

PALERMO
CULTURE

TREASURE MAPS

Twenty Itineraries
Designed to Help
You Explore the
Cultural Heritage
of Palermo and
its Province



Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali
e ambientali di Palermo

TIMELESS MASTERPIECES

edited by **Elvira D'Amico**

REGIONE SICILIANA
Assessorato dei Beni culturali
e dell'Identità siciliana



PO FESR Sicilia 2007-2013

Linea d'intervento 3.1.1.1.

“Investiamo nel vostro futuro”

Project TREASURE MAPS

Twenty Itineraries Designed to Help You Explore the Cultural Heritage of Palermo and its Province

project by: *Ignazio Romeo*

R.U.P.: *Claudia Oliva*

Soprintendente: *Maria Elena Volpes*

Timeless Masterpieces

edited by: *Elvira D'Amico*

texts by: *Gaetano Bongiovanni, Elvira D'Amico, Evelina De Castro, Maddalena De Luca, Valeria Li Vigni, Alessandra Merra, Maria Emanuela Palmisano, Rosario Perricone, Costanza Polizzi, Maria Reginella, Alessandra Ruvituso, Giuliana Sarà* photographs: *Dario Di Vincenzo* (cover, p. 5, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 27, 31, 35, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44-49, 50, 52, 53, 57); *Gero Cordaro* (p. 21, 23, 25, 32); *Archivio fotografico Museo Salinas* (p. 7, 8, 11, 12); *D'Aguanno/Civita Sicilia* (p. 54); *Archivi Guttuso* (p. 58); *Paola Verro* (p. 60); *Fabio Sgroi* (p. 61); *Enzo Brai* (p. 62); *Maria Antonietta Emma e Salvatore Bommarito* (p. 63).

editorial staff: *Ignazio Romeo, Maria Concetta Picciurro*

collaborations: *Maria Reginella, Girolamo Papa*

graphics and printing: *Ediguida s.r.l.*

translations: *Logoteum Language Services*

we would like to thank all the museums and institutions who grant us the reproduction of the works presented in this volume special thanks are due to *Fondo Edifici di Culto del Ministero dell'Interno* and *Prefettura di Palermo, Arcidiocesi di Palermo, Archivi Guttuso* and their Chairman *Fabio Carapezza Guttuso*

Treasure Maps: Twenty Itineraries Designed to Help You Explore the Cultural Heritage of Palermo and its Province. - Palermo : Regione siciliana, Assessorato dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana. - v.

709.45823 CDD-22

SBN Pal0274341

20.: Timeless Masterpieces / edited by Elvira D'Amico. - Palermo : Regione siciliana, Assessorato dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, 2015.

I. D'Amico, Elvira <1952->.

745.109458 CDD-22

CIP - Biblioteca centrale della Regione siciliana “Alberto Bombace”

© REGIONE SICILIANA

Assessorato dei Beni culturali e dell'Identità siciliana
Dipartimento dei Beni culturali e dell'Identità siciliana
Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali e ambientali di Palermo
Via Pasquale Calvi, 13 - 90139 Palermo
Palazzo Ajutamicristo - Via Garibaldi, 41 - 90133 Palermo
tel. 091-7071425 091-7071342 091-7071411
www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali

TIMELESS MASTERPIECES

- 6** Metope from Temple C at Selinunte
- 8** Metope from Temple E at Selinunte
- 10** Mosaic of Orpheus Charming the Animals
- 12** Bronze Ram from Syracuse
- 14** Capitals of the Cloister of Monreale
- 18** Crown of Costance of Aragon
- 20** The Triumph of Death
- 22** Bust of Eleanor of Aragon by Francesco Laurana
- 24** The Virgin Annunciate by Antonello da Messina
- 26** Portrait of an Unknown Man by Antonello da Messina
- 28** Polizzi Triptych by the Master of the Embroidered Foliage
- 30** Altar of Saint George by Antonello Gagini
- 32** Malvagna Triptych by Jan Gossaert
- 34** Our Lady of the Rosary by Anton Van Dyck
- 36** Saint Benedict distributes 'the Rule' by Pietro Novelli
- 38** Nativity with Shepherds by Matthias Stom
- 40** Nativity Scene by Giovanni Matera
- 42** Embroidered Altar Frontals (Paliotti) in the Church of Saint Francis of Paola
- 45** Frescos with Scenes from the Life of Christ by Guglielmo Borremans
- 48** Tapestry with Baldachin at Palazzo Mirto
- 50** Monstrance with Saint Ignatius of Loyola by Antonio Nicchi
- 52** Mellerio Stele by Antonio Canova
- 54** Tuna Fishing by Antonino Leto
- 56** School Children by Felice Casorati
- 58** Gioacchino Guttuso Surveyor by Renato Guttuso
- 59** 'La Vucciria' by Renato Guttuso
- 61** Untitled by Jannis Kounellis
- 62** Gradasso Moor
- 63** Cart from the Palermo Area

It is not easy to choose the most representative works of the artistic culture of such a vast and multifaceted area such as Palermo without being accused of superficiality or incompleteness. The criterion used has privileged several significant pieces from each period or artistic context particularly characteristic of the local culture, to provide a representative, though inevitably incomplete, overview. The space available admittedly turns out to be very limited in relation to the complexity of the subjects to be covered.

Notwithstanding this fundamental limitation, the approach to addressing the subjects was left to the discretion of the authors. Furthermore, as in most cases these works are universally known, it was deemed unnecessary to list a copious bibliography for every work, and so instead a few select functional quotes are given in the texts. With rare exceptions, the selection criterion ultimately favoured works on display in public collections, for obvious reasons of accessibility.



TIMELESS MASTERPIECES

METOPES FROM TEMPLE C AT SELINUNTE

Archaic period (6th century BC)

Limestone

Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Antonino Salinas'

Piazza Olivella Palermo

tel. +390916116807

The three metopes from Selinunte depicting the *Quadriga of Apollo, Perseus and Medusa* and *Heracles and Cercopi*, on display at the Archaeological Museum of Palermo 'A. Salinas', rank among the most significant testimonies of archaic colonial plastic art and document the transition from the style known as "Daedalic", in the 7th century BC and the first decades of the 6th century BC, characterised by the strict frontality of the figures and the symmetry of the composition, to that of 'mature archaism' of the mid 6th century BC, when the need to represent the human figure in movement began to manifest itself among Greek artists, which they inserted in the space and engaged in action through devices and solutions that used volumes, proportions and colour to create a perspective view that was not exclusively frontal but also foreshortened. The reliefs, which were carved in limestone, belonged to the frieze on the entablature of the east facing entrance portico of Temple C, a Doric peripteros built over the remains of a previous building in the sanctuary of the Acropolis of Selinunte around 560 BC. It was probably consecrated to Apollo, a hypothesis corroborated by epigraphic finds and mythical episodes relating to the worship of the god represented in the architectural decoration.

The fragments of the metope sculptures

were discovered in 1823 by two young British architects, William Harris and Samuel Angell, scholars of ancient history, on the steps in front of the vestibule, where the fragments had been buried under the collapsing building. Based on the location and arrangement of plates at the time of their discovery, it was possible to establish their position as sixth, seventh and eighth in the sequence of ten figurative scenes, of which only a few other fragments remain. They alternated with the triglyphs, and together they constituted the entire frieze of the pronaos.

The first metope, from the part of the frieze reconstructed by the 19th century restoration, shows Apollo driving his chariot flanked by two female figures identified as Leto and Artemis, the God's mother and sister respectively, forming the 'Delphic Triad'. In the foreground, the horses are in full perspective. Their front legs are completely detached from the background and the heads of the two horses at the sides are directed outwards and proportionally slightly larger, suggesting a position further forward than the central pair. The three gods are represented frontally and protrude from the background of the relief. The female figures, which are largely lost, are at the sides and Apollo is in the centre, his head, forearms, hands with reins and lower torso retaining the Daedalic tradition. Traces of red remain on the harness of the horses and the cart. In the next metope, the centre of the composition is dominated by the high relief figure depicting the burly shape of the hero Perseus, his face shown from the front, his torso slightly turned and his legs in profile, as he cuts off Medusa's head while

holding her hair with his left hand. Medusa's legs, which are in profile, are bent in the archaic 'kneeling-running' configuration. Her monstrous face and bust are shown from the front, with both arms encircling the winged horse Pegasus, who has just been born from the blood of her severed neck. On the right side of the frame, the goddess Athena, who is represented frontally, dressed in a long tunic (chiton) with rigid and symmetrical pleats, observes the scene unseen but ready to intervene on behalf of her protégé. Traces of polychrome decoration can be found on the goddess's dress and the bottom of the panel. Finally, the last of the reliefs depicts the mighty Hercules, naked, his face and torso shown from the front and his legs in profile,

in the configuration as Perseus. He proceeds briskly to the left carrying the two Cercopes robbers on his shoulders. They are hanging from a pole with their legs bent and head down, also naked, facing the viewer. Their long hair is gathered into Daedalic style braids pointing downwards, highlighting their unusual position. The upper listel of the metope retains a section of the original painted meander decoration. (For those wishing to learn more, we recommend Clemente Marconi's work from 2007 *Temple decoration and cultural identity in the archaic greek world: the metopes of Selinus*).

Alessandra Ruvituso





METOPES FROM TEMPLE E AT SELINUNTE

Classical Age (5th century BC)

Limestone and marble

Museo Archeologico Regionale ‘Antonino Salinas’

Piazza Olivella Palermo

tel. +390916116807

The story of the discovery of the metopes from Temple E (*Heraion*) in Selinunte, considered one of the most important cycles of Greek sculpture in Sicily, began in 1823, when the two British architects Samuel Angell and William Harris travelled to the island to study the ancient monuments, and spotted several fragments with Athena and Apollo among the architectural ruins of the eastern hill. Delaying their departure for England and their exhibition at the British Museum in London, excavations were undertaken in 1831, led by Francesco Saverio Cavallari with a report later published by Domenico Lo Faso Pietrasanta, Duke of Serradifalco, which brought the 12 metopes of Temple E to light. The building was dedicated to Hera, the goddess of brides and wife of Zeus. Designed in Doric style, the last phase of its construction dates back to

460-450 BC. The sculptured metopes formed part of the Doric frieze, and decorated the east front of the pronaos (the colonnade in front of the cell) and west opisthodomus (the portico behind the cell), six on each side. According to the most recent hypotheses (Clemente Marconi, *Selinunte: le metope dell’Heraion*, 1994), the mythological subjects depicted are: *Iris and Salmoneus; Hercules and the Amazon; Rhea and Cronus; Zeus and Hera; the Proetides and Artemis and Actaeon* (Metopes on the east side); *Athena and Enceladus, Apollo and Daphne, Poseidon and Amphitrite, Ares and Aphrodite, Peleus and Thetis, Atalanta and Meleager* (Metopes on the west side). The metopes are made of limestone, with marble inserts for the naked parts of the female figures and bronze elements for the weapons and crowns, and small traces indicate that they featured bright colours (vivid polychromy). The difference in technique and style between the metopes on the pronaos and those opisthodomus, which is evident in the anatomy and in the drapery of the figures, suggests that two different workshops and several sculptors worked on the marble and limestone. They were transported to Palermo by ship in 1832 and, in 1868, they were finally brought to



what would become the site of the current Museum Salinas, where the four best preserved metopes were exhibited in the Selinunte Hall, according to a hypothetical reconstruction of the frieze to which they belonged, alternated with triglyphs (rectangular slabs with three grooves). The metopes depicting *Hercules and the Amazon*, *Zeus and Hera* and finally *Artemis and Actaeon* belonged to the pronaos; that with *Athena and Enceladus* was on the opisthodomos. Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmena, is shown fighting against the Amazon. The hero is depicted naked with a lion's skin (*leonte*) knotted around his neck, with quiver and sword hanging by his left side; he is grabbing the Amazon by the cap and blocking her with his foot to prevent her from escaping. The woman is wearing a short tunic (*chiton*) with light armour and sandals. He is wielding an axe (*labrys*) with his right hand and holding a shield (*pelta*) with the left; his sword hangs by his left side.

