

# TREASURES OF MALTA

Christmas 2004  
No. 31

Vol. XI No. 1  
Lm 3.15



FONDAZZJONI PATRIMONJU MALTI

*in association with the*

MALTA TOURISM AUTHORITY

# MEMENTO MORI AND VANITAS ELEMENTS IN THE FUNERARY ART AT ST JOHN'S



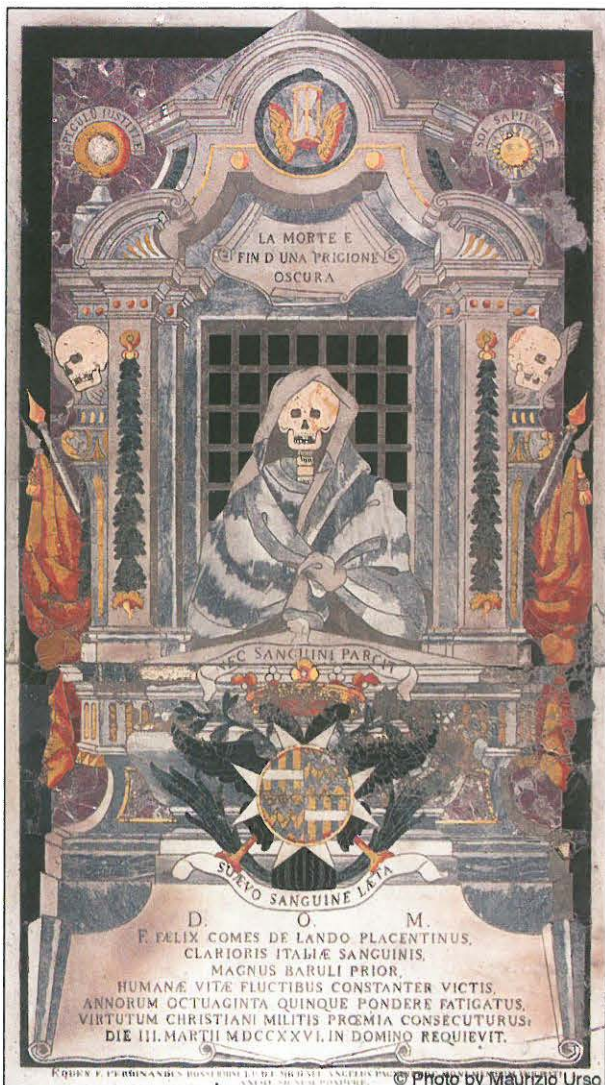
DANE MUNRO is specialising in Neo-Latin and Baroque culture, and is dedicating studies on St. John's and its treasures.

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. The Knights of St John were no exception, were they?

