

dd RARD BHENGU_ (1910-

Bhengu was born in 1910 at Centecow Mission, near Creighton in Natal. No one in his family is recorded as being interested in art, although his father, a farm worker at the mission, was interested in music. Bhengu's childhood artistic activities included modelling clay animals and dealing in chakceer, images on the walls of the family dwelling. He was educated at the Roman Catholic Mission School of Esibomvuini (Esibomvwini) at Centecow, Creighton. In 1925, aged fifteen, Bhengu left school with a Standard V certificate, in order to assist his mother

financially.

Unique amongst the artists discussed in this chapter, Bhengu's career has been regularly aided by white patrons, which has afforded him the opportunity of working as a full-time artist

His career began in 1926, assisted by Dr Max Kohler, a German doctor; later patrons and sponsors included Bishop Fleischer of Ixopo Mariannahill Mission in 1932; Dr D. McMalcolm and S. Dent from 1934 to 1937; and Dr Killie Campbell from 1942. Bhengu also executed a commission in 1959 for a black herbalist Edward Gwazindoda Tembe. Although the motives of his patrons have been at variance, the interest taken in Bhengu's work reflected a genuine regard for his talent in depicting scenes from tribal

life, together with a view to exploiting his works for sale to a white market.

In 1920, Bhengu met Dr Max Kohler at Ixopo Seminary during treatment for tuberculosis . He offered the doctor drawings in return for medical treatment. Kohler recognising his talent employed him from 1926 to 1931 primarily to illustrate the history and customs of the Xhosa Bhaca tribe. Kohler who was researching rural African customs, including traditional medical and healing practices, was also interested in demonstrating to colleagues in Europe that an 'African' from the 'bush' was capable of producing art works which, by European standards, could be regarded as 'art'. Kohler was responsible in this regard, for encouraging naturalism in Bhengu's drawing and painting style. He provided him with reproductions of European old masters, paintings of madonnas, and European landscape scenes. He also exposed Bhengu to a variety of commercially reproduced prints such as magazine advertisements*.

K.Schlosser records how Bhengu learnt to modulate flesh tones by copying faces on Quaker oats cartons, a technique later applied to black portraits. These formative years in Bhengu's career undoubtedly had a strong impact on his understanding of two-dimensional representation, especially in his naturalistic treatment of the human figure, later referred to by E. J. de Jager as photographic in quality. De Jager also regards Bhengu's style as "completely unspoiled by the influence of any contemporary trends in art", yet these very European influences determined the illustrative and photographic tendency in his work. Bhengu's style of drawing figures and faces is reminiscent

of late 1920's and 1930's Western poster and advertising styles.

While working for Kohler, Bhengu produced three self-portraits which Schlosser sees as significant of the artist's personal cognition of a shift from rural to urban identity. In Self Portrait (Plate 3.2 a) dated 1927, Bhengu depicts himself standing in front of a rural landscape, dressed in smart white shorts, shirt, striped jacket, and hat. In his hand he shows a drawing he is working on, of a woman in tribal dress, carrying a traditional water pot on her head. The artist stands against a dark, threatening mountain range which separates him from a small, distant rural village. The painting reveals Bhengu's pride in being an artist and an urban black youth. His painting technique is still naive but there is an attempt at clarity of form and naturalism. In a second self portrait Bhengu is depicted as a Zither Player, dressed as an urban man, with buckled belt and wrist watch, while a third self portrait depicts the artist as a strolling musician, in patched clothing. Schlosser suggests that the first of these two portraits indicates Bhengu's success in urban society, and the second is symbolic of the disillusionment he suffered during his years of unemployment between 1937 and 1942.

In 1932 Bhengu left the employment of Kohler, and went to work for Bishop Fleischer at Ixopo, Marionhill. Fleischer commissioned a series of paintings of scenes from the Bible in the style of Italian masters. However, Bhengu was dismissed in the same year reputedly for socializing instead of working*:-,

From 1934 to 1937, Bhengu studied at Edendale Training College, Edendale, under the sponsorship of Dr. D. M. McMalcolm, Chief

Inspector of Native Education, Natal, and S. R. Dent the District

80

ar te ennai eS 8 Na eiliine & ee i Vea. i reeam a ae es Fests iy ede

Inspector of Native Education, Natal. He received a general education, but no art training as it was felt that this might corrupt his unsophisticated style. Bhengu's pictures were sold in payment for his education, board and lodging, with a percentage of the money placed in the artist's savings account. Works of this period include illustrations for school text books, and for

Rolfe Dhlomo's book, Izikhali Zanamuhla³⁵.

