

Freedom Monument, Malta

The Golgotha Metaphor and the Intriguing Concept Design Sketch

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Abstract

Freedom Monument marks Jum il-Ħelsien, the last day when Malta served as a military base for a foreign nation. It was, for Malta's then-Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, a profoundly significant and moving event. As stated by the sculptor Anton Agius, the realised design was Mintoff's creation rather than his. Its location is L-Għolja tal-Ħelsien, which freely translated means Freedom Hill, a man-made hillock located along the Birgu waterfront, just in front of the Parish Church. This church has strong associations with the main previous occupying power, the Military Hospitaller Order of St John. This article 1. addresses the author's proposal that Golgotha is a suitable metaphor through which to read Freedom Hill, and 2. asks whether an atypical concept sketch among the many submitted by Agius could possibly be Mintoff's own design. With respect to the former, it is argued that Freedom Monument is Mintoff's iconic statement about the history of Malta in visual form and, given that his perception that Malta's road to total freedom from foreign rule was strenuous, Golgotha is a fitting metaphor. With respect to the latter question, although there is a change in medium and style, this concept design sketch does recall an earlier one. It is a fine monumental interpretation of the event quite remote from Mintoff's idea of four figures on an artificial mound. Stylistically, the sketch is a mature artistic expression; it is unlikely to have been drawn by Mintoff and more likely to have been created by Agius.

Keywords

Għolja tal-Ħelsien, Freedom Monument, Jum il-Ħelsien, Anton Agius, Dom Mintoff

1 Introduction

Jum il-Ħelsien, which translates to Freedom Day, fell on 31 March 1979, the day when the Maltese archipelago ceased to serve primarily as a military base for foreign powers (Fig. 1). With the advent of the Military Hospitaller Order of St John in 1530, the archipelago essentially became a military base due to its strategic geographical location in the Mediterranean, approximately 90 km south of Sicily, 300 km north of Libya, and 290 km east of Tunisia. Under the Knights' despotic rule, the islands served as a bulwark of Christianity against the Muslims in general and the Ottomans in particular, but the cost paid by the locals was that they were impoverished and forced to fight wars for the foreign powers ruling over Malta—with all the concurrent risks including being killed or taken as slaves. The Order was expelled during the War of the Second Coalition and the archipelago was occupied

by the Revolutionary French in 1798. During their short occupation, the church and the nobility were stripped of their riches and medieval rights and significant civil rights were introduced for the commoners – most significantly that the Maltese were no longer required to fight foreign wars. When the locals rebelled against the French rule, they requested help from Britain. After the capitulation of the French in 1800, the archipelago voluntarily became a British protectorate. Britain failed to evacuate the islands under the terms of the Treaty of Amiens of 1802 and it became a Crown Colony in 1813, a status confirmed by the Treaty of Paris of 1814 and reaffirmed through the Congress of Vienna of 1815. Following the Treaty of Amiens, Menorca permanently returned to Spain in 1802 and thus Malta became the principal Mediterranean base of the Royal Navy (Coad, 2013). Malta's status as a



(a)



(b)

Fig. 1 The Maltese archipelago (a) its location, (b) the habitable islands, position of Fig. 2 is shown in red (Source: Google Earth, 2025)

British fortress-colony remained until its formal independence from Britain in 1964 (Blouet, 2007; Cassar, 2000). During this period, the Maltese also participated in wars for the British Empire and its allies which led to widespread suffering and poverty.

Freedom Monument, located along the waterfront of the city of Birgu just in front of the 17th-century Baroque Collegiate Parish Church (Fig. 2), commemorates Freedom Day. National monuments are places of memory (Till, 2003); they are statements in the politics of memory (Hammond, 2020; Kippstoff, 2007; Mitchell, 2003). The Freedom Monument of Malta is a national monument which recollects the socialist psyche. It can be traced to the early years of Malta's constitutional history, which



(a)



(b)

Fig. 2 Freedom Monument (a) site location map, (b) detail, the site is circled in red (Source: Google Earth, 2025)

included the vision, at this stage still embryonic, of Malta as a republic free from colonial dominion.

Birgu is a maritime city with a history of commercial and naval activities which underwent considerable changes due to the arrival of the Order of St John. Like other localities in Cottonera, namely Isla and Bormla, it was heavily bombed by the Axis air forces during the Second World War due to the neighbouring dockyard facilities and the close proximity of Fort St Angelo, the main naval establishment in Malta. These amenities were first established

by the Order to defend them and their fleet of galleys, and were inherited and consolidated by the Royal Navy which later withdrew completely in 1979.

