WAYS OF SEEING
MANCOBA'S ART

E Mancoba

Patty Hardy | Bridget Thompson

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Art and Ubuntu Trust Series:
Exploring Aesthetics

WAYS OF SEEING MANCOBA'S ART

Written by Patty Hardy and Bridget Thompson

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Fugle met Unge. Ferlov, S. (1935) bronze, 56 cm courtesy Bornholm Kunst Museum

Abbreviations used in the titles of art works:
SANG (IZIKO South African National Gallery)
JAG (Johannesburg Art Gallery)

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L'Ancêtre (The Ancestor) (1969-1971) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.2cm (JAG)
Musician (1936) teak, 63 x 9.8 x 9.9cm (Private Collection)

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"The artist of today is isolated in spite of himself, because of his search for spiritual integrity within a society all devoted to the satisfaction of material needs as its first priority. Nevertheless he is in harmony across space and time with the ancient world and artists, in his awareness that spiritual and material values have to be reconciled."

Ernest Mancoba, 1994

INTRODUCTION

The artist, painter and sculptor, Ernest Mancoba, was born in Turffontein, South Africa, in 1904, and died in Paris in 2002. He left for Paris in 1938 and returned in 1994, 56 years later, for a large retrospective of his and his wife Sonja Ferlov's work held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The exhibition, *Hand in Hand* was curated by Elza Miles, author of *Lifeline out of Africa*, the definitive biography of Mancoba.

Mancoba's life, work and philosophy serve as an excellent example for South African art students. His sculptures, paintings, lithographs and drawings intersect with the sweep of twentieth century art internationally. Mancoba's first sculpture in 1929, the *African Madonna*, is an exquisite example of figurative work. His last works in the 1990's were seemingly abstract.

Although he spent 64 years living outside of South Africa, Mancoba drew deeply on South African visual arts and heritage as references in his work. Discerning viewers can recognise the influence of, amongst other things, southern African beadwork, rock art and Stone Age implements, as well as specific references to key moments in South African history, (such as the 1976 student protests), in his work. Despite his long absence from South Africa, he never forgot his mother's admonition, to hold true to the African values she taught him. While his work has very strong South African roots, it also references art from many other parts of the world, thereby underlining his belief that his people 'were the people of the whole world.'[1]

This book posits an understanding of Mancoba's point of view as it is expressed in his work and ideas, providing a close look at his unique artistic contribution. His approach provides a framework with which to view:

- African, Western and other art of the world
- Figurative and abstract art
- Sculpture and painting
- Spiritual and material dimensions of artistic expression
- Ancient and contemporary art

Mancoba's work is part of the schools' Visual Arts curriculum in South Africa, but teachers and artists alike lament the lack of resources available to support the teaching of the Arts and Culture and Visual Arts curriculum. The book is designed to be accessible to teachers, learners and art students. The ten illustrated posters at the end give an overview of the ten decades of Ernest Mancoba's life. Access to two complementary resources: the videoart, *Reading the Ancestor* and the documentary, *Ernest Mancoba at Home* can be found online via Tomas Films on VIMEO.

- Bridget Thompson

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part one

MANCOBA
the sculptor

Introduction

Mancoba was a sculptor before he was a painter. In this section, we will explore four of his sculptures: the *African Madonna* (1929), Mancoba's first sculpture, the *Musician* and *Figure of a Woman*, both completed in 1936, and lastly, *La Double Unité* (Double Unity) (1950), which we understand was his last sculpture. These four sculptures represent significant stages in Mancoba's aesthetic development.

We will also look at a beautiful carved stick which was given to Mancoba in the 1930s by an old Ndebele man in the rural areas of Pietersburg (Polokwane), and which he treasured all his life as a symbol of Africa's unknown, genius artists. He was encouraged and inspired by these artists, and felt that he represented them in the Western world.

Something we need to mention, when we consider Mancoba as a sculptor, was that his Danish wife, Sonja Ferlov, was also a sculptor, and he played a significant role in her work by looking at it and discussing it with her. An image of one of her early works, follows. Its title and theme, *Fugle met Unge* (1935) (*Mother and Child*, literally 'bird with young') has a special resonance with mother and child themes in Mancoba's work.

Fugle met Unge. Ferlov, S. (1935)
(*Mother and Child*) bronze, 56 cm

'Elza Miles has commented on how Ernest and Sonja employed two basic sculptural methods: he cut [away] in order to create in sculpture and she built…He cut in order to find in the medium the essential truth, the heart of the story. Whether in sculpture or in painting and drawing, his tendency was to strip to the essence and find the shining inner soul of his material'[2]. For Mancoba it was important to bypass the constraints of proportion and "come directly to the point of my expression". He spoke of "the problem of perspective"[3] which he felt distracted one from the essential message. This problem was a subject which he and Sonja Ferlov regularly discussed, and their work reflects the aesthetic and philosophical struggle that they had with proportion and perspective.'[4]

Sonja Ferlov's sculptures are original in the way that they break with classical proportions in sculpture. Mancoba's sculptures represent his journey in search of an aesthetic which expressed his beliefs and cultural values. It took him beyond "the problem of perspective" and the requirements of proportion (see more on page 80-81) into an expression of universal harmony and equality.

African Madonna (1929),
Yellowwood, 86 x 22 x 17cm

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1.1 IN THE BEGINNING

The *African Madonna*

In 1929, whilst studying to be a teacher at the *Grace Dieu* (Setotolwane) Teacher's Training College near Pietersburg (now Polokwane), in the former Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo), Mancoba carved his *Madonna*, which is known variously as the Bantu or *African Madonna*. He had been shown some woodcarving techniques by Sister Pauline, one of the nuns at Grace Dieu. Within ten days, he completed this sculpture for the Chapel of Saint Mary (for the Anglican Community of the Resurrection) at *Grace Dieu*.[5]

In the year that Mancoba's *Madonna* was sculpted, (1929), General Hertzog's National Party won the South African elections with an outright majority, and within seven years, all 'black' people had been taken off the common voter's roll. It was a time of crisis and despair for black South Africans.

Mancoba's *Madonna* resembles the usual Western representation of Madonna's to some extent. The drapery is typical of Madonna's from any Western period of art, but she is not holding a baby, and her face has clearly 'African' features and uniquely, uses indigenous wood.

The material

The *Madonna* is made from yellowwood, *Podocarpus Latifolius* (Latin), *Umkhomba* (isiXhosa), *Mogobagoba* (Sepedi), *Muhovho-hovho* (TshiVenda), *Umsonti* (isiZulu), *Opregte geelhout* (Afrikaans).

Yellowwood is a soft wood which grows naturally in mountainous areas and forests in the southern, eastern and northern parts of South Africa, extending into Zimbabwe and further north. It is also found on rocky hillsides and mountain slopes, but does not grow as tall where it is exposed, as it does in the forests. It is a yellow-coloured wood and was used for making flooring and furniture because it polished up so well, and for railway sleepers, because it was so strong.[6] Unfortunately most of our indigenous forests have disappeared, and there are not many large yellowwood trees left.

It was more usual to work in teak or oak[7] but it is possible that Mancoba chose yellowwood because of the golden sheen it has when polished. Gold is a significant colour in religious art (think of haloes) and it was to represent the sacred in Mancoba's work throughout his life.

The subject

'Madonna' is an Italian word that means 'my lady'. It is a term of respect given to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

There are several traditional ways that Mary was shown in Christian churches. Most often, she is seen standing, carrying the Christ child aloft, while her foot crushes the head of the serpent, Satan. Without her child, the Madonna is shown with her hands together in prayer. She is also seen ascending into heaven, her hands spread out, her eyes looking upwards in acceptance of her role as mediator in heaven, or looking downwards at the congregation in acceptance of her role as mother of the Christian world. Sometimes, she is shown in the moment that the angel Gabriel tells her that she is to bear the son of God. She is always serene, modest and submissive.

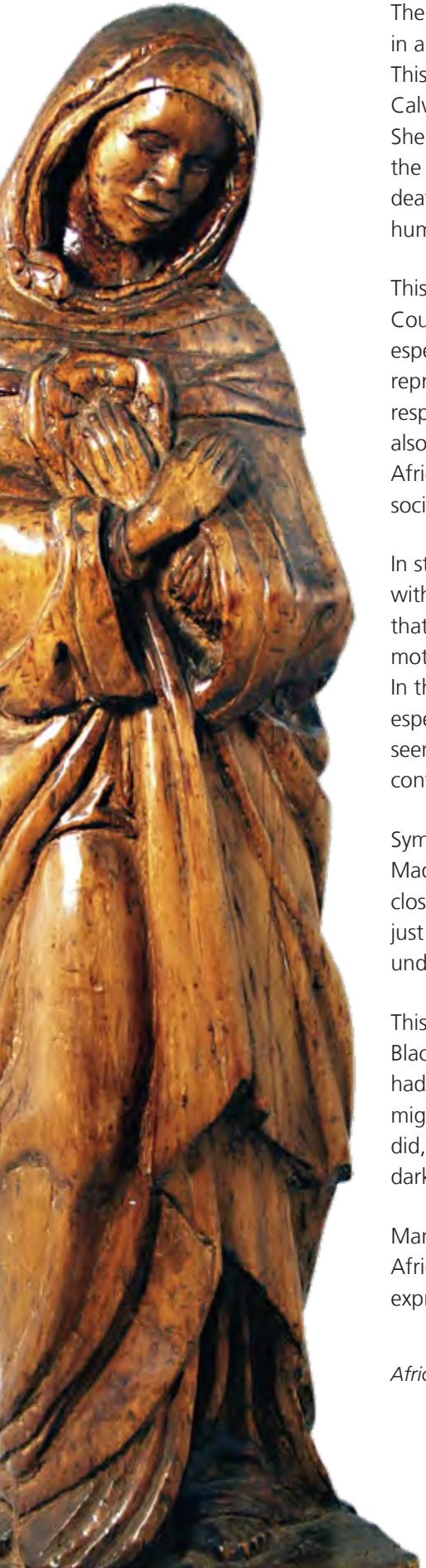
The face of the Madonna usually takes on the characteristics of the country of origin, except in South Africa at the time that Mancoba was working, when 'black' people were not citizens and were disregarded in all dominant discourses, and therefore were almost never seen in any form of respectful public imagery. All the Madonnas in South African churches were slender, blue-eyed, smooth-haired, boneless representations of an apparently spiritually perfect woman.

At the time that he made the *Madonna*, Mancoba was deeply attached to the church. He was an active participant, (he was a server at mass), and later became involved with the religious community in the making of commissioned art works. The church provided him with an opportunity to produce art, which was a rare opportunity for a black person at that time.

In an interview, just before he died, Mancoba[8] said that all he needed as a guide to life were two sayings: the Christian 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and the African '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*'.

A close reading of Mancoba's *Madonna* reveals how he showed his concern about his people and reflected both his African cultural values and his Christian beliefs in this sculpture.

Analysis of the *African Madonna*



The *African Madonna*'s head is bowed and her hands are crossed at the wrist in a gesture of submission. Her left hand holds a cloth close to her breast. This cloth reminds us of the cloth used to wipe Christ's face on the way to Calvary. If this was Mancoba's intention, this is a Madonna of the crucifixion. She is no longer mother of the infant that symbolises hope and salvation, but the grieving mother of a prophet whose accepted fate was to die a torturous death at the hands of the fearful, ignorant and evil, in order to save all humankind.

This Madonna sadly recognises that her son Jesus has to make a sacrifice. Could this sculpture also be representing the sacrifices required of all mothers, especially those of children born into an abusive political system? As Mary represents motherhood, the *African Madonna* could represent Mancoba's respect for all womanhood, a universal ancestor. If this is the case, we can also see her as poignantly symbolising the awareness of older generations in Africa that their young people had to make sacrifices in order to free their societies from the grip of colonialism.

In statuary of Mary, her robes usually appear to be of very fine linen, often with a gold trim. Since Mary and her husband Joseph were poor, it is unlikely that she ever wore an expensive robe, but in a church, representing the mother of God, she is usually clothed in something more befitting her status. In this depiction of the Madonna, her clothes are neither overtly rich nor especially modest. In the golden hue of the yellowwood, the folds of her robe seem to serve the purpose of enclosing her in a sadly submissive but serenely contemplative space, rather than emphasising her status.

Symbolically, in this context, her bare feet could imply, as with many other Madonnas, that she is standing on holy ground. They could also represent closeness to the earth, the womb of all life, and a natural state of being, just as motherhood is for most women. In this work, bare feet may also underscore the fact that she is a rural black African woman.

This could have been quite a challenge for white Christians at the time. Black worshippers were expected to sit at the back of the church, and it hadn't crossed the minds of many white worshippers that their Madonna might not actually have had a white skin. In fact, it is fairly unlikely that she did, since people from Mediterranean and Middle Eastern areas tend to be dark-skinned.

Mancoba was suggesting the seemingly impossible: the Virgin Mary was an African. For this reason, it has been suggested that this sculpture was an early expression of 'black consciousness'.[9]

African Madonna (1929), Yellowwood, 86 x 22 x 17cm

What has been said about Mancoba's *African Madonna*

Z.P. Jordan – former South African Minister of Arts and Culture

'It was while he was teaching in Pietersburg that Mancoba began displaying the artistic talent and originality that was to win him laurels outside South Africa…Mancoba's *African Madonna*…established him as an artist and as one with an extremely adventurous spirit'. '…Mancoba may be said to be an early exponent of the "Africanism", inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement that was to come into prominence during the nineteen sixties and seventies.'[10]

Prof. N. Masilela – South African cultural historian

'*African Madonna*, (1929), exemplified the synthesis or fusion of African aesthetics with Western artistic forms. Ernest Mancoba's poetic imagination had already been shaped by the monumental effort of New African intellectuals and artists - from the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s to the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s - to transform the principles and aesthetics of European modernity into those of New African modernity. This saw form as a medium for the expressive articulation of African philosophies of life.'[11] (In other words, the form shows the African philosophy of life.)

Elza Miles – Mancoba's biographer

'In the *African Madonna*, Mancoba's intention was "to convey the impression of motherhood" in the same way that certain European Madonnas did, with bent knees and arms folded across her chest. This gesture also corresponds with the posture of a black maiden's submissiveness in the presence of her superiors. She shows that she accepts, with all modesty, the responsibilities of motherhood and mediation. Furthermore, the contrapposto of her body underscores the twofold nature of her mission.'[12]

'Mancoba's *Bantu Madonna* is an innovation owing to the plastic construction in which the Virgin appears without the messenger angel. In this single figure Mancoba unites her responsibilities as mother and as mediator.'[13]

This carving is not only a good example of Mancoba's early style but can also be seen as his first attempt at his spiritualisation of the ancestral figure. This Mary is not just a mediator within a Christian context. Almost 40 years later Mancoba transformed her natural appearance in *L' Ancêtre*. Where Bantu Madonna relates to the Virgin of Humility – note the inclination of the head, arms crossed and bare feet – the ancestral figure evokes the imagery of the Kota reliquary figures.[14]

Ulrich Clewing – German art critic

'…her hand made the gesture made by Bantu girls on nearing the head of the family. This break with tradition was not limited to iconography but extended by implication to the whole Christian worldview as upheld in the West.'[15]

Athi Mongezeleli Joja – Art Critic

Mancoba's Madonna is delicate, unsullied, impassive, 'never as an agent possibly imbued with strength.' 'The white Madonna was to the Christianised African imagination, in the missionary's colonial tutelage, the ultimate horizon of womanhood, that which stands contrary to the superstitious, savage African woman.' Mancoba is clearly asking questions of the validity of white colonialists claiming Christianity yet in their practice subscribing to the complete opposite. The Black Madonna is a testament to Mancoba's contribution to critical thought in South Africa in the context of the widespread growth of African independent churches which emerged as a critique of the white churches.[16]

Abdulcadir Ahmed Said – Somali filmmaker

'The *African Madonna* more than anything shows that Christianity is not a Western religion but belongs to people just like you. This is what first and foremost Mancoba tries to show you. He wants to show you that what we have come to know as the blue-eyed Jesus, (and) his mother Mary, were black people, not white.'[17]

Lippy Lipshitz – sculptor and friend of Mancoba

'He carved a very boring Madonna in a typical ecclesiastical manner – which was mainly interesting for its symbolism in glorifying the African mother.'[18]

The contrast between Lippy Lipschitz's dismissive comment (although it must be noted that he was a friend of Mancoba and spoke well about other sculptures of his) and the passionate response to reproductions of this work by black teachers, students and artists during a nationwide education programme on Mancoba's work in 2010/2011, recalls Elza Miles' remark about the parochialism of the white art world in South Africa, which then – and even now – struggles to appreciate Mancoba's work.[19]

Here are some of the responses made during the Art and Ubuntu Trust 2011 programme of workshops introducing Mancoba's art in different parts of South Africa:

Johannesburg Drill Hall, April 2011: Ekurhuleni Arts and Culture teachers' workshop

- Mancoba shows that black women have the same capabilities as any other woman and that they too are made in the image of God.
- It breaks stereotypes between black and white people, that whites are better and that black people are bad.
- Mancoba can be read as implying, as he says in the documentary,[20] that we must bring our traditional cultures with Christianity: the black Madonna is a way of doing that.

Funda Centre, Soweto, April 2011: art students

- The Black Madonna is a representation of his inner feelings, when he merges Christianity and tradition, breaks boundaries by creating *Black Madonna*. It shows his commitment to humanity.
- His way of life defines his wisdom. Society was under pressure – *Black Madonna* exemplifies his commitment to a wisdom - and I would like to say he's my grandfather, my ancestor.

Thohoyandou Community Art Centre, June 2011: artists' and teachers' workshop

- *African Madonna* is a connection between cultures in conflict, the Western and the African cultures. Humanity triumphs at the end of the day: *ubuntu.*
- *African Madonna* shows that the artist has a deeper sense of spirituality.
  He is not saying this side is good or other is bad, but values them coming together for production of higher spirituality.

High School in Mpumalanga, July 2011: learners, teachers and artists

Comments translated from Ndebele.

- *Madonna* is something different. Not even in my dreams have I thought of *Madonna* modelled by a black woman. It shows that black people are not what we are always taught they are, bad and stuff.
- *Madonna* is breaking the stereotype about and discrimination of black people.
- *Madonna* brings two different peoples in one, though dressed in white people's clothes that Maria can not only be white woman. That black woman can also be seen as Maria – a caring mother who has kept the laws of God. This was more than conflict resolution but trying to bring peace.

These comments underscore Athi Mongezeleli Joja's interpretation of the African Madonna as representing the feelings of African Christians, and Z.P. Jordan's comment that Mancoba's Madonna was an early expression of black consciousness.

1.2 A CHANGE OF STYLE

Head of a Mapedi (1930) teak, 16,5 x 9 x 9cm

By 1936 Mancoba's style had changed significantly.

Elza Miles comments: '…Mancoba reduces the expressiveness of referential form by distorting the natural proportions between foot and thigh or head. As the imitative function of form (Madonna) in his work decreased, so his sculptured forms became more autonomous, as is the case with the classic carvings of old Africa.'[23] Elza Miles refers to 'natural proportions' which calls to mind the ideal scheme of proportion represented by Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man. This image still serves as a classical ideal in Western culture. Mancoba questioned these rules but never disavowed his early use of them.

Mancoba on the aesthetics of African Art

During an interview a few months before he died in 2002, Mancoba said the following:

"…we have lost the capacity to unite in our vision the outward aspect with the inner significance. Because our eye has been miseducated, so to speak, by the superficiality of academism, which can only estimate the worth of any representation of man, according to its fidelity to the purely aesthetic rules it has established, as, for example, the one decreeing that the human head must come eight times (or seven, I have forgotten) into the full length of the body. So when they see an African sculpture with, for example, an enormous head and short legs, they will consider it ugly and judge it 'worthless' as far as Art is concerned. But for the African artist it is not so much the abidance of certain rules (though he too, generally, works according to particular canons), that makes a thing beautiful, but its capacity to evoke the inner being, by the strength of the outward aspect. To that effect, he uses all means, both figurative and abstract. I, too, in the Madonna, did follow a certain canon, that was in contradiction with the newest cubistic or abstract ways and forms (which I, at the time, hardly knew), but without ever stopping my struggle with a style that was foreign to me, and the viewer, I hope, if I am lucky enough to have been understood and heard, can feel under the surface of the classical mold, the beat of an African heart. At times, the inner spirit breaks through, first in the very innovation within the South African context, of taking a black woman to represent the Virgin Mary, and secondly in the warmth of the pulse that, though provisionally contained by the strictness of the style, speaks up, under the skin or surface and threatens to burst free.[21]"

Mancoba defends his decision to carve a figurative Madonna using the rules of proportion, and at the same time, urges us to see more than that in his sculpture. It is also clear from the comments (pages 9-11) that this work touches black South Africans in the ways that he hoped it would, a full eight decades after it was made. At the same time, as we look further at Mancoba's sculptures, we notice the same characteristic that we see in the section on painting, that Mancoba moved fluidly between abstraction and figuration. In this section we observe that Mancoba's paintings were seemingly abstract, but, uniquely, we found many recognisable figures (and a lot more besides) when we looked closely at his work. Above all for Mancoba it was the spiritual expression in art that mattered and he goes on to suggest that its loss is rooted in a rising individualism:

Mancoba's comments on the split between the spiritual and the material:

"The distinction between what's called figurative and abstract is a distinction that has no real place, no significance, for the African artist, just as it never did for the European artist before the period that in the West inaugurated the division in our conception between spirit and material, life and death, the interests of the individual and those of the community of men. Our history has brought about, little by little, this dichotomy which provokes, more and more, a terrible atomisation, in the very essence of life. On the one hand, it has afforded us an infinite bounty of material advantages (among which, the scientific and technological development), but also an equal infinity of difficulties and woes. In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction of the very foundation to the human identity, as both belonging to nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being.[22]"

Figure of a Woman and *Musician*

In 1936 a productive year for him, Mancoba produced the two small works on the opposite page (amongst others). They are modest in size (no more than 63 centimetres), yet powerfully expressive. They are about twice the length of the average classroom ruler, not tall enough to be seen from a distance, as an altarpiece would be, but the right size for a small domestic dwelling, where they could be kept out of harm's way and in full view on a narrow wall shelf.

