

HUMANITY IN FORMS

Throughout the Story of Art we find that many artists attempted to explore the human form in various situations and ways. Artists used a diversity of media like paint, glass, wood, marble, metal and stone to create images of humanity. Amongst these mediums we find clay. Clay has been used to honour gods, kings and human achievements. It has been also used to express social and religious ideals.

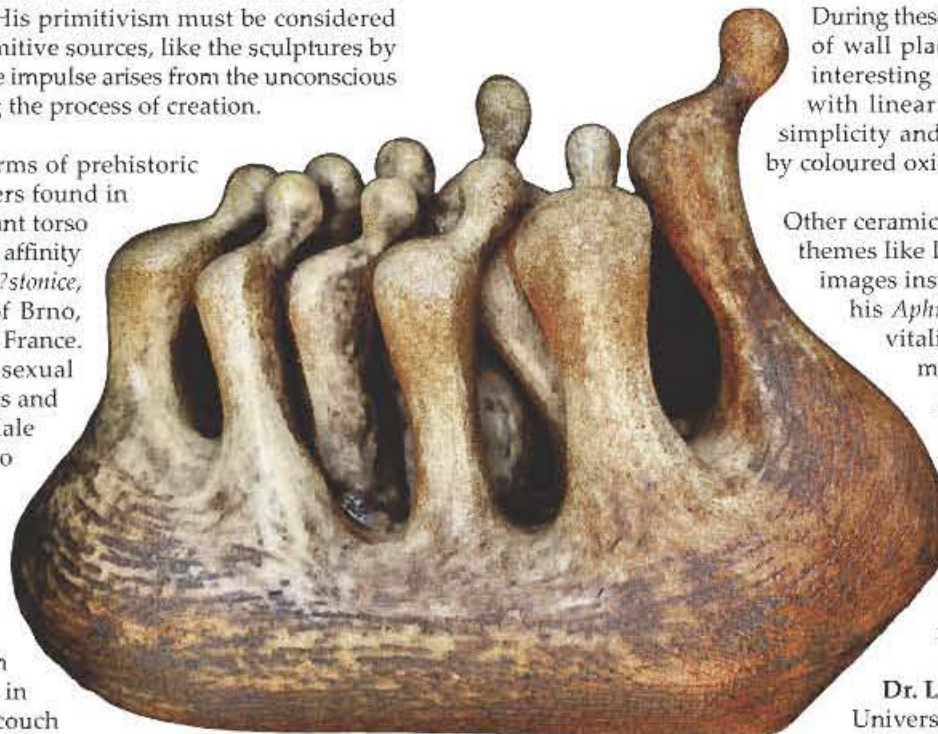
Amongst Maltese artists who use clay as their main artistic expression, we find Mario Sammut who enjoys a privileged place as one of the active ceramic artists. In his continuous research in the art of ceramics he uses different methods and techniques with the application of underglazes and coloured oxides in order to create sculptural forms which have a harmonious balance of texture, shape and line.

In this collection, Sammut explores the human being in many situations: the positive and negative influences of life. The artist is confronted daily with many different aspects of life with different people. In some of these aspects we find a range of themes like love, human destiny, death, and social circumstances; all are synthesised by the artist in ceramic form.

I believe that Mario Sammut's ceramic sculptures are derived from two different sources. First, his highly symbolical images are generated from the enigmatic forms that are found in prehistoric art. Like the archetypal sculptures of Henry Moore (1898-1986), Sammut shows respect for the primitive forms and structures but on the other hand remains faithful to the symbolical features they represent. His primitivism must be considered within a complex relationship between indirect primitive sources, like the sculptures by Moore, and 'primitive' works of art. The other creative impulse arises from the unconscious which produces archetypal images activated during the process of creation.

As stated, the artist is highly influenced by the forms of prehistoric statuary especially those from Malta and from others found in the Mediterranean regions; goddesses with an elegant torso and ample hips. I see that there is a great primitivistic affinity with the ancient clay figurines like the *Venus of Dolní Věstonice*, which was found in the Moravian basin south of Brno, Czechoslovakia, or the *Venus of Lespugue* found in France. These works have exaggerated female secondary sexual characteristics, especially the large pendulous breasts and enlarged buttocks and belly. In most solitary female figures, Sammut uses the typical elongated torso synonymous with some of the sculptures of female forms by the famous Swiss sculptor, Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966).

His work, *Twin Pregnant Women*, reminds me of the 'Double Goddess' or 'Twin Fat Ladies', found at the *Xagħra Stone Circle*, in Gozo. The difference between Sammut's ceramic double figures and those found in Gozo is that the prehistoric figures are seated on a couch



and not standing. But their similarity is that symbolically they represent fertility, the symbolical element of emerging life. In Prehistoric times, images of doubles indicate potency or abundance. But mostly they signify the origins of life or the matrix that nourishes life, that is, the cosmos.

Mario Sammut also addresses contemporary issues in society, like the illegal migration problem or the humanitarian call of refugees. For example in another work, entitled *Journey of Hope* one can see a group of people in a boat, struggling to survive over the high waves of the rough sea. This scene is usually seen in the Mediterranean waters where illegal immigrants attempt to cross from North Africa to Europe. The artist successfully captured a group of standing figures nestled together as if they are trying to form a human shield to fight the elements of nature. This theme was also expressed powerfully in the form of another work called *The Journey*. These works are a symbol of sacrifice and destiny.

Sammut's other two works show the attraction to the sacred or the spiritual. This is also another psychological explanation why he is so drawn towards that which is religious. The first work is *The Betrayal*, which depicts the very moment when Jesus Christ uttered the words "In all truth I tell you one of you is going to betray me" (John 13:21). It shows all the apostles around Christ who is raised above all the other figures and Judas is seen hiding his head behind one of the apostles. The other sculpture is composed of a group of figures illustrating the return of the prodigal son, and the father waiting to embrace his lost son.

During these last few years, Sammut also produced a good number of wall plaques. For example in *Lovers on a bench*, we find an interesting composition made with flat slabs of clay, combined with linear curves incised with a decorative rim to produce simplicity and elegance. The monochromatic effect was achieved by coloured oxides and deep dark glazes.

Other ceramic sculptures found in this personal art show deal with themes like love, dialogue between people, ritual dance and also images inspired from mythology. The beauty of form is seen in his *Aphrodite*, and although static, it suggests strength and vitality, energy and power. While in *The Dancer*, there is movement and gracefulness which evoke emotion and passion.

Mario Sammut started an artistic journey full of wonderful expectations in the world of ceramic art. We will continue to share his creative struggles and discoveries of unexpected images which reveal new insights with unequivocal surprise. Today we just witnessed a tiny glimpse into the extraordinary mechanism of the artist's mind.

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