



Fig. 1
Edward Caruana Dingli,
Village Girl with Goats (detail),
1908, oil on canvas, 43 x 60cm.
(Private Collection, Malta)

The Impact of Photography on Edward and Robert Caruana Dingli

Caroline Tonna continues to elaborate on the connection between painting and photography, with the works of Edward and Robert Caruana Dingli as examples

Edward (1876-1950) and Robert Caruana Dingli (1882-1940) were pivotal in shaping Maltese art in the twentieth century, both as teachers and artists in their own right. Edward, who was also Director of the Malta Government School of Art,¹ had his main interest in portraiture, but his repertoire of paintings includes Valletta cityscapes and folkloristic themes, subjects which were selected to promote overseas the Maltese Islands and its people.

Edward Caruana Dingli and Photography

In some cases, Edward featured picturesque scenes of Valletta from photographs taken by Richard Ellis (1842-1924), who possessed technical mastery and an artistic talent for photography. While Ellis recorded the authentic views and buildings of Valletta, Edward represented the urban space in an idealistic manner. They also collaborated in setting up studio photography, having models pose in traditional costumes. Both Ellis and Edward had their studios in Valletta and both were distinguished artists in their own field; it is understandable

Caroline Tonna has bachelor degrees in Anthropology (2008) and History of Art (2013) and is reading for a Masters degree in History of Art. She was editor of *Elegance* magazine and has been involved in the fashion industry and cultural media. Caroline is also a board member of the Arts Council Malta.



left: Fig. 2
Photograph of a village girl.
(Courtesy of Mr Joseph Axisa)

below: Fig. 3
Ta' Liesse, Valletta.
(Courtesy of Mr Joseph Axisa)

opposite top left: Fig. 4
Photograph from Edward Caruana Dingli's photo album.

opposite top right: Fig. 5
Edward Caruana Dingli, *Serenading on a Karetun on the Road to Mdina* (detail), 1908, watercolour, 24 x 17.5cm.
(Private Collection, Malta)

opposite bottom: Fig. 6
Edward Caruana Dingli, *Morning Activity at Ta' Liesse, Valletta*, 1908, oil on canvas, 67 x 49cm.
(Private Collection, Malta)

that they collaborated by bringing together their respective expertise in painting and photography. Some comparisons of specific photographs taken by Ellis and paintings depicted by Edward could attest to their collaboration.

At the Richard Ellis archives there is a number of glass plate negatives of photographs taken by Ellis of Edward's finished paintings, either as a personal visual diary or more possibly to commercialize the paintings for the printing of an album, posters or postcards. These photographs document the valuable record of paintings that are now only known from photographs, because they are either in the hands of private collectors or works which have been lost.

A number of photographs taken by the artist himself served as templates for his paintings, combining with them inventiveness and creativity. He probably carried his camera with him to record particular moments of the daily life of common people at the market place, village feasts and the harbour. Clearly, Edward was fascinated with peasantry and he took liberties in portraying them living a happy life, without any sign of poverty or hardship, or the lack of hygiene that existed in the early twentieth century in Malta. Edward painted countrymen *Serenading on a Karrettun* (Fig. 5) in two different versions, and another one titled *Maltese Cart out on a Festa*, probably based on a photograph (Fig. 4) that



he took of country people travelling uncomfortably on a cart, adding a guitar player to the accompanying female singers in his painting.

In the early twentieth century the Grand Harbour was very busy with Royal Navy battleships, cargo ships and merchant seamen from various countries.² Yet, Edward's paintings of the Grand Harbour show little more than the traditional *dghajsa tal-Latini*.³ Edward took a close-up photograph of such a boat berthed at Pinto Wharf with men loading cargo on board and a few passers-by at the water's edge. His camera captured the momentary atmosphere at the quayside, and in his painting *Gozo Boats (Tal-Latini) alongside Quay in the Grand Harbour* he blurred the figures to create movement using the technique of the 'Macchiaioli', with colourful blotches that are left raw and applied with quick strokes to create an impressionist image.

