

## From the collection



In late October, the Fine Arts Library received a copy of *A True and Strange Story: the life of Teuane Ann Tibbo 1895-1984* written by her eighty-year-old daughter Audie Pennefather. Achievement late in life seems to be a family trait: Teuane Tibbo began her art career aged 69, spurred into action by the results of Elam training this same daughter showed her.

Introduced by Pat Hanly, Barry Lett organised Teuane Tibbo's first solo exhibition at the Uptown Gallery in Queen Street in 1964. The *Te Ao Hou* reviewer was impressed: "Mrs Teuane Tibbo, who is aged 70, began painting only last year. Her paintings of the remembered landscapes of her youth have an innocence and directness of vision and a strong and natural sense of design." By July of 1965, she had a dealer gallery show in Elizabeth Bay in Sydney. She met Tony Fomison, Michael Illingworth and Denys Watkins when they bought her paintings, and her works soon entered public collections including the National

Gallery in Canberra. Visiting master potter Shoji Hamada bought three to take back to Japan in 1965. The University acquired Samoan Village at auction two years after Teuane Tibbo's death in Papakura in 1984, and it featured in Bronwyn Fletcher's 2002 survey of Tibbo's work from the years 1964-1974 at Lopdell House Gallery and most

recently in City Gallery's Oceania.

Bright and busy, the composition is typical of the glimpses of early twentieth century Samoan village life as earthly paradise that Teuane Tibbo enjoyed painting. Using her usual high viewpoint, symmetry and leaps of scale, she orders tropical vegetation including coconuts, hibiscus and taro into parallel rows. Villagers are similarly regimented, and lined up with the various fale structures, while an outsized parked bicycle announces the arrival of an important visitor. Giant red and orange hibiscus bushes bloom raucously in the background against a line of hills that McCahon might have wished he had painted. Wispy clouds percolate above in a blue Pacific sky.

In contrast to this idyllic image, Teuane Tibbo's early life in Samoa was far from peaceful. Born on the island of Upolu in 1895, just after the end of the first Samoan civil war (and ten months after the death there at age 44

of the Scottish poet Robert Louis Stevenson whom she claimed to have met), her early life coincided with the contest for control of Samoa between the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. As a teenager she witnessed the beginnings of the Mau movement for independence in 1908 and the arrival of New Zealand Expeditionary Forces sent to seize and occupy German Samoa during World War One. On the home front, things were no less turbulent. Her first unhappy marriage to a New Zealander, William Betham, ended when she shot him and he later died of gangrene. After imprisonment, she married another New Zealander, Edward Victor Tibbo in 1920 at the age of 25. Six years later he uprooted her and their eight children to live in Fiji for the next twenty years.

In 1946 the family arrived in New Zealand where Edward worked as an engineer in Mangakino, Rotorua and Grey Lynn before retirement in Kingsland. There a vision of Santa coming down New North Road inspired her to paint, as she recalls in a 1974 interview: "So I started painting Father Christmas coming down the hill, four reindeer, in the snow. The next day I had four paintings, then 20. I couldn't stop. It was a game to me. The television came, the newspaper, and the artist [Pat Hanly]. All the artists came and looked at it this way and that way. All the questions they asked!"

Teuane Tibbo continued to live a life as colourful as her painting until 1984, dying in her 90th year.

Linda Tyler

*Teuane Tibbo (1895-1984) Samoan village, c.1965, oil on canvas on board, 595 x 900mm*