Identification of the Bozzetto of Saint Paul's Statue Enshrined in Valletta

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The Statue of St. Paul which is firmly believed to be the work of our great sculptor Melchior Gafl was carved in wood in Rome, in the 17th century, a fact registered both by foreign and local historians. It is now enshrined in St. Paul's church in Valletta.

The sculptor was born in Vittoriosa, in 1636, and died in Rome, in 1667, aged 31 years, leaving behind him a good number of important works in proportion to his short career. His best works were made in Rome between 1658 and his tragic death, but by now he had already reached a high reputation and the esteem of his own well known master, Ercole Ferrata, and of other contemporary artists including Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the leading exponent of the Roman Baroque art. His name, in fact, has been included in prestigious art dictionaries including the well known Bénézit, while his life and works have interested many art historians and critics since the 18th century up to the present.

His works, chiefly consisting of bozzettos are to be found in many art collections round the world while finished statuary mostly carved in marble and bronze are treasured in various churches of Rome, Malta and other places. But let us dwell on St. Paul’s bozzetto. It appears to have been the first important work produced soon after the artist’s arrival in Rome about the beginning of 1658, but the commission of work might have been given in the previous year. It is therefore thought that the finished statue might have reached Malta not before 1659. It certainly was Gafl’s first big work showing a full size figure, a little over the natural size, complete with a highly decorated pedestal. On account of being intended to be carried in procession, it was carved in wood. Similar material was used in the case of a statue of Our Lady of the Rosary that was to be used in procession by the Dominican Friars, in Rabat. However it is to be noted that Gafl’s major works in Rome and other cities were executed in marble and bronze. His beautiful marble statue of Saint Rose, being perhaps his last work, is now to be highly admired in a Dominican church in far away Lima.

The first Maltese historian mentioning Gafl and his works was Count G.A. Ciantar, in 1780, but unfortunately he did not bother to give correct dates or other

1. Filippo Baldinucci, Notizie dei Professioni di Disegno, Firenze, (1728); Lione Pascoli, Vita dei Pittori, etc. (1730); Vincenzo Bonifazio, “La Chiesa di San Giovanni”, La Diocesi di Malta (1934); H.P. Scicluna, St. John’s Church, Rome (1955).
useful information. It also happened that later local writers copied him blindly; consequently we had to wait up to the present in order to have a fairly good account of the life and works of our great sculptor.

One of the present-day researchers, Fr John Azzopardi, recently unearthed in the Mdina Cathedral archives important notes, among them one made in 1680, that is 23 years after Gafà's death, saying that St Paul's statue was made in Rome to the order of Paolo Testaferrata who paid more than 300 scudi for the work; but it spoke nothing of the sculptor and the date when it was made. Although tradition among old writers fixed the date to 1657, Fr Azzopardi discovered that Gafà was still in Malta in May of 1658. In any event, the statue could not have reached Valletta before 1659.

The story of the statue is quite curious as it remained in Paul Testaferrata's home for several years before being donated to St Paul's church. Jos. Galea, in his history of the said church tells us that it was in February, 1690, that the statue was carried in procession for the first time. This has been repeated by another researcher, Michael Galea, who added that the donor was the Baron of Gomerino, Paolo Testaferrata. Lately, Jos. Borg gave more details but they could not fit the case and he soon replaced the Baron by the Noble Paschal Scierras-Testaferrata, born in 1731 who died after 1777; this gentleman was likelier to be the donor because he might have been among the heirs of the old Paolo who originally ordered the statue. At this stage I contacted the present Archpriest of Valletta church, Fr Ant. Galea, who assured me that the archives of his church contain no documentary evidence re St Paul's statue. However, a persistent popular tradition in Valletta asserts that the statue was presented to the church by the brothers of the Testaferrata family with the condition that four men would accompany the statue with decorated torches in hand during the church procession. We are happy to say that this provision is still being observed, and that the church still possesses four festive torches decorated with the gentle arms of Bishop Astirias (1669-1678), who is thought to have arranged the donation.

