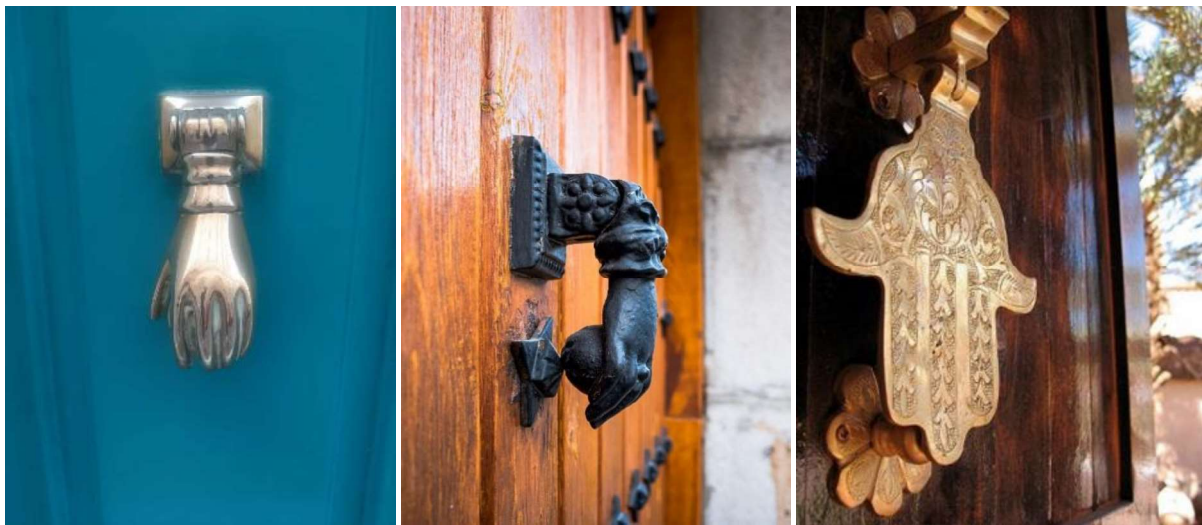


Figure 15 - The 'Hand of Fatima' found in Archbishop Square Mdina (photo by Sandra Friggieri); Hand shaped doorknocker in Spain(photo by Basotxerri) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Door_knocker#/media/File:Sah%C3%BAn_-_Llamador_01.jpg)
 Figure16Theopenhanded'HamzaDoorKnocker(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Door_knocker#/media/File:Door_knocker,_N'Kob.jpg.)

This hand symbol, linked to the iconography of the goddess Tanit, might have originated during the Phoenician civilization, all through the Roman and Islamic civilization (Ana Carolina, 2021) (Maçarico, 2011). It could have had different interpretations, both superstitious as well spiritual, denoting the belonging to 'the hand of God' of the residents of house, an indicator that they are a believer of the Muslim faith.

Folklore & Traditions in the Maltese Society

The geographical position of our islands in the Mediterranean, namely that of being halfway between Sicily and Africa, resulted in them being influenced by various cultures. In his paper 'Folklore', in the section *Death and Funeral Customs*, Guze Cassar Pullicino states that up to the 20th century, during family mourning, it was customary to remove door knockers from the door and replace them with a black cloth or cover them completely with black crepe. Both door wings were kept closed for three days or half shut for around 40 days. Moreover, neighbours kept their doors half shut or attached a black drape to their door as well to show their respect for the bereaved family. For some months window blinds were kept down and linen sheets replaced window curtains (Mifsud-Chircop, 2003) (Cassar Pullicino, 1994).

Door knockers also symbolised the wealth and status of the family. Members of the aristocracy had large, elaborated door knockers on their enormous doors, and shiny door knockers became a symbol of wealth, since these showed the level of cleanliness of that family, advertising that a maid was present in the house. The door knockers were the last item to be cleaned, usually on a Saturday before the maid left the house to spend the weekend with her family. The maids of the village townhouses used to compete eagerly on who had the most highly polished knockers (Camilleri, 2015 and 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Taking into consideration the number of walking tours that take place around the streets of our towns and villages, it was thought to be of interest to choose Maltese doorknobs and door knockers as the subject of this study. During their commentary, tourist guides commonly speak about the historical buildings, coat of arms and the symbolism of Christian art, but no specific reference is made to these artistic works of art that have become part of our culture.