The second metope depicts the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) of Zeus and Hera. The goddess, who is barefoot, wears a long tunic (*chiton*) and a cloak that covers her head. Zeus is sitting on the rock bare-chested, with a cape on his legs and boots on his feet;

he is grabbing the woman's wrist in a gesture typical of the Greek wedding ceremony. The other metope depicts Actaeon being torn apart by dogs. Punished for having boasted about seeing Artemis, goddess of the hunt, naked, he desperately attempts to defend himself from the assault by grabbing a dog by the throat and brandishing his sword against the other two. The man is only wearing a deerskin, the head and horns of which are visible behind him, and boots. Artemis is dressed in long tunic (*chiton*) covered by a peplos, and has sandals and headgear. Her left arm is wielding a weapon that has been lost, probably a bow.

The metope with Athena killing the giant Enceladus comes from the opisthodomos. The goddess of wisdom and science is armed with a helmet and aegis (the skin of the goat Amalthea) centred around the Gorgon's head, a monster whose eyes turned enemies to stone. Her hems are made of snakes. She once held a spear in her right hand, which has been lost. She is wearing a long tunic (*chiton*). The surrendering Giant is armed with a crested helmet and greaves, and is wearing a cape (*clamide*) on his shoulders.

MOSAIC OF ORPHEUS CHARMING THE ANIMALS

Roman imperial age, the time of the Severan dynasty (193-235 AD)

Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Antonino Salinas'

Piazza Olivella Palermo

tel. +390916116807

The *Mosaic of Orpheus Charming the Animals* decorated the floor of a large rectangular hall in the building called *domus* A of the residential complex from the Roman imperial age located in Piazza della Vittoria, in the historic centre of Palermo. It dates back to between the late second and early 3rd century AD and was discovered by chance, along with other mosaic floors, in 1868 during refurbishment works in the area. After being uplifted in 1874, it was transported to the National Museum of Palermo (today Salinas), where it still remains.

Made of multi-coloured tesserae (black, white, beige, brown, green, red and grey), it measures 6.14 x 5.55 m and is framed by a wide band with stylised plant and floral motifs that form a criss-cross composition consisting of spindles and circles. The central panel, surrounded by a frame with a braid motif, is dominated by Orpheus sitting on a rock, dressed in a short green tunic, coat and red cap, with tight-fitting grey socks and red boots. In his left hand he is holding the attribute that characterises him, namely the musical instrument with which he tames the animals, the lyre, made up of a turtle shell that serves as a sounding board, to which two gazelle horns are attached with four strings, strummed

with the long plectrum he holds in his right hand. The setting of the scene is only symbolically hinted at by the presence of a tree and small bushes beside the nineteen animals represented on narrow strips of earth. The fact that the animals are real (a bird, donkey, monkey, parrot, bull, lion, snake, leopard, deer, turtle, lizard, fox, hare, stork, peacock, antelope, tiger, ostrich and crow) and not fantastical, and that they refer to different natural environments, including some exotic examples, attests knowledge of distant geographical contexts on the part of the craftsman who created the work, or rather the acquisition by its so-called cartoons, i.e. models for inspiring the 'construction' of images, which circulated freely in the Mediterranean.

Taken together with allegorical scenes relating to the Orphic-Dionysian sphere in another large mosaic in the same building, as well as the anomalous arrangement of the rooms and the presence of a spa area, the depiction suggests that the building that housed it was a rich *domus* of a *schola*, i.e. the seat of a religious association perhaps connected to one of the mystery cults popular in the Roman world alongside the official religion. This would explain the inclusion of Orpheus, who is considered a god of death and rebirth because, according to myth, he descended into the underworld where he managed to move Hades, lord of the underworld, to pity with his song. Hades agreed to free his wife Eurydice, provided that he did not turn back to look at her until they reached land again, but he could not resist and turned too soon, losing her forever.



BRONZE RAM FROM SYRACUSE

Bronze

.....
Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Antonino Salinas'

Piazza Olivella Palermo

tel. +390916116807
.....

The Ram in the Museum of Palermo is one of the few large bronze sculptures of antiquity depicting animals that have been preserved to this day.

The events related to the work are extremely complicated, and its original destination remains unclear.

The oldest sources, which date back to 1500, attest to the existence of an original pair of rams. These historical references and those that followed soon after tell us that the statues were placed on two shelves, which still exist, on either side of the gateway to the castle built in Ortigia by Frederick II of Swabia, known as 'Castello Maniace'.

In 1448, King Alfonso V of Aragon gave the two rams to the Duke of Geraci, as a reward for having suppressed the revolt of Syracuse. The Duke took them to the Castle of Ventimiglia in Castelbuono, in the province of Palermo. They were later confiscated, kept in the royal treasury and then transported to Palermo, first to Palazzo Steri, then to Castello a Mare, where Fazello saw them. In 1735, during the time of Charles III, they were taken to Naples, but soon after they were transferred back to Palermo, and placed in the Palazzo Reale. Their presence here is testified by Houel, who depicted them in a drawing during his "*Voyage pittoresque*" and by Goethe, who described them in a letter. Thanks to the

historian Michele Amari, we know that one of the two sculptures was hit by a cannon during the riots of 1848.

The surviving statue was damaged and later restored. In 1866, at the behest of King Victor Emmanuel II, it was donated to the 'Royal Museum' in Palermo, where it has remained since then.

The animal is depicted crouching. Its head is turned fully to the left, its large



eyes open wide. Its nostrils are flared and its ears are stretched over its spiralling horns. Its half-open mouth reveals its lower teeth. The front and the part below the horns are covered with thick curls. The ram's right hind leg is not visible; of the two front legs, the right side is folded in on itself, and the left is brought forward, with the hoof firmly attached to the base. Having been cleaned during the recent restoration, some engraved signs became clearly visible on the left front hoof, namely a letter D cut in half, followed by two vertical bars, which can be interpreted as a numeral. The D cut in half

by a horizontal stroke was frequently used in the Roman imperial period to indicate 500. Our statue seems rather isolated in the Greco-Roman art scene.

Such large depictions of individual animals are in fact rare, and bronze examples that have been preserved are rarer still. As such, no comparisons can be made with similar statues, for while there are numerous depictions of rams in small plastic arts made from clay or bronze, they are rarely in a crouched position.

The work was made using the lost wax casting method, which was carried out in separate pieces and then welded to the body. Given its stylistic features, the ram has been dated to between the beginning and the middle of the 3rd century BC, but recently it has been suggested that it dates later, to the 2nd century AD.

Giuliana Sarà



CAPITALS OF THE CLOISTER OF SANTA MARIA LA NUOVA IN MONREALE

Southern Italian sculptors, late 12th century
Limestone and tuff, marble, mosaic

.....
Piazza Guglielmo II, 1 Monreale
rel. +390916402424
.....

In 1172, at the beginning of his reign, the Norman King William II conceived a grandiose project to build an architectural complex in Monreale, formed of a Cathedral, adjoining Monastery and Royal Palace. His intention was to found a dynastic mausoleum a short distance from Palermo modelled on the one previously made by Roger II in Cefalù, and to establish

a new archbishopric more powerful and loyal to the Crown than that of Palermo, which was promoting the reconstruction of the Cathedral at that time. As far back as 1183, a bull issued by Pope Lucius III elevated Monreale to an archbishopric, meaning that the church and monastery had already been completed on that date.

The construction of the cloister began at an advanced stage of the building works, with the expansion of the rooms of the monastery linked to the arrival of a hundred Benedictine monks from Cava dei Tirreni led by Abbot Theobald in the spring of 1176.

The strict uniformity of the conception of the cloister implies that the work was completed in a short period of time,



certainly by 1189, the year in which the sovereign who commissioned it died. The cloister extends between the dormitory to the south, the chapter house to the east, the refectory and the infirmary to the west, defined by four galleries divided by 26 pointed arches with double ring emphasised on the exterior by a inlaid geometric decoration in brown limestone and black lava tuff. In the southwest corner there is a cloister and a central fountain, with a basin and a column with shaft decorated in *chevrons* ending at the tip with 12 dancing figures and lion head protomes.

The arches are supported by 228 marble columns with three bulls at the base, coupled along the sides and tetrastyle at the corners with a systematic succession of pairs of mosaicked columns with others that are completely smooth. The corner columns are decorated with plant shoots populated by cherubs and zoomorphic elements. One noteworthy element, similar to Cefalù, is the constant use of the abacus as a unifying function, and the presence of a semi-cylindrical creasing in the soffits, where wooden frames may have been hinged to a partially close the arches. The only diversifying element is the rich decoration of the capitals, which denotes the complex articulation of the workers active in the yard; this almost always involves a border of leaves at the base and above the figurative or storiated ornamentation.

The subjects depicted are extremely varied, and range from simple spirals of plants frequently enriched by the presence of fantastical animals, putti, warriors, telamons and symbolic motifs, to scenes from the Old and New Testament, with no consequential



logic. Indeed, as in medieval hagiography, the narrative is exemplifying: each episode is valued for its underlying moralistic teachings.

Over the years, art historiography has identified derivations from sculptural trends from the Romanesque style of Provence, Burgundy, Pavia and Campania in the capitals of the cloister, but recently scientists have unanimously recognised a marked stylistic eclecticism that can be explained by the presence of artists from different backgrounds with different training in the construction site. An attempt was therefore made to identify the stylistic choices of the two main workshops engaged in the enterprise, which followed each other chronologically. A fundamental clue is provided on a capital in the northern gallery, the dossier of which bears the inscription of the name of the craftsman “*Ego Romanus filius Costantinus marmorarius*”, which can probably be equated with the person mentioned in a document from 1202,

Capital depicting the “Mission of the Apostles”



“William II offers the Cathedral to the Virgin”

who belonged to a family of Greek origin that worked with locally extracted marble. The term *marmorarius* in contrast to the job title of *magister* suggests the existence of a duplicity of roles in the building site (*marmorarius* and *magister*) made necessary by the complexity of the work and the short deadlines imposed by the patron.

