



Fig. 1
Francesco Zahra (1710–1773),
Virgin of Pilar appearing to St James
(detail), 1744, oil on canvas,
249 x 184cm.
(St Peter's Monastery, Mdina /
Photo: Daniel Cilia)

Francesco Zahra's *Madonna del Pilar* at St Peter's Monastery in Mdina

Petra Caruana Dingli highlights the role of women as patrons of the arts

Women and religious heritage

In early modern Malta, as elsewhere in Europe, women acted as patrons of artistic works in churches. They commissioned, sponsored or donated paintings, silverware, tapestries and other precious objects and decorations. The role of women in creating this religious and artistic heritage has not been widely studied.

Despite the strict enclosure, or *'clausura'*, imposed at female monasteries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cloistered nuns also engaged in art patronage. Monastery chapels were open to the public, and provided a space through which nuns could present the identity of their community to society outside the monastery. Some nuns also used this as an opportunity to shape their own personal identities and legacies, such as through promoting their distinct religious devotions.

A large painting by Francesco Zahra of the *Madonna del Pilar*, or *'della Colonna'*, appearing to St James hangs on a side wall of the chapel of the Benedictine monastery of St Peter in Mdina. It was completed in 1744 and was commissioned by a nun at the

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Fig. 2-3
 Francesco Zahra, *Virgin of Pilar appearing to St James*
 (detail), 1744, oil on canvas, 249 x 184cm;
The Risen Christ appearing to the Virgin of Pilar, 1745,
 oil on canvas.
 (St Peter's Monastery, Mdina / Photos: Daniel Cilia)

monastery, Angelica Menville, who had a special devotion to this Marian apparition, also known as 'Our Lady of the Pillar'.

The devotion in Spain

Sometime in the mid-eighteenth century a nun at this monastery, who was devoted to the Madonna del Pilar, wrote to Fra Francisco Antonio del Castillo y Jordán, of the Language of Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre within the Order of St John in Malta. This languge had built the Church of the Madonna del Pilar in Valletta.

Castillo was rector of Our Lady of Victory Church in Valletta for close to thirty years, from 1746 to 1774.¹ The nun



was seeking advice from him on how to organise celebrations and masses in honour of the Madonna del Pilar.

Castillo wrote back to her, apologising for his shaky Italian, as he was not accustomed to writing in that language. In his letter he addressed his recipient only as 'Madre', so it cannot be confirmed whether this was Angelica Menville or another nun. He described how the annual feast day of the Madonna del Pilar was celebrated in his hometown of Zaragoza in Spain on 12 October each year. He offered to obtain more information for her from his relatives at home in Zaragoza, and from a chaplain at the church dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar in that city. He described the church to the nun in some detail, by way of comparison also noting that it was larger than the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta.

A strong devotion to the Madonna del Pilar had long existed on the Iberian peninsula, and especially in Zaragoza. The story goes that Our Lady appeared to St James Major on the bank of the river there, with a pillar or column. Accompanied by celestial music, she requested that a chapel be built upon that spot in her honour.

The devotion in Malta

A devotion to the Madonna del Pilar also flourished in Malta, especially among Spanish and Portuguese knights. In the early 1660s, the acclaimed Calabrian artist Mattia Preti (1613–1699) was commissioned by the knights of the Language of Castille and Portugal to decorate their chapel dedicated to St James within the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta. There, Preti painted a beautiful lunette on a side wall of the chapel depicting the Madonna del Pilar appearing to St James.

In the mid-1660s Preti also painted another image of the Madonna del Pilar, for a chapel within the Carmelite Church in Valletta. The coat of arms of a Spanish knight features on this painting.² Years earlier, in 1627, Fra Nicolas



Fig. 4-5
Seating plan for the celebrations held at the chapel of St Peter's Monastery on 14 November 1744. (Mdina Cathedral Museum, ACM, Misc 63, Vol. 1, ff. 112v-113).

Cotoner had chosen that same chapel dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar for his investiture as a Knight of the Order of St John. In the rank of grand master over forty years later, Cotoner (r.1663–1680) laid the foundation stone of the new church dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar, in Strada San Michele (today West Street) in Valletta. As noted above, this was built by the Knights of the Langue of Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre, which was also Cotoner's langue. Its titular painting is by the Maltese artist Stefano Erardi (1630–1716). Following the earthquake of 1693, the church was reconstructed by Italian architect Romano Carapecchia in around 1718.

In the early eighteenth century, Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (r.1722–1736) built a chapel dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar at San Anton Palace, the country residence of the grand masters in Attard.

