





Fig. 1
Leandro Preziosi,
St Paul's Pro-Cathedral,
Valletta (detail).
(Private Collection, Malta)

Leandro Preziosi

Pioneer photographer in Malta and his connections with Istanbul

Caroline Tonna turns the spotlight on Leandro Preziosi, his career, travels and pioneering work in the art of photography in the mid-nineteenth century

When the surname Preziosi is mentioned, what comes to mind to art lovers is the famous and talented Orientalist artist Amadeo Preziosi (1816–1882), while many others may recall the internationally successful ophthalmologist and politician Sir Luigi Preziosi (1888–1965). Both gentlemen earned international fame in their own respective professions and carried the title of nobility with pride from their Corsican ancestor, corsair captain, Giuseppe Preziosi (c.1658–1730). However, Leandro Preziosi (1830–1869), Amadeo's brother and grandfather of Sir Luigi, was less recognised for his pioneering profession in photography in Malta, which he practiced in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

To understand the life of Leandro and construct the narrative of his photographic career, this research follows the timeline of his brother, Amadeo, from his early days of art studies in Paris, in 1840, to his rise to fame as an Orientalist artist in the district of Pera (Beyoglu), Turkey. Amadeo's two years studying art in Paris coincided with the discovery of the daguerreotype¹ photographic process, a new art form that must have captured

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Fig. 2
Leandro Preziosi, Painting of a market food seller and two customers.
(Private Collection, Malta)

his interest. In 1842, Amadeo moved to Constantinople, Istanbul, a city that at the time had become a popular destination for many European travellers who went on tour of the Orient. Both artists and photographers alike were lured to the Orient to paint or photograph its exotic setting and its people. Thus, Amadeo's Parisian and Istanbul experiences, besides determining his successful artistic career, were also influential in his fascination and knowledge of the art of photography. Like many other artists, Amadeo started to use the camera as a tool to capture accurate visual details of subjects and views that served as an aide-mémoire for his paintings.²

The two brothers must have had a good rapport with each other, and it is very plausible that it was Amadeo who encouraged Leandro to take up the art of photography. In Malta, the innovation of photography was also received with great enthusiasm. For instance, when in 1840, the French painter Horace Vernet³ (1789–1863) and his nephew, Goupil-Fesquet⁴ (1806–1893), demonstrated the use of the daguerreotype in Malta, the newspapers had reported the event.⁵

The photography historian Margaret Harker claimed that Amadeo had taken Leandro with him to Paris in 1840

to learn photography at the celebrated *atelier* of Augustin François Lemaître (1797–1870).⁶ These claims are not substantiated by any documentation and it is highly unlikely that Leandro, being only ten years old at the time, would have been accepted to attend a course of photography at such a reputable *atelier*. It is more plausible that Leandro learned the art of photography in Istanbul when he turned twenty-one. It was on 26 March 1851, that Leandro, accompanied by his brother, Amadeo, departed together from Malta to Istanbul.⁷ Leandro stayed at his brother's house and spent eleven whole months in the city.⁸ Amadeo was by then a well-established artist in Istanbul, while also serving as deputy of the Dragoman of the British Embassy and First Dragoman of the Greek legation.⁹ He worked within walking distance from the British Embassy and befriended some of the British diplomats who commissioned him work.¹⁰ Amadeo moved within the elite circles and his studio became a celebrated place to visit.¹¹ Pera was a lively area where many professional photographers were establishing their studios too, most significantly: photographers James Robertson, Pascal Sébah, Polycarpe Joaillier, and the court photographer Abdullah Frères.¹² Thus, it is highly probable that there must have been some sort of professional interaction between artists and photographers, whether as friends or as rivals.¹³ In any case, Leandro would have been introduced by his brother to his influential friends.

Leandro's visit to Istanbul must have been a very successful one because after his long sojourn in the city, he visited Amadeo again in March 1852, this time staying for a period of six months.¹⁴ It is documented that Leandro's longest stay in Istanbul was fourteen months in 1854,¹⁵ and his last visit was in April 1856, returning to Malta only after a few weeks.¹⁶ The frequent visits of Leandro to Istanbul during his prime years between the age of twenty-one and twenty-six, indicate that he was probably learning and practising the art of photography and even, perhaps, helping his brother as an assistant artist who had a high demand of commissioned works. It is known that Amadeo had assistants helping him in

top: Fig. 3

Leandro Preziosi, Hand-coloured photograph of a female sitter.
(Private Collection, Malta)

bottom: Fig. 4

Leandro Preziosi, Hand-coloured photograph of a female sitter.
(Private Collection, Malta)

his studio; he had several preparatory drawings that could be repeatedly reproduced in his paintings.¹⁷ Amadeo would have also, needed someone to look after his studio in his absence while he was painting *en plein air*, especially when he was commissioned to paint warships and the army¹⁸ during the Crimean War in 1854.¹⁹

