

PALEO
PALERMO

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

BAROQUE DECORATION

THE ORATORIES AND THE STUCCO DECORATIONS

Edited by **Carolina Griffo** and **Angiolina Ganazzoli**

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*

Baroque decoration. The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

edited by: *Carolina Griffo and Angiolina Ganazzoli*

written by: *Carolina Griffo, Angiolina Ganazzoli, Giovanni Errera, Maria Pia Guarcello, Ida Colucci*

photographs: *Mario Fazio*

a special thank you to *Girolamo Papa* and *Paola Vaccarello*

editorial staff: *Ignazio Romeo, Maria Concetta Picciurro*

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

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, 2015. - 20 v.

709.45823 CDD-22

SBN Pa0274341

10.: Baroque decoration: the Oratories and the Stucco Decorations / by Carolina Griffo and Angiolina Ganazzoli. - Palermo: Regione siciliana, Assessorato dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, Dipartimento dei beni culturali e dell'identità siciliana, 2015.

I. Griffo, Carolina <1966->. II. Ganazzoli, Angiolina <1962->.

729.609458231063 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

Warning: the days and opening times indicated in the volume could vary.

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

- 5 FOREWORD
- 7 GIACOMO SERPOTTA: A UNIQUE INTERPRETER OF PALERMITAN BAROQUE
- 13 Sodalities, Confraternities, Congregations
- 14 Techniques of stucco plastering
- 17 INFORMATION SHEETS
- 18 Oratory of San Mercurio
- 21 Church of Carmine Maggiore
- 22 Oratory of Carminello
- 24 Oratory of the Holy Rosary in Santa Cita
- 26 Stuccos in the Destroyed Church of the Stigmata
- 27 Oratory of San Lorenzo
- 30 Church and Oratory of Sant'Orsola
- 32 Oratory of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami
- 35 Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico
- 37 Oratory of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria
- 39 Oratory of Sabato
- 42 Ernesto Basile writes about Giacomo Serpotta
- 44 Oratory of the Holy Sacrament in Carini
- 47 Palatine Chapel of Sant'Anna in Castelbuono
- 48 STUCCO BEFORE SERPOTTA: THE WORKSHOP OF LI VOLSI
- 55 Basilica of San Pietro in Collesano
- 60 Mother Church in Ciminna
- 62 BIBLIOGRAPHY

The visitor to Palermo, who, whilst touring its famous medieval monuments takes time to look around, will most likely recognise the strong 17th/18th century imprint in the stately buildings of the city centre.

The architectural and decorative style commonly known as “baroque” is present in a variety of forms, in the sweeping façades of the imposing palaces and in the innumerable religious buildings (churches, convents, “houses”, oratories, chapels). This glitzy though severe style, nowadays rather melancholy due to the run down state of the old town following the bombing during the II World War, is the dominant note of the city’s appearance.

To the visitor it may even seem that, initiating from 17th century art, this splendour and overabundance has become a permanent feature of Palermo. Its inhabitants favour this style even in mundane objects such as the stalls in the fruit market or the windows of the pastry shops – together, it must be said, with a certain ceremonial stiffness and privacy that are not immediately obvious.

The constructive fervour of the 17th century, the pomposity of the great capital of the Sicilian Viceroyalty (the island was part of the Spanish empire, which was divided into viceroyalties) the building of a city centre committed to representation, the competition between the nobility, religious orders and congregations, for whom their architectural works were visible manifestations not only of opulence and power, but also of art and good taste; from everything mentioned above, between the end of 17th and the beginning of the 18th

century, a unique artistic phenomenon was born; (an important “episode” as they say, in the city’s history of art) , that of the sculptor and stucco decorator Giacomo Serpotta.

The work of Serpotta—closely linked to Palermo, to the point that it is believed that the artist never left Sicily – raises the island’s capital to the level of some of the best European art of the time and quite likely represents the most refined, graceful and fascinating version of an entire decorative and figurative artistic period.

But the valuable artefacts created by Serpotta would not have been so evocative, without the occurrence of a particular social phenomenon in 17th century Palermo: the spread of the congregations and the oratories. Serpotta, whose work was partly lost due to the destruction of the last war, decorated many churches and chapels in Palermo and its province. Most of the time, however, his stucco sculptures were simply added, carving out space in buildings that already had rich and historically important decorative elements. However, in the case of the oratories, and in particular of the three most famous among those remaining (the Oratory of the Rosario in Santa Cita, the Oratory of San Lorenzo and the Oratory of the Rosario in San Domenico), the entire decoration is his work and that of his workshop. These buildings, therefore, not only offer shining examples of his mastery, but they also have the unique charm of artistic masterpieces conceived by a single person, following a single design. These preserve, intact and whole, the impression of an era, of a style, and of a vision.

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

This occurred and is repeated, because of a particular historical conjunction. In the 17th century it became customary for the nobility and those of high society, to take part in religious associations, devoted to prayer and good works, but competing amongst themselves for social prestige. These congregational prayer meetings were also occasions for meetings and pacts concerning civilian life, and membership guaranteed mutual support and reciprocal solidarity. The associations operated as closed circles and their meetings were, excepting on rare occasions during the liturgical year, of a private and even secret nature.

A new type of building was created for these congregations, building, known as an oratory, and built in large numbers in Palermo during the course of the 17th century. Buildings, mind you, with plain exteriors: large rectangular rooms, annexed to prestigious churches, but with no external indication of their internal use. The beautification, the pomp, the surprise generated by the décor, were all concentrated inside and reserved only for the brotherhood. In these ample, but not enormous empty spaces, without a binding liturgical function, the artist's creativity was given free reign.

Serpotta can thus conceive and carry out articulated decorative projects that turn these oratories into places of wonder and enchantment, dazzling white and seductive. Thanks to Serpotta's work, Palermo found itself almost anticipating the artistic movement of early 18th century Europe, known, (initially in a derogatory sense) as

Rococo. A style that tended to emancipate itself from ceremonial solemnity and from the Baroque which – unable to manifest itself in large architectural public buildings, still controlled by the rhetoric of solemnity – preferred private interiors and floridly elegant decorations. These were often applied to simple and rigorous structures, relatively small in size. All these conditions also apply to the work of Giacomo Serpotta, which is decisively influenced by the material with which he worked: stucco, an easily modelled paste, soft and versatile, but which also requires rapid implementation, because it dries quickly.

The style of a new era and the malleability of his chosen material push Serpotta – equipped with a talent so uncommon that he became one of the greatest European artists of the genre – to dissolve the severity of the figures and postures of the Baroque and create a more light-hearted, graceful and elegant world: as fascinating as a dream, vaporous and seemingly ready to vanish like fluffy foam, instead of perennial and admonitory as marble.

I. R.

GIACOMO SERPOTTA: A UNIQUE INTERPRETER OF PALERMITAN BAROQUE

Carolina Griffo

In the building fervour of 17th century Palermo, which has left indelible traces in present day aspect of the historical city centre, a significant position is occupied by the construction of the oratories, places of worship and prayer built for select groups of brothers. The Sodalities and the secular Confraternities, who looked after these oratories, also used them for conventions and meetings, giving them, in fact, a dual function, both liturgical and social. They were usually rectangular buildings, with the access door on one of the shorter sides and an altar placed on the opposite side; along the side walls there were seats for the Brothers.

The decoration of the oratories in Palermo are mainly due to the activity of Giacomo Serpotta (1656-1732), who in his career specialized in stucco, unlike his peers who were usually also architects or stone sculptors. In his field, he achieved exquisitely original results.

The choice of subjects to be represented in the decorations was dictated by the client's precise indications. The narrative was always rather complex and the relative absence of liturgical constraints meant that the walls could be considered as a single canvas on which it was possible to create something unique.

It is not really possible to know in detail the artist's iconographic models of reference. Giacomo Serpotta's main source is the Iconology of Cesare Ripa, published for the first time in 1593, but widely distributed throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. This work codified everything from the clothes, to the postures and actions to which the artists had to comply in order to ensure that the faithful fully

understood the sense of what was depicted.

The artist was also, without a doubt, familiar with the engravings on papal catafalques (ephemeral trappings created specifically for the death of Popes) of the Late Mannerism period. An important model can be identified in the large marble gallery in stucco, which decorated the presbytery of the Cathedral of Palermo, created by the Gagini starting from 1510.

This work of art, destroyed during the restructuring of the Cathedral at the end the 18th century – and today known only from an engraving by Bova in 1760 – should be considered as the beginning of Giacomo Serpotta's training. Using the same materials he breaks with the concept of purely vertical decoration and transforms the staid Renaissance language into dynamic Baroque animation.

Stucco was generally composed of lime and marble powder. The artist also added some plaster to the mixture in order to give greater plasticity and make the material more pliable as, once dried, it assumed the



1
*Palermo, Oratory of San Lorenzo.
Detail*

consistency of stone.

The extremely short processing time, in fact, is one of the main difficulties of this technique: the artist must be able to improvise expressions and details while the material can still be worked. To complete his works Giacomo invented a particular finish for the last layer of his stuccos, which enabled him to make them shine as if they were made of marble. This polishing process was not made over the entire surface, but selectively, leaving some parts rougher in order to achieve the effect of contrast sought by the artist. This is one of the features that differentiate his work from those of other master plasterers of his age. This particular polishing technique is called, in Sicilian “allustratura”. Over the centuries, restoration has often damaged this patina, but where it has resisted it is still possible to appreciate the same magic veil that originally cloaked his works of art.

Giacomo Serpotta was born in Palermo in 1656. His father, Gaspare, was a renowned plasterer. In 1677 Giacomo was entrusted with the task of creating some stucco decorations in the Church of the Madonna dell’Itria in Monreale. Already, some of the details in this first work point to his capabilities and to the virtuosity that will characterise his later production. Within a few years the ability of the artist to decorate grew significantly, as shown by the interventions in the Oratory of San Mercurio (1678) and Santa Cita (1685) and in the Church della Pinta (1682, in collaboration with his elder brother Giuseppe), in which the

decorative sculptures fit harmoniously into the architectural structure. Giacomo's development evolves with the stuccowork in the Carminello, where the figures appear to take on a different volume: putti, chubby children in daring poses, acting as if they were alive and moving with extraordinary naturalism. In 1683 Giacomo, together with his brother, worked on the altars of the Madonna of the Carmelites and of the Crucifix, in the Church of the Carmine Maggiore in Palermo. Here the giant spiral columns, loaded with figures, burst into the transept, breaking up the solemnity of the architecture. Scenes from the Passion of Christ and the Life of the Virgin decorate the first coils of the columns of both altars; The Christ falling under the Cross, for example, is extraordinary. There are also mythological figures fighting each other, representing a clear reference to human nature always torn between good and evil. The narrative idea derives from the works of Gagini, still visible at that time, in the Cathedral of Palermo, but can also be connected to some engravings by the Cavalier d'Arpino (Giuseppe Cesari Arpino 1568 - Rome 1640) published in Rome in 1586 in a volume on the Statutes of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Between 1685 and 1686 Giacomo begins decorating the Oratory of SS. Rosario in Santa Cita, where the miraculous intervention of the Virgin del Rosario at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) is celebrated.

