

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to "Arts and Africa". Now, I wonder what the word 'sophistication' means to you. If it means a knowledge of advanced techniques then today we are going to hear about examples of the most and the least sophisticated art forms. But if the word conveys deep and intricate self-awareness then ancient paintings on rock faces and the latest image viewed through the lens of a camera both deserve the description - 'sophisticated'.

Let's begin with photographs of some of Africa's best known writers.

For some years now, George Hallett has taken the photographs that appear on the covers of the novels and poems published by Heinemann in their paperback "African Writers Series". Suitably, many of the original portraits were on show at this year's African Literature Association's conference held in the United States at Urbana, Illinois. There were also a number of other photographs but it was the portraits that George Hallett first showed to Mark Ralph-Bowman.

GEORGE HALLETT

I was very fortunate that I knew a lot of writers in South Africa while I was still at school and having read their stories I became interested in them as personalities too. Once I went overseas, came to Europe, I started reading people like Chinua Achebe, Frederick Oyono, Ngugi. I became fascinated with the prospect of meeting them to find out what they really were like as people because the images I saw of them never indicated anything like that and my idea is to get the writer to project something about his personality to the viewer. The image must give something of a character of the person.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

How do you get them to project that? What are your techniques - if it's not giving away too many secrets.

HALLETT

First of all, if I know somebody and I can spend some days with that person obviously it's easy, I wait for the moment. But if I have, say, ten minutes with somebody, I've an idea of his work, I then talk

HALLETT

to that person, it's like a psychological number, pick a subject so that he is able to project that part of him which I feel most represents his work or himself. So he's discussing a subject, and then I will say "Hold it! Don't move! Look straight into the lens." or whatever. Usually I like the confrontation because the eyes say a hell of a lot about people, the eyes and the mouth.

RALPH-BOWMAN

Which of the photographs in the exhibition do you think most nearly achieves this?

HALLETT

There are two portraits of authors that I like very much. One is Dennis Brutus, that was taken in West Berlin. He was sitting in a restaurant, I was outside, and reflected above his head were the clouds in the sky and the name of the restaurant and he turned towards me, saw me with the camera and he gave me such a strange look; hurt, gentleness, and a certain dignity and strength in his face, and his hair sticking out like that, and all those elements together with the restaurant, the people sitting around the same table (but they're all involved talking to each other and he's slightly set aside) gave me the feeling of distance, of being outside the country, the reflections in the glass and all that. It's also a picture that Nadine Gordimer commented on, and a lot of other writers. They felt that that picture indicated a lot about Dennis, his personality and the pain of living in exile for so long, because it is painful.

RALPH-BOWMAN

The other photographs in the exhibition, the photographs of Zimbabwe and South Africa, what are you after in them? Which of those photographs do you feel are the most important for you? And perhaps you could describe some of them and why they're important.

HALLETT

Well, if you've noticed, the Zimbabwe photographs are mostly rural pictures. I'm not really impressed with city life, I don't care which part of the world it is in. City life is very artificial, people rushing to and fro, you know. But in the rural areas, especially in Zimbabwe, and it's just after independence, I found an incredible dignity with the peasantry, with the peasant farmers. I remember there's one portrait of a woman standing in a field of sticks holding a bucket and she's busy pruning the tomato plants and training them up these sticks, and the sticks are all twisted, they're not straight, they were plucked out of a bush and these fall around, and she's quite old. I spent a lot of time talking to her about her work and she said to me when I'd taken the photograph: "Now I suppose I can die, I've been recorded".

TETTEH-LARTEY

The photographer, George Hallett, talking about his work to Mark Ralph-Bowman.

There's an unusual exhibition of South African art at the

TETTEH-LARTEY

University of London - unusual because it has been possible to show only photographic reproductions of the originals. That's because their creators chose to paint their pictures on smooth rock faces, often on surfaces sheltered by overhanging formations. These vivid paintings of people and animals were the work of some of the earliest inhabitants of the southern tip of the continent including the ancestors of the still existing Bushmen or San people. These unknown artists used earth pigments and blood to illustrate how they dressed, how they armed themselves, what they hunted and how they danced.

An enthusiast for these paintings, Richard Solomon, has toured the remote areas where these rocks are sited and has taken a great many colour photographs of them - he's a professional photographer. Most of the examples are from the south-western Cape but similar paintings exist in Namibia, the Transvaal, in the Drakenburg Mountains and as far north as Zimbabwe. The first picture Richard Solomon showed his fellow South African, Pitika Ntuli, had antelope and a number of human figures painted one on top of the other. The most striking figures had strangely whitened faces.

