





Fig. 1
Ugo Cali, photograph
of his sister Margaret in
the habit of a monastic
saint. It is likely that
this photograph served
as a note for a work by
Giuseppe Cali, their
father, probably for the
oil painting of St Rita,
hung above the altar of the
Virgin of Consolation at
the Parish Church of St
Andrew, in Hal-Luqa.
(Courtesy of Marquis
Nicholas de Piro)

Ugo Cali

An artist and portrait photographer of the early twentieth century

Caroline Tonna attempts to trace Ugo Cali's involvement in his family's photographic business and outline the events leading to his departure from the Islands

Photography was more than fifty years old in 1900, a time when Malta already was home to a good number of active skilled amateur and professional photographers. Photography studios mushroomed all around the Island particularly due to technological advancement and improvement in the economy. Yet, only a handful of photographers made a spectacular leap in quality and in the production of artistic photographs; one such artist-photographer was Ugo Cali (1878–?).

Some surviving photographs taken by Ugo are testimony to his artistic qualities in professional portrait photography. These stand out from the work of other contemporary photographers, which was mainly commercial. Professor Margaret Harker claims that his style was the nearest to one of Britain's most important and innovative photographers, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879),¹ whose photography was a rare combination of the intimate and aesthetic dimensions of soft-focus imagery; a revolutionary new style in the art of photography. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'pictorialism'² became the prevailing international style in America and Europe.

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Fig. 2
Ugo Calì, probably around thirty years old.
(Courtesy of Prof. Mario Buhagiar)

Increasingly more photographers were interested in elevating photography to an art status by producing photographs that emulated painting. Likewise, Ugo skilfully adopted the technique of intentional soft blurring in his portrait photographs to achieve a balance between reality and the romantic characteristics of his sitters. Imbuing his photographs with powerful emotions resulted in the appreciation of his art form in photography.



Ugo was born on 20 February 1878, and baptised Ugo Ernestus Josephus Carmelus Calì at the church of St Helen, Birkirkara. His father was the most important artist of the turn of the twentieth century, Giuseppe Calì (1846–1930).³ Giuseppe had married Perinia Pace (1854–1923) in 1871, and had eleven children, Ugo being the fifth in line. Undoubtedly, their children experienced an eventful life with their father's assiduous work. The Calì family was probably accustomed to the world of theatre since Giuseppe was regularly artistically involved in prestigious productions held at the Royal Opera House;⁴ undoubtedly, they were also exposed to the level of his virtuosity when executing frescos and church paintings in various towns and villages in Malta. He was regularly commissioned on private works of art, including the interior decoration of private houses and public entertaining establishments.⁵ Later in life, he taught art students. He must have surely influenced his children with his artistic mastery, mostly his sons Ugo, who became an exceptional portrait photographer, and Ramiro, who also developed into a fine artist.

Giuseppe would often turn to his wife and children to pose for him as models, particularly as saints and angels for his religious paintings.⁶ Margaret (1887–1923), Ugo's sister, was a beautiful young lady who fitted perfectly into the role of model for her father's saintly subjects in church paintings. Meanwhile, Giuseppe must have been impressed by Ugo's artistic photographic work that had a painterly quality to it. Thus, the three family members, Giuseppe the artist, Ugo the photographer, and Margaret the 'model', collaborated creatively to produce a set of photographs of Margaret wearing biblical costumes (Fig.1).⁷ It is plausible that she was directed by her father and brother to act out various poses in the imitation of biblical characters of saints and angels.⁸ Ugo excelled in his ability to imbue the photographic images with pious expressions, while also imparting a tactile quality to the drapery of the clothing through the play of light and shade.⁹ An exceptional set of twenty-four black and white

Fig. 3
Eduardo Grech Cumbo (5 February 1861– d. unknown),
photographer and father-in-law of Ugo Cali. This photograph
was taken at The New Artistic Studio, in Valletta.
(Courtesy of Ms Silvana Borg Cardona)



photographs still survive in the collection of Casa Rocca Piccola, Valletta. These served the art master as an inspiration and an *aide-memoire* for the depiction of religious subjects.