Work continued for several years. Not until 1707 is there news that the gilding by Michele Rosciano is terminated, but

Giacomo is still working on the project for the triumphal arch and the small apse in 1717. On the entrance wall, under a drapery supported by a multitude of putties, there is a relief with the famous naval battle. Above, the Virgin hovers as she hands the Sacred Rosary to Saint Domenic, whilst below, two young people, a Christian and a Muslim, look on, embodying the eternal conflict between winners and losers. The decoration of the Oratory continues on the walls in which the so-called "Teatrini" (small-scaled plastic theatres) are located, or perspective panels in which several subjects are depicted making gestures and movements appropriately chosen to allow the artist to narrate the glorious mysteries of the Rosary (those moments in the life of Christ and the Madonna which are recalled during the prayer of the Rosary).



2
Palermo, Oratory
of San Giuseppe dei
Falegnami. Detail

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

Perspective reliefs had already made their appearance in Sicily in the 15th century with Francesco Laurana in the Mastrantonio Chapel in the Basilica of St. Frances in Palermo. Even the Gagini (the family of sculptors active in Palermo from the 2nd half of the 15th century to the end of the 16th century) had used this technique in panels decorating arches and galleries. In both cases, however, the representation was linked to the figurative method of bas-relief: the secondary figures neatly succeeded each other along planes converging towards the background, where the main episode was depicted. Serpotta appropriated this traditional art form transforming it into a theatrical space in which the décor creates a continuous movement, and the figures are free to interact.

The personifications of the Virtues are alternated with these representations. All around there are jubilant putti, some wave olive branches and others play amongst themselves. The decoration of the entrance wall of Santa Cita is unlike any contemporary work: Serpotta not only pushes the skill and imagination of the artisans to the limit but he is also able to add psychological and spiritual insight to these works.

In 1699 the Sodality of St. Frances in St. Laurence commissions Giacomo Amato and Giacomo Serpotta with the transformation of their headquarters. The Brotherhood asks the two artists to represent the concept of heroic faith in the décor. The allegorical figures are not limited to just accompanying the scenes

from the life of the two Saints, but actively participate in performing the story. The entire decorative cycle revolved around the scene of the Nativity painted over the altar by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi, Milan 1571 – Porto Ercole 1610).

Stolen in 1969, its loss, in addition to being in itself of a very serious nature, has damaged the entire significance of the eight scenes that culminate in the Martyrdom of St. Lawrence and in the Apotheosis of St. Frances.

The decoration of this Oratory, in moving away from the “Gagini” method, manifests a new development of the “Teatrini”: the lateral surfaces are hidden by architectural elements which, because they are placed in perspective, create an illusion of greater depth. There are clear references to the works of two of the most important Baroque sculptors working in Rome, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Naples 1598-Rome 1680) and Alessandro Algardi (Bologna 1598-Rome 1654). The “Teatrini” are one of the most appreciated elements of Serpotta’s decorative repertoire. Their scientific and theoretical foundation are based on the work of the architect Paolo Amato, in his book on “Perspectives” published posthumously in Palermo in 1714.

Unlike the Treaty of Ripa, intended for painters, Amato addresses himself to sculptors, emphasising the importance of perspective perception in plastic representation. Giacomo Serpotta created a new school of thought. However, his later works differ from those of his followers in certain unique characteristics: for example

*Palermo,
Oratory of
Santa Caterina
d'Alessandria.
Detail*

in the florid shapes, the graceful faces, the elegant poses, the attention to detail and the burst of energy mirrored in the corresponding tension in the drapery. Moreover, the perspective is strictly congruent and invention and execution are always interwoven.

In the second decade of the 18th century the artist is employed in the decoration of the Oratory of the SS. Rosario in San Domenico (1710-1717). Built at the end of the 16th century, it still houses important works of art such as the Madonna of the Rosary by Anthony Van Dyck (Antwerp 1599 – London 1641) over the main altar and a series of paintings by Pietro Novelli (Monreale 1603 – Palermo 1647), the most famous painter of the Palermitan Baroque era. Giacomo's task was to create a décor that would unify this complex of important works, all very different from each other. The narrative structure is based on two different themes: the Apocalypse of St John and some stories from the New Testament related to the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary, connected to the allegory of the Virtues. The extreme complexity of the narrative suggests that it is the result of the close collaboration between Giacomo, the Brotherhood and, perhaps, an erudite theologian who assisted the artists in the field of iconography. The fourteen allegorical statues recall the lavish clothing worn by the Palermitan nobility of the era. On the arm of the Fortress there is a small lizard, in dialect called "sirpuzza", which was used by the artist to sign his works because of its assonance with his name. Instead of the usual "Teatrini" (small-scaled



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

plastic theatres) Giacomo places above each frame a large oval with scenes taken from the Apocalypse. Below each medallion there is a ledge with playful putti, in a variety of fantastic poses, all of which extol the virtuosity of the artist.

The spirit of the 18th century that gradually permeates Serpotta's work is even more evident in the Church of St. Augustus, where the artist began working at the end of 1711 and continued almost up to his death. The task is monumental and presents considerable difficulties especially because of the overall size of the meeting-room, which was very long and narrow. The decoration develops as a long procession of Augustinian friars and nuns that runs along the walls in the direction of the apse. Only the altars, dedicated to St. Augustine and St. Monica, which are filled with allegorical figures, interrupt the procession. For religious reasons and also because of the church's dimensions, the "Teatrini" are placed high up in the lunettes above the altarpiece. This diverse positioning forces the artist to accentuate the perspective of the panel in order to place greater emphasis on the figures in the foreground that are the subject of the scene. The putti – figurative motifs constantly used by Serpotta – seem to interact with the narrative panels and playfully participate in the representation, thereby forfeiting the role of spectator that they had played in the other oratories. Bernini's influence is far more obvious in the figures of St. Monica and St. Augustine, and this is probably linked to the circulation of the text "Drawings of Various

Altars and Chapels in Roman Churches" by De Rossi and perhaps even to Giacomo's contact with Giovanni Battista Ragusa, who returned to Palermo from Rome at around this time.

Giacomo died in Palermo on the 27th February 1732. His natural heir and successor in art is his son Procopio who, with regards to style, finish and imaginative detail, is absolutely his father's equal. Procopio, however, does not possess the same degree of artistic autonomy in relation to architects and painters: in decorating the interior of the Church of Santa Teresa in Kalsa, he simply executes the designs of the architects Amato and Dell'Aquila.

One of Procopio's most important works is the decoration of the Oratory of St. Catherine of Alessandria all'Olivella, where the artist works between 1719 and 1726. In this church he manages to blend the figurative and decorative elements with elegance and originality and, furthermore, his work evidences a change: far greater importance is given to architectural elements than in the previous century.



SODALITIES, CONFRATERNITIES, CONGREGATIONS

Carolina Griffio

Sodalities, Confraternities and Congregations, widespread in Palermo, were lay associations that were both religious and charitable organisations. Their headquarters were often oratories; usually either built or redecorated during the 17th and 18th centuries, at their members' expense.

The Confraternities were lay organisations, led by four chancellors, authorised by the Bishop of the diocese, whose statute was characterised by very precise rules. Amongst the good works carried out by the Congregations, assistance to the sick and the burial of the dead were of great importance; and indeed the latter could well have been a significant source of revenue.

The Congregations were generally dedicated to the Virgin, under the guidance of a clergyman, and their aim was usually to propagate worship, and often,

especially after the Counter-Reformation, propaganda for the faith.

The Companies, whose origin and diffusion dates back to the 16th century, were formed by the laity and had stricter admission criteria than those of the Confraternities.

In time, they freed themselves from the influence of the clergy. In addition to pursuing rules relating to devotion and prayer, they cultivated the privileges and benefits related to the exclusive association of its members, who were often influential members of high society. In a world in which civil life was dominated by religious rules and regulations, and vice versa, the sodalities functioned as a society that, over and above their spiritual aims, also acted as power centers, aimed at promoting their role in society.

At the beginning of the 18th century, there were more than 90 such entities. The artistic commissions, which included some of the most famous oratories created by Serpotta, are testimony to the power and wealth of the members of some of these associations.

4

Palermo, Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico. Detail of the small cupola

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

TECHNIQUES OF STUCCO PLASTERING

Angiolina Ganazzoli

Compared to marble, which is more prestigious, stucco was considered a “poor” material, and those who modeled it were considered to be less of an artist than “proper” sculptors. However Giacomo Serpotta obtained not only results of the highest quality from this less noble material, but also effects of lightness and expressiveness unobtainable with stone. Regarding the construction technique, stucco plastering is an art that is created and perfected on site; and restorations conducted in recent years by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Palermo have permitted a close and detailed study of the procedures followed by Serpotta and his workshop. The work of art was created in various phases. The Sicilian stuccos, in addition to the two-dimensional decorations known as base-reliefs, also present well rounded, large sculptures, finished with great attention to detail. The choice of the basic structure was extremely important, scaffolding was essential, often made of wood. Wire was used only for some elements, for example in the formation of the fingers of the hand. This skeleton was covered with twine, tow and hemp. The materials were always poor; the rib of a palm leaf could be used to serve as the core of a sword or the rim of a wooden sieve to construct a crown. Over this framework the first layer was modelled, known as the “corpo” or body and in all likelihood applied by the workshop apprentice, who followed a

preliminary drawing. This layer was of a variable thickness consisting of one part of river sand and two parts of lime to which gypsum was added together with a small amount of lime mortar. Over this first layer the artist himself would spread a very thin second layer. The thickness could vary between 2 and 6mm. This “finishing” layer was composed of three parts of lime and a white marble dust from Carrara. Combined with this mixture, in limited quantities, were some organic additives, such as fats and sugars, which gave the mortar greater pliability. Sometimes, to improve the plasticity of the mixture and give it durability and make it waterproof, oil and wax were mixed in as well. Occasionally gypsum was added to the second layer, with the aim of slowing down the time of setting and hardening of the lime. This is a very important factor in the definition of the sculptures, especially for the decorative details of lesser thickness, such as the folds and draperies of a robe. The work was then defined with a very light and almost liquid veil, a milk lime powder full of fine marble powder, which was intended to saturate the pores of the surface and make it compact and “lustra” (shiny), a perfect imitation of statues made of marble, applied with the aid of hot spatulas and woolen cloths. A variety of instruments were used in this process: during the renovation it was ascertained that a drill was used to create the curls on hair or the cutwork on lace; instead serrated trowels were used to define the ribs of the leaves.

