

Source: **Proceedings of History Week 1994**. (33-49). [Malta : The Malta Historical Society, 1996].

**Giuseppe Grech (1755-1787):  
Clarifications  
on his artistic Activity**

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An artist's early years of activity are generally a period of struggle during which he remains relatively obscure and often goes undocumented. The task of filling this important biographical gap falls therefore on contemporary or near contemporary biographers and commentators who often base their writing on oral sources. The reliability of such writing varies and becomes at times hard to verify, even if the notes provided by the reliable authors are generally accepted.

Biographical details regarding Giuseppe Grech's early Malta period have been hitherto based on Giuseppe Hyzler's biographical note, published in the *Repertorio di Conoscenze Utili* on 25 February 1843.<sup>1</sup> The source follows a logical consistency but is, however, very brief and provides only limited information. The documentary evidence which will be discussed in this paper clarifies in greater detail Hyzler's writings and provides further information.

Giuseppe Grech was born in Valletta on 8 November 1755<sup>2</sup> and as Hyzler notes, he received his first artistic training under Rocco Buhagiar. The same source notes that his first recorded works were some paintings intended to be fitted as ornaments above doors in the Grand Master's Palace. These, Hyzler says, attracted the attention of Antoine Favray who recommended him to Grand Master de Rohan. He was then sent to further his studies at the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome.

**[p.34] The First Recorded Activities**

The note recording his works at the Grand Master's Palace finds documentary corroboration and from January 1776 the 20 year old artist found regular employment within the Grand Master's circle of painters. These documented initial works are surprisingly of a very humble nature but the artist's talent gradually singled him out obtaining great favour.

In the early months of 1776 the young artist was paid 90 *scudi* for the *pittura, e tintura del soffitto di due gabinetti, frisi, tintura nelle porte, olio per i pavimenti, manifattura di 18 arme piccole, e due grandi per la Santa Cena*.<sup>3</sup> The payment was divided in two instalments, one for 37 *scudi* dated 20 January 1776, and another for 53 *scudi*, dated 23 April 1776.<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Grech's unpretentious beginnings pertained more to those of a house painter and

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<sup>1</sup> *Repertorio di Conoscenze Utili*, Anno 1, No.4, 25 Feb 1843, 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> His birth is registered in the Parish Archives of Porto Salvo Church, Valletta, Reg. Bat., f. 79, 8 November 1755, as noted by D. Cutajar 'Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Art in Malta,' in M. Buhagiar (ed.), *Marian Art during the 17th and 18th Centuries*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> NLM AOM 1068, Nov-Apr 1775/76, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

wood stainer, painting doors and ceilings, and rendering floor paving. On the other hand, the manufacture of coats-of-arms could possibly indicate that his able hand had already been noticed, even though certainly not yet exploited.

This expenditure entry was followed by a total payment of 55.4 *scudi*, again divided in two instalments dated 26 January and 23 March 1776, to silversmith Francesco Troisi for the manufacture and restoration of a number of armorial shields.<sup>5</sup> This might have been related to Grech's work. Similarly Maestro Melchior Xicluna was, on 30 March 1776, also paid 26.4 *scudi* for painting coats of arms and other works.<sup>6</sup> Melchior Xicluna appears on various expenditure entries, but he was mainly an *Indoratore*.

During the first months of 1776 Grech remained active mainly as a house painter, yet commissions started gradually taking another turn. He was still, by May, staining *persiane* in green, together with friezes, but painting in the palace apartments started also gaining ground. In the same period he painted along the *cupola* of the new reading room and in the reading room of an unnamed Capuchin Friar. These reading rooms are probably the same rooms for which he had painted the soffits. More important however was a miniature portrait for an enameled [p.35] box. For these works he was paid 31.3.10 *scudi* on 9 May 1776.<sup>7</sup> The latter is the first documented reference for a figurative work by the artist.

Work on the Palace apartments kept Grech busy during the summer months of 1776. On 28 June he was paid 21 *scudi* for unspecified work at the Valletta Palace and at that of S. Antonio in Attard.<sup>8</sup> A similar entry is noted for the year 1777 when he was paid the considerable sum of 164.5 *scudi*.<sup>9</sup> This was divided in two payments dated 22 July and 26 September. The former totalled 66.5 *scudi* and the latter 99 *scudi*. This commission surely foresaw a large scale decorative programme.

Grech's works were varied. On 12 August 1776 he was paid 22 *scudi* for painting on the Palace's *Orologio Maggiore*.<sup>10</sup> The bill included, apart from the 12 *scudi* for his work, expenses for colours, *bianchetto*, and linseed oil, together with expenses for the work of labourers. The words *e suoi lavoranti* indicates that the young artist had already enjoyed a certain degree of mutual respect within the immediate Grand Master's circle. The possibility that his endeavours were noticed by de Rohan himself, whom he could have met whilst working, is great. On the other hand, Hyzler notes that it was Favray who first noted the artist and recommended him to the Grand Master.

