

Gabriel Caruana at St James Cavalier

It is always a great event to have the works of Maltese artist Gabriel Caruana on show. Gabriel Caruana is considered a leading figure who pioneered and persisted towards establishing a fresh and vital school of thought focussed on a contemporary vision and philosophy. He had from the very beginning established the basic rule of following no rules in his art. His work remains a statement of rebellion against convention.

The current exhibition is made up of ceramic sculptures that have been produced in the *Antica Deruta* kilns under the direction of Alviero Moretti who was present for the exhibition inauguration. The works reveal Gabriel Caruana's instinctive urge and need to create spontaneously with a sense of immediacy that seems to flow in an endless source of energy. The freshness residing in his works is regenerated into the observer who partakes of the very energy put into them in the act of creation.

Gabriel Caruana has done much to promote art in Maka. His gallery at *Il-Mithna ta' Ganu* in Birkirkara bears witness to this. It remains to date an art gallery that promotes the contemporary idiom in a somewhat improvised space.

Caruana's name remains synonymous with the more exuberant approach in the moulding and firing of clay. He has influenced a whole new generation of young artists who followed him in the art of ceramics.

In December 1999 he was awarded the National Order of Merit for his achievements in art.

Now the *Accademia di Belle Arti, Pietro Vannucci* in Perugia, Italy, included him in the list of its prestigious academicians. This exhibition is celebrating Gabriel Caruana's artistic career, for it was in Italy that the artist decided to adopt clay as his main medium of expression.

Artistic background

One of the many gifts of Caruana has been his ability of linking aspects of popular Maltese culture as part and parcel of his artistic concepts.

His involvement in the Carnival festivities and its decorations allowed him to exploit the use of *papier mache* in floats. In fact he has served as competition-judge from 1952 to 1988. This important aspect of his work remains a valid point of reference when appreciating the creations that he produces.

Gabriel Caruana began to earn his living as an electrician, working mainly in government buildings, offices and schools. This experience led him to what was a rather ambitious project at the time: that of illuminating the façade of the parish church of the Annunciation in Balzan in 1950. The popularity of this project eventually led him to design decorations for the Floriana Parade Ground in 1957.

He was later commissioned to decorate the Palace Square Valetta for Carnival in 1960. This consisted of enormous *papier-mache* masks.

For 11 years he continued to be responsible for this great square in Valetta, designing fresh new designs each year. For the artist these occasions were challenges of how he could transmit his original and vigorous capacity through the traditional folk arts.

Gabriel Caruana felt the need for his own artistic education. So in 1964 went to Perugia, Italy, for three months. There he made contact with Enrico Caroselli, a



Joseph Paul Cassar

resident of Southfield, Michigan, US, and through him went to work for a few weeks at the School of Arts and Crafts in Detroit in 1966.

The artistic outlook of the people he met there helped him to reshape and redirect his own creative ambitions. People such as the engineer John Foster Julius Schmidt, Dean of the Department of Sculpture at the Crambrook Academy, admired Caruana's works and even secured for him a post as a teacher of sculpture at Ohio University, an offer which Caruana did not accept.

These experiences abroad cannot be emphasised enough. They allowed the artist to see great art collections and meet many creative people, exchanging ideas in the realms of form, technique and expression. These experiences converted him from a mere technician with artistic ambitions into a really original creative artist.

A pioneer

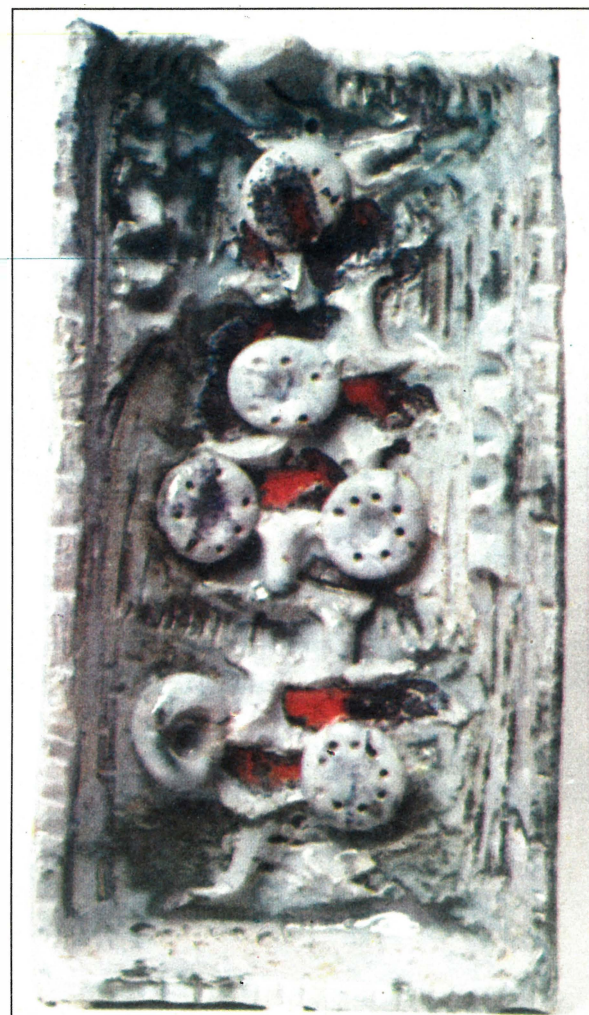
It was in the 1960s that Caruana pioneered in what seemed to be shocking odd creations for Malta when he used discarded truck-tyres and other objects and exhibited them right in the lobby of the National Museum of Archaeology in 1969. His enthusiasm for introducing fresh and innovative concepts did not pass unnoticed at a time when it was extremely hard to go against strong, conservative ideas.

