

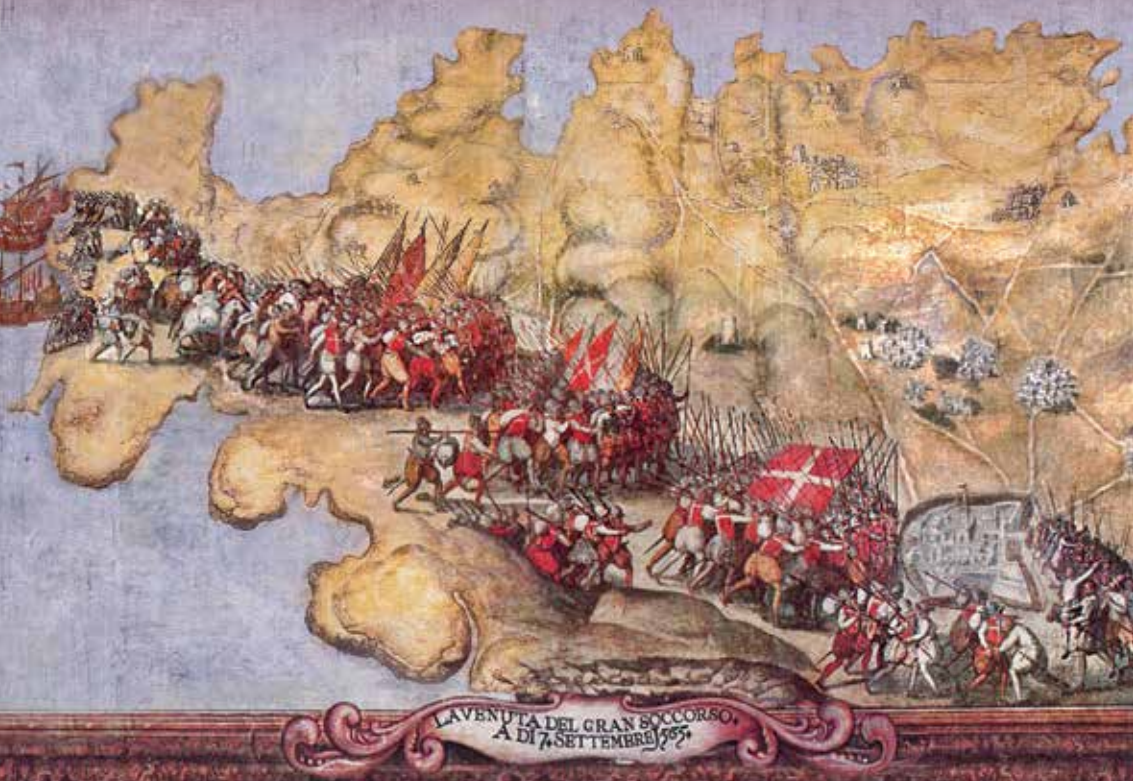


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# Influences of the Spanish Plateresque on Maltese Ecclesiastical Architecture

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## Introduction

Most historical accounts of Maltese architecture during the rule of the Order of St John (1530–1798) have to date focused almost exclusively on the influences of contemporary Italian and French architects. This is to be expected, as it is the natural outcome of the direct involvement of a number of Italian and French architects and military engineers who were engaged by the Order to oversee the design and construction of the island's fortifications. However, given the historical influence exerted by the Aragonese prior to the arrival of the Order and, subsequently, the seminal political influences of both langues of Castile and Aragon during the Hospitaller period, it is worthwhile to explore any tentative relations and historical synergy that could be traced between Spanish and Maltese architecture.<sup>1</sup>

Back in 1967, during the 'XV Congress on Architectural History', the Spanish historian Adolfo Florensa had presented a brief paper entitled 'L'Architettura di Spagna a Malta', as part of the theme 'Architecture in Malta from prehistory to the 19th century'.<sup>2</sup> Almost half a century later, it is useful to revisit some of the observations made by Florensa and explore further with a view to establishing the extent and type of relationship, direct or otherwise, which one could draw between Spanish and Maltese architecture with reference to the period of the knights. The main focus of this brief communication is to analyse the possible influences of the Spanish Plateresque with reference to Maltese

