

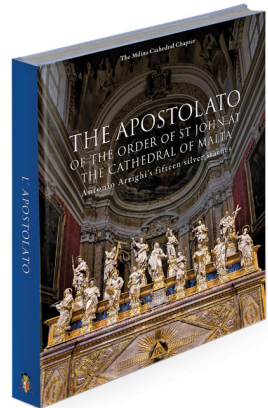
SILVER SAVED FROM THE MINT

Antonio Arrighi's 'Apostolato'

Reviewed by Petra Caruana Dingli • Photographs by Daniel Cilia



The Apostolato of the Order of St John at the Cathedral of Malta: Antonio Arrighi's Fifteen Silver Statues (The Mdina Cathedral Chapter, 2018) pp. 383



Far left: Apostolato silver statues on altar
Left: St John the Baptist

This book emerges out of a restoration project. In 2007, Sante Guido and Giuseppe Mantella had restored fifteen gorgeous Baroque silver statuettes by Antonio Arrighi (1687-1776) at the Mdina Cathedral. The statues depict the twelve Apostles, with St John the Baptist, St Paul and the Virgin Mary, and the set is known as the *Apostolato*.

The results of that project were not immediately published due to a lack of funds. They are now presented here, some years later, with studies featuring new research and findings.

In a preface by 'The Authors', we read that 'thanks to the patronage of a knight of St John, Silvano Pedrollo, chairman of S.p.A. Verona, and thanks to the generosity of the Metropolitan Chapter of Malta, as well as thanks to the perseverance of Mgr John Azzopardi, the book which started out with the essay 'Antonio Arrighi' written by Jennifer Montagu has now been published, enhanced moreover by new studies and research'.

While the volume does not name an editor, the bulk of the text is by restorers Sante Guido and Giuseppe Mantella. Photography and book design are by Daniel Cilia.

The statues have a fascinating history. They were first commissioned in the late 1730s by the Order of St John to embellish their Conventual church in Valletta, under Grand Master Ramon Despuig. When Napoleon and his troops took over the government of Malta in 1798, they confiscated and melted down silver from Maltese churches to finance their military campaigns.

In a valiant attempt to save the precious *Apostolato* from being sold or melted down, the canons of Mdina exchanged other silver and precious items for them. The statues have been in Mdina ever since. This dramatic story is related in detail in this volume, accompanied by transcripts of original documents related to this turbulent episode of Malta's history.

In her contribution, Jennifer Montagu provides an expert analysis of Arrighi's workmanship, noting the superb quality of



Above: The dismantled statue of St Bartholomew

the modelling and execution of the *Apostolato*. Unfortunately, many of his important works were destroyed with other silver throughout the Papal States, sent to the mint in the aftermath of the French revolution. Montagu highlights the importance of Arrighi's *Apostolato* in the history of Roman Baroque silver as, apart from its intrinsic quality, it is 'the only major enterprise in silver to remain from the hand of one of the more remarkable Roman silversmiths of the middle years of the *Settecento*'.

Adding to this story, John Azzopardi describes the 'despoliation' of the treasures of the two cathedral churches of Malta by the French military, including other artefacts which featured in this plunder of precious items in 1798. Aloysius Deguara also examines this



Statue of St James Major at St John Lateran, Rome

episode, focusing on the securing of the statues in Mdina.

Rome and its art was a constant point of reference in Malta. Arrighi's *Apostolato* figures are inspired, on a smaller scale, by the marble statues of the Apostles at St John Lateran church in Rome, completed some 20 years earlier. These famous statues were widely admired. Here Maria Chiara Cozzi analyses these marble statues and their sculptors. She notes that Arrighi's *Apostolato* constitutes 'one of the most significant examples of the diffusion of the Lateran style'.

Series of statuettes of the Apostles were not uncommon at this period, and in his essay Edgar Vella opens the context to other artworks in Maltese parishes, such as at Mellieha and Zurrieq, or in Gharb in Gozo.

The *Apostolato* can be divided into two groups on the basis of their commissions and dates of execution, as indicated by the heraldic escutcheons and inscriptions on the pedestals. Through their research, Guido and Mantella link these to an earlier sixteenth-century set of silver statues owned by the Order. They note that, prior to work carried out by Keith Sciberras and Jennifer Montagu, the history, artist and exact dating of the *Apostolato* were unknown. Further research work, as presented in this volume, was conducted at the Magistral Palace in Rome and the National Library in Malta, analysing records of the *Sacro Collegio* and the *Comun Tesoro*.

In other chapters, Guido and Mantella describe the treasures of the Conventual church of St John in Valletta, as well as the ceremonial function of the *Apostolato* statues in the eighteenth century. They trace Arrighi's career as a silversmith in Rome, suggesting that Cardinal Pietro Ottobone (1667-1740) in Rome could have played a role in commissioning the statues. In another essay, Alberto Bianco presents the figure of Giovanni Battista Baratta, also involved in the commissioning.

Besides an account of the restoration project itself, Guido and Mantella provide an expansive overview of the background to these fine statuettes. They delve into the history of their making by Arrighi, with an analysis of each statue. They view them as 'the final act' of the Baroque re-styling of the Conventual church of St John the Baptist in Valletta, which had been initiated eighty years earlier.'

This beautifully illustrated volume was published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the archives and museum of the Cathedral of Malta in Mdina. An edition in Italian was also published. ■