



Fig. 1
Julian Trevelyan, *Landscape Cubes* (detail), 1958, oil,
55 x 62.5cm.
(Private Collection, Malta /
Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

Julian Trevelyan and Mary Fedden Impressions of Malta

Lawrence Pavia discusses the Malta-related works of these two exceptional artists who visited the islands on a number of occasions

Malta's geographical location at the crossroads of the Mediterranean brought several visitors to the islands, either as part of the ruling contingent or as casual guests. Among such visitors, whether as permanent or transient, were artists who by their very nature viewed the islands from a different perspective. They looked at things that the natives took for granted, and saw in its landscape and panoramas that which for the untrained eye would have gone unnoticed.

The same phenomenon happened to Julian Trevelyan (1910–1988) and Mary Fedden (1915–2012) when they visited the islands for the first time in 1958, and in the five subsequent visits that followed. But this is not something unexpected, and neither is it peculiar to the twentieth century, when artists, more than ever before, gave their own interpretation to what they were seeing and painting.

In the nineteenth century the Schranz and D'Esposito families of artists settled in Malta and gave their own interpretation to the local landscape, whilst visitors such as Edward Lear (1812–1888) had his own take on what he saw,

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opposite: Fig. 2-3
 Julian Trevelyan, *Gozo Goats II*, 1958, pencil, 21 x 28cm;
Gozo Church Xaghra, 1958, pencil, 21 x 28cm.
 (Private Collection, Malta / Photos: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

right: Fig. 4
 Julian and Mary in Gozo.

pages 42-43: Fig. 5
 Mary Fedden, *Landscape at Gozo* (detail), 1963,
 oil on canvas, 61 x 76.2cm.
 (Private Collection, Malta / Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

pages 44-45: Fig. 6
 Julian Trevelyan, *Malta Dockyard* (detail), 1958, ink,
 felt-tip pen and gouache, 22.2 x 27.1cm.
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 Peter Bartolo Parnis)



commenting on its arid look. Writers too commented on Malta's look, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) commenting on the mountain-like fortifications. In the inter-war years Italian and British artists visited the islands as well, and they too contributed to the variety of interpretations.

All these artists had in turn some form of influence on the Maltese artists who had mainly remained insular to outside forces. In the post-war period this started to gradually change, but the change was still happening at a slow pace. It is with this in mind that the first visit to Malta by Trevelyan and Fedden has to be viewed. The intention of Graham Binns (1925–2003), who was the proponent of the couple's visit to Malta, was specifically to introduce Malta and Maltese artists to internationally renowned artists whilst they visit and paint in Malta.

Indeed, both Julian Trevelyan and Mary Fedden had a good reputation in Britain, with Trevelyan having had a number of exhibitions under his belt at some of the top galleries in London, as well as a post as Head of the Etching Department at the Royal College of Art; Fedden also taught painting at the same college, the first woman to have such a position, on top of being a painter in her own right. By the time that the Trevelyan's came to Malta, each had had their own achievements in their artistic career.

Initially, Julian was a literature student at Cambridge University, but in 1931, before completing his studies, he moved to Paris to pursue his interest in art and particularly printmaking, which eventually formed the hallmark of his oeuvre. In Paris he mingled with artists such as Mirò, Kokoschka, Braque and Calder, amongst others. He returned to London in 1935 and became involved with the Surrealist Movement, participating in the first surrealist exhibition in Britain in 1936. He was also actively involved in the Mass Observation organisation, witnessing and recording peoples' behaviour. He renounced surrealism, preferring instead to give a more personal interpretation to his art.

In 1949, Julian separated from his first wife, and married Mary in 1951. Mary, who in 1932 had studied art at the Slade School of Art, had subsequently started teaching art at an art school in Bristol. In 1950–51 both of them participated in the Festival of Britain with a series of murals, and commenced their ritual of travelling across Europe, where they recorded in their sketchbooks mainly the landscapes, and occasionally the people, they encountered.

In 1958, Malta was on their itinerary, having arrived on the island in the middle of August, and remaining until September. Their stay was to be spent partly on Malta, with a visit to Gozo; from the sketches still extant, it is evident that they did not waste any time and roamed both islands extensively. These include sketches of Mdina and Rabat, where they initially resided with the Binns family, as well as other sketches of Marsaxlokk, Qrendi, Mqabba, and several parts of Gozo. But what is immediately evident from the sketchbooks is that although they were certainly, and as expected, fascinated by the baroque architecture, their main interest was more in the vernacular architecture and landscape typical of these islands.

The simplistic and primitive approach to landscape painting that would evolve from these initial sketches may be considered as the character that is imbued with, as one commentator observed in recent years, an 'innocence of eye that could discover enchantment in the most mundane scenes.'¹ But even way back in 1958, Trevelyan's paintings were considered as showing a 'fresh artistic approach to our landscape,'² and as depicting 'local scenes seen through virgin eyes.'³ Certainly, these mundane, simplistic and innocent depictions should not be considered as lacking in sophistication. Indeed the opposite is most true.

