

GEORGE CLAESSEN – DRAUGHTSMAN AND PAINTER 1909-1999

Jane Russell

George Claessen, Sri Lankan painter, died in London on 1st May, 1999 five days before his ninetieth birthday. A founder member of the '43 Group of Ceylonese painters, Claessen chose, along with his '43 Group colleague Ivan Peries, to live and work in London. As painters in exile, Claessen and Peries shared an enchantment with their distant homeland. Their works are remarkable for "a serenity" which invites "the contemplation of calm moments" (George Butcher-*Arts Review*, June 1961).

Claessen did not share Peries' social and educational privileges though. Trained as a draughtsman in Colombo, he found his artistic avocation aged twenty-eight whilst working for the colonial government in Anuradhapura, the earliest of Sri Lanka's Buddhist capitals. He went first to Melbourne where he experimented with abstraction and had his first one-man show at the Velasquez Gallery in 1948. A year later he emigrated to London. Claessen's abrupt departure from Australia was associated with an experience he was to describe as a "revelation". How far this was connected with his friendship with an Englishman, Donald Sinclair, is unclear. Claessen later went to great lengths to locate Sinclair only to find that he had died.

There was no finer draughtsman than Claessen. Clarity, sensitivity, compassion and immense "humility before the model... be it a tree trunk, a female torso or a lizard" ensured that Claessen approached his subject "with the fresh, amazed and curious vision of the child" (Justin Deraniyagala in H.A.I. Goonetilleke, ed. "George Claessen Drawings", Colombo 1946). Claessen's sketches of jungle animals drew early acclaim. His lifelong preoccupation with Sri Lanka's fauna continued well into his eighth decade. The pen and ink drawing of an elephant done in 1994 rises above the classic Sinhalese Buddhist iconography to encompass the pain and confusion of a species living on the edge of extinction. Of his drawings, Claessen said, "what I have been trying to do is to make things come to life—my drawings are not really drawings, they are actual things—as if one day my figures would fly away" (Shamil Wanigaratne "George Claessen", London: publication forthcoming August 1999).

As a painter, Claessen sometimes suffered the lack of confidence that can effect the self-taught. His early masterpiece "Mother and Child" (1943) executed in warm reds, golds and dull blue was greatly admired at the 1953 exhibition of the '43 Group in Paris. However, the excellent "Church by the Sea" and "Surgical Operation" (both 1944) were compared not unfavorably with Douanier Rousseau's work by Ceylon's art critics. It is possible that the charge of derivation so wounded Claessen's sensibilities, it made him abandon his native land to which he never returned. He said he felt stifled by Ceylon's cultural parochialism.

Although he lived a turbulent emotional life, Claessen's paintings—whether figurative, abstract or expressionist—are extraordinarily serene, almost egoless. George Butcher found in his paintings "very little that is either environmental or specifically emotional. They are instead quintessentially calm, deliberative, contemplative". Claessen said of his work: "In paintings I never sought to distort. I like to bring out something with a form and dignity. Things are full of dignity. I like to find unusual ways of looking at things, but not unusually forced. I have never been afraid of doing what I wanted to do. Nor was I violent or anything like that—it's not in my nature to be so. Art is something that belongs to all ages and if there is truth in art, you can never destroy it" (Wanigaratne).

Claessen won some recognition in his lifetime. He showed at the 1956 Venice Biennale and won a prize for his drawing at the 5th Sao Paulo International in 1959. In the 1960s he showed at the New Vision Gallery and with the '43 Group at the South Bank in 1985 and 1987. He also exhibited in Colombo in 1994, after which a number of his works were acquired by the Sri Lankan government for the nation. He continued painting until his death and some of his best work is still to be exhibited. Claessen deserves a full retrospective—the art-loving public deserve a chance to view the full Claessen oeuvre.

George Claessen leaves behind his son Roger by his wife Inez de Kretser and a daughter Esmerelda from his union with Lilian Margaret Matthews. His partner, friend and companion of later years, was the painter Bethza Payne. ■

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