

Lino Bianco

Il-Monument tal-Helsien:

Mintoff u l-abbozzi tad-disinji ta' Agius

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The Freedom Monument in Malta is a divisive statement in the recent political history of the island. This bilingual book (Maltese-English)¹ gives a brief overview of the context and the creation process of the monument, giving particular attention to the relationship between Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, who commissioned it, and the sculptor Anton Agius, who realized Mintoff's idea. This publication is authored by Lino Bianco, an architect and civil engineer by profession, and a respected academic and diplomat.² The book is mainly based on an earlier publication by Bianco.³

At first glance, the target of the book is the publication of thirteen different original designs for Malta's Freedom Monument. The Monument was inaugurated in 1979 and is located in Birgu, on the roundabout in front of St Lawrence Church. This monument deserves increased attention this year, on 31 March 2024, as Malta celebrates the 45th anniversary of its Freedom Day. The sketches by Agius, the best-known Maltese sculptor of the 1970s and 1980s, are described in detail and illustrated with a rich photographic material.

However, the publication of the sketches seems to be only a prelude to the author's actual intention. The Freedom Monument has become the symbol of an important turning point in Malta's recent history: it is an ideological symbol of freedom designed by the leading Labor Party member and Prime Minister, Mintoff. It symbolizes Malta's path to military independence and has become a sign of the country's autonomy. For this reason, this publication must not be expected to offer an art historical interpretation of its own – only art historians such as Louis P. Saliba or Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci are quoted as authorities in this field – but serves primarily as a statement in favor of democracy, peace, and freedom. The monument marks the turning point of a political development from an oppressed, externally determined society to a self-determined young nation, which has been reflecting on its own culture and language and striving for an international culture of welcome between other nations and continents ever since. The monument commemorates the historical event of the peaceful withdrawal of the British colonial forces, and freezes the snapshot of the farewell ceremony.

The description of the creation process of the monument shows that, in this case, Agius' own interests in artistic self-realization, i.e., his own ideas, which he expressed in various sketches, were repeatedly rejected by his commissioner. Mintoff himself was a qualified architect and civil engineer. For Mintoff, human nudes, conventional symbols such as the "dove of peace," the "obelisk" as a symbol of strength and stability, the "cogwheel" as a symbol of progress, and the female allegory of freedom waving the flag of the respective country proved undesirable.

1 English title: *The Freedom Monument: Mintoff and the Design Sketches by Agius*.

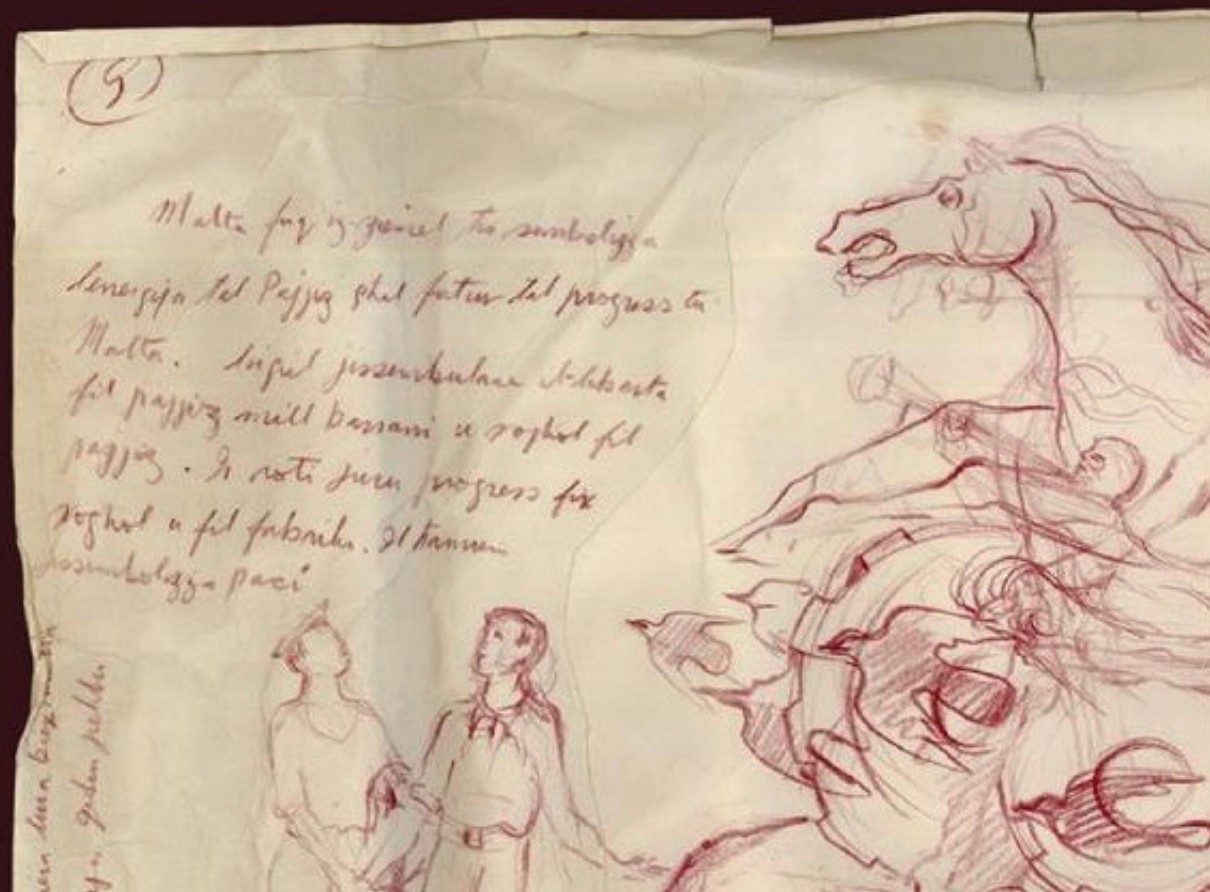
2 Svetlana Oleinic, "Architecture, civil engineering, academia and diplomacy: a comprehensive overview of the work of Lino Bianco," *Journal of Engineering Science* 29(4) (2022): 109–25; Vakhtang Davitaia, "A brief profile of Lino Bianco," *Urbanism. Arhitectură. Construcții* 14(3) (2023): 281–88.

