

COMMENTARY by Eva Curlanis-Bart

MASSIMO SCARFAGNA

OPUS SACRUM

Stories timeless and eternal .

The sacred, in the classical sense of the word, permeates the life of Massimo Scarfagna, the sculptor and the man. His journey towards the sacred is that of a pursuit of beauty and truth, of art transcending nature to reveal itself in the rich visual language of myths and faiths, of humanity.

After a youthful wandering, globe-trotting and living in the fast lane, Massimo Scarfagna settles in the countryside that straddles the borders of Tuscany and Umbria, the land of saints and sinners, where one lives for and through art, where talent humbles and exhilarates. At the prodding of a friendly priest, Scarfagna buys a property perched on a hill where at the end of the 13th century, Margherita of Laviano (later Santa Margherita, the Patron Saint of Cortona), lived a profane life with her beloved Arsenio del Pecora. The medieval tower commands the views of the nearby Trasimeno Lake, of the Sienese Range and of Cortona, of the rolling hills covered with olive groves, vineyards and fields that change colour and texture with every passing season. The main house of reddish brick as fits the Province of Siena, enlarged and remodeled over the centuries, becomes a home for his growing family – there, overlooking a walled garden, he sets up his studio. With Antonella at his side – his muse and wife – Scarfagna designs, paints, sketches, keeps a “log” in an elegant long-hand, and matures in the most difficult of *métiers*, that of a sculptor.

Tuscany, the land of farmers, artisans and warriors, the cradle of unprecedented talent, captivates this declared Roman. The treasures of the Etruscans, the still intact medieval art and architecture, the gems of the Renaissance as much as the avant-garde of the century past are Scarfagna’s academy. He becomes a master sculptor by being true to the rigours of the craft and to his own intellectual and aesthetic aspirations. His early work evokes the traditions of the Arts & Crafts Movement – furniture, sculpture, glasswork. He tries his hand at a variety of materials – stone, metal and wood, the building blocks of his creative vocabulary. He eventually settles on wood, as it best reflects his sensitivities and his imagination. It’s a humble material for sculpture, not much in use since the Middle Ages, and yet, it enchants Scarfagna – he sees endless beauty in the tortured pieces of trunks and branches, delicate twigs, in the resistance of roots, in the wonder of a piece discarded by nature or man.

But it is the olive tree that eventually seduces Scarfagna. Perhaps, again a coincidence – when in 1985, a violent cold damages hundreds of aged olive trees, Scarfagna buys dozens of them for their scarred beauty. This gift of nature spurns him to ponder, to reveal, to have an ongoing conversation with the objects he chisels. The olive tree that has given us the Mediterranean civilization, that has nurtured man for millennia, that carries the tales and secrets of the centuries past is a tough conversationalist – it does not give away easily, it will not be dominated, it forces one to think and to feel, to respect and to dare – in short, to match the language brought forth by nature by one’s own, contemporary and unique.

Scarfagna is good at this sacred conversation. His sculptures emerge from the primary matter in a vast expressive range. If their forms and dynamics call for a degree of naturalism, it is because nature has already tackled all the abstract elements. In this fusion of nature and art, art follows the canons of structure and composition to arrive at a balanced image of emotional expression. Out of the abstract womb of an olive tree, come out into the open the familiar figures – some selected from the people close to Scarfagna like *Anna, the Mother*, others borrowed from mythology *Harpies, Titan, Cyclops* or recent history *Woman & Man (Antonietta & Guido)*. The

sculptures reflect what we all feel and perceive – life and death, fulfillment and void. The messages they carry are legible to us as they form part of our collective experience – love, passion, friendship, motherhood, betrayal and pain.

In the true tradition of sculpture-the storyteller, Scarfagna's figures give off emotions, situations and moments in time with expressive force and detail. If the human forms emerging from a maze created by nature are reminiscent of the figurative sculpture of the late 19th century, their language of expression is totally contemporary and original. Scarfagna's *personae* are infused as much with the poetry as with the prose of need, passion or love. His *Woman & Man (Antonietta & Guido)* demonstrates with cosmic tension the couple's longing, entanglements, moments of fusion and exhilaration, of distance and anger, of fear. The lovers' paradise, the sacred Eden, explosive and mysterious, is but momentary.

The *Titan* group like the Orphic narratives gives us a glimpse at the ancient playground where fate is dictated by the whims of gods and goddesses. A woman's head, like a Caryatid, bears the weight of her man's burden. A desperate Apollo seeks consolation at the loss of his Daphne who appears at peace with her fate. In this song of love and hate, pursuit and escape, there are notes of what Plato calls "*man's Titanic nature*" – the titanic part being the man's body, and soul being his divine part.

Anna, the Mother takes this theme further – out of the ashes of the Titans comes new life, and not only physical, but spiritual. The latter is at the base of every human being as in the inverted tree of the sculpture – the body turning to earth, and the soul soaring towards heavens. Like mother earth, a woman creates, nourishes, defends, and is instrumental in the transformation of a man into a father as observed by John Paul II in his *Mulieris dignitatem* (1989) – motherhood is a sacred bond like no other from the moment a life forms within a woman's body.

