

Peter Korver

A M S T E R D A M



MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE PLANTS

PETER KORVER'S NEW PAINTINGS AND CEILING FOR MALTA'S SAN ANTON PALACE.

Foto's: Eddy Wenting

When a wing of Malta's 17th century presidential residence underwent extensive redecoration, Dutch artist Peter Korver was commissioned to create a series of botanical paintings for the palace's Grand Salon. Now installed, Korver's ceiling fresco and monumental wall panels beckon you to meet some remarkable animals and plants deeply rooted in the soil of these islands, almost literally so, as the paint used as background was made using the dust of pulverized Maltese limestone.

"I live, when in the country, which I am nine days out of ten, at the Palace of San Anton. If living in lofty and splendid rooms is a pleasure, I have it." wrote early romantic poet Samuel Coleridge to a friend in 1804, while staying in Malta for several years in the entourage of the first British Governor. Unfortunately, in later years, some of Malta's heads of state did not always share

Coleridge's aesthetic appreciation, and thus, over time, an entire wing of the Palace was stripped of the grandeur which had enraptured the English poet and was turned into series of bleak offices. "But that was to change when current President Coleiro Preca took office in 2014, making it one of her missions to bring back the splendour that would once have distinguished these rooms," explains Dutch artist Peter Korver, who became an integral part of the restoration. Known for his ceilings, panels and murals of intricately painted plants and animals, Korver's artwork adorns Amsterdam's canal houses and Dutch period estates. Owing both to his artistry as well as historical sensitivity, Korver was brought on board the San Anton redecoration project by Lisa Carson of Milano / Malta based design firm DAAA-haus and charged with the task of instilling a new sense of painted imperial magnificence in the palace's Grand Salon.





San Anton Palace was built as a country retreat in the early 17th century, by French knight Antoine de Paule of the Hospitaller Knights of Saint John, the order ruling Malta from the mid-1500's until 1798. The estate was enlarged and turned into San Anton Palace after 1623 when de Paule was elected Grand Master of the order and thus, effectively, became head of state. For centuries De Paule's successors cherished San Anton as an escape from the urban buzz and the intense summer heat of the Valetta Palace, while later, under British rule, it became the seat of the English governor. Since 1974 – when the office was created – San Anton Palace has been the official residence of the President of the Maltese Republic.

Large sections of **San Anton Gardens** were first opened to the public in 1882 and remain so until the present day. Many of the trees date back to the 19th century or earlier and with shade scarce in Malta, taking a leisurely stroll in the cool shadows cast by some of the gardens' towering trees, along the fountains and ponds with ducks, turtles and free roaming peacocks, is a pleasure cherished by many. In the early 1800's first British governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball initiated the gardens' shift from their original formal 'French style' baroque character to a more botanical approach. In recent years, however, the care for the botanical richness of the collection, once intended to reflect the global magnitude of the British Empire, has acquired a more decorative focus, now aimed at keeping the flowerbeds in full bloom year-round.



VEGETAL RENDEZ-VOUS

Renovations began with the music room in 2015, and over the course of the following years, six further state rooms were restored of which the Grand Salon is the largest. With windows on both sides, the room seems to act as a link between the extensive gardens the Palace has been surrounded with ever since it was built in the early 17th century as a country retreat by French knight Antoine de Paule. Staying as guest at the palace for close to three months altogether, during several research- prepping- and installation trips, Korver not only could happily have repeated Coleridge's words, he also became intimately acquainted with the Palace's Gardens, their plant life and inhabitants. "One evening, just before nightfall, I was walking along the belvedere overlooking the gardens, when a heavy

insect passed me by," he remembers, "With that size, sound and distinct silhouette, at that time of day it could only be a hawk moth, one of my favourite animals since childhood." It were 'meetings' like this, that in the end came to inform Korver's paintings for the Grand Salon. "When I first arrived on Malta, my approach was driven by the island's history of deforestation, its building boom, water problems and the process of desertification which all have been reshaping the landscape with increasing speed," he explains. "What gently shifted my conservationist approach then, was cycling." Against all recommendations, Korver rented a mountain bike and went looking for examples of plants he might use in his six monumental paintings. "Please don't listen to anybody telling you otherwise" he smiles "cycling is actually pretty good there" And while he also