Besides the Knights, the Madonna del Pilar also had a devoted following among the Maltese population, dating back to at least the late sixteenth century. In his will of 1585, Salvatore Testaferrata requested that his heirs complete the construction of a small chapel which he was in the process of building on his land in the outskirts of the village of Żabbar, dedicated to 'nostra donna del nive sive del piliero' (our lady of the snow or of the pillar). He also asked them to install a painting of this Madonna in the chapel. Pastoral visits during the seventeenth century confirm that the chapel was known as 'del piliero', but it also celebrated the annual feast of the Madonna tas-Silġ (of the snow).³

In 1647, an altarpiece dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar was installed at the parish church of the village of Kirkop.

The titular painting of the Madonna del Pilar in the Church of St James in the village of Żurrieq dates to the early 1730s, where an endowment for the Pilar feast was provided in 1735 by benefactor Giovanni Abela. This is thought to be one of the earliest known larger pictures by Maltese artist Francesco Zahra (1710–1773).⁴

Commissioning the painting

In his comprehensive study of Francesco Zahra, Keith Sciberras describes him as Malta's most important painter of the mid-eighteenth century whose, 'style wonderfully captured the spirit of the late Baroque. He was extremely prolific and could handle the brush with a fascinating ease, thus furnishing Maltese churches with hundreds of paintings, large and small.'⁵

Suor Angelica Menville at St Peter's Monastery had first commissioned a painting of the Madonna del Pilar by an

artist from Naples, whose name has not been identified. But when this work arrived she was disappointed with it, and sent it back. She then turned to Zahra and commissioned him to create another painting of the Madonna del Pilar.⁶ As noted above, Zahra had already painted a version of this Marian apparition for a church in Żurrieq.

Zahra's work was well received by Suor Angelica, and she was eager to inaugurate it. After some debate with the bishop's office to identify a suitable date for the occasion within the religious calendar of the monastery, Saturday, 14 November 1744 was agreed upon.

Suor Angelica was the daughter of the successful silversmith Vincenzo Menville of Valletta, and his wife Angelica née Tholossenti. Menville gained his warrant in 1715 and was appointed Consul for Goldsmiths in 1733.⁷ Her secular name was Antonia, and when she professed as a nun on 17 June 1725, aged seventeen, she chose her own mother's name Angelica as her religious name. She was born in around 1708 and her mother may have died in childbirth, or soon afterwards, as in 1710 her widowed father Vincenzo remarried.

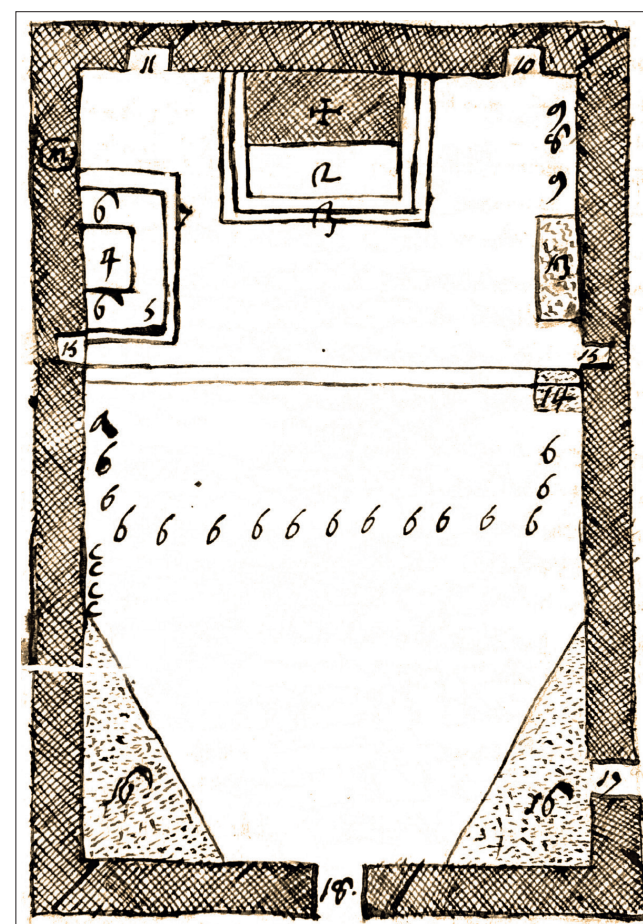
In three separate periods between the years 1750–1751, 1756–1761 and 1767–1771, Angelica was abbess of the Monastery of St Peter. But when she commissioned the painting from Francesco Zahra in 1744, she was not yet an abbess. She was then thirty-five years old and had been at the monastery for around nineteen years.

