

# Images of Man

CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN  
BLACK ART AND ARTISTS

A Pictorial and Historical Guide to the Collection of the *University of Fort Hare*  
housed in the *De Beers Centenary Art Gallery*.

E J DE JAGER

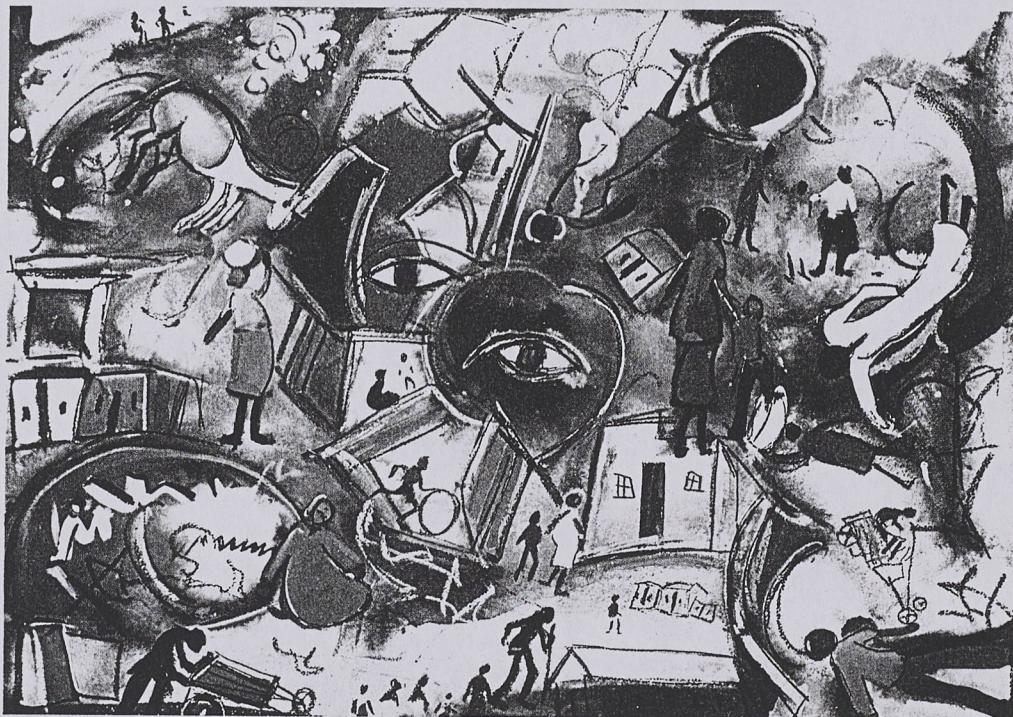
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FORT HARE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
in association with  
THE FORT HARE FOUNDATION



43 KOBELI, ELI  
 Impressions n.d.  
 Mixed Media on Paper  
 50 x 70 cm



school of artists who imitated and mannerized his style, but lacked his ability, emotional intensity, vitality and spontaneity. These imitators of Dumile were mostly responsible for the negative attitude that developed towards Township Art.

A great number of artists can be classified as belonging to the Township Art Movement. It is, therefore, not possible to discuss all of them. What follows is a small selection of the more successful ones and from those contained in the collection of the University of Fort Hare. This selection, nevertheless, adequately represents the diversity in approach to the township art theme by South African Black artists.

### Ephraim Ngatane

We know little about Ephraim Ngatane's childhood. He was born in Lesotho in 1938 and moved to Johannesburg in 1942. He attended the Mooki Memorial School and the Orlando High School. He studied at the Polly Street Art Centre under Cecil Skotnes from 1952 until 1954, and also in Johannesburg under the American missionary Hall Duncan from 1954 to 1956. He taught for a time at the Jubilee Art Centre and also privately at his home. Between 1956 and 1966 he built himself a home in Maseru, Lesotho, to which he often retired for periods of relaxation. After a short illness he died in Johannesburg in March 1971. This cut short the life of a very gifted artist, one of the first modern generation Black artists to have become successful.

Ngatane was a small, lean and likable person with an easy and casual manner. He was an excellent boxer and played both the penny-whistle and alto-saxophone well. He loved company and his untidy studio was often filled with friends making music and discussing the events of the day. Ngatane seriously contemplated life and its meaning. Creative self-fulfillment, rather than public recognition, was important to him. At one stage he had a group of talented young artists working with him, including Dumile, Macala, and others. He is still spoken about and revered by fellow Black artists today.

Ngatane initially worked in watercolours and gouaches, the media in which he first attained fame and success. He had good control over these fluid media. He later experimented with oils, which eventually became his main medium of expression. At first he found it difficult to create in the thicker and heavier medium of oils, the spontaneous atmospheric and impressionistic moods and perspectives characteristic of his watercolours. Some say that his paintings in oil never reached the same standard and measure of success as did his watercolours. Although the subject matter remained the same, township life and

Opposite page  
 44 NGATANE, EPHRAIM  
 Reading the Newspaper n.d.  
 Oil on Board  
 83 x 68 cm  
 (Donated by Incorporated  
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scenes, his oil paintings did not always show the same freshness, spontaneity and vitality of his watercolours. This may be because by that time he had exhausted township life as a source for creative ideas. In time abstraction became more evident in his oil paintings and compositionally there was less perspective and a more two-dimensional feeling. His compositions became simpler and more formal. His brushwork became broader as he added large areas of colour, the paint often heavily impasted. He also increasingly used a palette-knife to add and smooth paint onto his canvases.

