



ROBERT PLANTE & TITIA JETTEN: DOUBLE DUTCH MASTERS

By David Morrison

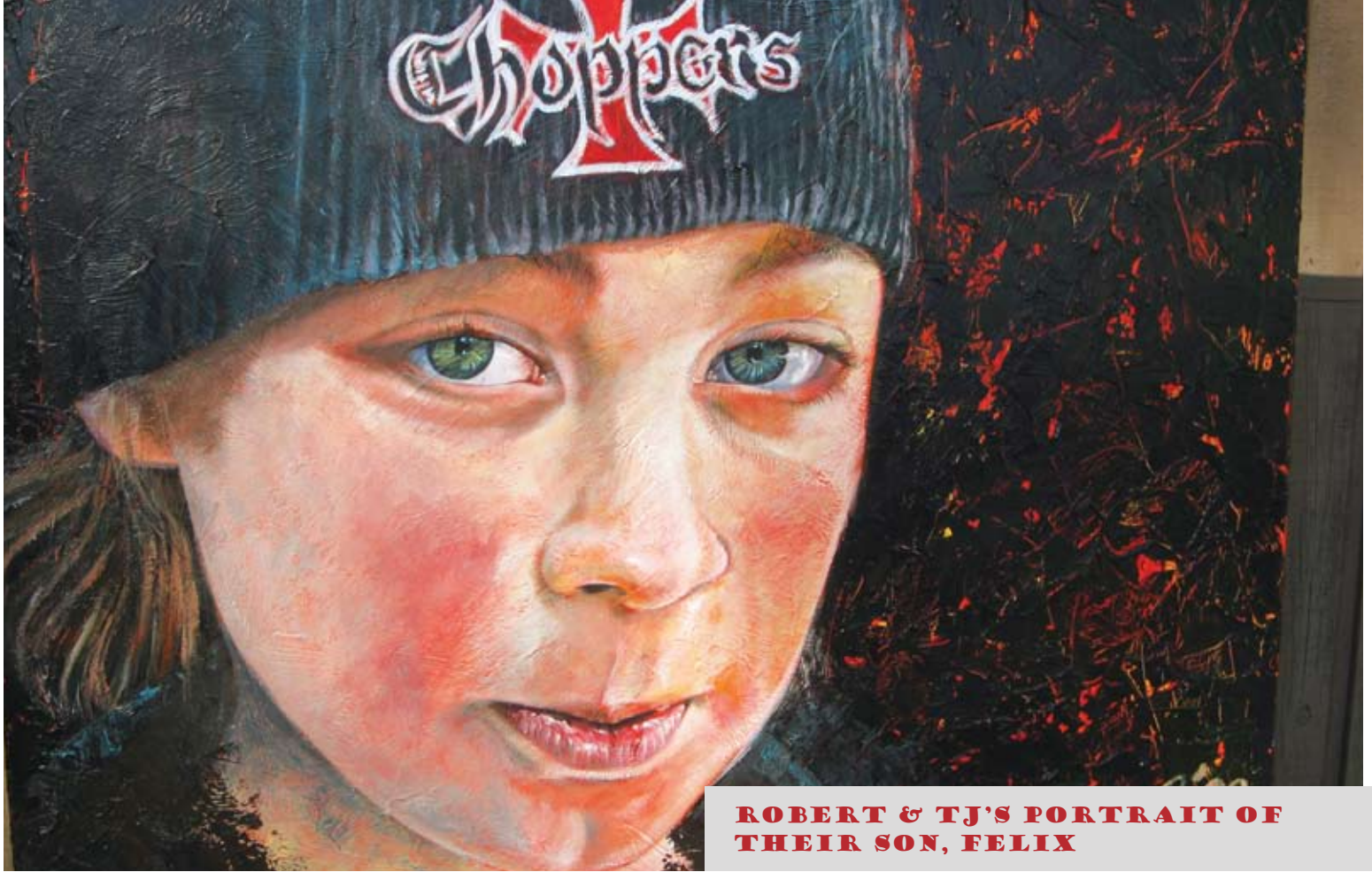
Robert Plante and Titia Jetten impressed me before a single word had passed between us. They popped into Fascinating Rhythm, where I work part-time, their commanding physical presence alone drawing my attention. At 6'3" Robert is a powerfully built bear of a man, yet he exudes an affable sweetness in embodiment of the archetypal 'gentle giant.' The vivacious Titia stands a sliver over six feet, her comely face amplified by a dramatic cascade of wavy auburn hair. Beyond their physicality, however, they radiated a tangible positive energy that I homed straight in on.

