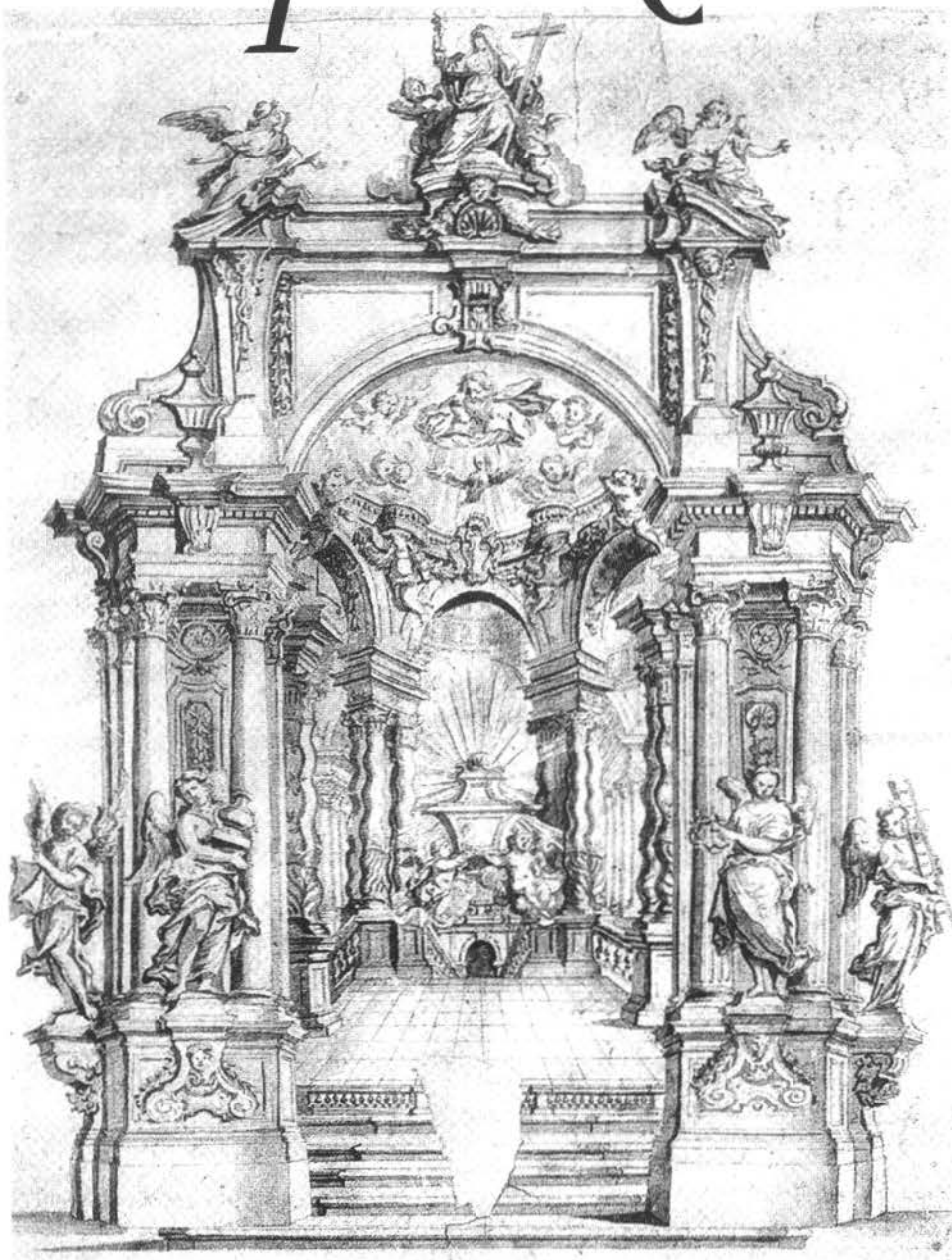


January 2006

No. 6



Baroque Routes



Newsletter

Foreword

Since its foundation in 1996, the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta has left no stone unturned to achieve excellence in research activity concerning diverse aspects of baroque studies. Considered from this perspective, this issue of the annual newsletter published by the Institute focuses on the results of a research project concerning the life and career of the baroque architect Pietro Paolo Troisi, who studied at the famous *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome and who was instrumental, on his return to Malta to take up the post of architect of the *Mdina Universitas*, in promoting the spirit of baroque art and architecture in the Maltese islands in the first half of the eighteenth century. According to Joseph Briffa's MA in Baroque Studies dissertation which I supervised, this was

the time when baroque in Malta reached its highest and most magnificent levels of expression, supported and encouraged by a series of enlightened Grand Masters of the Hospitaller Order of St. John the Baptist who were then ruling the island state. In presenting this feature on Pietro Paolo Troisi, this newsletter is keeping up with a tradition of incorporating within its pages, contributions based on primary source research carried out by staff members and students meant to introduce new knowledge about the baroque age.

Professor Denis De Lucca
Director
International Institute for Baroque Studies

The International Institute for Baroque Studies (IIBS) at the University of Malta was set up to promote the pursuit of interdisciplinary, academic studies on various aspects of baroque culture. It organises symposiums, public lectures, exhibitions and other activities leading to a greater appreciation of baroque culture, with particular reference to Malta, and networks with similar centres for baroque studies overseas. It is currently engaged in research projects concerning baroque art and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Institute organises MA courses on baroque studies and short courses on the baroque heritage of Malta and its conservation, and is also engaged in giving assistance to various bodies concerned with the restoration of baroque buildings and artefacts. It also runs a pre-tertiary Certificate course and a Diploma course in baroque architecture, commissioned by the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure of the Government of Malta.

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Baroque Routes Network Newsletter

Issue No. 6, January 2006

Edited by Dr. Petra Bianchi

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Front Cover: Design of the Altar of Repose for
the Cathedral of Mdina by Pietro Paolo Troisi,
1727, *Atti Capitolari*, Archives of the Mdina Cathedral

*Restoration of Sarria Church by Astrid Vella was first printed in the Sunday Times of Malta (5 June 2005)
The Marble Graves of Valletta by Petra Bianchi was first printed in Vivre magazine (June 2005)*

Study Tour to Rhodes

In November 2004, the International Institute for Baroque Studies and the Department of Architecture and Urban Design of the University of Malta organised a one-day study tour to Rhodes. This trip was intended to expose students to the living environment of the Knights of St. John before their arrival in Malta in 1530.

The visit to Rhodes was organised by the Director of the Institute for Baroque Studies in conjunction with Dr Lee Minaidis, deputy mayor of the city of Rhodes for international and public relations, who provided specialised guides and reading material for the occasion.

The students were given the opportunity to spend time in the former Grand Hospital of the Knights, now the archaeological museum, and in the castle-palace of the Grand Masters, which was restored with skill and imagination by Italian architects.

The visit included a tour of old buildings and Hellenistic and Byzantine ruins in the former Turkish and Jewish quarters, including a mosque undergoing intensive restoration and the sixteenth-century Turkish baths.

The students also viewed the impressive medieval fortifications of the town, which in the early sixteenth century



Rhodes



were reinforced with primitive bastions designed by the military engineer Basilio della Scola, in anticipation of the second siege of Rhodes in 1522 which led to the capitulation of Grand Master Villiers de L'Isle Adam.

In the late evening, the students were taken to visit the white-washed labyrinthine village of Lindos, situated in the southern part of the island of Rhodes, beneath an ancient Greek acropolis which was later converted into an impressive medieval fortress.

This was one of a series of annual study tours organised over the last few years, which aim to make students aware of the diversity of the architectural heritage of mankind and its conservation.

Seminar in Reggio Calabria, Italy

On 18 May 2005, Professor Denis De Lucca was invited by the rector of the University of Reggio Calabria, Professor Alessandro Bianchi, to conduct a seminar on the urban fabric of baroque Malta to postgraduate students and tutors involved in the *dottorato di ricerca* programme of the *Dipartimento di Architettura e Analisi della Città Mediterranea*. The well-attended seminar was introduced by Professor Massimo Giovannini, dean of the architecture faculty, and by Professor Sara Rossi, head of the above-mentioned department, who both expressed their desire to collaborate closely with the University of Malta in research endeavours concerning the Mediterranean built environment with particular reference to the baroque heritage.

The presentation focused on the development of the urban fabric of the Grand Harbour area during the period 1530-1798, outlining the often conflicting thinking and design processes involved, the main protagonists, and nebulous areas which need to be investigated further through archive work in Malta and Italy. A video about the historical development and conservation aspects of Valletta, the result of an ongoing collaborative project between the universities of Malta and Udine, was also shown to the audience during the seminar.

The faculty of architecture of the University of Reggio Calabria is one of the most progressive institutions of its nature in Italy, with a wide range of academic links and several publications to its credit. It offers specialised courses in architecture, urban design, landscape studies and the history and conservation of the architectural heritage, all within a clear approach firmly entrenched in the rich architectural history and building traditions of the Mediterranean area.

Lecture on the baroque Peterhof



The International Institute for Baroque Studies organised a lecture for students following conservation courses at both the Institute and the Department of Architecture and Urban Design, on the restoration of the Peterhof in the vicinity of St. Petersburg. Perhaps the most famous and spectacular baroque imperial estate in Russia, the Peterhof palace was built by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, by the architects Braunstein, Zemtsov, Leblond and Rastrelli, as part of a policy of the Tsar to westernise Russia. The vast complex of buildings and gardens adorned with fountains and pavilions were inspired by Versailles. Particular features of interest in the Peterhof are the impressive interiors and the so-called Grand Cascade, located directly below the palace.

