

Religious Art in Gozo (1500-1900): A Study on Patronage Patterns

PAUL MUSCAT

Introduction

The artistic scene in Gozo is dominated largely by religious art. The miniature size of Gozo and its often impoverished community of farmers and fisherman left no scope for private commissions. Throughout the past centuries the Maltese islands displayed a religious character which had been germinating as early as prehistoric times. The church in Gozo was the focal point of every village and the centre around which the life of every rural community revolved. Everything was divided and determined by the religious ceremonies and church festivities. There was a great belief in life after death and many villagers who owned property felt the obligation to remember their parish in their wills. Thus, artistic patronage in Gozo was mostly confined for religious practice and devotions, the most popular being dedicated to the Madonna venerated under various titles.

The commissioning of a painting or a statue served not only as mere decoration but inspired devotees for a proper veneration of the saint. The strong religious devotion is in fact strongly reflected in several valuable works of art which adorn several churches around Gozo. These works were the result of diverse forms of patronage patterns including church, clergy, knights, nobility, and sometimes even from lower classes of society often of collective type.

First References to Religious Art

Unfortunately, few works survived from the Byzantine (A.D. c.535-c.870)¹ and Muslim (A.D. c.870-c.1249) and late medieval period in Gozo.² However, a work of some importance survived from the turbulent years of the Late Middle Ages. This is a limestone relief representing two standing male saints, possibly Peter

and Paul which is presently exhibited in the Folklore Museum in the Gozo Citadel. (Buhagiar, 1990:84) The relief is executed in Byzantine idiom carrying a Latin inscription (SA[ncti]) in the left corner which could have contained the names of the two saints. Similar paintings executed in the style of the relief of the two Saints could have existed in the early post-Muslim churches of Gozo. Unfortunately none such works have survived. The first few documented references to paintings in Gozo date however, to the early sixteenth century. An example of such paintings was found in the chapel of the Saviour, in the old *Matrice* Church which was entirely frescoed with religious images including a Golgotha scene in the apse. (Buhagiar, 1995:116) These murals survived until around 1746.

Other murals in Gozo were found in countryside churches including a scene of the Assumption painted on an apse in a church at Ghajn Xejba, (Bezzina, 1983:224) while other saints and icons were executed inside the church of St. Barbara at Tal-Gruwa found in the limits of Sannat (Bezzina, 1989:75). These were not the only churches to own paintings. Other churches must have had altar paintings painted in the tempera on wood. Like Malta, paintings and *objets d'art* in Gozo were most probably donated by local gentry and other people of some financial means who left sums of money in their will binding their heirs to commission a work of art and for the celebration of masses and for candles to be burnt on their graves. Sadly, surviving Gozitan wills contain little information on *icone* and other works of art (Buhagiar, 1990:85; Wettinger, 1976:108-115).

Funding by the Church and Clergy

The church was the only place in Gozo which offered space for artistic patronage. Church funds were often provided by the proceeds of the *Veneranda*

¹ An example of refined artistic taste from the Roman period includes a beautiful headless draped statue presently found in the Gozo Archaeological Museum. For more information on the Byzantine period see Buhagiar (2005).

² In 1091 the Maltese islands were conquered by Roger de Hautville, Count of Sicily. During the late Middle Ages, Gozo like Malta was also ruled by the Normans, the Suabians, the Angevins and the Aragonese.

Lampada.³ An example of such patronage are two companion canvases showing St. Publius and St. Agatha, painted by Enrico Regnaud (1692-1764) and Gio Nicola Buhagiar (1698-1752) respectively in 1729 (Sciberras, 2003:99-104). These paintings originally flanked the titular altarpiece of “The Assumption of the Virgin” in the choir of the *Matrice* (Muscat, 2008:103-105). They were then replaced by two others showing the same theme by Tommaso Madiona in c.1853. Presently, Regnaud’s and Buhagiar’s works are to be found in the Gozo Cathedral Museum.

