

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



Soprintendenza per i Beni culturali
e ambientali di Palermo

FROM GOTHIC TO RENAISSANCE THE SEASONS OF ART

by **Evelina De Castro**

REGIONE SICILIANA
Assessorato dei Beni culturali
e dell'Identità siciliana



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From Gothic to Renaissance. The Seasons of Art

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THE SEASONS OF ART BETWEEN THE LATE GOTHIC AND RENAISSANCE PERIODS (1420-1535)

The artistic **15th Century, the 'Quattrocento'**, is immediately recognised as the era that began with Masaccio, Brunelleschi and Donatello in Florence, which saw itself influenced by the supremacy of the Medici. A simple list of these names instantly evokes the **Renaissance**. However, according to an argument that is now accepted by modern historiography, we know how the general categories required for sorting the knowledge, include different realities within them—even resulting sometimes contradictory—emerging from distinct historical factors in terms of time and space. The Palermo of **1420**, which welcomed King **Alfonso of Aragon**, who went to the Sicilian island to prepare for the conquest of Naples, was part of a very different geo-political and cultural context from that of the city of Florence, where in that same year Brunelleschi started the construction of the dome of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

This exemplifies the concept of **polycentricism**, which was perfect to explain the prodigious and unique phenomenon that was the Italian Renaissance: a set of centres coinciding with cities or politically autonomous towns, and often near and at war with each other, or at least in an antagonism that became a cultural competition in foreseeing, increasing, expanding and interpreting the Renaissance, that is, that which is classic of antique origin, to be reborn to new life. This competitive attitude also affected the commission of artists and architects, whose medium varied in a continuous process of growth and harmony with the environment that from time to time requested them. We usually recognise the differences in the work of Leonardo in Florence or Milan, of Bramante in Milan or Rome, of Antonello in Naples or Venice, and so on, leading to Raphael and Michelangelo.

1
 Triumph of King
 Alfonso, *Naples,*
Castel Nuovo



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2 Europa Regina
[Latin for
Queen Europe],
by S. Münster,
Cosmographia,
Basel 1544 (first
edition)

This brief introduction provides framework for the historical artistic situation of the 15th century in Palermo in a more generally renowned context of artistic capitals of the time. Keeping an eye open to the broader panorama where Sicily was symbolically at the centre of the Mediterranean, it is clear that artistic references of Palermo evolved over the century, progressively leaning towards the centres of Italy at the time. At the very end of our time period is 1535, the year in which King Charles V made his triumphal entrance into Palermo. From Palermo, he went up the peninsula,

passing through Naples to Rome, and was welcomed triumphantly. Between 1420 and 1535, in the Mediterranean crossroads of cultures, Palermo and Sicily carried out their central role between the Northern region (continental Europe from Milan to France to Flanders, Burgundy and Germany) and the Southern region (North Africa, whose liberation from Tunisian pirates became a rhetoric of the Crusade and gave European kings the credentials as defenders of Christendom against the infidels: Alfonso from 1432 and later Charles in 1535, paving their relations with the Pope); between the East (we recall that the Eastern Roman Empire fell in Byzantium/Constantinople during Alfonso's time) and the West (of which Italy was a spearhead, having the privilege of being the papal seat). In Palermo, located at the centre of the 'Mediterranean routes', the dividing line and continuity from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, from feudalism to the monarchy, from the countryside to the city, artistic expression was found in the transition from the Gothic period to that of the Renaissance. The strong and upstanding figures of the two kings more clearly illustrated the supra-regional features of century that was so complex, even on a social level. Everyone took action in public life, in parallel, in harmony or in dialectics, with the figure of the king as a reference—absent but represented by the viceroy: the political aristocracy of the Viceroy's court; the religious aristocracy both secular of a bishopric Palermo as well as regular, considering that the largest religious orders are present in the

city, from the Dominicans, Benedictines and Franciscans to the Carmelites; the merchant class of 'foreign nations', Catalan, Genoa, Pisa, active in trade and finance. The dynamics that involved so many subjects were echoed in the numerous actions and artistic personalities that

bloomed in the century's different cultural areas: urban planning, architecture, painting, sculpture and decorative arts, in a continuous dialogue: **centre/outskirts**, between Palermo and its area.



3
Male figure like Charles V with collar of the Golden Fleece, detail of La disputa di San Tommaso, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia [Sicily's Regional Gallery] in Palazzo Abatellis

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4

Decorative geometric and phytomorphic motifs, *detail from the southern Gate of the Cathedral of Palermo*

5

Bird in ornamental volute, *detail from the southern Portico of the Cathedral of Palermo*

THE QUATTROCENTO. LATE GOTHIC IN FIRST HALF OF THE CENTURY

The age of Alfonso of Aragon in Palermo traces back to the 1420s. There is not great historiographical evidence of such from the decades that precede the conquering of Naples in 1443, when the cultural authority of the figure destined to rise to extreme greatness, corresponding with the moniker 'Magnanimous' that would have been bestowed on him by his contemporaries, which encapsulated humanistic meanings of the Latin term: greatness of spirit, rendered by Pontano into humanistic Latin as a royal moniker. It is in this manner that the coetaneous sources and even Sicilian Fazello described him in the following century, passing down the figure of a perfect Renaissance prince, an expert in every discipline, including the art of war, enthusiast of letters and



bibliophile, inclined to meet and host all of the finest artists and craftsmen in each discipline. Lorenzo Valla, Guarino Veronese and Beccadelli, known as '*Panormita*', were among the humanist intellectuals called to Naples, where he had settled permanently with the triumph of 1443. But in Sicily and Palermo, he had long been present before the resplendent Neapolitan Renaissance period, which had his manifests over the arch of Castelnuovo in sculpture and that of a young and mysterious Antonello in painting, a pupil in Naples of the equally mysterious Colantonio, who were intent on treasuring the wide circulation, among others, of 'Nordic' works and artists, which had rendered Naples unique since the age of the 'good king Renato' (René of Anjou), a military and political rival of Alfonso, yet a good precursor in a cultural sense. In Palermo and for Palermo, in the decades preceding the final arrival in Naples, traces remain of Alfonso's cultural path in the twilight of the Middle Ages, with what was intended to be the end of the Gothic period where a latent glimpse of the unveiling of the next was seen. The king first entered the city on the 11th





roads by ‘*addrizzari*’, that is, facilitating the transformation of the mediaeval city with its short, narrow and curved road networks into a Renaissance city, with straight and crooked streets. Alfonso returned to Palermo in 1431, and on this occasion, the king called for the creation of the *Hospedale Grande e Nuovo*, bringing the small hospices in the city together under one roof. The construction of the hospital was a sign of modernisation, which was perceived as additional proof of the magnanimity of the king; this also proved significant for the history of art. The hospital was located in the sumptuous 14th century mansion that belonged to the Sclafani, a great architectural structure that rivalled the Chiamamontan Steri at the northern end of Cassaro (today corso Vittorio Emanuele).

February 1421, having disembarked at the port and greeted “*cum magno triumpho et honore*”. Historiography states that on this occasion, the king “allowed the city of Palermo to build a pier”, which confirms the importance that it was given both in terms of a development plan in a commercial sense, but likely also symbolic of the identity of the town, a prelude of the flourishing in the years following in the heavy construction of churches in the area of the pier and the ‘*Cala*’ [bay]. By the early years of the 16th century, the churches of Santa Maria della Catena, San Giovanni dei Napoletani, Santa Maria di Porto Salvo, and San Sebastiano were built. On a level of urban planning, in 1421 the measure was extended to Palermo, already promulgated at the time of the kings Martin I and Martin II, which facilitated the mergers and acquisitions of buildings to decorate and beautify the city. This start of the city’s transformation towards the regulating of properties and roads, preludes a modern view, which in 1482 would lead to the far more explicit measure that encouraged the expansion and definition of buildings in relation to

6
Phytomorphic decorative patterns, detail from the southern Portico of the Cathedral of Palermo



7
Southern Gate of the Cathedral of Palermo, detail

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To connote its new use as a hospital, the monumental fresco of the *Triumph of Death* was made on one of the walls of the great atrium, marked by porticos. Sources connect the entire history of the Grande e Nuovo hospital to the will of the king, also an indication, if not the commission, of such challenging work due to its size, iconographic complexity and formal features that highlight its 'extraneousness' to that which painting in Palermo and Sicily expressed at the time. Now housed in the *Galleria Regionale di Palazzo Abatellis*. The creator of the large fresco remained quite mysterious, and this work was without many terms for comparison. Only a few aspects – the iconography, style of certain parts, the formal nature of others – led it to fall under the larger panorama of

references to the international late gothic period, in which Burgundian-Provençal elements flowed within a series of markings of Catalan painting. To date, there are only partial comparisons to be made; and that can be considered emblematic of a cultural passage between two eras. Dated back to the forties of the century, the fresco could be reflected in its time in murals that no longer exist, apparently showing *Stories of San Bernardino*, in the chapel of La Grua Talamanca united with the church of the monastery of Santa Maria di Gesù of the Observant Franciscans, just outside of Palermo. Experts of the late 19th century, including Cavalcaselle and Bernard Berenson, who saw the remains, recognised the frescoes in relation with the *Triumph of Death*. The already severely damaged

8
The Triumph of
Death, Palermo,
Galleria Regionale
della Sicilia di
Palazzo Abatellis,
detail



paintings went on to be lost, while what remains are only 19th century graphic reproductions in the collections at Palazzo Abatellis.

