The development of domestic space in the Maltese Islands from the Late Middle Ages to the second half of the Twentieth Century

Said-Zammit, G.A.

Chapter 8

FURNITURE AND COSTUMES

"*Today ... there is a heavy demand for Maltese furniture made during the previous centuries, both as an investment as well as a mode of decorating one's habitation ....*"
(Manduca 2002: 12)

8.1 Introduction

This chapter uses the available sources to explore in detail the interior spaces of the Maltese houses from two further aspects: furniture and costumes. The notarial records, the *Cabrei*, the house surveys, works-of-art, travelogues and literary sources, old photographs and museum exhibits constitute the main sources which provide us with an interesting picture of how different dwellings were furnished during the period under study. They also give us an insight into the dress code which people stemming from different social classes adhered to during formal and informal occasions. This chapter is, therefore, relevant to our study because it provides a further insight into the relationship between the houses and their dwellers.

The first section focuses on furniture. It analyses the type of furniture and furnishings that prevailed in the *palazzi* and upper middle class houses, in the rural and lower class urban dwellings, as well as in cave habitations between the late Medieval period and the second half of the 20th century. Apart from the quality of the furniture items that feature in these houses, it also considers the main trading links which Malta had during this period regarding the importation of furniture.

The second part is concerned with costumes. It examines the type and quality of attire that prevailed locally among the different social classes during the period under review, and also how fashion changed through time. Through the available sources, particularly the notarial records and works-of-art, we can likewise study the trading links which Malta had with the outside world for the importation of textiles.

8.2 Furniture and furnishings

Part of this analysis is based on a sample of contracts, which collectively encompass a period ranging between the late 15th and the late 17th century. The picture acquired from these records is interesting, because they relate to people stemming from different social backgrounds.

The type and quality of furniture that feature in these contracts are not always described in detail. The notary often resorted to the general legal terms "*omnia bona mobilia et stabilia*" (all mobile and immobile property) or "*omnia et singula bona mobilia*" (all and singular mobile property), which also included furniture (*Acts*

Giacomo Zabbara 30-xi-1486: R494/1 f. 41-41v; 25-iv-1496: R494/1 f. 49v; 1-ix-1496: R494/1 f. 22; Galea Naudi in Manduca 2002: 9).

Another observation made is that furniture items do not commonly feature in these documents, suggesting that these were expensive and not everybody could afford them. In fact, the historical evidence also shows that even locally made furniture was unaffordable for most of the common people, because most wood had to be imported from abroad (Blouet 1993: 103-104). Consequently, the peasants and lower class urban families had to limit themselves to what was absolutely necessary, for example a bed, a chest, a table and perhaps a set of chairs. Our previous analysis has revealed that high tables and chairs were probably more commonly found in the elite houses, while many peasants and the poor ate round a low table in a squatting position (section 7.3 above). The house surveys have also shown that it was common in most late medieval and Knights' period houses to include recesses in walls, which were utilized as cupboards with limestone or wooden shelves for the storage of various domestic and personal items such as kitchenware, tableware and clothes. The presence of these spaces was therefore an ideal substitute for wooden furniture, for example cupboards and wardrobes (Figures 3.24 and 3.25). The notarial records sometimes make reference to mattresses rather than beds, implying that certain families could not even afford to have a bed, and therefore slept on mattresses on the floor (Fiorini 2006a: 262). The few furniture items present in the poor dwellings could have been produced by the peasant himself or by a neighbour in exchange for an agreed amount of agricultural products. Other items could have been bought second-hand or inherited from the parents or a relative. A similar situation occurred in other parts of contemporary Europe, with the furniture of lower class dwellings usually consisting of a bed, a chest, a table and a set of chairs (Pritchard 1952: 238-39). Horn's investigations of early modern England revealed that although these furniture pieces featured in several rural houses, others lacked these basic items (Horn 1988: 81). The historical evidence also indicates that in early modern England it was customary among the peasants to produce their own furniture or to have it made by a neighbour in exchange for an agreed amount of agricultural products or other payment in kind; the purchase of second-hand furniture or its inheritance from one generation to the other was also a common practice (Pritchard 1952: 239).

Another picture that emerges from these contracts is the fact that furniture always occurs in single pieces rather than in suites. The reason for this is that until the advent of the Baroque era it was still uncommon in Europe to furnish the house with furniture suites (Bonello in Manduca 2002: 33). In fact, the earliest furniture suites in Malta, for example the dining room, became popular in the elite houses and *palazzi* from the late 17th or the early 18th century onwards, as occurred in other parts of Europe, at a time when the rooms of the wealthy houses became more functionally-defined (De Piro 2003: 86). Apart from the fact that pauper dwellings were usually small, the financial situation of many poor families prevented them from acquiring furniture suites (section 4.2 above).

