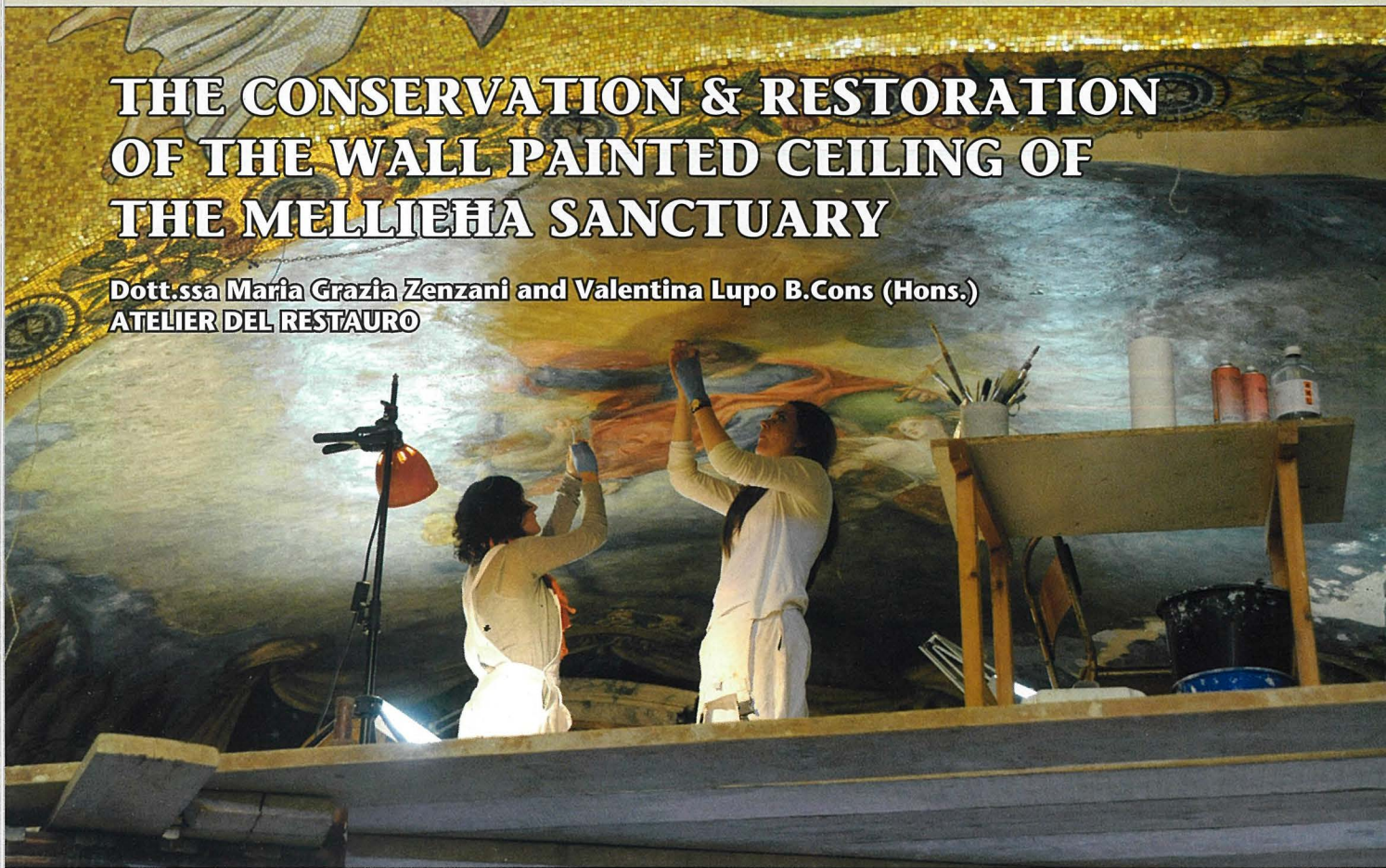


THE CONSERVATION & RESTORATION OF THE WALL PAINTED CEILING OF THE MELLIEħA SANCTUARY

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ATELIER DEL RESTAURO



Atelier del Restauro has been entrusted with the conservation and restoration of the wall painted ceiling of the Mellieħa Sanctuary dedicated to Our Lady. Atelier del Restauro is a joint venture between Maltese and Italian conservators who are specialised in the field of conservation of works of art. The team was established by Maria Grazia Zenzani and Valentina Lupo who are two paintings conservators and Simon Dimech who is a book and paper conservator. Maria Grazia Zenzani graduated from Firenze in 2002, obtaining a diploma in *Restauratore di Tele, Tavole e Sculture Lignee Policrome* and from Ravenna in 2007 obtaining a degree in *Tecnologie per la Conservazione e il Restauro dei Beni Culturali*. She has several years of experience and has worked

in Ravenna, Bologna, Ferrara and Malta. Valentina Lupo graduated in 2011 obtaining a degree in Conservation and Restoration of Paintings and Polychrome sculptures, B.Cons (Hons.).

