Pietro Paolo Caruana: The First Lithographs Produced in Malta

Lithograph is derived from two Greek words: lithos, stone and graphia, writing or drawing. Some of the very earliest drawings made by man must have been lithographs—drawings on stone. First, it was the stone of a cavern; much later, it became the wall of a sanctuary.

With the invention of printing, artists found the means of multiplying the objects of their creative talent by using wood blocks for relief printing and metal plates for the intaglio or gravure process. For three centuries wood and metal engravings held sway as the only reproductive arts. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century (1798) that a new reproductive process was invented in Germany by Alois Senefelder, a Bavarian, which later came to be known as lithography because stone was the medium used for the drawing to be reproduced.

As a form of art, lithography consists of drawing with greasy crayon or ink on a suitable type of stone. It is an application of the natural principle that oil and water do not mix. The design is drawn on the smooth surface of the stone with a greasy substance and the rest of the surface is wet; when the greasy printing ink is rolled over the whole, the moisture prevents it from adhering to the stone in those parts which are not covered by the drawing. The design is then transferred to paper with the aid of a press. For this reason, Senefelder named it “Polyautography” or “Chemical Printing”. The name “lithography” did not appear until 1803 and it was used on a piece of music printed from stone in France with the description “Charenton près de Paris, à l'imprimerie lithographique”.

Senefelder and some artists realised the possibilities of this new method, and started to experiment with it in Germany and on the continent. Artists' lithography progressed first of all in England where a patent for the invention

Abbreviations used:
CMM — Cathedral Museum, Mdina
MGG — The Malta Government Gazette
NLM — National Library, Malta
PAV — Palace Archive, Valletta
PRM — Public Registry, Malta
SDCV — St. Dominic's Church, Valletta
SPCV — St. Paul's Church, Valletta
was taken out in August 1801. There is documentary evidence that a certain Giovanni Dall'Armell received a licence in 1805 or 1806 to open a printing and publishing establishment for lithography in Rome (1). It was not before another twenty years that the first lithographs were produced in Malta. The pioneer was Pietro Paolo Caruana.

He was born in Valletta on the 4th January 1793 to M. Teresa Marchett and Giuseppe Caruana (probably a watch-maker) and was baptized at the Parish Church of Porto Salvo. The names confirmed upon him were: Joseph, Joannes, Petrus Paulus, Vincentius, Carmelus, Antonius (2). His background is unknown but he must have been initiated in the fine arts when Michele Busuttil and Giorgio Pullicino were instructing the young how to draw. Probably, he received a good education for, when the plague broke out in 1813, he was appointed, at the age of twenty, "Officiale di Barriera" and Clerk of Permits at a salary of £30 per annum. He served in this capacity from the 15th July until the end of the year (3).

It has been written that in 1814 Caruana was sent to Rome on a government scholarship together with another young artist, Giuseppe Hyzler, and that he came back to Malta in 1823. These scholarships were awarded on the initiative of Mgr. (Later Bishop) Francesco Saverio Caruana, who had been one of the leaders of the Maltese insurgents against Napoleon's army but who was also a patron of the arts (4). When the infirm, at the request of the Maltese, passed under the protection of the British Crown, Mgr. Caruana was appointed Rector of the University and he introduced at the Lyceum the study of drawing, painting, sculpture and architecture.

Pietro Paolo Caruana was not sent to Rome in 1814. Indeed, it was not until the 12th January 1819 that the Chief Secretary informed Messrs. Torlonia & Co., that Pietro Paolo Caruana was being sent there "in order that he may have the benefit of attending, or being placed under, one or more of the First Artists of that city". The bankers were instructed to pay to Caruana, from the date of his arrival, the same allowance as the other two Maltese youths (5) were receiving, namely, forty Roman dollars (6) per month (7). Caruana left Malta on the 19th February 1819 on board the Sardinian brig "Notte Signora del Carmelo" destined for Civitavecchia (8).

