

# Artist lived up to famous name

- **Sandy Guy**
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## **JASON MONET**

ARTIST

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JASON Monet, a prolific and popular expressionist artist who, over a 50-year career more than did justice to his illustrious surname, died at The Alfred hospital in Melbourne after a short battle with cancer. He was 70.

Monet, who was not related to the great French impressionist painter, developed his own vigorous and bold style that attracted art lovers and collectors worldwide. They included Rolf Harris, Barbara Streisand, Elliott Gould, Cleo Laine, John Dankworth and Frankie Howerd, while famous sitters included Noel Coward, Michael Caine, Jack Palance and the pop group Pink Floyd.

Harris, in fact, bought a block of land on Phillip Island so that his long-time friend could create a "Monet garden" in the style of the great French impressionist.

Born in Chelsea, London, the youngest of nine boys, Monet's early artistic talent led him to the London College of Printing and Graphic Art, from where he graduated in 1958. Early ventures into commercial art were abandoned in favour of fine art, and his tenacious commitment to his craft kept him productive even during national service with the British Army.

Back on civvy street in London in 1963 and broke — not for the first or last time — he took a job as manager of the jazz nightspot Establishment Club. Run by Peter Cooke and Dudley Moore, the club was patronised by such stars as Jack Lemmon, Peter O'Toole, Eartha Kitt, Francis Bacon and Michael Caine. Monet's drawings hung on the Establishment's walls, and through growing friendships with many of his famous customers he began to earn regular money for his artworks.

That year Monet met and married his first wife, Andrea Jaffe, an American actress, with whom he had two sons. In 1966, after a seven-month stint living and painting in the West Indies, he and his family returned to London, where his first solo exhibition, held at the Grosvenor Gallery, was opened by Barbara Streisand.

Soon afterwards the marriage ended, and a few years later Harris, who owned a nightclub in Malta, commissioned his friend to create several statues for the club. There Monet met his second wife, Doris. The couple lived in Malta for five years and he used the famous Malta limestone for his sculptures. In his first two years in Malta he produced about 200 sculptures that found their way to buyers around the world — and marked the start of almost 40 fruitful years of art.

In 1975, he and Doris moved to Australia, to where her parents, Joseph and Cettina Briffa, had emigrated in the 1950s. They set up home at the Briffa's holiday home on Phillip Island, and the first of their four daughters, Camille, was born the following year.

Monet set about building a remarkable house of rammed earth and recycled timber, which he always regarded as a giant sculpture.

His enormous creative output stretched beyond numerous canvasses to a giant koala for the koala sanctuary on the island, a slide in the form of a large magpie for a local school, and a pair of life-size wooden cows that still stand (although, to the despair of art lovers, they have been plasticised).

Over the years the Monets took several art-inspired journeys to places such as Fiji and Malta, but

it was Bali (he is pictured at work there) that captured his heart. He painted 40 canvasses in just two months during his first visit. He eventually settled in Ubud after he and Doris separated in 1988, and quickly became established with the local community, producing work that reflected the colour, intensity and beauty of his surroundings.

For the next 20 years, Monet lived either on Bali or Phillip Island, and successful solo exhibitions of his superb landscapes and portraits were held in Melbourne, San Francisco, Vienna, Munich, London, Sarawak, Jakarta and Bali.

Monet's last years were dominated by his work for the Sumatran Orang-utan Society, for whom he made designs aimed at engaging children and adults in the plight of this threatened species.

In typical fashion, he built more extraordinary houses — this time two masterpieces constructed entirely from bamboo — on his Ubud property. He saw bamboo as a renewable resource that could take the place of timber.

Monet loomed larger than life; he had an opinion on most things and, at times, an artistic temperament. But he was, more importantly, a man of incredible generosity and warmth. Free of pretentiousness and falsities, he was a huge personality with terrific humour and vitality.

In the final months of his life Monet returned to the family home at Phillip Island with Doris — with whom he had remained close — his daughters and grandchildren. He remained active to the end, calling for his brushes and a canvas to paint the staff caring for him at The Alfred before his death. He began a mural, which will be completed by his daughter Camille, also an artist.

Monet asked that his ashes be divided and spread at his homes on Phillip Island and Bali, and around St Paul's Bay in Malta. He is survived by Doris, daughters Camille, Marcelle, Louise and Simone, sons Aaron and Pablo, and grandchildren Syanna, Cadiz and Nuwara Eliya.

*Sandy Guy is a freelance writer and a friend of the Monet family.*