There are a considerable number of documented donations by individual ecclesiastics who were ready to finance a work of art. Such donations were made by priests, as well as by high members of the clergy. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the real reason for the actual act of donation. The seventeenth century saw an increase in patronage by the church. This contrasts with the former century which offers little evidence of artistic patronage. This was due to several corsair attacks which subsequently left no scope for artistic patronage.

Two notable artistic donations during the seventeenth century were made by Bishop Baldassare Cagliares (1615-1635). One of the donated altarpieces shows the “Flight into Egypt” (Figure 1) which is a work lacking documented evidence. The pastoral visitation report of 1755 by Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan, (Buhagiar, 1990:90; A.A.M, *Visitatio Alpheran de Bussan 1755*, f. 476v) attributes it to Filippo Paladini (c.1544-1616) who was a late mannerist artist active mainly in Malta and Sicily (Buhagiar, 1988:55-59). Presently the painting is exhibited in the Gozo Cathedral museum. It shows a night scene with St. Joseph pulling behind him the donkey which carries on its back the Virgin and Child. The work is remarkable for its realistic execution and great attention to detail which seems to be a work of a northern artist, thus the attribution to Filippo Palladini must be reconsidered (Buhagiar, 1995:118).

The other altarpiece was donated to a small wayside chapel in Qala showing the Immaculate Conception.



Figure 1. Attr. Filippo Paladini, “The Flight into Egypt,” Gozo Cathedral Museum

During his first year of administration in 1615, Cagliares made a pastoral visit to Gozo, however, it appears that the altarpiece was donated to Qala chapel in 1630 (A.E.G, *Visitatio Cagliares 1630*, f. 34v). Before the donation of this altarpiece the chapel was dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin. According to Agius De Soldanis, Cagliares purposely donated the altarpiece of the Immaculate Conception in order to avoid a clash with the other feast of the Assumption celebrated by the *Matrice* (Farrugia, 1999:Vol. II:119-120). The painting which still adorns the altar of the sanctuary church was wrongly attributed by Agius de Soldanis to the Counter Reformation artist, Federico Barocci (c.1535-1612), (Farrugia, 1999: Vol. II:120) however, the soft rendering and the religious sentimentality are similar to his works, and it could possibly be a product of his *bottega* (Buhagiar, 1995:118). The canvas is almost entirely dominated by the figure of the Virgin with the half length figure of God who appears from a radiant glow from the upper left hand side of the canvas carried by winged heads of cherubs.

Another significant work dates to 1644 commissioned by a Maltese priest Nicola Mangion, holder of a lucrative late medieval benefice of the church of the Annunciation, at Wied il-Lunzjata (Ferres, 1866:563; N.L.M, Ms. Bibl. 1123, f. 24; A.E.G, *Visitatio Cagliares 1630*, f. 25v.). This work shows “The Annunciation of the Virgin” painted by Fra Lucas Garnier who was active during the

³ The procurator of the church is also known as the procurator of the *Veneranda Lampada* which literally means the Holy Lamp. In fact the procurator’s main task was to provide oil or candles for the sanctuary lamp which was daily lit in front of the Holy Sacrament. He was the procurator for the embellishment of the church, therefore, he was involved in the commissioning of various works of art from silver *objets d’art* to altarpieces and statues. The procurator was also responsible to collect funds from the villagers, in fact, during the harvesting season, the procurator went door to door to collect cotton, grain and barely, in order to sell it.

mid seventeenth century. Fra Lucas Garnier's style betrays a Flemish background; however, he was probably French and lived in Malta (Buhagiar, 1988:79). Another donation came in 1680 from Bishop Michele Molina (1678-1682) who is held to have commissioned Mattia Preti (1613-1699) to execute the titular altarpiece of "St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness" (Figure 2) for Xewkija parish church (Borg, 1978:2; Falzon, 2005:60-61). Meanwhile, in 1682 Molina was summoned to the See of Lerida in Catalunya, Spain. According to tradition he took Preti's altarpiece with him and in return commissioned Gioacchino Loretta (1637-c.1712), who was Preti's assistant, to execute a new altarpiece showing the same theme (Buhagiar, 1995:120). However, no reliable documentation has been unearthed so far to sustain this tradition and the probability is that Molina donated only one altarpiece, that is, the one painted by Gioacchino Loretta which presently adorns Xewkija's sculpture museum.

