

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 2
Art in Southern Rhodesia

42 Fereday Drive
Eastlea,
Salisbury,
Southern Rhodesia
July 10, 1953

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
c/o Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Miss Rosemary de Souza, the young, dark-haired woman from whom we are renting our new home here, is one of the few practicing professional artists who live in Southern Rhodesia. It seemed to me she would be a good place to begin in an effort to find out what part art plays in this new country and whether it is progressing as fast as the refrigerator, the automobile and the tractor.

She was remarkably discouraging. "As far as I know," she said, "there are only three professional artists in Southern Rhodesia, and only one of them is anywhere near first-rate." She pointed to a portrait of herself which is hanging over her (now our) mantel. "The girl who painted that shows more promise than any of the other artists here now," she said.

"There are no locally-trained artists. Every artist who comes to Southern Rhodesia to paint was trained somewhere else." Miss de S. told me she had worked for several years in England as a commercial artist before coming to Southern Rhodesia to paint as she wished. "Even commercial art is strictly limited. There are no large, full-colour magazines here that must be filled with slick, well-drawn illustrations.

"The only commercial art consists of drawing stylized men and women for cigarette advertisements on tobacconists' counters."

It's easy to see why I didn't expect to hear much about art and artists the next day when I went to visit the proprietor of the largest (and only) art supply store in Salisbury, Mr. G. Rushforth. Mr. Rushforth runs a largish store on Speke avenue, one of the main streets of the city. He sells nothing but paints, brushes, canvas, and other artists. He does not, as I thought he might after my conversation with Miss de Souza, run a barber shop on the side to make ends meet.

"It's not the professionals who keep me going," he said. "It's the amateurs." Mr. Rushforth had no statistics on the number of amateurs who patronize his store. He could and did tell us that he does £2000 (pounds) worth of business in art supplies each year. "That may not mean much to you when you think in dollars," he said, "but it's quite a tidy sum in pounds."

Mr. Rushforth does not have a high opinion of professional artists in Southern Rhodesia. He sells the paintings of one artist, a Mrs. Joan Evans. All of the paintings by her which he had on display were water-colours which ranged in price from about £4 (\$11.20) to £9 (\$25.20), according to size. He told me that her oil paintings were not on display because they had been wrapped for shipment to an

exhibition at Johannesburg. When I ventured to comment that I hoped her oil paintings were better than her water-colours, he readily admitted that the water-colours were merely pot-boilers and that the only paintings she ever exhibits are the oils.

That brought up the question of exhibitions. Mr. Rushforth said that there is one regularly scheduled exhibition each year in Salisbury, held in October. Last year there were about 260 paintings on exhibition, representing the work of about 60 artists. From time to time there are special exhibitions. The last one held here was two months ago to choose paintings for the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition, now in progress at Bulawayo. Before that there was a competitive exhibition held to choose an artist to paint a mural in the new steamship Rhodesia Castle.

The regularly scheduled exhibition interested me most. "Are those 60 artists the ones who do £2000 worth of business with you," I asked, "or are there others who paint but do not enter their work at the exhibition?" He hastened to assure me that there are many more artists than the 60 in the show, but that the number is whittled down by a committee which picks and chooses.

I pricked up my ears at this. The existence of a committee gave the impression that there was some sort of organization behind the scenes somewhere. Apparently someone was aware of the need for art forms in a country which is growing so fast in so many other ways.

To find out more Mr. Rushforth sent me to a Mr. G. H. Stone, head of the government licensing bureau in Salisbury and, in his spare time, secretary of the Rhodesian National Arts Council.

Mr. Stone is a very official-looking man. He wears a carefully trimmed moustache, is thinning somewhat on top, and is spreading somewhat more under the waistband of his faintly pin-striped banker's grey suit. He led Julie and me into his private office (shared by two or three clerks) and dusted off two chairs placed near his old-fashioned rolltop desk.

"If you're at all familiar with the practice in government offices, you'll know that the Arts Council is not a government department," he said, very pleasantly. I had asked whether the council was an official part of the colonial government. "It's more of a loose organization under government sponsorship. A man is rarely an officer in more than one government department," he said, explaining his first remark.

He pointed to a map over his desk. "We have local organizations at Selukwe, Bulawayo, Umtali, Gwelo, and of course Salisbury. Our function, boiled down to its essence, is to improve interest in art here."

His committee is the one which puts on the annual exhibition in Salisbury as well as other exhibitions in the towns covered by the council. The council also gives aid grants to promising young Southern Rhodesian artists, paying for part of their instruction and providing some living expenses while they are painting to such an extent they have no time for ordinary employment.

There was a slight note of jealousy in his voice when he told us that the Art Council in Northern Rhodesia had been granted £20,000 a year with which to build theaters, museums, and concert stages. Southern Rhodesia has no such grant, he told us, but under federation, the two councils will be merged and each will benefit from the other's resources.

