

# Malta – The Splendour of its Baroque Architecture

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Architectural history can be one of the most boring or most exciting subjects to talk about. Architects and their buildings have always been inevitably intertwined with ideas about what is beautiful and what is not. Besides, the subject has also been intertwined with unfolding events in the political, religious, intellectual, technological and cultural fields.

A stimulating talk on architectural history, therefore, very much depends on the nature of the visual support that is provided and on the presentation of the subject in its wider context.

It is precisely my intention to do this in this lecture about the splendour of Malta's Baroque architectural heritage. I sincerely hope that my audience will not regret having come to hear what I have to say!

The jewel that best evokes the splendour of the Baroque architectural expression in Malta is, in my opinion, the Conventual Church of the then ruling Hospitaller Knights of St John the Baptist, situated in the heart of Valletta. This city, bordering the Grand Harbour of Malta, was then the seat of this ancient Military Order of the Catholic Church founded by the Blessed Gerard in the Holy Land in the year of Our Lord 1113.

More than evoking Baroque splendour, this magnificent church also evokes the first theme that I would like to address in this talk – the transformation of Valletta from a fortress of bland buildings into a city of Baroque architecture sporting the four main attributes of this international style.

But what were these four attributes?

First. The eagerness of the Baroque mind to explore space, to use axis, curvature, perspective artifices, proportional mechanisms,



*Above, View of the high altar of the Conventual Church at Valletta.*

and light effects and shadow play, to relate the interior of a church or palace with the exterior and the exterior with the surrounding squares or streets so as to render them holistic, dynamic dramatic and in a state of infinite development.

Second. The concern of the Baroque mind with collective values, with the potential that every new building in Valletta had to better enrich the urban theatre if its façade were to be conceived on the basis of dialogue with adjacent and opposite buildings. And there was a most important reason for this. Many and varied were the festive occasions in a Baroque city. And many and varied were the celebrations of victory, the religious processions, the military parades and the carnivals that added a rich dimension to Valletta. A unified architectural statement was therefore as essential as the scene of a theatrical stage to provide just the right backdrop for such festive spectacles, celebrating the prestige and successes of the so-called Religion of Malta. And such urban festive theatrical moods were not only confined to Malta, as these illustrations of a Baroque Easter in Piazza Navona, Rome, the entrance of the Queen of France in Delft on a state visit and the coronation prelude of the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria in Pressburg reveal.

Third. The desire of the Baroque mind to achieve a perfect integration, a *gran*



*composto* as contemporaries of Bernini would have called it, of architecture, painting and sculpture, achieving great beauty. Notice all this happening in the Chapel of the Langue of Italy in the Conventual Church!

Fourth. The issue of communicative force. Meaning the potential of buildings to explain without words the importance of its owner and function within the stratified social fabric of the Baroque age. A corridor in the Grand Master's palace in Valletta illustrates this point!

Seen in this context, the Conventual Church of St John's in Valletta can be defined as a magnificent microcosm of the process of the transformation of Valletta from a bland military city into a splendid Baroque city!

The geometry of its undecorated exterior and the original undecorated composition of its walls, arches and vaults - built shortly after the Ottoman Siege of 1565 - did reflect the military spirit of a city threatened by the Ottomans. They clearly reflected the martial spirit of Francesco Laparelli's fortifications and of all the early palaces and churches of late sixteenth-century Valletta which all sport bland walls and minimalist ornament.

Shall we call this the 'first' Valletta?

It was by no accident that the building of this 'first' Valletta, this new City of God of the

*Above, Celebrating victory over the enemies of Christ in Valletta - Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari with the spoils from his naval battles against the Ottomans. Below, Carapecchia. Entrance to Armoury in the Grand Master's Palace, Valletta.*





Above, Façade of the Jesuit college and church in Valletta.

Knights “facing Jerusalem”, as Pope Adrian VI Florensz put it, was undertaken just after the Great Siege by Grand Master Jehan de Valéa to create a fortified focal point overlooking the *Grande Porto di Malta*, which contained the precious war galleys and arsenal of the Knights.

