

THREE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY VERNACULAR PAINTINGS AT MQABBA*

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This paper takes into consideration three oil on canvas altar-paintings which belonged to the old parish church of the Assumption of the Virgin at Mqabba. Two of the paintings are at present on display in the vestry of the present parish church while the third lays discarded in a storeroom next to the roof of the church which also contains other old altarpieces and devotional paintings that are equally worthy of investigation; these it is hoped will be the subject of a future study.

HISTORICAL AND ARTISTIC BACKGROUND

The three paintings under review should best be considered as late manifestations of an indigenous vernacular tradition stemming from the late Middle Ages when a boom in church building brought with it the need for *icone* or devotional paintings which could either be altarpieces on one or more panels of wood, or wall paintings¹. This tradition which persisted until at least the first decades of the seventeenth century, produced an early master in the Carmelite friar Johannes Pulcella who flourished between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and was in popular demand for wall paintings. Some of his activities can be reconstructed in considerable detail,² but none of his works seems to have survived. Giovanni Maria Abela who lived towards the end of the sixteenth century and specialised in devotional paintings of the Virgin of the Rosary, was luckier because several of his works which he signed and dated have survived. They include an oil on canvas in the Cathedral Museum Collection,³ and a triptych of the *Crucifixion with St. Paul and St. Bartholomew* at Gharghur which has recently been restored and still awaits proper study. The *Virgin of the Rosary* in the parish church of Naxxar which is dated 1595 and usually attributed to Abela⁴ poses, on closer investigation, stylistic

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¹ The panel paintings are discussed in M. Buhagiar "Late Medieval and Early Modern Panel Paintings in the Maltese Islands", *Melita Historica*, viii, 3, 177-189. On the wall paintings see M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400 - 1900: Paintings*, Malta 1988, 10-31, 37-38, *et passim*.

² The documents concerning Johannes Pulcella and his works have been discovered and published by G. Wettinger "Artistic Patronage in Malta, 1418-1538", in *Hal Millieri A Maltese Casale* (ed. A.T. Luttrell), Malta 1976. See also M. Buhagiar, *Iconography*.

³ M. Buhagiar, *Iconography*, 38 - 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*

problems and might actually be the work of another artist. Two other painters in the same tradition were Bartolomeo Micallef who in 1551 signed and dated a *Virgin of the Lily with St. Anthony the Abbot and St. Paul the Hermit* now in the museum of the Capuchin House at Floriana, and the better known Amadeo Perugino who painted the 1619 *Madonna ta' Pinu* in the homonymous basilica on Gozo⁵. The names of other vernacular artists have passed unrecorded but a study of the surviving works makes it possible to group them on stylistic and occasionally technical considerations. Such a study is still in its initial stages but it has already given good results in the case of the Master of the Bir Miftuh Altarpiece to whom a number of late sixteenth century panel paintings with hints of Renaissance and Early Mannerist influence can be attributed with some degree of certainty⁶.

Most of the vernacular artists were presumably humble village painters who belonged to families that had practised the craft for generations. This accounts for the stylistic and technical anachronisms which hallmark their work. They were however not immune to the influence of good art with which they came in contact in the more cosmopolitan centres of Mdina, Valletta and the Three Cities. Such influences were, however, always filtered through the vernacular experience and often grafted in an *ad hoc* manner to a deeply rooted vernacular tradition. The sources of influence can sometimes be identified with considerable precision. A fine early Mannerist *Assumption of the Virgin* in the sacristy of Mdina Cathedral seems, for example, to have been the prototype for the *Ta' Pinu Madonna* and the *Qala Assumption of the Virgin*⁷. It was often the superficial or incidental element in an important work of art which attracted the vernacular painter most. From the Mannerist repertory they, for example, borrowed elements of sophisticated refinement and elegance which they translated into an insipid melodrama of sweet religious piety. Their work while lacking in artistic excellence is generally not devoid of a naive charm and, in the ambience of folk art, it is often of considerable interest. As in all vernacular art, formulas are often repeated with monotonous regularity. This makes dating considerations difficult, but the more gifted painter sometimes managed to mitigate the rigidity of the formula and produce works which have notable artistic interest and deserve the attention of the art historian.

