

Realism and Empathy: Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix as a Visual Manifestation of Post-Tridentine Culture

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The intricately and realistically rendered signs of violence present on Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix are amongst its most notable characteristics. The tactile rendering of suppurating, gaping wounds, scars, hematomas and lacerated skin, adds an element of shocking verisimilitude to the image which, together with the ungainly posture, the emaciated body and the pitifully visible rib-cage portray an image of a man pushed to the extreme. Ultimately, this is an image that leaves little to the imagination. The physical suffering associated with Christ's final ordeal as described by the evangelists and especially in the writings of the mystic St Bridget of Sweden, is here reified and made corporeal and three-dimensional. It is reasonable to believe that the seventeenth-century worshipper, praying beneath this effigy, would have felt the physical nearness of Christ, as if wood and paint had transubstantiated into flesh and blood.¹ The worshipper would thus have experienced a visceral, empathetic reaction to the image, very much in line with the requirements of a post-Tridentine Church.

This paper intends to study the cultic image known as Ta' Ġiežu from such angles of inquiry. It asks: Why does the image bear obsessiveness with physical suffering? How would contemporary (and

¹ Christian Attard, *Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix, Iconographical and Historical Survey*. In Christian Attard (ed.), *Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix, Faith, History, Iconography, Conservation*. (Malta: Arċikonfraternita tas-Santissimu Sagament, 2020), 15-26.



Figure 1: Chapel of the Crucifix (Photo Credit Keith Scicluna).

later) worshippers have reacted to such violent imagery? How was cheap materiality – wood, chalk, wax, parchment and paint – pushed beyond its physical limitations? What might have been the links between the Franciscan church of St Mary of Jesus, the Valletta Confraternity of the Santa Croce and the sculptor of the crucifix? How could an artist hailing from a provincial Sicilian *borgo* know the anatomy of the human body, especially when this is subjected to extreme physical trauma, in such an intimate detail?

It is probably axiomatic to draw connections with the widespread Counter-Reformation spirit that was asserting itself on all spheres of Catholic life during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; a life where religious imagery played an emphatic role.² This was a time when various authors were churning out a steady flow of books and *trattati* which prescribed and proscribed boundaries – not without the occasional conflicting proposition – of what is acceptable or not in the art and architecture of churches. Learned man such as Giovanni Andrea Gilio, Gabriele Paleotti, Carlo and Federico Borromeo and Bishop Molanus, tried to sway church imagery in a direction where

2 John Rupert Martin, *Baroque*. (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

its power would be mostly exerted over the hordes of illiterate Catholics and where the supremacy of the image was once again underlined, even if it was then given a new currency of meaning.³

It is difficult to trudge through the many long-winded arguments made by these authors and one can safely assume that as much as such writings might confound the modern scholar, the same could be said of those post-Tridentine artists to whom these writings were originally intended. Yet, over a number of decades, and with some noticeable prodding and coercion on the Church's part, then also abetted by the Inquisition, things did change. If nothing else, all the authors mentioned coalesce on one important point. If after Raphael, religious imagery had taken a turn towards the wilfully strange, the disconcertingly sensual and the theologically dubious, then it was high time to clean imagery from all that might jar and lack authenticity. The term *decorum* was splashed about liberally by these authors and, even if its meaning was never made amply clear, it was generally used to denote the perfect antidote to all the excesses of style that had become staple throughout most of the sixteenth century. In classical rhetoric, from where the term was borrowed, *decorum* typically meant a measured kind of appropriateness which had to be levelled according to which style was used. The use of the term within a visual context seems to have kept close to its original definition.⁴

Authors were also pushing forth the idea that imagery should carry an emotional quotient, so as to engage not just the worshippers' senses but also their empathy. In this line of thinking, when the Spanish Mateo Vazquez de Leca, archdeacon of Carmona, drew a notarial contract for the carving of an effigy of a Christ crucified, he specified that 'Christ was to be alive, before He he died, with the head inclined towards the right side, looking to any other person who might be praying at the foot of the crucifix, as if Christ Himself were speaking to

3 Michael Bury, Lucinda Byatt, and Carol M. Richardson, eds., *Dialogue on the Errors and Abuses of Painters: Giovanni Andrea Gilio. Texts & Documents*, trans. Michael Bury and Lucinda Byatt. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018).

