

Introduction to: Memento Mori, a companion to the most beautiful floor in the world.

BY: DANE MUNRO

St John's Co-Cathedral is undoubtedly a pearl of High Baroque. Its foundations were laid in 1571, just a few years after the Great Siege of Malta (1565). The church was constructed in a sober, military style, with a touch of Mannerism at the main entrance. In the first 100 years of its existence, it remained a sober, artless affair, not in the least because the financial strain of the Great Siege was still painfully present. Only with the advent of Baroque in Malta, matters of art started to take another perspective. The Order became, through its ambassadors in Rome, Florence and Bologna the most influential patron of the arts in Malta. With the arrival of the Baroque Master Mattias Preti, St John's Co-Cathedral was turned in to a total concept of Baroque art, covering from the painted ceiling, down the sculptured buttresses to the marble inlaid floor. Mattias Preti's influence, who worked in Malta between 1660-99, was also visible in the Baroque art of the city of Valletta itself. He was succeeded by Romano Carapicchio, responsible for further embellishment of St John's Co-Cathedral and Valletta's buildings in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. St John's Co-Cathedral is also the home of two prominent paintings of Caravaggio, namely 'The Beheading of St John' and 'St Jerome'.

THE LATIN TOMBSTONES AT ST JOHN'S HAVE KEPT THEIR BEAUTY TOO THEMSELVES FOR TOO LONG. DANE MUNRO IS HERE INTRODUCING HIS WORK 'MEMENTO MORI, A COMPANION TO THE MOST BEAUTIFUL FLOOR IN THE WORLD', AND TAKES ACCOUNT OF THE SITUATION.

For a long time the European aristocracy and the art-loving public in general have waited for a reliable edition, including a translation into English, of the Latin *corpus* of panegyric texts, inscribed on the sepulchral monuments and tombstones found at St John's Co-Cathedral at Valletta, Malta. Over the years much work has been done, sometimes serious, sometimes fanciful and occasionally reaching mythological proportions; moreover, 'Rumour and Evil Tongue' have made us believe that somehow and somewhere there was an obscure authority preparing such a work, although suffering an inexplicable delay of many years.

After spending many happy years on this project, I can understand why many people got lost in the myriad of messages the tombstones seem to transmit. The beholder, in order to fully enjoy the tombstones at St John's, needs to obtain certain knowledge of the various layers of perception which are embedded in the marble. One of the greatest drawbacks for the modern readers is the difficulty of understanding how it was to live in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to possess that culture and mentality, and

moreover, know to what it was to be a living and dying Knight of the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta.

We, the modern reader and observer, need to acquaint ourselves thoroughly with the various matters, such as language and symbols, and the notion that we are reading idealised accounts of heroism and religiosity directly related to and in memory of the days of the Crusades and the Great Siege of Malta of 1565. Otherwise the finer details will be elusive to us. Like many other eulogies of those times, most eulogies at St John's were written in Neo-Latin. During the years 1535-1875 (first and last date of tombstones) Latin was increasingly losing ground to the upcoming European vernaculars, but was certainly still *in vogue* in broad circles of the learned. I suppose that quite a number of eulogies were self-authored, or at least the deceased had a firm influence over the content. The not-so learned had recourse to erudite members of the Order. After all, many Knights were trained in handling the heavy steel of the sword, not the light feather of the pen, although in many cases the latter is mightier than the former. Some eulogies at St John's give the impression of a 'hired hand', as they possess an eloquence which seems to be out of character.

One cannot dream of discussing all topics at St John's at length in one book, not even those closely related to the inscriptions. *MEMENTO MORI*, out of the sheer necessity of providing a wider framework for the understanding of the tombstones, touches upon history, art and symbolism, but by the same force of necessity does not touch upon the field of heraldry, as that is a volume and speciality on its own, and outside its scope.

The poet John Keats lies in an anonymous grave at Rome's Protestant Cemetery, and his self-authored epitaph reads: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water". A rare case indeed, as the culture of memory requires more durable materials to reach posterity and to strike a chord of remembrance. And posterity needs durable materials, preferably polished marble, for reflection on those so far, and yet so near. A major defining characteristic of St John Co-Cathedral is its memorial floor of marble inlaid tombstones. The public display of those tombstones always had an educative and inspirational intention, which validity, one hoped, would extend beyond the contemporary passer-by, and sincerely imposed its message on the future generations.

