Painting for his life

When, in the summer of 1607, Caravaggio left the Spanish Viceregal city of Naples for the island of Malta, little did he imagine that, exactly one year later, a Frenchman, Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, would embrace him and bestow him with the habit of the Hospitaller Order of St John the Baptist as an honorific Knight of Magistral Obedience.[1] This was even more extraordinary because it materialised in a Catholic frontier country renowned not for its artistic patronage, but for the military austerity of its leader and for its absolute obedience to the Pope. It is within this humanist context that, in Malta, the celebration of Caravaggio's virtuosity overcame the dishonour of his turbulent lifestyle; he had, literally, succeeded to paint for his life.

By 1607, the new capital of Malta, Valletta, was solidly built, heavily fortified and nearing completion. It was the smallest and youngest capital city of Catholic Europe, and the one placed most dangerously at its southern frontier with the Islamic world. The Ottoman sultan and his berber allies were its enemy, and the galleys of the 'infidels', or the 'cruel Turk', as the Order's propaganda put it, sailed dangerously close. Valletta's fortifications should have impressed Caravaggio as much as they had impressed the French traveller and historiographer Jean Dumont later that century, who remarked: 'I may venture to say, without hyperbole, that this is the strongest City in the world'.[2] Indeed, despite its frontier status and the Ottoman threat, the fugitive artist should have felt safe and secure. Malta's military context, so deeply anchored within the war against the 'infidels', was new to the artist and to his art. Within Mediterranean politics, Malta, and the knights, punched in a manner that was disproportionate to its size and their numbers.[3] Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, or as he would be called, '*Frater Michael Angelus*', knew this very well.

It was the city of Valletta and the celebrated history of the Hospitaller Order of St John the Baptist that attracted to it the sons of the great European nobility, whether Spanish, Italian, German or French. Conditioned and driven by the propaganda of Papal Rome, their chivalric goal was that of knighthood, of

wearing the habit of the Order and of honouring religion and promoting their family name. Caravaggio's own elevation to an honorific knighthood within this Order, obtained in unique circumstances, was in itself an incredible feat of distinguished and refined connoisseurship and artistic patronage. The story is so unparalleled that any discussion of Caravaggio's Maltese phase must be done within the analytical framework of the Order's statutes, its military codes, its Catholic cause and the historic crusading ideals of the knights.

Ironically, the Order of St John, under the leadership of its grand master, sought authority directly from the Pope, the same authority that Caravaggio was fleeing. Papal Rome was held in utmost respect, even though controversies and negotiations between it and the Order were commonplace. Pope Paul V was *de facto* the Knights' supreme leader, and the artist was his fugitive.

Originally established within the context of the Crusades as a Hospitaller Order in Jerusalem in the early twelfth century, the Knights of St John soon took up the sword and became warriors, and their hospitaller intentions merged with their military status. Even though, between the thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the knights were gradually pushed further away from the Holy Land by their Muslim opponents, the Order of St John, as it became known, developed into a maritime power and its fleet became a force to be reckoned with in the Mediterranean. The fleet's ultimate goal was that of fighting the 'infidels', hunting them down, seizing their possessions and capturing them. In 1522, after the fall of Rhodes (which the Knights had occupied in the early fourteenth century), and a period of wandering that lasted seven years, the Order was given the island of Malta by Emperor Charles V, and its headquarters, or *Convento*, was established there in 1530.[4]

By the mid-sixteenth century and the dramatic episodes of the Great Siege of Malta of 1565, when the Ottomans attacked Malta on an unprecedented scale and were humiliatingly turned away, the Knights emerged as bulwarks of the Catholic faith. Their role in the victorious episodes of the Christian Armada in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 further strengthened this heroic and chivalric image. Rome, and the papacy, found in the Knights of Malta a natural extension of papal power. Malta became the Catholic faith's southernmost outpost in the Mediterranean, and the Knights patrolled the seas in this great duel between religions.

The exciting context of Caravaggio's life, from the moment of his turbulent escape from Rome in 1606, to his untimely death in 1610, witnessed perhaps the most significant artistic activities that were taking place outside Rome during those years. This short time span, during which Caravaggio moved through Naples, Malta, Sicily and once again Naples, has been called Caravaggio's 'final years'.[5] Caravaggio's final years were not those of an artist advanced in age, frail and seeking retirement, but those of an artist at the peak of his maturity and intellectual freedom, moving from place to place and impacting heavily on the art of all the cities where he stopped.

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5. Caravaggio, *Beheading of St John the Baptist* (Oratory of the Decollato, St John's Conventual Church, Valletta). Detail (blood and signature extensively inpainted, following damage in that area sustained over the years and during an attempt to steal the painting in 1991)

Within those four final years, and for a very brief moment in the magnificent history of Italian art, Malta was set to play a prominent role. It was a period when Caravaggio, who was essentially a fugitive yearning to return to Rome, produced outstanding naturalist masterpieces that shook the story of art south of Rome. Within this charged and dramatic setting, his stay in Malta provided the artist with a long moment of tranquillity, a period during which he reflected on both his life and his art. The Maltese paintings of *St Jerome* (St John's Museum, Valletta) and the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* (Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato, Valletta), amongst his others, bear testimony to this. They are the result of profound intellectual engagement, of an understanding of humankind, of the tangible and the intangible, of light and its transformative power, and of space and meticulous site-specific methods of composing.[6]

Caravaggio *Romanus* (as identified by the Inquisition in Malta upon his arrival in mid-1607), travelled to the island less than fourteen months after slaying a man named Ranuccio Tomassoni during a brawl in Rome. Away from

the crowded commotion of a sprawling Naples, the compact city of Valletta, so modest in comparison, became a haven for the artist. Far from his artistic rivals, reflecting on his art, and ambitiously painting his largest picture yet, he also sought political alliances with the aim of helping him achieve his ultimate objective of setting foot in Rome once more.

Malta celebrated the artist like no other place had done before. The Knights of St John embraced him within their fold in July 1608 in a humanist move that had no precedent, not even in the eventful five-hundred-year history of the Order of St John. However, after the sudden drama of a second brawl in which he was involved in August 1608, the subsequent detention in September, and a dramatic break-out in early October, Caravaggio's 'restful' period was over. His creativity and art became inevitably dogged by the turbulent circumstances that followed.

The extraordinary pictures that Caravaggio produced in his final years are the culmination of a powerful naturalist and realist style that had taken Rome by storm from 1600 onwards. By 1606, his style had evolved considerably, obviously conditioned by the charged character of his own life. Despite the rough and tumble of his daily life and the image of a macho painter that was inevitably created around him, the artist produced inventions of extraordinary religious and spiritual intensity, in many instances rethinking the established iconographic tradition of religious subjects. His own approach was a search for profound realist drama that was deeply anchored in the happenings of everyday life, particularly that of the street. This he illuminated by pockets of light and shade that hit the canvas with naturalist inventions of striking intensity.

