



Fig. 1
The lunette depicting *The Allegory of the Triumph of the Order*, after restoration

Mattia Preti's *The Allegory of the Triumph of the Order*

Cynthia de Giorgio recounts details of Preti's majestic lunette painting at St John's Co-Cathedral, and its restoration

The Allegory of the Triumph of the Order of St John painted by Mattia Preti on the interior wall of St John's Co-Cathedral has been restored on the initiative of The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation to mark the fourth centenary of Mattia Preti's birth. It forms part of the impressive vault cycle that narrates 'The Life of St John the Baptist'. The cycle was painted between 1661 and 1666 during the magistracy of the brothers and Grand Masters, Raphael and Nicholas Cotoner. It was to be the major artistic achievement of Preti's career. Within the six bays of the vault he fitted eighteen episodes from the life of the Baptist. It was the ultimate major step taken in transforming the church into an expression of baroque exuberance.

Mattia Preti was born on 24th February 1613 in Taverna, a small town set deep in the mountains of Calabria. The family belonged to the upper class of society,¹ and according to Bernardo De Dominici,² he was tutored by Don Marcello Anania, known to have been a faithful Tridentine. Thus, it was in the spirit of the Counter Reformation that Preti

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received his first education that in his maturity enabled him to interpret the intensely spiritual content of the cycle narrating St John the Baptist's life.

Taverna was a small town with no progressive school for artists, and driven by ambition Preti soon moved to Rome to join his brother Gregorio, also an artist, and later to Naples. The artistic currents of both cities influenced his artistic formation, and account for his scenographic skills reminiscent of Pietro da Cortona and his life-long affinity with Caravaggism. Rome was an exciting city for a young talented artist, and Preti soon attracted the attention of Donna Olimpia Aldobrandini; this gave him the confidence to submit a petition to the Barberini Pope Urban VIII to be admitted into the Order of the Knights of St John.³ In October 1642 he was invested as a Knight, henceforth known as *il Cavalier Calabrese*.

His association with the Order would shape the course of his career.⁴ Preti's next documented contact with the Order was in March 1658, when the newly elected Grand Master Martin De Redin wrote to Father Marcello Spinelli,⁵ a Jesuit in Naples, asking for his advice regarding a painting he wanted to commission depicting St Francis Xavier. Preti was given the commission. St Francis, a Jesuit missionary from Navarre, of which De Redin was Grand Prior, was a fitting subject. Preti executed this painting in a restrained and puritan manner, rather different to how he would treat the vault just a few years later.

During the seventeenth century the Church in Rome was seeking every possible means of asserting her

spiritual authority in response to challenges made by the Reformation; the Catholic Church turned to the visual arts to give tangible reality to its beliefs. Saints always had a special place at the centre of Christian devotion since its early days. The Counter Reformation movement encouraged the veneration of saints because they were effective intercessors with God; their lives were shining examples of the good works that must be performed by ordinary men and women to earn salvation.

Hence, the popularity of depicting scenes from the lives of saints increased. The first Counter Reformation art was initially harsh and realistic, as seen in the works of Caravaggio and those who sought to emulate his style. But by the mid-seventeenth century, the 'down to earth realism' that had set the tone of the Catholic Reformation of the early 1600s began to relax. It was now being replaced by a growing mood of religious fervour. It was also increasingly recognised that richness and splendour gave church services an emotional appeal that was absent from Protestant forms of worship.⁶ Christian art now aimed at glorifying the Catholic Church, and expressed itself in a new style of ecclesiastical architecture as well as painting and sculpture. Soon several churches were being sumptuously decorated, and the Grand Masters of the Order too were eager to redecorate their conventual church in a manner that rivalled the great basilicas of Rome.

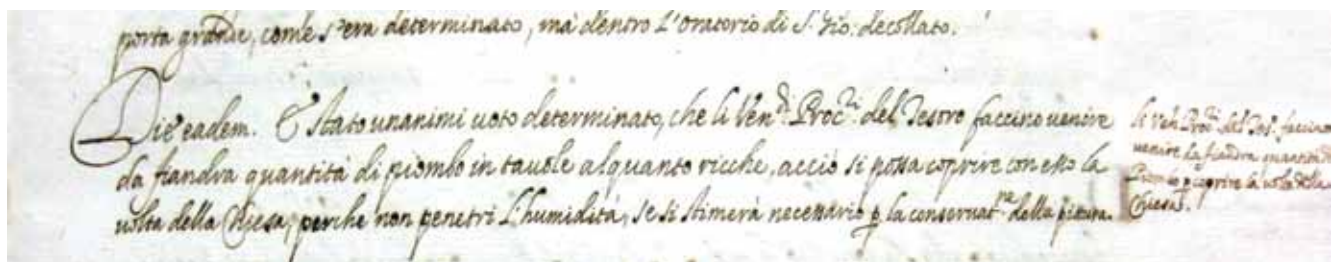
Preti responded to the change in the artistic climate, and translated it into some of the most glorious and

