

The Legacy of the Most Munificent Aragonese Grand Masters in Malta

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I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Long Essay and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another qualification of this or any other higher education institution.

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ABSTRACT

The Order of St John ruled in Malta between 1530 and 1798. During this time, different artistic styles swept across Europe. The Order had close relations with the different kingdoms across the continent and indeed its own members came from the different European realms. Thus, through the Order, Malta also experienced the different artistic styles, such as Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo and Neoclassical.

The period of the magistracy of the Aragonese Grand Masters Rafael Cotoner, between 1660 and 1663, that of his bother Nicolas, between 1663 and 1680, and Ramon Perellos, between 1697 and 1720, coincided with the flourishing of the Baroque style in Europe which, not unexpectedly, also reached Malta.

This work focusses on the relevance of the afore-mentioned Grand Masters as reflected in their Baroque artistic legacy in Malta. It seeks to bring out their munificence as expressed in their patronage of the arts.

While it is felt that this element has a universal appeal and is interesting in itself, the essay also takes a different approach in looking at certain details which are generally overlooked. Since the work is limited in scope it looks at only a restricted number of instances of the Grand Masters' artistic patronage.

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My course companions.

My family.

DEDICATION

To the memory of my father

Geoffrey Porsella Flores

1920 - 2016

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INTRODUCTION

The Order of St John of Jerusalem ruled over Malta between 1530 and 1798. The Order was organised in eight different *Langues*, which represented the different regions of the predominant powers in Europe at the time, spanning different kingdoms. The Order was led by a Grand Master, who was elected by secret ballot by the Knights Electors of the Order.

During their stay in Malta spanning 268 years, the Order was led by a total of twenty-eight Grand Masters, who came from seven out of the eight different *Langues*, one of which was that of Aragon, which also included Navarre and Cataluña.

Within five years of their election to the highest position of the Order, Grand Masters were obliged to donate a gift, known as a *gioia*, to the Order. These gifts varied in nature and artistic worth.

In addition to these gifts, many Grand Masters also commissioned other artistic works during their tenure and these contributed to the grandeur of the Order in different ways. In fact, patronage of the arts went beyond the simple financing of an art commission.

In her dissertation 'The paintings of the Order of St John in Malta: Hospitaller art collections and patronage from the late fifteenth century to the eighteenth century', Theresa M Vella (2012, p. 84) writes that 'Four successive Grand Masters, Martin De Redin, Rafael Cotoner, Nicolas Cotoner and Gregorio Caraffa consolidated the lessons learnt from the patronage of Verdalle and Wignacourt in linking art with power and authority.'

Patronage extended to various commissions including civil and military architecture, as well as projects in the social sphere. This essay is focussed on part of the legacy of three of the eight Grand Masters who appertained to the *Langue* of Aragon, viz., Rafael Cotoner y De Oleza (1601 – 1663), Nicolas Cotoner y De Oleza (1608 – 1680) and Ramon De Perellos y De Roccaful (1637 – 1720). (De Fluvia y Escorsa, 1970)

It is felt appropriate to explain that these were in fact the full names of the three Grand Masters, in line with the naming convention in Spain. There, people are given two surnames at birth – one being the paternal first surname and the other one being the first surname from the maternal side. For the purposes of this essay, primarily for practical

purposes, the short form of the names, showing only the first surname, has been used throughout, except where required for citation purposes.

Different authors make reference to the munificence of these three Grand Masters.

‘the Cotoners were the Mæcenās of the Order, princely patrons of the arts, with special predilection for the brush of Mattia Preti, whom they brought to Malta and made a Knight of Grace, keeping him busy to the end of his life, on the frescoes of the vault and lunettes of the Conventual Church, painting rich-hued altar pieces for the chapels of the Langues’.

Schermerhorn (1929, p. 191)

Zammit (1980, p. 21) wrote that ‘The Cotoners were...patrons of art, and their patronage of art is best seen in the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta.’

Perellos is referred to by Schermerhorn (1929, p. 247) as ‘that magnificent connoisseur of things good and beautiful’.

In Cutajar (2001, p. 93) we read that Perellos ‘strikes us as a Baroque aristocrat fond of grand generous gestures designed to impress with his magnanimity and refined good taste.’

In view of the word limit set for this research work, it was necessary and only possible to focus on specific instances of artistic patronage of these Grand Masters in the form of paintings and tapestries, except for one particular occasion which resulted in the building of a church. Thus, this essay does not discuss the patronage of other forms of Art commissioned by these three Grand Masters, such as sculptures or civil and military architectural projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various research has been carried out about the Order of St John and its presence in Malta between 1530 and 1798. This has resulted in the publication of several books and other material, both in Malta and abroad, which have looked at the Order's rule from a variety of perspectives. While some works deal with the general history of the Knights, others focus on individual Grand Masters; others still delve into specific areas such as the artistic legacy of the Order and the Grand Masters, in its various forms such as paintings, sculpture and architecture.

Elizabeth W. Schermerhorn's 'Malta of the Knights' provides a solid introduction to the Order's history and their stay in Malta and also provides a valuable insight into the traits of the different Grand Masters of the Order.

A reading of 'Patronage by the Knights of Malta' by Giovanni Bonello, in *Entre Le Glaive et La Croix: Cheft d'Oeuvres de L'Armurerie de Malta - Between the Battlesword and the Cross: Masterpieces from the Armoury of Malta* provides good information for the understanding of the patronage of the Arts in its various forms as exercised by the Grand Masters and other Knights of St John.

St John's Co-Cathedral, at the time the Conventual Church of the Order, sees a concentration of different works of art which bear witness to the munificence of various Grand Masters. The reference book *par excellence* about the Co-Cathedral is 'The Church of St. John in Valletta' by Sir Hannibal Scicluna, which covers the church's history in extensive detail. At the same time, it is known that the book includes various inaccuracies which have been highlighted and corrected over time by different authors.

Another important and indispensable book is that by Cynthia De Giorgio 'Woven Splendour - The Tapestries at the Conventual Church of the Knights of Malta' which describes in great detail the background behind the commissioning of the tapestries by Grand Master Perellos. It also provides extensive minutiae about all of the twenty-nine tapestries commissioned for the church of St John.

