

An authentic artistic spiritual experience

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The National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, is currently hosting a paintings exhibition by Giuseppe Schembri, who has established himself in Moscow and other European capitals and in Malta as theatre director and producer. His studies in philosophy and theology brought him closer to an appreciation of Byzantine art works and iconography. He studied under Adolf Orchinik, a highly-respected icon restorer at the famous Grabar Institute in Moscow, and Vladimir Moroz, a leading painter.

The exhibition focuses on the artist's will to use a modern language for contemporary society, attempting to reinstate the original dignity of what is sacred, inviting the viewer to feel that possible dialogue with God. It is an authentic expression of form and of outward signs of faith, similar to the oldest traditions that have offered us the veil of Veronica, the face of St Luke and the controversial, renowned shroud. Such forms failed to reach or equal the divine, for God is inexpressible!

What is striking in this exhibition is that we are made to realise that the religious theme does not suffice to turn art into a Christian art. The basis of Schembri's work remains the talent and the human and Christian qualities of the artist, which are able to transform the world. The works, at peak moments, are capable of attaining the objective of Christian spirituality. This absurdity of a material representation of God is explained in the Book of Exodus chapter 20, verse three, etc, and in Psalm 115, where it is said that the statue has hands and does not feel,



The Final Battle

it has feet and does not walk, it has eyes and does not see, it has ears and does not hear.

Giuseppe Schembri does not exploit the didactic element of the icons, where Christ's image changes from a sower to a vine, from sacrificial lamb to the Good Shepherd. Instead, he develops an art which springs from the emotional and spiritual experience of reality, consisting of strong chromatic emphasis and graphic incisiveness.

Aware of these insufficient images, the artist prefers to adopt the theological synthesis which provides an authentic portrait of Jesus as given by St Paul in Philippians chapter two, verses five to seven: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are, and being as all men are he was humbler yet even to accepting death, death on a cross..."

This aspect becomes the focal point of the exhibition.

The work of Schembri has a strength of its own, stemming from an innermost spiritual need of the artist. The viewer is invited to try and understand this intimate experience. The visitor, who dwells on the religious factor, limits his interest to only one aspect of the issue, while the visitor who looks only for beauty, in his final complacency, is likely to forget the subject.

The categories which the artist reflects upon are the areas of the mind and of the soul, man's divine origin, that which is beyond his understanding and will. The works remain the artist's individual manifestations but speak about ourselves, we the men and women who are but "grains of sand," but capable of thinking before God and life.

These works of easel-shape and size dwell on the central theme of Christ and His Martyrdom, the human condition, our stupidity, our world of solitude and fear. Christ is grasped with remarkable dramatic depth: the transfigured suffering of Christ outstretched in the last breath of his agony, the emblem of the sorrowful human condition, the defenseless victim of hatred. The silent screams of pain and death become the sublime promise of rebirth and resurrection. The accent is on pain, hope, compassion and hatred, the sorrowful reality vested in scenes of light.

Schembri's way of painting is one which communicates directly with others with deep feelings. His work is immersed in the painful, dramatic, desperate experience of humanity, our moral downfall and contemporary life.

During the official opening, guests did not view the works with drinks and food. This sense of reverence was respected, as candles burnt around a major piece in the middle of the hall, representing the last supper. This reminded me of what Jacques Maritain said of Georges Rouault (1871-1958): "The quality of a work of art does not depend on its subject but on its spirit."

This, indeed, is one of the best exhibitions we have seen so far at the National Museum of Fine Arts. It is open to the public until Tuesday.



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