

TONY SCIBERRAS (Part two)

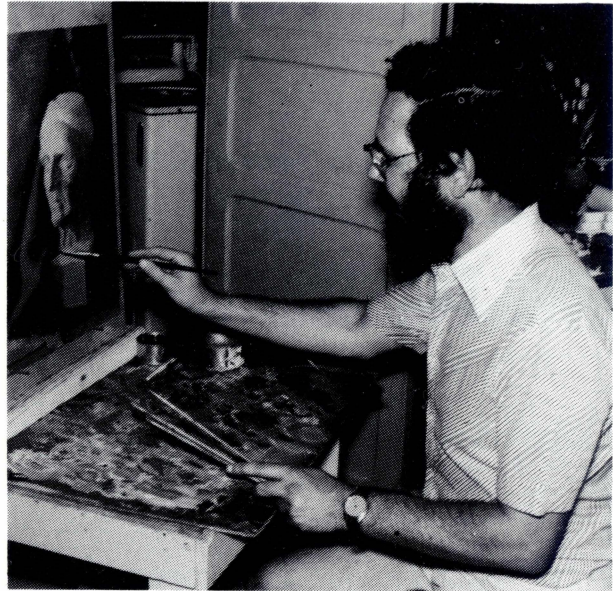
Tony Sciberras was born at Birkirkara on August 29, 1946 to Karmenu and Ġiga, née Piccinino. He was born the penultimate of eight children and his father, a clerk at the pitkali or vegetable market, died when Tony was only seven. His elder brothers, John and Joe are known for their contribution to Maltese literature.

Tony feels indebted to his brother Joe who was instrumental in helping the artist to go abroad twice before he had even finished his studies at the Lyceum, Hamrun. Although Tony had yet no basic knowledge of art history the youthful experience of having visited the Sistine Chapel and the *Stanze Vaticane* stimulated in him a thirst for art.

Sciberras admits that though he started drawing very early it was only in the third year at the Lyceum, under the fatherly guidance of Esprit Barthet (b. 1919) that he moved to a more adult approach. Besides imaginative picture making Barthet started the youth on still life. Two years later Tony applied for evening art classes at the School of Art and once more he came under the care of Esprit Barthet. The latter not only encouraged the lad but even guided him so well that Sciberras still feels grateful to him. During 1965 Tony also attended the lectures on art history delivered by Fr. Marius Zerafa O.P. (b. 1929). He frequented the cultural meetings at the British Council, read art history to his heart's content and went abroad as often as possible to study works in situ or in galleries.

Tony feels that patiently observing and studying the great works of art abroad is an essential part of his studies. So this pilgrimage became an annual excursion and planned for the leisurly summer days. Tony has visited Amsterdam to study Rembrandt, Hals, Vermeer and Van Gogh, attracted to Antwerp for Rubens, Venice for Titian, Rome for Caravaggio and Bernini, Paris for Corot and Monet, London for Turner and Madrid for Velasquez and Goya. He visited other galleries such as those in Zurich, Vienna and Basle. And in his own words, "The more I drink the more I thirst".

The seriousness of his approach is reflected in the artist's work. His dogged persistence and insistence, his infinite patience must reward him one day. Tony has a great love for Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875). The landscapes by Corot are for Tony the standard to emulate. His other loves as mentioned above demonstrate Tony's predilection for the romantic vision.



Sciberras in his studio

(Photo credit: P.E.G. Picture Library)

TONY SCIBERRAS AND SPECTRUM '67

At the School of Art Tony made several friends and in 1965 a certain intimacy grew among a group of students who later exhibited as the 'Young Artists' and later still since this attribute was perhaps too tenuous was changed to Spectrum '67. A bond of friendship and mutual respect grew among Tony Sciberras, Lino Briguglio (b. 1944), Maureen Spiteri (b. 1944) and Joe Mallia (b. 1931). They started working in Briguglio's garage temporarily improvised into a studio. Later they moved to a larger studio villa lent them by Ernest Spiteri, Maureen's father. Mary Rose (b. 1945), the daughter of Oliver Agius (1910–1982), joined the group at this studio.

The activities of the group included excursions into the countryside to paint the local landscape, studies of still lifes and they also had male and female models for figure and portrait studies. Very often the artists themselves took it in turn to serve as models and for a short break they found a female model for nude sketches and studies. They also held discussions on art, the family and religious values.

Tony's career now became so involved with that of the group that his biography is the group's history. Gradually the group increased its circle of friends and these included Harry Alden (b. 1929), George Fenech (B. 1926), Tony Pace (b. 1930) and Oliver Agius. These artists visited the group at their studio in Paceville and they on their part visited the artists at their studios.

Sciberras believes that the artist should not work in isolation and think that in life only he exists. On the



Baby in cot, 1981

(Photo credit: P.E.G. Picture Library)

contrary an artist should interest himself in what others are doing and allow them to study his work. When this is done with sincerity and love one stimulates the other and both gain in experience. In a particular way Tony was greatly attracted to the work of George Fenech who is one of our main exponents of realistic landscape – bold, colourful, warm. And this friendship grew deeper and from time to time Tony visits George Fenech at his studio in Mellieħa. Other people interested themselves in the group as time passed. These included the writer Francis Ebejer (b. 1925).

The activity as a group covered the years 1965 to 1968 and their programme included the Young Artists' Exhibition at the National Library, Valletta in 1966. Only the members of the group participated: Lino Briguglio, Maureen Spiteri, Tony Sciberras, Joseph Mallia and Mary Rose Agius. This exhibition of about 56 pieces got sustained publicity and it was fortunately visited by Klari Marsh who invited the young artists to exhibit at the Alderney Gallery,

Valletta that same year. Valentin Braun gave them the same opportunity at the Mdina Gallery.

