

SOME LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PANEL PAINTINGS IN MALTA

MARIO BUHAGIAR

introduction

The object of this paper is to discuss a few relatively unknown Maltese panel paintings which I have hypothetically dated to the period between the end of the 15th and the first half of the 17th century.

The late medieval murals of pre-Knights' churches, both built and rock-out, have now received considerable attention (1) though much work obviously remains to be done. What is often overlooked is that churches also had altarpaintings usually painted on wooden boards. They included large retables, such as the great polyptych of St. Paul at Mdina Cathedral, and the more modest triptychs, diptychs and single panels of plain rectangular shape. With the exception of the Italo-Byzantinesque Madonna at Mdina Cathedral, which is possibly 14th century, no other panel painting in Malta can be stylistically dated to before the 15th century when the influence of Catalan and Valencian art reached the island by way of eastern Sicily. The retable of St. Paul was commissioned for the Cathedral about this time. It was possibly painted in Catalunya and is attributable to the circle of Luis Borassa (1360—1426) who was the leading painter of the international Gothic period in Spain. It is remarkable for its lively colours and accomplished technique.

To a slightly later period belongs the now dismembered polyptych of the Augustinian church at Rabat, which derives from the artistic climate of Sicily though its anonymous artist was definitely influenced by the northern inter-

* This paper was read on 25th October 1980 during the Week of Historical Studies held by the Historical Society of Malta at the Headquarters of Din L-Art Helwa, Melita Street, Valletta. The author is grateful to the following gentlemen without whose co-operation this study would not have been possible: Mr. Emmanuel Parnis, verger of Minsija Sanctuary; Dun Salv Farrugia rector of the Żurrieq churches of St. Leo and St. Agatha; Dun C. Vassallo, parish priest of Luqa and the late Dun Gużepp Micallef of the same parish; and Mr. John Mary Debono of Zejtun.

1. See especially the contributions of Geneviève Bautier Bresc and Godfrey Wettinger to *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings*, ed. A. Luttrell, Malta 1976, 97-115, and G. Mathew, "Schools of Painting in Medieval Malta", *Journal of the Faculty of Arts: Royal University of Malta*, vi no. 1 (1974), and Mario Buhagiar, *St. Catherine of Alexandria: Her Churches, Paintings and Statues in the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1979, 189 - 200.

national style. (2) On this painting a hieratic Madonna, who quietly suckles the Child, is flanked by majestic figures of saints lyrically fretted against the gold background.

Towards the end of the 15th century contacts were established with the Sicilian followers of Antonello da Messina whose brother in law, Giovanni de Saliba, was possibly Maltese. Giovanni's painter-sons, Pietro and Antonio were active in Malta. No paintings by Pietro survive but Antonio (doc. 1480—1534/5) is represented by two panels in the Rabat church of Santa Maria di Gesù. Their cousin Giovanni Salvo d'Antonio (doc. 1493—c. 1526) also worked for Maltese patrons among them the nuns of S. Pietro at Mdina for whom he painted in oils a large retable. Two possible panels of it survive at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, where a triptych of the *Madonna del Soccorso with SS. Peter and James* is also ascribed to him. (3)

These works must have had considerable impact in Malta at a time when a boom in church building brought with it a demand for *icone* or altar-paintings. (4) Most of these were the works of anonymous village artists who worked in a traditional technique. Others might have been imported from Italy or, possibly, were commissioned from itinerant Sicilian or South Italian painters who might have stopped at Malta from time to time. In rural Malta altar-paintings continued being produced in this way well into the 17th century.

The Dusina report of 1575 records over 60 *icone* and there were probably many others. (5) One *icona* in the church of the Annunciation at Tarxien was painted on canvas. (6) The others were all panel paintings. In 1598 almost all churches and most altars mentioned in the visitation report of that year, had one (7) and their number had increased by 1615. (8) Most of these humble works of art have been destroyed but a considerable number survive and await proper recording and study. This paper is a first attempt in this direction.

