

MUŻA

The National Community Art Museum



Focus Groups

2014



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Storyline 1

Mediterranean

Title: Mediterranean

Date: 19.09.2014

Venue: Courtyard – National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

Attendees: Karsten Xuereb (Chairperson)

Petra Caruana Dingli

Walid Nabhan

Michael Zammit

Carmen Aquilina

Caldon Mercieca

Vincenzo D'Arro (Catania)

Excused: Charlene Vella



Scope and Objective

The scope and objective of this focus group was to review the choice of title and subject content for Story I. Mr Karsten Xuereb (V18) was chosen to chair this focus group and the choice of participants was negotiated directly with him as the chosen chair.

Comments Originating from the Discussion

- The Sea has potential and limitations for us. We take it for granted because we are immediately surrounded by it but we are unknowingly affected by it even on a small and daily basis. Nationality is about perimeters and land, while we/MUŻA should cast its focus on the sea.
- Is the Mediterranean Sea defined only by the surrounding lands that give it its geographical shape? Should we look at other enclosed seas? Should we compare views of the Mediterranean from Malta with the Mediterranean from Messina or from Trapani etc? Should we perhaps balance our focus on the Grand Harbour with other harbours such as M'Xlokk or Xlendi? How do we view things when we have our back to the sea and when we face the sea? Why not collaborate with the Maritime Museum, put up paintings where the sea takes prominence?
- Apart from the sea, our bright light and its impact on colour should not be underestimated. It has had a huge impact on foreign artists who have stayed in Malta. Let us also bear in mind those many artists who stopped in Malta, even if for a day, as they too left their mark.
- An essential theme to be explored and displayed is migration and its effects. MUŻA should also be the voice to different languages, different forms of prose and poetry, different modes of communication, social affairs, current hot issues and concerns. It should not only be dedicated to the visual arts.
- There was emphasis on making migration a central theme, possibly explored for a period of time, e.g. 6 months, during which exhibitions, seminars etc could be organised in order to create networks and discuss the various topics that emerge from this very present theme; events could be created to encourage interaction with special focus on young people to give



them a voice and discover their views on migration. After this period of time, another subject can be opened up for public discussion. The Museum of Migration in Paris is a good model to observe and learn from.

- The language of power, language for commerce/business and other languages were different channels of communication that created internal and external exchange, possibly bringing out the distinction between 'il-Malti tal-Port' and 'il-Malti tal-Popolin'.
- Apart from the sea and light, the wind should be taken into consideration. Winds go beyond the confines of language and culture. Winds have defined and determined directions, navigation, contacts, routes of travel etc. Winds have thus also brought in or exported cultures which also have different 'wind directions'.
- Islanders tend to have strong ties with confines and limitations. We have to bypass these and go beyond geography, just like ideas which are limitless. In this spirit, before being Maltese, MUŻA fundamentally needs to be human and about human beings. While the Mediterranean, Europe and Empire are socio-political dimensions, we should go beyond these too.
- Why link Malta with the Mediterranean via Sicily? No doubt Sicily had strong ties with Malta and judging from the historical connection between the two islands, Sicily is almost something of an obvious, natural progression. Malta's colonial status under the British in the last two centuries may have contributed towards somewhat eclipsing the significance of Sicily's connection with Malta and vice-versa. Sicily was a window for Malta; it acted as the shorthand for the Maltese. Malta's link with Sicily is evidenced in our language, religion (connected with Rome and the Catholic Church), art, gastronomy etc. However specifying Sicily in the MUŻA story may be limiting and may also be to the detriment of other countries in the Mediterranean that Malta was linked with for various needs and reasons.



