L’ANCÊTRE (1969 - 71) ERNEST MANCOBA, Oil on canvas, 92.3 x 60.3cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery
'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 it’s 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
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Ernest Mancoba died on October 25th, 2002, at the age of 98 in a hospital at Clamart, near Paris. His ashes were returned to South Africa and interred at the Actonville cemetery in Dunsward, where both his parents are buried.

Mancoba’s biography spans the most incredibly dense period of South Africa’s history, characterized by ten decades of the most violent conflicts the country has witnessed and its transformation from the last outpost of colonial domination into a promising democracy. South Africa was cast and recast many times in hard fought class and national struggles during those ten decades.

Two years into Mancoba’s life a rebellion in opposition to the recently imposed Poll Tax broke out in Natal, stimulating the worst fears of the White colonists, and thus spurring them to realize the Union, which was finally inaugurated in May 1910. The creation of the Union of South Africa with the former Boer republics in many instances being permitted to dictate the terms, set the tone for the first phase of Mancoba’s life.

The Mancoba family was among a small minority of African semi-professionals who had moved to the urban areas in the slip-stream of the Witwatersrand gold rush. They lived in Boksburg, on the outskirts of Johannesburg, where his father was employed as a mine clerk. In 1913, like so many other Africans who had managed to purchase land, Mancoba senior found that his rights as a small landowner had been seriously compromised by the 1913 Natives Land Act. While the political leadership was in Britain to try and get the law reversed, war broke out in August 1914.

The 1913 Natives Land Act had made landownership by Africans outside 13 per cent of the land set aside as “Native Reserves” a privilege which could be extended on application to the government. These “Native Reserves” too were not sites of private ownership. The land was state land, administered by traditional rulers recognized by the White minority regime.

Like most Africans of his class, the elder Mancoba was determined that his children receive a modern education. After primary school, Ernest was enrolled at Diocesan college, an Anglican mission school in Pietersburg. After completing his teacher’s diploma at the college, he taught there for four years, between 1925 and 29.
The 1920's in South Africa saw the emergence and phenomenal growth of the first militant national movement of African and Coloured workers, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). Within a few years the ICU spread like a veldfire across South Africa, exciting the hopes of the expanding Black urban population while it provoked the most terrible fears amongst the White rulers. The response of the White rulers was to have recourse to pre-colonial African traditions and customs, corrupted and badly distorted by colonialism and interpretations placed on them by colonial administrators.

These were comprehensively captured in the Native Laws and Amendment Act of 1928 which declared the Governor-General the Supreme Chief of all Natives, endowed his office with extra-ordinary administrative powers and made every African, whether they chose it or not, the subject of one or other tribal potentate. These African traditional leaders themselves became paid civil servants in the employ of the White minority state, which moreover held the power to appoint or depose chiefs as it saw fit.

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. What should otherwise have been embraced as a radically new interpretation of Christian iconography was described as “a scandal” in the South African art world when Ernest Mancoba sculpted a Madonna barefooted and with strongly African features in 1929. Mancoba’s “African Madonna” however established him as an artist and as one with an extremely adventurous spirit. When he enrolled at Fort Hare University college in 1930 he was thrown into the maelstrom of emergent nationalist and radical politics.

The generation of young Africans who were at Fort Hare during the 1930s were destined to play a very important role in South Africa’s intellectual and cultural history as well as its in politics. In the rural areas of South Africa this was the generation that witnessed the collapse of the agricultural economies of the so-called Native reserves. In the urban areas the law was employed to strictly control and regiment the movement of Africans. The Stallard Commission of 1923 designated the urban areas the preserve of the Whites into which Africans would be permitted entry provided they were ministering to the needs of the Whites. A White labour policy, introduced by the Nat/Labour Pact government in 1926, also excluded all Blacks from certain categories of work which were reserved exclusively for Whites.

The previous decade had demonstrated the organisational capacity of the Black majority and the struggles waged by mine workers, dockers and others in the urban areas had taught valuable lessons about the potential of an organized people to act as its own liberators.

