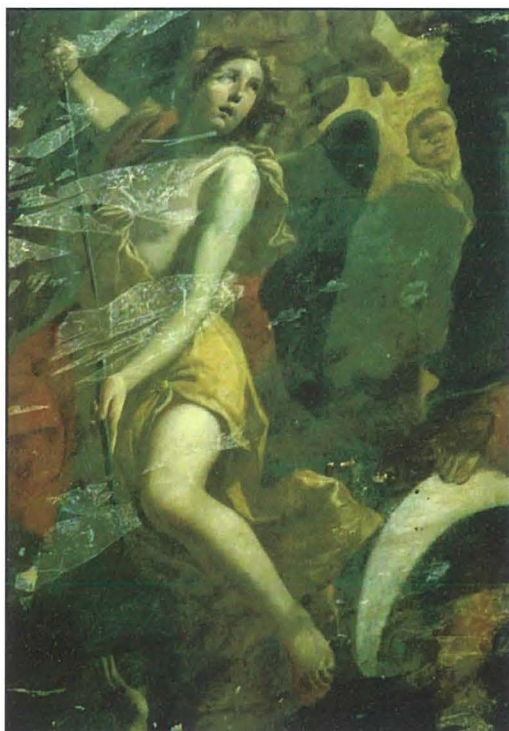


The Restoration of the Mattia Preti Paintings at Sarria Church

Maria Grazia Cassar

Executive President of Din l-Art Helwa



Detail from The Immaculate Conception before restoration

The Immaculate Conception before restoration

To mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Mattia Preti in 1613, *Din l-Art Helwa* took it upon itself to restore the paintings by this great artist that adorn Sarria Church in Floriana. The work is being carried out by Giuseppe Mantella Restauri, who have studied Preti's works extensively, having worked on the restoration of many of his paintings in Malta and in Italy.

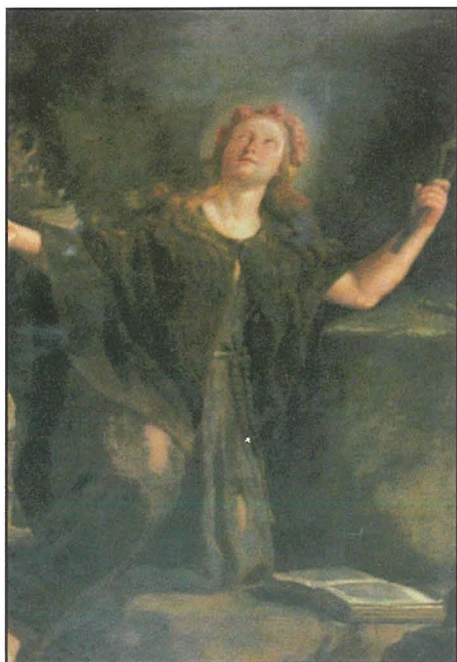
The church is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. It was built in Floriana as a sign of devotion to the Virgin and the saints who were called upon to intercede to stop the plague which had spread across the island in 1675, and had claimed thousands of victims.

Mattia Preti was commissioned with the design of the church and its decoration, and it is the only known architectural project by the artist. The 17th-century building was erected on the site of another church, also dedicated to the Virgin, a little chapel built outside the walls of the city in the second half of the 16th century by the Knight Fra' Martin Sarria, whose name it still bears. Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner (1663-1680) completely rebuilt and enlarged the church in 1676. Preti designed it on a centralised plan, creating a large circular space articulated with pairs of pilasters and surmounted by a large hemispherical dome.

The internal decoration consists of a series of paintings that were executed by Preti between 1677 and 1679. They were inspired by what he had painted in Naples 20 years earlier when,