Both works are made of teak, a low-maintenance, non-slip wood, useful for flooring and the making of windows and doors. Teak ages well and lasts a long time if you don't add oils or polishes, (it has natural oils just millimetres below the surface) and would have been used quite commonly in construction projects in Mancoba's time.

The *Figure of a Woman* and *Musician* were exhibited by Mancoba at the Bantu Welfare Trust in 1937. They drew comment in the press at the time: 'There is a Bantu sculptor on the Reef who has ceased to imitate the European style of sculpture. He has "discovered" the negro art of Africa, and he is already applying it in some of his own work.'[24]

These patronising comments do indicate some appreciation of Mancoba's artistry. Yet unsurprisingly, in this critically impoverished atmosphere, he struggled to find a space as an artist in South Africa. At the same time as he was making innovative sculptures, there was some woodcarving being done by entrepreneurs who sold their work in the tourist trade and made sure it met tourist expectations – that is, it was not original work but imitative, conformed to stereotypes, and was sometimes crudely made.

In 1936 Mancoba was invited to produce similar craft-like objects under the auspices of the Department of Native Affairs, but he declined this offer, which to him was insulting and reflected an inability to recognise him as an artist.

'These two works, and others, show that by the time he left for Europe in 1938, Mancoba had identified the principles of African art which were to guide him in his ongoing aesthetic development. The two sculptures, *Figure of a Woman* and the *Musician*, as well as a missing one, (Faith), identified by Elza Miles, illustrate this turning point in his struggle for expression.'[25]

Neither *Figure of a Woman* nor the *Musician* reproduces the human form. They are Mancoba's interpretation of the spirit of women and the spirit of music, through the vehicle of these sculptures. As we will see, he used another figure (the ancestor - in the form of a totem), for this purpose in his paintings.

'These sculptures, with their many-faceted surfaces, sculpted using the adze (the axe), and no longer conforming to the ideal scheme of proportion, point to Mancoba's mature aesthetic. Their surfaces remind one of the many facets of a diamond. And at the same time, they express the serenity Mancoba appreciated so much in ancient art. The mythologist Joseph Campbell speaks of the hero with a thousand faces, the hero that appears in different stories in a thousand ancient and contemporary myths from around the world, but with the same essential purpose. Mancoba's surfaces in these sculptures, and the colours in his paintings, represent the same multifaceted view of the oneness of humanity. The surfaces of the sculptures work in relation to each other, as do the colours of his paintings – take one away and the artwork becomes incomplete and loses its balance. In Mancoba's work, every colour is a colour by and because of another colour; every colour has its place in the story – every person and every culture has a role in the tapestry of humanity.'[26] His art expresses *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu* (a person is a person by and because of other people). See further page 34.

Left: *Figure of a Woman* (1936) teak, 59 x 10,5 x 9,5cm. Right: *Musician* (1936) teak,63 x 9.8 x 9.6cm

The *Musician*

'From the sacred order of the interconnectivity of all living things came music. *"The sound of the bow dissipates moving further and further into the atmosphere, releasing the performer into the universe, from the foundation of their deep-seated centre in the physical world.*"'[27]

A standing man, wearing a loincloth and a beaded necklet, holds a musical instrument, the *uhadi*. The short chop-marks of the adze create many facets off which light can reflect.

This makes the figure vibrate, and allows us to believe that he has just struck the bow with his playing stick. The *Musician* appears to be in a dream state.

South African Nguni and Sotho speaking people believe music is rooted in the body of the performer as much as in the body of the universe, so he could be in that boundless realm of the spirit. His head sits close to his body and forms the apex of the triangle created by his elbows. Within this triangle the stick is struck rhythmically against the string of the bow, and the gourd is lifted off and lowered against the chest.

The *Musician* has African facial features and the plump body of adolescence. He rests on his thighs, with knees bent and feet turned in, for balance. His feet are bare and square, symbolising stability.

Musician (1936) teak, 63 x 9.8 x 9.6cm

Most of the information in the figure of the *Musician* is seen when you look at the front. Although it works equally well from any point of view, as it is made up of many angles and long, flowing lines. Its outline suggests that, like Brancusi's *Endless Column*, it could go on forever. The *Musician*'s feet provide a solid foundation for the vertical figure, which is further stabilised by bent and turned-in knees and ankles. In this position one can stand comfortably for a long time. The *Musician* is using a 'braced bow' in which the calabash is tied in the centre. The player can therefore play the top or bottom portion of the string, thereby producing two sets of fundamental notes. Here he bangs the gourd against his chest to vary the vibration of sound, while he strikes the string of the bow below it.

The triangular forms which were to dominate Mancoba's paintings for many years, are already evident in this sculpture: the skirt or loincloth, the intersecting right arm and bow, the curve of the elbow on the right, the angle formed by the ankles at the front and knees at the back, to name just a few. You have already read about the use of the triangle in Zulu beadwork, and how Mancoba was inspired by this. You will see later on page 51 a discussion of the use of the triangle in Zulu beadwork, and how Mancoba was inspired by this.

The *Musician* is a commemorative piece embracing African spirituality. The pose of the *Musician* suggests internal concentration, which could be interpreted as a state of trance. The grip on the instrument is reminiscent of a musician embracing ancestral communication. From this state of trance, the *Musician* could be seen to emit a spiritual aura that suggests an internal spiritual journey. The bow and hands appear to be exaggerated or bigger than the normal size. The volume and exaggeration emphasise the emotional atmosphere of the sculpture. This is contextually appropriate as it puts emphasis on the activity and content.

The missing string is filled in by an interpretative eye which completes the instrument, encouraging participation by the viewer in the artwork. When looking at the sculpture from the waist down, the feet emphasise gravity and attachment to the ground.

Mancoba's constant concern about fostering communication was to find a way to unite the material and the spiritual dimensions of life, which he believed would save humankind from dangerous practices which would lead to our extinction. The fact that he chose to depict a musician here, and not a dancer or other figure, suggests that his intention was to present the language of music. His last works on paper, also convey this interest in music very strongly.

In an interview with Bridget Thompson in 1994, he talked about how Mozart used notes and van Gogh used colour to form a language which could communicate across the ages. In other words, long after the artist or musician has passed on, you can understand their message through their art or music.[28]

Mancoba's *Musician* draws you into his world. His absolute focus engages your full attention, and, before you know it, you can feel the vibrations in his space. His expression is absorbed, his face transformed by this spiritual engagement. Through this very special African music, which crosses many different language groups and two oceans (see page 18), he enters the realm of eternal values, the realm of the universal ancestor.

Uhadi

The Xhosa *uhadi* is a simple bow with a resonating gourd attached. Two fundamental notes are obtained by striking the bow with a lightweight stick: the lower note made on the open bow string, the higher note made by clasping the string, near the bow's end, with the thumb and first finger.[29]

The bow performs *izicaba*, which means it is singing the texts of the song. Bows produce two fundamental notes. Changing the shape of the mouth, or moving the opening of the calabash to and from the breast will bring out the harmonics of these two notes and create a melody. The construction of the bow takes into account the thickness and tension of the string.

Hollowed-out objects, such as the calabash (pumpkin), are ideal for use as a resonator to amplify the sounds produced by the string. (The mouth is also used to amplify the sound of the string.) The bow provides the scales of all southern African music.

"The [*uhadi*] is solitary and meditative because the player cannot talk or sing whilst playing. Her thoughts are free to wander as her walking feet become absorbed in the rhythmic complexity of the overall musical process."[30]

The *uhadi* is played in Brazil (where it is known as the berimbau), on the east coast of Africa, and in India (the ekatantri).[31] This instrument travelled with enslaved peoples across the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil and supports the martial art, capoeira, and also across the Indian Ocean to India where it is played by the Siddhi community who are descendants of enslaved Africans.

A widely-known variation of the *uhadi* is the jaw harp (or Jew's harp).

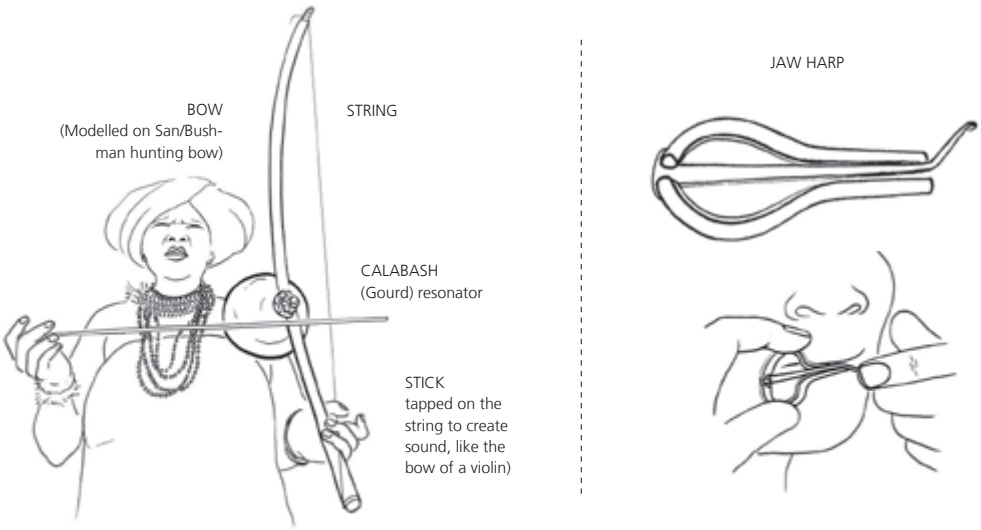
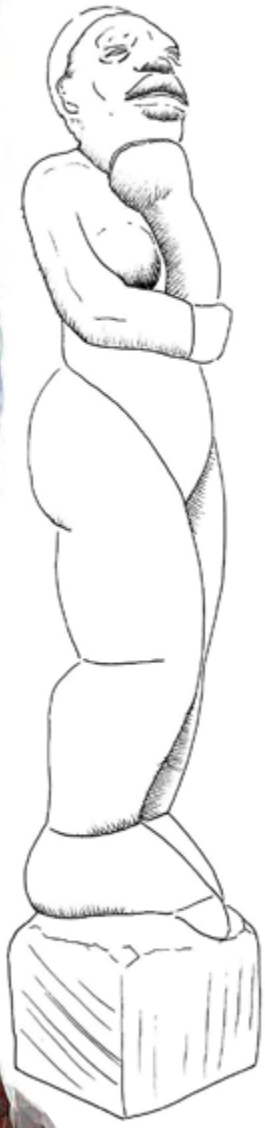


Figure of a Woman

Mancoba's *Figure of a Woman*, carved in the same year as his *Musician* (and one other, *Faith*, which, as we mentioned above, is now lost), presented the subject as an idea. The legs and feet of this woman provide a monumental base; she looks up with closed eyes, her chin resting on a fist - she is a giant we have to look up to. This woman is no longer the submissive maiden of the Madonna. Her head is its own universe; she is untouchable. She stands solidly on the ground, perfectly balanced, for an eternity of thought. Breasts identify her as female, and she is slender and graceful. She looks fit, capable and wise. Her body has not been idealised or turned into an object. We are drawn into her activity as we gaze at her, wondering what she is thinking about, and thus we enter the space of thoughts and images which seem to rise up continuously into the space above her head. Here womankind is represented as grounded, thoughtful and endlessly creative.



We know that Mancoba hugely respected his mother who taught him many significant things about art and the role of the artist, and about values, both Christian and African. We also know that Mancoba's response to the artistic creations of his wife, Sonja Ferlov, was as supportive as his father's had been to his mother's production of clay pots. Mancoba supported Sonja Ferlov's work wholeheartedly, as a keen eye and discussant. Even after her death, he insisted that her work be included in his first retrospective exhibition in South Africa, after 56 years of exile, in order to indicate their deep partnership and strong artistic collaboration.

Once again, as with the *Madonna*, Mancoba makes an inspiring work, which asserts in an entirely different way, the dignity of black womanhood, and at the same time, represents women universally as strong and thoughtful.

Figure of a Woman (1936) teak, 59 x 10,5 x 9,5cm

1.3 UNITING OPPOSITES

La Double Unité

La Double Unité (The Double Unity) was originally called *La Double Unité* and *La Double Vérité*. This is French for 'united binary' or 'double truth'. Both names give us some insight into the artist's intentions.

In English, the French word, *Unité*, means the act of coming together into a unit, suggesting oneness, togetherness and community. A unit is a single thing. Unity is a state of being when two or more things are united. The first word in this title is 'double' which means two, so Mancoba is not forcing but drawing our attention to two matters. We know his primary concern was with uniting the spiritual and the material, and in this work, we find these expressed in the actual and the symbolic. For example, a foetus represents the sexual union of male and female. But there is more duality in this work. Mancoba shows us how many things depend on their opposite for their meaning, just as life depends on death. He also unites the African tradition of creating an art object with a spiritual function, with European traditions of interpretation in this sculpture. *La Double Unité* seems to be one of the last sculptures he ever made. It is less representational and more abstract than the sculptures he was making at the beginning of his career but there are recognisable elements in it.

In *La Double Unité*, the actual and the symbolic are two equally important parts combined in one object. These two parts look out in opposite directions. Because Mancoba insisted on the importance of referencing the past as a guide to the future, it is reasonable to speculate that one part could be looking at the past and the other to the future. This is similar to the role of the Sankofa bird in the Akan cultures (see page 39).

La Double Unité (The Double Unity) (1950) olive wood, 46 x 17 x 6cm

He believed that a sacred rule for life was to link the past closely to the future, so that the present was lived with integrity. A person with integrity makes consistent choices based on their core values.

The sculpture stands up straight, like a carved stick, but also like a totem pole, a shape used by many cultures for their sacred symbols (see page 37). In sculpture, this shape has a universal significance – like the spire on a church resembling a finger pointing towards the heavens, connecting humans with the divine. It can therefore have a numinous (sacred) quality. It is also the shape of the phallus, the symbol of masculinity, and is very similar to the Mwana Hiti sculpture, a female doll used in female initiation rites in Tanzania.

Mancoba's thoughts on African Sculpture

Elza Miles described his early experience of sculpture:

'Ernest knew the clay pots his mother Florence made herself but, other than that, it was his introduction to the book *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, in the 1930s in South Africa, that was fundamental to his intellectual appreciation of the aesthetic principles of African sculpture. Later (that decade), in the British Museum in London, Ernest was struck by the serenity of the original sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa, because those works were created before colonialism, when the African domain was free - not buckling under the tyranny of the West. His own work mirrors the pain of an incapacitated community. In the past, artists had created for the preservation and survival of their societies. But isolated contemporary artists were working from within disintegrated communities.'[32]

Mancoba expressed this isolation and pain in an interview in '*The Church Times*' (1938).[33] While he said then that his sculptures were showing the pain of African experience to 'the white man', our reading of his later sculpture suggests that the message in his work was more complex than that; certainly, by the time he carved *La Double Unité* in 1950, he was fully resolved in an aesthetic which expressed his values, he was confident to a universal audience and indeed he described the 1950s as a very productive artistic decade for himself and Sonja. His assertion of his felt duty as an artist and an African, in an article in *Musee Vivant* in 1953 underscores this.[34] But let's go back a bit to 1938.

At the British Museum, in 1938, Mancoba could have seen the Mwana Hiti figures created by a number of peoples in Tanzania. Equally, he may have seen them later at the *Musée de l'Homme* (Museum of Man) in Paris [35] (see page 22). These two museums were key repositories of colonial loot. It was, and still is, possible to see art from all of Africa, Latin America and Asia in them. In fact, there is now a debate gathering momentum about how this art should be returned to its places
of origin.

In 1950 when he carved the *Double Unity*, Mancoba created a similar numinous (sacred) object. Because he insisted on the importance of knowing the past in order to create a future.

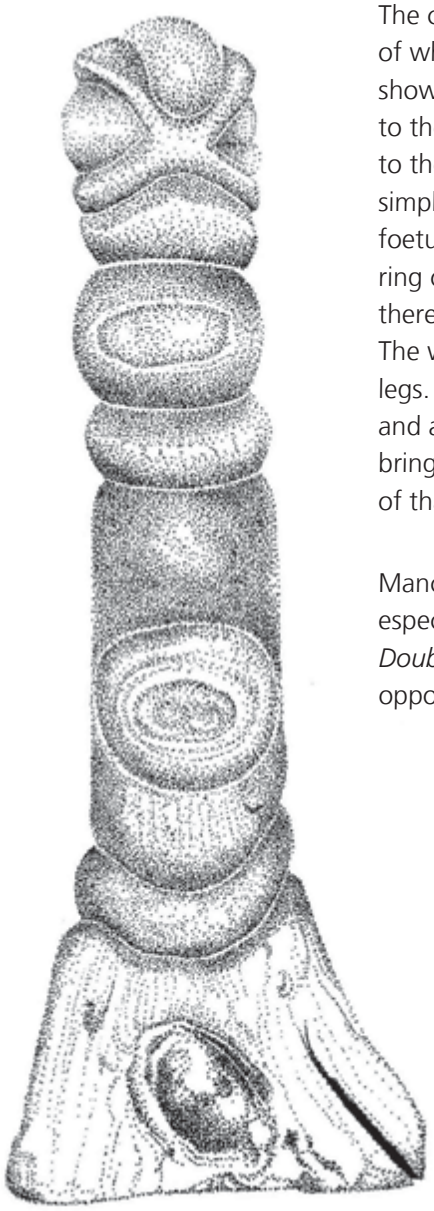
Mwana Hiti

Mwana Hiti are also called trunk figures, and in a highly stylised way depict the torso of a female figure. The name has been translated as "daughter of the throne" or "female child of the one who is enthroned".

The figure is said to be both male and female: male because of the general phallic shape and female because of the breasts. Mwana Hiti figures are given to a girl by her father's sister when it is time for her to begin a period of seclusion that is part of her initiation into womanhood.[36]

An interpretation of the form

There are many shapes carved into this small totem-like figure (see page 37), including fat rings that remind us of the coil of cloth on the head of Mancoba's special carved stick (see page 24), and the fat rings of beadwork worn around the necks of Ndebele people. In 1936, he sculpted *La Double Unité* a bust with a neck-ring just like this one (see page 12). The crossing lines emphasise the 'eye-like' shape of the parts looking out in different directions. It also looks like a blindfold that has been cut open to let the figure see. The band over the eyes prevents the figure from seeing out, but also suggests looking within. With the blindfold opened, both opposites can see, but there is a slit cut into the eye on one side. This suggests that there is another combination of opposites present here. The slit represents an open eye, one that can look outwards, and in this context, the other does not: it is open and therefore seeing, but the direction it is looking in, is inward. This is Mancoba's way of saying, 'Live consciously.' In other words, keep your eyes open, be aware and stay in touch with your inner world.



The chest area bulges as if there were a band of cloth around it, part of which is open like a visor, to reveal what is underneath. We are not shown shaped breasts, because the intention is not to draw attention to the femaleness of the sculpture. The visor simply draws our attention to the function of breasts: the capacity to nourish offspring. On the simplest part of the shaft, a circle surrounds a tiny bean shape or foetus, which indicates the fruitfulness of this double union. Below the ring or loincloth above the triangular shape at the base of the pole, there is a darkened part at the centre which suggests female genitals. The whole figure rests on the cut-off thighs. There are no arms, no legs. The sculpture does not refer to physical movement other than sex, and as this is a symbolic piece, we should see sex as that which can bring opposites together, creating something perfect and valuable out of that union.

Mancoba often spoke about the importance of uniting opposites, especially spiritual and material values.[37] The central theme of *La Double Unité* is that the conscious and creative reconciliation of opposites brings new life into the world.

1.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MANCOBA'S CARVED STAFF

Mancoba had a carved staff, a gift from an old Mandebele man whom he met in the Limpopo rural areas, while teaching at the Khaiso Senior Secondary School in Pietersburg (now Polokwane). Mancoba kept the stick with him all his life, as a comfort and reminder of his southern African heritage, while he lived far away in exile.[38] The knob of the staff has a head on it with a mask-like face and a coil of cloth on top, which is used to help carry a burden, in this case the weight of the person leaning on the staff. It also signifies royalty or chieftainship. The man who gave it to him said, 'I give you this, as you are going where I cannot go, into the world of the white man, but I want you to keep this as a memory of your heritage.'[39] It is possible that the man inherited it from his ancestors, or, being an artist himself, was given it by another artist.