This important piece of Palermo's history is also linked to Alfonso: the founder of the complex of Santa Maria di Gesù, Franciscan Matteo Cimarra, was among the most loyal followers of Bernardino. From the late twenties, Bernardino played an important role in Alfonso's religious policy in Palermo and the Agrigento area. This was to the extent that Bernardino of Siena attributed to Matteo Cimarra having led the king to remain close to the church in Rome, away from schismatic tendencies. Even the owners of the chapel dedicated to San Bernardino, the La Grua Talamanca, of Catalan origin, belonged



to the feudal aristocracy close to the king. Another critical religious figure of Alfonso's political and cultural action in Palermo was that of Benedictine Giuliano Majali. Sources cite him with having a central role in Alfonso's cultural policies for the city of Palermo. The king placed him at the head of the initiatives that he himself created: such as the already mentioned large hospital and the pier, to which the precise provisions and allocations for the care of the Norman temples, such as 'La Martorana', was added, giving visibility to the continuity of royal power in Sicily. Over that century and the following one the heraldry of the House of Aragon would become widespread within the *Cappella sacri palatii regi Panormi*, Palatine, in mosaic and wooden ceiling paintings. The Cathedral, another symbol monument of the original Norman monarchy and its papal legitimacy, was enhanced during Alfonso's time by a 'mark': the portico with three arches on the southern side. The new architecture determines the creation of the new prospectus of the Cathedral, as part

9
19th century drawing depicting the Paintings of the Grua Talamanca Chapel, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

10
The Triumph of Death, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis, detail



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11
Gate of the
Archbishop's Palace
in Palermo

12
Breviarium of the
Archbishop Simone
Beccadelli di
Bologna, *Palermo*,
Diocesan Museum,
detail

of the expansion of esplanade of the main church. Figurative language of the work, integrates, in part recovering the noble elements from the Norman monument and the three coats of arms carved in relief in the centre, where the House of Aragon appears between the insignia of the Church of Palermo and that of the town Senate, explicitly conveying the message. The marmoreal display of the entrance gate, designed to give continuity to the noble past of marble and mosaics, and the richly carved wooden door, were already part of an introduction of the late Gothic on the Norman monument in the twenties. Under Bishop Beccadelli de' Bologna, who is



credited with defining the portico, would arise the new Archbishop's Palace, located in front of the Cathedral and highlighted by its sober gate with a lowered arch, and a large, angular triple lancet window with carved lace on high and slender columns. The sign of the Aragonese king, who came to Sicily and was more attentive to it in the period preceding the taking of Naples, during the 'incubation' of the successive explicit direction towards the cultural renaissance, it is expressed in Palermo in a variety of places that were finished during the years when the Sovereign sat on the throne of Naples. From an urban and artistic monumental perspective, they were concerned the two ends of the axis of development of the city: the new pier to the north, and to the south and top part of *Cassaro* with the *Ospedale Grande* and the southern gate of the Cathedral. In this context of official commissions, there is also sculpture and painting in close relation to architecture, such as complex carvings in relief with wood and stone of the portico of the Cathedral and





the *Triumph of Death* fresco, made in the atrium of the *Ospedale Grande*.

The reticence of the sources and historiography in outlining this period has weighed on our knowledge as regards the artistic figures in Palermo starting from the twenties and the identification of their

work, which was particularly intense and culturally defined.

Architect Guillem Abiell, in Barcelona until 1419, was in Palermo in 1420, where he met his death. Also from Barcelona came Nicolaus Comes, who was present on the work site of the Cathedral's portico in the twenties. Painters Jaime Sanchez and Gaspare Pesaro were also active at the time. The former, from Seville, appears in direct relationship with the *serenissimus ac excellentissimus* sovereign. This suggests that he had gone to Palermo in his wake. Gaspare Pesaro shows as active in the city long before Alfonso's coming, but was made known by the former, requesting his presence as a miniaturist in his court stationed in Gaeta at the end of the thirties. Thanks to the work of painters, to which some of Gaspare's children would dedicate themselves, the Pesaros assumed a remarkable

13

Matteo Perruchio, Coronation of the Virgin with Saints Albert and Peter, Palermo, Diocesan Museum

14

Madonna with Child enthroned between Saints Peter and Paul, Catherine of Alexandria and Dominic, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis, detail



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15
Mystic Marriage
of St. Catherine
of Alexandria and
Saints, *Palermo*,
Church della Trinità
la Magione

entrepreneurial position in Palermo that extended to the various productive sectors of the city. Their active presence, permanently settled throughout *Cassaro* up to the present day Piazza Pretoria, well represents the situation of the time. The propulsion due to the presence of Alfonso and the continuity of this phenomenon, which in painting is projected over the middle of the century in the Gothic-Renaissance dialectic, would continue in parallel of the lone path of Antonello da Messina. Gaspare and Guglielmo Pesaro are emblematic of this phenomenon between the first and the second half of the century. In the vast panorama of the production of jewellery and applied arts, a truly international trait of the late Gothic culture period that lasted until the 16th century, we find the name of Pietro di Spagna, a silversmith in Palermo, who was documented as being stably and actively in the city from 1421.

THE QUATTROCENTO. BETWEEN THE LATE GOTHIC AND RENAISSANCE PERIODS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE CENTURY

The second half of the century in Palermo and its surroundings featured a relationship between the late Gothic and Renaissance in both painting and architecture, in a dialectic that would remain until the next century with the establishment of the High Renaissance. Sculpture managed to escape it, and a clear and radical between a 'before' and 'after' is seen just after the mid-century. Borrowing concepts and terms from Maria Accascina, it can be said that Renaissance sculpture was not the result of a 'maturation process' or 'production', but rather an "import owed to maestros from Lombardy and Carrara". The phenomenon once again takes place in the age of Alfonso. After having conquered Naples, the king not only led it in terms of politics but in an artistic sense as well, addressing it to a decisive change towards the Renaissance. The turning point in Renaissance sculpture in Palermo derived from an event that took place in Naples, the capital of Alfonso. The day after the king's death, in 1458, the so-called '*Diaspora of Castelnuovo*' began from Naples: that is, the dispersion of artists that Alfonso had called to work on the monumental triumphal arch in marble on multiple orders, closed in by the two crenellated large towers of Castelnuovo. The work formed a display of the figurative Renaissance culture of southern Italy, the artistic and visual

creation of the humanistic concept of the prince, a king of the modern age yet a descendant of historical emperors and rulers, who brought their triumphs back to life. In the years following 1458, Palermo 'imported' sculpture, or rather Renaissance sculptors who were up to date with the Tuscan culture. It was a decisive step, which was also emphasised with the entry of the term '*sculptor*' into the lexicon, which was frequently used. Also with regard to architecture, the '*Diaspora of Castelnuovo*' led to repercussions, albeit more complex, concurrent to a constructive fervor that has been defined as 'another Renaissance' (Nobile). This is related to the role that architects connected to the late Gothic Iberian culture—like the Mallorcan Guillem Sagrera—as well as that of marble workers already active in Castelnuovo, had in architectural works in Palermo. The complexity lies in the observation that both phenomena, that is, the unique input of Renaissance sculpture and the strong recovery in Iberian Late Gothic architectural sense, stem from the same work site—workshop that was Castelnuovo. In painting and applied arts the passage includes an ongoing transition, represented by artists and works that do not always go together. The period was witness to the introduction of new ideas (formal rigour, sculptural and spatial studies) within the late Gothic types. The painted cross of the Cathedral of Cefalù, miniatures of the *Breviarium* of the Bishop Beccadelli and the so-called Polyptych of Corleone in the Galleria Abatellis are eminent testimonies in painting. The criticism



refers to the works of the above-mentioned Guglielmo Pesaro; although no works were attributed to him with certainty, the artist is recognised for his role as the interpreter of the new style, albeit closely tied to tradition. The aforementioned works all have late-Gothic traits: cuspidate or lobed architectural forms, golden backgrounds, decorative graphic elements, yet the human figure appears centralised and normal in form, with non-stereotyped expressions. In jewellery, chalices and reliquaries attributed to Pietro di Spagna, already seen in 1421, reduce the decor within defined boundaries, and projecting elements seem to underlie a need for the regularisation of forms. In this field, these results would

16
Christ on the
Cross, the
Madonna, St. John,
God the Father,
St. Peter (*Chevet*),
Cefalù, Cathedral

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17
Coronation of the
Virgin and Saints,
Palermo, Galleria
Regionale della
Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

18
Planet embroidered
with St. John the
Baptist, angels,
figures of saints,
Petralia Soprana,
Mother Church

remain until after the turn of the century, while in painting, the 'phenomenon' Antonello, that in our eyes marks a complete break with the past, did not find success, if not late echoes in Palermo. Antonello's painting does not develop in Palermo, but rather between eastern Sicily and Naples; this city played a central artistic role, while Palermo only played said role until the forties of the Quattrocento. The story of Antonello became emblematic of Sicily as an incubator of figurative culture that evolved elsewhere. Paintings by Antonello present in the public collections



in Palermo and Cefalù tell of a relationship with the areas that begins in late period, at their arrival to a museum. The cusps were acquired around the middle of the century from an unknown origin. We know that the *Annunciata* belonged to the family of the Barons Colluzio, of ancient Iberian origin, cited in Palermo in their family's building in the Albergheria, since the late 18th century. The work reached the National Museum of Palermo in 1906, at the conclusion of a process led with determination by the then director Antonino Salinas, in continuation of that already undertaken in years precedent by Giocchino Di Marzo and Vincenzo Di



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20
Domenico Gagini,
Antonio Speciale resting, *Palermo,*
Church of San
Francesco d'Assisi

Giovanni, another figure of the Sicilian prelate from the late 19th century, scholar and historian. Di Marzo reported its presence in the home of a noble family

of Palermo, and Di Giovanni took possession of it, probably saving it from an unknown fate. Between the late 19th and early 20th century, the painting remained in the house of Di Giovanni, between Palermo and Salaparuta, where the family originated. It was held until 1906 when the heirs of the monsignor, sister Francesca and her husband Mr. Tamburello, respecting the will of their relative, gave it as a gift to Salinas. The painting is chronologically attributable to the season of Antonello's maturity, which took place between his stay in Venice, where he went in 1475, and his return to his hometown of Messina, where he dictated his last will and testament in 1479. The museum-based history of works by Antonello

21
Francesco Laurana
with *Pietro de*
Bonitate, Arch
of the Chapel
Mastrantonio,
Palermo, Church
of San Francesco
d'Assisi, detail





between Palermo and Cefalù is important to explain the absence of links with local contemporary paintings. This is not so, it must be said, as regards the similarities with sculpture by maestros already present in Naples. *Eleanor of Aragon* by Francesco Laurana enters into a relationship with the proportions and harmonious symmetry of Antonello's *Annunciata*, which is set apart by its power of communication and naturalness as a portrait. In this regard, it was noted that there are not any known portraits of women by Antonello, yet he portrayed women in every *Virgin with Child* and *Annunciata*. And yet it can be observed that the bust of Pietro Speciale by Domenico Gagini, with its firmness of expression, references Antonello's *St. Jerome in his Study*, on display at the National Gallery in London. In sculpture, the radical turn determined by the personality of Francesco Laurana and more importantly Domenico Gagini, the head of a real thriving family business,



22
Francesco Laurana,
 Cherub with
 cornucopia,
detail of the Arch
 of the Chapel
 Mastrantonio,
 Palermo, Church
 of San Francesco
 d'Assisi

23
Francesco Laurana
 (attributed), Figure
 lying, Palermo,
 Diocesan Museum

24
Pietro de Bonitate,
 The Genius of
 Palermo, Palermo,
 Piazza Garraffo

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25

Tommaso de Vigilia, Baptism of Christ, Palermo, Santocanale collection

replaced attempts of sculpture that were more dependent on contemporary pictorial models that were more 'Mediterranean' than central Italian. This is the case of the rare survival of marble triptych depicting the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine with*

St. Nicholas and Michael of the Magione church.