In a similar fashion, Fedden's painting reflects a sense of happiness coupled with the simplistic, pure, perhaps naïve, and deceptively unsophisticated approach to art. Her art had always been concerned with the depiction of still lifes, generally with a landscaped background, which







opposite: Fig. 7
Julian Trevelyan, *Carnival* (detail, part of the First Malta Suite),
1959, etching, 77 x 57cm.

subsequent page: Fig. 8
Julian Trevelyan, *Bonzo Bar* (part of the Second Malta Suite),
1970, etching, aquatint and soft ground, 58.5 x 79cm.

(Private Collection, Malta / Photos: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

is probably reminiscent of her earlier training in stage-set designs. In Malta, she not only sketched the outside scenes, but interestingly also interior sketches, some showing the Grand Harbour in the background, particularly when they stayed at an apartment in Siren Street in Senglea, which had offered panoramic views of the fortified harbour and Valletta. Her intricate and detailed designs in the sketches capture the traditional patterned tiles, typical furniture of the period and cacti so popular in Maltese homes. What is however peculiar and specific to her art is the one-dimensional approach and quasi-aerial view to her painting, which she continued to develop further, even later on in her artistic career.

Although both Trevelyan and Fedden had their own individual artistic approach, it was evident that in the 1950s Fedden's works had absorbed a lot of influence from Trevelyan. One of Fedden's biographers, Mel Gooding, attributes such an influence to the creative elements, commitments and confidence, rather than to the style itself.⁴ Whereas Fedden gravitated towards still lifes, Trevelyan was more concerned with the landscape, but with a preoccupation of the human element and that of capturing the spirit of the place.

Indeed, Trevelyan's initial sketches, and some more completed paintings he would have finished even whilst still in Malta, portray the islands' rural environment with the inclusion of rubble walls, metal-framed wind-operated water pumps, goats and donkeys, and the inevitable prickly-pear cacti around traditional, humble, flat-roofed vernacular architecture, or the more elaborate baroque, domed churches (Fig. 2-3). It was typical of both artists that when they returned to their London home and studios they would work from their sketchbooks to produce paintings in oils on canvas. Similarly, Trevelyan would also produce his works in the printed medium, with etching being his preference. Trevelyan was so impressed with what he saw, and the rich pickings whilst in Malta, that not only did he produce etchings, but he created his first in a series of suites in relation to the places that the couple visited.

Trevelyan's etchings known as the First Malta Suite, a series of six etchings, were actually finalised and published in 1959, and received favourable reviews. They were immediately sold out. He was already at the height of his career and considered to be one 'of the leading and most influential practitioners and teachers of etching in the country.'⁵ In three of the etchings, the artist depicted the rural landscape, one of which interestingly included quarries, which seemed to have instilled a particular fascination. Another showed the Grand Harbour with the Maltese *dghajsa* among the bigger military vessels, with Valletta in the background. The last two show the archaeological heritage of the island, with the Neolithic Sleeping Lady in the foreground and the Ħal Saflieni spirals and structures around, and another of a typical Maltese *fešta* with the patron-saint statue on forebearers and fireworks in the sky (Fig. 7). The technical accomplishments of these etchings cannot be underestimated, with Trevelyan experimenting whilst ensuring that the finished products met his high standards. What is also amazing is the fact that some of the sketches and preparatory drawings for these etchings indicate exactly what the artist had intended to achieve, as the on-site sketch seems to have been prepared with the etching already in mind.

The intention of the Trevelyan's first visit to Malta had been to expose local artists to international accomplished artists, and although its goal might have not been totally achieved before their departure, they had had at least one opportunity to meet some local artists. It is known that Frank Portelli, Joe Borg Xuereb and others also involved in the cultural scene, such as Maurice Caruana Curran and Vera Greer, had been invited to a party hosted by the couple. Their relationship with the islands however, did not end in 1958. They continued to visit Malta in later years, and five other trips are known to have taken place, apart from another trip with Mary Fedden on her own after Julian's death. Both continued to explore the islands and eventually produced works of art which show some of the beautifully natural integral aspects of Malta and Gozo.



Notes

- 1 Simon Martin, 2010, introducing 'Julian Trevelyan: Centenary Exhibition', Pallant House Gallery, 10 May – 13 June 2010; <http://www.pallant.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2010/julian-trevelyan-centenary>; accessed on 9 October 2010.
- 2 Anon, 'Trevelyan Entertain', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 7 September 1958, 15.
- 3 Anon, 'Painter Couple', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 7 September 1958, 7.
- 4 M. Gooding, *Mary Fedden* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 2004), 10-13.
- 5 N. Usherwood, 'The Imaginative Impulse', in *The Imaginative Impulse: Julian Trevelyan 1901-1988*, exhibition catalogue (Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire: Bohun Gallery, 1998), 21.