

Andrew MURRAY obituary – The Independent (London) – 16th October, 1998 – by Robert Murray

ANDREW MURRAY became known and loved as an imaginative painter who captured the character of cities (especially Cape Town and London) with humorous and affectionate insight.

He was born in north China, the son of a missionary. As a child of five he had his first lesson in painting from the son of another, the 10-year-old Mervyn Peake. Andrew's father, A.H. Jowett Murray, was the youngest son of Sir James Murray, the founding editor of the Oxford English Dictionary. After a triple First at Oxford, Jowett, aged 23, went to China two years before the revolution which ended the last dynasty, and started his missionary work teaching in Tientsin (Tianjin). He married six years later and Andrew was born in 1917, followed by a sister and two brothers before their mother died at only 43 (Jowett married again, a colleague in China, and had another daughter and son).

Many missionaries' children boarded at twin schools founded for that purpose: the boys at Eltham College, their sisters at Walthamstow Hall, Sevenoaks. Murray and his siblings followed this pattern. Since the age of four he had suffered from a severe stammer (the traumatic cause of which he was to understand only many years later), but this did not hinder his capacity for making friends and achieving success. Art was his favourite class (and Peake the pride of the art master, but unapproachably remote from Murray under rigorous social codes), yet no training in technique stayed with him, so that when at last he started painting he insisted that he was self-taught.

In 1936 Murray entered Wadham College, Oxford, to read Modern History. He enjoyed life in ways his studious father could never have imagined, finally achieving the ignominious glory of a Fourth in finals. His interests were more in creative writing (he started and edited one of Oxford's perennially ephemeral poetry magazines), but he did not yet discover his real gifts. He followed the Thirties' current towards Marxism, and later in life would claim that he was in the same cell (or at least a fellow "comrade") with Denis Healey, Christopher Mayhew, Philip Toynbee, Robert Conquest and (the future Sir) Ashley Bramall.

In fact Murray was never a political animal, but he had to discover his own way beyond parental discipline. By 1939 this had first led him to High Anglicanism, but while waiting for call-up he discovered and joined the Roman Catholic Church, which was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life. He had applied for the Navy and was trained as a telegraphist; his stammer did not affect the co-ordination of mind and fingers needed for Morse.

His first ship was HMS *Abdiel*, one of a class of brilliantly manoeuvrable and cheeky rapid minelayers. He took part in the heroic rescue operation from the beaches of Sfakia in southern Crete, the relatively unsung "second Dunkirk", where the survivors of the disastrous expedition to Greece and evacuation to Crete waited under a sky totally controlled by the Luftwaffe and helplessly watched their rescue ships being hit and sunk. *Abdiel* was one of the few which escaped the bombs on repeated runs.

Next, during seven months based in Alexandria, she made constant and equally successful runs to supply and reinforce the army besieged in Tobruk. After a mine-laying tour in the Indian Ocean, repairs were necessary in Durban. There Andrew met his future wife, Beryl Halsall, a young English dress designer with her own business. He did not re-join *Abdiel*; his last sea service was in HMS *Spartan*, a cruiser which ended its too brief life in Anzio bay in January 1944, hit by a German glider bomb. Murray was among the last out of the blazing ship.

After demobilisation he left England in 1946 for Durban and married Beryl. He had some success as a cartoonist but had no larger ambitions as yet. After a few years they moved to Cape Town, where Murray became managing editor of the Catholic weekly *The Southern*

Cross; during his years there he raised it from its previous parochialism to a mature level of journalism. But in 1956, in his 40th year, a chance present led to his breakthrough as an artist. An elderly English artist friend (perhaps by intuition?) gave Murray his own brushes and paints, and he bought himself Norman Colquhoun's Penguin Paint Your Own Pictures. So began the second and increasingly fruitful half of his life.

From the first, Murray's painting meant the release of the interior child which had been waiting for expression. A brief early dalliance with abstract painting taught him to think about structure in a way which became almost instinctive, but abstract forms could not satisfy the child's vision and sense of fun. Inevitably Murray is classified as a "naive" artist, but of a special kind: meditative, seeking the "inscape" of a scene; gently teasing in face of anything grand or pompous, yet without malice.

