

## Book Reviews

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*Mattia Preti. Beyond the Self-Portrait.* By Sandro Debono and Giuseppe Valentino, with a Foreword by Giorgio Leone. Malta, Midsea Books. 2013. 96 pp. with 59 plates in colour. €15. ISBN 978-99932-7-429-2.

This book contains two creative and thoughtful essays, the first by Giuseppe Valentino, ‘Configurations of a Social Comeback. The Taverna Diaspora and the Self-Portrait’, and the second by Sandro Debono, ‘Brushwork of Identity. The Politico-Religious in Mattia Preti’. The essays are introduced by an astute, shorter “resumé and critical evaluation” by Giorgio Leone who begins his review with: ‘These essays have literally ravished me’.

Although Mattia Preti (1613-1699) was the subject of a lengthy biography by the eighteenth century Neapolitan historian Bernardo De Dominicis: *Vite de’ pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani, c. 1742-1745*, modern studies about the painter, for the most part, did not begin until the early twentieth century, such as those found in a number of journal articles, museum collection catalogue entries, and general period studies. Comprehensive research on the painter, known as ‘Il Cavalier Calabrese’, did not begin in a systematic way until after the Second World War with the publication of a monograph by Claudia Refice Taschetta (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1959; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1970). From that time, with serious and determined interest finally given to Italian Baroque artists, one by one, the major painters of the *Seicento* have received long-

overdue attention. For Mattia Preti, this began with the 1979 doctoral dissertation (Harvard University) by John T. Spike, which twenty years later was expanded into two essential books: *Mattia Preti: I documenti: The collected documents* (Florence, 1998), followed in 1999 by: John T. Spike in collaboration with Michèle K. Spike: *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti, Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*. Since then, the literature about Mattia Preti has become extensive, and numerous exhibitions have brought his superlative paintings to a wide audience.

Giorgio Leone's introduction to this volume points clearly to a new direction in Preti studies, one which is invaluable to modern analytic methodologies applied to artists and works of art, which the authors of the two essays, Giuseppe Valentino and Sandro Debono, employ in exemplary ways. Once the vital *catalogues raisonnés* and collected documents for an artist have been established, art historians then can examine the cultural context of a work of art as well as tease-out the personal, creative intentions of the artist and the nature of the commissions; hence, the subtitle of these essays: *Beyond the Self-Portrait*. Such analyses can surely be subjective; however, with some of Preti's paintings, there are significant clues as to the layers of meanings, and it is these contextual subtleties that the authors present to us.

Three paintings form the nucleus of the arguments of the essays, the *Sermon of St John the Baptist with Self-Portrait* (Church of San Domenico, Taverna) [Fig. 1 centre]; a *Self-Portrait* (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) [Fig. 2 left]; and *St John the Baptist wearing the Red Tabard of the Order of St John of Jerusalem* (National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta) [Fig. 1 right], the latter of which is presented by Sandro Debono as Preti's self-portrait painted c. 1672, but as a young boy.

The Taverna painting, one of many masterpieces by Mattia Preti, is at the center of the discussion in these essays because it was painted for the Preti family chapel in the Church of San Domenico; the question of when it was painted is carefully examined by Giuseppe Valentino. Preti's family had lost their rank of nobility in 1605, when the governing body in Taverna, Calabria, demoted them. It would seem that throughout the years of his career, from its beginnings in Rome (where he moved from Taverna in 1634) and then during a later period in Naples (mid 1653-late 1660), Mattia Preti had his eye

on the Grand Knights in Malta through which he could be awarded a knighthood, and thus regain his noble status. The Taverna painting is most probably Preti's way, decades later, of trumping the authorities in their much earlier denigration of his family. He, through this painting, has returned to Taverna, as a famous painter, holding a sword and brush, and is dressed in the red tabard with white cross of the Military Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta.

Indeed, as Giorgio Leone points out, the two essays that follow his introduction are indissolubly linked by the examinations of Valentino's discussions of the 'physical' self-portraits, Florence and Taverna, and Debono's of the 'ideal' one, now in Valletta, the *St John the Baptist Wearing the Red Tabard of the Order of St John*. As Leone reminds us, and which is a significant point in Debono's argument, this is the red tabard with the white cross of the Military Order and not that of the black habit and white cross of the Monastic Order. In his essay, Valentino expounds on the significance of this depiction to stress Mattia Preti's declaration of the nobility of his family in his prominent family chapel in the Church of San Domenico. Leone proposes this self-portrait in the Taverna altarpiece, where the artist holds, in addition to a paintbrush, what Debono establishes as an old-fashioned sword, as an indication that the young Mattia Preti may actually have fought in some military campaigns, activities not proven by the numerous documents about Preti's life, but suggested to Leone by the lacunae in them, most notably during the years 1644-1645.

