

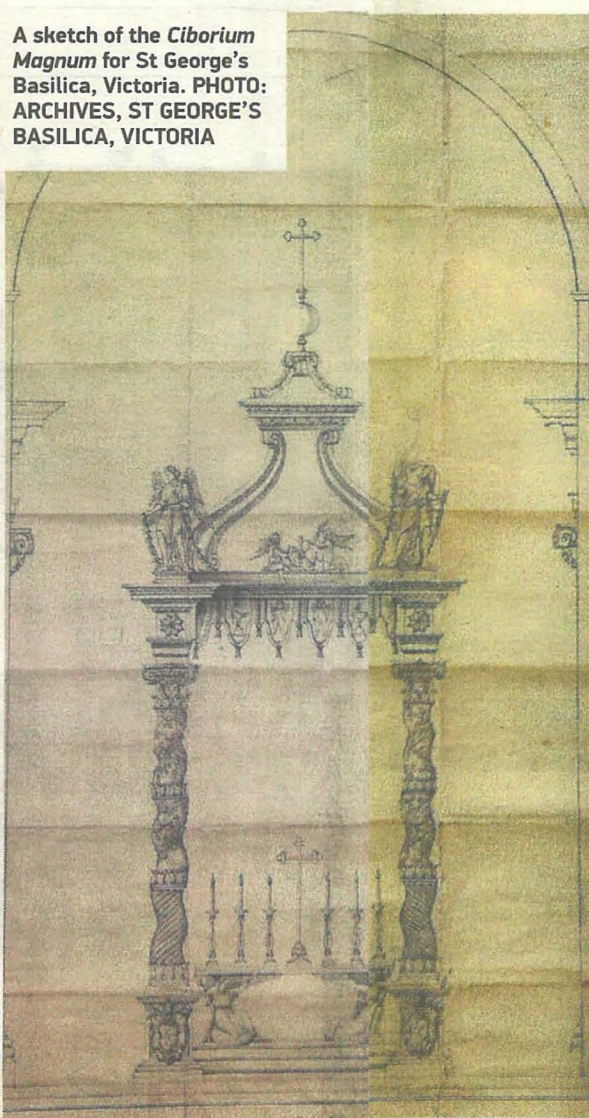
LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY

The bronze portrait bust of Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri at the Cathedral church, Victoria. PHOTO: DARREN VELLA



The marble portrait bust of Don Giuseppe Hili at Fontana parish church.

A sketch of the Ciborium Magnum for St George's Basilica, Victoria. PHOTO: ARCHIVES, ST GEORGE'S BASILICA, VICTORIA



The bronze bas-relief depicting the proclamation of the Dogma of the Assumption, at Mosta Basilica. PHOTO: MARK MICALLEF PERCONTE

Carlo Pisi – a gifted Italian sculptor in 20th century Malta

FABIAN MANGION



A proper study of the artistic development in the Maltese islands during the 20th century cannot omit the remarkable involvement of Italian artists. The local Church pioneered their activity with its premises, and it was due to its generous auspices that fine works of art were unveiled.

Carlo Pisi, born in Poviglio, in Reggio Emilia, in the lower Padana region, to a peasant family on October 28, 1897, and who spent his childhood in Brescello, was one among these fortunate artists who were entrusted with various commissions.

Pisi's artistic talent was recognised when he was a five-year-old child, when the town doctor, who had been treating his seriously ill father, saw the boy's small artworks modelled in clay and placed in the sun to dry, and strongly recommended that his education is not neglected. His parents, Giacomo and Marcella Mordonini, followed the advice, and when Carlo turned nine, they sent him to the sculptor Giuseppe Leone (1917-2016) in Parma, to learn the secrets of marble and the techniques of shaping it.

Unfortunately, his family's precarious economic circumstances did not allow him to pursue his artistic studies by enrolling at the Istituto d'Arte Paolo Toschi in Parma. Instead, with his first savings, the young man

bought some sculpting tools and art books to study on his own. In his little free time he would frequent the city's Biblioteca Palatina, where he became a self-taught, deeply cultured man by assiduously studying and assimilating the great classics of the past.

The Pietà (1914) in Cogozzo, Mantova, was his first important work; he was only 18 years old.

In World War I he was obliged to do military service. Its strict discipline was particularly stifling for the artist.

Little is known about his early artistic production which includes the execution of three monuments to the fallen of the Great War in the Reggio Emilia region, and other monuments in the areas around Parma, Mantua and Cremona. In the cemetery of Brescello there is a highly regarded chapel designed entirely by him.

After these first works, commissions multiplied, but, due both to his inability to manage his own financial interests and as a result of the 1930-31 economic crisis, Pisi was forced to settle down in Rome with his wife Giuseppina and two daughters Gigliola and Vincenza.

He set up his studio in Viale delle Medaglie d'Oro, in the area known as Monte Mario. His first years were particularly hard, also because he almost always refused to get paid or asked for paltry compensation. He managed to overcome these hardships also thanks to his wife's support. Even in his old age Pisi used to say that it was to his beloved "Pina" that he owed the great accomplishment of his position as an established sculptor.



Carlo Pisi (1897-1979). PHOTO: ARCHIVES, ST GEORGE'S BASILICA, VICTORIA

In Rome he worked under the guidance of painter Anselmo Bucci (1887-1955) and was an assistant to Angelo Zanelli (1879-1924) who, at the time, was engaged in the sculptures of the Altare della Patria in Piazza Venezia.

