A Late Medieval and an Early Modern Window in the Reserve Collection of the National Museum of Archaeology

Charlene Vella

Abstract

This paper focuses on the remains of two windows of notable interest to Maltese art history in the reserve collection of the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. The first which, to my knowledge, has never before been published, consists of two limestone slabs which must have formed part of a particularly fine sculpted window, with a drip-mould ornamented with crisply carved acanthus leaves and rosettes. (Fig. 1) The second is a square-headed, richly ornate window that was originally on a sixteenth, or perhaps early seventeenth-century country house in Carmel Street, Luqa, where it survived until 1929 when the house was demolished. (Fig. 2) Sir Themistocles Zammit took special care to have the window carefully dismantled and had it reassembled in the courtyard of the Auberge d'Italie in Valletta that at the time housed the National Museum collection. It survived at the Auberge d'Italie until a couple of years ago, when the Auberge became the Ministry of Tourism. Its importance was unfortunately not recognized with the result that it was dismantled and is now a heap of unnumbered stones. (Fig. 3) The window was one of the finest surviving examples of Maltese Early Modern vernacular architecture. Its decorative idiosyncrasies were heavily indebted to Medieval prototypes filtered through the popular experience. The only reference to this window is that contained in Mario Buhagiar's, The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands, published in 2005.

The author wishes to thank Professor Mario Buhagiar for his guidance and inspiration and Ms Sharon Sultana, Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, for generously giving her access to the two windows and the Museum Archives. The two windows will be published in a detailed study of the Mediterranean context of Late Medieval Maltese art and architecture on which the author is working.
These architectural remains are virtually unknown and in a state of neglect. The purpose of this paper is to draw an awareness of their artistic significance.

The art historical context

Being politically and economically a satellite of Sicily, it was from there that Late Medieval Malta received its most important (albeit not exclusive) artistic and cultural stimuli. The Sicilian architectural imprint was best reflected in the buildings of Mdina, or the Civitas, as it was known to the Latinised gentry of the city. Leaving aside churches and a handful of other buildings, an element of Westernising sophistication began to manifest itself in the countryside villages in the Early Modern period when the architecturally significant buildings of the Civitas were copied at grassroots level. This coincided with the better state of economic well-being that started being felt after 1530 with the coming of the Knight Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem.

One of the more conspicuous features of Early Modern vernacular architecture is its love for ornamentation. The Luqa window provides us with a very good example. (Fig. 4) The vernacular architecture of the Maltese Islands still needs to be properly studied and put in a meaningful context. Important work in this direction has been carried out by Professor Mario Buhagiar, but there is still much to discover before a meaningful critical appreciation can be arrived at. In most cases, one is talking of an architecture without architects. The result is nonetheless often curiously satisfying, and the cubical forms of the buildings have a sculptural relevance that gives them a special aesthetic appeal.

The Late Medieval Window

The cultured sophistication of the remains of this window suggest that it may come from a building of some consequence. Their provenance is unknown, but it is likely that the window belonged to one of the Late Medieval palazzi of the Civitas. It is unfortunate that the records of the National Museum of Archaeology do not seem to have any information on the history of the remains. A study of the records of the Antiquities Committee may perhaps reveal useful information, but this has yet to be undertaken.

The two surviving slabs belong to a round-headed window notable for its elegance and crisply carved acanthus leaf and rosette motifs. Stylistic and decorative

Fig. 2 opposite page. The Early Modern Window when it was still on the country house in Carmel Street, Luqa, Malta. (Picture in the National Museum of Archaeology Archives)
considerations point to the late fourteenth, or more probably the early fifteenth, century. A tentative reconstruction suggests one of two possibilities, either a one light arched window measuring ca. 101cm x 85cm with a slight hint of a horseshoe, or a mullioned window in which case the slabs are the remains of its two lights.

The acanthus leaf is the predominant decorative element. The acanthus leaf was a recurrent element of Medieval architectural decoration, and was extensively used on the buildings of Norman Sicily, some of which the author has personally studied. It, for example, survives on the portal of the Cathedral of Monreale and in its famous cloisters (Figs. 5 & 6), as well (and more importantly) on the door surround of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. (Fig. 7) These two buildings are among the best and most highly sophisticated examples of Siculo-Norman architecture. Closer in date to the Maltese example under consideration, is the decoration that brightens up the impost of the door columnettes and their dripmoulds on the side portal of the

Fig. 3 opposite page. The Early Modern window today
Fig. 4 above. The Early Modern Window as it was reconstructed in 1929 by Sir Themistocles Zammit in the Auberge d'Italie courtyard, Valletta
Fig. 5 top left. Detail of the left jamb of the west portal of Monreale Cathedral, Sicily, illustrating the use of the acanthus leaf motif.

Fig. 6 top right. The use of the acanthus leaf motif on double capitals in the Benedictine cloister at Monreale, Sicily.

Fig. 7 above left. Use of the acanthus leaf on the door surround of a doorway in the Cappella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily.

Fig. 8 above right. Use of the acanthus leaf as the outer decoration of a doorway at the Santuario della Vergine, Trapani, Sicily, and on the double capitals.

