

Rikors ta Dun David Gauci
Arcipriet tan Naxxar
24 ta Jannar 2025

44/2025

Lill E.T. Mons Charles J. Scicluna
Arcisqof ta Malta

Jesponi bil qima,

Li l Inkwadru li hemm fuq l artal tar Ruzarju bil misteri fih fil Kolleggjata tan Naxxar jehtieg restawr urgenti;

Li ma dan ir rikors qed nannetti d dokumenti kollha mehtiega fosthom resotarium method statement kif ukoll l istimi;

Li l ispiza ghal dan ix xoghol nitlob li jittiehdu mil account li l parrocca ghandha fi hdan il kurja li huwa propju ghal artal tar Ruzarju.

Nitlob li jinhareg id Digriet sabiex ikun jista jinbeda x-xoghol mehtieg.

Nitlob il Barka tieghek,



Dun David Gauci
Kan. Arcipriet



Prezentat fil-Kurja Arċiveskovili
illum 24 ta' Jannar 2025

Charles Bugaj, Kancellier

Our Lady of the Rosary, Francesco Zahra,

Oil on Canvas, 1748

And

The 15 Mysteries of the Rosary paintings,

oil on canvas, 17th Century

Parish Church of the Nativity of Mary, Naxxar, Malta

Restoration Method Statement



Semira Gayle Bugeja (M.Sc., B.A. (Hons) (Melit.))

January 2025

Contents

1. Introduction.....	03
2. The Painting - General Information.....	03
3. Condition Assessment.....	04
3.1 The Painting.....	04
3.2 The Decorative Frame.....	06
4. Proposed Conservation and Restoration treatments.....	09
4.1 The Painting.....	09
4.2 The Decorative Frame.....	11
5. Conclusion.....	13

1. Introduction

The following report carried out by Restawr Arti provides a description of the required conservation and restoration treatments for the canvas paintings that decorate the altar of the Rosary at the Parish church of the Nativity of Mary, Naxxar. These include the 18th Century altar painting representing Our Lady of the Rosary by Francesco Zahra, the 15 surrounding paintings representing the mysteries of the rosary, possibly works of the 17th Century, and the *sopra quadro* of the Eternal Father, possibly a work of the 17th Century. All knowledge gathered regarding the present condition of the work of art under study is based on a visual inspection with the use of visible light, raking light, and ultraviolet light. The proposed required conservation - restoration treatments are based both on professional experience, and published research, and may require slight changes in the process or methodology once the conservator/s carries out a close and thorough visual inspection.

The aim will be to present a conservative methodology for the conservation of the painting and wooden gilded frame, and hence preserving the original materials and colours. All conservation materials, and procedures stated will be compatible, and respectful to the original materials in discussion.

2. The Paintings

The altar painting in discussion is one of Francesco Zahra's depictions of the Madonna of the Rosary, together with St. Dominic and St. Catherine of Siena (Figure 1.). The work was produced in 1748, and it has the typical *sacra conversazione* composition.

The *sopra quadro* of the Eternal Father and the 15 oval paintings representing the mysteries of the Rosary, are earlier works, possibly 17th Century (Figure 1.), and that were present and decorating the altar together with the previous altar painting of the Madonna of the Rosary, today at the Parish Church Museum. The artist of these paintings is still unknown.

All paintings were produced with oil colours on canvas supports.



Figure 1. The Altar of the Rosary, at the Parish Church of the Nativity of Mary, Naxxar. This altar includes the altar painting of Our Lady of the Rosary, the sopra quadro of the Eternal Father and 15 oval paintings representing the Mysteries of the Rosary. Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.

3. Condition Assessment

A visual inspection to understand the present state of conservation was carried out in January 2025, from a distance, since the paintings are placed high on the walls, using visible light. At this point, the backside of the paintings was not possible to investigate. Hence, a better understanding of the manufacturing technique, original materials, deterioration phenomena, damages and previous restoration interventions may be identified once an inspection is carried out at a close distance, from front and back.

