

Suor Maria de Dominici:
the first Maltese female artist and her presence in Late
Baroque Malta and Rome

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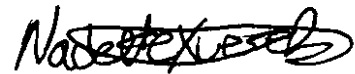
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Declaration of Authenticity

I, the undersigned, Nadette Xuereb, declare that this dissertation is my original work, gathered and utilized to fulfil the purposes and objectives of this study, and has not been previously submitted to any other university. I also declare that the publications, articles, and newspapers have been personally consulted.



Nadette Xuereb

May 2017

*To my family, friends, and all those who helped me become the woman I am
today.*

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List of abbreviations

AAC- Archives of the Archconfraternity of the Crucifixion, Malta

ACM- Archives of the Cathedral Museum, Malta

ASR- Archivio di Stato, Rome

AOC- Archivio Ordine Carmelitano, Rome

AVR- Archivio del Vicariato

NLM- National Library Malta

Preface

This dissertation will analyze Suor Maria de Dominici as an artist and a member within a religious order, and will evaluate her life and works in Malta and in Rome. Her significance, both as an artist within Preti's bottega and independently, will be analysed, together with her fortuna critica and literature written about her.

The methods of research carried out in this dissertation included a formal and technical analysis of the works of art attributed to the artist in Malta, which included viewing and studying the paintings physically. Historical analysis, including tracing patronage patterns and studying iconography of the image within its context, was also carried out. Of significant importance was also the research carried out in various archives in Malta and also in Rome, as, although unfortunately not much is documented or still exists, it helped to differentiate between what is factual and what is traditional. This was also done through the evaluation of stories generated about the artist, both that which has been published over the years as well as oral tradition, which exists even today in small Maltese towns, especially in churches. This was of essential importance for the scrutinization of the biography of Maria de Dominici and the works of art attributed to her. I also met with various people who are knowledgeable about the subject, such as Joe Borg and Mgr. John Azzopardi in Malta, and Dr Sergio Guarino in Rome.

Chapter 1 will examine the biography of Suor Maria de Dominici, focusing on her family, her artistic training and fortuna critica. De Dominici's significance as a tertiary within a religious order while working as an artist, as well as the concept of being a female artist within a man-centred world, will also be discussed. Chapter 2 will examine Maria's presence and artistic oeuvre within the workshop of Mattia Preti, and her independent works in painting and sculpture, as well as past attributions and lost works. Chapter 3 will analyse the artist's departure to Rome in 1682 when she was 37 years old, where she lived and worked as an artist until her death in 1703. Chapter 4 presents a catalogue of de Dominici's six paintings in Malta.

The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the life of Maria de Dominici and her artistic oeuvre, and to differentiate between what is a myth and what is factual, with the hope that more correct information about her and works of art by her will be brought to light. The significance of Suor Maria de Dominici as an artist and tertiary, as well as gender issues will

be studied throughout the dissertation. Finally, a conclusion about the de Dominici's oeuvre and contribution to the story of art will be drawn out.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Keith Sciberras, for his guidance, advice, and support during the period of research for this dissertation as well as throughout these past three years in my time as a History of Art (Hons.) student, in which he provided us students with knowledge about art history and Baroque art, and constant assistance whenever I needed. I would also like to thank Dr Charlene Vella, my secondary tutor, who provided me with constant guidance and support, particularly in terms of female artists and feminism in art history. My dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance of Professor Mario Buhagiar, who suggested the topic and provided me with any information and contacts that I required. I would like to extend my gratitude to all lecturers within the Department of History of Art, University of Malta, for the knowledge which they passed on to us during lectures and for their constant availability, making History of Art a Bachelor of Arts degree that teaches one about all aspects of life: Professor Conrad Thake, Fr Gino Gauci, Dr Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci and Dr Mark Sagona, as well as Dr Christian Attard, who guided me about methodology through tutorials. My gratitude also goes to Ms Marie Claire Finger, the departmental secretary, for her constant availability and assistance.

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the Carmelites at Valletta. I am also thankful to Dr Sergio Guarino, who met with me while I was researching in Rome, to discuss Marcello Sacchetti further.

I would also like to thank my History of Art colleagues, with whom I went through this wonderful university experience, for motivating me and helping me in every aspect of my life. I will indubitably miss their company and cherish the memories created throughout these past three years. I would also like to extend my gratitude to HoASA, for giving me space to freely express my love for art, and to the rest of its executive members, for being a constant rock and showing me the definition of true friendship.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends, for being so supportive throughout these past three years. No words can express the gratitude I feel for their assistance and for always being there for me, especially my parents, brother, sister, and grandmother. Without them, I would not have managed to arrive where I'm at today, and I will be eternally grateful to them.

Introduction

Born in 1645, the Maltese painter, sculptor and Carmelite tertiary nun Suor Maria de Dominici (Fig. 1) was the only significant female artist in Baroque Malta.¹ Unlike most women in art history who were overlooked simply because of their gender, she has a positive fortuna critica, and may be considered as an exceptional case, as, because she was female, she was given more credit than the other painters in Mattia Preti's bottega. Her popularity is mostly based around her association with Preti and the fact that she was a tertiary and the first known female artist in Malta whose biography has been recorded.² De Dominici worked both in Malta and in Rome. Recent scholarship, particularly by Keith Sciberras and Franca Trinchieri Camiz, has put together the main works in her artistic oeuvre in Malta³ and traced her artistic journey in Rome respectively.⁴

Maria de Dominici⁵ was born at Vittoriosa,⁶ into a family of artists⁷ who had moved to Malta from Naples at the beginning of the 17th Century.⁸ Her brothers, Raimondo and Francesco, were also painters and part of Mattia Preti's bottega.⁹ In Malta, de Dominici gravitated as an artist within Preti's workshop and independently.¹⁰

¹ Keith Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, Valletta: Midsea Books, 2009, 170.

² As will be discussed further on in this Introduction and in subsequent chapters, Maria de Dominici's biography was written by her nephew, Bernardo de Dominici, in his *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, and may be found in Volume 3 of the work:

Bernardo De Dominici, *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, vol. iii, Napoli: Stamperia del Ricciardi, 1743.

³ Sciberras (2009), 170.

⁴ Franca Trinchieri Camiz, "Virgo-Non Sterilis...": Nuns as Artists in Seventeenth-Century Rome. In: G. A. Johnson & S. F. Matthews Grieco, eds. *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 151-158.

⁵ There are instances in literature in which Suor Maria de Dominici is referred to as 'De Dominicis', however since the name used in Bernardo de Dominici's *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani* is 'De Dominici', this will be the way of reference.

De Dominici, 274.

⁶ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 151.

⁷ Franca Trinchieri Camiz, 'Dominici, Suor Maria de', *Dictionary of Women Artists: Artists, J-Z*, Delia Gaze, (Ed.), London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, 462.

⁸ This information is found in the Vittoriosa Status Animarum.

⁹ Dominic Cutajar, *The Followers of Mattia Preti*, Malta: Mid-Med Bank Ltd., 1989.

¹⁰ Sciberras (2009), 170.

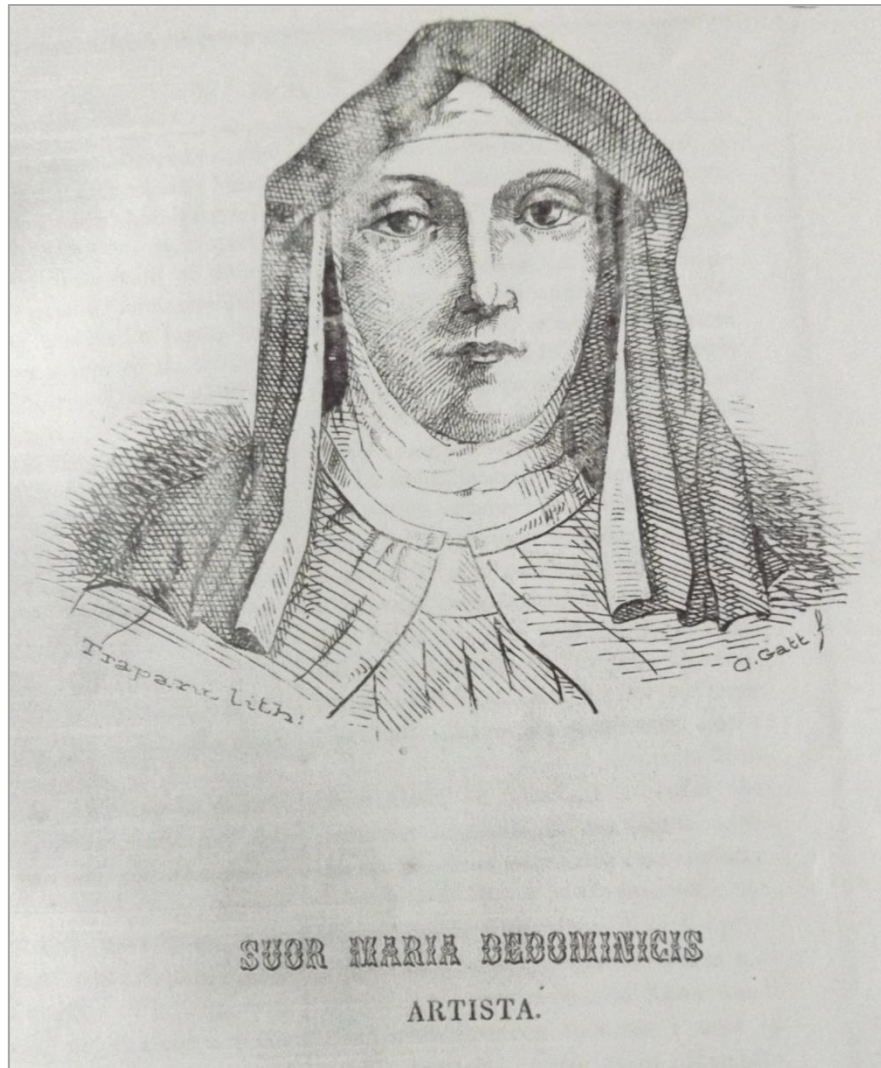


Figure 1. Artistic interpretation of Suor Maria de Dominici, from *L'Arte* 1-51

As a *pinzocchera*, Maria de Dominici held the vows of chastity and obedience, without poverty, and she could live outside of the convent.¹¹ It seems that she became a Carmelite tertiary in Malta, before her departure to Rome around 1682,¹² where she lived and worked until her death in 1703.¹³

Bernardo de' Dominici, the son of Raimondo and the nephew of Maria de Dominici, paid homage to his aunt in his biography of artists, *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti*

¹¹ This was a significant element in her artistic production, as will be discussed in Chapter 1.3. *Life as a Carmelite Tertiary Nun*.

Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 151.

¹² Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

¹³ *Ibid.*

napoletani,¹⁴ in which Mattia Preti is also included. Bernardo de' Dominici was Preti's main biographer; this shows the association that Maria de Dominici had with the Cavalier Calabrese. Bernardo de' Dominici recounts Preti's story as a romantic tale,¹⁵ and, although he is almost the only primary source to the life of Preti, one must be careful in what to believe from the biography as he tended to create fabrications,¹⁶ especially where his family was concerned.

Maria de Dominici is mostly well known for her association with Mattia Preti, since she was one of his students in his workshop, and was also a follower of the artist. Her style was highly dependent on Preti's,¹⁷ although one can distinguish her traits from other followers,¹⁸ and therefore a number of works by her have been identified and there is room for the identification of more works by her in the future.

Preti was the first major significant residential artist in the Maltese Islands during the 17th Century.¹⁹ His arrival was a significant milestone in the development of art in Malta,²⁰ which was, at the time, under the Knights of the Order of St John, which he himself was a member of.²¹ Prior to him, there had been no external artistic influences arriving to Malta for around half a century,²² however there still were a few talented local artists, such as Melchiorre Cafa' and Francesco Noletti.²³ Preti's *terribilita'*, as Bernardo de' Dominici described the strength of his art, impacted students and spectators, and it was through his triumphant manner²⁴ that the spirit of Baroque art entered the Maltese Islands.²⁵ He set up his

¹⁴ De Dominici, 382.

¹⁵ Keith Sciberras, *Mattia Preti: The Triumphant Manner*, Valletta: Midsea Books, 2012, 11-12.

¹⁶ John T. Spike, 'Mattia Preti's Passage to Malta', *The Burlington Magazine*, cxx, 905 (1978), 498.

¹⁷ Sciberras (2009), 170.

¹⁸ Keith Sciberras, *Caravaggio to Mattia Preti*, Valletta: Midsea Books, 2015, 142.

¹⁹ Sciberras (2015), 103.

²⁰ Cutajar, 27.

²¹ Preti was a knight of Magistral Obedience, and through his petition and work at the vault of St John's Co-Cathedral, he was elevated to the knighthood of Grace. This will be discussed in Chapter 2.1.

²² At the beginning of the 17th Century, art in Malta saw artistic progress through the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, who reigned for 21 years and brought to Malta important artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Leonello Spada.

See: Joseph F. Grima, *Żmien Il-Kavallieri F'Malta 1530-1798*. Pietà: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2001, 85.

²³ For more information about Cafa' and Noletti, see:

Keith Sciberras (ed.), *Melchiorre Cafà: Maltese genius of the Roman Baroque*. Valletta: Midsea Books, 2006; Sciberras (2015), 78-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

own workshop in Valletta,²⁶ which was thriving throughout his years in Malta.²⁷ Students, amongst whom were Maria de Dominici, her brother Raimondo, Giuseppe D'Arena, Giovanni Paolo Chiesa and Gioacchino Loretta,²⁸ trained with him and assisted him in commissions.

According to Mario Buhagiar, no artists of any particular artistic significance emerged from Preti's bottega,²⁹ although, as one can see through Maria de Dominici, some were important historically.³⁰ It is possible that Maria de Dominici had trained with Preti during her teenage years,³¹ however there is no evidence to this. As will be discussed in this dissertation, Preti's bottega works are stylistically similar to the independent works attributed to Maria de Dominici. Apart from being a part of Preti's bottega, de Dominici also worked as an independent artist. She is also recorded as being a sculptor,³² but unfortunately none of her sculptures survive, except for the heavily amended *Immaculate Conception* at the Cospicua parish church³³ (Plates 8 & 9). Maria de Dominici can be singled out in her independent works, as her style is quite distinctive, particularly in her angular and rigid drapery folds.³⁴ Currently, there are six paintings ascribed to her, all of which are religious works, three altarpieces and three smaller works, which have been identified as de Dominici from her characteristics recognised from her documented works such as the *Virgin with St Nicholas*

²⁵ Sciberras (2012), ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁷ Although the names of the artists present within it have emerged, it is difficult to determine the oeuvre that can be solidly attributed to particular artists, mostly because it seems that there was more than one artist at work on one painting. This will be discussed in Chapter 2.2 and 2.3.

See: *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁹ One may note that Giuseppe D'Arena was quite significant as an artist, and was the most competent of all the members of Preti's bottega.

³⁰ Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, 1400-1900: Painting*. Valletta: Progress Press, 1988, 111.

³¹ Cutajar, 29-30.

³² As will be discussed in Chapter 2.4, de Dominici is credited as being primarily a sculptor rather than a painter.

³³ Giovannantonio Ciantar, *Malta illustrata ovvero Descrizione di Malta isola del mare siciliano e Adriatico, con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie, [divisa in quattro libri, del commendatore F. Giovanfrancesco Abela, ... corretta, accresciuta, e continovata dal conte Giovannantonio Ciantar]*, vol. ii, Malta: Stamperia del Palazzo di SAS Per Fra Giovanni Mallia, 1780, 550.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997) 152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

and *St Roque* in Attard (Plate 1), her only documented work.³⁵ *Christ Receiving St Maddalena de Pazzi* at the Carmelite Priory, Valletta (Plate 2), should also be ascribed to her, due to its stylistic connotations with the Attard work.³⁶ The heavily repainted *Visitation of the Virgin*, which at the old sacristy in the Żebbuġ Parish Church (Plate 3), is described by Giovannantonio Ciantar in the 18th Century as being one of de Dominici's earliest works.³⁷ It was meant to be the altarpiece for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda (Plate 6), in the limits of Żebbuġ,³⁸ flanked by two side paintings, depicting *St Teresa of Avila* (Plate 4) and *St John of the Cross* (Plate 5), which have also been attributed to De Dominici, today in storage at the Żebbuġ Parish Church sacristy. A small *Crucifixion with Saints* (Plate 7) in a private collection has also been attributed to her recently.³⁹ Although these are the only works which have been securely ascribed to Maria De Dominici, there should be other works by her which have not been discovered yet or have been unfortunately amended or destroyed.

In Rome, De Dominici was tied with the Carmelite church of Santa Maria di Traspontina, and was recommended and protected by Fra Marcello Sacchetti, the Grand Master's ambassador in Rome, as might have been expected with her father's and Preti's associations with the Order of St John.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, there is no knowledge of any surviving works by de Dominici created during her Roman period, so her development as an artist after her departure from Preti's bottega and Malta cannot truly be determined.⁴¹ However, significant moments from her life in Rome, such as her two wills, which were studied during a visit to the Archivio di Stato in Rome, show that she was acknowledged as a qualified painter and sculptor.⁴²

Suor Maria de Dominici is only mentioned in passing in Eduardo Sammut's *Profili di*

³⁵ Daniela Bisazza, *The plague of 1676 in the art of Malta*, Unpublished B.A. (Hons.) Dissertation, Department of History of Art, University of Malta, 1998, 67-68.

³⁶ Sciberras (2015), 142.

³⁷ Ciantar, 295.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Sciberras (2015), 142.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴¹ De Dominici was encouraged to go to Rome to study sculpture from Antiquity as well as that of Bernini. See Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 158.

Artisti Maltesi, whilst other male artists were given more detailed descriptions.⁴³ However it is significant that she is mentioned at all, showing that she was probably more talented than any other female artist which Sammut might have had knowledge of.⁴⁴ In reality, she was not a great artist, but her status as a female artist rose her popularity considerably.⁴⁵ Her significance is also based around her life as an artist in Rome. Urban myths about her aiding Mattia Preti in the ceiling of the conventual church of St John's and sculpting with Bernini have also helped in the dissemination of her name.⁴⁶

Maria de Dominici was a significant painter and sculptor, skilful although she fluctuated in terms of quality,⁴⁷ and strong-willed, and passionately defended her own works of art,⁴⁸ as is evidenced in her wills.⁴⁹ She lived and worked as an uncloistered nun, during the 17th Century, which was still a man-centred artistic and social world⁵⁰

⁴³ Edward Sammut, *Notes for a History of Art in Malta*, Malta: Progress Press Co. Ltd, 1953, 64.

⁴⁴ Dennis Vella, *Women Artists in Malta Today*, Malta: National Council of Women, 1994, 3.

⁴⁵ This is evidenced in the crater on Mercury which was named after her in 2010, and which will be discussed later on in this dissertation.

See: IAU, USGS Astrogeology Science Center, NASA, 2010. *Planetary Names: Crater, craters: Dominici on Mercury*. [Online]

⁴⁶ Giuseppe Maria Piro (barone de.), Adolphus Slade (sir.), *Squarci di Storia e Ragionamenti sull'Isola di Malta*, (in confutazione di una gran parte di cio' che alla stessa si riferisce del primo volume dell'opera inglese intitolata Turkey, Greece and Malta, Malta, 1839, 74.

⁴⁷ This will be discussed further in Chapters 1 and 2.

⁴⁸ Susanna Hoe, 'Maria de Dominici', *Malta: Women, History, Books and Places*, Oxford: The Women's History Press, 2015, 117.

⁴⁹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 141-142.

⁵⁰ Hence, gender issues prevailed.

See: *Ibid.*, 158.

Chapter 1: The Life of Maria de Dominici

Suor Maria De Dominici's life is well documented, perhaps because she was a female artist and a tertiary nun, and for her links with Mattia Preti.⁵¹ Legends generated over the years have also contributed to more information about the artist and her work, although these may be unreliable. Unfortunately, her works are not signed or dated, but through documentation some of her works with extant paintings can be identified, and thus attribute others.⁵² This chapter will discuss the biography of Maria de Dominici, her upbringing within a family of artists, and her training and artistic endeavours in Malta and in Rome. Her status as an artist nun, her fortuna critica and publications about her, and her reputation as a female artist and other issues will also be analysed.

