

Book reviews

Melchiorre Cafà: Maltese Genius of the Roman Baroque. Edited by Dr Keith Sciberras; pp. 293; published by Midsea Publications, 2006.

Three showcases in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta are worth an hour's viewing and several repeat visits. In one of them one finds the bozzetti of two polychromed Martyr Saints on either side of the *Charity of St Thomas of Villanuova*, who has been caught by the sculptor in the act of placing a coin in the outstretched palm of a woman holding a baby. Another child looks up beseechingly at the saint while a third sits on a ledge that forms a platform below the saint and outside the 'picture'. The saint is leaning forward. Foldery sways and billows in sync with the complementary movements of the saint and the mother. It is an entrancing moment of charity caught by – *Melchiorre Cafà: Maltese Genius of the Roman Baroque* (Ed. Dr Keith Sciberras; Midsea Publications, 2006).

It is marvellous that these splendid items are lodged in Malta; as are, of course, the *St Paul* at the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked, the *Virgin of the Rosary* in the Dominican Church, Rabat, a *St Paul* in St Paul's Grotto in Rabat and, also in Rabat, the *Sanctuary Lamp*.

A century and a half before Cafà had created the bozzetto of *Charity*, the High Renaissance had run its course. The 'school' of Mannerism that served as an interlude between the Renaissance and the Baroque was ambiguous enough for the historian Paul Johnson to describe it as a 'confusing label that no one can define'. (*The Renaissance*, Wiedefeld & Nicolson 2000). Linda Murray was less dismissive but her careful phrasing suggests Johnson has a point. She regards the term, as one 'requiring rather careful definition ... a label only for certain works of a certain kind produced by artists between about 1520 and 1590, and only in certain parts of Italy'.

(*The High Renaissance and Mannerism*, Thames and Hudson, 1967, reprinted 1995).

Very highly definable, by contrast, was what followed when *la maniera* died of inanition. In the wake of its death, the Baroque stormed into 17th and 18th century Italy, first, then dominated the artistic scene in Europe for a century and a half. What Michael A. Mullett was to refer to as 'the fixed, straight line and the right angle, drawn by the set-square of reason, [that] prevailed in the Renaissance' was abandoned.

Leading art historians in the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century took a terrible revenge on the baroque and all its works. Francesco Milizia's description of Borromini's architecture as 'an exaggerated expression of the bizarre, or the ridiculous taken to extremes' (Ed. Rolf Toman; *Baroque Architecture. Sculpture. Painting*, Konemann Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1998) was surpassed only

by his indictment of Borromini, Bernini and Pietro da Cortona. He described them as '... a plague on taste, a plague which has infected a great number of artists'. (Bruce Boucher; *Italian Baroque Sculpture*, Thames & Hudson, 1998). Jacob Burckhardt was reduced to splutter, 'How Bernini in Rome, in the presence of the most beautiful ... statues of antiquity, went so astray remains a riddle' (quoted after R. Toman).

It was only in the second half of the twentieth century, thanks in great part to Rudolf Wittkower and, after him, to a host of scholarly art historians including the contributors to *Maltese Genius*, that its ravishing beauty was brought in from the cold. If I may mix metaphors, baroque no longer remained an orphan whose place was in the 'bizarre' poorhouse, or, if you prefer, the anaesthetic dog-house to which its nineteenth and twentieth century critics had consigned it.

Melchiorre Cafà Maltese Genius of the Roman Baroque is a magnificent tribute to one of its artists. Edited by Dr Keith Sciberras, a senior lecturer in the Art History Department in the University of Malta, it is a series of essays by twelve international scholars who establish firmly the reputation of Cafà as a baroque sculptor of the highest order.

This remarkable compendium was on the launching pad, so to speak, at an international Conference held in Malta in the autumn of 2003. However, its genesis may reasonably be traced to the eve of the second millennium when Jennifer Montagu, Maria Giulia Barberini, Elena Bianca Di Gioia and Keith Sciberras established a research network in 1999 to look into the sculptor's *oeuvre*s. Into the network were roped Angela Cipriani, Gerhard Bissell, Alessandra Anselmi, John Azzopardi, Tomaso Montanari, Louise Rice, Tuccio Sante Guido and Tony Sigel.

