

MISSION AND THE VISUAL EXPRESSION OF THE GOSPEL IN THE SCULPTURE  
OF JACKSON HLUNGWANI

by

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Jackson Hlungwani proved to be an example not only of an artist visually expressing the gospel, but a person courageously fulfilling God's call. His creativity with wood and words exemplified the indomitable spirit which became my inspiration. In the face of change, the fickle art world, fame and fortune he remained the humble servant of God, *Xidonkani*.

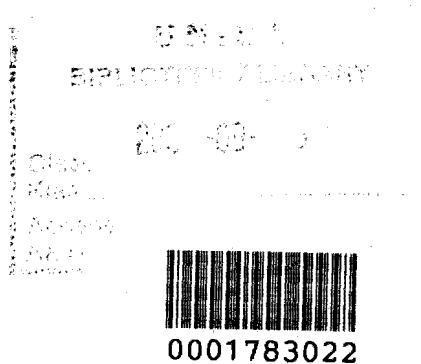
Had it not been for Professor Klippies Kritzinger I would not have met Jackson. I also owe to him a debt of gratitude for sharing with me a glimpse of his own passion for the use of the arts in expression of faith.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE QUEST

### 1.1. Introduction

At age six I was entering the world of reading and writing, but for all practical purposes my expression or comprehension on paper was still in the form of pictures or symbols which held meaning for me long before the alphabet did. One Sunday I was given the assignment to return to Bible Club the next week, having chosen the songs we would sing and prepared to lead them. My excitement grew as the day drew near, for I had taken my responsibility seriously and given much thought to it. So as not to forget my choices I carefully drew up my list. Literally. Words were not helpful at age six, but pictures were. I can still remember my drawing for the song “Climb, Climb Up Sunshine Mountain,” the mountain with the sun behind it and the figure with a face shining like the sun, climbing up the mountain.

Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, heavenly breezes blow.  
Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, faces all aglow.  
Turn, turn from sin and doubting, look to God above.  
Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, you and I.

As simple as this seems, it was visual expression of the gospel. It was also mission.

### 1.2. Definitions

#### 1.2.1. Definition of Mission

Several years ago I read the statement: “God is in the business of making man whole.” I have come to believe this is true, but I extend it to say: God is in the business of making all of creation whole. And this is what I call mission.

With the creation of male and female (Gen. 1:27) God gave them rule over every living creature and food from every plant and tree, except one. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Gen. 1:28-31). But early on sin disrupted the harmony and relationship on all levels of creation (Gen. 3:1-19). Since that time God has been in the business of restoring wholeness to his creation. Or, as Letty Russell (1993:196) puts it, crediting Krister Stendahl: “God is worrying about the mending of creation, trying to straighten up the mess so that all of groaning creation will be set free.”

Scripture gives account of God’s activity and history, beginning with the clothing of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21), continuing through the blessing of Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:1-3) and the deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 6-15). God’s concern for creation culminated in the gift of Jesus, God’s son. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). J. N. J. Kritzinger (1988:168) quotes Alan Boesak as saying “. . . the theme of liberation in the Old Testament became the same theme in the New Testament proclamation of Jesus Christ, and there is no way you can speak of the Gospel without speaking of liberation.” One can see and experience in the life, ministry and sacrifice of Jesus a salvation which liberated humankind and all of creation to experience the wholeness which God originally intended (cf Luke 4:18-21).

And what was his original intention? The Genesis story speaks to me of God’s desire for relationship, hence the creation of woman and man in his own image. Sin, in its various manifestations, breaks that relationship. God’s mission, then, is to work in all areas of life to restore right relationship where sin has wrought havoc.

#### 1.2.1.1. God’s Activity in Mission

What I describe as God’s activity is called by many, including Bosch, Kritzinger, Newbigin, Russell and Saayman, the *missio Dei*. According to Saayman (1993:5) *missio Dei* is “. . . the great mission of the triune God in the world, and then especially characterized in the mission of Jesus the Messiah.” And A. W. Hayes (1997:1) describes mission as God’s initiative flowing from the Creator’s heart, the movement of God’s love towards the world.



The English word 'mission' has the connotation of being sent and is derived from the Latin word 'missio,' which was an expression employed in the doctrine of the Trinity. It relates to the Father sending the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit (Bosch 1991:228). Bosch (1991:390) further broadens the scope when he expands the *missio Dei* to the sending of the church into the world by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Mission does not originate with the church. It originates with God. It is God's activity out of his great love for his creation. Even Jesus credited his word and works as being from his Father rather than himself (Newbigin 1996:117).

#### 1.2.1.2. Participation in Mission

Christians, as 'little Christs,' have the privilege as well as responsibility of joining God in his mission to bring wholeness to his creation, thus becoming his instruments. They are chosen as partners in caring for God's creation (Russell 1993:164), not chosen to positions of privilege or merit or for self-glorification, but to positions of service and witness, dedicated to God's purpose and glory (Russell 1993:166). They are elected because of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus who was himself the elected one (Russell 1993:171). Through this election they are brought into Christ's mission in the world.

Having, in brokenness, accepted God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ, Christians join him in his ministry to others in their brokenness. Bosch (1991:82-83) states that Christ's disciples are to make a turn, or conversion, to both God and neighbour. And Russell (1993:50) refers to Gal. 5:1 when she says Christ has set the sinner free to be for others. Involvement in God's mission flows out of a changed heart, a heart now free to love. Leslie Newbigin (1996:116) describes missions (the human activity) as beginning with an explosion of joy. It further becomes an extension of hope, a test of faith, and an expression of love (Newbigin 1996:126-127). Participation in God's mission bears witness to the change that has been wrought in the lives of believers and gives promise of the change that can come to the lives of others. Newbigin (1996:86-87) emphasizes that Christians are to be the bearers of God's saving purpose for the whole world, the sign, the agent and the firstfruits of God's kingdom which is for all. In so doing, they are giving expression to the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## 1.2.2. Definition of Gospel

### 1.2.2.1. Good News About Jesus

And what is that gospel? The gospel is the story of God's Mission: God's love incarnated in Jesus Christ his son and experienced in lives made whole by the forgiveness of sins which Christ's death affords. It is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. Jesus, as recorded in Mark 1:14, described the gospel of God with: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand" (Douglas *et al* 1982:436). Jesus preached the gospel, yet he also incarnated the gospel. His life as well as his death gave expression to it.

