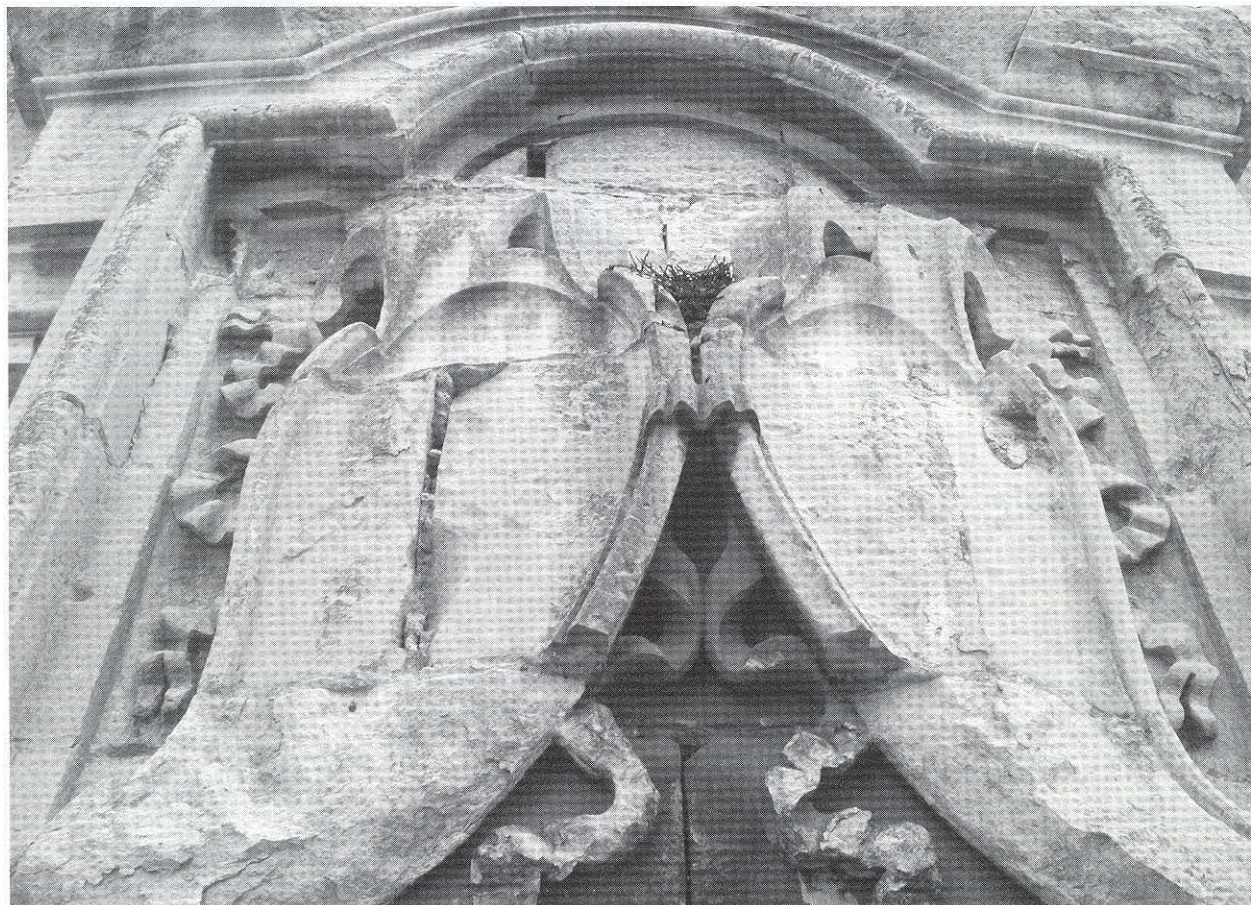


Restoration of Sarria Church

Astrid Vella

The process of restoring dilapidated buildings back to their former glory is a concept that fascinates me, so when I saw that Sarria church, one of my favourite landmarks, was being given a face-lift, I couldn't resist going round to take a look at what was being done.



Detail of the facade of Sarria church, Floriana

Being a virtual 'roundabout church', Sarria is known to the thousands of commuters who drive past it every day, however probably few know that it is the second church to rise on this site. The original one was built around 1571 and funded by Fra Martino Sarria de Navarro which explains why it is known as 'Ta' Sarria'. Built on open ground, as Floriana was not even thought of, this first church was mainly popular with sailors serving on the Order's galleys. This is reflected in the original altarpiece now conserved at the Maritime Museum, a very unusual piece where the Madonna is depicted blessing the Order's fleet assembled beneath her. The maritime connection may have been maintained, as a fascinating link between the old church and the new emerged when the dirt and layers of old paint were stripped away to reveal graffiti of galleons and boats carved into the walls.

Matters took a very different turn due to the terrible plague which devastated Malta and would claim over 6,700 lives by the end of 1676. On the 11th April of that year the Grand Council of the Order met to discuss the invocation of heavenly

protection against the devastation of the plague, deciding that a solemn procession should be undertaken '*a visitare la cappella della Sua invocation detta comunament di Sarria, nel di cui altare si mettano le imagini did S. Sebastiano, S. Rocco particolari protettori di questa infermità*' (to visit the chapel dedicated to Her, commonly known as 'of Sarria' upon which altar images of St. Sebastian and St. Rocco, protectors against this disease, will be placed).

