





Fig. 1
One of the abstract
works (detail) by Emvin
Cremona exhibited at the
29th edition of the Venice
Biennale, 1958.
(Courtesy of Heritage
Malta – MUŻA, Valletta /
Photo: Lisa Attard)

Commemorating Emvin Cremona

A hundred years from his birth

Katya Micallef presents a survey of the professional career and legacy of the twentieth-century Maltese artist Emvin Cremona (1919–1987)

This year, several parish churches and institutions are commemorating the hundred-year anniversary since the birth of Emvin Cremona, christened Emmanuel Vincent and born on 27 May 1919 – a man whose artistic achievements have guaranteed him a place among the leading Maltese artists of the twentieth century. Even though he passed away at the age of sixty-seven, on 29 January 1987, his legacy is extensive and can be seen both in public places such as churches and parishes, as well as in numerous private collections.

Throughout his career, especially during and following his studies overseas, Cremona had several occasions to work and live abroad, but he loved Malta and his family so much that he decided to remain on the island. He kept on living in Valletta, where he had a house overlooking the Grand Harbour nearby the Upper Barrakka, before moving with his family to H'Attard, in 1975.

In 1948, he married Lilian Gatt at St Gregory's Church in Sliema. They had four children: three daughters and a son. In his Valletta residence, Emvin Cremona had a studio on the upper floor with a very high ceiling and a large window facing the Grand

Katya Micallef is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at MUŻA (Heritage Malta), in Valletta. She is currently reading for a Ph.D. on Contemporary Art at Kingston University, London. Her M.A. degree focussed on abstract painting, after having previously conducted research on Victor Pasmore for her B.A. degree with the University of Malta. She regularly contributes essays and articles to publications, is a visiting lecturer at the University of Malta and has held the position of senior lecturer at MCAST Institute of Art and Design.



Fig. 2
Emvin Cremona with his wife, Lilian, at the Valleretta Studio.
(Courtesy of the Cremona Estate)

opposite: Fig. 3
Portrait photograph of Emvin Cremona.
(Courtesy of the Cremona Estate)

Harbour. He had always wanted to have a house studio, which would allow him to spend quality time with his family since he usually worked on his art after nine o'clock in the evening (Fig. 2). Family members recall the smell of varnish and several canvasses scattered around the house.

Cremona's journey as a young artist began at the age of seven, when he received a paint box full of colours, and went on to spend hours painting in the wooden balcony of his family home. Being artistically inclined, he soon started following music lessons and received a Distinction in his violin exam. No one from his family was art-oriented; indeed, his parents, especially his father, were against his inclination towards becoming a full-time artist, as most parents would have been. Nonetheless, Cremona adamantly focussed on his vocation, which was probably possible because his father worked overseas for around fourteen years, allowing Cremona the freedom to continue working on his art.¹

Before enrolling in the Malta Government School of Art in 1935, Cremona attended the Scuola Umberto I, which provided him with his first opportunity to visit Rome. His classmates at the School of Art included Willie Apap (1910–1970), Anton Inglott (1915–1948), Esprit Barthet (1919–1999) and Victor Diacono (1915–2009), among others. One of his main tutors was the Master of Painting Edward Caruana Dingli (1876–1950), under whom Cremona followed an academic course on portraiture as well as attended the *en plein air* painting sessions Caruana Dingli would organise for his students. Moreover, the Master of Modern Etching Carmenu Mangion (1905–1997) introduced him to the art of design and printing.

For a very short time in 1936, Cremona attended La Scuola del Nudo founded by Josef Kalleya (1898–1998), and sat for the scholarship exam in 1937, in which he placed third after Wille Apap and Anton Inglott. Despite this, Cremona managed to gather enough funds to study at the Regia Accademia di Belle Arti, where he won an Italian Government Scholarship during his second year of studies there. His stay, however, was short-lived as Cremona was back in Malta following the outbreak of the Second World War.

In 1945, Cremona received the Agnes Schembri Bequest which made it possible for him to continue his studies at the Slade School of Art in London. In between his studies in London, Cremona applied for short courses in Paris at the École Supérieure des Beaux Arts, where he was able to spend time with Art Deco artists and, importantly, Professor Jean Théodore Dupas (1882–1964). While studying in London and Paris, he experienced a cultural climate which was completely different from the one in Rome; in Paris, for example, he was exposed to the more contemporary trends of abstraction, better known as Tachisme and Art Informel.