The cloister of the Cathedral of Cefalù is an important reference that is useful for understanding the artistic training of the first workers employed in Monreale. The general outline of the space, the presence of paired columns, the capitals gradually united and surmounted by the dossieret, the angular carved beams and the acute arches are distinguishing features that emphasise a common artistic culture. The first group of capitals in the cloister of Monreale also refer to examples from Cefalù, and are mounted mostly in the

eastern and northern galleries, decorated with simple acanthus leaves or with eagles facing each others, or bearing the decorative motif of putti interwoven with plant shoots, the theme of dragons facing each other cast on the telamons, the half-bust figures that face each other from the second round of the leaves or the the so-called ‘acrobat’ motif, an anthropomorphic figure that stands balanced on its hands. Although it renounced the expressionistic tone of Cefalù, this first workshop active in Monreale replicated its layout and the relationship of the figures with the plant decorations. Even the illustrated capitals with stories of Samson, Joseph, Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel may be attributable to the same composite workshop, which included several different craftsmen, some with a more minute and graceful technique that was more pictorially orientated, others

with a rougher, more rugged but intensely expressive carving style.

The client probably did not appreciate the lively and expressive but toned down, unrefined plastic art of the first workshop of *marmorarii*, who were also involved in the cloisters of the Magione and San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo, both dating from the late 12th century, characterised by a uniformity of style that borders on mass production.

A second group of capitals indicates a marked change of tone due to the arrival of new personalities to the building site, namely the *magistri* who were entrusted the task of guiding the works, in direct correlation with the patron's desire to adapt the style to give it a precise symbolic design. One capital located in the west gallery shows a scene of donation: William II gives the cloister to the Christ Child, holding a model of the church with the help of an angel. The concrete portrait of the king, which refers to the mosaic within the cathedral, suggests that the sovereign is still alive and that the cloister is still under construction, as the model being gifted is still that of the cathedral with a very credible representation of the building.

The king gives the construction to the Christ Child and not only the Madonna, as in the mosaic, recognising - like a new Magus - the majesty of Christ and at the same time embodying the role of re-founder of the Christian empire on Earth. The capital depicting the *Mission of the Apostles* located just behind the dormitory also clarifies the evangelising function the king entrusted to the monks residing in Monreale. In this second macro-group of capitals the figures are not set on ascending

acanthus leaves: the leaves have been stiffened to give the protagonists of the scene a way to free themselves from the scales imposed by the structure and acquire an autonomous vitality in the space. In the stories of the Baptist, Lazarus, Noah and Jacob, for example, a remarkable virtuoso vivacity can also be appreciated; the plant element, when it is there, has fleshy leaves, far removed from the rigidity of the first style. There is a sense of liberation in the figures, which are portrayed in a naturalistic dimension with an early Gothic flavour. There are references to the cosmopolitan artistic environment of Jerusalem before the fall of 1187, an eclectic style that is aligned with a taste that captivated the Mediterranean in the 1180s in terms of its sentimentality tone, transcending the Provençal and antiquing approach on which it had been based in a realistic manner. The fineness of the carving and the exuberant laying of the ornamental branches denote a virtuoso re-interpretation of the early Christian plastic arts with a vital intensity. Because of these characteristics, it is thought that some of the sculptors of the pulpit from the Salerno cathedral, donated by Archbishop Romuald II Guarna, may have been transferred to Monreale around 1180, playing a decisive role in the construction site. The pulpit, made in 1180, is a point of reference for several generations of sculptors, such as the cases of Capua, Cassino, Teano and Sessa Aurunca, where the citation of that model and therefore the direct study of early Christian sculpture from the Byzantine area seem to have persisted.

CROWN OF CONSTANCE OF ARAGON

Workshop of Palazzo Reale in Palermo,
12th-13th century

Gold, filigree, pearls, precious stones, enamels

.....
Cathedral Treasury

Corso Vittorio Emanuele Palermo
tel. +39091334373 +390916077244

.....
The work, a unique masterpiece of its kind, was found in the sarcophagus of Constance of Aragon, wife of Frederick II, along with other jewels, during the examination ordered by Viceroy de Acuña in 1491. In a study from 1975, Angelo Lipinsky put forward the hypothesis that it could be the crown of

Roger II, which was reused for the Empress. In it highlights the craftsmanship of the workshop in Palazzo Reale between late Norman and Early Swabian periods, in what Maria Accascina defined as “Palazzo Reale style” in her *Oreficeria di Sicilia dal XII al XIX secolo* from 1974. The scholar from Palermo gives an enthusiastic and detailed description of the item: “The crown features a filigree technique that winds around in typical spirals to form a gold mesh that overlaps, softening the shine of gold, with regularly spaced gems placed in settings. Its border has strings of pearls. The large trim composed of quatrefoils with enamel, each with a gem in the centre that surrounds the base and crosses over



the dome, dividing it into four segments, according to models used in the Christian East... it also features the *fleur-de-lis* pattern that can be seen in the mosaics on the walls the Basilica of Monreale and elsewhere ... At the intersection, on the hushed pearly murmur, the gems stick out higher, lower and most graduated in the opaque, gentle and bright colours of amethysts, rubies and carnelian welcome the light, filter it and then repel it, in a vibration that gives life to the filigree.”

Maria Concetta Di Natale (*Il tesoro della Cattedrale di Palermo*, 2010) points out that the very presence of the filigree is now generally regarded by scholars as characteristic of the workshop of the Palazzo Reale in Palermo, as the Normans goldsmiths preferred it to bare golden foil favoured by the Byzantine production, because “it made it possible to dampen the luminous effect of the material and to create sophisticated games of light and chiaroscuro.”

It underwent several transformations, as shown by the 18th century drawing by Manganaro, engraved by Di Bella and published by Francesco Daniele in 1784 (*I regali sepolcrali del Duomo di Palermo...*) and it owes its current appearance to the restoration carried out in 1848 by the goldsmith Matteo Serretta.

At present, the crown is located in the first room of the Cathedral Treasury, accompanied by explanatory panels, in a display case that allows visitors to walk around it and therefore benefit from a comprehensive view of it.



Elvira D'Amico

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

Painters of Franco-Flemish and Iberian schools, 1440s

Fresco with tempera finishes, metal foils

.....

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

tel. +390916230011/0047

.....

The work was carried out on the southern wall of the inner courtyard of Palazzo Sclafani, a building from the late 14th century that was designated as the site of the “great new hospital” in Palermo at the behest of King Alfonso the Magnanimous during the first decades of the 15th century. Closer to our time, in the 1940s, protection issues made it necessary to ‘remove’ the fresco, which was taken away with a portion of the original underlying masonry, placed on a mobile support and transferred elsewhere. Since 1954, the museum complex in Palazzo Abatellis designed by Carlo Scarpa has made the *Triumph of Death* the centrepiece of the gallery. ‘Set’ on the back wall of the presbytery of the original 16th century church, the fresco is mounted on a support on wheels and can be viewed from close-up from below, like a huge illuminated page, or at a distance, from the upper floor, to grasp the complexity of the composition, rendered unique by the presence of the enormous *equus pallidus* of the Apocalypse of St. John in the centre, a livid and fleshless horse ridden by Death.

According to the principles of medieval culture, the work places the particular and the universal in relation to one another for pedagogical purposes and with strong ethical meaning. This was customary in the

Middle Ages for places such as churches, hospitals and other public venues that wished to encourage meditation on the transience of earthly goods in face of the necessity of death and its impartiality in striking the rich and powerful, intended as redemption for the poor and weak. Death is in the form of a skeleton with lucid anatomical accuracy, and is armed with bow, arrows and quiver, with medieval society unfolding all around, looking on in disbelief or unknowingly succumbing to the inevitable levelling force of Death.

Death saves those who recognise and invokes it, and, by striking down those who are not aware of its arrival and live protected by rules, roles and conventions that reveal all their vanity in the face of death. The system of symbols, such as the promised life source around which the young aristocrats huddle, engaged in their elitist activities, such as falcon hunting, music and dancing, is accompanied by the presence of characters from historical reality, one example being the figure of Bartolus of Sassoferrato, the medieval ‘Prince of Jurists’ who succumbs inexorably under the horse’s legs, while shaking the texts of his doctrine, which is also cancelled out by the force of a higher justice. The work refers to figurative courtly models, including cycles of frescoes, tapestries and miniatures, with harsh realistic descriptions alternated with examples of very refined ornamentation. The history of the architectural complex for which it was conceived, and the reasoning of the historical art critics tend to converge on the 1440s as the date on which it was painted, as the work of an unknown artist who may perhaps have portrayed himself and a collaborator in the two men on the



left of the fresco.

The complex components of figurative culture transect Catalan and Franco-Flemish painting, finding a meeting point in the composite taste of the Neapolitan court at the time of Alfonso the Magnanimous, who welcomed painters and sculptors from the rest of Italy at the time and foreigners at the particular turning point from the

late Gothic to the Renaissance. However, given its complexity and the multiplicity of unique formal, stylistic and structural elements that cannot be found in any other work of that scope within the southern context and at such an advanced time, at present it is not possible to name the author.

Evelina De Castro

BUST OF 'ELEANOR OF ARAGON'

Francesco Laurana (Lo Vrana between 1420 and 1430 - Avignon? between 1500 and 1502)

Marble

.....
Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

tel. +390916230011/0047

.....
The bust is traditionally identified as that of *Eleanor of Aragon*, who died in 1405 and was the wife of William II Peralta, lord of Sciacca, Count of Caltabellotta and Vicar of the Kingdom of Aragon. In accordance with the noble woman's will, she was buried in the church of the Olivetan Benedictine abbey of Santa Maria del Bosco in Calatamauro, near Giuliana, which she had served as a benefactor and where she had made her will. The bust was made posthumously well over 50 years after Eleonora's death, and comes from her tomb, which was rebuilt in the baroque period. It was probably commissioned by her illustrious descendant Carlo Luna, the new lord of Sciacca and Caltabellotta, and Laurana's first Sicilian patron, who he may have already met at the Aragonese court of Naples. Count Luna was one of the Sicilian nobles closest to the king Alfonso the Magnanimous, the great patron of Francesco Laurana for the Castelnuovo arch. The sculpture was recognised as the work of Laurana in the early 20th century by Antonino Salinas, director of the then National Museum. This places it at the height of the series of feminine busts made by the sculptor, including several for other

female members of the House of Aragon.

The portrait busts were also commissioned on the occasion of weddings or engagements to celebrate the union of important families through female figures.

The bust from Palermo dates back to the late 1460s, at the time of Laurana's commission and presence between Sciacca and Partanna.

