

A Man of Glass

The magic of glass making is an ancient mysterious process by which earth mates with fire and becomes a chemical contradiction, a rigid liquid. Glass is a natural material and it is known that it was actually discovered in the region of Syria around 5000 BC. Throughout the years artists used this medium in many ways, for functional or decorative purposes as well as an artistic expression.

One of the very few Maltese artists, if not the only artist, who use glass in his artistic expression is Walter Vella. In his recent personal exhibition entitled '*Shards*', held at the Heritage Malta main offices in Valletta, the artist showed an interesting work called *Cataclysm*. This glass sculpture, taken from his Atlantis series, symbolically represents the sea and a piece of rock, which signifies the earth, 'Atlantis'. As we know, this myth tells us that a violent surge of water covered the land and the island of Atlantis and its people were swallowed by the sea. This sculpture represents the power of water over the earth and that is why in this sculpture we see glass going through the rock. Vella managed to create interesting contrasts between the two vertical slabs of materials: glass shown as crystallized water rising above the solid, hard and cavernous rock.

Walter Vella who is also an excellent, virtuoso musician, started getting interested in the art of glass making when he was apprenticed as a craftsman and designer in a glass factory in Malta in the early seventies. After a short while, Vella followed a diploma course in interior design and in 1982 earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Design management from Kensington University, California. During the years 1978/79 he excelled in printing, namely in etching and aquatint in Stockholm, Sweden, where he also worked as a musician.

1981, Walter Vella held his first one-man show at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta. In this exhibition, Vella showed some of his best ink drawings. During this period he worked with several architectural firms and also on his own for about 10 years and in

1984 he opened his own stained glass studio. He was the first artist to open a commercial stained glass studio in Malta. This period was a turning point in Vella's career.

When Vella left the profession of an interior designer in 1986, he concentrated mostly on stained glass. He had rigorous training and experience in stained glass making under the tuition of Italian master and artist Alberto Positano in Siena, where he learned the difficult techniques of grissaille painting and silver staining. He also experimented with other glass-making techniques including glass-blowing and later started to create kiln cast sculpture. After participating in many collective exhibitions for a number of years, Vella had another personal exhibition in 2004 at St. James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. In 2006 he held another exhibition entitled *Glass Attitudes* which was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

The glass art of Walter Vella symbolically reflects the inner energy of life. The artist successfully finds a way how to work with colour and light to achieve a balance between line, volume, texture and colour. With his radiant beauty of melted coloured glass fused to other materials, Vella conveys to us a 'spiritual journey', which like his music, is an expression of an untimely metaphor.