We can but wonder what prompted her special devotion. Would she perhaps have seen the paintings of the Madonna del Pilar by Mattia Preti or Stefano Erardi when she lived in Valletta as a young girl, before she joined the monastery in Mdina? Sciberras also notes that a 'diluted interest in Preti is manifest' in Francesco Zahra's painting of this theme in the monastery chapel.⁸

The celebrations

On the appointed day of 14 November 1744, the walls and ceiling of the monastery chapel were covered with damask hangings. Sixty candles in silver candlesticks adorned the altar, and silver vases were filled with flowers. The chapel's titular painting by Mattia Preti, depicting St Peter, St Benedict and St Scholastica, was taken down from its position behind the altar. Instead, Zahra's painting of the Madonna del Pilar was given prime position for the celebrations, displayed under crimson damask draped in the shape of a small canopy.

As the titular painting of the chapel had been removed for the occasion, leaving the altar without an image of St Peter



1. Altare
2. Bravello
3. Scalinata
4. Sedia di Monsig Vex^o
5. luogo de Presb. Vex^o
6. luoghi delli due Diaconi Vex^o
7. Penult. di Monsig Vex^o
8. Sedia del Celebrante
9. luogo de' Arz. sacre Ministeri del Celebrante
10. Fenestella del Communio.
11. Fenestella del Concell^o
12. Porta
13. Credenza
14. Pulsito
15. Porte dei Confessionali
16. Polchi dei Musici e Suoradori
17. Porta della Sagrestia
18. Porta della Chiesa
19. luogo del Cantore
20. Sedia de S^{ta} Canonici
21. un Sedia delli Sig^{ri} Capitano e Diaconi



Fig. 6-7
The 2018 feast of St Benedict in the chapel at St Peter's Monastery;
The music gallery in the chapel at St Peter's Monastery.

or St Benedict, two smaller paintings of these saints were placed beside the Zahra painting. As they were not identical in size and could not be hung up symmetrically, the image of St Peter was displayed somewhere beneath the painting of the Madonna del Pilar, and St Benedict was placed on the damask canopy above it.

While the nuns could not access the public area of their chapel, they would have been able to view how the new painting was displayed through the wooden grates enclosing their upper choir area, above the main door and facing the altar.

The celebrations were attended by the Bishop of Malta, Fra Paul Alpheran de Bussan, and careful attention was paid to the seating order within the chapel.

Benigno Zerafa and the music stage

On either side of the main door in the back corners of the chapel underneath the upper choir, two raised stages covered in crimson damask were set up for the musicians. The festivities began with vespers, sung in the chapel on 13 November, featuring eight voices accompanied by instruments, and with a new musical composition by the priest-composer Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804), recently appointed *maestro di capella* of Mdina Cathedral. Zerafa is described by Frederick Aquilina as 'the leading Maltese composer of sacred music of the mid-eighteenth century'. He notes that this may have been the first of Zerafa's many commitments at the chapel of St Peter's Monastery, which continued over several years.⁹

The following day, on 14 November, the celebrations continued. Suor Angelica's uncle, the priest Don Giovan. Batta Tholossenti, read out a panegyric dedicated to the Madonna del Pilar. The quality of the music was praised ('*la musica fu riguardevole per la sua composizione*').

The bishop and his entourage returned for the second vespers later that day. But after the reading of the first Psalm,

suddenly one of the music stages set up at the back of the church near the sacristy door, collapsed. This created a huge commotion ('*un fracasso grande*'). The musicians fell down to the floor, apart from two who remained hanging above, clinging on with their hands.

It was immediately held to be a miracle with the intervention of Our Lady that, despite there having been several people underneath the stage when it fell, nobody was hurt and only a few musical instruments were broken. Due to the confusion and noise, it was impossible to continue the ceremony, and it was brought to a close.

Following this episode, in 1748 a safer and permanent wooden balcony or gallery for musicians was constructed above the main door of the chapel, beneath the upper choir, which was paid for by the nuns out of their own funds.¹⁰ This music gallery still exists in the chapel today.

A companion painting

In 1745 a companion painting was painted by Francesco Zahra for the monastery chapel.¹¹ It depicts the Risen Christ appearing to the Madonna del Pilar on earth, instructing her to go to the apostle James in Spain and bid him to return to Jerusalem, where he would become the first martyr among the apostles.

This companion painting was also commissioned by Angelica Menville, and features the same red column with a white cross and the small statue of the Virgin and Child, as in the first painting.

