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PIETRO PAOLO AZZOPARDI — A FORGOTTEN SCULPTOR

The lack of a comprehensive and coherent History of Maltese Art has tended to obscure the authorship of many valid contributions to our sculptural heritage. The works of Pietro Paolo Azzopardi, a gifted 19th-century sculptor, have not been spared from this cruel fate. Except for a brief note in the Appendix to P.P. Castagna’s History of Malta, Azzopardi has long been relegated to the realms of oblivion.

In this short talk I propose to deal briefly with Azzopardi’s life and works.

LIFE

Small Boy in Valletta

Pietro Paolo Azzopardi was born on 20 April 1791, and died on 24 October 1875 — a long life of 84 years.

The youngest of three children born to Antonio Azzopardi and his wife Maria nee Camilleri, he was baptized in the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked, Valletta, on 21 April 1791, and christened Salvator, Joseph, Petrus, Paulus, Jeremias in that order. (1) In adulthood, however, he invariably qualified himself Maestro Scultore Pietro Paolo Azzopardi. (2)

Little is known about his parents. His father, whose occupation remains obscure, hailed from Cospicua, while his mother’s family resided in the suburb of Floriana. (3) Pietro Paolo’s parents were married in the Church of St Publius, Floriana, which then fell under the jurisdiction of the Valletta Parish of St Paul. (4)

Pietro Paolo certainly received some form of elementary schooling, possibly in Valletta. Literacy was not widespread among his contemporaries — certainly not among his fellow craftsmen — and Azzopardi seems to have

2. Pietro Paolo gave three different spellings for his surname: Azoppardi, Azzoppardi and Azzopardi. For the sake of convenience I have adopted the modern rendering of the surname, Azzopardi.
4. Ibid
The years of Azzopardi’s youth saw the expulsion from Malta of the Knights of St. John, the Maltese insurrection against the French and the gradual but decisive consolidation of the British administration in our Islands. The Maltese Islands were also visited by plague in 1813 and a cholera epidemic in 1837. The profound political changes and social upheavals of Azzopardi’s lifetime were probably as fundamental and as all-pervasive as those experienced within a comparable span of time in our own period.

Yet even this was not all. Antonio Azzopardi, Pietro Paolo’s father, died in hospital in Valletta on 27 July 1808. (6) Pietro Paolo was then only 17 years of age. Evidently he had already made up his mind to become a sculptor; his first dateable work is a statue of the Redeemer, carved in stone in 1808. (7) And it would appear that the early loss of his father and a series of family tragedies merely had the effect of strengthening his determination to survive and succeed in his craft against all odds.

First Marriage
On 28 October 1817 Azzopardi married Giovanna Rosa Camilleri; the entry of his marriage in the register of the parish church of Cospicua records the fact that he was then a parishioner of that same town. (6) Yet there is evidence to show that, by 1806, Pietro Paolo and his parents had already moved house from Valletta to Cospicua. In fact, the Status Annumarum (1805) for Cospicua lists the Azzopardi family and gives a vague indication of the family’s address — Quartiere 25, Casa I, nella strada in cui si notano vagabondi. (9) The sinister allusion to vagabonds perhaps suggests that the sculptor’s parents had fallen on hard times. It is possible that the Azzopardi family may have moved out of Valletta sometime during the Maltese blockade of the French garrison in that city. At any rate, it is certain that Azzopardi opened his first workshop in Cospicua, and that his early sculptures were executed in that town.

Giovanna Rosa came from a family of traders with landed property in Zabbar and Qrendi. (11) She bore her husband six children, but only three survived their parents: Salvatore, born in 1824; Maria Concetta, born in 1826; and Giuseppe, born in 1830. (11)

Financially, the first years of Azzopardi’s marriage were far from rosy. His first important commission did not arrive before 1828, when the Cospicua Confraternity of the Holy Rosary commissioned him to carve a statue of the Virgin. (12) Meanwhile, Azzopardi had to content himself with carving stone effigies of saints for street shrines or otherwise restoring or completing statues carved by established sculptors. (13) Poverty and sometimes actual want must have been Azzopardi’s lot during these early years of his career.

