

1995-04-10

SENDER

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RECIPIENT

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FACTS

Document type:

Letter

Date explanation:

date on letter

Sender's location:

Paris

Recipient's location:

Johannesburg

DOCUMENT CONTENT

Ernest and Wonga Mancoba write to Elza Miles, Ernest's biographer and the curator of the retrospective at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, upon their return from their (first) trip South Africa from 1994 to early 1995. They reflect on the positive change of the ending of apartheid.

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Paris, April the 10 th. 1995

Very dear Elza, very dear John,

That it took us so long to react after our homecoming, "back from home" and our dear country, South Africa, owes to the state of emotional dumbness & verbal exhaustion in which the reception given us by our people and yourselves, has left our family.

Anything you might have had from us before would have been inarticulate thanks, unable in our eyes to express the deep, deep gratitude overwhelming us both in our hearts.

We have had to pause and digest all the physical and mental impressions, together with the swell of feelings generated by this unbelievable experience. And it has not yet been possible for us to take full stock of this complete upheaval in our existence nor of its impact and consequences on our lives and future. For it is not always easy, when confronted with unusual events of this dimension, to rise up in one's deepest self to their highest spiritual and symbolic meaning, and face the challenge which destiny has put on one's path.

Never have I, Ernest, had any other intention than to live in all stillness and discretion, only in pursuit of the best possible expression of my own spiritual vision, whether in carved wood or on canvas, trying to exist as a human being together with my family on this earth. And it was, among other things, because this very ordinary and one should think, altogether normal, ambition in an artist, did not fit with the image a sectarian society had of a black African man, that my life grew more and more irreconcilable with the realities in my own country, but also more generally speaking, with the tyranny of pure matter over spirit in the world as a whole.

Well am I aware that it was universal greed, which has been the cause of our country's atrocious plight, and that all the evil to be found in the old South Africa would never have sufficed to concoct and maintain such an unmitigated hell as our dear country has been for so long and for all with an ounce of moral sense, were it not for the more general necessity and demand which has made sheer inhumanity on African soil an acceptable price to pay for keeping that of gold extraction at a level suiting foreign markets and the Stock Exchange in Europe and America.

This fact, though it can never rid our nation from the burden of its own responsibility, makes the crime of apartheid a more general problem, one to be faced by all mankind regardless of origin.

It has been an exhilarating experience and one that has filled us with hope, to see our people in South Africa, beginning truly to face it, with a new feeling of togetherness and brotherhood, which is also the only possible basis for the building of our nation-to-be.

At last all of us have come to realize that only through the respect of each other, in our similarities as well as our differences, do we have a future and that it is by searching deep in ourselves for the best in our hearts and culture that we will be able to avoid the worst, namely the disaster that had been on the agenda for so long in our land.

We are very proud that our people have started on this new track, against all odds and expectations. In this choice away from the brink, they have been helped by the efforts of so many individuals and groups, known and unknown, who to the point of sacrifice, have been ready to stand for the immortal values and principles that have guided mankind from time immemorial, first when, amidst the difficulties and threats of pre-historic Nature, each of us felt spiritually one with the tribe of our fellow-men, then through

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the man-made horrors of History, up to this day, when for the first time, humanity is physically in the presence of itself, all over the globe. It has all possibilities in hand, either for survival or self-annihilation as a species, in other words, either to become what it is meant to be, the crowning, the jewel of creation or what present day materialism condemns it to, risking to make it a freak of Mother Nature that has grown into being a mortal threat to itself and Her, and whose self-destruction would therefore be the logical outcome of what we still call Progress, and would in that case also be a good riddance for Life itself on the surface of this earth which some dare call our own.

We feel proud and very fortunate, at such an important cross-roads to have you Elza and John as our friends. We look forward to a continued dialogue with you and all those who in South Africa and elsewhere wish to give human life a true and lasting basis, by the search for a new integrity between Spirit and Matter. Art which you both are working with, in your professions, either in plastic or literary form, is precisely in our opinion, the best means to deepen this consciousness in Man, for it is the field where anyone can experience this universal truth: that no matter nor form can stand without inspiration and on the other hand no true spirit can be meaningful and perceptible to us without embodiment in a material creation, which finds strongest and most lasting expression in what Keats has called "a thing of beauty."

Art only exists when Spirit and matter are One. This miracle which always comes, even to the artist himself, as a surprise, is the ever-renewed testimony that resurrection from chaos is possible, and that the renaissance of an integral man from the broken pieces of our decay is at hand, if we are able and willing to blow the breath of our hope, aspiration, and ideal into the clay of our humility, frailty and confusion.

My very dear Elza, I am eternally indebted to you for having contributed in giving me, at this moment of a long life, the occasion to be reunited with my people in their restoration to Hope, and helped to reknit the broken ties with my courageous family through my physical presence in South Arica, and to present in my own country the poor efforts of our family's creative expression. I wish also that you would transmit and express to all those who, with yourself have made it possible, all my thanks and deepest gratitude.

We have seen Elske and given her also your greetings as you told me to, with John's, Paul's and Carl's.

Do also transmit our best thoughts to Gerrit and Lennie from whom we received such a beautiful letter and to whom we also will write.

Now looking forward to seeing you again soon in Capetown if things turn out as planned, we send you, Elza and John

our best thoughts and friendly wishes

Your brothers

Wonga Mancoba Ernest Mancoba