

## Love of Nature and Life

Louis Laganà analyses some of the works of ceramic-artist Sina Farrugia Micallef who is inspired by Neolithic imagery and Nature

Maltese Neolithic art is full of symbolism which is reflected in many artefacts, statuettes, and ornaments found in different megalithic temples around the island. These Neolithic images and symbols inspired many artists from all over the world. Today, these images are translated in many forms in a variety of contemporary artworks. It is not just the beauty of the temples and their artefacts that attract many artists but also the mysteries that they convey. Artists feel that these ancient buildings are related to spirituality: a great reverence for Life.

Sina Farrugia Micallef, a ceramist, and also an educator, worked for many years on different themes related to the Neolithic culture. Her artwork evokes great spirituality. The symbols of life and death regularly emerge in her artwork, her ceramics. Farrugia's interest in Neolithic sites and themes goes back to her young days. She stated: "My interest started since I was of a very young age. I remember when we were children we used to be taken to visit the Neolithic sites and I was always fascinated by the grandeur of these temples. My father also used to take us especially to Hagar Qim, overlooking Filfla, and also I remember visits to the underground temples at the Hypogeum, the only one underground, and I was always fascinated and always drawn to these sites. At first I never worked consciously. Everything I did relate to the temples emerged unconsciously in my work but lately I did work specifically related to the Neolithic theme."

Sina Farrugia Micallef started her studies in art at the Government School of Art from 1967 until 1969 and later at 'Mater Admirabilis' Teachers' Training College. In 1971 she started teaching art with the Government Department and during the same year her interest in ceramics encouraged her attend a course in ceramics. Her first exhibition was held in 1986 at the 'Loggia' of the Museum of Fine arts, in Valletta. Most of her work consisted of ceramic pieces.

The artist always worked consistently throughout the years, exploring many subjects but mostly she was influenced by Maltese Prehistoric art and themes related to nature. In 1999, Ms Farrugia Micallef had the opportunity to work with a group of other artists, in a project, ending up in a collective art exhibition titled *Temples-Malta: Seven Women, Seven Temples*. The artists spent a year visiting seven major prehistoric temples, and also working inside these sacred shrines. Farrugia Micallef's work consisted of ceramic plaques, vessels and freestanding sculpture. Two interesting pieces with very symbolical significance are: *Hide me from the Winds* and *Make me forget all sadness*. These pieces are a sort of megalithic niches with a crouched figure inside them. The familiar deer-head or bull and the universal symbol of the spiral are also portrayed in these works. When one looks carefully at these works, one notices the great emphasis on the solitary figures and the profound depiction of the structure of the corbelled roofing of these niches.

Ms Farrugia Micallef uses a symbolical element in her work, which is based on two important connections. One is her love for life and nature. The other connection is a

psychological one, a personal connotation. At times these connections link with each other and are interrelated. For example, the symbol of the deer is repeated many times in her terracotta and ceramic works. It is a Neolithic symbol which is found in various cultures. It appeared with the birth-giving goddess, and extends far back into the Upper Palaeolithic. Sina Farrugia Micallef associates the deer with femininity. She describes the deer as an animal, which gives the impression that it is fragile, but at the same time swift and strong. In the past, animals like the deer were very important for human beings, used as a source of food and also for sacrifices and rituals. One could see the images of deer transformed by the artist into shapes of pots and vessels. In Jungian psychology the animal motif is usually symbolic of man's primitive and instinctual nature. The archetypal deer teaches us the power of gentleness, keen observation and sensitivity. They are in tune with nature and are sacred carriers of peace.

In another piece of freestanding 'sculpture in the round', made of stoneware, entitled 'Wingspan', showed at her exhibition 'Ceramics and Drawings' in 1998, Sina Farrugia Micallef makes great emphasis on the form of the antlers and the head of the deer. I feel there is synchronicity, balance and unity between the head of the human and that of the deer. One sees there is no distinction between the animal and the human figure. Both are made of the same linear patterns, swaying away off the surface of the sculpture. The human figure has an unconscious identity with that of the animal – the deer. The artist recounts that the image of the deer appears regularly in her work. She recalls: "I have strange ways of working because I wake up in the middle of the night and I get ideas. So I sleep with a little sketchbook beside me, and just lately I have been sketching deer again

and I don't know why it happens...it happens spontaneously, the deer are coming back into my work.”