1.1 Early life and upbringing within an artistic family

The earliest known written source about Maria de Dominici was the biography written by her nephew Bernardo de' Dominici (1684-1750), the son of Raimondo de Dominici (1644-1704), whom, whilst writing about Mattia Preti and about his father, also mentioned Maria as a *pinzocchera* and a disciple of Preti. Over the years, other art historians contributed to writing about her, and scholars have recently taken an interest in her life and works, and made attributions which opened on her artistic oeuvre.⁵³

Born on December 6, 1645, Maria was the daughter of Onofrio de Dominici (c. 1622-1698) and Giovanella Protopsalti (d. 10/12/1714), who were married at the Vittoriosa parish church on 8 September 1641.⁵⁴ They had eight children, Maria being the second.⁵⁵ The de Dominici family had migrated to Malta at the beginning of the 17th century. They soon became successful silversmiths, and worked in Valletta with the Famucelli family from

⁵¹ Her relations with Bernardo De Dominici, who was a prominent biographer, also helped in the dissemination of her name.

⁵² For instance, *Virgin with St Nicholas and St Roque* in Attard is documented to be by de Dominici.

⁵³ This will be discussed later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

See: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 139-164; Sciberras (2009), 170; Sciberras (2015), 142.

⁵⁴ Vittoriosa Matrimonii 1626-1696, f. 61v (8 September 1641).

⁵⁵ This information was obtained from Cutajar, 30, who researched in the Vittoriosa *status animarum*: vide P.A. Vittoriosa Batt., 94 (6 December 1645)

Vide P.A. San Paolo, Batt. 1637-1648 f. 137 (9 January 1644)

Perugia. The latter seem to have been more business inclined, rather than artistic like the de Dominicis, and soon took over the firm.⁵⁶ Onofrio de Dominicis continued on his family legacy by working as a goldsmith, and was also an appraiser of valuables for the Knights of the Order of St John's *Conservatoria* for 35 years without receiving remuneration.⁵⁷ Giovanella, Maria's mother, was also born into a family of silversmiths, as she was the daughter of Aloysio Protopsalti, and Don Franciscus Protopsalti's sister.⁵⁸ The genealogy of the de Dominicis family may be seen in the following family tree (Fig. 2):⁵⁹



Figure 2. The de Dominicis family tree

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁷ A petition from Giovanella de Dominicis (nee Protopsalti), requesting for a privileged consideration from the procurators in charge of the *Comun Tesoro* was received after her husband's death: Vide NLM, Arch. 647, f. 108 (13 Jan 1700).

See also: Cutajar, 29.

⁵⁸ Both her father and brother were silversmiths. See: *Ibid.*; Borg, 127.

⁵⁹ This was created through the data found in the Birgu *status animarum*. I would like to show my gratitude to Dr Simon Mercieca who guided me throughout this research process and presented me with most of the data. There are other details to this family tree which were not included here as they are not relevant to this study. See also: Cutajar, 29-30.

The de Dominici was a gifted family, and continued the artistic legacy of their predecessors. Aside from Maria de Dominici, two of her brothers, Raimondo and Francesco (1655-1733) were also painters, who studied in the bottega of Mattia Preti, and whose works can still be found in various churches around Malta. Raimondo was one of the artists in Preti's bottega who was old enough to assist his master at St John's Co-Cathedral, together with Maria, probably for any preparatory work.⁶⁰ Later in his life, he worked in the capital of the Kingdom of Naples,⁶¹ where it is evident that he was influenced by Preti in his forms, composition and chromatic scheme, as can be seen in *The Vision of St John of the Cross* (Fig. 3), his only documented work, dating to 1682 and located in the Ciccarelli Chapel at S. Teresa degli Studi. Although he is similar in style to his sister, since they were influenced from the same source, their master Preti, Raimondo appears to be surer in his forms, and may perhaps be considered a better artist. He returned to Malta a few months before Preti's death in 1699.⁶² In the three years that Raimondo spent in Malta before returning to Naples in 1701, he worked as a painter in churches around Malta, including those of the vault at the Carmelite Church, Valletta,⁶³ none of which, unfortunately, survive today.

On the other hand, Maria's youngest brother, Don Francesco de Dominici, is recorded to have travelled with his sister when she left Malta for Rome⁶⁴ in 1682, when he was 27 years old, and seems to have returned to the island around 1703, after his sister's death.⁶⁵ After his return, he seems to have mostly executed paintings around Gozo; there are paintings in Nadur and Żebbuġ amongst those attributed to him.⁶⁶ *The Virgin of the Rosary* at Żebbuġ shows Francesco de Dominici as an undistinguished artist, painting in a *retardataire* style,⁶⁷ and may be considered as inferior to his sister in terms of modelling and composition. He is credited as the last local follower of Mattia Preti.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Cutajar, 30.

⁶¹ De Piro, 74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶³ Cutajar, 30.

⁶⁴ De Dominici, 382.

⁶⁵ Cutajar, 44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*



Figure 3. Raimondo de Dominicis, *The Vision of St John of the Cross*, Ciccarelli Chapel, S. Teresa degli Studi, Rome.

Of considerable artistic significance was also Bernardo de' Dominicis (1684-1750), the son of Raimondo de Dominicis and Camilla Tartaglione, and Maria de Dominicis's nephew,⁶⁹ who was also an artist, but was more significant as a writer. He wrote the biographies of important 17th and 18th Century Neapolitan artists (1740-42),⁷⁰ paying homage to Mattia Preti, whom he may have met when he returned to Malta from Naples with his father in 1699, at 14 years old.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ferdinando Bologna, 'DE DOMINICI, Bernardo', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Volume 33 (1987), Retrieved on 12 October 2016, from [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardo-de-dominici_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardo-de-dominici_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

⁷⁰ As has already been discussed, in Bernardo de Dominicis's biographies, Mattia Preti's biography is recounted, with significant references to his father Raimondo and also Suor Maria de Dominicis. Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 151.

⁷¹ Bologna, 1997.

1.2 Training and her artistic endeavours

The fact that Maria de Dominici was born into the de Dominici family, a cultured and affluent family of artists, facilitated her immersion in the arts.⁷² According to Giovannantonio Ciantar, who mentioned Maria de Dominici in his *Malta Illustrata* (1780), the artist nun expressed great interest in drawing from a young age,

*...ella non faceva altro, che disegnare figure, o altre cose secondo il suo capriccio, e natural talento. Alla fine i suoi genitori vedendola così inclinata, e disposta alla pittura la provvidero d'un maestro che le insegnasse il disegno onde s'approfittò talmente che ritrovandosi allora in Malta il celebre Pittore Fr Mattia Preti...*⁷³

It is stated on no foundation by Bernardo de' Dominici that Suor Maria started training with Mattia Preti during her teenage years.⁷⁴ He stated that his aunt, who would have been sixteen years old at the time, was one of the few known artists in Preti's bottega who assisted him in his extensive project in the ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta,⁷⁵ which began in 1661, however there is no evidence to this. Bernardo also wrote that Maria was highly favoured by Preti for her marvellous spirit of her accurate design, stating that:

*Suor Maria de Dominici pinzocchera sorella di Raimondo fa anch'ella Discepola del Cavaliere, e sommamente da lui favorita per la bontà de' costumi, e per lo spirito maraviglioso con cui correttamente disegnava.*⁷⁶

Meanwhile, according to Giovannantonio Ciantar,

*...Mattia Preti... vedendola così ben disposta a quest'arte liberale se le affezionò e si offerse d'istruirla ; ed ella sotto la direzione di lui fece tali progressi, ch'egli dipingendo il tetto della Chiesa di S Giovanni, le permise di dipingere alcune delle figure femminili ; nel far le quali ella riusciva forse più felicemente del suo maestro.*⁷⁷

In his 1839 publication *Squarci di Storia*, Giuseppe Maria de Piro romanticises even further on this, stating that Maria de Dominici:

...essa studiò pure sotto lo stesso Mattias e superò qualunque altro di lui allievo in modo che

⁷² Sammut, 2.

⁷³ Ciantar, 550.

⁷⁴ Cutajar, 29-30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁶ De Dominici, 382.

⁷⁷ Ciantar, 550.

*questo celebre Maestro la scelse per collaboratrice nella pittura della gran volta della Chiesa di San Giovanni ove le figure femminili furono in gran parte da lei eseguite.*⁷⁸

Unfortunately, in the works created by the *bottega*, the particular hands of the different artists at work cannot be singled out yet.⁷⁹ Apart from being a *bottega* painter, Maria de Dominici also worked independently. Currently, there are six paintings and one sculpture believed to be by de Dominici.⁸⁰ The paintings are (i) *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* at the Attard Parish Museum (Fig. 4), (ii) *Christ receiving St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* at the Carmelite Priory, Valletta (Fig. 5) (iii) *The Visitation of the Virgin* (Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy) (Fig. 6), (iv) *Crucifixion with Saints* (Private Collection Malta) (Fig. 7), (v) *St Teresa of Avila* (Fig. 8), and the (vi) *St John of the Cross* (Fig. 9) both in storage within the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy; while the sculpture at the Cospicua parish church depicts the *Immaculate Conception* (Fig. 11).⁸¹

According to Ciantar, *The Visitation of the Virgin* at Ħaż-Żebbuġ (Fig. 6) is one of Maria de Dominici's first works, and was commissioned for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda.⁸² Additionally, *St John of the Cross* and *St Teresa of Avila* were also located within the chapel at Wied Qirda (Fig. 10), as they were the laterals to the *Visitation*.⁸³ These two works have also been attributed to her through stylistic analysis as well as the fact that they are in the same church, therefore it is possible that they were commissioned from the same artist.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ G. M. De Piro (1839), 40.

⁷⁹ Studies about this are currently being carried out by Ms Marie Claire Finger, a PhD candidate within the Department of History of Art, University of Malta.

⁸⁰ There is a detailed survey of de Dominici's paintings in Malta by Joe P. Borg, published in the Festa Programme booklet of St Joseph, issued by the De Rohan Band, Żebbuġ.

⁸¹ These will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

⁸² Giovannantonio Ciantar expanded the edition of Fra Giovan Francesco Abela's *Malta Illustrata*, Malta, 1780, Vol. II, 295.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 152.

⁸³ These works were recently attributed to Maria de Dominici, by Joe Borg, who also created a photographic representation of the way the chapel would look with de Dominici's original works (Fig. 10). This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

⁸⁴ This will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.



Figure 4. Maria de Dominici, *Virgin with Ss Nicholas & Roque*, Attard Parish Museum.



Figure 5. Attr. to Maria de Dominici, *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi*, Carmelite Priory, Valletta.



Figure 6. Figure 8. Attr. to Maria de Dominici, *Visitation of the Virgin*, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.



Figure 7. Attr. to Maria de Dominici, *Crucifixion with Saints*, Private Collection Malta.



Figure 8. Attr. to Maria de Dominici, *St Teresa of Avila*, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.



Figure 9. Attr. to Maria de Dominici, *St John of the Cross*, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.



Figure 10. The Chapel of the Visitation, at Wied Qirda.

Photographic representation of the Chapel with Maria de Dominici's works (Credits: Joe Borg).

According to Bernardo de' Dominici, his aunt was encouraged by Preti to go to Rome to further pursue her studies on sculpture as he saw her potential.⁸⁵ Other sources suggest that he was not impressed by her painting and so encouraged her to focus on sculpture instead.⁸⁶

Although most of the works of art ascribed to Maria de Dominici are paintings created both in Malta and in Rome,⁸⁷ contemporary sources credit her as being primarily a sculptor rather than a painter, which may indicate that she was better as a sculptor.

The only surviving example of a documented sculpture by Maria de Dominici is the above mentioned wooden *Immaculate Conception* at the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Cospicua (Plates 8 & 9). Unfortunately, only the face and hands of the figure are by de Dominici, as the rest of the body was severely amended in the early 20th Century. However, an old photograph of it does survive (Fig. 11), through which de Dominici's original work can be analysed and compared to the current statue.⁸⁸ De Dominici is also said to have created portable cult statues for processions in religious feasts.⁸⁹

Maria de Dominici left for Rome at around 1682, where she was placed under the protection of the ambassador of the Order of the Knights of St John, Fra Marcello Sacchetti.⁹⁰ She spent the remainder of her life in Rome, where, according to Bernardo de' Dominici, she studied Antique sculptures as well as works by the recently deceased Baroque master Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680).⁹¹

⁸⁵ De Dominici, 382.

See also: De Piro, 74.

⁸⁶ Cutajar, 29.

⁸⁷ Bernardo de Dominici confirmed that his aunt also created paintings in Rome, although she was primarily a sculptor. De Dominici, 482.

See also: Cutajar, 29.

⁸⁸ This will be discussed in Chapter 2.

⁸⁹ This is recorded in Ġoġ Aquilina's *Il-Ġimgħa l-Kbira tal-Belt*, and will be discussed further in Chapter 2, dedicated to Maria de Dominici's artistic oeuvre.

See: Aquilina, Ġoġ, *Il-Ġimgħa l-Kbira tal-Belt*, Valletta: Tau, 1986, 33-34.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

⁹⁰ This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. See: Sciberras (2009), 170.

⁹¹ De Dominici, 382.



Figure 11. Old photograph of the Immaculate Conception by Maria de Dominici at Cospicua, c. 1680.

It seems that by 1684, de Dominici was well established in Rome, as documents prove that in May of the same year, her painting created for the chapel of St Andrea Corsini, in the Calced Carmelite church of Santa Maria in Traspontina, was hung.⁹² After 1690, she had her own studio in Vicolo dell’Agnello.⁹³ Bernardo de’ Dominici wrote that in Rome, Suor Maria was a successful artist, earned significant commissions, in painting and in sculpture,⁹⁴ and also

⁹² Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

⁹³ This was noted in her in the information obtained from her inventory and will in the Archivio di Stato, Rome. See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

⁹⁴ De Dominici, 382.

received public commissions, amongst which was a sculpture of the untraced *Transverberation of St Teresa*, her most praised work.⁹⁵ Her nephew also wrote that she was loved and respected by everyone, until her passing away on 18th March, 1703.⁹⁶

Unfortunately, no works created by her during her Roman period are known to survive.⁹⁷ She died middle aged, at 57 years old, which meant that she may not have had time to create a large corpus of works, and perhaps fully mature as an artist. According to Bernardo de' Dominici, his father Raimondo inherited the possessions of Suor Maria,⁹⁸ amongst which were drawings, some of which were by Preti himself, who had granted them to the artist nun probably before her departure to Rome.⁹⁹

1.3 Life as a Carmelite tertiary nun

Maria de Dominici is also known as Suor Maria because she was a Carmelite tertiary nun¹⁰⁰ and was later affiliated with the Carmelites of Santa Maria di Transportina in Rome.¹⁰¹ As a tertiary in the 17th Century, Suor Maria de Dominici could live a relatively independent life, outside the convent walls, and without having any kind of family ties,¹⁰² and hence working freely as an artist. Trinchieri Camiz wrote that for one to be a *pinzocchera*, one had to be at least forty years old, which was not the case for Maria de Dominici since she was already a tertiary before she left for Rome at 37 years of age. De Piro suggests that she was given privileges to be an out-of-convent nun since it was the custom for such contravening

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

⁹⁶ This will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

See: De Dominici, 382.

⁹⁷ This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁹⁸ The first and second will of Maria de Dominici, located at the Archivio di Stato di Roma, will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁹⁹ De Dominici, 382.

¹⁰⁰ As discussed in the Introduction, the date when she became a tertiary is unknown, but it should have been sometime before she left Malta for Rome.

¹⁰¹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

compromises to be taken by high dignitaries at the time.¹⁰³ This may have been done because of her family's links and their importance in society, or perhaps even her connections with Preti.

De Dominici's mobility was therefore fairly easy, and, although it was common for women to have more home-related jobs,¹⁰⁴ in this case it is evident that de Dominici was well-educated and a respected artist. As a *pinzocchera*, de Dominici's connections with her religious order were the vows of obedience and chastity, and she could live freely otherwise;¹⁰⁵ perhaps this aided her artistic career, as she had better mobility and could gain access to potential patrons. Affiliations with the Carmelite Order in Malta and in Rome meant that she had a direct link if she needed shelter or commissions for artworks.¹⁰⁶ In fact, de Dominici executed paintings for the Carmelite church in Valletta, and for the Calced Carmelite of S. Maria della Traspontina in Rome, where she is buried.¹⁰⁷

1.4 Fortuna Critica

Although for many years she was solely and unfairly judged on her first known work, the overpainted *Visitation of the Virgin* at Haż-Żebbuġ,¹⁰⁸ over the years, Suor Maria de Dominici has attained a very positive fortuna critica.¹⁰⁹ Bernardo de' Dominici identified the names of Preti's assistants in his bottega, such as 'il Romano', who may be Giuseppe D'Arena, Raimondo and Suor Maria de Dominici, and Giovanni Battista Caloriti, amongst

¹⁰³ De Piro, 40.

¹⁰⁴ This was noted by Emanuel Buttigieg when speaking of 16th century women; therefore, earlier than the period Maria de Dominici lived in. See: Emanuel Buttigieg, 'Social Relationships in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Malta: An Analysis through Notary Juliano Muscat's Register R376/11', *Storja: 30th Anniversary Edition (1978-2008)*, Henry Frendo (ed.), MUHS, 2008, 47-66.

¹⁰⁵ Buttigieg, 60.

¹⁰⁶ This will also be discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ By word of mouth, Suor Maria de Dominici is very well known, even today. In Santa Luċija, one of the main roads is named after her, Triq Marija DeDominicis, which further shows that de Dominici is favoured in the Maltese Islands.

others,¹¹⁰ and although some of these artists, such as Giuseppe D’Arena and Pedro Nunez de Villavicenzio,¹¹¹ are well acclaimed, there is not much significant information about them as independent artists. One may go as far as saying that Suor Maria de Dominici is the only member of Preti’s bottega about whom we know so much,¹¹² whilst scholarship on the other bottega artists is still at an early stage.

Apart from the almost contemporary source written by Bernardo, Maria de Dominici has a lot of other literature written about her, the most significant of which are the 18th Century publications by Giovannantonio Ciantar, titled *Malta Illustrata* (1772), and Giuseppe Maria de Piro’s *Squarci di Storia* (1839).¹¹³ Despite these significant sources, one must also keep in mind that the information also included fabrications. For instance, Bernardo de’ Dominici’s biographies are often credited with containing mistakes in dates and at times relying on verbal accounts by other people; hence various scholars are cautious of his writings,¹¹⁴ aside from the fact that he may have also been biased when writing about family members, such as his father and his aunt. One should also be careful of Ciantar and de Piro’s account of de Dominici assisting Preti in the painting of the vault of St John’s Co-Cathedral; the quality of the work is too high for interventions by assistants, as noted by Keith Sciberras.¹¹⁵ When one compares the quality of the paintings in the vault to paintings executed by Preti and his bottega, the difference can be noted. De Dominici may, however, have aided in the preparation of the work, together with other assistants.¹¹⁶ There was also the suggestion that she sculpted with Gian Lorenzo Bernini in Rome,¹¹⁷ this too is pure

¹¹⁰ Sciberras (2009), 170.

¹¹¹ This artist was associated with Preti through other sources. See: *Ibid.*

¹¹² As will be noted further on in this chapter, this was also stated by Mario Buhagiar in *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands* (1987), 111.

¹¹³ Hoe, 115.

¹¹⁴ This includes the scholars John T. Spike, John Gash, Mario Buhagiar, Keith Sciberras and Dominic Cutajar. See: Nicholas De Piro, *The Temple of the Knights of Malta*, Malta: Miranda Publications, 1999, 43.

¹¹⁵ Sciberras (2009), 170.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Some of these fabrications even went as far as stating that Bernini became the master of Maria de Dominici in Rome, and, since she is quoted by Bernardo De Dominici and Giovannantonio Ciantar to have sculpted a *Transverberation of St Teresa*, there even was the misconception that de Dominici’s sculpture was that of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, which is considered to be one of Bernini’s masterpieces. According to Giuseppe Calleja, a 19th Century source, Bernini only made finishing touches. This shows the extent to which stories about Maria de Dominici have been generated.

