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St John's Co-Cathedral to extend museum

Vast collection of sacred robes to be displayed

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Embroidery details of the elaborate sacred robes stored at St John's Co-Cathedral.

Refurbishment and extension plans for the museum of St John's Co-Cathedral, in Valletta have been drawn up, outlining a five-year roadmap that should cost around €16.3 million (Lm7 million).

Plans are in the pipeline for what is known as the Loggia in its annex - recently the home of the Caravaggio exhibition.

Among the items on the wish list of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation is the unearthing and shifting of the collection of about 300 sacred robes - one of the largest in Europe - to the Loggia, which was appropriately originally used for the robing of the local clergy, St John's Co-Cathedral curator Cynthia de Giorgio said.

The idea would be to shed light - literally - on the impressive collection, most of which is stored away in the sacristy, stuffed in drawers in conditions that could not be described as ideal, according to the curator. They have not seen the light of day for at least 50 years.

It was the best that could be done at the moment, she said, pointing out that the treasures in the museum are innumerable.

Only about two per cent of the robes are on display in the vestments hall but when the foundation's plan materialises, visitors would finally be faced with the "full extent of the impact of the collection".

It would be impossible to bring out all the robes as an area of 500 square metres would be required for the vestments alone, Ms de Giorgio pointed out, but at least

they would be preserved in better conditions and would also benefit from a "resting period", which every work of art required.

Built in the 18th century, the Loggia was turned into a picture gallery in the early 1990s when it was decided that the paintings - mostly donations from the Knights of the Order of St John - that were overcrowded in the co-cathedral and its sacristy should be housed in there.

It would now be returned to its original use, displaying, for example, the entire collection of robes of Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner in procession order.

Every Grand Master, as well as bishops and inquisitors, gave about 65 pieces, Grand Master Pinto and Cottoner's being among those in the best condition.

However, being a south-facing area of the co-cathedral, the Loggia was not always the ideal spot in that temperatures in the hall rose, plus it got a lot of sun and light, which was even more damaging... until adequate measures were taken.

In order to protect the paintings - and eventually the sacred robes, which are equally at the mercy of atmospheric conditions - the Loggia has already been equipped with state-of-the-art blinds, sponsored by Camilleri Paris Mode and Silent Gliss, which has worked on mega international museums, specifically developing state-of-the-art fabrics.

The fabric was created purposely to block out harmful UV and IR rays, reducing the temperature by five degrees and producing a stable environment.

Although the idea is to bring the vestments to light, as it were, it is known to damage fabric - and particularly silk, which is what most of them are made of. Hence, the need for the protective blinds.

Ms de Giorgio described the vestments as "absolute treasures", not only made of pure silk and satin but also profusely embroidered with flowers in pure silk and gold thread, replete with symbolic and religious significance and not merely decorative.

A decision on the application of EU structural funds for the museum project is due shortly, she said.

The museum would help to expose the extent of the co-cathedral's treasures and relieve the congestion in it while exhibiting them properly as they deserve.

The project should incorporate an auditorium for visitors and a restoration lab as well as state-of-the-art storage and a system of climate control.

The auditorium is expected to relieve the queues - St John's was never intended to receive 3,000 visitors a day and was suffering due to the influx, Ms de Giorgio insisted.

The idea is to create a sense of ownership among citizens, which brings along with it responsibility, she added. "Their contribution is their payment at the door, which no one should complain about. On the contrary, they should take the initiative to donate more."
