

WORDS CAROLINE TONNA

A BEAUTY FROM THE EMPIRE ERA AT PALAZZO FALSON



*Silk Empire Dress, c. 1805-1810, private collection
Image taken from the exhibition catalogue
'Music in Malta – From Prehistory to Vinyl',
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A WELCOMING TEMPORARY EXHIBIT AT PALAZZO FALSON HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUM IN MDINA IS AN EXQUISITE AND RARE SURVIVING EXAMPLE OF A SIMPLE EMPIRE DRESS THAT WAS POSSIBLY WORN IN MALTA EARLY 1800S. THIS DISTINGUISHED DRESS, FOUND IN A PRIVATE COLLECTION, HAS KEY INFLUENCES OF THE GRACEFUL LINES AND ELEGANCE OF NEOCLASSICAL ELEMENTS IN WOMEN'S FASHION INSPIRED BY THE STATUARY OF ANCIENT GREEKS AND ROMANS.

The dress has been well preserved and appreciated as a historical object, yet nothing is known about its provenance. The starting point of the sartorial journey of this dress was to observe it closely and piece together all the 'clues' like a detective. The simple cut and construction of the dress puts it in context of the prevailing classical style of the period. The dress was carefully mounted on a special mannequin and the three-dimensional perspective of it brought back to its full splendour.

Painted portraits of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century attest that Maltese well to-do-ladies wore similar dresses made from fine light muslin or silk fabrics decorated with lace

trimmings. This fine golden silk dress has a low square neckline and high waist, which emphasises the bust, and a short corset would have been worn underneath to raise and support the top half part of the body. The elegantly shaped high waist has a front fastening with brass hooks and eyes with an overlying 'drop-front' short bodice. It is gathered in the centre with a fabric covered buttons in the same material and another two matching buttons at the edge and on each side to create a shape and make the bust look fuller.

The fabric of the skirt is gathered into the front waistband adding volume. The skirt falls loosely around the body and gradual increases in width at the hem to allow movement. The gown has

a train and is distinctively decorated with hand-embroidered intertwining tendrils of silver thread and silver metal disks along the edge. The entire dress is strikingly covered with repetitive delicate motifs of silver metal crescents and stars, giving it an exotic feel.

The short narrow sleeves are simple in construction and they drop out from the shoulder line and are adorned in the same style of the hemline with silver thread and silver metal tendrils around the edge. The additional touch of fine lace trimmings to the sleeves makes the gown look more refined and elegant. The back of the bodice is cut in a V-shape and the gathering at the back is created with pleats sewn into the waist seam to give the skirt more fullness at the back.

The seamstress who created this dress worked meticulously making small and even stitches by hand throughout with fine thread carefully chosen to match the colours. The fabric used and time employed to hand embroider the entire dress suggest that the chosen seamstress must have been highly skilled and the lady who wore it must have been wealthy.

The light and delicate fabric in vivid gold colour gives the dress a sense of lightness and opulence. One can only imagine the impact of the lady wearing this fascinating dress had on the viewers. While in motion, the silk fabric embroidered in silver thread and disks, would have shimmered under the flickering lights of the candles and the train softly trailing behind created the rustling sound of silk.

It is remarkable how this rare Empire dress is still in mint condition and has survived for around two hundred years. There are some concealed stains revealing signs that the dress has been worn and used and it has suffered some losses to the embroidery too.

Although we may never find out who wore the dress, it is worth trying to piece a story together by reading the dress and creating its story. The unique dress is now on exhibit in the Drawing Room of Palazzo Falson. ✱

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Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum is managed by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, a non-profit heritage foundation aiming to spread awareness about our heritage through museums, publications, exhibitions and events.

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