According to Marquis Nicholas de Piro, Margaret Cali was not allowed to model again after her marriage to Antonio Cassar Torregiani (1882–1959), in 1910. This implies that the set of photographs was taken prior to the marriage date, when Margaret was in her early twenties and Ugo was around thirty years old.

The high-level technique and quality of the photographs indicate that Ugo was by then an established photographer; indeed, it is estimated that he was already in this profession for at least a decade. Incidentally, Ugo married Giuseppina (1883–?), the daughter of Eduardo Grech Cumbo (1861–?) (Fig. 3), who had a photographic establishment in Valletta. The marriage deed, drawn on 19 February 1900,¹⁰ reveals that Giuseppina was still underage to marry and required the consent of her father, Eduardo, and her mother, Melita, to wed Ugo Cali. She received a dowry valued at three hundred sterling, while Ugo had to hypothec his photographic equipment, valued at around fifty-six sterling,¹¹ in favour of his young bride.

This document is significant because it proves that Ugo had already been practising as a photographer since the age of twenty-two. The inventory list of Ugo's equipment included new and second-hand complete photographic cameras, Dallmayer, Lancaster and Voigtlander lenses, tripods, studio furniture, a head rest, a back drop, tubs for the developing process of photographs, a paper cutter, and a wooden press.¹²

It is highly possible that Ugo was encouraged to work at his father-in-law's studio soon after his marriage to Giuseppina. Eduardo Grech Cumbo's photographic establishment was called The New Artistic Studio. Research based on photographs shows that the studio operated from three different locations, perhaps at different periods, namely No. 63, Strada Forni (Old Bakery Street),¹³ No. 141, Strada Stretta (Strait Street),¹⁴ and No. 133, Strada Teatro (Old

Theatre Street), Valletta. Possibly, Eduardo was moving from one studio to the other as the business flourished throughout the beginning of the twentieth century and, thus, needed more space to accommodate his clients and respond to the increasing demand for photographs.

An important document, unearthed from the National Archives of Malta in Rabat,¹⁵ reports that on 23 December 1899, 'Edward, photographer and proprietor of The New Artistic Studio, Strada Teatro 133, Valletta' was applying for a permit from General Sir Francis Grenfell, Governor and Commander in Chief of Malta, to allow him to 'raise a small moveable photographic barracca [studio] on the terrace of his studio'.¹⁶ A few days later, the assistant of the military secretary did not find any objection to build the structure on top of the building of No. 133, Old Theatre Street, but noted that it 'may possibly be objectionable to His Excellency, whose palace is opposite to the site'.¹⁷ In fact, the Governor objected 'to this erection on account of the Palace servitude',¹⁸ and permission was refused.¹⁹

It was interesting to sort out the various reports on the complex application of the studio, but even more exciting was the discovery of the proposed plans of Grech Cumbo's photographic studio, which were attached with the application.²⁰ The detail of the façade rendition of the rooftop studio, marked at No. 133, Old Theatre Street, on the corner with St George's Square, in Valletta, shows a design of one large room with a wooden framework (marked in yellow), a gabled roof, and a large glass window (marked in blue) (Fig. 4). The proposed design of the façade carried the 'Cumbo photographer' studio sign and address in very large lettering.

In 1906, a second attempt was made to acquire the permit to 'raise height of a photographic studio on 133, Strada Teatro, Valletta'.²¹ However, this time the applicant was

Fig. 4
 Front elevation of Eduardo Grech Cumbo's studio in Old Theatre
 Street, Valletta.
 (Source: NAM, SSGO2-1734-5, 1906 / Courtesy of the National Archives
 of Malta, Rabat)

Ugo Cali and not Eduardo Grech Cumbo. Is it possible that Eduardo moved to another studio in No. 141, Strait Street, Valletta, where notable Maltese professional photographers were opening their shops?²² And could it be that Ugo took over the business from his father-in-law?