Other notable publications dealing specifically with paintings as an art form, such as Mario Buhagiar's 'The Iconography of the Maltese Islands', 'Baroque Painting in Malta' and 'Mattia Preti – The Triumphant Manner', both by Keith Sciberras, provide extensive information about the different artists who flourished in Malta. They can be considered to

represent a most comprehensive catalogue of the several works of art commissioned during the Order's stay in Malta.

All these books, in addition to various others which are duly referenced, have provided the necessary information for the writing of this essay.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This being a bibliographic, secondary source research, information was drawn from the wide spectrum of books and other literature available with a view of bringing to the fore the munificence of these three Grand Masters through their various commissions. Where possible, opportunity was taken to visit personally the sites where the artistic patronage can be seen. Primarily this was done in order to experience the different works of art personally and appreciate them fully and thus be able to write about them. A selection of photos of some of these *oeuvres* have been included in Appendix A in order to assist the reader in visualising these works of art.

These visits were also undertaken with a view of planning and creating a half-day tour during which participants will be taken around the sites housing the works of art discussed in this essay. The tour will provide participants with a meaningful and profitable appreciation of the different works and hence an appreciation and understanding of the munificence of the three Grand Masters. The tour itinerary is included in Appendix B.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

CHAPTER I

Rafael Cotoner (1660 – 1663)

The Conventual Church of St John

While the Conventual Church of St. John had been completed by 1577, yet until the middle of the following century, it was still very plainly decorated. Indeed, the only decorations that adorned the interior walls of the church were still the original dull-coloured painted designs. Primarily, these featured the eight-pointed cross of the Order as well as a lion, part of the coat-of-arms of Grand Master La Cassiere (1502 – 1581), during whose magistracy (1572 -1581) the church was built. Debono (2005, p. 3) writes that 'For some eighty years after its construction, St John's remained a bleak temple, bare of any stone carving, gilding and marble ornamentation.' Even the vaulted ceiling of the nave was still bare.

All this was set to change when, on 15 September 1661, Grand Master Rafael Cotoner informed the Council that the Calabrese artist Mattia Preti (1613-1699) had offered to decorate the vaulted ceiling of the Conventual Church out of his own pocket. This 'was accepted immediately with great enthusiasm.' (Sciberras 2012, p. 30). Preti would use the wide expanse of the ceiling to paint various episodes from the life of St John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order. (Plate 1)

It is important to mention that contact with Preti had been established before the time of Cotoner. In fact, Preti's first commission from Malta which effectively introduced the artist's work to the Maltese islands came about in 1658, during the Magistracy of Grand Master Martin de Redin (1657-1660).

Interestingly, according to Scicluna (1955), the first contacts with the artist with a view to decorate the Conventual church had been established by Grand Master Lascaris (1560-1657), who ruled between 1636 and 1657. Lascaris had agreed to the proposal of Fra Giovanni Battista Brancaccio, *Ricevitore* of the Order in Naples and a personal friend of

Preti, for the latter to decorate the Conventual church. However, Lascaris preferred to proceed with caution and thus requested Brancaccio to ask Preti to submit a painting of *St George on Horseback* to prove his artistic ability. This painting was completed but it still had not been sent to Malta by the time that the Grand Master died on 14 August 1657. When Grand Master Martin de Redin, who had succeeded Lascaris, came to know of the latter's agreement to engage Preti, he directed that the painting be sent to Malta immediately.

However, Sciberras (2012, p.133), states that the work which effectively 'brought Preti's paintings in direct contact with the knights of St John' was that of *St Francis Xavier*, during the magistracy of Grand Master Martin de Redin. Hailing from Aragon, de Redin wished to commission a painting for the chapel of Aragon, Navarre and Cataluña in St John's, portraying the saint to whom he was particularly devoted. In fact, the saint was born in the Kingdom of Navarre. For this purpose, the Grand Master communicated with the Order's procurator in Naples in order that the work could be commissioned to the best brush in Naples at the time (Sciberras 2012). The choice fell on Preti and when the painting was delivered in September 1658, it 'was received with great excitement by the Grand Master.' (Sciberras 2012, p.20). This painting was followed by the commissioning of *St George on Horseback* to serve as the altar-painting for the chapel of Aragon in replacement of the painting previously executed by Francesco Potenzano (1540-1599).

It so happened that Preti's engagement to decorate the Conventual church still had not materialised by 1660 which saw the death of de Redin on 6 February and that of the successive Grand Master, Annet de Clermot-Gessant (1587-1660) on 2 June.

Rafael Cotoner's election to the highest position of the Order on 5 June 1660 was to pave the way for the transformation of the Conventual church.

'The Baroque re-decoration programme which Preti was to direct transformed the interior of the church into one of the most important nodes of Baroque art south of Rome. Preti was to assume responsibility of painting the entire ceiling and many altar paintings and lunettes. Moreover, he produced designs for the carved decoration that spread throughout the church walls, the inlaid marble slabs for the flooring, and ephemera.'

(Sciberras 2012, p. 30)

The vaulted ceiling of St John's is divided into six bays. Preti ingeniously partitioned each one of these six bays into three sections. Thus, the artist was able to use the eighteen resultant areas to depict as many episodes from the life of St John the Baptist. Preti's masterful technique can be seen in the way that he utilised the different sections in each bay which

'are linked by painted columns, cornices and balustrades that create the sensation of a palace architecture opening on to the sky. Illusionistic perspective is used with consummate understanding and the whole is characterized by a sparkling decorative freedom that ranks the work among the most satisfactory ceiling decorations of the Baroque period.'

(Buhagiar 1987, p. 102)

In all the bays, cherubs can also be seen holding the cotton plant, a clear reference to the Grand Master. (Plate 2)

At the base of each bay, on both sides of each window, Preti also depicted different figures which included three Grand Masters, saints and heroes. According to De Giorgio (2014, p.45) 'Several of the saints were well-established pillars of religious piety, while the heroes, some of whom died in battle, represent the knights' heroic character. Together they represent the religious and heroic ancestry of the Order.'. Preti's inclusion of peripheral figures was a concept that had already been adopted by Michelangelo when he painted the Sistine Chapel. Mattia Perez d'Aleccio (1547-1628) had also made use of the same technique when he included various allegorical figures in his depiction of the Great Siege in the Grand Master's Palace. (De Giorgio 2014)

In addition to the twenty-four figures adorning the base of the six bays, Preti also painted 'the founders of the Order, the Blessed Gerard and the Blessed Raymond du Puy in the narrow bay adjacent to the lunette above the main door (De Giorgio 2014, p. 83). These figures appear to be sitting down on the topmost step of a three-stepped stairs and one notes that their name is shown on the bottom step. The twenty-four figures in the six bays appear to be resting their feet on a platform, which creates 'a clear flat space that seems to be begging for the saints name to be inscribed in it' (De Giorgio 2014, p. 48). (Plate 5)

Apart from the painting of the nave, a project for the embellishment of the interior walls of the church including the side chapels had also been started. This project entailed the carving of various motifs into the globigerina limestone walls.

