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In memory of Adrian Bartolo

FILIPPO PALADINI: His Activities in Malta

The artistic activity of Filippo Paladini in Malta has to be seen against a precise historical background. Once the military-political crisis provoked by the Turkish invasion of 1565 was - with great difficulty - overcome, the Council of the Knights of St John was faced with a momentous decision: whether to remain or abandon the Maltese islands, granted to them as a feudal holding by the Emperor Charles V in 1530. After days of dramatic debate, the irrevocable decision was taken: they determined to stay. This implied that they had to be strategically entrenched to meet any future renewal of the Ottoman offensive capabilities and therefore they committed themselves to the construction of a *citta' fortezza*, on the Sceberras heights that dominated and overlooked both the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett harbour. Priority was given to the inner girth of massive fortifications, since the exigencies of immediate defence were paramount.

Thus, within a brief period of five years there emerged - out of nowhere - the inner fortifications of Valletta, complete with a landward ditch and a larger, reconstructed, Fort St Elmo on its eastern extremity. Only then, within the enclosed space, began to emerge the first constructions, the churches, auberges and palaces. In 1571, in a move to hasten the pace of the town's development, Grand Master Pietro Del Monte moved the seat of government from Vittoriosa to the new *citta' fortezza*. He also took the initial decision to construct the Palace of the Grand Masters on ^{its} present site, an initiative more strenuously pursued by the succeeding Grand Master, Jean Levesque De La Cassiere (d. 1581), to whom we owe the commissioning of the Great Siege fresco cycle by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio (1546-1616) in the Hall of the Grand Council within the new Palace.

With the next Grand Master, the Provencal Hugues de Loubenx De Verdalle, ruling between 1582 and 1595, we enter upon a period of more

intensive artistic embellishment, once the Knights' Council had ensured a superior defensive stance than that of the pre-1565 days. In fact, it was in the course of Grand Master Verdalle's rule that Filippo Paladini appeared in Malta, either in 1587 or, at the latest, early in 1588. Apart from the early Mannerist painter Polidoro Caldara da Caravaggio, who died in Messina in 1543, Filippo Paladini emerges as the next most accomplished painter active in the South Mediterranean area, which he only reached on account of some tragic circumstances in his life. He was born around 1544 at Casi in the Val di Sieve in Tuscany, and his first known work is an altarpiece for a church at Vinci, signed and dated 1573; soon afterwards Paladini moved to Firenze.

The formative influences of his art are easily traceable to the Florentine Mannerism, particularly the strand deriving from Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557), to which belonged such contemporaries as Santi di Tito (1536-1603) and Jacopo da Empoli (1554-1640); the refined Mannerist sensibility thus acquired, Paladini continued to elaborate in the relative isolation of Malta and Sicily, the two scenari of his activity after 1587. Late in life – after 1610 - while working in Sicily, he was struck by the dramatic realism of Caravaggio - perhaps he had only occasion to see the works that Caravaggio had painted in Malta and in Sicily. While it can be said that Paladini remained struck and indeed absorbed aspects of Caravaggio's dramatic chiaroscuro, but the experience did not generate substantial changes to the sophisticated idiom of his Late Mannerism.

Between 1586 and 1587, Paladini was twice arrested in the Firenze, fully armed and accused of armed assault. On the second occasion, the Grand Duke Francesco De' Medici '*per le cause residenti in petto*' condemned Paladini to rowing in the galleys of the Grand Duchy. We lack documentation of what happened next. In all probability, the Grand Duke's galleys sailed out for the annual *corso*, calling at the port of Malta as they often used to do. Grand Master Verdalle somehow learnt of Palladini's presence on the rowing benches of the Grand Duke's galleys and successfully managed to get the Florentine painter transferred to his service. The same Grand Master had a princely, indeed august, conception of his office; he had also been created cardinal of the Catholic Church by pope Sixtus V and greatly appreciated the

Renaissance ideal that art could be made to enhance a Prince's standing. In particular he had two projects in mind: his own private chapel in the new Magisterial Palace in Valletta, and the newly constructed Castello, replacing an older hunting lodge on the wooded grounds of Boschetto in the interior of the Island.