The wealthy houses contained furniture items which were usually of finer quality. The most common furniture that features in these houses consists of beds, tables,

chests, coffers and boxes, as well as chairs. Sometimes, we also find reference to small tables (*antitavula*) and icons depicting a saint or a holy figure. The *antitavula* was a small table on which aperitifs were placed or displayed (Fiorini 1996: 337). Two notarial documents make reference to the canopy of a four-poster bed (*Acts* Paolo Bonello 5-xi-1467: MS 588 f. 43v; Giacomo Zabbara 30-xi-1486: R494/1(I) f. 41-42). The coffers may have had various purposes, but most of them were probably used for the storage of clothes. There are also indications that some of these furniture pieces, particularly the chests, were also painted (for example, *Acts* Brandano Caxaro 22-viii-1562: R175/66(II) f. 1143v-44v).

Our historical records refer to various local carpenters who had their own *bottega* (workshop). This indicates that many furniture items were locally produced, although most wood had to be imported. In fact, in the 17th century the local carpenters established their own guild in Valletta to safeguard their trade and interests (Bonello in Manduca 2002: 123). However, in the elite houses it was customary to find imported furniture as well, mainly from Italy, France and Spain (Bonello in Manduca 2002: 29-35; Fiorini 2006a: 263). In the Colonial period imported furniture from England and other parts of the British Empire also became commoner.

Apart from the furniture, these documents also refer to various furnishings usually associated with the bed, such as mattresses, pillows, blankets and bed-linen. Several items were made of wool, while others were made of cotton, silk or linen (Fiorini 2006a: 262-63). The reference to fringes and ornamental weave indicates that certain items were of a finer quality and perhaps more expensive. Other furnishings are associated with dining, for instance table-cloths, serviettes, plates, cutlery and goblets. Several items were made of tin, while others were of silver, denoting a finer quality and therefore a higher value.

We also find various references to curtains, carpets and cushions. The furnishings mentioned in these contracts varied from local products to imported objects from Italy, France, Spain and Holland. The material and the quality of these furnishings usually denoted the status of their owners. For example, silver tableware and silk or cotton bed furnishings were usually synonymous with the elite, while in the rural and poor urban dwellings these were generally more limited in number and of inferior materials. For instance, in the latter houses bed furnishings were generally simple and made from wool or from inferior quality cotton or fustian. Most tableware objects in this type of dwellings were often made of tin. In these houses finer tableware items were, therefore, an exception. In the *palazzi* and upper middle class houses one could still find cheaper products, for example tin plates and cups, but these were probably reserved for the servants or slaves.

Porcelain items do not feature in these documents, because they were not yet popular in Europe during the period covered by these contracts. Porcelain ware was introduced in Europe between the 16th and 17th centuries through Portuguese and Dutch traders, and began to spread more extensively in the 18th century (De Piro 2003: 180). Although imported majolica jars became popular during the Knights' period, these do not appear in the notarial acts or in any of the other sources that were studied. This suggests that, as occurred in contemporary Italy, the common majolica jars were

possibly not considered of any particular market value and were, therefore, not listed among the household contents (John Bintliff 2015: personal communication). In Italy, only the most elaborate vases with painted scenes and heraldic devices usually appear in household inventories (Poole 1997: 45-57). The national majolica collection exhibited at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, consists largely of apothecary vessels (imported mostly from Sicily and Italy), which were commissioned and imported by the Knights to be used at the *Sacra Infermeria* (the hospital of the Order in Valletta).

Works-of-art constitute another important source through which one can study the type and quality of furniture in the Maltese houses during the period under study. The artistic works studied for the purposes of this section collectively encompass a period ranging between the late 17th century and the early 20th century. The reliability of this study lies in the fact that these works-of-art cover a relatively extensive period and they relate to people stemming from different social backgrounds. Although many of these works were commissioned to depict nobles and the elite, and sometimes part of their *palazzi* as well, other artists penetrated into the inner spaces of lower class dwellings, which therefore help us to acquire a more detailed picture.

One of the limitations encountered in this analysis concerns the fact that most of these artistic works are intended to depict portraits of important people, therefore the furniture that appears is usually only partially visible. Such a situation may make it more difficult for us to study the style, the quality and the material of a particular furniture item. However, the relevance of these works-of-art lies in their artistic detail as well as in the information they provide about the configuration of domestic space in the Maltese house.

Several of the paintings relate to an elite setting and generally use specific house spaces as their background, namely the sitting room (or parlour), the dining room, and the office or library. Two other paintings also depict the corridor of the house. This gives the impression that presumably these were the most important rooms in a wealthy house of this period. These were probably the formal rooms where guests were welcomed and entertained or where the office work was carried out. The formality of this setting is further substantiated by the fact that the gentlemen and ladies appearing in these works are depicted in formal and elegant attire, except for the servants and slaves. It is interesting to note that private spaces such as the bedroom and those associated with domestic work are rarely depicted.

