

PATRIMONIO CULTURAL:

Ética, capacidades
y sostenibilidad

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Universidad
Internacional
de Andalucía

ISBN 978-84-7993-417-0 (edición PDF web)

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The Madonie and its artistic heritage between the 14th and 18th centuries

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Resumen

El artículo se centra en el patrimonio cultural de las Madonie, una región del interior de Sicilia que, perteneciendo a la provincia de Palermo, está bajo la jurisdicción eclesiástica de la Diócesis de Cefalù. Esta área insular, que ha permanecido intacta a lo largo de los siglos, se caracteriza también por sus impresionantes paisajes, especies endémicas y asentamientos rurales. Los pueblos que la componen, antaño feudos, exceptuando Polizzi Generosa de dominio público y Cefalù, sede episcopal, todavía conservan un patrimonio histórico-artístico de notable interés. Investigado desde la década de los ochenta del siglo pasado, gran parte de este patrimonio sigue siendo inaccesible. Solo una mínima parte de estas obras de arte es, de hecho, accesible en los museos de la región. El sistema vial desde las principales ciudades hasta las Madonie resulta escaso y limitante, al igual que los servicios de transporte público. Si se valora el patrimonio cultural de esta área geográfica específica en todas sus manifestaciones, podría ser un medio para revitalizar la economía del territorio, que además alberga un Parque Regional protegido.

Palabras clave

Arte; Madonie; Sicilia; pintura; escultura.

Abstract

This contribution delves into the cultural heritage of the Madonie, an inland region in Sicily situated within the province of Palermo and under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Diocese of Cefalù. This secluded area, which has remained largely unaltered over the centuries, boasts breathtaking landscapes, endemic species, and rural settlements. The villages, predominantly feudal in nature, except for Polizzi Generosa and Cefalù—the episcopal seat—still retain a significant historical and artistic heritage. Although extensively investigated since the 1980s, much of this heritage remains inaccessible, with only a fraction of artworks available for public viewing in local museums. The region's limited road infrastructure and public transportation exacerbate this inaccessibility. Recognizing and promoting the cultural richness of this specific geographical area could serve as a catalyst for economic revitalization, especially given the presence of a protected Regional Park within the territory.

Keywords

Art; Madonie; Sicily; painting; sculpture.

In the Madonie, a mountain range bordering the Nebrodi and Peloritani to the west, forming the Sicilian Apennines, villages of ancient origins and more recently founded centers are found. The region, rich in history, offers a variety of breathtaking landscapes. It's an inland territory belonging to the province of Palermo, falling under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Diocese of Cefalù. The urban centers are mostly feudal realities, with exception like the demesne territory of Polizzi Generosa and Cefalù, the episcopal seat. These small villages, some with medieval layouts, still preserve a historically and artistically significant heritage today¹, promoted with the support of the populace, by ecclesiastical patronage, sometimes even within a conventual or monastic context², or of nobility. The latter, more prevalent in public domain cities, experienced strong growth even in feudal centers where the absence of the lord favored the rise of the nobles, originally small patricians, established jurists, or bureaucrats³. Over the centuries, they enriched themselves and asserted their influence in urban centers, sometimes with their *domus magna* and the commissioning of altarpieces and sculptures, occasionally within chapels of *jus patronatus*, where their names are immortalized⁴. Indeed, it was the Jurors of Polizzi, along with the procurator of the chapel of the patron saint S. Gandolfo in the Mother Church, who commissioned, in 1482, from Domenico Gagani, the marble ark of the saint⁵. The sculptor, originally from Bissonne, on Lake Lugano, and trained in Florence under Brunelleschi⁶, moved to Palermo in 1463 where⁷, along with his family, he dominated the art market throughout the island. The same artist, confirming the city's propensity for the best artists, was commissioned, in 1471, the *Madonna* of the Notarbartolo Chapel in the Mother Church, still existing and dated 1473⁸. This

1. ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2021.

2. FIGLIA, Francesco, 1999.

3. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2011, B, pp. 28-29.

4. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2011, B, pp. 28-29.

5. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 25-28; ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2014, pp. 26-35.