Dom Mintoff (1916–2012) was an architect and a civil engineer by profession from Bormla, elected prime minister in 1971. He approached the sculptor Anton Agius (1933–2008) – described as a fine artist and a humble man (Xuereb, 2008) – with a request to provide sketches for this monument. A few conceptual design sketches, likely dating to 1977, were produced by Agius. These original sketches and ultimate realisation of this monument were the theme of an article published in Romania in 2023, the 55th anniversary since Malta and Romania established diplomatic relations (Bianco, 2023). It was republished in 2024 – the 45th anniversary of Freedom Day, and the 50th and 60th anniversary since Malta became a republic and independent sovereign state, respectively (Bianco, 2024a).

The 2024 publication is a bilingual monograph, *Il-Monument tal-Helsien: Mintoff u l-abbozzi tad-disinji ta' Agius*, with the drawings and sketches in the original colour and with a higher magnification and resolution (Bianco, 2024a). Given the national significance of this monument, the book was launched on 15 March 2024, a fortnight prior to Freedom Day, under the auspices of the President of Malta (University of Malta, 2024).

2 Lest we forget

At the conclusion of the launch ceremony of *Il-Monument tal-Helsien* at the Presidential Palace, four aspects were highlighted (Bianco, 2024b):

1. what had inspired the publication,
2. to whom it was dedicated,
3. the circumstantial date of Freedom Day in 2024, and,
4. the way forward for Malta.

The publication was inspired by a Symposium on Neutrality held on 9 March 2023. It was organised by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of Malta, in collaboration with the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (University of Malta, 2023). At this symposium, senior officials from these diverse states presented and discussed perspectives on neutrality from the standpoint of their respective countries and how Malta could approach the concept of neutrality in the face of contemporary events unfolding in Europe. Thus, within that context, it was deemed fitting that the monograph

be dedicated to former Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici (1933–2022), also from Bormla, a leading figure who always firmly believed in Malta's quest for freedom and national independence, and in the policy of military neutrality and non-alignment (Bianco, 2023:p. 67).

The 45th anniversary of Freedom Day fell on Easter Sunday as celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church, the main denomination in the Maltese archipelago. Malta's journey to total freedom from foreign rule was not an easy one; it was a mission culminating at the metaphorical summit of the Golgotha. In Oliver Friggieri's cantata *L-Għanja ta' Malta* (Friggieri, 2002:p. 379), the three heroes of Malta – Dun Mikiel Xerri (1737–1799), Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829) and Manwel Dimech (1860–1921) – together sang:

*"Konn' ahna w nibqghu ahna li b'qalb wahda
terraqna fil-mogħdija bla waqfen.*

*Konn' ahna w nibqghu ahna li tellajna
bandiera bajda w hamra kullimkien"*

[We were and we will remain with one heart
we went down the path without stopping.

We were and will remain the ones who hoisted
the white and red flag everywhere].

In the concluding statements from my speech at the book launch, I noted that (Bianco, 2024b):

"Despite their different ideologies and opinions, George Borg Olivier [1911–1980], father of Independent Malta, and Mintoff, founder of the Republic of Malta, both loved and worked for the cause of Malta as a sovereign state. Today Malta is a full member of the European Union. We are part of this Union; we are with them but not theirs."

Acclaimed as Malta's national sculptor by President Emeritus of the Republic of Malta Ugo Mifsud Bonnici (1932–) (Times of Malta, 2005; Fiorentino, 2003; Saliba, 2002:p. 127.; Saliba, 2005:p. 12.), Agius was also entrusted with the design of separate monuments for each of the heroes hailed in Friggieri's cantata (Camilleri, 2019:p. 377–379, 398–399, 490–491).

3 Research objectives

The 2023 publication discusses the drawings with respect to the style of the monument and the tense relationship between Agius and Mintoff. These concept design sketches do not reflect the design of the monument as eventually

executed. Mintoff significantly encroached on the artistic licence of the sculptor. As erected, the monument is the artist's transliteration of Mintoff's idea into sculptural form. In the words of Agius (Mizzi, 2004:p. 21.),

"Nghid li dak il-monument holqu Mintoff u mhux jien. Imma unur kbir għaliġa li ntagħżilt jien għaliex hija l-isbaħ okkażjoni li grat fill-pajjiż kemm ili ħaj."