Students at Fort Hare were drawn not only from South Africa and its immediate neighbours but from as far afield as Kenya and Uganda. Among them were persons like Epainette Moerane, from Matatiele; Govan Mbeki from Mount Aylliff; Nathaniel Honono from Tsolo; Wycliffe Tsotsi from Tsomo; Phyllis Ntantalala from Idutywa; Archibald Jordan from Tsolo; George Singh from Durban; Janub Gool from Cape Town and others. Most of the students were Africans, but Fort Hare historically attracted students from the Coloured and Indian communities as well.
Being students during a decade that witnessed the rapid descent into another World War must have been akin to a roller-coaster ride. The events in Europe and the rest of the world found an echo in South Africa as the far-right among White politicians, trying to emulate their role models Mussolini and Hitler, organized their Greyshirts, the Ossewabrandwag and the New Order Movement. The complete disenfranchisement of the Africans, piloted as a bill through parliament during Mancoba’s days at Fort Hare, and passed as law in 1935 was probably the seminal event for the Fort Hare students of that decade. Like the 1913 Natives Land Act, the so-called Hertzog Bills fundamentally altered the political status of Africans in South Africa. Whereas Union in 1910 had recognized the so-called “exempted Native”, the small property-owner and professional, as a second class citizen, with limited voting rights and not necessarily subject to all the oppressive colonial laws; the Hertzog Bills stripped away that last fig leaf of colonial domination and reduced all Africans, regardless of income or social status, to colonial subjects to be governed by a separate body of laws and statutes from Whites and able to claim no rights under the law. The Cape African vote had been permitted to survive the creation of the Union in 1910 while it suited British imperial interests. In 1935 the White minority felt no need to preserve this inconvenient relic and disposed of it.

The invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 had an electrifying impact not merely in South Africa, but throughout the African world. In the USA huge demonstrations in the streets of Harlem, Washington and Chicago brought African-American activists on to the streets alongside anti-fascist Italians. Throughout the African Diaspora the cause of Ethiopia, as the last independent African state, was taken up enthusiastically as it was in South Africa and other parts of the continent. These were profoundly formative experiences for Ernest Mancoba who was forced to leave college before completing his degree.

Mancoba’s works appeared in a number of exhibitions held by the African Academy at the Selbourne Hall in Johannesburg. Despite the stir caused by his African Madonna, Mancoba continued displaying a spirit of determined independence by carving in indigenous materials, including yellow wood in which the Madonna was composed. In 1938, aged 34 years, he was awarded the Bantu Welfare Trust grant which enabled him to go to Paris and enroll at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs encouraged by the sculptors Lippy Lipschitz and Elza Dziomba. It was in Paris that he encountered the European avant garde.

Already established as a sculptor, Ernest Mancoba left his homeland for Europe and was not to return for another 56 years. His work, embracing both secular and religious themes diverged from what most other contemporary African artists were producing. 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. This affirmation of a non-western African aesthetic, though seen as close to heretical in South Africa, dovetaileded with the major movements in European art at the time, which had seen Europe’s leading artists take inspiration from sub-Saharan African sculpture, from Ancient Egypt and from Polynesia.
Mancoba’s departure from South Africa brings to a close the first phase of his life as an artist. It is unclear at which point in his career Mancoba opted for painting in preference to sculpture. His first oil painting, Composition (1940), appears to mark a significant moment.

The Nazi occupation of France later that year saw Mancoba imprisoned as a hostile alien at a camp in St Denis near Paris. In 1942, in this camp, he married a Danish artist, Sonja Ferlov. After the liberation of France they moved to Denmark before going back to Paris at the end of the 40s. In 1948, he was involved with Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Constant and others in founding a post war avant garde who named themselves COBRA, an acronym created with the first two letters of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, indicating the spread of its adherents. COBRA’s aims were summed up in a manifesto:

“Abstraction and Daring in Contemporary Art”: Present-day art is both as a necessary risk and as a creation threatened by conformity in two respects, which we strictly oppose: a) banal realism, a vulgar imitation of reality, and b) orthodox abstract art, a new academic style which tries to replace living painting through a range of purely decorative forms. We believe that on the fringe of official abstract art, and indeed only on the fringe, are the most valid works arising, as in the last century the works of the great heretics van Gogh and Gauguin arose on the fringe of impressionism...”.