An eighteenth-century work by Favray depicting an elite house is ‘Maltese Lady Visting her Lady Friend’ (Figure 5.31). It suggests that by this time the sitting room had become one of the formal places in the wealthy houses. This appears to have been located close to the main entrance of the dwelling, as substantiated by the background of the painting itself, which depicts the lady visitor passing through an arched vestibule. The parlour seems to have consisted of a separate space, so much so that it had its own doorway which detached this room from the rest of the house. Unfortunately, this painting does not portray the entire room, so a full picture of what else was included cannot be obtained. However, the partly visible section portrays a room embellished by a number of wall paintings, including a portrait of Grand Master Pinto. Underneath this

there is a wall clock accompanied by two oval paintings on each side depicting floral motives. The furniture of this room, which consists of a settee, two armchairs and a smaller chair, collectively belongs to a single set. Two other small chairs, one of which is used by the sitting lady to do her embroidery work and the other one located just behind the central standing figure, do not seem to form part of this set. On the right-hand side, the little child appears in a wicker play-pen, and behind him there is a small chair probably intended for the same. The furniture pieces are all typical of the second half of the 18th century, examples of which still survive in several local private collections (Manduca 2002: 23, 85-86, 232-33). The four pieces of the sitting room suite are all characterized by light brown velvet upholstery with brass buttoning. While the settee has a sinuous frame, scrolled arms, carved sides and cabriole legs, the two identical armchairs with tall backs on the left are characterized by elegant arms rounded at the edge. The top rail of both armchairs supports a set of decorated finials. The frequent appearance of these chairs in eighteenth-century paintings by the same artist suggests that they were in fashion during this period (Degiorgio and Fiorentino 2004: 21, 79, 148; De Piro 2003: 61). The evidence also indicates that this type of furniture was influenced by contemporary French and Italian models (Manduca 2002: 85-86, 232). The clock beneath Pinto's portrait is a traditional Maltese wall clock which was so popular during this period in the elite houses. The elegance of this room is further complemented by a partly visible elaborate valance of green damask hung to a gilded *supraporta* (pelmet), indicating that this room probably also had a window; the curtains, however, are not visible. Favray uses a similar background in another work named 'Dames de Malte se Faisant Visite' (Figure 5.32).

The dining room is depicted in a single example entitled 'Souper à Malte' (Figure 7.4). The relevance of this painting lies in the fact that it is the only artistic example which depicts a local eighteenth-century dining interior (De Giorgio and Fiorentino 2004: 44). The only furniture that appears in this painting consists of a rectangular table covered with a white table-cloth. Unfortunately, the painting does not permit a detailed study of the chairs, since none of them are completely visible. It is possible that these belonged to the same set. Some of the figures are seated on a stool instead of a chair, as the lady and the gentleman on the left clearly demonstrate. The depth of the background suggests a spacious room, possibly being the *sala* of the *piano nobile*, where it was customary for the eighteenth-century elite in Malta to dine and entertain their guests (section 3.5 above). The room appears to have been also embellished with some wall paintings and furnished by elaborate curtains.

Another two paintings depict the library or office. The first one is entitled 'Dr. Giovanni Nicola Muscat' and the other 'Dr. Salvatore Bernard and his Wife and Son' (Figures 2.15 and 7.10, respectively). In both cases, Favray uses a bookcase as a background, giving the impression that the room also included a library. The chairs are similar and their high curvilinear backs remind us of the sitting room in 'Maltese Lady Visting her Lady Friend'.

Some eighteenth-century paintings provide information about different types of house furnishings, which were popular in certain elite houses. Before the advent of photography, painted portraits were the only means to depict one's own image and

status. 'Maltese Lady Visiting her Lady Friend' depicts a portrait of one of Malta's Grand Masters, while 'A Young Girl with a Portrait', also by Favray, depicts a young lady holding an oval portrait of an elderly woman in her right hand, probably being her own mother or a close relative (Figure 8.1). Another piece of furniture which was also popular in certain eighteenth-century elite houses is the pianoforte or the harpsichord. From the works-of-arts that were studied only two portray this musical instrument. One of them, 'A Musician', portrays a gentleman playing this instrument, while the second example, datable to the late 18th century, portrays a young lady in a standing position near a similar musical instrument (Figures 8.2 and 8.3).

Figure 5.38 allows insight into a new genre, here the artist's studio, and at the same time into the life world of lower class people during the 19th century. In this example, Caruana depicts a multifunctional room, which probably served as an artist's studio, a bedroom and a dining room. Unlike the other houses that appeared in the previous examples, this building is presumably smaller and served as a small business and a dwelling place. The doorway, partly visible on the left-hand side, could have been the main door of the house or an internal doorway leading to another room. The setting of this house as well as the type and quality of furniture depicted in the painting concur with and complement our evidence of the previous chapters, including the house surveys, which showed that during the period under study the houses of working class families were usually small, with most rooms being multifunctional, and lacked individual privacy. The fact that no windows are depicted suggests that this house also lacked proper ventilation. The observations which emerge from this work also tally with the literary sources and the travelogues analysed in Chapter 4, which revealed that the furniture in such dwellings was usually minimal and of poor quality.

