A Selective Catalogue of Paintings
at the Parish Church of Stella Maris and the Chapel of the
Virgin of Divine Graces,
Sliema
A Selective Catalogue of Paintings
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Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces,
Sliema

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree
of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History of Art presented to the
History of Art Department, Faculty of Arts,
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To my family
Preface

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse a selected number of works from the Parish Church of Stella Maris and the Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces, Sliema.

A brief introduction about the origins of Sliema and thus the need for a church is illustrated in the introduction. The history and architecture of these two entities are discussed in their historic and social contexts, focusing mainly on the style of architecture and its influences. Giuseppe Bonavia and Andrea Vassallo will be a main focal point as regards to architecture. Amongst the artists which emerged in connection with Stella Maris Parish Church and the Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces, were Mattia Preti and his bottega, Giuseppe Calleja, Raffaele Caruana, Filippo Fortunato Venuti, Pietro Gagliardi, Giuseppe Cali, Lazzaro Pisani, George Preca, Mario Caffaro-Rore and Raymond Pitre’.

The chronological analysis of the works executed by these artists illustrate the style of art, from the church’s origin to the 20th century and the impact of the presence of Italian artists in Malta in the 19th century.

It is hoped that this dissertation offers a brief insight on the outcomes of restoration. I followed a complete restoration process of some of the works at Stella Maris church which revealed information about the work that was previously unknown. Works that were being restored during the research of this dissertation were the titular painting, the choir apse by Giuseppe Cali, Madonna of the Rosary by Lazzaro Pisani and a bottega copy of Mattia Preti’s St. Ambrose. This dissertation does not give a step-by-step analysis of the restoration process but a constructive narration of how the restoration relates to the artistic history of the works.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters which are purposely in chronological order. Each chapter is introduced by a brief thorough process of what it contains and the importance of the selected works amongst the others. The documentation in the appendices sheds light on the historical aspects of these works.

The history of the Parish Church of Stella Maris is not well documented. Tas-Sliema: Il-Knisja u l-Paroċċa ta’ Stella Maris by Maurice Busiella is the only book which briefly and
incomprehensively compiles information on the parish church of Stella Maris. Nonetheless, the book was helpful to my dissertation. The parish book was of minor importance but had essential information as regards to chronology and patronage. Articles in relation to the church compiled in parish leaflets and booklets were of assistance. This dissertation offers the first in depth analysis of a selective catalogue of art at Stella Maris church and the chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces.

The benchmark of this thesis is to illustrate a selective catalogue of works within this parish church which exhibits a celebration of art in Malta from its origins to the 20th century.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of certain individuals. First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciative gratitude to my tutor Profs. Keith Sciberras, Head of the History of Art Department, for his guidance and constant ascendancy which encouraged me throughout the writing of this dissertation. I would also like to thank all my professors and lecturers within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta, who through their education, enabled me to mature in my methods of study and research. Special thanks go to Dr. Conrad Thake and Fr. Gino Gauci.

I would like to thank Parish Priest Fr. Joe Bartolo for his constant support, enthusiasm and patience throughout my successive visits to the Parish Church of Stella Maris, the Church Museum and the Chapel of Divine Graces. My sincere gratitude is extended to Fr. Soler who was of invaluable help and always willing to impart any knowledge he had with regards to the history of the church. Mr. John Bisazza and Mr. Tony Terribile were also very helpful in aiding me with the information I required and were extremely interested in the work I was conducting. My further thanks goes to ReCoop and Roderick Abela who were always informing me on the ongoing processes and provided me with vital information for my dissertation. It was definitely beneficial that most of the restorations which had to be done at Stella Maris took place whilst I was writing this dissertation.

I would furthermore acknowledge the service of the staff at the University of Malta library, National Malta Library in Valletta and the Mdina Cathedral Archives. Last but not least I would like to thank my parents, Noel and Elizabeth for their constant support and encouragement, my extended family with a special thanks to my aunt Charmaine and my friends.
Declaration of Authenticity

I, the undersigned declare that this dissertation is my original work and that all sources have been duly cited.

__________________
Lisa Pace
Contents

Preface ....................................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents .................................................................................................. viii
List of Plates .......................................................................................................... x
List of Appendices .................................................................................................. xii
List of Plans ........................................................................................................... xiii
Table of Figures .................................................................................................... xiv

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1
The History and Architecture of the Church of the Virgin of Divine Graces .......... 4
The History and Architecture of the Church of Stella Maris ............................... 6

Chapter I, Earliest Works of the Parish Church of Stella Maris and of the Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces ...................................................................................... 10
  1.1 Stefano Erardi, *La Madonna del Divino Amore* (copy by Penni) .................. 12
  1.2 Mattia Preti, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* .................................................. 15
  1.3 Mattia Preti, *Guardian Angel* ....................................................................... 19
  1.4 *Bottega* of Mattia Preti, *St. Ambrose* ......................................................... 22
  1.5 Giuseppe Calleja, *St. Francis of Paola* .......................................................... 25
  1.6 Raffaele Caruana, *Stella Maris Star of the Sea* .......................................... 28
  1.7 Unknown, *Virgin of Porto Salvo with Ss Dominic and Thomas Aquinas and a Knight* ................................................................. 31

Chapter II, Late 19th Century Works at the Parish Church of Stella Maris .......... 35
  2.1 Filippo Fortunato Venuti, *The Nativity* ......................................................... 37
  2.2 Pietro Gagliardi, *Stella Maris Star of the Sea* (bozzetto) .............................. 39
  2.3 Giuseppe Calì, *Portrait of Lorenzo Farrugia* .............................................. 41
  2.4 Giuseppe Calì, *Crucifixion* (destroyed) ....................................................... 44
  2.5 Giuseppe Calì, *Stella Maris Star of the Sea* (apse) ...................................... 47
  2.6 Lazzaro Pisani, *Virgin of the Rosary with Ss Dominic and Catherine of Siena* ....................................................................................................... 50
  2.7 Lazzaro Pisani, *St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church* ....................... 52

Chapter III, 20th Century Works at the Parish Church of Stella Maris ............... 55
  3.1 George Preca, *Crucifixion* .......................................................................... 58
  3.2 Mario Caffaro-Rore, *Vision of Lepanto* ...................................................... 61
  3.3 Raymond Pitre, *Dome and Pendentives* ..................................................... 64

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 68

Plates ....................................................................................................................... 71

Appendices ............................................................................................................. 126
Plans ................................................................................................................................. 131

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 135

Primary Documents .................................................................................................................. 136
  National Library of Malta ...................................................................................................... 136
  Cathedral Archives Malta ...................................................................................................... 136

Secondary Works ..................................................................................................................... 137
  Books ................................................................................................................................. 137
  Journals ............................................................................................................................. 139
  Thesis ................................................................................................................................. 139
List of Plates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fort Manoel on Manoel Island with Sliema in the background</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tigné Seafront showing Fort Tigné and Barracks.</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A detail from an oil painting owned by Advocate Albert Ganado which depicts the Chapel at Tigné</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Capua Palace</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Original façade of the church of Stella Maris by Architect Giuseppe Bonavia</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>St. Anthony Church, Trieste Italy</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Giuseppe Bonavia, Borza of Valletta</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Giuseppe Bonavia’s project for the Opera House, Valletta, Front elevation</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Giuseppe Bonavia: an original drawing of the Buttigieg-Francia Palace, Valletta</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The present day façade of Stella Maris</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Leon Battista Alberti, San Andrea Church at Mantua, Italy</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Detail of Frontal Bifora Window</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Light Windows</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Niches showing the statues of the Virgin and St. Joseph cradling infant Jesus</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Attributed to Stefano Erardi, <em>La Madonna del Divino Amore</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Unknown Artist, <em>La Madonna del Divino Amore</em> (Copy), St. John’s Co-Cathedral, Valletta</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mattia Preti, <em>Rest on the Flight into Egypt</em></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Detail of cotton plant</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Detail of Saint Joseph</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mattia Preti, <em>Guardian Angel</em></td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Detail of infant Jesus</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td><em>Bottega</em> of Mattia Preti, <em>St. Ambrose</em> (Copy)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Mattia Preti, <em>St. Ambrose</em>, Private Collection</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Stefano Erardi, <em>St. Martin</em>, Annunciation Chapel Żebbuġ</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Detail of Riding Whip</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Detail of Book</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Giuseppe Calleja, <em>St. Francis of Paola</em></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Detail of face</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Detail of Coat of Arms</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Raffaele Caruana, <em>Star of the Sea</em></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Upper Tier</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Lower Tier</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Details of Angels</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Coat of Arms</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Unknown, <em>Virgin of Porto Salvo with Ss Dominic and Thomas Aquinas and a Knight</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Detail of Upper Tier, Copyright ReCoop</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Detail of Lower Tier, Copyright ReCoop</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Newspaper extract illustrating the inauguration of the titular in 1945</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Severe damage of World War II</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plate 41  An illustration of World War II damage inside the Church of Stella Maris ........................................ 101
Plate 42  Restoration on the Titular by George Preca .......................................................................................... 102
Plate 43  Filippo Fortunato Venuti, The Nativity ............................................................................................... 103
Plate 44  Detail of Nativity .................................................................................................................................. 104
Plate 45  Pietro Gagliardi’s Bozzetto for the titular of Stella Maris ................................................................. 105
Plate 46  The Titular Statue of Stella Maris modelled from Pietro Gagliardi’s bozzetto .................................. 106
Plate 47  Giuseppe Cali, Portrait of Lorenzo Farrugia ....................................................................................... 107
Plate 48  Giuseppe Cali, Crucifixion (destroyed) ............................................................................................... 108
Plate 49  Detail of the Crucifixion ..................................................................................................................... 109
Plate 50  A picture taken of WWII damage in the transept of the Virgin of Sorrows ...................................... 109
Plate 51  Giuseppe Cali, Stella Maris Star of the Sea. (Restored) ................................................................. 110
Plate 52  Giuseppe Cali, Stella Maris Star of the Sea. (Before restoration) ..................................................... 110
Plate 53  Giuseppe Cali, detail of Stella Maris Star of the Sea. (During restoration) ...................................... 111
Plate 54  Dark defined brush work ..................................................................................................................... 111
Plate 55  Giuseppe Cali, detail of Stella Maris Star of the Sea. (Before and after restoration) ...................... 112
Plate 56  Giuseppi Cali’s Signature .................................................................................................................... 113
Plate 57  Signatures of previous restorers being uncovered during the last restoration process by ReCoop ... 113

Plate 58  The rough texture illustrates Cali’s work, whilst the other smooth texture is the work and over-
painting of restorer Raffael Bonnici Cali Copyright ReCoop ..................................................................... 113
Plate 59  Lazzaro Pisani, Virgin of the Rosary ................................................................................................. 114
Plate 60  Detail of Virgin of the Rosary ............................................................................................................ 115
Plate 61  Lazzaro Pisani, Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church ...................................................... 116
Plate 62  Detail of the Vatican City .................................................................................................................. 117
Plate 63  Detail of Angels .................................................................................................................................. 117
Plate 64  The old altar of Saint Joseph in 1967 .................................................................................................. 117
Plate 65  George Preca, Crucifixion .................................................................................................................. 118
Plate 66  George Preca, Crucifixion (Bozzetto) ............................................................................................... 119
Plate 67  Mario Caffaro-Rore, Vision of Lepanto ........................................................................................... 120
Plate 68  Mario Caffaro-Rore in his studio working on one of the paintings for Stella Maris ....................... 121
Plate 69  Raymond Pitre’, Saint Mark .............................................................................................................. 122
Plate 70  Raymond Pitre’, Saint John .............................................................................................................. 122
Plate 71  Raymond Pitre’, Saint Luke .............................................................................................................. 123
Plate 72  Raymond Pitre’, Saint Matthew ....................................................................................................... 123
Plate 73  Raymond Pitre’s, Cupula illustrating themes of heroic women from the Bible ......................... 124
Plate 74  Details of Cupula decorations ............................................................................................................ 125
List of Appendices

Appendix A  Visitatio Pastoralis, Vol. 34 Fol. 646, Bishop Bartolomé Rull 1757-1769, 22 Oct. 1758 .. 127
Appendix B  Visitationes, Gargallo, 1588-1602, Fol. 270................................................................. 128
List of Plans

Plan 1 Stella Maris Plan. Retrieved from Busietta, .......................................................... 132
Plan 2 Stella Maris Longitudinal Section. Retrieved from Busietta .................................................. 133
Plan 3 An elevation of the façade retrieved from Church Archives ................................................. 134
Table of Figures

Figure 1  Raphael Sanzio and workshop of Gianfrancesco Penni, *La Madonna del Divino Amore*, (Original) .......................................................... 14
Figure 2  Bottega of Mattia Preti, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, (Copy) Wignacourt, Colleague Museum, Rabat. .......................................................... 18
Figure 3  Francesco Zahra, *Guardian Angel*, (Copy). .......................................................... 21
Figure 4  Detail of face with mitre. .................................................................................. 24
Figure 5  Detail of Lace and Book ................................................................................. 24
Figure 6  Latin Inscription beneath the portrait of Mr Lorenzo Farrugia ....................... 43
Figure 7  Giuseppe Calli, *Crucifixion* in the transept of the Virgin of Sorrow (before WWII) .......................................................... 46
Figure 8  Detail of *Vision of Lepanto* ............................................................................ 63
Figure 9  Mario Caffaro-Rore’s signature ....................................................................... 63
Introduction
The two churches dedicated to Stella Maris and the Virgin of Divine Graces are situated in the heart of Sliema on the Northern side of Marsamxetto area of the Grand Harbour. Prior to the coming of the British in the 18th century, most of the island’s population was centred around Valletta and the Three Cities. The other parts, now named Sliema and St. Julians were largely uninhabited. It was only towards the late 17th and early 18th century that the Order’s Council decided to build two fortifications; Fort Manoel (Plate 1), and Fort Tigné (Plate 2).

The arrival of the British brought prosperity, and the land now called Sliema developed into what it is today, one of the prime areas on the island. The British afforded security which brought with it an increase in population, a development of personal standards and a greater mobility within the population.

A church dedicated to the Virgin Mary existed in the 16th century within Fort Tigné.¹ Tradition has it, that during the 16th Century, a Maltese fishing boat or skuna was caught in a terrible storm and the people onboard prayed the Virgin Mary to save them from certain death. Gradually the storm abated and they returned safely, thus they attributed this to the Virgin’s intervention. As a result, the Captain decided to erect a church² in honour of the birth of the Virgin on Tigné promontory.³

It was blessed and dedicated by the Bishop with the title the Virgin of Safe Voyage. By time it was renamed tal-Madonna tas-Sliema as the sailors entering and leaving port would ask for Marian help by uttering Sliem Għalik Marija. As time progressed, the church was becoming well known and this is corroborated by Acts or proceedings of Notary Ferdinand Zarb dated 31 Oct. 1631 where he refers to a certain Duminku Seychell who established a foundation so that on the 8 Sept., the Primi Vespri would be sung and mass celebrated all according to research by Mr. Ġorġ Tabone.⁴

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¹ Published in Maurice Busietta, Tas-Sliema: Il-Knisja u l-Paroċċa ta' Stella Maris, B’Kara, San Gwakkin, 1977, 1. Busietta says that a document dated 1878 written by Ignazio Mangion supports this, but the document is not available.
⁴ Busietta, 1.
The Visitatio Pastoralis of Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan (1744-1751) (Appendix A), notes that although sailors and their relatives had great devotion for the church, Bishop Balaguer, decided to close the church and stopped it from functioning. He deconsecrated it on the 23 Mar. 1659.

Bishop Bartolomé Rull in a Pastoral Visit recorded that a new chapel (Plate 3) had been built in 1741 and that the Holy Icon was transferred there. Bishop Bartolomé Rull also gives a brief description of the Church of the Virgin, known in those times as ta’ Qortin ta’ Sliema (Appendix A).