Giorgio Leone affirms to the reader that the two major essays in this volume offer insightful hypotheses about works by Mattia Preti and interpretations about the painter himself, as well as the symbols and images to be found in them. Indeed, there is a heroic, scholarly freshness about this approach and it is through such intelligent and creative examples as found here in Valentino's and Debono's essays that scholars are able to advance a richer and fuller understanding of an artist. Mattia Preti is presented as a true, devout Catholic painter, in the sense that his works demonstrate both an affirmation of faith and a depiction of reality, so that the viewer, the worshiper, believes in the veracity of the image.

What might appear to be non-specific details in paintings are sometimes found to have richer significance or symbolic meanings.

One such example of a political-religious function is the landscape under the horse in the famous *Vision of St George on Horseback*, the altarpiece in the chapel of the Langue of Aragon, Catalonia, and Navarre in St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta. Here, Preti has provided a sense of the actual buildings and landscape of Jerusalem, where the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta had established their hospital in 1113, following the Bull issued by Pope Pascal II on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February of that year.

As has been frequently noted, the distant landscape in this painting refers on one level to the Battle of El Puig, near Valencia, in 1237, when King James I of Spain was successful in defeating the Muslims with the miraculous intercession of St George; however, in this landscape, there is a walled city, not unlike the Western idea of Jerusalem, complete with two domed buildings. Such a domed building was confused by the early Crusaders as being the Temple of Solomon, although both the first and second temples had long been destroyed; nevertheless, Crusaders thought that the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, were from the Temple of Solomon, and many images from the Renaissance onward of the Temple in Jerusalem are so-likened. The activity of St George's battle also occurring before the walls of Jerusalem reinforces the mission of Christian service provided by the Knights of St John in that city. Thus, Preti's painting has a pronounced political message for the Knights of Malta as well as a religious, or spiritual, one.

In his essay, Giuseppe Valentino traces the 1605 fall from nobility of the Preti family in Taverna and the subsequent, and very deliberate and logical, pursuits of Mattia Preti to regain nobility, beginning with his first letter in 1641 to Pope Urban VIII Barberini, requesting the pope's support with his petition to the Grand Master Jean-Paul Lascaris in Malta that he be received into the Order of St John as a Knight of Magistral Obedience. This was accomplished on the 31st October 1643; henceforth, Mattia Preti was known as 'Il Cavalier Calabrese'.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1660, when he had been working in Naples for the previous seven years, Preti began a similar process with the Knights of Malta, with a petition to Pope Alexander VII Chigi for support in his quest to be elevated to the much higher rank of Knight of Grace, an honor which would be confirmed by

the Grand Master Rafael Cotoner in Valletta on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1660, with refinements to the nature of the benefices continuing into the following year. In his 'negotiations' for this elevation, Preti had promised to paint, at his own expense, the vault of the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta; eventually, Preti would be paid for this work. He spent the final nearly-forty years of his life as the pre-eminent painter on Malta, with many commissions there, as well as in Italy.

Giuseppe Valentino surmises that Mattia Preti may have returned to Rome following the death of his painter-brother Gregorio on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1672, and perhaps continued on to Taverna. The church of San Domenico, the most important in Taverna, had been severely damaged in an earthquake of 1662, and Valentino proposes that Preti, now an affirmed and honored noble, returned to his hometown to make plans to endow an extensive family chapel and crypt. In his biography of Mattia Preti, Bernardo De Dominicis states that the artist spent some time in Taverna where he fully endowed his family chapel and painted works for it. The implication is that Preti's masterpiece of the *Sermon of St John the Baptist with Self-Portrait* could have been painted at that time (1672), as was suggested by Giovanni Carandante in 1966, and noted in the text, although documents for the renovated church indicate that the decorations for the various private chapels occurred during the early 1680s, with those for the Preti family chapel being concluded on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1687.

Valentino suggests that the great altarpiece may already have been in place by that date. Furthermore, since this altarpiece also has a separate painting framed above of *God the Father Blessing*, Valentino posits that this may be in homage to Mattia Preti's father Cesare, who raises his hand in blessing above the self-portrait of his son. As Valentino further implies, the cartouche, bearing the word 'Poenitentia', which is carried by a putto above the figure of St John the Baptist, surely is a message to the authorities of Taverna who took away the Preti family's noble status. Further, Valentino suggests that in this self-portrait, the artist appears to be about sixty years of age (Mattia was born in 1613); therefore to him, a date for the altarpiece might be around 1672.

