

Ernest Mancoba's dialogue with an ancient future  
Part one: Beyond the western paradigm

1. Introduction

*Modern art history is constructed and legitimised on the basis of formal innovations, amongst other things, that produce successive movements from one period to another, giving rise to constant production of new ideas that are fundamental to the dynamic of the system.*<sup>1</sup>

This definition succinctly describes modern *western* art history and its constant striving for the shock of the new, its endless reworking of form.

*Outside of the western system in which products and artistic expression are transformed into commodities for sale, there have existed and still exist cultural ways of being in which artistic expression is a product of social life, and is consumed socially. Within these systems there is also a dialectical evolution of the form and content of artistic expression, which is as significant as that within the western system.*<sup>2</sup>

The difference is that within these systems there was (and is) a direct relationship between artistic expression and the unfolding of cultural rituals and relationships between people.

Mancoba's concern was not with the western approach to endlessly renewing form or with performing repetitive technical stunts, although he skilfully innovated an entirely fresh use of African inspired forms.<sup>3</sup>

But formal innovation wasn't sufficient for Mancoba. He was concerned with the integration of form and content, man and man, colour and colour, balance within the picture, balance within humanity and balance in life on earth. Within ancient artworks one can find this balance and serenity, the expression of societies lived outside of the iron fist of commodity fetishism. Mancoba longed for us to regain that state of grace. He said the only way we could was if we allowed 'Man to meet man and that's it'.

For this simple statement he drew on a tradition of African spirituality which 'is simply an ethics or way of being where humans meet each other humanely in order to enhance each other'<sup>4</sup> as embodied in the proverb *Umuntu ngu muntu ngabanye abantu* (a person is a person by and because of other people). He felt that the Christian proverb 'do unto others as you would have others do unto you' was entirely compatible with this and in an interview a few months before he died he said these two frameworks were all he needed as a guide to life.<sup>5</sup>



This African proverb posits a view of humanity as an interdependent unity, and by using it as the bedrock of his values Mancoba forged a philosophical bridge between African and western culture, and indeed all cultures. Through this African spiritual tradition he perceived in the form, content and patina of ancient art forms from around the world, a life story of human expression, human usage and human relationship which communicates directly with us today. Some of the art forms he particularly appreciated included medieval Danish frescos (Kalkmalerei), Greenlandic folk art, native American totem figures, Chinese ceramics and most particularly ancient African art from different parts of the continent. It is important to note here that Mancoba also expressed a profound appreciation of great artists within the western tradition including Van Gogh, Mozart and Charlie Chaplin, amongst others.<sup>6</sup>

Mancoba declared that all artists use a language - Van Gogh used a set of colours, Mozart used a set of notes - through which they hope to be heard and leave a message for coming generations, but he was concerned that:

*The artist of today is isolated in spite of himself, because of his search for spiritual integrity within a society all devoted to the satisfaction of material needs as its first priority. Nevertheless, he [the artist] is in harmony beyond space and time with the ancient world and artists in his awareness that spiritual and material values have to be reconciled.*<sup>7</sup>

Mancoba's work posited a solution to the disintegration he perceived in modern society.

The stories told by the shapes and colours in his paintings require time to read and absorb. In viewing Mancoba's work we need to consider all that inspired and influenced him, in order to read his work holistically. At the same time we should be trying to enter into a space where we too can engage in dialogue with the ancients and with the children yet to come. In this way we help to create 'another resurrection another rebirth' with humanity at the centre of it, which is what Mancoba's work calls us to do.

## 2. 'That magnificent generation': the first age group comrades

Ernest Mancoba lived the first 34 years of his life in South Africa before leaving for Europe in 1938. Professor Ntongela Masilela, (the pre-eminent scholar of South African intellectual heritage in The New African Movement which started with Tiyo Soga in 1860 and ended with Ezekiel Mphahlele and others in the 1950s),<sup>8</sup> characterizes Mancoba as a 'New African' artist and locates him in this century-long movement of South African artists, writers, politicians, journalists and philosophers who grappled with history, identity, meaning and modernity.

Mancoba was intellectually, artistically and politically active in the 1930s, a key decade in The New African Movement's activities. He was active in focal sites of their activities, as a teacher in Pietersburg (Polokwane), as a student and chair of the debating society at Fort Hare, as a political activist in Gauteng and at the All African Convention

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in Bloemfontein (Emangaung), and finally as an artist in Cape Town. When he left South Africa in 1938 at the age of 34 he was regarded as one of the intellectual leaders of his generation.<sup>8</sup> When he returned 56 years later, he in turn described this generation as 'That magnificent generation'.<sup>9</sup>

These young artists, intellectuals and writers were not able to conceive of a traditional way of life as their parents may have been able to, albeit to a limited extent. They looked toward a modern future, yet the opportunities to engage this modernity were truncated in front of their eyes. The Herzog Bills of 1936 proposed reducing the land that could be owned by black people, from the already small allocation in the Natives Land Act of 1913 to 13%, at the same time as it proposed fewer political rights for black people in the country of their birth.

Naturally this provoked intense reflection, and a ferment of ideas and exchanges. This intelligentsia conducted debates and explored ideas which to this day are not complete, as the New African project was aborted by apartheid.<sup>10</sup> By the 1960s their philosophical endeavours were replaced, to greater or lesser degrees, with calls to political action, to praxis rather than theory. This necessary emphasis, along with the violent suppression of knowledge under apartheid, led later generations to become estranged from this intellectual heritage.

