



Fig. 1
Giorgio Preca, *Self-portrait*
(detail), oil on canvas, 1953.
(Courtesy of Midsea Books)

Giorgio Preca di Malta

A double self-portrait of an artist's soul

Sandro Debono unmask[s] the artistic roots and iconography behind a curious self-portrait that nods to both classical antiquity and modernity

My last acquisition as Senior Curator at MUŻA, Valletta, had to be a work by Maltese modern artist Giorgio Preca (1909–1984). It did not just simply happen. I had first seen a good picture of the portrait (Fig. 1, 6) way back in Rome, during one of my frequent visits to the city. It had instantly struck me as a highly unusual work by a Maltese artist painted during times when international modernism was slowly making inroads, albeit oftentimes bumpy. I later got to know that the portrait had been published by Emmanuel Vincent Borg in 1983, but it seems to have subsequently garnered little attention.¹

I was later to have the privilege of exhibiting it locally for the first time in late 2018 at the exhibition *NISĠA: Storja Kontemporanja*, held at Spazju Kreattiv in Valletta—one of the cultural activities supported and spearheaded by the Valletta 2018 Capital of Culture Foundation.² A few months later, Preca's self-portrait was to be registered as a national collection item. The portrait addressed a missing gap in the national collection cluster at MUŻA. Besides being a self-portrait by a Maltese artist who was relatively unrepresented, notwithstanding his standing

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opposite, from top: Fig. 2-3
Giorgio Preca and Josef Kalleya.
(Courtesy of Enio Kalleya);
Cover of the exhibition catalogue for *Giorgio Preca di Malta* exhibition,
held at Galleria il Camino, Rome, 1960.
(Courtesy of the Preca Family Archive)

overleaf: Fig. 4
Giorgio Preca, drawings of alien figures, ink on paper.
(Private Collection, Malta)

in the history of modern art in Malta, I will not hesitate to acknowledge the self-portrait as a seminal work by Preca that is nothing short of a masterpiece.

The visual literacy of a self-portrait

The picture is, indeed, unusual in the context of Maltese modern art history. The image that comes through at first glance is a self-portrait in the classical profile of antiquity. On closer observation, a three-quarters portrait worked out with the same expressive brushwork as the classicising version, also traced out with a firm hand, comes clearly into focus. This double portrait is also complemented by a triad of iconographic elements featuring a monkey-like figure, cerebral matter which the creature also extends forth to touch, and a serpent-like dragon which curls forth from the mouth of the profile portrait (Fig. 1).

These iconographic signifiers complement and intertwine with vigorous and expressive brushwork that approaches painting through drawing. The artist's selective colour palette also serves the purpose of his vigorous drawing, with swathes of colour worked in to give a sense of depth and perceived volume to his composition as guided by his introspective image. Indeed, the painting may be read akin to a drawing with carefully placed accents of colour, oftentimes laid out flat. Preca's brushwork defines contours and volumes, relegating the background to irrelevance.

There are at least five other self-portraits by Preca; some have also been published.³ In all of them, Preca considers physiognomy as the intermittent state through which his introspective inner-self may be read. By comparison, his double self-portrait moves away from physiognomy and resemblance. The subject, instead, is an introspective self-portrait of the artist's soul with a choice of semiotic signifiers that also features in the artist's production of the early 1950s, acknowledged by Elisabeth Manneville, one of the curators at

