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The Malta Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 as an Expression of Maltese Museography

Chiara Cecalupo*

Abstract

The article presents and analyses in detail the interior design of the Malta Pavilion of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. This is studied both from a historical and cultural point of view, and especially from the perspective of museology and museography. The essay makes use of a very rich set of partially unpublished photographic sources that allow an analysis of the impact of the first public museums in Malta on the 1924 Pavilion. This Pavilion is therefore presented as a showcase for the international exaltation of the emerging Maltese museography. In addition, the text also provides an overview of the Maltese presence at World Expositions and a reflection on the influence of European museology in Malta under British government.

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L'articolo prende le mosse dalla raccolta di una serie di cartoline parzialmente inedite che tramandano con precisione l'allestimento interno del Padiglione di Malta alla British Empire Exhibition di Wembley nel 1924. Queste immagini vengono utilizzate per studiare l'allestimento delle sale dedicate a Malta Preistorica e Malta sotto i Cavalieri a paragone con le coeve sistemazioni dei musei pubblici sull'isola. Per questa analisi si utilizzano varie fotografie, finora ignote o poco note, degli interni di queste istituzioni e questo permette di leggere l'esposizione di Wembley come un momento chiave della museologia maltese. Inoltre, il testo fornisce anche una panoramica della presenza maltese alle esposizioni mondiali e una riflessione sull'influenza della museologia europea a Malta sotto il dominio britannico.

The present article aims to contribute to the history of Maltese museology in the early twentieth century, based on the historical analysis of several (unpublished or little-known) graphic sources that have been collected by the author during a wider study on archaeological museology in Europe at the time of the Universal Exhibitions. In fact, the essay is mainly based on the setting up of the Maltese pavilion at the Great British Empire Exhibition of 1924, which can be compared with the museums of the island in order to provide more general reflections on the history of Maltese museums, as attested in detail by many postcards and photographs of the time. Indeed, while the history of Maltese collecting has often been analysed in its global and chronological extension¹, less attention has been paid to particular moments and phenomena that are very common in other European nations. This article therefore intends to contribute to a more detailed reconstructions starting from a general overview of Malta's presence in the nineteenth century universal exhibitions. Particular attention will be given to the 1924 exhibition, first from a historical point of view, and then investigating the inner layout of Maltese Pavilion. Thanks to the numerous images available, it will be possible to compare the pavilion to the contemporary Maltese museums and to identify museological guidelines and styles, placing them in the broader panorama of European museum history.

In this paper we will use a number of graphic sources, in particular postcards and photographs of different origins, dated between about 1860 and 1925. The main focus of our analysis are the so called Tuck's Postcards: with the opening of the Wembley Exhibition in 1924, the London-based firm Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd published two sets of six sepia-toned photogravure postcards, each representing a part of the interior design of the Malta Pavilion² and selected beauties of the island painted by the leading Maltese painters of

¹ Gambin 2003 and Delia 2011 in particular.

² 1 and 2. Hall of Malta under the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem; 3 and 4. Prehistoric Malta Section. 6. The Malta Pavilion at Wembley. 7 Industrial Section Malta (Fig. 3, 5).

the time³, which partly adorned the interior of the Pavilion. In addition, there is a postcard of the exterior of the Malta Pavilion published by Fleetway Press Ltd after a photograph by Campbell Gray (Fig. 1). In this way, the Maltese presence at Wembley is visually very well documented⁴.

1. *Malta at the international exhibitions*

The British Empire Exhibition of 1924 was not the first World Fair in which the Maltese government participated. Malta's first participation in an exhibition was at the Great Exhibition of Hyde Park in 1851, a moment when the practice of joining such events became standardised for the future. The 1851 exhibition was organised by the British government from 1849 onwards, with clear intentions of celebrating the empire. The main objective was to collect all transportable products from the colonies and dependencies in one exhibition⁵. Malta occupied area 31 of Avenue I with 34 exhibitors and displayed all its main handicraft goods: fabrics, jewellery, embroidery, lace, stones, marble table-tops, and vases with antique decorations and shapes⁶, with the idea of opening up to new markets. Before leaving for London in 39 boxes on 26 February 1851, a selection of objects was exhibited on 17 February at the Auberge de Provence in Valletta with great success, inaugurating a practice that would be typical of subsequent exhibitions. Apart from medals and honourable mentions⁷, the most important legacy left by the Hyde Park Exhibition in Malta was the arrival on the island of Sir William Reid, Chief Executive of the 1851 Exhibition. Reid was appointed as British Governor in Malta in 1852: as we shall see, Reid was a key figure for Maltese museums and for Malta's presence at the World's Fair. As soon as he arrived, he founded the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, which selected goods to be sent to foreign exhibitions and organised national ones⁸. Maltese pavilions were present at the 1855 Universal Exhibition in Paris and at the International Exhibition in South Kensington in 1862⁹. The presence of Maltese exhibitors at the Great Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867 was much more abundant. The chron-

³ 5. The Grand Harbour and the Three Cities Malta; 8. Valletta and the Marsamuxetto Harbour/The Destroyers of the Mediterranean Fleet moor in this Harbour; 9. Auberge de Castille, Valletta; 10. A Maltese boat; 11. Pictoresque Malta; 12. Malta. The Island of Sunshine.