Document-based research

In this study, past research was identified mainly through scholarly articles, books, and academic papers. A past interview with Mr John Magro from the Public Broadcasting Services archives was retrieved. Secondary data from the National Library of Malta, National Archives of Malta and from the Mdina Metropolitan Archives, were also consulted. However, document-based research relating directly to this subject was rather scanty, especially in relation to our islands. Thus, an uncommon methodology was resorted to, namely that of having meetings with people who deemed fit to share any knowledge or material regarding this subject. Furthermore, research material had to be sought beyond our shores, but this was still found to be relevant, especially since our islands went through various rulers, with each of them leaving their mark in many aspects, including art.

Interviews

A Qualitative Methodology was deemed most appropriate for the data collection on this subject. Primary data was gathered mainly from two semi-structured interviews, in which a set of questions was prepared by the interviewer, who then allowed the interview to proceed freely. A sample of the initial questions is presented below:-

Interview with bronzesmith

- What type of metals are used for casting door knockers?
- Is the process of doing a bronze bust and a bronze door knocker the same?
- What type of door knockers are ordered from this foundry?

Interview with blacksmith

- What type of metal is used for working with iron for door knockers?
- What type of door knockers are commonly ordered?
- Who does the design of the door knocker?

The first interview was held with Mr Christopher Chetcuti, who today runs the only artistic foundry on the island called 'Funderija Artistika Joseph Chetcuti'. The purpose of this interview was mainly to understand the work involved in producing a bronze door knocker using the traditional method. The original founder, Mr Joseph Chetcuti, had learnt the trade of casting in Florence using the lost wax process, the traditional way of casting bronze, and his son Christopher is seeking to evolve and improve this legacy in honour of his late father. In collaboration with Ms Lisa Gwenn Baldacchino from Maltadoors, Chris replicates door knockers for boutique hotels, banks, band clubs and private residences. On the other hand, Lisa has also identified an interesting niche to develop doorknobs and door knockers in contemporary designs.

The second interview was held with Mr Patrick and Mr David Xerri of il-Mużżan Blacksmith and Welder, a fourth-generation blacksmith in a traditional forge in Naxxar. The focus of the interview was mainly to get their view how wrought iron door knockers have developed over time, what metal is used for wrought iron work, how door knockers relate to the door and the portal, and if people are still interested in wrought iron work decorating their buildings. They have also an extensive experience in the restoration of such works.

A summary of the main points of each interview has been transcribed.

Illustrative Material

Illustrative material is fundamental in this research. This allows the reader to observe on how doorknobs and door knockers originate and develop over time, define their possible symbolic meaning and consider the various methods of working with metal.

The research relates also the door knocker to the door and portal. Illustrative material however, was not limited to only one site, thus making this study more interesting.

Limitations

Due to lack of previous research studies on the topic it was not possible to identify the age and the manufacturers of these door knockers. These research samples lacked a stamp, therefore making it impossible to mark a timeframe.

RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter the collected data from the two interviews were compiled and analysed and the result explained and discussed.

Doorknobs and doorknockers

These two interviews focused mainly on doorknobs and door knockers made of bronze and wrought iron, two materials that are still in use, using the traditional method. Whilst Mr Christopher Chetcuti explained the method of bronze casting, Mr Patrick Scerri concentrated more on the tools used to make these door knockers and the various accessories that went with the door. Both interviews took around 45 minutes to one hour.

Interview with Mr Christopher Chetcuti, managing director of 'Funderija Artistika Joseph Chetcuti'

During the interview, Mr Chetcuti shared the process of how bronze door knockers are cast in his foundry using the Lost Wax Method, or 'Cera Persa', which he claims is the traditional method, a claim which is substantiated by the author's research, which shows that this method was predominantly used in Italy since the 1500s according to her research.