The chapel was built in a quadrangular form with a semicircular apse. The altar and the predela were of marble. The main painting depicted the Virgin Mary, Saint Anne, infant Jesus and St. John the Baptist and had a gilded frame. This was accompanied by a smaller painting depicting infant Jesus. Above the doors, flanking the altar there were two small paintings depicting St. Michael and St. John the Baptist. The church at Tigné was further embellished by four paintings within four gilded stone frames: the two smaller ones represented St. Stephen and St. Francis of Paola, while the two larger ones represented the Annunciation and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Devotion to the church was not limited to the sailors, as shown by an inscription on the right side of the floor near the altar which said that a certain Mikiel Pianta, Knight of Graces of the Order of St. John and benefactor of this church had established a foundation so that mass would be celebrated every Sunday and feast days and for him to be buried there. When he died on the 28 Dec. 1749, his wishes were granted. There was also a portrait of him and a marble plaque read that Dun Tumas Vassallo, an official from the church of Hal-Balzan was to be buried there also. Although this was a small church it was embellished with other paintings like the Icon of Virgin flanked by St. Cosimo and St. Damian which were in the Greek style.

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5 AAM, Visitatio Pastoralis, Vol. 34 Fol. 646, Bishop Bartoloméo Rull, 22 Oct. 1758.
6 Appointed in 1635 and passed away in 1663.
7 Bishop Bartoloméo Rull, (Vol. 35) Fol. 646.
8 This is a free translation by Rev. Gino Gauci from Visitatio Pastoralis Bishop Bartolomé Rull (Vol. 35) Fol. 646.
In 1781 Bishop Vincenzo Labini wrote that the church in Tigné was called Ecclesia Portus Salutis ta’ Sliema or the Church of Portu Salvu⁹ in Sliema. In Malta bil-Gżejjer Tagħha, Pietru Pawl Castagna 1827–1907 gives an alternative name to Dragut’s point by calling it il-Ponta ta’ tas-Sliema.

Pietru Pawl Grima, a great poet and writer, wrote a poem called Lill Tas-Sliema:

‘Biss f’nofsok, fil-hdura dlonk tbajjad il-knisja,
Mibnija l-Omm t’Alla, Hallieq il-Bnedmin,
Hawn qabel is-safar, jokorbu l-bahhara
Jitolbu bis-sliema li jaslu henjin.’¹⁰

Sir Themistocles Zammit in his book Tas-Sliema u San Giljan¹¹ wrote that in the late 18th century, Sliema became a focus for new arrivals, and street constructions illustrate that Sliema began to be populated. Foreigners like Captain Hugh Hallet and Prince Charles of Capua built palaces there (Plate 4). ‘In the 1840s...’, says Sir Temi Zammit¹² ‘...people had money and some wanted to move out of the city and relax in a peaceful place like Sliema...’, showing the increased importance of the area. Inevitably due to population growth there was the need for a church.

The History and Architecture of the Church of the Virgin of Divine Graces.

During the French blockade of 1798, the church at Tigné was completely destroyed, so in 1803, the church of the Virgin of Divine Graces (Plate 5) was built. The land was donated by a woman, Giovanna Salvaloco¹³ and this church still stands and is known as il-knisja iż-żghira. Work began around 1801 and probably finished by 1804 when Bishop Vincenzo Labini (1780-

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⁹ Another church bearing the name of Portu Salvu was, and can still be found in Valletta. This is the other name given to the St. Dominic’s Church in Valletta; both of them bear this name denoting the special interest shown by sea-faring people.

¹⁰ Sliema became synonymous with the land facing Valletta probably because of Pietru Pawlu Castagna’s poem.

¹¹ Sir Temi Zammit, Tas-Sliema u San Giljan, Valletta, Empire Press 1930, 9.

¹² Ibid. p10.

1807) made a pastoral visit\textsuperscript{14}. It was dedicated to the Holy Virgin, but it was also known as the Church of the Nativity or the Virgin of the Graces\textsuperscript{15}.

According to Achille Ferres\textsuperscript{16}, the church is dedicated to the Holy Name of Mary. This chapel holds two important paintings by Mattia Preti and another one which is said to have been brought from the old chapel at Tigné, but its artist is unknown\textsuperscript{17}. Today, it is found in a densely built urban fabric but when it was built, it was a countryside chapel, thus its architecture is extremely simplistic and suited the needs of the people in that era. It is built on a small rectangular cell plan and has a small dome with a temple front and an aedicule façade. This consists of two shallow piers on either ends topped with a classical pediment. Just beneath the bare frieze there is an oval fanlight. The chapel has three bells and tradition says that one of these bells used to be rung when someone was hung in Floriana.\textsuperscript{18} This chapel has undergone restoration since cracks were starting to appear around its architecture but is now fully restored. In 1856 Ġużeppe Borg while clearing the land in Tigné found three human skeletons.\textsuperscript{19} These skeletons were transported from the St. Helen’s Basilica, Birkirkara to the Virgin of Graces Church and were buried there on the 29. May 1856\textsuperscript{20}.

Dun Amadeo Bonello kept alive the interest in the *knisja iż-żghira*\textsuperscript{21}. Due to demographic growth, this church became inadequate for the community. The first solution was to enlarge the existing church, but the project was shelved due to various objections. Finally it was decided to build a new and larger church\textsuperscript{22}. A site in front of the existing church was chosen and the fact


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 31-2.

\textsuperscript{16} Achille Ferres, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Valletta, Midsea Books 1866, 320.

\textsuperscript{17} It has recently been attributed to the circle of Stefano Erardi by Professor Keith Sciberras.

\textsuperscript{18} From an interview with Fr. Victor Soler, it was explained that since the chapel could be easily seen from Floriana, as the surroundings were relatively undeveloped, this bell used to be rung as a signal that someone who had just committed a crime was hung.

\textsuperscript{19} It was said that two of them were of Dun Mikiel Palma and Dun Tumas Vassallo, rectors of the old church at Tigné while the third was said to be of Mikiel Pianta, one of the church’s benefactors.

\textsuperscript{20} Busietta,15.

\textsuperscript{21} This church remained in use until the church of Stella Maris was opened to the public. Later on Dun Amadeo Bonello started to take care of the small church and suggested that every first week of the month and every Sunday, the Sacrament should be exposed. The Adoration of the first week of the month which had been established by a legat and from 1967 onwards certain liturgical services like the *Kwarantina* were transferred from the Parish Church to the small church.

\textsuperscript{22} Zammit, 32.
that it was so near the older church was an advantage, since it ensured easier acceptance from the people and made the transition much easier. 23

The History and Architecture of the Church of Stella Maris

The Church of Stella Maris was the fourth one built in Sliema, Sir Temi Zammit writes, ‘Sliema’s population was growing at a speed. The church of the Virgin of Graces was built a long time ago on Irjala Street for a couple of people at first…’ 24. By time, the need was felt to build a bigger church as the population was growing. This is corroborated by a reference from L’Ordine 17 Aug. 1855, ‘the old chapel of (Graces)... could barely fit 50 persons.’ 25 The land on which the new bigger church was built was allocated by the Cathedral Chapter with certain obligations. The building of the church itself was funded by the many donations. 26

In 1851 well known and respected residents signed a petition and sent it to the Bishop Publio Maria Sant (1847-1864), listing the discomforts and inconveniences of the community vis-à-vis the existent church and a proposal for a new church 27. This petition was accompanied by a professional architectural report drawn up by architect Giuseppe Bonavia (1821-1885) 28 about the building itself 29.

In the official acts of the Cathedral Chapter dated 3 May 1851, there is a reference to the donation of land for a new church. Bishop Publio dei Conti Sant had referred to the Cathedral Chapter about the need for a new and bigger church. The new church had to be dedicated to the Conversion of the Apostle St. Paul, 30 thus explaining why one of the two missing side altars was in honour of St. Paul. The Cathedral Chapter owned land in front of the small church and this

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23 Zammit, 32.
24 Busietta, 15.
26 Busietta, 21.
28 Leonard Mahoney, 5000 Years of Architecture In Malta, Malta. 1996, 234.
29 Ibid. 32.
30 Busietta, 25. The reason why the church was first dedicated to the Conversion of the Apostle of St Paul results from the fact that half of the land was owned by the Order and the remainder by the Dominican priory of Vittoriosa.
solved the problem which had arisen with the owners of the adjoining land. Architect Giuseppe Bonavia (1881-1885) gave an estimated value of the land in question and this was presented to the Cathedral Chapter 24 Jan. 1852 and permission for a new church was granted in 1852.

On the 28 April the Diocesan Vicar, Mons. Vincenzo Chapelle laid the first stone.\(^{31}\) *L’Ordine* on 29 Apr. 1853 reports about the church’s dedication\(^{32}\). The building of the church began in 1853 and was completed in 1855 so much so that in August of the same year it was blessed and dedicated on the 11 Aug. 1855 by Monsignor Chappelle under the title of the Virgin Star of the Sea or as commonly known *Stella Maris*\(^{33}\).

The church was of simple structure, without an aisle, dome or bell towers. The façade (Plate 6) was perhaps the most interesting part of the architecture. The façade’s west part was flat, two storeys high and surmounted by a moulding serving as an entablature, that seemed to be running along the perimeter. The only entrance was framed by a simple moulding.\(^{34}\) If one compares the church of St Anthony in Trieste (Plate 7) to an old photo of the church, one can immediately recognize its similarity. Bonavia must have had some connection with this church, either through prints or sketches or having visited the place himself. Although these buildings are Palladian, one cannot but notice their inherent similarity to the Pantheon in Rome\(^{35}\).

A neo classical tetrastyle classical portico was erected in front of this doorway. The Ionic tall and elegant columns were similar to the order to those of the interior\(^{36}\). An entablature surmounted these columns, and terminated in a triangular pediment that crowned all the width. A large semicircular articulation was inserted in the lower part of the upper level, probably serving as a window, very similar to those of the north and south walls. This storey terminated with a moulding similar to that dividing the lower from the upper level. Its central part raised


\(^{32}\) ‘Yesterday, 28\(^{th}\) April, in the village near the sea of Tas-Sliema, the first stone of the new church was placed by Monsignor Canon of Mdina Cathedral Vincenzo Chappelle, Diocesan Vicar, which is being built through the contributions of the villagers and citizens – Architect – Mr. Bonavia’.

\(^{33}\) Agius, 68.

\(^{34}\) Dalli, 68.


\(^{36}\) Busietta, 20-21.
into a small arch, forming a circular space into which the church clock was inserted. Above the roof-line, a short blocking course was erected serving as basis for two small structures acting as bellcots.

The use of simple Ionic columns reflect a prevailing preference by Giuseppe Bonavia, who frequently chose to design his buildings in this order (Plate 8 to 10). The façade of the Borsa di Malta in Valletta (Plate 8), completed in 1857\textsuperscript{37}, the columned Entrance Hall for the Opera House in Valletta (Plate 9) in 1859 and also for the now demolished tower of Villa Gourgion\textsuperscript{38} are all in the same style. The use of Ionic columns in Stella Maris church acquire importance in the development of Bonavia’s designs as they might be the first instances where he followed the Ionic order above the other orders.

In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century the Sliema population continued to increase resulting in another call for a bigger church. This was not the first time as in the 1870s there had already been calls to enlarge the church, so much so that in 1873 a project was drawn up for this purpose. Andrea Vassallo was responsible for the enlargement and almost total reconstruction (internally) of Stella Maris Church at Sliema\textsuperscript{39}. The church gained importance and in 1878 Bishop Carmelo Scicluna blessed and separated it from its parent parish of Birkirkara\textsuperscript{40}.

The church took a long time to be completed according to *Malta Herald* 1906, ‘The façade commences many years back, but for lack of funds the work has been left in abeyance for some time.’\textsuperscript{41} The church was completed by July 1909.\textsuperscript{42}

Describing the Church’s architecture today (Plate 11), one notices that it is an eclectic and revivalist church. It is a blend of elements from different periods, the most evident being: Roman, Early Christian, Renaissance, Venetian and Victorian. It is a simple Latin cross plan church, (Plan 1 to 3) with a typical Late Victorian three-bayed façade dominated by a large

\textsuperscript{37} Mahoney, 227.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 227.
\textsuperscript{39} Mahoney, 264.
\textsuperscript{40} Zammit, 39.
\textsuperscript{41} Op.cit from Newspaper *Malta Herald*, 9 May 1906
\textsuperscript{42} *Malta e Sue Dipendenze*, 11 Aug. 1909
central bay, similar to San Andrea of Mantua by Leon Battista Alberti (Plate 12), the new two-storey façade is divided into three sections, the middle one is a large portico in the shape of a conch shell and flanked by two twin large bell towers (Plate 11). The bell towers seem to have a combination of Early Christian and Renaissance motifs, such as the bifora windows (Plate 13-14) which are of a recognizable medieval style and the segmented pediments on the consoles are reminiscent of Michelangelo’s architectural style. The light windows both on the façade and on the two sides of the church give light to the interior (Plate 14). The sculptural reliefs at the top of the bell towers are most decorative and distinctive features of the whole building having an impact on the sky line. Mousù mentions how whilst the internal structure of Stella Maris was being reconstructed, Alfred Waterhouse’s Museum of Natural History in London was being built, but affirms that in no way was the new façade of Stella Maris either copied or inspired from this building but merely to show how the façade of the church was the last call of the mid ottocento architecture. Considering both façades, one can see how similar their format is: the bell-towers, the prominent arch, and all the other stylistic features. The church was built on a disleveled site and this was compensated by a blocking course all around the foundation. The two side-sections are two storeys high and supported by four cornering pilasters in the Tuscan Doric Order. The frontal space is dominated by two larger niches standing on a corbel stone, the two statues are of the Virgin Mary and St Joseph holding infant Jesus, which further embellish the façade (Plate 15).

Both churches are decorated with a number of paintings from the 19th and 20th century, even though there are also some important examples of paintings from the Baroque period.

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43 Mousù, 16-9.
Chapter I

Earliest Works of the Parish Church of Stella Maris and of the Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces
The following chapter will be made up of a selective catalogue of the earliest works of art owned by the Parish church of Stella Maris. The works will be discussed in the chronological order of when they were acquired and not executed, so as one could understand the evolution process of the works attained. The first three catalogues are the ones found at the chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces. The rest are either found in the church Museum or the church itself. I had to be selective in my choice of paintings; therefore some have not been included.

The following paintings were the first four paintings of the church; St Thomas doubting Jesus, Disciples at Emmaus, Resurrection and Apparition of Christ to Mary Magdalene. They are of unknown provenance but they were definitely installed in the church by 1855. They were replaced by the Cycle of the Virgin by Filippo Venuti and are now hung in the room adjacent to the vestry. Their similarities suggest they were executed by the same hand.

Antonio Xuereb’s 18th century devotional painting of the Doctrine Madonna is not catalogued in this thesis. Its provenance is also unknown but it was probably purchased by the church, as in the year 1907 George Preca had founded the Doctrine Foundation in Malta, thus every church was responsible for Doctrine teaching. This painting is a copy of Peter Paul Rubens Madonna. It is found in the church museum.

