

1997-12-12

SENDER

Ernest Mancoba, Wonga Mancoba

RECIPIENT

Elza Miles, John Miles

FACTS

Document type:

Letter

Date explanation:

date on letter

Sender's location:

Paris

Recipient's location:

Johannesburg

DOCUMENT CONTENT

(W. Sze) It is clear from the letter that correspondence between Ernest (and Wonga) Mancoba and Ernest's biographer, Elza Miles, continue after the retrospectives in South Africa have closed and Miles' biography on Mancoba has been published. Here, Mancoba confesses the difficulties in his and Wonga's attempt to write their book (refer to the audio tapes) which, at this point in time, is focused on slavery - Later, the purpose of the book would become more of a memoir of Mancoba's life.

TRANSCRIPTION

(transcribed by W. Sze)

[Sender: Ernest & Wonga]

[Date: 12 Dec 1997]

[Addressed to: Elza and John]

Dear Elza, Dear John,

Shameful laziness of the pen does not mean forgetfulness nor inconstancy of the heart. You are both with us, daily, and kept in a holy corner of our innermost. The memories of you, quietly, distil a precious essence of humanity, that feeds us, bounteously, giving us courage and new forces, in the doldrums of our disenchanting world, and in the middle of the spiritual waste, into which modern categorization, and its mechanic effectiveness have turned that golden treasure, which all yearn after, but was there in the first place, true human life.

Not that we reject, in the least, the many advantages of so called Progress - if the demiurge, at the back of it all, did not require such a high price for the enjoying of them, whenever we forget, while doing it, that they are, and will always be, secondary to the fundamental Integrity between Spirit and Matter, without the consciousness of which our Promised Land of technology and all its shining paraphernalia, that makes us so proud, will one day, as the puffed balloons of our vanity, burst into thin air.

But happily, material advancement can also be put to good use. It was a great joy, Elza, to receive your letter by fax, which we got, when Elske and we came together, to share a meal and many a good thought, in a continuation of the endless dialogue we have had with your whole family.

I, Ernest, wish to take this occasion to express my infinite debt to you, dear

Elza, for the scrupulous accuracy , and the very efficient devotedness with which you have collected the remembered facts, the few thoughts and ideas I confided to you,during our meetings, and,also, for the deep interpretation of my efforts and the thorough presentation to the public of my life and expression, in a manner that was both refined and sobre.

All the more do I appreciate your achievement, as I am experiencing,at the moment, the difficulty to translate into the conventions of bookly structure, the pulsating, breathless urgency of Being within the dimension of Time,as it had become a mere register of flesh and blood or the muddled history of our private trials and errors, when it, alas, remains the chaotic mess of actions only half accomplished, or half intended, of works always beggared by our dreams, of ever-bleeding sorrows, and, under the embers, of passions that refuse to die. As you know I am trying to tape record , and I have arrived on the very threshold of the Great Nowhere.

But when, after working, I listen to what I have said in the microphone, I realize that the transcription on paper will not render what orality evoked. So we help each other , with Wonga, to make the whole thing as readable as possible. Another problem is the very amount of what I,to my great astonishment,have been able to grip and salvage from the abyss of oblivion, which has been much more substantial than I could have imagined possible, on the part of my nonagenarian mind,that has such difficulty, else, remembering things not older than a moment.

Nevertheless, we plod along, without giving way to doubts, and although being under the impending decree of nature's exhaustion that could prevent us from reaching the end, before my own book of days, suddenly, comes to a close.

But in God - or the Human Spirit we trust.

Another project that occupies us, for the time being, is the evocation of that great institution of Mankind's self-inflicted, but highly profitable torment and crime : Slavery.

We have the wish of a collaboration,Wonga and I, on this subject. It is something that touches us particularly, as I, Ernest remember a very emotional moment of childhood, when my mother Florence questioned,very harshly, my father about this terrible legacy. Her words of

reproach, still, ring in my ears: "Alvin! - as she would mispronounce his name, when she was angry with him, although, in this case, he could hardly have had any responsibility - Alvin! How could you, men of Africa, have allowed such a thing to happen as letting your sons and brothers, mothers and sisters be removed from their land of birth, to be thus riven away to another world as mere objects for sale? ..."

This question has been haunting me ever since, and when I grew older, I have tried, by all means, to inform myself about this horrendous event, comparable only with the fate of the Red Indian, the treatment of Aborigenes or the Holocaust of Jews, without, ever, being able to reach any satisfactory answer to it.

Perhaps the inspiration of drawing and colour will help towards a better or deeper comprehension, but it may also be that such a question is far too overwhelming for the unweightful individuals of our time.

Now, we hope that all is well, as far as can be, in the beloved country, and with yourselves. We were happy and very interested to hear about Elza's exhibition on a little known aspect of african expression, in its early contacts with the colonial reality, in a period of transition that has been overlooked and obscured by the neglect, and ethnocentric contempt of others.

We hope really that the exhibition might also be shown abroad. Why not in France? The questions it raises are universal. And I would be glad to see the works, as I am very intrigued.

Until that time, and in that hope, we send you, dear friends, and to Paul and Carl, our most deep-felt regards and best wishes for the season.

Faithfully yours [signed Wonga and Ernest Mancoba]

KILDER TIL
DANSK
KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

Paris, Dec. 12 1997

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Wonga and Ernest Mancoba