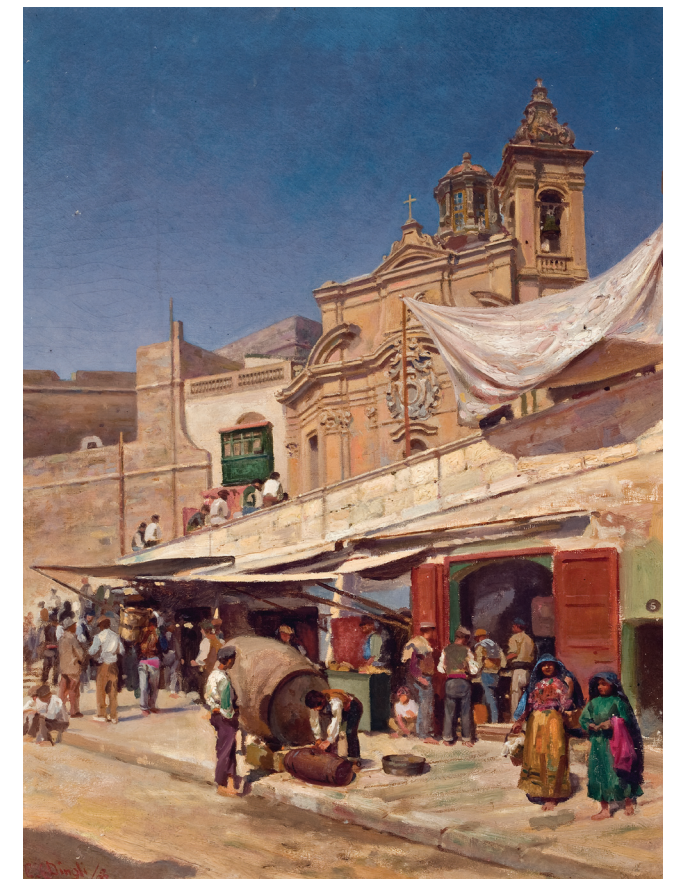
A photograph taken by Edward at Ta' Liesse (Fig. 3) is a snapshot of the buzzing trading activities in the area, with a few makeshift shops from storerooms. The shopkeepers displayed their goods outside the entrance of the shops to attract customers and provided some shade reusing pieces of *xoqqa*, a material mainly used for potato sacks. Edward borrowed the particular elements of the set-up shops in *Morning Activity at Ta' Liesse, Valletta* (Fig. 6) but made the shop awnings neater and added a large white drapery awning hanging from the street above. The architectural backdrop is authentic, with a house balcony and façade of the Church of the Blessed Virgin of Liesse that is only partly captured in the photograph yet fully expressed in the painting. The artist decided to remove the kiosk that sold ice, water and lemonade to passers-by and instead placed some men in the background, sitting on the elevated sidewall. Edward added more trading activity in his painting and included a large wine barrel in the centre foreground, probably using another photograph he had taken of wine trading.

Edward was also interested in the typical colourful Maltese village scenes such as the *festa* and Carnival. The



photograph taken by Edward is one of the narrow streets in Qormi⁴ (Fig. 7) festooned with hanging garlands across the street and a mobile lemonade vendor on the side. The artist was faithful to the architectural setting of the winding narrow street lined with balconies and *festa* statues in *Morning of the Festa* (Fig. 8). Edward made slight changes to passers-by, turning a man holding his children's hands to face the viewer.

A young village girl must have caught Edward's attention, as he took a few snapshots of her. One of these photographs shows her resting against the wall in company of her three goats (Fig. 2) and is interpreted faithfully in the painting of *Village Girl with Goats* (Fig. 1) making the girl stand taller,





more attractive and confident, with one of her hands resting on her waist, as if she were a model. Her blouse is slightly changed and unbuttoned, and Edward adorns her with a gold necklace instead of her Peter Pan collar. The position of the goats is identical, including the bell that hangs around the goat on the right-hand side of the girl. The recess in the wall is similar to the photograph, but the artist added more shade to make the form more visible.

Photographs for nude paintings

In 1915, a letter written by Edward's brother Robert to his close friend, Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969),⁵ states that the painting of *Salomé*⁶ (Fig. 10) by Edward was actually 'stolen' from photographs 'of the Salon' (Fig. 9).⁷ It is highly probable that Edward possessed a large number of French nude photographs⁸ which he secretly kept under lock and key because of their sensitivity. It was common for artists to have such photographs since it was very difficult to have live models in the nude for painting or sculpture. Local artists also made use of photographic books on nudes which were banned in Malta.⁹ The nude in Maltese art in the first half of the twentieth century should be seen within the local socio-religious context.¹⁰ The 'life classes' or '*Scuola Libera*



del Nudo' of Josef Kalleya founded in 1936 had to close down because of pressure from neighbours and the ecclesiastical authorities.¹¹ Subsequently, the Malta Government School of Art did not offer nude life classes and aspiring artists never had an adequate teaching in the study of the nude. Therefore, another way of studying the nude was by means of nude photographs in books or loose photographs secretly imported from abroad. They came in handy as a source for painting the nude, but nobody dared to speak about them as they were considered pornographic material.

