

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

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Abstract

Knowledge of the physical history of the *Great Siege* wall paintings (1576–81) by Matteo Perez D'Aleccio in the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta, Malta, has been fundamental in understanding their current condition and the continuity between their original function and current significance. It has also directly influenced the conservation approach employed by the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage, University of Malta. Diverse bodies of evidence—including archival photographs, physical evidence of past interventions and damage, and noninvasive methods such as multispectral imaging (MSI) and in situ microscopy—were synthesized to build a cohesive narrative and inform conservation strategies. This study demonstrates how the conservation and presentation of artworks can influence their perception and interpretation, and in turn their continuing relevance to the society within which they function.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the physical history and function of an artwork is fundamental to the conservation process, particularly in the case of *in situ* wall paintings. The story of the 16th-century CE *Great Siege* wall painting cycle located in the Grand Master's Palace, Valletta, Malta, is particularly compelling, since it reflects the history of the island nation of Malta, the continuity between the paintings' original function and their ongoing use, and how these factors have impacted key aspects of their conservation over time.

The 1565 Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman Empire was a pivotal event in the history of the Maltese islands, ruled at the time by the Knights of the Order of Saint John, with important political implications for the Mediterranean region and Europe. Roughly ten years after the Siege, the Grand Master of the Order commissioned the Roman artist Matteo Pérez d'Aleccio to record the historic event in a monumental painted frieze on the walls of the Grand Council Chamber of the Grand Master's Palace in the newly built capital city of Valletta (Figure 1). The *Great Siege* wall paintings (1576–81) are thus an exceptional document created within living memory of the Siege (Espinosa Rodriguez 2001, 56) and undoubtedly



Figure 1. *Great Siege* wall painting cycle, Grand Council Chamber, Grand Master's Palace, Valletta, Malta. © DCBH, 2022

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

in close consultation with the Siege participants while surrounded by material remains from the events. In fact, the paintings continue to serve as a primary source for historians due to their extremely detailed and accurate depiction of military costumes, weaponry and warfare, and their topographic depictions of 16th-century Malta (Sciberras 2009, 3).

The vast cycle (ca. 250 m²) depicts the four-month siege in a narrative sequence, from the arrival of the Ottoman fleet to its defeat and departure, and is composed of twelve episodes interspaced by allegorical figures (Figure 2). The story dominates the four walls of the Grand Council Chamber, which was used by the Knights for large state gatherings and ambassadorial deputations (Vella 2015, 167), and maintains its importance in the government and public life of Malta today.



Figure 2. Detail of one narrative scene and two Allegories. © DCBH, 2019

The paintings are applied on a single layer of lime-based plaster over ashlar of local Globigerina limestone and are generally thought to have been painted using a fresco technique (Leitner 2001). The original technology, though, is more complex than a pure fresco and studies on its make up are still ongoing.

In 2018, the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage (DCBH) of the University of Malta (UM) initiated a project (referred to as the “current project”) to complete the conservation of the *Great Siege* cycle. Approximately two-thirds of the paintings had been previously conserved by Dresden University of Fine Arts (Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HfBK)) in the early 2000s.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Extensive research on the physical history of the site and paintings was carried out to identify sources of past damage and deterioration, and to inform conservation strategies. Previously published partial summaries of this history (e.g., Braun 1946, Abela 1988, Ganado and Agius-Vadala 1994, Ellul 1998, Bonello 2001, Spagnol 2009, Vella 2015) were complemented with textual and graphic evidence from the National Museum of Archaeology archive (NMA) (Valletta), National Archive of Malta (NAM) (Rabat), Public Works Archive (Floriana), and UM collections. Conservators from previous projects were interviewed, and some provided access to their collections of data and photographs.

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

Physical evidence of past interventions was gathered from the paintings using noninvasive methods. Visual examination, photography, and in situ digital microscopy were used to identify and document traces (marks and materials) of previous interventions and to distinguish them from original paint layers and plasters.¹ Multispectral imaging (MSI) (visible, IR reflectance, UV reflectance, UV luminescence) (after Verri and Saunders 2014) was also used. Where relevant, evidence of certain aspects of the physical history (e.g., losses in the original plaster, incised lines, nail holes) were mapped and correlated with maps of earlier interventions, as reconstructed from archival images; these maps proved essential for interpreting the physical/direct impact of the interventions on the paintings. Material evidence of past restoration interventions was found through the excavation of debris accumulated in a wooden cornice directly below the paintings, probably installed sometime after 1908 (Magro-Conti, pers. comm., 2022).

