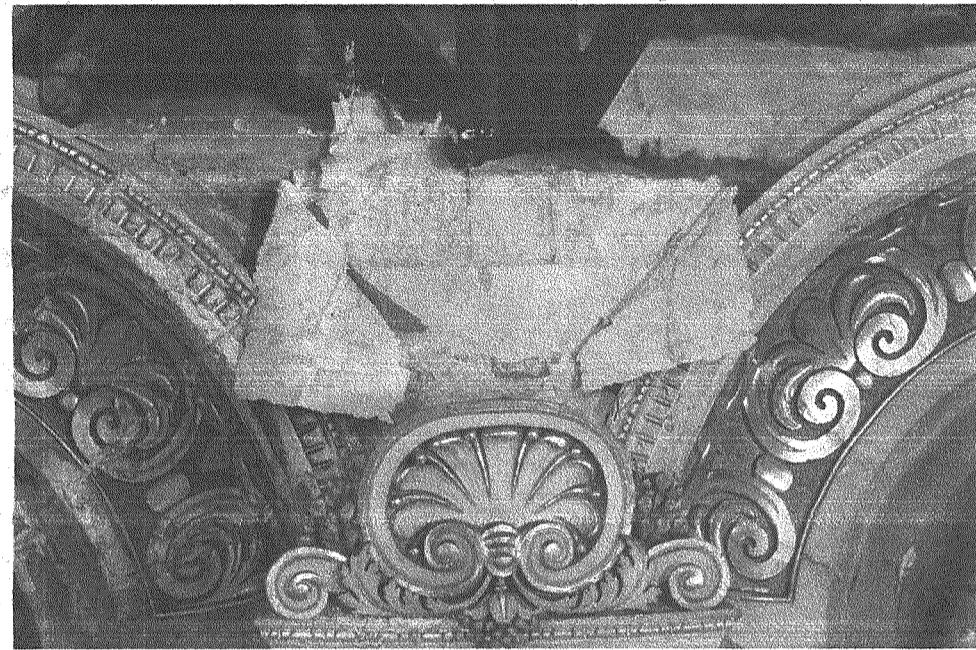
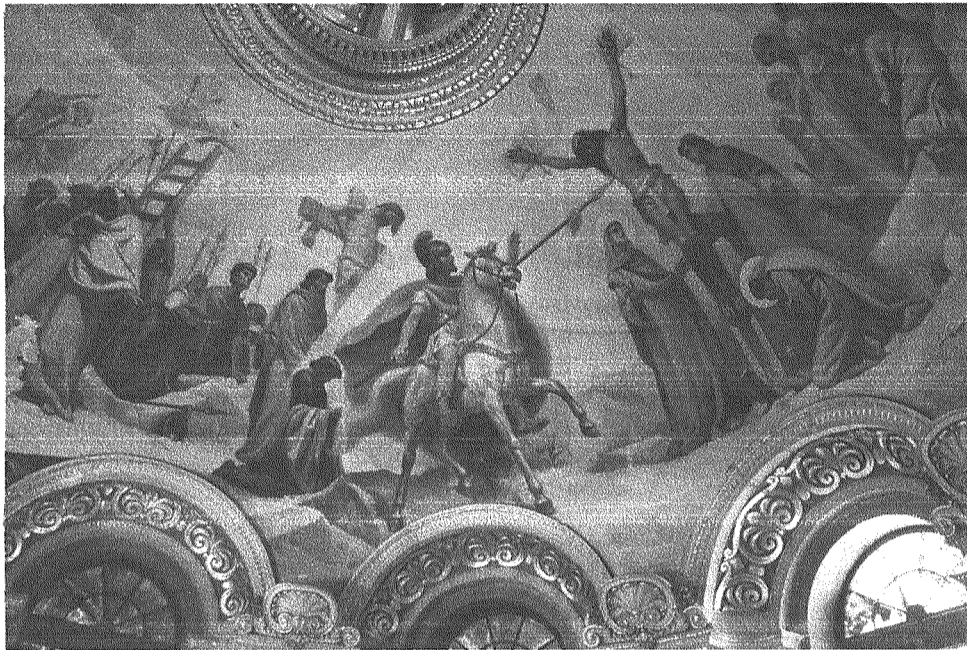


LIFE AND WELLBEING **HISTORY**

Recent photos of the dome paintings at the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Nadur, Gozo.