As described by Peter Serracino Inglott in his analysis of these two works, in the vase of white lilies on the table 'Zahra had in the Baroque tradition managed to fashion a fine emblem of fortitude-in-fragility', while the 'tremendous symbol of the pillar appeared as the sign of the divine strength that alone could uphold a feeble and fragile humanity'.¹²

Continuation

Francesco Zahra maintained connections with the monastery, and was engaged to carry out further works at its chapel in the 1750s. On 6 June 1756 his daughter Prassede Zahra entered the monastery as a pupil or '*educanda*'.¹³ She was then only ten years old, however, she left four years later on 6 April 1760, and did not continue into a novitiate. She is recorded as being at the monastery again for a short period in November 1761. Suor Angelica was abbess for the second time from 1756 to April 1761.¹⁴

In 1755 another nun at the monastery, Maria Persia Preziosi,¹⁵ set up a '*pio legato*' (pious legacy) of 12 *scudi* per year derived from 400 *scudi* of invested capital, for the continual lighting, throughout the day and night, of the oil lamp in front of Zahra's painting of the Madonna del Pilar on the left wall of the monastery chapel.¹⁶

In August 1761, Salvatore Cassar Desayn bequeathed two *scudi* per year derived from property in Mdina which he had inherited from his mother Margarita, to be used by the monastery to celebrate the feast day of the Madonna del Pilar each year.¹⁷ This indicates a continuation of the devotion to the Madonna del Pilar by the nuns at Mdina during the eighteenth century.

Invisible yet visible

The actions, thoughts and desires of women in early modern Malta are relatively elusive and hard to uncover, and are often almost invisible. Unlike men, the achievements of women barely feature in written records, and over time were swiftly obscured. Yet their patronage and commissions of the arts survive as physical manifestations of their participation in society. Even those women who actively chose to live invisible lives as nuns enclosed behind the thick walls of monasteries, still made themselves partly visible to the community through

the artistic and decorative works which they chose to display in their public chapels.¹⁸

The two paintings by Francesco Zahra of the Madonna del Pilar at St Peter's Monastery in Mdina, commissioned by Angelica Menville, offer one such example. Through an enduring personal legacy, an 'invisible' woman in eighteenth-century Malta becomes visible.

Notes

- 1 Achille Ferres, *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866), 189.
- 2 See Keith Sciberras, *Mattia Preti: The Triumphant Manner* (Valletta, Malta: Midsea Books, 2012), 180.
- 3 Notary Andrea Albano, R12/3, 13 June 1585, ff. 519v-529v. Thanks are due to Victor Bonnici for clarifying the Latin text and other aspects of the content of this deed. See also Michael Buhagiar, 'Il-Kappella tal-Madonna tas-Silġ maghrufa b'Tal-Plier f'Haż-Zabbar', *L-Orizzont*, 4 August 2014. I am grateful to Michael Buhagiar for this reference.
- 4 Keith Sciberras, *Francesco Zahra: His Life and Art in Mid-18th-Century Malta* (Valletta, Malta: Midsea Books, 2010), 44.
- 5 Sciberras (2010), vii.
- 6 Mdina Cathedral Museum. Archivum Cathedralis Melitensis, *Miscellanea* 63, Vol. 1, ff. 106-113.
- 7 Alaine Apap Bologna, *The Silver of Malta* (Valletta, Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1995), 45.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 9 Frederick Aquilina, *Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804) and the Neapolitan Galant Style* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2016), 18. See also Petra Caruana Dingli, 'Letters to a Nun: Monastic Music in Early Modern Malta', in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 71.3 (2020), 562-578; 567-568.
- 10 National Library of Malta, Ms 721, f. 104v.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Peter Serracino Inglott, *Adeodata Pisani: A Mystic Nun in Mdina*, Petra Caruana Dingli (ed.) (Mdina, Malta: St Peter's Monastery, 2018), 55.
- 13 [M]onasterio di [S]an [P]ietro, Sezione Moniali (Sez. Mon.), F, *Registro delle moniali 1691–1812*, f. 9.
- 14 Angelica Menville died on 20 May 1780, aged around seventy-two.
- 15 Maria Persia Preziosi (c.1706–3 May 1759) was the daughter of Count Giuseppe Preziosi and his wife Maria née Olivier. She professed at St Peter's Monastery on 27 October 1723.
- 16 MSP, Sez. Amm. J31, Misc., unpaginated.
- 17 MSP, Sez. Mon., G12, Misc., 42. See also the Acts of Notary Vittorio Gristi, 8 August 1761.
- 18 See also Marilyn Dunn, 'Invisibilia per visibilia: Roman Nuns, Art Patronage, and the Construction of Identity', in Katherine A. McIver (ed.), *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: Making the Invisible Visible through Art and Patronage* (London-New York: Ashgate, 2012), 181-206.