

Sculpture in Rome to meet its ‘bozzetto’... after 350 years

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A bozzetto (scale model) of Melchiorre Cafà's Santa Caterina sculpture is due to be taken to Rome and, around 350 years after the Maltese artist created the work of art, the two will finally be in the same place again.

The bozzetto is in the hands of Maltese restorer Fr Edgar Vella and will be taken to Rome to be part of a presentation on the conclusion of restoration work on the sculpture.

The relief in white marble is in the Santa Caterina da Siena church in Magnanapoli, near Via Nazionale in Rome, a former monastery.

The church we see today (minus the convent) was constructed at the expense of Cardinal Scipione Borghese in 1608 on a design by Cesare Maderno. Apart from the marble group by Cafà, it also features the heraldic signs of another person who lived in Malta, the Chigi family heraldic symbol of Pope Alexander VII.

The marble group was the last work completed by the artist, who died in September 1667 after some material collapsed on him in the foundry of Saint Peter's while he was working on the altar decoration for St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta.

Restoration on this group is now almost complete. It was done by the Sante Guido Company and is, once again, another step in its restoration of things Maltese – from restoration work at St John's Co-Cathedral to work all over Malta.

Although Cafà had finished the marble group, and had also planned the altar and the columns that would surround it, he did not live to see it in place.

While restoring the marble group, Prof. Giuseppe Mantella from the Sante Guido company told me the restorers discovered a particular technique that was used by Cafà and other baroque sculptors, on faces, hands and other uncovered parts of the body. Today, one would think that they used to leave these parts in marble white and that the patina on

the statues was the result of so many years, but it is now clear that the artists, including Cafà, pasted a sort of derivative of mozzarella on to the white marble, which, mixed with water, after a few days, gave the parts covered the colour of honey.

The same technique was used by Bernini in his famous Ecstasy of Saint Theresa in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, and also by Mazzuoli in the Gloria at St John's. The restorers even found traces of the brush strokes used by Cafà on the face of the saint. He also used the same technique on the monument of Grand Master Perellos in St John's (the two slaves) but not on the monument of Grand Master Cottoner, which faces it.

It is only now that this technique is being discovered and preserved. Previously, all restoration works carried out involved cleaning the marble groups, which restorers believed that in so doing they were 'removing' the detritus of centuries, mostly by rubbing the marble with pumice stone.

The Sante Guido group has also been working on a restoration less related to Malta, although where Malta and St Paul are involved, ties are never that far.

Pope Benedict will initiate the Pauline Year by opening the Pauline Door on 28 June. In preparation for this event, the Sante Guido team have been cleaning the tomb of St Paul underneath the main altar of San Paolo Fuori le Mura.

Work on the restoration commenced two years ago and the tomb of St Paul's disciple, St Timothy, which lay over the sarcophagus in which the body of St Paul is believed his, has now been removed.

Through the aperture created, it is possible to glimpse the sarcophagus with its very old script PAULO APOSTOLO MART and the holes through which pilgrims used to pass incense, money offerings or cloth to touch the sarcophagus of the saint.

From other information obtained by this paper, Pope Benedict has so far resisted pressure to have the sarcophagus opened, nor is it possible for sophisticated X-Ray machines that see through stone to be manoeuvred in place and so permit a glimpse inside the sarcophagus.

The restoration work by the Sante Guido team has been to clean the ciborium by Arnolfo di Cambio (1285), a gothic masterpiece rather out of place in the classical basilica but one that had withstood the fire of 1836, which burned down the church.

Even here, a revelation awaited the team: the original ciborium was far more colourful than the gold-hue that covered everything after 1836.

Yet another Maltese connection is the restoration work done to the Mattia Preti masterpiece of Santa Caterina in the church in Valletta.

Somewhat surprisingly, this is the Saint Catherine of Alexandria rather than the Santa Caterina d'Italia and there is a historical reason for it.

Ever since the founding of the Order, the Italian langue was charged with protecting the monastery on Mount Sinai dedicated to Saint Catherine. When the Knights were ousted from the Holy Land, they took the relics of the saint with them to Rhodes.

Once in Malta, they retained their devotion and in fact both the chapel of the langue in St John's and the church linked to the Auberge d'Italie have Saint Catherine as their titular saint.

Originally, the Auberge's front door was next to the church (where the police station is today) but when the Auberge was practically rebuilt by Romano Carapecchia, it was turned around and placed in Merchants Street. The original church must also have been much smaller.

It was for this rebuilt church that Mattia Preti did one of his biggest paintings, 10 square metres.

He had come to Malta for the first time in 1659 and again in 1661, when he asked Grand Master De Rohan to become a Knight of Grace.

Art experts still discuss whether Preti did this painting in Naples where he lived between visits, or in Malta. One factor, which led many to think he did it in Naples, was the fact that the canvas on which the painting is done is seamless, whereas paintings in Malta were done on strips of canvas. This led many to think he must have painted it abroad, where canvas of such breadth were available, but others have argued Preti could have used a sail.

More research on the painting has been done recently and, through contacts with Viterbo, it has been found that the base for the painting contains globigerina, which makes it almost certain it was done in Malta. Further examinations are being done so that a more probable opinion can be expressed.

A further factor has come in: there is a very similar copy of the Preti masterpiece in Pedara in Sicily. In fact the people of Pedara for a long

time believed their painting to be Preti's original and the Valletta painting a copy.

But Infrared examination of the Valletta painting has revealed huge pentimenti by the artist (ie, he painted something first, thought better of it – pentimento – and painted something else over it).

It now seems clear that the gallows must have been painted later and the saint's figure was the last thing to be painted. The soldier's lance behind her is actually a halberd and the saint's figure covers half the body of the soldier behind her.

The Pedara Saint Catherine has nothing like this. It would seem that Preti did the Valletta painting first and, when he got it finally right, did copies of this painting, or had his bottega do copies.

The restoration of the Preti masterpiece would not have been done were it not for the NSTF sponsorship. Back in 1996 it was a coincidence involving NSTF which brought the Sante Guido team to Malta: the St John Co-Cathedral authorities were about to propose the restoration of the St John the Baptist reliquary and contacted NSTF for sponsorship. NSTF insisted on going for proper scientific restoration and, with the help of the Italian cultural attaché Professor Xausa, and following an international call for interest, the Sante Guido team came to Malta, where they have been working ever since.