2. Bresc, *op. cit.*, 103.
3. On the activities of the Sicilian followers of Antonello in Malta see A. Luttrell in *Medieval Malta — Studies in Malta Before the Knights*, (ed. A. Luttrell) London 1975, 65 - 66 and Mario Buhagiar, *op. cit.*, 97-99. S. Bottari, *La Pittura del Quattrocento in Sicilia*, Florence 1954 and G. Vigni — G. Carandente, *Antonello Da Messina e La Pittura del'400 in Sicilia — Catalogo Della Mostra*, Venezia 1953, are indispensable to a proper assessment of late Maltese Medieval paintings.
4. On Maltese medieval church architecture see M. Buhagiar in *Medieval Malta*, 163-180.
5. (N)ational (M)useum (V)alletta, *Visitatio Dusina*.
6. *Ibid.* ff. 133-4.
7. (A)rchiepiscopal (A)rchives (F)loriana, *Visitatio Gargallo* 1588-1602 (1598 visitation).
8. A.A.F. *Visitatio Cagliares* 1615.

The Minsija Triptych (fig 1a)

One of the most interesting and, possibly also, one of the earliest of the surviving panels is the triptych of St. Leonard and the Annunciation venerated in the cave-church at Tal-Minsija, San Gwann, where it is still a cult object as the ex-voti that surround it testify. It shows St. Leonard in the central panel with the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin on the lateral compartments or volets. The state of preservation is extremely poor, the wood is badly worm-eaten, the paint is cracked and scaling off, and the panel of the Virgin Annunciate has become detached.

The three panels are c. 4cm thick and the overall measurements of the triptych are 85 x 59cm. The central panel measures 41 x 59cm and the volets 22 x 59cm each. The central panel is acutely pointed while the top section of the volets is cut at a sharp angle of 45°. It is painted in tempera which was the commonest technique until the late 15th century. In Malta tempera continued being used until the first decades of the 17th century. Briefly the process was as follows. The panel was well prepared with fine grained plaster or *gesso* and then painted with powder pigments usually mixed with fresh yolk thinned with water. There were several variations to this basic recipe (for example the whole egg was sometimes used and more sophisticated painters usually applied two layers of *gesso*: a *gesso grosso* and a *gesso sottile*) but the end result was usually a tough and permanent paint film which however had the disadvantage of drying up almost instantly thereby making re-working difficult. Allowance had also to be made for the fact that the colours dried several tones lighter. After the painting was finished a thin oil glaze was sometimes applied. This helped give a degree of transparency to the otherwise semi opaque tempera. Before starting work on the panel the artist generally prepared a full scale drawing for the painting on a *cartone* or large sheet of paper (hence the name *cartoon*) which was then transferred on to a panel. This was generally done by rubbing the cartoon on the back with chalk and then going over the main lines with a stylus thus transferring them to the panel. Sometimes, as in the case of the Minsija triptych and the other panels discussed *infra*, the outline was gone over with a black paint before the colours were applied. This is why the figures have such a hard outline.

In the Minsija triptych where each panel was enclosed by a plain border of seemingly reddish pigment, c. 2cm wide, the figures were painted against an apparent gold background but the gilding has almost completely disappeared and only faint traces remain. As in the Hal Millieri frescoes, which have been dated to about the middle of the 15th century, the artist has concentrated on essentials and rigorously rejected all anecdotal and narrative elements.

In the central panel St. Leonard lifts his right hand in benediction and holds a closed book and his symbol, a pair of handcuffs, in the left. He stands upright with the body facing forward and head slightly turned to present an oblique three quarters face. Like the Hal Millieri saints he does not look directly at the spectator. There are in fact several points of contact between this figure and the Hal Millieri saints but there are also some important differences: the figure is only shown from the knee upwards and has greater solidity so that the eye senses better the weight of his body. The drapery is also more veristically rendered and in the lower part of the panel are stylised trees and shrubs which are absent at Hal Millieri.