He lived *in* his art.

Art as experience

As one enters the space of the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato in Valletta, and is drawn in by the aura of Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, a potent exchange between the work of art and its audience starts. The painting's imaginary space turns real and it becomes part of the life world. The work moves from the eye to the mind, to a deeper penetration of the being, to an experiencing of that something beyond, that thing which the eyes on their own cannot achieve. It breaks the visible and bridges with the invisible. This painting is not about its shapes and forms, but about its capacity to challenge the mind and to transform art into experience. It gives a potent dimension to human action, to light and to silence. The enormous physical size of this work becomes larger and greater the deeper one engages with it; the more that one absorbs it, the smaller one becomes, as one is engulfed by the immensity of its creation. Once this is understood, one no longer stands in front of a picture, but experiences the sentiment of genius.

The corpus of his final years (1606–1610)

Recent interest in Caravaggio's 'final years', including exhibitions and conservation projects, provided a perfect context for assessing the role played by Caravaggio's Malta. This coincided with extensive research activity on the Maltese period; research which has moved into a phase of deeper and wider understanding. Malta's readiness to be absorbed by Caravaggio's *pittura del vero* is key to understanding the mechanics that led Caravaggio to paint his *Beheading of St John the Baptist*. However, despite the growing knowledge on the subject and documentary discoveries, there are still a number of questions that remain unanswered. In general, much is known, and the number of personages Caravaggio had contact with has been considerably enlarged, but at the same time, much also remains hypothetical. The precise reasons why the artist came to Malta, the personage who first directed him towards the island, the Knights' support for full papal pardon and eventual return to Rome, the reason for the eventful brawl, the circumstances of his escape, the extent of the Knights' vengeance and the full corpus of pictures, are still subject to some debate. The speed by which research moved is however fast, and the aim of this book is to bring readers up to date with the latest scholarship.

The Maltese works are deeply anchored within the oeuvre of Caravaggio's final years and need to be considered within the wider context of the pictures that the artist painted in the eventful last four years of his life. Chronology, for an artist who painted with vigour and nerve, is difficult to securely pin down and any discussion of it is subject to some disagreement.[7] There are obvious fixed dates for many of the works of his final oeuvre, but the chronology for a small number of paintings is still subject to controversy, and there is no universal agreement amongst Caravaggio scholars on the attribution and dating for some of the 'undocumented' works.

After 1606, Caravaggio's art changed rapidly; he rethought his methods and approaches, and at times worked in different methods in parallel.[8] There is, however, a clear and distinct development and change in his working method as he moved into his final years. On at least two occasions during this unsettled

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period, namely in the hasty flight from Rome and the dramatic escape from Malta, it is obvious that Caravaggio had left his preferred brushes, pigment pots, canvas rolls and palette behind. In Rome, moreover, he would have had to leave his friends and the models that he had been painting from life. In these circumstances, any artist would experience a sense of loss, even of direction, as well as a negative psychological feeling of having to start all over again.

In his post-Roman years, Caravaggio's models and types were different from those he had depicted in the papal city; he painted reality but some of his figures were not real personages depicted directly from life, but profoundly realistic images that inhabited his mind. Consequently, these personages appear more than once in paintings he painted in different locations. The prison guard in the Malta *Beheading*, for example, has more or less the same physiognomy as

6. Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of St Andrew* (The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland)

the man holding a handkerchief in the *Burial of St Lucy* (Church of Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, Syracuse), painted just some months later in Sicily. The head of the Malta *St Jerome* bears striking similarities to that of the earlier St Andrew in the Neapolitan *Crucifixion of St Andrew* (The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland), whilst the female image that he used for Salome (or her maid) in the *Beheading*, belongs to the same typology as the Virgin in the *Annunciation of the Virgin* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy), the Magdalene in the *Burial of St Lucy*, and the Virgin in the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Museo Regionale, Messina). This, however, obviously does not mean that Caravaggio abandoned the method of painting directly from reality, and there are numerous instances where the artist was clearly painting from life. The Maltese *St Jerome* and the *Sleeping Cupid* (Palazzo Pitti, Florence) are obvious cases in point.

FIG. 6

Stylistic, technical, documentary and contextual research carried out on the corpus of Caravaggio's final works provide, despite controversies, enough ground for a more than tentative chronology. There are pictures which fit within a stylistic continuum, but a number of others seem to defy time and location and cannot (without the availability of precise documents) be securely pinned down to a precise date. It must be underlined that the period under discussion is a short one, namely four years long, and that this in itself makes it difficult to present a precise chronology for undocumented pictures.

The Secure Corpus of Works

In quantifying the number of extant paintings dating to Caravaggio's final years, there is consensus amongst scholars on a corpus of twenty-one autograph pictures, or twenty-two if the stolen *Nativity with St Lawrence* (formerly Oratorio di San Lorenzo, Palermo) is included in the group.[9] This comprises nine altar paintings and thirteen easel pictures, of which only two are portraits.

The chronology of Caravaggio's large religious paintings emerges with considerable clarity, even though the patronage of three of them, namely the *Virgin of the Rosary* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the Cleveland *Crucifixion of St Andrew* and the Nancy *Annunciation of the Virgin*, is still not precisely documented. The greatest problem is certainly that posed by the *Virgin of the Rosary*, a picture traditionally held to be an early Neapolitan work, even though it is stylistically and technically much closer to his Roman period. The latter view, in which the picture may belong to the Roman phase, has recently gained some ground in Caravaggio scholarship.[10] The fact that the *Virgin of the Rosary* was on sale in Naples in September 1607 does not necessarily mean that it was actually painted there, even though it very likely was. In any case, this is a classic example where a picture's early provenance can, at times, complicate matters. Its patron is most probably the man immortalised by Caravaggio in the lower left corner, but his identity similarly remains difficult to ascertain.

7.

Caravaggio's circumstances and activity during his first weeks in exile after his escape from Rome in mid-1606, possibly protected in the towns of Paliano, Palestrina, or even Zagarolo within the Lazio region, are still difficult to assemble. Of the pictures that he painted during this time, only the *Supper at Emmaus* (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) can be held as a reference point, even though it can also belong to a slightly later date. Compared with his earlier treatment of the same subject in the *Supper at Emmaus* (The National Gallery, London), its profound and introverted intensity marks it as a veritable icon of this new late phase. There are no early documents for this work, but it is most likely the picture that Caravaggio's biographers, Giulio Mancini and Giovanni Pietro Bellori, mention as having been painted in this period.[11] FIG. 7

Of the other autograph pictures proposed as belonging to this period, Caravaggio's painting of *St Francis in Meditation* (Museo Civico, Cremona)[12] is a problematic one, not in its autograph status, but in its precise dating. It is an undocumented picture and its provenance can only be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century. There is a clear and very direct link with the Roman years in the treatment of the background, but the face of St Francis and his pose reflect the new developments announced in the Brera *Supper at Emmaus,* and which will climax in the Malta *Beheading*. The saint's crouching position, where one elbow rests on his knee, with hands clasped together and the head resting on them, was in Caravaggio's mind when he pondered and painted the man cast in shadow at bottom left in the *Seven Acts of Mercy* (Pio Monte della FIG. 8

7. Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus* (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

8. Caravaggio, *St Francis in Meditation* (Museo Civico, Cremona)

Misericordia, Naples) in Naples in late 1606. The *St Francis* encompasses the character of the artist's 1605–1606 work, even though its dating remains the subject of debate.