Once woven together, these disparate bodies of evidence formed a cohesive narrative, which revealed the story of the changes to the *Great Siege* wall paintings and the reasons behind these changes. Table 1 summarizes the methods used.

Table 1. Summary of information sources (see main text for references)

Archival sources	Text	• Museum Department Annual Reports from 1900: NMA Archive • Minutes of the Council of Government Debates from 1860–1920: Melitensia Collection, UM Library • Newspaper articles: Melitensia Collection, UM Library
	Graphic	• Plans and drawings: Public Works Archive • ~1908 post-cladding photographs: NAM • Post-1909 restoration and post-WWII photographs: NMA Archive • 1964 photographs: <i>Atlante</i> • 2001, pre-HfBK intervention photographs: David Pisani/Working Light • 2002–2005 pre-, during, and post-intervention photographs: HfBK • 2009 post-HfBK intervention photographs: Daniel Cilia
Noninvasive examinations		• Incident and raking photography • Portable microscopy • Mapping of previous interventions by using archival photographs • MSI
Cornice excavation		• Collection and documentation of found materials

PHYSICAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT SIEGE WALL PAINTINGS

The results of this work reveal intense periods of Council Chamber reuse and subsequent restoration, often with significant reinterpretation or re-presentation of the wall paintings. The cycle's 450-year physical history reflects some of the great events of Malta's own recent history, such as the impact of the over 150 years of British Colonial rule; the neglect and re-discovery of the *Siege* paintings; and the difficulties of World War II and its immediate aftermath. More recent physical history, including at least four restoration campaigns in the 20th century alone, reflects the development and evolution of conservation in Malta. Remarkable parallels between the experiences of early restorers and modern conservators while working on the site reflect the continuity of the function of the room and the paintings through centuries of major change.

Our findings indicate that the current appearance and condition of the *Great Siege* wall painting cycle are mainly the result of two major, pivotal

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

events during which extensive damage was inflicted on the paintings. This damage then precipitated multiple cycles of restoration/conservation interventions, up to, and including, the present day. The most salient events are analyzed in detail below and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Council Chamber use and salient events in the physical history of the *Siege* paintings (see main text for references)

Period	Date	Palace title	Room name/function	Event
Knights	1576–81	Grand Master's Palace	Grand Council meeting hall	<i>Great Siege</i> painted
British	1800	Governor's Palace	Hall of St. Michael and St. George; ceremonial events	British Governor's residence
	1818			Cladding installed
	1863–1908			Paintings partially uncovered
	~1908			Cladding removed
	1909			Restoration: complete overpainting
WWII	1940–42	Valletta Palace	Hall of St. Michael and St. George; ceremonial and parliamentary events	Palace damaged by bombing
	1944			Restoration: overpaint removal, repainting
Post-war	1952–70s	Magisterial Palace		Restoration: overpaint removal, repainting
Modern conservation	2000–05	Grand Master's Palace/President's Palace	Council Chamber; ceremonial events	Conservation (HfBK): cleaning, retouching
	2018–present			Conservation (UM): cleaning, retouching

British-period damage (1800–1908)

The first event to have a major impact on the paintings was the complete repurposing and redecoration of the Council Chamber during the period of British colonial rule in Malta (1800–1964). At that time, the Grand Master's Palace was reconfigured as the Governor's Palace, and the Knights' Council Chamber was reinvented as the “Hall of St. Michael and St. George” for use in ceremonial activities and as a ballroom (Abela 1988, 130). This involved the installation of a white and gold wood-and-canvas cladding in Neoclassical style in 1818, which completely covered the walls and ceiling of the Chamber, hiding the painted record of the *Siege* from view (Ellul 1998, 168) (Figure 3). A balcony was inserted into one wall of the Chamber, possibly in 1863, to accommodate musicians (Lintorn Simmons 1895, 58; Abela 1988, 130; Ellul 1998, 170–171). This modification resulted in the complete destruction of half of two narrative scenes and one allegory (Barling and Lochhead 1970, 68; Abela 1988, 131).

