

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS



Joseph Chetcuti's personal studio, now housing all his works.



Christopher Chetcuti preparing to start chasing a bronze casting.



Cleaning bronzes just after the casting from residual luto.



Christopher Chetcuti chasing his father's bozzetto of Jean de Valette.

A foundry as a legacy

Funderija Artistika Joseph Chetcuti was the brainchild of the late sculptor Joseph Chetcuti. Since Malta was lacking a foundry, he realised that, through the establishment of such a foundry, he would offer a service to local artists who were seeking to cast their creations in bronze and other materials. His son, **CHRISTOPHER CHETCUTI**, has inherited both the foundry and a rich legacy. He talks to **Joseph Agius** about the various aspects of the enterprise and how it can evolve.

The foundry was set up by your late father, Joseph Chetcuti, in 1993 and is the only one that operates in Malta as far as I know. Can you tell us more about its history and what compelled your father to embark on such an endeavour?

Yes, it is the only artistic foundry operating on the island. My father learnt the trade in Florence while studying sculpture there on a scholarship he had won.

On his return to Malta, he started building a small workshop to produce some bronzes for himself. A couple of friends of his wanted to start casting bronze as well.

The late lamented sculptor Frans Galea wanted to start casting some bronzes too. From there, it ballooned into a small business and an opportunity for artists to cast bronze locally.

Funderija Chetcuti has been responsible for the casting into bronze of the majority of the recent spate of public sculptures and monuments requiring this medium that one finds scattered all over the country. Is it difficult to carry on in your father's footsteps and improve on his legacy?

I do not see myself as carrying on into my father's footsteps.

That wouldn't be impossible. I learnt a lot from him and I wish I could have learnt more. I have my own path to take, and in time it might take me into parallel ways with the path my father took, but it will always be another path. As far as legacy goes, I feel I am improving it by keeping the foundry open.

I find that there are two categories of public sculpture. The monuments that document historical events, historical figureheads and politicians, and what constitutes and defines our nation; the other category is the realm of contemporary artists who, through a national call or through other channels, are invited to express themselves artistically with less thematic restraint. Do you find that the latter category should be encouraged more by the competent authorities to aid creativity in open spaces?

Yes, it should be encouraged. Embellishing our public spaces will make for better-looking public spaces. I feel that such sculptures should be accessible though. I do not agree with sculptures in the middle of a roundabout. You cannot look at the sculptures while driving,

can you? Authorities must understand what it takes to produce a public work of art.

Lately, public calls require the artist to take the role of a project manager and oversee the completion of the artwork itself, its installation, landscaping and transport. While this may not seem a lot, with a timeline of usually three months and €25k in budget, it's basically impossible to produce anything. Artists are thrown in a nightmare of paperwork and government official meetings. They are wasting a lot of time managing while they should be producing art.

At this point, either artists decide to take on a project at a great risk or else they try to find representation by a larger company that is willing to take on the production of the project in their name. But with the very low funding, the second option will mean finally that the artists will basically get no remuneration for their work.

Casting in an alloy like bronze or other metals like aluminium confers a dimension of posterity, gravitas and permanence to a work of art. However, this can be regarded as anachronistic in a society, in an art world, that at

times favours the ephemeral and the disposable. Do Maltese contemporary sculptors adhere to tradition? You can mention examples of these sculptors.

"There is a charm in working with your hands and make out something new. I always felt the urge to create. The foundry was and still is the perfect place to fulfil that urge"

I have a limited vision to what Maltese sculptors are producing. When it comes to what they produce in bronze, it is very much a question of funding and necessity. As you put it, once a piece of art is cast in bronze, it has a greater sense of permanence.

Public commemorative monuments are the most common: a bust, for example, as a memorial to a public figure in a community. If the community is large enough and the person