See: Giuseppe Calleja, *The works of art in the churches of Malta and the Governor’s Palace, Valletta*, Malta:

fabrication since it is highly probable that the artist nun reached Rome after the great Baroque master death.¹¹⁸

Suor Maria de Dominici has been documented and researched by Franca Trinchieri Camiz, in her chapter “‘*Virgo-non sterilis...*’: Nuns as Artists in Seventeenth Century Rome’, published in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*.¹¹⁹ It was the same author who wrote de Dominici’s biographic entry in *The Dictionary of Women Artists*, and was also responsible for the crater on Mercury being named after the artist.¹²⁰ Trinchieri Camiz also presented works of art, both surviving and lost, as part of Maria de Dominici’s oeuvre.¹²¹ Some of the attributions pointed out by Trinchieri Camiz have since then been disregarded by scholars such as Keith Sciberras¹²² who has attributed most of de Dominici’s known works in Malta.¹²³

Maria de Dominici is described as the best-known student of Mattia Preti in Mario Buhagiar’s 1987 publication *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands*. Buhagiar also stated that although there is a lot of hearsay about her artistic endeavours in Malta and in Rome, there is no actual documentation for it,¹²⁴ however since then, significant research, in archives and attributions, has emerged, particularly through Franca Trinchieri Camiz, and Keith Sciberras respectively.¹²⁵ In his publications *Baroque Painting in Malta* (2009) and *Caravaggio to Mattia Preti* (2015), Sciberras described de Dominici as being highly dependent on Mattia Preti’s style, although showing a few distinctive elements in her works,

L’Immacolata, 1881, 175.

¹¹⁸ Trinchieri Camiz suggests that Maria de Dominici left for Rome around 1682 with the retinue of Carlo Maria Carafa and his wife Isabella d’Alavos. Cutajar also suggests this, as he writes that de Dominici was still in Malta on 9 September 1680, as documented in *9 Sept. 1680, vide P. A. Porto Salvo Batt. f. 29*, while Bernini died on 28 November 1680.

Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156; Cutajar, 29.

¹¹⁹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 158.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 462; IAU, USGS Astrogeology Science Center, NASA, 2010.

See also: Hoe 115-17.

¹²¹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 152-58.

¹²² These attributions are found in the publications by Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta* (2009), 170 and *Caravaggio to Mattia Preti* (2015), 142.

¹²³ This will be discussed in Chapter 2 *infra*.

¹²⁴ He also stated that the *Visitation to the Virgin* painting (Fig. 6) believed to have been created by her for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, Żebbuġ, is ‘*badly drawn and artistically uninspiring*’.

See: Buhagiar, 111.

¹²⁵ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 151-158; Sciberras (2009), 170.

such as angular drapery folds and rigidity.¹²⁶

In his publication *Women Artists in Malta Today* (1994), Dennis Vella commented on how de Dominici only got a passing mention in Edward Sammut's *Notes for a History of Art in Malta*.¹²⁷ Dominic Cutajar also contributed to the fortuna critica of Maria de Dominici in his article *The Followers of Mattia Preti in Malta* (1988), in which he presented significant information about the de Dominici family in general and Maria de Dominici and her painter brothers in particular.¹²⁸

1.5 Presence as a female artist and other feminist issues

In the 16th and 17th Centuries, social, educational and legal barriers prevented most female artists in Western Europe from becoming great masters of art. These factors were studied by feminist historians such as Germaine Greer, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, amongst others.¹²⁹ Daughters of artists or those who came from affluent backgrounds who were mostly given the opportunity to study and create art,¹³⁰ as was the case with Suor Maria de Dominici, whose family was both artistic and wealthy.¹³¹ Most girls trained either in family workshops, where they formed part of the artisan class, like, for instance Artemisia Gentileschi,¹³² or, if they were part of a noble family, were sent to be tutored by professional artists,¹³³ like de Dominici. Female artisans who emerged from workshops could then marry other artists and continue their career, or seek in working for a sovereign. Noblewomen artists

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Vella, 3; Sammut, 64.

¹²⁸ Some of this information has been used throughout this chapter. Cutajar, 29-31.

¹²⁹ Catherine King, 'Part 1: Made in her image: Women, Portraiture and Gender in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Introduction', *Gender and Art*, Gill Perry (ed.), Yale: Yale University Press, 1999, 33.

¹³⁰ Chadwick, 87.

¹³¹ This was also changing by time. See: Frances Borzello, *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000, 54-55.

¹³² Gentileschi was trained by her father, Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), and later on also by the infamous Agostino Tassi (1578-1644).

See: Keith Christiansen, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Esther before Ahasuerus*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014. Retrieved on 17 February 2017 from <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436453>.

¹³³ King, 33.

could find positions as ladies-in-waiting, creating their portraits and teaching their children artistic skills. Alternatively, they could also seek refuge in convents.¹³⁴

The women whose reputations have survived to this day thanks to contemporary biographers, came from artist's families or were rich and educated, and learned their artistic skills before entering into the convent.¹³⁵ In the 17th and 18th Centuries, a lot of unmarried female artists in Italy, Spain and Portugal served religious roles and worked as artists in convents. In this manner, it was mandatory for these artists to put religion before their artistic production, to be allowed to produce artwork by their superiors.¹³⁶ This does not seem to have been an issue for Suor Maria de Dominici, since she was not bound to a convent like other artists such as Suor Plautilla Nelli (1524–1588) and Caterina Ginnasi (1590-1660). De Dominici lived freely as a tertiary nun, at one point even living on her own in Rome, and later having other female companions.¹³⁷

Women were still not given the opportunity to study the anatomy of the human figure like male artists; perhaps this is the reason de Dominici's figures are inferior to those by her male counterparts.¹³⁸ Maria De Dominici's subject matter seems to have been limited to religious works, perhaps because of her status as a tertiary and because most of her known works are public commissions, however it may be that other secular or private commissions were lost or are unknown.

According to Giovannantonio Ciantar, from a young age Maria de Dominici showed an aversion in attending to the duties expected of her as a female,¹³⁹

*'...dalla sua fanciullezza mostrava ripugnanza di applicarsi ai soliti lavori femminili onde n'era sovente ripresa e mortificata da suoi genitori.'*¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Borzello, 56.

¹³⁶ Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The fortunes of women painters and their work*, London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 1979, 62.

¹³⁷ Since they were sharing residence, this also shows women supporting each other, similarly to the women living together in convents.

De Dominici in Rome will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

¹³⁸ This will also be further discussed in Chapter 2, when discussing de Dominici's artistic production.

¹³⁹ Hoe, 115.

¹⁴⁰ Ciantar, 550.

Although Maria de Dominici was given the opportunity to study art and be an artist, she did find closed doors during her life, presumably because of her gender, although she was given the opportunity to study art and be an artist. For example, through her two wills which she fashioned in Rome, she noted that she was underpaid for works executed.¹⁴¹ She also had a painting in the chapel of St Andrea Corsini in the Carmelite church of Traspontina which was replaced by that of Gian Paolo Melchiorre, as it was probably considered to be more modern and more elegant than a work by a less famous Carmelite tertiary.¹⁴² As discussed with the mentioning of Maria de Dominici's sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* (Cospicua parish church), and the altarpiece of the *Visitation of the Virgin* (Żebbuġ parish church sacristy), some of her works were remodelled and repainted, although this may not be due to her gender.

As has been mentioned *supra*, there were other female artists who were nuns like Maria de Dominici, such as Suor Plautilla Nelli, a 16th Century cloistered nun who was self-taught, and the first known female artist in Renaissance Florence.¹⁴³ Like de Dominici, she was a part of a religious order, the Dominican, however she lived in the convent of Santa Caterina di Siena,¹⁴⁴ therefore she had restricted mobility unlike Suor Maria. Although Nelli had a limited knowledge in painting, she still succeeded in creating large works of art, such as *The Last Supper* (Fig. 12), her only signed painting.

¹⁴¹ This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁴² This information was obtained from Ms. Ord. C.O., II 21, f. 48, from the Archivio Ordine Carmelitano in Rome, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz, 280.

¹⁴³ Jane Fortune, '3: Pray for the Paintress Suor Plautilla Nelli', *Invisible Women. Forgotten Artists of Florence*, Ellen Wert (ed.), Florence: The Florentine Press, 2nd ed., 2010, 33-40.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 12. Suor Plautilla Nelli, *The Last Supper* (detail), *Sta Maria Novella*, Florence.

Similarly to de Dominici who also created large works, including altarpieces, the final product was often limited in invention and may be considered inferior to works created by other artists. Maria de Dominici had better access to teachings of art than Nelli, particularly because she had a tutor and was part of a bottega; this may be because she was born more than a century later, and by then women were being more accepted as artists, and because she was a tertiary, and therefore had a better access to the outside world. Nelli copied works by Agnolo Bronzino and Andrea del Sarto, her primary inspiration being Fra Bartolomeo.¹⁴⁵ However, in spite of her lack of formal training, Suor Plautilla Nelli was a much sought-after artist and earned many commissions during her life,¹⁴⁶ which, as has already been discussed, is similar to Bernardo de' Dominici's description of Suor Maria de Dominici's successful patronage.¹⁴⁷

Also similarly to de Dominici, Nelli was well known during her life and was mentioned in Giorgio Vasari's biography of artists.¹⁴⁸ Since it was prohibited for female artists to study the male nude, Plautilla Nelli based her male depictions on the female figure, thus they are often labelled as having 'feminine characteristics'.¹⁴⁹ In a similar manner, de Dominici's male figures are not as solidly painted as those by her male counterparts, as can be seen in the figure of Christ in the picture *Christ Receiving St Maddalena de' Pazzi* (Carmelite Priory, Valletta) (Fig. 5). By comparing de Dominici's Christ with the apostles by Nelli (Fig. 13-14), it can be conjectured that Nelli had a better grasp of the depiction of the male figure, as the faces are much more defined, and have facial hair. Their bodies seem to be

¹⁴⁵ Advancing Women Artists, *Suor Plautilla Nelli*, [Advancingwomenartists.org](http://advancingwomenartists.org). Retrieved on 8 January 2017 from <http://advancingwomenartists.org/suor-plautilla-nelli/>

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴⁷ De Dominici, 382.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Fortune, 36.



Figure 13. Suor Plautilla Nelli, *The Last Supper (detail)*, Sta Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 14. Maria de Dominici, *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi (detail)*, Carmelite Priory, Valletta.

better studied, particularly in the defined arms and the way the drapery clings to the body, contrary to de Dominici's angular drapery folds which typically conceal the human figure, as evident in *St John of the Cross* (Fig. 9).

Significantly, contrary to most female artists,¹⁵⁰ Maria de Dominici is very well known, presumably because she is female; in this case, gender worked in the artist's favour. Her known corpus of works of art is not particularly significant in number and quality, and one may state that there were better artists during the time, some of whom also emerged from Preti's *bottega*. However, her gender and the title 'Suor' gained through her link with the Carmelites as a *pinzocchera*, aided her to become the most acclaimed artist in Mattia Preti's *bottega* and the first known female artist in Malta.¹⁵¹ de Dominici fought the stigma surrounding her gender, producing significant works of art, and willingly defending any injustice towards her artistic production,¹⁵² despite of the fact that the status of a female artist, was, at the time, obscure in relation to the concept of male superiority, not just in the artistic field, but in all sectors.

¹⁵⁰ This excludes Suor Plautilla Nelli, who is also discussed in this chapter. Like de Dominici, Nelli was well-known as an artist throughout her life.

¹⁵¹ Hoe, 115-116.

¹⁵² This is evidenced in her wills, as has already been discussed, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Maria de Dominici's Artistic Oeuvre

Suor Maria de Dominici formed part of Mattia Preti's bottega, but also seems to have worked as an independent master. There are currently only a few known works of art by the artist, but they are nonetheless significant for their historical interest and the fact that she was female and a tertiary nun. De Dominici is believed to have spent most of her time in Malta working with Preti and then the rest of her life in Rome, so she may not have been free to create so many works independently. In fact, only seven documented or attributed works which have been identified with extant paintings survive, while many others are presumed to be lost or have not been identified yet.¹⁵³

In this chapter, the artistic oeuvre of Maria de Dominici will be discussed, both as an artist within Preti's workshop and as an independent artist. The historical context of the period in which de Dominici painted, including the presence of the Knights of the Order of St John on the Maltese Islands, and her presence within Preti's bottega will be analysed. The independent works of art, in painting and sculpture, by de Dominici, will also be discussed, together with any attributed works which cannot be proven to be works by the artist. Finally, this chapter will also discuss any erroneous attributions, as well as any works created by Maria de Dominici which are believed to be lost.

2.1 Historical context and the presence of Mattia Preti and his bottega in the Maltese Islands

During the period in which Maria de Dominici lived and worked as an artist,¹⁵⁴ Malta was experiencing ongoing development under the rule of the Knights of St John,¹⁵⁵ particularly under the rule of Raphael and Nicholas Cottoner. The two brothers left a cultural, architectural and educational legacy, which started off with the decoration of the ceiling of St John's

¹⁵³ This is documented in her inventory as well as her wills, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. In his biography of artists, Bernardo de' Dominici also mentions a few works by de Dominici which are not known to survive.

De Dominici, 382.

¹⁵⁴ Some of the parishes established during this period were those for which Suor Maria de Dominici worked, including Attard, founded in 1575, and Cospicua, in 1586.

See: Grima, 144.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

Conventual Church by Mattia Preti during Raphael Cotoner's magistracy.¹⁵⁶

Mattia Preti ran the busiest and most thriving bottega that Malta had seen up to that date.¹⁵⁷ Maria de Dominici was one of the older artists in his workshop, and thus may have been present when he was commissioned to paint the ceiling of the Conventual Church of the Knights of St John; perhaps even assisting him in any preparatory work linked with this vast project, and thus, would have been able to observe its development.¹⁵⁸ Preti was a member of the Order of the Knights of St John,¹⁵⁹ creating politico-religious works for them and catholic works for churches and private patrons.¹⁶⁰ Needless to say, he had direct links with the Order, which may have helped Maria de Dominici in promoting herself as an artist. It may have been de Dominici's link with Preti which earned her the protection by Carlo Maria Carafa, the Prince of Butera and the nephew of the Grand Master, and his wife, Isabella d'Avalos, when she left for Rome around 1682, although there is no concrete evidence for this.¹⁶¹

De Dominici may have also had links with the Knights of St John through her father, who was an appraiser of valuables for the Order.¹⁶² Her links with the Calced Carmelites may have also helped her in earning commissions and fame. De Dominici was an acclaimed artist, and there have been various factorisations about her artistic endeavours and her works of art,¹⁶³ such as the belief that she assisted Preti in painting the vault of St John's Co-Cathedral.¹⁶⁴ These beliefs were mostly based on implications made by Bernardo de' Dominici,¹⁶⁵ who probably gave impartial descriptions of his father and aunt's artistic abilities and endeavours, in a form of nepotism. Although many of her known works are recent attributions, there is a considerable amount of knowledge that can be derived from 17th

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁵⁷ Sciberras (2009), 165.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵⁹ Sciberras (2015), 101.

¹⁶⁰ Sandro Debono, 'Brushwork of Identity: the Politico-Religious in Mattia Preti', *Mattia Preti Beyond the Self-Portrait*, Sandro Debono, Giuseppe Valentino (eds.), Valletta: Midsea Books, 2013, 56.

¹⁶¹ This will be discussed further in Chapter 3. See: Ciantar, 551.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

¹⁶² Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

¹⁶³ This has been discussed in Chapter 1.4. *Fortuna Critica*.

¹⁶⁴ Ciantar, 550; G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

¹⁶⁵ De Dominici, 382.

and 18th century sources about some of her works.¹⁶⁶

This period was also characterised by the effects of the Counter-Reformation, which included the revitalisation of monastic orders, as well as the canonisation of various new saints, which often became the subjects for artistic productions, including those by Maria de Dominici.¹⁶⁷ The plague of 1676 was also an important factor, featuring in works by Preti and his bottega, as well as in independent works by de Dominici.¹⁶⁸

2.2 Maria de Dominici's presence in Preti's workshop

Mattia Preti's bottega probably started out with the master employing assistants for the extensive project of the ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, for small but time-consuming tasks such as holding *cartoni*, grinding pigments and mixing colours, and preparing the ground to paint on, then went on to become the largest and most successful workshop of the time.¹⁶⁹ Maria de Dominici's presence within Preti's bottega in Malta is not documented, and is only noted by Bernardo de' Dominici in his *Vite*, however, stylistically it is evident that she did work in the bottega, as her independent works come very close to the works executed by the bottega of Mattia Preti, and even by individual artists within the bottega, such as Giuseppe D'Arena (c. 1643-1719). This evidences the ongoing influence that their master left on them as bottega artists and individually.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Giuseppe Maria de Piro romanticises on what Bernardo had written in his account, stating that, as Preti's student, de Dominici superseded any other student in his bottega, and that, because of this, he chose her to collaborate with him in the female figures of the vault of St John's Conventual Church.¹⁷⁰ Whilst this has been defined as being highly improbable due to the excellent quality of the work, it may be assumed that as part of Preti's bottega, she was involved in the execution of several works together with other

¹⁶⁶ This will be evidenced with examples throughout this chapter.

¹⁶⁷ This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

¹⁶⁸ This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁷⁰ G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

assistants, especially in paintings by ‘Mattia Preti and bottega’ and works executed solely by the bottega. One may note, in fact, structural and stylistic similarities between the works by the bottega and those by de Dominici, such as her *Visitation of the Virgin* (Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy) (Fig. 15), with the *Visitation* by the bottega (Private Collection) (Fig. 16), which is evocative of Preti’s painting of the same subject,¹⁷¹ the *Visitation with St Thomas Aquinas and St Paul the Hermit* (Church of St Catherine, Żurrieq) (Fig. 17).¹⁷²

Within Preti’s bottega, Giuseppe D’Arena seems to have been more significant than de Dominici, and possibly the most equipped as a bottega painter as well as independently, as recent scholarship about him is proving.¹⁷³ So far, there has been no definitive answer to the scholarship about the individual hands of the bottega painters in works by Preti and his workshop or those by the workshop in Malta.¹⁷⁴ A number of works by individual artists have been identified, including a few attributions to Maria de Dominici,¹⁷⁵ and there are also other ongoing studies.¹⁷⁶

The significance that Mattia Preti had in the Maltese Islands in the second half of the 17th Century can be illustrated through the considerable number replicas of his paintings that the bottega executed,¹⁷⁷ as copies of works meant that there was a large demand from patrons.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, it can be established that it was advantageous to Maria de Dominici to be exposed to Preti’s genius, and be able work with other bottega painters, in order to study their work and to individually also develop as an artist.

¹⁷¹ Sciberras (2009), 205.

¹⁷² Sciberras (2012), 267.

¹⁷³ Sciberras (2009), 173.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁷⁵ Sciberras (2015), 141.

¹⁷⁶ This is the work that is currently being done by Ms Marie Claire Finger, PhD candidate within the Department of History of Art, University of Malta.

¹⁷⁷ Occasionally, the bottega used tracings for the copies of Preti’s works.

See: Sciberras (2015), 139.

¹⁷⁸ Sciberras (2009), 165.



Figure 15. Maria de Dominici, Visitation of the Virgin, Žebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.



Figure 16. Bottega of Mattia Preti, Visitation (Private Collection)



Figure 17. Mattia Preti, Visitation with St Thomas Aquinas and St Paul the Hermit (Church of St Catherine, Żurrieq)

2.3 Independent works

Maria de Dominici's artistic oeuvre is known only through six paintings and a sculpture as independent works produced in Malta¹⁷⁹ The paintings are the (i) *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* (Attard Parish Museum) (Plate 1), (ii) *Christ receiving St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* (Carmelite Priory, Valletta) (Plate 2), (iii) *The Visitation of the Virgin* (Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy) (Plate 3), (iv) *St Teresa of Avila* (Plate 4) and (v) *St John of the Cross* (Plate 5), both in store within the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy, and the (vi) *Crucifixion with Saints* (Private Collection Malta) (Plate 7), and the sculpture is (vii) *The Immaculate Conception* (Cospicua Parish Church) (Plates 8 & 9).¹⁸⁰

The sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* at Cospicua is documented as being by Maria de Dominici, whilst some of the attributions to the artist go as far back as the 18th Century. The paintings of the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque*,¹⁸¹ the *Visitation of the Virgin* and the *Christ receiving St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi*¹⁸² have been described by various sources as being by her hand,¹⁸³ while other attributions are recent and were made by contemporary scholars, based on recent scholarship by Keith Sciberras.¹⁸⁴

While de Dominici's known works fluctuate in quality, they possess some similar idiosyncrasies and chromatic schemes, and show her as an inconsistent artist who studied under a great Baroque master. Most of paintings by or attributed to de Dominici are not so well executed, at times verging on the mediocre, and evidence her limited technical capabilities. For instance, the modelling of the figures show that she did not have the essential skills to structure anatomy in her figures. However, her works are still interesting from an art historical perspective, and deserve to be studied.¹⁸⁵ Maria de Dominici looked at

¹⁷⁹ This section is largely based on the studies carried out by Keith Sciberras.