There were instances where an ecclesiastical commission was instilled by a votive motif, in thanksgiving for being saved from a terrible plague epidemic or other natural catastrophes. In fact, the titular painting of "The Virgin of Graces" found in the Capuchin's priory, Rabat, is reputed to have been commissioned as an *ex-voto* in thanksgiving for the lives spared by the earthquake of 1693. It is held that the altarpiece was commissioned by the Chapter of the *Matrice* (Bezzina, 1983: 238)⁴ to Stefano Erardi (1630-1716) (Sciberras, 2003:69-71; Scicluna, 1997). It seems that the Chapter of the *Matrice* was quite informed as regards artistic patronage. In fact, Erardi was an important Maltese artist during the second half of the seventeenth century.

The eighteenth century experienced an increase in patronage from the church. By this period several parishes were established and consequently the building of new churches offered ample space for artistic commissions.⁵ A notable donation came in 1763 from Giacomo Galea, the archpriest of St.

George's church, Rabat. Galea donated two side laterals painted by Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) who was the most important artist of the period (Ferres, 1866:554-555; Montanaro, 1986). These paintings which can be still admired in the choir of St. George's church show "The Beheading of St. George" and "St. George before Diocletian". Both works are typical of the Baroque idiom, characterized by a sense of drama, with figures painted with expressive gestures.

Among several eighteenth century patrons, Can. Benedetto Stellini (c. 1728-1800) stands out. This munificent patron donated three huge canvases executed by Michele Busuttil (1762-1831) to the *Matrice* church in a time span of just two years. The



Figure 2. Gioacchino Loretta, "St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness," Xewkija Sculpture Museum

⁴ Bezzina refers to Agius de Soldanis's manuscript in respect of the altarpiece's donation by the Chapter of the *Matrice*. However, de Soldanis makes no reference as regards its donation by the Chapter of the *Matrice*. The N.L.M, Ms. Bibl. 1123, f. 25 states that Erardi's altarpiece was commissioned by the Gozo *Universitas*. However, according to Agius de Soldanis, the Gozo *Universitas* was responsible only for contributing funds for rebuilding the church of the Virgin of Graces see; N.A.G, ZM 0101, p. 741

⁵ It was not until the second half of the seventeenth century that parishes started to be established outside the limits of Rabat. The first parish to be established was that of the village Xewkija in 1678 followed by; Gharb in 1679, and Nadur, Sannat, Xaghra and Zebbug in 1688.

most remarkable amongst the three donated canvases is surely the titular painting which represents “The Assumption of the Virgin” (Figure 3) executed in 1791. Possibly, Can. Stellini commissioned this huge painting to Michele Busuttill (1762-1831) after consultation with Francesco Saverio Cassar, the archpriest of the *Matrice* (Buhagiar, 1995:124). This painting replaced the old seven-piece retable which is now in the Cathedral Museum (Bezzina, 1999:37). During the time of this commission, Michele Busuttill was still fresh from his academic studies in Rome and this painting was largely admired and earned him such a great reputation that the archpriest Francesco Saverio Cassar in 1793 commissioned him to paint the huge choir laterals which were also paid by Can. Benedetto Stellini (Attard Tabone, 1991:8). These lateral paintings show the “Nativity of the Virgin” and the “Immaculate Conception.” They are also immensely large, however, their state of preservation is very poor. The dark films of old varnish make them very difficult to appraise their artistic value. However, they seem to be works of less artistic merit when compared with the titular painting.



Figure 3. Michele Busuttill, “The Assumption of the Virgin,” *Matrice*, Gozo Cathedral

Patronage by the church persisted also throughout the nineteenth century. It was a period of economic fluctuations and of several epidemics which affected the production of artistic patronage. However, an important donation came from the parish priest of the village of Sannat, Salvatore Grech (1779-1810), who commissioned two companion canvases from Rocco Buhagiar (1725-1805), who was Malta’s most prestigious artist, following the death of Francesco Zahra (Buhagiar, 1995:123; Sciberras, 2003:143). These huge canvases represent “The Beheading of St. Margaret” and “St. Margaret Experiencing the Visitation of the Holy Spirit.” Buhagiar executed these canvases at an old age which restricted him from showing his competence.⁶ These works are important because they are the last known works by Buhagiar (Buhagiar, 1995:123).

