

Ephemeral Manifestations in Baroque Malta

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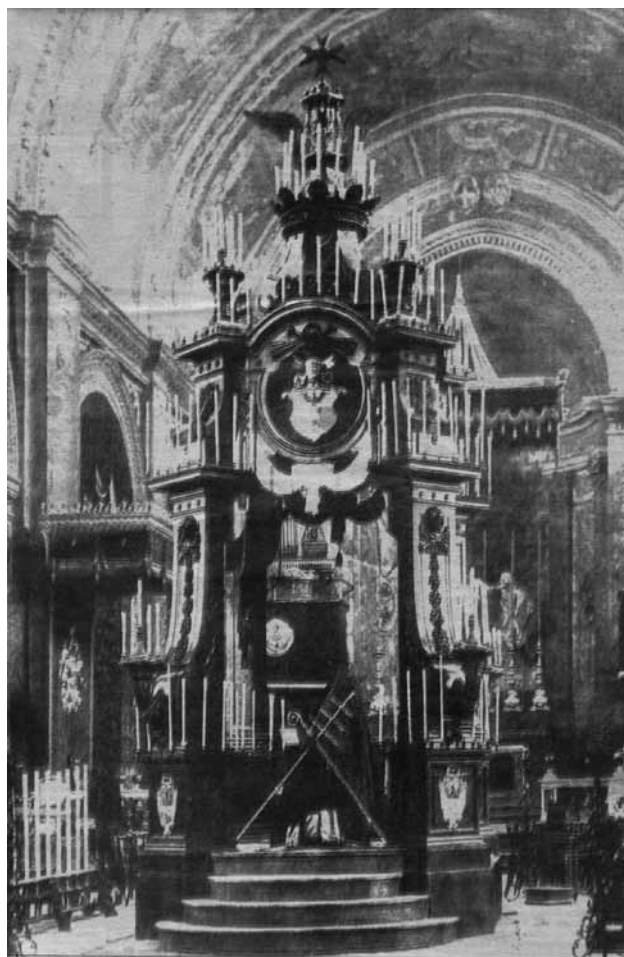
It was towards the end of the sixteenth century at the very beginning of the Baroque age, that Catholic Europe started commemorating the death of its important citizens by the construction of large ephemeral structures designed to publicly display a real or a mock coffin called a *representatio* (1). These catafalques as they were called, were normally assembled within a short period of time to stand in a prominent position in the Baroque church, either in the centre of the crossing under the dome or, alternatively, in the centre of the nave opposite the main altar, where they invariably formed the focal point of an elaborate funerary ritual involving solemn prayers, passionate orations, requiem masses and absolution rites, all part of an impressive *festa funebre* complete with incense and organ music. Recent studies of this remarkable Baroque phenomenon have revealed that the architectural form and elaborate ornamentation of catafalques in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were both devised to complement each other so as to produce an unusual and sophisticated symbol reflecting the importance of the deceased person. Designed by the best architects of the time and heavily decorated with allegorical figures or scenes, religious figures, antique motifs, coats-of-arms,

emblems, and other death symbols such as hour glasses and skeletons, Baroque catafalques invariably glorified the deeds, patronage and actions of the deceased and, from the point of view of the Catholic church, they justified and demonstrated the dead person's worthiness to be admitted to the kingdom of heaven. In certain countries, such as Spain, catafalques were also designed to glorify the triumphs of Spain, the invincibility of the Habsburg monarchy and the power of the Spanish Catholic church, if not by direct reference then by erudite allusion and allegory. In Malta, the magnificent catafalque designed in 1726 by the architect Romano Carapecchia was also meant to glorify the splendid principate of the Portuguese Grand Master Fra Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736), whose achievement was permanently commemorated by means of a monumental tomb by the Florentine artist Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656-1740), certainly one of the most splendid funerary monuments in the Conventual church of the Knights in Valletta, outshining others associated with other great Grand Masters such as Fra Nicolas Cotoner (1663-1680), Fra Ramon Perellos (1697-1720) and Fra Marcantonio Zondadari (1720-1722). As a revival of ancient Roman forms, customs and iconography; as devout funerary

