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Canvas of memories

*Drawing from many eras and generations, 'The Burgher Connection' promises a fascinating glimpse of an artistic community*

While staying over at the home of Henry James Walboeff at Katugastota in the 1880s, artist J.L.K van Dort did not spend the night in peaceful slumber. When they awoke the next morning, the Walboeffs found to their amazement that van Dort, the master draughtsman, had used their walls as his canvas. But this was in fact, characteristic of JLK who would even sketch while travelling by train. Born in 1831, and hailed as the only Ceylonese artist of note of the 19th century, JLK was often called in to record the social events of the day.

That sketch remained on the walls of the Walboeff home for many years, proof of the artist's consummate skill and was destroyed only when the family home was sold. But a photograph of it by Nihal Fernando still survives and is one of Michael Anthonisz's 'finds' when putting together a rare exhibition of Burgher art,

**GRACE VAN DORT (1861 - 1956)**

Daughter of the famous J.L.K. van Dort.
An artist of repute in her own right, Grace van Dort was equally adept in painting in oils as with watercolour. She revelled in painting nature, her special favourite - the flamboyant tree in full bloom. She would often be found on the banks of the Beira Lake, near the then Dhoby quarters (now the commercial hub of Colombo - Nawam Mawatha), painting scenes of the lake and its environs - especially the trees.....

- The Burgher Connection book

**W.W.BELING (1867 - 1928)**

To those who know of him, William Wright Beling is remembered as a very talented watercolour painter. It is a lesser known fact that Beling was equally adept in the use of oils and the range of his output bears ample testimony to his versatility as an
accomplished artist, in both media.....

Beling however, not only packed his gun, but his sketchpads - which he made himself - always accompanied him on his expeditions, into the then unspoilt wilderness jungles of Ceylon. He revelled in landscapes but especially loved to paint scenes of water and boats........

- The Burgher Connection book

rare because it not only features artists of the present day but also those of centuries past, like van Dort, whose names are seldom heard of these days in Sri Lanka.

'The Burgher Connection' to be held from May 27 to 30 at the Harold Peiris Gallery of the Lionel Wendt thus promises an intriguing glimpse of these accomplished artists of the Burgher community whose work enriched and continues to enliven the artistic scene in this country. George Keyt is without doubt, the most famous of them all, but that genius apart, there are many surprises in the line-up for on view will be an eclectic mix. Take for instance, the works of Aubrey Collette, whose fame as a cartoonist outshadowed his talents as a painter. Collette's cartoons were an integral part of The Times of Ceylon and Lake House newspapers from the 1940s until he migrated to Australia in the '60s. His skills were also recognized there and he won many an award over the years.

But if it is Collette's cartoons that immediately spring to mind, the paintings on show at this exhibition such as the quite enchanting portrait of 'Lorna' will reveal his considerable talents as a painter. "I don't want to show Collette the cartoonist, but Collette, the master artist," says Anthonisz.

The inspiration for this exhibition, came when the Dutch Burgher Union was looking at ways to mark the 400th anniversary of the Dutch arrival in the island. Several events were planned for 2002 and among them was an exhibition to celebrate the contribution made by Burgher painters and photographers to the country. Originally scheduled for the latter part of 2002, it however kept expanding, defying deadlines.
"Initially we thought of both painters and photographers, but decided to drop the photographers when the numbers began to become somewhat unwieldy," says Anthonisz. Himself a versatile artist and sculptor, though perhaps better known to many as a popular swimming coach and director of John Keells Holdings, he was entrusted the task of compiling the entire effort and spent countless hours tracing the artists. He talked to many friends and relatives both here and abroad and also made contact with many Down Under through another Burgher, Victor Melder, whose website proved immensely helpful.

The undertaking was a huge challenge but one that has been deeply satisfying. "The response was great," says Anthonisz, recalling how the artists' family members, children and grandchildren -everyone, opened their doors to him, dug into long-forgotten family papers and then emailed him images of photographs in their collection. "Thank God for this electronic age," he laughs, opening his laptop to reveal folder upon folder of photographs of the works of the artists he has so painstakingly tracked down.

Others unhesitatingly offered valuable Keyts and other greats from their personal collections to make the exhibition complete. Some of the paintings turned up in unlikely places as families rummaged through cupboards and pulled out discarded pieces to see if they had any value. One such, a sketch by Ernest van Dort of Talaimannar pier was not identified until another of its kind emerged and then it was obvious that they were both by the same hand. Trying to find some work by renowned art teacher Cora Abraham, Anthonisz still recalls the thrill he felt when he chanced upon a screen painted by her at her art school. Two of those panels are in the exhibition.

The numbers are still growing as more Burgher connections emerge and the exhibition will now show the work of some 50 artists among them the most famous Burgher names such as J.L.K. van Dort, then those of the '43 Group like George Keyt, Geoffrey Beling, George Claessen, and Aubrey Collette (all bound together by Lionel Wendt) and those who exhibited with them like
Terry Jonklaas and sculptor E.H. Blacker. There are also the unsung painters like Yolvin Thuring and Margaret de Kretser, also those who were discovered in this search like Tony Fairweather and Myles Christoffelsz. Add to them others like Bewis Bawa Conrad Felsinger, E. G. Koch, Terry de Niese, and contemporary names like Barbara Sansoni, Sybil Keyt, George Bevan, Royden Gibbs, Jeffrey Ebert, Nadine David, Michael Harridge, Michael Anthonisz himself...... and of course, Rahju......the list goes on.

The exhibition has also given rise to a book to be released in July. This will document the artists and their work and feature a few more as well, bringing the number to around 70, says Anthonisz, who is also delighted at the wealth of information he was able to unearth and the umpteen connections he found. 'Did you know that E.G. Koch, W.W. Beling and Douglas Raffel all painted views of the Wellawatte canal,'he asks. Or that Collette, Terry de Niese, George Bevan and Bevis Bawa did portraits of fashion icon and society beauty Yvonne Gulamhusein? Bevan's portrait incidentally is on show.

From the looks of it, the book will be a collector's item, for apart from featuring each artist's work, it also has a short account of their lives and therein lie many colourful stories, like the one about Richard Henricus who can be found in the pages of the 1903 Ferguson's Directory, listed as a portrait painter. Delving through old clippings, Anthonisz found more recent mention of him in an article by Lucian de Zilwa where Henricus was described as sometimes found in a curtained-off room in the opium dens at Cayman's Gate.

Talent they say, runs in the family and certain families seem to have had more than their fair share. The van Dorts beginning with Jeffrey Leonard Kalenberg (the aforementioned JLK) have daughter Grace and son Ernest who left Ceylon for Australia in the 1930s also producing some impressive work.

In the case of the Belings, there are paintings by W.W. Beling, his sons Christopher Lorenz and Geoffrey, the latter being a founder member of the '43 Group and
Inspector of Art in schools, and even work by Geoffrey's son David. Then there are the de Nieses, George, his son Terry and daughter Imsy de Silva all featured in the exhibition, along with other members of the family Michael de Niese and Tony Hopman.

Spanning several eras and generations, The Burgher Connection will bring back many memories when it opens at the Harold Peiris Gallery next week. The exhibition will be on from May 28 to 30 from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and is open to schools on May 27 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. -

Renuka Sadanandan