Antonellian evidence is absent, which remains consistent with the trend; Messina and Naples both during and post-Alfonso projected towards the Italian mainland and the Flemish situation, while in Palermo a transition to Renaissance painting is seen through other figures who are firmly linked to the area. From the 1460s onwards, the work of Tommaso de Vigilia showed continuity with the local background of the late Gothic period, which is also confirmed by the opportunity he was given to work on a large aedicula, left incomplete by Guglielmo Pesaro. De Vigilia's commissions alternated between traditional and new. Continuity with models and systems already in use by artistic enterprises such as that of Pesaro, saw Tommaso de Vigilia involved in monumental altarpieces in small and large cities in western Sicily, as well as in the series of frescoes in the chapel of the house of the Teutonic Knights of Risalimi, which is unanimously attributed to him, though he headed a team. At the same time, he made and often signed and dated, works in new languages, with a regularised triptych format with rectangular doors or small wooden panels, with centralised and symmetrical compositions, a sign of conscious participation in Renaissance influences through formal iconography and solutions in Provençal and Mediterranean style: 'gothic shaded by the renaissance' according to the fitting critical synthesis for De Vigilia by Roberto Longhi.





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View of the city of Palermo, *detail by Mario di Laurito, Madonna and Child and patron saints of Palermo, Palermo, Diocesan Museum*

THE CINQUECENTO. FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY TO THE START OF THE LATE RENAISSANCE

The historic opportunity to bring the art of the capital of the Viceroyalty in line with the Italian continent arose at the time of Charles V, the ruler of Habsburg. In 1535, just like Alfonso in the previous century, he arrived in Palermo by sea and brought innovation in the style of the late Renaissance. As was the case previously, the political situation involving the sovereign, his stay in Palermo, and military and political implications were reflected in the arts: either as fast progress, or as a turning point, or following a process already underway. Kings such as Alfonso V in the 15th century and Charles V in the 16th century were both involved in art as *'instrumentum regni'*, due to their upbringing and taste, making the relationship between artistic development



27

Antonello Crescenzo, Madonna and musician angels, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

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*Riccardo
Quartararo,
Coronation of the
Virgin amongst
saints, angels and
Carmelite friars,
Palermo, Galleria
Regionale della
Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis*



29

*Antonello Gagini,
Marble ancon and
arch, Palermo,
Church of Santa Cita*

30

*Antonello Gagini
and assistants,
Procession to
Calvary and
Crucifixion,
Palermo, Diocesan
Museum*



and the monarchy clearer.

From an artistic point of view, the Cinquecento in Palermo and its territory saw multiple forms of expression in painting and well-established continuity in sculpture and architecture. They both focused on pursuing several integrated solutions, which, in some cases, such as the large marble tribune in the Cathedral of Palermo, disused in the 18th century, and the church of Santa Maria Portosalvo,



involved Antonello Gagini, a leading sculptor in Palermo in the late Renaissance period.

During the Quattrocento (or fifteenth century), the entrance of Tuscan sculpture following the already mentioned 'diaspora of Castelnuovo' in Naples brought the artistic styles in Sicily together. In the following century, the arrival of certain works played the same role, sometimes even with the transfer to certain painters, who spread the



Roman Raphaelesque figurative culture of the years previous to Raphael's death in 1520. Nevertheless, in Palermo in the first two decades of the 16th century, continuity was maintained with the previous century thanks to some renowned artists who expressed their artistic contribution in the late 15th century and early 16th century. Moreover, sources and documents show, just as it had happened earlier for sculptors, that greater attention was given to painters' individual talents, as can be seen in the historiographical undertaking by Gioacchino Di Marzo in the late 19th century to 'seek' Renaissance painting in Sicily. Pietro Ruzzolone, Riccardo Quartararo and Antonello Crescenzio were painters who worked at the turn of the century, each one with his own distinct personality, although brought together under similar circumstances. Gothic / Renaissance dialectic saw them complying with the new forms of painting of the courts of the time, including Provence, Spain and the metallic and translucent Ferrara school, as well as paintings in the best Quartararo manner. Crescenzio showed a more advanced culture, also due to his age, that saw him still active in the 1530s, venturing with Raphael's models

31
Polidoro da Caravaggio, Lamentation and Adoration of the Shepherds, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

32
Polidoro da Caravaggio, Christ falls on the way to Calvary, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

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Vincenzo da Pavia, Lamentation of Christ, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

and in relation with those who introduced new ones: Antonello Gagini, for whom he created the shades of colour of marble elements and Vincenzo da Pavia, whose work he found himself appraising. In this 'operational' continuity, the turning point came with Antonello Gagini and Vincenzo da Pavia. Sculpture was the driving force of the artistic scene in Palermo in the early 16th century. It centered on the "dynastic enterprise" of the Gaginis, which had now reached its second generation with Antonello, son of Domenico. Antonello Gagini was the predominant figure in the first three decades of the 16th century in Palermo. His artistic



culture combined sculpture with painting, from which it drew, sometimes openly, on iconographic and compositional models. His presence was catalysing. He was either called to assess the work of his fellow painters or he recruited them himself to finish colouring his sculptures. Antonello Gagini played an important, if not major, role in preparing the artistic scene in Palermo to welcome 'innovative inputs' from Rome, the capital of art in the late Renaissance period. He created the marble altar with aediculae, columns and entablatures to accommodate the large altarpiece of *Christ Falling on the Way to Calvary*, created in Raphael's workshop in Rome. It arrived in Palermo circa 1519, and became known as the *The Torment of Sicily*. With his deep knowledge of Raphael's painting, which had become popular also thanks to prints, Antonello Gagini combined his past experience with new input. From the 1520s onwards, the painter Vincenzo Da Pavia was active in Palermo. A native of Pavia, Vincenzo Azani, was better known in Palermo by two names, one denoting his place of origin, '*de Pavia*' [from Pavia], and the other his cultural profile, '*lo Romano*' [the Roman]. Although modern critics highlighted the post-Leonardo Lombard school background of his painting, in the eyes of his contemporaries as well as for to the subsequent Sicilian historiography, the cultural identity of Vincenzo de Pavia was highlighted for its similarities with Raphael's paintings in Rome, probably acquired in the years after the Maestro's death, when the renowned school continued his work in Rome until the 'Sack of Rome' in 1527 and the consequent final 'diaspora' of the artists in all directions. In the post-Raphael period in Rome, Vincenzo de Pavia was able



direction of Polidoro da Caravaggio. It is a final mention to complete our collection of influences throughout a century of the history of art in Palermo, narrated through the two figures of its kings, regards the role and the importance of Flemish painting. It was very popular with political and religious elites, as well as the bourgeoisie, and facilitated by its highly dynamic diffusion, from workshops in Bruges and other Flemish towns to all destinations. A fondness for Flemish painting is a distinctive trait of art collecting in the modern age; although a century came between them, it marked the cultural circles of the time of Alfonso the

34
Vincenzo da Pavia, Descent from the Cross and Lamentation of Christ (dais), Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

35
Raphael, Christ falls on the way to Calvary, Madrid, Museo del Prado

to develop his cultural background, drawing on the work of Polidoro da Caravaggio, another native of Lombardy, who had been in Raphael's team working on the Loggias at the Vatican palace. After this, on several occasions Polidoro went to the south after the Sack of Rome, first and foremost Naples and Messina, where he settled. It was a historical and cultural period, which saw important relations between Messina and Palermo thanks to the work of Antonello Gagini, Polidoro da Caravaggio and his followers, also influencing the work of Vincenzo da Pavia. The route that joined Messina, the 'door' to Sicily *ultra farum* [beyond the lighthouse], to Palermo, home to the Viceroy and gateway to Christian Europe, already taken by painters, acquired political tangibility with the arrival of Charles V, who was solemnly celebrated along the stretch of land that joins the two cities and triumphantly welcomed: in Palermo, where Vincenzo de Pavia excelled, and in Messina, with the artistic



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*Petrus Christus,
Death of the
Virgin, San Diego,
California, Putnam
Foundation Timken
Museum of Art*

Magnanimous and of Charles V, bringing outcomes that significantly influenced the training of artists such as Antonello, initially, and later the iconographic and formal repertoire of Antonello Gagini and Vincenzo da Pavia, the latter happily coined by current critics for his 'Flemish Romanism' (Teresa Viscuso). In particular, the inclination towards Flemish art developed in Sicily in the early decades of the 16th century and became linked in various ways, albeit indirect or presumed, to specific examples: from 1519 until his death in 1544, the Burgundian Jean Carandolet was appointed bishop of Palermo. Although he had never reached the seat, he became a legendary figure in the Sicilian historiography. He was very close to the Emperor, in the role of his secretary and protector, and as a collector in Bruges of Jan Gossaert, who depicted him on several occasions. Along the land route that led Charles V from Palermo to Messina, through the Madonie mountains, Polizzi was a stopping point,

a state town that still preserves an ornate Flemish triptych dating back to the mid-15th century. It shows the route used by those who collected ancient paintings from Flanders, which had become increasingly popular with the most prominent Sicilian patricians in court since the early decades of the 16th century. Other excellent paintings, including the afore-mentioned *Death of the Virgin* by Petrus Christus, also dating back to the previous century, left their mark in the following century, when Antonello Gagini and Vincenzo de Pavia used them as a model. In contrast, the resplendent *Malvagna Triptych* was probably also present long ago in Messina and therefore had no immediate influence on the 16th century art scene in Palermo.

