WORKS OF ART IN THE GOZO CITADEL
AN ART HISTORICAL APPRECIATION*

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The history of painting in Gozo starts with a fragment (0.4 x 0.4 m) of a painting of the face of the Virgin, contained in a silver monstrance among the treasures of the cathedral where it is revered as a precious relic (Fig. 1). A mid-eighteenth century document reports the tradition that the fragment comes from a late sixteenth century copy of an icon credulously thought to have been painted by Luke the Evangelist, that was lost during the siege of 1551.1 The copy, it is maintained, was painted from memory when the Gozitans started returning home after being ransomed from slavery in North Africa. The early modern date suggested by the document seems to be confirmed by the stylistic and technical idiosyncrasies of the fragment. It seems to belong to a school of sixteenth – early seventeenth century native Maltese painting which on Malta produced that early masterpiece of vernacular art known under the title of the Filfla Madonna, currently in the collection of the parish church of Zurrieq. On Gozo the well known Ta' Pinu Madonna, and the altarpiece Assumption of the Virgin, in the vestry of the parish church of Qala, are artistically related, albeit

Fig. 1. Cathedral Church, Gozo. Silver monstrance reliquary with a fragment of a Maltese vernacular school icon of the Virgin.
(Photo credit: Mark Sagona)

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1. NLM, ms 1123, f. 3.
somewhat slightly later paintings. The probability is that we have here the surviving fragment of a painting that was extensively damaged in the tragic siege of the island.

The retable of the old Castello church, now the centerpiece of the Gozo Cathedral Museum, belongs to the early post-1551 period. Painted on gessoed wooden boards, it is composed of three registers; two originally independent triptychs, respectively of the Virgin and Child with Saints Peter and Paul and the Assumption and Annunciation of the Virgin (Fig. 2), and a crowning panel of the Coronation of the Virgin, that may, in fact, have been the central voto of a third triptych. In other words the retable seems to be built of three separate paintings that were presumably painted to serve as altarpieces for three different altars. The work is provincial and stylistically anachronistic. Figures are heavily outlined in black lines that make them look stiff and rigid. Certain mannerisms, particularly in the volets of St. Peter and St. Paul, in the lowest register point to the watered down influence of the Messina School of Antonello. There is, I think, sufficient internal evidence to ascribe the two triptychs to the Master of the Bir Miftuh Altarpiece who painted the oils on panel Trinity with the Virgin and Saints Peter and Paul for the old parish church of Santa Marija ta' Bir Miftuh at Gudja. The panel of the Coronation of the Virgin is by a different and apparently later hand.\(^3\)

In spite of their undisputed naïve charm these paintings seem to indicate a cultural backwater that was largely ignorant of the achievements of High Renaissance and Mannerist art. The sad situation was perhaps the result of the devastating experience of the 1551 siege that left Gozo impoverished and depopulated. The island had known better artistic sophistication in the Late Middle Ages. A limestone relief of two standing saints, in the Gozo Folklore Museum, is a noteworthy example of Siculo-Romanesque sculpture datable from a Maltese art historical perspective to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries.\(^4\) The saints who stand side by side in majestic frontality and stare fixedly at the spectator had their respective names inscribed in a beautiful Roman script but only a couple of letters survive, and this makes it difficult to establish their identity. The relief was allegedly found in the beginning of the twentieth century in the neighbourhood of Xendi Bay where it may have belonged to a church that stood in the district at an unknown period.\(^5\)

Of equal significance are the fourteen badly weathered and defaced tombstones in local limestone, the most important of which are in the Gozo Archaeological Museum.\(^6\) They are decorated with heraldic devices, cross monograms, and miscellaneous ecclesiastical symbols and have an artistic relevance that reveals westernizing refinement. There are similarities with some of the thirteenth century tombstones in the Musée de Cluny in Paris, such as those of Raoul Sarrazin and Guillaume de Vaugrigneuse,\(^7\) but they are difficult to date and remain in fact one of the most fascinating enigmas of Maltese late medieval art. The story told by G.P.F. Agius De Soldanis that they marked the resting place of some of the high ecclesiastics who had accompanied Saint Louis of France on the tragic crusade of 1270 should be dismissed as a modern fabrication.\(^8\)

