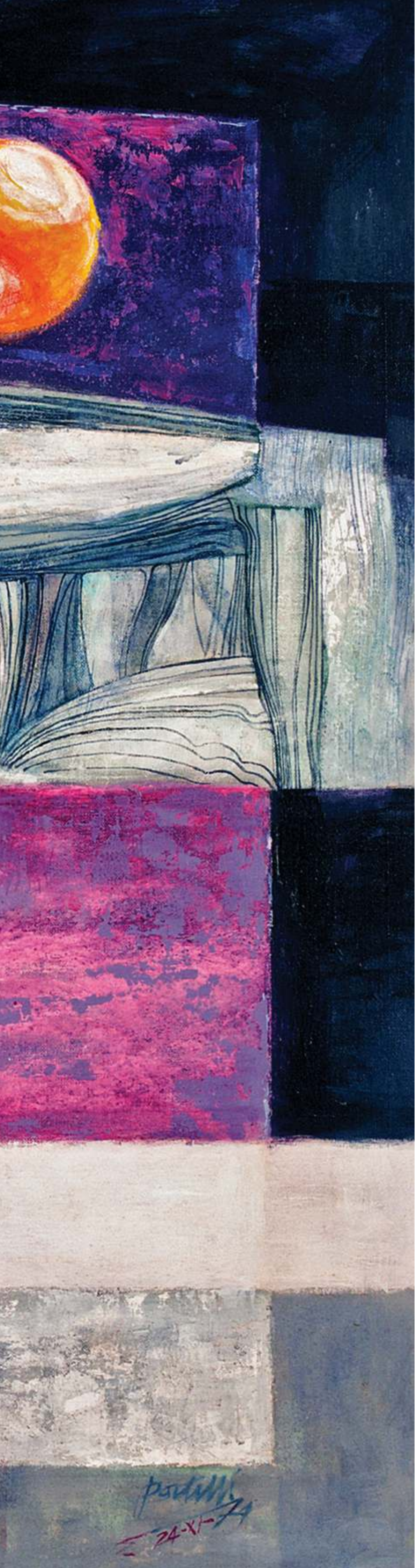

Fig. 1
Contours No. XLV - 30/X/48, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 100.5 x 100.5cm (Private Collection, Malta)

Frank Portelli:

Pioneer and artist

In this instalment about pioneers of modern art in Malta, **Kenneth Wain** discusses the innovative oeuvre of one of the foremost artists of his generation

The 1950s were important years for Maltese art. Modernist idioms were beginning to infiltrate its vocabulary after years of stifling artistic repression, direct and active and indirect and built into the cultural ambience of the time, an ambience where 'visual sterility and spiritual stagnation' reigned and where society and establishment, state and religious, were violently hostile towards anything 'modern'. (Peter Serracino Inglott 1991, p. 12)

One of the directly repressive forces was the Malta Government School of Art of the time where art students were actively discouraged, not to say intimidated, by their teachers and by the prevalent curriculum from experimenting in modern forms or idioms of any kind and from modernist influences, and pressed into academic discipline which they were taught to respect and observe at all costs. The early 1950s saw the return to Malta of a group of young artists who had pursued their studies elsewhere (usually on scholarship), instead of at the Regia Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome where their predecessors, right up to the beginning of the Second World War, had continued to be subjected to the same kind of anti-modernist indoctrination that was begun at the School of

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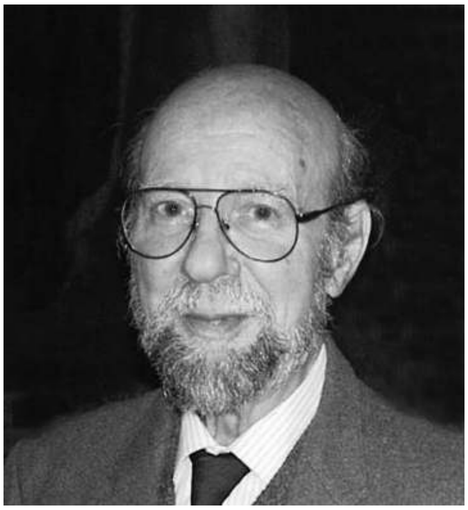


