

A LEARNER RESOURCE ON THE ART OF

Peter Clarke

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COMPILED BY THE
HERITAGE AGENCY CC

EXHIBITION

LISTENING TO DISTANT THUNDER:
THE ART OF PETER CLARKE

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Standard Bank Gallery
Johannesburg

'LISTENING TO DISTANT THUNDER: THE ART OF PETER CLARKE' HONOURS THE LIFE AND WORK OF PETER CLARKE, THE HIGHLY RESPECTED SOUTH AFRICAN ARTIST.

BORN IN SIMON'S TOWN IN 1929, CLARKE'S CAREER SPANS SIX DECADES. AFTER PAINTING IN HIS SPARE TIME FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS WHILE WORKING IN THE SIMON'S TOWN DOCKYARD, HE BECAME A FULL-TIME PROFESSIONAL ARTIST IN 1956.

CLARKE HAS RECORDED MANY ASPECTS OF SOUTH AFRICAN LIFE. HIS WORKS SHOW SUBTLE CRITICISM OF APARTHEID. ALTHOUGH HE AND HIS FAMILY WERE FORCIBLY REMOVED FROM HIS HOME IN SIMON'S TOWN DURING THE APARTHEID ERA, HIS ART IS WITHOUT BITTERNESS, AND IS OFTEN HUMOROUS.



Peter Clarke, *Listening to distant thunder*, 1970. Oil and sand on board, 610 x 764 mm. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery

Listening to distant thunder: The art of Peter Clarke tells the story of Clarke's work as an artist. It includes early pieces made in the 1940s and 1950s, works from the late 1960s that refer to the trauma of forced removals from Simon's Town, and the ambitious paintings he began making during his trips to America, Norway and France in the 1970s.

The exhibition also features some of his late works that look back on the apartheid years and celebrate the new South Africa.

Clarke built his reputation as a narrative artist with a distinctive style, and is best known for his portrayal of the social and political experiences of ordinary South Africans:

South Africa is a very inspiring place. I am very much interested in people. If I decided to only work in a figurative way, there would be no end to what I want to say about people... I used to think of South Africa as a mad house but a mad house is far more interesting, really. Had I lived in Europe, my art would have been completely different and probably not at all figurative.

Clarke is known as a visual artist and a writer, and has a strong interest in books. He has created book covers and illustrations for authors, such as his friend, James Matthews, as well as Es'kia Mphahlele, Alan Paton and Chris van Wyk. Commissions for book illustrations, as well as his own written work, which he publishes from time to time, have provided an ongoing source of income for Clarke.

In the late 1990s, Clarke began making 'artist's books' on a range of topics. These consist of works that fold up into their covers or boxes of various shapes and sizes that he handcrafts from leather. About his artist's books, Clarke has this to say:

You can't fold up a Monet or a Cezanne or any precious work of art. But with one like this, you can fold it up and carry it in a little box. You can sit next to somebody in a waiting room and say: "I've got something to show you" and lift it out of its box.

Clarke is well known for his depictions of the social and political experiences of ordinary South Africans



Peter Clarke, *Family fleeing from fire*, 1962. Wood and linocut. 190 x 250 mm. Private collection

Clarke's more recent work includes the *Fan* series, each of which is accompanied by prose writing. These works are concerned with various historical, biblical and literary figures, as well as artists, such as Sam Nhlengethwa, Jackson Pollock and Piet Mondrian.

'Listening to Distant Thunder: The art of Peter Clarke' is curated by Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin. The exhibition is accompanied by a book of the same title, also by Hobbs and Rankin. The result of seven years of research, the book traces Clarke's evolution and is a thorough account of his art in a socio-political context.

South Africa is a very inspiring place...I used to think of South Africa as a mad house but a mad house is far more interesting, really



THE LADY ONO NO KOMACHI
(9th century Japanese poet)
He does not come.
Tonight in the dark of the moon
I wake wanting him:
My breasts heavy & blazing.
My heart aches.

(note: Ach, shame!)

