





Fig. 1  
The Dome – its  
carvings are rich  
with symbols of  
the Virgin Mary.

# The Chapel of the Virgin of Philermos

Cynthia de Giorgio discusses the restoration of the Chapel of the Virgin of Philermos, and the powerful devotion commanded by the icon of the same name

The chapel dedicated to the Blessed Sacrament, formally known as the Chapel of the Virgin of Philermos, has just undergone complete restoration on the initiative of the Foundation of St John's Co-Cathedral. The monumental church dedicated to St John the Baptist was built by the knights of the Order of St John as their conventual church. It was to serve as a physical expression of their religious ardour and military valour, and they endowed it with lavish gifts of immense beauty and artistic value. This chapel was the first one to be given a particular devotion, selected by the Prior of the Church Frà Ponto Laurenzin. The knights had a great devotion to the Virgin Mary, and it seems that this chapel was already functioning as early as 1576 when the church was barely complete, as records exist of concessions of indulgences towards the Virgin Mary.

Like the rest of the church, the chapel had suffered from the ravages of time. The main cause of deterioration was due to the infiltration of rain water from the dome, which caused the loss of the gilding, and the erosion of some of the carvings.

Cynthia de Giorgio is Curator of St John's Co-Cathedral and Museum. She has written several articles in art journals and newspapers, and is the author of *The Image of Triumph and the Knights of Malta*, *The Conventual Church of the Knights of Malta* and *The Great Temple 360°*. She is also a guest lecturer at the Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta.

opposite: Fig. 2  
View of the  
Chapel

The lower strata of the walls had also lost most of their gilding as a result of rising damp. The remaining carvings and gilding had also deteriorated severely, and were covered with a thick layer of salts and candle soot deposits, as well as dust that had accumulated over the years. The painstaking process of bringing this chapel back to a good state of conservation took eight months to complete. The first stage of the restoration consisted of the careful removal of the thick layer of dust and candle soot, whilst stubborn salt encrustations were removed with appropriate solvents. This was followed by the consolidation of the loose stone carvings, after which the walls were prepared for regilding with 24 carat gold leaf, which was carried out with the same gilding process that was used in the seventeenth century.

The chapel is well worth a study as it was not only of great importance on account of the devotion the knights had towards the Virgin Mary, but also because it housed one of the most important and treasured items in their possession. This was the icon of the Virgin of Philermos, which they brought over from Rhodes and placed within the chapel as a symbol of the Virgin as protectress of the Order. The chapel was dedicated to the Glory of the Virgin Mary, and came to be known as the Chapel of Philermos. Believed to be miraculous, the icon drew great devotion towards it. It became customary for the knights to pray to the Madonna of Philermos for her intercession and protection before they went to battle, and would visit the icon again in thanksgiving for their safe return. Moreover, if victorious, they presented the keys of the captured fortresses to the icon. Amongst the keys which still hang in this chapel are those of the castles of Lepanto and Patras, won during the reign of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (r.1601-1622). Two silver plaques commemorate these events.

No expense was spared in the embellishment of this chapel. The icon was first fitted with a magnificent reredos of fine marbles during the reign of Grand Master Jean Paul de Lascaris Castellar (r.1636-1657), whose coat-of-arms is

included in the altar. The knights Frà Tommaso Hozzes and Frà Flaminio Balbiano, Grand Prior of Messina, who were both responsible for the decoration, commissioned Vitale Covati, a Florentine sculptor living in Messina, to execute the work. He was to do this according to the designs prepared by the architect Francesco Murtari<sup>1</sup> working in Messina, from where most of the marble was brought over for this fine piece of baroque polychrome design. It was stressed in the deed that he was to use only the finest of marbles and whole slabs for the steps, and any attachments were to be made of copper in order to resist corrosion.<sup>2</sup>

The rest of the stone carvings and gilding took place in 1659, when Frà Tommaso Hozzes commissioned the stone carver Giuseppe Faudali to adorn the walls of the rectangular atrium on designs prepared by Francesco Buonamici, an Italian architect from Lucca who was the resident architect of the Order at that time. The walls of the chapel were profusely carved with angels and acanthus leaves, as well as a symbol of a fish from the coat-of-arms of Frà Flaminio Balbiano, the main patron of the chapel. The inner sanctuary was then enclosed by a silver gate in 1752, and was paid for from the estate of Frà Francesco Rovero di Guarena and Frà Guglielmo de la Salle.

