



Flight 1992, Anton Agius, 1992

# Aspects of Maltese artistic expression 1974-1999

---

Joseph Paul Cassar

---

viewer to a better understanding of the current trends adopted by the younger generation.

## Historical overview

The exhibition focuses on the impact and various influences that artists experienced mainly from North America, as well as from mainland Europe. With a turbulent history of constantly being ruled by a foreign power, the search for an authentic identity became a central issue of artistic expression after 1964 – the year of Malta's independence – and in 1974, when Malta became a republic.

The pioneers of modern art in Malta emerge in the '50s and '60s as a group of individual artists who had been maturing in hibernation for many long years. The cocoon within which Maltese artists had been maturing was inevitably prone to various influences as soon as it was time for it to

break. This was a time when Maltese artists faced an identity crisis, bearing within them not only Malta's rich past heritage, but also the different foreign styles and influences that developed off our shores.

Comparisons between the island and the rest of Europe cannot be avoided, especially once Maltese artists came in contact with opportunities in nearby countries to further their artistic education. They came face to face with the reality of having to accept the limitations of the island.

Maltese artists inevitably tried to connect the island to the rest of Europe, which was responsible for the major developments of modern art in Malta. Artists looked at Rome as the mecca in which to further their artistic education. They turned to Italy to exhibit their works and promote their art (Antonio Sciortino, Giorgio Preca, Willie Apap).

As these attempts gained momentum, other alternatives were sought and some artists shifted their attention to London and

Paris (Karmenu Mangion, Emvin Cremona, Frank Portelli, Antoine Camilleri, Harry Alden, Joseph L. Mallia).

Maltese artists struggled hard to break out of their cocoon and flew far and wide but not losing sight of their original roots. The foreign experience had been instrumental in bringing about significant changes in Maltese contemporary expression in a culture that invests mainly in old historic items.

The results of these experiences were various, but they point to the fact that foreign influences have been the primary cause in bringing about significant developments which manifested themselves as important offshoots from the major movements of post-impressionism, cubism and abstraction in particular.

Young Maltese artists in the early '70s showed not only an interest in the avant-garde in Europe, but started themselves employing some of the latest aesthetic concepts. Indeed, their work offers parallel developments with what was going on in the rest of the world.

(Continued on page 20)

An exhibition commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Republic of Malta was recently inaugurated at the Gallerija Foyer, National Labour Centre, in Hamrun. Eighteen artists are taking part, and their works give an idea of some of the tendencies and developments that have taken place in the last 25 years on the island.

George Glanville, the exhibition curator, has brought together a balanced cross-section of some of the major protagonists, a combination of important old timers as well as the up-coming younger generation of artists who have been consistently active on the Maltese artistic scene. Thus, the exhibition provides a wide panorama of the various artistic expressions that matured from 1974 to the present.

The exhibition highlights the works of six artists who have passed away in recent years, namely Chev. Emvin Cremona, Joseph Borg Xuereb, Carmenu Mangion, Josef Kalleya, Chev. Esprit Barthelet and Joe Bellia. The latter passed away on November 25, 1999.

The works of these artists give a sense of continuity to the exhibition and guide the



Farmhouse, Joseph Bellia, 1990

# Maltese artists

(Continued from page 19)

Their statements remain sincere, original works and in no way a reproduction of the works of others or of what they saw in museums. It is evident that Maltese artists were in open dialogue with the rest of the world, working in different styles, offering a vast selection of media, inspiration and temperament.

This exhibition offers only a small reflection of those Maltese artists who have been committed to this development. Their creative efforts, together with others, during the last 25 years serve as an index of what one should expect in the years to come.

The period in question of this exhibition incorporates the formation of groups such as that of Vision '74 which had the intention of safeguarding closely the interests of Maltese artists. The name of the group itself sheds light on its objectives, that of giving "a wide and expanding vision to art in Malta."

This group, which started as X-74, aimed "to work diligently in order to enhance artistic life on the island through the highest possible achievement of aesthetic values."

This was also a time when two new galleries were inaugurated, which were to con-

tribute in the promotion of Maltese contemporary trends in Malta. The most significant gallery was *Gallerija Fenici* which published a cultural calendar with programme details of exhibitions for the year well in advance. In its five years of existence this gallery established itself as a model for similar future projects.

The exhibition includes works by artists who belonged to *Il-Ggajta* which, from May 1983 until October of the same year, brought together a group of artists who wanted to keep up the tradition established by the Modern Art Movement, Atelier '56, Spectrum '67 and Vision '74.

## Sculpture

Sculpture is well represented by some magnificent pieces in bronze by Anton Agius. His *Bullfight* (1993) and *Horse* (1998) are superb pieces depicting the dynamism of the moving animal. This same movement is captured in wood in the work *Flight* (1992).

The sculptures by Ray Azzopardi in wood focus on the human figure and they combine the pleasure in touching the smooth polished surfaces of his works with the contrasting texture of his chisel marks. In all this



Environmental Sculpture, Charles Sammut, 1997

process, the medium is respected for what it is and shines with its natural colour and grains.

The sculpture of Charles Sammut is characterised by the use of different materials including stone, metal and ceramic. His *Environmental Sculpture* (1997) dominates the Foyer area and one earnestly waits to see more of these open-air projects planned for the year 2000.

*Uomo Politico* (1998) in wood, by Gabriel Caruana, is monumental and colourful, and partakes to the numerous works that adorn the University of Malta Campus.

## Painting

In the painting section, *Wild Horses* (1986) by Antoine Camilleri captures that energy typical of his best expressionist works that combine movement, and gesture art with the use of sand. Tony Sciberras is represented with four works that represent the various phases of his artistic development, from painting landscape and nudes to Still lifes and more abstract compositions.

*I Have No Boundaries I* (1998) by Vince Briffa represents his concern with the soul of the human person as bone relics are fossilised and form part of the painting's lan-

guage.

Eman Grima's *Stat ta' Hedla* (1993) encompasses the major preoccupations of this artist with light and shade that in return create a perfect harmony of geometric shapes.

Jessica Debattista is showing two self-portraits, but her work *Speed* (1987) is a valid statement in composition, colour and motion in perspective.

The works by Charles Cassar emphasise the experimental nature in the use of the air brush as manifested in *Sunflowers* (1992) and *Washed Ashore* (1989). The interest and love of nature is omnipresent in Cassar's works.

Joseph L. Mallia is exhibiting three paintings where form and colour intertwine. However, his installation, entitled *The Power of Paper* (1999), attracted many a viewer in its unusual presentation. It is a comment on the use and importance attached to paper in today's society.

William Borg projects his vision on the future. His work *In the Year 2000*, an apocalyptic vision, strikes the viewer, similar to a last judgment scene.

Entrance to the exhibition is free. It is open daily from Monday to Sunday until January 23, 2000.