

## LIFE &amp; WELLBEING HISTORY



Our Lady shown as queen of angels (centre), of patriarchs (right) and of prophets (left).



The interior of the dome while decorative works were still being carried out and the paintings placed in their appropriate segment.



Portelli working on the martyrs segments; one can make out St Publius and St Lawrence's gridiron.

# Frank Portelli's monumental Senglea dome



FABIAN MANGION

The popular concept of a 'properly-dressed' church in Malta is typically baroque, with an emphasis on varied adornment in rich materials, sculptural decorations and paintings. Naturally, this is partly due to the prevalence of baroque ecclesiastical architecture.

Motives for this emphasis on decoration probably date back to the Counter-Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries: new paintings create within the congregation uplifting feelings of their church's increased prestige as well as provide visual aids for the people. Heaven becomes more tangible and the people can be proud of their embellished place of worship.

Although Senglea's original church was completed by 1581, it was only in the mid-17th century, when Fr Dominic Attard served as parish priest (1653-1657), that Thomas Dingli added a dome to it.

It was a rather low dome, having a tall drum with a plain surface on the inside. The drum had only four windows, which alternated with four trompe-l'oeil ones. In 1882, Canon Archpriest Anton Cordina commissioned Senglea-born artist Joseph Bonnici to carry out the first paintings on the dome's interior. They consisted of a series of flying angels, each holding symbols of the Virgin's virtues.

At the turn of the century, the excavation of docks below the bastions at the rear of the church visibly weakened the structure of the dome to such an extent that a thick iron ring had to be placed around its drum to prevent it from falling apart.

This situation was further exacerbated when a powerful earthquake hit the Maltese islands on April 18, 1923. After much deliberation, in 1927, Canon Archpriest Joseph Adami decided there was only one solution for the precarious state of the dome – that of dismantling it. The building of the second dome,



A view of the dome with the corresponding pendentives, also painted by Portelli and inaugurated in 1995.

designed by Senglea-born architect Joseph Mallia Milanese, thus started.

Inaugurated on August 24, 1930, the new dome was distinctly different from the first one. It had eight windows around the drum, and this time the inside was divided into eight segments by means of sculptured ribs.

The next artist to take on the challenging job of decorating the dome was Prof. Joseph Briffa, then still in his early 30s. In spite of his young age, Briffa, who had already received other church commissions, accepted his new assignment enthusiastically. Briffa filled the segments with paintings of St Anne and the child Mary, and seven female characters from the Old Testament who are considered to have prefigured the Virgin, namely Abigail, Deborah, Esther, Jahel, Judith, Rebecca and Ruth. The work was completed by 1937 and inaugurated by Canon Archpriest Joseph Bonanno.

However, once again, the dome was not favoured by fortune. After having resisted the incessant aerial attacks by the German Luftwaffe during World War II, the dome finally received a direct hit on April 9, 1942, collapsing on to the baldachin and the high altar below.

With the reconstruction of the devastated Senglea basilica after the war, a new dome, practically a replica of the old one, was built in 1953. Briffa,

by then an octogenarian, was commissioned by Canon Archpriest John Sladden to provide, once again, the structure with the same themes he had worked on 50 years before. His new bozzetti were approved on November 14, 1984.

Nonetheless, his connection with the Senglea basilica was, once again, dogged by bad luck. The artist only managed to finish two of the segmental paintings, those of St Anne with the Virgin and of Rebecca, before he passed away in 1987.

After this disheartening series of adverse events, and fearing that the decades-long efforts to have the dome decorated would be dissipated, in 1987, Canon Archpriest Vincent Cachia, together with a specially-appointed commission, held a competition for the decoration of the dome. Four artists presented their projects. However, none of the submissions were accepted.

Frank Portelli's paintings have thus come after a long period of misfortune. In June 1989, Portelli was approached; he had not taken part in the competition since he had been busy with various preparations for the 25th anniversary of Malta's independence. After some initial hesitancy, he accepted the enormous undertaking.

