

STATE OF CONSERVATION AND TREATMENT PROPOSAL
FOR THE IMPORTANT PAINTINGS AND FRAMES DEPICTING
THE VIA SAGRA LOCATED INSIDE THE BASILICA OF MOSTA
DEDICATED TO THE ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY

10th January 2025

ATELIER DEL RESTAURO
CONSERVATION & SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF WORKS OF ART

QUOTATION

Date: 10-01-2025

Quotation number: 25009

e-mail: info@atelierdelrestauro.com

VAT NUMBER MT 23561505

+356 79534766

Client's details

Name & Surname: Rev Archpriest Sebastian Caruana o.b.o Mosta Rotunda Foundation	
Home/ office number:	Contact number: 21 433 826 / 27 418 368
Address: Ufficcju Parrokkjali 15, Church Street, Mosta	e-mail: office@mostachurch.com , kppmosta@gmail.com
Other Information:	

Artifact's details:

Object: Oil on canvas painting and wood gilded frames	Title: The Via Sagra / The Stations of the Cross
Artist: 10 paintings by Rocco Buhagiar, 4 paintings by Antonio Scerri, 16 frames sculpted by Antonio Agius.	
Period: Painting done between 1791-1796 frames done between 1888-1963	Location: Mosta Basilica dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary
Dimensions: 187cm x 88cm each frame including the cross.	Inspected by: Valentina Lupo, Marzia Progetto, Francesca Giovagniola.
Notes: Light arrangement: Normal and raking light	Notes: Cleaning tests done on one of the frames on purpose for this quotation.

Introduction

The Via Sagra (*Via Crucis*) stems from the introduction of the devotion of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem in 1229, a processional route symbolising the actual path Jesus walked to Mount Calvary. Traditionally, the Via Sagra consists of the different episodes of the Passion of Christ and varies between seven and twenty two images. In 1726, Pope Benedict XIII gave all Franciscans the indulgences of the Stations of the Cross and set the number of Stations of the Cross to fourteen.

It was the Franciscan order who introduced the devotion to the Via Sagra on the Island and the first Via Sagra to appear in Malta was in the Franciscan church of St. Mary of Jesus (Ta' Giezu) in Rabat in 1727, followed by one in the Franciscan church of Ta' Giezu, Valletta, in 1731. The devotion

towards the Stations of the Cross was given particular importance during Lent and Good Friday. This tradition was introduced to Malta by many Pilgrims who were travelling from the Holy Land, bringing with them the devotional practice together with the *Via Sagra*.

About the Basilica of Mosta Via Sagra

The fourteen paintings of the Via Crucis are prominently displayed inside the Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Mosta. These works are of exceptional historical and artistic significance, as they originally belonged to the old parish church, constructed based on the designs of Tommaso Dingli. When the current Church was built, these highly ornate, gilded frames were commissioned to house these paintings, reflecting the intricate craftsmanship and decorative artistry of 19th-century Malta.



Figure 1 – The Stations of the Cross are displayed along the circumference of the Mosta Rotunda and are highly visible to visitors.