⁴ Bonello 2000; Agius WWI.

⁵ Greenhalg 1998, p. 53.

⁶ Royal Commission 1851, pp. 165-166.

⁷ Abela 1994, pp. 123-124.

⁸ Ivi, p. 120.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 120-125.

icle by the Englishman Rimmel¹⁰ informs us that the Maltese display cases were extremely interesting and contained ‘graceful stone statuettes, areal lace tissues, charming specimens of gold and silver filigree jewellery’. Rimmel also states that, at the entrance of the pavilion, the visitor was greeted and guided by a couple of peasants and a lady dressed in typical costumes and jewellery. This ‘living exhibition’ of Maltese costume fully anticipates the concept of ‘race in residence’, which we will see fully expressed at the Wembley Exhibition in 1924¹¹ (see below). The presence of this practice inside the Malta pavilion in 1867 reflected the idea that Malta was considered an exotic state and fell in the same geo-political area of African countries. Traces of this connection within the British Empire was clearly stated by the position of the Malta pavilion itself inside Wembley Park, as remembered during the *Assemblea Legislativa* of Maltese Parliament, that took place in Valletta on the 11th of February 1924: «l'onor. Dott. Mifsud Bonnici mette sulla tavola del Parlamento una pianta dell'Esposizione di Londra, da cui risulta che il pavilione maltese si trova calendato coll'Affrica Orientale»¹².

Another detail that was later reused in the pavilion at Wembley can be identified in the Maltese sector at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, opened on 4 May 1886 by Queen Victoria at South Kensington¹³. The types of objects from Malta were numerous and much admired¹⁴, and the Malta Court had, as its monumental entrance, a typical Maltese-style fortified gateway, built in stone by craftsmen in service of the Superintendent of Public Works, sent to England in several pieces and assembled on site.

2. Malta Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition

The most successful participation for Malta in an international exhibition¹⁵, however, was undoubtedly that of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

Conceived as early as 1919, soon after the end of the First World War, and opened in a very difficult year for the British monarchy, the British Empire Exhibition was designed to surpass the splendours of the 1851 exhibition. It

¹⁰ Rimmel 1868, p. 326.

¹¹ Clendinning 2012.

¹² «Malta» 12.02.1924, n. 12112, p. 1.

¹³ Abela 1994, pp. 124-126.

¹⁴ Colonial and Indian Exhibition 1886, pp. 123-124, 460-461.

¹⁵ Malta also participated in the 1871 South Kensington International Exposition, the 1888 Vatican Exposition (Abela 1994, pp. 124-126), and then in 1938 the Glasgow International, where Malta was placed in the Colonial Court (Greenhalg 1998, p. 62).

was partly a trade fair and partly an amusement park, combining educational and entertaining features with commercial ones¹⁶.

The presence of almost all the colonies, dominions and protectorates (such as Malta) of the British Empire was extremely functional for the grandiose narrative of an empire that, in the words of King George, was a ‘Family of Nations’ cooperating fraternally to move together towards a new post-war era of potentially unlimited prosperity under the British aegis. The Exhibition «intended to collect, import, replicate, display and communicate what was considered the essence of the entire world»¹⁷, namely the British possessions. There was also an educational aspect, aimed particularly at schools, associations and the working class, but also at all visitors who, on seeing the exhibition, could embark on a “democratic” journey to the sites of the empire while remaining in London. By presenting so many different countries, the exhibition that intended to celebrate the unity and cooperation of the empire, somehow ended up encouraging expressions of national identity of all kinds¹⁸, reinforced even more by the massive presence in the pavilions of natives and local inhabitants living on the stage but according to their own customs and traditions. This practice of ‘Race in residence’¹⁹ allowed visitors to come into contact with the different cultural expressions of the empire and placed the Wembley event in the questionable tradition of all previous British exhibitions where it was typical to ‘expose’ the inhabitants of the colonies to the public. The presence of human beings in the pavilion surely concurred and guaranteed a kind of authenticity of the display and the credibility of the whole event²⁰. But, at the same time, it helps connecting the 1924 British Empire Exhibition with many other colonial expositions that took place in Europe in early twentieth century, that massively displayed human being from the colonies in pavilions that aimed to recreated their homeland. A stunning comparison in this sense can be the *Villaggio Eritreo* set up during the International Exhibition of Turin in 1911. Many colonial events took places during this exposition and the organising committee wanted an Eritrean village to be built on the banks of the river and temporarily inhabited by Eritreans, to complement the exhibition²¹.

The architecture of the whole Wembley event, then, always moved in the direction of showing the differences while producing imperial order out of

¹⁶ Grant 2012; Clendinning 2012.

¹⁷ After Geppert 2010, p. 155.

¹⁸ On how the imperialism shown during the Wembley Exhibition became a controversial and politicised phenomenon, instead of celebrating union and connections, see: Beaven 2012, pp. 163-169.

