

Free spirits and lasting legacies

Byllee Lang lived life to the fullest, and the sculptures she left behind are a tribute to her skills as an artist, mentor and teacher

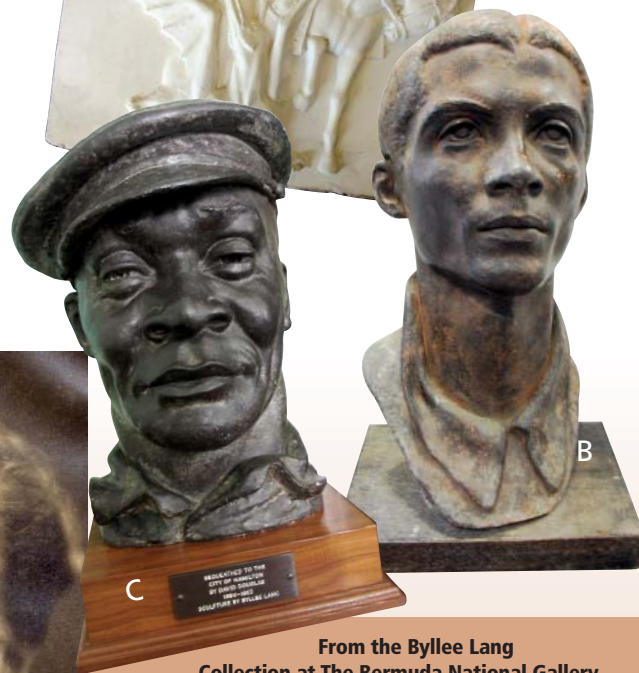
By all accounts Byllee Lang was an independent-minded, colourful — and totally colour-blind woman. Growing up on a ranch in Alberta, Canada nearly 100 years ago, the feisty young woman was as adept at handling a horse or rifle as she was to later become handling a hammer and chisel.

After studying art in Winnipeg and Toronto, the hard-drinking, heavy-smoking and free-spirited young Byllee took off for Europe where she continued her studies as a sculptor in Munich. Of course, the 1930s was a turbulent period in history and Lang had a ringside seat during her eight years on the European continent. She witnessed the rise of Nazism and the hounding of Jews in Germany, while her husband was to die fighting fascism in Spain.

Lang returned to Canada in 1936 where she quickly gained a reputation as a teacher. Her sculptures of prominent Canadians also won critical acclaim and on two occasions her work was selected to represent the Commonwealth abroad. Yet it is in Bermuda that the Canadian sculptor was perhaps to make her biggest impact, which is why the Bermuda National Gallery is now telling her story.

Lang first visited the Island shortly after the end of the Second World War. She returned again in 1948, making her home in Bermuda for the rest of her life. She received a number of notable commissions during her career here, including an altar screen and statues of Christ and 14 saints for the Anglican Cathedral. The figure of Jesus was installed in 1962, but the project was subsequently hit with financial problems and delays. Lang was only able to complete nine of the accompanying figures before her death in 1966.

But more than any slab of granite, it is her



From the Byllee Lang
Collection at The Bermuda National Gallery

A) St. George and the Dragon B) Bust of Rudy Commissiong
C) Bust of Davy Douglas

work as a tutor and mentor to an emerging group of Bermudian artists that is Lang's lasting legacy. She began teaching sculpture and clay modelling to youngsters almost as soon as she arrived on the Island. And although schools in Bermuda were segregated at the time, Lang insisted on teaching mixed groups of both black and white, rich and poor. She would waive fees for promising students and her studios soon became a meeting place for artists to discuss their work.

BNG director Laura Gorham said: "With our Bermuda collection we're very interested in telling the Bermuda story. We're not so much concerned with overseas artists who were visiting or on holiday and depicted what Bermuda looked like at that time; we want to highlight the people who actually made an impact here. In that sense Byllee Lang is very significant.

"Her studio became a creative centre where creative people gathered around her. In many ways, she really heralded the beginning of the contemporary arts scene as we know it today. Up until her arrival there wasn't really a central point or public organisation where artists could meet, but she fostered an environment for discussion.

"While the term 'hero' may sound grand, it is appropriate as a description because of her vision and humanity. Byllee was a committed artist who did not see colour or race as barriers, even though law and society saw otherwise. She was instrumental in inspiring emerging

Bermudian artists of her day."

The BNG's exhibition includes some examples of Lang's sculpture work, as well as archival photographs of her studio, and works completed in Canada, such as reliefs and busts. The Byllee Lang focus is one of just three separate displays that make up the BNG's Winter Exhibition programme, which opened at the end of last month. Taking up the majority of the gallery's space is an exhibition of Canadian Inuit art, which includes work from two travelling collections. The show consists of 23 sculptures, 28 prints and a number of wall hangings that, according to a BNG statement, 'make for a fabulous emersion into the world of Canadian Inuit artists'.

Seeking out and promoting more obscure forms of artistic expression — at least from a Western perspective — is a policy that the BNG is adopting with continued success. A recent show of Japanese prints represented quite a coup for the organisation, while other shows featuring work from a diverse collection of cultures have been equally successful.

"We see this as part of our continuing strategy to show other cultures, to open up our world to other cultures and to take a broader look at other forms of art," Ms Gorham said.

The third display in the gallery's Winter programme can be found in the Watlington Room, which will be home to 'African Influences and Affinities'.

The educational exhibit will highlight links and comparisons between African art and the work of contemporary Bermudian artists. The Bermuda National Gallery's Winter Exhibition runs until April 4. Admission is free.