[Mintoff created that monument and not me. But it is a great honour for me that I was chosen because it is the most beautiful occasion that has happened in the country during my entire life.]

The objectives of this article are twofold: to investigate whether the Golgotha (Fig. 3 (a)) is a suitable metaphor through which to read the realisation of Freedom Monument and whether the disputed concept design sketch in red ink pen (Fig. 4) is Mintoff's handwork.

4 Freedom Monument

4.1 The realised monument

Freedom Monument is positioned on a small mound – a man-made hillock erected by utilising large, hardstone boulders – colloquially known as l-Għolja tal-Helsien, which translated freely means Freedom Hill. The function of such monuments varies in a given public space (Cudny and Appelblad, 2019), ranging from the shaping of the space and associated cultural identities (Johnson, 1995; Johnson, 2002) to offering a place of aesthetic negotiation (Sci, 2009), to demarking spaces of engagement (Stevens and Franck, 2016). L-Għolja tal-Helsien is "a mound, a veritable man-made hill, an elaborate roundabout commemorating a turning point in Malta's modern political history" (Bishop, 2018). However, it failed to win support from the local population, who expressed dissatisfaction with its location and the way in which it clashes with the baroque façade of the nearby church (Baldacchino, 2013; Zahra, 2013). The hillock supports indigenous and alien floral species, both naturalised and cultivated. Mintoff directed Agius to design four life-sized bronze figures at the top of this hillock (Fig. 3 (b)): a group composed of a British sailor in uniform and a Maltese worker wearing a boilersuit and boots (Fig. 3 (c)), and another two figures, signifying separate representations of a Maltese worker in similar working clothes and a uniformed Maltese policeman holding a bugle ready to be used. The attire of the workers recalls blue-collar employees at the Malta Drydocks, officially established in 1963 when Swan Hunter and Wigham Richardson took over from Messrs C. H. Bailey of South



(a)



(b)



(c)

Fig. 3 Freedom Monument as realised (a) the artificial hillock, (b) the four life-sized bronze figures, (c) pair composed of a British sailor and a Maltese worker (Source: Monseigneur, 2024)

Wales (Zammit, 1984); Bailey was entrusted with running the former Admiralty dockyard on 30 March 1959, with the expectation that "the yard would continue to be supplied with naval repair work, which would diminish as commercial activities expanded" (Hampshire, 1975:p. 173). Mintoff specifically instructed Agius which figures to include, together with their arrangement and posture.



Fig. 4 The disputed concept design sketch (Source: author)

The realised design has three specific elements – the hillock, the figures, and the flag – and their respective statements and objectives are included in Table 1. The pathway to the top of the hillock and the vista of the bronze letters

Table 1 Design elements in the realised monument

Elements	Statement	Objectives
Hillock	Natural	Vegetation brings rural into urban landscape.
Figures	Representational	Re-enactment of a scene; the figures are allegorical, each representing a political entity: a sailor shakes hands with a worker whilst the Union Jack is lowered, and another hoists the Maltese flag while the policeman blows a bugle.
Flag	Symbolic	Re-enactment of the scene as per figures.

of a Maltese verse along it – founded and prepared at the Malta Drydocks – were also made on Mintoff's instructions. With respect to the latter, Mintoff had a change of heart; initially he wanted the letters highly polished but later he opted for an acid treatment that removed their lustre and rendered them green (Xuereb, 2017).

In the words of Saliba (Saliba, 2002:p. 94–95.),

"it might appear strange but it is indeed true that the most significant part of the monument is not the group of figures ... but the mass of rock which towers above everything else, rendering everything small by comparison. But it was meant to be that way. The mound, rocky, craggy, filled with pitfalls, with a path winding its way to the top, represents Malta and the innumerable sacrifices and obstacles that the people, led by the Prime Minister, had to make and overcome. Emphasis shifts therefore to the struggle, rather than to the triumph, however important it was. It records the culmination of a sequence of events: 1964, Independence; 1974, the proclamation of the Republic; 1979, the end of the military bases and the start of economic independence. The flame burning at the top symbolises the courage that the Maltese have always shown and the love they cherish for Malta."