After time passes, these messages were read by persons who had no longer any direct emotional ties with the deceased or their era. Then, they are just looked at by persons who do no longer understand the

language or culture. From that moment the tombstones have ceased to be monuments of memory in that sense, when memory parts and shifts to history and, one may hope, to cultural heritage.

MEMENTO MORI primarily aims at recording and documenting the tombstones and sepulchral monuments at St John's for aims of preservation. Inevitably, the memorial text and iconography, which were meant to remain forever, or at least to until Judgement Day, have suffered significantly from the decay of time. Ironically, a large amount of wear and tear was caused through the wearing effect of the shuffling feet of those for whom the texts were meant to be read initially, and later by large masses of visitors and worshippers, oblivious of the cry for eternity embedded in the inscribed texts under their feet.

The documentation of the whole *corpus* of inscribed texts in MEMENTO MORI has been achieved both through high-resolution photography of each tombstone and sepulchral monument, and a transcription of each inscribed text *in situ*. St John's Latin *corpus* can be considered as one, although a very diverse, oeuvre. In MEMENTO MORI, I have compared this *corpus* with two major printed sources, those of Pietro Paolo Caruana (1838-1840) and Sir Hannibal Scicluna (1955), and sporadically with René De Vertot (1728) and the manuscript of Paul Antoine de Viguier (1754). The transcriptions found in the work of Pietro Paolo Caruana, mentioned above, *Collezione di monumenti e lapidi sepolcrali dei Militi Gerosolimitani nella chiesa di San Giovanni in Malta*, in three volumes (1838-1840), can be accepted as the first nearly complete printed primary source. The textual comparison has shown me that the three Latin editors of Sir Hannibal Scicluna's *The Church of St John in Valletta* (1955) had based their transcriptions largely on the work of Pietro Paolo Caruana, as on many occasions the text found in Scicluna follows the text of Caruana, including copying and typesetting mistakes. The result of the textual comparisons can be found in the *apparatus criticus* of each inscription. Such a comparison is necessary to convincingly restore those parts of the inscribed texts which are now no longer visible. In total, I have been able to restore all texts, save one. Of all the other texts only a handful of words remain open to interpretation. Further research may hopefully one day yield result.

As a result, it is a strict diplomatic edition which respects the authenticity and rich diversity of the material, and the *usus scribendi*, which represents contemporaneous opinions and tastes in writing Latin. It also respects the original spelling, word and line distribution as they are found *in situ*, and there is minimal intervention in order to maintain the integrity of the text. Only a small number of clear mistakes, which cannot pass as variants, either made by the author or the engraver, were corrected according to the proper methodology. On the other hand, most 'mistakes' are left on purpose, as they

are showing us living history, the *mise-en-valeur* of the original text is of critical importance. I must emphasise that there are few real mistakes, as most 'mistakes' are simply variations in morphology or orthography, often dictated by the writer's native language, influence of vernacular, influence of pronunciation and regional perceptions of writing Latin. This edition, thus, shows great respect for the original content and shape of the text, and is typical for academic use, necessary to provide a basis for the study of the phonology, morphology, orthography and syntax of Latin used for specific requirements and goals. And of course, there can be no successful translation without a proper basis.

The beauty of the Latin in St John lies in its richness and diversity of outlook, style and spelling. There are probably nearly as many tombstones as there are authors, of whom the majority remained anonymous. One can assume that in many cases the deceased contributed to the content of the text. My further studies on the Knight's testaments and *spolio* (their gains of war) has confirmed this. On a few occasions the name of the author is known. Commendator Paul Antoine de Viguier wrote at least three panegyrics for friends. All the authors kept their own views of Latin, unwittingly preventing the *corpus* at St John's to acquire a boring uniformity. St John's definitely did not become a melting pot of European Latin. Although written for the same occasion, it forms, under one roof, a rare collection of the finest international panegyric occasional literature, chiselled on likewise unequalled marble art. When these tombstones are compared with similar works outside Malta, one may carefully conclude that the quality of the Latin is very high, but that the linguistic variants are comparable. In this respect there is nothing unusual.

The Latin of the *corpus* at St John's can be generally classified as Neo-Latin, which is firmly established as a phenomenon of its own. Any attempt to normalize the spelling in Neo-Latin, as up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century was practiced by austere Classicists, ought to be regarded as a grave mistake. It is only by presenting a reliable transcription, followed by a sensible translation, that I can be of service to preservation and the widest readership.

