



A Race Against Time: Conserving The Argotti Nymphaeum

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Deep within the tranquil **Argotti Botanic Gardens & Resource Centre** in Floriana, a unique piece of Maltese history is in a quiet but desperate battle for survival. The 18th-century monumental structure located within the gardens, known as the **Nymphaeum**, is fading. The journey of this project highlights the story of a dedicated team racing against time and the immense challenges of preserving our heritage.





External view of the Nymphaeum
Photo by James Moffett



Despite our size, we Maltese take pride in the rich history, vibrant culture and priceless heritage that surrounds us. Yet, beneath the veneer of Malta's timeless beauty, many of our most precious sites are silently battling the relentless march of time, often exacerbated by a complex web of conservation challenges. The ongoing efforts to restore the 18th-century Nymphaeum within the Argotti Botanic Gardens & Resource Centre in Floriana serve as a poignant case study, shedding light on the systemic issues that plague heritage conservation, from securing adequate funding and fostering public engagement to the sheer race against irreversible decay.

At the heart of this monumental effort is UM's Department of Conservation and Built Heritage, led by Head of Department Prof. JoAnn Cassar. The conservation project is primarily spearheaded by Jennifer Porter. As both a professional wall paintings conservator and assistant lecturer at the same department, Porter's leadership is central to every facet of the work. Together with a team of other professional conservators, archaeologists, conservation architects, and engineers, they bring a wealth of knowledge and an unwavering passion to the site.

For years, the Department has involved its students in documenting and studying the Nymphaeum, providing an invaluable training ground and fostering a new generation of conservators. 'It's very exciting that so many young people have shown such an interest and involvement, and a wish to participate in its preservation,' says Cassar. However, the escalating crisis demanded a shift in strategy. Due to the project's increasing complexity and the demanding timeline, the team came to the realisation that professional conservators and substantial funding were essential.

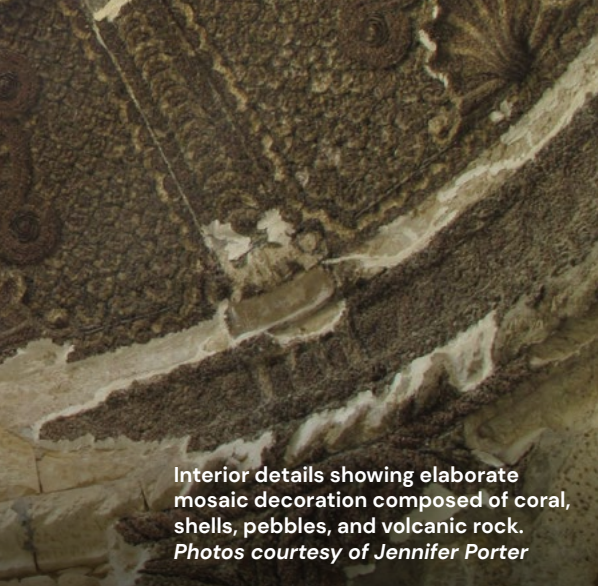
A MONUMENT IN PERIL: THE STRUGGLE FOR PRESERVATION

Complete with water features and an elaborate mosaic decoration of coral, shells, pebbles, and volcanic rock, the Nymphaeum once served as a serene retreat within the Argotti Gardens. Its uniqueness lies not only in its rich mosaic decorations but in the fact that it remains within its original 18th-century garden context – a rare survivor from the time of the Knights of St. John (read more about the Argotti Botanic Gardens & Resource Centre in **Issue 45, p. 44**).

Yet, its very environment has become its greatest threat. The porous local stone acts like a sponge, drawing moisture from the irrigated gardens and a nearby cistern. This moisture

carries salts that crystallise within the stone and plaster, causing them to flake and powder, pushing the delicate mosaics off the surface. 'It is just a concentration of many, many of the problems we're seeing everywhere in Malta,' Cassar explains. 'We have very porous stone and plaster, we have salts everywhere, and we have a lot of moisture. These coming together is a very unhappy recipe.'