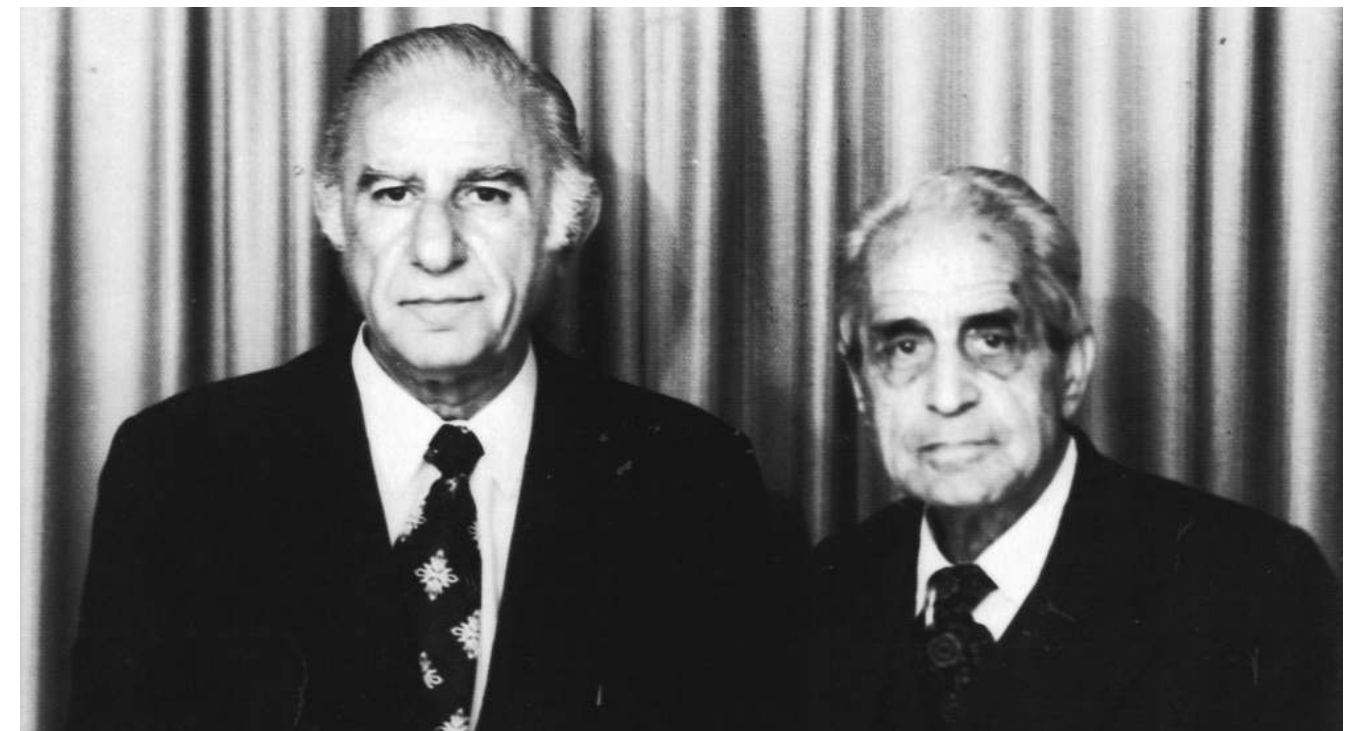
the Département des Antiquités Orientales of the Louvre, as defining his early maturity.⁴

Indeed, Preca is recognised by his peers as the best among them, and was elected as President of the Modern Art Circle active in the early 1950s.⁵ His 1948 exhibition at the then newly inaugurated Phoenicia Hotel, in Floriana, is eulogised by the likes of Italian art historian and critic Valerio Mariani and recognised as a watershed for modern art after the Second World War.⁶

I would like to focus on three stylistic traits exhibited by the double self-portrait which are self-evidently indicative of Preca's artistic repertoire. The first concerns a juxtaposed duality, which manifests itself in the oeuvre of a select number of Maltese artists contemporary to Preca; the second concerns the deliberate selection of iconographic devices, particularly the primate-looking alien which has a highly unusual connection to Maltese prehistory; thirdly, his choice of style which is in line with the latest artistic trends of his times, albeit being concurrently a very personal take on self-expression.

Juxtaposing Duality

Preca is the Maltese artist par excellence, caught within the positive dichotomy of being an islander, albeit having a mental disposition that goes way beyond. Preca never shrugs from acknowledging his Maltese origins; indeed, he is often identified as being Maltese in exhibition catalogues and related literature (Fig. 3). He also continued to frequent the island, perhaps drawn by the umbilical cord of identity that transcended his artistic production for years way beyond his permanent relocation to Rome, around 1958. This double self-portrait is a subtle synthesis of this duality, expressed in the choice of portrait signifiers that articulate the two-sided image of his soul. From one side, the classicising profile portrait is essentially reminiscent of tradition and authority; the other self-portrait is a three-quarters counter-statement

