



**PAINTING** (1965) ERNEST MANCOBA, Oil on canvas



One of the master narratives of South African intellectual and cultural history was the formation and consolidation of the New African Movement during the first half of the twentieth century. The point of its origin and the subsequent one of its termination are contentious zones, but this is invariably the case with the beginnings and endings of periodizations. The Movement was begun by the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s. It included Elijah Makiwane, John Tengo Jabavu, Isaac W. Wauchope, Walter Benson Rubusana, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, William Wellington Gqoba, John Knox Bokwe and Gwayi Tyamzashe. It ended inauspiciously in the late 1950s when it was superseded by the Sophiatown Renaissance, a constellation that included among its adherents Ezekiel Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo, Bessie Head, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane and Miriam Makeba. Between these two constellations there were many other intellectual and artistic formations such as: The Gandhi School (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar, Joseph J. Doke, Albert H. West, Henry Saloman, Leon Polak, Mandan jit Vyavahark), *Izwi Labantu* newspaper group (S.E.K. Mqhayi, Allan Kirkland Soga, Walter Benson Rubusana, Nathaniel Umhalla); the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s (H.I.E. Dhlomo, Walter M.B. Nhlapo, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Emman A.H. Made, C.L.S. Nyembezi, Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele, Albert Luthuli, Jordan K. Ngubane, R.R.R. Dhlomo).

Whereas the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s came to an end as a living experience in the early 1890s through intellectual exhaustion and internal contradictions, the Sophiatown Renaissance was terminated by the apartheid state at the time of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. As a result of the violent nature of this termination the New African Movement was haunted by a sense of incompleteness.

The historical imperative of the New African Movement was a construction of modernity in South Africa. This was the *raison d'être* for its eventuation in South African intellectual and cultural history. In a fundamental way, this imperative was imposed by European history on African history. The violent entrance of European modernity into African history through imperialism, capitalism and colonialism made the question of modernity an unavoidable historical issue. It was modernity that enabled Europeans to defeat African traditional societies and initiate their destruction. In defeating African societies, European modernity imposed a different sense of temporality and a different sense of history. Equally crucial, whereas the making of modernity in European history was a violent process of secularisation from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, in African history it was a violent process of proselytising and conversion into Christianity: in one experience, modernity is a secular eventuation, in the other, it is inseparable from acculturation and religiosity. Since in European history modernity occurred as a process of destruction and creativity over centuries, transculturation was the informing logic of the relationship between the past and the present, the *then* and the *now*.

In the African context it was a matter of enforced assimilation of the past into the present, the enforced Europeanization of the African, which resulted in many tragic consequences. Modernity, specifically European modernity, in Africa was an instantaneous 'eventuation' through imposition that clashed with the social ethos of traditional societies. Arguably, the most intractable crisis imposed by European modernity on African history was the matter of language in all its multiple complexity: language as a pathway into modernity; language as an instrument of historical representation; and language as a form of artistic representation.

The Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s were the first African intellectuals in South Africa to experience the consequences of the violent entrance of European modernity into African history. It is possible to reconstruct the arc of the trajectory of the New African Movement from the moment of its emergence to its demise through the epistemic constructs of religion, philosophy, politics, literature, music, art and film. This trajectory through the articulation and creation of these constructs was a monumental transformation of European modernity into New African modernity. The termination of the evolution of the Movement through force, rather than through its own internal contradictions or through exhaustion of its intellectual and artistic resources, has posed for the post-1994 era the historical question of whether New African modernity was synonymous with South African modernity. Today the valorisation of the Sophiatown Renaissance moment of the 1950s may be due to the perception that it succeeded in transforming New African modernity into South African modernity, despite the fact that it was not on an intellectual par with the preceding cultural formations of the Movement.