Was Gafà's Name Melchior or Marcello?

After the long story of the statue's origin, we are faced again with a complicated problem about the true name of our sculptor who was popularly called Melchior while his name is found to be Marcello in the Baptismal Register of Vittoriosa, his real birthplace. Incidentally, some writers held him to hail from Zejtun, while others said that he came from Lija, but a sound tradition in the Cotonera district indicated Vittoriosa as his probable birthplace. Eventually, on investigating the church registers of this city I found various families bearing the name Gafà but none contained the name Melchior. However I noticed that only the family of Marco Gafà fitted the circumstances of the traditional time of Melchior's known works. The register indicated Marco and his wife Veronica, while their children's names were: Joseph (without date); Gionmaria, 1631; Marcello, 1634; Marcello, 1636; and Lorenzo, 1639. There was not the avidly expected name, Melchior. However on looking again at the list it appeared to me that it was very unusual to find two sons of the same name in one household and therefore I suspected that the second Marcello was a mistaken form of Melchior. On further consideration I found out that both names of Marcello and Melchior were twisted into Marcolì among the people of Vittoriosa; consequently confusion arose in the Baptismal registers. This assumption found favourable confirmation in the Status Anonimus of the same church of Vittoriosa dated May, 1658, wherein the Gafà family consisted of Marco, aged 65, his wife, Veronica, 63, and their children: Grazio, 33, Giomaria, 28, Melchior, 20, and Lorenzo, 18. And so the problem was solved because the second Marcello in swaddling clothes was no other than the grown up Melchior.

It is a pity to note the inaccuracy of our local writers even in registering names and facts of prominent people such as was the case of our great Melchior. It is therefore not surprising to find mistakes in the works of foreign writers. In a recent study about graphics published in July, 1984, by Sansoni Editori of Florence, there is among other drawings a self portrait by Gafà which is certainly of great importance for us. It is accompanied by a plaque saying: "Melchior Gaffa Melitensis, pictor, sculptor et architectus, natus anno Domini MDCLXXXVIII". The faulty dates were probably made by the engraver of the print which is now being preserved at the National Museum of Stockholm.

The Bozzetto of St Paul's Statue

The local daily, The Times, of the 31st of March, 1984, reported the acquisition of Gafà's bozzetto of St Paul's statue by the National Museum, but it gave no information re the place it came from or who made the identification of such an important object. I here I would like to tell the whole story because it was I who found it and made the identification in 1950. Very naturally, it took me a considerably long time to arrive at a decision about its authenticity; it was a difficult enterprise owing to the existence of hundreds of small statues reproducing the finished statue; these were mostly cast in plaster, wax or made in paper mache, and were treasured in the homes of St Paul's devotees especially in Valletta and Rabat where there are fine churches bearing the Saint's name.

The difficulty deepened as a number of owners claimed to have the real bozzettos which were in the family for hundreds of years, but, on attentive observation I could see that all they had were copies of the Saint's finished statue. On the other hand, I noticed that my bozzetto showed better modelling and life, including a few variations from the Valletta statue; these were sure signs of alterations made on second thoughts by the sculptor. Another important quality in my bozzetto is in its material; in fact, it is made in terracotta - baked clay - precisely in the same manner generally used by Gafà and his contemporary Roman sculptors. In order to be sure of this fact I went to Rome in 1931, and saw various bozzettos including one...
of the Baptism of Christ which Gaò had prepared for the group to fill up the apse of St John's church in Valletta. I also examined part of the Baptism bozzetto and other works we treasure in our National Museum all of which are held to be genuine works by our Gaò. By now I was quite certain about the genuineness of my bozzetto, but my inquisitive mind suggested me to go on with finding the reason for the variations between bozzetto and the finished statue. First of all, the Apostle's figure appears a bit taller in the bozzetto than in the statue; its face in the bozzetto is turned a little to the left side while it looks straight at the spectators in the statue. However in both works the posture of the body is the same. A clear difference is in the position of the vicer which in the statue is seen springing out of a small fire by the side of the Apostle's right foot while in the case of the bozzetto the animal lies flat on the ground by the side of the Saint's left foot. Here one has to note that our old sculptors used to show the vicer crawling on the ground in the representation of the Apostle's shipwreck, one example is the old big statue in the historical cemetery annexed with St Paul's church at Rabat.

