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Stories of restorations

Storie di Restauri 2

Le Committenze del Gran Maestro Gregorio Carafa
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The second part of the book under review has nothing to do with the restoration of the Chapel of the Italian Langue, reviewed last week, except maybe for the fact that it deals with the Italian Grand Master Gregorio Carafa, whose funerary monument is the only one to be found in the Chapel of the Italian Langue.

There were other Italian grand masters in the Order's time in Malta, one of which, Marc'Antonio Zondadari, is honoured by a splendid monument that was so big it could not fit inside the chapel but was placed next door to the main door of the church.

When he was elected Grand Master on 1 April 1680, Gregorio Carafa, then 65 years old, was already famous. He was born in Castelvetero in Calabria thus a fellow citizen with Mattia Preti who reached his full maturity during his term.

From a young age, he took part in many military campaigns but as from 1644 distinguished himself in battles at sea. In 1644, 29 years old, he captured the Gran Sultana in a naval battle off Rhodes and found on board the Sultana Zafra and her son Osman who later be-

came a Catholic and a Dominican friar. Despite threatening retaliation, the Sultan did nothing to enforce the restitution of the prisoners.

In 1656 as head of the Order's fleet, he joined up with the fleet of Venice (the Pope's fleet had to remain in Civitavecchia because of an outbreak of the plague) to blockade the Dardanelles straits to stop the Turkish fleet from advancing towards Candia.

In the next year Carafa, heading once again Malta's fleet, this time joined by the Papal fleet and that of Venice arrived just off Constantinople and, though losing the Venetian leader Lazzaro Mocenigo, reported a signal victory over the Turkish fleet, which had been helped by artillery on land.

Once he became grand master, Carafa took on the big programme begun by his predecessors, especially Nicolas Cotoner, to transform the austere St John's into a Baroque wonder.

As from 1661, while Mattia Preti was decorating the vault, there was a project to create a new main altar, bringing it out from the rear wall and placing it at the centre of the choir. The project also included removing the old main painting of the baptism of Christ and replacing it by a monumental group on the same theme.

But in 1667 the sudden death of Melchiorre Cafa, who had been

tasked with the monumental group as well as the Order's economic difficulties, had temporarily blocked the project.

Once he became grand master, Carafa took up the project and gave it new impetus. (See later)

Carafa's second project regarded one of the Order's most important relics – the forearm of John the Baptist's right hand, that which had baptised Christ.

This had been donated to Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson (1476-1503) by the Sultan of Jerusalem Bajazet II.

This precious reliquary disappeared after 1798, reportedly taken by Grand Master Hompesch when he left Malta, and survives only in paintings such as that by Antoine Favray for the main door of the Oratory of the Beheading.

Up till Carafa's time, the reliquary used to be kept in the Chapel of Relics and carried processionaly to the main altar on the saint's feast day on 24 June.

Carafa decided to create a new setting for the reliquary.

A year before he was elected grand master, the Oratory had been given a Baroque makeover.

Originally, the Oratory was a simple rectangular hall at one end of which was Caravaggio's biggest painting.

The simplicity of the hall hides its importance for the Order – it was where the new grand master used to be elected, where the new Knights were nominated, where the novices were trained and where the Grand Councils were held – in short, it was Malta's Cappella Sistina.

It was also the place where the

Criminal Tribunal met. It is thus highly ironic that the hearing on 1 December 1608, which unfrocked Caravaggio from a Knight of the Order, in absentia, took place in this hall with his great painting of the Beheading of the Baptist dominating the proceedings.

On top of the big Caravaggio painting there used to hang a lunette attributed to Bartolomeo Garagona depicting the massacre of the last Knights defending Fort St Elmo on 23 June 1565. This painting, already in a bad state, was removed before 1692 and today hangs inconspicuously in the refectory of the Franciscan friars in Rabat.

There was a special reason for its theme – it encouraged the novice Knights to follow the examples set by John the Baptist and the St Elmo Knights.

Instead, a new theme was introduced in the chapel – the passion of Christ. With financial backing provided by the Prior of England, Stefano Lomellini and under the artistic direction of Mattia Preti, the ceiling was raised, the chapel lost its austere look and became a Baroque jewel... and Preti covered the walls and the ceiling with paintings showing the saints of the Order and the passion of Christ.

It is also said that Preti closed up a window on the right of the painting, where the light is coming from.

Once he was elected grand master, Carafa planned to house the reliquary of St John's arm in a more dignified way, by creating a grandiose reliquary and putting it on the altar of the Oratory. He

even got the Pope to concede special indulgences to all those who prayed to the relic.

Carafa began by ordering a new altar instead of the old one which was of the against the wall type. By 1689 the altar and its component marble parts had been brought to Malta and set up, although without the central medallion and the tabernacle door. Both have the beheading of St John as their theme. On top was positioned a Crucifixion group from the Algardi school.

In February 1686 Carafa obtained the approval of the Council of State and began the long correspondence which led to the reliquary. He also insisted on getting it done as soon as possible – artists such as Domenico Guidi and Giovan Battista Contini, who had proved to be unreliable and not punctual in their work on the main altar of the church were not to be allowed to work on the reliquary.

Although the name of the artist who gave us the splendid reliquary is never mentioned, it is clear the reliquary is by Ciro Ferri. This reliquary may have been one of his last works for he died in September 1689 and it was his heirs who got payments due to him.

In 1686, however, the proposed reliquary caused a certain amount of friction and tension among the Knights for some Knights wanted the altar of the Oratory to be kept clear for the devotion of the Quarant'ore (Maltese *kwaranturi*), which included the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Things were going to be quite crowded on top of the altar with the reliquary, the Crucifixion group and the throne for the Blessed Sacrament all competing for space. The grand master remained firm in his ideas and insisted that the Eucharistic apparatus should be moveable and not detract from the reliquary.