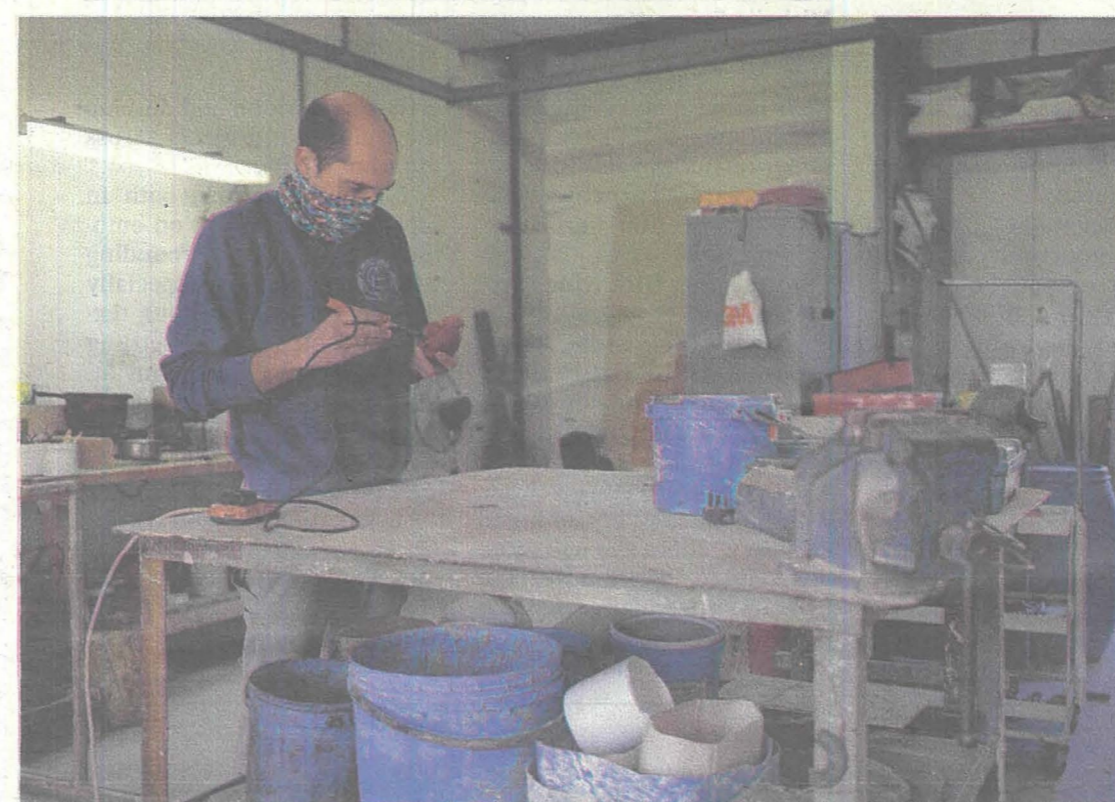
important enough, a full-size statue may be erected.

When it comes to private collections, again funding is the biggest hurdle for artists. So when it comes to bronze, the artist, more or less, must know that it will sell before producing it.

Your father was an artist on his own merits. The sources of inspiration must have been many while casting. The handling of the material itself must have been a source of inspiration. Are you of his same mould? Do you express yourself creatively like he did?

I do not think that casting itself inspired him much. He may have thought that it lent itself to his sculptures, initially but we may never know for sure. I think, deducing from his body of work, that he was more methodical than you might expect in producing his sculptures. He found inspiration in the movement of the human body and emotions expressed by the human body.

I am very much influenced by my father's methods. So, I am more or less inspired by the human body but not as much as my dad. I look for inspiration in nature, the sea, the sky, the



Christopher Chetcuti repairing defects on a wax copy to closely resemble the original as much as possible. Right: Some of the late Joseph Chetcuti's sculptures. PHOTOS: MATTHEW MIRABELLI



rocks, plants, trees, animals, people. Honestly, I am still discovering myself in that aspect.

Can you describe the foundry's environment as regards light, dimensions and general atmosphere?

The workshop is located at the edge of the Luqa Industrial Estate, overlooking Hal-Farruġ. The foundry is basically divided into two workshops. One workshop is dedicated to the production of silicon moulds, waxes, finishing of bronzes and patination.

The second workshop is dedicated to the production of investment moulds and houses the kiln and furnace for bronze casting. Both main entrances lead to a courtyard and are west facing. If the weather is nice in the evening, we get a lot of sunlight

inside the workshop itself during the winter months.

As a young boy, I would guess that the casting process was a mesmerising one; all the fire and danger that go into making a work of art is the stuff of childhood dreams. Was this too overwhelming and did it determine your choice of career?

As a young boy I was always hanging around in the workshop with my father, less so in my teens. The times I spent with him, helping out on some sculpture or other opened up another possibility for work for me. At times it did feel overwhelming. My father always wanted me and my brothers to go help at the foundry.

There were some very difficult times especially when he had accepted some large commissions and was falling behind, which

happened a lot. There was a lot of stress involved.

At the same time my parents pushed me to finish my studies. Deep down, I always liked working at the workshop. There is a charm in working with your hands and make out something new. I always felt the urge to create. The foundry was and still is the perfect place to fulfil that urge. I think I am very lucky in that sense.

Do you consider your discipline as a purist one that isn't too conducive to drastic change? Or is it one that is able to evolve in the use of unorthodox materials to cast? Are Maltese sculptors enterprising in this respect?

Artistic bronze casting is basically about transferring the

artwork with as much detail as possible in bronze or other castable metals. One can do that in a variety of methods or processes. I think as long as the result is good for both founder and artist, the method does not really matter. As far as sculptors and casting go, the casting is up to the founder.

So, the method of casting is decided upon by the founder not the artist. I have to be the enterprising one when it comes to casting and the materials used for casting. There are many modern materials that we use today which give a far better result than other traditional materials.

Yes, in this respect Maltese sculptors do tend to take the risk and try the new materials. Especially if there is a possibility of producing a more unique piece or else the material might

make it easier to produce a certain finish.

Have you got a vision for the space besides its function as a foundry? Do you intend to embark on new projects that would enhance the whole enterprise?

I am currently focusing on building a stronger network of artisans that are more familiar with casting metals. The younger of them have not had access to this sort of trade on the island. Hopefully, in the future, this will lead the workshop to become a centre where young sculptors can find advice, produce their work in bronze or other materials.

I also see it as a place where young sculptors are able to meet established local sculptors. A place where they are able to share their ideas and learn from each other.