The Verdalle chapel

Almost certainly, the first commission Paladini was asked to carry out in Malta is the fresco cycle depicting scenes from the life of John the Baptist in Verdalle's own private chapel, sited next to his bedroom inside the Palace. The chapel is a small rectangular hall, with two long walls, one of which was pierced by a doorway leading directly to the bedroom. One of the shorter walls has a window overlooking Archbishop Street (formerly known as *Strada dei Greci*). Above the opposite shorter wall, there used to be a musicians' balcony, removed to the Hall of the Grand Council in the course of the 19th century. The balcony was surmounted by a round window – now blocked – while beneath, at ground level, there used to be an arched doorway – much later reduced to a rectangular form – leading to one of the Palace's three corridors overlooking the courtyard.

It was along the two longer walls of the chapel that Paladini disposed the principal theme of the fresco cycle, the narrative of the Baptist's life and death, skillfully and summarily depicted in four main episodes - two on each wall – with every account framed and separated by panels representing pilasters decorated in the form of candelabra. The four episodes represent:

1. *The Baptist's nativity and imposition of a name;*
2. *The Baptist preaching in the desert;*
3. *The baptism of Christ; and*
4. *The banquet of King Herod with Salome' holding the Baptist's head in a dish.*

On each of the two shorter walls, the narrative gives way to representations of Sybils and Putti, depicted perched on fictive architectural elements. Arguably

these are the most accomplished and suggestive fresco-paintings in the chapel. His narrative scenes unfold in an open, ample, horizontal space, typical of Late Florentine Mannerism. The figure-modelling is generally accomplished and his choice of colours bright and exciting. One important observation: Paladini cannot be considered a “natural” fresco-painter; if one excepts the various affresco projects he was commissioned to carry out in Malta, he never again attempted to take on the technique. His instinctive reluctance towards the medium is borne out by his frequent resort to *secco* painting overlying fresco brushwork.

The Verdalle chapel fresco cycle by Paladini was very nearly lost as a result of World War II air-raids. It has been magnificently restored by a professional equipe, headed by Stephen Rickerby, from the Wall Painting Department of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, thanks to a generous grant from the Getty Conservation Institute. The conservation project, brought to an end in 2007, was masterminded by Mr Ray Bondin from the days he headed the Valletta Rehabilitation Project.

Above the altar of the Verdalle chapel, once stood an altarpiece painted on canvas, *The enthroned Virgin and Child flanked by Saints and Knights*; two putti at the foot of the throne hold a choral book with the prominent display of the Verdalle coat-of-arms after receiving the Cardinalate. This canvas - initialled and dated 1589 - was sent in 1811 to the Archbishop's Palace in Valletta by Sir Hildebrand Oakes, the British Civil Commissioner, in an exchange of paintings between the British Governor and the Archbishop, at a time when the Verdalle chapel was being adapted to the Anglican rite.¹ The original elegant Mannerist arrangement of this chapel continued to be rundown even later in the same century when it also lost the elaborate, finely-carved and gilded musicians' balcony, that was transferred to the Hall of the Grand Council of the same Magisterial Palace.

This extraordinary beautiful Mannerist balcony is profusely carved and gilded, as well as decorated with six small painted, wooden panels, insetted to its front, representing popular scenes from the Genesis: *the Creation of Adam*,

Adam naming the animals, the Creation of Eve, the Fall, the Expulsion from Eden, and the Flood. Old sources and recent critical opinion concurred in attributing these six small panels to Paladini, although now that the panels have been cleaned from dirt, layers of varnish, and various re-touchings, a firmer attribution can securely assign them to Paladini.

Castel Verdala

The second of Grand Master Verdalle's prestigious commissions to Filippo Paladini was the decoration of newly-built Castel Verdala, actually a stately country-villa set on the higher ground of the wooded area known as Boschetto. The project presented Paladini with the opportunity to carry out a formal scheme of decoration, in the final analysis restricted to the more "public" parts at ground-floor level. Unfortunately, Paladini's work at Castel Verdala has suffered untold indignities over the centuries from criminal neglect, willful damage, repeated repaintings and additions. It's difficult to arrive at a clear notion of his original conception, like attempting a re-creation of the Cretaceous age through the reconstruction of a dinosaur fossils.

Among the works which has survived in this abusive form, there are various allegorical figures in the vestibule, two large lunettes with the narration of Verdalle's personal history, prominently displayed in the adjoining *Gran Salone* (banqueting hall), together with an extensive gallery of monumental mythological figures lining its walls. The rooms to the left and right of the banqueting hall have two other lunettes with scenes from the life of St Paul the Hermit, apart from two others, one with *The dream of Jacob* and another with *Pharaoh's Dream*. Here and there one sees fading traces of possible mural decorations, possibly carried out under Paladini's direction.

