

## *Poetry in Geometry*

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Today some contemporary artists are trying to bring back the ancient images, because they feel that they were much closer to nature than the art of the industrial age. Certain Neolithic forms have been noticeable for a long time and they had great meaning for the ancient cultures. The centric circle, the spiral, the meander, the zigzag and many other shapes are still meaningful to us. Even if we cannot give the right interpretation of their symbolic significance, these forms have some kind of connection to human identity. Most of these geometric shapes have influenced many modern artists. Louis Casha is a Maltese painter who frequently uses geometric motifs and highly symbolical imagery. During the 1960's, he was one of the first painters in Malta to make use of Maltese prehistoric imagery in his work. His interest to recreate something that had already been created by the prehistoric artist moves him so deeply whenever he paints. Malta's prehistory is always in his mind. Casha finds a certain similarity between the prehistoric motifs and geometrical designs created in 'Op art'. This concept is expressed in most of his works.

Key words: Painting, Maltese Prehistoric art, Op art, symbolism, geometric motifs, psychological motive.

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## **Introduction**

An important Maltese artist who explored the geometric symbolism of Maltese Neolithic art is Louis Casha. Casha combines the geometric element, which is found on Maltese Neolithic pottery and other artefacts, with that expressed in Op art. The artist recalls his interest in prehistoric art and why it is a source of inspiration for him. He stated: "I think my interest is to recreate something that has already been created by our prehistoric artists. This is something that moves me and I admit that it is something on my mind whenever I paint. There is something, which is curious about these prehistoric motifs that inspire me, and so I think that I would be re-interpreting these motifs that have been already interpreted by our prehistoric artists. This is something that is in my heart" (2001).

We know that there is a 'latent mine' of material in Malta's prehistoric past which can be well explored and exploited by many contemporary artists. Louis Casha is one of the first Maltese artists who managed to achieve this in his art career. Professor Oliver Friggieri (1982) commented in the brochure of Casha's first personal art exhibition held at Gallerija Fenici, in Valletta, Malta in 1982: "Maltese prehistory is itself an environment, physical as well as psychological, within which the artist recreates what had originally been created, revisits the past to intuit the present, and derives the basic contours he needs as a point of technical departure and as a point of cultural (that is symbolical) reference embryonic symbolism, analogous to the idea of cyclicity, is a sure evidence of the artist's experience as an explorer in the desert of what is initial, primitive, mediate and therefore eternal. Continuity has become a version of the intuition of permanence. The artist's immobility, however, is moveable. Time is related to space and movement, immediately associated with the image of a circle, is depicted both as a state of transformation and as a state of changelessness. Repetition is interpreted as innovation".

Louis Casha's art is essentially derived from his love of Neolithic forms, discovering the individuality of the cultural identity of his country and redefining thematically and stylistically his artistic expression. Art critic, Emmanuel Fiorentino, describes clearly the profound attachment of Casha's art to his native land: "His is an art steeped basically in the full glow of patriotic sentiments nourished from an age when idea of patriotism had not yet been dreamed of but which was fully conscious at the same time of a pride in its religious buildings both for its living deities and dead ancestors, and either erected above ground or scooped out of the earth's bowels" (1986).

To many local and foreign artists the symbols from the temple architecture and the variety of figurines are one of the most fascinating aspects of Maltese Prehistory. The symbols vary from images of carvings in stone of domesticated animals, plants, and abstract designs, to pottery decoration, which all carry some kind of symbolic messages.

## **Geometric symbols and patterns**

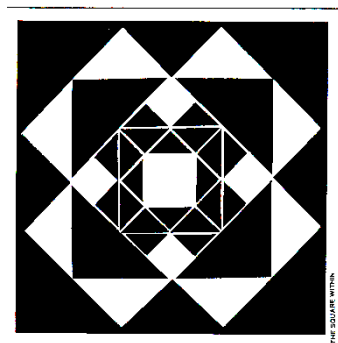
One of the most common sources of inspiration from Neolithic artefacts that is found in Casha's drawings and paintings are geometric symbols. He explains how he was inspired and from where he brought such motifs. "It is true that I experimented a lot on the geometric motifs from Malta's prehistoric art, especially from the phase of

