

# Religious Symbolism and Floral Motifs during the time of the Knights of Malta: The Vestments of the Cotoner Grand Masters

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During their 268-year sojourn in Malta, the various Grand Masters of the Order of St John donated a wealth of sacred vestments to St John's, their Conventual Church. Two of the more spectacular sets of vestments are those donated by the Cotoner Grand Masters in the 1660s. They are particularly striking due to their extensive use of symbolism, an important artistic tool used during the Baroque period to educate, elevate and enthrall.

During the reign of Grand Master La Cassiere (1572-1582) the General Chapter of the Order established that each Grand Master had to donate from his personal wealth a *gioia* to the newly consecrated church of St John within five years of his election.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the church of St John holds a precious and unique collection of works of art including sacred vestments most of which were gifts from the various Grand Masters. The inventories of the Order record thirteen gifts of sacred vestments to the Conventual Church, twelve by the various Grand Masters and one by Pope Alexander VII, Fabio Chigi, who was formerly Inquisitor of Malta between 1634 and 1639.

Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner, who reigned from 1663 to 1680, donated two



Fig. 1 *Chasuble and tunic, from the collection of vestments, a gift of Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner.*

sets of liturgical vestments.<sup>2</sup> One set was in memory of his brother Rafael, who had preceded him as Grand Master, and who had reigned for only three years, dying before he had the chance to donate his gift, and another set which was his personal gift to the church. These two sets are still in a relatively good state of preservation and some were still in recent use on major feast days and at pontifical ceremonies.

The practice of wearing specific robes for liturgical celebrations has a long tradition. It was adopted by the Roman Catholic church from the Roman Byzantine court some time after the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Byzantine court had a long tradition of using special ceremonial dress. The use of sacred vestments was given an impetus within the Catholic Church during the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century on account of some important events, such as the Protestant Reformation which brought about a schism in the Christian Church, as well as significant changes in liturgical practices. Whilst the Protestant doctrines stated that all artefacts made from costly materials, especially those that represented holy figures, and all ceremony was to be removed from church services, the Roman Catholic Church, on the contrary, chose to assert itself by reinforcing the use of images made from precious materials and added further ritual and ceremony to its liturgical events. This was seen as a useful tool to educate and draw the congregation to believe that this was the one true faith. Thus, wearing elaborate ceremonial vestments was implemented to enhance important events in the liturgy. The use of symbolism was used to further enhance the liturgical celebration. One should note that during this phase the Catholic Church as a whole was fighting for supremacy over both Protestantism and Islam and had engaged the visual arts as a means of propaganda. The dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the new Baroque style and its flamboyant and demonstrative character provided ample material.

The colour of the vestments was chosen carefully according to the liturgical calendar so that the symbolic meaning of the colour would add to the meaning of the liturgy. The major colours used tended to be white, which symbolizes light, and therefore truth and righteousness, and gold or yellow, a colour known to represent divinity. Green represented the earth and was worn for everyday use where no particular events are celebrated, whilst red, which symbolises blood and therefore suffering, was worn on occasions of the Passion, such as Good Friday, as well as on the feasts of martyrs. Purple and black symbolized penance and were used during Lent and Advent. Pink, which is a mixture of white and red, was used on the third Sunday of Advent and the fourth Sunday of Lent, as it anticipated the joy of celebrating Easter and Christmas.

Grand Master Rafael Cotoner's set of vestments consisted of eight copes, five tunics, three maniples, two stoles, one chasuble, one tabernacle canopy, one chalice cover, one burse and one altar frontal. They are made out of ivory coloured silk satin and are profusely embroidered with multicoloured silk yarns using some of the most fascinating designs of flowers in a stylized fashion.

The type and style of liturgical vestments also carry symbolic meaning. The chasuble is the last garment worn after the undergarments with which the celebrant is invested and represents Christian charity and protection. The cope, the richest and most magnificent of the vestments, is a large cape in the shape of a half circle and it is worn in processions of great solemnity. It represents purity and dignity. The tunic is symbolic of joy whilst the maniple, which is a narrow strip worn over the left arm, is an allusion to the rope with which Christ was bound and led to Calvary and therefore symbolized penitence. The stole is symbolic of Christian duty towards God's kingdom and the hope of immortality. It is usually bound at the waist by a rope or cord also made of silk which recalls Christ bound to the pillar during Flagellation. Its symbolic meaning is chastity, temperance and self-restraint.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 2 *The Vestments of Grand Master Rafael Cotoner.*

