

Mattia Preti - Architetto della Sacra Religione di Malta

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Note: This paper was presented at a scholarly conference organized by the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta in association with the Soprintendenza PSAE del Lazio and the Comune di Valmontone. Entitled 'Sotto la volta dell'aria: Mattia Preti. approfondimenti e ricerche.' This conference was held at Palazzo Pamphilj in Valmontone outside Rome where, Monday 3rd November 2013, a distinguished international gathering of academics and restoration experts addressed various historical, artistic and technical aspects of Preti's work, to commemorate the 400th centenary of the birth of the artist. The 'volta dell'aria' incorporated in the title of the conference manifesto refers to the restored ceiling fresco of the hall where the event took place, painted in the spring of 1661 by Mattia Preti (1613-1699) for Prince Camillo Francesco Maria Pamphilj (1622-1666) who was, at one time, the general of the Papal armies.

The mountains and hills of Calabria have contributed several illustrious personalities who have collectively enriched the turbulent history of mankind. Among these one can mention eighteen Saints of the Catholic Church including Saint Francesco de Paola [1416-1507]; six popes and, for good measure, one medieval antipope John XVI [945-1001]; King Roger II [1130-1154] and Prince Bohemond of Antioch [1058-1111]; the renegade Ottoman admiral and ruler of Tunis Uluy Ali Pasha, the 'Occhiali' who had participated in the great siege of Malta and the battle of Lepanto [1519-1587]; the famous philosophers

Bernardino Telesio [1509-1588] and Tommaso Campanella [1538-1639]; the astronomer Aloisio Lilius [1510-1576]; Prince Gregorio Carafa who was a Grand Master of the Religion of Malta [1680-1690] and, in the post-Baroque age, the Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni [1882-1916] and the world famous designer Gianni Versace [1946-1997]. In the Baroque age, Calabria also produced then three outstanding painters: Francesco Cozza [1605-1682], Gregorio Preti [1603-1672] and Gregorio's younger brother, Mattia Preti [1613-1699], the subject of this brief intervention.

Mattia Preti was primarily known to the Catholic world of the seventeenth century as a prolific painter and, since 1700, much ink has been spilled concerning his rich legacy of paintings in Rome, Naples, Malta and elsewhere, remarkable for the sophistications of their composition and execution and for their potential of admirably adorning sacred and profane interiors in true baroque style. By contrast very little ink has been spilled and still less research work has been carried out, concerning what I consider to be Mattia Preti's praiseworthy architectural skills, particularly evident during the 1660-1699 period when he was serving the Religion of Malta. One notable exception was a contribution by the twentieth-century art historian, Chev. Vincenzo Bonello who was the first person who was brave enough to contribute a brief but concise article entitled *Mattia Preti, Architetto* to the proceedings of the *XV congresso di storia dell'architettura*, held in Malta in September 1967 and published in Rome in 1970.

In this paper, I shall attempt to highlight some references to Mattia Preti's architectural formation and post-1660 activity as an architect by focusing on what is revealed in at least four quasi-contemporary printed sources, before discussing some case-studies of his architectural activity in Malta.

The first source – source A – consists of a four-volume work entitled *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani non mai date alla luce da Autore alcuno* published by the Francesco and Cristoforo Ricciardo printing press of the Royal Palace in Naples in 1742. The author of this work was the Neapolitan scholar Bernardo de'Dominici

who was the son of the Maltese painter Raimondo de' Dominici and who, incidentally, was in 1698 conducted to Malta by his Maltese father to satisfy his thirst to meet Mattia Preti - *per accondiscendere*, according to Ferdinando Bologna writing in the *Dizionario Biografico Treccani*, *al suo ardente desiderio di conoscere Mattia Preti, di cui Raimondo era stato discepolo in giovinezza*.

The second source – source B – consists of a monograph entitled *Notizie della Vita del Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti scritte da Bernardo de' Dominici e pubblicate fra le Vite dei Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti Napoletani* which was published by Zeferino Micallef in 1864 on behalf of the *Societa Maltese delle Arti*. The copy of this monograph once formed part of the library of the Maltese historian Sir Hannibal Scicluna, the author of a magnificent book on the Conventual Church of St John the Baptist in Valletta. It contains at least three pages of interest concerning Preti's involvement in the world of architecture.