Caravaggio had moved south to Naples in the last days of the summer of 1606. There, he immediately embraced a new network of patrons and prolifically embarked on the production of large-scale works. The first documented work is generally considered lost. On 6 October, Caravaggio received a hefty advance payment for an altar painting of the *Virgin and Child with Sts Dominic, Francis, Nicholas and Vito* to measure more than 3.5 metres high.[13] Commissioned by the merchant Niccolò Radolovich, this picture is still shrouded in mystery and has not yet been successfully identified, even if it has also been (wrongly, in my opinion) associated with the *Virgin of the Rosary*. It should be emphasised, however, that it is not known whether Caravaggio had actually ever completed or delivered the work. It would therefore be logical to conclude that the Radolovich painting can be considered as a lost picture or, as seems rather plausible, one that was never actually painted. Knowing how, between 1606 and 1607, the artist had conned Fabio Masetti, Cesare d'Este's (Duke of Modena) Ambassador in Rome, into delaying and never consigning a picture on which he had taken a deposit,[14] it is likely that Caravaggio left Naples for Malta without actually delivering the Radolovich picture. Throughout the artist's first Neapolitan period, for example, Cesare d'Este was furious about how his ambassador had been treated by Caravaggio, how he had been

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'fooled' into interminable prolongations over the delivery of his picture. The Radolovich picture could have been a similar case.

Two well-documented altar paintings from Caravaggio's first Neapolitan phase are the beautifully-controlled *Flagellation of Christ* (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples) and the impressively realistic re-interpretation of the theme of the *Seven Acts of Mercy*. These altar paintings show how Caravaggio had managed to overcome the shock of the Tomassoni murder, and how he could approach large canvases with such concentration, profound intensity of vision and spiritual understanding. Caravaggio received payment for the *Seven Acts of Mercy* in

FIG. 9

9. Caravaggio, *Flagellation of Christ* (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples)

10.

FIG. 10

FIG. 11

10. Caravaggio, *Seven Acts of Mercy* (Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples)

January 1607,[15] whilst payments for the *Flagellation*, executed for Tommaso de Franchis, date to May 1607 (documented payments do not specifically identify the picture),[16] just before he left for Malta. The invention of the *Flagellation* was tremendously successful and it was probably just after this that he painted a smaller horizontal version of the subject (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen) for an unknown patron.

Both paintings are perfect companions to another altar painting, the undocumented *Crucifixion of St Andrew* in Cleveland,[17] which probably dates to late 1606 or early 1607. The contextual problem with this work is that its early

provenance, though clearly associated with Don Juan Alfonso Pimentel, Conde de Benavente and Viceroy of Naples between 1603 and 1610, does not, on its own, serve to securely tie it down to any one of Caravaggio's two Neapolitan periods. Dating must thus be based on stylistic and technical grounds. Proponents for a late date consider mainly the treatment of the saint's body which, clearly, is different in handling to that of Christ in the *Flagellation*. This, however, happened on other occasions as well, where Caravaggio approached the handling of pigment in a different manner even though he was painting pictures within a relatively close period. On the other hand, in both works, the rendition of the tormentors shows remarkably similar handling and brushwork.

The next phase in this chronology is the period under study, namely the Maltese period, which spanned until October 1608. Given the amount of time that Caravaggio spent on the island, the corpus of secure pictures dating from Malta is undeniably small. Amongst these, the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* and the *Portrait of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt and a Page* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), are milestone pictures, which perfectly sum up his Maltese temperament and which probably sealed his elevation to knighthood. The vastness of the *Beheading*, spread out on an enormous canvas, was a challenge that Caravaggio probably set for himself. It was a scale that was more appropriate to mural painting and one that he had never previously attempted. The *Beheading* ambitiously, and successfully, extended the east-end space of the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato in Valletta, for where it was painted. In this painting, the street-like appearance that he had earlier envisaged for the *Seven Acts of Mercy*, with figures roaming by as if in a busy Neapolitan alley, made way for an arrangement of figures dictated by a calculated geometric composition. The vastness of the space itself, in turn, paved the way for the later Sicilian altarpieces of the *Burial of St Lucy* and the *Raising of Lazarus*.

The *Portrait of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt and a Page* and the *Portrait of a Knight Grand Cross (Antonio Martelli)* (Palazzo Pitti, Florence) are the only two portraits that can be securely identified as belonging to Caravaggio's late years, even though there are notable technical differences in how Caravaggio executed the two. The *Portrait of Wignacourt* was an official state portrait and is 'properly' finished in treatment. The *Portrait of a Knight Grand Cross (Antonio Martelli)*, on the other hand, is a more intimate 'household' portrait, almost fugitive in its technical nature and handling of the brush.[18]

Any doubts regarding the autograph status of the *Portrait of a Knight Grand Cross (Antonio Martelli)*, probably the last known portrait that Caravaggio painted (excluding self-portraits painted within religious compositions), have by now been fully settled. Undocumented, the picture was only identified and attributed to the artist in the mid-1960s. It has since been faced with controversy in both attribution and the identification of the sitter, especially in its association of the sitter with Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, which gained ground in the 1980s and 1990s. This should be dismissed,[19] in favour of the more plausible suggestion

11.

that the man is the Florentine knight Fra Antonio Martelli, who resided in Malta at the same time as Caravaggio. The Pitti canvas was most likely painted in the winter months of late 1607, or probably early 1608.

Close in date, but painted more solidly, is the *Sleeping Cupid* (Palazzo Pitti, Florence), painted for the Florentine knight Fra Francesco dell'Antella (1567–1624).[20] In turn, this is the only known mythological picture belonging to his late years. Its Maltese context is secure. An inscription on the reverse, dating the work to 1608, is without any doubt accurate.

Similarly, 1608 is most likely the date for the undocumented altar painting representing the *Annunciation of the Virgin* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy).[21] A Maltese provenance for this remarkable, but unfortunately ruined, painting, is forcefully argued for in the following chapters, despite some disagreement between scholars on its dating and context. Painted for the House of Lorraine in France, the painting was probably commissioned by the son of Duke Henry II, Charles of Lorraine, Comte de Brie and Knight of Justice, who was on the island in 1608. In its handling of brushwork and method of execution, the painting is fascinatingly similar to the *Beheading*. Moreover, as may be observed, it bears the same hallmark of an exercise in mathematical construction.

