

ST JOHN'S CO-CATHEDRAL - VALETTA

INTRODUCTION

The Conventual Church of the Order of St John of Jerusalem is a Co-Cathedral.

The name Co-Cathedral, refers to its later, dual role. In the 1820s, the Bishop of Malta, whose seat was the Mdina, was allowed to use St John's as an alternative see, hence the name Co-Cathedral. The Church is situated in St Johns Square and is its prominent feature. The Church was built as the Conventual Church of the Order to commemorate the Great Siege of Malta victory.

Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere commissioned the church in 1572 and paid for its construction, the building works were completed in 1577 and dedicated on 20 February 1518. The great structure was designed by the Maltese Architect Gerolamo Cassar (1520-c. 1586). He was in his 50's and had travelled extensively abroad. He was able to take responsibility for much of the earlier buildings, which characterise Valetta. Cassar was not only a trained military engineer; he had also experienced the latest Roman trends of palatial architecture. It made him eminently suitable to take on the task of planning and designing the Auberges and palazzi, which abound in Valetta.

He built the Grand Master's Palace, seven Auberges and other notable buildings in Valetta. The austere facade, of the Church flanked by two large bell towers is in keeping with Cassar's skills as a military builder and reflected the sombre mood of the Order following the Great Seige. The nave is 53 metres in length and 15 metres wide with side chapels on either side. These chapels were assigned to the various Langues in order of seniority ,closest to the alter.

After the reorganisation in 1462 they consisted of:

- Tongue of the **Provence**: southern France, with Grand Priories in Toulouse and Saint- Gilles
- Tongue of the **Auvergne**: central France, with the Grand Priory in Bourgneuf
- Tongue of **France**: northern France, with three Grand Priories
- Tongue of **Aragon**: Grand Priories of Aragon, Catalonia and Navarre
- Tongue of **Castile**: Grand Priories of Castile-Leon and Portugal
- Tongue of **Italy**: Grand Priories of Messina, Barletta, Capua, Rome, Pisa, Lombardy and Venice
- Tongue of **England**: covering the British Isles, with the Grand Priories of England (including Scotland) and Ireland
- Tongue of **Germany**: Grand Priories of Bohemia, Upper Germany, Lower Germany, Dacia (= Transylvania, Wallachia, Moldavia), Sweden, Poland and Hungary

Other parts of the building were added later, the Sacristy in 1598, the Oratory in 1603, and the Loggia annexes in 1736.

The richness and breathtaking interior in the Baroque style contrast with the austere exterior of the Church. The Knights, many of whom were from noble families competed amongst themselves in showering the Church with gifts in order to rival the Churches in Rome. Unfortunately many valuable relics were stolen and melted for bullion when the island was surrendered to Napoleon.

The floor a key feature is paved with 400 inlaid marble tombstones, under which members of the Order of St John lie buried.

THE CHAPELS

GERMANY

The Chapel of Germany is dedicated to the Epiphany. Towards the end of the 17th century Stefano Erardi painted the altarpiece, the Adoration of the Magi and the two lunettes. The white marble alter is the only remaining 17th century Baroque alter in St John's.

ANGLO-BAVARIAN CHAPEL / CHAPEL OF THE RELICS

This chapel is dedicated to St Charles Borromeo. It was previously known as the Shrine of the Holy Relics. The chapel is divided from the langue of Provence by marble balustrade, which has mounted on it an enormous bronze gate, which was previously in the chapel of Our Lady of Philermos. The altarpiece is an effigy of St Charles Borromeo by the 18th century painter Agostino Masucci, the Crucifix is by Alessandro Algardi. On the right of the alter is a figure of St John the Baptist, carved in wood which legend as it that it was once the figurehead of an armoured war vessel, owned by the Order of St John.

OUR LADY OF PHILERMOS / BLESSED SACRAMENT

This chapel has an alter and façade of fine inlaid marble. There is also a ceiling with paintings of The Virgin's Assumption and the Coronation of the Virgin. An enormous silver gate mounted on a marble balustrade, which it is said was painted black to disguise it from Napoleon's Forces, encloses the shrine. The Chapel has a copy of the 15th century Annunciation and a 17th century copy of Our Lady of Lanciano which was originally in the Italian Langue.

PROVENCE

The Chapel of the Langue of Provence, the most senior, is dedicated to St Michael. The alter façade of this chapel consists of four twisted columns that date from the 1620s. The alter was renewed in 1732 by Melchoir Alpheran de Bussan in white marble. The altarpiece is a baroque image of St Michael reworked by Mattia Preti.