Mr Chetcuti also said that his foundry has been responsible for the casting of several public monuments, as well as the casting of replicas. To name just a few, the most popular work is the monument of Grand Master Jean de Valette located in Valletta, which was modelled and casted in this foundry, as well the replicas of of Alessandro Algardi's Christ the Saviour, above the main portal of St John's Co Cathedral in Valletta and a bronze replica of Antonio Sciortino's monument of Les Gavroches, today situated in the Upper Barrakka Gardens in Valletta.



Fig 1- Statue of Grand Master Jean de Valette sculpted and casted by Chetcuti Foundry

Mr Chetcuti explained that a local artist would create a model made of wood, plaster, terracotta or stone, but would require a bronzesmith to cast their creation. Mr Chetcuti added that he casts models in bronze or aluminium because “if other different metals are used, the system and my tools would have to change”.

Method of Bronze Casting

Mr Chetcuti started off by saying that initially he creates a negative of the model by preparing a rubber mould. He claimed that this is a meticulous process because here the founder is transferring the artwork with as much detail as possible, keeping in mind that this eventually must be in bronze or other castable metal. He explained that the rubber mould of this negative sculpture would later be filled with wax to create a positive sculpture.* This layer in wax would then eventually change to bronze later in the process.

According to Mr Chetcuti, this mould can be simple or complex, depending mainly on the model that he is presented with. He claimed that multiple copies can be made in different material like cement for example, but that he uses wax for a purpose.**

He stated that once the rubber mould is ready, he creates a plaster support. A wax model is created by pouring an even coating of melted wax in this negative rubber mould and pouring it out again until a 4mm thickness is reached, this being the thickness he usually wants the bronze to be. However, this thickness may change depending on the size of the object.



Figure 2 - Wax model

Having reached the desired thickness of melted wax, a core investment material is poured into the wax hollow to produce a backing of luto, a mixture of plaster and ceramic that allows the wax model to form safely without changing its shape due to hot or cold temperatures. The wax model is then removed from its encasement***. Once the wax model is ready, any wax imperfections in the cast are cleaned up by him.

Next, the wax model is attached to a range of specialised wax rods known as 'kolati'. Their function is to form channels to carry the molten bronze and let gas escape. When Mr Chetcuti was asked by the author what determines the amount of wax rods needed, he confirmed that there is no general rule and his expertise and skill leads him to determine the amount needed. He added that it also depends on the shape of the cast and emphasised that one must imagine that this wax mould is an empty space and that it is like we are filling it with water. He adds that wax pipes are needed for the bronze to fill out all areas whereas other wax pipes allow air to come out to avoid air bubbles.

Once the necessary wax rods are attached, all of this is covered by a plaster encasement or luto.



Figure 3 - Wax rods and plaster encasement and the kiln

The plaster is then moulded with the wax model inside and is placed in a kiln. The kiln is heated up to about 500 degrees celcius and the model is left for from 24 hours to 3 days, depending on the size of the mould.

During that period, the heat melts the wax, with the latter reaching boiling point and evaporating from the plaster encasement. This is the “lost wax” process Mr Chetcuti was quoted as referring to earlier on in this Chapter.

He explained that after this process the wax areas, including the wax rods, are now empty spaces, ready for the bronze to be poured. The plaster encasement has an important function here and is the right material to withstand the heat of the furnace and to withstand the molten bronze whilst also being easily removed afterwards.

The next process is that of allowing the encasement to cool down before pouring in the melted bronze. The bronze flows through the channels to the figure inside the mould. Mr Chetcuti explained that he would realise that the mould is full because bronze would start coming out from the cavity allowed for air, similar to when one pours water.

According to Mr Chetcuti, bronze is made from a high copper content, tin and some other metals and when bronze is heated to about 1200 degrees celcius its consistency becomes like that of water. However, he added that bronze solidifies quickly, even if it would still be very hot and red in colour. This is left to cool for another 24 hours and then the plaster mould is broken up. The figure and the channels are now bronze, and the bronze rods are cut away a few millimetres away from the object, and the details of the figure are perfected using a grinder, or a file or a motorised sandpaper.



