

# Maltese sculptor Josef Kalleya turns 100 today

Many artists and friends vividly remember Josef Kalleya walking, up to a few years ago, around the vicinities of Marsa and Blata l-Bajda where he lives, greeting everybody – an old man who remained young in spirit.

Josef Kalleya was born on March 27, 1898, 100 years ago and lives with his wife Elsa whom he married in Rome in July, 1934. Although cut off from the contemporary artistic scene, he is still admired and on everyone's lips.

Josef Kalleya started studying art at a very young age under various masters such as Arturo Galdies (1861-1934), Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930), Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932) Giuseppe Duca (1871-1948), Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950)

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## Joseph Paul Cassar

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among others. He studied sculpture under professor Antonio Micallef (1883-1957), who saw talent in the young boy and trusted him to execute some of his commissions when he was under pressure from work.

With the money he earned, Kalleya went to Rome for the first time. It was 1926 and he started contemplating the idea of furthering his studies at the *Accademia di Belle Arti*. Eventually, he even attended the *Regia Scuola della Medaglia* under Professor Romagnoli, where he studied low relief for coinage and medals. These characteristics remained the basis of his art.

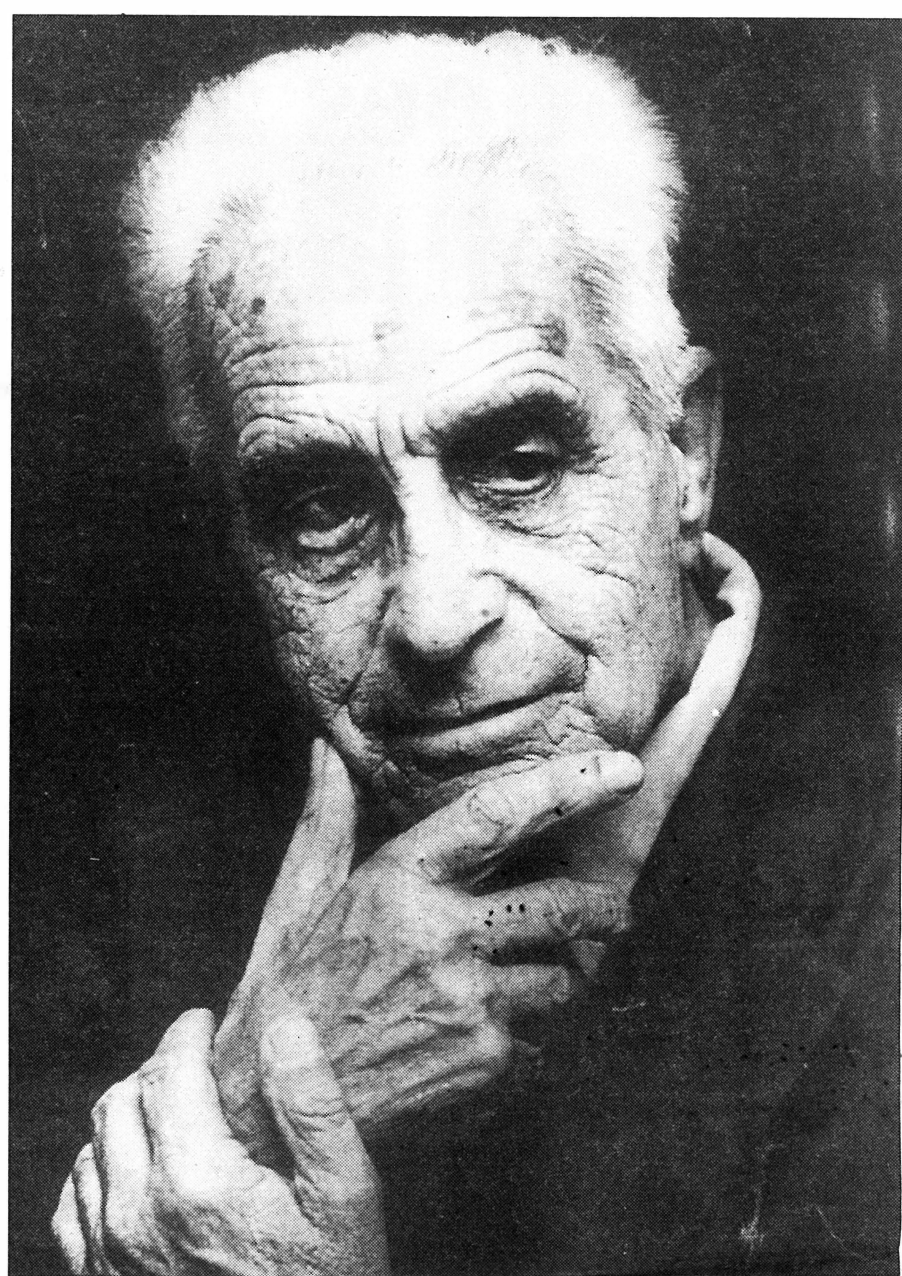
Josef Kalleya also remains famous for his courage and determination to open a school for the study of the nude in 1936 in Old Mint Street, Valletta. He also contributed to the teaching of art in state schools where he was visiting master in 1937 and became a full-time teacher only 10 years later.

