Count Saverio Marchese
A Conoscente with Special Reference to His Commentary on Uomini Illustri di Malta

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Count Saverio Marchese (1757-1833) enjoyed great respect as a connoisseur and a cognizant. His expertise extended over a number of fields, among them poetry, history, archaeology, the Maltese language and especially the arts and local art history. He amassed a substantial collection of paintings, drawings and prints, many of which he left to the Mdina Cathedral Museum.

Among Marchese's contributions to the study of local art history is a copy of an eighteenth century text to which he adds his own annotations. This was compiled in 1825. The manuscript, MS 1123, in the National Library Collection (Fig. 1), is a copy of Uomini Illustri di Malta, by an anonymous Capuchin Friar who is usually identified with Dott. Bartolomeo Mifsud (1707-1781), better known as Padre Pelagio. The text is a compendium of brief biographies of Maltese and foreign painters, sculptors and architects who worked in Malta (Fig. 2). It was written between 1762 and 1771. If the author is indeed Padre Pelagio Mifsud, it is strange that he remains anonymous.

1. A volume of his poems and writings is preserved at the Mdina Cathedral Museum Archives. ACM, Misc. 445 A, B, C. Poems e Scritti.
2. His interest in the Maltese language is revealed in his unfinished dictionary entitled Principio di Vocabolario Italiano-Maltese per necessario Supplemento al Vocabolario Maltese-Italiano del Ch. Michele Antonio Vassallo sive Vassali stampato a Roma nel 1796. Incominciato nel Blocco della Valletta del 1798 al 1800 (Ad) Conte Saverio Marchese per aiuto di chi vuol d'italiano conoscere le parole Maltesi e de' Lei non fine. NLM, Ms. 662.
6. The author mentions Favray's departure for the East in 1762 but does not record his return to Malta in 1771, presumably providing a time period during which the text was written. M. Buhagiar, 'Antonio Pippi - A Forgotten Quadraturista', Treasures of Malta, IX, 2, 2003, 25.
since the friar was a close acquaintance of the Marchese family. It is possible that Marchese was respecting Pelagio’s wish to remain unknown. Marchese describes himself as ‘...trascrittore, correttore, illustratore e contributore di de. Notizie’” (Fig. 3). He comments on the text and adds relevant notes giving new information available since the death of the friar. Marchese vouches his opinions about specific works or the merits of an artist showing that he was a bold and informed critic and providing an insight into his artistic tastes and distastes.

Marchese was very up to date on available art historical information. In the Uomini Illustri he expands on the entry on Antonello Ricci da Messina with recent discoveries in Messina dating to 1821 which shed light on the artist’s life and training. In the extract Belle Arti preserved at the Cathedral Museum Archives in Mdina, Marchese cites a number of sources to enrich his entries describing his numerous visits to churches around Malta. He quotes Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi’s Abecedario Pittorico (1704) to provide information on Melchiorre Gafa and Giovanni Baglione’s Le Vite de’ Pittori, scultori, architetti, ed Intagliatori (1642) to supplement his discussion on Matteo Perez de Leccio’s painting of ‘St Catherine’ in Zurrieq. Marchese quotes Giovanni Antonio Ciantar’s Malta Illustrata (1772) on a number of occasions, one of these being when describing the titular painting of the Carmelite Church in Valletta which Ciantar attributes to Leggiadro Pinnello, with which Marchese disagrees. Marchese bought Onorato Brest’s seminal publication Malta Antica Illustrata (1816) just two months after the author passed away. He also transcribes part of Luigi Lanzij’s Storia Pictorica dell’Italia (1809) to attribute two
Marchese's corrections attest to his expertise on art history. He explains that the altarpiece of the 'Flight into Egypt' originally in the Church of Porto Salvo, Valletta, was not by Filippino Dingli, as the Capuchin Friar claims, but was one of the best paintings on the island and was by Alessandro Turchi, although he is more inclined to believe that its authorship belongs to Domenichino;

'Erra di molto il P. ann'. Capuccc: nell' osservare, che nella Chiesa di Porto Salvo della Valletta il quadro della fuga d'Egypt fosse della mano del d. Filippo Dingli. Egli era uno de' migliori quadri, che esistesse in Malte; e si crede di mano di Turchi, o gia Alessio. Turchi Veronese, o piu incontrastabilm', di mano del Gran Domenichino, o piu Domeni'. Zampieri, Bolognese...''

Another significant mistake made by the friar which Marchese corrects is the attribution of the sculpture group of the 'Ecstasy of St Theresa' at the Cornaro Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, to Suor Maria De Nisci or Tonaci. He writes that the destroyed ceiling of Porto Salvo Church in Valletta which he wrongly attributes to Filippo Paladini.