In the 1880s the Xhosa intellectuals were faced with the historical problem that only the European languages (in effect English) were the viable cultural facilitators of entrance into European modernity. While their purpose in entering this modernity was to subvert it into a counter-narrative that would serve the imperatives of African people, African languages could not have been facilitators of entrance and comprehension of this new historical experience. This was the beginning of the marginalization of African languages in the context of modernity in South Africa, as well as on the whole continent. The first major debate in the history of the New African Movement was among these Xhosa intellectuals, about the English language, that is, about representation. Making a virtue out of necessity, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba argued in the pages of *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper that in the context of modernity the African languages were dispensable. Disagreeing, Elijah Makiwane declared that to dispense with the African languages was in effect to dispense *in toto* with African cultures. The famous debate among Zulu intellectuals in 1938-9, between H.I.E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, about the effectiveness of the historical representation of the African languages, was a replication of what had happened among Xhosa intellectuals in 1885-6.

Remarkably, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, founded by John Tengo Jabavu in 1884 did actually serve its purpose of facilitating discussion of intellectual matters, rather than on issues that invariably touched on religious concerns, as was usually the case in missionary newspapers.



The second debate between these two Xhosa intellectuals, which immediately ensued on that of the English language, was about *politics*. Again, in this instance, Mzimba urged Africans to dispense with politics and leave their political fate in the hands of Europeans. This posture too elicited a sharp response from Makiwane. In postulating the dispensability of African languages in modernity, Mzimba was following in the footsteps of the New Negro religious leader and intellectual Alexander Crummell. In presenting a similar argument concerning politics, Mzimba was influenced by another New Negro intellectual, the historian George Washington Williams. During these debates the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s followed Crummell's example of appropriating the English literary culture of William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and John Milton in order to fashion an intellectual bridgehead into modernity. In all of these searchings and investigations Xhosa intellectuals were following the edict of their predecessor and teacher, Tiyo Soga, the first modern African intellectual and religious leader, who attempted to use Christianity to salvage modernity from the rapacity of capitalism. They sought to establish a philosophy of history in modernity that would give a sense of direction to future generations: a *philosophy of history* at the intersection of Religion, Politics and Philosophy.

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William Wellington Gqoba, the first modern African poet, was also the first among these Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s to engage the matter of temporality in modernity, in contradistinction to that which prevailed in tradition. In a poem ostensibly about the four seasons, Gqoba wrote metaphorically of the changing historical times the Xhosa nation had encountered. Each season, possessing its particular temporality, had a particular effect on the consciousness and sensibility of the nation. Without acquiescing to the defeat of African people by European modernity, Gqoba was anxious to convey that they needed to make something positive for themselves in circumstances not defined by their own imperatives. In order for the nation to accommodate itself to its new experience, a poetic imagination had to enlarge the sensibility of the nation. The poem was written in English rather than in isiXhosa. In an essay written nearly at the same time, Gqoba posited that modernity had to be embraced at all costs because it represented rationality above and beyond the irrationalism he believed to be prevalent in traditional societies. Again, the English language was the linguistic instrument for conveying these ideological contestations.



Detail from **UNTITLED** (1990-92) E. MANCOBA, Ink and oil on paper



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S.E.K. Mqhayi, belonged to the next generation of Xhosa intellectuals, specifically to the *Izwi Labantu* group. He initiated a revolution in the historical consciousness and artistic sensibility of the African people in South Africa, in the opening years of the twentieth century, by changing the conception and understanding of modernity as much as modernity had changed African people. He challenged the regulative principles of historical and artistic representation that had been promulgated by the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s. While he agreed that the European languages may have been necessary cultural facilitators of entrance into modernity, he disagreed with them about whether the African languages were not as capable as the European languages in representing and articulating the complex experience of modernity. His classic novella *Ityala lamawele* (The Case of Twins, 1914) and his great poems were a testament to his conviction that only through African languages anchored in African philosophies of life, could modernity be made meaningful to the life experiences of African people. Mqhayi was followed by superlative writers in the two major African languages: J.J.R. Jolobe, A.C. Jordan, and Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo, who wrote in isiXhosa; and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, C.L.S. Nyembezi, and R.R.R. Dhloomo who wrote in isiZulu. On the artistic plane, this was the revolution that began transforming European modernity in South Africa into New African modernity.