37
*Gate, Palermo,
complex of the
Trinità la Magione*



INFORMATION SHEETS

COMPLEX OF THE SOUTHERN PORTICO OF THE CATHEDRAL OF PALERMO

Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Palermo
 tel. +39091334373

Throughout three decades, from 1420 to 1450, in the midst of the reign of Alfonso the Magnanimous, the southern façade of the Cathedral was laid out, with the entrance to the temple being projected towards the nascent plan of the Cathedral. Recognising the continuity between a past, which is Norman, noble and full of powerful symbols, and a present, with just as much potential, involved a work of great 'iconocratic' importance. The significance

of this work can be seen in the top cornice of the portal, which hosts a long and comprehensive inscription, in relief, in Gothic characters that expresses the profound values of the artistic enterprise: *Under the peaceful and powerful government of the magnanimous King Alfonso, this ornament for the city was made by bishop and doctor Ubertino de Marinis. It was 1426 when the work in pure white marble was completed, artfully sculpted by the skilled Antonio Gambara.*

What can be called a real monumental complex, conceived under the direction of Antonio Gambara, includes the marble gate, dated 1426, that incorporates important pre-existing elements;



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the wooden doors by Francesco da Castellammare, dated circa 1432, and the eminently architectural structure with its sculpture, iconography and colour,

which was the portico with three pointed arches, already begun by Gambara, whose works continued into the 1450s. The façade of the portico features a set of iconographic and formal repertoires in late Gothic figurative style, ranging from the iconic frontality of Byzantine busts of saints and prophets with halos within arches, to an ornate and stylised phytomorphic decoration. It has a carefully designed hierarchy that aligns a trinity of heraldic coats of arms of three subjects in the square insets of the entablature: the Church of Palermo, the reigning House of Aragon and the city Senate. Above, in the tympanum and in a central position, the Superior Trinity represented by God the Father is seated in-between the two figures of the Annunciation. In relation to this representation of a shared universal order and balance, in the lower order of the parietal areas that surmount the three arches, a composition unfolds with a very low relief on a blue-grey background. In the *horror vacui* style of a miniaturized page, a continuous sequence of large spirals develops, formed by branches that contain all types of animal and anthropomorphic depictions that are realistic, expressionistic and imaginary, representing the continuous flow of life. The portico of the cathedral became the monumental symbol of Palermo in the first half of the Quattrocento, embracing wealth and iconographic doctrine, formal and stylistic variety, and architectural and urban values, making it a kind of triumphal arch facing the city.

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
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The large fresco was created for the southern wall of the late 14th century inner courtyard of Palazzo Sclafani, which during the 1430s, at the behest of Alfonso the Magnanimous, was designated as the location of the '*Ospedale Grande e Nuovo*'



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of Palermo. During the 20th century, to protect the fresco, it was necessary to remove it, thus it reached its worthy destination in the museum of Palazzo Abatellis, in 1954. Affixed to the back wall of the presbytery of the original 16th century church, the fresco, mounted on a base support on wheels, is closely visible from below, as a large illuminated page, or at a distance, from the top floor. From here, the overall composition can be appreciated. It is come together as one by the presence in the centre of the enormous *equus pallidus* of the Apocalypse of St. John, a livid and fleshless horse ridden by Death. According to the principles of medieval culture, the work places the particular and the universal in relation to one another for pedagogical purposes and with strong ethical meaning. This was customary in the Middle Ages for places such as churches, hospitals and other public venues that wished to encourage meditation on the transience of earthly goods in face of the necessity of death and its impartiality in striking the rich and powerful, intended as redemption for the poor and weak. Death is in the form of a skeleton with lucid anatomical accuracy, and is armed with bow, arrows and quiver, with medieval society unfolding all around, looking on in disbelief or unknowingly succumbing to the inevitable levelling force of Death. It saves those who recognise it, and, by striking down those who are not aware of its arrival and live protected by rules, roles and conventions that reveal all their vanity in the face of death. The system of symbols, such as the promised life source around which the young aristocrats huddle,

engaged in their elitist activities, such as falcon hunting, music and dancing, is accompanied by the presence of characters from historical reality, one example being the figure of Bartolus of Sassoferrato, the medieval 'Prince of Jurists' who succumbs inexorably under the horse's legs, while embracing the texts of his doctrine, which is also cancelled out by the force of a higher justice. The work refers to figurative courtly models, including cycles of frescoes, tapestries and miniatures, with harsh realistic descriptions alternated with examples of very refined ornamentation. The history of the architectural complex for which it was conceived, and the reasoning of the art critics tend to converge on the 1440s as the date on which it was painted, as the work of an unknown artist, who may perhaps have portrayed himself and a collaborator in the two men on the left of the fresco. The complex components of the figurative culture of the unknown artist transversally involve Catalan and Franco-Provençal painting, finding a meeting point in the composite taste of the Neapolitan court in the first half of the reign of Alfonso the Magnanimous, who welcomed painters and sculptors from the rest of Italy and foreigners at the particular turning point from the late Gothic to the Renaissance. However, given its complexity and the multiplicity of formal, stylistic and executive elements that cannot be found in any other work of that scope within the southern context and at such a late time, at present it is not possible to name the author.

**THE REMAINS OF FRESCOS
REPRESENTING THE STORIES OF SAN
BERNARDINO**

Chapel La Grua Talamanca in Santa Maria
di Gesù

.....
Via S. Maria di Gesù (inside the cemetery)
Palermo
.....

Except for a small number of preparatory drawings retrieved during restoration work by the Soprintendenza [Sicily's Superintendence for historical and artistic heritage], the total loss of the frescoes left a large gap in the already heavily depleted history of painting in Palermo at the time of Alfonso the Magnanimous. The monumental complex of the La Grua Talamanca chapel is an expression of the period of Alfonso in Palermo, as much as other works, such as the *Ospedale Grande e*

Nuovo and the monumental complex of the southern Portico of the Cathedral, although, unlike these, it was non-public project.

Founded by Blessed Matthew Cimarra, a Franciscan Observant and a man close to Alfonso, the Convent of Santa Maria di Gesù was enhanced, from the end of the 1430s, with a chapel commissioned by the noblewoman Ilaria La Grua Talamanca.

She was mentioned in the now recovered commission documents of the chapel, with only the surname of her husband, Gilberto Talamanca. He came from a Catalan family that had been very close to the House of Aragon since the time of the kings Martin I and Martin II and up to the time of Alfonso, who had a loyal secretary called Gaspare Talamanca. The La Grua family, originally from Pisa, was also established in Palermo at the time of the two Martin. Having no male heirs, they had united their



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family with the Talamanca family thanks to the marriage, in 1408, between Ilaria and Gilberto, obtaining the privilege of using the names of both families. Construction work on the chapel, commissioned by Ilaria, adjacent to the right of the presbytery area of the church of Santa Maria di Gesù, was entrusted to the Antonio Gambara '*magister marammae*' (master mason) of the Cathedral, and to us already known as the on-site responsible figure for the southern portico of the Cathedral. The lost paintings of the La Grua Talamanca chapel represented the only documented evidence of figurative culture at the time of the *Triumph of Death*, as ancient historiography recognised it. All the original remains (very few) and graphic reproductions of 19th century frescoes that were still visible at the time *in situ*, reveal, if not the same 'hand', certainly the same culture of the Maestro of the *Triumph*. Then the subject, the stories of San Bernardino of Siena, is completely in line with the time

of the *Triumph*, since the first images of the future saint began to circulate in Italy shortly after his death in 1444. The Blessed Matthew was particularly close to Bernardino. Sources also report an excerpt from one of the famous sermons of the Holy in which he praised 'Friar Matthew of Sicily' for having well-advised King Alfonso to remain loyal to the papacy in Rome. Alfonso supported Bernardino of Siena and held him in high esteem. From him, he understood that friar Matthew of Agrigento was a loyal subject to be sent to Valencia and also close to him in Sicily. As for the analysis of the lost paintings, comparisons seem closer to the group of characters depicted in the *Triumph* on the back of the horse of Death. This is due to the sharp realism of their faces, their poses and the plastic chiaroscuro effect that makes them stand apart, and which very likely also characterised the paintings in the La Grua Talamanca Chapel, intended to represent episodes and contemporary characters.

THE ARCHBISHOP'S PALACE OF PALERMO

Via Matteo Bonello, 2 Palermo
tel. +390916077111

The history of the building fits in with the other known artistic ventures that saw Simone Beccadelli de' Bologna, the bishop of Palermo from 1445 to 1465, directly involved as a patron and benefactor; he was from an ancient family, the cousin of Antonio Beccadelli de' Bologna (called the '*Panormita*'), a noted humanist and tutor of Alfonso. The future bishop conducted studies in law; he was a man of his time, Ambassador of the city to Alfonso, and can be considered among the greatest members of the Southern society of the time, steeped in the dialectic between 'Humanistic Middle Age and Mediaeval Humanism'. In terms of artistic choices, Bishop Beccadelli is owed with having transferred the location of the Archbishop's Palace to where it is today. It was a clearly urban planning choice to give order, rule and measure to the Cathedral's esplanade, which he himself started on, completing the definition of the southern portico and its opposing esplanade. The architectural outline of the ancient building of the Archbishop's Palace remains concentrated in the gate with a lowered arch, inside a frame that references the Durazzesque gate framing *St. Jerome in His Study* by Antonello da Messina, on display at the National Gallery in London. Another sign is the monumental tri-lancet window next to the corner of the building towards *Cassaro* (corso Vittorio Emanuele); its vertical composition and moulding features the exuberant fretwork decoration of the interior, which appears formally coherent with the architecture of the potico of the Cathedral.



