

# A champion to the arts

Opera singer Paul Asciak passed away on April 21. Joseph Cassar writes about a lesser-known aspect of the tenor's life as champion to Maltese contemporary artists.

The news of tenor Paul Asciak's demise on April 21 affected many, both in Malta and overseas. The newspapers and the media showered him with all the honour he deserved as tenor and teacher.

However, what many remain unaware of is that Asciak was also an important promoter of the visual arts in Malta.

After the respected tenor retired from a very successful career abroad performing in the major opera houses of Europe, he returned to Malta in May 1961.

He felt that he was missing the morning encounters with his colleagues, exchanging views about what was going on in the operatic field at the time.

His wish was to remain active in the arts, an objective he successfully managed to reach by focusing all his energy in bringing unity among visual artists, providing for them a platform to exhibit their works both individually as well as a group.

Asciak's charisma and talent soon

attracted the attention of major modern artists of the time and, in December 1968, the tenor set up an Artists' Guild with the idea of giving the public a "cross-section of what was going on in the artists' studios".

The guild left its mark before too long; Asciak was asked by the Malta Trade Fair Corporation, to hold a collective exhibition at the fair grounds in Naxxar and the exhibition reported a record sale of 26 art works.

This news brought about a healthy debate in the media and aroused a much-needed public interest in contemporary art.

The following year, the Artists' Guild held another collective exhibition at the same location.

Asciak was also instrumental in promoting the art of this group of artists in other countries.

One of his merits remains the appeal he made to the Maltese government to purchase a work of art from each exhibition, which was held under the auspices of the then

Ministry of Education, Culture and Tourism. Asciak's suggestion was taken on board, marking the beginning of a collection of Maltese contemporary art by the National Museum of Fine Arts.

Various exhibitions followed, described by critics of the time as being healthy and thriving, but also progressive and ambitious.

The last meeting of the guild was held in July 1970; it was a short-lived group which harvested many successes both locally and abroad.

The knowledge that we have today about this group comes mainly from the surviving minutes of all the meetings, handwritten by Asciak himself. It was some years ago that I was handed these documents by the tenor himself, in order to assist my research on art in Malta of this period.

Asciak presided over the first meeting only, and immediately afterwards he insisted that the artists should chair their own meetings.

The guild held 20 meetings in all,



Paul Asciak next to a portrait depicting him in the role of Othello.

however there were also many other informal, unrecorded sessions.

The documents show that the guild contributed in no small way to ensure and raise the standards of artistic education in Malta. Between 1967 and 1977, Asciak went on to organise a series of exhibitions at the National Museum of Fine Arts; this 10-year period, in fact, is marked in Malta by important personal debuts by the leading pioneers of modern art in Malta.

The first of these exhibitions, held in November 1967, was dedicated to George Fenech.

One of the more important exhibitions organized by Asciak was a collective that was part of the programme of a five-day visit to Malta by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, who was coming to inaugurate a new campus at the

Royal University of Malta for its bicentenary celebrations.

This exhibition gave a major boost to the Artists' Guild as an artistic group, since the event received a high profile in the media of the time.

The 28 participating artists were given the opportunity to introduce their works to the Prince of Wales, an event that also made it on the British newspapers.

Another major milestone for the guild was the exhibition held at the Upper Grosvenor Galleries in London.

Ten contemporary Maltese artists, including Harry Alden, Antoine Camilleri, Emvin Cremona, George Fenech, Frank Portelli, Anton Agius, Vincent Apap, John Bonnici, Samuel Bugeja and Joseph Casha, took part. Each artist exhibited four works. The artists donated half of the proceeds of sales at the gallery to raise funds for the Emigrants' Commission.

By the end of the year, another collective exhibition of paintings and sculptures was held, once again at the National Museum in Valletta.

The idea was to bring the message home regarding the success achieved by the Maltese artists both in London and New York. These two countries were chosen because many Maltese had settled there and the group of artists served as a testimony to the ways the cultural dimension was kept alive in a small island through the creative efforts of its artists.

The above are but a few of the success stories that linked Asciak with Maltese modern visual artists. I am forever grateful for the resourceful information and documents Asciak provided to me. He will be missed, but his efforts are now well secured in the books of Maltese art history.

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