

Antoine Favray and his works

Foreign artists who made a significant mark through their presence in Malta are few and far between. Caravaggio and Mattia Preti are possibly the most illustrious examples. The art which they fostered on the island more or less conditioned the character of 17th century Maltese painting. Much the same was to happen during the second half of the 18th century with the arrival in 1744 of the French artist Antoine Favray, who was to stay in Malta until he died in 1798, except for a nine-year spell (1762-1771) in Constantinople. His presence in Malta was destined to play a decisive role in Maltese painting that had been languishing since the death of Preti almost fifty years previously.



Favray dominated the art scene in Malta in his time. His fame rests on his numerous portraits of high dignitaries of the Order of St. John, including those of three of the four Grand Masters during whose reign he resided in Malta, namely Manoel Pinto, Francisco Ximenes and Emanuel de Rohan (he was decrepit by the time Ferdinand von Hompesch was elected in 1797). Besides Bailiffs, Priors, knights, bishops, members of the Maltese aristocracy and other notable acquaintances, like the members of the Marchesi family with whom he was in close contact, were the subjects among his vast repertoire in portraiture. From his brush we also have at least two examples of portraits of Pope Benedict XIV, made after the original by Pierre Subleyras, and the equestrian one of King Carlos II of Spain.

But it would be wrong to equate Favray solely with portraiture, however much they stand out. Favray also has a significant number of religious works in churches that also demand attention. Even less well known are several landscapes and subjects of a historical nature, the former mostly relating to his Oriental phase, with relatively few of them having found their way to Malta. For an artist who lived to be almost ninety-two, and with a colourful working career that spanned six decades, what follows cannot be anything but a brief outline of his life and works.

Favray was born on 8 September 1706 in the village of Bagnolet, on the outskirts of Paris. His father was Claude Favray and his mother Marie's maiden surname was Millet. Information about his early upbringing is rather sketchy. The haze only starts to lift when he accompanied Jean-Francois de Troy as his pupil to the French Academy in Rome in 1738. Though he made original works there, most of his known Roman production consists of copies from old masters like Raphael (notably *The Fire in the Borgo* in the Vatican), Titian and Guercino. Among the Count Saverio Marchesi's bequest at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina is a copy of *The Satyr at the Peasant's Table* by Johann Liss, which is inscribed as having been painted in 1741. Several

academic studies of male nudes which exist in public and private collection probably also belong to this period.

Favray remained in Rome until 1744 when, at the invitation of some knights of Giuseppe Isidoro Marchesi who was studying Humanities in Rome at the time, he was lured to seek his fortune in Malta. And he did in fact, for he soon acquired the patronage of Grand Master Pinto, whose 1747 grandiloquent portrait for the sacristy of the Conventual church (now transferred to St. John's museum) soon catapulted his name into the higher ranks of Maltese society. From then on he never looked back.

Patronage was indeed the *sine qua non* that was to determine Favray's decision to settle in Malta. Commissions soon started flowing in, among them three sets of paintings with a religious theme, all completed within his initial five years in Malta. The first was in 1746 for the new chapel of the Blessed Sacrament in the church of St. Paul's shipwreck in Valletta. It consisted of four paintings, including the altarpiece of *The Last Supper* widely considered to be one of his most religiously inspired works, and a bozzetto of which is at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. The others represent Melchisedek and Abraham (one of his most powerful compositions), Elijah and the Angel (unfortunately heavily restored), and an oval painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which is one of the earliest representations of the theme to be found in Maltese churches.

The second commission on which he worked in 1748/9 was for the chapel of Our Lady of Manresa at the new Jesuits' Retreat House in Floriana, (now the Archbishop's Curia). The main altarpiece with Our Lady appearing to St. Ignatius at Manresa remains one of the highlights of Favray's production. But so are other paintings in this series like *The Death of St. Joseph* and *The Death of St. Francis Xavier* on two side altars, with the former attaining such popularity that a number of contemporary copies by other artists are known to exist in churches and private collections.

