





Ernest Mancoba
Composition 1951
oil on canvas
61.5 x 51.5cm

Photo: Abdulkadir Ahmed Said

'In the Name of All Humanity': the work of Ernest Mancoba

by Ruben Mowszowski

Ernest Mancoba, largely forgotten in his own country, spent nearly 60 years as an artist in Paris and Denmark forging a unique synthesis between Western modernism and African spirituality. When at long last he returned to South Africa, he was - as curator Bridget Thompson's affecting documentary *Ernest Mancoba at home*, which forms part of the exhibition, clearly shows - a man illuminated by a profound inner vision.

'In the Name of All Humanity' is a selection of Mancoba's works exhibited in such a way as to demonstrate the various sources of his inspiration, most of which belong to the first 34 years of his life in South Africa. These encompass Charlie Chaplin movies, Indonesian shadow puppets, Chinese bone ceramics, pictographic writing, rock art, stone tools, beadwork, reliquary carvings and African masks. All this and more was absorbed by the man who left the country when the Department of Native Affairs asked him to make oxen and figurines for tourists, and who came back 56 years later with the eyes of a seer.

From the backward-looking (but forward-travelling) Sankofa bird at the entrance, the viewer moves past two West African totemic masks and through the *sangoma's* trance-veil of beads to be confronted by two cabinets. One contains Mancoba's yellowwood carving of the Madonna (*African Madonna*, 1929); the other, a Kota Reliquary (the guardian of the bones of the dead, usually held in a container beneath it) from Gabon - Christian and African representations, respectively, of the ideal of an interdependent humanity. This ideal is summed up in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is central to Mancoba's art.

Composition, painted in 1951 after Mancoba's release from wartime internment, shows him building his African colour palette using ochre and earth colours - much like those of the stone tools he had collected and the rock art with which he was familiar. The painting appears topographic, as if Mancoba were recreating for himself the symbolic landscape of Africa.

Central to later works like *Drawing*, a 1969 - 71 sepia and wash on paper, is a recurring symbol of an ancestor representing our human origins and shared humanity. Mancoba avoids perspective, using rather a two-dimensional line-drawing for this image so that the emotional expression is 'instinctively expressed and not insisted upon', as the artist states in *Ernest Mancoba at home*. The symbol is a mechanism - like a mandala - to allow the viewer to go beyond the image in order to experience the connectedness of all humanity. Its purpose is shamanistic.

In *L'Ancetre*, 1969 - 71, Mancoba applies his 'gestural' brush-strokes democratically over the full visual field. He says, in the abovementioned documentary, that the colours come directly from his subconscious without conscious intervention in a manner that he describes as 'almost Freudian'. Stare at it for a while and it starts to shimmer. Like any trance-inducing image, the final product is in the consciousness of the viewer. 'Once the image begins to speak to you,' Mancoba adds, 'then the message is there.' There will be as many readings and interpretations of the subconscious effect of this work as there are people, and they will all be equally valid.

In Mancoba's final artistic phase, represented by *Drawing*, 1996, the central ancestor image changes signature and becomes serial - incorporating time - in the form of cryptic symbols reminiscent of pictographic writing. It is as if, due to the urgency of the times, the ancestor has begun to speak but the words are not in any language we can understand. Like the ancestor image, they speak directly to the heart so that we can be reminded, through art, that we are not only material beings but also spiritual beings.

Mancoba, a prophetic artist, has left us a vital legacy. Clearly he will become increasingly important in this country as his message is understood.

Ruben Mowszowski is a Cape Town based writer and journalist

Opens: June 26

Closes: September 30

Gold of Africa Museum

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Ernest Mancoba
Drawing 1969 - 71
sepia and wash on paper
49 x 32cm

Photo: Abdulkadir Ahmed Said



Ernest Mancoba
L'Ancetre 1969 - 71
oil on canvas
92.3 x 60.3cm

Photo: Abdulkadir Ahmed Said





Ernest Mancoba
Photo: TJ Lemon

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