

# Towards Sim



## The life of Peter Clarke

by Joline Young

Peter Clarke exudes the quiet confidence of a man who is comfortable with himself, but navigates the world around him with a probing mind. His use of words is so beautiful and melodic, that I could not help but quote him verbatim in many parts of this text.

Being a well-known man in his community, his house was easy to find. Just the mention of his name to the first passer-by, pointed me towards his Council cottage.

# Simon's Town



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PAPERWORK

PETER CLARKE

It was here in his tiny lounge, where his mother's old sideboard takes pride of place amongst an assortment of artworks, that he told me his story.

Born in Cardiff Road, Simon's Town, in 1929, as the third born child in a family of six, there was much that his domestic worker mother and Dockyard handyman father could not give him. But what they did give him he values greatly.

*"They were the right parents for me, because although they did not have a wonderful education, they were balanced people in that they wanted their children to choose the right paths.*

*They were both interested in reading and I always tell people that my parents read, and when your parents read you can't help being curious about this".*

By the time he was four the family moved to a two bedrooomed cottage in Wesley Street and it was from here that Peter would walk to the Boys Mission School which he attended until moving on to Arsenal Road School in Standard 3. A free spirited boy by nature, Peter suffered the institutionalisation of school life very badly. He battled to conform to the regimental thinking and behaviour that was expected of him and was happiest going off into his own world where he could be true to himself and draw

the pictures that he saw in his head. Peter's parents, though poor, recognised that this boy was a deep thinker and though their income was meagre, always tried to support him by supplying him with a regular supply of pencils, crayons and paper on which to practise his art.

As the years went by Peter felt more and more stifled by school and after a year spent at Livingston High School he told his parents that he no longer wanted to go to school.

*"I fell in love with freedom early in my life and when I saw what looked to me like institutional regulations, I could not take it."*

## Towards Simon's Town —



'Cactus'

His parents, though disappointed, decided that if he did not want to go to school he would then need to go to work. Peter became employed at the Dockyard, as a boat cleaner and painter.

*"When the ships came in we would go and clean the ships in Dry Dock and then we would paint the ships. I was 15 years old. A lightie."*

This was during the war-time, in 1944. After the war he found himself unemployed for two weeks and then the Navy re-employed him in



the Works Dept at the Dockyard. While doing "all sorts of shore jobs" by day, Peter sat up and painted until late at night and in 1947, attended evening art classes at Saint Philips School in Cape Town. It was during this period that he painted the very beautiful watercolour:

*"Towards Simon's Town from St James".*

A comment by his domestic worker sister to her "madam" about her brother who 'likes to paint', led to him being brought to the attention of Dean Anderson, the head of the architectural school at UCT. He bought some of Peter's work and word of this talented young man from Simon's Town started to spread.

Mathys Bokhorst, the Director of the National Gallery, came to know about him and, thus, in 1951, Peter took part in a group exhibition at the Association of Arts Gallery in Cape Town for the first time. By this time the Clarke family had moved from Wesley Street to the Waterfall Flats in Waterfall Road, where a steady stream of visitors came to view his work. An offer by Maskew Miller to do book illustrations soon followed.

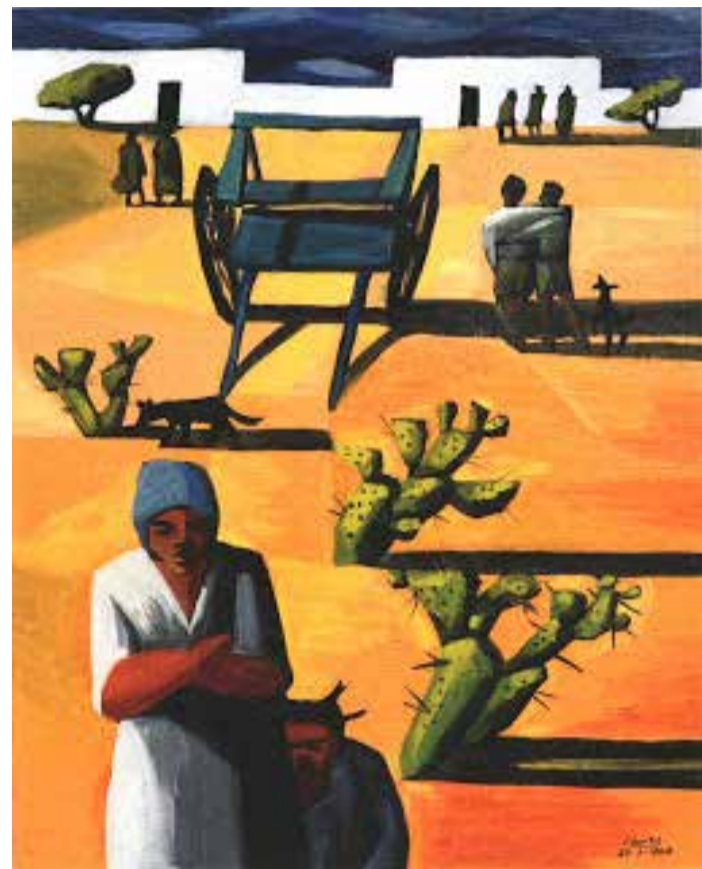
While painting was his first love, Peter also enjoyed creative writing and in 1955 he won first prize in a short story competition. The prize money of fifty pounds he happily spent on art materials.

In 1956, Peter felt the need to take time out where he could paint quietly and undisturbed for a few months at a time. A friend arranged for him to spend three months at his family home in Tesserlaarsdal, a little village in Caledon, where his friend's father lived alone. It was at this time that Peter gave up his day-time job at the Dockyard and from then on, for several years, Peter would go to Tesserlaarsdal to paint from September to December of every year.

