

The restoration of Christ the King

JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR interviewed Sante Guido who was responsible for the restoration of the Sciortino monument, and Keith Sciberras, the project manager, about the work involved to bring Christ the King Monument back to its original splendour.

My first few questions were addressed to Mr Keith Sciberras, lecturer in art history at the art unit, faculty of architecture at the University of Malta.

What was your role in the restoration of the monument?

My role was that of project manager for the sponsor and the restorer.

The sponsor was Bank of Valletta. This is the same system which was used by Farsons for the restoration of Neptune. There was of course the museums department, which had its own management and superintendents.

The day-to-day management involved coordinating with many different people and parties, such as Malta Drydocks who were responsible for the scaffolding, the delivery and provisions of services necessary for the restoration work, the department of museums and the day-to-day running of the site.

How did the initiative start?

The idea came from Bank of Valletta's millennium project committee.

There were other projects on their list such as the armoury restoration and the conservation of natural sites. The restoration of the Christ the King monument was one of the projects.

The restoration work started in February 2000.

What research work was carried out before the restoration project?

Research receives first priority. It was also carried out on other restoration projects. For example, a seminar was organised on the occasion of the restoration of the tondo of the Beheading of St Paul by Algardi. Dr Jennifer Montagu from Warburg Institute, University of London, delivered a lecture on the art historical context that produced the work.

Research is also still taking place for the Neptune monument to find out the author. I personally question the present attribution to Leone Leoni.

Following the Neptune's restoration, we went to Spain where much of Leoni's work is found and we are continuing the research. The same is being done on the Sciortino monument and also on the Vilhena Monument in Floriana.

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Sante Guido, you have been in charge of the restoration of this great monument. In what state did you find it?

The monument was in a very poor state because of the environment where it lies – outdoors and in a highly polluted area. The corrosion was caused by the acid rain's chemical reaction which in turn changes into a solution of green salts.

The bronze had no time to develop a natural stable patina to protect. When modern monuments, like this one, are immediately exposed to pollution, the bronze suffers.

The monument was in a far worse situation than the Neptune, which is 400 years older and also in the open air, but somehow protected in the palace courtyard and not in a heavily polluted area. The Neptune had time to develop its own protective patina, the Christ the King monument did not. I found the corrosion on the monument very accentuated and deep.

In the figure of Malta, for instance, there was a discrepancy in the surface levels, which in some areas was up to 2mm from the original state.

As we worked up towards the highest

parts of the monument, we found that the monument had even lost important original marks. Christ's gown, for instance, is modelled slightly rougher than the rest of the body. In these areas one can still see the thumb marks of Sciortino and his assistants.

It is more likely that what we saw was Sciortino's modelling. The monument lost part of this original structure, which remains an important datum of the statue's style itself.

The light, intended by Sciortino to fall and vibrate on the textured gown, is now falling on a transformed smoother surface.

What was the most immediate intervention you felt had to be done?

To block the corrosive act. Restoration has saved the monument and various areas of the modelling have been preserved.

The monument could not have waited another 10 years. It would have lost 50 per cent of the surface texture. At the present stage, I would say between 10-12 per cent of Sciortino's modelling surface has been lost. It would have been better if we started 10 years ago, but then, we did not have the chemical solutions we have today.

You said the problems mainly originate from the environment where the monument is situated. Can you identify in more detail the elements that cause harm?

Eighty per cent of the harm is coming from buses and cars pollution. These gases produce black soft dust which deposits itself on every surface (and which we are breathing all the time).

The areas that are not washed away by rain remain covered with this substance, such as under the neck and arms, the figure of Malta, especially under her hair.

This *crosta nera*, as we call it, covers the surface, maintains the humidity and causes corrosion. The acid rain itself, when very concentrated, kills vegetative life and, in the case of stone and metal, creates another substance.

This is like giving a patient a pill with a virus meant to kill. The process is not only infinite but always more accelerated. The area around the bus terminus is probably the most polluted area in Malta. It would be good to start checking on what type of gasoline has to be used by the buses for the reasons mentioned above.

Then there are the pigeons that live and have their home around the monument. The work was ready a couple of weeks before the official inauguration on July 5. But the face and hands in particular had to be cleaned again as they were all covered with pigeon dirt. Now it is again very dirty.

