



Milwa Mnyaluzo "George" Pemba (1912 – 2001), *New Brighton, Port Elizabeth*, 1977, Oil on board, 56 x 80 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

A Learner Resource on the art of A Black Aesthetic: A view of South African Artists (1970 – 1990)



That's #AfricanheART

Exhibition: *A Black Aesthetic: A view of South African Artists (1970 – 1990)*
Cnr Frederick and Harrison Streets, Johannesburg
Monday to Friday 8am – 4.30pm
and Saturdays 9am – 1pm
Tel: 011 631 4467
www.standardbank.com/sponsorships

The period before the first democratic election in 1994 was filled with uncertainty for all South Africans. Many artists had left the country because of growing restrictions imposed on freedom of expression and the cultural boycott.

This exhibition focuses on the Fort Hare University Collection and highlights the vast artistic production of Black South African artists, whose works are either from this year or were working between the period of 1970 and 1990. It is not a redress of the historical exclusion of black artists from the South African art historical narrative but rather traces this artistic expression to encourage further research into the works and lives of these artists. It is thus a reconsideration of this history of Black South African artists whose works has over the years been overlooked, rarely exhibited or seen in the public domain. This exhibition seeks to interrogate what constitutes 'Black art' in South African art history. It is foundationally based on research that has already been done but somewhat fragmented and displaced in the larger narrative of South African art history. It aims to raise the question of whether there is 'a Black aesthetic'.



Gerard Jan Sekoto (1913 – 1993), *The Senegal Woman*, 1973, Oil on Board, 65 x 50 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Ernest Methuen Mancoba, (1904 – 2002), *Drawing V2*, 1993, Ink and oil pastel on paper, 21,6 x 32 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection



Selborne Charlton Sobizwa Selby – Mvusi (1929 – 1967), *Urban Africans*, 1948 Woodcut, Sheet: 49 x 60 cm, Image: 38,5 x 48 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery

The Early Black Modernists

The Early Black Modernist refers to artists who were working within a modernist paradigm. While this is a contested notion when it comes to Black artists in this exhibition it is evoked to situate these artists within a broader art historical narrative. Modernism is associated universally with the 'white' male artist, however in the last few decades African scholars have made compelling arguments for the repositioning of Black artists as contributors to modernity. The works exhibited under this rubric are thus intended to ask questions as to what constitutes a modern artwork and whether this definition can solely be attributed to a western understanding of modernism.

In art history, many of these artists would have been placed under Post Modernism because it often refers to a broad movement that developed in the mid-to-late 20th century across various disciplines including art. However, in the context of this exhibition modernism is employed to refer to these artists and the level of experimentation with visual techniques that aimed to represent a Black experience.

Artists such as Ernest Mancoba, Selby Mvusi, Ephraim Ngatane, Gerard Sekoto, Welcome Koboka and George Pemba are important in this regard because of the way their works experimented with narrative and painting techniques that shifted the perception of Black images and reshape how we read and see the Black experience.



Sydney Alex Kumalo (1935 – 1988), *Upright Figure*, 2/5 c. 1974, Bronze, h.65 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Welcome Mandla Koboka (1941 – 1997), *Penny Whistle*, Undated, Oil on Board, 43 x 33 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

Black Consciousness and Art



Fikile Patrick Magadela (1950 – 2003), *Floating Spirits*, Pencil on paper, 37 x 54 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

By the late 1960s and early 1970s Black Consciousness emerged as an ideological movement. This segment of the exhibition looks at how its ideologies became influential in the creative approaches and subject matter of Black artists. It is important to note that these artists were not necessarily political artists but rather that they identified their critical thought towards art with ideas of Black Consciousness. During this time community art centres became a critical component of how artists mobilised the community using the arts and culture. Community art centres took an approach towards art making that sought to challenge the conditions of oppression. Artists such as Fikile Magadela and Thami Mnyele could be considered as artists who drew upon Black Consciousness for inspiration. While Mnyele emphasised a collective approach to using art as a tool for resistance, Magadela valued the Black individuals' ability for self-determination and dignity in the face of an oppressive system. Both were nonetheless able to establish a powerful visual language in response to their socio-political conditions.