On 20 October 1776 Giuseppe was paid 18 *scudi* for painting and restoring the *tela per il nuovo gabinetto*.<sup>11</sup> This could have probably been another ceiling decorative canvas.

Giuseppe Grech was, during the same period, entrusted with other parallel commissions within the Knights' circle. On 9 October 1776 he was paid 62 *scudi* for work and expenses in depicting the soffit, the *bocca d'opera*, and a *gabinetto* next to the Grand

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> NLM AOM 1068, May-Oct 1776, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> NLM AOM 1069, May-Oct 1777.

<sup>10</sup> NLM AOM 1068, May-Oct 1776, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Master's private theatre box within the Manoel Theatre in Valletta.<sup>12</sup> On 24 November 1776 he received 4 *scudi* for painting a prop set within the same theatre.<sup>13</sup> This depicted a house and door scene and was [p.36] intended for the French Knights' Opera. He apparently took over as theatre painter from the painter Filippo Vincenzo Pace who between December 1775 and April 1776 had worked in the theatre.<sup>14</sup> The following year, in September 1777 it was Giuseppe Grech's brother, the painter Antonio, who was commissioned works for 10 *scudi*.<sup>15</sup>

Giuseppe Grech's soffit paintings were apparently very successful and, by late 1776, his brush was in demand. Three expenditure entries document a decorative scheme for the Casa Grande Correa which was then property of the Manoel Foundation.<sup>16</sup> On 9 October 1776 he was paid 78 *scudi* for work and expenses for painting the soffits of the main hall and other unspecified rooms.<sup>17</sup> On 27 December 1776 he received 35 *scudi* for another two soffits. The last payment of 16 *scudi* was made on 8 February 1777.<sup>18</sup>

### The Naxxar *Via Crucis* Paintings

During 1778 the young artist attracted his first ecclesiastical commission. The painting represents Station XII of the *Via Crucis* Cycle at the Naxxar parish church and is, together with Station II, traditionally attributed to Grech. It is, however, only now that the work receives documentary support and secure dating. For this painting Giuseppe Grech received 16.1.10 *scudi* on 7 June 1778.<sup>19</sup> The *Conti* entry is corroborated by a receipt signed by Grech himself and written in a neat firm calligraphy that betrays good education. The expenses for Station XII<sup>20</sup> amounted to a total of 53.3.10 *scudi* which also included expenses for the frame, carving, gilding, transportation from Valletta and its fixing in place.

[p.37] The painting was well received by the church authorities and on 10 June through an advance payment of 50 *scudi*, noted in the acts of Notary Paulo Vittorio Giamalva, Giuseppe Grech bound himself to execute other paintings *a buon conto*.<sup>21</sup> Notary Giamalva received 3 *tari* for his fee.<sup>22</sup> The notarial record provides further information.<sup>23</sup> The parties were Rev. Dr Georgio Fiteni, parish priest of Naxxar, and Giuseppe Grech. Witnesses to the agreement were Nicola Azzopardi of Siġġiewi and Gaetano Psaila of Valletta. The main themes of the agreement were: (i) that the paintings were to be finished in all perfection,

<sup>12</sup> NLM AOM, Treas. A27, Giornale Fond. Manoel 1773-79, 9 October 1776.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 November 1776.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 December 1775, 20 April 1776.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 September 1777.

<sup>16</sup> The Casa Correa De Sousa (Nos. 153/157, Old Bakery Street, Valletta) was destroyed by enemy action in 1942. The site now houses the Dominican College of St Albert the Great. Victor F. Denaro, *The Houses of Valletta*, Malta 1967, 52-55.

<sup>17</sup> ALM AOM, Treas. A27, *op. cit.*, 9 October 1776.

<sup>18</sup> NLM *Ibid.*, 27 December 1776, 8 February 1777.

<sup>19</sup> AAF Conti, V53 Naxxar, N.27 Via Crucis, Esito Diverso, p. 28. The Naxxar Via Sagra series is discussed in detail in K. Sciberras, *Rocco Buhagiar and Late Eighteenth-Century Painting in Malta*, M.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1995, 127-139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> AAF Conti Naxxar, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> NAV Not. Paolo Vittorio Gianmalva R292/26. 10 June 1778, ff. 846<sup>v</sup>-7.

according to the best rules of the arts; and (ii) that the artist was to refund the 50 *scudi* if the paintings were not finished. *CapoMastro* Antonio Cachia stood surety for Giuseppe Grech.