Below, one will find a selective catalogue of paintings from many other paintings found in the early years of Stella Maris, amongst which there is two by Mattia Preti and the old titular of Porto Salvo dating back to the 16th century.
1.1 *La Madonna del Divino Amore* (copy by Penni), attributed to the circle of Stefano Erardi

Oil on canvas

Altar painting

Dimensions: 210cms x 93cms (circa)

17th century (circa)

This 17th century titular altar painting of the Church of the Virgin of Divine Graces is a small work which represents the *Holy Family*. (Plate 16) The artist of this work is unknown but it has recently been attributed to the circle of Stefano Erardi, who was “…the finest and most talented Maltese painter of the late seventeenth century...”44. It is a copy of the famous painting ‘*La Madonna del Divino Amore*’ by Gianfrancesco Penni, (Figure 1) also known as “il-fattore”, who studied under Raphael Sanzio, and is found in the Museum of Naples. Another copy signed “G.F” is found in the ‘Sala delle Oche’ of the *Palazzo dei Conservatori* of the Capitoline Museum in Rome.45 A later copy of this work is found in the Chapel of St. Paul of the Langue of France in St. John’s Co-Cathedral, Valletta.46 (Plate 17) A painting of the *Madonna of Divine Love* was mentioned in the pastoral visit of Bishop Rull XXII (Appendix A).47 It is possible that this is the painting under study which was transferred from the old church at the Tigné promontory to the church of the Virgin of Divine Graces; therefore one can attribute it to the 17th century. It was surely at the church of the Virgin of Divine Graces by the early 1800s.

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45 Sciberras and Stone, 2005, 10 Malaspina, *Malta, and Caravaggio’s St. Jerome*, explains that this picture of the *Holy Family* could have had Malaspina’s Coat of Arms. It is also possible that this painting is mentioned in A.O.M., Arch.2127,f.261v. and in Sir Hanible P. Scicluna’s book *The church of St. John in Valletta*, 87, op.cit, *Under the two lunettes are two beautiful framed paintings: that on the right shows St. John the Baptist in the desert, the other a Madonna with a child in her lap blessing the infant St John the Baptist. These two pictures are the work of Francesco Penni. Il Fattorino- a student of Raphael.*
46 Busietta, 14.
47 AAM, Bishop Bartolomé Rull, (Vol. 35) Fol. 646.
According to Giorgio Vasari, the painting at the Capitoline Museum in Rome was painted by Raphael himself for Lionello da Capri and his family. This painting is very famous and modern day art critics are of the opinion that it was painted by Gianfrancesco Penni who assisted in Rafael Sanzio’s studio and followed in his master’s footsteps. The harmonic composition of the sacred figures was probably designed by Raphael himself but its rigidity reveals another hand. This thesis goes against what Vasari had said about La Madonna del Divino Amore which at present forms part of the Farnese Collection.

The painting under discussion is in many ways almost identical in composition to the various copies existent both in Malta and Europe. Its size is comparable to the copies found in a private Roman collection and also to the one in the Farnese Collection. The copy found at St. John’s Co-Cathedral is considerably larger while the composition follows in the same lines. The same numbers of figures appear in all the copies including the one found at the church of the Virgin of Divine Graces. The figures of this copy are even mentioned in the Visitatio Pastoralis dated Oct. 1758 where it reads, “… the painting representing the Blessed Virgin Mary with her mother Saint Anne, the Child Jesus, and Saint John the Baptist…” This may be an indication that it is the same painting from the church that was built on the Tigné promontory.

There are only slight variations in the postures of the figures depicted. The positions of the figures follows the Renaissance triangular prototype and to add depth to the painting, there is the fortress of Meldolla in a smaller size and of lighter misty palette, as seen through an arch to give perspective to the painting. This fortress had been given to Pio da Capri by Pope Leo X in 1515 according to Giorgio Vasari’s writing about the painting. The central figure is the Madonna and the colours used for her clothes are the same colours used by artists in the Renaissance period, a good example of this is the Virgin on the Rocks by Leonardo Da Vinci. Another feature of the Renaissance Madonna prototype is that they are mostly seated; this trait harks back to the Byzantine period where a Madonna was always shown seated with a canopy over her head. The figures of St. John the Baptist and infant Jesus are shown in the nude which was a common feature of Italian Renaissance. All these elements further strengthen and enhance the fact that

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48 Busietta, 14.
49 AAM, Bishop Bartolomé Rull, (Vol. 35) Fol. 646.
50 This is a free translation from Latin to English from the pastoral visit aforementioned.
Penni followed faithfully and assiduously in Raphael’s footsteps. Despite so, clearly the temperament of this artist’s brush work is different to Raphael, one could see a brown ground showing throughout certain areas of the painting.

The copy of Penni’s painting which is at the Virgin of Divine Graces, like many paintings depicting the Virgin Mary has been crowned to show the devotion shown to the Virgin Mary. The state of the painting is fairly good as it has become very dark, therefore is in need of cleaning, and there are some abrasions and cracks throughout the work.

![Figure 1 Raphael Sanzio and workshop of Gianfrancesco Penni, La Madonna del Divino Amore, (Original).](image)

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51 The crowning is an act of devotion and is taken very seriously, the organizers usually invite a cardinal or a special Papal representative to head the celebration and both the crowns of the Virgin and the infant Jesus are made out of silver.
1.2 *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*
Mattia Preti

Oil on canvas  
Lateral painting  
Dimensions: 196 x 148 cm  
Late 1660s - early 1670s

The church of the Virgin of Graces is adorned by two prestigious paintings by the renowned Cavalier Calabrese, Mattia Preti (1613-1699). Upon entering the church, on the right, there is the enchanting lateral painting illustrating the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (Plate 18) which is considered to be one of Preti’s most charming large paintings of his entire opus.

Nothing is known of its provenance, except for the fact that by 1866 it was already installed in its present place. There is the possibility that it was once a side altar painting for another small church. Due to the lack of documentation, speculation arises in regards to its commission. The cotton plant in the centre of the background, (Plate 19) above the infant Jesus gives us inkling to its origins. It might be a reference to Egypt, where the cultivation of cotton was widespread, or in connection with Grandmaster Nicholas Cotoner (1608-1680) whose coat of arms included a cotton plant, or it might have been a sign of gratitude to the Cotoner family, during whose reign, Preti had executed many works at St John’s Conventual Church, including the central vault. This hypothesis does not necessarily mean that it was commissioned by the Grandmaster himself as it could be simply a reference to the period when it was painted.

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52 First mentioned in Ferres 1866, 330. See also Calleja, 1881, 128, Mariani 1929, 59, 60, 79, Cauchi 1970, 84 and Spike 1999, 283. Cat 220.
53 Sciberras, 2012, 179.
Preti recounts the story of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt to escape the anger of King Herod as described in the Gospel of St. Matthew.\textsuperscript{54} He based the painting not only on the Gospel of St. Matthew but also on the medieval legends which embellished the basic story.\textsuperscript{55} From the 16\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, painters found the subject very encouraging to depict the flight in an idyllic manner and Mattia Preti was no exception. The artist illustrates an eye-catching group of angels sent from heaven to comfort the Holy Family on its flight to Egypt. Mattia Preti uses the sycamore tree to give shade to the Holy Family whilst resting. The use of this specific tree can have a deeper iconographical meaning than just a reference to a very common tree found in the Holy Land. The sycamore is referred to more than once in the Holy Scriptures. There is a reference to it in the Old Testament, such as the prophet Amos praying under a sycamore tree,\textsuperscript{56} the felling of the sycamore trees and replacing them with cedar trees in Isaiah\textsuperscript{57}. In the New Testament, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree in order to see the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{58} The adoption of this tree was by no means accidental, as the Holy Family were seeking refuge from Herod’s wrath in Egypt. One can also make reference to the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead which gives the sycamore tree, four very important attributes which are protection, divinity, eternity and strength. In this painting, the tree is giving physical protection to the mother and child whilst they are comforted by the angels. The three other attributes are found in Jesus Christ as he is divine, eternal and all powerful.

Much of the picture space is occupied by the closely knit group of angels who all look towards the infant Child, thus guiding the viewer’s attention towards Jesus as he reaches to pick out a fruit. The composition is compact as it is full of figures. The beautifully rendered Madonna and child occupy the right side of the centre. Most of the attention is given to the plump figure Jesus reminiscent of the infant’s depiction in the \textit{Mystic Marriage of St Catherine}, from the Chapel of the Langue of Italy in St John’s Co-Cathedral and the \textit{Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist and Anthony the Abbot}, at the church of St Anthony, Verdala Palace, Rabat. This depiction of a seated Madonna holding infant Jesus is a central theme in Preti’s oeuvre. St Joseph, the adoptive parent is depicted asleep occupying the horizontal axis of the lower part of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{55} Spike, 283.
\end{flushleft}
the painting (Plate 20). This is innovative and original as in art; St. Joseph is usually depicted holding the child Jesus in his hands or teaching Jesus carpentry. The foreground’s luminosity given by the figures contrast well with the wild temperament of the background and brings to life the wilderness surrounding them. An oriental essence is given through the use of the turban around the Virgin’s head. Preti uses this oriental inspired headdress in other works of his, such as in Lot and his Daughters and many of the spectator figures in the foreground and background of his crowded works.

The lyrical qualities of the painting owe much to its luminous palette. Preti here controls the tonal values in such a way that the bold colours, such as the intense blue of the Virgin’s mantle, the white and red orange drapery of the angels and their hair colour bring to life the skin tones of the figures. His colour scheme in this painting is typical of this period, as later on he starts to substitute these highlighted tones with darker ones. Furthermore, the pigment is saturated and rich whilst later on in his artistic career it becomes more diluted and he starts to leave the brown ground showing. Spike explains how the chromatic qualities of this work with dominant tonalities of green are comparable to two other paintings from the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, the Baptism and the Doubting Thomas.

In this work we notice how Preti’s Baroque macchina is subdued with regards to the drapery. When we compare the drapery folds of his figures in the vault paintings at St. John’s Conventual church we notice that they do not follow the laws of gravity and on the contrary float around the figures, heightening the dramatic qualities of the painting. On the contrary in the Rest in the Flight into Egypt we notice how the drapery although bulky and robust falls down perfectly enhancing the roundness of the figures. The lighting of this work is another essential factor adding to the tranquil character of this painting.

The painting shows spotted areas of abrasion and retouching despite it has been restored over the centuries. This painting was exhibited in 1949 in the Mdina Seminary in the Marian

59 Sciberras 2012, 179.
60 Spike 1999, 283.
The work is definitely successful and this is supported by the fact that there is a full size replica of it in the Wignacourt Collegiate Museum in Rabat. (Figure 2)

Figure 2 Bottega of Mattia Preti, Rest on the Flight into Egypt, (Copy) Wignacourt, Collegiate Museum, Rabat.

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61 V. Bonello, 1949, 29.
1.3  *Guardian Angel*

Mattia Preti

Oil on canvas
Lateral painting
Dimensions: 196 x 144 cm
1670 (circa)

This autographed lateral painting (Plate 21) hangs opposite to the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* at the church of the Virgin of Divine Graces.\(^\text{62}\) Despite our lack of knowledge regarding its provenance it was certainly placed there prior to 1866 as the small church had been built in the early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century. It is most likely that it was an altar painting from another church. Although there is no written documentation of its early whereabouts, one can suppose that it had either formed part of a private collection or else been in a public place.\(^\text{63}\) This presumption is based on the fact that many copies of it are found dating from the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) and 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century. One of which is an altarpiece found on the right side of the Carmelite Church in Valletta by the famous Maltese painter Francesco Zahra (Figure 3). It is not an exact replica of the *Guardian Angel* by Preti as Zahra enlarges the painting and adds the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Holy Child\(^\text{64}\) and another male religious figure in the vestments of a bishop. While the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* might have some inkling to its commission, this work does not have anything to show who might have

\(^{62}\) First mentioned in Ferres 1866, 330. See also Calleja 1881, 128, Mariani, 1929, 59, 79 and Spike, 1999, 282.
\(^{63}\) Sciberras, 2012, 267.
\(^{64}\) Sciberras, 2010, 73.
commissioned it. It remains unknown who might have asked Preti to execute such a fine work of art.

The subject revolves around the Christian belief that each person on earth has a guardian angel who guides him in life. The monumental angel immediately captivates the attention of the onlooker due to its overwhelming presence in the painting. The figure looks upwards for divine help in keeping the young child away from the danger surrounding him. In religious iconography the angel is always taken as a messenger or guardian sent by God to help the human race. In this painting the guardian angel is leading a young child who is a symbol of the vulnerability of the human race. The guardian angel is not just a fiction of the mind or tradition inherited from our ancestors as there are references in the New Testament especially in the Gospel of Matthew 18:10 ‘See that you never despise any of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my Father in heaven.’ where they are shown. The child is beleaguered by danger from all sides, on both sides there are demons ready to possess the innocent child. Preti follows the traditional iconographical depiction of demons as found in religious paintings. The demons’ faces are dark, cruel, bloodcurdling surmounted by another iconographical symbol, that of two horns sprouting out of their heads. The threatening image of the demon with outstretched thickly muscled arms and with massive claws is depicted as coming out of fiery hell to prey on the frail human soul. Preti’s portrayal of the demon as the embodiment of evil follows the normal Christian traditions of his times.65 Evil is furthermore enhanced through the malevolent creature with sharp piercing fangs emerging from the left bottom corner of the painting about to pounce on the vulnerable child. (Plate 22) The indistinct background highlights the importance of the central figures which in contrast are sharp and lucid.

The angel stands in a contrapposto position. His towering figure is enhanced through the triumphalism of his flowing drapery, similar to St. John the Baptist’s drapery in the vault of St. John’s Conventual Church. This contrasts greatly with the Rest on the Flight into Egypt. Furthermore the contrast between the paintings reaches another level due to Preti’s typical

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65 Reference to demons is very common in middle Eastern religions from ancient times and Christianity is no exception. There are references in the Old Testament to demons or devils which referred to pagan gods and deities as in Leviticus 17:7: "And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring.” In the Gospel of Mark there is a reference to devils, Mark 3:22-26: "And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils.”
masculine typology where he abandons the sweetness and charm that is usually linked with such pictures. The only gentle like quality of this painting belongs to the delicate transparent fragile ribbon around the infant’s body.

Light plays an important role in this work as it illuminates the main figures in the painting whilst simultaneously giving them the roundness in shape they need to make them more realistic and theatrical. Preti’s lighting also casts shadows which in turn shape the figures and give the picture space intense depth. Unlike the demons and the background, the flesh of the main figures is very pale, setting a sharper contrast. The palette is typical of this period. Most significant is the different hues of brown Preti uses for most of the background and middle tones. The bright white flesh tones and blues and reds of the angel’s drapery give life to the entire work. In this work, Mattia Preti shows his mastery in creating an artistic gem worthy of his talents.

The Guardian Angel painting was exhibited in 1960 at the Catholic Institute in Floriana as part of the celebrations commemorating a thousand years from the shipwreck of Saint Paul in AD60.

Figure 3 Francesco Zahra, Guardian Angel. (Copy)

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1.4 St Ambrose
Bottega of Mattia Preti

Oil on canvas
Lateral painting
Dimensions: 109 x 84 cm (seen)
18th century (circa)

(Courtesy of Joe Borg)

A replica of a more famous original painting by Mattia Preti is this painting of St. Ambrose (Plate 23). It is the work of his bottega\textsuperscript{67} and for a long time has been wrongly taken to be that of St. Augustine. Through its study and iconography, one comes to the conclusion that the saint depicted in the painting is St Ambrose. It is not an original but a derivation from some earlier paintings, one of which is by Mattia Preti which is in a private collection in Rome\textsuperscript{68,69}. (Plate 24) A later copy is found at St. George’s Basilica in Gozo and the third is a copy of St. Martin by Stefano Erardi in the Annunciation Chapel in Ħaż-Żebbuġ. (Plate 25).

Up to 50 years ago, the painting of St. Ambrose was hung in the clergy room where liturgical vestments were kept. Its provenance is unknown. Until recently it was hanging in the church’s museum in the same room with the Doctrine Madonna and St Francis of Paola. At the moment it is undergoing restoration at the ReCoop.