Also indicative of refined good taste is a gilt copper ciborium with an octagonal cup and pyramidal cover, in the Treasury of the Cathedral (Fig. 3). It is delicately chased with allegorical Eucharistic birds such as the pelican or the phoenix, and shows good craftsmanship. It seems to date to the fifteenth century but the centre of production is unknown. Catalunya or Aragon are possibilities and there is an

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3. Ibid., 86 (Figs. 4 – 6)


6. The others are shared among the Gozo Library, the St. John Bosco Oratory, and the Augustinian Priory.


almost identical vessel in the Museu Episcopal of Vic near Barcellona. The ciborium can perhaps be identified with a chalice, mentioned in the eighteenth century document referred to above, which was reportedly concealed in a safe place to escape being stolen in the 1551 siege.8

The artistic gloom of the beginning of the early modern period was mitigated in the early seventeenth century by the informed patronage of Bishop Baldassare Cagliares (1615 – 1635) whose family had Gozitan connections. The enlightened prelate donated to Gozo two of its most precious paintings. The more important is the *Immaculate Conception with God the Father*, in the Sanctuary of the Virgin, in Qala, which comes from a source close to the great Counter Reformation artist, Federico Barocci of Urbino (c.1535 – 1612).10 The other is the *Flight into Egypt* by the Florentine Filippo Paladini (c.1544 – c.1616) that served as an altarpiece for the chapel of the residence that the bishop built for himself within the walls of the Castello.11 The fact that the chapel was completed around 1620, when the artist was already dead, suggests that the painting could have come from the bishop’s collection. Filippo Paladini was a Late Mannerist artist of notable interest whose work is currently in process of re-evaluation.12 The unfortunate circumstances of his life – he came to Malta as *forzato* on the galleys of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco de Medici – forced him to limit his artistic activity to

9. NL.M. ms 1123, f.3.
10. M. Buhagiar, ‘Painting in Gozo’, 90 (Fig. 4).
11. The painting is first attributed to Filippo Paladini in Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta, *Visitario Alpharan 1755*, f. 476. My attention to this reference was generously drawn by the late F. Daniel Gajewski S.J.

Fig. 4. Cathedral Church, Gozo. Domenico Bruschi. Allegory of the Church. Detail. Oils on canvas. (Photo credit: Mark Segona)
Malta, where he enjoyed the protection of the Knights of St. John, and to Sicily where he profoundly influenced the development of painting in the seventeenth century. His work is as a result little known outside the two islands, which accounts for the fact that his art has not received the acclaim it rightly deserves. The *Flight into Egypt* is an exquisitely delightful work of considerable sophistication that seems to have been painted late in the artist's career after he had taken up residence in Sicily. It is the finest painting in the Gozo Cathedral Museum and deserves to be better displayed.

Not all patronage was equally informed. In 1623 the native nobleman Giovanni Castelletti donated to the family chapel in the Castello church a painting of *St. Catherine of Alexandria* that includes his portrait in the bottom left hand corner. The painting, now in the Cathedral Museum, has a dark background mitigated by a bright halo of light that frames the saint's head and shoulders. This suggests a watered down, and very superficial, influence of Neapolitan tenebrist art. The painting is a provincial work of indifferent artistic merit.

Other works of art reflect new devotional orientations. A wall aedicule in the covered passageway that links the Cathedral Square to the seventeenth century Casa Bondf contains a painting of the Virgin of Sorrows that belongs to the typology of devotional image venerated in Spain under the title of Nuestra Senora de Solidad and presumably reflects Spanish religious influence. The date 1559 carried by the painting is of dubious authenticity and stylistic indications suggest a later work (Fig. 5). The popularity of the cult, which in the seventeenth century was propagated by the Castilian Knights of St. John from their church of St. James the Apostle, in Valletta, is reflected by a second version of the icon painted in 1751 by Francesco Vincenzo Zahra for the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament in the Castello church.