In 1936 Bhengu was commissioned to paint a mural frieze commemorating black development from village to university as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Department of Native Affairs, in Johannesburg. Despite encouragement from Dhlomo, Bhengu seems to have been unable to cope with the project and was eventually dismissed by the two inspectors for failing to

finish the mural. He returned to Natal*.

In 1942 Dr Killie Campbell commissioned four large paintings from Bhengu, entitled, Feast of The First Fruit, for her private museum in Durban. Only two were completed: Bhaca women singing and dancing at First Fruit Ceremony and Driving the bull into the homestead (Also called Catching the Bull) (Plates 3.2a.a/b)³. However Dr Campbell continued to support Bhengu, and in the same year organized a mural commission for the recreation room of the black volunteer recruits of World War II in the Wesleyan

pin

Methodist Institute, Grey Street, Durban. Collectively titled

gg eeneeeeeecrt eee ea Tn nen sereneensatentemamaeeenst

[Walcone Soldiers; Rest A While, the murals are recorded by

Campbell as being the artist's finest works, despite the rapid

deterioration in paint quality which left Schlosser unimpressed

in 1953 and 1959³⁸. The works no longer exist and apart from the

description given by Schlosser in 1971⁵⁹ and incomplete

photographic reproductions in the Killie Campbell Museum in Durban, there is no documentation of this work. A complete

analysis of the ten murals is not possible here, but a brief description follows.

The paintings can/be divided into two groups of five: numbers 1 to 5 consist of scenes from rural black life combined with allegorical depictions of political and divine personages, including Hitler, Mussolini, angels and devils, and Zulu ancestor spirits; paintings number 6 to 10 depict scenes from black rural and urban life. All the paintings are illustrative with attention to naturalistic details and vary in size from between 60cm-115cm in height, and 89cm-160cm in length. The scenes are set in panoramic landscapes with large expanses of sky and land, animated by small, black figures (Plates 3.3 & 3.4). The works' didactic purpose is established by the depiction of divine beings, who serve as messengers to the earthly dwellers. Of the various interpretations of the murals' overall narrative, (the original images being dictated in part to Bhengu by a white Officer named Hulley) reference is made to a rebirth of the Zulu nation, which Bhengu claims came to him in a vision. The Zulu nation is placed on a par with the other great nations: allied against Germany and Italy in World War II, as shown in painting 3 entitled Umkosi Wenkosi Yamakosi, (Proclamation of the Paramount Chiefs). England and Zululand are depicted together in the left section of the painting, while Germany, Italy, and the Japanese are placed in the right half. An angel moves towards the gaudily coloured faces of Hitler, Mussolini and a Japanese soldier,

pointing a sword towards a high tower on which is a shattered

Swastika. According to Bhengu the angel destroys the power of Germany and her allies. The propoganda in this painting speaks for itself; the power and salvation of the Zulu nation requires its participation in the war. The Church will assist England and her allies, which are "good" as opposed to the "evil" Germany. Paintings 1;4;8 and 9 convey a secondary theme of the affects of Western influences on Africa, (in this case Zululand). The corruption of money, Western clothing styles, and alcohol, are contrasted with the beneficial Church, medical-care services, and

technological aids such as ploughs and motor-cars*!-,

It is clear that by 1942 Bhengu was confident in depicting the human form in a variety of positions, demonstrated by the charcoal and water-colour illustrations for Kohler's ethnological surveys, (published circa 1941-2), entitled Marriage Customs in Southern Natal and The Isangoma Diviner and by the paintings for the Grey Street murals*- . Bhengu's use of charcoal is particularly effective in graphic descriptions of Zulu healing practices, and in depictions of mythological creatures from traditional folklore, for example uTokoloshe, and uMthakathi feeding and riding his familiar baboon in The Isangoma Diviner.

