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A South African artist

« The cruel hand that does shatter happiness and hopes of the neighbour may be the result of a pronounced selfishness, while this selfishness be the result of lack in self confidence ; and the latter happens to be a great defect, that may cripple — the virtue of the human mind which is : — Creative Art. »

Gentlemen,

As you have asked me in your last letter to contribute my thoughts in the congress of Negro Artists and Writers by having to tell in short of the difficulties confronting a South African Negro in Art, I gladly take up this opportunity to show you the picture of the situation as I personally see it and as I have personally experienced it.

Let me therefore begin my letter by laying a stress on the fact that I am writing this not as a politician but as an artist as I have given my whole living in art.

Unfortunately as a result of some political activities, the freedom I should expect from my community (as a South African citizen) is so narrow that often my creative powers feel deprived ; for I personally think ; — « as « creative art » is an interior human language, it is in « creative art » that we feel the truth, and therefore it is « creative art » that is the dignity and pride of the human mind ».

Every living community is conscious of this dignity, and therefore always leaves wide open spaces for its artists to prove it.

A community that denies its artists this freedom has failed to realise its true pride, and so may go on searching for ephemeral material values which too finally fail to build up « dignity » for the mind.

In my country unhappily this freedom is not evenly granted to artists of all races ; for, those belonging to the white skin have almost all the liberty they may desire, those of the less white skin (mixed blood) have according to the look of their colour, much less room to roam in, but the plain black ones have almost no room at all !

Any member of the community belonging to the two latter groups is refused admission in all the Art schools, and no social gathering of the white group would tolerate his presence !

This is the law of the country !

As we know that creative art is opposed to this law of grading human beings by order of their colour skin, the Negro artist therefore feels often deprived of his rights as a full citizen to contribute

in art towards the pride and dignity of his country in which he is made an outcast.

It could be proved in many ways that Art does not accept the colour line.

In my case personally, for instance, I have seen on many occasions pure white members of the community — artists or art loving people, sneak out of bounds laid out by the law to meet me halfway so as to exchange views on this interior human language which is the pride and dignity of all mankind.

It happened at one time that I left from one small town where I worked as a school teacher for little children (little Negroes of course) and went to the biggest city in my country — Johannesburg, where during my first few weeks I was introduced to a white young lady artist.

Judith Gueldin This happened in the office room of an English school master (belonging to the community of Resurrection in the Anglican church) who directed a Negro boarding school, and who soon became an enthusiastic admirer of my paintings.

This young lady artist was also very interested in my work in so much that she immediately offered to show me how to use oil colours, as I had no chance at all to learn at the Art schools, for they only would admit but purely white students.

Although I felt happy about her kindness, but I very reluctantly accepted this offer and went to her studio two or three times a week.

During this time I had to sneak in and out like a frightened wild animal for I know just how serious an offence it was before the law, in fact a crime, for a Negro to visit a purely white lady: No matter where, how or why!

She too, of course knew how serious it was but nevertheless, none of us made mention of it. At the time, I just couldn't understand why she was so colour blind, yet now I know that Art is an interior human language and accepts no colour bar.

These days I can look back and remember her with my great appreciation for her kindness. She was so sweet as even to feed me during lunch time, on the days we were working together in her studio. But as she had the obligation to join her family during this hour, she'd therefore arrange that the Negro servant brings me a very sumptuous meal on a tray all neatly laid out.

My first experience of this big lack was like a real « bolt from blues » insomuch that very surprisingly, even my habitual keen appetite had let me down!

As I become more and more restless of these unlawful frequentations, I therefore decided they came to an end, but did not say out my real trouble for fear she may insist on my continuation. So I had to make an excuse that it was time I went to work in my native location, to be on the scene of my subject matter. I had somehow to get away from it all, for I knew — « should the law ever catch me here trying to be smart, then not a single person on earth could take its teeth away from my throat ».

I therefore left and went to my lawfully area — the native location, where I belonged.