According to Cutajar (1989, p. 11), Preti had 'prepared drawings to decorate with elaborate and full-relief-carvings all the walls and the ceilings of each side-chapel or passage-way'. However, it would appear that such work started before Preti's intervention.

'The Order of St John had striven earnestly without sparing any effort to decorate its Conventual Church through stone carving at least since the mid-1640s. Stone carving in the Chapel of St George had commenced as early as 1656-57. It was followed by that on the walls and ceilings of the chapels dedicated to Our Lady of Philermos, to St Catherine and to St Michael. Also, the designs applied to decorate the Chapels of St Catherine and St James were both planned in imitation to that contained in St George's. So it follows that the stone relief in these chapels was undertaken before the settling of the artist Fra Mattia Preti in Malta in 1661.'

(Debono 2005, p.30)

Probably, this also explains why the designs and styles of the carvings of the walls in particular chapels, such as those of the *Langues* of Italy and France, as well as those of the *atrium* reached from the side entrance, are different from those found in the rest of the Cathedral. (Plate 6)

Bearing in mind the comprehensive project for the carving of the interior walls, another intriguing element is represented by '...the last (west) pairs [of the passage-ways leading to the sacristy and the oratory] which for different reasons were left in their pristine plainness.' (Cutajar 1989, p.11).

Rafael Cotoner did not live long enough to see the termination of the project of the painting of the vault. When he died on 20 October 1663, the work was still practically half finished.

CHAPTER II

Nicolas Cotoner (1663 – 1680)

Rafael Cotoner's death did not slow down the transformation of the interior of the Conventual church. Upon his death, his younger brother Nicolas was chosen to be the head of the Order. In itself, this ensured continuity in the redecoration programme of St John's, which the Grand Master openly supported.

Works continued unabated and in 1666, Cotoner accepted to pay from his own funds the expenses in connection with the encasement of the pillars of the central nave of the Conventual church in green marble (Debono, 2005). At the top of each pillar one can see the inlaid coat-of-arms of the Cotoner family. (Plate 5)

Marble roundels bearing the eight-pointed cross are also encased in the pillars. These represent the consecration crosses.

The painting of the vaulted ceiling of St John's included also the painting of the apse and the *controfacciata*, the wall on the inside above the main door of the Cathedral.

The painting in the apse represents *The Holy Trinity Receiving St John the Baptist in Glory* while in the *controfacciata*, Preti painted an *Allegory of the Order* showing the victory over the infidels. This latter painting includes the two Cotoner Grand Masters. (Plates 3 and 4)

While on the left Nicolas is seen tending to the sick, on the right Rafael is portrayed pointing to a galley of the Order. The depiction or representation of the two Grand Masters in various works by Preti reflect the predilection for Preti's virtuosity by the Cotoner brothers. In fact, such representations were repeated various times in future works. Thus, for example, in the main painting *Virgin and Child with Ss John the Baptist and Anthony the Abbot* in the chapel at Verdala Palace, which is dedicated to St Anthony the Abbot, one can see that 'An angel stands behind the kneeling John and proudly holds the bellowing Standard of the Order emblazoned with the cotton plant so that it specifically refers to the patronage of the Cotoner grand master. The child Christ actually points towards the flag, making this work a political painting.' (Sciberras 2012, p. 270) (Plate 12)

Additionally, the two lateral paintings portraying *St Raphael the Archangel* and *St Nicholas of Bari*, are a clear reference to the two brothers.

Explicit allusions to the Cotoner Grand Masters are also evident in the main altar painting for the *Madonna tal-Mirakli* church, which Preti executed in the mid-1660s. The painting is of the *Virgin and Child with Ss Peter and Nicholas with the Archangel Raphael*. Sciberras (2012, p. 178) writes that 'The presence of the Archangel Raphael, as well as that of St Nicholas, take on political connotations and pay tribute to the two brother grand masters.' (Plate 11)

The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Floriana (Ta' Sarria)

Nicolas Cotoner's patronage of the Arts was also borne out in difficult times. Practically at the end of 1675, the plague reared its ugly head in Valletta. In due course, this brought about the building of an architectural jewel which stands till this very day, namely the church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in Floriana, commonly known as *Ta' Sarria*.

Since adequate controls were not put up immediately, the disease started to spread and at the beginning of 1676, there were victims in around twenty other towns and villages. Controls were intensified but this did not have the desired effect. Indeed, the number of victims went on rising.

Grand Master Cotoner was greatly devoted to the Immaculate Conception and for this reason he fervently beseeched Our Lady to deliver the population from the disease. He vowed that if the plague were to be vanquished, he would build a new church at Floriana, instead of a small one that had been built in 1585. This church had been built by the knight Fra Martin de Sarria Navarro. In all probability, Fra Sarria's own residence – Villa Sarria – stood next to the original church. The name *Ta' Sarria* is still in use today, despite the passage of nearly 350 years.

In addition to the building of the church, Cotoner also vowed that he would hold a pilgrimage on a yearly basis from the Conventual church in Valletta to the church which he solemnly promised to build. In Kilin (2000, p. 161) we read that the vow was 'confirmed by a decree of the Council on 11 April 1676'.

The feast day of the patron saint of the Order, St John the Baptist, celebrated on 24 June, saw a slowing down of the epidemic and indeed no more deaths were recorded after 15 July; about 11,300 people had succumbed to the disease.

The building of the new church started in earnest in fulfilment of the Grand Master's vow and 'The first stone was laid with great ceremony on 8 December, 1676' (Mahoney 1996, p.323), the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Cotoner commissioned Mattia Preti to design the new church. In fact, the artist had also received architectural training which he put to good use in Malta. Indeed, some works carried out at St John's Conventual church, such as the opening of the passages between the side-chapels, had been carried out on his recommendations.