General comments

- Community curatorship is already happening rather than waiting for MUŻA to 'open'. MUŻA allows for cultural dialogue.
- Should embassies in Malta and overseas be tapped? MUŻA can perhaps harness contacts via embassies.
- Cultural diversity (because of Malta's culture-colourful history) should be brought out.
- Bearing in mind the original purpose for and the mission of UNESCO, which was to save humanity, to create communication and not division, MUŻA should be about connecting people and building networks. Its emphasis should also be on contemporary humanity i.e. for those who are still alive. MUŻA should move beyond artefacts; it should be human.
- MUŻA must outlive V18. We are badly in need of a Renaissance and MUŻA should be the springboard for this.
- MUŻA is the place and the project: the project does not necessarily occupy the place. MUŻA needs to be contained, physically and spatially BUT it also needs to be dispersed, disseminated to everyone. This can materialize through marketing and branding. The branding, which could also develop into an artistic form, should be simple; the simpler, the more effective, the more receptive, the more understood and the more universal.
- MUŻA should also value Malta's strategic position on the political border of two tectonic plates! This fact should be taken advantage of as it reveals Malta's exposure to influences infiltrating from lands it was connected with.
- MUŻA presents an interesting analogy with the Roman Empire. 'Rome' was one city and at the centre of this Empire but 'Rome' was not everywhere because as such the Empire derived the best of every occupied land. MUŻA may have been born in Malta but it is not limited to Malta. It goes beyond diplomacy and institutions.



Once compiled, this document was circulated amongst all participants to each of the four focus groups including those invited who could not attend. Each participant, irrespective of the focus group for which he was invited to participate in, was asked to comment and/or review accordingly.

This version includes all comments and recommendations forwarded.

The MUŻA team

January 2015



Storyline 2

Europe

Title: Malta and European Culture: Is Malta European?

Date: 26.6.2014

Venue: Courtyard – National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

Attendees: Toni Attard (Chairperson)

Simone Azzopardi

Emanuel Buttigieg

Virginia Ciccone

Vicki Ann Cremona

Adrian Grima

Immanuel Mifsud

Robert Zahra

Excused: Carmel Cassar, Aleks Farrugia, Noel Grima

Observers Charmaine Zammit

Nicole Galea



Scope and Objective

The scope and objective of this focus group was to review the choice of title and subject content for Story II. It was also convened with the specific purpose of investigating whether there is a bias towards European culture or whether there exists a duality in Malta's identity.

Mr Toni Attard was chosen to chair this focus group and the choice of participants was negotiated directly with him as the chosen chair. The Chair decided to show a brief power point presentation featuring nine slides in order to stimulate the discussion further. The images featured in this presentation were chosen at the discretion of the chair.

Comments Originating from the Discussion

- It is, indeed, significant that in the span of 30 years (more or less) between the years 1581 and 1610 (ref. quotes from the foreign visitors to Malta), Valletta became a thriving and pulsating town. This would explain why there was a change in attitude towards Malta, most especially Valletta and the Grand Harbour area, where foreigners witnessed a change from a 'barbaric' Malta (i.e. heathen/Arabic) to one that had more French leanings (i.e. European/cosmopolitan).
- Clothing, as represented in the slides shown, reflects stereotypes. The diversity in styles of dress dictated by social classes brings out the divide between the urban (this being a 'Europeanised style') and the rural (a reflection of Arab Heritage). Research in the Sicilian iconography for costume is needed to highlight Malta's connection with Sicily through contacts with regional museums and private houses.
- Athansius' Kircher's 17th century reference to Malta as the last European outpost mirrors Tunisia's current view of Malta as the last European corner.
- What foreigners visiting Malta recorded in their travelogues was many a time tied to an agenda: their written descriptions provided various images of Malta that were projected overseas and may have been politically driven.



General comments

The Chair also decided to question focus group participants. The answers to these questions also include general comments about MUŻA which are also being reproduced accordingly.

Question 1: What would make you cringe in a museum space?

- Non-Maltese narratives about the Maltese
- A focus on ONE past at the expense of other pasts, as different voices need to be taken into account
- A nationalistic view presiding over a democratic view (to counteract for instance how, in the 1920s, the Museum collection was formed specifically to highlight Malta's Italian heritage vs the 'horrible' British overlords)
- Trade relations, whilst important, only represent one type of narrative. Evidence needs to be extracted from such relations in a way that brings to light how the Maltese viewed themselves.
- The fact remains that several different travellers came to Malta over the centuries and this is a very important narrative that should not be overlooked or underestimated. It provides views and attitudes towards the Maltese hailing from different walks of life.
- It is high time that we start out from a Maltese perspective rather than an external or foreign one.
- The point on whether questions about Maltese identity should still be asked was made. Are such questions outdated or halting? Is the attitude of foreign leaders towards the Maltese and questions about our identity linked in some way? Is this constant questioning of our Maltese identity preventing us from self-reflection, from the Maltese viewing themselves outside the European and African paradigms?