4 Federico Borromeo, *Sacred Painting*, ed. and translator Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr. (I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2010).

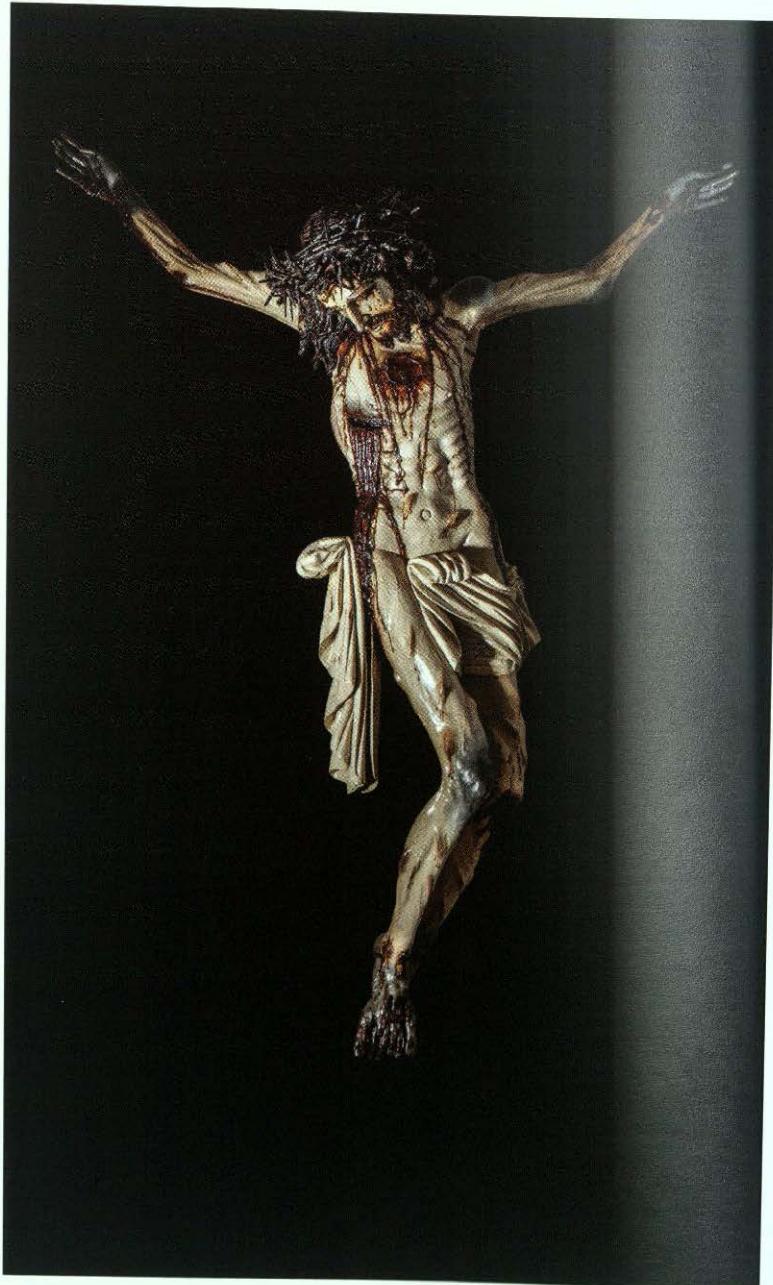


Figure 2: Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix (Photo Credit Brian Grech).

him'.⁵

This paradoxical need present in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious imagery to aim concurrently both for the distant heights of decorum whilst also grabbing the worshipper's sense of empathy, proved at times to be problematic. The former was advocating a certain amount of restraint while the latter demanded a degree of exaggeration, theatricality and over-indulgence.