5
*Oratory of the Holy
Rosary in Santa
Cita. Detail of the
preparatory sketch*



6
*Oratory of the
Holy Rosary in San
Domenico. Detail.
It is possible to note
the support of the
missing wing*



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations



7
*Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San
Domenico. Details of the medallions*

INFORMATION SHEETS

Angiolina Ganazzoli

At the start of the 17th Palermo has become heavily urbanised and is on its way to becoming one of Europe's most modern capital cities; it is now that the spirit of the Baroque style is affirmed. The city is enriched with new buildings, architecturally scenographic, grandiose and decorative.

The first major work is the building of the Quattro Canti, at the intersection of Toledo street (today Vittorio Emanuele) with Maqueda street: a big marble "contrivance", the symbolic heart of a city divided into four neighbourhoods. The religious orders and the aristocracy compete to excel in the decoration of buildings and churches. A whole host of master artisans appear on the scene: cabinetmakers, painters, decorators, sculptors, stucco plasterers, marble carvers symptomatic of the urge for renewal inherent in the Baroque era.

Giacomo Serpotta is one of these artisans, together with his workshop of plasterers. His work, full of lively and elegant figures, characterises oratories throughout the city, emphasizing their prestige and grandeur. The taste for baroque ornamentation spreads outwards to the small towns in the province of Palermo: Carini, Castelbuono, Ciminna all have gems of stucco decoration.

All these sculptures have now become almost "hidden treasures", that can be found inside the solemn religious architectural buildings of the era. The information sheets in this volume offer interested visitors a starting point for their journey of discovery.



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

THE ORATORY OF SAN MERCURIO

Giovanni Errera

Cortile San Giovanni degli Eremiti
Palermo

Opening hours

Mon.-Sun. (Including public holidays)
10.00 to 18.00

The Oratory is built over a grotto and cavern formation and amongst them is the cave named after Saint Mercury and the Chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Desert, which stood over a well considered miraculous and gave the Sodality its name.

The Brothers, who wore turquoise clothes, assisted the dying in the nearby Hospital of Palazzo Sclafani. From the courtyard of San Giovanni degli Eremiti one can climb a pincer stairway made of Billiemi stone with columns that have recently been restored, as has the simple main façade. The site plan is characteristic of those of the Sicilian oratories. The atrium has a central fresco depicting Christ visiting Saint Mercury in prison. Entrance to the rectangular side room is through two side doors, topped by pairs of putti and anthropomorphic figures of stucco, with the side stalls used as seating for the Brothers. The large windows are framed by putti, not particularly well executed, attributed by the scholar Donald Garstang to Giacomo Serpotta's very first commissioned work (dated 1678 on a cartouche).

The architectural structure is attributed to Paolo Amato, while the flooring, in

majolica tiles with a simple design (1714-15) was realized by Sebastiano Gurrello and Maurizio Vagolotto.

The original centre of the ceiling, made of straw, collapsed taking with it the large fresco depicting St. Mercury; the vault was rebuilt during the latest restoration (2000) and the fresco reassembled and repositioned in its original location. On the counter facade there is a well-made wooden choir, recently restored, and angels attributed to Procopio Serpotta, son of the more famous Giacomo,

9

*Carini, Oratory of San Mercurio.
Altar*



10

*Palermo, Oratory of San Mercurio.
Detail of the window*



modeled in the second decade of the 18th century, as were the decorations on the triumphal arch. At the base of the counter-facade there is a bretella with wooden benches from the 18th century for the Superiors of the Sodality. The triumphal arch divides the room from the rectangular presbytery with bas-reliefs in stucco on the ceiling.

11

*Palermo, Oratory of San Mercurio.
Choir*





**THE CHURCH OF MARIA SANTISSIMA
DEL CARMELO, KNOWN AS
CARMINE MAGGIORE**

Angiolina Ganazzoli

.....
Piazza del Carmine Palermo

Opening hours

Mon.-Sun. (Including public holidays)
9.00 to 11.00

.....
The church and the adjoining convent are built in the square of the same name, within the historic Palermitan market of Ballarò. It can be accessed by a flight of stairs, because the church is situated above the square, which was lowered in 1795. The monastery probably dates back to the early decades of the 12th century. The present day church, design by Gaetano Smiriglio, was built between 1627 and 1667; the magnificent Baroque dome, designed by the Jesuit Angelo Italia, was completed in 1681. The stucco decoration of the altars of the transept, were contracted to Giuseppe Serpotta in 1683, Giacomo's brother, who probably collaborated with him in realising this work.

The church has a simple facade, designed by Luigi Speranza subsequent to the modification of the street level; the central portal is surmounted by a niche containing an 18th century statue of the Virgin del Carmelo.

The scenographic dome, covered with majolica, is decorated with four majestic figures, made of stucco over rough cast in stone, depicting *Atlanteans* between columns, which appear to be supporting the canopy.

Inside, the spacious building has three naves with a transept and side chapels. The dome is adorned with stucco decorations created by Gaspare La Farina and Andrea Sulfarello between 1682 and 1683, probably in same period in which the Serpotta brothers worked on the transept altars. The architecture of the altar is dominated by the presence of two pairs of twisted columns, gilded and with ductile decorations in stucco, while the Corinthian capitals are adorned with figures and animal motifs. The square base panels, resting on tall parallelepipeds, are of "*Teatrini*" (Toy Theatres) narrating Biblical scenes. On top, on the trabeation, surmounted by a central arch, there are large statues of popes. The left altar is dedicated to the Madonna del Carmine; the narratives on the columns describe the life of Mary, enriched by phytomorphic elements. The frieze is decorated with cherubs and putti; overhead, in the centre two angels hold a scroll and on the sides figure the popes *St. Dionysus* and *Benedict V* are depicted.

The figure of the Everlasting God concludes the final scene.

The altar on the right is dedicated to the Holy Crucifix. On the columns there are scenes from the Passion of Christ, along with phytomorphic ornaments, putti, birds and mythological figures, such as tritons and griffons. In the center, above, two angels hold the image of the Holy Shroud; on the sides, the statues of the Popes *St. Telesphorus* and *St. Zaccariah*.

12

Palermo, Church of Carmine Maggiore, Detail of the Altar of the Holy Crucifix

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

13

*Palermo, Oratory of
Carminello. Detail
of an angel*

THE ORATORY OF CARMINELLO

Giovanni Errera

Via Porta Sant'Agata, 5 Palermo

Opening hours

Sun. 9.00 to 12.00

Mon.-Sat. pre-book +393292950170

The erudite Antonino Mongitore (1663-1743), attests to its construction around 1605, and the stucco decorations date back to the last decade of the 17th and the first quarter of 18th century. The use of diverse techniques and a variety of materials attest to the fact that they were made at different

moments in time. Based on stylistic considerations, the decorations of the side walls and the presbytery can be attributed to Giuseppe Serpotta. The decoration of the counter-facade, more refined in its execution, can be attributed to Giacomo and his son Procopio.

The plan is typical of oratories in Palermo: a rectangular atrium with two openings in front of the entrance, by which the brothers entered the rectangular room, arranging themselves on the side benches (they no longer exist), while the Leader with his deputy sat on a raised bretella in the counter-wall of the room.



The rich finishing of the interior stucco contrasts with the severity of the external facade of the monument.

On the left wall of the atrium there is a niche with two female figures on the sides. Upon entering the room, on the counter façade there are two perspective “Teatrini” (small-scaled plastic theatres) supported by angels, the *Nativity* and the *Flight into Egypt*, and in the middle of the wall allegorical figures with putti clearly modeled by Serpotta. Along the side walls, punctuated by oval medallions that frame female faces, top left are four Carmelite saints: *St. Helen*, *St. Angelo*, *St. Theresa* and

St. Elijah, placed in niches with shells and alternated with three large windows also framed by angelic figures and putti. The same compositional scheme can be found on the right wall, where the figures are those of *Beat Angela*, *St. Albert*, *St. Mary Magdalena de Piazz* and *St. Elisha of the Carmelites*. Continuing, along the two sides of the triumphal arch there are two muliebrous (female) figures topped with a rich decoration in white stucco; the marble altar is inserted into the typical rectangular presbytery.

14
Palermo, Oratory of Carminello. Overall view



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

THE ORATORY OF THE HOLY ROSARY IN SANTA CITA

Angiolina Ganazzoli

.....
Via Valverde, 3 Palermo

Opening hours

Mon.-Sat. 9.00 to 13.00
.....

The Oratory of the Holy Rosary is located in the second level of the loggia of the convent annexed to the Church of Santa Cita. Access is from the atrium via a marble staircase. Two portals open onto the gallery, still with its original majolica flooring, and between the two there is a bust of Giacomo Serpotta, sculpted by Antonio Ugo.

From here one enters the atrium of the Oratory, characterised by a decorated vault with motifs of Pompeii and walls painted in shades of pink and neoclassical views, partly visible due to restoration. Entrance into the Oratory meeting room is through two small doors in the short side. This rectangular space, lit by large windows, more closely resembles a church than an Oratory.

In the 15th century, the Confraternity of the SS. Rosario was founded by the Dominican Fathers, with the support of wealthy merchants, at the Church of St. Dominic. Following conflict within the Confraternity, twenty brothers left, and found hospitality and a new home at the nearby Convent of Santa Cita. At the end of the 17th century, the Society of SS. Rosario in Santa Cita built the present day Oratory on the site of the former Church of the 40 Martyrs.

The sculptural decoration in stucco was entrusted to Giacomo Serpotta, begun in 1685 and finished at a later period, some

time between 1707 and 1710, with the decoration of the presbytery, whilst Master Michele Rosciano carried out the gilding work. The long walls of this spacious environment, decorated by Giacomo Serpotta in a harmonious combination of architecture and decoration, are punctuated by a sequence of large windows enhanced by plastic architecture adorned with putti and phyto-anthropomorphic motifs. Near the openings, at the bottom, in correspondence with these apertures, there are the “*Teatrini*” (Toy Theatres), an ingenious invention of Serpotta, who creates three-dimensional pictures with the Mysteries of the SS. Rosary, the *Joyful* Mysteries on the left (*Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Circumcision, Jesus among the Doctors*) and the *Sorrowful* on the right (*Jesus in the Garden, Flagellation, Crowning with Thorns, Calvary, Crucifixion*). The narrative scenes interact with the overall sculptural arrangement and are completed by allegoric statues along the sides, and with the putti, positioned above the “*Teatrini*”, who, by their poses and attitudes, convey the feelings and emotions evoked by the narrative scenes. On the counter wall there is another of Serpotta’s extraordinary decorative inventions: the large space is, in fact, defined by a wide cultra, a soft drapery that contains all the *Glorious* Mysteries (*Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption of the Virgin, Glorification*) and the representation of the *Battle of Lepanto* in a large “teatrino”, flanked by the three-dimensional representation of two boys, the Christian, joyful *Winner*, and the Muslim, sad *Loser*.