The lecture on the Peterhof was delivered by Dr Anna Lobovikov-Katz, head of the BSc in Conservation Studies programme in the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning of the Haifa Technicon in Israel. Dr Lobovikov's late father, an architect, had masterminded the extensive restoration project at the Peterhof, following the considerable damage that was done to both the buildings and the gardens during the siege of Leningrad during the Second World War.

In her lecture on the subject, Dr Lobovikov described the restoration methodology used by her father with the help of images of the Peterhof both before and after the restoration. The lecture was well attended by both lecturers and students.

Relations with the University of Bari, Italy

In July 2005, the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Bari invited Professor Denis De Lucca to participate in the adjudication commission of final-year thesis projects of faculty students.

The projects concerned an urban housing development in the Murat suburb of old Bari, the rehabilitation of the medieval cemetery area in the historic centre of Cairo, the creation of a new university centre on the outskirts of Lecce, the restoration and re-use of a crusader castle at Tartous, a rehabilitation project for the Kasbah of Algiers, low-cost energy-efficient housing in the San Girolamo district of Bari, and three projects for replacement blocks in parts of Valletta that sustained war damage and which had been rebuilt in an unsatisfactory manner. The formal examination session of these projects was followed by an audio-visual presentation of the projects to the public.

Matters of mutual interest and student-staff exchanges in terms of a recently signed Socrates programme were discussed with Professor Attilio Petruccioli, dean of the architecture faculty

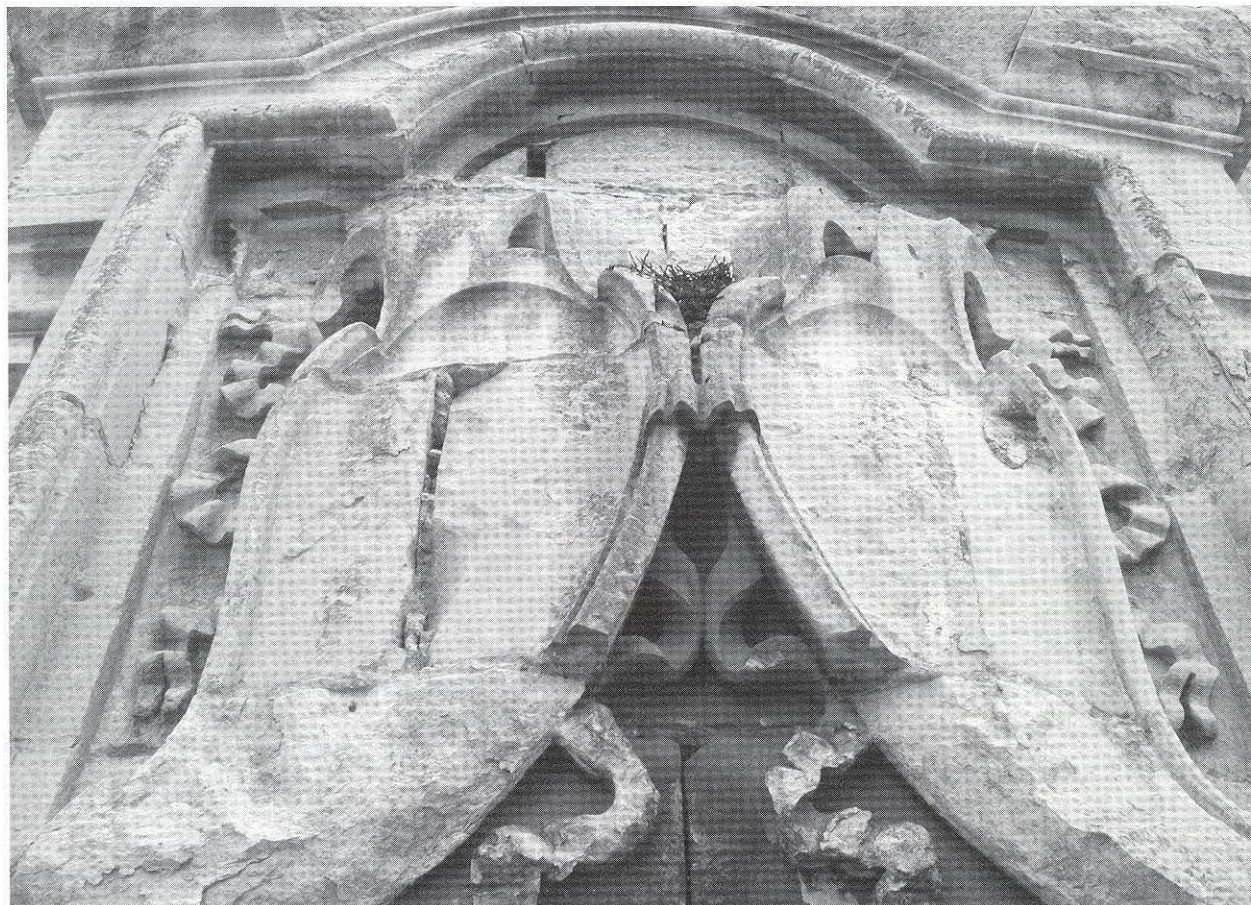
in Bari, and a decision was reached to encourage strong links at both teaching and research levels between the Institute and the department of architecture and urban design of the University of Malta and the Bari school.

Professor De Lucca, who also heads the architecture department in Malta, described the work of the final-year students of the Bari faculty as of a very high standard, full of ideas and based on thorough analytical studies. He said that the standard of the final-year projects in Malta compared favourably with the projects of the Bari faculty, and added that the external examiner, Professor Mauro Bertagnin and other distinguished professors had repeatedly praised the thinking, design and communication skills of Maltese architectural students.

Restoration of Sarria Church

Astrid Vella

The process of restoring dilapidated buildings back to their former glory is a concept that fascinates me, so when I saw that Sarria church, one of my favourite landmarks, was being given a face-lift, I couldn't resist going round to take a look at what was being done.



Detail of the facade of Sarria church, Floriana

Being a virtual 'roundabout church', Sarria is known to the thousands of commuters who drive past it every day, however probably few know that it is the second church to rise on this site. The original one was built around 1571 and funded by Fra Martino Sarria de Navarro which explains why it is known as 'Ta' Sarria'. Built on open ground, as Floriana was not even thought of, this first church was mainly popular with sailors serving on the Order's galleys. This is reflected in the original altarpiece now conserved at the Maritime Museum, a very unusual piece where the Madonna is depicted blessing the Order's fleet assembled beneath her. The maritime connection may have been maintained, as a fascinating link between the old church and the new emerged when the dirt and layers of old paint were stripped away to reveal graffiti of galleons and boats carved into the walls.

Matters took a very different turn due to the terrible plague which devastated Malta and would claim over 6,700 lives by the end of 1676. On the 11th April of that year the Grand Council of the Order met to discuss the invocation of heavenly

protection against the devastation of the plague, deciding that a solemn procession should be undertaken '*a visitare la cappella della Sua invocation detta comunament di Sarria, nel di cui altare si mettano le imagini did S. Sebastiano, S. Rocco particolari protettori di questa infermità*' (to visit the chapel dedicated to Her, commonly known as 'of Sarria' upon which altar images of St. Sebastian and St. Rocco, protectors against this disease, will be placed).

By the 15th of April, just four days later, these plans were superseded by a much more ambitious scheme to demolish the old church and replace it by a new one dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. These Council minutes include an intriguing feature often seen in contracts of work of the time, that is, that parameters for the new church were laid down by referring to another building which it should resemble, saying '*Che la grandezza sia come quella fabricate da Sua Eminenza nel boschetto in circa.*' This refers to the church dedicated to St. Anthony the Abbot, at Verdala Palace. Interestingly, this clause was not adhered to, as this latter church is actually rectangular

in-plan and quite different to the circular design which Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti proposed to the congregation of the Order on the 27th May 1676, at the height of the plague. The foundation stone of the new church was laid by Grandmaster de Rohan on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the 8th December 1676, amidst much celebration that the plague had lost its grip on the Island.

The church of Sarria is a rare local example of artistic unity where treatment of the interior complements that of the exterior, one of the main tenets guiding Roman Baroque architecture. Its proportions and design are a delight to the eye, but unfortunately the church can no longer be appreciated in its full grandeur as conceived by Mattia Preti. Early in the nineteenth century the domed lantern which crowned the ribbed cupola was dismantled either due to structural problems or to lightning damage. It was replaced by a simple cross, a rather unsatisfactory culmination to the building, impairing its aesthetic balance. In more recent times the dome was also treated with a silver-coated damp proofing membrane which also detracts from the original beauty of the building.

Happily, thanks to the restoration initiative of the Ministry for Works and Infrastructure, this deterioration is gradually being reversed as, panel by panel, the original features of Sarria church are coming back to life. The work is arduous and extremely laborious to be sure, involving every discipline of stone restoration. The building was first meticulously studied by the project coordinator, Architect Hermann Bonnici, in collaboration with the Institute for Baroque Studies and the University of Bologna who made their facilities available for running highly sophisticated tests. These permitted the identification of the causes of deterioration and therefore of the type of restoration required. Besides tests to check for the presence of salts, sulphates, acids and other pollutants in the stone, a thorough analysis of the mortar that was used 330 years ago was carried out. This included not only checking the granule size but also the composition as, strange as it might seem to us now, some mortars and lime washes even had animal fat included in the mix. Testing of the structure of the limestone used on Sarria church confirmed that unfortunately the stone is very



powdery and liable to attack from airborne pollutants. The delamination it displays, with stone surfaces 'cracking off' in thick flakes, is also very acute, its full extent and severity revealed by the use of a thermal imaging camera which highlights areas of delamination in different colours since they differ in temperature from the main body of the stonework.

