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Controversial "i . Ernest Mancobaâ\200\231s Black Madonna.

Boksburg-born Ernest Mancoba not wholly sure of new SA.

Artist back to his roots

As a talented young man aspiring to be a master artist, Ernest Mancoba flew to England in 1938 to learn more about art. Now, after 56 years of self-imposed exile, he has returned to a changing South Africa to rediscover his roots.

Even though he sees discernible reform, this Boksburg-born artist feels uncertain about his future.

â\200\234I left this country because there was a denial of humanity ... I hear things have changed, but I cannot conclude that I will definitely want to be buried here,â\200\235 he says.

Mancoba might have left the country to seek instantaneously greener pastures but his life still remained a bitter struggle. After he began his studies at an art school in Paris, World War 2 broke out and he was kept prisoner by the Germans for four years.

It was during this time of incarceration that he secretly married fellow artist Sonja Ferlov. She has since died.

â\200\230Hand in Handâ\200\231

â\200\234Mixed marriages were a risk because they conflicted with the German ideology and I think my marriage to a French woman would have been perceived as

bizarre during those years in this country,â\200\235 he says.

But Mancobaâ\200\231s paintings have come home. With his wife's sculptures, they are now exhibited in the Johannesburg Art Gallery in an exhibition entitled Hand in Hand.

The showcase of their joint talents reveals their struggles and a need to find freedom, acceptance and recognition.

His sculpture of the Black Madonna was not readily accepted in pre-1990 South Africa, but he was not surprised: â\200\234I did the sculpture as a protest and also to show that blacks are also human.â\200\235

But today it stands proudly as the preface to the exhibition.

Even though he has been away for such a long time, Mancoba vividly remembers the time his father did not come home one night -and was later found in jail â\200\224 arrested for being on the streets after the 9 pm curfew.

WHEN Ernest Maricoba left South Africa he could not exhibit his â\200\234Black Madonnaâ\200\235. Today, he is back to exhibit his work in the prestigious Johannesburg Art Gallery. City Reporter Bongive Mlangeni spoke to him

He laughs as he recalls those â\200\234every-dayâ\200\235 events. But, as he relates a story about his uncle, who was a priest and could not buy Holy Communion wine without a white priest's permission, the smile slowly disappears. â\200\234I have experienced racism all over the world and could never understand it.

â\200\234Humanity has common origins, irrespective of culture and beliefs, but unfortunately we have had our values and norms changed to fit into different systems of oppression,â\200\235 he explains.

Mancoba says he was worried about the future of his younger sisters and brother and this concern drove him to sculpt Future Africa, which depicts two young boys.

â\200\234These young boys are ready to begin

adult life, but I ask: â\200\230What is their fu- |
ture?â\200\231 The principals are my only broth- |
er and his friend and the sculpture is
about openness and readiness in a coun-
try that denies people rights,â\200\235 he says.

â\200\234According to my tradition, a child is
always with people . . . there is no time
when he is alone. But, our society has |
been disrupted and children are lost.â\200\235

In his search for equality, Mancoba

moved around Europe and in 1947 land-
ed in Denmark and joined a group of
artists who shared his views about
humanity. â\200\234We believed there was disin-
tegration in the culture of art ... that
we were losing the spiritual values and
getting mechanised,â\200\235 he says.
â\200\234We used our art to reveal our feel-
ings and to show that spontaneity and
spiritualism is just as important as intel-
lectual art.â\200\235

He modestly admits that his art work
might not have made an major impact
but he hopes that through it younger
artists will have something to learn.

â\200\234I have used art to relate my
thoughts, fears and hopes,â\200\235 he says.

â\200\234I have managed to maintain my cul-
ture and tradition using my hands and
simple material.â\200\235

He believes African sculpture has the
heritage of spiritualism and should sl-
ways be preserved.

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THE WAY THE WORLD IS MOVING.