The piedritti of the triumphal arch are decorated with the figures of *Hester* and *Judith*,



executed in an even more refined technique, similar to a rococo style. On the main altar, a large canvas by Maratta depicting the *Madonna of the Rosary* forms the backdrop to the decoration of the Oratory. It is worth mentioning that Serpotta's signature is to be found in the snake wrapped round the canvas positioned at the side of the representation of the *Obedient Reception*; particularly important, for the assignment of the sculpture to Giacomo Serpotta, was the discovery, during the last restoration, of a sentence written on the bottom of the eastern wall that reads: “...*decembri A II giovedì comingiaj io novizio*”; (...December on the 2nd Thursday I the novice, began) when the G of “*giovedì*” (Thursday) is compared with the artist's signature found in the Church of St. Augustus, the similarity of the pen stroke is evident.



15
Palermo, Oratory
of the Holy Rosary
in Santa Cita.
Photogrammetric
reading by arch.
Rita Corsale



16
Palermo, Oratory
of the Holy Rosary
in Santa Cita.
Detail of a 'Teatrino'
depicting the
Resurrection

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

STUCCOS IN THE DESTROYED CHURCH OF THE STIGMATA

Angiolina Ganazzoli

.....
nowadays to be found in the Oratory of
Compagnia del Crocifisso dei Bianchi ,
Piazza dei Bianchi Palermo
.....

The work of the Serpotta family in the Church of the Stigmata should not be ignored. The church was demolished at the end of the 19th century to create the square in front of the Theatre Massimo, but the statues have been preserved and are to be found in the museum in the Oratory Dei Bianchi, on the ground floor. The complex also includes the wide nave that was part of the 15th century Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria.

The documentation relating to the Stigmata indicates that in 1700 Giuseppe Serpotta started decorating the two chapels dedicated to the *Sacred Crucifix* and to *Frances*, and that between 1703 and 1704 his brother Giacomo decorated those dedicated to the *Holy Spirit* and the *Madonna della Pietà*. The original chapels had a single architectural design enriched with figures sculptured in stucco: a niche framed by fluted Corinthian lesene, with an entablature and a curved pediment, on which there were two seraphim, with a window at the center, with putti down both sides, holding back a stucco curtain. Leaning against the lesene there were allegorical figures: *Charity* and *St. Rosalie* in the altar “della Pietà”; *Strength* and *Purity* in the altar of “the Holy Spirit”. Above each altar a medallion is supported by mighty angels: The altar “della Pietà” held

the figures of the Madonna, the Child and San Giovannino, the altar of “the Holy Spirit”, a dove.

Over the altar “della Pietà” a huge portrayal of the “*Eternal God*”, who looks, with horror, at the scene of the crucifixion, framed by clouds, a ray of light and angels. In the present day staging it is still possible to recognise fundamental elements of Serpotta’s plastic decoration: the allegorical figures, including *St. Rosalie*, are placed on richly decorated pedestals with opus sectile. On the inside walls of the niches there are: seraphim on the curved pediments, playful putti holding the drapes of the curtain and medallions supported by the angels of the altar “della Pietà” and those of the altar of the “Holy Spirit”. In the center of the room, waiting for its final position, there are other unplaced elements, including the representation of the “*Eternal God*”.

17

Palermo, ex
Church of the
Stigmata. “*Saint
Rosalie*”



THE ORATORY OF SAN LORENZO

Giovanni Errera

Via Immacolatella, 5 Palermo

Opening Hours

Mon.-Sun. (Including public holidays)

10.00 to 18.00

The Oratory – which houses one of the more shining examples of Giacomo Serpotta's plastic art – was built by the sodality of St. Frances between 1574 and 1586 over a pre-existent church dedicated to the same San Lorenzo. The interior decorations were carried out between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the next, following the original drawings of Giacomo Amato, a re-elaboration of decorations already present in the original Oratory.

The congregation of the Bardigli, so called due to their grey habits, commissioned the great altar painting of the *Nativity* from Caravaggio, as well as those of the two Saints, *St. Lawrence* and *St. Frances*, to whom the Oratory is dedicated. Today there is only a copy of the *Nativity* in its original location as the artist's authentic painting was stolen during the night in October 1969. The Oratory has a rectangular plan with two windows overlooking the street, which were the former entrances to the atrium of the Oratory. These were eliminated after the level of the road had been lowered due to continued flooding, but another was nonetheless subsequently created, to the right of the room. The current entrance is through a courtyard, with a quatrefoil fountain at the centre and a bust of Giacomo Serpotta.

18

Palermo, Oratory of San Lorenzo. 'Charity'



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

19

Palermo, Oratory of San Lorenzo. "The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence"

Inside, the 18th century floor is beautifully decorated with opus sectile of varying colours. On the long sides of the room there are two wooden benches with dark wood seats inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl. The legs of the benches are of beautifully carved boxwood depicting hunting scenes. Severe looking allegorical statues depicting *Faith, Humility, Steadfastness* and *Penitence* stand on the left side, dedicated to San Lorenzo, emphasizing the peculiarities of the Saint and are interspersed by the so-called "Teatrini" depicting the story of his life and putti, who in contraposition appear joyous and lively in a variety of poses and attitudes. On the counter-façade, the high-relief depicting the *Martyrdom of San Lorenzo* personifies the conclusion of the Saint's life.

The right wall is, on the other hand, covered by "Teatrini" depicting episodes from the life of St. Frances and with allegorical statues

of *Mercy, Alms, Truth* and *Glory* with putti always busily playing. The representation of the life of St Frances ends with the episode of the "Stigmata" depicted above the triumphal arch. Also on the piedritti of the triumphal arch are two statues of *Hospitality* and *Charity* with the latter work being one of the Master's most expressive works. In the apse, Telamons support the weight of the two balconies adorned with musicians intent on playing 18th century musical instruments. Two large angels hold up the large stucco frame sized to accommodate Caravaggio's painting. The Oratory of San Lorenzo represents the most harmonious of Giacomo Serpotta's works, not only because he managed to strike the correct balance between white and gilded surfaces, but also for the apparent discrepancy between the allegorical statues, the "Teatrini" and the vivacity and almost insolent playfulness of the putti.

I ran to that Oratory in via Immacolatella, right behind the church of my convent. I entered: it seemed like entering Heaven. Finely modeled stuccos were all around the walls, on the ceiling, on the altar; borders, insets, statues, frames, milk-white in colour, and here and there insertions of highly burnished real gold, buntings, scrolls, flowers and foliage, cornucopias, flames, shells, crosses, radiant crowns, plumes, tassels, cords... There were niches with scenes from the life of the Saints Lorenzo and Frances, and joyful, childlike, naked and rounded putti, who cavorted on the clouds, curtains and waterfalls, both wound and coiled around them. But larger and more

visible were statues of women sitting on shelves, ambiguous ladies, noblewomen in gracious or imperious postures. I was dazzled, and not only by the ray of sunshine that, bouncing off the large crystal nymph, struck me full in the face.

By: *Vincenzo Consolo,*
Retablo, Palermo, Sellerio, 1987





THE CHURCH AND ORATORY OF SANT'ORSOLA

Carolina Griffio

.....
Via Maqueda Palermo

Opening Hours

Mon.-Fri. 7.30 to 10.00 Sun. 9.30 to 11.00
(closed December 26th and January 1st)
.....

The Sodality of St. Ursula, known in Palermo as the Sodality dei Negri because of the black clothes worn by the Brothers in processions, helped with the burial of the dead in the Albergheria neighbourhood and assisted the sick in the hospital of St. Bartholomew.

The Oratory, managed by the Sodality, is annexed to the Church of St. Ursula and dedicated to her. The emblem of the Sodality is depicted on the vault: the Crucifix on Golgotha with the symbols of the Passion and a skull and, below, the souls in Purgatory. The Oratory is decorated with 17th century stuccos framing the openings, and is complemented by paintings with stories of the life of the Saint. The presbytery and the altarpiece are decorated with stuccos, including the two Telamons, bent under the weight of the structure they have to support. The 19th century High Altar is complemented by a small altar piece “pale” depicting the *Martyrdom of St. Ursula*, a copy made by Giacomo Lo Verde of a painting by Pietro Novelli, originally in the Oratory and nowadays in the church.

In the counter- façade, there is a *Deposition* dating from the mid-17th century. In order to enter the Oratory, it is necessary to cross the church. In 1696 Giacomo Serpotta was commissioned to decorate two chapels: that of the “Souls in Purgatory” and that of St. Ursula – the latter identified by Palazzo

20
*Palermo, Church
of Sant'Orsola.
Chapel of
the Souls in
Purgatory, detail
of the angel*

to together with the chapel, dedicated to *St. Jerome*, where nowadays the painting by Gaspare Bazzano, depicting *St. Jerome* is on show. On the basement walls of the two chapels Serpotta proposes, probably influenced by his previous collaboration with Giacomo Amato in the Oratory of *St. Bartholomew* (now destroyed), a scheme widespread in Rome, an aedicule with a curved pediment and below two angels, designed to attract the viewers' attention by the way they support the drapery. The frames are supported at the corners by plant shoots, vines in the chapel of the "Souls in Purgatory" and olive branches in the other that seem to grow directly out of the walls. In the Chapel of the "Souls in Purgatory" the side walls are decoratively specular: on each two putti support a garland of flowers that frames an octagonal shape, which, probably should have been completed by a fresco; above each inset there is a skeleton, laid out and extremely realistic. This spectacularisation of Death allows Serpotta to bring to mind the main purpose of the Sodality. There is a profound contrast between the rounded anatomy of the putti and the bluntness in the representation of the skeleton. Above, following the lines of the barrel vault, there is a series of circles topped by a mask. In the two counterpoised circles are the "Teatrini" that probably represent two moments in *Elijah's* life, used to illustrate our destiny of death, the Life Eternal of *Christ* and the Suffering of Souls in Purgatory. Regarding the Chapel of *St. Ursula* (today dedicated to *St. Jerome*), the decoration is limited to the back wall and was probably never completed.





