

Frank Portelli's early works

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 TWO

Q.: Your early works show an interest in Impressionism. I am referring to the various scenes you painted in England and France. What impact did this movement have on you?

A.: The Impressionist movement fascinated me. I was particularly interested in Degas. I studied closely his drawing techniques, in particular his use of pastels. I even used to sketch on stage at the theatre like Degas.

When I was an art student in England, I acquired a permit to go on back stage at Convent Garden during rehearsals to sketch. This initiative was possible thanks to Major Victor Castillo.

These studies were then used for the realisation of larger works in pastels. But at the time I had no fixative and only a couple of these drawings have survived.

Q.: Once you returned to Malta from your scholarship, your work manifested a particular interest in the use of blue. How did this change come about?

A.: When I returned to Malta I was impressed by the impact that Picasso left on our century. Picasso is indeed the giant of his times. I loved his work and I remember vividly asking myself why did Picasso choose blue for some of his major works at one particular stage in his artistic career.

I discovered that blue gives a sense of space and I always loved space. My studios have always been on the roof on the top floor. This was the way I started using blue predominantly in my works. Eventually I turned to the earth colours, but blue was ideal for my expressionist art.

Then the use of black outlines surrounding the colours led me to stained glass effects.

Q.: In fact what projects have you done in stained glass?

A.: I did four stained glass windows for a private villa. The work was realised in Milan and the designs are included in the present exhibition. I also designed the church windows for St Theresa of Lisieux in Birkirkara. I consider this experience as fundamental for my crystallised cubism that I developed later.

Q.: You played a key role in the formation of the Modern Art Group in the 1950s. Can you explain the background that brought this group about?

A.: The whole idea started when I was in England where I belonged to a sketch club. This was organised by the school, which encouraged the production of extra work, which then was submitted for exhibition in the college itself. Foreign artists were invited from time to time to come and judge the works and offer a critique on the exhibits. The one who scored the highest marks won a prize.

I won several of these prizes and I became convinced that similar groups were possible to have in Malta, which could serve as pressure groups. When I returned I visited Mangion's class and talked to him about this idea. He told me that two of his students had

a similar idea and suggested that we collaborate.

These were Joe Muscat, who had a good pen and excellent ideas but later emigrated to Canada, and Joseph Borg Xuereb, who was artistically gifted and possessed a good pen too. We started meeting and the group was formed.

Q.: Can you briefly state what was the aim of the group?

A.: The principal aim was clearly stated in the statute, mainly to propagate modern art in Malta. Another important aim was to at least organise one collective exhibition per year. All personal exhibitions by the member artists were to be held under the umbrella of the group.

Q.: How and why did this important group die out?

A.: The press was attacking us hard that certain works on show were not up to standard. Everyone was being accepted in Atelier '56, which was an offspring of the Modern Art Group.

The shows we organised were somehow inferior and very much a mixed bag. I always insisted on ensuring that standards were high, meanwhile we were being labelled as amateurs.

Judging was needed to ensure a high level of works. We needed to eliminate the mediocre element that infested the group.

At this stage, I resigned from the group, and others followed. I was hoping to be able to form the group again, but this never materialised. In my view this is one side of the story which explains the end of this important modern art movement on the island.

Q.: When did you decide to work as a full-time artist and what did this involve?

A.: It was in the year 1963. I reached this decision because I was receiving various commissions for interior decoration for leading restaurants and hotels. Such work involved various processes such as surveys on the actual premises, submission of proposed designs complete with perspective drawings and first impressions. Once the client approved all these, working drawings with actual specifications started with the bill of quantities and colour schemes.