Before, it was held that the design of the *Ta' Sarria* church was the work of the renowned Maltese architect, Lorenzo Gafà. Actually, it was Vincenzo Bonello (Bonello, 1963 as cited in Sciberras, 2012) who had first suggested that the architect responsible was in fact *Il Calabrese*, the familiar name Preti was also known by. In Sciberras (2012, p. 63) we read that 'For Sarria, Preti was to design the architecture of the church itself and execute the paintings it was to contain.' The commission included also the titular painting and one lunette on either side and four lateral paintings.

The church's round temple shape capped by a dome is a gem of baroque architecture. (Plate 8)

The titular painting shows the Immaculate Conception and it is set in a gilt frame. Sciberras (2012, p. 281) explains that 'It is set within a carved reredos where putti lift a curtain to reveal the scene in a theatrical manner. This reredos is one of the first such Baroque devices on the island and was most certainly designed by Preti.'

The painting shows the subjugation of the plague and Sciberras (2012, p. 280) describes it as being 'one of the most dramatic pictures of Preti's late years.' (Plate 9)

The titular painting is flanked by a lunette on each side. One shows the triumph of St Michael the Archangel over Lucifer, while the other one portrays an Allegory of the Order of St John kneeling in front of St John the Baptist.

Four other paintings by Preti adorn the church. On the left side there are the portraits of St Sebastian and St Rosalia, while on the opposite side one finds St Roque and St Nicholas of Bari. It is well-known that the first three mentioned saints were widely invoked during times of plague. The presence of the painting depicting St Nicholas of Bari 'has got nothing to do with plague devotion but relates directly to the fact that Nicholas is the namesake of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner during whose magistracy the church was built.' (Sciberras 2012, p. 283) The painting also features a putto, who 'waves a cotton plant, the heraldic symbol of the grand master.' (Sciberras 2012, pp. 283,284) (Plate 10)

As mentioned *supra*, Preti had already made use of this device in the ceiling paintings of the Conventual church.

Writing about the Cotoner Grand Masters, Buhagiar (1987, p. 102) states that they 'were both great patrons and benefactors of the artist. It was possibly due to their constant encouragement that Preti decided to make Malta his permanent home.'

CHAPTER III

Ramon Perellos (1697 – 1720)

Following the death of Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner in 1680, seventeen years had to pass before another Aragonese Grand Master was elected in 1697, when Ramon Perellos was chosen to lead the Order.

The gioia to the Conventual Church

Perellos' legacy includes various invaluable contributions, but probably the most famous of these is his gift to the Conventual church of St John upon his election to the highest position of the Order. This consisted of the rare set of tapestries portraying episodes from the Life of Christ as well as Allegories depicting the Triumph of the Catholic Faith.

The *gioia* was typically associated with the Conventual church and the Catholic faith. With the ceiling and nave of St John's already sumptuously decorated, Perellos probably wanted to leave his mark on the church in a way that would be on a par with, and at the same time complement, Mattia Preti's masterpiece. Perellos might also have wanted his gift to eclipse that of the Grand Masters who had preceded him. Possibly, the gift of a similar set of tapestries depicting the Triumph of the Eucharist that the *Infanta Isabella* of Spain had given to the *Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales* in Madrid influenced his choice (De Giorgio, 2017). In fact, according to De Giorgio (2017, p. 8), 'tapestry remained among the most prestigious figurative media throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, prized by the wealthy for its artistry, and as a propaganda tool'.

The set of tapestries donated to the Conventual Church consists of twenty-nine units, all having a uniform height of just over six metres, but with differing widths. Out of the twenty-nine units, there are fourteen large tapestries, each having a width of more or less 6.5 metres; another fourteen are much narrower, being 1.8 metres wide while the final tapestry measures 3.2 metres in width.

Seven of the fourteen large tapestries depict the following episodes of the Life of Christ:

The Annunciation

The Adoration of the Shepherds

The Adoration of the Magi

Christ's Entry into Jerusalem

The Last Supper

The Raising of the Cross

The Resurrection

The other seven large tapestries allegorically represent the Triumph of the Catholic Faith:

The Triumph of the Catholic Church

The Victory of Truth over Heresy

The Victory of the Eucharist over Pagan Sacrifice

The Triumph of Faith

The Triumph of Divine Love

The Four Evangelists

The Defenders of the Eucharist

The other fourteen narrower tapestries depict the Virgin Mary, Christ the Saviour and the twelve Apostles.

The other large tapestry depicts Grand Master Perellos himself.

Schermerhorn (1929) writes that the portrait of the Grand Master on which this tapestry was woven was painted by Preti. This assertion is repeated in Scicluna (1955, p. 198), who states that '*la composizione e il colore del ritratto rivelano lo stile di Preti, che fu pure un intimo del Gran Maestro.*'; however, Bonello (1956) argues that the Grand Master had no relationship whatsoever with the Grand Master; he further states that Preti could not have

been the author since the inscription below the portrait of the Grand Master bears the date of 1700, and Preti had died the year before at the age of 86 years. In fact, Bonello attributes this work to the Maltese artist Gio Nicola Buhagiar. This, however, seems improbable since, according to Sciberras (2009), Buhagiar left Malta in 1715 at the age of 17 years for a period of training. Another anomaly is that Scicluna (1955, p. 214) attributes the Grand Master's painting which is found in the sacristy to Buhagiar. However, Sciberras (2009) attributes the painting to Alessio Erardi (1671 – 1727). Considering that the latter would eventually benefit from the patronage of Perellos, it could well be that the Grand Master's portrait for the tapestry set of St John was painted by Erardi.

The tapestries are based on cartoons of the Flemish Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens. They were ordered from the Brussels-based atelier of Judocus de Vos and were woven between 1699 and 1701 and arrived in Malta in 1702.

Each one of the tapestries bears the Grand Master's coat-of-arms and the area at the top of each unit is decorated with garlands of fruit and vegetables glorifying divine beneficence. (De Giorgio, 2017) The tapestries also bear the city mark of Brussels and the name of the weaver.

