

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.