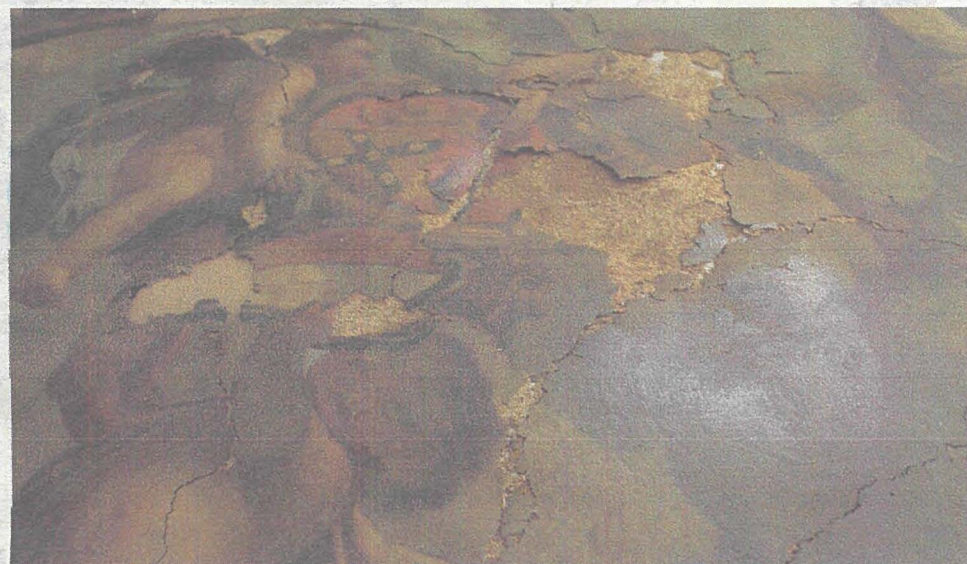


## LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



Amy Sciberras (right) and Gema San Gregorio during chromatic integration of infilled losses. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS



Details showing the substantial losses and various tears in the paint layer as well as several loose paint fragments. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS

# Salvaged from wreck

**Amy Sciberras and Rev. Dr Nicholas Joseph Doublet** write about an allegorical painting attributed to Francesco Zahra that was on the verge of being lost but now once again embellishes the ceiling of the chapel dedicated to St Calcedonius at the Archbishop's Curia, Floriana.

Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) is justly considered Malta's most important local artist of the mid-18th century, whose style superbly captures the essence of the Late Baroque. Truly a prolific artist, his works extend from paintings to the design of church furniture, liturgical vessels, silver artefacts, marble altars and other artworks, many of which still adorn the place – religious or profane – which they were created for.

Zahra's early works are greatly influenced by the works of his first tutor, Gio Nicola Buhagiar (1698-1752). In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between his early works and that of his tutor. However, Zahra soon enough matured his own style. By 1745, he became the most prolific Maltese painter of the period, rivalled only by the French artist Antoine de Favray (1706-1798), who dominated with him the local scene.

Nonetheless, as described by Prof. Keith Sciberras in his 2010 book *Francesco Zahra 1710-1773*, Zahra continued to progress, further advancing his style, thanks to his interest in proper *disegno*, the enduring influence of Mattia Preti's (1613-1699) artistic patrimony, as well as the works of his competitor, Favray. One of Zahra's masterpieces is the decoration of the whole ceiling of the chapter hall at Mdina Cathedral, a work he completed in 1756.

Of the same period is the painting being considered here, for the ceiling of St Calcedonius chapel at the former Jesuit retreat house, Casa di Manresa, nowadays the Archbishop's Curia, in Floriana.

Zahra was commissioned to paint the whole cycle for an oratory created at the back of the Madonna di Manresa church, in order to house the relics of St Calcedonius. The remains, known as *corpo-santo*, arrived at the

chapel from the cemetery of Pretastato, Italy, on May 20, 1753, as a gift from Pope Benedict XIV, upon the request of the house's founder Pier Francesco Rosignoli (1690-1775).

The works in this oratory provide a unique opportunity to see Zahra and Favray's works, side by side, as where Favray left, having decorated the Madonna di Manresa church, Zahra continued, in decorating the oratory, built at its back.

## Conservation and restoration

The restoration project started at the beginning of 2019, took nearly a whole year of meticulous work to complete. The ceiling canvas painting attributed to Zahra and representing an allegory of the Order, was found in storage, to where it had been moved several decades ago to arrest its deterioration. Unfortunately, at the start of the restoration project the painting was found in an appalling state, close to being completely lost. Amy Sciberras and her team were entrusted with this arduous conservation and restoration project.

In past years, two large wooden boards had been attached on to the paint with the intention of preserving it, thereby completely concealing what remained of the painted surface. Hence, the very first step involved removing the boards so as to be able to understand the work at hand.

Whereas most of the paint layer was still present, there were substantial losses as well as several loose paint fragments. This situation demanded emergency treatments that had to be carried out on site, prior to moving the painting. It was first necessary to position the several detached pieces of paint in their respective places within the painting. Small

pieces of Japanese tissue paper were used to bridge and temporarily hold in place the fragmented paint and torn parts. Once these were secured using the stitching procedure, full facing treatments (involving the overall application of Japanese paper) followed, further stabilising the painting and allowing it to be handled for transportation.