Also belonging to the same period (the late 1740s) is the set of five paintings for the chapel of the Seminary in Mdina (today the Cathedral Museum), which had been rebuilt by Bishop Paul Alpheran de Bussan. Once again the main altarpiece here, showing *The Annunciation*, is with its lyricism and chromatic qualities, one of the most precious relics of Favray's brush. In terms of altarpieces, one should mention at least three others – that of *The Apotheosis of St. Barbara* in the saint's church in Valletta, that of St. Cataldus (1760) for the homonymous chapel in Rabat, and that of *Our Lady of Mercede* for the chapel in Selmun in which he recalls Caterina Vitale's munificence in the founding of the Monte della Redenzione degli Schiavi in 1609.

In the meantime Favray was assessing his position within the framework of the Hospitaller Order, in which he was given a minor job at the Sacra Infermeria. Not being of noble blood precluded him from being admitted into the Order as a full knight. However, on the strength of two lunettes which he painted for the passage-way to the Oratory of St. John's, showing Grand Master d'Aubusson being presented with the Relic of St. John the Baptist's

arm and the Finding of the Baptist's Head (augmented at a later stage by a third lunette which shows The Burning of the Baptist's Body by Julian the Apostate), he received his passaggio into the Order as a Serving Brother, a low-ranking knighthood, following a papal bull from Benedict XIV dated 11 June 1871.

The capture of the Turkish galley Ottoman Crown by a group of Christian slaves in September 1760 was ultimately to provide a unique opportunity for Favray to seek new pastures away from Malta. The galley was brought to Malta, but the mutiny infuriated the Sultan to such an extent that only the timely intervention of France warded off a military assault on the island. The French frigate l'Oiseau was sent to Malta specifically to accompany the Ottoman Crown back to Constantinople. No knights were to be allowed on board the galley on its homeward voyage, the only exception being reserved for Favray who grasped the chance to acquire first-hand experience of Oriental subjects. The Turkish galley sailed into the Bosphorus on 19 January 1762, an event which Favray was soon to record as a painting which he presented to the Count de Vergennes, who at the time was French ambassador at the Court of the Sublime Porte. For de Vergennes himself and his wife he made separate portraits of them dressed in Oriental costumes.

Favray's friendship with de Vergennes was to be extended with Francois Emmanuel Guignard de Saint-Priest, who in 1768 succeeded de Vergennes as French ambassador and whom he had already known in Malta during one of the sea-services or caravans – *j'ai fait caravane avec lui* Favray wrote in one of his letters to Chevallier Turgot. The artist executed at least two paintings of the ceremony in which Saint-Priest was received by the Sultan. One of them was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1771, receiving the admiring attention of numerous visitors who were eager to view one of the first ever examples of an eyewitness account of Oriental manners to be seen in the west.

Favray was greatly fascinated by the Levantine atmosphere, both by its landscapes and especially by the diversity of female dress that was to become the subject of several paintings. The Cathedral Museum in Mdina possesses two paintings, respectively titled Turkish Ladies and Greek Ladies, which were apparently painted as late as 1792, many years after Favray had returned to Malta, from sketches done in the East. Of more artistic merit are two grouping of Oriental ladies which were painted in 1764 and which are today conserved at the Musee des Augustins in Toulouse.

The idyll which Favray must have experienced in Constantinople was rudely snapped by the outbreak of war between Turkey and Russia. It was probably at that point that he decided to leave, arriving back in Malta, via Marseilles, on 29 September 1771. As far as is known, he was never to leave the island again till his death which occurred on 9 February 1798 at the Sacra Infermeria.

Favray's second Maltese period was as fruitful as the first one. Following the death of Grand Master Pinto in 1773, for whom he designed the neoclassical

mausoleum which was put up at the Chapel of Castille and Portugal inside the Conventual church, the patronage of the succeeding Grand Masters, Ximenes and de Rohan continued unabated. Numerous portraits of them, either by Favray or his circle, are known to exist, both in Malta and abroad. For instance, among the de Rohan portraits was the one which Chevalier Louis-Francois Le Febure d'Ormesson commissioned for the Commandery of Saint-Jean-en-l'Isle près de Corbeil which d'Ormesson held in 1782-83. This portrait was reproduced as an engraving by F. Grec and Domenico Cunegio which was printed in Rome and which appears as the frontispiece of the *Codice del Sacro Militare Ordine Gerosolimitano* which was officially printed in Malta in 1782. Other portraits by Favray of Pinto and de Rohan were engraved and illustrated in Giovanni Antonio Ciantar's 1772-1780 *Malta Illustrata* as the revised and enlarged edition of Gio. Francesco Abela's *Della Descrittione di Malta* (1647). The *Codice di Rohan* which contains the seventh and final revision of the Statutes of the Order by a specially-appointed commission in 1776 features yet another fine engraving based on a Favray portrait of the Grand Master.