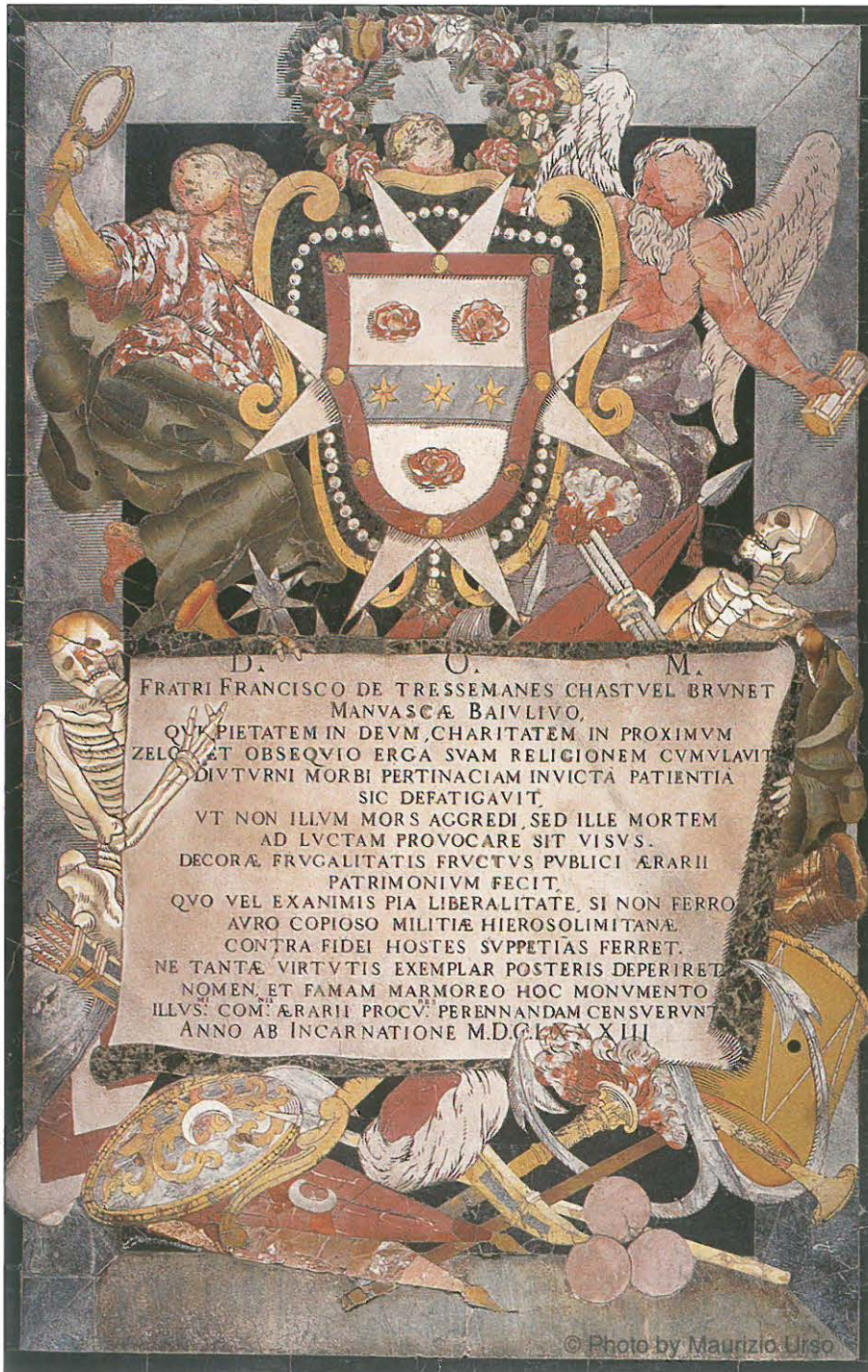
Funerary art at St John's followed cultural patterns as they emerged in Europe in the 15th and consecutive centuries, and in that respect the iconography is similar in intention, whether the funerary art was made for St. Michael's church at Schwäbisch Hall, Germany, Santa Maria del Popolo at Rome or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



Tombstone of Frà Felix de Lando at St. John's Co-Cathedral depicting an hourglass at the top.



The tombstone at St. John's of Frà Françoise de Tressemanes Chastuel Brunet embellished with fruit and flowers.

*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.

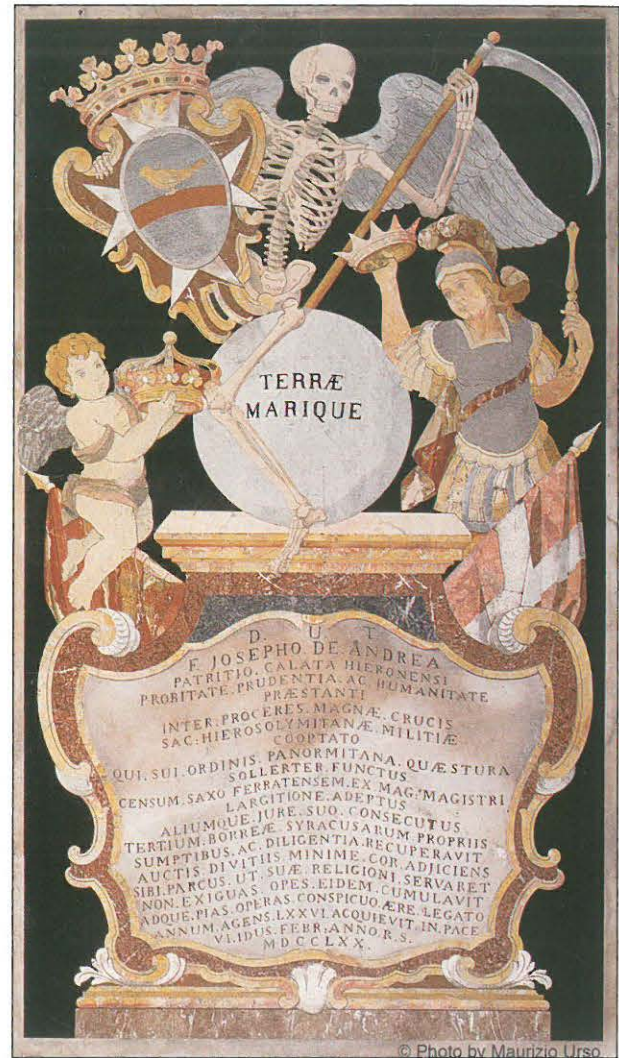
The anonymous 'Master E.S.', active between 1450 and 1467, from the Bodensee region of Germany, a goldsmith and copper engraver, left about 320 different engravings, in Late Gothic style, to the world, and his influence stretched from Germany to Holland, France, Spain and Italy. One of

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 11th 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, and 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.