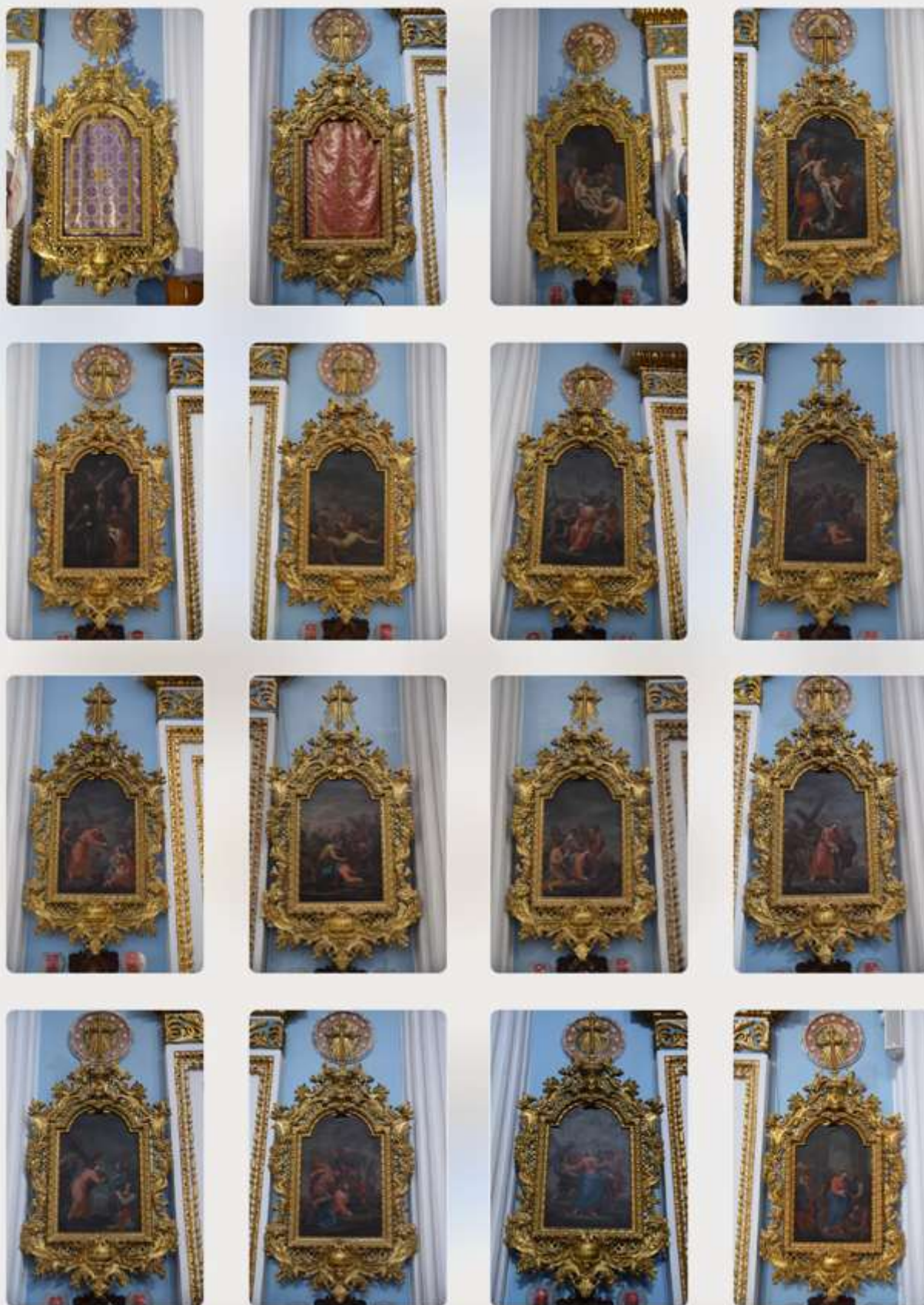


Figure 2 - The paintings and frames of the Via Sagra

The frames, sculpted by Antonio Agius (1888–1963), are masterpieces of Baroque-inspired design. Completed around 1923, **they are among the most elaborately decorated and gilded examples of their kind, making them a vital contribution to Malta’s decorative arts heritage.**

The paintings themselves date back to the late 18th century and were painted by two different artists, resulting in a fascinating stylistic contrast. The first two stations and the last two (Stations I, II, XIII, and XIV) were painted by the lesser-known artist Antonio Scerri between 1791 and 1792. These works are characterised by a Baroque style that, while accomplished, reflects a more traditional approach that had begun to wane by the late 18th century.

The remaining ten stations (Stations III–XII) were executed by the renowned Maltese artist Rocco Buhagiar (1723–1805) between 1793 and 1796. Buhagiar’s work leans towards the Neoclassical style, showcasing the influence of contemporary artistic trends that he likely encountered during his time in Rome.



According to Comm. Prof. George Cassar, the stylistic differences between the works of Scerri and Buhagiar are immediately apparent. While Scerri’s paintings adhere to the Baroque tradition, Buhagiar’s work reflects the Neoclassical movement that was gaining momentum across Europe during the late 18th century. It is believed that Scerri’s commission may have been interrupted, as his style did not align with the emerging artistic trends of the time. Buhagiar, who had studied in Rome, brought a more modern approach to the project, which likely appealed to patrons seeking to embrace the evolving tastes of the period.