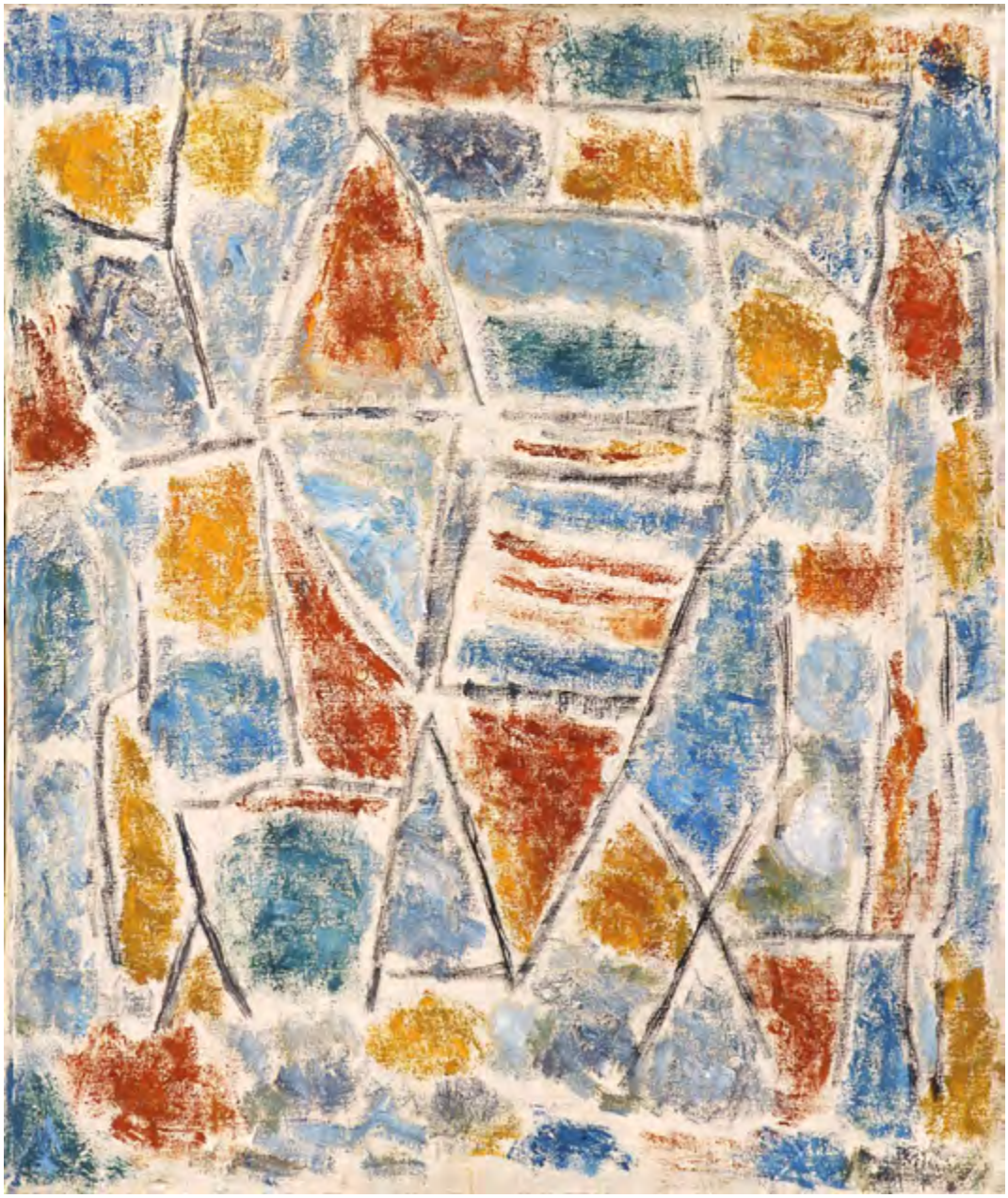
Mancoba never forgot this encounter, and in his ninety-eighth year, he described his reasons for going to Europe as follows:

'I wished to participate in the great universal debate where Africa, though present by its ancient sculptural masterpieces in the possession of collectors and museums and in the opinions of so many European thinkers and artists, had nobody to speak for it, and remained mute even in the elements of dialogue that concerned directly its own civilisation and culture.'[40]

Mancoba is referring to the many African and other art objects from the Global South which were piling up in the museums in Europe, as a result of colonial trophy hunting and its related 'museum culture'. In Europe these art objects were regarded as curiosities, with no concern for their role in the lives of the people who had made them. This ignorance about the objects, and the disrespect for their creators and original context, prevented the artworks from being fully appreciated.

'Mancoba passionately denounced the fact that we might regard the man who carved his precious staff as an ignorant "nobody". For Mancoba, the maker of this staff had made something of inestimable value for humanity. He vehemently asserted that we needed to acknowledge this artist as much as we admired his work: "He made this and it can't die."'[41]

In acknowledging this unknown artist, he was paying tribute to the work of many African artists whose work served as inspiration for the Western tradition in art, but who were themselves unacknowledged.



Composition (1951) Oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5 cm (Schachat collection)

part two

MANCOBA
the painter

Introduction

As with all abstract art, Mancoba's paintings did not have an obvious relationship with reality. He didn't, for example, paint portraits or landscapes. His paintings seem like squiggly patterns and random patches of colour. One might even say, as many people do say about abstract art, 'a five-year-old could have done that'.

If you think Mancoba's work is meaningless, you are not alone. Some museum curators and art historians haven't understood it at all. But we'd like to take you on a journey to see more in his paintings than you might be able to imagine at first sight. We will explore the significant symbols he uses.

We hope you will enjoy learning about Mancoba's work and develop some of your own solutions to the challenges it presents.

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Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60cm (*SANG*)

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- Masks
- The ancestor and African Spirituality

L'Ancetrê (The Ancestor)(1969) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60cm (*JAG*)

- Why do we respect our ancestors?
- The totem in Ernest Mancoba's work

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Sankofa a symbol

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Untitled (1959) oil on canvas, 49.5 x 39.5cm (JAG)

- White, the colour of the ancestors

Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60cm (SANG)

Untitled (1990) ink and oil pastel on paper, 28.5 x 51cm (Schachat Collection)

- The significance of ochre

Composition (1951) oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5cm (Schachat Collection)

2.4 THE INFLUENCE OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN BEADWORK ON MANCOBA'S WORK 48

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L'Ancetrê (The Ancestor) (1969-1971) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm (JAG)

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- Painting analysis: colour and meaning

Untitled (1976) ink and oil pastel on paper, 50 x 32.5cm (Private Collection)

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- Painting analysis

Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm (SANG)

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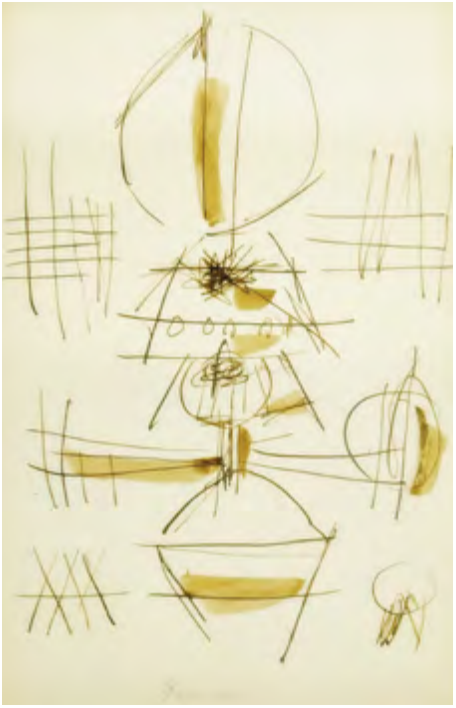
2.1 WHICH WAY UP?

At first Mancoba's paintings can seem like beautiful patterns, and we can't really tell which way is up and which way is down. Sometimes his paintings are even exhibited or printed upside down. The painting below was hung upside down in an exhibition at the South African National Gallery, and it was published upside down in the *Picasso and Africa* exhibition catalogue.[42]

The 1990 painting currently in the possession of Galerie Mikael Andersen, Denmark, was illustrated upside down in the Hans Ulrich Obrist interview,[43] and there have been other instances in which the works have been presented upside down by mistake.[44] However, Elza Miles says art students are encouraged to view their work from all angles and the fact that Mancoba's work can be seen from many angles is a sign of his mastery of composition. Nevertheless, we want to find a way to view or see the work which goes beyond its decorative surface, in order to develop a deeper understanding of its secrets. For this we need to know which way up to view it.[45]

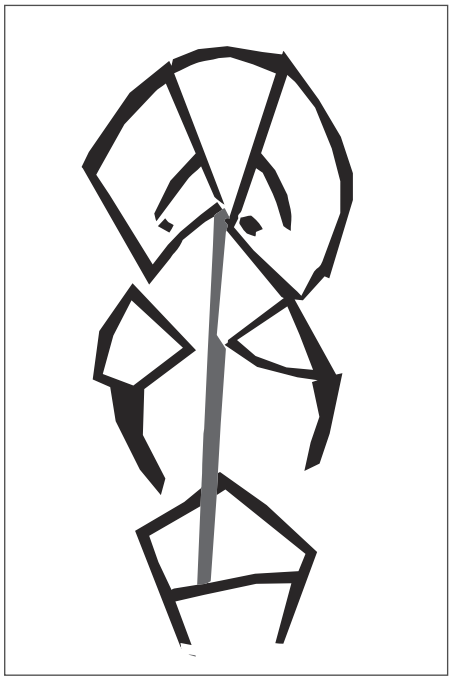
Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm

An inner shape suggests which way up these paintings should be hung.



Once you see the shape you know which way to hang the paintings, but what does this shape mean?

2.2 ASPECTS OF FORM



Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm

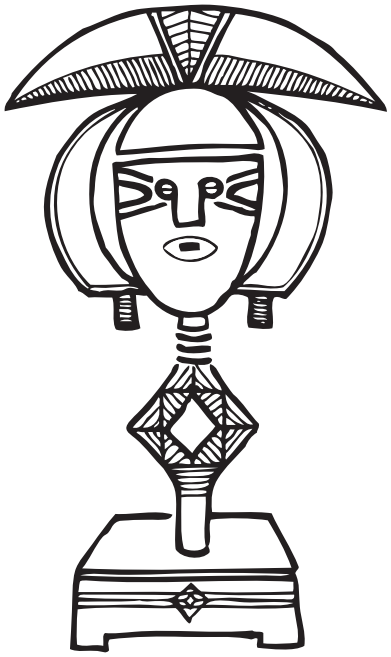
Form and meaning in Mancoba's work

When you look carefully, a shape begins to emerge from the canvas. This can be compared to the figure of the Kota, a small carving which stands over a box of sacred objects, used in rituals by the Bakota people of Gabon. It is this figure that shows us which way the painting should be placed.

Mancoba said: 'The Kota effigy has a strange resemblance with the central figure in my painting, not only formally, but also as to the destination it was supposed to have. It stood, traditionally, on top of a basket-box containing the bones of the deceased ancestor, whom it, somehow, represented and defended in the world of the living. It also contained different sorts of ritual objects, like shells and certain plants used magically. The sculpture and box had a symbolic meaning and function which maintains together the teachings and the experience of the tribe, and it gave a spiritual depth to rites, without which, these would risk, in a later context, to become mere folklore. This striking representation, standing on the reliquary, could also be seen as an effort to prolong and accompany the spiritual influence of the ancestor, not only in the remembrance of future generations, but in the consciousness these will have of themselves.'[46]

In other words, the Kota figure in many of Mancoba's paintings represents the spirit of the ancestor that lives on in modern times.

The Kota reliquary figure



The Bakota, also known as Kota, live in Gabon, West Africa. Traditionally, they have viewed themselves as a united people bound by a common fate. Kota children have been taught to value tradition, to respect the elderly, and to have a communal pride, referred to as Ewele. The bones of prominent ancestors, such as village chiefs, priests, judges, craftsmen, and specially honoured women, were kept in bundles in baskets attached to a carved figure. These reliquaries (containers of relics) were brought out from hidden places whenever the ancestors' assistance was needed to resolve a crisis, or assure success in an important project.[47]

The figures themselves were handled with care and reverence. Ornamented figures guarded the relics against the malicious actions of evil doers.[48]

Kota figures range in height from about 30 to 60 centimetres.[49] They are made of wood decorated with metal. All of them have large oval heads and tiny bodies, and a halo or headdress over the head. There is 'hair' on either side of the face; ear-lobes or holes pierced where ear-lobes would be; two eyes and a nose; a neck; and often, a necklace. The shape below the neck is sometimes described as arms bent at the elbow, with the hands clasped together. It has also been described as legs. Some figures have a mouth and some do not.[50] Brass and copper applied to the surface also served symbolic roles. The metal was finely detailed to express wealth, to honour revered ancestors, and its bright reflection guards the ancestors' bones from hostile spirits.[51]

In Kota tradition, women were not supposed to see the masks except when they were worn in a ceremony. Boys who were too young to join the dance troupe made play masks and imitated the dancers.[52]

In a museum exhibition, the mask will be presented as a sculptural work of art, but it is important to remember that the Kota reliquary mask was part of a ritual performance that used ceremony, dance, and music to fully exercise its power and relationships between the living and the ancestors.[53]

Masks

In the Western world, African masks are hung on walls to complement the décor of a home, but in pre-colonial Africa, Ernest Mancoba tells us that, 'The notion of Art for Art's sake is unknown. Art must have a social meaning or it does not exist at all…For the object of African art is not to please the eye or the senses but it is to use art as a means, as a language, to express feelings and ideas in relation to the present, the future and the past, to discover new concepts by which to regard the world for the salvation of man. It is more collective and social…'[54]

African ritual masks and costumes are an art form that evolves with every generation. Nowadays a mask can be decorated with modern enamel paint and other commercially produced materials, which shows that African art adapts to modern times without losing its meaning and value.[55] Indeed this shows that African art is not unchanging and stuck in the past, it is dynamic.

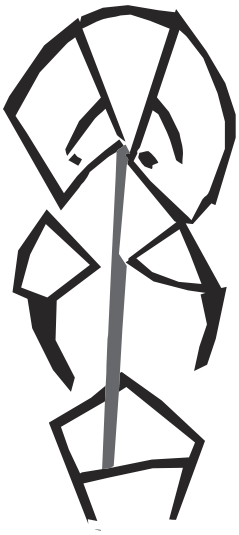
'These (African) artists value fine workmanship and great skill. In many African languages, there is a word that means 'beautiful' and 'good' at the same time, because what pleases the eye must uphold moral values too'.[56] Therefore the beauty or success of a work depends on its ability to convey a message. In addition to which, Mancoba tells us, 'The distinction between what's called figurative and abstract is a distinction that has no real place, no significance for the African artist.'[57]

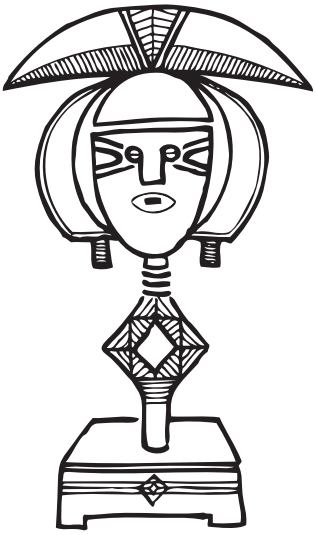
Many African and African diaspora societies see masks as mediators between the living world and the world of the dead.[58] Masks provide a bridge between them. The spirit of the dead possesses the individual who wears the mask.[59] The power of the mask lies in its ability to communicate with the world.

In producing a mask, a sculptor's aim is to depict a person's psychological and moral characteristics, rather than provide a realistic physical portrait.[60] Let's remember this when we go deeper into analysing Mancoba's portrayal of an ancestral figure. He said, 'Now my own expression can have different interpretations, but one of the ways to see the (ancestor) figure of the paintings or drawings could also be as a spirit evoked, that, in a more general way, would represent or stand up for its endangered identity, in a hostile environment...It aims to bring the hope of a spiritual survival and of a new relationship and integrity with Matter, to future human beings.'[61]

The ancestor and African spirituality

Mancoba's African and spiritual notion of humanism (*'ubuntu'*) can be seen in his art. One of the ways he did this was by often representing an ancestral figure at the centre of his paintings. He used something like the shape of the traditional Kota reliquary figure as an ancestral figure in his paintings.





L'Ancetré (1969) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.2cm

By placing this figure representing a common human ancestor at the centre of his paintings, Mancoba suggests that if we respect all of humanity and connect with each other in a human way, (rather than through greed or opportunism or seeking power), we will exercise our innate spirituality and thus affirm the value of all human life.

The proverb *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu* means that a person is a person by and because of other people (the word '*ubuntu*', which means 'humanness', is often used as shorthand for the proverb). This proverb expresses a philosophical concept, the essence of African humanism and spirituality, which was very important in Mancoba's worldview. It involves showing respect to all people, including those who have laid out a path for us to follow, that is to say, ancestors.

The meaning, values and heritage of African culture, which Mancoba argued vehemently needed to be preserved,[62] are contained in the idea of showing respect to the Ancestor. We show our appreciation of these when we show our respect for the sacrifices that have been made by previous generations in order for us to exist.

When Mancoba depicted the ancestor, he could have been inspired by the sacrifice his own great grandmother made for the lives of her people. This story gave '*ubuntu*' a very deep significance for him.

Mancoba's great-grandmother made a sacrifice that enabled her family to escape Shaka's regiments. They were fleeing 'the dictatorship imposed by Shaka Zulu' (in the area now called KwaZulu-Natal) in the early nineteenth century.[63] Mancoba's great-grandmother was slowing down the group, so she volunteered to remain where she was, in order not to hold them up. This meant that she would die alone, helpless and in strange territory, but she sacrificed herself for the greater good, for the sake of her people. When his mother told the story to him, the '*ubuntu*' and sacrifice of his great grandmother made a huge impression on the young Mancoba. He showed his respect for her values in his paintings.

In conversation with Bridget Thompson, Mancoba expressed that life on earth is in great danger because of the negative ways human beings relate to one another, to the environment and other forms of life. He felt that we face the possibility of becoming extinct, like dinosaurs, and that the only thing that could save us is to act with '*ubuntu*'. Mancoba also felt '*ubuntu*' could be equated with the Christian saying, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. He said that this biblical saying and the African proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*' were all he needed as a guide to life.

He drew on his own African knowledge to appreciate '*ubuntu*' but the more he learnt about other cultures the more he was pleased to find something like '*ubuntu*' buried in many cultures across the world. And it is true that some form of ancestor veneration can be found in every culture. So, we can see that this African form of spirituality is universal.

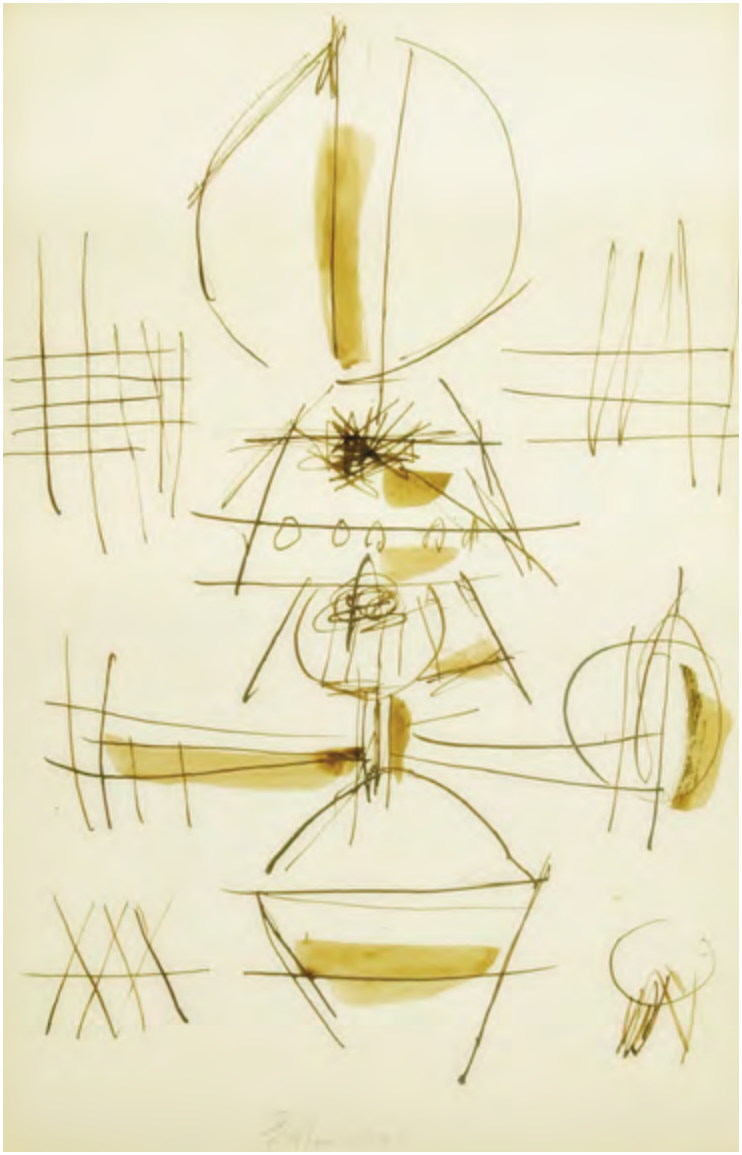
Why do we respect our ancestors?

The ancestor embodies the meaning, values, and traditions of the culture. We show our respect for these when we honour those who have come before us – and live according to a particular moral code handed down by those who come before us. Later, when we discuss Mancoba's call for the material and spiritual to be reconciled, we can appreciate that what he meant was that we need to live our lives in the material world without losing respect for all human beings. So we can see that African spirituality is rooted in showing respect for all human beings, both past and present.

It is important to note here that Mancoba took the idea of the ancestor from his own African upbringing, and when he used it in his art, he used it inclusively to represent an ancestor of all humanity.[64] This underlines an understanding of '*ubuntu*' as a democratic, universal but not a dominating concept.He believed that awareness of who you are and your human origins, (your ancestors) in the African sense of spirituality develops the values of '*ubuntu*'. This encourages people to become less materialistic and more spiritual and thus could ensure humanity's survival.

Mancoba felt that we had left behind certain important human values in our quest for progress. He asked, 'What are we leaving on the way of this so-called progress?' He meant that we should not forget important values from the past, such as those embedded in the proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*' (a person is a person by and because of other people).[65] Mancoba used a representation of the ancestor to convey this message, because showing respect for our ancestors (in any form and in any culture) strengthens the ties between the past and the present. It conveys the idea that we cannot exist and make progress unless we have respect for each other and our heritage.