The New International Dictionary of the Bible (Douglas *et al* 1987:396) states that the English word *gospel* derives from the Anglo-Saxon *godspell* which meant "good tidings" and later came to mean the "story concerning God." The message that God has provided a way of redemption through Christ Jesus is indeed Good News.

### 1.2.2.2. Something to be Shared

The word gospel, described as good news, connotes a message which is to be shared. And God's word admonishes it is indeed to be shared among all people (Mt. 24:14). Most often scripture refers to the preaching of the gospel (Mt. 4:23, 9:35, 11:5; Mk. 1:14, 14:9; Lk. 4:18, 9:6, 20:1, etc.). However, reference is also made to testifying to the gospel (Acts 20:24), proclaiming the gospel (Rom. 15:16), serving in the work of the gospel (Phil. 2:22), contending in the cause of the gospel (Phil. 4:3). However it may be passed on, the gospel is considered good news for a hurting world.

## 1.2.3. Definition of Visual Expression

### 1.2.3.1. Relaying a Message

The gospel as the message of God's redemption, God's mission, can be expressed or transmitted

in many different ways. I mentioned earlier that the term preaching, which is usually considered to be a verbal activity, is what is referred to most often in the Bible. However, I hope to demonstrate in the following pages that preaching need not be limited to verbal expression. It may be acted out in deed as it was by Jesus. And it may also be expressed visually.

#### 1.2.3.2. Relaying a Message Visually

By visual expression I mean the use of something which is perceived with the eyes rather than the ears, nose, mouth or touch, to convey a message. I further limit this to the use of a visual image. Such an image is created through the use of form, colour and line.

#### 1.2.3.3. Relaying a Message Visually Through the Arts

I will most often refer to visual art as opposed to just visual objects. And I will give a more complete definition of art at a later point, but for now I choose to use one given by Virgil Aldrich (1963:88) thirty-seven years ago: “A work of art is a material thing produced for prehension as an aesthetic object.” “Prehension” is the act of looking at something in a relevant way (Aldrich 1963:85) or with understanding (Gove 1965:670). “Aesthetic” connotes beauty (Gove 1965:15) and beauty connotes pleasure (Gove 1965:76). Arnold Rubin (1989:15) further describes aesthetic as a sense of exaltation, uplift or non-ordinary reality. In the hands of an artist an object or material takes on new life, new purpose, new expression. The inanimate becomes animated (Aldrich 1963:21-22), or is brought to life.

### 1.3. Mission and Visual Expression of the Gospel in My Life

#### 1.3.1. At Age Six

In light of these definitions let me explain why I see my experience at age six as mission and visual expression of the gospel. Only weeks before the experience related at the beginning of this chapter, as a result of a Bible story I had heard at Bible Club, I became aware of sin in my life. I told my parents what I was feeling and they gently led me in a prayer of repentance and

acceptance of Jesus as my Saviour.

When I drew the shining face on the figure climbing up sunshine mountain I was visually expressing the change that God's mission through the gospel of Jesus Christ had made in my life. The expression of my experience in this way helped concretize my faith. In turn, it gave me a way of participating in God's mission to others by sharing what had taken place in my life, perhaps before I could even put it into words.

### 1.3.2. Through the Years

Mission and visual expression have continued to be integral elements in my life. God's mission to bring me to the wholeness for which he created me began with that simple prayer of repentance. But the mission did not end there. God continues to draw me more fully into relationship with him which in turn enhances my relationship with others. God gives me purpose and self-identity like nothing else can. God comforts, strengthens, guides, encourages and corrects me. God loves me.

And how does he do these things? God's activity in history as recorded in Scripture comes to me afresh through his spirit. I can feel God's presence and hear his voice any moment in the day or the night. Or I may only realize his activity when looking back on a particular situation. But for me, God's touch is most easily felt in moments which are sparked by creativity, the aesthetic which brings new life to inanimate objects.

God is there when I prepare a meal for my family, rearrange the living room furniture, decorate a cake, write an E-mail letter to my parents or converse with a friend. God is there when I hear a sermon which creatively relates Scripture to my needs. God is there when I am awed by nature, brought to tears by beautiful music, carried to another place and time by a painting, photograph, or my son or daughter's artwork from fifteen years ago. God is there when I labour to design a quilt or make a lesson plan or create a chalk-talk. God is also there when I delight in the communication, the connection, the pleasure, the relationships enhanced by these moments of creativity.

Why is God there in the creative moments? Because God is the source of creativity (cf Gen. 1:27, 2:19-20). He is the creator God. It is God who made the heavens and the earth, the light and the darkness, the sky, the land and the seas, the vegetation, the sun, moon and stars, all living creatures and humankind in his own image (Gen. 1:1-27). It is God who, through creation, gave expression to his desire for harmony and beauty.<sup>1</sup> It is God who walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8-9). When artist Corita Kent said “To create is to relate” (Steward *et al* 1992:4) she probably had in mind the creativity of humankind, but she was describing well the creativity of God, the bringing together of the elements, the expression of God’s nature and the development of relationship between God and his creation.

Throughout my childhood I enjoyed drawing and making things with my hands. I remember feeling better about myself during such activity than at any other time. At age fourteen two friends and I began doing ‘chalk-talks’ before audiences. I would draw a picture with coloured chalk on a large sheet of paper attached to a board and easel while Sheryl gave a devotional talk and Anne played the piano. It became a means of expressing our faith which benefited others as well as ourselves. As an adult I have continued to use chalk-talks, quilt-making, cooking, flower arranging and cake-decorating to express my faith and as tools for teaching, encouraging and uplifting others. These things in turn give me purpose and joy. God effects his mission in my life as well as through my life most powerfully when the spark of creativity is ignited.

### 1.3.3. In Recent Years

Following a chalk-talk which I did at a church in a township near Johannesburg a few years ago, a pastor’s wife came to me and said “God’s word has never been made so clear to me as you have made it through this drawing.” Not long after that, in a class at the Baptist Convention College in Soweto I was introducing a creative activity using paints, so as to illustrate a point. One of the students, age 25, said “We were never encouraged or allowed to be creative in our schools.” These two statements have echoed in my ears many times. Knowing what creativity and visual art have meant to my own growth as a person, I desire the same experience for others.