See Sciberras (2015), 142.

¹⁸⁰ The catalogue entries of all works may be found in Chapter 4.

¹⁸¹ ACM, Ms. 180, Expanded version of Gerolamo Molina's *Pastoral Visitation Report*, c. 1725, 100.

¹⁸² Ciantar, 551.

¹⁸³ These attributions will be discussed further in Chapter 4, in the catalogue of the works of art.

¹⁸⁴ Sciberras (2009), 170.

See also: Sciberras (2015), 142.

¹⁸⁵ Mario Buhagiar, 'Il-kwadru ta' Santu Rokku u San Nikola fil-Knisja ta' Sant'Anna [Attard]', *Ghalik mill-Parrocča ta' H'Attard*, 7 (2001), 14.

various sources for her works, taking inspiration from prints which were in circulation at the time, including those by foreign artists.¹⁸⁶ She also seems to have taken inspiration from Mattia Preti on various occasions in her known works of art, capitalising heavily on his own compositions and gestures, as was natural to any young artist working with a master. For instance, the *St John of the Cross* (Plate 5) created for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda is very similar to Preti's *Blessed Gerland d'Alemagne* (Fig. 18) one of the lateral pictures at the Oratory of the San Giovanni Decollato, St John's Co-Cathedral.

St John of the Cross is depicted in almost the same position as *Blessed Gerland*, on his knees in prayer. Preti's chromatic scheme is much darker than de Dominici's soft, pastel colours. The figure of *Blessed Gerland* is much better modelled, and it is evident that the artist had significant knowledge of anatomy, especially in comparison to de Dominici's figure. Both saints have their faces bathed in light, however, whereas Preti's has a shaft of light which shows that the light source is coming from the top, de Dominici's source is hidden, and light seems to fall on the figures unnaturally, as is typical in most of her works. Also similarly to Preti's painting are the architectural elements; the arch on the right is almost the same as his, although it is deprived of the detail that Preti presents his viewers with. De Dominici, contrary to Preti, devoids the painting from all excessive elements. Preti worked on this cycle of lateral paintings in the 1680s,¹⁸⁷ when de Dominici was active as an artist in Malta, probably both as a bottega artist and individually, so it is possible that she drew inspiration from it or any similar work or study by her master.

¹⁸⁶ This was suggested by Mr Joe Borg in a personal communication held on 16 Aug 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Sciberras (2009), 150.

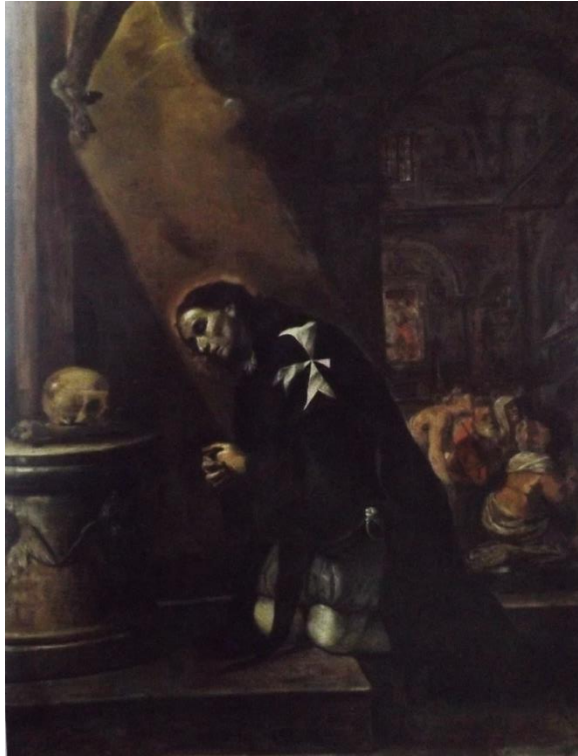


Figure 18. Mattia Preti, *Blessed Gerland d'Alemagne*, Oratory of the San Giovanni Decollato, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta.

Like Preti, Maria de Dominici often represented mystic figures on an earthly plane, without making a differentiation between the saintly and the earthly, a trait which was introduced by Caravaggio, who was an inspiration to Preti. De Dominici makes use of clouds and putti to show that there is a representation of the divine, and at times also puts a golden shaft of light behind the figures, for example in the *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* (Plate 2); all of which are elements that were used by Preti, for instance in the *Conversion of St Paul* (1668, Chapel of the Langue of France, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta) (Fig. 19); a date and location which makes it highly conceivable that de Dominici would have seen it. Preti's titular marks beautiful contrasts by the different draperies, the ochrish sky and the skin of the figures, in particularly that of Christ who moves atop a cloud on the top side of a crowded composition.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Sciberras (2012), 173-174.



Figure 19. Mattia Preti, *Conversion of St Paul*, (c. 1668), Chapel of the Langue of France, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta.

The choice of iconography for the depiction of the divine may not have been the only aspect that de Dominici took from this work by Preti: the contrast of a brilliant blue from the drapery and the yellow ochre of the sky is a conventional aspect in most of her works, while, like her master she also attempts at molding billowing Baroque draperies, which come across as angular and rigid, contrary to Preti's. Maria de Dominici's composition in the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* is also cognate to Preti's *Conversion of St Paul*, in the crowded composition of figures, the billowing clouds and putti and the position of the Virgin at the top right of the segmented composition, replacing Christ, and the plague victim at the bottom, in

almost the same position as the recumbent St Paul.¹⁸⁹

As discussed *supra*, Maria de Dominici's chromatic scheme is also derivative of that used by Preti and his bottega. This is understandable since they worked within the same workshop, therefore they used the same pigments. The red, golden and greyish pigments are particularly similar to those used by Preti and his bottega, whilst also significant is the silverish tone that Preti employed in the flesh of some of his figures, such as the putti in the *Martyrdom of St George* (St George Parish Church, Qormi), a work created during his last twenty years of his life, with the assistance of his bottega.¹⁹⁰ The same silverish tone is seen in most of the works attributed to de Dominici, particularly in the shadows that fall on the flesh of the figures depicted, most prominently seen in Christ in the *Crucifixion with Saints* (Plate 7).

When one analyses de Dominici's paintings in comparison to works by the bottega of Mattia Preti, various similarities in terms of composition, chromatic schemes and modelling of figures can be noticed, which is expected since all artists in the bottega were drawing from the same source. However, from the known individual names of painters within the bottega and from the study of their known independent works, it can be connoted that each had their own varying abilities. For instance, it can be conjectured that Maria de Dominici was on the same artistic level as Gioacchino Loretta (b. 1637), who executed the *Virgin of Sorrows* (Fig. 20) at the Virgin of Sorrows Church in Pietà, which may have been supervised by Preti,¹⁹¹ and has strong stylistic elements related to him, although it is rigid in its modelling and brushwork,¹⁹² in a way, similar to de Dominici's independent paintings.

¹⁸⁹ This comparison can also be made with Mattia Preti's *Conversion of St Paul* titular painting at the Mdina Cathedral, executed at around 1681-82, and very similar to the work at the Chapel of the Langue of France, although it is perhaps more chaotic.

See: *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁹⁰ Sciberras (2009), 165.

¹⁹¹ Expenditure reports addresses the payment to both Gioacchino Loretta and Mattia Preti, therefore the invention may have been Preti's while he also supervised the work.

See: *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

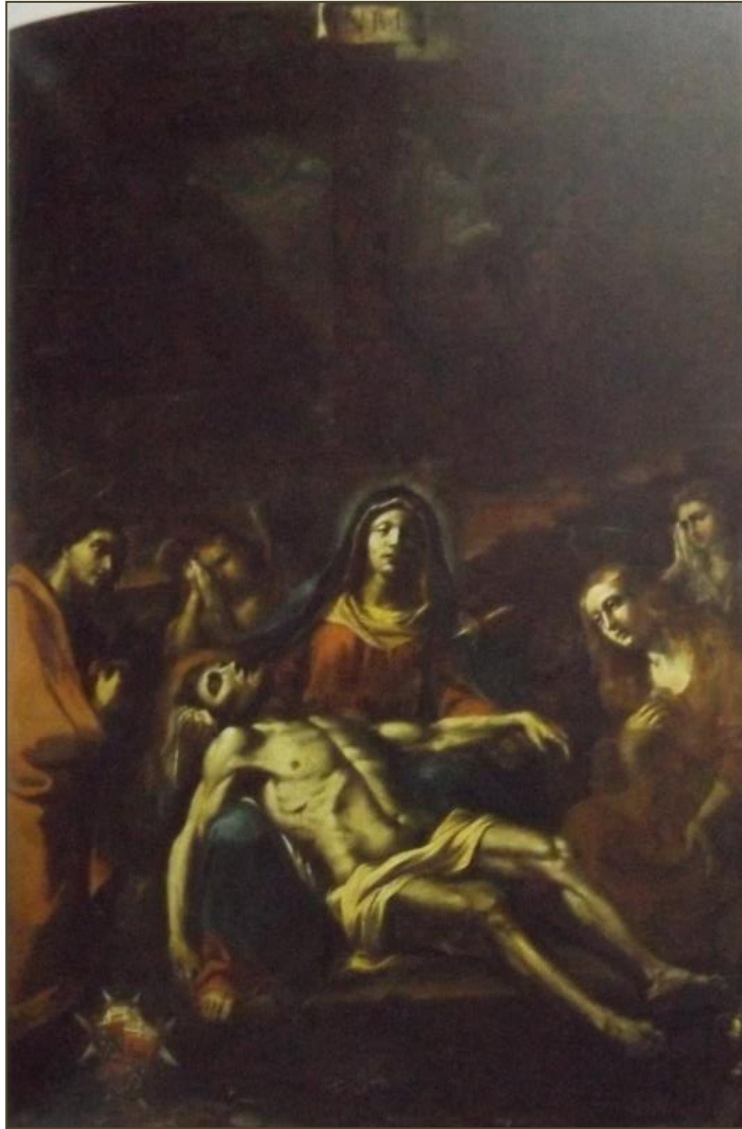


Figure 20. Gioacchino Loretta, *Virgin of Sorrows*, *Virgin of Sorrows Church*, *Pietà*.

On the other hand, it is evident that Giuseppe D'Arena was a much better artist than Maria de Dominici. Whereas de Dominici's figures come across as awkward and without enough pictorial space for them, D'Arena's are much more well planned, and knowledge of anatomy is evidenced, as can be illustrated by the *Virgin and Child with Ss Roque and Sebastian* (1710) (Fig. 21), at the Lija Parish Church, a painting which shows his late style, and moved away from Preti's influence.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 183.



Figure 21. Giuseppe D'Arena, *Virgin and Child with Ss Roque and Sebastian* (1710), Lija Parish Church.

Significantly, this work uses a similar chromatic scheme to that typically used by de Dominici, and makes use of similar iconography for the rendering of the Virgin and Child on the clouds, surrounded by putti and bathed in a golden background. St Roque, who also appears in two of de Dominici's works, the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* (Plate 1) and the *Crucifixion with Saints* (Plate 7), is rendered with the same iconographical attributes, however, the modelling of the figure and the dog are much more well-studied and executed, and there is a feeling of the human body underneath the draperies, which are well structured, unlike de Dominici's. D'Arena's eye for detail and good use of pictorial space also infers him as a better artist than Maria de Dominici.

Although de Dominici was reliant on her master, there are also distinctive features in her oeuvre, such as the angular rigidity of the drapery folds, which is omnipresent in most of her works.¹⁹⁴ In certain instances, the artist also somewhat succeeds in creating inventive compositions, however she failed in reaching the artistic level of her master; for example, in *St Teresa of Avila* (Plate 4) and in *St John of the Cross* (Plate 5), the artistic capabilities cannot even compare with the works created by Preti's bottega. Giuseppe Maria De Piro contradicts this, as in his monograph he writes that de Dominici superseded even Preti in her female figures, '*l'abbia superato*'.¹⁹⁵ However, most of the female figures in her independent works are hidden under large and rigid draperies and are anatomically incorrect, as is particularly evident in *Christ receiving St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* (Plate 2), which is a sharp contrast to Preti's female figures, such as those in *The Birth of St John the Baptist*,¹⁹⁶ part of the ceiling at St John's Co-Cathedral.¹⁹⁷ De Dominici also had difficulty in executing the male figure of Christ in this work, particularly in its anatomy and contrasts of colour; an element which is seen throughout in the artist's work.¹⁹⁸ This may be because women were not allowed to be part of academies, where artists could gather to draw from casts, learn anatomy and perspective and discuss theory. Thus, they had to study these subjects privately,¹⁹⁹ and perhaps were not as successful in it, such as, for instance, anatomy and the modelling of figures in the case of Maria de Dominici.

It may be that as a female artist, de Dominici portrayed her subjects differently to men, as discussed *supra* in the depiction of motherhood within her plague painting of the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* (Plate 1). De Dominici has already been discussed in comparison to another female artist, Suor Plautilla Nelli, in Chapter 1, however her works may be analysed as a correlation to works of art by other females, particularly those who

¹⁹⁴ Sciberras (2015), 142.

¹⁹⁵ G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

¹⁹⁶ Sciberras (2012), 139-140.

¹⁹⁷ According to de Piro, it was de Dominici herself who executed the female figures in the ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral however this is a factorisation, as has already been discussed.

See: G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

¹⁹⁸ It is likely that de Dominici studied prints after Pedro de Moya's (1610-1660) painting *The Vision of St Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*.

¹⁹⁹ Borzello, 57.

were active in Italy, especially Bologna,²⁰⁰ at the same time.

There were female artists who depicted other women as heroines, such as Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653). Contrarily, Maria de Dominici seems to have portrayed saints mostly, perhaps due to her status as a Carmelite tertiary and the nature of her commissions, which seem to have mostly come from religious institutions. Both Sirani and Gentileschi, who were also daughters of artists,²⁰¹ were far better artists than de Dominici; the modelling of their figures and the study of anatomy is much more accurate. For instance, if one were to compare Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) (Fig. 22) with de Dominici's Madonna in the *Virgin with St Nicholas and Roque* (Plate 1) it can be noted that whilst Suor Maria hid the female figure under large angular draperies, Gentileschi portrayed it accurately and realistically.

Elisabetta Sirani, who was frequently dismissed as a mere follower of Guido Reni, was also a significant painter, as evidenced from her works such as *Portia Wounding her Thigh* (1664) (Fig. 23). Unlike de Dominici, who only trained with Preti in his bottega, Sirani studied in a school for women artists in Bologna, and thus had a better opportunity at learning, even if she was probably a much better artist than de Dominici.²⁰² Significantly, although during her life Sirani was believed to claim her father's works as hers due to the speed with which she painted, upon her death, she was highly appraised as an artist, similarly to de Dominici who is credited to have also been respected.

Based on her few attributed works, it can be noted that Suor Maria's only produced figure paintings set in a religious context. This was perhaps due to her position as a Carmelite tertiary.²⁰³ She also often painted new saints, such as St Roque (Plate 1), St Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (Plate 2) and St John of the Cross (Plate 5). This may be because their cult was very popular during the time, and patrons would have requested such depictions.

²⁰⁰ Bologna was an important centre for the arts; it had a university which had educated women since the 13th Century, and had also had a female saint who was also a painter, St Catherine of Bologna (1413-1463). See: Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1990, 82.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁰² During her life, Sirani struggled with her father claiming all of the money she earned as a painter. There is no information on whether de Dominici suffered from this exploitation.

²⁰³ All of de Dominici's known works are ecclesiastical, however one cannot exclude the possibility of her painting secular scenes.



Figure 22. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610-1611, Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden.



Figure 23. Elisabetta Sirani, *Portia Wounding her Thigh*, 1664, Stephen Warren Miles and Marilyn Ross Miles Foundation, Houston.

Another possibility could be that de Dominici to depict these cultic figures in order to attract new commissions. Unfortunately, there is no known information about the patronage of the artist in Malta, since most of the works are not documented. There is still so much more to be discovered about other works of art by her and the artistic commissions that she received.

2.4 Maria de Dominici as a sculptor

As discussed in the previous chapter, Maria de Dominici is documented as also being a sculptor,²⁰⁴ perhaps even more prominently than as a painter. In fact, up until recent years, she was mostly known for her documented polychromed wood sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* (Cospicua Parish Church) (Fig. 24-26), believed to be her only surviving sculpture, although as discussed *supra*,²⁰⁵ it was severely remodelled, as in 1905, it was sent to the highly renowned firm *Antonio Ghezzi e Figlio*, in Milan, where a design was created for it to be fully covered in silver, except for the head, hands and feet, then executed by Abram Gatt (1863-1944).²⁰⁶ An old photograph shows the work in its original format. De Dominici included putti within this sculpture, which are as cleverly executed as the figure of the Virgin (Fig. 24). The drapery folds of the Virgin are distinguished and rigid, in a very similar manner to those that de Dominici painted.

The sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* can be dated to around 1680, which is the same date of attribution given to most of the paintings by de Dominici. According to tradition, the trunk of the tree that it was carved out of had been the space on which the Madonna had appeared. As may be seen from the old photograph, Maria de Dominici gave great attention to detail in the sculpture, as is evident in the facial features of the Madonna, and the wings on the pedestal.

²⁰⁴ Ciantar, 295.

Sciberras (2015), 142.

²⁰⁵ See *supra*, 23.

²⁰⁶ Cospicua Parish Church, *The parish church of the Immaculate Conception*, Cospicua, 2017. Retrieved on 12 February from: <http://www.cospicuaparish.org.mt/theparish.asp>



Figure 24. Old photograph of the Immaculate Conception sculpture by Maria de Dominici, with original pedestal.



Figure 25. Immaculate Conception, Cospicua Parish Church, remodelled by Abram Gatt.



Figure 26. Detail of face and hands of the Immaculate Conception by Maria de Dominici, Cospicua Parish Church, remodelled by Abram Gatt.

The influences that de Dominici had on her sculptural work are not known. It may be that she looked at prints which were in circulation at the time, or on works in the Maltese Islands, including those by Preti himself. The sculpture lacks the dynamism that others sculptures of the Immaculate Conception executed around this period had, such as those by Pierre Puget. De Dominici made use of the typical iconography used for the Immaculate Conception and for its pedestal. The original pedestal which may be seen in the photograph still exists, at the parish church of Paola (Fig. 24).²⁰⁷ Whilst it is notable for its modelling, it is mostly remarkable for its iconography, whereby it contains the symbols of the four Evangelists, which shows a well-informed artist at work.²⁰⁸

The drapery folds of the Immaculate Conception are similar to those depicted by the artist in her paintings, bold and angular, with an attempt in movement. This may suggest that indeed, de Dominici was better as a sculptor, and thus her painted works would be mostly based on the sculpture she executed. It seems that she also made use of similar iconography in the sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception*; for instance, she included the putti which are so common in her paintings.

The soft modelling of the *Immaculate Conception* may remind one of Properzia de' Rossi (c.1490–1530), a Bolognese Renaissance sculptor, who was influenced from the classical ideals present in Bologna at the time, as well as Correggio and Parmigianino. Like Maria de Dominici, de' Rossi was praised by a biographer, the much renowned Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) in his *Lives of the Artists*. However, de' Rossi's works are much more dynamic and well-modelled than de Dominici's *Immaculate Conception*, and further knowledge of classical sources is evident, for instance in the low relief *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (c. 1520) (Fig. 27).²⁰⁹ Of course, de Dominici's sculpture can only be analysed and compared through an old photograph, and thus, such judgement on this work may be incorrect. De Dominici may also be compared with Anne Seymour Damer (1749-1828), the first recognised female sculptor in Britain.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ The pedestal is used as the base of the *Victorious Christ* statue.