The totem in Ernest Mancoba's work

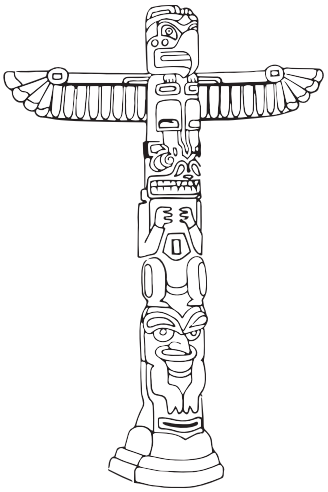


Drawing (1969-71) Sepia wash on paper, 49 x 32cm

In the work above we can see the figure of the Kota figure representing the ancestor in this work, but we can also see two figures in this drawing, one on top of the other. The top one could be the guiding spirit of the ancestor, and the lower one, the warrior spirit. In this form, they are totemic.

Mancoba called the totem 'the concretisation of our origins, our ancestor'.[66] In other words, it was the physical symbol of our human origins. He felt that our common human origins unite us across all cultures and differences.[67]

The totem



Totem pole from North America.

Aloara, totems from Madagascar.

A totem is an animal, plant, bird or natural object that has been chosen as the emblem or symbol of a clan or family. The totem is sometimes seen as its founder, ancestor or guardian. Totem poles are huge sculptures that were carved from large tree trunks by the indigenous people of the north-west coast of North America, who, like Africans, comprised many different languages and cultural groups. The word 'totem' comes from the Ojibwe word for 'kinship group' (odoodem). The Ojibwe are the biggest group of Native Americans, also known as First Nations in the United States. Totem poles were never worshipped by their makers, but Christian missionaries thought that they were, and forced people to destroy them. Not many still exist or are made today.

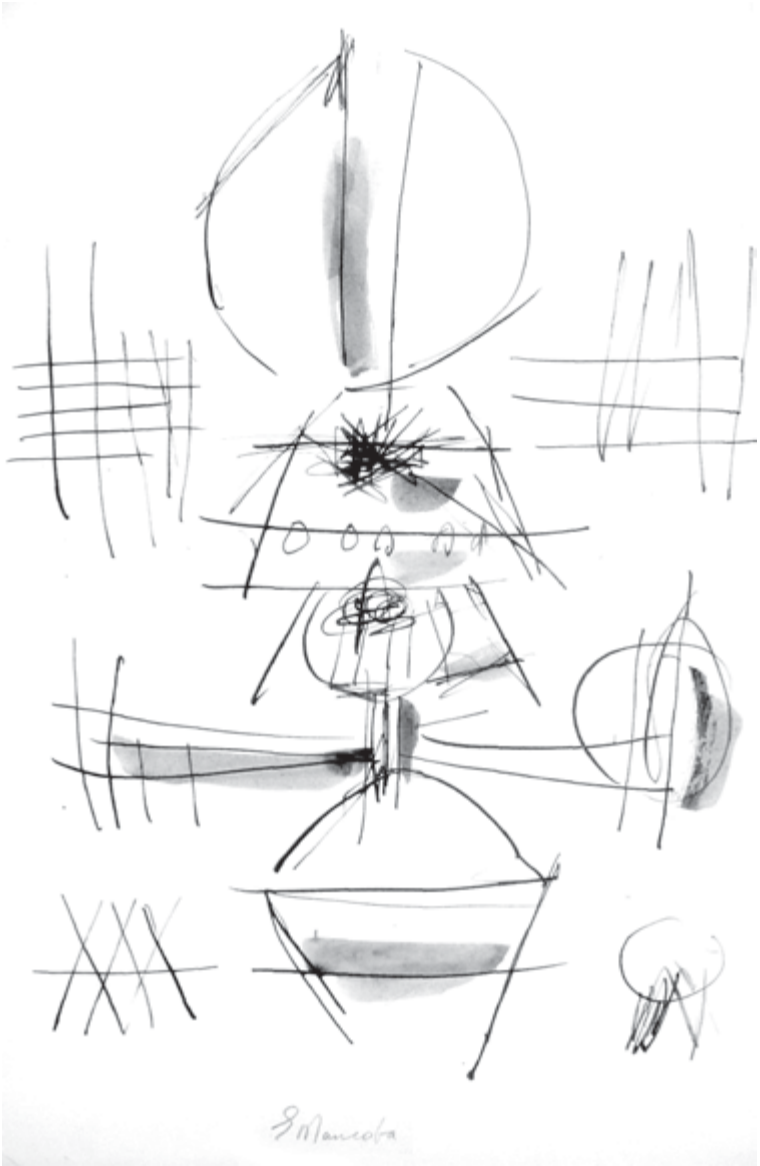
Each culture has its own rules and customs regarding the designs used on the totem poles. The designs themselves are generally considered the property of a particular clan or family group. The meanings of the designs are as varied as the cultures that make them. Totem poles may show familiar legends, clan lines, or famous events. The order of images on the pole is of no importance. Many poles have significant figures on the top, others on the bottom, and some have them in the middle. Some poles simply have a single figure on top of an undecorated column.

On the left, a totem pole of a Native American group, (we don't know which one), is made up of several animals and birds which are culturally important to the people who carved it. The aloara on the right are totems placed by the Merina people of Madagascar on the tombs of family members who have died. The carvings at the top of each aloara represent items which relatives wish to accompany the dead person in the next life.[68]

By calling his ancestral figure a totem, and saying that it concretised our origins, Mancoba was using a symbol to portray the ancestor.

As we discuss the ideas of the ancestor and of the totem, it becomes clear that they are symbols that carry many meanings. Symbols contribute to metaphoric language by representing ideas in pictures. For example, in the Christian church, the fish represents Christ. Many people around the world use important symbols of their heritage in totems.

So far, we've looked at two abstract concepts that Mancoba represented visually, using a symbolic language: one is the ancestor which symbolises humanity. Another interrelated concept is the important relationship between past and present, and heritage, as expressed in a totem. Let us go deeper into symbolism and metaphoric language, before we return to analysing this drawing.



Sankofa a symbol

In Mancoba's use of the ancestral figure at the centre of his paintings, we can also consider the African concept of the union of past and present, which is conveyed by the symbol of the Sankofa Bird, a very important symbol amongst the Akan people of West Africa. Although to date we haven't identified anything literally like the Sankofa bird in Mancoba's paintings, he did own a book with this image, and understanding the symbolism of the Sankofa bird helps us to understand his way of thinking.

The word 'Sankofa', from the Akan language, means to 'go back and take' (sanko- go back, fa- take). If you look at the image or symbol, you will see that the bird's beak is turned back to catch an egg on its tail. Although not all Sankofa birds carry an egg on their tail, they all look backward. In other words, you find the future in the past and you can bring the past forward into the future. As a wise leader of the African diaspora, the Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, once said, 'A people without knowledge of their history, origins, and culture, is like a tree without roots.'

The Sankofa symbol captures this relationship between past and present very well. The meaning we can derive from this, in relation to Mancoba's work and his depiction of an ancestral figure, is that people can integrate what they have learnt that is valuable from previous generations into their contemporary lives. In other words, nothing happens in a vacuum; the future arises from the past, and the seeds of the future are in the past.

The *Sankofa bird* and two increasingly more abstract representations of it.

The *Sankofa bird* is often associated with the Akan proverb, 'Se wo were fi nawoSankofa a yenkyi,' which translates as, 'It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten'.

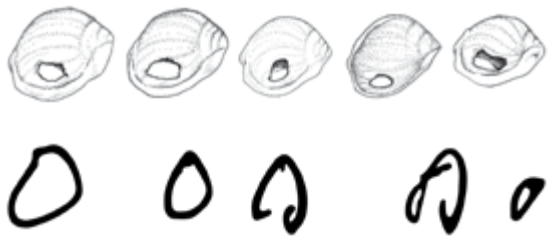
Metaphoric language and the origins of humanity

The transition of the images of the *Sankofa bird* into greater levels of abstraction, on the previous page, show how a symbol can be created which refers to something, but no longer resembles it. Here in South Africa, the language of beadwork has symbolic significance. In other parts of the continent, one of the most important bearers of symbolic language is the mask.

Metaphoric language is a vital part of African culture. 'It is a fundamental part of communication, the length and breadth of Africa. It is expressed variously in song, in poetry, in oral traditions, jokes, riddles, proverbs, stories, masks, dance, and in the language of everyday interaction. It is possible to meet many people, even today, in spite of rapid Westernisation, who are unschooled in terms of Western education, who yet have a more thorough grasp of philosophy and poetry than many Ph.D. graduates. The tradition of poetry and metaphoric or symbolic language has been an integral part of everyday life in Africa for many centuries.'[69]

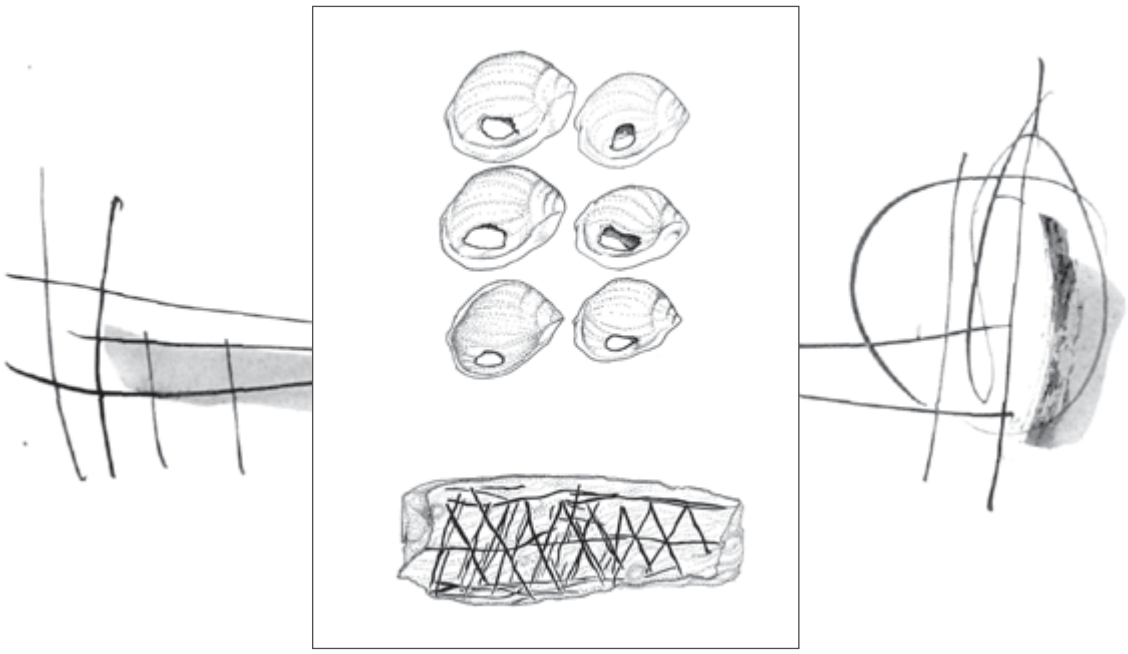
This language, where symbols are frequently used to allude to something else, and metaphors are used as word puzzles and challenges, creates dexterous minds and enriches culture. The ability to conceptualise an image, and then make a sign or symbol to represent it, is in fact the first mark of being human. Mancoba said that it was important for all of society, not only poets and artists, to understand symbols and hold on to the tradition of poetic language[70] suggesting that metaphoric thought is vital for human civilisation. See further page 56 on how Mancoba used metaphors in his paintings).

We know that Africa is the birthplace of all humanity. Recent research by palaeontologists has proved that the first man and woman were African. Much of this evidence was found at Sterkfontein and other caves near Johannesburg, in an area which is now known as the Cradle of Humanity.



The shells, illustrated on the opposite page and above were found by archaeologists at another site, the Blombos Cave near Stilbaai in the Western Cape, are dated to 70 000 years ago. Similar and slightly older shells have been found in Morocco. The fact that holes were made to put them on a string suggest they were the first jewelery.

The archaeologists also discovered cross-hatchings on pieces of ochre (a type of clay) in the cave. These could be the earliest art (or writing) made by human beings. Archaeologists say that these discoveries prove that human culture existed more than 70,000 years ago in Africa.



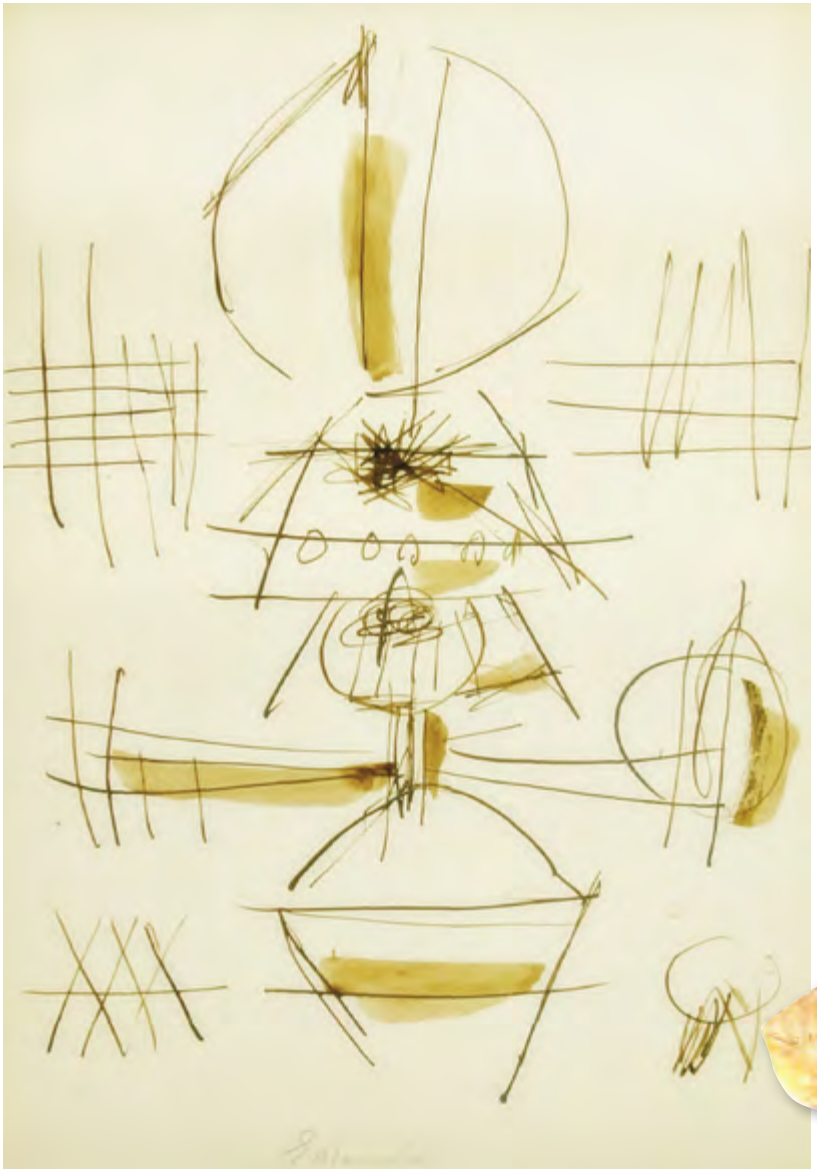
We may never know what these marks meant to the artist, but they prove to us that humans originated in Africa. The language of these ancient markings can be found in much of Mancoba's work. To understand what the marks may mean requires us to enter the world of the spirit. In the world of the spirit, it doesn't matter what language we speak; we can still get the message. Think of the way music works. You don't have to be able to read music to hear and feel what it is saying.

Reading symbols

The figure on the next page stands upright with limbs outstretched, ready for action. It is loaded with symbols of its ancestry: a line of beads across the chest, cross-hatching all around it and streaks of golden colour drawing attention to important features. The soft golden line is applied carefully, like an anointing of significant parts: the head, the heart, the fighting arm, the shield, the cask of revered relics.

The signs around this warrior are clear. The 'legs' are the basis of its strength, because they represent the history and foundation of the community, the very reason the community exists. The golden streak across the base line reminds us of the central role of the ancestors.

The ancestor warrior holds a shield that glints with the power of defence and his right arm is fortified with the pure strength of gold. That hand holds the message that will spearhead change. On either side of the shoulders, on the same plane as the body, the message appears again, held out like wings that declare both the message and its power to mediate between the material and spiritual world.



In many cultures, warriors adorn themselves with significant objects for rituals and to prepare for battle. Here, a chest band of shell beads could be designed for physical battle, to deflect the point of a spear, or worn symbolically to indicate spiritual protection. This would also enable the warrior to display his power and magnificence. We understand this figure as one that is defending the spiritual dimension of life.

2.3 INTRODUCING COLOUR

Colour is an essential part of a painter's art. Very few painters paint in monotones, but even if they do, it means something very specific. For example, Picasso's 'blue period' - in which all his paintings were in shades of blue - is said to have resulted from the suicide of a friend, and blue denoted his sadness. Catholic Madonnas are often dressed in blue as a symbol of purity. Colour is a deeply personal, cultural and emotional tool.

For example, white is the colour used for Western weddings, but red is used for weddings in India and white is used for mourning. Black is the colour of wisdom in Indonesia, but in many cultures, it is the colour of mourning.

Most of Mancoba's linear forms in his paintings are surrounded by colour, and these colours are very distinctive and often very pleasing. His friend, the Danish artist, Ejler Bille, described him as one of the greatest colourists.[71]

Ulrich Clewing, a German art historian, writes warmly and sympathetically about Mancoba's use of colour:

'Ernest Mancoba's work is notable for not only its mastery of its colour-composition but also for its emphasis on ornament, which is not to be confused with superficiality or charm. Mancoba's works often give the impression of being made of finely woven material whose pattern is basically symmetrical. This special materiality of his pictures, which had become evident long before he joined the Cobra group, intensified in the years after 1948 into vibrant, minutely and skilfully painted abstractions in which every thread seems to tingle with motion.'[72]

Clewing seems to suggest, through the title of his article, 'The unconscious motion of hues', that Mancoba's colours arise from his subconscious,[73] but he doesn't analyse Mancoba's colours any further than that.[74]

Let us see what we can discover about his colours from analysing the way Mancoba worked.

Mancoba used a technique called automatic drawing, in which you allow your hand to move randomly across the paper, without thinking about it. If you allow your subconscious mind to take over, the marks you make on the paper can reveal something within you of which you may not consciously be aware.

In applying chance and accident to mark-making, drawing is to a large extent freed of rational control. Thus, the drawing produced may reveal something of the psyche which would otherwise be repressed.[75]

Mancoba practised this technique, together with his wife, Sonja Ferlov, when they first met in Paris.

Later, he said that when he was painting or drawing, he allowed what was in his subconscious to rise up. In other words, he tapped into his deepest memories and dreams and brought to the surface things of which his conscious waking mind may not have been aware.

If we pay attention to the colours and art that Mancoba would have been familiar with, during his first 34 years living in South Africa, we can perhaps see into his subconscious store of images and understand his colour palette.

Colour and meaning

Untitled (1959) oil on canvas, 49.5 x 39.5cm

Stained-glass window in a church.

The colours in this painting are cheerful, strong and bright. They suggest the landscape one might see from a hill in a rural area in South Africa, and in shape are similar to a patchwork quilt or modern tapestry. They also suggest the stained-glass windows of churches, the realm of the spiritual. Both landscapes with colours similar to those depicted and coloured church windows were familiar to Mancoba from his childhood and early adulthood in South Africa.

In the next section we will explore other southern African sources of colour used by Mancoba that were rich with symbolic meaning.

White – the colour of the ancestors

Look at this painting, *Untitled* (1965), through your eyelashes and you could be looking through the white beads of a sangoma's headband. You can see a white outline come and go around the ancestral body as you open and close your eyes.[76]

Untitled (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm

White is an important feature of Mancoba's work. Elza Miles, a South African art historian and Mancoba's biographer, talks about the impressionistic techniques that Mancoba uses in his oil paintings; how the colours reflect the white of the canvas to create a shimmering impression.[77]

Sometimes, the way he painted white onto his canvas created a film of colour and light which became a strong feature of his work. In later works, especially the works on paper, he allows more and more of the white to show.

Untitled (1990) ink and oil pastel on paper, 28.5 x 51cm

In the drawing above, the white of the paper is a deliberate part of the work.

'What does this white symbolise for Mancoba? Is it the light of the spiritual world, the white of a sangoma's beads, the beads descended from the ancient shell beads found at Blombos Cave from 77,000 years ago? Is it the light of a stained-glass window in a church, representing the Christian values Mancoba's parents upheld? Possibly it's all of the above.'[78]

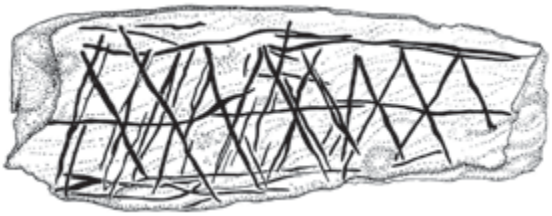
The most distinctive interpretation is based on what an Ndebele painter, Mrs Msiza, said about white. She said that in Ndebele colour composition, white mediates all the colours. This was neatly elaborated by art historian Athi Mongezeleli Joja, who said, "If you think carefully, the role of white as a mediating colour that lets others breathe is similar to that of the ancestors as mediators, that let us exist."[79]

The significance of ochre

Ochre is a type of clay soil (haematite or clay and ferrous oxide), whose colour ranges from light yellow to brown or red. It was used by prehistoric people all over the world, and was associated with blood, from which life is formed. It had spiritual significance and was used in ancient ceremonies such as initiations and funeral rites. The dead were often packed in red ochre, possibly to represent the blood of rebirth into the next life.[80] Red and brown ochre and the lines on this surface can be seen in much of Mancoba's work.