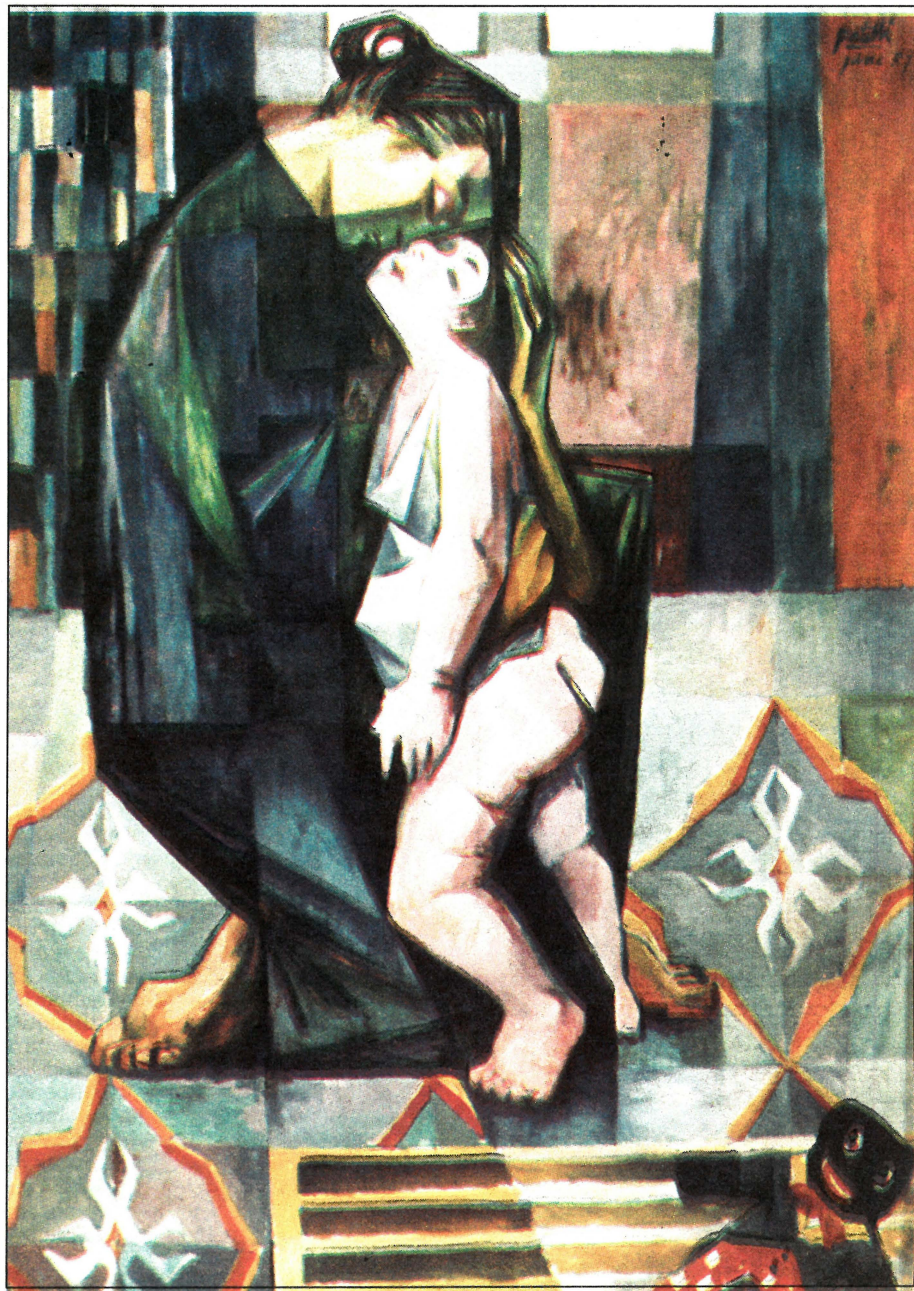
All this was quite a job, which involved sub-contractors, estimates, etc.

Once all this was approved, I supervised the work, did regular briefings and visits on location. As you can see, this requires time and energy.

Q.: Which project do you consider the most ambitious?

A.: I worked on various ambitious projects such as the decoration of the Meadowbank, the Restaurant Dragut, the Piper Club, but the most important project was the Casino, where I was appointed the sole designer with Dom Mintoff as architect. I made it a point not to touch the existing decorations in this place.

I loved challenges and I took a risk, which turned out to be very successful. This was a



"Carissima Simone" – 1957

time when I established an office in Valletta and later on at Development House in Floriana. I used to give my assistants various sketches and then they did the rest. As for my part it was important for me to work on other works that I was developing on the more abstract level.

Q.: What was your involvement in the centenary celebrations of St Paul?

A.: My major contribution was in the designs for all the pageants that took place in the stadium at Gżira based on the writings of Fr Orr. I remember vividly the work that went into the production of the Shipwreck of St Paul where a model of the stern of the ship was produced in wood and it moved to evoke the tempest.

The work was aided by various projections that made this scene an impressive memorable one.

I also decorated the second and third floor of the Catholic Institute in Floriana in which I depicted the mission of the Catholic Church. I also worked on various floats for this same occasion.

Q.: When did your interest in cubism start?

A.: My interest in cubism goes back to 1950. I was interested in all its branches including collage, lino prints with superimpositions of cellophane and I spent a long career on this. Cubism has that sculptural sense in it, which I love.

This eventually led me to constructivism. I experimented a great deal with architectural motifs, plastic reliefs and later paintings, which focus on the study of form and space in light. This, in fact, is what I am working on today, as can be seen in *Land and Sea* (1999) and *Forms and Space* (1998) – a mural commissioned by BoV Centre.

Q.: You give a lot of importance to sketching and you prepare studies before actually executing a work? Do you ever change anything from the original bozzetto?

A.: I do these studies to save me time.

Generally, I do not change much, hardly anything. However, in the work I am doing now, I do modify. It all depends on the nature of the work.

I sketch constantly, especially late in the evenings. Everything is collected in sketchbooks and at times I develop a particular project. I love crafts, and I used to spend time at carpenters' workshops or metal workers seeing them work. I find these crafts very important for the work I do.

Q.: You also did some street decorations. What did these consist of?

A.: I had a commission from Cafe Cordina to decorate Strada Reale, today's Republic Street, for the Christmas season and I had designed big angles which were all lit up. Unfortunately these have all been destroyed.

I was also entrusted 10 years ago to decorate the main streets of Valletta, Floriana and Rabat, Gozo, for the occasion of the 25th Anniversary celebrations of Malta's attainment of Independence.

Q.: I think that your Contour series remains to date probably your greatest achievement in the abstract idiom. How do you remember coming up with this idea?

A.: The idea came from my years of experience at the air ministry, doing map reading. I remember plotting on grids and I used to be fascinated with the way everything used to come out in relief. Even when I travelled by air, I made it a point to be seated by the window to observe the contours of the landscape. I decided to try this effect in painting.

One of the first works with these preoccupations represented Dingli Cliffs with shadows. Since then the concept has developed and is still central to my present work.

What the future holds nobody knows, but I accept the challenge to face new developments and execute them to the best of my ability.

(Concluded)