monuments very much concerned with the eminently Baroque themes of the Triumph over Death and Eternal Salvation, evoking Christ's Resurrection; as an expression of the Baroque love for theatrical scenography and power, it is now universally recognised that the design of Baroque catafalques shed much light on the *fiesta funebre* of the Baroque age, as explained in grand style in 1682 by the Jesuit priest C.F. Menestier who in that year published a monumental work entitled *Des Decorations Funebres ou v'il est amplement traite des tentures, des lumieres, des mausolees catafalques, inscriptions et autres ornemens funebres avec sont ce qui s'est fait de plus considerable de puis plus d'un siecle, pour les papes, empereurs, rois, reines, cardinaux, princes, prelates, scavans et personnes illustres en naissance, vertu e dignite* (2).

A superb example of the complexity of the problem involved in the design of catafalques in Baroque Malta, then ruled by the Hospitaller Order of St John the Baptist, was provided by Romano Carapeccchia in 1726 when he was commissioned to design a large ephemeral structure in wood, to be used in the *fiesta funebre* of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena who died ten years later on 12 December 1736 (3). It was deemed fit that just as the principate of the Grand Master had been inaugurated by the construction of a magnificent ephemeral triumphal arch designed by the architect of the Mdina *Universitas*, Pietro Paolo Troisi (4), his death should be similarly celebrated by a grand catafalque standing in the nave of the Conventual church in Valletta.

The architect Romano Fortunato Carapeccchia had arrived in Malta in April 1707 (5) after having been introduced to Grand Master Fra Ramon Perellos y Rocafull (1697-1720) by Pope Clement XI Albani who on 27 November 1706 had sent a *breve pontificio* (6) to the Grand Master in Valletta praising the merits of his '*dilectus filius Romanus Carapeccchia Romanus*', whom he was sending out to Malta to help the Order transform Valletta into a truly Baroque capital city. Having studied at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome where he had managed to win a first prize for a *seconda classe* project



for a palace in 1681 (7), having worked in the studio of his teacher and mentor Carlo Fontana during the period c.1681-1691 (8) and having designed the church of S.Giovanni Calibita (9) and the Palazzina Vaini (10) in Rome in c.1700, Romano Carapeccchia's career in Malta before 1726 had been characterised by his successful completion of two studies in 1708 and 1723 concerning the water supply of the Grand Harbour cities (11) and by the design of several edifices in Valletta including the Barriera magazines (1707), the churches of St James (1710), St Catherine of the Langue of Italy (1713), St Catherine in Strada San Giorgio (1714) and St Maria del Pilar (1718) as well as the sacristy of the church of St Paul (1718) and the Municipal palace (1721) (12). Romano Carapeccchia was also well experienced in the design of theatres, having written a treatise (13) about the subject entitled *Pratica delle Machine de' Teatri* (1689), and in the design of ephemeral contraptions. Before coming to Malta, the architect had designed, on the occasion of the

1704 exposition of the Holy sacrament in the Jesuit *Collegio Romano*, a *nobile e vaga fantasia* (14) expressing the universal message of peace of the Catholic church. This huge allegorical apparatus, painted by Pietro Resina, was placed in the middle of the college courtyard and it is recorded that its design was based on a large globe representing the earth supporting the Papal coat-of-arms. On the right of this globe stood the archangel Michael ready to throw his javelin to unleash the furies of hell contained within the globe while above stood the white dove of Noah flying out from a church towards the clouds in the middle of a large rainbow. In 1691, Romano Carapeccchia had also collaborated with Mattia de' Rossi to design a magnificent funerary catafalque for Pope Alexander VIII Ottoboni (15).

In the summer of 1726, the architect was approached by the French Knight *Commandeur* Fra Joseph de Robins de Barbantane who requested him to design an unusual contraption.