As already discussed above, religious works of art were not just mere decorations. They were sometimes a driving force to inflame a particular devotion. This is in fact sustained by a notable bequest made by Bishop Antonio Grech Delicata (1823-1876) who in 1873 donated the painting known as “The Virgin of Salus Infirmorum” (Good Health) (Figure 4) to Qala Parish Church executed by the Italian Pietro Gagliardi (1809-1890). (Buttigieg, 1971:16) In fact, the parish registers dated to 1881 show the payment for a hundred scapulars and a hundred small picture prints of the “Virgin of Salus Infirmorum” for the distribution among the devotees.⁷ The donated painting is a copy of an original medieval painting found in the church of St. Maria in Gianicolo in Rome. (Attard, 1999:43) Through his works, Gagliardi left considerable influence on Maltese artists particularly, Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930) and Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) without ever visiting Malta (Attard, 1999:36).

Internal commissions by the church came also from confraternities and procurators who were responsible for one of the several side altars carrying diverse dedications towards a particular saint. They were responsible from their altar’s embellishment. Funds were provided by the members of the confraternity, and also through legacies and donations by the villagers. One such

⁶ On the “Beheading” there is an inscription which records the donation. It reads: “*Ex dona Rev[erend]i Par[roch]hi Sal[vator]is Grech – 1801*”. Moreover, both paintings carry the coat of arms of the donor.

⁷ Q.P.A, *Esito Diverso*, f. 3r: “...pagate per costo di cento scapolari e cento stampe di Salus Infirmorum...4:7:...”



Figure 4. Pietro Gagliardi, “The Virgin of Salus Infirmorum,” Qala Parish Church

example is the titular statue of “The Immaculate Conception” found in St. Francis Priory Church, Rabat. The statue was sculpted in wood by Salvatore Psaila (1798-1871) in 1838 (Muscat, 2008:118-120). It is remarkable for Psaila’s ability in the rendering of the drapery folds.

Patronage by the church was not only reserved to individual ecclesiastics alone but there is also some limited evidence of collective patronage by the clergy. An example comes from the *Matrice* Church when the Sodality of Priests commissioned the altarpiece of “St. Philip Neri” to Tommaso Madiona (1804-1864) in 1846 (Muscat, 2008:69). It was established on 23rd February 1689, and was a sort of mutual help society for Gozitan priests (Bezzina, 1999:26). This altarpiece received great admiration and praise from contemporary critics who described it as a masterpiece (Espinosa Rodriguez, 1997:74; *L’Ordine* 24/7/1852; 31/7/1852). However, this painting is marked by some weak drawing and frigid composition. The canvas is divided into two tiers; in the upper part there is the scene of “The Nativity” and in the lower part the representation of “St. Philip in Ecstasy” (Muscat, 2008:162-164).

Patronage by the Knights

In Gozo, most of the surviving examples of patronage by the Knights are provided by its Governors. However, there is also some limited evidence of patronage by the reigning Grand Masters. There are various commissions by the Knights dating between the late sixteenth century and the late eighteenth centuries. The earliest evidence of such patronage dates to the 1580s. The first examples of their patronage was, however, not so much exciting in terms of artistic quality. One of the first possible indications of patronage from the Knights in Gozo is evident by two coat of arms of Grand Master Hugues de Loubenx Verdalle (1582-1595) found on a late Mannerist painting of limited artistic interest showing “The Meditations of St. Augustine” (Figure 5). The painting of the “Meditations of St. Augustine” is an oil on canvas presently found in the Augustinian Priory, Rabat. It is traditionally reputed to have belonged to the church of “Santa Maria ta` Gajdor” in the vicinities of Ramla Bay which was deconsecrated in 1657 (Buhagiar, 1995:116). The coat of arms which seems to be original, does not carry a cardinal’s hat, therefore this indicates that the



Figure 5. Unknown 16th Century, “The Meditations of St. Augustine,” St. Augustine Priory, Rabat, Gozo

painting was executed before Verdalle was ordained cardinal in 1588. Therefore, it must have been painted between 1582 and 1588. However, even though the painting seems to have been donated by the reigning Grand Master it is not a work of outstanding artistic quality. On the contrary it is rather a work of a mediocre artist, probably of Sicilian or South Italian extraction (Buhagiar, 1995:117).