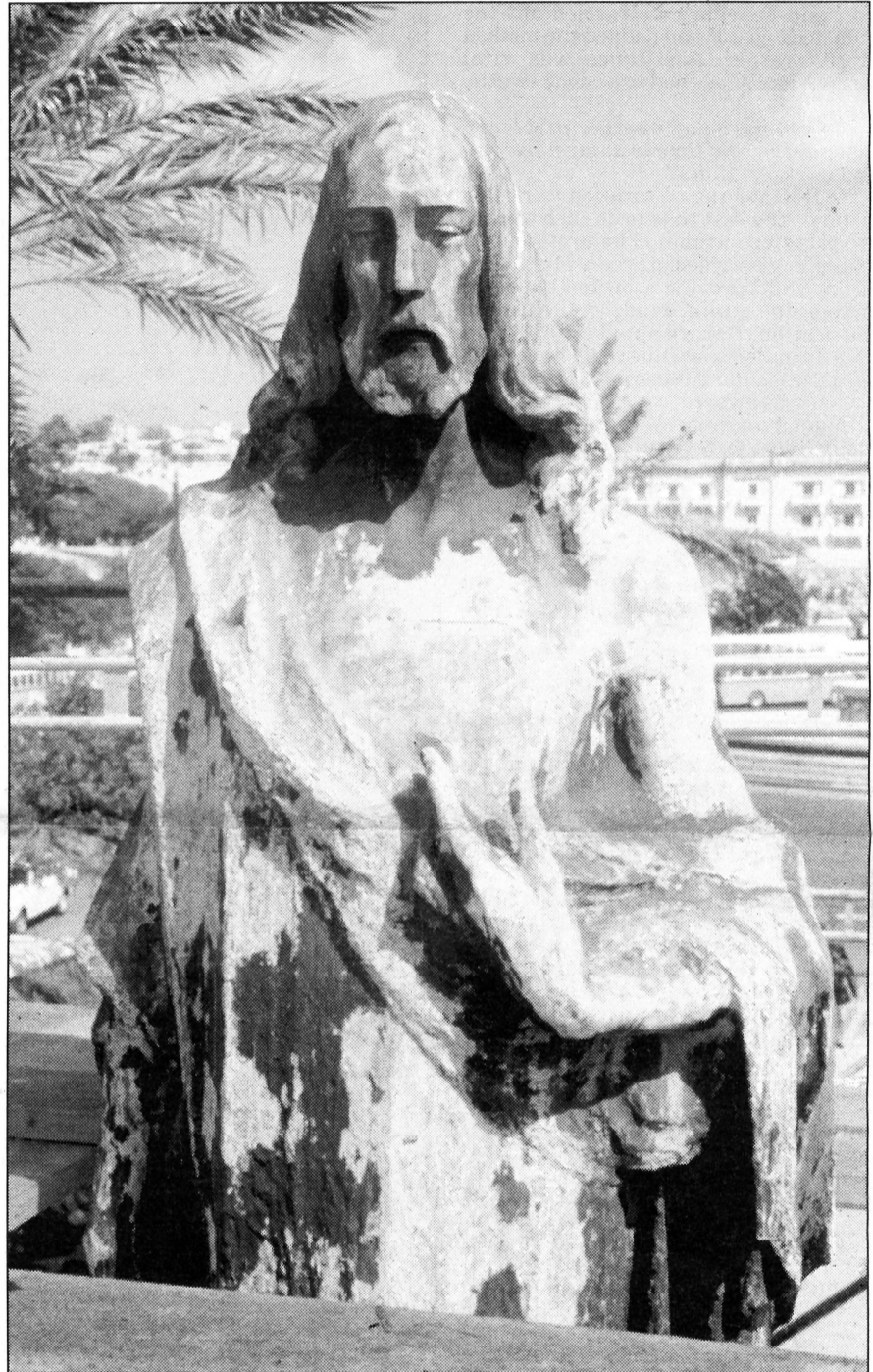
The best solution would be to wash the monument once a year. Getting rid of the pigeons is better still. Pigeons bring diseases and are causing great harm to the monument.

Explain briefly the restoration process.

It was imperative to understand the problem first. Examinations were carried out on the bronze and the green patina. My assistants and I soon realised that the monument was cast with great mastery in good, resistant bronze, but the corrosion was profound.

The corrosive agents were treated by the classical method practised by Rome's Istituto Centrale di Restauro. Simple, small instruments were used to remove the salts.

When 80 per cent of this agent, which accelerates corrosion, was removed, we washed the statue with 650 litres of distilled



Christ the King monument before it was restored

water and another 400 litres for the lower statue of Malta. The water was generated from a pump which collected the salt contents in a reservoir.

The water reservoir was tested twice a day to measure the percentage of salt content. The monument was clean when there was no further increase in the salt content.