3 Lino Bianco, "Freedom Monument, Malta: Conceptual design sketches and ultimate realisation," *Revista Transilvania* 16(10) (2023): 60–76.

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According to Schembri Bonaci, the final ensemble can be categorized stylistically as Social Realism (N.B., not Socialist Realism)⁴ and mainly consists of four figures of the farewell ceremony cast in bronze: the sailor representing Great Britain shakes hands with a Maltese worker; another laborer is hoisting the Maltese flag, with a Maltese policeman blowing a trumpet in between. The group of figures is located on a man-made stone hill with a rocky path and weathered letters, symbols of hard labor and Malta's painful history. Stones from Dingli and plants from the island shape the roundabout in the sense of a *pars pro toto*: they stand for the landscape of Malta, for the whole archipelago. It was meant to be a monument close to the people.

4 Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, *Anton Agius and Gothic Socialist Realism*. (Qormi: Horizons, 2011), 12.

The author, Bianco, tries to create a neutral picture of the events while avoiding his own judgment and quotes many authorities who gave their testimonies about the circumstances. He uses terms such as “monument,” “symbol,” and “sign” in his account, drawing on definitions from the world of experts. Critical conclusions are not drawn. However, speaking of symbols and signs raises questions and challenges the reader to analyze the content. Readers may wonder, for example, whether this is a successful, easy-to-understand monument that is actually “close to the people,” as Mintoff meant for it to be. The fact is that the local voices quoted by the author are not necessarily happy with the choice of location in a roundabout.⁵ The location of Birgu, as an area of historical importance since the 16th century, is justified by the author in the epilogue.⁶ Yet, couldn't another location in Birgu be chosen instead? After all, one expects visibility and grandeur from a national monument of this importance, which this inaccessible monument does not really have. The author admits that the ensemble of figures in the roundabout could probably not be categorized as a Freedom Monument without explanation and would probably not even be noticed if not indicated: “If not examined, the figures might go unnoticed.”⁷

Furthermore, one wonders what freedom really means when only the authority changes; in a free country, artists are allowed to express themselves freely and create freely, too. However, the Freedom Monument is known to be a commissioned work for which Mintoff clearly gave Agius ideological and political instructions. Whereas previously, the architect was the thinker and designer who had religious or ideological messages chiseled in stone by specialists, from the 17th century onwards, this separation came to an end and culminated in the myth of artistic genius. The genius combined technical skill with intellectual achievement. The artist, as a free spirit, no longer followed any external indoctrination or rules.

The Freedom Monument is intended to represent freedom in an independent Malta, but immediately suppresses one of the important characteristics of free states: artistic freedom. The series of drawings, which could also be interpreted as a series of attempts to make use of one's own artistic freedom, remained only sketches. What was achieved was what the state power and financier decreed. However, Bianco also makes it clear that the ideologized depiction of the farewell scene with sailors' and workers' clothing, which was finally realized, reflected Agius' own political views. Aware of the whole situation, Agius noted:⁸ “Mintoff created that monument and not me. But it is a great honor for me that I was chosen because it is the most beautiful occasion that has happened in the country during my entire life.”⁹ Agius is regarded as a national artist, although more specifically, he could also be seen as a Labor Party artist. The conservative symbols of the sketches had to give way to working boots climbing stony paths. The road to freedom is a hard one and requires many compromises.

In his publication, Bianco has succeeded in descriptively paving the way for a future critical and interpretative examination of the Freedom Monument while providing suitable starting material for future discussions.

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5 Bianco, *Il-Monument tal-Felsien*, 27.

6 *Ibid.*, 32.

7 *Ibid.*, 29f.

8 *Ibid.*, 26.

9 Charles Mizzi, “Tony Agius: L-iskultur li ghex l-istorja ta' Malta f'xogħlu” [Tony Agius: The sculptor who lived the history of Malta through his work], *It-Torċa* (March 14) (2004): 20–21.