The Southern Rhodesian council does have a nest-egg, he confided. Under terms of the will of Sir James MacDonald, one of the first men to become wealthy in southern Africa, £30,000 was set aside to build an art museum in the Salisbury city park. Mr. Stone said there is a campaign in progress to raise additional funds for construction of the museum. If there is, it is being conducted in secret, for no other person I spoke to had heard of it. The site in the park has already been set aside. Perhaps the council is waiting for federation to go ahead with the drive on a largery scale.

Mr. Stone suggested that perhaps one of the reasons for the slow development of home-grown art in Southern Rhodesia is the fact that no one outside the colony believes there is any art potential here. As an example, he pointed out that when the art work for the Centenary Exhibition was being planned, the centenary committee called in an "outsider" to select the artists. This "outsider" (Mr. Stone almost sneered when he said the word) chose other outsiders to paint the murals and backdrops for a good many of the booths and exhibits.

No provision had been made to provide illustrative art for the exhibition of the tobacco growers, however. When the growers asked for an artist to do this work, they were told to go ahead and choose their own man. They chose a Southern Rhodesian, D. J. Avery.

When he had completed his work, the "outsider" was so impressed with it he commissioned Avery to paint murals for several other booths and finally asked him to design and paint the scenery for the centenary pageant, the week-long presentation of Rhodesian history on the stage at the exhibition.

Mr. Rushforth suggested another reason for the lag in art here. "Those who are qualified to teach art don't teach it," he said, "and those who teach it are not really qualified." Mrs. Evans, whose paintings he sells, is much too busy raising her two children to give any instruction to anyone outside her family. In fact she learned her painting from her father, an artist who was also police commissioner of Salisbury.

"She has time to paint since house servants come so cheap," Rushforth said, "but she has no time to teach others."

One of the reasons I was so surprised at the lack of European and American painters here was the fact that there is time to paint. Even an artist with a family could live here, hire a cook boy by the month and paint to his heart's content. And there would be no lack of subjects to paint. Every African loves to have his picture taken; and on every hand there are landscapes full of colour that almost call out to be painted.

It must seem to you that I have been ignoring the art that was here before

the white man arrived. When we landed at Livingstone and Bulawayo, almost the first thing that caught our attention was a table set up in the airport waiting room, covered with figures carved from wood. These replicas of what I presume are primitive African Deities were for sale at very low prices, considering their religious significance. Every one was guaranteed to be the work of a native.

Other than this there is no native African art except for the drawing, clay modeling, and finger painting that go on in free native elementary schools. Some of this art work is regarded very highly. For instance, an exhibit of carvings and paintings by pupils of the Cyrene School for Africans, near Bulawayo, opened in the art gallery of the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, England last week. It will run until August 28 and already has attracted an unusual amount of attention. There have been requests from the United States that the exhibition be taken to New York.

An African, however, has no time for art after he leaves his native school. From that time on he is a worker, and his work leaves no time to do anything but whittle the little figures which attract the tourist trade in airport waiting rooms and depots.

All other art forms fall loosely under the Rhodesian National Arts Council. Sculpture is sadly lacking. Mr. Rushforth said there are usually about 10 pieces of sculpture in wood or stone at the annual exhibition at Salisbury. This, and the wood whittling done by the natives, is the sum total of the sculpture here.

Besides amateur singing groups such as choirs and semi-organized glee clubs, there is not much work done in vocal music here by Europeans. Their instrumental music is similarly limited. The African has a great store of folk music. As buses go by our house, which is on the main road to Umtali, there is always music. The native boys who walk by the house in groups are usually singing, in a very unusual kind of harmony which is pleasing to the ear.

It is interesting to note that when music was being planned for the visit of the Queen Mother, European music had to be imported from London in the form of the Halle Orchestra. The only purely local music was that played by tribal orchestras at native villages visited by the royal party.

Every month there is a combined vocal and instrumental music concert here in Salisbury. It features amateur soloists, a choir or two, and perhaps, a string quartet. It is to be held the 27th of this month and Mr. Stone has invited Julie and me to be his guests.

There are amateur theater groups here which put on plays sporadically. There are few, if any, authors, playwrights, or poets.

Even in the curriculum proposed for the new Rhodesian University, for which the Queen Mother has just laid the cornerstone, there are no courses in any of the arts.

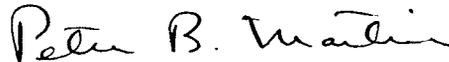
The first courses will be in English, Latin, History, Geography, French, Afrikaans-Nederlands, Mathematics, Economics, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, and Zoology.

Even in the field of popular music, Southern Rhodesians must borrow. The music played by the local radio station is purely American and the most popular number here now is "I Like Girls" as sung by Arthur Godfrey. In the lounge and in the dining room of Meikle's Hotel, where we stayed prior to taking this house, the orchestra which provided background music played American musical comedy numbers (very poorly).

It seems that the arts have not nearly kept up with industrial and population growth. Several private citizens with whom I have talked are well aware of the cultural lag. "What can we do about it, though," they ask. "We're too busy trying to hack a living out of the country to have time to do anything about art."

That's the feeling you find everywhere. And there is no sign that the situation will change in the near future.

Sincerely,



Peter B. Martin

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