Mancoba's friends in the 'magnificent generation' of the 30s, Thomas Masakela, Govan Mbeki, AC Jordan, IB Tabata, Jane and Goolam Gool, Gerard Sekoto and Louis Makenna, and those who followed them in the 40s and 50s, such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Robert Sobukwe, confronted and explored more acutely than any generation before or since, fundamental questions that our society has yet to resolve.

Masilela's rigorous research has unearthed a profound statement by the playwright, poet and theorist HIE Dhlomo, of principles for a New African artist Masilela says that while Mancoba did not necessarily follow the 'prescriptions' of Dhlomo's formulations' he would have shared in their underpinning philosophy, because 'the principle of creativity within the context of The New African Movement dictated their logic'.

Mancoba's mature expression and stated philosophy supports this contention in a variety of ways, as does, in a more anecdotal sense, the affectionate nickname of his youth 'Stereo', which he acquired by repeatedly saying to his fellow students 'don't be a western stereotype, be true to yourself'.

### 3. No place for an artist

It is apparent from Mancoba's life history<sup>11</sup> that in the midst of the societal turmoil of the thirties, he was in a deep artistic turmoil, constantly seeking out artistic knowledge and developing his expression as a sculptor.



In this period of his evolution as an artist (it continued until the 1960s), he briefly worked for the Anglican Church at a convent in Grahamstown. The Church provided him with a tranquil haven where art and spirituality were accepted and needed. A nun, Sister Pauline, had been the first to expose him to sculpture when he was teaching at Grace Dieu north of Johannesburg, and others in the Church commissioned his work and formed friendships with him.

This bust of Mancoba was made by Dorothy Randall, now 97, during the 30s when Mancoba was in Grahamstown. At this time he was commissioned, by the Church of the Resurrection to carve an altar according to a Sister Margaret's design. Ms Randall is now living in the Community of the Resurrection where the altar is housed. It is no longer in use as an altar but is kept on the wall of the recreation room. Ms Randall had no idea at the time she was making this sculpture, that she was portraying another sculptor, she thought Mancoba was merely assisting in the garden. It was she who advised Elza Miles' mother to send her daughter to art school, and later heard about Mancoba from Elza and discovered who the subject of her sculpture was. She has kept it with her all these years and recently offered it to a public institution.

The altar carving interests me as it makes me think about Mancoba's experience at art school in Paris a few years later.

*one of the projects which caused him (Mancoba's friend Poulsen) to decide to end his studies was a relief assignment for a restaurant with wine-making as a theme. Poulsen's self-evident design with grape leaves allowed him to pass. However, Mancoba's depiction of the brewing of palm wine and his emphasis on palm trees was not appreciated at all. Poulsen found it unacceptable that an original interpretation was given no recognition. Mancoba nevertheless continued his studies until he was interned<sup>12</sup>*

One wonders how challenging the brief was to somebody who had already executed quite perfectly a large altar covered in vines.

In complete contrast his mathematics teacher at Fort Hare University described him as 'the man who carved wooden heads', a comment that hurt and discouraged him to the extent that he stopped making art for a few months.<sup>13</sup>

His attempts at self-definition as an artist, and the inner turmoil that they inspired, seemed not to be fully understood or appreciated by his political friends, like Isaac Bangani Tabata who expressed cynicism about his relationship with the Church.<sup>14</sup>

There have been many generations of South African youth who have forsaken all other desires and career ambitions for the sake of a political life – a life which gave them a moral certainty of 'doing something' for their people in the face of terrible adversity. Mancoba, although he suffered hurt and humiliation in his struggle to be an artist, believed that this was a valid contribution:



*...even some of my political friends told me that the artistic activity was not the most urgent thing to concentrate upon, while our people were undergoing such a terrible plight, but I believed, on the contrary, that Art, was precisely also a means to produce a higher consciousness in Man, the which for me, is highly part of the struggle for any human liberation, and without which any practical achievement would, probably, sooner or later, deviate and miss its point. Therefore making art, I thought, was as urgent as working for the political evolution.<sup>15</sup>*

He yearned for a reconciliation of the spiritual and the material which the material basis of political discourse seemed to disallow.

Mancoba was as aware of the contradictions in the church as he was critical of the lack of a spiritual dimension in politics. His uncle was a priest and had founded an independent African church in Middleburg in counterpoint to an experience of racism in the white church. The African independent churches mix ancestral worship into the form of Christianity. Mancoba's uncle played a significant role in his upbringing and encouraged him in his path of higher education. No doubt with this important mentor he also discussed the role of African religion.

Later in his life he spoke very strongly against the institutionalization of religion and questioned why the religion of Africans is a religion of the unknown.<sup>16</sup> Throughout his life his work has a spiritual theme but later his references are not liturgical but African and ancestral, and he came to question why the Christianity being practised was so unchristian in character. He also questioned the imposition of academic principles in art.

In order to pursue his own original expression rather than do church commissions he committed himself to the life of a full-time artist and moved to District 6 in Cape Town. Here his sculptural technique became more innovative and expressionistic.

At this time he was invited by the Native Affairs department to produce curios. This complete misunderstanding of his work contributed to his sense that there was no space for him or his art in South Africa. He searched for more information on African art and was introduced by the sculptor Lippy Lipschitz to the book Primitive Negro Sculpture (1926) by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro. This led him to imagine that in Europe he might find a deeper discussion of African art.