When he came to study at Fort Hare in 1930 Ernest Mancoba encountered and inherited the intellectual and artistic legacy articulated by S.E.K. Mqhayi. Mqhayi imparted to Jolobe, Jordan, Vilakazi, and Mancoba the conviction that Africa had the linguistic amplitude, historical sensibility, artistic vision and stylistic tradition to encounter Europe on terms defined by African imperatives. Although Mancoba never graduated from Fort Hare, the second intellectual force he engaged at Alice was the different Marxisms of I.B. Tabata and Govan Mbeki, and of Jane Gool and Dr Goolam Gool when he subsequently moved to District Six in Cape Town. From these encounters, Mancoba did not so much subscribe to the theory of society espoused by this philosophy of history as much as appropriate its tradition of radical interrogation of the present or of the given. Also in meeting for the first time with Jewish intellectuals and artists like Irma Stern, Lippy Lipschitz and Elza Dziomba, Mancoba was compelled to an awareness not only of the revolution modern European painting had achieved but also to an acknowledgement that Paris was the capital of modern artistic creativity across the nineteenth century and several decades of the twentieth century. It is plausible that it was this combination of the historical knowledge of modernity, the conviction of the necessity of the radical interrogation of the present or the given, and the certainty of the African genius regarding plasticity, representation and artistic values, that encouraged Mancoba to continue his path as a full-time artist and to travel to Paris where he believed a dialogue about the role of African art in the world was under way. To become a modern painter and sculptor rather than a traditional maker of forms, was experienced as a historical challenge by this South African modernist. The remarkable scholarly work of Elza Miles that brought Ernest Mancoba back to the historical memory of South Africa resonates with these conceptual complexities.



By 1937 when Mancoba moved from Cape Town to teach at Khaiso Secondary School in Pietersburg (now known as Polokwane) the task was to find a medium or form for representing and articulating this historical challenge. Besides the challenge of locating the artistic medium through which to realize his Africanness, Mancoba overcame the challenge of completing his formal education by obtaining a baccalaureate degree from the University of South Africa (UNISA) in this critical year. In the same year, he met perhaps for the first time two other young African artists who had the same ambition he did of leaving, through artistic expression, an imprint of the African imagination on the historical moment of modernity: Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele, the first African playwright to write a play in an African language; and Gerard Sekoto, who like Mancoba, became a brilliant painter and settled in France. The emergence of Mancoba, Ndebele and Sekoto in this decade was not a matter of happenstance or coincidence, for within the history of the evolution of the New African Movement, their coming into being was a confirmation of an inner logic or necessity, because in the 1930s artistic matters began seriously to vie with politics for dominance in the inner sanctums of the Movement.

In the 1930s several important things occurred on the artistic and aesthetic plane that made this decade as vibrant and as interesting as the 1950s in New African cultural history. Firstly, by publishing in *The Bantu World* newspaper, poetry modelled on the poetic form and aesthetics of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, Peter Abrahams brought into the inner precincts of the New African Movement the literary modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. Prior to Abrahams the relationship between New Negro modernity and New African modernity was largely regarding politics, religion and pedagogy, but hardly ever concerning artistic matters and aesthetic issues. This artistic gesture was to take on greater significance in later years when the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s modelled itself on the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Secondly, literary criticism and literary appreciation emerged in the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper. Jordan Ngubane wrote on H.I.E. Dhlomo's *The Valley of a Thousand Hills* epic and Dhlomo himself initiated a critical appraisal of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's theory of poetics. Thirdly, there began appearing in *The Bantu World* columns and articles on matters that had not previously appeared in New African newspapers: cultural criticism of jazz and marabi music by Walter M.B. Nhlapo; reports on painters and paintings, as well as an intellectual portrait of the New Negro painter Beauford Delaney who was then living in Paris. Fourthly, H.I.E. Dhlomo established literary theory within the Movement in his voluminous articles explaining why New Africans in the context of New African modernity should learn from the dramaturgy of the Elizabethan theatre, particularly from Shakespeare, in order to forge modern drama on the basis of traditional theatre. In these writings Dhlomo was in effect theorizing the relationship between modernity and tradition. The constellation of the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s, which gestated in the 1930s, and of which H.I.E. Dhlomo, Walter M.B. Nhlapo, as well as Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele were members, attempted to shift the central preoccupation of the New African Movement from politics to aesthetics, as a reaction to the outbreak of the political struggle between Marxism and African nationalism within this political and intellectual formation.



