

CLÉMENT SÉNÈQUE 1896–1930: A PRIVATE COLLECTION OF HIS PAINTINGS

by NIGEL HUGHES

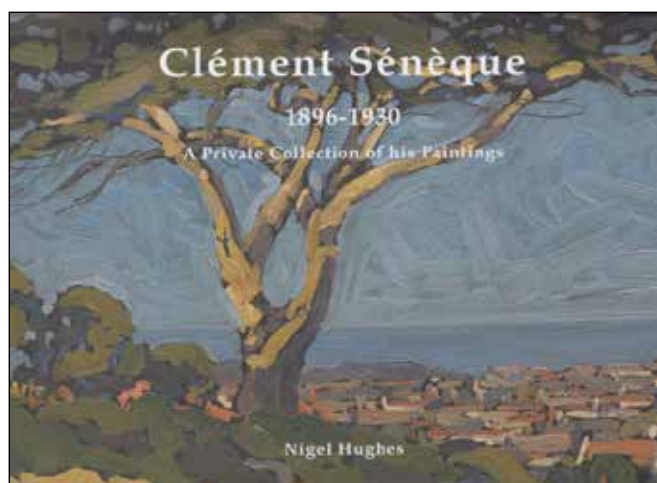
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CLÉMENT Sénèque may be categorised as one of history's countless talented artists who were known but not famous during their lifetime. Had his life not been cut short by pneumonia at the age of 33, it may well have been a different story.

The artist's legacy was teetering on the brink of obscurity in 1988, when Brendan Bell, the director of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, submitted to the University of Natal his MA thesis entitled: 'Clément Sénèque: life and work, including catalogue raisonné'. This meticulously researched dissertation at last provided a consolidated source of information on Sénèque's life's work. Fortunately for Bell, Sénèque's drawings and paintings had been preserved by the Sénèque family, various institutions and cognoscenti, including principal collector Nigel Hughes. And fortunately for the public, Hughes has had the foresight to cement Sénèque's rightful place in art history by publishing this handsomely illustrated book. In it, he brings together his own remarkable collection and Bell's research, augmenting them with Alistair Meredith's sound academic insight into art.

The book records forty works from Hughes's collection, all of which Sénèque executed from 1917 to 1929. Of these works, two depict scenes of Cape Town, one of Mauritius and the remainder of Durban. Each plate is accompanied by a text that places the artwork in the context of its time. Meredith's informative introduction traces Sénèque's artistic development and places his art in relation to both local and international artists of the period. Seen collectively and in conjunction with the written information, it soon becomes apparent that Sénèque was the primary painter of Durban in the 1920s.

With extensive knowledge of the history of Durban and an abiding interest in the city's maritime environment, Hughes was naturally drawn to the art of Sénèque. Other than a few paintings depicting buildings such as 'Durban's St Mary's church', 'Town hall' and 'Town gardens', the vast majority include the Indian Ocean, either in the background, such as in 'Picnicking on



the beach', in the foreground, such as in 'Durban harbour entrance' or as the element surrounding ships and dock structures such as in 'The Bluff wharf – Durban harbour'.

Although Mauritian-born, Sénèque was brought up in Durban when the city, and particularly its port, were rapidly expanding. That

he was a qualified architect, had a fundamental influence on his subject matter and painting technique. His artworks depict both the natural and man-made environment, including the city with its subtropical climate, vegetation and the surrounding ocean, as well as man-made structures, particularly those associated with the port.

Sénèque's architectural training provided him with the appreciation of perspective which is evident in his innate grasp of the underlying structure of both man-made and natural subjects. In creating a painting, whether depicting an organic object such as a tree or an inorganic object such as a floating dock, or as a reflection of either on water, he constructed three-dimensional form with broad daubs of strong but subtly modulated colour. From a distance, the eye sees these flat, daub-like shapes collectively, allowing the image to read as a cohesive whole, almost like seeing a building rather than the bricks from which it is constructed. Furthermore, in choosing colours that expressed Durban's heat and humidity, and applying them with vigorous and self-assured brushstrokes, Sénèque succeeded in realistically capturing a true sense of place.

While Hughes avoids discussion of the artistic merit of artworks in each accompanying text, he provides fascinating empirical information. Using the artwork as a starting point, in some instances Hughes has identified various landmarks and the location from which Sénèque viewed the depicted scene. In other cases, the function and placement of the harbour facilities and machinery are explained, ships are identified and described with enlightening details, and the harbour's expansion and the problematic nature of its sandbar are

referred to. Thus, in addition to enriching the reader's insight into S  n  que's imagery, Hughes's factual details provide a beguiling glimpse into and understanding of Durban's past.

This book serves the important role of recording for posterity and providing public access to a noteworthy

private art collection. Not only is it an attractive publication with a user-friendly layout and well-reproduced colour plates, but it has a succinct and informative text, which celebrates S  n  que's art in the context of Durban's distinctive history.

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