(Plates 3.5 & 3.6)

His illustrative and imaginative skill was taken further in one of the two billboard advertisements made for the Tsonga herbalist E. G. Tembe in 1959,) showing scenes from the life of the famed Tsonga neubaliet mahal Made, | to whom Tembe claimed to be related. The great izinyanga (healer) is depicted surrounded by real and fictitious wild animals, in a wooded landscape where he

demonstrates his ability to bewitch lightning. The lightning

Magically assumes the shape of a large green and yellow anthropomorphic snake, through which Made controls all animal and

â\200\224â\200\224â\200\224

human life (Plate 3.7)43-

From 1940 until 1959 Bhengu worked for the firm Payne Brothers in Durban, where he became something of a living artistic exhibit-. In 1951 a window poster which advertised him as the companyâ\200\231s resident artist read, "Visit the Exhibition of paintings and see the celebrated Zulu Artist"â\200\23045-. During these years Bhengu produced popular portraits of tribal Zulu men and women for sale to a tourist market. The above advertisement was surrounded by examples of his sepia wash portraits of black men and women in tribal dress. (Plates 3.8 & 3.9). From this point onwards Bhenguâ\200\231s work diminished in originality, with portrait motifs being repeated with only slight variations of detail, such as

necklaces, animal-skin clothing, tribal headrings and hair
ae

styles. Bhengu adopted(a formula for depicting the â\200\231Zuluâ\200\231 which

like the tourist attraction the â\200\230Zulu rickshaw boyâ\200\231, catered

for the exotic expectations of European visitors to South Africa in the 1940â\200\231s and 1950â\200\231s. To this end there is a certain sentimentality in Bhenguâ\200\231s work and in its appreciation:

"His human studies, specially portraits reveal an exceptional understanding of his people, and humanity in general. Portraying virtually every human quality. There is the sincerity of the child in his children's studies; the vitality, mischief, humour and even arrogance of his young girls and boys; joie de vivre, maternal love, sacrifice, faith and despair, humour and pride which radiate from his adult portraits." (de Jager 1975:)-

Bhengu is cited by Dhlomoâ\200\230â\200\231?- as victim of what he calls that

â\200\230insidious doctrineâ\200\231 whereby he, like other black artists pies

a

encouraged to be as â\200\230naturalâ\200\231 as possible, an attitude which has

done all the more damage to black art because the "protagonists

of this pernicious doctrine are the so-called friends of the African." To this end the ethnocentric idea of a natural African genius reveals similarities of distortion to that of the commercial value placed on black art as pointed out by G.Younge :

"In South Africa ..." commercialism "...takes on an extra dimension, in that economic exploitation of black artists is justified on the grounds of the supposed inferiority of African culture (note for instance the derogatory nuance in the term 'primitive'). This leads to the promotion of forms of black art oriented towards 'ethnic' and 'tribal' standards." (1979) *-

(See Plates 3.2 - 3.9).

A list of exhibitions and commissions of Bhengu's work is as follows:

Exhibitions

1940-1959 Exhibitions at Payne Brothers Department Store, Durban.

. .

CP ge 9 lg 7
Sete tila iS

ca.1934-36 Illustrations for Izikhali Zanamuhla by Rolfe Dhlomo.

1936 Mural freize for 50th anniversary celebrations of Department of Native Affairs in Johannesburg. (never completed).

ca.1940-42 Illustrations for Marriage Customs in Southern Natal and The Isangoma Diviner by Dr.M.Kohler.

ca.1942 Four Feast of first fruits pictures commissioned by Killie-Campbell (2 completed).

1942 Frieze of 10 murals in the recreation room for black volunteer recruits at the Wesleyan Methodist Institute in Grey Street, Durban (commission organised by Killie-Campbell).

1959 Billboards commissioned by E.G.Tembe (Herbalist) (2 completed).

Collections

Africana Museum, Johannesburg; The Campbell Collections of the University of Natal, Durban; University of Fort Hare, Alicea-.