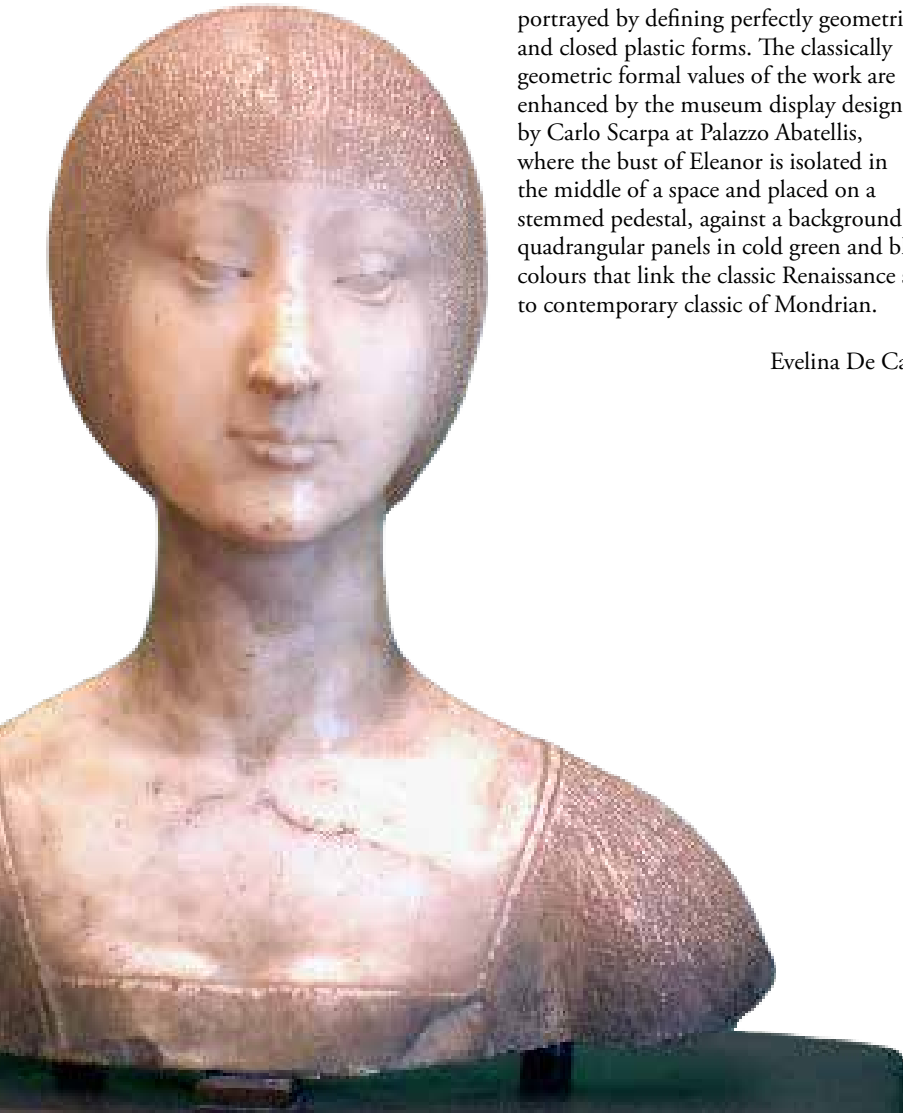
Three generations on from the distinguished character, the political intent of the patron was to invoke memory to formalise the dynastic link with the Prince of Aragon, whose success in the land of Sicily was thanks in part to the considerable contribution of the noblewoman, described by the sources as "inclita et generosa Alyonora" (illustrious and generous Eleanor), who exerted all her charisma in her decisive role as mediator regarding the rebellious trends in the local barony.

It is thus a posthumous portrait of the lady of Aragon, idealised in a model of absolute formal perfection as it had been developed over the 15th century in Italy and in the south of France, a fundamental contribution to which was made by Piero della Francesca. This latter, together with the formal lessons of Antonello da Messina, which



Laurana could even see, serves as point of comparison for the development of a model of abstract feminine beauty in painting, which presents the values of spiritual balance and ethical virtues of the character portrayed by defining perfectly geometric and closed plastic forms. The classically geometric formal values of the work are enhanced by the museum display designed by Carlo Scarpa at Palazzo Abatellis, where the bust of Eleanor is isolated in the middle of a space and placed on a stemmed pedestal, against a background of quadrangular panels in cold green and blue colours that link the classic Renaissance style to contemporary classic of Mondrian.

Evelina De Castro



THE VIRGIN ANNUNCIATE

Antonello da Messina [Messina c. 1430 -
Messina 1479]

Tempera and oil on wood

.....
Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

tel. +390916230011/0047

.....
The tablet was bought by Msgr. Vincenzo
Di Giovanni from the Colluzio noble
family, in Venice, when it was thought to be
by Dürer. It was later donated by the prelate
to the National Museum of Palermo in
1906, as a work by Antonello da Messina.
It was Enrico Brunelli who first attributed
the work to the painter from Messina in
1907. The date of its creation, according
to the same scholar, was unanimously
established by critics a 1474-75, the period
the painter spent in Venice, as confirmed
by a copy from the Academy of Venice,
which for a long time was thought to be the
original, although some sources indicate c.
1476-77 due to its proximity to the *Christ
Blessing* in London and the *Virgin* on the
altarpiece of San Cassiano.

The work, which is made unusual and
'revolutionary' by the absence of the Angel
of the Annunciation, "was created as it is
seen this day and is an Annunciate because
Antonello was profoundly skilled at involving
the viewer and making them watch the
event." "Solemn and distant, her face seems
distilled by all the earthly incidents to achieve
the absolute unblemished quality of an
oval, like a statue by Francesco Laurana... In
short, it is a painting of such concentrated
and studied concept, of architectural and

structural synthesis, that must be, and rightly
is, recognised as one of the finest examples
of European painting of all time" (Mauro
Lucco, *Antonello da Messina: l'opera completa*,
2006).

"Emblematic of beauty and female Sicilian
nobility" (as described by Eugenio Battisti
in his *Antonello: il teatro sacro, gli spazi, la
donna...* 1985), her face is narrow between
the folds of the cape closed by her hand
on her chest as "like armour that smells of
the cloister and sheep pen" (as Leonardo
Sciascia wrote in 1967 presenting *L'opera
completa di Antonello da Messina*), "but
it could very well be a Venetian woman if
the painting was really produced in Venice,
where an old copy is kept."

She is "poised between formal abstraction
and psychological truth, combining the
Italian language of perspective with the
cultured psychological notation and
naturalism of Flemish portraiture, in a
perfect synthesis... The light that shapes and
at the same time causes the figure of the
Virgin to live and tremble is Flemish... it
is not 'universal light' but 'environmental',
filtered from the side as if coming from
the window to which Scarpa wanted to
orientate the panel" (the words of Vincenzo
Abbate *Palermo: Palazzo Abatellis* 1991).

"This suspension between two worlds
supplies the suspension of the character and
of the time: the one is immobile listening to
the inner voice that has entirely supplanted
Gabriel; the other is immobilised in the
absence of action and in the very blocked
immobility of the image" (Raffaello Delogu,
La Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia, 1962).



PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN MAN

Antonello da Messina (Messina c. 1430 -
Messina 1479)

Oil on board

.....
Mandalisca Museum

Via Mandalisca, 13 Cefalù

tel. +390921421547
.....

As early as the 15th century, the reputation of Antonello was linked to his work as a portraitist. In fact, he stands as an innovator in this area, presenting the first isolated portraits as early as around 1470, in three-quarter views and no longer in profile, realistically grasping the physiognomy and psychological details of his clients (Caterina Zappia and Gioacchino Barbera, *Antonello ritrattista*, in *Antonello da Messina*, catalogue for the exhibition in Messina, 1981).

The portrait from Cefalù was mentioned for the first time by the famous art historian Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle in a letter from 1860, written in Termini Imerese to the owner, Baron Mandalisca, as the only work by Antonello seen by the scholar in western Sicily. According to tradition it came from Lipari, the homeland of Mandalisca's wife, and had for a long time been mounted as the door of a pharmacy cabinet. The baron then donated it to the town hall of his city (1886). Known as "portrait of an unknown mariner from Lipari", it was thought to have recorded a tradition very much alive in Cefalù, still found in situ around 1915, when it was photographed for the first time by Anderson (*Mauro Lucco, Antonello da Messina: l'opera completa*, 2006). More recently (1976) the work became the subject of the novel by Vincenzo Consolo, *The Smile of the*

Unknown Mariner. The character portrayed is most likely a 'baruni' (baron), however, "the time of genre art still being far away" (as Roberto Longhi stated in the journal *Paragone* in 1953), and also because a member of the common people could not afford such a portrait (still Lucco).

Federico Zeri insists on its inherent Sicilian quality (in *Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery* 1976): "it is very difficult to name something more intimately Sicilian than the *Portrait* from Cefalù, whose Aeginetic smile is poised between threatening and ambiguous, encapsulates the condensed essence of the fascinating and terrible island." By unanimous consent, the tablet is considered one of the first portraits by the artist; however there is no agreement on its date, since it reflects the influence of portraiture from Flanders and Petrus Christus, even more than that of Van Eyck. According to Stefano Bottari, writing in his monograph on *Antonello* from 1953, the meeting with Piero della Francesca is essential for giving the picture its almost architectural absoluteness; while other critics maintain it is precisely the absence of such knowledge that keeps him on this side of the limits of modernity. Lucco has stated, "the turgidity of the shape, which almost stands out like a wood carving, a certain cleanliness of the brushstroke, and the sharp contrast of blacks and whites in the robe all bear no relation to Piero della Francesca, and seem to link it more closely to the Provençal taste, following the routes circulating Mediterranean culture that Antonello would have been more likely to follow than the long and difficult journey to northern Europe."



TRIPTYCH OF THE MADONNA AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH FOUR ANGELS AND SAINTS CATHERINE AND BARBARA (TRIPTYCH OF POLIZZI)

Master of the Embroidered Foliage
(Flanders, active in the third quarter of the 15th century)

Oil on board

.....
Mother Church
Via Roma Polizzi Generosa

.....
Traditionally considered a Dürer, then associated with Van der Goes or Van Eyck and Memling, it has been recognised as the work of the Master of the Embroidered Foliage by Friedländer (volume 14, 1937, of his monumental *Die altniederländische Malerei*). Considered the masterpiece of the Flemish master and one of the most significant works of Flemish Renaissance painting, it has been kept *ab antiquo* in the ancient state property centre of Polizzi, where it passed from the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli to the 'Chiesa Madre' (Main Church), where it is now located in the 'cappellone' (Grand Chapel). The origins of its arrival in the centre in the Madonie are not clear, and range from the hypothesis that it was a votive offering by *Lucas Jardinus*, whose name appears at the bottom, to the belief that it was a gift from Giambartolo La Farina, an eminent figure from Polizzi who had the *jus patronatus* in the 'cappellone' of the church in the early 16th century (Vincenzo Abbate, *Inventario polizzano*, 1992). The central panel depicts the Virgin with the Child on her knees, browsing a book (*Mater Sapientiae*), surrounded by angel musicians, including St. Catherine of Alexandria (left) and St. Barbara (right). The



master, who may have been from Brussels but was close to the culture of Bruges, influenced by the painting by Roger Van der Weyden and Memling, has been attributed a body of work divided among the museums of London and Melbourne and several private collections, including the Grog collection in Paris, whose triptych shows strong similarities with our own (Abbate again). The unknown artist acquired their epithet because of their characteristic strong decorative vein, which is particularly evident



in the depiction of the flowered drapes, which offer us an important sample of the fabrics of the era.

It is characterised by bright colours, with red and gold prevailing, the skilled delineation of gothic architecture foreshortened, denoting acceptance by the Italian Renaissance, as in the female figure at the window in the left panel. Much attention is given to objects of material culture, such as musical instruments and the scores of the angelic musicians, but above all the rich

details in the clothing: the precious stones in the edges of the capes and dresses, the engraved crowns on the heads of the two saints, the perfect recreation of the brocades in use at the time, from that of St. Catherine with pomegranates, to St. Barbara's plants within grids, and the symmetrical leaves and palmettes on the surplises of the angel musicians, details that fully characterise the Flemish realism of the author.

