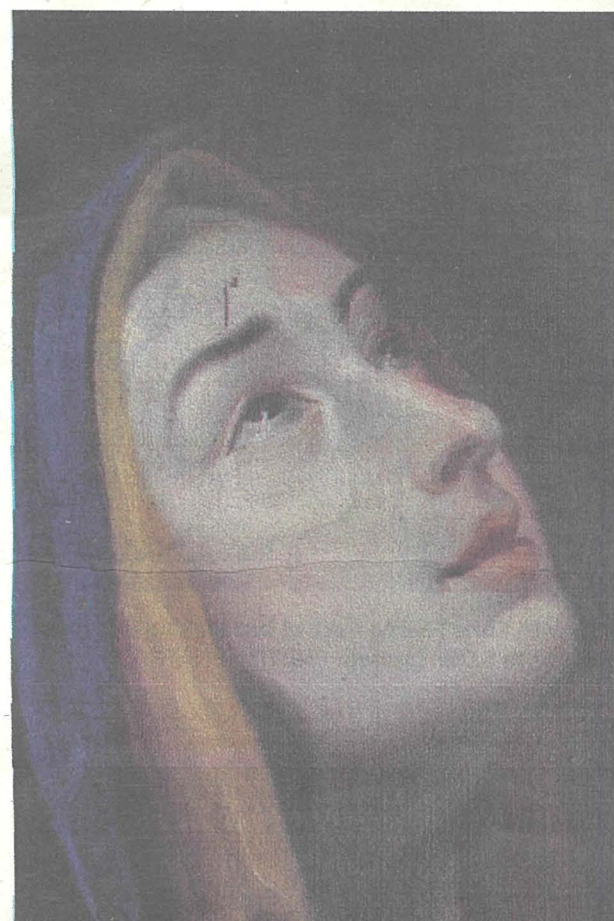
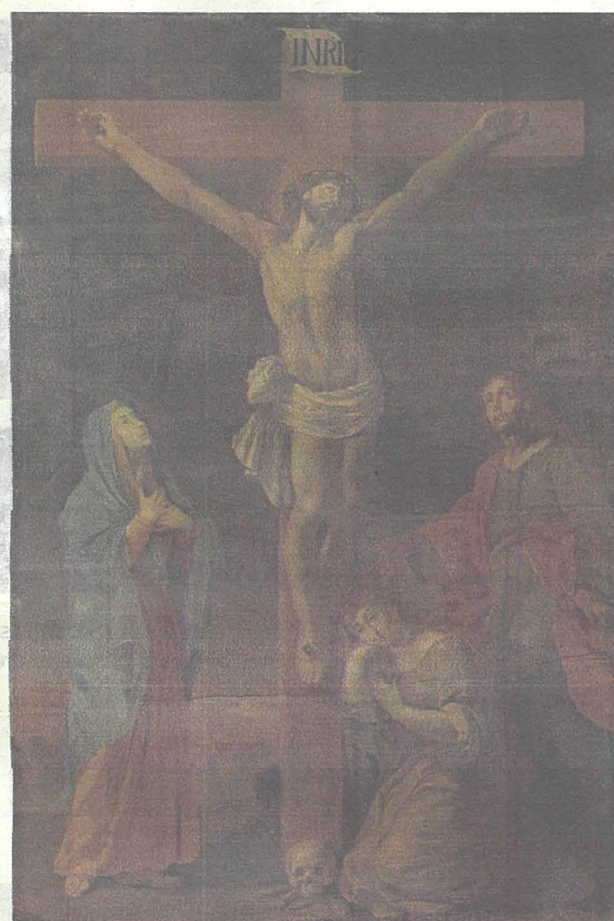


LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



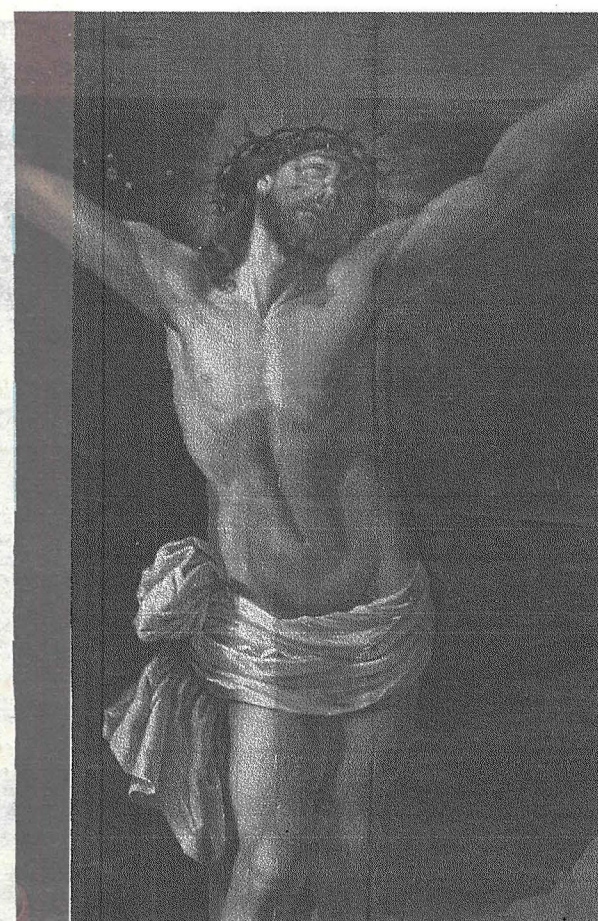
Detail of the Virgin's face following cleaning treatments and the removal of past retouchings. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS



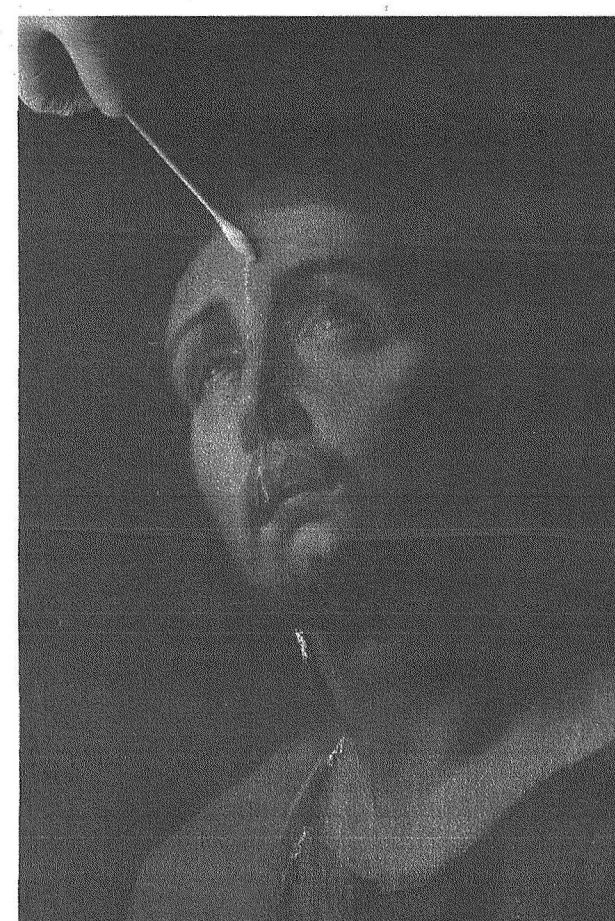
The painting before conservation and restoration treatments, as examined under raking light. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR, SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO



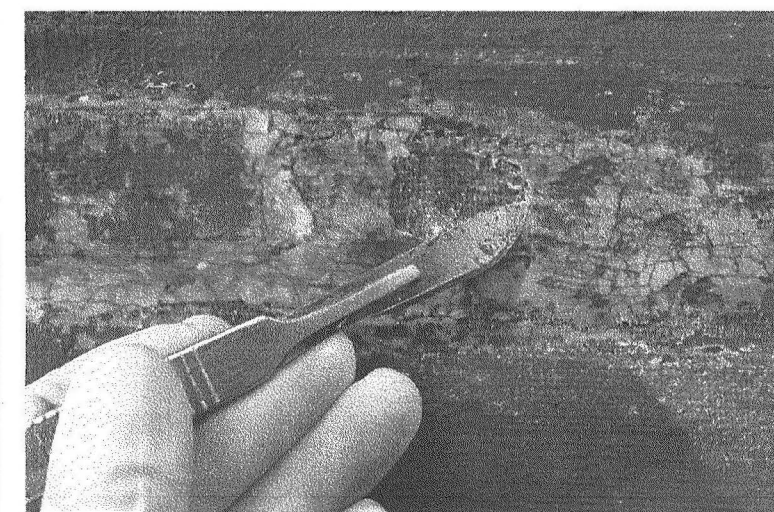
The painting during its final stages, following conservation and restoration treatments. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR, SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO



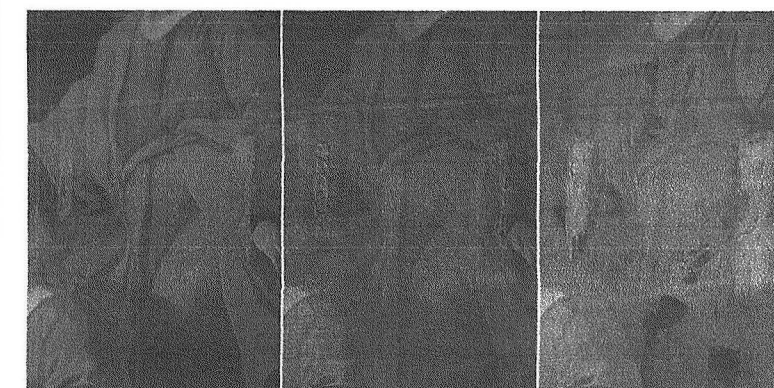
Detail taken during cleaning treatments. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR, SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO



Detail taken during cleaning treatments. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS



The removal of past interventions that were concealing tears and lacunae. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS



Damaged areas and past interventions being studied prior to conservation treatments, using (from left) visible light, raking light and ultraviolet fluorescence. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR, SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO

Gudja's Crucifixion altarpiece: rediscovered beauty and meaning

CHRISTIAN ATTARD and AMY SCIBERRAS

It has been time and again demonstrated that in 17th- and 18th-century Malta, sodalities and confraternities were very generous when it came to commissioning religious pictures and artefacts. Such method of patronage may well lie behind Gudja's intriguing altarpiece depicting a Crucifixion scene.

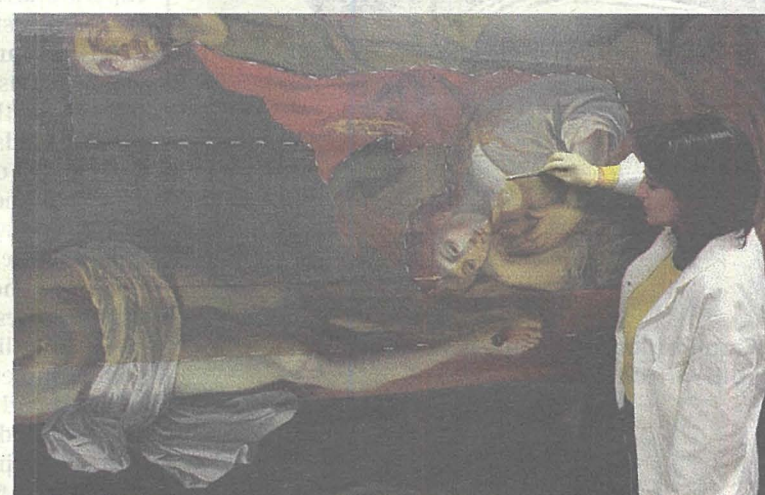
It is more than likely that Gudja's now defunct *Agonia* Sodality could have forked out the necessary money to commission it. Although we do not yet have proof that unequivocally connects the altarpiece's commission to the sodality, all extraneous evidence points in this direction.