sought contact with Maltese biologists and botanists, it was discovering the island at a leisurely speed that turned the whole project in a different direction. "Some plants immediately stood out for me," he recalls "the bright green stems and intricate pink based leaves of Giant Fennel, with their dry flower heads as dark iconic silhouettes punctuating the landscape later during summer." "Also the moment I came eye-to-eye with one of the omnipresent Fig Cactuses, I simply couldn't resist their magnificent beauty."

With his background in History and Biology Korver was well aware the same Cactus had recently been declared an invasive species, ironically after having spent decades as national icon on the country's coins, and doing centuries of service as basic means of fencing property. Knowing

full-well that in such a national and political setting as a palace, everything tends to get a stronger meaning, he found his original approach challenged by what he saw on his cycling trips. "I had originally intended to use only native or even endemics species in my paintings," he says "plants and animals that are only to be found on these islands". "But once I immersed myself in the landscape, I realised that I just couldn't ignore something as obvious as this Mexican Cactus." In much the same way an Agave wriggled its way into the palace's paintings. Yet, the original plan was not entirely overturned and to counterbalance his choice for two invasive plants taking up permanent residency on either side of the Salons fire place, Korver paired them with animals symbolic to Malta in other ways; Turtle doves, a Peregrine falcon and even a pair of the countries endemic Wall-lizards.





LIME STONE

Further vegetal *rendez-vous* led to the inclusion of flowering Capers and two iridescent Carpenter bees, Sea squill, Irises, Flower beetles and a Leopard snake. One particular meeting even provided Korver with the very basis for his pastel scenes. "One evening, I was walking over the rocky boulders along the coast," he recalls "When I looked into the quiet waters, I saw sea urchins slowly crawling along the bottom," "Then I turned around and noticed the same animals in the limestone rocks all around me, frozen in time, fossilised millions of years ago." "All of the encounters I had on Malta left their traces but seeing these sea urchins at once alive and encapsulated in the rock, left me with an overwhelming feeling of continuity. It later led me to develop a paint made with pulverized Maltese limestone, which I subsequently used as background colour for these paintings."



STATE PORTRAITS

The panels for the ceiling as well as the 3.6-m. tall wall paintings were executed in Korver's Amsterdam studio, from where they were eventually transported to Malta. "Visiting heads of state have been planting a tree in the San Anton Gardens to commemorate their stay at the palace for at least a century," Korver says. "Installing these paintings of smaller and larger herbs on the scale of the trees Malta so urgently lacks, somehow felt like doing something similar." Indeed, upon entering the Grand Salon, one now finds Malta's vegetal residents towering high over one's head. The Giant Fennel Korver encountered appears to have grown to even more majestic proportions, as have the dormant swallowtail butterflies suspended from its leaves. Meanwhile, the spiralling leaves of Malta's miniature irises have been enlarged a hundredfold, now bringing to mind the complex curls of the Rococo. "I have