Another notable variation is in the decoration of the pedestals, that of the bozzetto showing among other baroque ornamentations the arms of the Testaferrata family who obviously paid for the work, but in the pedestal of the finished statue the arms display the symbols of the Sceberras-Testaferrata families who very obviously happened to be the heirs of Paolo Testaferrata. According to a constant tradition in Valletta the statue was donated to the church by Paolo's heirs, but the present Archpriest of the Valletta church, Fr. Ant. Galea said that his church archives contain no documentary evidence of the statue or its donation. In the circumstances, it seems probable that the donation was made in the time of the Bishopric of Monsignor Astirias (1669-1678); in fact the Saint's church preserves four torches decorated with the Bishop's arms which are usually carried by four men round the statue during the Saint's festive procession. This provision is said to have originated from the Bishop himself.

St. Paul's pedestal which might probably be the only one ever produced by our sculptor has a square plan having a corpulent winged boy - Puttino - on each corner and other fine carvings. The bozzetto is made up of two separate parts, the Apostle's figure 45 cm. high, and the pedestal which is 25 cm. It should be added that the right hand of the Saint is missing. So I found it, and so I have left it; but in spite of the damage, it still has its high artistic qualities. The first time it was shown to the public was during the Saint's festive procession. This provision is said to have originated from the Bishop himself.

As recently as 1975, Daniela Jemma, a keen Italian student, came to Malta and took Gaò and his Works as subject for her doctoral thesis at Rome University. She did so after going round the world to see all known works by our great sculptor. In Malta she saw his statues in our churches and a number of bozzettos in the National Museum, and she also asked to examine my bozzetto of St Paul which she knew from the catalogue of the Pauline Exhibition of 1960. She was so pleased with it that she took various photographs from different angles and published four of them together with a complete description in her Tesi di Laurea in Rome, 1976. She also asked to have it for a good price but I hated the idea to let a work of such national importance go out of the Island. There were also good offers coming from local art collectors but even these were turned down because I preferred to sell it at a nominal price to our National Museum where the Maltese people and myself could see it whenever we like. Fr. Marius Zerafa, the Director of the Museum, was of the same opinion and did his best to make the deal with the financial help of the Captain O.F. Gollcher Foundation.

A Few Other Works by Gaò

After finding out the truth about the genuineness of Gaò's bozzetto of St Paul's Statue I thought that there would be found other works by the sculptor in Malta, and this belief has been manifested also in many instances in the writings of older Maltese historians, who advanced various attributions. Among these authors were Achille Ferris, and P.P. Castagna, both mentioning a few possibilities and a greater number of refutable works. However one has to be cautious because there are various considerations worthy of being seriously taken. As everybody would know, Melchior's younger brother, Lorenzo, was another notable artist who took architecture as his principal occupation but he also practiced sculpture in the Roman Baroque manner. The story of Melchior has been more or less given along with the study made about St Paul's bozzetto; here one need only add that he specialised in creating a great number of bozzettos for his great project of works many of which he left unfinished and consequently had to be completed by others among whom his own master, Ercole Ferrata.