¹⁹ Clendinning 2012.

²⁰ Geppert 2010, pp. 175-177.

²¹ Ministero delle Colonie 1913, pp. 46-47 and tables.

chaos²². The whole park included the Palaces of Industry, Engineering, Architecture and the Arts, an amusement park and stadium, a lake, two internal railways, gardens, cloisters, the Catholic Oratory²³, the main government pavilion and 36 pavilions of the Nations of the Empire, some of which were of great value because they were designed according to the architecture and styles of their countries of origin. Among these, the one with the greatest impact and much appreciated by critics, press and visitors was the Malta Pavilion. However, before delving into the detailed architectural and exhibition design description of the Pavilion, some general concepts about Malta's presence in this exhibition, with a very special pavilion reproducing the typical Maltese fortified Citadel with a monumental stone entrance, should be exposed.

Preparations for participating in the exhibition began in Malta in 1923, when the government encouraged the candidature of exhibitors through local exhibitions, medals and cash prizes. It was also arranged for a preliminary exhibition of the objects to be sent to London in the Auberge d'Italie, which had already housed the museum for almost two years, as we shall see below²⁴. At the same time, the architectural project of the pavilion was also put out to competition: the winner was the model of a fortified Maltese citadel by the architect Joseph Cachia Caruana, who took up the concept already expressed by the 1886 pavilion. Cachia Caruana citadel included the full-scale reproduction of the gateway to the ancient capital of Mdina and of two other lateral entrances modelled on the citadel of Birgu/Vittoriosa, the headquarters of the Knights of the Order²⁵. At the top of the main entrance the flag of Malta in the Commonwealth was hoisted. No official plans are known²⁶ of the interior of the pavilion. It occupied 370 square metres of the Wembley park and was divided into three rooms, the Industrial Malta as the entrance, then the Hall of Malta under the Knights, and the Prehistoric Malta, reflecting the island's historical development, the recent archaeological discoveries and the contemporary museographic expressions. Two weeks before the opening, the 247 boxes containing the entire pavilion sailed from Malta to England on the ship SS Aleppo²⁷.

From the political and organisational point of view, the agreement between British and Maltese authorities took shape years before the opening. In London it was Lord Grenfell, former Governor of Malta and promoter of the

²² Geppert 2010, p. 148.

²³ A Catholic representation was missing from the opening and was only installed in June, two months after the opening of the exhibition, right in front of the Malta pavilion: *The Tablet*, 24/05/1924 and 28/06/1924.

²⁴ Bonello 2000, p. 8; Agius WWI.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Abela 1994, p. 128.

²⁷ Agius WWI.

first archaeological museum in Valletta²⁸, who laid the foundation stone of the Pavilion and inaugurated it at the official opening on 23 April 1924. The Maltese authorities directly involved in the installation and maintenance were Edward Tancredi Agius, President of the Malta Association in London and Commissioner for Malta at the Exhibition, and Ugo Mifsud, Local Chairman of the special exhibition committee and future Prime Minister of the island²⁹. The combined efforts of these personalities led to the opening of a pavilion enriched by a garden and a small park, with Maltese-style kiosks selling food and other typical products. Much loved by visitors and authorities alike³⁰, the pavilion aimed to recreate a small Malta at Wembley, with its atmosphere, customs and traditions, and was so successful that it won the first prize for best pavilion design³¹.

The Maltese population remained constantly informed about the whole process through the chronicles of the government assemblies reported daily in the newspaper 'Malta'. The information provided on these occasions was almost always of an economic and administrative nature. On the other hand, there was limited local press coverage of the event in general, it was way more common to rely on reports appeared on English newspapers such as 'The Tablet'. We have only identified two descriptions of the event at the time of its opening: the first appeared in 'Malta' of 12 April 1924 (where the exhibition as a whole was described in Italian, without even mentioning the Maltese pavilion), the second in 'The Malta Herald' of 22 April 1924. After these dates, references to the event appear only sporadically in local newspapers.

The Malta Pavilion was not among those to be included in the second edition of the British Empire Exhibition, which reopened at Wembley in 1925 (perhaps also because of the untimely death of Edward Tancredi Agius, commemorated on 10 October in the exhibition's Catholic oratory³²) and its fate after dismantling remains mysterious. However, it is known that by June 1925 the objects placed in the pavilion and sent from local museums returned to Malta³³.

The appearance and impact of the Maltese pavilion certainly had wider cultural implications as well as museographic ones, which we shall address shortly. The idea of representing Malta through the concept of a fortress was not new during British domination, when the practice of displaying history for

²⁸ Gambin 2003, p. 23.

²⁹ Agius WWI.

³⁰ British and other royalties visit the pavilion several times in 1924: Sabey 2000 (28th of May and 30th of June) and Sabey 2001 (30th of July).

³¹ Abela 1994, p. 128.

³² Agius WWI.