The tapestries were specifically intended to line completely the nave of the church. The seven large tapestries depicting the life of Christ were to be hung over the main arches of the chapels and the *atria*, on each side of the nave where the congregation sits, while the other seven representing the Triumph of the Catholic Faith were hung around the area of the presbytery. The narrower ones were intended to be placed over the pilasters. The tapestry portraying the Grand Master was hung above the main door. Thus, the placement of the Grand Master's portrait in this specific location meant that his image would be seen in between those of the two Cotoner Grand Masters appearing on either side of the *controfacciata* above the main door.

According to Scicluna (1955, p.197) and De Giorgio (2007, p. 86), the tapestries were put up around the Conventual church as per Fig. 1 on the following page.

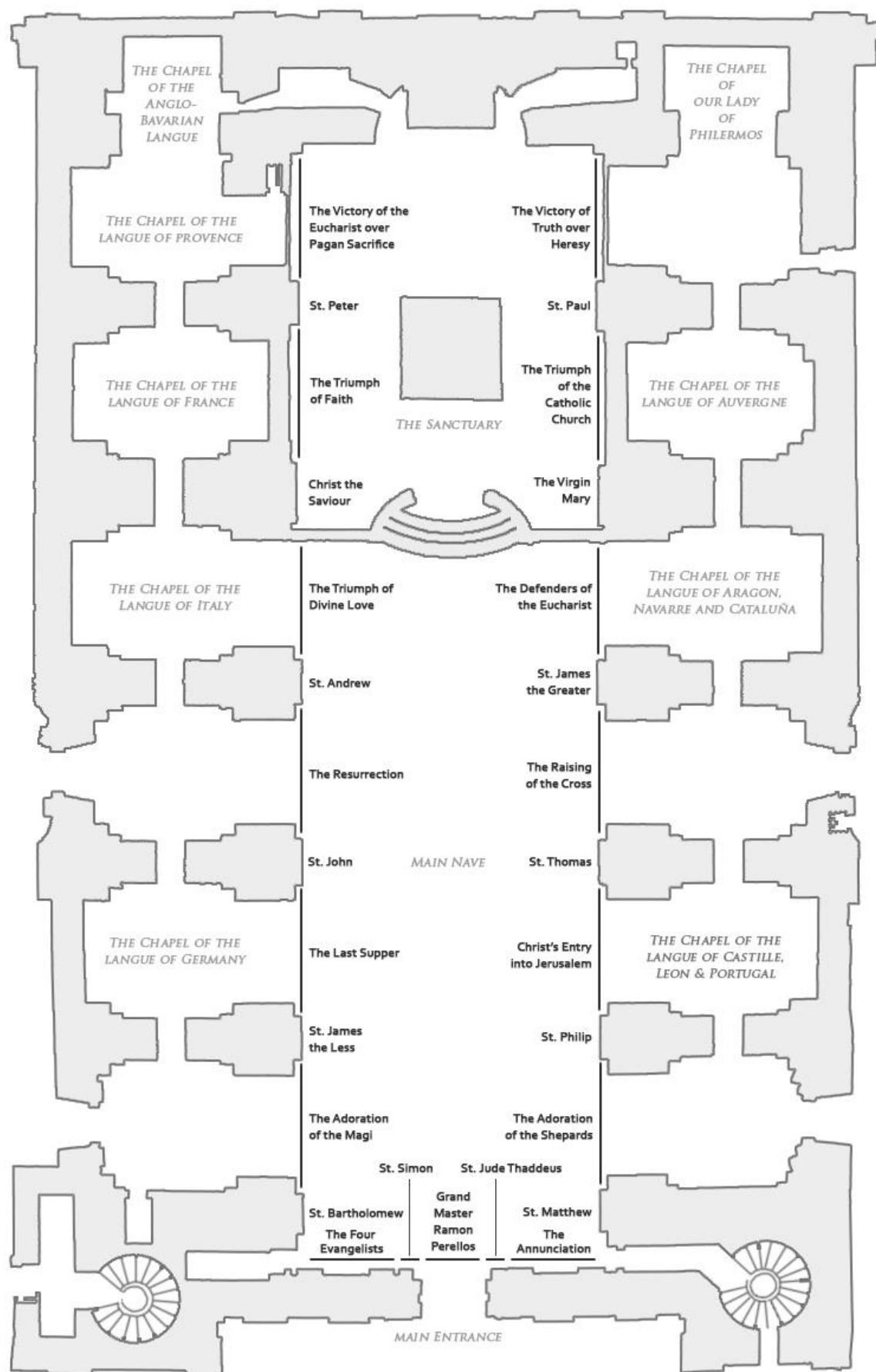


Fig. 1

The *grisaille* technique was adopted for the tapestries portraying the Apostles; this fully complements the three-dimensional effect of Mattia Preti's portraits on either side of the windows at the base of each side of the vaulted ceiling.

The whole set of tapestries used to be put up in the church from the feast of Corpus Christi, (which is celebrated on the Thursday after the first Sunday following Pentecost, which is celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Easter), right up to the 24th June. On this day the feast of St John the Baptist, Patron Saint of the Order, is celebrated. One can try to imagine the magnificent spectacle that the Conventual church offered during this period. De Giorgio (2017, pp. 87-93) recreates digital renderings of the tapestries as they would have appeared during that time.

Ever since the tapestries have no longer been displayed in St John's, they were placed in the Cathedral museum for public viewing, but in reality, this did not afford the ideal space and environment for them to be properly viewed and fully appreciated. Additionally, they were even dispersed in different rooms. Due to the ongoing refurbishment and extension of the museum, currently the tapestries cannot be viewed. However, works currently in progress will see the building of an apposite Tapestry Chamber where the full set of tapestries will be displayed and can thus be appreciated in their full glory. (Plate 7)

The Gobelin Tapestries at the Grand Masters' Palace

The set of tapestries donated to the Conventual Church must have left a very strong impact. So much so, that a few years later, Perellos once again commissioned another set of tapestries, but this time these were intended to embellish the Council Room at the Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta.

According to Cutajar (2001, p. 93) 'the fine Gobelins set of tapestries in the Supreme Council Chamber rank among the top artistic marvels held in Malta.'

