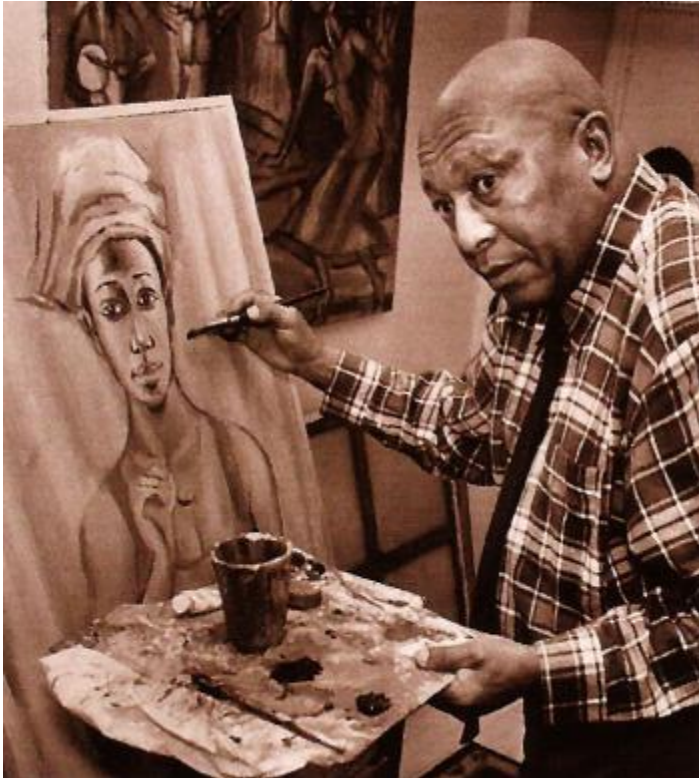


From the art archive: Gerard Sekoto – resistance artist

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Gerard Sekoto. Photographer unknown. Source: Proud (ed), 2006: 102

When I think about figures from the art world who might qualify as heritage icons and cultural treasures, the artist who immediately comes to mind is Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), followed by Dumile Feni (1942-1991) and then perhaps Cecil Skotnes (1926-2009). In all likelihood, many would agree with me here, particularly in respect of Sekoto, as he is fêted by just about everyone involved with the South African art world.



Gerard Sekoto, 'The artist's mother and stepfather', undated. Oil on canvasboard. 30 x 40 cm. The Campbell Smith Collection. Source: Proud (ed), 2006: 103

Thanks to some excellent research by Barbara Lindop and Chabani Manganyi, the details of Sekoto's biography are relatively well known, especially to the cultural intelligentsia. In brief, Sekoto, a pioneer of African modernism and a highly skilled social realist painter, was born at the Lutheran Mission Station at Botshabelo ('place of refuge') in what is now Mpumalanga. Educated at the mission school there, he was reared according to the missionaries' axiom that "to be Christian was to be civilised and to be civilised was to be Christian." He studied at the Diocesan Teachers Training College in Pietersburg (now Polokwane), graduating to become a member of the growing black professional class of his time. In 1939, just a year after becoming a full-time artist, he forsook his rural roots for the bright lights of Johannesburg, where he benefited from the assistance, training and patronage of white liberal benefactors and collectors, without whom he probably would not have become such a significant figure in history. By the mid-1940s he had established himself as a painter of great merit, to the extent that even *Time* magazine wrote about him in a 1949 feature article.

Sekoto lived in a world described by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Luthuli as one in which a great "awakening was taking place" (Couzens, 1985: 353), referring to the rise of a modern African consciousness, replete with political awareness. Sekoto was very much part of that awakening as he represented its cultural arm, along with other first generation black artists, such as George Pemba and John Mohl, and also writers like Herbert IE Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi.

In his politics, Sekoto was as much an agent for equality and African aspirations as any other resistance figure of the black petty bourgeoisie of his day, of which he was a member. But what set him apart from others of the growing black intellectual class – politicians, teachers, journalists, priests, lawyers, entrepreneurs and those who served in public life – was that he was driven by an unusual calling for blacks in the 1930s: he wanted to become a professional artist, using as he put it, "[his] own walking sticks" (Manganyi, 1996: 27).

An astute, politically aware individual, Sekoto was of a class that sought opportunities and progressive trends in the world, particularly in so far as these could be used to assist blacks with advancing out of underdevelopment and the trap of oppression. Somewhat gripped by the colonial fantasy that Europe was the epicentre of the world, he emigrated to Paris, the Mecca of art in his view, in 1947. Sekoto's life in exile was one of struggle and alienation in post-war Paris, but he also achieved considerable acclaim, exhibiting in quite a few European capitals. Described as "the father of the exiled home", he eventually became such a prominent figure abroad that he was sought after by visitors from all over the world, including many South Africans who kept him informed of developments back home. He never returned to the land of his birth, in spite of pleas for him to do so in the late 1980s.

When Sekoto left South Africa, this is what Mohl had to say to him: "South Africa or Africa needs artists badly, you see, to paint our people, our life, our way of living, not speaking in the spirit of apartheid or submission, but there are no artists here and there are no black artists..." (Couzens, 1985: 252).