Agonia sodalities were typically set up in most parishes. Their members were tasked with an activity that was considered fundamental to saving a dying person's soul from the eternal clutches of Hell. In those most crucial of hours, when a moribund person teetered between life and death, the *confratelli* would have given their all to save the poor soul from damnation.

The very word *agonia* is etymologically derived from Greek and denotes a struggle – a fight between angels and devils who in that holy hour would battle it out to possess one's soul. Prayer was the best recourse to neutralise the devil's final assault and that is what members of *Agonia* sodalities would have done; reciting the creed and prescribed prayers while assembled around the deathbed or in front of the exposed Blessed Sacrament.

The painting associated with Gudja's *Agonia* depicts Christ's Holy Hour, during which, like any other mortal and while dangling from the cross, he was also tempted to forsake all suffering. It was a humbling image that would have emphasised the mission embraced by the brothers of the *Agonia* who were instructed never to let their guard down, especially more so in that most delicate of hours.

Gudja's *Agonia* Sodality was set up in the mid-1670s, perhaps not fortuitously, right during the devastating plague of 1676. Around that time the fabric of Gudja's parish church had just been completed. In 1679, Bishop Miguel Jerónimo de Molina drew a report



Leading conservator Amy Sciberras during cleaning of the aged varnish layer. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS

about the church and, for the first time, the *altare Ssmi Crucifixi* is mentioned. His description tells us that the *icona* was *noviter facta*. He goes on to describe the image by identifying all the protagonists present and thus establishing that the image he is writing about is indeed the same image we can still see today.

The altarpiece represents Christ's *agonia*. Christ is on the throes of death but clearly still alive. He is preparing his soul to

take leave of his body, helped by the saintly figures beneath the cross. It is very much a deathbed scene, only here the cross is replacing the bed.

Christ, the *agonizzante*, is accepting of his fate while the three accompanying saints keep their perfect composure. They enact the ideal paradigm of what constituted appropriate conduct during mourning. The altarpiece must have functioned as a didactic picture for the sodality's

members who would have daily looked up to it and modelled their behaviour accordingly. All the above arguments may well establish a strong link between the sodality and the altarpiece to the point that it is hard to imagine that one could have ever existed without the other. And yet one pertinent question remains. Who was the artist who actually painted this altarpiece? Up to now, archival research has pointed to a mid-1670s production date. This was a time when Mattia Preti, along with his prodigious *bottega*, were radically changing the island's artistic topography, pushing forward an artistic language that was assertive, dramatic and triumphant, but not without its moments of dark, poetic introspection. Understandably, everyone was somehow hooked. No other artist active in Malta at the time could really measure up to Preti's larger-than-life persona.

Due to his presence, Stefano Erardi, along with his son Alessio, had to up their ante, creating a stream of pictures that typically channelled bits and pieces culled from the Baroque greats, from Nicolas Poussin to Pietro da Cortona, informed as they were by the

large collection of prints they owned. They doggedly resisted being completely swept away by the Italian master.

Others fared less successfully. Some worked strictly under Preti's guidance, effectively reducing themselves to mere functionaries in a *bottega* which at times must have operated like a picture-making assembly line. A sprinkling of artists, like the talented Giuseppe d'Arena, did acknowledge the pulling power of Preti's style but somehow kept a degree of autonomy.

Stylistically, Gudja's Crucifixion scene poses a little quandary. It seemingly refers to Guido Reni's *Crucifixion of the Capuchins*, even if it is far from a mere replica. Its artist, henceforth referred to as the Gudja master, also employs that typical Reni invention of representing the face of Jesus turned upwards and nobly pathetic. It is very likely that this master was looking at some print made after Reni but the overall composition, its colour scheme and the facial types have a ring about them that recall Preti.