- In reaction to the above point, attention was drawn to the need of taking into consideration not only identity but also identification (if not more). The ‘conflict’ as to whether Malta may be more European or African has long been standing and is inevitable, given that Malta is an island: it ‘stands’ as/at a border, a frontier and a periphery and at the same time lies in the heart of the Mediterranean. Like it or not, Malta’s geographical position and shape as an island will always prompt such questions. Such questions are part and parcel of our DNA not only as islanders but as Mediterranean islanders. In view of this, it would be worth researching on identification more than identity, as this can then lead to or translate into identity.
- The foreign outlook towards Malta has been given importance for far too long. The MUŻA project should aim at bringing out a ‘non-nation’ state or a different perspective of Malta. We are (possibly unknowingly) as yet influenced by remnants of a 19th-century ‘Romanticized’ attitude towards the Maltese and this therefore needs to be dismantled.
- MUŻA should further examine the notion that there was a sharp divide between the urban and rural areas, at least until WWII. Research should also be focussed on the social shape of Valletta and the Grand Harbour area against that of the rest of Malta: How different were these areas? Is our notion of what is urban and what is rural in Malta too fleeting? Is the segregation between the urban and the rural really so marked when considering that the nobility did not only live in Mdina but also in different areas such as Żejtun?
- When considering that there were no ghettos in Malta, how is it that in the 20th century there were working class areas close to the upper class areas?
- Research has shown that there were no less than 10 theatres outside Valletta. This proves the fact that art and culture thrived even outside Valletta.

Question 2: In the light of this discussion, how is this to be reflected in the Museum collection?

- Representation should highlight the different branches of the Maltese e.g. the Maltese Jews, Maltese Muslims, Maltese-Sicilians etc. These are all different narratives.
- Importations of art (e.g. Guido Reni’s “Christ with the Cross”) is another important narrative and this can be compared and juxtaposed next to purely Maltese-made art or material e.g. pottery.



- The collection can serve to showcase other skills e.g. through silver or lacework.
- Language and oral history should feature via the works.
- MUŻA should bring out the fact that a painting is a reflection of a narrative, both the artist's own and that of his/her times and social surroundings.
- The North African dimension of the Mediterranean and its impact on Malta has been unduly undermined and underestimated. It needs to be highlighted along with the other aspects of the Mediterranean i.e. Sicilian, European and Eastern. The 'Colonial' outlook that is still adopted needs to be removed. In the light of this particular area of the discussion, emphasis was placed on the need to learn from those Maltese communities that had migrated to North Africa. After all many Maltese had relocated to Tunisia and Algeria from the 19th century onwards. The narrative of migration is indeed significant for MUŻA.
- Visual literacy aids are also needed: the new museum should include aids that would enable the visitor to acquire skills on how to read and interpret visual material. Visitors should be given the opportunity to learn about the colour used in a particular painting (as an example), the composition, the circumstances of the commission, the goings-on in the background and foreground etc.
- It is important and high time that MUŻA focuses on and gives priority to the Maltese visitor. Cultural heritage should no longer target just the tourist.
- MUŻA needs to be dynamic, fluid and in a state of flux: narratives should be re-visited from time to time and possibly re-invented; this would consequently lead to the need to change part of the display on a periodical basis. The display should be approximately 60% permanent and 40% temporary (the latter subject to periodical change) to make MUŻA all the more singular.
- The display should adopt the 'less is more' approach. Apart from paintings, clothing, photography etc what else should be included to enhance the narratives? A suggestion was to include a half-way room to show how items are stored. Conservation in situ was another suggestion put forward.



Question 3: In view of what has come out of this discussion, what title would you propose instead of 'Malta and European Culture'?

- 'Malta's Malta'.
- 'Malta and Colonialism'.
- It was also suggested that a section dedicated to 'Religion' should be considered. A remark was made on the perhaps excessive repetition of 'Malta' in the four storylines ('Malta and...') as this may be dangerously misinterpreted as 'parochial' and pedantic.
- Irrespective of sections or narratives, another suggestion was to design the display/s in a way that the visiting public can recount his interpretation or be given the opportunity to inquire about it. The collection does not only 'tell' but should also encourage visitors to ask. Should the visitor be told or should he/she be asked to recount or else question the narrative him/herself?