His work was subject to ridicule and harsh criticism. At the same time it established him as a leading innovator.

In time, with the Dada movement and other anti-establishment ideas, he soon caught the attention of the Maltese public, even those uninterested in art. The public has come to expect the general unorthodoxy of his artistic approach.

The following years were years of commissions and great creative enthusiasm. While continuing to show annually at Faenza, contributing at the *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Ceramica* at Cervia in 1968, he took part in an exhibition in Munich, Germany, entitled *Form + Qualtat* (1969), at the National Museum in the same year, at the Malta Pavilion of Expo 70 in Japan, (1970), at Peterloo Gallery, Manchester, (1970), *Galleria la CittadeUzl*, Ascona Switzerland and at the Richard De Marco Gallery in Edinburgh, (1971).

During this same year Whitworth Gallery in Manchester acquired one of his works. It was at this time that Caruana started producing his *Bird-Baths* series. Although these circular and at times rectangular forms standing upon cylindrical bases of a smaller diameter are executed in white cement, later on similar works were executed in ceramics.



Scultura

Today, it is very easy to forget the courage that Gabriel demonstrated in presenting new problems of aesthetics and relating art to life.

All ceramic works prior to 1970 were executed abroad, mainly in Faenza, but he acquired the electrical kiln for firing ceramics up to stoneware temperature in late 1970.

Gabriel Caruana produced small works generally in relief in disc form which, in their glaze finish, evoked the beauty of jewels.

He was very interested in producing large works and he managed to turn his frustrations into a constant challenge to be creative.

His restless desire to experiment and press in new directions led him to come up with interesting solutions for the large wall reliefs. This consisted in the cutting of his clay mould into sections, each of which was fired separately and subsequently assembled and fixed in their respective positions.

Frequent exhibitor

At this time Caruana became a frequent exhibitor abroad. He took part in *Art from Malta* at the Commonwealth Institute in London, at Ascona in Switzerland at the prestigious *Espozione d'Arte Internazionale per la Ceramica* at Faenza in Italy, all in 1967.

It was the Faenza experience that made him adopt ceramics as his main sculptural medium. His periodical stays there attracted the attention of many and, since then, he has been invited to be an artist in residence by the *Istituto Statale per la Ceramica*.

Gabriel produced an innovative sculpture in wood entitled *Interchangeable Sculpture*, which consisted of large wooden beams that could be assembled in a variety of

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Piatto della Pace

Great pioneer of modern art in Malta

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conjunctions and compositions, according to one's fancy. This work lent itself particularly well to the combinations which strongly suggest the character of architecture.

This can be partly devoted to the collaborative influence of working with architect Richard England at the time. Then came the meeting in 1966 with Victor Pasmore, who admired Gabriel Caruana's work and purchased an important concrete relief which was incorporated into one of his courtyard walls of his house and studio in Gudja.

His present works

The quality which impresses me most about Gabriel Caruana's works is his boldness, his constant engagement in experimenting and exploring fresh original realisations in clay. His creativity and imagination pours out like a rapid stream.

His works have been compared to volcanic eruptions, because of the suggestive power in his lava like glazes which melt and flow like magma. The heat which forms his works leaves its traces of the burning fire even after it cools. His love of form pronounces itself in abstract expressionist works inspired by nature and the Mediterranean blue sea.

Gabriel Caruana's characteristics can be defined from the fact that he never settled down to routine and repetitive productions of a potter's studio. His response to material is his strength, in the way he attacks the lump of clay, his punches preserved in the cuts and shapes that he creates.

His coloured glazes often have their own rhythms that run independently of the modelled forms to allow a free-flowing, powerful effect. In this way his ceramic production takes into account the language of form contemplated by colour rather risking that the glazes predominate offer form.

It is this directness to materials which proclaims him as a great pioneer of modern art in Malta since his emphasis is on displaying the natural qualities of material, be it wood, paper, metal, clay or paint.

His ceramics many times consist of a kind of a

split cylinder that is transformed into half-columns of clay coloured in shades of Mediterranean blue, white and light green. They rise like divine objects of adoration before the viewers' eyes.

This work ranks among Gabriel's proudest creations and initiated an endless series of strange and personal symbols. They are evocative as much as ambiguous, but it is this uncertainty which adds colour to his artistic creations.

The work preserves in it a cascade of creativeness which must have gushed forth at so rapid a speed that it barely gave time to the artist to imprint on the malleable clay the rhythmic configuration of his urge. It is a work which also corresponds to a class of other works of his which represent flattened figures, like his *Grande Figura No: 2*, and *Figura Seduta*, evocative rather than representative of the human form.

The whole concept remains one concerned with the potential of a lump of clay. It reveals Gabriel Caruana as an artist who is more naturally amenable to the prompting of the rhythmic excitement that can be sensed in the cohesion of his forms and their contrasts. Their impact lies in the artist's sense of discovering unfamiliar frontiers exploring form and its inner rhythms.

It is not only the freedom of his imagination that is crucial here, but how these expressions recount the origins of the artist's prolific output. Ink drawings that accompanied these works in the initial concept shed light on the eventual process of how clay and glazes come to life in the artist's hands.

Artist Victor Pasmore, a personal friend and admirer of the artist's work, has described Gabriel Caruana as an artist who "cannot be classified and described with academic formulas. Caruana's art is always fresh and free, always alive and bold."

His work remains immediately recognisable for its originality. One of his greatest merits is due to the fact that one can look at his works time and again, and always discover something new in it, a detail perhaps, that had previously escaped one's attention.

Caruana's commitment to his art makes him a master of his craft, a manipulator of form. Gabriel Caruana's rich artistic career can be viewed on website:

<http://www.ZORIN.Com/Gabriel.index.ht.ml>