Figure 4 -Pouring melted bronze. Figure 5 - Different finishes

Finally the product is given a surface finish or patina using a brush. This is created using acid and wax. The three colours found for the patina are brown, black and green.

Sustainable approach

Notwithstanding the fact that bronze can be imported, Mr Chetcuti stated that in his foundry he buys local recycled metal from townhouses that are awaiting demolition. Any objects whose material is good for casting are bought. Unlike for plastic, there are no limits as to how many times metal can be recycled, and thus this makes this material exceptional. Furthermore, the company has also started to buy old electricity wire because when the core is removed the material inside is 99% copper and, as mentioned earlier, bronze has a high copper content.

Mr Chetcuti also buys the zinc one uses on a boat, which is called "Sacrificial Anode". Zinc is used because it has a higher voltage in the water so the current will be more inclined to flow through it than from the propeller. All this would be melted to make solid blocks of bronze called ingots 'ingotti'.



Figure 6 - Ingots

Door knockers made locally

The company recently produced a pair of door knockers that can be seen at Palazzo Zammitello, a boutique hotel in Valletta. They are a reproduction of the original ones that belonged to the family and go back to the Order of St John, having been inherited for many years and which today are kept on the door of their private residence.

Likewise, Mr Chetcuti added that different Band Clubs have ordered door knockers symbolising their patron saint together with the town's or village coat of arms.



Fig 7 - St Catherine's Band Club, Żurrieq (photo by Sandra Friggieri)



Figure 8 – Palazzo Żammitello and a reproduction of original doorknocker by Chetcuti Foundry (photos by Sandra Friggieri)

Mr Chetcuti emphasised that door knockers need more thought and take longer to make than a bust. He stated that he prefers to make the modelling of the door knocker himself, taking into consideration that this must relate to the shape and thickness of the door panel. If the door has long panels, then the door knockers have to be similar in shape. Normally a traditional door with two panels take an 18cm sized door knocker and have to be completely symmetrical. The type of hinges that need to be used are taken into consideration too. However, Christopher here was modest enough to share a trick of the trade. He gave an example that sometimes, during the modelling process, he makes a head looking forward. When this model is made of wax, however, the head is cut and arranged sideways so that with one model he is able to create two wax creations with heads looking in the opposite direction. Also, one must keep in mind that, apart from being elaborate in detail, door knockers need also to be functional. When Mr Chetcuti was asked how long it would take him to finish a door knocker he claims that usually it takes him three months from the first time the customer approaches with the idea. During this time, the model is created, cast and finished with the surface coating. The time taken is mainly due to the wax models being placed in batches in the kiln.