On this occasion the subject chosen was not a religious theme but the flora, fauna and indigenous inhabitants of the unknown continents of Africa and South America. The set is composed of ten tapestries and they were manufactured in the Gobelins Manufactory in Paris, France. Thus, these tapestries are interchangeably referred to as *Les Tentures des Indes* (The Indian Hangings) as well as The Gobelin Tapestries. The set ordered was

'nothing less than a replica of the same set that had added splendour upon splendour to Louis XIV's royal seat of Versailles'. (Cutajar, 2001, p. 94)

Buhagiar (2009, p. 136) explains that 'The set of the *Tentures des Indes* is especially notable for the warm intensity of its colours and vivid depiction of the exotic plant and animal life of the Americas...'. While understandable, it is a pity that for conservation reasons, the chamber council is kept in subdued light which precludes us from fully appreciating these works of art.

Interestingly, according to De Giorgio (2017, p. 66), the choice of a different weaver from a different country 'was a diplomatic move considering it coincided with the time when Spain and France were in competition for the succession of the Austrian empire, and the Spanish Wars of Succession.'

While the tapestries measure 4.70 metres in height, their width varies from 2.98 metres to 5.11 metres (Cutajar, 2001). The tapestries depict the following scenes (width shown in brackets):

The Striped Horse (5.04m)

The Two Bulls (5.11m)

The Elephant (4.08m)

Isabelle – The Horse (2.98m)

The Indian Hunter (3.59m)

The Ostriches (3.13m)

The Animals' Fight (4.58m)

The King Borne (4.58m)

The Indian on Horseback (4.30m)

The Fishermen (4.00m)

An interesting aspect that is usually overlooked is that the ten tapestries were actually based on only eight cartoons. In fact, according to Cutajar (2001, p. 96) 'consideration of the wall space available in the Council Chamber had suggested a more harmonious display if two of the larger panels were redesigned to produce four smaller compositions.'

In the original eight cartoon designs, The Indian Hunter also included an ostrich and a cassowary. Upon the division of this panel into two separate sections, an additional panel titled The Ostriches was created. Similar treatment was reserved for The Elephant, from the original design of which the extra tapestry of Isabelle - The Horse came to be. (Cutajar, 2001)

Ellul (1996, p. 55) affirms that the tapestries 'are considered to be one of the rare complete Gobelin collections in Europe.'

Cutajar's statement *supra* relating to the production of four smaller compositions for a more harmonious display, gives rise to an interesting observation that around and above the door to the Chamber on the inside, there is an area which is not covered by the tapestries.

Similar to the tapestries commissioned for the Conventual Church, all the tapestries in the Council Chamber bear the Grand Master's coat-of-arms at the top centre. In addition to the Gobelin tapestries, inside the Chamber there are also to be found an additional six smaller tapestries, with one being slightly larger than the other five. Each of these tapestries, which show only the Perellos coat-of-arms supported by Moorish slaves, are placed in front and at the top of the six window alcoves found in the Chamber.

The largest tapestry of these six smaller ones presents an intriguing element. A watercolour drawing (*circa* 1820) by Charles Frederick Brocktorff (1775-1850) shows the Council Chamber furnished as a reception room. In the painting, one can see six tapestries in front of the window alcoves with the largest of the smaller tapestries hanging below the crucifix at the far end of the chamber and not where it hangs today. The positioning of this tapestry under the crucifix is also mentioned by Schermerhorn (1929, p. 248). Nowadays, this larger tapestry hangs in front of one of the window alcoves.

Cutajar (2001, p. 96) states that 'Madeleine Jarry has opined that there must be one window panel missing, since the Chamber has six windows.' Thus, this would indicate that the smaller set of tapestries bearing the Grand Master's coat-of-arms actually consisted of seven units. However, the statement about the missing tapestry appears to be an undocumented hypothesis.

The tapestries of St John's and those of the former Grand Master's Palace also bring out an interesting aspect relating to the correct colours of Perellos' coat-of-arms. In fact, Strickland (2000) says that sometimes these are shown as having 'three golden pears on a black field, while others seem to think they should be green, or perhaps black on a golden field.' He concludes that 'there should be no doubt that this Grand master's arms are green pears on gold, since he would not have permitted his arms to be reproduced on his *gioia* unless they were correct.'

The Church of Our Lady of Victory

Perellos was a notable patron of the arts. His patronage of the Maltese painter, Alessio Erardi, translated into various important commissions, such as the painting of the ceiling of the church of Our Lady of Victory and immediately after, that of the church of St Ursula nunnery, both in Valletta (Buhagiar, 2009). Alas, the latter work was lost as a result of the Second World War. In fact, 'The women's monastery, ST. URSULA, founded in 1583, is a wreck and will have to be rebuilt; only the shell of its church remains.' (Braun, 1946, p. 28)

The church of Our Lady of Victory was the first one to be built in the new city, and it remained second in importance following the building of the Conventual church. 'The decision to decorate the ceiling came directly from Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697 – 1720) who, sitting in Council in 1716, undertook to defray all expenses from his own purse.' (NLM [National Library Malta] AOM [Archives of the Order of Malta] 1953, f.234, cited in Buhagiar, 2009, p. 152)

Similar to the vaulted ceiling of the Conventual church, that of Our Lady of Victory is divided into six bays. However, unlike St John's, the bays here are of unequal width. Out of the four inner bays, Erardi used the three wider ones to paint events from the life of the Virgin. Preti's influence can clearly be seen in the way that the artist has divided each bay into three separate areas, as Preti did at St John's, using the '*quadratura* painted architectural framework' (Sciberras 2009, p. 235). (Plate 13)

The narrow bay in the middle was used to paint two statues, being allegorical representations of Victory on one side and Truth and Abundance on the other. Above these two statues, Erardi painted the coat-of-arms of his patron, Grand Master Perellos. (Plate 14)

The two narrow bays, one at each end of the ceiling, were not painted by Erardi but by Enrico Regnaud (1692-1764). (Sciberras, 2003, p. 82)

The artistic value of the painted vaulted ceiling of the church of Our Lady of Victory is succinctly stated by Buhagiar (2009, p. 151), who writes that the church 'has preserved the most important Baroque ceiling in Malta after that of St John.'

CONCLUSION

Despite the limited length of this work, it is felt that the munificence of the three Grand Masters who were the main subjects of this essay, has been demonstrated. As with any research which is carried out, the various books and other documents which were consulted in order to produce this study brought up a wealth of information which, alas, could not all be included. May this work be the first step that gives the impetus to explore fully the numerous instances of art patronage that were engaged in by the Aragonese Grand Masters.