THE ORATORY OF SAN GIUSEPPE DEI FALEGNAMI

.....
 Via Maqueda, 172 Palermo

Opening Hours

Mon.-Fri. 10.00 to 12.00

The Oratory of this name, that from the first decade of the 19th century has belonged to the Congregation of Carpenters, was originally shared by two congregations, that of “Jesus, Joseph and Maria” and that of “the Servants of the Holy Sacrament and the Immaculate Conception”.

The complex of the Church and the Convent of St. Joseph of the Teatini, built in the early 17th century, contained in fact, two oratories, which had a common entrance: the first, the one cited above; the other was the original Oratory of the Carpenters, partially destroyed in 1805-1806, when the ancient monastery of the Teatini was transformed into the former Royal University (today the Law Faculty). In order to compensate the Sodality for the loss of their headquarters, they were assigned the other one, retaining, however, the original name. The remains of the old Oratory’s vault, with frescoes attributed to Novelli, reappeared with the restoration of the porch of the Faculty and in recent years can be visited.

The original entrance to the actual Oratory of the Carpenters was in Via G. D’Alessi (at the arches of St. Joseph). At present entrance is via the cloisters of the ex-convent. The quadrangular vestibule has a vaulted ceiling decorated with 17th century stuccos. It leads into the two oratories

through four portals, where it is possible to admire a sedan chair with a wooden statue of *St. Joseph*, dated 1759. On either side: on the right, a statue of “*Our Lady of Sorrows*”, on the left, an 18th century *Immaculate Conception*, made of papier-mâché.

In the center of the wall a painted door leads to the 17th century stage overlooking the room, made of gilt wood. In the room itself there is a magnificent decoration with stucco putti, swags, medallions and frames, attributed to the Serpotta family. In the frames late 18th century frescos, whilst the wall decorations of 1701 are the work of Giuseppe Serpotta, Giacomo’s brother, (the documents whereby the Congregations of Jesus, Joseph and Maria and that of the Slaves of the SS. Sacrament commissioned him have been preserved), while the grotesque depictions and the putti were probably the work of Procopio Serpotta, Giuseppe’s grandson. The frescoes in the vault and on the walls depict scenes from the life of the Holy Family: *Marriage of the Virgin*, *Nativity*, *Adoration of the Magi*, *St. Joseph the Carpenter*, *Resting during the Flight into Egypt*, *Flight into Egypt*, *Joseph’s Dream*, the *Holy Family* and allegorical figures. At the windows, pairs of stucco angels frame paintings depicting the Allegories: *Equality*, *Divine Glory* and *Strength* (on the right), *Generosity*, *Readiness* and *Peace* (on the left). Over the eight windows, in the “tondi”, are personalities from the Old Testament.





THE ORATORY OF THE HOLY ROSARY IN SAN DOMENICO

Angiolina Ganazzoli

.....
Via Baminai, 2 Palermo

Opening Hours

Mon.-Sat. 9.00 to 16.00 (November to March)

Mon.-Sat. 9.00 to 18.00 (April to October)

.....
The Oratory of the Holy Rosary in St. Dominic is swallowed up by the buildings all around it; only the North-East façade, built at the end of the 18th century by Vincenzo Fiorelli, later remodeled by Marvuglia, a member of the Confraternity, is visible from outside. The monument is built above the road and access to the Oratory is via a flight of marble stairs and through a portal decorated with red marble, on which the words “Societas SS.mi Rosarii” are inscribed. The vault is paneled and decorated with rosettes; at the back there is a chapel with an 18th century wooden Crucifix; stucco panels depicting *Episodes from the Passion of Christ* are attributed to the Firriolo.

Access to the Oratory is through two small doors, topped by triangular pediments. The floor of this simple hall is made of special black and white tiles, cut in the shape of a peacock's tail, and the vault ceiling is richly decorated.

This chapel is the only one to retain its paintings and frescoes, together with the stucco decoration by Serpotta. Along the walls there are benches of inlaid ebony, supported by corbels carved with figurative designs.

The Sodality of SS. Rosario, known as the Sacchi (sacks), founded in 1568, welcomed

the rich merchants, craftsmen and artists, such as Pietro Novelli from Monreale and the same Giacomo Serpotta.

Although the project of the architect Giuseppe Gialalone, one of the Brothers, dates back to 1573-1574 the presbytery was only built subsequent to the purchase of an adjoining piece of land. The rich Sodality engaged well known artists, commissioning from them works to beautify the room: Anthony Van Dyke painted the altarpiece, as well as Matthias Stomer, Luca Giordano, Pietro Novelli, Giacomo Lo Verde and Borremans, to whom are attributed the two frescoed “tondi” with angels placed the center of the long sides of the vault. Giacomo Serpotta worked here from 1710 about until 1717, when Michael Rosciano was brought in to gild the ornamental elements and the attributes of the *Virtues*, operating in a space already heavily typified; renewing

23

Palermo, Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico. View of the vault



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations



24

Palermo, Oratory of the Holy Rosary
in San Domenico, "Fortitude"

an already existing decoration, created under the direction of Pietro Novelli, by lesser-known 17th century plasters, such as Giovan Battista and Nicola Russo, Leonardo Arangio, Gaspare Guercio and Carlo De Amico.

The decorations of the first register narrate the "*Mysteries of the Rosary*"; amongst the paintings there are twelve niches containing the allegories of the Christian Virtues, each Virtue is linked to the representation of the Mystery of the Rosary in the painting placed alongside.

On the left wall the "*Joyful Mysteries*": *Charity, Humility, Peace, Purity, Wisdom*; on the right wall the "*Sorrowful Mysteries*": *Justice, Docility, Patience, Fortitude, Obedience* and on the counter-wall the "*Glorious Mysteries*": *Victory and Generosity*.

In the second register, alternating between the windows, are large medallions adorned with rich festoons, with high-reliefs depicting both Apocalyptic and Biblical scenes; under each of these there is the biblical Psalm of reference written on a golden cartouche, held by frolicking putti and angels. On either side of the imposing triumphal arch, with angels and putti supporting a large gilt cartouche on the top, are placed "the *Divine Providence*" and "the *Divine Grace*"; inside the presbytery, on the impost of the small elliptical dome, Serpotta creates an interesting scenography by placing figures of ladies and putti overlooking the altar.

A curiosity: on the column of the Allegory of *Fortitude*, it is easy to make out the shape of a small reptile, known as a "*sirpuzza*", acknowledged to be the signature of the Master Giacomo Serpotta.

THE ORATORY OF SANTA CATERINA D'ALESSANDRIA

Angiolina Ganazzoli

.....
Via Monteleone, 50 Palermo
.....

The Oratory of St. Catherine of Alexandria is accessed through a 17th century portal carved in stone, attributed to the carver Francesco De Nola; on the left there is a second entrance, in line with the adjoining courtyard, characterised by a marble plaque with a Latin inscription. Past the front door, it leads to the small atrium, with no particular merits, having been subjected to 20th century interventions; from the second entrance it is possible to access the trapezoidal courtyard with a central fountain sculptured in red marble and on the back wall there are three ogival arches, likely remnants from an ancient portico. From the atrium access to the Oratory is

through two small doors. It consists of a simple hall, characterised by a precious pavement with marble inlay, created by Gioacchino and Nicolò Vitagliano in 1730. The ceiling consists of a vault richly decorated in stucco, which frames the central fresco of the *Coronation and the Assumption of St. Catherine* and on the edge of this, the stucco bas-reliefs depicting in the corners the Allegory of the *Virtues (Charity, Hope, Faith, Strength)*. Along the walls there are the wooden benches for the Brothers, and on the seatbacks there are paintings narrating episodes of the life of the Saint. The wall opposite the entrance, is divided in three parts by lesene, is characterised in the upper register by the three arches of the choir. Below there is the precious inlaid wooden seat finished with a valuable painted border. Over the wooden altar, finished with fake marble, there is the

25
*Palermo, Oratory
of Santa Caterina
d'Alessandria. Detail*



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

26

Palermo, Oratory of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria.
Overall view.

painting by Zoppo di Gangi, depicting the *Martyrdom of St. Catherine*, while on the opposite wall there is the table with the *Madonna with Child* by Vincenzo from Pavia.

The Confraternity of St. Catherine, founded in 1400, owned two Churches dedicated to St. Rosalie and St. Catherine in the places that, according to tradition, hosted the birthplace of St. Rosalie; these were sold to the Philippine Fathers in order to build the nearby Convent and the Church; at the end of the 16th century the new Sodality of St. Catherine initiated the building of the current Oratory according to a 17th century project by Gaspare Serpotta, Giacomo's father.

In the 18th century the scenography of the Oratory was re-modernized by Procopio Serpotta, Giacomo's son, under the guidance of the architect Francesco Ferrigno.

Assisted by Domenico Castelli, Procopio started in 1719 and worked until 1724. The Oratory can be considered his masterpiece.

The decoration is dedicated to St. Catherine of Alessandria, the patron saint of scholars. On the walls the representation of the Sciences: on the counter-wall, above the corbels there are the *Divine Revelation* and *Human Science*; on the longitudinal walls, inside niches, bordered above by gilded shells, the Liberal Sciences; on the left *Dialectics, Physics, Geology, Theology, Rhetoric, Ethics, Geography* and *Astrology*. Under the windows, there are niches in relief that narrate the life of St. Catherine. Above, amongst the gilded capitals of the lesene, putti and angels conclude the sculptural decoration.

27

Palermo, Oratory of Sabato. "Innocence"



THE ORATORY OF SABATO

Carolina Griffio

.....

Piazza Casa Professa, 21 Palermo

Opening Hours

Mon.-Sat. 9.30 to 13.00

Sun. 6.30 to 12.30 public holidays 17.00 to 18.30

.....

The Oratory, adjacent to the Church of Jesus in Palermo, known as Casa Professa, was entrusted to the Congregation of the Cross and Martyrdom of Christ known as “Del Sabato” in the early 19th century: The Brothers, in fact, gathered – for spiritual exercises and the reading of the Gospel – on that very day of the week (Ital. sabato which means Saturday), and today the building still retains this name. Originally, however, it was run by the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception and St. Frances Borgia and by that of the Artefici under the title of the Purification of the Virgin.

The decorative furnishing in stucco, created by Procopio Serpotta around 1740, is elaborated according to the indications of these two Confraternities and is not free from erudite Jesuit theology. The characters represented explain to visitors the significance of the Virgin’s life, to which the Oratory was dedicated. In the original decoration, stucco statues on the right hand wall depict *Purity, Innocence, Modesty*, and on the left wall, *Sagacity, Strength, Prudence* and *Charity*, alternating with paintings, now lost, but although now lost, it was possible to identify the portrait subject from the inscriptions at the bottom of each frames. They were biblical heroines interpreted as precursors of the Virgin and the Immaculate Conception.