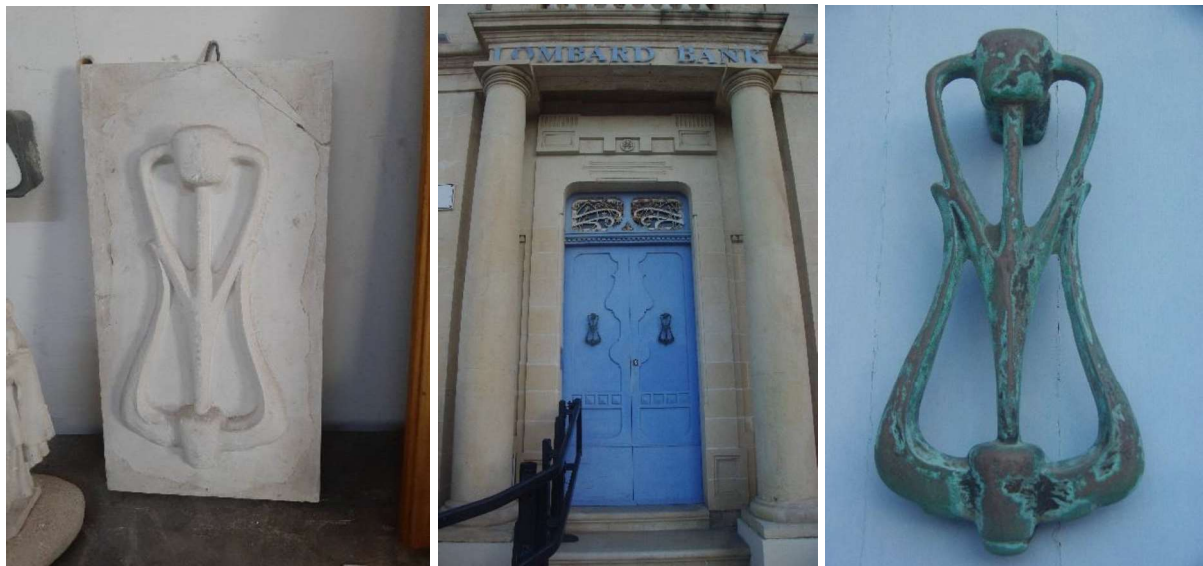


Figure 9 – Model of a doorknocker sculpted and casted in bronze by Chetcuti Foundry (photos by Sandra Friggieri)

Finally, when Mr Chetcuti was asked if he works brass knockers, he confirmed that most commonly people would come and ask for brass door knockers not bronze. Brass was later developed, and can keep its polished or antique finish for a longer time with little maintenance. On the other hand cast iron tends to lose its colour and becomes darker more quickly.

Interview with Mr Patrick and Mr David Xerri (brothers), blacksmiths running Il-Mużżan, Naxxar

The focus of this interview was to get first hand information about wrought iron doorknobs and door knockers from a long established blacksmith. Il-Mużżan is one of a long list of blacksmiths that have operated in Naxxar since the early 1900's and, as stated Mr Patrick Xerri, he and his brother are the fourth generation of blacksmiths, a trade that was started by their great grandfather, pursued by their grandfather, father and now by themselves. Unfortunately, Mr Xerri also stated that theirs is a dying craft and would cease with them because none of his children took up blacksmithing. He explained that at a tender age, after school, he and his brother used to come and help their father who encouraged them to start with small things like hooks for drain water pipes and for washing lines. They used to sell them at 2c5 each, earning 100 Maltese Liri each, a significant sum at the time.

Wrought Iron Works

When Mr Xerri was asked what sort of work they did back then, he claimed that in the early 1900s when the presence of blacksmiths was high in their village of Naxxar, every blacksmith specialized in his particular field. The list of products varied from door/window hinges, door-locks, simple and elaborate door knockers, different keys, windows and fanlights, balconies, gates and other decorative works. Il-Mużżan specialized in spiral stairs known in Maltese as 'turgien bir-raġġ'. In addition they made most of their tools themselves. With the passage of time, their work shifted towards tools for other trades, and used to supply farmers and builders. He continued by saying, however, that when this boom of blacksmiths diminished drastically, especially with modern technology, they had to accept whatever order came along in order to make a living.

When asked if these items they produced were marked and personalised, he stated that blacksmiths only marked tools, and their stamp represented the eight-pointed cross of the Knights. This means that unfortunately there is no way to identify the creator of door knockers and the date of their creation.

Tools for the Blacksmith

Mr Xerri explained that in the past, prior to the advent of electricity, everything had to be done manually. His father worked long hours, starting from six in the morning till nine in the evening in order to meet the demand. Mr Xerri stated that every blacksmith needs three essential tools to start working with iron, mainly the forge, the hammer and the anvil. He added that he and his brother are still using the same tools, pointing out at a hammer and an anvil that have lasted hundreds of years. Another important tool is the leg vice or 'morsa'. Its called a leg vice because it has a long leg that extends to the floor, thus allowing the ground to absorb the force delivered to the piece of iron being hammered.