Gerard Bhengu, 'Smiling Young Man with Feathered Headdress', undated. Watercolour and ink on paper. 25 x 16 cm. MTN Art Collection. Source: Hobbs (ed), 2006: 57

Mohl never explained what he meant by "not speaking in the spirit of apartheid or submission." What could he possibly have meant? Well, what he was probably referring to was a strong trend in the art market at the time. Somewhat in tandem with the colonial and apartheid view that blacks were a 'breed' apart, what many white collectors expected of black artists was an art that, through their eyes, represented cultural apartness, if I can put it like that, or what was called "native studies". And such works were those depicting the 'authentic', mystical and exotic African, showing 'tribal' life and customs – something like we see in Gerard Bhengu's 'Smiling Young Man with Feathered Headdress' (undated).

If Mohl's statement meant taking a stand against pandering to the tastes of a white art market seeking voyeuristic pleasure from artworks that were understood as windows onto a 'primitive' African world, then it also meant that new subjects and identities had to be developed in order to break free of white expectations of black artists. So it was that Sekoto, and also Mohl and Pemba, turned their attention to those who had been forced off the land since the Gold Rush of the late 19th century to prop up a wage economy regulated by a growing web of racial laws. Their lives had been disrupted; they had come to assume, to varying degrees, the outlook of a modernised urban people, and

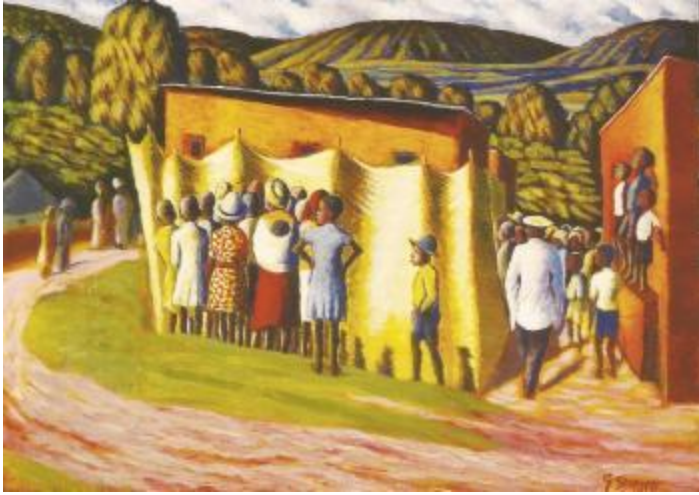
they lived in the slumyards and townships of Johannesburg – they were the black working class.



Gerard Sekoto, 'Women working outside a house', undated. Oil on canvasboard. 28.5 x 39 cm. The Campbell Smith Collection. Source: Proud (ed), 2006: 108

Sekoto painted the black working class of the 1940s against a backdrop in which most whites, because of the divides of segregation and class polarisation, knew very little about black, and also 'coloured', life. What Sekoto did was to reveal to whites, the primary consumers of art at the time as is largely the case today, and the world at large, the lives of people who were confined to townships when they were not toiling in the white economy. These people were those who lived in Sophiatown (Johannesburg) and Eastwood (Pretoria), although he also captured the lives of residents in District Six (Cape Town), another largely working class area to which, by his own admission, he was attracted because of its gaiety, celebratory zeal and sense of theatre. His empathetic depictions of black and 'coloured' urban life in these areas constitute an archive that is amongst the most valued in South African art history, not least because it represents a record of life in areas that were all subsequently declared white and demolished by apartheid's bulldozers.

In depicting those who were considered only good enough to keep the wheels of industry turning and the kitchen sinks of leafy white suburbs clean, Sekoto, along with his fellow-travellers like Mohl and Pemba, pioneered a genre that is today commonplace and a cornerstone of South African culture – 'township art', today a somewhat controversial term as it pigeonholes black artists, creating expectations about what they should be producing. Nevertheless, every artist who has worked in this genre – and there are many – follows in the footsteps of Sekoto and his cohorts, as do all black artists who have pledged themselves to art as a career.



Gerard Sekoto, 'Soka Majoka' (Sixpence a Door), 1946-7. Oil on canvasboard. 55.1 x 74 cm. Bowmint Collection, Pretoria. Source: Miles, 1997: 76.

Sekoto's sparkling, exquisitely beautiful and compelling representations of ghetto life in Sophiatown, Eastwood and District Six tell a story about the lives of a people burdened by racial and class restrictions – a story about black and 'coloured' life under siege. In his narrative about the besieged ghetto life of working class blacks and 'coloureds' in the years just before apartheid became official state policy in 1948, the characters go about their daily lives as if it were 'business as usual', no matter the constraints and weight of oppression on their lives. Rendered with enormous compassion, these characters are mostly engaged in some activity or the other, such as working, praying or talking, making for a visual narrative about human behaviour. What's more, they, strangely enough, never display anguish, agitation, trauma or dissatisfaction with their life conditions. While they might be poor and subjugated by an immoral social, economic and political system, they show no sense of life as a human crisis. And importantly, as they always seem to be shaping their existences through activity, they are never portrayed as despairing, helpless victims of oppression.