According to the astrolabe of a mathematician from Siracusa called Giovanni Antonio Inferrera, the foundation stone of the new city-fortress had been ceremoniously laid by the Grand Master at forty-two minutes to noon on 28 March 1566. An emotionally-charged sermon delivered by the famous orator Padre Spirito Pelo Angusciola, the blessing of the site and the firing of all the artillery during the elevation of the holy host, had concluded the festive occasion.

These proceedings had taken place within sight of a massive Turkish basilisk. This powerful and gigantic weapon had been abandoned by the retreating Ottoman jannissaries and subsequently dragged by the victorious Knights into the main gate area to remain there for a long time afterwards as a powerful trophy of a spectacular victory of the Bible over the Koran.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, most of Valletta had already been built up. It was however not before the fourth decade of the following century that the arrival of Baroque in Valletta coincided with the aspirations of Grand Masters Antoine de Paule and Jean

Paul Lascaris Castellar to introduce the new architectural style that was becoming so fashionable in Europe. Just as had happened in Rome, Baroque architecture was then seen by these Grand Masters as a passionate expression of hope for the future after the bitter experience of an Ottoman siege, of great artistic achievements, of unequalled splendour, of powerful rhetoric and of celestial inspiration ablaze with a blind faith in a triumphant Catholic God.

A significant gesture to announce the new age was the elaborate portal that was added by Buonamici to the façade of the Conventual church and, more than that, the lavish decoration works that were added to all the interior surfaces. Pride of place must here surely go to Caravaggio’s magnificent beheading of John the Baptist, and to Mattia Preti’s painted stone vault.

It was precisely these Baroque evocations that would have inspired what had then started to happen in Valletta after 1635. For this was the year when the first formidable exponent of Baroque architecture in Valletta, - a member of the famous *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome - arrived in Malta, as a humble assistant - a ‘*pittore del pennello*’ - to the great military engineer Pietro Paolo Floriani who was sent out by the Pope Urban VIII to build the new fortifications outside Valletta. These powerful Floriana outworks beyond the landfront of the fortifications of Valletta, repeatedly perfected in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, still carry Floriani’s name!

But who exactly was this Francesco Buonamici?

Francesco was born in the Medieval Italian city of Lucca in 1596. His parents were Antonio Buonamici and Anna Pistelli.

Having emigrated from Lucca to Rome, the young Buonamici had been involved in the refurbishing works of the church of *S. Croce dei Lucchesi e S. Bonaventura* belonging to the Lucca community in Rome - where he had been commissioned to paint the dramatic titular painting placed behind the main altar of the church. This painting depicted the precious relic called the *Volto Santo di Lucca*. In Rome, too, Francesco Buonamici had been involved in drawing up a project for the façade of the Giustiniani palace. His stay, however, had afterwards been interrupted by a brief visit to Lucca in 1633 when he had prepared designs for the Church of the Suffragio, a monument to

the victims of a terrible plague that had caused havoc in the city in the early 1630's.

Back in Rome after designing the Suffragio church, he had been commissioned by the nephew of the powerful Pope Urban VIII, the Cardinal Francesco Barberini to design some stage sets for the 1634 performance in the Cancelleria Palace of a very special Baroque opera depicting the life of an obscure Eastern saint called Sant' Alessio. The performance was held in front of a packed audience of Roman nobles and church dignitaries to mark the arrival in Rome of the brother of the King of Poland, the Prince Alessandro Vasa. Sant' Alessio had been a huge success.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Buonamici had soon afterwards been honoured by being elected member of the famous Roman art school called the *Accademia di San Luca*, then headed by the great Pietro Berettini da Cortona. It was at this point that the opportunity had presented itself for him to join the entourage of the pope's *Ingegniere Supremo dello Stato Pontificio*, Pietro Paolo Floriani in his military mission to Malta and to eventually stay on under the protection of the Knights of St. John. For the next 25 years Buonamici served no less than three Grand Masters as the resident architect of the famous 'Religion of Malta.' This was the beginning of the transformation of Valletta into a Baroque city.

It was by no accident that Buonamici's first Baroque interventions in Valletta coincided with the very first Baroque adornment interventions that were, under his supervision, carried out within the Conventual Church of St John.

But more was to come!

