

INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat

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Sunday Times

Jg..... Nr..... P. 39 Dat. 28 OCT 1990

Charlotte Firbank-King took 18 months to paint 126 eight-centimetre figures in this work of art that records Africa's history and heritage

Mark's concern for the preservation of black Africa is almost obsessive. "Black history has never been written down. It's passed through families in stories and song. We absolutely have to have some record of all this before it disappears. How many white South Africans know where the Ndebele come from — or anything at all about their traditions? The map is the beginning of a campaign to harness the past in an acceptable form — a form that could even be used by our education systems."

There were some interesting incidents on the research trail. "Often there are reasons for not talking about belief systems. Most of them are spiritually based. We went to see some Ndaun women. One still had an old ceremonial costume, and reluctantly she put it on for us to photograph. Suddenly she seemed possessed and fell on the floor, writhing in apparent agony. She spoke in a child's voice. It seems she'd been possessed by the spirit of her dead daughter. We were told ceremonial robes are not to be worn. They belong to the ancestors."

"Another time I was driving around in a highly inappropriate sports car. I was looking for the Himba. Oh, and incidentally," continues our mine of information, "the Himba never bath. They rub their bodies with ochre and fat. They have the most stunning complexions. Maybe some cosmetic house should take note of that."

Anyway, there I was in my sports car, in the middle of a desert, with a very rural Himba warrior sitting next to me showing me the way. Dire Straits was blaring forth into the wilderness.

And out of the trees staggered a huge army of British UN guys, completely lost and wanting ME to show them the way. Maybe you had to be there, but I found that hilarious."

After trekking round the continent, paying his respects to tribal lords and wading through the limited available archives, Mark would compile a list of details relevant to a particular tribe. Together with any photographs he'd managed to find or take, he'd assemble the information for Charlotte. She would paint an appropriate figure over

and over until it was deemed accurate. Then she'd add it to her map.

"We had as many experts as we could find to check the figure first," Charlotte sighs heavily. "And when we were as sure as we could be, we'd go with it. We've also had people checking the final product and the criticisms thus far have been negligible."

The question now is what to do with a painting the size of the average room. Mark has it all worked out. "It's no use as an educational tool if there's only one available. So we're making a limited number of prints and selling them together with an information sheet and a couple of other smaller drawings. The original will probably be auctioned. We've agreed to donate 25 per cent of the profits to an educational charity. Any remaining money will be used for our next project."

Mark's in a rush. He's in a rush to get out of Johannesburg and back to the bush. He's comfortable there. And he has work to do. And Charlotte?

"I'll go back to my painting. That's what I do. I live out in the country and paint. And I'll wait till Mark presents me with my next task." □

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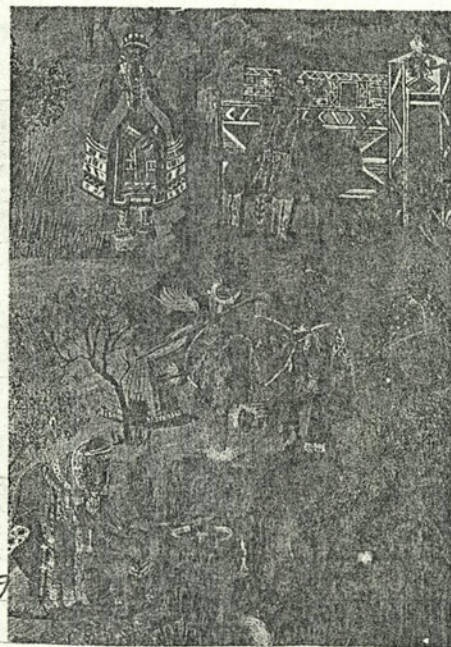
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MAPPED OUT

A nation without a history is like a man without a soul. Former game ranger Mark Valentine agrees with Seretse Khama on this, and is ensuring it won't happen here. He spoke to Linda Shaw about the preservation of our heritage in art. Andrzej Sawa took pictures



the creation of a map of Africa large enough to contain every indigenous plant, animal, fish, tribal costume and even shipwreck.

Mark spent three years looking for the right artist. He found Charlotte in

one of those organic markets. She was selling detailed wildlife paintings. Painting detail was not her problem. Research was. So Mark took on that role.

Mark's cute. He only stops talking to take breaths. And he has that boyish hyperactive enthusiasm that makes him hard to dislike. Just as well. "Getting the rural blacks to talk to you about their traditions isn't easy. I visited almost all of the tribes. Some of them still wear their traditional garb, but not many. I'm always telling people that traditional Africa is alive and well and wearing an overall. Blacks are still living the way they always have. You just have to get them to talk about it. Historically they don't trust the white man very much."

The inside of Mark Valentine's office looks like an Ndebele hut. Or some kind of hut. Unusual in Rosebank. You have to watch yourself in here. One false move and you could be stabbed through the heart by a spear. Or poked in the eye with a panga.

Today we have an extra piece of furniture. It's the hugest painting you've ever seen. It looms into the room, two metres square, depicting every known black tribe in southern Africa. And even if this kind of thing is not exactly your cup of home brew, the effect is awe-inspiring.

There are reasons for this. Most notable is that none of the 126 figures is taller than eight centimetres, and each, captured down to the last exquisite bead, has been painted under a magnifying glass.

In a corner lurks the artist, rubbing her eyes and what remains of her eyesight. Charlotte Firbank-King has devoted the past 18 months of her life to

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