As previously mentioned, it is highly possible that Leandro was introduced by Amadeo to photographers working in Pera, particularly the British engraver-photographer James Robertson (1813–1888). Like Preziosi, Robertson was married to a woman from one of the Levantine families of Pera, and both had their studios in the same district.²⁰ Amadeo and Robertson could have also met during the Crimean War (1835–1856) when they were both engaged on separate artistic assignments.

Margaret Harker states that Amadeo knew Robertson and befriended Leandro too.²¹ However, it is not documented whether the Preziosi brothers met Robertson in Istanbul or Malta, or whether they collaborated. For a short time, in 1856, Robertson had set up a photographic studio in Strada Reale to sell his photographic art.²² Another clue, which suggests that Leandro and Robertson could have had a collaborative work relationship, is the similar technicalities of their photographs showing ships and views of Malta. When one examines and compares the quality and composition of these photographs it is difficult to identify whether it was Robertson or Leandro who took them and it is only when they are signed by Robertson or marked by Leandro's name that one can distinguish their work. Robertson and Leandro took these views for commercial purposes, as stock photographs that were in demand by the British army and navy personnel. One questions whether Leandro was assisting Robertson in Istanbul and whether they continued to collaborate in Malta.

Although there is no evidence that Leandro had any formal training in drawing and painting, he clearly did experiment with this art form. The first drawing signed by Leandro, which was discovered during this research, was



executed when he was only nineteen years old.²³ Another drawing was later discovered in a private archive, and although it is rather dark, it clearly shows Oriental figures in the style of Amadeo's rendition of subjects in conversation (Fig. 2). It is noticeable that the background is void of any accurate architectural details that Amadeo would have likely included in his market scene paintings. Professor Ray Mangion, legal historian, confirms that he has also seen several sketches and drawings by Leandro in private collections.²⁴ It is also understood that Leandro was helping Amadeo as an assistant and was regularly sending him paintings to Istanbul to put up for sale.²⁵



Leandro excelled in colouring his black and white photographs with watercolours, which required the skill of an artist to achieve optimum results. Leandro would sign and date his hand-coloured photographs with pride, like a painter would sign his paintings. A few high-quality hand-coloured photographs still survive. The photographs of the female sitter pictured here (Fig. 3, 4), attest to Leandro's high standards both in photography and hand-colouring. Part of the table cloth in Fig. 3 is not coloured in because, as the oval pencil outline indicates, it would have been presented to the customer in a medallion-shaped mount, similar to the other photograph of the same female sitter wearing another dress, and reproduced here (Fig. 4).

Shortly after Leandro returned to Malta from his last visit to Istanbul in 1856, the two brothers met again, this time to go to Paris together. On 11 March 1857, Amadeo, his wife, Iphigenia, and their two children, Matilde and Roberto, together with Leandro, left from Malta to Paris.²⁶ Amadeo travelled often to Paris to participate in exhibitions and to publish portfolios of his lithographs and watercolour paintings that were printed in album format. It is likely that the purpose of his visit in 1857 was to oversee his new album of colour lithographs,

Stromboul: Souvenirs d'Orient, which was later published in 1858. Why Leandro accompanied Amadeo and his family to Paris is not known, but possibly he went to buy photographic equipment and to keep abreast of the developments in photography in Paris. Leandro returned to Malta on his own on 18 April 1857.²⁷ He was by then ready to settle down in Malta, and on 3 November 1858, he married Lucrezia Metropoli (Fig. 5), daughter of a notable notary from Valletta.²⁸

In their pre-marital contract, Leandro is referred to as working in the profession of photography.²⁹ At the time he was in the possession of photographic equipment that was valued at one hundred and twenty-five pounds sterling.³⁰ Leandro opened his first photographic studio at 19, Piazza Britannica (now Triq Vincenzo Dimech), Floriana, which formed part of his matrimonial home. He offered his services from his Floriana studio between 1858 and 1867, and then expanded his business to Valletta, establishing another studio at 28, Strada Federico, until his death in 1869. The Valletta photographic establishment was departmentalised into various rooms, from a photographic studio to rooms for production and post-production work, including a changing room for the sitters.³¹

opposite left: Fig. 5
Leandro Preziosi, Portrait of Lucrezia Preziosi, c.1858.
(Private Collection, Malta)

opposite right: Fig. 6
Leandro Preziosi, Self-Portrait, c.1858.
(Private Collection, Malta)

