

The Virgin Islands Consortium

New Details Emerge On Rare 1884 Oil Painting Of St. Croix, Danish West Indies

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ST. CROIX -- For several years now, Wayne James, avid art and antiques collector and former one-term senator, along with a team of Danish archivists and researchers, has been looking—to no avail—for information on a rare 1884 painting in James' private collection.

But all has changed after an unexpected email arrived in James' inbox, according to a press release issued late Monday, the findings of which will be officially unveiled later this year.

The “Danish Golden Age” oil-on-canvas painting by Niels Christian Theodor Jessen depicts the harbor of Christiansted, St. Croix, Danish West Indies (present-day US Virgin Islands) as viewed from the shoreline of the sugarcane plantation Estate Golden Rock, with the town's skyline rendered in yellow-gray hues depicting the atmospheric conditions over St. Croix several months after the August 26-27, 1883 volcanic eruption on Krakatoa in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), located over 11,400 miles away. One of the deadliest and most destructive volcanic events in recorded history, over 36,000 deaths were directly attributed to the eruption itself and the tsunamis that ensued. And the explosion, which destroyed over two-thirds of the island of Krakatoa, is regarded as the loudest sound ever heard in modern history, reports of it being heard over 3,000 miles from the point of origin and shock waves recorded on barographs worldwide, the release stated.

The identity of the artist of James' painting, signed “Th. Jessen 1884” and titled “Kristiansted,” has befuddled and eluded Danish auction houses, collectors, archivists, and art historians for years: The name “Th. Jessen” does not appear in Weilbachs Kunstnerleksikon, the Danish biographical dictionary of artists and architects.

But on September 14, 2015, after five years of searching, James received the big breakthrough: an email from Danish researcher Klaus Dahl. The message read, in pertinent part: “Dear Mr. James, In all haste, I send you the following: 'Niels Christian Theodor Jessen, f. 24/9 1847, cand. phil., 1880 Inspecteur ved St. Croix Faellessukkerkogerier.' Could it perhaps be him?” The message went on to read, “...apparently [Jessen] compiled the family's genealogical information in a book, which he signed 'Golden Rock, St. Croix, 1885.' ” The email closes with the caution: “Just a long-shot, Klaus Dahl.”

“The moment I read the email, I knew that what Dahl had thought to be a 'long-shot' was in fact a bull's eye,” James said. “Finally, the artist's full name had been identified.”

Born in Denmark in 1847, in 1880, at age 33, Niels Christian Theodor Jessen is listed as a candidate for a degree in philosophy, and serving as Inspector of the common sugar-boiling house at Estate Golden Rock, a plantation just west of the town of Christiansted.

But while Jessen may have found his vocation in the sugarcane industry, his avocation was art. And, ironically, while his professional pursuits in the sugar industry have long been forgotten or, at best, relegated to a footnote in the annals of Virgin Islands and Danish history, it is his avocation that preserves his legacy: Clearly a classically trained and highly skilled painter, one of the artist's paintings, titled *Fra Fællessukkerkogeriet på St. Croix*, dated 1886, and signed “Th. Jessen,” is at the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen, according to the release.

“This recent discovery will open a whole new chapter on the life of Jessen,” James said. “Now that his full name can be associated with his heretofore nebulously identified works of art, extensive research can now be done on his life, his surviving paintings, and his place in Danish and Virgin Islands art history.”

James will officially unveil the painting in Christiansted, St. Croix on November 10, 2015, thereafter to be on public display until further notice.

“The painting should be seen by the public, not tucked away in a private collection for another 130 years,” James said. “Very few paintings of its quality, age, and subject matter were ever created, and even fewer have survived. The painting is a treasure for the people of both Denmark and the United States Virgin Islands.”

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