In 1622, the Governor of Gozo, Fra Richard de Nini Claret (1618-1622), donated an altar painting showing “The Nativity of the Virgin” to the church known as Ta` Savina, in Rabat (Buhagiar, 1995:118). The reason behind its donation is recorded in the inscription found at the lower right hand side of the painting.⁸ The inscription says that the temple dedicated to the Virgin Mary was erected during the time of the death of Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt and the election of his successor Ludovico Vasconcellos (1622-1623). For this occasion, Fra Richard de Nini Claret who Governed Gozo for four years, donated the altarpiece as a gift to the newly erected church in 1622. The painting of “The Nativity of the Virgin” is of mediocre artistic merit painted in a late mannerist idiom. Its main significance lies in the depiction of the Castello in the background which makes the painting a work of documentary importance because it shows the modifications carried out on the fortifications of the *Castello* a few years before.

Another Governor of Gozo, Francesco Salinas donated the altarpiece representing “The Virgin of Soledad” (or of Sorrows) to the old *Matrice* Church in 1647 (Buhagiar, 1995:118). In 1644, Bishop Balaguer had requested the renewal of the altarpiece dedicated to “The Nativity” inside the old *Matrice* Church. However, nothing was done until 1647 when the Governor, who was a great devotee of the Virgin of Soledad, made a suggestion to replace the old altarpiece by a painting of “The Virgin of Soledad” that he had brought from Castille (Buhagiar, 1995:118). Throughout the years, the painting acquired great cultic devotion and was transferred to the new *Matrice* Church on its having been finished in 1711. It was installed in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament until it was replaced by



Figure 6. Preti and his Bottega, “St. George and the Dragon,” St. George Parish Church, Rabat Gozo

a copy executed by Francesco Zahra in the middle of the eighteenth century. Salinas` painting was subsequently placed in a street shrine from where it disappeared in the 1950’s (Buhagiar, 1995:119).

Donations by Governors of Gozo persisted also during the second half of the seventeenth century. This is evident by the donation of a canvas executed by Stefano Erardi showing “St. Zita and St. James” donated by the Governor of Gozo, the Castillian, Ludovico Xedler y Gamez (1665-1666/1667-1670/1673-1676) (Muscat, 2008:177). Stefano Erardi’s altarpiece was originally donated to the Priory church of St. Francis found in Rabat.⁹ Presently the altarpiece forms part of the exhibits of the Gozo Cathedral Museum. This painting represents St. Zita, the patroness of domestic servants and probably the apostle St. James the elder painted as a pilgrim who meets St. Zita by a well on which the words “*SANTA SITA / ORA PRONOBIS*”

⁸ “*Feliciter deficiente e vita ser(enissimi)o I(llustrissi)mo Fr. Alophio De Wignacourt se prostere succedenti Ill(ustrissi)mo Fr. Ludovico Vasconcellos Magno Magistro Insularum Melitae et Gauli Principe Edificatum Est Templum BMW in cuius Laudem et honorem ab Dom(inus) I(llustrissi)mo D(ominus) FR(ater) Riccardo Nini De Claret Qui Nunc Insulam Gauli Sedulo Gubernamivit Per Quadriennium haec imago dicata fuit – MDC. XXII Me(Nsis) (9) (Novem) Bris I(ndictone)s.*”

⁹ Verbal communication with Mr. Joseph Sagona.

are inscribed. This altarpiece is quite interesting and indicates that the Governor was well informed about the Maltese artistic scene for Stefano Erardi was a very popular artist during the second half of the seventeenth century.

