



Florence - Malta
Cross References

THE ZEJTUN PAINTING

SHADES OF CARAVAGGIO

VAE CATHEDRAL
VIRGINI ET MAKTIA
INVICTISSIMA ER
PHILIPPO S. V. CAMB
FRANCISCO VV
VIRTUOSI JOAN
TIEROSO MAGNI
AGISTRI, EQUITAT
RAEFECTVA
RAESINTESSINA
EVS OF PENT
IATIN PESSIO
EXPERTVS SEADI
IVLIA 1411
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Restoration and Conservation: Before, During, After

ROBERTA LAPUCCI

General overview on the state of preservation

When it arrived in the SACI Laboratory the painting was in a generally sound state.

The problems were related to:

- a bad lining (the painting is still slightly warped);
- a heavy plastering (with red plaster over mounting the original paint);
- negative factors from the surrounding marine environment (chlorine based, humid, warm);
- a bad stretcher (which provoked many losses especially along the central cross bar, unfortunately located just in the middle of the main figures faces);
- over cleaning (in the central young girl's face and in the adjacent boy's mantle).

Past restorations and negative life events

Documented:

St. Catherine of Alexandria was dropped from the Church calendar in 1969 as a result of Vatican II. Prior to that she was second only to Mary Magdalene in popularity among female Saints. She was reinstated in 2002. Therefore, for this event many of her images were renewed.

In the Zejtun parish Church both the globigerina statue (in 2001), and the painting (in 2004-2005) underwent restoration.

2004-2005: This intervention consisted of an attempt to clean two faces and bodies (the young woman in the centre and the young man with the hat). Here a too strong cleaning solvent had been used producing a harsh removal of subtle glazes, especially from the woman's face (Tab. XVIII). The project was abandoned and all the central area with the personages was protected with a synthetic varnish.

Hypothesized:

1990s: white plastering on losses (Tab. XIII); black contour retouching (Tab. XIV); relining.

1614: Maybe the painting was already in Zejtun at the time of the Turkish Razzia. This can be suggested by the location of the main losses (in St. Catherine body, in the faces and hearts of the personages). Maybe the Turks attacked this artwork as though they were real persons or Christian symbols because all the paintings in the Churches were terribly destroyed. Probably

this would explain why in 1615 during the Pastoral Visit it is mentioned as "recenter depicta" (recently painted).

Technique of execution and preliminary report on the state of preservation

The frame did not travel with the painting to SACI but remained on site in Malta; however it is old, wooden, gilded, though not original.

Support

The painting is executed on three portions of a linen canvas (long linden) ¹.

The painting's support is composed of three stripes of the same fabric having a regular, compact weave, 10 (warp) x 11 (weft) threads per centimetre. With a density of 110 per square centimetre.

The warp runs in the vertical direction, the weft in the horizontal one, however there is no selvedge visible. The threads are of a good quality and do not show any fusiform thickening.

Each stripe has a different width (A = 95 cm, B = 102 cm C is smaller on top 3 cm and progressively bigger towards the bottom where it is almost 7 cm). They are joined vertically with neat hemming stitches; the sewing runs from the top side downward.

- A/B at 95 cm distance from the left side;

- B/C at 197 cm from the left side.

Presumably the canvas was coated with animal glue, before the application of the priming layers, to close the air interstices between thread and thread.

The painting has been relined with a hemp canvas having a regular burlap weave, of 5 (warp) x 5 (weft) threads per centimetre; density 25 per square centimetre. As an adhesive Poly-vinyl-Acetate has been used. The lining canvas is attached with staples, at intervals of 8-10 cm.

The two canvases are currently fixed to the wooden stretcher with metal staples set at 5/6 cm intervals from each other (Tab. XV).

The original canvas however shows holes produced by large headed nails that previously anchored it to the ancient stretcher; between these holes the distance is of 9/10 cm from each other. 2.5 to 3 cm of the original are bent on each side and the current stretcher is much smaller than the original one. These second nails and the painted and primed canvas fragments folded on the side edges show us

how much bigger the painting was in the past; it has been trimmed more on the upper side (see Auxiliary stretcher section) and when positioned, it has been fixed in a bent diagonal direction.

