

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS

The heart in our art

Valentine's day is defined by the colour red which symbolises passion in all its nuances and contexts. The image of an enterprising but almost pestilent winged putto-like Cupid is a staple in pop iconography associated with this feast that celebrates romantic love.

Cupid pierces red tumescent hearts with arrows from his bow, thus inflicting love on his unwitting victims. Classical mythology has provided the narrative and imagery that are part and parcel of February 14, which makes it a day less ordinary for lovers all over the world.

Artists like Jim Dine have explored the pop value of the iconography of the cartoonised heart, whose intrinsic shape is quite far removed from that of its real counterpart, pumping blood through our circulatory system. Cy Twombly has dripped the icon into his idiosyncratic

calligraphy. The origin of the shape, which goes back centuries, together with its development into this stylised version, is of interest to a country steeped in its own mythologies of social and religious relevance, especially in the context of Christian iconography.

Joseph Agius has asked six Maltese contemporary artists for their take on the feast of love, via one example of their art, and to discuss in a few words the concept underlying the chosen work.



Etienne Farrell – Personal Jesus
(Part five of the first of three sets, of seven pieces each)

In devotional art, the Sacred Heart, a clear reminder of the love and devotion of Jesus to humanity despite the suffering that is endured, has been a symbol of passionate reverence for generations, approaching us in many ways and eliciting from us many responses.

Through the rendition of an older version of Jesus Christ, captured while having a burst of despair and anger (one of the seven deadly sins), with the heart shown as an independent organ separate from the body, the work aims to engage the viewers in a deeply personal exchange. It draws inspiration from personal and social concerns, tapping on personal griefs and universal emotions, such as anger, love, intimacy, despair, pain, loneliness as well as politics.

Mark Mallia – The Heart's Filthy Lesson

Taking cue from David Bowie's dystopic song and its video which was banned from being aired, this sculpture seeks to investigate, through its gruesomeness, contemporary society's indulgence in the seven deadly sins represented by the seven crow-tipped forks plunging into the flesh of lifeless heart.

The crow is a Poe-esque symbol of death, a natural scavenger that feeds on carrion.

In this sculpture, the heart, a major organ, is abused, sacrificed and presented on a 'chalice', thus evoking one of the sacraments that, we are told since early childhood, transubstantiates the wafer into flesh; in this case into a heart.

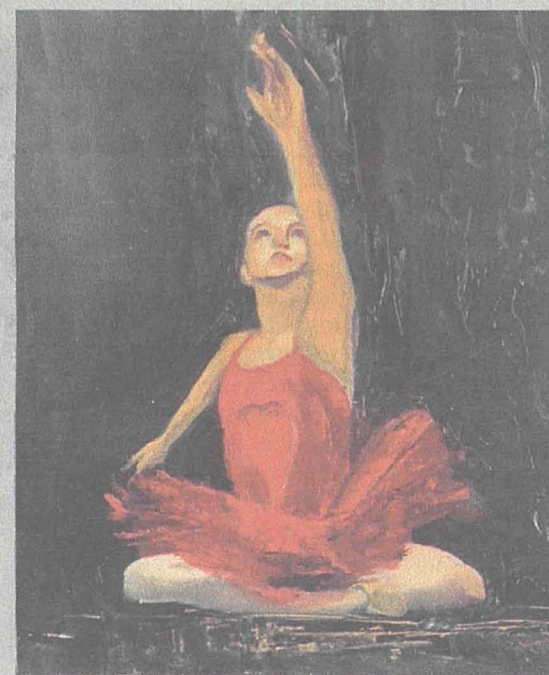
This chalice, however, unlike its shiny counterparts in our churches, has rusted over. The rust stands for deterioration, sorrow and negligence. However, not all of the shine is lost; hope is the last to die in the rivulets of metallic shine and one prays that the heart will beat once again with love and passion.



Michelle Gialanze – Reaching for Love

It is important to remember that most of us are exposed to the narrative of love from an early age through fairytales. While today there are alternatives to these fairytales, most of us have had a diet in our childhood of stories such as Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast etc. These stories present very traditional and very limited versions of gender roles, femininity, sexuality and youth, and often emphasise the primacy of romantic love at all costs for women.

Love is not a fairytale. Love is patient. It does not insist in its own way; it is about respect for each other, a deep understanding of each other. It is blind and it does not end. We have to keep hoping for love from our youth... it's a bright light shining on us. It may not be a fairytale, it may be painful sometimes, but it is still wonderful and we strive for it.





Wallace Falzon – The Heart Giver

The heart is fragile, made of layers of brittle slate. A copper wire links it to the donor whose life depends on the handling by the recipient of this ultimate gift of unconditional love. The choice of broken column that supports the figure is not co-incidental. It symbolises the balancing act one embarks upon when one falls in love – a tottering act of great vulnerability in doing one's utmost not to lose one's equilibrium. Otherwise, the heart would just smash to fragments as one falls to the ground.

Rupert Cefai – La Donna Gravida (2012)

The pregnant artist's partner is portrayed in this painting, a couple of months before giving birth to their son.

It is based on a sketch executed by the artist on their last holiday together before the new arrival.

Although unseen, there are two hearts beating in one body.

The mother is using the camera on her mobile phone to take a picture of the artist himself who is outside the field of view, thus linking the father, mother and son.



Paul Scerri – Qalb tad-deheb

Virtues and Iniquities is a series that revolves around the heart and relates to the good and bad found in humans and the evil traces left behind.

The heart is a fundamental organ in the human body. The human anatomy is mostly made up of pairs, where an individual has the ability to choose between the good and evil – for example, one hand can steal while the other hand can balance this out by contributing to charity.

The mouth, being singular in the human body, can either utter blasphemy or kind words that comfort the heart. The heart is also a singular organ and it can only be either good or evil. The heart is often referred to as the core of the human anatomy.

This concept builds upon popular Maltese idioms that relate to the heart, such as the golden heart, 'qalb tad-deheb', the sweet heart, 'qalb taz-zokkor', which are also found in other languages. However, there are idioms that are endemically Maltese such as 'qalb hadra' (green heart) which refers to a heart which is cruel, shows no compassion and which is intrinsically evil.