I think that the deer represents the artist's unconscious self, reoccurring automatically without any premeditation. Interpreting the symbol of the deer here is a complex process. Through Jungian studies, we know that primitive man believed that apart from the 'soul' (psyche) there is a 'bush soul' (totem) as a psychic identity. This identity was projected in either a wild animal or any other thing. Jung stated that: "It is a well known psychological fact that an individual may have such unconscious identity with some other person or object". In this case we see the artist having the same repeated images of the 'deer' in her imagination or dreams, which are finally produced in her work and become part of the *Participation mystique*. The archetypal deer is a gentle dweller of the unconscious forest. This archetype emerges from the unconscious as a symbol of protection. An inner protection is in operation. What does this sense of protection mean? Is it something personal or collective? We know that a large number of ancient myths are connected to this primal animal. Whether or not it is being represented as a personal or collective symbol, the archetypal deer must be a cause of fertility or creation. We know that the artist associates this archetype with femininity, as stated before. Taking this observation into consideration one may understand better the artist's love for nature and the process of life. All this is projected sublimely in her work.

Another important aspect of Sina Farrugia Micallef's artwork is her ceramic vessels. It is also another element of her inspiration from ancient pottery. A great number of pots and

vessels were found in many Neolithic temples in Malta. In a number of places in ancient Europe pottery had great importance. When the ancient Europeans discovered how to fire and produce pottery in about the seventh Millennium B.C., this provided a new way of expressing religious ideals. Beyond personal taste and ideology, ceramic vessels have been known to play an important role in various forms of rituals such as feasting, ceremony and burial. The probability is that pottery found in graves was used as part of the ritual for the journey to the afterlife. The most fundamental issues for human beings are life and death. Neolithic agricultural rituals developed a powerful symbolic language that spoke of gestation, birth, nurturing and death. Vessels served the purpose of art throughout life as well as into the hereafter.

The vessel is also the most basic of the archetypal feminine symbols. It stands for the female body as a source of life analogous to the earth. Joseph Campbell writes that there is a connection between the earth as life source and the body of the female divinity – ‘the Goddess’: “The appreciation of the real sanctity of the earth itself, because it is the body of the Goddess...she is within as well without. Your body is her body.” Another Jungian psychologist, Erich Neumann claims that the vessel represents also the unconscious mind of every man and woman. He stated that: “The archetypal body-vessel equation is of fundamental importance for the understanding of myth and symbolism. The inside of the body is archetypally identical with the unconscious, the ‘seat’ of the psychic process.” The unconscious Feminine vessel is often symbolised by a cave, which represents the womb as well as the tomb. Neumann continues to explain that the vessel character of the Feminine not only shelters the unborn in the vessel of the body, and not only the born in

the vessel of the world, but also takes back the dead into the vessel of death, the cave or coffin, in the tomb or urn. But Sina Farrugia Micallef sees the vessels not just as functional containers but symbolically represent the human being. During the last few years, the artist is trying to search into the past to find meaning in the present. This is why she is so interested in producing vessels. She maintains: "I love making vessels, because vessels are like ships. Malta is like a vessel. It is like a big ship riding the waves and I believe the temples are like vessels. They are vessels that are linking us to the past as well. Yes, I do think artists nowadays look for inspirations from the past. I think we all need this connection as we are not only linked together now in the present moment but we want to be linked to our ancestors as well."

As a potter, Sina Farrugia Micallef continued the ancestral tradition of making pots and vessels. For the way she makes pottery is like that of the alchemist's. She projects part of her psyche into 'matter' or 'inanimate objects'. This is clearly seen in one of her charcoal drawings called *The Calling*. The artist is handling the large pot from the handles with one hand and with the other hand the dark inside of the pot. The artist's mouth is wide open, as if she is screaming while giving birth. She is giving life to lumps of shapeless clay; it is a spiritual and emotional process. Sina Farrugia Micallef's vessels become mythical, unique and timeless.

Throughout the years, Sina Farrugia Micallef held more than twelve personal exhibitions in Malta and abroad. Her last art show was held last May at Robert Samut Centre in Floriana. In this exhibition one could see a selection of works from past years and also

her recent drawings and ceramic sculptures. Although the Neolithic theme remained a great source of inspiration in her work the artist also explores and experiences the flow of her creative powers coming from within her unconscious. One may say that her dialogues with clay result in ceramic sculptures and vessels that symbolise a universal mythological significance. The images of the deer (as well as other images of animals like the bird) and the way she uses metaphorically the vessels are paragons that personify the feminine unconscious.

Sina Farrugia Micallef is one of the very important ceramists in Malta. Her natural forms in terracotta, ceramics and stoneware particularly offer symbolic meaning that reminds us of the great love that our ancestors had for nature and life.

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