

A gift from their sister Mary:

Mary Stainbank's church commissions

by Milner Snell

Works by the sculptor Mary Stainbank appear in a number of churches in KwaZulu-Natal. This discussion will focus on three of these works: the altar in All Saints, Bellair; the altar screen in St James, Greytown; and the reredos in All Saints, Maidstone.¹ Stainbank generally had strained interactions with church committees that knew little about design, but had very strong opinions about how they wanted their commissions executed. She was at times able to persuade parish councils to accept her interpretation and the three works reflect, in different ways, Stainbank's emotions, style and sculptural techniques. The commissions became part of the buildings and communities for which they were made and it is necessary to look briefly at the histories of these parishes.²



Mary Stainbank

Stainbank's early life

Mary Stainbank, daughter of Dering and Ethel Stainbank, was born in 1899 and grew up on the family estate, Coedmore, near Durban. Her formal art training began in 1916 at the Durban School of Art. In 1922, she enrolled at the Royal College of Art in London where, despite some opposition, she studied sculpture. After obtaining her diploma, she returned to Natal in 1926. While studying in London she was influenced by the modernist movement in sculpture and her work was characterised by odd angles and distorted features. At times her sculptures appear unfinished, but still reveal intense emotion. Many of her sculptures, and smaller ceramic works, depicted African subjects. While ethnographic art had become popular by the 1920s, Stainbank's style and execution differed from that of other artists working in this genre whose works were 'sentimental or melodramatic'.³ She showed an interest and concern for African people, but many of

her works deal with servants or the children of servants and must be placed in the colonial context in which she lived.⁴ Stainbank was never a commercial success, as many conservative collectors in Natal favoured romantic realism and found her work exaggerated and crude.⁵ She made a living, instead, by teaching and through commissions. Her commissions were generally for the decoration of public buildings and 'busts of important personages', but she did undertake work for churches.⁶

Stainbank, according to her biographer Mary Webb, was not always inspired by commissioned work, which 'is not the true reflection of an artist's inspiration and genius', but were usually undertaken to earn a living.⁷ She was often frustrated by committee members with

very little idea about design overseeing the commission. Webb writes, 'Church committees are the worst offenders. Their designs are usually based on religious paintings by the Old Masters and it is a real battle to get them to acknowledge that a modern artist knows more about designing than the Committee does'.⁸ Despite the attitudes of church committees, at times Stainbank was able to alter the design, often without the committee being aware of changes.⁹

The altar, All Saints, Bellair

The original church of All Saints was built on Coedmore and consecrated in 1867.¹⁰ The thatch roof caught alight and the building was badly damaged. Instead of repairing it, a committee was formed in 1891 to raise money to build a new church that was more central for people living in Bellair, Seaview and Hillary. Dering Stainbank donated a piece of land in the main street

in Bellair as a site for the church. It was designed by the well-known architectural firm of Street Wilson and Barr.¹¹ After its completion the following year, the Stainbank family regularly attended All Saints. Ethel Stainbank was a staunch Anglican and very involved in the activities of the church.¹² As a younger woman,

towards the congregation. Four figures, male and female, watch with their hands clasped in prayer. The panels are full of emotion and reverence, which is shown through the actions of the biblical characters – they kneel, offer gifts, pray and either bow their heads in respect or gaze up at Jesus as he ascends to heaven.



Altar, All Saints, Bellair (courtesy Hugh Bland)

Mary Stainbank regularly rode from Coedmore to Bellair to attend services at All Saints. In the 1920s, she was responsible for collecting sustenance funds for the church and even started a Sunday school for African and Indian children.¹³ In adulthood, Stainbank ‘was inclined to be an agnostic’ who enjoyed ‘challenging the sanctity of sacred cows’.¹⁴ Nevertheless, she remained firmly rooted in the family’s Anglican heritage.

