

LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



Sacred Art Exhibition 1969 commemorative photo including participating artists during a reception held at the Archbishop's Palace, Valletta. Genuis is at the right, back row, behind Esprit Barthet and Prof. George Borg. Archbishop Michael Gonzi, at the centre, is accompanied by curator Rev Marius Zerafa, standing at the centre. COURTESY OF REV. MARIUS ZERAFI, OP.



Christmas party at the School of Art in 1962. Genuis is on the far left, front. Also seen are his tutors Carmelo Mangion (front row, sixth from the left), flanked by Rev. Marius Zerafa and Vincent Apap, principal of the school. Prof. George Borg is fifth from the right. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY

Joseph Mary Genuis (1934-1970) – an unsung modernist

HILARY SPITERI

This year we mark the 50th anniversary since the death of Maltese Modernist artist Joseph Mary Genuis. Few works of his survive, with most in private collections in Malta and abroad and a handful in the national collection.

Genuis was an introverted artist who, notwithstanding his humble social background, made it his mission to promote and propagate a Modernist artistic sensibility in Malta. In an island suffocating from political, religious, social and artistic stagnation, Genuis emerged to become one of Malta's unsung Modernists.

He was born in St Joseph's Street, Valletta, on March 12, 1934, to Carmel Genuis and Vincentia (*née* Magri) and baptised two days later in the parish church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo and St Dominic. Joseph Mary was elder brother to Mary (born in 1939).

He attended Valletta primary school during the war from 1940 to 1942. It was during this turbulent time that Genuis, under the tuition of Carmelo Mangion (1905-1997) who at the time was a teacher of Drawing, discovered his love for the arts.

During the mid-1940s, Genuis continued his elementary tuition at Stella Maris College, Gzira. It soon became clear he was not cut

out for the conformity demanded by formal schooling, and after two years, his parents shifted his education to a vocational one. As a result, Joseph Mary was apprenticed to carpenter Frank Farrugia who had a workshop in St Christopher Street, Valletta, where the child grew familiar with carpentry and basic wood sculpting techniques. Later in his career, he refined his technique and favoured wood as a medium of artistic expression.

During this period, Genuis started attending afternoon classes at the Malta Government School of Art in Valletta, which at the time was under the headmastership of Vincent Apap (1909-2003). Records for 1949 preserved at the school show he resided at 157, Kingsway, Valletta, and attended regularly.

Genuis joined classes in painting under Esprit Barthet (1919-1999), sculpture under George Borg (1906-1983) and art history under Rev. Marius Zerafa, OP (1929-). In June 1949, he sat for 'Bust from Cast Drawing Annual Exam' as part of the annual school competition but he obtained no mention. But in 1951, he placed third in the same exam. Maurice Galea had placed first and Helen Curmi second. Genuis' skill at modelling, in particular portraiture, was noted and rewarded by the school, and was to earn him considerable success later in life.

In 1952, his artistic prospects were cut short as he enrolled with the Royal Navy (assigned to Fleet Maintenance Base HMS St Angelo). For a short period, he was stationed in North Africa. Aged 22, he was transferred to H.M. Dockyard as a gate-keeper, a job he refused to do. As a result, on September 10, 1956, he was demoted to the grade of 'unskilled labourer'.

"He favoured wood as a medium of artistic expression"

On September 15, 1957, Genuis married Carmen (*née* Mifsud) at the parish church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo and St Dominic, and they settled in Vittoriosa. During this period, Joseph Mary became father to Dominic (born August 4, 1958), Mario (March 16, 1961), Alex (May 14, 1962) and Maria Dolores (April 9, 1963). Notwithstanding the demands of fatherhood, in 1961 Genuis kept himself busy devising floats for an early 'Battle of the Flowers'. He produced designs for two floats: the 'Lady of Dragon' and the 'Pegasus', both for the Vittoriosa Labour Party club.

