

Bonaria Manca

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Bonaria Manca (1925) lives near the town of Tuscania, in the old heartland of the Etruscans, about a hundred kilometres north-west of Rome. She was born on Sardinia, however, and her passion for the island where she grew up will never desert her. The song with which she always greets her visitors, a ritual incantation as it were, is in the Sardinian language.

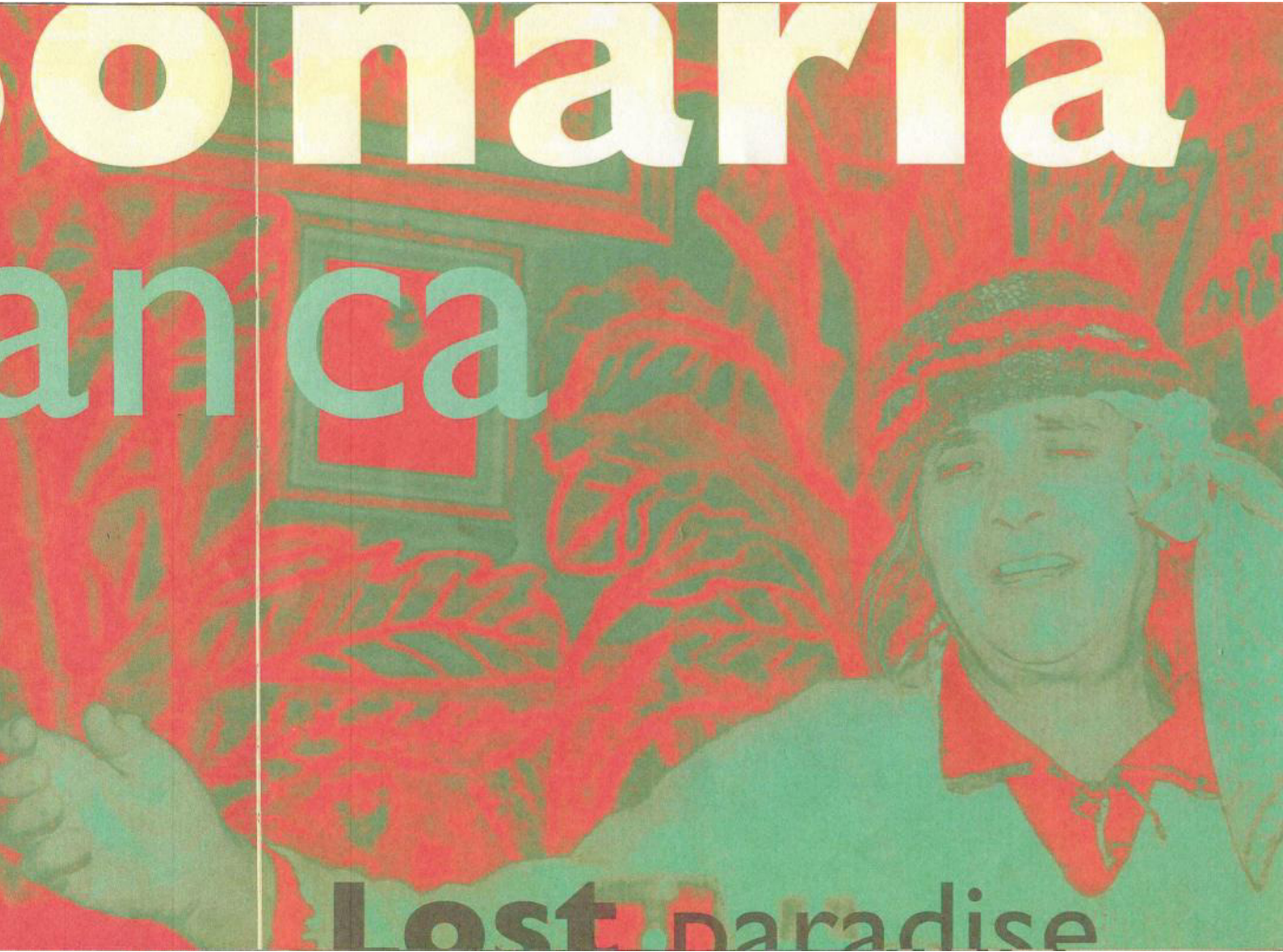
After moving to the countryside around Tuscania she herded her family's flock of sheep for many years. She still proudly describes herself as a *postoro*, a shepherdess, happy that her life is still an active one. Day in day out, she busies herself with the traditional domestic tasks of the Sardinian shepherdess such as making cheese and spinning wool. She also makes her own clothes from that wool. To her this tranquil pastoral lifestyle, in harmony with nature and the seasons, is the echo of a lost paradise.

Other traditional activities of Sardinian women such as sewing, knitting and embroidery were Manca's first outlets for her artistic expression. Working on a large embroidery, she created the first of her colourful universes full of swarming shapes, the details of which all serve to restore contact with her childhood. But this preoccupation with her early years is in no way regressive or pathological in character. Manca meticulously reproduces the happy days of her youth so as to bear witness to

an era that is now lost to everyone, to an archaic society and a rural lifestyle not much different from that of which Virgil sang. By depicting 'the image of the personal, inevitable land of one's life,' as Broch wrote in *La Marc de Vergile*, Bonaria Manca wished like the poet to represent immortal antiquity, that idyllic time of 'the soft imprisonment of youth, sheltered and destined for freedom'. Meanwhile she weaves together the fibres of her existence by her work in the meadows, where the days come and go in an eternal cycle and where time refuses to pass...