Among his earliest work, we find various portraits and landscapes which were exhibited at the Ellis Studio on his return from London. Among these portraits, there are two beautiful works representing his wife Lilian, both dated 1948, which are completely different in style from the portraits he had created at the School of Art in 1938, just ten years earlier.

Cremona was later employed for twelve years as Master of Painting at the Government School Art, between 1947 and 1959, but very little is known about Cremona's influence on his students.² However, an important photograph held within the family's collection, reveals that among his students were key artists of the twentieth century, including Antoine Camilleri (1922–2005), Frank Portelli (1922–2004), Alfred Chircop (1933–2015), Saviour Casabene (1928–2011), Tony Pace (1930–1989), and Joseph A. Caruana (1924–2011) (Fig. 4). A very interesting project, or rather





opposite, from top: Fig. 4-5

Emvin Cremona with students at the Malta Government School of Art;
Emvin Cremona with the painting presented by the Government of
Malta to the United Nations Headquarters, New York, in 1966.
(Courtesy of the Cremona Estate)

overleaf: Fig. 6

Working drawing of 'Mediterranja', Emvin Cremona's Villa, H'Attard.
(Courtesy of the Cremona Estate)

collaboration, with the students of the Government School of Art was the creation of a Carnival float, in 1958, representing the Carnival King, *His Rambunctious Majesty*.³

An important and well-known aspect of Emvin Cremona's life is the work he produced for public commissions, the most famous of which being his church commissions. The first and more popular one among these was the one for the Msida Parish Church of Saint Joseph. Following the death of Anton Inglott on 15 August 1945, just a few days after the unveiling of the *Death of St Joseph* apse within the same church, it was left to Cremona to continue the decoration of the ceiling. It seems that Cremona was the perfect candidate to substitute Anton Inglott since the two were stylistically similar artists who had both studied decoration in Rome and shared a kindred character. For this commission, Cremona was also recommended by the lawyer Dr Edward Vassallo, who was Anton Inglott's old friend. The official request for this commission was approved by the Curia on 18 February 1948.

According to Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini, Cremona 'was immediately confronted with a big obstacle. In fact, Inglott's style, pleasing and powerful and full of the artist's personality was... at a tangent with Cremona's'.⁴ However, the resulting decorative programme showed a happy combination of the two artists' styles. For this commission, Cremona employed a light palette in tune with the mystical aura present in Inglott's work. Following this important achievement, Cremona attracted several supporters who assisted him in important future commissions, the most important being Vincenzo Bonello (1891–1969), who was a major influence on the progress of Cremona's career.

Cremona cautiously managed to introduce novel stylistic compositions which included monumental poses and a vivid palette, and was able to do so because he negotiated the demands of the different churches. The list of church commissions he worked on around Malta and Gozo includes Birgu, Hamrun, Floriana, Burmarrad, Sliema, and Ta' Pinu in Gozo. Often artists would need to climb up scaffolding and

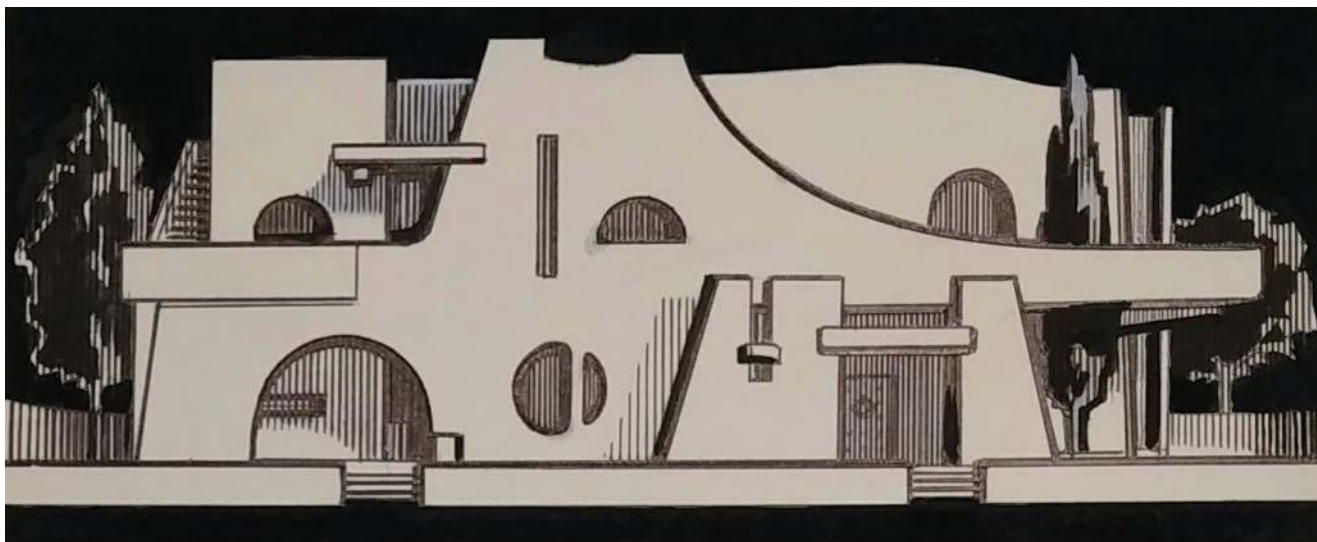
spend hours working in the same position, especially when working on large-scale commissions such as a church ceiling. However, due to the considerable size of Cremona's studio in Valletta, he had the space to paint some of these works at home.