One of the many illustrations (in my personal cases) to prove that art accepts no colour bar, is of a case when one day in the office room of the English master (at the Negro Boarding

School) I was introduced to a white young man artist who had studied for sometime here in Paris. He too took liking in my paintings and spoke to me in a tone that surprised me then, for he spoke as a human being talking to another. Not as a white Boer talking to a Negro and imposing his superiority upon the inferiority of a Negro, as though he knew all about *standard mind*!

As I knew that in the teaching job my spare time was too little for the amount of work I had in mind, then I thought of looking for another type of a job that would at least leave me my evenings free.

This time I thought it might have been simple and instructive too if I struck upon one as a floor cleaner in the municipal Art Gallery; but to my very greatest dismay I was told that Negroes were prohibited from cleaning the floors of this gallery. (Happily now very recently, I have just learned that this ban has been lifted!) so the result may mean a happy evening for a hungry Negro artist!

One of my illustrations showing that the colour bar bears an unfounded logic in art is a case of when my English master friend (at the Negro Boarding School) took with him one day two of my paintings to be judged by a hanging committee of the annual South African Art Exhibition, these two paintings were (very surprisingly to me) accepted and after the opening of this show, were even very attractively reproduced in the daily newspapers worded: < This a striking painting by a native house boy >.

This filled me with great excitement, although I did not believe in the last two words — < house boy > for I has just failed to pass as a floor sweeper in the municipal art gallery. But all the same I felt that things were moving, for, these two pieces were even bought by white people (of course) and my great delight at this was by far higher than the price I received for the two paintings.

I was still warm as a result of this big happening, for it was the first of its kind in the history of South Africa, when one day I received a letter from one of the few art authorities inviting me to send in two other pieces of my work to another exhibition of a small-group of which he was the director.

On my receiving this letter I could not have expected greater happiness in life for I thought that — after all I did not need any more feel guilty of being in this world; but this illusion was soon interrupted by frequent unhappy scenes and various obstacles in my way: for < Here I am in this big golden city of Johannesburg, where the tall beautiful buildings go high in the sky; Down there accross the road I can see a group of Negroes on the go!... Look, as they go with those hands in those chains! and behind goes a white man with pride! In a black helmet, sparkling buttons and a gun by his side!...

Around that corner over there — awaits a white policeman's van:

Into that van each Negro Goes,
They pushed, And 'Bang'
They closed that door!
While ev'ry hand in all those chains
Still had remained
Oh,
What a shame!...?

Now they go to jail for they've failed to produce a complete series of their identification papers!?

What does all this mean? Is ev'ry one of those men a criminal?... Perhaps!!!?

Scenes of this nature were very common, so that I later on just learned to be stubborn and refused to let a drop of fear go from my eyes.

However, I felt that my works of art were so far being appreciated by handful of white artists and art loving people. But still I lived in a constant fear. What aggravated my fears was the fact my papers too were not a job — this being the only way to get them all up-to-date.

Somehow, very fortunately I was saved from many dark and ugly situations by one of my old papers, which identified me as a school teacher. But this did not always satisfy the man in the black helmet, for the paper showed I was a school teacher else where not in Johannesburg.

So I had always to make up a little story — that I had come all in a hurry to see the sick and am going back the same evening to where I belonged!

It was through the help of my English friend (the school master) that this obstacle was finally cleared off. As one of this teachers had fallen ill in the hospital, he therefore appointed me to replace this member of the staff. Here once more, I had to teach the little children, and within a month and two weeks the teacher had recovered, and I had to go; but with a brand new pass in my pocket — < I felt I was walking on air! Now I can be able to renew even my annual papers too, and can go all the streets up and down looking for a job. This is real life now, I am a free man and an accepted artist too! >

It was two days after my service at the school had come to an end, that I was going up one street, still looking around for a job, but full of confidence and free from fear of the man in the black helmet, when I noticed outside one of the building, a poster showing that inside there was an exhibition of paintings going on. I as a painter was naturally attracted to go in and see what other painters do. So following the direction of the arrows I walked up the stairs to the second floor, turning to my right — here I could see already from outside, huge portraits of women in long beautiful dresses, some were even holding bunches of roses to give the finishing touches to their charm. This time I had already taken my hat off and my right foot into the hall when suddenly a man came rushing at me vigorously shaking the inside of his one hand in my face and pointing emphatically with the other to the direction I came from!