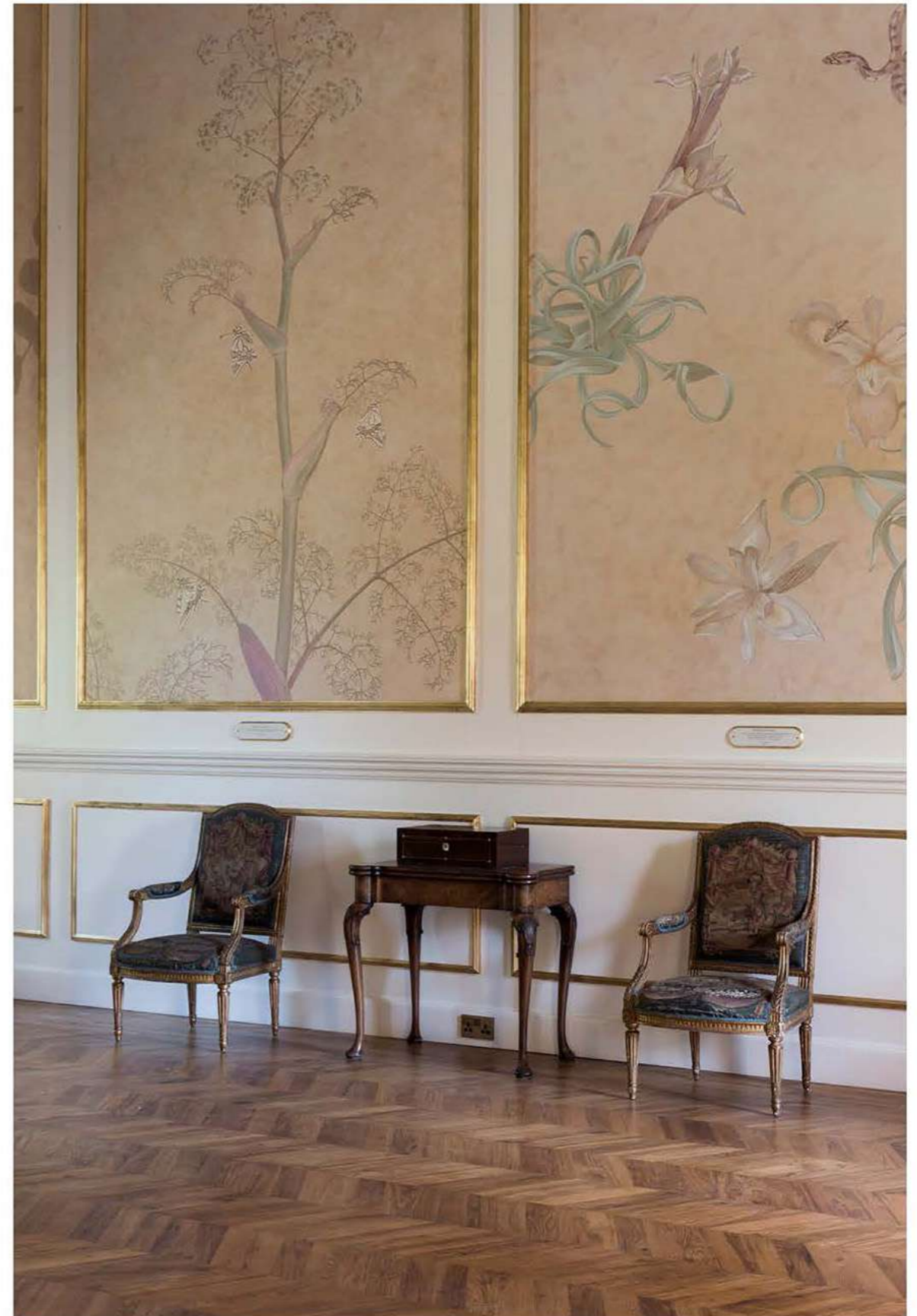


come to consider them as ‘portraits of the other residents of Malta,’ Korver says, ‘or, if you will, due to their size, as ‘state portraits.’ As with most paintings in the island’s three national palaces, a wooden plate with gilded edges has been placed underneath each of the new panels. In this case however these plates don’t read the names of historic heads of state like Alexander Ball, Queen Adelaide, or Grandmaster de Paule, but: Sea Squill, Turtledove or Carpenter Bee.