It was in the year 1637 that Buonamici was approached by Fr. Tagliava -the rector of the Jesuit college in Valletta - to remodel the interior and design a new façade and dome for the college church which had been originally designed by the Jesuit architects Giuseppe Valeriano and Tommaso Blandino. The church and the nearby college seem to have suffered substantial damages in the 1634 explosion of the *polverista* situated in the same *Strada S. Jacobo*. Buonamici completed the design and started supervising the remodelling operations in the same year. When the job was finished the long façade of the Jesuit college and church, situated behind the Grand Master's palace, introduced a new very Baroque dimension – the first of its kind – in Valletta's townscape. It was the beginning of a replica of the process that

had at the same time started happening in the Via del Corso in Rome!

In 1642 Buonamici was commissioned by Grand Master Jean-Paul Lascaris Castellar to design the layout, the triumphal arch entrance, and the two fountains of a new garden Valletta called *Gnien is-Sultan*, situated in a prominent position overlooking the Grand Harbour, described by Albert Jouvin de Rochefort in 1664 as 'one of the most pleasant gardens in Malta since it contains a large quantity of beautiful lemon trees, orange trees and other fruit trees which are evergreen.'

Other descriptions of this small garden by the Germans Duke Ferdinand Albrecht zu Braunschweig – Lüneburg and Baron Georg Friedrich zu Eulenberg in 1663, mention the fascination of these German aristocrats with the two fountains of this small but charming garden. The larger of these fountains had sculptures of nymphs and satyrs from Classical mythology blowing water from their musical horns while playing around a large statue of Europa. They are here represented at the moment of her being abducted by the lecherous god Zeus, here assuming the semblance of a bull. This was a favourite design theme at the *Accademia di S. Luca* in Rome. Buonamici was in 1652 also commissioned by the Confraternity of the Souls in Purgatory to replace an existing church in Valletta with a new edifice dedicated to S. Nicola, also known as the '*chiesa delle anime*.' The façade and dome of this centrally-planned church together with that of the Jesuit college further up the road marked the beginning of the transformation of Valletta into a Baroque city. It was the year of Our Lord 1658.

It was well known in seventeenth-century Sicily that the Knights of Malta had always left no stone unturned to maintain an excellent rapport with the charming town of Siracusa, which had once welcomed them so warmly prior to their arrival in Malta in 1530.

Keeping this in mind, Giovanni Antonio Capobianco, the Bishop of Siracusa between 22 March 1649 and 19 May 1673, decided in 1650 to further promote these close ties by inviting over Francesco Buonamici, then described as the '*valentissimo ingegnere*' of the Religion of Malta, to assist him in realizing his vision of a new Baroque Siracusa where the labyrinthine itineraries of Medieval Ortygia would be 'modernised' by grand replacement buildings designed in the fashionable Baroque style of architecture and interior décor. The initiative of

Capobianco in this respect paid off handsomely. During his long bishopric he not only succeeded to persuade Buonamici to decorate that model of a *Baroque Bel Composto* which was the *Cappella del SSmo Sacramento* in his cathedral church but also to carry out substantial modernisation works in his medieval palatial residence adjoining the cathedral. Bishop Capobianco also managed to convince Buonamici to design the beautiful church of *S. Maria della Immacolata Concezione*, also known as *S. Maria delle Monache*, in the heart of Ortygia.

And Francesco Buonamici's visits to Sicily were not only confined to the city of Siracusa. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the architect at some point also travelled to at least three other destinations; these being Messina, Palermo and Trapani.

In Messina, he seems to have been responsible for repair works in the old church of *S. Giovanni di Malta*, attached to the Grand Priory of the Knights of Malta – now destroyed. In Palermo, he was involved in building operations concerning the Jesuit *Collegio Massimo Imperiale* in Corso Vittorio Emanuele, now the *Biblioteca Statale*. In Trapani he designed the façade of the Jesuit church in the former *Rua Grande*, now Corso Vittorio Emanuele, recently re-opened to the delight of the citizens of Trapani after long years of disuse and decay.