RICHARD SOLOMON

The people probably actually had their faces painted in that way, these people really loved to paint themselves. You notice lots of stripes on their faces, red stripes. They loved decoration on top of their heads. They had very unusual head-dresses. We see one which could be a cock's comb, the other looks like porcupine quills.

PITIKA NTULI

What about those two stick-like people?

SOLOMON

The two stick-like people are probably the last paintings done in this panel. They are in a maroon colour. They have little white stripes on their necks and arms, those probably represent bangles. They also have them round their calves. They had their faces painted white.

NTULI

How big are these paintings?

SOLOMON

These paintings are quite tiny, only a few inches in size, but we see lots of detail in them; the white dots, those probably represent ostrich eggshell beads. The red lines hanging off the one figure's cloak represent thongs and tassles and things.

NTULI

Roughly how old do you think they are?

SOLOMON

Probably done in the last thousand years, Pitika, the last

SOLOMON

paintings were probably done in the seventeenth century and some even in the eighteenth century, but after that the art became extinct.

NTULI

In a sense they seem to be well-preserved. Has it got anything to do with where and how they were painted?

SOLOMON

The paints were mixed with binding mediums and in some cases these have preserved the paintings. The paintings are of course sheltered in natural rock shelters, which are sheltered from the weather, the wind, the rain. The older paintings often become bonded to the rock by a layer of calcium which glazes the paintings and those paintings will last for thousands of years.

NTULI

There is another one, a particular one, I'm very very interested in and which I would like you to tell me more about. It is this one. You can just see that there is some kind of a ceremony going on here. Would you care to tell us more about these tiny, long, red, stick-like, dancing figures?

SOLOMON

First let me start by saying what we see here is a panel with two groups of figures. The older group of figures are quite large and they're painted in a bright red colour, sort of maroon. They are all women, you can see their breasts, and they all appear to be doing a rhythmic sort of dance. They all have their arms in the air and they seem to be shuffling around. You can imagine a sort of rhythmic clapping going on and the twanging of musical instruments.

NTULI

There is something else here in the way of these palm prints on the wall.

SOLOMON

That's right. People have dipped their hands in paint and then applied their hands to the rock face and you see this all over the South Western Cape, hundreds of hand prints on the rocks. Perhaps it's the contribution of the people who weren't artists, so they just added their hand prints. Possibly it is the contribution of the people who sort of owned the rock shelters. Every time they came back to the rock shelter they would put their hand print against the rock.

NTULI

I see. We have this one here which seems to be very, very elaborate. It is completely different from those we have seen. The stick-like figures seem to be getting a bit bulkier and dancing.

SOLOMON

That's right. These are probably the so-called Hottentot people,

SOLOMON

the Khoin-Khoi; they carry bows, sticks and quivers and most of them are naked.

NTULI

What about those tiny bits right up in the background at the edge?

SOLOMON

Yes, lots of little finger smears. I believe those are probably a whole tribe of people walking along or migrating, but they haven't been painted in too much detail. The larger group you see there, those five, are probably a group taken from that whole migrating group and shown in all their glory.

NTULI

Richard, shall we go over towards the animals? I've just seen this red, charging elephant dashing forward.

SOLOMON

This particular animal is an elephant, which was of particular importance to the Cape, stone-age people. I think they admired the strength and the sheer power of these animals and they loved to portray them. We see this large elephant is being followed by a little chap which you can hardly see. That's the little calf running behind. It's so tiny you can hardly see it but it's definitely there.

NTULI

I don't blame them for respecting and loving this animal, you can see how they depict it in their pictures and what is also fascinating to me is that according to old history books, when the white man came to that part of the world there was absolutely nobody there.

SOLOMON

Yes, this is often what has been written, particularly in European history books, that is, when the white colonists arrived in Southern Africa there was just the animals and primitive people, and I think these paintings show that these people had a very distinct and fantastic culture of their own and it is very sad that they no longer exist. I hope that this exhibition will stand as a sort of testament to the people who once lived in southern Africa but unfortunately are now extinct.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Pitika Ntuli was hearing about the ancient art of the San people from Richard Solomon. And it's with the music of the modern descendants of these early peoples that we're going to end today's programme. I'll be here at the same time next week with more "Arts and Africa". For now, from Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

MUSIC

CHILDREN'S SONG