A 'sensible translation' may need further explanation. Many of the inscribed texts contain two or more distinguished styles. The descriptive part, in which the deceased Knight is introduced to the reader, contains his full name, and often his ancestry and place of origin, his *cursus honorum* (comparable to a short *c.v.*) and *res gestae* (his achievements). This part is composed in a military style, so typical of Latin, and up to expectation in harshness and brevity. The other part is of a much different style, where one may find poetic notions, human feelings, philosophical thoughts about life and death, and occasionally, some wit. Also mentioned here are the last deeds or moments of the deceased, composed

in an emotional style. Obviously, one needs to approach this kind of language differently than the other. The latter part of the texts gives the translator much more poetic freedom to bring out the meaning. In the translations I strove to combine both the technique and art of translation, just as in translating modern languages. Aim is, of course, that the target language, here English, may never suffer from peculiarities of the source language, here Neo-Latin. A few examples are sufficient to demonstrate this dual existence: *Franz Anton, Baron from the Dynasty of Schönau of Schwerstedt* welcomes his mourners and later readers in one full breath that he achieved to be the *BRANDENBVRGI BAJVLIVVS, / KLAINER TTLINGHEN, VILLINGHEN / AC TOBEL COMMEND(ATOR), / DVX PRÆTOR(IS) TRIREM(IS), CLASS(IS) PRÆFECTVS, / COMITE DE THVN / PRÆFECTVS MILITVM STATIONAR(IORVM), / PRÆF(ECTVS) ÆRARII, / QVO IN MAGISTRATV DECESSIT Bailiff of Brandenburg, Commendator of Kleiner Tuttlingen, Villingen and Tobel, Captain of the Flagship, Captain-General of the Fleet, Commander of the Garrisoned Troops with the Count of Thun, Governor of the Treasury and that he nevertheless died in this office, absolutely dear to everyone for his Christian love and kindness. Another famous Knight from the German realm *Johann Sigismund, Count of the Holy Roman Empire*, became *Bailiff of Schaesberg, Commendator of Steinfurt and of Münster and was distinguished with a wound at Coron*. He finally became *the highest Receptor throughout Germany and merited to be appointed to the Higher Counsels of the Blessed Johann Wilhelm, Palatine Elector, as well as of Emperor Charles*. A very unfortunate death was recorded for *Heinrich Ludger, Commendator of Mainz and Frankfurt, Baron Von Galen von Essen of the Holy Roman Empire, IAM MAGNUS IN RECTA VIA AD MUNIA ET MERITA MAJORA ESSET, / E PRÆCIPITE RHEDA INFELICITER EXILIENS / IN TUMBAM MORTIS MAGNO OMNIUM PLANCTO INCIDIT / DIE XI JULII, 1717, ÆTATIS SUÆ 43, who was on the right track to greater offices and merits, alas! unexpectedly, to the great lament of everyone, he had plummeted to his death when leaping unfortunately headlong from a carriage into a ravine on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 1717 at the age of 43.**

Understanding of Neo-Latin texts requires the consultation of dictionaries and wordlists, and where possible grammar books, of the period in question, as the regular Classical dictionaries obviously will not reveal contemporary thought. All words have been filtered for Classical, Medieval, Christian and Neo-Latin values and meanings, and treated and translated accordingly. Not surprisingly, the influence of Medieval and Christian Latin on the vocabulary and choice of words is large.

The second volume of *MEMENTO MORI* contains, among others matters, a commentary on the linguistic variations and the prosopographical, historical, cultural and geographical content of the text. The inscribed text on the marble tombstones offers an excellent opportunity for the study of Neo-Latin within the context of the writing of eulogies and the history of the Knights of Saint John.