⁵ On the *Madonna ta' Pinu* see M. Buhagiar, "Paintings in Gozo" in *Gozo the Roots of an Island* (ed. C. Cini), Malta 1990, 88-89. Bartolomeo Micallef's *Virgin of the Lily* was until very recently in the Capuchin Church at Rabat, Gozo. The painting shows stylistic affinities with the 1595 Naxxar *Virgin of the Rosary*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For a photograph of the *Qala Assumption of the Virgin* see *Ibid.*, 89.

THE PAINTINGS

a. THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

156 x 115cm

Inscribed *VOTUM FECIT GRATIAM ACCEPIT 1637* in the bottom right hand corner.

State of preservation: Poor.

Present whereabouts: Store room next to the roof of the church.

An insipidly sweet Virgin wearing the starred blue mantle of time honoured convention and portrayed in an attitude of pious devotion, is thrust into central focus as she experiences the gift of flaming tongues on first Pentecost. She is accompanied by thirteen disciples who form a symmetrically ordered, compact group which rejects logical perspective in the treatment of the crowded space and resorts instead to the anachronistic Byzantinesque device of piling up heads. Gestures and facial expressions are stereotyped and there is minimal interaction among the disciples who respond passively to the mystic event. The two disciples on the extreme left and right gesticulate mildly to create a diagonal movement which draws the attention of the spectator to the centre top of the canvas where the immaculate white Dove of the Holy Spirit appears in an aureola of bright light which dramatically breaks the enveloping gloom of the darkened setting. Their gesture also helps to impose an element of structural discipline on the group and to provide a compositional bridge between it and the Holy Spirit. The implied pyramidal scheme whose apex is the Divine Dove helps to emphasise the importance of the Virgin who occupies its focal centre.

In spite of the obvious limitations and dryness of the painter, the composition is satisfactorily organised and the Virgin has a quiet charm which makes her a pleasantly attractive figure. The inscription in the bottom right hand corner highlights the fact that the canvas was painted as an *ex voto*, but it can presumably be identified with the altarpiece of the pentecost altar mentioned in the pastoral visitation reports of the old parish church of Mqabba⁸.

⁸ K. Sciberras, "The Old Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin at Mqabba", *Proceedings of History Week 1992*, forthcoming.

b. THE VISITATION

172 x 120cm

State of preservation: Fair but over restored.

Present whereabouts: South vestry.

The aristocratically elongated Virgin embraces Elizabeth in the middle distance outside the house of Zechariah who, standing on the doorstep and clothed in his priestly robes, gesticulates in a sign of greeting. He is balanced on the right by Joseph who is a humble spectator to the scene while leaning on a rustic staff and leading weekly subdued donkey. The four figures are distributed in a frieze-like manner and the painter reveals a poor sense of draughtsmanship in his concern to create a lyrically attractive scene with an emphatic stress on melodiously falling draperies particularly in the affectionately embracing women. The Virgin who is unsatisfactorily drawn wears the characteristic starred mantle and a gilded nimbus which stresses her importance. A gentle breeze ruffles the cloak of Elizabeth and creates an implied sense of movement in a picture which is otherwise dominated by a placid calm. Depth is achieved by the three-stepped pavement in bottom left hand corner which, receding in perspective, creates a deep expanse of floor on which the two principal protagonists enact their ballet-like movements. The background is taken up by the towering mass of Zechariah's house and by an arid countryside which shows obvious signs of retouching. Colour is restricted to red, blue and brown tonal variations.

The painting shows watered down Mannerist influences and is stylistically datable to the first half of the seventeenth century. It was the painting of an altar of the Visitation of the Virgin which stood on the right hand side of the nave of the old parish church⁹.

c. THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE VIRGIN

148 x 112cm

State of preservation: Poor

Present whereabouts: North vestry

An elegantly poised Virgin kneels on a prayer stool as she turns in slight contrapposto to listen to the annunciation of a tall aristocratically refined Archangel Gabriel, who holds the traditional white lily in one hand while rising the other to point to a luminous orb with the Dove of the Holy Spirit which is swooping to invest the Virgin with Divine grace. Drapery falls with exquisite grace and light gently models the

