

# Arts and Africa

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## "ARTS AND AFRICA"

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### SIGNATURE TUNE

#### LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody; Louis Mahoney here with African music on a non-African instrument (the piano) and a visit to an exhibition of paintings by an artist from Mozambique - that's today's "Arts and Africa".

### SIGNATURE TUNE

Inacio Matsinhe is a Mozambique artist who's getting an international reputation. He's exhibited his paintings in Europe, in the United States and in South America, but not, apparently, anywhere in Africa outside his own country. There was an exhibition in Lisbon a year ago but it's hardly surprising that it didn't include his politically committed paintings. However, these were the pictures featured prominently in a showing at the Africa Centre here in London, and we asked Jim Hiley to have a look at them for us.

#### JIM HILEY:

I've come into the Africa Centre, past the famous Covent Garden fruit and vegetable market. I've walked into a large, long hall and I've just been looking at some children: some children who've been looking at me as if they were posing for a photograph. They are, in fact, children in a painting by Inacio Matsinhe. And I've left them to come over and stand by another picture, perhaps a more adult picture, because it's called "Our Shouting Never Had the Right To Be Heard". And I see that the artist breaks up different parts of the body with enormous black lines so that we see little skinny legs beneath the knees in rather raw, red colours. Then like a football almost, an enormous red, round belly and two long, languid red strokes of colour which represent the arms: one reaching downward, and one reaching to slightly obscure the face of the subject of the painting. The face shows lips divided up into four pieces and tired, wary eyes staring out of very white backgrounds and slightly haggard, very grainy, lined faces.

Now that painting, over there, is very interesting because it is called "I Became a Tortoise to Resist Torture". Again there is a very prominent face but behind the face of this shackled, black African is an enormous humped back with a pattern like a tortoise shell. Which actually, now I come

to think of it, reminds me of something I saw at the other side of the room - let's see if I can try to find this one, locate the one. Yes, this is a similar one although this is much more gaily coloured. It's called "Five Hundred Years of Torture and Slavery".

So, although, like a lot of these paintings, we have very, very gay primary colours, the message - or the import - of these pictures seems to be rather sad. And, once again, we see these almost dismembered limbs, squashed up across the frame of the picture. Legs; the head again with those staring eyes, a reproachful look in the face; and this enormous humped back with elaborate, intricate patternings in oranges and yellows, almost tortoise-like.

MAHONEY: A fact or two about Inacio Matsinhe: he was born in Lourenco Marques in Mozambique and it was there that he went to art college, and he's now nearly thirty years old.

Jim Hiley met him when he was at the Africa Centre and had the chance to record the following conversation, but Inacio felt so strongly about his art that he had to express himself in Portuguese, so we asked Manuela D'Oliviera to provide us with a translation. Anyhow, this is how Jim began the interview.

HILEY: Inacio, congratulations on the exhibition here. Do you feel you are painting for the world or are you painting for your fellow countrymen?

INACIO MATSINHE:

REFLIES IN PORTUGUESE. (Translated by Manuela D'Oliviera.)

I paint for my people but, of course, it is a problem that the world should know about. So I also paint for the world to know the problems of my people.

HILEY: What about your people's political situation? Are you making a commentary? Are you making a protest? What is the political nature of your work?

MATSINHE: I'm making a political portrait of the suffering of the people in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea: the people oppressed by the Portuguese. I chose this form because I believe this is a form in which I can tell other people of this suffering.

You will notice that one of the features of my paintings is the lips swollen, very swollen lips divided into four: that means that the people in those territories for five hundred years would not speak out, so I portray their suffering, their inability of speaking out in those lips divided into four. I also came to the conclusion that one of the best ways to portray this suffering was to make a picture of the tortoise and transform all the people in my paintings into tortoises..

HILEY: One of the pictures is called "I Became a Tortoise to Resist Torture" and in a number of the pictures we see men and women with enormously humped backs - sometimes these backs are painted with a tortoise pattern. I take it that the tortoise is an image which you have invented, yourself. It's an image which occurred to you rather than one that had been passed down.

MATSINHE: Yes, that's right. I've used the tortoise to symbolise the resistance that people have to have in order to face suffering and the conditions of their life. In order to resist the oppression they have to become like tortoises, protected by those very big shells.

HILEY: May I ask you to explain two other very striking features of your work. First, it isn't just the lips that are divided up: you separate different parts of the body with very bold strokes usually of black paint. And the other thing is, can you talk about your use of colour - although your pictures depict certainly very anger-making situations you still have very gay colours.