A passport application, issued on 25 July 1908, indicates that Ugo resided at No. 133, Old Theatre Street, Valletta, the same address of Eduardo Grech Cumbo's studio. By this time, thirty-year old Ugo and twenty-five-year old Giuseppina already had three children: Victor (b. 1901), Mary (b. 1903),

and Joseph (b. 1905). Thus, it is highly plausible that Ugo took over Eduardo's business or was giving a hand in the running of the family business. A noticeable change in the application is that there is no mention of The New Artistic Studio as was in the case when Eduardo Grech Cumbo had applied. This further suggests that Ugo, Giuseppina and his children were living at No. 133, Old Theatre Street, and probably using the premises as a *casa bottega*.

The second application once again caused different reactions from government officials; some objected harshly,

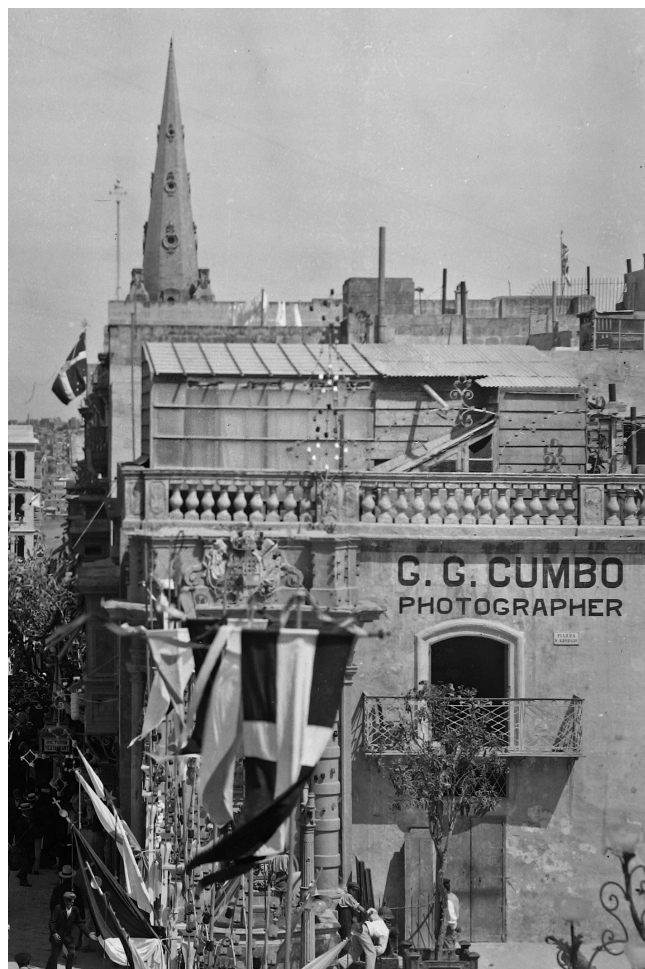


Fig. 5

G. G. Cumbo studio in No. 133, Old Theatre Street, Valletta, on the corner with St George's Square, Valletta. The wooden shed construction with a glass rooftop, which served as a studio, may be seen in the photograph (detail reproduced).
(Courtesy of the Richard Ellis Archive, Malta)

while others felt that permission should be granted. A certain R.H. Hare was adamant to stop the proposal of building 'a wooden hut on the roof 7 feet high over the balustrade and 31 feet long by 13 feet wide'.²³ He claimed that:

Although the structure would not obstruct the view from the Palace, it would be lower than the buildings at the back; it would, in my opinion, be an eyesore. In case the Crown Advocate has no objection, I would recommend that the application be, under the said circumstances, refused.²⁴



One of the government officials did not agree with R.H. Hare because he insisted that 'the only reason for which this application has been made at all, is the Palace Servitude, as, except on this ground, I think that the applicant had no need to ask for any permission to carry out the proposed work'.²⁵ He argued that since it was reported that the Palace Servitude was not encroached upon by the structure, he did not see why the erection of the studio should be objected to. He also added that 'the fact that it will be an eyesore is not a sufficient ground for refusal'. Furthermore, 'a photographic shed already exists on the terrace of the applicant's premises', he continues, and that Cali's proposal was only to raise the height of the existing structure.²⁶

R.H. Hare did not change his opinion; he refused to grant the permit and suggested that the application should be submitted to the Military Authority apart from the decision of the Palace Servitude.²⁷ To this request, the assistant military secretary replied that although the Military had no objection, they described the structure as a 'very unsightly shed' and should be referred to H.E. the Commander-in-Chief.²⁸