The tide did turn for Azzopardi, but not before he suffered a severe blow of misfortune. On 22 December 1833 his wife Giovanna Rosa died in childbirth at the early age of 37, and the newborn infant died soon after baptism. (14) Pietro Paolo was passing through a difficult time. With three children to look after — the eldest 9 and the youngest barely 3 — it is hardly surprising that Azzopardi should before long be on the lookout for a second wife.

Busy Years (1838 — 1845)

His choice fell on Antonia Attard, whom he married on 5 May 1836 in the Parish Church of Porto Salvo, Valletta. (15) There were no children from this second marriage. The union was apparently a successful one and appears to have afforded Azzopardi the necessary peace of mind to concentrate on his sculptures. Between 1838 and 1848 he carved no less than seven pro­cessional images.

It says much for Azzopardi that, despite his many setbacks, he was no recluse. He appears to have been sincerely interested in the artistic life of his Island home. He belonged to the Corpus Belle Arti del Disegno, and his signature appears on three contracts, on a Will, on the electoral register of the Corpo delle Belle Arti del Disegno (1836), and on one of his sculptures. No doubt it appears also on some of his other sculptures; local carvers discreetly concealed their name in the carving itself, and unless one is aware of this one may miss it altogether! For Vincenzo Dimech’s signature on his statue of St. Publius, see O. Friggieri, Il-Furjana, 1978, 4, p. 2.

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7. P.P. Castagna, Le Storia Ta Maltà Bil Gieejr Talha, III, 1900, p. 205.


11. See below Note 36 and 37.

12. P.P. Castagna, op. cit., p. 205. It is a pity that the Confraternity’s record, for this period were lost during World War II.

13. See below Note 36 and 37.


References:
5. See below Note 36 and 37.
7. P.P. Castagna, Le Storia Ta Maltà Bil Gieejr Talha, III, 1900, p. 205.
in 1836 was one of the signatories for the election of Michele Cachia and Pietro Paolo Caruana to represent that body in the national assembly on the occasion of the appointment of a Royal Commission to inquire into the affairs of Malta. (16)

It is a pity that we have no contemporary description or identifiable portrait of Azzopardi. His signature appears on five original documents ranging in date between 1838 and 1862. All reveal a bold, steady hand. Azzopardi was certainly proud of his profession — the appellative maestro scultore or plainly scultore always accompanies his signature.

Return to Valletta

A private writing dated 1 July 1855 shows that at that same date Azzopardi was a resident of Valletta. (17) And in November 1857 a panel of three artists (artisti periti) visited his home, situated at No 7 Strada Ponente, Valletta, to report on one of his statues, which had become the subject of a heated dispute: Per eseguire doverosamente il commissione incarico, esaminammo come richiede Varte, la statua in questione nella casa dell’Attore Pietro Paolo Azzoppardi situata nella Valletta, Strada Ponente No 7. (18) It was also from this address that the statue of the Bambino, completed by Azzopardi in 1853, was conveyed to the Carmelita Church in Valletta, to be solemnly inaugurated by Bishop Publius Sant. (19) It was also clear that his residence was in fact a casa bottega.

Last Will and Testament

The practice of his craft does not seem to have brought Azzopardi any great or regular income. Old age in particular, which forced him to reduce an activity in which physical strength played an important part, left him in financial embarrassment, if not in poverty.

This state of affairs clearly emerges from the Will which Pietro Paolo

16. A. Ganado, The First Lithographs Produced in Malta, in/re, p. 55
17. Process Appell Civili, 8A/1858, 4r.
18. Ibid., 20r.
20. A deed published by Notary Calcedonio Battajille on 18/4/1841 shows that at that same date Azzopardi was a resident of Cospicua.

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made jointly with his wife, Antonia, on 30 September 1862. The testators appointed their son Giuseppe as their sole universal heir, while their other two children, Salvatore and Maria Concetta, were the principal beneficiaries under the Will. However, the testators made it clear that Giuseppe was receiving preferential treatment in view of the financial assistance which he had afforded his parents during their old age. And it is expressly stated in the Will that in the absence of such assistance the testators would have been obliged to sell their belongings in order to procure their livelihood:

...dichiarando essi Testator! che in difetto delle suddette somme essi Testatori hanno potuto fin oggi conservare i loro beni. (21)

This makes sad reading. Yet the reasons for the testators' partiality in favour of Giuseppe may have been more complex than those stated in the Will. It is worthwhile to recall that Antonia was the step-mother of Pietro Paolo's three children. Although there is no direct evidence for it, it is possible that her relationships with Salvatore and Maria Concetta were not easy. Moreover, Giuseppe resided in Valletta, in close proximity to his parents, while his brother and sister resided in Cospicua; (22) he was therefore in a better position to render assistance to the testators.