Page 7 contains a reference to his early studies in Rome in the mathematical disciplines, perspective drawing and architecture, also to his association with distinguished professors of the famous Roman art school known as the *Accademia di San Luca*, later described by His Majesty Louis XIV of France as “the fount and teacher of many famous artists”: Page 129 contains a reference to Preti's interest in the sciences, which in the seventeenth century included a wide-spectrum of subjects gathered within the so-called mathematical disciplines, very useful for anyone wishing to learn about fortifications, architecture and related themes - which would have served him well during his later sojourn in fortress Malta.

Page 131 provides precious information about Mattia Preti's post-1660 architectural interventions in Malta, seemingly exaggerated but not so much when one evaluates Preti's documented close association in Malta with Mederico Blondel des Croisettes, the resident military engineer of the Religion of Malta who was responsible for all military and public building projects in Malta at the time. Cavaliere Blondel, the brother of the famous François Blondel, had somewhat reluctantly succeeded Francesco Buonamici who had in the Summer

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disegno lasciato in casa da Gregorio suo fratello, allor ch'ei partì per Roma. Attese ancora alla scherma, perciocchè praticando egli con alcuni nobili giovanetti volle in essa con loro esercitarsi. Poichè fu pervenuto all'età di 17 anni, sentendo che Gregorio suo fratello avea grido di buon Pittore a Roma, ed invitato ad andare colà dal medesimo, che ricordavasi della di lui abilità nel disegno, senza curar punto delle preghiere della madre, quasi fuggiasco partì dalla patria, accompagnandosi con alcuni mercatanti di seta, e dopo brieve dimora in Napoli, a Roma si condusse. Giunto in quell'alma città, fu amorevolmente accolto da Gregorio, e quindi incaminato ne' severi studj di Filosofia, e di Matematica, e specialmente di Prospettiva e di Architettura, e confortato alla lettura delle Sacre e Profane Istorie, in ciascuna delle quali facoltà egli eccellente divenne.

Ma perchè (come abbiám detto) il genio di Mattia era inclinato al disegno, ei volle soprattutto che il fratello lo istruisse nelle buone regole di esso, e fra poco spazio di tempo si trovò molto innanzi, non ostante le difficoltà, sicchè ormai con franchezza maneggiava il matitatojo, quindi fiorendo in Roma varj incomparabili maestri, lumi della pittura, s'ingegnò Mattia di veder tutti operare, prendendo domestichezze coi loro Discepoli. Gareggiò poi con gli Accademici di S. Luca, bravi disegnatori, e con lo stimolo della emulazione divenne eccellente nel maneggiar la matita, e nel disegno massimamente,

Figure 1. Page 7 from *Notizie della Vita del Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti*.

of 1659 returned to his native Lucca to there remodel a number of buildings including a theatre.

There is, besides and in connection with the indicated contents of Source B, one particular painting dating from Mattia Preti's sojourn in Italy that suggests that he was very much aware of contemporary palace design in Baroque Rome, dominated as it was by the Francesco Borromini - Gian Lorenzo Bernini -Pietro da Cortona triumvirate. When closely examined, this painting provides additional evidence of

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serio, coi civili giocondo, e faceto, coi plebei piacevole con gravità, e coi poveri era tutto amore, e carità. Fu eruditissimo nelle scionze, e voratissimo nelle istorie, o nelle favole, e tanto che nelle conversazioni era ammirato, e tenuto per dottissimo uomo. I suoi detti in quanto alla professione furono sempre gravi, ed era di esempio a chiunque l'ascoltava: come fu allora che disse ad un tal pittore, che persuadeva i giovani a colorir presto senza tanto disegnare, per acquistar la pratica de' colori: *Insegnate i giovani a disegnar bene, e poi a colorire, altrimenti sapranno ben colorire, e mal disegnare*, e però riprendeva molti su tal particolare, con chiamarli case fabbricate sulla crota, e senza fondamenta; compativa però gl'ignoranti, dicendo che non avevano avuto maggior dono da Dio; anzi allorchè ricorrevano a lui, procurava di ajutarli col consiglio, e colle opere, facendo a molti i disegni di ciò che essi dovean dipingere, molte volte ritoccava loro l'opere fatte, e in ciò, diceva egli, che adempiva il precetto dell'amare il prossimo, poichè col beneficio si dimostra maggiormente l'amore. Onorò poi i virtuosi così nelle lettere, che nella pittura, nè mai disse mal di niuno, tuttochè egli venisse censurato da molti. Parlò sempre con rispetto de' valentuomini, e dopo Raffaello stimò più di tutti Annibal Caracci, chiamandolo il moderno Raffaello, ed ebbe in venerazione i di lui scolari, e massimamente il Domenichino, che chiamava il vero seguace di

Figure 2. Page 129 from *Notizie della Vita del Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti*.

the exposure of Preti to architectural design and perspective drawing following his arrival in Rome in 1641 from his native Taverna in Calabria. It can be seen that the theme of this work – *The Parable of the rich man and Lazarus* – is here reinforced by the inclusion in the background scenario of an ornate Baroque palace which Preti presumably introduces to symbolise and communicate the rich man's affluence, as any person of consequence would have wished to do in contemporary Rome. This painting, now forming part of the collection

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de' suoi discepoli principianti fece una facilissima istruzione delle misure de' membri appartenenti alla testa; la quale noi in ultimo riporteremo per beneficio comune degli studiosi del disegno.

