

Peter Edward ChatkeÃ©

Peter Edward Clarke has made his imprint on the South African art scene as a versatile artist. He does not only make pictorial

art which includes painting, printmaking, illustrating, but he is also an acknowledged poet and writer. Moreover, he binds books, makes jewellery and works with leather, metal and glass @eedmeing Sense furettional optects. He never stops improvising. In 1975 he had to send off some prints. Because the tube which he used was too long, he cut it to the required length and improvised the

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cut off piece into his first box. Inside he lined me with wall

paper and the outside was covered with odd bits of leather.

Peter grew up in Simonstown where he was born on 2 June 1929 to Rose Clarke (nÃ©e Macauley) and Peter James. He was the third of six children. His father worked as a plumber's mate on the docks. At the time Simonstown was a naval base for the British Navy and the town's atmosphere was very English. On the 5 November Guy Fox Day was celebrated. That day the children wore masks ("mombakkiese") or painted their faces and carried images of Guy on their shoulders. And then at night the bonfire was lit and they all dropped Guy into the fire. Peter was fascinated with the masquerade. Later people wearing masks would keep recurring as a theme in his art (Boy wearing mask 1963, Girl with Masks 1963 and

Masked girl 1977).

Penny for the Guy by James Matthews was written in response to

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evidently started when he watched his father making ornaments

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from pieces of scrap metal. One of the copper candle sticks that

Peter James made when Peter was a child is 23 asses

in the Clarke home. Peter also remembers the drinking glasses

which his father made from bottles during warineme-when dlasses

wereVnot easily obtainable Â«<r aemu/expensive

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Peter started school in Simonstown at the Boys Mission School under the auspices of the St Francis Anglican Church. There they had drawing lessons that revolved round themes such as: "Make 4

picture of â\200\234A day at the Or VES Pichicâ\200\231Â@â\200\231â\200\235.

It was only when he attended the Arsenal Road School from standard 3 to 6 that his interest in arb was stimulated and his talents to draw and to write were encouraged. The headmaster Harold Josua who held a Bachelor of Arts degree was concerned with cultural progress and therefore considered art an important

component of the curriculum. He played the viclin and piano and

conducted the school choir. Bookbinding and carpentry were taught t

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by Mr Schneider. Peter enjoyed the bookbinding classes where hts love of the craft was kindled. In 1992 when the South African National Gallery presented a retrospective exhibition of his art

at the Natale Labia Museum fine examples of Peterâ\200\231s bookbinding

were shown. Though Peter also enjoyed carpentry he was not good

ab joining dovetails.

Harold Josua who taught languages was not only impressed by Peter's ability to draw but he sensed his writer's talent. On one occasion instead of an essay Peter wrote a review of a book he had read. This was met with great approval by his teacher who suggested that he either become an artist or a writer. Josua referred Peter who was in standard 6 at the time to the Livingstone High School in Claremont because art was taught there

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In 1944 Peter Clarke went to the Livingstone High School where Mr Esterhuysen taught art. Esterhuysen never interfered with their art expression but invited those among the newcomers who were interested in art to stay after school and make use of the facilities in the art room. This room became their haven where they stayed in the afternoons till five o'clock.

Hoe Gees: Estherhuysen had a pile of Studisc magazines in the art room. Peter who was an avid and perceptive reader obtained his

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knowledge of lino- and woodcuts from these magazines. He became acquainted with German Expressionism, mid Japanese and Mexican woodcuts. At the end of Standard 7 Peter left school to work on

the docks at Simonstown harbour.

He started as a ship painter. In the dry dock the painters

stripped the warships of old paint and barnacles. Then they

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namel paints to prevent further

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repainted these with red lead

deterioration and growth of barnacles.

When the war ended Peter was one of the dock workers who were "out off" because there was ne more work. Soon he was re-employed as an "office boy". It was at this time, roundabout 1947 that Peter abtended the night art classes Given by John Coplands at St Philips School in Woodstock. They did life drawing and still lifes in either watercolour or oil paint. Albert Adams, Pieter Sydney | and Louis Maurice also attended these sessions. Coplands was an assistant at the Continental School of Art that was established by Maurice van Essche in 1946. de wenb te the United States of America where he became director of the Akron Museum and promoted contemporary American artists. Coplands devoted mich of his time to photography and in 1994/5 he held an exhibition of selfportraits which featured. in the magazine Art in

America (Clarke: commmmnication by telephone 22 November 1995}).

