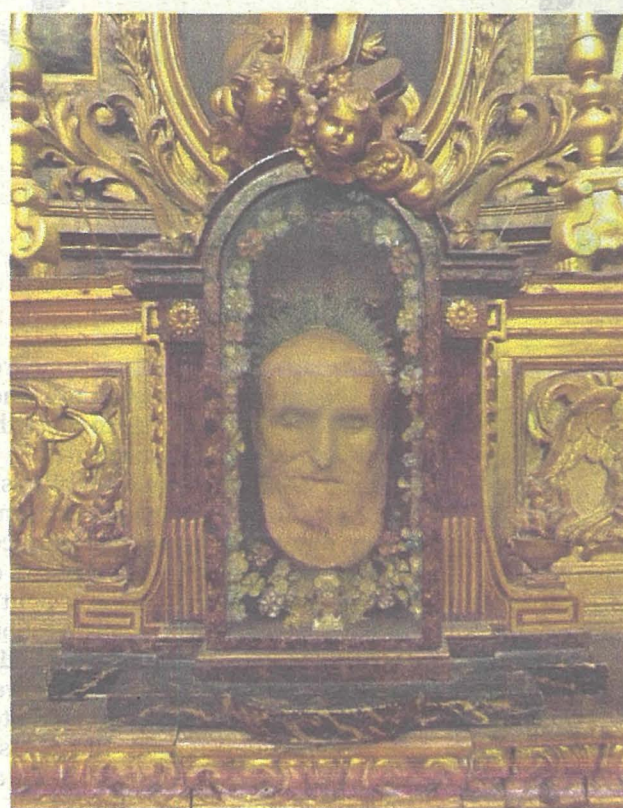


LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY

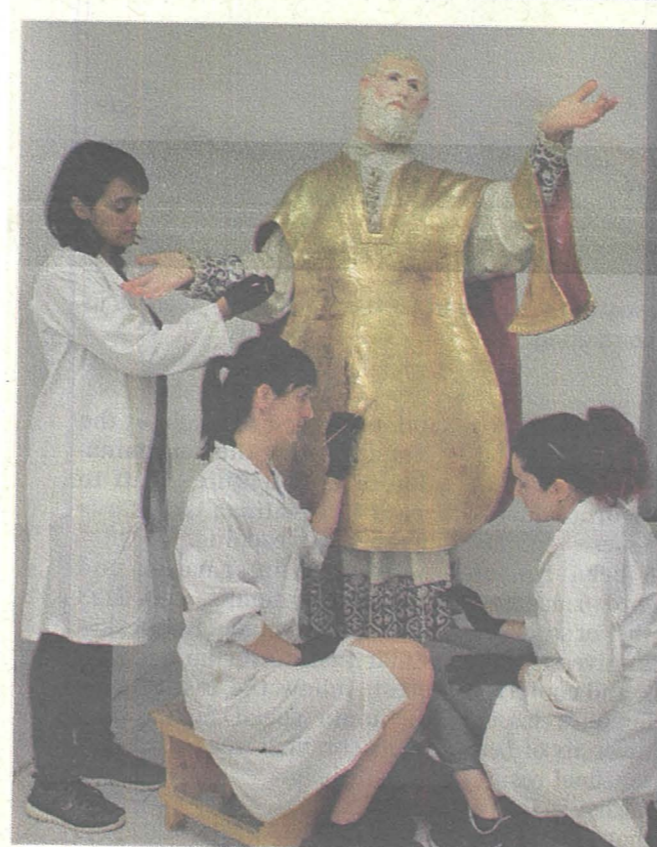


Death mask of St Philip Neri, at the altar of the Virgin of Porto Salvo, church of St Philip Neri, Senglea. PHOTO: CHRISTINA MELI



The polychrome and gilded statue of St Philip Neri before treatments.

The polychrome and gilded statue of St Philip Neri after conservation-restoration treatments.



Leading conservator Amy Sciberras (left) and her team carrying out final touches.



An X-ray image of the statue's head. PHOTO: DIAGNOSTIC SCIENCE LABORATORIES, HERITAGE MALTA



Consolidation treatments of a crack.

