

South African apartheid

Apartheid (“apartness” in the language of Afrikaans) was a system of legislation that upheld segregationist policies against non-white citizens of South Africa. Racial segregation and white supremacy had become central aspects of South African policy long before apartheid began. The controversial 1913 Land Act, passed three years after South Africa gained its independence, marked the beginning of territorial segregation by forcing black Africans to live in reserves and making it illegal for them to work as sharecroppers. The Great Depression and World War II brought increasing economic woes to South Africa and convinced the government to strengthen its policies of racial segregation. In 1948, the Afrikaner National Party won the general election under the slogan “apartheid” (literally “apartness”). Under apartheid, non-white South Africans (the majority of the population) would be forced to live in separate areas from whites and use separate public facilities in order to decrease their political power. Contact between the two groups would be limited. Despite strong and consistent opposition to apartheid within and outside of South Africa, its laws remained in effect for almost 50 years. In 1991, the government of President F.W. de Klerk began to repeal most of the legislation that provided the basis for apartheid. President de Klerk and activist Nelson Mandela would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for their work creating a new constitution for South Africa.

Expressionism

Expressionism, artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements. More specifically, Expressionism as a distinct style or movement refers to a number of German artists, as well as Austrian, French, and Russian ones, who became active in the years before World War I and remained so throughout much of the interwar period. The roots of the German Expressionist school lay in the works of Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and James Ensor. The second and principal wave of Expressionism began about 1905, when a group of German artists led by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner formed a loose association called Die Brücke (“The Bridge”). The works of Die Brücke artists stimulated Expressionism in other parts of Europe. The artists belonging to the group known as Der Blaue Reiter (“The Blue Rider”) are sometimes regarded as Expressionists, although their art is generally lyrical and abstract, less overtly emotional, more harmonious, and more concerned with formal and pictorial problems than that of Die Brücke artists. Some of the movement’s later practitioners, such as George Grosz and Otto Dix, developed a more pointed, socially critical blend of Expressionism and realism known as the Neue Sachlichkeit (“New Objectivity”). The partial reestablishment of stability in Germany after 1924 and the growth of more overtly political styles of social realism hastened the movement’s decline in the late 1920s. Expressionism was definitively killed by the advent of the Nazis to power in 1933.

“South Africa 1959” triptych

One of the most significant and ground-breaking works Adams produced is the “South Africa 1959” triptych, now in the Johannesburg Art Gallery.¹ “South Africa 1959” (Fig1), like Picasso’s Guernica (Fig2) and Feni’s African Guernica (Fig3), is a landmark painting that directly addresses

¹ Available at <https://www.straussart.co.za/artists/albert-adams/> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

the injustices, destruction and pain brought about by a repressive political ideology.²

When “South Africa 1959” was first shown in Cape Town in the year it was made, an art critic Neville Dubow³ compared the quality and intensity of Adams’ etchings to that of the great Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828).⁴ Dubow 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”.⁵

This artwork was known as the “South African Guernica” and was influenced by Sir Francis Bacon. Adams’ oil-on-board triptych bears the same relation to the horrors that occurred in Sharpeville as Pablo Picasso’s masterpiece does to the bombing of the Basque town some 20 years before. “South Africa 1959” is not a literal representation of an event – Picasso never went to Guernica, and Adams painted his picture before infamous shootings in the Transvaal had happened – but it does something that photography cannot do. In Adams’s masterful triptych, the brutality and degradation of the political system are clearly seen in the tortured figures stretched across the three canvases. It makes the horrors of war universal, finds in maimed limbs and howling mouths a history that repeats itself. The painting is both allegorical and prophetic, and it chillingly predates the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 by only a few months.

African Guernica was made shortly before Feni’s exile to London. The work expresses the anguish he felt at the social and political dispossession and dislocation that apartheid was forcing upon him. His rendering of the mutated and twisted animal figures, and the equally manic energies of the human figures, shows a world out of balance, an allegory of the conflict not only between the human and the natural world, the social and the cosmic, but between humans themselves, as the demented three-legged figure dominating the right side of the picture plane suggests.⁶

Both of their works show the profound impact of apartheid on them. Adams once said: “Ever since the Europeans discovered South Africa, a system of separateness, keeping various Ethnic groups apart existed. In 1948, this system was entrenched in law by the first Afrikaner National Party government. This system became known as 'Apartheid'. Apartheid brought about conditions of great suffering, imprisonment, and in many cases death. It also brought about rebellion, Dictators create artists, artists rebel.”⁷ Their revolt against Apartheid mirrors Picasso’s comment on the destruction caused by civil war.

Adams returned to London permanently in 1967. He would never again broach the subject of apartheid so directly, preferring to use tropes such as imprisonment, and the allegory of the ‘monkey on the back’ to make his powerful thematic points.