Since Peter's interest in printmaking was pice tara Esterhuysen's Studio magazines he kept looking for woodcut tools. One day on his way home Peter passed a shop in Simonstown selling

anything from "an anchor to a needle". There he saw a German set

Of wondcrtemiaaede and promptly bought it. He made his first prints

roundabout Pe Po "a tel la's

He also started to explore photography... He bought a Brownny box

camera and photographed the people and objects that interested him. Photography always fascinated him. He remembers as a child he was spell bound when he watched the photographer covered with a black cloth behind the camera calling out "watch the birdy" to capture an image.

Though he did not continue with photography as an art form he remained a photographer at heart. In his still lifes Peter Clarke captures the humble existence of ordinary objects. The

evoke the impression of just having been handled. They

therefore not arranged in a grand manner. The ordinary utensils for making ginger beer ateteeme (Home-made Ginger Beer) or the Glass and jug of flowers (A Glase of spring water) placed on the pine table are evocative of the ordinary lives lived in the confined spaces where these objects are found. Clarke pays homage in his still lifes to the early 17th century Dutch "monochrome

banket jes

When the classes at St Phillips folded, Peter and his fellow

artists attended evening art classes in

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Cape Town. Johannes Mett and Nerine Desmond were responsible

for these lessons.

Roundabout 1850 Peter and his friends decided to form their own club in Nel lang Bees on Saturdays when most of those who had permanent

jobs had the day free. One of the members of the group introduced

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Henry Jordaan (1

and he brought two of his oil paintings to the group. The one was a Canadian winter scene that he copied from a calendar. When he showed it to the group he said, "Here is winter" and of the other one he said, "And here is spring"

A glass

in ROD: o A107

Henry Jordaan's art was begun in 1985 when Ricky

Burnett selected a painting by him for the exhibition Tributaries. The South African National Gallery holds

one of his paintings in its permanent collection.

After two or three years of running errands at the harbour Peter was promoted. He became assistant storeman. He kept check on tools and other equipment. In 1958 after 11 years of service he left his job at Simonstown naval harbour to embark, without realising it then, on his professional career as an artist

He decided to look for a new job after this break. Equipped with sketchbooks, pencils, watercolours, gouaches and oil paints he went to the then quiet farming village of Teslaarsdal near Caledon. There he spent three months sketching, painting, writing, reading and walking. Peter obtained a room in the house

of Mr Ek the father of a friend and he began with his

meals 1 the 8 his family.

The stay at Teslaarsdal in 1956 was pivotal for him as an artist.

He observed the daily activities of the village people and he accompanied the aieonawis. There the shepherd did not lead his flock, but walked behind it. Instead they used goats to take the lead. Years later when he travelled in Greece, France and Israel he observed that the shepherd leads his flock. For Parker the period spent in Teslaarsdal was one of the hands on. The themes that he explored then became definitive of his work as a visual artist and therefore it is not surprising that one of the Foauche paintings of the time, Bend in the Road was acquired by the South African National Gallery.

In 1961 F L Alexander, art critic of Die Burger reviewing Peter Clarke's exhibition at the Rodin Gallery in Cape Town, observed that it was Clarke's talent, in the absence of formal art training, which sustained his development as an artist. Clarke has a clear picture of the hard lives of the people of the Cape Flats... In a stilted style he captures their hardships and their enduring struggle to survive which is succinctly symbolised by the ever blowing wind. Wind on the Cape Flats (a gouache) shows three people moving against a strong blowing wind through sand dunes to their modest cottages. The focus is in the middle figure of a girl carrying her father's hand. The father is literally dragging her as they climb the steep sand dune. In the silhouetted shape of her little figure Clarke captures a child's experience of wind

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lashing. sand against bare face and eyes, hence the

erect and halting appearance of her movement. The father

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seems to shield her against the wind while he pulls her along.
Alexander selected Wind on the Cape Flate as his favourite

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Painting in the exhibition. He fGeerri that the sharp modelling of

the dunes and the rest of the. landscape was done gust as

carefully as the human figures.