Ta' Ģiežu Crucifix is perfectly attuned to the demands of the latter but possibly fails to reach the ever-shifting standards of the former. Some modern viewers of the crucifix might find the copiously flowing blood or the thorn piercing the eye-lid nauseating. But what about seventeenth-century worshippers, what would they have made of the gory details? Such a question requires an ambivalent answer. There were those who wished to see art as a means to aesthetise reality. Such was the theoretician Gian Pietro Bellori and, one imagines that, if he were to be confronted with the crucifix's gory imagery, he would have been completely taken aback. On the other hand, even those who advocated idealism accepted the fact that art should never venture too far away from nature. Giovanni Battista Agucchi, in his 1615 *Trattato della Pittura*, defined the later sixteenth century – the era later referred to as Mannerism – as a decline, mainly because of the presence of 'various manners that were far from the true and lifelike'.⁶ He might have been all set against the artificiality of the Mannerists but not necessarily against the use of nature as an inspiring force. Thus, when singling out the Carraccis as the heroes who saved art from its sixteenth-century predicament, he wrote that in the academy they founded in Bologna, there was 'a continuous study of nature, not only of live models but often of cadavers'.⁷ Bellori himself, who might be considered as the anti-

5 B.G. Proske, *Juan Martinez Montanes: Sevillian Sculptor*. (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1967), 40.

6 Robert Enggass and Jonathan Brown, *Italy and Spain, 1600-1750. Sources and Documents*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 24-30

7 Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*. (London: The Warburg Institute, 1947), 241-258. See also John F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context: Learned Naturalism and Renaissance Humanism*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company,

Caravaggist par excellence, conceded that Caravaggio, ‘by avoiding all prettiness and vanity in colour, strengthened his tonalities and gave them blood and flesh. In this way he reminded his fellow painters to work from nature.’

The learned seventeenth-century *cognoscenti* might have had their meandering arguments about what degree of realism is acceptable in a work of art, but the general public, illiterate and very much oblivious to such high-minded debates, might have had its own tastes, shaped by a pervasive visual culture informed by myriad visual and non-visual cues. Such provincial tastes might have been shaped by the dogged obstinacy of a number of ideas and traditions that would somehow have survived the pressures of change. These would have included the cultic reverence to centuries’ old images, miracle plays set up in piazzas attended by throngs of people and Holy Week traditions. In regions geographically removed from the major centres of influence, such persistence was more likely to survive. If Rome and Bologna were pushing forth for an art that struck a perfect balance between Nature and the Ideal, ideas in the provinces may well have been still wedged in a dogged medievalism.

Ta’ Ġiezu Crucifix was made by an artist hailing from Sicily. Frate Innocenzo, the sculptor, of whom only his religious name is known, belonged to the Franciscan Tertiary Order.⁸ Petralia Sottana, the little *borgo* from where he hailed, forms part of the region of Palermo but is ultimately far removed from the city, cocooned as it is in the mountainous region of the Madonie. Innocenzo seems to have been trained locally, possibly with a Madonite carpenter who could have possibly been the father of Frate Umile, another Franciscan sculptor whose story is inextricably linked with that of Innocenzo.⁹ Even though Innocenzo did travel, and records exist which prove that he ventured out considerably away from his native Petralia, certainly to the Marche

2004), 11.

8 George Aquilina, *Il-Franġiskani Maltin ta’ Ġiezu*. (Malta: Midsea Books, 2011).

9 Giuseppe Fazio, *Frate Innocenzo da Petralia Sottana, le Fonte e la Critica*. In Giuseppe Fazio and Salvatore Brancati, eds., *I Crocifissi di Frate Umile e Frate Innocenzo da Petralia*. (Martorina, 2019), 160

and the Umbria regions, such travels took place only later in his life.