It is thought that soon after the tragic death of Melchior, in 1667, Lorenzo went to Rome for the purpose of collecting his brother's chattels and other possessions which naturally included drawings and bozzettos that eventually were brought to Malta as souvenirs for the family. Eventually, Melchior's devoted pupil, Giuseppe Mazzuoli, finished the group of the Baptism which his master had left unfinished, and this has naturally been fairly executed on the late Master's models which the knights preserved for about thirty years. Now Lorenzo, who outlived Melchior by many years, took an active part including great responsibility in the finishing touches and the transport and fixing of this huge marble group in St John's church of Valletta in 1704, which incidentally coincided with Lorenzo's death. His participation in the final phase of the work of the group was his supervision before the work left Rome.10

The story of the Gaia brothers has yet to be scientifically written; there are many traditions among the people who very rightly are still proud of their works and also anxious to know more about them.

I was particularly interested in Melchior's works since my first artistic studies including modelling in clay in the evening art classes in the Tarxien School, but I preferred to become a painter; colour fascinated me more than anything else. However the general history of art opened for me the door to the art of restoration and connoisseurship.

It is thought that among the bozzettos returned to Malta were two figures, St Peter and St Paul, which Melchior had prepared and included in one of the three bozzettos for St John's church, but which was not approved by the knights. Eventually, tradition says that Lorenzo made use of them and cast them in bronze for the decoration of the main door of the Mdina Cathedral according to his own design. Among other possible works which came from Melchior's hands is the model of Grand Master N. Cottoner's portrait that was later cast in bronze for the Grand Master's Memorial in St John's church. The memorial seems to be the product of two or more hands, while the bronze bust reflects pure Roman Baroque art. It was quite possible that the model had been made by Melchior during the visit he paid to Malta while preparing the bozzetto of the Baptism group, in 1666. Yet we found no documentary evidence to back the said attributions. However, I believe that a serious connoisseur could back some attributions, which appeared in the works of Ferris and Castagna.

I have another daring attribution to make, that is with regard to the big wooden Crucifix venerated in the parish church of Tarxien since the very lifetime of Melchior. It is a masterpiece which has been neglected for centuries but I could not hide my admiration for this marvellous piece of woodcarving of the Baroque period, and finally I felt in conscience bound to draw the people's attention to it. In fact, I took the occasion to include the Crucifix in my review of the works of art existing in Tarxien parish church as an appendix to a scientifically written history about the village church by Prof. Mgr. Vincenzo Borg, in 1973. Among other things, I said: The best piece of sculpture we can see in the church is the 17th century crucifix carved in wood over the altar of the Sacramental chapel, a work which I dare to attribute to Melchior Gaia, our greatest sculptor. The work deserves to be better preserved in our National Museum because it displays a fine example of the Roman Baroque art. Evidently this statement surprised many art lovers, but there followed only one who showed dissatisfaction and said that I have not backed my attribution with documentary evidence. I simply replied that I could not do so because no such evidence was found, and that this fact was not a valid reason why an attribution could not be accepted if it is not being contradicted on its stylistic ground and period.

In fact, I hold that Christ's statue displays a marvellous anatomy of perfect proportions and the lively arrangement of the hair and beard as well as the broad folds of drapery round the loins all of which indicate a Berninian influence probably taken from the St Longinus statue in the Vatican. And Gaia certainly had this influence in his works. We also learn from Prof. Mgr. V. Borg's description of the Tarxien church that the Crucifix existed as the property of the confraternity of The Agony the origin of which was in 1651, that is contemporary with Melchior's own life time, (1636 - 1667). The confraternity was annexed to the high altar, and therefore the crucifix stood as its altarpiece up to the time when the confraternity obtained a proper altar in a side chapel, in 1723, but at this stage this chapel was embellished with a new painting showing the Crucifixion incorporating Our Lady, St John and Mary of Magdala, while the crucifix was transported for preservation in the vestry. There it stood up to 1770 when the Agony confraternity changed its site and moved into another chapel now known as the Sacramental chapel, and there it took again the crucifix as its altarpiece. The well known artist, Giuseppe Cali, while being engaged on decorating the church vault in 1892, was asked to repaint the crucifix but he refused to do so saying that the old patina of the beautiful Baroque crucifix should be respected and preserved as long as possible. We should be very thankful for his expert advise.