The first truly remarkable donation by the Knights for the Gozitan churches came from the Governor of Gozo, Fra Don Francesco De Corduba (1676 – 1678) when in 1678 donated to St. George's church, Rabat, the titular altarpiece of "St. George and the Dragon" (Figure 6) executed by Mattia Preti and his *bottega* (Spike, 1989:50; A.E.G, *Visitatio Molina* 1678, f. 65v-66r). It was the period when the terrible plague epidemic which struck over the island of Malta between 1675 and 1676 faded away. This donation was purely a manifestation of devotion; in fact, De Corduba was so much devoted towards the saint that when the church was rebuilt he used to carry stone slabs and sacks of mason's sand as an example for those who saw him (Farrugia, 1999: Vol. II:58). The canvas which dominates the chancel of St. George's parish church shows the saint as a warrior, victorious over the dragon.¹⁰

However, despite these commissions by some Grand Masters and Governors, when compared with Malta, Gozo still did not benefit much from the Knights' patronage. During the eighteenth century there was a remarkable decline of patronage from the Knights. This is noticeable not only in Gozitan churches but also in the Conventual church, Valletta, Malta. In fact, during this period the Order was not prolific as regards artistic import, only few notable examples are found in the Conventual church dating between 1730 and 1775 (Sciberras, 2004:31). This lack of artistic patronage was the result of the Order's financial difficulties (Sciberras, 2004:31). This was due to the Grand Masters' lavish spending in various projects for defensive purposes, public works and personal commodities and warfare. In fact, Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773) alone left a debt of nearly two million *scudi* (Sire, 1994:221).

Patronage by the Nobility

Only few examples of donations and commissions of works of art by the nobility and gentry exist.

This was probably due to the fact that most leading families did not reside permanently in Gozo, but had main residences in Malta since it was safer and more secure (Montalto, 1979:127). The most notable families having connection with Gozo were Giovanni Castelletti, Giovanni Gourgion and Marchese Lorenzo Antonio Cassar Desain (1852-1884). The first known donation by a member of the Gozitan nobility was by Giovanni Castelletti of a painting showing "St. Catherine of Alexandria." It is dated to 1623 as inscribed in the lower part of the canvas. However, this date puts in doubt its actual donation by Castelletti since he died in the first half of the sixteenth century.¹¹ This painting is reputed to have been venerated in his private chapel dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria which was found in the old *Matrice* church (Buhagiar, 1995:92; Wettinger, 1975:9). Presently, this painting is exhibited in the Gozo Cathedral Museum. It is a work of an unknown mediocre late Mannerist artist. It has a portrait insertion at the lower left area which shows a man with his hands clasped in prayer. An inscription identifies this man as Giovanni Castelletti who assists a vision of a lavishly dressed St. Catherine of Alexandria.

Giovanni Gourgion was the most important benefactor in late seventeenth century Gozo. He donated several altarpieces and *objets d'art* for diverse Gozitan churches. Some of the works donated by this munificent patron are of notable artistic merit, namely, the altarpiece of "The Virgin of Mercy with All Souls in Purgatory" (Figure 7) donated for St. George's Parish Church, Rabat. It was executed by Mattia Preti and his *bottega* (Buhagiar, 1995:120). This painting includes two full-length portraits at the bottom corners of the canvas of the donor and his wife pouring water from a pitcher to succour the suffering souls who emerge from the blazing fires of purgatory. The upper tier of the canvas is dominated by the Virgin and child supported over a cushioning cloud carried by several *putti*. The painting carries two dates; that of 1687 and 1688. These dates presumably refer to the commission and completion of the work (Buhagiar, 1990:95). This painting is almost entirely the work of Preti's *bottega*. This was normal *bottega* practice

¹⁰ The figure of St. George is almost an exact replica of a "St. Michael the Archangel" that Preti painted in an altarpiece of "The Virgin of the Angels" for the church of San Domenico in Taverna. Apparently, De Corduba donated another altarpiece to St. Augustine Priory church, Rabat. This is evident by De Corduba's coat of arms which emblazons the altarpiece of "The Virgin of Charity with St. Roch and St. Dominic." This painting is of unknown authorship and date and its work is of lesser artistic merit.