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1 The period of Aragonese rule in Malta lasted from 1283 to 1412 and that of the joint Aragonese/Castilian rule from 1412 to 1530. For information on socio-economic, political, and artistic aspects in Malta during these periods, refer to A. Luttrell, 'The House of Aragon and Malta: 1282–1412', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: Royal University of Malta*, iv, no.2 (1970); A. Luttrell ed., *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975; C. Vella, *The Mediterranean artistic context of Late Medieval Malta: 1091–1530*, Malta 2013.

2 A. Florensa, 'L'Architettura di Spagna a Malta', in *Atti del XV Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura – Malta, 11-16 Settembre 1967, L'Architettura a Malta dalla preistoria all'ottocento*, Rome 1970, 413–21.

ecclesiastic architecture, specifically the churches designed by the Maltese architect Tumas Dingli (1591–1666).

### Definition of the term 'Plateresque' and the Spanish context

Valeriano Bozal defines 'Plateresque' as being 'in the manner of a silversmith' (*Plata* meaning 'silver' in Spanish).<sup>3</sup> It was an artistic movement, especially architectural, traditionally held to be exclusive to Spain and its territories, which appeared between the late-Gothic and Early-Renaissance during the late-fifteenth century, and spread over the next two hundred years. It is a modification of Gothic spatial concepts and an eclectic blend of Mudéjar, Flamboyant Gothic and Lombard decorative components, and Renaissance elements of Tuscan origin.<sup>4</sup>

The art historians George Kubler and Maria Soria, in their seminal work *Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal and their American Dominions, 1500–1800* describe Plateresque ornament as being 'adjectival' as 'it fits loosely upon the structure it adorns' and that 'no clear necessity determines location, context, or scale. The expressive effect is often extravagant and florid, suggesting great animation and energy, but at unexpected places and for unclear reason.'<sup>5</sup> Kubler and Soria identify two strains of the Spanish Plateresque, the first is referred to as the 'First Plateresque' dating prior to 1540, while the 'Second Plateresque' is manifested in buildings subsequent to 1540. During the 'First Plateresque' phase, the façade 'seems invertebrate, composed of clusters of ornament which stress neither function (as in medieval design) nor total harmony (as in Renaissance design). In the 'Second Plateresque' style, 'the architects imitated Italian conception of integral harmony'.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the examples of Spanish Plateresque architecture date to the mid-sixteenth century in the transitional period between Late Gothic and Renaissance architecture. As a style, it flourished during the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1519–56) and some of the finest examples of Plateresque architecture are to be found in Salamanca and other cities of the Iberian Peninsula, such as in Saragossa (Zaragoza), Burgos and León. For the purposes of this communication a few examples will suffice. One can cite the façades of the University of Salamanca (early sixteenth century), the new cathedral of Salamanca (begun in 1513, consecrated in 1733), the church of Sancti Spiritus at Oñati University (1543), the University of Alcalá de Henares (1537–53), San Miguel de los Reyes in Valencia (1632–44), the basilica of Santa Engracia in Saragossa (1511–17), and the church of San Esteban in Salamanca (159–92) (see Figs. 1 to 4). Most of these churches

3 V. Bozal, ed., *Art History in Spain: From the Origins to the Enlightenment*, Madrid 1978, 157, 165; A. Blunt, ed., *Baroque & Rococo, Architecture & Decoration*, New York 1978, 299–316.

4 Bozal ed. 157.

5 G. Kubler and M. Soria, *Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal and their American Dominions, 1500–1800*, Harmondsworth 1959, 2.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.



Fig. 1: University of Salamanca, Salamanca



Fig. 2: Church of Sancti Spiritus at Oñati University, 1543



Fig. 3: Alcalá de Henares University, 1537–53



Fig. 4: Basilica of Santa Engracia, Saragossa, 1511–17

and palaces historically date to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were built in the earlier Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles. Plateresque interventions dating to the fifteenth century are exhibited in the remodelling of façades and the integration of decorative retable portals within the building fabric.

