

Byllee Lang's Lasting Legacy

By Meredith Ebbin

In the 20 years she lived in Bermuda—a sojourn cut short by her sudden death the day before her 58th birthday—sculptor Byllee Lang (1908-1966) built a reputation for being a creative dynamo and a woman who lived life to the full.

She taught art classes, created window displays for A.S. Cooper's and prize-winning floats for the Easter Parade and lent her costume-making and set design talents to theatrical productions. All of this, in addition to sculpting her life's work. To quote Andrew Trimingham, her friend and artistic executor, Lang "was the godmother of every artistic endeavour going."

Artist Vivienne Gardner, for whom Lang became a mentor, recalled how she was "really into heads". Arts and political personalities in her native Canada sat for her, so did dignitaries whom she met during her travels in Europe. Shortly before coming to Bermuda from New York, she did a bust of the influential African-American playwright and Howard University professor Owen Dodson (1914-1983).

Her Bermuda work included portraits of Esso Steel Band leader Rudy Commissiong and Davy Douglas, a trucker who was well-known to locals and cruise-ship tourists.

Her most important artistic achievement was the Anglican Cathedral reredos, the altar screen and statues of Christ and 14 saints that she was commissioned to create around 1958. She died with five statues uncompleted, but the nine smaller figures of the Virgin Mary and Saints Anne, Brendan, John, Luke, Paul, Andrew, Mark and Peter, and the 10-foot, 1000-ton figure of Christ, Trimingham has observed, are "quite a remarkable piece of art for a modern Cathedral." Few would disagree.

The reredos, along with her other surviving works, some of which make up part of this exhibition, comprise her tangible legacy. Then there's her intangible legacy. Lang shared her creative gifts with anyone in whom she detected a whiff of talent. She taught and inspired a generation of artists,

black and white, wealthy, working class and in-between. Generous with her time and talents, she waived fees for promising students who couldn't afford to pay. Artists who hold her in high regard represent a broad cross-section of Bermudian society.

Her studio, which she set up first at Windsor Place, on Reid Street, then at Trinity Hall, and finally at Washington Lane, was a gathering place for artists of the day. She presided over the gatherings with a cigarette in one hand, and a rum or Scotch in the other. Those who were part of those soirees say they were so special that 40 years after Lang's death, nothing has emerged to replace them.

Over and above all this was Lang's refusal to allow the racial boundaries of the period to impinge on her world. Segregation was the order of the day when she lived in Bermuda. Her commitment to racial equality was unquestioned. While blacks and whites attended segregated schools elsewhere in Bermuda, they sat side by side in her classes. Carlos Downing, a black Bermudian whom she took under her wing when he was a teenager, and became a potter and sculptor largely because of her influence, said Lang "truly did not see colour."

For a woman who became enamoured with life on a small island, Lang—who was a naturalised Bermudian—had the unlikeliest of upbringings. A rancher's daughter, she was raised near Didsbury, Alberta, Canada and was an expert horsewoman and a rifle shot.

In 1926, when she was 18, she entered the Winnipeg School of Art, where she studied for four years and discovered that painting did not satisfy her, but sculpture did. The lack of sculpture courses in Winnipeg led her to Toronto and the Ontario College of Art. German-born Canadian sculptor Emanuel Kahn (1881-1957), who taught there, became a major influence.

After Toronto came Europe. She did more study in Munich and Berlin, travelled widely, had many commissions, but also encountered the headwinds of war. She was in Berlin when Hitler came to power and witnessed acts of anti-Semitism that greatly disturbed her.

She met her husband, Alphonso de Marin of Barcelona, in Paris. They were married in Majorca, where they set up home. In 1935, as the Spanish Civil War threatened, he signed up with the Spanish Red Cross and she returned

to Canada. He was to have joined her in Canada in time. She never heard from him or his family again. Lang later said her experience was typical of the war years—whole families just disappeared.

Lang resumed her career in Winnipeg under her married name. In 1936, she established the deMarin School of Sculpture on Main Street, teaching adults and children, but in 1940, she joined the staff the Winnipeg School of Art, where she taught sculpture for three years. She later worked for the National Film Board in Ottawa. Her work was twice selected to represent the Commonwealth abroad.