Romano Carapeccchia's client was a prominent member of the noble French families of De Robins and De Barbantane, who had been born in Avignon in 1676 and joined the Order of Malta at the age of twenty, rising rapidly in its ranks to eventually become Grand Master Vilhena's sub-prefect of the Magisterial palace. It was precisely to demonstrate his special regard for the new Portuguese Grand Master that in 1726, the *Commandeur* decided to approach his friend Romano Carapeccchia with the aim of convincing him to design a *Chapelle Ardente* which was meant to stand in the centre of the the magnificent vaulted nave of the Conventual church of St. John the Baptist in Valletta, on the occasion of the frequent solemn requiems held in the church to commemorate the demise of Popes and important public figures associated with Catholic countries such as kings, queens and cardinals (16). Barbantane's wish was that the *Chapelle Ardente* would also be used to introduce a touch fo Baroque religious splendour to the hitherto austere funeral services of



deceased Grand Masters whose corpses had upto now been displayed to the mourning members of the Order on a raised platform having large candelabras at the four corners, of the type that had been in 1691 designed by Carapeccchia and Mattia de Rossi on the occasion of the demise of Pope Alexander VIII Ottoboni. In the opinion of *Commandeur* Barbantane, such contraptions did not live up to the desired ceremonial grandeur of eighteenth century state funerals, more so in the context of the magnificently adorned Conventual church with its unique tunnel vault, elaborately painted by the famous Mattia Preti in the previous century.

Needless to say, Romano Carapeccchia was quick to take up the new challenge. In view of his intention to use walnut and a variety of other rich imported woods for the construction of his *Chapelle Ardente*, he sought the help of the renowned Maltese carpenter Michele Camilleri, to translate his ideas into tangible form. It emerges from documentary sources (17) that Camilleri was the head carpenter of the Ordinance of the Order, who was credited with a long and distinguished service of not less than twenty five years. It was to Romano's advantage that Michele was also well know to Grand Master Vilhena who had in 1722 given him the facility of using two rooms belonging to the Order to accommodate his large family on a rent free basis (18). Understandably, a grateful Michele Camilleri needed little persuasion to become the third man of the *Chapelle Ardente* triumvirate, as is recorded on an inside panel of the completed object by the following words:

'The Chapelle Ardente was completed on the first day of October 1726 by Signor Comm. Mag. Giuseppe Barbantane who commissed the work, the architect Cavaliere Carapeccchia Romano and the Capo Maestro del fianco, Michele Camilleri'

When completed on 1 October 1726, the *Chapelle Ardente* was indeed a tribute to its designer. Having a base defined by projecting steps, a paraphernalia of curved wood features, several blank spaces for the attachment of escutcheons and inscriptions which could be changed according to the occasion and a royal crown symbolising the sovereign status of the Knights surmounted by the familiar eight

pointed cross of the Order, Carapeccchia's design of the large catafalque was indeed superb. This became increasingly obvious in the late evening when the two hundred and thirty candles fitted into prepared sconces were simultaneously lit so that the whole contraption was transformed into the imagery of a huge bonfire, particularly beautiful to behold in the context of the gilded and painted decorum of the Conventual church.

Although completed in 1726, the *Chapelle Ardente* remained unused for ten whole years since both Barbantane and Carapeccchia intended its first user to be their esteemed Grand Master Vilhena. It is recorded that on the latter's demise in 1736, the *Chapelle Ardente* took two whole days to erect and to adorn with rich draperies, velvet and gold cloth, besides inserting the appropriate escutcheons and inscriptions prepared by the painter Giuseppe Calaviti (19). This operation which was personally supervised by *Commandeur* Barbantane as master of ceremonies, marked the beginning of a magnificent *Festa Funebre*, the likes of which had never been seen in Malta before.