Robert Caruana Dingli and Photography

In another letter written by Robert Caruana Dingli to Vincenzo Bonello, Robert wrote that a photographer had told him that Edward had one of the latest cameras.¹² However, even Robert himself was always experimenting with his camera, which he liked to carry in his pocket.¹³ There is evidence that Robert took photographs of his wife Carmelina (c.1898-1961) for his *Female Nude* (Fig. 12) and Ugo, one of his five children, was often used as a model. The painting was possibly derived from at least two photographs showing Ugo in the same position as the female nude (Fig. 11) and a head shot of Carmelina's head in profile. Robert took an

opposite left: Fig. 7
Village feast.
(Courtesy of Mr Joseph Axisa)

opposite right: Fig. 8
Edward Caruana Dingli, *Morning of the Festa*, watercolour, 36 x 25cm.
(Casa Rocca Piccola, Valletta)

below left: Fig. 9
Photograph of 'Salomé'.

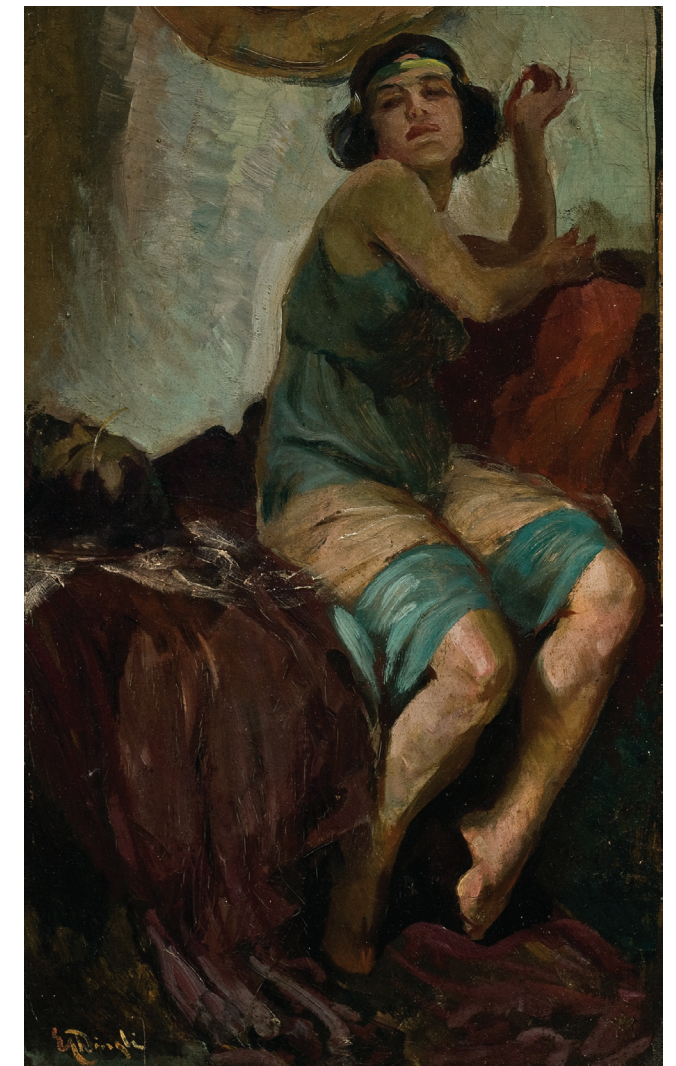
below right: Fig. 10
Edward Caruana Dingli, *Bozzetto of Salomé*, oil on panel, 42 x 24.5cm.
(Private Collection, Malta)

active role in photographing his family members. He did not hesitate to use his own photographs as a method of study and investigation for his works.¹⁴

A charming black and white photograph of his son Ugo (Fig. 13) served Robert to make a direct reference to it in his painting (Fig. 14). The three-year-old toddler is wearing a red summer hat and white cotton frock which falls off the

right shoulder, exposing the soft milky skin of the child who is holding a small teddy bear, an additional element that Robert included to make the picture more charming.

Robert, like his brother Edward, kept a scrapbook with several newspaper cuttings that featured his work. Throughout his career, Robert exhibited his works in various collective exhibitions, and in 1937 he had an individual



top left: Fig. 11
Robert Caruana Dingli's son Hugo posing instead of his mother.

top right: Fig. 12
Robert Caruana Dingli, *Female Nude*.

bottom left: Fig. 13
Photograph of Hugo.

bottom right: Fig. 14
Robert Caruana Dingli, *Hugo holding a teddy bear*.



exhibition in the establishment of Richard Ellis & Co.¹⁵ This indicates that Robert also knew Richard Ellis. Robert had a passion for photography, and he definitely shared ideas with photographer Paolo Agius Catania D'Amico (1898-1978) who was also his best friend.¹⁶

It is evident that most painters responded positively to the influence of photography, and they experimented with their own cameras or collaborated with photographers to expand on the visual possibilities photography afforded them. Yet, most painters may have been tight-lipped about their interest in photography and its direct application to their work. However, it is clear that photography had a positive impact on painting, as painters had better tools to plan and execute their works of art. One may conclude that photography complemented the bravura and virtuosity of the painters.