Be that as it may, the Will was certainly timely. Antonia Azzopardi died on 13 February 1864 at No 7 Strada Ponente, Valletta, and was buried in the Church of St Mary of Jesus, also in Valletta. (24) Pietro Paolo thus became a widower for a second time.

Dusk

In 1865 Azzopardi completed his last carving — a statue of St Michael. (25) He then retired, probably with considerable relief, to enjoy a well merited rest.

His name figures again in the register of baptisms kept at the Parish
Church of Porto Salvo, Valletta — he was a godfather to Giuseppe’s daughter, Giovanna Rosa, who was christened on 7 August 1870. (26) We can only hope that this happy event did something to brighten the last lonely years of his life.

A short while after, he was seized with a serious malady — cerebrite cronica (27) — and took up residence with his son, Giuseppe, at No 123 Strada Fornt, Valletta. He lived on at this address until 24 October 1875, when he died at the age of 84. (28)

He was buried in Tarxien Parish Church in a grave which bore the number 72. (29) Yet the entry for his burial in the Tarxien Parish register also states that the Azzopardi family grave-site bore the number 9, (30) and it is therefore likely that his remains were later transported to the latter grave in the same parish church.

Azzopardi’s children did not take up their father’s craft. Giuseppe became a successful merchant but died suddenly in 1886, (31) while Maria Concetta died a spinster. Salvatore had a barber’s shop in Senglea. With his death in 1887 (32) the direct male line became extinct. (33)

It is evident from the foregoing that Azzopardi’s biographical essentials have to be extracted from the parish archives, various notarial deeds and, following 1861, from the Public Registry. The material from these sources enables us to reconstruct Azzopardi’s personal history, not without serious gaps in the thread of the narrative, but with a credibility greater than in many biographies of Maltese sculptors.

27. Azzopardi’s Act of Death states categorically that this malady caused his death (1033/1874).
30. Ibid.
31. Act of Death 3328/1886. It is interesting to note that Giuseppe traded under the firm-name G. A. Azzopardi. In terms of an elaborate Will published by Notary Osbardo Pellegrini Petit on 26/11/1886, he bequeathed his business to his two daughters, Maria Carmela and Giovanna Rosa.
33. Giuseppe left no male issue; his daughter Maria Carmela married Enrico Psaila in Birkirkara on 28/10/1902, while his other daughter, Giovanna Rosa, died a spinster.

Azzopardi was essentially a wood carver. He belonged to a small but locally important body of craftsmen who sculpted and coloured devotional effigies destined to be carried in religious processions through the streets, and he was one of the best of their number.

Despite the gradual emergence of artisans resorting exclusively to the cartapesta technique, the more laborious and expensive craft of figure-carving in wood was to continue to hold its own for the better part of the 19th century. Azzopardi and his ilk were almost all but the last in a long line of native-born sculptors who chiselled their statues direct from the wood from which they were made. Working in this way “direct carvers” rather than as modellers, they produced a gallery of sacred images which today constitute the greater part of our sculptural heritage in wood.

Apprenticeship

A period of formation is essential for every artist. A brief note in Castagna states that Azzopardi was a pupil of Mariano Gerada and ‘a sculptor by appointment to King Ferdinand II’; (34) unfortunately no further documentary evidence has as yet come to light on these early events in Azzopardi’s life. (35) Clearly, however, he had an ordinary workshop training and it must have been Gerada who taught him the elements of figure sculpture.

