

The Baroque Heritage of Valletta

A Seminar

On Friday 3 November 2000, a seminar entitled 'The Baroque Heritage of Valletta' was held at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. This very well attended event was organised by the International Institute for Baroque Studies (IIBS) in conjunction with the Museums Department, and sponsored by the Bank of Valletta. The seminar was the contribution of the IIBS to the *Europe - A Common Heritage* campaign promoted by the Council of Europe.

The seminar was introduced by Professor Denis De Lucca, Director of the IIBS and Head of Architecture at the University of Malta. He began with a general description of Valletta as a fortified city built to provide a well-protected urban nucleus as an alternative to a dangerous life in scattered hamlets.

Protected urban life is the concept underlying an early plan of Valletta drawn up in Brussels in September 1565 by the famous Italian theorist and military architect Francesco de Marchi, and in a later plan drawn up by Daniel Specklin in Strasbourg.

Within a short time, the austere appearance of Valletta was transformed into a splendid European Baroque setting, well-suited to the ceremonial needs of the aristocratic Knights of St. John.

Denis De Lucca described how during the

17th and 18th centuries changes were made to the fortification system and urban texture of Grand Master de Valette's city. After 1650 a more relaxed Italy had already experienced the architectural and artistic revolution created by the great Baroque architects Maderno, Borromini, Bernini, and Pietro da Cortona.

The official opening address to the seminar was delivered by Professor Roger Ellul Micallef, Rector of the University of Malta.

He first expressed his appreciation of the initiative taken by the IIBS to organise the event, and then summarized the operative aims of the Institute, which is now offering an M.A. in Baroque Studies as a postgraduate course, as well as publishing this newsletter on behalf of the Council of Europe's *Baroque Route Network*.

The Institute has also embarked on an ambitious research programme studying hitherto unexplored aspects of the building of Valletta and the design of early Baroque churches in Malta.

Other areas of interest include co-operation with the University of Catania, the Baroque Centre of Syracuse, and other European Institutions concerned with Baroque Studies. Details of the Council of Europe campaign, *Europe - A Common Heritage*, were outlined to the audience by Mr Anthony Pace, Director of Museums, on behalf of the Minister of Education who was indisposed.

The first paper of the day was delivered by Chev. Roger de Giorgio, author of *A City by an Order*, who talked about the historical background leading to the foundation of Valletta and the subsequent Baroque

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transformations of the City after the arrival of the papal military engineer Floriani in 1635.

This was followed with a slide lecture by Annabel Vassallo, research assistant at the IIBS, who demonstrated the changing face of Valletta through a series of architectural features identified by the Institute for this purpose.

Claude Busuttil, a graduate student of the University of Florence, continued with a paper on the rich Baroque interior of the Conventual Church of St John the Baptist in Valletta, which offers a striking contrast to the bland 16th-century façade. Architect Hermann Bonnici, also a research assistant at the IIBS, spoke about various technicalities linked to the conservation of the Baroque heritage of Valletta.

The main speaker at the Seminar was Professor Mauro Bertagnin of the University of Udine, who gave personal insights into the spirit of Baroque Valletta as seen in a video produced in 1998 by the audiovisual centre of the University of Udine in conjunction with the department of Architecture at the University of Malta. Professor Bertagnin also highlighted the theoretical aspects of the gridiron urban armature of Valletta and compared them to projects by famous Italian architectural theorists of the 16th century. It was this same urban armature that provided the setting for the Baroque architectural transformations of 17th and 18th-century Valletta.

Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, Chairman of the board of the IIBS, delivered the closing address of the seminar. He emphasised the great need to actively conserve the unique Baroque heritage of Valletta, and also explored various relationships between Renzo Piano's proposals for the new city gate and the Baroque concepts discussed during the seminar, adding that the spirit of Baroque Valletta must at all costs be respected in any future interventions in the urban fabric of this fine city. ■