In The Light Of... Malta

Echoing the theme of the EU presidency selected by Malta, "In the Light of... Malta", the choice of paintings displayed in this exhibition seeks to explain how and to what extent Malta’s Mediterranean light is captured in the forms, themes and brushwork of different generations of Maltese artists.

Mediterranean light with its broad range of tonalities has long inspired artists and still continues to do so today in both landscape and non-representational paintings. The passage of time, light and shadow, and the evocation of a sense of the ethereal has inspired works of art that capture the essence of Malta through observation and sensitive renderings.

Altogether, the Maltese islands can look back to 7,000 years of history in culture and heritage. Since joining in 2004, Malta has been the EU’s smallest and most densely populated country. However, Malta’s geographical location in the Mediterranean Sea has made it strategically important as a naval base throughout history. This has made Malta a melting pot of cultural histories, ranging from a golden Neolithic period, with remains such as the mysterious megalithic temples dedicated to the goddess of fertility, on to Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans and the Byzantines, Normans as well as later to French and British remains; all left their trace on the islands.

In 60 A.D. St. Paul was shipwrecked on the island while on his way to Rome and brought Christianity to Malta. The Arabs conquered the islands in 870 A.D. The Muslim influence can be traced back to medieval times and the Siculo-Arabic language, which was imported to the island from Sicily and eventually evolved into the Maltese language. Until 1530, Malta was an extension of Sicily governed by the Aragonese and other conquerors.

From 1530 to 1798 the Knights of St. John took Malta through a new golden age making it a key player in the cultural arena of 17th and 18th century Europe. Italian and Flemish Mannerist painters embellished the Knights’ palaces and the churches on the islands. Among many others, painters such as Caravaggio, who painted at least seven works during his 15-month stay on these islands, and Mattia Preti further revolutionised local art.

In the 1920s the National School of Art was established by the Maltese Parliament. The emergence of the "Modern Art Group" greatly enhanced the local art scene after the Second World War. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1964, Malta has become an interesting destination for art lovers, not only because of its ancient cultural heritage, but also due to its emerging yet shy contemporary art scene. In recent years, a new generation of Maltese artists has begun to stretch their wings in Malta and produce art that can compete at international level.

Since 2002, StArt, a groundbreaking artists’ group, has curated a number of exhibitions in Malta. One of its aims is to get the importance of art recognised by the Maltese educational system. Founded in 2008 as a geographically specific project space by artist and curator Mark Mangion, the MCA—Malta Contemporary Art—is a research platform for contemporary visual culture that explores the diversity of artist-curatorial practices.

Malta, and Valletta in particular, will host the European Capital of Culture in 2018. Culture is thus at the top on the current national agenda, and the arts have never been as prevalent in the country as they are now.

This temporary exhibition brings together works of art from the permanent art collection of the European Parliament and Malta itself, also featuring artists that are represented in both parts.