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Nativity altarpiece at All Souls church restored

George Cini

Conservators Pierre Bugeja and Charlene Muscat retouching in puntini which are a series of dots. The intervention is discernible only at close range.

The Nativity of Christ, an altarpiece in one of the side chapels of the All Souls church, Ta' l-Erwieħ in Lower Merchants Street, Valletta has just been restored.

According to an unpublished MA thesis in History of Art by Bernardine Scicluna, Achille Ferris had described the altarpiece as a copy of a Guido Reni painting done at the peak of Stefano Erardi's career, conservator Pierre Bugeja, who restored the painting, said.



Mr Bugeja is the managing director of PrevArti, a firm of conservator-restorers specialising in the preservation, conservation and restoration of paintings and polychrome sculptures.

Maltese artist Stefano Erardi (1630-1716), who was a copyist, is presumed to have had, with his son Alessio, a bottega in Valletta as most artists then did. He painted over 60 paintings, found in churches, museums and private collections in Malta and Gozo.

The Nativity at the All Souls church was in a poor state of conservation mainly due to numerous paint losses and tears, making it unstable and fragile.

The main damage on the canvas structure was caused by water infiltration leading to lack of adhesion between the original support and the relining canvas. As the original canvas support was uncovered, numerous tears, holes, deformations and deteriorated tacking margins were found.

Being a large painting, measuring 2.08 metres by 1.57 metres, it was made of two canvases sewn together. However, the seam opened and divided the painting in two due to induced stresses once the canvas shrunk, Mr Bugeja explained.

The paint layer had suffered from numerous losses in a number of places mostly on the eyes of the Madonna. Moreover, the shrinkage of the support had led to the tenting of the paint causing severe lifting in most areas.

"Scientific investigation showed that the painting had been extensively over-painted.

"The canvas at the back was cleaned of dust, embedded dirt, insect remains and from the glue used for past relining treatment.

"Another phase required the fixing of numerous tears and holes and the rejoining of the seam by using inlays and patches. Once the painting was relined, work could proceed on the front," Mr Bugeja said.

Consolidation and flattening of lifted paint was done using localised adhesive, humidity and heat.

The reconstruction of the eyes of the Madonna was done using a series of reversible coloured dots next to each other.

"These dots can only be distinguished from a close distance, respecting the original as requested by today's conservation professional code of ethics.

"The eyes of the Madonna were reconstructed by rigorously following the remains of the existing paint flakes and by relying on a study of the face of the Virgin as shown in other paintings by the same artist," Mr Bugeja added.

The All Souls church in Valletta opens for Mass every Friday.