It could be well argued that despite his journeys, Innocenzo never really moved too far away from his provincial, Sicilian upbringing. The religious rituals which took place on the Sicilian island especially around Eastertide (some of which survive up till the present day), which include the carrying in procession of effigies portraying a suffering Christ bewigged in real human hair, and the hanging of votive offerings in the shape of dressed-up wax dolls or else in the shape of bunches of carrots and other vegetables, must have ingrained themselves within Innocenzo's psyche. These experiences must be seen as the result of a vibrant form of worship, far removed from the sophisticated ways proposed in the writings of post-Tridentine theologians and Renaissance Humanists.

As pointed out, Innocenzo was also a Franciscan and it is a well-known fact that Franciscan devotion was strongly drawn towards an asceticism that included the morbid contemplation of the suffering Christ. Franciscan thought always put strong currency on embracing the earthly as a means to aim for the spiritual realm. If one were to look at San Carlo Borromeo, a through and through Franciscan in spirit, if not even in the flesh, one realises that Borromeo's insistence on mortifying the flesh, on embracing humility to the point of abject poverty and on using images and relics as means for higher contemplation, is deeply Franciscan at heart.¹⁰

Equally connected with Franciscan devotion were the writings of St Bridget of Sweden. Bridget was a mystical saint whose writings about the life of Jesus, especially her meticulously detailed descriptions of Christ's final hours, have no parallel in religious literature. In her detailed description of Christ's method of crucifixion, she wrote:

And they violently extended those glorious limbs so far on the cross that nearly all his veins and sinews were bursting. Then the crown of thorns, which they had removed from his head when

10 Anne H. Muraoka, *The Path of Humility, Caravaggio and Carlo Borromeo*, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts, vol 34. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015).

he was being crucified, they now put back on, fitting it on to his most holy head.

It is documented that Frate Innocenzo was a devotee of the writings of St Bridget and he is described as travelling from one convent to the next carrying a copy of St Bridget's *Revelations* under his arm, a little detail that attests both to Innocenzo's deep attachment to the mystic saint but also to the seemingly insignificant fact, but which ultimately carries important ramifications, of Innocenzo's ability to read.

It is here argued that one other source which could have imprinted itself forcefully upon the Madonite sculptor's way of thinking was the *Sacra Sindone*, that much venerated relic which carries an uncanny negative image of a brutally executed man, believed to be Christ, on a linen shroud. This treasured winding sheet was also deeply revered by San Carlo Borromeo and it could be well argued that Innocenzo's Valletta Crucifix – and most of his other crucifixes – could be read within a Borromean key. Pietro Giussano, Carlo Borromeo's biographer, wrote this regarding the saint's devotion to the holy relic:

The remembrance of it never left his mind, serving as a stimulant to his love for God, and memorial of the sufferings of our blessed Lord. He felt such devotion to that holy relic that he was not satisfied with visiting it once or twice, but invited Cardinal Paleotto (sic) to go with him, that they might both share in the grace of the pilgrimage.¹¹

It could possibly be argued that the inclusion of one particular wound on Christ's central upper torso could be inspired by the marks present on the Turin shroud. A blemish visible on the Sudarium, (possibly the result of a water stain) might have inspired Innocenzo to create this wound in almost all his crucifixes, including the one in Valletta. The possibility of Innocenzo being familiar with the shroud is quite plausible. During

11 John Peter Giussano, *The life of Charles Borromeo Cardinal Archbishop of Milan*, vol. II. (London: Burns and Oates, 1884), 171.

his trips to central Italy he could have encountered the sacred relic in one of the many towns and villages where it was periodically exposed for worship. If not the actual relic, Innocenzo could have seen one of the many copies – at one point there were more than forty – made after the shroud.

