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art restoration & conservation

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Works of art on paper, maps, prints and antique books;

The Conservation and Restoration of painting ***Ex-voto: Madonna and Child with Saints***



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General Data

<i>Title</i>	<i>Ex-Voto: Madonna and Child with Saints</i>
<i>Technique</i>	Oil on canvas
<i>Artist</i>	Borg (?)
<i>Period</i>	17 th century
<i>Location</i>	Gharghur Parish House
<i>Date of Inspection</i>	November 2009
<i>Method of Inspection</i>	Normal and raking light

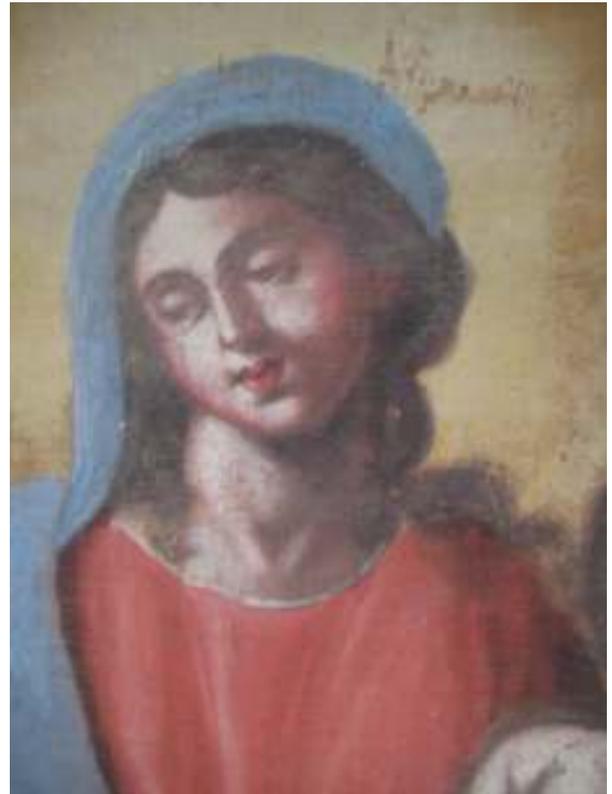
Description

The painting is a typical representation of the Assumption: the Virgin seated on a cluster of clouds, aided by angels with a figure on the right hand side identified as a Pope.

This painting is considered as an ex-voto since the letters VFGA (Votot Fecit., Gratia Accepit) are inscribed upon it. An ex-voto is an offering given in fulfillment of a vow, or simply as gratitude or devotion towards a saint or divinity (who may possibly be the Pope in this case). The other inscription 'Clementio•Borg', may refer to the Pope (Clementio?) present in the painting on the right hand side, while 'Borg' may be the patron/donor or the painter.



Painting front before restoration-conservation treatments



Various details of painting before restoration/conservation treatments



Various details of painting before restoration under raking light, showing defects in the canvas tension, seam and perforations

State of Conservation

Auxiliary frame

From visual examination it was obvious that the painting had no auxiliary frame since it was stretched onto a wooden support. The canvas painting is therefore kept into place with the help wooden strips that are nailed on the tacking margins from the front.

A stretcher frame is important in this case as it has the ability to expand and thus can correct defects that happen with time due to the movement of its components in fluctuating environments. Such problems are deformations and sagging of the canvas support that may impact on the state of conservation of the other layers in the canvas painting. In this treatment proposal, it is suggested that a new stretcher frame would be devised, and the painting is stretched as it was originally.

Canvas Support

The support is made out of two or more canvases as a vertical seam is seen running longitudinally along the painting. The support seems to be in a fair state of conservation. It seems that in the past the support was damaged mainly due to improper stretching, causing deformations and the weakening of the original support. Thus reinforcement is needed; being a relining treatment (where a new canvas support is stretched and attached with an adhesive to the back of original canvas) or strip lining where only strips of canvas are adhered to the tacking margins, a process that enables the re-stretching of the canvas painting. The best treatment will be devised upon further investigations.

Ground Layer

The preparatory layer or several initial layers of material is usually applied to the support in order to obtain a proper surface to receive painting pigments. The ground of paintings on canvas generally consists of white, calcium-based mineral substances, like gesso, and of adhesives with an animal glue base and sometimes earth pigments to create a warm base for the subsequent paint layers. The quality of the materials used and the correct execution of the ground are fundamental for the conservation of the painting throughout time. Due to the location of the ground between the support and the pictorial layers, the ground's binder must contain a sufficient absorbent capacity, for permeability and elasticity. In this case it seems that the adhesion between the preparatory and paint layers is good.

Paint Layer

It is obvious that the painting has suffered from a lot of damage due to the inherent properties of its material components and their surroundings. A varnish layer is absent meaning that the paint layer was exposed to direct light, heat, moisture, air pollutants, dust and dirt. Exposure to ultra violet rays found in natural light is the most damaging causing chemical changes to the components of the material. In fact the fading of colours are a result of their impact.