This *CapoMastro*, identified as the son of Gio Domenico, was no other than the architect Antonio Cachia (1739-1813),<sup>24</sup> one of the Order's 12 *periti* and an important figure in Maltese late eighteenth century architecture. Antonio Cachia features at the initial stages of the *Via Crucis* commission and he was probably the commission's supervisor.

The contractual obligations were noted in two separate chirographs preserved by each party. One of these notes survives in the Naxxar Parish Archives. It is signed by Giuseppe Grech and reads:

*Io sottoscritto in vigor di questo chirografo: mi obbligo di dover fare quelli quadri della via Crucis che mi siano ordinati dal Reverendo Signor Don Giorgio Fiteni Parroco del Naxiaro, che non devono essere di qualita inferiore a quello da me fatto della Stazione XII e cio secondo lacordato fra me e il medesimo Parroco vole a dire per il prezo di scudi quindici luno; e pero mi sottoscrivo da mio proprio pugno oggi li 10: Giugno 1778.*<sup>25</sup>

There is no indication of the date bracket for execution and of the number of the stations to be executed. The sum of 50 *scudi* none the less indicates at least [p.38] three other paintings. Only one of these paintings was however executed and the commission was probably interrupted by Grech's period of training abroad. This painting, though undocumented, can be identified as Station III. It represents the First Falling under the Cross.

The only documented reference to this Station is dated 7 January 1779 when the *Intaliatore* Vincenzo was paid 18 *scudi* for carving two frames.<sup>26</sup> There is no mention of Giuseppe Grech but the attribution can be established on stylistic and technical evidence.

On 10 June 1778, three days after Grech received payment for Station XII, the painter Giuseppe Pace received the inferior sum of 14.1.10 *scudi* for Station XIII, representing the Pietà.<sup>27</sup> This dual commission suggests that the two artists were probably commissioned on a competitive basis. Grech seemingly won. The involvement of Antonio Cachia in Grech's notarial agreement for other works indicates that the architect, so active in the whole commission, probably also formed part of the adjudicating panel. Grech possibly already knew Cachia. Both were from Valletta and both were working within the Grand Master's immediate entourage.

The work of Giuseppe Grech surpassed that of Pace in both compositional arrangement and technical structure. Grech's brushwork flows with a freedom rare in late eighteenth-century art and his production surpasses all that was then being executed by Maltese painters. The work of Pace is feeble and dry, inconsistent in draughtsmanhip and weak in execution. Neither artist was, however, destined to complete the whole cycle.

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<sup>24</sup> For Antonio Cachia see G. Bonello; 'The Cachia Dynasty of Architects,' in *The Sunday Times*, December 10 1995, 56-7.

<sup>25</sup> PA Naxxar, loose sheet receipts. Mr T Terribile kindly brought the existence of these receipts to my attention.

<sup>26</sup> AAF Conti V.53, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

By late 1778 Grech should have had already executed Station III. The exact period of completion is unfortunately difficult to identify but, a different source cited *infra*, suggests that Grech's painting should have been completed by this period. The notarial agreement had bound the young artist to execute other works but these could not be produced because within the same year Grech was to further his studies in Rome.<sup>28</sup> The church procurators therefore turned to commission their third artist, Rocco Buhagiar.

The presence of Rocco Buhagiar in three of the Naxxar *Via Crucis* paintings, and the near stylistic proximity to the work of Grech suggests artistic links [p.39] between the artists. Grech's painting has the classical bearing of the Roman school, probably derived from his training under Rocco Buhagiar. This period of training is also suggested by Hyzler and, considering the usually strong reliability of his writings, it is probably true. Grech, by this stage, had probably also formed some kind of artistic contact with Favray.

What is certain is that the initial training that Grech received in Malta did not reflect outmoded theatrical exuberances and his work does appear to be very modern. Station II is indicative of a good knowledge of Roman aesthetic taste and the work is indeed an immediate precursor of the Neo-Classical. The seriousness of Grech's approach and the disregard for illusionistic devices reflects the new prevailing ideas for noble simplicity and calm grandeur. The work is the closest that Maltese art of the 1770s gets to continental thought.

The First Falling under the Cross (Station III) evolves into a lucidly organized narrative scene dominated by an atmosphere of languorous drama. The slow motion kind of action that animates the work through central focus diagonals is arrested by the verticality of the flanking soldier, to whom Christ directs his vision. This figure acts as a foreground repoussoir, giving depth to the picture and enhancing the theme. An architecture backdrop of pure geometrical types towers on one side and achieves an effect of solidity, permanence, and still solemnity. Figures are generally well executed, with minor instances of unassuring modelling.