Notes

- 1 Nadine Debattista Briffa, 'The artistic success of Edward Caruana Dingli: A biography', in *Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950): Portraits, Views and Folkloristic Scenes* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2010), 5.
- 2 Natalino Fenech, *Richard Ellis, The Photographic Collection: Grand Harbour and Cottonera* (BDL Ltd, 2008), 56.
- 3 The *tal-Latini* was the boat specifically employed on the Malta-Gozo shuttle service. It had a relatively short life, remaining in service for a century. With the introduction of a regular daily service between the Islands employing larger boats, the service of the *dghajsa tal-Latini* became redundant.
<http://www.gozochannel.com/gozoboat.htm>; accessed on 5 March 2013.
- 4 The house seen in the photograph has been identified as no. 88, Main Street, Qormi by the Qormi Local Council and Sandro Debono, Curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts, 18 June 2014.
- 5 Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) founded the Fine Arts section within the Museums Department (which later became the National Museum of Fine Arts) in 1923.
- 6 The painting of *Salomé* by Edward was featured in The Malta Art Book of November 1924 and exhibited at the Auberge de France under the auspices of the Malta Art Amateur Association (May 1922).
- 7 Letter from Robert Caruana Dingli to Vincenzo Bonello dated 1915: '*Cens dina Salome li amel bia tiftakara mil liema numru min nudi tal Salon li seraka? Taf'xnumru ghir andu minnom*'. [Cens, this Salomé that

my brother did, do you remember which number it is of the nude Salon (photographs) from where he stole it? Do you know that he has a large number of them].

- 8 The production centre for nude photographs c.1840-c.1880 was Paris. The centre of artistic life, and a city with more tolerant attitudes than other capitals, it had the photographers, models and artists for these pictures, as well as other customers who were not necessarily interested in turning them into paintings. From the 1850s onwards, production boomed. The painter Julien Vallou de Villeneuve (1795-1866) took up photography and created dozens of artistic calotype nudes between 1852 and 1854, some of which were used by Courbet and Delacroix.
<http://www.answers.com/topic/nude-photography#ixzz2S9yCRdgM>; accessed on 2 May 2013.
- 9 Verbal Communication with Lino Borg, Lecturer at the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta, 5 May 2013. Although the actual Salon photographs have not been traced, it is known that local artists made use of them. Maltese artists at the time also made use of other available photographs and photography books of nude models, even though they were censored.
- 10 Robert Galea, 'The Nude in Twentieth Century Maltese Art' in Carol Jaccarini and Randolph Camilleri (eds), *Of Flesh and Spirit: The Wednesday Group of Artists* (2013), 7.
- 11 Joseph Paul Cassar, *L-Arti Moderna* (Malta, 2000).
- 12 Giovanni Bonello's private collection of letters sent to his father Vincenzo in 1915 by Robert Caruana Dingli.
- 13 Interview with Dr Noel Caruana Dingli, grandson of Robert, 18 April 2013.
- 14 Marina Vaizzey, *The Artist as Photographer* (New York, 1982), 104. Medardo Rosso (1858-1928), Constantine Brancusi (1876-1957) and Henry Moore (1898-1986), all took photographs of their work to study and keep a visual record of their works.
- 15 'La Mostra Pittorica di Rob. Caruana Dingli', *Malta*, 5 August 1937, 2. '*Per I nostri artisti fare una mostra personale è spesso un pio desiderio più che un fatto realizzabile, anche perchè essi non trovano un ambiente abbastanza decoroso per esporre le loro opere. Con tutto questo non mancano i volenterosi, i quali se servoni di locali offerti a loro da amici, anche se questi ambienti non siano i più indicate per la loro Mostra. Dopo circa un anno dalla Mostra d'arte che si vuol tenere al Museo di Valletta abbiamo avuto l'occasione di ammirare le opere del Valente pittore Robert Caruana Dingli nello stabilimento della spett. Ditta R. Ellis (ambiente attraente dove gli artisti sono sempre i benvenuti)*. [For our artists holding a personal exhibition is often an unappeased wish rather than a wish that can come true. This is also because they do not find a venue fit enough to exhibit their paintings. Notwithstanding this situation, volunteers help by offering locations to their friends to show their works, even if these places are not always suitable. After a year from the exhibition at the Museum of Valletta, we have the occasion to admire the works of the talented Robert Caruana Dingli in the establishment of the firm R. Ellis, an attractive environment where artists are always welcome.
- 16 Margaret Harker, *Photographers of Malta 1840-1990* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2000) 135.