

Isaac Mendes Belisario

BORN IN THE CITY OF LONDON in the early 1770s, Isaac Mendes Belisario was the son of a prosperous merchant and probably the grandson of a famous rabbi of the same name.

It is likely that the family worshipped at the synagogue at Bevis Marks, also in the City, since Belisario's most famous work is a painting of the interior of that synagogue. This painting was exhibited at London's Royal Academy in 1815. It was later

hung in the Bevis Marks synagogue where it can still be seen, having survived the World War Two bombing which devastated much of the surrounding areas.

Belisario was an established artist when he first visited Jamaica in 1832. It is likely that he had family connections among the island's long-established Jewish community which predated the British colonization. The Jews in Jamaica also maintained close ties

with Bevis Marks, and this might have influenced Belisario's decision to visit the island.

During the following years, he seems to have travelled between Kingston and London frequently, exhibiting at the Royal Academy from time to time and setting up his own studio on the Parade in Kingston.

In 1837, Belisario published his first series of Paintings and Sketches of Character, illustrating the 'habits, costumes and characters of the Negro population of Jamaica'. These and other pictures, printed in Jamaica by A. Duperly, bring to life the people he observed, especially in their entertainments. The John Canoe Christmas revelries are shown in detail, with their accompanying groups or Sets, of elaborately dressed girls.

Belisario's work was admired in Jamaica as can be seen from the *Jamaica Herald & Commercial Advertiser* of 29 July 1835:

To those who are lovers of the Arts, who delight in contemplating miniature resemblances of the "human face divine" we earnestly recommend an early visit to the studio of Mr Belisario, at the south-east corner of the Parade in this city.

The Belisario prints became more widely known when they were used on a special issue of Jamaican stamps for Christmas 1975 and 1976.