These art historians deal punctiliously with various facets of the artist's work. Their publications are well known in art history circles, but at this point let me offload two remarks that need to be made. First, it would have been helpful if an autobiographical sketch about each contributor had been provided as a sort of personal introduction to the general reader. Second, there are irritating lapses in proof-reading in one or two of the texts, which a hawk-eyed publisher should have spotted. This lacuna in a book of distinction will no doubt be corrected when the second edition comes to be published.

Sciberras has divided what he calls 'the first truly collective attempt to study the works of Melchiorre Cafà with an almost obsessive fairness. He has directed Italian and non-Italian scholars (English, American and Maltese) – and how gruelling that must have been – in an operation that, as is acknowledged in the book, will not be the last word on the sculptor.

One finds that difficult to believe until one wrenches oneself away from the book's considerable influence to remember that it is inherent in the unfolding story of art history that fresh evidence will turn up, or, more likely, be hunted down, to confirm or dismiss attributions that are currently doubtful or dubious, throw new light on previous work, and discover fresh details that have so far gone unnoticed. Perhaps, too, new evidence will crop up about the life, as opposed to the works, of

Cafà: his habits, beliefs, behaviour, loves, hatreds, quarrels. Art history is a story on which art historians build more storeys.

Indeed, as Jennifer Montagu remarks in her piece on Cafà's models for Ercole Ferrata a pro pos the unknown author of the Rensi volume: 'A clue was provided by Keith Sciberras, who recognised that two of the drawings in the volume were used in a painting by Michelangelo Marullo in Rabat. I do not want to anticipate the study that I hope (Sciberras) will write on the still rather mysterious "Michelangelo Maltese" who accompanied the sculptor from Rome to Malta and back in 1666, and remained in the Eternal City for some time after Cafà's death, but this makes an attribution to Marullo highly likely'. This means that in all likelihood, Sciberras will be spending the next year or two researching this subject and coming up with another book to add to his scholarly work on Roman baroque.

The English-speaking contributors to *Maltese Genius* deal with an Introduction *Melchiorre Cafà: Maltese Genius of the Roman Baroque* (Keith Sciberras), *Cafà's Models for Ercole Ferrata* (Jennifer Montagu), *Cafà at S. Caterina a Magnanopoli* (Gerhard Bissell), *Cafà's Baptism of Christ for the Knights of the Order* (Keith Sciberras) *Cafà's Statue at St Paul's Grotto* (John Azzopardi), *Cafà's Conclusions* (Louise Rice), *Cafà's Clay Modelling Techniques* (Tony Siegel) and a List of Works (Keith Sciberras).

Their Italian counterparts are Maria Giulia Barberini, who places *Cafà nella Storia della Critica* – it would have been interesting to learn whether she is the descendant of the famous family; and whether Angela Cipriani, who discusses *Appunti dall' Archivio Storico dell' Accademia di San Luca di Roma*, is related to the family that owns the stunning hotel in Venice, never mind the world-famous Harry's Bar in the same city. Elena Bianca di Gioia deals with *Cafà a Roma Tra 1660 e 1667*, Alessandra Anselmi with *La Santa Rosa di Cafà: Iconografia e Significato*, Tomaso Montanari with *Il Matrimonio Mistico e la Visione delle Rose di Santa Rosa di Lima* and Tuccio Sante Guido with *Sulle Cere di Cafà a Malta*.

Taken together these pieces make up a very detailed and comprehensive study of Cafà's work by a formidable array of scholars. We should gratefully acknowledge their contributions.

By 1636 some of the masterpieces of the baroque era had already been created by Bernini, the greatest of baroque sculptors; of all time his most avid admirers insist. That year Alessandro Algardi, whose Malta Connection is recorded in detail Sciberras in his *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Knights of Malta* (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malta, 2004). Guido Reni, Francois Duquesnoy and a phalanx of other sculptors, painters and architects were all working in Rome where the baroque was finding its strongest expression; not least because Popes and powerful families – Colonna, Farnese, Borghese, Chigi, Pamphili, Barberini – were lavishing their patronage on this new art.