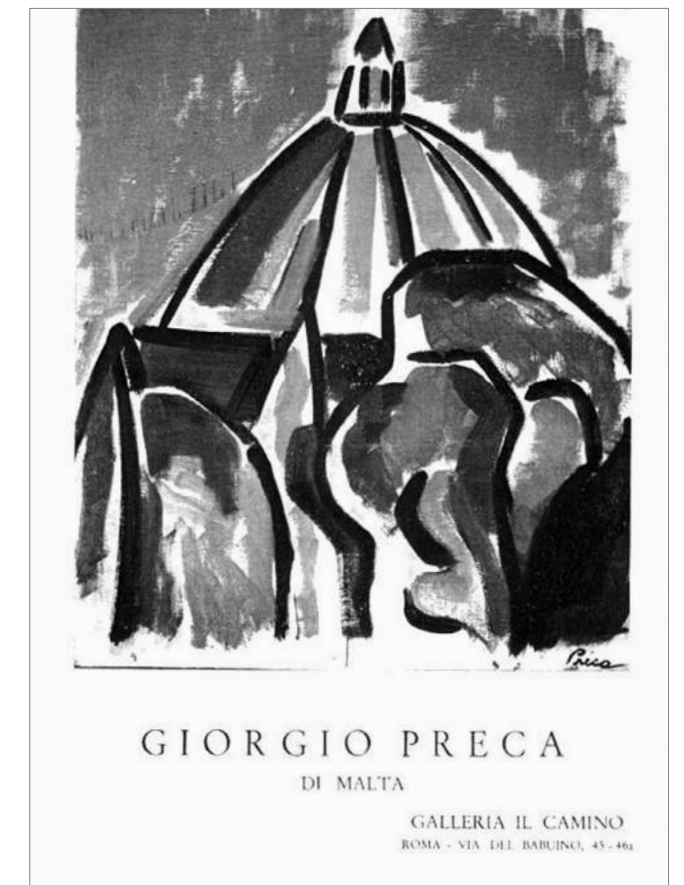


to the two-dimensional classicising profile portrait that is inherently dynamic.

The self-portrait is, indeed, representative of his early maturity; his most profound self-conscious is abstracted through the casual choice of subject matter, including portraiture. It certainly stands out in comparison to the repertoire of physiognomy portraiture mostly painted in the second half of the 1930s, from which we can single out the portraits of Vincenzo Bonello, a close acquaintance and mentor of Preca, Sir Arturo Mercieca and Lady Mercieca, among others. This repertoire, too, can be described as a collection of introspective studies of the personalities portrayed and may also be intrinsically considered as psychological studies. This portraiture repertoire comes to its logical conclusion with his double self-portrait. There is no concern with any compromise of sorts, particularly of the type advocated by Maltese artists such as Frank Portelli (1922–2004), who at that point in time would consider exhibits at the *Modern Art Circle Exhibition* as being hardly modern and 'may displease the art critic whose appreciation of art is restricted to what is classical or romantic', while also maintaining that 'there will be a few who will be disappointed on seeing reproduced here what in Europe was already old a century ago.'⁷

The alien's brain

The main signifier of Preca's double self-portrait is an alien tickling the artist's brain, which complements a series of alien representations painted by Preca in Malta during the 1950s.



This unusual series, extensively exhibited and published, also includes a select repertoire of fine drawings that testify to Preca's agility and search for expressiveness in drawing (Fig. 4-5).

Indeed, Preca's invention of the 'alien iconography' and its assimilation as an iconographic signifier within his repertoire can be read within the context of the times and