As previously indicated, all of Paladini's work in Verdala has been heavily and repeatedly repainted during the nineteenth century and continuing right up to 1939, including one unforgiveable attempt to blot them out. Two instances of well-intended – but still ruinous - over-paintings were those carried out by Salvatore Micallef (1863) and Giuseppe Cali, who both left their signature, to memorize their intervention. In 1985-1986, a partial

cleaning operation of the two lunettes in the *Gran Salone*, recording Verdalle's election to the grandmastership and his nomination as cardinal, was carried out by George Farrugia of the Museums Department. More recently, a major cleaning operation was carried out by a unit from the Bighi Restoration Laboratory on the vault of the *Gran Salone*, in particular including the large mythological figures depicted on the walls; but the cleaning stopped on reaching the level of the Cali over-painting.

Other Paintings

Apart from the altarpiece, that was originally intended for the Verdale chapel, there are also four other altarpieces, and a few easel-works, by Paladini still to be found in Malta, including an altarpiece in the parish church of St Lawrence at Vittoriosa representing the three *Saints Paul, Roque and Sebastian* - all three of whom were invoked by devotees against the plague affliction, particularly in the course of the one very severe outbreak that had hit Malta in 1593. The painting can therefore with confidence be dated to the years 1593 to 1595, the latter being the date when Paladini is known to have left Malta for Sicily.

There is also a small canvas, measuring only 70cm x 60cm, representing *The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine*, once held in the church of Santa Caterina d'Italia, attached to the Auberge of the Langue of Italy. This exquisite small painting was passed on to the Museum of Fine Arts by the rector, Fr Gino Gauci, in 1988 and now forms part of the permanent collection. Although it has severely suffered from over-cleaning in the past, this small work is exceptionally important, as it reveals the full extent of Palladini's command of the sixteenth century Florentine Mannerist idiom, apart from being one of his most refined creations to be found in Malta.

The main altarpiece of the Gesu' church (popularly known as the Jesuits Church) in Valletta, representing the *Circumcision of the Child Jesus*, was cleaned and restored in 1995-1996 by Mr George Farrugia, after it had been accidentally hit and badly damaged in the church. The work reveals the ability of Paladini in handling animated crowded scenes with conviction and success, a feat he

continued to refine and elaborate in his numerous Sicilian works, a consideration that helps in dating the Gesu' altarpiece towards the end of his stay in Malta.

Another notable work is the main altarpiece of the church of *St James the Less*, painted for the high altar of the church of St James in Valletta, belonging to the Langue of Castille and Leon. It is the most impressive work by Paladini to be found in Malta, one that never fails to strike by the sheer monumentality of the apostle's figure, enhanced by the economy of general details. Signed and dated 1611, it therefore belongs to the artist's Sicilian period, proving that Paladini had retained his old contacts with Malta, a fact further strengthened by Grand Master Wignacourt's renewed intercession ^{on} his behalf in 1610.

Yet another altarpiece by Paladini is to be found on one of the side altars in the Church of the Franciscan Conventuals in Valletta. Likewise signed and precisely dated to 1612, it represents the *Miracle of SS Cosmas and Damian*, the patron saints of the medical profession. The altarpiece was probably commissioned by the *Confraternità dei Barbieri*, then deemed members of the medical profession. Towards the end of the 17th century, this Paladini painting was in its turn to inspire Mattia Preti in creating one of his last masterpieces, dated 1698, now in the Museum of St John's.

One should also draw attention to two paintings in the Chapel of the Langue of France in St John's church, one representing *La Madonna del Divino Amore*, the other with the *figura serpentinata* of the *Young St John the Baptist*. Formerly both these charming works were in the church of Santa Caterina d'Italia belonging to the Italian Langue, but in the 1830s were taken to the present location in St John's Church, after the Nazarenes' zeal for so-called reform had denuded the chapel belonging to the Langue of France of much of its Baroque glory. Both works bear the escutcheon of Ipolito Malaspina, Pilier of the Langue of Italy, who died in 1622. The *Madonna del Divino Amore* is a copy after a work by Gianfrancesco Penni, exhibited in the Museum of Capodimonte, Naples, a work that in its turn was inspired from a drawing of Raphael. The two paintings had been attributed to Paladini by Dr John Cauchi in 1978, an attribution supported by an early nineteenth century tradition in the Fondo Panzavecchia,

published ten years later by the undersigned.²

Through the published researches of Ludovica Sebregondi we learn the precise date when Filippo Paladini left Malta - 28 August, 1595 - on the mistaken belief that he was free to return to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, after his freedom was restored to him by Grand Master Verdalle on his death-bed.³ The re-entry to his homeland was denied to Paladini, but confusedly it was thought he was able to do so in 1610, on the specific request of Grand Master Wignacourt. We now know that, from about 1600, he was intensely active in Sicily where the majority and the very best of his paintings can still be found, and where he died early in 1615. One might add that, on the very day Filippo Paladini departed from the island of Malta, a Maltese artist by the name of Vincenzo Azzupardo was giving evidence before the local tribunal of the Inquisition. In his evidence Azzupardo declared that he had been in the company of Paladini one day during the preceding Lent in the house of a third unnamed painter.⁴ This piece of evidence helps us to reliably assume that:

