



THE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF THE ALTAR PAINTING DEPICTING ST. HELEN FINDING THE CROSS, BY FRANCESCO ZAHRA

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HISTORY AND ICONOGRAPHY¹



The altar canvas painting depicting 'St. Helen finding the Cross' was painted by the artist Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) in 1763. The painting was completed at a time when Zahra was regarded as being the most significant painter in Malta.

The imposing canvas painting measures 370cm x 550cm and for this painting, Zahra felt inspired by the famous marble statue of St Helen by Andrea Bolgi, executed for the crossing of Saint Peter in Rome. Both depictions of the saint demonstrate similar poses, physical structure and draping of her robes. The iconic image of Saint Helen is illustrated gracefully in Zahra's masterpiece,

¹Francesco Zahra 1710-1773: His life and art in mid-18th century Malta, Keith Sciberras (2010) ; p196



where both the saint and the cross occupy the central space of the painting. It is thought that Salvatore Psaila was inspired by Zahra's painting to sculpt the marvellous wooden polychrome titular statue of St Helen in 1837.

In the painting, the followers surrounding St. Helen display a range of emotions, from excitement to even bewilderment, expressing the importance of her presence. A compositional link is provided between the spectator and the scene by the use of two characters, an old man and a young page, who both look directly at the beholder.

The scene tells the story of St Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine, as she goes on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. While on her travels, she discovers the True Cross. Shown in the painting as one of her followers is Bishop Macarius, who can be seen in front of a large building that likely refers to the church of the Holy Sepulchre. This was a building, which was constructed on the site on the request of the Saint. Its remains can be seen at the feet of the Saint, shown as debris and a broken statue. St Helen was also recognized for having discovered the nails of the Crucifixion, which can also be seen in the painting, held by the page on the right. Light bathes the figures of the Saint and the holy images of the Dove of the Holy Spirit and the lively angels, seen at the top of the painting. This creates an overall balance and sense of completeness to this magnificent painting, illustrating brilliantly the captivating scene.

STATE OF CONSERVATION

Prior to commencing with the conservation intervention, the painting visual observations and investigations were carried out in order to evaluate the painting's state of conservation. Whilst the painting was found to be in a fairly good state of preservation, superficial deposits, such as atmospheric particulates, insect droppings and other substances which did not pertain to the painting's original constituent materials were detected on the entire surface of the painting.

In particular, wax drippings were observed on the lower part of the painting, probably resulting from the candles that were in the past placed on the altar below the painting. It is assumed that the same candles are the cause of the widespread presence of a non-homogeneous black/grey layer present throughout the surface of the painting, in particular on the lower part. This layer, together with the oxidized varnish coating present, darkened the overall appearance of the painting and obscured the original tonality and aesthetical qualities of the work of art. Moreover, it was evident that several areas of



the painting had been re-painted during a later intervention. Most notable was St. Helen's crown, which was found to be completely overpainted. The preparatory layers and paint film were found to be affected by a network of cracks resulting from mechanical damage, particularly present along the edges of the auxiliary frame and its crossbars. In addition, a network of drying cracks, having a diffuse reticulated pattern was observed over the entire pictorial surface. Drying cracks of the pictorial film have a historical value as they represent the signs of the time and the history of the painting itself. Since the latter are formed for reasons attributable to the manufacturing technique and to the materials used, they cannot be permanently removed/ repaired but can be made less visible.

Abrasions and losses of the paint film and preparatory layer were also noted during preliminary observations. Some losses appear to be the result of a previous cleaning intervention; whilst others, in particular those found at the crown, ear lobes and neck appear to relate to elements that were attached directly onto the canvas support. It is assumed that previously the Saint was adorned with a crown and jewels, probably earrings and necklace. These jewels would have been attached to the painting by means of metal pins which would have been re-enforced by a wooden element, positioned on the back of the canvas and fixed to the frame by metal nails.

The painting's original wooden auxiliary support is composed of three elements joined together by metal hinges, culminating in an arch at the top of the painting. As the auxiliary frame was original to the painting and dated back to the 18th Century, its fixed construction did not allow for it to be expandable and was therefore unable to accommodate and follow the movements of the canvas. This results in the formation of tensions along the perimeter of the painting which cause damage of the paint film, such as cracks and the consequent loss of colour. Moreover, flight-holes attributable to xylophagous insect activity, which appeared to no longer be active, further compromised the stability of the wood structure. It was therefore decided to replace the auxiliary frame with a newly-constructed expandable stretcher frame.

