

MALTESE LANDSCAPE — A POINT OF VIEW



There has emerged during the last years in these Islands an increased interest towards the need to preserve the historical heritage and our environment. This has been felt first because of the increasing exigencies in the country's development and secondly because of an awareness that further encroachment necessarily deprives us of much needed open country that mother earth has bestowed upon us for our enjoyment and relaxation.

This perhaps because the peculiar and single character of our landscape has been scarcely understood. The pure colours of the arid countryside, the patched areas of various shades of greens, ochres, and reds, of the undulating hills and the stark blue of the sky characterize a landscape which only the Mediterranean can convey.

This is a picture that everyone sees but few understand. It is a scene of quiet and poetic significance, a quality that few have the sensitivity to feel.

It is with a genuine commitment for the preservation of a unique and single Maltese landscape that I have therefore attempted to portray in my work a facet of this silent and untainted countryside. It is indeed not

without difficulty that one could come to terms with the problems encountered in conveying a genuine interpretation of the subject. This because the artistic sensibilities of modern art which had found fertile ground in Europe at the beginning of the century were only felt in this country in the beginning of the fifties.

As a result of the awareness to these influences which had reached our shores and dismantled the deep-rooted, sterile and traditional tastes, local artists finally started working on the difficult task of conveying to the public an idiom which represented an expression which truly reflected the present times.

I have therefore felt it was essential for me to treat the subject with simplicity but with objectivity so as to avoid a repetition of a subject which in the past has been treated with much sentimentality.

This is not the landscape which has achieved popularity in the past but that scene which is usually left unnoticed and neglected. It is that landscape without subject, flat and unspectacular. In its aridity, and its barrenness lies its soul. It is a picture which identifies itself with the character of the Island. It attempts to combine the essential elements of our

"Citadel of Mdina", an etching by the author



environment, the liberating and expressive powers of its colours with the blandness of its features.

An artist cannot arrive at a destination unless he is aware fully of the subject he is about to tackle. He must first of all understand the form and substance of his subject, feel the qualities and sense its colours and the atmosphere it generates. He therefore needs to experience the wide expanse of the countryside, enjoy the fragrant smell of the grass, hear the whisper of the wind, there engulfed in a spiritual union with his creator.

It is this experience which a true artist seeks to capture in his work, that which he feels in his heart,

the spiritual and emotional sensation which places man in harmony with nature.

What is of interest to the artist is not reproducing every detail but that the structure of forms distinguishing the countryside becomes the means of achieving a more liberal concept of reality.

Hence the figurative aspect in a picture is not an end in itself but a means to achieve a synthesis of a series of ideas and expressions. In short the resultant picture cannot but not expose the artist of his intimate self, of his inner secret emotions and feelings.

Experience has shown that man-made structures and man himself are features which disturb the harmony of the landscape. It has been seen that where it is possible a landscape scene would acquire greater harmony without them. The environment would thus assume an atmosphere of religious mysticism, a feeling and a silence reminiscent of the interior of a Gothic cathedral.

To an artist technique is purely a means to an end, a language to be used for his creative purposes. There is little point in technical perfection beyond the purposes necessary for a complete realization of the subject, for it has the tendency to obscure the purely aesthetic qualities and lessen the evocative and emotional expression.

Simplicity is a virtue to be cultivated for it helps man to free himself of all that burdens him. It allows the viewer to enjoy what is essential and to appreciate values of form, colour and expression. A true work of art embodies qualities setting up spatial movements that carry a poetic message of harmonious relationships. It is a statement of mystic simplicity, an icon of contemplation and meditation.

Colours and forms are arranged rhythmically so as to represent things, not simply to repeat and confirm what is obvious and known as a fact. The artist, as Paul Klee exclaimed, must seek to paint not that which is evident, but to depict that which is not seen.

The artist's aim during maturity will be towards clarity, towards the elimination of all that is superfluous and an obstacle between the painter and the idea.

The deliberate use of colour relationships carefully selected are intended to give an overall balanced composition, each colour in harmony with the one next to it, thereby conveying a picture of subtle variations of colours and a sense of poetic feeling.

If you let it, colour and form will take charge of you. The mind will concentrate on the particular design chosen with its spatial overtones controlling the implications of the various colour relationships.

The mediative and mystical is indicated implicitly so that the mind is free to absorb an experience which it then makes its own.



Two works by Richard Saliba,
above "Untitled"
below "Il-Qolla"
(both Mid-Med Bank Collection)