28

Palermo, Oratory of Sabato. Triumphant arch with angels holding the shield

This compositional scheme is reminiscent of the Oratory of SS. Rosary in St. Dominic by Giacomo Serpotta. Even if stylistically the derivation of the allegorical statues from that Oratory is evident, the expressive limits and the light touch that differentiate Procopius from his father are recognisable. The altarpiece was probably a painting by Pietro Novelli representing the *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*, today in the church of St. Matthew.

The frescoes on the vault – in the center the *Virgin Crowned Protector of the Arts* and figures of *Prophets and Doctors of the Church* in the lunettes – were executed in 1741 by Filippo Randazzo (Nicosia 1692-1744). A 17th century wooden Crucifix and a small canvas with *St. Anne and the Virgin* from the 18th century complete the artwork in the Oratory. There is another dramatic *Crucifix*, attributed to Giovan Paolo Taurino, on the last flight of stairs, before accessing the actual Oratory of Sabato. Access is through the Casa Professa. In the Church, richly decorated with opus sectile, there is, once again, evidence of participation of the Serpotta family: Giacomo provided models for the statues in the presbytery made between 1706 and 1708 by his brother-in-law Gioacchino Vitaliano (Palermo 1669-1739) and Procopio, with the initial collaboration of his father, made the stuccos lining the aisles to frame the frescoes of scenes of the Life of the Virgin on the right, and the Passion of Christ on the left, painted by Antonio Grano (Palermo sd-1718). The view down the right aisle ends with the altar of St. Joseph surmounted by the “Impetuous Figure of the Almighty”. This work once again demonstrates Procopio’s

ability to utilise his father’s audacious inventions, almost as if he were “quoting” from them: The figure of the “Almighty”, in fact, derives from the one created by Giacomo in the church of St. Mary della Pietà.

29

Palermo, Oratory of Sabato. Angel



BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

ERNESTO BASILE, THE FAMOUS ARCHITECT OF THE ART NOUVEAU PERIOD, WRITES ABOUT GIACOMO SERPOTTA

The Sicilian art of the 17th and 18th centuries, although it has the same fundamental common qualities present on the Italian mainland, has deep-rooted traditions of preceding original arts – the influence of Arab art, never really lost; links with Spanish art, with its love of luxury, magnificence and sumptuousness, dear to the Island conquerors – a unique and singular style that was supremely well expressed in countless monumental works.

In the city of Palermo alone, at least a hundred grandiose buildings were built or embellished between 1660 and 1740, from the reign of Philip III to that of Victor Amadeus of Savoy. All kinds of religious buildings and in particular churches, convents, monasteries, oratories, chapels, together with renovated and enlarged patrician houses, renewed and transformed the landscape. The architectural and artistic methods used during this period show all the maturity of form and conception of a style, which has reached a complete and harmonious stage. [...]

A large number of valid artisans and brilliant executors congregate around the major artists grouped, who take up and maintain with singular virtuosity the traditional techniques of decorative art, carving, sculpture and ornamental painting, wrought iron, stuccowork, inlaid marble, all in very rich polychrome, with concurrent influence from Byzantine and Arab art. [...]

James Serpotta belongs to this ostentatious period, which has no equal in Sicily in any former period. Up until 30 years ago his name was almost unknown outside of the Island. He was considered by his contemporaries to be nothing more than a valid stucco worker, certainly not only the greatest of Sicilian sculptors but also one of the most important in the history of this art. [...]

The art of stucco, whose technique, traditional in the island from the classical period to the Arab-Norman period, was never abandoned during the following centuries. It was revived in the 16th century with extraordinary virtuosity by Antonino Ferraro from Giuliana and its pupils, flourished and then lent itself admirably even for the sake of brevity and rapidity of execution, to follow especially in interior decorations, the new form of art; Giacomo Serpotta found the material better in order to promptly create the images and the creations of his fertile imagination. The themes imposed on him are primarily religious, as he is called to adorn churches, chapels, oratories; but his work is not limited to the figurative creations of symbolic, allegorical concepts or biblical scenes or pure decorative thoughts; but he does well beyond the field of architectural composition; which is, even in its smallest details, so in complete agreement and such a natural and spontaneous connection with sculpture, that all this must be recognised as a creation by Serpotta. [...]

The putti, which at first seem designed simply to fill gaps, to connect or crown various architectural parts, to hold plaques, emblems and appurtenances, to create



effects of light and shadow on uniformly white surfaces, instead participate in the action and sentiments that animate both characters and scenes in the vicinity; they smile at the celestial goodness of the sacred images and at the graceful movements of the beautiful women incarnating the Virtues; they marvel at the sight of portents and miracles, they are upset by the pain of the suffering, they retract horrified and hide their beautiful young faces at the sight of the Martyrs; they pray, implore, cry, rejoice, sing, and, in perfect communion with the feeling that is expressed in every single episode, strengthen it and reach out to help people understand the deeper moral significance.

[...]

Giacomo Serpotta was not simply a decorator, as his contemporaries considered him, nor a cold reproducer and interpreter of the beauty of figures. A profound observer, gifted with a fervid imagination, magnificent creative skills and excellent taste, he would conceive and then mold shapes into expressions of pure spirituality, imbued with deep poetic sentiments. He shied away from expressions of sensuality, exceptional at that time; but he still managed to demonstrate how reality, in its immortal essence, can diffuse light out of decorative works created from a very particular and singular medium. A halo radiates from his putti, whose little bodies move in a thousand graceful and lighthearted ways, who have beating hearts, who attract and enchant and not necessarily with only the fascination of decorative beauty; in the adult and group figures and in the historic and religious compositions, the severity, the

nobility, the naturalness of expression and feeling impose and captivate the imagination allowing one to forget their actual role as the sculptural decoration of the architectural whole.

Like all the best artists, he stood head and shoulders above the common aesthetic understanding of the time, and by his spontaneous, confident and skillful interpretation of nature he instilled in all his creations something profoundly human, and it is through this that his work will be understood and the artist's name will live forevermore.

Ernesto Basile, "Giacomo Serpotta", 1911.
Now in: *Delle Cose di Sicilia*, edited by Leonardo Sciascia, vol. III, Sellerio Editore Palermo 1984, p.127-138

30

Palermo, Oratory of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria. Detail

31

Palermo, Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico. Detail



THE ORATORY OF THE HOLY SACRAMENT IN CARINI

Maria Pia Guarcello

.....
Piazza Duomo Carini

Opening Hours

Mon.-Sun. 8.00 to 12.00 and 16.00 to 20.00
.....

The Oratory of The Holy Sacrament is architecturally separate from the adjoining Chiesa Madre of Carini, but functionally connected to it through the Chapel of the Sacred Heart. It was conceived as a meeting place for the Sodality of the Holy Sacrament founded in 1550 with the aim of disseminating devotion for the Eucharist and administrating contributions of the devotees as “wedding dowries” for destitute girls. It was inaugurated sometime between 1567 and 1568.

The date and the paternity of the inner decoration are uncertain, attributed by some critics to Bartolommeo Sanseverino from a design by Procopio Serpotta (F. Pottino), by others to Vincenzo Messina (F. Pottino, F. Meli). Garstang, one of the greatest scholars of Serpotta and of his school, supports the latter view, based on archival documentation. The Oratory falls into the typology of those in Palermo decorated by Serpotta: a room, which ends with a rectangular apse, accessed by two portals placed in the atrium, which serves as a filter to external reality. However the choir, designed to overlook the room and embellished with a “serliana”, breaks up the continuity of the wall of the background perspective and introduces a new relationship between full and empty that do not fit into the “architectural box” typical of many Serpottian Oratories.

The compositional rhythm of the sidewalls is created by the horizontal element of the cornice, which is configured as a marble

bench on which eight Virtues are seated and is paralleled lower down by the line of benches used as seats for the Brothers. The walls are marked by the theory of framed windows in correlation to the lunette in the vault of the room.

The architecture is subordinate to the sacred plastic-pictorial symbols, finalised to elevate to divine status – or as the “Apotheosis” of – the Eucharistic. The young boy astride a majestic eagle placed under the choir, exhorts silence and invites meditation of the mystery of the Eucharist, as written on the stucco ribbons placed on the bottom wall of the apse: “Cogitate quali mensa fruaris”. The triumphal architecture calls into play the example of the “Theological Virtues”, (*Faith, Hope, Charity*), the “Cardinal Virtues” (*Prudence, Justice, Strength, and Temperance*) and those of the Church, the certainty of the “Historical Miracles” (*Melchizedek’s offer to Jabveh, the Miracle of the Holy Viaticum, the Miracles of St. Anthony of Padua, of Bolsena, of Turin*), the Mediation of four pre-Christian Sibyls (*Cumaeian, Libyan, Phrygian, Delphic*), prophetesses of the Messiah, all decorate the ceiling with historical scenes, together with the four Kings from the Old Testament (*David, Solomon, Asa, Japheth*), and the four Evangelists of the New Testament.

The doctrinal thought is given concrete form in “a tutto tondo” sculptural elements of undisputed “amazing grace” and “artisanal skill”, found in the “Virtues”, in the virtuoso miniatures of the “Miracles”, placed on corbels, unlike Serpottian “Teatrini”, in complex decorative motifs such as garlands, baskets of flowers putti and grotesques. The same doctrinal thought is also transmitted through the remarkable fresco on the vault of the room, the *Triumph of the Eucharist*, and the altarpiece of the “Last Supper” in the apse.





**THE PALATINE CHAPEL OF SANT'ANNA
IN CASTELBUONO**Maria Pia Guarcello
.....

Piazza Castello Castelbuono

Opening HoursTue.- Sun. 9.30 to 13.00 and 15.30 to 19.00
.....

The Chapel of St. Anne is located on the second floor of the south wing of the Castle of the Ventimiglia di Castelbuono. It is an autonomous architectural structure inside a medieval artefact, which unites the architecture styles of a medieval keep (*Dongione*) and that stemming from the concept of the internal court used in residences during the era of Frederick II. The chapel was designed as an extraordinary container for a reliquary that was supposed to have been in the Ventimiglia family for centuries, namely the skull of St. Anne. In 1657 the Pope granted the reliquary the privilege of being able to grant plenary indulgences and Rodrigo Antonio Ventimiglia wanted to place it in a prestigious location, decorated according to local taste and open to the public. The Chapel was opened in 1690. The master-artisan Paolo Milia was commissioned in March of 1684 and Giuseppe Serpotta in December of the same year for the stucco decorations, which were finished in 1687, only to continue with the realisation of the entrance portal, by Giovan Battista Marino and Gerardo Scuto. The Ventimiglia family styled at least three contracts with Giuseppe Serpotta. In the last contract of 1686, Giuseppe also involved his brother Giacomo. The most likely artistic and spiritual director of the work was the Jesuit Carlo Ventimiglia, a famous mathematician and a member of the family. The simple prismatic space of the chapel, roofed over

with a cloister vault is rendered complex by its wealth of decoration. From the shining gilded walls the “a tutto tondo” statues stretch out into the room invading the spectator’s space, involving his senses in the spatial movement which also characterises the phytomorphic motifs in relief as well as those of the “Teatrini” – perspective Toy Theatres – that narrate salient episodes from the life of St. Anne.

