



ABSTRACTIONS IN CERAMICS

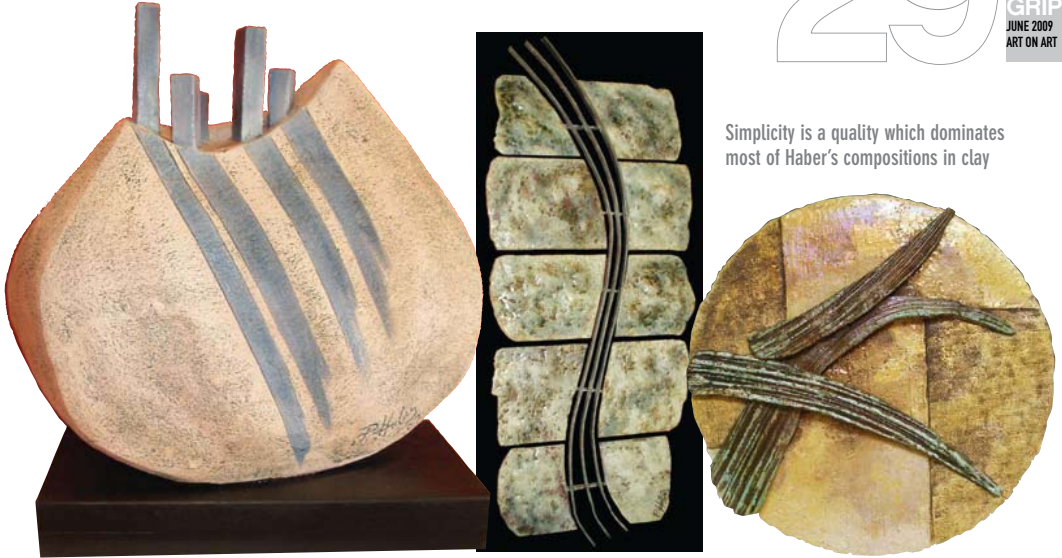
Ceramic sculpture is a popular medium with local artists and art collectors. Louis Laganà explores the freedom and possibilities of the medium through the ceramic sculptures of Maltese ceramists **George Muscat** and **Paul Haber**

Contemporary ceramic art in Malta is going stronger than ever. Artists are finding clay as one of the versatile mediums for creating sculpture. The History of Contemporary Ceramics in Malta dates back to the 1960's and apparently, Gianni Bonnici was the first ceramic sculptor to introduce the art of ceramics in Malta. Later, Gabriel Caruana continued to teach ceramic sculpture to Maltese students while Paul Haber was one of the first to study ceramics abroad.

Another well known ceramic artist is George Muscat who is an artist of a later generation of ceramic sculptors and who studied under the tutorship of Gabriel Caruana. Muscat took ceramic art very seriously and today he is a leading figure in the contemporary expression of this medium. He is remembered as an excellent thrower and also known for a number of hand building and decorating techniques. This experience culminated in 1997 when he held his first personal

exhibition. Throughout the years Muscat experimented continuously with different firing methods and techniques. Last March, he held his fifth personal exhibition at the Middlesea Gallery in Floriana, entitled *Changing Metaphors in Clay*.

In this exhibition Muscat showed some of his recent works and a selection of past works which are pivotal in the development of his art in ceramics. There is a marked change in Muscat's works not just in form but also in the firing techniques. This body of work is mostly abstract sculpture, both as wall plaques and free standing. In my opinion, Muscat's ceramic sculptures are the synthesis of his emotional passage materialised in space. Muscat observes and contemplates, remembers, anticipates and projects, memorises, dreams and has visions on clay. In this collection, his abstract pieces convey an array of emotions to the viewers: joy, happiness, sadness, fear, pain and other human conditions. His ceramics have great symbolic content.



Simplicity is a quality which dominates most of Haber's compositions in clay

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The name of George Muscat is synonymous with the Raku technique of pottery making. This technique is a Japanese inspired method for firing clay and each piece is fired in a kiln with a temperature of about 1800 F. Then, the fired object is removed with tongs while red hot and placed in a metal can with a combustible material like paper or sawdust. The combustible material ignites and the fire and smoke react with the glaze to create very unique and unpredictable colours, lustres, and patterns. Recently Muscat found other methods and practices to create extraordinary textures and shapes which evoke joyous and touching sensations.

Muscat derives his inspiration from two sources: the environment and life's emotional situations. Although most of the works on show do not have a title, viewers can easily grasp the meaning behind each work. Abstraction is just a means to express spontaneously the emotions of the moment. We clearly see human conditions related to fragmentation, separation, joy, sorrow and other states of life. These are emotions that are intrinsically linked to this world and to humanity. It is interesting to note that the artist includes other materials such as iron, glass and other metals, sometimes combined with clay. Some free-standing sculptures in stoneware have glazed surfaces with highly coarse, textured forms in contrast with the warm and skin-like planes which define spatial volumes. Other works describe the artist's deep reflections on the environment, using minimal language to explore more complex concepts of the surroundings.

Paul Haber is a veteran Gozitan artist and like many Maltese artists, studied art at the Government School of Art. Afterwards he was awarded a scholarship to pursue his studies in England and later in Italy. Haber specialised in Ceramics and was one of the first to contribute to the development of industrial ceramics in Malta. In fact today he runs one of the leading ceramic industries on the islands.

During his studies at Hornsey College of Arts and the Central College of Arts and Design in London, Haber experimented and studied different techniques of ceramics making and the chemistry and composition of different clays and glazes. He also had the opportunity to work with renowned companies such as Wedgwood and Spode in Stoke-on-Trent.

Haber was awarded the College Diploma and B.A. (Hons) degree and his research was based on Maltese local clay and Prehistoric Maltese pottery. One of his works exhibited at the graduation exhibition was acquired by The Wedgwood Company for their collection.

Today, Haber is a leading ceramist in Malta and he held numerous personal art exhibitions locally and abroad. A major exhibition held in 2005 was *Fireworks*, held at the Loggia Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta. In this exhibition, Paul Haber also exhibited his works in the open, outside City Gate - people had the opportunity to see ceramic works of art which had never been exhibited in this way before. This novelty was well accepted by many and it was a great initiative to bring his works to the people.

When one looks carefully at Haber's work one discovers that in his sculpture his abstract forms have rough and smooth textures, rigid and flowing movements, light and shadow. This gives Haber's work a surreal dimension. Simplicity is also another quality which dominates most of his compositions in clay. In his recent wall plaques and sculpture in the round, the artist successfully created an outstanding beauty of abstract structures which are not so ordinary. His intensely textured surfaces are created with slips and glazes applied in layers. The glazes are distinctive made with an earthy coloured palette. Haber shows a kind of sprouting organic matter in contrast with his ebony like, solid and smooth forms - such contrasting surface elements are pivotal to the earthy strength of his sculpture.

Haber is inspired directly from nature. He finds that the sea and marine life are a valuable source of inspiration for his ceramic work, and he employs intricate shapes and asymmetrical forms which are also found in the Maltese landscape. ■

Dr Laganà is a reader in Modern and Contemporary Art History, specialising in Jungian Aesthetics, Primitivism and other aspects of art criticism and theory. He lectures at the Junior College and the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.