6. CAGLIOTI, Francesco, 1998, pp. 70-90.

7. KRUF, Hanno Walter, 1972; MIGLIORATO, Alessandra, 2015, pp. 491-521; MENDOLA, Giovanni, 2021, pp. 7-37.

8. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2014, pp. 26-27.

workshop was such a success in the hinterland, that the same workshop was entrusted, among others, by the patrons of the *Madonna of Help* of the church of S. Maria de' Franchis in San Mauro Castelverde in 1480 (fig. 1) or by Canon Giovanni Passafiume for the *Annunciation* of the Cathedral of Cefalù in 1472⁹. Instead, it was Marino Notarbartolo who commissioned the marble triptych with the *Madonna between Saints Anthony of Padua and Francis of Assisi* for the convent church of S. Francesco in Polizzi, now placed, along with the sculpted arch, in the Mother Church, completed in 1524 by Bartolomeo Berrettaro and Francesco del Mastro, the latter sculptor being credited with the three large figures¹⁰. In Pollina, Benedetto and Eleonora Minneci commissioned Antonello Gagini, son of Domenico, in 1515, for the bas-relief of the *Madonna of Grace* in the Mother Church, a church building where the *Nativity* is located, attributed to the same sculptor, requested in 1526 by Margherita Minneci, another member of the family¹¹. In Isnello, the execution of the *Annunciation* of the eponymous church between 1474 and 1506, attributed to Arnaldo Santacolomba Ventimiglia, who took over the village during that period¹², has recently been attributed to the renowned workshop of Domenico Gagini¹³. The lords of Isnello, presumably Simone Santacolomba and his wife Eleonora Agnello, also wanted the grand and dazzling panel with the *Madonna of the Rosary* for the eponymous church of the village, unanimously attributed to Simon de Wobreck, a native painter of Harlem¹⁴, dated between 1572 and 1583-85¹⁵.

Significant and predominant, however, is the commission of the Ventimiglia, a family of Ligurian origin that dominated the Madonie for centuries¹⁶. They attracted artists from all over Europe, particularly to Castelbuono, Geraci Siculo, and San Mauro. In the late 1460s and the early

9. KRUFFT, Hanno Walter, 1972, p. 269 e MENDOLA, Giovanni, 2020, pp. 8-12.

10. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 43-49; MIGLIORATO, Alessandra, 2010, pp. 122-123.

11. KRUFFT, Hanno Walter, 1980, pp. 411-412; ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2021, pp. 218-221.

12. SAN MARTINO DE SPUCCHES, Francesco, 1926, p. 254.

13. ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2021, p. 151.

14. VISCUSO, Teresa, 1974, pp. 105-107.

15. PUGLIATTI, Teresa, 2011, pp. 50-53.

16. CANCILA, Orazio, 2010; CANCILA, Orazio, 2016; CANCILA, Orazio, 2020; ANTISTA, Giuseppe (coord), 2011.

1470s, Giovanni I even wanted the chapel of S. Antonio in the church of S. Francesco in Castelbuono, known as a mausoleum, a project continued by his heirs. The design of the chapel, along with some carved parts, such as the entrance portal, is attributed to Francesco Laurana or Lombard workshops, such as Giorgio da Milano, the latter being more convincing hypothesis¹⁷. Simone I, instead, in the second decade of the sixteenth century, is credited with the superb painted polyptych, with its extraordinary Renaissance-style frame, depicting the *Madonna and Saints* of the *Matrice Vecchia* of Castelbuono (Fig. 2). It is one of the greatest masterpieces of Sicilian painting, whose controversial authorship has been much debated by art historians¹⁸. It was the enlightened marquis Simone I who commissioned, around 1525-27, the altarpiece of the *Presentation at the Temple* for the church of S. Maria la Porta in Geraci Siculo¹⁹, and, in 1522, the retable of the *Madonna and Saints* for the church of S. Maria de' Franchis in San Mauro, works attributed to Del Mastro, a Carrara sculptor widely attested in the hinterland²⁰. One of his convincing attributions is the *custody*, dated 1516, of the Mother Church of Caltavuturo, composed of the Risen Christ in the center, the Nativity on the lunette, and the Apostles on the predella²¹.