Because of this, fine cracks were filled by injecting special lime mortars to consolidate the delaminating stonework as soon as initial cleaning was carried out. As well as brushing and washing of the stone surface this also entailed the removal of vegetation, old cables and rusted nails and hooks. Decaying areas of special interest such as sculpture are being treated with consolidant liquids which, when absorbed by the stone, solidify within it, strengthening it without reducing its porosity. Careful prising away of the most recent layers of paint is all carried out by hand mainly using surgeons' scalpels; slowly but surely the door surrounds and mouldings which had been submerged under many layers of paint are now beginning to emerge.

Worse still is the layer of cement rendering (plastering) which had been applied mainly to the lower level of the church. The bane of every restorer's life, cement render poisons the stone on which it is laid, as salts seep from the cement into the stone causing deterioration by salt crystallisation. Furthermore, the cement coating prevents the damp from evaporating out of the stone, forcing it upwards instead, carrying the salt deterioration higher. Cracks in old cement also allow the ingress of acidic rainwater which causes further deterioration of the stone face behind the cement layer. Although it is no easy task, hand removal of old cement is therefore a priority at Sarria church.

Then begins the process of replacing stonework which is irremediably decayed; in order to retain as much as possible of the original stone, stones are only being replaced as a last resort in the case of decayed blocks which pose a danger of structural weakness. The church face is then cleaned by the application of poultices in the form of pulped paper impregnated with a weak ammonia solution and laid on each and every stone block. By the time it is lifted off after 15 minutes, the solution will have softened up the centuries of dirt



Here and above: Restoration work at Sarria church

with which the church is covered. Since Sarria church is being constantly choked by vehicle emissions, as well as by pollution from the Marsa Power Station and the industrial estates, it is particularly prone to 'black crust'. Thus in areas such as under cornices where this calcium sulphate is not washed away by the rain, a gypsum crust forms, trapping soot which gives it a black colour and allowing acid droplets to attack the backing stone. Although the cleaning poultices soften this gypsum, it still takes a good deal of vigorous scrubbing to get rid of it - and in order to avoid damaging the stone, the scrubbing is carried out with the use of a toothbrush! To get an idea of what is involved, picture yourself perched up nine stories of scaffolding, laboriously scrubbing stubborn grime off each stone with a toothbrush. To me it seemed like one of the labours of Hercules, though it is not being carried out by the Greek god but by personnel from the Restoration Unit within the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure. Having followed courses in baroque architectural restoration, the Restoration Unit staff are now in a position to handle jobs which in the past would have required the engagement of foreign personnel. Their work was not made any easier by winter's severity, as the only concession to inclement weather is that in case of rain or high winds, work continues on the lower levels, rather than on the 7th to 9th stories!

Going up ladder after ladder on the scaffolding is like a journey back in time to early biblical films of the Tower of Babel, but it is worth the effort to examine, close-up, the intricacy of the stone-carving. It is always a humbling experience to see such workmanship, carried out with such precision without the use of modern tools. Cleaning this intricate sculpture requires not only the poultice packs but also the use of micro blasting air jets (women: if this talk of packs and abrasions sounds familiar, you're right; the restoration of old stone uses the same principles as beauty therapy to rejuvenating our skin!) In the case of stone carving especially, the replacement of stones is avoided by using 'plastic repairs', building up the stone again by using a special lime-based cement-free mortar which matches the stone in both colour and texture. As a result of all this specialised care, the intricately carved shields of the Order and the religious decorations which were previously so blurred by erosion and staining that they could hardly be deciphered, are now re-emerging crisp and clean.

It is amazing but even something as simple as pointing (filling with mortar) of open joints between the stone blocks becomes a fine art when dealing with the restoration of old buildings. This is why specialised training such as that which Restoration Unit personnel received at the San Servolo Restoration Centre, Venice is so invaluable, as are the old stone-cutting skills which had almost been lost and are now being fostered again. Another science which has been rescued from becoming completely obsolete is the trigonometry involved in planning and cutting complex stone structures which is now being studied in baroque architecture courses organised by the International Institute for Baroque Studies in collaboration with the Ministry for Resources



Astrid Vella and Hermann Bonnici at Sarria church

and Infrastructure. All these disciplines come together in the special stone-cutting workshop which has been set up at Sarria, where master stone-cutters reproduce deteriorated features of the church, using templates (profile patterns) prepared from them by personnel from the Restoration Unit. In a country beset by civil servant indifference, the whole team's evident pride in their work is a joy to behold.

As each section is completed, pigeon anti-roosting spikes are placed on any sill or overhang where pigeons might get a foothold and soil the freshly-cleaned stones with their droppings. The sight of a bird on the wing is so rare in Malta that I have to admit that part of me enjoys seeing pigeons flying in our cities. Equally, however, I have to admit that the acids and salts in these droppings do untold harm, contributing to the disintegration of the fabric of buildings, retaining water which exacerbates problems of dampness and encouraging plant growth on buildings. Therefore I have to reluctantly agree that their banishment from our cities would be a good thing.

The final step in the face-lift of Sarria church will be the stripping, repair and repainting of the church's wooden doors and windows, all to be done scrupulously by hand. This painstaking approach to the Sarria church restoration project might lengthen the duration of the works, but it is the only way to guarantee an outcome which is not only professional and reversible, but also pleasing to the eye. The aim of restoration is not to render 'as new', for correcting all signs of decay would rob the building of that quality of antiquity that only the passage of time can bestow. It is thanks to this approach that the faces which have been restored have retained their glorious original patina.

Born of the plague and threatened by destruction in the Second World War, Sarria church is now ensured a bright future thanks to this restoration. Take a stroll past it in the evening as the sun's setting rays light up the church in their glorious glow. That's what makes it all worthwhile.

Astrid Vella is a Diploma in Baroque Architecture graduate of the International Institute for Baroque Studies.

This essay was awarded a diploma for Cultural Heritage Journalism by Din l-Art Helwa in 2005.

The Manoel Theatre

FESTA BAROKKA 2005

3rd edition (9-14 May)

Valletta is a world heritage city, recognised internationally for its stupendous baroque architecture. Alongside the building of beautiful houses and palaces during the baroque era, great music was composed and magnificent pictures were painted. This was a time of immense creativity and artistic skill. Baroque Europe blends together in Malta – the multinational community of the Knights of St. John brought artists and architects from all over Europe to the island, creating a unique synthesis of baroque ideas and design.

As a baroque theatre, the Manoel Theatre has long recognised the importance of this aspect of Malta's heritage, and in May 2005 it organised the third edition of its 'Festa Barokka', offering a choice selection of excellent performances and events.



Florilegium

The festival hosted the internationally-acclaimed *Florilegium* – one of Britain's most outstanding period instrument ensembles. *Florilegium* has established a reputation for stylish and exciting interpretations of music from the baroque era, and performs at major international festivals each season. *Florilegium's*

programme at the Manoel in May was titled 'The Italian Connection', and included famous pieces by the popular composers Vivaldi, Corelli and Locatelli, as well as Ucelli, Frescobaldi and Gabrielli. The ensemble of four was led by Ashley Solomon.

The festival was also privileged to host the *Ensemble Européen William Byrd*, which is composed of some of the best solo singers of baroque music in France. The *Ensemble* has been heard in some of the most famous festivals in the world, and is directed by Graham O'Reilly, who has been directing specialist early-music groups for over twenty years. The *Ensemble's* performance at the Manoel, titled 'The French Connection', was a vocal programme with five singers. The pieces included a selection of French music by Charpentier, Dumont, Moulinie and Lully. The *Ensemble Européen William Byrd* attempts to recreate the historical context of the works being played, while also bringing out their universal nature to appeal to contemporary audiences of the 21st century.

Following the success of the baroque seminar at the last edition of the baroque festival in 2003, the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta organised a seminar on the theme 'Baroque Connections' at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, with a talk by Mro Joseph Vella on baroque music.

'Baroque Connections' seminar

On 9 May 2005, a seminar titled 'Baroque Connections' was held at St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity, as an introduction to the biannual Baroque Festival co-ordinated by Dr Petra Bianchi and organised jointly by the International Institute for Baroque Studies and the Manoel Theatre.

Mro Joseph Vella delivered a lecture on Maltese music of the baroque age, in which he discussed the position of Malta as a centre of musical excellence in the 17th and 18th centuries. He discussed Maltese baroque music extant in manuscripts that survive in Maltese archives, especially at Mdina. Mro Vella focused on the brilliant work of the earliest known Maltese

baroque composers, and also talked about the existence of two *capellas* in Malta, one in Valletta and one in Mdina, as well as the exchange of musicians between Malta and Italy in the baroque period. He used recorded examples of musical works by Maltese composers, illustrating local practices and standards.

