From prison to portraiture

Maria Cassar concludes her three-part series about painter William Apap

While serving his sentence for treason, William Apap experienced terrible loneliness and withdrawal in the secluded prison environment. One evening, a fellow prisoner identified as Adriano T., like him a political detainee, reported hearing sobs from a cell nearby and, across the iron bars, seeing shadows of a kneeling figure and a live flame. Although constrained to remain within the confines of the prison walls, Adriano had permission to walk between the cells and, in doing so, found Apap kneeling and crying before an image of the Virgin Mary which he had depicted on the chalky wall of his cell using charcoal.

"She reminds me of my mother.... I had this urge to see her so I painted an image and lit a fire to see it in light," Apap exclaimed.

After Adriano put off the fire which was by then getting bigger, he offered Apap a small electric lamp which the artist, nostalgic about Malta and his family, refused while continuing to cry: "My mother has no news of me for a long time and she will think that I'm dead."

Adriano exclaimed that the painting would get him (Apap) out of prison and that he would personally talk to the Prison Commandant.

"You are innocent," Adriano said. "Someone who makes such a rendering of the Virgin Mother cannot be but innocent."

The story continues that, apart from the charcoal sketch. Apap had painted the lips and cheeks of the Madonna red, making pigment from a terracotta jar which he had smashed earlier.

And, when asked about the blue of the Virgin's mantle, Apap replied that the blue belongs to the skies and cannot be created in a prison cell. The artist was eventually released – to a disgruntled British Commandant who had become used to their long conversations about the art of painting and about life in London.

After their release from *Regina Coeli* prison and some time spent under house arrest, Apap and his fellow eight detainees were transferred to prison in Malta while they awaited their trial by jury.

This started on January 7, 1947, and the Bill of Indictment read under a principal count that related to conspiracy and treason.

In his testimony, Apap steadfastly rejected suggestions that he had been active in any Fascist movement or group, only acknowledging that he held a membership card of the *Gioventù Universitaria Fascista*. Other charges were about his participation at the *Mostra di Malta*, his frequent presence at *Palazzo Antici Mattei* (as also evinced by his pencil sketches of its interiors), his visit to the house of the *Duce* in Forlì and his presence at the unveiling of a bust of Dr Fortunato Mizzi at the *Pincio* gardens – all of which he ascribed to his student activities at the *Accademia*.

He insisted that that he never surrendered his passport to the Italian authorities but only exchanged it in return for a *lascia passare* that allowed him a nice monthly allowance of 1,000 *lire* and freedom from anything that could restrict his burgeoning art studies. The trial ended with all defendants being acquitted of their charges.

Whether the trial settled once and for all the question of his political sympathies is debatable. Apap was a British subject residing in wartime Italy, having made art his career and profession. He lived in an environment where Fascist culture filled the air and Fascist architecture and art marked any young artist's sensibilities – but that did not necessarily make him a Fascist.

He was obviously influenced by the art movements competing for the place of a state art, absorbing and aligning with the surroundings. Fascinated by the artistic climate of the time, one can say that all of them – Sciortino, Preca, Diacono, Cremona, Barthet, as well as Apap – adhered to a Fascist ideology, cultural if not political.

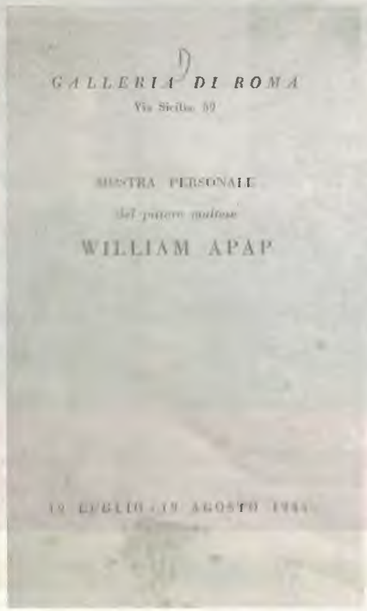
For Sciortino and Apap, their cultural survival is an attestation to their tenacity in an environment which was increasingly hostile. Yet, unlike Apap, who was probably fired by his youth and artistic dreams, Sciortino succumbed to the demolition of his life's work – the closure of the British Academy in 1936 – and had returned to Malta demoralised before the war even broke out.

Apap's watershed 1947 trial and his acquittal from all charges of conspiracy and treason marked a turning point for the emerging artist. His reputed nonchalant behaviour during the sittings and the fervent output of drawings and caricatures of important figures in the court room may have already been an indication that his sights were set on life after the trial.

He was now maturing, approaching 30 years and eager to graduate from the classical and realist to a more expressionist language. Apap's work from this period reflected the modern Italian climate he had now experienced, fused from the ravages of war, industrialisation and speed, different from that in insular Malta which would in future only skim the aesthetic of futurist art.

Veduta dal Mio Studio, oil on canvas, 1962

La Famiglia del Clown, oil on canvas, 1966



The catalogue of a personal exhibition held at the *Galleria di Roma* between July 9 and August 19, 1945.

> *"Someone who makes such a rendering of the Virgin Mother cannot but be innocent"*

By now he was established in the eternal city, more Italian than Maltese, having sacrificed all for his dreams but also freed from the provincial constraints of his native land.

And, while his Maltese contemporaries were still organising themselves in pursuit of a modernist idiom and trying to connect with the cosmopolitan world, struggling against local, parochial mindsets, Apap was absorbed in the Italian avant-garde currents.

