

Keith Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Knights of Malta*, with a preface by Jennifer Montagu. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2004: pp. 234 + xx.

The scholarly significance of this book is best appreciated if considered in the context of the research programme that the History of Art Programme at the University of Malta has on its academic agenda. The author is a senior lecturer and full-time member of staff on the Programme, who combines his research pursuits with a full teaching schedule.

The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, which I published in 1988, was a coherent first attempt at coming to terms with the history of the visual arts in Malta by providing a critical survey of painting in the 500 years between 1400 and 1900.

The Introduction emphasised that the book was intended as a point of departure, and cautioned that new research would inevitably necessitate modifications and revisions. The ultimate desideratum was that it would serve as a stimulus for specialisations in the several historical art disciplines, and that future studies would, in due course, crystallise in a comprehensive scholarly history of art in Malta. Fourteen years later, this goal has not yet been attained, but appreciable progress has been made.

The most significant step forward was the introduction of classes in the history and appreciation of art at the University of Malta, and the consequent fostering of a better concerted and more scholarly-oriented research programme. This bold initiative, that I was asked to co-ordinate, started in the same year as the publication of the book, and was to some extent the result of its success. Over the years, it has matured into a History of Art Programme responsible for an area of study within the Faculty of Arts.

The Programme offers courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and has been instrumental in the training of scientifically well-prepared art historians and critics who now occupy key positions in the country's fine arts (and other cultural) institutions. The idea of History of Art as a cultural pastime that can be pursued by any suitably motivated dilettante or art collector has finally started to be discredited, and there is a better informed attitude to the subject as a rigorous academic discipline.

The Programme has contacts of mutual academic collaboration with the History of Art departments of major universities and fine arts museums in Europe and North America, and has taken important initiatives in the protection and conservation of the Maltese artistic patrimony. Academic staff members sit on committees for international art exhibitions and colloquia and publish research papers in referred art historical journals and publications.

The richness of the new data collected since 1988 makes the time ripe for re-interpreting and rewriting the story of art in Malta in its wider Mediterranean and Western European contexts. *Roman Baroque*

Sculpture for the Knights of Malta is the first in a series of scholarly monographs that the Programme has on its agenda. It will be followed later on this year by an in-depth study on the art and architecture of late medieval Malta that I will be authoring and which will also be published by *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti*.

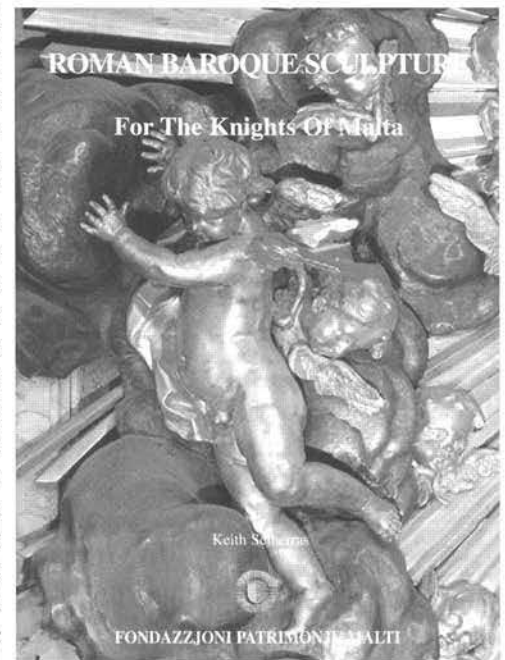
What Dr Sciberras has produced in the book is in many ways a unique academic achievement. As Dr Jennifer Montagu, one of the most respected and internationally celebrated contemporary historians of Roman baroque art, has stressed in her preface, Dr Sciberras has not only rewritten the history of Roman sculpture in Malta, but in so doing he has also broadened our knowledge of a significant aspect of the history of Roman baroque sculpture. He has done this by assiduously and intelligently tapping the rich resources available in Maltese and foreign archives.

This, coupled with his trained eye, has enabled him in "not only identifying and analysing a number of extremely

important sculptures, but also examining the ways in which they were commissioned." The book is in this way a landmark in Maltese art historical studies and one of the few works produced in Malta that can stand comparison with the best art historical studies produced elsewhere in the academic world.

It is a credit to the author, to the institution that he represents, and to *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti* that has been responsible for its publication.

Dr Sciberras is one of the first (and also outstanding) products of the History of Art courses that I pioneered at the University of Malta. The roots of the book are to be sought in the studies and research that he undertook, under my supervision, for his doctoral thesis in History of Art. He was the second PhD graduate of the Programme, the first being Dr Martina Caruana, currently head of Academic Studies at the Malta Restoration Institute, Bighi, whose studies, under my direction and that of Professor Anne Prache, were carried out jointly at the University of Malta and the University of Paris (Paris IV) Sorbonne. Her thesis on *The Codex Evangeliorum Melitensis and Related Late Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts Produced in Sicily* still awaits publication. I hope that Dr Caruana will see to it in the near future because it is a valuable contribution to Maltese late medieval studies,



particularly the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Dr Sciberras' book is destined to remain a standard work of reference for many years to come. A cursory look at his bibliography provides an idea of his extensive reading in both primary and secondary sources. Particularly valuable, and richly rewarding, was the work carried out at the archives of the Sovereign Military Order at the Magistral Palace in *Via dei Condotti*, Rome, where he received the generous assistance of the then Librarian and Keeper of Archives, Fra John Critien, whose invaluable help he gratefully acknowledges.