'Fra Manoel de Vilhena, Grand Master of the Gerosolmitan Order who died in his Magisterial Palace on 12 December 1736, was on the fifteenth day of the same month transported in a splendid cortege, according to custom, from the Magisterial Palace to the Conventual church of St. John in the city of Valletta. As soon as the funeral procession arrived at St. John's the corpse of the Grand Master was placed in the Chapelle Ardente, raised from the church floor to a height of five steps, surrounded by innumerable candles. The Chapelle Ardente was erected opposite to the high altar; in the centre of the church. On the side facing the altar and on that facing the main entrance to the church, were placed the two coat of arms of the Grand Master; affixed on the upper side of the Chapelle Ardente. On the sides, were placed two inscriptions. Surrounding the Chapelle Ardente were forty eight torches, each with four wicks.'(20)

Romano Carapeccchia's magnificent catafalque outlived the Grand Master for whom it was designed. In later times, it was repeatedly re-assembled and dismantled to commemorate the funeral services of Grand Masters Despuig, Pinto de Fonseca, Ximenes de Texada and De Rohan-Polduc. It was also re-used on the occasion of the demise of Pope Benedict XIV



Lambertini in 1758, King John V of Portugal in 1750, Queen Maria Barbara of Spain in 1750, Cardinal Joachim Portocarrero in 1760, Queen Maria Amalia of Spain in 1761, Emperor Francis I in 1765, the Dauphin of France in 1766 and Queen Maria Sofia of France in 1768. On these occasions, the place of the Grand Master's corpse in the *Chapelle Ardente* was occupied by a *representatio* consisting in a black velvet table with three pillars also of black velvet, on which were placed replicas of the symbols and decorations of the deceased, covered with a transparent crepe veil. According to contemporary protocol, these decorations consisted in the patriarchal cross, the triple crown and the crossed keys in the case of a pope; the imperial crown, the sword and the sceptre in the case of an emperor; the crown and the sceptre in the case of an empress; the royal crown, the sword and the sceptre in the case of a king and the crown and the sceptre in the case of a queen (21).

The importance of the *Chapelle Ardente* designed by Romano Carapecchia lies in the fact that it was the first example in Malta of a truly Baroque contraption using a magnificently designed display of candles

intended to instill an intense religious feeling of reverence and awe, eminently suited to the character of the architecture of the principal church of an illustrious Order of Knights. The spectacle created on funeral occasions, must have undoubtedly been closely related to the grand spectacles commonly held in Rome where the element of fire was then being used with increasing skill within the context of beautiful state settings designed by the architect Alessandro Specchi (1666-1729) (22). Designed 'to inflame the souls of the spectators, to enrich their thoughts and senses and to instill an awareness of a supernatural being who could give them strength and courage', these so called *Apparati architettonici per fuochi d'artificio* soon become part and parcel of the typically Baroque concern with theatrical displays and communicative force. It does not require much imagination to realize that the intended role of Romano Carapecchia's catafalque on the occasion of Vilhena's *Festa Funebre* was to transform the static nature of the nave of St. John's into a truly supernatural and dynamic experience where the celestial figures of Mattia Preti's vault above would be seen to come alive against a moving backdrop of ever changing architectural and decorative colourful forms, forming in the process a candlelight fantasia that was undoubtedly closely related to the contemporary theatrical experience. Considered from this viewpoint, and considered in the context of the several catafalques built in Rome during the course of the previous century, the *Chapelle Ardente* must have represented the summation of those creative skills of its architect which were later so much praised by Lione Pascoli (23). In this respect, it is understandable that a grateful Grand Prior of the Conventual church soon asked Romano Carapecchia to start thinking about possible extension and embellishment works involving this magnificent building. These interventions which included the affixing of two side annexes to the bland sides of the building and the design of some tombstones and the altarpiece of the Chapel of Italy, were all completed before Carapecchia's death in 1738. The architect was buried unceremoniously in the Bartolott crypt of the building for which he had designed Baroque Malta's finest ephemeral contraption.

The great interest of the Baroque Catholic church in the dogma of the Resurrection symbolising the ultimate triumph of life over death resulted in the fabrication in the Baroque age of several ephemeral artefacts of a different order which, however, called for as much imagination and creative energy as that required for the design of catafalques. One should perhaps mention at this stage, Girolamo Rainaldi's magnificent triumphal arches which had been in 1589 and 1592 put up in Piazza Navona in the heart of Rome to celebrate Christ's Resurrection amidst a colourful display of fireworks, to be followed in April 1650 by two other even more splendid ephemeral contraptions designed by Domenico's son, Carlo Rainaldi on the occasion of the same feast (24). In Baroque Rome, the Resurrection was celebrated as the greatest feast of the Catholic liturgy; it was in connection with this singular event which formed the very core of post-tridentine Catholic teaching, of those so-called altars of repose which were repeatedly assembled and dismantled during every Holy Week to remind everyone of the death of Christ prior to his miraculous resurrection on Easter Sunday.

