

It is also not surprising to learn that in 2007 he obtained a certificate in theology by part-time study.

Another skill, and one that served him well in his various careers, especially at the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Museum Service, was his fluency in no fewer than four languages: English, Afrikaans, Zulu and German. In 1986 he passed a Zulu proficiency test at the University of Natal.

Gilbert somehow also found the time to serve for many years on the committee of the KwaZulu-Natal Branch of the South African Museums' Association (SAMA), including two stints

as Chairman, from 1994 to 1996 and 2006-2009. During these years he also served on the Council of the South African Museums' Association. During his periods of office the branch thrived and Gilbert convened several successful provincial conferences. In Pam McFadden's words he "gave total devotion to serving on these committees in the interests of protecting and expanding museums and the service they could deliver to the public".

Gilbert leaves his wife Jenny, two sons and a granddaughter.

MARK COGHLAN

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## *Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)*

THE artist and ethnographer Barbara Tyrrell died on 23 September 2015 at the age of 103. She was born on 15 March 1912 in Durban, one of three children. Her father worked for Native Affairs, and early in her childhood they moved to Eshowe. She was immersed in Zulu language and culture from birth. At the age of two, she was present at a performance of Zulu dancers given in honour of Henry Rider Haggard.

She trained at the Natal Technical College Art School and obtained a BA (Fine Art) from the University of Natal, after which she worked as a fashion artist and art teacher. In 1944 she bought an old van, which she converted it into a camper and christened "Nixie", after an Irish wild spirit. It was the first of several similar vehicles that gave her the independence to roam gypsy-like around Southern Africa.



*Barbara Tyrrell in a portrait commissioned for her 100th birthday*

She undertook her first unaccompanied trip in 1944 to work among the amaNgwane people of the Drakensberg. From then on, she dedicated her life to researching and recording the

traditional dress and ornament of rural people, which she knew was fast disappearing. Her subjects included people from many parts of Southern Africa, including Namibia and Swaziland. Later, the Bhaca people of the Richmond region became the subject of her special interest.

Fluent in Zulu, she sketched only what her sitters permitted, drawing on her inherited knowledge of African etiquette in recording her subjects, all of whom she knew by name and paid for their time. Wherever she went, she received the benevolence and hospitality of chiefs and rural communities. In fact, in all her solitary travels, Barbara was never threatened or robbed. Trading stores, she said, were a good place to camp. They were safe and busy – wedding parties, everybody, passed that way.

Barbara also painted and sketched other subjects such as flowers, landscapes and wildlife. Art historian Wendy Gers remarked that her work has “strong decorative qualities”. From early on she organised solo exhibitions. One of the first was in 1946 at the prestigious Bothner’s Gallery in Johannesburg. It received extensive press coverage, and the *Sunday Express* commended her foresight in recording disappearing traditional dress.

Barbara’s first book, a little volume of light verse inspired by her travels which she called *A Medley of South African Caravan Verse*, was published in 1945. Her other books were *Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa* (1968), *Suspicion is My Name* (1971), *African Heritage* (with Peter Jurgens) (1983), and *Barbara Tyrrell: Her African Quest* (1996). She enjoyed a lifelong collaboration with the writer T.V. Bulpin, illustrating his publica-

tions, and he published *Suspicion is My Name* and republished her classic *Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa*.

In her books and accompanying her paintings she gave lengthy informative notes. She explained:

The knowledge of tribal dress was not to be found in books. I do not exaggerate when I say that in 1944, when I began the work, few people realised that such a thing as tribal dress existed.... It is true that tradition is breaking down and that in the process dress is becoming hybridised.... In order to obtain a true record I had to observe, and perhaps even draw, many types before I could be sure of the authentic one. I tried out many ways of “hunting”, keeping a sharp lookout on roadsides, haunting trading stores, reading books, taking up a lead from a photograph seen somewhere, or acting on a casual remark heard in conversation and, above all, by asking endless questions, with endless patience and perseverance.

*African Heritage* is a book about the customs of the people she illustrated, for example beliefs and religion, healers, birth and infancy, married life and home, livestock, huts and agriculture. Personal narrative is a feature of her books, and as time goes by, this becomes increasingly valuable for contextualising her work.

Barbara married William Adrian “Pete” Jurgens in 1952. After their marriage he became a film cameraman and stuntman, and they made their home in Richmond. They had one son, Peter (“Ottie”), who was born in 1952. After her husband died in 1963, her son was her companion, who accompanied her on her travels and later collaborated with her on her book *African Heritage*. He settled in Paris where he died in 1998.

Barbara was well known in Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Two of her paintings were presented to the Queen Mother by the Governor of Southern Rhodesia during the Rhodes Centenary Celebrations in 1953. She and Pete undertook a 5 000 mile journey to deliver paintings she had been commissioned to make for the new Rhodes-Livingstone Museum in Zambia. There she mounted her murals and set out the entire ethnological section of the museum. They then travelled up the Zambesi to Barotseland in western Zambia.

Barbara's close friend was Dr Killie Campbell of Durban, who would provide her with a bath and bed on her return from her travels. They collaborated in selecting her subjects. The Killie Campbell Library, part of the Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, purchased 700 of her 1200 original field-sketches in watercolour and pen and ink, while the Oppenheimer family's Brenthurst Library acquired the remainder. Her finished art works are held in many important collections. Judge Albie Sachs was a staunch supporter of her work, and through him some of her paintings were added to the Constitutional Court collection in Johannesburg. The University of Natal awarded her an honorary doctorate in 1965, and the

President bestowed the Order of Ikhamanga (Silver) on her in 2008.

Barbara retired to Muizenberg, where, on her 90th birthday, representatives of a clan of the Thembu in period ceremonial dress paid her homage.

An exhibition in her honour was opened in the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town on her 100th birthday in March 2012. It marked a shift in her reputation towards recognising her artistic importance, since major art galleries do not hold her work unless they have an ethnographic collection. The catalogue for the exhibition concluded:

It was her technique of recording in great detail the entire, multi-layered outfit of her subjects that inspired collectors to begin assembling complete outfits as worn by local people in different age-sets, regions and occupations. The comprehensive collections of spectacular mid-twentieth-century beadwork regalia in this and other local museums owe their genesis to the work of Barbara Tyrrell.

The exhibition brings to younger audiences the beauty and power of the work and relationships forged by Barbara Tyrrell. Celebrated by her sitters and their descendants, re-evaluated and rightfully acknowledged in a post-democratic society, Barbara Tyrrell has earned her centenary exhibition at last.

ELWYN JENKINS