



Fig. 1
Photo album II from the
Olof Frederick Gollcher
(OFG) Photographic
Archive Collection showing
photographs of Olof's
various engagements with the
Confraternità della Pipa.
(Courtesy of Palazzo Falson
Historic House Museum
Collection)

Arte è Allegrria Olof Frederick Gollcher's *joie de vivre*

Through a visual dialogue between art and photography,
Caroline Tonna articulates Olof Gollcher's motivations and
aspirations to be regarded as an artist among peers



Arte è allegria ('art is cheerfulness') is a phrase used by an Italian press journalist, Mario Matteucci, in a report about a group of artists active in Rome in the 1920s. Among its members was Olof Frederick Gollcher (1889–1962). Olof was a collector, amateur researcher, and philanthropist but lesser known as an artist.¹

Olof resided at the so-called 'Norman House', now Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, in Mdina. His 800-year-old *palazzo* was a perfect resting place for the sweeping range of collections accumulated by the Gollcher family, and Olof continued to amass a variety of objects that today comprise the Palazzo Falson Collection in its final form. One of the rooms, the art studio tucked in behind the fountain of the Museum's charming courtyard, is a celebration of Olof's artistic years (Fig. 4). On display in the Studio are, in all, fourteen oil paintings executed by Olof between 1919 and 1937, mostly scenes from the Amalfi Coast in Naples, Italy.

Also, adorning the walls are sets of reproduced photographs of artist friends gathering in *allegria* wearing fancy

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Fig.2-3
Photograph (OFG 222 001) of Olof Gollcher with a group of Italian artist friends and peers in a studio, in Rome. In the upper left corner, part of Olof's painting of *The Saracen Castle* may be seen;

Group photograph (OFG 226 001) showing Olof Gollcher among peers from the *circolo artistico*, dressed up in Indian and exotic clothing.

(OFG Photographic Archive Collection, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, Mdina)

costumes and papier-mâché noses, glass in hand and smoking pipes. Olof belonged to a club founded on the principle of art and joy who met regularly in a subterranean hide-out at 47, Via Margutta, Rome where exhibitions were also organised.² The *circolo artistico* of free-spirited artists, to which belonged prominent and established artists in Italy, shared a common passion for art, pipe smoking, and a preference for a bohemian lifestyle. They produced an elaborate membership certificate on parchment indicating the different roles of the members and also organised parades carrying the banner of the Confraternità della Pipa in the countryside of Anticoli Corrado, a province of Rome, known for beautiful female models (Fig. 1).³ Some of their works were given, exchanged, and collected by Olof, who later donated them to the National Museum in Valletta.⁴

Old photographs in the OFG Collection, and those found in other archives that refer to Olof Gollcher's life, have the power not only of visually documenting a specific moment, but are in themselves objects with their own unique properties. When examined closely and 'read' in a critical manner, photographs may serve as material culture. There are, of course, limitations on how much photographs may reveal, and given the subjective and personal nature of our main query, much of what will be suggested about Olof's persona as an artist remains, at best, precisely that: suggestive.

Nonetheless, a more secure departure point is to be found in a set of reproduced photographs.⁵ At a first glance, the art studio photograph taken in Italy, indicated that Olof met at another artist's studio to paint from life painting sessions.⁶ Less obvious, in the upper-left corner of the photograph (Fig. 2), is a partial view of one of Olof's paintings, *The Saracen Castle* (1920),⁷ which would later find its place on the wall of his rooftop room at the 'Norman House' (Fig. 5), and presently displayed in the Studio.

The translocation of the painting is revealed from the photographic collection along with supporting archival documents consisting of newspaper cuttings compiled in a

Fig. 4
The reconstructed Studio at Palazzo Falson, Mdina.
(Courtesy of Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection / Photo: Hannake Jansen)

scrapbook by Olof (OFG 041/001).⁸ These cuttings, mostly from Italian newspapers, shed light on Olof's active years as an artist and his participation in exhibitions in Italy, Paris, London, and Malta.