### Tumas Dingli and the Maltese context

In architectural terms, Malta never quite experienced a flourishing of Renaissance architecture on the same scale as witnessed in Florence, Urbino and Venice. The post-medieval architecture introduced by the Order of St John in the sixteenth century was austere and spartan in spirit and appearance as befitting the image of a military and religious order. Adolfo Florensa in his paper had tentatively alluded to Aragonese influences in Maltese architecture particularly in relation to the so-called 'fat sausage-roll' mouldings in the early buildings of the Order, decorative carved stone roundels and corbels underlying balconies.<sup>7</sup> However, these are at best tenuous observations that are limited to architectural elements as opposed to entire buildings.

The buildings that come closest to an equivalent of a Maltese Renaissance period, albeit a highly retardaire one at that, would be the ecclesiastical works of local architect Tumas Dingli.<sup>8</sup> Dingli started his career working as a *scarpellino* (stone carver) with his father Ġakbu, a sculptor, and his uncle Andrea Dingli, an engineer.<sup>9</sup> After his formative years, during which he assisted Giovanni Attard in the construction of the Wignacourt Aqueducts (1610–14) and the design of the Porta Reale as a new gateway entrance to Valletta, Dingli obtained several commissions to design a number of parish churches. The list of churches attributed to Dingli includes the old parish church of Birkirkara; the old parish church of Mosta; the parish church of St Mary, Attard; the parish church of Naxxar; the parish church of Għargħur; and the parish church of Żabbar. Most of these churches were subsequently rebuilt to other forms or were extensively remodelled and acquired new façades.<sup>10</sup> The two churches which have intrinsically retained their original

7 Florensa, 415–16.

8 The main studies on the life and architectural career of Tumas Dingli are the following: J. Tonna, *Tumas Dingli – A Study of His Architectural Works*, Malta 1966 and E. Zammit, 'Thomas Dingli, 1591–1666: His Life and Work', unpublished BA (Hons.) History dissertation, University of Malta 1977. Tumas Dingli was born on 22 December 1591, the son of Giacomo and Katerina Dingli, the fourth of ten children. Attard Parochial Archives (APA), Liber Primus: Bapt. Matrim. et Defunctorum, no pagination, cited in Zammit 1977, 4.

9 Tumas Dingli's father was a *scarpellino* and one of the procurators of the parish church of Attard. Tumas would later also become a procurator and member of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, APA, Libro d'Esito dei procuratori della Confraternita del Santissimo Rosario, f.29, ff. 325–7, 340–6. In archival documents Dingli is sometimes referred to as '*mastro maisi*'; a corrupted abbreviation of '*maestro thomaso*'. His wife is also referred to as '*Argenta di mastro thomaso*'; see Zammit, 4.

10 Works on the old parish church of Birkirkara commenced around 1616 but the church was never completed and was neglected after the construction of the new parish church dedicated to St Helen around 1726. The old parish church of Mosta was constructed around 1614 and demolished in 1860 to be replaced by the Grognet de Vassé Rotunda (1833–60s). The original church was left in place while the Rotunda was being built. The parish church of Attard dates to 1613–16. The parish church of Naxxar was constructed between 1616 and 1630, was altered by Lorenzo Gafa in 1691, with a later extension and a new façade being built in the twentieth century. The Għargħur parish church was constructed between 1617 and 1638 with its façade being entirely remodelled in the Baroque style around 1740. The Żabbar parish church was originally

forms are the old parish church of Birkirkara and the parish church of Attard. Thus, the discussion as to the possible influences of the Spanish Plateresque will be limited to these two examples. Various architectural historians including Hughes, Mahoney, and Tonna have alluded to the possible influences of the Spanish Plateresque on the façades of these churches.<sup>11</sup>