After Malta, disgraced and still a fugitive, but not at all secretive about his whereabouts, Caravaggio escaped to Sicily in October 1608, restlessly moving, seeking protection and painting in the major cities of Syracuse, Messina and Palermo.[22] Strangely, he did not travel immediately north to mainland Italy, to the Neapolitan city that had given him fortune, but embedded himself in

11. Caravaggio, *Flagellation* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen)

Sicily for some twelve months. The Sicilian period was particularly productive, and stylistically and technically anchored in his Maltese works. The three great works of this period, namely the *Burial of St Lucy*, painted late in 1608, the *Raising of Lazarus*, and the *Adoration of the Shepherds,* both painted in 1609, echo the power of Caravaggio's art in their brilliant conception and rendition of compositional space. It is fascinating to see how the artist moved from the constrained masterpiece of the *Beheading* to the astounding dramatisation of the *Lazarus*, or how, within the space of a couple of weeks, he could paint the *Adoration*, so different in character to the *Lazarus*. The sadly compromised appearance of the *St Lucy* and the *Lazarus* unfolds more drama; unfortunately, their state of preservation does not help much in comparative work with the smaller paintings.

The *St Lucy* was painted when Caravaggio was once again on the run, a fugitive Knight of Malta, understandably looking over his shoulder with some apprehension. In such a situation it is simply incredible how the artist summoned the spirit to paint a picture measuring some four by three metres, and its sheer size is indeed an obvious indication that he was by no means in hiding. It was a bold statement painted for the most venerated shrine in Syracuse, built just above the burial place of the martyred saint. After Malta, Sicily was now to succumb to his art. The Senate of Syracuse, instead of arresting the fugitive painter, applauded his brush and granted him the protection he so badly needed.

The altar paintings of the *Burial of St Lucy,* the *Raising of Lazarus* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, together with the *Nativity with St Lawrence* (stolen in 1969 and not yet recovered), are the only large paintings that can be clearly documented to Caravaggio's Sicilian period. The artist is, however, known to have produced a number of easel paintings, even if their identification remains, in some instances, controversial.

In Messina, Caravaggio's psychological state attracted the attention of the Sicilian nobleman Nicolò di Giacomo who, sometime before August 1609, commissioned from him four paintings of the Passion of Christ. One of these, an unfortunately untraced painting representing *Christ carrying the Cross with the Virgin and two tormentors*, was actually delivered by the artist,[23] but it seems probable that the other three pictures were never executed. Dramatically, in his own note on the commission, di Giacomo described Caravaggio as having a *cervello stravolto* (confused mind). Tension and strain were perhaps starting to take their toll, but this was also when Caravaggio charged his work with an even greater intensity. Soon thereafter, the artist was on his way to Naples.

Why the artist had not felt the urge to return immediately to Naples after escaping from Malta remains somewhat of a mystery, the veil on which may perhaps be lifted by the fact that, on his return to the Parthenope city a year later, in October 1609, he was badly manhandled and beaten. The real cause of this scarring attack remains, however, unknown. This second Neapolitan sojourn thus commenced in dramatic circumstances.

A fascinating group of easel pictures, generally held to be very late works, provide more dating problems than certainties. These are the two versions of *Salome with the Head of St John the Baptist* (Palacio Real, Madrid; The National Gallery, London), *David with the Head of Goliath* (Galleria Borghese, Rome), *St John the Baptist* (Galleria Borghese, Rome), the *Denial of Peter* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and the *Martyrdom of St Ursula* (Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano, Naples). Only one of these, namely the *St Ursula*, is securely dated to the second Neapolitan period; the others fluctuate between 1606/07 and 1610.

The important fixed reference for dating these works is that set by the haunting *Martyrdom of St Ursula*. This picture was painted in Naples during the artist's last weeks of life, and is well documented to May 1610.[24] In both style and technique, it is very close to the undocumented *Denial of St Peter*. The latter, a masterpiece in the articulation of gestures, should thus be a very late work and of Neapolitan origin. It is painted thinly, just like the *St Ursula*, with strong dabs of paint in the white highlights. Through such dramatic highlights, in which the brush struck the canvas with vigour, Caravaggio very selectively modelled the figures and dramatised the representation.

FIG. 13

In the Borghese *St John the Baptist*, traditionally held to date to 1610, the young saint is a recluse who looks out at the spectators with a perturbing intensity. Undeniably, however, the picture has a perplexingly different character to that of the *St Ursula*. If it were one of the two paintings representing *St John* that Caravaggio is known to have had with him on the *felucca* during his last unfortunate trip (as documents of 1610 suggest), then it was probably not painted in his last weeks of life. It is traditionally maintained that the *St John the Baptist* was painted for Cardinal Scipione Borghese in order to appease him and hope for papal pardon. Even if this were the case, it does not necessarily mean that the picture dates to 1610, and it could have been painted in Naples before he left for Malta in 1607.

Similarly, the Borghese *David* is at the same time haunting and problematic. It is one of those pictures that, like others painted by the artist, simply cannot be dated easily and securely. Traditionally, and rather romantically, it is held to be Caravaggio's last picture and its drama fits in perfectly with this, but such dating may need to be reviewed.[25] Its power spans the entire four years of his late period, and its uncertain early history makes it even more enigmatic.

FIG. 12

Of the two interpretations of *Salome with the Head of the Baptist*, the one in Madrid, so forceful in its composition and treatment of mass and space, is probably the earlier and possibly dates as early as the first Neapolitan period (in Naples, it was greatly admired by Battistello Caracciolo, who was inspired by it for his own work).[26] Again, the early history of these works is not known and both paintings are the subject of considerable debate.[27] The London *Salome* is probably post-Malta and, in its handling of paint, is undeniably close to the Sicilian works. In this, it could possibly be identified as the picture that Bellori claims Caravaggio painted in order to placate Grand Master Wignacourt after

12.

13.

12. Caravaggio, *Salome with the Head of St John the Baptist* (Palacio Real, Madrid)

13. Caravaggio, *Martyrdom of St Ursula* (Gallerie d'Italia, Naples)

his escape from the island, even though Bellori mentions Herodiade with the head of John in a basin, rather than Salome.[28] The painting mentioned by Bellori, however, does not seem to have ever made it to Malta.

As already mentioned, Caravaggio's second Neapolitan sojourn is a period of easel paintings. Badly injured following the tavern brawl, the artist hardly had the energy to paint, and remained in convalescence at the palace of his long-time protector, the Marchesa Costanza Colonna. After regaining his health, he painted his last pictures.

