A Certain South Africanness

Artists differ from one another, and create their art in different ways. But everywhere in the world – and the world is big – contemporary, internationally operating artists refer to the past of their own local history and culture. Things are scarcely different in South Africa. In some instances these references relate to many centuries ago, as the history of art and the origins of mankind could well have begun in southern Africa.

Could this long history be at the roots of A Certain South African-ness? Is there actually something that is typically South African? Something that is shared throughout all population groups of The Rainbow Nation? Something that can be compared with a concept such as ‘the typical Low Countries’ ‘sky’ and the attention to ‘everyday life’ in Dutch art?

In trying to answer this question one is immediately confronted with a major problem: namely that one cannot speak of just one history of South African art. There are many histories, and to make things more difficult these are also subject to constant rewriting. This is particularly true for the last twenty years, in which our perception of the history of South African art has been completely overturned by the abolition of apartheid.

And there are still many books to be written. A great deal of research must still be carried out, because most of the literature goes no further back than one hundred years. Furthermore, whilst one can find bookshelves full of material about white artists such as David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Claudette Schreuders and Jane Alexander, publications about black artists such as Jackson Hlungwani, Dumeli Feni and Sidney Kumalo can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This difference has everything to do with the fact that books about Kentridge and Goldblatt sell like hot cakes on an international market. Publishers are more willing to invest in publications such as these.

Nevertheless, currently in South Africa ground is being gained in this area. What is apparent from this is that despite the differences that still exist between the black, brown and white South Africans, the similarities are sometimes surprisingly great. The differences are mostly to be found in the subjects covered, but with regard to form almost everyone is borrowing from the other cultural groups.
One example is the flat, beaded ‘eggs’ created by the young artist Frances Goodman. They fit within the global artistic discourse, but also display elements that could be described as South African. The works appear to be inspired by the necklaces of the Zulus. The jewellery is made from beads that are applied in special patterns, each pattern carrying a message for the careful reader. These are mostly messages of love. But in some cases the colour pink can for instance also mean poverty. Apart from these Zulu love letters it is possible that the traditions of the Bushman and Khoi Khoi also play a role. Since as far back as 50,000 years ago ostrich eggs have been used to carry water in southern Africa. Some of the eggs are richly decorated with different motifs from those used in Zulu jewellery.

![Cutting Insults](image)

Cutting Insults (2006)
Swarovski crystals, beads, silk, thread - 31 x 21 x 7 cm

A little more information about South Africa lends additional meaning to the art of Frances Goodman. Because of this, there follows here a bird’s-eye view of the rich artistic and cultural history of South Africa, in order to offer some extra layers to the art selected for this exhibition.
South Africa: cradle of mankind and the arts

Beginnings

Ernst Gombrich begins his world-famous book The Story of Art with the chapter Strange Beginnings. In this chapter he devotes attention to the art of the first peoples, in Palaeolithic times.

The first human footprints were found in southern Africa. Archaeological finds of works of art in Southern Africa are dated as being very old. Symbolic markings on stones and jewellery made of snail’s shells were made approximately 77,000 years ago. Thus, Africa was ahead of Europe by some 40,000 years. Modern man (Homo Sapiens) has created works of art from his earliest beginnings. With works of art we mean therefore: one or other form of expression in the form of symbols.

Apparently, it is a very human trait to make something from nothing. Or, put differently: there appears to be a general need or obsession with the decoration of one’s surroundings with geometric forms such as, the external walls of houses, the interiors of houses, implements and utensils, people, and ostrich eggs. The best-known forms of art in South Africa are the 15,000 cave paintings that are to be found throughout the country, and these date from 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, though examples are still being produced.

Equally spectacular but of later date are the seven heads that were found near Lydenburg in about 1950. Opinions differ somewhat as to the precise age of the Lydenburg Heads. The Metropolitan Museum in New York believes them to be from 500 B.C., but in South Africa itself the scientists put their date of burial at 700 B.C. The heads are made of earthenware, and have the intriguing appearance of fantastic animals. One of these resembles a dog.
The figures fit within a long, long tradition of earthenware statues, pots and ceramics. In many instances the forms represent parts of the human body, such as the lips, shoulder or neck. As the Shona, one of the many cultural groups in South Africa, say:

*A pot is a person, a pot is a grave.*

The pots were not only used as a burial object, they were also used for keeping beer in, for example. Through the centuries, beautiful, and sometimes also humorous types of pots and pot decorations evolved in form and colour. And South African ceramicists are still some of the best in the world.

