

Compare two or three local museums that you have visited

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Year 4
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Introduction

The traditional understanding of a museum is that it is a permanent non-profit institution housing collections of objects of artistic, historic, or scientific interest, conserved and displayed for the edification and enjoyment of the public. The main aim is to collect, preserve, study and interpret this assortment of objects .

I tried to keep this concept in my mind during my visits to two prominent museums in Malta. My choice fell on the Inquisitor's Palace, due to the fact that at the moment it is housing one of the most intriguing collections in the world and the second choice fell on the Museum of Fine Arts due to the debate that I often hear regarding the present situation of this building.

The Inquisitor's Palace

The Inquisitor's Palace is a grim reminder of the days of the Inquisition in Malta. Established in 1562 and abolished by the French in 1798. It is situated at the very heart of Vittoriosa and many described it as "*one of the very few surviving examples of such palaces found in Europe and South America*".

Arriving there resulted to be no hassle at all. The road signs were very clear and I was thankful that parking did not present a problem. As soon as I went in , I was greeted by a pleasant man who offered assistance. I met the Curator Mr. Kenneth Gambin, at the reception area and after paying a fee of Lm1.50 (students fare) I was taken around the museum.

Sixty-two inquisitors resided in this Palace over three centuries. The original *casa* was a Norman building which served as a Court of Justice. In 1574 the first Inquisitor took the building in his hands and the building was extended - until it could appropriately be called a *palazzo*. The Inquisition was abolished by an edict of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798.

As we went through rooms and halls, I have noticed that there were very little signs to direct the visitors along the tour. I asked Mr. Gambin whether there is any thought in the near future to introduce signage to the museum and he assured me that they are being organised.

As we proceeded to the court yard it was hard to think that this was actually the yard where the Inquisitor's prisoners were allowed some fresh air. The shrubs and trees

were young so it must have been fairly bare when the Inquisitors were here. A bell shaped hole was in the middle of the yard which I learnt was used for human excrement – so much for fresh air.

The corridor on the left, with its Gothic arches, led to the yard and the Kitchens located on the ground floor. It's interesting to note that the same kitchen served the Inquisitor and his staff as well as the prisoners hosted in the cells on both levels.

The beautiful staircase was constructed by Inquisitor Francesco Stoppani during his tenure of office between 1731 and 1735. A grand staircase, visible from the entrance of a building, would show a person's or an institution's social standing and Stoppani's staircase sought to embellish the Palace as well as the respect for the office of the Inquisition.

The sundial that I saw was nothing spectacular but it was intriguing. It was inscribed into stone, from a first floor window, by one exemplary prison warden - Neapolitan Francesco Palombo in 1730. The wardens would be required to check on the prisoners twice a day - once in the morning and later in the evening and the prison warden would regulate his duties by the sundial.

After this somewhat rushed tour, I was then allowed to go through the Torture tools exhibition quietly. The artefacts I must say were well exhibited and all had detailed information about them. So much so that my imagination started running wildly and was not at all pleased with the visions I was having. The artefacts were placed in a manner that it seems as if they guided you on where to proceed and so I was able to appreciate the stories behind them better. And although the museum is somewhat like a maze (a characteristic that I find in most museums) it was somewhat easy to go around.

While I was there, there was a group of school children going around. My first reaction was how could they enjoy a museum of this kind – torture and all. But to my amazement, the children were having fun. The museum guide was describing the exhibition in a simple way that depicted the truth whilst at the same time keeping it as “pleasant” as possible, keeping in mind their tender age. To my amazement these 8 - 9 year olds even asked intelligent questions about what they were seeing and I was further convinced then, that if artefacts are properly placed and explained, every one could enjoy them and learn from them.

The building *per se* is in good shape and it somewhat gives the effect that is needed to present that period that it is known for. It is well maintained and even though there are at present works going on, one could barely notice it.

Unfortunately not the same could be said about the Museums of Fine Arts.

The Museums of Fine Arts

I chose to visit this museum on Republic Day when entrance to all museums was free. This was not my first visit to this museum, but it was quite some time ago since I last saw it, so I was hoping that I would see some changes. What a disappointment!

As I walked along Republic Street I checked out for signs but could not see any. This was important because knowing that this museum is situated away from the normal *tourist bubble* I wanted to know whether any tourists who were interested in fine arts could find it. So much so as I turned in South Street I met an old English couple who were asking for directions. Since I was heading that way they walked with me till we arrived there.

The Museum of Fine Arts is seated in one of the finest baroque palaces built by the Knights of St John. It was originally erected in 1571 as the residence of Fra Jean de Soubiran. Its main feature is supposed to be its monumental staircase which is situated between the courtyard and the entrance hall. When one reads about this he expects to see this grandeur in splendour not in the state that it is at the moment.

As I arrived with the tourists I asked the museum guide on whether he could give us a tour and his reply was that today entrance is free. I could not make the connection on why because we did not pay any money to go in, we were not given a tour. So I said goodbye to the old couple and started to tour the museum on my own.

I started from the ground floor and worked my way to the first floor. Being a lover of art myself I was abhorred at the state of the paintings, not to mention their worst enemy – humidity almost in every room.

Most of the paintings were just hanging there with little or no information about them or the artist who painted them. To top it all, plastic pockets the size of an A4 were placed instead of paintings that were taken abroad for an exhibition – adding to the eye sore that exists already in this museum.

I was pleased when I came across two rooms that were painted in blue and green decorated with very soft lighting. In my heart I thought that this is how these beautiful paintings should be treated. Later I learnt that these rooms were painted because a prominent bank gave the museum funds, but were not enough to finish at least that floor if not all the museum. I ask myself, can't the government get its maintenance men, who most of them are sitting idly in a corner in one of its departments and use them to redecorate buildings such as this one? I am sure the expense would be reduced considerably.

Another thing that irked me on my visit was the fact that all rooms were marked with a number but there was nothing indicating what that number was for. When I asked on whether they had a map or some kind of brochure that could guide you along the exhibits the people at the reception area looked at each other and smiled. As if I was so naïve to think that they would have something like that. But hey I was offered the questionnaire!!

As I thought I finished my tour it was brought to my attention that there was a painting exhibition of a local artist, so I decided to see it. As I went down the stairs and came to the courtyard, I was surprised that the paintings were hanging there in open air, around the courtyard. I could not imagine how the artist agreed to put up his exhibition there!

All said and done, even though I was highly disappointed with the state of this museum, I still believe that it has potential to be the place of art that it should be. The building in itself is beautiful even though it is rundown and with the examples of those two rooms which were made up, the museum can be made up to look beautiful. It is a pity that the works of Mattia Preti are not given their due importance, or any other artist for that matter. Unfortunately the only description that I could give to this place is that of a hotchpotch of paintings hanging without any structure or direction.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore I must add that to compete with all the other media today, museums have to use the genuine things that only they possess in order to increase people's appreciation and understanding of the past. They're failing to do this at the moment. Pure example is the Museum of Fine Arts that I just described. It contains some of the world's rarest treasures, yet its labels communicate only the briefest and

most mundane information. How many people shuffling past these painting look at them with any understanding? It would be perfectly possible, to create a whole display that introduced the visitors to the artists's times and life's work, and led them, by degrees, to that painting in particular , so that, when they looked at it, they catch a glimpse of the painter's mental effort as he tried to depict the soul. But as it is, visitors pass on without a second glance at these remarkable achievements of mankind.