The solitude and serenity at Tesserlaarsdal gave him the freedom to produce many beautiful pieces of art and culminated in his first solo exhibition in 1957. This was held at the Golden City Post.

His life as a full time artist and writer had begun.

By 1961, Peter's art was being showcased at exhibitions in England, Germany and the USA and in 1962 he was invited to study printmaking in Holland. A few years later he went to Norway where he studied etching. He also continued to write and one of his stories "Eleven O'Clock: The Wagons, the Shore" was read on BBC radio in England.



Coming and Going

In 1966, a year after receiving the C P Hoogenhout Book Illustration Award, Peter's personal world became unsettled by newspaper reports that Simon's Town had become an 'affected area' under the Group Areas Act. But it was only when an official came knocking on the door that reality sunk in.

*"So we were informed. This official came, took our particulars, how many in the family and then he told us that we were expected to move on a certain date. It was made clear that we would be moving from where we were to Ocean View. Various people were by then moving to Ocean View and the place was becoming more and more deserted. My family were still where we had been all the years and one family higher up were also still in their flat, because at night we could see their electric light going on. And nothing was happening. People were receiving notices to say you had to move and they would disappear, so eventually it was just those two families in that ghost town. It was like living on two little islands of electric light."*

# The life of Peter Clarke

The loneliness that he felt at this time is movingly encapsulated in his oil painting 'The Lonely Wanderer', which depicts a man walking all alone in a barren street, where no smoke drifts from the solitary chimney and the barren windows all stare out like the vacant eyes of the dead. Even the clouds are dark and grey, giving warning of a storm. Is this the storm he felt in his heart?

*"In time we moved. We had to organise our own transport and a friend of mine, who happened to be Jewish and who had a business, said 'alright I will arrange transport for you. I've got a big truck'. And he arranged for his truck and his workers to come and give us a hand and this in the heart of winter. Soup had been organised by my mother so that she could give all the helpers soup and bread and we moved off to Ocean View."*

In 1975, he was invited to take part in an International Writer's programme at the University of Iowa, USA, where he spent nine months. While he did a good deal of poetry during his stay, it was in his art that the sense of prevailing loss he felt was so clearly evident. From the triptych *"Haunted Landscape"*, the anguish and desolation felt not only by himself, but by all the people affected by the Forced Removals, is so clearly evident. The depiction of the once peaceful doves fighting, proved all too prophetic a year later when thousands of school children took up the fight against Apartheid, many losing their lives in the process.

"When I came back it could have been about May. I was actually struck by how peaceful and prosperous Cape Town looked because there was a lot of building going on and I still commented on all this activity going on, buildings going up and everybody employed and then suddenly it all exploded and the change of course ....."

When asked whether he was happy living in Ocean View, he responded by saying: "Actually I think that this is a ghetto, but the nice thing about this ghetto is that it has mountains and there is a sea not too far away and the air is always fresh."

For more than 20 years he ran an art workshop for underprivileged children in Ocean View and although he says he didn't expect his students to all become artists, his eyes take on a certain glow when he mentions the few who chose art as their careers. "It's nice to see these adults now, who had not been crippled by tik."



*Listening to the sound of thunder*

I asked Peter whether he would consider returning to Simon's Town and his reply left me with a great sadness: "I would not like to go back to Simon's Town because you can't go back to the past. The thing about going back to the past is that all those elements that made up your life; the neighbours, the people you knew, the smells of supper coming from different houses, the sounds of voices of people living around and so on, all those familiar things are not there any longer."

"I would like to be able to ask people living in Simon's Town, 'are you happy living here?', but so many are strangers and in so many cases there are houses that appear to be empty. You go into neighbourhoods, you don't see people, no children playing and sometimes a dog barking. It is the same, but it is not the same."

Having lived in Simon's Town for fourteen months now, where I am renting a little flat, I was at great pains to express to Peter how much I love Simon's Town.

I love the serenity, the sounds of the sea, the seagulls' call in the evening, the sounds of the penguins at dawn; the beautiful quaintness of this historic town. To this he replied:

"When I go to Simon's Town, it is very attractive for all those reasons you have just mentioned. It is the kind of place, if I had never lived there before, I would look at and think: 'this is where I think I could find myself,' and so I would start off in this new place and probably end up quite happy there. I am at a certain stage in my life now and I would be able to have friends over in this quiet place. And the thing is, the friends would enjoy it just as much. They would say it is so quiet, it is so unusual; it is so nice. I didn't feel threatened living in Simon's Town; you could walk around in the middle of the night and you would be quite alright. But the thing is, having lived there before, I tend to look at it from a then and now point of view."

One of the most remarkable things about Peter is his total lack of ego and his seemingly total disinterest in material gain. The fact that he received an Honorary Doctorate of Literature degree in Taiwan in 1984 or that he was presented with the Order of Ikhamanga (silver) award by President Mbeki in 2005, has not altered him. Instead of using his talent for self-enrichment, he produces his art for "art's sake".

I was amazed to learn that he donated a sizeable quantity of art to the Caledon Museum. In a world where everything is about making a profit, this man is an anomaly. As I drove home amongst the mountainous peaks of Ou Kaapse Weg, I thought about this a great deal, and then I think I understood: his love of freedom is so great that for him the trappings of material wealth would be a shackle. I thus returned home feeling that I had just interacted with one of those rare individuals who are truly wise.



'Bull francais'



'Daschund'



'Too-2-step'



See Peter Clarke talk about his work 'For Some the Pathway to Education Lies Between Thorns'

which is presented as part of his retrospective, 'Wind Blowing on the Cape Flats' at Rivington Place, London.



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