The paintings remained completely concealed beneath the Neoclassical cladding until the 1863–1908 period (Scicluna 1915, 200; Ellul 1998, 171), when stakeholders began to advocate for their uncovering and preservation. During an 1879 meeting of the Council of the Government of Malta, it was suggested that “some care should be taken that the paintings behind the wood-work are not deteriorated” and that “Originals such as those ought to be preserved and ought to be accessible” (Savona 1879). In 1881, another Council member argued that “the wood-work should be removed, and the frescoes made visible. In no other part of the world such frescoes recalling the glorious deeds of our forefathers would be allowed to remain hidden from the public gaze” (Cachia Zammit 1881). This persistent interest in the *Siege* cycle finally resulted in the uncovering of some sections of the painting to facilitate viewing (Figure 3).

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta



Figure 3. Council Chamber after the installation of the Neoclassical cladding (photo taken after some sections of cladding had been removed to reveal the *Siege* paintings). Credit: Richard Ellis, ca. 1862–1908

The cladding was finally fully removed in 1908 by request of King Edward VII (Scicluna 1915, 200; Ellul 1998, 171). A remarkable set of photographs taken at this time records the condition of each panel of the paintings, including cracking and large losses (Figure 4). During the current project, the layout of the British cladding was reconstructed from archival photographs and overlaid onto maps of the condition of the paintings in 2018 (see Table 1). Almost all areas of damage in the paintings coincided perfectly with the various elements of the cladding, confirming that the cladding intervention is still one of the most significant sources of damage to the cycle (Figure 5).

1909 restoration

The first 20th-century restoration was undertaken in 1909 (Ellul 1998, 173) with the aim of masking the extensive cladding damage. Previously

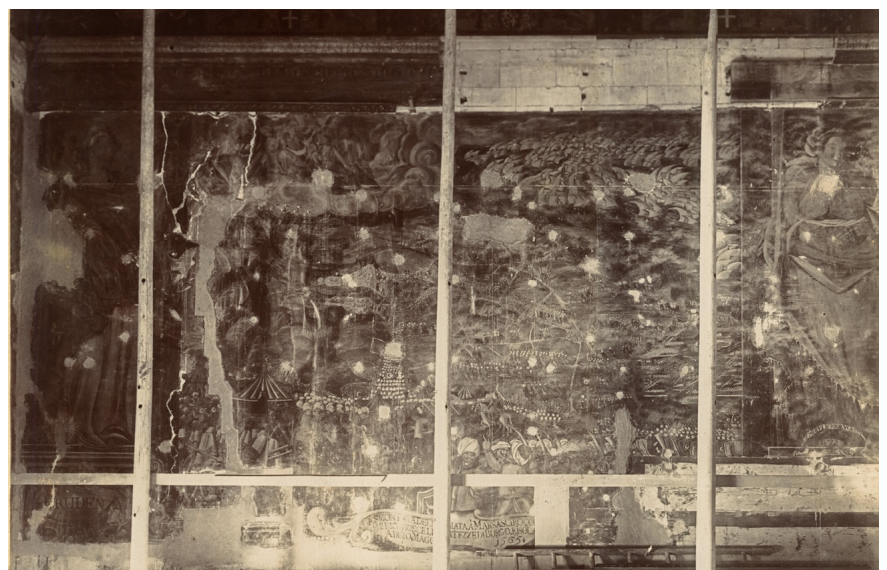


Figure 4. Narrative scene and two Allegories after the removal of the Neoclassical cladding and before restoration. © NAM, 1909