Until the day they entered the store I had not seen these guys around Nanaimo before. Curious, fascinated, I wondered if they were new to town, visiting, or what, so when they had visited the store a couple more times I decided to find out by extending the hand of friendship with an invitation to dinner. Well, call it my intuitive journalistic nose or

whatever you will, but the story that unfolded as we got to know each other was amazing.

Artists Robert and Titia (known to all as 'TJ') and their young sons Hugo, Felix and Dirk, immigrated to Nanaimo from the Netherlands, landing on May 15 last year. As you will see, their passage was far from smooth. Presented at every turn with agonizing emotional challenges, infuriating administrative incompetence and other problems, they nonetheless rose above it all in pursuit of a long-term dream.

"It all started 18 years ago," begins TJ. "We were working hard to earn good money, so able to travel. Between Pakistan, Ecuador and Alaska, we chose to visit Alaska, and discovered there what *space* is! I still remember being in awe looking at the mountains and this *vastness*. A couple of years later we went to Montana and experienced the same thing. When you don't live close together, like we did in Holland, life is a lot more relaxed, so this feeling made us want to move away."



ROBERT & TJ'S PORTRAIT OF THEIR SON, FELIX



ROBERT PLANTE & TITIA 'TJ' JETTEN WITH THEIR UNTITLED "OCTOPUS PAINTING"

Gripped from that point by the strong desire to relocate somewhere with room to stretch out, they considered Scotland, then Sweden, but thoughts kept returning to Montana. The turning point, however, came with a trip to Portland, OR., their first visit to the Pacific Northwest.

"I immediately fell in love!" gushes TJ. "I went there 20 times, started a small business, networked, wrote a book about the people of Portland and had the greatest time of my life. But we realized it was very difficult to get green cards and go live there. In the meantime we had friends moving to Victoria, so had contacts in this area. We knew we couldn't live in Portland, but really wanted to go to the Northwest. So we researched and chose Nanaimo! We are so, so happy we did, because we *love* it here!"

Minds made up, ex-rock singer Robert and dancer TJ set the immigration application process in motion in 2006. In the three years until they received their immigration documents they faced many difficulties and uncertainties. Firstly, as the owners of an advertising, art and graphic design business, they had to gradually wind up operations. A seemingly straightforward (though long-winded) procedure on paper, in doing so they found themselves dogged by all manner of bureaucratic and legal problems with financial repercussions. Too complex and tedious to recall here, I'll just say that these nightmares tested their resolve to the limit.

Adding to the stress at various junctures the Dutch post office lost the whole family's passports for a time, and a hospital lost their medical files. *Twice*. Then there was the drama of trying to sell their house in a depressed market, which they eventually achieved just *three days* before leaving for Canada.

Cutting to the chase of an eventful and, in many ways, surreal story, everything came to a head in the family's frantic final three days in the Netherlands. On May 13, Robert received a telephone call from his best friend, informing Robert he'd been diagnosed with two brain tumours. He was distraught, but worse was to follow. At 10:00am on 15th, the day their new life would begin, another call came in.

"It was my brother," begins the softly spoken Robert. "He said: 'Your father died this morning.' He wasn't sick; he just had a heart attack at 76 years-old. It was crazy. My feelings were so mixed because on the day you leave—when you *must* leave—your father dies, and you have to make a *huge* decision." Robert's voice cracks and he shakes his head, struggling with ongoing disbelief at what occurred that day. "I could let my family go to Vancouver and stay in Holland to bury my father, but there would have been so many different problems if I did that, so I decided we just *had* to go together. I knew from then I would be the black sheep, and this is now so." TJ touchingly reaches to caress her husband's wrist, interjecting: "It was a *crazy* situation. It was very dramatic, but we just *had* to go and *not* look back."

Having crawled relatively unscathed from the emotional wreckage of their calamitous departure, Robert,

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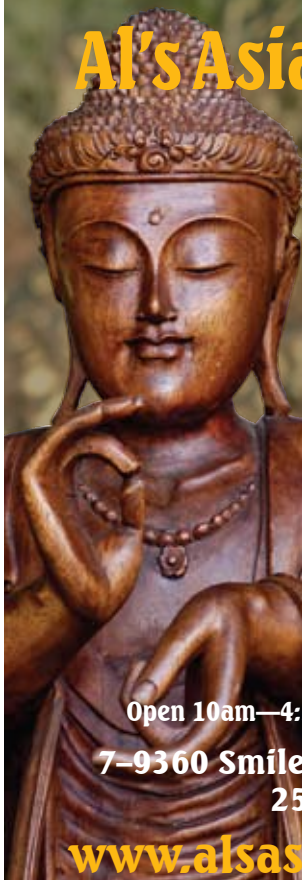