All this had taken me by surprise just like a car accident and I was so flabbergasted that I did not even have time to dare say I was an artist myself.

Back to the street I had to go with my head full of confusion once more and this time even less confident to walk into the bureau of the boss with my hat in the hand pleading for a job.

A few hours later on the same day as I was standing on the pavement trying to think what way I should take, as I had done almost all the buildings of the area; across the street I notice, the policeman, in the usual black helmet who was beckoning me to

his side. But, as I was not particularly enthusiastic to meet his acquaintance, I rushed hesitatingly, dodging the traffic. When I finally got to the spot he was standing, I had my brand new papers all ready in my one hand with my hat in the other, and my knees slightly shivering before him, just like an amateur entertainer with a stage fright!

After carefully looking through each paper he then commanded me to go on, and not just stand on one spot.

At this I was for a moment dazzled as I had just been trying to work out my next direction; however, I soon got out of the trance, turned quickly to the direction of my back and got away.

I felt triumphant with my new papers only after I had been perfectly sure I was completely out of his sight!

My days with the new pass papers were not as bright as all that — after all. However one afternoon I had called on my English friend and was introduced to another friend of his who owned an Art gallery. He also took interest in my paintings and even agreed to hold a small exhibition for me.

This show was so successful that I sold each of the 14 paintings at two guineas a piece — all this happening within two days. I could hardly believe myself. This joy was simply breath taking! Even the idea of a job I can leave out for a while for, I have no luck that way at all.

As I did leave it out, it was not long that a real big surprise came my way: ... < One of my paintings has been bought by the municipal Art gallery? > ... This gallery that had refused to take me as a floor cleaner, but now going to hang my paintings side by side with the works of other white artists? ... I just hope that I am not dreaming. >

Life becomes real worth living for now I can proudly walk into a paint-shop, buy my art materials, and work with new courage. for I know that there are however certain white people who are conscious of the fact that even Negroes do feel the need for this interior human language which is the virtue of the mind and a pride to any living community.

It is therefore < the law that imposes colour line, has failed to realise all its pride >.

As I had just shortly made some money now, and had bought some materials for my work, I now took the brush almost with my two hands and painted my native location street scenes: e. q. the backyards with women digging holes in the ground to bury their unlawful intoxicating drinks.

I very often would have an inspiration after a police raid was performed in these back yards by a storm of the men in the black helmets, sparkling buttons and each a gun by the side, who in their company had Negro police too! With the latter, although authorised with all the rights to arrest other Negroes, but may not lift one finger or have a say in the case of a white citizen doing something he may imagine unlawful!

This Negro police also runs short of several other qualifications e. q. the black helmet etc...! All the same he does wear a uniform but a khaki one. The hat is of a broad brim turned upwards on the one side, the buttons rather modest, but a pair of big boots with a knob at the end, and no gun by the side. However round his waist there is a tight belt with a shine of a pair of handcuffs by his side.

These raids would sometimes be concentrated mainly on the men whose papers were not all in order and would take place rather early in the mornings as the labourer leaves his home on his way to work.

On a morning like this I would try to avoid going to town (should I be in need of some materials) until the raid was thinned out; for although my papers were all in order, I hated taking part in this whole thing, moreover that one had to fall into a long line and had to wait till his turn came to be checked.

But as these operations very often lasted till noon time or very much later, I sometimes just got tough and went it through, for however round about 11.30 a.m. the queues of the unchecked ones would have grown much smaller, leaving several lines of the law offenders chained together and waiting for police vans to load them away.