Mancoba was one of a body of African and Black South African intellectuals who, unlike the generation that preceded them, received their university education in South Africa. Brought together from various parts of the country and the sub-continent on the campus at Fort Hare which was staffed by the leading African academics of the day, Professor D.D.T. Jabavu, to scion of the father of African journalism in South Africa, John Tengo Jabavu, and Professor Z.K. Matthews, the first graduate from Fort Hare. Both were politically engaged, taking an active interest in both education and the political struggles of the time. When the Hertzog Bills became law, his contemporaries turned to Professor D.D.T.Jabavu to call a conference of African opinion makers in an All African Convention. (AAC)

The political outlook of the average Fort Hare student was molded by the thinking of these two outstanding personalities and by the interventions of a number of new political players including the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Dr Eddie Roux, a botanist by training and the founder of the first African language Communist newspaper in South Africa, regularly camped out on the banks of the Thyume River, near Fort Hare, where he interacted with students and imparted elementary Marxism to them with some pamphlets.

The campus at Fort Hare was awash with nationalist literature of various stripes, Garveyist from Britain and the USA; Gandhian from India; cultural nationalist from West Africa and Europe, as well as home grown nationalism.
The African intellectuals of the previous generation had been very profoundly influenced by their training in the USA, often drawing badly conceived parallels between the situation of Africans in South Africa and the USA. Like their American counterparts they were explicitly modernist in outlook and regarded themselves as the advance guard of an Africa which was destined to take its place amongst the nations of the world, once a critical mass had acquired modern skills and education. Their attitude to things African was at best ambiguous. The “civilization” they aspired to was often the poor-man’s version of European culture they experienced in the colonies; what they wished to turn their backs on was the caricature of African tradition that colonial powers permitted to continue under their tutelage.

While they regarded White minority rule as a burden, they tended to regard it as legitimate provided that the rulers were open to reasonable argument by the ruled. From the African minority in the USA they derived the notion that in order to advance, the Africans should draw onto their side White allies who because of either Christian conviction or liberal politics did not support the system of racial oppression in South Africa. Such liberal Whites, they hoped, would be able to persuade a large enough number of White voters to elect a reformist government that would incrementally extend political rights to the Africans. Political moderation, reasonableness and a courteous tone would help keep liberal Whites on their side while they slowly changed the views of the other Whites, they argued. But, in the meantime, deserving Africans, like themselves who had proved their worth by professional training or ownership of property should be enfranchised, as “civilized men”.

This political outlook dominated the politics of both the African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912, and the African Peoples’ Organisation (APO) founded in 1903, until the passage of the Hertzog Bills in 1935.

Ernest Mncoba and the generation who arrived at Fort Hare during the 1930’s had the scales ripped from the eyes rather unceremoniously by events in South Africa and the rest of the world. The rethinking of African nationalist politics began amongst them as students, finding expression, in the first instance as cultural nationalism. A small group amongst them resolved not to follow the convention of giving children “Christian” (i.e. European) names when they had offspring. Others turned to anthropology and history to uncover the hidden treasures of African culture and history. Others took to the study of language and literature as a way of affirming their African identity and the abiding value of African modes of cultural expression. Ernest Mncoba had preceded these sentiments when he produced a Madonna with African features, celebrating the universality of the Christian gospels as well as Africa’s claims in relation to the Christian faith that had adherents amongst Africans centuries before there was a single convert in Western Europe.

The Atlantic Charter, asserting the principal of ‘government with the consent of the governed’, came as a vindication of the views he and his contemporaries at Fort Hare subscribed to. The quickening pace of events after 1945 saw the independence of India in 1947,
the liberation of China in 1949, the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the independence of Ghana in 1957.

The Mancobas went back to France in 1952 and settled in Paris and became French citizens in 1961, both being forced to relinquish their original citizenship. Ernest Mancoba produced the greater part of his oeuvre while living in France. In the midst of the intellectually stimulating environment of post-war France, he turned to his native Africa for inspiration indicated by the totem-like figures found in his paintings of the period. He also turned to print-making, reproducing many of his works in this form.

Ernest Mancoba like his contemporaries was a modernist with a difference. Imbued with a strong sense of African values, he had embraced Christianity as a universal religion that recognized the common humanity of all. From his African upbringing he had brought the values learnt from his parents – compassion, empathy, respect for others and a sense of justice. In the France of the 1950s, with the rebirth of African independence about to dawn, Mancoba was an important figure in cultural discourse about Africa and the arts in Africa. In 1956 he was among those involved in the journal Presence Africaine’s conference on African art, the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists held at the Sorbonne, Paris. His participation in that discussion was virtually the coming full circle of his growth and development as artist.

