



The History of Art Programme at the University of Malta and the Rewriting of the Art History of Late Medieval Malta

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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS, that I published in 1988, was a coherent first attempt at coming to terms with the history of the visual arts in Malta by providing a critical survey of painting in the five hundred years between 1400 and 1900. The Introduction emphasized that the book was intended as a point of departure and cautioned that new research would inevitably necessitate modifications and revisions. The ultimate desideratum was that it would serve as a stimulus for specialization in the several art historical disciplines and that future studies would, in due course, crystallize in a comprehensive scholarly history of art in Malta. Fourteen years later this goal has not yet been attained, but appreciable progress has been made.

The History of Art Programme

The most significant step forward was the introduction of classes in the history and appreciation of art at the University of Malta and the consequent fostering of a better concerted and more scholarly oriented research programme. This bold initiative that I was asked to coordinate, started in the same year as the publication of the book and was to some extent the result of its success. Over the years, it has matured into a History of Art Programme responsible for an area of study within the Faculty of Arts.

The Programme offers courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has been instrumental in the training of scientifically well-prepared art historians and critics who occupy key positions in the country's Fine Arts (and other cultural) Institutions. The idea of History of Art as a cultural pastime that can be pursued by any suitably motivated dilettante or art collector, has finally started to be discredited and there is a better informed attitude to the subject as an academic discipline. The Programme has forged mutually beneficial contacts for academic collaboration with the History of Art Departments of major Universities and Fine Arts Museums in Europe and North America and has taken important initiatives in the protection and conservation of the Maltese artistic patrimony. Academic staff members sit on committees for international art exhibitions and colloquia and publish research papers in refereed art historical journals and publications.

Re-interpreting the Art History of the Maltese Middle Ages

The richness of the new data collected since 1988 makes the time ripe for re-interpreting and rewriting the story of art in Malta in its wider Mediterranean and Western European contexts. A book on the late medieval and early modern periods is due for publication early in 2004. Two other volumes, one on Roman Baroque sculpture for the Knights of St. John and the other on the pioneers of the modern art movement in Malta are in various stages of preparation. These three works are necessarily the fruit of different fields of specialization and reflect the current foci of the ongoing research being undertaken by the academic staff members of the Programme. This short paper concentrates on the first book for which I am responsible.

The book represents the accumulated results of nearly thirty years of research that started in 1975, when I contributed a study on medieval churches to the volume of collected essays, *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, edited by Anthony T. Luttrell and published by the British School at Rome. The Muslim conquest in 870 A.D. is taken as a

convenient point of departure while the founding of Valletta in 1565 is recognized as the natural point of conclusion because it heralds the start of a new beginning in the artistic history of Malta. Stylistic developments and idiosyncrasies are interpreted in the light of the cultural cross-fertilizations that resulted from Malta's geographical location and historical realities.

The Norman, Swabian, and Angevin Periods

There are several new shifts of emphasis. The time bracket between 1127 when there is the first secure evidence for a Latin presence and 1282, when the islands became part of the Confederation of the Aragonese Crown is, for example, highlighted as one of long lasting influence. This was the time that witnessed the start of the urbanization of the countryside, and the origins and early development of an architectural language that remained current well into the early modern period. Influences did not come exclusively from the Latin West. There is a growing corpus of evidence which points to the presence of Greek-rite monastic activity that promoted Byzantine religious iconography and cultural orientations. Latin and Greek artistic influences moved along parallel courses and mutually conditioned each other.

The countryside marked the divide between the governing Siculo-Norman elite and its Latin-rite clergy, who knew a measure of western sophistication and lived in European style houses, and the mass of the native population, many of whom were Muslim *villani*, or servile labourers, who worked the extensive royal estates (*masserie*). Many of the latter lived in caves or in rude stone houses and it was among them that the Greek-rite monks carried out their missionary activity. This partly explains the fact that as in the case of Sicily and the island of Pantelleria, many conversions from Islam were apparently to a Greek-rite, not a Latin-rite Christianity. The cave-churches on the outskirts of Mdina and in several areas of countryside are closely related to the Christianization process and have an artistic significance that has been constantly overlooked. Their wall-icons of hieratic saints in the Siculo-Byzantine tradition are the earliest surviving paintings in Malta and reflect a programme of church decoration that remained in use until the turn of the sixteenth century.

The Latin artistic imprint is represented by a few sculptural fragments that include a couple of Siculo-Romanesque capitals from Mdina and the limestone relief of two standing saints from Gozo. The Castello on Gozo and the *Civitas* and *Castrum Marison* Malta, remained for a long time the only enclaves of European refinement in an island that retained its Muslim character until at least the second half of the thirteenth century and possibly for some time after that as well. The Latin element was consolidated during the brief but crucially important, Angevin period, between 1268 and 1282, that saw the final decline of Greek influence. The earliest documentary evidence for built churches date to this period and one gets the impression of a well organized Latin church with a politically powerful cathedral chapter. An inventory of the movable property of the church of Santa Maria in the *Castrum Maris*, suggests that churches were adequately furnished with icons, silver plate, liturgical linen, sacred vestments, and illuminated codices. The cathedral itself is, however, only reliably mentioned in 1299.

Sicilian, Catalan, and Venetian Influences

The long political association with Catalunya-Aragon, between 1282–1530, profoundly affected art and architecture. Influences often arrived filtered through the Sicilian experience, but sometimes came direct. This seems to be the case of the great *retable* of St. Paul which was produced for the cathedral sometime in the early fifteenth century. This is one of Malta's

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great paintings and can be attributed, on sound stylistic and technical grounds, to the immediate circle of Lluís Borassa (1360–1462), Catalunya's most important International Gothic painter.