³³ As Giuseppe Despott recalls in the Museum Annual Report for 24 June 1925: «The paleontological specimen Exhibited in the Malta Pavilion at Wembley have been duly returned here in good conditions»: Despott 1925.

the political purposes of legitimising the British presence as heir to the Knights dominated: at that time, pro-Italian propaganda of the Maltese independence activists in an anti-British key, after Mussolini's seizure of power in Italy, was mounting³⁴.

The exhibition of the Order of Malta's Armoury and Magistral Palace at Wembley was connected to the citadel-like exterior to promote the idea of Malta as a historic Mediterranean fortress and protective bastion of the empire. The military role of Malta was to be recovered by the British in the very tradition of the Knights' great battles (first of all the Great Siege of 1565) and was clearly expressed at Wembley, particularly in the interior display of real historical relics to celebrate Malta's military role in the Empire even after the First World War³⁵.

Regarding the interior design, going through the reproduction of the Mдина gateway one entered directly into the Industrial Malta Section. Of this room only one picture remains to this day, number 7 in the series of Tuck's Postcards (Fig. 2), which also offers a brief description on the back: «The main exhibits in this Section are gold and silver filigree works, embroidery, artificial flowers, cigarettes, canned goods, candles, furniture, fabrics, etc., as well as the exquisite lace for which the Island is famous. A representative collection of the paintings of modern Maltese artist is also on view».

The postcard shows only a partial view of the right side of the room, from which we can see the oval arrangement of the wall cupboards and the natural lighting in a zenithal position. What we can admire is a display of handicrafts (one can recognise decorative stone elements, models of boats and armour, curtains, fabrics, and in the foreground the display case for ATLAM cigarettes). The upper part of the room appears decorated with paintings by contemporary Maltese artists³⁶: in the centre we see the personification of the Holy Religion and, on the right, two views of the port. Also on the right there is the opening to the next room, on either side of which we see a suit of armour with its round shield bearing the Maltese Cross and a large painting of an English soldier, while at the top the plaque introducing the Hall of Malta under the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. The non-visible part of this section can be partially observed in postcard number 4 (Fig. 5b). Here the subject is the Prehistoric Malta Section, but from the doorway connecting the two sections a view of the industrial hall is offered, introduced by the sign "MALTA". Certainly, it is a blurred view, but one can at least recognise cupboard windows, some diplomas and posters and, higher up, part of a maritime view. As far as we can see from these pictures, the arrangement of this first section did

³⁴ Debono 2015, pp. 149-150.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 149.

³⁶ Bonello 2000, pp. 8-9.

not deviate from the rationally chaotic style visible in the illustrations of all other international exhibitions, with the objects arranged in central and side cabinets in Art Deco style, or directly on the floor. Moreover, the industrial section is the only one in which the materials on display could be purchased, and therefore the one that best met the primary aims of the exhibition.

The door to the right of the photo then leads into the room where the most symbolic part of Maltese history, the Johannite theocracy, was displayed. The Tuck's postcards for the Hall of Malta under the Knights (numbers 1 and 2) show only half of the room, which is however enough for analysis and comparison. The captions of the postcards introduce the contents as follows: «This hall contains real armour worn by the Knights of their Wars against the foes of Christendom, models of the galleys in which a famous Grandmaster of the Order once forced the Dardanelles (1656), antique furniture and several other interesting Exhibits of the times of the Order» (Fig. 3a and 3b).

In the room, also with zenithal lighting, we see all the types of materials that characterise the Knights' time. First of all, the weapons, displayed on the short side as panoplies and trophies on a dark background on either side of the door to the room. In addition, there are parade drums on the ground, a few swords in a case on a small table in the middle of the long side, and at least two complete suits of armour, reconstructed standing up. They are leaning against the wall along with the rest of the objects. In the centre, in fact, there is only a display case with the reproduction of the prow of the Grand Master Lascaris' galleon, and a desk on a circular platform which was also used to sell (Fig. 3c) the souvenir postcards commissioned by the Maltese government from the painter Edward Caruana Dingli to celebrate the beauties of "Malta – the island of sunshine and history"³⁷.

In the lower part of the walls are arranged, rhythmically and very close together, works of art of the period, namely the eighteenth and nineteenth century portraits of the Knights and large canvases of seascapes³⁸. There are also key pieces of Maltese craftsmanship of the modern age: the furniture (also containing vases or silverware), the gilt-framed mirrors and the Maltese-style wall clocks, pieces which only in recent years are given much more consideration as museum objects and cultural heritage. Everything had its own visible caption. From the postcards we can also appreciate the frieze in the upper part of the room, alternating views of Malta and the main palaces of the island, historical scenes of the Order and large coats of arms of the Grand Masters, attributable to the painter Ramiro Cali. Under each painting, despite

³⁷ Ivi, p. 9.

³⁸ Regarding the fine arts exhibited by colonies and dominions at Wembley with the aim of celebrating the development of the Empire, see Boyanoski 2017.

the height, there were descriptive captions (“Auberge de Castille” and “Co-Cathedral of Valletta” are clearly readable).