Appeal to save marouflage paintings at Gozo church

IAN CAMILLERI and
AMY SCIBERRAS

An ambitious project is under way to conserve and restore the marouflage paintings that embellish the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Nadur, Gozo, which are part of the artistic legacy left to us by renowned artist Guzeppi Briffa (1901-87) and which vividly represent the crucifixion of Christ and the blessed sacraments in a style influenced by art nouveau.

Unfortunately, the paintings have been in dire need of conservation for numerous years and if not treated urgently, the Maltese islands risk losing a unique set of paintings in this devotional church frequented daily by many locals for religious services, along with numerous sightseers.

The church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was built between 1902 and 1908. The news that a new church was going to be erected in Nadur was announced in the newspaper *Il-Habbar*.

The founder of the church was Fr Guzepp Vella and the church was designed by Fr Peter Paul Charbon. Its interior is richly decorated and gilded. Most of the sculptural motifs were designed by well-known Maltese sculptor Francesco Saverio Sciortino (1875-1958) and started being executed in 1952.

In 1953, when the church's sculptural decoration was nearly ready, the Vella family decided to further enrich the dome and ceiling with paintings. Three Maltese artists – Emvin Cremona, Guzè M. Caruana and Guzeppi Briffa – were approached, and asked to hand in *bozzetti* for the decoration of the church. The preferred *bozzetti* were those by Briffa, who had been

responsible for a vast number of works executed for ecclesiastical patrons.

Guzeppi Briffa

The artistic output of Guzeppi Briffa has been described by art historian Christian Attard as “a bridge, connecting an old ailing tradition of academic anachronisms with a more innovative search for modernity”. Briffa's major contribution to Maltese art comprises a vast number of works executed for church patrons. From his student years, during the early decades of the 20th century, up to World War II, Briffa produced some of his most memorable ecclesiastical works.

“Some of the detached painted canvases are literally hanging in air”

Briffa had generally used the marouflage painting technique to decorate churches. This involves the attachment of canvas supports to the interior of architectural settings or to an intermediate rigid support which is, in turn, fixed to the wall. The materials and methodology of the marouflage technique employed by Briffa were scientifically investigated in the author's (Sciberras) unpublished thesis ‘A Study on the Deterioration Phenomena of Marouflage Paintings – The Nave Marouflage Paintings by G. Briffa at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Nadur, Gozo’ (2015).

Like many other artists of the period, Briffa believed that the marouflage technique, as opposed to painting directly on

the wall, offered an increased chance of preservation. Artists were concerned that paintings executed directly on walls were more susceptible to flaking due to decay and salt problems manifested by Maltese limestone buildings. Yet, this notwithstanding, marouflage paintings in Malta and Gozo still tend to exhibit deterioration, which is typically related to the deterioration of the stone support.

As expected, Birkirkara, Briffa's hometown, has possibly the largest share of his works. Paintings made by him are found in the churches of Tal-Herba, St Paul's, St Helen's basilica, and the old parish church. Away from Birkirkara, other works of his are found in St George's church, Qormi, St Leonard's parish church, Kirkop, Kerċem's parish church, besides at the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Nadur.

Current state, initiatives, events and planned actions

Unfortunately, the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is in a critical condition. The advanced deterioration of the historical marouflage paintings decorating the entire ceiling and dome, prompted conservator-restorer Sciberras to carry out intensive scientific investigations and studies at the University of Malta's Department of Conservation and Built Heritage that enabled her to formulate a unique and specific conservation strategy to save these paintings.

The aforementioned scientific post-graduate study, monitored by JoAnn Casar, led to the launch of an awareness and fundraising campaign in March 2019 by Anton Refalo, MP and former chairman of Heritage Malta. This brought about a satisfactory response, attracting several

sponsors who encouraged the project team to start work. Two of the foremost sponsors were Mapfre MSV Life and Computime Technology Ltd.

The fundraising and marketing strategy was further developed whereby every entity or individual donor were able to sponsor the restoration of a square metre of painting or a specific work package of the restoration.

Support and guidance is also being received by Chris Said, MP and former mayor of Nadur.

Additional activities were organised to raise awareness and funds in aid of this worthy cause, including a concert held at the church itself on November 2, 2019. The concert comprised a recital of religious music and solo harp works, performed by Classique Meets Pop duo Lydia Buttigieg on the harp and singer and guitarist Fiona Cauchi, and poems recited by Justine Balzan Demajo. The event's main sponsors were Gozo Graphics Ltd and Vini e Capricci by Abraham's.