Conservation and significance of St Philip Neri statue in Qrendi

CHRISTINA MELI and AMY SCIBERRAS

The seed for the cult of St Philip Neri in Qrendi, which reaches its peak in the recently-restored statue, was sown in 1878 by parish priest Fr Pietro Paolo Xuereb when he established the Confraternity of the Virgin of Lourdes in the same locality. Xuereb hailed from Senglea and harboured a personal connection with St Philip Neri through the cult which the saint already enjoyed in the Cottonera area. His decision to make St Philip Neri the patron saint of this confraternity confirmed this allegiance.

The first community of Oratorians of St Philip Neri in Malta was established in Vittoriosa in 1650. The church of Santa Maria degli Angeli was entrusted to their care, which they rebuilt and rededicated to St Philip Neri in 1651. An oratory, central to their belief and religious apostolate, was erected adjacent to the church.

A more populous community was established in Senglea on July 15, 1661, when the petition that six priests presented to Bishop Balaguer with the request to form a congregation under the protection of St Philip Neri and to adopt the way of life according to the rule of the Oratorians, was accepted.

The church of the Virgin of Porto Salvo, situated on the edge of the Senglea peninsula, was given to the priests in March 1662. The Orato-

rians gave it new life and increased its religious and social significance in Senglea.

Xuereb sought to carry on his hometown's legacy of the cult of St Philip Neri also in Qrendi. The first artistic work for the village depicting the saint was executed by artist Giuseppe Calleja in 1873. This small painting of St Philip Neri was given as a gift from the artist to Xuereb, who in turn gave it to the Confraternity of the Virgin of Lourdes and placed it on the altar of St Stephen in Qrendi parish church. Today, this painting is housed in the church's sacristy.

“Darmanin endowed the statue with an expression of piety, especially through the eyes of the saint”

Five years later, in 1878, Xuereb commissioned sculptor Gerolamo Darmanin (1834-79) to create a processional statue of St Philip Neri. The Darmanin family was already connected to Qrendi since Gerolamo's uncle, Carlo Darmanin, had been commissioned to make the processional statue of the Virgin of Lourdes. The attribution of the statue of St Philip Neri to Darmanin is confirmed by the inscription on the lower part of the statue, which reads: “Gerolamo Darmanin Fecit”.

The statue was paid for by Giovanni Psaila, who also funded the gilded wooden pedestal, the platform supporting the statue (*il-bradella*), the bench on which the statue and pedestal are placed when it was not being carried in procession (*il-bankun*) and the niche for the statue. The gilded pedestal bears the emblem of St Philip Neri and the coat of arms of the surname Psaila, and the inscription “*Expensis Joannis Psalia tal-Nubell A.D. 1878*”, which confirms the patron's name and date of execution of the statue. The confraternity also commissioned a silver diadem for the statue as well as the gilding of the saint's vestments.

Darmanin modelled the face of the saint on St Philip Neri's wax death mask, which is held on the altar of the Virgin of Porto Salvo in the choir of the church of St Philip Neri in Senglea. A death mask – a likeness of a person's face after their death that is made by taking a cast or impression from the corpse – ensured faithfulness to the true facial features of St Philip Neri, which was characterised by a long strong nose and a wavy beard. Darmanin also endowed the statue with an expression of piety, especially through the eyes of the saint, which are testament to his devoutness.

Gerolamo Darmanin, born in Senglea on June 12, 1834, was the son of sculptor Salvatore Darmanin and Maria Anna Frendo. His grandfather, Giuseppe Darmanin, founded the family workshop in Valletta in the early 19th



During cleaning treatments of grime, aged coatings and past retouchings.

century. Named *Giuseppe Darmanin e Figli* (or Joseph Darmanin & Sons for their British clientele), the firm was made up of Giuseppe's five sons and four grandsons, and is renowned for its contribution to marble sculpture in Malta and abroad.