Two months before Caruana's departure, the first investiture in Malta of the newly constituted Order of St. Michael and St. George took place with great ceremony in the "Sala del Maggior Consiglio" at the Palace. The distinguished persons in Malta upon whom the dignities of the Order were conferred, assembled on the 16th December 1818, were invested in due form by the first Grand Master of the Order, Sir Thomas Maitland, Governor of Malta and Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands (9). Before leaving for Rome, Caruana presumably received Maitland's commission to paint two pictures to hang in the "Sala del Maggior Consiglio", one representing St. George and the Dragon and the other recording St. Michael's triumph over the Dragon. The recipients of the allowance at the time were probably Giuseppe Hyzler and Salvatore Busuttil. I have so far been unable to confirm that Hyzler left Malta in 1814; he was certainly back in 1823 when he kept a studio at Piazza Regina, no. 3 (MGG, 1 August 1823). Busuttil's presence in Rome in September 1818 is established from the records of the Accademia di San Luca where he won a first prize in the "scuola del medaglie"; he never abandoned Italy, and he died in Rome in 1854 at the age of 56. Giovanni Farrugia was also given a Government scholarship during the same period and in 1823 it was intended he should "repair to Florence with the view of prosecuting his studies in the art of engraving under the tuition of Morgenthal" (Letter 23 January 1823 Chief Secretary to Torlonia & Co. — PAV, Letter Book No. 7, p. 169); however, he was certainly present at the Accademia di San Luca between April-November 1824 (New, entitled "Professori e studenti di Belle Arti in torno all'Oratorio tenuto nella Chiesa di S. Giuliano da Fiamminghi", dates 24 April, 8 May, 15 May, 19 June, 16 July, 6 November, 13 November). Later, Tommaso Madonna also attended the Accademia (Same ms., from the 1st July 1827 onwards). In the preceding century, the following Maltese artists won prizes at the Accademia: Giuseppe Casha (1760, 1762); Giuseppe Grech (1780, 1781, 1782); Michele Busuttil (1782); Giorgio Pullicino (1797, 1799, 1800). I have not found any reference to Hyzler or Caruana in the few extant records at the Accademia. Unfortunately, no lists of students have been preserved.


2. SDCV, Baptismal registers, Vol. XII (1787-1797). The year of Carnana's birth has so far been always wrongly given as 1794.


Lucifer. Evidence that the paintings were executed abroad can be gleaned from the comment of a Roman journal “Notizie del Giorno”: it wrote about the artist and these two pictures: “gli meritano la lode de' professori dell'arte, e il pubblico plauso” (10). It must be pointed out, however, that they are not original work but reproductions of two well-known paintings (11).

Once in Rome, Caruana (like Hyzler) joined the Brotherhood of Artists for the improvement of Sacred Art, a movement headed by the German Frederic Overbeck. He also became a pupil and a very close friend of Tommaso Minardi, who was godfather to Caruana’s eldest son, Raffaele (12). The latter was born in Rome in 1820 (13) and he was destined to follow his father’s footsteps.

Sir Thomas Maitland died on the 17th January 1824 and he was succeeded by the Marquis of Hastings, Earl of Moira. At a Levée held at the Palace on the 1st January 1825, the guests were gratified with a sight of a full length portrait of George IV copied by Pietro Paolo Caruana from the famous painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence at the Vatican. Hastings had requested Caruana to paint this picture, after having obtained from the Holy See a special permission for the purpose. It was remarked at the time that “for truth, good colouring, and ease” this copy appeared little inferior to the original (14).

These were extremely good beginnings for our young artist who was lucky to be able to continue his studies in Italy for a few more years. Indeed, in 1824, Caruana ran a serious risk of being recalled to Malta together with his two companions. After Maitland’s death, it was not until the 7th June 1824 that his successor arrived in Malta. During the interim administration, the Chief Secretary advised Messrs Torlonia on the 30th March that “the allowance hitherto granted to the three Maltese artists resident at Rome for some years past, and paid by you, is to cease on the 30th of June next”. The

