

Frank Portelli

His life and work

On the occasion of Frank Portelli's retrospective exhibition at the Bank of Valletta's head office in Sliema, **JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR** has met and interviewed this veteran artist to discuss his long artistic career.

PART ONE

The history of modern art in Malta remains largely unwritten, but the name of Frank Portelli will definitely be sealed as that young artist who had been instrumental in founding the Modern Art Circle which later became known as the Modern Art Group and eventually as Atelier '56. His enthusiasm, vision and organisational skills have been indispensable in the foundation and realisation of modern tendencies on the island.

On the eve of the present historic exhibition which marks his second personal exhibition in Malta to date (the first one being in 1950 at the National Library in Piazza Regina in Valletta), the artist recounted to me with fervour how, on his way to England in 1948, he toured the great art centres of Europe and since then continued to visit regularly the Biennale di Venezia.

Ten years later, he was to take part in this Biennale, marking Malta's first participation in this prestigious exhibition.

Question: It is very noticeable that some of your earliest artistic achievements deal with the sad aspects of life and executed in an expressionist manner. Does this bear any reference to the loss of your dear father in 1944?

Answer: I was 22 years old when my father died, and I was devastated. His loss had such an impact on my artistic career. We were very close and he had supported me in my choice of studying to be an artist. With his death all my hopes seemed to come to an abrupt end and I was scared.

You are right to note that this air of sadness is evident in my works because I reflected a lot on suffering and death itself. It is amazing, but I can still feel the weight of his body as my brother and I carried his coffin on our shoulders on the day of his funeral.

On his deathbed my father told my eldest brother Vince to continue supporting my

artistic career, to take upon him this task to ensure that I succeed. I continued to suffer his loss ever since. The scene at the cemetery impressed me tremendously and I painted it in 1951.

Q.: Can I therefore say that this painting depicting your father's funeral served as a starting point and eventually led to other important works produced during this same period? What is the connection between these feelings and for instance the painting *La Vie* (1951)?

A.: You see, we were seven children. With the exception of my eldest brother, the rest of my brothers and sister were all still very young, and I remember seeing my mother worried in that situation for the family.

The scene of a widow with many children and the uncertain future of my brothers and sister, the lack of trust I had in medicine and the misery we all experienced during the war, became central themes in my works. I made several sketches dealing with these aspects, I developed several ideas, building up a vast resource ensuring that the latest drawings surpassed the previous ones and eventually I came with the idea of this painting in which I added a religious touch.

Q.: I know that you consider this painting as one of your greatest achievements, in fact it is very prominently displayed in the current exhibition. Can you give me an account of the major elements and symbols incorporated in this work?

A.: *La Vie* is composed as a triptych. On the left is the figure of the mother with two heads, one representing anxiety and the other grief. The mother embodies within her the future. In fact you can see that she is pregnant as she holds her child. Another child clasps firmly to her knees as he hides his face from the gruesome vision of a crucifix that is created out of two door openings.



"Good Friday" 1951

The central panel depicts an operating table with two surgeons, as medical students watch the lesson in progress sitting on a wall. From underneath the operating table comes out a child as if from a womb representing the future of the child in the left.

The third section on the right shows a surgeon who walks out from an architectural building in ruins and out of the picture on to the frame with clean hands.

After this painting I continued to tackle variants of the same subject. *L'Evictees* and *The Homeless* (1952) were all part of this series of works. I was very much struck by the disasters of war and any young person of my age at the time felt the distress of such difficult conditions.

Eventually this theme led me to paint the Holy Week series in which I started to introduce the cubist idiom.

Q.: At the Malta Government School of Art you studied under the Caruana Dingli brothers and Karmenu Mangion. What do you remember of this artistic formation?

A.: Between 1935-38, I studied drawing under Robert Caruana Dingli. Then, this master was taken ill and Anton Inglott came in for a while. One fine day Inglott was impressed by a drawing I had made of a hand and he suggested that I should be promoted to Edward's class which was upstairs.

But since this decision came towards

the end of the academic year, I was told to sit for the examination in the drawing class since it would have been unfair to compete with the more advanced students. I came first in the examination and I was promoted to Edward Caruana Dingli's class.