#### 1.3.4. As a Growing Concern

Africa, in one way or another, has been a part of my life since age five, first as the child of missionary parents in West Africa and then as an adult, returning to spend eighteen years in Central and Southern Africa as a missionary with my husband. It is natural, then, that my visual orientation would be towards things African and I grew up with what I felt was an appreciation for African art.

Over the years I and then my husband and I have collected many beautiful and fascinating art objects from across Africa. But seldom did we find anything with a Christian theme or subject matter, other than nativity scenes or crosses. I do recall our delight when, in Zambia, we came across Da Vinci's Lord's Supper carved out of wood, with African facial features. We promptly commissioned one for ourselves and it hangs on our wall today. But where were the original expressions of Christian faith in African experience?

In 1984 my family and I travelled through Hong Kong on our return to the United States from Zambia. While there we found a shop which sold china plates on which were painted exquisite gospel scenes in Chinese settings. I remember thinking then, "I wish this sort of thing could be done in Africa."

#### 1.4. In Search of African Visual Expressions of the Gospel

##### 1.4.1. Articulating the Search

More and more, I began to question. In a land where artistic ability seems to abound and art is used pervasively in African traditional religion, why is it not used in Christianity? Why is not African creativity being tapped for the cause of Christ? And perhaps even more importantly, what is being lost as a result? How is this affecting African Christians?

#### 1.4.2. An Example Suggested

Early in 1997, while attending a meeting of SAMS (South African Missiological Society) at UNISA (University of South Africa) I posed some of these questions to Professor J. N. J. Kritzinger (Kritzinger 1997). In response he said “Have you seen the work of South African artist Jackson Hlungwani?” When I said “No,” he proceeded to tell me about one of Hlungwani’s pieces of sculpture entitled *Christ the Soccer Champion*, in which Christ is wearing a crown. His right leg is extended as if kicking to score the goal which will make him a champion. And his right hand is lifted up to his ear.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

#### *Christ the Soccer Champion*

I was immediately excited by what sounded like a visual expression of the Gospel using forms and symbols which have meaning in the African context. In the African world today soccer is ‘the national pastime.’ Where no official ball is available, one is made from plastic bags and string. Where no playing field is levelled, the street suffices. Depicting Christ as a soccer player brings him into the lives of all South Africans whether they are in the black townships of Johannesburg, coloured neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats, Indian settlements of Durban, or white suburbs of Pretoria.



Fig. 3

### 1.4.3. Further Examples on Exhibit

A few weeks following the conversation with Professor Kritzinger, my husband and I happened to be at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, enjoying a leisurely Saturday afternoon outing. At one point Nelson wandered ahead of me, but soon called back saying “Isn’t this the artist Prof. Kritzinger was telling you about?” Indeed, there before us was an installation of Jackson Hlungwani sculpture: *Altar of God, Adam and the Birth of Eve, Tiger Fish (III), Michael Star, God and Christ, Large Crucifix, and Star*. Each piece was unmistakably a visual expression of the gospel I know and

love, but in an equally unmistakably African medium and form!

### 1.4.4. Intrigued

We determined we must find out more about this artist who is doing what I had been yearning to see in Africa. Information at the art gallery told us he lives at a place he named New Canaan just outside Mbhokota village, near the town of Elim in the Northern Province of South Africa. On our next free weekend (8-9 February, 1997), we packed our bags for an overnight stay and began the five-hour drive from Johannesburg to see what we could find. When we reached Elim we stopped to ask where Mbhokota village might be and if anyone knew the man Jackson Hlungwani. One person we asked knew neither one, but the second knew both. We were given instructions to the village and assurance we would find the man. Sure enough, as we neared Mbhokota we saw a sign with the name Jekiseni Hlungwani and the drawing of a fish.

### 1.4.5. Meeting the Artist

#### 1.4.5.1. The Homestead

Following the ruts in the dirt road just past the sign brought us up to the top of a hill. At the



entrance to what became obvious was the private homestead was a cattle kraal enclosed by a wooden fence, but now empty. Projecting above the kraal was a roughly hewn cross. Three small (perhaps three metres by four metres) buildings made of concrete blocks and with tin roofs were situated approximately two metres apart from one another.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.4.5.2. A Warm Welcome



Fig. 4

Between two of the buildings was an open-sided tin-roofed shed underneath which we did indeed find the man, Jackson Hlungwani. No questions were asked as we parked our car, not even any introductions were made, just Jackson motioning with a big smile for us to join him under the tin roof, his admonition to “Come” and his exclamations of “Hallelujah.”

We recognised this to be the artist we were in search of by a photograph we had seen at the museum. He wore a similarly woven, brightly coloured hat and had the same smile. In his left hand and resting on a tree stump was a piece of wood beginning to take on new form. In his right hand was a short-handled, home-made axe. Between gestures and in the midst of conversation he chipped away at the piece of wood, giving new life to the inanimate object, seemingly without having to even think about it.

Seated near him was another man. I estimated both to be in their late sixties or early seventies. He was just finishing what must have been the noon meal, for a tin plate was tilted to his lips. Jackson’s empty plate lay on the ground at his feet. During the course of our four hour visit on Saturday and two hour visit



Fig. 5

on Sunday this other man came and went, so I assumed him to be a companion, relative or friend. Also coming and going was a woman Jackson referred to as Magdalena, his wife. She seemed accustomed to having strangers in their midst.

#### 1.4.5.3. A Bible Lesson

Even before we could find a stump of wood to sit on<sup>4</sup> Jackson laid his wood and axe aside and picked up a large book which turned out to be an art history book. Leafing through the pages from back to front, he pointed out Jesus, God, the devil (saying the devil is in every man), Mary, “Eva,” Cain, Abel, Adam, using obviously Christian and non-Christian scenes alike to tell stories from the Bible, mingled with references to current-day issues. By and large he was depicting the struggle between good and evil. In one picture he pointed to a donkey and said “This is Jackson.” In another he was one of the sheep. In several pictures he pointed out the woman who was either putting a stop to some evil action or directing an activity. He said “Women are stronger now than they used to be. Women are chief.” Grabbing his beard with both hands he said “The time for man is finished.”



