

1993-12-06

SENDER

University of Western Cape

RECIPIENT

Ernest Mancoba

FACTS

Document type:

Letter

Date explanation:

date on letter

Sender's location:

Belville

Recipient's location:

Paris

DOCUMENT CONTENT

The University of the Western Cape (Bellville, South Africa) writes to Mancoba advising that they are awarding him an honorary doctorate.



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Ref./Verwys.

6 December 1993

Mr Ernest Mancoba
153 Rue du Chateau
75014 PARIS. France

Dear Mr Mancoba

Please allow me to introduce myself. I am the vice-chancellor of the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa. I attach hereto a short extract from a publicity pamphlet of the university in order to give you some introduction to the institution.

I am writing on behalf of the university's Senate and Council which at its most recent meetings voted for the award of an honorary doctorate to you in recognition of your magnificent achievements and contributions in the field of art. We would be honoured if you were to agree to accepting from the university the degree Doctor Litterarum (honoris causa).

I attach for your information the memorandum in support of your nomination for an honorary award.

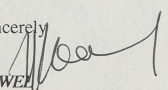
Other persons to whom the university would be awarding honorary degrees are the painter Gregoire Boonzaier, the jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim and the novelist Bessie Head (posthumously).

The university has previously awarded honorary doctorates to the following persons: Dr Erika Theron, former chancellor of the institution; the poet-painter Breyten Breytenbach and Dr Richard van der Ross, former vice-chancellor of the university; ANC and SACP activist Govan Mbeki and Professor J C de Villiers, renowned neurosurgeon and former chairperson of the university council; national leaders Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela; four women in veteran trade unionist Ray Alexander, the Mocambican patriot Graca Machel, French human rights fighter Danielle Mitterand and Cape Town activist Mama Zihlangu.

We have learnt from Elza Miles that you may be coming to South Africa for the launch of the soon to be published book on your work, and would like to liaise about the possibilities of combining that event with the award of the honorary doctorate.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely


G J GERWEL
RECTOR AND VICE-CHANCELLOR

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Ernest Mancoba, artist

Ernest Methuen Mancoba is a highly esteemed European artist. He is one of the remaining members of the Cobra group which came into existence after World War II, with artists such as Appel, Corneille, Alechinsky, Constant, and the Dutch poet-artist Lucebert. In spite of his participation in the post Surrealist movement he has nevertheless retained his African identity: a totemic influence which persists in his expressions. It calls up associations with kanaga masks and kota funerary sculptures. His works were exhibited at the first public manifestation of the newly found Cobra in Copenhagen (1948). A retrospective exhibition toured Denmark in 1977; a retrospective of Cobra was shown in 1984 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris; and the exhibition Cobra 40 years later at the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, in 1988. He was included in the Agence de Court Metrage's television program on foreign-born artists in Paris in 1990.

Before Mancoba left South Africa in 1938 to study art in Paris he was already acclaimed as sculptor for his African Madonna (1929), executed in yellow wood for the St Mary's Chapel, Grace Dieu, a work which is today still regarded as a most significant contribution to church art. Carvings of his were selected in 1934 and 1935 for exhibitions of the South African Academy, and he was awarded first prize for the carving Future Africa in the Esther May Bedford Bantu Art Exhibition at Fort Hare.

Ernest Methuen Mancoba was born at Boksburg on the 29th of August 1904, the first-born of Irvine and Florence (née Manggangwana) Mancoba. His father, who worked on the Comet gold mine, was an evangelist. His mother saw to it that he received his education through Anglican Church schools on the East Rand and later at the Diocesan Training College at Grace Dieu near Pietersburg, where he taught Zulu and was trained in wood carving. He furthered his study at the University of Fort Hare, and in 1937 he obtained a BA degree, and taught English at the Khaiso Secondary School in Pietersburg. The teacher-playwrights Louis Makenna and Nimrod Ndebele and the artist Gerard Sekoto were his colleagues.

During the mid-thirties Mancoba befriended the artists Irma Stern, Lippy Lipshitz, Elza Dziomba, Job Kekana and Thomas Masekela, as well as Dr Goolam Gool and Jane Gool. Lipshitz influenced him to make a study of Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro's book Primitive Negro Sculpture. This changed Mancoba's approach to art and awakened in him an enduring respect for the art of old Africa. His imagery, technique and style changed and his interest shifted from descriptive to expressive carving.

In 1938 he was granted a bursary and a loan of 100 pounds respectively from the Bantu Welfare Trust to enable him to continue his art studies in Paris. He enrolled at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs de Paris, where he met the sculptor Sonja Ferlov and paid his first visit to the Musée

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de l'Homme. He was introduced to Alberto Giacometti by Ferlov. He was interned after the outbreak of WW2 at St Denis, where he married Sonja Ferlov in the internment camp. In 1946 his son Wonga was born and the family settled in Denmark.

Gradually painting takes preference to sculpture in his art, and with Ferlov he explored automatic expression, with the emphasis on the autonomy of line and colour wash. He was inspired by Mediaeval frescoes, but especially by the new revolutionary of the Cobra group.

Cobra (an acronym for Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam) started as movement just after WW2, after the great Surrealist Congress where the poet and writer André Breton was the revered, but outocratic, spokesperson, the "Pope". This group of young artists could not accept the Surrealists' elevation of the dream as the single norm for the expression of artistic knowledge. Their protest was against the exclusivity of expression and of participants: to them all forms of expression were important. They were inclusive regarding their art as well as their members - which included the art of children and that of the aberrant, and persons from Scotland, Greenland, and Africa.

Apart from his art Mancoba also wrote on the art of Africa, such as his articles in the journal Musée Vivant, of which he was a correspondent, as well as in the Danish journal Hvedekorn (Grain of Wheat).

In November 1986 his wife Sonja Ferlov died, and he now lives in Paris with his son.

From the early thirties Mancoba has been part of South African art. But at that time he was also involved with leaders from the Eastern Cape, and with educational institutions of that time (Lovedale, Healdtown and Fort Hare), which were to influence the direction of black resistance politics. The people whom he associated with were Govan Mbeki, I B Tabata, A C Jordan and Wycliffe Tsotsi. He was part of the social history of the Cape Left in the 1930s.

The Cape Town publishers Human and Rousseau is producing a comprehensive study of his work by the art historian Elza Miles, who has spent some months with Mancoba in Paris, and who studied his major works in Denmark. This publication will include photographs of artworks from private and public collections throughout the world. Publication date: November 1993. In 1994 a large retrospective of his work will be exhibited in South Africa.

In conferring an award on Ernest Mancoba the University of the Western Cape will not only honour a great European artist, but will recognise an African and South African artist who has not only retained his roots in his creative expression, but has integrated the traditions of Africa and Europe to produce enduring images of visual knowledge for all people. While honouring him as an international figure the University will at the same time honour him as a South African and an African

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we can call our own: primarily as a figure of culture, but
also as a person who has not been uninvolved in the political
debates of our country.