His subjects can be divided roughly into works of free imagination and evocation of city scenes. The former include biblical and religious subjects (but never too serious), animal and jungle groups, and playful variations on Jungian themes, for example "the artist" (a self-caricature) sitting with dubious expression between his angelically winged "anima" and his "shadow" in the form of a snarling black dog. In fact, psychoanalysis, undertaken to try to understand his stammer, not only led Murray and his wife to a deep and lasting interest in Jung but also decisively helped him to release and affirm the child within, so that this both formed the deepest source of his creativity and also made his naiveté more authentic than the kind which simply tries to imitate childish artlessness.

It was city scenes, however, that gave Murray the success, first in Cape Town (1956-69) and thereafter in London and Paris, which enabled him and his wife to live by his painting. To their sorrow, they had no children of their own, but sales and commissions constantly led to lasting friendships which filled their successive homes with good conversation and laughter. Almost all Murray's pictures set in South Africa have remained there, some now in the National Gallery in Cape Town. In many, Table Mountain rises above the scene, an icon as dominant as Mount Fuji in Japanese painting. The images of street life have a vividness and humour which is rarely if ever surpassed in Murray's later pictures set in London or other European cities.

Leaving the hated atmosphere of apartheid for Britain in 1969, the Murrays had to recover their British citizenship and start earning their livelihood from the bottom of the ladder. For the first few years they alternated between lodgings in London or Penzance and stays of a few months at a time in Seville, Perugia, Nice and Paris; all these gave inspiration for paintings, while Venice and Paris offered opportunities for making them known through exhibitions, sales and inclusion in large books of naive art. But a London base was essential. Murray was taken on by the Portal Gallery (then in Grafton Street) and began a series of successful exhibitions, especially "Poetry into Paintings" and the two series of "Images of Reconciliation"; one of these "images", the lion cradling a lamb, was adopted as a UNICEF Christmas card.

Perhaps it was partly the success of this card which suggested a series of gift cards reproducing paintings in colour; once the Murrays had settled in Chelsea, the cards could give their address, and sales and commissions could be arranged without depending on a gallery. Murray also learned colour etching and for a few years produced a number of successful works, but always concentrated on painting and producing the "Andrew Murray Cards". In the next 20 years the series of these grew to well over a hundred, and in 1980 a selection was reproduced as a book, Andrew Murray's London.

At first the cards (and etchings) included some works of free imagination, but it was the London scenes - both major public monuments and attractive corners, especially of Chelsea - which sold best. Andrew did the paintings and oversaw the colour printing; then Beryl found sales outlets and kept them supplied. People recognised and enjoyed the characteristic clouds

like piled puffballs, the ridiculously huge flags and the horses with bulgy Chippendale table legs, pulling drays or carrying policemen, but also, deeper than the fun, the intimate feel for London's moods and a sure sense of structure and colour harmony.

Commissions came from many sides; a set of four Christmas cards, very popular for several years, led to Sheikh Yamani's commissioning a Koranic Nativity to send to his Christian friends. Eventually the most fruitful outlet came to be London Mitsukoshi; they both bought and sold many of Murray's paintings and agreed to his producing cards from the same, while in Tokyo small reproductions on phone cards became fashionable.

In later years the task of distribution became too heavy and the Murrays sold Andrew Murray Cards to Simon Tan, a Singapore Chinese resident in London, who (with his own family) became a close friend and support. One of his developments which continued is Harrod's annual calendar of Murray's London scenes. Andrew Murray continued painting until a stroke in 1995.

Robert Murray

Andrew James Jowett Murray, journalist, painter and etcher, born Tientsin, China 14 January 1917; Managing Editor, The Southern Cross (Cape Town) 1950-69; married 1946 Beryl Halsall; died London 11 October 1998.

Downloaded from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-andrew-murray-1178497.html> on 12th February, 2013

Return to:

www.art-archives-southafrica.ch