As far as the history of Maltese museography is concerned (and thus the heart of this essay), the Hall of Malta under the Knights really speaks for itself. The layout of this room had in fact a direct connection with that of the Palace Armoury in the Grand Master’s Palace in Valletta. As early as 1555, a few years after settling in Malta, every Knight was obliged to leave their arms to the Order at the time of his death. The Order’s large collection of arms and armour then created was officially recognised as such in an Armoury by Grand Master de Wignacourt and transferred to the Magistral Palace in 1604³⁹, in a large gallery at the back of the Palace, specifically designed for the display of these signs of power⁴⁰. A certain architectural renovation can be dated to the period of Grand Master Pinto De Fonseca (1741-1773), who emphasised the rhythmic scansion of the galleries of armour and arranged the trophies of arms on the wall, as seen by a French visitor in 1791⁴¹. Such a collection, which grew larger and richer every year with each deceased knight, lived in the perennial tension between respect to the relics of legitimisation of the past and the continuous need to modernise and renew. The turning point is obviously the end of the Order in the Napoleonic period and the beginning of English era in 1815. The British Government, however, also brought a certain number of novelties for the valorisation of the Maltese heritage, both negative, such as the outflow of artefacts to museums in England, and positive, such as the opening to the public of the first museums.

The attention of the English governors was immediately drawn to the Palace Armoury because of its political significance, which suited perfectly the English narrative of being in continuity with the Knights. If in the first years of British rule there was an attempt to modernise the collection by moving and transferring Maltese arms to London, which led to a partial emptying of the armoury, the situation changed in the following time. Under Sir William Reid’s own governorship (1851-1858) the armoury was given a monumental public entrance for the first time, while under the next governor, Sir Gaspar de Marchant (1858-1864), the room was restored, and the Armoury opened to the public as the island’s first real museum in 1860. In its design, the Armoury at this stage began to take on the features that would later be seen at Wembley: panoplies and trophies on the wall, armour standing on its sides with the use of wooden dummies, and a romantic layout of the room with columns with antique decoration⁴². This arrangement is testified by two splendid photographs kept at the Leiden University Library and dated around 1865. In the

³⁹ <<https://heritagemalta.org/the-palace-armoury/>>, 19.03.2022.

⁴⁰ Czerwinski, Sygulski 1969, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

first one (Fig. 4a) we see the corridor that leads to the first floor of the Grand Master's Palace, with a ceremonial arrangement of armour, paintings, coats of arms and trophies in the style of the 15th and 16th century museum galleries in Italian museums. In the second photograph (Fig. 4b) we see the armoury gallery with a row of central columns to support the ceiling: here are densely arranged the standing armours, trophies and panoplies of arms on the walls, small showcases in the middle of the room.

A further change that brings us even closer to the Wembley layout occurred under Grenfell's governorship (1898-1903) in response to a growing sense of national identity to be expressed also through cultural institutions⁴³. Between 1902 and 1903, Grenfell chose Guy Francis Laking to carry out a general refurbishment of the armoury, which resulted in the first inventory of the museum. In *A Catalogue of the Armour and Arms in the Armoury of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem*, more than 5200 objects were catalogued in a very concise manner, and presented according to their location. In the new layout, Marchant's columns were removed, the original airiness of the gallery was restored and the objects chosen for display (both trophies and standing armour) were moved to the wall, with very few display cases remaining in the centre. In addition, Laking recovered numerous pieces of furniture and paintings of Johannite portraiture and added them to the spaces available between the armours⁴⁴, free and accessible to visitors. We are therefore facing a historicist installation that aimed to recreate a generic setting of the Knights' era, exactly what was done in the Hall of Malta under the Knights at Wembley. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the Laking display (and consequently that of the Malta Pavilion, which is its "replica"), also responded to new styles and fashions for armouries. Clearly the most obvious comparison is with the Stibbert Museum, which was set up and opened in the very same years (1859-1906 and 1908) in Florence. Frederick Stibbert's collection of antique weapons, paintings and furniture was set up in an old-fashioned and timeless atmosphere, where the display of standing armour, horses and wall trophies were designed to offer a historical reconstruction that was definitively pleasant to look at and illustrative of the glory of the past⁴⁵.

The large opening on the right, noticeable in postcard number 1, gave access to the third and last room, the Prehistoric Malta Section, visible in good part in Tuck's Postcards number 3 and 4 (Fig. 5a and 5b) and also partially in number 1 above (Fig. 3a). From the captions of the postcard, we learn some

⁴³ Gambin 2003.

⁴⁴ Cerwinski, Sygulski 1969, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Colle 2017. References about the Stibbert Museum are numerous and they flourished in the last two decades. About the museum in general, see Fuchs, Di Marco 2003, Di Marco 2008 and Colle, Becattini 2019. For some deeper insight on the museographic aspects please refer to Becattini 2014, Becattini 2014 and 2016, Franci 2016.

basic information: «Prehistoric Malta Section – This section contains models of the famous megalithic and other temples with which Malta abounds. On the left of the postcard is the megalithic temple of Tarshien (4000-3000 B.C.); on the right the famous temple of Hagar Kim (4000-3000 B.C.). Flint implements and typical Neolithic pottery were found in the ruins».

