

FESTIVAL OF AFRICAN ART 1984 BROCHURE



**CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION
UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND**

1984 ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF AFRICAN ART

JUDGE'S REPORT by JOHN ROOME

The organisers of the 1984 Annual Festival of African Art expressed three main aims:

1. To promote and exhibit the work of Black artists who have had limited opportunities for communicating with the public.
2. To document and record aspects of contemporary culture.
3. To provide a forum for all artists in Southern Africa to explore and express art in the African context.

As a member of the panel of five judges invited to select and judge the exhibition, I have been asked to provide a brief report on how the judges approached this task and comment on issues brought to light.

As stated above, the aims of the festival are broad and drew a wide range of entries. The diversity of work submitted did not make for easy judging. This diversity was seen as a positive, if challenging aspect but the judges did feel that an introduction of certain categories would provide for a fairer judging system, namely a section for amateur artists, one for students and one for professional artists. With the present open system professional artists seem to have an unfair advantage over those in the other two categories.

However despite the above fact, the judges found that by applying criteria of artistic honesty and integrity it became possible to evaluate the worth of works by artists with different backgrounds. For example certain works which may have had a great degree of technical sophistication paled when seen against works which used far humbler means to achieve far greater ends. The judges rejected works which made use of tired visual cliches, which lacked significant content or which fell into the category of commercial or "airport" art. In certain cases it was sadly noted that commercial success had adversely affected the work of established artists and their work was rejected in favour of work that was more challenging, vital and significant.

As for the awarding of prizes in the various sections, the judges were given the freedom to allocate these as they saw fit. Due to the low standard of the entries in the Sculpture section and the high standard of Paintings, Prints and Drawings it was decided to re-allocate the prize money accordingly.

Deciding on prize winners proved to be a difficult task, especially in the painting section. There were a large number of works of an equally high standard and after much deliberation the first prize money was split.

The judges hope that their final selection reflects their view that this event is an important one which seeks to promote standards of excellence and as a result will attract more entries of quality in the future.

TOWARDS A SOUTH AFRICAN ART FORM

by H R Dent

There has been much debate in artistic circles as to how to establish a truly South African art form. One would assume that the underlying aim of such expression would be to achieve international recognition, recognition based on artistic merit rather than some curiosity from the continent of Africa.

What is considered the hallmark of international artistic merit? Two references show an interesting contrast which seems to have a bearing on the process of change occurring in S A at this time.

In 1969 in a television series entitled "Art & Totality" Professor Bradshaw, then Head of Fine Art at Rhodes, made the following comment: "The significant thing about international art is that it bears the mark of its tribal, community or national origin."

Another point of view is given by Robert Henri, an American artist and teacher who wrote in 1923: "The greatest American (artist) of whom the nation must be proud, will not be a 'typical' American at all, but will be heir to the world instead of a part of it."

From these two quotations it seems that international art has universal qualities which allows it to transcend its national origins while at the same time embodying them.

South Africa has a vast store-house from which to draw, but this has been largely untapped. White and Black artists in S A should be able to benefit much from each other without necessarily losing their own identities. Black imagery and mythology could greatly enrich White artistic expression. Few White artists produce work which has the sincerity seen in Black South African art. For lack of content many fall prey to fashionable and stylistic trends, thereby making style their subject matter. As Bradshaw comments: "This is the mark of imitation, not creation."

Black artists in S A are still being subjected to the humiliation of false sentiment and White condescension when their work is promoted before its time because they are Black rather than for its artistic merits. In many cases they lack the basic training and technical skill to use the wide range of mediums available. It is in this area that White artists can be of most assistance.

The socio-political environment does not promote contact between Black and White artists and this is essential if South African art is to develop and achieve international significance. For this reason the African Arts Festival is to be lauded. It is one of the few opportunities for South African artists to meet each other and to be exposed to the influences of various artists and art forms. The rapid expansion of this Festival since its inception in 1980 bears witness to its relevance. It is from just such a platform that South African art may one day achieve international recognition.