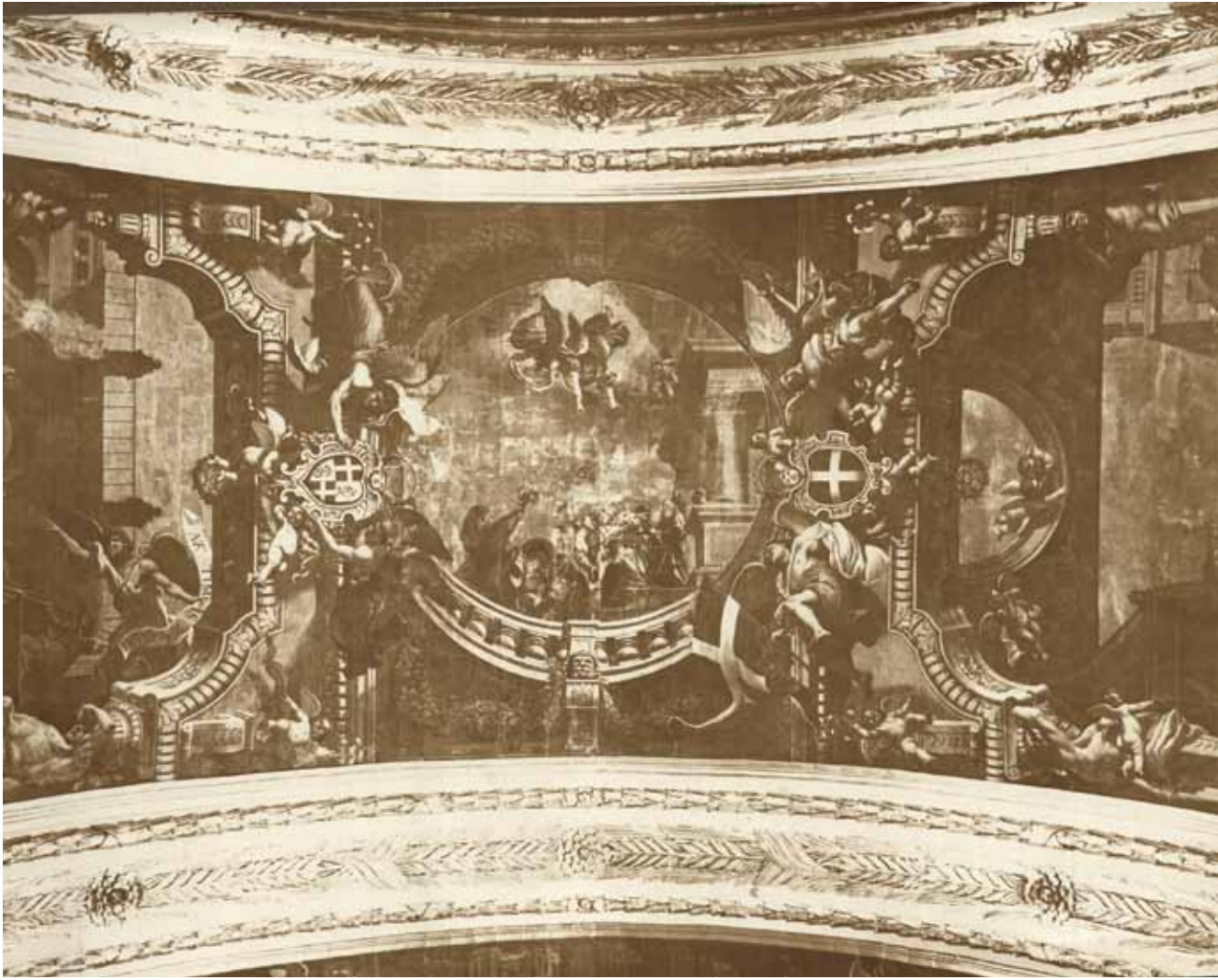
below: Fig. 2

AOM Liber Conciliorum Status 262, 1664, f.16

opposite: Fig. 3

A section of the vault after the intervention by Carlo Ignazio Cortis. Over-painting and damage by water infiltration is evident (Image courtesy of Heritage Malta)





triumphant religious imagery that was generated in the mid-seventeenth century.