Early Works (1808 — 1825)

Azzopardi started life as a stone carver. The works attributed to these early years are the limestone effigy of the Redeemer in the Ghaxaq Chapel of Santu Kristu, and another limestone effigy representing St Catherine in a street shrine at Zurrieq. (36) Azzopardi is also credited with the completion of...
the processional statue in wood of Our Lady of Graces at Zabbar, following the demise of Mariano Gerada in Cospicua on 24 January 1823.\(^{37}\)

1828 — 1834

In 1828 Azzopardi completed the first of his major carvings, a *Madonna of the Rosary* in wood, commissioned by the Cospicua Confraternity of the Rosary.\(^{38}\) This graceful and slender *Madonna* was repainted and gilded in the 1950s. It is fortunate that we still possess a photograph of the original work. In this instance the alterations effected on the original carving can be traced without much difficulty.

The *Christ at the Pillar*, carved in wood in 1834 for the Valletta Confraternity of the Holy Cross,\(^{39}\) is one of Azzopardi’s most stirring works. It was completed within a year from the death of his first wife, Giovanna Rosa. During restoration work carried out in 1981 it was found that additional material had been wrapped round the figure’s original loin-cloth. Evidently, Azzopardi had not accounted for the body-denying tendencies of his patrons.

Wood has of course been used for many purposes besides statues. And Azzopardi is known to have carved wooden figureheads (puleni) for sailing ships, as well as altar-furniture, candlesticks and items of ornament.\(^{40}\) However, little information is available about Azzopardi’s secular work. The lacuna is most regrettable. But this is not to say that Azzopardi failed to attract lay patronage; it is only that the available written records tell us very little about it.

**Abundant Sources**

Documents exist for numerous commissions carried out between 1838 and 1858, all concerning processional statues in polychromed wood. Azzopardi was incredibly prolific at this period. The surviving records — contracts, news-

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37. In the first edition of his History of Malta, P.P. Castagna attributes the statue of Our Lady of Graces to Azzopardi, and ascribes its execution to the year 1824 (III, p. 109). It has been held that the statue was in fact gilded by Azzopardi in 1825; the date 1825 is inscribed in the Virgin’s sandal — see K. Bonavia, *Lehen h-Santwarju, Zabbar, Festa 1980*, p. 4. However, Azzopardi did not practise the gilding craft. It is more likely that he was engaged to complete the work on the statue, begun by Mariano Gerada, but left unfinished at his death in 1823.


St George

One of the most striking features of Azzopardi's sculptural career is his success in acquiring a clientele of patrons from Gozo. His popular prestige in Gozo probably gained most from his St George, a life-size effigy in wood of the soldier-saint. The St George (Basilica of St George, Gozo), apparently commissioned as an ex-voto effigy in 1838, was probably completed in 1839, since the Libro Esito 1817 — 1844 for St George's Parish Church records that a wooden niche for the statue was ordered and paid for in 1839. And from the same source we learn that on 25 October 1840 Azzopardi received a modest fee per aver accomodato la statua di S. Giorgio. (44) However, the true implications of this last entry remain somewhat obscure.

St Joseph

On 5 May 1843 Azzopardi completed a wooden statue of St Joseph, commissioned by the Cospicua Confraternity of the saint. The statue was subsequently damaged beyond repair by the unfortunate attempt to convert it into a representing St Andrew. (45) Nonetheless, a contemporary newspaper gives us a description of the original work:

Lo scultore nostro concittadino Pietro Paolo Azzopardi, avendo condotto al suo termine l'esecuzione del monumento rappresentativo di San Giuseppe Sposo di Maria. V. intrapreso per commissione della Ven. Confraternita di sotto Santo, il 6 del corrente maggio ha esposto nella Ven. Chiesa di San Paolo Apostolo della Città Cospicua... Non possiamo però negare al sagace scultore un piccol tributo di lode; avendo egli dato alla statua un atteggiamento che fa sentire la pace che regna nei santi cuori di Gesù e di Giuseppe. Le vesti sono composte con grande intelligenza e sono piegate in modo il più soave, ed il più pastoso: ove comparisce il nudo ispira pietoso candore, e in tutta la figura domina un'armonica proporzionamento. (46)

The almost apologetic reference to the figure's nudity recalls the problems provoked by the Christ of the Pillar of 1834 at Valletta.

St Agatha

The rivalry which animated the patrons showed no sign of abating. The

44. St. George’s Parish Archives, Gozo, Libro Esito 1817-1844, 256v. This document was brought to my attention by Mr. John Bezzina.
46. Il Triunfo della Religione, 11/5/1843, p. 76.

