

## Inauguration speech for exhibition at the Charles University in Prague - 30.6.16

Memory! How precious a faculty it is!

It is priceless because without it, we would not be able to do many things – not even the normal, everyday actions that we tend to take for granted; without memory, we would be unable to walk, run, read, write, learn... we would be deprived of the ability to recognize people we personally know or others whom we know of, and, worse still, we would be unable to even recognize our own selves.

Yes – memory is indeed that precious; and perhaps we do not really appreciate how much we depend on it until we experience/encounter a person who has lost it all or part of it – that memory-impaired person would have forgotten who he/she is, his/her origins, his/her loved ones, family, friends, his/her stories, his/her life – that is when it dawns on us that memory loss is something close to a tragedy.

The faculty of memory gives us a sense of yesterday, of the past - recent and remote - of our own past in our lives and that of those lives before ours; and as we ponder about the past, we come face to face with one inescapable fact – time!

Time that moves relentlessly on, merciless time that neither stops nor slows down for anybody and with this at the forefront of our minds, we are forced to make huge efforts to keep the past alive, as much as possible. In order that it is never forgotten, it is always remembered/ always commemorated.

How do we do this?

We do this by paying attention to old stories, written and told; we give value to those objects and items that we have all kept in our lives (for as long as we are alive) because through them, we can recall certain past experiences; we also attach importance to those objects that have been left behind by older generations: whether they are narrations, books, photographs, drawings, paintings, clothes, jewellery, cooking utensils etc., these are in the end all objects that bring memories – and they are the only tangible evidence remaining from a near or distant past and they also hold the memory of that past alive, present and relevant to our time.

With the same affection that we treasure our late grandfather's wedding ring, or our recently passed aunt's favourite porcelain vase, we, who work in the field of cultural heritage, treat our artefacts, objets d'art, works of art, with as much care and dedicated attention – exactly because we firmly believe that these works from the past today serve to protect society's collective memory – and we, as curators, are

bound to put to action our mission to present these works, these collections as a means to commemorate and, through them, bring to life the 'silent' stories surrounding these works and objects; as, ultimately, behind these works of art and objects, one should never forget that there is the hand, mind, intention, aspiration, spirit and creativity of human beings - there is the human story.

On a daily basis, we as curators go to great lengths to research the artefacts and works of art in our collections so that we attempt to understand why they were made, where they were made, how they were made, when they were made and by and for whom they were made.

This small but very specialised exhibition centred around four maps of the great siege of Malta of 1565 has been structured precisely on these foundations (what-who-how-why-when) in order to understand what their original function was 451 years ago and to see what they mean to us four and a half centuries later. They were once visual sources of news on developments of the great siege of 1565 – these journalistic sources had to at all costs be widely and rapidly circulated for as much as the means of communication and transport existent in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century could permit.

Today, because of the value they have been assigned as part of our cultural heritage, these maps carry the memory of a distant past, of particular circumstances, after all, of a decisive moment/turning point which was the siege involving the hospitaller, military and Christian order of St John and the Maltese up in arms against the Ottoman Turks whose objective to capture the Maltese islands also meant the conquest of the Mediterranean; these maps hold the memory of needs and priorities related to a political and social contest that has long been changed – so, when considering all this, it is indeed most fortunate that these maps have not been lost over time, as otherwise part of this memory would have perished forever too.

Hence the significant role these maps today play as 'protectors' of collective memory – in other words, by looking after these maps, we are hence safeguarding the collective memory they bear and convey.

This exhibition, first put up in Malta and now here at the Charles University, is an interesting opportunity for the visitor as s/he can view these siege maps together, side-by-side, probably for the first time ever! I like to compare these four maps to siblings – like siblings or brothers and sisters, they resemble each other in many ways but in others they are quite different, and like siblings, they are born from the same 'mother', in our case, the 'mother' is the copper plate on which the images of these

four maps had been engraved by means of the 'intaglio' technique. As these four maps share a common source, i.e. their 'mother'-copper plate, they are technically referred to as 'states' – states 1, 2, 3 and 4. The differences between these four states are the outcome of the changes that had been made on the original copper plate itself, changes that in fact reflect the latest developments of the great siege. So the contrasts between state 1 and state 2 actually show an update of news on the siege, then more changes in state 3 show that there were further news updates from the situation captured in state 2, finally state 4, the most dramatically different from the previous 3 states, is sure evidence of the drastic change in events that finally spelled the victory of the order of St John's over the Ottoman Turks.

These siege maps, displayed together and therefore enabling the possibility to see the contrasts and similarities between them, are very fascinating. We remain captivated by the concise economy of manner with which these cartographic images were created so that, through them, news on the great siege of Malta could travel fast, far and wide. As we pore over the details, we are in awe by the meticulous work that must have been involved in the engraving of every single detail. Today, well away from and outside their original context and no longer serving their original function, these maps commemorate the great siege of Malta of 1565 – but not only – they capture and, thus commemorate, old means of communication; military systems and strategies now defunct; locations, gardens, terrain, buildings and fortifications that have changed radically or have disappeared forever; they show very old seacraft dependent on the power of the wind; and finally they are animated by the presence of human activity whether engaged in sea or land battle, or standing guard or resting, eating, in a state of sickness, or even burying their dead.

As our eyes and imagination get lost in the minutiae of these great siege maps by Giovanni Francesco Camocio, indeed, all the more convinced do we become of their importance as invaluable safekeepers of memory.

I now wish to conclude my speech by saying that...

It would be a grave failure on my part if I do not state, with emphasis, that all of this would not have materialised had it not been for the initiative of the geography department of the Charles University. It was this very department that brought heritage Malta's attention to the existence and vision of Unesco's international memory of the world register. This department was instrumental in igniting enthusiasm for work to be done in order that these four maps, three in Malta and one here in Prague, to be tendered as a series in the prestigious register of the international memory of the world. The collaboration between the geography

department of the Charles University and the national museum of fine arts (part of heritage Malta, the national agency for the management and conservation of museums and sites) has been absolutely wonderful and most rewarding. So here, I would like to wholeheartedly thank dr Eva Novotna, ms Mirka Troglova Sejtкова, Lada Fenclova and Marketa Hyndrakova, for their immense support, patience and kindness.

I am forever indebted to mr Joseph Schiro', a bibliophile, a distinguished books & paper conservator with several years of experience, formerly the head of the conservation division within heritage Malta, and who has published extensively on cartography. I wholeheartedly congratulate him for his discovery of the existence of Camocio's state 2 map and thank him for his help in the drawing up of the nomination form for IMWR. His eager support and contribution have been indispensable for this project.

I wish to thank the committee members of the Malta map society, most especially its president, dr Albert Ganado, a most respected and international authority on maps of the Maltese islands, and who has generated much interest in cartography in Malta.

I must take the opportunity to thank h.e. ambassador mgr Joseph Vella Gauci of the permanent delegation in Malta to Unesco and mr Kevin Sciberras from the centre for education, science and culture.

Lastly but not least, I cannot forget to thank my colleagues at heritage Malta and particularly my superiors: the chairman, dr Joseph Buttigieg, the CEO, mr Kenneth Gambin, the chief curator, mr Godwin Vella, exhibitions & design manager, mr Pierre Bonello & his team, and senior curator, mr Alexander Debono, who, without hesitation, kindly accepted to finance my trip to magical Prague.

Thank you very much!