*Borġ in-Nadur* and *Baħrija* but incidentally it was not the geometric patterns as such that started me on my prehistoric themes. I had started with the rhythmic spirals from *Tarxien*, and then went to the lyrical works from the oracle chamber of *Tarxien*. Then I used the symbolic works of the goddess and the statue-menhir and later the geometric shapes of *Baħrija*. Incidentally I had read a degree in Maltese history and archaeology at the University of Malta and one of the main themes that I scrutinized, and analysed, was the fragments from the prehistoric art and those fragments started me off to recreate geometric patterns, from the early times of pre-history and to make them look contemporary by re-interpreting them as real geometric works. They were first geometric works in black and white. Mainly they were triangles and squares, which I depicted from the fragments of the *Baħrija* and the *Borġ in-Nadur* phase" (2001).

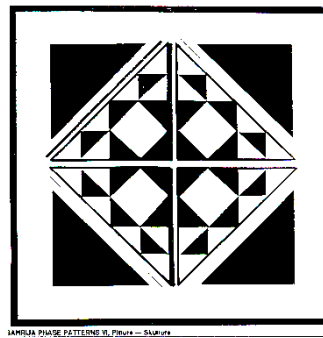
### **Geometric motifs and Op art**

We know that the decorative patterns that are found on Maltese Neolithic pottery are some of the best examples in Europe. The abstract motifs found on pottery range from spirals, circles, zigzags, triangles, squares as well as other patterns that are both geometrical and at times various irregular shapes. Casha was mainly attracted to the form of the triangle and the square. In fact the motifs that are found on pottery from the phase of the Bronze Age in Malta were of important inspiration for the artist. He succeeds to interpret these motifs in his paintings in a modern context. Neolithic geometrical shapes are his point of departure, and this serves as a way to come closer to a modern style of artwork - Op art. The artist feels that his work becomes the bridge between the past and the present. He relates how he became interested in Op art. "Mainly I realised that there was a vacuum in Op art as such in Malta and so I thought, why not recreate Op art from these pre-historic motifs? That is what I tried to do. I enlarged these geometric shapes and made them look contemporary to Op art, which was so popular in the 60's especially in England. As a matter of fact it was after I had visited the Venice Biennale in 1968 that I came in contact with the works of British artist Bridget Riley. You know that she uses Optical art, Kinetic art, and so those started me off to Op art" (2001).

Casha's artistic vision is to re-create geometric forms derived from Neolithic Maltese pottery and transform the shapes into precise mathematical forms that show the aesthetic value of what our ancient ancestor artists left for us. At times the artist takes only particular patterns from just simple fragments of prehistoric pottery. The final aspect of the painting or drawing would be the repeated shapes resulting in an abstract composition as seen many times in Op art. A good number of these works were made purposely in black and white to achieve an optical tension of movement. Two good examples of these works are *The Square Within* (Fig. 01) and *Baħrija Phase Patterns VI*. (Fig. 02).



(Fig. 1: *The Square Within*)



(Fig. 2: *Bahrija Phase Patterns VI*)

The use of mathematical forms has become not only his characteristic (1986) but also a kind of "poetic fantasy" (Cutajar, 1982). Ex-National Museum curator, Dominic Cutajar (1986) wrote: "They are in effect summary poetic notations beamed by an aesthetic cosmos across the distance of 7,000 years, picked and sensitively deflected by a modern intellect" (p.7). Emmanuel Fiorentino (1982), gives a comparative example when he comments that "Casha's relationship with line and form is based on a relative, purity of spirit, recalling in a vague manner Klee's wish to be 'as though newborn ... ignoring facts and fashion, to be almost primitive', making it clear that creative impulse cropping out from within the psyche determines the paths of self expression. The eye and the mind converge towards the same pole, weaving through a maze of visual impressions many of which have their justification lost in the bewildering tissues of the labyrinthine subconscious."

One may sense that in Casha's work the spirit of nature and that of the unconscious become united. His geometric forms symbolise order. I see that the way he handles these geometric shapes especially the square as well as the rectangle, the artist is seeking to converse with nature. "The square (and often the rectangle) is a symbol of earthbound matter, of body and reality" (Jaff , 1964, p. 249).