The arguments continued and some insisted that there were no grounds for objection. Higher buildings already existed behind the proposed studio and, principally, only the members of the Maltese Club could be affected because the north-facing windows would be somewhat blocked. Thus, if anything, it is the members who should be given the power to object before the structure is erected.²⁹ In a separate report, it was noted that the members of the Maltese Club were the lessees of the building and, as it turns out, did not have the right to object since the owner of the premises was, in fact, the Government. It was argued that the structure of the wooden shed was 'a temporary structure' and, thus, 'no servitude would result from its erection'.³⁰

The battle between the government officials continued; some viewed the proposed structure as an eyesore,³¹ while others insisted that there was no legal ground for refusing permission.³² To maintain peace, it was proposed that the



opposite: Fig. 6

Portrait photograph of Eugenia Degiorgio née Testaferrata Bonici, taken at the studio at No. 133, Old Theatre Street, 1911.
(Courtesy of Nicholas Jensen Testaferrata)

Fig. 7

Portrait photograph of Adelina de Piro, taken at the studio at No. 133, Old Theatre Street, 1911.
(Courtesy of Nicholas Jensen Testaferrata)

Superintendent of Police could, in an amicable manner, try to dissuade Ugo Calì from his plan or induce him to modify the structure so as not to be an eyesore.³³

Soon after, in a letter dated 20 June 1906, Ugo wrote to the Lieutenant Governor's office to be granted a permit for a lower structure relative to the adjacent buildings. He attached the plan, which clearly shows that the wooden structure would have a sloping roof from the view point of the Palace.³⁴

It seems that a happy compromise was reached and, finally, a permit was issued on 7 August 1906.³⁵ Oddly enough, it appears that Ugo did not execute the works immediately because three years later, on 2 March 1909, he once again applied to renew the permit,³⁶ making reference to the approved permit issued previously in 1906.³⁷ Incidentally, a report filed at the Lands Office, stated that the erection was completed on 5 September 1907 and a renewal application was required if the works were not done. Ugo was also warned that he could not continue carrying out any works unless such a permit was issued.³⁸ In turn, Ugo wrote a humble letter to the Lieutenant Governor and Chief Secretary to the Government that he was not aware that the permit had expired and begged him to renew it for him to complete the works.³⁹ The studio was eventually built and a photograph, published in the first volume of Richard Ellis' *The Photography Collection: Valletta and Floriana*, captures the studio sign of G.G. Cumbo, from St George's Square (Fig. 5).

It is not clear when Ugo stopped operating from No. 133, Old Theatre Street, but there is evidence of family photographs from a private collection, taken in 1911 and signed 'H[ugh] Calì, Malta' (Fig. 6-7). The style of the portrait photographs have Ugo's signature style of portraiture. These photographs have a close-up composition using soft focussing and dramatic lighting. They are compellingly emotional and dreamy.

It is difficult to draw a precise timeline of Ugo's professional career. However, as noted in Kevin Cash's publication *Photography in Malta*, at some point in time, Ugo



was employed by Francesco Tabone, the owner of 'The Grand Studio, Photographers and Photographic Goods dealers, in No. 268, Republic Street, Valletta'.⁴⁰ This was a particularly fashionable place for portrait photography.⁴¹ Ugo was also working on his own merit, signing photographs in his name with no specific studio address.

An extraordinary portrait photograph from a private collection, and signed by Ugo Calì, portrays an attractive young lady, tenderly referred to as 'pupa' (Fig. 10). The sitter is captured in an unconventional pose; she sits half turned to the camera, resting her arm casually on the back of a chair, smiling directly and confidently at the viewer. She wears a velvet turban hat – very fashionable in the early 1920s as a symbol of Eastern glamour – which is worn lopsided to show her soft curls neatly kept in place with a decorative hair clip. The double-breasted, long jacket with fur collar, worn over a skirt, also indicates the deco-style fashion of the early 1920s.