Tumas Dingli's churches are 'specially noteworthy for the beauty of their stone carving. The west front façade of Attard church is outstanding in this respect particularly for its exquisitely carved main doorway.'<sup>12</sup> The aedicular temple-front west façade framed by giant Order pilasters that support a classical triangular pediment (see Fig. 5). Tonna states that 'Dingli's architecture reflects those ties and affinities with Spain somewhat more subtly at Attard but more explicitly in his next two churches. Externally he makes free use of Spanish motifs to soften the classical severity of his façades. Giant Corinthian pilasters are panelled to make them look lighter; coffers appear on the frieze;



Fig. 5: St Mary, parish church of Attard

constructed between 1641 and 1660; it was radically altered and enlarged around 1738 with the architect Giovanni Bonavia being responsible for designing its ornate Baroque facade.

11 Q. Hughes, *The building of Malta during the period of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, 1530–1795*, London 1956, 89–96; L. Mahoney, *A History of Maltese Architecture*, Malta 1988, 189–90; J. Tonna, 'Tumas Dingli' in *Malta – Past, Present, Future*, a special issue of *Architecture Review*, vol. CXLVI, no. 869 (July 1969), 74–8.

12 E. Sammut, *Art in Malta*, Malta 1953, 49.



and the carving round the doorway is as intricate and filigree-like as that which earned Spanish work the appellation of Plateresque. Unlike most Plateresque works, however, the decoration at Attard is carefully controlled and closely related to the structural form.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the intricate decorative stonework is concentrated around the main central portal and its overlying stonework. Quentin Hughes wrote that 'the carved centrepiece has a Spanish quality and the superimposed arrangement with the carved escutcheons reminds me of Sancti Spiritus at Salamanca and the Pellejeria door of Burgos cathedral (Fig. 6)'.<sup>14</sup> The stonework of the base plinths, column shafts and entablature of the central portal are incised and covered with naturalistic representations of vines emanating from Classical urns and merging into an intricate vegetal mesh (see Figs. 7 to 10). Still, the decorative aspect is spatially focused and contained being concentrated around the central portal. The ornament does not detract from the clarity and legibility of the structure of the façade.

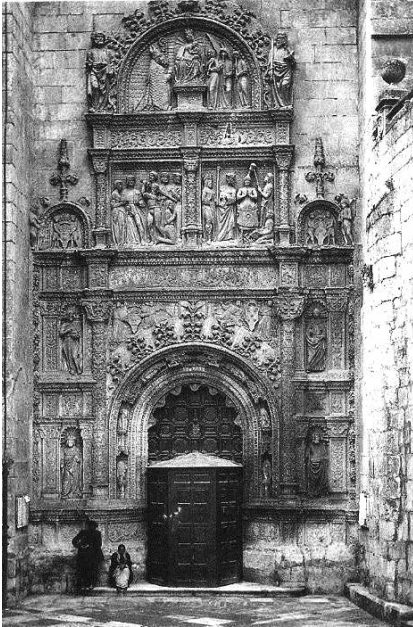


Fig. 6: Pellejeria door of Burgos cathedral, Spain



Fig. 7: Decorative detail of column, Attard parish church

13 Tonna, *Tomas Dingli – A Study of His Architectural Works*.

14 Hughes, 90.



Fig. 8: Decorative detail of column base, Attard parish church



Fig. 9: Decorative detail of main portal, Attard parish church



Fig. 10: Decorative detail of main portal, Attard parish church

A similar arrangement is manifested in the aedicular façade of the old parish church of Birkirkara where the central bay is reminiscent of a highly ornate retable, with a doorway inscribed within a semicircular arch flanked by column clusters on each side, and a superimposed superstructure featuring five decorative stone carvings of escutcheons framed by miniature columns and pilasters (see Figs. 11 to 13). The arrangement is even more elaborate and intense than in the parish church of Attard and is, in my view, stylistically linked to the Spanish Plateresque. However, as Florensa observed, there are definite limitations as to the degree of transferability of the term Plateresque from a Spanish context to the Maltese situation. The course of Maltese architecture was conditioned by a unique set of historical and political circumstances which was radically different from that of Spain. Quentin Hughes wrote that, with the death of Tumas Dingli in 1666, 'the late flower of the Renaissance on the island faded and the Baroque of Italy and of Sicily, where it was marked by Spanish influence, replaced it in all important church architecture which followed'.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 11: Façade of old parish church, Birkirkara (Photo credit: Carmel Psaila)