He admired and was influenced by Pope Pius X, Dun Gorg Preca, Dante, Milton, Origene and Papini. His vision of the artist is that of a prophet or moral preacher – a communicator of clear ideas, enlightened by faith.

While still a student in Rome, his works showed clear tendencies to want to break with tradition. His *L'abbandono della casa materna* (1933) remains powerful in its solidity and monumentality. It represents a mother embracing her daughter before leaving home. The expressive boldness in the unfinished technique of the embrace has some of that magic of Brancusi's *The Kiss* where the two figures become one form.

His liberal technical and stylistic contribution to the modern idiom of expression in Malta was very much in line with what was happening abroad. He emphasised the importance of the process rather than the actual end result, realising that the work undergoes constant changes. He retouches, remodels, at times destroys to start afresh and to purify his work.

I remember him telling me how he purposely left his works in the yard so that the sun and the rain would work on them as well. For this reason he rarely finishes his works, especially the drawings which he produces as part of his research in crystallising his notions in sculpture.



What is striking is the movement, the nervous energy, the rhythm of strokes "alla cieca" that he creates in attempting to capture the undefinable. He works with an addictive spirit, always trying to understand the haunting mysteries of art itself. He constantly asks questions and "libero e indipendente corro nei cieli inespolorati".

Josef Kalleya remains essentially an expressionist who remodels nature by creating scratches in the material. Vertical and horizontal lines converge; the vertical gives the artist a feeling of soaring high in the skies, while the horizontal is the realisation of the vast, unexplored space that has no end. These lines form the crucifix, becoming for Kalleya, divine lines. The crucifixion thus comes out, on many an occasion, in the style created by the gorged lines, the distortions and the overlapping of rough textures.

Kalleya often uses the comic in life to emphasise its tragic aspect. His series of *Clowns* offers statements on fear, humiliation and the mask of grief. Yet life, for Kalleya, with all its ups and downs, remains essentially divine.

His exhibitions at the National Museum of Archaeology (1974), the Cathedral Museum, Mdina (1976) where he exhibited some 100 magnificent pieces, the De La Salle Palace (1978) on the occasion of his award of the Gold Medal presented by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce, remain to date, exhibitions of the highest standards ever organised in Malta.

Works such as *Angelo apocaliptico*, concerned with the second coming of Christ, *Miriam Cosmica*, *Josef Cosmico*, highlighting the hidden holiness of St Joseph, *Il mostro che ama i suoi figli*, *L'aborto*, *Uccisione della bestia*, *La Lanza* which, for the artist, points to the mystery of the Trinity

and the internal wound on Christ's chest interpreted by Lucio Fontana as a cut in the canvas, *Dante e Beatrice*, *Il bacio di Juda*, *Pena capitale* and *Super Ego* remain imprinted in my mind.