'[...] there is one thing I believe in: if you draw the black man, he must be beautiful, handsome; the woman must be heavenly. (Magadela, 1980)

Did you know?

In 1940 Ernest Mancoba was interned by the Germans in St. Denis where he met his wife Sonja Ferlov in a camp. They were finally released in 1944 and in 1947 settled in Denmark. The two became part of the CoBrA group and in 1952 the Mancobas (with their son Wonga) returned to France, Mancoba became a French citizen in 1961.



Dumile Feni (Zwelidumile Geelboi Mgxaji Mslaba) (1942 – 1991), *Bicycle Riders*, 1973, Charcoal on paper, 92 x 186 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

A critical component of knowing one's socio-political conditions is based on understanding the psychological impact of such conditions. Artists such as Dumile Feni and Ezrom Legae displayed this in their work and stylistic approaches. While these artists were often limited and boxed into the rubric of 'township art', their work had little to do with a literal depiction of the township but rather the psychological trauma it caused for many living under these harsh conditions.

The Township and Black Artists

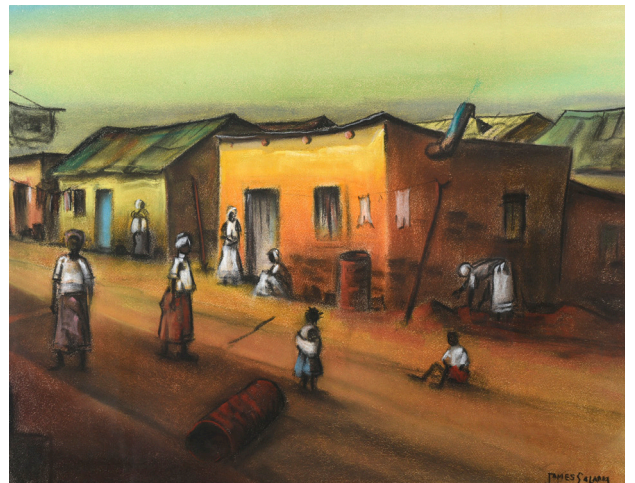
During the 1970s and 1980s the townships were a volatile space characterised by poverty, despair and violence this is still the case today. Many Black artists were affected by these conditions and as a result portrayed this in their works. The term 'township art' was derived by art historians and writers to describe this work which was later contested and found wanting because of the way it patronised and limited these artists. Art by Black artists, most of who lived in the townships, is informed by different factors including socio-political factors. These however should not limit the artistic expression of all Black artists from the township to one singular and often narrow label.



Leonard Tshela Mohapi Motsoso (1949 –), *Portrait of a Philosopher*, 1971, Ink on paper, 54 x 36 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Joseph "Jo" Ramapulane Maseko (1940 – 2008), *Boy with a Yellow Shirt*, Undated, Oil on Board, 78 x 120 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



James Salang, *Township Scene*, 1972, Pastel on paper, 58 x 64 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

AN INTERESTING FACT

In 1988 as part of its centenary commemoration De Beers Consolidated Mine Ltd made a very generous monetary gift to the University of Fort Hare. The University decided to use the money to build a gallery for its extensive collection which was named the De Beers Centenary Art Gallery.



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Glossary

Aesthetic

1. Concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.
2. A set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement.

Modernism

1. Modern character or quality of thought, expression, or technique.
2. A style or movement in the arts that aims to depart significantly from classical and traditional forms.

Consciousness

1. The state of being aware of and responsive to one's surroundings.
2. A person's awareness or perception of something.

Theology

1. The study of the nature of God and religious belief.
2. Religious beliefs and theory when systematically developed.

Mysticism

1. Belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.
2. Vague or ill-defined religious or spiritual belief, especially as associated with a belief in the occult.