The eighteenth-century engraving depicting Għar il-Kbir is the only artistic work which shows the interior of an inhabited cave-dwelling (Figure 1.8). The reliability of this work lies in the fact that it is based on a visitor's description, which refers to the presence of rock-cut furniture: beds, cupboards and benches. This demonstrates that during this period the local cave dwellers developed a primitive type of rock-cut furniture to serve their most basic needs. Fsadni's ethnographic surveys revealed that a similar situation occurred among the cave dwellers in later times, practically until the second half of the 20th century (Fsadni 1992: 104-105).

Travelogues are also another important source to study the type and quality of furniture that prevailed in different houses during the period under review. However, our analysis revealed that these had a tendency to be more concerned with the elite houses. For example, the description provided by Ballou reminds the reader of the elegant and fine quality furniture of the Knights' period *palazzi*, several examples of which still survive in local private collections and museums (Ballou 1893: 145-146) (Figures 8.4 and 8.5). Senior (1882: 241) describes a wealthy house in the centre of Valletta which, apart from its garden and various rooms, also included "*three large drawing-rooms, a dining-room, a library, and a study on the first floor.*" This description suggests a typical Knights' period elite house, which in the 19th century was presumably converted into a Victorian-style dwelling.

Shepherd (1926: 49) argues that many of the elite houses of Valletta and Mdina were packed with furniture items: *"they* [the Maltese] *like a congestion of it in every room, the heaviest sort, and a riot of knick-knack*." His description of a drawing room in one of the townhouses of Valletta suggests a late Victorian or an Edwardian setting (Shepherd 1926: 50). The rooms packed with furniture and the lack of movability within them were something which he also experienced in an elite house in Sliema.

One of the few commentators that refer to the interior of a rural house is Angas. The fact that the author mentions only a wooden table suggests that in the 19th century, like previous periods, rural and poor urban houses contained only a few items of furniture, the table perhaps being one of the most common pieces (Angas 1842: 39). The fact that no chairs are mentioned in this extract suggests that in this rural dwelling these could simply have been nonexistent. A similar picture also emerged from our analysis of the local literary sources and notarial records (sections 4.2 and 4.3 above).

This section has used a number of sources to explore the various types of furniture that featured in different houses. The fact that all the local classes featured in this section – from the elite to the cave dwellers – has made our picture of the local house more complete and reliable.

Our analysis revealed that while the elite houses were characterized by functionally-defined rooms, rural and lower class urban dwellings were smaller in size and the rooms were often multifunctional. This affected the type of furniture that was used and also where it was placed within the house. The emergence of wealthy houses with clearly defined spaces from the 17th century onwards meant that the owners could acquire furniture suites that became specifically associated with certain rooms within the house, for example the parlour, the office or library, and the dining room. In the Victorian era, furniture suites were also produced for the drawing room and the smoking room. The situation with the lower class dwellings was completely different. Given the poor financial situation which many peasants and lower class urban labourers had to endure and the small size of their dwellings, furniture was often restricted to what was absolutely necessary and was placed wherever space within the house permitted. Other poor families could not afford to have some of these basic items. For example, during this period it was customary among several poor families to sleep on mattresses on the floor or to eat around a low table in a squatting position. In the cave-dwellings there were apparently no wooden furniture items, as the cave dwellers made rock-hewn furniture to serve their most basic needs.

The quality of the furniture items varied according to the owner's social status. In the wealthy houses the furniture items were generally of a fine workmanship. In the Knights' period locally produced fine quality furniture generally imitated French and Italian models. Given that woodlands in Malta are not common and most of the wood had to be imported, fine quality furniture was an asset that only the well-to-do could afford. As happened in various parts of contemporary Europe before the mid-18th century (Pritchard 1952: 244), the local evidence suggests that furniture was made for known individuals rather than for stock and the casual purchaser. During the Colonial period imported furniture from England and other parts of the British Empire became more common, especially among the well-off. The furniture of the elite houses was

usually made from good quality imported wood. With the Industrial Revolution, mass produced imported furniture became cheaper, therefore reaching a wider section of the local society. However, the furniture of the rural and poor urban houses was of an inferior quality and was usually produced by the house owner himself or was bought second-hand. It was also customary among the lower class to have some furniture items manufactured by a neighbour in exchange for an agreed amount of agricultural products. There was also a tendency for the furniture to pass from one generation to another through inheritance, as the notarial documents indicate.

