

THE INFLUENCE OF ITALIAN MANNERISM UPON MALTESE ARCHITECTURE

BY

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For many years the style of architecture, which developed in the early years of the 15th century in Florence and was closely allied to movements in the other arts based upon a reinterpretation of classical philosophy and aesthetic theories, was believed to be one consistent style right up to the emergence of eclecticism in the latter half of the 18th century. Fitting a theory of architectural development whose promoters believed applicable to all ages, the Renaissance was seen as a style which in its early years showed all the signs of the freshness of youth; by the 16th century in Rome it reached the peak of its maturity; and subsequently lapsed into a decadent old age. The writers believed that those who strove to design works of architecture in this last period had similar aims to the architects of the Early Renaissance, but, due to the overpowering effects of natural evolution, effects which the writers believed to influence all human progress, they were unable to achieve the sparkle of Quattrocento architecture, nor the studied perfection of the High Renaissance.

A typical quotation from Fergusson(1) will illustrate this approach to art history. "Iuvara and Vanvitelli, men with as little feeling for Art as can well be imagined, but whose good fortune it was to live in an age when the art was at its lowest ebb — so low that their productions were universally admired by their contemporaries, and were consequently everywhere employed". Another author, referring to 17th century architecture in Italy, boldly complained that "by such freaks and caprices almost every building of the era... is more or less disfigured".(2)

To later historians the overall classification of this period seemed inadequate, and some made steps to subdivide it into a number of styles, each one being characterised by different aims. In the last years of the Nineteenth century, Wolfflin, Schmarsow and Riegl, working in Central Europe, discovered the significance of the Baroque style in art. The re-classification of the styles of architecture in Italy under Renaissance and Baroque became generally accepted in Europe. It was felt that the Renaissance artists aimed at a balance or perfect poise, whilst the Baroque architects, fired by the enthusiasm of the Counter-Reformation, produced an art which was dynamic and moving. It was as though the same grammar had produced two languages: the Roman architectural orders were the same in each case, but the way in which they were used was in two opposite directions. The

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(1) FERGUSSON, James, *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture*, London, 1862, p. 127.

(2) ANDERSON, William J., *Architecture of the Renaissance in Italy*, London, 1898, p. 162.

Renaissance flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Baroque in the 17th and 18th centuries(3).

Donato Bramante and his followers, working in Rome from about 1500 onwards, designed buildings in which all the proportions were adjusted to create a perfect equilibrium. Nothing jarred — all was peaceful and serene. The little Tempietto in the courtyard of S. Pietro in Montorio, Rome, designed by Bramante about 1502, epitomises the qualities of the High Renaissance. The building is circular, a shape considered* to be most perfect in its balance by both Ancient and Renaissance theorists(4), the proportions of the order were made to conform to those used by the Romans and propounded by Vitruvius(5), and all the parts of the building were so carefully related to the whole so that "nothing could be added or taken away"(6) without damaging the poise of the design.

The forceful approach of the Baroque architects was first apparent in the Gesù church in Rome which was completed in the year 1575, a revelation to the Italians. Here the militant policy of the new spirit in the Church, drawn up at the Council of Trent(7), was put into practice. Clearly the aims of the architects are here quite different from those of Bramante. Equilibrium is intentionally broken down, and the eye is irresistibly drawn to the main door of the church because the facade is stepped forward in a number of planes towards the centre. Inside the church the eye is drawn down the nave by the line of the barrel vaulted ceiling and the powerful entablature, until it finally rests on the magnificent high altar. This is an architecture of movement — a dynamic architecture very different in conception from the work of the High Renaissance.

Seventy years separate the building of these two churches and a further change in architectural approach occurred in those seventy years. An unsettled period occurs, dating from about the time of the Sack of Rome in 1527 and going on until a new direction in architectural thought is again established in the Baroque period. Its existence was first pointed out in the 20's of this century by several art historians working in Germany(8).

This period has been called Mannerism(9), and its characteristics are equally clear. In painting the artists revolted against the balanced compositions and colouring of Raphael and introduced disturbing contortions and frenzied congestions into their pictures. The excessive elongation of Pontormo's figures are

(3) Various other classifications have been made, but these need not detain us here, for they have no bearing on this case. The Academic and the Neo-Classical Schools ran concurrently with the Baroque in Rome; and the Quattrocento Style, with a strong Gothic flavour, preceded the Early Renaissance.

(4) ALBERTI, Leon Battista, *Il Re Aedificatoria*, Rome, 1484. SERLIO *Architettura*, Venice, 1537. PALLADIO, *I Quattro Libri di Architettura*, Vicenza, 1570.