Elvira D'Amico

ALTAR OF SAINT GEORGE

Antonello Gagini (Palermo 1478-1536)

Marble with traces of polychromy

.....
 Church of San Francesco d'Assisi

Piazza San Francesco Palermo

rel. +390916162819

The work is located along the right aisle of the church, but originally it stood in the chapel of the Genoese Nation within the Franciscan complex, a small autonomous oratorio that still exists, albeit with another function, embellished with a marble portal and windows. With a notary deed dated 1520, the wealthy Genoese residents of Palermo, who were members of the lay association called 'San Giorgio dei Genovesi' in San Francesco d'Assisi, commissioned Antonello Gagini to create marble furnishings for the chapel's altar. The important task was following the other two major assignments for Antonello Gagini in Palermo, the Tribune for the Cathedral and the altar for the Olivetan church, made for the great altarpiece *Lo Spasimo*, sent by Raphael directly from Rome.

In this high context, the altar of St. George sees Antonello again engaged in the conception and creation a sculptural work with an architectural structure.

The whole piece, minutely described in the document from 1520, presents the altar table on columns, surmounted by the central 'imago marmorea' with a high relief depicting the Saint in arms and on horseback, defeating the dragon and saving the girl. The aedicule with entablature on columns is flanked by side pilasters with the busts of six saints (John, Stephen,

Jerome, Lawrence, Sebastian, Roch) and ends with the tablet pediment with a bas relief image of the Madonna and Child surrounded by seraphim. On the sides of the frame, two cupids in the round show the coat of arms of Genoa. The work was to be filled with ornaments and white marble. Its execution, as often happened, lasted well beyond the appointed time, and it was only completed in 1526, as the inscription carved on the base states. The recent restoration has revealed the existence of traces of the original colour scheme on the central altarpiece, attributing them to the possible intervention of the painter Antonello Crescenzo, who collaborated with the sculptor to add colour to works on other occasions, according to a tradition which the Gagini family pursued in their Sicilian activities, starting from Domenico, father of Antonello. In this work, Antonello Gagini once again shows his particular sensitivity to painting, which is evident in the construction of the central altarpiece that uses progressive levels of perspective, from the high relief of the main figures in the centre, reaching to the *stiacciato* group of knights in the background. The image of St. George on horseback, who is almost chiselled in his armour and his well designed physical traits and hair, refers to late 15th century examples of noble taste.

Evelina De Castro





MALVAGNA TRIPTYCH

Jan Gossaert known as Mabuse
[Maubeuge c. 1478 - Middelburg 1532]
Oil on board

.....
Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
tel. +390916230011/0047
.....

At the centre of the Flemish hall, it is one of
the gems and rarities of Palazzo Abatellis.
Conceived almost as a portable altarpiece,

on the recto it depicts *The Madonna and
Child Enthroned*, on the left *St. Catherine
of Alexandria*, on the right *St. Dorothy*; on
the verso *Original Sin* with the emblem
of the Lanzas. The figures of Adam and
Eve, taken from a woodcut by Dürer
published in 1511, establish that year as
the *terminus post quem* for the creation of
the work, which is unanimously attributed
to Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse, “the
most important of the Romanist Flemish”
(Roberto Salvini, in *La pittura fiamminga*
1958) and one of the greatest exponents of



were “*in limine* between the live image and the figure carved or sculpted”. He concluded: “It is from this very suspension between nature and artifice that the figures derive their charm.”

The miniaturist precision and analysis of detail, typical of Flemish realism, extend to the elements of material culture, such as the ornaments golden of the artefacts, musical instruments of the angel musicians, the ornamental details of the clothes and hairstyles of the saints. With these features, it seems to counteract the wide spaciousness of the background, with vast landscapes dotted with Gothic architecture that is perfectly delineated despite its small size. The work—one of the first examples of Flemish Mannerism—denotes considerable influences of Italian maniera, in the broad construction of the space, the iridescence of the bright colours, the abundance of lights—a technique the painter learned during his trip to Rome and Venice, following Philip of Burgundy, in the first decade of the 16th century (Delogu).

Purchased in the early 17th century by Palermo nobleman Pietro Lanza di Trabia, baron of Mojo in Messina; then, in the same century, it was inherited by the princes of Malvagna and for a time became part of the collections of Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici, before being returned to the owners and donated to the National Museum of Palermo by a descendant of the family, Don Alessandro Migliaccio e Galletti, Prince of Malvagna, in 1866 (Vincenzo Abbate in *Palermo: Palazzo Abatellis* 1991).

Flemish Mannerism. Above it flutters the historic critical notation by Raffaello Delogu (*La Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia*, 1962):

“The triptych repeats its appeal beyond its admirable state of preservation..., even and especially in the supreme skill with which the spatial composition, conceived on a monumental scale, was then constrained in a micrographic representation, validated for all eternity by the pounding analysis of detail.”

Salvini noted that the figures “chiselled with the same preciousness as the wood carvings”

Elvira D’Amico

OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY AND SAINTS

Anton Van Dyck (Antwerp 1599 - London 1641)

Oil on canvas

Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico
Via Bambinai, 2 Palermo
tel. +39091332779

It is the most important public commission of the Flemish painter's entire Italian period. Called to Palermo from Genoa in 1624 by the viceroy Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, whose portrait he then painted, he stayed here for over a year, until the end of 1625. The work was commissioned in August of 1625 by the governor and by the designates of the Compagnia del Rosario (Society of the Rosary) for the Oratory of the same name. The artist chosen was Van Dyck, who was due to produce it the city of Naples or whichever city he was in, as confirmed by his imminent departure from Palermo on that date. The subject was specifically ordered by them: the frame had to include the Dominican Saints Dominic, Vincent Ferrer and Catherine of Siena, the newly rediscovered Saint Rosalia and the four patron saints of Palermo, Christina, Nympha, Olivia and Agatha. The agreed price was 260 Neapolitan ducats, equivalent to 104 Sicilian *onze*. The painting came to Palermo from Genoa by April of 1628 (Giovanni Mendola, in his essay *Un approdo sicuro*, in the catalogue *Porto di mare*, 1999). It seems to be the last in which Santa Rosalia—who had risen to the status patron saint of Palermo after the discovery of her bones—is depicted alongside the four older patrons. The work is a clear homage

to 'Santuzza', as a votive offering for the salvation from the plague, symbolised here by the child holding his nose, and is dedicated to the miracle, in the form of a Holy Conversation (Pierfrancesco Palazzotto in *Sante e Patroni: iconografia delle Sante Agata, Cristina, Ninfa e Oliva...*, 2005). The apt judgment of Larsen (in *L'opera completa di Van Dyck* 1980) states: "The painting, described in detail by Bellori (1672), refers overall to the *Virgin and Saints* made by Rubens for the Chiesa Nuova in Rome, but it reveals an original concept. It constitutes an important result for Baroque art, in its adaptation of the Italianate motifs to the style and expression typical of Nordic painting. The elongated figures of the saints, with the Virgin Mary holding the baby in her lap under a round arch, against the backdrop of a bright sky, mottled with clouds, compose an animated and lively scene." The large altarpiece, located on the high altar of Serpotta's Oratory, a true treasure trove of art from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is characterised by its skilful orchestration, its golden light, its evening atmosphere, its ability to evoke the rustling of the silks and the typology of its characters, elements that influenced numerous local artists, including the young Pietro Novelli. He attended school in the Sicilian capital, producing many imitations.

Elvira D'Amico



SAINT BENEDICT DISTRIBUTES “THE RULE” IN THE FORM OF BREAD TO THE RELIGIOUS AND CHIVALROUS ORDERS

Pietro Novelli (Monreale 1603 - Palermo 1647)

Oil on canvas

.....
Town Hall

Piazza Guglielmo II Monreale

tel. +390916564111
.....

It is the most famous painting by Novelli, known from the travellers of the 18th century to the most recent critics. In 1797 it changed location—to the right wall of the staircase in the Convitto di Guglielmo school—and underwent restoration by Velasco who severed the upper lunette (according to Angela Mazzè in his description for the painting in the volume by Guido Di Stefano *Pietro Novelli il Monrealese* 1989). Painted in 1634- 35 for the refectory of the monastery of the Benedictine Abbey of Monreale, it is an allegory of the vital food provided by faith that the Benedictine rule, symbolised by bread, provides to both the Benedictine order, represented by the various founders, and the affiliated knightly orders (St. James and Calatrava), as well as the faithful population, depicted in the lower right corner (from Vincenzo Scuderi in the catalogue from 1990 titled *Pietro Novelli e il suo ambiente*).

It is an “exclusively earthly, landscape orientated” painting (Guido Di Stefano), derived in part from a painting by Bassano, previously in the refectory of the Abbey of Montecassino, now destroyed, and is emblematic of Novelli’s ‘eclecticism’, which give his own touch to the various cultural



instances at the base of his art—inspired by Van Dyke and de Ribera *in primis*—reshaping them in a figurative language of his own, the original ‘novellesco’ style. Vincenzo Scuderi penned some apt thoughts on the work in the catalogue for the memorable Novelli exhibition organised by the Region of Sicily in 1990: “The inclusion of the painter’s bourgeois family next to the noblest chivalrous and religious levels is not a coincidence, but expresses a specific aspect of catechesis and the social doctrine of the post-Tridentine



Church, aiming at a reshuffling of classes in one single devoted movement, which was predominantly expressed in the congregations.” And again: “It is characterised by the tone of warm evening light of Neo-Venetian derivation; ... in a controlled composition dynamic and the solemn arrangement of courtly figures in the dishevelled positioning of the group of common people.” The scholar continued by noting that “the strength of the painter’s portraiture is perhaps best expressed here, in the memorable figure of St. Benedict to that

of monk by his side, the family members and the extraordinary father.” Another determining factor is the “luministic-colour component, hinged on the dialectical relationship of blacks and whites among the monks, who are made vivid by the light that derides them.” He concluded: “Despite these unreservedly naturalistic interests and attributes, ... Novelli’s work remains unusual and original, with a high moral and aesthetic expression.”

Elvira D’Amico

NATIVITY WITH SHEPHERDS

Matthias Stom (Amersfort 1600 - Sicily?
1652)

Oil on canvas

.....
Town Hall

Piazza Guglielmo II Monreale
tel. +390916564111
.....

Matthias Stom (or Stomer) was one of the great Flemish painters who visited Sicily in the 17th century—the most representative of them was certainly Anton Van Dyck. He established himself there for a certain period of time, leaving us significant, variously imitated, works that exerted a considerable influence on local art.

The painter's *Nativity* was commissioned by the Spanish prelate Giovanni Torresiglia, who ruled the diocese of Monreale from 1644 to 1648, and was then donated by him to the Church 'dei Cappuccini' of his city, so that "it could adorn the altar", which took place around 1646.

In taking up a broad, widespread iconographic theme, the work of Monreale seems to privilege the components of Nordic taste: the theme of the Adoration of the Virgin seems to re-imagine Mary kneeling in adoration of the Child, in a silent and intense relationship with him, based on 14th century vision of St. Bridget of Sweden, where the child appears bathed in light, iconography that is well suited to the experiments in artificial light dear to the Flemish, such as Gerrit or Gerard van Honthorst. For the rest, it appears faithful to the 17th century iconography of the Adoration of the Shepherds, in which context the painter seems to make another



clear choice, privileging the use of the animalistic elements dear to the Flemish and Neapolitan realism.

