

POWERFUL IMAGES – FROM MALTA, JERUSALEM AND EL SHADDAI WITH LOVE – **ELAINE SULTANA MICALLEF VALENZIA**



El Shaddai and Israel

For many years after immigrating to the United Kingdom from Malta, I was not very actively engaged in art, as I moved around the country with my husband, and was, moreover, busy finishing my MA in Baroque Studies. At first I hoped to work in publishing, as we lived in the Cambridgeshire area, but ended up temping. By the time I joined El Shaddai, I had forgotten publishing, and was doing rather less temping. I was soon drawn into rather more exciting things, just going to El Shaddai healing masses, and eventually flying to Israel with people from my parish in 2013... This was the start of something really tremendous. Barely a year from the pilgrimage, I started drawing cartoons from the Bible, beginning with Christmas cards, progressing to the healing of the Woman with a Haemorrhage, and right through Christ's passions, death and resurrection, Mary's memories of the visitation, right to the birth of Christ and finally, Paul's horrendously eventful journey towards Rome with Luke, Mark, and Aristarchus, ending up as "guests" of the Chief Man of Malta, Publius. In 2015, I showed these drawings to Monsignor Michael Buckley, co-founder of El Shaddai, with whom I was in correspondence and showed him the original drawings, which I had used to promote the website: <https://www.facebook.co.uk/linktoelshaddai>. Monsignor Buckley described the drawings as Powerful Images and simply told me to put them

in a book! The book is all but ready, as I am editing the pictures. I posted one of the newly-edited images, finished only a week ago, on the Society for Catholic Artists website.

Malta and Baroque Studies

My sister Sarah and I were raised in an artistic and art-loving family in the Hospitaller City of Valletta, Malta, growing up surrounded by Baroque buildings, many of them churches, and enclosed by fortifications. Art was a huge part of our background, especially since our mother Wilhelmina Micallef Valenzia was an active painter, though she did not exhibit till her mid-fifties, and mid-seventies. I exhibited with her the first time at the Museum of Fine Arts in 1987. Most of the art that surrounded us was religious art, paintings and sculptures adorning the many churches, and even cornices of buildings. Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John*, arguably the finest and most famous painting, was, infamously stolen by a gang and famously recovered by the courageous Dominican Friar, Father Marius Zerafa, former Director of the Museum of Fine Arts. Eventually, having obtained a BA (Hons) in History, I worked in a government Department, I returned to read for an MA in Baroque Studies. When I completed this in 1999, submitting a dissertation on the *Military and Civil Architecture of Baroque Malta and the Chevalier de Malte Mederico de Blondel des Croisettes*, I was too exhausted to think anyone would want to read it, but I was mistaken, as one architect studying the popular Mederico told me the work was always being "misplaced" (hidden) and asked me where else they might obtain a copy (I had handed a second to the Malta Archives, as Maltese graduates do, and given a copy to a priest in Bedford whom I had asked to bless my work). I had made copies to swap with other colleagues who did brilliant work, and have lately been reading my friend Moira Pisani's *Serve Per Abellire*, a brilliant dissertation on Valletta churches and the architects who designed them.

After that, having recovered from an operation on my womb, I settled into life in "the Shires", living in Little Paxton (or Paxton Parva), often travelling to Cambridge to work at the Cambridge Ethnic Minority Forum, and occasionally painting pictures of the fortifications I had studied. Other times, I might go out somewhere and sketch something in Blackburn town centre, which I took to doing again when I started art courses but mostly setting up the limited Company which I still run with my husband, as we settled into Lancashire.

Powerful Images in My Studio

Ten years after completing my MA in Baroque Studies, I joined El Shaddai, through which I became a happier (if more religious person!) to my husband's surprise, and travelled to the Holy Land. This inclined to doing religious cartoons, whilst at the same time enjoying the world of comics. There are many more connections between religion and comics than many of us might realize: Jesus figures very largely in Marvel Comics, my favourite among all the producers of comics, and the flying heroics of the Sistine Chapel have their echo in the depiction of superheroes. Putting these together makes it easier to understand how artists and even art itself evolves. I began by collecting *The Mighty Thor* (the god of thunder) comic, to progress to drawing Jesus and the Sons of Thunder – Jesus's nickname for James and John.



