



St Sebastian's Hearing with Pope Caius, Frans Galea, 1994. PHOTOS: HILARY SPITERI



St Sebastian Attending Marcellinus and Mark in Nicostratus' Prison, Frans Galea, 1994.

Gone too soon – Frans Galea (1945-

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This year we mark the 75th anniversary of the birth of Maltese sculptor Frans Galea (1945-1994). He is remembered by his family, friends and colleagues, on both personal and professional levels, as a meticulous and introverted artist, whose love for the arts became his *raison d'être*.

In an island emerging from the dust and rubble of war, rising towards independence and freedom from its colonial past, Galea's work walked the fine line between respect for tradition and a search for more dynamic forms and compositions.

He was born in Rabat on May 22, 1945, to Paul Galea and Marianna (*née* Fenech). They had five children and Frans was the second child and eldest son. He enjoyed a happy childhood and youth with his family at 4, Triq San Kataldu, Rabat, in the heart of the town, just opposite St Paul's parish church, witnessing the bustle of the square and the religious processions with the folk decorations and festivities linked to them.

From an early age, he regularly attended the Centre of the Society of the Christian Doctrine (MUSEUM) in Rabat where he nurtured his love for the arts, particularly modelling and polychromising Nativity figures. Galea was introduced to formal academic artistic tuition at the State primary school in Rabat by Carmelo Tonna (1901-1973), who at the time was teacher of drawing and also well known for his artistic decorations.

For his secondary education, he went to St Joseph Technical School (Corradino), Paola. This was a turning point in Galea's artistic education as he was assigned three artistic mentors who by that time were already well-established contemporary artists – George Fenech (1926-2011) (paint-

ing), Gianni Bonnici (1932-2019) (sculpture) and Samuel Bugeja (1920-2004) (sculpture), who relayed to him the artistic passion and discipline they had fostered at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome.

In 1965, Galea started attending evening courses at the Malta Government School of Art in Valletta where he furthered his studies in sculpture under sculptors George Borg (1906-1983), Samuel Bugeja and Anton Agius (1933-2008). Throughout, Galea proved himself to be a committed student and a promising artist worthy of the scholarship awarded to him in 1976 by the Italian government. He was thus granted the opportunity to enhance his artistic skills at the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Florence under Giovanni Chissotti (1911-1996) (modelling) and Francesco Cenci (1927-1981) (bronze casting).

"Galea's pedestal fell victim to the blindness that bedevils Maltese art"

In 1978, his work *Umbrelel* (Umbrellas) so impressed renowned Italian sculptor Giacomo Manzù (1908-1991) that he requested to be introduced to Galea personally. In 1981, Galea crowned his Florentine study-sojourn with a *trenta e lode* (the highest grade in the Italian educational system) in the study of modelling, artistic anatomy and art history. During that same year, he married Nila Lopez and decided to return to Malta.

Upon his return, notwithstanding his artistic achievements, Galea went back to his previous post, that of a microbiological medical technician at St Luke's Hospital. Meanwhile, he set up a studio in Tal-Virtù, Rabat, where between shifts he kept on practising sculpture and fulfilling minor commissions. Later, in 1988, he took up the position of Systems of Knowledge teacher



Frans Galea. PHOTO COURTESY OF JOS. A. VELLA, MOSTA

focusing on Art History at the Gian Frangisk Abela Upper Lyceum, Msida, where he also taught art practice from 1991 onwards.

Galea's artistic output amounts to few works produced in various media, including bronze, epoxy resin, concrete, stucco, plaster, marble and wood. His limited output has hamstrung his artistic standing and his name is hardly ever featured in the Maltese artists' hall of fame. Nevertheless, to this day, Galea's artistic impetus is unmistakable to anyone whose studies include his works, most of which, unfortunately, have been neglected and are in dire need of restoration, while others were dismembered.

Two public projects that Galea undertook in the final decade of his artistic career were the 1984 monument *Ċrieki* (Rings) on the Strand in Gżira and the 1994 *Pedestal for the Titular Statue of St Sebastian* in Qormi. The works are different in nature, the former a public monument while the latter is an ecclesiastical work complementing the St Sebastian processional statue, sculpted in wood by Galea's master George Borg (1906-1983).

Both pieces manifest Galea's constant commitment to producing high-level art

as a means of visual communication and education. In his work, through the modelling of the medium, artistic contrasts converge: undulating asymmetrical lines govern his sinuous figures, elegant and graceful, which are yet infused with powerfully rhythmic energy.

In April 1984, *Ċrieki* was unveiled in Gżira. This is a monument that stands out from the rest, spatially bridging land and sea while offering a striking aesthetic focal point to passers-by who daily walk past this sculptural group. *Ċrieki* was meant as a joyful, nostalgic portrayal of youth embodied in a group of youngsters engaged in a game of hula hoops and seemingly thrust forward by a collective teen spirit.

In his work, Galea manifests his familiarity with the artistic complexity of the human form. The entanglement and articulation of forms draws in the viewer in a *rhythmus* of circular play in which all elements merge. Yet it looks graceful, effortless, evocative of that stage in our lives when our body and spirit are one.

Unfortunately, in 1987, three years after its unveiling, the work was vandalised amid the political turmoil of the time. The sculptural group, which originally rested on an oval-shaped base, a compositional feature typical of Galea, was towed out of its place and dragged off its base, leaving it shattered in bits and pieces, some of which were discarded in the sea nearby. The work was so severely damaged that even Galea himself, discouraged and heartbroken, found it very difficult, almost impossible, to restore it to its original state.