The shrub in the left hand corner of the central panel is completed on the volet of the Archangel Gabriel creating in this way a somewhat naive illusion of continuity between the scenes of the two compartments. The angel kneels solidly on the ground and his ample draperies fall in heavy folds. He is better drawn than the Virgin who kneels, on the other volet behind a high prayer-stool which conceals most of her body leaving only the head and shoulders and the folded arms visible. The clumsily drawn prayer-stool demonstrates the artist's ignorance of mathematical perspective. There is none the less a primitive attempt at indicating depth.

Like all other surviving examples of primitive art in Malta the Minsija triptych must necessarily be placed within the artistic milieu of Sicily and Southern Italy. It is likewise extremely difficult to date. Its points of contact with the mid-15th century Hal Millieri frescoes have already been hinted at but the solidity of the figures and the more sophisticated modelling of St. Leonard's face seem to indicate a later date possibly the late 15th or early 16th centuries. The style is, however, earlier. As at Hal Millieri the painter may, on his own initiative, or on that of his patron, have taken an earlier painting, or paintings, as his model. The St. Leonard in particular recalls the hieratic figures of early 15th century Sicilian paintings notably the panel of St. Nicholas Enthroned in the Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia, Palermo, which has recently been attributed to Giovanni di Pietro da Napoli who was active between 1402 and 1405 and seems to have been trained in Pisa. The head of the seated Saint who occupies almost the whole picture space is similarly modelled and he likewise blesses with one hand and carries a closed book and bishop's staff in the other. This painting is however a vastly superior work and the saint is shown in majestic frontality. The figures on the volets of two triptychs by the *Maestro delle Incoronazioni* also at the Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia and datable to the second decade of the 15th Century have less solidity but similar grandeur without familiarity. A parallel may finally also be drawn with a St. Catherine (on a triptych in the same museum)

by the Sienese Nicolò di Maggio who was active in Palermo in about 1450. Though more decorative and linear the saint is similarly posed.

The cult of Leonard of Siponto, patron of slaves and prisoners, may have reached Malta by way of Southern Italy where the saint was especially popular among the Normans of Apulia. In Malta it is first documented about the beginning of the 15th century and he soon became one of the most venerated saints. In the Lunzjata Valley outside Rabat is a cave-church with a seemingly late 15th or early 16th century mural of the saint and by 1575 there were nine churches dedicated to him. (9) One of them in *Contrada Arar* outside Birkirkara may possibly be identified with the Minsija church. The Duzina Report of that year describes it as a poorly endowed church with no rector. It had an altar and wooden doors but there is no reference to an *icona* or painting. (10)

The late medieval iconography of the saint was, however, considerably diffused. Besides the Minsija triptych and the Lunzjata cave-church he also appears at Hal Millieri and St. Agatha, Rabat and Dusina mentions a now lost *icona* in his church at Kirkop. (11) He also appears together with St. Peter on one of the volets of the triptych of S. Marija preserved in the church of St. Leo at Bubaqra, Zurrieq.

The Filfla Triptych (fig 1b)

This is surely one of the most beautiful of the surviving panel-paintings. Traditionally it is claimed to have come from a cave-church on the island of Filfla. This church was deconsecrated in 1575 by Mgr. Dusina because it was difficult of access and was visited by none except a few fishermen. Dusina ordered its benefice and its furnishings to be transferred to the church of St. Leo at Bubaqra where the rector was to set up an altar of the Assumption of the Virgin which was to be furnished with three altar-cloths, an antependium and two candlesticks of painted wood (12). There is no reference to a painting and it would have been, to say the least, strange that such a beautiful painting should have come from a poor cave-church on a deserted island. Also suspect is the date 1604 painted in black pigment in the lower part of the central panel. The painting has all the indications of being an earlier work. The date may perhaps have been added when it was moved to St Leo's church.