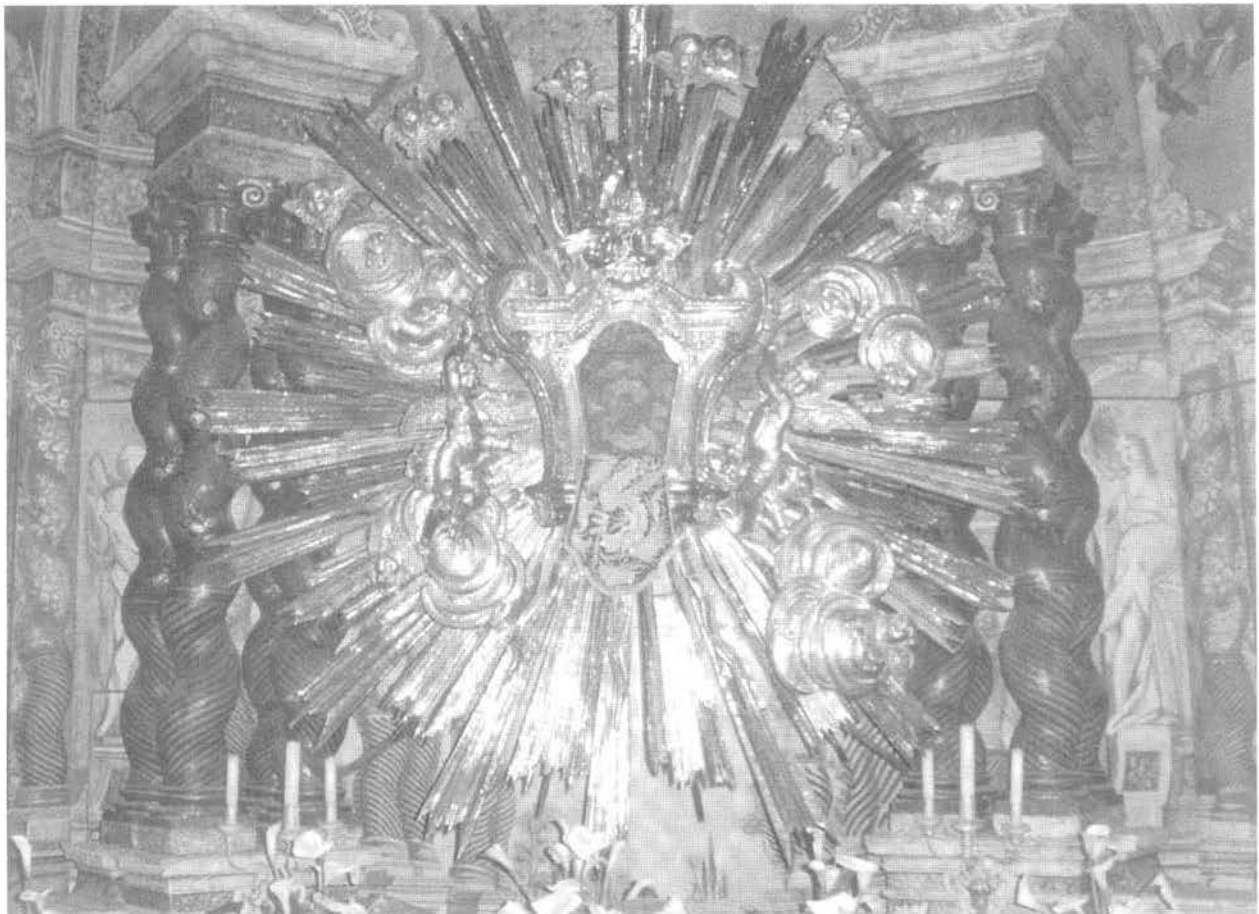
The seminar was concluded with a short presentation by Professor Denis De Lucca about the musical archives of the Marche in Italy, which contain a rich repertoire of 17th-century music written for the archilute, the theorbo and the Spanish guitar, interpreted by Andrea Damiani on a CD, excerpts of which were also played to the audience.

Pietro Paolo Troisi (1686-1750)

A Maltese Baroque Artist

Joseph A. Briffa

The exuberant style of the architecture, sculpture, painting and music of the baroque period was mainly the result of the directives of the Council of Trent, which promoted the need to glorify God and the church as a response to the Protestant condemnation of the pomp and ceremony of the Catholic church.



P. P. Troisi/ F. Zahra, Altar of Repose, Mdina Cathedral.

The baroque was an age of absolutism. The monarchs and princes of Europe contributed significantly to the spread of the arts through their patronage. Architecture and the arts were highly ornamental and favoured a style of exuberance. Palaces reflected the absolutism of the rulers and churches aimed for the glorification of the divine.

It was against this background that architects, painters, sculptors and other artists were creating wonderful baroque architectural and artistic works throughout Europe, such as the works of masters like Bernini, Algardi or Melchiorre Caffà, as well as those by lesser known artists such as the Maltese Pietro Paolo Troisi.

During this period Malta was ruled by the Knights of St. John, an Order with roots spread throughout Europe. Once they had

finished building the city of Valletta following a lull in warfare after the Great Siege of 1565, the Knights began to import architects and artisans to build and decorate their churches and palaces.

At the beginning of the 18th century, there was no foreign artist of high calibre working in Malta. This signified a breaking of contact with the high baroque style which until then had been represented in Malta by Mattia Preti. In the circumstances, the Order sent a number of young Maltese artists, painters and sculptors to Rome, who were mostly admitted to the *Accademia di San Luca*. This experience, combined with the influence of Preti, developed into the particular elements that constitute the Maltese baroque style.

In 1704, the first Maltese student who went to Rome to study

art was Pietro Paolo Troisi (1686-1750), who was then 18 years old. Troisi spent two years in Rome. Following a recommendation by Grand Master Perellos, he had the full support of the ambassador to the Order, Fra Marcello Sacchetti who engaged him in a *bottega* of the established sculptor Pietro Papaleo – who was later one of the three judges who awarded the *Concorso Clementino* prize of 1705 to Troisi. In 1664, Papaleo declared himself to be a pupil of Melchiorre Cafà.

Pietro Paolo Troisi was born on 29 June 1686 in Valletta, the son of Carlo Antonio Troisi and his wife Ninfa Bison. He was baptised in the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo, Valletta on 2 July 1686.¹ The parish records show that Pietro Paolo was the second of nine children.

The Troisi family were of Italian, probably Sicilian, descent and at the time of Pietro Paolo's birth they seem to have been quite new to Malta, as only four Troisis were recorded in the census of 1687² - probably Carlo, his wife Ninfa, and their two young sons Antonio and Pietro Paolo.

Pietro Paolo married Magdalena Marcella Desira at the parish church of Senglea on 26 August 1716.³ The baptismal records of Porto Salvo in Valletta indicate that Pietro Paolo had five children, Philippus, Xaveria, Veronica, Gaetanus (later known as Gioacchino), and Paola who died six days after birth.

The exact date and locality of Pietro Paolo's death was not

identified in an exhaustive search which I carried out in the archives of the Porto Salvo and St. Paul's Shipwreck churches in Valletta, as well as the Senglea parish church. P.P. Castagna enters the date of his death as circa 1750. Mgr. John Azzopardi has concurred with this date as in the *Atti Capitolari* of the Mdina cathedral of 2 May 1751, basing himself on the fact that Canon Giovanni Maria Azzopardi presented for consideration the design for the altar of repose originally made for the Mdina cathedral by the late Pietro Paolo Troisi in 1727, and which was approved.⁴

Few biographical details of Troisi's life are known. Castagna describes him as a sculptor, engraver and metal-caster of the Order, who coined the money of Grand Master Vilhena.⁵ Giuseppe Calleja, the Maltese painter, says "Troisi, the Master of the Mint who fashioned the dies of the coins of Grand Master Manuel (de Vilhena) was a skilfull engraver, and was also at the head of a school of drawing from the naked figure, the cost of which was defrayed by the aforesaid Grand Master."⁶

It is also recorded that Troisi together with the Knight Marc Antonio Zondadari, who later was to become Grand Master, founded a school of design and painting at the Mint in Valletta.⁷ In the documents of the Mdina *Universitas*, Pietro Paolo Troisi is described as the "*Maestro Architetto dell' Illustrissimo Magistrato della Citta Notabile*."⁸