(5) VITRUVIUS, *De Architectura*.

(6) ALBERTI, op. cit.

(7) BORROMEO, St Charles, *Instructions on Ecclesiastical Buildings*. Translated by G. J. Wigley, London, 1857.

(8) DVORAK (1920), PINDER (c. 1924), FRIEDLAENDER (1925), PEVSNER (1925).

(9) Taken from "de Maniera", a term used by VASARI, *Vite*, Tom. 9. ed. Siena, 1793, describing the style of Francesco de' Salviati.

typical illustrations of this style; and similar trends are discernible in sculpture, Benvenuto Cellini being one well-known sculptor to practice them.

To gain the maximum effect from shock one needs a placid period to precede the application of the shock tactics. We who have been subjected to a continuous breaking down of artistic standards for a century and a half, have become numbed, so that the most glaring architectural irregularities pass unnoticed. But after the balance of the High Renaissance, the artists felt that Bramante had said the last word in that direction, and they reacted by bringing irregularities and small incongruities into their designs, so that what had been logical and composed became illogical and disturbing(10).

How then did these various Italian styles affect Malta? Because of its nearness to Sicily and the mainland of Italy, Malta has always been influenced by Italian art. The Norman invasion and the subsequent occupation by European forces brought strong Siculo-Norman and Siculo-Aragonese influences to the island, which were the predominating styles of the period before the arrival of the Knights(11). During the years immediately preceding their arrival very little building was being done in Malta, and of that, even less remains with us today. By 1530 the High Renaissance had become the prevailing style in Rome, but already the seeds of Mannerism were producing plants in Italy. Between 1521 and 1526 Michelangelo built the Ricetto of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence. On its facade there are a number of wall planes none of which appears to be the main wall surface, and inside both the scale and the incongruity of some of the details are disturbing. It is impossible to say just how much of Mannerist art is in the first place due to Michelangelo. He was regarded as a giant in his own day and his peculiarities were assiduously copied. It was enough for him to set a fashion; others followed. Baldassare Peruzzi's masonry facade of the Palazzo Massimi delle Colonne, Rome (1535), has a paper like quality; Sanmicheli's Palazzo Bevilacqua (1530) at Verona has a quite incomprehensible rhythm of column and window head; Michelangelo reintroduced his scale shattering tactics on the apse of St. Peters (1547-51); and his student Vasari created a long powerful vista down the courtyard of the Uffizi at Florence (1550-74), only to make it meaningless by resolving it onto an insignificant pierced screen which opens onto a flat view of the turbid Arno. There are many other examples of Mannerist architecture and one could quote the courtyard of the Pitti Palace in Florence (1558-70) and Pirro Ligorio's Casino for Pius IV (1560-61) in the garden of the Vatican. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that Mannerism affects nearly all the major works of architecture in Italy at this time.

In Malta the buildings erected before the siege of 1565 are unpretentious. The demand for housing and the imminent fear of invasion, left the Knights and the Maltese architects with little opportunity to study current developments in architec-

(10) Examples of this treatment in architecture are given by PEVSNER N., *Architecture of Mannerism* in "The Mint", London, 1946., BLUNT Anthony, *Mannerism in Architecture* in "Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects", March, 1940., and WITTKOWER R., *Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurenziana*, in "Art Bulletin", Vol. 16, 1934.

(11) See WARD PERKINS, *Mediaeval and Early Renaissance Architecture in Malta* in "Antiquaries Journal", Vol. XXII, 1942.

ture. The plans follow a traditional pattern, the facades are plain, and if the proportions of the doors and windows do show some appreciation for Renaissance proportion, the "fat" Melitan mouldings are not derivative.

It was only with the successful outcome of the siege and the foundation of the new city of Valletta, that a serious study of Italian architecture was once more undertaken. The two outstanding characters in this sphere at that time were Francesco Laparelli, the Italian engineer, and Gerolamo Cassar, the Maltese architect. Laparelli's work was preparatory, for he left the island before he had an opportunity to erect many buildings. However, we know that he designed and built stores, windmills, and at least one house, though the actual buildings are no longer known to us. There can be no doubt but that he influenced Cassar, for he was the senior partner for several years in a close collaboration. It may be that Cassar drew his love of rusticated quoins from Laparelli who certainly used them on his house(12). But Cassar learned more than this. He acquired a competent mastery of the use of the architectural orders which he applied when he wished, a knowledge which would seem to come from an actual study of Italian buildings(13). It is this competence in Renaissance detailing, plus his repeated use of Mannerist motives, which brings me to the conclusion that he studied in Rome for a while during the Mannerist period. He was about fifty years old when he was given the splendid opportunity of building the seven new Auberges, the Magisterial Palace and the Conventual Church, as well as numerous other churches and palaces; and it is interesting to reflect that many of the Italian masters turned to Mannerism in their late middle age, including Michelangelo, Palladio, and Vignola.