By February 1689 the reliquary was ready but then a new complication arose. The reliquary was to be shipped already mounted, that is, not broken down into the component parts. The voyage: Rome-Naples-Messina-Malta. It left Rome at the beginning of April and reached Naples on the 20th. Then the Pope died and the Order's representative in Naples kept the big box in his house for security.

Then Carafa's cardinal brother got permission to load the box on a Papal vessel and sailed for Messina on 29 September where he was met by two Maltese vessels towards the end of October. It was on 16 November that the box was finally opened and one could admire the reliquary.

The reliquary is one of Malta's best treasures. It resembles the Blessed Sacrament Ciborium by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in St Peter's, one by Ferri himself in S.

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Maria in Vallicella and the tabernacle of Santa Maria Maggiore, all in Rome.

However it later had a chequered history. First the reliquary and the Crucifixion group were removed from the altar to afford a better view of the Caravaggio masterpiece. The reliquary was moved here and there – it was placed on the main altar of the church for the Eucharistic Congress of 1913. Then it spent some time in the damp surroundings of the church's crypt. But the worst was to come, in 1959 during the colonial interregnum when it served as the basis of a flower arrangement in St George Square during the Festival of Flowers.

Lastly the book speaks about the same and redesign of the main altar of the church including the Gloria and the marble group and Grand Master Carafa's part in this.

Until the advent of Mattia Preti this end of the church had an altarpiece showing Christ being baptised by John painted by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, a collaborator of Michelangelo in Rome, who is more renowned for the fresco cycle on the Great Siege in the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta.

In March 1664 Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner and the Council decided to remove the Perez painting. In the meantime Preti had been covering the vault with his glowing colours and the Perez painting may have looked dull in comparison. This painting can now be seen in the museum.

The decision was taken to substitute the painting by a marble group. This may sound strange to us but there are a number of examples and models being created in those days. The Council insisted the design should be one by Bernini or someone of that grade.

Bernini, then working at the French Court, suggested "a certain young Maltese" – Melchiorre Cafa. The Maltese sculptor was fully oc-

cupied by other orders and it was only in August 1665 that he sent two designs and two models to Malta. He then visited Malta in January 1666, six or seven years after he had left the island. Together with Preti and the Order's architect Melderico Blondel it was decided the statues were to be of bronze with golden touches. Cafa was to make the statues in Rome under his direct supervision.

But Cafa died accidentally in September 1667 and the uncast statues remained for a long time in the Fonderia di San Pietro without anybody finishing them off.

It was only when Carafa became grand master that the project was again taken in hand. Carafa focused mainly on the altar (apart from the embellishment of the Oratory). Giovanni Battista Contini, well known in Rome and head of the Accademia di San Luca, was chosen as the architect and he in turn chose Girolamo Lucenti, the Pope's founder, collaborator of Bernini in St Peter's especially, the Baldachin. Lucenti is the creator of the gilt bronze Last Supper at the centre of the altar.

At the death of Carafa in 1690 the work suffered a new delay, caused by the Order's financial problems. Then there was the unexpected death of Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt in 1697. It was only in April 1699 that Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful gave a new impetus to the project and decisions were taken.

First it was decided that the statues would not be of silver as had been intended but of marble. Lorenzo Cafa, Melchiorre's brother, went to Rome to supervise the works and Giuseppe Mazzuoli was chosen to sculpture the two figures and Giovanni Giardini for the Gloria.

It was only in July 1701 that the bulk was shipped on board two Maltese vessels from Civitavecchia and installed in St John's by June 1703.



Gieħ l-Ghasri award presented to Theresa Cutajar

On 26 December the Ghasri Local Council held the Premju Gieħ l-Ghasri ceremony at Corpus Christi parish church in Ghasri. The honourable award was given to Dr Theresa Cutajar, Ambassador for Malta to Turkey.

Cutajar is the daughter of Laurence and Grace. She was born in Ghasri on 16 March 1963. She is the 10th child among five boys and six daughters. She attended her primary education at Laura Vicuna School of the Salesian Sisters in Ghasri and later on in Gharb. She continued her education at the girls' school in Victoria and continued her studies in sixth form Mikelang Refalo.

She entered the University of Malta where she graduated with a B.A. (Hons) in Economics. She continued her studies, which led her to take a Masters in Diplomacy, at the Mediterranean Academy for Diplomatic Studies MEDAC. She then took a post-graduate course in diplomacy at Oxford University in the United Kingdom as a Chevening student. She subsequently graduated with a Bachelor of Laws (Hons) and a Master of Advocacy from the University of Malta. Dr Cutajar was inducted into the Malta Bar and is a member of the Malta Bar Association.

Dr Cutajar served as High Commissioner of the Republic of Malta to India from 2011 to 2013. From 20 July she began to serve as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Malta to the Republic of Turkey, with its Embassy



inside the city of Ankara.

The ceremony was presented by Kav. Joe Attard and attended by various family members, the Ghasri mayor Dr Daniel Attard, Ghasri councillors, executive secretary and staff. Also present were Members of Parliament, Dr Chris Said, Dr Kevin Cutajar and Dr Joe Ellis.

During the ceremony various certificates and mementos were presented also to the Ghasri children and residents that took part in events organised during the year in lieu of feast activities due to the pandemic.

During the ceremony the Lauda Sion choir of Ghasri, a choir made up of Ghasri residents, delivered an enjoyable performance.

The trophy presented to Dr Cutajar was designed and sculptured by Joe Xuereb of Ghajnsielem.

In her acceptance speech Dr Cutajar said her experience

should be an example to all youths, especially those in Ghasri, and that with work, perseverance and integrity everything can be achieved. Youths should "dream and reach up to the stars".