At this point, thanks to the advancement of studies, it is clear that this corner of Sicily was not isolated “but always closely tied to Palermo in terms of cultural influence and even more so in figurative culture, although it never lacked connections with Messina”²², another undeniable cultural center of the island. *Conditio* could not have been different, as the entire southern slope of the island was crossed by the royal *trazzera* of Messina-Montagne, which connected the city of the Strait with Palermo by land for centuries²³. Only a part of the heritage is consistently accessible in the museums of the

17. MAGNANO DI SAN LIO, Eugenio, 1996, pp. 43-61 e BOTTA, Pinuccia, pp. 123-129.

18. PUGLIATTI, Teresa, 1998, pp. 84-86; ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2011, A; ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2021, pp. 37-39.

19. FAZIO, Giuseppe, 2023, pp. 47-58.

20. ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2011, pp. 154-157 e FAZIO, Giuseppe, 2023, p. 50.

21. ANSELMO, Salvatore 2009, pp. 207-209; MIGLIORATO, Alessandra, 2011, pp. 118-131 e FAZIO, Giuseppe, 2021, pp. 140-169.

22. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2021, p. 14.

23. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2021, p. 14.

region. For example, in the Civic Museum of Castelbuono, located within the Ventimiglia manor, paintings, sculptures, and liturgical furnishings are displayed²⁴. An integral part of the museum route is the chapel of S. Anna, the patron saint of the town, entirely stuccoed by Giuseppe Serpotta with the collaboration of his brother Giacomo between 1684 and 1687, at the behest of Francesco IV Rodrigo Ventimiglia²⁵. Here is kept the *reliquary bust of the Virgin Mother* commissioned in 1520 by Isabella Moncada, wife of Simone I Ventimiglia, and attributed to Pietro Torrigiani and his workshop, while the base, commissioned by Giovanni IV Ventimiglia, is by Palermo silversmiths from 1669-70²⁶. The Treasure of Geraci Siculo, the county of the Ventimiglia, is remarkable, set up in 1995 in the crypt of the Mother Church, where liturgical furnishings, sacred hangings, and votive offerings from the 14th to the 19th centuries, from all the churches of the village, are collected²⁷. In Cefalù, the Mandralisca Museum is accessible, the home of Baron Enrico Piraino di Mandralisca, a collector from the first half of the 19th century who wanted to donate his substantial heritage to the city, resulting in the establishment of a foundation, with a museum and library, and a gymnasium²⁸. The Museum consists of several sections, housing, among others, the portrait of an unknown man, depicted in three-quarters and unanimously attributed to Antonello da Messina (fig. 3)²⁹. The mysterious man, previously identified as an anonymous sailor due to his origin from the island of Lipari, has recently been identified as Bishop Francesco Vitale of Cefalù³⁰. The portrayed man, with his sharp and ironic gaze, assimilates Flemish painting experiences that emerge thanks to the contrasts of whites and blacks in the garments and background. In the same room is the effeminate *St. John the Baptist* attributed to Giovan Antonio Sogliani³¹. In other rooms, works produced by artists active in Sicily are

