

Keith Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, Midsea Publications, ISBN-10: 99932724932009, ISBN-13: 978-9993272496, 2009

This marvellous and huge tome provides a detailed survey of the 'Baroque period' in Malta. This period was marked by the realism and naturalism of Caravaggist painting, the 'noble classicism' of the Bolognese school, and the exuberance of the high and late Baroque periods. The period is the richest in Malta's art history as far as 'old paintings' are concerned. The author, Keith Sciberras, a History of Art academic at the University of Malta with a growing international reputation for his work in the area (particularly his work on Melchiorr Cafa and Caravaggio) states that he has been researching the period for the past fifteen years. This period is represented on the island by fine works of art. The painters in question include quite a number who stamped their mark on the history of western European art. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio is undoubtedly the towering figure here. Then we come across works by Guido Reni, Jusepe de Ribera (the Valenciano, known as 'Lo Spagnoletto', from the Borgias' city of Xativa), Luca Giordano ('Luca fa presto'), Giovanni Battista (Battistello) Caracciolo, Massimo Stanzione, Mattia Preti (il Cavalier Calabrese), the Dutch caravaggist Mathias Stom (or Stomer), Pietro Novelli (il Monrealese) and Andrea Vaccaro. There are also lesser known figures on the international stage such as Mario Minniti (Caravaggio's personal friend from Syracuse), the Florentine Filippo Paladini (he came here as a result of his having been sentenced to the galleys), Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, Giuseppe Arena and Stefano and Alessio Erardi. Conspicuously absent is Carlo Maratta or Maratti, as he is referred to elsewhere in the text. His beautiful pyramidal 'Madonna and Child' hangs at the National Museum of Fine Arts with an identical representation, without the intersecting point provided by the Holy Ghost, on display at Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum.

The strong artistic connections between Naples, Rome and Sicily are underscored in this volume. Many of the paintings in question, as Sciberras notes, can be found in palaces, museums and churches and are therefore available for public viewing. Others, such as a wonderful painting by arguably the greatest

painter of the Neapolitan school at the time, Luca Giordano, are found in private collections.

Incidentally, another painting, said to belong to Giordano and which forms part of the J. Cauchi collection at the Cathedral Museum, is omitted.

Sciberras adopts a scholarly approach throughout, providing revealing evidence to confirm, refute or even make attributions. He distinguishes between works by , for example, the prolific painter Mattia Preti and others to which the Calabrian must have contributed in some way but which were mainly or partly carried out by members of his flourishing bottega and works which are simply products of his bottega assistants. Sciberras also refers to the bottega's production, often involving tracing, of copies of Preti's works for which there must have been a lucrative international market. Sciberras is equally meticulous and persuasive with regard to the attributions concerning works belonging to the 18th century period. This period is represented on the island by such painters as Sebastiano Conca, Francesco de Mura, Antoine Favray, to whom ample space is dedicated, Giuseppe Grech and, of course, the redoubtable Francesco Zahra. Sciberras' other merit here is that he retains a flowing narrative style throughout. Though displaying a strong sense of rigour, the text is unencumbered by scholarly 'asides'. These are confined to endnotes placed in the last section of the volume, a section which also provides a select list of works by a number of artists discussed in the chapters.

Quite intriguing is the discussion of the work of a formidable Maltese 'still life' painter, Francesco Noletti. Like the sculptor, Melchiorr Cafa, Noletti earned himself a considerable reputation especially through his work in Rome. He has been referred to as *Francesco il Maltese*. In the *Chronological List of Modern Painters*, Joshua Reynolds calls him *Il Maltese*. His works can be found in private collections and in such museums as the Louvre. Hopefully other works, shedding further light on this acclaimed Maltese painter, will follow.

This volume is impressive in terms of its comprehensiveness where artists of international stature who have graced our shores or whose works are found on the island (e.g. Caravaggio, Reni, Caracciolo, Preti...) are discussed alongside other artists who are less known but who were quite accomplished. Then there are others who are inconsistent (e.g. Minniti whose work at Mdina is probably among his best, though the caravaggist figure of the Roman guard is more befitting of a Bacchus, given his languid posture and vacuous stare, than what he is actually meant to represent). References are also made to painters who were simply mediocre.

All in all, this is a wonderful volume, though very expensive. It represents the recurring case of 'small island, big book.' It can be regarded as a reference work, even though the narrative style is lucid and compelling. I feel that Sciberras could have done with less use of Italian stock phrases, save for important technical terms. The quality of plates is excellent and I found many of the details, focused on, quite revealing. And yet, given the steep price, I would have expected some more careful editing. In the Caravaggio discussion, we come across instances when a sentence is repeated verbatim in another section of the text. There are instances, in Sciberras' discussions, when paintings are said to be of "unknown authorship" but can be "associated with" the work of a specific artist (e.g. Johann Ulrich Loth on p. 46). They are then referred to, in the captions accompanying the relevant illustration, as belonging to the painter (not 'associated with' or 'attributed to' but accorded clear authorship). These are however minor slip ups which do not detract from the overall quality of this magnificent work – *a tour de force*.

Peter Mayo
University of Malta