Genuis maintained close ties with the Malta Government School of Art and, during this period, he returned there as a student. His name was listed in the school

records as "J.M. Genuis, living in 49, Quarters Street, Birgu". He attended classes from May 1964 to June 1966. An interesting unfinished *Female Nude Figure* study (Casa Rocca Piccola Bequest), signed and dated 'J.M. Genuis, 1962', was painted in this period.

In 1966, after the birth of his sixth child, Odette (March, 1966), Genuis left the Malta Government School of Art in search of an independent artistic enterprise. Around this time, Genuis met artist Frank Baldacchino, who had just returned to Malta from Australia. They were introduced by artist Josef Kalleja (1898-1998). In his memoirs, Genuis spoke highly of both artists. He described Kalleja as "*l-artista ta' qawwa*" (an artist of powerful expression) and Baldacchino as "*hija fl-art*" (my brother in art). Kalleja and Baldacchino became committed to supporting Genuis in his art and encouraged him to develop a more personal approach to sculpture.

On October 22, 1966, Genuis took part in the Triennial Art Collective Exhibition organised by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce at Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta, with a sculpture entitled *Mother and Child*. Genuis' debut as an aspiring modern sculptor was very exciting and noticeable. The sculpture acquired by Lord Gilbert Monckton, 2nd Viscount of Monckton of Brenchley, was the start of a lasting profes-

sional relationship between the artist and the Moncktons.

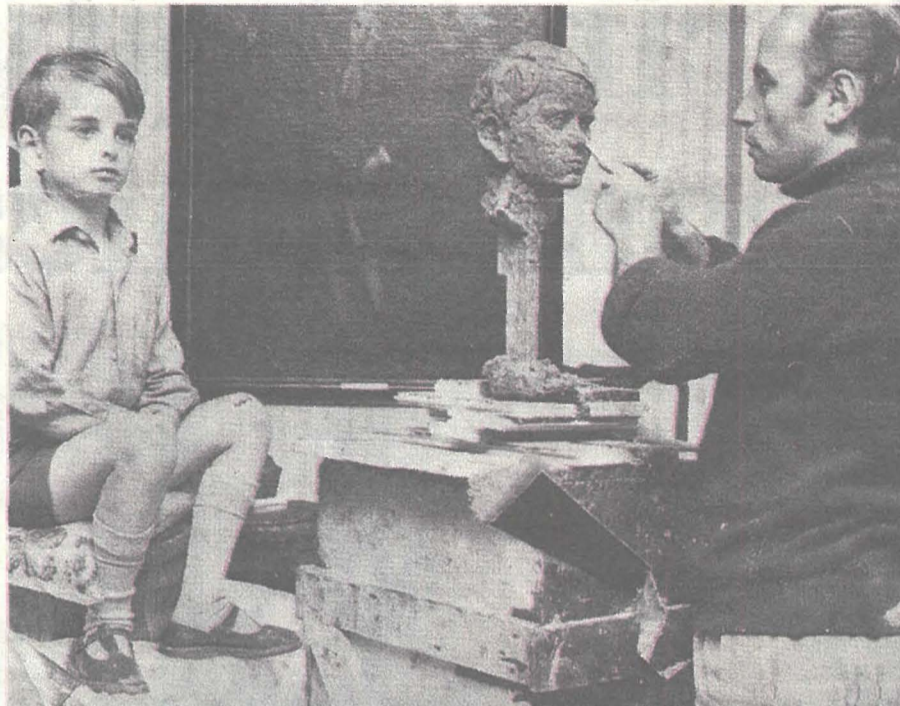
Following this success, and encouraged by Rev. Marius Zerafa, Genuis exhibited five sculptures (three 'elongated' Madonnas and two busts) at the Bank of Alderney, in St Zachary Street, corner with South Street, Valletta. The works mark a departure in the artist's stylistic venture. The anatomical elongation of the neck and limbs in his sculptures is reminiscent of 16th-century Mannerism and the work of artists Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) and Alberto Giacometti (1922-1966).