Marchese also expresses resentment for the barbarous alterations done by Grech to a painting by Preti representing 'St Rose of Lima', now in the Oratory of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary of the same church of Porto Salvo, which was barbarously cut up to fit into the new altar. Marchese refers again to Antonacio Grech to discuss the decorations of the Manoel Theatre by Antonio Pippi which Grech was entrusted to repaint. Grech ruined the decorations in the theatre completely and he demanded an unreasonably high fee. Consequently he was never again awarded a commission by the Government.

Marchese attributes the decorations in the ceiling paintings of the piano nobile corridors of the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta to the same Antonio Pippi; 'Non dubito poi, che dà quest' Antonio Pippi sieno stati dipinti tutti i Corridori delle Loggie del Palazzo gia' Magistrato della Valletta, poiche oltre d'esser maestrevol'. coloriti, e bizzarramente inventati, furono questi fatti in tempo del d. G. M. Mgr. Vilhena [...]' e sono dello stesso colorito, maniera e stile dell' antico dipinto di d'. Teatro.
It is a mystery why Marchese attributes these paintings to Pippi since they are the work of the celebrated quadraturista Niccolò Nasoni (1691-1773). Nasoni was very much commended by the Order of St John and although few works in Malta can be securely tied to him through documentation, a number of others can be stylistically attributed. The Capuchin friar was a contemporary of Nasoni but fails to mention him in his manuscript and it seems that by Marchese's time Nasoni had been largely forgotten.

An interesting insight into Marchese's tastes in architecture is revealed when he describes the new church of Porto Salvo by Antonio Cachia: "...che con pessimo disegno, ed enormità inutile di massi fabbricò d' nuova chiesa..." Cachia's church has a dynamic Baroque design which was revolutionary for its time but was loved by the clergy and the people. Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851) had also submitted a design for this church which teemed with neo-classical hints. It seems likely that Marchese was more in favour of Pullicino's design. Marchese knew the artist personally as he was a member of a Committee of the University where Pullicino was a Professor of Drawing. Marchese also bought a number of paintings from Pullicino who was an occasional art dealer.

A possible connection can here be made to Pullicino's similarly rejected design for the new Parish Church at Mosta. Giorgio Grognet de Vasse's monumental neo-classical rotunda, based on the Pantheon in Rome was preferred. Bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana, former Rector of the University, was so indignant that he was not present at the laying down of the foundation stone of the church. One is tempted to assume that Marchese, as a friend of Bishop Caruana, to whom he also dedicated a sonnet, and also a friend of Pullicino, was a supporter of the latter's invention. Moreover, Grognet was Marchese's nephew but he was a disgraced member of the family. Grognet disregarded his father's wishes for him to enter in the service of the Church and instead chose to join Napoleon's forces in Italy. Grognet was the only nephew that Marchese did not mention in his will, however, the Count did own two 'Astronomical Designs' by Grognet. One can never be sure of Marchese's reactions towards Grognet's invention for the Mosta Dome, as he died a few months after construction began.

Giorgio Pullicino was only one of the artists with whom Marchese was acquainted. From his writings, it is clear that he had a special admiration for Antoine Favray. Giuseppe Isidoro Marchese, the count's father, was probably responsible for encouraging Favray to establish himself in Malta and he remained a loyal friend and patron during his stay on the island. Count Saverio Marchese adds that he himself had became a good friend and companion to Favray in his old age.

In the entry in the Uomini illustri di Malta on Favray, Marchese writes that the anonymous friar omits from the life of the painter his second visit to Malta after his return from Constantinople, probably because the author was already dead at the time. He makes a commitment to write in the manuscript a biography of the artist with a full catalogue of works of art once he finished transcribing the original text. This, however, never materialized. His ties to Favray certainly influenced his artistic tastes and he owned a number of works by the French artist, including works executed by Favray during his stay in the orient. This suggests that he shared the

27 NLM, Libr. Ms. 1123, f.14v.
29 Azopardi 1983, 29.
30 Franzoni 1992-3, 53-4. These are Drawings Nos. 374-5 at the Mdina Cathedral Archives.

31 NLM, Libr. Ms. 1123, f.71r. Count Saverio Marchese writes that his father and Favray had been very close friends. The later entrusted his will to the former before leaving for Constantinople. Favray is also known to have made portraits of members of the Marchese family, including one of Saverio in a Private Collection in Malta. S. Degiorgio, E. Fiorentino, Antoine Favray (1706-1798): A French Artist in Rome, Malta and Constantinople, Malta 2004, 34, 154. Azopardi 1982, B. Giuseppe Isidoro Marchese owned numerous paintings by Favray. His son Vincenzo records nine including a portrait of Giuseppe Isidoro, and two portraits of his wife Sensiff. NLM, Libr. Ms. 658, Vito di Giuseppe Isidoro Marchese, scritto dal Dott. Vincenzo di li Figlio 1791, ff.25v-26c.
32 Among Favray's works owned by Marchese now in the Cathedral Museum are a study for the altarpiece of Our Lady of Ransom, a Portrait of Agostino Marchese, and a Satyr at the Peasant's Table. Paintings by Favray related to his stay in the orient are 'Interior with Orientals', 'Turkish Ladies' and 'Greek Ladies'. A. Espinosa Rodriguez, Paintings at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta 2005, 282-9, 286-7, 292-3, 278-80, 284-5.
interest in the East which was widespread throughout Europe at the time. Artists, connoisseurs and noblemen travelled to the east in search of the new and unusual; a sign of an increasingly Romantic attitude.