Other portraits of notable personalities from that time include those of Cardinal Fra Joaquim Fernando Portocarrero (Museum of Fine Arts) whose vast collection of volumes was purchased, after his death on 22 June 1760, by Bailiff Fra Jean Louis Guerin de Tencin, a great collector of books himself, and eventually donated to the Order to form the nucleus of the present-day *Bibliotheca* in Valletta and that of the reigning Pontiff Pius VI (1775-1799) who had been for many years a protector of the Order of St. John. This portrait is still housed at the Palace, Valletta.

In 1779 Favray was invited to send his self-portrait to the Grand Duke of Tuscany to be included in the collection of self-portraits which originated in the 17th century through Cardinal Leopold de' Medici. With the eight-pointed cross on his breast and with the mosque of Hagia Sophia in the background – the title *Self-portrait as Asiatic Philosopher* was suggested by the artist himself – this painting, today part of the Uffizi collection encapsulates the landmarks of his life both as a member of the Order and as a traveller to the Orient.

Such a great esteem with which Favray's services were held from above facilitated further commissions from numerous other quarters, including ecclesiastical ones. Among the latter could be mentioned the paintings of the Immaculate Conception, St. Francis Xavier and St. Louis Gonzaga for the parish church of Zebbug, Malta.

Another parish church that benefited from his services, or at least from those of his workshop, was that of Cospicua where the altarpiece of Our Lady of Graces (now transferred to the sacristy) presents an overall concomitance to his compositional schemes and palette, but also certain problems of a stylistic nature in some of its details. This could however be explained by assuming that a considerable part of its execution was left for his assistants to complete, most probably at a time when he was burdened with other commissions or old age.

This in no way implies that Favray did not remain active as a painter when he was well over eighty years old. Probably one of the very last paintings by Favray specifically done for a church is an altarpiece for Tas-Samra church in Hamrun. Signed and dated 1791, it shows The Virgin and Child. By that time the artist was fast approaching the last lap of his long career.

Favray equally remained an active member of the order. He successively received pensions from the Commanderies of Lagny le Sec, Juny le Temple, Sommereaux and Dijon, all of them belonging to the Priory of France. On 8 August 1783 he became a recipient of the Commandery of Valcanville which brought him an annual income of 7118 livres.

On 18 January 1793 the Council of the Order elected him to the post of armoniere which assigned him to the charge of the silverware at the Sacra Infermeria. Contrary to normal procedure whereby holders of the post were not allowed to extend their term, the post was confirmed in his favour on two other occasions, on 7 February 1795 and 30 January 1797.

This was practically the last rung Favray was to scale. As an artist he had by now practically stalled his activity due to failing health and poor eyesight. What he surely saw in his mind's eye was his fast approaching end. He therefore dictated his will to his long-standing friend Lamberto Wathour, the Commander of Rheims and Prior of the hospital where he was confined during his last illness. The artist specified that there were no outstanding debts between him and others. Two of the five paintings hanging in his bedroom, described as Un Democrito ed Alacrito and Un vecchio del quale una govine si vide, were to be donated to Grand Master Hompesch. The next day, on 9 February 1798, Antoine Favray breathed his last and was later buried in an unmarked grave inside the Bartolott crypt, beneath the Oratory of St. John's Conventual church. He had outlived three Grand Masters and come to know a fourth, Ferdinand von Hompesch who, just four months later, was to be ousted by Napoleon Bonaparte, the icon of the new France from where the artist had originated.

The late Emmanuel Fiorentino, who died early this year was a distinguished art critic and historian

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