

SEASHELLS AS FOLK ART

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One gets accustomed during *fešta* time, seeing in our parish churches, the usual array of flower bouquets offered by local societies or some individual devotees, in honour of the patron saint during parish celebrations. This is a long established folkloristic manifestation, and a custom of our colourful folk life. Yet, on their own, these bouquets of flower arrangement form a definite folkloristic study. On such an event, one occasionally comes across something with a difference, some folkloristic item that should be duly recorded with comments about it.

On Saturday, August first, 1992, and next day, Sunday, during the *fešta* of Saint Peter, patron saint of Birżebbuġa parish, in the church there was the usual array of pyramidal and cone-shaped flower bouquets in front of the titular statue, but among them there was an item of an entirely different nature. It was a metre high model of the parish church of Saint Peter, covered all over with seashells collected from Ramla, Pretty Bay, Birżebbuġa.

It was, in itself, a showpiece, much admired by those visiting the church on *fešta* days. It was a magnificent piece of folk art done with admirable perseverance and infinite patience by Mr. John Worman of Birżebbuġa, a retired Englishman. The model was very accurate in shape, proportions and details, and one could marvel at the craftsmanship and great work undertaken by the gentleman! We were informed that it was made from 22,000 colourful tiny sea shells covering the whole model, mainly composed of the *Tricolia pulla* species, together with others, as *Cyclope (Panormello) pellucida*, *Mitrella scripta*, *Columbella rustica*, and *Astraea (Bolma) rugosa*, and the whole work was interspersed with small *Arca noae* shells for extra decorative effect. One very rarely, these days, comes across such a fine piece of folk art.

Seashells, with their myriad patterns, natural design colour and shapes, offer varied possibilities for their application in different abstract patterns. The lure, attraction and fascination of collecting seashells, by many called "jewels of the sea" have been irresistible for the creation of *objects d'art*. Their use in folk decoration, personal or ambiental, has been going on since time immemorial, all the world over, especially by people dwelling close to the coast, and more so around sandy beaches where these shells are cast ashore and easy to collect, turning up in their best show form.

When St. Gregory's morning festivities at Żejtun were over, people used to throng the seaside resorts close by, and combed Marsaxlokk beach and the nearby Ramla sandy cove at Birżebbuġa, for seashells. Later on in the evening, the various species of shells were taken back home, and kept them busy creating *objects d'art*. But then, those days were more leisurely and easy going! Coral too, white or red, (the latter more valuable and less available) was obtained from fisherfolk, to be incorporated for extra decoration in many a folk *object d'art*.

Many people, these days, have a try at some sort of folk design or folk decoration made from seashells, and patiently persevere in this time-consuming *pasti* Some doing it profes-

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sionally, producing souvenirs for tourists. At one time, this pastime was very popular in Malta; indeed it is a very old form of folk art. It reached its peak around the middle of the 18th century, and in private collections, one could see exquisite bouquets made entirely of seashells. These were presumably made by convicts, but were commissioned by the Maltese nobility, and given as presents to the Grand Master of the Order of Saint John. In Maltese churches and church museums, one can also see these small bouquets in niches. But such exquisite work as practiced in those days is all but a lost art, in spite of some survival on a small scale.

However, this form of folk art went on sporadically throughout the Victorian era, and one could still see many fine examples today, in private homes and collections. At my grandparents' house in Senglea, I remember a couple of folk art examples made from seashells; one was a small cave of coral and shells, sheltering a small clay figure (*pastur*) of St. Anthony the Abbot inside it, and the other a wax figure of Baby Jesus surrounded by flowers and abstract ornaments made from coral and seashells. Both these 18th century examples were protected under glass,, but unfortunately lost in the blitz.

Seashell folk art was most popular among seamen on long journeys, and among convicts serving long terms in jail. However, this pastime, from time to time, was taken up by people of all standing, and luckily there have been many books published on the subject. This type of folk decoration has been concurrent, but on a lower scale, with another, but practically dead folk craft, the *ganutil*, artificial flower-making and arrangement.