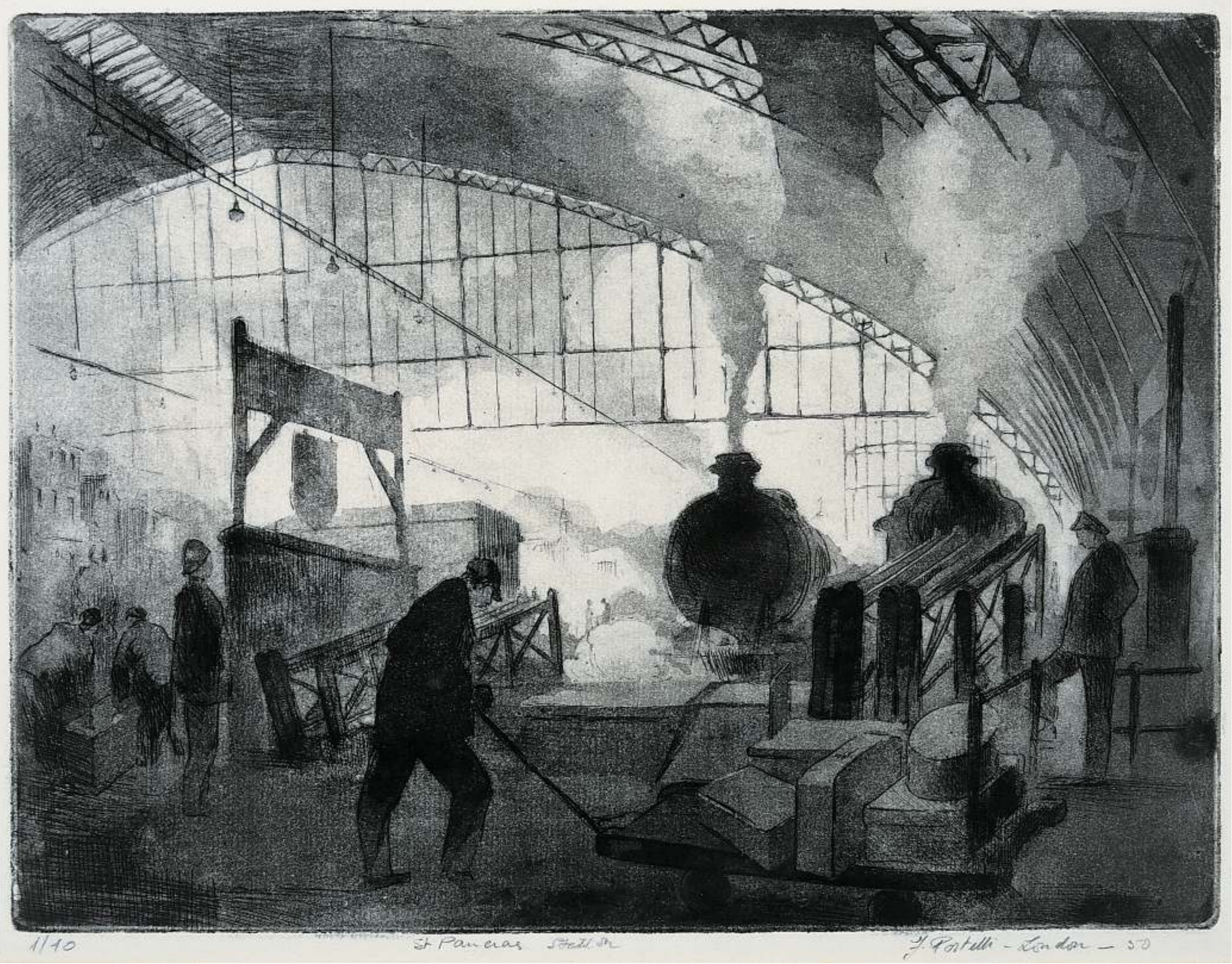
left: Fig. 2
Frank Portelli

below: Fig. 3
St Pancras Station, London, 1949,
aquatint, 22 x 29.5cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

opposite: Fig. 4
Good Friday, 1951
oil on wood, 44 x 38cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

Art in Valletta, which had given them their first artistic training and 'education'. As Peter Serracino Inglott put it, once again, 'The bonds tying the local culture to just one foreign centre were broken,' at the end of the war with Italy, 'and, instead, each [of the returning artists of the 1950s] developed his own singular mode of communication out of the strands derived from a multiplicity of sources,' that became available to him in the UK, France, Switzerland, the USA, and so on.

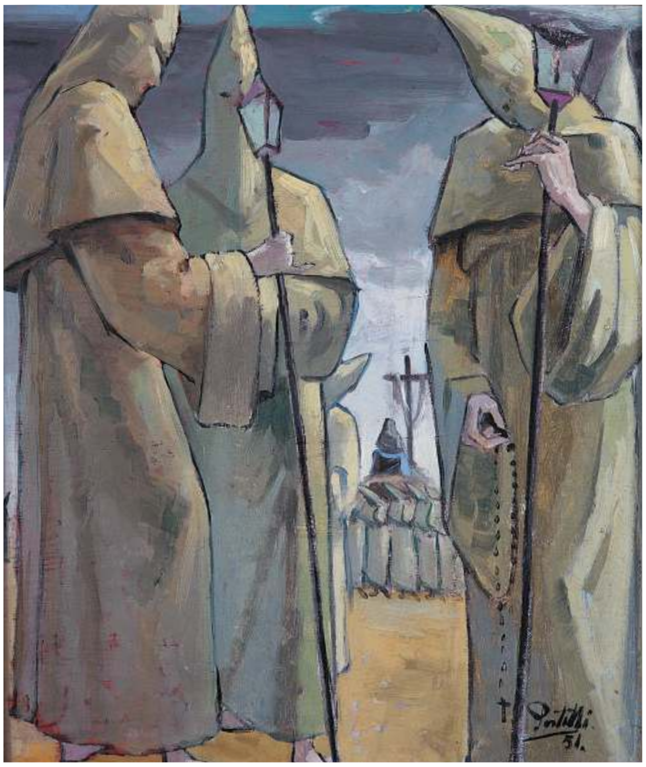
The history of the 1950s, from this point of view, is a history, a story of the groups, associations, circles and ateliers that these artists set up to promote the modernist artistic styles and forms of expression which they had been attracted by and which they were using in their own works. Thus, the period is marked by a recurrent controversy in the daily newspapers, *The Times of Malta* especially, on the merits and demerits of modern art, with the artists themselves being hard pressed to show a

