

## HONORARY GRADUATE

### Gerard Sekoto

Gerard Sekoto was born at Botshabelo, near Middelburg, in 1913. Despite a complete lack of exposure to art and art materials in the Western sense, he began drawing at an early age, using his elder brother's school slate, and persisted with this interest throughout his childhood in the rural Transvaal. Yet not until his early teens did he even have the use of coloured crayons; this was at Botshabelo College, where his skills had their earliest recognition when he was awarded a prize of five shillings and a Bible for his design for the school badge. In 1930 Sekoto enrolled at Grace Dieu at the Diocesan Teachers' Training College near Pietersburg to train as a teacher, and took up a post in the primary division of the nearby Khaiso Secondary School in 1932. Although there were no fine art studies in the curriculum of either institution, he began drawing more seriously while at the college, and took up watercolour painting a little later, encouraged now by his colleagues, Louis Makenna, head of the primary school, Ernest Mancoba, the sculptor, and Nimrod Ndebele, who persuaded him to enter a competition for black artists in 1938, in which Sekoto won second place. Mancoba was less successful in persuading Sekoto to travel with him at the time to Paris, where he was taking up a scholarship to work on his sculpture: Sekoto felt that he had to understand his own country better before he could travel abroad.

His commitment to art was so complete that in 1938 he reached the decision to give up his teaching post in order to go to Johannesburg to become an artist. There he discovered poster paints, which he used on cheap brown wrapping paper to depict the urban way of life he observed about him in Sophiatown, where he lived. Sekoto's introduction to Brother Roger of St Peter's Secondary School in Roseettenville led to the inclusion of his work in a group show at the Gainsborough Galleries at the end of the 1930s, where it was an immediate success. At this time also he learnt the technique of oil painting from the artist Judith Gluckman, and soon assembled enough works for his first solo exhibition in 1942, which was again favourably received. He had developed a bold and colourful style in his painting, which captured with keen observation the vitality of black community life, but also recorded with great honesty its deprivations. The money raised by his exhibition enabled him to travel to District Six in Cape Town, which was also an important source of subject-matter in his work, before his return a few years later to his mother's home in Eastwood, near Pretoria. There he worked for two further highly successful exhibitions in Pretoria and Johannesburg in 1947, which earned the funds to enable him to fulfil his ambition to travel to Paris. Although Sekoto applied for assistance, it was only two years later that the Bantu Welfare Trust sent him two hundred pounds.

The holding of three successful solo exhibitions in the first decade of any artist's career is noteworthy; in the career of an artist with no formal training and every imaginable material disadvantage it is truly remarkable, and is a testament to his perseverance as well as his talent. Sekoto's exceptional qualities are also acknowledged in his rapid recognition in the professional art world. At the South African

Academy, work by black artists had previously been shown in a 'Native Section', but when Sekoto first showed his paintings in the twentieth exhibition in 1939 in Johannesburg he was listed amongst the professional painters. His work was exhibited again in 1940, 1941 and 1942, and it was at this time that the Johannesburg Art Gallery purchased his painting representing a black artist in its collection. When he moved to Cape Town in 1942, Sekoto was invited to exhibit with the New Group, arguably the most advanced body of artists in South Africa at the time. Sekoto was also the only black artist represented in the touring exhibition of South African art that was shown at the Tate Gallery in London in 1947, where his painting *Sixence a Door* was particularly admired by the Queen Mother. He was subsequently the subject of two articles in *Time* magazine in August and October 1949.

These marks of recognition stress Sekoto's unique position in South African art history and his significance as a model for the black artists who followed. Although his decision to stay in Paris in voluntary exile has meant that Sekoto has not had a direct influence here, many artists working in South Africa today know about Sekoto's art and look on his early contribution as an admirable example. Nor has Sekoto cut himself off from his homeland: South Africa continues to be a consuming interest and the chief subject-matter of his art. In a career that spans half a century, even though forty years of it have been spent abroad, Sekoto remains a South African artist.

For many years Sekoto has been overlooked in South Africa, with very few exhibitions here, although he continued to paint and exhibit in Europe, and also in Senegal during a visit in the mid-sixties: he has, for example, participated in many exhibitions in Paris, Stockholm, Venice, Denmark and Washington. But earlier this year a major retrospective of his work was held in South Africa. As well as being owned by many private collectors in South Africa, Britain, France, the United States and Senegal, Sekoto's work is represented in important public collections in this country: the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Kimberley; and the Art Galleries of the University of South Africa and the University of the Witwatersrand. Professor Chabani Manganyi has been working on a biography of the artist, Barbara Lindop documented over 200 of his paintings for a major publication in 1988, and Lesley Spiro produced a fully researched catalogue in support of the retrospective exhibition in 1989. Sekoto's position as one of the 'fathers' of black art in South Africa is being fully recognized at last.

Sekoto's art is important not only because of aesthetic qualities, the sure personal sense of colour and design which was at its strongest when he worked most closely with his subject-matter, but also because of his ability to capture the innate dignity and vigour of those whose social position is depressed. The humanitarian message in his painting is universal, but also has a special relevance for South Africa. His works between 1939 and 1947 in particular have historical significance as an enduring record of communities that were the victims of South Africa's iniquitous Group Areas Act. Sekoto was one of the first artists to

succeed in employing Western art forms to record the experiences of black South Africans, and thus to make an essentially black statement.

In honouring Gerard Sekoto, the University of the Witwatersrand is publicly acknowledging the importance of the heritage of black art in South Africa, and his seminal role in its forging.