As well as the firing and decoration of clay, the knowledge of metalworking came from northern Africa to the south approximately 2,000 years ago. The most spectacular archaeological find in this field dates from 1933 when the golden treasure of Mapungubwe made its appearance out of a grave. This involved a large number of objects that were made *circa* 1200 c. Among the objects are beautifully refined pieces of jewellery and an extremely lifelike rhinoceros.

The discovery was kept quiet during the regime of apartheid, as it did not fit in with the ideology current at that time. How can a primitive black society from the Middle Ages have created such *objets d'art*? The treasure proved that the view that, prior to the coming of the whites, no ‘higher’ or ‘developed cultures’ were in existence in the country was wrong.
By contrast, the discovery of this treasure meant that it could be demonstrated that there had been between 1,000 and 1,500 powerful kingdoms in southern Africa. These kingdoms maintained a brisk trade with the Islamic world, where there was a great demand for gold and ivory. The Southern African rulers were able to meet this demand. As a result, they became richer and even more powerful, and were in a position to buy more and more, as the result of which the production of art of high quality blossomed. The craftsmen or artists in gold became more skilful, and increasingly invented new ways of refining their products.

**The Europeans**

From 1500 there was a reduction in the exchange between the north and south of the continent because the Portuguese had begun to take over the African trade. The spice trade with Asia was one of the Europeans’ motives to navigate round the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa. This area occupied a very strategic position in the trade routes of the Dutch East India Company. In 1652 a party of Dutch settlers, under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck, landed near the Cape in order to establish a fort there. They, and other Europeans that followed, brought their European culture with them. The European cultures mixed with the ‘native’ cultures and with Asian cultures, such as those of the Javans and Moluccans. Many of these Asians were imported by the Dutch as slaves. The establishment and sometimes enforcement of cultures were often accompanied by violence. People did not simply let themselves be trampled underfoot.

An interesting example of one of the many mixtures of cultures is the language Afrikaans. For a number of internationally known South African artists, this language has a meaningful part in their work.
Another illustrative example of the influence comes from the nineteenth century, in which King Shaka founded his powerful Zulu empire. Shaka (1786-1828) and his successors admired the Europeans’ ‘high’ chairs (high by African standards). They used these thrones, which had been fashioned on the European model, as an expression of power vis-à-vis their own subjects. These ‘Europeanizing’ chair-thrones were carved from a single block of wood. The Zulu leaders were aware of the power and importance of art and culture, and invested in it. For example, Shaka’s successor Dingane wanted to set up glass bead production. The beads were a well-loved and expensive import product that was closely linked with the Zulu identity. ‘Zulu bead motifs’ are now to be found everywhere in South Africa.

Even on the yarmulkes that are for sale in the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town.

Crucial to the further development of art and culture was the Anglo-Boer war at the end of the nineteenth century. The first conflict lasted from 1880 to 1881, the second from 1899 to 1900. This war is now also known as the South African War. This historical change of name relates to the fact that many thousands of black South Africans fought on both the British side and the Boer side. It seemed like a European war that took place Africa, but the war had repercussions for all the inhabitants of South Africa.

In the rest of the world the Boer War was front-page news, and extensive attention was paid to it in the Netherlands and other European countries. Some people felt moved to offer their support, some of this coming
from the world of art. The most important artists who decided to emigrate from the Netherlands to South Africa were Anton van Wouw and Frans David Oerder.

The painter David Oerder became the official war artist to the Boers. As compared with his British colleagues, who pictured the war from the British side in a romantic-heroic style, Oerder’s drawings and sketches displayed rather the opposite. He concentrated principally on the daily life under war conditions: the boredom, the waiting, and the cooking. In his choice of subject and style he was a follower of the French neo-realis...
impressionists. He followed the same pattern in his portrayal of the population of South Africa, both white and black.

Both Oerder and Van Wouw taught in South Africa. One of the most impressive artists to come directly from their 'Dutch school' is Jacobus Hendrik Pierneef.