3.1 The Altar Painting- Our Lady of the Rosary

Initiating from the canvas support, the painting is well stretched to the strainer/ stretcher frame (Figure 2.), and hence no sagging is present. This may be due to a previous restoration which among the treatments, the painting was re- lined, and may also indicate

that the original support required further strength through the support of a new canvas. This hypothesis is however to be proven once the painting is dismantled and studied at a closer look.

Due to the previous restoration, the present condition of the preparation layer/s of the painting is not entirely clear. Areas of original oil paint which seem to be in a good state of conservation indicate that the underlying preparation layer is in good condition too. However, areas of previous damage and losses will be exposed during the progress of work.

Dirt and grime are entrapped between the paint layer and layers of varnish. Areas of the pictorial layer are retouched and/ or overpainted with what is thought to be oil based paint. These additions that have altered in colour and can be identified as matte patches (Figure 3.), were carried out during a previous restoration intervention. The variations in colour compared to the original colours are creating uneven aesthetics when observed at close and at a distance. The final varnish applied during the previous restoration has oxidised and is giving a very dark appearance to the entire pictorial layer (Figure 2.) This is obscuring the colours of the artist and its details and dimensionality. Additionally, previous continuous use of candles may have contributed to the dark appearance of the coloured surface.



Figure 2. Our Lady of the Rosary, Francesco Zahra, oil on canvas, 1748. Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.



Figure 3. Previous restoration retouched patches, visible as matte areas (marked in yellow). Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.

3.2 The Surrounding Paintings- Mystery of the Rosary Paintings and The Eternal Father

Initiating from the canvas support, several paintings are in a dire state of conservation. Some have detached from the strainer frame, with tacking margins entirely loose (Figure 4.). Additionally, due to the lack of good tensioning, some paintings are suffering from severe deformations which if not addressed can result in further damage and deterioration (Figure 5.). Although minimal, flaking and detachments in the gypsum preparatory layer and paint layer were visible too (Figure 6.). This phenomenon was noted in the bottom oval paintings. This could possibly be the result of rising damp, however this is a hypothesis and needs to be investigated further once the paintings are removed off the walls.

Due to the previous restoration, the present condition of the canvas support is not entirely clear, however there might be lacuna and tears which can only be determined once the paintings are removed off the walls.

Dirt and grime are entrapped between the paint layer and layers of varnish. Areas of the pictorial layer are retouched and/ or overpainted with what is thought to be oil based paint. These additions that have altered in colour and can be identified as matte patches, were carried out during a previous restoration intervention (Figure 7.). One can barely determine the subjects of the different paintings due to the very dark layers of varnish, and hence all the artist's work is hidden (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7.). Additionally, previous continuous use of candles may have contributed to the dark appearance of the coloured surface.

After thorough visual observations it was concluded that all the mentioned paintings require a conservation and restoration methodology designed specifically for their requirements in order to preserve the original materials, and reduce further damage and deterioration.



Figure 4. Loose tacking margins, and flaking at the bottom section. Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.

