



The artist George Fenech painting outdoors recently in the outskirts of Mellicha.

# George Fenech – his artistic formation and present works

**An exhibition of paintings, *George Fenech: Gli Anni Romani 1956-1961*, sheds light on the work produced at the Roman Academy when Maltese artists proceeded to Rome to further their studies. As curator of the exhibition, JOSEPH PAUL CASSAR writes about its historical importance**

cocoon and fly far and wide without losing sight of their original roots. They felt the need to be up-to-date with what was happening beyond their shores although the information available in books, magazines and catalogues was extremely limited at the time.

The main ones were: *Primavera* edited by Margerita Morcaldi, Libreria del Littorio, Roma, 1929, *Architettura e Arti Decorative - rivista d'arte e di storia - organo del sindacato nazionale Architetti casa editrice d'arte Bestetti e Tumminelli, Milano-Roma, 1930, Il Frontespizio*, edited by Vallecchi, Firenze, 1938 and *La Cultura Moderna - Natura ed Arte - casa editrice Dott. Francesco Vallardi, Milano, 1931.*

It is possible to believe that some of these magazines were available also locally at some point in later years.

Studies in anatomy and the nude remained the speciality of the Roman *accademia*. George Fenech was awarded a scholarship in 1956 after sitting for a competitive examination at the Malta School of Art. He proceeded to the *Regia Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome. There he studied painting under Prof. Amerigo Bartoli, etching under Mino Maccari

and decoration under Ferruccio Ferrazzi.

He also attended the *Scuola Serale dell'Arti Ornamentali San Giacomo* under Prof. Ciotti specialising in fresco techniques. During this time, George Fenech attended evening classes at the *Circolo Artistico* in *Via Margutta* which provided Fenech with the opportunity to study the nude and observe established artists at work.

George Fenech performed very well in all these centres and on a special recommendation of the director of the academy, Michele Guerrisi, the Maltese government granted the aspiring artist an extension of another year of scholarship.

The selection at the exhibition forms only a small part of the artist's vast production. Many such paintings could not be brought to Malta and were left behind at the academy. Others were given away to friends or exchanged for other students' works. It is noticeable that some models are worked time and time again, for the artist got to know them well, such as Antonietta, who appears in a half-length portrait and Maria who appears seated in a more laboured study.

The *posa fissa* allowed Fenech to work at length on his study and these works are generally more detailed and refined. The *posa volante* allowed him to be faster and more sketchy in his execution and these works are generally fresher and bolder. However, this cannot be adopted as a fixed and fast rule, for Fenech was a hard and fast worker. He even painted the model while she was resting and did portraits of his friends at the same time.

Some of the less laboured studies might be incomplete because the model never came back or it was George Fenech's decision to leave it so. A few charcoal studies have been included in this category which reveal a swift method of understanding the anatomical structure of the body captured with a few sure strokes.

There is a significant development in the portraits – they reveal in a synthetic manner his understanding of the essential form. Generally, the texture is achieved by the dry brush technique.

The profile of the model *Maria* (oil on board, 1960) is sculptural and monumental. On the other hand, *The American Student* (oil on canvas, 1958) is passionately painted in a thicker manner with a black outline which attracted the attention of Prof. Amerigo Bartoli as well as that of Mario Mafai.

The few remaining views of Rome capture scenes from the landscape that has been significantly transformed since the late 1950s. The two views of *Acqua Acetosa* (oil on canvas, 1958 and 1960 respectively), represent different views of the Tevere. The early version shows clearly that the *Villaggio Olimpico* was not yet under construction, while the

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The artistic production of Maltese artists in these last 70 years has been studied in the light of their training at the Malta Government School of Art as well as their subsequent studies abroad. The exhibition by George Fenech, covering his years of training in Rome between 1956-61, shows the young artist in his academic formation. Each piece is a study and represents him as a truly committed student on scholarship taking every possible advantage offered to him by the Roman *accademia*.

Studying abroad provided Maltese artists with the opportunity to mix with other students of different nationalities. There they came in contact with important artists: Antonio Sciortino with Auguste Rodin, Vincent Apap with Pericle Fazzini, George Borg with Angelo Zanelli, Tony Pace with Emilio Greco, Ganni Bonnici and Frans Galea with Giacomo Manzù, Harry Alden with Bridget Riley, Anton Agius with Anthony Caro and Eduardo Paolozzi, George Fenech with Mino Maccari and Amerigo Bartoli... The list goes on.

Rome was considered the mecca of art studies, with its churches, palaces and streets serving as open museums. Rome stood for the centre of western and classical European art.

Artists like Antonio Sciortino, Giorgio Preca and Willie Apap turned to Italy to exhibit their works and promote their art. As these attempts gained momentum, other alternatives were sought and some artists shifted their attention to London (Frank Portelli, Harry Alden, Joseph L. Mallia) and Paris (Carmenu Mangion), or both (Antoine Camilleri, Emvin Cremona).

Maltese artists grasped every right opportunity, which was instrumental in assisting them to break out of their



# George Fenech exhibition

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latter version shows the very beginnings of the *Stadia Olimpico*. These weekend landscapes were exercises that the artist did out of the academy and are generally characterised by their dark greens and ochres.

Other works from this series in this exhibition are the views of *Regina Celi* (oil on canvas, 1959) which was not far from the academy, *Via Appia Antica* (oil on canvas, 1959), famous for its archaeological remains, *Piazza Epiro* and *Via Saturina*, two different views from the artist's apartment. Examples of George Fenech's works have been included in this exhibition because they mark such a striking contrast with the works from his Roman period. The present production is bathed in the study of light contrasts. The Mediterranean heat can be felt in the breeze and on the white-washed walls of the farmhouses. The artist selects peculiar interesting corners that he knows so well around Melieha where he lives and works. Among his subjects, *Gnien Ingraw*, *San Niklaw*, *Irdum il-Qawwi*, *Imgiebah*, *Ghajn Znuber*, *Qammieh*, become recurring themes. He is fascinated by the rocks that have been modelled by rain, sun and wind which he captures on canvas as pillars and monuments of unknown beauty in the Maltese landscape. His preoccupations with composition feature also in his still lifes where every object plays its part with dignity.

• The exhibition, organised by the art unit of the University of Malta, in conjunction with the Italian Cultural Institute, is currently on at the main hall of the institute in Valletta. It is open from Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Entrance is free.