A closer viewing reveals the colours, and then discernible shapes and recognisable types appear in every colour imaginable. Is it possible that the figures are fighting each other? Looking at the painting as a whole one sees that the original patterning is still clear, perfectly balanced and composed, but now the painting is alive with motion and one can almost hear the clashing of sticks in battle. The figures can be both abstract and at the same time represent clearly recognisable figures, characters and situations in a disturbed frenzy of activity. Often they are very 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 fight they seem to destroy the ancestor itself. The essence of our heritage is threatened. Life on earth is in danger.

Ernest Mancoba

A heritage which belongs to all mankind (is) a heritage which we must carry for our survival because if we lose contact with this then we risk to disappear like these animals, what do you call them?

Bridget Thompson


Ernest Mancoba

Isn’t it? And therefore we might be in a situation in which future, future societies will dig in the ground and say these ones here, like these dinosaurs… they could not find a way to continue this beautiful thing and therefore they’ve disappeared because its a heritage, a heritage of trial and error. We’ve got to try when we are in a problematic way and if certain things do not succeed we try other ways until we find a way to get a continual Renaissance, rebirth.28

In this painting we see the metaphoric language which communicates across cultures, the language of the body and gesture and the contradictions contained in 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.

A person is a person by and because of another person – we have to accept that man must meet man and that’s it.29

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30 Personal communication Wonga Mancoba, 2005.
MANCOBA AND COLOUR

Most of Mancoba’s linear forms are underpinned by colour and colour was one of his most significant tools. His friend the Danish artist, Ejler Bille, described him as one of the greatest colourists. From where was his colour sensibility derived?

Unusually, in the painting under consideration, the colours are in discernible figurations. Over subsequent decades Mancoba’s use of colour became more abstract, and in his later lithographs the ancestor figure walks almost alone with discrete patches of colours around the figure. In contrast his oils are multi-layered, with colours sometimes worked over other colours, sometimes even softened with a layer of white. Nevertheless there is a compositional resonance between works from both phases. But without having the figurative use of colour in the painting under discussion as a guide to meaning, how does one assess the symbolism of his colours? How does one interpret his colours?

Ulrich Clewing writes warmly and sympathetically about Mancoba’s use of colours.

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.

Clewing begins to suggest through the title of his article ‘The unconscious motion of hues’ that Mancoba’s colours arise from his subconscious. However he doesn’t analyse Mancoba’s colour symbolism and methodology and thus misses much of their significance.
Mancoba said to me ‘I allow what is in my subconscious to rise up in my awareness of the moment… and then I take on my pencils and my colours…’ and as he says ‘my colours’ his voice drops with the tenderness of love. It makes one wonder exactly what his colours symbolized for him - perhaps we will never know - but I’d like to suggest that Mancoba was not immune to the powerful, collective and indeed spiritual, artistic expression of Southern African beadwork.

SOUTHERN AFRICAN BEADWORK AND MANCOBA’S PAINTINGS

The methodology of colour patterning and symbolism that Mancoba uses has all the hallmarks of the methodology of Southern African beadwork, an art form which developed in an explosion of creativity with the widespread introduction of beads by European traders. It was practised on a large scale until at least the middle of the twentieth century. This creative expression had antecedents in the application of shells and seeds on leather, as well as a more limited use of rare trading beads from ancient times.

The forced removal of some seven million people, which was at its most intense in the 1970s in the Eastern Cape (and all over South Africa), gave rise to unimaginably difficult life circumstances for the people who expressed themselves through beadwork, and ravaged the practice of this art. Once this beadwork was part of everyday life, now its absence as an expression of communal life is haunting. The many projects which draw beadworkers together to produce according to western designs, are no substitute for the artistry that went before. As Mancoba said, ‘what are we leaving on the way of this so-called progress?’ In this instance it’s not only the art but also the lifestyle, the memories and rituals, the communal ways of being.

