

A watercolor illustration of a tropical village scene. The background is filled with a dense forest of palm trees and other tropical foliage, rendered in various shades of green, blue, and brown. In the foreground, several traditional thatched-roof huts are visible, nestled among the trees. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a muted color palette.

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## Forgetting Gallipoli

Ellis Silas in the  
Trobriand Islands





valley in

de

de

high  
green  
blue



Streak in mud marks  
January







Eliu Silas





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**Forgetting Gallipoli**  
Ellis Silas in the  
Trobriand Islands

MICHAEL GRAHAM-STEWART 2014



**frontispiece**

*Studio*

oil on board, 250 x 355mm

**endpapers**

*Trobriand Islands beach*

pencil on paper, 280 x  
440mm

**cover**

*Detail of Trobriand village*  
(see p. 10)





## From sketchy beginnings to Anzac Artist

Our signallers have been nearly all wiped out – I suppose I'll get my lead pill next. It has been now a ceaseless cry of "Stretcher bearers on the left" – they seem to be having an awful time up there – one poor fellow has just jumped out of his dug-out, frightfully wounded in the arm; I bound it up as best I could, then had to dash off with another message. All along the route, scrambling along the side of the exposed incline, my comrades offered me a dug-out for me to take cover as the snipers are getting our chaps every minute, but as the messages are important I must take my chance. All along the route I keep coming across bodies of the poor chaps who have been less fortunate than I.

From the 26 April 1915 entry in  
Silas's Anzac diary

The early life of Australian artist Ellis Luciano Silas (1885-1972) is known only in outline. He was born in London on 13 July 1885 to Louis Ferdinand Silas, an artist and designer, and Letizia Sara, née Paggi, an opera singer. Educated by private tutors, Silas subsequently entered his father's studio, receiving further artistic training under the well-known painter and printmaker Walter Sickert. Marine art was his initial focus, and he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in part to facilitate its practice. Silas worked in various seaside towns in England, before leaving for Australia in 1907. He spent time painting in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, eventually settling in Perth, where he established a studio.

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*Signaller Ellis Silas,*  
*ex-16th Battalion, c. 1919*  
Australian War Memorial  
P02801.001



Following the British declaration of war in August 1914, Silas attempted to enter the army. Initially rejected for his slight build, he persisted, and was accepted in September. Silas took his enlistment oath on 16 October, entering the 16th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, as a private. Though he would have preferred to serve as a medical orderly, Silas was made a signaller. He left for Egypt on the *Ceramic* in December, training at Heliopolis. A somewhat eccentric figure, Silas was ill-suited to army life, and doubted his abilities as a soldier. Nevertheless, he diligently practised signalling, while making drawings and paintings whenever he was able.

On 25 April 1915, Silas landed with his unit at Gallipoli. He served with distinction at Bloody Angle, Pope's Hill and Quinn's Post, recording his activities in a detailed diary and sketchbook. A revised version of the diary, made by Silas in 1916, and today held by the Mitchell Library, gives a potent sense of his terrible trials at the front with the 16th Battalion. Less than a month after arriving, Silas was evacuated from Gallipoli. He had been found unconscious, having spent several days signalling, almost entirely without rest. The demands of duty left him severely shell shocked, and he subsequently developed typhoid fever. He had performed bravely, and was lucky to survive.

Silas convalesced in Egypt, and then in England, where he was discharged from the AIF as medically unfit on 17 August 1916. Later that year, a record of his wartime experiences, *Crusading at Anzac*, was published in London. Worked up from his diary and sketchbook, it remains one of the most moving accounts of the Dardanelles campaign. Silas also produced paintings based on his time at Gallipoli, one of which, *Landing at Anzac*, was accepted for exhibition by the Royal Academy. In an act of patriotism, Silas offered the piece to Australia House, but the officials declined it.