In the 1930s Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, like other New African artists and intellectuals, were also searching for forms that would make representations of the dialectic between tradition and modernity possible, in their particular instance through painting and sculpture. They had been born in cities and were educated in missionary schools, and they could not assume that they had knowledge and understanding of the aesthetics of African traditional art just by virtue of being born Africans. A historical divide had occurred or had been imposed, and a way of bridging it had to be found. Like other young New African intellectuals and artists, Ernest Mancoba had to undertake a historical rediscovery of his cultural roots. One result of this was *Bantu Madonna* (also known as *African Madonna*, 1929), which exemplified the synthesis or fusion of African aesthetics with Western artistic forms. Even before meeting European artists such as Sonja Ferlov, Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi, or seeing in the galleries of Paris the work of Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Henri Matisse, 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 language (in its complex De Saussurean form of *parole* and *langue*) as an instrument of historical representation and as a form of artistic representation, and form as a medium for the expressive articulation of African philosophies of life.

Among the brilliant essays that H.I.E. Dhlomo wrote in the 1930s, there is one about the theory of the poetics of African art form that seems particularly relevant to the instance of Ernest Mancoba who was then seeking a point of synthesis between Africanism and Europeanism as a way of forging and establishing his modernistic sensibility. Although the essay, 'Why study tribal dramatic forms?' was about the creating of dramatic theatre in the modern context, which is not surprising since Dhlomo at this time was a dramatist, nonetheless its grappling with the relationship between the past and the present was pertinent to all New African artists seeking to realize 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.

Dhlomo made the following observations: one cannot build anew by forsaking origins; the 'primitive' is the embodiment of the fundamental; traditional forms of expression are a sacred inheritance that embody the new and the old; these traditional forms reveal the essential oneness of the African people; traditional forms enable one to engage European forms of expression, not through vacillation but with a sense of determination; the past should be preserved in a living and dynamic form of creating and/or recreating the new; the past should be the basis of the new form; the development of the modern cannot purely be from traditional or African roots, but must be grafted onto modern western forms; the past cannot be delved into unless the present is grasped; a form of artistic expression is the reconstruction, reproduction and recreation of the great experiences of the people; in the narrative of African travail, birth and progress lies the inexhaustible source of African expressive forms; and lastly, African expressive forms expound and dramatize the philosophy of African history.



Without claiming that Ernest Mancoba followed the 'prescriptions' of these formulations, the principle of creativity within the context of the New African Movement dictated their logic. Not only were they essential for his own creative process, they seem to have been central to his appreciating and reading of West African traditional art, particularly the mask. They also explain his moving away from sculpturing to painting in the late 1930s in France, as evidenced in the extraordinary work entitled *Composition*, produced in 1940. In a dramatic way this painting marks the advent of Modernism within the history of the Movement. The poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho had introduced Modernism in literature in much the same way in the 1920s. Here, language as an instrument of historical representation, language as a form of artistic representation, and form as a medium for the expressive articulation of African philosophies, concord and coalesce in an uncommon manner. 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. Many decades later he was one of the painters who through his practice enabled the emergence of contemporary African art studies in the early 1990s. For all intents and purposes it was initiated by two Nigerian art scholars and curators: Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe. In a major essay, 'Appropriation as nationalism in modern African art', Oguibe examined the contribution of the early pioneers of contemporary African art, Aina Onabulo, Jean Mohl, Gerard Bhengu, Gerard Sekoto, and Ernest Mancoba himself, in the construction of African modernity adjacent to or in simultaneity with the emergence of African nationalism. This breakthrough essay together with the scholarly work of Elza Miles, posed an issue that became unavoidable in African cultural history regarding the achievement and significance of Ernest Mancoba. The extraordinary exhibition 'The Short Century: Independence and liberation Movements in Africa, 1944-1994' organized by Okwui Enwezor in Munich, Berlin, Chicago and New York City at the beginning of the new millennium, and the great book and catalogue of the same name, enabled one to view Ernest Mancoba in relation to other African artists from other parts of the continent. In his very perceptive review of this landmark achievement of Okwui Enwezor, Simon Gikandi rightly observed that it had posed a very complex question to which a serious response is unforeseeable for several decades of this century: What is African modernism? Optimistically, the question should be: What was African modernism? Part of the response will have to reckon with the achievement and legacy of Ernest Mancoba.