1. Paladini had regained his freedom in Malta by the Lent of 1595, and
2. that a circle of minor artists, some Maltese included, gravitated around Paladini, which explains the presence of a considerable body of paintings in Malta of Paladinesque derivation, at times very close to the Florentine master's style, as the twin panels of *St Paul* and *St John the Baptist*, belonging to the Church of Our Victories, restored by Mr Mario Galea, of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1998.

Other documented works

To round up, one ought also to add a brief note about works of Paladini, some documented to have been in Malta, but the whereabouts of which are now unknown. One of these, the *Discovery of the True Cross*, once kept by the Capuchins in their Floriana church; a note about this painting has been preserved by the eighteenth historian Count Ciantar. The second record of a lost Paladini painting has been documented from the Dominican archives and published by Fr. Mikiel Fsadni; the record refers to an *Annunciation of the*

Virgin once held in a side-chapel of the Dominican church at Rabat. A third Paladini work, a magnificent easel-work, dated 1611-1612 to the artist's Sicilian years, was shown in the 1950 exhibition "La Madonna nell'Arte", representing the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine*, belonging Vincenzo Bonello, the first curator of Malta's Museum of Fine Arts. In August 2009 the painting was presented to the Valletta Museum of Fine Arts by Judge Giovanni Bonello and his sister Anna Xuereb.

Still another work which one would like to refer to is the *Madonna of Itria*, still held in the Refectory of the Franciscan Friary in Valletta: - an excellent Mannerist work in the Paladini tradition - as indicated by Dr John Cauchi in a letter carried by *The Times* on 30 September 1983. In my opinion, the presence of St Philip Neri, canonized in 1622, would seem to exclude Paladini's authorship, although it could represent a later addition. With this work, we have, I believe, overstepped the subject of Paladini's work and entered into that of his heritage, which is a different topic and certainly deserves separate treatment.

Paladini in 18th and 19th centuries records

Yet one cannot leave this subject without taking into account the fact that there exists an old extended comment on works by Filippo Paladini, to be found in Malta in an National Library of Malta manuscript – **Libreria 1123** - entitled *Uomini Illustri*, which carries a mid-eighteenth Century account - as the principal text - penned by a writer described as the *Anonimo Capuccino*, securely identified by the Rev. Francis Azzopardi OFM as Padre Pelagio. The original manuscript (now lost) was recopied in 1825 by Count Saverio Marchesi, who not only incorporated some of his own independent observations to the original text, but also added his own very extensive annotations and comments on the obverse pages, besides cramming others in the margin of the pages.

The *Anonimo Capuccino* had listed in all eleven paintings ascribed to Paladini, four of which he states were held in the Capuchin church and Convent at Floriana, including the former titular painting *The Finding of the Cross*,

replaced in the eighteenth Century and since lost (as reported above). Of two other paintings, a *Sant'Anna*, together with the *Virgin Mary with St John* - of which the latter is likewise lost - while the present oval of *St Anne holding the infant Mary*, held in the Museum of the Convent, is certainly unconnected with Paladini. The fourth work, the *Martyrdom of St Agatha*, is still in place as the altarpiece in one of the side chapels in the Capuchin church – a good Mannerist painting that has the finest female nude that I know of in local Mannerist art. Unfortunately, the work has suffered through frequent interventions –even within living memory - and has an overall brownish tonality that heavily emphasizes the *chiaroscuro* passages of the painting. It would be advisable to have this significant work of art properly cleaned and restored, before definitely excluding it from the corpus of Paladini's work.