Fig. 6. Cathedral Church, Gozo. Painted and gilt wood reliquary bust of St. Ursula. Sicilian and Neapolitan early 17th century. (Photo credit: Mark Sagona)

Similarly of cultic interest, but more important artistically, is the gessoed, painted and gilt wood bust-length effigy of St. Ursula venerated in the Chapel of Relics in the Castello church (Fig. 6). The statue that encloses a crystal container with a relic of the virgin saint belongs to a typology of bust reliquaries that enjoyed popularity in the Counter Reformation period. Naples and Sicily were alongside Spain important centres of production. The effigy which reached the Castello church in 1614 as a gift of the Governor of Gozo, the Castilian Knight Fra Eugenio Ramirez Maldonato, became the center of a popular cult and St. Ursula came to be venerated as a protectress of Gozo. The tradition that it was originally the figurehead of a galley is improbable.

The Castello church was rebuilt in its present form in 1697–1711 on the designs of Lorenzo Gafà (1639–1703), Malta's most important native born Baroque architect. One of first important works in the new church was the illusionistic oils on canvas painting of a dome at the crossing of the nave and transepts (Fig. 7). This is one of Malta's most impressive quadratura decorations and shows an excellent grasp of perspective geometry in the way the trompe l'oeil architecture is painted to appear an extension of the real space. The work, inaugurated in 1739, reveals a knowledge of Andrea Pozzo's treatise *Prospettiva pictorum et architectura*, published in two volumes in 1693–1700, and possibly also a direct acquaintance with Pozzo's spectacular ceiling fresco in the church of San Ignazio, Rome. The usually well-informed scholar and cognoscente, G.P.F. Agius de Soldanis (1712–1770), writing around the middle of the eighteenth century, attributes the work to Antonio Emmanuele of Messina, about whom nothing was known. He has in fact been the subject of active speculation.

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15. Ibid.
My on-going art historical research has now enabled me to positively identify him with the Sicilian architect and quadratura painter Antonio Pippi whose activity in Malta is described in a nearly contemporary manuscript in the National Library of Malta.\(^{17}\) Antonio Pippi was summoned to Malta in 1733 by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena to decorate in distemper the ceiling of the Manoel Theatre that had been built to the designs of Romano Fortunato Caracacchia (ca. 1668–1738). Pippi’s work, which centered round a large armorial shield of the Grand Master, survived until the turn of the nineteenth century when it was reworked with disastrous results by Anonaci Grech (? – after 1820) and subsequently destroyed. An annotation to the ms describes the work as similar to Nicolò Nasini’s illusionistic ceiling paintings in the corridors of the piano nobile of the Grand Masters’ Palace.

On the Gozo painted dome the author of the ms. has this to say:

His (i.e. Antonio Pippi’s) skill was then manifested in the painting he executed for the collegiate matrice-church of Gozo. The proportions of architectural members, the chromatic qualities, and the height at which the work is displayed are here truly remarkable. Everyone’s admiration was, however, intensified by the fact that a work that displays such a grasp of perspective devices was undertaken almost as a joke (‘l’averla lavorata quasi burlando) and completed in a few days. He (the artist) declared himself satisfied with a fee (ricompensa) of 40 scudi in Maltese money insisting that he had undertaken the work with the only intention of leaving a testimony of his skill (dicendo averla soltanto fatta per impegno della sua valentezza) and that he was not at all interested in any wretched money gains or other presumptuous considerations. His only motivations were his love of beauty (vaghezza) and enthusiasm for art.\(^{18}\)

The fee of 40 scudi that Pippi received for his work was ridiculously low even by the standards of the eighteenth century. The artist presumably wanted to impress in the hope of securing prestigious commissions from the Knights of St. John. In this he does not seem to have been successful, and sadly enough he appears to have been forgotten soon afterwards.\(^{19}\)

The building of the new Castello-church provided other good opportunities for new works of art. One of the first to be commissioned was the large canvas, in the north transept, of Christ Distributing Holy Communion to the Apostles by Giuseppe D’Arena (c. 1633–1719), known as Il Romano. The painting reveals the clear influence of the High Baroque virtuoso Fra Mattia Preti (1613–1699) who took up residence in Malta in 1661. D’Arena was one of the painters who moved in his circle and he knew how to imitate his style and technical idiosyncrasies with considerable success. He was remarkably prolific and was in demand for altar paintings, and other devotional canvases for the many churches of the Maltese Islands, but his work is often inconsistent in quality. He has other paintings in Gozo, notably the two canvases of the Rising of Lazarus, and the Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine, in the collegiate basilica of St. George, but these are of inferior quality. The Christ Distributing Holy Communion is, in spite of certain dryness and some weak drawing, one of his better paintings. It is a work of late maturity, but certainly not his last painting as maintained by G. F. P. Agius De Soldanis.\(^{20}\)