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CYCLE OF FRESCOS REPRESENTING THE PANTOCRATOR AND SAINTS

Small Church of San Biagio in the countryside of Cefalù

.....
for information tel. +390921421050

.....
After the restoration managed by the Sicilian Soprintendenza in the eighties, the frescoes in this small isolated church in the hilly countryside surrounding Cefalù, a series of wall paintings from the late Middle Ages emerged with all of their strength to survive, which is very rare for a rural monument, making them once again viewable. It was thus confirmed that the old tradition, according to which they were the work of Benedictine figurative culture—widespread in the 12th century, was a legend. Today we study them with all the interest devoted to cultured paintings, primarily as regards the iconography, because of the clear references to courtly mosaic cycles of Norman churches

(the apse of the Cathedral of Cefalù, but also of Monreale), seen in the rounds that frame the bowl-shaped apse bearing busts of Old Testament figures inside with cartouche. Another cultured and very advanced aspect in terms of the use of space is the special aniconic representation of the cross at the centre of the apse, located between the two rows of apostles. The variety of symbolic meanings is not dwelled upon with regard to the spheres, their number and alignment, a symbol of sublimated perfection. In terms of figurative language, the modernity of the use of geometric shapes is certainly surprising as well, as it is without any decorative traits: despite damage to the finish, of the entire cycle, it appears that it was not there originally. The inscriptions of the cartouches of sibyls and prophets denote a high cultural level, just like the miniature detail of the inscriptions, while certain words refer to the Catalan-style phonetic. The paintings of the nave, of which only a few side panels survive, indulge more devotional needs, relative to newer, local-based cults such as the *Madonna del Soccorso* (Lady of Perpetual Succour), *Sant'Onofrio* and the *Saint Blaise*, made with didactic evidence. According to new cultural points of view waiting for further confirmation, the report of Iberian accents of the series of Saint Blaise was placed in evidence with the group of works that belong to some polyptychs present at the museum of Syracuse and in Licata, remembered by critics as the result of a culture “in the process of slow development” by artists of Valencian culture who settled in Sicily, or Sicilians having returned after Iberian experiences within the mid-century (Roberto Longhi).



**TRIPTYCH OF THE MADONNA
AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH SAINTS
JOHN THE EVANGELIST AND MICHAEL
THE ARCHANGEL**

Museo Civico 'Baldassare Romano' di
Termini Imerese

.....
Via Marco Tullio Cicerone Termini Imerese
tel. +390918128550
.....

The painting was located in the ancient church of Santa Maria della Misericordia, in Termini Imerese.

The depictions of the central wooden panels are complemented by full-length Saints on the side pillars, the Nativity and Apostles in the dais. The inscription bearing the date is placed on the frame between the dais and the upper panels.

The triptych was already known in late 19th century historiography and attributed to Gaspare Pesaro; due to repainting, it was believed to be of dubious authenticity, and was therefore excluded from the broad exhibition of paintings in Sicily at the time of Antonello, held in Messina in 1953. When the restoration of the work by the Soprintendenza alle Gallerie was completed in 1977, its authenticity was discovered and therefore its importance rose as a piece whose date is certain time and traditionally attributed to Gaspare Pesaro, deceased in 1460, whose contact with the Termitan and Madonite areas were gradually well-documented, reviving the historiographical interest in his person and work, even in comparing it to the *Triumph of Death*. Aside from its attribution to Gaspare Pesaro, the triptych of Termini Imerese well documents the figurative culture



of the time in the Palermo and low Madonite areas, rich with innovative elements, such as research on perspectives planes for figures, the prestige of the landscape painted in the dais, the great decorations of the Virgin's mantle with inflorescences and its monumentality. All of this is incorporated into a compositive, iconographic and formal context that lies within the late southern Gothic with central Italian - and especially Iberian - influences, as regards the decorative character of the whole, with an affable yet dreamlike detachment of figures.

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TWO ILLUMINATED PLAYING CARDS FROM THE 15th CENTURY

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

.....
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
tel. +390916230011/0047
.....

The two cards likely represent the *Empress*, in a rare iconographic variant, and the *Two of Clubs*, one of the 'suits' of mediaeval tarot decks, with the traditional iconography of crossing clubs.

The unexpected discovery during research conducted for a meeting of experts in the field, the restoration of the two very precious cards followed, conducted at the workshops of the Biblioteca centrale regionale [Central Regional Library] of Palermo. They became a part of the collection at the Museum of Palermo at unspecified date and occasion, and the two cards were never before seen within the collection of drawings and prints.

They are playing cards like those of "*trionfi*", made of cardboard and foil gold processed with a punch and miniature. The thickness was achieved with other re-used sheets of paper. Fortuitously the two cards from Palazzo Abatellis still retain their trimmings, obtained from cards with different scripts referenced to lists in which a few dates are repeatedly mentioned: 1426 and 1427. The latter particular is of understandable philological interest in establishing a benchmark for a hypothesis in regards to dating.

The importance of the two artifacts is highlighted, reminding us that known



specimens of the same type are extremely rare and lead back to a few decks of various attribution, preserved in a few museum collections both public and private, from the Pinacoteca di Brera, the Accademia Carrara di Bergamo, the Civic Museum of Cremona, the Civic Museum of Bassano del Grappa, the Louvre, the National Library in Paris and the Cary Collection



at Yale, in the United States. This exclusive group, in which scholars distinguish different pathways for attribution and chronology, was joined by the series of fifteen cards from the Museum of Castello Ursino in Catania. The former were brought in with the new items from Palazzo Abatellis: their formal and stylistic features suggested that they came from the

same deck. The cards from the Museum Ursino, well known by scholars, are dated around the middle of the 15th century and attributed to being produced in Ferrara. The presence of specimens in Sicily it reflects the pathways of the European collections in the 18th century, whose protagonists in Catania were the Prince of Biscari and Benedictine abbot Amico, whose respective collections, already known in the mid-18th century, contained the two groups of cards that would then become a part of the public Museum of Castello Ursino. The cards of Palazzo Abatellis, if the scientific study should confirm their similarity to the group from Castello Ursino, might have had the same history as the cards from the Museum of San Nicolò l'Arena of the Benedictines of Catania that had the counterpart in the Museum San Martino delle Scale in Palermo, which was also given to the public Museum of Palermo in the mid-19th century. Another hypothesis concerns the brief citation of sources (Villabianca 1786) that, in addition to the cards of the Prince of Biscari, reference others "in a house of a nobleman of the Val di Noto". We know about the Museum of Palermo in mid-19th century confiscated much of what had been the Museum of Baron Astuto in Noto, another huge collection of Sicilian archaeology, antiques and library materials, the cards could be assimilated.

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BUST OF PIETRO SPECIALE

Domenico Gagini

[Bissone 1420 ca. - Palermo 1492]

Museum of Palazzo Ajutamicristo

.....
Via Garibaldi, 41 Palermo

tel. +390917071411
.....

The work is one of the most significant of the artistic turning points towards the humanist Renaissance in Palermo. It is a portrait bust significantly emphasising the face and thus the centrality of the human figure. The person depicted was a protagonist of his time, both politically and culturally. During his life between 1405 and 1474, Pietro Speciale was the exponent of the administrative-bureaucratic class in Palermo in the second Quattrocento, kingdom's president and then *'pretore'* [magistrate]. He even ascended to the noble class as lord of Alcamo and Calatafimi. On the cultural level, he was "a man of principle and doctrine" and his personal library was famous for its precious manuscripts and texts. He himself was an author and inspirator of texts on the history of Sicilian

institutions. A benefactor and patron of works and artistic enterprises, de facto, he facilitated the process of the transition from Gothic to Renaissance of central Italy. Works on the walls and gates of the city and the reconstruction in modern forms of the Praetorian Palace are a few



of the interventions promoted by Pietro Speciale as a public administrator. The burial monument that he commissioned for the family chapel in the presbytery of the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi represented the first important opportunity for Domenico Gagini, and through his work, for Palermo to approach Renaissance sculpture of the Tuscan school. In 1463, Pietro tasked Domenico Gagini, who had recently arrived in Palermo, with creating a burial monument for himself and his son Antonio, who prematurely passed away at a young age. The committee document describes the monument as a work of humanist conception, in the manner of the Tuscan tombs of Rossellino and Desiderio da Settignano. The preeminence was reserved for the effigy of the deceased, which was seen on the lid of the sarcophagus and in the lying position that made the acceptance of death clear, both in the portrait bust placed on the wall with a plaque that highlighted the spiritual and civil virtues of man and hence the transmission of values beyond death. Repeatedly dismantled over time, even as early as the 16th century, some

elements of the monument dedicated to Speciale survive in the church of San Francesco, while it is thought that the bust of the patron Pietro, who was still alive at the time of completion of the work, is identified with what the museum today. For many years it was placed on the staircase of the palazzo Speciale, with the commemorative plaque dated 1468. Unlike the Laurana portrait busts that were highly idealised and timeless, the bust by Speciale they expresses the personality of the illustrious character, and his rational strength of reality's domain. The somatic traits of the face correspond to very specific features, while the clothing and headdress are those belonging to lords of that time. If the paintings by Piero della Francesca can be considered in relation with sculptures of Laurana, for portraitist Domenico Gagini one must reference the poignant portraits by Antonello da Messina. They were dedicated to men unknown to us today, but in their time and political, social and professional environment, expressed said humanist values based on knowledge, that artists are called to portray, as they are able to grasp and transform it in image. The original museum placement of the piece at the Palazzo Abatellis, in the room adjacent to the masterpiece by Francesco Laurana and in the context designed in the fifties of the 20th century by Carlo Scarpa, highlighted this comparison between the two main conceptions of man and art of the Italian Renaissance.



FROM GOTHIC TO RENAISSANCE

The Seasons of Art

BUST OF 'ELEANOR OF ARAGON'

Francesco Laurana [Vrana between 1420 and 1430 - Avignon? between 1500 and 1502]

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis

.....
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

tel. +390916230011/0047

.....
The bust is traditionally identified as that of Eleanor of Aragon, who died in 1406 and was the wife of William II Peralta, lord of Sciacca, Count of Caltabellotta and Vicar of the Kingdom of Aragon. She was buried in the church of the Olivetan Benedictine abbey of Santa Maria del Bosco in Calatamauro, near Giuliana, which she had served as a benefactor. The bust comes from her tomb, which was rebuilt in the baroque period, and was made posthumously well over 50 years after Eleanor's death. It was probably commissioned by her illustrious descendant Carlo Luna, the new lord of Sciacca and Caltabellotta, and Laurana's first Sicilian patron, who he may have already met at the Aragonese court of Naples. Count Luna was one of the Sicilian nobles closest to the king Alfonso the Magnanimous, the great patron of Francesco Laurana for the Castelnuovo arch.