The commissioning of such an important work is indicative of a perceptive patronage and an artistically informed upper class of petty nobles and high ecclesiastics. In addition to Sicily and Catalunya, Venice emerges as a third artistic port of contact. A bell with a Byzantine image of St. Paul and three shields emblazoned with the lion of St. Mark was produced there for the cathedral in 1370, and in 1422, the Dean of the Cathedral Chapter, Don Bernardus Janer, bound his heirs with precise instructions to order from the Lagoon City an embroidered *banderiam* (possibly a tapestry, or perhaps a banner) that was to depict him kneeling at the feet of St. Paul.

The Sicilian milieu was, nonetheless, the most significant. Sicily was a melting pot where continental Italian and Catalan influences combined to produce a vigorous artistic language that in Malta is best represented by two major works: the *Deposition from the Cross*, in the church of St. George, at Hal Qormi, and the *Virgin and Child with St. Paul and St. Augustine* in the Augustinian Priory, outside Mdina. Fifteenth and early Sixteenth century buildings at Mdina and elsewhere are also, in spite of certain regional idiosyncrasies, essentially Sicilian. Sicilian and Maltese architects and artists commuted between the two islands and there are indications of mutual collaboration.

Early Renaissance Contacts

In the second half of the fifteenth century, close contacts were established with Sicily's greatest native-born artist, Antonello da Messina (c.1430–1479) and his Messina school. The *intagliatore* Giovanni Saliba, (or Resaliba) whose name suggests a Maltese origin (doc. in Messina in 1469) married Antonello's sister by whom he had two artist sons, Pietro (d. 1530) and Antonio (1466/7 - c.1535) who worked for Maltese patrons. Their cousin Salvo d' Antonio (doc. 1493 – c.1526), the son of Antonello's brother Giordano, was also active in Malta where he produced, in 1510, a *retable* for the nuns of San Pietro at Mdina. Their surviving paintings in Malta are of good quality but their most important significance lies in the fact that they introduced the island to the Renaissance.

In sculpture, equally important contacts were established with Domenico Gagini (1425/30–1492) whose work in Naples and Sicily is of crucial interest in the study of Early Renaissance sculpture, south of Rome. Domenico's workshop in Palermo was commissioned with at least two works for Mdina Cathedral, a holy water stoup (now in the parish church of Gharb, Gozo), and a baptismal font. The latter, produced posthumously, synthesizes the late Gothic tradition of fifteenth century Sicily with the Florentine Renaissance, and belongs to a typology that won notable fame for the sculptor. Domenico's son Antonello (1487/9-1536) was also popular in Malta where his works include an early *Virgin and Child*, in the church of the Franciscan Minor Conventuals at Rabat, that was commissioned in 1504. Other works can be attributed to him on stylistic and technical grounds. Late in life he produced the white marble lid for the sarcophagus of Grand Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1521–1534) which in the medieval tradition carries a full-length effigy of the Grand Master in the repose of death.

There were also several Maltese artists and craftsmen, including stone carvers, mastermasons, silversmith, and *maitre ebenistes*, who sometimes got commissions for important projects. At the turn of the sixteenth century, *Mastru* Cola Curmi, for example, produced major works in woodcarving for the cathedral. At a more grass roots level, there were the itinerant painters, such as the Carmelite friar Johannes Pulcella (doc. 1496–1508), who toured the rural parishes and produced *icone* or sacred images for their churches whose

walls they sometimes also decorated with frescoes. In this way, they perpetuated a vernacular artistic tradition that was still vigorous in the first decades of the seventeenth century, and produced the occasional masterpiece, such as the Zejtun *St Thomas* panel, or the 1604 *Fiffla Madonna*, at Zurrieq.

The Knights of St. John

The Knights of St. John who established their convent on Malta in 1530 brought in their luggage a treasure of tapestry hangings, liturgical vestments, church plate, illuminated codices, and reliquaries in precious metals. Of greater artistic import was a rich collection of icons that included the stupendous *Damascus Madonna*, a rare surviving example of an early twelfth century work of the Palace School of Constantinople, and one of the largest surviving Byzantine icons. There were also important paintings such as an *Adoration of the Magi*, reportedly by Albrecht Dürer, which left Malta as a gift for Cardinal Scipione Borghese in the early seventeenth century, and a *Deposition* triptych, that I have ascribed to the immediate circle of Jan van Scorel, which is now in the picture gallery of the Conventual Church of St. John.

The Knights had the means and the necessary cultural preparation to invest in works of art. Under their enlightened government Malta developed into a prosperous principality, on the Italian model, where art and architecture were encouraged as a status symbol and as a means of enhancing the prestige of the state. The founding of the new city of Valletta in 1566 was an important art historical benchmark that marked the definite end of the Maltese Middle Ages, and the start of a new artistically resplendent chapter that was to transform the island into one of the most vital Baroque centres south of Rome.

Conclusion

Research is an ongoing process and as in all other academic disciplines, no art historian can ever lay claim to exclusivity, or to having said the final word. Some of the hypotheses that I have formulated may not stand the test of future scholarship. In the light of the current state of my studies they appear to offer a good interpretation of particular art historical contexts, and to enrich and diversify our knowledge and understanding of medieval and early modern art. □

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