

Emotions through watercolour

Louis Laganà takes a look at the four stages of the career of watercolourist John Martin Borg who considers the artist as ‘an individual who has matured his sensibility towards life, nature and everything that is going to influence him emotionally and spiritually’

Undoubtedly one of the leading watercolour artists in Malta is John Martin Borg. He became interested in art at a very early age. His academic formation started in 1966 when he attended the Government School of Art, at that time in Msida (MCAST). During this period his first art teachers were Harry Alden and Esprit Barthet and later he had some lessons by Vincent Apap, who at that time was also the head of the School of Art. 1971 marked the year when Mr. Borg started getting interested in watercolour but unfortunately he had to stop art lessons because entered university. He graduated in pharmacology in 1977 and it was after this time when the artist started to study watercolour on his own.

John Martin Borg is influenced mostly by the Norwich School of watercolour painters and also by two great masters of the Romantic period J.M. W. Turner (1775-1851) and Thomas Girtin (1775-1802). He has great respect for the medium and is also considered a purist in his technique and style in watercolour. The artist relates: “My personal experience with watercolour started out of necessity being the ideal medium for outdoor painting; clean, quick in drying and light to carry about. Given the fact that during the early days when I began exploring the medium there was no one to teach it, I had to struggle with great difficulty to learn how to handle such a demanding and unforgiving medium. However the years of frustrations and hardship created in me an enormous respect for the medium.” Painting on location is a very important aspect of Mr. Borg’s art. He searches in the local landscape and seascape for inspiration and often emphasises on light in its changing qualities to explore beauty and impressionistic colours. He maintains that “the experience of working on location for all these years forged in him an

unusual sensitivity to the weather and atmospheric moods, which became the hallmark of his work.” The formal constraints of his scientific discipline also ensure a continued commitment to verisimilitude in his rendering of specific themes like Maltese rural landscapes and architectural vistas, and marine scenes; but the range of his interests has broadened, and there is a bold leap here toward a synthesis of influences that develop Mr. Borg’s distinctive and exciting visual artistic style.

One can say that the artistic career of John Martin Borg is divided in four stages. He started to show his work to the public in 1979 in a three-men exhibition held at the Museum of Fine arts in Valletta. During this first phase, his interest was focused mostly on the study of the sky and his watercolour became more fluid and poetic in style, freeing himself from the confines of the topographical painting techniques of the landscape. He struggled to achieve a professional handling of the medium and so it was natural to concentrate on the material. The result was that he produced a vast selection of watercolour paintings demonstrating the beauty of washes with an excellent technique.

The mid-eighties marked the second stage of his watercolour study when John Martin Borg developed a great love for maritime subjects and atmospheric landscapes. This was reflected in his work with a matured exploration of the essential structure underlying all natural forms. The artist succeeded in creating a unique impressionistic style which attracted many Maltese and foreign viewers. In December of 1987, art critic Dominic Cutajar wrote: “In spite of surface appearances the artist is barely interested in strict topography, yet he allows nature to dictate his compositional schemes, a device that makes him a true landscape-painter. Notwithstanding he resorts to a kind of poetic license to weed out unnecessary trivialities. Thus the watercolours of John Martin Borg robe lyrically the basic spiritual essence of Mediterranean reality. It is a soothing but sombre poetry that cannot but grow directly from inner resources.” One can argue that most of Mr. Borg’s work reflected his determination to cultivate his ‘primitive’ self and to discover analogous subjects for his art.

Plein air painting for many years made him absorb the beauty of the aesthetic qualities of the local environment and find that capturing true colour, value and the mood of a subject was best done on location or through direct observation. Mr. Borg stated. "Once I find myself on location, I always spend some time soaking in the mood that enshrouds me, wind, temperature, humidity, cloud formation and more important the type of light are the effects I will be scrutinizing. I spend some time studying the landscape or maritime coast that surrounds me looking for an interesting subject and deciding what type of paper I will be using to best depict the mood. It always takes some effort to start laying down the preliminary pencil sketch. However once I lay down the first washes on paper I am caught up in the magical world of creation." This very act of painting outside in the open air gives the artist the full possibilities to explore transparent watercolour, a medium bringing colour and light to life. Some recent fine examples of Mr. Borg's emphasis mostly on light, shadow, atmospheric perspective and gradation of colour are: 'Below the silent One', 'Poetry in Gozo', and 'Showers in the afternoon'.