\textsuperscript{67} First mentioned in Sciberras 2012, 459. See also Spike, 1999, 371.
\textsuperscript{68} This piece was formerly at Asta Sotheby’s Milan, 1997, 12 June 1997, Lot 726 and formed part of Preti’s late works.
\textsuperscript{69} Spike, 1999, 371. Cat 313.
After a thorough cleaning procedure, the painting became much more lucid and clear. One could notice how the artist although still unknown, substituted certain attributes of Stefano Erardi’s *St. Martin*’s composition (Plate 25) such the addition of the riding whip (Plate 26) and the book (Plate 27) on which the saint is writing. Interesting, yet still very vague are the traces of two possible halos emerging from the back of his neck and out of his cheek bone. The painter cunningly introduced some of the most prominent iconographical symbols that represent St. Ambrose which are the riding whip and Episcopal mitre (Figure 4 and Plate 26). The artist excluded other important iconographical features such as the crozier, the swarm of bees, the inspirational dove and the ox.

The saint is set in a triangular format as he occupies most of the picture space. He is set against a dark plain background. St. Ambrose is seated at a desk looking downwards attentively at what he is writing in a thick book which is on the red draped desk in the bottom right corner of the painting. The writing on the tome is illegible to the viewer and subsequently cannot be deciphered. In his left hand he holds a riding whip which symbolizes his total control over the city of Milan. This *sferza* is also a symbolic reminder of the penitence that he inflicted upon Teodosio for arranging a massacre at Thessalonica.\(^70\) He is dressed in full silvery toned ecclesiastical garments which texture is extremely shiny illustrating richness, silk or satin fabric. The same texture of the cloak is given to the mitre. Opulence is heightened with the use of gold braid and gold designs on the cloak. This is furthermore acquired through the elegant large golden clasp with red stone that holds the mantle together and the intricate brushworks in the lace detailing on his cuffs. (Figure 5) Another element which exudes delicacy is the fine feathery brush work detail of the quill held in his right hand. This delicate texture is contrasted by the rough harsh brush stokes given to the riding whip.

Light plays a formative role in this composition as it highlights the most important elements in the painting whilst casting shadows which give the painting more of a realistic feel. The artist’s main playing field for this beautiful play of light and shadow is definitely in the cloaks folds. The position of St. Ambrose’s right arm is brought out through the way light catches the roundness of the drapery, whilst a strong dark clear cut shadow marks the drooping remainder of

\(^{70}\) Spike in Rende, 1999, 66.
the mantle which obviously no longer rests on the arm. The drawing skills of a mature artist are shown together with the aid of reflected light through the detailing of the hands and its dark shadows between the fingers and on the book (Figure 5).

Shadows enrich the modeling of the facial features where similar to the St Francis of Paola painting; the saint has dark deeply set eyes and strong high cheek bones. The wrinkles on the forehead and eyes together with the thick beard show an erudite person fully concentrated on what he is writing. The expression of the saint is strong and could have been inspired from other paintings with an inner emotional feel such as Mattia Preti’s *Penitent St. Peter*.

It is a great achievement that this painting is being fully restored as it is of great importance and value as an artistic work and for the church.
1.5 *St. Francis of Paola*

Giuseppe Calleja

Oil on canvas

Lateral painting

Dimensions: 115 x 172.5 cm

1857

This Nazarene lateral painting (Plate 28) was once hung in the church on the other side of the pulpit together with the painting of Saint Paul\(^7\) which is now lost. The painting illustrates St. Francis of Paola who according to history and tradition was a saintly man and is known to be the patron saint of sailors, naval officers, mariners and boat men, thus having a great connection with Stella Maris, Star of the Sea. St Francis of Paola’s maritime tradition is derived from the legend which retells the story of when he was denied a sea crossing from the mainland across the straits of Messina to Sicily. He improvised by laying his clock on the seas tying one of the ends to his staff to create a sail and successfully sailed across with his friends.

It was executed by Giuseppe Calleja (1828-1915), a student of Giuseppe Hyzler (1787-1858). Calleja was considered to be one of the most *letterati* or cultured artists of the period. He was the main lecturer in design at the Lyceum School in Valletta\(^7\) He continued teaching until retirement.


\(^7\) P.P Castagna 1985, 233.
This painting was a present given by Rev. Can. Fr. Paolo Alessio Portelli in 1858.\textsuperscript{73} The Church archives refer to an article in the \textit{L’Ordine} Newspaper of 21 Jan. 1858 but when further researched there was no reference to this painting and the only references of presents given to the parish church of Stella Maris were dated in \textit{L’Ordine} Newspaper of 21 Jan. 1855. The coat of arms found in the lower left corner of the painting (Plate 30) is that of an ecclesiastic and thus it probably refers to the coat of arms of Canon Portelli, donor of the painting. My deductions are based on the fact that the green hat and tassels depicted is of a high rank in the church\textsuperscript{74} and also because of the door depicted in the lower part of the coat of arms which is found also in the Portelli heraldry.

As stated earlier the painting was first hung in the church, “…above the altar on the right representing St. Francesco di Paola…”\textsuperscript{75}. When the church was enlarged it was moved again to the church’s new parish hall in Cathedral Street. An old photo from Fr. Soler’s resources shows a group of people sewing the church damask under the painting of St. Francis of Paola. At present it is hanging in the Church Museum adjacent to Antonio Xuereb’s \textit{Doctrine Madonna}.

The figure of St Francis of Paola occupies the center part of this lateral painting. He is shown kneeling on clouds which continue on to the sides as if encapsulating him in a cocoon. The lower tier forms just one third of the painting where there is a range of mountains against a cloudy sky which joins the upper part with the lower tier. Boats are present in the lower tier together with a depiction of a tower at the top of the hill at the left of the painting in the foreground. The lower tier is very difficult to decipher as it is in a very bad condition and has darkened drastically over the years.

The painting follows the traditional iconography of St. Francis, depicted as an old balding man with a large light grey beard. A thin delicate halo surmounts the saint’s head. A long brown walking staff rest against his shoulder, which symbolizes travelling and this order was a mendicant order. He wears the usual brown Franciscan habit, as he was the founder of the Minims (1470), a Franciscan Order. As opposed to other representation of St. Francis of Paola

\begin{footnotes}
\item[(73)] J.Calleja, 51.
\item[(74)] Usually that of a Bishop.
\item[(75)] G. Calleja 1881, 129.
\end{footnotes}

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the figure here is not wearing his hood and the inscription “CHARITAS” cannot be seen. The Bible and rosary bead are also missing in this representation.

The saint is kneeling down with hands out, stretched arms and broken eyes looking up to heaven as if expecting the blessing of God. The chromatic scheme is of a subdued earth colour palette mainly shades of brown and grey. The saint is emanating an aura of saintliness which the artist shows through a lozenge shape luminous yellow light emerging from behind the saint.

The light radiates down onto the saint from above as if he is receiving a spiritual divine connection. The light strikes certain features of this face creating very bold and strong shadows and features such as the prominent cheek bones and eyes (Plate 29). Light also plays an important role in creating shades, which bring out the folds of his religious habit and the pose of his half raised left knee. St. Francis of Paola had been represented by many artist and sculptors amongst which are the Spanish Baroque masters: Murillo, Goya and Velasquez. Though one cannot compare these representations, this work is successful and different as it shows the Nazarene influence and ideas, the reinforcement of honesty and spirituality in Christian art forms.

Unfortunately the condition of the painting is definitely the worst, out of all the catalogue works in this thesis. It is extremely darkened and most of its sides have severe cases of flaking and abrasions. Parts of it are covered with foreign bodies and it needs to be stretched. This painting was exhibited in the National Exhibition of Fine Arts, in November 1857 in the old hall of the Armory in the Grand Palace of Valletta. It was one of the largest paintings in the exhibition and was highly praised.76

76 J. Calleja, 51.
1.6 *Stella Maris Star of the Sea*
Raffaele Caruana

Oil on canvas
Titular painting (previous)
Dimensions: 250 x 180 cm (seen)
1855 (circa)

This 19\textsuperscript{th} century work of art was once the titular painting of Stella Maris church (Plate 31). It illustrates a seated Madonna holding her child Jesus on her lap as she floats on a cloud over the sea, under the title of Patroness of sailors, “Stella Maris”.

When the church was enlarged, the altar in the choir was dedicated to Stella Maris Star of the Sea. In fact there is a Latin inscription which in English reads:

“All those devoted to her Sanctity and who pay homage to Mary star of the sea, have taken it upon themselves to erect this Altar at their own expense. AD 1892.”

Thus a titular painting appropriate to the name of the church had to be commissioned. Raffaele Caruana’s (1820-1886) painting did not hang as the church’s titular for long as when the church was enlarged again it was moved to the sacristy, as it was too small in proportion to the new church.\textsuperscript{77} At present the painting hangs in the sacristy of the church in between the two copies of Guido Reni.

\textsuperscript{77} Mentioned in Stella Maris Sliema, 22. See also P.P Castagna 1985, 277.
Raffaele Caruana studied at his father Pietro Paulo Caruana’s (1793-1852) studio and Tommaso Minardi (1787-1871). He gained many commissions due to his father and despite this, his recognition as an artist was not received by the public when compared to his father. Amongst other of his important works this painting was mentioned in P.P Castagna’s book. Stella Maris Star of the Sea was given to the church as a present from Mr Girolamo Tagliaferro in the first years of the church. At the bottom left corner of the painting there is the patron’s coat of arms. (Plate 35)

The format of the painting is of a vertical rectangle and the composition follows that of a two tiered format. The upper tier consists of the Virgin Mary sitting on a throne of clouds holding her standing infant Jesus. (Plate 32) In the background, there is the Star which alludes to the title of Stella Maris, Patroness of sailors. The virgin is encapsulated by a choir of playful cherubs. The lower tier (Plate 33) depicts a light serene seascape which shows on the right hand side the Valletta fortifications whilst on the left the Tigne’ promontory. In between these two peninsulas there is a beautifully rendered sailing ship disembarking or embarking people on a Maltese traditional boat. On the horizon, one could get a glimpse of the outline of a sailing ship leaving or entering the harbor. In the very foreground emerging from the bottom left corner is Fort Manoel. The Virgin follows the typical iconographical tradition of being shown seated in a red dress and a deep blue mantle with a white headdress. She looks fixedly as her son who stands on her right lap giving his blessing. Her left hand is open set downwards as if asking her son to bless the ships and their sailors.

One can see the influence of his training under Tommaso Minardi as his purist style emerges through the drawing of the Madonna and child. The rendering of the cherubs surrounding the Virgin are at times poorly executed. (Plate 34) The star behind the protagonists is a geometrical rendering of a star with rays radiating from it, which link the upper and the lower tier as they fall on the ship which is the focal point of the lower tier. This three-masted sailing ship and the small boat ferrying sailors embodies the whole theme of sailors. The focus lies in this ship and the rest of the bottom tier is mostly set as a silhouette and mere outlines. Fort Manoel is slightly

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78 Fiorentino 2006, 25.
79 P.P Castagna 1985, 277.
80 This information was given vivavoce by means of an interview with Fr. Soler.
more detailed as it is in the foreground and introduces the viewer to the picture space whilst simultaneously giving depth to the picture.

There is a major contrast between the palette used in the upper tier when compared to the pale subdued light palette used in the lower tier. The seascape seems almost like as if the medium was water colour as it is much diluted. The sails seem to be diaphanous and their texture is very delicate to give the feeling of fabric. Towards the foreground closest to the viewer the pale hues of blue become darker and more intense though still conservative. On the other hand, the upper tier is rather dull most especially in the background.

The brushwork in the background in very loose and rough and is made up of mere shades. The main protagonists in contrast are very defined and sharp. Both figures have sharp yellow golden halos around their heads. Shadows are sharply contrasted in the clouds and the drapery folds of the Virgin Mary. The muscular anatomy of the infant Jesus is brought out through deep shadows and makes him seem almost sculpturally three-dimensional.

The artist succeeded in creating a painting which fits the theme. It shows the Virgin Mary showering her protection over the ships and sailors which in reality is what the churches’ dedication is about: Stella Maris, Star of the Sea. It is in good condition especially when compared to the other paintings in the church and it is always open to the public since it is hangs in the sacristy.
1.7 Virgin of Porto Salvo with Ss Dominic and Thomas Aquinas and a Knight

Unknown

Oil on canvas

Titular painting

Dimensions: 450 x 240 cm (circa)

1583

This magnificent titular painting (Plate 36) dating back to the 16th century of the Italian Mannerist style has a remarkable history of how it came to be one of Stella Maris’ oldest and most prestigious paintings. 81 With the enlargement of the church there was the wish for a larger titular painting. Pietro Gagliardi was commissioned to execute the work but after the bozzeto was made, nothing came of this. Thus, in 1891 Sir Ferdinando Inglott bought this painting from the Dominicans to replace the previous titular by Raffaele Caruana 82 “His excellency Mr. Ferdinando Inglott gave a beautiful painting to the Church of Stella Maris Sliema a few weeks ago. It represents the Madonna of Porto Salvu by Knight Paladini Filippo.” 83

He bought the painting for a very small amount of money and restored it and cleaned it at his own expense. 84 Once it was given to the church of Stella Maris, the Dominicans wanted it back but Sir Ferdinando Inglott explained how the titular will only be given back to the Dominican

82 Inawgurazzjoni tar-restawr ghall-original tal-apside, xoghol ta’ Giuseppe Cali u t-titular, xoghol tas-Seklu Šittax fil-Knisja ta’ Stella Maris, Tas-Sliema. 10 ta’ Awissu 2012, minn John Bisazza.
83 Newspaper, Gazzetta di Malta Corriere Mercantile Maltese, 2 Apr. 1891.
church of Porto Salvo if the titular should be removed from the choir of Stella Maris. The painting knows its origins from as early as June 1583 when it was given to the Dominicans from Knight Carafa and placed as the titular altarpiece during this period. Two Pastoral Visitation reports of 1602 and 1608 by Bishop Gargallo mentions a painting of the Virgin Mary, with Saints Dominic and Thomas Aquinas and a figure of a knight (refer to Appendix B) including the representations of a harbour. In 1843 it was replaced by the Visitation by Pietro Paolo Caruana and stored poorly in the convent.

The opus is that of a symmetrical rectangular vertical one, split in two halves. The upper half is heavenly and consists of the Virgin Mary with closed eyes as she gracefully holds her son Jesus seated on the clouds. (Plate 37) She is placed right in the center of the upper tier and is framed by a symmetrical composition of two angels on either side of her, two cherubs’ heads at either side of the upper corners and two puttini hovering over her, holding a crown of flowers above her head. It seems like each side of the upper part of the painting is mirror image of the other with some slight changes. The upper tier is joined to the lower (Plate 38) as the composition is of a sacra-conversazione forming a triangle, with the head of the Madonna being the top of the triangle and leading down to St. Dominic in the far left corner of the painting and St. Thomas of Aquinas on the far right of the painting. The composition is perfectly symmetrical apart from the Knight who is kneeling next to St. Thomas of Aquinas. It is very probable that the Knight was added at a later stage. In the background of the lower tier there is a seascape illustrating what seems to be a Medieval Italian town on the left over the sea against a pale pink sky. The three boats flying the Maltese flag were also probably added later.

Both saints are adorned with their associated iconographical symbols as they wear the black and white habit of the Dominican Order. Furthermore St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominican Order, holds a white lily in his right hand and a book in his left, as beside him a dog holds a lighted torch in his mouth. He also has a star above his head. St. Thomas of Aquinas was also a Dominican. He holds the Blessed Sacrament in his right hand as he looks at it in deep

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85 Busietta, 45.
86 Fsadni, 26.
87 AAM, Visitationes, Gargallo, 1588-1602, f, 270, Visitationes, Gargallo, 1579-1608.
meditation. His role as a teacher of doctrine is represented through the emblem of the shining sun on his chest. He holds a book in his left hand. Both saints stand facing each other and looking up towards the heavens. The knight kneels down in adoration as he holds his left arm towards his chest and outstretches his other arm forward. He is dressed in full armor, the style of which is extremely detailed and typical of Milan. This might be another indication towards its provenance or the artist’s influences.

