

From The Times
March 14, 2007

Albert Adams

South African artist whose work was characterised by expressionist technique and emotional intensity

June 23, 1929 - December 31, 2006

Albert Adams, a black South African artist, spent most of his life in self-imposed exile in England, where his work benefited from the influence of European masters such as Francis Bacon, Oscar Kokoshcka and Picasso. However, the years he spent growing up classed as a Cape Coloured in an apartheid society also made an indelible mark on his highly expressive style, with his compositions often taut with repressed energy and unease.

He was born in Johannesburg in 1929 to an Indian father and a mixed race mother. They separated when he was small and he and his mother moved to a Cape Town suburb. He had been drawing as far back as he could remember, though his artistic training started under an inspirational art teacher at Livingstone High School and continued with evening art lessons for Coloureds.

After Hewat College in Cape Town, however, progress in South Africa for Adams was barred — he was refused entry into the city's university because of the colour of his skin.

Undeterred, he was encouraged by the South African artist Irma Stern to apply overseas, and won a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Art in London. He arrived in 1953, and remained there for most of his life.

At a summer school in Austria he met the artist Oscar Kokoschka, who became a friend and recorded an introduction to Adams's first solo exhibition in Cape Town, in 1959. The show won him high praise as an emerging talent from the critic Neville Dubow.

Adams's work was characterised by its expressionist technique and emotional intensity, and in the years that followed he exhibited in Yugoslavia, Brazil, Germany and Belgium, as well as Britain.

Adams first taught at comprehensive schools in the East End of London, before becoming a lecturer at City University, London, in 1979, where he remained for 18 years.

His work constantly alluded to the social and political environment he saw around him. This was perhaps most notable in his 2002 one-man exhibition at the South African National Gallery, full of strange and striking works inspired by his visits to post-apartheid South Africa and his reflections on its many upheavals.

Questioning himself as well as everybody else, Adams once asked "Can baggage be something we cling to unable to let go — or unwilling to discharge? Is our baggage at once our glory and our damnation?"

Adams was a warm, elegant, tasteful person who possessed a zest for life and was a wonderful raconteur.

Albert Adams, artist, was born on June 23, 1929. He died of lung cancer on December 31, 2006, aged 77



Albert Adams stands in front of one of his paintings entitled 'Celebration'

Albert Adams – artist who painted Apartheid

The death of artist Albert Adams is a devastating blow to the art world, writes Tim Bruce-Dick

ALBERT Adams, who died after a short illness on New Year's Eve 2006 and who lived in Delancy Street, Camden Town, was an artist who enjoyed international recognition comparatively late in his career.

Born in South Africa of Indian stock, he suffered the cruelty of the Apartheid system throughout his youth. His outstanding talent was spotted early, but it was not until his self-imposed exile to England in 1953 that he blossomed.

He first studied at the Slade School of Fine Art where he won a scholarship at the University of Munich, Germany. He then went on to work under Oscar Kokoschka in Salzburg, Austria, with whom he had a long friendship.

In 1959 he returned briefly to South Africa when he painted the Triptych 'South Africa 1959' which some critics described as the African Guernica, the famous painting by Picasso. It has been hailed as the most important painting by a black South African artist of the 20th century. However the political and social climate was not to Albert's liking and he returned for good to England where his subject matter was always to be South Africa.

He drew and painted vivid and disturbing images in large format as well as etching, a field in which he was a master. Over the years he participated in many exhibitions and his work went into collections in the USA, South America, Europe as well as South Africa. Meanwhile he was visiting lecturer in the history of Modern Art at City University.

But it was only after the collapse of the Apartheid system that at last his talent was fully celebrated in his native land with a series of exhibitions at the National Gallery of South Africa at Cape Town where many of his finest works are kept.

In Europe he had successful exhibitions at Antwerp, Manchester and London. In recent years he devoted more time to etching, producing startling and moving images of South Africa including the Cape Minstrels and the Incarceration series inspired by a visit to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and members of Albert's family were imprisoned.