Further funds to carry out urgent first-aid treatments of Briffa's marouflages were obtained from the National Lotteries Good Causes Fund administered by the Ministry of Finance.

The current objectives are to carry out urgent conservation treatments to stabilise vast areas of the nave and dome marouflage paintings that have become detached from the stone support. Some of the detached painted canvases are literally hanging in air.

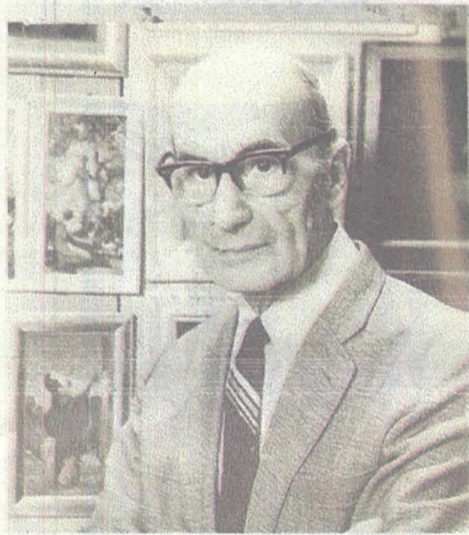
Other urgent treatments being undertaken include maintenance works of the architectural fabric aimed at eliminating defects such as open mortar joints, which can lead to water seepage. These are mainly being catered for by the Vella and Grech families.



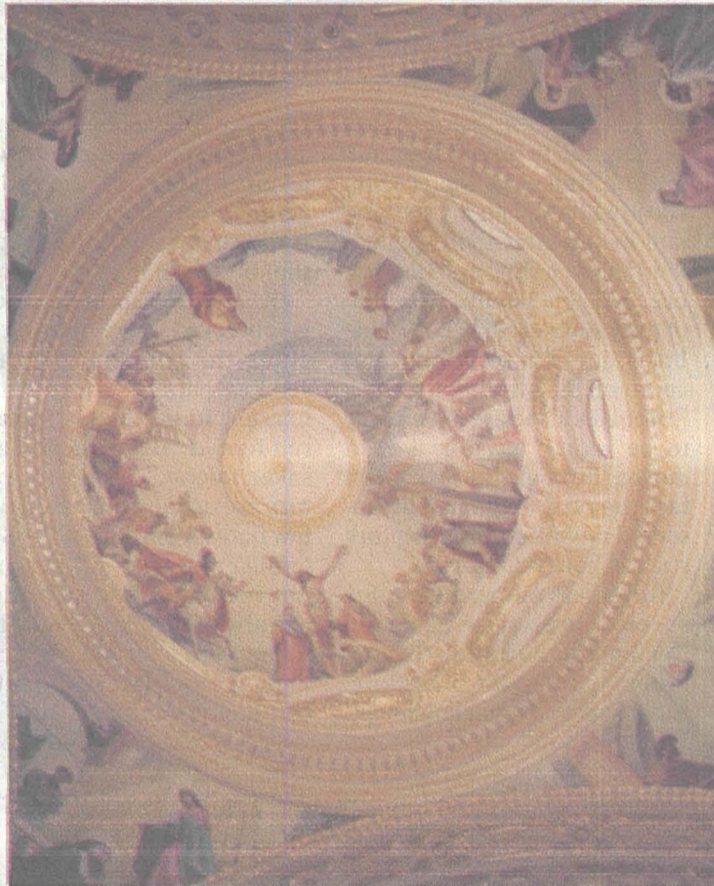
Deterioration of the nave marouflage paintings.