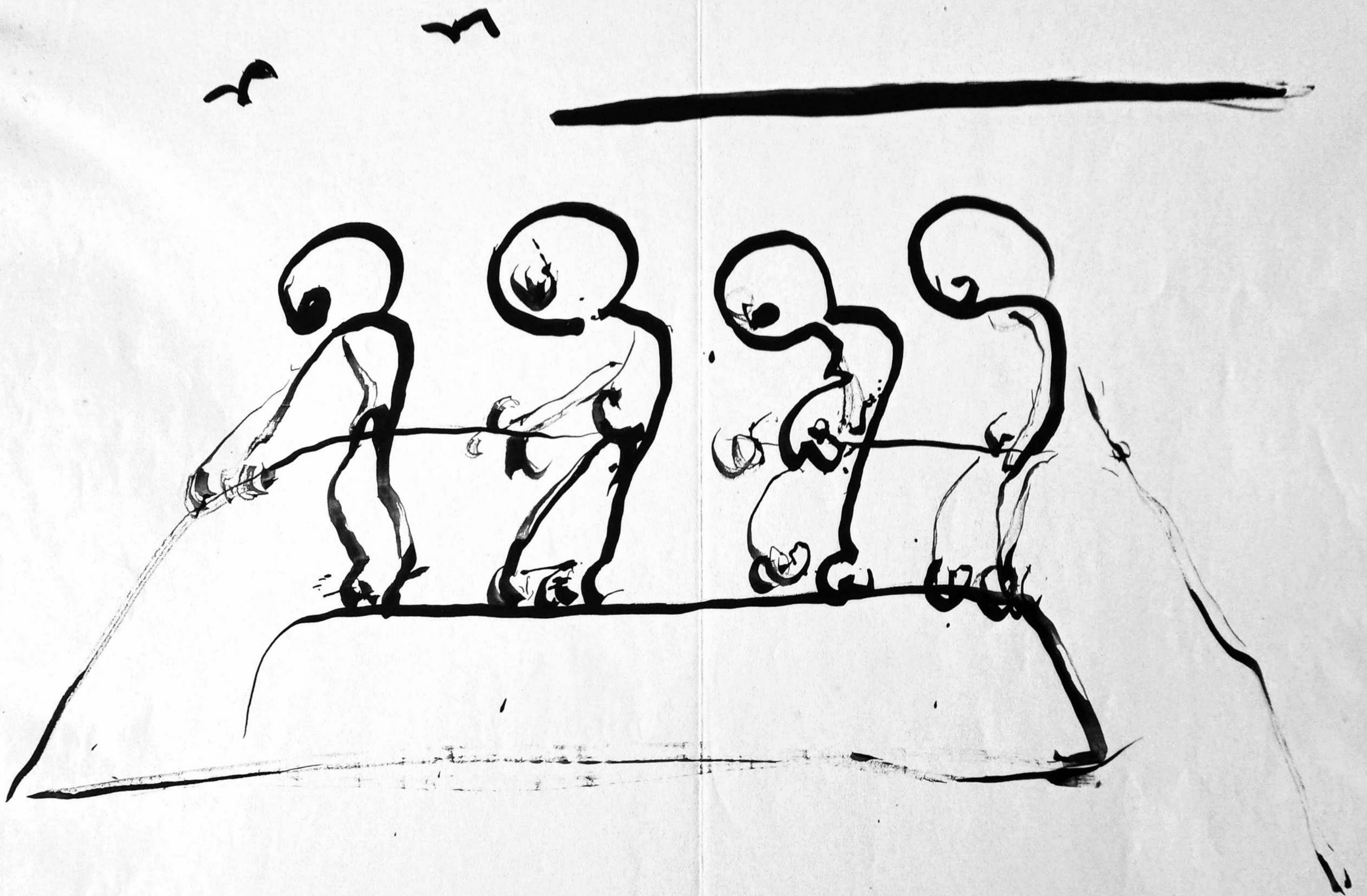
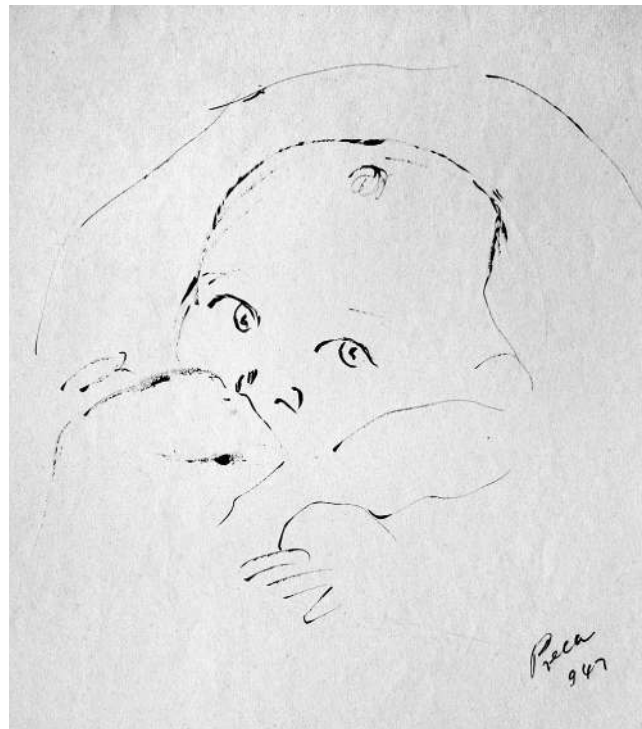


Fig. 5
Giorgio Preca, drawing of a child, ink on paper, 1947.
(Private Collection, Malta)



the increase in alien sightings registered during the post-war period. This iconography can also be read as a direct reference to Malta's prehistoric culture understood by Preca's creative stint to be an alien civilisation. It is also an iconographic invention that was to resonate much more in Rome where the paintings had also attracted the attention of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.⁸ Preca also felt uneasy about Carlo Rambaldi's visual concept and iconography for Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, which was also taken up by the Italian press.⁹ Indeed, Preca had conceived the iconography for his extra-terrestrial alien civilisation much before Rambaldi.

