

‘More than meets the eye...’:
Observations on the Mattia Preti
Quadricentennial Exhibitions of 2013

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Fig. 1
Mattia Preti (1613-1699),
Lucretia (detail), oil on
canvas, 209 x 155cm.
(Palazzo Falson Historic
House Museum, Mdina /
Photo: Peter Bartolo Parnis)

In dedicating the following notes to Maurice de Giorgio, I wish to add the simple Italian words that say everything: *con stima e con affetto*. During the decades (almost four) of my love affair with Malta, I was introduced many times to Maurice de Giorgio, until finally we became friends. In the early years, it was through the good offices of our mutual friend John Bugeja Caruana that I sought Maurice's advice or assistance with my work on the catalogue of Mattia Preti. Out of sympathy to one attempting to trace hundreds of scattered paintings, Maurice directed me to at least one original in a private collection and no doubt there were others whose details I have forgotten. In his charity and modesty, I know he would forgive me. The Acknowledgements in the *Catalogue raisonné of the Paintings of Mattia Preti* of 1999 duly include his name - as does nearly every other book on my Malta shelves from the last half-century.¹

Maurice de Giorgio was always present, if not presiding, at meetings and events organized by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, the marvellous foundation that is blessed to have such a guardian angel. In recent times, I was able to contribute a little to his research into the paintings, including an overlooked *Lucretia* by Mattia Preti, in the fabled collection of Captain Gollcher (Fig. 1). For many years, he described his ongoing efforts to save Palazzo Falson, which ultimately, and chiefly due to his extraordinary tenacity and sensibility, has been transformed into one of the brightest jewels in the crown of the silent city, Mdina. Palazzo Falson stands at the entrance to the square commanded by the Cathedral of St Paul, which occupies a special place in Preti's career as the patron of many of the most important paintings of his old age. After completing his magnificent cycle of canvases with the miracles and ministry of St Paul on Malta, Preti worked right up until his death in January 1699 on guiding his Maltese pupils in the execution of his designs for the side altarpieces in the nave.

The 300th anniversary of Preti's death in 1999 was observed in Malta with a mass in his honour in the Church of St Publius in Rabat, and with a public lecture organized by the Museum of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta. The lecture attracted so many hundreds of dignitaries and citizenry that it was necessary to re-direct the crowd into the nave, with Preti's vault as a splendid canopy overhead. It was the first time that Mattia Preti on his own, not in Caravaggio's shadow, received his due. In the way of events that come to mark a turning point, probably more people in Malta remember being present than the great church could possibly have held. In Italy, the Preti tercentenary of 1999 was observed with various exhibitions in Naples, Taverna and Catanzaro, each with a catalogue, but as time has shown, the most durable landmark from that anniversary was the publication by his birthplace, Taverna, of the complete catalogue of his paintings, including many previously overlooked and never previously illustrated originals in Maltese churches and collections.

Because Preti lived a long life from 1613 to 1699, only fourteen years passed before the next *Anno Pretiano* of 2013. For the first time, Preti's art and achievement have been celebrated in special one-artist exhibitions in three lands, Malta, Italy and even the United States of America, across the Atlantic Ocean. In this essay I shall briefly review some of the high points and scholarly contributions of last year's three commemorative exhibitions, which took place in

four venues, beginning in early February with the Muscarelle Museum of Art at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Later the same month, Taverna inaugurated its celebration of her native son's birthday on the 24th February, with a multi-faceted exhibition co-curated by Giuseppe Valentino, *Direttore* of the Museo Civico, and Sandro Debono, Senior Curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts. Titled 'Mattia Preti: Faith and Humanity', this fascinating examination of Preti as a sacred artist re-opened in May in the State Rooms of The Palace, Valletta. In the meantime, the *Regione* of Calabria sponsored a loan exhibition of paintings, '*Mattia Preti: Tra Caravaggio e Luca Giordano*', which took place at the Reggia di Venaria Reale outside Turin during the summer months.²

In the year of our Lord 2013, the paintings of Mattia Preti enjoy the greatest and most widespread esteem they have ever known. The last such pinnacle in Preti's reputation occurred, not by chance, in 1913, in connection with the festivities organized in Calabria to honour his 300th birthday. In the catalogue essay to the exhibition organized at the Muscarelle Museum of Art in Virginia, I underscored the significance of the Preti commemorations of 1913, placing the event in historical context.

