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If you are intrigued by this beautiful island's ability to create 'Gozo fanatics' like ourselves, then plan a visit. We always stay for more than just a day. It's the secret hideaway of all Maltese. Which is why we would prefer to leave it undiscovered by you. But it's in our nature to share the best we have with visitors.



FOLKLORE FANTASIES IN WATERCOLOUR

Maltese ladies sipping tea in their overfurnished sitting rooms; crowded *festa* scenes reproduced in a typical detail; reminders of the gaudy festivities and noisy celebrations which happen every summer in our villages. Kenneth Kenneth Zammit Tabona perfectly captures Maltese culture on canvas.

JO ANN VASSALLO words







Kenneth Zammit Tabona has long been building up a fine reputation when it comes to art in Malta. As a child, he doodled and scribbled like most other artists of calibre did. A doodle turned into a figure and a figure was given a face and soon the realisation that he was talented became something rather obvious to those around him. He wasn't one to take criticism and being the opinioned child he was, his experiments were totally in his hands and his art wasn't open for suggestions. He laughs about this as he recounts the stories of his relatives trying to correct his work.

Anyone who knows Kenneth takes pleasure in his conversation and those who are familiar with his writing know that his talent does not only stop at art. His paintings ooze a sense of cultural richness and creativity and they certainly do not lack colour.

The thing about Kenneth is that he seeks to bring out a sense of accuracy in each preliminary sketch which is then brought to its finished state by an overflow of colour. This is ideal when seeking to paint a rich Mediterranean culture like that of the Maltese. The colours bring out the warmth of the people, the dedication in their village festas, the typical Maltese ▶



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HIS WORK HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS NAÏVE, CARTOONIST. ONE THING MOST PEOPLE AGREE ON IS ITS UNIQUENESS IN STYLE

furniture that fills their sitting rooms, and lately, the colours of ‘plein air’ and the Maltese outdoors.

In fact a change in subject is seen in Kenneth’s latest exhibition at Gallery G in Lija; his painting ‘en plein air’ with his fellow artist comrades have slowly but surely led to the creation of a new collection of landscapes. The landscapes are just as colourful and detailed, such as the picture of the branched tress at Argotti, standing in all their glory against back drops of niches and stone work. This change in theme, moving to the outdoors, was mostly brought about by a change in medium, explains Kenneth. Whereas previously he painted solely in gouache and pen and ink, lately he has started to make use of water colours. This gives his

painting more freedom, and although I couldn’t comprehend this change immediately, if you study a painting of his from the ‘people’ collection and compare it to the more recent ‘al fresco’ collection, you may notice how the older painting has a more static feel to it. Nowadays Kenneth has captured a fluidity in what he paints which is different and improved in certain ways but at the same time it doesn’t override the beauty of his former collection.

The most exciting development however arises when one sees his newest work which is a fusion of the old ‘people themes’ but using his newly perfected watercolour skills; thus we can admire the same details of a village

festa but with a more fluid feel to the whole scene as the work becomes freer with watercolours. To obtain the effect of the heraldic statues the artist has a special trick – sprinkling some gold glitter on his paint brush. Kenneth giggles as he admits this may sound a bit gaudy but the finished effect is truly unique.

Pen and ink are always the base of every painting, he explains, but as I discovered from Zammit Tabona himself it was also the first medium he used when he was introduced to his audience as an illustrator. One could say that this incident was the start of an adventure which led to him becoming a professional artist. Kenneth likes to refer to his becoming ▶

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HE SEEKS TO BRING OUT A SENSE OF ACCURACY IN EACH SKETCH WHICH IS THEN FINISHED OFF WITH AN OVERFLOW OF COLOUR

an artist as a series of accidents, and like all people whose dreams come true, there is a slight fairy tale feel to what happened. Kenneth in fact never really thought that one day he would be a professional artist. "It was just never part of the equation," he exclaims.

The story started in the eighties, when as a young man he used to write reviews about musical performances at the theatre, and, having acclaimed a reputation for his writing skill, he was approached by the Marquis Nicholas De Piro who at that time resided abroad. De Piro was preparing his book "Lost Letters" and had asked Kenneth to contribute to its writing. A friendship was established between the two and a correspondence began. When Kenneth was sending one of his manuscripts by post one time, he happened to insert a sketch in pen and ink of De Piro's aunt. This was greatly appreciated by the Marquis and he immediately phoned up Zammit Tabona with a new even more exciting proposal – to illustrate the book! And that was that; "Lost Letters" was the first book to be illustrated by Kenneth Zammit Tabona. It was certainly not the last, as among the books that Zammit Tabona has illustrated, one can find "Malta – A collection of Tales and Narratives", written by Robert Attard and published by the Edward De Bono Foundation. ▶



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One can say that Kenneth Zammit Tabona's local breakthrough after his illustration work was his exhibition in 1992 at the Melitensia Art Gallery in Lija. Here the work he presented was well received and he slowly became an icon in his field. Kenneth has since had a number of exhibitions including both solos and collectives. He has taken part in an endless number of exhibitions for charitable causes and was featured as one of the ten watercolourists in the collective exhibition at Gallery G in November 2005 which led to the publication of a book which also included his work.

His work remains bright and colourful and fiery with detail. It has been described as naïve, cartoonist and "ecclesiastical haute-couture", (De Piro, *The International Dictionary of Artists who Painted Malta*). One thing most people agree on is its uniqueness in style. Zammit Tabona says he does not like to be influenced by mood when painting and has never really turned to art to get over a bad mood. He believes that his art expresses the type of colourful person he is. Nicholas De Piro also writes about Kenneth, "Zammit Tabona's understanding of the traditional décor flavoured by the Maltese gentry is the product of his gift of penetrating observation"; he says that, "his many depictions of busy street scenes, idyllic landscapes, grandiose drawing rooms and spectator-filled balconies grace the walls of good collections at home and abroad where people feel some nostalgia for Malta".

The enthusiasm of the artist to learn more and develop his skills is obvious when one looks back ten years and analyses the changes he continues to make till this very day. "One of my greatest inspirations is the late lamented Giuseppe Arcidiacono who I admired tremendously and whose boldness I timidly try to emulate!" (www.kztabona.com). He recalls his mentor with great sympathy and how he had urged him to throw more water onto his paintings during class. Now Kenneth seems to be finding a whole new freer style as he takes on the world of watercolours and keeps the memory of his teacher close by. **SL**