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Ninu Zammit stops restoration of Jesuit Church's works of art

Priceless 16th century paintings disintegrating in a government store

Restoration started in 1999, but never completed

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Three large priceless, 16th century lunettes which once adorned two chapels of the Jesuit Church in Valletta have been abandoned for the last year in a government building in Cottonera, exposed to severe conditions of heat and humidity, without any form of protection.

The three semi circular paintings, each measuring about four by two metres, were commissioned in the late 1600s. Originally they were attributed to the famous Italian artist Mattia Preti, who had made other paintings in the same church. Yet, they are now thought to be works of artists from his school, possibly Stefano Erardi (1630–1716) and Guzeppi D'Arena (1643–1719).

No protection, little security

maltastar.com investigations have shown that these paintings are now stored in a hostile ambiance in a government building in Cottonera with no form of protection against further damage. This e-newspaper will not be publishing the exact location of the paintings, as the place has little security and can be easily accessed. Unfortunately, unless immediate action is taken, the damage to the paintings may soon become irreversible.



After hundreds of years on the walls of the Jesuits' Church, the last ten years of these paintings' history were a story of failure, as government has been trying to have them restored since 1999, but repeatedly failed to bring back these public works of art to their original splendour.



One of the paintings, probably the oldest one, which was located in the church's chapel dedicated to St Agatha and St Lucia, is in urgent need of conservation, as art restoration experts who had the chance to view it, confirmed to this e-newspaper. Its back is now almost completely deteriorated, and is covered in mould. Also the paint layer seems to be too brittle.

Ninu Zammit stopped the restoration

"The three paintings are currently stored face down on makeshift scaffolding which had been used for construction work, in a top floor room with direct sunlight entering from large windows" said one of the art experts who saw the paintings, "There is no control of the excessive humidity, light, or heat, which are further damaging the three lunettes. Since it is a top floor room with no form of protection, it is very hot in summer and very humid in winter, and these extreme conditions are the last thing the paintings need."



The Infrastructure Minister Ninu Zammit, who is responsible for the restoration of these national treasures, was well aware that they need urgent attention. In May 2007, his officials even issued a call for tenders for their restoration (Works Department Advert 58/07).



But Zammit decided to cut short the tendering process half-way. Sources at the ministry confirmed that the decision was taken because the cost involved, possibly in region of €60,000, was considered to be “unaffordable”.

Failed 1999 restoration

This was the second time that these paintings were abandoned before proper restoration and conservation had been completed. Two of the lunettes were taken off the church’s walls back in 1999, when Minister Francis Zammit Dimech, then responsible for similar works of art, contracted a Maltese restorer to work on them (Advert 41/99). But for the next eight years, the two lunettes remained in the Jesuit Church’s oratory awaiting completion. It seems that soon after a Maltese restorer started working on them, however the work was soon abandoned and never returned to.

In the meantime, a third lunette, featuring St Lucia’s martyrdom, fell from the wall where it was hanging in the church. Then the inexpert government workers did something which continued to damage the work – they wrapped it up in plastic sheeting, and consequently it got covered in mould and became even more fragile.

In 2007, the Jesuits asked government to take action, to no avail. They contended that not only were the paintings subjected to further damage, but they were also taking up precious space in the oratory. Thus Heritage Malta were called in to supervise their transit to Cottonera.

From then onwards, the paintings were left to abject neglect.