The canvas is slightly loose, resulting in a general concave depression. However the lining canvas is able to function as a support. No relining is needed at this time. Eventually strip lining is needed to recover the original size of the painting on a new bigger eventual future auxiliary stretcher.

Auxiliary Support

A modern wooden stretcher is present now. It is made of silver fir (*Abies Alba*).

It is not the original but has been replaced during a modern restoration.

It is fixed, glued, and has a single fork mortise. On the corners it is reinforced with a nailed flat wooden triangle shaped portion (Tab. XVI). It is planar but does not provide an adequate support; the corners cannot expand in case of need, so the painting must be kept in the future in a climate controlled environment (stabilizers and buffer materials must be applied to the back).

It has a central horizontal cross bar and four diagonal ones on the corners (English stretcher).

The current stretcher is smaller than the original must have been; the canvas has been cut down from its original size, especially on the upper side edge on the other three sides painted canvas is bent over the side edges of the stretchers (see Support). On the paint layer we can notice the marks impressed on the front of the canvas by the previous stretcher bars.

These marks indicate that its bars were originally much wider; the stretcher's marks do not appear on the top side, making us hypothesize that on top the painting was much higher (at least 10 cm).

The wood is slightly attacked by a wood worm infestation.

In the future, after the painting has been returned to its Island, and not before transportation back or it will not fit in its precise box, which had been prepared for shipping it to Florence and back, it would be appropriate to insert small round portions on the side of the stretcher to distance it from the bars and to expand to recover the original canvas size; this would also mean expanding or substituting the gilded frame.

Priming Layers

The chemical analysis showed us the presence of two thick layers of priming both with large grains (*gesso grosso*); the lower one contains orange grains; the upper one also contains a few rare grains of charcoal black ².

On top of these two layers there is another layer only containing charcoal black (not definable as

priming but rather as a ground layer); it is quite thin, 15 microns, and discontinuous, probably used to set some areas immediately on a deep dark level ³.

Because there is not a distinct separation of the two layers in the chemical sample, we can deduce that probably the top layer of priming was added when the underlying one was still wet.

In synthesis:

n. 1 is pale red-orange thick (deeper)

n. 2 is reddish brown, thick (uppermost)

n. 3 is only charcoal black, thin (not present everywhere and not containing gypsum).

This reddish orange layer is visible only in the abraded areas; no *en reserve* technique is present.

In other areas the red old plaster (darker and more purple than the original priming layer) is evident.

The surface of the painting is marked by numerous losses ⁴ (Tabs. XIX-XX-XXI).

During a past restoration most of them were covered with a tacky red plaster in an effort, perhaps, to mimic the reddish priming layer beneath. Although the plaster conceals the losses, its rough, haphazard application with a large spatula has not only spoilt the surface texture of the picture but obscured much of the intact original paint layer by over plastering.

Other smaller losses, have been filled, at a later time, with a white plaster; these repairs are smoother and generally better as the restorer has been careful not to lather plaster over the original paint layer.

Also as to the materials, the red plaster is made of Calcium Carbonate, red ochre and oil; therefore it cannot be softened and removed by chemical procedures without risking harm to the original oil paint layer; we must remove it from the original paint layer by microscope and mechanical cleaning procedures (scalpel). We will not remove it from within the losses (being too compact and strong, the side edges of the loss could flake off) but we will take off what is placed on original portions of the painting.

The white plaster does not need to be removed being made of a still soft and compatible plaster (based on calcium bi-hydrate) and not being placed over any original portion but only located within the losses; it only needs a better surface texturing.

Preliminary Drawing

IR reflectography did not show any trace of preliminary charcoal drawing. Some black contour lines are visible on top of the paint layer (marking the outer profiles of the composition). It is not easy to understand when they are retouching work and when they are original composition at lines ⁵.

Paint Film

The picture was painted in an oil medium, of walnut ⁶. Paint and priming layers flaked off in the past due

to lack of adhesion with the support. This caused several losses which have been plastered and retouched at different time periods.

There is an ancient red over plastering⁷; in other areas a white plastering of the XX century (see Priming layer). White plaster was retouched with oil in a black colour (no-shades at all); being quite recent oil paint this bad retouching can be eliminated by chemical cleaning.