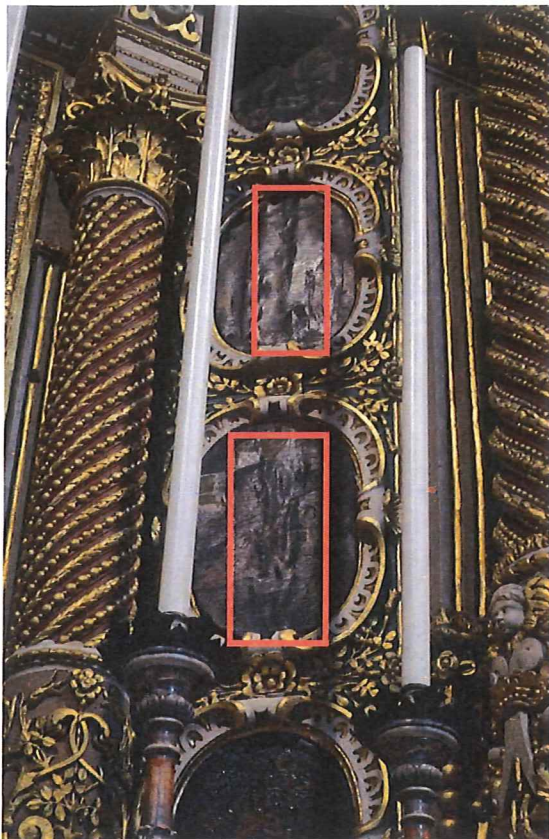


Figure 5. Severe deformations. Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.



Figure 6. Detached and flaking paint layer. Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.

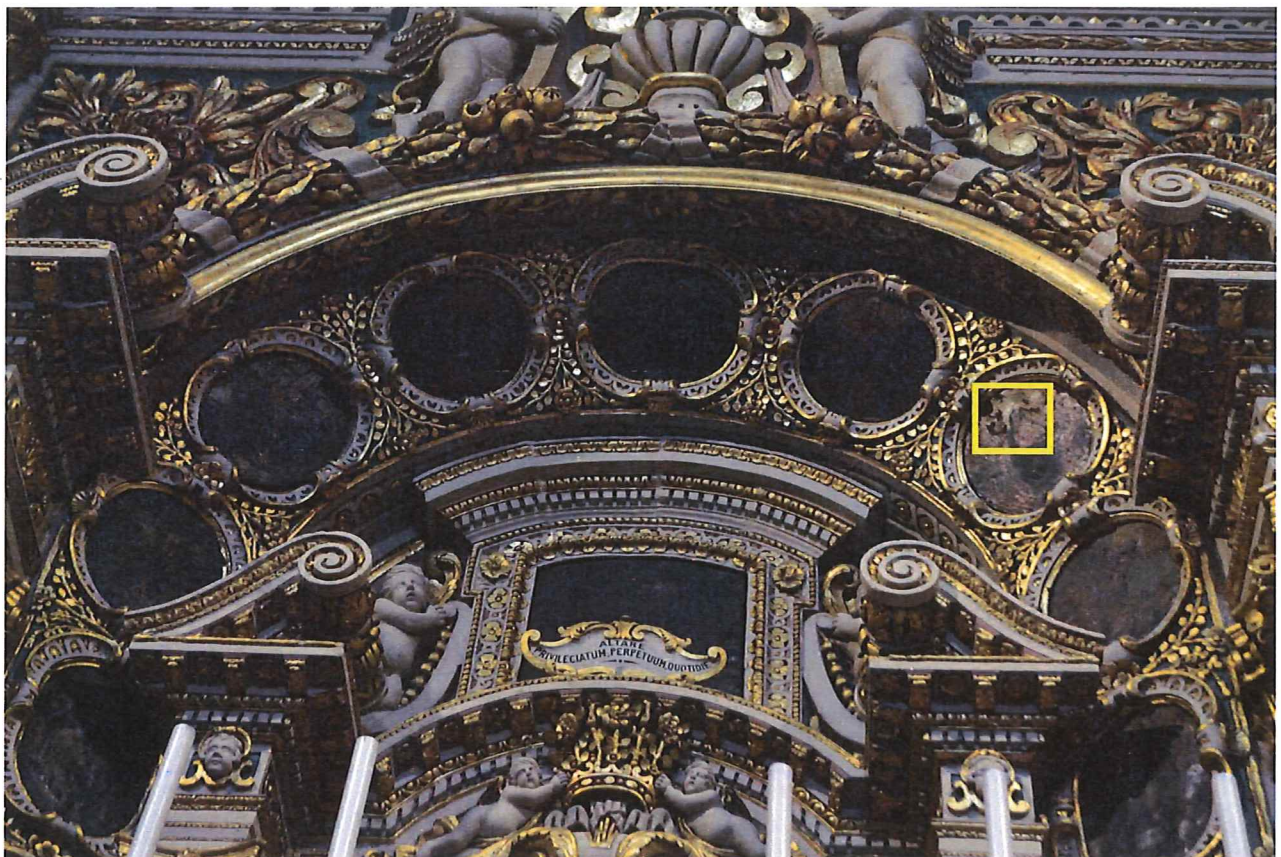


Figure 7. General image of the top paintings showing illegible paintings due to the dark surface, and matte patches of previous restoration colours (marked in yellow). Image, Restawr Arti, 2025.