Scarfagna's art is infused with homage to women and their sacred mysteries. The artist makes a parallel of sorts when he transforms the raw material into a statement of fascination and gratitude that he lays at the feet of the one who's given him life, or nourishes his talent. In the work entitled *Muse*, Scarfagna makes it clear that his muse is not only his source of inspiration, but also a guiding spirit that gives sense as much to his art as to his life.

The pursuit of sense in the contemporary life dominated by technological and material advances is seen in the three sculptures entitled *Prisoners*. Executed in low and high relief, the forms emerging from large trunks reveal the seductive illusion of progress that in the end enslaves human beings. Screaming or speechless in their terror, women and men in bondage of chains, bandages or lianas, continue the tale commenced by Michelangelo's *Prisoners*. Human suffering and pain is further manifested in a large piece entitled *Hiroshima*, a work in progress that goes on in the corner of Scarfagna's garden. Monumental in its form, it has acquired a new meaning recently – that of mankind at the mercy not only of its own follies, but those of an unpredictable nature.

Again, the artist continues the tale started a few millennia earlier – the man's struggle between life and death, humility and pride, daring and resignation. His *Icarus*, in the last moment of the fatal flight reaches out for support – and gets it, in a sense, from his father's failed "engineering project" – the wings made of wax. In death or fall from heaven, they become his arc of support, his elegant sepulcher. Carved out of a hollow trunk, the sculpture manifests another side of human interactions – that of dependence and independence, of daring and caution.

The works of Scarfagna have a strong appeal to our senses as they depict a world real and imagined, a world populated by good and evil, by monsters we create in reality and imagination. The sinuous and elegant figures emerging from the tortured, rough and knobbed surfaces signal the conflicting traits of human nature, if not the crisis of values we experience so acutely today. Does the artist point to a way out of this eternal predicament? If he does, it is through his own

creative tales and their morale that man has to fuse with his inner self, his feelings and not his purely rational and logical self. If there is any contradiction in this fusion, it is of the kind that has characterized the history of mankind from times immemorial.

Scarfagna's poetry and philosophy find a perfect outlet in the work entitled *Geminazione*. Out of a single olive tree, contorted, full of scars and ravages of time, emerge images of men and women accompanied by mask-like effigies and humanoids – they mingle and interact, dissolve and reappear as if brought to the scene by the life generating winds. The outstanding feature of this group is a beautiful woman's face made out of bronze, the man-made material of high art, that embodies the essence of life. Cybele-like, she has the force of the mother of all gods to create both good (human figures) and evil (humanoids).

Scarfagna handles his wood with utmost care, love and respect. It has allowed him to enter and experience a world created by the intricate shapes that are born from a tiny seed, that crave light and warmth, that enchant with abundant greenery, that nourish, and command respect when they grow old. It is a world full of fascinating insights and secrets that he transforms into stories timeless and eternal.

Life is at the centre of Scarfagna's creative endeavours. In its sacred and profane character, it keeps the artist engaged in a continuous conversation, prodding him into new directions, ever testing his mental creative efforts. The very nature of wood – be it olive tree, Lebanese cedar or cypress – simple and natural in its expression, has always been an integral part of the language of man.

We see its great dramatic force in a composition entitled *The Last Supper*. Scarfagna translates this key moment of Christianity, the communion of Christ and His Apostles, in his own creative way. A lone figure of Christ looks towards a table where twelve pairs of hands, each with the imprimatur of one of the Apostles, cup the celebratory chalices. Auguste Rodin observed that "*hands express the man*", and they do with the historic detail of the disciples as much as our own, with our virtues and vices. The thirteenth pair, not touching the chalice, embodies the celebratory nature of Christ. With a great dramatic effect, it also signals the celebratory within us – a moment in time, of pain and hope. This table-altar made out of cedar, the wood of the cross, sits on three legs made out of olive tree trunks. The materials and their potent symbolism are further dramatized by the play of light and shadow – light, the bearer of life, both sacred and profane.

Scarfagna returns to the theme of pain and hope in a piece entitled *Judas*. Again, departing from the established iconography, the crucifixion is that of Christ and Judas. Before they take their last breath, Christ poses the very human question "*Why?*" while Judas is fully cognizant of his own betrayal. Scarfagna points here not only to the conciliatory force of the Church, but to this great virtue embodied in all of us – saints and sinners.

Pope John Paul II, in his "*Letters to the Artists*" (Turin 1999) talked of the great mission entrusted to the artists – theirs is a contribution not just to the cultural heritage of a nation, but to individual human beings by reminding them of the good, of the *daimon* and not just the demons. This is exactly what Scarfagna has been doing – looking to his material and to his own creativity to formulate messages free of rhetoric, yet poignant. His sculptures revive what appeared to have been lost to the modern world, art at the centre of the public square – art that engages and invites us all to enter the conversation that is timeless and eternal.