Red plaster has been over painted and its colour has changed over the years, no longer blending with the original. This more ancient retouching has to be eliminated too but this time by scalpel and mechanical cleaning.

Tears and rips are abundant but have all been plastered and repaired in the past; none is open or exposed now; they were located mainly in the faces and bodies of the personages.

There is a difference in the use of pigments between the first two versions (using lead white, red ochre, green earth, yellow ochre, charcoal black, ultramarine)⁸ and the third paint layer (addition of second head of soldier, coat of arms, map and inscription, after 1614) where indigo is present (instead of ultramarine) for the blue and red lacquer⁹.

The paint film underwent minimum chromatic alterations; it is slightly discoloured, primarily due to a general darkening caused by the aging of the oil and by the effect of the burnt umber and charcoal coming up from the ground layer.

On the face of the young girl in the centre of the crowd strong cleaning has expunged subtle glaze layers along with a notable amount of pigment. It will be glazed again during the current restoration to blend it in with the original artwork with easily reversible pigments and binders.

Problems are occurring also in the mantle of the boy; the green original subtle glazes have been over cleaned in the top part by the restorer who over cleaned the young girl's face; revealing an underlying bright yellow ochre layer. On the rest, during the XX century restoration, a black layer had been applied; which will be taken away in this restoration.

Craquelure pattern is regular and more evident in the thick lead white areas.

Along the central cross bar (transversal) there are exposed losses, due to the contact of that bar to the back of canvas, unfortunately located in the faces of the main personages. They will be plastered and retouched.

Varnish

Several varnish layers are present in different areas of the artwork, unevenly coated with two layers of glossy varnish.

The top varnish is not original but quite modern; it produces a bluish fluorescence in UV light

meaning the use of a synthetic product, acrylic or ketonic varnish and has a polarity of Fd 87.

The underlying layer is aged; it produces a yellow fluorescence (natural resin based); it has been partially removed, only from the central area of the faces, by the restorer in 2004–2005; it has a Polarity of 79 and is probably an oleo-resinous mixture (we can guess it is older than 150 years, due to the resistance to certain solvents). This varnish is oxidised, darkened and covered with dust and grime. Rebalancing of the varnish layers is needed; partial removal of the older oxidized layer is mandatory to recover a good readability of the composition. The painting's surface is quite dry and will need also a general new varnish layer application.

Daily diary of work

The painting entered SACI Laboratory in September 2006. Temporary importation documents were arranged.

The wooden box containing the painting was opened downstairs, the painting was carried to the second floor Laboratory.

Immediately an anti-wood worm treatment was applied on the infested stretcher bars: a solution of Per-Xil 10 applied by brush, to be repeated after 6 months and then every two years.

For over a month preliminary Image Diagnostic and Chemical Testing were performed.

At the end of November, with the help of Luisa Gusmeroli, cleaning tests (Feller, Wolbers and Cremonesi) (Tab. XXII) were executed to estimate the polarity of the materials to be removed and thus to understand if organic solvents alone could be sufficient to remove these materials or if restorers needed to apply physical/chemical forces.

Successful Solutions:

- for the most recent layer of varnish (synthetic varnish): Fd 87: 20% Acetone, 80% Ligroin;
- for the second layer (old resin based varnishes mixed with aged oil): Fd 79: 30% Ethanol, 70 % Ligroin.

Decision: first solvent to be used all over the painting Ethyl Alcohol/petroleum ether (1:3) neutralized with petroleum ether to remove recent varnish layer (same polarity as the tested solvents, but minor toxicity) (Tabs. XVII, XXIII).

This procedure was carried on from December 2006 to beginning of February 2007.

The Image Diagnostic had permitted us to distinguish ahead some shapes that were hidden from visible analysis, by the darkened varnish layers and the surface grime deposits.

The first level cleaning, revealed the presence of several retouching and also recovered those details revealed by the diagnostic test, such as under the brown background, the presence of lances and halberds on

the left side; and an arch door and a capital on the right side (Tab. XXIV).

After this general cleaning was over, a recent matt varnish layer was applied temporarily in order to get rid of the blanching phenomenon and determine if the first level of varnish removal could be uniform and sufficient (Tab. XXVI).

At this point other solvents were tested aimed at removing the second level varnish, such as

- Acetone based Solvent gel, neutralized with Ligoir.