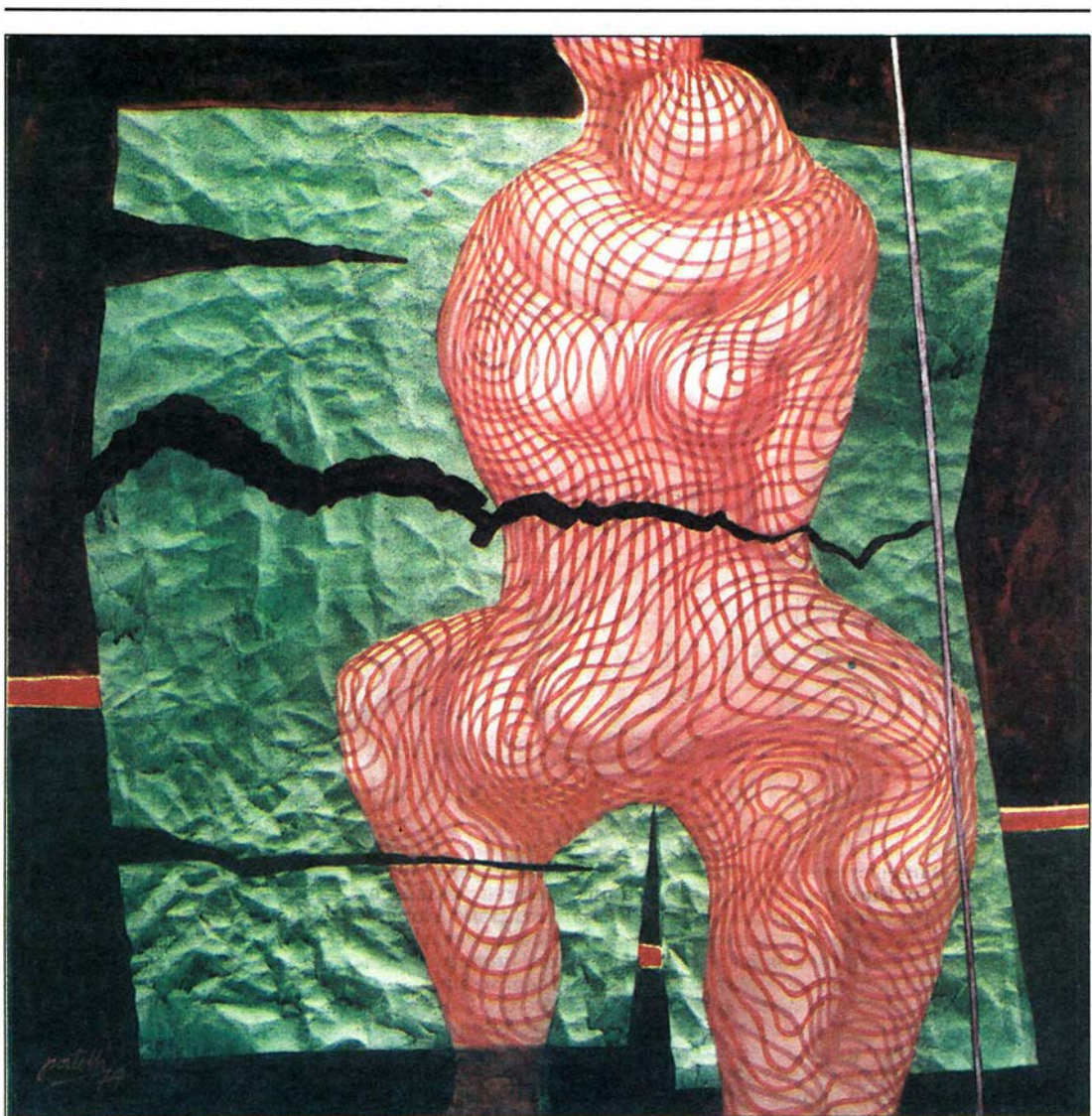
I remember that I was overjoyed as I was presented a prize, which consisted of a beautiful painting box complete with brushes, palette knives and oil colours. Generally the prize was a book, but all I know is that I wanted to use those colours instantly and I rushed home to give the news to my parents.

Meanwhile, I used to attend etching classes under the tutorship of Karmenu Mangion. Besides, at the time, he also used to give me private lessons in painting at his residence at Valley Road, Birkirkara. This was every Saturday morning.