Pierneef 1928

Pierneef's works display a great affinity with the earlier works of Piet Mondriaan. It is probable that Pierneef saw not only early Mondriaans, but also his later, abstract works, during his visit in 1925 to the Netherlands, where he visited as many museums as possible. Once back in South Africa he wanted to devote himself to abstract work, just as Mondriaan had done. However, he was confronted by the lack of understanding of the very conservative white South African cultural world. As a result, he changed direction, and went on to paint beautifully hushed, almost religious landscapes with monumental trees, mountains and clouds. In these works there is seldom a human being – or indeed any other living creature – to be seen. Partly for this reason, these works are now looked upon as the zenith of the Afrikaans identity. He seems to represent the Afrikaners' wish for an empty Africa, the possession of which the Boer can take, undisturbed. But despite this accusation he is now recognized as one of South Africa's great masters.

**Giving a voice to the unpronounceable**

In the beginning of the twentieth century it was not only white South African artists such as Pierneef who went to Europe. Black South Africans were equally interested in making the trip. In contrast to the white artists like Pierneef, the black artists mainly stayed on in Europe or later continued their travels to the United States, as there was a better life for them there. Included in their numbers were some outstanding figures, such as Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002), Dumile Feni (1942-1991) and Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), who have now become shining examples for artists and scientists in South Africa.

Ernest Mancoba left for Paris in 1938, as he wanted to enter the dialogue with the European artists about European/African art. In Paris he met the Danish sculptress Sonja Ferlov, whom he married in 1942. He and his wife affiliated themselves with the artists in the groups Host and Cobra in 1948.
Despite the plethora of art-historical literature that has been published about these artists, strangely enough there is very little to be found in this historiography about this 'true African' in the company. It is stranger still, since it was precisely these artists who sought, among other things, 'the African in themselves'. For example, in her voluminous overview of Cobra, the specialist Willemijn Stokvis devotes no more than a single line to Mancoba. Her explanation for this can be found in a footnote: 'His work must have had scarcely anything in common with that of his companions in the group. I saw stylized little wooden figures by him from the period shortly after the war that verged on naturalism; these clearly betrayed his African origins. I saw one or two pieces of his later work during my visit to him and his wife in Paris, spring 1965.'

Was Mancoba too African? Too primitive to be numbered among the primitivists?

Internationally, however, Ernest Mancoba is now beginning to become an important and classic example of the disregard/marginaliation of African artists by western scholars of art.
Mancoba's colleague Gerard Sekoto did not go to Paris until 1947, only after he had established his name as an artist in South Africa. In his paintings he has portrayed life in the townships as none other. His works may indeed be compared with the works created in New York by the Afro-American artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Both style and content are similar. With simplified shapes, taut lines and expressive fauvist colours he represents scenes from daily life in the big city slums. His perspective is not that of the white outsider looking at the poor black community. One becomes part of that world. Like the Harlem artists, he represents himself in all simplicity. This township art gained a great following among other artists, and became popular with the white population of South Africa.

In the 1960s many of the white South Africans who were living in luxury had hanging on their walls colourful works of art that represented life in the townships – and the associated poverty. At the same time, the great black leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were 'safely' under lock and key.

But by this time Sekoto had already left for Europe to escape the restrictive regime: 'I must go to Paris, I must go to France where a man is free, where a man finds freedom' was one of the many statements he made about his departure. And later other highly talented black artists such as Louis Maqhubela and Dumeli Feni followed.

With effect from 1948 the Afrikaners, with the support of the Anglo Africans, gained supreme rule in South Africa. They began to pay more attention to places (so-called locations) where non-white people 'belonged'. These people were grouped into tribes and colours, and an 'ethnic policy' was introduced. 'Homelands' were designated, and artificial borders set out. Deportation was carried out, as a result of which large groups of people found themselves in areas of no-man's-land. No one had a perspective of a better future. Non-whites were seriously restricted in their ambitions and in the opportunities of taking part in cultural activities elsewhere. A bizarre system of passes was introduced to ensure that people were unable to go to places that were outside the areas allotted to them. Marriage outside one's own 'race' was strictly forbidden. Academies for training in the arts were prohibited to blacks.

