The Order of St John’s Ambassador in Rome is on record as having asserted, around 1665-66, that the great Gian Lorenzo Bernini was heard singling out the young Maltese, Melchorre Cafa`, as the only sculptor he feared in Rome. Bernini felt that the Birgu born sculptor (Birgu is a maritime city in Malta which, prior to the building of Valletta served as the seat of the Military Order) could have surpassed him in his achievements. The Order had in vain been trying to secure the services of Bernini (who was in France at the time) to carry out the sculptural group of the ‘Baptism of Christ’ for the Order’s Conventual Church of St John’s in Valletta. This accolade by Bernini speaks volumes for the artistic standing of the 17th century Maltese Baroque sculptor.

Melchiorre Cafa`, brother of Malta’s leading 17th century architect, Lorenzo, has certainly placed Maltese art on the international map. His works can be admired in such museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (the autographed cast of Pope Alexander V11), the State Hermitage Museum St. Petersburg, the Palazzo Venezia Museum and the Museo di Roma in Rome, the Fogg Museum at Harvard University (‘Personification of Silence’ in a collection of bozzetti by Bernini and his contemporaries), the Fitzwilliam Museum-Cambridge University and the Staatliche Museum in Berlin, to mention just a few. In addition he was commissioned to carry out important works for such churches as St Agostino, Santa Maria in Campitelli, Sant’ Agnese in Piazza Navona and St. Caterina a Magnanapoli, Rome, the Duomo of Siena and the Church of San Domingo, Lima. Prominence is accorded to him in published
conceive histories of European sculpture. All this testifies to his standing as an important exponent of the Roman Baroque.

It is fitting therefore that a volume, comprising well researched chapters on various aspects of his work, has been produced. The volume, edited by Keith Sciberras, History of Art academic at the University of Malta, is impressive in terms of the range of rigorous scholarly contributions in English and Italian (each accompanied by detailed annotations), the quality of illustrations provided and the details concerning Cafa`s life, commissions and oeuvre. Furthermore the volume is concluded with a list, in alphabetical order, of practically all known works by or attributed to Cafa`. These are classified as autographed works, casts, casts after Cafa` and probable or improbable attributions. Each entry is accompanied by a black and white illustration of the work in question.

Some of Cafa`s works betray the influence of Gianlorenzo Bernini, the major exponent of XVII Century Roman Baroque sculpture. This influence is strongly felt in the `Glory of St Catherine of Siena` which, as several contributors to the volume point out, captures the spirit of the Neapolitan born master`s `Ecstasy of St Theresa` at Santa Maria delle Vittorie, Rome. As Sciberras explains, however, Cafa`s early works, including the well known wooden processional statues in Malta, those of St Paul (Church of St Paul Shipwrecked, Valletta, Malta) and of the Madonna of the Rosary (Dominican Church, Rabat, Malta), are in the Baroque style associated with Bernini`s great rival, Alessandro Algardi (two of his works can be found in Malta).

One other work that is given prominence in this book, and which can be found at Malta`s National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, is the bozzetto of St. Thomas of Villanova.
“The dynamic quality of this excellent piece of Baroque sculpture is enhanced by the somewhat agitated folds of the drapery” and the “use of the serpentina in the figure of the female beggar. “ (Mayo, 1997, pp. 27-29) This terracotta model was carried out in preparation for the marble group at the church of St Agostino close to Piazza Navona, Rome, which was completed, after Cafa`s premature death at the age of 31, by Ercole Ferrata in whose bottega the Birgu sculptor worked. Ferrata finished a number of works for which Cafa` was contracted, including the Martyrdom of St Eustace in Sant` Agnese in Agone (the well known church in Piazza Navona, designed by Francesco Borromini) and the statue of St Paul in St Paul`s Grotto, Rabat, Malta. The statue at St Paul’s Grotto constitutes the subject of an excellent contribution to this volume penned by John Azzopardi. Furthermore, as Jennifer Montagu reveals, in her splendid essay on Cafa`’s models in the Ferrata bottega, Ercole Ferrata relied on his assistants, including Cafa`, “for making models to give him ideas”; he “would then correct the best of these to conform to his own style.” (p. 67) Cafa`, for his part, needed Ferrata’s assistance “in the slow business of carving marble.” (p. 67)

The clay modelling techniques adopted by Cafa` is the subject of a lengthy, detailed and very instructive piece by Tony Sigel that rounds off a volume that also includes an overview of the critical reception of Cafa` works in publications in Italy and elsewhere (Maria Giulia Barberini), an account of Cafa`s seven year period in Rome (Elena Bianca di Gioia) and a very short piece focusing on the artist as he features in the historical archives of Rome’s St Luke Academy (Angela Cipriani).

The volume also includes essays focusing on specific works: the commission for the ‘Baptism of Christ’ group for St John’s (Keith Sciberras); the statue of St Catherine at
Magnanapoli (Gerhard Bissell); the statue of the dying (or dead) St Rose of Lima (Alessandra Anselmi) and the various related casts that belong to different collections, including that of the renowned Italian art critic, politician and TV personality, Vittorio Sgarbi; the already mentioned statue of the Apostle Paul for St Paul’s Grotto at Rabat (John Azzopardi); two reliefs at the Descalzas Reales in Madrid (Tomaso Montanari); the thesis broadsheet of Giovanni Francesco Rota (Louise Rice); three models, including two situated at Malta’s National Museum of Fine Arts (Tuccio Sante Guido). The models at Malta’s Fine Arts Museum, featuring martyr saints, could well have been intended, according to Sciberras (p. 11), as preparatory works for the Vatican colonnade.

This book is a boon for history of art scholars, art lovers and anyone interested in Baroque studies. Naturally, as is often the case with edited compendia of essays focusing on the same person, there tends to be a lot of repetition, throughout the volume, with respect to biographical background. This is understandable and probably inevitable.

We tend to use the word ‘genius’ rather loosely these days, but this book certainly pays due homage to one of the very few artists of truly international calibre that Malta has ever produced. It provides considerable insight into the history and development of different strands of the Baroque and into the politics of representation connected with the Counter-Reformation.

Reference


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