Denmark. Here he became a member of
Cobra, the 'school of freedom.'

The Mancobas, with their son Wonga,
went back to France and settled in
Oigny-en-Valois in the countryside. In
1961 they went back to Paris, and
Mancoba became a French citizen.
Ferlov died there in 1984.

After Ferlov's death, writes Miles,
Mancoba progressively stripped his
images of referential material . . . The
sheets on which he inscribes with ink or
ink and oil-pastels become formulations,

documents or reports for the absent.

Looking carefully at the white spaces . . . one sees appearing in new configurations a beloved one, as well as envoys out of Africa. As Mancoba said:

... for the object of African art is not to please the eye or the senses but is to use art as a means, as a language, to express feelings and ideas in relation to the present, the future and the past, to discover new concepts by which to regard the world for the salvation of man. a

Life out of Africa: the art of Ernest Mancoba by Elza Miles is published by Human & Rousseau.

The Ernest Mancoba retrospective exhibition is to be held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery from November 1 1994 to February 26 1995.

Tribute October 1994 99

Quenching the never-ending thirst.
Glodina, as practical as they are beautiful.

GLODINA - THICK, SOFT AND THIRSTY.

and other subjects at Grace Dieu, near Pietersburg. He followed this up by teaching at the Diocesan Training College in the same area, an institution which first knew him as a student. It was when studying for a Junior Certificate that he showed the first symptoms of an artistic inclination when, through the nun Sister Pauline, he was introduced to the art of carving wood.

It will be understood that in those days of what may be called the academic golden era â\200\224 before the Nationalist Party curtailed and limited education for Africans â\200\224 the curriculum of many colleges exposed students to a myriad subjects for a better balanced outlook.

Later, between 1931 and 1935, Mancoba was to study for a BA degree at the Alma mater of many great South African activists, Fort Hare (then the South African Native College). His aim was to become a journalist.

Here he became friendly with, among other important contemporaries, Govan Mbeki and Isaac Bangani (IB) Tabata. Sympathetic to communism, Mancoba had disagreements with the Marxist Tabata on the subject of religion. Miles writes: â\200\234Mbeki remembers that Mancoba . . . perfectly reconciled his convictions as a Christian with his sympathy for communism.â\200\235

Also among the friends of the early '30s were activists Dr Goolam Gool and his sister, Janud (â\200\234Janeâ\200\235), founders of the All-African Convention, whom he met through Tabata.

Then there was â\200\234the foursome of Khaiso in the Great Northâ\200\235 â\200\224 Lois Makena, Ernest Mancoba, Nimrod Ndebele and Gerard Sekoto, all teachers at the Khaiso Secondary School near Pietersburg (Mancoba from 1937), all friends who aspired variously to be

either great artists or superb writers.

During these years Mancoba kept on sculpting, gradually developing a reputation. It was a study grant that took him to Paris, his teaching career and journalistic ambition jettisoned. On the quayside to see him off was Goolam Gool.

In Paris Mancoba registered at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in the Rue d'Ulm. Because he could not as yet speak any French he was assigned, to assist him, a Danish student named Christian Poulsen who was conversant in English (and who became a renowned ceramist). Through Poulsen, by then a friend, Mancoba met

After the liberation of France Mancoba increasingly began to draw and paint. Using lines and strokes, the work is suggestive rather than affirmative and he speaks of it thus: "When I make a picture or a drawing, I'm

other Danes, including his wife-to-be, Sonja Ferlov, who was also an artist. Mancoba married Ferlov at a traumatic time in the affairs of the world. It was during World War 2 when he and other British passport holders were interned during the German occupation of France.

always aware of the space which is at my disposal. At the same time I'm aware that the thing that I'm trying to express has to be an organic whole and that it must not look like a section of a vision, but it must be a vision which is integral . . ."

Between 1947 and '51 the couple relocated to Kattinge, a small principality of

Tribute October 1994 97