From this picture we have evidence of the right side of the room, the one facing the exit. The layout, however, appears homogeneous throughout the section. In the middle, available for visitors to touch, there are four large wooden tables with reproductions of the main megalithic archaeological sites on the island, which had recently been brought to light. In postcard number 3 are visible the models of Tarxien and Hagar Qim, in number 4 probably Mnajdra and Ġgantija of Gozo. There are also many Punic pottery artefacts (probably originals and not copies, but it remains unsure): some of them are placed on table-like surfaces (Fig. 5b), but mostly on pedestals and tripods leaning against the walls. The rest of the exhibition is set on the walls: there are showcases with smaller archaeological finds, such as the typical small boards on which the ceramic fragments were applied, and the female figurines massively found in Maltese prehistoric sites. On both postcards one can clearly see casts of the spiral reliefs of megalithic temples, which decorated the lower part of the walls together with other casts of unidentified subjects. The rest of the exhibition included exclusively graphic materials. On each half-pillar there were three photographs and prints of archaeological sites of the island. Meanwhile, as well as in the other rooms, the upper part of the walls is decorated with paintings of other important archaeological sites on the island. One can recognise the paintings by Robert Caruana Dingli of the Quaternarius Landscape (now kept in the Ghar Dalam Museum in Birżebbuġa): they were executed specifically for Wembley, as testified by some letters between the author and the curator of the Fine Arts section of the museum in Valletta Vincenzo Bonello⁴⁶. In addition, one can clearly recognise a view of the St Pauls Catacomb with its caption, the only exception to the exclusive presence of material regarding the prehistory of Maltese archipelago. From the postcards one can also faintly see a frieze at the highest part of the room, perhaps intended to recall the decorations of the Megalithic Temples.

The layout of this small room can also be connected with museographic styles and fashions of the motherland. The archaeological display at Wembley came at a time of novelty and renewal for Maltese archaeological museums represented by two cases: the Roman Villa Museum in Rabat and the Museum in Valletta. Both of these museums can be analysed thanks to original photographs and postcards. In 1881 occurred accidental discovery of a Roman villa in Rabat, immediately outside the Citadel of Mdina, with mosaics of great

⁴⁶ Bonello 2000, p. 8.

value⁴⁷. In that period the area of Rabat underwent a general redevelopment due to the planting of the Howard Gardens (the Roman Villa was discovered while planting trees for this green area) and, before 1889, the Museum Train Station. These works, like many others on the island, brought to light numerous Roman artefacts, which were gradually collected at the Roman villa. It was therefore decided to build a museum to preserve the villa⁴⁸, and this became the first museum on the island built specifically to protect and exhibit an archaeological site⁴⁹. It was opened to the public on February 1882, but the continue addition of findings led to a further extension in 1906 and then to the final work in 1922, which gave the Roman Villa Museum the appearance it still has today (Fig. 6a)⁵⁰. The museum was given its classical façade by the architect Galizia and was structured as a single rectangular exhibition hall. The way this hall was set up inside can be seen in a postcard of the period, the back of which reads «Roman Villa Museum – Rabat Malta» (Fig. 6b). The picture – never published before – gives us a nineteenth century antiquarian setting in which we see statuary, capitals and a large millstone placed randomly on the ground. A series of busts and portraits stand on individual supports on a sort of platform, the amphorae high up on the wall, and pottery (exclusively whole forms) was arranged inside a large wooden showcase.

This is a layout which, therefore, is very similar to that of the Wembley Pavilion and of the contemporary museum in Valletta. While the districts of Mdina and Rabat were only provided with a central archaeological museum in 1881-1882 after many archaeological discoveries in the whole area, the capital Valletta had already a museum point, and for almost a century. In the very early years of the nineteenth century, in fact, the Public Library of Valletta – established by the Grand Master of Rohan (1775-1797) – started hosting local archaeological finds donated by various private individuals⁵¹ and those coming from excavations. The intention was to unite all the archaeological finds of the island in this Cabinet of Antiquities, under the care of the various librarians⁵². Following in the footsteps of the contemporary public libraries of Europe, the Cabinet of Antiquities became an ordered appendix to the library and a central point of heritage protection policies on the island. In general, even for the later set-up in the last years of the nineteenth century, we have few significant pho-

⁴⁷ Cardona 2021, pp. 235-237.

⁴⁸ See the official website <<https://heritagemalta.org/domvs-romana/>>, 19.03.2022.

⁴⁹ Cardona 2021, p. 235.

⁵⁰ <<https://heritagemalta.org/domvs-romana/>> (upload of the year 2015), 19.03.2022.

⁵¹ First of all, the first collection of Maltese antiquities by Giovanni Francesco Abela, which remained with the Jesuits until 1655 and was later incorporated into the Public Library (Cecalupo 2020), then other various donations from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (as visible in some letters in the National Archives of Malta, see Gambin 2003, p. 11).