As he put it: *I wished to participate in the great universal debate where Africa, though present by its ancient sculptural masterpieces in the possession of collectors and museums and in the opinions of so many European thinkers and artists, had nobody to speak for it, and remained mute even in the elements of dialogue that concerned directly its own civilization and culture.<sup>17</sup>*



However it is important to note that by the end of his life, when reflecting on his early work, he asserts the following:

*The distinction between what's called figurative and abstract is a distinction that has no real place, no significance, for the African artist, just as it never did for the European artist before the period that in the west inaugurated the division in our conception between spirit and material, life and death, the interests of the individual and those of the community of men. Our history has brought about, little by little, this dichotomy which provokes, more and more, a terrible atomization, in the very essence of life. On the one hand, it has afforded us an infinite bounty of material advantages (among which the scientific and technological development), but also an equal infinity of difficulties and woes.*

*In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction of the very foundation to the human identity, as both belonging to Nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being. Certain artists in Europe have too often been under the dictatorship of Philosophy, or what is known under that name, which, by the way, has always been puzzling to me, because that area of learning has, for a long time, been used not so much to put in practice any love of wisdom, as its name would imply, but rather for trying to fit our conception of man into the social structures offered by History, at any given time.*

*Moreover, certain philosophers in Europe have had, as a more or less hidden aim to get rid of Art altogether, for supposedly belonging to some outdated form of humanity, or to replace it by some purely intellectual ersatz, that would help discipline and control the inspired freedom of poetry, a concern shared by the political authority: this, as far as I can understand, was the main motivation behind the foundation of the Academy. Hence we have lost the capacity to unite in our vision the outward aspect with the inner significance. Because our eye has been miseducated, so to speak, by the superficiality of academism, which can only estimate the worth of any representation of man, according to its fidelity to the purely aesthetic rules it has established, as, for example, the one decreeing that the human head must come eight times (or seven, I have forgotten) into the full length of the body.*

*So when they see an African sculpture with, for example, an enormous head and short legs, they will consider it ugly and judge it 'worthless' as far as Art is concerned. But for the African artists it is not so much the abidance of certain rules (though he too, generally, works according to particular canons), that makes a thing beautiful, but its capacity to evoke the inner being, by the strength of the outward aspect. To that effect, he uses all means, both figurative and abstract. I, too, in the Madonna, did follow a certain canon, that was in contradiction with the newest cubistic or abstract ways and forms (which I, at the time, hardly knew), but without ever stopping my struggle with a style that was foreign to me, and the viewer, I hope, if I am lucky enough to have been*



*understood and heard, can feel under the surface of the classical mold, the beat of an African heart.*

*At times, the inner spirit breaks through, first in the very innovation within the South African context, of taking a black woman to represent the Virgin Mary, and secondly in the warmth of the pulse that, though provisionally contained by the strictness of the style, speaks up, under the skin or surface and threatens to burst free.<sup>18</sup>*

From these words it is possible to see that from his early adult years Mancoba struggled to make sense of his world, free of political, religious or artistic dogma, and to search for a way of expressing the spirit of humanity.

Before he left for Europe he had identified the principles of African art which were to guide him<sup>19</sup> in this ongoing struggle. The two sculptures, Figure of a woman and The musician or Uhadi player as well as a missing one (Faith) identified by Elza Miles, illustrate this phase of his struggle for expression.

However as Elza Miles said in an essay written when he died<sup>20</sup> the parochial white- and western-dominated South African art world in the 1930s couldn't understand what he was doing then, and even more recently has struggled to come to terms with Mancoba's expression.

#### 4. In search of artistic companionship: CoBrA, the second age-group comrades

*'It was a precious thing to find some people with whom one could breathe.'*<sup>21</sup>

With the acute sense of responsibility towards his society that was typical of his age group in The New African Movement, and guided by the tenets of this movement, Mancoba left for art school in Paris in a 'state of research', stirred by the frequent and fierce debates he engaged in with his friends, the brother and sister Goolam and Jane Gool, and Isaac Bangani Tabata. At Fort Hare University he'd met Tabata who later became Jane Gool's husband. The three were leaders of the underground Worker's Party formed in Cape Town in the 1920s.

Cape Town in the 1930s was a cosmopolitan and intellectually vibrant city and 'had the advantage of being situated in an intermediate zone on the Atlantic and Indian Ocean basin where ideas constantly circulated'.<sup>22</sup> While there Mancoba had engaged in an organic internationalism. Like the Gools, many Capetonians were descended from families who'd come there from India and from Dutch East India Company occupied Indonesia, bearing oral traditions which included stories of resistance to the Dutch East India Company in Java.

