

Seminar on Melchiorre Cafà – Maltese genius of the Roman baroque

On 25 October 2003, a day seminar on the Maltese sculptor Melchiorre Cafà was held at the Aula Magna of the Old University in Valletta. Dr Ray Bondin, Executive Coordinator of the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, opened the event by proposing that the statue of St. Paul by Melchiorre Cafà and the procession of St. Paul should form part of a trans-boundary nomination to UNESCO for World Heritage status.

Dr Keith Sciberras (University of Malta) chaired the morning session, which began with a paper by Dr Jennifer Montagu (Warburg Institute, London) discussing Melchiorre Cafà's models for Ercole Ferrata, followed by Dott. Maria Giulia Barberini (*Museo di Palazzo Venezia*, Rome) and Dott. Angela Cipriani (*Accademia di San Luca*) who gave a joint paper entitled '*Fortuna Critica*'. Dott. Elena Di Gioia (*Museo Capitolini*) gave a paper titled '*Chi non esce talvolta dalla regola no la passa mai. Melchiorre Cafà e la scultura a Roma tra il 1657 e il 1667: alcuni problemi aperti*'. Professor Louise Rice (University of New York) spoke of 'Cafà's Conclusion', while Dott Alessandra Anselmi (University of Cosenza) examined Cafà and Santa Rosa.

The second session was chaired by art historian Professor Mario Buhagiar (University of Malta), and began with a paper by the art historian Dr Gerhard Bissell entitled '*Melchiorre Cafà at S. Caterina a Magnanapoli*', continuing with Dr Keith Sciberras who discussed Melchiorre Cafà and the Knights of Malta. Mgr John Azzopardi (Wignacourt

Museum, Rabat) spoke of Melchiorre Cafà and the Grotto of St. Paul, whereas conservator Dott. Sante Guido's paper was entitled '*La tecnica delle cere di Cafà*'.



Melchiorre Cafà, St. Thomas of Villanova distributing alms, National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta.

Exhibition of works by Maltese sculptor Melchiorre Cafà

A specialized exhibition of works by Maltese sculptor Melchiorre Cafà, recognized internationally as one of the great masters of Roman baroque, was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta in November, entitled *Melchiorre Cafà – Maltese Genius of the Roman Baroque*.

The highlight of the exhibition was an oil lamp designed by Cafà and made in Rome on commission by Donna Cosmana Navarra of Rabat in 1666. The exquisite silver and bronze lamp hangs in the side chapel dedicated to St. Anthony at the parish church of St. Paul in Rabat. The exhibits also included the terracotta model of *The Charity of St. Thomas of Villanova*, an excellent example of Cafà's inventiveness which made him one of the most respected artists of his time in Rome. The exhibition was set up by Heritage Malta and curated by baroque historian Dr Keith Sciberras (University of Malta).

"Cafà became so famous and his inventive capabilities were so great that he attracted commissions from the most important patrons. His legacy has been recaptured in the twentieth century", said Dr Sciberras. Cafà was born in Vittoriosa in 1636 and died at the young age of 31. Like many other artists of the time, Cafà was attracted to Rome as a centre of artistic activity. Aged 22, he left Malta for Rome where he spent the rest of his short working life.

Cafà may have died after a piece of a life-size model of St. John the Baptist fell on him, however the cause of his death is not firmly established.

The exhibition included models of marble statues located in Rome. The wax relief of *The Glory of St. Catherine of Siena* was made as a sketch model for the marble altar relief of St. Catherine in the church of *Santa Caterina in Magnanapoli*. The terracotta model of the *Charity of St. Thomas* was made for the marble group of the church of *S. Agostino*, and was commissioned by Prince Camillo Pamphilij in 1663. Cafà only managed to complete the statue of St. Thomas before his death. The rest of the group was eventually completed by Ercole Ferrata, Cafà's close collaborator and friend in Rome.

The exhibition also contained two wax figures of martyr saints. These models were pigmented, a process which resulted in the loss of a substantial amount of detail. The purpose of these models is not known, although they may have been made for the colonnade of St. Peter's in Rome. Cafà was one of the sculptors shortlisted for part of the project months before he died. Works securely attributed to Cafà included the statue of St. Paul at St. Paul Shipwrecked church in Valletta, and the *Virgin of the Rosary* at the Dominican Priory church in Rabat. The marble statue of St. Paul in St. Paul's Grotto in Rabat was completed by Ferrata after Cafà's death.