The altar in the church was carved by Stainbank in memory of her brothers, William and Arthur. It consists of three wooden panels, depicting scenes from the life of Jesus Christ. The panel to the left (facing the altar) shows the birth of Jesus. Mary is in the centre holding the baby Jesus with Joseph standing to her left. The three magi are present. One is standing to Mary’s right, while the other two are kneeling in front of her presenting gifts. The men are wearing turbans which alludes to their eastern origin. A cross above Mary’s head hints at the fate of the child. The centre panel shows the tomb of Jesus after his resurrection. Two angels, their heads bowed and their hands in prayer, guard the empty tomb. There are three women present, and although their identities are not clear, one is probably Mary Magdalene. The panel to the right portrays the ascension of Jesus into heaven forty days after the resurrection. Jesus, a halo showing his divinity, rises above the cross with his palms turned

At the bottom of the centre panel is a brass plaque indicating that the altar is in the memory of William Dering Stainbank and Arthur Reeve Stainbank, and is ‘A Gift from their Sister Mary’. As a consequence of the isolation of farm life on Coedmore and the death of their father, the Stainbanks ‘were a closer knit family than is often the case’.¹⁵ The loss of William and Arthur deeply affected the family. During World War I, William served in German South West Africa in the Natal Mounted Rifles and at the end of that campaign travelled to England and joined the Royal Field Artillery (RFA). He died in 1916, at the age of 24, in Broughton, Lancashire, of meningitis. Arthur also served in the South West Africa campaign before joining the RFA. He was reported missing, presumed to have been killed in action, on 20 July 1917 at the battle of Passchendaele.¹⁶ Stainbank carved the memorial tablet, which includes the names of her two brothers, to those men of the parish who died in the war. It was unveiled in early August 1922, a few weeks before Stainbank sailed to England with her family to start her studies at the Royal College of Art in London.

There are three stained-glass windows in the church to the memory of Stainbank’s father, brother and mother. Dering Stainbank died in July 1907 of pneumonia. His family and friends donated a three-panelled,

stained-glass window in his memory. The window, from the United Kingdom, shows the ascension of Christ. A window of St Francis, designed by Guido van Besouw, is to the memory of Mary's brother and sister-in-law, Kenneth and Gwen.¹⁷ The window to Ethel Stainbank, who died in 1942, is based on a vision by one of the parishioners and shows Mary holding the baby Jesus and standing on a crown. Below the crown are the images of Ethel, her husband and two sons who died in the war, as well as the figure of Jesus. The window design was carried out by Wilgeforde (Wilgie) Vann-Hall. She was born in Leicester in 1894 and educated at the Liverpool School of Art and Royal School of Art in London. It was there that she met Stainbank and they became close friends. She accompanied Stainbank back to South Africa and they set up the Ezayo Studio together at Coedmore. Wilgie specialised in stained glass windows and painting. Her works include murals at the Addington Children's Hospital and at Coedmore.¹⁸ She and Stainbank remained close friends until Wilgie's death in 1981.¹⁹

The altar screen, St James, Greytown

A piece of ground was granted by the Crown in 1855 to the Anglican Church in Greytown.²⁰ For ten years, services were conducted by the magistrate in the courthouse as the settler community was too small to justify the expense of building a church. On significant occasions, Bishop Colenso rode from Pietermaritzburg to hold services. In 1862, the parish acquired more land in addition to the original grant and began levelling the ground. The foundation stone was laid by Bishop Colenso and Lieutenant-Governor Keate in 1863 and the church was completed and consecrated in 1867. The parish was soon pulled into the conflict that emerged from Colenso's biblical criticism of the Pentateuch. The bishop of Cape Town, Robert Gray, deposed Colenso in 1863, but the Privy Council ruled that Gray had no authority to do so and Colenso was the legal bishop of Natal. Gray, however, consecrated William Macrorie in 1868 as a bishop of the Church of the Province. St James remained the property of the Church of England and although the vicar, Thomas Taylor, was ordained by Colenso, he supported Bishop Macrorie. Colenso denied Taylor the use of the church and so he conducted services in the school building. In 1888, the church building was closed until a vicar appointed by the Church of England could be found. It remained closed for five years until Taylor was finally able to conduct services in it, although he was replaced as vicar a year later by George Pennington.



Last Supper, altar screen, St James, Greytown
(photograph by the author)

It was Pennington who designed the altar screen that is now a memorial to him. George Edgar Pennington was born in Kendal, Westmorland, United Kingdom, in 1854. He came to South Africa in 1883 and in 1894 was sent to Greytown, where he served as vicar until 1927. He started a drive in 1910 to collect funds to build a new church as the old building from 1867 was beginning to crumble and needed constant repairs. In 1911, the foundation stone was laid. Pennington was very involved in the process, and it is recorded that 'in his black frock coat and gaiters, his white hair bobbing up and down, [he] was everywhere – supervising, encouraging, soothing, harassing the architect (Street Wilson) and getting everybody to work'.²¹ The new church was consecrated on 27 March 1913. Pennington died in 1937 in Kendal, although his usual residence was in Loop Street, Pietermaritzburg. Stainbank had a connection, albeit tenuous, to Greytown and Pennington that went back to the early 1900s. Her brothers, Kenneth and Christopher, both went to St David's boarding school, established in 1902 by Pennington, and attended St James as schoolboys.