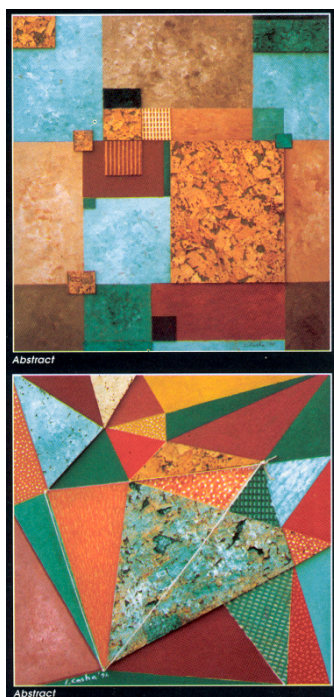
### **Memories of Childhood and the Kaleidoscope**

Another point I want to mention is that Louis Casha combined the inspiration from prehistoric motifs and his childhood recollections of visual images of the kaleidoscope. After his 1986 exhibition *Time and Space*, at the museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta, Malta, his repertoire of black and white geometric patterns prompted him to work more on abstract images derived from the patterns of the kaleidoscope. He remembers how such images seen through a kaleidoscope remained in his mind since childhood. He recalls: "When as a child I used to play with a paper kaleidoscope, I used to turn it round and round to see the geometric images that are still vivid in my mind. Of course they are not as clear as they were then, so I started off with recreating those visual images, which were so important to me as a child. It was a kaleidoscope, which we, as children, used to make ourselves. We used to put in it tiny bits of coloured paper or fragments from wine bottles, which gave me a certain sensation. I still remember trying not to disturb the kaleidoscope because there would be some fascination behind the scene, but of course, the images used to be blurred. Once you shift it a little, the image would be gone" (2001).

The merging of geometric shapes inspired by Maltese prehistoric motifs and coloured images from the kaleidoscope provided Casha with enough material to produce a vast range of abstract compositions. The 'stylistic primitivism'<sup>1</sup> aspect of his work, strongly demonstrated the formal borrowing of geometric patterns derived from Neolithic pottery. The motifs inspired by the kaleidoscope support the idea that the simplicity found in the coloured shapes reminds the artist of the primary vision he first observed when he was a child. The artist continues to speak about the kaleidoscope and the relationship with prehistoric patterns:

"So, after 1986, I started to play with the idea of going back to my childhood days and recreating more colourful imagery. But even when I come to execute these works, at the back of my mind there are still the textures from prehistoric art, the dots for example, and the scratching. They were evident and that is how I want them to look like. I want that these kaleidoscopes would be a follow up of the geometric, of the Op art, which I had already done in the 1986 Fine Arts exhibition" (2001).

In Casha's assemblage *Abstract No1* and *Abstract No2* (Fig.3) one could see clearly the delicate results of his marbled coloured triangles and rectangles used with fine textures, inspired by the kaleidoscope. He utilises all sorts of found objects like pieces of wood, fabric, cork, glass, broken shards of pottery, and plastic. The artist brought back in his art the vivid memories of the effect that the kaleidoscope left on him as a child. Going back to his childhood days is a psychological motive. Here the artist is treating the 'archetype' of the child as a link with the past. As Jung (1969) stated in his study of this archetype: "The retelling and ritual repetition of the mythical event, consequently serve the purpose of bringing the image of childhood, and everything connected with it, again and again before the eyes of the conscious mind so that the link with the original condition may not be broken" (p.162).



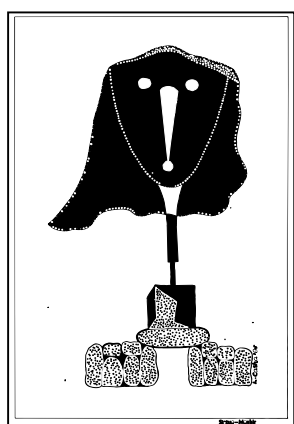
(Fig.3: *Abstract No1* and *Abstract No2*)

It appears that such geometric shapes stimulate a psychic urge to bring back to consciousness the basic factors of life that they symbolise (Jaffé, 1964, p.49). His great love for the natural setting of the environment where he used to live as a child, a place covered with relatively luxuriant vegetation, has left its mark on the man (Borg, 2000, pp. 66-67). The reason to create works of art representing these reminiscent aspects of his childhood is his great care for nature. According to art critic, E.V. Borg, Casha's "intention is not to protest against artistic convention, not even a desire to create a new order out of chaos, but his natural inclination and deep longing to sing a paean to Mother Nature, to his environment, so comforting and caressing. He grows so nostalgic that he would never let go his childhood memories. He clings to them with determination."