Preti first visited Malta in 1659 to donate a painting representing St Catherine to the Italian Langue, certainly in a bid to improve his status in the Order. On the 15th September 1661, Grand Master Raphael Cotoner informed the Council of Preti's offer to paint *la volta della nostra maggior chiesa*.⁷ As a result Preti received his elevation to Knight of Grace. On the 30th of September the Commissioners charged to review Preti's designs accepted them.⁸ Preti had also suggested structural alterations - the enlargement of the window above the main door, the widening of the oval windows in the vault of the nave to admit more light, and the removal of the buttressing walls enclosing the chapels, but the latter two were not accepted on account of fear of structural damage. In December of that year Pietro Burlo and Domencio Gambin were commissioned to carve the six arches under the direction of Preti himself.⁹ These were completed by January 1662 as Preti wrote to his friend Don Antonio Ruffo, stating that the Grand Master was very satisfied with the work, and had given him a gold chain with a Maltese Cross of great value.¹⁰

Preti must have worked with a considerable bottega, as in June 1663 he was awarded another gold chain and wrote again to his friend Ruffo telling him of the gift upon the unveiling of the '*terza parte*'.¹¹ Frustratingly, he does not indicate which parts this phase consisted. But according to the account given by Duke Ferdinand Albrecht in March 1663 the matter is now clearer; he wrote about his visit to St John's stating; 'that a member of the Order had painted the story of St John the Baptist very nicely on the vault. These paintings show how he prayed in front of Herod, how he was imprisoned and the dance of Herodias as well as the beheading of St John'.¹² Thus the *terza parte* was the fifth and sixth bays – the duke does not mention the apse. It is therefore not known with certainty if the apse formed part of the first phase, although De Dominici states that he started from the apse. Hannibal Scicluna also states that the representation of the Holy Trinity with St John the Baptist in the apse was unveiled that year on the eve of the feast of St John the Baptist, which would make it the 23rd June in accordance with Preti's letter to Ruffo.¹³

In glorious scenes from the life of St John the Baptist, Mattia Preti creates an intensely imagined and heavenly

Fig. 4
Drawing of proposed protective roof, 1947
 (Courtesy of Perit Raymond Farrugia, Director General,
 Works & Services Department)

world. The story is told according to the biblical sequence and starts from the first bay at the entrance of the church with the vision of St Zachary in the temple and John's nativity, and continues to narrate the Baptist's early life preaching in the desert and the Baptism of Christ in the third bay. Later narrations show the final stages of the Baptist's life, when he was captured and finally beheaded at the hands of Herod. The illusionistic architecture beautifully frames the scenes against an open sky. The caryatids supporting the framework have different expressions and participate in the dynamic movement of the

entire narrative, adding an amusing theatrical touch. Preti's Venetian treatment of the cycle such as the atmospheric effects, the opulent palette and painterly qualities are reminiscent of Titian and especially Veronese, and are testimony of a visit to Venice recorded in Preti's epitaph. Saints and heroes of the Order sit beside the windows providing an important link between heaven and earth. An impressive feature of the vault is the profusion of exulting angels that inhabit the cycle exquisitely painted *sotto in sù*; several hold the cotton plant, glorifying the Baptist and the Cotoner brothers equally well.

