

by SUSANA VARELA FLOR

Commissioned by Doña Elvira Maria de Vilhena, Countess of Pontével (1627-1718) and consecrated on the sixth of September, 1708, the church of Nossa Senhora da Encarnação (Our Lady of the Incarnation) in the heart of Lisbon is among the most splendid Baroque churches in a city known for its exquisite architectural heritage. Until recently, however, the extraordinary paintings that grace its vaulted interior went virtually unnoticed, obscured by untold coats of varnish and blackened by soot. Today, this celestial suite of polychromed cherubim and seraphim has been returned to its former glory after a year-long conservation program, underwritten

Glory of Lisbon

RESTORING NOSSA SENHORA DA ENCARNAÇÃO



PRIOR TO RESTORATION, A SCENE OF GOD DISPATCHING THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL WAS ILLEGIBLE, BLACKENED BY SOOT AND LAYERS OF VARNISH. THE SAME PAINTING, FACING PAGE, AS IT LOOKS FOLLOWING RESTORATION.

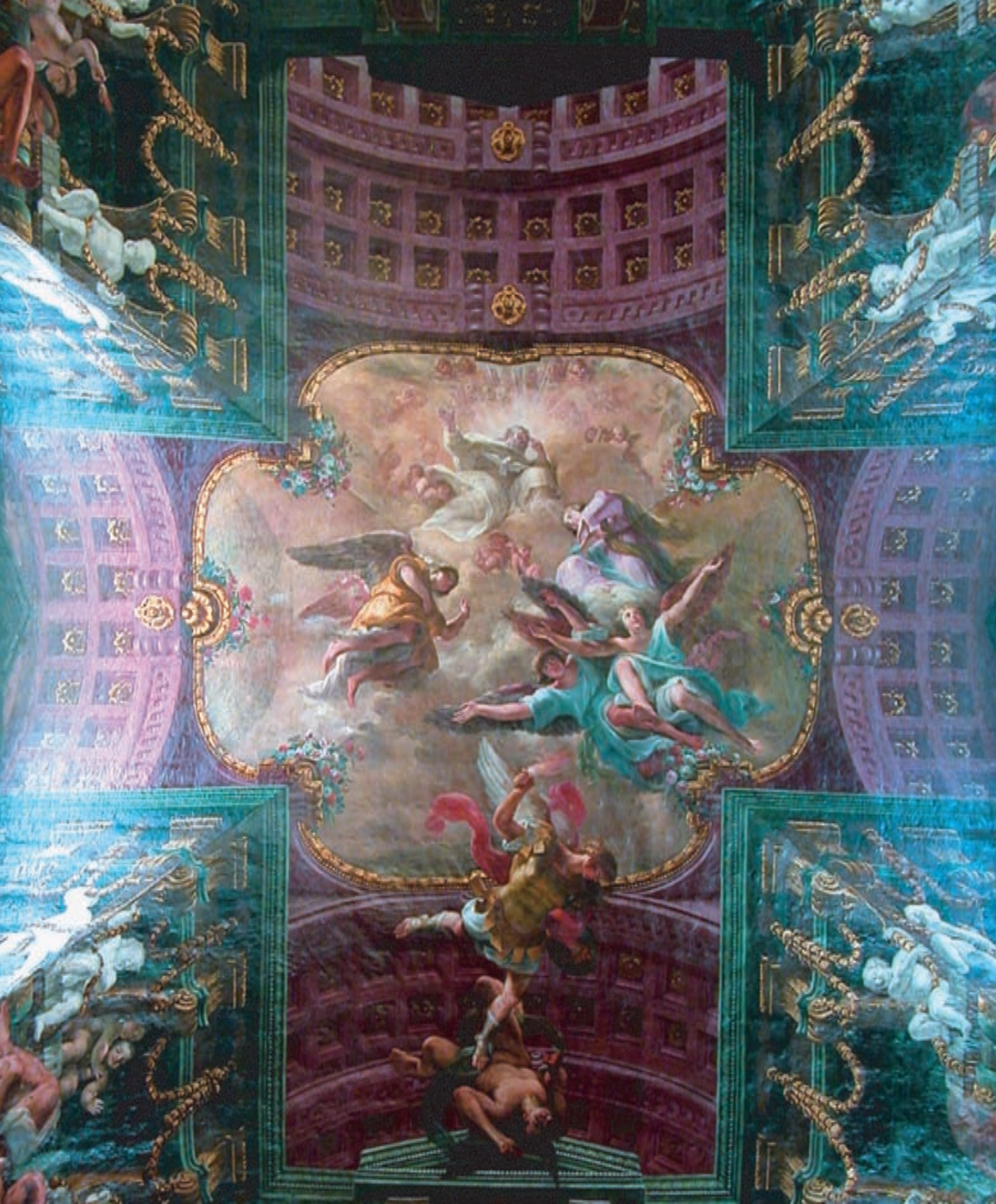
by WMF Portugal and carried out by master restorers from the art conservation firm Junqueira 220.