Demonstrating an overall similarity to his earlier façade of the Jesuit church in Valletta,

Francesco's achievement in Trapani reflected a thorough knowledge of the basic rules governing the building of a Baroque church, where the horizontal is carefully balanced by the vertical, where all bland and solid wall surfaces become refined and sculptural, where all projections and recesses are carefully dimensioned to achieve a superb play of light and shade, greatly embellishing the final product which also reveals his encyclopaedic knowledge of diverse ornamental features rivalling the superb work of the other more famous Francesco in Rome, where the churches of Borromini show similar characteristics in the handling of ornament to maximize shadow play. Considered from this viewpoint, the church of the Society of Jesus in Trapani surely represents the *chef d'oeuvre* of Francesco Buonamici's Sicilian adventure. This splendid church was consecrated in 1705.

It had to be Lascar's successor, the Aragonese Grand Master Martin de Redin, who finally allowed Francesco to return to Lucca in the summer of 1659. He was soon appointed Architect of the Republic of Lucca (1659-1677). In this capacity, he was commissioned to remodel the interior of the medieval Dominican church of San Romano and to design the theatre of San Gerolamo. The illustration shows Juvara's sketch for the interior of this splendid seventeenth-century playhouse.

Before departing from Malta, Buonamici had been asked to design a new façade for the old church of St. Paul in Rabat, also to remodel its



claustrophobic interior space. The foundation stone of Buonamici's new Rabat church had been laid on 1653 and after his departure to take up the post in Lucca, his capable master-masons Lorenzo Gafa and Pawluccio Formosa were in April 1664 commissioned to continue the works on the basis of the original design that had been provided by Buonamici. The design that was good enough to have found its way into the milieu of engravings of the famous Venetian Franciscan friar and cartographer Vincenzo Coronelli. Vincenzo Coronelli was a famous cosmographer who had designed two terrestrial and celestial globes for the great Louis XIV of France.

Buonamici's design of the Parish Church of St Paul in Rabat represented a landmark in Maltese Parish church design. It reflected the new Baroque gusto that he had introduced into Malta as an intended departure from the earlier Latin-cross parish churches that had been designed in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Designed in a style that had a very Spanish flavour, these parish churches represented an early response of the Bishop of Malta to S. Carlo Borromeo's *Instructiones fabricae et supellectillis ecclesiasticae* formulated at the Council of Trent and published in 1577. Examples of these early parish churches could then be seen at Attard, B'Kara, Mosta, Naxxar and Gharghur.

It is said that while building the Rabat church, Francesco Buonamici came into contact with a very capable Maltese *capomastro* called Lorenzo Gafa, who, learning much about architecture from both Buonamici and his own brother Melchiorre who was then rivaling Bernini in Rome, later on in the century moved on to design or influence the design of the splendid Baroque Cathedral of Mdina, the Church of St Catherine of Zejtun, the Church of St Lawrence in Birgu, the Church of St Helen of B'Kara and so many other Baroque churches, large and small.

Gafa's buildings became models and goads for the dissemination of the characteristics of Baroque architecture to the village settlements outside Valletta after 1660, time-wise coinciding with the geometric splendour of the new fortifications designed by Count Maurizio Valperga and Don Carlos de Grunenbergh. These fortifications were perfected in the first half of the eighteenth century by the French military mission of Renat Jacob de Tigne and Charles Francois de Mondion, both associates



Lorenzo Gafa. Mdina Cathedral.

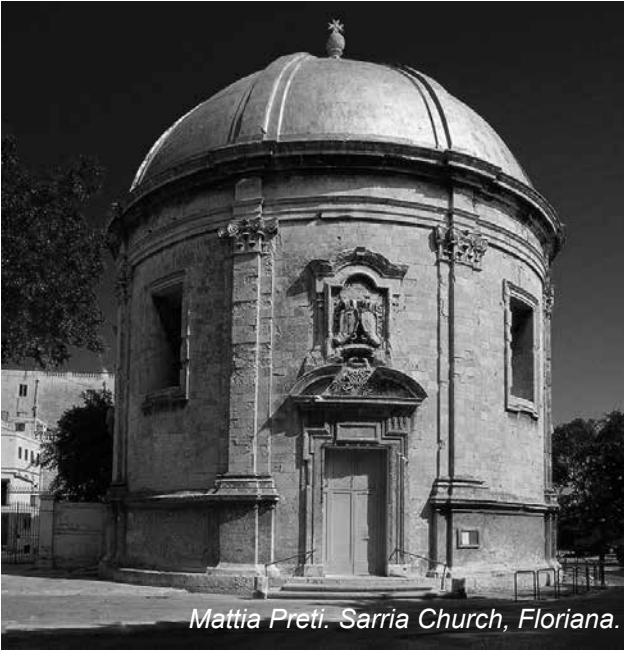
of the great Marshal Vauban.