Marginally effective, leaves yellow residue. Refused.

- Cocollagene Solution, pH 8.5 (2 ml. TEA in water, 4 ml. Cocollagene, 3-4 g. Klucel; neutralize with water and Tween 20). Marginally effective; excessively alkaline, too strong/uncontrollable. Refused.

- Alkaline-thickened chelating solution pH 8 (100 ml. water, 1.5 g. citric acid, 9 ml. TEA, 2 g. Carbopol; neutralize with a mixture of 5 ml. water, 45 ml. isopropyl alcohol, 45 ml. white spirit, 5 ml. ethyl alcohol. Rinse a second time with 2% Cocollagene in water). Not effective. Refused.

- Chelating solvent (1 g. Citric Acid, 25 ml. DMSO, 4 ml. TEA, 5% Klucel. Eliminate with a dry cotton swab, rinse with ethyl alcohol and water 1:1). Effective in removing retouching. Accepted.

This second level cleaning occurred from February to October 2007.

At times it was interrupted in order to carry on some other diagnostic tests, such as FTIR, FORS.

This second level cleaning was not necessary everywhere. In some areas the previous restorers had already removed partially or totally this older varnish layer. We applied it only where it was still obscuring (like in the background and in the lower bottom part and map), using the solvent just mentioned above.

In other parts, which required a more "delicate" ap-

proach, as they had had already part of the ancient varnish removed, we used a solution of DMSO and ligoir (1:2) supported in a wax Emulsion and neutralized by ligoir.

Meanwhile (April to November 2007) other cleaning tests were done aimed at determining the best way to remove the red coloured plaster, applied in an ancient restoration, which surmounted much of the original paint layer.

No solvent or supportant was effective to jellify it, or in anyway to soften this hard plaster.

Therefore we had to remove it completely by the use of a scalpel (Tab. XXVII), mechanically under binocular microscope.

Though it was possible to recover some areas of the original paint layer from underneath, the red plaster was extremely tough and adherent, making removal a very delicate process; within the losses it has been left but a surface texture bettering has been executed.

Replastering of the open losses occurred with synthetic plaster (Modostuc, a mix of acrylic and poly - vinyl because it has to resist high humidity and temperature levels on the island); we choose the mahogany coloured one for the background areas, the white one for the faces of the personages.

Surface texturing occurred in negative (carving by scalpel) and positive (mimicking the reliefs with plaster or Schminke Water paste by brush).

Talens gouache colours were used for the basic layers of retouching on the plastered areas to create a base undertone nuance (Tab. XXV).

End of November 2007: the painting was varnished at this first retouching level with Talens Retouching Varnish by brush in order to provide a good readability to the artwork (Fig. 15).

After this checking we considered the cleaning level uniform and the retouching bases balanced; we were ready to "close" the painting with the final transparent glazes (Tabs. XXIV-XXV) in varnish colours (Kremer pigments suspended in Schminke Mastic varnish mixed to Canada Balsam) on the basis undertone to bring every area to the matching level.

Final varnishing was executed by the use of a compressor (air spray) and with Ketonic Varnish ¹⁰.



15. Varnishing.

Notes

¹ BORGIOI, p. 25.

² *Ivi*, p. 27.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ PELAGOTTI-MARRAS, p. 24.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ BORGIOI, p. 27.

⁷ PELAGOTTI-MARRAS, p. 23.

⁸ BORGIOI, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ A special thank to Ottavio Ciappi for his precious suggestions.

A new Approach Determined by the Restoration

ROBERTA LAPUCCI

Beheading Discrepancies

The interpretation of the beheading of St. Catherine in the Zejtun painting is unconventional, displaying significant discrepancies with literary sources and previous portrayals:

- St. Catherine is not depicted young and beautiful as in her legend;
- witnesses to her death are extremely calm. Traditionally, when the wheel shatters many are injured and the atmosphere surrounding her beheading is chaotic;
- when St. Catherine is finally beheaded, milk pours from the wound of decapitation, although in the Zejtun painting it is clearly blood which flows from her neck.

