



The Conservation and Restoration of the Oil on Canvas 17th century painting 'Our Lady of the Rosary' by Stefano Erardi

✍️ DOTT. Marija Grazia Zenzani & Valentina Lupo B.CON.S. (HONS) – ATELIER DEL RESTAURO

The canvas painting depicts Our Lady of the Rosary and is found in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mellieħa. It was painted in the late 17th century by Maltese artist Stefano Erardi.

During the seventeenth century the Order of St. John in Malta was marked by great religious zeal. This enthusiasm was expressed mainly in the building of magnificent churches adorned with paintings and sculpture meant to reflect the power of the order. The Order attracted a number of illustrious foreign artists to Malta, namely Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Mattia Preti (1613-1699). Maltese artists therefore had to face tough competition to be secured important commissions. An exception was the Maltese artist Stefano Erardi (1630-1716) who managed to secure numerous commissions. Not much is known about Stefano's early life, though one supposes that he was greatly encouraged into pursuing an artistic career by his father, a craftsman himself. He is known to have executed more than sixty oil on

canvas paintings found in churches, museums and private collections throughout Malta and Gozo.

When our team of conservators was called onsite, the painting was found to be in an advanced state of deterioration. Extensive damage over the canvas support was first noted. This was due to the continuous exposure to air currents present in the grotto, together with high humidity levels. These conditions completely relaxed and slacked the canvas support. Thus forming severe deformations, which successively strained the painting and led to extensive tears in the canvas and the paint layers.

Further more due to gravitational forces the tears also accentuated and the painting was almost hanging loose from its auxiliary frame. As soon as this grave situation was identified, an emergency treatment was immediately carried out on site. This consisted of facing the paint layer by means of Japanese paper, which prevented from further paint being lost. This intervention was a very

delicate and meticulous one since most of the tears were overlapping and because of the large amount of detachments present.

In a past restoration the painting was lined using an organic adhesive so as to reinforce the damaged canvas. When the painting was brought to our laboratory it was thoroughly examined from the back and it was concluded that two lining canvases adhered with *colla pasta* were present. This lining intervention was not serving its supportive purpose any more. In several areas it was observed that the lining was detaching from the original canvas. It was therefore deemed necessary that a new lining intervention was needed to conserve the painting in the future.

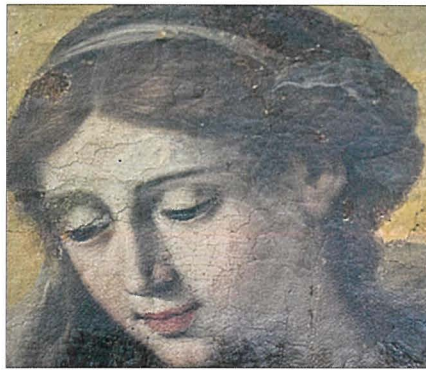
The removal of the double lining canvas was consequently carried out. It was at this point that it was found out that the painting was undergoing a major infestation from biscuit beetles (*Stegobium paniceum*). These insects are attracted to the starch present in the *colla pasta* used in the past as an adhesive. Considering that



the infestation was still active and that an innumerable amount of biscuit beetles and larvae was present, it was decided to immediately proceed with a disinfection treatment. An anoxic treatment process was carried out to eliminate these organisms. This was carried out by enclosing the painting and flushing the enclosure of oxygen by applying an inert gas. The anoxic treatment was carried out for a period of approximately one month, thus giving a guarantee that any of the insects present, at any stage of the life cycle, were disinfested. Selected conditions of pressure and temperature were applied.

When the painting was finally ready from the disinfection treatment, all the starch paste present on the back of the canvas was removed, thus avoiding that a similar infestation may take place in the future. Following this, the deformations in the painting were then treated through the use of controlled heat and pressure. Various layers of different stucco having different composition and colours (bright white, cream and grey) were found. These were the result of various past interventions. All these layers had to be removed, during this treatment it was found out that some of these stucco infills were also covering the original paint layer.

The next step was to fix the numerous tears present in the original canvas, before a double relining support was applied. This will permit to better control future tensions and stresses, which may take place at the tears, favouring a better planarity of the painting. Where losses of the canvas support were present, these were inlaid using a canvas having a similar weave and thickness to the original.



A double lining intervention was then carried out. This involved the attachment of a new canvas support, to the back of the original canvas. A synthetic conservation standard adhesive was used in order to strengthen the original canvas support. After the lining intervention the painting was then stretched. Since its original auxiliary frame stretcher could not support well the

painting a new stretcher frame in Tulip wood was manufactured for the painting.

After the stretching of the painting it was then safe to proceed with the cleaning of the oxidised varnish layer and several overpaintings present all over the paint layer. Thanks to the cleaning tests carried out, it was already possible to appreciate the original vivid tonalities, which the artist had used. For the cleaning of this painting, a surfactant gel was formulated at our laboratory, which allowed the full control and efficacy of the cleaning treatment. During this intervention it was very important to respect the original aging patina of the painting.

Lacunae in the paint layer were then infilled using gesso di Bologna. These were leveled down and textured so as to imitate the painting's surface. Lacunae were then retouched using gouache colours. An intermediate layer of retouching varnish was successively applied to the painting surface. Retouching was then finished using reversible varnish colours. A final synthetic and non-yellowing protective coating was finally applied to the painting.

All the materials used in the conservation and restoration of the painting have the common characteristic of reversibility and every phase of the project has been documented through photography. The project was performed in accordance with the ethical principles for the protection and preservation of a work of art following the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisation's (E.C.C.O) Code of Ethics. This conservation and restoration project required many hours of meticulous work and brought back to light the palette and soft brushstrokes of one of the most beautiful altar paintings by Erardi.

References

Stefano Erardi (1630 - 1716) : *Manufacturing techniques of a seventeenth-century Maltese artist Bellizzi, Charlotte 2005. Unpublished University of Malta Thesis.*

Baroque Painting in Malta. Keith Sciberras, Baroque Painting in Malta Midsea Books, 2009