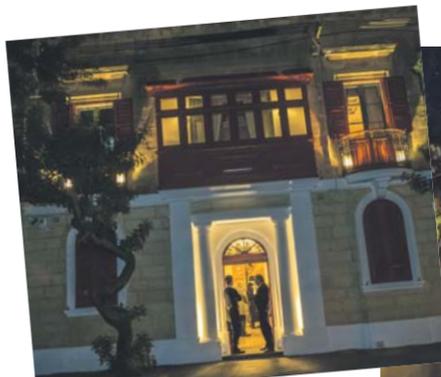


# Lifestyle & Culture



## One man's passion for Wilde unleashed



The façade of No 79 lit up on the evening of the launch



The garden at night - a magical sight



Prof. Gloria Lauri Lucente, Prof. Ian Christie and Mr Spiteri Paris viewing some of the artefacts

Is there anyone, in the English speaking world, who has not heard of Oscar Wilde? He must be one of the most quoted (and quotable) writers in the world of English literature. I have always admired his work and his personality and one of my favourite books is his long letter, *De Profundis*, to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie). Wilde who was known for his wit and flippancy, which he nurtured, writes in it "The supreme vice is shallowness." This brilliant man after his two years in prison was a changed man indeed. Following his bitter experience his tone had changed, profoundly. *De Profundis* must surely be one of the greatest love letters ever written - a long, introspective and often hostile letter in which Wilde's emotional genius is evident.

The Storm Petrel Foundation has organized an exhibition, *Vanities: Collecting Oscar Wilde* featuring the collection of Mr Francis Spiteri Paris, Managing Director of Perry Estate Agents.

There were talks at Villa Bologna over a weekend in early March and I attended the Saturday talks which were preceded by drinks in the gardens of the Villa. A reception was followed by the viewing of the exhibition

The first talk was by Prof. Ian Christie who introduced the 1916 film *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Prof. Christie was followed by Prof Saviour Catania who spoke of 'Lewin's Wildean Undead: Adapting *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I would have loved to attend, too, the talks on the following evening given by Prof. Christie, by the owner of the collection, Mr Francis Spiteri Paris, Prof. Ivan Callus and Dr Maria Frendo, but I was unable to do so.

The Storm Petrel Foundation is a non-profit voluntary organization, set up in 2013, 'to promote art, literature and popular culture by providing a home for private collections that would otherwise remain unseen.' The Board of Trustees is headed by Ms Bernie Mizzi. The other Trustees are Prof. Gloria Lauri-Lucente, Prof. Ivan Callus, Prof. Saviour Catania and Clare Camilleri. The archivist/cu-



Prof. Christie addressing guests at Villa Bologna

ator is Ms Romaine Petrocochino. While Ms Sarah Bianchi is assistant to Ms Mizzi. Says Ms Mizzi: 'There are a number of Maltese individuals who over the years have put together fascinating collections of objects and artefacts, and the Foundation will be playing its part in the safeguarding of these valued pieces.'

The Oscar Wilde exhibition is the first to be held in the traditional Maltese townhouse at 79 Triq San Anton, Attard purchased for the purpose and which has been beautifully renovated and includes a flourishing garden. Good taste and discernment reign from the top to the bottom of this oasis. The two floors have exhibition cabinets painted in storm blue/green/grey with gilt decoration. There is also a small lecture room upstairs. Says Ms Mizzi: 'Facilities at No 79 mean that items can be curated and preserved to the highest professional standards. Acquisitions are organized as distinct units or bequests in acknowledgement of their provenance - making it possible for the Foundation, researchers, as well as the general public, to browse detailed catalogue entries about each individual collection.' In fact Mr Spiteri Paris has prepared a catalogue of his lithograph collection which is soon to be published in book form.

You cannot simply walk into No 79 as visits are by appointment. Since on the evening of the talks I could not stay to see the exhibition I made an appointment and turned up with about eight other enthusi-

asts on another day.

The house and garden are truly worth a visit in their own right. Our guide was Kathleen Vella-who is reading for a Ph.D entitled *Poets who painted or Artists who wrote? Literature and Art in the Victorian Era and in Early Modernism with special reference to the novel and to the work of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf*. Her knowledge of the collection is impressive and her enthusiasm contagious.

We were guided from room to corridor to room; to walls covered in spy prints, *Spy* being the *nom de crayon* of Sir Leslie Ward, the British portrait artist and caricaturist who over four decades painted some 1,325 portraits. There are over 100 lithographs.

Caricatures of Wilde and his contemporaries like George Meredith, John Ruskin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Anthony Trollope, Emile Zola, Mark Twain, Leo Tolstoy and so many other famous personalities are neatly hung on the walls.

On display there are more caricatures by another famous caricaturist Carlo Pellegrini, nicknamed Ape who served as caricaturist for *Vanity Fair* magazine (then a leading journal of London Society) before *Spy*. Caricatures by other artists are also featured.

What inspired Mr Spiteri Paris to start the Oscar Wilde collection way back in 1966 was a trip to London to watch the World Cup. During that stay he went to watch one of Oscar Wilde's plays and one can say that he

fell in love with Wilde's writings.

There are many jewels in this memorabilia: a letter from Robbie Ross, his most faithful friend and in whose arms Oscar Wilde died in Paris and to whom he gave the manuscript of *De Profundis*.

We already know that the actor Stephen Fry, who played Wilde in the 1997 film of the same name, on a visit to Malta, was most impressed with this collection.

There are first and other editions of plays written by Wilde as well as other memorabilia connected with him.

But surely the pièce de résistance is the original key to Oscar Wilde's prison cell. The key, mounted in a wooden presentation box was sold along with a framed statement from Leslie Portch, a former governor of HM Prison Reading, who said the key had been used for all cells in 'C wing' and consequently would have been used to unlock C. 3-3 occupied by Oscar Wilde.

We are so lucky to have this unique piece in Malta.

Wilde's wife, Constance was also a writer of children's stories copies of which can be seen at No 79. A portrait of Lily Langtry, the actress and producer who was one of Wilde's first sweethearts is there as are editions of books by Wilde's mother who wrote under the pseudonym Speranza (she was of Italian descent). His father, an eminent ophthalmologist was also a writer.

A copy of the book *The Green Carnation*, published anony-

mously and which was assumed to have been written by Wilde but which turned out to have been written by one, Robert Hitchen who had quietly observed Oscar Wilde and his lover Lord Alfred Douglas for a whole year. By the time the name of the real writer was revealed it was too late. The book was used in court to condemn Wilde who was sentenced to hard labour for the crime of "gross indecency".

In this collection there is the original copy of a very famous (and witty) letter which Wilde sent to the *Pall Mall Gazette* denying he wrote the book.

Our guide pointed out that in the last verses of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* Wilde, now repentant, was referring to his wife Constance when he wrote the moving words: 'And all men kill the thing they love, By all let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!'

This is merely a taste of what the exhibition holds in store. It is a unique occasion to see this extraordinary collection locally. Wilde may be dead, but his literature lives on, as inspiration and catalyst for successive generations. Go and browse intelligently. Don't miss it!

For enquiries on individual, group visits or events, please contact Romaine Petrocochino at [info@stormpetrelfoundation.org](mailto:info@stormpetrelfoundation.org)