The surface was then dried and a protective chemical was applied. This is a very thin layer, which can be destroyed by fierce wind and rain. A plastic resin was applied to act as a sealer. This will protect the bronze from rain. A synthetic wax layer was applied followed by an acrylic film – about four to six coatings depending on the area.

Does the fact that Malta is an island affect this salt element?

Malta has an additional chemical problem in the atmosphere. The salt causes corrosion.

What do you recommend for the best conservation of this monument in the future?

The best way to maintain the monument is by protecting all the restoration work, that is, the wax, which is likely to go away with the corrosive acts of the sun, rain and wind. This protects the plastic resin, which in turn protects the bronze underneath.

In the future there would be no need to restore the Sciortino monument, not even the plastic film applied on it. But once a year

the statue has to be cleaned professionally by washing away the dust and pigeon dirt and applying the wax afresh.

This is in fact what we are doing at present on the Neptune monument. The process is included in the restoration agreement, because we need to verify the conditions of the monument after one year.

I appeal to the sponsors to take over this initiative of maintaining the restoration work, which after all entails only two days' work costs very little. We have this agreement with Bank of Valletta.

Were there any particular reasons why restoration was done in situ?

It depends on the budget. However, there are risks involved in moving a monument. In this case, restoring in situ was a better decision to keep expenses low and for the monument itself.

How many assistants did you have with you?

I had four assistants. In the initial phase, we worked together. This is the time when the bronze is kind of naked and subject to the natural elements. The green salt component was being removed. At this stage, the bronze is like having an open wound.

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The monument back to its original splendour

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In mid-February we carried out the tests, took photos and defined the method of restoration. Assistance was vital because this phase had to be done swiftly.

Did you have any weather problems? When is the best time to do such restoration works in Malta?

We finished the restoration work late in June. The best time to do such work is in spring or autumn. The professional scaffolding provided gratis by Malta Drydocks could provide a protective cover against the strong winds at the time of restoration. But we opted not to go for such an option since this could have damaged the monument in case it would have been blown away.

In summer you can work on a monument like the Neptune, which is in a courtyard in the shade of the trees. You do not get direct sunlight.

At the very last phase, on the Christ the King monument, we worked mainly early in mornings and late in the afternoons. The monument was extremely hot during the day. It was impossible to touch it or apply the plastic resin.

Besides Bank of Valletta, who offered assistance?

I sincerely thank Malta Drydocks for the scaffolding which, at times, we needed to remove and enlarge depending on the area we were restoring.

The Phoenicia Le Meridien offered us a room, where we deposited our tools and could change. They also offered us electricity.

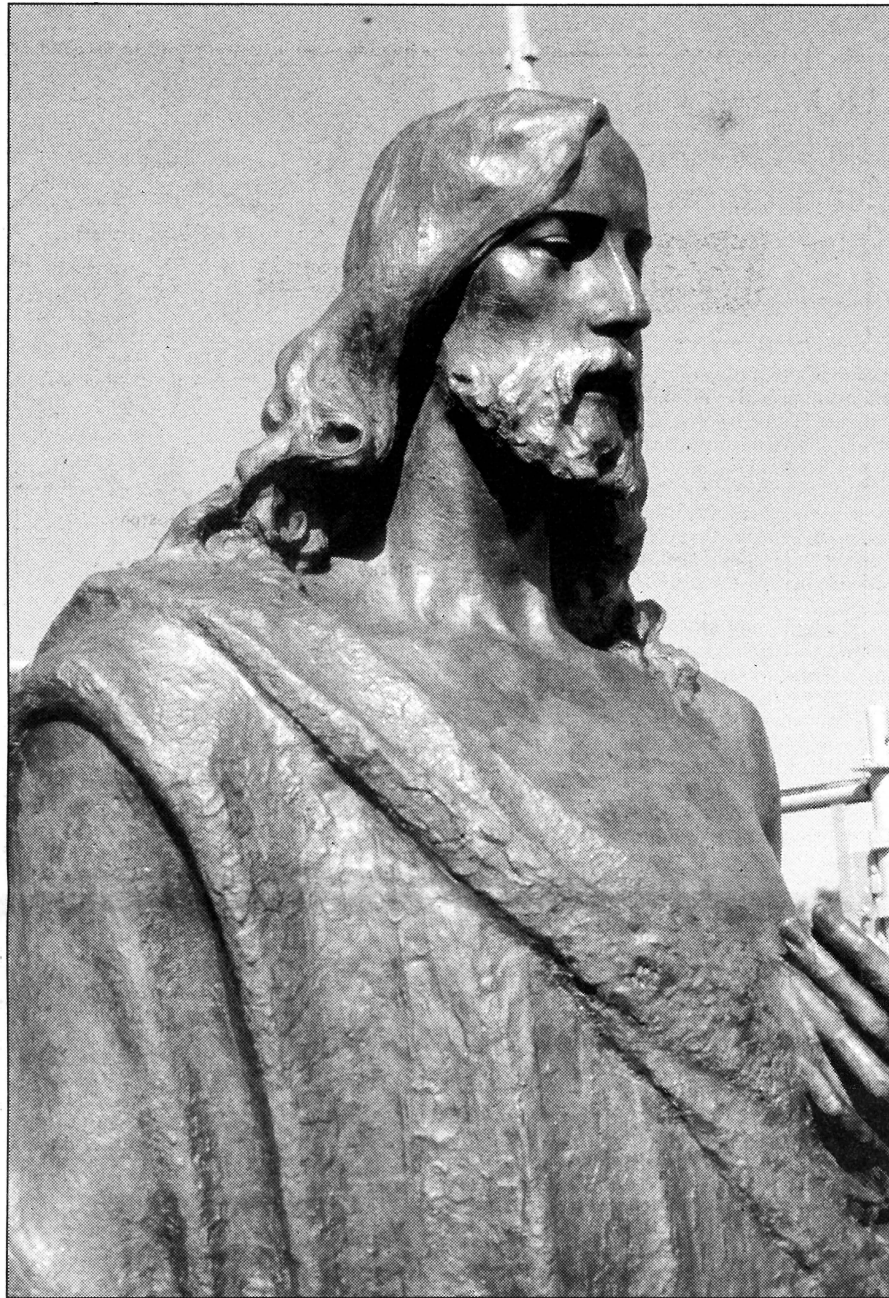
Air Malta offered the expertise of Albert Muscat who carried out a partial endoscopic examination of the interior of the monument via a hole that Brigadier Maurice Calleya believes to have been caused by a 20mm calibre armour-pierced bomb fired from a low-flying aircraft.

