



Ir-Redentur. History, art and cult of the Miraculous effigy of Christ the Redeemer at Senglea, Malta

By Jonathan Farrugia (Editor)

Published by Midsea Books, Malta, 2019, pp.184,

ISBN: 978-99932-77-14-9

The devotion to *ir-Redentur ta' l-Isla* certainly needs no introduction. This venerable image has long drawn crowds to its shrine. Pilgrimage to it is now a well-established tradition, extending over a number of centuries. The wealth of masses, votive offerings, and processions centred around this image, can be considered an emblematic expression of the vivid devotional life of the Maltese. True to its descriptive title, the book gives a long awaited thorough scientific presentation of this statue, and our people's devotion to it. This work is the fruit of a conservation project on the statue itself, admirably carried out by the *Atelier del Restauro* that has restored back the original beauty of this artefact, ensuring its survival for years to come.

The significance of such works must be read within the broader history of both the local and the universal Church - the Church that promoted such art in order to nourish the faith of its flock. These are not simply artefacts of astounding beauty, but cultic objects; icons in the true sense of the word, the main purpose of which remains that of rendering honour to God, the source of all beauty, and the lifting of the heart of the believer to give true worship to his creator. Sacred art, in particular, enjoys this transcendental quality, subtracted from which it loses much of its meaning. It is therefore fit, that the statue of Christ the Redemer, is first of all read, by Dr Sandro Debono, an established art historian, within the wider iconographic tradition. Certainly, the depiction of passion mysteries, from the visual to the theatrical arts, have been popular since the medieval period. As Debono rightly notes, the particular representation of this *redentur* must be read with the baroque tradition and the formative catechetical purpose of the *theatrum sacris*. Sacred Art in the context of the Catholic reformation has the ultimate purpose, one tied to its very nature: to instruct the faithful in the faith and to arouse in them sentiments of devotion. In this the *Redentur* becomes a prototype for the representation of the suffering Christ bearing the Cross, that has remained popular to the present day. Through the study of archival sources, the author traces the history of Senglea's Good Friday processional statuary in the light of the wider Maltese artistic context, truly providing a comprehensive iconographic study of the subject matter.

The next contribution, by Dr Jonathan Farrugia, constitutes the breakthrough established by this volume, since the author managed to trace the origin of Senglea's *misteri*. He not only presents a detailed study of the history of the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, from its foundation, but also of its administration, its feasts, as well as the origins of its oratory and adjoining sacristy. Through the study of a previously unpublished source, the author establishes that the statue of the Redeemer is the work of Saverio Laferla executed in 1742. This study must be considered as fundamental for the study of confraternities in Malta. The rich documentation that accompanies the text, even

visually, makes it a model for further research in this field.

The final part of the volume documents the detailed scientific work that went into the conservation and restoration of this statue. In explaining the process of safeguarding this national icon for future generations, Valentina Lupo and Maria Grazia Zenzani, together with the comparative photographic study of Joe P. Borg, and the extensive appendices, evidence the rigour with which the whole process was undertaken. Their detailed study allows the reader to understand the lengthy process and scientific seriousness that true conservation interventions require. Once again, the text sets the benchmark of how similar studies are to be presented, allowing the community to feel fully involved, and therefore, to take greater responsibility for the conservation of the artistic patrimony entrusted to its care.

All this would not have been possible without the selfless dedication of the archpriest of this venerable collegiate chapter, Rev. Canon Robin Camilleri, whose commitment to the service of his community made this project and innumerable others possible.

The volume must be understood as a milestone in the study of devotional art in Malta. It truly sets a model for understanding the wealth of sacred art works that not only embellish the local churches but constitute a fundamental aspect of our national identity.

Rev. Dr Nicholas Joseph Doublet

University of Malta