



THE NATIONAL TRUST
OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Screen Stars Mural: A Journey Through Belmont's Rich Heritage

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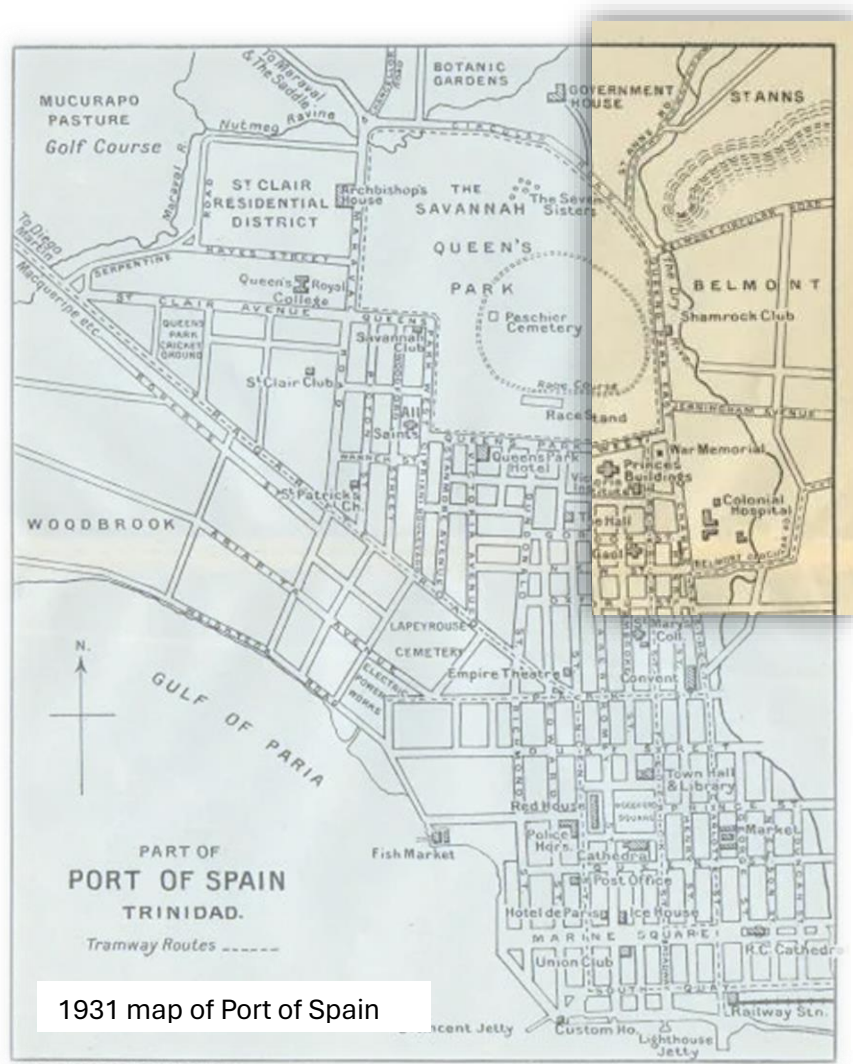
Screen Stars mural by mural artist Zinnia Cheewah (images by Nesyamn Ranut).

The mural adorning the walls of Screen Stars Limited at 81 Belmont Circular Road in Belmont stands as a captivating embodiment of the cultural vibrancy and rich heritage of Trinidad and Tobago. While the Screen Stars Facebook

page modestly beckons observers to “Check out the vibrant mural on Screen Stars Ltd building, celebrating the rich heritage of Trinidad and Tobago,” residents can proudly boast that all scenes depicted on that wall can be found within Belmont itself – from the quaint gingerbread houses to the vibrant steelpan music and masquerade (1). The mural also resurrects the spirit of the celebrated men and women of diverse talents, reflecting the dynamism that defines both Belmont and the artist behind this masterpiece. This mural, therefore, serves as a testament to the diverse and rich artistic legacy that has flourished within the Belmont community.