Further still, this could open the way for the investigation into the various examples of patronage undertaken by the other twenty-five heads of the Order. Indeed, further research based on primary sources could bring to light yet unknown information and details about the subject.

One other particular research that could be undertaken would be the interesting story of the different *gioie* that were donated by the newly-elected Grand Masters. While some of these donations are well known and documented, there seems to be a dearth of information about many others. It would be extremely fascinating to learn more about the different gifts and their nature and what has become of them.

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APPENDIX A

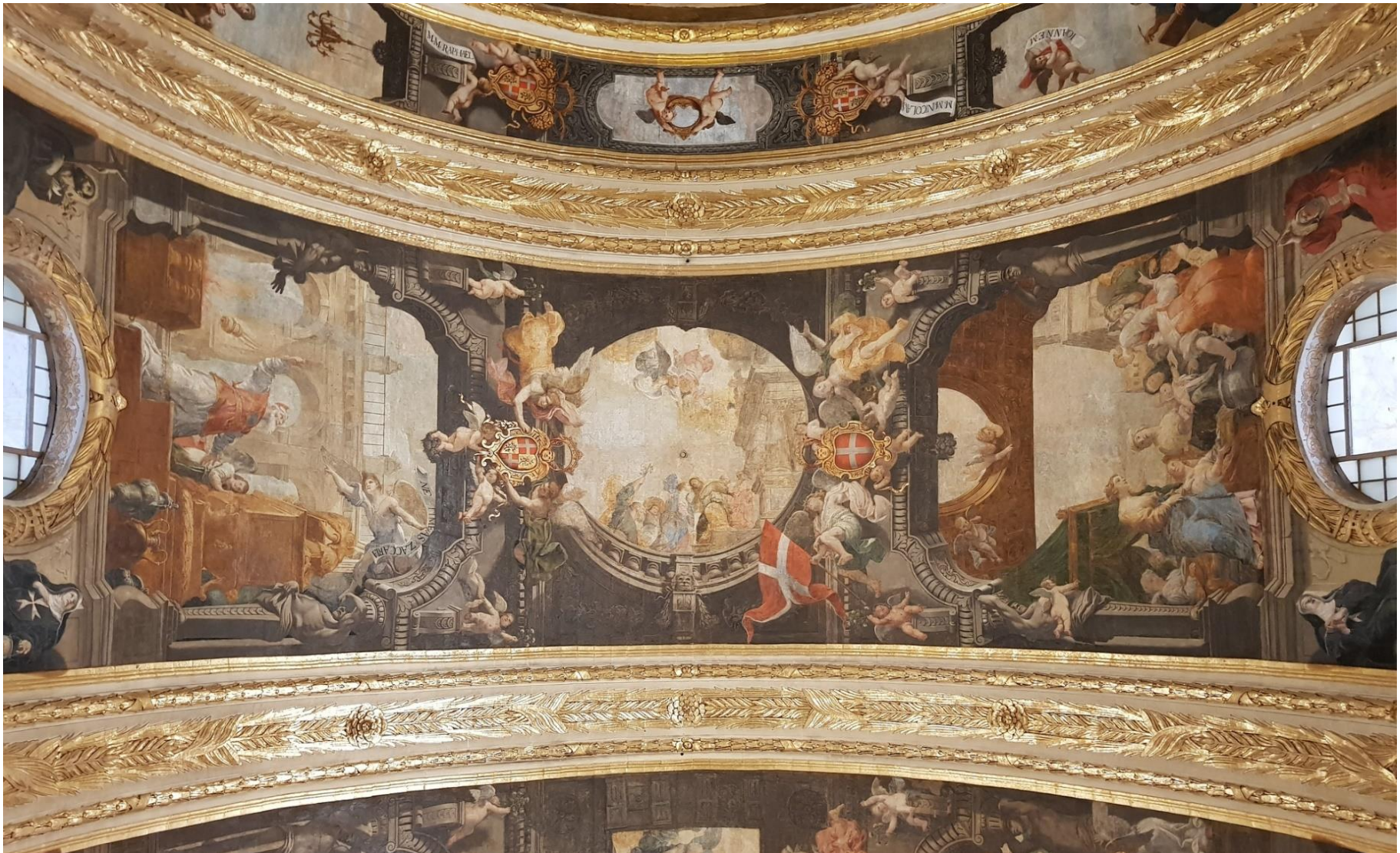
Plates

(All photos taken by the author unless otherwise stated)