If one were to try profiling this artist, three basic characteristics could be inferred: (i) this must have been a male artist, especially evident when bearing in mind the fact that the only known female artist of the period was Suor Maria de Domenici and this picture does not seem to come from her hands; (ii) he must have been Maltese or, in any case, settled in Malta; and (iii) he must have been drawn to Preti's formidable visual language but not to the extent to be

completely overwhelmed by it. We do not yet seem to know all the names of the artists who were active in Malta during the second half of the 17th century. As expected, there must have been dozens of artists of little or no consequence, but we could never lump the Gudja master with them. Judged by this one single work, he must have possessed complete mastery of his craft. It is a pity we cannot as yet associate a name with him.

“The altarpiece must have functioned as a didactic picture for the sodality's members who would have daily looked up to it and modelled their behaviour accordingly”

What follows is an exposition of the painting's restoration and conservation programme which has managed to bring its intrinsic beauty even more to the fore.

Over the years, the painting's condition deteriorated due to various factors, including unprofessional past restoration interventions, accidental damage, as

well as tears caused by shrapnel generated during the 1942 Axis powers' bombing.

Seeing the deterioration afflicting the painting, in 2019 parish archpriest Fr Norman Zammit decided to professionally conserve and restore this *magnum opus*. The project was entrusted to fine arts conservator-restorer Amy Sciberras and the painting was taken to her laboratory for further analysis and treatments.

A thorough preliminary examination and documentation using various non-invasive scientific means enabled the conservator to analyse the painting's manufacturing technique and to identify the various forms of deterioration affecting the painting. This examination and study also allowed the conservator to identify past restoration interventions.

The painting had in the past been lined (a technique whereby a new canvas was adhered to the original), probably to repair shrapnel damage during World War II. However, layered patches of textile and paper were also found on the lining canvas in two areas. This meant the painting had suffered further damage following the lining treatment.

The patches on the lining canvas corresponded with roughly applied gesso infills on the front that were concealing tears in the original canvas. Furthermore, organic glues used in these various past interventions had already started to attract insects such as the biscuit beetle (*Stegobium paniceum*) and contributing to further deterioration,

including canvas deformations and tensions. The aesthetic qualities of the painting could not be truly and fully appreciated prior to the start of the restoration treatments, as the original tonalities and hues applied by the artist were concealed by thick, aged varnishes and overpaint. Past retouchings were found on the varnish layer, whereas other retouchings were found underneath the oxidised and yellowed varnish layer, thus indicating an even older restoration intervention.

The Virgin's drapery was found to be entirely overpainted. Past restorers had applied extensive overpaint to cover degradation and deterioration of original paint in certain areas of the drapery. However, in doing so, they also concealed the surviving vivid and exquisite blue tonalities and highlights.

Conservation and restoration treatments carried involved the removal of these unprofessional past interventions, addressing both the stability of the painting and its aesthetic qualities. The paint layer was cleaned from aged varnishes and overpaint, including past stucco infills. Old patches, old lining and organic glues were also removed. This uncovered the original canvas and allowed torn threads to be aligned under magnification and repaired.

Canvas seams were reinforced after having been found completely cut and the painting

was relined to reinforce the very oxidised and brittle canvas. Lacunae in paint and preparation layers were infilled, levelled, textured and retouched in line with current conservation ethics and methods. These interventions reinstated the stability, integrity and beauty of this masterpiece at Gudja parish church.

Acknowledgements

Amy Sciberras wishes to thank the Gudja parish church Art Committee for entrusting her with this conservation and restoration project which was made possible with the support of the Gal Xlokk Foundation and Grupp Żgħażaġh Gudja. Special thanks go to parish archpriest Fr Norman Zammit, art committee member Martin Gravina, Grupp Żgħażaġh Gudja project leader Stefan Caruana and member Fabio Scicluna, professional photographers Manuel Ciantar and Suzanne Ciantar Ferrito, and the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage. A note of thanks also goes to Prof. Keith Sciberras with whom the painting was discussed.

Christian Attard is a researcher, lecturer and exhibition curator. Conservator Amy Sciberras directs a team of conservators and has been entrusted with restoration projects of national and international importance.

WWW.AMYSCIBERRAS.COM