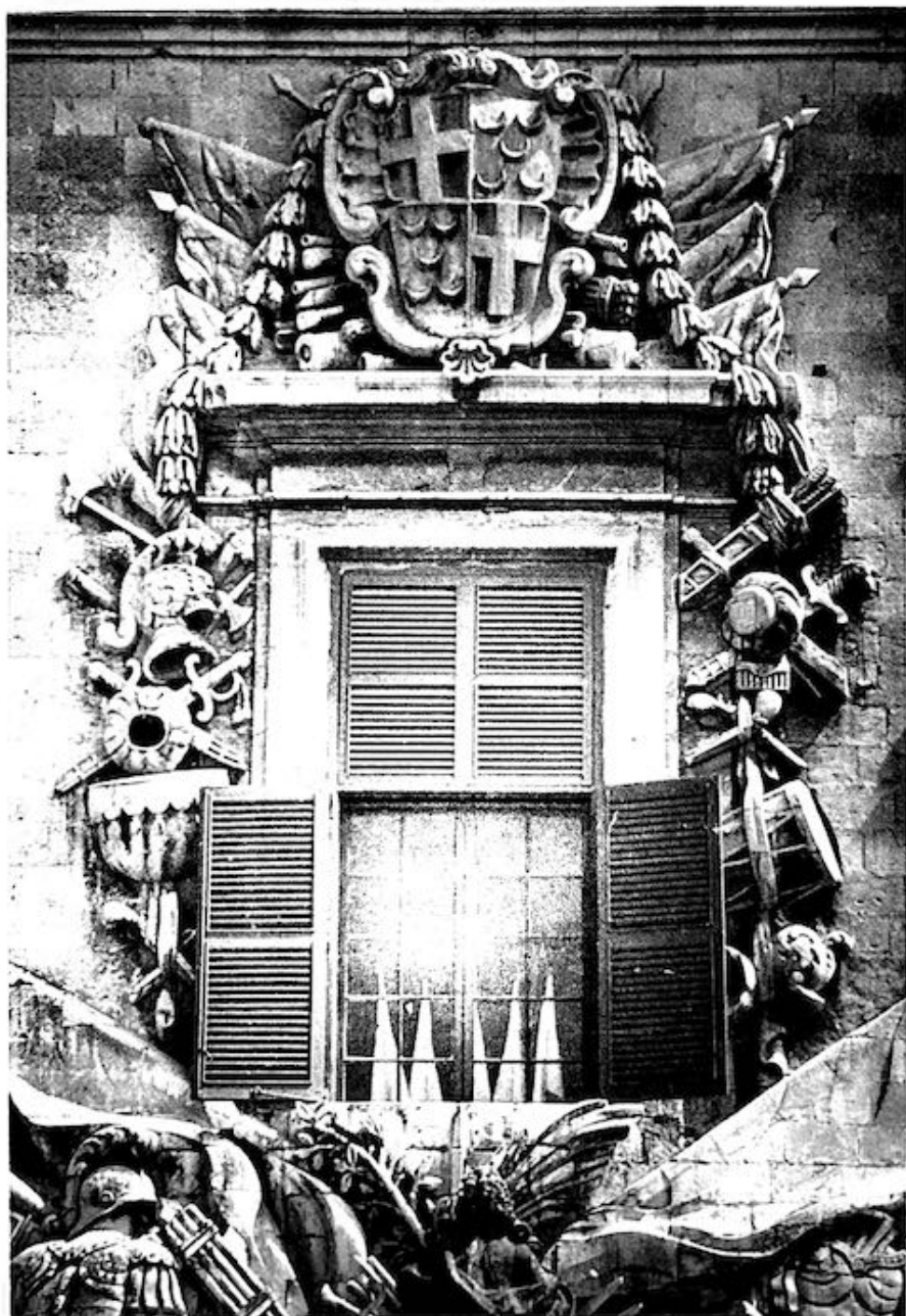


MALTESE BAROQUE



**Ministry of Education,
Malta**



Forty years
Council of Europe

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Strasbourg**

Maltese Baroque

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The Concept of Baroque

by Peter Serracino Inglott

I am not going to try here and now to expound what is the singular essence of all things called Baroque, not certainly in five minutes. It would be both unnecessary for you and impossible for me. I think the only thing reasonably required of me is to make some philosophic-sounding opening noises before my colleagues go into particular aspects of the Baroque age in Malta. Possibly, I thought, the question I could attempt to answer might be: Is there a Maltese Baroque, or more precisely, is there a specifically Maltese variant of Baroque art? But although I could attempt to answer that question by saying, for instance, that Maltese Baroque architecture does not have the typically dynamic handling of space familiar to you in the works of Bernini or Borromini, but that it consists rather of a decorative overlay of baroque ornament over basically classical and static spatial organisations, however, since there are many architects who will be talking about different examples of Baroque architecture, I thought it would be extremely hazardous and probably not useful to try to put forward any such generic commentary. So I decided that I would use these few minutes just to try to tell you what the Baroque means to at least one Maltese, that is to somebody who was born here, and was brought up in this environment, but who has also travelled abroad and, in the

light of that, comes to a sort of reflexive awareness of the part which the Baroque has played in the formation of his imagination.

I will begin by recalling that in Malta there have been just two golden ages in our artistic history and it is not surprising that it is the visual symbols produced in these two ages which make the deepest impression on people's consciousness. These two periods are obviously the Prehistoric Period which produced the Megalithic Temples, and the Baroque Period, following the stay in Malta, for a brief while, of Caravaggio, a lightning flash which left a belated imprint on subsequent Maltese art. I think a young person in Malta whose mind is open and impressionable by powerful symbols is likely to be deeply marked by the art of just these two periods, because I don't think there is really anything coming from any other period which is of such supranational significance or aesthetic power.

