

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT LITERATURE



A painted gecko incorporated into the design of the Gozo Cathedral cupola.



The cupola design by Fr Andrea Pozzo.

A masterpiece of Trompe l'oeil

JOE ZAMMIT CIANTAR

Designed by renowned Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafà and built between 1697 and 1711, the Gozo Archdiocese Cathedral, high up in the centre of Malta's sister island in the middle of the Cittadella, flaunts a false cupola – a *trompe l'oeil* – which is one of the finest and most deceiving among similar architectural painted domes in Europe.

The false domes of the Gozo Cathedral and other churches

Joe Zammit Ciantar

Cover of *The False Domes of the Gozo Cathedral and Other Churches* by Joe Zammit Ciantar.

“One of the finest and most deceiving among similar architectural painted domes in Europe”

There it is, on the flat round drum, in the centre of the Latin cross, with some pots with flowers (which never wither) placed above the columns' capitals, a gecko in the middle of a pane (which never moves), and the lower ends of curtains hanging in the foreground (which never sway).

It is an enchanting painting that engulfs the visitor who would hardly bother about either of the flowers, gecko or decorative curtains.

From the days of my youth, I have been fascinated by this painted dome. I have written and published several articles

about it and, most recently, a book as well: *The False Domes of the Gozo Cathedral and Other Churches*. Besides my research on the Gozo painting – the only one in the Maltese islands – I have researched books and travelled to see similar painted domes in Rome, Arezzo, L'Aquila, Montepulciano, Modena, and even in the Jesuits' church in Vienna.

In this profusely-illustrated publication, with an introduction by Laurence Grech – former editor of *The Sunday Times of Malta* – I have supplied a short historical background regarding the painting by Antonino Manuele from Messina, discussing the presence of a gecko in one of the glass panes of a large window in the foreground centre, while furnishing a detailed description of the architectural features as

designed and originally painted by Fr Andrea Pozzo S.J. (1642-1709) in an identical painted dome in the St Ignatius majestic church in Rome, in 1695. His studies in perspective were spread by his highly-successful two-volume treatise, *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum* (1693 and 1700).

Gozitan scholar and historian Gian Pietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis was a canon of the Matrice at the time of the execution of the painting. He was, moreover, an eyewitness when the painting, in two extremely large semi-spheres, was raised and fixed in place on March 24 1739.

He wrote about it in his unpublished history of Gozo: *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno, Sacro e Profano*.

Together with this extensive information, I have also

Fr Andrea Pozzo S.J. (1642-1709)

included photos that document moments in the restoration process at Pre-ARTi in Mosta, and the eventual return to its place in Gozo last year.

The second part of the book reflects on my endeavours to learn more about similar painted domes – three executed by Pozzo himself (Rome, Arezzo and L'Aquila) – and my visits and correspondence with the respective authorities of the different churches and cathedrals 'adorned' with similar *trompe l'oeils*. Colourful photos of the painted domes have been reproduced in the book, together with information about these domes and the façades of the respective churches where they are found.

The list of people acknowledged in the research is evidence that no stone was left unturned in the process of producing a book intended to build a name for the Gozo cathedral dome painting. The extensive bibliography adds to the standing of this study – the first of its kind about the unique, marvellous *trompe l'oeil* we Maltese should be proud of; it is surely an attraction of universal acclaim.

The False Domes of the Gozo Cathedral and Other Churches (Malta 2019) by Joe Zammit Ciantar is available from Book Distributors Ltd, all bookshops in Malta and Gozo, and from the Gozo Cathedral Bookshop, at the Cittadella.

