

# JAN BUYS—PAINTER OF PARADISE

By Herman J. Hahndick

Nostalgia is not a malady, an illness that comes over us from time to time. It is a perpetual condition of the soul, an awareness of and longing for the paradise we have lost and hope to regain. It is a vacuum of spiritual unfulfilment. It goes back to a state beyond memory, and reaches out towards a serene eternity. It is that nameless craving within all of us—a craving for perfect harmony, purest love, true contentment, for God. From it stem our tribulations and despairs, our visions and dreams, our hopes and expectations. From it may also spring the urge to create works of art.

Artists are the scribes of mankind. They record, interpret, accentuate and illuminate all that is of life and nature, all that is in and of themselves, each according to his conception, each according to his own language and symbolism, each according to his own ability.

With these things in mind one should consider the work of the painter Jan Buys.

Buys is at heart a painter of the nostalgic. He is a raconteur of romance, a classical painter in the modern idiom, a dreamer

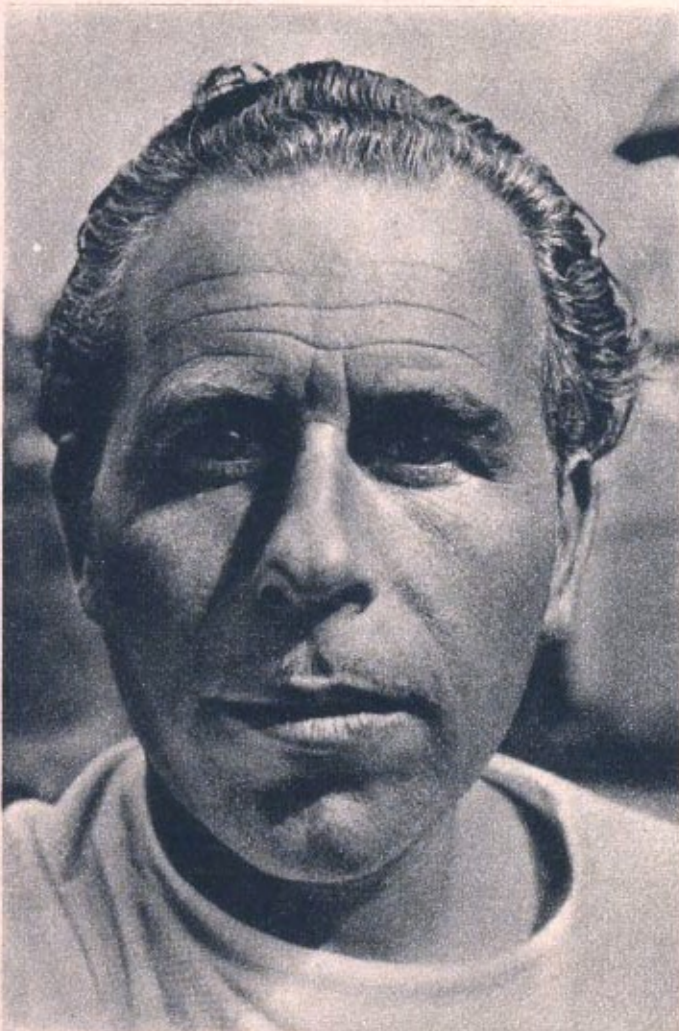
and idealist, a painter who is not out to change the world, but who simply makes his own world and lives in it. Treatment and style are subservient to his theme. They accentuate and enrich it, giving it grace and elegance and a classical beauty rare in an age of plastic and chrome.

Buys came to South Africa four years ago. He is a Hollander. He studied at the Rotterdam Academy, was influenced by the Flemish and Dutch painters both old and modern, and became a student and close friend of Quiryn van Thiel, in those days one of the greatest living masters of the Rotterdam school. Another painter who made a deep impression on him was Modigliani. It is to be expected that, especially in his older work, traces of these influences should be found: that is understandable and natural. (I do not think there ever was a painter who in his youth was not influenced by somebody he considered his master.) Gradually, however, Buys absorbed these influences and came to a style and conception of his own.