10. Article by Sig. Misdrini reproduced in MGG, 21 October 1823, p. 3691. See also Dr. N. Zannini’s biography of P.P. Caruana in L’Arte, 7 January 1864, Anno II, no. 28, pp. 2-4, illustrated with Caruana’s portrait lithographed by J. Trapani after G. Callipa. The last £50 in aettlement for these two pictures were paid to Caruana in April 1828 (PAV, Letter book no. 9, p. 469).
11. R. Bonnici Call, op. cit., p. 36.
13. PFM, Act of death no. 2670 of 28 September 1866, according to which Raffaele died at the age of 66; Rome is given as his birthplace.
14. MGG, 5 January 1824, p. 2. V. Bonello (op. cit.) wrote that Caruana was sent by the Government to Rome to paint this copy. This is incorrect, as Caruana was studying in Rome between 1819 and 1827. Indeed, the Gazette stated: “Mr. Pietro Paolo Caruana, one of the Maltese students at Rome, was allowed to take a copy of this celebrated likeness”. 

The Madonna in art.

THE FIRST LITHOGRAPHS

banks were also authorised to advance to “these young Gentlemen” a sufficient sum of money to enable them to pay the expenses of their voyage in returning to Malta (15).

For some unknown reason, this decision was not carried into effect (16).

When Hastings died, Malta was placed on the establishment of a Lieutenant Governorship, to lessen the heavy charge upon the revenue of the island. When Sir Frederick Cavendish Ponsonby took the oath of office, one of his first steps was to implement the decision taken three years before, and, on the 16th March 1827, Messrs Torlonia were requested to communicate to the three artists that the allowance issued to them would stop immediately (17).

After a stay of more than eight years, Caruana’s Roman sojourn was coming to an end. Probably, Caruana decided to stay on till the end of June. Before the time came for the family to move, Pietro Paolo’s wife was bearing her third child. There is room for conjecture that the Caruanas wanted for this reason to remain in Rome for another year and they might have decided that Pietro Paolo should leave for Malta to try and persuade the Government of Malta to extend the allowance for this period. The fact is that Pietro Paolo Caruana arrived in Malta alone on the 12th August 1827 on board the “Assunta” (18).

After a short stay, during which he might have looked around for a suitable house to accommodate his family, Caruana left on the 1st September (19). On the 28th October 1827 the “Favorita” (20) brought Caruana back to Malta.

16. For 1824 the Malta Government paid Torlonia & Co. £417.16s.5d in respect of the Maltese artists at Rome (see Malta, London, Wm. Clowes, 1828, p. 16. This is a book “containing the Financial accounts, Return of Establishments and Statements of other matters relating to the Island” of Malta laid before the Committee appointed by the House of Commons to enquire into the existing state of the Revenues and Expenditure of the British Empire. See PAV, Despatch Secretary to State of Gov- ernor, 5 June 1828).
18. English schooner, 156 tons (PAV, Register of arrivals Vol. 26, entry 12 August 1827. The voyage took 13 days from Leghorn and 6 days from Civitavecchia (where Caruana probably embarked). This port is about 46 miles north of Rome. As the road connecting them was a good one, it took only seven days to cover the distance (See Letter Chief Secretary from Rome to Ponsonby, 12 Nov. 1827, NLM, Libr. A.31).
20. Brig-schooner of 82 tons from Leghorn (12 days) and Porto Ercole (4 days) (PAV, Register of arrivals, Vol. 26, entry 28 Oct. 1827)
accompanied by his wife Ursolina, and his two sons Raffaele and Salvatore. A daughter, Maria Anna, was born at Floriana on the 13th February 1828 (21). As will later be seen when discussing the album of lithographs, it is important to establish who were the members of Caruana’s family at this particular period.

Apart from pioneering lithography in Malta, Caruana made his mark as a painter and several pictures from his easel are to be found both in private and public collections (22). On the 5th November 1831, he was appointed teacher of drawing at the Lyceum (23), but, apart from his academic qualifications, his art was well-received by his contemporaries, including foreign travellers.