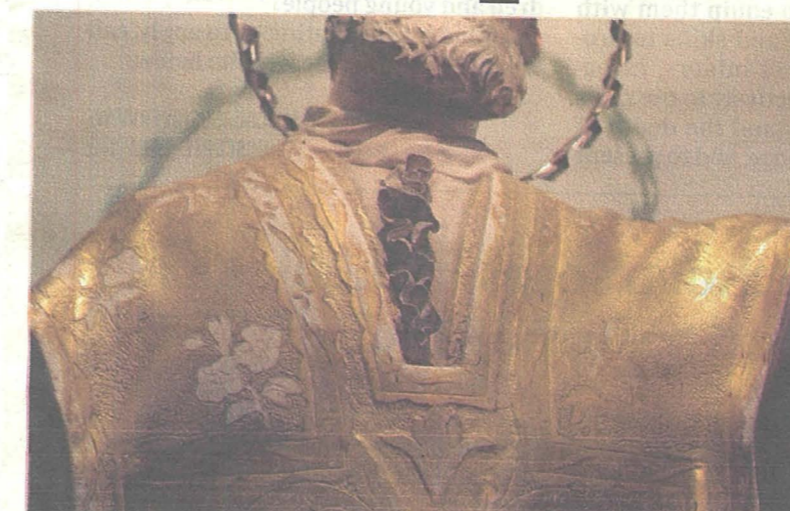
Gerolamo Darmanin participated in the Great Exhibition of 1851 with wax statuettes, two of which portrayed Grand Masters Jean de Vallette and Marc' Antonio Zondadari. Wax was a medium that the Darmanin workshop was not particularly known for since they specialised in marble works. His work received words of praise from the jury, attesting to his skills and talent.

Gerolamo also worked in marble. He produced works in this medium for the altar of the Holy

Crucifix at Ta' Giezu church, Valletta. The memorial plaque for Lorenzo Farrugia Bugeja, dating to 1858, in St Paul's Shipwreck parish church, Valletta, is another of his known marble works.

The notarial contract for this commission also reveals that Gerolamo had his own *bottega* in Floriana, separate from his grandfather's workshop. Gerolamo eventually became a renowned papier-mâché religious statuarian.

Over the past few years, parishioners noted how Gerolamo Darmanin's venerated statue of St Philip Neri had darkened and how it was also suffering from numerous losses, especially in the gilded tunic and base. Due to the great devotion to St Philip Neri, who is still devoutly venerated in Qrendi, a decision was taken in 2019 to



A detail showing losses in the statue's gilded surface before conservation-restoration treatments. PHOTOS: AMY SCIBERRAS

conserve and restore the statue. The restoration project was entrusted to author and fine arts conservator/conservation director Amy Sciberras and her team.

The statue was scientifically studied and examined by both Sciberras and by the team of scientists from Heritage Malta's Diagnostic Science Laboratories using a non-invasive scientific strategy involving X-ray radiography (XRAD). The main aims were to establish the manufacturing technique of the actual structure and its state of conservation.

Radiography was essential in the successful capture of the internal structure of specific areas in the statue. From the radiographs it became apparent that the papier-mâché technique was used to make the statue, thus coinciding

with textual and historical sources. The statue appears to have been manufactured in the traditional Maltese way.

The manner with which the artist constructs the statue is by initially creating a metal framework of the figure and appendages (known as the statue's *anima*), onto which he then formulates a mannequin using papier-mâché. The artist then applies fabric which would have been bathed with adhesive to stick to the papier-mâché, thus formulating the vestment.

During this process, nails are applied to various areas to create folds in the fabric in order to achieve the desired effect. Indeed, from the radiographs it was evident that both hand-forged and smooth industrially-manufactured nails were used for this purpose.

Finally, the artist applied the polychromy, which would be composed of various layers of gesso on top of which the pigment layers are applied. In this case, both polychromy and gilding had been used.

The radiography, in conjunction with the preliminary scientific examinations carried out by Sciberras, were also essential to understand the state of conservation and forms of deterioration. The statue of St Philip Neri was suffering from cracks and localised detachments which had resulted in flaking and losses of its polychromy and gilding.

Treatments carried out by leading conservator Amy Sciberras and her team included stabilisation and consolidation of unstable areas of the paint layer; the gilded surface and the underlying layers.

Cracks were also addressed during these interventions and were followed by cleaning treatments. Unprofessional old interventions and past retouching which had altered in colour were removed. This was followed by the integration of losses in the polychrome and gilded surface.

Through the study of the art historical significance and the

conservation and restoration of this beloved portrayal of St Philip Neri in Qrendi, the community can once again appreciate the full legibility and fitting presentation of this devotional statue.

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Acknowledgments

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More information on the Darmanin family is available from Guido Lanfranco's article on the sculptor (Sliema Lehen il-Banda, 1986), Fabian Mangion's article on his various works (Times of Malta, June 15, 2014), and Jessica Muscat's extensive MA dissertation (Department of Art and Art History, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 2019).

Conservator Amy Sciberras directs a team of conservators and has been entrusted with restoration projects of national and international importance. Christina Meli is a research support officer and PhD candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Malta, working on a research project supported by the Notarial Archives, Valletta.