

Albert Adams

Arthur Albert Hugh Adams (June 23, 1929 – December 3, 2006) was one of the most important and gifted expressionist painters to come out of South Africa in the 20th century. Adams is noted for his paintings, prints, and drawings. His excellent expressionist technique was influenced by Oskar Kokoschka, Francis Bacon, and Pablo Picasso.¹ Adams' primary subject was a series of self-portraits, and his works are marked by his own sense of identity. His most significant artwork "South Africa 1959" triptych echoed Picasso who, in defence of his painting Guernica, said: "Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy."² Adams fought a war against injustice; against ignorance; against anything that diminished the human spirit.³ The themes for Adams include apartheid South Africa, inhumanity of the human, the horrors of war, and the bloodiness of repression. He once said, "My work is based on my experience of South Africa as a vast and terrifying prison—an experience which, even now, after a decade of democracy, still haunts me."⁴ Therefore, Adams' artworks are life-affirming, though-provoking and often, disturbing. His works were exhibited in South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Brazil, and Britain.⁵

Early life:

Adams was born in Johannesburg, the largest city in South Africa, informally known as "The City of Gold". His mother, Emma Caroline Adams, was a South African of multiracial heritage who supported the whole family as a domestic worker.⁶ His father, who was Hindu, had emigrated from India to South Africa in 1911. Since his parents divorced when he was four years old, Adams moved with his mother and sister to his grandmother's house in Cape Town.⁷ He showed an interest in art from an early age and taught himself to draw with paper and pencils given by his mother.⁸

While living in Cape Town, Adams attended Livingstone High School in Claremont after graduating from Arsenal Road Primary School. Adams's time at Livingstone was crucial to his life, as his artistic enlightenment and education during this period laid the foundation for his later achievements. It was there that his talent for drawing was discovered by the principal, Mr. E C Roberts and recommended to study art with Mr. Esterhuysen.⁹ During that time, he also met lifelong friend, Peter Clarke.¹⁰ They became acquainted as 14-year-old pupils at Livingstone

¹ From the Times - Albert Adams: South African artist whose work was characterised by expressionist technique and emotional intensity [Accessed: 14 March 2007]

² Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1946). *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. p.202.

³ Albert Adams A Tribute. p.3, tribute co-ordinated and designed by Lorna and Graham de Smidt, 2007. Available at <https://adamsalbert.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/albert-adams-a-tribute.pdf>. [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

⁴ London January 2005 (quoted in the University of Antwerp Exhibition leaflet 2005)

⁵ Peter Clarke. (2008). *Portrait of a Friendship-Words for Albert Adams*. In: Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.15.

⁶ Marilyn Martin. (2008). 'The task of the artist is to see' (Oskar Kokoschka). In: Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.66.

⁷ Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.102.

⁸ An interview - Baggage art: Albert Adams Self Portraits

⁹ Peter Clarke. (2008). *Portrait of a Friendship-Words for Albert Adams*. pp.12-13.

¹⁰ Peter Clarke (1929-2014) was a leading visual artist, writer, and poet working in South Africa. Available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Clarke_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Clarke_(artist)). [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

High school, Claremont in 1944.¹¹ Adams then applied to study at Michaelis School of Fine Arts, the University of Cape Town, but was rejected due to the university's racially discriminatory policy.¹² In 1947, he invited his best friend Peter to join art classes at St Philip's School in Chapel Street in District Six, which was run by an artist named John Coplans.¹³ Both became a vibrant part of the political, cultural, and artistic scene in Cape Town.

Education:

After being rejected from Michaelis School of Fine Arts, Adams began work as a window-dresser in Cape Town.¹⁴ He was able to save sufficient money to enrol for a teaching degree at Hewat Teacher Training College where he edited the annual magazines. He used the publications to take a stand against racial discrimination and the inferior education offered to African and multiracial learners.¹⁵ Adams became actively involved in the anti-apartheid movement. After being arrested twice, Adams realised that the South African political situation was rapidly deteriorating and applied to universities in England. He subsequently was awarded a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London (1953-1956).¹⁶ He moved to London with the help from his two German friends, Rudi Von Freiling and Siegbert Eick.¹⁷

After studying in London, he was awarded a Bavarian State scholarship to the Munich Academy of Art from November 1956 to July 1957. During the summer, he attended master classes with Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) in Salzburg, Austria¹⁸. Kokoschka had a dramatic influence on Adams as a painter and later Francis Bacon proved a strong influence on both his paintings and drawings.¹⁹ Although Adams was a "second-class citizen" who never felt South African during the apartheid years, his astonishing talent was so widely recognized that he returned to his country in the late 1950s.²⁰ In Cape Town, he held his first solo exhibition at the Argus gallery in 1959. After the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, Adams and many other South Africans left the country to settle in London.

Career and death:

In the UK, he taught at various secondary schools in the East End of London and thoroughly enjoyed teaching. In 1979, he began teaching Art History at City University in London for 18 years.²¹ When liberation movements were decriminalised in 1990, Adams made regular trips to South Africa to visit his family and participated in artists' workshops. After 1994, he explored

¹¹ Peter Clarke. (2008). *Portrait of a Friendship-Words for Albert Adams*. p.11.

¹² An interview - Baggage art: Albert Adams Self Portraits.

¹³ Peter Clarke. (2008). *Portrait of a Friendship-Words for Albert Adams*. p.13.

¹⁴ Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.102.

¹⁵ Marilyn Martin. (2008). 'The task of the artist is to see' (*Oskar Kokoschka*). P.67.

¹⁶ Available at <https://africanah.org/albert-adams-1929-2006/> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

¹⁷ South African History Online, available at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/arthur-albert-hugh-adams> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

¹⁸ Colin Cina. (2008). *Welcome to London, Mr Adams*. In: Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.18.

¹⁹ Joe Dolby. (2008). *Beloved comforter Albert Adams as a printmaker-an appreciation*. In: Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.34.

²⁰ Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/jan/05/guardianobituaries.southafrica> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

²¹ An interview - Baggage art: Albert Adams Self Portraits

the challenges, dangers and threats that came with political change in South Africa.²² In the spring of 1962, Adams first met his partner, Edward Glennon.²³ Adams lived in Camden Town with Edward from 1967 till the end of his life. Towards the end of 2006 he was diagnosed with lung cancer and passed away on 31st December 2006.²⁴

²² Marilyn Martin. (2008). *'The task of the artist is to see' (Oskar Kokoschka)*. p.66.

²³ Edward Glennon. *A Remembrance*. In: Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.101.

²⁴ Martin, M, & Dolby, J, eds. Retrospective Catalogue. *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*. Published by Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008, p.102.