

## Finding Sandra

In 1995, for the 50th anniversary of leaving Roedean School, Johannesburg, I compiled *Fifty Years On*, a small book of 'life stories' of our class, to mark the occasion. I had not seen Sandra McGregor, one of our class, since a chance meeting in London in 1950. I discovered that she was living in the Ladies' Christian Home in Cape Town, and, subsequently, I collected her from her single room. With long-standing class friends, Barbara, Gill, Peggy, Phil, and Lizzie, we sat together with Sandra to hear the extraordinary story of what had happened in her life during the last half century.

We heard that she had lived in style in London, Paris, and Florence, studying art and sculpture, and had returned to South Africa after many years abroad: how she was bewitched by District Six and how her work there became her life's joy and focus. I found out later that she had been obliged to return from Europe to South Africa. The vagaries and vicissitudes of life had affected her in spite of her early enviable lifestyle and she had suffered disappointment, rejection, loneliness, and poverty.

Sandra painted in District Six from 1962 to 1979. In February 1966, the whole area was declared a 'white area', under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and she witnessed the removals and the breakdown of a community she admired. Her story was inspiring and tragic; her courage and achievements unrecognised. When we found her, she was living alone with her easel and brushes, and a few of her favourite paintings – impecunious, cheerful, and with a lifetime of unrecorded work and experiences.

I was moved by the content of her life's work and the anecdotes she told me. I encouraged her to write down her own story and the history of her paintings. She began over the next few months to fill several small exercise books with free-flowing hand-written memories, and as she talked to me this story began to form. I set about tracking down her works, contacted the descendants of people she had painted, and began to piece it all together.

It was intermittent research, yet over this last decade, Sandra's compelling story has slowly taken shape. I, a stranger to District Six, have recorded it as well as Sandra's recollections and my research dictate. It is one story of many, Sandra's personal view of a place and its people, expressed through her experiences and her paintings, one unique window on District Six. It is a story worth the telling.

Dolores Fleischer  
Cape Town, 2010



*Atta's kitchen*

1964/65

110 x 50cm

Panel – oil on board

Signed bottom right

ANGLICAN CHURCH  
OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

*Atta, an elderly washerwoman, was Motjie Ragmat's cousin. She always had a pot of coffee on her primus stove. One day I knocked on Atta's door: I was carrying my easel and a big basket of painting equipment. The children opened the door and said, "No thank you, no old clothes!" I painted the interior of the kitchen, and included the three children playing a game.*



*Backyard with basins*

1964/65

110 x 50cm

Panel – oil on board

Signed bottom right

ANGLICAN CHURCH  
OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

*This was a typical small backyard, usually with one tap, a table and basins. The long pole (branch of a tree) was used for stringing the washing line up high, so that the washing could dry and not become soiled.*

List of twenty-five panels first exhibited at St George's Cathedral, Cape Town, in 1965, before being hung in the Grand Hotel in Strand Street:

1	Buck's Chair	61
2	Malay Quarter rooftops in sunlight,	63
3	Malay Quarter rooftops as the sun is setting	63
4	The Black Trunk	65
5	Sandra's Kloof Street studio	66
6	Motjie Ragmat's kitchen	76
7	Motjie Ragmat's backyard leading to Caledon Street	77
8	Portrait of Rashied, Motjie Ragmat's grandson	78
9	Portrait of Cass in Hadj robes	79
10	Portrait of Cass with red lantern	79
11	Portrait of Cass	80
12	Life at the Seven Steps – daytime	94
13	Staircase in the 'Big House'	95
14	Stairs with little girl	95
15	Sandra's favourite cart	100
16	An old cart	101
17	The Blue Door	106
18	Die Hokke at the Seven Steps	107
19	Portrait of Gadija, an Indian girl	108
20	Backyard behind Hadji's house	109
21	Ayre Street	112
22	Die Kraal, Ayre Street	112
23	Hadji's backyard in bright sunshine	112
24	Atta's Kitchen	113
25	Backyard with basins	113



*Ayre Street*

1964/65  
110 x 50cm  
Panel – oil on board  
Signed bottom left

JULIAN ADLER

*This is a typical domestic washday scene. Women usually washed clothes in basins in their backyards, but here they are using an open-air trough*



*Die Kraal, Ayre Street*

1964/65  
110 x 50cm  
Panel – oil on board  
No visible signature

OWNER UNKNOWN

*There was always thick mud in front of this house, possibly due to the overflow from a nearby washing trough.*



*Hadji's backyard in bright sunshine*

1964/65  
110 x 50cm  
Panel – oil on board  
No visible signature

OWNER UNKNOWN

*There was a nook under the stairway in Hadji's backyard where (another) Gadija, 'the ugliest woman in District Six' slept. Gadija had won this remarkable title in a competition!*



