The Allegories of Truth and Time at St John’s Co-Cathedral

Fig. 1
The allegories of Truth and Time as illustrated on the marble tombstone of Fra Francois de Tressemanes Chastuel Brunet.
Fig. 2
The marble tombstone of Fra Cristoforo Balbani.
Concepts are thoughts that in general are not easy to visualize, and since ancient times writers have tried to render them more distinct by treating them as personifications. As a result Truth and Time, like other ideas of wisdom, beauty and many others, came to be imagined as spirits having human form, often female. Hence, several ideas came to be personified into allegories. The concepts of Time and of Truth are closely related, and it is widely accepted that only Time can unveil Truth. Both themes became widely represented in art.

The first hints of the personification of concepts and virtues are found illustrating the Psalms. An example is found in Psalm 85:10: ‘Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other’. Some allegories can be traced to medieval times, but the humanists and Neo-Platonists of the Renaissance went further. They expressed the basic concepts of their philosophy by means of figures, whereby an iconography was established for them and they were referred to as allegories. This was a useful convention which was taken up and used through the ages. Eventually, the Church took up some of the allegories for its own purpose too.

Since it was Truth's nature to be simple and unadorned, she was often personified naked and found popular expression in classical literature. During the fifteenth century Truth began to take on a more important role when artists started to depict the Calumny of Apelles, of which Truth formed part. Truth soon gained popularity chiefly in secular art, becoming a widely popular figure in Renaissance and Baroque allegory.

The Italian myth-poet Cesare Ripa, in his *Iconologia* of 1593, immortalized the iconography when he presented a codification of symbolic attributes associated with various ideas and phenomena uniting a wealth of allusive references from classical literature. In Ripa's *Iconologia* the personification of VERITAS, meaning Truth, is depicted as a nude female figure modestly covered with a drape, who holds a sun in one hand, an open book and a palm frond in the other. She rests her feet on a globe of the world, whilst seated at her feet is a putto holding a mirror and a pair of weighing scales. On the left stands a palm tree with a grapevine growing up it. Truth’s nudity indicated that truth is a natural state, and like a nude person exists without the need of artificial embellishment. The sun is an attribute of truth, because it is the source of light that reveals all truth, as it chases away the shadows in the same way truth does in the mind. The open book represents the study of science and of facts that reveal truth, hence, it is also an attribute of the allegory. The palm frond and the palm tree refer to the tree’s resistance to obstacles, which is also a characteristic of truth. Truth’s foot on the globe represents her dominance, as she is superior to anything on earth. Truth is also seen in a mirror, as it only reflects the true image and does not lie. Truth is compared to a set of weighing scales that consist of equal parts, as they are, and as they are perceived. Sometimes she can be wearing a laurel crown as a reminder that the victory of Truth is always hers in the long run.

On the other hand, Ripa’s personification of TEMPUS, meaning Time, is that of an old man, bearded and winged (symbolizing that time flies). He wears a drape of shifting colours which is spangled with stars; they represent the heavens which are eternal and control all earthly
things. He stands on a Zodiac wheel, which is the measure through which the heavenly bodies are measured. His teeth are made of iron, because he can gnaw away anything, whilst on his head he wears a wreath of roses, ears of grain, fruit and dry branches, symbolic of all four seasons of the year. In one hand he holds a mirror that represents only the image it holds in the present, whilst in the other, he holds a snake biting its own tail, which is an ancient symbol of eternity and the irony of time as it folds upon itself year in, year out. Two putti are looking into a mirror, they are the past and the future, both of which live in the mind of man, one as memory and the other, his hopes and dreams. Seated on the floor next to him are two other putti, one of whom wears the sun on his head representing day, whilst the other wears a moon symbolic of night. They are the division of time during which human life goes on, and they write down its events in a book, therefore recording history. Near their feet lies a set of weighing scales as time equalizes all things. The setting is that of classical ruins symbolizing Time as the destroyer. An alternative from classical antiquity also shows Time holding an hourglass and a scythe said to represent Charon the boatman, who ferries the dead down the river Styx.

The idea that Truth was revealed by Time required that the personification of this concept was presented as an allegory where Time was necessary as an instrument of Truth's unveiling. Therefore, Truth was personified as the daughter of Time. This is supported by the ancient proverb, ‘Veritas filia temporis’ meaning ‘Truth is the daughter of Time’. Hence, the figures of Time and Truth were often represented together to express the allegory of ‘Time revealing Truth’.

In the visual arts, this allegory became a popular subject especially when it was adopted in the late sixteenth century by the Catholic Church in response to challenges of idolatry made by the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church, seeking every possible means of asserting its spiritual authority, turned to the visual arts. Counter-Reformation art, promoted by the Catholic Church especially in Rome, gave rise to the sumptuous decoration of churches which developed into an art form called the Baroque; it was an artistic expression intended for public display and spectacle, leading to exuberant displays of traditional themes such as triumph, fame as well as truth and time. The popularity and success of the Baroque style was encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church, which had decided at the time of the Council of Trent, in response to the Protestant Reformation, that the arts should communicate religious themes with direct and emotional involvement. The aristocracy also saw the dramatic style of Baroque architecture and art as a means of impressing visitors and expressing triumph, power and control.