At the time, Portelli was a very well-known artist with a large array of



The Creation segment, with God the Father bringing into being Adam and Eve.

mural paintings to his credit. Before he was given the Senglea commission, he was involved in other works of sacred art, most notably the design and execution of an altar at Marsascala and decorations in the church of St Theresa at Birkirkara.

Once he accepted the Senglea assignment, Portelli channelled all his physical and mental energy into this new and challenging enterprise. Indeed, the work on the dome became his consuming passion. There is no doubt, either, that he had long desired a commission of this kind, which explains the enthusiasm with which he undertook the work and the relish with which he carried it out.

Portelli felt at first that he was faced with unprecedented challenges from both the scale and the sacred content of the project. Undeterred, he spent some time researching and immediately decided that he would approach the work thematically on completely

different lines from Briffa's. He eventually chose different titles from the Litany for his subjects, where the Virgin is invoked as Queen of the angels, of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins and ultimately of all creation.

After making his initial technical calculations and studying the factors of light and its dispersion in the dome, each one of the eight segments was painted on canvas in the artist's Birkirkara studio after the bozzetti had been approved on July 6, 1990. After the eventual gluing onto the stonework, Portelli also painted on the structural ribs of the dome in order to obtain a better visual continuity between each segment.

The result is a truly impressive sight. Portelli's interpretation is best taken in comprehensively from a distance, which is one indication that his decision to make the eight segments conform to a single idea was perhaps



The Confessors segment, which shows St Julian, St Philip Neri and St Roque, among other saints.

the best one. Even the setting, an orderly flight of eight steps going around the circumference of the base, interrupted only by the primeval scene of the Creation with its distant blue mountains, gushing waters and fauna

and flora, all reflecting God's generative powers, is meant to tie the whole into a single choreographic spectacle. Anyone familiar with the abstract contours of Portelli's 'cubist' compositions may be surprised on first viewing the artist's massive paintings in Senglea. Furthermore, some degree of compromise was necessary in such a context. In spite of his use of certain baroque techniques, as in the dramatic sotto in su poses, the artist tried to retain some elements of his more characteristic style, such as his liking for bright colours.

Seen from below, the eight tableaux, each divided between the heavenly and earthly realms, stretch away through an accelerated diminution of scale into the nebulous reaches where tiny angels can just be made out. In effect, the stepped base gives the impression that we, as spectators, are scanning this celebratory supplication to the Virgin from below ground level.



Portelli painting, in situ, on one of the sculptured ribs of the dome and carrying out finishing touches on the segment depicting the prophets.

The Creation segment is self-contained in its presentation of Genesis, with God the Father bringing a still torpid Adam and a suppliant Eve effortlessly into being, yet with a rhetorical, William Blake-inspired twist of the body. However, the rest of the segments have a direct bearing on each other. At the farthest end from the nave is the Apotheosis of the Virgin, borne aloft by a host of angels, with archangels Gabriel and Michael providing the necessary visual enrichment from the level of the steps.

The figures in the other six segments are aligned to draw their attention upwards and towards the vision at the centre. Seen from the correct angle and visually assisted by the streamer-carrying angels in mid-air, they are pulled in synchronisation towards the peak of heavenly glory.

Some of the saints that are included, like St Julian, St Philip Neri and St Roque, have a direct connection with

Senglea's history. The church at the tip of the town, dedicated to Our Lady of Porto Salvo, was, between 1662 and 1928, in the care of the Oratorians of St Philip Neri; the oldest church recorded in Senglea, built in 1311, was dedicated to St Julian; while St Roque was specially invoked against various calamities, especially during the plagues of 1676 and 1813.

This long-cherished dream for the people of Senglea was realised on the first day of spring 1993 – 25 years ago – with the unveiling of Portelli's paintings inside the dome of the basilica. It was the first time since March 13, 1982, when beams were laid across the ledge of the dome as part of the preparation for its decoration, that people had the chance to view once again the space inside the dome integrated with the rest of the interior of the church. And the addition that they saw was one of the best decorative schemes in living memory for an ecclesiastical building.