The sculpture was recognised as the work of Laurana in the early 20th century by Antonino Salinas, director of the then Museo Nazionale [National Museum]. This work is placed at the height of the series of feminine busts made by the sculptor, including several other female members of the House of Aragon. The portrait busts were also commissioned on the occasion of weddings or engagements to celebrate the union of

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

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

It is thus probably a posthumous portrait of the gentlewoman, idealised in a model of absolute formal perfection as it had been developed over the 15th century in Italy and in the south of France, a fundamental contribution to which was made by Piero della Francesca. This latter serves as point of comparison for the development of a model of abstract feminine beauty in painting, which presents the values of spiritual balance and ethical virtues of the character portrayed by defining perfectly geometric and closed plastic forms. The classically geometric formal values of the work are enhanced by the museum display designed by Carlo Scarpa at Palazzo Abatellis, where the bust of Eleanor is isolated in the middle of a space and placed on a stemmed pedestal, against a background of quadrangular panels in cold green and blue colours that link the classic Renaissance style to contemporary classic.



FROM GOTHIC TO RENAISSANCE

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MARBLE ARCH OF THE MASTRANTONIO CHAPEL

Francesco Laurana (Vrana between 1420 and 1430 - Avignon? between 1500 and 1502) with Pietro de Bonitate (records in Palermo from 1466 to 1501) Church of San Francesco d'Assisi

.....
Piazza San Francesco d'Assisi, Palermo
tel. +39091582370
.....

In the eighties of the 20th century, marble from the Mastrantonio arch underwent a preservative operation, financially supported by contributions from private citizens and associations. That initiative gave rise to a renewed interest in the restoration of the church's Renaissance marble work, which was recognised as the home of Renaissance sculpture in Palermo, where Domenico Gagini and Francesco Laurana left their mark.

Already distinguished for his activities in the areas of Sciacca and Partanna, Francesco Laurana was in Palermo in 1468, when, together with Pietro de Bonitate from Lombardy, both qualified as sculptors 'living' in Palermo, were tasked by the *magnificent* Antonio Mastrantonio '*regi militi*' to build the family chapel at San Francesco d'Assisi. The commission concerned the entrance arch to the chapel as well as all of the marble décor, the altar, tombs and a statue of the Madonna. The iconographic design of the arch was very complex, just as it appears today: within rectangular panels that mark the pillars

are figures, whose depiction in relief gradually raises, from the *stiacciato* of its base with cherubs and cornucopias to the more pronounced relief in the higher parts and in the soffit of the arch. Other panels depict the fathers of the church and the Evangelists. In the spandrel of the arch, according to a composition of architectural and sculptural elements derived from antique models, there are two *tondi*, here depicting the Annunciation, while the key displays a relief with the Lord. The inside of the arch, following antique tradition, had lacunars with phytomorphic and protome human features, within strictly centralised compositions. At the base of the pillars that stand over the frame, Mastrantonio's coat of arms is placed on both sides. The work displays a rigorous and classical architectural form (rounded arch between pillars). The marble cladding, both figurative and decorative, focuses on the principles of compositional equilibrium and decorative sobriety, entrusted to the unfolding of the classical repertoire. These elements appear indicative of a maturing form and style that references the culture of the Castel Nuovo in Naples, of which Laurana was also part. In the arch Mastrantonio in Palermo, Laurana was able to express his most evolved feelings and mastery gained. Here he reaches a surprising level of image definition through minimal relief on the marble's surface. His work stands out for its purity of form, rigour and minimalism of its descriptive and iconographic elements.



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SAINTS AUGUSTINE, JEROME, GREGORY

Antonello da Messina
[Messina 1430 ca. - 1479]
Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

.....
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
tel. +390916230011/0047
.....

The three paintings are related to a lost polyptych with compartments, each culminating in one of the pinnacled wooden panel paintings. Since they depict three of the four Doctors of the Western Church, it is assumed that there was originally a fourth pinnacle depicting *St.*

Ambrose. Another observation concerns the pose of the figures, turned toward the centre of a hypothetical central apex of a lost polyptych. The panels paintings were purchased for the museum of Palermo in the late 19th century, with the knowledge that they were works by Antonello da Messina. The conservative restoration carried out in 1952 for the historic exhibition dedicated to Antonello in Messina involved the transfer from the support of the original wooden board to canvas, in order to eliminate factors of deterioration that could diminish the painted surface. The exhibition in '53 permanently confirmed their attribution



to Antonello, which on a few occasions, albeit from deep connoisseurs like Bernard Berenson, was put into doubt. To sum up the importance of the three works, the current museum exhibition of Palazzo Abatellis places them right before the *Annunciate*, and simultaneously in continuity with the polyptych of previous room, of a different figurative language, albeit of compatible chronology and similar structure.

In the small number of known works by Antonello obtained, the three pinnacles are not attributable to none of the two renowned polyptychs, that of St. Gregory at the Museo Regionale

[Regional Museum] of Messina, the other reassembled from the two wood panel paintings of the Uffizi and the door that belongs the collections in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. In the three pinnacled wood panel paintings, it is possible to verify what could be the culture of Antonello in the early seventies of the Quattrocento. He was active in Sicily for a commission who traditionally preferred the models of the late mediaeval altarpiece polyptychs with golden backgrounds and floral sprays. Despite this, Antonello was able to introduce a concept that is already space-based and real in terms of portraiture and naturalness of the human figure. This showed his knowledge of Flemish painting, which he acquired during the course of his training between Sicily and especially Naples, with a particular reference to Petrus Christus, as well as examples of Provençal painting.





PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN MAN

Antonello da Messina
[Messina 1430 ca. -1479]
Mandralisca Museum

.....
Via Mandralisca, 13 Cefalù
tel. +390921421547
.....

The painting has increased over time its communicative and “empathetic” power, which transcends the need of all types of knowledge of history of art to establish a relationship with the viewer. This was due to various reasons, such as perfect execution, the aura of the narrative about his coming from the island of Lipari, hidden for centuries in the door inside of a pharmacy closet. Hence the establishment of the aura; already in 1915, photographer Anderson cataloged the subject as “unknown sailor from Lipari”, causing the reaction of the prince of art historians, Roberto Longhi,

who pointed out that Antonello did not do portraits of fishermen, but of renowned figures. But the aura remained, and continued to suggest stories. In 1975, Vincenzo Consolo published *The Smile of the Unknown Mariner* in limited edition, with an etching of Renato Guttuso that accentuated the ‘subtle ripple’ of the man’s smile, as well as his quiet irony. Well before that time, Leonardo Sciascia had written that the *Portrait of an Unknown Man* had played a leading role in his interest for art. An indisputable element of the work’s charm lies in the fact which, compared to the diaspora of precious paintings by Antonello, it is a unique case of permanence in the physical location where its history began, in the home of the Baron Mandralisca, and currently housed at the homonymous foundation and museum. Scholars relate the painting to the work done by the painter in Messina in the 60s and 70s of the Quattrocento, as proof of the existence of a ‘client base within the emerging middle merchant class’ already in place (Bologna), where the new portraiture of Antonello was congenial and functional for the promotion and visibility of the social and cultural elite. All this was before the move to Venice, as scholars point out, which would increase Antonello’s success in portraiture. *The Portrait of an Unknown Man* already has the characteristics of a language that Antonello would continue to refine later on, in applying Flemish knowledge in the pictorial detail of reality, seeking a higher plastic and volumetric synthesis in figures, in which the light offers a unity and especially that “great strength, great vitality and *maxime in li ochi*” [mostly in the eyes] (Michiel) of a mature production.

**MADONNA AND CHILD ENTHRONED
AND SAINTS AGATHA, LUCIA, JOSEPH,
CALOGERO, CHRISTOPHER AND
DOMINIC (SIDE PANELS, FRONT),
SEBASTIAN AND BLAISE (SIDE PANELS,
BACK)**

Tommaso de Vigilia
[Palermo, records from 1444 to 1497]
Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

.....
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
tel. +390916230011/0047
.....

The piece was purchased for the public museum in 1910. Beforehand, it was part of the collection of the Duke della Verdura, who had “taken it from a church in Sciacca” as Gioacchino di Marzo wrote, who identified the triptych in the late 19th century as an important piece of art, signed and dated 1486 by Tommaso De Vigilia. The triptych was considered representative of the figurative culture of ‘Primitives’, understood by Vasarian tradition as the artists of the period previous to the triad of Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo. Modern-day critics give it the importance of a figurative text that well exemplifies painting in Palermo at the end of the 15th century, when formal Renaissance issues flowed on a traditional background not shaken by examples such as that of Antonello. The wealth of iconographic elements that the triptych depicts—the heraldry, numerous figures of saints, particular environmental elements such as landscapes with Tuscan backgrounds and majolica pavement in perspective—were well representative of a social context of high-level patronage. All of these elements

and the detailed inscription/description of the name of the painter and date, testifying to the distance between the Renaissance humanist vision of absolute formal, spatial and iconographic synthesis, and the parallel ‘mediaeval humanistic’ vision, an encyclopaedic, hierarchical and doctrinal vision. Today’s archival research attests to the commission of the work to De Vigilia in 1484 by the noble Giacomo Bonanno, civic magistrate and one of the magnates amongst the moguls of the city of Palermo, whose crest, a black cat on gold, is clearly visible on the piece. The format of the triptych, as specified in the commission, is also an interpretation in a monumental manner, of a type already evolved from Gothic models. Other inscriptions made on the work are to be referred to later interventions that took place on the rear doors.



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THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

Antonello Gagini

[Palermo 1478 – 1536]

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

rel. +390916230011/0047

The piece contains a significant part of Palermo's history; for centuries it was located within the recess over the gate of the Collegio Massimo dei Gesuiti along the *Cassaro* (corso Vittorio Emanuele), which today houses the Biblioteca Regionale [Regional library]. Sources passed on its attribution 'to Gagino' and its original provenance from a building belonging to the noble Ventimiglia family that stood on the corner between the *Cassaro* and the old Via del Gambino, which is now Via dell'Università.