Another major public commission was presented to Cremona by the Malta Postal Office for the production of a series of stamps, a commission which lasted from 1957 until the early 1980s. The designs vary from religious themes to images of commemorative anniversaries and to others which lean more towards abstraction. Today several examples of these stamps are exhibited at the Malta Postal Museum, in Valletta, following an exhibition held in the same building in 2016. His mastery in design is attested to by book covers, posters and journals, mainly in *Lehen is-Sewwa*, a weekly Catholic paper which was first launched in 1928. The artist designed the front cover of several editions of the paper, including the 50th anniversary of *Lehen is-Sewwa*, the Independence of Malta, the Commemoration of the International Eucharistic Congress in Malta, the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, and the Pauline Centenary.⁵

His mastery in design is also evident through his stage designs. Together with Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini, he collaborated on the stage design of *L'Araldo di Cristo* ('The Herald of Christ'), in 1960, and *La Predestinata* ('The Chosen One'), which was held at the Radio City Opera House in May 1955. Cremona used to work on the large-scale set design at his studio in Valletta.

Cremona also worked on public monuments including the one at the entrance of De La Salle College, in Vittoriosa (Birgu), which stands on a circular base of 7.3m with a concrete column rising to a height of 10.6m. The side facing the college drive is covered in mosaic and represents St John Baptist De la Salle. The elongated figures are made up of some 100,000 *tesserae* pieces.⁶

In addition to his public works, Cremona's personal artistic achievements play an equally important part in contributing to the artist's reputation. Notably among these are a number of



international exhibitions, mainly involving his participation at the Venice Biennale with six other Maltese artists, namely Oliver Agius, Josef Kalleya, Frank Portelli, Carmelo Mangion, Antoine Camilleri, and Hugo Carbonaro.⁷ The opportunity to participate in the 29th edition of the Venice Biennale, an event which in itself was of great national importance, was only made possible with the support of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce and the government. Cremona's colleagues exhibited one or three works while he was given the opportunity to exhibit a landscape and three abstract works, one of which was chosen to feature on the catalogue cover (Fig. 1).

Cremona's international accomplishments are also evidenced by his participation in four collective exhibitions between 1958 and 1977 at the Commonwealth Institute, in London. For the 1967 exhibition, dedicated to contemporary art in Malta, Emvin Cremona's work was also selected to feature on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. Another important and international engagement was the work for the United Nations headquarters in New York, executed in 1966 (Fig. 5). In the same year, Cremona was also commissioned a painting for the World Health Organization headquarters, in Geneva, and another for Barclays Bank in New York.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Emvin Cremona developed and strengthened his understanding of abstract composition by introducing bright, strong colours and linear features to his work, echoing the contemporary artistic developments in France. Cremona's ideas and experimentation are key to the development of abstract painting in Malta. Following the first abstract works, and in between the many private and public commissions, Cremona managed to develop abstract composition by using broken glass. This series of works is popularly known as the 'Broken Glass' series, but according to his family Cremona referred to it as 'glass collages'. In these works, which vary in size, he employed materials such as glass, which was not usually associated with the art of painting in Malta.