Fig 10 - The hammer, the anvil and the leg-vice

Today the brothers own two forges, namely the old coal forge and the gas fuel forge. Here he pointed out to the old bellow 'il-minfaħ', which later was replaced by the electric blower. The bellow was manned manually and controlled the airflow, bringing the fire to a large flame or a small flame as the blacksmith required. According to Mr Xerri, the gas fuel forge, although it burns cleaner, lacks the high temperature that the coal forge delivers. In fact, the coal forge achieves fire temperatures of around 1100 degrees celcius, and thus is still used when working with large, thick items. On the other hand, gas forges are used for smaller projects. He claimed that they still have old coal that used to come on barges and he recounted experiences of how they used to get the coal they needed.

Sometimes, he said they even bought coal that used to be thrown on purpose in the sea, with people having to dive for it in the evening to then sell it.



Fig 11 - The hand blower and the coal forge

Door knockers made locally

When Mr Xerri was asked what type of door knockers they used to produce, he stated that they did simple door knockers for urban and rural dwellings, these being either round or pear-shaped. Elaborate door knockers were ordered mainly for houses and palaces. Here he recounted the story of Palazzo Falson in Mdina and how his grandfather worked on a pair of ornamented door knockers commissioned by Olaf Gollcher. Unfortunately one of these was stolen. This was never replaced, stating that it would have cost around 2000 Maltese Lira at the time.

He explained that elaborate door knockers took around a month to do because these were patiently sculptured with a chisel. Some door knockers were made from one piece of metal, while others were made from two pieces and joined in the middle.

The former took longer to make. He continued to explain that when an order for a door knocker was received, usually the carpenter took the necessary measurements of the door and decided on the size of the door knocker, whether one or a pair sufficed and the style that suited the door most. In some instances, they were approached by the designer who was commissioned to do its sketch, especially when it was an elaborate door knocker.

Mr Xerri continued by saying that sometimes they did door knockers that were fitted with the lock of the door, meaning that one of these door knockers had a dual function. In fact, besides used as a knocker, when turned it used to lift also the piece of metal/tongue in the lock, thus opening the door. On its back there used to be a squarish hole permitting it to turn. When asked if this allowed anyone to enter the house, he confirmed that this was the case, stating that at the time it was the tradition for people to leave their key in the door, so this was not an issue. The information provided by Mr Xerri was substantiated by social media groups like Maltese Heraldry and Malta Vintage History, wherein people recounted stories from their childhood, where they used to pull these intricate door knockers, thus knocking and running away as fast as they could.



Fig 12 - Iron works at Palazzo Falson and pear-shaped doorknocker in wrought iron

Materials and Finish

When Mr Xerri was asked what type of metal was used for the make of door knockers, he answered that common metal was used. At the time metal was imported directly from the UK, which came from mines. He confirmed that the best metal was called 'mysteel 16 solid' since it was very malleable, allowing them to work therewith. He claimed that they still own some of this hundred year old metal, which today they use mainly for winding staircases. He shared that today's metal is made of recycled melted items, which form a mixture which does not meet past standards.

Other Accessories related to portal

Mr Xerri was asked whether the door knocker was given a finish, but he claimed that at the time they used to heat it up, and wipe it with a wet cloth dipped in burnt oil to preclude it from corroding/rusting immediately. They let it dry and gave it a polish with linseed oil. It was the carpenter who later used to give it a colour to suit the door.

Besides door knockers, Mr Xerri pointed out that they used to produce other items related to the door. They made bars which were fitted on the inside of the door for better safety, and secret keys – ‘imfietah sigrieti’. There were two types of keys, the ‘muftieh’ which was considered a male key and the ‘cavetta’, the female key which had a hole and was considered more difficult to make, thus rendering its lock more expensive. Both keys had their respective male and female locks. As the name implies the secret key had a secret way to open the door, thus making it safer in case it was stolen, because the owner of the house had to remember personal data. He added that brass keys were ordered mostly because of their shiny polish which made them look more elegant, but they were less durable than iron. The author then asked Mr Xerri why on a two winged maltese door one tends to see two keyholes, one on each side. He affirmed that one was used for the everyday key, simpler to use when entering or exiting the house several times during the day. The other was used mainly when one was going out on a longer mission or when locking the door for the night. Some locks even had an iron bolt fitted with them so when one is locking with a key, the door is locked also with a bolt for more safety.

