

Gudja

Titular Painting Restored

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The titular painting of *The Assumption of Our Lady* by Pietro Gagliardi in the parish church of Gudja, has just been restored and put back in its place following a thorough cleaning and general restoration by restorer Alfred Briffa.

Pietro Gagliardi (1809-1890), a Roman artist who had his studio at Palazzo Giustiniani in that city, was among the foremost of a number of Italian artists who during the second half of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries enhanced the artistic patrimony of the Maltese Islands.

His principal patron, who was also a great friend of his, was Canon Paolo Pullicino, whose zeal to import good artistic talent from the Italian mainland often brought the latter into conflict with the locally-based artist Giuseppe Cali', who in a fit of spite wrote the cleric's name on the devil's tail in the *St Michael* altarpiece in the parish church of Luqa!

Apart from the titular painting, Gudja parish church has another important altarpiece by Gagliardi, that of *Our Lady of Mount Carmel with*

Archangels Michael and Gabriel. This was painted in 1879, which means that its execution came two years after the titular painting, which bears the date 1877.



THE ASSUMPTION, (1877), by Pietro Gagliardi
 in the Gudja parish church

Other works in Malta by Gagliardi include *The Madonna and Child* (1868) at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, which is apparently his earliest work on the island, the titular paintings of *The Annunciation* (1874) and of *St Cajetan* (c.1882) at the parish churches of Tarxien and Hamrun respectively, the *Our Lady* patroness of Malta altarpiece at Mdina Cathedral, and the altarpiece of *St Joseph as Universal Patron of the Church* (also restored in recent years by Alfred Briffa) at the Ta' Ġiezu church in Rabat. In a Maltese private collection I also know of a painting depicting *St John the Evangelist* which is

dated 1890, the year of the artist's death.

The titular painting of Gudja, measuring 397 x 275 cm, was already restored some 30 years ago. Some months ago, in preparation for some added decoration with new gilding, done by John Orlando of Tarxien, around the frame of

the painting to continue with the work done last year on the apsidal cap, parish priest Canon Evan Caruana took the opportunity to have the painting removed and sent it for restoration.

The major damage consisted of spattering of wax from lighted candles on the choir altar which scorched the lower half of the painting. The overall cleaning, apart from some minor retouching, thus entailed the removal through a heating process of a film of carbonisation that had developed on the affected parts.

The figure of Our Lady dominates the whole picture. She is flanked on either side by the archangels Michael, with the inscription *Quis ut Deus?* (Who is like God?) emblazoned on his chest, and Gabriel who holds a lily (symbolic of virginity) in his hand as a reminder of his role in bringing the message of her divine maternity to the Virgin.

Their open wings serve to provide that necessary dimension to present Our Lady in an airborne surge upwards. Beneath the three central figures are cavorting *puttini*, who carry bunches of flowers by way of celebrating the uniquely happy event unfolding around them.

Gagliardi's art radiates a sweet piety which fits in perfectly with the religious inspiration typical of the time when it was being offered to the faithful. Its unmistakable academic approach, despite those detractors who deem it as *passee*, can still send waves of inspiration in all who stand in front of it.

Many of his paintings have the Madonna as their subject. Even when she is not the actual subject of the painting, as in Hamrun, she still makes her presence felt. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the repetition of themes, the paintings by Gagliardi retain a freshness of colour schemes and religious intimacy which are perfectly suited towards both devotional and aesthetic appeal.

Some time ago I was leafing through a book, published in America, about the universal feasts of Our Lady. It had a number of black-

and-white illustrations of paintings relating to these feasts. Complementing the chapter about 'The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin' was an illustration indicated simply as being by Gagliardi, though this not being an art book, the publishers gave no indication as to its whereabouts.

The top half of the painting, as illustrated in that book, is occupied by the Virgin and surrounding angels in a composition approximately similar to what is seen at Gudja, while the lower half depicts the apostles at the moment when they discover the empty tomb of the Virgin.

This is a fundamental difference from the Gudja painting where the scene of the apostles is relegated to a barely visible corner, almost like an insignificant detail, in the bottom right corner. In so doing, Gagliardi was directing our attention almost exclusively to the glorious Assumption into heaven by the Mother of God without giving undue attention to the discovery of her empty tomb.

This imagery by Gagliardi at Gudja goes against the traditional iconography revealed in other titular paintings of the subject in Malta and Gozo, which include those by Pasquale Buhagiar in Mosta (1678) and Attard (attributed), Francesco Zahra (attributed, 1745) in Ghaxaq, Michele Busuttill (1791) at the Gozo Cathedral, Virginio Monti (1910) in Dingli, Giuseppe Cali (1917) in Qrendi and Lazzaro Pisani (1920) in Mgarr.

At Mqabba, the altarpiece by Filippo Venuti (1896) unscrupulously plagiarises the Gudja Gagliardi, with practically the sole difference being that Our Lady is shown with her arms uplifted.

By way of celebrating the restoration of this painting and the 125th anniversary of its execution, an academy was held on Friday on the parvis of Gudja parish church, through the initiative of Canon Caruana and other clergy of the village. ☩