He departed from Naples in July 1610, almost sure that a papal pardon was finally being conceded. Caravaggio would, however, never make it to Rome.[29] With him on board a *felucca*, among other things, he had at least three pictures, two representing St John and one of the Magdalene.[30] Following a brief detention in prison at Palo and a hurried move north, Caravaggio died, most probably of fever, at the age of thirty-nine, miserably deserted at Port' Ercole on 18 July 1610.

Lost Works, Proposals, Rejections and Controversies

Whilst the corpus of autograph paintings by the artist is held as closed by many scholars, others open Caravaggio's oeuvre to include a small number of other pictures and inventions. These obviously come with considerable controversy.

Mancini, Bellori and Giovanni Baglione, another of Caravaggio's biographers, mention a painting of the Magdalene, which Caravaggio painted when he was in hiding after his escape from Rome. This painting remains elusive. The imagery of this work is well known, but it surely cannot be identified with one of two paintings (both in private collections) presented as autograph works in recent years; these pictures are here considered to be contemporary copies. These two paintings, namely one recently discovered in a private collection and attributed to Caravaggio by Mina Gregori,[31] and one formerly in the Klain collection,[32] are controversially ascribed by some to the artist himself.

Caravaggio's depiction of the *Magdalene* immediately achieved great popularity and was widely copied; it is a haunting image, an evocation of the artist's personal drama and an intimate reflection of his own distress. If this were the picture painted when in hiding after escaping from Rome, the artist must have then taken it with him to Naples. It is also probable that it was deposited there until he took it back with him on his last and ill-fated sea voyage in July 1610. It has already been mentioned above that a painting of the *Magdalene* is known to have been on the *felucca* that was carrying the artist during his voyage from Naples to Rome. The reference to this picture is clear; Bishop Deodato Gentile makes note of '*doi S. Gio(v)anni, e la Maddalena*', which had been taken in custody by the Marchesa Costanza Colonna once the boat carrying Caravaggio's possessions had made its return to Naples.[33] Documentary traces for the

Magdalene are lost after the reference to the picture being in the hands of the Spanish authorities on 31 July 1610.[34]

It is very probable, but not a fact, that the painting mentioned in the Gentile 1610 document is Caravaggio's prototype for the many copies that survive. Care must be taken, however, because it cannot, with the present state of affairs, be ascertained whether the picture on the *felucca* was the one painted in 1606 or, possibly, another one painted at a later stage in Naples.

It is very clear that Caravaggio's prototype was much celebrated because many copies and derivations of it exist. One of them, executed by the artist Wibrandt de Geest, is actually signed, dated and significantly inscribed as: '*Imitando Michaelem Angelum Carrava . . ./Mediolan./Wybrandus de Geest/Friesius/A° 1.6.2.0.*'[35] The specific reference to it as a copy after Caravaggio strongly reaffirms the ascription of this imagery to Caravaggio. Furthermore, the artist Louis Finson (before 1580–1617), who worked in Naples between 1605 (or just before that) and 1612, appears to have known the original Magdalene well and repeated this composition at least twice. One of the two is in a private collection[36] and the other is at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Marseille.[37] FIG. 16

There is still considerable controversy on other proposed inventions by the artist known only through hypothetical copies. A *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (Private Collection), controversially ascribed to Caravaggio by some scholars but rejected here,[38] is a case in point. Even though it is well documented that a picture of this subject by Caravaggio was on sale in Naples in 1607, it is debatable whether this specific painting, plausibly attributed by other scholars to Louis Finson, is a perfect replica of a work by Caravaggio that should still be considered lost.[39]

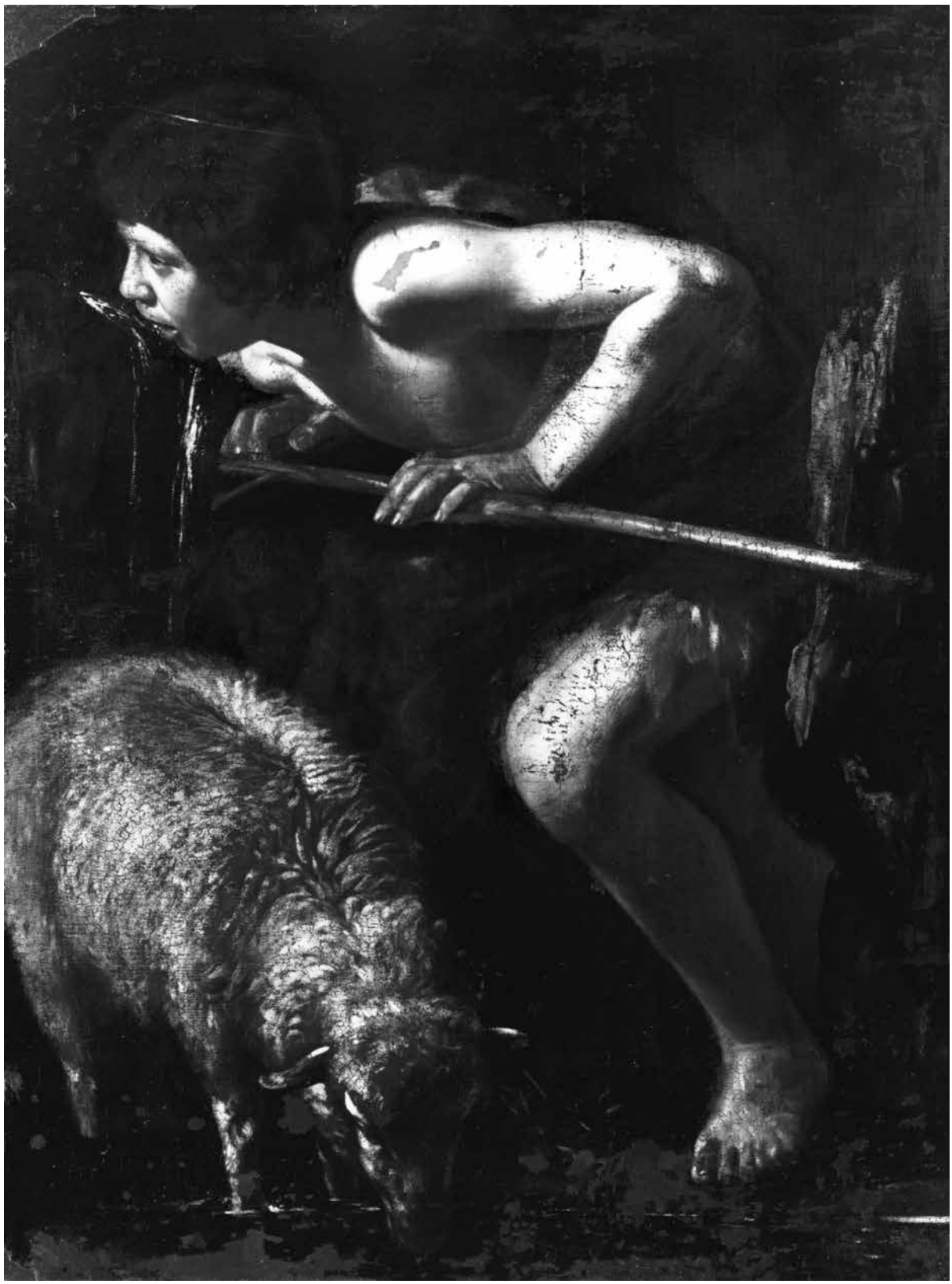
Amongst other controversial works are the paintings representing *David with the Head of Goliath* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), *Reclining St John the Baptist* (Private Collection, Monaco) and the *Toothpuller* (Pitti Palace, Florence).[40] The *David* could indeed be an original of *c.*1606/1607 (even though problematically painted on panel), but the *Reclining St John the Baptist* is most definitely not. The *Toothpuller*, on the other hand, remains a problematic picture. While it has some points of contact with Caravaggio's late work, there are also notable differences that gravitate against its autograph status.[41]