Historical Roots and Evolution

Belmont, a French derivative of the Norse word meaning "beautiful mountain" or "hill," may encompass a mere 0.6 square miles, yet its historical significance far exceeds its small footprint (2). In the era of enslavement, Belmont was defined by sugarcane and coffee estates that prevailed across its landscape. This scenery presented a stark juxtaposition to the present, featuring plantations rather than the crammed housing that would later define the area.



Tracing the Path of Settlement

The history of largescale colonial settlement in Belmont, as well as across Trinidad, began with the enforcement of the Cedula of Population outlined by Roume de St. Laurent in 1783. This initiative granted land and concessions to settlers, mandating that they be Catholic and establish their home on the island (3). Consequently, French and coloured settlers, accompanied by enslaved Africans, arrived and settled, with the latter forced to clear forests and establish estates for mono-crop cultivation and extraction.



Cazabon painting of the East Dry River which passes through Belmont, c.1850.

From Enslavement to Liberation: Freetown's Legacy

Following the abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807, a significant number of Africans, representing diverse ethnic groups like Yorubas, Radas, Igbos, Mandingos, and Krumen, found themselves either bound for plantations in non-British territories or unlawfully traded by certain British ships (4). The Imperial Government intervened to rescue and transport many of these individuals to Trinidad, designating Belmont as a key settlement for them (5).



Adherents of vodun engaged in worship (image by Nesyamn Ranut).

This led to the establishment of an area in Belmont known as Freetown, commemorating these Africans who arrived in Trinidad not as enslaved persons but as free women and men. Freetown's boundaries extended from the East Dry River, at the north end of Circular Road, up into the Belmont Valley Road (6). Also, according to Gérard Besson, "In 1852 and 1866, additional liberated Africans were granted land beyond Erthig Road, and many of the present-day families residing there are descendants of those individuals (7)." Belmont's street names, such as Sampty Lande and Mayock Place, stand as tangible tributes to these individuals, preserving their stories within the community's identity (8).



Chief of the Rada community in Belmont, *hubono* Henry Antoine (image by Nesyamn Ranut).

Antoine Lane in Belmont is another area paying homage to liberated Africans, housing the Dangbwe Comme, also known as The Rada Compound (9). Established in 1868 by its founder Abojevi Zahwenu (who adopted the name Robert Antoine), The Rada Compound is unique as the only community in the country practicing vodun (10). This underscores the Belmont community's crucial role as a repository for African spiritual tradition.

The Expansion of the Belmont Area



Image showing narrow lane and tightly packed housing in Belmont (image by Nesvamn Ranut).

The late 19th century witnessed a remarkable influx of residents in Belmont, marking the period when Belmont emerged as the inaugural suburb of Port of Spain (11). Initially, the area experienced an exodus following the end of slavery in 1838, leaving Belmont largely unoccupied. However, the demographic landscape of Belmont underwent significant transformation as it evolved into the densely populated area known today. This evolution was driven by the desire of people to live close to where they worked, resulting in unplanned construction of closely packed houses without proper planning approvals (12). This urban expansion had a dual consequence, escalating population density and narrowing the winding footpaths. Eventually, these footpaths were widened, giving rise to the narrow streets and lanes that characterise the area today (13).

Belmont's Architectural Splendour



Beautiful Belmont architecture: (L) Meyler House, (R) St. Margaret's A.C. church and Sisters of Cluny Providence Convent (Images by Nesyamn Ranut)

Despite the unstructured nature of housing, Belmont underwent a significant transformation, evolving into a community increasingly occupied by Black professionals who, due to social restrictions, were barred from residing in the areas traditionally inhabited by the white elite. Notwithstanding the significantly small scale of their houses, these residences exhibited ornate architecture comparable to some affluent homes in St. Clair and Maraval. This architectural similarity earned Belmont the colloquial designation of "The Black St. Clair." Modest gingerbread homes ..adorned with wooden jalousie windows, gabled roofs, lattice work, and intricate interiors became the signature motifs of Belmont as indeed the Trinidad of yesteryear. Amidst the prevalence of modern, boxy structures today, glimpses of these historic buildings endure. Myler House, St. Jude's Home for Girls, The St. Dominic's Home and L'Hospice are just a few remnants of a bygone era serving as reminders of the meticulous attention and craftsmanship invested in creating beautiful residential spaces and other significant structures in Trinidad. Some

of these including Meyler House (previously mentioned), Providence Girls School, St. Francis R.C. Church, and St. Margaret's A.C. Church are on the National Trust's Inventory of Heritage Assets and are recognised as sites of historical and architectural importance. Presently, St. Francis Church of Assisi Roman Catholic Church stands as the sole listed property of interest in Belmont.