Today, the fourteen paintings, each housed in their opulent Baroque-style frames, are prominently displayed in the Basilica. They stand as a testament to the artistic transition between Baroque and Neoclassicism in Malta and the enduring craftsmanship of 19th-century gilded woodwork.

I. Details of the Paintings:

- **Stations I and II** – Antonio Scerri (1791–92), oil on canvas
- **Stations III to XII** – Rocco Buhagiar (1793–96), oil on canvas (signed)

- **Stations XIII and XIV** – Antonio Scerri (1791–92), oil on canvas
- **Two extra frames one conserved a number of Reliquaries and the other one the Enointment oil for the sick.**

State of Conservation of the paintings and frames

The ornate gilded and sculptured wooden frames have been decorated using the water gilding technique. During preliminary investigations the state of conservation of all the frames was assessed. In general the surface decoration of the frames was found in a bad state of conservation with the surfaces covered in dust and grime along with detachments, abrasions and losses of the gilding. Furthermore dust and grime are accumulated on the surface. The gold turned dark especially because in the past these were lit by oil lamps and therefore the soot has covered the gold gilded surface.



Some restoration interventions on different areas were done where the areas were regilded using the oil gilding technique.

Losses of the wooden support together with the losses of the overlying preparation and gilding were present in some small areas. These areas of the support will require consolidation and reconstruction.

Fissures and breaks in the wooden support were observed in various areas of the wooden elements, especially in vulnerable areas of the carved decorations. Cracks and detachments of the gilding and its preparatory layers were also observed in these areas as well as in other parts of the gilding.

Over time mechanical damage, handling and cleaning of the gilded elements have all contributed to its current state of conservation.

Additionally cracks and detachments were also present at different levels of the decorative stratigraphy. The frames which are hung closer to the doors at the back have several flyspecks (small black dots) which cover the gilded surface. Where flyspecks accumulations are present due to their acidity the gold underneath is usually found abraded. Some of the frames have also evidence of a bio-film indicating the presence of mould.

For the purpose of this project specialised conservators in the conservation of wooden and gilded surface did a site- visit to carry out cleaning tests.

The paintings in general were found in a stable state of conservation. Some exhibit a craquelure pattern. This pattern is present throughout the painting due to the repeated expansion and contraction of the canvas support. This movement most probably happened because the painting absorbed humidity present in the air. Due to the expansion and contraction of the canvas support with changes in temperatures and humidity stresses are created on the paint layer and by time a loss in the painting's elastic properties takes place.

The varnish layer appears homogenous however it has oxidised in time and has therefore altered the original colours, resulting in an overall dark yellowish tone which hinders the full appreciation of the painting's intended tonality. Restoration intervention attempts seem to be present due to a number of overpaints observed in some of the paintings.



Figure 3 – General image of the 13th Station of the Cross



Figure 4 - During the cleaning tests carried out on the frames



Figure 5 – Details showing a dirty gilded surface, with losses of the paint layer and restoration interventions done by the oil gilding technique.



Figure 6 – Details showing cracks and an oil gilding intervention on the water gilded layer



Figure 7 – other cracks and oil gilding interventions.



Figure 8 – Large black circular dots are a bio-film indicating the presence of mould on the top part of the inscription smaller dots are acidic flyspecks.



