The official opening of Olievenhuis Art Museum on 11 October 1989 heralded the beginning of a new cultural era for Bloemfontein. It was the realization of a dream for many individuals who for decades had campaigned for the establishment of an art museum in the Free State. One such individual was Mrs Dora Scott, well known in Bloemfontein’s art circles. Dora Scott, fondly known as Tante Dora, was a remarkable woman. When she passed away on 24 February 2013 at the age of 99 years, she left a great legacy to Bloemfontein and its art community. Both she and her husband, the late Prof. Frederick (Frik) Petrus Scott played a huge part not only in establishing an art museum in Bloemfontein, but also in their immense contribution to promoting a local visual arts culture.

Dora Bossart (her maiden name) was born in Kalmthout in the Belgian province of Antwerp on 20 June 1913. She studied natural sciences and education at Ghent University (1934–1938) where she acquired the equivalent of a Masters degree in science. In 1937 she received the Mac Leod Prize for the best Dutch language publication in Physics at a Belgian University. As a student she travelled to Groningen in the Netherlands in 1937 and later worked there as a laboratory assistant from 1939 to 1941. During this time she met medical student, Frik Scott, originally from Winburg in the Free State. Scott developed an interest in art while boarding with Dutch sculptor and painter Sebastiaan Galis.

Returning to Belgium in 1941, Dora could get a permit to travel to the Netherlands again only in 1943. She and Frik married before this permit expired and their oldest son Willem was born in 1944. After the war they stayed in Kalmthout near Antwerp for just over two months. Many hours spent debating and discussing art with Dora’s parents, both patrons of the arts and involved with a society named “Kunst van Hede”, further stimulated the couple’s devotion to art and resulted in them starting their personal collection.

The Scotts arrived in South Africa on 11 December 1945 and settled in Edenville where their son Louis was born in 1946. They later moved to Vrede where Frederick was born in 1948. In 1953 the family moved to Pretoria where Dr Scott specialized as a dermatologist. On their arrival in South Africa the Scotts started building close friendships with artists such as Gerard de Leeuw, Gregoire Boonzaier and Walter Battiss. In 1956 they moved to Bloemfontein and soon became recognised as a couple with a passion for and inestimable knowledge of the arts.

Dora was an accomplished cook and hostess and their home soon became a hub for local artists. The constant encouragement and enthusiasm of the Scotts and the unique bond of friendship and mutual understanding that existed between these artists and the Scotts was the sturdy foundation on which the Bloemfontein Group was established. This group originally consisted of Father Frans Claerhout, Alexander and Marianne Podlashuc, Eben van der Merwe and Renée Le Roux. They were later joined by Stefan and Iris Ampenberger, Arthur Cantrell, Fayetta Varney, her brother Neville Varney, Walter Westbrook and Mike Edwards. The first meeting of the Group was held at the Scotts’ home, 17 York Road, Bloemfontein, in November 1958. The Group held their first exhibition at the National Museum in Bloemfontein in April 1959. The formation of the Group was important not only for artists, but also for art activities in the Free State.

The members of the Bloemfontein Group are seen as artists meditating on past achievements in the visual arts. They challenged existing norms and found innovative ways to create art, and each created his or her own personal artistic style with a specific
philosophy and/or purpose. They were especially prolific in the production of modern art, and the work of some of the Group members had an avant-garde inclination. Within a short period the Free State artists won national acclaim. Eight years later, in 1966, a major group exhibition was held at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, which confirmed their status and recognition as artists. The artists of the Bloemfontein Group also received recognition for their particular expression of freedom from the renowned expert art connoisseur/collector, patron and actor Vincent Price (1911-1993), who visited South Africa in the 1960s.

Dora is considered to have been one of Bloemfontein's leading art experts. Together with her husband, she endeavoured for 30 years to work for the establishment of an art museum in the city. In 1958 a small art gallery, the A.C. White Gallery, was opened in the Municipal Theatre Building. It was named after a former mayor who donated his collection of South African paintings to the Municipality and also contributed financially towards the maintenance of the gallery. After the death of Frik in 1976, Dora and her three sons established the FP Scott Trust. In March 1988, more than a year before the Olievenhuis Art Museum was officially opened, 24 works of art, two from each of the twelve members of the Bloemfontein Group, were donated for the future art museum in Bloemfontein.

It was announced in 1985 that Bloemfontein would open its own art museum in the converted former residence of South Africa's State Presidents. The Olievenhuis Art Museum opened on 11 October 1989. The A.C. White collection of 32 artworks was donated to this museum in 1990. Dora Scott had already at this time visualised sculptures in the attractive gardens, a dream which was finally realised in recent years.

Dora Scott served as an active committee member of the Friends of Olievenhuis Art Museum and assisted with arranging many exhibition openings and other activities, even before the official opening of the art museum. She was later declared an Honorary Member of the Friends of Olievenhuis. She also served on the Advisory Committee of Olievenhuis Art Museum for many years, where she assisted tremendously with the selection of new works for the collection. In 1989 the National Museum awarded Dora Scott with a certificate for outstanding service as an Honorary Curator since 19 March 1976.

As Olievenhuis Art Museum celebrates its 25th anniversary on 11 October 2014, we will remember Tante Dora, not only for her role in establishing the art museum, but also for her sense of humour, humanity and passion for the arts and artists.

References
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