Soon after the Sette Giugno riots of 1919, the Calì family started to emigrate to America. The first one to leave was Ugo's eldest son, Victor. At the age of eighteen, a 1919 passport record shows that he was living at No. 10, Tigné Street, Sliema.⁴² Other passport records show that his mother, Giuseppina (housewife, thirty-six years old), his sister Mary (fifteen years old) and brothers Joseph (fourteen years old), Carmelo (nine years old), and John (six years old), joined Victor in America for good (Fig. 8).⁴³



from top: Fig. 8-9

Group passport photograph of Giuseppina Cali (aged thirty-six), surrounded by her children. From left to right: Carmelo (aged nine), Joseph (aged fourteen), Mary (aged fifteen), and John (aged six). The application for the passport to travel to New York was submitted on 23 October 1919. (Source: NAM, MFA01, 2820-1, 1920 / Courtesy of the National Archives of Malta, Rabat);

Passport photograph of Ugo Cali at forty-one years old.

(Source: NAM, MFA 01-557, 1920, 26 January, 1920 / Courtesy of the National Archives of Malta, Rabat)

opposite: Fig. 10

Portrait photograph of an unknown lady referred to as 'pupa', taken by Ugo Cali.

(Courtesy of Giovanni Bonello)

The List, or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States, shows that the Cali family arrived at the immigration port of Ellis Island, New York, on 17 November 1919, together with the Grech Cumbo family.⁴⁴ Among the names on the list are those of Eduardo (photographer, fifty-nine years old), his wife, Melita (sixty years old), and their married son Matteo (photographer, twenty-seven years old), together with his wife, Mary (twenty-one years), and their baby son, Victor (eight months old). Passport application records confirm that the Grech Cumbo family submitted their application on 11 October 1919 to go to the United States of America.⁴⁵

Three months later, in January 1920, Ugo also applied for a passport to go to America. The application shows his signature as Hugh Cali (the English version of his name) and his residence was at No. 10, Tigné Street, Sliema. He was forty-one years old (Fig. 9), and his profession was still listed as photographer. The application describes Ugo as five feet, six inches tall, with light brown eyes and grey hair. His skin complexion was dark and had a scar under his right jaw.⁴⁶ Ugo had probably joined his family in New York to prepare for his daughter Mary's wedding to Victor Turnbull,⁴⁷ on 10 September 1920. He must have returned one final time to Malta sometime after the wedding as another record shows that Ugo travelled to the city of Brooklyn, on 10 August 1921.⁴⁸

Ugo Cali's life in New York remains a mystery and hopefully this article will launch further research on the life and career of an excellent Maltese artistic photographer of the early twentieth century.

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Fig. 11

Ugo Cali at forty-four years old, 1922. The photographer and location are unknown.

(Source: Kevin Casha Image Archive / Courtesy of Karen Houghtaling)