Another observation made from this analysis concerns the aspect of fashion. It was noted that in the wealthy houses furniture styles changed according to European fashion (mainly Italian, French and English), however in lower class dwellings the situation was different. With their restricted financial situation, peasants and poor labourers could not afford to buy or make expensive furniture items to suit fashion, therefore their simple furniture generally adhered to the vernacular idiom and took a longer time to change. The same was noted with the way architectural styles changed in the Maltese islands during the period under study (section 3.3 above). Until the mid-20th century, furniture was therefore another important indicator of the person's quality of life and social status.

This difference between the social classes was reconciled after the Second World War. A higher level of compulsory education, an improved standard of living, diversity in employment (particularly in tourism and the manufacturing industry), the emancipation of women in the world of work, access to better and more spacious accommodation as well as the demographic mobility that characterized these islands from the fifties of the previous century onwards narrowed down the economic gap between the social classes that featured in earlier periods (section 2.4.2 above). The post-war national censuses show a tendency among the working class to live in better accommodation furnished with the most useful furniture sets, for example a bedroom, a kitchen and a dining room.

Apart from locally produced furniture, the elite houses also included various imported furniture and furnishings. Italy and France seem to have been the major exporting countries, although our historical records refer as well to items imported from Spain, Greece and Holland. Imported furniture from England became more common from the 19th century onwards.

8.3 Costumes and jewellery

The second part of this chapter studies another important aspect related to the Maltese house: the dress code. The sources used in this section encompass the entire period under review and include all social classes.

8.3.1 The attire as a means of value

The notarial records refer to a variety of female attire, such as the shirt, the skirt, the mantle, the cloak, the overcoat and the faldetta, a cape stiffened with whalebone which covered the woman almost completely including her head. There are also references to other items, such as head-dress (for example, kerchiefs and bonnets) and neckwear (Fiorini 2006a: 264-65). Some of these items were intended for outdoors, while others were for indoor use only. For example, while the "*gippone*" (a long garment open in front with wide sleeves) was intended for indoors, the "*cuttetto di panno*" (a type of overall) was an outer garment which possibly covered the person down to the waist (Fiorini 2006a: 265). The faldetta varied both in material and colour. A particular document refers to three ladies' "*gunelle*", one of which was red, the other blue, and the third one turquoise (*Acts* Giacomo Zabbara 30-vii-1487: R494/1(I) f. 110v-12v). Such faldette were usually made of damask (for winter and cold weather) or of lighter and cooler material, such as satin and taffeta (for summer and hot weather). Certain other faldette were made of silk, implying finer quality products. Although this type of garment was worn by all women, its quality, material and colour were a clear indicator of the class of the person wearing it. For example, a lady's faldetta was usually of a fine quality, made from satin or damask and of different colours, while that of a peasant woman was generally black and of a cheap textile material. Figures 8.6 and 8.7 depict two ladies wearing a faldetta, however the quality of this garment and their attire indicate at once that they belong to different social classes. This traditional garment was so popular locally that it attracted the attention of several foreigners, for example Badger (1838: 96), Angas (1842: 36), and Luke (1949: 26). There are historical indications that this traditional costume was originally worn by the ladies, as the artistic evidence suggests, but was emulated by the village women in the Knights' period through the use of cheaper textile materials (Bonavia 2012: 49).

The quality of the textile fabric generally was a determining factor of social class. The attire of the elite was often made from fine imported textiles, like satin, silk and damask, while the peasants and the poor dressed in clothes made from local and cheaper materials, for example wool, linen and hemp. There is historical evidence that the local peasants produced hemp and linen cloth on a household basis to make their own clothes or to sell them at the local market (Epstein 2002: 191; Scicluna 2008: 80). Bobbin lace became popular from the late 16th century onwards particularly for different types of female headgear, but local and imported lace apparel were something that only the wealthy could afford. Cotton clothes were worn by the wealthy and the poor, however the fabric quality determined the price of the garment; for instance, pure cotton clothes sought a better price than those made from mixed fabrics like cotton and fustian (Mazzoui 1972: 263-64). Textiles were often imported from countries like Italy, France, Spain, Holland, Greece and Egypt (Wettinger 1982: 3; Busuttil 2003: 60-68).

Sometimes, notarial records provide us with certain descriptions about these garments. For instance, an interesting example comes from the notarial acts of Paolo Bonello (10-xi-1508: MS 588 f. 53v), which refers to a woman's garment made from Majorcan cloth and to another one intended for mourning ("*gramagliam lugubrem*").