And it was in 1636 that Melchiorre Cafà was born in Vittoriosa, Malta, the ninth of ten children. Cafà's siblings included Giuseppe, who entered the Order of

the Dominicans, an Order that was to play an important part in Cafà's professional life, and Lorenzo, who became an architect and remained for a long time better known to his countrymen than Melchiorre. *Maltese Genius* will change this if, one must add, there is more official recognition given to the only Maltese who has, as a friend of mine recently observed, 'crossed the threshold of greatness'. There is, shamefully, far too little awareness of this fact and one must be grateful to all the contributors to *Maltese Genius* for their collective affirmation of this greatness.

The actual year of Cafà's birth has long been contentious we learn from Maria Giulia Barberini: 1631 (according to Schlegel); 1635 (Pascoli, Wittkower and Preimesberger, who later opted for 1638); as has been the year of his death, 1680 (Pascoli); 1687 (Nicola Pio). The Maltese art historian Dr Edward Sammut, who with Chev. Vincenzo Bonello before him, was instrumental, initially, in bringing Cafà to a segment of Malta's consciousness, established beyond doubt that Cafà saw the light of day in January 1636; this was later confirmed by Vincent Borg.

Sadly, Sammut's doctoral thesis on the sculptor in 1978 which, curiously, gives the artist's life-span as '1638? - 1667', was never published, but his body of research work won him the recognition of international art historians. It was Sammut, too, who discovered from a letter written to Grand Master Cotoner by the Order's ambassador in Rome and dated the 10th September 1667, that, *Il povero Melchiorre Cafà nelle cadente settimana se vi e passato all'altra vita*.

It was to a Rome bustling with creative artistic activity that our Maltese genius went at the age of twenty-two and in Rome that he died nine years later at the brutally young age of thirty-one. It was said of him, some sixty years after his death, that he 'worked little and lived little'. Taken in its context, this is not as disparaging as it sounds, for Pascoli, the author of these words, goes on to declare, 'much can be said about his beautiful works, works that are immortal ...'

Yet how, one cannot help asking, could a young man physically and intellectually separated from the contemporaneous artistic and aesthetic culture of Rome, with scarcely any experience at the back of him except for some sculptural carvings executed when he was still less than sixteen years old for the Cathedral of Syracuse - how could he have asserted his genius so swiftly in the driven, competitive environment that was seventeenth century Rome?

Yet within two years of his arrival he had received his first major commission - an altarpiece of the *Martyrdom of St Eustace* for the church of S. Agnese in Agone in Piazza Navona - from no less a figure than Camillo Pamphili. Two years later, he received a commission from the Dominicans for a sculptured altarpiece representing the *Glory of St Catherine of Siena*, which Gerhard Bissel thinks is 'central to our understanding of his work'; and as Sciberras notes, 'was to be his great triumph, a work that set him on the highest ranks of sculpture in Rome and....regarded as one of the most important moments in the transition from High to Late Baroque...' It is a measure of Cafà's self-confidence that he took this on knowing that comparison was bound to be made with Bernini's bel composto of the *Ecstasy of St Catherine*

in the Coronara Chapel, some twenty years earlier.

The following year, Pamphili commissioned the *Charity of St Thomas of Villanova*. And if he was not the talk of the town, this recently unknown sculptor must by now have become an earnest topic of conversation among everybody who counted, in the Eternal City.

The question remains (unanswered). How had this young man from Malta scaled the heights? Leaving aside what sounds like an apocryphal account cited by Keith Sciberras and more or less acknowledged by him to be just that - a ten or twelve-year old Cafà in the *bottega* of an unknown sculptor in Malta attracts the attention of a Spanish Knight for whom the boy, not yet a teenager, knocks together some garden sculptures and so impresses the 'unidentified Spanish Knight' that Cafà is taken under his protection and later "sent to Rome (where he places) him under influential protection" - leaving all that aside, the question must continue to haunt us.

Nor can I buy without some misgivings the story that the future Alexander VII, Fabio Chigi, had a hand in it. After all, he was the Apostolic Delegate here when Cafà was not yet born and left the appointment when our sculptor was only three years old. The Pope's nephew, another possible intermediary suggested by Sciberras, may be a safer bet; but to date, a bet for all that.