The 1660s were also the time when the great Mattia Preti the painter painted St John's, and Mattia Preti the architect designed Sarria.

The Church of the Immaculate Conception at Sarria was a superb case-study of Mattia Preti's architecture, now clearly attributed to him by virtue of a document dated 27 May 1676 which refers to a decision by the council of the Religion of Malta to approve a wooden model made by Mattia Preti for the new church.

The decision to build this miniature Roman Pantheon on the site of a sixteenth-century chapel that had been constructed on the same site by the Spanish Fra Martino Sarria Navarro, had actually been taken on 11 April of that same year. Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner and his Council, alarmed at the devastation caused by a virulent plague, had resolved to seek the intercession of our Lady and other Saints through a solemn vow of everlasting devotion to the Immaculate Conception. Originally fitted with a lantern rising above its ribbed dome, the Church of the Immaculate Conception at Sarria was a unique project. It revealed the harmonious thinking processes of Preti the architect and Preti the painter, evident in the positioning and composition of all the interior sacred paintings inside the building including that of the Immaculate Conception placed on the main altar. Installed in 1678 by bishop





*Mattia Preti. Sarrìa Church, Floriana.*

Molina, this painting represented a remarkable combination of both Marian and plague iconography, eminently suitable for a sacred building in the Catholic world of the Baroque.

There is a reference that during the construction of the church of Sarrìa, Mattia Preti struck a friendship with the resident military engineer of the Knights, Mederico Blondel des Croisettes who had replaced Buonamici after his departure. Mederico Blondel was the brother of the famous Francois Blondel who was the founder of the *Academie d'Architecture* and the designer of a fascinating course on architecture in Paris.

Did Preti, in the absence of any other foreign architect of repute, occasionally act as an architectural advisor assisting Blondel in his Valletta office, particularly during the principate of his Calabrian compatriot, Grand Master Gregorio Carafa?

And would this imply that Preti would have sometimes been involved in designing fortifications, as well as a number of churches and palatial buildings in Valletta?

Seen in this perspective, it becomes understandable why the magnificent façade of the Auberge de Provence and the splendid interior of the Church of St Francis - both happening at this time in the main thoroughfare of Valletta – as well as other buildings such as Blondel's Church of St Mary of Jesus, that would have appeared in Valletta at the time, would have echoed the contemporary transformations that were also then happening in and on the sides of the wide nave of the Conventual Church, now magnificently enriched with Mattia Preti's painted vault. This splendid work, described by the French traveller to Malta Albert Jouvin de Rochefort in 1664 as representing the apotheosis of the 'Religion of Malta', was indeed a landmark in the transformation of the sacred interior of this church into a sumptuous Baroque edifice.

So that it would seem that by 1670, walking down the nave of the Conventual Church and looking towards the aisle chapels and superb funerary monuments on either side and walking down the parallel *Strada San Giorgio* and



*Façade of the Auberge de Provence, Valletta.*

looking towards the palatial enclosure planes on either side, one would have enjoyed identical exciting experiences.

For when looking around in these two beautiful 'streets', one interior and one exterior, one sacred and one profane, one could not fail to admire all that was splendid in the new architecture and works of art of the Baroque.

And would this not have led a Baroque persona, as Jouvin comments, to think that he or she would have been in some sort of gallery full of beautiful paintings that collectively would have led any visitor to Valletta in the Baroque age to form a marvellous opinion of the city and its buildings?

Was this not indeed a fitting celebration of the emerging splendour of Baroque Valletta?

A splendour that soon reached its apogee in the eighteenth century!