Pennington designed the wooden altar screen in which is inserted Stainbank's rendering of the Last Supper in a semi-circle bronze cast. Jesus sits at the head of an oblong table. He is portrayed in a traditional manner with long hair, a beard and halo. He is holding a goblet in his left hand. His right hand is raised and he is conversing with his apostles, probably revealing that one of them would betray him. As in many renderings of the Last Supper, it is impossible to work out specific apostles, except for Judas. Eight of the disciples are pressed towards and are listening intently to Jesus. We view them in profile and their facial features are quite similar, but each man is clearly agitated. At the left end

of the table Judas is sitting with his back to Jesus and clutching a bag of silver. His mouth is turned down in emotional agony. Interestingly, sitting next to Judas is an apostle facing him, rather than Jesus. His hand is open and pointed at Judas, leaving the viewer unsure if he is asking about the contents of the bag or demanding some of the silver. At the right end of the table are two disciples speaking intensely to each other, which creates visual balances in the panel. Like other works by Stainbank, the facial features of Judas and the other disciples are stylised and seem even rudimentary, but express intense emotion.

The reredos, All Saints, Maidstone

The settlement of Maidstone was built for the white employees of the Tongaat Sugar Company and named for Maidstone in Kent. In February 1930, 38 members of the staff working at the Maidstone Sugar Mill wrote a letter to the Tongaat Sugar Company indicating their support for the erection of a church, which ‘would have a good moral and social influence on the community’.²² Edward Saunders, the owner of the company, agreed to sell land on which a church could be built as long as it was ‘used for European church purposes and European church purposes only’.²³ The cornerstone was laid at the beginning of 1930 but in June work came to a halt when malaria spread among the men working on the building. Work resumed in July and the church was consecrated in October 1930. It was named All Saints and dedicated with the prayer used in 1395 at the dedication of All Saints, Maidstone in Kent.

Stainbank carved the reredos, or altar screen, in the mid-1950s. It is

dedicated to the ‘Glory of God and His Saints and Thomas Hamlyn and Gertrude Saunders and all benefactors of the church’. The screen is described in detail by Wayne Jayes.²⁴ It consists of five panels. Jesus, his hands open and pointing towards the altar, is in the centre panel with six figures on either side of him. In the panel to the left of Jesus (facing him) are St Peter and St Paul. St Peter is carrying the keys to the kingdom of heaven and St Paul is carrying a book and sword. The book represents his epistles in the New Testament and the sword alludes to his martyrdom. In this panel is an African boy holding a flame representing the Holy Spirit. In the next panel are saints Catherine of Alexandria, Simon of Cyrene and Veronica. St Catherine became a martyr when she was beheaded at the order of Emperor Maxentius. St Simon helped Jesus carry the cross to the place of crucifixion and St Veronica is believed to have

wiped the face of Jesus on the way to Calvary. In the first panel to the right of Jesus is his mother Mary, St John the Evangelist and a young girl holding the flame of the Holy Spirit. Mary has a shawl over her shoulders and St John is holding a chalice with a snake in it. The last panel to the right shows St Anthony of Padua, St James and Mary Magdalene. St Anthony is carrying a lily, a symbol of purity, and St James, the brother of Jesus, clasps a staff and book. Mary Magdalene is wearing earrings and is carrying a jar of perfumed ointment, which refers to her supposed loose morals.