Being far from the centre of where important things are supposed to happen is not a disadvantage. As we can't claim the history of the old world as an automatic right, we can't rely on its traditions to provide us with our values and standards. Some may fit Africa, some may not. It is for us to decide. We can accept what we want, discard the rest. Distance gives us the choice. And the freedom. Without this security we have to make things to prove that we exist. And that we are here. And it is only the creative people who can do it. If it has never been easy being an artist, it is even less so now. Artists feel that they are less useful than before and this is a worry. They feel isolated from the society of which they are otherwise in every other way part. In a country with rough and ready values such as ours, the gulf is even more pronounced. Visual literacy is low, visual education minimal. And our situation is complicated by other extraneous issues that should have nothing to do with the making of art. Some people find these stimulating and make them the intellectual meat that nourishes them. Others find them so daunting that their creativity withers. Training or the lack of it load the dice. The favours are handed out irrationally, and it is this that makes our situation different from most.

But for all that these are probably the most exciting times for artists. Dull they are not. One feels that something can happen, WILL happen, that the future is open. Everywhere there are signs that younger artists particularly are turning more and more to Africa for inspiration, guidance and solutions. Even the older ones can perhaps be infected by the new spirit. Less and less is it fashionable or imperative, to look over one's shoulder to Europe and America for confirmation. As our artists become more involved in what is happening here, and their art reflects local ideas, so the great international movements seem less relevant and tempting. We have to be good where we are. And only then is there a chance that what we do will matter to others. It cannot happen the other way round. And history tells us that it never has.

Some of the most beautiful things ever made have come out of this continent: something the rest of the world has been quicker to notice than we. The

great lesson of Africa is this: although people never made things simply to be admired, at the same time they never made a stool or a headrest or a bowl that was not beautiful. They did not know how. They would not have been satisfied with less. What they made had to work well, and it had to please the eye and the senses at the same time. It wasn't a problem in the past. Why should we find it a problem today?

Andrew Verster
mem. 29 August 1984.

ANDREW VERSTER

THE ROLE OF THE "NON-COMMERCIAL" GALLERY
ILLUSTRATED BY A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE
AFRICAN ART CENTRE.

In using the term "non-commercial" gallery I use it to distinguish it from a Public gallery such as a Municipal gallery for example the Durban Art Gallery (which is heavily financed by the Durban City Council) and which is there to exhibit for the general public's interest and benefit and which does not sell art works, and on the other hand the commercial gallery, which is there primarily to buy and sell art works for the profit of the gallery owner.

There is obviously a place for both these types of galleries, and artists do benefit from them - more particularly those professional artists who have already achieved some recognition. However, I should mention here that the Durban Art Gallery has in recent years bought the work of several young unknown artists and crafts men and women, even though they have had no art training whatsoever - for example, the ball point pen drawings of Tito Zungu, and the sculpture 'Cock' on a tortoise by Sangweni.

A gallery which is to operate on a non-commercial basis must have two ingredients -
i) it should have clear aims and ii) it should have at least some financial sponsorship.

As far as the African Art Centre is concerned, it was started in 1960 in a very small way by the Natal Region of the S A Institute of Race Relations as a cultural project of the Institute, in order to demonstrate amongst its many other activities, the artistic talents of the indigenous people of Natal and KwaZulu. Its aims since these early years have broadened and are as roughly follows -

- to promote the artistic heritage of Africans and in particular of the Zulu people
- to inspire confidence in artists and crafts people who wish to give individual expression to their work, rather than resort to the curio market
- to encourage and assist the transition from traditional skills to more contemporary expression in changing society
- to provide incentives to artists by finding bursaries for people who wish to study and by arranging exhibitions for young artists.

A major influence and I think a good one on the aims and objects of the Art Centre came from our very early association with the Rorke's Drift Art & Craft Centre. In fact their influence on the whole Black art scene has been extremely important and all of us who are interested in art owe a great debt of gratitude to the

early art teachers from Sweden - in particular to Ulla & Peder Gowenius and Otto and Malin Lundbohm. They set a standard of excellence - and it is this standard of excellence we should all aim for.