While these divergences could have been deliberate choices made by the artist, one can see another possibility when comparing this scene with a second famed beheading, that of St. John the Baptist:

- Both Saints were beheaded, a death reserved for the noble-born;
- the settings are similar; St. Catherine is beneath an arch outdoors, a locale much like the prison yard of St. John's execution;
- figures commonly seen at St. John's death are also present in the Zejtun painting: a brutish executioner, an elderly woman identical to the one rendered in the Co-Cathedral *Beheading of the Baptist*, and a woman similar to Caravaggio's model for Salomé (Madrid, Prado or London, National Gallery) ¹ (Fig. 19 and Tab.VI).

The alternate iconography of St. John is able to explain certain elements evident in the Zejtun painting where St. Catherine's legend falls short:

- the masculine anatomy and rough complexion of St. Catherine is closer to representations of St. John;

- St. Catherine's lack of formal attire corresponds to the iconography of St. John, who is generally portrayed as wearing a white garment.

Taking these distinctions into account, if one were to strip St. Catherine of her long hair and sole attribute, the scene could reasonably be interpreted as the beheading of St. John.

Conclusions

The painting is executed in three different stages:

1. By Caravaggio? (1607-1608);
2. By Minniti? (1611);
3. By Garagone? (1614),

1. By Caravaggio (1607-1608)

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Lombard artist (1571-1610)

More intriguing is the hypothesis that this *Martyrdom of St. Catherine* could have been a compositional sketch for a first version of Caravaggio's *Beheading of St. John* in the Co-Cathedral, supported by the fact that:

- the model who posed for the face of St. Catherine seems to be the same as the one in St. John's face in the *Beheading* ²;
- St. Catherine's body seems sketched from a male one (right breast is not present), and transformed into a female one at a later stage;
- in this possible first *St. John's Beheading* the violent action is already executed (the head is completely cut off), while the final *Beheading* is frozen at the instant of the execution (St. John's head is not completely cut off, the executioner is taking out his knife to complete the separation of the head in order to place it on the servant's tray).

It is possible that Caravaggio started executing this painting as a first draft for the *Beheading* in the way (stylistical and technical) he was used to working when in Naples (just before his Maltese sojourn); the size, and format are very similar to the *Flagellation* and the *Seven Acts of Mercy*, as is the chemical composition of the two priming layers with a charcoal black subtle discontinuous film on top ³. Then someone could have asked him to start again with a different iconographical repre-



19. Zejtun painting, detail showing a portion of Salomé's silver platter, after restoration

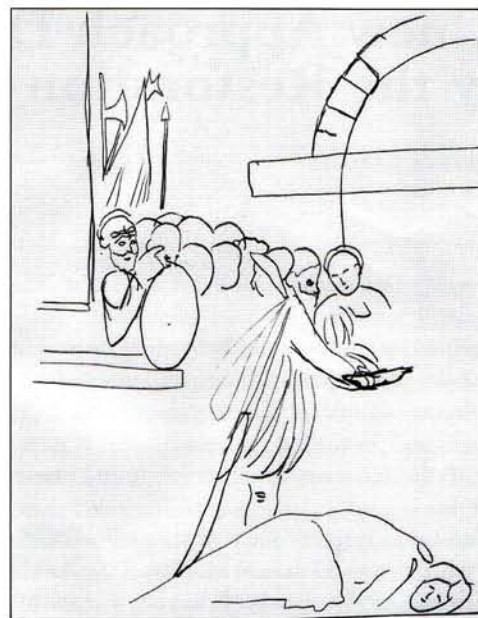
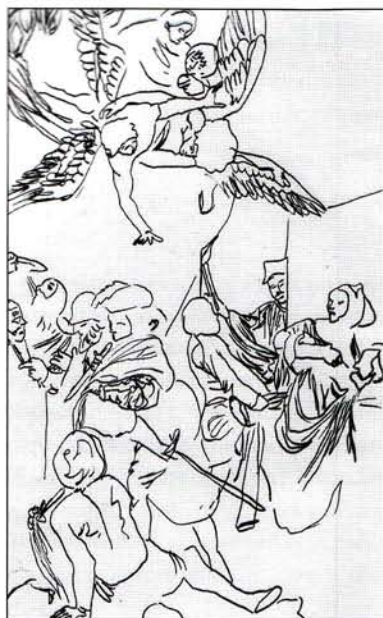
Graphic of the compositional lines in:

20. Caravaggio, *Seven Acts of Mercy*, Naples, Capodimonte

21. Zejtun painting, first sketch

22. Caravaggio, *Beheading of St. John*, La Valletta, St. John's Co-Cathedral

23. Caravaggio, *Burial of St. Lucy*, Siracuse, Church of S. Lucia al Sepolcro



sensation (with St. John not already dead) and also to include imprisoned figures, as the "tasks" of the Confraternita della Misericordia required for them) and with a more monumental size and a horizontal format.