⁵² Ivi, p. 14.

tographs of this cabinet. There is an image of large funerary Phoenician-Punic materials in the typical wooden showcases (Fig. 7), and another one of a more heterogeneous section in which the statuary is displayed on central pedestals that allow a 360° view, while on the walls we see the same type of showcases and a large wall display case where ceramic series seem to be displayed (Fig. 8).

The experience of the Cabinet of Antiquities of the Public Library showed its limitations already in 1901 under Governor Grenfell, the one who opened the Malta Pavilion in Wembley. Early-twentieth century was indeed a period of great excavations⁵³ and growing general interest in archaeological finds and local heritage in general. In 1901, during the Duchess of York's visit to Malta, a temporary exhibition of Maltese antiquities was organised by the father of modern Maltese archaeology, Themistocle Zammit, at Xara Palace in Valletta⁵⁴. The exhibition was held in the industrial hall of what once was the headquarters of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturers, and Commerce, founded by Sir William Reid and primarily responsible for the Maltese presence at the European World's Fairs. We have important photographs of this display as well (Fig. 9). In the beautiful classical architecture of the room, the visitor was immediately struck by the arrangement of coats of arms, casts and drawings/photographs encrusted on the walls. Statuary and architectural pieces also leaned against the walls in a rhythmic display. In the middle of the room there were large tables where, at the back, perhaps the models of the temples can be glimpsed.

The enthusiasm provoked by these exhibitions, together with the chronic lack of space in the Public Library, led to the creation of the first national public museum, which was first set up in 1903 in Palazzo Xara and then moved to the Auberge d'Italie in 1922⁵⁵. This collection, that expanded the core that came from the Public Library, became the island's museum landmark, the place where the preliminary exhibition of the Wembley event also took shape.

The Malta Pavilion of 1924 actually owed much to the archaeological display at the Auberge d'Italie. In its archaeological section, in fact, the first Maltese exhibition of purely prehistoric materials took shape: the archaeological objects, models, casts, but also the inspiration for the exhibition design of Malta Pavilion in Wembley came totally from the museum in Valletta. This is shown by the photographs of the period (Fig. 10), in which one sees condensed

⁵³ For a general overview of the period see Vella, Gilkes 2001.

⁵⁴ Gambin 2003, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 22. The growing interest in national collections of the Maltese population in those years appeared in a short chronicle of *The Daily Malta Chronicle* on the 14th of February 1905. Here, talking about the necessity of creating some new and rich museums on the island, the reporter states: "before the present day we have been said to have a museum. Most of us have never seen it. Few could tell a stranger where it was, if enquiry about it were made of him [...] But we have in Malta enough of interesting objects to fill two great museums".

all the features highlighted so far and visible at Wembley. On the walls, large maps, reproductions, photos and casts are interspersed with statuary on high pedestals. In the middle, protected by some dissuading frames, there were the models of the megalithic temples, clearly one of the museum's main attractions.

3. *Final thoughts*

After the success of the closing event in 1924 and after the return of the objects in 1925, an important season of discussion on the protection and enhancement of cultural and archaeological heritage opened in Malta. These debates culminated in the Antiquities Protection Act of 1925, which among other things extended the Museum's rights over the assets of private individuals for sale⁵⁶. This brought Malta in line with other European protection laws and established the Valletta Museum as the main body for the protection and public enjoyment of cultural heritage. Thus, the Wembley exhibition took place at a turning point for Maltese museology, when European styles and inspirations, which undoubtedly came through the British, were realised in local museums. In the Wembley Pavilion we see the factual display of the museographic ideas regarding armouries and period rooms with a European flavour, which had found their first expression on the island thanks to the English arrangements of the Armoury of the Grand Master's Palace. In the Prehistoric Malta Section, on the other hand, the intention was to promote the rich and distinctive past of the megalithic sites: the exhibition trends of European archaeology and *antiquaria* were thus re-proposed with a mixture of "casual" and scattered display and of didactic arrangement of ceramic types and fragments in showcases. In addition, there were architectural models on large tables. These trends arrived at Wembley because they had already been widely experimented in the island's archaeological exhibitions from 1910 onwards, and after Wembley they would be re-proposed in the new Valletta Museum, which opened in 1925. It is therefore interesting to note that both the Hall of Malta Under the Knight and the Historic Malta section of the Malta Pavilion at Wembley used the layouts of the only public museums then existing on the island, which were therefore considered avant-garde and representative of the island's culture in all its complexity.

The British Empire Exhibition at Wembley was thus the true showcase for the international exaltation of the emerging Maltese museology and as such it deserves today a prominent place in the history of collecting on the island, as a crucial moment before the long crisis of the Second World War.

⁵⁶ Delia 2011, p. 579.