“Nel palazzo del governatore ho anche ammirato... variere tele di pittori maltesi, tra le quali mi parvero notevoli quelle di Pietro Paolo Caruana” wrote Padre Baruffi (24), whilst George French Angas (25), another traveller, remembered him as “an artist of considerable merit” and a “pleasing master”.

Dr. Cesare Vassallo, the Librarian, described him as a “valente pittore” (26) and, a few years before his death, a local paper eulogised “il sommo impegno di un artista di talento”.

His salary was £20 p.a., increased to £50 on the 1st January 1839, (NLM, Libr. A19, loc.cit). He filled a vacancy created by the death (or retirement) of Michele Busuttil.

In 1836, when, at the behest of Maltese politicians, a Royal Commission was finally appointed to inquire into the affairs of the island, a national assembly of 100 members was formed for the purpose of laying the grievances of the inhabitants before the Commissioners. It consisted of representatives of all the towns and villages, as well as of members elected by constituted bodies, the professions and the trades (30). At a meeting held on the 12th November 1836 at no. 24 Sda. Reale, Valletta, “Il Corpo delle Belle Arti del Disegno” resolved to elect as their deputies in the Assembly “Michele Cachia per la branca dell’Architettura e Pubblica Agrimensura ed il Sigr. Giorgio Pullicino in sua assenza, e per la Pittura e Scultura il Sigr. Pietro Paolo Caruana” (31). This shows that Caruana was held in high esteem by his fellows-artists.

Pietro Paolo Caruana died suddenly on the 23rd April 1852 survived by his second wife and nine children. His last work was a painting of St. Augustine for the Church of the Nuns of St. Catherine. He was buried in the same church where he had been baptised (32).

Practically all those who have written about Caruana have given little importance to his contribution to the graphic arts and no one seems ever to have mentioned that Pietro Paolo Caruana was the very first artist to print lithographs in Malta.

Years ago, I came across a copy of Caruana’s album of lithographs. Possibly, it is the only copy extant; undoubtedly, it is a very rare piece of Melitensia. It is entitled “Costumi Maltesi” and it contains ten pictures in oblong form (150 x 237 mm.). It has a printer frontispiece and a greenish blue cover. On the front cover is a lithograph depicting the artist’s studio.

Although the picture is rather worn, the outlines are distinct. The drawing shows Caruana and his family in a large room with a rib-vaulted ceiling. On the extreme right, the artist’s name and address are inscribed on a tablet propped up on an easel, next to which, his son (Raffaele) is holding up a tablet on which the title of the album is written.

22. It has been written that “Besides engaging in original works, Caruana was kept busy working on all sorts of reproductions of topical and court paintings which were in great demand by the public. In fact, when either a royal visitor came to our Islands or else a royal birthday or other occasion fall due, the Maltese artist...” (J. Cardona, Peter Paolo Caruana. In The Sunday Times of Malta, 27 April 1958, p. 12). The writer was probably referring to Caruana’s commemoratory lithographs, as, for example, that entitled “Assunzione dei Malti (atta al R. Commissionari il 26 Ottobre 1836)” (183 x 298 mm.).
23. His salary was £20 p.a., increased to £50 on the 1st January 1839, (NLM, Libr. A19, loc.cit). He filled a vacancy created by the death (or retirement) of Michele Busuttil.
27. II Portafoglio Maltese, no. 483, 5 August 1847, entry dated 24 April 1852.
28. MGQ, 9 Sept. 1829, p. 299.
29. N. Zammit, op. cit.
30. (G. Mitrovich?) Maltese claims. London, 1837, pp. 5-8. The assembly was called Comitato Generale Maltese.
32. Ibid., 31 September 1855.
The artist is in the centre, reclining in a chair, with a child in his lap and another resting its hands on his knee. His wife (33) is standing on his left, affectionately holding up a lamp from which the artist is lighting a cigar. At the far end, on the left, a woman is sitting, looking on the scene as if she does not belong. The painter is dressed in an artist's garb, with large beret and a long protective apron.

The drawing is a charming composition, with the low perspective of the ceiling infusing more warmth to the scene, and it is probably the only picture that has come down to us of a Maltese artist's studio in the 19th century.