Two key players entered the scene at the dawn of the eighteenth century. Romano Carapeccchia, an architect trained by Carlo Fontana, arrived from Rome in 1707. And Charles Francois de Mondion, a military engineer trained by Vauban, arrived from Paris in 1715. Both reached the zenith of their very considerable achievement in Malta when Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, a Prince of Portugal, was elected Grand Master on 19 June 1722.

The considerable output of the Italian architect Romano Carapeccchia after 1707 posed a fresh approach to elaborating the emerging splendour of Baroque Valletta.

Born in 1666 to poor parents – Giovanni Antonio Carapeccchia and Francesca Roveti - residing in the S. Eustachio parish of the spiritual capital of Catholic Europe, Romano was a self-made man.

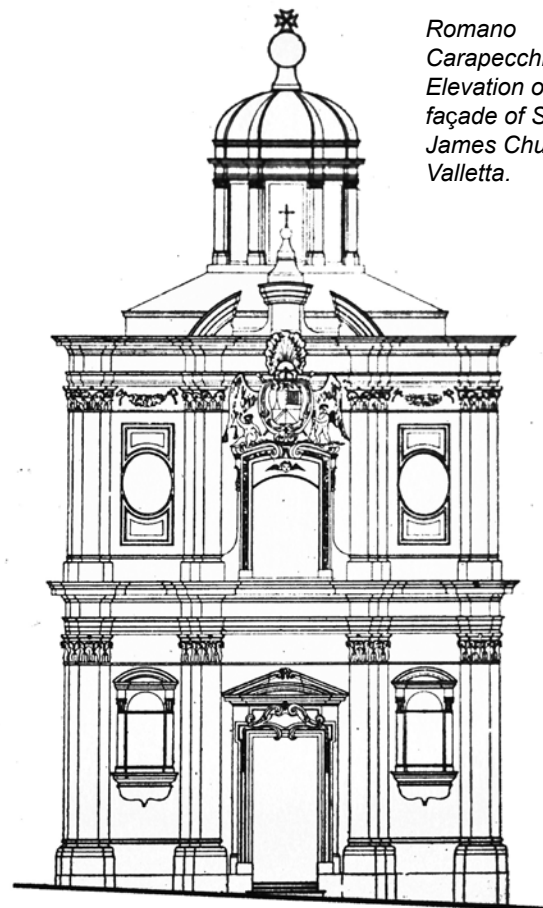
Having received his architectural education in the studio of the influential Carlo Fontana, he soon started practising his profession in Rome where he is credited with the design of the church and nearby hospital of S. Giovanni Calabita, the Palazzino Vaini and the Tordinona and other palace theatres.

In a Rome dominated by the presence of Queen Christina of Sweden and her friend Ebba Sparre, Romano also recorded the highlights of his education experience at the *Accademia di San Luca* in a unique document entitled *Compendio architettonico inventato da Romano Carapeccchia* and drew up several projects for large urban schemes and fountains, shown in these images.

Disappointed with the limited opportunities available in Rome at the turn of the century, Romano Carapeccchia was persuaded to leave the city in 1707 to eventually settle in Valletta during the principate of Grand Master Ramon Perellos Y Rocafull. Within the context of an island fortress situated on what was still considered to be the very edge of European Catholicism, the newly arrived architect soon managed, as a result of Pope Clement XI Albani's recommendation, to find favour with the Grand Master.

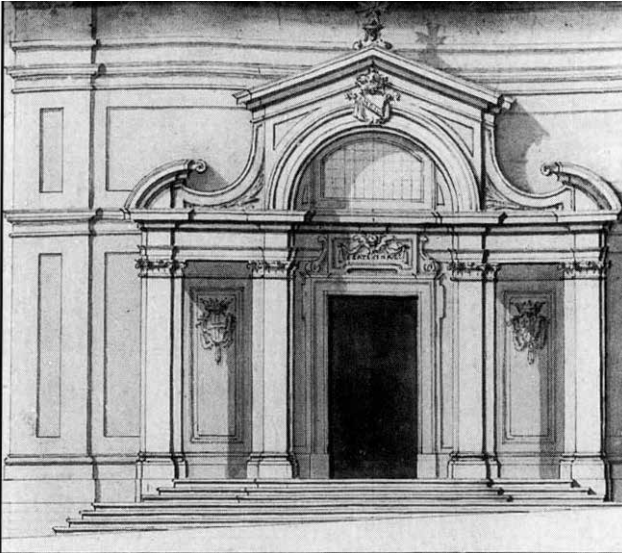
As a result he soon drew up several embellishment projects which all reflected a total commitment to his profession to an extent that rarely has the spirit of the Baroque been more powerfully and splendidly evoked in Valletta than it is in the work of this distinguished Roman architect.

