

Co-cathedral enters another golden age



Restoration work costing about €530,000 on the arches along the main nave of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta has just been completed. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi.

The arches along the main nave of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta have been restored to their original splendour in an extensive project that cost about €530,000.

The arches were damaged by the dampness and the accumulation of dust and grime over time and it took the Italian and Maltese restorers almost two years of meticulous work to reveal their former beauty.

The project was funded by the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation and entrusted to Sante Guido restorers from Italy.

The cathedral is often described as Malta's gem. Now, it sparkles even brighter. After the recent controversy that raged over the foundation's proposed underground museum, the focus can now shift to the exquisite grandeur of the cathedral's interior.

The grandmasters of the Knights, who took great pride in their conventual church, wanted it decorated in a Baroque style. The process of decoration lasted from the 1650s to the 1660s and it was only after Mattia Preti painted the vault that the nave and

chapels were adorned with elaborate motifs, transforming the walls into a riot of richly gilded foliage, flowers, angels and triumphal symbols.

As a result, the restoration of each arch and the interior wall of the façade entailed an initial detailed study of each arch, taking into consideration the gilding technique, the state of conservation, old restorations and materials as well as factors of deterioration.

Samples were taken to understand the constitutive materials of several arches as well as for comparative studies.

The arches suffered from dampness, salt migration to a height of approximately three metres, loss of gold and original paint layers, over paintings in tempera and oil medium and application of linseed oil.

Tests were carried out on each arch to ensure the cleaning method was suitable for all arches.

The restorers then started from the top, removing all dirt and grime using aqueous solutions applied by brush and working on the surface with a circular motion, followed by thorough rinsing with de-ionized water.

Lower areas that had a high content of water and salt florescence were rid of salts using absorbent materials and techniques. Thick layers of linseed oil were removed using poultices of alkaline solutions.

In all methodologies, rinsing the surface from all products was extremely important to stop any action on the surface that could cause further damage.

Unstable and detached stone or paint layers were consolidated while old, weak in-fills were removed and replaced with fresh plaster. Cracks and other losses were filled in with the same reversible material to attain continuity of decorative surface.

Once the structural work was wrapped up, areas that had loss of paint layers were repainted using reversible water colour technique and then gilded.

Comments

M Grima (5 days, 1 hour ago)

@Mr Buttigieg

At the time the Cathedral was built the Knights of St.John were the 'de facto' Government of this Island.They were both a 'State' and a religious order but clear distinctions between the two were always maintained. While the Cathedral may have

been administered on a daily basis by the Church, at no time did the Church inherit any part of that building or its treasures. "Happened to be" is neither here nor there. The building and its precincts always belonged to the State and as such presently to the people. Proof of residence or usage is not proof of ownership and no rights are bestowed.

Joe Buttigieg (5 days, 6 hours ago)

@ D. Mercieca

The Order of St. John was a religious order founded to provide hospital care to pilgrims to the Holy Land. St. John's was their conventual church in as much as the Knights were a religious order much the same as the Dominicans or the Franciscans. That they happened to be also the rulers of Malta (and other places prior to that) was not their primary vocation. Indeed they had other buildings from which to rule the country such as the presidential palace in Valletta. So I beg to differ from your opinion that the church had nothing to do with St. John because the order considered itself as part of the Church and the building itself is a "church" and was dedicated for Christian worship by the Knights themselves.

D Mercieca (5 days, 14 hours ago)

@Mr de Giorgio

The splendour of St John's has very little to do with the Church and everything to do with the Knight's. Praise where praise is due. We have a problem with 'sitting tenants' there and it would be wrong to give the impression that the Cathedral ever belonged to the Church.

James De Giorgio (5 days, 15 hours ago)

Prosit tassew! We are very proud of St John's Co-Cathedral, a bastion of Christian heritage in Malta. A stark reminder to all that were it not for the Roman Catholic Church, our island would be devoid of its Baroque splendour.

Luke Gatt (5 days, 15 hours ago)

@Alfred Grech

Mr. Grech I'm no expert in this field but I know for sure that light damages the paintings etc.

Alfred Grech (5 days, 15 hours ago)

One problem I see is that most of the time the lights are not turned on and the Cathedral is pretty dark and it's impossible to enjoy the beauty of its details. A big prosit to those who worked hard to have this restoration performed.

v.pulis (5 days, 16 hours ago)

This must have been the sight that greeted the knights when the cathedral was new. Now I wish someone would come up with a valid and practical solution for the protection of the splendid floor of the church. This is without doubt a tricky challenge but continuous restoration, albeit a very commendable thing is not a final answer.

Rudi Psaila (5 days, 20 hours ago)

Well rules may have changed. Certainly the last time I went to St John's ,which was about three years ago,I was asked to pay, even though I told the lady at the door my intentions.I haven't darkened their doorstep since.

Paul A Attard (5 days, 21 hours ago)

@ Rudi Psaila

The Co-Cathedral is open without any obligation during church services and ceremonies, daily until 09.00 and on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning when you can hear Mass.

If you wish to pray at other times during the week you simply indicate your intention to the cutodian. An admission fee is charged so that major restoration as well as ongoing maintenance works can be carried out and utilities are paid for. The custodians and other members of staff receive their remuneration as appropriate. As indicated in the news item, the triumphal arches project alone cost 530,000 Euros. Currently there is the restoration of the external walls of the Co-Cathedral by the Works Division, the restoration of two more tapestries in a very specialised workshop in Belgium, the restoration of the main organ boxes, the restoration of monuments, the ongoing repair of the tombstones, while research is being carried out and more restoration is being planned. Besides the several projects undertaken in the last few years. Visit the Co-cathedral.

Emmanuel Marmara' (5 days, 21 hours ago)

Rudi, where did you get this from ?...I go to hear mass every sunday in this church and never ever payed any money... and even sometimes when I go to Valletta during the week and visit this co-cathedral never payed either.//

Rudi Psaila (5 days, 22 hours ago)

Mr.Gatt we have to pay to go to that Church,even if just to pray. Who say's God and Mammon don't mix?

L..Galea (6 days ago)

Congratulations to all concerned.

This is what should be done to preserve our national heritage.

Andrew Gatt (6 days ago)

A fanastic restoration. They look incredible. A very well done.....indeed, credit where credit is due. Prosit!

To all - well worth a visit. If you haven't been to St John's for some years, go see it now!

Lawrence Bonello (6 days ago)

A labour of love indeed!! Well done to all concerned!