Later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories, and miscellaneous documents and sources, refer to other pictures that Caravaggio possibly painted in his last years. Whilst some references are no doubt incorrect, the probability that other paintings by the artist are just waiting to be 'rediscovered' is considerable.

A number of other paintings have, over the past years, been presented as 'proposals'; the ones under review here pertain to the artist's late years. Only one of them, in my opinion, is really worth proposing as a Caravaggio original, namely a full-length *St John at the Spring* (Private Collection).[42] The invention for the painting is fascinating and it seems likely, judging by the number of

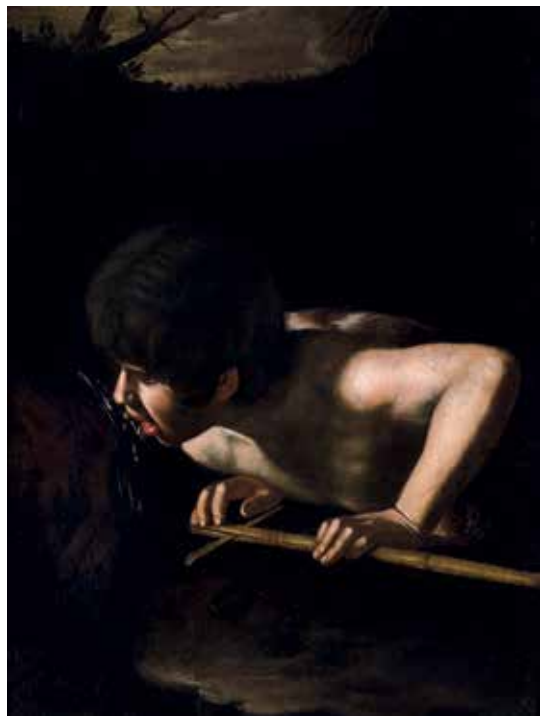
FIG. 14

14. Caravaggio, *St John at the Spring* (Private Collection). Photo taken during restoration in 2004



14.

16.



17.

copies and derivations, that Caravaggio executed an original version of this image. This can possibly be associated with one of the two paintings of St John that Caravaggio had with him when he left Naples in the summer of 1610. The painting's picture surface has suffered and parts of it, most notably on the figure, are currently repainted and thus hamper proper examination of the original brushwork. The work, however, has a hauntingly potent timbre that makes it stand out as a strong candidate for autograph status.

In addition, two smaller versions of the *St John at the Spring,* both from private collections, have featured in earlier publications as possible autograph works, even though both are not. One of these, showing the saint represented in a close-up quarter length, is in a private collection in Malta (on loan at MUŻA, Valletta); this picture has been, in the past, attributed to Caravaggio, but the attribution no longer has any validity.[43]

FIG. 17

Of interest are copies and versions of a half-length horizontal narrative of the *Ecce Homo*. The invention for these copies seems correct and Caravaggio might have painted an original of this very same composition, probably in Sicily, which has yet to be unearthed. A recently discovered and restored *Ecce Homo* (Private Collection, Spain), associated by some scholars with a documented commission for Massimo Massimi in Rome, has been otherwise proposed to date to the artist's Neapolitan phase. This is a painting of interest and potential, which however still requires to be properly exhibited and studied by a wider group of Caravaggio scholars.[44]

For the purpose of this study, note should be made of the painting of *St Jerome* (Worcester Art Museum), held to be bought from Malta in the mid-

Opposite: 15. Attributed to Filippo Vitale, *St John at the Spring* (Private Collection, on loan to MUŻA, Malta). Detail

16. Louis Finson, *Mary Magdalene* (Private Collection)

17. Attributed to Filippo Vitale, *St John at the Spring* (Private Collection, on loan to MUŻA, Malta)

15.

18.

twentieth century.[45] Its attribution to Caravaggio has been supported by some scholars,[46] but this interesting picture is definitely not by the artist. It is the work of a very close follower, who probably had first-hand knowledge of Caravaggio's Maltese and Sicilian works. The picture deserves greater study once it is restored.

Caravaggio's reputation as a portrait painter was considerable but, somewhat paradoxically, few are the portraits that can be securely attributed to his final years and the two that are known date to the Maltese period. This is indeed an area where more research needs to be undertaken and where, surely, the corpus of portraits attributed to the artist may be enlarged. Proposals for new portraits are currently met with considerable misgivings; some still need to be properly exhibited and studied. One such work ascribed to Caravaggio's first Neapolitan period is the *Portrait of a Man* (Private Collection).[47] Stylistically, this painting is closer to Caravaggio's Roman (rather than first Neapolitan) period, but it still needs to be exhibited and studied in greater detail.

A number of the 'lost' portraits are well documented, and these include an oval portrait of Grand Master Wignacourt, which was in the possession of Fra Francesco dell'Antella.[48] This picture should have been painted in Malta and was probably taken to Florence, where it was recorded, when dell'Antella left the island in 1611.

It is within this multifaceted approach to Caravaggio's final years that the stage is set for the discussion of the artist's Maltese period. It must be underlined that the complexities of Caravaggio's Malta cannot be bracketed only to the period between July 1607 and October 1608, but it should be analysed within broader theoretical issues, timeframes and patronage mechanics.

18. Mid-seventeenth century *Map of Malta* (Private Collection)

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Caravaggio to Mattia Preti: Baroque Painting in Malta

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Synopsis
This book builds on and adds to *Baroque Painting in Malta*, which was published in 2009. Unlike the previous publication, this book concentrates exclusively on the 17th century. It synoptically surveys the context and character of Baroque painting in Malta and discusses the work of its major protagonists. Based on extensive archival research and connoisseurship study undertaken by the author over the span of twenty years, the first edition of this book addressed and clarified many issues of attributions and dating of paintings and presented firm oeuvres for the major figures of the Maltese Baroque. Many archival references, payments for pictures, and patronage issues were new. Similarly, many attributions were new. Numerous attributions were confirmed, revisited or newly ascribed and the oeuvre of the major protagonists of Baroque Art in Malta was properly defined. This book expands on such work, providing new data, attributions, discoveries and analyses.