Attese gran tempo all' architettura, e la possedè in ottimo grado, a tal segno, che non fu meno stimato in questa facoltà che nella pittura. Testimonj di ciò sono le molte fabbriche fatte in Malta, e massimamente ne' baluardi che difendon la marina, e le fabbriche del nuovo castello, ove è situata la lanterna sul molo. Anche alcune chiese sono state rifatte, ed abbellite con suoi disegni, ed assistenza, ed alcune case ancora di Gran Croci, e di altri cavalieri, e cittadini. I suoi quadri si veggon per lo più arricchiti di architettura, e nella chiesa di S. Giovanni in Malta quanto è dipinto d'architettura, di prospettiva, e ornamento, tutto è di sua invenzione, e del suo pennello. E questa è la ragione, perchè egli intendesse bene, e rigorosamente il sotto in su, parte tanto difficile, e da pochi pittori posseduta, ancor che molti falsamente si lusinghino di esserne maestri.

Fu di religiosi costumi, nè mai lasciava giorno senza udire la S. Messa, e soleva spesso ricevere i Sacramenti della penitenza, e della Eucarestia, e col suo esempio esortava tutti i suoi servidori, e schiavi cristiani, come ancora i discepoli a far lo stesso, anzi che per lo più gli conduceva seco a tal fine. La divozione della B. Vergine Maria:

Figure 3. Page 131 from *Notizie della Vita del Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti*.

in the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica* of Palazzo Barberini in Rome constitutes perhaps the strongest visual evidence of Preti's early interest in architectural design, proving beyond a shadow of doubt that he would have clearly understood the underlying principles and embellishment aims of Roman Baroque architecture before travelling to Malta in 1661, about which more below. It is also evident from this painting that Mattia Preti would have also been conscious of the Baroque mind's

equation of this ornate type of palace architecture with the privileges and pretensions of the upper strata of contemporary society, in this case symbolized by the artist's "rich man"

The third source – Source C – is an extract from Lione Pascoli's *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti moderni scritte, e dedicate alla Maesta di Carlo Emanuel Rè di Sardegna* which was published in Rome in the printing press of Antonio de Rossi in 1736. Relying heavily on an earlier text authored by Filippo Baldinucci entitled *Notizie de' professori del disegno*, Lione Pascoli focuses on Mattia Preti's versatility as a professor of composition and Baroque aesthetics, responsible for *molte, e molto bell'opere, edazioni, che fece, occulta al mondo erudito*.

The fourth source – Source D – is Fra Bartolomeo dal Pozzo's *Istoria della Religione militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolmitano detta di Malta* published in the printing press of Gerolamo Albrizzi in Venice in 1715. This valuable source contains on page 302 - corresponding to the year 1662 – a reference to Preti's *chev d'ouevre* in the Conventual Church in Valletta and on page 446 – this time corresponding to the year 1674 – a reference to the motivation for the rebuilding by Mattia Preti of a *Suntuosa Cappella sotto l'invocazione dell'Immacolata Concettione de Maria nel sito della vecchia cappella di Sarria, il che viene eseguito l'anno seguente*, a task involving important architectural and structural decisions that had to be made because of the large dome of the building and, particularly, because its proximity to the lines of fire of the Pietro Paolo Floriani artillery fortifications.