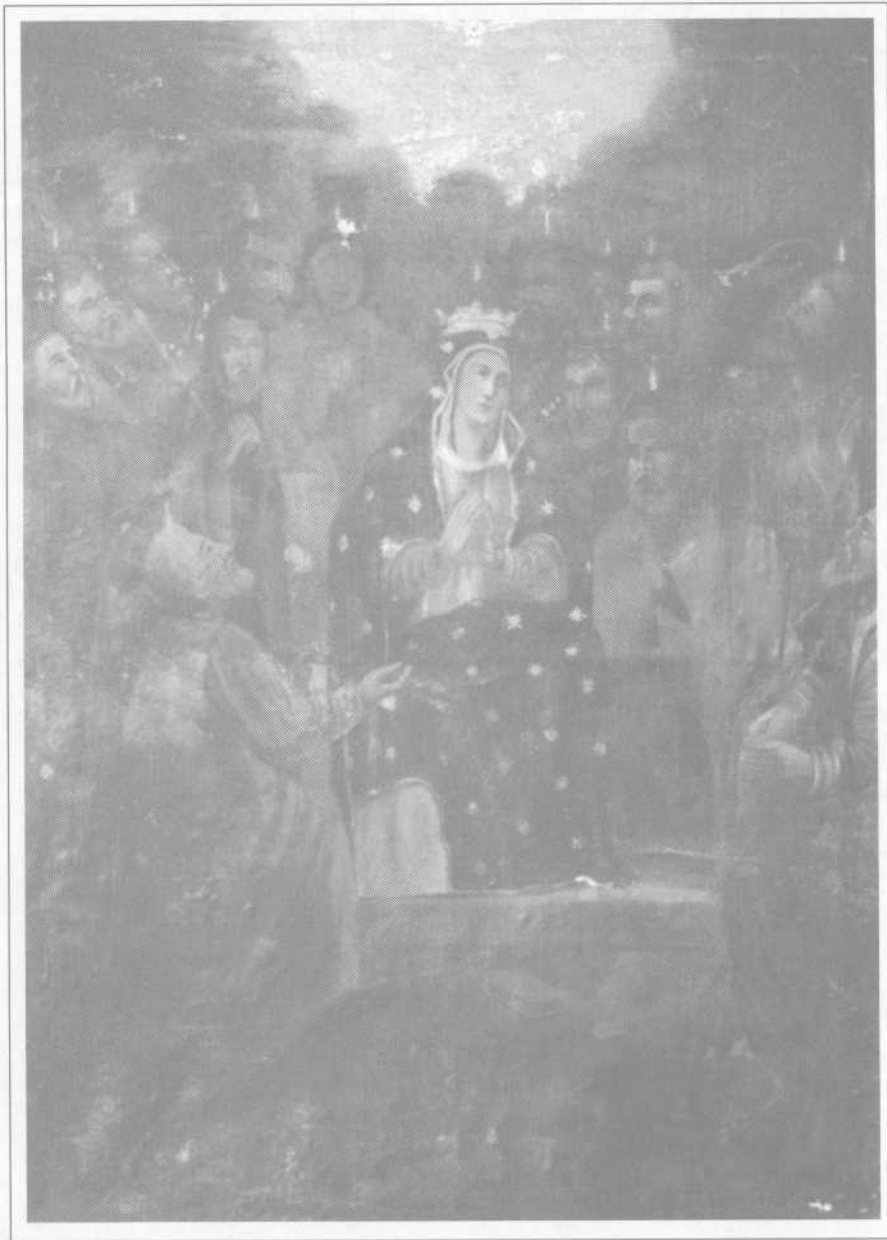
Virgin's body as she piously folds her hands and modestly uplifts her eyes. A monumental archway with a coffered ceiling frames the scene and encloses a miniature gabled building ornamented with half columns and a balustraded parapet wall that isolates the Virgin and stresses her key role in the composition.

The archangel is feebly modelled and his contrapposto is not satisfactorily resolved. He is none the less not lacking in artistic interest and the painter betrays a knowledge of a Mannerist palette in the harmonious interplay of lyrically modulated intense oranges and blues in both the large wings and the gently falling robes. The angel's uplifted arm is also beautifully drawn and he seems to be moving with a graceful ballet-like step which is quite attractive.

