

RESTORATION PROJECT

Vilhena Palace - Mdina



Top: President Guido de Marco being greeted by the Chairman of the Mdina Rehabilitation Committee, Professor Denis De Lucca.

Left: (L to R) Mr Ray Bondin, President Guido de Marco, Professor Denis De Lucca and the Hon. Dr. Francis Zammit Dimech.

In July 2002, the newly restored forecourt of Vilhena Palace in Mdina – one of the most important Baroque spaces in Malta – was inaugurated by President Guido de Marco and the Hon. Dr Francis Zammit Dimech, Minister for Resources and Infrastructure.

The project was carried out by the Mdina Rehabilitation Project in collaboration with the Mdina local council over a period of five months, with the financial support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal. Total expenses were in the region of Lm 46,000. The project was proposed and directed by Mdina Rehabilitation Project Co-ordinator Mr Ray Bondin. From an area covered in concrete, with a neglected garden on one side and aquaria on the other, the forecourt of Vilhena Palace has been transformed into a dignified space, reflecting the architectural splendour of the building which dates back to 1726.

Two 250-year-old olive trees were donated to the project by the descendants of Manoel de Vilhena's family, and very effective use was made of Maltese hard stone together with Portuguese marble – reflecting the cultural and historical links between Portugal and Malta. The connection between the

Portuguese Foundation and Malta date back to the 1960s, when Calouste Gulbenkian donated Lm3,000 to the University of Malta.

The committee of the Mdina Rehabilitation Project, chaired by Professor Denis De Lucca, has also initiated a programme of collaboration with the Works Division and the University of Bologna to monitor and identify the nature and cost of repairing the damage to the back part of Vilhena Palace, which is built on a foundation of weak rock, Roman walls, medieval fortifications, and Grand Master L'Isle Adam's Palace.

During the inauguration, Professor De Lucca described the



Top: (L to R) Mr José Blanco, trustee of the Gulbenkian Foundation, President Guido de Marco, the Hon. Dr. Francis Zammit Dimech, Dona Luisa Axarujinha de Almeida Ribeiro (descendant of Grand Master de Vilhena), Professor Denis De Lucca, Mr Ray Bondin.



Palace forecourt as evoking the spirit of Baroque Europe, with its brilliant and typically Baroque reconciliation of two opposite elements – the mathematical precision of the forecourt quadrangle, now enhanced by Architect José Campos' paving design, and the sculptural fantasy of the enclosure plane, restored by the Sante Guido firm under the guidance of Dr Keith Sciberras.

The President of Malta Guido de Marco also addressed the gathering and called for a greater national conscience with

respect to Malta's heritage. Mementoes as a sign of gratitude for the intensive work and commitment put into the project were presented to Ray Bondin and Denis De Lucca, as well as Ray Caruana on behalf of the Kalaxlokk workers, Piju Fenech on behalf of the Works Division employees and Paul Ciantar, the chief technical officer.

Dr José Blanco, trustee of the Gulbenkian Foundation, also

gave an address during the event, which was attended by Dona Luisa Axarujinha de Almeida Ribeiro, a descendant of Grand Master de Vilhena. The Gulbenkian Choir performed during the evening. The Gulbenkian Foundation is based in the Portuguese capital Lisbon and was founded in 1956 according to the testament of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, a British citizen of American origin and a pioneer in the oil industry in the Middle East. The Foundation supports projects related to charity, art, education and science, and its international department supports specific projects related to the promotion of Portuguese culture in foreign countries.



Top: President Guido de Marco, the Hon. Dr. Louis Galea and other members of the audience listening to the Hon. Dr. Francis Zammit Dimech.