

THE RESTORATION OF THE ORATORIES AT THE JESUIT CHURCH IN VALLETTA

TWO JEWELS HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

The original layout of the Jesuit complex in Valletta, now the University of Malta Valletta Campus and the Jesuit's Church, is attributed to Padre Giuseppe Valeriano (1542-1596), a Jesuit painter and architect from Naples. It was subsequently modified over the centuries. Now the recently completed restoration of the Oratories of the Immaculate Conception and of the Assumption of Our Lady (Onorati) at the Jesuit Church in Valletta has unveiled and given new life to two jewels hidden in plain sight writes the team at the Restoration and Preservation Department.

Photography courtesy Restoration and Preservation Department.

This page: The Oratory of the Immaculate Conception in its current form dates to the seventeenth century. While oratories at the time were austere and plain spaces, this oratory is ornate and richly finished. The Oratory of the Immaculate Conception after intervention.



Above: Oratorati Oratory interior after intervention. **Below:** Detail of the ornate decoration in the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception before intervention.

Above: The Oratorati Oratory interior before intervention. **Below left:** The Oratorati Oratory roof after intervention. **Below right:** The Oratorati Oratory roof before intervention.

The Jesuit complex in Valletta comprises two parts: the church and the *collegium*. The former is dedicated to the Circumcision of Our Lord and is the first Latin cross church on the island; the latter served as a top-quality grammar school and eventually a university.

Adjoining the church are two oratories, one dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and the other to the Assumption. The latter is popularly known as the Oratory of the Onorati. These spaces were set aside for meetings and worship by members of confraternities who originated from the *collegium* academic classes.

The explosion of a nearby *polverista* on October 12th 1634 damaged

parts of the complex. Repairs in 1637 provided the opportunity to embark on improvements entrusted to Francesco Buonamici (1596-1677), an architect and military engineer from Lucca working for the Order of St John.

The Oratory of the Immaculate Conception in its current form dates to the seventeenth century, resulting from this spurt of improvements. While oratories at the time were austere and plain spaces, this oratory is ornate with crisp and exquisite sculpture, richly finished, and adorned with a cycle of paintings depicting episodes from the life of the Virgin, believed to be the work of Filippino Dingli and the young Stefano Erardi. The novelty of this oratory was groundbreaking and outshone by far what existed at the time.

The subsequent remodelling of the Oratory of the Assumption occurred between 1657 and 1659 and included the remodelling of all the interior, and the dismantling of the original roof and replacing it with an attic and soffit. The oratory is adorned with a cycle of paintings by Stefano and Alessio Erardi again depicting episodes from the life of the Virgin, possibly dating to the late 1680s and early 1690s.

In recent times the church and oratories fell into disrepair, with the Oratory of the Assumption closed off to the public since the 1990s because of issues with the roof. Rainwater infiltration through the church dome, several of the cupolas over the side chapels, and the roofs over both oratories was common. Several reports also highlighted the need to address falling pieces of masonry on St Paul's Street.

The Restoration and Preservation Department embarked on a project in 2015 for the restoration of the roof areas of the church, followed by the external facades of the whole complex, including those of the church, sacristy, and the oratories on Merchant, St Christopher, and St Paul's Streets. Subsequently in 2021, the Jesuits' Church Foundation was established through an agreement between the Government and the Archdiocese of Malta to administer and conserve the Jesuits' Church complex as a historic and architectural monument, as well as a sacred place of worship.

It was during the interventions on the external fabric that research and on-site documentation continued in preparation for the interventions on the sacristy and oratories. Ample use was made of already published material as well as several theses. A number of scientific analyses were carried out. This historic research was complemented by on-site surveys using laser scanning techniques, close-up inspections of the building fabric, and the assessment of the deterioration mechanisms on a practically stone-to-stone basis. Additionally, innumerable hours were spent on site, examining the interiors, speaking to the users, seeking to understand the issues, and evaluating how these had been addressed in the past.

The interventions on the interior of the oratories started with the repair of the timber roof over the Oratory of the Assumption in 2020. Repairs were also carried out on the roof over the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception. The restoration of the sacristy, followed by that of the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception and that of the Oratory of the Assumption, addressed the interiors of these spaces. This included the restoration of the choir stalls in the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception and the soffit of the Oratory of the Assumption. All the services were replaced; modern lighting and sound systems were introduced along with intruder and fire detection systems. Similarly, all the major paintings in the oratories were restored so the oratories could once again be used from 2023.





Above: *The Oratory of the Immaculate Conception apse after intervention. Below:* *The Oratory of the Immaculate Conception before intervention.*



In line with best practice restoration principles, which clearly acknowledge that restoration is a multidisciplinary process, the project saw the collaboration and input of various entities and individuals. It is not possible to fully acknowledge all the work carried out over the years by numerous professional and technical personnel.

The Restoration and Preservation Department's in-house multidisciplinary team included project architects, surveyors and draftsmen, supervisory staff, quantity surveyors, and laboratory researchers. Additional assistance was sought from conservators specialising in stone and timber, as well as from building engineers and scientific personnel. All interventions were carried out under the direction of warranted conservators. Conservators were also commissioned by the Jesuits' Church Foundation to carry out the restoration of the paintings.

The revealing of the underlying colour schemes was probably the most pleasant of surprises, justified by the fact that what was removed was of little interest and the material uncovered was of greater historical and aesthetic value. Decisions about what was to be removed/uncovered were taken jointly by the architects leading the work, scholars, and conservators. It was as if jewels were being rediscovered as these spaces shook off years of neglect and grime.

The most rewarding outcome of these interventions has been witnessing the revival of these once-forgotten spaces. Today, they resonate with life, hosting a myriad of cultural activities that transcend their original religious purpose. The oratories and sacristy have become dynamic venues attracting a diverse audience, including both locals and tourists. This newfound vibrancy not only enriches the cultural landscape of Valletta but also fosters a sense of community engagement and pride. No longer neglected, these meticulously restored seventeenth-century masterpieces now stand as beacons of heritage, inviting all to rediscover their timeless beauty and historical significance. Truly, these treasures hidden in plain sight have been resurrected for generations to come. ■