

## Obituary

**Peter Clarke**  
**1929 - 2014**

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### By Emile Maurice

It was with great sadness that the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) received the news that the internationally-acclaimed artist and author, Peter Clarke, had passed away at the age of 85 on Sunday 13 April 2104.

In the 1980s Clarke served on the UWC Artworks Committee, working alongside, among others, Auguste Hopley, Head of the Children's Art Centre at Zonnebloem, Prof Larry Skully, Head of the Fine Arts Department at Stellenbosch University, and Prof Jakes Gerwel of the Afrikaans Department at UWC and later rector of the university. Clarke is represented in the UWC Art Collection through a number of works which he generously donated.

Influenced by the Mexican muralists of the 1930s and '40s, and also by the German Expressionists, Clarke built his reputation as a narrative artist with a distinctive, bold graphic style and is best known for his subtle depictions of the social and political experiences of marginalised people in the Western Cape. In the mid-1980s, however, he veered away from making statements about social and political life in the narrative style that had dominated his oeuvre when he began exploring abstraction, particularly through the use of collage.

Clarke had a strong interest in books and created book covers and illustrations for authors, such as his friend, James Mathews, as well as Es'kia Mphahlele, Alan Paton and Chris van Wyk. He also published his own written work from time to time.

With the advent of formal democracy in 1994, Clarke's work underwent something of a metamorphosis:

After 1994 I started feeling that one must also explore other things beyond the statement. I felt that it was a time for liberation, a renaissance. So I gave free reign to working with various kinds of material, like coloured paper, cloths and whatever... If I decided only to work in a figurative way, there would be no end to what I want to say about people.

In the late 1990s, Clarke began making 'artist's books' on a range of topics. These consist of works that fold up into boxes of various shapes and sizes that he mostly handcrafted from leather. About his artist's books, Clarke had this to say:

You can't fold up a Monet or a Cezanne or any precious work of art. But with one like this, you can fold it up and carry it in a little box. You can sit next to somebody in a waiting room and say: 'I've got something to show you' and lift it out of its box.

Among Clarke's early works as a professional artist are those made at Tesselaarsdal, a small rural village near Caledon in the Western Cape. His more recent work included a series of collages entitled *Fanfare*, each of which is accompanied by prose. These works are concerned with various historical, biblical and literary figures, as well as artists, such as Sam

Nhlengethwa, Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock. As the prose is, in some cases, by Clarke himself, the works draw on both his visual and literary talents.

Clarke was born in Simonstown, Cape Town, in 1929. He finished his schooling in 1944 at Livingstone High, where he studied art under Hendrik Esterhuizen. On leaving school, he worked as a ship painter in the Simonstown dockyard. In 1947, he came across an article on Gerard Sekoto, the first black artist to be represented in a public collection and one of South Africa's most important artists. For Clarke, Sekoto's success as an artist was inspirational. "I remember thinking," he says, "if he who is black can be an artist, so can I."

Clarke was largely a self-taught artist who learned much from books and magazines. He did, however, receive some informal art tuition. In 1947 he attended art classes at St Philips School in District Six, where he was taught by the London-born artist, John Coplans. After Coplans returned to Britain, the classes moved to the Roeland Street Technical College, Cape Town, in 1948, where they were run by Johannes Meintjies and Nerine Desmond, a member of the New Group. Clarke later worked with Katrina Harries at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town (1961), and also spent time at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunste in Amsterdam (1962-1963) and at Atelier Nord in Oslo, Norway (1978-1979).

Clarke worked in the docks at Simonstown until 1956, resigning from his job to become a full-time artist in his late twenties. For nearly sixty years since then, he worked as a professional artist – a rare phenomenon in the South African art world, where so few have managed to pursue art without some other means of support.

With assistance from his life-long friend, James Matthews, Clarke held his first solo exhibition in the newsroom of the newspaper, *The Golden City Post*, in 1957. In an interview from the time, he commented:

Before [my exhibition], I was just another 'coloured' man. Our people took it for granted that only whites could do such things. Now people are becoming aware of the fact that they can do these things too; they are human beings.

After his first exhibition, Clarke participated in numerous group shows, both here and abroad, and also held many solo shows. In 2011 Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin curated a retrospective of his work, 'Listening to Distant Thunder: The Art of Peter Clarke', held at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg and at Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town. Aimed at honouring Clarke's life, work and contribution to art and cultural development in South Africa, the exhibition included his early pieces, made as a schoolboy, works that reflect the social disruption on the Cape Flats, as well as his prints, for which he is renowned. Also on the show were works from the late 1960s that reference the trauma of forced removals from Simonstown, and the ambitious paintings he began making during his trips to America, Norway and France in the 1970s. In addition, the exhibition highlighted his late works that look back on the apartheid years and celebrate the new South Africa. At the time of his retrospective, Clarke said in private conversation that after decades of working, he had at last arrived at the national gallery and that, if he had not, his ghost would have haunted the museum.

Clarke's last solo show, 'Wind Blowing on the Cape Flats', was held at the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) in London in 2013, curated by Tessa Jackson and Riason

Naidoo. Here he was positioned as being “part of a lost generation from South Africa and a voice largely unheard in Europe.”

Clarke was the recipient of quite a few awards, as both a writer and artist. These include the Drum International Short Story Award (1955); an honorary doctorate in literature from the World Academy of Arts and Culture in Taipei, Taiwan (1984); the Order of Ikhamanga, awarded by the government to those who have excelled in the arts and literature, among other fields (2005); and the Arts and Culture Trust Lifetime Achievement Award (2010).

Apart from his work as an artist and author, Clarke also made a contribution to cultural development as an activist and organiser, particularly during the anti-apartheid era. He was involved with the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town almost since its inception in 1977, and was among those from CAP who attended the historic ‘Culture and Resistance Festival’ in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982. There he delivered a paper and also participated in the Festival exhibition, ‘Art toward social development: an exhibition of South African art.’ At the festival, a resolution was passed calling on artists to use their skills to serve communities. To this end, he was instrumental in establishing Vakalisa in 1982, an arts group that promoted cultural development in the Western Cape in deprived communities.

An eloquent public speaker who sometimes opened exhibitions, Clarke was also associated with the District Six Museum since its inception in 1994. He designed the poster for the museum’s first exhibition, drawing on a woodcut of his depicting a hand releasing a bird flying to freedom. This image was inspired by a couplet by American poet, Langston Hughes:

Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die / Life is a broken winged bird, that cannot fly

Clarke’s image of the bird was also printed on the museum’s memory map of District Six, and was recently re-interpreted in 3D for the making of a gate at the entrance to the District Six Homecoming Centre. Clarke is also inscribed in the museum through his poems, which are painted on the floor.

“The important thing”, said Clarke, “is the enrichment of the people, even if you are living in a ghetto.” In this respect he taught and organised a programme of exhibitions in Ocean View on the Cape Peninsula, where he had lived since his eviction from Simonstown during the apartheid era.

Clarke was not only an important and inspiring artist but also a role-model and mentor to the young. The Centre for Humanities Research acknowledges his valuable and rich contribution to the arts and humanities in South Africa, and also to art education. He was a gentle, caring, humble soul and a humanitarian. An elder ‘statesman’ of the South African art community, he will be sorely missed.