

Conserving and restoring the statue of Christ the Redeemer

The team of conservators at Atelier del Restauro explain the process of conserving Senglea's renowned statue of Christ the Redeemer in a project that involved years of consultation, analysis and hands-on work.

There's a sense of anticipation that comes from starting every new conservation and restoration project; it is the opportunity to go back in time and to discover the history of the piece at hand, to discover its legacy, tell its story and, of course, conserve it for the present and future generations.

As a team of conservators, we are always honoured to be entrusted with the priceless artifacts that we work on, and this was especially true when we were asked to carry out a study in September 2014 by the Collegiate Chapter of Senglea on the state of conservation of the miraculous statue of Christ the Redeemer (Ir-Redentur) at the Oratory of the Holy Cross annexed to the Basilica of Our Lady of Victories in Senglea.

The statue, depicting Christ encumbered with the cross, is considered one of the most devout in Malta. It has long been considered to be miraculous, and has attracted devotees from across the islands. It is among the oldest and most-frequented statues locally, and is considered a national treasure and icon of Maltese faith. We were already aware of some of its history, including the fact it had been through a number of restoration interventions. One notable previous restoration was carried out in the mid-19th century by Carlo Darmanin.

The study of the statue, which we completed in September 2015, was an important phase in its conservation. It provided the team an in-depth understanding of the manufacturing technique, constituent materials, past interventions and the state of conservation of the statue through documentation and a number of diagnostic scientific investigations.

The study focused on the statue's internal assembly using

state-of-the-art instruments. These included a borescope inspection, which was necessary to visually investigate the state of conservation of the filling materials inside the statue of the Redeemer, because the inside is inaccessible by other non-invasive means. Then, through the use of two different X-ray radiography inspection systems, it was possible to scan the statue in full so as to study its structure and materials, both of which supported the statue's physical structure and state of conservation. The X-ray and visual investigations indicated that the preparatory layer of the tunic was not in a good state of conservation, because several cracks were present and the cohesion between the pictorial

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The removal of the thick layer of candlewax, dust and dirt from the hand of Christ the Redeemer.

and preparatory layers was weak all over the statue; in fact, detachments were also observed.

Next, in order to analyse the multi-layered structure and composition of the painted film, micro-samples were taken from different parts of the statue and were analysed through the use of various scientific instruments at Heritage Malta's Diagnostic Science Laboratories. This showed that the statue had undergone numerous aesthetic interventions in the past, and the tunic in particular had been painted over more than once. Stratigraphic tests later provided indications of the material composition of both the preparatory and pictorial layers of the vest, as well as of the skin tones, including the non-original paint layers.

It was found that repeated maintenance interventions and subsequent use of the statue during the three yearly processions (and several other pilgrimages around Malta and Gozo in the past) had, over time, resulted in abrasions, losses of colour and detachments of the original materials.

It was also decided to carry out an environmental monitoring campaign inside the statue's niche at the Oratory of the Holy Cross to monitor its relative humidity and temperature, so as to assess whether the climate inside the niche was appropriate for the statue's conservation.

Overall, the study provided an understanding of the materials and technique used in the statue's construction. It also provided an in-depth understanding of the statue's state of conservation, including important information that was needed to establish a suitable conservation methodology.

After the study was completed, the actual conservation process started in May 2017 and took nine months to complete. A conservative approach was adopted for the long-term preservation of this very important statue that necessitated the improvement of both its structure and aesthetics, while at the same time guaranteeing that it could safely continue to fulfil its symbolic purpose for future generations.

When the conservation process started, the statue was found to have several structural cracks and detachments across its stratigraphy, as well as superficial cracks and the loss of the paint layer. Consequently we embarked on an emergency facing treatment using fine Japanese paper that was employed to protect the statue's pictorial layers and prevent further losses from occurring. A reversible and compatible

The nine-month-long conservation project was held inside the oratory of Senglea's basilica.



conservation standard adhesive was then injected under very small cracks to consolidate the paint layers and re-establish adhesion of the statue's stratigraphy.