FRANCE

The Chapel of the Langue of France is dedicated to the Conversion of St Paul. The only original part of this chapel is the altarpiece which is by Mattia Preti and was ordered by the Langue in 1668. The original alter which was ordered from Melchoir Gafa in 1666 by the Langue, was never finished and was finally replaced in the 1830s by a plain white marble alter. There are two lunettes representing the Beheading of St Paul painted by Mattia Preti and the St Paul's Shipwreck. There are four monuments in the French chapel, that of the Marquis Gioachim de Wignaco, the Grand Master Adrien Wignacourt, the Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan and also the Viconte Beaujolais (not a Knight) brother of the future King Louis Philippe.

AUVERGNE

The Chapel of the Langue of Auvergne is dedicated to St Sebastian. The altarpiece is by Silvestro Querio. The two lunettes, Pope Caius blessing the Saint and his Martyrdom are by Giuseppe D'Arena. The only monument in this chapel is that of the Grand Master Annet de Clemont de Chattes-Gessan, the shortest reigning Grand Master.

ARAGON

The Chapel of the Langue of Aragon, Catalunya and Navarre is dedicated to St George. The altarpiece, St George is by Mattia Preti as is the St Francis Xavier, which hangs above the chapel's gangway. The two lunettes, St Lawrence and the St Firminus are also by Mattia Preti. There are four monuments, Grand Master De Redin, Grand Master Rafel Cotoner, Grand Master Nicola Cotoner and Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful.

ITALY

The Chapel of the Langue of Italy. The Chapel of the Langue of Italy is dedicated jointly to the Immaculate Conception and St Catherine of Alexandria. The altarpiece, The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine is by Mattia Preti. The original alter was replaced in 1733 by the present marble alter by Romano Carapeccia. The two lunettes are by Grand Master Rafel Cottoner. The only monument in this chapel belongs to the Grand Master Gregorio Carafai.

CASTILLE

The Chapel of the Langue of Castile, Leon and Portugal is dedicated to St James the Less. The alter was redone in marble in 1792. There are two lunettes dating from the 1680s which are St James assisting the Spaniards in defeating the Moors and St James's vision of Our Lady of Pilar. There are two monuments, the first of the Grand Master Manoel de Vihena, and the second of the Grand Master Pinto, the longest serving Grand Master.

GRAND MASTER'S CRYPT

This is where most of the Grand Masters are buried. Of note is the supine bronze effigy of Grand Master Jean Parisot de La Valette, which covers his tomb. His body was moved from the original tomb in the church of Victoria's also known as the church of St Anthony Abbot. The inscription on his tomb reads:

*Here lies La Valette
Worthy of eternal honour
He who was once the scourge of Africa and Asia
And the shield of Europe
Whence he expelled the barbarians by his Holy Arms
Is the first to be buried in this beloved city
Whose founder he was*

He lays beside that other brave warrior Fra Philip Vielliers De l'Isle Adam was buried in the chapel of St Anna; at the castle of St Angelo in 1534 and his remains were later moved to the Magisterial crypt of the conventual church of Valletta.

THE VAULT

The decoration of the barrel vault (named after its rounded ceiling) began in 1661.

Normally, paintings on walls are carried out in a fresco technique, which is watercolour based, but here Preti used oil based paint and applied it directly onto the stone. He started from the lunette above the main door where he depicted the allegory of the Order represented by Minerva, the goddess of war and wisdom, crushing Moorish slaves beneath her feet. To the left and right are the Cottoner grandmasters (1660-1680) Raphael and Nicolas (who commissioned the work and were great benefactors of the Order and this church). On careful inspection, knights can be seen in heaps, slain in battle, and angels descending from the sky holding palm fronds. This is a symbol of martyrdom.

For the next six years Preti toiled with the rest of the vault. He ingenuously used its six bays to fit his narrative cycle. Each bay is subdivided into three sections. The story of St John starts from the first bay at the main door with the vision of the priest Zachary and ends with the beheading of the saint in the 6th and last bay to the right of the altar. In the apse he painted St John holding the Order's standard being presented to God the Father by Jesus Christ. The vault is illuminated by six oval windows; the figures on either side of the windows are of individual Knights and Saints revered by the Order of Saint John.