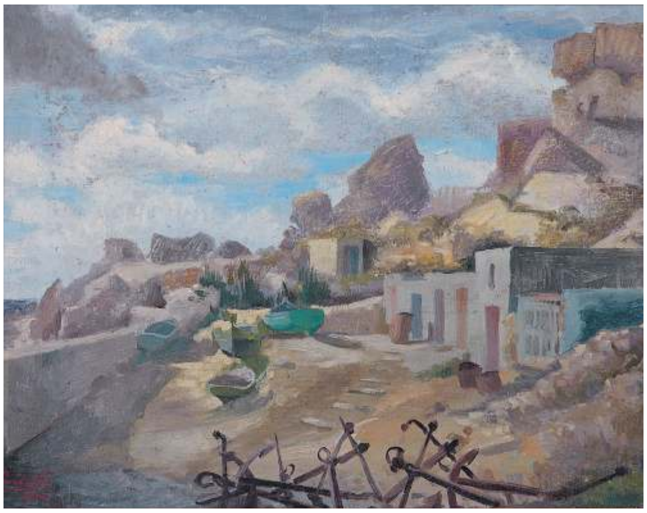


skeptical public that modern art was art at all and not some kind of aberration or '*schifezza*' as it was generally described by the Italian-speaking conservative elite of the time. While those of the members who individually found writing congenial for them pursued the battle in print, all participated practically regularly in the various collective exhibitions they organized together to bring their work to the public, hostility or, worse still indifference, and all. One of the major protagonists of the time at the organizational level, and of the pioneers at the artistic level, was Frank Portelli (1922-2004). Portelli was the secretary of the Modern Art Circle (later the Modern Art Group) which was formed in Valletta in 1951, shortly after his return from his studies in the UK, by a group of artists who at the time met regularly at Café Malata in Valletta to discuss art. The group exhibited together for the first time the following year at Palazzo de la Salle and Portelli's work was prominently included with the others.

I have chosen this way of introducing him to the reader, and in the rest of this article, as a pioneer artist with a rich career that spanned over half a century and which began in the early 1950s, because I know that it would have pleased him. This is because it is a way of locating him in the history of Maltese art and of according him the recognition he very richly deserves – the recognition of a pioneer (with all that the word entails, particularly the risk-taking of being innovative) which is something barely acknowledged or appreciated by all but a small circle of art lovers, today or since. It is hard for people today, particularly the younger generations of artists and others who are used to a very different cultural and artistic (and indeed political) environment to understand, much less appreciate, this element of risk; the risks the artists advocating modernist idioms, were taking at that time.

Apart from the hostile conditions I tried to summarize in my first paragraph, commissions were few and far between, mainly coming from one source, the Church, and the likelihood of being commissioned to do work in the churches with modernist technical influences was impossible (indeed, as I shall say later, Portelli himself was to wait forty odd years before being commissioned by that source). So virtually none could afford to be full-time artists, most resorted to teaching to earn an income; early on Portelli worked as a draughtsman with the Royal Air Force. Not living those conditions today makes it hard to recognize the contribution of artists like Portelli and the others of his generation towards liberating Maltese art from the 'visual sterility' Serracino Inglott refers to, from the decadent conservatism in which it foundered just sixty years ago. Like all his contemporaries the young Portelli was himself a product of the Government School of Art, which he first began to attend in 1935. There he underwent his apprenticeship, like all the other students there, under the tutorship of the Caruana Dingli brothers, Edward and Robert, who dominated the School, and of the other teachers there. Were it not for that small matter of the outbreak of the Second World War, he would undoubtedly, eventually have ended up, like those who had gone off on a scholarship to study abroad before him, also pursuing his further studies in Rome. But in 1948, in the immediate post-war years when the European countries were reconstructing their infrastructures including their educational and artistic, when Portelli won his scholarship it was not to Rome (notwithstanding that, understandably in the circumstances, it was his first choice) that he went, nor to Paris (which was his second choice), but to the United Kingdom. Travelling overland, as was the practice in those days, through Italy, Switzerland and France (where he stopped in Paris for a short while) before eventually crossing the English Channel, provided him with the opportunity to catch a first-hand glimpse of the French Impressionists,