The frontispiece does not seem to leave any room for doubt that it was Pietro Paolo Caruana who first used in Malta the new process of chemical printing for the multiplication of his drawings. Indeed, it reads as follows:

"To the Right Honourable/Lady Emily Ponsonby,/This early essay in the Lithographic art,/never before attempted in His Britannic (sic) Majesty's Mediterranean Possessions,/delineating the various cost­umes of the Maltese,/is humbly dedicated/by the most devoted of His Majesty's faithful subjects./Paolo Caruana".

Although officially Caruana was named Giuseppe, he was always known as Pietro Paolo. Occasionally, as in this instance and in the "Status animarum" of 1833, his name is given as Paolo. It was quite common in those days for the first name to be dropped in favour of the second or the third.

Being an "early essay", these lithographs are, as one would expect, rather primitive, but quite satisfying. Caruana must have learnt in Rome what kind of stone (or marble) he should use, how the stone was to be prepared properly and which correct ink to utilise. The main feature of this "early essay" lies in the fact that Caruana was not yet very familiar with the technique of drawing on a smooth surface with pen or chalk. He was still mastering the new art, although his first attempt can be described as quite a successful experiment. A manuscript record exists of Caruana having produced at least two engravings during his Roman sojourn, one of which was dated 1822 and depicted the Virgin and Child (34). But these were probably engravings on copper, although at the time we do find the word "incisione" used for a lithograph.

The lithographs in this album are coloured by hand, presumably by Caruana himself. The technique of colour printing of lithographs is highly specialised and it only came into existence several decades after the publication of Caruana's album. Both the subject of the Lithographs (mostly street vendors) and the colours used by the artist himself are of prime importance for the study of the Maltese costume and folklore of the period. Besides, they are very pleasing.

These are the subjects of the Lithographs in the album:
1. Vendor of ladies' ware, household goods or, maybe, souvenirs.
2. Water-seller (an oft-repeated subject in water-colours of the period).
3. Transport by donkey.
4. Fishmonger.
5. Fruit (and vegetable?) vendors.
6. Cloth merchant at the quayside.
7. Milk vendors.
8. Cane-basket (or strawberry?) vendor.
9. Street hawkers (settling accounts?).
10. Country musicians playing the tambourine and the bagpipe, or "zaqq". (35)

The album must have been printed at Caruana's lithographic establishment, although the frontispiece was probably produced at the Government Printing Office. In Ponsonby's time, the Maltese were still being denied a free press, and, apart from the Government press, there were only two other printing presses, one belonging to a Protestant Missionary Society working under licence and an official one at the Commissariat Department.

The address of Caruana's studio printed on the front cover of the album cannot easily be identified. Possibly, it reads "Strada Britannica". From other sources, I have succeeded in establishing that in the early part of the year

34. CMM, Primo costo. Spese della raccolta di stampe, quadri e disegni ed anche d'argenti, e d'altro piccoli fatte dal Conte Saverio Marchesi fin dall'anno 1791". Marchesi paid 4 tari for the engraving of the Virgin and Child.

1828, Caruana was living at Floriana, Piazza Miratore, no. 42 (36). However, in September 1829 the public was invited to view at his house (in sua casa) at 98, Strada Britannica (Valletta), the Shipwreck of St. Paul he had painted for a Church in Tripoli (37). In the 1820's, the block of buildings at 97 to 101 Strada Britannica was used as store houses by the English (38). This block stood at the extreme north end of the street, facing Tigné Point. It was destroyed during the war and completely rebuilt as apartment dwellings.

Caruana took up residence at this address sometime between 1828 and 1829. He probably used the premises as a “casaboutega”, because the first guide-book of the Maltese Islands, published in 1830, states that “from the windmills overlooking Marsamuscetto” the visitor “may descend to the paint­ing study and lithography of Mr. Caruana, who uses his utmost endeavours to render himself perfect in his art. Leaving the study and proceeding along the bastions of Marsamuscetto...” (39).