Recognition soon came from a higher office. Following an exhibition of his work at a gallery in New Bond Street, Silas was summoned to a private audience with King George V and Queen Mary, an astonishing honour for a little known colonial artist. His painting *Digging in at Pope's Hill* was included in an exhibition of the Royal Colonial Society of Artists. This and two other of his Gallipoli works subsequently entered the collection of the Australian War Memorial. Silas's evocative images led renowned Australian military historian John Laffin to term him 'the Anzac artist', emphasising his matchless importance in documenting the Anzac experience.



## Escaping to the Trobriands

Life presents many facets, both beautiful and repellent. I selected for my theme the beautiful, touching but lightly upon the more sombre and perhaps forbidding characteristics of the Papuan. The quest for the beautiful was the impulse which inspired me in my effort to find a way to overcome difficulties, while endeavouring to reflect, both with brush and with pen, something of the pulsating life so characteristic of the inhabitants of these islands.

From Silas's 1926 memoir,  
*A Primitive Arcadia*, p. 9

In 1921, Silas returned to Australia. He initially made Sydney his home, working as a commercial artist, and contributing both cartoons and articles to the *Bulletin*. Soon, however, he left again, this time travelling to the Trobriand Islands. The Trobriands, now part of Papua New Guinea, and officially known as the Kiriwina Islands, were then administered by the Australian Commonwealth. Silas was invited to the Trobriands by a friend of his, the Resident Magistrate. He evidently made two excursions to the islands, the first of which appears to have taken place in 1921 (most of his Papuan sketches are dated '1921/4').



*Landing at the Trobriands*  
ink on paper, 370 x  
255mm



Silas had long harboured a desire to see the tropics, stimulated by such romantic accounts as R. L. Stevenson's *Coral Islands*. He was also deeply affected by 'the calamitous years 1914-1918, and their aftermath of violence and crime', and sought an escape from 'the trials of post-war civilisation'. Confident that his past experiences had more than prepared for any hardships he might face in Papua, Silas did what no Australian artist before him had done, not merely visiting the 'South Seas', but making them his home for an extended period of time – in his case, for three years.

In the Trobriands, Silas found the refuge he sought. This he recorded in drawings and paintings, with the same skill for evocation with which he had treated his wartime subjects. Living 'for periods at a stretch' in native villages, Silas took a keen interest in Papuan culture. He collected examples of Trobriand Islands art, and wrote an article on the same, printed in the *Studio* in 1924. In 1926, his book *A Primitive Arcadia* was published in London. Though the work is, by his own admission, 'not an ethnographical study', it includes valuable observations about the Trobriand Islanders, together with an account of Silas's artistic activities that is quite unique in art history.

In 1925, Silas returned to England, resuming his work as a marine and commercial artist. This work would sustain him, in considerable comfort, for the rest of his life. He married Ethel Florence Detheridge, known as Daphne, in London in 1927. In 1950, the British Museum purchased from Silas a large number of Trobriand Islands artefacts. The institution also holds a collection of his Papuan drawings, photographs and negatives, donated by the artist. On 2 May 1972, Silas died. He was survived by Daphne. His art – powerful, pioneering and impressively varied – remains little known and underappreciated.



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Page from 'The Art of the Trobriand Islanders', an article by Silas in the *Studio 88*



## A Papuan Venus

For the first few sittings the novelty kept her amused, but after a while she grew restless. In order to palliate the monotony for her, I suggested that she should bring a friend to talk to her while she sat. She did so, but though it amused her it made my work increasingly difficult, for the two would while away the time with music on a jews' harp or with practising the words of a song for the approaching dance season. And then the friend would grow bored, and would curl up on the floor and go to sleep, leaving me with my problem of quieting a restless model again unsolved.