Other important libraries outside Malta, the resources of which he perceptively tapped, included those of the *Bibliotheca Herziana* in Rome, the Warburg Institute in London, the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome, the *Archivio Storico del Vicariato* in Rome, the *Archivio Doria Pamphili* in Rome, the *Archivio Storico della Banca di Napoli*, and several others. The list is truly impressive.

The book considers in remarkable depth and detail the most exciting and richly rewarding period in the modern art history of Malta, from around the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, when under the culturally enlightened government of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, the little central Mediterranean archipelago developed into a microcosm of the Baroque art of Roman Catholic Europe. The benevolent despotism of the Grand Masters was crystallised in a discerning programme of artistic patronage that generally reflected remarkable connoisseurship.

The city of Valletta in general, and the great church of St. John in particular, were transformed into a centre of artistic sophistication aptly described by Patrick Brydone who visited the islands on his Grand Tour in 1770, as "an epitome of all Europe". The acumen of the Knights' patronage is above all testified to by the choice of artists whom they enticed or sometimes coerced into their service, particularly in the decoration of the Conventual Church on which successive Grand Masters lavished their munificence.

Only the best was acceptable and through their agents, particularly in Rome and Naples, the Knights kept themselves informed of the artistic situation. It was to their credit that the Conventual Church became one of the great showpieces reflecting the unsurpassed *magnificenza* of baroque Rome. Dr Sciberras has demonstrated that, contrary to what has traditionally been maintained, the major influences that shaped the Baroque identity of Malta came from Rome rather than Naples.

The alleged Neapolitan bias, to which I myself had previously subscribed, resulted from the predominant influence of Mattia Preti whose sparkingly brilliant palette, tactile qualities, and warm lyrical appeal had a conditioning effect on Malta. This should not however blur our judgement of the other developments in local art.

Several artists who contributed to the glory of baroque Malta moved in the circles of Alessandro Algardi and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the greatest

exponents of Roman high baroque sculpture who, although seemingly temperamentally and stylistically different from each other, shared a lot in common. The Knights tried to cajole both into their service.

They were not very successful with Bernini, although a bronze crucifix on the choir altar of the Conventual Church might possibly have been cast from a model for one of the several altar sets produced by him and his bottega, sometimes in collaboration with other sculptors, such as Ercole Ferrata. When in the early spring of 1655 they approached him through their ambassador in Rome for a sculptural altarpiece of the baptism of Christ for the grand niche of the Conventual Church, he diplomatically refused. The work was, as a result, entrusted to Melchiorre Cafà.

Cafà, on which Sciberras is currently preparing another major publication, is one of the great heroes of the book. Important new light is shed on the story of the commission, the untimely death of the great Maltese virtuoso, and the subsequent history of the project until its eventual realisation several years later by Giuseppe Mazzuoli. Of great interest to Maltese art history is the involvement of Melchiorre's brother, the architect Lorenzo, both in the final preparations of the setting for the baptismal group and of the chancel altar. His artistic credentials are in this way appreciably enhanced.

Many of the monuments discussed by Dr Sciberras have recently been restored by Dott. Sante Guido and his highly qualified equip of professional conservators and restorers. There has been all along a salubrious relationship between the two, with Dr Sciberras providing the correct historical context for conservation and restoration interventions, and Dott. Guido giving the scientific and technical advice that enhances the appreciation of the work of art.

This collaboration has resulted in the study and analysis of some of the great works discussed in the book, such as the *Christ the Saviour* by Alessandro Algardi, now in the Art Gallery of the Conventual Church, or the magnificent portrait bust of Pope Innocent XII, from the church of the Virgin of Victories, that Dr Sciberras has perceptively attributed to Giuseppe Mazzuoli. Both projects were made possible through the support and cooperation of the Valletta Rehabilitation Committee, and the enthusiasm of its coordinator Dr Ray Bondin.

Dr Sciberras' commitment to research and scholarship has attracted international attention and he is acquiring recognition as a leading authority on baroque studies.

Recently he has broadened his interests to include Caravaggio and he has been invited to sit on the organising committees of major exhibitions and scholarly fora on this great early sixteenth-century artist.

The book under review will further enhance his academic reputation. It also provides us with a foretaste of his future achievements.

Mario Buhagiar

This review first appeared in the Sunday Times of Malta (2nd May 2004), pp.32-33