Sometimes they would be marched slowly up one street and down by the other, while another group of the police is doing some little extras for the day in the back yards.

The women caught with selling their drinks or in possession, sometimes with their children on their backs, would have to join the lines. Although chains were not frequently used on women during these raids.

For my subject matter I would include scenes of little children dressed in ragged clothes, some plainly naked playing with old rusted tins. The interiors of houses where quite often families shared one room. The fruit seller and the location shops. I would also paint the Sunday parties (particularly exciting) which were generally composed of several styles of dancing, loud and gay shouts almost drowning the sing-song part of the show. Here the music would be of very piercing notes and cheerful carefree tunes too would be included.

These parties were almost free from the police disturbances, and here women of the backyards would make good business on their skokian drinks; for after the men had helped themselves to a few tins of this beverage, they would often become so happy-go-lucky and carefree that the police generally thought it rather unwise paying them regular visits on such occasions.

This was Johannesburg — the great city of gold and from day to day my inside was burning with thirst to create and to enjoy as well the creations of other Negro Artists with whom I might have exchanged ideas in Art. But in this domain I felt almost alone for the only two Negro Artists I knew, lived in areas very far apart from one another and far from mine. So I would always find it difficult to contact them as they had to search for other means of making a living.

However I had my way always opened to visit this English master friend, and to go to the art gallery which handled my works; although these two places were quite a long way from my native location, and taking a trip to any of them did not always give me the mental comfort I desired, for once more I'd meet some of those ugly scenes I had expected to see — (in spite of the fact that it was through these ugly scenes I had to earn my meagre living) but it was also through this gallery that for the first time in my life I enjoyed the freedom to see the works of other white artists and to observe their technique.

This has been of great help to me. — I just had to learn in

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the long run to ignore the attitude of certain customers that could stare at me from down upwards ; for this reason — whenever there would be an opening of a show by another artist (more especially when this was accompanied by a few drinks of the *dry wine*) I'd be in full agreement with the hint that the gallery director once casually made, quite understanding to me, of the general inconveniences in visiting a show on its first opening day.

On the whole I was feeling somehow hopeful, as now and again I'd receive a cheque to gladden my thoughts and make me forget for a while that my movements were much too limited in the country I belonged.

As time went along I left Johannesburg to live in another big town not so far away. Here I soon found a gallery to accept my work. This making an additional proof that in art the colour line is a lie, and could be a crime when it is imposed upon the minds of human beings.

During this time I met an artist of white colour who also had done his studies in Europe, and by then taking charge of a children's Art Centre (white children evidently) made friends with me and would occasionally invite me to this centre, giving me access into his studio to look up the Art magazines.

But somehow I did not feel at home, as the kids came peeping too frequently for my liking, for I regarded them as part of humanity closest to reality, and therefore could take quite freely. So I soon very politely avoided my visits, moreover that even grown-ups would come peeping in rather questionable manner!

That my friend did not get into trouble, I fail to understand up to this day!

This town was by far less hectic than Johannesburg, but the sobriety of its buildings was very pleasantly in harmony with the beauty and charm of the hills that half embraced it.

In this same town there lived my gentleman artist friend I have already mentioned meeting in Johannesburg, who spoke to me on a human level tone.

It happened that one day this friend sent an invitation card inviting me to an Art Exhibition of his works to be shown in one room of the local university.

As my friend had not hinted to me the general inconveniences of visiting a show on its first opening day, I therefore thought it just polite to <take the bull by its horns> and go, banking all my hope on the dignity of the university — but still choosing to make my visit towards the very end of the ceremony.

This movement proved quite successful, for on my arrival the house had thinned down to my satisfaction and I immediately felt cheerful when the director of the gallery (then taking care of my paintings — not so far away from this university's premises) came to say <hallo> to me, in a company of a young English lady to whom I was at the same time introduced.

As the director had come from his near-by gallery particularly to help receiving the visitors and to answer questions of prospective buyers, he soon left the young lady and I talking about the paintings.