The aim of a panegyric, chiselled on a tombstone, is to identify and identify with the deceased, whose mortal remains are reposing beneath. It needs to record information necessary for proper identification, such as the name in full, ancestry and coat of arms. There must be words of consolation and instruction, and words of praise for the deceased's achievements, but also of his relatives and dedicators are lauded, in the hope that their virtue will be an example for thousand others. The Baroque mentality allowed a relative larger freedom in writing eulogies, as long as they were doctrinally sound, than at present. In many countries today, wit is not allowed on tombstones, and epitaphs may not be presumptuous or laudatory, although this rule is probably more honoured in the breach than in the observance.<sup>2</sup> In early Christianity it was deemed arrogant and pagan to eulogize the dead, rather than to simply pray for their souls. Humanism changed this custom to the opposite, and the virtues of the deceased were emphasized to the extent that the epitaph became a summation of the late person. The iconography of the tombstones at St John's shows us Angels of Fame whom never seem to be out of breath when sounding their trumpet and blowing the deceased's reputation into the four winds, and the other allegorical figures are playing for the galleries indeed, while prompted from the grave.

What do the Knights reveal about themselves? Besides the standard practice of introducing themselves and summing up their achievements and titles, there are other, much more interesting elements. There is the issue of Purgatory, and although the word *Purgatorium* is mentioned only once in the *corpus*, not on a tombstone but a papal letter hewn in marble, it seems that many Knights were occupied by it, while others simply denied its presence. In Catholic theology, the soul after death may be transferred to Heaven to enjoy eternal bliss in paradisiacal circumstances, but not necessarily at once. Direct access is granted only to martyrs and saints, who instantaneously receive their eternal reward, and are therefore exempt from undergoing any further purification of the soul. This purification happens in Purgatory, the "third" place, between Heaven and Hell, and the only place with a future after death.

Denial of Purgatory is not explicit, but there are instances that the deceased expects that his soul is transferred directly to Heaven, without delay. After all, the Knights had made a vow of fighting against the enemy of their religion and therefore had to offer their life for it, without hesitation or delay, and therefore assuming a martyr-like position, even when they did not die in harness. The denial of Purgatory is more explicitly supported by the iconography. The tombstone of Melchior Alvaro Pereira Pinto Coutineo reads *IGITUR / LAUDIBUS EI PRECES PERSOLVE, UT HUMANAM FUGIENTI / GLORIAM COELESTEM TRIBUAT AETERNAE AUTOR VITAE*, *Therefore, offer prayers to him with praises, so that the Creator of eternal life may grant Heavenly glory to him, who escaped from earthly glory.* The

iconography accordingly shows an opened, empty sarcophagus, with the lid placed vertically next to it, pointing towards Heaven as an arrow, to show that the soul of the deceased had made a direct transition to the Lord. On other tombstones we see Putti carrying off the soul of the deceased to the heavens, which was exactly their role in the Roman set of beliefs too.

A set of ingenious and most emotional devices were developed for those Knights who believed in Purgatory, and therefore had the necessity, according to temporary Baroque views on religious matters, to shorten their stay in Purgatory by obtaining prayers from the living. In this respect there was great solidarity between the living and the dead, and this provides also the *raison-de-être* of not only having memorials in a public place, but also to attract individual attention. To attract and to impress were important features in Baroque art and mentality, and great competition created the need for great art and sublime ways to obtain prayers for one's soul.

The passer-by is addressed directly, and some authors invented catching phrases, in order to barter or elicit prayers. Joachim de Challemaison illustrates this in with *ORA PRO TE, ORANDO PRO ME Pray for yourself, by praying for me*. Some authors chose for a bolder approach. There are instances where the authors of the panegyrics hoped to extract an extra prayer from a passer-by through the subliminal use of words found in the Litany; this shows an early mechanism which later would be known as “sublime advertising”, a hidden sort of advertising which works on the subconscious through very short exposure time. One would be not surprised if such a passer-by had unconsciously made three signs of the cross while reading *SPECVLVM IVSTITIÆ* Felice de Lando's tombstone, just as he would have done when reaching the same text in the Litany.

The inscriptions at St John's are true in the historical sense, save that mostly victories are mentioned. On the personal level, the Knights speak from the grave as they perceived themselves, doing their utmost to avoid oblivion and please God. By default, the *corpus* contains a disproportional amount of self-glorification and ego caressing, at least according to modern taste. The eulogies and *memento mori* engraved or sculpted in marble of the funerary monuments and tombstones of St John's Co-Cathedral are meant to remind the passers-by of their mortality and that they should prepare for the inevitable. In Western Christian culture living well and dying well were major achievements for each pious Christian.

