

## REHABILITATION

# NEGLECTED TRADITION

## SELBY MVUSI (1929 – 1967)

Extracts from writings by Elza Miles, compiled by Sandy Shoolman.

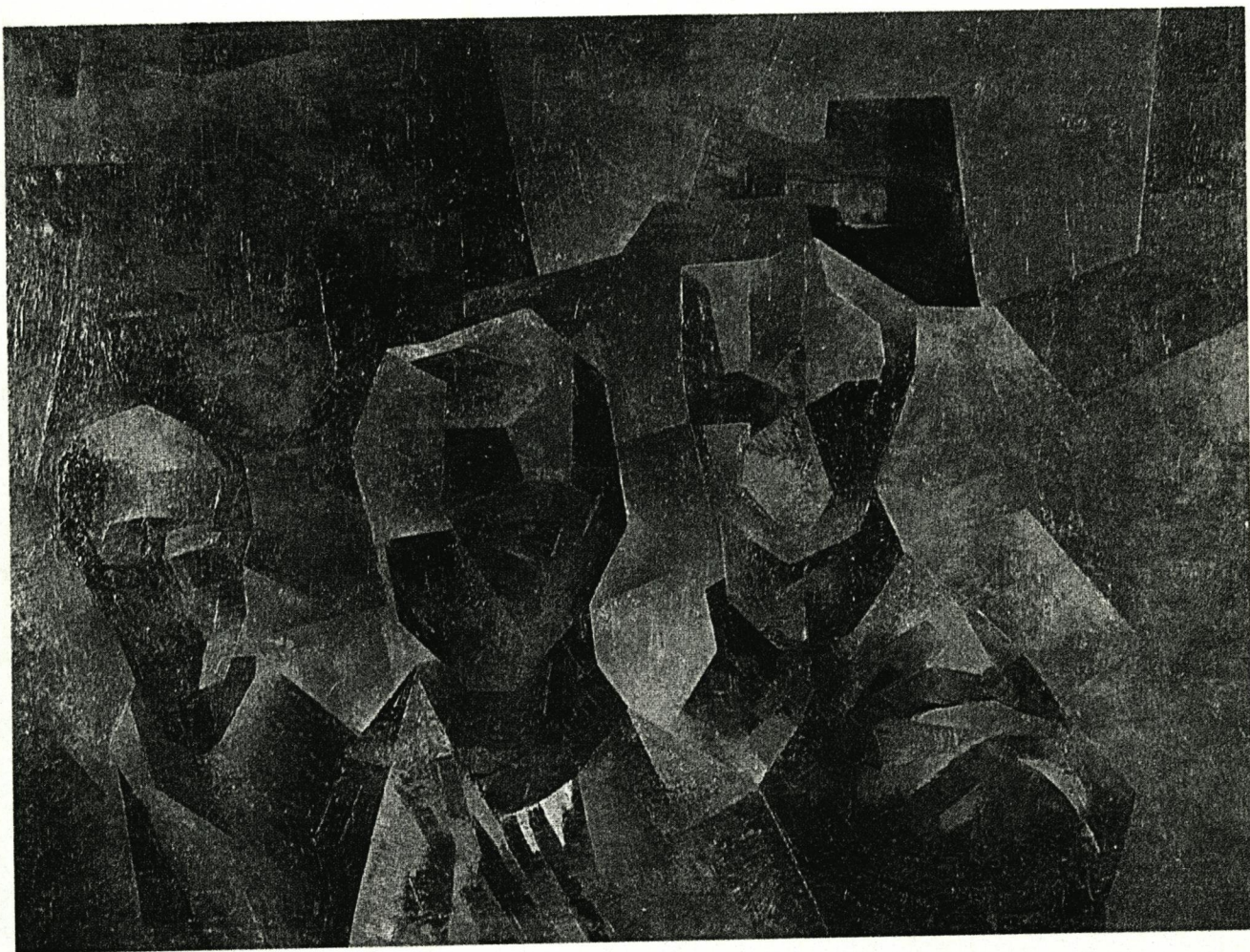


To those who would ask:  
What does your art mean?  
To them I say  
It means that I am an African  
What that means  
I do not know  
But what that is  
I know  
because  
I am  
– Selby Mvusi

**A** retrospective exhibition of the work of Selby Mvusi, made possible by Nedbank, will open at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in February 1996. This will be the third exhibition presented by the Gallery on neglected major artists of this country. The first exhibition showed the work of Gerard Sekoto (1989) and the second, Ernest Mancoba (1994).

Selby Mvusi, a South African artist and academic, was killed in the prime of his life in a motor car accident. The accident occurred in Kenya where Mvusi was teaching Industrial Design at the University College of Nairobi. Although he died in exile, his remains were buried at his ancestral home in Umzimkulu near Ixopo in Natal.





**Opposite:** Mvusi, Selby, *Magogo Singing*, 1955. Mixed media on paper; 36,5 x 45,5. Collection: Ms Cecilia Pienaar, Gardens. Photographer: Kathy Gründlingh, 1995.

**Above:** Mvusi, Selby, *Measure of the city*, 1962. Oil on canvas; 79,5 x 106. Collection: Mrs L. Mvusi. Photographer: Wayne Oosthuizen, 1995.