During the third stage of the development of his artistic career, John Martin Borg made dramatic changes in his approach to watercolour. He developed what is termed as 'ethereal' landscape painting which became synonymous with his work. During this period he also became interested in religious art. In 1988 he exhibited for the first time in Gozo at the Circolo Gozitano and a year later he had another personal art exhibition at the Chamber of Commerce in Valletta. In January of 1990 he showed a series of works at the Auberge de Provence Gallery in Valetta and the title of this one man art show was 'A Decade of Outdoor Watercolour'. The works executed during this period were more demanding and required a stronger mental effort because the artist's concern was not just to achieve a topographic expression but above all a truer expression of his emotions.

The final stage manifests a new era in Mr. Borg's art life. We find now a more mature, sensitive and accomplished artist with a great mastery of the medium of watercolour. Art critic Emanuel Fiorentino confirmed this in December 1991. He wrote: "John Martin Borg's standing as a watercolourist has in recent years attained such heights that any announcement of his participation in a local exhibition is received with more than a fair

amount of anticipation. The overall impression is that of an artist who has mastered his medium to an extent that it is well nigh beyond reproach.” Apart from maritime and landscape works the artist embarked to work on a series of religious and abstract works which rank high also in his repertoire of works in watercolour. In June of 1990 he was commissioned to do a large oil painting of St. John of The Cross for the Centru Spiritwalità at tas-Silġ, Marsaxlokk. An interesting study of the saint was also executed in watercolour. In this work one notices that the depiction of the saint was done with a lavish use of dark tones of colours contrasting with the transparent washes of lighter hues as background, leaving specific white spaces to capture the movement of the figure. An exhibition which was solely dedicated to religious themes was held at the Contemporary Hall at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta in 2000, the year of the Jubilee. The title chosen for this exhibition ‘Rendered in Red and Gold’ explains also symbolically the meaning of liturgy and divinity.

In recent years, John Martin Borg worked more on abstract themes and succeeded in expressing more the emotional side of his art. In these works one notices that the artist started to merge the landscape or the figurative (mostly religious) into the abstract. In fact the artist created a series of works called ‘Concept Studies: Structured from Virgin Rocks’. I argue that these works mirror strongly Mr. Borg’s own liberation from the realist confines of formal scientific illustration. In fact the artist stated. “In my abstracts inspiration comes from within. In certain instances, however, the stimulation comes from a specific theme be it theological or musical. Each abstract is the culmination of a long period of study, deliberation and reflection.” A very interesting work entitled ‘Unity’, executed in June 2007 and exhibited in his last personal exhibition at the G Gallery in Lija last December, symbolises the merging of the entities of humanity: The Divinity of God with Humanity. Many times his abstracts contain horizontal and vertical bands of colour; the horizontal signifying the ‘human’ aspect and the vertical the ‘divine’. In such paintings Mr Borg focuses mostly on colour rather than form. It is a deep investigation of the ‘self’, using the power of colour as the main ingredient in his watercolour creations. It is exactly as Kandinsky explained in his famous book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: “Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the

keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many stings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.” I believe that the work of John Martin Borg is now moving through a new aesthetic realm, that is, from an impressionistic to a more expressionistic phase, leaving space for ‘colour’ being the primary means to stimulate the emotional and spiritual response of the viewers.

Throughout these years John Martin Borg had more than twenty five personal exhibitions in Malta and abroad. His works are found also in many prestigious places, the most noteworthy are found at the Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, the Royal Collection in England and the WHO headquarters in Geneva.

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