

2005-02-21

SENDER

Wonga Mancoba

RECIPIENT

Elza Miles

FACTS

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Johannesburg

DOCUMENT CONTENT

Wonga writes to Ernest's biographer, Elza Miles, that he is aware of the deep bond of understanding between she and Ernest. He shares news he is trying to write Ernest's memoir whilst trying to develop as a painter.

TRANSCRIPTION

(transcription by W. Sze]

[sender: Wonga, from 153 rue du Chateau.]

[addressed to: Elza Miles]

[date: 21 Feb 2005]

Very dear Elza,

This has been an all too long, terrible silence on my part. I hope you will pardon me. The reason is manifold.

Firstly, comes the daunting and somewhat paralyzing effect upon me, of my thankfulness to you and great admiration, each time I consider the monumental achievement of your engagement for so much that has been dearest and most vital to my existence. I have indeed, such a fundamental debt to you personally, to your family and friends - as well as, on the whole, to our now liberated country, that the gratitude I feel, quite overwhelms me. For weeks, for months, since my return from South Africa, have I been at pains to muster my thoughts, and, in spite of my poor command of the idiom, tell you this : I have been touched to the deepest, by your constant and total dedication to my father, beyond life and death.

I have come to understand that your relation with him was something so extraordinary and rare, having to do with much more than just an art-historian's sympathy for a painter's expression, however essential, or with someone's appreciation of a particular person's worth, as experienced within the short span allotted in time and space.

Dear friend, such a sumless account have I to you that it can never, anyway, be settled with any few scribbled thanks and beggarly acknowledgements.

Such contribution as yours to Ernest Mancoba's oeuvre and life is to me proof that there is indeed an inborn disposition deep in the heart of

humans that makes them-nobody knows why - to query\* the reasons of their condition and the meaning of their lives well beyond the conveniences of ideology as known within some locally established order ( even when the world has gone astray in the wastelands of a dark history), and insistantly, to reach for answers, not in routinely notions and established values, but through a more consistant dialogue with others or, more precisely, in deeper understanding with them- that is with, maybe, complete strangers, however different from speculated identities of the indulging Self.

By some astonishing and mysterious miracle, but above all through our own persistant, unyielding research, Ernest's reclusive and unassuming presence was unearthed, at last, revealing what many could not see, under the razmattaz of the politico-cultural official-dom: the faint voice of Africa's unartificial essence, which to be heard by any who wish, does not need all the material overflow or intellectual assertion that some think necessary to promote human expression in today's mechanical nadir of our so called 'culture'.

You (among very few) were able to perceive what can only be seen with eyes of the heart, and its all-piercing ability to reach beyond the self-evident and into the very core of being, in the most tender part of us, which is also the most vital to Man's survival. Such is indeed the only level of meaning where Ernest's expression must be read and understood.

For that gift of yours, and for much more which I will mention on some other occasion, I am with all my family, dead and alive, ever grateful to you and those who supported your quest (namely your close family and friends, plus only a handful of responsible people in the 'art-world' like Rochelle and the people at the Jo'burg Art Gallery.)

Else it would not be unthinkable for, one day, to stand side by side with Sonja and Ernest as we did in our common daily life, since we had come to constitute in the course of time and owing to the isolation from which Sonja and Ernest suffered, a kind of little group, beyond differences of generation, especially after the disappointment with certain contemporaries, after the end of Cobra. We started indeed a constant and universal dialogue, open to any who might have been ready to work along the lines of a better understanding between men of all races, and who wish to preserve and develop the spiritual heritage in harmony with the

material necessity, as the only way to survive as humans. I remember Sonja's referring to this 'entity of three' that was so strange to others, by signing certain letters : 'E.W.S.' . With Ernest we have also spoken once or twice about such an exhibition with Sonja as a possibility. But clearly, it could only be on some particularly fit occasion in the future.

I had also previously had some phone calls from our dear Bridget, who has long had a project of making some kind of exhibition or presentation around Ernest's philosophy and african vision. Surely, it will be interesting and necessary at some point. But I told her that whatever she undertook, she should ask for your advice and help to judge the feasibility, opportunity and general conception of such an idea. I wish to send her a copy of the transcript from the last interview with the Paris museums-director, Mr. Obrist, which seems to have been partly published in an italian art magazine, but I do not actually have it in hand.

Of course there remains the fundamental necessity to finish what was started with Ernest about his memoirs and turn the tapes into readable material. But it will be an enormous enterprise, especially at a moment when I must dedicate so much time to painting. For I do really work very hard, to prepare a new show in the near future, wherever it be in the world. It is tough but it also helps me to get out of my depression after the burial. I have precisely one painting standing at the moment, which was perhaps provoked by what I have just lived through, called 'Burial Under the Moon'. It describes the nightly burial of a slave in a 'nearby field', as ordained under the rules of the 'Code Noir', the Sun King's legal code for dealing with slaves in His Majesty's colonies.

Else how are you doing personally? What a wonderful thing to hear about the news of your grandchild. I believe it brought joy to the little house in Melville. And it is great for Carl and his companion.

I do think very much about Paul and remember our endless discussions and the unforgettable (?) day at the MaiMai Market. I still have my Madiba shirt and my rampashanas. I take the occasion to give him the news that nothing has changed in Corsica, since Pieri now sits in jail. He still holds the island under his sway. Therefore the time has not yet come for our return to the Ile de Beauté. Especially also because there is a wave of hysteria against foreigners, for the time being. I love Paul very much, as a good human being, for the courage of his quest, and as a brother.

Now, my dear friend, in the hope of seeing you in a not too distant future, I send my warmest greetings and thoughts.

Yours [unsigned]

P.S. Please do greet your sister and Saskia, who offered us such a wonderful Christmas eve and country trip.  
Remind me to all the others I know. Tell my family that I will write soon.

Elza Miles  
Melville. South Africa

Wonga Marc Mancoba  
153 Rue du Chateau  
75014 Paris  
21 February 2005

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# KILDER TIL DANSK KUNSTHISTORIE

NY CARLSBERGFONDET

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