Selby Mvusi obtained a BA from the University of Fort Hare, a UCD from Rhodes University and a BFA from the University of South Africa. In 1957 he received a grant of 5 000 dollars from the Ella Lymam Cabot Trust. The prize money enabled him to study in America, where he obtained masters degrees in Education and Fine Arts from Penn State University and Boston University, respectively.

In 1960, en route to Zimbabwe, he visited South Africa for two weeks to unite with his family. Events like the Sharpeville massacre, subsequent bannings and the political situation led to his decision not to settle in South Africa. A period of teaching in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Kenya ensued and he became part of the African Diaspora, a dilemma reflected in his art.

With the exception of his art being selected for the art exhibition *Interfaith* held at the Durban Art Gallery in 1965, Selby was soon forgotten after he left South Africa. Furthermore, being a self-imposed exile until his death contributed to his estrangement from the country of his birth. Selby Mvusi's art was brought back into focus in

1989 when his sculpture *The high priest* was selected for the exhibition *Images of Wood: Aspects of the History of Sculpture in 20th-Century South Africa* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Being exposed to a variety of styles, it was inevitable that Selby's early work was eclectic. On the one hand his art was conventional. It represented the natural appearance of people, objects and landscapes. On the other hand it explored the possibilities of expressionism and cubism. Selby distorted natural proportions in his woodcuts to convey human emotions like disagreement, compassion and pain. These pieces are similar to German Expressionism. Then again, his carefully constructed portraits and figure compositions based on angular shapes recall the cubism that was practised at the time by South African painters.

After his move to the United States of America, Selby was exposed to the American art scene and the shift of interest from Paris to New York that occurred after World War 2. This is in contrast to the influences on Ernest Mancoba (born 1904) and Gerard Sekoto (1913 – 93)



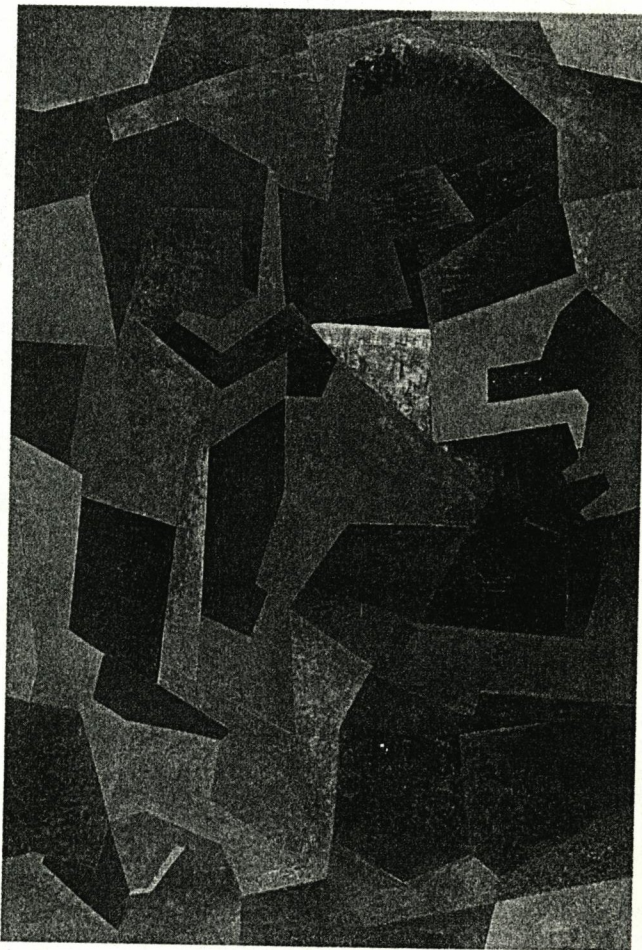
who worked in Paris for most of their lives. Though Abstract Expressionism as explored by Jackson Pollock (1912 – 56) was setting the pace for many young artists in America at the time, Mvusi explored a more lyrical and internalised version of it as we can see in his painting *The image of the city* (1959). The mood he captured established him as a high innovative artist.

There are other international influences in Selby's art, such as that of Vorticism, the English movement which tried to reconcile humanity and technology. The movement lasted from 1912 – 1915 and was similar to Futurism in Italy in that it used technology and abstracted the forms of machines and buildings into flat shapes organised in concentric circles to imitate the pull of a vortex. *Measure of the City* (1962) shows his very personal interpretation of Vorticism.

Selby Mvusi was frequently invited to participate at UNESCO conferences. His writings on industrial design for low income and developing countries are still relevant as well as his observations about the "the things we buy" and the function of design and art in everyday life.

Selby Mvusi left behind him an extensive and fascinating collection of academic papers, poems and artworks. His belief: "Artists are never apart or divorced from the people" applies to his own paintings, drawings, graphic prints, sculpture and poetry, which explore the human condition and, like a premonition, his last drawing of 1967 shows the face of a woman weeping.

A catalogue written by Elza Miles and published by the Johannesburg Art Gallery will accompany *Selby Mvusi: A Retrospective Exhibition*. V



**Above:** Mvusi, Selby, *Abstract III / Untitled (c)*, 1962. Oil on board; 78,2 x 119. Collection: Mrs L. Mvusi. Photographer: Wayne Oosthuizen, 1995.



**Left:** Mvusi, Selby. *Family in Cato Manor*, 1954. ink and watercolour on paper; 25 x 33. Collection: Wolfgang Bodenstein, Pretoria. Photographer: Wayne Oosthuizen, 1995.