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MOHL (Motlhakangna), John Koenakeefe

Dinokana, Zeerust, North-Western Province, 29 September 1903 - Soweto,

Johannesburg, 28 January 1985

Artist, teacher and gallery owner

John Koenakeefe Mohl was the youngest child of Mr and Mrs Mogodivi Motlhakangna's four children. (His cousin Ismail Matlhaku explained that the name

Koenakeefe means /ittle crocodile, and the original Tswana surname was probably shortened during his sojourn in Germany to facilitate pronunciation.) His father was a

sculptor of functional objects such as chairs and maize stampers.

During his youth, Mohl drew on rocks, and used river-clay to make objects that he fired. He attended primary school in Dinokana but was apparently more interested in drawing pictures than concentrating in class. His father decided to take him out of school in order to tend the goats but Mohl got into more trouble when he left the goats unattended while he drew on the rocks with pepa (a chalk-like stone). His grandfather, Chief (Kgosi) Marogoe, always protected him and payed the fines when

he was punished for his negligence.

Mohl later attended school in Mafikeng, where the Reverend Hale of the London Missionary Society recognized his talent while on a visit to the school. He suggested that the teachers should allow Mohl to spend extra time on his art. With the help of

Mohl's grandfather, Reverend Hale arranged for him to attend Tiger Kloof Training

College where he obtained a teacher's diploma, and then arranged for him to accompany a German woman artist to SWA/Namibia, where he could study painting at the Windhoek School of Art. In order to make ends meet, Mohl performed various odd jobs such as working as a house-painter. With the aid of the London Missionary Society and the Lutheran Church, Mohl was able to attend the Academy for Art in Düsseldorf, West Germany, for a few years. The academy archives were destroyed during the Second World War, so that no records of his studies there could be traced.

It is known that he learned to speak German and travelled around the country.

On his return to South Africa, he worked on a mine for a brief period of time after which he settled in Sophiatown in the 1950s. There he established an art school, known by his students as the White Studio, behind his home in Annandale Street, and became one of the first black artists in South Africa to be involved in art education for

his own people. Mohl later moved to Dube and also taught at the Madiban High School and Orlando High School in Soweto, where he was a popular teacher. He was a founder member of Artists under the Sun, an organization that arranged regular informal exhibitions in Joubert Park, Johannesburg, where he also exhibited his own works. During the late 1950s Mohl established the Apollo Art Gallery in Johannesburg, registered in the name of a Belgian by the name Frank van Melten

(also documented as van Walter, van Halter and van Malter), where he exhibited.

Mohl was an accomplished landscape painter but he also painted several portraits during his career. According to Elza Miles's research, he was commissioned to paint

things of historical importance to the Bechuanas by the government and tribal

administration of Bechuanaland (Botswana) in 1946. Mohl also indicated that he had

painted historical sites for Chief Tshekedi, at the royal home at Palapye Road and the Royal settlement at Serowe. Unfortunately not all of these paintings have been located, but those that have been prove Mohlâ\200\231s ability to â\200\230capture the mood of life lingering on in the countryâ\200\231. Mohl also painted the portrait of Paramount Chief Tshekedi Khama around 1936, which was probably exhibited at the Empire

Exhibition of that year.

Mohl made history by being the only black artist to participate in the South African Academy of Arts annual competition in 1943, held at the Selbourne Hall in Johannesburg. On top of that, he won the first place. Snow falling in Sophiatown was the title of the work that he entered in 1942, and Magaliesburg in Midwinter the work he entered in 1943. His fascination for snow must have been sparked by his stay in Germany and his passion for nature was obvious in his paintings. He used oil paints to depict atmospheric qualities such as snow, rain, smoke, harsh sunlight and heat. His style was realistic, although he sometimes worked in a more impressionist way

when he painted township scenes of early dusk and dawn.

Mohlâ\200\231s first public appearance in the art world was in 1936 at the Empire Exhibition

and he held his first solo exhibition in Bloemfontein in 1941. Various other exhibitions followed and a definite highlight was the group exhibition at the Piccadilly Gallery in London in 1965. Mohl exhibited alongside other black South African artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Ephraim Ngatane, Durant Sihlali, Lucas Sithole and Sydney Khumalo. Mohl advised and instructed Gerard Sekoto, who moved to Paris in exile during 1947 and stayed there until his death in 1993. Helen

Sebidi and Credo Mutwa were also instructed by him.

Mohl was a man of great esteem in Soweto. His first wife died in the early 1940s, and in 1949 he married Puseletso, a qualified nurse. Mohl had two sons from his first marriage, Jerry (born 1935) and Archie (born 1939), who also became artists. He instructed Puseletso (who was also liaison officer of the Artists Market Association)

in oil-painting and she later became an artist in her own right.

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