However, the author adds his own, as if to connote the work with personal, unconventional and unusual features, as can be seen, for example, in St. Joseph posing with his right hand holding the ox horn, in a fatherly gesture protecting his son.



Compared by recent critics to the works of the Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds and generally agreed to belong to the artist's first Sicilian period, the *Nativity* in Monreale is particularly close to the *Flagellation* in the Oratory of the Holy Rosary, that is thought to have been made between 1638 and 1639.

Together with the two canvases in Palazzo

Villafranca - *The Tribute Money* and *The Stoning of St. Stephen* - which are very close chronologically (c. 1640), it constitutes a conceptual triad, signifying the various stages of the great Flemish artist's stay in Sicily, albeit in a very short period of time.

Elvira D'Amico

NATIVITY SCENE

Giovanni Matera (Trapani 1653 – Palermo 1718) and workshop

Wood, cloth and glue

Museo Etnografico ‘Giuseppe Pitre’

Via Duca degli Abruzzi, 1 Palermo

tel. +390917409008

The nativity sculpture by Giovanni Matera is characterised by the use of “poor” materials such as wood, cloth and glue, mainly from lime, for the uncovered anatomical parts, such as faces, hands, feet and often also arms and legs. Dressings in soaked cloth

were hardened with glue and subsequently painted on all the other parts of the figure. This technical construction process is primarily typical of Trapani. Among Trapani’s many ‘*pasturari*’ master craftsmen, Matera excelled as an artist who was “unique in sculpting small wooden figures in which he was able to combine all the characteristics of beauty that can contribute and shine in great figures”, in the words of Fogalli, penned in the 19th century in his *Memorie biografiche di trapanesi illustri per santità, nobiltà, dottrina ed arte*, manuscripts kept in the Pepoli Museum in Trapani. Accused of a crime and therefore wanted by the forces of justice, Matera sought refuge in the fief of Tornamira at Monreale, owned by the De Gregorio family. His offence could have been that of sedition, as the sculptor may have actively participated in the revolt of Trapani in 1671 that caused a crisis among the local craftsmen, as many artists, especially sculptors and coral workers, were forced to move away from their city. Matera later moved to Palermo, where he was hosted by the Franciscan friars of Sant’Antonino, out the Termini gate. However, the basic information provided by the sources would be inadequate without the possible comparisons arising from formal readings of his works, which draw nourishment from the famous contemporary ‘*Misteri*’ (Mystery) groups of Trapani. The technique of “wood, cloth and glue” is in fact the same, but while the figures of the groups of the *Passion* were in full scale, while Matera created his shepherds ‘in small scale’, achieving extraordinarily refined craftsmanship, which can also be glimpsed in the varied expressiveness of the faces. In addition to the cultural inspiration drawn from the





renowned craftsmanship of Trapani that has left us an incomparable rich legacy of decorative art pieces in coral, ivory, alabaster, pearl and marine materials, Matera blended the more modern and elaborate Baroque culture that he absorbed in the 'happy' city of Palermo. The incisive presence of the religious orders, that craftsmen, the artist-decorators, and ecclesiastical and profane construction sites that embellished or rapidly replaced existing structures contributed to studies that refined the Baroque tendencies of his sculptural nativity productions. It is not unlikely that the artist from Trapani made the acquaintance of his illustrious contemporary Giacomo Serpotta while working within the Palermo cultural circuit.



In fact, some similarities can be grasped between the two: the ease and docility of stucco work is similar to the soft and natural potential offered by the technique adopting wood, cloth and glue. With their formal and technical coherence, the *Massacre of the Innocents* groups also present in the Museums of Munich in Bavaria and 'Pepoli' in Trapani constitute the most significant works in Matera's catalogue. In fact, the theme of *Herod's Massacre*, which is further removed from common nativity representations, has been described by Georg Hager, in his 1902 study *Die Weihnachtskrippe: ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde und Kunstgeschichte aus dem Bayerischen Nationalmuseum*, as "a kind of intoxication, a carousing representation of horror and the terrible."

In terms of its *pathos* and movement, this representation is expressed through the rhythms of a theatrical transposition of the sacred mysteries, in which Matera is a skilled director of the staged fiction. Sculpture and painting, moreover, are also found in the '*Pasturaru*' that he coloured to give reality and expression to his figures, demonstrating an artistic streak that aligns with the naturalistic painting of the 17th century.

Gaetano Bongiovanni

**PAIR OF EMBROIDERED ALTAR
FRONTS (PALIOTTI) DEPICTING
'ST. FRANCIS OF PAOLA' AND 'THE
FOUNTAIN OF LIFE'**

Sicilian masters, second half
of the 17th century
Silk, gold, coral, garnet, painted canvas

.....
Church of San Francesco di Paola
Piazza S. Francesco di Paola Palermo
tel. +39091588673
.....

The church of San Francesco di Paola in Palermo houses two precious altar fronts made from embroidered silk and decorated with coral beads, used to cover the altars during solemn celebrations.

The first, made for the altar of the chapel dedicated to St. Francis of Paola, to the right of the presbytery, depicts the façade of a large building, characterised by late-mannerist architecture punctuated by three large arches and a series of pilasters decorated with candelabra motifs. Through the central arch, we see a vast garden with a checkerboard floor on which St. Francis of Paola is kneeling as he receives the sign 'Caritas' (CHS), a symbol of his Order, from Archangel Michael.

The second frontal, once displayed in the second chapel on the left of the church, also depicts the façade of a building with a central porch that overlooks a viridarium, adorned with a hexagonal fountain with overlapping basins, a symbol of the *fons vitae*. In the arches at the sides, there are two balconies bearing the crest of Bishop Drago, who probably commissioned the work. The embroidered panels, placed before the altar like a theatre wing, fall within



the 'building façade' category, with richly decorated architectural settings in the foreground that open onto a natural environment, to which a miraculous occurrence is added as if it were a real event. This is in keeping with the Counter-Reformist notion of 'surprise to persuade' (Maria Clara Ruggieri Tricoli, the 1992 volume entitled *Il teatro e l'altare. Paliotti d'architettura*).

As documents from that time state, the palio



d'architettura (architectural embroidery given as a prize), was part of the vast array of works from the 17th century commissioned by the island's most important religious orders, such as the Franciscans, Jesuits and Theatins, to enhance the front of the altar. The preparatory cartoons were drawn by local architects, who often still reworked the compositional schemes of 17th century palaces, enhancing it with religious symbols, while the frontals were subsequently from

'*marmi mischi*' (multi-coloured marbles), in silver or embroidery. In Sicily in particular, professional embroiderers but also religious women used coral beads, produced by the '*corallari*' of Trapani, to make the items more valuable. The extraordinary embroideries used gold and silver thread directly on canvas or cardboard padding, corals and garnets to draw the architecture and multi-coloured silk threads in needlepoint to represent the landscape



and figures. The flesh tones of the characters were obtained by means of the watercolour painting on fabric technique, and were then shaped and applied to the stand with glue and finishing touches with a needle (Roberta Civileto, *Preziose architetture ad ago recuperate in Restauri nella Chiesa di San Francesco di Paola di Palermo*, 2015).

Some documentary clues suggest that the technical methodologies for this kind of artefacts were fine tuned by the workshops of embroiderers from Messina, who had reached a high degree of specialisation in the second half of the 17th century (Elvira D'Amico *Un laboratorio di ricamo in corallo nella Messina del secolo XVII*, which appeared in *Oadi* in 2014).

The series of frontals from Palermo was completed by that displayed in the museum of the Convento dei Frati Minimi di San Vito in Vico Equense (NA), which is similar

in terms of its formal and technical features, but also the figurative theme at the centre of the architectural frontispiece, which represents the Saint in the act of spreading his cloak on the water, after having calmed a storm, to cross the Strait of Messina with his companions.

Maria Reginella



FRESCOS WITH 'SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND THE PROPHETS'

Guglielmo Borremans
(Antwerp 1672 - Palermo 1744)

Chapel of the Archbishop's Palace
Via Matteo Bonello, 2 Palermo
tel. +390916077111

The chapel is now the only surviving room featuring by the dense decoration by Borremans, which once stretched to the spacious halls of the main floor of the Archbishop's Palace in Palermo. Despite its lack of originality and undoubted anomaly compared to the traditional architectural canon, it is still considered "one of the most precious gems of art in Palermo" (Maurizio Calvesi *Il Palazzo arcivescovile di Palermo*, in *Documenti della I Rassegna nazionale del*

Sacro nell'arte contemporanea, 1976).

The cycle of paintings was commissioned by the archbishop of Palermo Matteo Basile (1733- 36), perhaps through the intercession of the bishop of Catania, Galletti. The Flemish painter who produced them had settled in Palermo in 1715, becoming "the most effective and authoritative spokesperson of the more secular and anti-academic trends" in the sphere of fresco decoration, in the wake of Luca Giordano, Paolo De Matteis and Pietro del Po, and he was able to emerge "against the rampant mediocrity of the local environment" (Citti Siracusano, *Guglielmo Borremans tra Napoli e Sicilia*, 1990). He had already painted frescoes in important churches of the Sicilian capital, imbuing them with a hitherto new concept, offering a view of the biblical and evangelical events in key graceful and worldly style, carried out with

TIMELESS MASTERPIECES

a lightness in the tale that is equivalent to the lightness of touch of his airy rococo style. The theme of the *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, taken up by the painter several times in the exquisite and solemn halls of the palace in Palermo, is boosted and exalted, unfurling in all its length, adopting a narrative and detailed tone to sequentially depict “the key moments of expectation and the birth of Christ, tracing the steps of the festive liturgy that ends with the Epiphany” (Mariny Guttilla, *Arte e restauro nella decorazione a fresco del Palazzo arcivescovile di Palermo, in Arti decorative nel Museo diocesano di Palermo...* from 1999). The basic facts of the infancy of Christ—*Joseph’s Dream, the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Magi, the Flight into Egypt*—

are interspersed with figures of prophets in half-busts—*Moses, Ageo, Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah, David*—with the task of “visually and conceptually connecting evangelical episodes with Old Testament tradition, according to the established norms of the Counter-Reformist Church” (Guttilla). The whole work is connected and framed by ornaments and painted friezes. Guttilla also stressed that “the compositional schemes are... entirely focused on the monumental figures situated in the surrounding space, demarcating its boundaries. However, the gravity of this structured is offset with the lightness and airiness of the lilting rhythm in the gestures and plastic movements, and the colour range that is brilliant an yet imbued with wispy luminescence, inspired





by formulas advanced by Giaquinto.” The original expanse of the cycle is suggested by the testimony of Di Marzo: “It represented the principal figures in the life of Jesus naturally, beginning with the birth and maybe leading to death, occupying all those ... spacious walls, which provided a very broad backdrop for such spacious representations.” The same historian also gave an account of the beauty

of the building, before its transformation: “Only one room remains almost intact today, in which the value of the Flemish painting emerges as it does in the best works” (Giacchino Di Marzo, *Guglielmo Borremans di Anversa, pittore fiammingo in Sicilia nel secolo XVIII (1715-1744)*, 1912).