The Crucifixion scene (Station XII) is more liberally executed and not as sober in approach. It fits in the general scheme of local art production but its fresh qualities are rarely present in Maltese late eighteenth-century small sized paintings. The artist's compositional arrangement is well structured and interplays harmoniously within the complex decorative design of the picture space. The vertical masses that dominate the central picture space converge to lead the spectators' eyes onto the compact group below, where a well modelled Virgin swoons in the hands of John and Mary Magdalen to form a chromatically clear beautifully rendered group. This mourning group does have strong points of contact with Rocco even if the younger Grech is definitely the more able. Grech's brushwork flows freely with spontaneously mature strokes, testimony of the talent of the artist. The elegant elongation of the central Christ gives the work a clear definition and emotionally contrasts the group below. The crucified figures are well executed and their general treatment shows a sound formative approach. The small figures inhabiting the background are however not entirely successful.

The influence of Rocco Buhagiar is most evident when compared with the execution and general treatment of the mourning figures in Rocco's Żebbuġ *Via* [p.40] *Crucis* Pietà scene. Rocco fails however to achieve Grech's level in the near similar thematic interpretation

of the Crucifixion scene in the Floriana *Via Crucis*. The treatment of the crucified figures in the latter work suggests that Rocco was the least appropriate to train Grech in figure modelling.

It is not known how Grech relieved himself of the Naxxar contractual obligations, or whether Antonio Cachia refunded the first, and only, instalment of 50 *scudi*. The parish priest seems not however to have interfered to spoil preparations for Grech's wonderful opportunity to study in Rome.

### Academic Studies in Rome

During these years Giuseppe Grech gained the total favour of the Grand Master, who came personally to sponsor his studies abroad. An intimate relationship developed between the two and Grech's bursary to further training in the most prestigious Academy on the continent was an almost predictable consequence. The personal interest of the Grand Master in the studies of the younger generation of Maltese artists consolidates de Rohan's commitment to ensure good quality artistic production and to maintain that intimate relationship between the Order and the arts.

The exact date of Grech's departure is unfortunately unknown, but a letter dated 16 January 1779 could probably identify Giuseppe Grech with the *giovane pittore* who arrived in Rome around January 1779. In this letter, addressed to the Bali La Brillane, Ambassador of the Order to the Holy See, Grand Master de Rohan notes this young painter and remarks that *ci rimettiamo alla vostra prudenza per fargli somministrare quanto giudicarete necessario al di lui mantenimento con incaricarne la spesa alla nostra fattura*.<sup>29</sup> The Ambassador is asked to provide all that he could.

There is no other documentary evidence that Grech was in Rome in 1779 but he was surely there by 7 January 1780 when he received 76.25 *scudi* through Cav. Depoul.<sup>30</sup> He was by then probably already enrolled at the Accademia di San Luca. This he probably did in the early months of 1779. The preparations for his enrolment and for his years-long stay in Rome should have been a relatively [p.41] quick affair since by June 1778 Grech was still binding himself with contractual obligations in Malta.

In Rome the young artist resided in comfortable quarters and the note by Hyzler describing that the artist resided at the residence of Ambassador La Brillane is confirmed by La Brillane himself when he later writes that *egli [Giuseppe Grech] stette in mia Casa dal primo giorno della sua venuta a Roma*.<sup>31</sup> This residence was situated right in the hub of Roman cultural activity, a few metres away from the Spanish steps. The Palace, now Palazzo Malta, in Via Condotti provided the ideal surroundings for Grech's artistic endeavours.

The Archives of the Accademia di San Luca,<sup>32</sup> together with the letters of the Ambassador of the Order to the Holy See and de Rohan's *Conti Delle Ricette*, provide

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<sup>29</sup> NLM AOM 1531, Lettere de Rohan 1779, f. 16.

<sup>30</sup> NLM AOM 1072, Nov-Apr 1779/80, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> NLM AOM 1371, Lettere Ambasc. S. Sede 1787/88, f. 89<sup>v</sup>. The reference was also noted by D. Cutajar, *op. cit.*, 23 who, however, does not discuss it.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Mr Michael Ellul for his very considerable help in making available for study the exhaustive archival research he carried out at the Archivio Storico of the

exhaustive documentation of the artist's studies and progress at the Academy where his precocious talent was immediately rewarded. In September 1780 Grech is recorded winning a first prize in the *Seconda Classe della Scuola del Nudo*<sup>33</sup> which was directed by the sculptor Tommaso Rigi.<sup>34</sup> This news was immediately brought to the attention of de Rohan through a letter dated 19 September 1780 in which Ambassador La Brillane notes that Grech obtained third place in a contest held at the Accademia di San Luca.<sup>35</sup> There is a slight discrepancy in the order of merit but both references should be referring to the same prize. The Ambassador does not specify the artist's name but *il Pittore suddito della medesima e che gode del'Alta sua protezione* is, as demonstrated below, an obvious reference to Grech. It also is an important reference that further consolidates de Rohan as a direct patron of the arts.<sup>36</sup>