The account of the *Anonimo Capuccino*, whom Marchesi himself accuses of often committing *sbagli massicci*, goes on to indicate two paintings of *St Roque* in Mdina - the surviving work, in the chapel of the saint, is certainly not by Paladini⁵. He then correctly identifies both the altarpiece of *St James* in Valletta, as well as the *Holy Family* (i.e. *La Madonna del Divino Amore*) and *The Young St John*, by then both were still retained in the chapel of Santa Caterina d'Italia, but in the 1830s both paintings were transferred to the chapel of the Langue of Italy in St John's. Count Marchesi, in his separate annotations calls the latter two works "*cattive copie*"! He also thought the former titular altarpiece of the old Dominican parish church in Valletta, dedicated to the *Madonna di Porto Salvo*⁶ (since 1891 transferred to the Sliema parish of Stella Maris) to be attributable to Paladini, and goes on to recount an ugly story of its "restoration" by Antonaci Grech – a minor artist of the earlier nineteenth Century whom he calls "*igniorantissimio in genere di pittura ad olio*" and even promises to give further evidence of his bad taste (eventually duly delivered!).

A lengthy annotation of Marchesi deals with the confused issue regarding, the authorship of the painting representing the *Shipwreck of St Paul*, the titular altarpiece of the Valletta parish of St Paul. Traditionally generally presumed to be by Paladini, it was rejected by modern critical

opinion and finally disproved by the publication of the note of a payment made for the painting to a Matteo da Leccio dated 5 October 1579. Marchesi had seen a published Melivetana of this transaction well over 150 years before the undersigned (in 1983) drew attention to its registration in the accounts of the Cathedral Chapter⁷. Marchesi was however, not convinced by the evidence he had unearthed, and continued to assert its attribution to Paladini, persuaded by stylistic considerations and the assurances of an unnamed *Sig. Canonico* who persuaded him '*che sotto il cornice del quadro, sotto il di lui battente sia scritto il nome del sudetto Paladini*'. One need concede that the kneeling figure of Bishop Gargallo appears to be a very early addition to the original work, maybe in some way it was thought to be connected to Paladini.

Count Marchesi, continuing his annotations, correctly attributes to Paladini *The Circumcision of Christ*, altarpiece at the Jesuits' church, Valletta, together with the *Enthroned Virgin and Child, flanked by Saints and Knights*, that he reports to have seen at the Bishop's Palace, some thirteen years after its transfer from the Magisterial Palace (strangely, Marchesi believes it was originally removed from the chapel annexed to Castel Verdala).

Finally, he refers to another painting reputedly by Paladini, which he confusingly describes as a former *quadro titolare* of the Porto Salvo church, representing *Our Lady of the Rosary with the Child*, flanked by '*il profeta Davide con l'arpa e San Domenico*'. Unfortunately, no painting fitting this description can now be traced at Porto Salvo; it has been suggested that the good Mannerist painting, of likely Sicilian derivation, currently hanging in the oratory of the Rosary, adjoining the Dominican convent, might be the painting indicated by Marchesi, but that canvas only represents Our Lady of the Rosary.

The composite manuscript account in question has the virtue to have transmitted to us the oldest extensive commentary on works by Paladini thought to be found in Malta – in doing so preserving an eighteenth-century text commingled with another of the early nineteenth century. Its

disquisitions already highlight the problem of individuating the authentic works of this late exponent of Florentine Mannerism from that of his late Mannerist followers, a problem that has only begun to be tentatively addressed in the last half century.

¹ A.A.M. *Brevia et Constitutiones Apostolicae* (1811-1814), enc. 22 and 23; published by the writer in *Marian Art during the 17th and eighteenth Century*, Malta 1983, p. 32.

² A.C.M. Fondo Panzavecchia vol. 9, f.66; a brief note that deals with the church of Santa Caterina d'Italia. Collaborated by NLM. Lib.1123, *Uomini Illustri* – an 18th cent. compilation by Anonimo Cappucino, annotated by Conte Marchesi early in 19th cent.

³ *Paragone*: gennaio – marzo 1982, pp. 107-122; “Francesco dell’Antella, Caravaggio, Paladini ed altri” by Ludovica Sebgondi.

⁴ A.I.M. Processi XIV (1595), f. 24

⁵ Cathedral Museum, CEM.183 f.4v; records payment of 25 scudi “a Emanuele Perreira pittore per un quadro di S^{to} Sebastiano e S^{to} Rocco”.

⁶ M.Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani fil-Belt 1569-1619*, pub. Malta 1971, pp.25-26, reports the painting was passed on to the Porto Salvo priory church by Fra Gerolamo Caraffa in June 1583.

⁷ A.C.M. Misc.295 ff.207-208, first reported in *Marian Art during 17th and 18th centuries*, pub. Malta 1983, footnote 2, p.21.