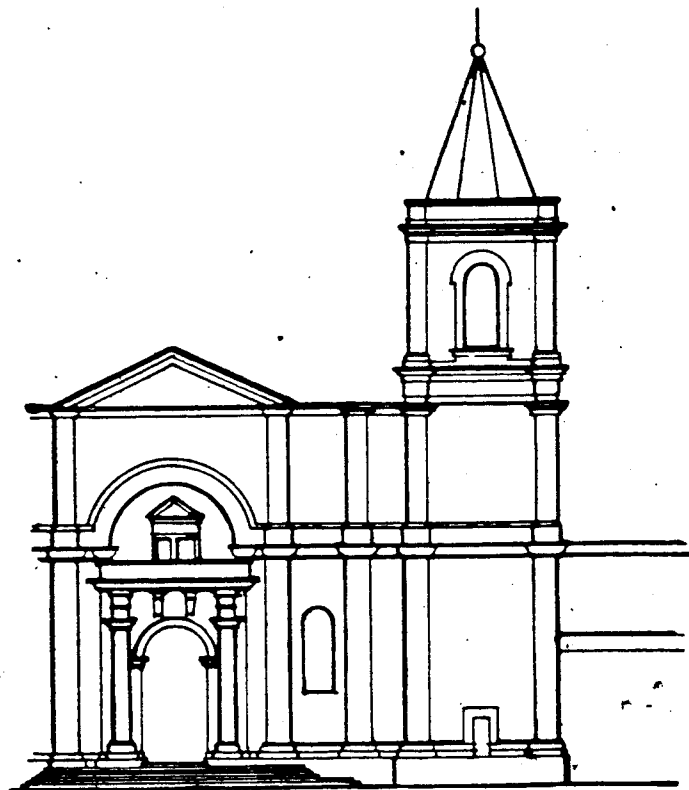
The influence of Italian Mannerism is evident in all Cassar's architecture; the massive scale of his giant quoins, out of all proportion to their sustaining task — the almost cruel contrast between the slender elongated coupled columns of the main portal and the squat bulbous Doric drums of the interior of the Augustinian church at Rabat — the mezzanine windows of the Auberge de Provence which cut into the architrave (which is unusually thin) and the frieze, forcing these mouldings up over the line of the window(14), and above, the entablature of the superimposed order is left unsupported at the two ends where it abuts the rusticated quoins — the picture-frame windows on the mezzanine of the Auberge d'Italie — and the use of only a part of a Doric entablature to complete the roof line of the Auberge d'Aragon, where the frieze is greatly reduced in size and the triglyphs omitted. The architrave is similarly omitted; but hanging guttae have been placed ten feet apart along the length of the entablature although above them there are no triglyphs(15).

(12) And perhaps Bartolomeo Genga gave him ideas. Genga used very heavily rusticated columns on the Ducal Palace at Pesaro.

(13) Both WARD PERKINS, *op. cit.* and TENCAJOLI, *Artisti Maltesi a Roma*, p. 2, suggest that Cassar studied in Italy, but give no supporting evidence. However, since writing this article I have received positive proof from Dr. E. Sammut who has favoured me with a copy of Cassar's passport made out for him to visit Rome and other places in Italy in order to study the Architecture. The passport is dated April, 1569. A.O.M. *Liber Bullarum*, vol. 432, fol. 253.

(14) Something similar to this was done by Palladio on the Loggia del Capitano & Palazzo Valmarana at Vicenza. *Quattro Libri Lib. II. 17.*

Undoubtedly the Conventual Church of St John was Gerolamo Cassar's most important design, and, as might be expected, the facade of that church is the most Mannerist of all his compositions. If we first analyse the centre section of the main facade, the portion lying between the two towers, it will be noticed that Cassar has introduced an apparently haphazard rhythm of the spaces between the pilasters where the width of the outer intercolumniation is not related to either the



Conventual Church of St John. Part of the West Front.

second or the centre intercolumniation. In the great central arch, the outer part of the arch moulding is a curved continuation of the base of the first floor pilasters, whilst the inner portion is a continuation of the capitals of the ground floor order; thus, what appear two distinct storeys of pilasters on the sides of the arches, become one cohesive moulding in the centre. This is a double function of two attached mouldings which are at the same time both separated and attached.