[p.42] Grech's studies in Rome were crowned with other more prestigious successes. He won the first prize in the following two contests. In March 1781 he won the *Terza Classe* contest<sup>37</sup> under the direction of Antonio de Maron,<sup>38</sup> and in September 1781 he reaffirmed the previous year's success in the *Seconda Classe*<sup>39</sup> under Tommaso Rigi.<sup>40</sup> The following year the artist was enrolled in the prestigious *Prima Classe* and, in September 1782, he achieved distinctive recognition with a *Primo Premio*.<sup>41</sup> The Ambassador was quick to inform de Rohan of Grech's remarkable success in a letter dated 17 September 1782:

*Non lascio ignorare a Vostra Altezza Eminentissima che il Pittore Giuseppe Grech protetto dalla Medesima, nell'Accademia al Campidoglio, ha meritato ed avuto il Primo Premio, e il secondo la avuto Michele Busuttil anche Maltese.*<sup>42</sup>

Michele Busuttil's second prize in the same class is also noted in the Academy registers.<sup>43</sup> It is apparent that Michele Busuttil, who had been with Grech in Rome since 1780, did not find the Grand Master's similar favour. Both were students under the sculptor Tommaso Rigi.<sup>44</sup> The artists' drawings can be probably identified with two charcoal and

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Accademia di San Luca in Rome. Mr Ellul's notes were of great assistance during my further research in Rome. I also thank Simona Capodimenti, for her collaboration in research of the Accademia.

33 ASL, *Schedario*, B318, matita nera e gessetto, 55.5 x 42 cm.

34 ASL, Ms 33 Bi, *Registro di Antichi Premiati dal 1754 al 1848*, f. 25<sup>v</sup>.

35 NLM AOM 1367, f. 249.

36 De Rohan's art patronage is the subject of an interesting small painting representing Grand Master de Rohan as Protector of the Arts in the Valletta Fine Arts Museum. The painting is of unknown authorship but should date to this period.

37 ASL, *Schedario*, B326, matita con gessetto, 52.5 x 40 cm. The drawing is, at this stage, also unidentifiable. It seems strange that after winning the *Seconda Classe* prize Grech contested in the *Terza Classe*.

38 ASL, *Antichi Premiati*, op. cit., f. 25.

39 ASL, *Schedario*, B330, matita con gesso, 52 x 40 cm.

40 ASL, *Antichi Premiati*, f. 25.

41 ASL, *Schedario*, B340, matita con gessetto, 52 x 39 cm.

42 NLM AOM 1368, f. 247.

43 ASL, *Schedario*, B341, matita con gessetto, 55 x 41.5 cm.

44 J. Attard Tabone, 'Michele Busuttil (1762-1831),' in *L-Għid ta' l-Assunta*, N.26, Gozo 1991, 7. see also M. Ellul, 'Art and Architecture in the Early Nineteenth Century,' *Proceedings of History Week* 1982, Malta 1983, 9.

chalk drawings representing a similarly posed figure and respectively inscribed *Primo Premio Giuseppe Grech Maltese*, and *Secondo Premio Michele Busuttil Maltese*.

In the following year Grech reaffirmed his growing stature and won another, even more important first prize. In a letter dated 3 June 1783 the Grand Master, was informed that

[p.43] *il Pittore Grech cotanto meritamente protetto da Vostra Altezza Emminentissima, nell'ultima Accademia di S. Luca tenuta al Campidoglio ne ha meritato ed avuto il primo e piu distinto premio a preferenza di tutu gli altri concorrenti.*<sup>45</sup>

This was the coveted *Concorso Clementino di Pittura* which he won with a drawing representing *The Cleansing of the Temple*. The selected subjects for the *Concorso* were

*imbussolati ed indi a sorte estratti i seguenti fatti della Sacra Scrittura da disegnarsi e modellarsi rispettivamente:*

*Prima Classe. Pittura*

*Si rappresentera in disegno Gesù Cristo, che caccia i negozianti dal tempio.*

*Seconda Classe.*

*Si dovra esprimere la Casta Susanna che lavandosi nel suo giardino viene sorpresa da due [anziani del popolo]*

*Terza Classe*

*Si disegnara la statua dell' Antinoo di Campidoglio.*<sup>46</sup>

The titles and Grech's prize are reaffirmed in other sources.<sup>47</sup> The *Tema della Prova* was held on 24 May 1783 and the five students who sat for the *Prima Classe* exam had to gather in the Salon where the subject was read out *ad alta voce*. It was of two hours duration and the results were communicated immediately after dinner. The conferment ceremony was held at the Campidoglio on 2 June.<sup>48</sup> Grech's *Concorso* drawing of *The Cleansing of the Temple* can be securely identified with a beautiful drawing of the same subject that is preserved within the Academy.<sup>49</sup> The drawing is inscribed [Pri]mo Premio Giuseppe Grech Maltese. The thematic representation faithfully reappears in a small monochrome [p.44] painting representing *The Cleansing of the Temple*, inscribed in ink Giuseppe Grech Theij Maltese fatto a Roma on the back of the canvas. This painting survives in a private collection.<sup>50</sup> It is possible that the latter monochrome painting was a tonal study for the *Concorso* drawing. There are only minor variations between the two and one is surely a copy of the other.

