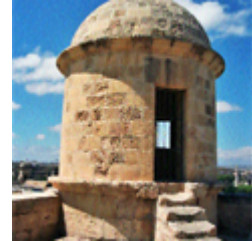


Our Heritage Saved...Vedette – St James Bastion

by Victor J Rizzo

This late 16th century Vedette, or Gardiola, on St James Bastion, Valletta is one of a number of watch posts constructed by the Order of St John at strategic points along the bastions.



As their name suggests, the vedettes were used as look-outs for the early warning of any attacking fleet approaching the Maltese islands. Din I-Art Helwa, a long-standing watch dog for the conservation and preservation of heritage sites and the environment, has aptly adopted the gardiola as its logo.

Located in front of the Central Bank of Malta and St James Cavalier it overlooks another vedette on another bastion over St James Ditch. Whilst the latter vedette is hexagonal in shape, the former is a dome over a cylindrical drum, nine courses high, separated by a cornice. Yet another cornice separates the drum from the base constructed over larger stone slabs forming part of the bastion wall. A flight of four steps lead to the proper floor at the lower cornice. Viewed from below the bastions, the lower cornice is seen as the base of the vedette.

This watchpost commands sweeping views of the Grand Harbour, the Three Cities, and down towards Floriana. Manoel Island can also be seen on the other side of the peninsula. It is located on part of the Valletta defenses known as St James Counterguard. These were not part of Laparelli's plans for the defense of Valletta but were added in the eighteenth century as part of the fortifications.

When Din I-Art Helwa took over the restoration of the vedette in 1994, a condition survey showed serious cracks in the structure from the dome to the foundations within the bastion walls. Large areas of stonework were so badly damaged that they needed replacement. Past rendering with cement on some parts of the external walls caused the structure to deteriorate significantly especially at the side more exposed to the elements.

It seemed pointless to restore only the vedette when its foundations were also in a critical danger of collapse.

Work commenced in March 1995 and had to be carried out in three phases. Stones forming part of the vedette were dismantled and numbered. The supporting bastion walls had to be repaired. The final phase involved rebuilding the watch post using the original stone and substituting the severely damaged stones with similar material.

The entrance to the vedette was closed by an iron door to keep away vandals. The work was entirely sponsored by the Central Bank of Malta.

Din I-Art Helwa welcomes and acclaims the recent announcement by the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs of a seven year programme for the restoration of a major chunk of the bastions around the Maltese Islands with funds from the European Union. This will be a major step forward for the further preservation of our prime historic locations.

Be a guardian of Malta's heritage by becoming a member of Din I-Art Helwa. For more details send an e-mail to info@dinlarthelwa.org indicating your name and forwarding address, or visit our website www.dinlarthelwa.org

Mr Rizzo is Treasurer of Din I-Art Helwa

Photos by Joe Chetcuti and the author