²⁰⁸ ACM, Ms. 180, Expanded version of Gerolamo Molina's *Pastoral Visitation Report*, c. 1725, 100.

²⁰⁹ Chadwick, 283.

²¹⁰ This was suggested by Professor Alison Yarrington.



Figure 27. Properzia de' Rossi, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (c. 1520), Museo de San Petronio, Bologna.

Maria de Dominici is also documented to have produced paintings and sculptures that served as cultic statues that were to be carried in religious processions on specific feast days.²¹¹ For instance, she is documented to have executed an *Ecce Homo* for the Good Friday feast of Valletta in 1675, which was to be executed out of wood and papier-mâché.²¹² The *Libro dei Conti* (1672-1703) at the Archives of the Archconfraternity of the Crucifixion²¹³ documents that she received 8 scudi for two heads of Jewish personages in plaster,²¹⁴ whilst other parts of the statue, such as the hands and feet, were worked in papier-mâché by Dr Matteolo Ciantar.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

²¹² Aquilina, 32.

²¹³ Although this statue does not survive, we can get the idea of what it looked like through the fees paid for it between 1679-1683.

²¹⁴ AAC, *Libro dei Conti* 1672-1703, f. 24t-24v.

²¹⁵ For more information, see, Aquilina, 1986, 32, 35.

Since Maria de Dominici was commissioned to execute the faces of the two Jewish figures in the *Ecce Homo* sculptural group, one may assume that she excelled at sculpting faces and heads of figures. This argument may be enhanced by analysing the face of the *Immaculate Conception* at Cospicua, which, as has already been discussed, is still original, and is brilliantly executed, showing the delicacy of the female figure (Fig. 23-24).²¹⁶

2.5 Attributions

A drawing of *Lo Sposalizio della Vergine* in ink and wash, in the Cathedral Archives of Mdina collection (Fig. 28), is attributed to Maria de Dominici. The attribution is listed in John Azzopardi's *Elenco dei Disegni del Museo della Cattedrale di Malta*, published by the Cathedral Church of Malta in 1980, where a description of the work, inventory number 58, as an *Annunciation of the Virgin*, is provided together with the old attribution to de Dominici, as well as the new attribution to her, provided by Causa.²¹⁷

Beneath the drawing is an inscription with the artist's name, "*Maria de Dominici*", however the first name seems to have been a later addition as it is off-centre, and the ink used is different.²¹⁸ The style of the drawing is similar to de Dominici's works, but the draughtsmanship displayed in the drawing is superior to any other known works by de Dominici. This may signify that this drawing is not by the artist after all, despite what the inscription states. It should be noted that there is no knowledge of any other drawings by the artist to compare her draughtsmanship. It may also be that she was more capable at creating small-scale works on paper, than executing the final piece on canvas using paint, as often happened with artists.

²¹⁶ However, as has been discussed supra, one cannot be truly sure about this, since the rest of the figure was amended, and can only be seen through an old photo.

²¹⁷ John Azzopardi, *Elenco dei Disegni del Museo della Cattedrale di Malta*, Malta: Cathedral Church of Malta, 1980, number 258, 14.

²¹⁸ This was suggested by Mgr. John Azzopardi and Mr Joe Borg.



Figure 28. Drawing of Lo Sposalizio attributed to Maria de Dominicis, Mdina Cathedral Archives.

Therefore, despite the similar stylistic elements and the fact that the painting is inscribed with the name of Maria de Dominicis, it may be that the drawing is not by the artist. It is possible that it was by one of Maria's brothers, Raimondo or Francesco de Dominicis. The provenance of the work and its first date of attribution are unknown. If the drawing is by Maria de Dominicis, the perception about the artist would change, as it would present her as a much better draughtsman.

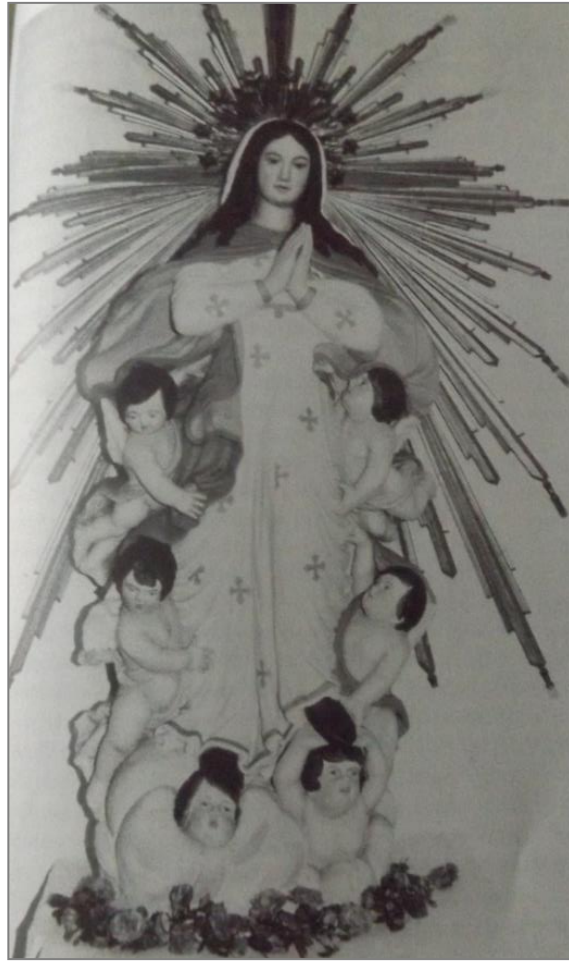


Figure 29. Sculpture of the Virgin at St Catherine's Nunnery, Valletta, attributed to Maria de Dominici

The painted stone sculpture of the *Virgin* in the church crypt of St Catherine's Nunnery, Valletta (Fig. 29), is traditionally conceived as de Dominici's second version of the *Immaculate Conception*, however there is no documentation or any other evidence of this.²¹⁹ Although the execution of the Virgin's face and hands are similar, the Valletta sculpture is inferior in quality, although it was also severely amended, and therefore the attribution is questionable. Nevertheless, the Valletta sculpture is believed to be based on it.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462; Hoe, 116.

See also: Subchapter 2.6. Lost works.

²²⁰ This was suggested by Professor Mario Buhagiar.

2.6 Erroneous and Past Attributions

A painting of *Beato Franco* at the Carmelite Church, Valletta (Fig. 30), was attributed to Maria de Dominicis in the late 20th Century.²²¹ However, there are elements that suggest this is an erroneous attribution that is further corroborated by the lack of documentation. Furthermore, although the painting was influenced by Preti, especially in its dark tonalities and dramatic use of light and composition,²²² from the works created for the same church,²²³ in terms of style it is different to the other works documented or attributed to de Dominicis. The Blessed Franco is better executed than figures in other works by the artist, such as St Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, particularly in the modelling of the face and hands. He is also less elongated, and the drapery folds are less rigid. The iconographical elements are, however, similar, especially in the putti and the Crucifixion. However, these similarities may have come about due to the artist also being close to Preti. Due to these diverse reasons, one may conclude that this work is not by Maria de Dominicis.

A painting of a *Crucifixion* at the Chapel of Our Lady of Ransom, Qrendi (Fig. 31), has also been described as a work by Maria de Dominicis,²²⁴ however, it bears many stylistic differences to other works attributed to the artist, as well as a variegated chromatic scheme and quality, where, one may note that the work at Qrendi is inferior. Therefore, this painting should also be removed from Maria de Dominicis's oeuvre.²²⁵

²²¹ The painting suffered through restorations done over the years, including the repainting done by Antonio Zammit in 1754, in which the figure of St Maddalena de' Pazzi was added to the composition. It was restored in 1989.

See: M. Schembri, *Id-Devozzjoni u l-Arti, Programm tal-Festa tal-Madonna tal-Karmnu, Valletta, Malta, 1993, 30.*

See also: Bisazza, 71.

²²² Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

²²³ Bisazza, 71.

²²⁴ Caruana-Gatto, 'Parte 1ma: Pittura', *Malta Artistica Illustrata*, Hamrun: Casa di San Giuseppe, 1905, 54.

²²⁵ Information about the painting was kindly granted by Mr David Schembri, the present mayor of Qrendi.



Figure 30. Beato Franco, Carmelite Church, Valletta, formerly attributed to Maria de Dominici.



Figure 31. Crucifixion, Chapel of Our Lady of Ransom, Qrendi, formerly attributed to Maria de Dominici.

There are other paintings in the Maltese Islands, which have been attributed to de Dominici over the years, such as *St Paul* at Marsalforn, Gozo,²²⁶ amongst others. However, they are based on speculations or are very different to Maria de Dominici's style in her known works, therefore they should also be disregarded.

2.7 Lost works

Several documented paintings and sculptures by Suor Maria de Dominici have either been lost or have insofar not been associated with the artist. For instance, according to Giovannantonio Ciantar, Maria de Dominici also sculpted *St Teresa's Transverberation* which was in the Carmelite Church at Vittoriosa.²²⁷ Unfortunately, there is no trace of this work. She is also known to have sculpted in painted stone a second version of the *Immaculate Conception* for Cospicua, which is similarly untraceable,²²⁸ although there are sources that suggest that this work is now in the crypt of the church of St Catherine's Convent in Valletta.²²⁹ Caruana-Gatto also mentions a *Madonna of the Pillar* for the Carmelite church, however there is no other information about this work, and there is also the possibility that the attribution is erroneous.²³⁰

Maria De Dominici is also credited by her nephew Bernardo to have created paintings and sculptures in Rome.²³¹ De Piro also records these works, stating that she was lauded for her works in Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome, where she is buried, and at the Galleria Pamphili. However, it is not known whether any of the works mentioned by Bernardo or De

²²⁶ This work has been attributed to Maria de Dominici erroneously, when in fact it is a documented painting by Giuseppe Bonnici. This was discussed with Dr Mark Sagona.

See also: Caruana-Gatto, 54.

²²⁷ Ciantar, 551.

See also: G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

²²⁸ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ This occurred with other attributions by Caruana-Gatto, such as *St Paul* at Marsalforn, discussed *supra*.

See: Caruana-Gatto, 54.

²³¹ De Dominici, 382.

Piro have survived.²³²

Certainly, there must be other works by our artist, both in Malta and abroad, that have survived but which have not been identified or which are currently erroneously attributed to another artist. Hopefully, more works by Suor Maria de Dominici can be brought to light through future research and scholarship about her and her works, as well as about Mattia Preti and his bottega, within the upcoming years, to better classify the artist.

²³² This will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: An analysis of the documents and traditional accounts of de Dominici's Roman period

Suor Maria de Dominici left Malta in 1682, to pursue a life and career in Rome, where she lived until her death in 1703. The artist is not so well documented in Rome, aside from a few documents which mention her works, and her two wills, which shed a light on her possessions and her role as an artist. Otherwise, what is known about the artist is written by Bernardo de' Dominici, who may have romanticised since he was her nephew,²³³ and Giovannantonio Ciantar, amongst other writers, who relied on oral history which may not always be correct. As is recounted in her will, in Rome Maria de Dominici worked as a sculptor as well as a painter. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the works executed by the artist in Rome, and it seems that they do not survive.

This chapter will discuss Maria de Dominici's life and works in Rome as it is known through the diverse sources, and includes her departure and her links with the Sacchetti family and the Calced Carmelites of Santa Maria in Transpontina. Her wills and any other contracts drafted out in Rome will also be analyzed, with a particular emphasis on the documents found at the Archivio di Stato, Roma, in which specific research about the artist was carried out.

3.1 Maria de Dominici's Departure to Rome

According to Bernardo de' Dominici, Suor Maria de Dominici left for Rome encouraged by Mattia Preti, since she was better as a sculptor and he suggested that she went to better study the sculptures produced in Antiquity as well as by the Baroque master Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Bernardo writes that Suor Maria de Dominici took liberty from her parents and her Master, Mattia Preti, accompanied by her younger brother, Don Francesco de Dominici, with letters of recommendation from the Grand Master, to be given to the ambassador of the Knights of the Order of Malta in Rome, Marcello Sacchetti,

*Presa licenza da' Genitori, e dal Suo caro Maestro, partì accompagnata da un suo Fratello Prete, chiamato D. Francesco, e da lettere di raccomandazione del Gran Maestro dirette all' Ambasciadore Sacchetti, che dimorava in Roma.*²³⁴

²³³ Therefore, there might be an element of nepotism in his text.

²³⁴ De Dominici, 382.

Other sources, such as Giovannantonio Ciantar in *Malta illustrata* (1780)²³⁵ and *L'Arte* (1-51),²³⁶ credit Maria de Dominici to have left Malta on 17th March 1682, with the retinue of Carlo Maria Carafa, who was the Prince of Butera, and nephew of Grand Master Carafa²³⁷ (Fig. 32)²³⁸ and his wife, Donna Teresa d'Avalos, the daughter of the prince of Pescara,²³⁹ who had visited Malta in the same year.²⁴⁰ Donna Teresa d'Avalos came to know of Maria de Dominici in Malta, and sought to know her and probably also her works of art, and, seeing her potential, encouraged her to join the couple in Rome:

*Nell'anno 1682, essendo venuto in Malta D. Carlo Carafa Principe della Roccella, e di Botera, colla sua consorte D. Teresa d'Avalos, figlia del Marchese di Pescara; (i quali furono dal Gran Maestro Carafa zio di detto D. Carlo nel proprio palagio alloggiati), la predetta Principessa ebbe notizia della virtù della nostra Pittoressa, e volle conoscerla; ed avendola conosciuta: se le affezionò talmente, che volle condurla seco in Roma. Ma i genitori di lei ricusavano di privarsi d' una figlia tanto virtuosa: ma poscia persuasi dagli amici e molto più dal le autorevoli parole del Gran Maestro, che assecondare voleva il genio della sua nipote si ridussero a darle il permesso di partirsene colla Principessa, per non farle perdere la fortuna, che vi avrebbe potuto incontrare con tal protettrice nella Capitale del mondo. Dove giunta dimorò nel palagio della Principessa finché questa sen partì per ritornare a Napoli.*²⁴¹

Maria De Dominici is believed to have resided with the couple during their brief stay in Rome,²⁴² presumably before she was put under Sacchetti's protection and sequentially obtained her own studio and residence.²⁴³

²³⁵ Ciantar, 551.

²³⁶ *L'Arte* 1-51, Periodo Patrio Dimensile, no. 20.

There are also other sources which mention the date 1682, such as Vincenzo Caruana Gatto.

See: Caruana-Gatto, 55.

²³⁷ Giuseppe Scichilone, 'BUTERA, Carlo Maria Carafa Branciforte principe di', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 15, 1972, Retrieved on 12 April 2017 from [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maria-carafa-branciforte-principe-di-butera_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maria-carafa-branciforte-principe-di-butera_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

²³⁸ *Figure 30, the Portrait of Grand Master Gregorio Carafa*, has recently been attributed to Stefano Erardi by Keith Sciberras. This was discussed in Rachel Vella's dissertation, *The Portraits of Grand Masters at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat* (2017).

²³⁹ This was cited from the writings of Bartolomeo del Pozzo and Nicholas De Piro, in Hoe, 117.

²⁴⁰ Ciantar, 550; G. M. de Piro, (1839) 74.

²⁴¹ Ciantar, 550-551.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Hoe, 117.



Figure 32. Attributed to Stefano Erardi, Grand Master Gregorio Carafa, Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat.

3.2 Life and Work in Rome

As discussed *supra*, different authors romanticised about Maria de Dominici in Rome, where amongst the stories recounted was that the artist worked with Gian Lorenzo Bernini. This is a factorisation since Bernini died in November 1680, whilst Maria de Dominici is believed to have left Malta in March 1682.²⁴⁴

Bernardo de' Dominici writes that the artist gravitated in Rome, studying painting, sculpture and architecture, and creating public works in painting and sculpture. He also hints that some of her devotional works were engraved by Charles de la Haye and Andrea

²⁴⁴ Ciantar, 550; Caruana Gatto, 54.
See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156; Cutajar, 29.

Magliar,²⁴⁵ and that Carlo Maratti (1625-1713) granted her the most luminous space within a chapel in which she could hang her painting for an exhibition,²⁴⁶ thus showing how highly he esteemed her:²⁴⁷

*Fece opere in pubblico così di pittura, come di Scultura, e volle, che Carlo Maratta gli cedessè il luogo d'una Cappella più luminosa, ove dovea esporre un suo quadro, di che volle quel grand' Uomo compiacerla, sapendo bene, che ovunque l'opera sua esponeva avea il primo luogo, e gli applausi di tutti i Professori.*²⁴⁸

The protection of Don Carlo and Donna Teresa d'Avalos, as well as Fra Marcello Sacchetti, all of whom were linked to the Knights of St John, may have aided Suor Maria in establishing herself as an artist in Rome. She was first recorded as a painter at work in Rome in May 1684, when a painting by the artist, painted for the altar dedicated to San Andrea Corsini, was hung up in Santa Maria di Traspontina.²⁴⁹

*'Currente mense maio 1584 sfilata veteri reidiqua tabula picta S. Andrei Corsini ex eius altari, nova elegantior ibi est imposita, manu Sor Maria Domenici, nostra tertiaria, depicta video*²⁵⁰

In these records, de Dominici is described as a *'nostra tertiaria'*, therefore as one of their own tertiary members of the Calced Carmelites of Santa Maria in Traspontina; thus, by 1684 she was already associated with this order in Rome.²⁵¹

According to parish records, in 1690 Suor Maria de Dominici had her own residence and studio in Vicolo dell'Agnello, in the vicinities of the Sacchetti family palace.²⁵² In 1694, she had a Neapolitan female companion, Antonia Cenci, who was also listed as a beneficiary of various items in de Dominici's will.²⁵³

²⁴⁵ Giovannantonio Ciantar gives different information to this, stating that Maria de Dominici created designs requested by the two engravers

See: Ciantar, 551.

²⁴⁶ De Dominici, 382.

²⁴⁷ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

²⁴⁸ De Dominici, 382.

²⁴⁹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

²⁵⁰ AOR, L. Perez de Castro, *Notitia...*, Ms. Ord. C.O. ii 21, f. 48.

Source retrieved from: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156, 280.

²⁵¹ Ciantar also states that de Dominici obtained the permission of the Pope to wear the black habit of the Carmelite Order, as professed in the Sagri Chiostrì. See: Ciantar, 551.

²⁵² Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462.

²⁵³ The widow Camilla Petrini, who was 25 years old and from Naples, is also listed as sharing a residence with Maria de Dominici in 1694, and she returned to de Dominici's house in 1699.

AVR, S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini, "Stati d'animi," 1692-1710, vol. xxxv: 1692, f. 11; 1693, f. 9, 11.

3.3 Link with the Sacchetti family

The Sacchetti family were wealthy Florentines who had moved to Rome²⁵⁴ and had been significant since the 12th Century.²⁵⁵ Because of their social, political and economic status, they patronized Italian as well as foreign artists, as was expected from families of their privilege; and thus certainly had a role in the embellishment of art in Italy.²⁵⁶ By 1573, the family had already acquired a few works of art. Patronage increased with the arrival of Marcello Sacchetti (1586-1629),²⁵⁷ who was Urban VIII's treasurer and depository general, and was involved in the establishment of Pietro da Cortona's career.²⁵⁸

Fra Marcello Sacchetti (1644-1720), whose protection Maria de Dominici had been placed under upon her arrival to Rome in the 1680s, was one of the longest-serving ambassadors of Malta for the Knights of St John in Rome, serving under three different magistracies.²⁵⁹ His role was to defend in the best possible way the rights of the various members of the Order in front of the Pope and Papal tribunals.²⁶⁰ The ambassador was also the supervisor for Roman works of art, particularly in sculpture, that were shipped to the Grand Master in Malta. This was especially significant in the Magistracy of Gregorio Carafa, who was serving during a period in which sculpture was important for Malta. Sacchetti hence became the trusted person to commission and supervise such works of art to be produced for Malta, engaging with artists such as Domenico Guidi and Ciro Ferri.²⁶¹

Source retrieved from: Camiz (1997), 156.