Elvira D’Amico



**TAPESTRY WITH BALDACHIN
(TOSELLO)**

Embroiderers from Palermo, 18th century
Embroidery in silk and gold on canvas,
painted fabric

.....
Museo Regionale di Palazzo Mirto
Via Merlo, 2 Palermo
tel. +390916164751
.....

Embroidered tapestries played an important role in furnishing the noble palaces of Sicily. They were placed alongside tapestries in the stricter sense, but sometimes replaced them, providing opportunities for custom commissions for local artisan featuring a specific desired subject, rather than purchasing them from far away. Some embroidered tapestries, made with a picturesque stitch by skilled craftsmen belonging to the ranks master embroiderers, bear witness to the popularity in Palermo of these items made on cartoons by renowned painter-architects. Among these

who produced them in the late Mannerist period, Vincenzo La Barbera from Termini Imerese stands out in particular. A *unicum* within the aristocratic Sicilian dwellings because of its uniformity and optimum state of conservation, it is represented by the vast cycle of embroidered tapestries in Palazzo Mirto, once home of the Filangieri princes. It denotes how the embroideries were with a celebratory and illustrative cultured function used in civic palaces, like the paintings and frescoes found in the same rooms. Here, in the ballroom, an impressive tapestry with baldachin, known in the papers of the time as a 'tosello', depicts an episode from the epic of Alexander the Great on the mantel, *Fame* on the sky and the emblem of the Filangieri on the curtain. The work comes from an engraving by Pietro da Cortona from 1658, which also constitutes its *terminus post quem*, and despite bearing 17th century stylistic elements, it can plausibly be traced back to the beginning of the next century. As such, it would be ascribed to the period of Prince Vincenzo Filangieri, which ascended to the title in 1725. However, its unusual, primarily military subject matter, as well as the repeated warlike trophies placed on the frieze, would suggest that it was more plausibly conceived by a predecessor with the same name as Vincenzo, who lived in the 17th century and is known for his strong militaristic attitudes. The possibility has not been ruled out, therefore, that Filangieri continued or repeated work previously started or in any case conceived by his illustrious ancestor, who first had the title of Prince of Mirto in 1643 as well as the privilege of being First Class Grandee of Spain. The theme of the embroidery, the conquest

of the Persian city of Ariamazes in 327 BC, during which 300 Macedonians demonstrated their daring mountaineering skills, an event alluded to by the phrase embroidered on the flagpole: PENNAS HABENT ALEXANDRI MILITES, is rare in the iconography of the Macedonian king, though his exploits are among the favourite subjects depicted by tapestry in the strictest sense. The flawless technical execution of the embroidery is evident in the uniformity of the shiny silk, stretched out in a picturesque stitch in order to create the effect of tissue fabric, and in the choice of dazzling

colours—green, red, blue—blended in skilful shades, as well as the golden thread used to stitch the weapons and armour, almost as if to make them gleam. The Filangieris' predilection for embroidered wall hangings can be seen in other similar items of in the adjacent Hall of Tapestries, including some with mythological stories in neoclassical style, and a series of panels embroidered with scenes from the *Jerusalem Delivered*, in Arcadian 18th century style, which entirely cover the Hall of the Baldachin.

Elvira D'Amico



**MONSTRANCE WITH SAINT IGNATIUS
OF LOYOLA**

Antonio Nicchi (news 1736-1781)
Gilded silver, gems and enamels

.....
Casa Professa Museum
Piazza Casa Professa, 1 Palermo
tel. +390916077111
.....

This precious artefact is an extraordinary testimony to the level of quality achieved in the 18th century by the silversmiths of Palermo, who looked at works of fine art with figurative vivacity. In this case attention was turned to sculpture, repeated here as a Baroque model in the statue of St. Ignatius in place of the stem.

Unanimously deemed by the art historians to be the work of Palermo-based silversmith Antonio Nicchi, the *Monstrance* (25 cm high) shows compositional and formal talent that tends towards the Baroque with regard to the figure of the saint, while both the mixtilinear base and the rays relate to the declining phase of the same style, defined as late Baroque or Rococo. However, the extraordinary homogeneity of the liturgical artefact must be recognised, as decorative arts and sculpture appear inextricably intertwined within it.

Antonio Nicchi worked in a sizeable period of the 18th century, with news of him from between 1736 and 1781, and is described by Maria Accascina as a goldsmith and silversmith with a well-accredited workshop. The item bears multiple punches with the eagle flying high and the initials RUP (Regia Urbis Panormi) relating to the Consulate of the silversmiths of Palermo,





in addition to 'GCR36' and 'AN', which identify the consul Geronimo Cristadoro, the year 1736 and the silversmith Antonio Nicchi, respectively. The sculptural models recalled by Nicchi for the composition of the small statue of St. Ignatius—which replaces the entire stem of the *Monstrance*—are of primary importance and have been identified as the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Giacomo Serpotta, and in any case are presumed to be from the Roman Baroque.

The plastic articulation of the figure of the Saint caught in movement and emphasised by amplified drape marks the extraordinary results achieved by the silversmiths of Palermo in the early 18th century. Furthermore, the item features a noteworthy presence of precious gems that still seems to be dictated by medieval symbolism, evoked within the context of the Counter-Reformation. The chasuble worn by St. Ignatius is in fact largely adorned with rubies and diamonds, with a sapphire of considerable size in the centre, a gem that could symbolically refer to the concord (Albertus Magnus, 1584). The Saint is holding an open book decorated with enamels, clearly stating the famous phrase: *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*. Even the rays are all sprinkled with

gems, such as pure sapphires, diamonds and rubies, which are around the lens where vine leaves appear in green enamel, and bunches of grapes and ears of corn in gilded silver, symbols of the eucharistic bread and wine. From the point of view of form and composition, it is useful to highlight the reference to a *Reliquary with St. Ignatius of Loyola* created in 1730 by Geronimo Cristadoro on a commission by the Jesuits of Catanisetta, now kept in the Diocesan Museum of that city.

It should also be noted that the *Monstrance* in the Museum of Casa Professa, from six years later, has a punching by Cristadoro, in the role of consul, and presumably mutual influences or references to the same decorative repertoire dictated by the same Jesuit patrons could be envisaged between the latter and Nicchi.

Gaetano Bongiovanni



MELLERIO STELE

Antonio Canova (Possagno 1757 - Venice 1822)

Marble

.....
 Palazzo Ajutamicristo
 Via Garibaldi, 41 Palermo
 tel. +390917071411/425

These works were acquired by the Soprintendenza of Palermo in the late 1970s, after being blocked by the export office, which they had passed through to be shipped to Germany. Having been placed in the Museum of Palazzo Mirto for a certain amount of time, they are now on display in the new Museo della

Soprintendenza, where they constitute two of the most remarkable pieces. An absolute masterpiece of Italian sculpture, the two tombstones were commissioned by the Milanese Count Giacomo Mellerio to honour his uncle Giambattista and his wife Elisabetta Castelbarco, and they were kept in the family villa, located in Brianza, in Gerno, until the late 1970s. Produced in the second decade of the 19th century (c. 1811-1814), the sculptures fall within the large catalogue of works destined for funerary and memorial purposes, sculpted in Rome by Canova, showing clear similarities with the allegorical figures of the great tomb of Pope Clement XIII Rezzonico, in St. Peter's, which attest to Canova's predilections for the sculpture of Praxiteles. Given its typological-compositional layout, they are situated among the Stele of Giovanni Falier from the church of Santo Stefano in Venice and Domenico Manzoni from the church of Santissima Trinità in Forlì. They reveal "the interest in the fluidity of light, through the volumetric values ... through the linear evolution resolved in terms of threads of light and slight grooves of shadow" (Silvana Riccobono, *Le stele Mellerio dalla Brianza a Palermo*, in *Antonio Canova e le stele Mellerio*, 1992). They appear animated by the figurative synthesis enacted by the sculptor in the "celebration of the departed and the elaboration of the secular worship of the tomb in the presence of that tragic inevitability of death, to which the artist was able to give a meaningful and ineffable aesthetic value" (texts VII.10 and VII.11 of Francesco Leone, in the catalogue from



2009 Canova: *l'ideale classico tra scultura e pittura*).

An additional salient feature is the pain of the survivors for beloved deceased person, and the correspondence of the amorous feelings that unite the living to the dead, in the style of Foscolo, represented by the ideal figure of a woman weeping found in

many works by the sculptor.

The works are a valuable record of neoclassical sculptures by Canova, which inaugurated a new wave in Italian and European art of the time.

Gaetano Bongiovanni

TUNA FISHING

(‘MATTANZA’ IN FAVIGNANA)

Antonino Leto (Monreale 1844 - Capri 1913)

Oil on canvas

.....
Fondazione Sicilia - Villa Zito

Via Libertà, 52 Palermo

tel. +3909160720264
.....

A masterpiece of 19th century Sicilian pictorial realism, which finds a literary equivalent in the realism of Verga. Leto, one of the greatest 19th century landscape painters, together with Lojacono, carried out the work after returning to Palermo from his many travels, first to Campania, then Rome, Milan, Florence and Paris. In his city, after 1880, he began to paint for the Florio family, who had already commissioned numerous works and supported him in his artistic activities. Two masterpieces date back to this new phase, both due to the patronage of the influential Sicilian family, the *Trapani Salt Pans* and the *Mattanza*, which can be dated to 1883-87, and is considered one of the masterpieces of Sicilian Realism (Ivana Bruno, *La pittura dell'Ottocento nella Sicilia occidentale...* in *La pittura dell'Ottocento in Sicilia ...* edited by Maria Concetta Di Natale, 2005).

It was in Favignana, where he had gone to visit the tuna fishing facilities of Ignazio Florio, that Leto “was able to observe the violent spectacle of tuna fishing and meditate on it to create depiction with powerful emotional involvement, resulting in a work with an amazing formal quality and sentimental range, in which reality is brought to life in all its disturbing intensity” (Silvestra Bietoletti in the description dedicated to



the painting in the catalogue *Di là del faro: paesaggi e pittori siciliani dell'Ottocento*, edited by Sergio Troisi and Paolo Nifosì, 2014). It is worth rereading the enthusiastic words used by Accascina (in his *Ottocento siciliano*, 1939) to describe the painting, a shining example of the painter's artistic principles, based on the lyrical transfiguration of the natural event: “the range of blues that become violet: clarities of foam in contrast with the

(ph D'Aguzzo/Civita Sicilia)



slate grey of the darting tuna: blacks on light, resolute contrasts and highly sensitive hues, over an area that borders on the infinity of the clouds. The stage for the drama is closed off first by a backdrop made up of fishermen on fishing boats, busy at work with rapid gestures, and then by a second layer of spectators with implacable serenity, and further on plastic masses backlight to enhance the depth of the space... The

solemn and brutal elements in that struggle of forces and of traps between man and tuna remained in his heart and transfused within the painting... Leto painted this tuna fishing expedition, transforming it into an obscure and primordial drama between man and beast, aided by the sea.”