The Shroud, very much in conflict with well-established crucifixion iconography, presents the nail wounds as damaging the heel rather than the wrist of the hands. If Innocenzo were familiar with the shroud, he still chose to go with the iconographical tradition and yet, incongruously, in the *Ta' Ĝiežu Crucifix*, blood, thick and copious, is mostly present near that part of the wrist where the carpal bones would be rather more logical on the palms.¹²

The need to present Christ as an emaciated, bloodied figure, as present in Frate Innocenzo's crucifixes, strongly belongs to the Spanish seventeenth-century tradition, which, in its turn, was influenced by the Counter-Reformation spirit of the age. Artists such as the Castilian Gregorio Fernandez or the Sevillian-by-adoption Juan de Mesa have repeatedly made sculpted effigies depicting the suffering Christ that communicated a bleak sense of despair. Fernandez and de Mesa, together with other Spanish artists, strove to move away from the Italianate, Renaissance-like forms, which were still evident in the images carved by Juan Martines Montanes – de Mesa's one-time master – towards a more expressive, less idealised treatment of the human body. Spanish political and cultural connections with the island of Sicily must have made the islanders well acquainted with such effigies. An overfamiliarity that must have inured Sicilians to the extreme violence depicted. The effigy seized to be just that and it started to acquire the characteristics of a relic. Image and relic began to be confounded to the point that worshipping Catholics, next to one of Innocenzo's crucifixes, might have felt that they were in the presence of the real Jesus or, at least, next to an authentic relic of the crucifixion, the Holy Nail, a thorn from the crown, or a splinter of wood from the Holy Cross. This way of thinking coupled with the morbid rendering of the crucified Christ

12 Attard, *Ta' Ĝiežu Crucifix*, 25.

would have ultimately helped to generate an empathetic reaction from the devout audience.

Innocenzo's visual manner might have been well attuned to that of his Sicilian audience who must have relished, if not venerated, the uncanny verisimilitude he achieved in his art. Yet, conversely, that same manner might have seemed too exotic and regarded as dangerously suspect by the institutionalized authorities of the time: the Church, and especially more so, the Inquisition. When in 1638 Frate Innocenzo was denounced, not for the first time it seems, in front of the S. Uffizio, the accusation was clear enough. It read: 'contro frate Innocenzo, siculo, laico dei minori osservanti, che ha pubblicamente esposto un crocifisso, scolpito contro il commune uso della Chiesa Romana'.¹³ The sentence he received was harsh and succinct. It concluded thus: 'dovrebbe come temerario esser punito, et in oltre e detto crocifisso si dovrebbe far levare dal detto altare, per apportare più tosto ammitatione e scandolo alla città, che devotione'.

Through the research carried out by Fr George Aquilina it has been established that Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix was commissioned by Fra Marco Rosset, an Aragonese knight of St John and member of the Valletta Confraternity of the Santa Croce.¹⁴ It is revealing to note that the date of the setting up of the confraternity in 1646 seems to coincide with the date of the commissioning of the effigy from Frate Innocenzo, underlining the fact that confraternity and image were intrinsically bound from the outset, to the point that one could have hardly existed without the other.¹⁵ The confraternity's main aim was to elevate and enhance the cult towards the miraculous and healing powers of the crucifix. The simple fact that crucifix confraternities were originally set

13 Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Decreta S.O.1638, f. 57v. Cited in Alejandro Cifres, *Fra Innocenzo da Petralia davanti al Tribunale dell'Inquisizione*. In Fazio and Brancati, *I Crocifissi di Frate Umile e Fra Innocenzo da Petralia*, 340-405.

14 Notarial Archives Valletta, R468, 4.21II, 1648, f.253-258. First cited in Aquilina, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*.