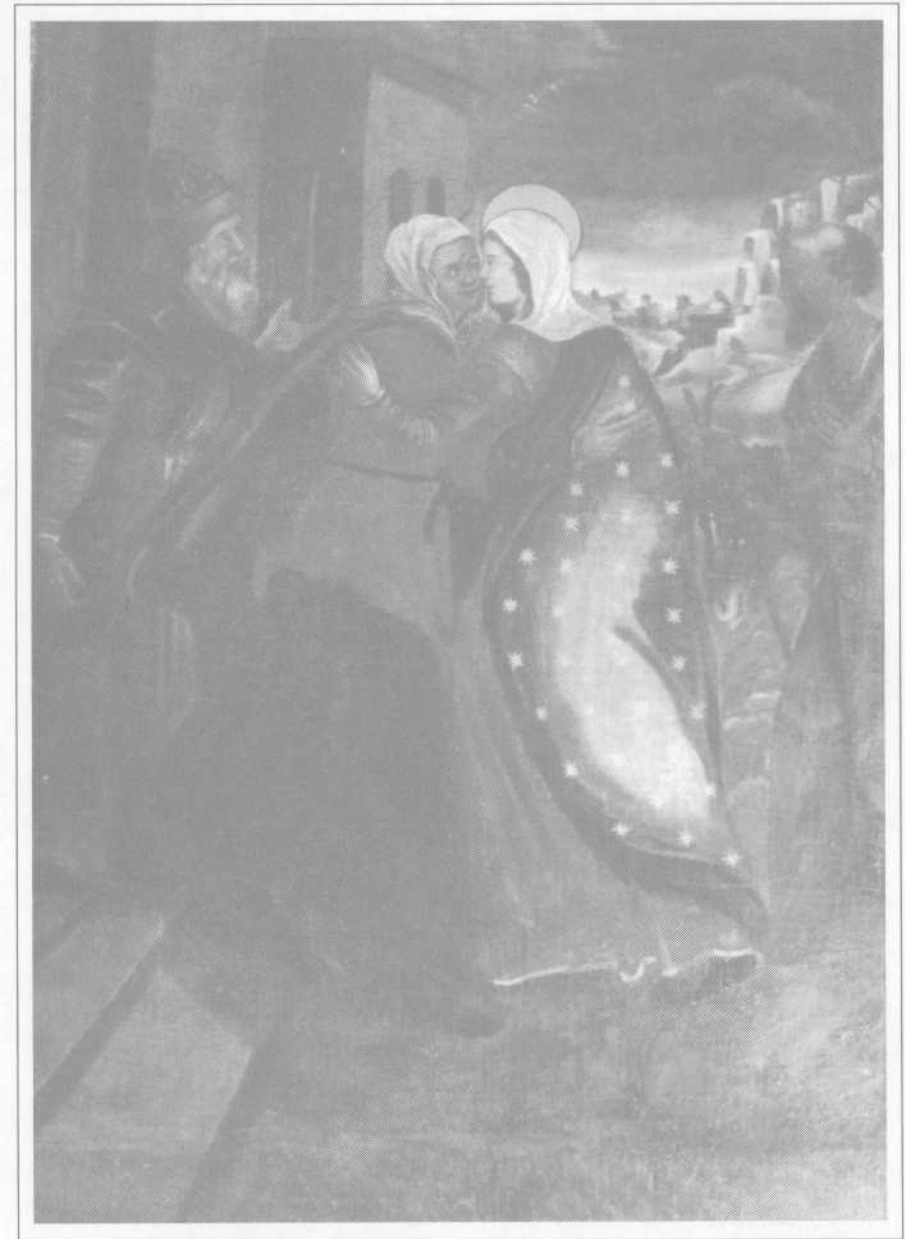
The composition is well thought out on a system of diagonals complimented by the great half circle of the framing arch whose receding coffer vault is possibly one of the earliest exercises in single point perspective in Maltese vernacular art.