And yet, some patronage there had to be else how does a young man leave home and Malta - and we are talking 1658 - and enter, so soon afterwards, the *bottega* of Ercole Ferrata? On what basis was it conferred apart from those cathedral carvings? What credentials did he have to show Ferrata by form of introduction? Was his brother in the Dominican Order in Malta in contact with prestigious Dominican figures in Rome, pushing his brother's name, informing hem they had a genius on their hands if they would but recognise it?

We can conclude, with Keith Sciberras, that the Knights did not extend this patronage to Cafà, for in 1665, seven years after the sculptor's arrival in Rome, the ambassador of the Knights of the Order of St John refers to him as *un certo Maltese* (not *il nostro* Cafà, as would have been the case had he been the Order's protégé). This reference to the sculptor was made in the context of a commission for the apsidal termination of the Conventual Church of St John, for which Cafà, among others, was being considered. I have gone on at some length about this because this unknown artist reached such great heights in an environment not short of eminencies; and did so in so short a time.

Barberini bears out the impression of a dark fog surrounding Cafà's professional life, let alone his personal one. A similar fog seems to have descended after his death: *Poche le notizie scientifiche relative alla fortuna dell'artista dopo il suo arrivo a Roma*. His 'attachment' to the *bottega* of Ercole Ferrata is documented (1660). By 1662 he is listed below Ferrata as a sculptor, not an apprentice. Between 1662 and 1663 the accounts of Christina of Sweden show payments made to his name *per modelli in creta e disegni* indicating *un riconoscimento della sua notevole*

personalita artistica. And by 1665 the Order's ambassador in Rome is writing to the Grand Master in Valletta that *essendomi stata data notizie che il Bernini si e sentito piu volte a dire che un certo Giovane Maltese lo havrebbe passato nel mestiere per haver mostrato gran giudizio et attivita in molti lavori da lui fatto.*

Each of the authors, it goes without saying, gives an in-depth approach to the subject he or she has selected to deal with. Readers will lap up Sciberras's lively and detailed treatment of the drama involved in Cafà's *Baptism of Christ*. You can almost hear the summons Cafà received from the Grand Master to come to Malta, the bargaining between the Order and the artist, nearly see the arm-twisting, feel the urgency for this commission to pass from project stage to completion, share Cafà's anxiousness for the work to be done in Rome where other work awaited him, sense the watchfulness of the Order's ambassador in Rome once Cafà returned and then, when the artist died as he was nearing completion of his models, the tawdriness that followed.

Maltese readers in particular will bemoan the fact that in the event Malta lost out on what would have been a monumental Cafà. Both texts submitted by Sciberras receive a generous tribute from Maria Giulia Barberini – *un contributo importante sia per le opere presenti a Malt ... sia la collaborazione con Michelangelo Marullo. Si tratta di una importante testimonianza da parte dello studioso maltese verso lo scultore che gran cose avrebbe fatto se morte nimica tolto non l'avesse in eta troppo immature dal mondo.*

In the context of Cafà's *opere* in Malta it is well to note that Cafà returned to Malta in 1666. He spent almost four months here, gained other commissions, caught up with his family, in particular his brothers Lorenzo and Giuseppe. The former, we are told by Mgr John Azzopardi in his expert account of this period and on the statue of St Paul at St Paul's Grotto in Rabat, was in great demand and at the time working on the Parish Church in Rabat; the second had just completed his term as Prior in the Church of St Dominic in the same hillside town. What would one not give to have listened in on the conversations they must have had? More to the point, perhaps, what would art history scholars not give to discover correspondence between the three talented brothers? Again, what a strange lacuna for history to ponder.

I have to confess to a fascination for Tony Sigel's essay on Cafà's clay modelling technique. The longest by far of the contributions to *Maltese Genius* (Sigel describes it as a 'preliminary assessment'), it is a formidable, analytical study of thirteen terracotta models linked with, or attributed to, Cafà. Here is an example of the cool, calm tone Sigel employs when he describes, in this case, the clay model of Cafà's only known work of portraiture - his bronze bust of Alexander VII:

The bust has been badly broken and reassembled, with restored losses of the head, the right and left collar, and extensive restored losses of the right and left sides of the cape. Several filled firing cracks were noticed. The head has been

reconstructed from many pieces, and includes joints crossing the right temple, across the nose where there is almost a small loss on the bridge, above the left eye, and back to the temple. This is a forensic expert at work, interested only in what he sees, in the evidence before him, avoiding any emotional involvement. You can almost hear him call for the scalpel, please.