Her celebrated sculpture, a bas-relief entitled *Coal Miners*, led to a job with Canadian National Railways in Montreal, where she was living by 1945.

In 1945, she came to Bermuda from New York, where she lived for short time, holed in a cold-water flat in Greenwich Village. She never took to New York, she later said. She was used to the wide open spaces of the prairies and felt closed in by the tall buildings of Manhattan.

Like countless visitors, Lang fell in love with Bermuda. By 1946, she was living here permanently. She befriended the Cooper brothers, arts patrons Sir Gilbert, a Hamilton mayor, and Arthur. They rented her studio space on the second floor of their department store A.S. Cooper's and later hired her to be a window dresser.

In 1948, she began teaching sculpture and clay modelling to children at the Bermuda Art Association's new art school at Hamilton Hotel. Two of her students were Eddie Lima—who became a sculptor—and Vivienne Gardner, whom she later took on as her assistants at Cooper's. She created prize-winning window displays for the two Cooper stores in Hamilton and spectacular floats for the annual Floral Pageant. In 1954, A.S. Cooper's float "Surf Riding", decorated with 16,000 Easter lilies, won the top prize.

Within three years of moving to Bermuda, she received permission from the Board of Trade to accept commissions. She eventually left Cooper's and opened her own studio, where she taught adults and children, and was free to work full-time on her sculptures. She often worked late into the night. Her closest friends were creative people like herself. They included Elsbeth and

Don Gibson, who nurtured the careers of countless Bermudian entertainers during the heyday of tourism.

Lang's life was a whirlwind of artistic activity. She was a member of the Bermuda Society of Arts. She worked on Bermuda Musical and Dramatic Society theatre productions. Dance costumes she designed (with John Kaufmann) and created for the 1959 production of *My Heart Stays Here* were one of her more spectacular creations.

In 1958, she received her biggest commission—for the reredos. It was a mammoth project that was launched with great fanfare, but by 1962, had become bogged down by delays, cost overruns and controversy over Lang's use of locals as models for the statues.

The central figure of Christ was installed and dedicated in July 1962, amid a blaze of publicity, by Bishop Anthony Williams, who had commissioned the project, and seven more statues were in place by December the same year.

But Williams left Bermuda following the dedication, leaving Lang to do battle with his successor Bishop John Armstrong, with whom she didn't see eye to eye. Things became so stressful, she flew to Mexico for an extended vacation. While there, she discovered she had breast cancer and had to undergo a mastectomy. She recovered and returned to Bermuda to resume work on the remaining statues. With the £10,000 the church had allocated for the reredos used up, the remaining statues had to be paid with contributions from individual donors.

Throughout of this, she was helping to nurture a generation of artists. Besides Vivienne Gardner, Carlos Dowling and Andrew Trimmingham, they include Joyce Joell-Haydn, Shirley Pearman, Emma Ingham-Dounouk, and Elizabeth Trott. At the time of her death, Dowling was working as her studio assistant, in exchange for sculpture classes.

In December 1966, still struggling to finish the statues, she cancelled her art classes for the week and entered hospital for surgery. Friends were preparing to celebrate her birthday in hospital when they learned the grim news that she had died (of a heart attack). They had to shift gears and began planning a funeral. That her death was front-page news was an indication of her standing in the community.

Lang once told a reporter she did not think there was much artistic impulse among Bermudians. She worked to uncover it. She also “moved among people at all levels of society and brought together people who wouldn’t otherwise have met”, said Georgine Hill, an artist and a founder of the Bermuda Art Association.

Carlos Dowling, who studied pottery in the United Kingdom with funds from a scholarship established in Lang’s memory after her death, said she was “just about willing to accept anybody regardless of colour, or station in life or sexual orientation. She was like a 80s or 90s woman back in the 60s.”

As Bermuda still grapples with the legacy of racial inequality, it is as much for her artistic genius as it is for her humanity that Lang is being remembered and honoured with this exhibit.

Meredith Ebbin
November 23, 2007