Cape Town's cosmopolitanism in the 1930s
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I was alerted to the cultural significance of this heritage at Jane Gool Tabata's memorial service in Cape Town in 1996 when her sister Minnie, herself widely respected as a dedicated community worker who expressed herself through her midwifery and lived her Muslim beliefs through her concrete actions of support for the poor and other political activists, got up as the first speaker and without any preamble launched into this story:

*Our grandfather used to tell us the story of a resistance fighter in Java. He was imprisoned by the Dutch and when his family visited him in jail they saw through the iron bars of his cell that he was painting a ship on one wall of the cell. He said that this ship would take him to freedom. One day they came and found that wall on which the painting had been [was] broken down and they heard his voice singing a freedom song across the water as he sailed away on his ship. She then sang his song in Malay.*

It was not surprising that Jane Gool and her brothers and sisters, the heirs of this resistance tradition and grandchildren of the old Muslim man who in the nineteenth century had converted slaves to Islam as a defence against Christian masters, would themselves turn to the most radical resistance theory in the early twentieth century, Marxism. What better body of theory could be a guide for resistance to oppression in colonial South Africa? It was also not surprising that this would be a Marxism which would have difficulty accommodating itself to an exclusively *national* liberation struggle. Growing up in a milieu of stories of resistance from other lands might have created a cultural ambivalence and difficulty with nationalism for young activists who were imbued from childhood with a sense of a struggle against colonialism which crossed oceans. It was this same milieu which gave rise to the significant historical text 'The contribution of non-European peoples to world civilization' by teacher, lawyer and activist Ben Kies.

Adjacent to Cape Town, Robben Island had the dubious distinction of being the site of incarceration of third world elites from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the late twentieth century. It was used as a prison from the days when the Dutch East India company imprisoned first local people who resisted their rule and then almost simultaneously imprisoned sheikhs and princes there who had resisted their rule in the islands of present day Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> This habit of British colonialism continued through to the nineteenth century. Whilst contemporaneously implicated in the Atlantic slave trade, it conducted a 100 year war against the Xhosa and imprisoned their chiefs and princes on the island. The last nefarious use of Robben Island as a political prison was the infamous twentieth century incarceration of Mandela et al.

It was in this confluence of experiences of Dutch and British colonialism, a 200 year history of slavery, the near genocide of the indigenous people, the importation of many cultures, religions, resistance theories and languages with different peoples of the world being incarcerated on the nearby prison island that gave rise to a rich, independent and



searching intellectual milieu which was possibly nearing its apex in the 1930s when Mancoba lived in District Six, the neighbourhood founded by freed slaves just a century before.

It stands to reason that this confluence of international oppressions in Cape Town, (Dutch imperialism and slavery, British imperialism, slavery and dispossession), which were linked to all the major sites of colonialism in the world, would give rise to a rich exploration of theories of resistance to imperialism, colonialism and more fundamentally to oppression in general.

When Mancoba arrived in Europe in 1938 and began to engage other young people about the state of the world, he was interested to note that the analysis he had shared with his friends in Cape Town was possibly more developed and conscious of the state of the world than that of the avant-garde in Europe.<sup>24</sup> In particular the international tensions that precipitated the Second World War and its attendant destruction of 56 million civilian lives, had been analysed in depth by his friends in Cape Town.

Mancoba attended art classes for a brief period before being interned by the Nazis. He married Sonja Ferlov during his incarceration. In Europe he found comrades briefly but ultimately inconclusively in the CoBrA movement which had started with great hopes for the building of a new society after the Second World War.



## AN EXTRACT FROM

The CoBrA art calendar 2006<sup>25</sup>

CoBrA – the fairytale lives on

CoBrA came into being on 8 November 1948 – in the early beginnings of the Cold War.

‘In the café behind the Notre Dame Hotel, in the heart of the revered city (Paris), six non-Frenchmen founded COBRA; I wrote a brief text, which we signed: Jorn, Constant, Corneille, Noiret, Appel and I,’ explained COBRA’s ‘secretary-general’, Belgian art writer Christian Dotremont, in an article in the journal *L’Oeil* in 1962.

A few days after that meeting on 8 November, Dotremont sent a letter to Jorn with various proposals for a name for the new association. ‘Jorn chose COBRA, and that is what it became. CO for Copenhagen, BR for Brussels and A for Amsterdam, but also, of course, the cobra snake, ready to sink its venomous fangs into the lethargic resisters.

That is the origin of the name of the famous international group of artists that officially only existed from 1948 to 1951.

CoBrA was a revolution and the aim was to create a brand-new kind of art for the new society that would naturally be constructed after the war. The artists were politically aware; most were sympathisers with or members of the communist parties in their respective countries. Constant once declared: ‘I was a Marxist and so was Jorn.’ Egill Jacobsen said in 1984: ‘Our starting point was decidedly revolutionary.’

What they had created was a new and different working partnership. The years from 1948 to 1951 were marked by a lot of travelling, lots of meetings and activities. ‘These three years fundamentally changed us,’ Dotremont later wrote. Exhibitions were planned but did not always come to fruition. The magazines *Cobra* and *Le petit Cobra* were published in several languages in Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam and Liege. Fifteen small monographs, *Les artistes libres*, were published by Munksgaards Forlag, Copenhagen, in 1950.

But the artists had difficulty selling their works, and attempts to achieve a breakthrough in Paris failed. In 1951, the two most active members of the group, Jorn and Dotremont, became seriously ill because of poverty and undernourishment, and in the tenth issue of *Cobra*, it was announced that the CoBrA co-operative had ceased to exist.

Jorn went straight from Paris to Silkeborg Tuberculosis Sanatorium, where he was admitted in May 1951 with scurvy and pneumonia. When Dotremont came to visit Jorn, he, too, despite not being a Dane, was received as a patient and hospitalised in the same room as Jorn.