An important development in the history of the Art Centre took place in 1963, when the Institute of Race Relations in Durban initiated, in conjunction with the Natal Society of Arts, a national exhibition known as Art : South Africa : Today. This exhibition was the first to cater for a completely non-racial exhibition which would be selected entirely on merit by competent and well-known judges. Hundreds of entries were received from all over South Africa and from this first exhibition emerged artists such as Lucas Sithole, Michael Zondi and Sydney Khumalo, whose works were selected and recognised for the first time in competition with professional White artists.

These Art : South Africa : Today exhibitions continued every two years until 1975, and more and more Black artists received recognition - Azaria Mbatha, Judas Mahlangu, Omar Badsha, John Muafangejo and others.

(It is unfortunate that this biennial exhibition fell away in 1975 and I hope the University of Zululand exhibition may be on its way to filling this gap).

The 1963 Art : South Africa : Today exhibition broadened the work of the Art Centre from being concerned mainly with traditional crafts to being an outlet (possibly the only one of its kind) for young Black artists.

A gallery such as the Art Centre has I believe a role in that artists feel free to sell through the Centre or anywhere else. This is not usually the case with commercial galleries, where an artist is contracted to the gallery and is not free to sell privately. This can, though not always, mean an artist may be required to produce the kind of work the gallery owner wants, leaving little room for experimentation, in other words he can lose his independence.

A few comments by artists and crafts people show how they regard the African Art Centre. One artist we interviewed said "Being a Black artist and not having enough money to rent places to sell their work, the Centre helps a lot, being their only outlet". He also said - "Even when I have made a slight mistake, I get advice and this improves my art".

Mpostoli Mzila a woodcarver from the Msinga area said "The Centre buys most of his carvings. He gets a fair deal for his work, whereas in some other shops they persuade him to bring the prices down". He also says "although his father has been carving for many years they were not known as much as they are now".

Comments of beadworkers : Abegail Gasasaid the reason she came to the Centre to sell her beadwork "was because they were paid well compared to other places" - even if there was enough beadwork in stock we bought something - they never went away empty handed" - if they make something extra well we pay them more than the price they ask".

Even though the Art Centre may be deemed "non-commercial" everything has to be commercial to some degree - for the artist, the outlet and the buyer - and while some financial sponsorship is necessary - too much can be detrimental to the artists and crafts people and a non-commercial gallery should not be looked upon as some sort of charitable organisation, but should be there to assist the artist to develop his or her potential. This I believe the Art Centre has done with some success. This too applies to the Natal Society of Arts Gallery, whose aims are broadly similar to those of the Art Centre, though not so specifically directed to the development of Black Art. Here again the Natal Society of Arts could not exist without some sponsorship.

Most artists and particularly Black artists do not have the knowledge required to market their work, and it is in this area non-commercial galleries such as the African Art Centre can be useful.

Jo Thorpe
CO-ORDINATOR
DURBAN AFRICAN ART CENTRE ASSOCIATION
(Registered as a Company not for gain)

T.H. MATTHEWS

SUMMARY - Tribal Painting in South Africa, with Particular Reference to Xhosa Painting.

Tribal traditions persist over long periods of time, yet the materials of the culture are transient. Mural paintings are renewed annually, sometimes more often, yet utilise ancient pictorial conventions. This dichotomy between permanence and change is related to the ahistorical world-view of the tribal mind. Techniques are simple, colours and tools are procured from the immediate environment. Wall-painting is collective rather than individualistic. Training consists in watching and imitating. The forms of wall-painting are related to architecture, and are conditioned by the techniques of wall-construction.

Veneration for the plant-world borders on the religious; plants, trees and flowers figure prominently in wall-painting. The forms of tribal decoration tend to be geometric, and a direct relationship exists between geometric form and plurality of meaning. Symmetry prevails - bilateral, shifting, radial. Among the Xhosa it is strict in the old style, and becomes attenuated in the later style. Nevertheless, symmetry remains as a basic principle of organisation.

Ndebele polychrome style, and the archaic monochrome style with its skeuomorphic implications, are each restricted to specific wall surfaces. The three phases of Ndebele painting

each have a characteristic treatment and subject-matter.

