

The Church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq  
Main Altar and Reredos

Restoration Method Statement



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## 1. Introduction

The following report carried out by Restawr Arti provides a description of the required restoration treatments for the conservation and restoration of the main altar at the 19th century church of St. Agatha in Zurrieq, Malta. All knowledge gathered regarding the present condition of the site under study is based on a visual inspection. Additionally, the proposed required restoration treatments are based both on professional experience, and published research. All proposed treatments abide by conservation ethics, and will not effect its value as a religious and historical site.

The aim will be to present a conservative methodology for the preservation of the original *finto marmo*, and architectural decoration. All materials, and procedures stated will be compatible, and respectful to the original materials of the mentioned site.

## 2. The Church and Altar of St. Agatha

The church of St. Agatha in Zurrieq is a 19th century church dedicated to Malta's minor patron saint, St. Agatha (Figure 1, 2.). The main altar is located opposite the main door, and it is entirely composed of Globigerina Limestone with simple architectural Neoclassical features. The altar and reredos were repainted with commercial oil paint in a blank light cream colour, and hence covered original decoration. However, 19th century *finto marmo* and architectural decorations are visible through damages and previous restoration interventions. The altar is also decorated with symbols related to St. Agatha, such as, palms and a crown. All the mentioned decorations were possibly produced with oil paint.

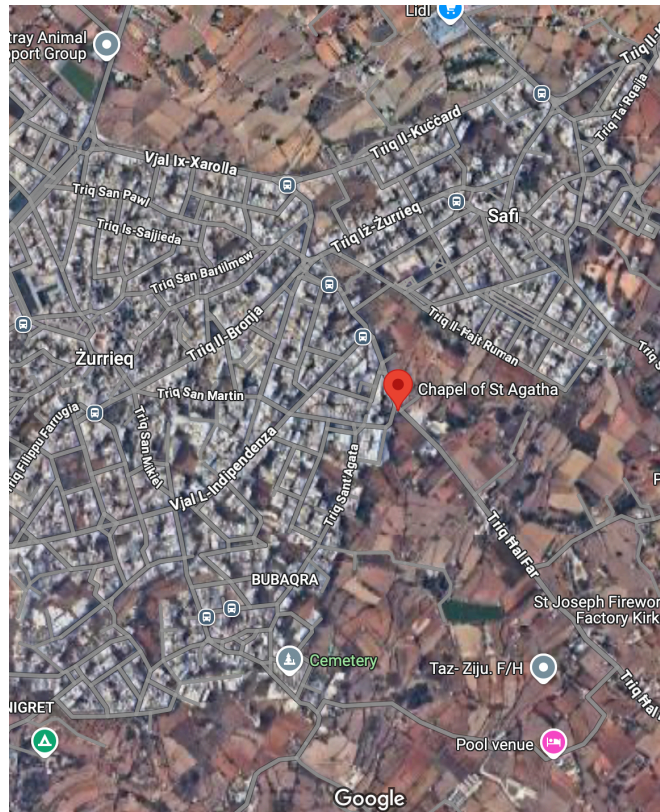


Figure 1. Location of the Church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq, Malta. (Image, Google maps)



Figure 2. The church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq. (Image, Restoration and Preservation Department)



### 3. Condition - The Steps, Altar, and Reredos

The stone support seems to be in a good condition, no major cracks or losses where noted. The altar and reredos are re painted with a commercial oil paint of a light cream colour (Figure 3.). Beneath this over paint one can notice an original *finto marmo* decoration (Figure 4.). This decoration is not entirely visible due to the repainted surface, and hence the actual condition of the underlying decoration needs to be investigated once cleaning tests can be carried out (Figure 5.).

Additionally, due to the continuous rising damp and salt cycles, some areas of the repainting, mainly at the lower area of the altar, are flaking off, and exposing the original painted decoration. The colours at the lower area close to the ground are powdering and as a result seem to be faded (Figure 6.). Parts are entirely lost (Figure 7.). Lacunae in the paint layer are also exposing slight powdering, and salt efflorescence in the stone support (Figure 8.).