The value of jewellery items, made from gold, silver, pearls or precious stones, cannot be underestimated. The notarial contracts make several references to earrings, necklaces, rings, collars and cameos. While most of these documents limit themselves just to mention these items, others provide some detailed descriptions. For example, a late fifteenth-century contract makes reference to a necklace of pearls with silver buttons ("*hannacam de perulis cum buctonjs de argento*") (*Acts* Giacomo Zabbara 9-vii-1495: R494/1(III) f. 1v). These documents also refer to various types of precious stones, for example emerald, ruby and amethyst. These jewellery items often feature in documents related to the elite or upper middle class, showing that these were hardly ever found among the peasants and the destitute.

8.3.2 The attire from the artist's perspective

Most of our knowledge about the dress code comes from various works-of-art, consisting mainly of portraits, which help us to study how fashion changed through time and how people from different social classes were dressed in.

Favray is perhaps the best artist who provides us with this information. 'Maltese Lady Visting her Lady Friend' clearly demonstrates that the three ladies belong to the nobility (Figure 5.31). They wear the traditional lace wimple, which was popular among the elite ladies in the 17th and 18th centuries, while the visitor lady in the background appears in her elegant black faldetta. They all wear elaborate dresses of fine quality fabric, probably satin or silk. The attire of these ladies is typical of the 18th century, characterized by an elaborate triangular *pettorino* (stomacher) worn over a white chemise with wide sleeves and laced cuffs, and a long and wide skirt. The central figure also wears a pair of high heeled shoes. Regarding jewellery, while the standing lady in the centre wears a gold necklace, a pearl bracelet in each hand and a wedding ring in her right hand, the seated lady next to her wears a bracelet in her right hand. The ladies' hair is well doused with rice powder, a common practice during this period among the elite, unless a wig was worn instead (De Piro 2003: 204).

In another masterpiece, 'Dames de Malte se Faisant Visite', the ladies' garments are similar to those observed in the previous example (Figure 5.32). The importance of this painting lies in the contrast that it creates between the noble ladies and the two other women who appear in the background on the right-hand side: a black servant (or possibly a slave) and a barefoot nanny nursing the child. Apart from the fact that this painting gives a clear idea as to how nobles and servants dressed in a wealthy house, this work also creates a distinction between different social classes within the same dwelling (section 3.5 above). The servants' attire certainly lacks the elegance and finesse by which the outfits of all the other ladies are characterized. These two women are both dressed in simpler clothes typical of the lower class, consisting of a long skirt, a chemise with wide sleeves, and a headscarf. Their humble attire is similar to that of the peasant women depicted in some of the contemporary *Cabrei* of the Order (for example, Volume 290: ff. 37, 58-59, 70), therefore confirming that the information derived from this work is reliable.

In 'Souper à Malte' (Figure 7.4), Favray once again creates a contrast between the central figures, who all belong to the nobility, and the servants confined to the

background, being partially concealed. This is perhaps another proof showing that class separation within the elite house was crucial. The standing figure at the back giving a helping hand to the servants (the one almost at the centre with his back to the seated persons) is possibly the house butler. The seated gentlemen all wear elegant clothes, consisting of a white collared shirt with embroidered cuffs, breeches with long stockings, a vest, a brocade coat and buckled leather shoes. The seated gentleman at the centre is probably a Knight of St. John since he bears the eight-point cross of the Order on his left breast. As in the rest of eighteenth-century Europe, in Malta the white wig was not only in fashion among the ladies, but also formed part of the gentleman's formal attire (De Piro 2003: 204).

'Dr. Giovanni Nicola Muscat' and 'Dr. Salvatore Bernard and his Wife and Son' give us an insight into how members of different professions were usually dressed in during the Knights' period, a common denominator in both being the white wig (Figures 2.15 and 7.10, respectively). The first example is also interesting, because it depicts the best outfits that the local commoners possessed, which they probably used for special occasions, for example when visiting a lawyer or a doctor, for a special family occasion or for the Sunday mass. The two standing male figures in the first painting do not wear a wig, since this was not customary among the commoners. The woman at the edge appears wearing a black faldetta. Dr. Muscat wears a white-collared shirt with jabot, wide sleeves and embroidered cuffs, and a dressing gown or coat of oriental silk. One of the standing gentlemen wears a white shirt and a double-breasted vest, while the other wears a white shirt, a short jacket on his vest, and a red girdle round his waist. In the other work, Dr. Bernard wears a white shirt with jabot and elaborate cuffs, a red vest, and a collarless red jacket. His wife wears an embroidered wimple, which was so popular among the ladies in eighteenth-century Malta.

Other paintings by Favray portray children, giving us an insight into how infants and children were dressed in during the 18th century. An example of this is 'Veneranda Abela with her Grandson' (Figure 8.8). In this painting the little boy is dressed in a female outfit as was customary in those times, even in other parts of continental Europe like France. In 'The Three Generations', Favray portrays a mother, a daughter and a nephew in descending order of age and linear-motion vision. The boy and the two ladies are dressed in eighteenth-century elegant fashion (Figure 8.9).