In 1996, Emmanuel Galea, in homage to his brother Frans, took it upon himself to restore *Ċrieki* and bring it back to life on its original oval-shaped podium. It was unveiled, for a second time, in May that year. When the Gżira promenade was upgraded, the monument was altered and was placed on an improvised rectangular base, which compositionally altered its visual aesthetics.

Another work by Galea, which the present author regards as the artist's *magnum*



The Martyrdom of St Sebastian, Frans Galea, 1994.



The Death of St Sebastian, Frans Galea, 1994.

1994)

opus, is the 1994 *Pedestal for the Titular Statue of St Sebastian* in Qormi. This sculptural composition was Galea's last work. The commission by the Qormi (St Sebastian) parish, approved by the ecclesiastical authorities, was to produce an artistic substructure to support and complement George Borg's acclaimed, neo-Renaissance statue of their patron saint.

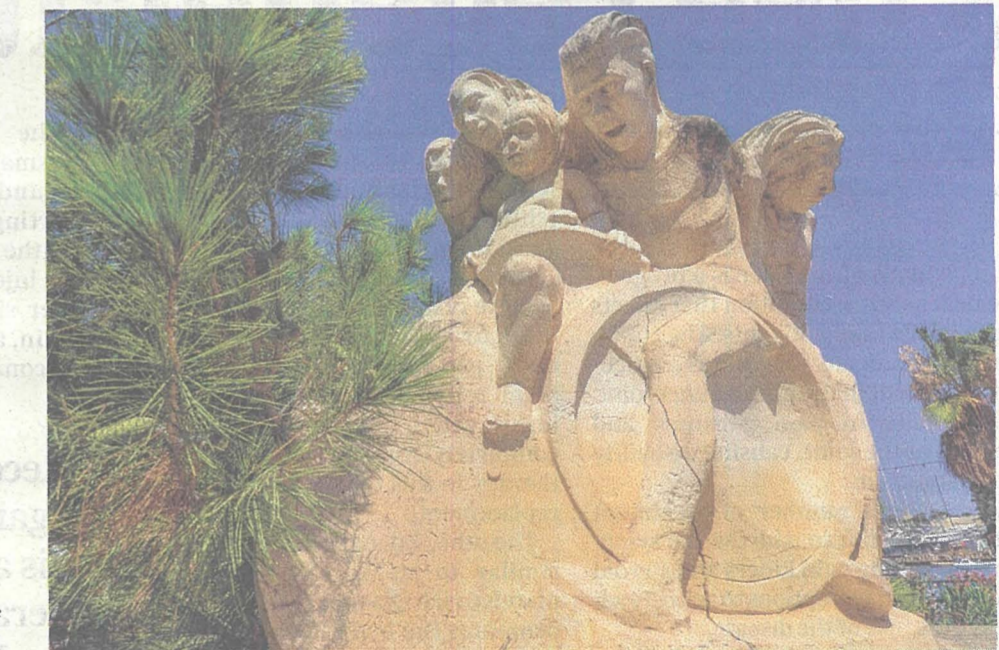
Galea was humbled yet honoured to be entrusted with the commission. He produced a work that, apart from paying homage to his master, instilled a sculptural cutting-edge dynamism that set up a contrast, yet also harmonised with the linear rigidity and classical allusions manifested in Borg's statue.

Galea's work respected Borg's original idea of having a pedestal incorporating four distinct relief panels which alternated with four heraldic eagles, displayed as on the Roman standards used by the Holy Roman Emperors. Nevertheless, in Galea's hands, Borg's rectangular composition evolved into a dynamic circular structure, buttressed by four bulging pilasters on two diagonal axes, providing space for the eagles to rest.

Galea's artistic excellence is showcased in the four relief panels: *St Sebastian's Hearing with Pope Caius*, *St Sebastian Attending Marcellinus and Mark in Nicostratus' Prison*, *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* and *The Death of St Sebastian*.

In all panels, Galea's technical bravura in the modelling of the human form enabled him to illustrate the episodes from the life of the saint by brilliantly compressing and orchestrating enormous detail into the restricted space of the panels. Characteristically, he contrasted the classically poised figures with dynamic infills (animal forms, angels' wings and bows) which the artist used to instil a three-dimensional fluidity in his works.

In 1994, Qormi parishioners celebrated the golden jubilee since Borg's processional statue had first toured the streets of the city. The festa celebrations that

George Borg's (1906-1983) original early 20th-century idea (*bozzetto*) for the pedestal for the titular statue of St Sebastian. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINO BORG. Right: *Pedestal for the Titular Statue of St Sebastian*, Frans Galea, 1994.*Umbrelel*, Frans Galea, 1978. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINO BORG*Ċrieki*, Frans Galea, 1984. The monument is scheduled for restoration and regeneration by the Gżira local council. PHOTO: HILARY SPITERI

year were eagerly anticipated because of the unveiling of Galea's new pedestal which took place on June 24.

The present author was a teenage boy in the middle of the crowd that cheered and welcomed Galea's work. Everyone had one regret, however: the festivities were marred by Galea's premature demise on February 14, at San Filippo Neri Hospital in Rome where he was refining the wax *modelli* for the pedestal, before they were cast in bronze. The work was unveiled by his wife Nila and daughter Margaret, and everyone gazed in awe at the pedestal and fell under

the spell of the golden rays from the setting sun that were reflected from the gilt reliefs. Nevertheless, only a decade after its unveiling, Galea's pedestal fell victim to the blindness that bedevils Maltese art. Claiming technical and practical issues, the parish authorities discarded and later dismembered Galea's work. His composition,

based on George Borg's original ideas, was cast off to make way for another one by a different artist.

At the turn of the 21st century, our obliviousness to Galea's artistic convictions, values and achievements are no doubt another missed opportunity to raise the bar in the national art scene.