Is the present patina very close to the original patina intended by Sciortino?

From my 18 years of experience, this monument is indeed a rare case. The present patina is similar to the original patina intended by Sciortino. The parts which have not been corroded, like under the arms, once cleaned, have the same dark green colour they used to have.

But we don't know the original colour of the Neptune, for example. The patina develops naturally. We, of course, preserved the natural patina that has developed on the Neptune for these last 400 years.

I assume there is going to be a detailed



Christ the King monument after it was restored

report on the restoration work that has been carried out for future reference.

Yes, there is photographic documentation before and after the restoration. These are mostly slides – they tend to preserve better than photographic prints.

The report specifies all the phases of the work's execution and the materials and chemicals used. Future restorers need to know what was applied to carry out their work effectively. This report is in a very advanced stage and will be deposited com-

plete with photographic data at the museums department in a few months'.

What other projects are you working on?

I am restoring another great Sciortino monument, Les Gavroches, at the Upper Barrakka Gardens.

I have also been commissioned by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project to work on the Vilhena monument, a unique piece of art for its times in all of Europe. We are at the testing stage. I hope the restoration work will take place soon.

I am also working on two altars at the Basilica di San Paolo Fuori le Mura which the Tsar Nicholas I gave to Pope Pius IX. This work incorporates bronze, malachite and lapis lazuli.

I am restoring religious *objet d'art* for an exhibition in Urbino and I am in charge of all the restoration work of precious metal objects for the embassy of Spain in Italy and Malta. Soon we will be embarking on a new cooperation with the Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona to restore objects in metal and precious stones.

Back to the Christ the King monument, what do you think of its artistic merits?

I am impressed by Sciortino's ability to empower the monument of Christ the King with such spiritual intensity. Christ's face is noble, simple, rich in infinite expression.

Then the details of the hands: the intentional deformation of Christ's left hand is so unnatural yet communicates a humble act.

There are other impressive details, such as his foot gripping the granite monument as he walks, the movement suggested by the gown.

Sciortino is indeed one of the greatest sculptors Malta has ever produced. I admit I did not know about him before I came to Malta. He mainly worked in Rome and was very famous there until the Avant-garde took over. I am checking with the Galleria D'Arte Moderna if they have any of his works since the British Academy, where he was head, was very close by. I am earnestly awaiting a positive reply.

Have you had any offers to teach in Malta?

The main offers came from the art unit at the university, where I have already conducted a study unit on bronze restoration on the initiative of Dr Mario Buhagiar, the head. The course entailed the study of chemicals and on site lectures.

Another seminar is planned on marble restoration.