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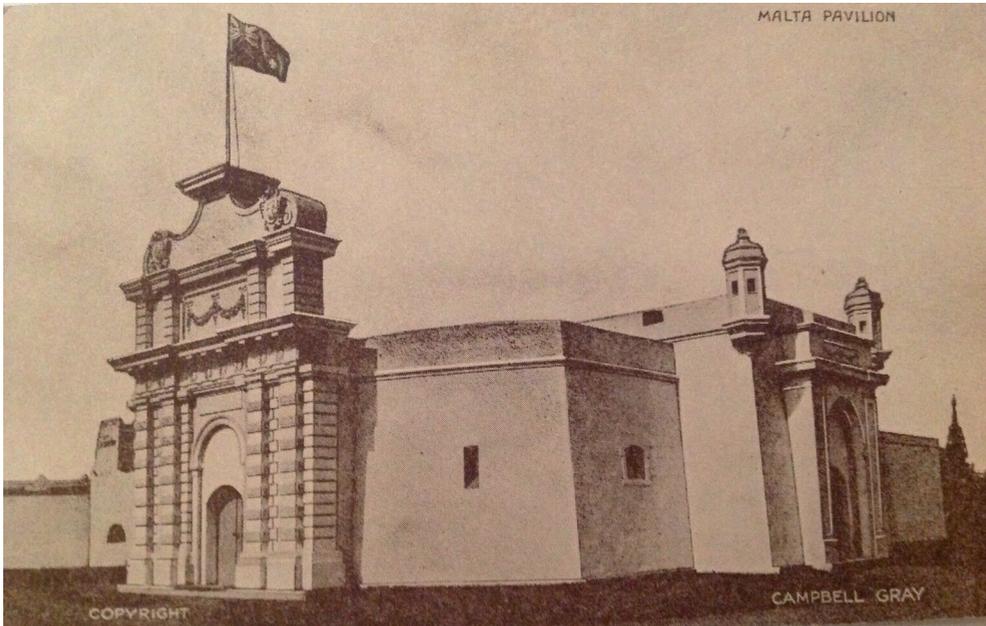
Appendix

Fig. 1. The exterior of the Malta Pavilion. Fleetway Press Ltd, photograph by Campbell Gray (Private Collection)



Fig. 2. Tuck's Postcard n. 7. Industrial Section Malta. (Private Collection)



1. HALL OF MALTA UNDER THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM



2. HALL OF MALTA UNDER THE KNIGHTS OF ST JOHN OF JERUSALEM



Fig. 3. (a and b) Tuck's Postcard n. 1 and 2. Hall of Malta under the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem (Private Collection); (c) Detail of the Hall (from Agius WWI)



Fig. 4. (a and b) The Armoury of the Grand Master's Palace in two pictures of 1865 (Leiden University Library)

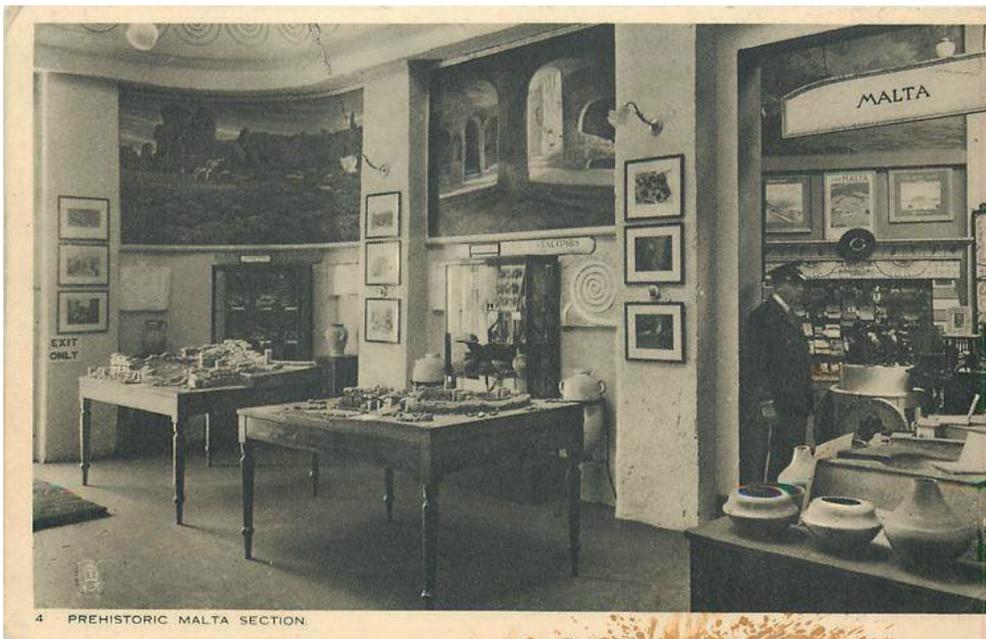


Fig. 5. (a and b) Tuck's Postcard n. 3 and 4. Prehistoric Malta Section (Private Collection)



Fig. 6. (a and b) Internal and external view of the Roman Villa Museum in 1920s (Private Collection)



Fig. 7. Punic showcase at the Public Library of Valletta (from Gambin 2003)



Fig. 8. Archaeological display at the Public Library of Valletta (from Gambin 2003)



Fig. 9. Public exhibition at Palazzo Xara in 1901 (from Gambin 2003)



Fig. 10. Display of the museum at the Auberge d'Italie in 1922 (from Gambin 2003)

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