Church of Gesù e Maria (today S. Caterina), Sassari, 1579–1609

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Church of Gesù e Maria, Sassari, view of the façade, 1579–1609. Image in the public domain.

The Society of Jesus officially established, on September 1, 1562, its first educational institution in the city of Sassari: The College of Gesù e Maria. Its church building, built between 1579 and 1609, was originally a part of the Jesuit College complex, which included an adjacent building that today houses the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Sassari. The complex remained in the Society of Jesus' care until 1767, when the Jesuit order was expelled from the Spanish territories. The church was then re-dedicated to Santa Caterina, as it is known today.

This building not only represents the introduction, as Marisa Porcu Gaias states, of the late Renaissance style in Sardinia, but is also the first Counterreformation architectural work on the island. Porcu Gaias speaks of the introduction and advancement of classicism in Sardinia as marked by the construction of the Gesù e Maria church, begun on 1579. Roughly a century later, the start of the construction of the San Michele Jesuit complex in Cagliari, in 1674, according to Salvatore Naitza, marked the definitive abandonment of the Aragonese gothic style in Sardinia. Porcu Gaias reports the presence of a 1567 edition of Vitruvius (translated by Daniele Barbaro), as well as copies of Palladio, Serlio, Vignola, and Juan Bautista de Villapando's commentary to the Prophet Ezekiel's book in Jesuit libraries; many of these are housed today in the Biblioteca Universitaria of Cagliari.

Besides the order's influence on the local architectural culture, as Raimondo Turtas affirms, the opening of the Jesuit school in Sassari signaled a new era in the cultural life of Sardinia: the Jesuits would be responsible for educating a great number of Sardinians following the *Ratio Studiorum*, the Jesuit's novel pedagogical method, with its focus on a strict, systematic, and ordered curriculum, and its emphasis on the study of the liberal arts and humanities.

While the most representative Jesuit building in Sardinia might be the baroque church and complex of San Michele in Cagliari, the modest Church of Gesù e Maria constitutes a most intriguing piece of architecture. Its Counterreformation character shows in the disposition and design of the church's nave. Upon entering, the worshippers' attention focuses on the main altar, the intention being that the decorative and artistic program was aimed, principally, at corroborating the mystery of Christ's resurrection. The church's plan clearly follows the prototype of the Gesù in Rome, characterized by the ample central nave and the shallower lateral chapels. The design of the Sassarian Gesù was carried out by a prominent Jesuit architect, Giovanni Maria Bernardoni, who was in the city around 1578 supervising the works for this and other Jesuit enterprises in Sardinia, including San Michele in Cagliari. Bernardoni sent the design of the Church of Gesù e Maria and its college (which a couple of decades later would be transformed into a *Casa profesa*), to Rome, to the order's *Consiliarus Aedificiorum*, the Jesuit authority in charge of approving all of the order's constructions, which was led at the time by another Jesuit architect, Giovanni De Rosis.

Bernardoni's plan came back from Rome highly altered by De Rosis, so Bernardoni yielded to the *Consiliarus'* design, overseeing the construction until 1583, the year he was transferred to Krakow. By the time the peripheral walls were ready to receive the vaulting, around the year 1585, the rector of the Gesù e Maria College at the time, requested that a master builder supervisor be sent from Rome, given that the local workers, the rector claimed, had executed the transept "incompetently" (Porcu Gaias). The help from Rome never came, so a compromise solution was adopted: the local Sardinian workers continued with the construction of the vaulting in the late-Gothic

style that they knew better than the novel classical manner. For this reason, the church possesses a series of vaulting solutions that can be qualified as hybrid, since they utilize a constructive solution that combines classical arches with late-Gothic ones.

The result is an unusual display of syncretic constructive technologies. The transept's western arch, for instance, is a pointed arch, while the other three are a combination of pointed arches, at the same height as the western one, with a lower, depressed arch beneath, as if adding structural support. In turn, each depressed arch displays a rectangular, classical framed window in their spandrels. An analysis of the church's plan reveals a transept that is the same depth as the lateral chapels, marked by an octagonal dome at the crossing, and with a rectangular apse. In elevation, the dome's drum contains a set of paired windows on each of its eight sides, which combined with other lateral windows along the nave and the windows on three of the arches at the transept, allow for flooding of light to the interior. Of particular interest are the decorative vegetative motifs on the dome's peculiar pendentive-squinches, which Porcu Gaias interprets as vernacular interpretations of Renaissance ornamental elements. Specifically, the interior decoration, she argues, could be the local Sardinian craftsmen's interpretation of motifs taken from Vignola's *Regola delli cinque ordini (1562)*.

The façade pulls together the hybrid elements of the building. It stands slightly taller than the nave, reaffirming the interior's considerable height while masking the compressed longitudinal length of the building. The originality and vitality of the ornamental idioms employed in the church are expressed most fully in the set of incisions on its pediments, cornices, architraves, jambs, and lintels. The façade is divided into three horizontal bodies and two vertical ones. In the lower horizontal body, the central portal is flanked by paired Corinthian attached columns that support a triangular pediment. The outer columns extend vertically to the upper body's top, which is crowned by a semi-circular pediment. Below the façade pediment, three windows are distributed into three sections marked by the flanking columns of the portal, and two pilasters at each end. At the same time, the strict order and economy of the façade design contrasts with the profusion of incised lines across its cornices, architraves, and jambs. This ornamentation was the product of a vital, regional variety of classical architecture that has been variously termed Mudéjar, Plateresque, or Herrerian-influenced, but which evades classification on account of its originality and liveliness.

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