

Under and On Canvas – Paul Camilleri-Cauchì

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Introduction

Paul Camilleri-Cauchì was born in Victoria, Gozo on December 2 1940, the second out of six siblings of Wistin Camilleri and Francesca née Cauchi. His father, Wistin, was renowned for his prolific artistic career in sculpture, particularly as a statuarian, while his mother, Francesca, was an excellent dressmaker, besides being an avid music lover. His three brothers have all excelled in the artistic field: Alfred and Michael as sculptors and Mario as a gilder. His nephew, Austin Camilleri, the son of his younger sister Rina, is an established contemporary artist.

Childhood

It is not easy for Paul Camilleri-Cauchì to identify a particular moment in his early childhood when he started dabbling in art. “I always remember myself jotting and drawing lines on a piece of paper on our home dining table or at the workshop next to my father with a piece of paper and charcoal he used to hand me to sketch with. The workshop was

next door to our residence at Ghajn Qatet Street in Victoria, so practically my childhood was spent mostly in my dad’s workshop.”

Camilleri-Cauchì’s early childhood lessons at the local primary school and the Gozo Seminary were complemented with the discovery of art as a true passion. No empty paper was spared the criss crossing of lines emanating from his furtive pencil. He was always inundated with requests from his class mates to draw figures or to do some decorations for them. “I found this very convenient because I would exchange such scribblings and designs for my undone homeworks!”.

Formal Training

The first tentative steps towards formal training in art were delivered by his father. More concrete steps were taken when Italian artist painter, Gianbattista Conti, arrived on the local artistic scene on being commissioned the pictorial decoration of Saint George’s Basilica’s vault in Gozo. “Conti used to give me instruction lessons in art at the Duke of Edinburgh hotel where he was sojourned during his stay in Gozo in those years.” Subsequently Camilleri-Cauchì also undertook lessons in art under a number of Maltese artists, including Joseph Briffa of Birkirkara, Joseph Caruana and Toussaint Busuttil, both of Żejtun.

In 1960 Camilleri-Cauchì graduated from the London School of Art. Eventually, during the next couple of years, he enrolled at the Pietro Vannucci Accademia di Belle Arti in Perugia. The artistic environment of Perugia and his familiarisation visits to the world-renowned museums and the number of art studios in Rome and Florence continued to imbue in him the zest to dedicate his life to art, a feat which at that point in time seemed rather unrealistic. Being in a foreign country, surrounded with works of art which he could previously only appreciate in books, proved to be an overwhelming experience for the young artist, who was already treating the mastering of colours and figure drawing as his areas of specialisation.



While in Rome in 1962 studying with Profs. Paolo Citraro.



Wistin Camilleri flanked by his sons Alfred (left) and Paul (right).



At the studio working on the figure of Christ on a live model for the Floriana parish dome.

In Perugia Camilleri-Cauchich studied restoration under the tutorship of Professor Lanciotto Fumi, ceramics under Professor Edgardo Abbozzo and engravings under Professor Fr. Diego Donati. Two pivotal tutors were Professor Gerardo Dottori, a renowned futuristic and avantgarde painter, who taught Camilleri-Cauchich the mastering of colours and affresco painting, and Professor Adelmo Mirabelli, who taught the young artist anatomy studies.

While in Perugia, Camilleri-Cauchich joined forces with his classmates and set up painting exhibitions at the Palazzo Comunale. In 1962 he was selected as the most academically active student in a competition organised by the Pineta di Cugnana. Through such exhibitions he came in contact with a number of foreign artists. This allowed him to set up solo exhibitions, besides a number of other collective ones. "I still remember an exhibition I held between the months of July and August of 1963 with a Dutch artist and two Mexican sculptors. It was held in Perugia and officially opened by the Honorable Amintore Fanfani. The exhibition was described as one "di alta qualità."

The public appreciation towards Camilleri-Cauchich's art goes back to the years prior to his sojourn in Perugia. In 1957, at the tender age of seventeen years, he successfully exhibited a number of his works at a government sponsored exhibition in the entrance hall of the then Gozo Lyceum under the title 'Gozo, the life and the people.'

Artistic Career

On completing his art course and returning to Malta, Camilleri-Cauchich was enrolled with the Education Department as an Art Teacher. The post gave him the possibility to teach art in a number of schools all over Malta. It was through such academic contacts that he started to receive private commissions. Eventually he started being commissioned with paintings for parish churches, a development which compelled him to abandon his teaching career and start his professional career in art in the early 1970s.

On the academic aspect, Camilleri-Cauchich pushed the idea of establishing an art school in Gozo. This was publicly announced during a programme 'It-Tokk' as initiated by Paul Mizzi and Franco



Working on a private commission.

Masini with the active participation of Vincent Apap and Fr. Marius Zerafa in 1971. He was very conscious of the disadvantages he went through during his early years of the rudimentary art lessons he had to put up with at school. Hence he felt that a distinct and separate entity dedicated for art would greatly enhance the knowledge and art practice to all aspiring Gozitan students who wanted to further their studies in Gozo. However, almost two decades had to go by, for Camilleri-Cauchì's dream to come to fruition. In 1988 he was invited by the then Gozo minister to form part of the Gozo Cultural Committee and later to chair a four-member Art sub-committee. There he actively participated in drawing up a programme which led to the establishment of the Wistin Camilleri - Gozo School of Art at Ghajnsielem.

At the time, Camilleri-Cauchì even promulgated an artistic culture towards the history of Gozo. He put pressure for the completion of the monument to Reverend Louis Vella at Sabina which sculpture was completed but never put in place. He endeavoured to promote personalities who were

instrumental in some stages of Gozitan history by setting up public monuments to them.