In the preface to the book Held og Hasard (Luck and chance) (1963), Jorn writes: 'CoBrA lay in ruins while Christian Dotremont and I, desperate and distrustful of each other lay in the beds of Silkeborg Sanatorium and commented on what had happened. Neither of us dreamt that, despite everything, we had achieved something unique.'

Conditions to resolve a better future for the world did not unfold favourably in Europe and CoBrA became an incomplete experiment. It did however raise significant questions and assert the importance of all the artistic cultures of the world. Nevertheless at the same time, in practice, it didn't seem able to comfortably accommodate the presence of Mancoba, a subject of colonialism, nor to address the ongoing European colonial occupations, despite its call for the recognition of all the art of the world. Mancoba says that there were individuals in the movement, such as Asger Jorn, who welcomed him and acknowledged both his position and his person.<sup>26</sup> Mancoba's position in CoBrA has been treated ambivalently by history. He was once described as 'the black dot in CoBrA'.<sup>27</sup> This suggests a latent racism which is in contradiction with the group's stated aims, and reinforces again the unfinished, unresolved 'problem of perspective' in all its philosophical ramifications, which was one of his key concerns.<sup>28</sup>

But Mancoba was always alert to the contradictory nature of human experience and often recognised great humanity in difficult circumstances. He spoke with appreciation of how as children he and his friends invented fabulous games in the dangerous structures of the mine scaffolding. And another example of the contradictory experiences of his life are that, although he probably experienced racism in Denmark (and elsewhere in Europe) it was the Danes, Christian Poulsen, Ejler Bille, who were his first friends in Paris.<sup>29</sup> It was Danish galleries who bought his work, and Troels Andersen who arranged his first solo exhibition in 1977. Galerie Mikael Andersen in Copenhagen today represents his work. Danish fresco paintings were a major inspiration in his work and of course his greatest love and life partner, Sonja Ferlov, was Danish. In her he found a companion who, through needing to make art herself, also understood his need and eventually they worked alongside each other for more than 40 years.

*Our family (or rather Sonja and I as individual creators, united in their vision) has always been a problem for ethnocentric categorizations and fears, as it disturbed and moved established boundaries and the classifications imposed by the perspectives of a particular time or the bias of a certain critical intellectualism, often motivated by other considerations than Art. In spite of such hostile environment, it has stood up for and, constantly, kept as a priority the integrity of the human expression. Neither Sonja Verlov, before she died, nor I, today, can accept to be separated from each other, as far as the significance of our work and common engagement is concerned, because it would be the negation of our very lives.<sup>30</sup>*



His regular visits with Sonja to museums in Paris, in particular Musée de l' Homme, were both a comfort and an inspiration, as well as feeding his 'state of research' by exposing him to ancient works that he would not have been able to see in South Africa. Mancoba is said to have had a good friendship with Madeleine Roussouw who worked at Musée de l' Homme and was the editor of Musée Vivant.<sup>31</sup> He contributed to Musée Vivant from time to time:

'Here is what an African from Johannesburg (South Africa) wrote to me in May 1953' wrote Madeleine Roussouw about Mancoba's contribution to that issue, the translation of which follows:

*Just like Asia and Oceania, Africa is taking a stand*

*Today, more than any other moment in the history of mankind, we must realize that we can no longer live in isolation (nationally, racially or socially...) in this world; we must adapt to the aspirations and needs of others as well. It was simplistic for past generations to brush aside or destroy whatever did not suit their mode of thinking. Yet our generation is reaping the fruits of these mistakes, crimes, injustices and indignities committed by our forefathers and, more particularly, the bitter fruits of colonization [imposed] during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before we can even begin hoping to see the way ahead of us, it is imperative that we take cognizance of all those things and that we begin to readapt after some honest and sincere introspection, based on scientific insights into our present situation...*

*I believe that we all bear some responsibility. My forefathers should never have allowed Europeans to deprive them of their African heritage. They should have struggled and passed on to their children as well as their children's children a culture of resistance until such a time when, on both sides, it became possible to speak to one another on a basis of equality and mutual respect... The world has become more and more of a single entity, to such an extent that we have to reconsider all our views and opinions on racial distinctions because they have become obsolete and dangerous...*

Apart from Mancoba's short but powerful contribution to Musée Vivant, the references to and exploration of ancient art from all cultures (Africa, Europe, America and Asia) is exceptionally strong in this issue. An intriguing possibility that Mancoba had direct contact with the Senegalese historian, Cheikh Anta Diop, also emerges from the pages of this 1953 issue of Musée Vivant in which the section on Africa is co-edited by Madeleine Roussouw and Cheikh Anta Diop.

Mancoba describes the years from 51 to 60, when they lived outside Paris, as hard but extremely creatively productive for himself and Sonja. It was during these years that Cheikh Anta Diop was living in Paris, active in student resistance to colonialism and



fighting to defend his doctoral thesis. Diop's project to prove the relationship between ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa was also a project which asserted Africa as the cradle of humanity and called for an African Renaissance. Just half a century later palaeontology has definitively demonstrated the truth of Diop's thesis and it seems remarkable that he had to fight for a decade to have his doctorate accepted. Yet as recently as eight years ago a debate raged on the campus of the University of Cape Town, in which Diop's thesis was ignored as a premise for an undergraduate course in African studies. Mancoba and Diop's concerns and interests are so similar and their proximity to each other through Musée Vivant so close that it seems likely that there was some direct exchange of ideas

Mancoba's work at this time reveals a distinctly Southern African expression. It is in this decade that we can clearly identify the colours of his youth in South Africa in his work. At the same time he includes new references to West African Kanaga and Kota figures.<sup>32</sup> Like Diop's explicit political call for an African renaissance and recognition of the entire continent as a single cultural entity, Mancoba's paintings begin to do the same.