In his annotations to the entry on Favray’s contemporary Francesco Zahra Marchese provides important information on the choir pendants at Zebbug Parish Church. He ascribes their invention to Favray and claims that Zahra was only responsible for their execution. Zahra is described as Favray’s most loved and gifted pupil. Marchese confirms that Zahra ‘...mai studio fuori dalla sua Patria’.

Marchese was also a close friend of other contemporary painters. When, in his annotations, he discusses certain works in his collection he associates a painter identified by the original author only as Ignazio with Francesco Ignazio Borgognone better known as Ignazio Bavarese. Marchese tells us that he owns three works which the Roman painter and his very close friend Filippo Benunci had assured him were originals by Bavarese and that he had been encouraged to buy these works by the painter Charles Allingham. His close relationship with Benunci is also attested by the numerous purchases of Old Masters works he made from the artist to enrich his collection.

Marchese’s collection features few paintings by Maltese artists. He inherited works by Stefano Erardi, Giuseppe d’Arenza and Francesco Zahra, as well as a number of paintings by Antoine Favray. The only personal commissions recorded in the register Primo Costa are two views of the Grand Harbour from Anton Schranz who had just settled on the island. Marchese also bought a ‘Country Villa in Rome’ by Giuseppe Grech which he had restored by Giuseppe Schranz, who also inserted a number of figures in the foreground. We have an indication that Marchese did not particularly treasure a painting of the ‘Nativity’ by Michele Busuttil which he bought for its exquisite frame while he gave the painting to a ‘muratore’ as a gift.

Marchese’s adaptation to the changes in government. Under the Order of St John, he occupied positions of high repute in society. His gratitude is expressed in his sonnets, one of which is dedicated to Grand Master de Rohan who made Marchese Count of Maimon in 1793. Marchese’s opinions on the French Government were somewhat unsympathetic. During the two-year siege in Valletta, Marchese did not make any purchases and he kept himself out of the public and political eye. In a random collection of transcriptions and notes, Marchese recorded incidences that made Napoleon look bad. He also writes a sonnet to commemorate the liberation of the Pope and Napoleon’s fall. A curious and unique drawing by Marchese records Napoleon in his deathbed (Fig. 4). It is signed by the count and dated 1825. Marchese was probably inspired from numerous prints that were in circulation after the Emperor’s death which were presumably also popular among the British circle in Malta.

Marchese adapted effortlessly into the British environment under the new government. In 1823, he was elected to the University Committee responsible for examining the University’s performance and progress. In his collection of poems, there are a number of sonnets praising British Governors, among them Hastings and Ponsonby. Marchese was also favourable of British preferences in art and architecture. He describes with approval Governor Maitland’s alterations to the Grand Council Chamber of the Grand Master’s Palace, ‘...le decoro magnifico, con colonne, e soffitto maestevolmi’. We gather
that Marchese was able to feel at home easily under each government. His talents and social merits were appreciated by both the Grand Masters and the British Governors, who elected him to high social positions and invited him personally to important events and celebrations at the Palace on numerous occasions.

Marchese was a progressive figure whose ideas and actions reflected the contemporary European outlook. Art collecting became increasingly widespread among the European nobility. Marchese was one of the earliest collectors to leave his acquisitions to a public institution, the Mdina Cathedral Church, with the intention of these going to the establishment of a public museum. Throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century several museums were established, the most outstanding being the Louvre in Paris in which Napoleon's artistic loot were very well organized. Museums were considered both 'culturally enriching and morally uplifting.' It is significant that by donating his collection Marchese was encouraging this awareness of the necessity to instruct the public on local art and history.

Count Saverio Marchese's writings, especially his annotations to the *Uomini Illustri di Malta*, provide a valuable insight into his artistic tastes; his preferences and dislikes. They also show that he was very well-read and aware of recent findings and events of art historical relevance. Marchese also shows that he and his family had very strong connections with well established artists, academics, connoisseurs, collectors and dealers both in Malta and abroad. Consequently, obtaining a more in depth idea of his artistic inclinations, through the study of this significant manuscript, and other writings by Marchese, can lead to a better understanding of the artistic scene and criticism of his day.

48 The collection was to go to the Cathedral once the male line of his family was extinguished. Azzopardi 1982, 32. For other contemporary Maltese collectors see R.Delia, Art Collecting in Malta (1600-c.1850), M.A. History of Art, unpublished dissertation, University of Malta, 2008, 159 and Frazerl 1992-3, 9-10.