MALTESE LACE - THE CEILING

Maltese bobbin lace has been world-renowned for eons, but the squares and circles of its intricate handkerchiefs, collars, cloths and coasters also reminded Korver of “those magnificent 18th century Georgian ceilings”, so it was clear from day one that lace somehow would serve as the base of the design for the Salons domed ceiling. Malta’s lace however is by nature not as floral as Brussels’

or Venetian for instance, so to get it to match the botanical theme of the room a ground of basic lace stitches was superimposed as a meandering grid, stretching the ceiling from corner to corner like the latticework of the faux painted treillage gallery this palace wing is said to have once held. Along the sides of the ceiling four large lace trimmed cartouches have been painted, a night flying butterfly in each of them, all drawn to the light of an antique Murano chandelier. It’s the Maltese Hawk-moth Korver “met” at San Anton Gardens, now in the company of three closely related Mediterranean species. All equally stunning. “Recent research has shown that Malta’s endemic is a hybrid between the other species depicted here,” Korver explains “One from North Africa, one from Southern Europe.” “I didn’t know this when I painted them but I really like the idea that it in a way reflects the mixed language, history and culture of this country,



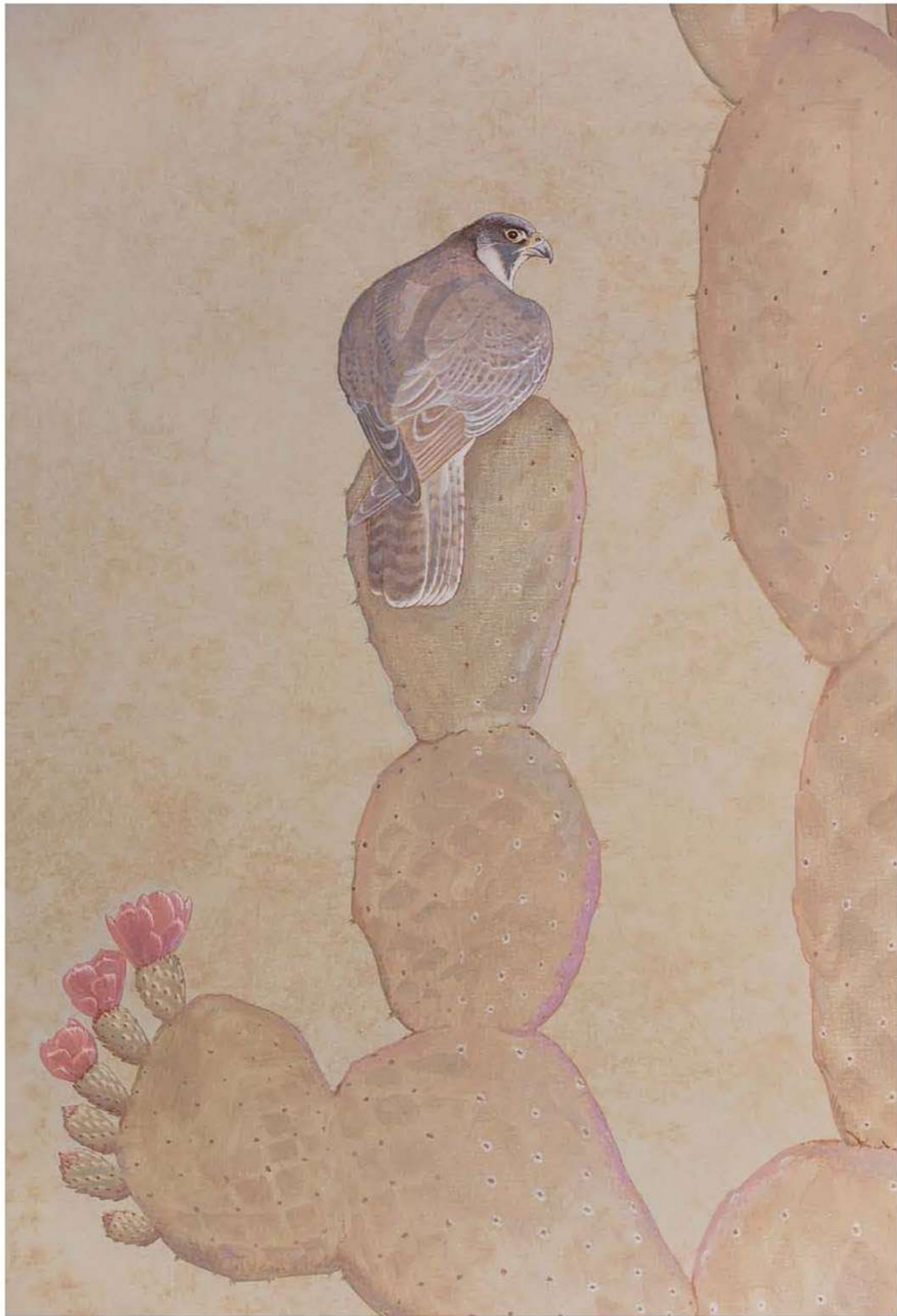


especially as the combined outline of all four, subtly echoes the shape of a Maltese cross, one of the islands most cherished symbols.”

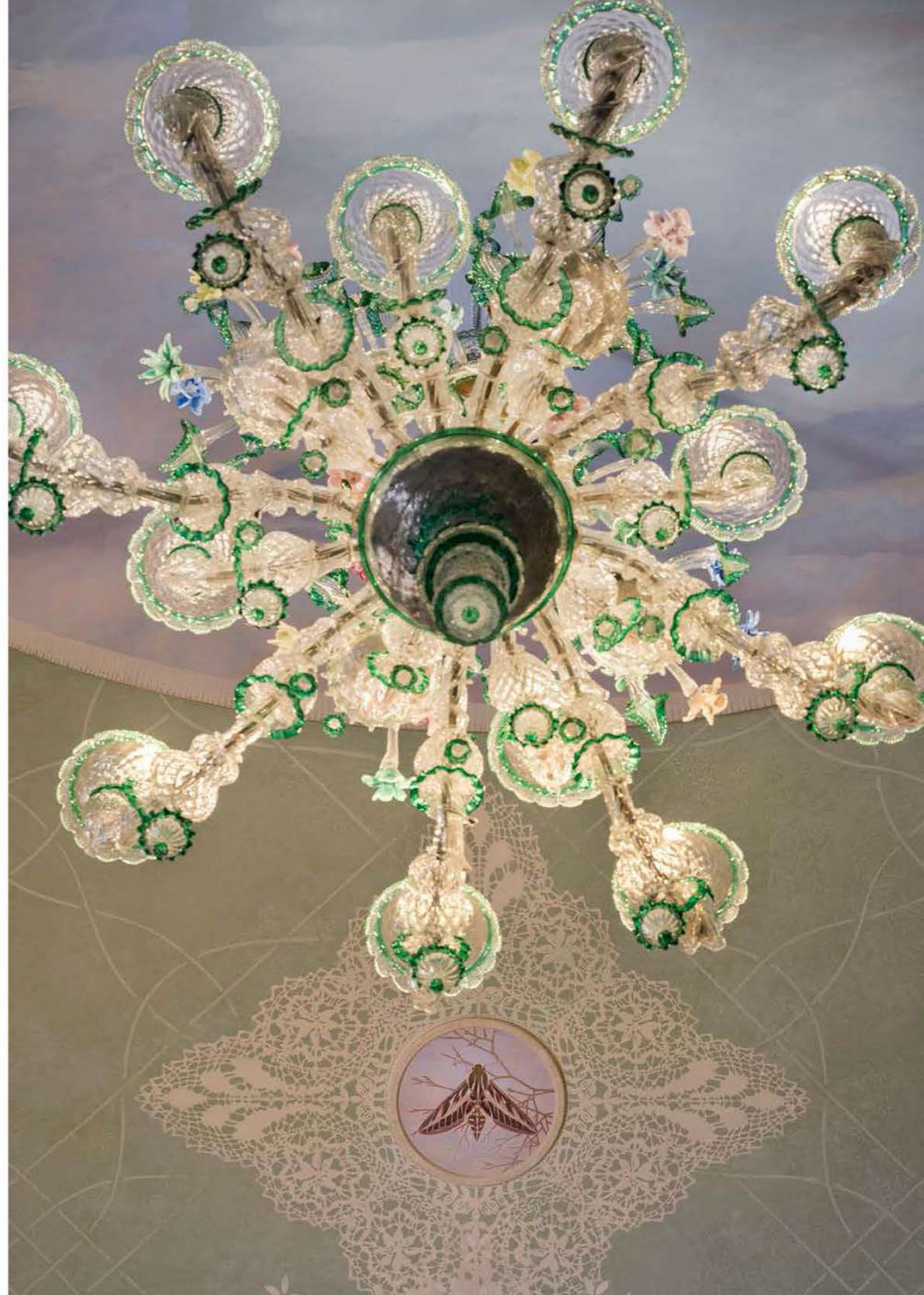
In the summer of 2018, the restored State Rooms at San Anton Palace were inaugurated and while all rooms now look, once again, as splendid as Coleridge could have found them, it is the Grand Salon that stands out. Not just for its size, but because, thanks to its connection with the gardens and the textile, almost tent-like appearance of its domed ceiling, the room has become a breathing space where fresh air appears to flow