The Sanctuary's wall painted ceiling is of an elliptical shape, depicting a multitude of bishops, flanking the titular image of Our Lady of Mellieħa. According to tradition the Bishops were painted to commemorate the meeting held by the Melivetan Council in Mileto. The artist who painted the bishops is unknown and originally these were painted on a gilded ceiling, which has been overpainted with a cloudy sky in a later period.

The Eternal Father is portrayed at the centre of the ceiling. Stylistically, this painting is dated



to the second half of the 18th century, a time during which the late baroque tradition succeeded in the Maltese artistic scene. It is attributed to Rocco Buhagiar (1723 - 1805) and is an almost reproduction of a painting situated in the Collegiate Parish Church of Saint Helena in Birkirkara. However, records indicate the existence of another, earlier Eternal Father; an account of a pastoral visit by Fra Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa, Bishop of Malta, on 18th November 1664 describes a portrait of the Eternal Father surrounded by nine seraphins, with gilding in some parts.

Throughout the Sanctuary's history several restoration interventions were carried out by Maltese artists, such as the famous Francesco Zahra in the 1700s.

The last restoration intervention was carried out by Samuel Bugeja between 1970-1973. During his interventions Bugeja overpainted several missing areas of the bishops and he reconstructed ex-novo some of the figures.

Atelier Del Restauro started the restoration-conservation interventions on the ceiling of the Mellieħa Sanctuary in November 2012. Immediately the team of conservators-restorers felt the need to carry out various mappings in order to identify the different types of damages present and the various past restoration interventions. A systematic methodology involved the use of photography in visible light and ultraviolet light, together with the support of scientific analysis, namely: Ion Chromatography (IC), X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF), Fourier Transform Infra-Red Spectroscopy (FT-IR), X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) and Raman Spectroscopy, carried out in collaboration with Prof. Paolo Zannini from the *Dipartimento di Scienze Chimiche e Geologiche, Università Degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italia)*. Through these analysis it was possible to have a complete picture of what were the binders and pigments used in the palette of the original artists, and which were the techniques used successively in the interventions carried out by famous Maltese artists such as Francesco Zahra, Rocco Buhagiar and the last restoration intervention

carried out between 1970-73 by Samuel Bugeja. Thanks to these results we have revealed that the execution of the wall paintings (both the bishops and the Eternal Father) was carried out using the oil on stone technique. Whereby a layer of plaster is applied to the wall support and then painted using pigments mixed in an oil-binding medium.

Originally, gold leaf was used in certain parts of the background over a preparation layer of hematite. In a successive re-embellishment of the ceiling, the original background was covered with a blue sky composed of Lazurite, the mineral which forms the bulk of the gem stone *lapis lazuli*. The use of these precious materials enlightens the unique importance of this Sanctuary.

Many of the problems which effected the condition of the wall painted ceiling were mainly linked to the fact that the wall support is a carved rock. Considering this natural environment, high humidity levels and water and moisture infiltration, together with the lack of maintenance in the past and use of inappropriate methods and materials in past restoration interventions, caused several deterioration phenomena. Unfortunately, in the course of its existence, this wall painting has continued to suffer. The team of restorers has incurred the presence of salt efflorescence, detachments in the pictorial film, voids between the rock and the ground layer, together with various unstable stuccoed areas from past interventions. The ceiling has also been severely overpainted in the past. Hence it was deemed necessary to commence the work by first carrying out emergency treatments in order to stabilise the numerous parts in danger of being lost due to their instability. This was done through the temporarily application of gauzes using reversible adhesives. The adhesion of the paint layer was imperative due to the extensive amount of detachments present, including the flaking and powdering of the paint layer. This high degradation level would definitely have led to large losses of the painted strata, if not treated.

A conservation-standard adhesive was injected slowly under the detached paint layer and flaking



areas by means of insulin syringes. Heat and pressure were then applied over the area by means of a heating spatula. The heating spatula was used over a Melinex® sheet to avoid direct heat over the paint layer, pressure was then applied in circular movements to re-adhere the paint film to the plaster layer.