It is not widely known that the appealing tradition of celebrating the centennial birthdays of great artists and writers only dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and that the Preti tercentenary of 1913 was the first dedicated to a post-Renaissance painter. While precedents can always be found for commemorations of beloved native sons and daughters, the first national centennial of an illustrious birthday was devoted to the German poet Schiller (1759-1805) in the autumn of 1859. Hearing of this, the Italians immediately followed suit with a plan to organize a Dante festival in the same year. But the distinguished scholar, Henry Clark Barlow, pointed out the appropriateness of waiting until 1865, the sixth centenary of Dante's birth. As an Englishman, Barlow knew that the third anniversary of Shakespeare's birth was approaching in 1864. One last piece in this historical mosaic remained to be placed. In 1875 Florence and Rome presented a massive program of cultural offerings in honour of the fourth centennial anniversary of the birth of Michelangelo Buonarroti. The younger Raphael's turn followed in March 1883, with simultaneous processions in Urbino and in Rome, accompanied by 'orations, poetical recitations, performances of music, exhibitions of pictures, statues, and busts, visits to the tomb of the great artist in the Pantheon, and with banquets and other festivities', as reported two months later in a popular weekly, the *Scientific American Supplement*.³

Being remote in distance, but not in spirit, Mattia Preti's homeland of Calabria resolved not to be outdone in its profession of local pride. A committee was formed in honour of the greatest painter ever born in that region, publications were prepared, and in 1913, an exhibition was organized in the largest available civic space, which happened to be the municipal building in Catanzaro - Taverna's bitter rival. Lacking the means to transport original paintings from other regions, the organizers adeptly resorted to technology: the first Preti exhibition mainly consisted of high-quality black and white photographs, which are still displayed in the corridors of the town hall of Taverna.

News of the Preti centennial in Calabria came to the attention of a brilliant young scholar, Roberto Longhi, who was inspired to write an extraordinary article in which he argued strenuously on behalf of Italian Baroque painting.⁴ His remarkable conclusion was that Caravaggio, Battistello Caracciolo and Mattia Preti were the three greatest Italian painters of the seventeenth century. So much, Longhi seemed to say, for those also-rans Carracci and Domenichino, celebrated by the academies but too antique for their own good. Longhi believed the realism of Caravaggio and his two best followers made their paintings proto-modern, and, to judge from the number of painters who imitate Caravaggio today, it appears that history has proved him right. Thus the die was cast; as a direct result of the 1913 Preti tricentennial, the re-evaluation of Caravaggio, Caracciolo and Preti was launched.

I. Williamsburg, Virginia: 'A Brush with Passion: Mattia Preti (1613-1699)'

The common objective of centennial celebrations since their inception has been to revive the public's enthusiasm for these titans of literature and the arts through the media of exhibits, lectures and publications buttressed by documentary research. As the first monographic Preti exhibition ever held in the United States, the catalogue duly responded to the occasion with new information concerning the earliest disembarkation of a work or works by Preti and his school in the New World. In the 1790s, Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert, a French painter from Troyes with a penchant for roaming, happened to be in New York City, where he witnessed the public response, or, in this case, lack thereof:⁵

An art dealer in Naples decided one day to send to America a cargo of paintings by the school of Calabrese and by Guercino, etc. I was witness to the displeasure that the exposition of these paintings caused to the public in New York. Despite the impressive style of these paintings, the people accustomed to the fresh and dazzling tints of watercolors or to the bright tones of English prints printed in colors, could not enjoy the subtle shadows or the sudden flashes of chiaroscuro in these Italian paintings. It is true that the subjects did little to make themselves attractive. Among other martyrs were Saint Agatha ... and Saint Lawrence, etc., although the exhibition's lack of success was mainly caused by the unappealing appearance of the somber and monotone colors.⁶

In this early account by an informed eyewitness, Guercino and the school of Preti emerge as the protagonists on the losing side in a pivotal moment in the history of taste. Like most of his colleagues, the French painter Paillot was enthralled by the great baroque masters. Since Preti did not have identifiable followers, he appears to speak collectively of 'the school of Calabrese' as comprising Preti and his Neapolitan contemporaries. The American public, however, had no desire to hang dark, disturbing martyrdoms in their homes - as the enterprising Neapolitan picture-seller discovered the hard way.