By the 15th of April, just four days later, these plans were superseded by a much more ambitious scheme to demolish the old church and replace it by a new one dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. These Council minutes include an intriguing feature often seen in contracts of work of the time, that is, that parameters for the new church were laid down by referring to another building which it should resemble, saying '*Che la grandezza sia come quella fabricate da Sua Eminenza nel boschetto in circa.*' This refers to the church dedicated to St. Anthony the Abbot, at Verdala Palace. Interestingly, this clause was not adhered to, as this latter church is actually rectangular

in-plan and quite different to the circular design which Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti proposed to the congregation of the Order on the 27th May 1676, at the height of the plague. The foundation stone of the new church was laid by Grandmaster de Rohan on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the 8th December 1676, amidst much celebration that the plague had lost its grip on the Island.

The church of Sarria is a rare local example of artistic unity where treatment of the interior complements that of the exterior, one of the main tenets guiding Roman Baroque architecture. Its proportions and design are a delight to the eye, but unfortunately the church can no longer be appreciated in its full grandeur as conceived by Mattia Preti. Early in the nineteenth century the domed lantern which crowned the ribbed cupola was dismantled either due to structural problems or to lightning damage. It was replaced by a simple cross, a rather unsatisfactory culmination to the building, impairing its aesthetic balance. In more recent times the dome was also treated with a silver-coated damp proofing membrane which also detracts from the original beauty of the building.

Happily, thanks to the restoration initiative of the Ministry for Works and Infrastructure, this deterioration is gradually being reversed as, panel by panel, the original features of Sarria church are coming back to life. The work is arduous and extremely laborious to be sure, involving every discipline of stone restoration. The building was first meticulously studied by the project coordinator, Architect Hermann Bonnici, in collaboration with the Institute for Baroque Studies and the University of Bologna who made their facilities available for running highly sophisticated tests. These permitted the identification of the causes of deterioration and therefore of the type of restoration required. Besides tests to check for the presence of salts, sulphates, acids and other pollutants in the stone, a thorough analysis of the mortar that was used 330 years ago was carried out. This included not only checking the granule size but also the composition as, strange as it might seem to us now, some mortars and lime washes even had animal fat included in the mix. Testing of the structure of the limestone used on Sarria church confirmed that unfortunately the stone is very



powdery and liable to attack from airborne pollutants. The delamination it displays, with stone surfaces 'cracking off' in thick flakes, is also very acute, its full extent and severity revealed by the use of a thermal imaging camera which highlights areas of delamination in different colours since they differ in temperature from the main body of the stonework.

Because of this, fine cracks were filled by injecting special lime mortars to consolidate the delaminating stonework as soon as initial cleaning was carried out. As well as brushing and washing of the stone surface this also entailed the removal of vegetation, old cables and rusted nails and hooks. Decaying areas of special interest such as sculpture are being treated with consolidant liquids which, when absorbed by the stone, solidify within it, strengthening it without reducing its porosity. Careful prising away of the most recent layers of paint is all carried out by hand mainly using surgeons' scalpels; slowly but surely the door surrounds and mouldings which had been submerged under many layers of paint are now beginning to emerge.

Worse still is the layer of cement rendering (plastering) which had been applied mainly to the lower level of the church. The bane of every restorer's life, cement render poisons the stone on which it is laid, as salts seep from the cement into the stone causing deterioration by salt crystallisation. Furthermore, the cement coating prevents the damp from evaporating out of the stone, forcing it upwards instead, carrying the salt deterioration higher. Cracks in old cement also allow the ingress of acidic rainwater which causes further deterioration of the stone face behind the cement layer. Although it is no easy task, hand removal of old cement is therefore a priority at Sarria church.

Then begins the process of replacing stonework which is irremediably decayed; in order to retain as much as possible of the original stone, stones are only being replaced as a last resort in the case of decayed blocks which pose a danger of structural weakness. The church face is then cleaned by the application of poultices in the form of pulped paper impregnated with a weak ammonia solution and laid on each and every stone block. By the time it is lifted off after 15 minutes, the solution will have softened up the centuries of dirt