Fig. 6

At first I found myself suspicious of the theology being depicted and uncomfortable that Jackson called this book his “new Bible.” But more and more it became obvious that this was a man with joy and love overflowing, someone who must have a personal relationship with “Christa.” He spoke of “going up to be with God” and “coming back to teach all nations.” At one point he said

to Nelson and me, “You go up! Spend a week-end with God, but come back!” When I asked if his pieces of sculpture are inspired through dreams, Jackson said “No, I go really.” He talked about walking through a hole, or going on wings, or closing his eyes and finding himself in the presence of God.

#### 1.4.6. Seeing the Art

##### 1.4.6.1. Prolific Humility

Lying all about were pieces of wood in various stages of being carved; a six-foot tall man, laughing, with hands on his belly; pieces with two faces and four arms; crosses with and without the body of Christ; bowls, Fig. 7



platters and spoons; fish, cats and other animals. Seemingly, no particular care was being taken of the sculpture. It was stacked in piles or even set out in the sun and the rain. I was not sure if the occasional cloth lying around was to protect the art work or dry the cloth.

When we asked what will be done with the sculpture Jackson replied “Teach the nations.” He said he carves for God. He accepts money for his work just so he can eat and determines the prices only by what God tells a person to pay.

##### 1.4.6.2. Sent to See *God*



Fig. 8 *God*

After about two hours of the Bible lesson using the “new Bible” and conversation about the sculpture, Jackson suggested that we “go see *God*” and he waved towards a grassy knoll a hundred metres from his homestead. A group of children who had been sitting around the edges of the tin shelter became our tour guides and led us to what, from a distance, looked like

a fallen tree trunk. As we drew nearer it became obvious that, although still basically a tree trunk, at the hands of the artist it was taking on a new form with meaning and animation.



Fig. 9

The children quickly clambered on top to sit or run the length and back, either oblivious of the ‘sacred space’ or totally at ease and comfortable with this art object being a part of the whole of life. We soon discovered that to truly see and experience the sculpture one did indeed have to climb up on it.

Only then did we see the carved spikes in the palms of the Saviour at the end of two tree limbs; a crown of thorns, or was it a halo, on the third stump of a limb at the head; four eyes; an African nose; a cross; three fish forms; and at the rooted end of the tree trunk two prominent, sandalled feet. Gradually we came to realize that God and Christ were being depicted as one. On the right side of the trunk the stump of a limb had been burned off. Could this be reminiscent of the fire Jackson uses for healing his own wounded leg?



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

From the knoll where *God* lay could be seen the beautiful valley below. Even with the children chattering around us, but especially when we returned the next day and they were elsewhere, the lone, rough sculpture gave essence to the spot as a place of worship and I felt as if I had indeed “seen God.”

### 1.4.6.3. Sent to See New Jerusalem

Returning to Hlungwani, he now suggested that we go to see the site of his original worship centre, New Jerusalem. He appointed a grandson to be our guide as we drove two miles away to another hill on the opposite side of Mbhokota.

We parked at the homestead of Relandu, one of Jackson's daughters. She, like Jackson, welcomed us as if we were part of the local community, no questions asked. According to Relandu, Jackson and Magdalena had twelve children. Five have died, so there are seven remaining, six daughters and one son.



Fig. 13 *Mary and Elizabeth Praising God*

When we told Relandu we were interested in her father's sculpture, she proudly brought out a piece he had done at the birth of her daughter, Valishi. The sculpture depicts Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John, both raising their arms in thanksgiving for the birth of Valishi. According to Relandu, Jackson considers Valishi a gift from God. The sculpture stands

about two feet tall, just shorter than Valishi at age four.

From Relandu's homestead, again with the grandson as our guide, we began a steep ascent on foot which took about five minutes. As we crested the hill we began to see mounds of rocks which took shape as walls, enclosures, platforms and pits. Some were encased in vines and weeds. Others projected defiantly out of the vegetation. It was obvious that great care and effort had been made to transport and arrange the stones in



Fig. 13

meaningful fashion. I had read that this was where Hlungwani first utilized his sculpture in his



Fig. 14

ministry. I was to learn more details later, but knew enough to be inspired as well as be saddened that the sculpture was no longer there. I would love to have seen it in its original setting, high on the hill in Mbhokota. All that remains are two elongated fish at the base of the path.

#### 1.4.6.4. Presented With Gifts

When we returned to Hlungwani's homestead we found him as we had left him, incessantly chipping away at another piece of wood. We asked if we could return briefly the next day and were told we would be welcome. But before saying our good-byes Jackson presented us with gifts, a piece of sculpture for each of us.

Mine was a wooden spoon with a scoop on both ends, one for stirring and one for eating, he said. He talked long about the worth of a wooden spoon over a metal one, how the Western metal spoon burns the lips while the African wooden spoon with two ends is more useful. On the side of the spoon he pointed out a protrusion which resembled a "headrest" and another resembling a "hand," the headrest for rest, the hand for work, he said. All the while, I felt like he was again using analogy and metaphor to express deeper meanings.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 16

To Nelson he gave an elongated cat. It was obviously unfinished and he told Nelson to finish it. Then we would know the meaning of it, he assured us. Nelson said “I will bring it back to show you when it is finished.” Jackson replied “It doesn’t matter if you do or you don’t. You find out its meaning. You finish it.”

#### 1.4.7. A Rest and Return

It was good that we were tired from the long, hot day. Otherwise, I might not have slept due to my excitement over all we had experienced.

Refreshed the next morning, we returned, especially eager to see what form worship might take on a Sunday morning at Mbhokota. Hlungwani had spoken of his followers and of teaching the nations. We were curious to see what he meant.

The day was rainy and when we arrived at about 10:30 a.m. we found a small group of two women, three men and two children gathered in Jackson’s one-room house. The “new Bible” was open on the floor in the middle of the group and Jackson was “teaching the nations” much as he had “taught” us the day before. We were told there was no worship today because of the rain. Jackson said “God is at work (making the rain) so Jackson inside. Let God work.” We would not know what other form the worship might have taken.