Particularly: «At the time that Caravaggio was painting the *Beheading*, Fra Bernardo de Espeleta Xavier was probably the most distinguished and important figure in the Confraternity (of the Misericordia). It can be assumed, but not proven, that he was still a member of the Confraternity and involved in discussions with the artist on the method of payment, donation or otherwise and on the very significant decision to have it painted on a monumental scale and horizontal format»⁴.

This Confraternity changed the name from Oratory of St. John the Baptist, to Oratory of St. John Beheaded in 1602 and continued complaining that they were missing a painting dedicated to this Saint's Martyrdom.

The Saint's supreme act of dying well and the presence of the prisoners are alluding to the tasks of the Confraternity member, which was assistance to condemned men during their final moments⁵.

In a later phase Caravaggio could have reused this "rejected" (refused) composition, that he had already studied, in another place where he was freer to choose (in Sicily for example, as for the *Burial of St. Lucy*).

From a technical point of view, two other characteristics bring this masterpiece (in the first layer of work) so close to Caravaggio:

- the way the canvases are joined, following a scheme that is almost the same as for the Sicilian canvases⁶;
- the colour and composition of the two priming layers (orange, red-brown) with charcoal on top

which resemble his Neapolitan artworks (*Flagellation*, *Seven Acts of Mercy*)⁷.

For what concerns the pictorial layers he "just started" setting down his lead white preliminary "abbozzi" (sketches) like the face of the Saint, the main shape of his/her body executed after the face⁸, a very rough sketch for the central personages' faces and bodies and for the first version of the left hand side soldier's bust. And then he abandoned this masterpiece.

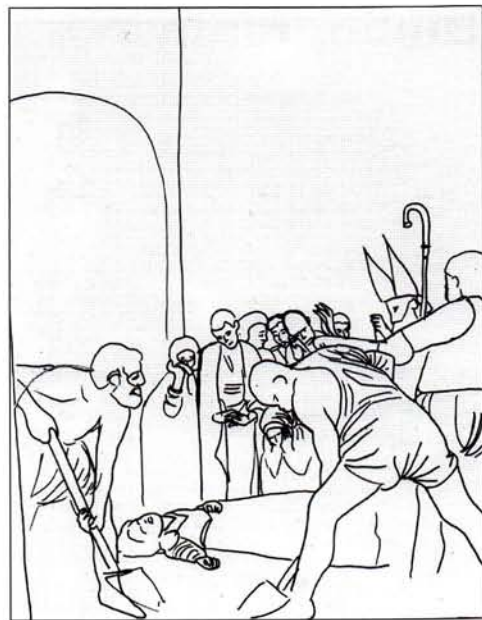
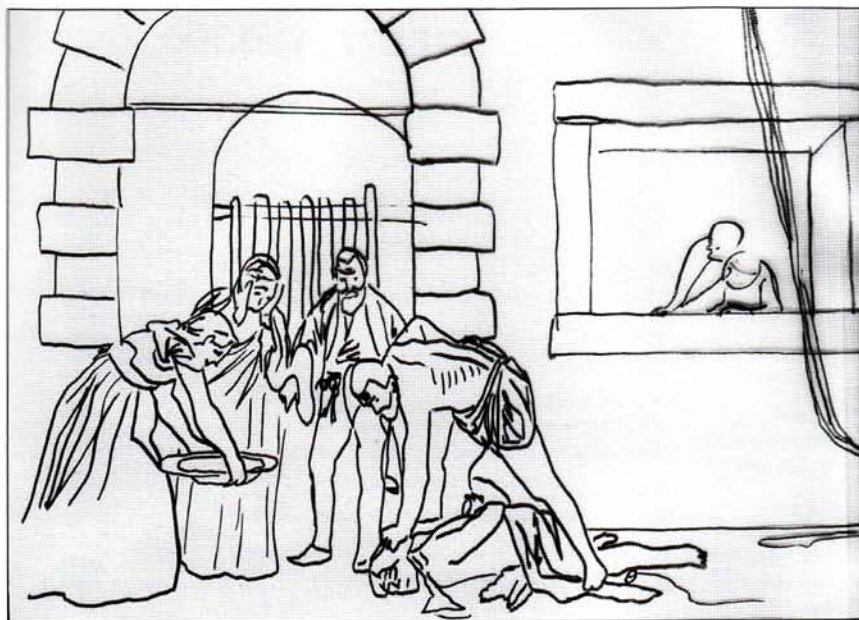
2. By Minniti, between 1609-1613