Peter Clarke, *The Lady Ono No Komachi (9th century Japanese poet)*, 2007. Fan series: folded marbled paper with inscribed poem. 500 x 350 mm. Artist's collection

Biography

PETER CLARKE



An internationally-acclaimed artist and author, Peter Clarke was born in Simon's Town, Cape Town, in 1929. Clarke finished his schooling in 1944 at Livingstone High, where he studied art under Hendrik Esterhuizen. On leaving school, he worked as a ship painter in the Simon's Town dockyard. In 1947, he came across an article on Gerard Sekoto, the first black artist to be represented in a public collection. For Clarke, Sekoto's success as an artist was inspirational. "I remember thinking," he says, "if he who is black can be an artist, so can I."

Clarke is largely a self-taught artist who has learned much from books and magazines. He has, however, also received some informal art tuition. In 1947 he attended art classes at St Philips School in District Six, where he was taught by the London-born artist, John Coplans. After Coplans returned to Britain, the classes moved to the Roland Street Technical College, Cape Town, in 1948, where they were run by Johannes Meintjes and Nerine Desmond, a member of the New Group. Clarke later worked with Katrina Harries at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town (1961), and also spent time working in the printmaking studios at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (1962-1963) and at Atelier Nord in Oslo, Norway (1978-1979).

Clarke worked in the docks at Simon's Town until 1956, resigning from his job to become a full-time artist in his late 20s. For more than 50 years since, he has worked as a professional artist – a rare phenomenon in the South African art world, where very few people have been able to make a living as an artist without any other means of support.

With assistance from his life-long friend, James Matthews, Clarke held his first solo exhibition in the newsroom of the newspaper,

The Golden City Post, in 1957. In an interview from the time, he commented:

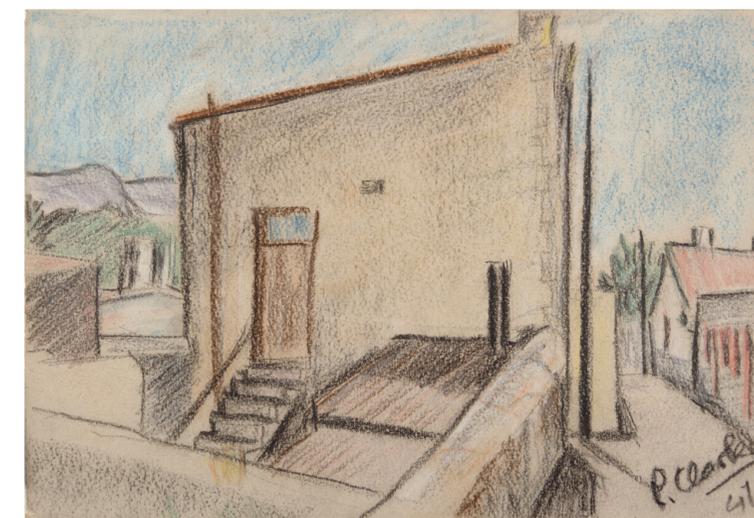
Before [my exhibition], I was just another 'coloured' man. Our people took it for granted that only whites could do such things. Now people are becoming aware of the fact that they can do these things too; they are human beings.

Since his first exhibition, Clarke has participated in numerous group shows, both here and overseas. He has also held many solo shows. In addition, he has received a number of awards, honouring him both as a writer and artist. These include the Order of Ikhamanga, awarded by the President of South Africa to citizens who have excelled in the arts and literature, among other fields (2005), and the Arts and Culture Trust Lifetime Achievement Award (2010). Recently, *Family fleeing from fire* was bought by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Apart from his work as an artist, Clarke contributed to cultural development as an activist and organiser during the anti-apartheid era. He was involved with the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town almost since it was started in 1977 and, in 1982 attended the historic 'Culture and Resistance Festival' in Gaborone, Botswana. There he delivered a paper and also participated in the festival exhibition, 'Art toward social development: an exhibition of South African art'. At the festival, a resolution was passed calling on artists to use their skills to serve communities. Clarke took this call to action seriously and was instrumental in establishing Vakalisa, an arts group that promoted cultural development in deprived communities in the Western Cape, in 1982.

"The important thing," says Clarke, "is the enrichment of the people, even if you are living in a ghetto." To help this cause, he has taught and organised a programme of exhibitions in Ocean View on the Cape Peninsula, where he has lived since his eviction from Simon's Town during the apartheid era.