The work, small in size, was originally destined for an external location, not an altar. In the transfer to the Jesuits, it was modified by adding the Order's monogram to the shield. The attribution 'to Gagini', understood as Antonello, is confirmed by the latest document-based research proving the existence of the work in 1517, when it was mentioned in the will of Ventimiglia, owner of the "new manor... on the corner in the Gambino area, where the image of the *St. Michael the Glorious* is located". Apparently, the area was identified by the presence and visibility that the statue had on the *Cassaro*. The archival notation is critical to attribute the San Michele to Antonello Gagini with certainty, with respect to other hypotheses regarding his heirs and followers. In 1517, when the statue already existed,



his father Domenico was already deceased; as his children were not yet of age, the only person dedicated to sculpture was, in fact, Antonello, who in 1514 already appeared to have had a studio in the alleyway of Misser Gambino. In the years following, Antonello expanded his presence along the same street, in relation to the large work of art of the Tribune of the Cathedral that he would work on until his death in 1536. This was continued by his children, who also maintained the properties on Via del Gambino. The *St. Michael the Glorious*, as the document cites, presents formal characteristics that are consistent with Antonello's production of the second decade of the Cinquecento, with a more subdued plasticity and a reference to forms by Donatello and Desiderio da Settignano.

**'MALVAGNA TRIPTYCH'
MADONNA ENTHRONED WITH CHILD
AND ANGELS, SAINTS CATHERINE AND
DOROTHY (SIDE PANELS), ADAM AND
EVE AND LANZA COAT OF ARMS (REAR)**

Jan Gossaert

[Maubeuge 1478 - Antwerp 1532]

Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo
Abatellis

.....
Via Alloro, 4 Palermo

tel. +390916230011/0047

.....
The work is known with the name of
the owners, the Princes of Malvagna of

the old Migliaccio and Lanza family.

In 1866, his descendant Alessandro
Migliaccio e Galletti, gifted the prestigious
masterpiece to the public museum of
Palermo, which appropriated it in 1868.
The 19th century printed guides of the city
of Palermo signalled the “not very large
triptych picture above the wooden panel
painting by Albrecht Dürer” at the Palazzo
Malvagna, today's Via Lungarini. At that
time, the reference to Dürer alluded to
a masterpiece of Nordic painting. At the
very recent exhibition at the Metropolitan
in New York dedicated to Gossaert called
Mabuse, from Maubeuge in northern



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France, its likely place of origin, the Malvagna triptych was again studied and subjected to non-invasive analysis and investigations that offered unexpected results and significant confirmations: on the stair of the throne of the Virgin,



camouflaged among the golden carvings, the letters NNI and G are seen; the work was confirmed as the only currently known Gossaert triptych that has been received in its original integrity, complete with its side panels. One could assume its presence in Sicily, in the area of Messina, from the beginning - that is, the early Cinquecento, since the work is datable to 1515. It reached Palermo as part of an inherited estate in the following centuries, but not without intricate events that brought it into the hands of the Grand Duke of Tuscany during the 17th century, to be then returned to its rightful owners. As regarding the specific figurative language, the extreme specialisation of artists emerged, highlighting the contribution of another maestro alongside Gossaert; Gerard David was the artist who painted several parts, including the beautiful landscape with a central building on the rear panels, while the composition and majority of the figures, including Adam and Eve on the rear, who interpret an engraving by Dürer *all'italiana*, are wholly owed to Gossaert. In this dialogue between figurative Italian culture (spatial and perspective rendering, plastic softness and physicality of figures), which Gossaert learned directly in the Italian cities in which he stayed, and the Flemish interpretation, a virtuosic and meticulous rendering of finite lenticular perspectives in small visual fields, obtained with a perfection in preparatory design and pictorial execution, still forms the charm of today's Malvagna Triptych, a symbol of Gossaert's Renaissance.

PIETÀ

Vincenzo da Pavia
(d. 1557 Palermo)
Church della Pietà

.....
Via Torremuzza, 1 Palermo
tel. +390916165266
.....

Among the many works by Vincenzo da Pavia made in Palermo, some of which are housed in the galleries in Palazzo Abatellis, while others, such as this, are still present on the altars of the historical churches in the city, the *Pietà*, dating back to the mature period of the painter, is an important summary of its culture.

The work was commissioned to da Pavia in 1546 by the Dominican nuns of the Convent della Pietà for the main altar of the church that had just been built to serve as their religious residence, the grand house that Francesco Abatellis had destined to become a convent, today's Galleria di Palazzo Abatellis. The lesson of Raphael, learned by various means, such as work left by the Maestro in Rome, carvings and direct contact with Polidoro da Caravaggio, who had worked in the Vatican's Loggias, was fine-tuned by the study that da Pavia would long undertake on *Lo Spasimo*, the large wooden board that came from Raphael's studio, which reached Palermo at the end of the first decade and was placed on one of the altars of the homonymous church of Palermo. The figures of the mourners in the *Pietà* show a reflection in the dramatic sense of the known Raphael's iconography. Da Pavia gained this inflection from the knowledge of Polidoro's painting and his *Road to Calvary*, whose direct citation is found in the rocky wall

topped by vegetation on the right side of the alterpiece as well as in the shifting shapes of characters in the background. Lastly, it highlights the Flemish nordic component that is seen from the choice of iconography that complements the theme of lamentation to that of the *Vesperbild*, which focuses the visual field on the lying prone and exhausted body of Christ.



ARCHITECTURAL WORKS OF LATE 15th AND EARLY 16th CENTURY IN PALERMO

Salvatore Greco

MATTEO CARNILIVARI

Protagonist in the architectural field of the late 15th century in Palermo is the *magister* Matteo Carnilivari.

Few documented records are found on his life and artwork, but they are sufficient to provide a clear picture of an expert and complex man who was able to interpret the ancient Gothic language and renew it with results offering of high architectural value.

A native of Noto, he was trained like all maestros, in a workshop. As a boy, he served as an apprentice under the auspices of a maestro, to gain competence in building art, which would have enabled him to fill the role of *magister fabricator*.

Carnilivari learned the art of cutting stone, acquiring the secrets of stereotomy and the rules of design, knowledge without which it was impossible to create the right shapes, proportions and profiles for gates, windows and frames and the construction of vaults. The particular technical expertise acquired in the construction of vaulted structures, took him to Palermo on behalf of the Viceroy Fernando de Acuña, who would task him to build the vaults the Royal Chancellery (Steri) in December of 1489. This competence was developed in the field of the construction of military facilities, towers and castles where stone vaults ensure the solidity of construction, with the walls forming a compact unit.

These works of art performed with particular skill, earned him particular fame, and in November of 1494 he was invited by the Viceroy to perform urgent work on the fortress of Augusta as a *expert in the repair and fortification of castles and walls*.

His knowledge of construction, linked to his carving ability, must have been well known in Palermo, considering that in April of 1487, a *magister* (a person of the same professional level and not a young man, as was common), committed himself to working for Carnilivari for a year in exchange for learning how to build a carved stone gate with a lintel beam and a payment.

The best-known aspect of his profession is that related to the field of design.

During the time of Matteo Carnilivari, planning took place on the work site,



where plans met practice.

Skilled master carvers contributed to the project, along with patrons that requested the construction of architectural elements that reflected a model like those that were seen in other contemporary buildings.



PALAZZO AJUTAMICRISTO

Via Garibaldi, 41 Palermo
tel. +390917071411

In 1490, the wealthy banker from Pisa Guglielmo Ajutamicristo, Baron of Calatafimi, Favara and Misilmeri, decided to have his stately home built in the city on the alleyway of Porta Termini, taking advantage of the benefits of *Privilege of Ferdinand the Catholic of 1482*.

This Privilege allowed the placement of large buildings and the realignment of irregular roads, aimed at improving the urban appearance, for the benefit of the wealthiest patrons.

The planning choice and management of work fell on the most experienced man of the time, the maestro from Noto, who had proved his skills to the banker by assisting in the work of completing and expanding the castle of Misilmeri.

Construction started with the demolition of buildings that were located in the area to build on, which was followed by new masonry. Once the main structure was built, master carvers were chosen, who would carve the blocks of the façade, the windows and of all the other carvings.

The presence of Matteo Carnilivari on the work site is clear from archived documentation up to December 1493. From this date, he was replaced by the foreman of the fabricators of the city of Palermo, Nicolò Grisafi who would complete the construction and create the loggia with three arches on the front interior of the entrance, which takes the

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form of that made in the inner courtyard. The outcome of research conducted to date on the Quattrocento-esque building plan offered a hypothesis as to the original structure consisting of a main building on the current Via Garibaldi, and two wings behind it forming an orthogonal C-shape, closed in by a wall outlining an inner courtyard, which was nearly a requisite for homes of prestige.



Comparing the hypothetical original planimetry of Palazzo Abatellis and Palazzo Ajutamicristo, the latter shows a failure to close the fourth side with buildings, presenting a singular C-shape enclosed by a wall.

A recent discovery of two single Quattrocento-esque lancet windows in correspondence with the wall that enclosed the courtyard, evidenced by the presence of a construction towards the inner side of the wall, which would have completed the quadrilateral enclosure to create a rectangular courtyard, making the floor plan similar to that of Palazzo Abatellis. The body of this building, of one or two floors, may have been demolished in order to expand the space of the internal courtyard when the structure was expanded at the end of the 18th century, annexing a new building, external to the old wall. The main façade in freestone did not offer access to the rooms of the ground floor, accessible only through the courtyard through two large gates, illuminated by five finely carved lancet windows. The windows on the ground and second

floors had a lowered arch with arched lintel in relief that rested on corbels, while for the main floor, were chosen articulated mullioned and three-mullioned windows with pointed arches with a multiple arched lintel in relief, resting on the stringcourse frame. The model chosen for the living quarters—mullioned and three-mullioned windows placed above the entrance area, architraved with rich fretwork—is more elaborate. Another model used, which is found in various contemporary buildings, is the simple lancet without carvings in relief with lintel comprised of two symmetrical blocks forming a curved profile with the tip pointing upward. On the rear façade of the main structure of the building stands the portico with lowered polycentric arches, with a loggia above with perfectly carved pointed arches. There were, of course, multiple halls with wooden ceilings with corbels with hanging arches finely decorated as would suit the most important stately mansions of the Quattrocento.

