

An Architect in Context – Francesco Buonamici

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When, in September 1635, the famous Italian military engineer Pietro Paolo Floriani arrived in Malta to undertake and implement his plans for the extension of fortification works outside the city of Valletta, he had with him as his assistant Francesco Buonamici, an architect and painter from Lucca who was then in his late thirties.

The Floriani mission, which commenced at the request of Grand Master Antoine de Paule, enjoyed the protection of Cardinal Francesco Barberini, the powerful nephew of Pope Urban VIII. Cardinal Barberini had rallied experts who were close to him and instructed the Papal Legate and Inquisitor in Malta, Mgr Fabio Chigi, to extend his protection directly over them while they were on the island.

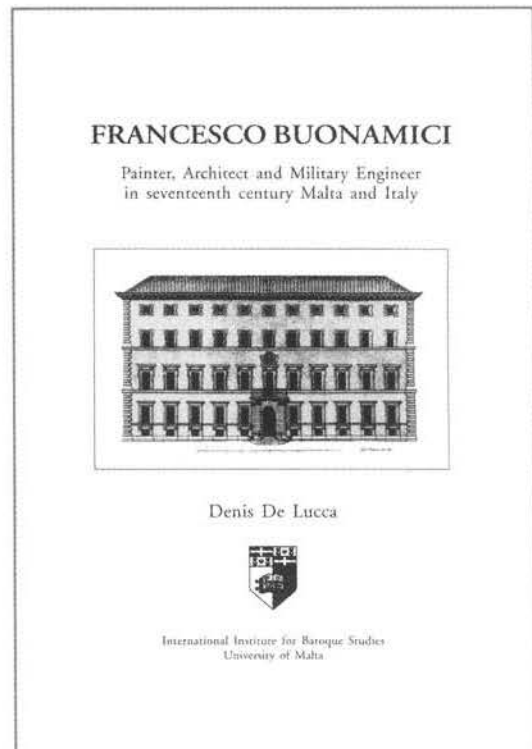
Floriani returned to Italy in October 1636 but Buonamici remained in Malta to serve the Order of St John for more than two decades until his return to Italy in 1659. During this period, he directed a number of projects in the fields of military, religious and secular architecture; for his services, but also through direct Papal intervention, Buonamici was elevated Knight of Grace in 1638.

The architect's main works in Malta include the milestone remodelling of the Ta' Giezu church and the Jesuit college in Valletta, the parish church of St Paul and the Wignacourt College in Rabat, and the church of St Nicholas in Valletta.

Throughout his stay in Malta, Buonamici played a major role in bringing Maltese architecture in line with contemporary



Façade of the church of St Paul, Rabat



Denis De Lucca, *Francesco Buonamici: Painter, Architect and Military Engineer in 17th Century Malta and Italy*. International Institute for Baroque Studies, University of Malta, Malta: 2006.

developments in mainland Italy; he is, in many ways, the father of Baroque architecture in Malta.

Notwithstanding this role as a key player in the development of a Baroque idiom, Buonamici only resurfaced from relative oblivion (or mistaken identity) in the past two decades and his real contribution was, until recently, not properly surveyed.

Modern scholarship on the subject has been restricted and a cursory look at the bibliography of Maltese architecture shows only a few studies on architect. While credit should go to the late Leonard Mahoney for having pointed research in his direction, the first real contribution on the artist is a short monograph published by Denis De Lucca and Conrad Thake in 1994 and an article by Giovanni Bonello on the subject published in 2005 in *Treasures of Malta*.

Denis De Lucca's *Francesco Buonamici: Painter, Architect and Military Engineer in 17th Century Malta and Italy* is a much awaited continuation of the author's research work on the subject. This follows De Lucca's books on other foreign military engineers and architects who worked in Baroque Malta, Giovanni Battista Vertova, Charles Francois de Mondion, and Romano Fortunato Carapecchia.

Professor De Lucca's *Francesco Buonamici* is not a book about architectural descriptions, but a book about architectural history, a book that delves into the important questions of art and context, of patronage and the mechanics of its process.

It is a book about the cultural and political context of Rome and its overspill onto the island of Malta. It is a book that discusses Buonamici as both man and artist, and that seeks to understand his wide interests and his personality.



Interior view of Francesco Buonamici's Cappella dell SS. Sacramento in the cathedral of Siracusa

In nine neatly written chapters, De Lucca surveys Buonamici's career in Lucca, Rome, Malta and Sicily, and seeks to place his Maltese phase within the wider context of the Italian Baroque. De Lucca uncovers the exciting details that set the stage for Buonamici's artistic ventures and discusses the architect's excursions into painting; particularly impressive were his inventions for theatre scenes for Stefano Landi's opera *Sant' Alessio*, performed in Rome in 1634 and sponsored by Cardinal Francesco Barberini.

In its unpretentious format, this book does not seek to impress through photography and lavish binding. Its size and format is more in the nature of an academic journal, of a scholarly publication that seeks primarily to attract a specialised audience.

Yet its fluent writing and coherent flow in both 'storyline' and argumentation is also aimed at the general reader. Its photographs, largely in black and white, provide a wonderful companion to the Italian context in which this book is so interested.

For this work, De Lucca has trailed Buonamici and worked in a number of archives and libraries in Malta, Rome, Lucca, and Sicily; this remarkable research activity is compressed into the 85 pages of this book.

The author's methodology is clear and his arguments and hypotheses are all strongly backed by documentation, wide bibliographic capture, and contextual analyses. The general reader should thus not only read this work for its 'content' but should follow the references and try to understand the working structure of disciplined scholarship.

As a university academic and as Director of the International Institute for Baroque Studies, Professor De Lucca clearly spells out his aim in that this work seeks primarily to be a source of inspiration to students and scholars interested in furthering research on an architect who has "been grossly underestimated". The book is thus a reference work that suggests areas for future research; this work is not a 'finished project' but one that is meant to generate research activity on and around the subject.

One of these areas for further research, I believe, is that of better understanding the role that Buonamici played in the Baroque 'remodelling' of the interior of St John's Conventual Church (now Co-Cathedral), a remodelling which is, in simplistic terms, generally given to the inventive genius Mattia Preti – who was its great propagator but which, in reality, commenced before Preti settled on the island.

Another is that of studying Buonamici's relationship with Lorenzo Gafà, the most important native architect of the second half of the 17th century, who most probably began his studies in architecture as Buonamici's apprentice.

Denis De Lucca's *Francesco Buonamici* is a very significant addition to the ever-growing library to which the International Institute for Baroque Studies has added much in both published and unpublished form (long essays and dissertations at Diploma and Post-Graduate levels).

This book is, indeed, a must for all Melitensia lovers and for students of the Italian Baroque.