The restoration process also brought attention to the exquisite carvings executed in the seventeenth century; with scaffolding reaching up to the ceiling one could examine the carvings closely, which reveal that the entire chapel had not been simply carved for decorative purposes, but embellished with motifs of rich symbolic meaning several of which were attributes of the Immaculate Conception and other titles of the Virgin Mary. This comes as no surprise, as symbols were profusely made use of in the baroque period. This leads to the understanding that the chapel had been dedicated to The Glory of the Virgin Mary in her entirety with special focus on the Immaculate Conception. This strong devotion towards her was probably a result of the challenge to her role that was made by the Reformation in the sixteenth



right: Fig. 3  
The Rose without  
thorns.

below: Fig. 4  
The arch leading to  
the altar was carved  
with symbols of the  
Virgin Mary.



century that had served only to give fresh impetus to her portrayal, especially in her attribute as the Immaculate Conception, which was most disputed during that period. The difficulty was to establish a representational type for so abstract a concept. The Song of Songs became a favourite source, and from the sixteenth century onwards artistic expression had many instances of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception surrounded with imagery applied from it and from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin, a form of responsorial prayers in which the congregation took part. The dome carvings are especially rich with these symbols and others also frequently identified with the Virgin of the

Immaculate Conception such as, the gold censer<sup>3</sup>, the gate of heaven<sup>4</sup>, the city of God, the tower of David, mirror of justice, the seat of wisdom, the ladder of Heaven<sup>5</sup> and the morning star. These symbols allude to the concept of her flawlessness and her virginity in general, and are also found in other Marian contexts.

The archway at the entrance to the altar area was also carved with other symbols placed in ovals representing the Virgin, such as, the dove of the Holy Spirit as a symbol of her immaculate conception. Two ovals on either side display the rose that grew without thorns until the Fall of man as Mary was said to have been born without sin, and the lily





Fig. 5  
The image of the  
Holy Spirit

amongst thorns as a symbol of her purity. The two other ovals depict the Cedar of Lebanon and the Cypress of Zion, that represent her everlasting majesty, whilst the palm of Cadiz and the Rose of Jericho are symbolic of her perfection and beauty<sup>6</sup>. The remaining ovals depict the rising sun, as Mary was also said to be as beautiful as the moon and as bright as the sun.

The restoration process also revealed that the dado, unlike the rest of the church which was painted in burnt Siena, was painted pale blue as the Virgin traditionally wears a blue cloak and veil; the colour represents heaven and is a symbol of the Virgin's role as Queen of Heaven. The lunette over the entrance was then carved with the image of God the Father enthroned in glory, surrounded by angels holding symbols of the Virgin Mary; this intervention however most probably took place at a later stage, as it is recorded in the archives of the Order that the painting by Mattia Preti depicting the birth of St John the Baptist was hung here<sup>7</sup>. This painting was moved at a later stage to the entrance above the sacristy.

Also fitted into the arch above the altar, amongst carvings of exquisite beauty, were three paintings which were also found to be in dire need of restoration. The subject of the paintings depict important events in Mary's life, they feature *The Assumption*, the *Crowning of the Virgin* and *The Annunciation*. The latter had already been attributed to Mattia Preti by art historians. During the restoration process past interventions were removed, and the fine draughtmanship that emerged now securely places this painting within the artist's wide repertoire. The paintings are fitted into rich carvings depicting angels and cherubs.

The chapel also contains the tombstones of several high-ranking knights; amongst them is the afore-mentioned Frà Flaminio Balbiano, and Frà Giovanni Francesco Abela, the Maltese Chancellor of the Order and Malta's first historian. The tombstone of Frà Claude de Blot Viviers, who was

commander of Aulios, was severely damaged; it was broken in several parts and had lost most of its fine incisions. This tombstone was removed and has also undergone restoration.

This chapel is where the precious icon of the Virgin of Philermos remained until it was removed by Grand Master Ferdinand Von Hompesch, who took it with him when the knights left Malta in 1798 after Napoleon expelled the Order from Malta. The icon was taken to St Petersburg, but after the Russian Revolution it was hidden in a monastery and its whereabouts remained unknown for several decades. It is now exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts of Montenegro. The icon was later replaced by the early seventeenth century copy of Our Lady of Lanciano, known as Our Lady of Carafa, which was removed from the chapel of the Italian Langue where it had been placed in 1619 after the death of Frà Gerolamo Carafa, Prior of Barletta, according to his own last will.

#### Notes

- 1 John Debono, *Art and Artisans in St John's and other Churches in the Maltese Islands ca. 1650-1800* (Malta, 2005), 32.
- 2 Ibid. 33.
- 3 The censor symbolises the womb of the Virgin where divinity was united with humanity (Heb.12:29).
- 4 Since the Lord is the gate of life (John 11:25), then the Virgin is the gate of life, that gate out of which the Lord came granting life to all those who believe in Him
- 5 The Virgin is also compared to the ladder of Jacob, that ladder which 'was set up on the earth, and its top reached to Heaven' (Gen. 28:12)
- 6 'The trees planted by God (Psalm 104:16) also mentioned in the litany of the Virgin 'Cedar of Lebanon, Cypress of Mount Zion, pray for us' also in the Matins of the blessed Virgin Mary and the third lesson: Eccles. (24, 17-20) 'I am exalted as the cedar in Lebanon and as the cypress on Mount Zion. I am as exalted as the palm tree in Cadiz and the rose in Jericho.'
- 7 AOM 1953, f. 84v

Photos for this article are reproduced by courtesy of The Foundation of St John Co-Cathedral, Valletta. (Photos: Joe P. Borg)