Clarke carefully looked at the work of Diego Rivera (1886-1957},
JosÃ© Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros
(1896-1974) because the â\200\234history behind those pictures was almost
familiarâ\200\235 (Hardy 1992 :3}. Though The Fire, a handcoloured
linccut of 1962, shows correspondences with the formal
sualisation of Riveraâ\200\231s work in the heavy and clear shapes it
is the â\200\234history' behind the formal composition that speaks out.
it tells of the plight of a Cape family whose humble house caught

fire. Whereas the father and his daughter move to the shelter of.

their home in Wind on the Cape Flate jin The Fire a father, mother
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and baby flee from the home which is now transformed into fiery |

death. ~

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Clarkeâ\200\231s interest in the work of the Mexicans opened a window on
a form of visual expression that was new in South African art.
Except for Clarkeâ\200\231s Mexican role models it was Jack Copeâ\200\231s wife,

the painter Lesley Cope (1921-88) who played A significant roles
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In 1961 Peter Clarke, following the advice of Professor Matthys

Rokhorst, briefly attended the classes in etching given by Kathrine Harries at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town. At the time it occurred to him to engrave on perspex instead of on wood. When he printed his first perspex engravings towards the end of that year he was convinced that he had invented a new technique. Soon after his arrival in Amsterdam he learned that a Dutch artist - the father of a fellow student - was doing the same. This Dutch artist was also under the impression that he was the first to use perspex for this purpose,

They seem to have invented the technique almost simultaneously.

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Peter worked in terdam from 24g, ty goes, Ete AE Se? wert
At Ao Lon UAL PKA) +

RijksaWademie varr Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdatfs under the

@uidance of Professor Kuno Brink, he concentrated on woodcut and linocut printmaking. Though Brink had his training under the painter Jan Sluyters (1881-1957} he was very conventional in his approach to art. His wood enddnvings were meticulous in detail and corresponded to natural appearances. He was frequently commissioned to design stamps for the Netherlands. Peter benefitted from working in the disciplined atmosphere and Patricia Hardy observes that in the prints carried out at the academy â\200\234 ... there is evidence of a more refined integration of mood and technique. This enables him to evoke the drama of an abtack by bie ... as effectively as the idyll of a wintry

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Alexander noted in one of his reviews

Peter was an excellent illustrator. After the year's study at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten he became more involved in illustrating books published in South Africa, Sweden, Germany,

Switzerland, England and Nigeria. One of these books, *Snoet Alleen*

by Freda Linde was given the C P Hoogenhout Award for child

literature in 1965.

In 1975 Peter travelled to the United States to participate

in the International Writers Programme in Iowa.

There he and two other poet-painters Dilip Chitre from Bombay

and Ahmed Muhamed Imavovic from Sarajevo engaged in a joint painting which they called *The Triple Triptych*. Each one painted a panel. Their theme was light as embodied in the sun.

Peter painted an Iowa farm scene, Dilip Chitre an illumination and Ahmed Muhamed Imavovic combined a hand and a Tiffany lamp

suspended in the air. At the time Peter was also elected Honorary

Fellow in Writing of the University of Iowa.

Peter spent the winter of 1978-8 in Norway where he refined his technique of etching at the Atelier Nord in Oslo. His wry sense of humour comes through in a recollection of his stay in Norway. One evening as the festive season was drawing closer he and a lady-friend were sloggng through the snow. Suddenly she asked him the question he had been anticipating for quite some time:

"By the way, Peter, what do people in South Africa eat at

Christmas time?" he replied: e eab missionaries. But we first
remove their pith helmets

The Wake, a woodcut of 1970 captures the moment when relat

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station. The corpse @ shrouded in an open coffir

& candle on a table. The â\200\234haloâ\200\235 of the candle finds a

counterpoint in the head of the figure on the left. There are
four men observing this wake. Each one reacting in his individual
manner. Two years prior to The Wake, Peter painted Drinker. It is
a watercolour painting showing the central seated figure of The
Wake.. By incorporating this figure into a broader context his
drinking becomes motivated and a dramatic dialogue engages
between the painting and the woodcut.

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Morning pastoral is another woodcut of the seve i which

Peter Clarke Wag _.., light. Ip this picture the rising sun

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transforms the f/aight scen he first rays of light enmuelepe.,

the mountain and a shepherd.gaurding his flock of sheep. The
light silhouettes the shepherd into a dark shape and transforms
the summit of the mountain into the features of a benevolent
being. After a peaceful night between these two protecting forces
the flock is ready to move out. Within this context the shepherd

and his sheep evoke religious connotations.

Peter Clarkeâ\200\231s work bears the stamp of wholesome honesty an

represented in public collections in South Africa as well as in Europe and the United States of America. Throughout his career he participated in major exhibitions in South Africa and abroad and

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many honours bestowed on him for his writing. It is not suprising that V H of Die Burger soberved: "Deur die jare heen het Clarke aan sy kuns getrou gebly en hom nie deur hierdie en

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