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<sup>45</sup> NLM AOM 1369, f. 56<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> ASL, *I pregi delle Belle Arti Celebrati in Campidoglio per Solenne Concorso tenuto dall' Insigne Accademia del Disegno in S. Luca li 2 Giugno 1783*.

<sup>47</sup> ASL, *Archivio Rubricella* Vol. 54, Libro dei Decreti 1783, f. 10, and ASL, *Concorsi Clementini di Pittura 1702-1869*, 1783.

<sup>48</sup> ASL, *Archivio Rubricella*, *op. cit.*, f. 38<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> ASL, *Schedario*, A523, and *Concorso Clementine*, 1783, matita nera e gessetto. 56 x 95 cm.

<sup>50</sup> I only know the work through a weak photographic reproduction kindly provided by Dr M. Buhagiar.



Michele Busuttil also participated in this *Concorso Clementino*. He won a second prize in the *Terza Classe* with a sanguinia drawing of the statue of Antinoo. A well executed polished drawing, the work still survives in the Academy collection. It is inscribed *Terza Classe - Secondo Premio - Michele Busotili Maltese. Anno 1783*.<sup>51</sup>

A number of other prize-winning Academy drawings by Giuseppe Grech are still preserved at the Accademia. These belong to the *concorsi* of the *Scuola del Nudo*. Together with the 1782 drawing there are two male draped figures respectively inscribed *Terzo Premio Giuseppe Grech Maltese*, and *Terzo Premio Giuseppe Grech Maltese*. A beautifully modelled, muscular male nude is also inscribed *S.o Giuseppe Grech Maltese*. The identification of these drawings with the recorded, or otherwise, prizes is, at this stage, still unfortunately inconclusive.<sup>52</sup>

The three draped Giuseppe Grech studies are drawings that the artist presented for the *sessione delle piege* in which the students studied drapery folds dressed on a mannequin. The folds were then animated by the students' own modelling of the human body beneath. This accounts for the similarity of drapery between the two 1782 charcoal and chalk drawings executed by Grech and Busuttil during the same session. The facial types are however different. There is not much difference in pose between the three Giuseppe Grech drawings, executed in a different *sessione d'Accademia*. The slightly leaning figure turning in soft contrapposto seems to have been a standard model for the examination sittings. The *sessione* were, after 1762, held on a semestral basis and were divided in the study of the nude and of drapery folds. The surviving Grech nude study [p.45] belongs to one of the former sessions. There were three classes, streamed according to ability. The younger students normally formed part of the *Terza Classe*.

De Rohan's yearly payments, sent through Ambassador La Brillane, were kept regular. On 24 January 1781 Grech received 85.0.6 Maltese *scudi* (38 *scudi romani*),<sup>53</sup> on 16 March 1782, 85 *scudi* (38 *scudi romani*),<sup>54</sup> and on 30 January 1783, 89.6 *scudi* (40 *scudi romani*).<sup>55</sup>

The year 1783 was possibly interrupted by a brief sojourn on the island, during which the Grand Master surprisingly requested his services in painting rooms and doors situated *sopra la Guardaroba di Palazzo*. This he did for the sum of 90 *scudi*.<sup>56</sup> This entry is dated 23 June 1783, barely 20 days after the dated letter in which Ambassador La Brillane informed the Grand Master of the 1783 award. The date may suggest that when La Brillane sent his dispatch to the Grand Master, Grech was already on his way to Malta, even if the conferment ceremony was held on 2 June.<sup>57</sup> The de Rohan *Libro delle Ricette* reference is somewhat confusing since it was indeed very difficult for the artist to have completed his travels and

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<sup>51</sup> Inv. No. A534, 55 x 32 cm.

<sup>52</sup> A number of drawings by other Maltese art-students survive at the Accademia. Only when this research at the Academy, which I have unfortunately not been able to conclude during the preparation of this study, is terminated should the artistic career of Grech, and others, emerge as truly exhaustive.

<sup>53</sup> NLM AOM 1073, Nov-Apr 1780/1781, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> NLM AOM 1074, Nov-Apr 1781/1782, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> NLM AOM 1075, Nov-Apr 1782/1783, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> NLM AOM 1075, May-Oct 1783, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Conferment dates are also published in *L'Accademia Nazionale Di San Luca*, De Luca Editore, 1974.

executed the commission within such short a time. The possibility that this entry should have recorded Giuseppe's brother Antonio should not be discarded.