The Spirit of Competition: Belmont's Cultural Prowess

Belmont carved out a distinctive identity, drawing inspiration from the upscale neighbourhoods that influenced its aesthetic. As highlighted by Clarence Charles in his thesis, "Belmont..., a town annexing the northern border of Laventille was considered a 'nice,' 'quiet' neighbourhood"(14). This characterization, according to Charles, originated from the settlement of Yorubans post-Emancipation, who were artisans, entrepreneurs, and individuals striving for respectability. Charles also provides a firsthand account underscoring the pervasiveness of this attitude, stating, "I was born and raised there [in Belmont] and recall being consistently warned against venturing 'behind the bridge' or associating with 'those wayward boys from round there (15). The self-perception of Belmont as superior to some areas around Port of Spain, albeit not as prestigious as locales like Maraval and St. Clair, fuelled a pervasive sense of competition and a desire to prove worth. This unique blend of pride and aspiration birthed a plethora of intellectuals, musicians, and carnival luminaries, each driven by a



determination to assert their capabilities. Hence, Belmont became a fertile ground for the cultivation of extraordinary talent.

Cultural Icons: Belmont's Contributions to Trinidad and Tobago

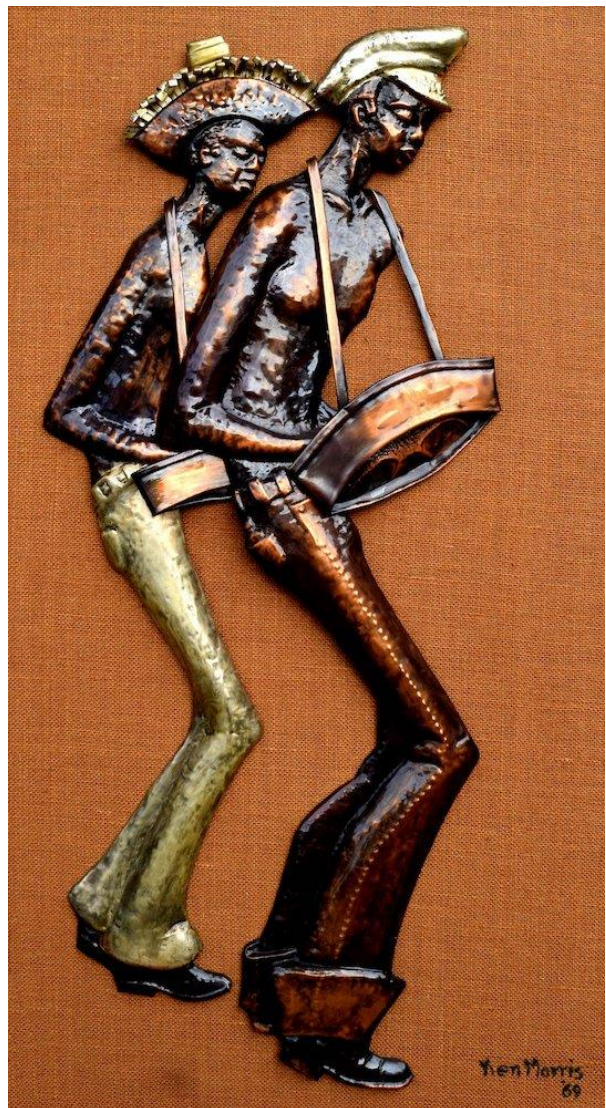
Belmont has significantly shaped Trinidad and Tobago's socio-cultural tapestry, from skilled stickfighters to world-class cricketers, footballers, and the nation's first Republican President, Ellis Emmanuel Innocent Clarke, to the legal luminary Sir Hugh Beresford Wooding (16). Beyond this, Belmont's influence, particularly on the Trinidad Carnival scene has also been remarkable. One noteworthy example is the legendary Casablanca steelband, established in 1945 and named after the iconic 1942 Humphrey Bogart film. This band, according to Royce Russel in his article "Belmont Casablanca Steelband coming back", was formed by pan men originally from Merry Boys and Bar 20 in 1945, also originating from Belmont (17).