These limited possibilities led to the coming into being of a number of alternative studios, training and educational establishments, publications, theatres and centres for the arts that were open for all 'races' and where people could meet. Artists' initiatives such as Polly Street and Rorke's Drift Art School are now particularly commended by all as important centres for the arts. One could say that Polly Street, under the leadership of the artists Cecil Skotnes was of great influence on some very talented black artists such as Louis Maqhubela, Dumeli Feni and Sidney Kumalo, who studied further at these arts centres. There they came into contact with the works of Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, Arturo Martini, Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore.
Sidney Kumalo

Post-cubism, blended with traditional South African styles, blossomed here. Dumile Feni is now looked upon as one of the great masters of South African art of this period. An important subject for these artists was what was known as ‘the struggle’: the fight against apartheid. A constantly recurring theme within this is the so-called ‘inter-morphosis’ of human and animal figures, which have their roots in a native religious perspective of the world and of the cruel realities of apartheid. These animal-human figures symbolized the position in which many found themselves: the dehumanization of existence and the animalism that is hidden in each one of us.

Dumile Feni Untitled ca 1970 on Rainbow Nation Exhibition Scheveningen

There are obvious links with the rigours of the South African life at the time, but one can also recognize universal human, surreal conditions. Because of his dark, lugubrious images Feni became known as ‘the Goya’ of South Africa.

New times

Once Nelson Mandela had been released from imprisonment in 1990 and the first democratic elections had taken place in 1994, the phenomenon that was South African art joined the international art scene, and the worldwide interest took hold after the cultural boycott had come to an end. There followed a large succession of Rainbow exhibitions worldwide, all of which related to the emancipated South Africa, the land of Mandela. In South Africa itself there have been some rapid developments in the field of art during the last twenty years. There was much that had to be dealt with; feelings of hate and suspicion had to be overcome. The fears that the
groups had had of one another set the tone of the cultural and societal debate in the first ten years of the newly liberated South Africa.

There are still many major issues that have to be surmounted. For example, in diverse black communities the acceptance of homosexuals continues to prove difficult, and there remain major problems relating to AIDS, the virulent disease that is still claiming many victims. Alongside this, the fear of one another, the fear of foreigners, the anger, the exasperation and amusement about corruption and an exaggerated machismo are leading to some fascinating artistic themes.

Zanele Muholi

Whiteness
An exceedingly interesting development is the theme of origin and skin colour, which has now become an issue with the white South African artists.

For example, in *The White Lie* Michael MacGarry researches the structures that legitimised the violence of apartheid. In this he places great emphasis on the pistols and rifles that are fetishes through which the white man can feel that he is ‘better’. There is a never-ending circle of violence in which men, in his eyes always white, appear to be imprisoned. He also lifts the taboo on the pleasure that is experienced from violence.

There have also been a few South African publications on the subject of Whiteness in art. White men have the feeling that they have sunk from the highest to the lowest point of the hierarchy. They are now *The Other*. They are also ‘the guilty ones’ of apartheid. Artists address such questions as: May the white man still be in South Africa? Does he actually belong there? Does the white women belong there? (Claudette Schreuders) Should he not learn to speak Xhosa, the most widely used language in South Africa? (Brett Murray) How does it feel to be subordinated, to be treated with intense hatred? (Kendell Geers) How is the fear of black among white people? (Anton Kannemeyer) What does the white feeling of guilt consist of? (Penny Siopis, Jane Alexander).
In the last ten years, the emphasis has come to lie on ‘me’, in the artist’s own identity. The artist and his own world, his own culture and his own history become the subject of art. The most noticeable and important common denominator is the representation of animals and animal-people. And these are not lions, elephants and crocodiles, but dogs, cows, goats and horses. Animals. Animals that people have in their close vicinity. One of the many explanations I have been given for this in South Africa is that it was easier to ‘connect’, to establish a bond, with an animal than with ‘the other’ from ‘another race’. I would like to call or designate these animals and animal-people as ‘a certain South African-ness’. They have, as an image or emotion, something universal. Who does not love his very own dog, horse or goat? ‘Me’
But if you were to be threatened by a pack of wild dogs, you would then want nothing rather than to exterminate them. And: is there not a dangerous dog, or a dog that runs with the pack?

It is especially the dogs that appear to have a symbolic function for all the cultures and sections of the population of South Africa. But the significances of the animals are always different; however, one recognizes the other’s ‘dogs’ and knows what they stand for. The same applies to a considerable number of other symbols, including place names and people of an historic significance. In this regard, The Rainbow Nation in the arts is a success. That is to say, one has a lot in common, but is not the same. But in that large and beautiful country, there is still work to be done.
Mary Sibande and Claudette Schreuders on Rainbow Nation exhibition Beelden aan Zee Scheveningen

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The exhibition is in The Hague and Scheveningen (Netherlands) until 30-9-2012