

The Return of the Repressed

Work by Apartheid-Era Black Artists Is Coming Home to South Africa

By MICHAEL WINES

PRETORIA, South Africa — In 1975 a white Australian diplomat named Diane Johnstone invited Michael Maapola, a black South African artist, to her apartment here to show his drawings to her guests. Within days Ms. Johnstone was evicted and her apartment ransacked. But what happened to Mr. Maapola, whose drawings of police clubbings and prison scenes recorded the ugliness of apartheid at its peak, was worse.

For years he was harassed. In 1988 he was imprisoned. In 1989 an arsonist torched his studio in Hamman-skraal, a township north of Pretoria. Years of paintings and sculpture went up in smoke.

So it was more than a bit remarkable that a selection of Mr. Maapola's apartheid-era drawings were exhibited in Pretoria in 2004 and in Johannesburg in 2005.

"I thought that they had gone forever," Mr. Maapola, in his Hamman-skraal studio, said of his work from that time. Now 57, he is an established artist.

Some of it survived because of Ms. Johnstone and like-minded foreigners. Decades ago they bought his works and those of other black township artists who could not freely exhibit. Now, in an unusual and well-orchestrated burst of generosity, these collectors are giving the art back to South Africa, helping to restore an important part of the country's historical record.

The returns come courtesy of the Ifa Lethu Foundation, a nonprofit group first set up in 2004 under the name Homecoming Foundation to retrieve apartheid-era art and memorabilia from around the world. The organization has brought in about 50 objects, mostly artworks, and hopes to retrieve hundreds more, primarily from Western diplomats, journalists and businesspeople who removed them from South Africa from the 1960's to the 80's.

Ifa Lethu — Xhosa for "Heritage" — has identified about 120 artists whose works it wants to locate and display, as well as a number of objects, from paintings to oral histories and films, Narissa Ramdhani, the foundation's chief executive, said in an interview here.

Some of these works will be placed in a mobile exhibition that will travel, along with apartheid-era artists, to remote villages. Eventually the art will be placed with exhibitors selected to make it broadly available to ordinary South Africans.

"We don't even know what left the country," Ms. Ramdhani said. "It left at such turbulent times that there was no process in place to keep track. Some of it may not have great artistic value. But they have great historical value, because they give us



Above and below, Ifa Lethu Foundation



Joao Silva for The New York Times



Michael Maapola, left, whose apartheid-era work was returned to South Africa, thanks to the Ifa Lethu Foundation. It also retrieved, top, David Mbele's "Boy With Flute" (1973) and a Fikile Magadledla painting, above.

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a glimpse of life in the townships in the 70's and 80's, and even the 60's."

Such glimpses are less common here than one might think. Black artists' work was rarely exhibited under apartheid, and politically minded artists like Mr. Maapola were persecuted. Much township art and other artifacts were destroyed by security forces or spirited away by foreigners, leaving what Ms. Ramdhani calls a yawning gap in the nation's cultural legacy.

Both South Africa's government and its dominant political party, the African National Congress, have programs to recover historic memorabilia. Ifa Lethu, however, is private and relies entirely on the generosity of foreigners for donations of artworks and other objects. Potential donors' only reward is the knowledge that with their gifts, many South Africans will be seeing blacks' contemporary views of apartheid and township life for the first time.

Although they are now being hailed as saviors of a critical part of South Africa's collective history, some of the foreign collectors said their motives were less altruistic at the time.