¹¹ The epigraph seen on his monument says that the monument was already installed in his chapel in 1544.

where apprentices worked from preparatory sketches prepared by the master. Some years later, in 1690, Gourgion donated another altarpiece by Preti and his *bottega*. This was the titular altarpiece of the Augustinian Priory church situated in Rabat which represents “St. Augustine with St. John the Baptist and St. William of Aquitaine” (Buhagiar, 1995:120,122). The hands of the assistants can be easily detected such as in the figure of John the Baptist who is painted in a stiff and rigid position directing the spectator’s attention towards the seated figure of St. Augustine.

After Giovanni Gourgion very little documented evidence exists of artistic patronage by nobility and gentry during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, this should not exclude the possibility of such type of patronage patterns. An interesting example dates to 1876, when the Marchese Chev. Lorenzo Antonio Cassar Desain donated an altarpiece to the old parish church of Ghajnsielem. This altarpiece shows the representation of “St. Anthony of Padova with the



Figure 7. Preti and his Bottega, “The Virgin of Mercy with Souls in Purgatory,” St. George Parish Church, Rabat, Gozo

Child Jesus” however, its authorship is unknown. It is traditionally attributed to Giuseppe Cali, however, there is no documentation to sustain its authorship.

Patronage by Middle and Lower Classes

Patronage by Middle and Lower Classes was more frequent when compared with the nobility. Patronage by Lower Classes was more in the form of collective contributions since no ordinary workman was able to finance an entire commission on his own. Patronage of Middle Class origin sometimes produced interesting works of art. In 1642, a certain Giorgio Muscat from Hal Luqa, Malta, donated an altarpiece showing “The Virgin of Mercy with Souls in Purgatory” (Buhagiar, 1995:122). Muscat nicknamed as ‘*il-Bennicc*’ was a merchant of cotton (Vella, 1995:95). Through the founding and donation of this altarpiece, Muscat was responsible for the initiation of the veneration of “The Virgin of Divine Grace” (Figure 8) in St. George’s church (A.E.G, *Visitatio Balaguer, 1654, vol. III, ff. 8r-v; Bezzina, 1965:20*). The artist is unknown, however, stylistically the execution points to the late Mannerist artist Filippino Dingli who was active during the first half of the seventeenth century (Buhagiar, 1995:122). The bottom centre of the canvas is emblazoned by the family coat of arms and an inscription which reads; “*GEORIVS MVSCAT MELITENSIS DE CASALI LUCA ANNO DOMINI 1642*” which records the donation.

Two bequests worth mentioning date to the first half of the eighteenth century donated by Horatio Gilestri and a Giurato, Basilio Grima. The former was a Maltese who resided in Gozo in the vicinities of the Virgin of Mercy chapel (*tal-Hniena*) in Xewkija. The altarpiece which represents “The Virgin of Mercy with St. Bartholomew” was donated to the mentioned chapel in 1735 and was painted by Gian Nicola Buhagiar who was one of the leading Maltese artists during the first half of the eighteenth century (Borg, 1978:11,88). Grima’s bequest is however, of less artistic merit. This painting was donated to St. George’s church, Rabat in 1739 (Bezzina, 1965:9-10). The authorship is unknown, however, it has strong stylistic affinities to Enrico Regnaud (Buhagiar, 1995:126; Sciberras, 2003:99-104). It was previously venerated on the altar dedicated to the Holy Trinity found in the right aisle next to the

transept.¹² Presently, it is preserved in the storeroom of St. George's church. The painting shows the Holy Trinity and the Virgin in the upper tier while the lower tier is occupied by Sts. Omobono, Basil and Andrew.