Particular architectural elements of two rooms on the roof of the Museum, featured in the photographs (NMA 3742, NMA 1066) reproduced in this article (Fig. 5-6), are preserved and now serve as the Museum's Gustav café. The naturally lit-up sitting room, that frames stunning views





Fig. 5-6
Photograph (NMA 3742) showing the rooftop sitting room at Olof's palazzo in Mdina where some of his paintings were on display. Visible in the photograph are (from top left): *Atrani* (1923), *The Saracen Castle* (1920), *Oleandro* (1931), *Village View* (c.1937), and in the bottom row (from left), *A Kitchen* (1924), *A Coastal Scene* (1923), and *A Kitchen* (1924);

Photograph (NMA 1066) showing Olof's rooftop studio with paintings hanging on the right wall (from left) are identified as the *Coastal Scene with Hills* (1923), and *A Village Scene* (1919). The framed work on the left side of the facing wall is a lithograph *Arco dei Cappellari* (1919) by Olof.

(Courtesy of Heritage Malta – National Museum of Archaeology, Malta)

from a large bay window, gives the impression that Olof and his Italian wife, Teresa Lucia known as Nella (1895–1962), enjoyed this space as their sanctuary. Olof adorned this room with some of his paintings, possibly evoking memories of his artistic days, while Nella did some sewing⁹ and embroidery.¹⁰

When the photographs are enlarged for examination, the paintings become more visible and may be identified without too much difficulty: from top left (Fig. 5) are *Atrani* (1923),¹¹ *The Saracen Castle* (1920), *Oleandro* (1931),¹² and in the bottom row are: *A Kitchen* (1924),¹³ *Coastal Scene* (1924),¹⁴ and *A Kitchen* (1924).¹⁵ On the adjacent wall, is *Village View* (1937).¹⁶ The photograph of the rooftop studio (Fig. 6; NMA 1066) was also a very well lit-up room with natural light from the large window overlooking the courtyard, and was thus ideal for an art studio. Olof also displayed several of his prints and oil paintings in his private den. Two of the paintings hanging on the right wall have also been identified: *Coastal Scene with Hills* (1923)¹⁷ and *Village Scene* (1919).¹⁸ As do these photographs, each oil painting tells a story or, rather, reveals a meta-narrative related not only to Olof's whereabouts but also to what he chose to commit to memory or record in paint.

Restoring Memory: The restored paintings of Olof Frederick Gollcher

Some of the paintings which feature in these photographs have been recently restored.¹⁹ Like the photographs so far discussed, each may serve as a window into Olof's artistic life and practice, particularly on the interplay between the disciplines of photography and art.

The earliest of these group of paintings, *Village Scene* (Fig. 7-9), painted in 1919 when Olof was residing in Rome, exemplifies Olof's practice of using his own photography as a visual reference. Indeed, the picturesque village scene with the water fountain as its main feature captured Olof's attention to such an extent that he took several photographs of it from

Fig. 7-8
Olof Gollcher, *Village Scene*, oil on canvas, 70cm x 91cm, 1919, before and after restoration.

overleaf: Fig.9
Olof Gollcher, *Village Scene*, after restoration intervention in 2021.

(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3284 / Photo: PrevArti)

different angles, with the intention to later interpret it on canvas.²⁰ He cleaned the depiction from trees and figures and imbued the landscape view of the village with tranquillity and stillness, bathing it in Mediterranean light and shade. The orange doors and roofs contrast with the almost transparent blues and greys of the painting. Olof depicted the architectural features behind the fountain quite realistically,







opposite, left column: Fig. 10-11
Details from Olof Gollcher, *Village Scene*, 1919.
(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3284 /
Photo: PrevArti)

opposite, right column: Fig. 12-13
Photographs of a village street and fountain square, taken by Olof Gollcher.
(OFG Photographic Archive Collection; Inv. Nos OFG 328 001, OFG 337
001, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum , Mdina)

right: Fig. 14-16
Photographs of village buildings and water fountain, taken by Olof Gollcher.
(OFG Photographic Archive Collection; Inv. Nos OFG 326 001, OFG 329
001, OFG 1415 001, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum , Mdina)

bottom: Fig. 17
Olof Gollcher, *Village View*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70.5cm, c. 1937.
(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3280 /
Photo: Hanneke Jansen)

including the shaded areas captured in the photograph. Such a concentration on the architectural features of doors, windows, rooftops, and niches, coupled with the intentional omission of figures and trees—live protagonists, as it were—are stylistic and compositional choices which bear a close resemblance to the photograph. Perhaps, this reveals an attempt to convey some quality of timelessness; the preservation of the unchanging, serene beauty of the village scene.