Funerary art at St John's followed cultural patterns as they emerged in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> and consecutive centuries, and in that respect the iconography is similar in intention, whether the funerary art was made for St Michael's church at Schwäbisch Hall, Germany, Santa Maria del Popolo at Rome

or St John's at Valletta. Disease and famine, war and pillage have kept mankind in check since time immemorial. In the late Middle Ages people were reminded on a daily basis of those horrors, through personal suffering or rumour. Certainly preaching from the pulpit and widely available block-books also helped to establish a very imaginative and graphically explicit image of Death.

A firm belief was held that the fate of one's soul was decided in one's last hour on one's last day – and in that *hora mortis* the Devil was up to many tricks. A dying person might be lured into succumbing to one or more of the Five Temptations (cf. below), and every pious Christian should be taught the art of dying well. The *ars moriendi* served to prepare a person for a 'perfect death', with text and pictures warning against Devil and demons lying in wait beneath each deathbed. Living well and dying well needed daily preparation through prayer and reflection, and in some extreme cases, self-flagellation.

Priests used to preach often about Death, because plague and war, the wrath of God, had made Death terrible and ugly. It seemed that in the midst of life everyone was surrounded by Death, who was jealous, invincible and triumphant. In many eyes Death, *mors triumphatrix*, was the ruler over the realm of the dead. Too many people died to be accompanied by priests' Last Sacraments, too many souls were lost in their last hour. Printing came to the succour of priests and the dying. Ever since illustrations of the skeleton and skull appeared in the *Trionfi* of Petrarch (1304-1374) such images gained popularity as *memento mori*. This Latin phrase means 'remember that you will die too', or 'remember thy death', a reminder that Death is unavoidable, and that the Grim Reaper comes harvesting at random.

The anonymous 'Master E.S.', active between 1450 and 1467, from the Bodensee region of Germany, a goldsmith and copper engraver, left about 320 different engravings, in Late Gothic style, to the world, and his influence stretched from Germany to Holland, France, Spain and Italy. One of his most popular works was a series of 11 engravings about the art of dying, *ars moriendi*, in which the Five Temptations of Faith, *temptatio de fide*, were compared with the five *inspiratio de fide*, or inspiration through Faith. In the 11<sup>th</sup> picture the Devil is shown standing powerlessly next to the deathbed, while an angel receives the soul and escorts it to Heaven. Such prints were cheap and widely distributed, so that many people could acquire copies of such works as a cure against evil, gaining hope and assurance in case of a lonely death, without a priest to administer the Last Sacraments.

The Knights of St John were not only patrons of art, but also ambassadors of the art of dying well, *ars bene moriendi*. Living well and dying well belonged to their Knightly ideal of eternal life in the Lord



and Resurrection with Jesus Christ. The iconography of the funerary art may have followed main streams of the consecutive periods, but the intention and textual expression makes the Knights leaders in the field of applied *memento mori*. Through their religious vocation and the close ties of their Order with the Vatican, the Knights were, and still are, and integral part of the Catholic faith. Such an elevated position obliged the Order to provide a shining example in both religious and secular matters, a living example of *inspiratio de fide*. Inscribed texts of their funerary art witnesses a pride in informing the passer-by of their careful preparations for dying, in a language that reaches the heart and touches the soul. Frà. Jacques de Saint-Maur-Lordoue's tombstone reminds the reader that he *lives long who lives well and never ceases to live for eternity*, *DIU VIVIT QUI BENE VIVIT ET NUMQUAM DESINIT, ÆTERNITATI VICTURUS*. Frà. Joachim de Challemaison states that he *is here awaiting his resurrection since the 9<sup>th</sup> day of November 1667*, *HIC RESURRECTIONEM EXPECTAT*, thereby answering to the opening line of the same text, in which the Lord is calling him "*I am awaiting you*", *EXPECTO TE*. A tombstone is dedicated to the *happy and sacred memory of Frà. Pompeo Rospigliosi, who lived well and died well*. Frà. Agosto Sanz de la Llosa is aiming towards that last day and final hour, *invites you hither to meditate on his last day besides, he engraved for himself while alive on this tombstone the last day, which he wished to have in mind*. The text of Frà. Barthélemy de Bar opens with "*I have lifted my soul up to you*". Chevalier De Bar is obviously *mindful of human transience, bearing in mind during his lifetime the Last Things*. These Last Things referred to are the *NOVISSIMA* of line 25 of this inscription, which remind Catholics that they must face Death (the consequence of the original sin), Judgement (before God) Heaven (for those who died in the grace of God) or Hell (for those who died in sin.) The Last Things are mentioned in the Old Testament, the Book of Sirach *Sir.(Ecli).7.40: In omnibus operibus tuis memorare novissima tua, et in aeternum non peccabis (in all your deeds remember your last things, and you shall never sin forever)*.