Figure 9 – Abrasions of the gilded layer show the exposed red bole



Figure 10 - Abrasions of the gilded layer show the exposed red bole



Figure 11 – Wax residues found on some of the frames



Figure 12 – Several flyspecks abraded the gilded surface due to their acidity

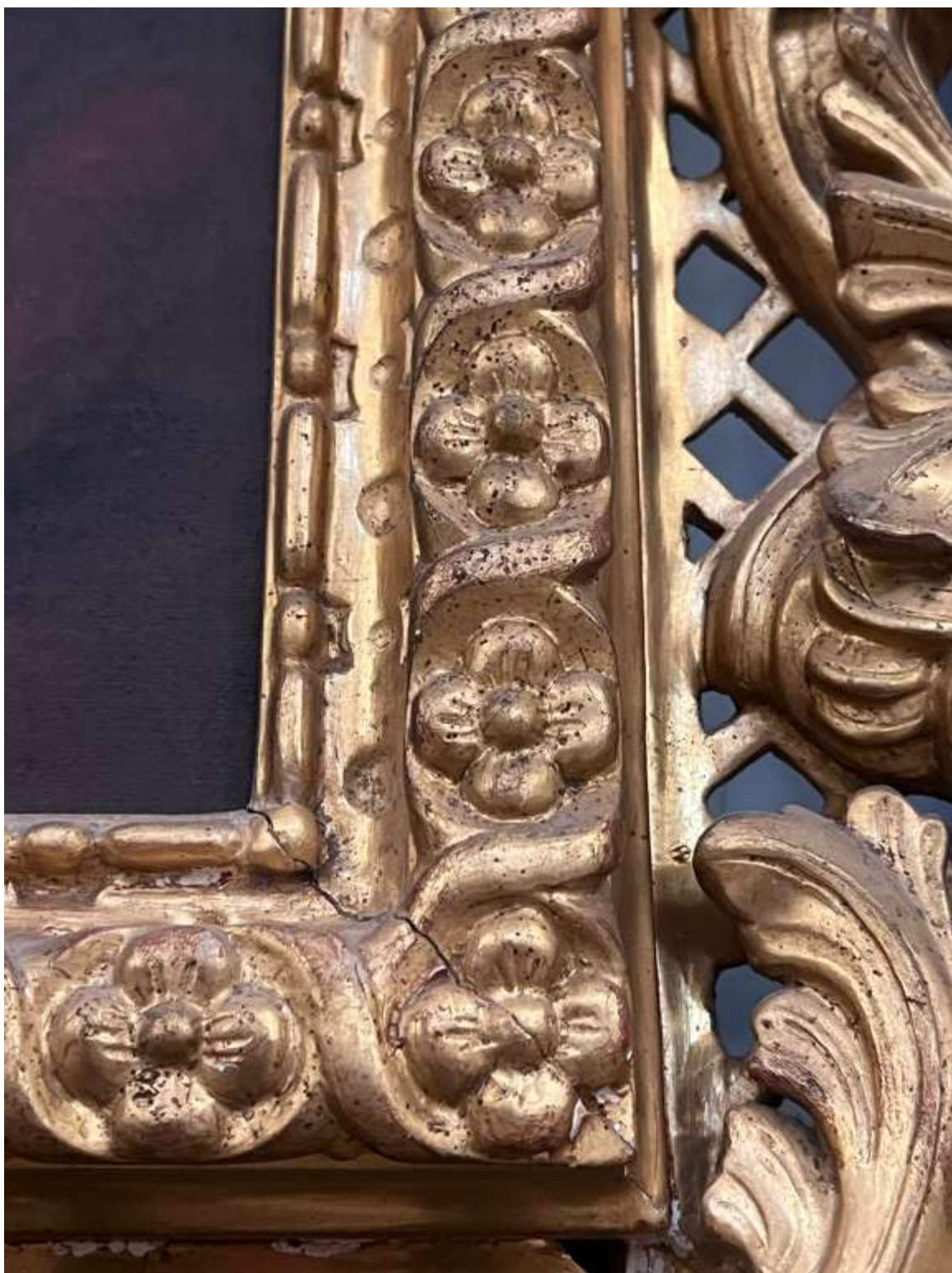


Figure 13 - Several flyspecks abraded the gilded surface due to their acidity



Figure 14 – A whitish layer is visible on this painting indicating blooming (trapped humidity on underneath the varnish)



Figure 15 – General photos of two of the Stations showing a highly oxidized varnish



Figure 16 -the highly ornate cross found on top of the frames, having an abraded gilded surface exposing the red bolo.

