

CHURCH DEVOTION

g that bigger is better. *FIONA VELLA* discovered that the same reasoning prevails
, maintaining a tradition handed down from the time of the Knights, and
n entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.

by Fiona Vella

AN ANCIENT TRADITION

The craft of church model-making had been introduced to our islands by the Knights of St John back in the 16th century, so its knowledge was a distinct tradition. However the adversity of war in the 1940s ravaged even this ancient memory until eventually this craft was almost completely forgotten.

In 1986, this dire situation inspired Raphael, an avid enthusiast of church model-making, to make an effort to revive this craft. Together with his friends Tony Terribile and Paul Piscopo, he started up an association under the name of *Għaqda Dilettanti Mudelli ta' Knejjes* (Church Models Enthusiasts Association) which aimed to instil interest in, and spread the knowhow and craftsmanship of, the art of church model-building. The first president of the association was renowned social historian Guido Lanfranco.

"After 26 years, I am proud to say that now we have our own premises, at 37, East Street, Valletta. Although it is a small place, our 400 members meet regularly and enthusiastically under its humble roof. Members' ages differ greatly, starting from young children of seven and going up to elderly individuals over 90. Together we learn and discuss new ideas of how to enrich this cultural tradition. Each of the members has the opportunity to explore his skills and to enhance them further through interaction with other members and under the guidance of craftsmen and historians who are frequently invited to our premises."

Many members have built their own church models, some of which one can even walk through – a popular model is one by Simon Mercieca which is often open to the public for viewing. Others have opted to produce statues and accessories which are used in the church models. Most of the members succeed in producing marvellous works, sometimes 'scratchbuilt' using common objects and transforming them into intricate decorations which adorn the models.

Each year, during the Lenten period, the association organises an exhibition, both to give members the opportunity



Raphael Micallef – one of the association's founders next to a stone facade model

to share their skill with others and also to attract the public to this old tradition, which one can view as an offshoot of the long-standing devotion to the Catholic faith and the building of its temples all over the islands.

"Our association is deeply cherished by its members. In fact some of them have honoured us by donating us prestigious works which belonged to them or to their families. It's a great privilege for the club to possess a few lucky survivors of pre-war models which managed to make it, as their owners lovingly took them along with them to safer areas, away from the bombing."

WORLD RECORD

Raphael showed me some of these examples, including an elegant limestone church facade which was designed by Manuel Psaila between 1935 and 1940, and a delicate niche produced out of quilling (paper filigree) which dates back to more than 100 years. His calm and serene smile was full of pride as his dream of giving life back to a significant part of our cultural make-up has been fulfilled. In fact the association's work has gone beyond what its members could have ever aspired for, as, in 1994, member Joseph Sciberras won a mention in the →