

NO, NOT CARAVAGGIO

Crowds may flock to view Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John* another artist, equally talented, has an even a greater link with Valletta – Mattia Preti.

In 1613, in the small town of Taverna, in Calabria, southern Italy, a baby boy was born who would grow up to become one of the world's greatest and most prolific artists of his time and to leave precious legacies in Valletta and the rest of Malta.

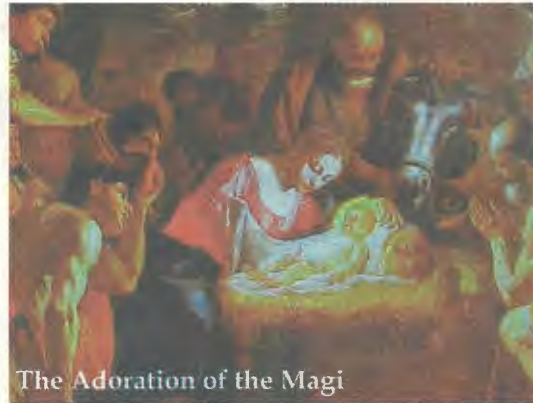
He is thought to have first been apprenticed to Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, who was known as a follower and admirer of Caravaggio. His brother, Gregorio, was also a painter and sometime in the 1620s Preti joined him in Rome.

There he grasped Caravaggio's techniques and those of other famous and popular artists of the age, including Rubens and Giovanni Lanfranco.

Preti spent time in Venice between 1644 and 1646 taking the chance to observe the opulent Venetian styles and palettes of artists like Veronese. He remained based

in Rome however, where his work consisted mostly of painting church frescos.

Between 1653–1660, Preti worked in Naples, absorbing the influence of, Luca Giordano, another major



The Adoration of the Magi



Diogenes With His Lantern, In Search of an Honest Man

painter of the era.

One of his great works, in Naples was a series of large frescoes depicting the plague with the Virgin Mary, and saints, delivering people from the plague, painted on seven gates in the city. Sadly, these have been lost over time but there are two sketches in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples.

Preti visited the island of Malta 1659, probably due to the patronage of the Knights of St John. It was to become his lasting home. His reputation grew and so did his circle of patrons. Commissions came from the whole of Europe. Having



Part of the vaulted ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral

Painted an altarpiece for the Chapel of the Language of Aragon, Preti offered to do more work on the then new and very, bare St John's Co-Cathedral. Grand Master Raphael Cotoner accepted his offer and commissioned him to decorate the whole vaulted ceiling. The magnificent scenes from the life of St John took six years and completely transformed the cathedral. Preti was promoted to the rank of a Knight of Grace.

But Mattia Preti's talent did not end at painting. And, he was to leave the island another even more priceless artistic legacy. In December, 1675 there was an outbreak of plague in Marsamxetto. It rapidly spread to Valletta, Senglea and Żurriq. Malta lost a third of its population.

Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner looked to the divine intercession of the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception, as the power over evil, to stop the plague. He ordered that the small Sarria Church, in Floriana, be rebuilt in a grander style in thanksgiving for her intercession. Mattia Preti was commissioned to design the church and he also oversaw its building.

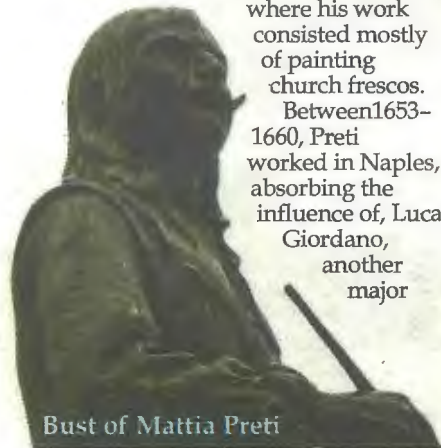
It is thought to be the only church in

the world designed and built by Preti, and no fewer than seven of his paintings hang within it. They include the monumental titular painting and others which fit perfectly in the architecturally designed stone alcoves he created for them.

In keeping with the original need for the church, the saints in the images are all connected in some way with the deadly disease.

Mattia Preti presented the Grand Master with a model of the church in May 1676. That same year the plague ended.

As an artist Mattia Preti is justifiably revered. His career was long and very prolific. His paintings, mostly in the Baroque style and depicting hundreds of scenes, portraits and ecclesiastical subjects, hang in the greatest museums, churches and private collections worldwide; including, of course, his hometown. But Malta has the honour of being the place he called home, where some of his greatest work was done, and can still be enjoyed. And where, at the then remarkable old age of 86, he was finally laid to rest in the cathedral he transformed so brilliantly, in 1699.



Bust of Mattia Preti