The Virgin is dressed in her typical iconographical attire, red and blue, although the colours are typical of the Mannerist style, most especially in the left upper tier of the painting. The drapery of the angel to the left of the Madonna displays clashing colours of yellow, pale green, pale pink, and blue. A difference also in the skin tone is evident from the original work done by the artist and the rest of the figures from the right upper tier of the painting which went missing. The skin tones of the saints and angels on the left are very pale, almost white with some blending of pale shades of pink creating a harmonious and idyllic atmosphere.

While technically masterful, its brush work is very fresh and loose especially in larger areas such as the seascape and the background of the upper segment. The artist most probably made a preparation of a dark brown layer before painting. The flow of the drapery, especially that of the angel on the left is slightly bulky but graceful. This same brush technique is employed to the clouds which carries the figures on the upper tier. It is of unknown authorship but some attributed it to Marc Antonio.\textsuperscript{89} This attribution was probably mistaken as another source explains that the frame of the painting was painted by Marc Antonio. Count Saverio Marchese wrongly attributed the work to Filippo Paladini and explains his distaste for the restoration work done by Antonacio Grech on this titular where he over-painted and altered so much of the painting:

\textquote{‘...volle ridipinger quasi quel quadro rappresentante la Vergine Santissa sulle nuvole contornata d’angeli avendo a sinistra o più del quadro S. Tommaso, a destra S. Domenico, e nella meta un Cavaliere vestito d’armi bianche a terra sopra un ginocchio ad implorarla. Egli dopo aver cancellato detto Cavaliere, per dipinger nel fondo del quadro la Punta del Dragotto,}

\textsuperscript{89} Alexander Bonnici and Joseph Grech, 2000, 84 and Vella, 1971, 27.
o forte Tignè, ritoccòtutta l’aria che era prima armonica col tutto, e la rese tanto rossa, ed oscura che in oggi la mede con tutto il quadro fà orrore."\(^{90}\)

In fact after Sir Ferdinando Inglott restoration process hidden figures were revealed, this was probably the work of Grech.\(^{91}\) After World War II, the painting suffered severe damage as on Sunday 1 Mar. 1942 a bomb exploded right inside the church. (Plate 40 – 41) The titular was torn in many areas and it is said that the upper area consisting of the Virgin and Child with the two angels on the right of the painting were completely missing.\(^{92}\) George Preca was appointed to restore this painting (Plate 42) for the amount of 150 pounds and after 18 months, it was inaugurated on the 21 Aug. 1945.\(^{93}\) (Plate 39) In 2012 it was fully restored again under ReCoop.\(^{94}\) Amongst all the work that this involved, the cleaning of the painting proved most interesting as it revealed even more about the painting’s origins. The typical medieval building background one sees today was repainted upon with a typical Maltese landscape. This gives an indication of its earliest provenance.\(^{95}\) It is assumed that the center of production must have been from Tuscany.\(^{96}\) A lot of over painting was found on the helmet and the seascape. Interestingly enough, restoration illustrated some *pentimenti* such as another dog next to St. Dominic, a completely different chalice, different knee of the knight, different foot of the angel and other minor details. What was very significant was the particular pattern of folding lines on the canvas which illustrated that when the titular was stored at Porto Salvu, it was folded across its vertical axis.

This titular, illustrating the Virgin and child as a Protector of the Sea is probably the most prestigious and important paintings at Stella Maris. This is not just due to its high caliber of execution but also to its extremely interesting provenance and dating. It is unbelievable that such a work of major talent and prestige was once given dismissal. Fortunately enough today it enriches the choir of Stella Maris and receives the admiration and reverence it deserves.

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\(^{90}\) NLM, Libr. Ms. 1123, f.8v.

\(^{91}\) Lofaro, 2002, 23.

\(^{92}\) It is believed that this part of painting was stolen.

\(^{93}\) Busietta, 44.

\(^{94}\) This restoration process was being directed by conservator Agatha Grima, B.Cons. (Hons).

\(^{95}\) Article by Roderick Abela B.Cons (Hons) 2012, *Progetti ta’ konservazzjoni u restawr fil-Parroċċa ta’ Stella Maris, Sliema*.

\(^{96}\) The texture of the canvas was typical of Tuscany, Florence in that era.
Chapter II

Late 19th Century Works at the Parish Church of Stella Maris
Chapter two is a collection of paintings executed in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Cycle of the Life of the Virgin by Filippo Fortunato Venuti is composed of: The Death of the Virgin, Jesus in the arms of the Virgin after being taken down from the Cross, Jesus disputing with the learned doctors in the temple, The birth of Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem, The presentation of the Virgin in the temple and The adoration of the shepherds.

The Nativity was selected to be catalogued from the whole group because it is the only published work by Venuti from Stella Maris and was featured on The Sunday Times, Christmas Supplement, 3 Dec. 2000. Furthermore it was printed as a Christmas postcard. The whole cycle was produced in the same year and follows the charming Italian style of an average artist who did not gain his reputation through his capabilities but through his Italian descent. Most of Venuti’s paintings were destroyed in World War II.

Giuseppe Cali’s work in the church are all catalogued apart from the faithful devotional copy of the Madonna ta’ Pinu \textsuperscript{97} which is found in the room adjacent to the choir. This chapter also features Pietro Gagliardi’s (1809-1890) bozzetto for the titular that unfortunately was never executed and two of Lazzaro Pisani’s altarpieces, Madonna of the Rosary and St. Joseph.

The selective catalogue illustrates a fully blown style of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century art in Malta. Unfortunately the war caused a lot of damages destroying some of these prestigious paintings such as Cali’s Crucifix.

\textsuperscript{97} Fiorentino and Grasso 1991, 87.
2.1 *The Nativity*
Filippo Fortunato Venuti
Oil on Canvas
Lateral Painting
Dimensions 235 x 170 cm (circa)
Late 19th century (circa)

The *Nativity*\(^98\) (Plate 43) is one of the six paintings of the first cycle of the *Life of the Virgin* by Italian artist Filippo Fortunato Venuti. It formed part of a larger cycle\(^99\) and it speaks a completely different language from the style of art in Malta of the late 1900s, when it was produced. This dramatic baroque style, full of charm was very much favoured by Maltese patrons at the time.\(^100\) In fact, Venuti gained most of his commissions not because of his actual talent but because of his Italian descent.\(^101\) Furthermore, after the execution of his work at the Parish church of Birkirkara many other churches sought him out for commissions.\(^102\)

Fr. Soler retells how Venuti’s studio was in Annunciation Street just around the corner from the church. The artist was paid £8 for each work of the *Cycle of the Life of the Virgin* by the church.\(^103\) The *Nativity* was chosen as the cover of *The Sunday Times*, Christmas Supplement, 3 Dec. 2000.\(^104\) It hangs high on the choir wall on the left as one looks towards the altar. The

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\(^{99}\) Some of the paintings of this cycle did not survive WWII and thus were replaced by new painting by Mario Caffaro-Rore.
\(^{100}\) Maltese artists such as Giuseppe Cali’ and Lazzaro Pisani at first struggled to acquire commissions as they were competing against an Italian presence in Malta which was favored much more by the Maltese.
\(^{101}\) Attard, 1999, 168.
\(^{102}\) Ibid 169.
\(^{103}\) Stella Maris, 36.
\(^{104}\) The painting was also printed as a Christmas card.
story of the *Nativity* together with the related narration of the Adoration of the Magi is the main subject of the painting. (Plate 44)

This night scene is set in the foreground and occupies slightly more than half the composition from the right side. The left half of the painting illustrates a smaller greenish blue monochrome landscape which gives depth to the composition, whilst simultaneously leads the viewer’s attention to the main scene. Earthly colours are employed in the foreground.

A compact semicircular group of eight figures surround the glowing infant Jesus who reclines in a manger in a dramatic manner. The figures all set in different positions give the scene a feeling of awe and grandeur. A light cloud full of angels occupying the space above this group sheds rays of light towards Jesus. The detailing in the foreground scene is contrastable to the loose brush work of the background scene of the landscape. The white moon is slightly hidden behind the tree which frames the painting.

His style is very much still indebted with the baroque. ‘Filippo Venuti was an unabashed plagiarist who could nonetheless be deceptively pleasant.’

His finest works are probably in the Parish church of Mqabba. Although his paintings are charming to behold, they lack artistic energy whatsoever. This is probably the main reason behind this painting’s popularity within the Christian scene; as it is a picturesque traditional representation of the Nativity.

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105 Buhagiar, 178.
106 Published in Buhagiar, 178. The works on the pendentives have been destroyed by WWII and were therefore replaced by new paintings.
107 Attard, 170.
2.2 *Stella Maris Star of the Sea* (bozzetto)

Pietro Gagliardi

Oils

*Bozzetto*

Dimensions: N/A

1877

In 1877 Sir Ferdinado Inglott had asked major Italian painter Pietro Gagliardi (1809-1890) for a *bozzetto* for the titular painting of Stella Maris Parish church. The commission did not develop any further than the *bozzetto* (Plate 45) which is now in a private collection in Malta. Despite this, the statue of the titular of Stella Maris sculpted in Paris in 1891 is modelled on this *bozzetto*. (Plate 46) Gagliardi was a competent and lyrical artist whose style was pleasant but at times encompassed an exaggerated amount of sweet piety.

The *bozzetto* illustrates a delicate *Madonna* in a red dress with a blue cloak over her shoulders standing on a cloud surrounded by a couple angels at her feet. She holds out the blue cloak with her right arm as she delicately places her left hand towards her chest whilst tilting languidly her head. She stands in contrast to the extremely light clouded background. Beneath her, there is a small seascape with a ship depicting her as protector of the seas. The style is very fresh and natural. The composition largely follows his Mdina painting: *The Madonna of the Guardian Angel*. Through the Mdina painting, the hypothetical final result of this *bozzetto* could be understood. Gaglairdi’s Madonnas always posses delicate faces, full of sweetness and charm.

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108 Mentioned in Stella Maris Sliema, 61. See also Attard, 47 and Bonello Vincenzo, *La Madonna nel Arte* 44.
109 Attard, 47.
110 Buhagiar, 178.
This is evident in the bozzetto for Stella Maris. He worked in the Purist style of his teacher, Tommaso Minardi (1787-1871) thus creating a serene-like composition.

The formal analysis follows the Mdina picture. The lower tiers of both pictures illustrate a rectangular horizontal scene in protection of the Virgin. Whilst the one at Mdina illustrates Valletta and the Three Cities, the bozzetto depicts a dark blue sea with a boat in the middle. The slightly older angel on the Madonna’s left in the Mdina painting is a directly inverted image of the younger angel to the Madonna’s right of the Stella Maris picture. The angel’s arms are outstretched in admiration, whilst drawing the viewer to the focal point in the picture.

Chromatically beautiful, Galgiardi’s works always encompass an idyllic serene like palette which enhances the depth of the painting through its light and shade. The bozzetto lower tier has a very dark atmosphere, not typical of Gagliardi. The seas are composed of different dark shade of royal blue which contrasts greatly with the light peacvy atmosphere of the upper tier, a vast contrast between the heavens and earth.

It is unfortunate that the commission did not materialize but nonetheless it is exciting to be aware of what might have been the end result and connection with Stella Maris Parish church.111

111 Pietro Gagliardi left a significant impression on Maltese art. His friendship with Mgr. Paolo Pullicino (1815 to 1890) definitely aided him in acquiring a large number of commissions in Malta. Gagliardi through his work continued to illustrate the Purist style of Tommaso Minardi (1787 – 1871). Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930) and Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) were very much influenced by this major artist. Amongst many of his works in Malta, there is All Souls Titular painting at the Gudja Parish Church (date unknown), the Madonna of the Guardian Angel at the Cathedral Museum of Mdina (1880c) and Madonna and Child at the Cathedral Museum Mdina (1868).
2.3 *Portrait of Lorenzo Farrugia*

Giuseppe Calì

Oil on canvas

Portrait

Dimensions: N/A

1881 (circa)

This small late 19th century oval portrait of Lorenzo Farrugia was commissioned by Canon Giuseppe Dingli.\(^{112}\) (Plate 47) Mr. Farrugia was one of the most important benefactors of the church, thus this portrait appropriately occupies a prominent place in the sacristy of the church. He was involved in Stella Maris since its groundwork.

His role in the foundation of the dome and the transepts was pivotal and he also gave a Byzantine icon to the church. His generosity and kindness earned him a great reputation and his portrait hangs on the same wall with that of the first Parish Priest Vincenzo Manche’.\(^{113}\)

The oval painting has an intricate gilt frame which encompasses arabesque floral motifs which elevates the paintings richness. Beneath it, lies a framed Latin inscription;

\(^{112}\) Mentioned in Fiorentino and Grasso, 95. See also L’Amico del Popolo, 21 Oct 1881, G. Calì’s Centenary exhibition, 38, Cat 135, Edwin A. Camilleri, 34, Cat. 130 and Busietta, 64.

\(^{113}\) Stella Maris Parish Church is also in possession of the portrait of Pope Pius IX who elevated the church’s status to a Parish in 1878. It hangs in the church’s Museum. An article in *L’Amico del Popolo*, 21 Oct. 1881, explains how Monsignor Scicluna and Don Orazio Borg were as important to the church as Lorenzo Farrugia was but their portraits were not commissioned.
LAVRENTIVS FARRVGIA VIR RELIGIONE ET MORVM SVAVITATE CLARVS
PRAEPOSITVS COMMENTIVM A MAVROCI REGE ELECTVS DE TEMPLO SLEMANO
EXIMIE MERITVS (Figure 6)

It explains Mr Farrugia’s status as the head of commerce chosen by the King of Morocco, and
him being a kind a generous benefactor of this church.

It is not one of Cali’s most exciting portraits, but nonetheless it is a commemorative painting
of the individual and illustrates the artist meeting the requirements of his patrons.\textsuperscript{114} The sitter
occupies the center of the small canvas and is portrayed in a bust length frontal view, his face
slightly turned towards the left. He is not smiling but looking intensely out of the picture in all
seriousness.

His dark inlaid brown eyes together with his neutral expression conveys an impression of a
somber, austere and contemplanted man, calm but determined. He has smartly combed dark hair
with a receding hairline. The greyish white highlights at the side of his hair together with his
dark grey moustache and white side burns illustrate the age of a mature man. This is further
supported by the wrinkle lines of his eyes and cheeks and the realistic sagginess of the skin on
his neck.

Smartly dressed in a white shirt and black suit jacket, he wears a black cross tie around his
neck illustrating the era of the late 19th century costume in Malta. On the left side of his chest
one sees three broaches, which probably signify his status as the council of Turkey, head of
commerce and any other high statuses he possessed.

Light enters from the top left of the painting, focussing on the right half of his face, casting a
shadow on the other half of his face. His skin has realistic flesh tonalities which contrast
dramatically with the dark Payne’s grey background so typical of the Victorian portrait.\textsuperscript{115} The

\textsuperscript{114} Fiorentino and Grasso, 95. His prevailing portrait patron was the \textit{Borsa di Commercio} which has eight of Cali’s
finest portraits.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid 95.
palette is therefore a restriction of dark colours in contrast with the light tonalities of the flesh and shirt, creating a stern confirmed atmosphere.

Though there is nothing extraordinary about this portrait, Calì manages to create the image of Mr Lorenzo Farrugia as a serious man who offered a lot to the church. Calì has a large corpus of portraits and this is important considering the prominent portrait artists at the time, such as Cortis, Pisani, Bonavia and the Caruana Dingli brothers.

In conclusion, Fiorentino and Grasso explain how; ‘The art of portraiture, in its imitative role, found in Calì’s the perfect exponent, not only to achieve a likeness of his sitters, but also to create a life-like effigy of them by means of his magical application of paint and the warmth of his tonalities.’

