

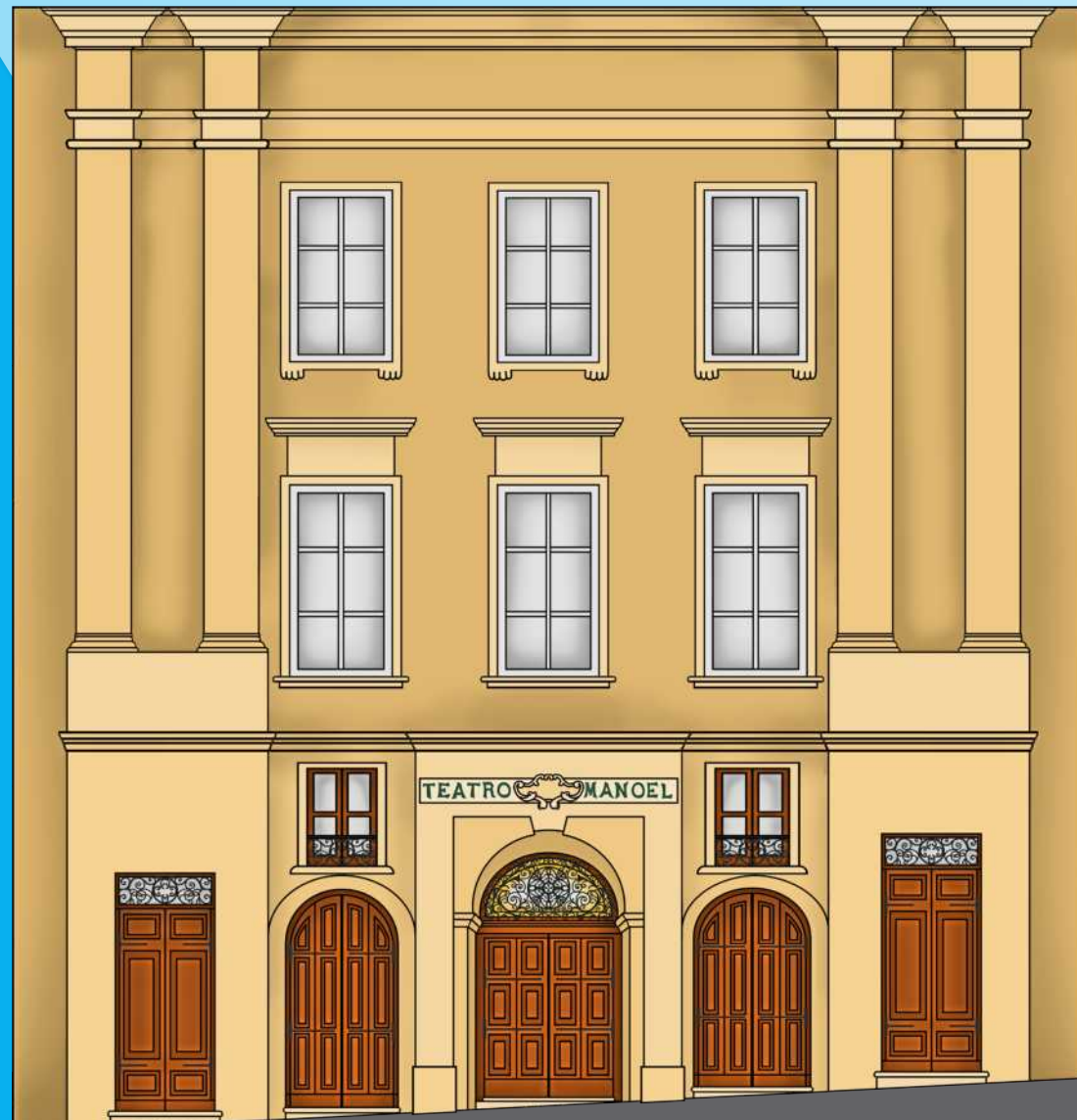
MANOEL THEATRE

Hailing from some of Europe's most sophisticated families, the Knights of St John were very fond of visual and performing arts. Theatre, which is the net sum of a wide variety of artistic expressions, including gesture and speech, poetry and song, dance and music, architecture and engineering skills, painting and composition, was by default, a staple of their social life. To this effect, the large halls incorporated in each Auberge often double up as makeshift performance venues, particularly prior to the construction of a fully-fledged theatre in 1731-1732.



PUBLIC THEATRE

As expected, the original masterplan of Valletta did not feature an allocation for the construction of a theatre. Back then, the Knights faced the tall order of crafting an impregnable and capacious fortress for the accommodation of the Convent and the greater part of the Island's population in the shortest time possible. The prevailing state of affairs took a favourable twist by the late 17th- and early 18th-centuries, and Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) deemed it opportune to set up a public theatre for the honest entertainment of the people. He acquired two spacious and adjoining properties in San Salvatore Street from the Spanish Priory of Navarre in 1731, and ensured that all demolition and construction works were completed within less than one year.