The altarpiece of St. Francis of Paola, in the south aisle, is roughly contemporaneous but of unknown authorship. (Fig. 8). The traditional attribution to D’Arena creates problems and should probably be dismissed. Certain mannerisms seem, on the other hand, to point in the direction of Stefano Erardi (1630–1716) but they are insufficient to support an attribution. Stefano Erardi was Malta’s most important native-born painter in the period between the second half of the

17. NLM Ms. 1123, f. 67.

18. Ibid.


seventeenth century and the first two decades of the eighteenth. The Castello has a good example of his work in the canvas of **SS. Zita and James** in the Cathedral Museum. This painting was, allegedly, originally in the church of the Franciscan Minor Conventuals, at Rabat.  

The two pendant canvases of *St. Publius* and *St. Agatha*, also in the Cathedral Museum, belonged on the other hand to the Castello church where they remained until the late nineteenth century. Stylistic considerations suggest that they are the product of different hands. The *St. Publius* points to Enrico Reginau (1682–1764) while the *St. Agatha* seems to be the work of Gian Nicola Buhagiar (1698–1752). Reginau was a prolific artist, but in spite of his very substantial output he is a still largely unstudied. His paintings are often marked by artistic and technical inconsistencies and he hardly ever rose above mediocrity. Gian Nicola Buhagiar (1698–1752) was a better artist. His paintings are however once again inconsistent in quality. His canvases are generally satisfactorily composed and technically sound but they are often overcrowded and marked by a sense of *horror vacui*. Together with his younger contemporary, Francesco Vincenzo Zahra (1710–1773), Buhagiar was the most important exponent of a provincial Maltese School of Late Baroque painting. Zahra was however the more accomplished artist, and in his best works he managed to achieve a degree of greatness. The *St. Liborius* in the Cathedral Museum is one of his characteristic devotional canvases.

In 1791 the Castello church acquired a new titular painting. This was the large canvas of the **Assumption of the Virgin** by Michele Busuttil (c. 1750–1828), a painter who was to forge intimate links with Gozo where he married and where his family eventually settled down. Busuttil had his artistic roots in the Late Baroque tradition of Gian Nicola Buhagiar and Francesco Zahra. As a young man he had shown precocious talent and was awarded a bursary to further his studies in Rome at the Accademia di San Luca where he distinguished himself and won prestigious competitions. On his return to Malta he was appointed Professor of Design at the University where a Faculty of Design was set up after that Institution was refounded by the British Protectorate in 1800. The promise that he had shown in his formative years remained sadly unfulfilled, and his paintings are often disappointing and marked by weak drawing and a sterile imagination. The **Assumption of the Virgin**, was his first important commission and he obviously went out of his way to impress. It remains his most lasting achievement. It has several good qualities particularly in the lower half of the canvas where the Apostles form an agitated ring around the empty tomb. The doll-like Virgin in the upper half is however both insipid and awkwardly posed. The only mitigating element here is the large, elegant angel who assists the Virgin in her heaven-bound journey.

Busuttil also painted the companion canvases of the **Nativity of the Virgin** and the **Immaculate Conception** in the choir of the church. They are similarly impressively large, but their present poor condition does not permit a sound critical judgment. The altarpiece of the **Flight into Egypt**, on the altar of St Joseph, in the north aisle, is also his work (Fig. 9). The interest of this canvas does not lie in any intrinsic artistic merit, but rather in the fact that it is the last known faithful copy in Malta of an important original by Alessandro Turchi (1578–1649), known as *L'Orbetto*, of Verona. The painting, now in the Manchester City Art Gallery, was at the time an altarpiece in the Dominican church of the Virgin of Porto Salvo in Valletta where it is first recorded in 1635. Busuttil was one of Malta's great paintings in the time of the Knights of St John and he exerted notable influence on Maltese painting, as shown by several copies after it scattered in many churches and collections. In addition to Michele Busuttil's copy there is an earlier, and equally important, version by Stefano Erardi, in the collegiate church of St. Laurence at Vittoriosa. Turchi's painting left Malta in 1815 when the then Vicar Provincial of the Dominican Order, Fr. F. Vincenzo Portelli, sold it to a certain Mr. Robinson, an English merchant, for the sum of 1000 Maltese scudi that were spent on a bell for the newly reconstructed Porto Salvo church. It was rumoured that Mr. Robinson sold the painting in London at an enormous profit that amounted to around forty times what he had paid for it in Malta.  