Much has been written about the Conventual Church of the Religion of Malta situated in the heart of Valletta which started being built in 1573. The travelogue of Albert Jouvin de Rochefort describing the visit to Valletta of this distinguished Frenchman in 1664, informs us that Mattia Preti's famous ceiling fresco glorifying the life of the patron saint of the Order, St John the Baptist, was instrumental in beautifying the interior of the church. What Jouvin does not mention, however, is that the execution of this painting in 1662-1664 by 'Cav. Fr Mattia Preti, pittor celebre sopra nominato Il Calabrese' (Pozzo), was preceded by



Figure 4. Line engraving showing a portrait of Mattia Preti (1613-1699).

a request of Preti to effect a number architectural interventions to the structural fabric of the church which, according to a letter that he wrote in January 1662 to Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina, - quoted by John Spike in his book *Mattia Preti – Documenti [Firenze:Centro Di, 1998]* - were executed under his direction in 1661 – “*le opere architettoniche nella Chiesa di S. Giovanni a Valletta sono state compiute con grande soddisfazione sia del Gran Maestro Raffaello Cotoner, che gli regalo una catena d’oro valutata sei cento scudi, che del Consiglio che istrui il Comun Tesoro dell’Ordine di pagargli tutte le pensioni gia promesse.*” In reflection of his knowledge of what was more and what was less important in the new Baroque churches of the Counter-Reformation, Preti had originally recommended all these alterations with the intention of admitting more light into the interior of the building so as to better illuminate his grand project of transforming its bland walls of the sixteenth century into the truly seventeenth-century jewelled casket that can still be admired today. For fear of structural problems, however, not all his recommendations were accepted by the Grand Master and his



Figure 5. Preti in Rome - The Parable of the rich man and Lazarus - 1653.

Council. According to the archival records¹ he had wanted to enlarge - by transforming into a square shape - the oval vault windows but this proposal had been refused in view of the insistence of third parties that cracks would consequently appear in the vault. Mattia had also wanted to eliminate the cross walls that separated the different langue chapels but, because of fears of inadequate support for the immense vault, this was scaled down to a mere widening of the arched doorways to a bare minimum of “*tre palmi per parte*”. He had also wanted, and this time obtained approval, for introducing the heavy piers - which he later brilliantly decorated with carved and gilded decoration - supporting the arches to the side chapels. But, perhaps, the main architectural achievement of Mattia Preti in the Conventual church - for which he understandably obtained immediate approval - concerned the entrance wall of the building where, on the inside, a magnificent balustrade and a larger door ‘window of appearances’ – to be used after the election of a new Grand Master – was formed while on the outside, the bland

¹ NLM, Arch.260, *Liber Conciliorum Status* 1657-64 ff.108v-109r.



Figure 6. Frontispiece of *Notizie de' Professori del Disegno* by Baldinucci (Florence. 1728).

walls of the earlier building were now magically transformed by means of an arched architectural feature introducing - in the post-tridentine manner of Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones Fabricae et Suppellectillis Ecclesiasticae* of 1577 - the central axis to the church leading to the high altar. Mattia Preti's interventions in the entrance area of the Conventual church suggest that he was not only aware of the Borromeo's directives

of the Council of Trent for the building of Catholic Churches but also of the diverse solutions that had been explored by the architects of ancient Rome in the creation of their vaulted buildings, which Mattia Preti, like other architects associated with the *Accademia di San Luca*, would have certainly been encouraged to study during his sojourn in Rome!

The Church of the Immaculate Conception at Sarria represents the second case-study of Mattia Preti's architecture, now clearly attributed to him by virtue of a document dated 27 May 1676 which refers to a decision by the council of the Religion of Malta to approve a wooden model made by Mattia Preti for the new church – *Die xxvii Maij 1676. Essendosi visto il modello della Chiesuola, che deve fabbricarsi, nella Floriana dedicate alla Concettione purissima di Nostra Signora formato dal Cavalier fra Mattia Preti di forma sferica, l'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Gran Maestro, e il Venerando Consiglio hanno approvato detta forma, ordinando, che il diametro sia di quaranta palmi con l'altezza proportionate.*² The decision to build Preti's miniature Roman pantheon on the site of a sixteenth-century chapel that had been built on the same site by the Spanish Fra Martino Sarria Navarro, had actually been taken on 11 April of that same year when Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner and his Council, alarmed at the devastation caused by a virulent plague, had resolved to seek the intercession of our Lady and other Saints through a solemn vow of everlasting devotion to the Immaculate Conception.³ Originally fitted with a lantern rising above its ribbed dome, the Church of the Immaculate Conception at Sarria is a unique project since it reveals the harmonious thinking process of Preti the architect and Preti the painter, revealed in the positioning and composition of all the interior sacred paintings inside this building which were made by Mattia, including that of the Immaculate Conception placed on the main altar. Installed in 1678 by bishop Molina, this painting, according to Spike, “*represented a remarkable combination of both Marian and Plague iconography*”, eminently suitable for a sacred building in the Catholic world of the Baroque.