Mural painting in the Free State, a localised version of Sotho art, is characterised by the use of relief, mosaic and litema-patterns.

Zulu, Swazi and Shangaan mural-decoration in the southern and eastern Transvaal conforms to a "second style", distinct from Sotho and Ndebele styles of that area.

Xhosa mural-painting is most diverse between the Fish and Bushman's Rivers. Doors and windows are given symbolic emphasis by means of painted form.

Doorways are flanked by architectural or plant motifs. Some plant-depictions represent particular types, others are composite or anthropomorphic. Common motifs are isikwens, step-patterns and ifestile motifs. Contrary to previous opinion (e.g. Walton), it seems that Xhosa mural decoration derives not from the Sotho, but from an autochthonous Nguni style.

Configurations of dots, depictions of anthropomorphic plants, cups, feathers and arrows in Bantu wall-decoration indicate a fertility symbolism, connected either with seeds and plants or with phallic and vulvate allusions.

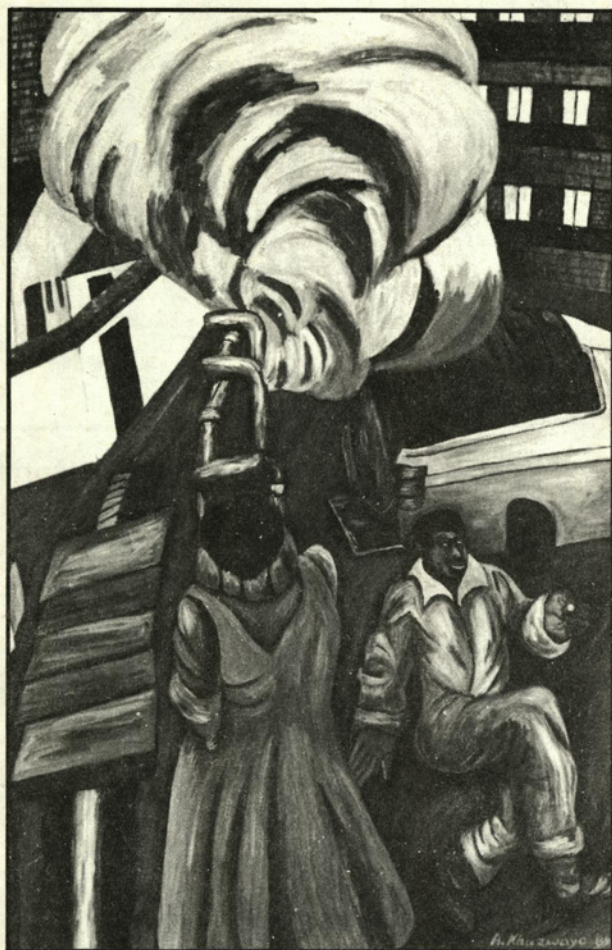
The heraldic figure-compositions of Xhosa wall-decoration,

the theme of tree-and-mound and its development into secondary themes, relate to conventions in Mesopotamian art. Certain motifs are similar to those in Bushman art. Formal correspondences also exist between Bantu and modern European and American painting. Space-representation, foreshortening and values of light and shade occur.