Nikolaus Pevsner, the art historian, states that Mattia Preti's work depicting the life of St John the Baptist in the vault of St John's is "the first realized example of high Baroque art anywhere".

NAVE

The entire pavement of the nave is made up of more than 400 tessellated tombs of knights of St John. The earliest, in the Chapel of Aragon, dates from 1602. The symbols range from simple to garish, but each are individual.

One of the memorial slabs in the Republic Street entrance, belongs to the French knight Anselmo de Caijs. His inscription translates: "You who tread on me, you will be trodden upon, reflect on that and pray for me."

SACRISTY

In the Sacristy, to the left of the main entrance, can be seen old vestments and some fine paintings by Preti.

Antoine de Fairy's terrific portrait of Grand Master Pinto is one of Malta's best paintings. Painted in 1747, it tells chromatically and stylistically how far the Order of St John and its magistracy had departed from its crusading Hospitaller origins. Dressed in flowing ermine robes, Pinto points at the jewelled crown symbolically placed in front of his redundant steel helmet.

Other works include the late 16th century Baptism of Christ by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, the old Aragonese altarpiece of St George by Frederico Potenzano, from 1585, a portrait of Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner by Mattia Preti and a portrait of Preti himself.

In what is now the entrance to the sacristy, there was once a chapel for the remainder of the English langue, which ceased to exist after 1540, following Henry VIII's break with Rome. At the foot of the pillar is the painter's tombstone, which was placed there after the grateful Order had made him a Knight of Grace.

A group of some of the most beautiful Spanish and Italian embroidered church vestments from the Renaissance period can be seen here.

MUSEUM

From outside the oratory, and from some of the museum's upstairs windows, you can see the cemetery where many of the knights killed during the siege of 1565 are buried. The highlight of the museum is a tableaux of 29 fine Flemish tapestries found in its three principal rooms. The three cycles of tapestries are divided into two seven-piece cycles and are all modelled on drawings by Rubens, with the exception of the Last Supper, which was from Poussin. The cycle tells of the story of Christ from the Annunciation, through his entry into Jerusalem to the Resurrection; the order portrays different allegories including the Triumph of Charity, the Destruction of Idolatry and the Four Evangelists. Additional oblong panels are disciples, the Virgin Mary and Christ. The tapestries used to be hung in St John's each year on June 24, the feast of St John the Baptist, but now are used only for special occasions; the last was Pope John Paul II's visit in 1990.

Among the other exhibits and vestments is a collection of antiphonaries (illuminated choral books). There is also a sparse collection of church silverware.

ORATORY

The oratory was build at the request of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt in 1603, as a place of worship and for adult novices waiting to be admitted to the Order of St John. Until Preti took charge of the decoration in the 1860s, it remained, like St John's itself, clinically functional; the gilding, the painted soffits, Grand Master Carafa's marble altar were all added at Preti's instigation. His Baroque updating was designed around Caravaggio's huge canvas The Beheading of St John's the Baptist, which until then had been illuminated by a window on the eastern flank.

In the Oratory are three pictures by Preti, the Bearing of the Cross, Ecce Homo and the Crowning with Thorns.

THE BEHEADING OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

The Beheading, often called the painting of the 17th century, is a magnificent picture that captures the tortured emotions of each individual present at the chilling scene, set in the deep shadows of a prison. The old lady gripping her head knows the wrong that has been done, and the jug-jailer with outsize keys points to Salome's salver, which she clutches with trepidation. The most haunting image to emerge out of the chiaroscuro is not the pitifully trussed-up St John, but the executioner. From behind his back he stealthily removes a knife from its sheath, to finish the work his sword started. His brow is deeply furrowed and his body taut. A most moving, figurative interpretation of St John's last moments.

MATTIA PRETI

Mattia Preti, sometimes called "Il Cavalier Calabrese" (the Knight from Calabria), was born in the small town of Taverna in Calabria in 1613.

In 1659, Preti, having been made a Knight of Magistral Obedience, came to Malta most probably attracted to the island by the possibility of gaining the Knights' patronage. He was soon commissioned by Grand Master Martin de Redin to paint a new altarpiece for the chapel of the Aragonese Langue. The following Grand Master, Raphael Cotoner, requested him to decorate the entire vault of the church with scenes from the life of St John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order. The artist was then promoted to the rank of a Knight of grace.

Preti spent most of the remainder of his life in Malta. Forever remembered as a great artist of the Baroque movement, he died in 1699 and is buried in St John's.

Note: The information is from a number of different sources