Josef Kalleya worked on *bozzetti* for major projects such as the doors of the Blata l-Bajda Church; projects for the entrance to Valletta, a Catholic city surrounded by a flight of steps intended to lead to a super gigantic statue of St Paul, so big that people could go inside it and through elevators rise to the top to see as far as Sicily; the monument and medallion for Dun Mikiel Xerri at the Palace Square, Valletta and many others.

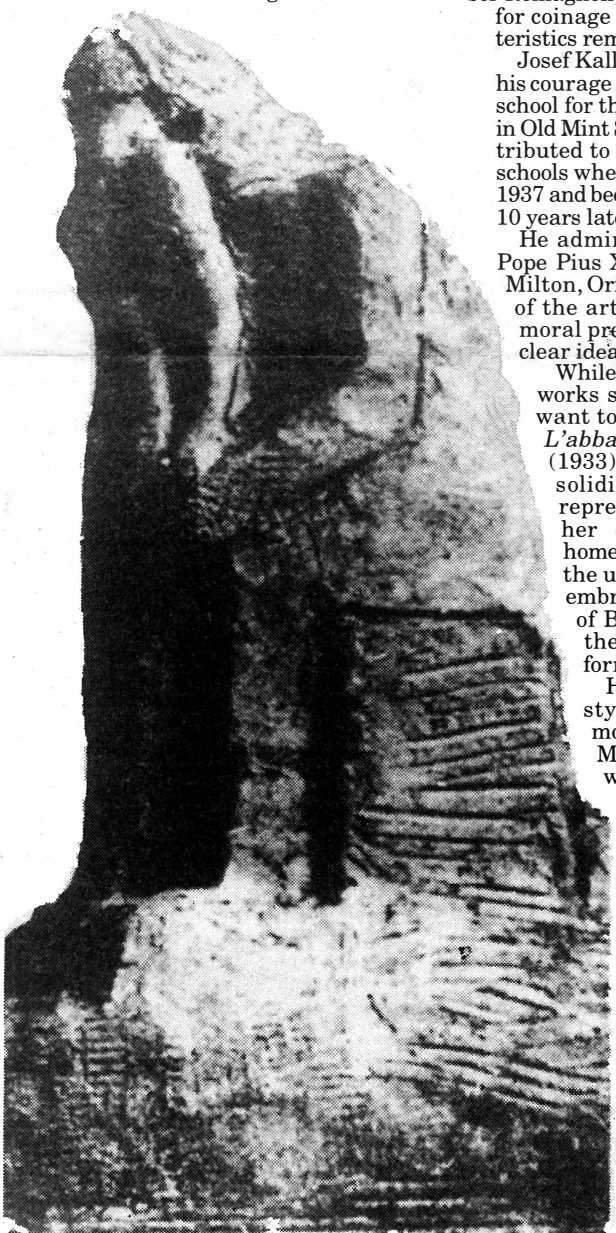
These projects never materialised and only a photographic record remains. The artist often remarked to me that, in a way, it was good that they were never taken seriously for this gave him more time to continue contemplating and executing other works.

I remember very clearly how impressed I was when Josef Kalleya said to me how the late Dr Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini used to encourage him to publish these ideas and projects, but he used to answer that then, he would not have enough time to dream!

The Premio Città di Valletta given to Josef Kalleya in 1990 and the Member of Merit of the Republic of Malta bestowed on him in 1992 are not enough honours to this great sculptor.

Apparently, he continues to work on a daily basis, in isolation in his home studio in Blata l-Bajda, under the loving support of his wife and family.

On this special day the Maltese greet this great master and pioneer of modern sensibility in Malta.



*L'abbandono della casa materna* sculptured by Josef Kalleya in Rome in 1933