9. N.M.V. *Visitatio Dusina* f. 216.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.* f. 129.

12. *Ibid.* f. 147

The triptych is in a fair state of preservation but the gold background has suffered extensively and only a few patches of gilding remain. It is preserved behind a glass-pane which made it impossible to take the thickness of the panels and examine the condition of the wood. The central panel is round-headed while the volets end in half a segment. As in the Minsija triptych each of the panels is framed by a thin border of seemingly red pigment. The overall dimensions are 86 x 110cm. The central panel measures 46 x 110cm and the volets 20 x 100cm.

The painting is more linear and decorative than the Minsija triptych and though its inspiration is once again probably Sicilian or South Italian its feeling for refinement shows more affinity with the more northern International style. In the central panel the graceful Virgin in a richly embroidered mantle, standing on the horned moon of the Book of Revelations, is enclosed in a mandorla of bright light filled with the winged heads of putti drawn in outline. In the lower part of the panel two angels, in red and white robes respectively, sustain the Virgin while two other angels place a crown on her head.

On the volets the beautiful figures of SS. Peter and Leonard, fretted against the gold background, are once again majestic without being familiar. The graceful elongated hands of the Madonna deserve special notice. They call to mind several parallels in 15th century Sicilian paintings with a marked tendency towards International Gothic or Sienese Art.

The closest Sicilian parallel I could find to the Filfla Madonna is a panel of St. Agatha in the church of the saint at Castroreale. It is by an unknown artist definitely influenced by Sienese art, and has been dated to about 1420. The modelling of the saint's face, the rather prominent nose and the way this is linked to one of the eyebrows and the treatment of the folds of the starred mantle all have a certain similarity.

The SS. Peter and Leonard recall on the other hand the hieratic figures that flank the enthroned Madonna on a poliptych attributed to Nicolo' di Maggio, datable to about 1411, in the Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia at Palermo. They have also points of reference with the saints flanking the two triptychs by the Maestro delle Incoronazioni mentioned earlier. (13)

The SS. Peter and Paul Panel (fig 2a)

There is also in the church of St. Leo a panel of SS. Peter and

13. *Supra*, p.180.

Plate 1



a. Minsija Sanctuary, San Gwann: Triptych of St. Leonard and the Annunciation of the Virgin.



b. Church of St. Leo, Bubaqra: Triptych of the Assumption of the Virgin. Detail of central panel.

Plate 2

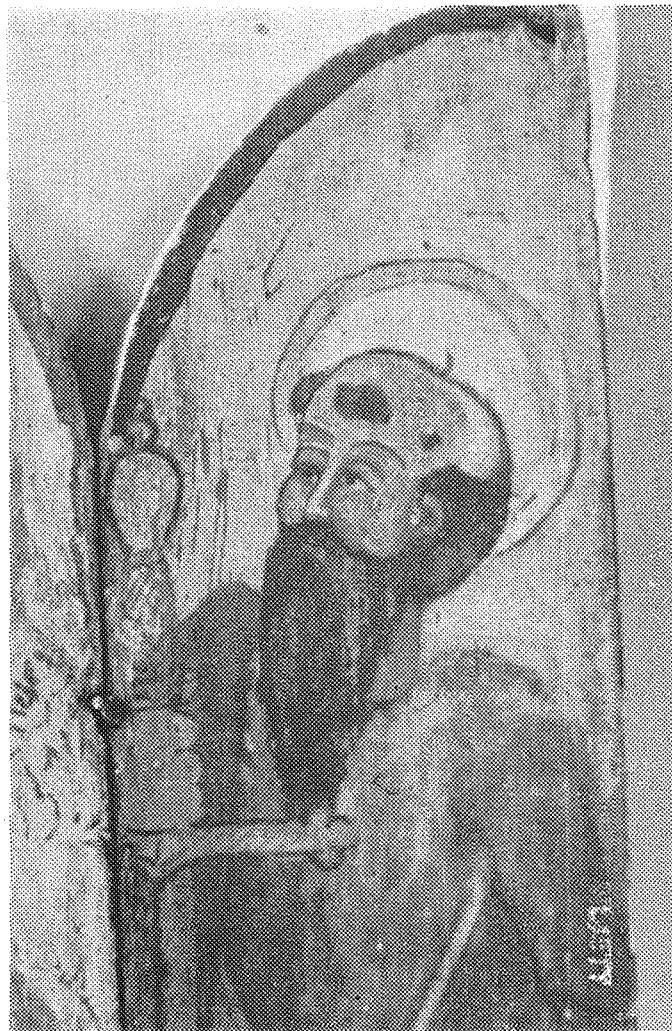


a. Church of St. Leo, Bubaqra: Panel of SS. Peter and Paul.



b. Church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq: Triptych of the Assumption of the Virgin. Detail of central panel.