The sensitive pigments, such as the blue, are the so-called fugitive due to their instability and lack of permanence. Fugitive pigments irreversibly fade over time, or with exposure to light. These properties are usually linked to lake pigments. The blue may be therefore easily identified as a lake (a pigment that is manufactured from a dye by precipitating a soluble dye with a metallic salt e.g. Prussian blue or Indigo). Some lime drippings are also seen on the paint layer.

Surface

The surface of the oil painting was not varnished but is subject to surface dirt. This is hindering the full appreciation of the painting's intended tonality. The hygroscopic particles of dust attract humidity and are a source of movement and future biological attack.

Decorative Frame

The decorative frame is in a fair state of conservation having damage in gilding patinas and gesso layers in the form of losses and abrasions.

Before Conservation-Restoration Treatments

Auxiliary support and canvas support

The painting was removed from the four members that were keeping it in place, attached to the wooden plank.

The painting was then turned face down so as to start treatments on the canvas back to prepare it for the relining process. The canvas was sanded in order to remove all defects, like glues and excess ground used for the manufacturing technique. The central seam was also thinned with sand paper and other mechanical methods in order not to leave its mark from the front after the relining process. Fragile areas such as the thinned seam and torn areas of the canvas were supported using Japanese paper. The seam was also faced from the front in order to avoid any movements in the canvas while moving it. Any defects in the ground layer or missing yarn were infilled using gesso and inlaid respectively, in order to have a smooth flat canvas support to be ready for the relining treatment.

The relining process was carried out by attaching a new canvas to the original support with a synthetic adhesive. After the relining process, the painting gained back its original tensile properties and was then properly re-stretched onto a new stretcher frame.



An area on the canvas back showing excess ground that went through the canvas support. This is referred to as cushioning



Detail of cushioning



Mechanical removal of the excess ground layer



Thinning of seam using mechanical methods



Showing losses of the ground layer, leading to weak areas of yarn



Gesso infilling and leveling in areas of missing ground layer



Detail of canvas inlay in area of missing yarn



Facing of seam with Japanese paper



Painting after relining process, still stretched on a temporary stretcher frame. One can also note the facing along the seam

Paint and varnish layers

The paint layer was superficially cleaned after carrying out a number of cleaning tests. After the cleaning process the paint layer showed to be brighter, since all the dust and superficial grime was successfully removed.

Any losses in the ground and paint layers were infilled using gesso and leveled down to the same level of the paint layer.

The painting is seriously affected aesthetically due to chemical alteration of the pigments. The absence of varnish layer and surface dirt affected the original tonalities hindering its appreciation. Hence, reintegration of the paint losses, which were previously infilled with gesso, was carried out systematically using varnish colours in dots or *puntini*.

As for the Madonna's and Angel's blue cloaks, glazes of colour were applied, since the original shadows were completely lost due to fading process. Flyspecks were either mechanically removed or retouching, depending on the situation.

A varnish layer consisting of a totally reversible synthetic resin was given to the painting for both saturation and protection purposes. The varnish applied is very stable and does not yellow or darken over time. A rather matte finish was given to the painting.

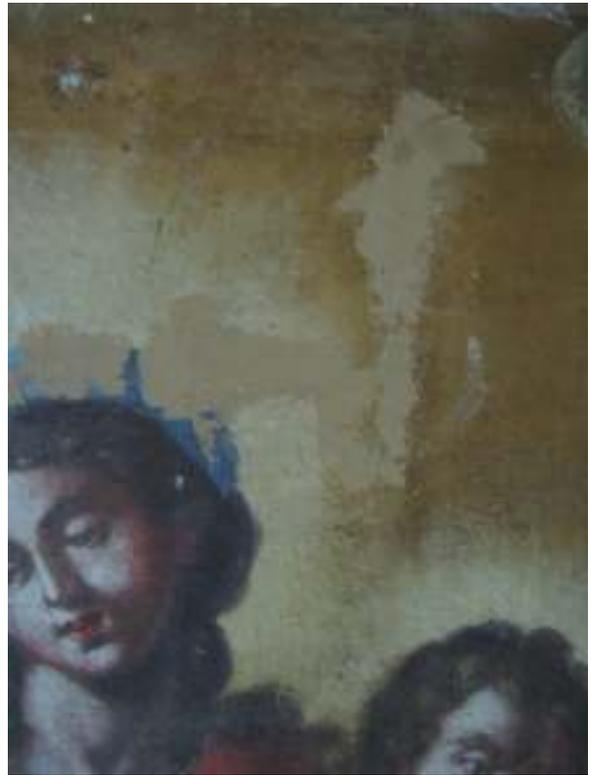
A plain stained wooden decorative frame was made to fit the perimeter of the painting.



Details during the cleaning treatment



Details during the cleaning treatment



Application of gesso in areas of missing ground and paint layers



*Detail after stucco leveling,
before varnishing and
retouching*



Detail after varnishing



Detail after retouching



Detail before and after retouching



During the retouching process



Detail of Madonna showing fading of the blue pigment before retouching



Painting before restoration



Painting after conservation & restoration

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