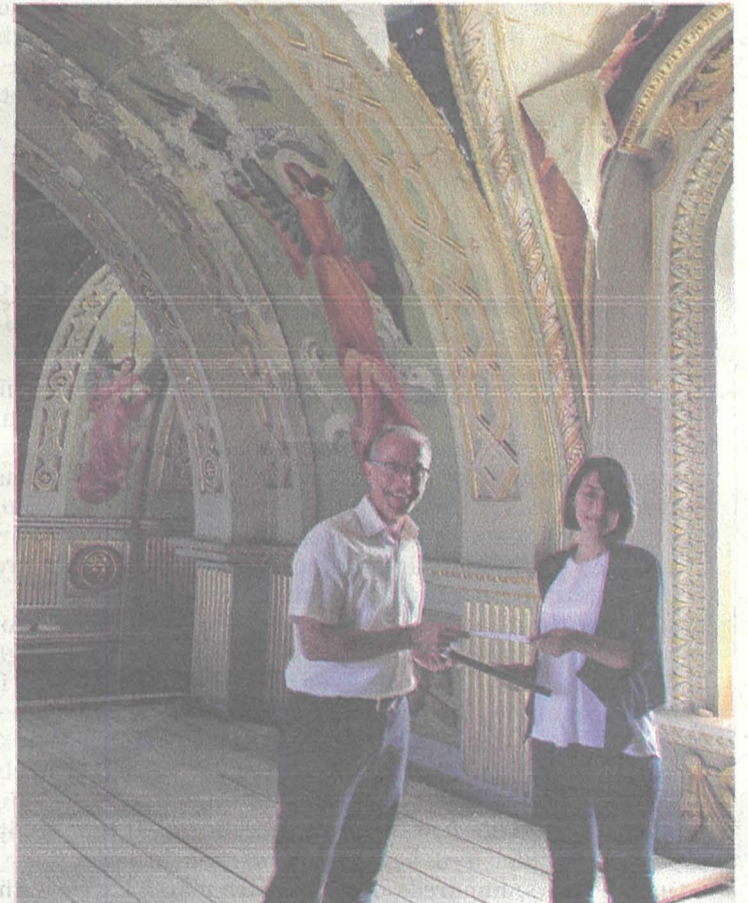
The nave marouflage paintings.



Guzeppi Briffa in his Birkirkara studio. PHOTO COURTESY OF GUZEPPI BRIFFA'S SON ALFRED



A photo taken in June 1988 showing the dome paintings before they were concealed by the current platforms. PHOTO COURTESY OF JONATHON GRECH



Mapfre MSV Life chief financial officer David Demarco presenting Amy Sciberras with a sponsorship during a visit to the church.

In fact, since the paintings are an integral part of the architectural structure, the success of the entire conservation programme depends on first carrying out the necessary maintenance works of the church's stone fabric.

Architect Edward Scerri was appointed to provide architectural services, to submit the Planning Authority application and advise the project team. Over the past months, urgent maintenance works of the external stone fabric of the dome were addressed. These were aimed at arresting water seepage and consequent further deterioration of the marouflage paintings.

Detached, fallen pieces of the dome paintings were regularly being found, so stopping the infiltration of water was imperative. These repairs will now enable the 'first-aid' conservation treatments of the paintings to start.

The two platforms installed several years ago beneath the dome and nave first have to be modified. At the time the intention had been that of stopping pieces of the historical paintings from falling on the congregation.

Implementing improvements recommended by the appointed engineers is the immediate next step which would ultimately allow the conservation treatments on the paintings to start and for which sponsors are currently being sought.

With a fundraising strategy in place, an urgent drive to seek potential sponsors and funding opportunities has started. In addition to encouraging response from local Nadur residents and beyond, the project team hopes to get support from the public and private sectors, bearing in mind that this is national patrimony.

The church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an artistic gem of historical significance open to the public for daily religious services. Saving the church and its impressive paintings will not only reinstate the dignity of this fine place of worship but will also return to our collective patrimony a significant achievement in Malta's and Gozo's 20th-century artistic heritage. When completed, the project will provide educational, religious, social and cultural benefits to the local community in Nadur, as well as to the nation.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank all the people and entities who are already supporting this project, including the National Lotteries Good Causes Fund – Ministry for Finance, Capture IT Media, Computime Technology Ltd, Gozo Graphics Ltd, Mapfre MSV Life, The Basement Lounge / Wood and Coal, Vini e Capricci by Abraham's and Whale Digital Marketing agency. They would also like to thank the Vella and Grech families, together with Anton Refalo and Josef Camilleri, without whom it would not have been possible to launch this project

Conservator Amy Sciberras directs a team of conservators and has been entrusted with restoration projects of national and international importance. Ian Camilleri is a retired civil engineer, who had been previously

contracted by Transport Malta as project manager on the St Elmo and Ricasoli break-water restoration projects. He is currently a volunteer with Din l-Art Helwa and on this project, he is responsible for project management services, fundraising and events.

How to sponsor

Sponsors will receive publicity in a long-term marketing campaign together with other benefits. For more information, contact Amy Sciberras via the website www.amysciberras.com.

Donations can be made directly to the following fundraising account: Bank of Valletta. BIC: VALLMTMT. IBAN: MT74 VALL 2201 3000 0000 4002 5502 501.