Grech's possible soujourn on the island could not have been too long since by 7 January 1784 he was back in Rome and receiving 109.7.13 Maltese *scudi* (49 *scudi romani*).<sup>58</sup> His activities must have been generally satisfying since a year later the sum saw further increment, rising to 118.9.15 *scudi* (53 *scudi romani*) on 6 January 1785<sup>59</sup> together with a second payment of 80.6.12 *scudi* (36 *scudi romani*) on 28 November.<sup>60</sup> During these years the total recorded [p.46] payments *pagati d'ordine di sua Eminenza* reached the considerable sum of 734.8.11 Maltese *scudi*.

### The Proposed Mdina Cathedral Vault Commission

The fame of Giuseppe Grech was by 1787 so great that he was considered as the best candidate able to decorate the vault of the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul in Mdina. His name was proposed in a Cathedral Chapter meeting dated 1 September 1787. The Chapter was apparently well versed on the artist, recording that he had until then *dato prova della sua perizia nelle opere da lui fatte e con l'avere riportato il premio dell'Accademia di quella citta*.<sup>61</sup> A further note called for the meeting to deliberate on calling Grech over from Rome, *affin di osservare ocularmente la Chiesa e concertare quant'occorre intorno alla pittura della volta*.<sup>62</sup> The Cathedral Chapter's intention to commission Grech to execute the whole ceiling is all too evident.

The commission was however most unfortunately not carried out because the young artist died untimely within the same month. Hyzler, who was again correct when he spoke of this commission, included that the letter notifying Grech of the honourable work arrived in Rome just three days after his death.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, the hypothesis in which Citti Siracusano suggests that Grech could have proposed Vincenzo Manno's name to the Cathedral Chapter is incorrect.<sup>64</sup> Siracusano suggests that the two artists could have met each other in Rome during 1788, the year in which Grech was however already dead. The possibility that Grech knew other members of the Manno family remains valid, but certainly not within the context of the Cathedral commission.

### [p.47] The Death of the Artist

The sad news of Grech's sudden death must have surprised everyone. It was communicated to the Grand Master by Ambassador La Brillane himself in a disconsolate letter dated 25 September 1787:

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<sup>58</sup> NLM AOM 1076, Nov-Apr 1783/1784, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> NLM AOM 1077, Nov-Apr 1784/1785, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> NLM AOM 1078, Nov-Apr 1785/1786, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> MCM ACM, *Minute Capitolari* 1786-1790, 1 September 1787, f. 254, 258. Can. J. Azzopardi drew my attention to this reference.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Repertorio Di Conoscenze Utili*, 32.

<sup>64</sup> Citti Siracusano, 'Gli Affreschi Della Cattedrale di Mdina e l'Opera dei Fratelli Manno a Malta,' *Quaderni* 2, 1976, De Luca Editori, 55.

Altezza Eminentissima

*Non avendo in quest'ordinario che riferire a Vostra Altezza Eminentissima rapporto agli affari pendenti mi restringo a non lasciarle ignorare che il buon Giuseppino Grech Pittore, che meritamente godeva dell'Alta Protezione di Vostra Eminenza, assalito da una febbre che ben presto si manifesto esutrida nel brieve corso di otto giorni cesso di vivere nella mattina di mercoledì ultimo scorso. Continuava a farsi onore con gran profitto nell'Arte sua liberale che lo avrebbe un giorno distinto nel ceto di questi migliori Pinori. Egli stette in mia casa dal primo giorno della sua venuta a Roma fino a quello della sua morte, che mi ha rammaricato moltissimo, tanto esucche per l'ottima sua condotta serviva di esempio a me medesimo, e a tutta la mia Famiglia.*<sup>65</sup>

The date 25 September 1787 leaves note for one final clarification. If La Brillane is correct it is an obvious indication that the traditional date of Grech's death, recorded by Hyzler and mentioned thereafter as being 27 September 1787, is wrong. The *mercoledì ultimo scorso* noted above suggests, through intricate mathematical calculations, a new and more reliable date of Wednesday 19 September 1787.<sup>66</sup>

He was buried in the parish church of San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome.<sup>67</sup>

### **Proposed and Suggested Works by the Artist**

The number of Giuseppe Grech paintings on the island are indeed limited and some of the attributions still remain questionable. He is accredited with a small portrait painting of Grand Master de Rohan, which hangs in the National Museum of Fine Arts. It is a well executed work that follows the general full-length posture of the Favray 1776 painting but reinterpreted in a more lavish and exuberant [p.48] setting. The small scale and the spontaneous approach may suggest that the work was a preliminary study for a larger painting, which, however, is not known to exist. Grech's name does not appear in any of the rather comprehensive documentation detailing de Rohan's portraiture but it is indeed not improbable that the young artist painted a portrait of his patron. The painting was formerly attributed to Favray.

