

Book Review:

The *trompe l'œil* dome of the Gozo Cathedral

Joseph Bezzina
Malta (2020); 112 pages

REVIEWED BY GIOVANNI BONELLO

It is nothing short of amazing that up to a year ago we knew virtually nothing about one of Gozo's most iconic showpieces, and now there is enough to fill a whole book dedicated almost exclusively to it. The editor and principal author, Mgr Joseph Bezzina, roped in Giuseppe Ingaglio and Pierre Bugeja to document various aspects of a unique artefact, together with Daniel Cilia and JJP Zammit (Joseph) for the lavish photography that illuminates the text.

The ambitious new Gozo Cathedral, built between 1697 and 1711 to the designs of Lorenzo Cafa, had everything in place, except for a dome. One had been planned but was never built. Although historians have suggested a number of reasons for this default, among others the overrun of costs, and military considerations, personally I find none of these explanations wholly convincing. The fact remains that for years the edifice remained an architectural jewel and an important cult venue, beheaded of what should have been its summation.

A fallback to a real masonry dome started being mooted. *Trompe l'œil* (deception of the eye), two dimensional treacheries to replace real three-dimensional domes, were becoming fashionable in Europe, promoted by the genius of the Jesuit painter and architect Andrea Pozzo. He worked out the complex geometrical rules to achieve the perfect trickery, and popularized his cunning formulas in books and in magnificent real-life exemplars, like the false dome of the church of St Ignatius in Rome started in 1685, and instantly famous. This genre took the name of *quadratura*.

Before the Gozo exploit, Malta had already experienced the art of a renowned *quadraturista*, Nicolò Nasoni, who had worked successfully on major projects in the Palace, and in the Order's Chancellery. The Gozo Cathedral Chapter took

the hint. In 1738 they engaged Antonino Emanuele from Catania called *Pipi* to fill in the gaping void of the missing dome. The result is the breath-taking achievement everyone admires today.

Joseph Bezzina can rightly claim the credit to have fleshed out in not insignificant detail, the first biographical profile of this artist who left his most notable work in Gozo. Though sometimes hinted at in footnotes, we knew virtually nothing of his life and his work before Mgr Bezzina undertook a thorough trawl through the sources. One of the curious coincidences that emerged is that Emanuele shared the same DNA as Grand Master Antonio Manuel de Vilhena, just deceased when he painted for Gozo.

During his stay in the Maltese islands, various commissions kept Emanuele busy. He came to Malta to decorate the brand new Manoel Theatre. Sadly, with the early British renovations, all Emanuele's decorations seem to have been destroyed. He also painted the first scenes for the new theatre productions. Theatre-scene painting is a subject that scholars have only now started showing an interest in for the first time, and Emanuele must count as the absolute pioneer.

The authors give the clearest accounts of the older and more recent vicissitudes of Gozo's memorable tour de force. The various mishaps that befell it through the ages, its being smothered in corrosive lime as a useless treatment - a consequence of the lethal 1814 plague, the catastrophic felling of a campanile by lightning, the first attempts at its restoration and the recent bold and thorough scientific conservation treatments, documented by Pierre Bugeja.

Professor Ingaglio has a fascinating chapter in Italian on the false cupola, and how it fits in the scene of Malta's forays into *quadratura*. Although



Joseph Bezzina

Photography

Daniel Cilia & JJP Zammit

This book on Malta's most spectacular perspective painting is divided into six parts. PART ONE is a timeline summarising all that follows. PART TWO is a biography of the hitherto largely unknown painter of the *trompe l'œil* dome, followed in PART THREE by its history from its conception to its restoration and inauguration in 2019. PART FOUR outlines the technicalities of perspective paintings with reference to the dome and contemporary quadraturism in the Maltese archipelago. PART FIVE summarises the process of its handling and restoration; and PART SIX describes for comparison eight other famous *trompe l'œil* domes of Europe.



MINISTRY FOR GOZO

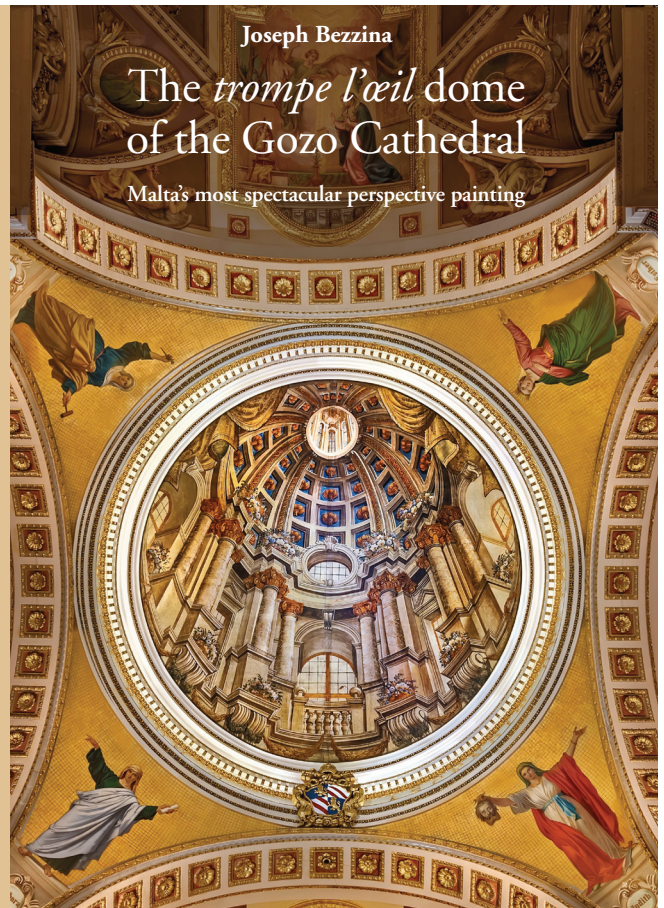


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Joseph Bezzina • The *trompe l'œil* dome of the Gozo Cathedral



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The *trompe l'œil* dome of the Gozo Cathedral

Malta's most spectacular perspective painting

Emanuele virtually copied his concept from Pozzo's perfect prototype engravings, he did put in some of his own craft – not always with the happiest of results. His vanishing points, the soul of *di sotto in su* geometrical painting, are uncertain when not outright wrong. Antonino covered up his failings with drapery at the top end of the roundel, and with vases of decorative flowers. These peccadillos notwithstanding, overall the painter from Catania left the Maltese islands not only his masterpiece, but unquestionable evidence of artistic bravura.

The author has a chapter in which he illustrates eight other *trompe l'œil* cupolas in Europe, mostly Italian, but also German and Austrian. I must say that apart from the Pozzo original prototype, Gozo

stands the comparison quite comfortably on a par with the best.

Among the pluses of this book I count the input of the two Gozo photographers – Daniel Cilia, the more creative one, Joseph Zammit the one who documented the record of events connected with the false dome. Only one minus: the lack of an index. The first thing I look for. A didactic chronicle without one loses brownie points.

This work witnesses a strange paradox. Gozo boasts of a plethora of real cupolas, most ranging from the beautiful to the very stunning. And yet it is not the real ones that hit the popular imagination, but the only false one. Do we draw any ethical conclusion from this?