The set of vestments donated by Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner is in ivory coloured silk satin. It consists of eight copes, two stoles, one altar cover, one chasuble, two tunicles, two maniples and one altar frontal. All the vestments are embroidered with stylised variations of the cotton plant, the symbol of the Grand Master's coat of arms. They are arranged in a symmetrical pattern and are found both in full bloom as well as in bud form. Acanthus leaves are also inserted amongst the plants. All the motifs are embroidered with gold and silver threads. Gold, the most precious metal, symbolizes pure light and the heavenly realm of God the Father. Silver, on account of its whiteness, came to represent purity and chastity.

Both sets of vestments date to the late 1660s and were originally embroidered on a lamé fabric and at a later stage transported to a silk ground.<sup>4</sup> However of greater interest is the profusion of embroidery of the set belonging to Grand Master Rafael Cotoner. The entire design consists of an impressive variety of stylized flowers several of which could carry significant symbolic meaning. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the height of the Baroque age, a profusion of ornamentation developed making use of symbols especially flowers and vegetation.

It is very unlikely that these garments were so painstakingly embellished into a work of art purely for decorative reasons. Since these were liturgical vestments, it is most likely that they carried some symbolic significance. With some difficulty some of these flowers have been identified.<sup>5</sup> Some of the flowers are well known such as the rose, whose symbolic significance has long been associated with the Virgin Mary. She is referred to as the 'rose without thorns'. St Ambrose relates how the rose grew in Paradise without thorns until the Fall of Man, only after that did the rose take on its thorns to remind man of the sins he had committed and his fall from grace, whereas its fragrance and beauty continued to remind him of the splendour of Paradise. The Virgin is often represented holding a white rose and has since become a symbol of Her purity.<sup>6</sup> A red rose symbolized martyrdom, representing the martyr's blood. In this case the rose is gold and could symbolize the sacred ornament that was made of pure gold which the Pope occasionally conferred upon illustrious churches or distinguished individuals, such as the Grand Master would have been, for their Catholic spirit and loyalty to the Holy See, as a mark of esteem and paternal affection.

The rose was blessed on Laetare Sunday which was the fourth Sunday of Lent



Fig. 3 *The altar cloth, 4.90m by 1.05m.*

often called Rose Sunday. The function represented the end of fasting and penance and the transition from hunger into fullness, hate into love, and sorrow into joy as designated by the rose's rich colour, odour, and taste. On this day the congregation was asked to look up beyond Calvary and see the first rays of the Easter sun that represented the risen Christ who brings redemption. The golden flower and its shining splendour was symbolic of Christ and His Majesty and was profusely represented in art during the Baroque age.

Another flower which is found adorning several parts of the vestments is the columbine *equilegia vulgaris*. Its name derives from the Latin word for dove, *columba*, and literally means 'like a dove', named so because the shape of the flower was thought to resemble doves in flight. It is therefore a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The columbine has seven blooms, which were seen to symbolize the 'seven Gifts of the Holy spirit' according to the prophecy of Isaiah, 'and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord' (Isaiah 11:2).<sup>7</sup>

The Iris *xiphioides*, first appears as a religious symbol in the works of early Flemish masters, where it accompanies and at times replaces the lily as the flower of the Virgin. It is often seen as an attribute of the Immaculate Conception. Its symbolism emerges from its name iris, which means sword lily, and was taken as an allusion to the sorrow of the Virgin at the Passion of Christ. Here it could be symbolic of faith.

Another interesting flower represented in the vestments is the tulip. It only arrived in Europe in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, having been introduced from the east. Lacking edible value or religious significance, they represented the bold spirit of the age when Turkish armies still bombarded the walls of Europe. They were first found in Vienna making their way there from Constantinople. They became very popular in Holland and were soon hybridized beyond recognition of their original wild species.<sup>8</sup>

The narcissus is popularly known to represent self-love, indifference and coldness, referring to the Greek legend of the youth, Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image when he saw it in the water and drowned while trying to embrace it. After his death, the youth was changed into a flower: the narcissus. However, it is sometimes depicted in Christian art, in scenes of the Annunciation and Paradise, to signify the triumph of divine love, sacrifice and eternal life over death, selfishness and sin.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 4 *The Golden Rose, detail from the altar cloth.*

Other interesting flowers seen embroidered in the vestments are the violet *viola canina* which is a symbol of humility and is often used to denote the humility of the Son of God in assuming human form.<sup>10</sup> Anemones *adonis annua* are normally scarlet red and grow commonly in the Near East. Its representation is often associated with death. Anemones are said to have sprouted where the blood of Adonis fell on the earth. Within Christian symbolism red also stands for the blood of Christ and the martyrs, and the anemone is often found among other flowers in the scene of the Crucifixion. In this context it most probably symbolizes suffering and sacrifice.