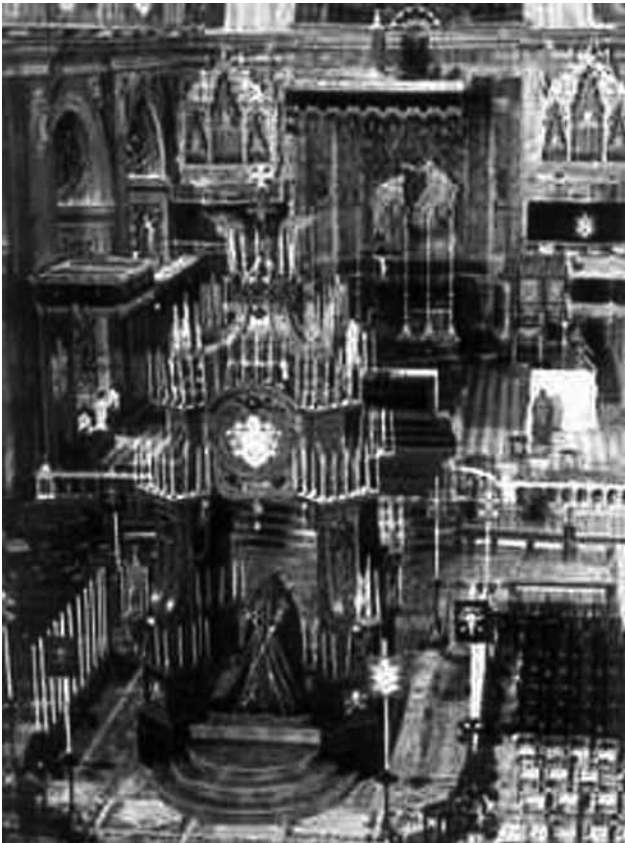
In 1727, the *Mastro Architetto dell'Illustrissimo Magistrato della Citta Notabile*, Pietro Paolo Troisi was approached by the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina to design a grand altar of repose for the recently completed new Baroque cathedral of the old capital city of Mdina which had replaced an old Romanesque building destroyed in the 1693 earthquake which had destroyed many towns in the Val di Noto in neighbouring Sicily. Pietro Paolo Troisi, the winner of the 1705 first prize in sculpture at the *Accademia di San Luca* (25) was no newcomer to the art of assembling and dismantling ephemeral artefacts. In 1720, he had in fact designed a beautiful triumphal arch to commemorate Grand Master Marc' Antonio Zondadari's ceremonial entrance to Mdina (26) and, besides, he had also introduced a special arts school in Valletta based on the study of the nude which had been set up, it was rumoured, at the personal expense of the Grand Master (27). It is said that before designing his altar of repose, Troisi had carefully studied the austere scenario of Lorenzo

Gafa's new cathedral. He eventually decided to contradict the sombre mood of the place by designing a rich and colourful ephemeral contraption based on a woodwork extravaganza of straight and twisted columns, arched forms and balustraded galleries with curvilinear projections, all focused on a silver tabernacle and overflowing very confidently on one of the nave arcades, producing in the process that type of intense three dimensional effect that could be experienced in other masterpieces of the same genre in contemporary Catholic churches. To mention an outstanding example in Rome, the Jesuit architect Andrea Pozzo had in 1685 designed a magnificent theatrical contraption to be set up in the church of Il Gesu in Rome for the Holy Week rituals (28).