War had transformed him, he was more able to focus on consolidating style, building on his draughtsmanship and experimenting with his palette.

A 'freer' Apap, co-existing a parallel world that was perceived new for the Maltese but not for Italy: an innovator back home but a follower in Rome.

His visits to Malta were becoming less frequent, mainly to execute portrait commissions and to see his family. Apap was absent from the local exhibition circuit except for the odd entry in the collective *Marian Art Exhibition*, Mdina, in 1949 and the *Centenary Art Exhibition* at Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, in 1952. His last (only) personal exhibiton in Malta had been from his student days in 1936 at Café Premier, Valletta, his next one was to be in 1984 – 14 years after his death.

Apap's love for the human figure made him a sought-after painter and he was commissioned portraits for the well-established families in Malta, Rome as well as in the rest of Italy, particularly in the Piedmont and Lombardy regions. A more expressionist style developed from the influences of the artistic establishment of Via Margutta where he lived and had his studio, later moving to Via del Babuino, continuously imbibed by the language of those environs. With the help of private diaries and interviews of friends in Italy who still remember Apap vividly, a walkthrough of his workshop is helpful for a better understanding of his daily life and habits and how these could have influenced his artistic development.

From street level in Via del Babuino, the door opened immediately on to a long flight of stairs, winding in places, mid-way through which there were small side rooms that served as a kitchen and a bedroom, respectively.

Continuing the flight of steps one came into a large and airy room which served as his studio, with high ceiling and a large window. A few further steps led to a big terrace with wonderful views of Rome and neighbouring Piazza di Spagna.

The stairs were lined with primed canvases and the studio used to be full of paintings, hanging or standing against every piece of wall. There was never a picture hanging in his bedroom although he used to keep a canvas on an easel handy, to which he could spontaneously turn in bursts of inspiration.

Apap never painted from photographs but would invite the models to his place and busily sketch them, either in the studio or on the terrace, eventually moving to oil. He would be at his most productive late in the evening and work through the night, sometimes till the early hours of the morning.

The busy stretch of portrait commissions meant that Apap was unable to be fully settled in Rome before 1955, which is when he is also reported to have taken part in his first ever collective exhibition in his adopted land: the *Premio di Pittura Olevano*, held between October 10 and 31 at Palazzo Venezia, Rome.

Here, Apap exhibited a landscape titled *Olevano-Romano*, in which he presented the picturesque hilltop town with strong dabs of colour for the olive trees, red-roofed houses clustered together with a luminous sky in the background. Other collective exhibitions followed at *Il Manichino*, in Via Margutta, Rome (1955), at the *Titanus* and the *Prima Mostra Annuale Artisti Residenti a Roma*, at the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni*, Rome, both in 1956. At *Il Manichino* Apap exhibited a work depicting ballet dancers while the exhibition at *Titanus* was on the subject of *The Roof*, inspired by the homonymous film by Vittorio de Sica released around the same time.

Although Apap's reputation had remained firmly in the portraiture camp, his thematic oeuvre was seriously changing under the influence of post-war contemporary movements in Italy and the prominence of artists like Casorati, de Pisis, Carena, Vespignani and Pirandello.

In 1958 Apap held two personal exhibitions in the space of eight months, both at *La Cassapanca* in Via del Babuino, Rome. At these, he presented to the Roman audiences Maltese landscapes as well as, to mixed reactions, a first rendezvous with depicting ballerinas.

Apap, now 40, was to embark on a phase of experimentation with light, evolution of his palette, first attempts at striping and a tendency for elongation, an important development of the painterly style leading into his mature period.

The origins of the *strisce* can be ascribed to his post-war prison experience at *Regina Coeli*. A Swedish friend of the artist who would spend time in his studio in the 1960s as he worked on the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* for the *Santuario di Capocroce*, in Frascati, recalls asking him about the vertical stripes which ran from the top of the canvas.

Apap stopped painting, sat next to the young lady and spoke to her about his time in jail. He used to be fascinated by the sunrays passing through the high, iron-barred window of his cell and which bathed the walls with radiant stripes.

The image of that light which seemed to have a celestial source kept haunting him and eventually he introduced its effect into his art. Years later he was to experience a similar sensation while walking on Battersea Bridge in London with his brother Vincent, watching the falling rain in the distance.

This style, which was to dominate his art for the last decade of his life, was born out of a fascination with light which helped immensely the artist's natural endowment as a colourist.

Apap's life centred around his studio and the *Tridente* area near Piazza del Popolo where his circle of artist friends were within reach. He enjoyed the *bella vita*, loved to eat well, smoked incessantly, drank a lot of wine, whiskey and coffee and socialised with good friends and beautiful women.

Self-Portrait, oil canvas, 1942

Even when he would not be painting he was typically a late sleeper. He was always sketching and drawing, on anything he could lay his hands, including paper table cloths and napkins at restaurants. There was also a comic streak to Apap which he used to bring out with close friends, such as his mimicking of Italian comedian Totò, posing as a mannequin when visiting department stores and other funny situations. But this bohemian character was many times like his figurative art, cloaking a lonely inner self.

Apap died in Rome on February 4, 1970, at the age of 51, after a particular decade of stylistic evolution which one can only speculate about where it could have led had his life not come to a premature end. This brilliant phase in Apap's art – his mature period – will be the subject of a future contribution.