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

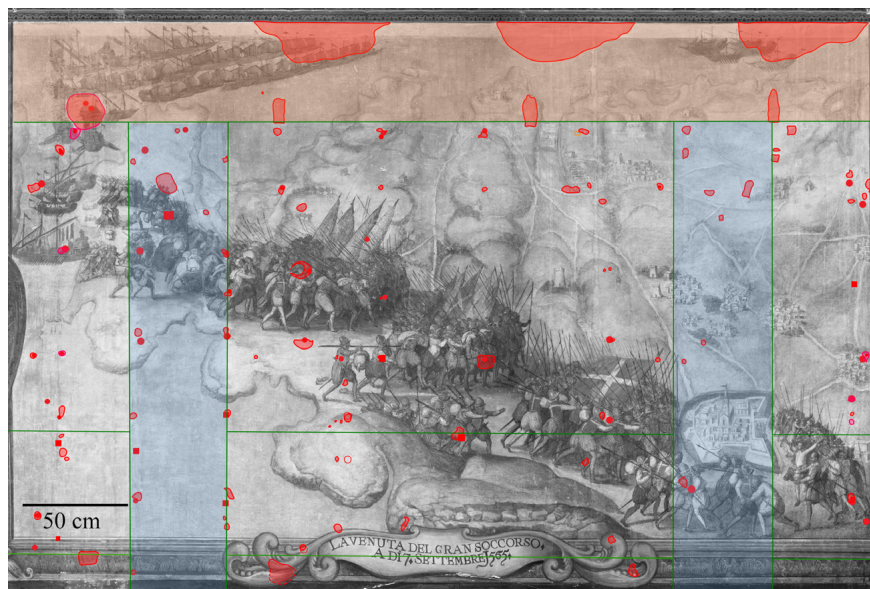


Figure 5. 2018 condition map of paint and plaster losses (red) with the location of the Neoclassical cladding indicated by green lines, as reconstructed from archival photographs. The location of the upper soffit of the cladding is shaded in pink; columns in blue. © DCBH, 2021

unpublished photographs taken after this intervention² and notes from early restorers (Bonnici Cali 1967) reveal that the cycle was completely painted over at this time. The restorer used a thick, opaque paint applied in a rough and almost cartoonish style (Figures 6, 7) but generally seems to have replicated the composition of the d'Aleccio paintings. Thus, from this

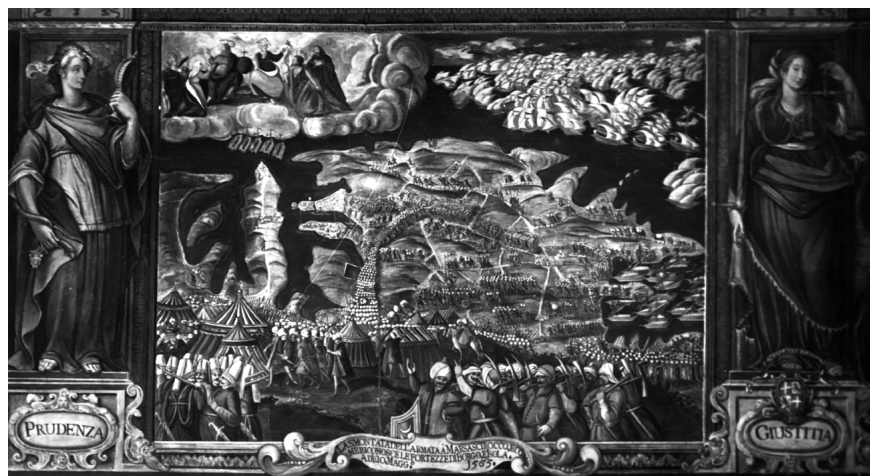


Figure 6. Same section of painting as shown in Figure 5 after the 1909 restoration. © NMA, Heritage Malta, 1909



Figure 7. Single area of painting after the 1909 restoration (left) (© NMA, Heritage Malta, 1909), after post-war restorations (middle), and after the HfBK intervention (right) (© HfBK, 2003)

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

point until the mid-20th-century restoration interventions, viewers of the cycle would have perceived the 1909 restoration overpaint as d'Aleccio's *Great Siege* paintings.