Pisi worked mainly in marble, bronze and occasionally in stucco. His oeuvre is stamped with humanity, always remaining true to an academic ethos with evident classical overtones. For marble sculptures, he would first create full-scale models, or in the size the client required, in plaster. After this stage, he would refine them further and then send them to Carrara where they would be transposed into marble. This explains the rigorous precision inherent in his works.

The numerous bas-reliefs in which the sculptor makes the figures

emerge completely from the background are also interesting. In many of them the artist is depicted in profile, following the ancient fashion of the sculptor who would include himself in the work without actually signing it.

Perhaps his most applauded works are the life-size statues of Pope John XXIII (1969) for Sotto il Monte, the pope's native town, and that representing Padre Pio (1975), commissioned by Fra Daniele da Pietralcina, founder of the Casa del Fanciullo di Padre Pio in Palermo.

His fame crossed national borders and he had various commissions from abroad. In fact, his works are found in different parts of the world, which include the US, the Philippines, India, Malta and Palestine.

Pisi's meeting with Paolo Pace (1917-93), a Gozitan who had gone to study in Rome in the 1930s, turned out to be very important. Pace, who eventually married Pisi's elder daughter Gigliola, was a cousin of Gozo bishop Mgr Giuseppe Pace, who commissioned the sculptor to carry out works for various Gozitan churches.

Thanks to this bond, Pace became Pisi's agent and intermediary in the Maltese islands, and in fact, immediately after the end of the Second World War, the artist was commissioned to sculpt the Monument to the Fallen placed in Victoria, Gozo. The monument consists of a statue of a resolute-looking Christ raised on a high plinth decorated by four bronze low-reliefs showing a pilot, two soldiers, a mourning family group and a sailor respectively, to commemorate the heroic participants of the war.

Completed in 1947, the work was inaugurated on May 7, 1954, by Queen Elizabeth II. It is undoubtedly one of Pisi's memorable creations.

On April 3, 1949, Bishop Pace blessed a new marble cycle of the Via Crucis in the parish church of St George in Victoria. Here, Pisi portrayed himself as Simon of Cyrene – the only person who relieved the physical burden of Christ – in Station V.

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The finesse of Pisi in his marble works is best manifested in the statue of St Anne with the young Virgin in the square in front of the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary in Gharb. This sculptural group is one of a set of four which also includes St Joseph with the infant Jesus, St Joachim and King David. These were commissioned in 1955 by the Victoria-born merchant Michelangelo Galea.

In the 1950s Pisi was engaged to work on the production of the baptismal fonts of the Lija parish church (1954) and St George's parish church,

Victoria (1957). Belonging to this same period of time and found also at St George's are the two marble angels holding the holy water stoup, nobly conceived, and bearing an appealing poetic beauty in their face.

Mosta Basilica possesses the four bronze relief panels and the eight statues of biblical figures that adorn the predella of the titular statue of the Assumption, sculpted by the artist in 1957.

A work that kept the artist busy for a number of years was the replica, on a smaller scale, of Bernini's Ciborium Magnum at the Vatican. In 1958, to coincide with the elevation to the status of a Minor Basilica of the parish church of St George in Victoria, Gozo, Paolo Pace was asked to set the ball rolling for the project with which Pisi was entrusted. The ciborium, cast in bronze at the firm Mariani e Belfiore foundry of Pietrasanta, was completed in 1967.

As part of this project, Pisi was also commissioned to produce the new high altar for the church (1960). It is made up of four kneeling angels carrying the altar table on their wings. Through this polished and symmetrical marble work, the sculptor managed to create an artistic piece that combines devotional aspects with realistic imagery. His love for portraiture resurfaces again in the inclusion of his daughter Gigliola's face as one of the angels' own.

In the early 1960s, again for St George's Basilica, Pisi produced the models for four angels in different poses carrying scrolls, which were then reproduced in plaster to decorate the pendentives of six side chapels.

In 1964, Bishop Pace inaugurated the white marble statue, executed by Pisi, of the Immaculate Conception raised on a high plinth in Qala Parish Square. The large bronze bas-relief on the façade of the Don Bosco Oratory in Victoria also belongs to this period, and features Don Paolo Micallef's portrait and his ministry with the Oratory youths.

Pisi also produced a number of portrait monuments. The marble bust of Fr Giuseppe Hili, first parish priest of Fontana, dating from the late 1940s,



The marble sculpture of St Anne with the young Virgin at Ta' Pinu Sanctuary Square, Gharb.



The bronze War Memorial at Independence Square, Victoria.

is found at the Fontana parish church. Other monuments include those of Mgr Giorgio Agius (1955) at St George's Basilica, Victoria, Bishop Giuseppe Pace (1962) and Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri (1973), both at the Gozo Cathedral, and Archbishop Michael Gonzi (1960) at the Catholic Institute, Floriana. His works show an admirable attention to the human form, presented in idealised and often stylised poses.

Despite his discreet way of life, away from any form of spotlight, and his refusal to organise an exhibition during his lifetime, he was made a knight of the Holy Sepulchre, an honour bestowed on the grounds of artistic merit. In 1970, the Unione della Legion d'Oro (Comitato Italiano delle O.N.G.) within the United Nations awarded him the prize Operosità nell'Arte (industriousness in art).

Carlo Pisi passed away in Rome on December 6, 1979 – 40 years ago – in the quiet and very humble environment in which he always worked.

The sculptor's creation of works for Malta, which began in the 1940s, continued until the late 1970s when the artist was at the conclusion of his long career. Even today, 40 years after his demise, his versatility in terms of subject matter and techniques of execution can still be admired in all its original splendor in the churches and public spaces that benefitted from his talent.

Acknowledgements

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