² Available at <https://javettup.art/artworks/south-africa-1959> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

³ Neville Dubow, chair of the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town from 1971 to 1988 and founding director of the University of Cape Town’s Irma Stern Museum. From Artthrob Archive: Issue No. 133, September 2008, Obituary: Neville Dubowby written by Sue Williamson. Available at website <https://artthrob.co.za/08sept/obituary.html>. [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

⁴ Available at <https://africanah.org/albert-adams-1929-2006/> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

⁵ Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/jan/05/guardianobituaries.southafrica> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

⁶ Available at <https://javettup.art/artworks/african-guernica> [Accessed: 26 February 2022]

⁷ London January 2005 (quoted in the University of Antwerp Exhibition leaflet 2005)



Fig1: Albert Adams, South Africa 1959, 1959, Oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery



Fig 2: Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, Oil on canvas, 349.3x 776.6 cm, Museo Reina Sofía, Spain



Fig3: Dumile Feni, African Guernica,1967, Charcoal on newsprint, 226 x 218 cm

The image of the ape

Towards the end of his life Adams was particularly drawn to the image of the ape, a subject that recurs again and again in his paintings and in his works on paper. The drawing of the ape is the precursor to a remarkable series of prints- usually accompanied by drawings- depicting an ape baring its teeth (Fig4), a seated ape (Fig5), or apes, riding on the back of a standing man (Fig6), bent over by the burden he is carrying and where the man is eventually metamorphosed into skeleton (Fig7). The apes in this series were depicted riding triumphantly on the back of human beings.



Fig4: Ape baring its teeth



Fig5: Seated ape



Fig6: Ape on a standing man



Fig7: Ape on a skeletal figure Darfur

The series also highlights the mysterious and at times paradoxical natural of the creative process because the ape is a memory of a beloved childhood toy, "my only comforter." According to Art Quarterly, on one level, these works could scarcely be more private, or more autobiographical. When Albert's mother, Emma Adams, left Johannesburg in 1934, she bought her small son a toy monkey to keep him entertained during the long journey back to Cape Town.

However, in adulthood it would become a symbol of Church and State, of everything that seeks to control and oppress humanity. The much beloved comforter for the young boy is transformed into a mute and malevolent creature, a literal and symbolic burden.

The story of this ape series is also a wider one of apartheid South Africa; of the horrors of Darfur and the Holocaust and Guantanamo; of human inhumanity. "Ape on a skeleton over a holocaust scene" is one of a sequence of etched aquatints in which the monkey (or, perhaps, baboon) grows ever bigger, the skeleton on whose back it sits more and more bowed. Below this skeleton, there is a pile of white bones, which looks cruel, ruthless, and bloody. The Goya-esque images have the feel of those evolutionary charts in which the apes learn to walk upright and use tools, the nimbly moves from homo erectus to homo sapiens. In Adams' "Ape series", though, nothing evolves. Man carries his ape-ness with him, is always and only an animal. For all the evident horror in the etchings, there is something carnivalesque. "Ape on Skeleton" (Fig8) is instantly followed by "Skeleton on Ape" (Fig9); which of their two characters is the villain of the piece is a moot point.



Fig8: Ape with a flag on a skeletal figure



Fig9: Skeleton electrocuting an ape

About the story of ape and Adams, Edward once mentioned in *A Remembrance*: "A few months later on returning from one of my trips abroad, I brought him a small African monkey, which I thought he would like, but the poor frightened animal ran amok in his studio, running along the picture hanging rail near the ceiling, until it slipped on a wet painting, sliding down the painting to the floor, removing the image with its hairy back and limbs as it went down. Albert had been working on that picture for several days, but he shrugged his shoulders and told me not to worry about it, as he wasn't happy with the picture anyway. It was so typical of him to always put other people's feelings before his own. That painting was scrapped off and repainted as *Red monkey seated* (Fig10), the real monkey was re-homed by Palmers Pet Store in Parkway, Camden Town."



Fig10: Red monkey seated

A taped speech by Kokoschka

The time spent with Oscar Kokoschka had an enduring influence on Adams' philosophical and technical approach to his own creative expression. Throughout his life, he remained true to Kokoschka's words, contained in a taped speech, specially recorded for and played at the opening of Adams' first solo exhibition in Cape Town in 1959: never to close his eyes to 'the misery we create on earth'. Adams spoke of the tightrope that an artist walks, between the emotions that direct creativity, and the objectivity required in the development of the work; he managed this walk throughout his creative life in his paintings, drawings, and graphic works. Through his training and volition Adams was a modernist and expressionist, but he remained – till the last – spiritually and politically contemporary.

The Salford connection

In 1953, Adams won a scholarship to Slade School of Art in London, and he subsequently spent his first Christmas in the UK with fellow art student Harold Riley and his family in Salford. Adams remained friends with Riley and this display is drawn from the significant number of paintings, prints, drawings and personal studio items generously gifted to the University of Salford via the Art Fund, by Adams' surviving partner, Edward Glennon. Salford's School of Arts and Media has a well-known printmaking course to this day.