4. Proposed Conservation and Restoration Treatments

This section will include the different treatments, processes, and methodologies thought to be required at this point based on visual inspection, knowledge from previous projects, and research of published literature. Prior and throughout the stages of the project, all steps and methodologies will be photographically documented. All the treatments, and methodologies will be documented in a final conservation report for future reference.

The Archpriest Canon David Gauci and committee members of Għaqda Kulturali Wirt Naxxari are invited to visit Restawr Arti Studio whenever required and think fit, in order to view and follow the progress of works. Additionally, an inaugural presentation of the works carried out can be prepared and presented, depending on the wishes of the curators.

4.1 The Altar Painting - Our Lady of the Rosary

The first step is to photographically document the painting from front and back using visible, raking, and ultraviolet light. A thorough inspection will be carried out at close distance in order to evaluate and design a precise methodology for the treatments required. The pictorial surface will be dusted off with soft brushes and a vacuum cleaner.

The next stage will be to determine the best possible cleaning methodology or methodologies to remove the oxidised varnish, candle soot, and altered restoration colours without affecting or touching the original paint layers. Various cleaning tests will be carried out to determine the mixture of solvents in liquid or gel state, and the methodology of cleaning. This process will be carried out to expose the artist's bright colours once again. Entrapped dirt and grime, and gypsum infills from the previous restoration will be softened and removed by fine scalpel blades.

After the cleaning, the focus will move to the lengthy and important treatments related to the structural support. The pictorial layer will be temporarily protected with fine Japanese paper in order to reduce the risk of losing parts of the paint layer during structural interventions. The painting will be dismantled from the strainer frame, and the tacking margins will be flattened through a process of humidification and pressure. Once the tacking margins are dry, the re-lining canvas will be removed from the original canvas. The first attempt will be to remove it mechanically by dry methods. If this proves to be difficult, tests will be carried out to find a solvent that swells and softens the lining

adhesive, and hence will allow for the removal of the re- lining canvas. The next step will be to remove the lining adhesive which is present on the backside of the painting. This adhesive is an additional material from a previous restoration that will not be serving any purpose after the re- lining canvas is removed. Tests and trials will be carried out to find the best possible method to clean the backside of the painting. This process is essential to allow for a better understanding of the state of conservation of the original canvas while also preparing it for the following treatments.

A synthetic consolidant will be applied by brush from the backside of the painting. The type of consolidant and its dilution will be determined depending on the requirements of the canvas. A synthetic consolidant is preferred over a natural adhesive due to a higher melting point, and therefore disintegrates less in the high temperatures of Summer, and also does not attract unwanted pests. Additionally, they are reversible with mild solvents. The consolidant will then be re- activated to reach and re- adhere all the different layers of the painting by the use of heat and a low pressure vacuum table. This system will ascertain homogeneous and controlled heat throughout the painting, and also controlled pressure to aid in better adhesion and consolidation. At this moment the Japanese paper facing will be removed.

Depending on the strength of the canvas after consolidation, the conservator/s will decide if a re- lining is required. If the canvas is able to support the weight of the painting, strips will be applied only to the edges and tacking margins of the painting in order to give more strength to the edges while providing a longer edge from where the conservator can pull during the re stretching process. However, taking into consideration the size of the original canvas, most probably a re- lining will be needed. In any chosen treatment, the adhesive will be compatible with the consolidant used previously. This will eliminate undesirable reactions due to their different physical properties that might reduce the bonding strength between the original canvas and the new lining canvas or strip lining canvas. The type of new canvas chosen will be of a similar composition, thread and weave in order to have similar properties as the original. The painting will be re- stretched and tensioned on the original strainer or stretcher.