Notes

- 1 Margaret Harker, *Photographers of Malta, 1840–1990* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju, 2000), 118.
- 2 'Pictorialism' generally refers to a style in which the photographer manipulates a photograph by using soft focussing to produce a pictorial image rather than a record of the subject. This style thrived from about 1885 to 1915 although it did not fade away completely until the 1940s.
- 3 Giuseppe Cali (1846–1930) was a renowned Maltese painter who dominated the local artistic scene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- 4 Mario Buhagiar, 'Snippets of the Cali Family History', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 14 No. 3 (Summer 2008), 43. Cali also composed polkas and rondos that he dedicated and donated to his family and friends.
- 5 Examples of mural decoration may be found at Villa Lugsland, Rabat, Villa Grech Mifsud, Mosta, the Salesian Theatre, Sliema, and Caffè Cordina, Valletta.
- 6 Raphael Bonnici Cali, 'Giuseppe Cali – Biographical Notes', in *Giuseppe Cali Centenary Exhibition 1846–1946*, organised by the Malta Art Association (Malta, 1946), 13.
- 7 Caroline Tonna, 'The Creative Collaboration between painters and photographers in Malta' (unpublished B.A. (Hons.) dissertation, University of Malta, Department of Art and Art History, June 2013).
- 8 Nicholas de Piro, 'A Model for the Artist, Giuseppe Cali', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 11 No. 2 (Easter 2000), 65.
- 9 According to Harker, op. cit., Ugo emphasised the features of his sitters and ensured a good rendition of the clothes they were wearing.
- 10 N[otarial] A[rchives] V[alletta], R256, Vol. 50, Notary Mickle Angelo Scerri, 19 February 1900, ff. 86–103. Assisted with the kind help of Isabelle Camilleri from the NAV.
- 11 Ibid., f. 102.
- 12 Ibid., ff. 92–94.
- 13 Kevin Casha, *Photography in Malta: The History & The Protagonists* (Malta: APS Bank, 2016), 316.
- 14 Giovanni Bonello, 'More notes for a history of photography in Malta', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 2 August 2015, 38.
- 15 Passport and petition documents were provided with the kind help and assistance of Joseph Amodio, National Archives of Malta.
- 16 N[ational] A[rchives] M[alta], SSG02, 1743-3, 1906, 23 December 1899.
- 17 NAM, SSG02, 1743-1, 1906, 27 January 1900.
- 18 In the correspondence, the ancient rights were known as 'Palace Servitude'.
- 19 NAM, SSG02, 1743-2, 1906, 30 January 1900.
- 20 NAM, SSG02 1734-5, 1906.
- 21 NAM, CSG02, 872-1, 20 June 1906.
- 22 Bonello, op. cit., 38. Bonello mentions several notable Maltese professional photographers who had a photographic establishment in Strait Street, Valletta, among whom were Richard Ellis, James Conroy, Davison and Ciantar, Aquilina and Zarha, John Cianco, and Rosati.
- 23 NAM, CSG02, 872-1, 1906, 9 July, 1906.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 NAM, CSG02, 872-3, 1906, 12 July 1906.
- 26 NAM, CSG02, 872-2, 1906, 12 July 1906.
- 27 NAM, CSG02, 872-3, 1906, 12 July 1906.
- 28 NAM, CSG02, 872-4, 1906, 21 July 1906.
- 29 NAM, CSG02, 872-5, 1906, 24 July 1906.
- 30 NAM, CSG02, 872-5, 1906, 26 July 1906.
- 31 NAM, CSG02, 872-6, 1906, 26 July 1906.
- 32 NAM, CSG02, 872-6, 1906, 31 July 1906.
- 33 NAM, CSG02, 872-7, 1906, 31 July 1906.
- 34 NAM, CSG02, 872-10, 1906.
- 35 NAM, CSG02, 872-8, 1906, 11 August 1906.
- 36 NAM CSG02, 406, 1906, 2 March 1909.
- 37 NAM CSG02, 406-1, 1906, 26 February 1909.
- 38 NAM CSG02, 406-3, 1906, 26 February 1909.
- 39 NAM CSG02, 406-2, 1906, 2 March 1909.
- 40 Casha, op. cit., 114.
- 41 Nicholas de Piro, *The International Dictionary of Artists Who Painted Malta* (2nd edition, Malta: AVC Publishers, 2002), 80–81.
- 42 NAM, MFA01, 1919-1, 4 August 1919. It is also noted that an American newspaper published a report which states that Victor had initially embarked on a career in America as a professional dancer with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet and later joined the Russian Ballet. Unfortunately, he injured his knee and soon after became a successful painter. The report was kindly forwarded to me by Gina Cali.
- 43 NAM, MFA01, 2820-1, 1920, 25 October 1919.
- 44 Gina Cali provided the List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States, List 21, passengers sailing from Le Havre, 8 November 1919.
- 45 NAM, MFA01, 1399, 1919, 11 October 1919; NAM, MFA01, 2727, 1919, 11 October 1919.
- 46 NAM, MFA01, 557-1, 1920, 26 January 1920.
- 47 NAM, MFA01, 722, 1920, 9 February 1920. The passport application of Victor Turnbull shows that he had applied for the passport on 9 February 1920 to travel to the United States of America. He also hailed from Sliema and probably followed his sweetheart, Mary Cali, to America to marry her on 10 September 1920.
- 48 Gina Cali also provided the List, or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States, of passengers sailing from Malta on 10 August 1921.