Casablanca Sextet c.1950s. Image courtesy www.casablancasteelorchestra.com

Additionally, other pansides such as Belmont 5th Dimension, Belmont City Kids International, and Noyal Hill Steel Orchestra have made notable contributions, etching their names into the historical narrative of Trinidad and Tobago (18). Even defunct steelbands like Dem Boys and Stromboli played pivotal roles in shaping the community's carnival legacy (19).

Masquerading in Tradition: Belmont's Carnival Influence



Broze sculptures – “Masqueraders” and “Panmen” – by Ken Morris, 1969. Images courtesy 101artgallery.com

Another great contribution of Belmont is in the creation of mas. Ken Morris, a mas' icon, eloquently captures the essence of growing up in Belmont, stating, "Growing up in Belmont for me was fantastic; I was surrounded by carnival all year round. Everyone in Belmont played mas, ensuring there was always work to be done." (20) Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that Belmont has nurtured cultural giants, producing renowned mas men such as Jim Harding, Wayne Berkeley, Harold Saldenah, Jason Griffith, and Ken Morris, all of whom contributed significantly to the illustrious era of Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival history.

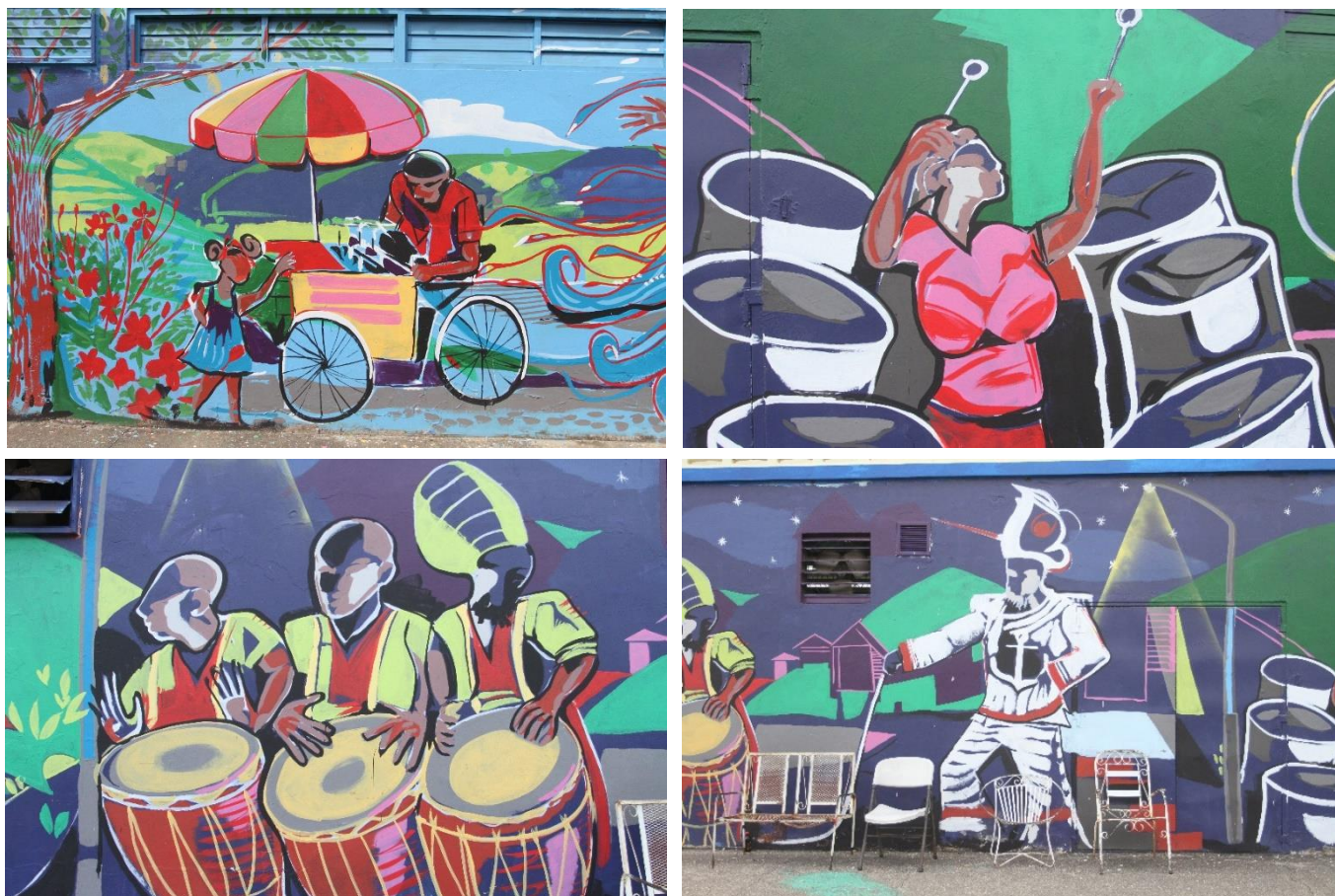
The Creative Mind Behind the Masterpiece