Composition (1951) oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5cm

The ochre tablets found in the Blombos Cave had amongst the earliest signs of modern thought scratched into them. Ancestors of San people used mainly ochre pigments to record aspects of their cultures in what are now precious, world-famous rock paintings. Ochre was the first mineral mined in southern Africa by ancient people who used it for many purposes, including for cosmetics. Xhosa blankets turn ochre-coloured when they are dyed with clay, before coloured beads and mother-of-pearl buttons are attached to decorate them. Ochre dust is scuffed up by passing herds and strong winds in many parts of southern Africa. The walls of homesteads are made smooth with ochre clay. The faces of initiates are painted with creamy ochre clay. Ochre-coloured clay produces ochre-coloured pots. Mancoba's use of ochre shades could not have been incidental. They would have been full of memory and meaning from his youth and early adulthood in South Africa.



Red and brown ochre and the lines on this surface can be seen in much of Mancoba's work. Mancoba's use of ochre shades and patternings could not have been incidental. They would have been full of memory and meaning from his youth and early adulthood in South Africa.

2.4 THE INFLUENCE OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN BEADWORK ON MANCOBA'S ART

Mancoba said, 'When I paint, I allow what is in my subconscious to rise up.'[81] Let's consider a strong visual influence which would have been in his subconscious.

His parents were amaMfengu (who speak isiXhosa), who, in the late nineteenth century, moved from the Eastern Cape to Johannesburg (Gauteng) to work. They were Western-educated, but his mother, in particular, was still very much in touch with African cultural practices, and, because Mancoba grew up in a mining township where migrants came from all over the country, indeed the region, he was surrounded by the indigenous visual art, including beadwork, of many southern African cultures. On Sundays, the workers would usually reconnect with their rural memories by wearing their culturally rooted attire, including beadwork.

Further proof of Mancoba's connection with other language groups is that even though he wasn't Shangaan himself or Tsonga, he was given a significant name by a Shangaan mineworker when he was a baby. The name is 'Ngungunyane', the name of a resistance leader. He signed some of his work as N.E. Mancoba, signifying that he regarded Ngungunyane as his name.

Furthermore, in his young adulthood, Mancoba lived in Limpopo and the Eastern and Western Capes, and travelled to the Free State and Mozambique (called Mocambique till 1975), so he would have seen many examples of indigenous visual expression while he was still living in South Africa. At this time, indigenous visual language was expressed in beadwork which was produced for use and aesthetic pleasure within African societies.

Mancoba would have seen a lot of beadwork in his life in South Africa, since it was very much more commonly worn at that time than it is now. Thus we can assume that he was knowledgeable about indigenous visual language as expressed in beadwork.

We understand that he drew on the colours and symbols expressed in southern African beadwork for his palette (range of colours), symbolism and method.

Symbols in Southern African beadwork

'The art of beadwork began with the attachment of seashells and seeds to leather. It often had a sacred meaning, as it represented society and its elements in harmony with each other'.[82]

'…Southern African beadwork developed in an explosion of creativity with the widespread introduction of glass beads by European traders during colonial times. It was practised on a large scale until at least the middle of the twentieth century.'[83] This creative expression began in ancient times with tying shells and seeds onto leather, as well as a more limited use of rare trading beads.

"It used signs and symbols which were already familiar in southern Africa society and used, for example, typical floor patterns that were marked in the mud at the entrance of a home, that meant "You are welcome" or "Don't come in"'.[84]

Southern African beadwork has evolved into distinctive patterns used by different language groups, but there is a similarity in the method, purpose and use of symbolism that transverses language groups. It is important to note that the production of beadwork has drastically declined since Mancoba's youth, and much of the beadwork produced today no longer has the deeper meanings and symbolic reminders of the earlier works. This is because of the massive disruption of people through forced removals during apartheid, coupled with the reduced availability and quality of beads, also because so few people still know the art of beadwork or the meanings of the colours.

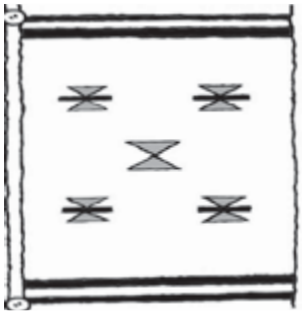
Signs of the influence of southern African beadwork artistry can be seen in many of Mancoba's paintings. The subtleties of colour gradation, geometric construction and patterning of Xhosa beadwork can be seen in some of Mancoba's work. Similarly, in some of his work, Ndebele colours can be identified, and in yet others, Zulu or Shangaan colours.

We can observe the differences between the work with which Mancoba would have been familiar, which we now see most often in museums and collections, and the work that is sold in street markets and is often created to capture the tourist's eye. But let's look at some of the classic forms, since this would have been what Mancoba was familiar with.

Examples of patterns characteristic of Zulu, Ndebele and Xhosa beadwork.

Zulu

Ndebele



Xhosa

In all of these instances, the colour and patterns of the beads play a communicative and symbolic role. For example, most Zulu and Xhosa beadwork related in some way to courtship and marriage. It was used to communicate between men and women, and to regulate their behaviour. Men wore beadwork to show the nature of their involvement with a woman, or with women.

Zulu beadwork

A Zulu woman's beadwork could describe whether she was free, engaged, married, had unmarried sisters or children, and where she came from. Men asked their female relatives to explain beadwork they did not understand. The bead code uses one basic geometric figure, the triangle, which is arranged in particular ways to mean different things.

Interpreting Zulu beadwork requires an understanding of proverbs, language and imagery, and of the purpose of the item. All the colours, except for white, can have positive or negative meanings. There are many ways of combining colours, using them in certain items rather than others, or emphasising their meaning by increasing the number of beads in a particular colour. Meaning can also change according to which colours are next to each other in a design.

Positive	Colour	Negative
Marriage, regeneration	Black	Sorrow, despair, death
Fidelity, request	Blue	Ill feeling, hostility
Wealth, a garden, industry, fertility	Yellow	Thirst, badness, withering away
Contentment, domestic bliss	Green	Illness, discord
High birth or rank, an oath, promise	Pink	Poverty, laziness
Physical love, strong emotion	Red	Anger, heartache, impatience
Spiritual love, purity, virginity	White	----------

This table shows the meanings given to different bead colours according to Zulu tradition. Other cultures may have similar or different meanings.[85] A woman may construct a message on an Ibeqe (white head band) as follows:

- Black next to the white of the band = marriage
- Red next to the black = an aching heart
- Yellow following the negative black/red combination = withering away, pining
- Blue as the central colour, followed in opposite sequence by the colours preceding it, yellow, red, black, demands a response

The woman could be saying: 'We are married, but my heart is aching because our love seems to be withering away. When will you return?'and this would serve as a message when sent to a young man working in the city, from whom the woman has not heard in a long while.[86]

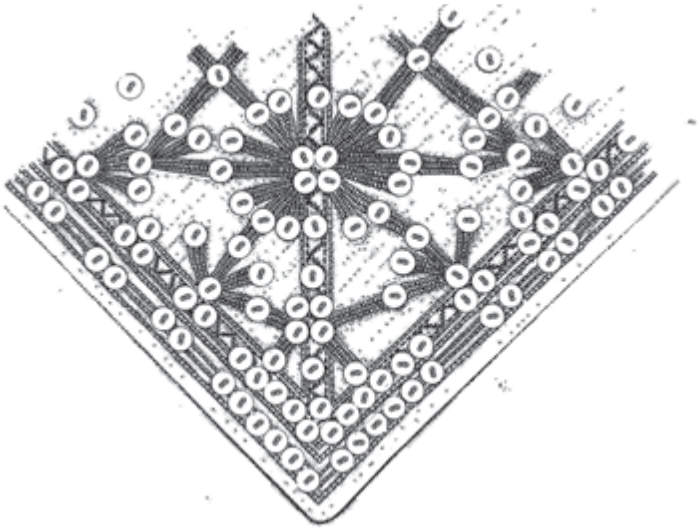
Ndebele wall painting and beadwork

Ndebele people developed house painting as a form of cultural protest after being defeated militarily by the Boers.[87] In the beginning of Ndebele house painting, the symbols and patterns they used were often based on Ndebele beadwork. The patterns were tonal and the women who painted them used their fingers to do so. The original paint laid down on the house was a limestone whitewash. The colours added to make the paintings were mostly natural pigments consisting of browns, blacks, and different ochres.

Colour had, and still has, a strongly symbolic meaning in Ndebele culture. It can refer to the status or power of the home's owners, offer prayer, announce a marriage in the home, or even represent a current protest. Many of the patterns use variations on a triangle on a large shape of colour.[88]

Xhosa beadwork

What is distinctive about Xhosa beadwork, which, like Zulu beadwork, was most often produced by young girls for their boyfriends, is that the colours are soft and muted and the patterns are sparse and subtle. Xhosa beadwork and Xhosa blankets are also often decorated with mother-of-pearl buttons which combine to make larger patterns.



The same subtleties of colour gradation, geometric construction, and patterning of this beadwork can be seen in Mancoba's work (see pages 52 and 84).The signs of the influence of southern African beadwork artistry can be seen in many of Mancoba's paintings. If we accept that Mancoba referenced the beadwork patterns of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and other southern African language groups, then the next question that arises is whether he also used colour symbolism to tell stories in the same way that these peoples did, and to some extent, still do.

*L'Ancêtre (*1969-71) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm

2.5 STORYTELLING WITH COLOUR

We will look closely at a work which has many elements of Ndebele colour and design and see if we can work out its story. Before we do, let us reflect on how a skilled painter Mrs. Msiza, described the use of colour in Ndebele painting. She said that Ndebele paintings are about combining and playing with colours. White separates the design pattern so as to let other colours breathe, make the image 'clean' and unite the colours. Black is about pushing all the colours in or out; it's about creating depth in the colour scheme. She said that colours are in conversation with each other. For example, when red is put together with pink, it has a particular meaning. If you don't know the symbolism of the relationship, you can miscommunicate.

Painting analysis: colour and meaning

Mancoba's ancestral figure sometimes looks like the figure of a child in his paintings. This has been interpreted by some as representing the Christ child, and by others, as his son, Wonga. In the painting on the next page, the ancestral figure seems small and vulnerable, like a child. Since Mancoba was concerned with the collective, with all humanity, it is reasonable to assume that the body of the ancestor in this painting represents children, or childhood. The date of the work, 1976, gives us a clue as to which children he may be referring. 1976 marked a crucial change in resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Young Sowetan school students, enraged by the new regulation that they be taught in Afrikaans, organised a series of peaceful meetings and marches to protest this. Afrikaans was not their mother tongue, or even the second language of many. It was also the language of the oppressor.

The police, intimidated by the size of the march which took place on 16 June, opened fire, killing two students, Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Peterson. The shootings sparked off days of insurgency and hundreds of deaths around South Africa, as students throughout the country joined in solidarity. Images of the chaos and carnage became front-page news around the world. A now iconic photograph of Hector Peterson, carried in the arms of a crying friend, was beamed around the world. Over the next nearly two decades, until a democratic government was installed, students actively supported trade unions, civic organisations, many NGOs and the external armed wings of the ANC, PAC and AZAPO, in their efforts to topple the apartheid regime. 16 June 1976 was the beginning of the end of apartheid, but the death of so many children and others, before and after that, was a terrible price to pay.

Through the media, Mancoba became aware that children were being viciously treated by the state in South Africa. They were being attacked, beaten, dragged about and shot at by adults, in full view of the world. Already in exile for 38 years, Mancoba must have been devastated by the news of this turn of events in his home country. His whole vision was to forge ways of cooperation and collaboration between different cultures. He had first-hand experience of life without rights in the land of his birth. He had experienced the injustices and crass tortures of everyday life in South Africa. He had been a child there.

Untitled (1976) ink and oil pastel on paper, 50 x 32,5cm

The symbolic use of colour by Mancoba

The central, small and vulnerable figure in *Untitled* (1976) seems to be attacked by black smudges of ink. Although this drawing does not show the figure in relation to another, and therefore make clear the youthfulness of the figure through its relative size, it uses other methods to convey this – the fragility of the figure reminds us of a baby bird. The colours tell a further story: the colours are exactly those of Ndebele painting as described by Mrs Msiza. In Ndebele colour symbolism, black indicates a trauma. We see sky – blue, symbolising a man (according to Mrs. Msiza), seemingly scratched out by black ink. Does this mean a young man is scratched out of life?

We see what could be a 'bridge' of Ndebele painting created at the bottom of the totemic figure. The bridge is the entry into the homestead and it is layered in brown, the colour of earth, and then orange which signifies a burn, and the next layer up seems to be green, which signifies hope.

Italian fascist symbol

Hector Peterson

We can see the childlike body attacked on its head, its face, its neck and its midriff. To the left of the picture, we see something reminiscent of the Italian Fascist symbol, the Roman Fascio in black, and to the bottom right, we see a dreamlike image of Hector Peterson, carried in the arms of Mbuyisa Makhubu.

Mrs. Msiza says of Ndebele painting: 'Red, it has a meaning. It is the colour that denotes sacrifice or the spilling of blood. So it is like you are sacrificing when you use red. And after sacrificing, you are cleansing, you are cleansing your home. Now we are talking about green. The green is always over the suffering, the garden that has been ruined. Things turn to be normal again. We become happy. We go back to sow in our gardens. We harvest and eat. Things are right now. The blue also works as substitute for green to give the meaning that we have harvested and are about to eat.'[90]

In this drawing, we see the red of sacrifice and we see the green of hope, just a little, on the face of the child. So whilst Mancoba depicts the devastation of these attacks on children, he also suggests that there is some hope from their sacrifice.

It is extraordinary how Mancoba uses the language of Ndebele painting in a modern work, which tells a contemporary story. He is doing what he suggests we should all do: he lives in the present while drawing on heritage to guide a way forward.

'When ideas and images rose from Mancoba's subconscious, he drew on a system of storytelling using colours, which is the method of southern African beadwork. Then he wove these colours together with other symbols thereby creating metaphors. This is also the method of the *imbongi* (praise poet or griot).'[91]

The imbongi

'*Izimbongi* have a duty to comment in symbolic language on the events of the day by placing them in context, predicting dangers and obliquely, yet often very cleverly, criticising the abuse of power.'[92] (For example: "The lion (our king) is losing his teeth (is not effective). We must feed him porridge (give the tough affairs of state to someone else)." Mancoba said:

"Poetry is symbolic. It needs to be said by poets and understood by the general population. We have absolutely to hold on to this heritage of poetic language. Everybody must be ready to carry this thing hand in hand together".[93]

'At a surface level, the poet's work may entertain or even praise, but when you read the metaphors, especially as an adult, you find a deeper meaning. Mancoba's mother taught him that certain poets had a special responsibility to comment on their society, to speak the unspeakable and to say the unsayable: "…there are sudden expressions (in poetry) which surprise and shock but these expressions have to be heard and have to be listened to and it is not all joyful, we have to make sacrifices in the poetic context because human experience is full of dreadful experiences, sacrifices."[94]

'The *imbongi* has a collection of perhaps 2 000 metaphors which he or she shapes and reshapes into a poetic declamation which both praises the situation of the day and highlights any problems. Metaphoric language is used to speak the unspeakable, that is, to raise problems and criticise. A spirit moves the *imbongi*, his or her voice drops to a growl, the spirit speaks through him or her.'[95]

'Mancoba followed a similar method in which he allowed the contradictions and misunderstandings of his daily life to rise up in him from his subconscious, and then he 'took his colours and his practical instruments', using metaphors of colour as an imbongi uses verbal metaphors or poetic phrases and used them to tell the story of his people of the whole world.'[96]

Mancoba took a range of colours, each of which represented a meaning and then wove them together with other symbols, thereby making a new 'poem' out of them. This is the way he told stories about his society. Mancoba spoke often about the importance of storytelling. He said that telling stories to children "keeps society together". It seems he told stories in his paintings in order to give hope and courage.

With all of this in mind, let's return to the first painting we looked at *Untitled* (1965) (page 29).

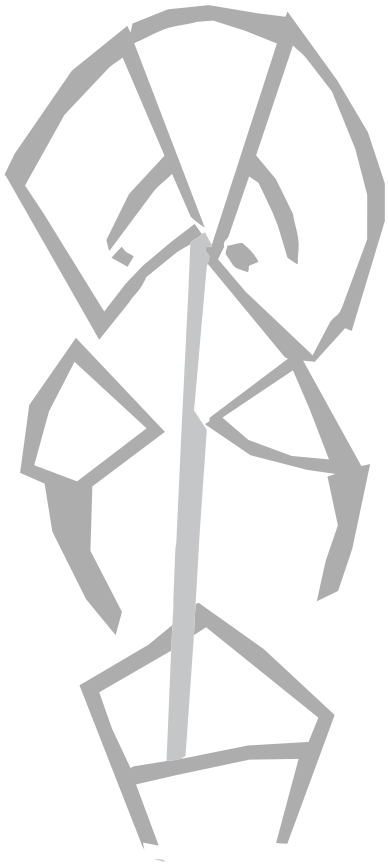
2.6 FORM, CONTENT AND COLOUR

Painting analysis

Again, an ancestor figure provides the environment within which to view Mancoba's feelings about his home country. Four years after the Sharpeville massacre, he produced a work which indicated conflict and confusion. There was a reign of terror in South Africa at the time. Mancoba's family still lived in this atmosphere, and were daily subjected to its cruel humiliations, frustrations and hardships. Again, an ancestor figure provides the environment within which to view Mancoba's feelings about his home country.

We can see the Kota figure. Although this ancestor is full of colour, it has a sad and battered face, seemingly more human than any other ancestor Mancoba depicted. The figure looks utterly worn out and is reminiscent of Mancoba's own face. The tragic face could also be an Mboom mask (of the commoner trying to overthrow the king). (See page 75 for more information about this mask).

A closer viewing reveals the colours, and then recognisable shapes appear in the muted tones of Xhosa beadwork.



Sans titre (*Untitled*) (1965) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm

We discern the following: In the top left, a very foreboding character; top right, children, perhaps in the style of San rock painting; bottom left, a Klu Klux clan figure with arm up, holding a stick, with head bowed to his right; bottom right, a Boer-looking figure.

'Is it possible that the figures are fighting each other? The original pattern is still clear, perfectly balanced and composed, but now we see that the painting is alive with motion and you can almost hear the clashing of sticks in battle. The figures can be abstract and, at the same time, represent clearly recognisable figures, characters and situations in a disturbed frenzy of activity. They are often quite reminiscent of rock art. Some are a smudge of colour. Could this be blood? They are fighting on the ancestral body, which is larger than any of them, and the ancestor is filled with sadness. The grief in the mask is palpable. The ancestor may be suffocating. As all the colours of the world clash with each other, they seem to destroy the ancestor itself. The essence of our heritage is threatened. Life on earth is in danger.'[97]

'In this painting, *Untitled* (1965), we find a metaphoric language which communicates across cultures, the language of the body and gesture (usually signs made by the hands and arms), and the contradictions contained on the body of the ancestor. The ancestor is expressed in terms of African spiritual processes, yet speaks to all humanity. It calls to all humanity in a silent yet eloquent plea to stop destroying each other; it calls for peace and understanding.'[98] Mancoba said, very emphatically, 'A person is a person by and because of another person – we have to accept that man must meet man and that's it.'[99] What does this mean, 'man must meet man'? In a world where financial profit is the driving force in business, people regard each other as competitors, consumers, or cheap labour. They cannot afford to notice people's humanity, because this would bring out their own humanity. It would make them unable to profit by abusing others. As we discussed on page 34-35, Mancoba believed fiercely that we should have relationships with each other based on our humanity.

Whilst we have seen that Mancoba was inspired by a local, southern African visual language and used it in his work, in order to understand Mancoba's use of colour, we should go deeper, in order to know what his colours meant to him, and try to understand each colour system he used specifically. We do know that he drew on a life lived intensely on two continents, through many tumultuous historical experiences and cultural changes, and as with all other dimensions of his art, his colours have multiple meanings.[100]

Here, Mancoba talks about how he balances his colours while he is painting. Notice how he talks in a way that is very like the proverb that he held so dear: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*.

'When I make a picture or a drawing, I'm always aware of the space which is at my disposal. At the same time, I'm aware that the thing that I'm trying to express has to be an organic whole and that it must not look like a section of a vision, but it must be a vision which is integral…One touch leads to another and this touch, if it is colour - one colour calls out for another which will answer rightly to be represented in a dignified way; in a way that is acceptable in all senses to its presence. Therefore, when I go step by step, I stand back and look. Each touch must correspond and be acceptable to the whole. And step by step I move until at last the whole is there present and this whole can speak to me and I can listen to the message.'[101]

Like the *imbongi*, Mancoba communicates in the metaphoric language of art, using many symbols that he absorbed as a child, youth, and young adult in South Africa. He weaves them together to comment on human experiences and vehemently criticise the abuse of power. He tells us stories which, like oral tales, are cautionary messages about life and values, yet they are pleasureable too. He uses colours, which he balances in relation to each other, to express the meaning of the proverb *umuntu ngamuntu ngabanye abantu* (see *page 3*4-35).

2.7 SUMMING UP

We have discussed the Kota reliquary figure, ancestors, masks, symbols, totems, metaphoric language and the origins of humanity in Africa. We have looked at the colour white, at ochre, and at the colour symbolism expressed in beadwork, a distinct South African visual language, in which colours are symbols organised in patterns to tell stories. We have suggested ways of seeing these influences and sources in Mancoba's art.

Mancoba drew these elements together in many paintings which have an ancestral figure at their centre. In doing so he created a message, which is both a riposte to the 'problem of perspective' initiated during the renaissance and the Cubists who, inspired by African art, broke the rules of perspective but according to Mancoba didn't go far enough. An explanation of how he did this is on page 82.