**“For the first time in decades it is now possible to observe, study and appreciate this allegorical painting in its full beauty”**

Once in the restorers' studio, the painting, measuring 4.40m in length, was lowered on a large working surface. When the old lining canvas (applied to the back of the painting by past restorers) was removed, the devastating state of the original canvas was uncovered. This was practically non-existent due to having been eaten away seemingly by biscuit beetles. In fact, all that practically remained after this past infestation was the paint layer and the underlying *gesso* preparation. Only a few threads from the original canvas had survived.

The painting was also suffering from broad and rigid deformations. Hence, conservation treatments carried out included the lowering of deformations, tear repair and fixing the previously positioned pieces of fragmented paint, this time addressed from the verso through the use of a specific adhesive. Furthermore, parts of the painting that were

completely missing, were inlaid. The outline of the painting's missing areas was traced on to the newly-prepared canvas and the traced shapes were cut and positioned within the painting.

Considering the severe damage to the painting, a double-lining treatment was fundamental to completely stabilise it. This involved preparing two separate lining canvases that were first attached to one another and then to the verso of the painting.

Cleaning of the aged varnish and of past retouchings followed. Ultraviolet fluorescence techniques enabled the restorers to thoroughly understand the numerous past retouching interventions. Apart from covering extensive areas of the original, including significant parts of the faces and the flag, past retouchings had altered in hue over time. Thus, during cleaning treatments various areas of the original paint layer were uncovered.

The last phases of this exhaustive conservation and restoration project consisted of integration of losses. Infilled losses were chromatically integrated using the *puntini* technique, thus allowing close-up identification of retouched areas. This entailed the application of successive series of dots, which when viewed from a distance, integrate with the original paint layer.

## Iconography

For the first time in decades it is now possible to observe, study and appreciate this allegorical painting in its full beauty. The use of allegory – a symbolic fictional narrative that conveys a meaning not explicitly set forth in the narrative – can be traced back to Homer; and figures used therein can have two or





Stitching and first-aid conservation treatments. PHOTO: AMY SCIBERRAS

more meanings, and thus needs interpretation. Its use is attested in classical authors such as Cicero and Augustine. The use of allegory in art was very influential on the work of Cesare Ripa (c.1560-c.1622), *Iconologia*, first published in 1593. As a true humanist, he draws his inspiration from classical representations in order to personify intangible qualities, such as the virtues and vices, passions, arts, sciences, as well as continents and regions. The work became a treasure trove for artists of all forms, literary and pictorial.

In the case of this allegorical representation of the *Victory of the Order*, attributed to Zahra, the influence from Ripa's work, mediated through Mattia Preti's own *Victory of the Order* at St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, is visible. Ripa draws various examples of representing victory from ancient sources, explaining that: "*Gli Antichi dipinsero la Vittoria in forma di Angelo, con l'ali, e ben spesso a sedere sopra le spoglie dei nemici con Trofeo dinanzi al petto, con una palma, e uno scudo*".

Zahra depicts an angel, brandishing a sword in one hand and unfurling the banner of the Order of St John in the other, which replaces in this case the palm branch of victory. Under his feet, a *putto* holds the fasces, the symbols of authority in Ancient Rome. This, for Zahra, constitutes the enemy spoils.

This last detail is important, because it opens up the work to a second necessary interpretative level. *The Triumph or Victory of the Order* is here tied to the triumph of St Calcedonius, to whom the chapel is dedicated. The ceiling piece, in fact, completes a cycle of three paintings, depicting scenes from the imprisonment and martyrdom of the saint. Calcedonius here becomes a model of virtue for those who here venerated his mortal

remains. As he won the victor's crown, overcoming the paganism of Ancient Rome, so too was the Order's calling to triumph over the opponents of the Christian faith.

On a charismatic level, this formed part of the very mission of the Order of Malta, as masterly depicted by Preti in his lunette at its conventual church in Valletta. Zahra set aside the Minervian helmet of Preti's allegorical figure, borrowing instead the banner and the sword.

On a spiritual level, for Zahra's work embellishes an oratory in a house originally intended for spiritual retreats, the St Calcedonius cycle embodies not only the baroque church's fascination with the cult of the saints, but becomes a calling to the retreatant and pilgrim alike, to take on the virtues of the martyr and root out evil from his life.

The restoration project has given us back a large canvas by Zahra, which once again allows to enjoy the St Calcedonius cycle in its original integrity and splendour.

### Acknowledgements

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Amy Sciberras is a professional conservator and restorer of fine arts. For more information visit her website [www.amysciberras.com](http://www.amysciberras.com).



The painting's deformations shown using raking light examination. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR AND SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO

A composite photo showing three stages of conservation and restoration of the painting representing an *Allegory of the Order of St John* at St Calcedonius chapel at Casa Manresa, better known as the Archbishop's Curia, Floriana. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR AND SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO

The painting after completion of the conservation and restoration treatments. PHOTO: MANUEL CIANTAR AND SUZANNE CIANTAR FERRITO