The only instance when Grech securely cited Favray was in the production of a drawing for a portrait engraving of de Rohan. This was executed after a Favray painting. The portrait was subsequently engraved by D. Canego and published in the Codice del S.O.G.M. 1782. The portrait is contained within an oval medallion resting on a pedestal decorated with foliated scrolls of classical inspiration. A winged armorial shield with the arms of de Rohan surmounted by a closed crown bridges the portrait with the supporting pedestal and interrupts a garland of olive branches that intertwine round the lower part of the framing medallion. A set of ten medals, each of them an exercise in Neo-Classical iconography, extol the virtues of Rohan and the Order and are linked to each other by ribbons and foliated garlands. The print is inscribed *Favray pin. / J. Grech del. / D. Canego sculp. / Roma 1782.*

The whole plate design is attributed to Favray in the *Memorie Melitensi catalogue*<sup>68</sup> but his work should perhaps remain confined to the de Rohan portrait. The Neo-Classical

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<sup>65</sup> NLM AOM 1371, f. 9<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>66</sup> I thank Prof. S. Fiorini for his help in calculating this date.

<sup>67</sup> *Repertorio di Conoscenze Utili*, 32.

ensemble was probably designed by Grech. The drawing after the Favray portrait suggests that Grech could have probably visited the island some time immediately before 1782 or that he was copying a painting which had been sent over to Rome, possibly to hang in the Order's Roman Embassy. The possibility that, when Grech first went to further his studies, he took with him a portrait drawing of de Rohan is most improbable.

Another painting attributed to Giuseppe Grech is a fine small painting representing Aeneas that hangs in the Cathedral Museum at Mdina. It is a chromatically lucid remarkably fresh work, executed in oil saturated short brushstrokes that compliment strong draughtsmanship and modelling. The light rendering of Aeneas' drapery folds, the spontaneity of his helmet, and the loose approach to foliage are indeed commendable. There is little however with which the painting can be stylistically corroborated to authenticate its authorship, yet the general flesh tone rendering and facial type are none the less strongly, [p.49] reminiscent of the soldier holding Christ's cross in the Naxxar Falling. The attribution to Grech should stand correct.

The painting has been tentatively suggested to be a preparatory study for a *The Miracle of Aeneas*<sup>69</sup> which, according to Hyzler, was intended to be donated to the Academy. This painting was, unfortunately, interrupted by his untimely death. The thematic representation of the Aeneid scene in the Mdina painting remains however somewhat uncertain. Aeneas, olive branch in hand, appears seemingly surprised as he enters into the woods whilst in the distance three figures discuss and toil next to a ship. It could possibly show the moment when Aeneas plucks the Golden Bough to descend to the Underworld as described in Book VI.<sup>70</sup> On the shore the Trojans weep for Misenus and pay their tributes to his ashes.

Grech's reputed self portrait, hanging in the National Museum of Fine Arts, is another significant work in which the artist portrays himself in quarter length, well dressed in a red coat and turning in a slight contrapposto against a darker background. The painting is unsigned but it is most probably the painting which was copied to provide Grech's portrait accompanying the *Repertorio* essay. It is a small work, direct in approach and skilfully executed in polished brushwork.

Hyzler notes that a number of works were sold in France and that two paintings, representing *Christ Condemned to Death* and *The Entombment*, hung in the *oratorio del padre Caravita*. The presence of such Oratory is however unknown. Another entry notes portraits of the Marchesi family<sup>71</sup> which are similarly of unknown whereabouts. A documented painting representing a Roman landscape scene with a Country Villa,<sup>72</sup> bought by Marchese in 1820, could be possibly identified with a painting which formed part of the Marchese collection and which today hangs in the Cathedral Museum in Mdina. The figures

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<sup>68</sup> G. Morello (ed.), *Memorie Melitensi nelle Collezioni della Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana*, S.M.O.M.. 1987, 26.

<sup>69</sup> J. Gash, "Painting and Sculpture in Early Modern Malta," in V. Mallia Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta (1530-1708)*, Malta 1993, 602.

<sup>70</sup> This has been suggested by Dr Helen Langden.

<sup>71</sup> R. Mifsud Bonnici, *Dizzjunarju Bijo-Bibliografiku Nazzjonali*, Malta 1960, 264.

<sup>72</sup> J. Azzopardi, "Count Saverio Marchese (1757-1833): His picture Gallery and His Bequest to the Cathedral Museum," *Proceedings of History Week 1982*, The Historical Society, Malta 1983, 42.

in the landscape are probably the insertion of Schranz. A number of small paintings preserved in Italian Collections are still being studied.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> K. Sciberras, *Giuseppe Grech (1755-1787)*, forthcoming.