It was not long that I noticed this young lady was exceptionally keen on exchanging ideas with me because she was new in the country.

A little later as we continued our conversation — here comes one more my director friend with one cup of tea from the students restaurant. As the cup was being handed to this young lady, she being surprised that the cup is only one, wants to know if I didn't feel for tea?

At this I promptly replied « with greatest pleasure ».

So my director friend being a gentleman, went again to the same restaurant and coming back with another cup, handed it to me and left the two of us together, for he had to go on with his work.

Now, by the look of things, this young lady and I, both are feeling fine!

As we continued our conversation on art while enjoying our very nice and stimulating drink, from the door — in rushes a white middle-aged woman almost like a flash of lightning! I had just slightly caught a glimpse of a long thin face when she was already at the other end of the room, standing face to face with my artist friend — while we were merely exposed to her back view!

Dressed up all in white and flinging her arms right and left, I quickly guessed she must have come from this restaurant of the students; and with the corner of my eye, the looks on the young lady's face made me understand that she had guessed the same, and so our conversation on Art had ended. All I heard my young neighbour say was « I'm so sorry »!

At the other end of the room, the middle-aged woman, dressed up all in white, was still going on — this time bending backwards, sideways and forward nearly hitting her forehead on the table, to mask the importance of her very urgent message!

Fortunately or unfortunately for me, from the distance I was standing, I could not overhear the wording of this heated message. For this too, I had to guess.

However, I appreciated the way this middle-aged woman respected the presence of the visitors by her efforts to restrain her voice and to swallow the words of her heated message. Not just shouting loud and breaking the ceilings; instead, concentrating more on the positive gesticulations of her limbs!

This mission was soon ended by her quick short and snappy strides towards the door as she kept her arms at an arm's length from her sides!

The director friend soon came to collect the two cups, but would not stand to explain!

I left the University room with a sad smile on my face, and was on my way back home, home to my native location where I belong!

Before going out of the town, I felt from my pockets that I was out of smoke, and so went to the next tobacco shop.

I was just going to put my foot at the entrance when suddenly before me I see the back of a young man who had already shouldered me out of his way. This was a white citizen, pompously shaking his big broad shoulders as he swaggered towards the shop's counter and very proudly yelling out words that meant: « White always in front and black always at the back ».

He performed this act so attractively that I was fully convinced he'd make a big « hit » on the stage as a clown!

So I regarded this performance as more of an entertainment

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than anything else; after my disappointment at the university — the story I'd thought all over, but only to have understood a few days later that it had been more serious than I had imagined, for on the same evening all the students had gathered together protesting strongly, as they thought is a disgrace an insult to the prestige of their university that they should start sharing their cups with Negroes!

I later felt very hurt to learn that all the blame had been thrown upon my artist friend.

Finally somehow this university rage was calmed down by one of the influential professors, who furthermore made mention that the Negro in question even made pictures himself. This professor went to say where they may see these pictures if they so desired. As a result of this some students did go, who on seeing those pictures exclaimed: « Oh, one would think that they were made by a white man? »

It is with all these varied experiences together with very many others, I would not choose to mention that I come to this conclusion:

a) While the South African Negro Artist at present has a very narrow room in which to roam, with comparatively shameful possibilities to meet his material needs,

b) a very thin chance to exchange ideas, as he is being refused in all the schools of art and social gatherings,

c) while he is being exposed from day to day to such scenes, that have taught him to close his eyes and hide his tears —

There is on the other side, the white artist and the white art loving person.

Both these do not fully enjoy the entire liberty they would have desired; for in Art:

« This colour line is just a lie
And could be a crime
When so imposed
on
Human Mind. »

I therefore look forward into the very near future, that all the inhabitants of my country, who see from day to day the same common land, living under the same climatic conditions, will soon realise that they have one common need; for

« All proud human beings are chasing the same wild goose — The Truth » which we can feel only through this one interior human language — « the creative art » which is the virtue of « the human mind ».

Gérard SEKOTO.