QUOTE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF THE CANVAS PAINTINGS

Treatments
1. Documentation 2. Removal of the decorative gilded frame 3. Low suction cleaning of the back
4. Cleaning of overpaintings 5. Cleaning of oxidized varnish 6. Cleaning of flyspecks using mechanical methods
7. Facing 8. Humidity tests front and back 9. Treatment of the deformation
10. Removal of the past lining 11. Cleaning of the old glue
1. Consolidation of the canvas support 2. Adhesion of paint layer under vacuum
3. Tear repair and patches 4. Canvas inlays 5. Sizing of the new canvas 6. STRIP LININ or LINING intervention using a conservation standard adhesive under vacuum
7. Removal of facing 8. Mounting the painting on the stretcher frame*
9. Infilling of Lacunae with Gesso di Bologna 10. Infilling of cracks with micro-crystalline wax 11. Leveling and imitation of the pictorials surface
12. Reintegration of losses in the paint layer using gouache 13. Application of retouching varnishing 14. Retouching using Maimeri® varnish colours including reconstruction of areas where a complete loss of colour and form is present. 15. Application of final protective varnish with a UV filter.
16. Mounting inside the frame and packing
TOTAL EXCL. 18% VAT for one painting 1,150 euros x 14 paintings = 16,100 euros
18% VAT 2,898 euros
TOTAL INCL. 18% VAT for 14 paintings =18, 998 euros

QUOTE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF DECORATIVE FRAMES
THE QUOTATION INCLUDES TREATMENTS USING CONSERVATIVE APPROACH THAT IS WITHOUT
REGILDING THE WHOLE FRAMES

1. Photographic and graphic documentation
2. Report writing
3. Removal of the altar from the site and installation once completed
4. Tests for adhesion
Adhesion of Gold
5. Treatment of cracks using a special flexible material for the consolidation of wood
6. Treatment of mould
7. Cleaning Tests
8. Cleaning Dust, Grime and Altered Coating
9. Mechanical cleaning of wax droppings
10. Removal of purpurin
11. Removal of oil gilding
12. Cleaning of oxidised varnishes to reveal the original brilliance of the gilded goldleaf
13. Infilling with resin wax over capillary cracks
14. Infilling Lacunae with gesso di Bologna
15. Reconstruction of lost forms/carvings using Balsite, Ex-novo decorations using bas-relief or incisions according to the lost decorative motifs.
16. Application of bolo layers on lacunae and abrasions were the reddish layer of bolo shows
17. Water gilding with 23.75ct gold leaf* on lacunae and abrasions were the reddish layer of bolo shows
18. Application of bolo layers on lacunae and abrasions were the reddish layer of bolo shows
19. Integration of the new gilded surface
20. Retouching of losses in the inscription
21. Ageing of the newly integrated areas
22. Final Coating

TOTAL EXCL. 18% VAT for one frame 3,560 euros x 16 frames = 56,960 euros

Whole project discounted to 54, 681 euros

18% VAT 9,842.58

TOTAL INCL. 18% VAT 16 frames = 64, 523 euros

Conservation standard materials except gold leaf are include in the price.

*Cost of 23.75 k real Gold leaf bought on purpose for the project according to today's price of gold = approximate 4,500-6,800 euros for a conservative intervention

This quotation is valid for a period of 4 months from the date of issue.

The following costs will be included:

1. Documentation photography carried out before during and after treatments
2. Specialized professional work carried out by experienced conservator-restorers
3. All the equipment and materials to carry out the treatments such as solvents, consolidants, adhesives, retouching colours, varnishes etc... are conservation-standard materials bought from specialized conservation and restoration material suppliers namely C.T.S.srl Italy, AntaRes Italy, Conservation by Design (CXD) England.
4. Preliminary state of conservation report and treatment proposal

We would like to thank you for your trust and interest in our work. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions regarding the proposed treatments and quotes.

- We will be more than pleased to invite you over at our laboratory to see the work in progress at different stages of the conservation and restoration treatments.

- Please note that insurance cover for artefacts held at Atelier del Restauro's laboratory is applicable on a limit per item of Eur 10,000 (fire and theft). Insurance cover in excess of this amount is the sole responsibility of the client. The client may make use of our insurance, in which case an estimated price of the artefact has to be provided by the client as required by our insurance policy. Extra charges are payable by the client