Stylistically datable to the early seventeenth century, the canvas seems to have been painted after 1615 because the Cagliares report of that year describes the Annunciation altar in the old parish church as lacking in all furnishings, which presumably means that it did not have an altarpiece¹⁰.

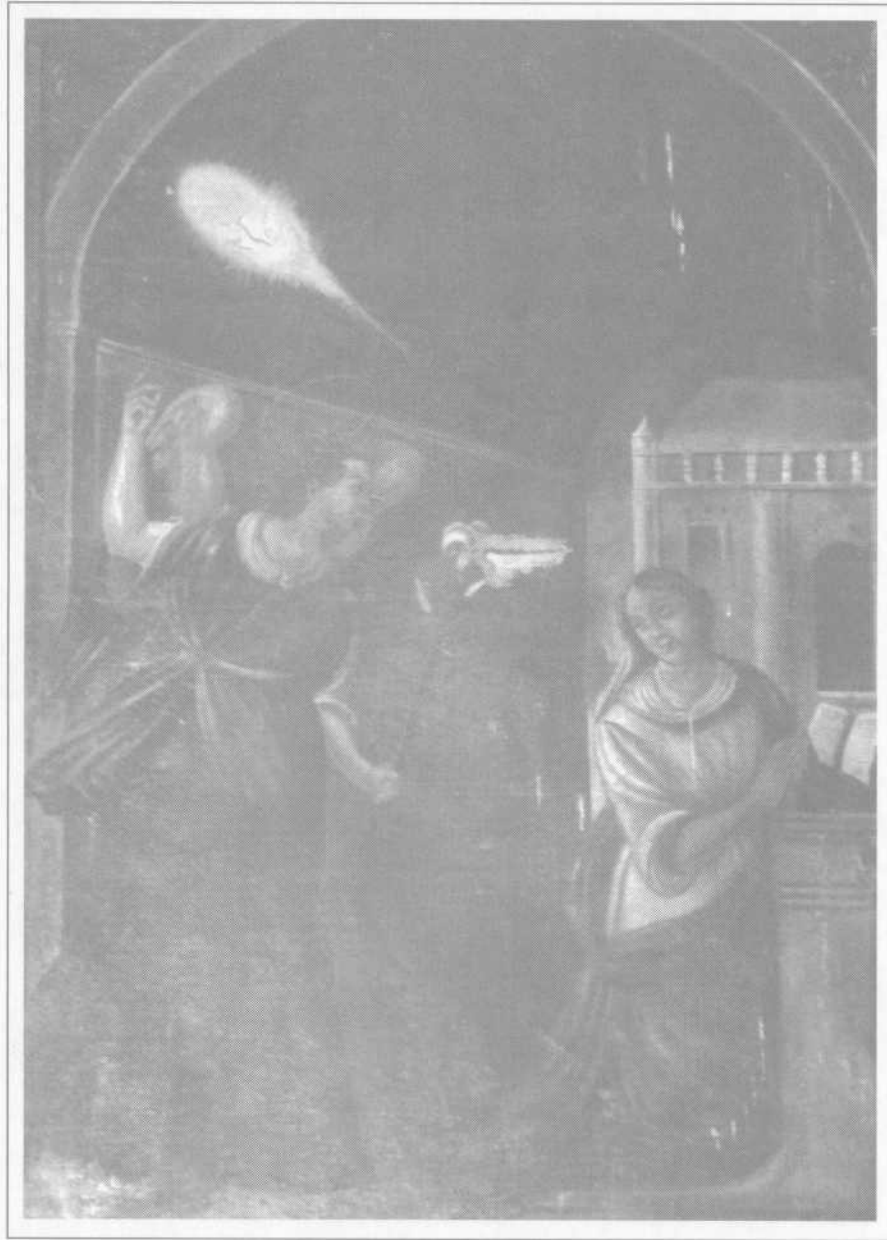
⁹ *Ibid.*¹⁰ AAM *Visitatio Cagliares 1615*, f. 236.



Unknown Seventeenth Century Painter, *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*,
Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, Mqabba.



Unknown Seventeenth Century Painter, *Visitation*,
Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, Mqabba.



Unknown Seventeenth Century Painter, *Annunciation of the Virgin*,
Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, Mqabba.