As of 2013, as we all know, the tide of taste has mainly turned in favour of Mattia Preti and the Italian Baroque. In the last fifty years, following the Second World War, an impressive number

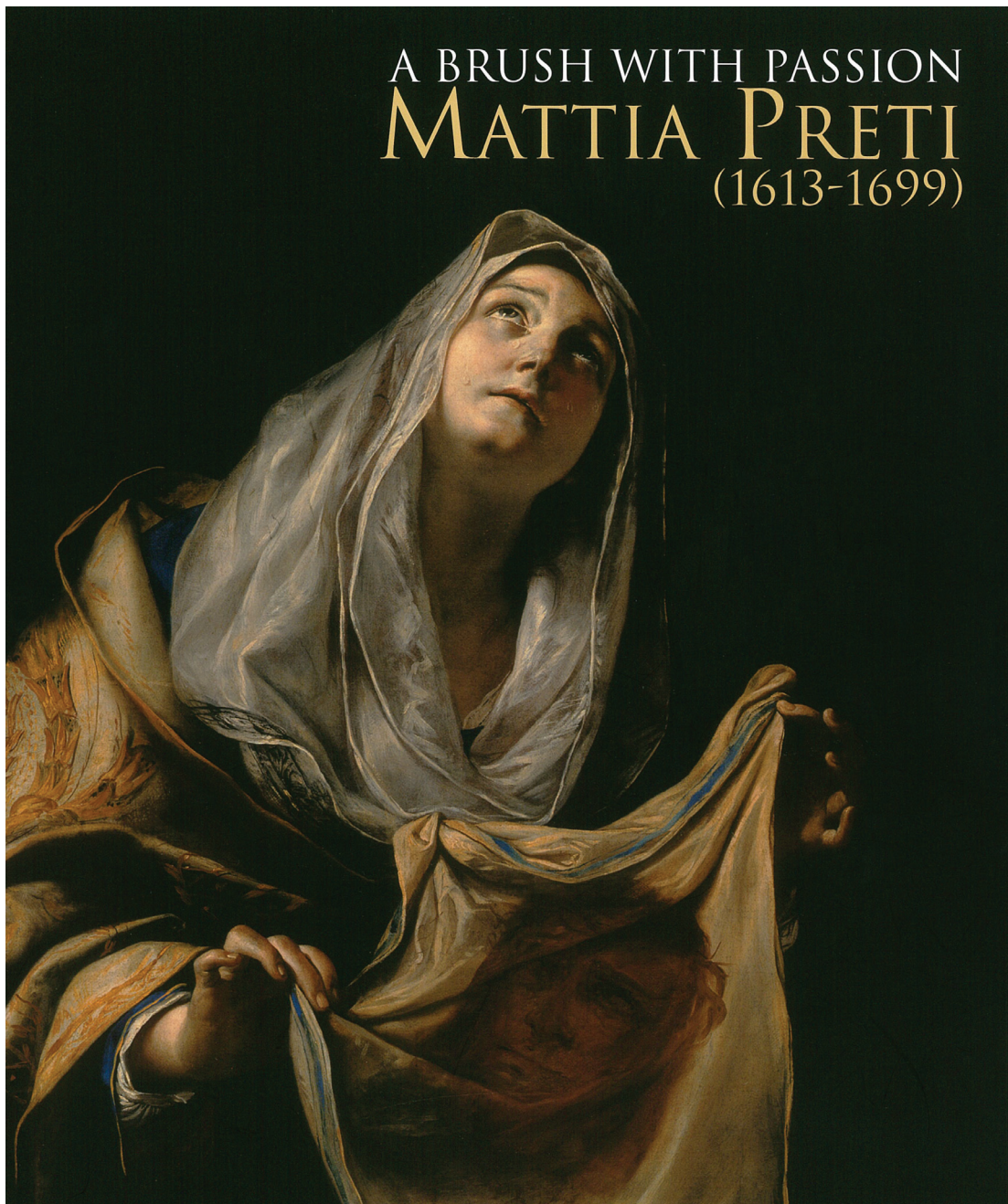


Fig. 2
The front cover of the
exhibition catalogue
*A Brush with Passion: Mattia
Preti (1613-1699)*, featuring
a detail from *St Veronica
with the Veil* from the Los
Angeles County Museum of
Art, California, USA.

of major canvases have been acquired by American and Canadian museums. Drawing upon these, the Williamsburg show, subtitled 'A Brush with Passion', featured a sparkling galaxy of fifteen large canvases lent from the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Toledo Museum of Art and other major collections. The wall-to-wall display of these acknowledged masterpieces was in fact magnificent. Exhibited in counterpoint to an important Renaissance exhibition of drawings from the Casa Buonarroti in Florence, 'Michelangelo: Sacred and Profane', Preti's first one-man show in America was enjoyed by nearly 50,000 visitors during its six-week duration. The proud artist would be gratified to know that many first-time viewers of his works commented afterwards that while they duly admired Michelangelo's genius, they rather enjoyed the theatrical drama of Preti's portrayals of Veronica, Salomé and Tomyris.