![Latin Inscription beneath the portrait of Mr Lorenzo Farrugia](image)

Figure 6 Latin Inscription beneath the portrait of Mr Lorenzo Farrugia

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116 Fiorentino and Grasso, 94.
2.4 Crucifixion (destroyed)
Giuseppe Cali

Oil on Canvas
Altarpiece
Dimensions: N/A
1886

Tragedy struck Stella Maris Parish church on the 1 Mar. 1942 at 14:50 pm when an Axis bomb went straight through the left transept (Plate 48), destroying one of Cali’s most impressive works, the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion was the main altarpiece of the transept of the Virgin of Sorrows. Its provenance and who commissioned the work are unknown but it was certainly in place by 1886. It was probably commissioned by the church itself, since the church archives note that it cost £35.

The composition is set in a vertical rectangular format. Unlike most depictions of the Crucifixion, the cross is very low and slightly off centre to the right but it is counter balanced by the tightly knit group of figures to its lower showing the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and St John. The work is similar to the version of the same theme by Cali for the Parish church of Floriana. This dramatic depiction of the episode if furthermore enhanced through the void space on the left of the painting. This plain void space spreads to the background leading the eye

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118 Corriere Mercantile Maltese 12 March 1886.
119 An interview with Father Soler supported this quote.
120 Destroyed during enemy action in April 1942.
directly to the dramatic scene. The figures are boldly modelled and their drapery is richly contrasted, enhancing the deep shadows which in turn give a greater sense of three dimensionality. The figure of Christ is idealized and sensuous, typical of Calì’s Romantic style. His anatomy is of a classical flawless degree, with his face being the only feature of anguish and despair. Flamboyant white drapery hovers in the airs against the laws of gravity from around Chirst’s pelvis. This is the only source of movement on the left side of the painting. On the other side, Chirst and the Virgin hold a deep gaze towards each other as St. John and Mary Magdalene look down in grief. Pathos is furthermore enhanced through the Virgin’s hand gestures, as she tightly clasps them together towards her face in agony and sorrow. Mary Magdalene lies powerfully on her side on the ground with her hands forward\textsuperscript{121}. A superlative portrayal of anguish which defiantly captivates the viewer’s attention. (Plate 49)

In the foreground Cali illustrates a rubble wall of realistic stone work. The texture seems to be rough. During this first phase it was typical for Cali to employ a rich impasto colouring technique which may in fact be the case. Towards the left bottom corner an ‘INRI’\textsuperscript{122} label is placed at the foot of the cross. Fiorentino Grasso comments that it ‘...could refer to the vitriolic ingratitude of the world at large being put aside so that Christ’s last minutes become totally absorbed by the deed pathos of his mother and the impenetrable distress suggested by St. John and Mary Magdalene.’\textsuperscript{123}

Unfortunately no coloured prints or pictures of this painting are known, thus the only knowledge of its colour scheme dates back to 1886 from an article from the Corriere Mercantile Maltese 12 March where in Italian it states, ‘Il manto turchino della Vergine, spoglio dalla solita gaiezza, quello rosso di San Giovanni, con pochi cinabri ni chiari del quadro giallo smorto de S Maddalena rinforzo l’effetto generale del quadro completata dall’aria cupa, e sanguigna in fondo.’\textsuperscript{124} Thus according to this article, Cali retained his palette to the ichnographical colours so much traditional of the Crucifixion scene.

\textsuperscript{121} Through an interview with Fr. Soler, it was mentioned that Giuseppe Calì used his niece and Mr. Caruana taċ-ċampelin as models for this painting.
\textsuperscript{122} The acronym INRI refers to Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum represents the Latin inscription which means ‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews’.
\textsuperscript{123} Fiorentino Grasso 1991, 38.
\textsuperscript{124} Published in Fiorentino Grasso 1991, 29 See also orignial article in Corriere Mercantile Maltese 12 March 1886.
The destruction of this work was one of the many misfortunes of World War II (Plate 50). Had this not been destroyed, the transept of Stella Maris would be a celebration of late 19th century works, as it hung right opposite Lazzaro Pisani’s *Virgin of the Rosary* (Figure 7). Today there is Mario Caffaro-Rore’s *Crucifixion*.

Figure 7 Giuseppe Calì, *Crucifixion* in the transept of the Virgin of Sorrow (before WWII)
2.5 *Stella Maris Star of the Sea*

Giuseppe Calì

Oils on a preparation of plastered stone
Choir Apse
Dimensions base circumference 13 mtrs (circa)
1889 (circa)

The choir apse of Stella Maris is a late 19th century work by the renowned Maltese artist Giuseppe Calì.125 (Plate 51) It represents the Virgin as Star of the Sea, the victory of Pope Leo XIII over heresy and the four women represent the four principal continents of the world ransomed by Christ. It is an example of Calì’s fully academic sweetened style of Romanticism.

In 2013 this apsidal cap was fully restored by ReCoop126 and this had a major impact on the work’s history. It unveiled that the work one looked at before (Plate 52) was not that of Giuseppe Calì, but a modified over painted version of it from all the restoration processes it endured. In World War II a bomb exploded inside the transept of the Virgin of Sorrows and this also moved the structure of the apse of the choir which in turn resulted in the flaking of various parts of Calì’s work. In 1943, parts of it were restored by Candido Giglio for £30, but on the 8 Aug. 1948 it was completely restored by Giorgio Preca for the amount of £150.127 In 1972, whilst the church was being painted R. Bonnici Calì was appointed to restore it completely by Dun Gwido Calleja for the amount of £400.128

After a long process or research and documentation by ReCoop regarding these restoration interventions, it was discovered that the drawing of the apse was quite different in 1921. Some old photographers from 1921 illustrated a number of differences, most of which were the case of

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126 This restoration process was being directed by conservator Roderick Abela, B.Cons.Hons.
127 An interview with Fr Soler brought out these facts. See also Busietta, 46.
128 Busietta, 46.
R. Bonnici Cali’s over-painting. Through a thorough cleaning restoration process apart from a completely different colours scheme, to the left corner of the apse, one found each of the restorers signatures and dates painted on top of each other’s. (Plate 57)\(^{129}\) At the right bottom corner of the Apse, Giuseppe Cali’s signature is evident with the date 1889. (Plate 56)

The medium employed by the artist is of oils on a prepared base of textured plaster, thus from very close one could notice which sections are original, that is done by Cali, and which have fallen off due to the structural problem of the entire apse. (Plate 58). ‘The technique is typical of Cali’s mural works, consisting in bold brush work, high impastos on a harsh preparation layer’\(^{130}\). Firstly the restorers consolidated the whole apse to try and save what was left of Cali’s works since it was flaking off, and after that it was cleaned off, all the interventions that were done to it after the war, unveiling the real work which had been covered for so long, by Cali. This process took many months to be completed.

The composition is loosely composed of three groups of figures set in a wide triangular format. In the center there is the Virgin seated on the clouds surrounded by a group of angels at either side. Right beneath her one could see a ship in the sea illustrating her as protector of the seas. The bottom features a light brown ground slowly fading into the sea with a one point perspective which leads to the Virgin. Pope Leo XIII, ‘...the reigning Vicar of Christ at that time...’\(^{131}\) stands right next to the fallen figure of heresy on the left as he lifts his left arm towards the Virgin. The largest group is the allegorical figures representing the four continents on the right. Cali manages to create a panoramic view as the three groups of figures are secluded in extreme spaces of air land and water.\(^ {132}\)

The figure of Europe is the female holding a large wooden cross in her right arm very much similar to the representation of St. Helen. She is dressed in rich attire including jewels and headdresses. On the contrary, Africa, the dark figure to her right and Asia, the kneeling figure to her left, kneel in poverty. They are robed differently and poverty is even illustrated in the bony

\(^{129}\) This is pure evidence which supports the documentations of the church archives which could only be discovered through restoration.

\(^{130}\) The Times of Malta, Saturday, June 9, 2012

\(^{131}\) Fiorentino and Grasso, 42.

\(^{132}\) Fiorentino and Grasso, 42.
spine of Asia, a clear illustration of malnutrition. America stands behind Asia as she leans forward and rests her right hand on Europe’s shoulder. America’s attire is similar to that of Europe, rich and affluent. Thus a dramatic contrast between the four figures is evident.

Heresy who lays at the Pope’s feet in a foreshortened position as though he has just fallen, only wears an olive green drape which floats in a dramatic manner against the laws of gravity. The light is beautifully reflected on his dark skin, especially on his shoulder. Interesting is the intricate detailing of the Pope’s vestments, so superlative and realistic in the variations of texture, lace, tassels, velvet and gold embroider.

The iconography of the Virgin’s cloak is traditional. Through restoration it was revealed that the Virgin’s face was completely different and so was her hair. She wore a veil and the star right in the middle (Plate 55) was an act of repainting. The halo of stars and the round yellow circular forms of light above her head was Rapheal Bonnici Cali’s doing. Instead of the over-painted forms of clouds, today there is the serene faded shades of sky Calì produced. (Plate 53) since the work is seen from afar the artist frequently painted dark shaded areas to form the face of all the angels, rather than the redefined features present before restoration. (Plate 58). Cali’s fast and bold brush work is evident through certain bold lines. (Plate 54)

A bold and intense colour scheme had previously covered Cali’s painting being the complete opposite of Giuseppe Cali’s actual palette which is present today. Calî opted for light, pale colours especially evident in the sky and sea which were supposed to be of very light blue and pink almost verging on to white and not deep dark ultramarine blues and purples executed by Raphael Bonnici Calì (Plate 53). Europe’s dress previously had red drapery which was once supposed to be a light pale purple. (Plate 55) Furthermore, the pebbles in the one point perspective was all over-painting, Cali’s intention was to have a much plainer passage way. (Plate 53)

Today, as a result of restoration, the choir apse speaks the language of Giuseppe Calì, a romantic and academic style of his late 19th century phase, which appropriately represents the Virgin of Stella Maris.
2.6 Virgin of the Rosary with Ss Dominic and Catherine of Siena

Lazzaro Pisani

Oil on Canvas
Altar painting
Dimensions: 224 x 210 cm (circa)
1891

This late 19th century altar painting by one of the most popular Maltese sacred artists of the time, Lazzaro Pisani, is a copy of the original Madonna of Pompeii. It represents Saints Domenic and Catherine of Siena receiving the rosary beads from the seated Virgin and Child. (Plate 59)

As one faces the main altar, the chapel on the right is dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary. This is where the painting used to be hung before it was damaged by the war and replaced by Mario Caffaro-Rore’s Virgin of the Rosary. For a while it was stored in a room in the church but in 2012 it was fully restored by ReCoop and presently hangs in the church’s Museum.

The composition is set in a vertical rectangular format. It follows a symmetrical pyramid sacra-conversazione prototype as the Virgin and Child are seated on a circular podium in the centre of the picture, flanked by the two kneeling saints at either sides of the lower tier. It is an exact inverted replica of the Virgin of Carmel 1883 from St. Peter the Martyr’s Church, Marsaxlokk. The faces of the saints are furthermore alike to the aforementioned painting.\(^{133}\) Pisani is faithful to the traditional eastern icon prototype which could be traced back to the 6th

\(^{133}\) Pisani has other copies of the Virgin of Pompeii at the Church of St Joseph in Hamrun and the church of the Virgin of Pompeii, Rabat, Gozo (1900-1905). In 1903 he again employs this composition in the upper tier of one of his best altarpieces, The Virgin of the Rosary in Parish church of St Philip Haż-Żebbuġ (1903).
century as regards to structure and pose. Inscribed on the pedestal is the iconographical aphorism ‘Ave Maria’ Ss Dominic and Catherine of Siena introduce us to the centre of the picture in the manner they are placed, through their gaze towards the main protagonists and through the baroque gesture of affetti. The seated Madonna extends her left arm as she hands over the rosary beads to Ss Catherine whilst the child Jesus, hands over another rosary beads to St Domenic. A large intricate golden crown floats above the Virgin and a similar but smaller one over her son’s head which radiates with luminous light.

Set against an architectural structure composed of a plain wall and two narrow arches at either ends of the painting, the figures are rigidly cut out and definitely illustrate Pisani’s academism so much indebted to the draughtsmanship of Luigi Fontana. Perspective is brought out through the small landscape scene in the background of the arches and the one-point perspective floor tiling in the foreground.

Chromatically uninspiring, the artist dresses the figures in their iconographical colours; that is, the virgin in a red and blue cloak and the saints in their monochrome habit, whilst infant Jesus is draped in pure white fabric. (Plate 60) The drapery of the figures are rather bulky and have heavy drapery folds which highlight the roundness of the figure. A varied palette of browns compose the architectural setting with deeply cast shadows of a darker tone in certain areas such as the curves of the arches and the emerging wall. After its restoration, the blue in the background appeared to be much lighter and more serene, thus it was evident that there were many areas of over-painting. It was stretched and the damage that had been done to it was mended.

It is not one of Pisani’s most exciting works but nonetheless, it shows his deep roots in academism through a work of simple clarity and lacking excessive detail.
2.7 *St Joseph Patron of the Universal Church*

Lazzaro Pisani

Oil on Canvas

Altar painting

Dimensions: 275 x 170 cm (circa)

1896

This late 19th century altar painting representing *St Joseph as the Patron of the Universal Church*134 (Plate 61) is considered to be one of Lazzaro Pisani’s most important works. It adorns the altar chapel on the left side of the nave, opposite the altar of the Virgin of Carmel135 and has been there since April 1896. Newspaper, *Malta Corriere Mercantile Maltese* of the 27th of April 1896 explains how for the occasion of the inauguration of the new painting that represents the patron of St Joseph by Lazzaro Pisani was celebrated yesterday with Devotion and solemnity the feasts of the saint after 3 days of preparation.

The altar of St Joseph was commissioned by one of the important benefactors of the church, Mr Anselmo Mercieca136 (Plate 64) but it was removed and today there is only the altarpiece of

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135 In the beginning of the church these altar chapels were dedicated to St Paul (the painting is missing) and St Francis of Paola. These painting were later replaced by Lazzaro Pisani’s *St Joseph* and Azzopardi Preziozi’s *Virgin of Mount Carmel* respectively. The latter was moved to the room adjacent to the choir as it was replaced by the niche statue of Stella Maris.

136 Taken from article Il-Kult Guzeppin fil-Knisja Parrokkjali Ta’ Stella Maris by Mario Formosa Holt written in the Feast 2012 book of Stella Maris, 69.
St Joseph\textsuperscript{137}. Since the first years of the church, St Joseph has always had a deeply rooted devotion as he is the protector of various categories, amongst which are of the universal church and carpenters. On the 8 Dec. 1870, St Joseph was proclaimed patron of the universal church by Pope Pius IX.\textsuperscript{138} Thus it was only appropriate to dedicate the altar to St Joseph.

The altarpiece is set in a high vertical format with a segmented top. Pisani maintains the iconographical image of an old St Joseph holding the young child Jesus on his arm, as he places them right in the centre of the painting. A closely knit group of three angels kneel at the bottom left corner of the painting as they look up towards the saint. (Plate 63) The upper tier of the painting has two playful angels on the right side, one holding the iconographical flowering staff associated with St Joseph and the other an inscription, whilst a small lonely figure of a cherub looking in awe at St Joseph adorns the top left of the work. The figures are set against a plain, cloudy and misty background which clears up towards the bottom right corner, from which a beautifully rendered architectural scene of the Vatican City emerges centering on St Peter’s Basilica. (Plate 62) This is an obvious connotation to St Joseph’s role as patron of the Church. Lazzaro Pisani’s signature is found right below this scene together with the date 1896.

Earthly colours are used throughout the majority of the painting with the protagonist’s dark brown cloak boldly outlining the massive figure against the warm hues of the pale clouds which cover the whole picture space.\textsuperscript{139} The angels are draped with pastel colors with the one in the foreground encompassed in an elegant flow of white drapery full of plays of light and shade.

