

# MALTESE ART OVERVIEW: FROM MODERNISM TO CONTEMPORARY

Although Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean, with a population of less than half a million, one could find a fairly large number of artists working in various fields of art and craft. Most of the artists work as 'Sunday' artists, and very few pursue a professional career. The first modern art groups appeared in Malta in the early 1950's. The Modern Art Circle was formed in 1952. Way back in 1947 when young art students followed scrupulously the methodology of the Malta School of Art, they were already thinking of freeing themselves from the traditional practice of art (Cassar, 2002,80). It was a practice to send Maltese art students abroad, mostly to Italy or the United Kingdom, to continue their artistic studies. Some artists who studied abroad before the 1950's were George Preca. Antoine Camilleri, Josef Kalleja, Esprit Barthelet, Frank Portelli, Joseph Borg Xuereb, Carmelo Mangion, Gorg Borg, Ervin Cremona, Hugo Carbonbaro, and Samuel Bugeja. These artists knew what was happening on the international art scene, that is, the changes toward modernism.

The road to modernism was not an easy one. Some Maltese artists broke completely from the conventional approaches of 'the covetous possession of the things seen', in the 1960's. This was rather late when compared to the development of international modernism in art. Few artists engaged themselves in the field of abstract art. Many were still being attached to the artistic orientation of the figurative and influence of 19th century Italian art. Other groups that followed the path to modernism were the group called Atelier' 56, which actually originated from the Modern Art Circle (1952), also known as the Modern Art Group, and afterwards in 1968, the Artists' Guild founded by Paul Asciaq, an internationally acclaimed tenor (Cassar, 2002,84.). One of the last groups was Vision'74 which was led by veteran artist, Josef Kalleja, who was also president

for some years (Cassar, 2002,89). After this period no other groups were formed. It was only recently, in 2002, that another group of artists became interested to form another group (Vella, 2003). Some artists, interested in working together with new concepts and media formed a group in Malta in 2002, under the name of Start. The need to form a group was greatly felt especially when Malta was preparing to join the European Union. Funding and organisation were two important issues that encouraged these artists to come together.

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The distinction between 'modern' and 'postmodern' has never been defined for the arts except artificially. Contemporary artists are those who contribute to the current global issues. On the other hand there are other contemporary artists who continue to find relevance in the modernist impulses as started by Kandinsky. One can say that today, in Malta, there are two types of artists: those who still work using the traditional modes of expression, painting, sculpture, pottery, and so on. and a few who use other postmodernist tools, like digital photography,

video, other multi-media equipment, and a range of ready-made objects and materials. The latter category of artists tend to move from the studio to the more public contexts of the political, the social and the environmental life.

In recent years we have seen a great change and growth by artists especially of the younger generation to pursue a career in creativity and art practices. Several private art galleries were opened in the last decade and sponsorship for art exhibitions and other artistic events increased substantially. But the question of funding always remains an important issue for many Maltese artists. Although a number of local institutions embarked on the development of schemes to help artists, there is still the need for a proper plan so that more artists will benefit from such funding.

The Malta Council for Culture and the Arts (MCCA), which is a government entity, also funds artistic events including the fine arts. But unfortunately very few individual artists succeed to acquire funding to further develop their art practices.

In recent years APS Bank increased its funds to help Maltese artists and joined some other local institutions to set up projects to promote local talent also in the fine arts sector. "The philosophy of APS Bank is to assist in projects and initiatives that are significant to the local artistic scene, in order to contribute towards the promotion and development of creative talent" (APS Bank, 2010, XIII). Last year APS Bank sponsored various artistic exhibitions, including the exhibition organised by the philanthropic association 'Friends of St. Luke's Foundation'. This exhibition consisted of various types of paintings by established local and foreign artists mainly depicting Birgu. Other events were the Biennale of Contemporary Christian Art exhibition held in Mdina, a photographic exhibition illustrating the fateful voyage of St. Paul to Malta by Peter Paul Barbara, and a personal art show entitled 'Introspections' by Gozitan artist Christopher Saliba. Last year,

APS Bank also sponsored the commission of the portrait of the Archbishop of Malta, Mgr. Paul Cremona by the young artist Philippa Bianchi.

As from this year, APS Bank embarked on a three-year programme to hold a collective art exhibition every year at its head office, APS Centre in Birkirkara, which was inaugurated in September last year. The objective of the bank is to give exposure to artists who come from different backgrounds, disciplines and experiences. The four Maltese artists chosen for the first exhibition are showing works in different media. They are Jacqueline Agius, Joseph Casha, Liz Denaro and Walter Vella. The intention of the organisers is to present a combination of artists not only in terms of age and style but also in terms of artistic development. So there are artists who are at the peak of their artistic career and well-established in the style and medium; other artists who are in the middle of their artistic career and, yet, others who are 'emerging', and, consequently, not well-known in the artistic scene in Malta.

This year's exhibition brings together a tight set but varied team of artists. They express themselves in various media, but they focus on set themes for this exhibition. Except for Joseph Casha, who, following his demise in June, is being represented via different media.

Jacqueline Agius is an artist who specialises in watercolour and her favourite subject is the Maltese landscape. Joseph Casha who passed away last June was a veteran, established sculptor who worked in different mediums like wood, stone, ceramics and also bronze. Casha was one of the few artists who used surreal imagery in his sculpture. This exhibition will also pay tribute to his important contribution to Maltese art. Liz Denaro is an emerging artist and she is relatively new in the Maltese art scene. Her forte in painting is the human figure. She works mostly in oils and acrylics and creates her female nudes with a distinctive style. Walter Vella, a well-acclaimed musician in Malta, is also a practicing artist and expresses his thoughts and feelings in glass sculpture. His unique shapes and structures made with an array of coloured glass are inspired by nature, the sea and the artist's surrounding environment.

In the next two years APS Bank will be exploring the local artistic scene as it will be evolving. The eight artists who will be represented have already accepted to submit their works. These artists will be addressing themes related to ancient spirituality, identity, architecture and our environment, subjects taken from everyday life and the relationship of society and the self. The purpose of these exhibitions is to bring together artists who explore visual investigations of the peculiarity of human activities and the impact of contemporary society on the individual.

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References:

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CASSAR, Joseph Paul, 2002 Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta, A Critical Analysis of the Beginnings of a Cultural Change in a European Perspective 1900-1970, Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Art Unit, Faculty of Architecture, University of Malta, January 2002.