

# HOUSE

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the cool  
charm of  
**WICKER**

**GREEN ENTERS THE SCENE**





For Johannesburg art critic Elza Miles uncovering the details of the life and work of 90-year-old Ernest Mancoba is a passion. Her interest was sparked off by

## Homecoming of a master

a drawing in a European art catalogue: 'I have seldom encountered a drawing of such strength and simplicity. I knew that the work of the artist was going to open unforeseen perspectives for me'

TEXT: ELZA MILES PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANCKI BURGER

**I** THINK I HAVE FOUND my spiritual home so far as form is concerned but the content I am still searching for.' Ernest Mancoba wrote these words from Paris to his friend Dr Goolam Gool. He continued, 'My impressions of the French people are happy ones . . . their respect for humanity, formally, is excellent. I feel for the first time that I count as a human being - also there is not such glaring bestiality as you find in London. In London the street crowd was just *one* face. In Paris every man has *his* face.'

Ernest Mancoba, an artist virtually unknown in his native land, was drawn to the French sense of liberty, equality and fraternity. As a child he was guided by his mother in the African philosophy of 'the brotherhood of man'. Throughout his life he lived by this guidance. He believes the survival of man depends on regaining the spiritual content displaced by materialism. Art is paramount in achieving this ideal. He equates the artist with the praise singer (*imbongi*) or shaman who leads the members of the community; the artist is the one who has to express the 'unspeakable'. For Ernest the function of art is not a means to 'tickle and make people laugh'. It must express what society regards as rude and uncivil in order to heal the breach that has developed between spirit and matter.



Ernest left South Africa in 1938 to study art in Paris. He planned to stay there for two years. But fate, in the form of the outbreak of World War II, four years of internment in a German camp, marriage across the colour bar and artistic involvement resulted in an absence of 56 years. (Unlike his friend, the painter Gerard Sekoto, who was never to return to South Africa, Ernest is currently visiting the land of his birth. He is accompanied by his son Wonga.)

En route to Paris, Ernest spent a few weeks in London. He visited the British Museum to look at its collection of African sculptures. What impressed him about them was their serenity. Unlike the repose of the African works, his own sculptures expressed the pain



Top right Ernest Mancoba's son Wonga, art critic Elza Miles, and the artist pictured outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery  
Above right Elza and Ernest with his wife Sonya Ferlov's sculpture, *Warrior*  
Above Ernest with his *Bantu Madonna*, carved in 1929

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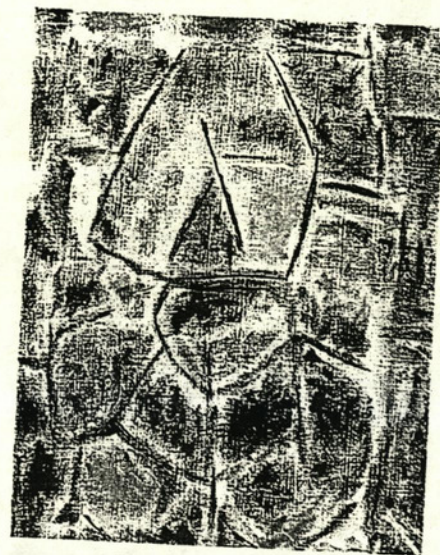
## HOME COMING OF A MASTER

of a shattered society as reflected in the individual.

When he left South Africa, he enrolled at the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris where he befriended the Danish artist Christian Poulsen who introduced him to other Danish artists. Among them was the sculptor Sonja Ferlov whom he married in 1942.

In spite of a looming war, life in Paris was exciting. Ernest's Danish friends took him to galleries exhibiting the art of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Henri Matisse. They also encouraged him to work on his own instead of attending art school and introduced him to the informal *Académie de Chaumière* where artists gathered to draw from the living model. In turn Ernest shared his African heritage with his friends when they looked at African art and artefacts in the *Musée de l'Homme*.

Ever since their first visit to the *Musée de l'Homme*, the Mancobas kept returning to its collection of African art. On one occasion they rubbed shoulders with Picasso. Mancoba was struck by Picasso's interest in African art, contradicting his



Above left An oil on canvas, painted in 1950 much-quoted and noncommittal retort: 'L'art nègre, connais pas' ('Negro art I do not know').

Ernest Mancoba, born on 29 August 1904, grew up in the mining town of Boksburg and attended Anglican Church schools on the East Rand. His parents saw to it that their children were educated. Ernest once explained that his mother had both her hands full. In the one hand she held Christianity and in the other



Above right This ink and watercolour drawing was done in 1939

Opposite *Lifeline out of Africa*, by Elza Miles is published by Human & Rousseau

Africa. She was a good storyteller.

After Ernest had attended primary school in 1920 he left for the Diocesan Training College at Grace Dieu near Pietersburg. Four years later he qualified as a teacher. He was given a teaching post at the College until 1929 when he left on a bursary from the Transvaal

Education Department to study for a BA degree at the University of Fort Hare.

It was at Grace Dieu that his artistic talent was discovered by one of the teachers, Sister Pauline. She encouraged him to do woodcarving. In 1929 he made his first major sculpture at Grace Dieu: the *Bantu Madonna*. This sculpture of awakening womanhood seems to be the earliest South African interpretation of Mary as an African.

Ernest interrupted his studies at Fort Hare to carve an altar panel for the Woodville Chapel in Grahamstown. At the end of 1935 he moved to Cape Town

*Sculpture*. This book had an immense influence on Ernest. Though modest in scale, his new carvings became powerful images of uncharted life forces that reveal either a Madonna or a face wrestling to be freed from a chunk of wood.

When Ernest arrived in Paris in 1938 his work was not representational anymore. He used ink and watercolour for spontaneous drawings and in 1940 he started to paint in oil.

Riches and comfort were never to be part of Sonja and Ernest Mancoba's lives. They always had to share their

### His own sculptures expressed the pain of a shattered society as reflected in the individual

where he was employed as caretaker of a block of flats in Kloof Street.

Life in Cape Town in 1935 – and especially in District Six, where he had a studio – was stimulating. He met the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz and the painter Irma Stern. Lipshitz shared his Parisian experiences with Ernest, and recommended that he read *Primitive Negro*

poky working spaces. After 1952 he stopped sculpting and devoted his time to painting and drawing.

In 1947 Ernest, Sonja and Wonga moved to Denmark. They settled in a small village called Kattinge until the end of 1951 when they returned to France to live in Oigny-en-Valois, a village in Brittany.



In Denmark they became part of the vibrant but short-lived group, CoBra, which was founded as a reaction against Surrealism and was often referred to as 'the school of freedom'. The name is a contraction of the first letters of the cities Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.

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A programme on Ernest Mancoba will be screened on NNTV's prime-time magazine programme *Blasé* at 8.30pm on Thursday, 19 January 1995.

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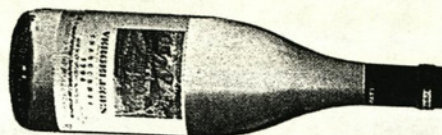
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