freely in and out. “All plants and animals depicted in the room are connected in one way or another,” Korver pointed out on the opening occasion. “Connected by ecological relations, as they live ‘on’, ‘from’, or ‘with’ each other. They are also connected by stories, by history, or simply, because they share the limited space of these islands together. With each other and with us. Together, we make up “the Lace of Malta” or, as the Maltese title of his work reflects; *‘Bizzilla ta’ Malta*.

Peacocks - *With their wings fully functional, the gardens peafowl often fly up to take an inquisitive stroll around the arched verandas, the terraces, walkways and belvedere that were all added to the exterior of the palace’s ‘piano nobile’ in the early 1800’s. Sometimes one cautiously steps through an occasional open door.*











Peter Korver

Growing up in the natural surroundings of Holland's coastal region, Peter Korver wanted to become a Biologist since the age of four. After a few university years however he decided to switch to History, combining this with an education in the Arts. Today it seems all of this, and over a decade of experience in interior design, has added up to a very personal specialty. In recent years he installed a new painted ceiling in the former British consulate of Amsterdam, one of Holland's finest and best preserved 18th c. interior monuments. Although his painting reintroduced the original 1731 scene of Dido and Aeneas, which had been missing for over 120 years, its return seems to be temporary. The more than twenty painted birds Korver added to the original scene, have already started taking it apart again, by pulling curling threads and twines from the canvas. Elsewhere a country estate's 17th c. period room was embellished with spiraling ornamental leaves between the beams of its ceiling, populated with Garden snails, while yet another ceiling featured thousands of single handedly painted wheat ears, couples of mating butterflies and the prickly leaves of blue thistles. In an 18th c. Amsterdam apartment, a meandering

Boa constrictor was painted on the walls of the entrance, measuring up to seven meters and part of a painted menagerie that occupied all but every room of the stylish modernist interior.

One of his largest ceilings, in the boardroom of a Cees Dam designed office, features over sixty square meters of coffered ceiling, an open grid revealing a sky filled with butterflies, delicate dragonflies and a flock of colorful insectivorous birds. Another recent project was finished behind an impressive Louis XVI façade on Amsterdam's Herengracht. Having served as residence of Napoleon's gouverneur to the Netherlands and later head-office for the corporate exploitation of the Dutch Indonesian colonies, this 1790's urban palazzo had an interesting history to say the least. Korver's paintings have changed the entrance into a gallery of aviaries with birds hanging around between historic memorabilia.

Voluntarily, as it seems because the doors of their cages are wide open. What ensues is an encyclopedic collection depicting the splendor of the birds as well as the history of the house, but at the same time drawing an ambivalent image about the concept of freedom.