Figure 8.10 portrays two Maltese ladies in typical nineteenth-century elite attire. When compared to the eighteenth-century works, two important differences can be noted in their dress. Although the nineteenth-century ladies still wear their traditional faldetta, they do not cover their head by a wimple. The hairstyle is also different and is not doused with rice powder. There are also indications that during the 19th century the elegant triangular *pettorino*, which was popular in the previous century among the elite, also went out of fashion. Apart from the traditional faldetta and high heeled shoes, a nineteenth-century lady's outfit generally consisted of a chemise, a corset, a corset cover, a petticoat, a long underskirt, a skirt and a bodice.

Another five portraits provide us with knowledge of the local dress fashion between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. 'A Lady Sitting on an Armchair' by Caruana Dingli depicts a lady in elegant attire typical of the first half of

the 20th century (Figure 8.11). Two other portraits by the same artist, both entitled 'Portrait of a Lady', depict two ladies who, like the previous one, probably both pertain to the local elite (Figures 8.12 and 8.13). One can note here that, although the faldetta was still worn during this period (De Piro 2003: 206) none of the portraits depict any of these ladies in this traditional cape. It seems that, while the faldetta was still popular among the working class people, its popularity by this time had declined among the elite. Figure 8.14, 'Portrait of a Gentleman' by Calì, portrays an elderly gentleman in an elegant Victorian suit. On the table there is a top hat and an open book. The gentleman appears reading a piece of paper, indicating that he was possibly a businessman or else pertained to a particular profession. The other portrait, also by Caruana Dingli, depicts another gentleman in an early twentieth-century outfit (Figure 8.15).

'An Artist's Studio' by Caruana shows the type of attire that lower middle class people were dressed in during the 19th century (Figure 5.38). While the elderly woman in the background and the standing female figure at the centre wear simple garments, the seated lady, who is about to smoke a cigarette, is elegantly dressed in Victorian attire. The gentleman on the right wears a Victorian style shirt and jacket.

The remaining works-of-art included in this section consist of nineteenth-century paintings and lithographs depicting various local peasants, young and old. Village women usually appear in their simple attire, usually made of cotton and consisting of a chemise, a long striped or coloured skirt and an underskirt, a waistcoat, an apron round her waist, and generally with their head covered with a white head kerchief or scarf. Sometimes, the traditional faldetta covered the upper half of the body down to the waist, while occasionally she would leave her head uncovered. Generally, poor women are depicted barefoot, something which was also noted by certain foreigners (Badger 1838: 97) (Figures 8.16). A painting by Caruana Dingli, depicting a young village woman, suggests that in the first half of the 20th century this type of attire was still popular among the rural community (Figure 8.17).

Like the peasant women, nineteenth-century villagers and working class men were easily distinguishable by their typical attire. This usually consisted of a shirt, trousers (or pantaloons with or without long stockings) and drawers, a vest, a girdle round his waist, and a hat or a cap. It was also customary for a villager to carry with him a long woollen bag, hanging down behind and dyed with different colours. Sometimes, the peasant man also wore the traditional *kabozza*, a loosely fitting overcoat reaching the calf or knee and was closed with buttons along the centre front (Bonavia 2012: 6). The villager is depicted either barefoot or else wearing a pair of sandals (Figures 8.18 and 8.19).

It is interesting to note that this peasant attire bears similarity with that of the villagers depicted in certain *Cabrei* (for example, Volume 290: ff. 57-59, 109-10), which demonstrates that in a period of approximately two centuries change in fashion occurred at a faster rate among the elite and upper middle class than that of the villagers and the urban poor. The evidence presented in this section has revealed that while the elite and upper middle class dressed according to fashion, imitating mainly French, Italian and English styles, the peasant's attire remained essentially the same. Our analysis in the preceding chapters has revealed a similar pattern insofar as architectural

styles, domestic space, dining fashions and furniture are concerned (see Chapters 3 and 7 and section 8.2 above).

Until the mid-20th century the dress code distinguished the elite from the peasant and the poor. The attire was, therefore, a symbol of a person's quality of life and social status. This is further testified to by several early twentieth-century photographs which depict people stemming from different social classes. For example, Figure 8.20 shows a group of villagers, clearly identified by their typical peasant attire, while Figure 8.21 depicts a young village woman wearing the faldetta, which was still popular in the villages in the first half of the 20th century, as Figure 8.22 further shows (Bonavia 2012: 49). Figure 8.23 shows a lady in front of her house in Valletta with her children, buying milk from a street vendor. This lady does not wear a faldetta, since by the late 19th/early 20th century century its popularity had probably already declined in the urban centres, particularly among the elite and upper middle class.

