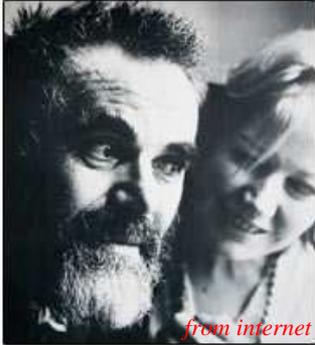


# Victor Pasmore (1908-1998) in Malta

*Extracts from Joseph Paul Cassar's Public Lecture on Victor Pasmore in Malta.*



Pasmore was a tireless analyst who treated painting primarily as an object – with its own life, its own rhythms, forms, colours and texture. It is a statement from within, the expression of a mental process which leaves an aesthetic impact on the spectator. His passion for experimentation and sense of playfulness led him to believe in the independence and

free activity of painting.

Pasmore possessed the supreme gift that deals with the natural elegance of line and the language of colour. He often quoted Paul Klee's celebrated idea of a line going for a walk, as well as Paul Gauguin's view that any true painting was always a portrait of the artist himself. Pasmore based his development on the tension brought about through trial and error. He discovered in the writings of Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Pissarro and Seurat, that abstraction was inevitably the way for his future artistic development. This was indeed a key moment when Pasmore grasped an understanding of modern art, since these masters taught him that colour, form and line were the foundation stones on which to build pictorial structures.

Through poetic instinct he could freely compose a new nature without referring to the world directly. In his early landscapes, riverscapes and gardens, he worked towards a trend which focused on drastic simplification of forms. The shapes seen through the mist or Hammersmith's metal grate were transformed into a pattern and the trees in the distance became vague forms of pure colour. Everything acquired an abstract form, related to nothing other than the deliberate structure of a harmonious well thought out composition. He claimed:



*I have not stopped imitating nature because the artist is nature himself. But he can throw out the objects of nature and develop a new nature.*

In another instance he pointed to the essence of forms which arrests our attention because of their inherent visual quality:



*I do not paint directly from nature; I endeavour to paint in relation to natural forms. I have only an uncertain idea before I begin. I proceed as the painting demands until I have realised it in as complete and satisfying a form as I can.*

He felt that the picture had to be an independent object in its own right, not the representation of another object. This was the fundamental basis from which he started abstract painting.



Pasmore's adventurous spirit led him to perform various tentative experiments. He concentrated on new modes and means of pictorial expression. He followed a cautious instinctive development guided by an inquiring mind. He searched for a sense of continuity starting from very basic elements and build paintings that convey an organic whole.

Pasmore engaged in an activity which he called the "*developing process*" and it manifested itself in a series of works such as the celebrated "*Apollo 11: Ascending development*" (1970) which was exhibited at the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce in the same year and which now hangs at Queensland Art Centre, Brisbane, in Australia. It commemorated the landing on the moon in 1969. this work bred its own series of which St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity proudly displays "*Apollo 4*" executed in 1972. the black shapes on a white canvas testify to the ductility of paint as well as to the appeal of complex curved shapes moving and pressing against each other. The viewer experiences the growth of forms and how these addresses each other and the surface on which they exist. Pasmore introduced more and more the role of chance into these processes as he poured paint and with attention led it to its natural course according to the laws of gravity as he lifted the canvas and guided the pace of the flow with his brush. In the end he generally added, blotted or sprayed, balancing the composition with more contemplated shapes. These stains of colour-shapes float before our eyes, we perceive and imagine, experience the spaces of the areas left empty from colour, at times leading to a surprising spot or his favourite broken line similar to a snail-trail. The work lives on transfigured by the different possible attention and interpretations successive generations bring to it. It becomes an engagement with the developing process itself, the work is every time reborn and is thus never quite finished.

No wonder abstract art has been compared by many to music or to a bird's song which is simply beautiful without knowing what it really means. Abstract art thus emerged as a new tool for human expression and development at a time when traditional techniques proved to be inadequate.

Pasmore's philosophy was rooted in the belief that art had a part to play in one's day-to-day life, as opposed to fulfilling the function of decorating the wall in a home or become a

precious object in a museum. His research and activity in the constructions and paintings were the result of an attitude to life which envisaged art as a social, intellectual, architectural and creative phenomenon.

Pasmore came to Malta in 1966, bought a farmhouse in Gudja and with Wendy made it home and working space. This was only two years after Malta's independence. The island was experiencing a climate of great excitement, artistically and economically. Pasmore chose to settle in Malta at a time when the island was asserting its identity as a country which had surprisingly succeeded in maintaining the charm of its old village simple life, while at the same time was ready to accept the advanced world of science and economic development. Pasmore chose to come to an island which was modernising itself without putting aside its great values of a tight knit family life with strong religious beliefs, customs and traditions.

He was a great stimulus to the artistic community in Malta. He made friends with leading Maltese artists such as Gabriel Caruana and admired the art of Alfred Chircop amongst others. He collaborated with Richard England for the work of art that adorns the annex of the Central Bank. His presence in Malta has been described as the greatest cultural event in the history of art of this country, since Caravaggio visited these shores.

The works which he produced here are full of sky and water, with radiant blues spread over large surfaces with little forms in them. He added new techniques such as sprayed paint and colours became more intense and free-flowing. He let recognisable images appear where they wanted and started using titles that could refer to the visible world. At times his titles have references to music such as in *Linear Symphony in Four Movements*, (1978-9), or refer to specific melodies as *A Line from the Tune of Annie Laurie*, (1988), where he has incorporated a quotation from the printed music. Some refer specifically to Malta such as *La Grotta di Calipso* series (1978), *A Garden in Malta*, *Old Trees in Malta*, (1990) and *The Temples of Malta* series (1992) which are clear references to themes that have inspired some of his works. He claimed that: “*One is subconsciously affected by one's environment, but I haven't tried consciously in any way to represent the light of the Mediterranean.*” The superb etchings and aquatints in this exhibition produced at the 2RC workshops in Rome



come closest to our island. The bright and strong colours are prominent in his prints, although black and white retain their crucial role.

Joseph Paul Cassar

*Note:- Joseph Paul Cassar was the curator for the Victor, Wendy, John Pasmore Exhibition held at St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity held in April 2001 organised in conjunction with the British Council Malta and Marlborough Graphics, London.*