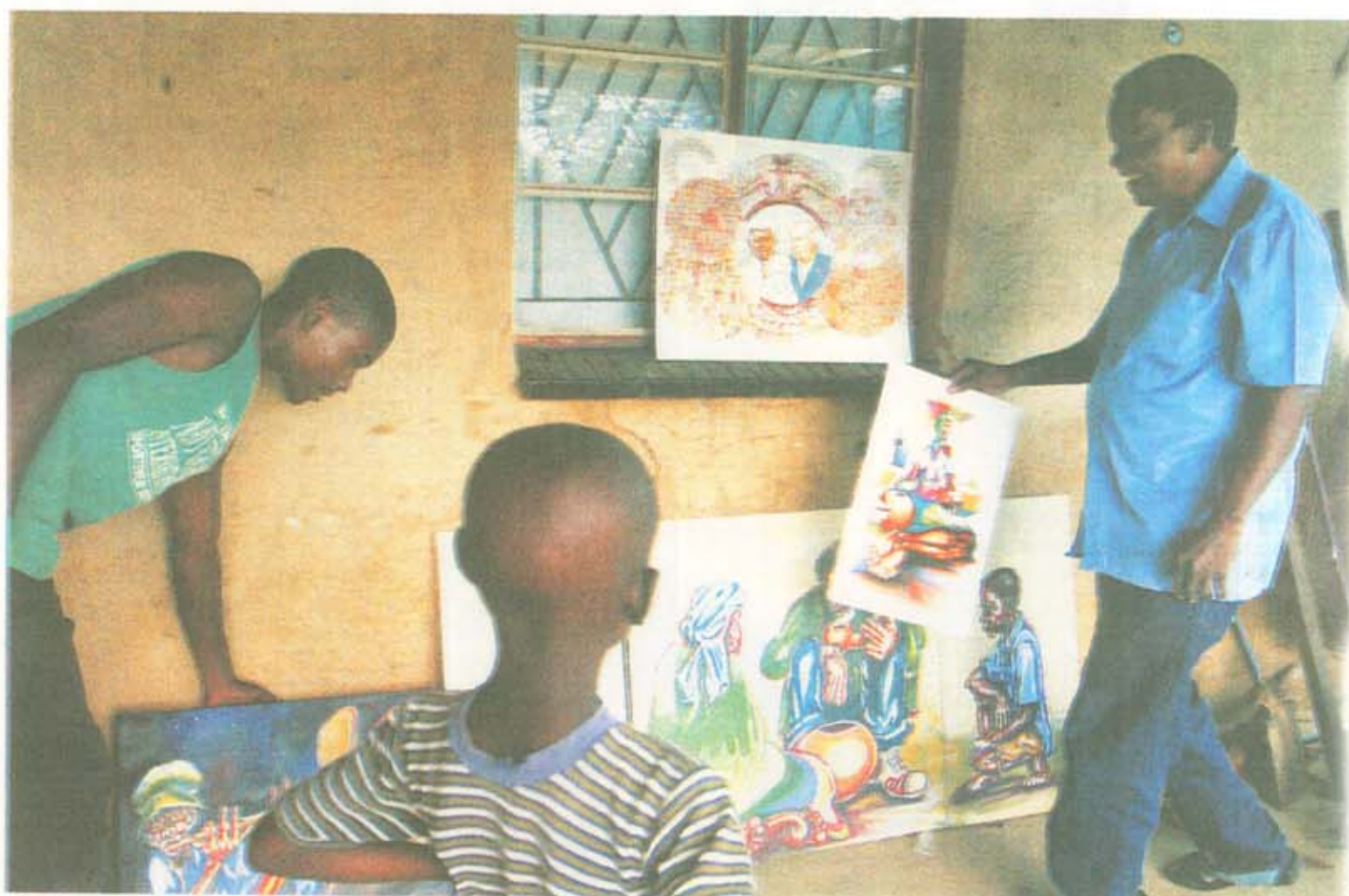
"We didn't take the art to save it," Bruce Haigh, a writer and retired Australian diplomat who served in Pretoria after Ms. Johnstone, said in a telephone interview. "We purchased it because we thought it was good. Had we been smarter, we would have grabbed everything we laid our hands on, because I didn't know how much the security police were wrecking."

How he, Ms. Johnstone and a handful of American diplomats helped save township art in the 1970's is a story that leads directly to Ifa Lethu.