In the exploration of Belmont's cultural legacy, the Screen Stars mural, curated by Belmont native Zinnia Cheewah, stands out as a socio-cultural masterpiece. Renowned for diverse artistic skills, Cheewah serves as an art director, designer, mural artist, and tattoo artist. Being a Belmont native, Cheewah lived in the mecca of arts and culture, profoundly shaping the artist's style (21). Cheewah's work adorns the magnificent NCC wall in the Queen's Park Savannah and the BP Renegades Panyard, paying tribute to legendary pan arranger for BP Renegades Steel Orchestra, Jit Samaroo, among other places. The Screen Stars mural enriches Cheewah's repertoire, contributing to Belmont's cultural heritage with its captivating imagery and symbolism.

Beyond Representation: A Living Testament

Tasked by the Ministry of Social Development to enhance the original graffiti-style mural, Cheewah's artistic rendition goes beyond a mere representation, serving as a profound homage to Belmont's historical intricacies.



Screen Stars mural by mural artist Zinnia Cheewah (images by Nesyamn Ranut).

The mural artfully encapsulates diverse aspects of Belmont's cultural heritage, seamlessly weaving childhood scenes into its narrative. Elements such as a snowcone vendor, beautiful mas, and pan are immortalised on the mural's canvas. A testament to Cheewah's creative vision, the mural vividly captures both the luminance of day and the mystique of night in Belmont, providing a refreshing portrayal of scenes intimately familiar to Belmont residents. Throughout the creation of this captivating work, the artist expressed that the endeavour fostered community involvement and garnered appreciation, as evidenced by the gestures of food, drink, and heartfelt encouragement from the residents (22). The Screen Stars mural, thus, transcends its role as a mere visual representation; it becomes a living testament to the communal spirit and cultural pride thriving within Belmont.

Belmont's Enduring Legacy



A view of northwest Trinidad taken from the Belmont lookout
(Image by Nesyamn Ranut)

Belmont's journey from its historical roots to its vibrant present is a compelling narrative that mirrors the evolution of Trinidad and Tobago itself. The Screen Stars mural stands as a visual chronicle of Belmont's socio-cultural legacy, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in the dynamic tapestry woven by generations past and present. As Belmont continues to shape its future, the mural serves as a beacon, reminding all who pass by of the community's rich heritage and enduring spirit. The Screen Stars mural is a testament to the power and magic of Belmont, inviting all who gaze upon it to share in the captivating journey of a town that has etched its name in the annals of cultural excellence.

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