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Cospicua Confraternity of St Agatha promptly commissioned from Azzopardi a statue in wood of their patron saint. The statue of St Agatha, executed by Azzopardi on a design by G. Hzyler, was completed in 1846. (47) The figure shows the least external movement but is charged with intense religious fervour.

Gozo

Meanwhile, Azzopardi continued to attract clients from Gozo. His wooden statue of St John the Baptist at Xewkija was inaugurated on 22 June 1845. (48) It is worth nothing that Azzopardi gave to the surface of the base of this figure a treatment similar to that given to the statue of St George. Both figures in fact stand on rough-hewn rock.

Next in date to the St John comes the wooden Crucifix which is the foremost processional image of Holy Week at the Basilica of St George, Gozo. This Christ on the Cross, completed by Azzopardi in 1848, (49) is a gentle figure of compassion and love; the suffering is in fact restrained.

The Bambina

The half-life size wooden effigy of the Bambina at Mellieha was commissioned from Azzopardi by a private patron in 1853. The event is recorded by a correspondent of L'Ordine, a contemporary weekly:


It must be noted, however, that significant alterations to the head and hands of Azzopardi's Bambina were effected in 1916. (51)

47. G. Calleja, The Works of Art In The Churches of Malta And The Governor's Palace, Valletta, Malta, 1881, p. 73.
50. L'Ordine, 10/7/1853, p. 4160.
The Cospicua Redeemer

In virtue of a private writing dated 1 July 1855 the Cospicua Confraternity of the Holy Cross commissioned from Azzopardi una statua di legno completa di Gesù Redentore ossia la Bajulazione. The statue was to be delivered to the patrons, pitturata tutta in olio, con colori di più fini. (52) This was to prove the most difficult and frustrating undertaking of Azzopardi's career.

The agreement illustrates, even more than the previous contracts, the jealous emulation which the statues provoked. Azzopardi was to give his figure a posture similar to that of the Redeemer at Sengiea, and he was to complete the work by the third Sunday of Lent 1856. (53) The agreed fee was one of 200 scudi. The sculptor was to receive 50 scudi on signing the agreement, another 50 scudi on completing the bozzetto, a third instalment of 50 scudi after having completed and gessoed the statute, and the outstanding balance of 50 scudi on delivering the statue to his patrons.

The commission seemed to be under an unlucky star from the beginning. Azzopardi was not granted permission to view, and sketch, the statute of the Redeemer at Sengiea. The patrons were apparently satisfied with his bozzetto but eventually refused to pay him the second instalment of the agreed fee. They contended that the statue did not conform with the agreed model and that it was not completed within the stipulated time-limit.

Azzopardi, therefore, instituted legal proceedings in order to obtain the second instalment of his fee. He also requested the Court to condemn his clients to provide him with a suitable cross for the statue.

At length, the Court appointed a panel of three artists (periti dell'arte), namely Salvatore Micallef, Antonio Falzon and Salvatore Psaila, to submit a report on the statue in question and to establish whether the delay in execution was the fault of the sculptor, or, alternatively, that of the patrons.

The Referees' Report, which was submitted to the Court on 17 November 1857, declared that the statue conformed with the model executed by Azzopardi and approved by the patrons:

Essaminata attentamente questa statua come eseguita sul detto modello l'abbiamo trovata di essere regolare nelle sue proporzioni, decente e propria nell'attitudine, le pieghe ben intesi ad una figura cadente la quale è della dimensione di sei piedi e due pollici. (54)

Moreover, according to the Report, Azzopardi's figure was an improvement on the model agreed to by the parties in the private writing of 1855.