If you are unable to attend this exhibition in person, take a virtual tour of the gallery at www.standardbankarts.com.



Peter Clarke, *Raffle's Shop, corner Waterfall Road and Budge's Lane*, 1947. Pastel. 190 x 280 mm. Private collection

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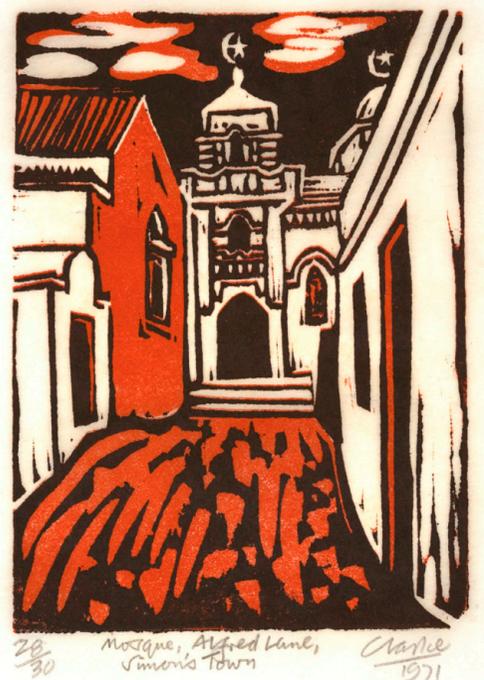
FOCUS ON THE ART OF Peter Clarke

Printing and painting

Peter Clarke uses a number of different media to make pictures. In this Education Supplement, you will find reproductions of paintings, prints and drawings made by Clarke over the years.

Take a very careful look at two works which both show places from Clarke's life, but are made using different media. *Mosque, Alfred Lane, Simon's Town*, for example, is a print and *Coming and going*, is a painting. Then discuss the following questions with a classmate.

- How does the medium affect the way in which colour is used?
- How has the artist used the different media to show texture?
- Do you think one medium is more suitable than the other for creating fine detail?
- Both works have a sense of depth. The mosque looks as if it is at the end of Alfred Lane, and some of the people in *Coming and Going* seem to be much closer to the viewer than others. How has Clarke created this sense of depth in each of the works?
- Do you think one medium is more effective than the other for expressing feelings or creating a particular kind of atmosphere?
- Imagine that Clarke had made a painting of the mosque in Alfred Lane, instead of a print. Would that have made a difference to the way you respond to the picture? Explain how and why you might respond in a particular way.



Peter Clarke, *Mosque, Alfred Lane, Simon's Town*, 1971. Colour-reduction linocut. 125 x 111 mm. Artist's collection



Left: Peter Clarke, Drawing used for *Coming and going*, 1960. Pencil. 135 x 105 mm. Private collection



Right: Peter Clarke, *Coming and going*, 1960. Oil. 511 x 409 mm. Private collection

FACT FILE: RELIEF PRINTMAKING

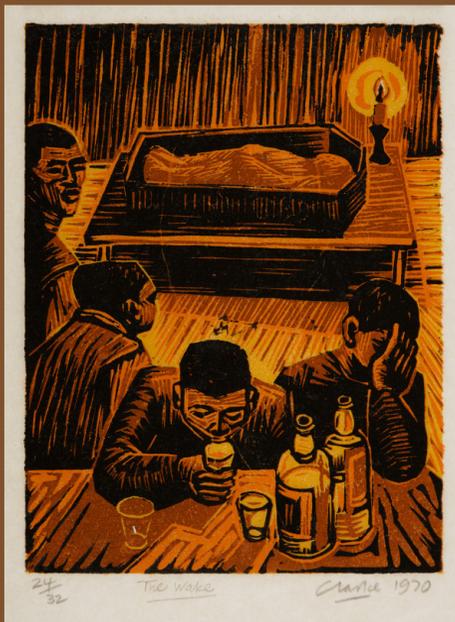
Most of the prints that you see on this exhibition are relief prints. To make a relief print, the artist starts by drawing a design onto a smooth block of wood or a sheet of linoleum. Next, the artist uses a knife or a cutting tool to cut away areas of the surface that are to remain white. To print the design onto paper, the artist uses a roller to coat the raised parts of the block with ink. To transfer the design on to paper, the artist presses paper onto the inked surface of the block, either by hand or using a press, and then lifts it off carefully. The same block can be used over and over again to make a series of identical prints. Peter Clarke's *Mosque, Alfred Lane, Simon's Town* is a two-coloured relief print made using the colour reduction method. To make this, Clarke would have begun by cutting away all the areas that he wanted to leave white. Then, he would have rolled red ink onto the block and printed a set of prints on white paper. Next, he would have cut away all the areas that he wanted to remain red. Finally, he would have rolled black ink onto the block and printed this over the red and white, creating a three colour image. In this process, the final number of prints made by one block is limited to the number produced in the first stage, before additional cutting is done.