Plate 3



a. Church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq: Triptych of the Presentation in the Temple. Detail of volet of St. Paul.



b. Parish church of St. Andrew, Luqa: Panel of St. Nicholas. Detail



a. Parish church of St. Andrew, Luqa: Panel of St. Thomas.



b. Zejtun Parish Museum: Panel of St. Thomas.

Paul. It may have come from the church of St. Peter built in the first decade of the 16th century by parish-priest Petrus Hellul in the cemetery around the parish church of St. Catherine at Zurrieq. In 1508 Don Pietro entered into an agreement with the friar-painter Joannes la Pucella to paint the apse and east wall of the church with the images of God the Father and other saints who were to include SS. Peter and Paul. (14) An *icona sanctis Apostoli Petri et Pauli* is reported in the church in the Visitation Report of 1598. (15) It is mentioned again in the 1615 report which describes it as an *icona parva*. (16) The church was soon afterwards demolished but its *icona* may have been preserved and eventually found its way to St. Leo's church where it now hangs in the vestry.

The panel is segmental-headed and measures 51 x 51cm. It is nearly 5cm thick. The state of preservation is on the whole fair but the paint has started to scale off and prompt action is necessary to prevent further damage.

The style is close to the Minsija triptych. The hieratic figures of Peter and Paul stand against a plain background painted yellow to simulate gold-leaf and at the feet of St. Peter is a stylised plant. The figures have the same hard outline of black paint. Like the St. Leonard they stand upright and their heads are similarly slightly turned in profile. The painting is however a markedly inferior work. The figures are squat, heavy and almost grotesque. Notice for example the right hand of Peter which holds a gigantic key. Both saints carry their emblems and hold closed books. The artist may possibly have been familiar with Riccardo Quartararo's large panel of SS. Peter and Paul, now in the Galleria Nazionale at Palermo, which is signed and dated 1494. In this great painting the saints are similarly posed and they are characterised by a detached monumentality. Quartararo, active between 1485 and 1501, was a highly skilled artist. The Zurrieq painter on the other hand lacked all artistic competence but his work is nonetheless not devoid of a certain naive charm.

The Assumption Triptych (fig 2b)

Not far from St. Leo's church in the church of St. Agatha, near the Xarolla Windmill, are two other triptychs which previously hung in the old parish church of Zurrieq. One of them, with the Assumption of the Virgin on the central panel and St. Paul and the Baptist on volets, is mentioned in the 1615 visitation report as the *icona* of one of the two altars of the Assumption

14. Contract in Wettinger, *op. cit.*, 114.

15. A.A.F. *Visitatio Gargallo* 1598, f. 29v.

16. A.A.F. *Visitatio Cagliares* 1615, f. 172.

of the Virgin. (17) This altar is first mentioned in 1575. (18) In 1598 it was taken care of by Margherita widow of Salvatore Vella. (19)

The triptych is in a very bad state of preservation, the paint is scaling off at an alarming rate and woodworms have literally transformed the panel into a pepper-pot. The wood is nearly 5cm thick and the overall dimensions of the triptych are 81 x 99cm. The central panel measures 41 x 99cm and the volets 20 x 99cm each. The central panel is round-headed while the volets end in half a segment.