Fig. 9. Use of the acanthus leaf on the chamfering of the doorway of the Palazzo Francica Nava, Syracuse, Sicily

Santuario della Vergine in Trapani. (Fig. 8) Among the Sicilian examples of secular architecture studied, the acanthus leaf can perhaps best be seen in Syracuse on the main doorway of the Palazzo Francica Nava and on the Palazzo Chiaramonte doorway and stringcourse. (Figs. 9 & 10)

The acanthus leaf motif was also used profusely in Catalunya, where the author similarly undertook research visits. Catalunya is important for a proper understanding of the architecture of Late Medieval Malta because the Maltese Islands, starting from 1282, belonged to the Confederation of the Aragonese Crown. Artistic ideas sometimes came directly from Catalunya, by-passing Sicily.

This same motif was also applied locally to door hood-moulds that run around the voussoirs and ends in rosettes that carry the same decoration. This survives on the west doorway of the Chapel of the Nativity of the Virgin at the Church of Santa Maria ta' Bir Miftah near Gudja and the Church of Santa Marija tal-Virtu at Rabat. On the old parish church at Birkirkara, the acanthus leaf type of decoration is applied on the capitals of the pilasters on the church's facade. Furthermore, it survives on a commemoration plaque in the parish church of Qormi which bears an inscription that records the demolition of the Late Medieval church that was rebuilt in 1456. The acanthus leaf motif also survives on one of the doorways of Palazzo Santa Sofia facade in Villegagnon Street at Mdina. It is here used as a decorative feature on the projecting hoodmould that survives in a fragmentary state. It presents an example of crisp decoration of the fleshy type of vegetated motif in question.
One important example is the Church of Santa Maria de Porqueres at Banyoles, (Fig. 11) where acanthus leaves are used in a frieze in the chancel area, on the apsidal arch separating the nave from the chancel, and more prominently on a continuous frieze on the portal on the west facade. (Figs. 12 & 13) The motif features also on the famous Ripoll monastery triumphal arch and cloisters, on the portal of the Antic Hospital de Sant Julià at Besalu, and on the capitals of columnettes at the Cistercian monastery at Poblet. (Figs. 14-17) At Barcelona, acanthus leaves feature, among other places, on the mullioned windows of the Museu Frederic Marès near the Cathedral. (Fig. 18)

The truth is that the acanthus leaf motif is a ubiquitous decorative element of the Early and Late Medieval architecture of Western Europe. The reason why the author has concentrated on Late Medieval Sicilian and Catalunyan examples is because it was from Sicily and Catalunya that Malta received its most important cultural influences. It is therefore highly probable that the decoration on the window under consideration came from there.

The rosettes are very much indebted to the Catalan rose that is often met in the area around Barcelona, Girona, and Vic area. One notable example is its use on a plaque on the side of the Church of Sant Pere in Besalu. (Fig. 19)

The combination of the acanthus leaf with the rosette, that is a feature of the Maltese window, can be seen in the Church of Sant Feliu in Girona. (Fig. 20) One can also mention the mullioned windows of the Pia Almoina (or Canon’s house) situated in Girona’s Cathedral square. (Fig. 21) In Sicily, the combination of the acanthus leaf with the rosette features prominently on the rose window of Trapani’s Santuario della Vergine. (Fig. 22) There are other Sicilian examples, but this rose window is singled out because of its important artistic significance.

There are very fine examples of the acanthus leaf and the rosette complimenting each other in Maltese architectural decoration, such as for example on some mullioned windows of Mdina. Examples can be seen on a window at Carmel Street (corner with Villegaignon Street), and in another window on tenement no. 6 in Inguanez Street. Both windows are of the Catalan type and characterised by an elegant and straightforward articulation of the decorative elements. (Figs. 23 & 24)

As already pointed out, Catalan influences may not necessarily (as has often been maintained) have reached Malta filtered through the Sicilian experience. Sometimes, they came direct. One must keep in mind that the gentry who commissioned acanthus leaf decoration for their palazzi in the Civitas, were often Catalan expatriates. The remains of the window in the Museum collection provides us with one of the finest examples. (Fig. 1) The acanthus leaves and rosettes are here

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3. For example, in the fourteenth century there is mention of Margherita d’Aragona being married to the royal Captain of Malta, Giacomo de Pellegrino of Messina, and in the fifteenth century Antoni Desguanes became Castellan in Malta. A.T. Luttrell, ‘Approaches to Medieval Malta’, in Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights, ed. A.T. Luttrell, London 1975, 45, 50.
contained within a thin spiral voluted arc that curls around the top part and takes the shape of a coiled rope. At the lower end is a simple moulding. Arc and moulding effectively frame the decoration and give it a touch of aristocratic elegance.