Cosmology

1. A branch of astronomy that involves the origin and evolution of the universe.
2. Field of study that brings together the natural sciences, particularly astronomy and physics.

Animalism

1. Is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value of sentient beings.
2. In philosophy, animalism is a theory according to which humans are animals.

Black Theology and Black Artists

It is important to note that religion and not necessarily Christianity per se had an influence on Black artists. Theology is more about the philosophical study of religion and often artists explored this theme through their artworks. During the period of Black Consciousness, Black artists were able to formulate if not derive an expression that sought to transcend beyond the restrictions of practicing under apartheid conditions. Black Theology was thus a way of questioning the use of religion in an oppressive system like apartheid that sought to oppress others. Spirituality became an important aspect of this enquiry although this was not as explicitly politically motivated as Black theology. Black theology in South Africa is thus not about power and religion but about the rediscovery of human dignity and Black identity.



Linda Hugh Nolutshungu 1921–, *The Black Priest*, 1973, Charcoal on paper, 70 x 54 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Daniel "Dan" Sefudi Rakgaothe (1937 – 2004), *Lady-Moon Dream*, 1978, Coloured linocut, Ed 3/20 –, 30 x 21 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection



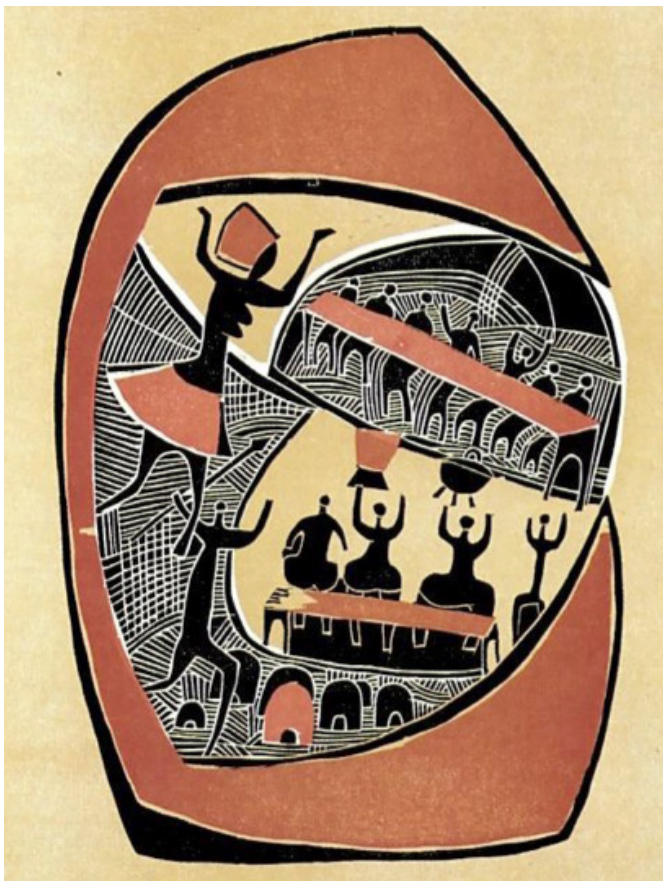
Daniel "Dan" Sefudi Rakgaothe (1937 – 2004), *The Prophet II*, 1978, Coloured linocut, 39 x 29 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection



Daniel "Dan" Sefudi Rakgaothe (1937 – 2004), *Duality on the cosmic planet*, 1978, Linocut, Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection

History and Black Artists

Some aspects of the works in this exhibition explore history, particularly how Black histories features in art works. Black histories refer to narratives that speak about historical events that may not necessarily be formally recorded or documented in history books such as important wars. There are a number of artists in this exhibition that made visual representations of these events.