A firm command of a wide architectural vocabulary, an exceedingly pronounced integrative approach, flexibility of thought and a rare control of the design process presupposing the architect's ability to think out every detail on the drawing board, represent the hallmarks of Carapeccchia's sophisticated work. It is obvious that he well understood the four characteristics of the Baroque idiom that I mentioned in the beginning of this talk.

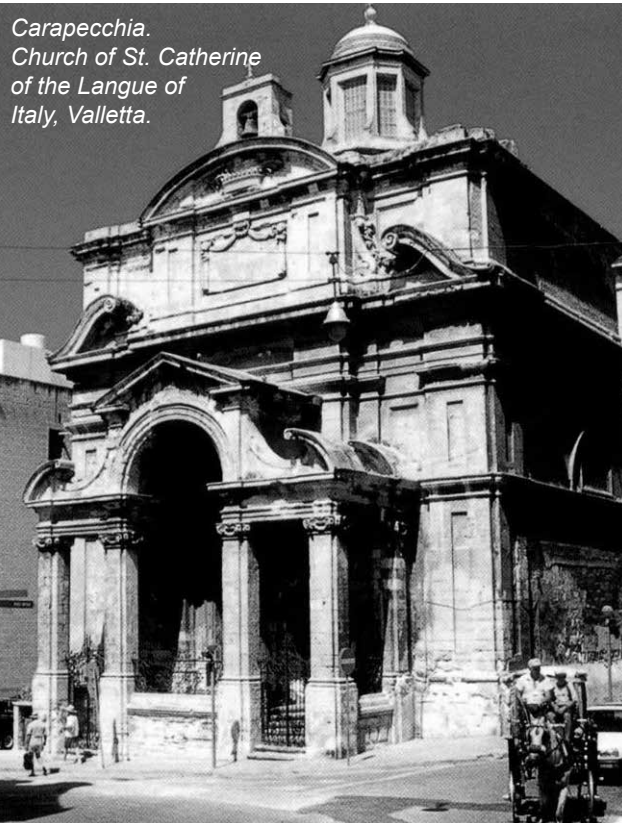


Romano Carapeccchia.  
Elevation of  
façade of St.  
James Church,  
Valletta.





Carapecchia.  
Church of St. Catherine  
of the Langue of  
Italy, Valletta.



Which is why all this can be seen in his oval church of St. James, in his church of St. Catherine of the Langue of Italy, in his church and convent of St. Catherine in lower Republic Street in the beautiful Pilar church adjacent to the Auberge d'Aragon and in the church of St. Barbara in Republic Street which seems to have been built posthumously.

But Carapecchia's success in Valletta can be perhaps best measured by his very detailed *Disegno della facciata o sia il Prospetto della Chiesa di S. Caterina*, which he prepared in connection with his project for the church of St. Catherine of the Italian langue to which he was proud to belong.

It was the first projecting structure of its kind to be introduced into the urban fabric of Grand Master Valette's city, in blatant contradiction to one of the main town planning regulations that had been drawn up by the *Officium Commissariorum Domorum* of the Knights in the sixteenth century, when such projections had then been considered to be detrimental to the rapid movements of troops and artillery in times of war.

It was indeed a sign of the changed times when the embellishment requirements of Venus now superseded the military requirements of Mars, that had dominated the 'first' Valletta. For the talented Carapecchia - who according to Lione Pascoli, '*disegnava a maraviglia*' - was now allowed to introduce from the heart of Rome all those architectural elements of mature sophistication and studied finesse that went a long way to transform the military city of the Knights into a fine Baroque city.