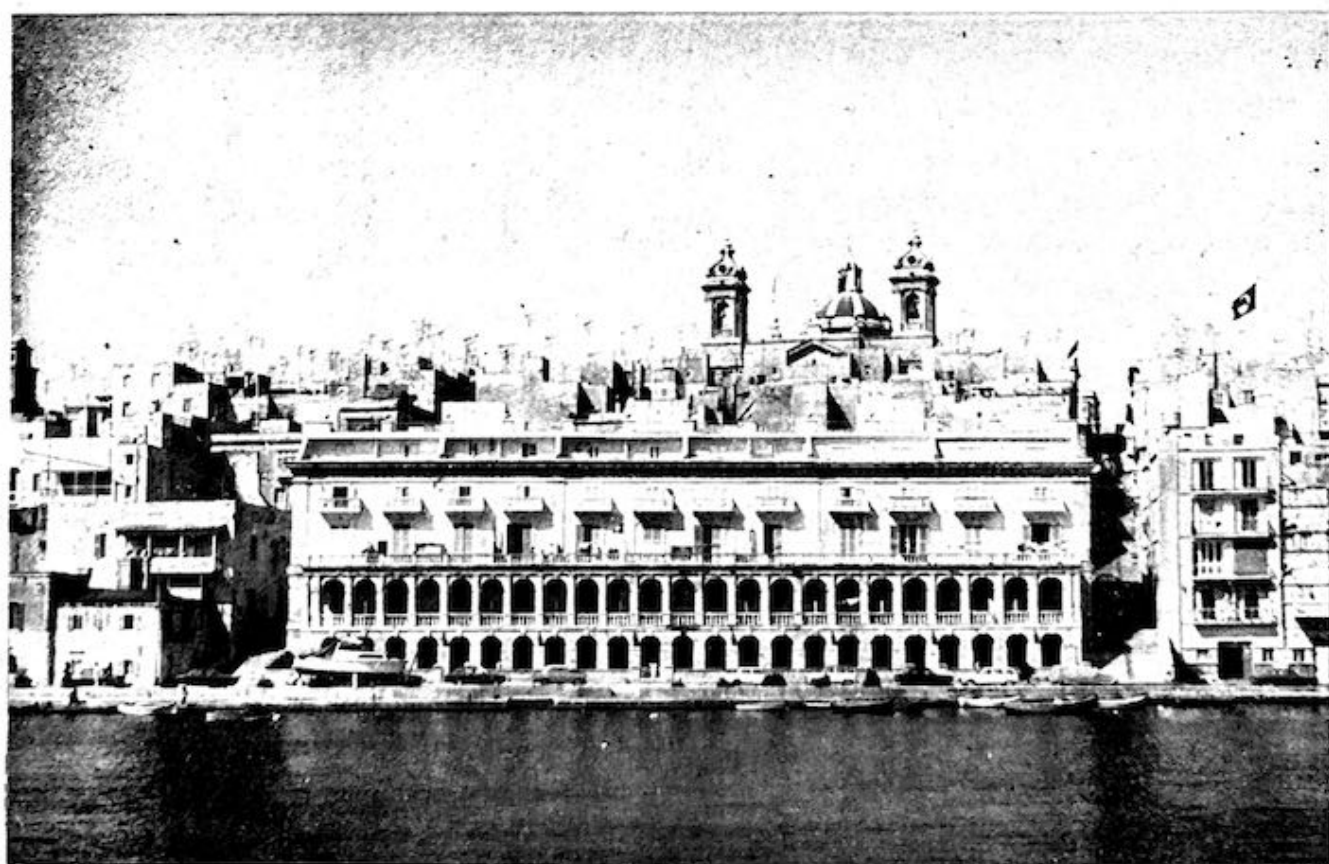
These two periods provide us, in particular, with two symbols which I think allow us to identify the rôle of the Baroque in our symbolic heritage precisely by contrast with the other element. The two symbols are the so-called Mother Goddess of the Megalithic age, that very singular figure which does not have any of the female sexual characteristics, that is, no breasts, no pubic signs, except for her enormous womb; it is a figure which represents Woman essentially as a container, as the source from which all mankind emerged. In counterfoil to this we have, from the Baroque age, the figure of Our Lady, characteristically in the moment of the Assumption, that is in a supernatural miraculous environment with agitated clouds, full of "putti". The two images are thus, on the one hand, a chthonic figure, an Earth figure, and on the other hand, a celestial image, a Heavenly figure.

I think that is how the Baroque features in the Maltese imagination: as the ethereal dimension of our existence, in a diptych with the earthly. After the war people belonging to my generation were exposed to, say, the writings of the British architects Harrison and Hubbard who were charged with the reconstruction of Valletta and the Three Cities; they held that the Baroque was a foreign language to the Maltese, that our traditional idiom was the vernacular architecture which is seen in our villages and farmhouses with their low, cubic, volumetric forms in naked simplicity, in sharp contrast with the sumptuous language of the Baroque buildings. This was declared to be not only foreign because associated with the Knights of St John, but also not functional, and therefore not appealing to the contemporary mind in the same way as the primitive, unsophisticated structures of our humble countrymen.

But that is not at all the way in which we Maltese, I think, generally

perceive the presence of the Baroque in our country; on the contrary we perceive it as neither an extraneous nor a domineering language, but rather as an antiphonal component in the total Maltese environment. It represents the festive note which enlivens our humdrum, work-a-day, routine efforts. If the Baroque elements, notably the church at the heart of the village, contrast with the rest of the village buildings, it is because they evoke for us the eschatological future, a sort of Utopia, the dreams which we hope will someday be realised, present as a constituent element of our world, not as something totally unreal, but as something which is present in anticipation, in desire, as an integral part of the texture of the environment in which we grow.

I've already had the sign made to me that my allotted time is up. The Baroque makes us relish, in the fleeting passage of time, a foretaste of Eternity.



Senglea seen from Vittoriosa. A typical Maltese townscape.