Several parallels in execution, stylistic preferences and subject choices may be drawn to another painting, *Village View* (Fig. 17), despite some two decades separating the two.²¹ Although no photographs directly connected to this scene have yet been traced within the Gollcher family archive, Olof seems to have nonetheless relied on other snapshots as an aide for modelling the details of some of the architectural features, such as the water fountain which, once again, dominates the scene. Furthermore, Olof seems to again rely on his photography in the execution of the relation between doorways and window openings, as well as the realistic rendering of building angles, street corners, and the all-important lighting effects animating such rural scenes.

The use of photography as an *aide memoire* to artists was, of course, not unique to Olof Gollcher. Indeed, even before the invention of photography in 1839, the potential of the *camera obscura* had already come to the attention of painters since the sixteenth century. Nor did its use and application to painting fall out of fashion. As Conte Francesco Algarotti (1712–1764) writes in *Saggio sopra la pittura*, in 1874: the best Italian painters were using the *camera obscura* as an aid to their drawings.²² Once photography became more readily available, painters quickly realised the potential that photography offered them and used it as reference for their paintings. It would be a quick and easy method of capturing a visual record for painting rather than spend hours on end sketching and drawing on site. Some painters have no qualms in openly admitting their use of photography, stressing that it is ultimately an ancillary medium.

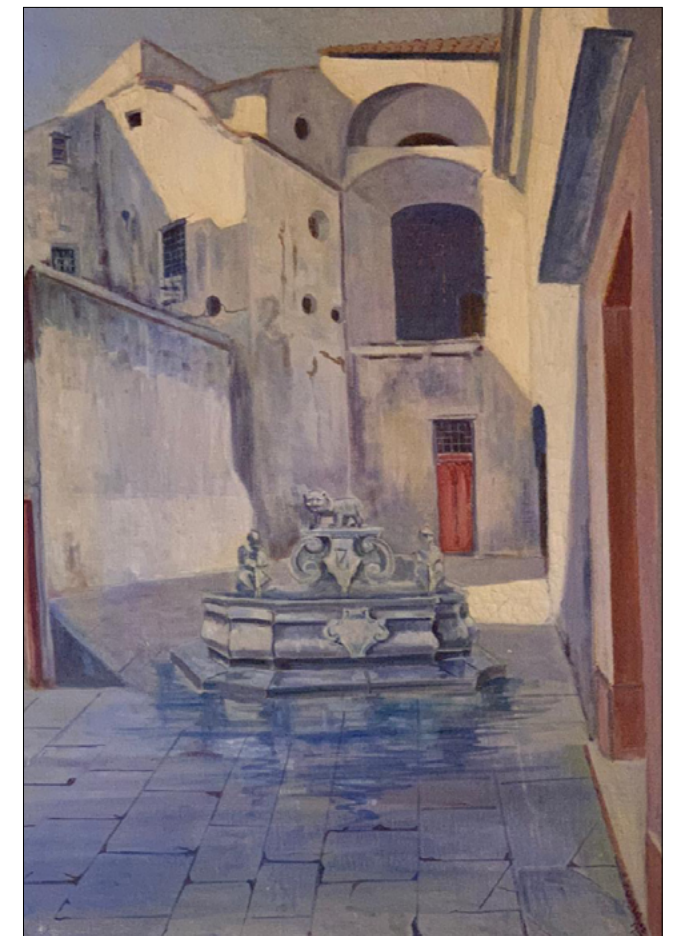


Fig. 18-19
Olof Gollocher, *Coastal Scene with Hills*, oil on canvas, 89.5cm x 70cm (inside frame), 1923, before restoration.
(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3274 / Photo: PrevArti);

Photograph by Olof Gollcher capturing the Amalfi coast covered in mist.
(OFG Photographic Archive Collection; Inv. No. OFG 340 001, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, Mdina)

opposite: Fig. 20
Olof Gollocher, *Coastal Scene with Hills*, after restoration.
(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3274 / Photo: PrevArti);