Troisi was an architect, scenographer, designer, silversmith



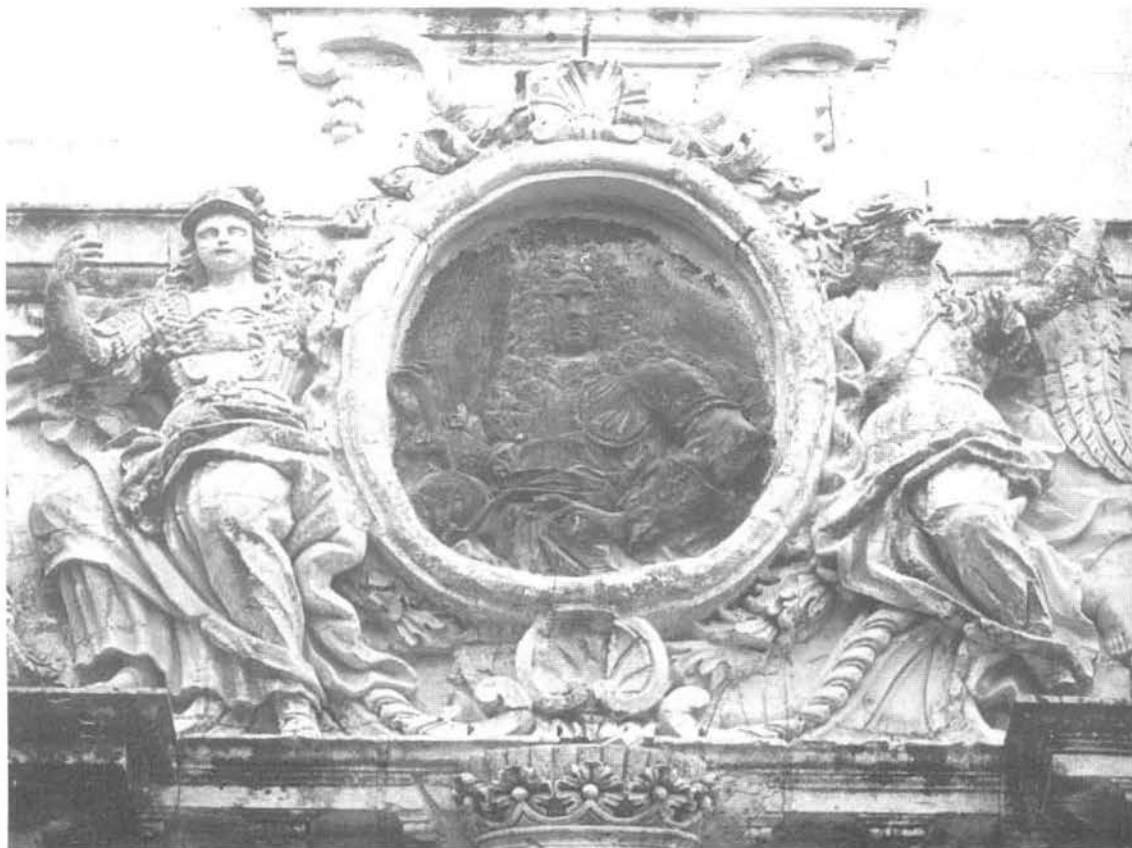
P. P. Troisi/ F. Zahra, *Altar of Repose, Mdina Cathedral.*



Pietro Paolo Troisi. sui laboris primos fructus – his first engraving
Portrait of G.M. Zondadari - 1720



Pietro Paolo Troisi. Bronze Bust of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena for the
Magisterial Palace, Mdina
Manoel Theatre Museum, Valletta



Pietro Paolo Troisi. Bronze tondo portrait of Grand Master de Vilhena on the entrance to the Magisterial Palace, Mdina. Stone figures by the Fabri sculptors

and Master of the Mint, bronze sculptor and medallist. He was a very able baroque artist, although somewhat eclipsed by the innumerable baroque artists, both foreign and Maltese, who flourished during the period. The fact that he was sent to study design for two years in Rome in 1704-05 is an indication of his skill. Troisi declared that he had studied in Rome when submitting his *Stato Libero* to the authorities on 21 July 1716 before his marriage.

After receiving his first training in his father's *bottega* in Malta, Troisi left for Rome to specialise in a silversmith's *bottega*. In Rome he was admitted to study at the prestigious *Accademia di San Luca*. Troisi was the second Maltese to be admitted to this academy after Melchiorre Cafà in 1662. In view of his promising talent he was at once promoted to the advanced class.

In 1705 Troisi participated in the *Concorso Clementino Prima Classe*. Five candidates took part, with a religious subject chosen by Giuseppe Ghezzi. Troisi won first prize in this competition *ex aequo* with the famous Roman sculptor Antonio Arrighi. The prize-winning ceremony was held on 7 May 1705. It began with a thanksgiving Mass said by the Vice-Regent of Rome at the Church of *San Luca e Martina*, followed by a *Te Deum* sung to the accompaniment of various instruments.

The prize-winning exhibit was a relief measuring 62 x 76 cm, in a theatrical setting with the subject contained by a column on the left and an altar with the statue of Ercole in a niche above the altar, on the right. In between, a figure kneels in a diagonal position. The event is crowded with figures expressing motion through their postures and their crossing looks. In the centre stands the sacrificial altar around which the priests are gathered while holding a bull to be sacrificed. On the right stands Romolo, in full relief with his gaze fixed on Ercole.

Back in Malta, Troisi created a large corpus of artistic works. He worked as a silversmith and medallist, cast coins, designed the famous altar of repose for the Mdina cathedral and the triumphal arches for the *possesso* of Grand Masters Zondadari and Vilhena. He also executed the statue in the grand baroque style as well as the bronze busts of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena. He designed and created several artistic works for local churches executed in wood, metal, stone and marble.

'Maestro Architetto dell'Illustrissimo Magistrato della Città Notabile'

Pietro Paolo Troisi earned this title through his work in Mdina, which was being reconstructed under Vilhena and the architect Charles de Mondion. The Order of St. John and the Maltese church in the 18th century made great use of architectural scenography in their ceremonial events. Ever since the Knights had come to Malta, it had become customary to hold a *possesso* ceremony where the governor and jurats of the Mdina *Universitas* symbolically handed over the keys of Mdina to the Grand Master. The grand public spectacles that were held in Mdina, particularly during the reign of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36), included ephemeral triumphal arches, festoons, damasks, street decorations and movable altars for stately and church events.

The highlight of the procession in the *possesso* ceremony was a triumphal arch which was set up near the corner of the present day *Banca Giuratale* and the house of the Navarri family, which then occupied a considerable part of what is now St. Paul's

Square, and which separated the smaller square from Strada Reale, now Villegaignon Street. Through these ephemeral structures the Order sought to imitate the grand triumphal arches used on ceremonial occasions of the Popes and the French Royal Court.

As these arches were temporary constructions, the only two designs that have been preserved in the Mdina Cathedral Archives are those created for the formal entries of Grand Master Zondadari (1720-22) on 30 June 1720 and that of Grand Master Vilhena on 20 September 1722.⁹

Four designers were invited to submit drawings for the triumphal arch to be erected for the *possesso* of Grand Master Zondadari. Of these, two were by P.P. Troisi and Abbate Don Aloisio Buhagiar. The Grand Master himself selected Troisi's design and another by an unspecified artist. However Zondadari left it in the hands of the *Universitas* to choose the least expensive design. This was Troisi's at an estimated cost of 299 *scudi*.¹⁰ Three days before the entry of the Grand Master, the *maestro architetto*, and the Fabri family of sculptors were called to set up the arch in the agreed place.

Vilhena succeeded Zondadari and on 20 September 1722 made his entry into Mdina. On this occasion the *Universitas* directly commissioned Troisi to prepare a design for a grand triumphal arch. It was specified that Vilhena's arch was to be constructed from the same material as Zondadari's arch, which after being dismantled had been donated to the monastery of St. Peter where it remained for two years in memory of the late Grand Master. The woodworks were remodelled by master carpenter Andrea Camilleri, and the painter Aloisio Buhagiar (1696-1769) renewed the polychromy.¹¹ Buhagiar was paid 80 *scudi* for *haver dipinto l'Arco trionfale*, while P.P. Troisi received the small amount of 20 *scudi* for the design and supervision of the arch construction.¹²

Both arches were designed and constructed in three tiers with Troisi making the best use of the architectural orders. Both have a central coffered doorway and sculptured panels with symbolic figures representing the bravery and kindness of the Grand Masters. Military trophies, banners and other paraphernalia show the courage and victories of the Knights over their enemies. Both have the emblem of the *Universitas*, the coat of arms of the respective Grand Masters and inscriptions in their praise.

The arch for Vilhena is surmounted by his bust and its apex consists of the janus imperial double-headed eagle, insignia of the Kingdom of Sicily from which the Order held Malta in fiefdom. The overall ensemble of these arches, with their architectural motifs and rich symbolic iconography, highlights Troisi's qualities as a designer and scenographer. The reporter of the Order describes these designs minutely as preserved in the Mdina Archives where they are marked as Drawings 476 and 477.

The altar of repose for the Mdina cathedral

The most significant artefact designed by Troisi is the movable chapel for the altar of repose, a temporary ephemeral structure for the exposition of the Holy Eucharist on Maundy Thursday. This structure is still extant and erected yearly during Holy Week in the Mdina cathedral.

Troisi was commissioned with the design of this altar by Canon Gourgion on behalf of the Metropolitan Chapter in 1727, for which he charged 5 *scudi*. Unfortunately at the time the



*Silver Antependium by Pietro Paolo Troisi
in Sta Maria di Gesu church, Valletta*

project was discarded as other well-known architects were also invited to submit alternative designs. However in 1751 both the Bishop and the Chapter authorised Canon Alberto Portugues and Giovanni Castelletti to choose a design for this altar and Troisi's design was submitted for consideration. Having been conjectured that Troisi had died in 1750, the well-known Maltese artist Francesco Zahra (1710-73) was commissioned to execute Troisi's design *in toto* and without variations while assuming full responsibility for the whole structure. The work was to be completed in nine months and was inaugurated during Passion Week in 1752.

The entrance to this chapel is through a dominant ornate portico in the form of a triumphal arch with a flight of steps leading to a circular space. All around this space, the walls are decorated and painted, creating optical illusions and perspectives. The ceiling of the chapel has the shape of a richly painted partial dome supported by arches and quadri-pairs of salomonic columns. Above, the famous 'Glory' is painted with clouds and with a number of backdrops depicting angels and the figures of God the Father and the Holy Spirit. These devices are made of segmental panels creating a three-dimensional depiction of heaven.

This circular arrangement reaches its climax with the superb silver capsule over the altar, centrally placed at the back. The capsule was executed by the master silversmiths Gio. Andrea Troisi, Pietro Paolo's brother, and Annetto Pullicino. Giovanni Bessiere, who was the consul for silversmiths at the time, gilded its double rays at the edge of which embossed cherubs alternate in single or twin couplings.