The historical circumstances leading to the design and fabrication of Pietro Paolo Troisi's altar of repose are indeed fascinating. As already mentioned, in 1727 the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina had approached the architect through one of its members, Canon Gourgion, asking him to design for them an ephemeral contraption to be used for the liturgical rituals of Maundy Thursday. On 3 August of that same year, Gourgion reported back to his colleagues stating that Troisi had accepted the commission against a nominal fee of 5 *zecchini* (29). Pietro Paolo Troisi had made a name for himself in 1720 when he had designed Grand Master Zondadari's triumphal arch – a magnificent creation that had greatly impressed the people of the city. Records indicate that it had cost 310 *scudi* to build, of which 40 *scudi* were paid to its architect (30). The master carpenters had been Lorenzo Borg and Antonio and Giuseppe Fabri of Valletta (31). After being dismantled, the arch had been donated to the cloistered nuns of the nearby monastery of St Peter where it had remained unused for two years up to September 1722 when it was re-acquired by the Mdina *Universitas* for the sum of 42 *scudi* and transformed for re-utilisation on the occasion of the ceremonial entry into Mdina of the new Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena on 20 September 1722 (32). The necessary modifications were carried out by the master carpenter Andrea Camilleri and the painter Aloisio Buhagiar (33).

According to one source (34), the design of Troisi's altar of repose could have been also inspired by the altar reredos of the chapel of the Immaculate Conception in the church of the Friars Minor Conventual in Rabat, which had also been designed by Troisi in c. 1710. For an unknown reason however, Pietro Paolo Troisi's altar was then suddenly shelved for two decades so that it was not until 6 April 1643 that a committee met to discuss the matter (35). In a report submitted on 2 May 1751, this committee repropoed the fabrication of Troisi's design, appointing the painter Francesco Vincenzo Zahra as the new *architetto della machine* (36). There is some evidence that Zahra took some liberties with Troisi's project but he did manage to complete the altar of repose within nine months when the completed Baroque contraption fulfilled its original designer's aim of working upon the emotions of its eighteenth century spectators by its sparkling magnificence, illusionistic effects, flickering candles and incense saturated atmosphere, the likes of which had never been seen in Mdina before. The painter Francesco Vincenzo Zahra, assisted by a formidable team of craftsmen (37) who included Giuseppe Buhagiar, Giovanni

Antonio Mamo, Giovanni Monreale, Simone Gauci, Francesco Axisa, Giovanni Battista Giardina, Saverio Laferla, Giovanni Farrugia and Don Giuseppe Vella, worked on the project in his Valletta workshop during the first five months of the operation, paying occasional visits to Mdina, sometimes twice a week. As the work progressed, however, the need for Zahra's presence in Mdina became increasingly important so that he was offered lodging in the adjoining seminary building (38). After some litigation with the Cathedral Chapter, Zahra was paid 450 *scudi* for the job but he was compensated for reluctantly accepting this miserly payment when he was awarded the additional commission to paint the ceiling of the Chapter Hall of the Cathedral. Unlike Romano Carapecchia's *Chapelle Ardente* which is lying in a dismantled state in the crypt of the Conventual church of the Knights in Valletta, Pietro Paolo Troisi's altar of repose as executed by Francesco Vincenzo Zahra is still being regularly assembled in a side chapel of the Mdina Cathedral, providing a unique focal point of Catholic devotion and Baroque splendour in Malta during Holy Week.



References and Notes :

1. D. De Lucca, *The Festa Funebre of Baroque Europe* in *Journal of Baroque Studies*, Volume 1 (Malta, 2003) 7-38. This journal is published on an annual basis by the International Institute for Baroque Studies of the University of Malta.
2. D. De Lucca, *op.cit.*, 22 states that the Jesuit C.F.Menestier was the friend and adviser of the French decorator Jean Berain (1640-1711) who was one of the principal designers of Baroque catafalques in Paris.
3. Sir H. Scicluna, *The Church of St John in Valletta* (Rome, 1955) 225-227. See also V. Bonello, *Qualche inedito sulla Cappella Ardente di San Giovanni* in *Malta* (Malta, 1939); D. De Lucca, *Carapecchia: Master of Baroque Architecture in early eighteenth century Malta* (Malta, 1999) 177-182 and S. Cefai, *Romano Carapecchia's Chapelle Ardente* in *Journal of Baroque Studies*, Volume 1 (Malta, 2003) 79-95
4. D. De Lucca, *Mdina: A History of its Urban Space and Architecture* (Malta, 1995) 89. See also M.Buhagiar and S. Fiorini (ed.), *Mdina: The Cathedral City of Malta*, Volume II (Malta, 1996) 577-581 and D. De Lucca, *Medievale e Barocco a Mdina in Demetra*, Volume VI (Palermo, 1994) 8-16
5. D. De Lucca, 1999, 107
6. N(ational) L(ibrary) (in) V(alletta), A(rchives) (of) (the)