Lucky Sibiya (1942 – 1999), *The Feasting of Mabatha's Kraal from the portfolio uMabatha*, ed. 60 / 225, 1975, Woodcut, 72 x 50 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Roy Ndinisa, *Witching in the Night*, ed.2/30, 1989, Linocut, 62 x 54 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

Mythology and African Cosmology

Spirituality is often informed by the intersection between the spirit world and mystic world in certain Black artist's works. Artists such as Cyprian Shilakoe and Dan Rakgaothe were informed by dreams and connecting to the ancestral world for inspiration. The atmospheric, dream-like effect in their work is a visualization of a loss of humility and sense of being. They both sought to depict the worst kind of Black pain and the suffering of Black people and indeed the Black experience during a dire period of living in South Africa. Shilakoe and Rakgaothe's work has an otherworldly quality which is about illustrating the experiences of Black people under apartheid, as well as aspects of African traditional legends and myths. While Rakgaothe and Shilakoe's aim was to record the harsh realities of day to day life they also did this using a highly personal and symbolic language.



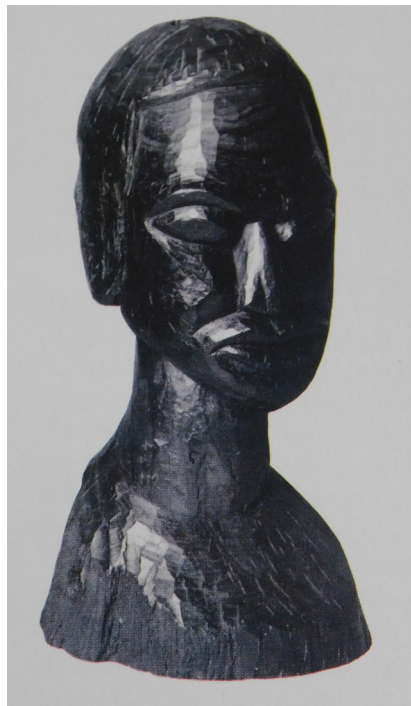
Cyprian Mpho Shilakoe (1946 – 1972), *Children Waiting*, ed.8/25, 1968, Etching, 32 x 22 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

Sculpture and Black Artists

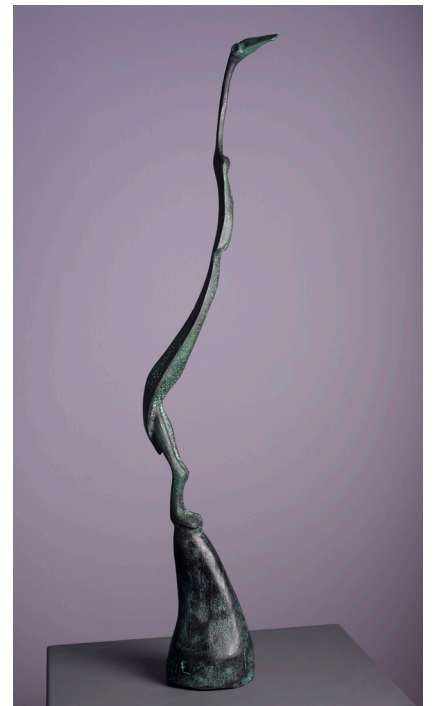
Modern sculpture forms a pivotal part of this exhibition and the various themes it seeks to explore. Although sculpture is an expensive medium, some artists were able to experiment and make it their medium of choice. Artists such as Sydney Kumalo and Lucas Sithole for example won numerous awards for their command of the medium. Their work also illustrates how sculpture is not only about volume, space and mass but also about embodiment/disembodiment of the Black experience.



Durrant Basi Sihlali (1935 – 2004), *Bag Carrier*, 1982, Partridgewood, h. 44,5 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Eric Ngcobo (1933 – 1987), *uNonkhublwana*, 1964, Tamboti, h. 40 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection



Lucas Sithole (1931 – 1994), *My Friend the Chameleon*, 1979, Swazi Redwood, h. 116 cm, Fort Hare University Art Collection

About these worksheets

This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition, *A Black Aesthetic: A view of South African Artists*. In it artworks are explored through analysis, thought-provoking questions, fact files, word/concept definitions and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10 – 12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on the works on this exhibition.

Acknowledgements

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