The allegory of Truth was utilized to express one of the Catholic fundamental truths, and became a very popular subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The iconography was adapted with additions of Christian themes. To VERITAS, Christ in the background is said to be preaching to His disciples the moment in the Gospel of John 14: 6 when he said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth, the Life’. 
Fig. 3
The marble tombstone of Fra Henri Martins Champoleon.
For the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, a Hospitaller Order that had turned military in the wake of the rise of the Ottoman Empire to defend Catholic Europe, the representation of allegories was widely used to interpret their faith and honour in many art forms. The allegories of Time and Truth, amongst others, are displayed frequently in their memorial tombstones within St John’s, their Conventual Church now known as the Co-Cathedral. The large number of inlaid marble tombstones that cover the church floor is one of the best examples that demonstrate the important role of symbols and allegories. The entire floor is covered in a vast collection of symbols, and it is one of the most intriguing expressions of symbolic language.

The tombstones are the resting place of some of the most illustrious knights of the Order, whereby they demonstrate a concern to be remembered and their virtues to be perpetuated. There are several elaborate symbols; most commonly displayed is the image of Death followed by the symbol of Time. It was time that would unveil the truth of their chivalrous deeds and it was time that transported them to enjoy eternal life in the kingdom of God. An example of the allegories of both Time and Truth used to illustrate tombstones is that of Fra Francois de Tressemanes Chastuel Brunet who died in 1683 (Fig. 1). In this remarkably skillful rendition of symbols, Truth is represented by a female figure holding a mirror and Time as a winged old man holding an hourglass. Together they carry the coat of arms of this knight as symbols of his virtues. Other examples appear in the tombstones of Fra Cristoforo Balbani (Fig. 2) and Fra Henri de Martins Champoleon (Fig. 3), where the full figure of Father Time takes a central role in the composition.

One of the most impressive and eloquent visual interpretations of the allegory of Time unveiling Truth is found in the tapestry that forms part of the collection which was given to St John’s Church as part of the gift made by Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful in 1702. This was made as part of a traditional custom whereby the newly appointed Grand Master bestowed a gift, or gioia, to the Church. The tapestries were ordered and made at the Brussels atelier of Judocus de Vos, well known as the court weaver to King Louis XIV, for the sum of 40,000 scudi, and were based on the cartoons made by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens. They were specifically designed to be hung from the cornice along the main nave of St John’s. The grandeur of the idea with which they were perceived is remarkable, as is their brilliant colour scheme that harmonizes admirably with the paintings by Mattia Preti on the vaulted ceiling of the Church.

The sets consist of twenty-nine tapestries and evidently represent the triumph of the Order and the Catholic Church equally well. Sir Ferdinand Inglott aptly described them: ‘The subjects selected for the tapestries illustrate its (the Catholic church) distinct two-fold character of History and symbol’. The fourteen large tapestries measure approximately six by seven metres, and depict scenes from the life of Christ and allegories portraying the principal and fundamental divine truths of the Catholic faith. Another fourteen panels represent the Virgin
Mary, Christ the Saviour and the Apostles. A tapestry portraying the donor Grand Master Perellos completes the collection.

The tapestry depicting Time unveiling Truth (Fig. 4) which was intended to hang first in line close to the high altar in the presbytery, indicates the importance of the subject. It serves to represent the Catholic Church and its mission to spread the supremacy of the Catholic faith and overcome heresy, and that this fundamental truth would be revealed by time.

Rubens’s unrivalled visual powers enabled him to give form to the abstract idea of Time unveiling Truth, conveyed in an impressively dramatic scene and in a truly masterly fashion. He combined a theme deriving from classical antiquity with the emblematic elements which in the seventeenth century were developed as a means to express an abstract subject pictorially. In the illustration Rubens created a synthesis between the antique iconography established for Truth and Time and the ‘modern’ Christian idea.

The composition is typical of the Late Baroque style: several figures are employed so that the theme sprawls across the horizontal plane of the picture. In a beautiful open landscape the triumphant image of Truth represented by a classical female figure is ushered in by her father, Time; her copious form is typical of Rubens’s female forms. Time, although represented as a winged elderly male, is muscular and strong. Drapery is used abundantly as it flows agitated by the turbulent winds. The allegories trample over heresy represented by a dragon that emits its last flaming roar, whilst its perpetrators are vanquished and slain. The ugly form of error, represented as a grotesque spirit, is seen flying away into space. They are accompanied by two men, one of which holds a codex in his hand. Woven out of pure silk and wool, its details are truly remarkable.

As a synthesis of the prevailing Counter-Reformation triumphalist idea rendered in an ingenious and highly decorative form, this composition was widely circulated, and Rubens’s heroic triumph of Truth unveiled by Time was subsequently adopted and repeated by several artists. The iconography by Rubens was so striking that after his invention it was difficult to imagine the abstract idea of Truth unveiled by Time differently. The allegories of Truth and Time were thus assimilated and reached iconic levels throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This essay is a tribute to Maurice de Giorgio in the form of an analogy that proves how time has unveiled the truth of the passion and dedication he has devoted to the promotion of Maltese heritage. His work brought awareness of the unique character of several aspects of Maltese objets d’art to Maltese and international audiences, for them to be able to appreciate and enjoy.
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Notes

2. A popular subject during the Renaissance period. Apelles was a Greek painter of the Hellenistic Period. Though Apelle's works have not survived, the Greek writer Lucian recorded details of one in his *On Calumny*. The Allegory of Truth was popularised by such artists as Botticelli, who painted *The Calumny of Apelles* based on the description by Apelles. See Rudolph Altrocchi, *The Calumny of Apelles in the Literature of the Quattrocento* (Publications of Modern Language Association of America, University of Michigan, 1921), 454.
7. The reform of the Catholic Church was headed by the Council of Trent, which met on and off for nearly twenty years from 1545, and reaffirmed the basic doctrines that were under attack from Protestants.