During his short career in the art of photography, which lasted around eleven years, Leandro did not seem to have travelled again to Istanbul but kept close contact with his brother. Records show that he went on a trip to Naples on 2 June 1863 with his wife, Lucrezia, before they had children.³² It is not clear whether the couple went to Naples for leisure or business. It is plausible though, that Leandro knew of the photographic works of Giorgio Sommer (1834–1914); there is an interesting photograph of Leandro and an unknown person that was taken by Sommer in Naples.³³

Documents show that Sommer came to Malta in the 1860s; he produced *carte-de-visite* photographs³⁴ of Valletta and the Grand Harbour,³⁵ and published many of the photographed views of Malta in various catalogues.³⁶ He also produced stereoscopic photographs of Malta that required a special camera with two side-by-side lenses to produce two identical views of the same subject. When viewed with a hand-held viewer, known as the stereoscope, photographs acquire a three-dimensional perspective. Leandro used the stereoscopic camera, which became popular in the late 1850s and 1860s.³⁷ Fortunately, one example of a stereographic photograph taken by Leandro was discovered (Fig. 8). This photograph is a rare and unique find because, up to this day, there is no other existing example of a stereoscopic photograph that was taken by any other Maltese photographer.

Leandro was also an excellent portrait photographer. He had an eye for observing important details in the dress and accessories of his sitters, capturing the tactile quality of the drapery and posing them in a dignified conventional pose borrowed from traditional portrait paintings. His photographs match the high quality of other contemporary professional photographers in France and England, especially that of Camille Silvy, thus placing the art form of photography in Malta on a par with Europe.³⁸

Leandro Preziosi deserves to be given credit in his own right for his *bravura* in photography. He became an established professional photographer in Malta, especially for

his artistic portrait photographs, while most of his *cartes-de-visite* are still intact after almost one hundred and sixty years since they have been printed. Leandro, set high standards in studio photography, development and printing, elevating photography in Malta to an appreciated art form.

Notes

- 1 The daguerreotype, named after Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, was invented and patented in 1839 in France. The daguerreotype could only produce a single picture.
- 2 Bahattin Öztuncay, *The Photographers of Constantinople: Pioneers, Studios and Artists from Nineteenth Century Istanbul* (Istanbul: Aygaz, 2003), 126. There are signed photographs signed by Amadeo Preziosi, one of which shows soldiers standing guard at the Malta fortress in 1856. He also engaged a professional photographer, A. Cailliez, to take photographs of Oriental subjects and mundane scenes of Constantinople on which he based his paintings.
- 3 Émile Jean-Horace Vernet (1789–1863) came from a family tradition of painters.
- 4 Frédéric Auguste Antoine Goupil-Fesquet (1806–1893) author and lithographs published in *Voyage d'Horace Vernet en Orient*, 1844. Retrieved on 1 June 2016 from <http://eng.travelogues.gr/collection/>
- 5 Kevin Casha, *Photography in Malta – The History and the Protagonists* (Malta: APS Bank Ltd, 2016), 11. Horace Vernet arrived in Malta on 4 March 1840 at 10.30 pm. NAM, CUS 1840, ff.112-113.
- 6 Margaret Harker, *Photographers of Malta 1840-1990* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2000), 17.
- 7 Archives of the Archbishop's Curia (AAC), *Status libero*, 1858, f. 219; NAM, CUS 18, Doc. 96, f. 296, 20 March 1851. Vessel French Government steamer, *Caire*, destination from Marseille to Alexandria to Beyzouth, A. Preziosi and brother Leandro.
- 8 AAC, *Status libero*, 1858, f. 219. Declaration made on 27 October 1858 by Joannes Franciscus Preziosi, father of Leandro Preziosi, that his son always stayed with his brother in Constantinople whenever he visited him.
- 9 Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Preziosi in Romania* (Bucharest: Noi Media Print, 2003), 19.
- 10 Briony Llewellyn, Charles Newton, *The People and Places of Constantinople, Watercolour by Amadeo Count Preziosi 1816–1882* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985), 7-8. Robert Curzon who was the British Ambassador Lord Stratford de Redcliffe's private secretary, who commissioned a series of drawings of typical Constantinople characters from Preziosi.
- 11 Dominic Cutajar, 'Amadeo Preziosi: Exceptional artist of the Orient', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. II No. 2 (Easter 1996), 13. Amadeo Preziosi's studio was visited by the famous pioneer archaeologist Henry Layard, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) and King Carol of Rumania.
- 12 Engin Özendes, *Photography in the Ottoman Empire 1838–1923*



opposite: Fig. 7

Leandro Preziosi, *An unknown female sitter*, c.1860
(Private Collection, Malta)