Perhaps it is a testimony to the enormity of the achievement of Ernest Mancoba that his legacy was at the centre of an illuminating discussion this year in the London-based journal *Third Text*. The editor of the journal, Rasheed Araeen, initiated the conversation with his essay, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's place in the history of art of our age' (it actually incorporates two essays given on two different occasions, 'Post-colonialism and the dependency syndrome' and 'An open letter to African thinkers, theorists and art historians'), in which he argues that despite colonial oppression, political domination and economic exploitation of the continent, Africa has entered or attained modernity and thus is expected to create, produce and innovate on the level of excellence comparable to other historical experiences of modernity.



Despite this capability, Africa suffers from a dependency complex, whereby not only does it not recognize its own significant achievements, but also suffers from an inferiority complex in wishing to judge its attainments by the standards of European modernity even when the latter has been contaminated or poisoned by Eurocentricity. Taking Ernest Mancoba as an example, Araeen argues that even though the South African modernist was a member of CoBrA, one of the last cultural movements of European modernism in the twentieth century, Africa must produce its own scholarship, critical analyses and systems of knowledge, whereby such an artist, or any African artist, or for that matter any Third World artist, will be understandable and appraisable within his or her cultural and intellectual history, first and foremost, before being situated within a larger international context.

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Concretising his theoretical and historical reflections, Araeen briefly analyses Mancoba's painting *Composition* (1940), with the intent of indicating that although the work was triggered imaginatively by the European context in which he lived in exile, nonetheless if its form is understood in its proper temporality and historicity, it would reveal its meaning and significance as well as its Africanness. Araeen concludes by calling for the production of 'a body of new philosophical ideas' that would enable this historical emplacement, thereby facilitating its critical understanding. I believe the remarkable critical achievement of Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe has been the construction of such a knowledge system concerning contemporary African art that simultaneously reveals its nativism as well as its cosmopolitanism. Their work establishes complex dialectical unities against binarisms. Oguibe's recent book *The Culture Game* (2004) is revelatory in this instance. In his rejoinder, 'The true location of Ernest Mancoba's modernism', which is in full agreement with Araeen's reflections, Oguibe states that the real significance of Mancoba is not so much his participation in a (European) modernist movement as, much as his assistance in the construction and definition of African modernity. In other words, Mancoba, Sekoto, Onabulo and others succeeded in their efforts to establish the syntax of contemporary African art. The real merit of Bridget Thompson's contribution to these reflections, 'The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba', in addition to providing the intellectual, political and cultural context from which Mancoba emerged, including his proximity to, and friendship with, A.C. Jordan, Thomas Masekela (father of Hugh Masekela), Eddie Roux, Nimrod Ndebele and others, lies in emphasizing that the form of his artistic modernism had deep affinities with *Ubuntu* philosophy, which in post-apartheid South Africa is being re-discovered and elaborated. My own contribution in this essay is an extension and elaboration of Thompson's acute intuition. Though critical, the contributions of Frank Ugiomoh and Denis Ekpo, in 'African art history' and 'The abortion of Africa's modernity' respectively, are not directly connected to the issues regarding Ernest Mancoba.

To conclude, this marvellous dialogue in the *Third Text*, makes clear the imperativeness of situating Ernest Mancoba in the critical situation that defined and articulated his *historical moment*, the New African Movement, in the *African context*.



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