The situation at the Nymphaeum is not a sudden occurrence, but a build-up of existing problems in tandem with well-intentioned but misguided conservation practices from the past. The struggle to secure funding further compounded the delay, a common hurdle in the world of heritage preservation where the quiet, slow-motion crisis of decay often fails to capture the urgency of the situation. It was only through the persistent efforts of the Department and the sponsorship of the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) obtained through the Research, Innovation and Development Trust (RIDT) that the necessary funds were secured to begin the hands-on conservation work by Porter and her team of Research Support Officers, Michel Salameh, Eleonora Genova, and Nathalie Debono. Additional contributions came from colleagues within the Department, including Dr Roberta De Angelis, Prof. Reuben Grima, and Dr Shirley Cefai, as well as



Interior details showing elaborate mosaic decoration composed of coral, shells, pebbles, and volcanic rock. Photos courtesy of Jennifer Porter



Prof. Spiridione Buhagiar (Department of Civil & Structural Engineering). Vital support has also been provided by the Restoration and Preservation Department of the Ministry for Culture, Lands and Local Government.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

With the clock ticking, the team's approach is a careful blend of scientific analysis and creative problem-solving. The primary goal is not to restore the Nymphaeum to a pristine, 'as-new' condition, but to stabilise it – to slow down the relentless decay and preserve to the best of the team's ability the authentic, historical fabric that remains.

The current phase involves meticulous testing and treatment design. The team is developing support systems to hold the fragile, overhanging mosaics located on the dome in place while they are treated. This allows the team to apply consolidants or grouts without the risk of the decorations falling.

One of the key techniques will be the use of sacrificial plasters. These are specific lime-based renders applied to the stone. These plasters are designed to be more porous and weaker than the historic stone and mosaic materials. They act as a sponge, drawing the damaging salts into themselves. Porter explains that 'what we're hoping for is that these will deteriorate preferentially and slow down the

deterioration of the surrounding materials'. These plasters are not a permanent fix. They need to be part of a long-term management plan and may need to be replaced periodically.

This reality underscores a crucial message – conservation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing commitment. Education and awareness campaigns are vital to bridge this gap, but they too require resources and sustained effort, hence becoming another layer of challenge in the conservation process.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST: THE VIRTUAL REALITY VISION

Given the fragility of the Nymphaeum, rebuilding the lost mosaics on the walls is not an option. It would be ethically questionable to invent designs and practically impossible to attach new materials to a surface that is inherently unstable. So, how can visitors appreciate the structure's original magnificence?

The answer lies in technology. The team is exploring the creation of a virtual reality experience. This innovative solution would allow visitors to put on a headset and see a meticulously researched, 3D digital reconstruction of the Nymphaeum as it likely appeared in the 18th century, or even in later periods, depending on the availability of documentary evidence. They could explore the

vibrant colours and intricate patterns of the lost mosaics and even see the long-gone statue of Diana that once graced its fountain.

This approach brilliantly balances the need to preserve the site's authenticity with the desire to create an engaging and educational visitor experience, thereby offering a window into the past without compromising the integrity of the original monument.

A LESSON OF CAUTION

The conservation of the Argotti Nymphaeum is more than just the story of one structure. It is a testament to the people who dedicate their lives to protecting our heritage. It is a powerful lesson in having realistic expectations of conservation and a reminder that these treasures, once lost, are gone forever. The story of the Nymphaeum is a microcosm of the broader challenges faced by heritage professionals. It serves as a crucial reminder that, for countless other historical treasures, the clock is still ticking, and without a more robust, proactive, and publicly supported conservation framework, many more of our heritage assets will remain at risk, taking with them valuable fragments of our shared human story. The Argotti Nymphaeum is but one example of the need to shift the discourse of how we value, fund, and ultimately try to preserve the irreplaceable legacies of our past. 