The alien's gesture is even more compelling. Indeed, the creature reaches out to the subject's brain, seemingly tickling his creative genius. The coagulated mass of the artist's brain is worked out in spiral-shaped forms and a layered chromatic palette; these are not only signifiers of the subject's brain, but may go beyond to denote the eternal and transcendental qualities of the idea or concept, irrespective of perceptions and reactions, and the freedom of expression that comes with critical thinking. The alien's head in Preca's portrait becomes the eye for his three-quarter portrait through which the artist explores primitivism.

The alien may also double-up as a reference to the unknown and to the primordial, which also concerns the artist's identity roots, attracting and continuously teasing his critical mind to explore, be inquisitive, and search within himself and his thoughts for the ultimate essential.

A mere title to a picture?

Preca's title is synthetic—*Self-portrait*—in line with the artist's use of titles for his works that are usually short, concise and to the point with no poetic license of sorts.¹⁰ This tends to reflect the synthetic approach of his subject matter which is, more often than not, essential and abstracted, as in the case of his

late phase still-life repertoire. Indeed, Preca's choice of subject matter is evidently purely casual, meant to serve the purpose of a point of departure for his creative itinerary.

The portrait has been described as painted in the abstract expressionist style, but inspiration may be closer to home. Indeed, Preca might have been more conversant with the prevalent style in Europe, as promoted by the likes of Joan Mitchell (1925–1992), whose career is registered mostly in France and whose handling of paint and the juxtaposition of patches of colours, vigorous lines and brushwork marks are suggestive of Preca's. It is pertinent to point out that Abstract Expressionism was introduced in Europe during the 1950s by Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923–2002); this coincides with the period during which Preca painted his double self-portrait. It was also promoted, for example, by the works of Michel Tapié's groundbreaking book, *Un Art Autre* (1952), featuring works by the American Abstract Expressionists. Indeed, Preca's double self-portrait also compares well to works described as *art informel*, characterised by improvisation and a highly gestural technique. Comparisons with works by the Dutch COBRA Group also hold interesting comparisons, particularly the works of Wilhelm de Kooning (1904–1997).

The iconographic reference to the alien in Preca's double self-portrait may also be amply contextualised in the choice of style too. The first generation of American Abstract Expressionists, then in search of timeless and powerful subject matter, turned to primitive myth and archaic art for inspiration. Preca, at this point in time, would have explored his very personal choice of primitive myth through Malta's own prehistoric culture, which he also figuratively

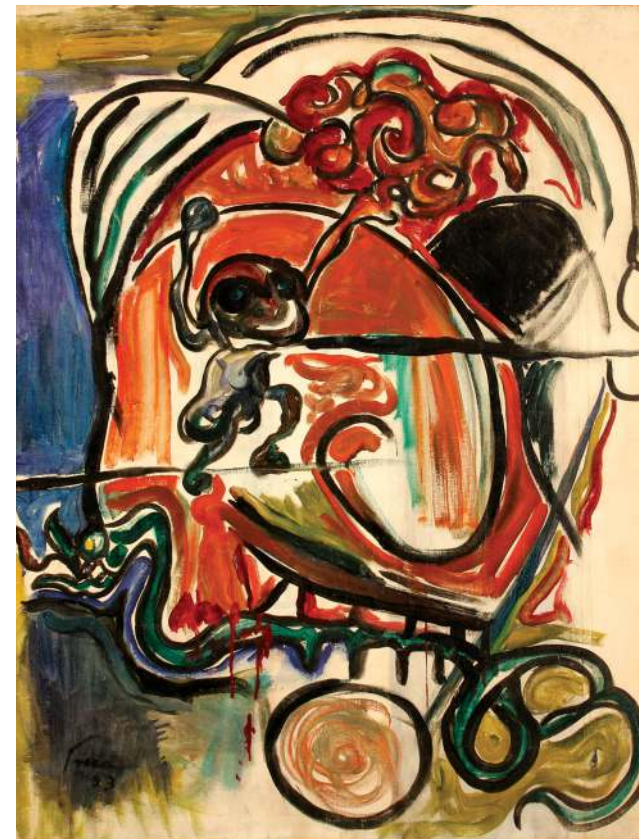


Fig. 6
Giorgio Preca, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, 1953.
(Courtesy of Midsea Books)

