

HONORARY GRADUATE

Cecil Skotnes

Born in East London in 1926 of parents who served in the Salvation Army, Cecil Skotnes grew up in an environment that instilled in him concepts of liberalism and philanthropy. He showed a youthful ability in art but, finishing school in the war years, he joined up and served with the South African Forces in the Italian Campaign in 1944-5. Although this delayed the start of his career, it did provide opportunities, when he was on leave in Florence, to refine his growing interest in art. When he returned to South Africa, Skotnes, like many ex-servicemen, enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand where he studied Fine Arts. Skotnes completed his degree in 1950, one of the group of talented students which became known as the Wits Group. The group included Christo Coetzee, Nel Erasmus, Larry Scully and Gordon Vorster and art historians Esmé Berman and Frieda Harmsen. All became important figures in South African art, but none more so than Cecil Skotnes.

As a married man, Skotnes needed a reliable income, but he was not attracted to teaching, by which most young artists earned their keep. He applied for a post as Welfare Officer in the Non-European Affairs Department. After a brief period as Assistant Supervisor at Jabawu Township, he was appointed Cultural Recreation Officer for the Department in 1952. In this capacity he also served as Secretary for the Johannesburg Local Committee for Non-European Adult Education, which had established the Polly Street Centre in 1949. Various educational and recreational activities had taken place at the centre since its inauguration, but it was Skotnes's individual initiative that led to the development of art classes which would prove to be seminal in the evolution of black artists in South Africa.

Resources for black adult education and recreation were very limited and it took great determination and ingenuity to keep the Centre going, with its many activities, such as music, dance and literacy classes, as well as art. Skotnes organised publicity in the press and on radio and found donors who provided art materials. The numbers at the once-a-week evening class grew steadily, and by 1953 there was sufficient material for a workshop show in the foyer at Wits. The next year the Centre held its first exhibition at the Helen de Leeuw Craftsman's Market. The exhibition was opened by Father Trevor Huddleston. Skotnes also managed to organise commissions for the artists, notably paintings and reliefs for a number of churches, where the work of Sydney Khumalo soon gained prominence. The number of exhibitions too gradually increased and by the 1960s Polly Street artists were holding successful group and solo shows in commercial galleries. Their work also began to enter public collections, albeit slowly, and they were amongst the first black artists to be represented in South African art galleries and museums.

Cecil Skotnes had come to realise that the making of art could serve as more than recreation for black people in South Africa, especially at a time when opportunities for education and any kind of professional employment were increasingly curtailed. The sound technical training, despite limited resources, and the sympathetic guidance and personal encouragement that Skotnes offered those who came to classes at Polly Street launched many important artists on their careers. During Skotnes's fourteen years at Polly Street, it became a vigorous workshop and the focus of black urban art development in South Africa.

Important as Skotnes's role as a teacher might have been, it did not eclipse his own career as an artist. Even before he began working at Polly Street, he had exhibited at the South African Academy in 1948. The first of numerous solo exhibitions was opened by Walter Battiss at the Pretoria Art Centre in 1957. Skotnes represented South Africa on many occasions at exhibitions abroad, such as the San Paolo and Venice Biennales, and he had a solo exhibition in London in 1965. Such was his reputation that his work was, uniquely for a South African artist, illustrated in the 1969 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

These events, of course, preceded South Africa's isolation during the long years of the cultural boycott, but happily Skotnes's art fed more on South African and broader African inspiration than on the international scene, and his production continues unabated to the present day. He evolved an unusual technique of wood engraving by developing the carved and painted panel as an art form in its own right. He frequently drew

his subject-matter from Africa, as in his collaboration with the poet Stephen Gray to produce the portfolio *The Assassination of Shaka* (1973), later published by McGraw-Hill. He also undertook an array of significant public commissions, such as a huge mural at the Kroonstad Catholic Church (1965), the graffiti wall outside the Hyde Park Shopping Centre (1969), tapestry designs for the Sandton Holiday Inn (1982), engraved panels for the Fountain Court of the 1820 Settlers Monument in Grahamstown (1986), and many other works for churches, hotels, hospitals and corporate buildings.

Skotnes's stature as an artist has been recognised by many invitations abroad to lecture and participate in exhibitions in countries as diverse as Italy, Yugoslavia, the United States of America, Great Britain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, West Germany, Spain, Greece, Austria, Israel and Sweden. His awards over the years include a Chamber of Mines Gold Medal in 1965, a South African Breweries Gold Medal in 1968, a Gold Medal at the Terza Biennale Internazionale della Grafica d'Arte in Florence in 1972 and a medal of honour from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie van Wetenskap en Kuns in 1976, as well as the award of an honorary degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts from the University of Cape Town in 1993.

The University pays tribute to the remarkable contribution made and distinguished achievements attained by Cecil Skotnes as a creative artist, and as a teacher and mentor of other artists, and expresses its pride and appreciation of the distinction he has brought to his Alma Mater by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*.