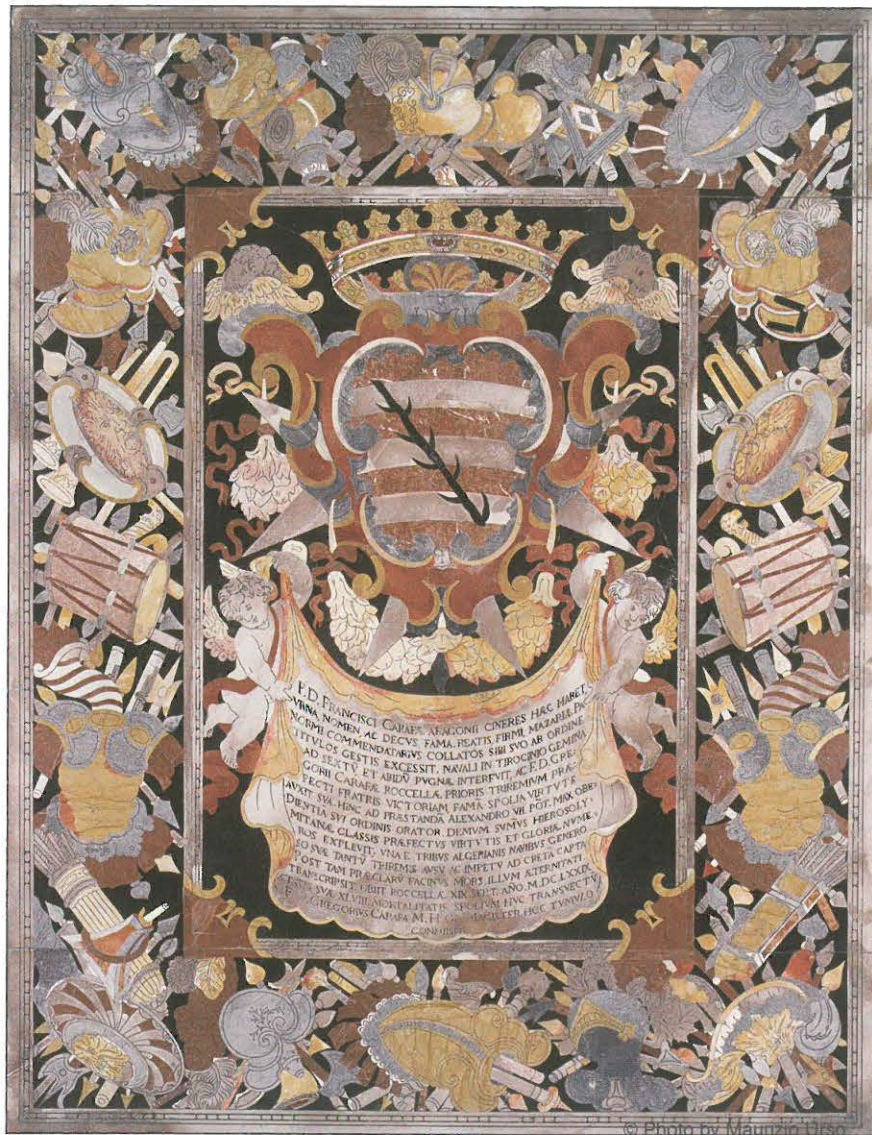
Frà René Duprè's tombstone adorned with skulls atop a monument.

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, an 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, AETERNITATI VICTURUS*.<sup>1</sup> Frà. Joachim de Challemaison states that he is



Tombstone of Frà Giovanni D'Andrea showing a skeleton astride the globe.

here awaiting his resurrection since the 9th day of November 1667, *HIC RESVRRECTIONEM EXPECTAT*, thereby answering to the opening line of the same text, in which the Lord is calling him "I am awaiting you", *EXPECTO TE*.<sup>2</sup> A tombstone is dedicated to the *happy and sacred memory of Frà. Pompeo Rospigliosi*,<sup>3</sup> 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*.<sup>4</sup> The text of Frà. Barthélemy de Bar opens with "I have lifted my soul up to you".<sup>5</sup> 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*



The triumphant and festive tombstone of Frà Francesco Carafa depicting death as just another form of celebration of life.