The years spent in Rome, immediately after World War I, seemed to have been prolific ones for Olof. Indeed, the newspaper cuttings preserved in one of Olof’s personal scrapbooks (OFG 041/001, document his participation in exhibitions, at least since 1918, when he was twenty-nine years old.²³ The first exhibition which records Olof’s participation with his lithographs, was entitled *Mostra di Bianco e Nero*, organised by the Società Francesco Francia, at Palazzo Bentivoglio in Bologna. Olof was later nicknamed *Maestro del Bianco e Nero* by Adolfo del Vecchio.²⁴ Olof was also sending his lithographs from Rome to Malta, to participate in Maltese exhibitions organised by the Malta Art Amateur Association (M.A.A.A.). His prints were presented at the Auberge de France, Valletta, in 1920 and 1921. The exhibition was received very well as attested to in a local newspaper, *La Voce del Popolo*, published in Italian on 4 May 1921.²⁵ Incidentally, the poster and the front cover of the catalogue of this exhibition were both designed by him.²⁶ At the same time, he was exhibiting his works at the Real Accademia di Brera, in Milan, and at the Salon International, in Paris.

The same year, in 1921, Olof Gollcher participated in what must have been the most prestigious exhibition he had ever been involved in: the 153rd exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, at Burlington House, London, between 2 May – 6 August 1921. For this exhibition he submitted two oil paintings, *Amalfi* and *Sunset in Amalfi*.²⁷ An article published anonymously under the term ‘Vigilant’, and which appears in an identical format in different newspaper clippings, reads:

I am very pleased to notice that Chevalier OF Gollcher, who has been eulogized for such a long time by foreign critics, has at last come into his own in this country. He has two pictures in the Royal Academy this year, and all lovers of Italian beauty should see his ‘Amalfi’ and his ‘Sunset in Amalfi’. Chevalier Gollcher is a great friend of England, and worked very hard for us in Rome during the war.²⁸



Another cutting from the same scrapbook, probably a Maltese newspaper published in Italian, brandishing the enticing headline ‘Maltesi che si fanno onore’, highlights the extraordinary event of Olof Gollcher taking part in the Royal Academy of London exhibition. Furthermore, both *Amalfi* and *Sunset at Amalfi*, among works by Olof, were reproduced in a French bimonthly publication, *Revue du Vrai et du Beau Arts et Lettres*, in 1924, to illustrate an article in which the author praises Olof as an *artiste superbement doué*: ‘a superbly gifted artist.’²⁹

Notably, the painting entitled *Amalfi* foreshadows what Olof was to paint a few years later, in 1923, in the painting *Coastal Scene with Hills* (Fig. 18, 20), a work which, following its restoration, exposed Olof’s typical use of subtle tones and his almost impressionistic treatment of light. In *Coastal Scene with Hills* (1923), Olof once again makes use of photography as a visual reference, but, unlike the other examples discussed so far, he gives little importance to the architectural buildings sprawling along the coastline of Amalfi in his painting, focussing instead on the natural features and phenomena dominating the scene: the hills, the sky, the sea and the reflection and refraction of light.



The southern region of Campania and, especially, the Amalfi coast, seemed to have offered much by way of inspiration and a desire to paint. Indeed, for the *Seconda Biennale Romana: Esposizione Internazionale di Belle Arti*, in Rome, between 4 November 1923 – 30 April 1924, Olof exhibited an oil painting representing this subject: *Atrani, View of the Campanian Coast* (1923), which was donated to the National Museum in 1929, presently catalogued as ‘View of the Campanian Coast, 1927’.³⁰ It was exhibited by the National Museum at the M.A.A.A. exhibition, in 1929.

Another work featuring the Amalfi coast, and donated by Olof Gollcher to the National Museum in 1929, is the oil painting *Capo d’Orso* (1923),³¹ a work which was accepted for the *Terza Biennale Romana: Esposizione Internazionale di Belle Arti*, a sell-out exhibition held at the Palazzo delle Belle Arti, Via Nazionale, Rome, between 1 March – 10 June 1925. In this exhibition, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti curated a section on Futurist artists, including Giacomo Balla, and works by Giorgio de Chirico were also on display, an artist whose influence—it is not unthinkable to suggest—might have spilled and fashioned Olof’s own artistic output. In the exhibition there was, furthermore, a section on Carlo Carrà’s and Umberto Boccioni’s work, and sculptures by Antonio Sciortino were also exhibited. Works by other prominent artists include Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, and Camille Corot.

