

Conservation of L-Irxoxt ta' Bormla – the Lord's triumph over death



Thanks to its recent conservation, today the statue of the Risen Christ of Cospicua, commonly known as L-Irxoxt ta' Bormla, one of Malta's most important wooden polychrome statues, can once again perform the devotional function for which it was donated 278 years ago for a common good and offer its image to the faithful and visitors.

The statue strongly reaffirms not only the resurrection of Christ after his passion and death – a fundamental mystery of the Christian faith – but also the profound motivation that has guided the traditional Easter Sunday procession in Cospicua for decades. The statue is located in Cospicua parish church, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady.

The work, which is characterised by an evident upward momentum given by the suspended and raised feet, portrays Christ at the moment when, rising from death after three days, he comes out in glory from the sepulchre, blessing humanity with the branch of a palm tree in his hand. His luminous body, while still presenting the wounds of the Passion in his hands, feet and the side of his chest, is covered with a gilded sgraffito

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loincloth painted in white. The figure seems to be moved by a wind that also hits strands of his hair and the edges of the gilded and polychromed blue cape held on the left shoulder that crosses the body and flutters on the opposite side.

The statue dates back to the mid-18th century. It is recorded that a certain Captain Andrea Scarinu transported it on his vessel from Naples to Cospicua for his friend Captain Celestino Sacco. Captain Sacco, rector of the archconfraternity of the Holy Crucifix, donated the statue to the archconfraternity on April 7, 1741.



During the pictorial intervention on the statue.

The artist of the statue is as yet unknown. In the absence of documents attesting to the commission and artist of the statue, the artistic provenance could be attributed to a Spanish school on the basis of technical and stylistic comparisons conducted by Dr Sandro Debono. Debono found in the sculpture features similar to works by the important Spanish sculptor Francisco Salzillo 1707-83. This attribution requires further in-depth research, which will be carried out in the near future.

Cospicua, together with Senglea and Vittoriosa, were among the first towns in Malta to hold celebrations on Easter Sunday. Up until World War II, it was customary for the statue of the Risen Christ of Cospicua to be taken around the streets of the city at 4am. The statue's pedestal features the 12 silver lanterns that showed the bearers the way at that early hour.

The silver palm held in the Risen Christ's right hand replaced the original wooden one. In the early 20th century, renowned Cospicuan artist and decorator Abraham Gatt was commissioned to design the tombstone of Christ's grave, which was covered with silver by Casa Ranchi of Milan in 1926. The Cospicuan boatmen led by Vincenzo Spiteri collected money to pay for this artistic work.

The statue is carried shoulder high in the procession of Easter Sunday. At various points during the processional route, men would run with it, raising it triumphantly at the end of each run. It is said that the rush forward with the statue of the Risen Christ dates back about 150 years, although further research needs to be done to find exactly what gave rise to it.

The custom probably arose when a British governor on the island issued an edict stating that Easter Sunday commemorations had to be over by 10am. It is said that the spectacular dash originated when the statue bearers realised they were not going to make it on time and decided to rush through the last lap. The rush came to symbolise the Lord's triumph over death.

In 2015, Cospicua parish church commissioned Atelier del Restauro to carry out a professional investigation and a thorough assessment of the statue's condition. The investigation highlighted how the statue had been marred by ambient conditions and accidental damage which were affecting the conservation state of its wooden support and the consecutive preparatory, polychrome and gilded layers.

The conservation project started a month after Easter 2018. It started with the scientific analysis of samples from the wooden

support which indicated that the statue is made from two types of wood: the figure was made of Limewood (Tilia sp.) while the base is of Elmwood (Ulmus sp.).

The statue was facing three main conservation problems: a wood boring insect infestation in the wooden support, a serious infestation of mould growth at the back all over the robe, and the statue was also detaching from its base.

The wooden support had an active wood boring insect infestation, which had led to biological degradation. This was clear because of the number of insect flight holes present (ranging between 2 to 3mm in diameter). As a result, the statue was treated using Anoxia, which stopped the infestation and further degradation of the wooden support.