*aeternum non peccabis (in all your deeds remember your last things, and you shall never sin forever).*

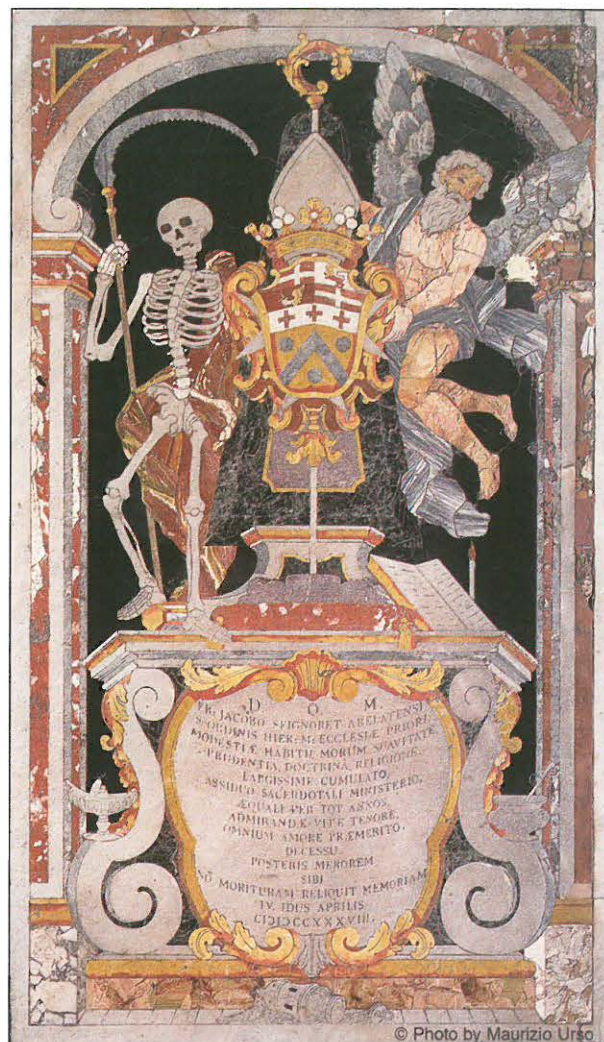
*Temptatio de fide* included temptation of Faith, temptation into despair, temptation into impatience in suffering on one's deathbed, temptation into vainglory and temptation into avarice. Failing resistance to even one of these temptations was deemed to be fatal for the soul of the dying. The cure against 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>6</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.*<sup>7</sup> Frà. Giovan Battista Macedonio, *truly with reliance on his Faith, offered his life in the decisive moment FIDELITER PRO FIDE IN DIS / CRIMINE VITAM ADDVXIT.*<sup>8</sup> 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.*<sup>9</sup> 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.*<sup>10</sup> *VANÆ GLORIÆ CONTEMPTOR*, reminds the passer-by that Frà. Carlo Francesco del Maro was a *despiser of vainglory.*<sup>11</sup>

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’.

Related to *memento mori* are the *emblemata* or emblems, which are essentially poems with illustrations, first published by Adrea Alciato in 1531. The themes are influenced by Renaissance thought, and contain Classical myths as well as Biblical and Christian symbols. A basic design would contain the *inscriptio* (the title or motto) over the *pictura* (illustration) and followed by the *subscriptio* (explanatory note). The content would be moralistic and educational. Some books of emblems achieved great popularity, and were translated into many languages. Often they were used as a handbook for other artists, a ready source of inspiration to be used by, for instance, engravers of marble tombstones in Malta and Italy. To name a few, besides the already mentioned Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum liber* (1531), there were Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (1593), P.C.Hooft, *Emblemata Amatoria* (1611) and Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (1614). The latter stated that there is no object without a meaning, *nihil est in rebus insane*.

*Memento mori* and *ars moriendi* 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 16th 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. The genre of *vanitas* became nevertheless very popular throughout all of Europe, and was an independent subject around 1600. Very characteristic of



Another tombstone adorned with a skeleton holding a scythe. This one is Frà Jacques Seignoret’s.

*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, 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 will stop, 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.* The preacher then continues with a long list of comparisons between mortality and eternity, old and new, future and past.

Baroque, with its capacity to shock and to capture the eye, was an excellent vehicle for the *memento mori* and *vanitas* ideas. St John's funerary art typically contains many *memento mori* symbols, and fewer symbols which are shared with *vanitas* paintings. The religious ideas and military ideals of the Knights and the Order did generally not lend themselves very well to civic atmosphere of *vanitas* paintings. The Knights gave a different meaning to the Renaissance concept of *utile et dulce*, with instruction and delight, 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.*<sup>12</sup> 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.*<sup>13</sup> The tombstones at St John's have the same moralising, warning and educational function as the *memento mori*, *emblemata* 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.*<sup>14</sup> A simple reminder of things we have lost at present.

(Photographs by Maurizio Urso. Courtesy of St. John's Co-Cathedral Foundation)

(See Notes on page 124)

Dane Munro has been a resident of Malta since 1993. He was engaged in the pursuit of further studies in Classics and History at the University of Malta and is currently reading a PhD in Neo-Latin and Baroque Culture in the Netherlands.