Mario Minniti, Sicilian artist (1577-1640)

After seeing the *Burial of St. Lucy*, and maybe after Caravaggio's escape from Sicily probably Mario Minniti could have completed this painting that had been left unfinished by his best friend; he might have been responsible for transforming the subject from St. John's Martyrdom into a St. Catherine, perhaps because the artwork was going to be put into a Church dedicated to St. Catherine.

Minniti's materials match perfectly Caravaggio's ones; there is no-technical difference; we must remember that they often worked together, such as at the Del Monte Palace, in Rome, or in Sicily. However from the stylistic point of view some parts are absolutely by his hand (they lack Caravaggio's quality, and are weaker); particularly referent to Minniti's way of painting are:

- the head of the central girl (so close to the Nain widow and so similar as a pose, but different in brushstroke mark, from Caravaggio's Madrid Salomè)⁹;
- in the executioner's body those typical orange counter-light effects and semi-shadow passages (in his neck, leg), which are absent in Caravaggio.



3. By Garagona, immediately after 6th of July 1614—before 1615

Bartolomeo Garagona, Maltese artist (1584–c. 1641)

The artwork is mentioned in Cagliares Pastoral Visit of 1615 as “recently painted”; after analysis and restoration, we all agree that the coat of arms, the new soldier’s head and the map were added at this stage. The hypothesis of Garagona as an author for these additions was proposed by David Stone¹⁰. The local origin of the artist could justify the use of such a pigment as indigo (sea trade linked to Spain and consequently to the New World, where indigo comes from).

Again some references go back to the Co-Cathedral of St. John; in 1612 the minor painter Bartolomeo Garagona was commissioned to paint a *Crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St. John*; some scholars assert¹¹ that it was intended to replace Caravaggio’s *Beheading*. The documents, however show otherwise. The picture was commissioned by the novices, and there is no mention of replacing a Caravaggio painting.

In conclusion I cannot remove the question marks from my three proposals of attribution.

From a technical and iconographical point of view it seems that Caravaggio is present in a starting sketch for a *St. John’s Beheading* composition; Minniti changes and does most of *The Martyrdom of St. Catherine* version. Possibly Garagona adds the inscription, the map, the coat of arms, and the second head of soldier.

Stylistically Caravaggio is very hidden; X-ray and IR reflectography confirm his possible presence in some faces sketch (girl, boy with hat and mantle, body and face of St. Catherine/John, legs). As well as the general composition (especially after the recovering of the halberds and lances and of the arch on the right upper side). For a reconstruction of Caravaggio’s elements, see graphics in these pages. For the rest, the painting’s style rather suggests Minniti. And the different materials identify what could be by Garagona.

Historically the lack of the final “links in the chain”, impedes a confirmation of these hypotheses, but we all hope that with this publication we were able to open a new path for research to the Maltese specialists working on documents and in the archives.

Notes

¹ HUTER, p. 14.

² *Ibidem*.

³ LAPUCCI 2007, p. 134 (referring to Bruno Arciprete analysis and restoration, 2005).

⁴ SCIBERRAS 2007, p. 765.

⁵ SCIBERRAS 2007, p. 764.

⁶ LAPUCCI 1994, p. 21; LAPUCCI 1996, p. 38.

⁷ LAPUCCI 2007, pp. 136–137; ARCIPRETE 2005, pp. 33–34.

⁸ PELAGOTTI-MARRAS, p. 23.

⁹ HUTER, p. 14.

¹⁰ CUTAJAR 1989, p. 10, note 3.

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