Fig. 17

We were not invited to join the group, although we probably would have been welcome. Having had a lesson the day before, we chose instead to go back to the hilltop where the sculpture of *God*

lay and Jackson sent us off with his characteristic grin, thumbs up gesture and “Hallelujah!” followed by “Instant Shoeshine!”

## 1.5. A Quest

### 1.5.1. Purpose

With more questions than answers following these intriguing two days, but with a feeling that my quest was a valid one, I chose to pursue a Masters of Theology degree in the Department of Missiology at the University of South Africa. This would afford a framework of guided readings and research in the realm of theology and mission. By looking for evidences of mission and visual expression of the gospel in the works of Jackson Hlungwani I would hope to determine the value of the African arts in the realm of faith. If Hlungwani was deemed successful at depicting Christian themes in his art others may be encouraged to do the same.

### 1.5.2. Methodology

#### 1.5.2.1. Theological Perspective

I approached my research from the perspective of a Baptist missionary seeking to break out of a conservative mould, not to jettison a firm biblical basis for sharing the gospel of Christ, but to enquire into more effective, contextual ways for doing so. I recognize with Stephen Bevans (1996:5-9) that outside the Christian community there is general dissatisfaction with classical approaches to theology because: they do not make sense in other cultural patterns and thought forms; the older approaches are oppressive in regard to race, wealth, group mentality, and sex; there is growing identity of local churches in “mission settings”; and contemporary sciences have opened up an understanding of culture. Inside the Christian community there is new understanding on: the incarnational nature of Christianity as a process of “becoming particular . . . visible . . . graspable . . . intelligible”; the sacramental nature of reality where “encounters with God in Jesus continue to take place in our world through concrete things”; and the continuing revelation of God to women and men.



My theological orientation leans toward the “creation-centred approach” which Bevans (1996:27) describes as believing that culture and human experience are good. And an anthropological model for contextual theology would be my choice. I am aware of possible dangers inherent within it, but its values include an emphasis on: preservation of cultural identity by a person of Christian faith; Christianity being about the human person and her or his fulfilment; God’s hidden presence in a situation; the validity of the human as a place of divine revelation; a missionary needing to be a “treasure hunter” (the treasure being God’s grace in Christ), rather than a “pearl merchant” (with merchandise to sell); Christianity challenging, but not carelessly changing a culture; mutual benefit for the particular culture and wider Christianity; inter-religious dialogue (Bevans 1996:47-52). Having sensed the anguish of a people who yearn to express their Christian faith in vibrant forms relevant to their context, I am struggling to develop a theology which affirms the culture and art of any group of people. Such a theology would use culture and art as tools for understanding deeper needs and issues. It would allow Christ to interact with persons on all levels of their lives. And it would encourage the expression of Christian faith and experience through the forms and symbols which carry the most meaning for any particular context.

#### 1.5.2.2. Interviews

The substantial interviews with Hlungwani which took place during the two-day visit my husband and I had with him enter strongly into the methodology for my research on his work. While there I took notes and photographs and my husband did video coverage. That experience has given a peg on which to hang every other piece of information I have gleaned. It has given a visual image to the stories others relate. I understand easily what Alex Dodd (1999) means when he tells of his visit to meet Hlungwani, of being welcomed by Hlungwani with no great ceremony, of losing track of time as Hlungwani gave interpretation to the pages of a book entitled *Revelation: Art of the Apocalypse*, of being saddened by the absence of pieces of sculpture at New Jerusalem. I identify with Marcelle Manley ([sa]:1) when she questions: “Is he crazy? Is he taking people for a ride?” And again when she asks “Why does he make me feel so *good*?” Having seen the rock setting at Mbhokota I can visualize the sculpture in place there. Using my own experience as a foundation I am able to piece together information from other sources to

give a substantial and coherent history and evaluation of the man and his work.

#### 1.5.2.3. Pictorial and Literary Sources

Photographs from that visit as well as ones taken by myself of Hlungwani's sculpture now found in exhibits gives life to the descriptions of his work. Other photographs come from J. N. J. Kritzinger, UNISA Professor; Frieda Hattingh, curator of UNISA's Art Gallery; Brendan Bell, curator of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg; Karen Lomax, a friend in Cape Town; and Mary Chase, a friend in Johannesburg. Photographs in the 1989 Hlungwani Retrospective Exhibit catalogue further inform an understanding of the man and his art. This catalogue, which lists and portrays 223 works, also serves as a resource for an analysis which I do on the themes, subject matter and years of productivity of Hlungwani's sculpture.

Literary research figures strongly into my methodology as I study not only Hlungwani, his sculpture and its influence locally, nationally and internationally, but also the broader categories of South African Christian art, African traditional art and art as it relates to faith. From the Johannesburg Art Gallery Library, UNISA's library, the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg and the Internet I obtained numerous newspaper and journal articles written between 1985 and 1999. I found Hlungwani's work to be featured in several well-known books on South African art. And the Internet offered Rayda Becker's description of his work held by the Gertrude Posel Gallery at WITS (University of Witwatersrand), as well as descriptions of his work at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town and the University of Cape Town's African Studies Building and Irma Stern Museum. Libraries, lectures, exhibits, workshops and television programs in the Philadelphia, United States area related to African art and faith and the arts have been extremely valuable as well. Books on culture, communication, mission, missiology, contextual theology and the interplay between faith, theology and art have all become integral to this study.

#### 1.5.3. Relevance

Hlungwani's life and work is an appropriate case study in which to explore and develop a

contextual theology. His religious as well as artistic development was outside of the confines of the establishment. If his effectiveness can be acknowledged it will do much to underscore the validity of using visual art, but more especially, contextual visual art as an expression of God's activity. I hope to demonstrate that visual art can tell the gospel story effectively, but also can often go beyond the simple narrative. It has the ability to take one inside the story and to the very feet of Jesus. Even more importantly, visually contextualizing the gospel story as Hlungwani does has the capability of not only taking the viewer to Jesus but also bringing Jesus to the viewer.