Artists have their moods, and, when Buys has to paint

The painter—Jan Buys

The Clown, by Jan Buys





## Two Recent Pictures by Jan Buys



while feeling uninspired, he does not succeed. His mood, or rather his lack of mood, betrays him. These works are open for academic discussion and criticism. Even the greatest of old and modern painters are known at times to have produced works in which their usual vigour appears to be at a low ebb. The Buys I have in mind all the time, however, is the inspired artist whose works are more than just painting, the Buys who as a painter becomes a poet. It is in this mood that his work attains a strange enchanting beauty, a radiance from within, a grace and distinction that raise it above argument.

One should approach painting—all art for that matter—unprejudiced, with an open mind, appreciative not only of its technical and aesthetic qualities, but also receptive of its spiritual values. Painting, after all, is an art, not a science. If it were a science one might attempt to explain it in theories and terms, but all terms and theories in art prove inadequate and unsatisfactory. Art cannot be defined: it is a quality, never a quantity.

There is good painting and bad painting, but there is no such thing as bad art, for bad art is not art. There may be more art in the inexperienced work of the beginner than in the perfected technique of an advanced painter. Good craftsmanship by itself is not enough.

One should approach art with goodwill and respect. Every honest and serious artist is expected to expose his inner self, the best that is in him, publicly—a terrible ordeal for many of them and something quite a few artists never get used to. Therefore the public should realize that every sincere work of art is holy ground—one may not understand or appreciate it, but that does not mean that one has the right to treat it with disdain or disrespect.

Painting has become more and more creative and less reproductive and illustrative. The last fifty years witnessed the liberation of art from convention and set standards. The artists sought new styles, forms and techniques to express themselves in, and though this revolution confused and estranged the public for a time, they gradually realized that the birth of modern art was a natural development of historical importance. Art is often ahead of its time. That does not mean that our future diet should solely be abstract or intellectual art, that we must all acquire mathematical minds and join the cult of the aesthetes. The field of art has been extended, not narrowed down, and through it runs the golden thread which connects it with the past. In Buys's work this thread is clearly visible. In his painting the past and the present are intermingled and create a feeling of timelessness. He does not suffer from soul erosion and his work is far from anaemic. In fact, it is very much flesh and blood.

With Buys, painting is no intellectual problem but a spiritual matter. Buys knows more about painting than most, but he is a conjurer rather than a perfectionist. He often allows himself a freedom which may be mistaken for nonchalance. His best pictures are never the result of long, meticulous and painful planning. He paints them spontaneously, often in feverish haste. He paints his visions and as soon as he has captured the dream he is satisfied and takes the picture off the easel. It is characteristic of him that he invariably forgets to sign his work, an omission that could not happen to a perfectionist.

As a painter Buys is a primitive. To appreciate his work properly, to feel and understand the spirit of his Josephs



and Marys, in all their simplicity, his peasant Madonnas in their exalted wonderment, his serene dream-women and legendary horses, nostalgic glimpses from the paradise of his imagination, one must discern but not dissect. Buys comes from a world where the ages linger, a world pervaded with legend and superstition, where imagination counts as the greater reality—a world of peasant folk living by the promise of heaven and the fear of hell, by the wiles of nature and the mercy of God. It is here that the mystics are found, the dreamers, poets and prophets, the painters, with their primi-

tive conception, childlike submission and deeply religious simplicity, whose work is often beatified by a divine luminosity.

The world of Buys is a world of wonder where the meaning of the miraculous surpasses the futility of time. It is his paradise to which he alone has access. When he closes the doors on reality, to explore his enchanted and timeless landscapes inhabited by the most lovely and beautiful creatures only his dreams can conjure up, we can but wait until he reveals what adventures befall him. These journeys are recounted in his extraordinary paintings, rich and radiant.