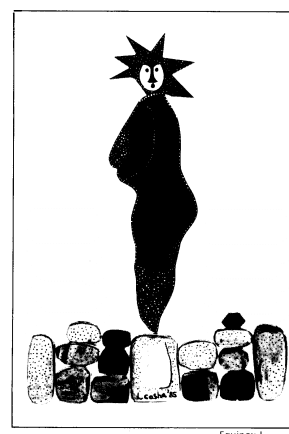
Louis Casha's outlook is that unconsciously images from the past keep coming and appearing in his work. For him painting is nothing more than colour and form, and he found this in his exploration of ancient motifs, the colourful shapes seen through a kaleidoscope, and Op art. I argue that Casha's work is not an imitation of what Op artists did in the 1960's but rather a creative urge to abstraction, which we find in some modern primitivists like Kandinski and Klee.

### The Menhir and the Goddess

Going back to his early work of 1985, in *Statue – Menhir* (Fig. 4), Casha combines the shape of the megalithic structures in a very formal manner and the geometrically shaped head of an anthropomorphic statue. The inspiration for this piece is derived from the limestone sculpture found in a rock-cut tomb at Żebbug, Malta. Another similar work called *Equinox I* (Fig. 5), is inspired by the famous Hagar Qim statuette *Venus of Malta*, undoubtedly a very naturalistic portrayal of the female body. Casha created a stylised, imaginary 'head' with a sort of a spiky halo, attached to the body of this mythical female figure. The figure is standing on Neolithic boulders. In both paintings, a pointillistic technique was used to achieve various hues and tones.



(Fig. 4: *Statue – Menhir*)



(Fig. 5: *Equinox I*)

In other works, Casha uses geometric figures and Neolithic motifs like the spiral and pitted designs very frequently found in megalithic stonework. In the case of his interesting painting *Goddess of Fertility* (Fig. 6) the artist uses symbolical abstracted motifs as well as a very stylised geometric female figure, representing the goddess of fertility. He has a great sense of veneration for the mother goddess of nature and the

environment. This work symbolises harmonious balanced structure and order from primordial times born out of chaos. The geometric lines behind the figure represent the 'sacred geometry' (Lippard, 1983, pp. 77-82), which is linked to the essential elements of the earth and the cosmos. Casha mythologizes these motifs and tries to convey the ancient message of an egalitarian peace and an environmental consciousness towards the earth. The geometric figure of the fertility goddess is a visual metaphor which represent birth, death and regeneration.



(Fig. 6: *Goddess of Fertility*)

## Conclusion

I consider Louis Casha's work as 'Poetry in Geometry'. It also appears that there is another motive, which inspired the artist to express symbolical images from prehistory. He also wants to reveal the real cultural identity of the country – Malta. The artist uses his art as a bridge between the past and the present. His work is a straight-forward representation of Malta's unique 'cultural impressions' expressed by using symbolical geometric motifs found on ancient Maltese pottery. The motifs that Casha uses and which carry meaningful significance in prehistoric culture have become invested with new 'personal meanings'. The artist's vision is also a struggle to strengthen the national identity.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Stylistic primitivism' is the term that Rhodes used after Robert Goldwater and Lovejoy and Boas, to describe the work produced by artists and art movements that were greatly influenced by primitive art. He classifies 'stylistic' primitivism into two types. The first is when the artist appropriates the formal language of 'primitive' artefacts, that is, the artist utilizes direct formal borrowings from primitive art forms. And the other one is when primitivism is just a shared creative 'impulse' in the 'primitive' and 'modern' works. These two elements of primitivism provide a general approach to the ways one may classify 'stylistic' primitivism in modern art (Rhodes, 1993, p. 87).

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