#### 1.5.4. Outline

In the chapters which follow I hope to build up to an imperative for the use of visual art in mission, especially in an increasingly globalized, cross-cultural world. Chapter Two, "In Support of Visual Art as Expression of the Gospel," will continue a look at the function of creativity and visual art as they relate to faith. Chapter Three, "Embarking on an Understanding of African Art," will give characteristics and trends in traditional and contemporary African art, as well as look at a brief history of South African Christian art. Chapter four, "Jackson Hlungwani Sculpture Expressing the Gospel," will trace the history, function and value of Hlungwani's art locally, nationally and internationally. And Chapter five, "An Imperative for Mission and the Visual Expression of the Gospel," will give the challenge and opportunity for use of visual art in mission.

#### 1.6. Conclusion

It is my desire that as a result of this study God's mission in my own life as well as on a broader scale will be enhanced. I am convinced that his mission and creativity go hand in hand, each enhanced by the other, each at the service of the other. Where God is present there is creativity. Likewise, wherever the spark of creativity is ignited the evidence of God can be found. The gift of the creative process which God gave to humankind is one of many which he uses to bring his creation to wholeness.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER ONE

1. Gen. 2:9 states that the Garden of Eden was pleasing to the eye.
2. Kritzinger would later describe this sculpture more fully: “The sculpture, carved from a single tree, creates the impression of solidness and power. This is underscored by the fact that Christ is portrayed as having a crown on his head: Christ is the successful king-champion, the apex of human aspirations for glory and power. But Hlungwani’s Christ has another feature: with his right hand lifted to his ear, he is listening intently to something. Could it be the appreciative roar of the crowd? Hardly likely. I think Hlungwani has carved the basic paradox of the gospel into wood: the power of Christ is not revealed in outward majesty but in vulnerable identification with the weak, who have been beaten by society into a ‘culture of silence,’ those who cannot be heard unless you strain your ears. The compassionate Christ, who hears every sigh and groan of those who suffer, strides confidently to the penalty spot to score another goal. . .” (1999:2).
3. We later learned that one was Jackson’s living quarters, one was the kitchen and one belonged to Jackson’s son, Gazland.
4. In most African cultures one seats oneself without having to be invited to sit, for all are welcome.
5. According to L. Meyer in *Black Africa: Masks, Sculptures, Jewelry*, “An external sign of wealth and prestige, the spoon was more than purely functional. Its carved design linked it with myth” (1992:204). This appears to be an example of how functionality and spirituality merge.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IN SUPPORT OF VISUAL ART AS EXPRESSION OF THE GOSPEL

#### 2.1. Introduction

In Chapter One I described the creativity of God, gave examples of my own creative process and related my encounter with the South African artist, Jackson Hlungwani, whose creative genius is apparent and intriguing. One might ask: “What right do you have to liken human to divine attributes? Are they indeed the same?” Or again, “Is creativity something given or something experienced?”

Using these questions as a springboard into a description of creativity I hope to give reason to embrace it as a gift from God as well as a way of knowing God. I will develop a definition of visual art as a form of creative expression which places them in the arena of God’s mission and the relaying of the Gospel story.

#### 2.2. Creativity

##### 2.2.1. A Part of Being Made in the Image of God

Scripture states that male and female were made in God’s image or according to his likeness (cf Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6) but does not list the resulting attributes. According to G. C. Berkouwer (1962:74), “Attempts to understand the riddle of the image of God have produced numerous proposed solutions.” However, most scholars agree that it is the whole of the individual, rather than just some part or aspect of him or her which was created in the image of God (Douglas 1982:508). The Interpreter’s Bible (Buttrick *et al* 1952:485) emphasizes that going along with Hebrew thought the image of God meant much more than physical representation. It also included likeness in spiritual powers -- the power of thought, the power of communication, the power of self-transcendence. Carl F. H. Henry (1982:383) calls it a “rational-moral image.”

Berkouwer (1962:114-117) uses the words “representation” and “analogy” to describe the essence of humankind’s portrayal of God’s image on earth so as to reflect the glory of God. He emphasizes the non-autonomous and non-independent nature of the creature. He notes the similarity to God’s characteristics, the conforming to such traits as perfection (Matt. 5:48) and the perceptibility to others to which the redeemed are called. He also speaks of Jesus, who, *as* the image of God, became like man for the renewal *of* the image of God in humankind.

Why would God create man and woman in his image? Previously indicating that it is to reflect the glory of God, Berkouwer (1962:78-84) goes on to discuss the second commandment which is to make no graven images. He concludes that the image of the creator in the created is for the purpose of presence, relationship and communion. This presence therefore negates the need for human depiction of God for the purpose of worship. He says it is only when relationship with God is broken that the temptation to erect graven images surfaces. It is in such a situation that the characteristics of God in one of his children must be perceptible enough that the one who has lost sight of God might find the way back to him.

The most obvious characteristic of God which should be displayed to speak of presence, relationship and communion is love, another is forgiveness, another is justice and another is creativity, to name but a few. Dorothee Soelle (1984:37) defines creative power as the power to renew the world for someone or for a community. In Chapter One I noted that Corita Kent’s definition of creativity is to relate. And Webster’s Dictionary (Gove *et al* 1965:195) lists creativity as the ability to bring into existence or invest with a new form. Being made in the image of God who created the world and all that is within it confers on man and woman his characteristic of creativity. Human creativity is limited by the previously mentioned non-autonomous and non-independent nature of the creature, but is nevertheless inherent in each person. The process of relating one object to another, expressing a thought, emotion or feeling and entering into relationship with another being is inherent in being created in the image of God.

Observation gives evidence to the fact that all human beings are creative if they are capable of exercising choice. Whether one chooses to wear a yellow blouse with a brown skirt (like most women would) or eat yoghurt instead of milk on cereal (like fewer others would) one is being

creative by making a choice to bring separate elements together to form a new reality. South African artist Azaria Mbatha (1998a:54) defines creativity as originality of thought and action, that which solves problems and organises daily life, past experience and future dreams.

People often exercise creativity without even being aware of it. Perhaps this is what Fritz Eichenberg (1984:5) means when he speaks of creativity being potentially dormant in every human mind, if he means it is functioning but the realization of it is dormant. However, if he means by dormant that it is not being utilised I would disagree. Just the living of life requires creativity, choices, decisions and the accomplishments of tasks in new and original ways. Creativity is potentially resident in all of life, not only the arts. All people would do well to recognise and embrace the creative process more actively. Like a muscle, awareness, exercise and use will strengthen it even more. Eichenberg (1984:5) evidently agrees for he says creativity needs nourishment and care.