In the central panel the Virgin, sustained by angels, is carried heavenwards on a luminous cloud while the Dove of the Holy Spirit hovers above her and floods her head with radiance. In the lower part of the panel the diminutive figures of a man and woman, possibly the donors, kneel in prayer in an arid, rocky landscape and lift their rosary beads in the direction of the Virgin. Between them immediately beneath the cushioning cloud of the Virgin was an inscription in Roman capitals painted in black pigment. Of the first line only the first two letters *MI* remain but the second line is well preserved. It reads *MRO ANTONINO*. This mysterious Maestro Antonio may have been the painter. It is indeed a pity that no particulars about him are known.

The style of the panel seems to exclude a date prior to the late 16th century or, possibly also, the beginning of the 17th. (20) Notice especially the Virgin on her putti-filled cloud and the way the light around her is handled. Pedestrian though the artist might have been he had nonetheless a certain knowledge of the artistic trends of the later Renaissance and in his own untutored way he tried to manipulate light and shade in the modelling of his principal figure. The attempted realism in the treatment of the kneeling donors and of the landscape background are also indicative of a late date. The man who wears a mantle and high ruffled collar may have been a village worthy. He is thrust into the foreground and treated with more importance than his wife, who clad in her faldetta, recedes into the background.

On the volets the choice of the Baptist as a companion to St. Paul may

17. *Ibid.* ff. 169r-172r.
18. N.M.V. *Visitatio Dusina*, f. 134-137.
19. A.A.F. *Visitatio Gargallo* 1598-1602 (1598 visitation) ff. 28r-29r.
20. The rosary beads held by the donors are another indication of a late date. The recitation of this Marian prayer was popularised by the Dominicans in the late 16th century, and a Confraternity of the Rosary was founded in Zurrieq parish church on November 25, 1588 (See M. Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani ir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620*, Malta 174, 280).

be taken as further evidence for a post 1530 date. The two saints are, however, anachronistic figures and their style is entirely different from that of the central panel. Once again we are here confronted with hieratic cult images and it is not improbable that the painter may have copied the two saints from a 15th century fresco-cycle similar to that at Hal Millieri.

The Presentation Triptych (fig 3a)

The other triptych in St. Agatha's church seems to have come from the altar of *Ste. Marie de presentatione* in the old Zurrieq parish church. The 1615 visitation report records that it had an *iconam in satis decentem* but it does not describe it. (21) Like the Assumption triptych it may have been transferred to St. Agatha's church in the course of the 17th century as a result of the rebuilding of the parish church.

The triptych, of similar shape to that of the Assumption, is in an even worse state of preservation and, especially in the lower sections, large areas of paint have scaled off. Its over all dimensions are 80 x 90cm. The central panel measures 40 x 90cm and the volets 20 x 90cm each. Each of the panels is framed by a thin order of reddish pigment. The theme of the central panel is either the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple or the Circumcision. It is a crowded, badly organised composition. In the right hand corner, the Virgin with folded arms watches as the mitred priest places the Child on a stone altar. The space between them is filled with the figures of temple-attendants or spectators. Interesting is the lack of iconographical importance given to St. Joseph. Only his head is visible as he peeps over the Virgin's shoulder to catch a glimpse of the ceremony. It is demonstrative of the fact that the intense cult now enjoyed by the humble foster father of Christ has a recent history. Until the 17th century he rarely appears in art except as a companion to the Virgin and his presence, as in the Zurrieq triptych, is generally never given importance and sometimes, as in some 15th century Flemish paintings, he is even treated in a light vein.

The geometric tiles in the foreground show a naive attempt at perspective which, however, does not succeed in giving any depth recession to the painting.

On the volets SS. Peter and Paul carry their emblems against a plain background painted yellow to simulate gold. They are badly drawn but their

21. A.A.F. *Visitatio Cagliares* 1615, ff. 169r-172r.

22. They may still have been in the parish church until April 1679 for the A.A.F. *Visitatio Molina* 1678-80, ff. 186v-192r lists two paintings respectively of the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Presentation* in the vestry of the Rosary.

style is different from that of the hieratic saints discussed so far. Their elongated forms seem to hint at an awareness of Manneristic conventions of the late 16th century. This is also indicated by the treatment of the figures in the central panel. I do not think that the triptych can be dated earlier than before the very end of the 16th century and I favour an early 17th century date.

