

NDEBELE

Since Margaret Courtney-Clarke took her photographs of Ndebele art in the early eighties much has changed in the world of the Ndebele people. In their so-called "homeland", KwaNdebele, they went through a bloody civil war in 1985-86 in which many were tortured and killed by agents of the state and the clique of black businessmen and civil servants that had collaborated with the apartheid ideologists in setting up the puppet regime. Then, in the early 90s the whole edifice of apartheid came tumbling down to be followed, not by racial conflagration, but by the miraculous emergence of a democratic South African state, in which KwaNdebele became part of the newly named province of Mpumalanga.

Sadly, political progress has not been matched by a noticeable flowering of Ndebele art. Those bright splashes of geometric colour on the veld, the decorated homes of Ndebele families, are becoming fewer. With more capital-intensive farming the demand for agricultural labour has diminished and the old ways of labour-tenancy have been discarded. Farm workers' homesteads with their closely integrated satellite buildings and low-walled forecourts, are giving way to rows of prefabricated housing for nuclear families.

While apartheid has gone, its progeny, the resettlement camps of KwaNdebele, have not. They are at peace and have become communities. But no core of substantial economic activity has arisen to undo the madness of apartheid. The men and women of those places continue to rise long before dawn to catch buses and taxis to work in faraway Pretoria, and to come home well after dark. In that exhausting tedium Ndebele women seem to find it ever less imperative to apply traditional decorations to their homes which are becoming more suburban than rural.

On the other hand Ndebele art has become widely known in the developed world. It has been exhibited in several of the great museums of Europe and America; its artefacts are much sought after by collectors and its designs have been incorporated in fabrics, fashions and ceramics. This book and Margaret Courtney-Clarke's passionate engagement with the art of African women and with that of the Ndebele in particular, have been important influences in these developments. In September 2001 her concern was made most concretely manifest when the Cultural Centre for Women and Children was opened at Mabhoko, in the heart of what used to be KwaNdebele.

The Centre and its parent body, the Ndebele Foundation are the outcome of an unstintingly dedicated effort by Margaret to raise funds, design, build and involve the local community in a place that would nurture, diversify, grow and pass on to their children, the arts of Ndebele women. It consists of a school and training workshop, a bed and breakfast facility for visitors, a shop and tearoom and vegetable gardens. Already there are some 50 students, ranging in age from four to 17 years who, with unwavering concentration and eagerness, are learning to draw and paint and to work with traditional patterns derived from mud. Their teachers are Franzina Ndimande, one of the great exponents of Ndebele art, and her daughter, Angelina.

The older children decorate ostrich eggs, tins, bottles and greeting cards. Their designs are screen printed onto fabrics or hand painted and stitched into colourful sarongs, cushions and table linen. Some forty women are engaged in beadwork, while others grow vegetables. Soon there will be sewing and the weaving of mats. The products of all these efforts are sold in the shop, the major portion of proceeds going to the people who made them, the rest contributing to the maintenance of the Centre. In time the work will be marketed more widely.

Under economic and social pressures traditional wall decoration and beadwork for ritual use are tending to disappear. But if this bustling Centre remains true to the spirit in which it has been founded, it will surely become the seedbed, not simply for a revival of Ndebele art, but for its movement in new directions. Through its broad based programmes Ndebele women will be encouraged to turn their gift for colour and design to new forms and expressions. The work done at the Centre should help counter the already marked vulgarisation of Ndebele artforms found in airport curio shops. Perhaps the greatest benefit conferred by this centre is the empowerment of those who participate in its activities. In a place of few employment opportunities and very little stimulus to creative effort they will earn much needed income and will enjoy the confidence that comes from skills well learnt and used.

Margaret Courtney-Clarke's love of Ndebele art found expression in her photography and in this seminal book. But it didn't stop there. For years she worked tirelessly for the appreciation of that art in the wider world and nursed the dream of a centre in which it could flourish. Notwithstanding obstacles that would have deterred most others, she has realised that dream. For this we are all enriched.

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