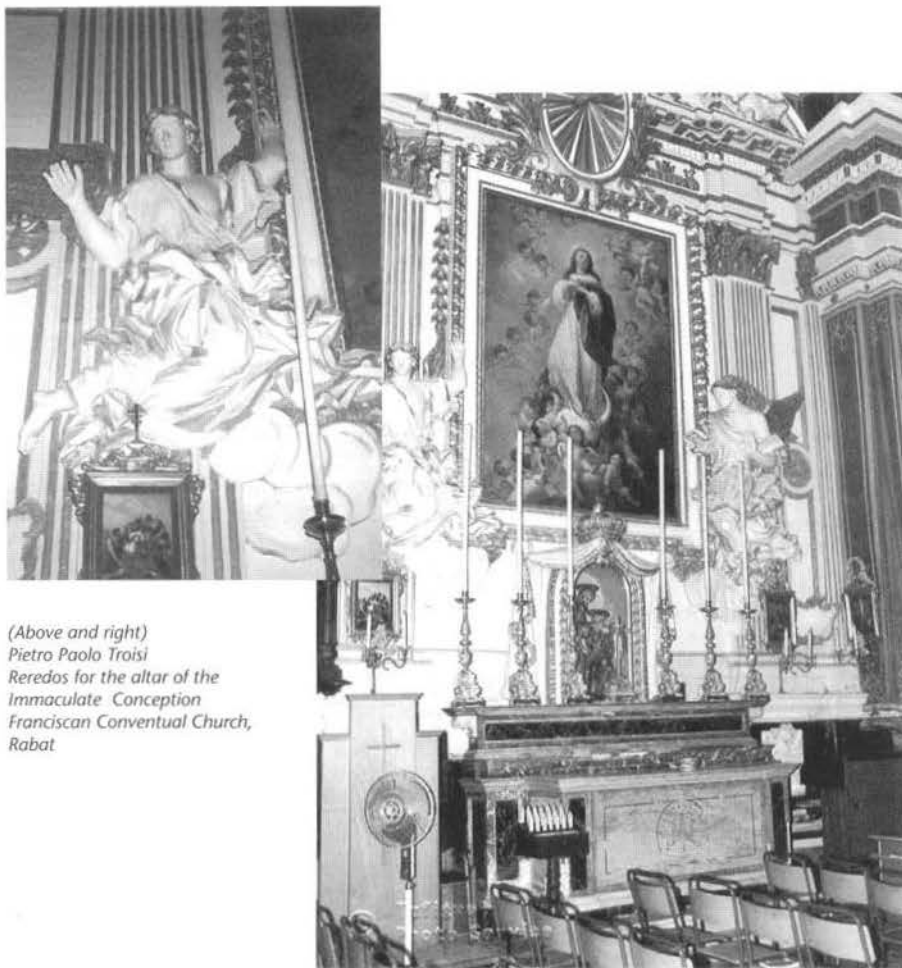
Engravings

Three autographed engravings by Troisi merit special attention. First, the portrait of Grand Master Zondadari, set in a round frame and measuring 38 x 40 cms, dated 17 April 1720 with an inscription by Troisi.

Another engraved portrait by Troisi is the frontispiece of the Vilhena Code of Laws *Leggi e Costituzioni* (1724), which bears the inscription, 'Petrus Paulus Troisi Invenit'. This engraving is linked to one of the silver medals which Pietro Paolo had just struck in 1724 for Grand Master Vilhena to commemorate his magnificent project for the fortification of Manoel Island. The reverse of the medal is almost an identical replica of Fort Manoel as represented on the oval of the pedestal under the bust of the Grand Master in the drawing.¹³

Another fine engraving in silver by Troisi is a dish identified by Giovanni Bonello.¹⁴ This oval charger is 53.2 cm long, 41 cm high and weighs 1,200 g. The oval plaque has a laurel-and-tie border while the fluted broad rim has a *repousse* gadrooned border. The dish is signed 'P.P. Troisi In. et Delit'. The engraving which occupies the whole of the bottom of the silver dish depicts an allegory of Victory over Land and Sea. To the left is Mars in full armour holding a sword, with a shield and dagger. Crowned Neptune holding a trident is depicted on the right suppressing prostrate Turks while the background features the fleet of the Order.

The coat of arms of the Pallavicini and Spinola families are shown on banners held by *putti*. The display of the joint coat of arms is attributable to the fact that this dish was intended as a



(Above and right)
Pietro Paolo Troisi
Reredos for the altar of the
Immaculate Conception
Franciscan Conventual Church,
Rabat

(Below)
Pietro Paolo Troisi
Reredos for the altar of St.
Anthony of Padova
Franciscan Conventual
Church, Rabat



gift for a marriage between these two families, both of which had contacts with Malta and the Order. The choice of Troisi to carry out such a work highlights his fame, as these families could choose among many other gifted artists in Europe.¹⁵

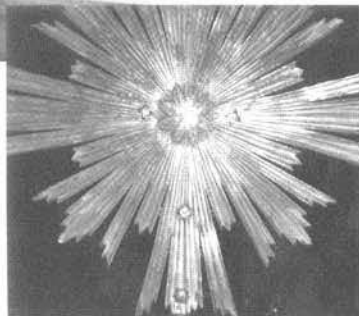
The monumental statue and busts of Vilhena

In 1734 the French Knight Commendatore Fra Felician de Savasse, to ingratiate himself with Grandmaster Vilhena commissioned Monsieur Louis Bouchut, a French bronze founder



Pl. 5.4 Pietro Paolo Troisi
Naxxar Parish Church
Silver gilded Monstrance
for the Reliquary of the
Vere Lignum.

Silver gilded Monstrance.
Detail of the back.



who worked for the Order in Malta, to make a life statue of the Grandmaster. The statue cost 2,150 *scudi* 5 *tari* 14 *grani* (£180), however Savasse was soon in financial difficulty and left the island only paying Bouchut 100 *scudi*. His widow received a further 300 *scudi* as compensation from Grand Master Pinto much later and after a long struggle in court. It is conjectured that this statue was cast in Malta by Bouchut, in Fort St. Paul where de Savasse was Commander.¹⁶ It is improbable that Soldani Benzi, who was initially believed to have modelled this statue, would have sent the fragile clay model for casting in Malta when Benzi himself was a renowned bronze founder in Italy.

The frontispiece of the Vilhena Code of Laws has led Giovanni Bonello to attribute the statue of this Grandmaster, originally erected on Manoel Island and now in Floriana, to Pietro Paolo Troisi. E.V. Borg had previously attributed this statue to the famous Florentine sculptor Soldani Benzi. The plinth in the engraving, if narrowed at the centre, is highly similar to the pedestal of the monument. This statue was transferred from Piazza Tesoreria in 1858, where it stood for a time after being removed from Manoel Island. During this transfer, two beautiful medals fell off its base. These were attributed recently by Klaus Lankheit as medals presented to Vilhena by Soldani Benzi. On

the reverse side of one of them there is a relief of the monument with variations in the figure of the Grand Master, leading to the conclusion that Benzi did not see the finished statue. The medals thus could have been modelled from a sketch of the monument sent to him.

Unless proven otherwise, this monument is therefore attributed to Pietro Paolo Troisi also considering that Vilhena seems to have held Troisi's skills in high esteem. Troisi had already executed Vilhena's bust for the Magisterial Palace of Mdina. This monument was unveiled in 1736, the year when Troisi was appointed Master of the Mint, an honour which might have been granted by Vilhena in appreciation of this work.

Two further portrait busts of Vilhena confirm Troisi's talent. One is the portrait bust in the round commissioned by the jurats of the *Mdina Universitas* in December 1726. Various documents exist showing a warrant for its final settlement as authorised by Mondion as well as instalment payments received and endorsed by Troisi himself.¹⁷ This bust was ordered for the Casa Giuratale, later the Magisterial Palace built for Vilhena in Mdina, where it was kept until 1970. It is now exhibited at the Manoel Theatre Museum in Valletta. This is a highly professional and polished work, with masterly detail in the face, armour, scarf and wig.

The other is a high relief bronze *tondo* portrait of Grand Master Vilhena that crowns the imposing portal on the main façade in the forecourt to the Magisterial Palace built by Mondion in Mdina. Although no documentary evidence has yet been found to attribute this work to Troisi, stylistically the attribution seems correct. The Grand Master here poses frontally and is shown in half-length, clad in armour and wearing a wig. To the right of the figure is the stock and pilier bestowed upon him by Pope Benedict XIII (1724-30).

Other busts of Vilhena which could be attributed to Troisi, both in the round as well as in relief, are at the entrance of the Convent of the Franciscan Conventuals in Valletta; at the old *Conservatorio* in Floriana - the present Police Headquarters - and in the atrium of the old Chancery in Valletta. All of these buildings are linked to the rule of Vilhena.

Troisi becomes Master of the Mint

The Order of St. John began minting its own money in 1310, and Grand Master L'Isle Adam even threatened to leave Malta when this privilege was suppressed by Charles V. It was through the intercession of the Pope that this privilege was reacquired. The Order exercised strict surveillance over the craft of goldsmiths, jewellers and silversmiths. It was the Grand Master's prerogative to appoint the Master of the Mint, which was a highly prestigious post. The Master of the Mint had jurisdiction over all goldsmiths and silversmiths operating in Malta.