The St. Nicholas Panel (fig 3b)

Another triptych stylistically datable to the early 17th century was the altar-painting of the church of St. Nicholas at Luqa. Only the central panel remains and it is preserved in the vestry of Luqa parish church. The church of St. Nicholas, situated in the heart of the village, a few metres away from the piazza, was a small late medieval church with a ceiling of flat stone slabs carried on the tops of four arches. (23) It was deconsecrated in the course of the 17th century and subsequently demolished but its west wall with a fine arched doorway with large voussoirs and the east-end apse survive in the yards of two adjoining houses. (24)

The 1618 visitation report records the dilapidated state of the church. (25) Shortly afterwards it was, however, restored by Domenico Bonnici and it continued being taken good care of until 1634 after which date it was allowed to become derelict once more. (26) The triptych of St. Nicholas may have been donated by Domenico Bonnici. It is first recorded in the 1634 visitation report from which we learn that SS. Peter and Paul were painted on the volets. (27) These were eventually detached from the central panel and subsequently lost. This is a pity. It would have been interesting to compare them to the Peter and Paul on the Zurrieq Presentation triptych.

The central panel became private property. It was donated to the parish church some time ago by Mr Noe Ciappara of Luqa. It is in a good state of preservation and shows signs of recent restoration and, unfortunately, of repainting. It measures 39 x 92 cm x c. 4cm thick and it is framed by a narrow border of red paint. St. Nicholas in rich Episcopal robes and mitre sits majestically on a sculptured throne the arms of which are sustained by two grotesque

23. A.A.F. *Visitatio Pontremoli* 1634, f. 57v; *Visitatio Balaguer* 1635-37a, ff. 98v-99r.
24. I am grateful to Mr N. Ciappara for permission to photograph and study the remains of the west-front of this church in the back yard of his house at No. 33 Britannia Str. Luqa.
25. A.A.F. *Visitatio Cagliares* 1618, f. 115v.
26. A.A.F. *Visitatio Pontremoli* 1634, f. 57r., *Visitatio Molina* 1678-80, f. 339v.
27. A.A.F. *Visitatio Pontremoli* 1634, f. 57r.

angels. He lifts his right hand in benediction and holds an open gospel book and a bishop's staff in his left. For a background there is a sky of luminous clouds which open up in the arched top of the panel to reveal God the Father as a diminutive figure who holds the orb of heaven and blesses the saint.

The early 17th century date of the panel is suggested by the elongated figure of the saint, which gives it a certain refinement, by a handling of light in the background and by the shape of the throne. St. Nicholas is however still a hieratic saint in the medieval tradition and he is similarly posed frontally for the purpose of invocation. Despite the late date the conventional tempera technique is still used and the figure is still outlined in black which makes it look as though it is fretted against the background.

The St. Thomas Panel (fig 4a)

There is also in the vestry of Luqa parish church another panel-painting in a tempera technique which represents St. Thomas. It was once the altar-piece of a church of the saint which stood outside the village close to the Hal Farrug road. In 1575 the church was in a dilapidated state and did not even have wooden doors. (28) Visitation reports of the first half of the 17th century give further details. It had an east-end apse in which stood a stone altar and it was surrounded by a cemetery. (29) It was deconsecrated in 1656 (30) and then pulled down but its cemetery remained in use for a long time. Its site distinguished by an arched doorway and the stone statues of SS. Peter and Paul is a landmark on the road to Luqa Airport from Marsa. It is still known as *ic-cimiterju ta' S. Tumas*. (31) The altar-piece is first mentioned in the 1615 visitation report which describes it as an old painting. (32)

The panel is rectangular in shape and measures 56 x 90cm. Like the S. Nicholas painting it shows signs of recent restoration and some parts have been repainted. The saint is once again a hieratic figure possibly copied from a late medieval panel or a fresco. He stands bolt upright holding his emblem, the mason's square, in one hand and a closed book in the other. His face and right hand are modelled with some competence but the rest of the body has the stiffness of a dressed mannequin. The background is of some interest. Instead of the gold or plain background of convention is a sunset sky and a