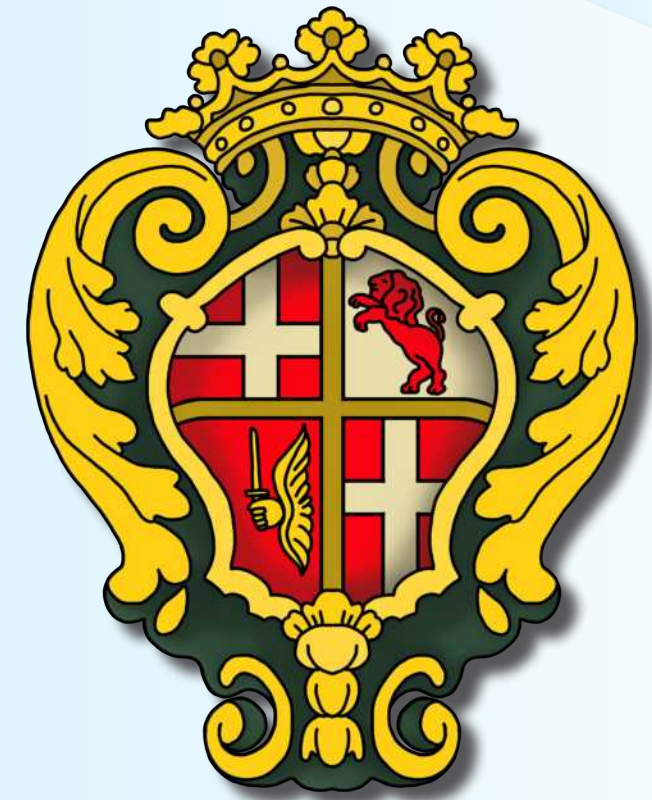


ARTISTIC AUDITORIUM

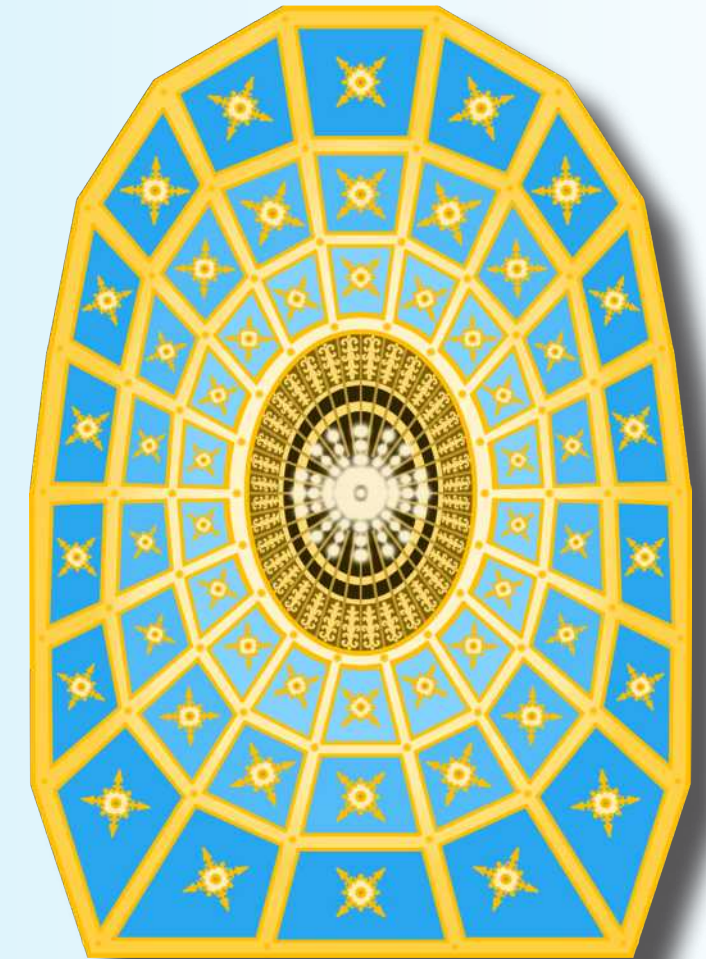
The façade is characterised by a bay with three tiers of symmetrically-spaced openings, flanked by giant double pillars resting on high plinths. These plinths have since been punctured by square-headed doors, while the open balcony atop the main door has been removed. The interior is far more eloquent. Originally, the U-shaped auditorium abounded in stone carvings and comprised two tiers of parterre boxes and an overlying gallery. A third tier of boxes was added on in 1812-13. Likewise, the ceiling was raised, whereas the boxes and top gallery were clad with painted wooden fronts. It also became to be known as the Theatre Royal. Further alterations and embellishments were carried out in due course.

NATIONAL THEATRE

With the inauguration of the Royal Opera House at City Gate in 1866, the Theatre Royal was renamed as Manoel Theatre. By and large, it was relegated to second class, but survived the onslaught of the savage World War II bombardments. Eventually, it was subjected to an extensive restoration and redecoration programme between 1957 and 1960, and was declared Malta's National Theatre.



Coat of Arms of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena



Trompe-l'oeil auditorium ceiling