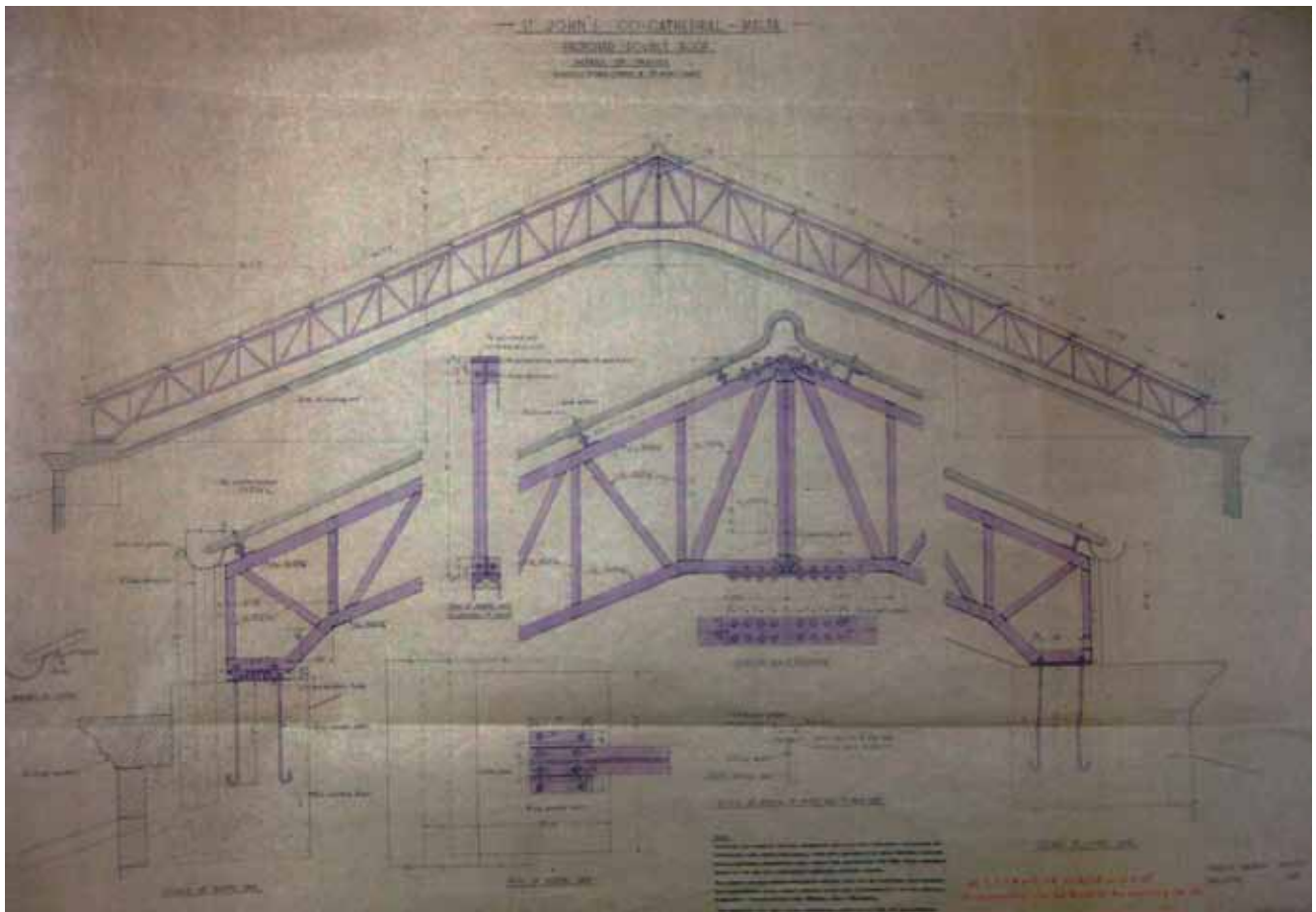


Fig. 5
The results of cleaning tests with various solvents to determine a method that would remove oxidized varnish and over-painting without causing any damage to the original paint layer

For the vast lunette-shaped wall above the main door, Mattia Preti painted *The Allegory of the Triumph of the Order*. He created an innovative composition to symbolize the mission of the Order as hospitallers and defenders of the Catholic faith, and depicts this abstract subject in clear visual terms to document the victory of the Order of St John over the Turkish infidels whom they battled against in the name of their faith. He selected the classical allegorical image of Victory to represent the Order,¹⁴ dressed in armour and helmet, she brandishes a sword in one hand and holds the flag of the Order in the other, standing heroically and

trampling over the enemy. She is the goddess of war, but of just war. The two angels accompanying her represent the old and new testaments.

In the background lie slain knights and a fortified city in a scene that recalls the battle of the Great Siege. Angels and putti holding palm fronds, the symbol of martyrdom, descend from the skies to offer the palms to the deceased knights. In the foreground, on either side of the doorway, Preti depicts the two Cotoner Grand Masters, Nicolas tends to the sick whilst Raphael points towards a picture of the galleys of the Order. The Grand Masters are depicted in the typical black





robe displaying the white eight-pointed cross of the Order on their chests. Whilst the older Raphael wears the hat of the Grand Masters, Nicholas, who had just been elected Grand Master in 1663, is accompanied by two youthful pages to hold his hat until his duties have been completed.