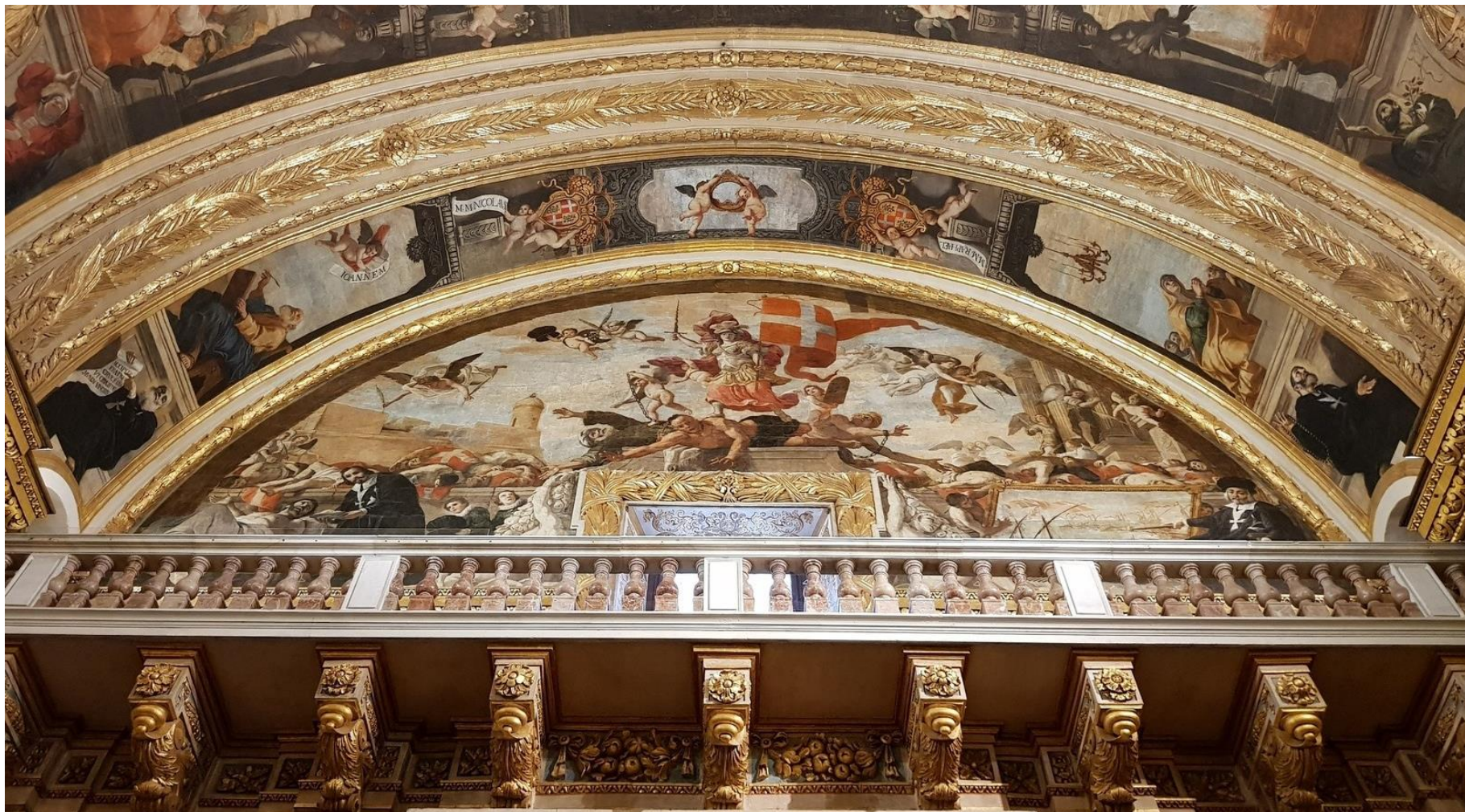
1. The vaulted ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral
2. St John's Co-Cathedral – First Bay of the vaulted ceiling
3. St John's Co-Cathedral - the *Controfacciata*
4. St John's Co-Cathedral – the bay above the *Controfacciata* showing the names of the Grand Masters (detail)
5. St John's Co-Cathedral – pillars and part of the vaulted ceiling
6. St John's Co-Cathedral – Chapel of the Langue of Italy
7. St John's Co-Cathedral Museum - Artistic impression of the proposed tapestry chamber
([https://www.stjohnscocathedral.com/new-museum/#iLightbox\[5de46aa30a1231ae762\]/o](https://www.stjohnscocathedral.com/new-museum/#iLightbox[5de46aa30a1231ae762]/o))
8. The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Floriana (*Ta' Sarria*)
9. Titular painting of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Floriana (*Ta' Sarria*)
10. *St. Nicholas of Bari* (Sciberras 2012, p. 325)
11. *Virgin and Child with Ss Peter and Nicholas with the Archangel Raphael*
(Sciberras 2012 p. 249)
12. *Virgin and Child with Ss John the Baptist and Anthony the Abbot*
(Sciberras 2012, p. 240)
13. The ceiling of Our Lady of Victory church
14. The ceiling of Our Lady of Victory church - detail



1. The vaulted ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral



2. St John's Co-Cathedral – First Bay of the vaulted ceiling



3. St John's Co-Cathedral - the *Controfacciata*



4. St John's Co-Cathedral – the bay above the *Controfacciata* showing the names of the Grand Masters (detail)



5. St John's Co-Cathedral – pillars and part of the vaulted ceiling



6. St John's Co-Cathedral – Chapel of the Langue of Italy



7. St John's Co-Cathedral Museum - Artistic impression of the proposed tapestry chamber

(Source: [https://www.stjohnscocathedral.com/new-museum/#iLightbox\[5de46aa30a1231ae762\]/0](https://www.stjohnscocathedral.com/new-museum/#iLightbox[5de46aa30a1231ae762]/0))



8. The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Floriana (*Ta' Sarria*)



9. Titular painting of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Floriana (Ta' Sarria)



10. *St. Nicholas of Bari* (Sciberras 2012, p. 325)



11. *Virgin and Child with Ss Peter and Nicholas with the Archangel Raphael*
(Sciberras 2012 p. 249)



12. *Virgin and Child with Ss John the Baptist and Anthony the Abbot* (Sciberras 2012, p. 240)



13. The ceiling of Our Lady of Victory church



14. The ceiling of Our Lady of Victory church - detail

APPENDIX B

Half-day tour

The tour will focus on the heritage interpretation of the legacy of the three Aragonese Grand Masters Rafael and Nicolas Cotoner and Ramon Perellos.

The fusion of historical information with elements of art and other titbits of information will provide tour participants with a unique, unforgettable experience. While both locals and foreigners with a general love for culture and history would profit from the tour, this would also appeal to those who could have a particular interest in the Spanish connection with Malta, and thus of course, Spanish tourists.

The following sites will be visited as part of the tour, during which the points and findings discussed in this essay will be promulgated. Of course, other relevant information will also be included as appropriate.

St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta

St John's Co-Cathedral museum in Valletta*

The church of Our Lady of Victory in Valletta

The Grand Master's Palace in Valletta

The church of the Immaculate Conception (*Ta' Sarria*) in Floriana**

An extended version of the tour will also be offered for those participants who would wish a full-day visit, which would also include lunch. For this extended tour, the following two sites will also be visited:

The church of the Blessed Virgin '*Tal-Mirakli*' in Lija**

The church of St Anthony the Abbot (next to Verdala Palace) in Buskett**

*Until the construction and upgrading works are terminated and the museum reopened, this part of the tour will not be undertaken. However, the appropriate information about the tapestries will still be included in the tour. Electronic tablets will be distributed to tour participants containing photos of the tapestries as well as the digital renderings of their location inside the Cathedral to enhance the various explanations and descriptions.

**These churches are usually open only when mass is celebrated. For this reason, the necessary prior arrangements will be made so that these churches can be visited on the day of the tour.