4.2 The Golgotha metaphor

In the 1970s Malta was still staunchly Roman Catholic and Mintoff grounded much of his politics in the scripture. He often used the figure of Christ and references to Cain and Abel and the parable of the Good Samaritan to convey his socialist ideology. Mintoff directed Agius to position the bronze figures at the top of the Għolja tal-Ħelsien. I propose here that this hill can be metaphorically read as the Hill of Calvary, otherwise known as Golgotha, the site linked with the biblical narrative of the passion of Christ which culminated in His crucifixion. The Hill of the Calvary was a painful route, the preamble of the triumph over death. As the biblical site was immediately outside Jerusalem's walls, Freedom Monument was erected on the periphery of Birgu – the edge of the city in terms of Lynch's theory of urbanism (Lynch, 1960:p. 62–66.) – the quay used by the colonisers for the past centuries.

According to the Christian faith, through His ultimate, altruistic sacrifice, Christ ensured humanity's salvation. Resurrection is freedom, the final encounter with the past. Mintoff described 31 March 1979 as the day of destiny: "Għalhekk għamilnieh aħna dan l-appuntament mad-des-tin. Għalhekk għalina s-sena 1979, u l-31 ta' Marzu

f'nofsillejl, tkun l-ikbar festa li qatt rat Malta" [That's why we made this appointment with destiny. That's why for us the year 1979, at midnight of 31 March, will be the biggest feast that Malta has ever seen] (Farrugia, 2014:p. 17). For Mintoff, Freedom Day epitomised the realisation of the full sovereignty of Malta and its dependencies (Pirotta, 2014).

Agius originally designed the steps along the path to be easy to climb. Mintoff objected, arguing that "nobody laid easy steps for the Maltese in their acquisition of freedom. The nation had to struggle, suffer and risk" (Xuereb, 2017:p. 16.). Thus, Agius subsequently designed the pathway to be laborious to climb (Xuereb, 2017). This pathway symbolises the way that generations of Maltese once lived as subjects of foreign rule, a situation which – through feudalism, capitalism and colonialism in their repressive and abusive norms – decided their destiny. Their suffering through the ages was their experience of torment. Agius recalled that:

"Mintoff wanted to show suffering and simplicity representing the turning of a previous military base into a republic built on work and peace. He also seems to have wanted to bring to urban Vittoriosa, the first city of the Knights on the island, a piece of the countryside, complete with cactus and palm trees." (Xuereb, 2017:p. 16.)

The top of the hillock, where on 31 March 1979 the Maltese flag was raised after the Union Jack had been lowered, marks the triumph of freedom for present and future generations, born from the pain of being ruled. This fight for freedom is recalled in the verse along the path: "Ghollew lehinom il-feddejja, inghaqdu l-haddiema, batew, tqabdu, hadmu fuq li hadmu u wasal il-jum, rebhet Malta l-helsien" [The redeemers raised their voices, the workers united, they suffered, they worked hard, they worked tirelessly, and the day finally came, Malta won freedom] (Xuereb, 2017).

Golgotha is thus a fitting metaphor to l-Gholja tal-Helsien. Coincidentally, the date and month of Freedom Day coincides with the period of Lent in the liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church, leading to Good Friday and Easter Sunday which, in 2024, fell on 31 March.

One must consider the hillock not as a place, but rather as a passageway. The Golgotha passageway is often used as a metaphor for the toughest path one must undergo. In this sense, the little path ascending the hill to the foot of the statues plays a very significant role within

the monument. The main concepts are therefore 'path' and 'event'. The 'event' is represented by the allegorical sculpture, while the 'path' is actualised every time one wants to climb the monument. 'Nature' and 'human feelings' are real components of the monument, whilst sculpture, stone and flag are symbolic and representational.

5 The disputed concept design sketch

5.1 The odd concept design sketch

The realised design of Freedom Monument is not congruent with Agius's concept design sketches. Referring to an interview five years following its inauguration, Xuereb notes that "prominent in his [Agius's] original design was an allegorical shape of a feminine figure symbolising Malta, carrying the flag, followed by a throng of citizens. The design also included a naval ship and a warplane leaving the island" (Xuereb, 2017). A recurrent theme in the art of Agius is that of nude figures "to symbolise how the people had been liberated from poverty and colonialism" (Xuereb, 2017), a theme which Mintoff vetoed in state monuments.