Among the main interventions was the consolidation of structural cracks in the statue's cork base, which resulted from accidental damage and movement when it was handled during processions. This provided a stable support upon which further treatment of the statue's pictorial layers could be carried out.

Next, the statue's red tunic was found to have been painted over several times. So a cleaning intervention began to allow the best preserved and older colour to be revealed. This was found to be a more vibrant colour, using a finer paint quality than the one used later. The statue's hair and crown of thorns was also found to be heavily overpainted, and a long and meticulous cleaning intervention took place to reveal a lighter hair colour underneath and the paint layer of the same period over the real thorns.

The statue's face was then consolidated to re-adhere any detachments before a layer of superficial dust and soot was removed, and restoration varnishes were thinned, to reveal the colours and fine details of the face of the period we decided to preserve.

The glass tear on the right side of the statue's face was also cleaned from accumulations of dust and dirt, revealing the brilliancy of the glass. Similarly, a layer of superficial dust and debris was removed from the hands, including a bio-film layer. Further studies and analysis were then carried out to determine if the

skin tones present were, in fact, the original paint colours, or if further paint layers were present beneath the current one.

After that, the restoration intervention was completed with the infilling and retouching of the lacunae. A fine conservation grade varnish was then applied to the statue; this was done to saturate the colours of the statue and protect the painted surface from atmospheric pollutants and the effects of light over time.

An environmental monitoring campaign inside the niche is being carried out over a period of 24 months; the monitoring is still going on after measures were

implemented to improve the climate inside the niche. A mechanical device was professionally designed by an engineer to safely remove the statue from the niche and vice versa, and avoid handling that could cause accidental damages. Anoxia was also carried out to eradicate any insect infestation present.

From the start of the project, as restorers we were aware that this statue fulfilled a great function as an object of devotion and highlighted how the Maltese have a special connection and devotion towards the statue of Christ the Redeemer. Therefore we wanted to engage the public in the project as much as possible.

Initially, we wanted to educate people about the importance of carrying out professional conservation work on works of art such as this one. So during the first three months of the project, the public was invited to view the team at work on the statue behind a gate. Then, last October, and in collaboration with the Senglea parish, the oratory was open to the public for four days so they could view the progress of work on the statue in close proximity. We were overwhelmed by the thousands of visitors who attended and showed interest in our work, while also admiring the beautiful polychromy of the face. We were also touched by

several people who spoke to us about their personal experiences related to this miraculous statue.

The project was completed and inaugurated last March. Due to the significance of the project, we chose to use a multidisciplinary approach towards the professional, ethical conservation and preservation of the statue. With this in mind, we collaborated with a number of key scientists, engineers and art historians to achieve our shared goals.

The statue provided unique challenges because it is made of different materials, each of which required different treatments. We hope our work has laid the foundations for this important statue to

continue to be appreciated and venerated by the public and for them to understand the great value this work of art represents: redemption.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the Archbishop's Curia and Senglea parish church for entrusting us with this important project. Special thanks go to Archpriest Rev. Can Robin Camilleri for his dedication and faith in this venture, the administrative staff and the committed team of volunteers at the church.

Publication on the project

Drawing on the reputation and intriguing history of this important statue, a team of Maltese scholars, Atelier del Restauro conservators and scientists from the Diagnostic Science Laboratories of Heritage Malta and the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-IVALSA), in collaboration with Senglea parish church, are currently working on a publication about the project. This will be published in winter 2018.

Shedding light on the development of its cult status, the publication will bring together an iconographical study of the statue within the context of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Crucifix and the Good Friday procession, with previously unpublished archival research, scientific analysis on its structure and materials, manufacturing technique and past restoration history, before finally delving into its recent important conservation project.

To reserve a copy at a special pre-publication price, e-mail parrocca.senglea@maltdiocese.org.

Conservator Sandra Ruiz García removing the thick overpaintings found over the statue's red tunic.



Conservator Valentina Lupo during the cleaning of the statue's hands.



Conservator Maria Grazia Zenzani during the pictorial integration of the skin tone of the face of the Redeemer.