The active mould growth could be seen from the thick, dark circular stains on the back of the sculpture. This had been caused by years of condensation, as well as the build-up of dust and organic remains on the polychrome surface. An environmental, scientific campaign inside the statue's niche was thus carried out through the use of data loggers which were installed for a year to check if any haphazard fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity were present, and to determine whether the climate inside the niche was appropriate for the statue. Mould had caused significant damage to the painted and gilded surface of the statue because of the organic acids it releases. The team carried out a specialised treatment through the use of enzymes to catalyse the mould infestation.

The detachment of the statue from its base was probably the result of the mechanical shocks the statue experienced during the Easter runs. The team carried out an X-ray inspection to learn whether there were any important fractures in the wood and to better understand how the statue had been constructed.

The X-ray analysis was carried out by Heritage Malta's Diagnostic Science Laboratories, and the results revealed that the wooden structures at the bottom of the statue were held together using hand-forged nails, which are typical of the 18th century when the statue is believed to have been constructed. There was also a metal structure inside the end of the robe held at the base – this metal counterweight was introduced by the sculptor to balance the weight of the statue, making it more stable.

X-rays also revealed that several restoration interventions had been made at the bottom of the robe as means of reinforcement, except these were achieved with machine-made nails, and therefore indicated that they are not original. A crack was also visible at the back of the sculpture, indicating an important fissure in the wooden support.

In view of the damages the statue experienced during the runs we have advised the parish to reduce the runs with the statue, and especially the more haphazard moments when the statue is raised triumphantly at the end of each run, as the latter causes most damage.



Before and after the conservation and restoration of the left hand.



An X-ray image of the lower part of the mantle, showing a vertical metal support encased in the wooden structure along with two large, hand-forged nails. On the top part, machine-made nails are visible, indicating a more recent restoration intervention.

The statue has suffered a number of accidents in its history, as well as a number of undocumented interventions. These included cracks, losses of support, broken fingers and an arm that had been fractured.

Cracks in the wooden support were consolidated through injections of a two-component epoxy-resin, specially formulated for grouting and bonding of wooden artefacts subject to movement generated by thermo hygrometric variations.

Finally, a number of different parts of the polychromy and the beautiful gilded and painted robe were found to have several abrasions and scratches to the gilded area that exposed the red-orange bole layer underneath, as well as unprofessional restoration. This was evident in the diffused cracks in the polychromy and gilded layer, which included detachments of the paint layer – mainly over the skin tones and the gilded layers painted with the blue motifs. The floral motifs on the gilded and sgraffito robe had also been extensively overpainted during past restorations.

The cleaning intervention was highly selective and included the removal of all the thick overpaintings that have been applied to the sgraffito and painted motifs on the robe along with the impregnated dust,



During the water gilding intervention on the loin cloth to repair abrasions and other lacunae.

grime and overpaintings found on the skin tone and hair. The removal of the oxidised and yellowed varnish uncovered the light cerulean blue colour of the robe, which prior to the cleaning appeared green due to the yellowed varnish.

A water gilding intervention using real gold was carried out where there were lacunae and large abrasions. Finally, the pictorial intervention involved the reconstruction of an amount of lost sgraffito motifs using reversible colours in order to improve the legibility of the lost forms.

Finally the statue was varnished using a synthetic resin characterised by high resistance to ageing and warm temperatures and good optical properties close to those of natural resins.

“The statue suffered a number of accidents in its history”

A satin surface finish was given to protect the gilded and painted film from weathering and functional in the aesthetic presentation of the painted surface.

All the materials used in the conservation and restoration of the statue have the common characteristic of reversibility and every phase of the project has been documented through photography.

The conservation and restoration of ecclesiastical works of art are two concepts of fundamental interest and importance. This cultural heritage should not only be considered in a strictly historical-artistic sense, but also has an added value: the very nature of each work constitutes the testimony of centuries of faith and devotion.

Consequently, as conservators we felt it was a moral duty to make use of the best possible conservation treatments available to protect such a rich and meaningful heritage, a symbol of the synergy between history, art and faith – and return it to be transmitted to the present and future faithful and to the entire community.

Maria Grazia Zenzani and Valentina Lupo are conservators at Atelier del Restauro.

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Detail under UV light showing a detail of a mould infestation on the mantle.



Detail of the bottom part showing a section of the foot cleaned. The cleaning involved the removal of the oxidised varnish layer and a thick layer of dust and grime.



During the reconstruction of the flower and leaf motifs found on the mantle.