For in Valletta, Romano Carapecchia also designed the Municipal palace, the façade of the Palazzo Spinola, the annexes of the Conventual church, the armoury door of the Magisterial palace, and the Perellos fountain which graces its courtyard. The prolific architect also produced designs for the tombstones of the floor of the Conventual church, for the sacristy furniture of the Church of St Paul and for several other fountains to embellish the city in true baroque style! Fortification gateways were also one of his favourite themes.

But even more important from Grand Master Vilhena's point of view was Carapecchia's involvement in the design of the Manoel Theatre, this inspired by studies that he had made in his earlier *Pratica delle machine de' Teatri* treatise. And the architect's project for the Barriera warehouses was perhaps one of the earliest attempts of the Knights to transform the waterfront of Valletta facing the Grand Harbour into an impressive Baroque scenario which was continued towards the middle of the eighteenth century with the building of the impressive Pinto warehouses. Outside Valletta, in the midst of Malta's beautiful countryside, the restoration of the old citadel of Mdina which had been damaged by the outer ripples of the great Sicilian earthquake of 1693 was a project that would have posed a formidable challenge for the second important personality of eighteenth-century Baroque in Malta, the Frenchman Mondion who was born in Paris and who had studied under the guidance of Vauban.

Charles Francois de Mondion's achievement in Mdina included the updating of the main landfront fortifications with the addition of an impressive array of outworks based on calculations used by Vauban.

It also included the replanning of the main entrance area of the town where the irregular medieval planimetry was now replaced by a straightforward and spacious Baroque design hinged on a splendid gateway building which reflected the best that Vauban had to offer in the France of Louis XIV. Mondion was also here responsible for the design and execution of a magnificent magisterial palace with its adjacent law courts, for a municipal palace, for a small church dedicated to S. Rocco, also for several storage magazines and for a number of smaller buildings including an armoury which was executed posthumously by his *capomastro* Petruzzo Debono.

Concerning Mdina, there is also a strong possibility that Mondion was actively involved in the design and building of the Bishop's Seminary for his fellow national Bishop Alpheran de Bussan. There is also some evidence that the municipal palace project was a collaborative effort involving the architect Pietro Paolo Troisi, who specialised in the creation of magnificent ephemeral artifacts - two triumphal arches and a magnificent altar of repose – for festive occasions, as was common fare in the Baroque world.

Carapecchia himself had designed a magnificent ephemeral *Chapelle Ardente* for the Conventual church in Valletta which had been first used during the death rituals of his master, Grand Master Vilhena in 1733.

The last flowering of Baroque architecture in Valletta happened as a response to the absolutist attitudes to governance that infiltrated Malta in the second half of the eighteenth century.

One now finds Grand Masters Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca, Francisco Ximenes Texada and Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc forgetting most of their Knightly vows to patronise with great zest a full-blooded mature Baroque architecture that added the final touches to Carapecchia's transformation of Valletta into a Baroque city.

Among the principal large scale buildings that were erected to communicate the unbridled powers and prerogatives of the above-mentioned Grand Masters one can mention the Auberge de Castille, the Castellania, and the palace that presently hosts the National Fine



*Grand portal of the Auberge de Castille in Valletta.*

Arts Museum.

Stefano Ittar's *Bibliotheca* building, evoking the language of the post-earthquake architecture of nearby Catania, closes the history of the Baroque architectural experience in the Valletta. This magnificent building, with its undertones and overtones of an emerging neo-classicism, was linked to the adjacent palace of the Grand Master which was now fitted with two magnificent portals.

But it was the Auberge de Castille that perhaps represented the ultimate expression of the spatial dominance, the ornamental magnificence and the communicative force of the Baroque age, eloquently evoking Grand Master Pinto's great temporal power and prestige, considerably enhanced after his thoroughly brutal suppression of a Muslim slave uprising.

This palace represented indeed the epitome of Baroque splendour in Malta. When completed it seems to have been acclaimed by many Knights as a superb representative of an architectural form of expression associated with political autocracy and with a pre-Kantian beauty which embraced a now defunct appreciation of fine things.

The Sicilian poet Corrado Rizza once wrote that '*Il Barocco e' un inno all'occhio e alla teoria della visione*' – the Baroque is a hymn to the eye and to the theory of vision.

To my mind, there are no better words to succinctly describe the splendid architecture of Malta in the Baroque age, the subject of this lecture.