Not a claw mark, not an impression, not a finger print, not a layer in the development of the clay in the formation of this or that bozzetto, seems to have missed Bissel as he visually and mentally chiselled away at the evidence. I found his piece enthralling even if taxing.

Maltese Genius is a fascinating read, its contributions overlapping here and there, emphasising one point, querying this, not quite certain about that. The success of its sales overseas testify to the intellectual curiosity about this Maltese sculptor in the international art history world and to the high standards of scholarship that make this book a work of reference and one to be enjoyed; a rare achievement. The illustrations, in black and white apart from the polychromed works to be found in Malta, are for the most part excellently reproduced and sensibly captioned throughout in English. The format is well laid out.

Dr Sciberras and the contributors to this publication should feel well pleased with what they have accomplished. So should Malta, which has for so long failed to give Melchiorre Cafà the recognition due to him. His genius is to our credit, which is why it would be discreditable if we did not acknowledge it in a form that he would have relished – a bronze bust by an internationally established sculptor to serve as a monument to 'the only Maltese who has crossed the threshold of greatness'.

John H. Micallef

Lanfranco Guido, Drawwiet u *Hajja Mill-Istorja ta' Malta*,
Wise Owl Publications, Malta 2005,
pp. 167 illus., ISBN: 99932-32-46-7.

Mr Guido Lanfranco needs no introduction to whoever is interested in Maltese history, folklore, folk medicine or natural history due to his far-ranging list of publications, to which one must add a great number of articles (usually annotated) found in the local press, periodicals and parish publications. His interest in folklore and his drive to keep alive the memory of old Maltese traditions and customs has found its expression in various writings aimed to ensure that the younger generation in particular would be given an even chance to become cognizant of obsolete usages. These are part and parcel of our nation's history and it would indeed be a great loss to our national culture if they are left unrecorded. Indeed, the doyen of Maltese folklore, the late Ġuzè Cassar Pullicino, blazed the way with his scholarly contributions. Mr Lanfranco has followed suit, albeit in a more popular manner.

Mr Lanfranco has recorded many traditions and customs through his writings and illustrations. However, a multiplicity of articles distributed among a plethora of publications is certainly not the best way to ensure their continued reading and usefulness. So it was a good idea to group together a number of Mr Lanfranco's articles in an illustrated book, naturally after the necessary updating, corrections and insertions of references was carried out. In this way, all those interested in Maltese social history have been presented with an up-to-date rendition of various aspects of local social history.

The publication under review includes no less than 38 illustrated contributions which vary in content but mainly include various religious aspects including folkloristic usages connected with local *fešta* celebrations. An important aspect of each contribution is the historical background which builds up the information to the present time or to the years when that particular custom died out or was discontinued. A typical example is the use of the parish *bulletini* by which parish priests could keep tabs on the parishioners who carried out their religious obligation of receiving Holy Communion at Eastertide. This custom was discontinued after 1967 and so, Maltese under the age of 45 years (at least) would have no idea of this usage unless they read something about it. The same applies to Music Boxes (*terramaxka*) in the streets, customs connected with fasting and abstinence, the sale of toys at the feast of St Venèra, parish reliquaries, and so on.

Mr Lanfranco has dedicated this book to those young students who appreciate the way of life of our Maltese forefathers. This sums up his main aim, which has already been referred to: to keep a written record of our forefathers' way of life under different aspects. Many of us tend to forget what happened just a couple of decades ago and so a written record of our social interactions of the past is something which should be appreciated by one and all.

The book is written in an easy, flowing style which should not present any

problems to the general reader. Most of the articles are annotated, mainly though secondary works but which are themselves based on primary sources. Such notes are useful to those readers who may wish to delve deeper in a particular subject. Although an index is lacking and, in my opinion, should be included in all publications of this nature, I do not hesitate in recommending this book to all lovers of Maltese culture and melitensia.

Joseph F. Grima