The end wall of the presbytery with the centre wider than the laterals, is continuously connected to the rest of the room by the cornice “with its foliage, notches and agarics”. Its focal point is the aedicule with the reliquary whose marble base connects structurally and chromatically with the main altar. The fluted lesene “swell out” at the base, providing support to two angels, which, by the rotation of the bust and the direction of their gaze, orient the viewer’s attention towards the niche, as if all the plastic movement in the room merge at that particular point, - Christian apologetics of the reliquary. According to the critic G. Garstang, one of the greatest scholars of Serpotta, “the stucco decorations were carried out following contractual instructions, without additional personal touches...an exception being made for the three putti over the niche of the High Altar”. Male figures in pairs, supported by corbels, stand at the base of the windows of the sidewalls, characterised also by the repetitive motif of the sculptured backboard of foliage *held up by two angels*. Symmetry and dynamism are the principles that animate the composition, manifesting itself in the voluptuous roundness of the putti and in the drapery, governed by the metamorphism: the fluidity of the stucco flows through plant like motifs that turn into monsters, whose jaws appear to swallow the heads of angels.



STUCCO BEFORE SERPOTTA: THE WORKSHOP OF LI VOLSI (1580-1670)

Maria Pia Guarcello

In the second half of the 16th century, with the spread of the Counter-reform, not only in Palermo, the capital of the Viceroyalty in Sicily, but also in the minor provincial centres, in order to reaffirm the prestige and authority of the Church, monumentality and magnificence of artistic works are required to generate a strong emotional effect in the faithful.

There is a renewed interest in the construction of religious buildings and the decoration of churches and convents. And since speed and quantity are the watchwords that regulate the artistic production of this period, stuccowork is well received, in place of or in addition to marble work.

This technique becomes a favourite with the religious and secular client/patron because of the significant cost savings, with the use of materials already existing locally, and for the considerable reduction in production time in comparison with those needed for the modeling of marble. In this artistic frame of reference, before and alongside famous workshops like that of the Serpotta dynasty, others establish themselves, creating excellent works of art. One such was the workshop of the Li Volsi family based in the Madonie and covering a wide area. The scattered geographical location of the Li Volsi family (Nicosia, Gangi, Tusa, San Mauro) does not involve the dismemberment of the workshop, indeed it fosters and multiplies the opportunities for obtaining commissions, allowing the family to complete projects without the intervention of other artisans. At the time the commissioning requests were often set out in a notarial contract: the job had to follow the guidelines and drawings laid down by the nobility, religious Brothers, Archpriests, Confreres

and devote lay-members. In the case of Li Volsi, one will never know whether the choice of his repertoire was more influenced by his workshop or by the taste of his commissioning client. Certainly the diffusion of printed texts, promoted by the Franciscans in Tusa and the Madonie, play an important role in providing a source of iconographical and decorative ideas. It is an era in which the late figurative Gothic was replacing an innovative experimentalism, linked to Italian Mannerism. The undisputedly talented sculptors Gagini also continue to be authoritative, acting on the memory and training of painters, architects and sculptors throughout the first three decades of the 17th century. It is evident in both the persistence of their figurative language, especially in the statuary, and in the repetitiveness of well-established models, such as the great gallery of Antonello in the Cathedral of Palermo, which no longer exists following the intervention by the architect Ferdinando Fuga in the 18th century.

THE COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES OF LI VOLSI

The stucco works created by Li Volsi in the province of Palermo were added to architectural artifacts already created over the centuries. No decoration is contextual with an architectural project, neither for a new building, nor for a restoration. Inside religious buildings there are a variety of decorative themes designed for chapels and altars, inserts for wall paintings, galleries complete with statues. The singular characteristics of Li Volsi's plastic art can be summarised as follows:

THE FRETWORK EFFECT

In the interesting "fretwork" found on the ceiling of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament of the Mother Church in Collesano, created by Giuseppe in 1619, the sculptural plan overlays the pictorial plan allowing a view of the mural paintings framed by plaques, multi-foiled shapes.



34

*Collesano, Mother Church.
Chapel of the Holy Sacrament by
Giuseppe Li Volsi*

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

35

*Isnello, Mother Church.
Chapel Coccia by Scipione
Li Volsi*

36

*Ciminna, Mother Church.
Chapel of the SS. Sacramento by
Scipione Li Volsi*

37

*Isnello, Mother Church. Chapel
of Saint Maria La Marmorata by
Giuseppe Li Volsi*



THE PLAQUE-SCROLL

The introduction of the “plaque”, which delimits the surface of painted stories, becomes an occasion for the creation of illusions of depth. Imitating a crumpled parchment, unrolled, equipped with artificial grooves to enable it to connect with other plaques, it is clearly visible in the Coccia Chapel in the Mother Church of Isnello, and frames the biblical episode of The Expulsion from Earth’s Paradise. Created in 1620, it is one of the characteristics of the wall decorations of Scipione Li Volsi.

THE “SPATIAL EXPANSION” EFFECT

In the side aisle of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in the Mother Church in Ciminna, Scipione Li Volsi adopts an innovative spatial solution, using, in addition to the flat surface of the walls, the concave portion of the vault: the portal that frames the altar of the Madonna is surmounted by a drapery-canopy within which the allegorical scene, dedicated to the Holy Spirit, unfolds. The use of this kind of sculptural decoration visually creates an expansion of the architectural space that fits well with the theological and mystical theme.







38

*Ciminna, Mother Church. By
Scipione Li Volsi and his workshop*

THE TRIBUNE

The workshop also addresses one of the recurrent decorative issues in the 16th century in Palermo, which is the Tribune in the apse of the church. The “Bottega” uses as their model the grandiose Tribune by Gagini in the Cathedral of Palermo as well as the Tribune in the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in the Cathedral of Messina by Jacopo Lo Duca. However it does not follow the consolidated decorative style, with stucco statues “a tutto tondo” placed against the walls of the apse, with a figure of the Omnipotent in Glory,

together with putti and angels playing musical instruments. Giuseppe proposes an architectural structure with figurative styles such as seashells, spirals, angels holding crowns in strict Renaissance style (Isnello, Matrice, Chapel of the Virgin Mary della Marmora, 1608), whilst his son Scipione reviews the model and moves away from the classic canons, using new formal styles: next to the figures of Saints and angels, he introduces for the first time, frames decorated by jocular putti, anticipating a motif that will be well developed in the Serpotta’s workshop.



39

*Ciminna, Mother Church.
Frieze above the Tribune*



40

*Isnello, Mother Church. Chapel
of Maria Vergine della Marmora.*

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations



The Saints in the Tribune in Isello have a physical spatiality; in Ciminna they are flattened, reduced to a mere pictorial symbol. This contrast makes the plastic consistency of the characters stand out; deployed along the back wall, they appear to advance towards the faithful.

DRAPES AND CANOPIES

The simulation of sumptuous fabrics of the era in the “drapes” and “canopies” suspended by groups of angels, in order to conceal the naked wall surface, becomes a prelude – typical of Baroque art – of the need to meticulously fill empty spaces (*horror vacui*).



41
Ciminna, Mother Church. Drapery over the Tribune

42
Ciminna, Mother Church. Chapel of the SS. Sacramento, canopy

THE BASILICA OF SAN PIETRO IN COLLESANO

Ida Colucci

Piazza Duomo Collesano

Opening Hours

Tue.-Fri. 9.00 to 12.00 and 16.00 to 18.00

Built between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, the Basilica was consecrated in 1548, assuming the role of the Matrice, i.e. the Mother Church in town. It has a magnificent staircase of 24 steps in three flights, facing the square. A Norman

period watchtower, with an elegant 13th century mullion window, is annexed to the aisle of the Church. It has a three-nave plan: a wide central nave and two narrow aisles, supported by 14 columns with a polygonal base. A decorated truss-beam wooden roof covers the three aisles. There is an amazing carved wooden complex of the “*Crucifix of Providence*”, suspended in mid air over the central nave, an unique example in Sicily for the intricacy and extraordinary detail of the work, sculpted by G. Di Marzo and Vincenzo Pernaci and painted by A. Sillaro, signed and dated 1555.

43

*Collesano, Basilica
of San Pietro.
Detail of the
ceiling*





44

Collesano, Basilica of
San Pietro. "St. Paul"

The Church offers an example of the connection between painting space and architectural space effected through stucco decoration. The stuccos are attributed to the "work-shop of the Li Volsi", decorators and sculptors from Madonie, Mannerists in the artistic scene of 16th-17th century Sicily. The novel idea proposed by Li Volsi is crystallised in the choice of different illusionistic motifs, and especially that of the plaque that "*composed of stratified levels is applied with a spatial extension that tends to embrace the entire wall*" as stated by the scholar Filangeri in his book "*breaking the weary patterns set by the position of the walls*".

Collesano, Basilica of
San Pietro. Detail of the
presbytery

Once the painter Gaspare Bazzano had completed the frescoes on the walls of the presbytery with *Stories of St. Peter and Paul* and episodes from the life of Jesus, as well as those on the vault, then the stuccos were carried out. Two imposing statues at the entrance to the presbytery, depicting the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, standing on the pillars of the Triumphal arch, topped by two angels holding crowns, are attributed to the Master Giuseppe Le Volsi. At the front, above the altar, on the right there is "*St. Michael Archangel overwhelming the Demon*" and on the left the "*Guardian Angel*"; on the capitals of the pillars, on the right a statue of the "*Archangel Gabriel*" and on the left one of the "*Annunciation*". High up on the central altarpiece, the stucco decoration of the walls and the vault of the presbytery expound the theme of the "*Glorification of the Eternal Father*" surrounded by musician angels (1614 -1618). Finally, on the top of the Triumphal arch, two angels hold a shield with the keys to heaven, a typical creation by the Tusan workshop.

In the same years that the presbytery is decorated, the apse of the right aisle is transformed into a square chapel. The accounts book of this Chapel of the Holy Sacrament (1619) documents that the stucco are by Giuseppe Li Volsi from Tusa and that the frescoes are by Giuseppe Salerno. An inscription dates the end of the works as 1624.