Mbatha (1998a:54) credits creative power for giving meaning to life. I credit the connection to God generated by creativity as bringing that meaning and significance. Expressing creativity puts one in touch with who he or she is as a being made in God's image.

### 2.2.2. A Birthright, A Gift

One way of depicting creativity is as a gift (McGovern 2000:5) from a gracious God (McMullen 2000:6). Another is as a birthright bequeathed by God to his children (Clowney 2000:1). Whether designated as a birthright or a gift, it should be acknowledged that the blessing comes from God. Kenyan artist Jak Katarikawe makes it clear in all of his conversations that he credits his abilities to God (Agthe 1994:375).

Unfortunately, the birthright is sometimes sold in exchange for a bowl of soup (cf Gen. 25:29-34), the gift may be set on the shelf to gather dust, or the entrusted treasure is buried beneath the sand for safe keeping (cf Mt. 25:14-30). Without acknowledgement and utilization the attribute cannot flourish.

### 2.2.3. An Obligation or a Joy

But one need never view the responsible use of the birthright, the gift of creativity, as an obligation. It should rather be a joy, as is participation in God's mission. H.S. Olson (1988:5) shares Stephen Neill's observation that people are happiest when making or creating something. Neill further suggests that creation, and the care of created things, is perhaps part of the happiness of God himself. Olson then tells about Albert Dashika, a former South African gold miner, who lives with his wife and three children in a two-room house in Botshabelo township. Dashika's description of how he feels when sculpting is of his heart singing. I am reminded of my son's comment: "I feel God's pleasure when I play rugby" and I am awed by what I perceive to be the creative process even there. Other artists speak of their art being praise (Raad 1997:4-5), celebration (Friert 1997:67), worship (Mulder 1998a:87) and prayer (Glasheen 2000:21).

### 2.2.4. A Reason to Celebrate

What in the creative process would generate praise, worship, celebration, prayer? What would cause one's heart to sing or cause one to feel God's pleasure? According to artist Elmer Yazzie, an artist's work is worship when he or she has experienced inspiration (Mulder 1998a:87). Inspiration is what Francesca Genco (1999) was referring to when she described the creative process to Eastern College students as:

allowing the Divine to move through me and I just ride the wave . . . . an amazing journey . . . . stepping back and witnessing the process . . . . getting out of your own way . . . . a state of receptivity, not productivity . . . . allowing self to be an instrument . . . . following an impulse from within.

That impulse from within is what some describe as God's activity, his prompting, his communication with the creation made in his image. The fact that the Creator would choose to communicate with the creation is reason for praise. The experience of communication with God is cause for celebration. The blessing prompts thanksgiving.



### 2.2.5. Something for Everyone

Creativity is most often associated with the arts. However, as intimated previously, most people agree that it functions in all aspects of life, including sports, daily chores, jobs and free time. Whenever one is not following a prescribed pattern or routine there is opportunity for creativity. Eichenberg and Kent both give wonderful suggestions for incorporating it into all of one's life.

Eichenberg (1984:6) describes creativity as setting off the spark that lifts one out of anonymity, providing the shot of adrenalin that energizes one's mind, gives wings to one's imagination, and makes one a partner with the divine spirit that created the universe. It assists in reaching out to others, attaining far shores, and perhaps even setting in motion momentous changes which cannot be foreseen. If such is a birthright, there is reason for praise, worship, celebration and prayer. Exercising this gift may not make all into artists, but it will enrich life. Most importantly, it will enhance relationships with the giver of the gift.

## 2.3. The Arts

### 2.3.1. Categories

Although creativity should by no means be limited to the arts, it seems to be most visible in the arts. Perhaps this is because, especially in the West, compartmentalization tends to relegate the creative process to one segment of life. In many societies outside of the West there is not even a word for art (Ember, *et al* 1999:440). This would lead one to believe that where this is true the creative process and resulting endeavours are more a part of all of life. It may mean Western dualism and scientific reason have not found their way into those cultures.

Not only do Westerners single out the arts from the sciences, but they further systematise them. Olson (1988:4) gives the categories as follows: useful arts (practical utility), decorative arts (aesthetic value), liberal arts (philosophy, religion, literature, language and history), graphic arts (printing, designing, bookmaking), fine arts (painting, music, sculpture, ceramics) and visual arts (architecture, painting and sculpture). But in some circles these categories apply only to

European art. Arts from non-western countries are simply called “non-European,” which is ethnocentric and nondescript to say the least, but is perhaps better than the categories Rubin (1989:15) uncovered: Primitive Art, Exotic Art, Traditional Art, Folk Art, Arts of Pre-literate/Pre-logical Peoples, and Tribal Art. Rubin chose to use geographical terms instead of these when he studied what he labelled the arts of Africa, Oceania and Native America, yet he recognised the limitations and distortions of even these terms.

### 2.3.2. My Focus

I have chosen to focus on the use of visual art to express the gospel. My category cuts across the ones listed above, however, because I do not limit my definition to visual fine arts or even to visual graphic arts and fine arts. Visual art that is effective in expressing the gospel can be found in useful arts and decorative arts as well as graphic arts and fine arts. However, as indicated briefly in Chapter One, I am limiting my category here to visual art which utilizes form, line and colour to produce an image.

Developing sensitivities have caused me to further cut across cultural boundaries, out of the realm of European arts, not into “Primitive” or “Traditional Arts” but into the broad category of African Arts. There I find a preponderance of visual images, rife with meaning and symbolism. But what do I find as well? I find that in traditional African art the visual image is seldom isolated from the other arts of music and dance. I have reason to wonder if the object is even prehendend as an aesthetic object (considered to have life and meaning) when it is separate from the ceremony or the function. I am convinced that all of the arts are effective tools for expressing the gospel, whether used in concert or in isolation.

### 2.3.3. Qualities of Art

Anthropologists Carol and Melvin Ember (1999:440) list several qualities of art as they say it expresses, communicates, stimulates the senses, affects emotions, evokes ideas, is produced in culturally patterned ways and styles and has cultural meaning. Could not these same modifiers be used to describe Christ’s methods of teaching as recorded in Scripture? I am actually startled

by the similarities. But I need not be. The creative process which produces art is God-given and would naturally have been innate in Christ's methodology as well. Delineated below are other aspects of art which validate it for the task of sharing the message which Christ incarnated and taught.