The entire composition successfully conveys the triumph of the Order together with the responsibility of the duties of the knights, and advocates heroic death, an important virtue which is recounted in several of the epitaphs on the tombstones and funerary monuments throughout the church. This was the last phase in the decorative scheme of the vault, after the alterations were made to the doorway and window in 1665. On the 20th December 1666 the painting of the vault was declared '*terminata con intiera sodisfazione*' of Grand Master Cotoner and his Council.¹⁵

Mattia Preti executed the entire vault paintings using an oil-on-stone technique rather than the usual fresco method for wall paintings, knowing that when soaked in linseed oil, Maltese limestone could easily be painted over with oil-based pigments. A procedure that served him well was using the golden hue of the oil-soaked limestone as a background, saving him hours painting vast areas with colour.

The history of the restoration of the vault and lunette dates back to the nineteenth century. Interesting to note is the fact that Preti was aware of the possibility that water filtering through the roof could be a problem, and in 1665 there seems to have been a purchase of metal sheets from Flanders to cover the nave (Fig. 2). The poor state of the paintings caused by water filtering through the roof in 1859 drew the attention of Mgr Gaetano Pace Forno, who wrote to Nicola Consoni, head of the Accademia di San Luca. After much deliberation, in 1868 the artist Carlo Ignazio Cortis was commissioned to repair the paintings. His intervention consisted mainly of extensive over-painting, a method he employed to cover the losses that in the absence of an established restoration methodology gave way to artistic licence (Fig. 3).

This was immediately recognised as a disaster and Vincenzo Bonello, Inspector of Works of Art, wrote about his concerns.¹⁶ Between the years 1920 and 1923 Bonello carried out experimental cleaning from the white layer of salt efflorescence caused by water filtering that had covered the paintings.¹⁷ However, the roof continued to deteriorate until 1935, when under Bonello's direction the paintings were cleaned. He was sorely opposed to Cortis's treatment and wrote in his report: 'unfortunately this artist, who was brought up in an artistic environment that was bitterly opposed to the school of painting which had produced Mattia Preti was certainly not the most suitable person - the paintings were not restored but reproduced; only a small portion escaped this harmful frenzy'. Discussion ensued on the options to stop rainwater entering through the roof, and in 1940 a drawing for a protective roof was produced.¹⁸ Another drawing of the structure was proposed in 1947, which was subsequently installed (Fig. 4).

Finally, in 1952, Cesare Brandi was engaged to investigate the state of conservation. Similar to Bonello, Brandi established that the major deterioration factor was water infiltration through the vault, and that the over-painting by Cortis covered what was left of Preti's original work. Subsequently, between 1959 and 1962, the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro, Rome, was engaged under the direction of Brandi to carry out the restoration of the vault, and this consisted of removing Cortis's intervention. Brandi's work showed that the vault paintings had suffered extensive deterioration, and in some areas the opulent colours had faded.

Presently, the vault paintings remain well preserved as a result of the protective roof installed over the nave. The restoration of the lunette was carried out by the firm Giuseppe Mantella Restauri Opere D'Arte, and started in August 2011. Preliminary studies showed that the supporting wall had not suffered the deterioration caused by water infiltration experienced by the vault simply because

opposite: Fig. 6

The selected cleaning method consisted of a mixture of organic solvents followed by the application of ion exchange resins using brushes and cotton swabs

below left: Fig. 7

Deep cracks in the mortar joints were consolidated by injecting them with a hydraulic lime-based grout

below right: Fig. 8

The painting being retouched to conceal visible mortar joints

it is a vertical structure, and rain water did not settle and seep through the stonework. The painting was suffering mainly aesthetically from the accumulation of dust deposits and discoloured varnish caused by the passage of time. The restoration revealed Preti's original work, preserved almost intact. Other studies showed that the stone support and the paint layer were in a sound state of conservation, which is a testimony to the compatibility of materials originally used and the manner in which they were first employed by Preti in the execution of the painting. Scientific tests were carried out to analyse the composition of the pigments and materials used by the artist and the additional materials employed by subsequent restorers.

The first stage in the restoration intervention focused on removing the thick layer of dust and other deposits that had settled on the irregular stone surface. After this process it was possible to study the surface and this investigation confirmed that the oxidized protective layers of varnish

diminished the tonal range of the painting (Fig. 5).

Previously applied over-painting residues were especially noticeable in portions of the sky. Several cleaning tests were carried out with various solvents to determine a method and technique that would remove oxidized varnish and over-painting without causing any damage to the original paint layer. The selected cleaning method consisted of a mixture of organic solvents followed by the application of ion exchange resins using brushes and cotton swabs (Fig. 6). As a result, the cleaning process revealed the vibrant colours and the original brush strokes of the artist.