Figure 3. General image of the Church of St. Agatha, Zurrieq. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)



Figure 4. Original 19th century *finto marmo* exposed due to the natural deterioration of the re painted surface, and a previous restoration intervention. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)



Figure 5. Re painted reredos. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)





Figure 6. Powdering and faded oil colours. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)



Figure 7. Lost painted decoration and exposed stone support. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)





Figure 8. Stone powdering and salt efflorescence. (Image, Restawr Arti, 2025)

#### 4. Conservation and Restoration - Proposed treatment Methodology

According to the visual inspection carried out by Restawr Arti on site in February 2025, there are a number of treatments that should be carried out, both on the stone, and on the painted decoration, in order to preserve the altar and reredos. All the proposed treatments will only commence once trials and tests prove safe, compatible, and effective. In any case where the proposed procedures and materials prove to be

uneffective, another methodology will be tried and tested. All steps will be well documented photographically, and a final conservation report will document all treatments, and methodology for future reference.

Primarily, dust and dirt that has accumulated on the flat surfaces, will be dusted off using dry soft brushes and a vacuum cleaner. Additionally, a pre consolidation treatment will be applied in order to protect the powdering paint from getting affected during the coming steps. A low viscosity acrylic based consolidant diluted in water, such as PRIMAL CM300 or ACRIL ME, will be applied with a brush over a protective facing of Japanese paper. This method will ensure homogeneous application, without drippings, and eliminating the risk of pulling off powdered paint due to the use of brushes. The preferred consolidation strength will be tested as a first step through different test patches.

The process will then move to the removal of the over painted paint. Cleaning tests are to be carried out to find the best possible solution and/ or gel to remove the re painted layer. Since the re painting is thought to be commercial oil paint, a polar solvent, or mixtures of polar solvents might be the best way for removing the unwanted re paint, while keeping the original 19th century *finto marmo*.

Eventually, a process of salt extraction will be carried out to those areas, essentially, at the lower areas of the altar. The process will involve the application of poultices by paper pulp and distilled water.

A biocide diluted in distilled water will be applied to the surfaces as a prevention of possible mould formation in the future. This step will be carried out due to the continuous rising damp, that may contribute to biological formation in certain instances.

Once the surfaces are cleaned, a second treatment of consolidation will be applied on the deteriorating areas, hence those that are powdering or damaged. This stage will follow the same process of the pre consolidation treatment mentioned earlier in this section.

The conservation process will continue with the mortar infills of losses and minor reconstructions. A non hydraulic lime, local sand, and Globigerina Limestone powder mix is proposed. Self designed mortars which cater for the requirements of the site understudy are preferred over ready made mortar mixes.

A fine layer of diluted synthetic retouching varnish will be applied by brushes on a dry surface. This step will saturate the original colours while separating the original colours

from the re- integrating restoration colours. The lacunae and newly applied mortar will be re integrated using an imitative technique and stable restoration varnish colours. As a final step, a final protective coating with a matte finish will be applied to protect both the original colours and also homogenise the final aesthetic of the painted surface. The varnish will be diluted as to not interfere with the porosity and breathability of the stone support. The final varnish will be sprayed over the entire surface.

## 5. Conclusion

From the observations carried out on site, Restawr Arti suggests that the altar, reredos and painted decorations understudy are preserved by going through a conservation and restoration process. All treatments carried out must be based on a methodological, and ethical approach in order to preserve the historical materials present on site, while being base on established conservation materials.

The discussed conservation and restoration proposal is based on theoretical knowledge, and practical experience in the field. However, some may change or other treatments may be added according to the needs and requirements of the site. All processes and treatments will be consulted with the architect and the Restoration and Preservation Department.

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