Carlo Troisi (1650-1730), Pietro Paolo's father, was Master of the Mint directly appointed by the Grand Master as his Minister and that of the Order. Pietro Paolo showed great ambition to acquire this post. In April 1714 he made his first request to replace his father as Master of the Mint.¹⁸ According to Valentino Lupi Scerri, Pietro Paolo was appointed in 1736.¹⁹ From April 1714 to 1730, Pietro Paolo only qualified as his father's assistant. In his later petition, Pietro Paolo argues that his father, then 80 years old, should be relieved from his work. He mentions that he had often travelled to Genoa and other places to bring machinery and tools to upgrade the art of coinage

at the Mint, *per raffinare l'oro con maggior facilità*.²⁰

With the Troisis at the helm, a change for the better in the quality of coins took place under Perellos and Zondadari. However the highest artistic standard of coinage in both gold and silver was reached under Grand Master Vilhena. The artistic merit of the gold 12 and 10 *zecchini* coins of this Grand Master was never surpassed throughout the Order's reign in Malta. Joseph Sammut believes that these two coins, because of their rarity and high value, were not used for general circulation but reserved to be given as royal gifts and distributed on special occasions.²¹

The Troisi family of silversmiths

Both Carlo and Pietro Paolo Troisi were silversmiths, as were Pietro Paolo's brothers Massimiliano and Gio. Andrea, Francesco the son of Massimiliano, and Aloisio the son of Francesco. The silver mace 'il mazza', which was a symbol of rank and authority, was introduced to Malta by the Knights. Grand Master Zondadari conferred the privilege of wearing a toga and carrying the mace of office, formerly a privilege of the nobility, to those who were elevated as representatives of the people. In the archives of the *Universitas* at the National Library of Malta, I discovered a document dated August 1721, in which Pietro Paolo Troisi is offered the sum of 132 *scudi*, 11 *tari* and 7 *grani* for 7 lb 45/8 oz of silver to be used for the manufacture of the silver mace, which I believe to be the one carried by the jurats of the *Universitas* of Mdina as representatives of the people.²²

In 1718 Pietro Paolo Troisi manufactured an altar antependium in silver for the Archconfraternity of the Holy Cross at *Sta Maria di Gesu* church, Valletta, which cost 1,303 *scudi*.²³ Although originally intended for the altar of the Holy Cross, in the middle of the 19th Century it was adapted for the high altar of the church and is displayed on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on 14 September. It is made of good *repousse* work with a central silver medallion in high relief showing the cross being lifted by a number of angels. The medallion is surrounded by various detached silver floral ornamentations. All the silver components are laid on a background of red silk and the whole ensemble is encased within a silver moulded frame.

Pietro Paolo Troisi manufactured a fine reliquary for the *Vere Lignum* for the Sodalitas of the Agonia of Naxxar. The archives at the Curia record that he was paid 36 *scudi* and 6 *tari* for one third of the reliquary on 7 October 1732, and on page 117 of the same records there is the following note: '*Un reliquario d'argento di peso tre libre nov'onze e mezza, a ragion di scudi venti la libra in parte scudi settanta sei e grani cinque (scudi 76, 0 tari 5 grani). La sua manifattura scudi 35. Ho pagato due cristalli per l'assetatura delle reliquie tari Quattro, scudi 0*'.²⁴

This silver reliquary at the Naxxar parish church measures 42 cm in height and 27cm in width, and consists of a central filigree cross over the relic preserved in a glass phial. From this cross radiate eight clusters of silver gilded rays, giving the whole reliquary the form of a halo. The whole stands on a knopped stem finishing in an inverted domed trumpet base, 11 cm in diameter.

In the bills for the Lija parish church preserved at the Archbishopial Curia, I have found a note stating that the Procurator of the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary obtained approval for the manufacture of a *krucetta*, a silver cross spearhead, to be placed on top of the mast of the banner of the Confraternity. Its manufacture was assigned to Pietro Paolo Troisi and on 27 May 1726 he presented a receipt of the expenses and services rendered by him, which states that the silver spearhead weighed 3 lb and 25/8 oz, and for its manufacture Troisi charged 20 *scudi*, while its total cost amounted to 82 *scudi*, 9 *tari* and 15 *grani*.²⁵

Other works

Several other works by Troisi further highlight his versatility in various aspects of design and artistry. He designed the altar reredos of the Immaculate Conception and St. Anthony of Padova besides another four in the church of the Franciscan Conventuals in Rabat between 1710-21; the reredos of the main altar of the Carmelite church in Mdina and the reredos and choir altar of the old collegiate church of St. Mary in Birkirkara.

Troisi executed the highly praised articulate designs for the choir stalls of the parish churches of Lija and Zebbug, endowed with all the details expected in the art of woodwork. Crowning the choir altar of Zebbug, which he also designed, he created



A Collegiate Church in Malta. Silver antependium for the altar of St. Joseph. Tower Mint Mark, probably by Pietro Paolo Troisi
Maker's Mark: Gerolamo Cassar and Assay Mark: 18th century Rome, known as the *Argento dell'Ombrellone*



Attributed to Pietro Paolo Troisi. South transept apse of the altar dedicated to the Holy Souls in Purgatory. Sculptor Pietro Paolo Zahra. Zebbug parish church.

the gilded reliquary monstrance throne to hold the ostensory of the arm of St. Philip. This monstrance of perfect proportions and innovative design is a typical example of the high baroque. The ostensory was the gift of Grand Master Vilhena and was transported to Zebbug amid the cheers of people through the decorated streets during a feast organised for the occasion, in which Grand Master Vilhena himself participated. Like many

European princes who patronised great artists, Vilhena did the same in the case of Pietro Paolo Troisi.

Joseph A. Briffa is an architect with an MA in Baroque Studies. This essay is based on his MA thesis titled Pietro Paolo Troisi 1686-1750: a Maltese Baroque Artist, which was submitted to the International Institute for Baroque Studies in 2004.

Notes

¹ Porto Salvo, Valletta. Register of Baptisms, p. 469

² S. Fiorini. "Status Animarum II", Proceedings of History Week 1984. (Malta Historical Society), p. 99

³ Marriage Archives. Senglea parish church.

⁴ J. Azzopardi. 'Is-Sepulkru tal-Kattidral' in *Lehen is-Sewwa* (21 March 1970), p. 8

⁵ P.P. Castagna. *Lis Storia ta Malta: It-Tieni Darba*. (1888), p. 249

⁶ G. Calleja. *Works of Art in the Churches of Malta and the Governor's Palace, Valletta*. (L'Immacolata Press: 1881), p. 183

⁷ K. Sciberras. *L-Arti Barokka f'Malta*. (Malta: 2003), p. 87

⁸ NLM MS 1397 fol 1

⁹ NLM AOM Ms 1397; NLM Ms 27 Univ. ff 19-28

¹⁰ NLM Ms 26 f.51

¹¹ D. De Lucca. *Mdina* (Malta: 1995), p. 89

¹² NLM Ms 89 Univ. un. fols.

¹³ H. Calleja Schembri. *Coins and Medals of the Knights of Malta* (1908,

1966), Part 3 Pl.12 Fig.3

¹⁴ G. Bonello. *Discoveries and Recoveries*. (Malta: 1999), p. 117

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 118

¹⁶ NLM Ms 412, published by G. Bonello

¹⁷ NLM Ms Univ. 96ff. 338, 358, 435, 505 flaps 1 & 2, 615

¹⁸ NLM AOM 1187. Tomo VI fol. 226-247

¹⁹ *Monte di Pietà. Maltese Hallmarks 1521-1873*, p. 19. Referred to by J. Sammut

²⁰ NLM AOM 1187 p. 226 rv

²¹ J. Sammut. *Currency in Malta* (Malta: 2001), p. 38

²² NLM Univ. Vol. 89 un.

²³ G. Scerri OFM. *Monografia del Arciconfraternita del S.S. Crocifisso*. (Malta: 1932), p. 47

²⁴ AAM Bills Naxxar Parish Church, pp.103 & 117. Indicated by Keith Sciberras.

²⁵ AAM Conti Vol. 43 Lia (1720-1729) fol. 4 (Conf. S.Rosario 1724-27), p. 46

A 17th-century French traveller in Malta

Albert Jouvin de Rochefort was a 17th-century French traveller who visited several cities in Europe, Asia and Africa soon after the conclusion of the so-called Thirty Years War of 1618-48.

His largely forgotten *Voyage d'Italie et de Malthe* formed part of a six-volume work published in Paris in 1672 during the reign of King Louis XIV. Jouvin, accompanied by some friends, arrived in Syracuse in December 1663, where they managed to board a war galley of the Knights of Malta which was then berthed in the port of that city to participate in the festivities of Santa Lucia. Having safely reached the island, Jouvin remained in Malta for about four weeks, returning to France in 1665 where he was eventually appointed treasurer in the office of Limoges by the King of France.

The fascinating description of baroque Malta by Jouvin, based on travel notes written during his stay in a hostel in Valletta, is the subject of a recent book by Professor Denis De Lucca published by Heritage Books on behalf of the International Institute for Baroque Studies.

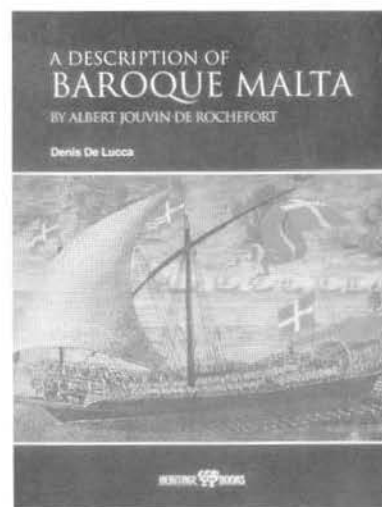
Jouvin gives detailed descriptions of Valletta and of the many beautiful buildings and gardens in 17th-century Malta. His notes give a revealing and personal account of Malta in 1663-64. Jouvin was mainly interested in all the changes that had begun to transform Valletta and other European cities into splendid baroque urban environments. These cities were now full of beautiful palaces and impressive artillery fortifications, forming a new concept of urban living marked by the lavish use

of straight avenues, spacious squares and exotic gardens.