After Olof Gollcher purchased the *palazzo* in Mdina in 1927, his art production slowed down and only participated in some local exhibitions sporadically. Among these, worth mentioning are the M.A.A.A. exhibitions and the Palace Art Exhibition, held in Valletta. Here, he displayed a landscape painting alongside well-known local artists, such as Carmelo Mangion (1905–1997), Anton Inglott (1915–1945), Emvin Cremona (1919–1987), Victor Fleri Soler (1898–1959), Gianni Vella (1885–1977), Giuseppe Duca (1871–1948), Toussaint Busuttil (1912–1994), Giuseppe Arcidiacono (1908–1997), Ella Price (active 1935–1939), Joseph Galea (1904–1985), Vincent Apap (1909–2003), and Edward Caruana Dingli (1876–1950); in other words, inserting his works among the islands’ most recognised, prolific, and sought-after artists.

Acknowledgements
I would like to whole-heartedly thank Ms Francesca Balzan, former curator of Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum (2007–2018) for her thorough research related to Olof’s artistic activity; Mr Pierre Bugeja, founder and senior conservator at PrevArti Art Restoration and Conservation, for his restoration work on Olof’s paintings, some of which have been reproduced in this article; and Dr Charlene Vella for her art historical research. As leader of the restoration project, I would like to thank the the Majjistral Action Group Foundation which made this project possible through the LEADER Programme of the European Union Rural Development Programme for Malta 2014–2020, Measure 1: Restoration of Assets and Sites of Artistic and Cultural Value, and the Capt. Olof Frederick Gollcher O.B.E. Art and Archaeological Foundation for co-financing the restoration project, and Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.



Fig. 21
Olof Gollcher, *Atrani*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70cm (inside frame), 1923, after restoration in 2021.
(Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3277/ Photo: PrevArti)

Notes

- 1 Francesca Balzan, “Il folle innamorato di Roma” the artist Olof Frederick Gollcher’, in *At Home in Art. Essays in Honour of Mario Buhagiar*, edited by Charlene Vella (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2016), 515-540.
- 2 OFG 041/001. The newspaper cutting, penned by Mario Matteucci, is entitled ‘La Confraternità della “Pippa”’.
- 3 Anticoli became known in the nineteenth century because of its young inhabitants who used to pose as models for the community of artists living near Piazza di Spagna, in Rome. Some artists eventually went to see the birthplace of their models and found Anticoli a very picturesque site to the point of living there for some time. The town attracted artists until World War II.
- 4 Annual Report on the Working of the Museum Department for the years 1927–1928 and 1929–1930, and the list entitled ‘List of Objects presented to the Museum by Mr O.F. Gollcher’; OFG 017/002, OFG 017/004.
- 5 OFG Photographic Archive Collection, OFG 222 001.
- 6 The art studio could possibly belong to Giuseppe a.k.a. Peppino Carosi (1883–1965), an Italian painter, etcher, and watercolourist, who formed part of the XXXV della Campagna Romana movement, and had an art studio in Via Margutta, Rome, Italy; OFG 041/001.
- 7 *The Saracen Castle*, oil on canvas, 1920, 70cm x 90cm (inside frame), Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3274. Markings on the *retro* and *verso* of the canvas of the painting also reveal information on the painting and its movement. It is signed and dated 1920 with writing on the back of the canvas: *No.III, the Saracen Castle by O.F. Gollcher, Via dei Groechi [sic] 297, Rome 26, 6279*. The painting has recently been restored by PrevArti, in 2021.
- 8 OFG 041/001.
- 9 Vivienne Portelli née Schembri claims to have been one of the maids at the Norman House between 1950 and 1958. In conversation with Francesca Balzan, Vivienne recalled that Olof was using the long room on the roof for painting and as a carpentry workshop where he also kept archaeological artefacts. He would not let anyone clean or touch his things, she claims. In the other room on the roof, Nella did some sewing. Photograph NMA 3742 (Fig. 5) captures a Singer sewing machine in this room, now part of Gustav Café.
- 10 In a letter dated 17 March, 1955, Nella wishes Olof a happy birthday and sends a *saccoccio* that she seems to have embroidered herself: ‘in the many stitches there is my heart and my immense love’. OFG Archive 020/316. Compiled by researcher volunteer Cecilia Xuereb.
- 11 *Atrani*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70cm (inside frame), 1923, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3277. Signed and dated; written on back of stretcher: *29077 ATRANI OF Gollcher Rome SA42*, with circular stamps possibly indicating the railway station or that it was received at an exhibition. See Balzan, op. cit., 522. The painting has recently been restored by PrevArti, in 2021.
- 12 *Oleandro*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70cm, 1923 (digits not very legible), Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3275. Signed and dated; writing on back of canvas, *Oleandro / OF Gollcher Rome SA42*, with circular stamps.
- 13 *A Kitchen*, oil on canvas, 40cm x 60cm (inside frame), 1924, PPalazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3281. Signed