Moreover, they produced handles for vintage doorbells which would have been in the form of a ring. Another item which today we rarely use is the shoe scraper which we normally see set in semi-circular niches beside the front doors of most homes. In the first decades of the century before streets became asphalted, footpaths were lined with scrapers to wipe off the mud and excrement before going indoors.

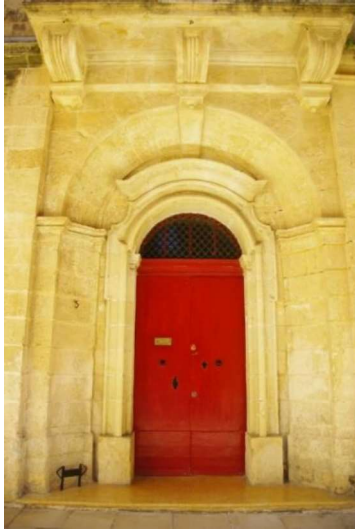


Fig 13- The fanlight, the two key holes, the boot scraper made of wrought iron (photo by Sandra Friggieri)

Fig 14- Balcony in Archbishop Street, Valletta (photo by Sandra Friggieri)

Nowadays wrought iron is still used to make fanlights – ‘loġġ/vilestrun’ - above the door to let in light and air. Wrought iron is also used to make open balconies, pregnant windows, winding stairs and gates.

In conclusion Mr Xerri mentioned some of their works, including the famous balcony in Archbishop Steet, Valletta, the crypt of Grand Master Jean de Valette, the iron works around St Albert’s statue in the main square of Ghargħur, and the decorated facades of several band clubs. Lastly the author asked Mr Xerri what is the secret of producing a really good job. He explained that he was taught by his father to only work for an hour or two on the same item, before then moving on to work on something else, since if you continue pressing on the same item, the result would be unsatisfactory.

FINAL ARGUMENTS

Recommendations

In Venice, in the Correr Museum, one finds one of the largest collections of Italian door knockers that belonged to distinguished people like the Grimani, Gradenigo and Medici families (Trofimova, 2010). Similarly, these works of art should be exhibited in Malta, considering the complexity required to make them. Mr Chetcuti confirmed that door knockers on houses awaiting demolition were recycled by himself; these should be exhibited together with others that heirs or noble families would be grateful to give as collectables. Information panels showing how these evolved over time, the materials used, what they symbolize, and the traditions attached to them would surely be quite interesting.

Lack of information, such as that related to their age and their manufacturers, and to whether they were produced locally or abroad could possibly be overcome in the future if craftsmen start applying their stamp on the finished product. Here the author managed to find a set of door knockers on a door pertaining to a band club with a stamp of the bronzesmith, thus determining the timeframe.



Figure 3 - Door knocker at St Joseph Band Club, Zebbuġ (photos by Sandra Friggieri)

This subject can be studied further, and considering that Italy was the hub for local artists to study and work, and that Malta was sought by Italian artists to settle permanently or for long spans to produce their art, more information can surely be retrieved from national libraries and archives abroad. There are other sectors that could be studied under the title of this subject. Cultural anthropology – the study of human culture by analyzing these artistic artifacts - could have been included in this research. Moreover, a quantitative method of research of styles of doorknobs and door knockers could be also interesting. However, due to time constraints and work count limitation, this was not possible.

Conclusion

There is a clear interest by locals and tourists alike to know more about doorknobs and door knockers. Walking tours, especially along the streets of our cities Birgu, Mdina and Valletta, are numerous all year round. Another approach as to the way one can conduct a tour is to share our living culture with people by giving value to these cultural assets, thus linking the commentary of architectural buildings and portals to these artistic works of art. Giving the right balance would add spice to the tour. Door knockers have survived the mechanical and electrical doorbells and today different motifs embellish our streets, some even by their symbolic or superstitious role. Indeed, culture embraces what people think, their beliefs, ideas, and values, what they do, their lifestyle and customs and what they create, our works of art, and cultural products.

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