Fig. 8

Leandro Preziosi, *A stereoscopic photograph of a view of Valletta*.
(Private Collection, Malta)

- (Istanbul: YEM Yayin, 2013).
- 13 Briony Llewellyn, 'Across Cultures: Joseph Schranz and his associates in the mid-19th century Constantinople', in Giovanni Bonello (ed.), *Celebrating 200 Years of Schranz* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2018), 236.
 - 14 NAM, *Passports and Visas*, No. 237, f. 26, 23 March 1852; NAM, CUS 18, Vol. C, f. 225.
 - 15 NAM, *Passports and Visas*, No. 730, 2 June 1854.
 - 16 NAM, *Passports and Visas*, No. 1015, 25 April 1856; NAM, CUS 18, Vol. CXXIII, 11 June 1856.
 - 17 Francesco Leone, *I disegni preparatori Amadeo Preziosi (1816–1882)* (Florence: Art & Libri Firenze, 2011).
 - 18 Llewellyn, 2018, op. cit., 227.
 - 19 Terry Sonman, *Count Amadeo Preziosi: An Artist's journey from Istanbul to London 1855* (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 2010). The painting is signed Scutari, 12 May 1854; watercolour, Stratford Canning, the British ambassador at the time in Istanbul.
 - 20 Llewellyn, 2018, op. cit., 236. For a short time, 1855–1857 she set up a photographic partnership with her brother Felice, and a studio in Postacilar Sokagi.
 - 21 Harker, 2000, op. cit., 17.
 - 22 *The Malta Times*, 30 September 1856.
 - 23 Leandro Preziosi signed and dated the painting based on a copy of *The Murder of the Sons of Edward IV*, Private collection, Malta.
 - 24 In correspondence with Prof. Ray Mangion, 16 November 2016.
 - 25 In correspondence with Dr Josef Preziosi, 1 September 2018.
 - 26 NAM; MAF, *Passports and Visas*, No. 210, 3 March 1857 and Customs Dept. Ms. No. L33, f. 148, 11 March 1857. Mr A. Preziosi, wife, two children and brother left from Italian ports to Marseille on the French steamer *Capitole*.
 - 27 NAM, CUS 18, Doc. 127, *Arrivals and Departures*, f. 13, 18 April, 1857. French steamer *Simois* sailed from Marseille to the Levant.
 - 28 ASP (St Paul the Shipwreck Church Archives, Valletta), marriage certificate, 3 November 1858. Translated from Latin to English with the help of Dr Joan Abela.
 - 29 NAV, R516, Vol. LII, Not. Vincenzo Paolo Frendo, f. 5328, 1 November 1858.
 - 30 NAV, R516, Vol. LII, Not. Vincenzo Paolo Frendo, 1858, f. 5328.
 - 31 NAV, No. 6/2, Not. Filippo Cilia, 1870, f. 30-31.
 - 32 NAM, *Passports and Visas*, No. 772, 2 June 1863.
 - 33 Georg Sommer (1834–1914) was an early pioneer of photography in Naples. Retrieved on 11 November 2016 from <http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/GiorgioSommer/A/>
 - 34 The *carte-de-visite* was patented in Paris by photographer André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri in 1854 and widely used between 1860 and 1910.
 - 35 Casha, 2016, op. cit., 85.
 - 36 In 1882 he published the *Catalogo di fotografie d'Italia e Malta*, in 1886, the *Catalogo di fotografie d'Italia, Malta e Ferrovie del Gottardo*, and in 1900, he published the *Catalogo di fotografie d'Italia, Malta e Tunisia*.
 - 37 NAV, No. 6/2, Not. Filippo Cilia, 1870, f. 55.
 - 38 Miles Lambert, *Fashion in Photographs 1860–1880* (London: Batsford, 1991), 11. Camille Silvy (1834–1910) was a leading photographer in London (1860 and 1867).