On April 2, 1967, Genuis travelled to Britain and was welcomed by Lord Monckton at Bertie House, Bearstead Maidstone in Kent. During a month-long sojourn, he was commissioned to produce a set of five portraits of the Viscount's children. This was a turning point in his artistic career which he described as "*l-isbah moment f' hajt*" (the best moment of my life). The Moncktons were very satisfied with Genuis' work and his experience was extensively published both in Malta (*Times of Malta*, August 11, 1967) and abroad (*Kent Life* magazine).

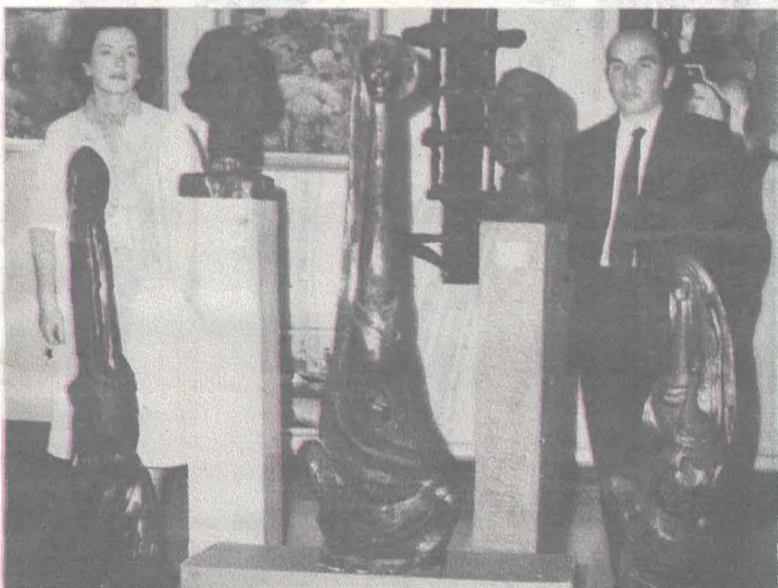
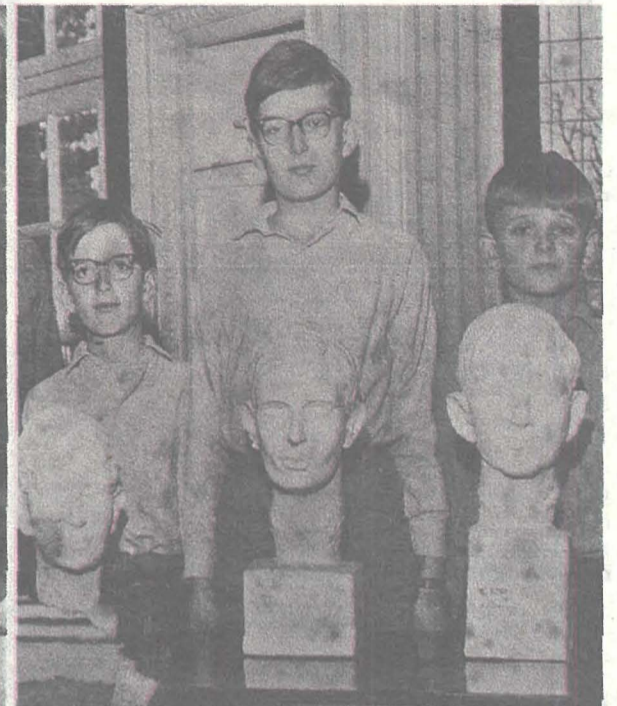
Upon his return to Malta, Genuis consolidated his standing as a member of two local modern art groups. Joining the 'Young Artists' Group' (later known as 'Spectrum '67') in 1967 and the 'Artists' Guild' in 1968 enabled him to promulgate



Joseph Mary Genuis (1934-1970)
COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY



Top: Genuis working on a bust portrait at Bertie House, Bearstead Maidstone in Kent. Right: Christopher Monckton, 3rd Viscount Monckton of Brenchley, together with his brothers in a photo shot for the *Kent Magazine* in 1967. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY



Genuis and exhibition curator Klari Marsh pose next to the artist's sculptures at the Bank of Alderny, Valletta. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY



Two floats – the 'Pegasus' (left) and 'Queen of Dragons' – that Genuis designed for the Vittoriosa Labour Party Club. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY

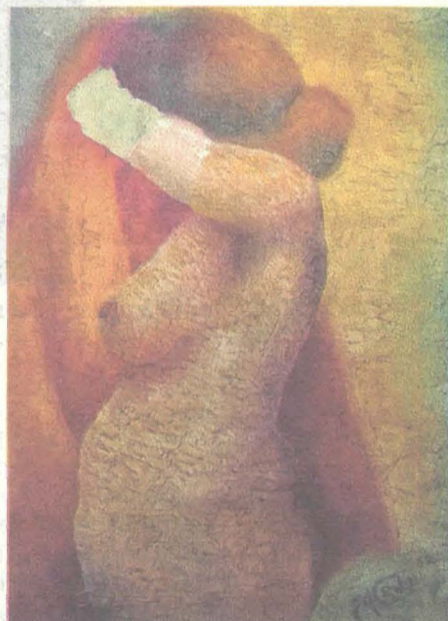
his artistic concepts and technique and expand his contacts. Members of both groups sought advice and guidance from established artists and art connoisseurs, including George Fenech (1926-2011), Harry Alden (1929-2019), Vincent Apap, Anton Agius (1933-2008), Antoine Camilleri (1922-2005) and John Cauchi (1913-1992), the curator of the Malta National Museum.

From 1967 to 1969, Genuis took part in a series of collective exhibitions in different prime locations, including the Auberge de Provence, Valletta, (April 1967, April 1968, December 1968, November 1969, December 1969); Hilton Malta, Sliema (December 1967); Vilhena Palace, Mdina (June 1969); Cygnet Gallery, Sliema (June 1969); Cathedral Museum, Mdina (July 1969); Malta National Trade Fair, Naxxar (July 1969); Malta Law Courts, Valletta (October 1969); Mazaron Art Gallery, Paceville (1970); Palazzo De La Salle, Valletta (February 1970); and St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta (July 1970).

Genuis' commitment and perseverance to produce works for these exhibitions in such a short period honed his self-discipline and his artistic proficiency, in terms of technique and inventiveness.

It was during this period that Genuis came in contact with some of Malta's notable art connoisseurs like Marquis Nicholas De Piro (1941-) and Marquis Joseph John Scicluna (1925-1995), who collectively supported and employed the artist. Marquis De Piro provided Genuis with a studio in the mezzanine of his house, Casa Rocca Piccola, where he also produced sculptures, mainly portrait busts.

1970 was a decisive but turbulent year for Genuis. Following the birth of Oscar (July 7, 1969) his ever-growing family and pitiful financial situation weighed heavily on the artist. Nevertheless, he joined George Casha and Joseph Mallia to put up a three-man show at the Malta National Museum at the Auberge de Provence, Valletta. To add insult to injury, Genuis'



Left: *Female Nude*, 1962, oil on canvas, Casa Rocca Piccola Bequest. COURTESY OF CASA ROCCA PICCOLA BEQUEST. Centre: *Jacob and...* c. 1968, wood, private collection. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY. Right: *St Lawrence*, c. 1970, wood, private collection. COURTESY OF GENUIS FAMILY

work was not well received in the press, except for a note of encouragement which describes his work as produced with "a spirited virility and freedom of movement..." (*Times of Malta*, March 21, 1970).

In May 1970, Genuis was commissioned by the De La Salle Brothers of the Christian Schools in Malta to produce a monumental

statue of St Benilde Romançon, FSC (1805-1862), the first Brother of the Lasallian Institute to be canonised. Genuis found solace in the Brothers' hospitality. The monument which stands in Vittoriosa testifies to his artistic impetus.

On the evening of October 15, 1970, after attending an exhibition at the Civil Service Sports Club, Val-

letta, Genuis returned home and died that same night, aged just 36, leaving a wife and six children (Josephine was born posthumously on May 23, 1971).

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