FACT FILE: COLOUR

Artists use colour for many reasons. Colour can be used to create a particular mood or atmosphere – many people say that pale colours make them feel calm whereas brighter colours can express happiness or anger. Colour may be used to create a sense of depth in a painting; landscape artists may, for example, paint trees in the 'front' of a painting a brighter green than those in the distance. Colour can be used to create a sense of form, or to make a painted object appear three dimensional. Colours affect the way you 'read' and understand the painting and the way it makes you feel.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Study *The wake*. This is another colour-reduction linocut, in black, orange and yellow. Clarke has managed to include quite a bit of detail in this artwork by carving lines out of the linocut block at various stages in the printing process. How does he use lines and shapes to show the emotion of the guests at the wake? Are the colours appropriate for the mood of the artwork?



Peter Clarke, *The wake*, 1970. Colour-reduction linocut. 220 x 170 mm. Private collection

TRY OUT

Choose a place or scene from your own neighbourhood. Imagine that you will recreate it in the form of a two-colour linocut. Which colours would you choose? Make a sketch in your visual diary, experimenting with different combinations of colours. How do they change the mood of the picture?



Peter Clarke, *Mondriaan*, 2004. *Fan* series: folded paper with gouache and inscribed text. 660 x 500 mm. Collection: Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

Tributes

Clarke's recent work includes the *Fan* series. These works are tributes to well-known artists, historical, biblical and literary figures. Each work features a fan-shaped image and is accompanied by a piece of text

In *Mondriaan*, Clarke pays tribute to Piet Mondrian, a 20th-century Dutch artist, whose later works are made up of restricted range of colours – red, yellow, blue, black and white – in strong lines and straight-edged forms. The text below quotes Mondrian speaking about his studio.

- Find out about Mondrian and his work. Look at Clarke's tribute to Mondrian. How does this demonstrate Clarke's respect or admiration for Mondrian? Consider how another artist might have paid tribute to Mondrian. What other images or designs could have been used? What other form could the tribute have taken?
- How does the writing beneath the fan image affect the way you think about the artwork? Does it help you to interpret it, or does it add another layer of meaning to unravel?

Wayne Barker is another artist who is inspired by the work of others for his art. See the Standard Bank Gallery Learner Series 01/2011 on the art of Wayne Barker for examples of his *Legends* series, which pays tribute to South African legends and which draws on the art of JH Pierneef.

TRY OUT

Select a South African artist or public figure whom you admire or respect and design an artwork paying tribute to him or her. How will you show that the piece is about your chosen person? Consider whether you will include words, photographs or symbols to show your respect, then make a sketch of your proposed artwork. Swap sketches with a classmate and see if you can tell who each other's chosen figures are.

FACT FILE: FAMOUS TRIBUTES

Tributes can take different forms. One of singer-songwriter Elton John's greatest hits, *Candle in the Wind*, was written as a tribute to actress and singer Marilyn Monroe. Musicals such as *Beatlemania*, which is based on the music of the Beatles, pay tribute to popular bands and groups. Mandela Day, celebrated worldwide on 17 July every year, pays tribute to Nelson Mandela and the contribution he has made to building democracy.