Unique Selling Points
The books provides new insights into the art scene and patronage in Malta during the time of the Knights and provides documentation on how the two masters – Caravaggio and later Mattia Preti – of the baroque period influenced the works of painters in the major courts across Europe.

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CARAVAGGIO TO MATTIA PRETI

Baroque Painting in Malta

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Back cover: Mattia Preti, Ceiling decoration of St John's Co-Cathederal, Valletta. Detail

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Contents

Preface

This book builds on and adds to *Baroque Painting in Malta*, which was published in 2009. Different to that edition, this book concentrates exclusively on the seventeenth-century. It synoptically surveys the context and character of Baroque painting in Malta and discusses the work of its major protagonists. Based on extensive archival research and connoisseurship study undertaken by the author over the span of twenty years, the first edition of this book addressed and clarified many issues of attributions and dating of paintings and presented firm oeuvres for the major figures of the Maltese Baroque. Many archival references, payments for pictures, and patronage issues were new. Similarly, many attributions were new. Numerous attributions were confirmed, re-visited or newly ascribed and the oeuvre of the major protagonists of Baroque Art in Malta was properly defined. This book expands on such work, providing new data, attributions, discoveries and analyses.

The first edition of this book was the result of the gigantic leaps made in the study of the story of Baroque painting in Malta during the final decades of the twentieth century, when scholars embarked in proper archival study of the period. Until then, there were many generalizations and inaccuracies, especially concerning biographical aspects and attributions. The study of the mechanics of patronage was, furthermore, practically inexistent. Research thus necessitated extensive work on the Conti volumes of the Archiepiscopal Archives, Floriana (AAF) and in those dispersed in various parishes, in the Archives of the Order of St John (AOM) at the National Library (NLM), and at the Notarial Archives in Valletta (NAV), amongst other archival sources both in Malta and abroad.

There are no contemporary accounts of seventeenth-century art in Malta, even if some of its international protagonists feature in the major accounts of Italian art. Caravaggio's stay on the island, for example, was discussed by most of his biographers, including Giovanni Baglione and Giovanni Pietro Bellori. These provided the essential snippets of information on both his life and works, even though both writers do not seem to have ever visited the island. Mattia Preti's biographer Bernardo De Dominici, who wrote the *Vite* of Neapolitan artists, on the other hand gave an exhaustive text (with some inaccuracies) on Preti's work and included not only his work in Naples, but also those in Malta. De Dominici had an intimate knowledge of Malta, having lived on the island with his father Raimondo De Dominici, who was himself a bottega assistant to Preti and had direct access to the master.

An attempt at a compendium of *Uomini Illustri di Malta*, including notes on artists active on the island, was made in the mid-eighteenth century by a Religioso Cappuccino, possibly the Capuchin Friar Bartolomeo Mifsud, known as Padre Pelagio (1708–81). His work remained unpublished, but it fortunately survives in a manuscript written by Count Saverio Marchese (1757–1833) from notes originally compiled by the Capuchin. Despite having some inaccuracies and contradictions, the work is very informative. Similarly informative is the *Galleria Maltese* compiled by Francesco Caruana Dingli in 1846 and still in manuscript form (NLM, MS. 1142). In the same period, the artist Giuseppe Hyzler provided valuable short studies in the short-lived *Repertorio di Conoscenze Utili*. Hyzler's initiative in writing about art history was taken up by his student Giuseppe Calleja, who contributed extensively on the matter during the second half of the nineteenth century.

A short attempt at a synoptic survey of art in Malta, with a short section on Baroque art, was made in the mid-nineteenth century by Stefano Zerafa without, however, providing major breakthroughs. Shortly later, Achille Ferres provided a detailed description of the churches of Malta, listing several altar paintings and their attributions. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Vincenzo Caruana Gatto and Pietro Paolo Castagna, amongst

Francesco Noletti, *Allegory of Wealth (Allegory of the Riches),* Private Collection. Detail

others, added to the lists of works by the major Maltese artists.

It was, however, only during the first half of the twentieth century that Malta witnessed the birth of a proper study of its Baroque artistic history. Within this context, the most important figure was Vincenzo Bonello, whose enthusiasm and sound connoisseurship attracted the attention of major international scholars on the study of the Maltese artistic patrimony. He resuscitated the attribution of Caravaggio's *St Jerome*, paved the way for studies on Mattia Preti, and was instrumental in studying the work of the major international masters. It was in this period that Italian scholars showed growing interest in both Caravaggio and Mattia Preti. Bonello's influence in shaping the study of Malta's art history was considerable. Edward Sammut and John Cauchi were, after World War II, similarly influential. Gradually, research work became more analytical and specialized, with a growing interest in exhibitions, technical studies, and restoration. Within this climate, *The Order of St John* in Malta Council of Europe Exhibition of 1970 provided a major benchmark for scholarship.

A new generation of scholars and researchers emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s, with a growing emphasis being made on archival research. Great advances were made not only in the study of Caravaggio and Preti, but also in establishing the biographies of Maltese artists. Important contributions were made by John Azzopardi, Mario Buhagiar, Dominic Cutajar, John Gash, and John Spike, amongst others.

The opening of an undergraduate course in History of Art at the University of Malta under the direction of Mario Buhagiar in 1989 provided the academic stimulus that was required in order to generate an unprecedented amount of scholarly research and activity on the subject. Such activity matured in the 1990s and thereafter with numerous long essays, dissertations, theses, and post-graduate work undertaken in order to study Baroque art in an exhaustive, systematic, and analytical method. The speed of research was extraordinary and the advances made were great. Under the direction and tutorship of Mario Buhagiar, Conrad Thake and Keith Sciberras, work was undertaken on multifaceted aspects of Baroque art and architecture, including connoisseurship, stylistic, biographic, contextual, archival, iconographic, and technical research. Graduates of the Department of History of Art are the new generation of researchers and scholars of Baroque Art. The Department of History of Art continues with its mission to cultivate, motivate, and generate research.

Professor Keith Sciberras
Head, Department of History of Art,
University of Malta
October 2015

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Without the specific interest and academic support of Professor Mario Buhagiar, former Head of the Department of History of Art within the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, the first edition of this book would have not reached its end. Baroque Art in Malta has been a specific area of research and study at the Department since the inception of the undergraduate course in History of Art in 1989. Thanks extend to all the members of the Department of History of Art, including my other fellow departmental colleagues Rev. Gino Gauci, Dr Giuseppe Schembri, Professor Conrad Thake, Dr Mark Sagona and Charlene Vella and the departmental secretary Marie Claire Finger. This publication is due to the continuous support of the Department of History of Art and the University of Malta.