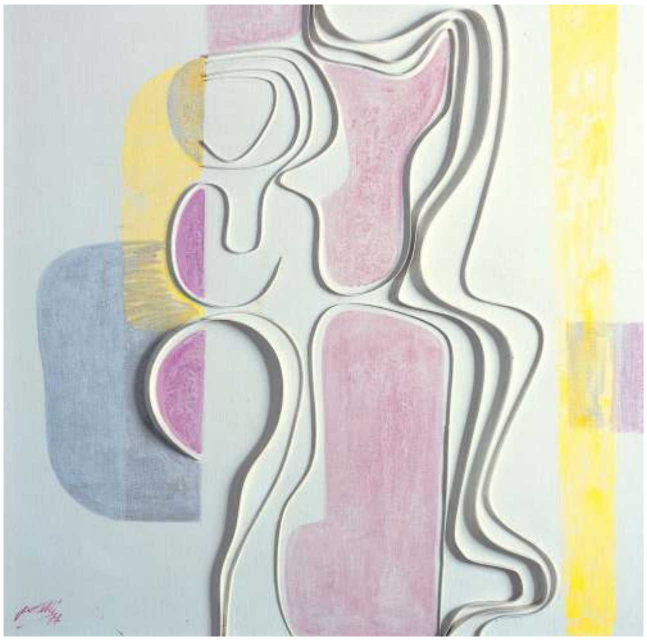
left: Fig. 5
Anchor Bay (detail), 1950
oil on canvas, 43 x 58cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

below: Fig. 6
Contours No. XLIX,1974,
acrylic and plastic on canvas, 78.5 x 78.5cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

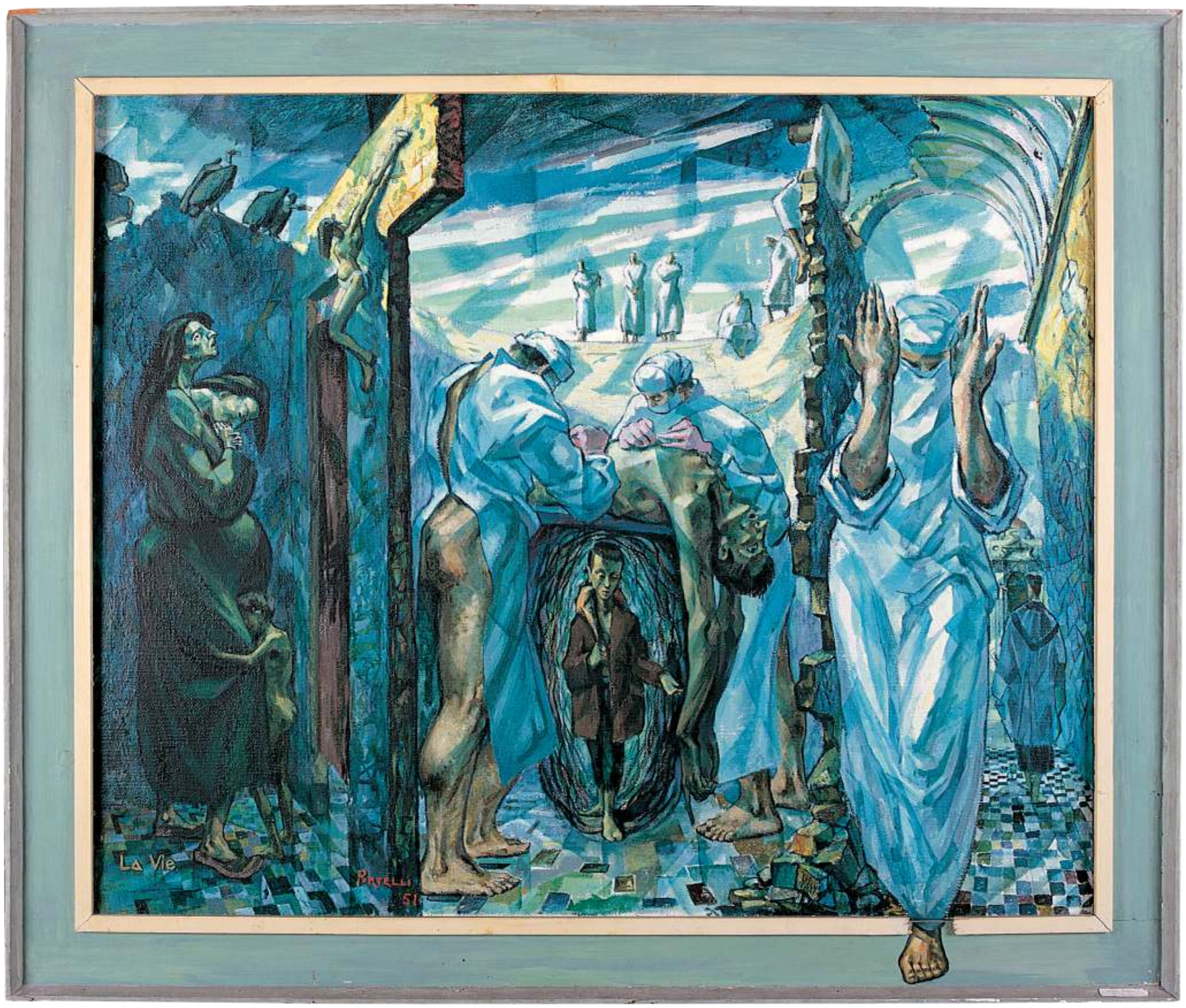
opposite: Fig. 7
La Vie, 1951
oil on canvas, 127 x 150.2cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