For the moment we will highlight two works produced by artists in response to Mancoba's painting *L' Ancêtre* or the Ancestor. This painting is unusual in that he gave it a title after a discussion with Elza Miles about his great grandmother (see further page 34) and both artists who interpreted it, found it exceptionally rich with meaning. Joseph Ndlovu (1953 - 2019), described as the best weaver in South Africa, was commissioned by the Art and Ubuntu Trust to produce a tapestry (290 x 162.3cm) interpreting this painting for donation to the Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC) see next page. In preparation he studied beadwork. It took him a year to complete the task during which he isolated himself and listened closely to Mancoba's voice.[102]

The CCAC was also given a copy of the video art, *Reading the Ancestor* (2006) an 8 minute deconstruction and reconstruction of this painting directed by Abdulcadir Ahmed Said for the 2006-2007 exhibition *In the Name of all Humanity, the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*. In receiving the videoart Justice Khampepe as chair of the CCAC collection said the following in appreciation:

"The symbolism and sound design of the film speaks poignantly to the history of the African continent. Mancoba's message included at the end of the film, saying we need to preserve African heritage as a shared heritage of humanity, resonates with Joseph Ndlovu's *Humanity*, the very first artwork of the CCAC, aptly speaking to our constitutional ideals, as reflected in the CCAC".[103]

From these two profound engagements by African artists with Mancoba's work it can be seen that recognising his African sources and inspirations are central to appreciating his aesthetic and message.

Joseph Ndlovu, Inspired by *L'Ancêtre (The Ancestor),* wool, 290 x 162.3cm, Constitutional CourtArt Collection. Donated by Art and Ubuntu Trust.
See the painting that inspired this tapestry on pages 34 and 52

part three

MANCOBA
visualises harmony on earth

Introduction

In previous chapters, we discussed how Mancoba interpreted indigenous African visual language in unique ways. In this section, we show how he also sought inspiration from other parts of the world. As a result of these various inspirations, he solved a conundrum facing the dominant Western paradigm in art: how to re-link the spiritual and material. Drawing on his profound understanding of African philosophy and aesthetics, his familiarity with some of the great leaps forward in the Western tradition in art during the twentieth century, and inspired by the art of many other cultures, he produced work that provided a vision of a harmonious future for the whole world.

3.1 INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND AFRICA 65

- Chinese ceramics and EID
- Charlie Chaplin and the body of the ancestor
- Danish Kalkmalerier

Composition (1951) oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5cm (Schachat Collection)

- The CoBrA Art Movement
- Iniut Art

Drawing (1969-71) sepia wash on paper, 49 x 32cm (JAG)

Untitled (1976) ink and pastel on paper, 52 x 32.5cm (Private Collection)

3.2 A NEW PERSPECTIVE 74

- Innovations within Western Modernism

Composition (1940) oil on canvas, 59 x 50cm (Private Collection)

Mboom mask

- Visualising the world from the perspective of Western power:
- Africa and different world maps:
- Maps and ideology
- The 'problem' of Perspective in the Western tradition of art
- Mancoba's symbolic breakthrough restores a vision of human equality

3.3 LAST WORKS: AN ANCIENT YET MODERN VISION OF HARMONY IN A NEW ALPHABET 84

Untitled (1996) ink and oil pastel on paper, 21 x 32cm (Schachat Collection)

Cuneiform
Hieroglyphics
Cursive Script
Ancient Rock Art,

- Visualising harmonious communication in life on earth

Untitled (1990) ink and oil pastel on paper, 28.5 x 51cm (Schachat Collection)

3.1 INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND AFRICA

Mancoba sought knowledge from all the cultures of the world. Cosmopolitan Johannesburg, where he grew up, was home to many different people who came from all over Africa and the rest of the world to seek their fortunes on Johannesburg's gold mines.

Mancoba related to other cultures, not as an imperialist seeking to dominate the world, but through the lens of an African spiritual philosophy which saw all human beings as equal. He constantly compared the attributes and practices of different cultures, and was always pleased to find that the deeper you explored any culture, the more you found the essence common to all of them.[104] For example, as we have already discussed, the ancestor and the totem are African, but are also universal, as use and awareness of them can be found in many societies across the globe.

In previous chapters, we concentrated on his African inspirations. Here, we start by exploring some significant sources of inspiration that he drew from other cultures of the world. Later we look at Mancoba's unique contributions to world art, which built on but went beyond innovations in twentieth century art in Western Europe, and see how he expressed his belief about a positive human essence in all cultures in his art. His search for human values in other cultures arose out of, amongst other things, his experience as a racially despised black man. For now, let's start by looking at observations he made about other cultural expressions some of which he was exposed to as a young person in South Africa.

Chinese ceramics and EID

During Mancoba's childhood on the mines, he met indentured Chinese workers, one of whom gave him a beautiful ceramic cup.

Chinese ceramic cups. These are similar to the one that Mancoba received as a gift.

Mancoba appreciated the graciousness of the giver as much as the beauty of the gift and perhaps saw in this gesture an expression of values similar to '*ubuntu*'. When he participated in Eid celebrations at the end of Ramadan with his friends, the Gool family, in Cape Town,[105] he also saw similarities between this Islamic practice and the values of African culture.

Charlie Chaplin and the body of the ancestor

Another significant influence during his childhood on the mines was the popular Charlie Chaplin films, which Mancoba found very meaningful. Chaplin's critique of the way people were dehumanised through industrial labour resonated with what Mancoba observed on the mines.

Mancoba recalls:

"We used to go as children to the little cinema…in the location…the municipality arranged a… kind of a screen which was put up for the workers on Saturdays so that in the evening they could go and look…in the open air…at the cinema…They showed Charlie Chaplin most of the time for the working people. My sisters would come home and they would imitate, each one in turn…how Charlie Chaplin moved and the scenes which he made…and it was very amusing".[106]

He was very impressed by the 'shadow play' in Charlie Chaplin's silent films.

"…as a poet he [Charlie Chaplin] used shadow images not speech, and his action was directly (and) at once understood by children…by all races…without having to be interpreted…his language was understood. He left very, very important images of the contradictions of society…(to)…such an extent that at a certain moment the governing powers thought he was a dangerous element, his messages were dangerous to society and they started to move against [him]".[107]

Mancoba was absorbed by Chaplin's story of the 'little tramp' in the film Modern Times because, in it, he saw similarities to the life of workers in South Africa. The daily rhythms of their rural lives had been radically changed by the demands of deep-level mining, industrialisation and the migrant labour system. These occupations drove them into inhumane compounds, cut off from family, community and nature.[108]

In his persona of the 'little tramp', Charlie Chaplin used his body as a vehicle to tell a story which questioned the life of workers in industrial society. It was a story that didn't require words, because it was told in gestures and actions, and in this way, it could communicate across the world, irrespective of the language spoken. This is another way of looking at Mancoba's central figure: it too, is a body through which stories are told and which can communicate across the world without words, through the visual language he uses.

It seems that Mancoba's understanding of Charlie Chaplin's artistry gave him access to a deeper message. Something, which, on the surface 'tickled and entertained', which, as a child, he and his sisters had laughed at and enjoyed, but which came to have a more serious meaning for him as he matured.

Mancoba enjoyed the humour, but also understood the deeper message that Chaplin conveys. This insight is one of the reasons why Mancoba said, with such gravity, 'Art is not just to tickle and entertain. No! It is a matter of life and death.'[109]

Danish Kalkmalerier

Whilst living in Denmark, Mancoba, his wife, Sonja Ferlov, and the CoBrA artists were exposed to two very interesting and compelling local art forms. One was the pre-Renaissance (400-1400CE) paintings on church walls, Kalkmalerier, and the other was the art of the Inuit.

Kalkmalerier is the Danish word for paintings which are laid on a foundation of lime wash (chalk). Most Kalkmalerier can be found in churches whose murals (wall paintings) date back nine hundred years to the 12th century. The paintings present many popular stories from the Bible's Old and New Testaments for the benefit of worshippers who could not read. The white on which they were painted, produced a clear imprimatura (background) for the pastel colours.

Ernest and Sonja Mancoba loved Kalkmalerier, and had two books on the subject in their collection.

The aspect of Kalkmalerier which most appealed to Ernest Mancoba was that much of it was pre–Renaissance (and therefore did not use the 'window on the world' perspective). He was also delighted by the discovery that this art reflected the imagination of Danish folklore in addition to church teachings. We have already seen how much he appreciated the visual storytelling traditions of his home country (see page 55) and used this symbolism in his art.

Some of the Kalkmalerier were just being uncovered from limewash when he saw them, giving them the appearance of emerging from white, which was spiritually significant for Mancoba. Some of the muted colour combinations in Kalkmalerier can be seen in the southern African beadwork that Mancoba knew well, particularly that of the Xhosa speaking people, and it is likely that he recognised this too. He liked the dry chalkiness of the colours in the unrestored frescos.[110] Elza Miles has compared this to the look and feel of the mud floors of huts in South Africa. The patterns on these mud floors carry symbolic meaning. At least one of his paintings uses this technique. See *Composition* (1951) Oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5cm, page 26 and 69.

Composition (1951) Oil on canvas, 53 x 33.5cm

In 1951, when the painting above was completed, Mancoba was working on a farm in Denmark. As discussed, he loved the Danish Kalkmalerier, whose colours are very similar to the colours in this painting. The colours are more structured in the centre of the canvas, and float about the edges. Here we see patches of farmland under a blue sky from the height of an aeroplane, or fields of flowers and rape seed interspersed with the ochre of newly-ploughed land, seen from a distant hill.

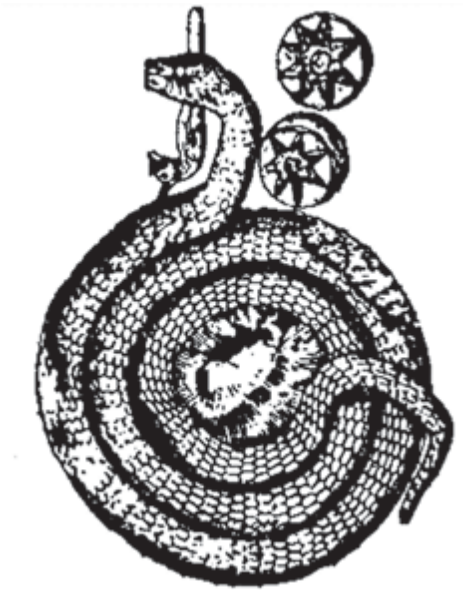
In another vein, the many shades of blue create a luminous surface that suggests stained glass, and the straight dark lines between the colours suggest the metal that holds the pieces of glass together. This is a dream-like space in which Mancoba uses shapes that he was to draw on for the rest of his life. At the same time, we can see signs of his distinctive 'ancestor' configuration emerging, and the important southern African colour, ochre. (See page 46).

The CoBrA art movement

At key moments in his life, Mancoba was surrounded by challenging thinkers and artists. In South Africa, he was regarded as the leading intellectual of his generation during the 1930s, and in Europe, he had no less an impact on the ideas of those around him.

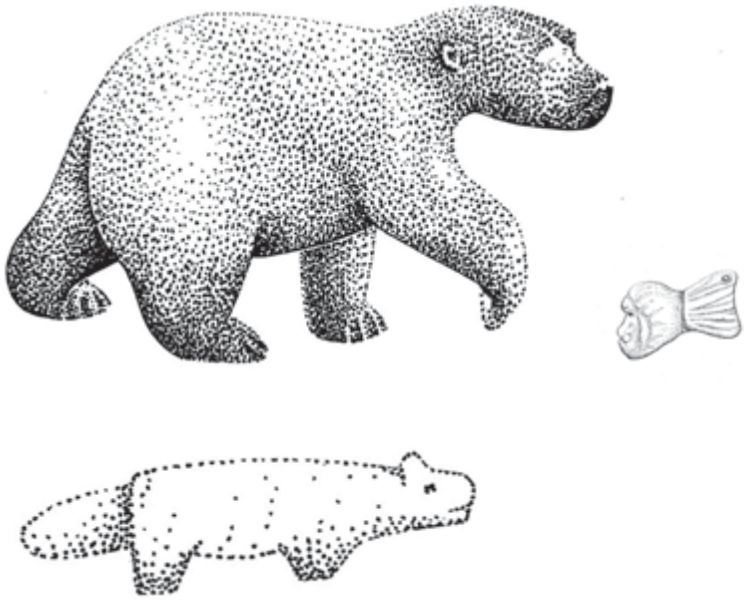
In the late 40s and early 50s, there was a dynamic artists' movement in Europe called CoBrA. Its name is made up of the first two letter of the names of cities where its members were based: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. CoBrA developed in response to the Surrealist movement. From 1947 to 1952, while they were living in Denmark, Mancoba and his wife, Sonja Ferlov, belonged to CoBrA through their membership of the Danish artist's group, HØST (which in Danish means harvest). This was a moment of exchange and artistic experimentation, which, although officially short, had an enduring aesthetic impact on modern art in Europe. Mancoba was treated badly by some members of the group, who, although the group was anti-colonialist, were not entirely able to accept a black person as an equal.[111]

A contemporary art historian, Olu Oguibe, says that Mancoba provided many ideas for CoBrA.[112] Whatever the case, Mancoba was associated with the most avant-garde movement of its time in Western art, and his work is fully modernist – but, as was explored in Parts One and Two, he also incorporated values from the past in his work.



Emblem used by CoBrA

Inuit Art



Inuit bone sculptures: polar bear, fish and a fox.
(smaller than the palm of a hand)

The Inuit live in Greenland, in the Arctic Circle. They live in difficult terrain where it snows most of the year. They have limited resources and have a daily struggle to survive. Yet they did manage to make small, tender, spiritually powerful works of art from simple materials found in their environment. Mancoba saw Inuit art on a large exhibition in Denmark in the 1950s.[113]

The Inuit used to be known as the Eskimo, but they prefer their own term, 'Inuit', which simply means 'people'. They have a harsh daily struggle for survival in a tough environment. They use their environment ingeniously for their survival, even in the past, making homes from snow (igloos), while animal skins have provided their clothes. They also make art which dates back more than 4000 years. All their amulets, utensils, tools and weapons were made from natural materials found in their environment: stone, bone, ivory, antlers and animal hides.

Until recently, there was no word for 'art' in the Inuit language. Now the word for art is *eqqumiitsuliaq*, which means 'something strange that is created'.

Animals, people, objects and spirits were valued equally by the Inuit, because they all had souls, known as 'inua'. As a result, ceremonial objects, hunting tools and everyday materials were transformed into objects of beauty, which often had spiritual significance, and performed both a symbolic and practical function. Tools like harpoon heads and combs were finely decorated to protect the wearer from evil, or to persuade the hunter's prey to offer itself for slaughter. This is similar to pre-industrial African art, which also had a function in the lives of African people.

Mancoba once implied that he could not continue making sculpture because of a lack of material and space in which to work, but was comforted by his understanding of how the Inuit overcame their difficulties and still made art. He said:

…the material that one uses is secondary…for example the Eskimos (Inuit) in the north, they used feathers and they used fishbone and they used all that they could get to have expressed in a tangible way something to be left for the coming generations.[114]

Mancoba also used whatever materials he could lay his hands on. He and his wife were practising artists, and had a child to raise. He was never financially well-off, so he admired the Inuit's use of materials found in their environment to make their tiny but resonant works of art.

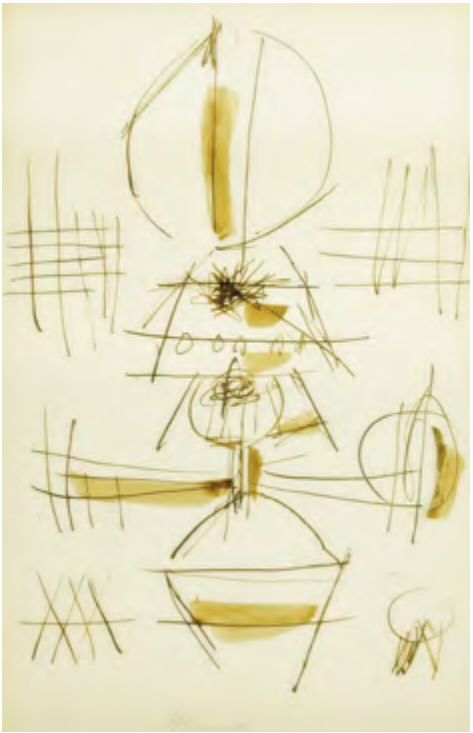
When we think about how Mancoba lived in Europe, sometimes working as a farm labourer in order to survive, and having very little access to art materials, it is extraordinary that he still managed to produce significant innovative works on small canvasses with sparse applications of paint. He clearly identified with the daily struggle for survival that the Inuit experienced in the Arctic and took the simple power of their artistic expression very much to heart:

"My belief is that once the idea is there, whether the message is heard or not, will never depend upon the intensity of the voice, but rather the inner pertinence, the intrinsic coherence and the human urgency of what is being said".[115]

Mancoba felt that despite using only the materials that they could find in their environment (such as bone and feathers), the inner voice of Inuit carvings was urgent and relevant, and that they created significant art for the benefit of future generations.[116]

Illustration of a whale carved from bone/whale tusk

The following two examples of Mancoba's works use minimal materials, yet have a strong impact. In the work on the left, Mancoba uses a piece of paper, a pen and a bit of sepia wash (see the analysis of this painting on pages 36-42). In the picture on the right, which is similar in size, he used ink and oil pastel on paper. (See analysis of this work on pages 53-55)



Drawing (1969-71) Sepia wash on paper, 49 x 32cm

Untitled (1976) ink and oil pastel on paper, 50 x 32,5cm

3.2 A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Innovations within Western Modernism

We've mentioned that Mancoba was part of the avant-garde CoBrA art movement in Europe, from the late 40s up to 1951. However, in 1940, when he'd barely been two years in Europe, and just before he was interned by the Germans, he painted a very significant work, Composition (1940), which has been described by Rasheed Araeen, an art historian as possibly being a precursor to the movement in art known as Abstract Expressionism.[117] Whilst it may be true that Mancoba's painting preceded the Abstract Expressionist movement, and that this may be significant within the Western way of thinking about art, he did more than innovate formally.

Rasheed Araeen also said: Mancoba's achievement flies in the face of all the binaries that are constructed by colonialism, White/Black, Coloniser/Colonised, Self/Other, Modern/Primitive, etc, etc - and whose legacies continue to undermine the freedom of the post-colonial liberated subject, by denying him/her a place in the genealogy of mainstream modernism. Mancoba has not only challenged but demolished these binaries.[118]

Composition (1940) oil on canvas, 59 x 50cm

Mancoba's painting cuts through all these tensions, and rejects the hierarchies imposed by colonialism. It speaks of neither one nor the other, but cuts to the core of the matter: I am because you are. Whether or not Mancoba preceded a movement, or innovated, within the framework of Western art history, it is significant that he made an aesthetic breakthrough, using amongst other things, an African-informed visual language and philosophy as a guide.

The dominant colour in this painting is red. The colour contrasts are strong, vigorous, assertive. The upper part of the picture bristles ferociously, while the lower third emerges from shadows, seeming to rest upon shadows, too.

Composition's rich earthy palette and symmetrical arrangement of graphic signs (crosses, grids, chevrons, zigzags) all along its central axis and their slight deviations in the symmetrical doubling of motifs, recall for Elza Miles the time-honoured designs of hand-knotted Persian and Turkish carpets.[119] The balanced patterning of the designs on these carpets symbolise a society in harmony with itself. These motifs are also common in many San rock paintings and engravings.

Some features of *Composition* (1940) remind us of the Chinese Dragon masks used in the annual festival commemorating the death of a much-loved Chinese philosopher poet, Qu Yuan. The pattern is strong but not decorative. The short, sharp, angular lines vibrate with energy. This dragon-like creature has a presence, a history, and an intention. There is a forehead, eyebrows, eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth. It is a mask, and a mask is used to conceal the wearer and perform an assigned, ritual role.

Chinese dragon mask

Mancoba's *Composition* is also reminiscent of the Mboom mask which is used by the Kuba of central Africa, in the rites of passage from boyhood to adulthood, (see page 76) and Elza Miles says, 'Thus, on the eve of Mancoba's internment, the symbolism of this particular mask is telling.'[120]

The Mboom mask also symbolises the mask of the commoner who opposes the king's authority.[121]

Mboom mask

All Kuba art is laden with symbolic and iconographic meaning, and the same is true of the rich Kuba masquerades. The masked Kuba dancer is, in every instance, a spirit manifestation. The Mboom is a wooden helmet mask carved from a single piece of wood and described in varied oral traditions. Mboom appears in initiation ceremonies and acts with pride and aggression.

Despite regional variations, the Mboom mask conforms to a distinct type. All styles feature strongly rendered proportions dominated by an enlarged brow, broad nose, and usually naturalistic ears. Typical features include the metal work on the forehead, cheeks, and mouth, bands of beads that embellish the face, and an expanse of beadwork at the temples and back of the head, and the design at the back of the head is associated with royalty.[122]

It is typical that Mancoba's work can be seen to refer to different ancient cultural sources with multiple meanings, and that he weaves them together, to repeat a message of peace.

Prof. Ntongela Masilela captures his intent:

'...the relationship between the past and the present was pertinent to all New African artists seeking to realise a new form of art on the basis of, and in close proximity to, the social ethos and aesthetic values of the traditional. The new can only be new in relation to the old...In a dramatic way this painting marks the advent of Modernism within the history of the [New African] Movement.[123]

'With this achievement Mancoba became not only one of the principal constructors of New African modernity in South Africa but also one of the major African artists who forged the canon of African modernism in painting and sculpture.'[124]

'Whilst this painting was a significant achievement within the framework of Western art, Mancoba was not searching for a place in mainstream modernism, but was looking beyond that framework.'