²⁵⁴ Harris, Ann Sutherland, *Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture*, New Jersey: Pearson Education, First published 2005, 2nd ed. 2008, 14.

²⁵⁵ Lilian H. Zirpolo, *Ave Papa/Ave Papabile: The Sacchetti Family, Their Art Patronage, and Political Aspirations*, (Essays and Studies, Vol. 6), Ontario: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005, 21.

²⁵⁶ Zirpolo, 22.

²⁵⁷ This information was obtained from Dr Sergio Guarino, through personal communication at the Musei Capitolini, Rome, on 15th September 2016.

²⁵⁸ This further shows the family's significance.

See: Zirpolo, 24.

²⁵⁹ Adrian Scerri, *Fra Marcello Sacchetti, Hospitaller Ambassador to the Papal States: his official correspondence*, Unpublished M.A. Hospitaller Studies Dissertation, Department of History, University of Malta, 2011, 5.

²⁶⁰ Keith Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Knights of Malta*, Valletta, Midsea Books, First Published 2004, 2nd ed. 2011, 77.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

It seems that Carafa instructed Sacchetti the protection of Maria de Dominici in Rome, although she was not a member of the Order.²⁶² It is possible that as a protégée of Sacchetti, Maria de Dominici resided within the property of the Sacchetti family before acquiring her residence in the vicinities of the family palace, as it appears that there had been others who had also resided within their property, such as the physician, anatomist, and epidemiologist Giovanni Maria Lancisi (1654-1720).²⁶³

Suor Maria de Dominici was commissioned various works of art from the Sacchetti family; hence, aside from her protectors, they were also acting as patrons during her time in Rome.²⁶⁴ Fra Marcello Sacchetti was also the executor of Suor Maria de Dominici's two wills.²⁶⁵

3.4 Primary Sources

Maria de Dominici is recorded in documents within various archives in Rome, including the Archivio di Stato, the Archivio Ordine Carmelitano, the Archivio del Vicariato and the Archivio Sacchetti,²⁶⁶ although there may also be others which have not been brought to light yet. The most significant Roman archival research about de Dominici was done by Franca Trinchieri Camiz, who adds onto what Bernardo de' Dominici wrote about the artist in his biographies.

As discussed *supra*, this section will focus on the Archivio di Stato, Rome, in which there are around a handful of documents that we know of which concern Maria de Dominici.²⁶⁷ De Dominici is mentioned directly in two documents: her wills (Appendix).

²⁶² This was stated by Bernardo de Dominici in his *Vite*, as has been discussed *supra*.

See: De Dominici, 382.

²⁶³ Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *The Villas of Pliny from Antiquity to Posterity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 82.

²⁶⁴ This appears in de Dominici's wills, and will be further discussed *infra*.

²⁶⁵ Sciberras (2015), 142.

²⁶⁶ The Sacchetti Archives, which are found within the Palazzo Sacchetti in Rome, contain genealogical information, wills by family members and inventories, amongst other documents.

See: Zirpolo, 20.

²⁶⁷ The five documents concerned were researched at the Archivio di Stato, Rome, and further clarification of them was made through Franca Trinchieri Camiz's articles in Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156-158, and (1997), 462-463.

Maria de Dominici drafted out two wills in Rome: the first on 20th July 1699,²⁶⁸ almost four years before her death.²⁶⁹ The second version, which annulled the first, is much shorter, and was executed on 1st March 1703, a mere 17 days before her death²⁷⁰ (Appendix). De Dominici also requested more masses, and declared Lamberto Jamar, the personal secretary to Fra Marcello Sacchetti,²⁷¹ as the major beneficiary, replacing her brother Paolo de Dominici.²⁷²

In her wills, de Dominici mentions twenty-three works of art, although it is unknown whether all of these were executed by her. In some instances, though, she specifies for whom she created these works; for instance, she lists the works she executed for the Sacchetti family,²⁷³ as well as other works, including a *St Teresa* and *Queen Sofonisba*, which were executed for different patrons. For the *St Teresa* altarpiece and another unspecified picture, de Dominici states that she received the worth of 38-40 scudi in money and furniture, a humble remuneration for which she was dissatisfied, and duly asked her heirs to have the painting reassessed. De Dominici is noted to have been paid the exact same amount for a canvas depicting the *la cena originale*, which perhaps refers to a Last Supper painting.²⁷⁴ She also mentions twelve paintings varying between small and large, an *Ecce Homo* and a small *Annunciation*, which, as discussed *supra*, do not specify their author. The painting of *Queen*

²⁶⁸ In a visit to the ASR, the first will was not found, as there was no manuscript which fell under the name 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, which was quoted by Franca Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156, in which she mentioned fols. 447-448v and 477-478 as a reference.

²⁶⁹ De Dominici's first will was not seen by her heirs, and was only unsealed by a notary 25 years after her death.

See: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

²⁷⁰ ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 10, E. Gattus, Testamenti 1695-1703, xi, fols. 453v-453r, 474r-474v.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 463.

²⁷¹ Will of Marcello Sacchetti, 19 April 1715: Archivio Sacchetti, Rome, busta 92, no. 17.

Source retrieved from: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ These works will be discussed in 3.5 Possible Works of Art.

²⁷⁴ “[D]ichiaro che il quondam Giuseppe de’ Maij mi ordino un quadro in tela d’imperatore con la cena originale, che da me è stato fatto, et à conto del prezzo di quello in più volte hò ricevuto tra danari, robbe e tavolino d trent’otto in quaranta scudi, però intendo, che l’eredi di detto quondam Giuseppe siano tenuti a pigliare detto quadro, e farlo stimare come anche dichiaro di non esser soddisfatta del quadro di S. Teresa di sedici palmi quadro d’Altare ordinatomi del medesimo per li quali, e per un altro di tela d’Imperatore ne hò ricevuto li scudi di 38 ò quaranta in circa”: ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, f. 448, taken from taken from the text quoted by Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 157-158 since the original document was not available.

Sofonisba, for Simone, the surgeon of Prince Borghese, was paid for by 15 *giulii* and around three barrels of wine, and was described as an incomplete payment:

*Item dichiaro esser Creditrice del Sr. Simone Chirurgo del Sig.r. Principe Borghese, e della sua moglie, per il prezzo del quadro rappresentante la Sofonisba à conto del quale hò ricevuto quindici giulij e tre barili di vino incirca...*²⁷⁵

These prices for works of art, recorded in her wills, credit de Dominici as a professional artist who knew her artistic worth. The sums in which the artist was paid for were modest, particularly when compared with those by artists such as Carlo Maratta, although the level and quality of the work is inferior to his.

De Dominici also records gessi, clay and wax *modelli* in her first will, which show her continuous propensity for sculpture, especially in bronze.²⁷⁶ In her second will, she adds casting moulds as a part of her collection, whilst her collection of drawings, which, according to Bernardo included works by Mattia Preti himself which he had given to her as a symbol of his 'loving kindness',²⁷⁷ was willed to her brother Raimondo²⁷⁸ (Appendix 1.3 & 1.4). The fact that her collection included works by Preti shows that although the artist was in Rome and could thus look at some of the greatest works produced by masters, she still held on to the knowledge given to her by her master in Malta, some of whose works which date to his pre-Maltese period were also present in Rome and thus directly accessible to de Dominici.

In the postscript to her first will drafted in 1699, Suor Maria de Dominici appealed to the Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari, which proclaimed that the painting at the chapel of St Andrea Corsini at Santa Maria in Traspontina, Rome, could not be taken down from its position in the case of excommunication after her death, thus perhaps indicating that there had been a previous attempt by the Carmelite brothers at removing her work from the altar.²⁷⁹ In 1698, the chapel was donated to the Corsini in Rome, a Florentine noble family,²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, fols. 447-448v, 477-478.

²⁷⁶ *'Item lascio al Sig. Francesco Perti tutti gli gessi, stampe, e forme e modelli di creta, come di cera grandi e piccoli concernente all'arte di scultore e pittore...'*:

ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, f. 448v.

²⁷⁷ *Ma della eredità altro non ebbe Ramondo se non che i disegni, fra quali erano alcuni del Calabrese donati a lei da quel grand' Uomo in segno di sua amorevolezza, e 'l resto della robba fa Iddio ove futata.*

See: De Dominici, 382.

²⁷⁸ ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 10, E. Gattus, Testamenti 1695-1703, vol. xi, f. 474.

²⁷⁹ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 157-158.

who in turn renovated it. Perhaps this was the reason for Maria de Dominici's postscript in her will which she finalized in the following year; the artist must have been worried that her work would be replaced due to this development.²⁸¹

3.5 Possible Works of Art

Through different primary and secondary sources, it can be professed that Suor Maria de Dominici was a very active artist in Rome, and executed various works of art, none of which, unfortunately, survive.

As discussed *supra*, one of the works produced by the artist in Rome was the altarpiece for the chapel dedicated to San Andrea Corsini, which is in the left transept of the church of Santa Maria in Transpontina. This painting, which in de Dominici's postscript is described to have been painted 'with great toil',²⁸² replaced an earlier painting, and was regarded as '*nova elegantior ibi est imposita*',²⁸³ hence new and more elegant than the work it replaced. This is the only known description of the painting, which is unfortunately lost today.²⁸⁴ The Corsini family, amongst whom was Cardinal Lorenzo Corsini (1652-1740), who would become Pope Clement XII in 1730, created a redecoration programme for the chapel, in which he donated altar fronts, crosses adorned by jewels and statuettes, and in 1697 commissioned Biagio Pulcini for the chapel vault. De Dominici's painting was replaced soon after her death in 1703, therefore it is possible that this was done during these renovations. The new altarpiece depicting *Andrea Corsini's Vision of the Virgin*, which took its place and is still *in situ* today, is by Gian Paolo Melchiorre, a pupil of the most prestigious artist in Rome at the time, Carlo Maratti.²⁸⁵ Trinchieri Camiz suggests that such a work, created in the style and by the student of such a highly-esteemed artist, must have held a higher regard than

²⁸⁰ Enciclopedia Treccani, 'Corsini', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 2010. Retrieved on 14 February 2017 from http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/corsini_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/.

²⁸¹ The fate of the painting will be further discussed in section 3.5: *Possible Works of Art*.

²⁸² ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 10, E. Gattus, Testamenti 1695-1703, xi, fols. 453v-453r, 474r-474v.

²⁸³ AOR, Roma, L. Perez de Castro, Notitia..., Ms. Ord. C.O. ii 21, f. 48.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156, 280.

²⁸⁴ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 463.

²⁸⁵ Luca Bortolotti, 'Maratti, Carlo', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 69, 2007. Retrieved on 12 February 2017 from [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maratti_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maratti_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

a work by a female artist and tertiary nun, and was hence replaced.²⁸⁶ However, the real reason de Dominici's work was replaced is not known, and, since there is no knowledge of de Dominici's painting, the quality of the two works cannot be compared with each other. It is possible that the Corsini family desired a work of a higher quality for their chapel, hence they may have commissioned a more modern painting by a better-known artist.²⁸⁷

A painting of San Andrea Corsini of a similar size as that of Melchiorre's²⁸⁸ is listed within the inventories of the church until 1924, located in the choir in 1911, then subsequently at the sacristy.²⁸⁹ It may be that this was the painting by Maria de Dominici, therefore it may have survived within the sacristy until the early decades of the 20th Century. There are, however, no other records of the painting after 1924.²⁹⁰

As noted *supra*, in her wills Maria de Dominici recorded various other works of art which she executed in Rome,²⁹¹ including a *Last Supper* for Giosepe de' Maij²⁹² and a *Queen Sofonisba* for 'Sr. Simone Chirurgo del Sig.r Principe Borghese, e della sua moglie',²⁹³ whilst a painting of the *Ecce Homo*²⁹⁴ and the *Annunciation* are also mentioned.²⁹⁵ For the ambassador of the Knights of St John in Rome and her protector, Marcello Sacchetti, de Dominici sculpted a marble bust of the *Virgin*, whilst, for his family, she created various portraits and a picture of *St Stanislaus*.²⁹⁶

²⁸⁶ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 157-158.

²⁸⁷ However, there is no evidence to this.

²⁸⁸ The painting of *Andrea Corsini's Vision of the Virgin* measures 295 cm by 183 cm.

See: *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁸⁹ 'Quadro in tela m. 3.02 x 1.97 rappresentante S. Andrea Corsini che sulle indicazioni di un fanciullo viene rinvenuto nella Certosa di Firenze dove era nascosto a pregare e perciò le parole che si leggono Apud Cartisianos Invenitis Oranem Quadro seicentistico di mediocre valore' described as being located in the choir of the church.

RMI, Giunta liquidatrice dell'asse ecclesiastico di Roma, 104, n. 26, "Inventario degli arredi sacri..." (11 September 1911).

According to the *Scheda* of the Soprintendenza of the church of the Traspontina, dating to 9 January 1924, the painting was up to date located within the entrance of a corridor in the sacristy.

Source retrieved from: Trinchieri Camiz (1997) 158, 282.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 158, 282.

²⁹¹ Although de Dominici mentions various works of art in her wills, it may be that not all of them were executed by her, as has been discussed in Chapter 3.4 *Primary Sources*.

²⁹² ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, f. 448.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, f. 447.

²⁹⁴ '...un quadro rappresentante un Ecce Homo originale di mia mano:': *Ibid.*, f. 448v.

²⁹⁵ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 157.

²⁹⁶ 'un S. Stanislao con li tre ritratti di casa Sachetti... [al] Sig. r Ambasciatore di Malta la testa à busto di Marmaro dino rappresentante la Madonna Santissima con il suo piedistallo di pietra mischiata':

Ciantar mentions that the artist had works in the gallery of Prince Pamphili,²⁹⁷ whilst Bernardo de' Dominici also writes that his aunt executed a sculpture of the *Transverberation of St Teresa*, which used to be in a Theresian church in Rome, a work which was very much praised:

*'molto lodata la Marna di Santa Teresa cui un bellissimo Angelo, o sia l'amor Divino trafigge il cuore con un dardo; Si ammira questa statua in una Chiesa de' PP. Teresiani.'*²⁹⁸

It has been suggested that this was a copy after Bernini's famous sculpture which de Dominici may have seen at Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.²⁹⁹

Because none of the works by de Dominici in Rome survive, it is difficult to analyse their quality and compare them to her surviving Maltese works, except thematically or by descriptions about them. It can be affirmed that all of the artist's known works, in Malta and in Rome, depict religious subjects, and were mostly given a positive fortuna critica, as highlighted throughout this dissertation.

3.6 Death and Artistic Legacy

Suor Maria de Dominici died on March 18th, 1703, aged 57 years old, and was buried in the church of St Maria in Traspontina,³⁰⁰ with which she had been associated during her life in Rome, due to her links with the Calced Carmelites of the church and the painting of St Andrea Corsini, that she had created for it.

Unfortunately, there is limited information about de Dominici's life and work in Rome, hence the quality of her artistic production, the significance of her journey and her contribution to the art world cannot truly be analysed. However, from the available sources, it can be affirmed that as an artist, Suor Maria de Dominici was successful also in Rome:

ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, f. 448v.

See also: Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 157.

²⁹⁷ Ciantar does not specify the subject matter and nature of these works.

See: Ciantar, 551.

²⁹⁸ De Dominici, 382.

²⁹⁹ Caruana-Gatto, 55.

³⁰⁰ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 158.

‘Suor Maria de Dominicis discepola del Cav. Calabrese che dipinse e scolpì in Roma ed espose con lode al pubblico le sue opere mentre cola fiorivano un Bernini ed un Maratta.’³⁰¹

Church records in Santa Maria in Traspontina describe Maria de Dominicis as having lived ‘an exemplary life, exercising the art of painting.’³⁰² According to her nephew Bernardo, she was admired and respected by all:

‘ed essendo amata dalle Dame, rispettata da’ Signori, ed ammirata da tutti finì i suoi giorni l’anno 1703.’³⁰³

Thus, Maria de Dominicis may be considered as a strong-willed artist who knew her artistic worth and identity, and strived to be represented as a professional painter and sculptor, as witnessed from her wills, and in the way she successfully represented herself in society. Certainly, the direct links that de Dominicis had during her life in Rome, for instance with Donna Teresa d’Avalos and Fra Marcello Sacchetti, gave her protection and patronage within such a highly esteemed artistic city. This must have helped her in settling down and making a name for herself as an artist, although she was not a particularly remarkable artist, judging from her known works in Malta, since her Roman works do not survive.

³⁰¹ Pietro Napoli-Signorelli, *Vicende della Coltura nelle Due Sicilie* (o sia storia ragionata della loro legislazione e polizia, delle lettere, del commercio, delle arti, e degli spettacoli, dalle colonie straniere insino a noi), Tomo V, Napoli: Pressa Vincenzo Flauto, 1786, 347.

³⁰² The original text, taken from the Archivio del Vicariato (AVR), Rome, “Libro dei Morti IV 1683-1719,” vol. xxviii, 18 Mar 1703: *‘[I]n quo exemplariter vixit Pictricem artem exercendens’*, translated to English by Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 156.

³⁰³ De Dominicis, 382.

Chapter 4: Catalogue of Suor Maria de Dominici's Paintings in Malta

The following catalogue presents the six paintings in Malta which have been securely attributed to Suor Maria de Dominici. The sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* at the Cospicua Parish Church has been excluded from this study, due to the severe modifications made to it in the early 20th Century.³⁰⁴

The following works will be discussed in individual catalogue entries: (i) *The Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* at the Attard Parish Museum (Plate 1), (ii) *Christ receiving St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* at the Carmelite Priory, Valletta (Plate 2), (iii) *The Visitation of the Virgin* (Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy) (Plate 3), (iv) *St Teresa of Avila* (Plate 4) and (v) *St John of the Cross* (Plate 5), in storage at the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy, and (vi) *The Crucifixion with Saints* (Private Collection Malta) (Plate 7). These works show Maria de Dominici as an artist who fluctuated in her inventiveness and painterly qualities. As will be evidenced throughout this catalogue, it seems that the artist was more capable at working on larger pieces, particularly in terms of composition, and even in her figures. This study also evidences an artist who did her best at imitating her master, while at the same time attempting to be inventive, despite her limited artistic capabilities.

The aim of this catalogue is to show Maria de Dominici's capabilities as an artist and analyse her artistic oeuvre in Malta, with the prospect that more works by the artist nun will be brought to light in the future, through similar style, subject matter and compositional elements.

³⁰⁴ More information about the Cospicua sculpture may be found in 2.4 *Maria de Dominici as a sculptor*.

Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque

Date: c. 1678-80

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: c. 288cm x 144 cm

Location: Attard Parish Museum

Provenance: Originally commissioned for the Church of St Roque (commonly known as the Chapel of St Anne), Attard, and relocated to the Attard Parish Museum at around 1960-70s.



The *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque*, is an altar painting executed in oil and dating to c. 1678-80, in the immediate years after the plague of 1676, which is its subject matter. It is a key work in the artistic oeuvre of Suor Maria de Dominici, a female artist and follower of Mattia Preti.

The original location of the painting was the Church of St Anne, located within the heart of the city of Attard, previously dedicated to St Roch,³⁰⁵ and built as an *ex voto* directly after the plague of 1676³⁰⁶ and finished in around two years. The painting was moved to its present location, within the Attard Parish Museum, at around the 1960-1970s, when the Church stopped being used as a place for worship and was leased to the Society of Christian Doctrine,³⁰⁷ to use as a chapel for the boys' M.U.S.E.U.M..³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ Bisazza, 67.

³⁰⁶ ACM, Ms. 180, Expanded version of Gerolamo Molina's Pastoral Visitation Report, c. 1725, f. 10. See also: Carmel Mallia, H'Attard: il-Parrocca, Grajjietta u Niesha, Zabbar, Veritas Press, 2007, 31-32.

³⁰⁷ This information was obtained from Professor Mario Buhagiar through personal communication in April 2017.

³⁰⁸ Mallia, 31.