whose work had been brought to his attention in Malta by Karmenu Mangion, one of the few enlightened of his teachers. Mangion, who taught him etching at the School of Art and was apparently a charismatic teacher, drew Portelli to the medium which he studied and used over the early years of his career, including in London where he eventually settled for his studies, to produce several impressive works like *St Pancras Station, London* (Fig. 3). His early, pre-London painting was, as could be expected, influenced mainly by his teachers of the medium, the Caruana Dingli brothers, but his exposure to the Impressionists, Manet and Degas in particular, through Mangion, already disposed him towards their style of painting even before he left for his studies.

On his way back to Malta from London in 1950, having completed his studies successfully at Kennington College after a brief sojourn at the Leicester College of Art, Portelli was able to take a second, possibly deeper, bite at the cherry. Returning overland as he had gone, he was able to stop in Paris again and, this time, for a longer while. He was also able to stop briefly in Venice and Florence on his way down. Meanwhile, in London, he had fallen under another influence beside Degas and Manet, an influence that was to be more deeply enduring than that of either, that of Cezanne which materialised in the early 1950s in his earliest visual exploration of cubism. When he returned to Malta in 1950 he was producing work inspired by all three artists (Fig. 4-5). But the transition to Cezanne and to cubism was already decisive in *Good Friday*, and the series of paintings on the same theme it was part of. And it was conclusively confirmed with the production of *La Vie* (Fig. 7) in the same year. *La Vie* (1951) is a key work to study for anyone who wants to understand Portelli both as an artist and as a man – a catalyst work for him in both ways – a complex work of autobiography and artistic experiment, significant in the latter sense in being his first painting using the technique he came to call 'crystallized cubism.' First exhibited in 1952 at the first Modern Art Circle exhibition at Palazzo de la Salle referred to earlier, and later at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1958, it brought to a head and emptied onto the canvas his long-standing anguish over the death of his father which had occurred in 1944 and which, by his own account, had left him suffering a permanent tendency towards depression.

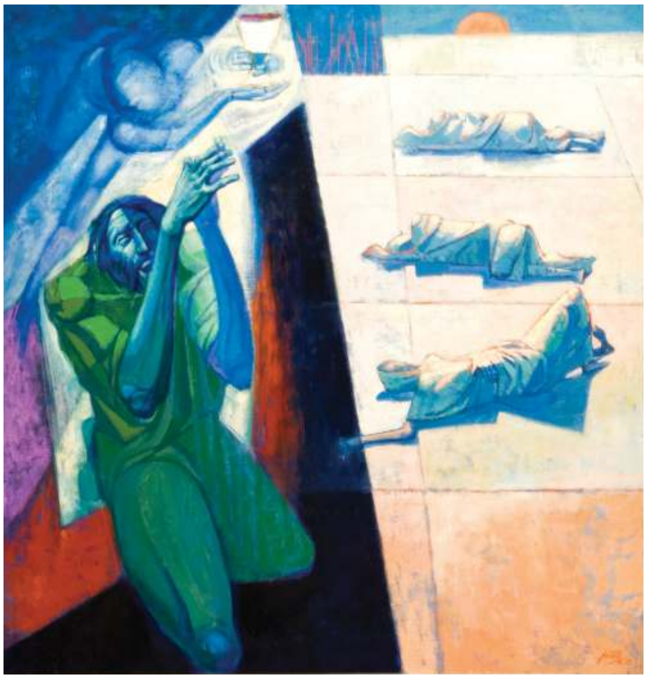


When I was preparing for my article on Frank for *Malta: Six Modern Artists* in 1991, I discussed the painting (which I have not seen now for several years) with him where it stood then in his apartment high up in St Ursula Street, Valletta. I remember we talked at some length and in considerable depth. Through earlier conversations we had together I already knew about his father, about the role he had played in Frank's life, in encouraging Frank's artistic talent and mentoring him over his early years. Our friendship had, in fact, begun in the mid-Seventies very shortly after I became art critic for *The Times of Malta* (the paper's policy in those days was to not publish the name of its reviewers of any kind, so I just appeared as 'Our Art Critic'). I think that what I wrote in my article in the book following our discussion of the painting bears reproducing at some length:



> Dominating the figure is the artist's protest against death itself and against the impotence of modern medicine, with all its supposed progress, before it. Medicine or, better still, the doctors, had in fact, in his eyes, failed the crucial test: it/they had been helpless in preventing the death of his father. The artist, in fact, makes the issue a personal one, subjectifying it into his grief. The doctor, who is the composition's central figure, is presented as inefficient and callously indifferent to his failure to save his patient's life at one and the same time. The drama of the patient's death is the focus to which the eye is inexorably drawn. Built into the dark and somber background of the picture are the dream-like symbols of doom and despair that represent the state of mind of the commentator himself, the artist. Moreover, this complexity of description is matched technically with a complexity of styles and effects that anticipated his later work, where they were to reappear deepened into far greater sophistication. Here we find the continuation and refinement of the artist's first experiments with cubism. At the same time, the pictorial influence of Degas and, more especially at this stage, Picasso's 'blue period' born out of the vision of a world of heartbreaking sadness, are flagrant. Finally, one may also find the last lingering remnants of his former impressionistic technique, and the first use of a dream imagery which was to be continued ever since, and which was to mature in a startling way over two decades later.' (1991, pp. 160-161)

Looking at it again today in the photo, twenty-one years or so after that conversation, I have lingering memories of the pain still in his face when he referred to his father's death even so many years later, and when he spoke about the narrative contents of the painting. As I look at it again I am still struck by the complexity of the work; its mixture of narrative (integral to nearly all Portelli's subsequent paintings), symbolism, irony and pathos. All enclosed – and not enclosed – as the surgeon's foot captured in the act of stepping out of the 127 x 150.2 cm of canvas onto the frame, into the liberating world beyond suggests. The surgeon stepping out



of the claustrophobic world of the operating theatre with its dramatic events, emphasizes the failure of the operation of which he has just washed his hands. Then there is the artist's own very different orphaned emergence from beneath the tunnel or cocoon-like operating table where, following the surgeon's failure, his assistants are busy finishing the (botched up?) job on the lifeless corpse lying prostate on it, into the alien world which he must now travel alone.

In my 1991 essay, commenting on the autobiographical, anecdotal nature of *La Vie,* I wrote: 'The need to paint pictures of this kind was subsequently to become a felt necessity for the artist, though the stories he tells in his future pictures is, usually because of their intimate nature, never so explicitly told as this one' (1991, p. 159). The remark was based on personal experience of when Frank and I collaborated together on the project of creating a broadsheet with his paintings and my poems in 1978. I'm not precise whose idea it was but I am almost certain that it was his. In fact all I did was to provide the poems, he took care of everything else related to the broadsheet, including the photos on it and the design. *Stillness*, the poem on the blue side, was already written before the project. He did a corresponding painting for it, which is in my possession. *Dream*, which appears on the other, purple, side of the broadsheet, I wrote especially for a painting which he had already done in 1974, and which was dated precisely (very unusually for him) 25th November of that year. This is because the dream had, in fact, truly occurred and was captured in his enigmatic way in the painting on the very day. He described it to me at the time and the story, which was very personal, and which clearly distressed him a great deal, is captured in the poem – I have forgotten the details since, but the date in the title (*Contours No. XLV - 30/X/48*), which coincides with when he was in England, refers to the events in his life when they occurred, which the dream returned him to in the startlingly vivid way which produced the painting (Fig. 1).

This painting, which I hadn't seen since, subsequently reappeared as one of the exhibits shown in the retrospective Bank of Valletta exhibition, curated by Emmanuel Fiorentino, organized in Portelli's honour at the Bank's head office (then in Sliema), and is included in the catalogue specially produced for the event. Strangely, Fiorentino's short comment on it at the foot of the page where it is printed makes no reference at all to this context (indeed it provides a completely different explanation for the painting) or, indeed, to my poem or of its existence. He remarks that 'the mood is rather morose, for the painting was in fact inspired from a distant event in the life of an acquaintance of the artist (hence the date forming part of the title) that the artist however prefers to keep secret.' (1999, p. 66) The title of the work clearly identifies it within the series of works that had marked a fundamental shift in Portelli's style of painting by the 1970s; the virtual abandonment of cubism itself for what he called his 'contour' paintings.

La Vie, as I remarked earlier, saw a crucial development in the cubist style he had been working with up to this point under Cezanne's influence, where he had divided his paintings into broad, ample, planes into crystallized cubism, which was his own invention, where composition and subject are more complex, the surface broken into spatially smaller and more plastic planes, and where a rich and more vibrant palette is brought into play. For a brief time in 1954 he also experimented, not unsuccessfully, with collage. Although he quickly abandoned the medium which he never repeated, the experiment was important and was carried over later to an important phase (which he referred to as constructivist) of his contour works – which he produced and developed in different forms until the end of his life (Fig. 6).

