

## Conservation of the wall paintings of the Chapel at Palazzo de la Salle, Valletta

### The Project

Located in the lower part of the Republic Street, in Valletta, and built in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Palazzo De la Salle has been home to Knights of the Order of St John for over 200 hundreds years during the Baroque era. The magnificent Palazzo has been the seat of the Malta Society of Arts (MSA) since 1923, and is currently used for arts education, exhibitions and performances.

The little-know Chapel within the Palazzo is decorated with stunning 1730s wall paintings depicting the Coats of Arms of Fra Guillaume de la Salle, the eponymous resident of the Palazzo, Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, and scenes from the Life of St John. These paintings are highly significant as some of the few Baroque wall paintings in Malta to survive within a domestic context, but they are virtually unknown to scholars and the public alike, since the Chapel has been closed to the public since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Project entails the completion of the conservation of the wall paintings of the Chapel, started by the Department of Conservation and Built Heritage of the University of Malta in 2016. Such important paintings will be finally presented to the public after hundreds years of obscurity.



Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM)



Medallion depicting St John, Frieze, Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM)



Coat of Arms of Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, Frieze, Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM)

### Meet the Team

The Department of Conservation and Built Heritage of the University of Malta is a dynamic and growing department within the Faculty for the Built Environment, staffed by professional wall paintings conservators, conservation architects, scientists, archaeologists and curators, all with extensive professional experience in Malta and abroad. The Department has been carrying out the study and conservation of the Chapel since 2016, as a core component of the training of emerging professional conservators studying on its Master of Science programme in the Conservation of Decorative Architectural Surfaces.

In October 2018, the Department will entrust the completion of the project to two of its recent professional graduates, who have been a part of the conservation project since its inception. The project will be carried out under the continuing guidance of the Departmental professional staff.



Helene Nuland stabilising the Coat of Arms of Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, Frieze, Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM)



Nathalie Debono uncovering the cornice of the Frieze, Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM)



The Team involved in the conservation of the Chapel (2016-2018) – Michel Salameh, Nathalie Debono, Helene Nuland, Lara Marie Walker, Roberta De Angelis, Chiara Pasion, Jennifer Porter (©DCBH, UM)



**The conservation project so far**

From 2016, the Team composed of the staff of professional wall paintings conservators of the Department together with the MSc students carried out the study of the wall paintings of the Chapel, from archival research to documentation with innovative techniques to scientific analyses. This involved the collaboration of the Department with researchers and institutions in Malta and abroad.

Between 2017 and 2018, after the uncovering of the paint layer which was obscured by multiple layers of covering paint, the Team proceeded to the stabilisation of the wall paintings. The conservation treatments were carefully developed, tested and implemented on the basis of the study of the original materials and techniques and the deterioration phenomena encountered, always pursuing the highest standards in the conservation practice.



Nathalie Debono developing a material for the stabilisation of detached plaster (©DCBH, UM)



Nathalie Debono treating the wall paintings, Chapel of Palazzo De la Salle (©DCBH, UM) (©DCBH, UM)



The conservation Team working in the Chapel (©DCBH, UM)

### Why Crowdfunding?

After the hard team work carried out in 2016-2018, the final phase of the project will include the cleaning and retouching of the paintings, and is therefore a crucial stage of the work, since it will return full legibility and aesthetic value to the paintings, after 300 years of obscurity. This will require 6 months of full-time work of two recent professional graduates, after which the paintings will be presented to the public. The estimate of funds needed to complete this project is 25,000.00 € over a six-month period.

The Chapel will then house exhibitions related to the history of Palazzo de la Salle, the paintings and their conservation, where the work of the Department and its sponsors will be showcased. The Department and MSA are planning a wide-ranging dissemination campaign upon completion of the project, including a press release, public talks, and a variety of publications.

