

Art

Living an enchanted dream

Charlene Vella

A world of chivalry and war, of hope and unrequited courtly love, a world of castles, weapons, armour, shields, staffs and fearlessness on facing death, a lost age that lives on in fairytales, 13th century romances and history books. A world inhabited by tales such as those of the Lady of Shalott and Camelot, and the legends of King Arthur. This mystifying age of gallantry is what Luisa Del Campana (b. 1950) has tried to capture in her exhibition at the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* in Valletta, that is mainly representative of the knights that belonged to the Order of the Temple.

The paintings, hung high up on the main hall's walls, tower over the spectator and demand attention. The visitor is just a helpless onlooker witnessing an ongoing battle, the last breath of a dying warrior, or a helpless mother and child bidding farewell to their beloved husband and father who is departing to fight for honour. The set-up thus was successful in transporting one's mental state to the Middle Ages, despite the Baroque décor of the hall which is nonetheless symbolic of the history of another chivalric order, the Knights of St John.

The two-dimensionality with which the subjects have been treated and their heavy black outlines are very akin to the aesthetics of the art of stained glass. This is a lingering aspect in Del Campana's work, a natural development having worked for many years in stained glass. Unlike the inflexible medium that is glass, within the chromatic confines of the canvases' outlines, Del Campana leaves visible fading brushstrokes that leave a somewhat unfinished effect that contrasts to the rigidity of the subject and composition, and thus, imbues it with a little life and freshness.

The bold colours seen throughout the exhibition are symbolic of the regal age, with crimson and blue compositions imbued with metallic greys and gold. The predominance of blue is perhaps indicative of the costly bright blue pigment obtained from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone used widely down the centuries, including the Middle Ages, to adorn architecture, mosaic programmes and also used for painting.

There is no doubt as to the use of gold, reminiscent of the medieval courts with their gold crowns worn by royalty, a colour symbolising the heavens. The colours' audacity conforms to the aloof figures, most of which are depicted as faceless warriors who in battle lose their personal being and are enveloped by bravery, strength and valour.



The Battle

Del Campana is also using medieval symbolism such as the fleur-de-lys, a heraldic symbol, as well as the enlarging of bodily features such as hands to strengthen the imagery's impact. This is however one facet of the Middle Ages, which was also an age of deep spiritual thinking.

"This art sacrificed the proper representation of the natural world to evoke the spirit of a fearful age"

On the insistence of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), for instance, a French abbot and a reformer of the Cistercian order, an austerity in the visual aesthetic was demanded in order to not distract those in prayer with unnecessary ornamentation.

Although this austerity is present in some Cistercian buildings, a rich and colourful art and architecture developed throughout the Middle

Ages, one that is hard to appreciate since much of the colour on sculpture and architecture has decayed. In the latter, a Christian art that elevated an overpowering God developed, an art that was to embellish but also to instruct the layman on Christian doctrine.

This was an art that sacrificed the proper representation of the natural world to evoke the spirit of a fearful age, an age inhabited by people who wanted to live a holy earthly life to ensure a passage to a heavenly after-life. This art, with its seemingly naïve visual language, is what Del Campana is trying to reinterpret in modern terms to evoke the sense of an honourable age depicted in what is harmony and beauty in its own right.

In the exhibition hall, a video montage of Del Campana's working process was on at one end of the hall, but what was a little bothersome was the lack of captions of individual works, though a booklet was printed for this Malta exhibition.

Tempo di Medioevo was inaugurated in the presence of Nazareno Betti, mayor of Pian di Sco', Del Campana's home town in Tuscany, as well as Italian Ambassador Paolo Andrea Trabalza.



Crimson Horseman



Blue Bowman

YOU'VE ONLY GOT ONE LIFE
TAKE CARE