28. N.M.F. *Visitatio Dusina*, f.

29. A.A.F. *Visitatio Balaguer* 1656-59, f. 77v.

30. *Ibid.*

31. See G. Micallef, *Hal Luqa — Niesha u Grajjietha, Malta* 1975, p.86.

32. A.A.F. *Visitatio Cagliares* 1615, f. 167r.

simple landscape with a mountain in the distance. To the left of the saint a curious plant erupts from the ground and climbs heavenwards like Jack's fabulous beanstalk. But the most noteworthy feature is the little church in the right hand corner. This is probably the church for which the panel was painted and its interest lies in the fact that it seems to have been depicted with remarkable faithfulness. The facade with its arched door, hood-mould and gabled top is typical of late Medieval Maltese church architecture. The circular window or deep eye that pierces the gable is less characteristic. Very few churches had such windows prior to 1575 and Mgr. Dusina ordered their opening on several occasions. (33) The gable-window of St. Thomas's church may therefore have been post-1575. On this consideration I suggest a late 16th century date for the painting. This hypothesis is supported by stylistic considerations particularly the treatment of the landscape and evening sky.

The Zejtun St. Thomas Panel (fig 4b)

Another panel-painting of St. Thomas is preserved in the Zejtun Church Museum. It is said to have been the altar-piece of a little church at ir-Ramla ta' S. Tumas close to Marsascala Bay. (34) The rectangular panel, made up of two wooden boards vertically joined together, measures 77 x 131cm.

This is definitely a late painting presumably datable to the early 17th century and its style is entirely different from that of the other panels discussed in this paper. Thomas is no longer a hieratic cult-figure frontally posed to elicit our prayers. He has been injected with a new humanity. Gone are the cool composure and detachment of the earlier saints. Instead we have an almost pugnacious, very human figure. Swarthy and bow legged with rugged weather-beaten, bearded face and balding head, he wears his halo uncomfortably as he lifts his bold gaze heavenwards and points an almost accusing finger to the top right hand corner where the Almighty appears as the segment of an orb with radiating rays. The mason's square is gripped clumsily in his left hand and the closed gospel book lies discarded at his feet. One gets the impression that a Zejtun fisherman or farmer must have posed for the artist when he was painting this St. Thomas.

The anonymous artist has also laid aside the convention that in the earlier cult-images had rigorously rejected all anecdote and scenes of action. In the lower right hand corner is a little inset with a pleasantly naive depiction of the martyrdom of St. Thomas and curled round the saint's right leg, on the

33. N.M.V. *Visitatio Dusina*, ff. 27-28, 30-31, 105-106.

34. W.M. Zahra, *The Parish Church of St. Catherine at Zejtun and Its Environments*, Malta 1969, p.25.

flower-patterned ground, is a strange animal that looks like a crossbreed between a dog and a porcupine. Beneath the inset is the inscription in red pigment S. THO/MAS/APVS.

Despite the originality of the composition the artist still abides by the traditional tempera technique and the incised lines made by the stylus when the outlines of the picture were transferred from the cartoon to the plastered panel are plainly visible. As was customary the incised lines were then gone over with black paint and colours were then applied.

Conclusion

The Zejtun St. Thomas is probably one of the last panel paintings produced by humble local craftsmen working in an anachronistic technique that as a result of insularity, conservatism and lack of artistic training had persisted well into the 17th century. With the exception of the few months in 1608 when Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt played host to Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, the Maltese Islands remained for the greater part of the 17th century cut off from the main streams of European art. No Maltese painter of note had yet emerged and official commissions were awarded to continental artists, mostly Italian, who paid sporadic visits to Malta and occasionally produced significant works. A real artistic awakening only manifested itself in the second half of the century when Mattia Preti left behind him a brilliant career in Italy to settle in Malta as official artist to the Knights of St. John.