In November 1994, after an absence of 56 years, Ernest Mancoba returned to South Africa for the Hand in Hand exhibition, a retrospective of his art and that of his wife’s at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. He was awarded two honorary doctorate degrees, by the University of the Western Cape in 1994 and his alma mater, the University of Fort Hare, in 1997. From 1997 to 1999 he was the recipient of a grant of the Krasner-Pollock Foundation.

Ernest Mancoba had nailed his colours to the mast of African modernism at the beginning of his artistic career. When offered the patronising commission to carve “models of Natives and cattle” by the Department of Native Affairs for the Empire Exhibition in 1936 he turned it down with disdain. He refused to be constrained by the inherited conventions from Europe when he executed his African Madonna but would not surrender to the colonial diktat that required African artists to be separated from Whites. He passed from this life holding firmly to a humanist perspective that accepted all of humanity as its moral universe.
The introduction to the book ‘Seeing Jazz’* by Robert O’Meally, reveals that ‘three aspects of jazz have emerged as definitive: complexity of rhythm, the magic of improvisation, and the conversational call and response’. It proceeds to place the emergence and growth of jazz in relation to time and space. It routes its ancestry and indebtedness to a range of geographical influences but especially to Africa. It dramatises the historical movements in its transition into a modern art form, and the rhythms that define it, concluding with its locus as an urban phenomenon. Referring to improvisation it calls jazz ‘a music in the oral tradition...’ and then spells out the conditions for its engagement: ‘Jazz call and response also identifies complicated exchanges between a single voice and other voices: soloist and the chorus of other players; soloist and the congregation and listeners and dancers.’ The book rather provocatively creates a conversation between art forms.

The current exhibition seeks to assemble an exchange that transcends the death of the soloist in his own expressions with the other voices, players and the congregation of listeners and dancers. Mancoba’s use of colour is the means by which he expresses himself through a language for exchange, with a complexity of rhythm which through the magic of improvisation allows for continuity. It is his essential call for humanity that resonates. His art speaks to that message. As part of an African art diaspora, disconnected and dislocated, he tracks the need to seek its reconnection at a locus in which a larger gathering was occurring. Its subject transcended its diverse sources of inspiration and courageously sought to define another world. Mancoba allows us to enter into that conversation as South Africans. He went ahead and paved a definition, which is all of us. The expression is the compression of several generations from clan to urban compatriots, seeking meaning from rapid processes of dislocation and insertion into industrial discontents, and the simultaneous cosmopolitan exhilaration.

Just as jazz grew out of a diaspora expressing its worldliness and its need to explore heterogeneity and difference, it would seem that the visual art world discovered its voice. The complex notions that live within Mancoba’s work allow us to explore as well. If, as a form its expression sometimes exceeds our ability to make sense of the complexity around us, its value surely lies in a language it offers and the message it attempts to convey. In his words it attempts to reconnect the ‘spiritual with the material’. He references the oral traditions as an issue of social and personal proximity. Yet as a form of expression, his art like the movement he was associated with, makes very deep tracks on the critical questions that faced a divided and very traumatized world. It is bold and assertive and attempts to transcend issues of race, gender and class. In this very act it attempts to reconcile humanity and simultaneously mark its transition.

*SEEING JAZZ edited by Elizabeth Goldson; Chronicle Books in association with the Smithsonian Institution, 1997.
The legacy and work of Ernest Mancoba were for many years obscured and largely unknown in the country of his birth. This applied to many black South African artists and it was not until the exhibition *The Neglected Tradition* initiated by the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1988, that the full extent of the contribution made by artists of the calibre of Mancoba, Sekoto, Pemba, Mohl and others was made evident.

Mancoba, like his friend and colleague Gerard Sekoto, left the country in the 1930s and he and his art remained lost to this country for decades, until his brief return in 1994 for the opening of his retrospective exhibition curated by Dr Elza Miles at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Bridget Thompson and the Art and Ubuntu Trust have through this exhibition added a dimension to the understanding and appreciation of Ernest Mancoba and the influences that shaped him and his work. The visual juxtaposition of his painting and sculpture with artefacts, which Mancoba referred to as providing spirituality and creativity, gives an immediate and powerful insight into his mind and artistic process.