‘Light does not directly model the features of the participants but radiates from behind to create a contrasting silhouette which becomes the iconographical hallmark of the painting.’\textsuperscript{140} A deeply cast shadow increases the three dimensionality of the cloud the saint is standing upon. Here we see how due to the competition between him and Giuseppe Cali he softened his academic approach. Nevertheless there is certain stiffness in the modeling. It is noticeably that although still very much influenced by the drawing of Luigi Fontana, he is here employing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} On the stairs of the altar there is an inscription which reads so and also his coat of arms.
\item \textsuperscript{138} According to Formosa Holt in his article Il-Kult Guzeppiu fil-Knisja Parrokkjali, Pope Pius IX has lifted the status of Stella Maris to the first Parish Church in Sliema.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Sciberras, 1992, 44.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid, 44.
\end{itemize}
thicker layers of paint and including more dynamism in the painting as in the loose brushwork of the background. In fact, in the catalogue of Lazzaro Pisani 1854-1932, a commemorative Exhibition of his works V.M. Pellegrini explains how, ‘...the figure of the “Pe’re par excellence” is full of vigour, but how sweet and inspiring is his benign look! With the utmost simplicity of design, the artist has achieved a family atmosphere...’

Although it is a satisfactory work, it lacks the spontaneous brushwork and vivid colors of St Philip of Aggira which was painted in the same year. Despite this, the painting received a lot of praise. In La Gazzetta Di Malta 27 Iv 1896: Un Nuovo Quadro an article elucidates ‘e un bel quadro! E un quadro che ispira divezione e santi affetti! Ci gode l’animo di vedere affidati questi lavori artistici a nostri compatriotti; e noi ci rallegriamo intanto, coll’ artista signor Lazzaro Pisani per il suo ben condotto lavoro.

It was exhibited in the Commemorative Exhibition of the artist’s works by the Institute of cultural changes at the Strand Palace, Kingsway, Valletta from the 3rd to 15th May 1960 as Exhibit number 9 from the Parish Church of Stella Maris Sliema. The painting and the artist were highly praised. It is in this religious sector that Pisani worked and it is through works like these that many critics consider him to be one of the most popular Maltese sacred artists. Fortunately the painting is in a good state and did not suffer any damage.

141 Taken from an article in the exhibition catalogue of Lazzaro Pisani 1854-1932. A commemorative Exhibition of his works. Institutue of cultural changes. Strand Palace, Kingsway, Valletta. 3rd to 15th May 1960. 142 Sciberras 1992, 44. 143 Published in Sciberras 1992. See also Gazzetta Di Malta, Corriere Mercantile Maltese 27 Apr. 1896: St Joseph was also mentioned in A Retrospective Exhibition of paintings, drawings and sketches declared open by H.E.Agatha Barbara from the 1st to 16th December 1983 as exhibit number 21 but it does not say whether it is the one from Stella Maris or the Church of St Philip in Żebbuġ.
Chapter III

20th Century Works at the Parish Church of Stella Maris
This chapter analysis the works that were commissioned chronologically in the 20th century. After the destruction of the war, the church slowly embarked on regenerating the church art that was destroyed. Therefore 20th century artists were commissioned to paint subject of the art that was lost.

George Preca’s *Crucifixion* was commissioned by a benefactor of the church in 1947-57. This work created major controversy due to its innovative style which was not acceptable by the church as a devotional image and after 10 years of hanging in the Chapel altar of the transept of the *Virgin of Sorrows* was brought down and removed from the church. It now hangs at the Church of the *Virgin of Graces* in Zejtun.

Most of the paintings of the cycle of the Virgin, first composed by Filippo Fortunato Venuti were also destroyed and in 1956, Mario Caffaro-Rore was commissioned to complete the cycle. His works at Stella Maris include: *Crucifixion, Virgin of the Rosary, Marriage of the Virgin, Apparition of Lourdes, Annunciation, Vision of Lepanto, Flight into Egypt, Road to Calvary, Deposition, Funeral of the Virgin, The Virgin visiting St Elizabeth, and Presentation at the temple*. Caffaro-Rore’s *Crucifixion* replaced George Preca’s work and the *Virgin of the Rosary* replaced Lazzaro Pisani’s work. In appendix C, there is a letter dated 26 Apr. 1956 that Caffaro-Rore wrote to Mgr. J. Inguanez explaining the progress of the themes along with a set of photographs that show each painting for Stella Maris Church together with some studies and *bozzetti*. The reason behind picking the *Vision of Lepanto* as a catalogue entry is not only due to its artistic competence, but because of its deep connection with Stella Maris and the recitation of the Rosary.

The last catalogue entry features the decorative works of portrait artist Raymond Pitre’ on the pendentives and cupola of Stella Maris in the 1983. The pendentives illustrate larger than life figures of the four evangelists, together with their iconographical symbols, whilst the cupola illustrates scenes of heroic women from the Bible. Pitre’ was actually asked to paint the whole

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145 Published in Dominique Ciancio, 2004, 80. Ciancio also says that all the paintings at Stella Maris are published in Italian Art in the World –Il Mondo di Mario Caffaro-Rore, unpublished catalogue, Centro Libro Italiano, Turin, 4.
church and through a personal interview with the artist, he recalled how one of the scenes was going to be the Battle of Lepanto. Due to financial difficulties this did not materialize and the project was stopped after the execution of the cupola.

Two oval paintings by Candido Giglio representing the traditional iconographical illustrations of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and the other, *Sacred Heart of Mary* are not included in the chapter. These two paintings were commissioned by Mr Lawrence Quintano for the amount of £70 to replace the two painting of the same subject by Carlo Ignazio Cortis (1826c-1900) that were unfortunately destroyed by the war. Giglio’s paintings used to be hung on the pilasters of the main altar, but are now hung in the room adjacent to the choir.

The Maltese traditional mentality and conceptions of sacred art in this era is illustrated and contrasted through the catalogues entries in this chapter. This selective catalogue of works reflects the history of the nation, where the modern idiom was frowned upon and negatively criticized whilst the more traditional iconographical manner was praised upon and respected.

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146 Busietta, 54.
3.1 Crucifixion
George Preca
Oil on canvas
Church of the Virgin of Mercy, Zejtun
Dimensions: N/A
1946-47

The Crucifixion, a mid-20th century work by George Preca (1909-1984) formerly formed part of the Stella Maris church collection of paintings.\textsuperscript{147} (Plate 65) This work was the center of speculation and controversy due to its modernity in style; ‘The signal that the revolutionary spirit of contemporary art has finally hit the stronghold of baroque traditionalism, that Malta had remained, was given by Giorgio Preca - with the Crucifixion...’\textsuperscript{148}

Due to the bomb that had destroyed Giusppepe Cali’s Crucifix for the altar of the transept of the Virgin of Sorrows, a new altar painting had to be done. A benefactor of the church commissioned George Preca to execute a Crucifixion scene for the amount of £120.\textsuperscript{149} A bozzetto for this work is found in a private collection. (Plate 66) It hung on the main altar of the chapel before it was removed and placed into the sacristy and after some time removed from the church.

\textsuperscript{147} The Times of Malta, article by V.M. Pellegrini 1 Jul. 1968. See also Gauci, 1990, 21, Cassar J.P., 290 and Civilization Volume 11, 308.
\textsuperscript{148} Gauci, 1990, 21.
\textsuperscript{149} Published in Cassar, J.P., 2010, 293. See also minutes of the General Meeting of Atelier’56 held at the Civil Sports Club, Valletta, on Friday 28 June, 1957, 1-2, Section 3.
Preca paints the subject of the Crucifixion in a vertical format in a modern style so appalling to the people in that era. The scene is charged with vibrant energy expressed through the agitation in Mary Magdalene attire and hair full of movement. The crucified Christ occupies the center of the picture whilst the sorrowful Mary, St John and Mary Magdalene occupy the lower half of the painting. On the left side of the painting Mary kneels at the foot of the cross looking up towards her son as she delicately touches his leg with her left arm. St John, at the farthest left, is illustrated in a profile view leaning over to console the sorrowful mother. On the right side of the painting one sees the vibrant anguished figure of Mary Magdalene standing with open arms looking up towards Christ in distress. Innovatively, Preca portrays a different representation of Christ hanging on the cross. In contrast to the traditional iconographic profile cross, Preca adjusts the cross as if it were seen from a three-quarter view. Cassar explains how this could be one of the main reasons the painting was not deemed as an acceptable devotional image in the church.

The drawing itself is already dramatic, but with the addition of the contrast of light and darkness and colour, this furthermore imbued with a dramatic and emotional climax. Light plays a significant role in the painting’s novelty as it comes from behind Christ illuminating only his right side and casting a deep shadow across the foreground of the picture. Preca’s desire for originality is shown in the dark contrast of the painting, such as the difference between the darkness of the cross and its shadow with the light background. This application evokes a somber scene with a greyish winterly atmosphere of a unique episode. Unfortunately ‘…the taste and criticism of the parishioners were put above the aesthetic and intrinsic artistic value of the painting itself.’ Apart from the light hues of the background, the artist harsh chromatic and tonal values which are very different to the bozzetto made for this work. The flesh tones faces of Mary and Mary Magdalene are extremely pale. The parishioners did not understand that austerity and introspection could be sacred.

George Preca took a large blow to his self esteem when after 10 years of being hung at Stella Maris the painting was removed to the sacristy. The Atelier’56 group protested about the case

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150 Cassar, 290.
151 Cassar, 290.
and after meeting with His Graces the Archbishop Sir Micheal Gonzi, a letter addressed to the ecclesiastical authorities in the Times on Malta August 7 1956, delegations and after a long, tedious what seemed to be an ineffective process, the groups managed to withdraw Preca’s painting from the church and make arrangements for its national hanging at the National Museum.  

In 1958 when the debate was at its peak, V.M. Pellegrini printed Preca’s Crucifixion on the cover of one of his bestselling books, ‘Il-Martri tal-Golgota’. Furthermore it was the subject of all negative criticism at the first Sacred Art exhibition of 1968 organized by the Catholic Institute. V. M. Pellegrini quotes, ‘He may be treating a sacred subject profanely, a sort of art for art’s sake but never a picture worthy to be hung in a church for the pious devotion of the children of God.’

This George Preca Crucifixion incident illustrates the difficulty artists faced in Malta in that period. Artist who tried to go against the outdated favored traditional baroque taste in hope of introducing a modernistic idiom. Nonetheless it stimulated a group of artist-friends of Preca, who reacting against this traditional Maltase iconography and deeply motivated through group meetings, they supported each other to fight for a just cause. ‘It is an episode in the history of the Maltese modern period that shows how active and determined were the artist-members of Atelier’56 as they made sure not to leave any stone unturned on the matter.’ Despite all the controversy this painting and George Preca endured regarding its unacceptance in the church due to its decorum it is now housed in the Church of the Virgin of Mercy in Żejtun.

152 Published in Cassar, 291. See also Times of Malta 7 Aug. 1956.
153 Published in Cassar, 293, Rev. Fr J. Inguanez had asked for a deposit of £60 because the benefactor had paid £120 for its execution.
154 The Times of Malta, 1 Jul. 1968, V.M. Pellegrini.
155 Cassar, 291.
3.2 Vision of Lepanto
Mario Caffaro-Rore

Oil on Canvas
Lateral painting
Dimensions: 155x253 cm
1956 - 59

The Vision of Lepanto is a mid 20th century work by the talented Italian artist, Mario Caffaro–Rore (1910-2001). It hangs on the left wall of the transept of the church, dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary, and forms part of the larger cycle of the Virgin. Mario Caffaro–Rore was asked to complete the cycle of the Virgin by Mgr. J Inguanez, as some of the paintings of Filippo Fortunato Venuti were destroyed by the war. Each work was commissioned for the sum of £150.

The subject of this work circles on the episode of the great news given to Pope St Pius V by the Virgin of Stella Maris; the Christians were victorious over the Turks at Lepanto. This naval battle which took place in 7 Oct. 1571 was between the Holy League which were a group of Christian maritime states and the fleet of the Ottoman Empire which wanted to take over Europe. Christian tradition has it that Pope Pius V had passed an order to all the churches to have a certain amount of hours of devotion towards the Virgin of the Rosary. Tradition says that due to the recitation of the Rosary, the Virgin of Stella Maris protected all the Christian sailors and the battle was won. Due to the painting’s connection with the devotion of Stella Maris, it was

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156 Ciancio, 2004, 50. See also Stella Maris, 36.
157 Published in Ciancio 2004, 80. Mario Caffaro-Rore had sent a letter from Turin dated April 1956 to Mgr J. Inguanez in which he explained the development of the paintings for Stella Maris (Appendix C).
158 Stella Maris, 36.
appropriate to be selected as a catalogue entry. Given its connection with the rosary it is only suitable that it is hung in the transept dedicated the Virgin of the Rosary.

The composition is horizontally set, split in two groups on either side of the foreground and a scene of the naval battle set against the beautiful sfumato background. The larger composition is set in a form of a triangle on the left side of the painting. It features a tall floating Madonna in movement towards the center of the picture flanked by two suspended angels who hover on a lower plane. (Figure 8) This section is superlative in movement; the three figures all lean forward as their drapery comprise many dark contorted shadows illustrating wind, thus the moment of a miraculous apparition of the Virgin. The artist here is adding excitement and drama to the theatrical scene of the Vision. The Virgin’s cloak is blown in an elegant way, in contrast to the drapery of her angels. Parallel diagonals form towards the top right corner of the painting with the cloak of the Virgin and the large wing of the angel giving his back to the viewer. Traits of a mannerist style could be seen in the elongation of forms and movements.

Pope Pius V eagerly kneels on a faldstool in a profile position on the right half of the painting. He leans forward supporting himself with his arms against the stool and his right arms slightly up in a gesture of awe. There is a diagonal deep gaze between the Virgin and Pope Pius V.\textsuperscript{159} the Pope’s attire is glowing and static, evolving an impression of agitation, the movement before he receives the news of the victory. It is noticeable that the artist here illustrates all his figures with a profile face.\textsuperscript{160}

The center of the background features a dark grey naval battle scene full of sails of ships in movement illustrating Lepanto. The remainder of the background is a beautifully modernistic plain sfumato effect of merged colours. A stunning chromatic variation is employed in this painting. Just around the virgins head and modern halo made out of different sized stars is a circular glow of bright white and yellow illustrating that she is holy. Different hues of grey and white with a tinge of red imbued the skies adding more atmosphere to the whole aura of the work. The left composition of the painting is completely made up of earthly brown colours.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{159} Ciancio 2004, 50.
\textsuperscript{160} Almost all his paintings at Stella Maris have this profile face characteristic.
\end{footnotesize}
The Virgin is not dressed in her iconographical red and blue attire but in white with a brown cloak. The bright damask crimson red of the stairs, stool and attire of the Pope, on the right side of the painting greatly contrasts with the other half of the picture. The Pope’s vestment is bright white and has deep dark contrast in its few shadows. It is an autographed work, as towards the bottom right of this painting there is a black inscription with red marks, which reads, ‘MARIO CAFFARO- RORE DIPINSE 959’. (Figure 9)

The Vision of Lepanto is one of the most effective paintings from the whole Cycle of the Virgin at Stella Maris, not only due to its connection with the church but through the atmosphere and emotion it conveys and revives in the viewer.

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162 Every work of the cycle by Caffaro-Rore carries the same inscription.
3.3 Dome and Pendentives
Raymond Pitre’

Oil on canvas
Cupola and Pendentives
Diameter of dome 880 cm (circa)
1983

The dome and pendentives of Stella Maris church are the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century work of Maltese portrait artist Raymond Pitre’ (b.1940).\footnote{Wain, Kenneth, Raymond Pitre’: A retrospective exhibition, Malta, 2002, 17. See also Stella Maris, 48, and Wain, Kenneth, Raymond Pitre’: A Study, Malta, 2000, 61.} (Plate 74 and 69-72) The pendentives illustrate the four evangelists, whilst the dome illustrates scenes of different heroic women from the Bible.