The conceptual design sketches presented to Mintoff are mainly labelled with materials to be used and numbered consecutively by Agius. All are in caput mortuum colour pencil except two – one in graphite pencil and the other in red ink pen – and most included references to the materials to be utilised in their construction/manufacture. The latter drawing, the topic of this article, was drawn on the overleaf, along the shorter edge of the concept design sheet numbered 5 (approximate size of paper: 21.7 cm × 35.7 cm) by Agius (Fig. 5). As stated elsewhere (Bianco, 2023:p. 63), this numbered concept design sketch – whose dimension stones are in travertine whilst the other elements are in bronze – included:

"Two figures shaking hands stand on an architectural block; the vertical block is erected at the top of the base. The flag of Great Britain has been lowered and hung on the face of the upright block; doves circle around the same block. The Maltese flag is waving on top, where a memorial fire is burning in a metal receptacle. The stele becomes the centrepiece, and the two human figures stand as toy figurines".

The drawing in red ink pen presents a different narrative than the neighbouring concept design sketch 5; it recalls sketch 4 (approximate size of paper: 21.2 cm × 30.7 cm), the most monumental interpretation (Fig. 6) with:

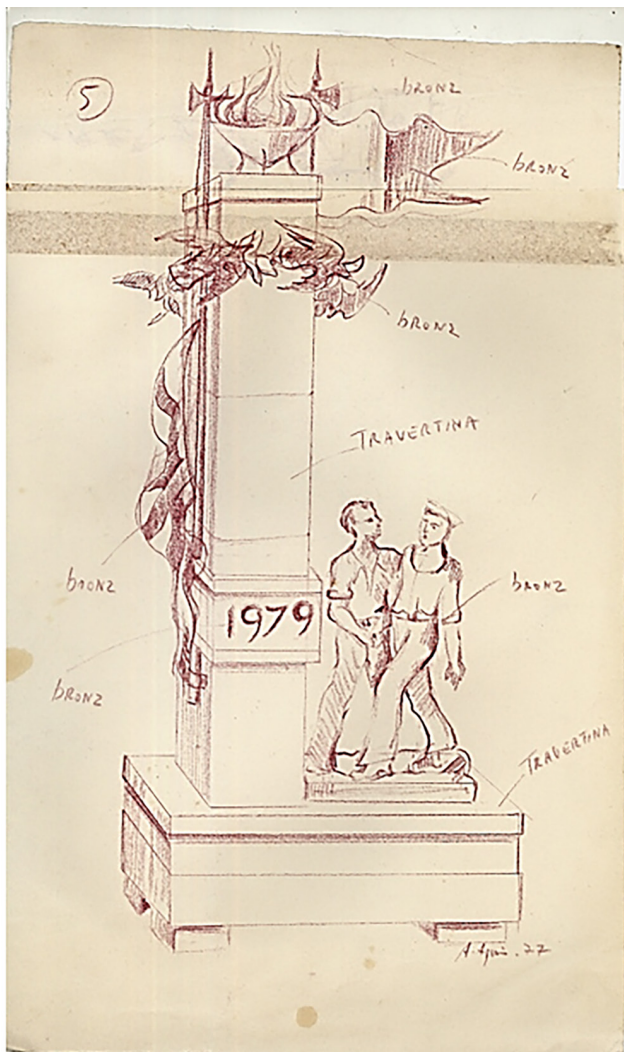


Fig. 5 Sketch on sheet numbered 5 (Source: author)

1. the base in travertine and bronze,
2. the blocks on top of the base in travertine,
3. the year 1979, the mast, the flag and the figures in bronze.

The intriguing sketch depicts four rectangular blocks, each clearly articulated. The lowest block includes a bas-relief recalling a group of people; a smaller one, much lower in height, overlies it. On top of the latter, there is a larger, cube-shaped block bearing a relief and supporting an allegorical figure. At the top is a vertically oriented block supporting a mast on which the country's flag is erected; doves, symbolising peace are attached to the mast.

5.2 Is it a sketch by Mintoff?

Comparing it with the other design sketches, one notices a difference in medium and style in the disputed one, but the interpretation is a monumental one, as in a previous sketch