Similarly to Xhosa, Zulu and other Southern African beadwork, in many pre-industrial art forms a patterning of equal elements played a role: from African American slave era quilts to Native American beadwork and others outside of the Western system, this patterning often has a sacred meaning as it represents society and its elements in harmony with each other. One can get as much pleasure from looking at the part as at the whole, in fact the whole is meaningless without the detail. This strategy clearly informs Mancoba’s two-dimensional compositions.

35 There is one called Touching Stars pattern which evokes the metaphor of Elza Miles’ essay in this volume, see p68.
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.36

Mancoba’s colours represent the many different facets of a diamond which although separate are an integral part of one thing. The surfaces of his sculptures suggest this as well, especially when he uses the adze, and these in turn represent the different facets of humanity and the different colours of the world.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell speaks of the hero with a thousand faces, the hero that appears in different stories but with the same essential purpose in a thousand ancient and contemporary myths from around the world. Mancoba’s surfaces and colours represent the same multifaceted view of the oneness of humanity and they work in relation to each other – take one away and the picture becomes incomplete and loses its balance. Every colour is a colour by and because of another colour, every bead has its place in the story – every person and every culture has a role in the tapestry of humanity. We return again to umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu.

But to understand Mancoba’s use of colour we need to go deeper, we need to know what his colours meant to him and try to understand each colour specifically. Although, without asking Mancoba, it is hard to know exactly what each colour represented to him, we do know 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 artwork his colours have multiple readings.

Although Mancoba’s colour references may have been very specific to his own life story, there is an extraordinary pleasure in responding to the call of Mancoba’s colours, by reading them over and over again and finding one’s own references.
Sometimes one sees distinctively the colours of Danish Kalkmalerei at other times one sees distinctively the colours of Xhosa beadwork. Can one see the sand of the desert in his painting, *The ancestor*? Does the painting refer to the first people of Southern Africa, the San, practitioners of the shamanic trance tradition and executors of ancient rock art in the process? Do the multiple shades of ochre in his work refer to this pervasive colour in Xhosa cultural life? The more one views Mancoba’s paintings and considers his life story the more possibilities emerge: The hue of stone-age implements which he collected as a young man in Pietersburg in the 1920s seem to emerge in his oils painted in Paris in the 1960s.

When ideas and images rose from Mancoba’s subconscious, was he drawing on a system of storytelling through colours and metaphors, the methodology of Southern African beadwork, combined with the methodology of the imbongi? The imbongi has an arsenal of perhaps 2 000 metaphors which he/she shapes and reshapes into a poetic declamation\(^\text{37}\) which both praises the situation of the day and highlights any contradictions. Metaphoric language is used to speak the unspeakable – a spirit moves the imbongi, his/her voice drops to a growl, a spirit speaks through him or her in the same way that Mancoba followed an almost Freudian 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 the metaphors like an imbongi does and reworking them to tell the story of his people of the whole world one more time.\(^\text{38}\)

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\(^{38}\) Bridget thompson interview with Mancoba, Paris 1994.
A RICH AREA OF EXPLORATION

To take this study further and in order to engage this dialogue with Mancoba one would need to travel into the places he knew, and this means visiting, amongst other places, the world of Southern African beadwork as it was expressed during his lifetime.

Growing up in a mining town on the East Rand Mancoba must have observed the beadwork of the Shangaan mineworkers, and probably many other kinds of beadwork would have been present on the mines, for Johannesburg was a meeting point of many, many cultures and still is. When Mancoba was a young student in the Eastern Cape in the 1930s, Xhosa beadwork must have been ubiquitous because decades later in the 60s during my childhood it was still very much practised.

Joan Broster, a woman with a similar background to mine, that is, a descendant of an Eastern Cape settler family, spent time in the 50s and 60s recording some of this phenomenal artistry in beadwork. She made this observation about the life and art of some of the Xhosa speaking people in the Transkei, those known as traditionalists:

…the AmaQaba cling to their ancient ways. Believing in the spirits of their ancestors and in the efficacy and magic of their witchdoctors [sangomas] they suffer hardship and privation, discomfort, disease and dirt. Yet this very background, this harsh primitive life of dire poverty, destitute of all improvement and advance, yields an art, a craft in beadwork which has an accepted design and motif, the beauty of which is rich in imagination and aesthetic appreciation. No matter how poor the home, every man, woman and child wears at least one example of this art; wears a necklace or a headband with an appreciation of its beauty and keen awareness of its ritual and traditional significance. They have learned to read messages in beads and have developed a form of symbolism contained in colour combination and motif. In this artistic composition the colours are exquisitely proportioned to inflect meaning.