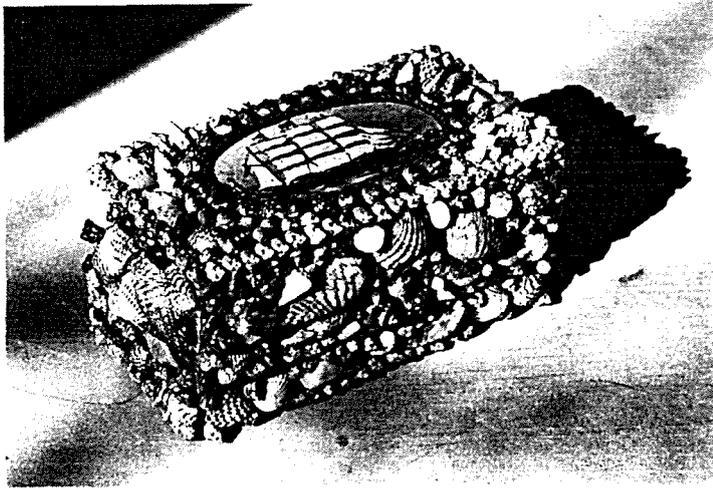
There is a tendency to create abstractions in free forms or geometric patterns. It is also a form of (so-called) peasant art, or what we could term as fisherman's art. This little written-about (here in Malta) form of art could be looked upon as a collage of freely found pieces of pretty natural objects. The folk artist also aims at adding something more to his life's environment and make his surroundings more congenial to live in. Objects such as those made of seashells could serve as a memento of someone who has been a few times to the seaside or to some *festa* at Marsaxlokk some years back!

In this type of folk art, one could see framed pictures of flower bouquets and various types of abstract decoration, or picture frames studded with seashells in abstract design, old seamen's valentine boxes, grottoes large or small, credence-top decorations under glass, bouquets, bottles and furniture covered all over with various species and sizes of seashells, and all sorts of other decorative items. One should not forget outdoor fountains, loggias and grottoes.

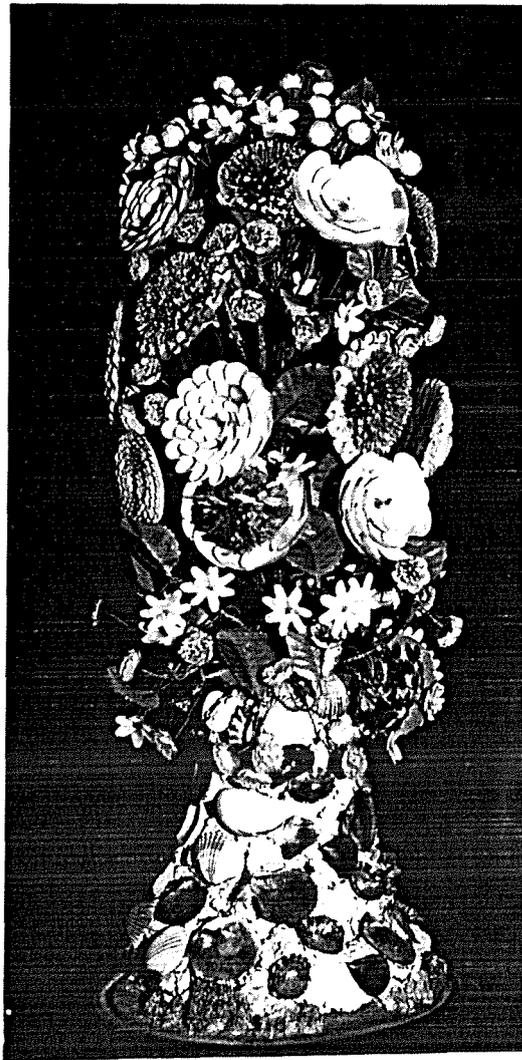
A great exponent and expert in this type of folk art was the late Reverend Dun Frans Camilleri of Hamrun; he left us many examples of his exquisite works to admire.

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