The thistle *cirsium sp.* is known to symbolize earthly sorrow and sin because of the curse set on mankind against Adam by God. ‘...cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field’ (Genesis 3:17-18). Piero della Francesca included a bed of thistles in *The Nativity* (1470-5) to foreshadow Christ’s suffering. In Christian art it came to represent suffering and penance, and in this case it could also symbolize sacrifice.

Other flowers which appear are the Turk’s cap *lilium marta* and the forget-me-nots *myosotis sylvatic.* Their presence here could represent faithfulness. The carnation is also a curious addition. It is traditionally known to symbolize pure love. According to Flemish custom, a variety of carnation called ‘the pink’ was worn by the bride on the day of her wedding and the groom was supposed to search her and find it. From this custom, pink has become a symbol of marriage. In this context it could symbolize pure love and devotion.

The lily *lilium candidum* is associated with the Annunciation, therefore its use here would be to represent chastity and devotion.<sup>11</sup> The pansy is rarely depicted in Christian art and could mean remembrance and meditation. The morning glory, *ipomoea tricolour* is a popular flower and often depicted in still life paintings but rarely in religious pictures. Since it opens at dawn it could represent light through which truth emerges. The tiny white flowers are commonly known as stocks *matthiola incan.* They are members of the *Cruciferae* family and because they have four petals in the form of a cross, they are symbols of sacrifice.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 5 *The Tulip, detail from the altar cloth.*



Fig. 6 *The Narcissus flower, rarely depicted in Christian art*



Fig. 7 *The Anemone, detail from the altar cloth..*



Fig. 8 *The Thistle, detail from the altar cloth.*

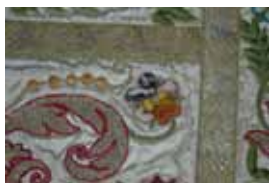


Fig. 9 *The Pansy*, detail from the chasuble of Grand Master Rafael Cotoner.



Fig. 10 *The Morning Glory*, detail from chasuble of Grand Master Rafael Cotoner.

Although one cannot be sure of the meanings of the symbols decorating this splendid collection of vestments donated by Grand Master Cotoner, it is most likely that they were chosen for their symbolic meaning as was customary in Christian art especially during the Baroque age. Flowers in Christian art have been used for their significance since the early Renaissance. The interpretation of their meaning is seldom as straightforward as their appeal, and there may be cases of mistaken identity. One also has to appreciate that in those days many of the flowers depicted were very rare, such as the striped tulips and yellow *centaefolia* rose, and could be extensively stylized making them hard to identify. The development of the species into the type known today could also contribute to hindering their identification. The symbolic meaning could also have changed and this makes the messages they were intended to communicate to the viewer less accessible to contemporary interpretation. This essay is a preliminary study into the symbolic significance of the decorative scheme of these vestments and certainly warrants further study.

### Notes

- 1 H.P. Scicluna, *The Church of St John in Valletta* (Rome, 1955), Statute XXXII, p.212.
- 2 A. Ferris, *Memorie dell'inclito Ordine Gerosolimitano esistente nell'Isola di Malta* (Malta, 1880), p.90.
- 3 For more detail about Christian symbols see A.N. Didron, *Christian Iconography* (London, 1851); G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York, 1954); E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1957).
- 4 For more technical detail see E. Baluci, *Liturgical Vestments for the Order of St John in Malta*, Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Malta, 2005.
- 5 The author is indebted to Edith Hili and Mariucca Micallef Grimaud for identification of the flowers.
- 6 V. Lasareff, 'Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin', *Art Bulletin*, vol.20 (New York, 1938), p.26.
- 7 The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are: wisdom, understanding, good counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.
- 8 C. Fisher, *Flowers and Fruits* (London, 2002), p.46.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ferguson, p.40.
- 11 A. Moore, 'The Flowers of Faith', in A. Pavord (ed.), *The Meaning of flowers in Art* (London, 2003), p.20.
- 12 Fisher, p.111.