Lacunae and losses in the paint layer, and preparation layer will be infilled with fine quality *gesso di Bologna* and rabbit glue, and eventually levelled to match the rest of the painting's surface. Prior to re- integration, a low molecular weight retouching varnish will be applied to separate the original colours from the retouching restoration colours while

saturating the original colours. Then, the pictorial re- integration of losses of the pictorial layer will be carried out using stable varnish based colours purposely designed for restoration. This phase will unify the appearance of the painting. As a final step, the surface will be given a synthetic coating with a satin finish. A synthetic varnish will be chosen over a natural varnish since it is proven to be more stable to high temperatures and humidity levels, does not discolour by time, and also has an ultraviolet filter incorporated, hence it protects the oil colours from the negative effects sunlight may have on the original materials.

4.1 The Surrounding Paintings - Mystery of the Rosary Paintings and The Eternal Father

The first step is to photographically document the paintings from front and back using visible, raking, and ultraviolet light. A thorough inspection will be carried out at close distance in order to evaluate and design a precise methodology for the treatments required. The pictorial surface will be dusted off with soft brushes and a vacuum cleaner.

The pictorial layer will be temporarily protected with fine Japanese paper in order to reduce the risk of losing parts of the paint layer during structural interventions. The paintings will be dismantled from the strainer frame, and the tacking margins will be flattened through a process of humidification and pressure. Once the paintings are dry, the re- lining canvas and patches will be removed from the original canvas. The first attempt will be to remove them mechanically by dry methods. If they prove to be difficult, tests will be carried out to find a solvent that swells the lining adhesive and patch adhesive, and hence will allow for the removal of the re- lining canvas and patches. The next step will be to remove the lining and patch adhesive which is present on the backside of the paintings. Previous restoration adhesives are additional materials that will not be serving any purpose after the re- lining canvas is removed. Tests and trials will be carried out to find the best possible method to clean the backside of the paintings. This process is essential to allow for a better understanding of the state of conservation of the original canvas while also preparing it for the following treatments. The next step will be to treat the deformations through a process of humidification and pressure.

A synthetic consolidant will be applied by brush from the backside of the paintings. The type of consolidant and its dilution will be determined depending on the requirements of the canvas. A synthetic consolidant is preferred over a natural adhesive due to a higher melting point, and therefore disintegrates less in the high temperatures of Summer, and also does not attract unwanted pests. Additionally, they are reversible with mild solvents.

The consolidant will then be re- activated to reach and re- adhere all the different layers of the paintings by the use of heat and a low pressure vacuum table. This system will ascertain homogeneous and controlled heat throughout the painting, and also controlled pressure to aid in better adhesion and consolidation. At this moment the Japanese paper facing will be removed.

The next stage will be to determine the best possible cleaning methodology or methodologies to remove the oxidised varnish, and altered restoration colours without affecting or touching the original paint layers. Various cleaning tests will be carried out to determine the mixture of solvents in liquid or gel state, and the methodology of cleaning. This process will be carried out to expose the artist's bright colours once again. Entrapped dirt and grime, and gypsum infills from the previous restoration will be softened and removed by fine scalpel blades.

Once the paintings are cleaned, the focus returns to the structural treatments. The tear/s will be repaired from the back of the paintings by using fine threads that will be adhered systematically as to re- strengthen the area around the tear. Holes will be inlayed with perfectly cut canvas in order to fill the missing canvas parts. A non woven support material will be used to patch the areas of the tears and holes. This will provide further strength around the damaged areas, while adding an intermediate protective layer between the restoration repair and the re- lining canvas that will be applied later on.