15 Christian Attard, *La Confraternita della Santa Croce e Passione di Nostro Signore Gesu Cristo: Beginnings and Development*, in idem., *Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix*, 51-55.

up within the Harbour Area makes perfect sense considering that this was the region with the heaviest number of inhabitants, where people of different creeds would have mingled, where the environment was all ripe for all forms of unimaginable iniquities. Valletta's Santa Croce Confraternity might have been the first confraternity dedicated to the exaltation of the crucifix to be established in Malta. Yet, it was soon followed by other similar confraternities which were set up in other harbour cities, and all were to embrace a powerful image in their quest to push forth the devotion amongst the populace.¹⁶

It would have typically taken Innocenzo less than ten days to produce a crucifix. He would have then gathered his meagre belongings and started journeying towards the next convent and hence, the next work. It is quite uncanny how Innocenzo managed to be so fast considering that work on an effigy would have included the actual carving of wood, the assembling and the polishing, the covering with multiple layers of gesso, the polychromy similarly applied in layers and, last but certainly not least, the addition of parchment and *ceralacca* (sealing wax) to imitate lacerated skin and copiously flowing blood. Accounts recount that the artist would have almost put himself in a religious frenzy, preparing himself spiritually before tackling the next project and praying incessantly whilst absorbed in his work. Possibly one reason why most of Innocenzo's crucifixes, including the one in Valletta, were considered miraculous was due to the expeditious way in which they were produced.

Was Frate Innocenzo residing in Malta whilst carrying out the Valletta Crucifix? Circumstantial evidence seems to point out that he was, possibly living with the Valletta Franciscans. If this were so, as some later chroniclers attest,¹⁷ then this would have been very typical of the Madonite sculptor who was an out and out itinerant artist, who travelled all along the boot of the Italian peninsula (and possibly

16 Matthew Vassallo, 'Crucifix Confraternities in the Harbour Area up to 1800'. (Unpublished Dissertation University of Malta, 2003).

17 Simon Mercieca, *A Sainly Sojourn: Frate Innocenzo da Petralia's Stay in Malta*. In Attard, ed., *Ta' Giežu Crucifix*, 39-46.

beyond), tools in hand and ready for the next work.

The sculpted crucifixes of Frate Innocenzo are not only anatomically correct but they present a convincing portrayal of a man who is physically pushed to his very limits. This includes the parched lips possibly showing signs of mucositis, the skeletal body, the discolouration of the skin, the hematomas, or swollen lumps visible all over the body but also around the ankles, and the gangrenous extremes of the body. One imagines that to be so well conversant with the effects of trauma on the human body it would have taken Innocenzo more than just contemplation and readings of religious texts. One could possibly imagine the Madonite sculptor looking at books about anatomy, such as those published by Andreas Vesalius and Giovanni Filippo Ingrassia. Equally plausible could be Innocenzo's presence during anatomy lessons carried out by doctors on human bodies, more often than not the bodies of executed criminals. These were typically well-attended events, intended both for the instruction of new doctors and barber-surgeons but also as a sort of morbid public entertainment.

The visual demands of a post-Tridentine Church were exacting and possibly also occasionally contradictory. Simplicity of the image to the point of archaism was somehow coupled with a need to be original and relevant to the modern age; or a *regolata mescolanza* as memorably referred to by Andre Gilio. Dramatic imagery, and hence a need for a hyper-realism which aimed to pull out all the emotional stops of the Catholic worshipper, was coupled with a requirement to be visually direct and to create *imagine oneste e devote*. Bishop Molanus in his *De Picturis et Imaginibus Sacris* recalls the medieval concept of the *Excitatio*,¹⁸ where an image was expected to move expressively the worshipper. It is no surprise that a humble, itinerant artist such as Frate Innocenzo might have easily lost himself within such meandering arguments. And to further compound matters, the visual demands of the uneducated, possibly superstitious populace, would have been well distanced from the elitist, sophisticated tastes of those higher up on the social scale. How could one pander for the lower classes without vexing

18 Molanus, *De Picturis et Imaginibus Sacris*. (Leuven, 1570).

the others? Innocenzo's Valletta Crucifix is the perfect embodiment of such ideas, including the implicit but very much present incongruities of the post-Tridentine age. Above everything else, the Crucifix is the product of a rediscovered fervent faith, medieval in its intensity, but which is, again, very much within the expected behaviour consequent upon Trent.