The Luqa window

The Luqa window, (Fig. 4) was, until its recent dismantling from the internal courtyard of the Auberge d'Italie, the finest surviving example of a Maltese Early Modern vernacular ornate window. Its rich decoration was in all probability a sign of the affluence of the owner of the house that it belonged to. It is really fortunate that Sir Themistocles Zammit had the foresight to have it photographed before the demolition of the tenement to which it originally belonged. As already pointed out supra, he was fully conscious of its artistic and architectural significance. This explains why he had it carefully reassembled in the Valletta Museum. Similar windows were probably fairly common. As a matter of fact, the remains of another window with similar artistic idiosyncrasies can still be seen on a farm building on the Zurrieq-Qrendi road close to the church of Hal Millieri. (Fig. 25)

The Luqa window is particularly remarkable for its wealth of decorative elements and motifs. These include stylised foliated motifs, delicate Catalan roses, richly fluted mouldings, and a highly articulate and visually stimulating border of miniature triangles that encloses the foliated border. (Figs. 26-29) However, the sculptor may have made use of natural forms that were easily available and was accustomed to seeing, such as the star aniseed. Of particular interest is a lintel band of miniature coffers each one containing a lozenge or diamond shape, where the dissecting lines have different orientations to diversify and enhance the visual impact. (Fig. 30)

The dexterity with which the vernacular sculptor used his chisel is truly remarkable. The decoration has a crispness that is impressive. It is probable that he used a window in Mdina as his prototype. His grassroots taste, however, injected it with an excess of ornamentation.

Similar ornate windows can be noticed in vernacular contexts in Sicily. Examples from Erice and Trapani which the author has studied and photographed are here considered. In Erice, an interesting example survives on the street elevation of the former Church and Convent of the Annunciation, now the Palazzo Militari, close to the Porta Carmine. (Fig. 31) This is an earlier window that has been dated to the fifteenth century and is in a poor state of preservation. Like the Luqa

4. The author would like to thank Liam Gauci for an exchange of information held in December 2009.

Fig. 13 opposite page. Use of the acanthus leaf on the main portal of the Church of Santa Maria de Porqueres in Banyoles, Spain
Fig. 14 top. Detail of the triumphal arch in Ripoll Monastery, Spain, showing the use of the acanthus leaf.

Fig. 15 above left. Detail of the triumphal arch in Ripoll Monastery, Spain, showing the use of the acanthus leaf.

Fig. 16 above right. Antic Hospital de Sant Julià in Besalú, Spain.

Fig. 19. The rosette is used extensively in Catalonia; here it is employed on a plaque on the side of the Church of Sant Pere in Besalú, Spain.

window, it is richly ornate. The Trapani examples occur on the sixteenth-century Palazzo Giambrà, popularly known as La Giudecca. (Fig. 32) Saracenic, Gothic and Renaissance elements combine to produce this decorative effect, which can to an extent be referred to as Plateresque, the filigree-like decorative style that characterized architectural ornament in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in the splendid street elevation of the famous University of Salamanca. (Fig. 33) In the Maltese context, Plateresque can be used to describe the architectural ornament in early seventeenth century parish churches, such as those of Attard and the old parish church of Birkirkara, which we usually associate with Tommaso Dingli.

The Luqa window is to an extent the vernacular expression of Plateresque; the La Giudecca windows are eloquent in their similarity to the Luqa window. (Fig. 34) As one can notice, there are several decorative idiosyncrasies that relate them to the Luqa window. A window in Catalunya that can be likened to these examples survives at Besalú in Plaça de la Llibertat. (Fig. 35) Significant examples are also extant in the Apulia region in the heel of Italy, namely in Bari in the Cathedral and on the fifteenth-century Palazzo Caccetta in Trani. (Figs. 36 & 37)

The Luqa window, as Temi Zammit perceptively realised way back in 1929, is of importance to the Maltese architectural vernacular heritage. The dismantling of the window was carried out in 1994 before it became mandatory for Government
Fig. 17 top left. Detail of the portal of the Antic Hospital de Sant Julià in Besalú, Spain, showing the use of the acanthus leaf motif.

Fig. 20 top right. Rosettes and acanthus leaves are used simultaneously in the Church of Sant Feliu in Girona, Spain.

Fig. 18 above. Acanthus leaves on the capitals of the mullioned windows of the Museu Frederic Mares in Barcelona, Spain.

Fig. 21 top. Rosettes and acanthus leaves decorate the capitals of the mullioned windows on the Pia Almoina or Canon’s house in the Cathedral square, Girona, Spain.

Fig. 22 above. Acanthus leaves and rosettes feature prominently on the rose window on the Santuario della Vergine, Trapani, Sicily.

to apply for planning permission. It is a shame that whoever was responsible for the restoration of the Auberge d’Italie, failed to realise its importance, and had it so crudely removed. Fortunately, the component stonework was sent to the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta. The sincere plea is that the window be reassembled and put on permanent display. It is a very significant part of our architectural heritage.
Fig. 23 opposite left. The use of rosettes can also be seen on a mullioned window in Carmel Street, Mdina

Fig. 24 top. A mullioned window in Holy Cross Street, Mdina, which incorporates the use of delicate rosettes

Fig. 25 above. Foliated motifs and the Melitan moulding used on a window situated on a farm building on the Zurrieq-Qrendi road
Figs. 26-9. Several details of the Luqa window

Fig. 30. Detail of the Luqa window ornamentation (Detail taken from a picture in the National Museum of Archaeology Archives)