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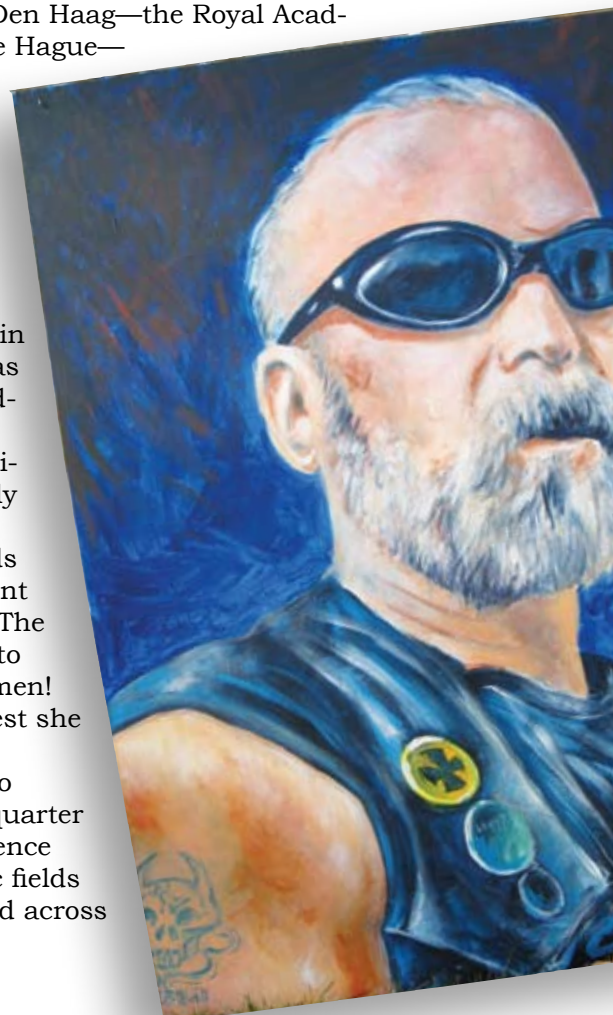
DETAIL OF "OCTOPUS PAINTING"

TJ and their unsurprisingly artistically advanced boys have hurled themselves with great enthusiasm at their exciting fresh beginning. Recently moved into a family-sized cabin on Diver Lake, they have set up their studio and three art businesses, and are already using their considerable creative skills to benefit the community.

These consummate art professionals met on their respective first days at Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten, Den Haag—the Royal Academy of Art, in The Hague—

27 years ago, and have been together, immersed in each other and the world of art, ever since. (Bizarrely, but delightfully, TJ is well known in the Netherlands as the country's leading biker portrait painter! It's a position she ultimately worked hard for, yet drifted towards entirely by accident when setting up 'The Goddess Project' to paint mature women! Long story; it's best she tells it!)

So they come to Nanaimo with a quarter century of experience in various artistic fields that will be spread across



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ROBERT PLANTE & TITIA 'TJ' JETTEN WITH THEIR SONS (L-R), FELIX, DIRK, AND HUGO

their new companies. Of Pacific Picasso, TJ says: “We make commissioned art and we do workshops and art classes. We also want to start masterclasses for teachers and people in design or illustrating. And we have Artskunk—art with a *bite!*—which is where we want to continue the biker art and do edgier projects. Then there’s Alegria’s Gallery, for businesses—animations, illustrations, conceptual design, calligraphy and commissioned business art.”

TJ has also become actively involved with Start With Art Nanaimo (SWAN) at Studio 366 on Selby St. “It’s a place where people can gather to do art—all kinds of people with different abilities,” she explains. “It’s just ‘come, connect, create, enjoy!’ It’s all volunteers—artists and people who love art and want to be involved in it—so it’s a very exciting, energetic group of people.”

I have to say that meeting this lovely, fun-loving family has already truly enhanced my life. They are so full of vim and vigour, creative imagination and big plans for the future that it’s easy to get swept along by their exuberance. They treat every day as an adventure and say they feel blessed to have made it here. “David, it really feels like coming home, here

in Nanaimo,” Robert tells me with touching sincerity. Then I say to you Robert, TJ and your boys: Welcome home! I for one am delighted you chose to join us.

For more information on Robert and TJ and their range of art services, please contact them at 250.585.8403 or visit the following websites:

PACIFIC PICASSO: www.pacificpicasso.com

ARTSKUNK: www.artskunk.com

ALEGRIA’S GALLERY: www.alegriassgallery.com

SWAN: www.startwithartnanaimo.blogspot.com

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