Elvira D’Amico

SCHOOL CHILDREN

Felice Casorati (Novara 1883 - Turin 1963)

Oil on board

.....
GAM Galleria d'Arte Moderna

'Empedocle Restivo'

Via Sant'Anna, 21 Palermo

tel. +390918431605
.....

.....
Signed on the lower right by 'F. Casorati', the large painting was presented at the *XVI International Exhibition of Venice* in 1928 and was acquired soon after by the Municipal Gallery of Palermo. The depiction of six school pupils with ovoid heads and geometrical patterns, reminiscent of the compositions of Piero della Francesca, appears to be emphasised by the open book, the globe and from the square table covered with a green brocade drape. The solid geometrical layout of the work not only refers to the scientific perspective of the Renaissance, which is stressed here by the dizzying convergence towards the background of the floor tiles, tends to be uncertain because of the uneasiness that pervades the school students and the surrounding environment dominated by a suspended, almost metaphysical immobility. The value of the light is also used with a plastic function, in a manner intended to bring out and at the same time isolate the figures and objects. According to Lionello Venturi (in the catalogue for the 1924 Venice Biennale), the painter "imposes its form as law", encapsulating the salient aspect of Casorati's paintings. With Carlo Carrà and the Broglio spouses, Casorati was a prominent exponent of the *Novecento* group who aimed to restore order and

continuity in keeping with the classic artists of the Renaissance.

His operating practice involved making preparatory drawings on untouched media and coloured backgrounds, the result of endless steps taken to achieve meticulous tones. Having trained in the climate of European *Art nouveau* and Italian symbolism, between the wars the painter from Piedmont embodied the figure of the artist of the Novecento group through a cultured composition approach with 15th century roots that never came to terms with the experiments of the avant garde. He drew inspiration from Cézanne for his method of constructing paintings for volumetric structures as a "harmony of masses, lines and colour in a reciprocal relationship, in perfect correlation... despite not being aligned with the metaphysical painters, his works contain an atmosphere marked by *suspense*, a character of melancholy loneliness, a sense of deep detachment" (Giuseppe Marchiori in the entry dedicated to Casorati in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 1978).

For him, the revival of tradition also involves painting interiors of great simplicity, with rigorous architectural boxes and human figures with impeded gestures, as if immersed in fantastical but plausible atmospheres. Despite being based on theoretical writings by Massimo Bontempelli and the art critic Margherita Sarfatti, the Novecento group - and therefore also Casorati - did not have the unitary character of a real movement, but pursued certain 'strong' ideas, such as the purification of forms, the revival of the painting tradition, especially that of the 15th century, from Paolo Uccello to Fra' Angelico



and Piero della Francesca, the refusal of experimentalism and the solid relationship between figure and space. All of these elements can be read in Casorati's *Scolari*, now in museum collections of Palermo. In *Concerto*, a piece from 1924, now in the

collections of the RAI in Turin, Casorati evokes the Renaissance through female figures in movement, the figurative results of which come close to sculpture.

Gaetano Bongiovanni



Guttuso by SIAE

GIOACCHINO GUTTUSO SURVEYOR

Renato Guttuso [Bagheria 1912 - Rome 1987]

Oil on canvas

.....
Guttuso Museum - Villa Cattolica

Via Rammacca, 9 Bagheria

tel. +39091943902
.....

Gioacchino Guttuso, surveyor, painter's father, died in 1940, is portrayed full-length in the action of setting up the theodolite, the instrument used to measure lands.

The background, constituted by a dark blue sky and by a field in which yellow and green dominate, acts as a setting to the character, who stands out for tonalities tending to be monochrome ones.

At his back the umbrella that he used as a sunshade frames the parental figure with a timeless mythical aura.

Guttuso Archives

'LA VUCCIRIA'

Renato Guttuso (Bagheria 1912 - Rome 1987)

Oil on canvas

.....
 Rettorato dell'Università di Palermo
 Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri
 Piazza Marina, 61 Palermo
 tel. +390916075306

A work produced by the painter from Bagheria at the height of his maturity (1975), it is emblematic of his painting and is one of the most appreciated by critics and the public, and, especially given that recent times have seen the closure of the ancient market in Palermo that it depicts, it has become an icon of the 'lost city'.

The canvas was presented at Galleria La Tavolozza in Palermo and then at the Galleria Toninelli in Rome with a text by Goffredo Parise. It was then purchased by the University of Palermo, which placed it in the 14th century Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri, situated in Piazza Marina. The following year it was part of the Venice Biennale, together with the *Funeral of Togliatti* and *Convivio*.

In the work, described by the author himself as "a huge still life, with a tunnel in the middle, where people pass by and meet each other", he was able to express himself in all the strength of his chromatic expressionism, which he first developed in the 1930s, when he fought as part of the Gruppo dei Quattro, as an alternative to the

conventional art of the Fascist regime.

Rivers of ink have been devoted to it by art critics and writers.

One of the foremost instances of these is the opinion of Maurizio Calvesi (*Guttuso e la Sicilia*, in the catalogue of the same title from 1985), which defines it as "an icon of the author's Sicilian attitude": "Sicily calls, its womb redundant and loud, with the roaring and richness of the unforgettable *Vucciria*. The colours suddenly return, to sing their hearts out ... Around it is... heavenly hell, hallucinatory chaos in a juxtaposed order with a carefully considered layout."

The drama of the painting is captured by Cesare Brandi (*Guttuso*, 1983): "The piece burns with almost violent tones that clash, coming to life within boundaries of pitch, draped in mourning. It shimmers with colour, but as if it were on a black background, as if it were depicted on a slab of slate, and is no less tragic than Gibellina." Again, the dramatic nature coupled with the theatricality of the work has been highlighted by Paolucci in 1997 (*Guttuso pittore di teatro: il sogno di una cosa, in Guttuso e il teatro musicale*, edited by Fabio Carapezza Guttuso): "The *Vucciria* is a dramatic painting, in the literal sense of the word. Men and women meet, touch and confront one another in the space that cuts the shining carnality of life like a wound. They are in the spectacle of nature as it offers up its treasures, in a form of alert and fiery choral participation."

TIMELESS MASTERPIECES



Guttuso by SIAE

Recently, la Vucciria was chosen as the subject of a story by Andrea Camilleri (*La Vucciria*, Milan, Skira, 2008) and a play by Marco Betta and Roberto Andò, staged

at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo (February 2015).

Elvira D'Amico



UNTITLED

Jannis Kounellis [Athens 1936]
 Furniture, environmental dimensions

Museo Regionale d'Arte moderna
 e contemporanea - Palazzo Riso
 Via Vittorio Emanuele, 365 Palermo
 tel. +39091320532

Jannis Kounellis was born in Athens in 1936 and in his early twenties he left Greece and moved to Italy, where he still resides. He held his first solo exhibition in 1960 while still a student of the Accademia, where he was a pupil of Toti Scialoja. He made a key contribution to the Italian figurative culture of the 1960s and 1970s and research into a free language. His own research, which began with a naked and pure frame, transcended the boundaries of painting and took concrete form in the rejection of traditional media. His definitive turning point came with his *performances* and with his use of organic and inorganic materials, which nevertheless refer to the reality of matter (iron, wood, coal, jute, live animals, animal scraps).

With his works, Kounellis produces a particular dialectic, which testifies to their independence from technology and the nature as unusual handmade objects. The works produced cause technology and obsolescence to interact, attributing a cathartic function to their artisanal appearance. Kounellis believes in the importance of transmitting the idea of freedom to young people, encouraging them to push the boundaries of their linguistic space and redefine the image into a common perspective, in which the reasoning of the other can be heard by launching towards the other. The *Untitled* work, created for the 'Albergo dei Poveri' in 1993 and remounted in '*site specific*' form in 2008 for the Riso Museum, upsets the laws of physics by giving lightness to cabinets suspended from the ceiling. There is a strong evocation of folk traditions, of a past that can no longer be defined as memory but rather as a kind of hoarding of something about to be lost, testifying to the artist's constant desire in his continuous studies into his own and other people's origins.

Photo by Fabio SgROI

Valeria Li Vigni

GRADASSO MOOR

Catania style 'pupo'

Museo Internazionale delle Marionette
'Antonio Pasqualino'

Piazza Antonio Pasqualino, 5 Palermo
rel. +39091328060

"The *Opera dei pupi* is the traditional puppet theatre from Southern Italy, the repertoire of which consists mainly of the

Photo by Enzo Brai



epic-chivalric literature, and in particular from the Carolingian cycle. Intended for an educated and middle-class audience up to the 18th century, in the 19th century it was clearly characterised by a tendency towards the popular" (Gabriella D'Agostino, from *Enciclopedia della Sicilia*).

The 'pupo' puppet from Catania depicting the Moor Gradasso belongs to the original nucleus of the collection of the International Museum of Marionettes, founded in 1975 by the Associazione per la Conservazione delle tradizioni popolari (Associazione for the Preservation of Folk Traditions).

Originally from the theatre of Natale Meli, it dates back to the 1950s. The head was sculpted by Paolo Marino and painted by Emilio Musmeci; the armour was made by Giuseppe Maglio. The *pupo* is characterised by white knickerbockers decorated with red stripes and trimmings. The armour is embossed and the image of a Greek comic mask recurs across the shield, suit of armour and the flaps of the 'faroncina', a skirt.

The tongues of the masks are sticking out and are framed by foliage in tendrils and clusters. It seems likely that the armour was originally used to arm a character of from Greek history. According to the identification by Natale Meli, the *pupo* corresponds to Gradasso, who was, however, usually represented with a long, thick black moustache pointing downwards and a helmet topped by one or three crescents; his thoughtful gaze and white beard suggest that it is more likely to depict King Subrino.

Rosario Perricone

CART FROM THE PALERMO AREA

painters: Brothers Onofrio and Giuseppe Ducato (Bagheria 1974)

constructor: Giuseppe Badalamenti son of Giovanni (Partinico 1973)

Oil on wood

Museo Regionale di Terrasini
Lungomare Peppino Impastato Terrasini
tel. +390918810989

The Regional Museum of Terrasini brings together the more conspicuous heritage of traditional carts, buggies, trappings and harnesses from Sicily, documenting both the major production areas and the excellence achieved by the different schools of master carters, manufacturers of structural parts, carvers and painters.

The use of painted carts was first documented on 1829, in a votive offering of the 'Giuseppe Pitrè' Museum. It gradually increased in the second half of the 19th century, becoming a real repertoire and a precise stylistic language. Alongside the repetition of consolidated stylistic features, customised stylistic canons also later emerged, as in the painting school of the family of the Duchy of Bagheria. The



extremely bright colours and the accuracy of the figures came to constitute their distinguishing feature, together with the enrichment of the thematic repertoire.

The cart—former Badalamenti collection—serves as an effective testament of the technical expertise of the artists. Entirely painted, its decorative devices refer to the functions of cart painting, which in the first instance responds to a need for magical religious protection.

The St. George painted and sculpted on the neuralgic parts of the vehicle helped to ward off any kind of negative forces.

The painting guaranteed the protection of the wood in a vehicle constantly exposed to the elements.

The figurative redundancy also allowed the developer to advertise, and the cart was often used for selling on the streets. Finally, the economic capacity of the carters was displayed through the flamboyance of the decorations.

Maria Emanuela Palmisano