The altar painting of the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* is undated; however, it is believed that it was commissioned in the years directly after the plague, similarly to the church that it was commissioned for, at around 1676-1680, because of its subject and location. However, it does not appear in the 1678-1680 Pastoral Visitation reports by Michael Gerolamo Molina.³⁰⁹ It is first documented as a work by Suor Maria de Dominici in a document dating to c. 1725, at the Archives of the Cathedral Museum, which expands on Molina's 1680 Pastoral Visitation reports:

*'... E fu dipinta il suo quadro con l'effige de Santi Nicola, e Rocco da suora Maria de Dominico Pittore maltese...'*³¹⁰

This attribution is strengthened by the stylistic elements which are similar to early documented works by the artist, such as the *Żebbuġ Visitation of the Virgin*, in its angular rigidity and drapery folds, the difficulty in the execution of the human figures and the inclusion of architectural elements. The identification of this painting as a work by Maria de Dominici aids in the attributing other works to the artist, particularly through stylistic and iconographical elements.

Stylistically, the Attard work fits with other late 17th century paintings.³¹¹ It seems that de Dominici was well informed about the current artistic trends probably through her master, as well as other artists on the islands and the circulation of prints. Iconographically, it also corresponds to the period, as it was created for a church that was built by *devoti*,³¹² as an ex-voto after the 1676 plague outbreak that struck the Maltese Islands.³¹³ As the saint invoked against the plague, St Roque is included within the work, together with another male saint, St Nicholas, whose presence is justified by the fact that the church was built on the previous site of a church dedicated to the saint.³¹⁴ He replaces St Sebastian, who is in this case obliterated from the painting, although he is typically seen side by side with St Roque in

³⁰⁹ AAM, VP22 Michael Gerolamo Molina, 1678-1680.

³¹⁰ ACM, Ms. 180, Expanded version of Gerolamo Molina's Pastoral Visitation Report, c. 1725, f. 100.

³¹¹ Bisazza, 68.

³¹² The church of St Roque was commissioned by '*alcuni devoti del popolo, essendoci in essa seppeliti... alcuni morti col contagio del 1676.*': ACM, Ms. 180, f. 100.

³¹³ Bisazza, 68.

³¹⁴ "*La Chiesa di San Rocco e stata fabricate dopo le peste del 1676 in bella forma nel luogo ove si era La Chiesa di San Nicola Vescova gia profanata.*": ACM, Ms. 180, f. 100.

paintings depicting the 1676 plague.³¹⁵

This painting can be considered as being Maria de Dominici's best work particularly in terms of composition, which is in a vertical format with a segmented top. In a *sacra conversazione* arrangement, the Virgin appears at the top right corner of the painting, looking above the two saints, St Nicholas and St Roque, and the plague victim, that is, the female figure grasping a dead baby against her chest in the foreground. The artist creates an intimate link between the four figures in the foreground, which together create a triangular composition. A female figure, perhaps St Anne³¹⁶ or one of the *devoti*, recedes in the background and looks up at the Virgin. This interaction may indicate that the church and the painting were commissioned in the immediate aftermath of the plague.³¹⁷

Maria de Dominici's narrative abilities are evident in this altar painting, particularly through its iconography. The artist manages to evoke sentiments of sadness by depicting the horrors that the plague brought with it, particularly through the inclusion of the dead baby against his mother's chest, both victims of the plague, an element of motherhood which perhaps can be better understood by a female artist. However, de Dominici may have gotten the idea such a sentimental image from one of Mattia Preti's sketches for his depiction of the plague in *The Immaculate Conception with Ss Gennaro, Rosalia and Francis Xavier who intercede for the plague in Naples* (1656), at the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (Fig. 31) in which a similar mother and child are depicted in reverse; thus, de Dominici may have seen a sketch or a print of this work.³¹⁸

De Dominici makes use of soft brushstrokes throughout the whole painting, and also uses pastel colours in the clothes of her main figures, which are contrasted by the greyish tones of the angels in the background. Contrarily, the angels in the foreground are well-lit and of similar tones to the main figures; this is a typical feature in the known works by the artist. There are harsh contrasts of colours acting as shadowing effects in the main figures, particularly in the faces of the plague victim and the Virgin, in a similar manner to that of the angular drapery folds of St Nicholas.

³¹⁵ Buhagiar (2001).

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ Bisazza, 68.

³¹⁸ Sciberras (2012), 19.



Figure 31. Mattia Preti, The Immaculate Conception with Ss Gennaro, Rosalia and Francis Xavier who intercede for the plague in Naples (1656), Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

As is typical in works by Maria de Dominici, not all of the figures are very well modelled, in particularly the angels, and the dog in the foreground which is in incorrect foreshortening. The female figure, a plague victim, at the front, however, is portrayed in foreshortening that has been studied properly. There is a great difficulty in the portrayal of the dog at the feet of St Roque, as it is evident that his body is disproportionate to his face

and is in incorrect foreshortening. Such a difficulty is also seen in St Roque's dog depicted in the *Crucifixion with Saints* (Plate 7).³¹⁹

Although somewhat flat and with not enough pictorial space for all of the figures, the composition is elaborate, and recalls Preti's own compositions,³²⁰ which the artist must have looked at since the artist was her tutor and she was part of his workshop, as well as the fact that she was highly susceptible to his work.³²¹ The pyramidal structure is particularly similar to Preti's *Virgin and Child with Ss. Peter, Nicholas and the Archangel Raphael* at the Church of Tal-Mirakli, Lija, although there are also structural variations. De Dominici may have worked on similar compositions in Preti's bottega. There are also similar compositional affinities with Preti's *Virgin and Child with St John the Baptist and Anthony the Abbot*, at the Church of St Anthony the Abbot, at Verdala Palace. De Dominici employed the type and colour of clothing for the Virgin used by Preti, for her depiction of the Virgin in Attard.³²²

Unfortunately, this painting is in a poor state of preservation (Fig. 32), as it is discoloured by varnish and has scattered losses and crackling paint at the bottom of the canvas. The old framing of the canvas has not been removed, and overlays on the picture, particularly at the bottom left. Since the painting does not have proper framing, the canvas is exposed at the sides and bottom, covered only by what seems to be a thin sheet at the back of the canvas (Fig. 33 & 34). The painting would benefit from a restoration intervention which would preserve it and grant it its formal glory.

Maria de Dominici's *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque* is one of the best works by the female artist, particularly in its creative iconography and composition, although it does have many artistic limitations. As a painting, it is also significant as it helps to set the typology of works by the artist, and thus attributing other works to her, as has been done over the years.

³¹⁹ See *infra*, 98.

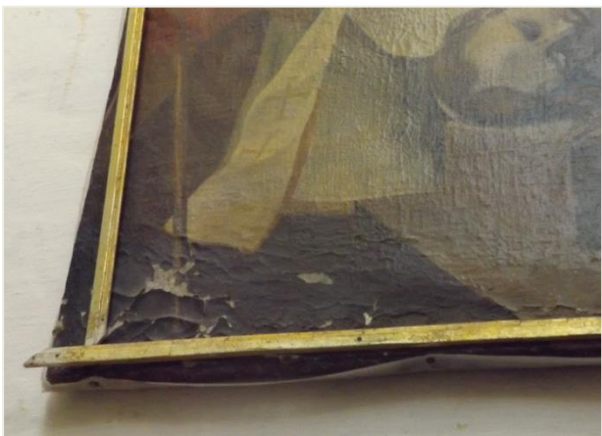
³²⁰ Bisazza, 69.

³²¹ Sciberras (2015), 142.

³²² Bisazza, 69.



Figure 32. The current state of the painting, discoloured by varnish and with scattered losses



Figures 33 & 34. The broken frame and exposed canvas, and scattered losses within the painting.

Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi

Date: c. 1680

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: c. 205 cm x c. 145 cm

Location: Carmelite Priory, Valletta

Provenance: Carmelite Priory, Valletta.



The *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* is an oil painting dating to the second half of the 17th century, located at the Carmelite Priory, Valletta, significant for its angular rigidity and drapery folds, as well as the difficulty in portraying the human figure, so typical of works by Maria de Dominici, to whom the painting is attributed.

A painting representing *St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi*, at the Carmelite Priory, Valletta³²³ was first mentioned by Giuseppe Maria De Piro, in his 1839 publication *Squarci di Storia*,³²⁴ although it is unclear whether he was referring to it or another painting, of *Beato Franco*, within the same church, which had an overpainting that included *St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi*,³²⁵ which was also attributed to the artist.³²⁶

³²³ The painting was described as a *St Teresa* by Maria de Dominici, by Keith Sciberras in 2003, perhaps due to the bad state of the painting. This was updated in his 2006 monograph *Baroque Painting in Malta*, in which much more light is shed on the female artist and her works. This was subsequently updated in 2015, in his monograph *Caravaggio to Mattia Preti*.

See: Sciberras (2003), 59; Sciberras (2009), 170.

³²⁴ G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

³²⁵ This attribution has been discussed in Chapter 2.

This painting was first attributed to de Dominici in 2003, by Keith Sciberras,³²⁷ based on stylistic similarities to her previously known works, the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas & Roque* at Attard and the *Visitation of the Virgin* at Żebbuġ. At the time, the painting was referred to as a *St Teresa*, however this information was updated in 2009.³²⁸

This painting represents St Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, the Italian Carmelite and mystic, in her vision of Christ, who embraces her, and the Virgin, who is represented as the Queen of Heaven, and presents the saint to her Son, surrounded by two putti, one of whom holds lilies, the symbol of purity, and the other who crowns her. The figures in the painting look towards the main focus of the scene: Santa Maria Maddalena de Pazzi in ecstasy.³²⁹ St Mary Magdalene de Pazzi was invoked as a saint in 1669, hence this painting was produced during the early years of her cult, as was quite typical in works by de Dominici; for instance *St Teresa of Avila* and *St John of the Cross*.³³⁰

The *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi* represents a Carmelite saint and was painted for the Carmelite church at Valletta; therefore, it may be that her cult was venerated because she was a saint of the same order. Suor Maria de Dominici was herself a tertiary of the Carmelite Order, although it is unknown whether she was already a part of the order when this painting was executed. Such a commission is prestigious, and although there is no information, it is possible that de Dominici got the commission due to her affiliation with the Order.

The painting is in a portrait format, divided within its central vertical axis, with the Virgin and St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi on the left and Christ on the right. The composition is relatively simple when compared to other works by the artist, such as the *Virgin with Ss*

³²⁶ Vella, 31.

³²⁷ Sciberras (2003), 60.

³²⁸ In Sciberras's 2009 monograph *Baroque Painting in Malta*, more information is given about the female artist and her works.

See: Sciberras (2003), 59; Sciberras (2009), 170.

³²⁹ Significantly, beginning in 1575, Maria Maddalena de Pazzi spent four years within a community at the monastery of S. Giovanni dei Cavallieri, San Gallo, with nuns who belonged to the Order of the Knights of St John. Therefore, since the Knights were ruling Malta at the time and would continue their Magistracy for more than another century, there is a link between St Mary Magdalene and Malta; this may have been one of the reasons why she had a cultic appeal with the Carmelites.

See: Clare Copeland, *Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: The Making of a Counter-Reformation Saint*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 28.

³³⁰ Borg, 134.

Nicholas & Roque at Attard. Its structure and composition is very similar to that of Pedro de Moya, depicting the same subject, the *Vision of Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi* (Fig. 35), created at around 1640, almost 20 years before the canonisation of the saint. De Dominici may have seen a print of the work by de Moya, in fact, her composition of the painting is in reverse to his, as a print would be.

The artist makes use of soft tonalities which are contrasted by bold hues and harsh shadows, particularly in the figure of Christ. The palette is similar to that used by Preti, although perhaps de Dominici's works are more vividly executed. The figures of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi, the Virgin and Christ have a greyish undertone to their flesh, and are almost rendered in monochrome. The putto on the left has a darker skin tone, whilst the one on the right is white, as is typical in most works by the artist.³³¹

Whilst the Virgin's figure is not so well modelled, only the face and hands of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi can be seen, as the bodies of both female figures are hidden under large robes, while on the other hand, the figure of Christ is partially exposed. Although de Dominici attempts at depicting the male figure, it is evident that she found difficulty in executing it, as it lacks proper form and detailing, and Christ's arms are incorrectly foreshortened. The rigidity that is seen in other works by de Dominici is also felt here.

The painting is in a good state of preservation as it was restored in 2009, after years of neglect,³³² wherein, before its relocation to the sacristy of the Carmelite Church, it used to be in the attic of the priory.

³³¹ This was noted by Joe Borg.

³³² This information was obtained from Joe Borg by personal communication on 16th August 2016.



Figure 35. Pedro de Moya, *Vision of Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi* (1640), Museo des Belles Artes de Granada.

Visitation of the Virgin

Date: c. 1678

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: c. 221.5cm x 150.5cm

Location: Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy

Provenance: Original location as the titular altarpiece in the Chapel of the Visitation, at Wied Qirda, Żebbuġ, and moved to its present location, at the Żebbuġ parish church sacristy on an unknown date.



The *Visitation of the Virgin* is a titular altar painting attributed to Maria de Dominici and dating to around 1678. It is heavily over painted, however it is regardlessly significant as it was one of the first works attributed to the artist, and therefore helped to establish the typology and distinctive elements of works by de Dominici, thus helping in attributing others.

The painting, which is today at the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy, was originally the titular of the Chapel of the Visitation of Our Lady at Wied Qirda, which is in a valley beneath the ‘Casal Duyn’ in the rural area of Żebbuġ.³³³ The facade of the chapel has an inscription that dates the building to 1678, which suggests that the painting of the *Visitation of the Virgin* by Maria de Dominici was executed at around this period, since its subject is the same as the dedication of the chapel, and it is therefore presumed to have been commissioned specifically for it.³³⁴ In fact, it is believed to have been one of the first works created by the artist.³³⁵ The

³³³ Ciantar, 294.

³³⁴ Unfortunately, most of the archives concerning the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda were destroyed in a fire.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

Visitation was first attributed to Maria de Dominici by Giovannantonio Ciantar in 1780,

*‘il quadro della Madonna nella Chiesa rurale situata sul vallone detto uied Cherda ne limiti della terra Zebbugi ed altri quadri in cafe particolari’*³³⁶

The Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda was a highly devoted and worshipped space up until the 1960s. Unfortunately, the care of the Chapel has decreased, although lately there have been significant attempts to keep it alive.³³⁷ The feast of the Visitation was eminently celebrated, as may be evidenced from the dedication of the chapel as well as the titular altarpiece³³⁸ of the *Visitation of the Virgin* by Maria de Dominici.³³⁹ The chapel, which also contains original paintings by Pasquale Buhagiar, contained two lateral paintings apart from the titular altarpiece, believed to be the *St John of the Cross* and *St Teresa of Avila*, today both in storage at the Żebbug parish church sacristy. Seemingly, all three works are by the same artist, and may be credited as being mediocre in execution. It is not known when the original paintings were removed from the chapel and relocated to the parish church’s sacristy and storage space; however today copies of what are believed to be the original works have been established in situ,³⁴⁰ and an artistic interpretation has also been created by Joe Borg for the purpose of this study (Fig. 38).

The composition is set within a triangular format, with the two main figures, the Virgin and St Elisabeth, occupying the central space, and set an architectural background, as was typical in works by de Dominici. The steps in this painting are somewhat similar to the podium used in the Attard painting, and the artist also makes use of the receding figure in the background, which in this case may portray St Joseph. The tender image of St Elisabeth and the Madonna embracing brings out the femininity of the artist, yet the figures are rigid. The inclusion of the seraphim is common in de Dominici’s oeuvre. Their elongation and varying in white and darker skin tones have become a means of attributing works to the artist.³⁴¹

³³⁶ Ciantar, 550.

³³⁷ The painting was stolen, together with others in the same chapel, but was fortunately retrieved.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.

³⁴⁰ The chapel had been devoid of its paintings for years, before recent restoration attempts were made, particularly through the perseverance of Joe Borg.

³⁴¹ This was suggested by Mr Joe Borg in a personal communication on 16 Aug 2016.

Artistically, the modelling of the figures and the draughtsmanship are undistinguished,³⁴² but the painting is given a distinct character through the artist's efforts to imitate Preti, amalgamated with her restricted visual knowledge.³⁴³ The dependence on her master in this case may indicate that this painting is, in fact, one of the artist's first independent works.

Maria De Dominici may have also studied a print after Federico Barocci's painting of the same subject, the *Visitation of the Virgin* (1583-86), Chiesa Nuova, Rome (Fig. 36), as the composition of her work is similar, particularly in the embracing figures of the Virgin and St Elizabeth. De Dominici also makes use of similar architectural elements, such as the steps and the arch.

The *Visitation of the Virgin* is heavily overpainted, as has also been remarked by Sciberras,³⁴⁴ especially in its drapery folds and chromatic scheme, which conditioned the way the artist was regarded. Although one must bear in mind that Suor Maria did have limited artistic capabilities, such overpaintings may have negatively impacted on how Suor Maria's oeuvre has been evaluated in the past, being dismissed as an uninspiring artist. The *Visitation* was one of de Dominici's best known works and is of significant historical interest.³⁴⁵

Stylistically and iconographically, the work complements the other two works which hung alongside it in the Visitation Chapel at Wied Qirda (Fig. 38). Due to its overpainting and dire need for restoration, it is difficult to analyse whether it is the best painting out of the three, although this would be expected to be the case since it was the more prominent of the paintings. The painting is in a good state of preservation, although it may be slightly discoloured by varnish. Unfortunately, its view is compromised due to its diagonal hanging and its limited lighting within the sacristy (Fig. 37).

Although De Dominici's painting of the *Visitation* was tampered with in the early 20th Century, it still is significant within the artistic oeuvre of the artist in Malta, as it continued the typology of works by the artist which had been set by the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque*, and shows her dependence on Preti in terms of composition and storytelling ability.

³⁴² Bisazza, 70.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Sciberras (2015), 142.

³⁴⁵ G. M. De Piro (1839), 74.



Figure 36. Federico Barocci, *The Visitation of the Virgin*, (1583-86), Chiesa Nuova, Rome.



Figure 37. The compromised view of the *Visitation of the Virgin* by de Dominici, at the Žebbuġ parish church sacristy.



Figure 38. Artistic interpretation of the original paintings at the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, by Joe Borg.

Left to right: St Teresa of Avila, the Visitation of the Virgin and St John of the Cross.

The painting is also significant as it was painted specifically for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, and thus helped to also attribute two more works to the artist nun, which were within the same chapel. A photographic representation of the three works together has been created by Joe Borg, which shows how the paintings would have looked as a group. It can thus be concluded that the three paintings complement each other, stylistically, chromatically and in terms of draughtsmanship.

St Teresa of Avila

Date: Late 17th Century

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: 75cm x 97cm

Location: Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy

Provenance: Original location as a lateral painting in the Chapel of the Visitation, at Wied Qirda, Żebbuġ, and was moved to its present location, at the Żebbuġ parish church sacristy in an unknown date.



The painting of *St Teresa of Avila* is a late 17th Century lateral, attributed to Suor Maria de Dominici, and believed to have been executed before the artist's departure to Rome in 1682, for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda.

The painting was commissioned as a lateral painting on the left-hand side of the titular altarpiece, the *Visitation of the Virgin*, and opposite the *St John of the Cross*, both of which are attributed to de Dominici, for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda. Today, the painting is in storage at the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.

The painting of St Teresa is almost the same size as *St John of the Cross*, and is the smallest work that has been attributed to Maria de Dominici, and the weakest in composition and execution. The attribution was made by Joe Borg in 2012, based on style and the analysis made on the painting during its recent restoration, in 2012, where it was established that the pigments, ground preparation and brushwork are similar to that typically used by Maria de Dominici.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ This information was obtained from Mr Joe Borg by personal communication in January 2017.

St Teresa was a visionary saint, known for her mysticism and practical common sense,³⁴⁷ but in this work she is depicted in prayer, stripped off most of her attributes, a sharp contrast from the more popular depictions of the saint, in which she is typically depicted during her *Transverberation*, a subject which de Dominici is also believed to have depicted.³⁴⁸ The saint is in half length and is set in the middle of the vertical composition, within a dark background, where she she may be kneeling in front of the Crucifix, her hands together in prayer. On the table on the left of the composition, where the Crucifix is depicted, are an hourglass and a Bible; the only depiction of a still life in de Dominici's known works. Above the saint, who wears a halo, is the depiction of the Holy Spirit, represented as a dove and bathed in golden light. At the top right is a ribbon with the words *Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo*. De Dominici makes use of a minimal amount of colours, the most prominent of which are the white of the cloak and the rosy colour of her skin.