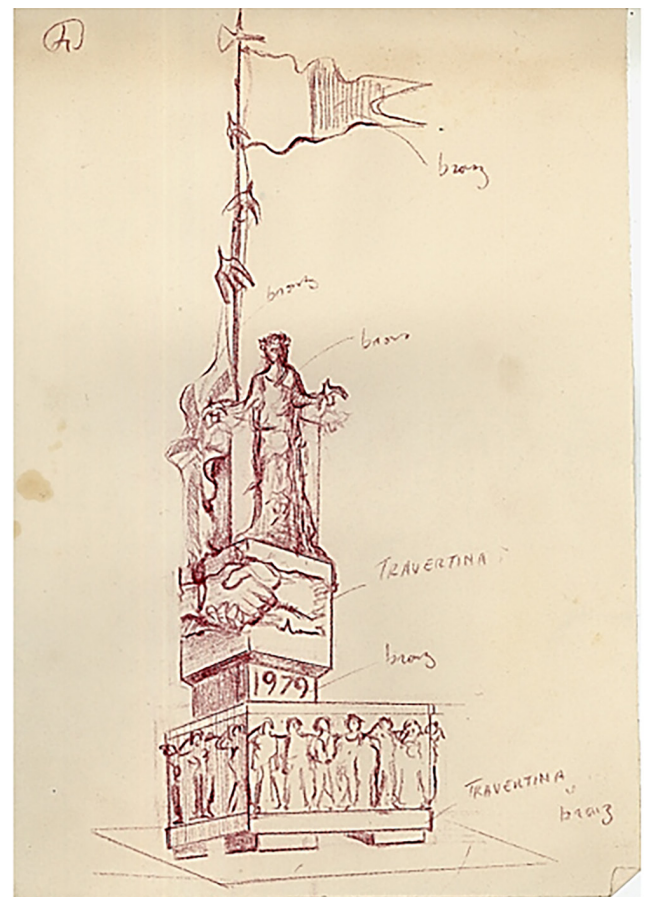


Fig. 6 Concept design sketch on sheet numbered 4 (Source: author)

in the collection. It is remote from Mintoff's realised idea of four figures on an artificial mound, presenting a much less monumental interpretation of the event. The composition, proportions, perspective and detail in labelling the materials – thus communicating the texture of the materials to be used – are indicative of a mature skill in sketching technique. Overall, this design sketch reveals an artist who is proficient in drawing. Although Mintoff held the traditionally local warrant of architect and civil engineer, he was essentially more the latter. Stylistically, the maturity of its artistic expression suggests that this sketch is unlikely to have been drawn by Mintoff, as he was not so versed in sketching. In fact, it is likely a drawing by Agius. Besides his known use of red ink pens for sketching, this sketch can be attributed to Agius on four other counts:

1. consistency,
2. detail and complexity,
3. references, and,
4. feedback.

The respective reasons for each of these values are given in Table 2.

Table 2 Evaluation of the sketch

Value	Reasons
Consistency	There is consistency in quality and style. Although the medium is different from the other sketches by Agius, the proportions and composition are similar.
Detail and complexity	The artist is comfortable with the comprehension of the design concept.
References	References to construction/manufacture materials of the different elements are consistent with the other sketches by Agius.
Feedback	The artist seems to have reverted to a former concept design sketch, namely the sketch on sheet number 4, redrawing it in a different medium.

6 Conclusions

Agius explicitly stated that the executed design of Freedom Monument was not his artistic concept. It was Mintoff's idea, his iconic statement about the history of Malta in sculptural form. It represents Mintoff's understanding of Malta gaining freedom from the foreign dominion that caused past generations to suffer and be exploited. The journey to total freedom from foreign rule was not an easy one; it was a journey towards Golgotha. It is imperative that one does not forget the passion that former generations of Maltese went through: resurrection is freedom.

With respect to the intriguing concept design sketch, it is more likely by Agius than by Mintoff. Besides the use of red ink pens for sketching, this drawing is also consistent with the detail, complexity and references which one finds in other sketches in Agius's collection of conceptual designs for Freedom Monument.

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Author's notes

In a meeting held on 12 December 2024 – in the presence of Joseph Scerri (a former student of Agius and the sculptor of Agius's monument near the Domus Romana, Rabat, Malta), Marie Louise Agius (the widow of Agius) stated that Mintoff gave her husband a hard time. Instead of paying him for the monument, Agius was made to take time off his lessons which he gave in a public school to work on it. Marie Louise was not just Anton's wife but also his muse and 'informal' critic. In the same meeting, she vividly recalled how the late Marius Zerafa OP – at the time curator of the Fine Arts Section of the Museums Department – communicated with Agius to soften the aggressiveness in the body language expressed in the monument to Manwel Dimech; she advised her husband not to affect any changes to the figure of Dimech, as it communicated the message of determination which the artist wanted to convey.

This paper is dedicated to all the former employees of the Malta Drydocks, notably the late John Caruana, former president of the Metal Workers Section of the General Workers' Union.

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