

## *Vryhof Anton (Hoffie) Van Der Hoven (1921–1993)*

If heredity really makes a difference to what a person achieves in later life, then perhaps the first thing to note about Hoffie van der Hoven would be that he was the grandson of Anton van Wouw. A well known painting of a young girl reading, by Van Wouw's friend Frans Oerder, is almost certainly a portrait of Hoffie's mother as a child.

To suggest that the outstanding feature of Hoffie's life was that he was the grandson of the elder statesman of South African sculpture would, however, be an injustice to him, both as a man and as an artist. Vryhof van der Hoven's professional career was devoted to medicine, and after making the choice to serve the public rather than remain in private practice, he rose to the highest rank in Natal's provincial hospital services. He was not Natal born: his parents were hoteliers in Parys, but, after graduating from the Witwatersrand University at the end of 1946, he did his year of housemanship at Addington Hospital in Durban.

It was normal then for the aspirant specialist to enter general practice first, and Hoffie spent three years at Amatikulu. He had married Elsabe Gie of Worcester in 1948, and thus became connected to the great South African Murray clan. By the end of his spell in Zululand, his first ambition to specialise in pediatrics was amended, and he joined the provincial hospital services, moving in 1951 to Dunnottar in the Transvaal.

1956 brought him back to Natal. For the next eight years he and his wife more than compensated for having come from outside the province by serving its hospitals in Greytown, Port Shepstone, Eshowe, and finally the capital. His promotion was rapid and, in the eyes of his peers, well-deserved. As Medical Superintendent of these hospitals he was held in affectionate esteem by his staff both for his concern and his judgement.

After two years at Grey's Hospital, he was awarded a British Council grant to make a specialist study of hospital design in the United Kingdom. To use his new expertise, the province broadened the scope of his employment: he was made an inspector of hospitals and then moved into the planning section, where he was centrally involved in the planning of the new Grey's. Deputy Directorship, and finally the Directorship of Hospital Services in Natal followed. The top post was not one that he relished, yet he held it with distinction. He found himself at that point where what is politically expedient

is often at odds with the priorities of the medical and nursing professions. In this role, his formidable integrity won him wide respect.

On his retirement in 1981 he began to develop the artistic talent that had lain dormant through his professional career, and he did so with a fine deftness of touch that suggested that he might have become as prominent in medicine as a surgeon as he did as an administrator. While his grandfather had often worked on a monumental scale, Hoffie's genius in art lay in his reading of the seemingly commonplace. He would find, often in the least picturesque outlook, images that he could render with an intensity that was as vigorous as it was delicate. It was only after his final illness set in that recognition of his work began to widen. A view of the Botanic Gardens was selected for the 1993 Natal Biennale, and in the same year he was invited guest artist at the exhibition of the Midlands Arts and Crafts Society's sculpture group. The piece which brings together two of the strongest threads of his life, however, is a banner which he designed for the Metropolitan Methodist Church in Pietermaritzburg.

It was Vryhof van der Hoven's distinguished career in the public service that made his life a matter of public note. It may seem incongruous to dwell at the last on the art of someone who, to the world at large, was no more than a talented hobbyist. Yet these two facets of his activities, together with his Christian faith and his family life, are woven together. His art is characterised by a remarkable sense of light, and those who knew him felt that this was as much as reflection of his inner self as the product of his observation of the world about him.

MORAY COMRIE