There are two tall niches with semi-circular arches, one on each side of the main door, with their arches raised above the apex of the door opening, so that

(15). The detached and isolated guttae were used by Baldassare Peruzzi on the courtyard elevations of the Palazzo Massimi delle Colonne, Rome (1530+). This is an indication of Cassar's careful study of contemporary architecture in Rome: I know of no other place where this motive occurs.

the main door, which should appear magnificent, is apparently reduced in size. In normal Renaissance buildings, each order of columns is surmounted with a full entablature, made up of an architrave, a frieze and a cornice, but Cassar's ground floor entablature is replaced by a continuous band of masonry, repeating at each side the mouldings of the capital of the ground floor pilasters. He does the same thing to the first floor order, but to show that he is fully conversant with the more usual practice, he does incorporate a full entablature on the first floor of the towers. Then in true Mannerist form he again omits it on the top floor.

The main portal itself has two Tuscan columns, one on each side of the door. Each has an entablature over it, but this, instead of spanning the width between the columns and giving support to the balcony, runs back into the wall of the church leaving the balcony precariously held upon a thin cornice moulding. Cassar has here created weakness where strength was expected.

Finally, the balcony windows show a lack of clear articulation similar to the arch over the main portal. Their inner arched mouldings rest uncomfortably upon two pilasters, leaving no room for the outer portion of the arched mouldings which overspill and have to be held up by little projecting corbels.

It might be possible to suggest that these irregularities are due to Cassar's late approach to Italian architecture. If we suppose that for most of his life he was confronted with the naive Early Melitan buildings of the pre-siege period, and only studied Italian work late in life, either by tuition from Laparelli, or from actual research in Italy, then it could be said that those irregularities were due to his lack of true comprehension of Renaissance architecture. Early Renaissance architecture in England is a case in point, where garbled interpretations of Italian designs give, at first sight, the appearance of Mannerism: but the work in England is not Mannerist because there is no intentional lack of logic, nor are the incongruous motives introduced as shock tactics as they were in Italy. However, this cannot be true in Cassar's case. As we know, he could design a full entablature when he chose, and his columns and pilasters on the facade of the Auberge de Provence are quite competent even if the details are a trifle crude. It can then only be assumed that these compositions were studied and intentional, and as such, from Cassar's point of view they were therefore Mannerist.

It is equally true that so far as Malta in general is concerned, they are not really Mannerist, for the strict aesthetic standards of the mainland had not been established on the island in the years before Cassar's work. The incongruities would, for the most part, have passed unnoticed alongside the older buildings. Perhaps it was for this very reason that Cassar exaggerated his Mannerism, because subconsciously he realised this lack of standards against which he could pit his genius, or because he had not the artistic traditions of the Italian architects of the 16th century.

There seems to be only one building which was not designed by him having a strongly Mannerist facade. This is the Church of St Ursula in Valletta(16). The architectural orders on the facade are applied on three planes. The first has coupled pilasters for the lower order supporting a pilaster capped by a small

(16) The architect of this church, built in 1583, is unknown. Cassar may have furnished the design for it.

pyramid of stone, and alongside, another free pilaster throwing off a short length of raking cornice. The second plane, a quarter pilaster set back from the face of the first plane, supports a superimposed quarter pilaster. A third plane is set back and consists of the capital mouldings of the superimposed orders, and the cornice and cap mouldings of the raking cornice are applied to the ashlar face of the church facade. The normal function of different planes on a facade is to create a climax, but this facade, by the indecision of the supporting members, destroys the climax at birth. In addition, the upper order has no entablature; the upper pilasters each stand upon separate pedestals, the lower ones stand upon a combined pedestal.

By the beginning of the 17th century, when Baroque architecture was gathering momentum in Italy, and spreading with the expansion of the Jesuit Order across the lower half of Europe and over the oceans to the new colonies, Malta had an architectural recession. The Auberges and the Magisterial Palace were practically complete for the time being, and most of the building was switched to the large group of new parish churches — Qormi, Cospicua, and Zebbug at the end of the previous century, and then Birkirkara, Attard, Naxxar, Gudja, Gargur, and the important alterations to Zebbug. Many were erected at this time.

Instead of a logical development from Mannerism to the clearly defined policy of the Baroque, (like that which had occurred in Italy), the Maltese churches of this period tended to return to a form of Renaissance architecture which had a strong Spanish flavour. Attard Parish Church (1613) is undoubtedly the finest creation in this new style.

The true Baroque style had to wait a hundred years; from the time of Cassar's Mannerism until Lorenzo Gafa's return from a visit to his brother in Rome. The greatest genius of Maltese architecture, Gafa brought with him a knowledge and an ability to build the great monuments of Maltese Baroque.