

South african art of the apartheid history essay



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Great social and governmental movements in history are maintained and expressed through the artistic endeavors of writers, filmmakers, designers, crafters, painters, and sculptors. Sculpting clay, painting an image, and mass producing posters created an image for the political movement and also aided the citizens in having a way to express themselves when their mouths are figuratively taped shut. Using their hands to express their anger, annoyance and fear help not only the artists, but also the citizens ability to reflect and have an escape on their own emotions and feelings as well.

The white Afrikaner's created their own form of structure and regulations during the apartheid to dominate all other populations and many artists helped in fighting their dominance through artistic civil disobedience. Their art helped show the falling apart of the Afrikaner's rule, the urban slums created by their reign, the displacement of people from the apartheid movement, and the black African's agony, confusion, dissatisfaction and anger.

The history of white suppression in South Africa starts with the colonization by the English and Dutch in the seventeenth century. As the English maintained control of the colonies the Dutch established the areas northern to the English territories and created the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The Dutch decedents, also know as the Boers or Afrikaners, created their own culture and history after the tragic events of the Boer War and the suppression of the English surrounding them. Changes within the black African population also sparked new cultural changes with different warring tribes becoming more near to each other because of more whites moving into their lands and pushing the blacks out. Most of the movement of

whites towards the interior was due to minerals, diamonds and gold, were discovered and the English rushed their way into the south African interior to fight for land. Pushing the black Africans to exterior lands in poor agricultural areas and out of the cities, the whites were able to pass legislation with the Native Lands Act to legally push blacks onto reservation type areas. Land equaled diamonds or gold and that equaled money and there for with the large amounts of land more whites came to get rich quick.

The white South Africans struggled, within their groups, for power following independence from England. During the early 1900s the British and Afrikaners formed political groups, such as the Afrikaner National Party and the South African National Party, to gain more attain more for their individual groups. The black South Africans also created a group, the African National Congress, to help fight for the rights of black South Africans and push against the Native Lands Act. During the early 1930's as people were moving around throughout South Africa photographers were busy capturing the new history that was happening out on the " primitive" settlement grounds.

Photographers were interested in getting shots of the diamond and gold fields, the workers, and the actions, emotions and culture of the people out in the interior. Some of the photographers, like Constance Stuart Larrabee, worked on showcasing black South Africans and their lives. As a modernist artist she " photographed the Ndebele, urban scenes" looking more at the scenic aspects of their lives and incorporating their cultures. (Peffer, 14) In Larrabee's " Ndebele 1947", as stated in *Art and the End of the Apartheid*, " two children are arranged against a wall decorated with abstract ' razor blade' motifs and a life-sized reproduction of the Mr. Peanut logo. Larrabee <https://assignbuster.com/south-african-art-of-the-apartheid-history-essay/>

certainly did not mean to disparage her subjects. Rather, she intended to isolate what she saw as the beauty of Ndebele culture within a society that treated black people as second class citizens." (Peffer, 16) This type of feeling was grown to even high proportions with Apartheid growing in strength against black South Africans.

During the 1940's the Afrikaner National Party was able to push their way for the majority rule and therefore were able to create strategies to implement an Apartheid social system to gain control over the blacks and "coloureds", seen as people of mixed black and white decent, by furthering racial separation. The use of passes to regulate separation made it so black Africans or "coloureds" had to present a pass when going into cities or other areas to show whether or not they were allowed there. Early on African blacks and "coloureds" burned, forgot or misplaced pass books in a way to silently fight against the system. Groups such as the African National Congress set up pass burning to non-violently protest the actions of the all white government and their laws restricting the movement and lives of African's black population.

The apartheid plan from the National Party became increasingly more effective as it moved through the 1960s. More strict sanctions were created, which were the most notable actions from the Apartheid, for thorough separation with exact reservation areas for different groups of people by race. These strict sanctions lead to additional police suppression and federal force to continue this plan's course of action. The purpose for the apartheid, as seen by the National Party, was to separate all the races. This was not just by color, but also within each racial group. Keeping the blacks, "coloureds",
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Asians/Indians (Natal) from each other would help suppress their civil unrest and ended up pinning the different groups against each other.