For scholars, the opportunity to view this masterpiece selection in a chronological sequence allowed numerous observations, more than can be repeated here but which will doubtless appear in the scholarly literature. Perhaps the most significant resulted from the opportunity to see, side by side, two of the three famous martyrdoms painted by Preti for his patron, Ferdinand van den Einden around 1656. It was evident that the *St Bartholomew* (Currier Art Museum, Manchester, NH) was painted with a Ribera-influenced physicality at least a year earlier than its companion *St Paul* (MFA, Houston), which displays the liquidity of streaming light that first appeared in the ceiling canvases of *S. Pietro a Maiella*, Naples. Thus, we can deduce that the van den Einden Martyrdoms were not initially conceived as a trio, or, if so, then Preti was interrupted in delivering them and changed his approach. The catalogue also included an illustrated appendix of additional paintings in American collections, and a comprehensive essay by Keith Sciberras on Preti's international patronage.

II. Taverna, Italy and Valletta, Malta: 'Mattia Preti: Faith and Humanity'

This exhibition, which was produced in collaboration between Taverna and Malta, was by far the most ambitious of the commemorative events this year. Not by chance, the two curators began their preparations more than a year ahead, requesting loans and refining (or perhaps broadening) their theme. As the title indicates, Preti's treatment of Christian and philosophical subjects was highlighted in the selection. For example, Preti's painting of the Infant Redeemer, in San Domenico, Taverna, was discussed in relation to a devotion that appears to have flourished in Malta before its adoption in Calabria. Two polychrome wooden sculptures representing the Infant Redeemer were exhibited next to the painting.

'Mattia Preti: Faith and Humanity' was the only exhibition this year to present a good number of drawings - by my informal count, nearly as many drawings as the twenty-nine paintings that were unquestionably autograph. Conservation issues were also discussed both in the catalogue and in the show, including the radiographs that revealed how Preti was able, by

making surprisingly few adjustments, to transform a completed canvas of the *Martyrdom of St Paul* into the circular *Martyrdom of St Catherine*, which is one of his best-known paintings (NMFA, Valletta). As a stoical thinker, Preti was a confirmed believer in economy of action.

The catalogue of the Taverna and Malta exhibition contains a number of essays with an emphasis on the artist's personality, although problems of his chronology are not neglected. Only a few can be named here: Giuseppe Valentino composed a compelling portrait of the cultural and social fabric into which Preti was born in 1613, and notes the local rarity of the name 'Mattia', the saint whose feast day falls on the 26th February, two days after the artist's birth. Perhaps because it seemed too obvious, none of the early sources, nor modern scholars so far as I am aware, had pointed out that he must have received the name on the day of his baptism. Valentino's expertise in all things Tavernese is neatly bookended by Sandro Debono's essay, who opens a new perspective, besides, with the novel proposal of a Maltese 'hagiography' of Mattia Preti, citing instances of Preti's adoption by the Maltese as a patriotic symbol. He traces signs of the artist's honorific cult up to the twentieth century. An interesting essay by Devin Therien summarizes the evidence, including new comparisons, that Preti's appreciation for Roman baroque sculpture was partially responsible for the dynamic monumentality that enters his early mature paintings of the 1640s. Robert Cassar contributed the first systematic survey of the 'edged weapons' seen in Preti's paintings, thereby ensuring that future entries will use the proper nomenclature.

III. Turin, Reggia Venaria Reale: 'Il Cavalier Calabrese Mattia Preti: Tra Caravaggio e Luca Giordano'

This exhibition enjoyed the grandest setting of the Preti commemoratives; indeed the Venaria Reale counts as one of the largest formerly royal residences in the world, nearly on a par with Versailles and Caserta. Although, admittedly, Preti seems never to have been near this Savoy possession, its original construction was contemporary with the last years of his life. As stated in the subtitle, from 'Caravaggio to Luca Giordano', this exhibition, organized and co-curated by Vittorio Sgarbi and Keith Sciberras under challenging circumstances, strove ambitiously to present as many works as possible by Preti together - by my count twenty-eight - with about ten paintings by other artists who influenced his formation.