The Immaculate Conception after restoration





Santa Rosalia before restoration



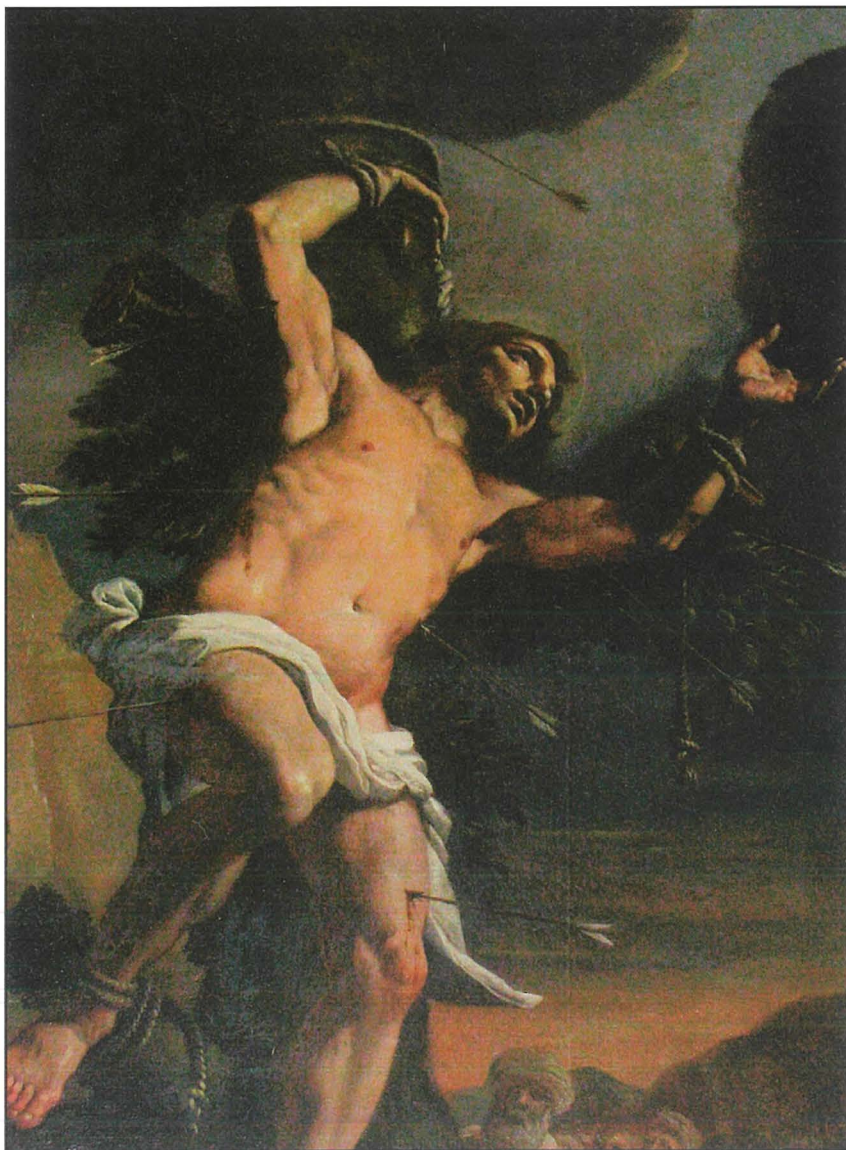
St Roque before restoration



St Roque after restoration

during the outbreak of the plague in that city in 1656, he was asked to paint the Immaculate Conception and the plague saints on the seven gates of the city.

St. Sebastian after restoration



Above the main altar is the monumental altarpiece of *The Immaculate Conception in Glory*, flanked by two angels who are sheathing their swords, signifying the end of the epidemic, which is well-represented in the lower part of the painting. This painting was in a perilous state and its restoration was sponsored by Shireburn Software Ltd.

The restoration of *St Roque* was sponsored by Mr David Curmi and MSV Life plc. The saint is represented with the pilgrim's staff and cape and showing the plague wound on his leg, obtained by his unceasing assistance to the sick. The restoration of *St Sebastian*, whose arrow-pierced body resembles that of a plague sufferer, was sponsored by Malta International Airport plc, and the restoration was carried out in the departure lounge of Malta International Airport.

The restoration of *St Rosalia*, who was particularly venerated in Naples and Sicily and was called upon to fight the pestilence, is being sponsored by the Malta Rotary Clubs and District Clubs of Palermo.

St Nicholas of Bari was associated with the saving of dying children, but is also the namesake of the Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner who commissioned the new church. This painting is still awaiting a sponsor, as are the two large lunettes representing the victory of good over evil: *St Michael overcoming the Devil* and the *Allegory of the Order of St John*, with the Baptist blessing the symbolic personification of the Military Order, ready to unsheathe her sword and embark on a sea voyage on one of the galleys in defence of the Faith.

Once the plague had passed, a solemn procession was instituted as a sign of gratitude on 8 December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, starting from the Co-Cathedral of St John in Valletta and ending up at Sarria Church, with the icon of Our Lady carried in procession. This tradition survived up until a few years ago.