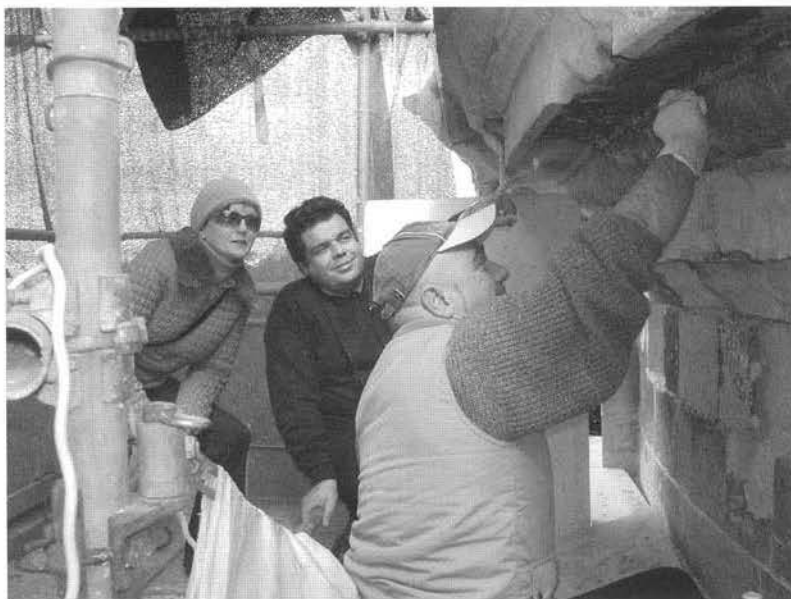


Here and above: Restoration work at Sarria church

with which the church is covered. Since Sarria church is being constantly choked by vehicle emissions, as well as by pollution from the Marsa Power Station and the industrial estates, it is particularly prone to 'black crust'. Thus in areas such as under cornices where this calcium sulphate is not washed away by the rain, a gypsum crust forms, trapping soot which gives it a black colour and allowing acid droplets to attack the backing stone. Although the cleaning poultices soften this gypsum, it still takes a good deal of vigorous scrubbing to get rid of it - and in order to avoid damaging the stone, the scrubbing is carried out with the use of a toothbrush! To get an idea of what is involved, picture yourself perched up nine stories of scaffolding, laboriously scrubbing stubborn grime off each stone with a toothbrush. To me it seemed like one of the labours of Hercules, though it is not being carried out by the Greek god but by personnel from the Restoration Unit within the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure. Having followed courses in baroque architectural restoration, the Restoration Unit staff are now in a position to handle jobs which in the past would have required the engagement of foreign personnel. Their work was not made any easier by winter's severity, as the only concession to inclement weather is that in case of rain or high winds, work continues on the lower levels, rather than on the 7th to 9th stories!

Going up ladder after ladder on the scaffolding is like a journey back in time to early biblical films of the Tower of Babel, but it is worth the effort to examine, close-up, the intricacy of the stone-carving. It is always a humbling experience to see such workmanship, carried out with such precision without the use of modern tools. Cleaning this intricate sculpture requires not only the poultice packs but also the use of micro blasting air jets (women: if this talk of packs and abrasions sounds familiar, you're right; the restoration of old stone uses the same principles as beauty therapy to rejuvenating our skin!) In the case of stone carving especially, the replacement of stones is avoided by using 'plastic repairs', building up the stone again by using a special lime-based cement-free mortar which matches the stone in both colour and texture. As a result of all this specialised care, the intricately carved shields of the Order and the religious decorations which were previously so blurred by erosion and staining that they could hardly be deciphered, are now re-emerging crisp and clean.

It is amazing but even something as simple as pointing (filling with mortar) of open joints between the stone blocks becomes a fine art when dealing with the restoration of old buildings. This is why specialised training such as that which Restoration Unit personnel received at the San Servolo Restoration Centre, Venice is so invaluable, as are the old stone-cutting skills which had almost been lost and are now being fostered again. Another science which has been rescued from becoming completely obsolete is the trigonometry involved in planning and cutting complex stone structures which is now being studied in baroque architecture courses organised by the International Institute for Baroque Studies in collaboration with the Ministry for Resources



Astrid Vella and Hermann Bonnici at Sarria church

and Infrastructure. All these disciplines come together in the special stone-cutting workshop which has been set up at Sarria, where master stone-cutters reproduce deteriorated features of the church, using templates (profile patterns) prepared from them by personnel from the Restoration Unit. In a country beset by civil servant indifference, the whole team's evident pride in their work is a joy to behold.

As each section is completed, pigeon anti-roosting spikes are placed on any sill or overhang where pigeons might get a foothold and soil the freshly-cleaned stones with their droppings. The sight of a bird on the wing is so rare in Malta that I have to admit that part of me enjoys seeing pigeons flying in our cities. Equally, however, I have to admit that the acids and salts in these droppings do untold harm, contributing to the disintegration of the fabric of buildings, retaining water which exacerbates problems of dampness and encouraging plant growth on buildings. Therefore I have to reluctantly agree that their banishment from our cities would be a good thing.

The final step in the face-lift of Sarria church will be the stripping, repair and repainting of the church's wooden doors and windows, all to be done scrupulously by hand. This painstaking approach to the Sarria church restoration project might lengthen the duration of the works, but it is the only way to guarantee an outcome which is not only professional and reversible, but also pleasing to the eye. The aim of restoration is not to render 'as new', for correcting all signs of decay would rob the building of that quality of antiquity that only the passage of time can bestow. It is thanks to this approach that the faces which have been restored have retained their glorious original patina.

Born of the plague and threatened by destruction in the Second World War, Sarria church is now ensured a bright future thanks to this restoration. Take a stroll past it in the evening as the sun's setting rays light up the church in their glorious glow. That's what makes it all worthwhile.

Astrid Vella is a Diploma in Baroque Architecture graduate of the International Institute for Baroque Studies.

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