From *A Primitive Arcadia*,  
pp. 92-93

The most important work of Silas's Papuan period is a portrait of a woman named Kadakavina, illustrated and discussed at length in *A Primitive Arcadia*. The painting was executed during a stay in the village of Kavataria, where the artist set up studio in a converted hospital hut. In search of a subject 'with whose beauty [he] could surprise the world', Silas visited the 'girls' hut'. Here, he met Kadakavina, who agreed to sit for him. Silas was frustrated by Kadakavina's habit of applying elaborate face paint, different for each sitting, and was 'annoyed and amused that she assumed a grandiloquent and somewhat assertive air'. In the finished work, he has demurred her, both in makeup and in expression, though Kadakavina retains an air of quiet self-possession.

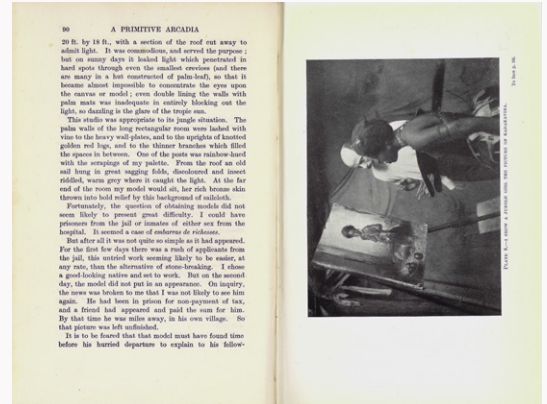


*"Kadakavina", a Papuan  
Chief's daughter*  
oil on canvas, 610 x  
510mm  
(illustrated in *A Primitive  
Arcadia*, facing p. 92)

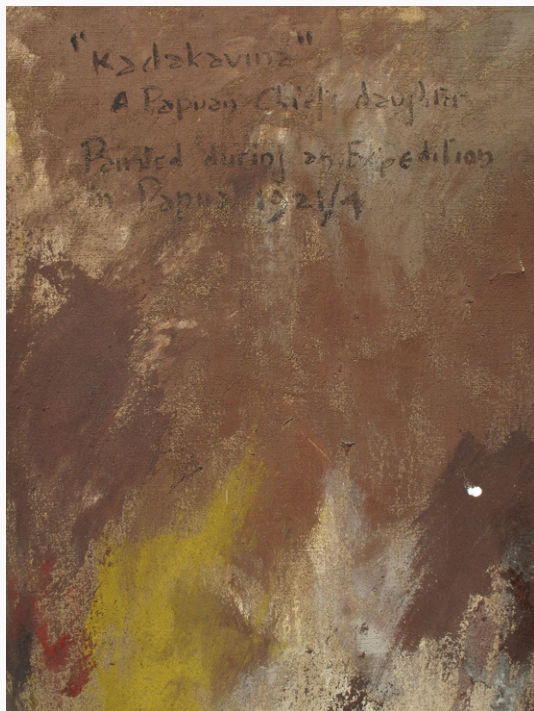


Like so many of Silas's Papuan models, Kadakavina quickly tired of sitting still, and was reluctant to return for multiple sessions. At one point, she stopped coming altogether. When Silas enquired as to the reason, Kadakavina indicated that she was frightened of him. This much surprised the artist, who was generally considered to be of a gentle demeanour. It transpired that Kadakavina was not nervous of Silas himself, but of the facial expressions he made while painting. When Silas explained that his glares were merely due to concentration, the model agreed to attend further sittings. Ultimately, however, she did not.

Though he would have preferred more time with Kadakavina, Silas was fortunate for the sittings he was allowed (indeed, no other Trobriand woman would prove as generous). He was able to complete his Papuan Venus to a remarkably high standard. Silas's brushwork is confident and free, subtle in its evocation of light and texture. Though undoubtedly idealised to some extent, the subject is convincing in her physiognomic and psychological reality, and surprisingly understated in her exoticism. Above all, Silas created a work redolent of calm, a reflection, surely, of the essential tranquillity he experienced in the Trobriands, for all their noise and colour.