Through law makers, the Group Areas Acts of 1950 and 1986 were enacted and created townships for the areas that concentrated these different ethnic groups. These areas established more regulation on the racial laws enforcing the separation of blacks and whites interactions with one another socially through prohibiting interracial marriage. This was eventually followed by having to classify who was in each race by determining their race by their color, and with color other measurements were also taken into consideration including their education, language and behavior.

Playing off of the exuberance and colorful atmosphere of the Ndebele was another artist, painter Gerard Sekoto. He was raised in this environment but after training he became fascinated with the relation of people to their culture and within their space. Like in his trip to Cape Town and Johannesburg he exclaimed his findings on the novelty of their environment; " All these various types of people: women with baskets of shopping, some carrying baggage on their heads or shoulders. Men of various styles of walking and clothing... There are also many children of varied appearance in attire and expression."(Peffer, 3) In his painting, Yellow Houses, there are bold sharp nervous lines with large bold color. He used this style to " romanticize attention to the details of everyday life among the working poor." (Peffer, 3). The scenes he depicted were not familiar to the whites of South Africa, they saw the black townships as a " place of decadence, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions- and Sekoto painted them in

appositive light, with an angle of vision that was usually at eye level or from the back, but never invasive." (Peffer, 3-4)

Every aspect of the government was a contribution to the defense, enforcement, and support of the Apartheid. After 1976 the areas of the black townships turned into police states. They used new machines in the urban environments, such as " Hippos", were used to " terrorize and ' pacify' the residents in the black locations. Children ran from these monstrous vehicles of state repression." (Peffer, 127) The government wanted complete control over its citizens and their actions and therefore any form of protest were handled with by severe punishments which could sometimes led to death or even imprisoned for life much like leader Nelson Mandela.

A large part of the government's response to its South African peoples was through separation at all costs. It was so highly divided that each of the areas that the different races and ethnicities developed into were given names. As stated by encyclopedia. com;

" Under the prime ministership of Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966) apartheid developed into a policy known as " separate development," whereby each of the nine African (Bantu) groups were to become a nation with its own homeland, or Bantustan. An area totaling about 14% of the country's land was set aside for these homelands, the remainder, including the major mineral areas and the cities, being reserved for the whites. The basic tenet of the separate development policy was to reserve within the confines of the African's designated homeland rights and freedoms, but that outside it blacks were to be treated as aliens."

The areas of the black Africans were very poor with horrid housing conditions, poor sewage treatment, low water, and no or little electricity. But leaving these towns were incredibly hard and the only time someone left their residence was for employment in which they would be given permission on their passbooks to travel to and from. But at some times the families of the black South Africans had to break up so the father could live closer to work but this permit was only received under certain circumstances. When living in the cities the black African workers had to live to curfew laws and have their passbooks at all times. These passbooks contained their papers and if they did not have them they would be arrested.

This ability to be arrested without their passbooks led the passbook to become a symbolic article when protesting the apartheid government and its laws. As mentioned before, they would burn or forget their passbooks to fight against the law. This was one of the main tactics of protestors, as established by Gandhi when fighting the passbook system in Natal.

The territories of poor quality land that all of the South African blacks were pushed onto, the Bantustans, developed in the 1960s to 1970s into having some limited self governments. They were not considered their own entities but were in some cases considered puppet states where the entitled self governments were not strong enough to support themselves and did whatever the main apartheid government wanted. This land had large amounts of people but did not have agricultural rich land to use to farm; there were also very few jobs available there and no matter where the black South Africans went their wages were very low to the point where it was hard for them to even support their own families.

The harsh realities of people not having the necessities they needed to live were all around the artists during the apartheid era of South Africa. The history of the colonialism and white take over of South Africa had become so engrained into both the black and white African culture. An expression of this fight for life can be seen in 1986 Dumisani Mabaso's untitled work where he created a "series of swooping arrows made of twisted cord traversing a field of vertical lines of colored paint that have been hurled onto the canvas."