GLOSSARY WORDS

FIGURATIVE ART

FIGURATIVE ART CONTAINS REFERENCES TO THE REAL, OR NATURAL, WORLD, SUCH AS HUMAN AND ANIMAL FORMS, AND OBJECTS. FIGURATIVE ART IS DIFFERENT FROM ABSTRACTION, WHERE THERE ARE NO RECOGNISABLE FORMS – PEOPLE, TREES, OR FURNITURE, FOR EXAMPLE

MEDIUM

THE MATERIAL THAT IS USED TO MAKE A WORK OF ART, SUCH AS CLAY, PAINT, INK OR PENCIL. THE PLURAL OF MEDIUM IS MEDIA

TRIBUTE

AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RESPECT, GRATITUDE OR ADMIRATION. CAN TAKE MANY FORMS INCLUDING A POEM, ARTWORK, SPEECH, POEM, GIFT OR PAYMENT

Narrative art



Peter Clarke, *For some the pathway to education lies between thorns*, post-1994. Colour-reduction linocut. 283 x 343 mm. Collection: Donald Jansen

Clarke's beautiful linocut, *For some the pathway to education lies between thorns*, shows a group of children on their way to school.

- In this linocut, Clarke seems to suggest that the road to education is full of difficulties. What do you think these difficulties may be? Do you think all South Africans experience the same sorts of difficulties? What could be done to lessen these difficulties?
- Are you happy with the 'pathway to education' that you and your classmates are travelling? What could you, the school authorities, or your community do to improve the quality of your education or your experience of school?

FACT FILE: NARRATIVE ART

A narrative artwork is one that uses a picture to tell a story about a person, a place or an event that may be drawn from life or may be fictitious. Although he has made abstract works, Clarke is often called a narrative artist because his pictures tell the stories of ordinary people and their experiences.

ABOUT THESE WORKSHEETS

This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition, *Super Boring*. In it artworks are explored by means of thought-provoking questions, fact files, glossary words and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. The questions also refer learners to other African and European art styles, drawing on previous educational supplements in the *Gallery Learner Series*. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10-12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on Wayne Barker.

Note on assessment

We recommend that educators develop assessment activities based on this learning experience. Assessment ensures that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills. It also provides teachers with indications of achievement. When assessment is focused, say in the form of continuous feedback over a year, learners understand more clearly what they are required to know. Self-assessment helps learners set personal goals, evaluate performance and build self-confidence. Peer assessment encourages a sense of responsibility. When planning an

TRY OUT

Poverty is widespread in South Africa. Imagine that an economics magazine has commissioned you to illustrate the cover of its next edition, which will focus on South Africa's poor people and the hardships they face. What images would you use to depict poverty and its effect on the lives of South Africans? What medium would best suit this purpose?

Have a look at *Afrika which way?..* It shows a boy, thorn bushes, birds freed from a cage by the boy, and a wall with graffiti.

- The following names appear on the wall – Cabral, Luthuli, Kenyatta, Nkrumah and Nyerere. Find out who these people are or were. You may need to look the names up on the web, consult your local library or ask a knowledgeable person in your community. Once you know more about these people, and why they are important, discuss the message that Clarke is communicating in this painting.
- Also written on the wall are the names of the European colonial powers – France, Britain, Belgium and Portugal. What does the term 'colonialism' mean? Do you think Clarke supported or opposed colonialism? Explain why you think that.

Among the slogans on the wall is "We shall overcome", the title of a freedom song that was sometimes sung during the South African struggle for liberation. The values of dignity, equality and freedom for which people struggled are protected by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. This includes a Bill of Rights which commits government to protecting the rights and freedoms of all the people in the country.

All South Africans are entitled to the rights spelled out in the Constitution. But all South Africans also have a responsibility to contribute to building a great country. South Africa is the first country in the world to have developed a Bill of Responsibilities which sets out the actions that ordinary people can take to transform the nation.

- Get hold of a copy of the Bill of Responsibilities and discuss ways in which you and your classmates can apply this to your daily lives.



Peter Clarke, *Afrika which way?*, 1978. Gouache and collage. 755 x 945 mm. Collection: William Humphreys Art Gallery

assessment programme, school teachers need to refer to Learning Outcomes and Standards for the Visual Arts, as envisaged in the National Curriculum Statement.

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