The work was commissioned by late Canon Bianco in 1983. Pitre’ was first asked to paint the four evangelists, later the dome and the whole church but this did not take place because late Canon Bianco was transferred to Mdina and his predecessor stopped the project completely due to financial priorities.\footnote{Wain 2000, 61.} During this period, the artist was passing through a difficult time but after the two church commissions; those of the Msida cupola and of Stella Maris, he found some financial security.\footnote{Whilst speaking to the artist, he expressed how he was completely against the subject and how the dome is not finished according to his plans. Furthermore, Pitre’ explains how he was meant to paint the whole church but after the transfer of his patron the deal was no longer held.}
The subjects were chosen by the patron and the artist was not fully on board with the project. Despite so, work started with the pendentives of the four evangelists. In 10 Sept. 1983 Bozzettos of the works were produced and the work on the church pendentives begun. Each of the evangelists follow their traditional iconographical image accompanied by their symbols. 166 Since the earliest of their iconology, the aim of the evangelists’ symbols was an emblematic image of their spiritual mission which simultaneously decipher the saint’s identity.

St Matthew is frequently drawn with a figure of a cherub or a human form because he begins his gospel with the human generation of Christ or because his Gospel centers more on Christ as a human savior, rather than of a divine nature. (Plate 72) Pitre’ illustrates a seated bearded, bald old man pointing at the gospel on his lap as he looks with an intense gaze at the young angel. The angel definitely dominates the pendentive with its large colourful wings, whilst in the bozzetto St Matthew is more central to the composition.

St Mark is represented seated one leg on top of the other as he holds a fairly large book in his left arm. (Plate 69) His right arm is held in enlightenment and his hand is rather large and disproportionate in comparison with the rest of his figure. The composition of the figure of St Mark is from the bozzetto of St John. Beneath his feet, a roaring head of a lion seems to be coming out of the pendentives. There are various interpretations of his representation through a winged lion, one of which is that St Mark set forth the dignity of Christ. St Mark was commonly called the ‘Historian of the Resurrection’ 167 and in the Middle Ages it was believed that the young of the lion was born dead and revived after three days by its father’s roar. Furthermore Mark begins his gospel with ‘roaring’- ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’. 168

Luke is represented by an ox at his feet, which is an emblem of sacrifice and his gospel included the fullest description of the sacrifice of Christ. (Plate 71) The patron saints of artists

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166 Jameson, Anna, Sacred and Legendary art, containing legends of the Angles and Archangels, the Evangelists, the Apostles, the Doctors of the church, and St. Mary Magdalene, London, 1891, 132. ‘No authentic resemblances of these sacred personages have ever been known or even supposed to exist; such representations have always been either symbolical or ideal.’

167 Ibid, 134.

168 Ibid.
sits back in an uncomfortable pose with a paint brush in his hand and a palette in his other hand. To his left there stands the back of an easel which enhances depth.\textsuperscript{169}

Pitre’s bozzetto of St Mark was definitely employed for the final composition of St John. St John is illustrated at the moment of inspiration as he sits writing his gospel with his right hand and lifting up his left hand in enlightenment. Jaw dropped, he holds a gaze towards his representational symbol, the eagle. An eagle is a symbol of the highest inspiration.\textsuperscript{170} The eagle is beautifully rendered in an innovative approach; its wings are large and merge into the background.

Each of the Evangelists apart from St Luke are represented with a book, thus the concept of wisdom and peace. Interestingly the only clearly visible halos are those of St Matthew and his angel. St Luke seems to have a yellow ambiguous radiance of light around his head, but the other two evangelists clearly do not have a halo.

Unfortunately the anatomical structures of these evangelists are not proportional. They are larger than life size and they have a particular elongation in their limbs. St John’s left leg seems detached in an uncomfortable contorted position. The artist explained how he did not use any models for reference but composed purely out of his imagination. Lamentably this did not prove beneficial to the end result as the hands and feet apart from other problems are way too large. Pitre’ is a self taught artist and it is incredible that just two years earlier, in 1981, he had painted the beautiful cupola of the Msida church which turned out to be a great challenge but none the less a success.\textsuperscript{171}

Colour plays a major role in Raymond Pitre’s work at Stella Maris. The colour scheme made up of extremely light and bright colours of pure pigment. Turquoise and yellow definitely dominate the loose brushwork of the background. When the artist was asked about his choice of a bright palette, he replied that he wanted to create something different to the monotonous

\textsuperscript{169} Tradition holds that St Luke painted a portrait of the Virgin, thus when he is frequently depicted painting the face of the Virgin but in this case the artist does not illustrate what St Luke is painting.

\textsuperscript{170} Jameson 1891, 164.

\textsuperscript{171} Gabriel A. Pellegrini on the 9 Oct 2002 wrote in Focus on Maltese Art blog how for the Msida cupola Pitre’ had to balance his composition, style and colours to complement the already existing work by Anton Inglott (1915-1945) and Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) without sacrificing his own style.
traditional church art in Malta and Gozo. Indeed it was very different and illustrates a side of Pitre’ that was willing to emerge but was restricted due to the orders of his patrons. There is a freshness of colour that contrast brightly within itself. A certain dynamic and forceful energy brought out through the brushstrokes of paint. During this period Pitre’ was working on a lot of sculpture and in the same year he was producing deliberate chaotic and wild brush strokes with thick layers of paint such as the Screaming Head. In the bozzetos, each evangelist had his name written in Latin above his head, but this did not materialize in the final work.

Most of the characteristics of the pendentives, such as the vibrant intense bright colours and disproportioned figures, are also present in the cupola (Plate 73) which the artist deems unfinished according to his plans. The subject of the cupola focuses on eight different segments of scenes of heroic women from the Bible. These colourful segments are highly decorative; towards the top of each segment, there is a winged cherub head with a halo and a frivolous fluorescent design of flowing ribbons (Plate 74) which merge into the background. The scenes are crowded with figures as the artist ‘…never stays away from the human figure for long, and this is not surprising since human predicament, human drama, his own in particular, is the subject of his work.’

The conditions of both the cupola and the pendentives are good because the artist applied the canvas to strips of wood and plastic in such a way to prevent it from humidity. Pitre’s works at Stella Maris are probably his least successful public works. They illustrate an artist trying to break with tradition whilst simultaneously struggling to please his patron, thus sacrificing his style. It remains an ambiguity whether the completions of the supposed project would have had a different result had it been maintained.

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172 A personal interview with the artist revealed some of his thoughts behind his works.
173 Wain, 2002, 63.
174 This highly decorative feature is rather similar to the parts of the original design of Domenico Bruschi’s Cathedral Chapter ceiling at Rabat, Gozo.
175 Wain, 2000, 96.
Conclusion
This selective catalogue of works has illustrated a notable status in the artistic possessions of Stella Maris. It forms a selective survey of a range of works selected from the origins of Stella Maris Parish Church to its latest works. It also includes a brief analytical history of the church and of its architecture so as to introduce the thesis. Selectivity was a must due to the amount of works owned by Stella Maris Parish Church. It is interesting that despite Stella Maris’ relatively recent placement as a Church, the history of art at Stella Maris and the chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces definitely has a place in the study of Maltese art history due to its works of art.

The Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces, which forms part of Stella Maris Parish Church, houses three valuable paintings of unknown provenance. Its titular, discussed in Chapter One, dating to the 17th century could be the former titular of the eldest chapel in Sliema, which was on the Tigne’ promontory. A pastoral visit dating back to the 17th century by Bishop Bartolomé Rull

(Refer to Appendix A) mentions a painting of the exact precise description to that of the Virgin of Graces. Furthermore, unspecified is how the two large paintings by major Italian artist, Mattia Preti came to adorn the side walls of this tiny chapel. Extensive research has been carried out but nothing has come out of their provenance as yet.

Works of art acquired or commissioned in the 19th century are discussed in Chapter Two. The Church of Stella Maris was very much conditioned by its history, in fact had it not been for the bombing in World War II, which destroyed many paintings at Stella Maris, it would probably be a celebration of late 19th century art. Despite so, one of Lazzaro Pisani’s works for the church still adorns one of the altars in the nave, together with a couple of Filippo Fortunato Venuti’s surviving paintings and Giuseppe Cali’s apse. The destruction of the war destroyed one of Giuseppe Cali’s finest work; the Crucifixion, and almost all of Filippo Fortunato Venuti’s cycle of the Virgin. The apse painting by Giuseppe Cali and the 16th century titular were damaged but not destroyed.

Breathtaking is the acquisition of the precious old valuable titular painting bought by Sir Ferdinando Inglott for the amount of £6. Its’ well documentation supports its high value and identifies it as a precious and superior work of art with a rich history. An in depth analysis of
this work is given in Chapter One, together with earlier works in the possession of the Church. The benefactors of the church, through their commissions illustrate that they wanted to decorate the church with notable art and not mere decorations. This is illustrated through the fact that major artists like Pietro Gagliardi were commissioned to create a bozzetto for the titular. Post war, apart from the commission for the *Cycle of the Virgin* by Mario Caffaro-Rore, a new artistic, modern language was introduced to the church with the most controversial of all works, George Preca’s *Crucifixion* and Raymond Pitre’s work on the pendentives and dome. Unfortunately, due to the traditional baroque taste of the parishioners, the latter works were not greeted and resulted in the removal of the *Crucifixion* and the stopping of the ceiling project by Raymond Pitre’.

This thesis gave me an opportunity to follow a complete restoration process which revealed much information about the selected works. The restoration on the apse rediscovered Giuseppe Calì’s original work which was completely covered by repainting of previous restorers. The titular painting also revealed certain details which shed some light on the paintings provenance through the uncovering of the Italian architecture buildings. This is discussed in Chapter Two.

This selective catalogue of works from the parish church of Stella Maris is comprehensive. This is illustrated through the variation of paintings dating to different periods which reflect how the church collection of art expanded and evolved in style.
Plates
Plate 1 Fort Manoel on Manoel Island with Sliema in the background.

Plate 2 Tigné Seafront showing Fort Tigné and Barracks.
Plate 3 A detail from an oil painting owned by Advocate Albert Ganado which depicts the Chapel at Tigné.

Plate 4 Capua Palace.
Plate 5 The Chapel of the Virgin of Divine Graces.
Plate 6 Original façade of the church of Stella Maris by Architect Giuseppe Bonavia.

Plate 7 St. Anthony Church, Trieste Italy.
Plate 8 Giuseppe Bonavia, Borza of Valletta.
Plate 9  Giuseppe Bonavia’s project for the Opera House, Valletta, Front elevation.

Plate 10  Giuseppe Bonavia: an original drawing of the Buttigieg-Francia Palace, Valletta.
Plate 11 The present day façade of Stella Maris
Plate 12  Leon Battista Alberti, San Andrea Church at Mantua, Italy.
Plate 13 Detail of Frontal Bifora Window
Plate 14  Light Windows

Plate 15  Niches showing the statues of the Virgin and St. Joseph cradling infant Jesus.
Plate 16  Attributed to Stefano Erardi, *La Madonna del Divino Amore*. 
Plate 17 Unknown Artist, *La Madonna del Divino Amore*. (Copy), St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta
Plate 18 Mattia Preti, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. 
Plate 19 Detail of cotton plant

Plate 20 Detail of Saint Joseph.
Plate 21  Mattia Preti, *Guardian Angel.*
Plate 22  Detail of infant Jesus
Plate 23  *Bottega of Mattia Preti, St. Ambrose (Copy)*.

Courtesy of Joe Borg
Plate 24 Mattia Preti, *St. Ambrose*, Private Collection
Plate 25  Stefano Erardi, *St. Martin*, Annunciation Chapel Żebbuġ
Plate 28 Giuseppe Calleja, *St. Francis of Paola*. 
Plate 29  Detail of face.

Plate 30  Detail of Coat of Arms
Plate 31 Raffaele Caruana, *Star of the Sea.*
Plate 32 Upper Tier

Plate 33 Lower Tier
Plate 34 Details of Angels

Plate 35 Coat of Arms
Plate 36 Unknown, Virgin of Porto Salvo with Ss Dominic and Thomas Aquinas and a Knight
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Plate 37  Detail of Upper Tier, Copyright ReCoop
Plate 39  Newspaper extract illustrating the inauguration of the titular in 1945

Plate 40  Severe damage of World War II
Plate 41  An illustration of World War II damage inside the Church of Stella Maris.
Plate 42 Restoration on the Titular by George Preca
Plate 43  Filippo Fortunato Venuti, *The Nativity*
Plate 44  Detail of Nativity
Plate 45. Pietro Gagliardi’s Bozzetto for the titular of Stella Maris
Plate 46 The Titular Statue of Stella Maris modelled from Pietro Gagliardi’s bozzetto
Plate 47 Giuseppe Calì, Portrait of Lorenzo Farrugia
Plate 48 Giuseppe Calì, Crucifixion (destroyed)
Plate 49  Detail of the Crucifixion

Plate 50  A picture taken of WWII damage in the transept of the Virgin of Sorrows.

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Plate 52  Giuseppe Cali, *Stella Maris Star of the Sea*. (Before restoration)

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Plate 53 Giuseppe Calì, detail of *Stella Maris Star of the Sea*. (During restoration)
Copyright ReCoop

Plate 54 Dark defined brush work
Copyright ReCoop
Plate 55 Giuseppe Calì, detail of *Stella Maris Star of the Sea.* (Before and after restoration)
The pictures on the right are the original by Giuseppe Calì whilst the picture of the left shows the over-painting of the previous restorer. Copyright ReCoop
Plate 56  Giuseppi Cali’s Signature
Copyright ReCoop

Plate 57  Signatures of previous restorers being uncovered during the last restoration process by ReCoop
Copyright ReCoop

Plate 58  The rough texture illustrates Cali’s work, whilst the other smooth texture is the work and over-painting of restorer Raffael Bonnici Cali  Copyright ReCoop
Plate 59  Lazzaro Pisani, *Virgin of the Rosary*

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Plate 60  Detail of Virgin of the Rosary
Plate 61  Lazzaro Pisani, *Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church*
Plate 62  Detail of the Vatican City

Plate 63  Detail of Angels

Plate 64  The old altar of Saint Joseph in 1967
Plate 65 George Preca, *Crucifixion*
Plate 66 George Preca, *Crucifixion (Bozzetto)*
Plate 67  Mario Caffaro-Rore, *Vision of Lepanto*
Plate 68 Mario Caffaro-Rore in his studio working on one of the paintings for Stella Maris.
Plate 69  Raymond Pitre, *Saint Mark*

Plate 70  Raymond Pitre, *Saint John*
Plate 71  Raymond Pitre’, *Saint Luke*.

Plate 72  Raymond Pitre’, *Saint Matthew*. 
Plate 73 Raymond Pitre’s, Cupula illustrating themes of heroic women from the Bible.
Plate 74  Details of Cupula decorations
Appendices
Die XXII Octobris 1758

Visitatio Pastoralis, Vol. 34 Fol. 646, Bishop Bartolomé Rull 1757-1769, 22 Oct. 1758
Appendix B Visitationes, Gargallo, 1588-1602, Fol. 270.
Gli stessi, come le precedenti che a chi lo avesse, sono fotogr.
iamo l'unico ripro di documentare il procedere del
lavoro... Ma sono quelli delle singhe riproduzioni
con due giunti. (Riproduzioni fotografiche però e perfino le
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Queste parti di articol e mancava del interesse
comunicazione con l'ora del tuo arrivo a Torino.

da poco intanto guardar i miei più curiosi
i loro stessi o tra i sabbi. Sono desiderosi di partire

Mario Caffaro

Torino 26 aprile 1905
Plans
Plan 2 Stella Maris Longitudinal Section. Retrieved from Busietta
Plan 3 An elevation of the façade retrieved from Church Archives
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