World War II damage (1940–42)

World War II was the second cataclysmic event in the history of the paintings. The extent of bombardment of the Maltese Islands during this period is well known (Braun 1946). Bombs fell directly onto portions of the Palace and areas immediately adjacent to the Council Chamber, though none within the Chamber itself (Bonello 2001, 29). Upon inspection after the war, extensive cracking and detachment were noted in the *Siege* paintings, which required stabilization (Sciortino 1944). During these condition surveys, restorers also realized that the cycle was completely overpainted, noting that “these affrescoes [sic] were restored some years ago by inexperienced people who appear to have used oil colours thus greatly reducing the value of this famous work. This superimposed matter has to be taken off and cleaned away” (Sciortino 1944).

War-damage restorations (1944–1970s)

World War II damage triggered the second big cycle of restoration interventions. Records from this period are especially interesting, because they reflect the difficulties and austerity of life, as well as the working methods of these resourceful early restorers. To stabilize delaminated areas of painting, the restorers injected casein mixtures and noted that “a certain kind of cheese, called Provatura, obtainable in Italy, is a requisite essential. The lack of this is greatly felt” (Sciortino 1944). Sciortino goes on to say that, “owing to the lack of suitable restoring material we have had to fall back upon substitutes obtained from local markets and to experiment with these in various ways. We have also had to use paper to hold up sections of these affrescoes [sic], wherever such threatened to come off” (Sciortino 1944). Evidence for this was found in photos of the Council Chamber published in 1964 (*Atlante* 1964),³ where an entire section of the paintings can still be seen covered by strips of paper lottery tickets. Extensive remains of this improvised facing material (with dates ranging between 1943 and 1967) were also found during the excavation of debris accumulated in the cornice below the paintings (see Table 1). It is known that this same method was used for the stabilization of other paintings at the Palace (Martin de Fonjaudran 2002, 8; Spagnol 2009, 43–45) and probably reflects approaches to the treatment of many other artworks around Malta in this period.

The removal of the 1909 restoration overpaint was the focus of work for many years in the post-war period (Zammit 1968, 9) and presented a different challenge to restorers (Bonnici Calì 1967). Sciortino described it as “a task that is proving itself greatly laborious and difficult” (1944), and examinations of the paintings during the current project found extensive abrasion of the original paint and plaster layers. In situ microscopy revealed the presence of fragments of metal threads (e.g., steel wool) on the surface of the paintings, and wads of metal fibers and metal blades were found during the excavation of the cornice, suggesting that these tools were used by the post-war restorers in their cleaning efforts.

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

The cleaning would have revealed the pre-1909 damage, and the process itself created further damage. To remedy this, the post-war restorers applied further layers of overpaint, mostly in a rough and sketchy but localized manner, rather than as complete covering layers. The 16th-century d'Aleccio painting thus began to re-emerge in this period (Figure 7). In large areas of loss, entire sections of the paintings were reconstructed, and some of these are now perceived as integral and even iconic parts of the *Siege* paintings. The best example of this is a large-scale figure of La Vallette, the Grand Master of the Order of St. John at the time of the Siege, which is regularly reproduced in publications and promotional materials. However, this was mostly reconstructed and wholly overpainted in the post-war period, most of the original painting having been destroyed during the British renovations (see British-period damage).

Full-scale MSI of the paintings during the current project proved indispensable in distinguishing between the various layers of restoration paint and original materials; it thus also informed cleaning decisions and supported the evaluation of the cleaning results (Figure 8). On top of the remains of the 1909 overpainting, at least three further overpainting layers were identified, along with various coating layers. A tin of shoe polish was found during the cornice excavation, suggesting that this material may have been used to coat or varnish the paintings, though this has not yet been confirmed through analysis by portable Fourier transform infrared (pFTIR) spectroscopy (it may have simply been used as a storage tin). Interestingly, the excavation also provided some very tangible glimpses into the daily life and working habits of the post-war restorers. For example, an old packet of cigarettes, produced in Malta, and a religious medal were found amongst the accumulated debris of years of restoration materials.



Figure 8. Visible light (left) and ultraviolet luminescence (right) images showing multiple layers of restoration overpaint and coatings © DCBH, 2020

Reports from the time also record repeated interruptions in the restoration work due to government use of the Council Chamber for ceremonial activities (e.g., Zammit 1959, 3; 1962, 9; 1963, 7). The current conservation project has experienced similar logistical challenges—for election celebrations, Independence Day celebrations, meetings of Heads of State, and even a visit by Pope Francis in 2022—reflecting the continuity in the use of the

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

space since its inception and the continuing role of the *Siege* paintings in this function. It can be imagined that d'Aleccio may have faced similar issues during his work, though evidence of this has yet to be found.