Dated to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the paintings are not the first to have graced the church's interior, but rather the third—the sanctuary having been ravaged by fire and natural disaster on several occasions since its cornerstone was laid nearly three centuries ago.

The Countess of Pontével donated the land upon which the church was built and underwrote its construction, desiring both a proper environment in which to celebrate the divine mystery of the incarnation, and to create a lasting memorial to her family, who would be buried in the sanctuary. On the day of its consecration, the countess had the body of her husband, D. Nuno da Cunha e Ataíde, who had died a decade earlier, moved to the chancel. Upon her death in 1718, the countess willed the administration of the church to the Santíssimo Sacramento Fraternity, who arranged for her body to be interred next to that of her husband.

According to the earliest descriptions of the church, its interior walls were covered with "excellent marble and paintings." The building's façade, of baroque inspiration, possessed two niches in which were placed statues of St. Catarina and Nossa Senhora do Loreto.

In 1755, the building was severely damaged by the great Lisbon earthquake and fire that followed, which forced the Santíssimo Sacramento Fraternity to raise funds for a much needed, albeit premature, renovation of the sanctuary. Two of Lisbon's most





CHERUBS, ABOVE AND FACING PAGE, WERE STRIPPED OF SOOT AND DISFIGURING OVERPAINT.

renowned painters volunteered their services—Simão Caetano Nunes, who painted the sacristy ceiling, and his protégé, Gaspar José Raposo, who rendered the chancel's ceiling.

In 1802, another fire inside the church destroyed major portions of the Baroque paintings, and once again, the Santíssimo Sacramento Fraternity was charged with renovating the church's ceiling and side aisles. The commissions went to José António Mateus and João Rodrigues, respectively, who completed their work in 1825 and whose artistry is visible today.

Above the High Altar is a rendering of the Archangel Gabriel being dispatched by God with a message for the Virgin Mary. Above the aisle is a depiction of the Annunciation in which Gabriel greets the Virgin with news of the Incarnation.

Over the course of nearly two centuries, the paintings adorning the ceilings above the Altar, the Aisle, and Choir, as well as older renderings on the walls and other altars, have suffered countless restorations that have greatly altered their features. The damage has been further compounded by the accretion of soot from candles and a devastating fire in nearby Chiado in 1988, which rendered the paintings illegible.



A CONSERVATOR, RIGHT, CAREFULLY REMOVES DIRT AND PIGMENTS FROM AN EARLIER RESTORATION. ORIGINAL PAINT WAS CLEANED, CONSERVED, AND, WHERE NECESSARY, REATTACHED. COMPLETION OF THE RESTORATION IS CELEBRATED AT HIGH MASS ON JULY 3, 2004, BELOW AND FACING PAGE.





Before embarking on a restoration, conservators carried out a comprehensive conditions assessment to determine the stability of the underlying architecture, how much of the “original” paintings had survived, and the best methods for cleaning and preservation. In the process, they discovered that a thick layer of brownish varnish had been applied to the paintings, atop a thick, careless layer of paint, several more recent layers here and there and a thin, homogenous layer of stratified gray paint that not only altered figures and ornaments but muted the chromatic qualities of the canvases.

In addition, rainwater seeping into the masonry had resulted in the detachment of significant portions of the canvases from the walls and ceiling. It was in these areas, where painted patches had simply curled up, that more recent “trompe l’oeil” infill was discovered.

Over the course of ten months, some 1,200 square meters of painted canvases were cleaned and consolidated. All of the layers of paint and varnish were removed. The canvas support beneath the paintings was treated, places that had curled were unfurled. And, on July 3, 2004, the restored church was inaugurated in a splendid high mass. Now as one enters the sanctuary, the church seems much larger and lighter, truly fulfilling the Countess of Pontével’s desire to celebrate the glory of God. ■