Despite a hankering for the images of western beauty expressed in magazines like Vogue, it was impossible as a white child in the Eastern Cape in the 1950s and 1960s not to be affected, at least on a subliminal level, by the very strong aesthetic and culture surrounding us. Whites lived in a tiny minority and daily encountered Xhosa speaking people wearing beadwork, making beadwork and buying beads. All children made beaded strings and daisy chains in the simplest of patterns. As a result of this childhood experience I am familiar with Xhosa beadwork and Xhosa blankets decorated with mother of pearl buttons, and perceive the same subtleties of colour gradation, geometric construction and patterning of this beadwork in Mancoba’s work. In fact, it was a consideration of the influence of Xhosa beadwork and blanket patterning in my sister, Jane Thompson’s graphics, which are a constant interplay between part and whole, which led me to recognise this aspect of Mancoba’s work.


Joan Broster, Red Blanket Valley. p21

South Sotho leather-backed panel, late 19th century
Broster documented Xhosa beadwork in a number of books and another white South African, Gary van Wyk, who runs the Axis Gallery in New York selling Southern African art, including beadwork, refers extensively to Broster’s collection in a series of articles:

Because tradition linked the living to their ancestors, beadwork was spiritual art. Absent the ancestor figures and masks that focused belief for other African peoples, this religious function of beadwork was vital. The cultures of Xhosa- and Zulu-speakers were essentially iconoclastic. The Xhosa peoples produced virtually no figurative sculpture. Among the Zulu, even as late as the 1920s it was said that ‘any person making an image of any living thing is committing an impropriety’ (Dube 1928:43). Visual art for these Nguni peoples was located mainly in abstract forms and in beadwork. Recently, utilitarian objects used by Zulu-speakers have gained recognition, often under the umbrella of ‘abstract forms’. They conform to the Western stereotype of African art as male-carved wooden sculpture, often polished up and darkened for a market that prefers these signifiers in its art from the ‘Dark Continent’. Beadwork, full of colour, proclaims another Africa, one of light, abstraction, and women’s work. As will be suggested here, it is the primary sacred art form among the Xhosa, and is also of key importance among Zulu-speakers.

This is obviously a huge area of exploration, aesthetically, sociologically, historically and even mathematically it would be very rewarding if children or grandchildren of beadworkers would engage this work with a view to indicating its significance to our society, our sense of colour, our knowledge of symbolism our traditions of storytelling and indeed our value system.

However for our immediate purposes suffice it to say that I am convinced that it is a central feature of Mancoba’s mature methodology and is rooted in his Southern African origins, as it speaks to his conviction of the urgent necessity to reintegrate the spiritual into our human relations.
A SOUTHERN AFRICAN ANCESTRAL SYMBOL WHICH LINKS BACK TO ANCIENT EGYPT IN MANCOBA’S WORK AND THEN FORWARD AGAIN TO THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Elza Miles talks about the impressionistic technique that Mancoba uses in his oils, how the colours reflect the white of the canvas to create a shimmering impression. The whites of his canvas are such a strong feature of his work, and in later works, especially the works on paper, he allows more and more of the white to show.

What is this white? Is it the light of the spiritual world, the white of the sangoma’s beads, the beads descended from the ancient shell-beads found at Blombos Cave from 75,000 years ago? Is it the light of a stained glass window in a church, representing the Christian values Mancoba’s parents held in one hand? Probably it’s all of the above. However the concept of the ‘living ancestor’ also comes to mind. This appellation was given to the white haired gentlemen who re-entered social life in South Africa after decades of being incarcerated and hidden from us on Robben Island. Does Mancoba himself, when he reaches his eighties and nineties, become a living ancestor? Does he enter this state of grace? Or is he just more alone and lonelier than ever before? In Artaud’s unforgettable formulation Van Gogh was ‘suicided by society’, but unlike Van Gogh, Mancoba did not succumb, he remained resolutely alive until the age of 98, with Wonga’s good care and companionship and his ongoing communication with Sonja.