The objects held by the saints often appear in Christian art and are drawn from biblical references and well-established traditions and stories stretching back many hundreds of years. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a



Reredos and detail, All Saints, Maidstone
(courtesy Hugh Bland)

woman of loose morals, questioned by more modern scholarship, was generally accepted at the time.²⁵ However, what is unusual, especially for a country church in 1950s at a time when the National Party government was brutally enforcing apartheid, is that the figures are of different races, ages and genders. Jayes writes that

Stainbank's work shows humanity in its diversity. St Paul has a classical Greek profile. St Peter is shown as an oriental man, Simon of Cyrene is depicted as a Negroid African (he came from Libya). Catherine is depicted as someone of status, wearing a crown over her straight plaited hair. Stainbank clearly doesn't try to tick all of the boxes of racial classification. Veronica and Mary are carved as humans of indeterminate race. The remaining characters have possibly European or Levantine features. The figures in the Reredos represent the whole spectrum of peoples of the world, for all of us are called to be Saints.²⁶

It was not the first time that Mary had included people of different races in her religious art. At college in London, she had carved a wooden panel of the Lamentation of Christ 'in her own style and included African figures in the group'.²⁷ The depiction of Africans often featured in her art from the 1920s and influenced the reredos at All Saints.

Overview

Despite her misgivings about undertaking commissions for churches and often adhering to long-established ecclesiastical imagery, Mary Stainbank was able to include her own feelings, interpretations and sculptural techniques in her religious works. The altar at All Saints, Bellair, in many ways her most conventional interpretation of religious images, was her most personal and emotional work, a dedication to two brothers killed in World War I. This personal dimension is magnified by the memorial tablet she carved to the men of the parish who died in the war and the window to her beloved mother by her close friend Wilgie Vann-Hall. In St James in Greytown, the agony in the face of Judas is striking despite the lack of detail, a technique used by Stainbank in her other works. At All Saints in Maidstone, influenced by her interest in African subjects that went back to the 1920s, the reredos shows the saints gathered around Jesus as people of different ages, races and genders – a remarkable interpretation in apartheid South Africa.

NOTES

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- 2 Besides the three churches discussed here, there are bronze figures in Our Lady of Mercy Roman Catholic Church, Kloof; altar panels in St Etheldreda's, Woodlands (Durban); and the font, St Paul's, Scottburgh. Mary also carved a teak chair for St James, Isipingo. The church was opened in 1872 and demolished in 1964 as a consequence of the Group Areas Act.
- 3 Melanie Hillebrand, 'Mary Stainbank: sculptress of Natal' *Natalia* 17 (1987): 75.
- 4 Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, 'Mary Stainbank and popular culture: images of the "indigene"' (D. Litt. thesis, Unisa, 2002): 75.
- 5 Hillebrand, 'Mary Stainbank': 74.
- 6 Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, *Mary Stainbank: Collection of Sculpture* (Pietermaritzburg: Voortrekker Museum, 1998): 6.
- 7 Mary Webb, *Precious Stone: The Life and Works of Mary Stainbank* (Durban: Knox Printing, 1985): 2.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*: 3.
- 10 W. Carter (ed.), *All Saints' Church, Bellair; Diocese of Natal: Centenary Brochure, 1892–1992* (1992): 4.
- 11 The architect's drawings of the church are in Michele Jacobs and Brian Kearney, *The Street Wilson Drawing Collection* (Durban: Durban Heritage Trust and the authors, 2016): 84.
- 12 Webb, *Precious Stone*: 60.
- 13 *ibid.*: 69 and 56.
- 14 *ibid.*: 169.
- 15 *ibid.*: 43.
- 16 *ibid.*: 59.
- 17 Carter, *All Saints' Church, Bellair*: 11.
- 18 For Vann-Hall's stained-glass windows at Addington see Hugh Bland, *Addington Children's Hospital and Nurses' Home* (Pinetown: Hugh Bland, 2020): 106–109. For Stainbank and Vann-Hall's work at Addington see Webb, *Precious Stone*: 99.
- 19 In All Saints, Maidstone, there is a rose window in the east gable in memory of Dr Evan Lennox Batchelor by Wilgie Vann-Hall.
- 20 Information on Pennington and St James comes from *Umvoti County: Jewel of Natal* (Greytown: Greytown and District Council for Care of the Aged, 1985): 18–21.
- 21 *ibid.*: 20.
- 22 Wayne Jayes, *All Saints' Church Maidstone, Natal: A Guide and Short History* (Maidstone: Rector and Churchwardens, 2019): 8.
- 23 *ibid.*: 9.
- 24 *ibid.*: 45–55.
- 25 *ibid.*: 53–54.
- 26 *ibid.*: 54–55.
- 27 Webb, *Precious Stone*: 96.