

ST JOHN'S CO-CATHEDRAL, VALLETTA

by R.E. Martin

One of the first religious buildings erected in Valletta was the Conventual Church of the Order of St. John now known as St. John's Co-Cathedral. It was built between 1573 and 1577 to the designs of the Maltese architect Girolamo Cassar (1520-1586) whose portrait is shown on the 1c3 stamp of the Prominent Maltese People set issued on 12th January 1974 (SG. 511). He is also shown on 2/6 value of IV Centenary of the Foundation of Valletta set (28th March 1966 - SG 370) examining plans of the Cathedral of which an exterior view is shown. The cathedral was consecrated in 1578. It was built at the expense of Grand Master L'Eveque de la Cassiere.

Views of the simple and austere front exterior of the Cathedral are the subject of the king George VI 3d definitive stamps (SG223, 223a, 240 and 240a) as well as the 1954 Royal Visit commemorative stamp (SG 262). The spires shown on the top of the towers had to be removed on account of war damage sustained in the Second World War.

The breath-taking richly decorated interior, largely designed by Mattia Preti (known as "Il Calabrese" 1613-1699), is also of immense interest on account of its historical associations. A view of the interior appears on 5d denomination of the XIII Art Exhibition of the Council of Europe issued 21st March 1970 (SG 432). Preti designed many of the gilded decorations on the interior walls including those of the chapels as well as painting the ceiling which is one of the largest and most significant works of the Italian "Seicento." Other additions were made to the Cathedral at later dates. The floor inside, inlaid with coloured marbles, is composed of about four hundred tombstones bearing the names and escutcheons of

many illustrious families from various European countries.

The immense central nave of the Cathedral is flanked by the chapels of the various "langues" (i.e. Ethnic divisions) of the Order and the monuments to the various Grand-masters in the chapels are truly works of art.

In the oratory, there are lunettes by the French artist Antoine Favray (1706-1798) and on the walls, the "Martyrdom of St. Catherine" by Franciso Potenzano (from Palermo and who died in 1599). It may be of interest that a statue of St. Catherine by Melchiorre Gafa, (which may be seen in the Magnanapoli, Rome), is shown on 2d value of the set issued 1st August 1967 commemorating the III Centenary of his death (SG 385). Behind the altar is one of the most admired masterpiece of Michelangelo da Garavaggio (died 1609) - the "Beheading of St. John;" the subject of 1d value XIII Art Exhibition 1970 (SG 430). There are other paintings including those on the ceiling by Preti as well as a marble head by Pierre Puget (from Chateau Follet, France 1622 - 1692) of St. John, the patron saint of the Order.

The chapels of the various langues are:-

CASTILE and PORTUGAL which contains monuments to Grand Masters Manoel de Vilhena of Massimiliano Soldanis Banzia (from Florence) and to Emmanuel Pinto by Vincenzo Pacetti.

ARAGON - the altarpiece of St. George was painted in Naples by Preti and was sent to Malta as a specimen of his work before took up residence there. There are monuments to Grand Masters Nicholas Cottoner and Ramon Perellos. (Queen Elizabeth 1956 definitive set, 2/6 and 5/- values, SG

279 and 280). The former was probably by Domenico Guidi (1625-1701) and the latter by Guiseppe Mazzuoli (from Siena, 1644 - 1725).

AUVERGNE with paintings by Guiseppe d'Arena (born Rome c 1630). There is an entrance from this chapel to the Presbytery where there is a finely carved statue showing Christ and St. John the Baptist (Q.E. 1956 set £1 value, SG 282) by Guiseppe Mazzuoli. The choirstalls, lectern and pulpit are from the late 16th century; the silver sanctuary lamp is a fine example of Roman art of a century later.

PROVENCE (entered from a small door in the choirstalls) which is of little artistic merit. From this chapel a flight of steps leads to the crypt which contains tombs of Grand Masters of the Order. The ceiling of the crypt was painted by Niccolo Nasoni of Siena; the sarcophagus with the figure of L'Isle Adam is by Antonello Gagini (from Palermo 1478-1563), that of La Vallette is by an unknown sculptor (6d value Great Siege commemorative 7 Sept. 1962 - SG 309).

FRANCE. The altar piece is a fine painting by Preti, the two paintings by G.F. Rennie, the lunettes by Lucas Killian and the white marble monument to the Prince of Orange was sculptured by Jean-Jacques Pradier.

ITALY. Preti also painted the altarpiece; on the wall is the beautiful St. Jerome (8d value XIII Art Exhibition March 1970 - SG 434) by Caravaggio. The bust of Grand Master Carafa is by Alessandro Algardi from Bologna (1602 - 1654).

GERMANY. In this chapel there are paintings by the Maltese artist Stefano Erardi (c1630 - c1753).

There is no English chapel as, following the dissolution of the monasteries in England, King Henry VIII forbade any of his knights to join the Order of St. John.

As well as the chapels of the Order there is the Chapel to the Blessed Sacrament where there is the

“Madonna Damascena” by Andrea del Brescianino (born c1485). This Madonna was executed as an act of thanksgiving after the great siege, and was the subject for the 2d value of the 1962 commemorative set (SG 307). Behind the silver gates is the altar with the venerated “Madonna di Carafa.”

The Malta Post Office issued four sets of stamps (March 1977, January 1978, January 1979 and January 1980) depicting the 17th century Flemish tapestries which were specially commissioned for the Church of St. John by Ramon Perellos y Roccafull on the election as Grand Master in 1697. They were woven in Brussels by the firm of Jose de Vos. There are in all fifteen large panels, measuring nearly seven hundred square metres, woven in full colour, alternating fourteen smaller panels ‘en grisaille.’ Thirteen of the large tapestries were woven on cartoons made from the paintings by Reubens (1577 - 1640). Five of these show scenes from the life of Christ, six depict Allegories, the other two feature the “Annunciation” and the “Four Evangelists.” Another large tapestry, showing the “Last Supper” was woven on a cartoon made from a painting by Nicholas Poussin (1594 - 1665); the fourteen small panels and a portrait of the grand master were woven after a painting by Preti.

The bronze bust of Christ in the tympanum of the Cathedral is by Alessandro Algardi. Inside the main sacristy are paintings by Francesco Curia (from Naples 1538 - c1610), Preti, Antoine Favray (1706 - 1798), Perez d'Aleccio (c1547 - 1600), an altarpiece by Stefano Pieri (1542 - 1629) and “St. George” by Potenzano (from Palermo, died 1599).

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