The gap which separated the privileged class from the rest of society began to narrow down after the Second World War. Our analysis in Chapter 2 has shown that there were various factors which led to reconciliation between the local social classes (section 2.4.2 above). Chief among these was the demographic mobility that occurred as a result of the Second World War, which brought villagers and town dwellers closer together. The enemy attacks which affected the harbour urban centres in particular led many urban families to escape and find refuge in various villages which were less prone to danger (Cassar 1988: 118-20). After the war several refugee families returned to their homes however others, particularly those whose dwellings were completely destroyed, continued living in the villages. This brought about a blend of cultures which affected the lifestyle of the villagers as well as the way they dressed. Later urban and suburban development and the access to more comfortable accommodation which reached a wider section of the local society continued to narrow this difference between the social classes (section 3.7 above). A higher level of compulsory education especially among the younger generation, more employment opportunties after Malta's industrialization process and an improved road network and public transport led to an improvement in the quality of life of many Maltese. Many farmers and villagers left their fields to find a more stable employment with better pay in the urban centres, while travelling between different parts of the island became easier. In addition, the development of the Maltese islands as a tourist resort, the introduction of television and the influence of returned Maltese migrants on the local society were other reasons which brought the local social classes closer together, at least in a number of aspects, for example diet, attire and lifestyle. Figures 8.24 – 8.26 depict how these changes affected the way common people dressed in the immediate post-war years and in the fifties of the previous century. They show that by this period it was difficult to distinguish between the elite and working class people in the way they dressed. The people who appear in the street in Figure 8.26 probably stem from different walks of life, yet their attire makes it difficult to determine exactly their social class.

8.4 Conclusion

The sources used for this chapter were all instrumental to acquire various snapshots about everyday life in a Maltese house during the period under study, with particular reference to furniture and costumes. Through them it was possible to investigate how the Maltese organized the domestic space of their houses and how they furnished them during the period under study. They also gave us an insight into how the local inhabitants dressed themselves outside and inside the house. This chapter, therefore, also revealed that there is a close relationship between dress code and houses.

The first part of this chapter was concerned with furniture. It analysed the type and quality of the furniture and furnishings that prevailed in different types of local houses. Through the available historical records, it was also possible to study the main commercial links which these islands had with the outside world insofar as the importation of wood and furniture was concerned. Our analysis showed that furniture was often a symbol of status and class. While the privileged class could afford to embellish their *palazzi* and houses with fine quality furniture, whether locally made or imported, often imitating French, Italian and English styles, the villagers and the poor generally limited themselves to what was absolutely necessary. The peasant's furniture usually adhered to the vernacular idiom and was usually produced from cheap quality wood. These investigations revealed that it was customary among several peasant and destitute families to sleep on mattresses on the floor or to eat round a low table in a squatting position. In this section it was also possible to explore the type of furniture that was likely to be found in cave-dwellings, which was probably rock-hewn.

The second part of this chapter focused on local costumes, analysing the type and quality of attire that various people from different social classes were dressed in during the period under review. Historical records also provided knowledge about the trading links Malta had with other countries regarding the importation of textiles. Like furniture, the attire was also a symbol of class and social status, which distinguished the elite from the peasants. The costumes of the privileged class, usually made from fine material, emulated Italian, French and English styles, while the peasants and the poor dressed in simpler clothes, the style of which hardly changed in a period of about two hundred years. Even the traditional faldetta was for a long time a symbol of status, so much so that its type, quality and material were clear indicators of the class of the woman wearing it. The popularity of this traditional garment declined in the first half of the 20th century in the urban settlements, while it remained popular among the folk women. In the villages this garment disappeared completely during the second half of the 20th century. Another symbol of status was the jewellery that a woman used to adorn herself. The notarial records and the works-of-art that were studied made this distinction in social class very clear.

Our analysis revealed that changes in furniture and dress fashion moved at a faster rate among the socially privileged, while changes among the peasants and the urban poor were sporadic and minimal. Apart from the fact that the peasant furniture and attire adhered to the vernacular idiom, it was also customary among the poor to buy second-hand furniture or to inherit clothes and furniture. A similar pattern was also

noted in the previous chapters, which showed that architectural styles, domestic space, diet and dining fashions also changed at a faster rate among the elite than the peasants.

Class distinction, at least insofar as these aspects are concerned, remained evident until practically the mid-20th century. The social and economic changes that characterized these islands in the immediate post-war period and the fifties of the previous century narrowed the gap that had separated the local social classes, particularly the elite and the peasants, for many centuries. While until the mid-20th century these two classes appear to have moved in different directions and were clearly distinguishable from each other, from the second half of the 20th century this distinction became more blurred, at least in aspects like diet, dining fashions and attire.

These dwellings offered a stage for the owners to portray themselves and play out their social roles. This concept of self-projection within a private space is particularly manifested in the sample of paintings analysed in the previous section of this chapter, which clearly show that furniture and dress code were for a long time both indicators of material wealth, class and social status.