In the central part of the chapel there is a marble altarpiece, on two overlapping orders, with at the top the *Eternal Father*; in the first order a statue of the *Virgin Mary*







amongst the Saints *John the Evangelist* and *Biagio Bishop and Martyr* and then *Christ arisen amongst the Apostles Peter and Paul*, dated 1552. Distinct from the alterpiece, below, a bas-relief with the 12 Apostles twinned, that appear to be from the Gaginian school.

The Chapel was decorated with stucco by Giuseppe Li Volsi in (1619), who creates 4 statues of the Saints: on the right wall *St. Agatha* holding a vase with breasts, *St. Barbara* holding a tower, with three windows that symbolise the Trinity, and recalls the place where she was incarcerated by her father. On the left wall *St. Christina* with the palm and *Mary Magdalene* holding the vessel with the ointment.

The 15th century marble Gallery on several levels, elaborates the story of *Christ from the Nativity to the Mystery of the Eucharist*. Attributed to the sculptor Domenico Gagini, it merits special attention. In 1630 the apse of the left aisle of the Church was transformed to create the new Chapel of the Crucifix, nowadays dedicated to the Madonna of the Miracles and fully symmetrical with the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament on the right. Between 1632 and 1636 the new Chapel is decorated with frescoes and stuccos. The stuccos are attributed to the workshop of Li Volsi and depict *David, Isaiah, Moses, Jeremiah, Job* and *Solomon*.

46

Collesano, Basilica of San Pietro. Detail

BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Deco

47

*Ciminna, Mother
Church. Detail*

THE MOTHER CHURCH IN CIMINNA

Maria Pia Guarcello

.....
Piazza Matrice Ciminna

Opening Hours

Thur. 9.00 to 12.00 and Sun. 10.00 to 12.00
(for other days, call. 3808699823)
.....

Arranged on the slope of a dominating hill, near the rocky outcrop, the church is the most impressive work of the city. The geometry of the exterior heralds the interior space: three naves, concluded by three deep apses, visible volumetrically from the outside except the one to the north, which is incorporated into a massive bell tower. The Church was rebuilt in the 16th century on a pre-existing building from the 13th century, maintaining its dedication to St. Mary Magdalene. Contracted in 1621, Scipione Li Volsi undertook, also on behalf of his brothers Francesco and Paolo, to create the Tribune of the main altar, following drawings of which no trace remains. Inserted into a semicircular apse, the Tribune follows the contours of the walls with twelve columns on pedestals with a deep dado. A succession of graphic scenes articulates the space: from the oculus of the small balconies, contained by an architectural framework, inside, eleven crown-holding angels appear. In this space one finds the eight apostles and the *Saints Bartholomew* and *John the Baptist* with the Church's patron saint *St. Mary Magdalene*, dominated – in the space created by the ribbed vault – by the *Almighty in Glory*, along with putti and angels playing music. The boldness of the composition that





BAROQUE DECORATION

The Oratories and the Stucco Decorations

characterises the Tribune echoes that of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in the Cathedral of Messina by Jacopo Lo Duca, and also follows the Gaginian pattern of the great Tribune in the Cathedral of Palermo, now destroyed. Following the Gaginian example, the Li Volsi deviate from the classical style: the irrepressible spatiality of the Tribune expands outwards, invading the bulk of the wall with its Saints and its angels placed in the small balconies. This unusual style also manifests itself in the architectural order, lacking any lintels, and which, with the *Brunelleschi's pulvino*, forces Scipione to eliminate the second order, unlike that in the Cathedral of Palermo, helping to create a more modern spaciousness, whose emotional mysticism is entrusted to the imposing presence of the "Figure of God".

From 1635 to 1637 Scipione Li Volsi, probably assisted by Giovan Battista, realized in stucco all the architectural and decorative elements of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament, in the style already adopted in the main Tribune. The main feature is the invention of the canopy within which the angelic and allegorical scene unfolds: four women representing "*Faith, Abundance, Truth and Penitence*" are to be found on the sides of the Tabernacle. That motif is repeated in the North Chapel, called the Chapel of the Madonna Libera Inferni because of the presence of the marble statue by Guercio. Stylistically attributed to the Li Volsi family, it houses the statues of "*St. Frances of Assisi, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Steven, Pope Innocent III*".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chirco, Adriana.

Palermo, la città ritrovata: itinerari entro le mura

III ed. con un nuovo percorso sui Serpotta. Palermo: D. Flaccovio, 2005.

De Seta, Cesare; Spadaro, Maria Antonietta; Spatafora, Francesca; Troisi, Sergio.

Palermo città d'arte: guida illustrata ai monumenti di Palermo e Monreale

V ed. aggiornata. Palermo: Kalós, 2009.

Garstang, Donald.

Giacomo Serpotta e i serpottiani: stuccatori a Palermo 1656-1790

Fotografie di Melo Minnella.
Palermo: Flaccovio, 2006.

Palazzotto, Pierfrancesco.

Gli oratori di Palermo

Fotografie: Enzo Brai; disegni: Emilio Di Gristina.
Palermo: Rotary Club, 1999.

Palazzotto, Pierfrancesco.

Palermo: guida agli oratori: confraternite, compagnie e congregazioni dal XVI al XIX secolo

Presentazione di Donald Garstang.
Palermo: Kalós, 2004.

Palazzotto, Pierfrancesco; Sebastianelli, Mauro.

Giacomo Serpotta nella chiesa di Sant'Orsola a Palermo: studi e restauro

Palermo: Congregazione Sant'Eligio, Museo diocesano di Palermo, 2011.

Pettineo, Angelo; Ragonese, Peppino.

Dopo i Gagini, prima dei Serpotta: i Li Volsi

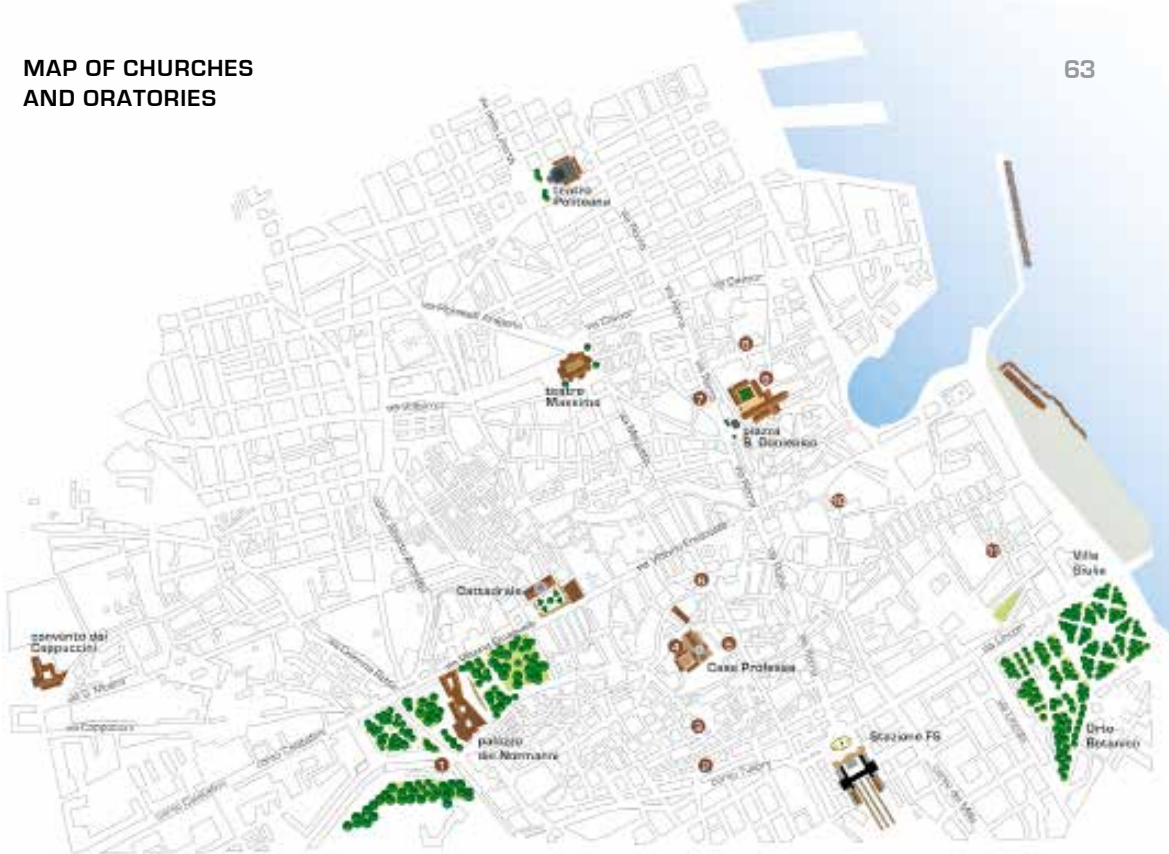
Con un contributo di Rosario Termotto.
Tusa: Archeoclub d'Italia, 2007.

Serpotta: il restauro come ricerca: cronaca degli interventi di restauro della Soprintendenza di Palermo su oratori e chiese serpottiane

Palermo: Assessorato regionale dei beni culturali e ambientali e della pubblica istruzione, 2003.

Lo stucco: cultura, tecnologia, conoscenza: atti del convegno di studi: Bressanone, 10-13 luglio 2001.

A cura di Guido Biscontin e Guido Driussi.
Marghera-Venezia: Edizioni Arcadia Ricerche, [2001?].



PALERMO

- ① Oratory of San Mercurio tel. +390916118168
- ② Oratory of Carminello tel. +39329295017
- ③ Church of Carmine Maggiore tel. +390916512018
- ④ Oratory of Sabato tel. +393387228775 +39338452011
- ⑤ Church and Oratory of Sant'Orsola tel. +390916162321
- ⑥ Oratory of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami tel. +39091331606
- ⑦ Oratory of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria tel. +390916162488-302667
- ⑧ Oratory of the Holy Rosary in Santa Cita tel. +39091332779
- ⑨ Oratory of the Holy Rosary in San Domenico tel. +39091332779
- ⑩ Oratory of San Lorenzo tel. +390916118168
- ⑪ Oratory of the Bianchi (Church of the Stigmata) tel. +390916230011

PROVINCE OF PALERMO

- ⑫ Oratory of the Holy Sacrament in Carini tel. +390918661181
- ⑬ Palatine Chapel of Sant'Anna in Castelbuono tel. +390921671211
- ⑭ Basilica of San Pietro in Collesano tel. +390921661077
- ⑮ Mother Church of Ciminna tel. +393808699823