O(der) (in) M(alta) 510, ff. 183v-184v.

7. Carapecchia's prize project for a palace is reproduced in D. De Lucca, 1999 by the kind permission of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome.

8. *Ibid.*, 30-67

9. *Ibid.*, 94-96

10. *Ibid.*, 76 and 87. See also E. Coudenhove-Erthal, *Carlo Fontana und die Architektur des Romischen Spätbarock* (Vienna, 1930) 112 and P. Portoghesi, *Roma Barocca* (Rome, 1968) 566.

11. N.L.V., A.O.M. 6551, ff. 80v-83v and N.L.V. Manuscript 195.

12. D. De Lucca, 1999 contains exhaustive details of Carapecchia's involvement in the design and execution of the mentioned buildings.

13. *Ibid.*, 56-62 and 253-261. See also E. Tamburini (ed.), *Scenotecnica Barocca* (Rome, 1994) 99-139 and L. Bartolini-Salimbeni, *Il taccuino di un apprendista nella Roma di fine seicento: Il 'compendio architettonico' di Romano Carapecchia* in *Architettura: Storia e Documenti* (Rome, 1990) 163

14. D. De Lucca, 1999, 103

15. *Ibid.*, 70-71

16. Sir H. Scicluna, *op.cit.*, 225-227

17. *Ibid.*, 225-227

18. N.L.V., A.O.M. 648, f.244

19. Sir H. Scicluna, *op.cit.*, 226

20. N.L.V., A.O.M. 145, ff. 265v-267r

21. Sir H. Scicluna, *op.cit.*, 227

22. M. Gori Sassoli, *Apparati architettonici per fuochi d'artificio a Roma nel settecento* (Milano, 1994) 81-94. See also C. Rizza, *Per una teoria del Barocco* (Milano, 1985) 83-92

23. L. Pascoli, *Vite de pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni* (Rome, 1730) 549

24. M. Fagiolo dell'Arco and S. Carandini, *L'Effimero Barocco – Struttura delle festa nella Roma del '600*

(Rome, 1977) 140 and 144-145.

25. L. Pirotta, *Contributo alla storia dell' Accademia Nazionale di San Luca : Alunni Stranieri delle scuole accademiche premiati nei 'vari concorsi* in *L'Urbe*, no.2 (March-April 1962).

26. N.L.V., Manuscript 1397, f.1

27. S. Zerafa, *Discorso sulla Storia Artistica di Malta* (Malta, 1850)

28. M. Fagiolo dell'Arco and S. Carandini, *op.cit.*, 298

29. M(dina) C(athedral) M(useum), A(rchives) C(athedral) M(useum), Reg. Deliberationum Capitularium, Volume 7, f. 24v

30. N.L.V, Univ. 89, Mandati (28.vi.1720)

31. *Ibid.*

32. N.L.V., Univ.89, Mandati (20.ix.1722)

33. D. De Lucca, 1995, 89

34. M. Buhagiar and S. Fiorini (ed.), *op.cit.*, 578

35. *Ibid.*, 581 mentions a 1986 publication by Mons. J. Azzopardi, former curator of the Mdina Cathedral archives who writes that the need to construct a new altar of repose was voiced by Canon Caspar Andrea Garsin and that the mentioned committee was composed of Canon Giovanni Maria Azopardi Castelletti representing the Cathedral Chapter and Canon Albino Portuguese representing the bishop of Malta.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*