These excursions to meet the public started a landslide of exhibitions jointly organised by Tony Sciberras and Lino Briguglio. The group decided to invite outside artists to participate with the group. In all, three exhibitions took place, once annually, between 1967 and 1969. The name Spectrum '67 was used only in the 1969 exhibition and later. These shows took place at the National Museum, Valletta and were inaugurated by Dr. A.J. Montanaro Gauci, in those days Chairman of the National Commission for UNESCO. The artists taking part in the three shows numbered 20, 19, 10 respectively. Artists invited to exhibit with the group included at one time or other Joseph Genuis (1934 – 1970), Paul Haber (b. 1945), Mary Depiro (b. 1946), Francis Galea (b. 1945), Emanuel Farrugia (b. 1934), Paul Carbonaro (b. 1948) and Caesar Attard (b. 1946).

In the meantime, in October, 1968 Tony started his teacher's training at St. Michael's College of Education, taking art as a special field of study. The main aim of this art course (Harry Alden was in charge) was the study of the method of teaching of art to children. At College Tony became secretary of the social committee and together with his colleagues constructed the props and scenery for the operetta *The Gypsy Baron*.

Spectrum '67 again made its mark when it organized an exhibition at De La Salle Palace, Valletta in 1972. The group included Tony Sciberras, Lino Briguglio and Marie Briguglio née Lucia (b. 1947), together with Francis Galea, Aldo Arcidiacono (b. 1943) Joseph Saliba (b. 1943) and Rosario Vassallo (b. 1924). This was the first time I could study a group of eight works by Tony Sciberras. I fell in love with the tender, sensitive and tranquil idiom in Tony's works. The exhibition was so serious that I reviewed it in two long articles in *The Sunday Times* of February 27 and March 5, 1972. Then came a period when Tony Sciberras continued exhibiting in various collective shows.

In 1971 Tony got married to Mary Loudes Grech and went to live at Mqabba in an old converted farmhouse. Tony lived there for eight years breathing country air, smelling the scent of wet soil and feeling the breeze wafting over the hazy blue hills of Siggiewi caressing his face during stupendous sunsets. The author and Tony Demicoli often visited him there in this nest of a house. I used to be led to the *setah*, a kind of verandah overlooking the countryside and into his studio, a long narrow room. From here "every evening Tony Sciberras works until dusk – the sound of an aeromotor pumping water in the garden below . . . a bird chirping and leaving . . . the sound of a hoe digging the soil. . ." (Tony Demicoli, March 1979). He sketched repeatedly Ta' l-Għolja at



Sea-scape, 1980

(Photo credit: P.E.G. Picture Library)



Qoffa - still life, 1976

(Photo credit: P.E.G. Picture Library)

Siggiewi, or a dove-cote nearby, or the sprawling fields behind or a balustrated balcony beneath. Tony's love of nature was sharpened by the new rustic environment and by his father-in-law, a farmer, who introduced him to the problems of farming and the rearing of animals. Never before so close to nature he could now feel one with it.

In September 1974 Tony Sciberras became the treasurer of the art group Vision '74. I served on the committee with the artist and a bond grew between us working together side by side.

1977 was a turning point in Tony's career. With my collaboration Tony launched his first one-man show at St. John's Co-Cathedral Annex in June. We selected 60 of his works. The exhibition was a clamorous success although we could have limited ourselves to less works. This was followed by his one-man shows at the National Museum of Fine Arts in May 1979 and at Café Renoir, St. Julian's in the summers of 1980 and 1981. In 1979 he took part in collective exhibitions of Maltese art in Palermo at the *Centro Cultura Mediterranea* and in Paris at the UNESCO Headquarters and also attended a summer course at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia where he was introduced to the fascinating art of etching. During the same year Tony moved house and went to live at Birkirkara. He redecorated his mother's house where he was born and started working again in the studio which he had used before getting married. This studio is lit by a large curtained bay window overlooking the roofs of Birkirkara homes.

During the seventies Tony developed an intimate friendship with Joseph Kalleya (b. 1898) and passed long hours in his company discussing life and art with this veteran sculptor. They visited each other in their studios and in 1976 travelled together to Rome, Milan and Venice where they were joined by Caesar Attard. In 1975 Kalleya took Tony to Joseph Briffa (b. 1901) of Birkirkara and this encounter forged another friendship. Tony visited Briffa regularly, showing him his work and listening to his criticism and advice. Briffa thus became after Esprit Barthet and George Fenech, another beneficial influence on him, a very important one.

In 1981 he won a four year scholarship to further his art studies in Florence and I now look forward to be able to assess the influence of this city and its art treasures on him. Tony's career is representative of the period and should fill young students with enthusiasm and hope to face difficulties with his patience and endurance.

E.V. Borg

Note: Sciberras has just concluded successfully a four year (1981 – 85) diploma course in painting and history of art at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence under Professors Goffredo Trovarelli and Roberto Giovanelli. His meticulous thesis on *Mattia Preti: Gli anni della volta maltese* was well received.

FURTHER READING

Agius Muscat, Anton. Harsa Madwarna. *It-Torċa*, 27.5.1979.
Cutajar, Dominic. A Romantic of Integrity. *The Times*, 9.5.1979.
See also *Civilization* p. 756.



Landscape, 1976

(Photo credit: P.E.G. Picture Library)