Later, Caruana moved his establishment to no. 236 Strada Sant'Ursola, whence, in 1838-40 (40), with the help of his son Raffaele, he produced his “magnum opus” on the monuments and tombstones in St. John's Co-Cathedral, “essendo questo un genere da me, per la prima volta, in quest’isola introdotto”.

In three folio volumes. In the dedication of the work, Caruana stresses that he was the first to introduce lithography in Malta: “essendo questo un genere da me, per la prima volta, in quest’isola introdotto”. This was still Caruana’s business address in 1849, but when he died in 1852 he was living at no. 8, Strada Tramontana (41).

What now remains to be established is the year of publication of the album.

All the lithographs are signed with the initials “PPC”, with the letter “L” appearing on the first 240 lithographs of the tombstone at St. John's Cathedral. The monogram means: “Petrus Paulus Caruana”.

The copy of the album I have examined belonged to “E.M. Starkie”, signed on the frontispiece, at the head. This is almost certainly the name of Edmund Starkie, ’Apothecary to the Forces, who married Elisabeth Moira Hastings at the Govern­ment Chapel in the Palace on the 4th September 1827.

At the foot of the portrait is the following distich by Dr. L. Mifsud Thomasi (sic):

“Ineque quae cervis clarus, Melle, Caruana est,

Claritas ex illo parvula nomen habebit

Beneath is the imprint: “Lith. P. Paolo Caruana. Malta 1831.” Mons. Caruana be­came Archbishop of Malta on the 28th February 1831, and the lithograph was pro­duced for the occasion. It shows Mons. Caruana’s coat of arms surmounted by an Archbishops hat.

In 1830 Tommaso Madonna, another young Maltese artist studying in Rome since about 1827, was trying his hand at lithography. He designed on stone ten heads from the famous picture by Raffaello “The descent from the cross” which were printed at the lithographic establishment of the Roman Giovanni Dall'Armi. They were selling in Malta for 1s. per print (MGG, 9 March 1830). Dall’Armi died in 1829 but Settimio Rosi carried on with the firm at least until 1834.

The monogram appearing on the first 240 lithographs of the tombstones at St. John’s consists of three letters superimposed “CPP”. On the remaining plates, the mono­gram changes to two letters “CP”, when it appears.

The copy of the album I have examined belonged to “E.M. Starkie”, signed on the frontispiece, at the head. This is almost certainly the name of Edmund Starkie, Apothecary to the Forces, who married Elisabeth Moira Hastings at the Govern­ment Chapel in the Palace on the 4th September 1827.

At the foot of the portrait is the following distich by Dr. L. Mifsud Thomasi (sic):

“Ineque quae cervis clarus, Melle, Caruana est,

Claritas ex illo parvula nomen habebit

Beneath is the imprint: “Lith. P. Paolo Caruana. Malta 1831.” Mons. Caruana be­came Archbishop of Malta on the 28th February 1831, and the lithograph was pro­duced for the occasion. It shows Mons. Caruana’s coat of arms surmounted by an Archbishops hat.

In 1830 Tommaso Madonna, another young Maltese artist studying in Rome since about 1827, was trying his hand at lithography. He designed on stone ten heads from the famous picture by Raffaello “The descent from the cross” which were printed at the lithographic establishment of the Roman Giovanni Dall’Armi. They were selling in Malta for 1s. per print (MGG, 9 March 1830). Dall’Armi died in 1829 but Settimio Rosi carried on with the firm at least until 1834.
was much cheaper than that of copper-engraving, and the output of the local artists in this field became considerable. Michele Bellanti, the Schranz brothers, and the Brocktorff family (Cay, Luigi, Federico, Giuseppe and Leopoldo) produced between them hundreds of lithographs.

The first lithographs of Malta views were printed abroad in 1826. They were executed on stone by Filippo Benucci from sketches drawn by Benucci himself and by Antonio Schranz, and they were printed in Munich at the lithographic establishment of Lacroix. But the earliest incunabulum of lithographs drawn, executed and printed in Malta is the album of Maltese Costumes by Pietro Paolo Caruana!