The Southern temper, which occasionally breaks out in the painting of Preca is not a school acquirement but a spontaneous flowering of his soul, a native memory: it is the intimate and secret essence of his palette which has now attained such a sureness and independence.

represents in the contemporary series of alien paintings. This is tantamount to an inner search for primordialism, leading Preca to explore the beginnings of time when unknown civilisations might have inhabited the Maltese Islands.

A synthesis of the artist's soul

Preca's double self-portrait is, indeed, worthy of an artist whose islander background did not hinder him from exploring and engaging with contemporary international artistic practice. He remains true to his roots and simultaneously construes a contemporary identity to bridge with the latest artistic developments; a direct outcome of his free spirit. There is little to suggest that this is not a true representation of his soul. It is but an introspection that yields forth his duality and knowledge of contemporary modernism. It is an image of himself as seen through the lens of a very contemporary aesthetic idiom which is uniquely informed by his Mediterranean roots, even though his style leans on European and international examples.

What singles out Preca's double self-portrait are, perhaps, its distinctive Mediterranean qualities in iconography, colour palette, and narrative. The self-portrait is, in several ways, uniquely Maltese, Mediterranean and international, all at the same time. It is, indeed, a true expression of the artist's soul as aptly described by Valerio Mariani in the catalogue of Preca's 1948 exhibition, held at the Phoenicia, in Floriana:

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the artist's son, Massimo, and his wife, Fabiola, for their friendship, lengthy discussions and debates, without which this contribution would have been so much poorer. This contribution is part of the run up to the exhibition *Giorgio Preca di Malta*, which will be held at MUŻA—the Malta National Community Art Museum, in Valletta, in late 2020. The research published here is also part of a wider project on Giorgio Preca, comprising of a forthcoming publication.

Notes

- Emmanuel Vincent Borg, 'Portrait of Giorgio Preca', in *Civilisation*, No. 11 (Malta: Gulf Publishing, 1983).
- Sandro Debono and Irene Biolchini, *NISĠA – Storja Kontemporanja* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2018), 45, 47. This publication has been reviewed by Giovanni Bonello and may be found in this issue on page 84.
- The main portraits I am so far aware of belong to the family collection. One of these has been published in Nicholas De Piro, *The National Portrait Gallery of Malta* (Malta: Miller Publishing, 2015), 481. Besides those in the family collection, one other was sold by Belgravia Auctions in July 2004.
- Joseph Paul Cassar, *Pioneers of Modern Art in Malta*, Vol. 1 (Malta: PIN Publishing, 2010), 124, 374. Elizabeth de Maneville from the Louvre had this to say about him: *il suo talento può dirsi ormai maturo e ciò può essere constatato dal modo originale col quale egli rappresenta individuale gruppi, facendogli vivi nuovi movimenti e dando loro espressioni naturali. È ormai diventato spontaneo in lui rappresentare il soggetto delle sue composizioni senza riempire spazi vuoti rappresentati con colpi di pennello facili ma forti.*
- Cassar, op. cit., 124-129. Dennis Vella, 'Giorgio Preca (1909–1984)', in *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. 18 No. 1 (Christmas 2011), 52-61.
- Exhibition Catalogue, *Giorgio Preca Exhibition* (Floriana: Phoenicia Hotel, 1948).
- Cassar, op. cit., 129.
- Some of the paintings from the alien series still have the museum label at the back. It transpires that the museum had, indeed, acquired the works, but the artist decided to retrieve them later at some point in time.
- Anon., 'Marziani Venticinquenni', in *Momento-Sera*, 23-24 July 1976: *È dal 1952 che Giorgio Preca dipinge esseri extraterrestri per un innato gusto del fantastico e dell'irreale che forse gli deriva dalla sua origine Maltese.*
- See Cassar, op.cit., 288-289.