

Books/Art

The iconography of St Paul in Malta

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JOHN AZZOPARDI (Ed.): *Salve Pater Paule: a Collection of Essays and an Exhibition Catalogue of Pauline Art, 2009, 210 pp.*

The Wignacourt Museum in Rabat has an important link to the cult of St Paul in Malta. It originally housed a college of chaplains of the Order of St John.

This college was set up by Grand Master Aloph de Wignacourt to manage the church and grotto of St Paul across the road, a popular destination for religious pilgrimages. A tunnel was dug underneath the road connecting the college to the grotto.

Monsignor John Azzopardi, the present curator of this intriguing museum, has held a longstanding interest in the history of the cult of St Paul in Malta and has published several works on the subject.

Big celebrations to commemorate anniversaries of St Paul's shipwreck were held in Malta in 1858 and 1960. The church throughout the world commemorated a Jubilee year in 2008-2009 in honour of St Paul.

On the occasion of this Pauline year, the Wignacourt Museum organised an exhibition focusing on Pauline art held in churches and ecclesiastical buildings in Malta.

In late medieval times, St Paul already held a place of importance on the island. When the Knights of St John were in Malta, St Paul was the principal patron saint of the Maltese, with well-established traditions and legends.

In section one of this volume, Azzopardi provides an informative

survey of Pauline iconography held in the 15 churches in Malta and Gozo which are specifically dedicated to St Paul.

Enthused by the unique collection of works featured in this exhibition, Peter Serracino Inglott asks whether it is possible to identify a "Maltese Paul who emerges from our local tradition of representing him in images."

Joseph Bezzina concentrates on the development of the cult of St Paul in Gozo, while Thomas Freller surveys descriptions in 17th century travelogues of the chapel dedicated to the shipwreck in St Paul's Bay. Robert Cassar studies the iconography of St Paul displayed on Maltese church bells.

The middle section of the book describes various paintings and sculptures with a Pauline theme that were recently restored, with contributions by Joanna Lace, Alain Blondy, Pierre Bugeja, Gemma Farrugia, Simon Mercieca and James Licari.

The final section is the exhibition catalogue, put together by Antonio Espinosa Rodriguez, John Spike, Roger de Gaetano and Mark Sagona. It includes paintings, drawings and sculptural works of uneven artistic merit, as the main focus is on the theme

"Some of the traditions surrounding Pauline legend in Malta are not referred to in the Acts"



Francesco Vincenzo Zahra (1710-73): St Paul swimming to Malta 1760. Archbishop's Curia Floriana.

of St Paul rather than on the level of craftsmanship or artistic accomplishment.

The exhibits range from rare 16th century icons, to 20th century works by artists such as Emvin Cremona and Willie Apap. The artists include both foreign and Maltese established masters like Mattia Preti, Antoine Favray, Stefano Erardi, Alessandro Algardi, Francesco Vincenzo Zahra and Giuseppe Cali. Some of the works are by unknown provincial artists of lesser ability.

Many of the exhibits depict St Paul in conventional poses, wearing typical red and green robes and holding a sword and a book. They focus on well-known scenes such as his conversion or his martyrdom in Rome. Unsurprisingly, several of the works also concentrate on scenes linked to the shipwreck, and a number of these are by Maltese artists.

An accomplished painting by Francesco Vincenzo Zahra depicts St Paul with a viper touching his fingers, and another shows St Paul preaching to the Maltese near the sea. A third remarkable scene by this artist imagines St Paul swimming in a rough sea trying to reach land, with his book held close to his chest in the water.

Giuseppe Cali paints him riding into battle against the Moors to defend the Maltese, and a striking 19th century work by Pietro Gagliardi shows St Paul above a birds-eye view of Valletta, reminiscent of 18th century cartography. Vincenzo Gonzi depicts St Paul over a stormy Maltese landscape with a large coastal watchtower.

A beautiful 18th century painting by Antoine Favray combines St Paul and St John, two saints with special significance for the Knights of St

John and the Maltese, while a rediscovered painting of St Paul from a private collection is linked to Mattia Preti's early years in Malta.

The catalogue also includes accomplished sculptures, such as the statue of St Paul in St Paul's grotto by Melchiorre Cafà with Ercole Ferrata, and the renowned gilt bronze roundel of the beheading by Alessandro Algardi.

Over the years, John Azzopardi's passion for the cult of St Paul in Malta has brought into being a collection of notable studies documenting and analysing his life, his shipwreck, and the deep and vital influence of the figure of St Paul on Christianity in Malta.

This catalogue complements the previous works on this subject written and edited by this author. It is a significant source document for anyone interested in following the development of Pauline art in Malta.

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