

Great Siege monument gets overdue facelift

George Cini



Portrait of Antonio Sciortino by Silvio Galimberti found at the National Museum of Fine Arts, South Street, Valletta. Right: A detail showing active corrosion.
Photo: Matthew Attard Navarro

The 1565 Great Siege monument in Republic Street, Valletta is being given a much-needed new lease of life thanks to an injection of money by FIMBank plc in collaboration with the heritage NGO, Din l-Art Helwa. This bronze sculpture lies in Great Siege Square, opposite the law courts and by St John's Co-Cathedral. Designed by Antonio Sciortino, one of Malta's top artists of the 20th century, it consists of a granite base supporting three figures.

The female on the left, holding a papal tiara in her right hand, symbolises faith. The female on the right holds a mask of Minerva in her left hand, representing civilisation. Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom and the arts whom the Greeks called Athena. The male, standing in the middle, -portrays valour and holds a sword and a shield.

The monument was unveiled on May 8, 1927.

Conservators Ingrid Ross, James Licari and Frank Chetcuti, from Heritage ResCo, cleaned the sculpture of salt deposits, acidic bird droppings and past interventions.

“Bird droppings are extremely acidic and erode the protective ‘patina’ built through the years, over and above the possible coloured patination chosen by the artist and given by the foundry.

“Bronze corrodes when exposed to fluctuations of humidity and temperature,” Mr Licari said.

“The cleaning included the removal of external deposits, dirt and grime as well as any previously applied waxes and oils,” he explained. The areas of active corrosion – that show up as bright green powder – were cleaned and treated chemically in order to reduce the possibility of further damage. The bronze was then given several layers of a protective coat.

The stone pedestal was also cleaned. When bronze corrodes, the residues run down and penetrate the pores of the stone, causing stains.

Several maintenance attempts were undertaken in the past.

“Apparently, every time an event took place in Great Siege Square, not only in connection with the feast of September 8 (when Il-Vitorja is celebrated, marking the victory over the Turks in 1565 and that over the Axis powers in WWII), water and cleaning agents were used to wash the monument, which didn’t do the bronze any good,” Mr Licari said. The work was coordinated with architect Claude Borg from the Restoration Project Office at the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs.

The conservation project which will be ready for next Wednesday’s celebrations was dedicated to Dennis Vella who died last year and who was curator of the National Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Antonio Sciortino

Antonio Sciortino was born on January 25, 1879 in Żebbuġ, Malta. In 1900, he won a national competition, entitling him to an annual subsidy of £40 sponsored by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce to pursue studies in Rome.

In Rome, Sciortino studied at the Istituto di Belle Arti and attended the British Academy of Art, among other seats of learning. In 1902, he graduated in engineering and monumental architecture.


Later, at the British Academy of Art in Rome, Sciortino lectured sculpture and for 25 years was director of the same academy. He was conferred the title of professor of fine arts by the Italian government.

He was appointed curator and inspector of fine arts at the National Museum on May 3, 1937.


His bequest to the people of Malta included works spanning 40 years of activity.

Sciortino died on August 10, 1947, aged 68.

Comments

James Licari(1 week, 6 days ago) 

I must emphasize and clarify further the quoted comment with regards to the generic phrase: 'Previous Maintenance Interventions'. That statement was not meant, in any way, to impart a harsh criticism towards these but rather to emphasise the need to start tackling these projects scientifically with academically and experienced professional conservator-restorer, (who are trained specifically on materials composing the monument/s). We are all aware that many dedicated individuals were responsible for preserving this monument and others, utilising the best methods and materials during their time. Throughout the team's historical research, it has come to our attention that possibly in the early 60s the monuments 'patina' had been polished off. It has also been pointed out that oil was applied to the monument in the past, apparently on the advice of the local council at the time but this was amended upon, thanks to the intervention of Dr Ray Bondin, representing Valletta Rehabilitation Projects [VRP] and various other individuals. These latter facts are still being researched and recorded as part of the documentation process. I do hope this has clarified any misunderstandings.


James Licari(1 week, 6 days ago) 

The scientific approach to the conservation of this monument included:

- Documentation (historical research; state of preservation; intervention undertaken)
- Various cleaning tests were undertaken to select the most appropriate methodology to use.
- The cleaning of the monument included the removal of any external deposits, dirt and grime as well as any previously applied waxes and oils (which may have aged through the passage of time (like a varnish on an old painting).
- The various areas of active wear were meticulously cleaned, and treated chemically in order as to reduce its further development.
- The bronze was then given several layers with a conservation protective coat.
- The stone pedestal was also cleaned. Unfortunately, when bronze corrodes, the residues which run down the stone work, penetrates the pores of the stone and cannot be completely removed again, causing stains.

All the above was done respecting the developed protective 'patina' of the bronze.

Anyone may feel free to contact me, to discuss further. In the name of the team, I would like to thank you all for your praise. Let's strive to conserve and maintain all our outside monuments and niches, within the ethical boundaries of our times.


James Licari(1 week, 6 days ago) 

Conservation is not simply 'a power wash and three coatings of lacquer'.


Conservation is an academic profession which follows a scientific approach towards these individual works of art, similarly to a medic who treats his patient with individual attention.

'Conservation', 'Restoration', 'Conservator-restorers', and 'Preventive Maintenance' are not terms associated with a trade anymore but rather are linked to an established profession. This can be further emphasised with the existence of the Malta Association of Professional Conservator-Restorers [MAPCo-Re], who are part of the Malta Federation of Professional Associations. This profession is the only profession

within the artistic field who are legally bound to a professional status, within the Cultural Heritage Act 2001.

R.Borg(2 weeks, 3 days ago) 

LONG LIVE THE LOCAL PROPHETS OF DOOM AND GLOOM!
AND
LONG LIVE THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP DECISIONS AND
INITIATIVES TO MAKE 'THIS DIN L-ART HELWA' A MORE BEAUTIFUL PLACE!

Joseph Vassallo(2 weeks, 3 days ago) 

So, in layman's terms... a power-wash and three coats of lacquer?

P.Cassar(2 weeks, 3 days ago) 

BUT HAVEN'T WE GONE TO THE DOGS.
A NATIONAL MONUMENT, IN VERY SERIOUS NEED OF CARE, HAS TO FALL
ON NON-GOVT ASSISTANCE !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
WHILE OUR MONEYS ARE SQUANDERED IN VERY DUBIOUS WAYS !!!!!!!!!!

J. J. Borg(2 weeks, 3 days ago)

You mean squandered on free healthcare, free education, free rubbish collection,
and all that sort of bad stuff?