Another personal artistic achievement is the creation of 'Mediterranja', Emvin Cremona's villa in H'Attard (Fig. 6). Several drawings and designs were created by Cremona, and which were later technically finished off by the architect Joe Spiteri, who collaborated with Cremona on the designs of the Osaka 70 World Trade exposition in Japan. This villa is today a scheduled building.

It is not surprising that Cremona's achievements received public recognition. In 1961, he was awarded the Knighthood of the Pontifical Military Order of St Sylvester; in 1963, he received the Order of Merit, and was also awarded the Golden Medal from the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce.

Unfortunately, three years before he passed away, Cremona had suffered a stroke which cost him the use of his right hand. Nonetheless, he kept on painting and created five religious works in a completely different style.

Despite his early death, Cremona accomplished a great deal in a very short time. His remarkable style is permanently featured on the vaults of local churches and on the walls of private houses, while his sophisticated design put Maltese philately on an international platform. Above all, he was a husband and father who was happiest when surrounded by his family.

Notes

- 1 Verbal communication with Anna Cremona and Sylvana Pace, Emvin Cremona's daughters.
- 2 Jesmond Vassallo, 'Emvin Cremona: An Innovator in Maltese Modern Art' (unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation, Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, 2000), 106.
- 3 Sephora Borg, 'The Maltese Carnival as an Artistic Expression in Maltese Culture' (unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation, Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, 2015), 70.
- 4 Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini, 'Emanuel Vincent Cremona: a biographical sketch' (Malta, 1961), unpaginated.
- 5 Emanuel Fiorentino, 'Emvin Cremona: A Leading Artist of the 20th century', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 3 No. 3 (Summer 1997), 19.
- 6 Fabian Mangion, 'The building of De La Salle College and its majestic monument', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 11 May 2014.
- 7 Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art Malta*, Vol. 1 (Malta: PIN Publications, 2010), 245.

The word 'artist' is synonymous with innovation, creativity, passion and ambition, determination, colour and texture to name a few; Emvin Cremona, creator of the so-called 'Broken Glass Series' and overall avant-garde, boasts this talent across each and every facet that is expected of a great artist. But with his 1969 'Broken Glass' exhibition, Cremona carried forward one other notion that, from the beginning, could not help but show in his creation of art: destruction.

Emvin Cremona's creation through destruction is a process tackled by the artist and is best seen in his series of broken glass works. Destruction may seem like a contradictory affair to pair up with creation, but in laying his panel of glass over the highly plastered and sometimes pigmented board, only to strike a hammer on its surface was, in a way, the purest form of creation and expression for Cremona.

The work from the MUŻA collection featured here, and which has finally found its rightful home on permanent display, is a clear example of the complexity through which Cremona's vision was created. Entitled *Sunset* for its warm red, orange and off-white tones, it is a bold statement that highlights the artist's best ability to create through destruction and is 'encased within a glass shield true to the expression perceived in the *Broken Glass Series*'.¹

The thick *impasto* seen on the base of the work of art, paired with the chromatic representation of colour, elevates the senses of not only the art historical connoisseurs, but also strikes a chord with the lay man as a viewer. In *Sunset*, Cremona also evokes dimension and depth of field with the addition of a coloured glass sheet on the established glass present in his series. The exposed *impasto* creates a textural element that takes its viewers on a metaphysical journey. *Sunset* behaves in a way that begs for detailed artistic evaluation, indeed, very much like the inclusion of a rope on the left hand side of another 'Broken Glass' work proudly hung in the Farsons Brewery complex. Cremona's nuances are bold, striking, captivating and ultimately crowd-pleasing. There is a definite reason why *Sunset* forms part of MUŻA's collection; it is nothing other than sheer elite talent.

The ingenuity of this series as a whole gives the Maltese modern art scene a focus point, a vision seen through a church painter's eyes elevated through the 'Broken Glass' series as a philosophical collection of master works.

Kristina Cassar Dowling



Emvin Cremona, *Sunset*, oil paint, glass fragments, *impasto* and glass on panel, 100 x 102.5cm, 1969. (Courtesy of Heritage Malta – MUŻA, Valletta / Photo: Patrick J. Fenech)

Notes

- 1 Kristina Cassar, 'Emvin Cremona and his use of Mixed Media in the *Broken Glass Series*' (B.A. (Hons.) dissertation, Department of Art and Art History, University of Malta, 2014), Cat. entry No. 12.