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The evergreen gardener

Kurt Bugeja Coster



It took some encouragement for Fr Marius J. Zerafa to join a group of renowned artists and mount an exhibition featuring paintings, sculptures, photos and caricatures entitled Fr Marius J. Zerafa... A Tribute, hosted at Gallery G in Lija.

Fr Zerafa sits back in an armchair and sips coffee. "You have to be chaos to give birth to a shining star," he tells me with a smile, a smile reminiscent of adolescence.

He uses his cane to get out of the chair and draws himself to his full height. He walks out into the corridor, past his works and into the adjoining room, where his old students' works are.

Fr Zerafa has "tended his garden" for decades, his "garden" being the numerous students he taught and encouraged to develop their artistic talents.

In fact, he insists that his students are the most important people to him, almost all of whom have become well-known and established.

Such artists include Vince Caruana, Debbie Caruana Dingli, Madeleine Gera, Anna Grima, Isabelle Borg, Alfred Briffa, John Martin Borg, Marisa Attard, Josette Caruana, Monica Spiteri, Catherine Cavallo, Ray Pitrè, Chris Ebejer, Paul Haber, Zell Osbourne and Sandrina England. Fr Zerafa was the main protagonist in the recovery of Caravaggio's St Jerome when it was stolen in 1984 and the author of Caravaggio Diaries, a breathtaking account of the painting's return to St John's Co-Cathedral in

Valletta. The thieves had even asked a local entrepreneur to kidnap Fr Zerafa and demand a Lm5,000 ransom. Fr Zerafa's Dominican prior joked that he would have paid the thieves another Lm100 to keep him. At the time, Fr Zerafa was Director of Museums following a decade as curator of fine arts, during which period he was responsible for the setting up of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta.

Artists whose works are sought after, including Vincent Apap, Edward Pirotta, Esprit Barthet, Joseph M. Mallia, Charles Cassar Farrugia, Harry Alden, John Martin Borg, Michael Lewis, Gabriel Caruana, Eman Grima, Jan Molga, Tony S. Mangion, Libby Getz, Piero Zampieri, Ray Pitrè, Lawrence Buttigieg, Jamila Rizgalla and Luciano Micallef have all given works to Fr Zerafa as an expression of appreciation. These are also being exhibited. You have to be chaos to give birth to a shining star... and a constellation he has fathered.

Fr Marius J. Zerafa... A Tribute runs until the end of this month.

Gallery G is located at Villa Gourgion, 4, Triq Ugo Mifsud Street, Lija and is open between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday and between 9.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. on Saturday. For further information call 2142 1984/5 or send an e-mail to grimand@medzone.com.mt.

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