The Turin exhibition opened with a special gallery devoted to a distinguished guest: Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight* from the Doria-Pamphilj Gallery in Rome. Although this early and uncharacteristically pastoral masterpiece by Caravaggio is not generally held to have inspired the younger Preti, no visitor to the show would have complained about its presence. The balance of this large show was crowded into a succession of small palace chambers not ideally suited for the exhibition of large baroque paintings. For specialists, there were many informative comparisons, not to mention a good number of rarely seen pictures and even some autograph paintings that are waiting to be published in the Supplement to the Preti

opera omnia, whenever that appears. For the public, to judge from the comments voiced by the non-specialists in my group, the jumble of so many paintings, their frames almost touching on the walls, detracted from a coherent experience, and no doubt some pruning of questionable attributions would have helped. On the other hand, the insertion of comparative works by other artists, most notably Manfredi, Valentin, Lanfranco and three by Guercino, were a helpful contribution, certainly appreciated by students. With few exceptions, the entries for these other artists neglected to relate them to their purpose, i.e. Preti's development; fortunately, some of that gap was filled in the introductory essay by Keith Sciberras.

In summation, the profusion and abundance of good essays, too many to name them all, on many aspects of Preti's art and life, and the organization of three worthwhile exhibitions, each with its own character, left this viewer with a rosy feeling both for the success of the Preti centennial for 2013 and for the future of Preti studies. Let's all agree to mark our calendars for 2099! It is safe to say the 'Cavalier Calabrese' has gone global, and, if so, the credit needs to be shared among many contributors, one of whom is the *festeggiato* of this book, Maurice de Giorgio.

Professor John Thomas Spike is a noted art historian and author specializing in Italian Renaissance and Baroque art. He is also an important critic of contemporary art and directed the Biennial of Florence. He earned his PhD at Harvard University with a dissertation on Mattia Preti. Taverna, Preti's birthplace, awarded John honorary citizenship in 1998. Among his many books and exhibitions on Preti is the complete catalogue raisonné of the artist's paintings (1999). In 2007, John was named to the faculty of the Masters in Sacred Art History at the European University of Rome and the Pontifical Commission on Cultural Heritage. Since 2012, he has been Assistant Director of the art museum of the College of William & Mary in Virginia, one of the oldest universities in America. In February 2013, John delivered the Mattia Preti 400th anniversary lecture in St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, and in July 2013, HM Queen Elizabeth II appointed him to the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John.

Notes

- 1 I would like to express my gratitude to the many colleagues who facilitated my studies of the exhibitions and catalogues cited in this essay, in particular to Melissa Yuen for our many valuable exchanges of views both in Williamsburg and Valletta, and afterwards. Special thanks to my friend, Judge Giovanni Bonello, for his patient assistance with the preparation of this article.
- 2 Here follow the full titles and dates of the three exhibitions, which all took place during 2013.
 - I. 'A Brush with Passion: Mattia Preti (1613-1699). Paintings from North American Collections in Honor of the 400th Anniversary of his Birth', Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, 9 February - 14 April.
 - II. 'Mattia Preti: Faith and Humanity', Museo Civico, Taverna, 24 February - 22 April; State Rooms, The Palace, Valletta, 3 May - 7 July.
 - III. 'Il Cavalier calabrese Mattia Preti. Tra Caravaggio e Luca Giordano', Reggia di Venaria Reale, Turin, 16 May - 15 September.
- 3 'The Raphael Celebration at Rome', *Scientific American Supplement*, No. 385 (19 May 1883), accessible at Gutenberg.org.
- 4 R. Longhi, 'Mattia Preti (critica figurativa pura)', in *La Voce* (1913, republished in Roberto Longhi, *Scritti giovanili 1912-1922, Opere complete* [Firenze, 1961], 29). In 1915, G.A. Borgese, *Il Conciliatore*, Vol. 2, 267, followed Longhi's lead, writing, 'La mostra pretiana di Catanzaro à segnato come un risveglio di tutti gli studi della pittura napoletana che nel '600 può ben dirsi d'avanguardia e può ben vantarsi e fregiarsi del nome di artisti come il Ribera e Mattia Preti, G. B. Caracciolo e Salvator Rosa...'
- 5 Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert (1771-1849) had come to the United States hoping to make a career as a portrait painter. Failing at this, he returned to Europe, where his treatise on art was published in nine volumes in 1829. His treatise is considered a primary source for the study of old master techniques and the theory of the modes of art.
- 6 Paillot, *Traité Complet de la Peinture*, Vol. VIII (Paris, 1829), 522-523. In Volume I, page 515, Paillot provides the correct birth and death dates of the painter he calls 'Mattia Preti, dit *il Calabrese*'.