......vi abbiamo rilevato che la posizione della figura fatta dall' Azzopardi è del tutto uguale nel suo assieme a questa della Sengiea, ma per altro rimarciamo che l'esecuzione dell'Azzopardi è più gliudiosa, mentre la statua della Sengiea pecca di sproporzioni e mal piegata nei panni da non imitarsi. (55)

The Court-appointed experts concluded that the delay in execution was occasioned by the behaviour of the patrons:

......noi rileviamo, che dal tenore delle due lettere officiali esistenti in processo risulta che tale discontinuazione del lavoro venne per fatto dei convenuti i quali hanno considerato la statua in lavoro come non a seconda della convenzione, e piccola. Oltre a ciò dalla deposizione di Giuseppe Terreni risulta che l'artista Azzopardi attendeva dai suoi committenti la croce, e che non gli fu mandata, circostanza che ha sospeso l'Azzopardi dal continuare il lavoro. (56)

On the basis of this Report, Azzopardi won his case, with costs. The Court of Appeal confirmed the judgement of the Court of First Instance on 1 February 1858. (57) Consternation ensued. The correspondent of L'Ordine inveighed against the patrons who had availed themselves of the Confraternity's funds in litigation without consulting their fellow-members:

Questa questione nata dai suddetti procuratori non solo per ingiusto motivo ma puranche per vessazione: ......litigarono pure a spese della Confraternita senza veruna intimazione dei confratelli. (58)

52. Process Appell Civili, 8A/1858, 4r.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 21v.
55. Ibid., 37v. This judgement reflects Salvatore Psaila's artistic integrity. Salvatore Psaila (1798 - 1871) and Alessandro Farrugia (1791 - 1871) were Azzopardi's most serious rivals in this line of work.
56. Ibid., 21v.
57. Ibid., 37r.
58. L'Ordine, 19/2/1858, p. 5096.
The sculptor-patron dispute thus lasted a period of three years. However, there is no doubt that the Cospicua Redeemer is the most amply documented of Azzopardi’s commissions.

The Last Sculptures

Soon afterwards, Azzopardi began work on the sculptural group of the Invention of the Cross. The subject was clearly conceived as a whole: by gesture and posture the free-standing figures of St Macarius and St Helen lead the eye towards the focal point, a beautifully inlaid wooden cross. In these figures, Azzopardi mixed two media — the head, hands and feet are carved in wood, while the body-frameworks are in papier mâché. The work is signed and dated — Febraro 1862

P. Paolo Azzopardi
Sculitore

The Invention of the Cross was originally commissioned by the Valletta Confraternity of the Holy Cross. However, in 1900, the same Confraternity acquired a new group of statues depicting the same subject, which were manufactured in Lecce. (59) In that same year, 1900, Azzopardi’s figures were purchased by Antonio Portelli, a Gozitan, and are now in the Oratory annexed to the Church of St Francis, Victoria, Gozo. (60)

Azzopardi’s last surviving work is an effigy in wood of St Michael, commissioned by the Confraternity of the saint in Qormi, and completed in 1865. (61) The figure portrays the Archangel in the traditional warring stance, trampling over Satan.

Epilogue

During the last quarter of the 19th century the craft of figure-carving in wood suffered a temporary eclipse in these Islands. Nicola Zammit, writing some eleven years after P.P. Azzopardi’s death gives a very dismal account of the decline in the technique:

60. Nicholas Vella Append, Consorzi e Chiese dei Frati Minori Conventuali in Robuòt di Gozo, Unpublished ms. f. 33r.

Fortunately, the craft was revived by Abram Gatt, whose sculptural career spilled into the present century. The modern abhorrence for the figurative and the representative in art has proved a setback for the commissioning of life-size images in wood. Nonetheless, George Borg’s St Sebastian (Qormi) is a fine example of this form of traditional woodcarving, and “the art has been kept alive by a number of fine craftsmen who include Antonio Buhagiar (b. 1906), Samuel Bugeja (b. 1920) and others.” (63)

It must be conceded that the documentary sources for Azzopardi’s sculptures are highly impersonal. They are perhaps highly illustrative of patrons’ requirements and preferences, but tell us very little about the sculptor’s point of view. Moreover, Azzopardi left no written scrap of record about his life or his craft.

In these circumstances it is difficult to relate Azzopardi’s inner feelings and intentions to the local contemporary artistic scene, and any attempt to do this must be largely hypothetical. It is probably true to say that Azzopardi believed ardently in the authentic work of the hand and in the role of the carver as an unpretentious craftsman like the sculptor of the Middle Ages.

In essence, however, he was a contributor to an effort in which many other sculptors shared, and which was perhaps more important than any one of them. Their statues are a living witness to the special cultivation of hand craftsmanship in these Islands.
