

INSIDE MAIL

Only in death is Moses equal

LIN MENGE



Moses—painted by Waalko Dingemans.

The life has gone out of this place now I tell you," said young Chris Crake, manager of the gallery.

Mme. Haenggi said: "They say no one is indispensable — but it is not true. We can never replace him."

It was a shock, when Moses died, to find where Moses lived — the wretchedness and evil of Kliptown, the tiny house —

lounge, bedroom, kitchen — the wife who had been away from home for some days before he died and was not there to be told of his death, the nine children aged four to 16 in the care of the oldest two girls.

But the little man who always wore a cap partly to hide the marks of the beatings he received from less sober-living

people around him, at least had something of the other Moses in his home — a small collection of paintings.

One or two he bought for himself at auction sales, others were given to him as presents by grateful artists. Among them was his portrait — by Waalko Dingemans.

If the family agree, the gallery will arrange to sell some of these paintings for them. A circular letter is being sent to artists throughout the country asking them to donate a few rands or, if they prefer it, a work which can be sold for funds for the family.

A trust fund will be set up and the money properly controlled through, it is hoped, the welfare authorities, to pay, especially, for the children's education. Moses — he paid his monthly dues to a funeral society — always dreamed of being able to educate his children.

Moses had other dreams too. He once started to write a book — in pencil in two exercise books. It was called "The Artist's Friend — for the Art Lover." Excerpts were published in the South African Artlook magazine in December 1967. Here are some of them again.

● "We very seldom read books on South African art written by a South African so I decided that it's up to me to make art live here, and my only hope is to succeed. If art means to us all what it means to me, then we would have had a string of galleries and paint shops or rather a little 'Art Town' here ages ago."

● "Painting is a messy business and tiring as well so if you haven't seen an artist at work yet then you haven't seen anything. If an artist is not satisfied with the results of his canvas he simply repaints the whole picture no matter how big the canvas was so you can say that you get double trouble for your money."

● "I think the artist is the most troubled man on earth apart from his personal worries he has got to concentrate on his office work by day and at least think what he is going to start painting tonight and his mind is never at rest, and yet we the people who have but one job to cope with for the day are always the ones who complain."

TWO MEN named Moses died on Saturday. One was Moses Bee, one of the best-known personalities in the South African art world, the other was Moses B. Gamatjie, father of nine children who lived in a tiny, old house in run-down, Coloured Kliptown.

Of course, they were the same man, but the people who knew the one did not know the other. Now that he is dead there is a chance to bridge the gap, because a trust fund is to be launched in memory of Moses Bee for the family of Moses B. Gamatjie.

Moses died of a heart-attack last Saturday morning at his work in Gallery 101, in Johannesburg. He was 43.

Born in Pietersburg, he had worked as an assistant in various Johannesburg art galleries for the past 16 years. He knew and was known to artists all round the country. He knew their styles and works as well as anyone and he helped judge the selection of works even well-known artists submitted to this gallery.

He had an eye for good art, could criticise technique and detect commercial pot-boilers. He framed paintings, helped hang them, could re-touch a cracked canvas, despatch works of art all round the country and to buyers overseas, and deal with even the most difficult artists.

"If he had been White, he would have been a framer of repute," said an artist. "If he had been overseas, he could have commanded a position in any gallery," said the owner of Gallery 101, Madame F. Haenggi.

But Moses wasn't White, so he was the general factotum who carried and lifted with the considerable strength of his short, stocky frame, who helped artists late into the night to prepare for exhibitions, who ran shopping errands for the gallery on Saturday mornings.

When he died it was shortly after he had returned from doing the shopping. He felt hot, unwell, fetched a bucket to be sick in, and died before a doctor could be found.

As a person he was "bubbling", witty, utterly unservile, chatty, comforting and concerned for anyone old or in distress. No one expected him to suddenly die.

"Everyone ragged him, and always had us in hysterics.