Depending on the strength of the canvas after consolidation, the conservator/s will decide if a re- lining is required. If the canvas is able to support the weight of the paintings, strips will be applied only to the edges and tacking margins of the painting in order to give more strength to the edges while providing a longer edge from where the conservator can pull during the re stretching process. In any chosen treatment, the adhesive will be compatible with the consolidant used previously. This will eliminate undesirable reactions due to their different physical properties that might reduce the bonding strength between the original canvas and the new lining canvas or strip lining canvas. The type of new canvas chosen will be of a similar composition, thread and weave in order to have similar properties as the original. The paintings will be re- stretched and tensioned on their original strainer frame.

Lacunae and losses in the paint layer, and preparation layer will be infilled with fine quality *gesso di Bologna* and rabbit glue, and eventually levelled to match the rest of the paintings' surface. Prior to re- integration, a low molecular weight retouching varnish will

be applied to separate the original colours from the retouching restoration colours while saturating the original colours. Then, the pictorial re- integration of losses of the pictorial layer will be carried out using stable varnish based colours purposely designed for restoration. This phase will unify the appearance of the paintings. As a final step, the surface will be given a synthetic coating with a satin finish. A synthetic varnish will be chosen over a natural varnish since it is proven to be more stable to high temperatures and humidity levels, does not discolour by time, and also has an ultraviolet filter incorporated, hence it protects the oil colours from the negative effects sunlight may have on the original materials.

5. Conclusion

From the observations carried out on site, Restawr Arti suggests that the canvas paintings of Our Lady of the Rosary and the surrounding paintings at the Parish church of the Nativity of Mary are to be preserved by following a conservation and restoration programme. All treatments carried out must be based on a methodological, and ethical approach in order to preserve the historical materials. Conservation treatments, and procedures must be carried out using established and reversible conservation products and tools.

Restawr Arti,
69 Triq it- Tuffieħ Naxxar Malta
VAT no. MT 23161310

RESTAWR ARTI

69, Triq it-Tuffieħ, Naxxar, Malta NXR 3024

+356 79576344

restawrarti@gmail.com

VAT: MT 2316-1310



05/11/2024

Quotation #
044/24

Għaqda Kulturali Wirt Naxxari

Phone no.

Email

Conservation and Restoration – Our Lady of the Rosary,
Oil on canvas, Francesco Zahra, 1748. Naxxar Parish Church

DESCRIPTION OF TREATMENTS

PRICE (EURO)

- Restoration Method statement and Final Conservation Report	180.00
- Cleaning and removal of oxidised varnish, overpaint, dirt and grime	1380.00
- Structural intervention including consolidation, inlays, strip lining/ re lining	1040.00
- Gypsum infills	260.00
- Pictorial re- integration and final protective coating (UV filtered)	1560.00

Subtotal exc. VAT 4420.00

VAT 18% 795.60

Total (Euro) 5215.60

This quotation is valid for 6 months from date of issue.

RESTAWR ARTI

69, Triq it-Tuffieħ, Naxxar, Malta NXR 3024

+356 79576344

restawrarti@gmail.com

VAT: MT 2316-1310



05/11/2024

Quotation #

045/24

Għaqda Kulturali Wirt Naxxari

Phone no.

Email

Conservation and Restoration – The 15 Rosary Mysteries and *Sopra quadro* of The Eternal Father, Oil on canvas, Naxxar Parish Church

DESCRIPTION OF TREATMENTS

PRICE (EURO)

- Restoration Method statement and Final Conservation Report	180.00
- Cleaning and removal of oxidised varnish, overpaint, dirt and grime	2150.00
- Structural intervention including consolidation, inlays, strip lining/ re lining	2150.00
- Gypsum infills	320.00
- Pictorial re- integration and final protective coating (UV filtered)	2050.00

Subtotal exc. VAT 6850.00

VAT 18% 1233.00

Total (Euro) 8083.00

This quotation is valid for 6 months from date of issue.