*Temptatio de fide* included temptation of Faith, temptation into despair, temptation into impatience in suffering on one's deathbed, temptation into vainglory and temptation into avarice. Failing resistance to even one of these temptations was deemed to be fatal for the soul of the dying. The cure against evil could be found in the *inspiratio de fide*, in which one should be firm in one's Faith, have hope, have patience in suffering, show humility, be generous. All these elements of *inspiratio de fide* can be found in the inscribed texts of the Knights' tombstones at St John's. Frà. Jean-Gabriel de Pollastron La Hillière Ledain was *bearing most patiently the long lasting pains of death*, *DIUTURNAS MORTUAS ANGSTIAS PATIENTISSIME TOLERANS*.<sup>7</sup> *In the bitterest torments of a terminal illness*, Frà. Antonio Manoel de Vilhena's *utmost faith and patience shone forth*, *IN ACERRIMIS ULTIMI MORBI CRUCIATIBUS / SUMMA EJUS RELIGIO AC PATIENTIA EMICUERE*. Frà. Giovan Battista Macedonio, *truly with reliance on his Faith*,

offered his life in the decisive moment *FIDELITER PRO FIDE IN DIS / CRIMINE VITAM ADDIXIT*. Frà. Ramon Soler was living in order to die, in darkness I lay out my bed, and after the dark I hope for the light again when my chance comes on the Last Day, *VIVVS MORITVRO, /IN TENEBRIS STRAVI LECTVLVM /MEVM, ET RVRSVM POST TENEBRAS /SPERO LVCEM QVANDO VENIET IMMV- /TATIO MEA IN NOVISSIMO DIE*. Frà. Paul de Félines de la Reneaudie shows his *HUMILITATE*, he was distinguished and clearly noted for the sanctity of his life, charity towards the sick, generosity towards the poor, humility and other virtues. *VANÆ GLORIÆ CONTEMPTOR*, reminds the passer-by that Frà. Carlo Francesco del Maro was a despiser of vainglory.

In Classical times the notion of *memento mori* was already propagated by poets like Horace. In his Odes, I.37, he writes on the death of Cleopatra *nunc est bibendum, nunc pede libero pulsanda...now is the time for drinking, now the time for dancing footloose*. Horace means of course to say that one should not delay enjoying and doing things now, as in the afterlife there might not be such things. The cliché *carpe diem* directly comes to mind. When Latin became the universal language of early Christianity, *memento mori* developed into a Christian genre of visual and literary arts and became charged with the salvation of the soul, emphasising mortality, the brevity and fragility of human life in the face of God, the emptiness of earthly pleasures and the fickleness of achievements and 'conspicuous consumption'. *Memento mori* provoked thought, with a moralising and educational focus on eternity in Heaven or Hell. A typical *memento mori* picture would contain reminders of death and mortality, such as skeletons, skulls, clocks, sun-dials, hourglasses, extinguished candles and other perishable goods such as fruit or flowers. All these images are present in the iconography of St John's funerary art.

Closely related to *memento mori* images are the so-called *vanitas* pictures, still-life paintings which became popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The vanity-still-life painting originated in the Dutch university city of Leiden, which was under strong Calvinist rule. Followers of the Calvinist denomination were expected to be suspicious of all worldly matter, and to follow strict moral codes and avoid all pleasures of life, which life style was generally alien to the Catholic region. Very characteristic of *vanitas* pictures is that they join symbols of a seemingly good life with the notion of death, whereby these connections are only visible to the informed observer. Although they would contain a number of explicit symbols of mortality, they would exceed in symbols emphasising the worthlessness of worldly goods, science and achievements, showing that everything is just vanity. Frequently occurring symbols are fruit and flowers, *vita voluptaria* (musical instruments, smoking devices and scientific implements), books or arrows, as indirect reminders of human vanity, seeking joy in worldly pleasures, materialism and luxury. At first glance these do not seem to be connected with death, so it requires some reflection

to recognise the vanity. Flowers in full bloom are beautiful, but they will wilt soon enough, and shiny fruit will rot away. The notes played on a lute will shortly fade away in all their harmony, and the discoveries in sciences will not prevent you from dying. A book will be finished one day, and the flight of the arrow stops, sometimes in mid-flight. A globe stood for territorial expansion and the urge to conquer. Vanity, in the sense of human uselessness, is lifted from the Old Testament, the Book of Ecclesiastes *Ecc.1.2: Vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes, vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity.* It is extremely interesting to see that the tombstones at St John's Co-Cathedral seem to have fused the notions of *memento mori* and *vanitas* into an iconography of its own.