The book is illustrated with the reproduction of several plans and old views including a 1633 plan of Valletta showing Albert Jouvin's itinerary and the location of the many buildings and urban spaces that he describes, including the palace of the Grand Master

where "there is also a large birdcage and a small garden containing shrubs and beautiful flowers, irrigated by the water of fountains and little springs that also serve to amuse the many beautiful birds of different plumage that roam around them", and the slaves prison where "there are also some Greeks who sell sorbet, coffee and chocolate".

The book concludes with a reproduction of the French text of Jouvin's description, reproduced from his memoirs kept in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in Paris.



Recent Publications of Interest



Adami, Giuseppe. *Scenografia e scenotecnica Barocca tra Ferrara e Parma 1625-1631* (Todi, 2003)

Bonello, Giovanni. *Histories of Malta: Reflections and Rejections, vol. 5* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, Malta: 2004)

Cuppini, Giampiero. *Malta: la fabbrica delle mura* (CLUEB, Bologna: 2004)

De Lucca, Denis. *A Description of Baroque Malta by Albert Jouvin de Rochefort* (Heritage Books, Malta: 2004)

Degiorgio, Stephen & Emmanuel Fiorentino. *Antoine Favray (1706-1798): A French Artist in Rome, Malta and Constantinople* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti: Malta: 2004)

Freller, Thomas. *Spies and Renegades in Hospitaller Malta*. (PIN, Malta: 2004)

Munro, Dane. *Memento Mori* (MJ Publications, Malta: 2005)

Muscat, Joseph. *Slaves on Maltese Galleys* (PIN, Malta: 2004)

Quintano, Anton. *The Maltese-Hospitaller Sailing Ship Squadron, 1701-1798* (P.E.G., Malta: 2003)

Savona-Ventura, Charles. *Knight Hospitaller Medicine in Malta, 1530-1798* (P.E.G., Malta: 2004)

In his fascinating recent book 'Memento Mori', the researcher Dane Munro has painstakingly translated the inscriptions of the tombstones of the Knights into English, offering contemporary readers who are not familiar with Latin a unique insight into the thoughts, fears and aspirations of the Knights. Munro's text is accompanied by beautiful photographs by Maurizio Urso, and is published by MJ Publications.

MEMENTO MORI



The marble graves of Valletta

Petra Bianchi has a look at the magnificent floor of St. John's Co-Cathedral, the burial ground of the Knights

Spread over the grand floor of St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, the rich designs, colours, textures and exquisite veining of marble ledger stones create the effect of a painting. The church is lavishly paved with the finely crafted tombstones of high-ranking Knights of the Order of St. John, who lived and died in Malta during the Order's reign over the island from the 16th to the 18th century.

Many of these decorated marble ledger stones were commissioned by the deceased themselves well before their death, to ensure that their place in the church, as well as in the after-life, would be secure and also fitting to their rank in the social hierarchy. The elaborate designs and inscriptions were usually executed to their own specifications, which was common practice at that time.

In his well-known poem 'The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church' (1845), Robert Browning satirised his Renaissance Bishop's desire to plan his tomb to outshine that of his rival Gandolf, who has "paltry onion stone", an inferior type of marble that flakes, on his grave in the same church.

The Bishop warns and begs his illegitimate sons not to trick him and use "beggar's mouldy travertine" on his grave once he is dead; instead he desires them to place a lump of stunning blue lapis lazuli in his hands, and to use "peach-blossom marble, rosy and flawless", dazzling jasper, and a bronze frieze in bas-relief to contrast with deep black marble above.

The Knights of St. John commissioned famous and established architects and artists, such as Romano Carapicchia and Francesco Zahra, to design their own tombstones. A sketch of the design would first be drawn out and then modified and approved by the Knight himself, with the marbles to be used, mostly imported from Italy, carefully chosen for their hues and textures.

The design would then be enlarged and transferred onto a pristine slab of white marble. Once the design had been skilfully chiselled out by artisans, the multichrome carved marble was inserted and molten lead was poured in to form the grooved Roman lettering of the inscribed epitaph.

"Pray for me", many of the dead Knights call out and entreat passers-by, with the idea that prayers said for them could help shorten their painful stay in purgatory and hasten their entry into the eternal life.

To ensure that passers-by appreciate how worthy they are of their prayers, in their inscriptions the Knights list and display all their virtues and earthly achievements, particularly their military and naval exploits as defenders of the faith, as well as their noble family lineage and coat of arms.

The tombstones are filled with allegorical images of death, which form part of a symbolic language warning the faithful of the vanity of earthly goods while reminding them of their own mortality, and thus urging them to instead think of the salvation of their souls.

Central to this symbolism is the image of a skeleton, representing death, often wearing a cloak and brandishing a scythe in the role of the 'grim reaper'. This is death treated like a character in a story, come to claim the living and accompany them into the

land of shadows. At the same time, it is also a horrifying reflection of the deceased person resting in the tomb below.

This macabre image is intended to provoke a sense of fear and dread in the onlooker, by showing us a picture of what we will become. Yet placed within Christian imagery it also accentuates the comfort that is offered by the idea of life after death. Although death, personified in a grinning cloaked skeleton armed with a scythe, may appear terrifying as he reflects our own future selves, for the deserving this figure is to be seen only as a temporary companion to accompany us to heaven and the eternal life.

The skeleton is often depicted together with the image of an hourglass or a clock, showing that our time on earth is limited. Little angels or *putti* blow trumpets heralding the entry of the deceased into the after-life, or hold inverted torches with their light put out to signify the end of life on earth.

In this pictorial and rhetorical world, the state of the soul and other abstract concepts are represented in sensual and material images. The weaponry of the Knights is also visually important, emphasising their high status, wealth and power.

This typically baroque love of opulent and exuberant display is also central to the design of the tombs of the Grand Masters, which are built on the sides of the chapels within the church. The celebration of death as the entry into the after-life, together with the celebration of the status and achievements of the departed, are combined into a great spectacle aimed to inspire veneration and awe.

These grandiose funerary monuments are large and ornate, so that they almost appear to be bursting out of their restricted spaces along the walls. Like the ledger stones on the floor, they are crafted out of a sophisticated blend of elaborate and expensive materials. Baroque funerary monuments often combined different materials and marbles within a single work, to create a sense of spectacle through the introduction of a polychromatic field of vision.

It is understandable that an elaborate ritual was deemed necessary to lay the dead to rest in such imposing tombs. Baroque funerals were conducted in line with the extravagant tastes of the age. These theatrical occasions varied according to the status and wealth of the departed one, and were often planned in detail by him during his lifetime.

In his will, the Knight would often include provisions for the number of Holy Masses, possibly running into hundreds of services, to be offered for his soul in purgatory. The idea of purgatory was central to religious belief at the time. With their emphasis on purgatory, the tombstones at St. John's reflect the religious attitudes and themes of the age.

The imagery on these ledger stones touches on the inner life of man when confronted with the mystery of death and the after-life, explaining it in a rich physical and spatial dimension. It provides a fascinating example of the blending of the material and the spiritual in the baroque imagination. The Knights buried beneath these beautiful and precious stones express their deep and genuine yearning for immortality in the most material of ways.

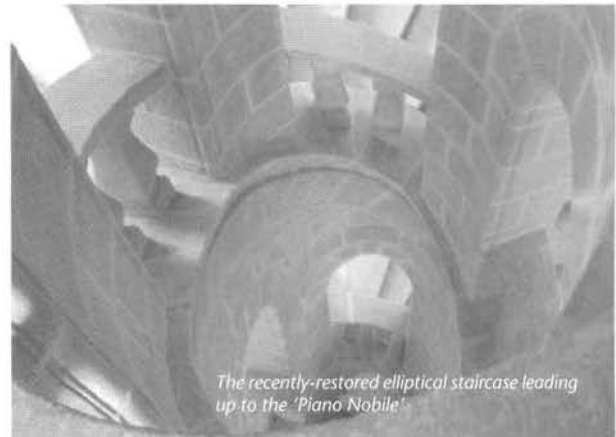
Tour of Verdala Castle in Buskett, Rabat

The course members of the Baroque Architecture Diploma Course run by the Institute for Baroque Studies who graduated in 2004 met up recently at Verdala Castle to mark the first anniversary of their graduation. This was part of an on-going initiative to keep up their studies of local baroque architecture, and the group enjoyed an interesting tour of the Castle, taken around by Mr. Mifsud who takes care of the premises. The group also included George Grima who is carrying out an in-depth study of Verdala Castle as part of his ongoing baroque studies, and who could therefore supply additional information.

As usual this event attracted a very good turn-out and the tour of the Castle was followed by an anniversary celebration lunch in Rabat where the group had the chance to catch up on each other's news while enjoying a pleasant meal.



Some past and present students of the Baroque Architecture Diploma Course during the visit to Verdala Castle



The recently-restored elliptical staircase leading up to the 'Piano Nobile'

Recent theses presented by students following the M.A. in Baroque Studies course at the IIBS included:

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Maria A. Scicluna
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The elaborate ornamentation surrounding the Mattia Preti altarpiece in the Verdala chapel