'He was concerned with the integration of form and content, man and man, colour and colour, balance within the picture, balance within humanity and balance in life on earth. Within ancient artworks one can find this balance and serenity, the expression of societies lived outside of the iron fist of commodity fetishism. Mancoba longed for us to regain that state of grace. He said the only way we could, was if we allowed "Man to meet man and that's it"'.[125]

'His concerns are not surprising, considering that his life experience had been shaped from childhood by the effects of colonialism. He had been subjected to racism in Europe as well as in his home country, and on his arrival in Europe, was faced with the frightening inhumanity of the Second World War. He keenly and personally felt the problem of the split between the spiritual and material introduced into the world by the European Renaissance, and observed the increasing loss of spirituality in all modern political systems.'[126]

Visualising the world from the perspective of Western power

Maps are used to find our way and to visualise the world. Wherever we live, when we look at our spot on the map, we get a sense of ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. We assume that most maps are scientifically accurate, yet they are simply visual representations that reflect the needs or value judgements of the people who made them.

A world map is a flat picture of a curved shape. The map is not a reproduction of the globe; it is a view of the globe. The world doesn't have a top and a bottom. It is a ball that we can roll in any direction and look at from any point of view. What we put on top (or in the middle) is a matter of convention or of emphasis.[127]

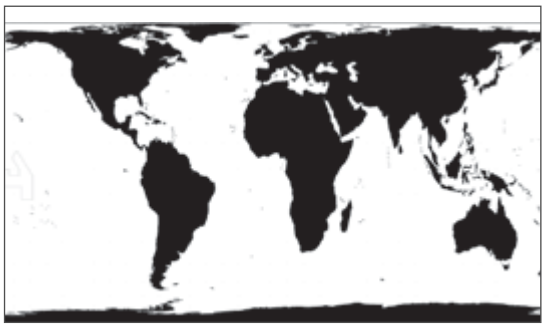
Illustration of how a two-dimensional map is derived from a three-dimensional globe

Because the globe is round, it is very difficult to accurately express it or project it onto a flat piece of paper, in a map.

Gerardus Mercator's map, centred on Europe, was created in 1569, at a time when navigators were still sailing the oceans in wooden ships powered by the wind and navigating by the stars. It was particularly useful because straight lines on his map could be followed, using a compass. Today the Mercator map still remains useful for navigation purposes, and is referred to by seafarers and airline pilots.

Arno Peters' purpose was to help the rest of us. He believed that the widespread use of Mercator maps for purposes that had nothing to do with navigation built up in our minds a seriously distorted image of the world. He centred his map on Africa.

Africa and different world maps



The *Mercator Map*, 1569 (left) compared with the *Peters Map*, 1974 (right)

Which map is right? Each map has its own point of view. Only when you know a map's purpose, can the map's correctness be assessed. If you're flying across the ocean, the Mercator Projection is going to be useful, but if you're trying to compare the relative size of places, you will want to use the Peters'.

On a Mercator map, the former Soviet Union is much larger than Africa and Africa is almost equivalent in size to Europe. Since size can often imply importance, wouldn't people looking at such a map imagine that the Soviet Union was much more important than Africa?

Africa is actually about the same size as the former Soviet Union and the United States combined. Africa is much larger than the United States and the current Russia, and is huge in comparison to Europe. If size was the criterion, Africa would rank second in importance to Asia.

The Peters map makes this clearer than the Mercator map does.

The *Hobo Dyer map* with Africa at the centre.

The Hobo Dyer map (2002) shows true size comparisons, turns the world upside down to challenge North-South perceptions, and keeps Africa at the centre of the world. This draws attention to Africa as the origin of humankind.

Maps and Ideology

All maps have a purpose. As European nations made themselves into colonial powers and conquered most of the world in the late 19th century, and because it made Europe seem bigger than it really was, Mercator's map of the world became an important icon of Western superiority.

On the other hand, agencies that give aid to the Global South, use the Peters map, because it represents the true proportion of developing countries and thereby gives them a more realistic sense of the scale of work they need to do.[128]

Using the latest geo-technology, a Harvard University-based collaborative project has recently come up with a projection which is somewhere between the two, which is believed to be the most accurate compromise between relative landmass size (Peters) and correct shape (Mercator) thus far.[129]

Having seen how an apparently scientific and accurate visual depiction can be imbued with ideology, it should now be possible to appreciate how the use of perspective and proportion in art has also been value-laden.

The 'problem' of perspective in the Western tradition of art

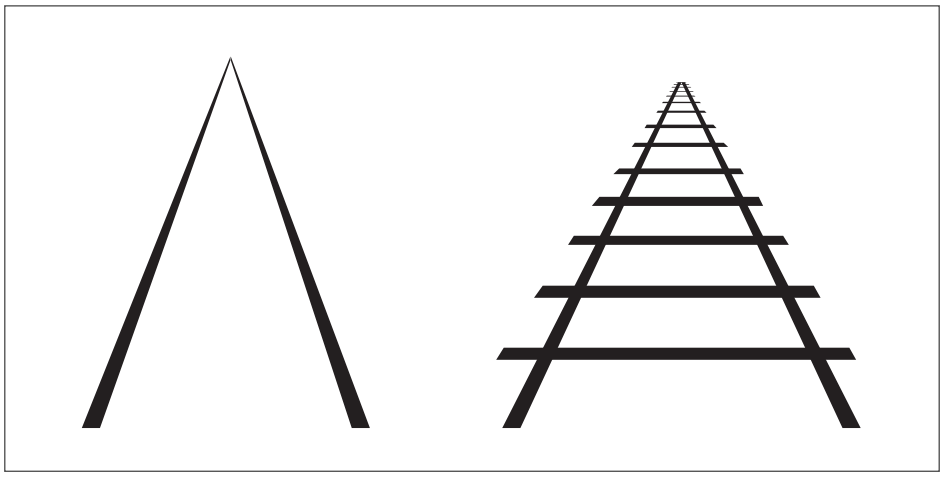
Having discussed different depictions of the world map, showing how visual images carry subjective readings, which can have very real impacts in the world we now turn to another ideologically laden visual approach: perspective.

The use of perspective in art, during the European Renaissance, combined with rules of proportion was a huge innovation in ways of seeing the human subject. The breaking of the rules of proportion and perspective, centuries later with the rise of modernism, was yet another significant innovation. Mancoba we believe went further and again, we see him looking beyond the obvious.

Mancoba used the opportunity of being in Europe, to deepen his knowledge about European society, history and art. We know that he had great respect for European artists such as Mozart, Van Gogh and Stravinsky, as well as thinkers like Kierkegaard and Artaud. He and his family once visited Italy to view sculpture, and they were regulars at museums in Paris and Denmark. From these observations, Mancoba drew many conclusions.

A concern that he repeatedly expressed was his deep apprehension about the 'problem of perspective'. This has been understood as the way perspective was introduced into Western art during the European Renaissance, innovating the depiction of human beings as objects at the end of the vanishing point; in other words, an 'us-and-them' situation was symbolically expressed. Robert Romanshyn calls this way of seeing, 'the despotic eye.'[130] We must remember that knowledge of perspective existed in ancient Egypt, yet, at that time, the human body was only shown in profile. The architect Apollodorus of Damascus introduced perspective into European life in the cupola of the pantheon. It was first used to depict the human body during the European

Renaissance, which sourced knowledge from the African society of Ancient Egypt for many of its innovations. Mancoba and an intellectual associate of his, the Senegalese polymath, Cheikh Anta Diop, considered Ancient Egypt as an intrinsically African society. This is one of many examples of African knowledge providing a basis for Western development.



Illustrations of the vanishing point

In his article, Romanyshyn (1984) explores how the introduction of the vanishing point and perspective creates a view of the human body which is intrinsically one of a power relation between viewer and viewed, because the viewed becomes an object. He argues that this revolution in art foreshadowed a fundamental philosophical shift, ultimately giving rise to the rationale for European colonialism which treated people as objects.

'Modern' perspective made scenes look 'real', thus removing the soulful element of symbolism and equality between elements in two-dimensional art (2D art has height and width, not depth). In addition to this, showing the subject of a painting (a person) 'through a window', turned the subject into an object viewed by a 'superior' subject. The subject is active, the object passive, or acted upon. This paradigm shift allowed Western European society to change the way it went about organising and understanding relationships between humans - by creating the possibility of conceiving of human beings as simply objects. This prefigured the Atlantic slave trade, where people were treated as objects (goods and chattels) that could be bought and sold. This trade is understood to be the origin of modern racism and the colonisation of Africa.

For Mancoba, the Renaissance idea of perspective as a fixed point of view was very limiting, trapping the viewer and depriving them of their own interpretation, making the work of art prescriptive, rather than liberating.[131] Prior to the Renaissance, artists in Europe were less concerned with the illusion of reality, and more concerned with the content and symbolism of their work. The size of each element in the image related more to its importance, than its placement in a space organised to suggest reality. This continued to be the case in African art deep into the twentieth century.

Mancoba's symbolic breakthrough restores a vision of human equality

'Mancoba's effort to fully deconstruct the ideologically laden use of perspective, and thus question the "despotic eye" and all it represented, was part of his quest to re-link the spiritual and the material'.[132]

"The evolution of our materialistic societies whether of the totalitarian type, which has just crumbled overnight in the East or of our own mercantile one which is dominating nowadays, has caused progressively, the artist, as any other spirits in their truest selves, to feel more and more isolated, precisely because we have divided spirit and matter, in order to more freely pursue and enjoy the worldly goals of our acquisitive nature at the expense of the other side of our being that yearns for spiritual fulfilment".[133]

'He was not the first to deal with what he called 'the problem of perspective', being preceded by many decades by the Cubists, who, following Cezanne, were the first to break the dominance of perspective in modern Western art. Mancoba respected the significant contribution of the Cubists, who clearly used aspects of African art (for example, two of Picasso's mask-like faces in Les Demoiselles d'Avignon) as inspiration for their innovations. His concern, however, was that they hadn't entirely gone beyond the problems of perspective, because, unlike the African work that inspired them, they had only dealt with perspective formally.[134] They did not represent the humanity of the people whose art inspired them. In ignoring the meaning and spiritual significance of these African works, while using their formal dimensions, they left Western art devoid of the spiritual dimension of humanity that these works carried.[135]

Mancoba depicted a totemic ancestral figure (representing the spirit of all humanity, a common human ancestor) (see page 36) at the centre of many of his paintings, then, using colours to symbolise the people of the world, all existing in relation to, and on, the same pictorial plane as the common human ancestor, he reintegrated the sacred and the social in the form and content of his work,[136] symbolically suggesting the terms for a human renaissance and reminding the world of the need to integrate human values or human spirituality with material progress.

As mentioned on page 33. In 1962 he said the following about African art:

'…for the object of African art is not to please the eye or the senses but is to use art as a means, as a language, to express feelings and ideas in relation to the present, the future and the past, to discover new concepts by which to regard the world for the salvation of man.'[137]

'Most significantly, Mancoba's appreciation of ancient art from all cultures, and the inspiration he drew from them, allowed him to solve the problem of perspective in a manner which is hardly yet understood to have been one of the most significant artistic revolutions of our times. By putting our heritage and our common human ancestor at the centre of the pictorial plane, in equal relationship with signifiers of all the people of the world, he suggests that if we live according to the tenets of the proverb he quoted so frequently and clearly expressed in his paintings, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*, we can create harmony in the world.[138]

Detail of Untitled (1996) ink and oil pastel on paper, 21 x 32cm (page 85)

3.3 LAST WORKS: AN ANCIENT AND MODERN VISION OF HARMONY IN A NEW ALPHABET

In the 1990s, Mancoba's mark-making began to suggest pictograms.

We have seen the symbolism of the shapes and colours that Mancoba used in his previous work, and their reliance on the body of the ancestor as a vehicle for their meaning. In Mancoba's 'alphabet' paintings, this body is no longer the central figure. Now many bodies move in celebration and there is possibly music and dance. There are still the Xs, circumflexes and ticks, and you could find a solitary figure with a bag on his back and a long stick in hand , but there is also the dark and light-headed dancer twirling excitedly off the ceiling, a couple caught in the erotic lean of the tango, and a vivacious couple revelling in the athleticism of the event.

The colours in *Untitled* (1996) reflect the palette of Zulu beadwork. (See page 50). They are strong, and assertive. There is a lot of black and white, which is typical of Zulu beadwork. And the basic shape used in Zulu beadwork, the triangle, abounds.

Simplistically, using a Zulu interpretation of colour in Mancoba's drawing, we could say that the fundamental mood is one of regeneration (black) and spiritual love (white). There is also strong emotion (red) and fidelity (blue). Finally, there is an acknowledgement of wealth (yellow) and contentment (green).

Although black has been used extensively, this picture is full of colour play and lively movement. The strokes are short and vigorous, musical in their rhythm: sweeping, circular lines slur a note, or make it slide, glissando, into another note. The dark lines provide the base line, and the colours bounce off this, or imitate, or harmonise with it.

If we have seen written music, we are used to seeing sound depicted in notes. What if we were to read these marks as a musical composition, and assign a specific role to each colour, or to lines that form crosses, right angles, arrow heads, squiggles, letters and patterns?

Mancoba was interested in the number three. Elza Miles notes that '…the division of things into three parts recurs in various motifs so that the rhythm created reminds one of music and poetry.' 'The marks on the horizontal lines preserve the sounds of song and history. […] these marks take their place in Mancoba's art all the more clearly as ideographic pictograms.' [139]

In the painting there is an implied alphabet, a beginning, a sequence, and an end. It could be read from right to left, top to bottom, or left to right. It is a message, for all humanity, in the language of colour and line. There is a strong suggestion of sound and movement.

In 1990, Mancoba said, 'Dance is a symbol of you as an individual and you as an individual belonging to the organic whole…You feel all alone and yet you feel part of the whole.'[140]

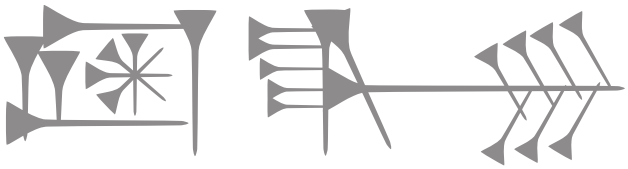
Elza Miles said 'After his wife Sonja's death in 1984, Mancoba progressively stripped his images of referential material. It appeared that he was reverting more and more to a language without boundaries, hence his preference for signs.'[141]

These signs are not arbitrary, they suggest meanings. As we can see next, early peoples all over the world derived their alphabets from images.

Untitled (1996) ink and oil pastel on paper, 21 x 32cm

Cuneiform

Cuneiform writing was invented in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) around 5000 years ago. It was made by pressing marks into wet clay with a wedge-shaped pen. The clay was then baked in an oven which made it able to survive fire and water. There are therefore many examples of the early writings of Mesopotamia. 'There are different theories on how cuneiform developed. The first, and most popular, is that pictograms, or drawings representing actual things, were the basis for cuneiform writing. Early pictograms resembled the objects they represented, but through repeated use over time they began to look simpler, even abstract. These marks eventually became wedge-shaped and formed the cuneiform script, which allowed people to convey sounds and abstract concepts.'[142]



Hieroglyphics

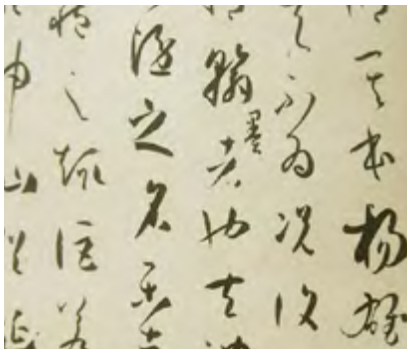
Ancient Egyptian writing uses more than 2000 characters known as hieroglyphs. Each hieroglyph represents an object, the sound of the object, or an idea about the object. For example, a picture of a snake means: 'snake' or the 's' sound.

Often created on public buildings, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics provide a wealth of information about the wars, politics, beliefs and daily lives of the peoples of the Nile over many centuries.[143]

Cursive Script

A person cannot be expected to read cursive script without training.

The Japanese hiragana style of writing is based on cursive script, which is also the source of simplified Chinese characters.



Ancient Rock Art

Long before ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians used hieroglyphics and cuneiform, early people started painting and engraving images on rocks. Much of the most famous and extensive rock art in the world is found in southern Africa, providing information about cultures that have almost disappeared. Engravings (petroglyphs) are made by scratching, carving and cutting into the surface of rocks that are weathered by age. Pictographs are painted with ochre and other natural pigments on protected surfaces such as overhangs and in caves, using quills, sticks, feathers, hands and animal-hair brushes.

Visualising harmonious communication in life on earth

Untitled (1990) ink and oil pastel on paper, 28,5 x 51cm

Mancoba's last paintings, with their very sparse yet deliberate patches of colour, appear almost like hieroglyphics, cuneiform, or the elegant shapes found in rock art.

'By using something approximating pictograms, Mancoba returns to the source of ancient civilisations, to the beginning of forms of communication between humans used at the start of human existence on earth.

At the same time however, he refers to the future, because pictograms are beginning to dominate our everyday lives through information technology, where we use pictures and graphics to navigate our way through the internet'.[144] The ancient art of human communication through the making of marks therefore comes full circle in Mancoba's late work. It connects the ancient past and the future.

part four

MANCOBA
illustrated timeline

1904 -1913

1ST TEN YEARS

Ernest Mancoba was born on 29 August 1904 in Turffontein Johannesburg. His parents were Amafengu from the Eastern Cape. Shortly after Ernest was born they made a final attempt at farming in the Middleburg area but by 1907 his father was forced by a drought to leave farming forever and to take up work at the Comet Mine in Boksburg.

Ernest and his siblings grew up in the 'location' attached to the mining compound. They led a tough life of poverty which was alleviated by loving parents who taught them the values of Christianity imbued with African culture. In 1909 Ernest started school at an Anglican school in Boksburg which he attended until 1915.

In his first decade Ernest had two significant cultural encounters:

As a baby he was named Ngungunyane by a Shangaan mineworker, and as a small child he was given a beautiful Chinese ceramic cup by a Chinese mineworker who visited their home.

1914 -1923

2ND DECADE

In 1915 the family moved to Benoni and so from 1915 to 1920 Mancoba attended the Anglican school in Benoni. Here he had his first experience of plastic art.

Living in a bleak industrial area he and his schoolmates had no vision of nature. Their teacher created models of rivers, mountains and forests in the classroom to give them an idea of nature. He and his sisters also appreciated Charlie Chaplin films which were shown on the mines. At the same time his mother, a potter, taught him about art in African society, particularly highlighting the importance of the izimbongi.

In 1920 Mancoba left his parents home to undergo teacher training at Grace Dieu, a religious institution near Pietersburg (now Polokwane), until 1923.

1924 -1933
3RD DECADE

From 1924 –1929 Mancoba taught at Grace Dieu. In 1927 he completed his junior certificate (grade 9). At Grace Dieu he was exposed to wood carving by one of the nuns, Sister Pauline and in 1929 he carved his first large sculpture, the African Madonna. He then sculpted St Augustine for St Augustine's Church in Kent, England.

In 1930 he received a three year bursary to study at the South African Native College (University of Fort Hare) where he matriculated in 1931 and then started a B.A. degree in journalism. He led Fort Hare students in debates with the nearby white university, Rhodes and played rugby (where he was cheered on from the sidelines with his nickname 'Stereo').

Like many of his peers he was deeply concerned about the Herzog bills designed to further reduce rights for African people. He led a delegation of students, including Govan Mbeki, to meet Eddie Roux, an active communist, at Sandile's Kop near Alice, after Roux had been banned from the campus.

1934 -1943
4TH DECADE

In 1934, whilst still a student, a sculpture of Mancoba's was chosen for a national exhibition.

In 1935 he left University without graduating due to a shortage of funds, worked on a commission for the Anglican Church in Grahamstown and then decided to become a full time artist and moved to Cape Town where he settled in District 6.

He got a job as a caretaker of a block of flats and looked up IB Tabata, a friend from Fort Hare who introduced him to his political circle, including the brother and sister, Jane and Goolam Gool. With them he attended the All African Convention in Bloemfontein (1935) and through them he later distributed a political journal called 'Spark' amongst workers on the East Rand.

He also sought out artists and made the acquaintance of sculptor Lippy Lipschitz and painter Irma Stern. He was interviewed by the Cape Times in 1936 in Irma Stern's studio.

In 1935 and 1936 he produced a number of sculptures and exhibited them in Johannesburg for the Bantu Welfare Trust. At this time he was approached by the department of Native affairs to produce tourist art and declined this offer. His work was described in the media as more expressionistically African. Mancoba expanded his network of artistic acquaintances in Johannesburg as well, meeting Elza Dziomba and talented sculptor Thomas Masekela.

Mancoba had developed an appreciation of African art in Paris through discussions with Lippy Lipschitz who had studied there and had read 'Primitive Negro Sculpture' which had impressed him.

1934 -1943

4TH DECADE *(continued)*

Mancoba took the advice of members of the Bantu Welfare Trust to complete his degree through UNISA and apply for a bursary to study art overseas.

Whilst studying he took up a teaching post at Khaiso Senior Secondary school in 1937 in Pietersburg (now Polokwane) where he taught with: Gerard Sekoto, who was to follow him to Paris, Nimrod Ndebele, a playwright, and Louis Makenna an educationist.

Together they travelled into the countryside around the school and it was here that Mancoba met the traditional sculptor who gave him his treasured stick.

Mancoba continued sculpting and teaching until he graduated, got a bursary to study in Paris. He left South Africa in 1938 via boat from Cape Town to London. Here he visited the collections of African and Oceanic art at the British Museum (Museum of Mankind) and tried to meet CLR James, the Trinidadian pan Africanist marxist.

1934 -1943

4TH DECADE *(continued)*

In Paris, Mancoba enrolled at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Arts Decoratif. Here he was befriended by an English speaking Dane, Christian Poulsen, who introduced him to Sonja Verlov, another Danish artist.

With Sonja he paid his first visit to the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind) and she introduced him to the sculptor, Alberto Giacometti.

In 1939 he and Sonja started experimenting with automatic drawing, using paper, ink, and watercolors.