Page spread from  
*A Primitive Arcadia*,  
showing the artist with  
his portrait of Kadakavina



Verso of "Kadavina",  
a Papuan Chief's daughter

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Detail of "Kadavina",  
a Papuan Chief's daughter











## Palms and Paints

Eventually I reached the summit, and the sea suddenly broke into view: so brilliant was it, that all sense of distance was lost. It sparkled between the dark foliage and hanging vines, having the effect of a stained-glass window. A declivity leads down to the beach and village of Wawela, the most beautiful lagoon on Kiriwina; it stretches for two miles a sheet of pure emerald, the foam curling upon the fringing reefs, beyond it the deep blue sea.

From *A Primitive Arcadia*,  
p. 214

Silas was greatly impressed by the physical beauty of the Trobriand Islands. He painted numerous landscapes, both in oil and watercolour, emphasising the play of light on water and through foliage. Among Silas's finest works are *Wawela*, in which he masterfully evokes the palm-girt settlement, situated on the edge of a placid lagoon, using quick strokes of paint. Similarly striking is his *Studio*, which likely depicts the converted hospital hut in which he painted Kadakavina, rather than his later, purpose-built workshop. The studio appears in a clearing, bathed in a brilliant light that apparently impeded Silas's work considerably, thanks to the many crevices in the building.

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*Trobriand village*  
watercolour on paper,  
420 x 300mm



*Wawela*  
oil on board, 350 x 250mm



*Interior of My Studio*  
 ink and pencil on paper,  
 500 x 355mm  
 (illustrated in *A Primitive*  
*Arcadia*, facing p. 136)

## Freedom and Precision

In addition to paintings, Silas produced numerous drawings during his time in Papua. These fall into two broad categories: works in pencil, and works in ink. The former consist in expressive studies, mostly of people, places and plants, and presumably made on-site. The latter are more deliberate, incorporating both stylised and more naturalistic elements. A number of Silas's drawings were used to illustrate *A Primitive Arcadia*. A particularly impressive example is *Interior of My Studio*, which shows an almost cartoonish Trobriand infant standing in the convincingly rendered inside of the artist's purpose-built workshop.

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*Port Moresby study*  
 pencil on paper, 370 x  
 310mm



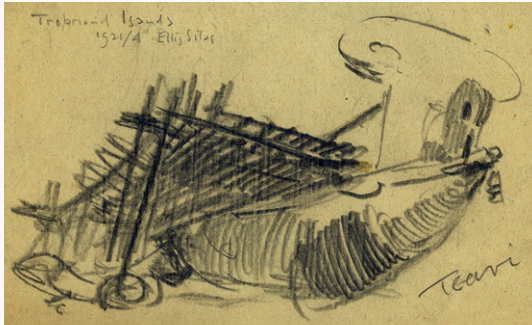






Tadpole Papers  
1921/4  
Tadpole  
Children playing cricket





*Teavi canoe*  
pencil on paper, 125 x  
190mm



*Teavi study*  
pencil on paper, 295 x  
245mm

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*Teavi children playing  
cricket*  
pencil on paper, 310 x  
190mm



*Off to the fishing grounds*  
 ink on paper, 280 x  
 375mm  
 (illustrated in *A Primitive*  
*Arcadia*, p. 17)



*Artist and model*  
 ink on paper, 295 x  
 250mm

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*Papuan study*  
 pencil on paper, 320 x  
 280mm







*Every mother would come  
out of her hut with the entire  
junior branch of her family*

ink on paper, 315 x  
250mm

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This collection of Silas's Trobriand works comprises four oil paintings, one watercolour, 13 drawings in ink, and 18 drawings in pencil (most with colour). Also included are copies of *A Primitive Arcadia* and the *Studio 88*. With the exception of the portrait of Kadakavina, all materials are from the artist's estate.

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*Papuan child*

oil on board, 355 x  
250mm





**endpapers**

*Painting in Papua*

ink on paper, 270 x  
390mm

**cover**

Detail of *Warwela*  
(see p. 11)













MICHAEL GRAHAM-STEWART 2014