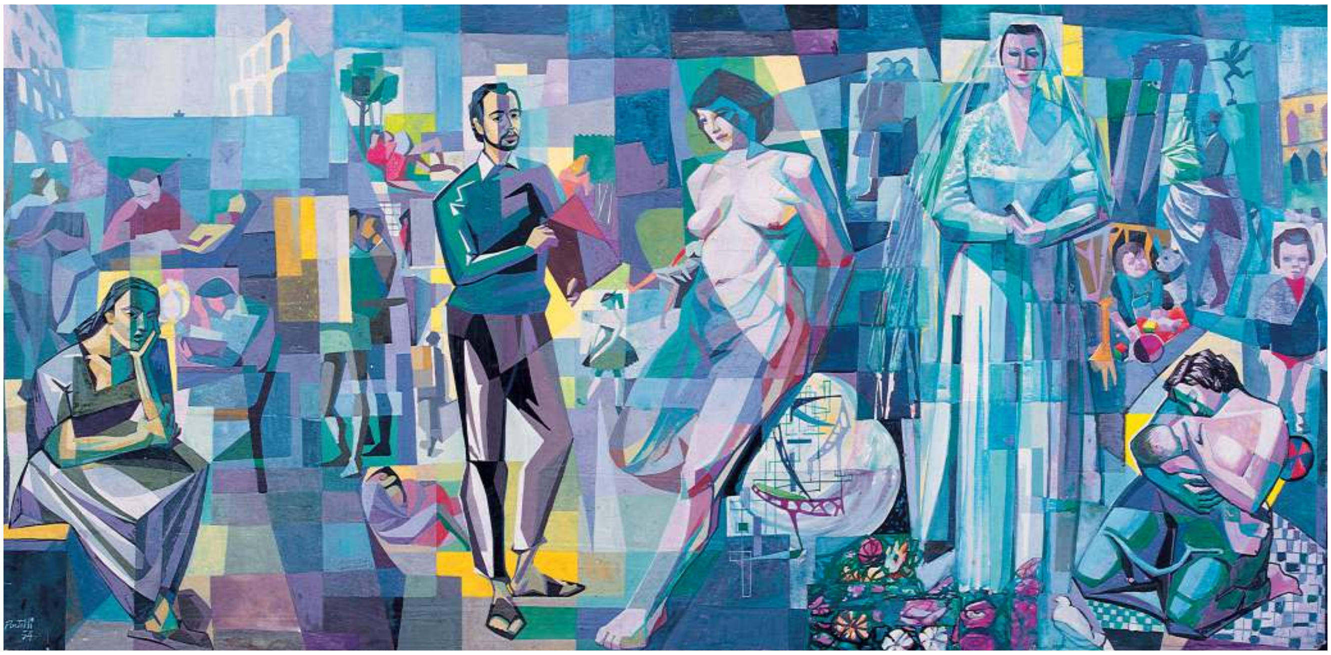
opposite left: Fig. 8
***Agony in the Garden*, 1972**
tempera and emulsion on canvas, 102 x 102cm
(Courtesy of the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta / National Collection, Heritage Malta)

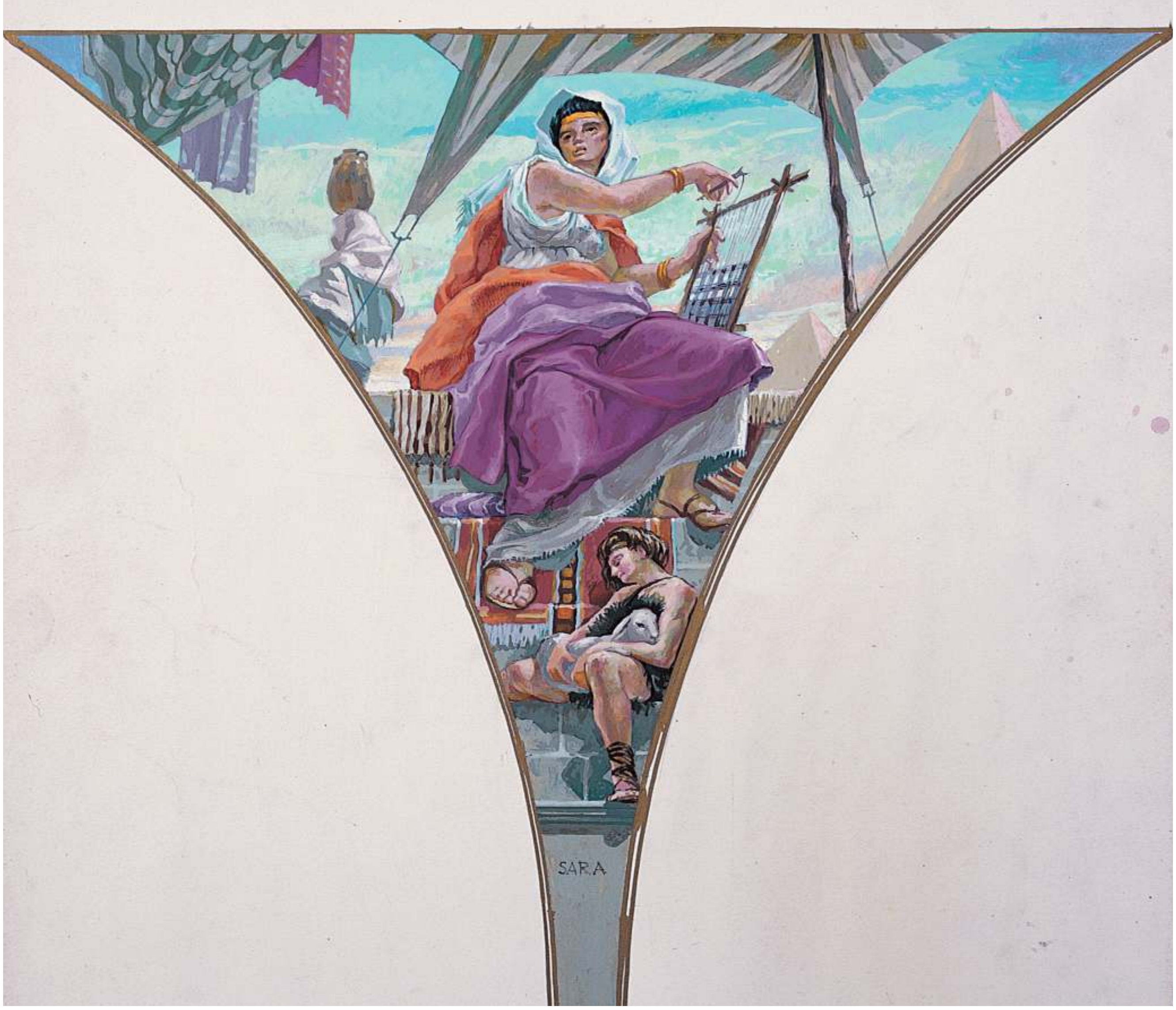
opposite right: Fig. 9
Model for the *Sette Giugno* Monument, 1983,
wood and clay, 65cm high
(Private Collection, Malta)