Modern conservation interventions: Dresden University of Fine Arts (2000–2005)

The third, most recent (and, one hopes, final) wave of conservation interventions began in 2000, initiated by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project (Leitner 2001), and later continued by UM, and is characterized by a modern scientific approach to treatment. These interventions aim at the removal of all past restoration overpaints and coatings, many of which show signs of deterioration (discoloration, flaking, weeping, acidification), and the recovery of the surviving d'Aleccio painting, as well as stabilization of materials at risk of loss. The first of these projects was carried out in 2000–2005 by the Dresden University of Fine Arts (HfBK) (Leitner 2001). The HfBK only completed the treatment of two-thirds of the cycle, but it clearly demonstrated how much of the original d'Aleccio painting had survived through years of damage and intervention. The project also left exciting visual records of their finds, from before, during, and after treatment, which provided critical insight into what the current project would face during treatment (Figure 7).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UM INTERVENTION (2018–PRESENT)

The current, UM conservation project focuses on the remaining third of the paintings which were not treated by the HfBK. The work now forms part of the cycle of stabilization, cleaning, and presentation that has defined so much of the physical history and perception of the *Great Siege* wall paintings over the last centuries. Based on the compiled physical history, it was clear that, like previous projects, the UM treatment would mainly consist of cleaning to remove accumulated overpaint and coatings. Moreover, the process was likely to reveal a greatly compromised original paint layer. It was also clear that most of the damage to the *Siege* cycle was due to past interventions, and that current treatments had to be designed to minimize further damage.

The UM project has had more time for research and testing than previous projects, and conservation research and analytical technologies have advanced rapidly in the nearly fifteen years since the end of the HfBK project. New discoveries about d'Aleccio's painting technique have therefore been possible, including his extensive use of organic materials in paint layers. Cleaning treatments have been designed to preserve these especially sensitive materials, while revealing as much as possible of the 16th-century paint layers.⁴ In addition, most sections of the large and iconic post-war reconstructions are being preserved, since they are recognized as integral parts of the cycle.

It is hoped that dissemination of the full details of the long and troubled history of the *Siege* paintings may put an end to the cycle of heavy, interventive treatments and see a move toward preservation through prevention and maintenance. Knowledge of this history may also encourage stakeholders to appreciate the paintings not only as aesthetic objects or as an invaluable

MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

record of a single historic event but also for the layers of information they contain about Malta's past, the continuing impact of that past on the present, and the ways in which the meaning of an artwork changes and endures as these stories are revealed.

CONCLUSION

The Grand Master's Palace continues to function as one of the principal seats of Malta's government; the Council Chamber is still reserved for ceremonial occasions of the highest political order in which the *Great Siege* paintings figure prominently, as an enduring touchstone of Maltese identity. Nonetheless, a thorough understanding of their physical history and room use has radically altered our way of viewing the paintings and the conservation approach, and this is expected to alter academic (historical, art historical) interpretation and public perception of the paintings. This study therefore provides a clear example of how the conservation process can contribute not only to the material preservation of an artwork but also to its continuing relevance to the society within which it functions. It also encourages reflection upon the conservation process itself, with its continual cycle of cleaning and repainting, and implications for the original artwork.

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NOTES

- ¹ USB microscopes: Dino-Lite Pro AM413T, Dino-Lite Edge AM4515ZT. Multispectral imaging: Nikon D50 DSLR camera; IDAS-UIBAR, XNite 830, XNite CC1, XNite 330C, Schott GG 420 filters. Processing software: Adobe Photoshop.
- ² Thanks to Daniel Cilia for bringing these photos to our attention.
- ³ Thanks to Emmanuel Magro-Conti for sharing this publication.
- ⁴ Studies of the original technique and treatment development to be published in the future.

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MURALS, STONE, AND ROCK ART

Change and continuity: Significance and physical history in the conservation of the 16th-century *Great Siege* wall paintings in Valletta, Malta

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