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This version includes all comments and recommendations forwarded prior to publication.

The MUŻA team

January 2015



Storyline 3

Empire

Title: Empire

Date: 28.10.2014

Venue: Courtyard – National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

Attendees: Mark Anthony Falzon (Chairperson - Absent)

Sandro Debono (Acting chair)

Petra Caruana Dingli

Lawrence Pavia

Hilary Spiteri

Caroline Tonna

Edward Said

Excused Dominic Fenech, Conrad Thake, Mark Sagona, Peter Vassallo, Liam Gauci



Scope and Objective

The scope and objective of this focus group was to review the choice of title and subject content for Story III. Mark Anthony Falzon was chosen to chair this focus group and the choice of participants was negotiated directly with him as the chosen chair. The session was eventually chaired by Sandro Debono given that the chosen chair could not make it on the day.

Comments Originating from the Discussion

- Photography is an important resource to understand the topic in a more comprehensive way. Information concerning architecture and streetscapes could be easily extracted from this medium. The effects of the industrial revolution on the islands were also clearly visible.
- The main reference point for the arts continues to be Italy. Italian influence has to be clearly mapped out. Everyone wanted to be part of the centre. The big nations, including the British, French and Dutch, had their academies in Rome. This made connections between Malta and Rome in particular more fashionable, and in line with what was happening on the international scene. For the Maltese, it was easier and more practical to go to Italy given the proximity. This was also due to the fact that many spoke or at least understood Italian. Aspiring artists continued to be sent to study in Rome at the Accademia di San Luca.
- Styles inspired by different areas of Empire were also introduced into Malta. Eclecticism, particularly noticeable in the history of architecture in Malta, also concerned Maltese domestic interiors, which featured a mix of Orientalism, Edwardian and Victorian. Victorian, eclectic and heavy furnishings were also fashionable.
- There was an element of continuity from the times of the Order of St John, particularly in architecture, despite eclecticism. The Palladian Tuscan Order was very much in use. The neoclassical style, so popular during the British period, was introduced during the final decades of the Order of St John in Malta. The British may have found this continuity easy to achieve, given the availability of trained and experienced masons in Malta.
- Travel is of great relevance, particularly the Grand Tour. Travellers moved south to Malta and there were more people visiting the islands than ever before. British visitors to the islands thought of Malta as an exotic country and their presence in Malta meant good business for the locals. These tourists, including English and also Italian archaeologists, are known through sources and documents. It also became fashionable to live in Malta for



health reasons and the Maltese, such as Edward Galizia, could travel to update their knowledge about the world. One should also not forget the authors who wrote about Malta.

- Education is a key British legacy. The British introduced new learning programmes not only for those who wanted to learn fine arts but also for apprentices. Certain Maltese artists were also active as craftsmen. Apprenticeship, particularly in the docks, provided a career path for creatives.
- British period architecture is more present than one would expect it to be, especially in Valletta. By the 1920s St Paul's Street was like Tower Road in Sliema. 1930s Strada Forni was also used and remodelled during the British period. Victorian architecture in Sliema was not strictly British but more Italian. There also exists an interesting image of Rudolph Street which looks similar to a typical English street thanks to houses and a church designed by Galizia.
- Malta had no products to sell to its visitors as in the case of India, given that the island's geographic location was more important. The revival of Maltese lace during the British period may have been brought about by this lack of supply in spite of the demand.
- It may be pertinent to consider costume as part of the display. Clothes were a sign of status. They were very expensive in the 19th century – a dress was worth 8 thousand shillings.
- The British introduced things in a very subtle way and the perceived animosity between the locals and the British is not what it was previously imagined to be. During times of war, particularly World War II, no one manifested any hatred towards the British. The Maltese had business to do also thanks to the British. Freedom of the press and the introduction of magazines during the British period were also mentioned as a key development.

General comments

There were no generic comments concerning MUŻA and other aspects of the project.

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This version includes all comments and recommendations that were forwarded.