Comics have come in from the cold: in my twenties, I was regarded as “weird” for drawing them, used in teaching, they are a powerful way to conveying information without too much use of or emphasis on words. I felt this very strongly at the time I started drawing them to promote my Link to El Shaddai page on Facebook at a time when some positivity was badly needed. Monsignor Buckley agreed heartily with this message in my drawings. I wish he were still around to see how much more powerful the images have become after years of courses, study and practice, but I believe he

does see them and smile, as he backed me up when few others, apart from Professor Gorg Mallia, Associate Professor of the Department of Communications at the University of Malta, would! In 2017, I began taking courses at Blackburn College, drawing life models and doing urban sketching under the tutelage of artist Peter Lazell, and attending painting sessions at a designer's studio in Great Harwood. I met Gorg when I was eighteen years old and he was about twenty-one, and was already an accomplished author and illustrator, who had launched a comic in Maltese – which excited me very much – at least, SOMEONE else loved comics in 1980s' Malta.... I first became keen on drawing comics and cartoons generally, after meeting Gorg Mallia who was already very accomplished in this field – and encouraged my work, as he admires the way in which I express my thoughts and beliefs in art. So, inspired by Gorg and encouraged by Monsignor Buckley in 2015 when he told me to put my cartoons into a book, because they were powerful images – I have since written this book, *An Issue of Blood: Adventures in Faith, Healing and Love*, and am now editing the cartoons on Paintshop, uploading them onto my online botteggha <https://www.facebook/linktoelshaddai:comicsforjesus> sharing them onto the older website <https://www.facebook/linktoelshaddai>, which I set up in 2011.



Besides this, I also run <https://www.facebook/helenaanna'sbotteggha> for secular works, such as a sketch of Valletta's beautiful Triton Fountain, and more recently, a portrait of my niece Kristina Cutajar. I experimented in oils as a young girl, a “tweenie” and soon changed to using pencil, graphic artists' pens, and gem markers (felt-tip pens) which I am really happy to use, loving the jewel-bright colours! Recently, I have learned to update my works using Paintshop. As a sixth-form student in Valletta, I was really fortunate to get some training from the famous painter Emvin Cremona, while at home, my Mum Mina would teach me how to view paintings, encouraging me to sketch outdoors when I could. At one time, I wanted to become an illustrator, so in 1984, I signed up for and completed a course in Advanced Illustration with International Correspondence Schools (ICS).

My complete resume' is mostly centred on my university degrees especially the MA in Baroque Studies, inspired by El Shaddai, a Christian movement for inner healing and peace, and by my 2013 pilgrimage to Israel which resulted in my writing a book to launch the powerful images. i hope to make these more powerful yet by completing the editing of these, but have had constant interruptions! I am happy to have joined the Society of Catholic Artists, because I believe that bringing all these religious **images** together will **powerfully** benefit our Church.

Degrees and Written Works

My MA in Baroque Studies from the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta (1999), was preceded by a BA (Hons) in History from the same University. Prior to publishing "Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus – Two Sides to the Reformation" in the Society of Catholic Artists Bulletin (Spring/Summer 2020), I had also produced the following works:

2009

Mederico Blondel: Hospitaller Malta's Citizen Engineer, in ARX: Online Journal of Military Architecture & Fortification Fortress Explorer Society (<https://issuu.com/arkitettura/docs/arx-vol7-2009>)

2002

The Tagliaferro families and the Consulat Russe in Malta, in A Journey Through The Centuries, Historical Discoveries in Russo-Maltese Relations (Elizaveta Zolina et al, Progress Press, Malta, 2002)

1999

UNPUBLISHED

The Military and Civil Architecture of Baroque Malta and the Chevalier de Malte Mederico de Blondel des Croisettes (The International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta.)

1984

The Adventures of Chuck Muddle, cartoon contributed to *Il-Munita (The Coin)*, Mid-Med Bank's Journal (cartoon unfortunately no longer extant.)

When not drawing, I like to spend time with my husband (my biggest fan), our parrot (not that bothered!), and am very vociferous about human rights. Meanwhile I hope to get our Liverpool group (a new branch of SCA) up and running. I also like to practice German and French and hope to travel when the pandemic is over. Amen to that.....