- and dated; writing on back of canvas: *No.21* in chalk and a drawing of a galley. See Balzan, op. cit., 534.
- 14 *Coastal Scene*, oil on canvas, 40cm x 61cm (inside frame), 1924, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3278. Signed and dated, with writing on back of canvas: *No. 20* in chalk. See Balzan, op. cit., 534. The painting has been recently restored by PrevArti, in 2021.
 - 15 *A Kitchen*, oil on canvas, 30cm x 50cm (inside frame), 1924 (digits not very legible), Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3282. Writing on back of canvas: *No. 24* in chalk.
 - 16 *Village View*, oil on canvas, 90cm x 70.5cm, 1937 (date is not fully legible), Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3280. Signed and dated, with writing on the back of the canvas: *No. 13* in chalk.
 - 17 *Coastal Scene with Hills*, oil on canvas, 89.5cm x 70cm (inside frame), 1923, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3275. Signed and dated. The photograph 340 001 in the OFG Photographic Archive shows the same scene of the recognisable *molo* of Amalfi with hills.
 - 18 *Village Scene*, oil on canvas, 70cm x 91cm, 1919, Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum Collection; Inv. No. OFG 3284. Signed and dated, with writing on the back of the stretcher: *No. 12* in chalk. 39 (?) *Chev. Gollcher / 32*.
 - 19 Pierre Bugeja, head conservator at PrevArti, was entrusted with the restoration and conservation project. The project was made possible thanks to funds obtained from the Majjstral Action Group Foundation under the LEADER Programme of the European Union Rural Development Programme for Malta 2014–2020, Measure 1: Restoration of Assets and Sites of Artistic and Cultural Value.
 - 20 OFG Photo Archives, 327 001 and 328 001 – *Village Scene*.
 - 21 In the photograph NMA 3742, the painting is displayed on the right wall.
 - 22 David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the lost technique of the Old Masters* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 214.
 - 23 The cutting of the unknown newspaper was possibly published in Italy. The article penned by ‘Astrolabio’, titled ‘Cronache d’arte “La Mostra del ‘Francia” a Palazzo Bentivolgio II’, mentions Olof Gollcher’s lithographs; OFG 041/001.
 - 24 Adolfo del Vecchio, ‘Note d’Arte. Olaf [sic] Gollcher. Maestro del Bianco e Nero’, Rome, 22 May 1920; OFG 041/001.
 - 25 *La Voce del Polpo* was the organ of the Comitato Patriottico which was against the colonial government. Simone de Battista, “Il-Hmar” and the Sette Giugno Riots: The impact of one of the most prominent newspapers on Maltese citizens’ (diploma essay; Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, Department of Media & Communications, University of Malta, 2019).
 - 26 Balzan, op. cit., 538.
 - 27 *Sunset in Amalfi*, signed and dated 1919, was donated by Olof to the National Museum in 1929, and now forms part of the Heritage Malta National Collection. Until recently, the painting was housed at Verdala Palace, Rabat, Malta.
 - 28 OFG Archive 041/001.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 Annual Report on the Working of the Museum Department, 1929–1930, Malta: Government Printing Office, 1930; OFG 017/004.
 - 31 Ibid. This painting was also exhibited at the M.A.A.A in 1929. Olof donated the painting to the National Museum in the same year.