

Coming through the snow

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In South Africa, a country of sunshine and blue skies, it rarely snows. Occasionally one sees snow covered mountains in landscapes by South African painters like Hugo Naudé (1868-1941), Clement Senèque (1897-1930) and Jean Welz (1900-75), but real snow scenes are rare. H. G. Fitzherbert, a painter who disappeared from the South African art scene, painted *Johannesburg under snow, September 11, 1936*. According to The Star (17 September 1938) this painting generated discussion when the artist exhibited it in 1938. Another painter who had been inspired by the same snowstorm as Fitzherbert was Maud Sumner (1902-84). She painted *Crown Mines under snow, using watercolour and ink*. (The Oliewenhuis Art Gallery in Bloemfontein holds this picture and Stefan Hundt brought it to my attention.)

Drawing, painting and modelling clay oxen came naturally to John Koenakeefe Motlhakanga. Koenakeefe (the little crocodile) used *pepa* (a chalky whitewash) to draw goats and sheep on either rocks or the smooth sides of hides while he was herding his father's goats. This humble beginning eventually flourished into some of the most telling renderings of the South African landscape. Yet Koenakeefe's creativity landed him in difficulties. Instead of preventing the goats from grazing in the neighbours' gardens he became engrossed in his pictures. An infuriated father punished him severely but often Koenakeefe's grandfather, Kgosi Marogoe protected his grandchild and made amends for the damages by paying the fines.

John Koenakeefe's early attempts at art remind of a similar beginning of another South African landscape painter. Jan Ernest Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936) was also a herdbooy and his talent was discovered when a member of the Reitz family, a land surveyor, saw the boy drawing on stones in the veld in the Klein Karoo. He then urged the boy's father to send his son to school.

John Koenakeefe was born on 29 September 1903 in the North Western Province at Dinokana near

Zeerust. He attended the primary mission school in Mafikeng where his passion for art was not appreciated. At school he was humiliated for making art instead of studying. Fortunately his situation improved when Reverend Hale of the London Missionary Society visited the school. Hale was stationed at the Teachers' Training College at Tiger Kloof. After he had listened to the complaints of the teachers and looked at Koenakeefe's drawings he convinced the teachers that the boy was intelligent and talented. He suggested that Koenakeefe was given a day free to go out sketching on his own. Years later Mohl recalled in the biographical notes that he compiled for the poet-painter Francois Van Halter of the Apollo Art Gallery in Johannesburg, what Hale told his teachers: "The boy is far from stupid. He draws well. Give him one day off a week to go where he likes and draw what he likes. You will find that he is not stupid or disobedient". On Fridays, equipped with paper and charcoal Koenakeefe explored the koppies and bush for subject matter.

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On completion of Koenakeefe's studies at primary school, Hale persuaded Kgosi Marogoe to send him to Tiger Kloof where he did two-year teacher's training and practised his art. Hale's interest in Koenakeefe's art never dwindled and he eventually arranged for John Koenakeefe to go to Luderitz to continue art studies. Mohl remembered that he was given a sound training in the preparation of canvases and boards. His teacher was a French woman, Miss Collac, who made him feel at home. He said: "Here I went about painting the sea, the hills, the islands. It was wonderful to draw and paint all that I saw". In order to continue painting he did all sorts of odd jobs like working as a dock-labourer and as a house-painter (Mohl's biographical notes compiled for Van Halter).

Eventually he was enabled with the aid of the London Missionary Society and the Lutheran Church to attend the Academy for Art in Düsseldorf. He studied there for a couple of years, but no records of the time he spent at the Academy could be located as all the archival material was destroyed during World War 2.

It was probably during his stay in Germany that John Koenakeefe's enduring fascination with snow began. His first winter and "white Christmas" in Germany must have been a revelation to him. Unfortunately not a single painting done in Germany by Mohl was located. It has also been suggested that his surname was shortened and Germanised at the time he was studying in Germany.

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landscape painting. None of the portraits has been located.

From an art historical point of view the friendship between Mohl and Khama was very significant because Khama enabled Mohl to paint places which were of historical interest to the people of Botswana. The scenes that he painted before 1948 at Shoshong, Palapye en Serowe have not been located, but those he did in 1954 at Moeng and Serowe are exquisite examples of his ability to capture the mood of life lingering on in the country.

In the 1960's Mohl's focus shifted to urban life. He shows workers moving on foot or by bicycle to work at the crack of dawn and returning home at night. Some of these paintings of people with boxes on their heads filing through narrow alleys between high-rise buildings, are symbolic of the workers' invasion of down town Johannesburg and Hillbrow which was to occur in the late 1980s.

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These titles give the impression that the four paintings probably recorded a sequence of events at the time of the snow storm, starting at sunrise and ending at night. *Snow storm in southern Africa* was priced highest at 400 gns and was probably the kingpin of the sequence.

In "*Miners through the snow*" Mohl acknowledges the selfless labour of people. Between the mine headgear and powerlines 10 miners are caught up in an incessant conveyor belt flow from and to their working place. The pull and thrust which is manifested in the movement of these labourers dehumanises them. They move mechanically to and fro. The pathos of this situation is underlined by the ominously lit sky and anonymous footprints in the snow. This is the scene that Mohl witnessed on the 19 June 1964 and it suggests that as long as there is ore to be mined the same routine will continue in spite of snow storms, torrents of rain or sunshine.

After his first wife's death in the 1940's he remained a widower for many years before he remarried. His second wife, Puseleto, a qualified hospital sister came from Lesotho. She attended his art classes in Soweto. This companionship introduced a new phase in his art. He and Puseleto

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