The original canvas support is assumed to be jute and is composed of three pieces of canvas attached together having two seams. It was in a good state of preservation, having only superficial and partially coherent surface deposits, particularly atmospheric particulates and insect droppings, on the back of the painting. Given the good condition of the support, it was decided to carry out a strip-lining (as opposed to a more invasive lining intervention) of the canvas in order to reinforce the perimeter edges of the painting, allowing for the



repositioning and re-tension of the painting onto the new stretcher frame. In this way, the original support is preserved as much as possible.

CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION INTERVENTION



Following a detailed evaluation of the painting's state of conservation, a laborious conservation and restoration intervention of titular painting was carried out. The restoration intervention, commencing in October 2018, brought back to light the beauty of the figures and the chromatic integrity of the pictorial layers that characterize the works of Francesco Zahra.

The removal of coherent and inconsistent deposits from the surface of the painting was performed using brushes and vacuum. This was followed by the removal of the altered varnish coating and other additional surface deposits, which was carried out using a series of buffer solutions having different pH in gel form. Using a soft bristle brush the gel solutions were massaged onto the paint film and mechanically removed with cotton wool pads and then rinsed with aqueous solutions. The overpainting were then removed using a solvent surfactant gel prepared with organic solvents, whilst the old infills corresponding to the losses and over paintings, were removed mechanically



with a scalpel. Removal of overpainting revealed that during a later intervention a crown had been painted over the original crown painted by Francesco Zahra. Cleaning exposed the original crown painted by the artist with fine detail, and particular attention being given to the highlights and shadows.

The treatments proceeded with the consolidation of the canvas support, which was carried out using an acrylic resin dissolved in solvent and applied to the painting with a brush. Strip-lining was carried out to allow for the proper tensioning of the canvas during the re-stretching of the painting onto the new auxiliary frame.

The canvas was then re-stretched and attached onto the new expandable frame. The last phase of the restoration intervention involved the aesthetic re-integration of the painting. A coating of synthetic resin dissolved in solvent was applied to the surface of the painting primarily to saturate the painting colours and also to act as an intermediate layer between the original constituent materials of the painting and the retouching to be carried out. Losses of the paint and preparation layer were infilled using a synthetic stucco. The infills were levelled mechanically using a scalpel and were then mimetically retouched using conservation standard varnish colours. Finally, a layer of synthetic resin in solution with final protection of the surface was applied to the surface of the painting by spray.

THE MONUMENTAL DECORATIVE FRAME

The monumental gilded frame that surrounded the painting was also treated as it was found to be in a poor state of conservation. Large fractures and cracks were present at all the joints of frame's wooden structure. Losses of the gilded surface were also present in these areas. Furthermore, detachments of the gold film from the underlying



bole preparation, caused by the loss of adhesion, were present in several areas of the frame.



Treatment of the frame involved the removal of all the coherent and inconsistent deposits present on the surface using solvent surfactant gels prepared with organic solvents. This was followed by the re-gilding of losses and abrasions of the gold using 23.75Kt double gold leaf, applied following the water-gilding technique. The areas of re-gilding were burnished to a high shine in some areas whereas other areas were left matte, following the original aesthetics on the frame. The conservation treatment was concluded with the application of a final protective coating using a synthetic resin characterized by high resistance to aging and warm temperatures and good optical properties close to those of natural resins.

SHARING THE PROCESS

From the start of the project, as restorers, we wanted to engage the general public in the project to educate people about the importance of carrying out professional conservation work on works of art. In January, in collaboration with the Birkirkara Parish, we opened the doors for two days to the general



public so they could view the progression of work on the painting in close proximity and speak to the conservators involved.

CONCLUSION

The conservation project was aimed at preserving the painting's original constituent materials whilst the interventions carried out allowed for the artist's original intent to be appreciated by the viewer. The project was concluded in August 2019. Throughout the project, the painting's state of conservation and the procedures carried out were documented. All conservation and restoration treatments were performed in accordance with the ethical principles for the protection and preservation of works of art. The project required many hours of very detailed work, done entirely to address the painting not only from the aesthetic but also from a materials point of view.

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