As well as painting and drawing in his top floor studio in Delancey Street he loved etching at Morley College, south London, and he was often seen cheerfully marching to Camden Underground wearing his favourite trilby hat with his portfolio under his arm.

Albert lived for over 40 years in his house, which he and his partner Ted Glennon immaculately restored and filled with African, Indian and Art Deco furniture and art.

A brilliant cook and raconteur, Albert was vibrant, charming and energetic until he was suddenly and cruelly taken away from all who loved him.

His funeral took place yesterday (Wednesday) at St Bride's Church in Fleet Street.

* Tim Bruce-Dick lectures on contemporary architecture at City University and was a friend and colleague of Albert Adams.

The Guardian – Albert Adams (obituary)

The political awareness that the South African artist Albert Adams, who has died of lung cancer aged 77, acquired as a boy at Livingstone high school, in Capetown's Claremont district, remained with him. So did the disillusionment and sense of alienation, yet he never lost sight of the present and the relevance of art to society. What he has left behind is a body of masterly works that will continue to challenge, enrich and move.

This was confirmed at Adams's exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery in 2002, which included the Celebration series on the Cape Town carnival, the Kaapse Klopse. The works were anything but jolly, festive and celebratory; on the contrary, the mask-like, distorted faces were angry and menacing. Created in London between 2000 and 2002, all the works referred to post-apartheid South Africa and the challenges, dangers and threats that came with political change.

Adams's parents separated soon after he was born in Johannesburg. His father, a Hindu, had come from India, and his mother was classified by the white government as Cape Coloured. Adams lived in London from 1960. South Africa had offered him much confusion, frustration and pain - from the time that he had to sneak in and out of his mother's domestic-worker room as a child, to being refused entrance to the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town because of the colour of his skin and the vicissitudes of life in the city.

There were, however, positive influences; among them an art teacher and principal at Livingstone high school and classes alongside the artist and poet Peter Clarke at Hewat College of Education, Cape Town. There were also the German émigré friends of the South African artist Irma Stern who, recognising Adams's talent, encouraged him to apply to art colleges overseas. He won a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Art in London, left his homeland in 1953 and never looked back. The Slade's prestigious summer prize took him, via a Bavarian state scholarship, to the University of Munich and time spent studying with Oscar Kokoschka in Salzburg.

Though he was a second-class citizen in his land of his birth during the apartheid years, Adams's prodigious talent was recognised and he visited the country at the end of the 1950s. His first solo exhibition in Cape Town in 1959 was launched with a taped address from his friend Kokoschka - the artist was too old to attend in person - and Neville Dubow of the Michaelis School noted Adams's "technical ability to express himself fluently in several media, and more particularly the tremendous emotional intensity behind that expression." It was a talent, Dubow continued, "well above the ordinary and a training to match". That year Adams's Cape Town Harbour was added to what is now the South African National Gallery's permanent collection.

Adams's 1960 exhibition in Cape Town comprised graphics and watercolours; again, Dubow referred to his "brilliant expressionist technique" and compared the quality and intensity of his etchings to that of Goya. The influence of Kokoschka was profound, as was that of Francis Bacon and Picasso. Adams spoke of the tightrope that an artist walks between the emotions which direct the creativity and the objectivity required in the development of the work.

In 1979 Adams began 18 years as a lecturer at the City University, London. Apart from Britain, he exhibited in Belgium, Brazil, Germany and Yugoslavia. His most recent work made powerful comments on the war in Iraq. His death came at a time when a retrospective exhibition at the Iziko, and at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, was being discussed.

Youthful, energetic and inspired, Adams was a great artist. I will remember his charm, beauty, wit and elegance, the intelligence and insight he brought to conversations on everyday life, art and politics, his generosity of spirit, and unwavering commitment to his art. He is survived by his civil partner Edward Glennon.

• Albert Adams, artist, born June 23 1929; died December 31 2006

By Marliyn Martin □ [The Guardian](#), Friday 5 January 2007