

The canvas paintings of the Chapel of Sts. Crispin and Crispinian at the Collegiate Church of St Paul Shipwreck, Valletta – An historical appreciation and condition assessment.



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1. Description

The three canvas paintings that are being discussed in this report are of a large dimension. They are painted in oil colours on canvas which is stretched on wooden frames. The main altar painting is fitted within a polychrome marble clad reredos while the two crescent-shaped lunettes are fitted within the arches flanking the altar of the side chapel dedicated to Sts. Crispin and Crispinian. The first painting by Maltese Rococo artist Rocco Buhagiar (1723-1805) shows the two saints in glory with Christ the Saviour surrounded by numerous angels and putti amongst billowing clouds [Fig.1]. Some angels also carry the attributes of saintly martyrdom namely the palm fronds, a flowery wreath and crown of glory. This is a typical Sacra Conversazione piece set within a triangular structure which is very pleasing to the eye.

The other two canvas paintings show episodes from the saints' martyrdom. These works also on canvas were painted by Michele Busuttil (1762-1831) who was buried in this same church in his family tomb found only a few metres away from this chapel. One of the paintings shows the two brother saints being arrested and dragged away by Roman soldiers during a persecution of Christians in France where the saints had lived [Fig.2]. The other painting shows the moment when the saints are being executed [Fig.3]. At the centre is one of the saints kneeling in the act of being beheaded by a sword wielding executioner close by. On the right is the life-less body of his brother with head severed lying nearby. On the left of the scene is the setting in which the act takes place, showing a classical architectural townscape. Hovering above are two angels, one carrying a metal crown, while the other swoops down to lay the flower wreath onto the saint's severed head, while holding a palm frond. Interestingly the composition in both paintings is cleverly filled out with the artist juxtaposing proportion to fill the curved format of the canvas while making them clearly read from below at ground level.

2. Historical Details

The confraternity which had commissioned the works of art was established in April, 1614. The lay religious group was formed of cobblers, saddle makers and other workers related to the art of leather. Apart from being a union for the profession safeguarding their work and the members themselves. The chapel also served for the spiritual aspect of the confraternity.

Saints Crispin and Crispinian are the Christian patron saints of cobblers, curriers, tanners, and leather workers. They were beheaded during the reign of Diocletian; the date of their execution is given as 25 October 285 or 286. Born to a noble Roman family in the 3rd century AD, Crispin and Crispinian fled persecution for their faith, ending up at Soissons, where they preached Christianity to the Gauls while making shoes by night. It is stated that they were twin brothers. They earned enough by their trade to support themselves and aid people experiencing poverty. Their success attracted the ire of Rictus Varus, governor of Belgic Gaul, who had them tortured and thrown into the river with millstones around their necks. Though they survived, they were beheaded by the emperor c. 286.

3. Condition

All three paintings need urgent conservation. The two lunettes carry various tears that had been repaired in time during past interventions but have again re-emerged. The main altar painting has a huge loss in between the two saints. This has been patched up in the past but the damage certainly needs urgent attention. Overall, the paintings are very badly discoloured and aesthetically, they cannot be appreciated as should be. This is greatly manifested in the two lunettes by Busuttil which are thoroughly yellowed by the altered varnish layers and dirt obscuring the painted layer. The same can also be said for the main altar painting by Buhagiar where the clouds which should be white have turned yellow or brown, while the light blues, typical of the rococo style of Buhagiar have turned green. A very much needed professional conservation intervention would restore the

three paintings back to their original hues and aesthetic values as intended by the artists themselves.

4. Photos



Figure 1: The main altar painting by artist Rocco Buhagiar showing Sts. Crispin and Crispinian in Glory.

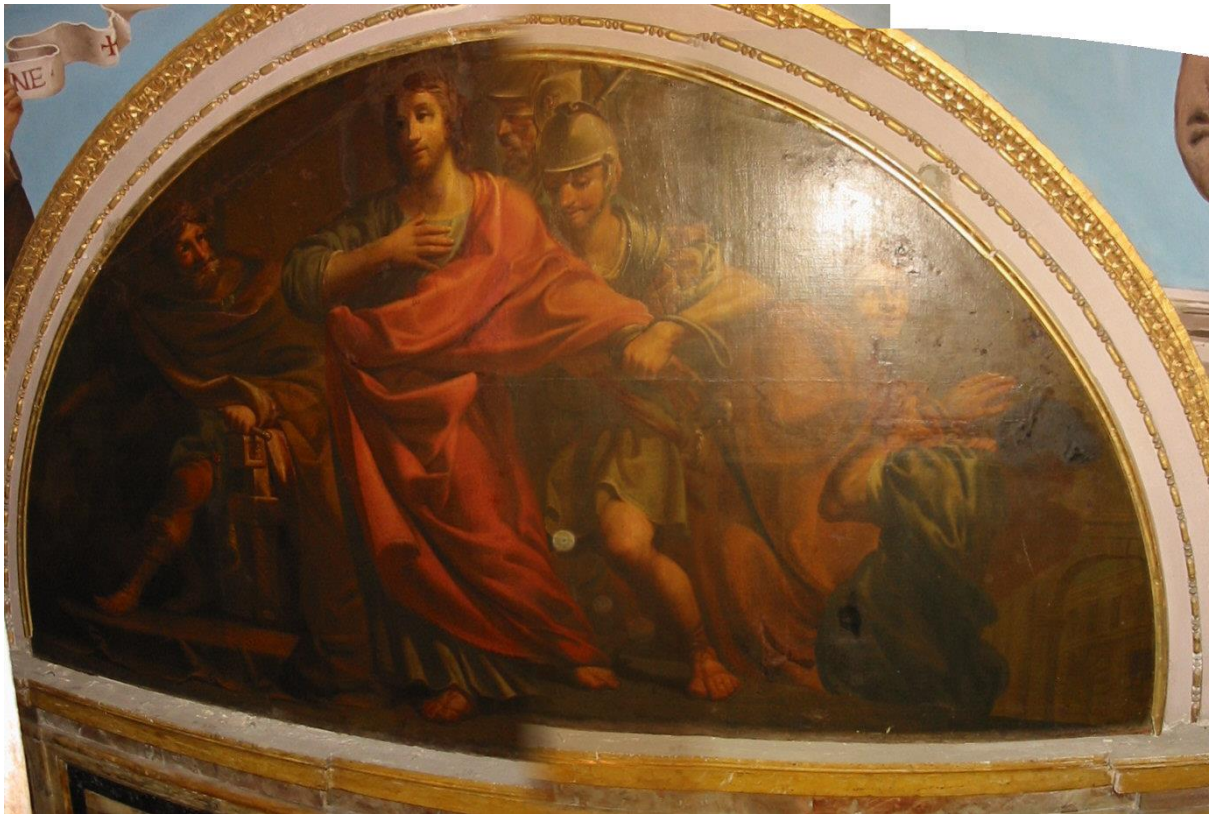


Figure 2: Sts. Crispin and Crispinian being imprisoned.



Figure 3: The martyrdom of St. Crispin and St. Crispinian.