(Peffer, 131) Abstract expression much like Mabaso's work stated the harsh realities of living in violence and just the emotion put into "hurling" the paint onto the canvas shows his frustration and the anger against the apartheid that is shared by the people. Another artist, much like Mabaso's work, Garth Erasmus created his signature painting Playground where he also took globs of painting at the canvas and pushed the actual tubes of colors into the canvas. As stated by Peffer, "Playground, as the title suggests, evoked both a liberation from the daily concern for survival and a search for novel methods for aesthetic expression through the addition of the element of chance."(131)

The anger, sorrow and humiliation of the black South Africans during the apartheid could also be seen through the expressive artwork of Ezrom Legae in his ink drawing "Icons de Dakar 'Africa'." Just within the scratchy lines and very melancholy style there is sadness that emanates from the paper. In the upper right hand corner there is a woman crying and horses within a town, showing how the urban and rural life were one and the same due to similar issues of helplessness and confusion. His other sculpture "Sacrifice", Legae remakes Michelangelo's Pieta and within the image, instead of the woman

holding her dead son she is holding a dead goat. This drawing is to reference the cry to protest violence. His artwork is very ominous and creates a feeling of fear and sadness to help move the viewer into action.

Feeling the violence, intensity of anguish and resentment of the black South Africans in the urban slums, was Dumile Mslaba Fenmi. His figures are of artistic discipline but the movement of their bodies and faces are abstract. They seem to not be in their world, and they merely capture the human behavior and response to their environment. It seems as if they move mechanically and are just going through the motions of being within the world they are apart of. The anger has distorted their face to the point of no return.

A way for the communities to move from the oppression of the Apartheid was to create artwork where they could describe their culture and celebrate their candor towards freedom. A lot of the art was based around visual, commercial and traditional artwork. Communities would work together to create their traditional and cultural art staples such as chairs and decorated houses but there had to be significance behind why it was done. They also had to rework the audience that they needed to start making their work for; they needed it to not be made for the white middle class, but for their community and for themselves. (Peffer, 81)

In 1994 the Bantustans were abolished and the territories were reabsorbed into the nation of South Africa.

Despite public demonstrations, UN resolutions, and opposition from international religious societies, apartheid was applied with increased rigor in <https://assignbuster.com/south-african-art-of-the-apartheid-history-essay/>

the 1960s. In 1961 South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth of Nations rather than yield to pressure over its racial policies, and in the same year the three South African denominations of the Dutch Reformed Church left the World Council of Churches rather than abandon apartheid. Although the policy of apartheid was continued under Prime Minister John Vorster , there was some relaxation of its pettier aspects, and this accelerated under his successor, P. W. Botha .

Probably the most forceful pressures, both internal and external, eroding the barriers of apartheid were economic. International sanctions severely affected the South African economy, raising the cost of necessities, cutting investment, even forcing many American corporations to disinvest, for example, or, under the Sullivan Rules, to employ without discrimination. In addition, the severe shortage of skilled labor led to lifting limits on African wages, and granting Africans the right to strike and organize unions. Unions, churches, and students organized protests throughout the 1970s and 80s. Moreover, political, economic, and military pressures were exerted by the independent countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

As a result of these pressures, many lesser apartheid laws-such as those banning interracial marriage and segregating facilities-were repealed or fell into disuse by 1990. In 1991 President de Klerk obtained the repeal of the remaining apartheid laws and called for the drafting of a new constitution. In 1993 a multiracial, multiparty transitional government was approved, and fully free elections were held in 1994, which gave majority representation to the African National Congress.

CONCLUSION:

The suppression of the black South African people since the beginning of colonialism, to the rush of the gold and diamond mines, to the separation of the races ran a long haul through the 1800s up until the early 1990s.

Throughout the intense history of the apartheid artists like David Goldblatt, Dumile Mslaba Feni, Gerard Sekoto, Willie Bester, John N. Muafangejo, David Koloane, and Jane Alexander created symbolic representations protesting the apartheid. Revolving around photography, sculpture, painting, drawing, ceramics, embroidery, etchings, and collage work these artists made a political stand. Towards the end of the apartheid era, the artists of the period began to think of themselves as “ cultural workers” protesting against injustices through their work.