Another interesting example of Middle Class patronage comes from the small village of Kercem. In 1854, Rosa Camilleri donated the titular altarpiece showing "St. Gregory Interceding with the Virgin for the Plague-Stricken" painted by Salvatore Busuttill (1798-1854) (Scicluna, 1970). It was executed in Rome against the fee of 300 *scudi*.¹³ This altarpiece is one of the finest nineteenth century paintings in Malta (Buhagiar, 1990:110). It commemorates the victims of the plague which struck over the village of Xaghra in 1813-14 leaving more than a hundred victims (Scicluna, 1965; Cassar, 1964:175-187). This painting is very important since it is Busuttill's only work found in the Gozitan and Maltese churches.

The nineteenth century saw an intensification of collective patronage by the villagers. However, patronage by individual patrons persisted throughout the century. The last decades of the nineteenth century were dominated by the works of Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930). Gozo also benefited from his works some of which were the result of humble patronage. These include the titular altarpiece of "St. Lawrence" donated by a certain merchant Lorenzo Camenzuli to the Saint's church in 1889 (S.L.P.A, *Ms. Chronicon ed Inventario Parr. Salv. Portelli (1933-34)*, p. 3). Meanwhile, another three paintings by Cali were donated in 1891. One of them was donated by a short lived foundation better known as "Conservatorio Vincenzo Bugeja", established by Bugeja himself. He was a banker and financier. Bugeja donated the sum of £1000 to be divided amongst several parishes around Malta and Gozo and had to be realized in a work of art, executed either in silver, marble or as an oil painting (*Risorgimento*, 19/9/1890; Bonnici, 2002; *Risorgimento* 9/9/1890; *Risorgimento*, 12/9/1890). The best known work in Gozo funded through Bugeja's legacy is Cali's altarpiece of "The Crucifixion" which was donated to Zebbug Parish

Church. Meanwhile, the other two were donated by a certain Michele Mercieca and Michelangelo Borg. These paintings show "The Virgin of the Rosary" and "St. Michael the Archangel" donated to Ghajnsielem's old Parish church and St. Lawrence Parish Church respectively. Mercieca was most probably a boat owner (*padrone*) as evident by his marble tomb stone which is dominated by a representation of an anchor. Whereas, Borg was an emigrant in Boghari (S.L.P.A, *Ms. Chronicon ed Inventario Parr. Salv. Portelli (1933-34)*, p. 3). Two other emigrants living in North Africa, Giuseppe and Saverio Sultana, provided the necessary expenses for the realization of the two lateral paintings both executed by Giuseppe Cali in 1894 (Refalo Rapa, 1969:33). Giuseppe and Saverio were brothers who before leaving to North Africa resided in Xaghra (*Id-Devot ta` Marija*, no. 12, November 1894:18). The paintings represent "The Immaculate Conception" and "The Presentation of the Virgin" both executed in a delicate decorative charm.



Figure 8. Circle of Filippino Dingli, "The Virgin of Mercy with Souls in Purgatory," St. George Parish Church, Rabat Gozo

¹² It was then replaced by the present altarpiece of "The Holy Trinity together with the Sacred Family" painted by Giuseppe Cali in 1905.

¹³ K.P.A, Ms. Dun G. Cachia 15/5/1875, [unpaginated]: "*Quadro dei Titolari la B.M.V del Soccorso, e San Gregorio Papa Magno posto sull'altare Maggiore fatto a spese della fundatrice Rosa Camilleri a Roma dal Pittore Sigr; Salvatore Busuttill Gozitano nell'anno 1854 col Prezzo di scudi 300.*" I would like to thank Fr. Karm Borg for handing me this documentation.

The island's limited resources and its seclusion were sometimes of a detriment to artistic patronage patterns. However, despite all the drawbacks a small island possess, Gozo owns notable works of art and succeeded in attracting some of the most important Maltese artists of the period. Nonetheless, whatever the advantages and disadvantages of Gozo as an island, the study and understanding of its patronage patterns and the mechanics of ecclesiastical commissions is essential for a proper evaluation and understanding of the Gozitan artistic scene.

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Paul Muscat possesses the degrees of B.A (Hons) and Masters in History of Art from the University of Malta. His main area of research is Patronage Patterns and Mechanics of Ecclesiastical Commissions in Gozo.