The Castello church became the Cathedral when the island was created a separate diocese from Malta in 1864. A white, Carrara-marble, portrait bust of Pope Pius IX, by the Roman sculptor Mario Gori, commemorates the event (Fig. 10). The monument is distinguished by an academic discipline that was one of the hallmarks of the Accademia di San Luca in the nineteenth century. This was Gori's first Maltese commission and it was soon followed by others that included the monument to Bishop Publio de Conti Sant in Mdina Cathedral.  

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21. Information generously supplied by Mr. Mark Sagona.  
the Cathedral Museum. He also painted the four Old Testament prefigurations of the Virgin, on the pendentives of the trompe l'œil dome, which impress by their classical unperturbed majesty. It is sad that his other paintings in the vault of the church have been destroyed.

The academic and Purist sensibilities of the paintings of Ignazio Cortis and the sculpture of Mario Gori were buttressed by the Nazarene preoccupations of Giuseppe Hzyler (1787–1858) who exercised a conditioning influence on the visual arts in Malta during most of the nineteenth century. The Nazarene ideal that Hzyler propagated with a missionary zeal, was the regeneration of Christian art by the elimination of all hints of Baroque theatricality and a return to the iconography and visual purity of the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. Perugino, the young Raphael and Dürer were the great heroes of the movement. Hzyler’s masterpiece is the altarpiece of St. Ignatius of Loyola with the Virgin of Manresa, in the chapel of the Jesuit retreat house on the outskirts of Rabat, on Gozo. In 1847 he painted a bozzetto, now in a private collection in Rabat, Malta, for an altar painting of St. Ursula Extending her Protection to Gozo, for the south aisle of the Castello church. The painting which was ready and put in place on 14th August 1851, was however largely executed by Hzyler’s faithful assistant Giuseppe Calleja (1828–1915).

Tommaso Madiona (1803–1864) was by artistic formation a Purist. Between 1825–1832 he studied and worked in Rome where he moved in the circle of Tommaso Minardi but, like Michele Busuttil, the promise he showed in his formative years remained unfulfilled. The altarpiece of St. Philip Neri that he painted for the north aisle of Castello church in 1852, is one of his most disappointing works.

has an unpleasant dryness and rigidity, and one has to dismiss it as a mediocre work. The two pedants of St Publilus and St Agatha, that flank the high altarpiece in the choir, and replace the two canvases of the same subject discussed supra, are of better quality.\textsuperscript{26}

One final significant artist involved in the decoration of the Castello church in the late nineteenth century was the Italian Domenico Bruschi (1840 – 1910). Without ever visiting Malta, Bruschi had an important impact on Maltese art and his paintings with their hint of Symbolist and Stile Liberty sensibilities introduced a breath of fresh air. His standing in the Roman Accademia brought him into contact with Maltese artists studying in the Eternal City, and he received important commissions from Maltese patrons. For the Castello church he painted in the 1870s a large ceiling canvas, with an \textit{ Allegory of the Church}, for the main sacristy. This is the most important Stile Liberty painting in a public place in the Maltese Islands and it is a pity that it has been so heavily retouched. The fact that Bruschi painted it in Rome without a proper knowledge of the hall resulted in a handicap that interferes with the impact it was meant to produce. In spite of this it remains an impressive work that deserves to be better known and appreciated.

A discussion of the works of art in the Gozo Castello does not, naturally, come to a close with the end of the nineteenth century. The works that were added in the course of the twentieth century are however of inferior quality and generally lacking in art historical interest.

\textsuperscript{26} E. Fiorentino, \textit{The School of Tommaso Minardi as Reflected in Nineteenth Century Painting in the Maltese Islands}, unpublished M.Phil dissertation presented in the Art Unit, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 1998, 248–266.