Ngatane's work shows a particular sensitivity for and perception of township life. Canvases depicting such scenes are dense and crowded and contain much detail. Favourite township scenes included the train rush-hour, waiting at the bus stop, weddings and funerals, children playing in the street, impressions of township squalor and poverty, and the humour, vitality, happiness and sadness of life in the townships. When it first appeared in public, his work caused a sensation. Berman (1974:212) correctly states that it was perhaps the sociological implications, rather than his interpretive ability, which made the greater contribution to his success. This may be true of his initial success but the discerning also appreciated his work for its aesthetic qualities.

His work contains many fine aesthetic qualities. Ngatane was, for example, a good and clever colourist, applying colour with great delicacy, often lending impressionistic qualities to his work, and to his watercolours in particular. His work always contained a measure of abstraction, and he, so we were told by his friends, envisaged a future exhibition of pure abstract work based on the theme "Outer Space". He was at the time greatly impressed by the American Apollo ventures and moon landing. His sudden death prevented this from materializing and very few of the ideas which he had on the subject, some of which he had written down, survived or are known.

Ngatane's work was publicly shown for the first time in 1960, at the *Artists of Fame and Promise Exhibition*, Johannesburg. Both of his early and very successful one-man shows were held in Johannesburg, the first in 1962 and the second in 1964. These were followed by other one-man exhibitions in



47 NGATANE, EPHRAIM  
Seated Man 1966  
Charcoal on Paper  
72 x 53 cm (sight)



Johannesburg and by the *African Painters and Sculptors from Johannesburg Exhibition* held at the Piccadilly Gallery, London, in 1965. During 1966 he participated in the *Republic Festival Art Exhibition*. In 1967 and 1968 he staged two further one-man exhibitions in Johannesburg, exhibiting work done exclusively in oils. These oils, as indicated, showed a tendency towards abstraction and formal composition. In 1979 his work was included in the *Contemporary African Art in South Africa Exhibition*, works from the collection of the University of Fort Hare, that toured four major centres in the Republic. His work was included in the *Black Art Today Exhibition* held in Soweto in 1981; *The Neglected Tradition Exhibition* held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1988 and the *Looking at Our Own: Africa in the Art of Southern Africa Exhibition* held at the Pretoria Art Museum in 1990. His work was also selected for inclusion in the prestigious publication *150 South African Paintings: Past and Present* (Alexander & Cohen 1990:141,142).

In 1958 Ngatane, together with others from Polly Street, completed some murals for St Mary's Church in Orlando, and in 1969 for the Mooki Memorial School, also in Orlando. Today his work is much sought after and regarded as essential for any representative collection of South African art. His canvasses consequently fetch high prices. From this point of view he is one of the most successful Black painters to have emerged from this country. His work is contained in all important private and public collections in South Africa and in many collections abroad. South African public collections that contain his work are the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the Pretoria Art Museum, the William Humphreys Gallery in Kimberley and several University collections, including that of Fort Hare and the Witwatersrand. His work is particularly well represented in the collection of the University of Fort Hare.

### Durant Sihlali

Durant Basi Sihlali was born in Germiston, Transvaal, on 5 March 1935. He was greatly influenced and stimulated by his father who was talented in drawing and modelling. From a very young age Sihlali loved to copy his father's work. The cartoon illustrations that appeared in newspapers during World War II fascinated the young Sihlali and inspired him to draw on any paper he could find, including toilet rolls. In 1947 his family moved to Moroka, a township in what was then the slum area of Johannesburg. In 1950 he joined several art students working under Alphius Kubeka at the Moroka Chiawelo Centre. He remained with this group for four years, also attending classes at the Polly Street Art Centre under the guidance of Cecil Skotnes. Here he gained valuable experience. During 1955 he studied with Carlo Sdoya and still later between 1955 and 1958 with Sydney Goldblatt. Both these artists encouraged the young Sihlali. The year 1965 can be regarded as of particular importance to the career of Sihlali. During this year he studied under Ulrich Schwanecke and developed his watercolour technique in particular. In 1981 he undertook an overseas study tour and visited Athens in Greece and Palermo in Sicily. He studied in France at the Villa Arson Art School in Nice from 1985 to 1986 on a French Government travel scholarship.

Sihlali has devoted much of his time to teaching art. From 1978 to 1983 he taught at various art centres in Soweto on a part-time basis. He successfully headed the Fine Arts Department of FUBA from 1983 until his resignation at the end of 1988.

Although mainly a painter, since 1981 Sihlali has also done figurative sculptures. Sihlali employs several pictorial media, including pencil, charcoal, pastels, oil paints and watercolours. He has also executed work in graphic media. It is, however, his watercolour paintings that have earned him most acclaim. He is a skilled watercolourist and has developed a sophisticated, mature and personal style, characterized by his sensitive use of this medium, his delicate, often calligraphic brush work and his preference for soft colours. Successful integration is achieved in most of his pictures and a certain measure of confidence can be seen in his work. He has also proved himself to be an accomplished draughtsman.

The subject matter of most of his early paintings related to township life. However, initially he did not use it in any overt critical or acrimonious way, but as source for the imagery of his pictures. He painted that which he knew best, township life, and this was responsible for the confidence radiating from these works. He recorded township life and scenes in great detail and with insight and sensitive attunement. His interest was primarily in recording these township scenes as faithfully as possible, yet giving them his own aesthetic interpretation and artistic rendering. As such he is one of the most successful painters of the township genre. Two themes recurred in this work. There was firstly his recording of the demolition phase of the older Black townships such as Old Pimville. These paintings are of great historical value since they recorded a part of South African social and economic history. Secondly, he also recorded on paper his people, the people of the townships, as they busied themselves with their daily tasks. Not only the people of the townships interested him, but also the physical environment and material com-