These objects have a timeless and universal currency in that they reflect the creative spirit of all humanity, unfettered by geographical and political boundaries. His African origin and culture tempered and shaped his humanistic philosophy, while his Western European home and life's experience sharpened and focused his belief in a common humanity free of the racism and prejudice which impacted on his life. His search for a meeting point of all cultures where understanding and meaning is communicated free of the appropriation of cultural and artistic form, is central to the structure and form of his work.

The Gold of Africa Museum is dedicated to preserving the traditions, heritage and art of Africa and continues to fulfil this objective by being a part of this vital and insightful exhibition. Mancoba's lyrical art is a song of the African continent, which contains within it the spirituality and humanity of which he was a reflection and exponent. It brings an echo of the vibrancy and energy of that magnificent generation of artists and intellectuals of the 30s, whose African voice is here again heard once more.

Credit is due to Bridget Thompson for her vision of making the life and work of Ernest Mancoba known and understood imaginatively through the eyes and mind of the artist, using artefacts of the cultures that influenced him together with the works brought together for this exhibition. The Art and Ubuntu Trust could not have selected a more appropriate vehicle and metaphor to illustrate their ethos.
It gives me great pleasure to be associated with this exhibition of the works of one of South Africa’s finest artists, the late Ernest Mancoba. The bonds are many between South Africa and Denmark. The present exhibition is a strong and impressive expression of a very particular relationship.

Ernest Mancoba and his Danish wife Sonja Ferlov were both groundbreaking artists. Their works were characterised by their rare artistic communality and convergence. They both participated and found freedom through participation in the permissive and influential COBRA Group of artists. They were impressed and inspired by the folk art of Greenland.

I believe that Ernest Mancoba expressed his vision of the role of art - the humanism of art - in the most pertinent way when he wrote: ‘... the central idea, and the central force, is the eternal stream of appeal to all human beings in a universal way, timelessly.’

I think we can all learn and benefit from this vision – as we enjoy the works of Ernest Mancoba!

TORBEN BRYLLE
Ambassador of Denmark

Pretoria/Cape Town
Republic of South Africa
LYDENBURG HEAD · MPUMULANGA, SOUTH AFRICA
(750 AD), Earthenware head, 251 x 135 x 145mm low-fired clay slip specularite, IZIKO Museum
INTRODUCTION
AND MEMORIES OF AN ENCOUNTER

After nearly six decades away Ernest Mancoba came back to South Africa in 1994 for a retrospective of his work and that of his wife Sonja. Entitled ‘Hand in Hand’ it was curated by Elza Miles and held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He returned the following year for the move of this exhibition to a second venue, the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. I had in the meantime had a chance to edit the film on him I’d shot during the previous year. I shared my perceptions from this experience with him:

As you move from the physical body represented in your sculptures (made mainly in South Africa and for a decade or so after he left), to the metaphysical being in your paintings, you reflect your journey away from South Africa. It seems to me that your paintings are paintings of mourning for your people?

He replied very quickly and very firmly, ‘Yes, but Bridget never forget that my people are the people of the whole world.’

By the age of 39 Ernest Mancoba had been caught up in a World War. For four years he was imprisoned in a Nazi internment camp, and then faced the horror of a concentration camp that he was sent to but never reached as there was a sudden change of plan.

By this stage of his life he’d also taken his mother’s injunction to heart - ‘a person is a person by and because of other people’ and evolved a truly cosmopolitan consciousness from this proverb and from his life experience. Even before he left South Africa in 1938 he’d encountered Chinese, Shangaans, Indians, whites, Christians, Jews, animists and Muslims, Marxists and nationalists, liberals and conservatives as well as diverse forms of artistic expression. He’d evolved a theory of African art rooted in the proverb his mother taught him - *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu* and begun to express it in his sculptures. He had also seen apartheid ‘begin endlessly’, as he put it.

It was his declaration ‘my people are the people of the whole world’ that gave rise to the title of this exhibition.

In the name of all humanity: the African spiritual expression of Ernest Mancoba.

*Ngungunyane Ernest Methuen Mancoba* (1904 - 2002)