Although this argument has merit, we know from Sandro Debono's assertion in his essay that Preti was able to cast his own youthful

features as those of the young St John the Baptist in the painting now in the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, which he dates to about 1672. One must be cautious in accepting these reasoned surmises for the actual date of the painting. In the final paragraphs of his essay, Valentino analyzes the recently conserved, but remaining in diminished condition *Self-Portrait*, by Mattia Preti of 1695, now in the Vasari Corridor of the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, finding in it the heroic, Christian knight who would survive until the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1699.

Sandro Debono carefully and succinctly presents the paintings by Mattia Preti on the vault of the Co-Cathedral and those for the Church of Our Lady of Sarria, Floriana, as being among those works by Preti as having political as well as religious subtexts, works that were preceded by the *Vision of St George on Horseback* mentioned above, a work which was probably painted while Preti was in Naples, but sent to the Conventual Cathedral in Valletta for the Langues of Aragon, Catalonia, and Navarre. In many ways, this monumental painting was Preti's 'public relations' piece, a demonstration of the supremacy of his skills, and one which won him great favor and recognition by the Knights of Malta; Debono rightly refers to it as 'intentionally political yet painted as a religious icon', with clear meaning to and references for the favor of the Grand Master De Redin. This, then, is the thrust of Debono's further arguments for a 'political-religious' interpretation of similar paintings by Preti, which he sees as continuing throughout the long career of the artist.

The most significant of these paintings is the *St John the Baptist Wearing the Red Tabard of the Order of St John of Jerusalem*, the painting which is critical for the interpretation and dating of the Taverna altarpiece.<sup>1</sup> Debono places this work in the context of other paintings of St John the Baptist which may be self-portraits of artists in the guise of the saint, such as, for one example, Caravaggio's famous painting now

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1 Keith Sciberras in *Mattia Preti. The Triumphant Years* (2012, Midsea Books, Malta), dates the MFA, Valletta, painting: Cat. 55, p. 261, to 'late 1660s-early 1670s'; he dates the San Domenico, Taverna, painting: Fig. 95, p. 65, to 'during the 1680s'. John T. Spike in *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti, Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings* (1999, Taverna (Campobasso), Museo civico di Taverna; Florence, Centro Di), dates the MFA, Valletta, painting: Cat. 274, pp. 345-346, to the 'end of the 1670s or slightly later'; he dates the San Domenico, Taverna, painting: Cat. 236, pp. 297-298, to 'ca. 1687'.



Fig. 1. Paintings in the exhibition: Mattia Preti. Faith and Humanity. Taverna, Calabria, Museo Civico. 24 February-21 April 2013; and illustrated here: Valletta, Malta, State Rooms: The Palace. 3 May-7 July 2013.

in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. The political and religious union for interpretation is further explored by Debono in the magnificent altarpiece of *St Luke Painting the Virgin*, Church of the Franciscan Conventuals, Valletta, wherein is prominently placed Preti's 'F.M.P.P.' monogram (Frater Mattia Preti Pinxit) the date of 1671, and above that, in gold, his coat of arms as a Knight of Malta.<sup>2</sup> The self-identification of his profession with St Luke is a powerful reminder of Preti's own Catholic life as well as his professional pursuits.

Soon after the publication of this volume, Sandro Debono and Giuseppe Valentino organized an important and splendid exhibition: Mattia Preti. Faith and Humanity (Taverna, Museo Civico: 24 February-21 April 2013; Valletta, Malta, State Rooms, The Palace: 3 May-7 July 2013; with English language catalogue published by

2 I am grateful to Sandro Debono for the information that during a recent cleaning, the second 'P' in the monogram appeared.

Midsea Books, Valletta, Malta). The works for the exhibition were carefully chosen to convey the understanding of Preti's devotion to his profession, which he used for his personal advancement as well as for the prestige and religious pursuits of the Knights of Malta. The paintings were exquisitely exhibited in groups expressing key ideas for the interpretation of the artist, ideas that are carefully developed in both the exhibition catalogue and this book being reviewed.

Although this is a small volume, the importance of its methodologies and the intellectual explorations of the authors place it as a powerful and liberating example for other historians to follow. Giorgio Leone's great enthusiasm for the investigative and interpretative nature of these essays is well-founded. These are exemplars for creative thinking, where ideas may be put forward, unfettered by convention, and with the purpose of stimulating further investigations and promoting richer and fuller understanding of artists, as well as works of art and the contexts for which they were painted.

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