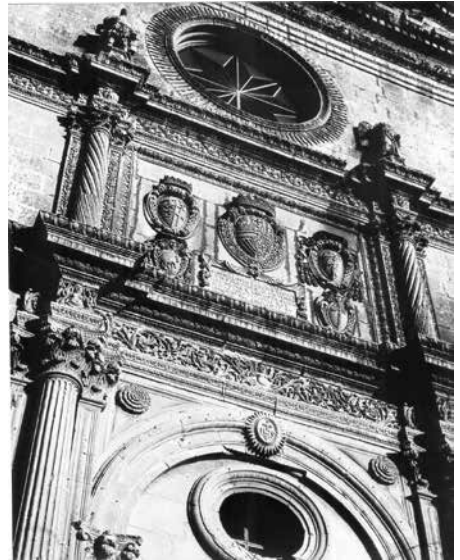


Fig. 12: Façade detail, old parish church, Birkirkara (Photo credit: Carmel Psaila)

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, 96. Tumas Dingli died on 28 January 1666, aged 74. He was buried in the parish church of Attard. Mass was celebrated for the repose of his soul with the participation of musicians from the Mdina Cathedral. APA, part of a register, f. 43, cited in Zammit, 75.



Fig. 13: Façade detail, old parish church, Birkirkara (Photo credit: Carmel Psaila)

The Plateresque is the most tangible manifestation of Spanish influence in local ecclesiastical architecture during the early seventeenth century. Unfortunately, we are limited in making a full assessment owing to the fact that a number of Dingli's church facades were over time totally redeveloped and are no longer extant. With the only two surviving examples being those of the old parish church of Birkirkara and that of Attard one cannot over-extrapolate and overstate the argument that the Plateresque was well-established locally. It is a fact that the local manifestations were more than a century later than the Spanish examples. This suggests that Tumas Dingli was working in some kind of timewarp. However, there are still some unresolved issues that need to be addressed by further research. Did Tumas Dingli come into direct contact with an exponent of Spanish Plateresque architecture? Although it is unlikely that he travelled to Spain, could it be that he had access to prints, engravings, or lithographs illustrating Spanish architecture that could well have influenced his designs? These are the kind of questions that need to be delved into in greater detail.

Beyond the Plateresque there were other later developments, such as the popularity of the twin bell-towers in Western church façades, the enclosed timber balcony that emerged on the urban scene after the mid-seventeenth century, and the ornate facades

of eighteenth-century Baroque palaces, such as that of the Auberge de Castille, Valletta, that appear to bear a Spanish lineage. Another area for potential exploration is that of contemporary Spanish architectural treatises, in particular the work of the Cistercian monk Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz (1606–82), who promoted the use of the oblique order.<sup>16</sup> Architectural details of the balustrades of the fine staircases within the Museum of Fine Arts and the Auberge de Castille demonstrate familiarity with the oblique order as postulated by Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz. Iberian Baroque architecture as manifested in churches is distinguished by the presence of ornate retable screens. Local high-altar reredos, such as that of the Jesuit church in Valletta, are reminiscent of the Spanish examples, although one may argue that they never emulate the decorative excesses of the Churrigueresque (see Fig. 14). These aspects lie within relatively uncharted territory and deserve to be researched far more assiduously. One hopes that future academic research within the archives of the two countries could shed more light on the extent of the symbiotic relation between Spanish and Maltese architecture.



Fig. 14: Ornate high-altar reredo, Jesuit church, Valletta (Photo credit: Carmel Psaila)

<sup>16</sup> J. Caramuel y Lobkowitz, *Architectura civil recta y obliqua*, Vigevano 1678.

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