

# TOP DRAWERS

*Marika Azzopardi* SEES THE WOOD FOR THE TREES AS SHE GAINS ACCESS TO A PRICELESS COLLECTION OF 17TH CENTURY ANTIQUE MALTESE FURNITURE

PHOTOS BY PIPPA ZAMMIT CUTAJAR

There is something about antique Maltese furniture that makes collectors run to each and every auction in search of that very elusive piece which occasionally turns up, patiently waiting to be recognised for the rarity that it is.

On a tiny island like Malta, where most people are very familiar with everybody else's possessions, the announcement of yet another estate being auctioned means many tongues will be wagging and spreading the news. Which precious objects belonged to whom, where they came from and how they were bequeathed: all become part of the gossip and fuel curiosity which attracts the crowds.

But there is more to possessing antique furniture than merely knowing its origin. That very origin may well be part of a history of workmanship that goes back decades. There is the relish of being part of an age-old tradition of workmanship that died a natural death with the influx of container-loads of modern furniture and which was for a while discarded and even burnt at a stake, the fruit of ill-informed choices.

Being born on an island where wood is limited, each antique piece is a graceful creation gleaned from what was available. ▶

An early 17th Century Maltese bureau bookcase, veneered in olivewood and orangewood stringing in a geometrical pattern.





A later 17th Century Maltese bureau bookcase on bun feet.



A fine example of a very rare 17th Century Maltese chest of drawers, veneered in carob and olive wood, inlaid with orangewood, bird motifs, on bun feet.

With typically rough finishes to their interior, antique Maltese pieces however boast extremely refined exteriors, veneered to high shines that exude an added charm. Even unpolished, these are works of art in themselves, as intricate fretwork and exquisite lacework combine the different coloured woods in graceful stylistic designs. This makes for rare pieces that are accomplishments in fanciful parsimony.

With one eye on the latest auction announcements and another on my bank account, I take a trip to meet auctioneer Pierre Grech Pillow, who may well be young in age, but his experience in the sector of antiques is already blossoming.

"I was brought up surrounded by antiques, and always had a passion for auctions. Of course, the fact that I have worked with and know all Maltese auctioneers on a personal level certainly helps."

"This year has been a very interesting year so far and I had one of the most interesting auctions in the past decades. It was pretty exciting. It is one of those things which really fuel my passion for antiques - a fundamental prerequisite in this profession."

In this very recent auction, Mr Grech Pillow hammered away a 17th century oil painting to the tune of €116,000. The painting, St John the Baptist in the Wilderness by Jeronimo Jacinto de Espinosa, formed part of a private collection. But paintings apart, Grech Pillow's particular predilection is for 17th century Maltese furniture, perhaps due to the fact that his first major sale was in fact a very rare, museum quality, 17th Century chest of drawers on five bun feet.

17th Century Maltese furniture always sells in auctions locally and abroad. The main reason is that this earliest form of local furniture is very rare to come by, and hails back to when the Knights of St John were bringing in their own cabinet makers from their respective countries.

Asked to endorse the fascination of antique Maltese furniture to the average auction scout, Pierre Grech Pillow takes me to view three stupendous examples of the sort of pieces a collector would vie to possess. Needless to say, I am bowled over as Grech Pillow explains: "This 17th Century furniture typically has a framework in red deal (pine) and this



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was only used by Maltese and Italian makers. The Maltese were inspired by all the foreign influences on the island and also after being trained in the workshops of the 'imported' cabinet makers who worked for the Order and for the nobility. Needless to say, the Maltese absorbed these influences and made them their own, typifying them with the use of Maltese wood such as all kinds of fruit and olive wood."

Grech Pillow also shows me a fine example of a very rare 17th Century Maltese chest of drawers, veneered in carob and olive wood, inlaid with orangewood, bird motifs, on bun feet. This was made in Malta at the time of the Knights of St John's and could very well have been ordered by a knight. The work is typical of North Italian workshops, typically from Lombardy and this is especially noticeable from the upper smaller drawer and from the fretwork, which is also used in reverse. This kind of chest was used in the main bedroom which was bedecked as one would expect a living room. It would have held the bride's dowry and contained linens, tablecloths and the like.

Yet how hard is it to find an authentic piece on the market? Mr Grech Pillow says that prospective buyers need to watch out. "Whilst original pieces are rare to find, reputable auctioneers will catalogue authentic period furniture with great attention, and this does occasionally turn up on the local market. Foreign auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's also include Maltese pieces in their auctions from time to time."

"People should watch out for reproductions. Nothing can compare to a true period piece." Jokingly Pierre Grech Pillow comments: "It's a bit like asking a plastic surgeon for a Brad Pitt nose. Nothing can really and truly beat the original." ■