Ms. Johnstone, a third secretary in the Australian Embassy, came to know township artists in 1973 through Jock Covey, then a consular officer at the United States Embassy. Mr. Covey and an American cultural officer, Frank Strovas, had been bringing black musicians to the embassy from nearby townships for regular jazz sessions.

"Many of the musicians were also artists, so I eventually offered to show some of their works at the concerts," Mr. Covey, now an executive at Bechtel Corporation in San Francisco, recalled in an e-mail message. The works sold well, so he and James Baker, the embassy's first African-American diplomat, staged an art show at Mr. Baker's home.

The show was a sellout, and a boon to the artists: a painting or drawing might fetch \$70, enough to sustain an artist's family as well as the pur-



Joao Silva for The New York Times

Michael Maapola, right, displaying his artwork at his home in Hammanskraal, a township north of Pretoria.

chase of paints and brushes.

By the time Mr. Covey left in 1974, the Americans had held several shows and the artists had built a Western clientele. He asked Ms. Johnstone to carry on with the exhibitions.

"I felt it was a wonderful opportunity," Ms. Johnstone said. "And because these people trusted Jock, they trusted me." So at her apartment in

Collectors who saved art by taking it abroad are now giving it back.

Sunnyside, a Pretoria suburb, she staged another show, with one difference: a promise that the art would someday be openly displayed in their homeland.

"These works of art were going to be walking out of the country, never to be seen again: a whole body of art, marvelous works," she said. "So I said to the artists at the end of the exhibition, 'I undertake to you to make sure that these works are returned to a public institution so they can be seen by all South Africans.'"

The show provoked her neighbors and South Africa's security estab-

lishment. Ms. Johnstone's landlord evicted her, but before she could move, unidentified white men ransacked her place, telling her roommate that it contained "something very dangerous."

Still, the art sales continued. After Ms. Johnstone left the country in 1976, Mr. Haigh carried on through one of apartheid's bleakest periods. Mr. Maapola lived and worked in an outbuilding at Mr. Haigh's home for a year.

Noting that 1978 and '79 "were very hard years" in South Africa, Mr. Haigh said, "You often didn't ask the artists to come to you. You'd go and pick them up and drive them to your house," knowing that diplomats' automobiles could not be searched.

With apartheid's end in 1994, Ms. Johnstone said, "I decided the time had come to fulfill my commitment." In 2003, after much negotiation, her collection of 32 works was entrusted to the Pretoria Art Museum. Mr. Haigh's 17 pieces followed last year.

The gifts inspired the creation of Ifa Lethu, whose chairwoman, Mamphele Ramphele, was the partner of Steve Biko, the black rights advocate murdered by the police in 1977.

The foundation has since won financing from South Africa's government, the Australian mining company BHP Billiton and Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, among others. It has enlisted former diplomats and

others in the United States and Europe to lobby for the return of art and historical items.

At a South African factory, Goodyear is building the mobile art exhibition, and efforts are under way in several countries to return other collections to Pretoria.

Of the return of the Johnstone and Haigh collections, which include his works, Mr. Maapola had but two words: "Exciting, exciting." For all he endured under apartheid, many other black artists were less fortunate. Some fell to alcoholism or the stress of persecution. Thami Mnyele, a graphic artist from Alexandra, a Johannesburg township, whose works documented apartheid's abuses, met a more violent end.

Mr. Mnyele went into exile in Botswana in 1978. In June 1985 South African soldiers raided his home there and shot him to death. Then they turned their guns on his art.

Ms. Ramdhani, who lived in Connecticut before returning in 1993 to set up the archives of the African National Congress, remembers visiting a New York bank's boardroom in the early 1980's and seeing "a beautiful piece of art" depicting an anti-apartheid protest. It was by Mr. Mnyele.

"I told them, 'One day we're going to take that back to South Africa,'" she said.

Ifa Lethu hopes to enter negotiations soon to do just that.