44 Fractal theory is beginning to address these questions.
45 Miles, E. (1994) Lifeline out of Africa. p63
46 Elza Miles has also suggested that after Ferlov’s death in 1984 Mancoba’s paintings became ‘stripped of referential material’.
Consider this extract by Charlotte Moor from *In the country of the heart, love poems from South Africa*.47

The following verses are an almost literal version of two short stories, worked by Kafir (sic) girls with beads. One of them was worked into a belt made chiefly of black beads (the symbol of grief and desolation), with a sprinkling of other colours: - red, meaning weeping; green, hope deferred; blue, hope fulfilled; white, joy and ease again after pain, also goodness; and the almost inevitable pink for the Juba, or dove, for that seems almost as necessary an adjunct to love with them, as with us! At one end of the belt was a tiny string of beads of different colours.

This was the synopsis of the tale, and when reading it the girl told off bead by bead, holding it until its full signification was explained. The story is elaborated in the body of the work. When they have finished it (and these letters take a long time to write!) they send it to the lover or friend for whom it was done, and leave it to speak eloquently for itself. People are sometimes surprised to find how cheaply they can buy work which is composed of material alone worth more than they are asked for it. It is because the letter has carried its message – done its work – and is now but a bare and barren husk; the fruit has been gathered; the orange has been sucked dry.

**A letter from Machuda to Nozilwa**

*Red and hot is my heart,*  
*Pure and true though it be;*  
*Like a dove for its home,*  
*So my heart longs for thee.*  

*Green and fruitless the outlook;*  
*Poor, and destitute, I –*  
*You have gone – return quickly,*  
*My sad tears to dry.*  

*Dark with trouble my heart;*  
*Weary seems every day.*  
*It is long since I have seen you,*  
*Oh haste back, I pray!*

48 Mancoba did have occasional contact with South African political exiles, most particularly with his old friend Gerard Sekoto who lived in Paris from 1948.
49 Tomas Films recording of Mancoba’s speech at the opening of his retrospective exhibition, Johannesburg Art Gallery (1994).
50 Mancoba speech, Nedbank, Johannesburg, 1996
From the same to the same:

My days are all prisoned in darkness,
Long and weary the troubles of life;
Hope now, like the blue sky before me,
Seems to promise an end to the strife.

Like a dove flying high in the air,
Long hovered my hopes o’er their home.
Black and dark was my heart with despair,
But ’tis white again now you will come.

Elza Miles also discerns, amongst other things, emissaries from Africa appearing in the blank spaces on the paper or canvas. Perhaps, although she doesn’t say this, they refer to the significant visits to Paris of Elza herself – the first South African to travel from South Africa to visit Mancoba and relate to his work after many decades. Only a nun, Sister Mariya from the convent in Grahamstown, had visited him once before, but Elza was the one destined to bring him and his work home, and that of Sonja, so she must have had a special significance in his imagination. Mancoba described his return to South Africa in 1994 ‘like a dream that he couldn’t believe’. His later drawings and paintings with their very sparse yet deliberate patches of colour appear almost like hieroglyphics or cuneiform. It seems that in these drawings and by using something approximating pictograms Mancoba is returning to the source of ancient civilizations, to the beginning of forms of communication between humans, used at the start of our civilizations on earth. At the same time however he is looking forward because pictograms are beginning to dominate our everyday lives on a massive scale through our use of information technology, where more and more we respond to pictures and graphics to navigate our way through the World Wide Web. It seems the ancient art of human communication has come full circle in Mancoba’s work as he reiterates his message.

It is this vital balance between the individual and the collective, between spirit and matter, between tradition and progress that our culture needs to find again, without returning, if such a thing were possible to a past that no one will ever revive but by finding again the fundamental values without which no human society can last and which are in essence, universal and to be found in any particular culture, if one digs deep enough.