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A final word of thanks goes to my family, my parents Ann and Nazzareno, my wife Martina, and children Zach and Sam.

Fig. 1

Photo Courtesy

We thank the following institutions and all private lenders for their help and for the courtesies forwarded in publishing their works of art: Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Copenhagen; Palazzo Pitti, Florence; Archbishop's Curia, Floriana; Heritage Malta; Carmelite Priory, Mdina; Cathedral Chapter, Mdina; Cathedral Museum, Mdina; Musée des Beaux Arts, Nancy; Musée du Louvre, Paris; Augustinian Priory, Rabat; Wignacourt Museum, Rabat; St Francis Friary, Valletta; Franciscan Friary, Valletta; Foundation of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta; Monastery of St Ursula, Valletta; Office of the President, Valletta; Monastery of St Scholastica, Vittoriosa; and the parishes of Attard; Cospicua; Lija; Mosta; Naxxar; St George, Qormi; Qrendi; Rabat; Siggiewi; Virgin of Carmel, Valletta; St Paul Shipwrecked, Valletta; Zabbar; Zebbug; Zejtun; Zurrieq.

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Restoration and Conservation

Several paintings were restored by ReCoop, many of which for the purpose of being included in this publication. These painting are figs 1, 2, 6, 43, 52, 54, 67, 70, 72, 80, 81, 111, 114, 115, 118, 125, 128, 132, 133, 134, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 153, 154, 159, 160, 161, 167, 171

Fig. 1. Anonymous mid-17th Century, *Map of Malta*, Private Collection, Malta

Introduction

The story of Baroque painting in Malta reflects that of the Italian peninsula and, in many ways, it can be directly integrated within its stylistic context. In terms of quantity, the island was impressively prolific. In terms of quality, works vary tremendously, but its corpus undoubtedly counts some impressive masterpieces that emerged out of celebrated instances when Malta was significantly at the forefront of stylistic development. The insular context, however, also conditioned the island and there were particular instances when Malta did not keep up with the pace of stylistic development.

The island's small population gave it, statistically, few chances to produce great artists, even though there were periods when it did. A handful of Maltese artists worked beyond the island's shores and some, like the painter Francesco Noletti (il Fieravino) and the sculptor Melchiorre Cafà, made major breakthroughs in cities such as Rome. The island's small size also meant that it could be easily conditioned by one or two major artists working there and that any talented artist, Maltese or foreign, could exert a dominating influence on the stylistic currents that prevailed. The story of Baroque painting in Malta is marked by such artists.

The fascinating political context of the island also impinged significantly on the character of its art. In this period, Malta was ruled by the Catholic knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta. Their history was one of considerable turmoil. Established in the late eleventh century as hospitallers to look after pilgrims in Jerusalem within the context of the Crusades, the knights gradually grew into a military power as they struggled against the Muslim 'infidels'.[1] Following the loss of Jerusalem, they were gradually driven farther away from the Holy Land, eventually establishing themselves in Rhodes before capitulating there at the end of 1522. After wandering through various cities for some eight years, the knights established themselves in Malta in 1530, following the donation of the islands by the Spanish Emperor Charles V.

Religion combined with chivalry and military valour in the history of these Hospitaller Knights. The sons of the great Catholic nobility of Europe, they brought to the island an exciting baggage of cultural diversity. Italians, French, Spaniards, Portuguese, and Germans (all in their many territorial, political, and cultural sub-divisions and alliances) lived together in a delicate harmonious embrace of brotherhood. Their political clout, and their Cross, attracted great artists (such as Caravaggio, Leonello Spada, and Mattia Preti) like a magnet towards them, whilst their refined tastes saw them commission important works from the continent. Thus, paintings by Battistello Caracciolo, Guido Reni, Andrea Sacchi, Alessandro Turchi, and Francesco Romanelli were brought to Malta in the period under study.[2] The same applied to sculpture, where major masters of the Italian Baroque, including Alessandro Algardi, Domenico Guidi, Ercole Ferrata, Ciro Ferri, Girolamo Lucenti, and Giuseppe Mazzuoli produced monumental work for the island.[3]

Spread throughout the numerous commanderies, bailliwicks, and priories around Catholic Europe, many knights had their portraits executed by the most fashionable artists of the time. Thus, for example, Titian, Tintoretto, El Greco, Ludovico Carracci, Bernardo Strozzi, Carlo Dolci, Pierre Mignard, Velazquez, and other great masters were commissioned to paint such pictures.[4] Several knights took with them private pictures and objets d'art to adorn their abodes in Valletta. In some instances, pictures were also sold privately whilst, in circumstances where such knights died in Convent, paintings could have been subsequently transferred to the Order's general patrimony. Records speak of paintings in Malta attributed to Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Rubens, and Van Dyck, even though it has not been possible to correlate such documents with specific paintings. Pictures by Jusepe Ribera, Luca Giordano, and others, on the other hand, survive in national and private

Fig. 2

collections and almost undoubtedly entered Malta through the knights.

The other major influential force on the island was the Roman Catholic diocese, under the authority of the bishop of Malta. Numerous churches dotted the island, which was divided into a number of parishes. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, pinned by the relative security that the knights gave the island, saw demographic growth, a rapid expansion of the country villages and the establishment of new parish churches. These provided a fertile climate for the production of religious pictures, including altar paintings, sotto quadri, laterals, lunettes, and devotional pictures. The major Religious Orders, including the Augustinians, Franciscans (Minors and Conventuals), Carmelites (and Teresians), Dominicans, Capuchins, Benedictines, and Jesuits also established monasteries and convents and built their own churches. The Inquisition, on the other hand, had little consequence on artistic production despite having some major personalities, such as Fabio Chigi (later Pope Alexander VII), as inquisitors on the island.

The Maltese nobility and the merchant class provided a market for portraiture and easel pictures, but their 'market share' was small even though not insignificant; this share grew significantly during the second half of the eighteenth century. The absence of a strong secular presence in Maltese art, however, also meant that religious art dominated the themes of artistic production. Mythological themes and allegories are a minority with, similarly, only a small percentage of works being of a philosophical nature or taken from literature. Still-lifes had a fair share, whilst genre scenes only gained some popularity in the mid-eighteenth century. On the other hand, the popularity of maritime pictures and views of the Grand Harbour (Fig. 2) is no surprise in the context of an island of seafarers ruled by an Order that proudly held its fleet in such high esteem.

Fig. 2. Anonymous late-17th Century, *Valletta*, Private Collection, Malta

Fig. 3. Anonymous late-17th Century, *Valletta*, Private Collection, Malta. Detail

Fig. 3