Areas of loose plaster were held in place with Japanese paper and consolidated with acrylic adhesive. Deep cracks in the mortar joints were consolidated by injecting them with a hydraulic lime-based grout (Fig. 7). The painting was then retouched with watercolours using the *rigatino* method (a series of fine parallel lines for the restoration intervention to remain easily legible), (Fig. 9). This



method was applied to conceal the visible mortar joints and give an overall aesthetically appealing result (Fig. 8). The final stage was the application of a diluted layer of protective varnish.

At close proximity Preti's work showed his original brushwork and artistic tools. His vast colour scheme consisted of lucid pastel shades for skies and vibrant colours for the figures and drapery. Facial contouring was built up with glazes and strong dabs of colour. The architectural framework was loosely sketched in with charcoal, leaving the golden hue of the oil-saturated stone as the architectural background as well as clouds, and large

washes of pale blue were applied for the skies. The figures do not seem to be drawn, and were painted with broad and rapid brushstrokes laden with pigment. Dabs of paint were used for highlighting his figures, which are impressionistic in style and show Preti's technical confidence and knowledge for painting large-scale compositions.

Mattia Preti introduced a grand manner depicting his subject with unparalleled dramatic effect. The cycle displays his virtuosity and is one of the most exuberant scenographic works of the high baroque style executed in the seventeenth century. *The Allegory of the Triumph of the Order* is instantly recognisable as one of the most iconic

below: Fig. 9

The final retouching being applied using the *rigatino* method that consists of a series of fine parallel lines for the restoration intervention to remain easily legible but still give an overall aesthetically appealing result

opposite: Fig. 10

The image of *The Allegory of Triumph*, after restoration





images of the Knights of St John. Mattia Preti ranks among the most outstanding Baroque decorators of his time.

Subsequently, the walls of the nave and chapels were carved with elaborate motifs characteristic of baroque ornamentation on designs prepared by Preti, transforming the walls into a riot of gilded foliage, angels and triumphal symbols. The artist also painted several of the altarpieces within the chapels. His artistic output was truly considerable, and much of it was produced in Malta where he lived out the last forty years of his life. Preti died in 1699 and was laid to rest in the Conventual Church of St John alongside other high-ranking knights.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 B. De Dominicis, 6. See J.T. Spike, *Mattia Preti. I documenti / The Collected Documents* (Centro Di, Firenze per la Banca di Credito Cooperativo della Sila Piccola - Taverna, 1998), for transcription of documents cited in this article. AOM 2132, ff.242-242v. In 1663 the Italian Langue reviewed proof of nobility.
- 2 De Dominicis is the biographer of the artist. He was the son of Raimondo De Dominicis, an artist who worked in Preti's bottega between 1689 and 1701, and where he had the occasion of direct contact with the ageing master. The biography may have inaccuracies.
- 3 See Spike, op. cit. (1998), 57.
- 4 For details on Preti's life see F. Piccirillo in Mattia Preti (1989), J.T. Spike, *Mattia Preti* (1999) and K. Sciberras, *The Triumphant Manner* (Malta, 2012).
- 5 AOM 1434, ff. 57-57v.
- 6 An early lead on the design and furnishings of churches had been given about 1572 in a book by Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), the Archbishop of Milan.
- 7 AOM 260, f.106v.
- 8 AOM 260, f.108v-109v.
- 9 NAV R 412/26, ff. 90-91. For transcription see J. Debono, *Art and Artisans in St John's and other Churches in the Maltese Island ca. 1650-1800* (Malta, 2005), 66.
- 10 Spike, op. cit. (1998), 148.
- 11 Ibid., 167.
- 12 T. Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour* (Malta, 2009), 332.
- 13 H. Scicluna, *The Church of St John in Valletta* (1955), 198.
- 14 Similar to Cesare Ripa's interpretation in *Iconologia* of 1593, a codex of symbolic attributes.
- 15 AOM 261, f.61.
- 16 *Arcivium Melitense*, vol. VII, 3, 62-69...446. See *Storie di Restauri nella Chiesa Conventuale de San Giovanni Battista a la Valletta*, G. Mantella & S. Guido (2008).
- 17 Vincenzo Bonello was Inspector of Works of Art in 1920, Member of the Antiquities Committee in 1923 and Curator of Fine Arts in 1925.
- 18 The installation of the roof was possibly put on hold as the Second World War broke out.