The MUŻA team

January 2015



Storyline 4

The Artist

Title: Profile of a Maltese Artist (Malta and its artists)

Date: 23.07.2014

Venue: Courtyard – National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta

Attendees: Georgina Portelli (Chairperson)

Caesar Attard

Matthew Attard

Vince Briffa

Austin Camilleri

Ryan Falzon

Sina Farrugia

Anna Grima

Alexandra Pace

Keith Sciberras

Excused: Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, John Martin Borg, Joseph Paul Cassar



Scope and Objective

The scope and objective of this focus group was to review the choice of title and subject content for Story I. Ms Georgina Portelli was chosen to chair this focus group and the choice of participants was negotiated directly with her as the chosen chair.

The chair initiated the discussion with a brief overview concerning the scope and objective of this focus group and the reasons why it was convened. The scope of the focus group was to come up with a definition of a Maltese artist based on identity rather than on nationality.

The discussion referred to the subjective opinions of the focus group participants and the ensuing discussion also referred to what was up for consideration namely (1) the artwork and (2) the artist. Both embrace contemporary values. Participants queried whether this profile should refer to the historic (past) or to the contemporary, and asked whether this referred to the aspirations involved or a stock take of the sector.

Comments Originating from the Discussion

- The profile of an artist is the same as the profile of a Maltese Postman i.e. there is no specific profile to discuss. Everyone knows that artists work in line with international styles which guide their work. Today, more than ever before, everything is global and universal. There are, however, local connections with materials used and the context of geography. There are also trends that need to be discussed. Artists may be influenced by the fashion of the time, such as in the case of abstract art, which was very popular with Maltese artists as a genre. Religious iconography may also be a trend for Maltese artists.
- Such a profile may be difficult to discuss due to globalisation. Could this concern insularity? Obstacles and territory were the two things that might be defined, although insularity may be relative and, perhaps, refer to mobility. It may also be a matter of resources. One particular participant also referred to his personal experience in the 1970s. The argument can also be reversed in that these obstacles help shape the artist in a distinctive way. Global



may be a more appropriate term. One particular participant mentioned Palazzo Strozzi, Florence as an example of how a museum can look at the global but act local.

- Progress also means those who could not travel in the past can do so with more ease and better facilities. There is also a marked difference between younger and older generations of artists.
- There is no connection between identity and creativity. One can be an artist irrespective of whether he is Maltese or not. Maltese identity is very much contextualised. One participant suggested that for someone to be recognised as a Maltese artist he had to be identified as such by third parties. Recognition or self-identification from a central European or Chinese artist may be easier. In this regard, American artists are in a much better position.
- Artists should challenge the structure of tradition and the establishment with their creative initiatives. Diversity has to be acknowledged given that contemporary art is very flexible. Taking a step to grasp the essence of what is happening on the international scene is a must.

General comments

- MUŻA has to be an organic platform. It has to reach individuals and groups that are changing all the time, and such an initiative needs to come from the institution itself. Needless to say, institutions change and develop at a slower pace when compared to artists.
- The overriding value concerns shaping MUŻA as a place where to give space to artists to discuss. MUŻA has to be a self-reflective entity.
- There should be a break between past and present as the institution continues to collect documentation. It is often the case that artists don't even care to record their work. However, institutions need to react to the current circumstances. If an artist is not influenced by the local context and appropriates foreign objects/influences, how is MUŻA going to react to this?
- There will always be someone selecting works and acting as an arbiter of taste. Some artists create art irrespective of whether it ends up in an institution. It is up to the institution to



follow the scene and keep abreast with what is happening, given that it has the responsibility.

- There is a social responsibility with MUŻA. It has to choose the exceptional as it continues to discuss with people. MUŻA has to work for both the macro and micro audience. It also has an obligation as a repository and a responsibility for defining what is precious and what is not. Art is about the spirit but there is also an issue with quality (ie exceptional) even though a work can be of good quality but not necessarily exceptional.
- In Malta we have the gallery system missing, although this has its pros and cons. Not having a gallery system has its positives given that it is nowadays 'killing artists'. The problem with the international scene is that those preoccupied with galleries have personal agendas, which are not necessarily shared with the artists. On the other hand a proper gallery system can function as a filter. Galleries can connect the artists with the international scene, but it is ultimately not the market which defines what makes an artist.

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The MUŻA team

January 2015