2 NLM, Arch. 260, Liber Conciliorum Status f.52v.

3 NLM, Arch. 262 f.49v.

There is a reference that during the construction of the church of Sarria, Mattia Preti had struck a friendship with Mederico Blondel des Croisettes, the resident military engineer of the Order. This introduces the last subject which I would like to briefly comment about in this paper. Does this association with Blondel throw new light on Bernardo di Dominici's often-considered controversial assertion that Preti was involved in designing fortifications, as well as a number of churches and palatial buildings in Valletta including those *baluardi che difendono la marina, e le fabbriche del nuovo castello ove è situata la lanterna sul molo. Anche alcune chiese sono state rifatte ed abbellite con suoi disegni, ed assistenza, ed alcune case ancora di Gran Croci e di altri cavalieri, di cittadini?* And did Preti, in the absence of any other foreign architect of repute, occasionally act as an architectural advisor assisting Blondel in his Valletta office, particularly during the principate of his Calabrian compatriot, Grand Master Gregorio Carafa?

In support of these suggestions, it is recorded that, as a precaution against a Turkish attack in reaction to the constant provocations of his war galleys in the Morea, Grand Master Carafa had focused his efforts to protect the Grand Harbour by stopping the building of his predecessor's Cottonera lines and, instead, ameliorating the three strategic points of the defence of the Grand Harbour – St Elmo, St Angelo and the new fort of Ricasoli that had been designed by the military engineer Count Maurizio Valperga. To do this – and also to strengthen the Floriana land front that had been designed by the pope's military engineer Pietro Paolo Floriani – he had requested the Spanish Viceroy of Sicily to send over his top military engineer, the very capable Don Carlos de Grunenberg who, as a result visited Malta in 1681, 1687 and 1689. In 1681, Grunenberg had just completed the impressive horn work that protected the landward approach to Siracusa, which was well known to the Knights of Malta whose galleys of war visited Syracuse at least once a year to participate in the feast of Santa Lucia.

During Grunenberg's absences, it is recorded that Carafa's resident military engineer Blondel, had not only managed to implement the Flemish military engineer's designs for the Floriana Crown Works



Figure 7. Interior of the Conventual Church of St. John in Valletta.

and the *faussebraye* overlooking *Pieta* - thus further protecting Valletta from the landward side - but also build the magnificent girdle wall around Fort St Elmo, thus firmly integrating this fortress within Valletta and, besides, embellishing the entrance to the Grand Harbour thus, according to Pozzo, “*perpetuating the memory of the Grand Master.*” In view of the Grand Master’s great esteem for Mattia Preti and in view of the friendship that went back to the building of *Sarria*, it would not



Figure 8. The Church of the Immaculate Conception at Sarria, in Floriana.

at all be surprising that Preti would have assisted Blondel in the many architectural challenges that would have emerged during the building of these fortifications. He would have certainly informed Bernardo de' Dominici about this when he had briefly met the latter in 1698, thus justifying Bernardo's assertion in this respect. And Vincenzo Bonello further states that: *Il pittore pare abbia costruito, per suo uso, ben tre case. Una e quella di Valletta in strada S. Patrizio, dov'è anche morto, e che portava scolpito nella trabeazione sul portale d'ingresso il suo stemma gentilizio, la quale è stata, una mezza dozzina di anni addietro, sacrificata alla presuntuosa fogar innovatrice di certi trionfurbanisti. La seconda, una bella casa in Valletta, retrostante l'Albergia di Francia, rasa al suolo dalla violenza dei bombardamenti dell'ultima guerra che, per certi particolari architettonici e per le grosse mensole aggettanti sul portone d'ingresso avevano una spiccata aria di famiglia*

con il ritmo e le movenze della parete interna creata dal Preti nella chiesa conventuale, mi convinse che il nostro pittore ne fosse l'autore.

According to records of the Religion of Malta,⁴ Mattia Preti died in his home at one o'clock in the early morning on the third day of January 1699, at the venerable old age of eighty-six. Described in Zeferino Micallef's 1864 monograph as a tall man of strong moral values, his name and capabilities had managed to repeatedly earn him the respect of no less than seven Grand Masters – Jean-Paul Lascaris, Martin de Redin, Rafael Cotoner, Nicolas Cotoner, Gregorio Carafa, Adrien de Wignacourt and Ramon Perellos - five of whom had been fortunate enough to be eyewitnesses of his great achievements in Malta so that, according to the same source: *non era cosi ossequiato il Gran Maestro, quando egli era da tutti inchinato per dovunque passava.*

4 NLM, Arch. 1948 – *Liber in quo describuntur nomina Religiosorum Ordinis Sancti Joannis Hiermi pro tempore defunctorum f.11.*