##### 5. Looking back and finding significance in the world he had left behind

Mancoba was deeply attached to an exquisitely sculpted stick given to him by an old man as an almost prescient gesture of the voyage he would take as an artist. He carried it with him from South Africa and back again 56 years later, and thus it symbolized the continuity of his link to Africa and Africa's artists.

The name Ngungunyane was given to him by a Shangaan mineworker when he was a baby. Ngungunyane is the name of a Shangaan chief who led anti-colonial resistance and it is rare that anybody is given this name. There is a myth associated with chief Ngungunyane, that when cut down, a tree where he was buried always grows again, thus symbolizing his strong and enduring spirit.

Ernest Mancoba shared with me the poem that was given to him at the same time as the name:

*You are so great that as a bird comes and settles on the branch of a tree the tree bows down because of the importance that you have for our survival and we shall live because of what our heritage has given us and you keep on and we shall listen if you can be present and we can hang together as a symbol.*

These strongly symbolic 'gifts' would always remind him of who he was, where he came from, and what his destiny would be. They suggested a path and a responsibility he would have to carry.



Mancoba had a South African childhood which was rich with imagery, metaphors, comradeship, intellectual exploration and bitter experiences.

*So it was that my father and mother were left without land and without cattle. And that,' he said with a gentle and patient smile, 'is how my father and mother, young Christian people, came to the locations of the gold-mines in Johannesburg. We were very poor. The conditions of living were such as you, who are white and live in England, could not understand. My father worked and worked, but the money which he earned was not enough to feed my mother and us children, nor to clothe us warmly.*

*You know...' he said, 'that on the Reef the only way in which some families can live is for the wife to brew illicit liquor and sell it secretly. But my mother was a Christian. She saw the harm that this secret trade did to men, breaking their health and spoiling their home. She felt that, as a follower of Christ, she could not make money out of the ruin of the workers. So she used to get up at the dawn and go down to the mine ash-pits for little bits of coal or ashes that would warm the house, a shack where the roof leaked and little furrows were made in the floor to let the water drain away. I have seen my mother come back from the pits with her hands bleeding, but with the precious pieces of coal for the fire when we children were ready to get up.'*<sup>33</sup>

Mancoba was aware of how his parents lost their land and how his great grandparents became refugees as he ultimately did. In trying to find a solution to the suffering he saw amongst his own people and in the world at large, Mancoba makes reference to the history of art of the whole world, and in particular to how this reflects and expresses a common humanity. He makes these references from his own position as an African, who was taught the continental values of 'ubuntu' by his parents, especially his mother.

In my conversations with him, Mancoba repeatedly emphasised the importance of what he had learnt from his mother. He refers to the role of the *imbongi* as a model for the artist who says the unsayable and speaks the unspeakable. He refers to the traditions of poetry and storytelling as a means to 'keep society together' and emphasises the importance of women's artistic expression as part of the rituals of life. He appreciated how his father gave his mother space to join comrades of her age group in the making of earthenware pots. This allowed him to respect and collaborate with Sonja's artistic process and later with Wonga's.<sup>34</sup>

He dwelled often on the notion that Africans knew democracy before the coming of the colonialists. One of his most significant works, *L'ancetre* or *The ancestor* is a tribute to an ancestor whose sacrifice enabled a whole group to escape the dictatorship imposed by Shaka Zulu.<sup>35</sup> At the same time he recognised and understood what drove Shaka to forcibly bring the nation together to fight colonialism, and a close reading of this painting reveals it as a powerful statement against any kind of supremacy embedded into a story of how Southern Africa came to be dominated by colonialism.



## 6. In defence of the spirit

There is no doubt in my mind that in spite of the appreciation Mancoba expressed for the form of life he was able to live in Paris he also suffered enormously in Europe. In his drawings it seems that it is him, personally, holding the spear and shield in a defensive position, ready to fight. We might also read the warrior in his images as himself ready to be the spiritual warrior defending our souls, and his colours as a form of continuous protest against injustice.<sup>36</sup> This theme is explored further in part two of this essay.

He always tells the story through a body, sometimes it's his body, angry and defensive, with a shield in his hand like a Zulu or Shangaan warrior, at others it is an ancestral body with all the colours of the world fighting on it whilst its tragic face or mask gazes out with flickering hope. Is it the story of his own life that he is telling in his paintings?

He spoke of the artist being 'suicided' by society, a concept he derived from Antonin Artaud's description of Van Gogh having his hand forced by the way society alienated him. Many of Mancoba's works are incandescent with anger, and when I first met him in Paris in 1994 he was almost speechless with rage about what was happening in Rwanda at that time. He said, 'They are killing each other. But who, who creates all this hatred?'<sup>37</sup>

Yet ultimately, his methodology and strategy made possible by his extraordinary vision, exceptional artistry, highly evolved intellect and firm belief in his duty as an artist towards society, allowed him to overcome this pain sufficiently to enter the place of art making and engage in a transcendent dialogue with all humanity. This we inherit in his paintings.