Ecclesiastical commissions provided him with a sound foundation for his artistic career. "I realised that the authorities recognised my strong academic brush which could find the right place in such environs and be in harmony with the internal architectural idiom. This was further justified when I was commissioned to resume the pictorial project when the original artist failed to continue because of ill health. This was done on the recommendation of the artist himself especially in the case of the Hal Balzan and Floriana churches when the late Emvin Cremona was unable to continue due to ill health and hence it was left up to me to complete the former's unfinished pictorial decorations".

A number of churches, which were already endowed with partly decorated vaults, were encouraged to restart the pictorial projects when they realised that Camilleri-Cauchì's paint brush could match the style and tonality of the original masters. Church commissions allowed the artist

to roam into the realm of compositional art taking into consideration the different perspectives contained in the internal architecture idiom of the church. “Each and every church is unique and I always endeavoured to put my works in the spatial framework they occupy. These are splendid examples of the “*furia dei penelli*” that typify the manner, and display a fluid and generous handling of pain.”

Although his output seems oriented predominantly towards the execution of churches’ mural paintings, a group of easel paintings made for private patrons attest to the same artistic approach. These include portraits, landscapes, allegorical subjects and still life. Even public entities such as band clubs have his works embellishing the ceilings and walls of



On the way to Calvary: working on one of a set of six paintings for the Saint Paul’s Bay parish church in Malta.

the main halls. There exists a balance between the churches’ mural paintings and the private easel paintings, all executed with great creative energy and brilliant dynamism.



The Transfiguration executed on a contemporary design.

Camilleri-Cauchy insists that a lot of preparatory work is involved prior to the sketch stage on the canvas. Without distinction, whether for public enjoyment or private collection, each commission demands that patrons’ satisfaction should be a priority. Many sorts of ideas are exchanged between the patron and the artist who in turn is to transfer the final idea onto the canvas. This becomes more complicated when commissions are to contain symbolic meaning especially in the cases of ecclesiastical entities. However, Camilleri-Cauchy takes extra measures at the preparatory stage in order not to compromise the art and style. Notwithstanding such challenges the final result would make Camilleri-Cauchy’s effort to emerge with ease and triumphantly perpetuating his skills in the design, composition and the different hues of his palette colours.

Camilleri-Cauchy’s pieces of art can also be found in a number of foreign countries. They can be found in public and private collections. Some of them even form part of prestigious collections such as at the Vatican in Rome. “Notably I remember a particular event when a copy of the Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu was donated to Pope John Paul II in October 1985. Also during his visit to Gozo in 1990, a copy of the titular painting of the Gozo Cathedral was presented to the same Pope by the Cathedral Chapter.” Various images of Saint John Bosco as executed by Camilleri-Cauchy were also reproduced on the



On the scaffolding applying the finishing touches to the painting of the Hal Luqa parish dome.

annual publication cover of the Salesians' mondial organisation, *Strenna*, over a number of years.

Large works can be found at the Bova Marina cathedral in Reggio-Calabria dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and at the Cine Citta' basilica "Maria Ausiliatrice." A titular painting and three pieces were put up at churches of Saint Paul and Saint Domenic Savio at Marbusu' and

Malawi respectively in India while other paintings found their way crossing the South Atlantic towards Brasil mainly at the churches of the Immaculate Conception, Saint Joseph and at the cathedral in the districts of Londrina and Rolandia of Parana and Salvador, Bahia respectively. Further works are found at the Hola church in Kenja, Saint Clare parish church at Westmounth Avenue in Canada as well as at the Saint Eric cathedral church of Sweden and at Saint Joseph College in London.

Notwithstanding his intensive artistic activity in sacred art, one should not ignore another line of stylistic contemporary art. His contemporary works of art are more often made on commission for private collections. They are not large in size as his ecclesiastic ones. However, there exists consistency in both styles in that the tonality is emphasized with the same intensity affirming his brilliant manipulation of colours. "As my Umbrian professor, Dottori, used to tell me, I am a *colorista* and that the academy underlies the composition of each painting." Such examples can also be admired in ecclesiastic entities drawn and built on modern lines such as the Iklin parish church.



The Sacred Family: the titular painting of Iklin parish church.



The Gozo parishes' Patron Saints: a small cupola painting at the Gozo Cathedral church.

For Camilleri-Cauchì, the secret is simply to paint for the joy of it and not for the sake of ambition. "I am convinced that the foundation of art is joy. In the visual arts, like in other branches of art, the act of creation is joy. Certainly this creative joy is of a unique kind. If I have the impulse to try an abstract or to create a composition on the traditional and classical lines, I would give it a go. I would paint energetically throughout the day as I used to do during my training. After each execution I feel an immediate feeling of release that my original idea and schematic colours would have helped my intuitive mind to find an understanding between me, as an artist, and the audience at large. Just as an artist needs his art to complete his life, so, too, he needs an audience to see it. By giving definition, thought and feeling, the artist demands a response: once the work is finished, the need of communication exists."

Awards

Camilleri-Cauchì was knighted in 1968 in ORCB and in the SOSJ of Jerusalem in 1979 following his father's death. In acknowledgment for his artistic output and contribution towards art, he was listed

in "Contemporaries Who's Who" of the American Biographies International, and was awarded "Man of the Year 2004" from the Board of Directors. In June 2004 was awarded "Ġieħ il-Belt Victoria" by the then Mayor, Mrs. Vivienne Galea-Pace. In 2011 he was awarded "Ġieħ Ġhawdex" by the Circolo Gozitano.

Dr. Aaron Attard-Hili is a lawyer by profession. He is a full time Judicial Assistant at the Gozo courts of law. He is also a researcher in local history and is a contributor of a number of articles of historical interest in local papers and publications.