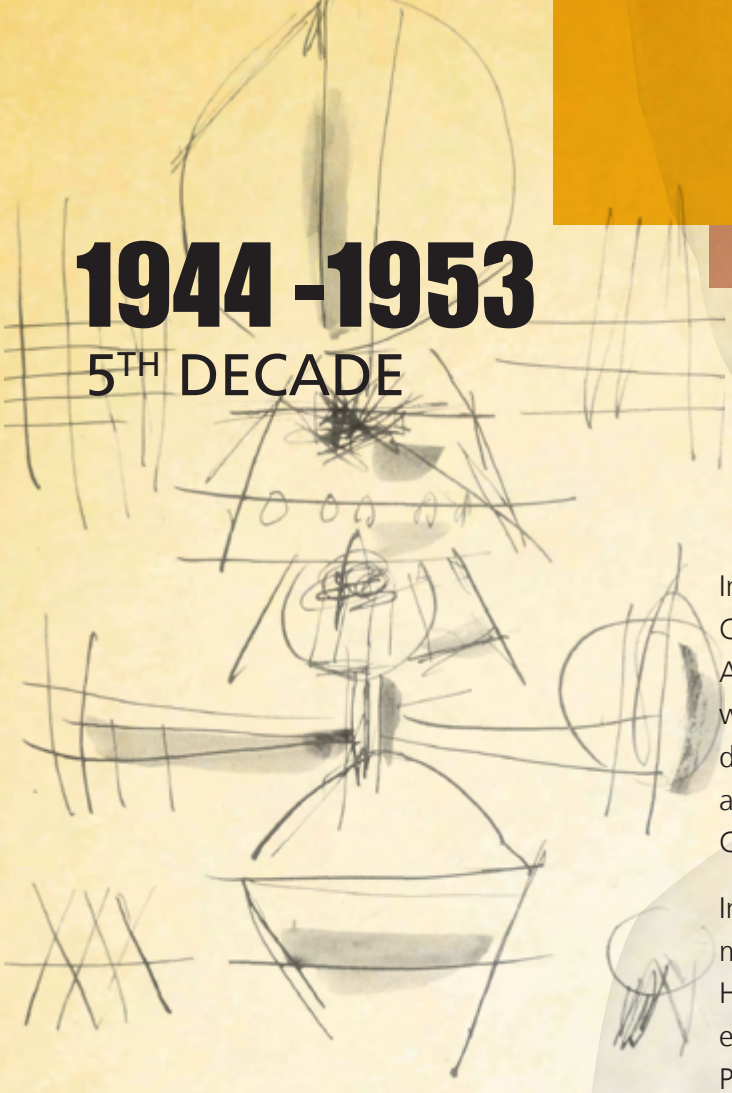
In 1939 the Second World War broke out and Sonja returned to Denmark.

In 1940 he continued with his art work making drawings and his first oil painting, Composition on canvas.

Sonja sent a message saying she was returning to Paris. She took the last small aircraft out of Denmark to Paris, saying a final farewell to her mother who she never saw again. As a result Mancoba didn't leave Paris, and as a British subject was interned by the German occupying force at St. Denis camp. Sonja crossed Paris to visit him weekly. In 1942 they married while he was still in the internment camp.

1944 -1953

5TH DECADE



In 1944 France was liberated from Nazi occupation and Mancoba was set free. He lost the diary he kept while incarcerated.

In 1945 he started sculpting again and attempted to return to South Africa but the Jan Smuts government refused to allow him to return with his European wife.

In 1946 his son Wonga 'Marc' Mancoba was born in Giacometti's attic.

In 1947, finding the atmosphere in Paris intolerant after the war, the family moved to Denmark. Here Mancoba was exposed to medieval murals in Danish churches and to the art of the Inuit people, both of which made a deep impression on him. He worked as a farm labourer in Denmark to support his family.

In 1948 he exhibited in the HØST Exhibition, Copenhagen, in the first public show of the newly founded group CoBrA. He continued to draw, paint and sculpt.

In 1949 he was invited to participate in the CoBrA exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam but a difference of opinion within HØST prevented this. Nevertheless he designed the cover for the HØST Catalogue and exhibited in another HØST show in Copenhagen.

In 1950 he became a member of the art movement CoBrA, and made two sculptures. He continued to draw and paint and in 1951 exhibited with Sonja Ferlov and Grethe Inge Pedersen in Copenhagen.

After 1952 there is no record of any more sculptures produced.

In this year too life in Denmark became difficult due to racism and artistic differences within CoBrA, and the family returned to France and settled 70 kms outside Paris.

This was an economically hard but creatively productive time for the couple. Again Ernest had to work as a farm labourer but he also kept up his political and intellectual life by meeting up with intellectuals and anti-colonial activists in Paris. He reconnected with Gerard Sekoto who had moved to Paris in 1948.

In 1953 he began a relationship with the journal Musée Vivant. In his first article for them he stated the case for contemporary Africans and their Art. This issue was co-edited by Madeleine Rousseau and the leading Senegalese intellectual and anti-colonial activist, Sheikh Anta Diop.

1954 -1963

6TH DECADE

In 1956 Mancoba participated in the first congress of Negro writers and artists in Paris. This continued to be a creative time for the Mancobas. Ernest painted and drew throughout his sixth decade.

In 1960 he started his first linocuts. In 1961, after being stateless for many years, he and Sonja became French citizens and the family moved back to Paris for the sake of Wonga's education.

In 1962 Ernest's article on African artists was published in a Danish Journal.

1964 -1973

7TH DECADE

Ernest exhibited in Holstebro and Aarhus in Denmark (1969) and in Copenhagen (1972).

1974 -1983

8TH DECADE

In his 70s Ernest continued to paint, draw and exhibit his work. In 1977 his retrospective exhibition, organised by the Denmark Art Association, was shown in three museums in Copenhagen. In 1982-3 the CoBrA retrospective exhibition was held in Paris. It was here that a Johannesburg art historian, Dr Elza Miles identified one of Mancoba's drawings and began her research project on him.

1984 -1993

9TH DECADE

In 1984 Sonja Ferlov Mancoba died in Paris. Possibly as a tribute to Sonja, Mancoba started a painting that he finished only in 1990. He also began a decade-long struggle to protect her work. At the same time his own work began to get wider exposure whilst he continued to draw, paint, produce linocuts and his first lithographs.

In 1984 he was part of a CoBrA Movement Exhibition in Venezuela and in 1986 his work was exhibited at the Louisiana Art Gallery. In 1993 his work was exhibited in two exhibitions each in Paris and Denmark, and his first lithographs were exhibited in Copenhagen. In 1988 his work was part of exhibitions in Odense, Amsterdam and Johannesburg. In 1989 he was the recipient of the Egill Jacobsen Award and some of his work was acquired by Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

In 1990 he gave an interview in a documentary on foreign-born artists in France.

1994 -2002

10TH DECADE

In 1994 the University of the Western Cape awarded Mancoba an Honorary Doctorate in absentia. Then, aged 90, after fifty six years of absence, Mancoba returned to his native country accompanied by his son, Wonga, to attend the opening of the retrospective exhibition of his and Sonja's work 'Hand in Hand' at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. It was curated by Elza Miles who also published a book Lifeline out of Africa, The art of Ernest Mancoba.

He reunited with his family and friends: Govan Mbeki, Jane Gool, Nimrod Ndebele, Thomas Masekela.

In 1995 Mancoba travelled to South Africa again in order to attend the opening of the exhibition in Cape Town. He also attended the premier at the South African National Gallery of Ernest Mancoba at home a documentary by South African filmmaker, Bridget Thompson. In 1997 The University of Fort Hare granted him his second Honorary Doctorate Degree. He travelled back to South Africa to receive it and delivered a speech at Nedbank (Johannesburg), the sponsors of his trip.

In 2001 seven of Mancoba's paintings were part of the El Tiempo de Africa at Las Palmas, curated by Cameroonian, Simon Njami. Then he contributed several paintings and sculptures to the "Short Century", a significant travelling exhibition (to Munich, Berlin, Chicago and New York, 2001-2002) on the short period of Africa's liberation in the twentieth century, curated by Nigerian, Okwui Enwezor.

In May 2002 Mancoba released an in depth interview with art historian and critic, Hans Ulrich Obrist..

25 October, 2002 Ngungunyane Ernest Methuen Mancoba passed away at the age of 98 in a hospital in Clamart near Paris.

PICTURE CREDITS FOR POSTERS

Attributions of images used in Poster Timeline *(pages 91-100)*

Poster 1: 1904-1913	• Bust of Mancoba, Randell, D. (1930-1931) Plaster of Paris 350x320x170mm • Chinese ceramic cups, illustration Jane Versfeld
Poster 2: 1914-1923	• Charlie Chaplin as the Little Tramp • Photograph Black and white Grace Dieu mission school photographer unknown
Poster 3: 1924-1933	• *African Madonna* (1929) yellowwood, 86 x 22 x 17cm (JAG)
Poster 4: 1934-1943	• *Musician* (1936) teak, 63 x 9.8 x 9.9cm (Private Collection) • Altar designed by Sister Margaret, Community of the Resurrection, Grahamstown. Carved by Ernest Mancoba (1935)
Poster 5: 1934-1943 *(continued)*	• Photograph Mancoba's stick (2006) Paris Jacques Fajour • *Figure of a Woman* (1936) teak, 63 x 9.8 x 9.9cm (private colllection)
Poster 6: 1944-1943 *(continued)*	• Illustration Jane Versfeild • *Composition* (1940) oil on canvas, 59 x 50cm
Poster 7: 1944-1953	• *Drawing* based on (1969-71) Sepia wash on paper, 49 x 32cm (JAG), Jane Versfeild
Poster 8: 1954-1963	• *Untitled* (1959) oil on canvas, 49.5 x 39.5cm (JAG) 1964-1973 • *L' Ancêtre* (The Ancestor) (1969-1971) oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.2cm (JAG)
Poster 9: 1974-1983	• *Untitled* (1976) ink and oil pastel on paper, 50 x 32,5cm (Private Collection) 1984-1993 • Extract from *Drawing* (1990) Ink and oil pastel on paper, 28.5 x 51cm
Poster 10: 1994-2002	• Photograph of Ernest Mancoba (1994) T. J. Lemon Johannesburg

AFTERWORD

Ernest Mancoba's Modern Life and Modern Art

Ernest Mancoba was a sculptor and a painter. He expressed himself figuratively and abstractly. His work was modern and at the same time, drew inspiration from, and referred to, the ancient art of Africa and to art from the whole world. His first work was produced in 1929, and his last in the 1990s.

Mancoba's work was significant in twentieth century art. Rasheed Araeen founder of the journal Third text says his work preceded minimalism and abstract expressionism.[146] We believe, however, that the significance of his work on the world historical stage is devalued if we think of it only in terms of modern movements in Western art. His visionary paintings took the modern art movement, dominated by a Western centre, firmly into the twenty-first century and far beyond its Western ethnocentric boundaries.

His art expressed a profound philosophy which he repeatedly said was informed by his mother's teachings about African cultural values. He expressed these values continually throughout his life: verbally to fellow students and friends, in a small body of written work and in a few interviews, but most particularly, he expressed them in his art.

As an intellectual, Mancoba was held in high esteem by his peer group of political activists, writers and artists in South Africa in the 1930s. He impacted their ideas, notably introducing Govan Mbeki to Marxism and Gerard Sekoto to Van Gogh's work, yet he chose not to take a leadership role in South Africa's liberation struggle.[147]

Having lived intensely in South Africa from birth to age 34, exploring major sites of resistance and many varied cultures, artistic expressions and intellectual ideas in the build-up to apartheid, in Europe from 1938, he continued his research into the contemporary condition of humanity as part of his artistic quest.

One of his reasons for going to Europe was to take part in the avant-garde discussions on art that he heard were taking place in Paris. He was especially curious to hear that African art was being discussed seriously in Europe, unlike in South Africa, where he had been invited by the government to produce curios for tourists. He wanted to contribute to the discussion of fine art in Europe, where African art was a key influence but African people were not part of the discussion.

In Europe he sought out other black artists and met a European artistic avant-garde who provided him with some companionship – but none among them was his intellectual equal. After a brief spell at art school in Paris, he was faced with internment by the Nazis for four years and here experienced more racism, the plague of which was to torment him until the end of his life in 2002.

In Europe, he had some significant relationships and artistic exchanges, most particularly with the Danish artist, Sonja Ferlov, whom he married in 1942. He tried to come back to South Africa after the war, but he was refused by the Smuts government (notably this was pre-apartheid) who said it was not possible for him to return and live in South Africa with his European wife.

He and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba lived and worked together until her death in 1984. Together they participated in HØST, a Danish art movement, and then in CoBrA, an art movement including Danish, Belgian and Dutch artists, amongst others. However, due to philosophical differences, which the couple felt could have been bridged, CoBrA didn't last. They then became a movement of two who worked alone, making tremendous aesthetic and philosophical innovations.

In Paris, in the 1950s, Ernest Mancoba again met young Africans who were fighting for liberation from colonialism and contributed to their discussions, most notably with Senegalese polymath, Cheikh Anta Diop and in the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists. He also contributed to a journal of art called Musée Vivant.

He was always poor. When he was a child, his mother had cut her hands collecting scraps of coal to warm their home. He worked for many years before going to University and then had to leave Fort Hare University, despite being a leading student, when his application for another bursary was not successful. He finished his degree through correspondence with the University of South Africa (UNISA). He had to work as a farm labourer, both in Denmark, where he lived with his wife and son for a short while, and back in France. Whilst he was alive, he never had a solo exhibition in France, although he did have a few in Denmark and a highly significant joint exhibition with Sonja Ferlov in 1994 in South Africa. Once he had decided to be a full-time artist, he never had a regular income. Until his death, he lived in a matchbox-sized, one-roomed apartment, with virtually no place to work.

Despite Mancoba's difficult material circumstances, he produced work continually throughout his life, expressing himself in wood sculpture, oil painting, lithographs and ink and pastel on paper.

Mancoba appreciated that, unlike in other countries, where he more frequently experienced direct racism, people on the streets of France were usually polite to him. He was, however, deeply troubled that the world as a whole, whether under capitalism or communism, had not balanced the spiritual and material dimensions of life nor the problem of conflict. He was very concerned about the alienation of human beings from one another in advanced industrial society. He suggested a solution in his paintings.

Having been born on the Rand in 1904, with his feet firmly planted in modernity, he did not look back to the past in a sentimental manner. He realised it was impossible to roll back progress. He did, however, question the human cost of this progress. He felt it was vital that as society moved forward, it did not discard the important aspects of older cultures that express humanity. He was concerned, in fact, angry, about inequalities, racism, the abuses of colonialism and the deep alienation between human beings which he observed both in industrial Johannesburg and Europe, where workers lived as automatons, cogs of industrial society, and the rest of society was largely unaware of their suffering or not interested in doing anything about it. He felt that society had reached a tipping point, where it was urgent that we change our way of being, if we were not to destroy ourselves and the world.

After exploring significant aspects of twentieth-century philosophy, he returned to the simple, yet profound proverb, that his mother had taught him, and which, remarkably he expressed in his work:

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu.
A person is a person by and because of other people.

This means that the humanity of a person exists when it is expressed in relationships with others. This expresses values that can be found the length and breadth of Africa and in the diaspora.

Mancoba's appreciation of these and other values rooted in pre-industrial African society came from his own life experience. He was born 35 years after the mineral revolution had turned southern Africa upside down – and many African people no longer lived according to the old ways. But on the mines, where he grew up, migrant workers were still practising the art and culture drawn from their rural lifestyle. It was an in-between time, where the old had not yet died and the new had not yet been born. Two years after he was born in 1906, the Bambatha uprising, the last 'pre-colonial' resistance in southern Africa, happened, and within a short space of time thereafter, in 1912, the African National Congress (ANC) then called the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), the modern liberation movement which was to lead South Africa to democracy in 1994, was formed.

Although when Mancoba was born in 1904, there was not yet a country called South Africa, the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, six years after his birth, and racism was built into its foundation, as it denied black people rights from its inception.

Mancoba, feeling that life in South Africa without rights and dignity was untenable, explored all the key sites of the new nation during his youth and participated in modern resistance politics, guided by Marxist ideas. During the 1930s, he brought a Marxist educator, Eddie Roux, to meet his fellow students at Fort Hare. He participated in intense political debates with friends in Cape Town and promoted and distributed a newspaper called Iskra or Spark in Johannesburg's industrial heartland, the East Rand. He attended the All African Convention in Bloemfontein, in 1935.

Yet he never fully accepted the modernism of Marxism. He was not able to deny the spiritual dimension of humanity, and at that time, the Marxism of his comrades seemed to have little place for this. Mancoba's parents had known a different lifestyle from that of the 'native location' or ghetto, in which they raised their family. They knew of a pre-colonial and pre-industrial past in which African people were able to live their cultures and values, experiencing democracy and gender equality. In particular, his mother was familiar with stories, values and artistic practices which she impressed upon him, and which played a significant role in guiding and shaping him. In fact, during his long, lonely experience in Europe, it was to this guidance that he turned for comfort and sustenance. Through the contemplation of his memories of Africa, its art and philosophical values, and his close observation of European culture and history, Mancoba formed a clear sense of what was wrong with the way things were being done in the world, and what needed to be done to put it right.

He took artistic inspiration from a number of sources in Europe; from his fellow artists and friends and from museums and galleries, where he was able to see work from the rest of the Global South, which had been stored in European museums after being looted by colonialists.

In Denmark, he saw much to inspire him in the Inuit art of Greenland and the Danish Kalkmalerier, and he also made a meaningful trip to Assisi in Italy. Before going to Europe, he had been touched by Chinese ceramic art, Charlie Chaplin films and other artistic forms. He saw in all these examples of art a common human value which he felt expressed something similar to what he had learnt from the African values his mother had impressed on him.

He admired artists in the Western tradition, like Van Gogh and Mozart, because they had developed new and enduring artistic languages, and respected the formal breakthrough, inspired by African art, made by Picasso and the other Cubists. He, however, felt that the Cubists had not entirely solved the problems of post-Renaissance European art which had been dominated by what he described as the 'problem of perspective'. Our reading of this problem is that it facilitated the entrenchment of the idea of domination of one human over another, through the objectification by a 'despotic' eye of the human form, at the end of the vanishing point. For him, the solution to the 'problem of perspective' resided in appreciation of the spiritual dimension of African art – wherein the content of '*ubuntu*' could not be separated from the form.

Although Ernest Mancoba spent 64 years living outside of South Africa, he drew deeply on South African visual arts and heritage as references in his work. Discerning viewers can recognise the influence of, amongst other things, southern African beadwork, rock art and Stone Age implements, as well as specific references to key moments in South African history, (such as the 1976 student protests), in his work. Despite his long absence from South Africa, he never forgot his mother's moral guidance. While his work has very strong South African roots, it also references art from many other parts of the world, thereby underlining his belief that his people were the people of the whole world.

I curated a commemorative exhibition on Mancoba in Cape Town in 2006, *In the Name of All Humanity the African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*. Collecting materials for this exhibition, which spoke, amongst other things, to his aesthetic influences during his first 34 years lived in South Africa, afforded me the opportunity to make connections between Mancoba's words, as expressed to me in the documentary film I made with and about him in 1995, *Ernest Mancoba at Home*, with his work and his Southern African influences notably '*ubuntu*'.
This intense exploration from the time I met him in 1994 through meetings and discussions until 2000 when I saw him for the last time in Paris coupled with my research and reflections leading to the exhibition in 2006 allowed me to conclude that:

Mancoba's integration of form and spiritual content, using a symbol denoting the ancestor of humanity within a harmonious interplay of elements, all equal on the pictorial plane, was a revolutionary contribution to world art, because it suggested the symbolic possibility that life on earth could be lived in equality and harmony.

I hope that this book will allow you to appreciate the beauty of his work and the human African wisdom embedded in his aesthetic.

- Bridget Thompson

ENDNOTES

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63	*Ernest Mancoba at Home* (1995) Documentary film. Dir. Bridget Thompson. Tomas Films, Cape Town.
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145	Ibid p 96
146	See Araeen's keynote address to SAVAH in 2007
147	In conversation with Bridget Thompson in 2006, Prof Njabulo Ndebele said that his father, playwright Nimrod Ndebele, a close friend of Mancoba regarded him as the leading intellectual of their generation in the 1930s. Both Govan Mbeki and Jane Gool Tabata expressed their high esteem of Mancoba in multiple conversation with the author in the mid 1990's.

Ernest Mancoba and Bridget Thompson in conversation, Johannesburg 1994

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WAYS OF SEEING
MANCOBA'S ART

There are not many books in South Africa that help guide the teacher, student and ordinary people to get into the creative mind and explore the intricacies of genius. Ways of Seeing Mancoba's Art does exactly that. It provides us with tools to see into the complex and restless mind of Mancoba as he searches for the elusive spirituality in Art. His canvas takes us to the whole continent of Africa seeking symbols, images and ideograms to pattern meanings.

There is a general cry in South Africa's educational system that there are not enough teachers to teach Art and as a consequence brilliant programmes are abandoned save in private and some Model C schools. Township schools are left lagging behind creating a cruel uneven development in our national aesthetic appreciation and understanding. This book will fill a gap and I hope inspire others to build on this powerful foundation!

Mancoba's art is not abstract but "abstracted" from the reality of signs and symbols to reveal Africa's richness in the visual arts. His Art is contemporary and essentially African thus creating tensions that challenge and infuse the viewer with stunning surprises as it draws one deeper and deeper into the world of the creative mind.

- Professor Pitika Ntuli

Mancoba's integration of form and spiritual content, using a symbol denoting the ancestor of humanity within a harmonious interplay of elements, all equal on the pictorial plane, was a revolutionary contribution to world art, because it suggested the symbolic possibility that life on earth could be lived in equality and harmony.

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