below: Fig. 10
***My Life*, 1954**
tempera on plywood, 138 x 67.2cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

overleaf: Fig. 11
Bozzetto for Senglea pendentive (*Sara*), 1995
acrylic on cardboard, 34.8 x 37.5cm
(Private Collection, Malta)

In 1954 we have another autobiographical narrative, still with his crystallized cubism technique, but very different in style, scale, tone, mood and composition than the claustrophobic *La Vie*. Titled *My Life* (Fig. 10), it was exhibited at the British Institute in Valletta in 1957. As the title indicates, Portelli wove into it different episodes from his life, the narrative proceeding from left to right but really divided into two broad chapters by the disproportionately large and ample figure of an anonymous female nude model. Otherwise, the two central figures in the work, both smaller, are those of Portelli himself, standing to one side of the model facing her, and his newly wedded and mothered wife Rosa (Henri, their son who appears anecdotally in the painting, was born in 1953; their two younger children, Simone and Sharonne, were born later) standing on the other. Rosa is fully dressed in her white bridal garments (contrasting with the naked flesh of the nude) sobre faced and virginal, holding a prayer book in her hand and looking straight in front. The episodes narrated on her side and that are related to their married life are clearly connected. The episodes on other side where the artist stands are less clear and vague. The figure of the nude model which dominates the centre and breaks the narrative into the two halves is enigmatic – what significance does her presence have in the painting, in Portelli's life'? Any hypothesis I could present would remain just that, a hypothesis. On a different and more concrete tack, the painting demonstrates the comfort he had already achieved by this time in working with large complex surfaces, and which translated well financially for him in the 1960s. The years that followed Independence, with the economic boom they brought with them in the tourist and construction industry, earned him several commissions for murals and the interior design for all sorts of venues; hotel lobbies, nightclubs, restaurants, ministries, and so on. In 1967/68, in fact, he established his own design concern, Studioportelli. Beside the murals and the interior decorations, he was commissioned to design stamp editions, posters, film sets, carnival floats, masks, costumes, and to model monuments and public places, and so on (Fig. 9).





Very late in life he was finally able to fulfill a lifelong ambition to be commissioned to work in churches, which had long resisted any infiltration at all by the modern. In the 1980s he was commissioned to design the interior of the Sanctuary of St Theresa of Lisieux at Birkirkara in its entirety, quickly followed by a commission in the same period to design an altar for the parish church of Marsascala. In both these undertakings he enjoyed a comparative freedom to experiment with designs and materials; stained glass and other effects in the former, sculptural hard metal finished in power bronze in the latter, a freedom which was largely denied him when he nonetheless accepted a direct commission to decorate the Senglea Basilica (Fig. 11). But even though there was much frustrating to-ing and fro-ing with his designs for the dome and pendentives he was asked to produce until they were finally approved, this project (which he began working on in the early 1990s), gave him, I felt, particular pride and satisfaction. I still remember the happiness in his voice the afternoon he invited me over the phone to the Basilica to view the work on the interior of the dome, which he had just finished, and at close quarters before he had the scaffolding removed. I still remember my nervousness standing on a windswept roof where he had taken me when I realised that I would have to climb a rather long and unsteady ladder through the window into the dome. The result of my rewarding experience once inside was my article 'Portelli's Painting of the Senglea Dome', which appeared in *The Times* of the 23rd April 1993.

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Photography
Peter Bartolo Parnis

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