*In Africa as in Ancient Greece you are only a man when you, like Homer's hero Achilles, in the Iliad, are able to conquer yourself, and at last, see in the enemy himself, yourself, in his old white haired father, your own.*<sup>38</sup>

Again one finds in Mancoba's point of view the oneness of values in Africa, indeed in all humanity. *Ninka naftiisa ka adkaada, geesi dheh* is a Somali proverb which means 'The man that is able to defeat himself, is called hero'. 'Thus the man who is able to overcome all the forms and the nature of his weaknesses becomes a strong and just person in the process, and consequently becomes a hero. Furthermore, it suggests that a person who understands where he stands in life and what surrounds him is able to confront or interact, and most importantly is confident and not afraid'.<sup>39</sup>

## 7. Respecting the giver, the gift and the giving - a lesson for all humanity



As a child on the gold mines Mancoba was given a ceramic cup by Chinese workers who came to his parents' home. He mentioned this to me and to Elza Miles at different times as an important life experience, and at first I thought its primary significance was artistic. However, when I went to find examples of a typical cup of that time I was touched to discover photographs and records of the life of these indentured workers in early twentieth century South African history, which illuminated the gracious practice of gift giving by these workers.

I realised then that Ernest Mancoba was affected as much by the beauty of the cup as by the grace and civility of the people and it was this latter trait which he was alluding to as much as anything else when he described receiving the cup as a significant early life experience. Of course this civility would be deeply appreciated in a typical African home governed by similar rules of civility and mutual respect.<sup>40</sup> However it took an artist with his insight to weave this experience into an artistic expression which symbolized the unity of the world.

He found this civility and acceptance again from yet another culture when he was invited to share in Ramadan at the home of the Gool family in Cape Town and he always celebrated the mixed background of his peers at Fort Hare University.<sup>41</sup>

When researching Chinese ceramic cups and observing their aesthetic qualities I couldn't help being struck by the subtlety of expression and the delicacy of their form and decoration. I wondered how a sensitive young mind living in uncongenial conditions in a location might have responded to their aesthetic. Undoubtedly the grace of the person who made the gesture as well as the aesthetic of the object combined in Mancoba's mind as a unit.

He passionately denounced the fact that we might regard the man who carved his precious stick as a 'nobody', somebody who hasn't had a *douche* (bath). For Mancoba he had made something of inestimable value for humanity. He vehemently asserted that we need to acknowledge this artist as much as his product: 'He made this and it can't die'.<sup>42</sup>

In these two instances we can trace experiences that strengthened his firm belief and confirmed his mother's teaching that the western world was mistaken in accepting the products of ancient and non-western cultures without giving the same consideration to the people of these cultures as fully human and equal.

## 8. In conclusion

From Europe Mancoba looked back to South Africa and allowed 'what was in his subconscious to rise up.'<sup>43</sup> It was in Europe that he repeatedly expressed an African ancestral configuration in his work. It was here that he first used colours in a typically Southern African way. This became a central part of his resolved and mature



expression. It was here too that he confronted the paradigms set by the Renaissance of 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

Embedded in ancient artworks by their makers who were unknown, unnamed artists of long ago (or not so long ago if they were working outside the western commodity system), Mancoba saw a common human expression which was handed down to us through the meaning, social function and life story condensed in the objects. The patina of age on the objects contains the spirit of the human beings who made and handled them<sup>44</sup>. Mancoba saw this life story as a common human bond but felt that the west's inability to recognise the makers of these artworks or their heirs and/or brothers and sisters as equally human, contributed to the breaking down of society in a way which alienated artists and symbolized a dangerous lack of integrity and balance in life on earth.

He felt that if we recognise all humanity perhaps we can avoid contributing to its demise and prevent humankind from 'disappearing like dinosaurs'.

Mancoba spoke as an African who was imbued with the wisdom of African tradition, while at the same time being part of a century long movement, The New African Movement, that seriously confronted the meaning of (western) modernism in South Africa. From these two platforms of his childhood experience, African and western, in its Christian expression, he searched to find the points of commonality with other cultures.

His work posited a solution to the difficulty of fully accepting the 'other' by suggesting that the individual finds him or herself in the collective. In this way his friend Govan Mbeki's eight decades of commitment to a political life was fed by the collective and lifted to celestial heights, most especially by the collective voices of his people in song. Even in death, Mbeki insisted on being amongst the people by requesting to be buried in Zwile cemetery outside Uitenhage alongside ordinary people and *Umkhonto we Sizwe* heroes. Mancoba also dedicated his life to this collective. This same African notion of humanity informed Mancoba's artistic expression, and over and over again in his paintings he invoked the collective of *all* humanity, bound by the body of the ancestor represented by figurations that seem inspired by Kota and Kanaga funerary figures.

Distinctively however as one reads his paintings one can see multiple references, multiple cultures expressed in the methodology of Southern African beadwork. Finally his constant repetition of the Nguni proverb taught to him by his mother makes sense and one can read in his work *umuntu ngu muntu ngabanye abantu* - a person is a person by and because of other people. This uniquely African expression allowed him to speak for all humanity and to draw inspiration from all the cultures of the world. This was the essential theme of his life's journey.



Sankofa - go back and retrieve<sup>45</sup>

Symbol of wisdom, knowledge, and the people's heritage



From the aphorism: *Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a, yenkyi.*  
Literal translation: There is nothing wrong with learning from hindsight.