In his etching class he channelled me to study aquatint after Walcot while painting after reproductions from Frans Hals and Rembrandt. I remember Mangion telling me to emphasise colour and almost forget about drawing. His discussions used to be of great stimulus to me.

Q.: Who were your classmates who competed for the scholarship at the Malta Government School of Art?

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"Contorno No. XLIII Broken Marriage" – 1974

Studying art in England

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A.: There were, among others, Antoine Camilleri, Aldo Micallef Grimaud, Privitera and Caruana. At the time, Willie Apap, Emvin Cremona, Anton Ingloft, and Esprit Barthet had already left to study abroad, but before they left I used to visit their class after the weekly history of art lecture and see what they were doing.

Q.: Did you continue to attend the evening art school during the war?

A.: I vividly remember that on Monday, June 10, 1940, after attending lessons at the School of Art, as I approached the Main Guard in Palace Square, Valletta, on two speakers that were erected by Rediffusion, I heard Mussolini declaring war. My parents were very concerned for me and in this situation told me to forget about going to Valletta anymore. I only started to go back to the school in 1943.

Q.: What did you do during these years?

A.: I was conscripted at the time, but during this period I was asked by the Royal Air Force to design the props and do the make-up for the shows that were organised periodically at the ICWT Station in Ta' Kandia, Siggiewi. I executed a few portraits as well, until I finally became an architectural draughtsman with the Air Ministry Directorate of Works.

Q.: How come you chose to study in England rather than in Rome as was the custom at the time?

A.: When I won the scholarship, the Education Department did not identify art schools for us where we could go to further our studies. Remember that, at the time, it was very problematic to go to Rome. The war had just ended and there were too many difficulties and complications. As a matter of fact my scholarship was only for two years instead of the usual four because of these reasons.

We were informed that it was up to us to identify schools where we wanted to go. I went to talk to Lieutenant Governor Campbell and it was he who suggested that I should go to study in England. I remember asking him why in England and not in Paris? And he reverted the question to me asking: But why in Paris and not in the UK? This was in 1947.

Therefore, I started the painstaking process of writing to various art schools, asking about their courses and possibilities of admission. I wrote on behalf of myself and Samuel Bugeja who had won the scholarship in sculpture.

The answers we received were all in the negative. There were no vacancies at the time and we were advised to wait for the next year. I kept on trying and finally we were accepted at Leicester College.

My aim at the time was to go to this college and eventually look up for a different college in case I did not like the place. Sorting all this out took me a whole year and during this period Emvin Cremona, who had just taken over from Edward Caruana Dingli, asked me to attend classes at the school until it was time for me to leave to further my studies abroad.

Q.: Did Leicester College meet your expectations?

A.: I liked Leicester College, but I felt that it was not the environment I was looking for. Students worked very much on their own and they did not mix and share ideas. They were all British and I felt very much a stranger.

I stayed there for three months and made friends with only one student who was an ex-serviceman by the name of Shepherd. During the Christmas holidays I went to Paris and visited Antoine Camilleri.

When I returned to England I started visiting art schools where I had applied before, hoping that by checking in personally I will be accepted. I visited Slade School first, only to discover that it was full up of ex-servicemen that could not be refused. I was asked to wait for the first term, but I was pressed for time as my scholarship was running out.

I visited other schools; among them Camden or Camberwell School of Art. While being taken around the studios I met for the first time Victor Pasmore who was teaching there at the time. I had just bought a book on his impressionist works, a Penguin book by Clive Bell. Unfortunately, I could not stay there.

I tried St Martin's College of Art and Regents Polytechnic, until finally I visited Kennington College in London. This school was my last chance, and as I entered and saw those spacious studios and students talking in different languages, I knew there and then that this was my place. I was asked to take my portfolio and the next day I was told that I was accepted.

I rushed to Leicester and informed Samuel Bugeja that I was leaving, but he wanted to stay. We used to have lessons even on Sundays and I studied life drawing, painting from life, mural design and anatomy.

I spent two solid years doing sculpture as well as etching at this college. The idea was to take over the etching class in Malta from Mangion, but the etching classes were stopped and instead the decorative arts were introduced.

While in England I was offered a job as a book illustrator as well as a poster designer. I wanted to stay there as my chances were very good. My wife's aunt used to live there alone but, because of family reasons, I decided to come back to Malta.

(To be continued tomorrow)