

RELIGIOUS PATRONAGE—CYRENE

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CYRENE is a school with some 150 pupils in its Primary Section, Sub. A to Std. III, about 250 in its Central Primary Department, Stds. IV to VI, and 150 in its Secondary Department. Africans come from all over the Federation and Bechuanaland, chiefly to learn how to speak and write English, that they may qualify themselves for better-paid jobs. Only one in two hundred comes with the specific purpose of doing Art which, until last year, had no place in the Education Department's curriculum and was taught at Cyrene as an additional subject. Yet, during the last dozen years of the school's existence, Art has played so dominant a role that scores of former students now know painting and sculpture as a natural expression of experience. Particularly to the cripples, who drag themselves or are carried for hundreds of painful miles in the hope of gaining admission, has the Art instruction been of use, discovering unknown aptitudes and often providing them with a chance of making their living in spite of the harshest handicaps.

Apart from the cripples, very little Art is done in the Primary School outside of modelling, and only with Std. IV do Art classes become compulsory for every student, instruction and practice absorbing two hours of each afternoon. During the first term a close watch is kept on every pupil's work, and groups of promising students, separated according to the technique in which they show aptitude, are given extra instruction, while the others attend classes in Farming or Building. Together with these are the cripples who cannot do industrial or agricultural work in the afternoons and who therefore spend the time on their Art instead. As a result, they often acquire much greater proficiency than the physically normal students, one of whom was once overheard to complain, "I shall never be a good artist, for I am not a cripple."

Cyrene exists in an artistic vacuum as far as possible, the expressive forms of other peoples and periods being rigorously excluded from instruction in order to remove the temptation to slavish copying and encourage a spontaneous and original expression. It is interesting to compare the efforts of pupils from different parts of the country. The urbanized Africans,

of course, produce pictures with trains, motor-cars and shops, while the rural ones turn to their tribal background for their themes. Both, however, soon seize subjects from their new surroundings in the Matopos district and themes from the Scriptural stories they hear.

The work of the beginners is always exciting, revealing a most sensitive appreciation of form and colour, and portraying effortlessly something beyond the world of visual appearance. Much of it provides original patterns for textile design, and new materials with Cyrene paintings printed on are expected in Southern Rhodesia soon. Many visitors to the school remark on how the detailed style of Cyrene painting reminds them of Persian, Indian and Chinese Art, revealing as it does an infinite patience with no sense of urgency. And indeed I have seen some students take a whole term of twelve weeks over one large picture.

To many observers the paintings are monotonously similar, both in subject matter and execution. But this is far from being so, and subjects are taken in endless variety from everyday life, from the Old and New Testaments, from the history of Africa, from folk-lore and from present-day events. Though the style may seem superficially similar, every artist conveys something of his own individual experience, mind and feelings. Some form of commonly accepted artistic currency must be used, and Cyrene insists on craftsmanship instead of mere impressionism as the road towards a fuller and more intelligible expression of mental imagery. Cyrene therefore is a "School of Painting" in exactly the same manner as were, for instance, those at Norwich and Sienna.

Throughout the centuries, Art has prospered as a result of patronage—by the wealthy classes, the State, the Church, Industry and Commerce. Cyrene Art is, of course, in its infancy, and its chief patronage comes from exhibitions, the interest and purchases of visitors, and occasional orders from the Church, municipalities, commercial houses, and architects. Mural paintings have been done for the Bulawayo publicity offices; carved and painted Mayoral Boards for Ndola; carved altar-table with Minister's and Elders' chairs for the Bulawayo Presbyterian Church; presentation paintings to the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cuddesdon College, Oxford; carved cross, candlesticks and credence tables for Cape Town Cathedral; paintings for Central African Airways, Livingstone; and many

other commissions, especially from various churches. The Museum of Natural History in New York and the County Art Gallery in Long Island, where successful exhibitions were held in 1955 and 1956, have Cyrene works in their permanent collections, and successful touring exhibitions have been held in Great Britain, West Germany and South Africa.

I can conclude no better than by referring briefly to two of our finest artists. Samuel Songo, a Kalanga from Belingwe, is badly crippled in both legs and along his whole right side and arm. With his left hand, feebly supported by his right, he has painted and carved a world-wide reputation for himself. Lazarus Kumalo, a Tebele from Essexvale, has also been a cripple from infancy. Both his water-colour drawings and his sculptures have a touch of the Assyrian about them. His paintings are quite distinctive, with cool bluish-grey colours predominating. Both artists indeed are men of rare accomplishment, and an inspiration to the school that has harboured and encouraged them.



'Samson and the Lion'

by Lazarus Kumalo