

Elza - het jy die gesien? Ek was bang jy het dit dalk gesien! Liefde! Mis jou - Christine xx

NEWS FEATURE *Sekoto, the late South African painter, is celebrated at prestigious festival*

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“I SO WISHED YOU were here at the house to look at these autumn leaves of various colours as they fly away down to the ground and lay a carpet that we often feel ashamed to tread upon. It is so varyingly delightful to look at ...”

I find this quote from Barbara Lindop’s part biography, part catalogue on Gerard Sekoto enchantingly quaint and fresh. It captures part of the spirit, if you like, behind this extraordinary man’s genius.

Professor E’skia Mphahlele, scholar, novelist, poet, artist and friend of Sekoto, when he opened an exhibition of his works clothed his elegant message this way:

“What stands out also...is Gerard’s restlessness and search for modes of self-expression in the graphic arts. The beginnings are clear of what was to become an odyssey into our present time: a journey characterised by the sheer blistering effort to survive, by the passion to find a mode of self-definition. There was Sophiatown, District Six: there is France — the T-junction, as it were.

“There is something in Gerard’s odyssey that reads like so many accounts of the lives of exiles in Europe, seeking cultural anchorage...”

Before I express my personal views on the poignancy of internal and external exile — what Mphahlele somewhere else, I think, describes as the tyranny of time and space — permit me to say something about Sekoto’s peculiar writing style. There is something arresting in the manner in which this black South African, who had virtually become a Frenchman, stumbles over the English language.

Very few English writers would give such an evocative description to a pastoral scene “so varyingly delightful to look at” as Sekoto does.

Childlike innocence

The syntax is charmingly ungrammatical, stumbling along in fresh childlike innocence. It is also powerfully descriptive. This almost illusory, delightfully awkward nuance between his writing and paintings describes the artist’s life, and the story of exile. It is unintentional, leading to a kind of slip that juxtapositions the two art forms.

This enchanting example of the French-like English comes from the same letter to Barbara Lindop. It says:

“I am suffering to imagine that you are anxiously awaiting a reply from me.

“Do please forgive me for the prolongation of time...I so wished you were here at the house to look at these autumn leaves of varying colours as they fly away down to the ground and lay a carpet that we often feel ashamed to tread upon. It is so varyingly delightful to look at.”

The Sekoto journeys in South Africa, in Africa and abroad are as interesting as the lives of most famous artists tend to be.

Alienated men

South Africans of all races have been through one form or the other of internal and external exile.

Without putting too fine a point on it, all disadvantaged people have lived in the wilderness of an internal exile made only bearable by the fact of their having the fatherland firmly under their feet.

The laws of apartheid alienated men, women and children in various crude forms, from various forms of house arrest, bannings, banishments and the extraordinary creation of camps called homelands.

Most of us have relatives who died in exile after leaving or being forced to leave their homes.

The ravages of life in exile, even in Africa, are deep and lasting. Most of those who left did not have the will, perhaps, or even the courage to do what Professor Mphahlele did. He just came back, long before February 1990.

Deathly frightened

There are musicians in London, as we speak, who left with my brother Sol Klaaste, in the jazz opera King Kong, who are deathly frightened of coming home. It is so tragic that it seems for my brother to have shuffled off this mortal coil in London years ago. He would have been like those elderly musicians, perhaps like Sekoto before he died; torn between the desire to set their eyes, if only fleetingly, on the motherland but terrified of making the move.

It is fitting for these works to be displayed at this famous festival. When *Sowetan* bought the Sekoto sketches we had hoped to give them a home that would become part of the new Jerusalem we are all yearning for.

We had also hoped that these works would be freighted around the country, so that the children see them, enjoy them, experience them and perhaps learn from them. It is our wish that, conditions allowing, we would be able to show the works at schools and universities in all parts of the country.

They tell in ways that are accessible to non-fundis of the discipline like myself, the social history of some of the most important parts of South Africa. They touch on the rural areas of the Northern Transvaal, where Gerard did his early schooling — a geo-historical part of South Africa that still sees the dying apartheid horse frantically kicking — to Sophiatown, which has as colourful a history as the next stop on the odyssey, District Six.

Part of the journey includes Eastwood township, placed handily for this story in another stronghold of apartheid, Pretoria.

There are many people to be thanked for this posthumous exhibition.

Requiem for a genius

Sowetan Editor Aggrey Klaaste today opens the Gerard Sekoto exhibition at the Grahamamstown Festival. This is his address:

mous honour to this South African artist. To single out Professor Chabani Manganyi and Barbara Lindop is not in any way disregarding the significant roles played by scores of scholars and ordinary folk in South Africa, in the continent and

in Europe, who made this man’s last few years deservedly comfortable. This is the type of ending experienced countless times by some of the most renowned artists throughout the ages. Recognition comes late, or too late.



Gerard Sekoto

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