The word SANKOFA is derived from the words SAN (return), KO (go), FA (look, seek and take). This symbolizes the Akan's quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent and patient investigation.



The symbol is based on a mythical bird that flies forwards with its head turned backwards. This reflects the Akan belief that the past serves as a guide for planning the future, or the wisdom in learning from the past in building the future.



The Akan believe that there must be movement with times but as the forward march proceeds, the gems must be picked from behind and carried forward on the march.

In the Akan military system, this symbol signified the rearguard, the section on which the survival of the society and the defence of its heritage depended.



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- <sup>1</sup> Rasheed Araeen 2004 Artthrob News <http://www.artthrob.co.za>
- <sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Abdulkadir Ahmed Said, Cape Town, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> See in particular the last two chapters in Lifeline out of Africa in which Elza Miles poetically explores Mancoba's references to the Kota, Kanaga and Mboom masks in a vein which is very much in tune with Mancoba's own sensibilities.
- <sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Abdulkadir Ahmed Said, Cape Town, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Mancoba interviewed by Obrist, March 18 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> Architect Fanuel Motsepe responds to Lindsay Bremner's article: *The architectural dominance of one culture is problematic in an intensely multicultural city*, by highlighting the colonial ethnological premise to Lindsey Bremner's error in conceiving of Tswana culture as unable to accommodate all of South Africa's cultures, (indeed all of Johannesburg's cultures which also include the rest of Africa). Motsepe *'I am accused of highlighting the Tswana. The point though is that I am using the Tswana as a symbol of a more general feature of Bantu culture which is ubuntu, a feature that scholars trace all the way up Africa as far as Nigeria. And this philosophy accommodates modernity.'* November 27, 2005. The Sunday Independent Culture section.
- <sup>7</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist on 18 March 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> In conversation in 2005, Prof Njabulo Ndebele mentioned to me that his father Nimrod Ndebele regarded Mancoba as the leading intellectual of their generation.
- <sup>9</sup> Mancoba speech, Nedbank, Johannesburg, 1996.
- <sup>10</sup> Masilela [http://www.pitzer.edu/new\\_african\\_movement/general/interview.htm](http://www.pitzer.edu/new_african_movement/general/interview.htm)
- <sup>11</sup> Mancoba made these observations in my interviews with him in Lifeline out of Africa (1994), in his interviews with Ciraj Rassool in 1995, and in his interview with Obrist in 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> Lifeline out of Africa, 1994. p33.
- <sup>13</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist in 2003.
- <sup>14</sup> Lifeline out of Africa, 1994. page 12
- <sup>15</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist, 2002. p15.
- <sup>16</sup> Bridget Thompson interviews, 1994.
- <sup>17</sup> Mancoba speech, Nedbank, Johannesburg, 1996.
- <sup>18</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist 2002. page 18
- <sup>19</sup> "There is a Bantu sculptor on the reef who has ceased to imitate the European style of sculpture. He has "discovered" the negro art of Africa, and he is already applying it in some of his own work The Star 8 June 1936 quoted in Lifeline out of Africa 1994 p 24
- <sup>20</sup> Elza Miles Appreciation Journal of Contemporary African art 2003
- <sup>21</sup> Bridget Thompson interviews, 1994.
- <sup>22</sup> Christopher Lee, 2005.



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<sup>23</sup> The VOC was arguably the world's first multinational. It employed a million people in its time to extract the wealth of the east in order to fuel industrialisation in Europe.

<sup>24</sup> telephone communication with Wonga Mancoba, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Published by Forlaget Permild & Rosengreen ApS. Naverland 8 – DK-2006Glostrup.

<sup>26</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist 2002. page20

<sup>27</sup> Regrettably I haven't been able to find this reference. I believe it was published in Holland.

<sup>28</sup> See further discussion in the second part of this essay.

<sup>29</sup> Lifeline out of Africa, 1994. page33

<sup>30</sup> Mancoba interview with Obrist 2002. page 20

<sup>31</sup> Elza Miles personal communication, April, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Lifeline out of Africa, 1994. see pages 43 -71

<sup>33</sup> Mancoba interviewed by the *Church Times* in England, 1938.

<sup>34</sup> When I last visited Mancoba in Paris in 2000 he was quietly contemplating one of Wonga's paintings which was propped at the end of his bed.

<sup>35</sup> Bridget Thompson interview, 1994.

<sup>36</sup> This insight was shared with me by Abdulkadir Ahmed Said, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> B Thompson interviews 1994

<sup>38</sup> Mancoba speech Nedbank head Office May 1996

<sup>39</sup> Personal communication with Abdulkadir Ahmed Said, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> My thanks to Prof Njabulo Ndebele for alerting me to the meaning of *akanabuntu* (lack of civility) and suggesting it as a subject worthy of deeper consideration.

<sup>41</sup> Mancoba's article in Lifeline out of Africa. 1994 Page 91

<sup>42</sup> Bridget Thompson interview, 1994.

<sup>43</sup> Bridget Thompson interview, 1994.

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Dr Patricia Davison for the formulation of this perspective.

<sup>45</sup> These notes on Akan proverbs and pictograms are taken from the website <http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/> (copyright Dr George F Kojo Arthur and Prof Robert Rowe 1998-2003).