Chromatically, the painting complements the *St John of the Cross*, the lateral painting which is believed to have been created as its companion. Iconographically, the two paintings also match, as they both depict Spanish saints who were the founders of the Barefoot Carmelites in the Mendicant Order.³⁴⁹ *St Teresa of Avila* was restored in the same period as the *St John of the Cross*, and is therefore in a good state of preservation.

The rendition of *St Teresa of Avila* is inferior to the two other works created for the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, *St John of the Cross* and the titular, the *Visitation of the Virgin*. It is artistically uninspiring, and may be considered as a mediocre work, especially when one considers the face and hands of the Carmelite saint. There is almost no modelling of the figure, as it is hidden under large garments, whilst the hands and face are almost flat in rendition. The still life, on the other hand, is depicted with more intricacy and detail. *St Teresa of Avila* is believed to have been copied from another painting or a print by another artist. It also bears compositional resemblance to a 17th century painting at the Wignacourt Collegiate Museum (Fig. 39).

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 298-299.

³⁴⁸ According to Bernardo de Dominici, Suor Maria was highly praised for her sculpture depicting this subject in Rome.

See: De Dominici, 382.

³⁴⁹ ReCoop: The Restoration and Conservation Co-operative Ltd, *St Teresa: Suor Maria de Dominici* Conservation Report, 2012, 4.



Figure 39. Spanish School Early 17th Century, St Theresa of Avila, Wignacourt Collegiate Museum, Rabat.

St Teresa of Avila is an essential painting within Maria de Dominici's artistic oeuvre, as it shows the limited capabilities of the artist, who was probably better as a sculptor. It may be said to be the most inferior work out of the six known paintings by de Dominici, however it is relevant because it sustains in obtaining more knowledge about the artist, and possibly attributing other similar works.

St John of the Cross

Date: c. 1680

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: 76.5cm x 95cm

Location: Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy

Provenance: Original location a lateral painting in the Chapel of the Visitation, at Wied Qirda, Żebbuġ, and was moved to its present location, at the Żebbuġ parish church sacristy in an unknown date.



The lateral painting representing *St John of the Cross*, attributed to Maria de Dominici, is a key work in the manifestation of the artist's limited artistic capabilities, and because its identification as a work by the artist should help ascribing more works to her.

The painting, which is one of the smaller works within de Dominici's known artistic oeuvre, was attributed to the artist by Joe Borg in 2012, together with the painting of *St Teresa of Avila*, based on stylistic similarities to other works by the artist, such as the *Visitation of the Virgin*. Its original location within the same chapel, at the Visitation at Wied Qirda, may indicate that the same artist created the work, however there are no documents confirming de Dominici's authorship.

St John of the Cross was originally the right-hand side lateral painting at the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda, before it was put into storage and forgotten for many years. Today, it is located at the Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy, following a restoration intervention in 2012.

St John of the Cross was an important theologian and poet during the Counter-Reformation, a Spanish mystic who, together with St Teresa of Avila, was vital for the establishment of the Discalced Carmelites.³⁵⁰ He is often depicted with her;³⁵¹ in this case she is depicted in the opposite side painting, to his left. *St John of the Cross* and *St Teresa of Avila* were clearly conceived to be a pair and they depict Carmelite saints, which often feature in de Dominici's oeuvre, who was herself a professed lay member of the Carmelite Tertiary Order.

The composition is divided into two along its vertical central axis. St John of the Cross is depicted in prayer in the right side of the composition, and is set in front of an arch, which is part of the architectural framing that fills out the whole composition. The saint interacts with a framed portrait of Christ who falls under the weight of the Cross he bears, with an open Bible in front of him, and is looked on by a seraph who holds an inscription which seems to be addressed to the saint, with the words '*Gio*': *che cosa vuoi che ti conceda ple tue fatiche.*' Like the seraphim, the inscription is an element which is also seen in other works by the artist, such as the sister painting of this work, *St Teresa of Avila*.

Stylistically, this work is typical of Maria de Dominici, as it exerts her distinguishable characteristics: the angular drapery folds, rigidity in figures and the pale colour of their skin, although it also relies heavily on Preti's style. The chromatic scheme is the typical used by Maria de Dominici, as there is the presence of pastel and diluted colours in Christ's portrait and in the background, contrasted with the almost grisaille rendering of the flesh of the three figures. De Dominici made use of a solid white in the cloak of St John of the Cross, the putto, and the open Bible, all of which are contrasted by harsh grey shadows.

St John of the Cross is in a good state of preservation, as it was restored to its former glory by ReCoop in 2012.³⁵² It is a significant painting as it not only illustrates the artistic

³⁵⁰ James A. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, London, John Murray (Publishers) Ltd, First published 1974 (1992), 299.

³⁵¹ This used to be seen in the *Beato Franco* at the Carmelite Church, Valletta (see Chapter 2.3), when the figure of St Teresa of Avila was added to it in the 18th Century. For more information about this attribution to Maria de Dominici, see Chapter 2.5.
Ibid.

³⁵² ReCoop: The Restoration and Conservation Co-operative Ltd, *St John of the Cross*: Suor Maria de Dominici Conservation Report, 2012, 4.

limitations that de Dominici had, but also shows her dependence on her master, Mattia Preti. Its original location within the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda portrays de Dominici as a well-respected artist who was trusted with the decoration of a whole chapel, despite her artistic capabilities.³⁵³

³⁵³ This may have been due to limited funding, since this was a small wayside chapel, however there can only be speculations about this as no information is provided.

The Crucifixion with Saints

Date: Late 17th Century

Style: Late Baroque

Technique: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: 104cm x 78cm

Location: Private Collection

Provenance: Private collection



The Crucifixion with Saints is an oil on canvas painting which has recently been attributed to Maria de Dominici,³⁵⁴ and is an important work in the artist's oeuvre as it opens new possibilities for attributions.

The Crucifixion with Saints, which is in a private collection in Malta, is one of the smaller works attributed to the artist. Its provenance, that of belonging to a private collection, suggests that it was used as a private devotional piece. Like many of de Dominici's works, the painting's history is obscure and provides little information about our ambiguous artist nun; however, this attribution may guide scholars in identifying more works by her.³⁵⁵ This painting should be attributed to de Dominici because of the forms of the figures, the angular rigidity of the drapery folds and the well-planned composition. It is the most recent attribution to the artist, made by Keith Sciberras.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Sciberras (2015), 142.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The painting depicts the Crucified Christ set at the centre before a well-defined arch, flanked by the Virgin and St John and Ss Roque and Paul, who are depicted on the left side, whilst St Rose of Lima is set to St John's right. St Roque is identified from the dog, the typical iconographical emblem for the saint, which was also used by the artist in the Attard altarpiece, the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas & Roque*. St Rose of Lima had been declared as a saint a few years prior, in 1671; the artist once again depicts a saint whose cult was popular at the time. The figures form a triangular composition, which is given depth by the stark architectural background.

Although the figures in the *Crucifixion with Saints* are in a smaller format than those in the other known works by De Dominici and are thus rendered with far less detail, they are similar in execution and style, and are well-executed within a well-structured composition. There is an attempt at depicting the correct anatomy, especially in the male figures, however one can see the difficulties that the artist had faced when executing the work, particularly in the elongation and foreshortening of figures. It is evident that Maria de Dominici found it difficult to portray the figure of the dog by St Roque's feet; a difficulty which is also evident in the *Virgin with Ss Nicholas & Roque*.

De Dominici makes use of an architectural background once again; the arch is similar to that depicted in *St John of the Cross*. The figures are bathed in direct light onto their flesh, contrasted by harsh shadows and dark tonalities, which are used in the main figures and their garments, the architectural setting, and the background. The red in the clothing worn by two of the saints is similar to the red worn by Christ in the *Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi*, which may also point to de Dominici as the artist.

The painting was restored by ReCoop in 2015 and sold to a private collector in an auction in 2016.³⁵⁷ Through the restoration process of the work, it emerged that the artist made use of the same ground preparations of the canvas and similar pigments that she used in her other works.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ ReCoop: The Restoration and Conservation Co-operative Ltd, *The Crucifixion with Saints*: Suor Maria de Dominici Conservation Report, 2015, 5.

³⁵⁸ Joe Borg, 'Suor Maria de Dominici (1645-1703) u x-Xogħlijiet Tagħha f'Malta', *San Ġuzepp Żebbuġ Festa* (2016), 145.

Although in the past years this painting would have been considered as a bottega painting, scholarship about the bottega and Maria de Dominici as an independent artist has opened up the possibility of identifying the work as a painting by the ambiguous female artist, whose oeuvre is slowly opening up.

Like the *St John of the Cross* and *St Teresa of Avila*, the *Crucifixion with Saints* is smaller than the other works ascribed to de Dominici. This may suggest that there are other works by de Dominici, in a smaller format. So far, this is the only painting in a private collection that is attributed by Maria de Dominici. Hence, there must be other works by the artist which exist in private collections or in a smaller format, that have not been discovered yet, have mistakenly been attributed to other artists, or have been lost over the years.

Conclusion

This dissertation has placed Maria de Dominici within the context of Baroque art in Malta and Rome, and assessed her relevance as an artist and her presence as a female painter and tertiary nun. It has also analyzed the works of art attributed to the artist, to see which of them should be securely attributed to her and which of them should be dismissed. Traditional stories generated over the years, both written and oral, have been addressed and analysed within the context of documented information about the artist.

Literature such as Bernardo de' Dominici's *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*,³⁵⁹ and Giovannantonio Ciantar³⁶⁰ helped to shed a light on how Suor Maria was regarded as a female artist and tertiary nun, although they sometimes contain factorisations in their texts. Over the years, there have been many stories generated about Maria de Dominici, most of which have been declared as erroneous, such as her painting the female figures of Mattia Preti's ceiling depicting the *Life of St John the Baptist* (1661-1666) at St John's Co-Cathedral, and superseding her master,³⁶¹ and training with Gian Lorenzo Bernini in Rome.³⁶² This study has shown that it is imperative that not all assumptions can be considered as correct, and one has to analyse carefully, as there is a lot of scattered information about the artist. It has showed how further information and paintings within de Dominici's artistic oeuvre in Malta has been brought to light by Keith Sciberras,³⁶³ while her popularity increased through the studies of Franca Trinchieri Camiz,³⁶⁴ particularly since she was a female artist.

As has been identified from her six known paintings which were discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, Maria De Dominici was not a particularly great painter. She fluctuated, and at times even verged onto the mediocre in terms of modelling and shading, particularly in *St Teresa of Avila* at the Żebbuġ parish church sacristy. Her known works of art present her as an artist who was influenced from different sources, but attempted to be as original as possible, particularly in terms of iconography and composition, at times succeeding such as in the *Virgin and Child with Ss Nicholas and Roque*, and in other instances failing.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁹ De Dominici, 382.

³⁶⁰ Ciantar, 295, 550-551.

³⁶¹ This was discussed in Chapter 2.

³⁶² This was analysed in Chapter 3.

³⁶³ Sciberras (2009), 170; Sciberras (2015), 141.

³⁶⁴ Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 151-158; Trinchieri Camiz (1997), 462-463.

³⁶⁵ This was discussed in Chapter 4.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is an undeniable influence of Mattia Preti and the other bottega painters, in de Dominici's compositions, chromatic schemes, and choice of iconography. Her paintings show her as distinguished from him because of their angularity and rigidity, a factor which has been highlighted throughout this dissertation. Unlike her master; de Dominici was weak in design and inventiveness, and her modelling is flat, and she lacks pictorial depth.³⁶⁶

Despite her artistic limitations, Maria de Dominici seems to have been well-respected as an artist, and earned significant commissions, both in Malta and Rome.³⁶⁷ The commission of three different paintings within the same chapel, at Wied Qirda (Plate 6), as well as her work for the Chapel of St Andrea Corsini in Santa Maria in Traspontina, Rome, evidences this. Her positive fortuna critica generated over the years, discussed in Chapter 1, continues to show her relevance as a female artist within the male dominated artistic world of the time. Although she was not a great artist, her hardship and achievements gave her the opportunity to be mentioned within the same circles of artists of the stamina of her master, Mattia Preti, and Carlo Maratta.

Other female artists, such as Properzia de' Rossi and Elisabetta Sirani, may have been dismissed as artists who were inferior to male artists because of their gender, although they were well-established and became successful artists within their lifetime.³⁶⁸ Maria de Dominici seems to have been given the same treatment, since her wills show that there were instances where she was underpaid in comparison to male artists, as has been highlighted in Chapter 3. However, it must be kept in mind that de Dominici was not a particularly remarkable artist, contrary to other female artists who were brilliant but often overlooked, such as Sirani herself, as discussed in Chapter 2.³⁶⁹

Suor Maria de Dominici also had a propensity for sculpture, and may have been primarily considered as a sculptor rather than a painter.³⁷⁰ Unfortunately, only the amended

³⁶⁶ This was discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

³⁶⁷ This was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

³⁶⁸ A comparison between these artists and Maria de Dominici was made in *Chapter 2.3: Independent Works*.

³⁶⁹ Chadwick, 87.

³⁷⁰ This was stated by Bernardo De Dominici and Giovannantonio Ciantar in their monographs, and has been discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

See: De Dominici, 382.

See also: Ciantar, 551.

sculpture of the *Immaculate Conception* at Cospicua Parish Church exists, so one cannot truly tell about her sculptural abilities. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is also an old photograph and the base of the statue, which, when analysed, may credit her as a very good sculptor (Plate 8).

Maria de Dominici left Malta for Rome in 1682, presumably to pursue a career in sculpture and by the recommendation of her master, Preti, and lived there for 21 years, until her death in 1703, as has been discussed in Chapter 3, which was dedicated to primary and secondary sources which evidences this. De Dominici had great links by which she could gravitate in Rome, including Fra Marcello Sacchetti, who is credited as being her protector, and earned her important commissions.³⁷¹ The two wills discussed in Chapter 3 have shown that the artist also executed a significant amount of works of art in Rome³⁷² (Appendix) Secondary sources have also shown that as an artist, de Dominici admired and respected by everyone.³⁷³

In conclusion, this dissertation has highlighted Suor Maria de Dominici's significance in the world of art, as a female artist and a tertiary nun. Although she is not a particularly great artist, as is evidenced in the works of art documented and attributed to her,³⁷⁴ she deserves to be given further significance. Fortunately, her artistic oeuvre seems to be opening, and there must be other works of art by the artist which have yet to be discovered. Hopefully, through this study, her life and works will be further analyzed, and thus more information about the enigmatic artist nun will be revealed in the future, so that she will be given the credit that she deserves as the only known female Baroque painter in Malta.

³⁷¹ This was discussed in Chapter 3.

³⁷² ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 6, not. H. Sercamilli, Testamenti 1693-1723, fols. 448-448v; ASR, 30 not. cap., uff. 10, E. Gattus, Testamenti 1695-1703, xi, fols. 453v-453r, 474r-474v.

³⁷³ This was discussed in Chapter 3.

See also: De Dominici, 382.

³⁷⁴ This has been discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

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Plates



Plate 1. *Maria de Dominici, Virgin with Ss Nicholas and Roque, Attard Parish Museum, c. 1678-80.*

Photo credits: Joe Borg



Plate 2. *Attributed to Maria de Dominici, Vision of St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi, Carmelite Priory, Valletta.*

Photo credits: Joe Borg



Plate 3. *Maria de Dominici, Visitation of the Virgin, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy*

Photo credits: Joe Borg



Plate 4. *Attributed to Maria de Dominici, St Teresa of Avila, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.*

Photo credits: Joe Borg.



Plate 5. *Attributed to Maria de Dominici, St John of the Cross, Żebbuġ Parish Church Sacristy.*

Photo credits: Joe Borg



Plate 6. *Artistic interpretation of the original paintings at the Chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda.*

Credits: Joe Borg.

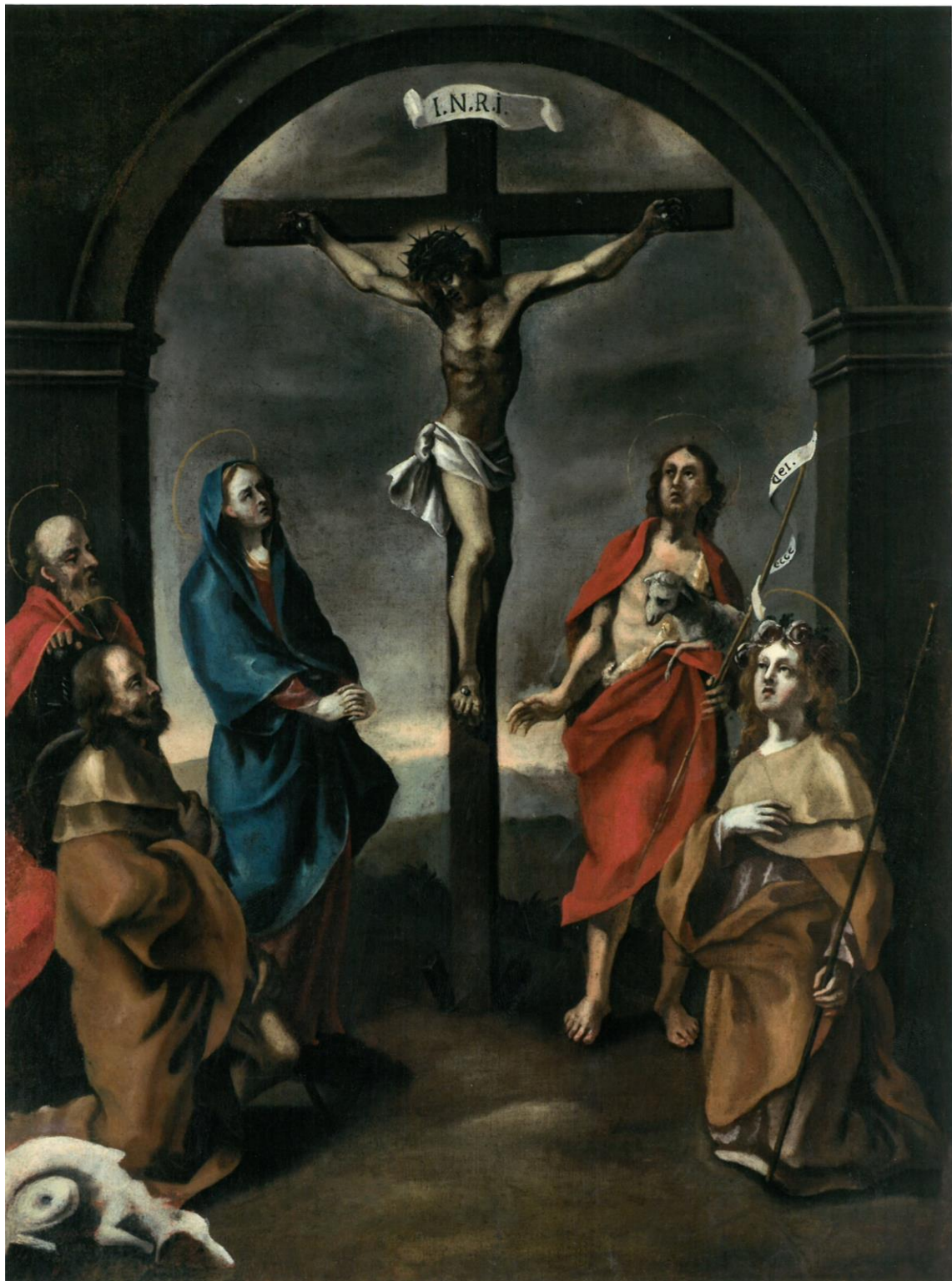


Plate 7. *Attributed to Maria de Dominici, Crucifixion with Saints, Private Collection Malta.*

Photo credits: Joe Borg



Plate 8. *Old photograph of the Immaculate Conception by Maria de Dominici at Cospicua, c. 1680.*

Photo credits: Franca Trinchieri Camiz



Plate 9. Immaculate Conception sculpture after its 20th Century remodelling by Abram Gatt.

Photo credits: Richard Faenza.



Plate 10. *Drawing of Lo Sposalizio attributed to Maria de Dominici, Mdina Cathedral Archives.*

Appendix