What we have with Sekoto is the artist as a sort of sociologist who studies and observes human conduct, or, alternatively, the artist as a social historian who renders the lives of 'ordinary' people. Because we don't see any people rising up to overcome their oppression in his South African work – he produced a few paintings about political life in South Africa while in France – it might seem as if his work is bereft of politics. And because it is seemingly without politics, some would probably conclude that Sekoto is not a resistance artist, i.e. an artist who uses his art as a vehicle to critically challenge, or at least engage, an oppressive system. This view of Sekoto as an apolitical artist is in fact re-enforced by the artist himself, who said that "he did not want to hoist a flag" (Manganyi, 1996: 35), implying that political gusto had no place in his art. And exactly why he did not want to hoist that flag was simply because he was a creatively intelligent conduit through which flowed the 'politeness' and political conservatism of the 'go gently' generation of which he was a member – a generation believing in prayer meetings, dialogue, petitions, and acting 'responsibly', rather than radical action, such as strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience campaigns.

But no matter what Sekoto had to say about not wanting to hoist a flag in his work, he is, in my view, and without a doubt, a resistance artist. Any thinking to the contrary is, I would argue, quite erroneous. What we should consider here firstly is that he saw his art as a vehicle for dialogue and exchange between the 'races' in the interests of breaking down cultural barriers and the walls of prejudice. He put it like this in 1961, fourteen years into his exile in France: "Art is a human virtue and I have given my whole self to

it, for it promotes human understanding among races rather than destroy it" (Manganyi, 1996: 103).

As an artist seeking to build human understanding through his art, what I think Sekoto sought was to challenge the white colonial and apartheid perception that "deemed [blacks] to be savages prone to witchcraft, cannibalism and other vices credited to barbarians," as TD Mveli Skota, the General-Secretary of the ANC from 1923-27, put it in 1930 (Couzens, 1985: 4). Sekoto's antidote to this casting and degradation of blacks as barbarians, and as inferior beings, was to render them with great dignity, always depicting them as noble beings in the face of hardship. And because his representation of blacks as people of innate worth constitutes a counter-narrative to skewed colonial notions about the other, this is why I consider him to be a resistance artist.

Although he achieved success as painter in the 1940s, earning enough money from sales of his work for a passage to France, it was only in the late 1980s that Sekoto was really elevated to a pivotal place in South African art history. That it came so late in his life – he was by now an old man – was because, until then, black artists were virtually written out of South African art history. As the country marched towards 1994, a new revisionist art history began to emerge, based on the recovery of lost history and new values, such as cultural diversity and inclusiveness. Sekoto stood at the forefront of this new art history.

Because he, as an artist in the Western mould, was among the first to insert black creative intelligence into the white art market and public consciousness, because he was a resistance artist of great calibre, and because his beautiful works about black working class life are signposts of South African culture, Sekoto is today a celebrated figure of the post-apartheid heritage landscape. Postage stamps featuring his paintings were issued in 1996; Becker Street in Newtown, Johannesburg, was renamed Gerard Sekoto Street; and he is only one of a handful of artists to be awarded the Order of Ikhamanga (in Gold) – an honour bestowed upon him in 2003 by President Mbeki for not only "exceptional achievement in the arts," but also, notably, for his "contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle."

Such honours are, of course, well and good, but the state can do more to cement the Sekoto legacy in the public mind. While I was writing this article, Jo-Anne Duggan, the Director of the Archival Platform and a colleague with whom I have worked for some 25 years now, told me about her recent visit to Botshabelo in Mpumalanga, where Sekoto was born. At the time of her visit, Jo-Anne, however, had no idea that this was his birthplace as there was nothing in the town to indicate that this was so. A simple plaque or monument with a bit about his life-story would do the job, although an interpretation centre with reproductions of his work would be even better. Or what about a Sekoto museum as we have with the Walter Battiss Museum in Somerset East in the Eastern Cape, where the artist was born in 1906? Or is that too much to ask? The state does much to commemorate South Africa's icons of the political struggle against apartheid through remembrance gardens, museums and the like, but in securing the country's cultural legacy, it needs to step up a notch or two.

And there is also something else that the state should think about. Sekoto, a recipient of one of the highest national cultural honours in France, the award of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters, was buried at the Nogent-sur-Marne cemetery in Paris. The French, who look upon him with considerable pride, and as one of their own as he became a French citizen, would probably argue with this, but his remains should be

repatriated for re-burial in South Africa. If this were to happen, his grave would serve as a poignant reminder of a man who, as I have argued, challenged the colonial/apartheid perception that blacks were lesser beings, if not sub-human, by rendering them with great dignity. His final resting place would also serve as a monument to a man who waged, and won, a struggle for acknowledgement and acceptance as a gifted black artist in a white world which hardly regarded blacks as creative beings. After all, they, in the words of apartheid architect HF Verwoerd, were only meant to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Described in 1946 by a professor of fine art at Pretoria University, thought to be Matthys Bokhorst (Miles, 1997: 79), as the "Negro... who even made pictures," Sekoto showed otherwise.

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