MATSINHE: Let me answer first your first question. Yes, I did use the limbs in distorted positions. Well, the limbs represent torture, the torture that my people had to sustain for so long. And, of course, the enormous tummies represent hunger and the misery in which my people have to live. As regards your second question, the reason why I decided to use such vivid colours: I thought it was much stronger, if I could, use very, very vivid colours to portray all this misery at the same time give you an idea of the colourful Africa.

HILEY: Let me ask you one last question: what is the impression of your work that you most want me to leave this splendid exhibition with?

MATSINHE: All my works are very, very important to me, because they represent the sufferings of my people. It's like seeing myself in each figure I paint - I am inside, I can feel them, I am there. They are all very significant and very important to me.

MAHONEY: And perhaps the Lagos Festival will provide Inacio Matsinhe and many other artists with the chance to show their work to the rest of Africa.

A while ago, the Nigerian pianist and composer, Akin Euba, came to the "Arts and Africa" studio to talk about his music. He'd been giving some concerts in Europe and in each of them he included some music by the Nigerian composer, Ayo Bankole. He and Bankole are great friends they've had a similar training, both of them studying music in London and at the University of California; and both of them write in a modern idiom. But there's at least one difference between the two composers - Ayo Bankole writes a great deal more music - as Akin explained to Florence Akst.

AKIN EUBA:

He's an extremely prolific composer. He writes much more than I ever do. He just keeps turning out music. Sometimes artists don't get along, but he and I, I think, have a similar temperament and so we get on very well indeed and I have played his music and he also has played my music.

FLORENCE AKST:

To my ears, his music sounds a little more derivative from western composers than your music. Is this something he's consciously doing, do you feel?

EUBA: Well, Ayo too is experimenting in the same direction that I am experimenting in: looking for new means of combining African elements with European elements, and also using combinations of African and European instruments. But I would say that, in general, his own style - his melodic and harmonic style - is fairly more conservative than mine. And this may be why you feel that his music is more derivative of western music.

MUSIC

MAHONEY: Akin Euba playing part of a movement from Ayo Bankole's "Nigerian Suite". That one has the title "Song for the Rainbow". Bankole is obviously influenced by western composers but Florence Akst wondered whether Akin admitted to an influence in his music.

EUBA: I have been very keen on Bartok. I think I have been more keen on Bartok than I have been on any other western composer.

AKST: Now, he's a Hungarian composer. Is this one of the attractions?

EUBA: The main attraction really was that here was a man who was able, successfully, to evolve a modern idiom, you see, out of the folk idiom. Because when Bartok writes a melody you think it is a folk melody, in fact he has written it himself. The folk idiom has become so much part of him that he can use this within the context of dissonant harmony and still get across the folk element. Very often composers try to write in what they call a "national idiom" - to use folk tunes and all that - but they are not really successful, you can see that this is just something sitting on what is, essentially, a common European tradition. But with Bartok, you see, he has been able to derive from the folk idiom a new style, to use elements of traditional music. And since I'm trying to do this, you can see why I'm interested in his approach.

AKST: I suppose one reason of his was that he was trying to reach several audiences.

EUBA: I don't know.

AKST: I was going on to ask you if this was one of the experiences you are having: that you play to an audience in Nigeria; you play to an audience in Britain or in the United States; perhaps you have played to audiences elsewhere in West Africa. What kind of audience reaction do you get?

EUBA: Well, my music is not very popular in Africa.

AKST: Why not?

EUBA: People think that it is difficult. A friend of mine once would not come to a concert I was giving, because he said that the music was too difficult. I'm not so sure that there are many people in Nigeria who understand my music. But then I don't think that this is a disadvantage because I'm quite happy to play to an audience of 30 people who are really interested in what I am playing. And, in any case, I feel that some of the things I'm doing do not have a wide appeal in Nigeria. But in several countries of the world today, especially some of the third world countries, similar experiments are going on, so that one has a community at large.

MAHONEY: A challenge there, I'd say for Akin Euba, for his fellow composer Ayo Bankole and for the Nigerian audiences. Listening to more of Bankole's "Nigerian Suite", the movement with the strongest rhythm is the Conga, "O Ya Ka Konga" and we'll end the programme with Akin Euba playing it. And from me, Louis Manoney, it's goodbye until next week and the next edition of "Arts and Africa".

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