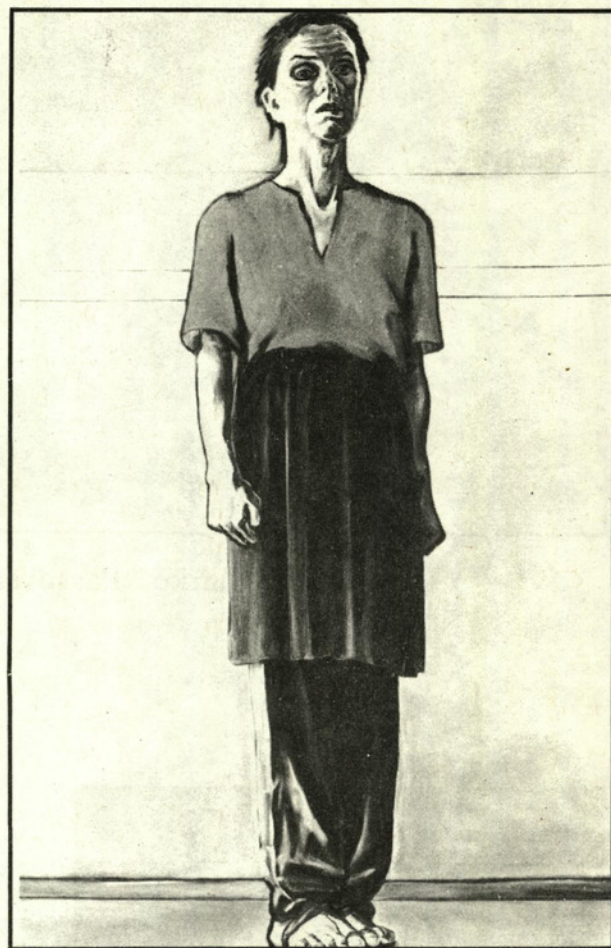
Body painting is based on a belief in the magical significance of colour applied to the human form. Like the wearing of masks, it serves the dual purpose of disguise and transfiguration. Body-painting among the Xhosa stands at the extreme of pre-determined ritual gesture, and finds its most important manifestation in the male initiation ceremony. The ritual of the abakwetha, the part played by the ingcibi, ukojiswa, the symbolic opposition of the "white" and "red" stages, all are related to initiation ceremonies performed throughout the primitive world.

FESTIVAL PRIZE WINNERS

1984



Angela Khuzwayo "Burst Pipe"



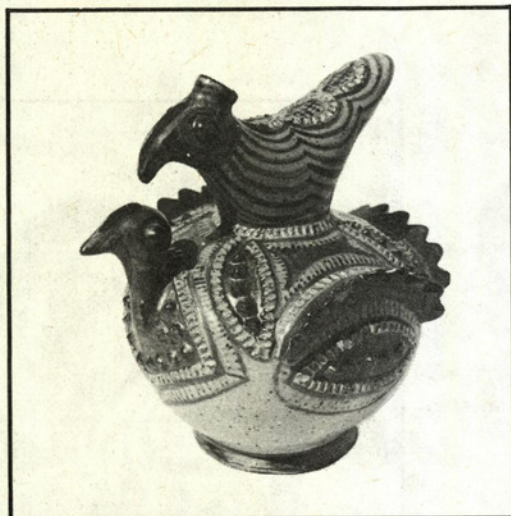
Marion Griffin "Woman"



Mary Shabalala Gordon Mbatha
 "People who stay on White Farmers' Property become Slaves"



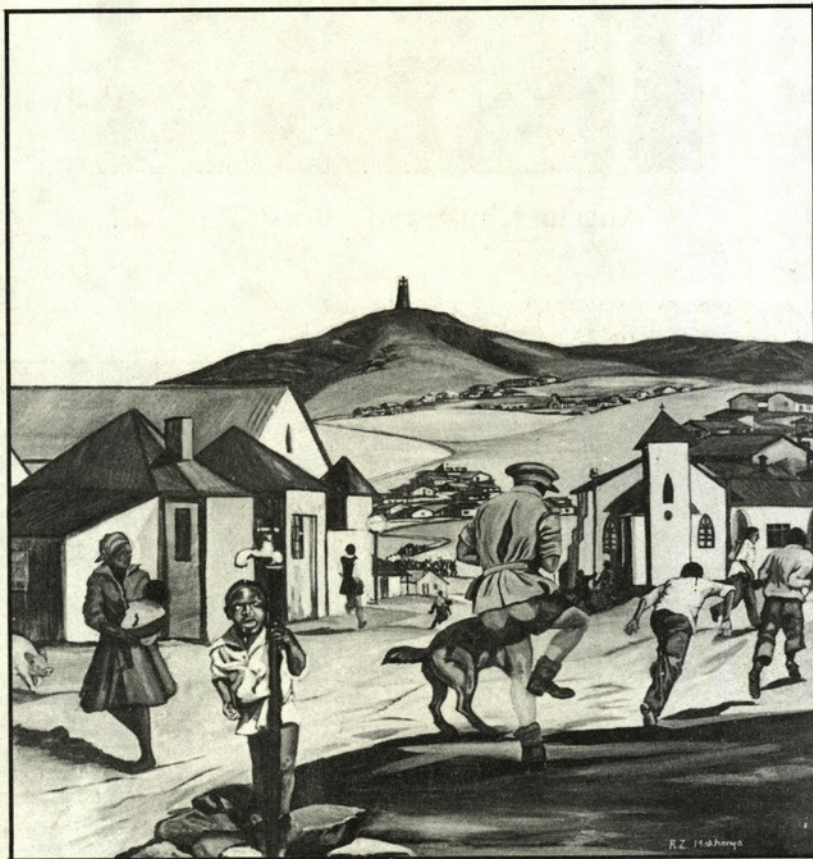
Leonard Clarke "Passover"