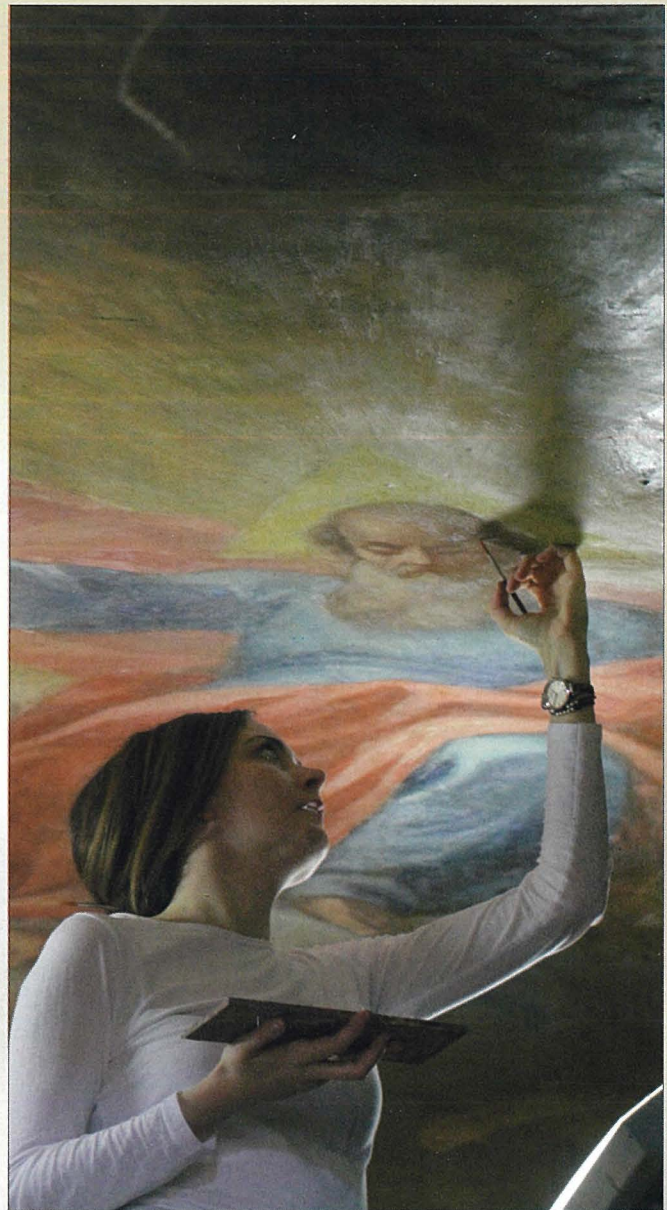
Grouting treatment was carried out in the void areas between the stone and the plaster layer. Void areas were determined by thoroughly knocking the ceiling. The intervention consisted of drilling small holes using a hand held driller, and the infilling of a grout by injection, using syringes combined with either needles or catheter tubes according to the area. A specific consolidant with bulking and hydraulic properties was selected. Injections were carried out slowly, so as to allow time for the consolidant to entirely fill the void area, taking care not to leave the detachment to bulge out. At the end of the treatment absorbent layers were applied to the surface of the painting and held in place with a press until the grout had completely dried.

Thanks to the cleaning tests carried out, a cleaning methodology was developed for the removal of the salts patina of oxalates and nitrates, the removal of the yellowed and depolymerised varnish layer and the removal of over-paintings. Following the cleaning intervention, it was possible to distinguish the location of the old stuccature done in the past restorations. Those that physically were not able to support the paint layer were substituted with new ones.

A mortar mixture having a similar chemical composition of the original preparation layer was devised, thanks to the results from the XRD analysis. The first application consisted of a coarse mortar, proceeding layer by layer using thinner mortars.

After having conserved the structure of the ceiling, the conservators moved to the aesthetical part. The chosen integration method established the former unity of the wall paintings, using reversible colours, which will not alter in time. Mainly water-based colours were used. Certain considerations regarding the method of retouching were put a forth; the paintings serve a religious meaning in this Sanctuary through their iconography. Therefore one must consider certain aesthetic demands from the church community. The painting is situated in a living environment where religious ceremonies take place, and thus cannot be compared to a painting exhibited in a museum, so some of the pictorial integration was intended to recreate the lost forms so as to bring back the meaning of the work of art.

The project will be completed in September 2013 and was carried out using reversible conservation-



grade materials which permit the transpiration of the rock support and avoid the concentration of humidity on the painted ceiling, a major factor contributing to the degradation of these wall paintings. Ethical considerations were applied during every step of the conservation process following the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisation's (E.C.C.O) Code of Ethics.

References

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