Driven by a need to record 'the image of childhood in a land that is eternally crossed, the picture of the ancestral countryside,' Bonaria Manca became an artist. 'I took the brushes, paint and canvas,' she recalled, 'and started painting the scene... and I was actually relieved of my fears.' She had, in her own words, to liberate the visions she carried within her. Impatient to fulfil this duty, she soon abandoned embroidery and took up painting as a way of recording her visions from day to day.

Her work has gradually changed in character since then. The meticulous colourist whose paintings initially stayed close to the embroideries of her youth matured into a woman whose expressive urgency demanded much more space. She developed a preference for painting on a large scale



Lost paradise

and began to decorate the walls of her house with murals in lively colours, ornamenting the whole ensemble with simple mosaics made of rows of pebble stones. She regards these pebbles as a kind of archaeology because they bear mysterious witness to the long past that they had endured. Like Roger Callois, she is sensitive to the script of stones. That is why she turns to them again and again in her artistic work. Several large collages of pebbles are echoes of the ephemeral drawings which she is fond of making with stones on the floor of her home. One of these panels, which is partly painted and partly pebbled, is titled *Anuspicio*. It is a homage to the augur who read omens of good and evil in the entrails of animals in ancient Rome. Manca does not regard herself as a seer or magician but does feel she is a kind of *anuspicio*, seeking the vestiges of a vanished world.

Painting is primarily a way for her to recall her own life and that of others. She does so by depicting important incidents of her own life and by giving a traditional reverence to the *antenati*, those who have gone before. The ancestors are not dead and buried. They are, rather, all those beings – animals, people and gods – who populated the earth in harmony before our own birth and re-convene on Manca's canvases to show us that they once inhabited the same world as ourselves. Before us, who knows how long ago, people

worked, thought, built, amused themselves, and suffered just as we do," she wrote.

The *antenati* are now fixed permanently in her house, where practically every vacant spot has been painted. The few essential pieces of furniture are set at an angle to leave the walls free for her murals which stretch from floor to ceiling. The door frames and the corners of the room are also embellished with ornaments, and she has even started decorating the floors. Imposing figures loom forth, the faces of mysterious gods and strange animals, with carefully arranged lines of stones before them. She collects the stones in the vicinity which is richly endowed with ancient Etruscan burial cities. In this domestic interior, where she lives alone, the majestic figures show the visitor how crowded her seemingly lonely life actually is.

In the period 1970-1971, Bonaria Manca became intrigued by the archaeological digs taking place near Tuscany. She participated in them herself, for they took place in the very fields her sheep grazed. She saw how the monumental Etruscan burial figures emerged one by one from the earth. But her own imagination took her further back, before the Etruscan period to a prehistoric world which she longed with all her might to rediscover and reconstruct. The likeness of a stern deity who occurs repeatedly in her work

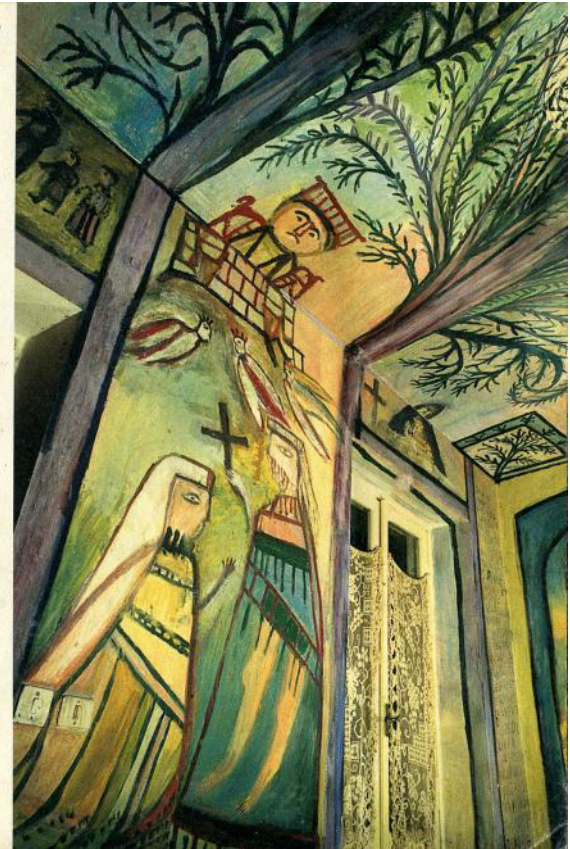


Bonaria e il suo cane (Bonaria and her Dog)
undated oil paint on canvas 70 x 50 cm collection of the artist



Anuspicio mosaic of pebbles on laminated chipboard 95 x 44 cm collection of the artist

Mural in Bonaria Manca's house in Tuscany, Italy



originally appeared to her in a dream. It is the image of a divinity who was unknown to the Christians, the Romans and Etruscans but who was honoured by prehistoric man. This being is to her a genius loci, the protector of the locality.

A rural lifestyle still survives (but for how long?) in the area of Italy where Bonaria Manca lives and in her native island of Sardinia. Because it is rooted deep in the fertile soil, it has retained vestiges of a pagan existence. The Latin word *paganus* means both rural and heathen. But in the Christian tradition, a pastoral life is idealized for the Biblical simplicity that is its true glory. Manca recently started using the stones she collects to make large collages, most of which represent Biblical figures such as Moses and Aaron. Faith, whether solemn or intimate, is always present in her work.

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Divinità undated oil paint on board 137 x 90 cm collection of the artist.



Tuscanella 1991 oil paint on canvas 80 x 100 cm