Euriel Mbatha "Untitled"



Scotch Matebula
"Hunting Man"



Zamani Makhanya
"Give me a Chance"



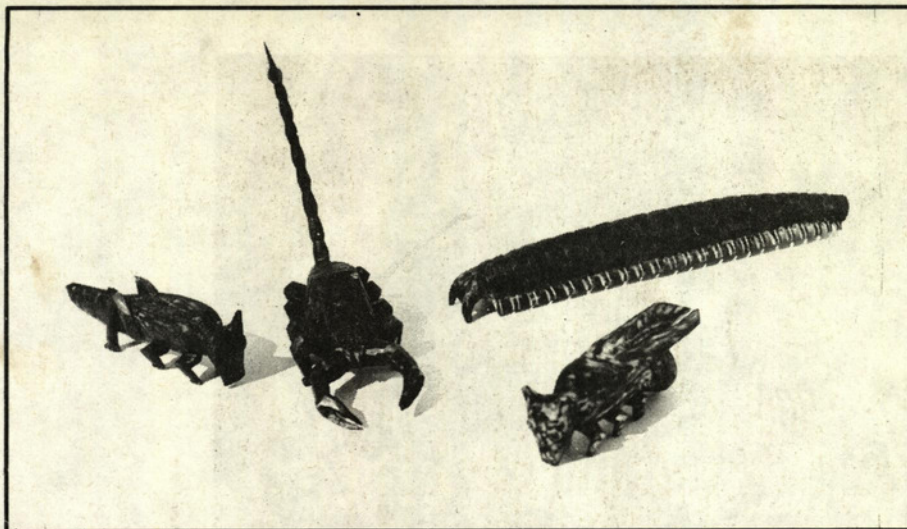
John Clarke "Acropolis"



Suzette Grobbelaar
"Plantasia Reeks V"



Lionel Murcott
"Self Portrait"



Beki Myeni
"Grasshopper, Scorpion, Centipede, Bee"



Irene Nene
"Isichumo"



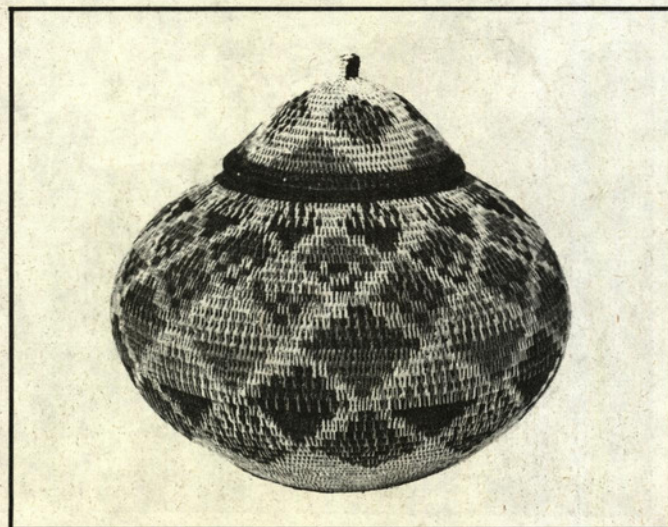
Norah Mangele "Isichumo"



Jesse Mdluli "Ukhamba"



Thandi Mangele "Ukhamba"



Elijah Mhlongo "Ukhamba"