

THE REMOVED FRESCOES / 02



Ph. Antonio Leo © FAI

On the southern side of the complex, there is a 19th-century building that was once used as the farmer's house and the olive-oil press. The works carried out in the 1970s, directed by Franco Minissi, transformed this space into the Museum of the Popular Arts and Traditions of the Salento Area, which featured reconstructions of domestic spaces and showcased the objects and tools of the rural world. Off to one side, eight frescoed panels that had just been removed from the walls of the church were reattached to the walls of the museum. Through this technique*, widely deployed in the past but today only used in emergency situations, portions of fresco were removed from the wall surface for the purpose of safeguarding them or, as in the case of Santa Maria, revealing underlying layers.

Following a careful, complex restoration by the ISCR and the restoration laboratory of the San Castromediano Provincial Museum, six of the eight panels are once again in a good state of conservation and have been provisionally relocated in the Farmer's House, where they will remain until research currently under way can confidently confirm their original position inside the church.

* The technique of *stacco* (detachment) sees the removal of the pictorial film along with a substantial part of the plasterwork; in contrast, the technique of *strappo* (lifting of the paint layer) involves the removal of a thin layer of the paint film, with a thickness of no more than 3 mm. This is also known as the Calicot method.

VIRGIN WITH CHILD, FRAGMENT (14th – 15th CENTURY)

The fresco, which in the 1970s was lifted off a wall adjacent to the third column on the left, shows the lower portion of a Virgin with Child seated on the throne, based on models of the local late-Gothic culture. Portrayed in three-quarter view, under a large reddish-brown cloak Mary wears a bright-blue dress (like that of the Child), from which emerge her dark boots, resting on a wooden board. Following the cleaning carried out as part of the recent restoration, the Child's feet have also been revealed, confirming the Marian subject.



SAINT ANTHONY (LATE 15th CENTURY)

This fresco, like the previous one, was lifted off in the 1970s, and comes from the same context. Anthony, whose Greek titulo appears just behind his shoulders, is positioned within a two-tone frame against a red and yellow background. The saint's emaciated face is surrounded by a yellow halo studded with pearls. The subject, venerated throughout Europe, wears a large dark cloak, with underneath an azure garment complete with a hood; with his right hand, he seems to be in the act of blessing, whereas with the left he holds a scroll containing a number of fragmentary Greek inscriptions that have thus far not been deciphered. The author of the painting seems to combine techniques that belong to the older local Byzantine tradition with solutions that are overtly Western.



SAINT STEPHEN (FIRST QUARTER OF 15th CENTURY)

Located within a trilobate cornice, the saint wears the typical dalmatic and carries a stone – his main iconographic attribute – on his left shoulder. In his right hand he holds the censer, while a book is held under his left arm. Worthy of note is the unusual presence of a shoulder bag, which is an allusion to the donations that he gave to widows in his role as deacon. Historical photographs show the original location of this fresco on the northern wall, to the left of the door that leads to the colonnade. The image was identified and brought back to light for the first time at the end of the 19th century by the historiographer Cosimo De Giorgi, who removed the layer of plaster that had been obscuring it.



ST MARY OF THE PEOPLE (16th CENTURY)

The fresco is surrounded by a dual-banded cornice that, over the course of the recent restoration, revealed, at the lower left, a pair of worshippers portrayed in prayer. At the centre of the composition, against a red backdrop, there is a depiction of Mary, who is referred to as the Madonna del Popolo (Virgin of the People), a name that designated the church of Santa Maria di Cerrate in the 16th century, when the monastic complex was entrusted to the Hospital of the Incurables in Naples.

The Virgin Mary, with the blessing Child on her knee, is portrayed with her head shown in three-quarter view, and above her red tunic she wears a bright-blue maphorion with gilded and embroidered elements. The fresco was originally located on the northern wall of the church, after the figures of the Saints, towards the apse.