24. DI NATALE, Maria Concetta, VADALA, Rita, 2010.

25. MAGNANO DI SAN LIO, Eugenio, 1996, pp. 221-239 e RIZZO Giovanni, 2009, pp. 236-239.

26. DI NATALE, Maria Concetta, 2010, pp. 29-34 e LANUZZA, Stefania, 2017, pp. 45-80.

27. DI NATALE, Maria Concetta, 1995.

28. CONSOLO, Vincenzo, *et al.*, 1991

29. LUCCO, Mauro, pp. 162-163, DE LUCA Maddalena, 2017, pp. 22-27.

30. VARZI, Salvatore, VARZI, Sandro, DELL'AIRA, Alessandro, 2017.

31. ABBATE, Vincenzo, (coor), 2009.

displayed, such as those by the valenzano Joannes de Matta, also active in other centers from 1519 to 1541³², or native artists like the Mannerist Pietro D'Asaro (known as the Monocolo of Racalmuto), to whom the *Conversion of Saul* is attributed³³. In the same Norman town, the Treasure of the Cathedral is now accessible, set up in the rooms adjacent to the church building, where liturgical furnishings and sacred hangings, commissioned by bishops and rulers between the 12th and 19th centuries, are displayed. The itineraries, which also include the canonical cloister, the Osterio Magno, and the towers of the Cathedral, allow you to admire the painted mosaics of the presbytery and the vault of the Cathedral, consisting of individual figures, placed, except for the Pantocrator and those on the sails of the crossing, in almost serial systems³⁴. They provide the backdrop to the painted cross attributed to Guglielmo da Pesaro and dated around 1460-65³⁵. Other parish museums located in the centers of the diocese belong to the same *Itinerarium Pulchritudinis*. Near Cefalù, in Gibilmanna, there is the Capuchin Sanctuary dedicated to the Madonna, with the attached "Fra' Gianmaria da Tusa" Museum³⁶. This museum exhibits works from convents and churches of the Valdemone, such as wooden and marble sculptures, sacred hangings, liturgical furnishings, and paintings executed by friar artists, such as Fra Umile da Messina, who signs and dates the *Sacred Visitation*, or Fra Felice da Sambuca di Sicilia³⁷.

Therefore, it is a geographical area where remarkable works of art from the 14th and 15th centuries are preserved, a period that constitutes "the golden century" of art in the Madonie region³⁸. However, only a few fragments of some artifacts have come down to us, such as the late Gothic frescoes from the second half of the 15th century³⁹, or the panels with the

32. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 54-65.

33. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2013, pp. 62-65.

34. ANDALORO, Maria, 1982, pp. 96-101; ANDALORO, Maria, 2013, pp. 21-23.

35. DI NATALE Maria Concetta, 1992, pp. 135-136.

36. *L'arte*, 1999.

37. PORTERA Domenico, 1999, pp. 24-33.

38. ABBATE, Vincenzo 2021, p. 15.

39. MUSOLINO, Grazia, 1993, pp. 19-42; TRAVAGLIATO, Giovanni, 2008, pp. 77-93; TRAVAGLIATO, Giovanni, 2023, pp. 73-94, CAMPAGNA CICALA Francesca, 2021, pp. 326,

Madonna and Saints from the first half of the 15th century in the church of S. Maria in San Mauro. In the latter, connections have been identified with artistic events in central Italy mixed with a more international culture⁴⁰. On the other hand, intact is the triptych, of unknown commission, of the *Mater Sapientiae with the Child between Saints Catherine and Barbara* of the Mother Church of Polizzi (fig. 4), a superb work by a Flemish painter active around the last quarter of the 15th century, identified as the Maître des feuillages brodés, and recent studies place him in the workshop of this latter painter, while others lean towards Rogier Van der Weyden⁴¹. In the corpus of Renaissance artifacts, the painted crosses and the two triptychs with the *Madonna and Saints* on a gold background from the second half of the 15th century, with elaborate frames, fit well, found in the New Mother Church of Castelbuono and the Mother Church of Petralia Sottana, both with controversial attributions⁴².

Artistic production did not cease even during the Mannerist period, in the midst of the Counter-Reformation, thanks also to imported works such as the *Madonna of the Angel and Saints* from the Capuchin church of Petralia Sottana, signed in 1609 by the Flemish artist Ettore Cruzet, active between Sicily and Naples⁴³; the *Holy Family* from 1598 in the church of S. Francesco in Cefalù by Antonio Catalano l'Antico, a Messina painter documented in Rome who painted the *Madonna of the Angel* in 1601 for the Capuchin church of Castelbuono⁴⁴, and the *Saints Catherine* from the Basilica of Collesano signed in 1596 by Giuseppe Alvino (il Sozzo)⁴⁵. Two painters native to Gangi, Gaspare Bazzano and Giuseppe Salerno, interpreted Mannerist production, playing a primary role between the 16th and 17th centuries. While the former moved to Palermo, producing few works in the Madonie like the

328-331, 334-336; 340-341,

40. VISCUSO Teresa, 1984, pp. 24-28.

41. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 31-37; SCHIMMENTI Luciano, VALENZIANO Crispino, 2001 e GOBERT Florence, MERTENS Didier (coor), 2005, pp. 28-37.

42. DI NATALE, Maria Concetta, 1992, pp. 128, 143-144, 147, 150-152; PUGLIATTI Teresa, 1998, pp. 45-47, 21, 80-82; ANSELMO Salvatore, 2021, pp. 43, 176.

43. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 2000, p. 272, CLEOPAZZO, Nicola, 2021, pp. 219-253

44. CAMPAGNA CICALA Francesca, 1980, pp. 101-104; CAMPAGNA CICALA Francesca, 2002, pp. 16, 18, 19, 23

45. TERMOTTO Rosario, 2010, A, pp. 67-68, PUGLIATTI, Teresa, 2011, pp. 106-108.

frescoes from 1624 in the chapel of the Mother Church of Collesano⁴⁶, the latter remained in his native city where, except for some brief stops in other nearby centers, he responded to commissions from the villages of the Madonie and even the Nebrodi, addressing iconographic and programmatic themes requested by a clientele consisting of lay congregations, clergy, monastic orders, and the nobility⁴⁷. This is evidenced, among various paintings, by the large canvas of the *Universal Judgment* in the Mother Church of Gangi from 1624, whose points of reference range from the Flemish mannerism spread between Naples and Sicily at the end of the 16th century, with references to works by Bril, Breguel, and Cobergher, to specifically Northern elements, such as the crude and brutal representation of Hell⁴⁸.

Despite the plague, famines, and other events that could have slowed down commissions between the 17th and 18th centuries, the artistic heritage of these centuries still consists of significant works, some of which were once again imported. These include the *Savior of the World* sculpture by Ercole Ferrata, located in the church of S. Maria in San Mauro. Created in Rome in 1674, it was donated by Vincenzo Greco to his hometown. Despite the influences of Bernini, strong Algardian influences are revealed⁴⁹. Another example is the *Immaculate Conception* painted by Donato Creti from Cremona between 1727-29 for the senatorial chapel of the Virgin in the church of S. Francesco d'Assisi in Palermo, later transferred to the church of S. Francesco in Polizzi⁵⁰. These artworks are complemented by paintings still located in their original settings, such as the *Madonna of the Angels and Saints*, likely from the fourth decade of the 18th century, signed by Luigi Borremans, son of Guglielmo, in the church of S. Maria di Gesù in Gratteri⁵¹. Additionally, there are large fresco cycles found in some churches of Gangi⁵², a village where the local nobility displayed their power with

46. TERMOTTO Rosario, 2010, A, pp. 25-36

47. Vulgo 1997, ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 101-117; PUGLIATTI, Teresa, 2011, pp. 327-415; MENDOLA Giovanni, 2010, pp. 289-322; TERMOTTO, Rosario, 2010, b, pp. 323-343.

48. DE CASTRO Evelina, 1997, pp. 240-242; PUGLIATTI, Teresa, 2011, pp. 409-410.

49. GIACOMETTI, Cristiano, 2017, pp. 159-170.

50. ABBATE, Vincenzo, 1997, pp. 129-134.

51. ANSELMO, Salvatore, 2021, pp. 136-137.

52. FARINELLA, Salvatore, 2018.

noble palaces, such as the Bongiorno Palace, now the town hall, frescoed in 1757-58 by the Roman painter Gaspare Fumagalli, in collaboration with Pietro Martorana (fig.5)⁵³. Gangi also gave birth to the architect Gandolfo Felice Bongiorno, who designed buildings and coordinated decorative enterprises⁵⁴.

The cultural heritage of this specific geographical area, if valued in all its manifestations, could serve as a means to invigorate the local economy, which suffers from deficiencies in both the road system and public transportation. Therefore, only a political will that recognizes the potential of the territory and leverages it with a rational and efficient infrastructure network can provide these places with vital energy. This mission, if conducted with good practices, could certainly prove effective not only in enhancing the artistic heritage but also in the entire economic sector, promoting employment and work opportunities, especially for the younger generations.

* The photographs are by Vincenzo Anselmo. We thanks the Diocese of Ceflù for the kind concession.

53. FARINELLA, Salvatore, 2018, p. 48.

54. FARINELLA, Salvatore, 2017.

THE MADONIE AND ITS ARTISTIC HERITAGE
BETWEEN THE 14TH AND 18TH CENTURIES



Figura 1.



Figura 2.

THE MADONIE AND ITS ARTISTIC HERITAGE
BETWEEN THE 14TH AND 18TH CENTURIES



Figura 3.



Figura 4.



Figura 5.

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