In 1558, Palazzo Ajutamicristo was bought by the Moncada family of the princes of Paternò, who made various changes to the building both in terms of interior decorations and openings, almost completely erasing those original. In the 18th century, as already mentioned, a new building designed by Venanzio Marvuglia was annexed to the rear sections. A portion of the building was sold in the late 19th century to the Calefati di Canalotti family, while the other, which included the 18th century structures, was sold to the Tasca family then acquired by



the Regione Siciliana. Today, it houses the public collection of sculptures and stone materials to which Canova's *Stele Mellerio* and the *Bust of Pietro Speciale* by Gagini belong (see above, p. 38).

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PALAZZO ABATELLIS

Via Alloro, 4 Palermo
tel. +390916230011/0047

Francesco Abatellis, the master *Portulano* (Magistrate who controlled the ports) of the Kingdom, a leading political figure in Palermo during the late Quattrocento, chose the magister Matteo Carnilivari, the most experienced man who had already proved his ability, to build his stately home in the area of *Ganchie Sancte Marie de Jesu* (now Via Alloro).

The act with the provisions for construction



was signed by the maestro from Noto on 16th January 1490. Among these, Carnilivari agreed to follow the design guidelines provided by the patron, consisting of the prescription as models for the *domus* of architectural elements and finishes of private buildings: the building of the Catalan merchant Bonet and that of the Baron of Muxaro in Agrigento. The number of master *fabricators* and carvers are indicated at no less than twelve, as well as workers and assistants, which gives an idea of the size of the work site.

In order to build the quadrilateral-shaped building with its inner courtyard, Carnilivari chose to collaborate with skilled carvers, who would also work at Palazzo Ajutamicristo, the Majorcan Joan de Casada and Antioco de Cara, creators of the architraved windows with fretwork that open on the crenellated towers and prospectus, both internally and externally. Similarly to Palazzo Ajutamicristo, on one side of the inner courtyard, a portico with overhanging loggia was built, in this case with the arches of the loggia aligned with the portico below, from which an exposed stairway connected it with the loggia. The singular entrance gate is formed by four concentric orders of scepters, of which the



last twisted rope connects the overlying rhombus with the heraldic emblems that of the Abatellis family as well as that of his wife, the Soler family. Construction was completed in 1495 by *magistri* Domenico Ramundi and Bernardo de Fossato, who in 1491 replaced the *magister* Matteo Carnilivari who had resigned.

As a bequest of the master *Portulano*, who died without heirs, the building was donated to the Dominican nuns della Pietà in 1526 following the death of his second wife. The transfer preserved the property from the risk of heavy modification, which were limited to those dictated by the demands of the monastic life and tastes of the time.

The building defined, by historian of 17th century Vincenzo Di Giovanni, “*a home with workmanship finer than every other house in Palermo*”, following the removal of religious bodies in 1866, it became property of the State.

After a long period of neglect, the bombings

of the Second World War seriously damaged the building, causing the collapse of the loggia and part of the corner tower. The early response of the Superintendent Mario Guiotto allowed for the recovery of the collapsed parts and restoration of the original structure, repairing the stone elements destroyed and those removed over time due to the changing needs of style. The skilled creators of the new carvings, Antonino Pumo and Mario Rutelli, heirs of an ancient tradition, were able to reproduce the simplest to the most complex architectural elements, demonstrating an ability that could compete with the old masters of the Quattrocento. Once the post-war restoration was completed by Superintendent Armando Dillon, the layout curated by Carlo Scarpa would follow, which concluded in 1954, leaving the building to house the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia [Sicily’s Regional Gallery].



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CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DELLA CATENA

.....
Piazzetta delle Dogane (Cala), Palermo
tel. +39091321529
.....

The church, a jewel of Catalan-Gothic architecture, was built in the early 16th century at the request of the brotherhood of Santa Maria della Catena, near the basin of the *Cala*, at the same site where a chapel bearing the same name was located.

The special care taken in the architectural design, and the attention paid to the decorative elements encouraged several historians to attribute *magister* Matteo Carnilivari as its creator, even though documented sources to date do not allow substantiate this claim.

The church was made entirely of freestone, and architect Hittorff defined its execution *the finest*, taking the planimetric and spatial constructive elements of the Cathedral of Palermo, the most important place of



worship in Palermo, as a reference. Basilica floor plan with three naves, titulus and antititulus, three apses and oriented to the east, just like the Cathedral, which differs in the form of its polygonal apses. The area corresponding to the presbytery (titulus and antititulus) was transversely wider in respect to the naves, originally without side chapels, using a Norman model that was already used in the construction of the churches of San Sebastiano alla Galca and San Francesco d'Assisi.

The columns with fine composite capitals in marble and pedestals in articulated geometric form comprise the internal vertical elements of the entire church, surmounted by exposed stone arches with multiple arched lintel with lowered points in a longitudinal direction and acute points transversally.

The walls raised on the arches have single lancet windows in the central nave, and double lancet windows and a circular oculus in the presbytery.

The ceiling of the church is made entirely with stonework vaults with a ribbed cross in the nave and presbytery, with the exception of the central area of the titulus covered with a stellar vault, the lateral naves were covered by lowered ribbed barrel vaults. This construction technique, which replaced the traditional decorated wooden ceilings of places of worship, was made possible by the arrival to the city of skilled master carvers in *dammusi* [vaults] from Spain and Eastern Sicily, among which were the *magister* Matteo Carnilivari and his best pupil Antonio Belguardo.

The naves are lit by single lancet windows



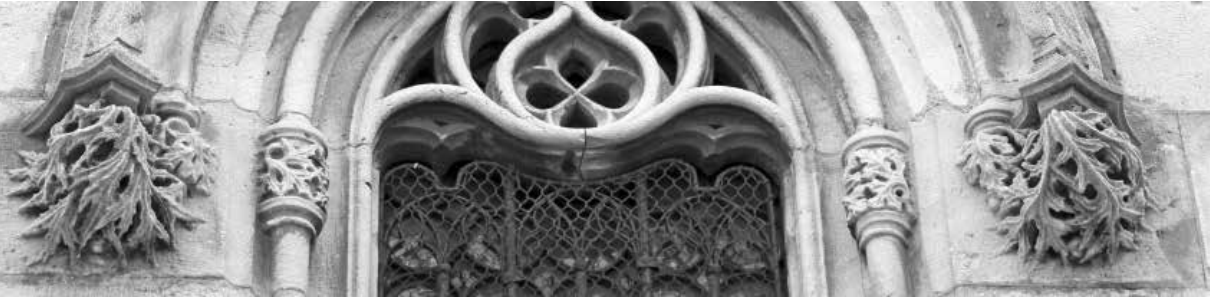
in the central nave, and by well-carved with fretwork on the northern nave.

The area of the presbytery is illuminated by single lancet windows on the northern facade, of a similar form to those of the northern nave, and two circular oculi located on the wall of the side apses. Two single lancet windows, located in the wall of the titulus above the naves increase the brightness of the presbytery, as the southern wall does not show any windows due to the presence of structures placed against it.

The beautiful result achieved in the implementation of the various constructive details shows the special care taken by the members of the Brotherhood in choosing the best artisans in Palermo. For the marble gate, would rely on the most famous family of *marmorari* [marble workers], the Gaginis or their workshop; Vincenzo Gaginis

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attributed with the high reliefs in marble of the lunettes inserted in the gates of the main prospectus.

The exterior, which features a lowered arched portico with side turrets, crowned with finely carved elegant tiles, would have had an overhanging element before 1581, as would the Church of Santa Maria la Nova, enriched by five windows carved in marble. This is derived from an appraisal made

for the Brotherhood of Santa Maria della Catena to obtain compensation from the Senate for damages incurred following the extension of *Cassaro* (now corso Vittorio Emanuele) that took place precisely that year.

The urban planning intervention desired by the Viceroy involved the creation of an external staircase with double-flighted stairs to compensate for the height difference produced by lowering the street level and the configuration of the front side to the new road, with a coating of dressed stone with slightly protruding pilasters, similar to those of the northern front, complete with simple rectangular windows in Renaissance style. It is likely that the expansion of the original portico with centred arches, as seen in the pictorial views of the early 19th century, is coeval to this configuration. In 1835, the architect Hittorff, in *Architecture moderne de la Sicile*, graphically represents the portico of the church by removing the discordant expansion of the portico, a change that would take place a few years later on behalf of the Commissione di Antichità e Belle Arti [Commission of Antiques and Fine Arts],



which would task architect Francesco Saverio Cavallari to prepare a restoration's expertise.

Between 1841 and 1846, the warehouses located to the left of the portico and the northern prospectus are demolished along with the structure that expanded the portico towards via Toledo, and the double staircase was replaced with the present polygonal staircase. The purpose of the intervention was to give the monument back an image that was more similar to the original, which after the demolitions, required restoration of some parts decorated in freestone (the carved panels

of the crown, the blocks of ribs on the cross and the arch to the left of the porch), which due to the particular difficulty of execution, it was established that it must *have been made by the best stone carver in Palermo.*

Maestro Nicolò Rutelli was chosen, an expert carver and confidant of the Commission, whose intervention is recognisable only due to the colour difference in the blocks of limestone used. The external image is restored, the Commission intervenes between 1884 and 1891 with architect Giuseppe Patricolo to remove "*the 18th century cloak that enveloped*



(ph D'Aguzzo/Civita Sicilia)

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the church with a vulgar and insignificant mass of stucco... and make the body of this admirable work appear with grace".
(Gustavo Giovannoni).

The church would suffer some damage as a result of air strikes during World War II, would be restored by the *Soprintendenza dei Monumenti* under the direction of Mario Guiotto.

In the fifties, in occasion of the construction of the new entrance at the *Archivio di Stato* [State Archive], the apses were uncovered displaying the exquisite stone carvings of the crowns. Up until this point, they were almost entirely incorporated into the old structure of the Convent.