Baroque, with its capacity to shock and to capture the eye, was an excellent vehicle for the *memento mori* and *vanitas* ideas. The Knights, however, gave their own different meaning to the Renaissance concept of *utile et dulce*, instructive and delightful, which characterised the *vanitas* paintings. Instructive the tombstones definitely were, but the delightfulness was achieved not through showing a beautiful lady next to a bush of roses and shiny fruits, but through the intensity of the Knights' spirituality and piety. Also, there are other elements of *memento mori* which do not occur at all in the iconography of St John's funerary art. *Dance Macabre* is absent, maybe because it was judged too frivolous and too common, and there was also no space for the typical *psychomachia* or morality play, in which the forces of Good and Evil fight over the possession of one's soul. It seems that there is no place too on the tombstones for doubt in the Knights' religiosity.

However, the largest difference is that, although the Knights took the reminder of their mortality to heart, they did not accept Death as a *triumphatrix*. Death's role is simply as an active agent, unavoidable but necessary in pursuit of higher goals. It frequently occurs in the texts as *mors invida*, *jealous Death* or *mors praematura*, *premature Death*, but nowhere is it allowed to be victorious. Whereas elsewhere Death was feared for its ugly face, the Knights of the Order, at least as evidenced in marble, simply regarded Death as a temporary inconvenience, an obstacle in the way to their ideal of eternal life and Resurrection with Christ. Death was not the victor, but they. The eulogy of Frà. Joseph de Langon states that *he in his last action, on conquering the Algerian Flagship, was wounded, from which wounds he, the victor, died.* Here he is not only victorious at sea, but also, as a martyr who died for his Faith, victorious over Death. Such a death in action was perceived to bring one directly, without further delay, to the desired place and time. Frà .Augusto Maurizio Benzo de Santena makes the following comparison, in which *he is not estimating life more than death, if the former led to victory, the latter to triumph.* The tombstones at St John's have the same moralising, warning and educational

function as the *memento mori* and *vanitas* paintings, but they speak with more authority and are fearless of Death. This exclusive group of European nobles embraced and encouraged others to follow their virtues, showing the way to the perfect after life. With this they showed that they, without a shred of doubt, possessed and carried out *inspiratio de fide*.

On a final note, the tombstones at St John's are in their majority rendered in various artistic expressions of Baroque. Just as in paintings, the chiaroscuro technique is present, although it is much more difficult to create a sense of three-dimensionality on marble inlaid tombstones than on canvas. However, seen under the right lighting, or rather the absence thereof, the whole floor of St John's comes to life as one gigantic chiaroscuro with larger-than-life *memento mori* images. At present the interior of St John's is bathed in bright light, for the comfort of parishioner and visitor alike, but to really appreciate the art of the tombstones and the effectiveness of the *memento mori* contained in them, we should switch off the bright interior light and bring back the interior of St John's to its original state of near darkness. Then one should try to find one's way through the church with a candle in hand. Once accustomed to the surroundings, with the eyes squinting in the dark and the mind wide open, something truly amazing happens. When one is thus roaming the floor in twilight, with only the candle lighting up a small area before one's feet, suddenly the *memento mori* images spring forth from their dark background, just as they were intended to do. The shock is a pleasant one of a lost treasure found. For Frà. François de Vion Thesancourt this was a regular exercise and he warns the passer-by of the inevitable *FLECTE LVMINA, QVISQVIS ES, MORTALITATEM AGNOSCE*, *bend over with your lighted candles, whoever you are, and acknowledge your mortality*. A simple reminder of things we have lost at present.

*Dane Munro*

*Illustrations of the floor can be found on [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) and on the website [www.danemunro.com](http://www.danemunro.com)*



Photo by Maurizio Urso