#### 2.3.3.1. Art is Communicational

Overarching the qualities of art as a creative process, is its ability to communicate. Perhaps this is because at the root and requisite of both creativity and communication is relationship. Samovar, Porter and Stefani (1998:24) define communication as "a dynamic, systemic process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction with symbols." Recognised for its communicative powers, art can be described as systemic, dynamic, symbolic and relational.

##### 2.3.3.1.1. Systemic

As a form of communication, art can be seen as a system which has a source (the artist) who originates a message, a vehicle (the medium or materials) which transmits the message, and the receptors (the audience) who interpret the message (cf Gamble *et al* 1999:8-12). Kraft (1996:122-126) further situates communication in the overall system called culture, along with technology, religion, sociology and economics. Art is there as a form of communication. Arnold Rubin (1989:17) defines it as technology and Rosalind Hackett (1996:2) depicts it as inseparable from religion.

In reality, all of these systems are probably more interrelated than the Western propensity for systematics would acknowledge. Samovar, Porter and Stefani (1998:22) state that some anthropologists, including themselves, believe the terms communication and culture are actually synonymous (cf Gallois and Callan 1997:22). Whether one situates art in the system of communication, technology or religion it becomes evident that it is integral to culture and thus is qualified to participate in cross-cultural communication of the gospel.

#### 2.3.3.1.2. Dynamic

Viewed as a system made up of source, vehicle, and receptor which interacts within itself as well as with other systems, art is inevitably dynamic. It changes, moves and evolves. Gamble and Gamble (1999:8-12) highlight the noise and interference which keeps efforts at communication from being understood. They also emphasise that communication is set in context, elicits feedback and creates effect or change. Each of these characteristics as applied to art have inherent in them an ongoing interchange which continues until a message is successfully transmitted.

Art may also be described as dynamic because it is a reflector of culture which is itself not static. Kraft (1996:361-366) gives the reasons for why cultures change as children never learn perfectly, mistakes are made, or people are creative and prone to borrowing. Changes result largely from people choosing a different allowed alternative, but some are the result of their choosing a more radical alternative. Certainly art is a product of culture and influenced by it as are individuals. It serves as a carrier of culture, transmitting tradition from generation to generation. But, in like manner, art, as well as individuals, influence culture. The exchange is reciprocal as in any effective process of communication.

#### 2.3.3.1.3. Symbolic

Symbolism in art is probably its most obvious characteristic. Each form of art makes use of either one or a combination of several of the twelve signal systems assigned by Kraft (1991:109-110) to communication: verbal, written, numeric, pictorial, audio, kinetic, artifactual, optical, tactile, temporal, spatial and olfactory. Elements from these systems are used to form a code. As in communication, art's symbols represent units of meaning.

Symbols are very powerful, yet they have no power without the meaning assigned to them. The question is: Where does meaning reside? Is meaning in the symbol (code, form or object)? Or is meaning in people, (the senders and receivers)? According to Charles Kraft (1991:82-83) the most prevalent theory is that meaning resides in people. In other words, meanings are attached

to words and other symbols used in communication by people, rather than being inherent in the symbols themselves (Kraft 1991:34). Walter C. Kaiser (1994:26-45), in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, says there has been nothing short of a major revolution since the 1960's in the way meaning is assigned to written materials. Prior to that time there was a dependence on what the author meant to say. Now there is realization that meaning includes the referent, the sense, the author's intention, the significance a passage has, its value, and its entailment. Kaiser defines referent as the object, event, or process which is being spoken about; sense as what is being said about the referent; intention as the way the author put together words, phrases and sentences to form a meaning; significance as the ever-changing relationship to a person, conception or situation; value as preference or priority; and entailment as one phenomenon leading to another. He ends by saying that, though broken down for analysis, all of these aspects need to act holistically when searching for meaning in a text. Therefore, meaning is determined by the reader, the listener or the viewer, whether the medium is literature or art.

I still remember my surprise several years ago to discover our students in Soweto often saw beauty in places or things where I did not see beauty. When asked to write an essay on the most beautiful thing they had ever seen they described the power of ocean waves, the personality of a girlfriend, the harmony of a herd of impala as they run across the veld, the sustaining hope seen in flowers growing amidst a rubbish heap, rather than the objects themselves. Kraft (1991:84) enlightens me with his explanation that meaning is the result of interpretation, the subjective interaction of one or more persons with a situation. Such interaction is determined by reflexes and habits which have been carefully taught by elders.

So it is that interaction with art or the perception of beauty is influenced by culture. This potentially causes grave problems for communication through art across cultures and will be addressed again in Chapter Five. But it is not unlike the challenge faced by any cross-cultural communication.

#### 2.3.3.1.4. Relational

Part of the answer to the problem of cross-cultural communication through art lies in the

remainder of the definition of art as a form of communication: people create shared meanings. Creating shared meanings requires relationship and interaction, the artist (or sender) knowing the audience (or receiver) and the audience seeking to know the artist and his or her intended meaning. An object is not even considered to be art unless it is prehendend to be aesthetic. In other words, it only comes alive with interaction from the audience. Especially seen in Africa, but a reality everywhere, “Art is . . . concerned more with process than object, more with dancing than the mask, more with the beat than the drum” (Olson 1988:15). Herein lies much of the value of art used to communicate the gospel. It encourages relationship, relationship with the art object, with self, with the community, with the creator of the object and with the Creator of the universe. Relationship was among God’s purposes when he first created the world and when he gave humankind the birthright of creativity.

#### 2.3.3.2. Art is Metaphorical

When art is spoken of as being communicational, its metaphorical aspect also needs to be highlighted. Just as language is sometimes figurative, depicting one object or idea in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy (Gove 1965:532) so too is art often figurative or metaphorical.

Jesus regularly made use of figurative language in his teaching. Metaphors such as “You are the salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13), “You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5:14), and similes such as “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed” (Mt. 13:31), were effective because they depicted difficult concepts in everyday, understandable terms. Jesus demonstrated the fact that literal explication is not necessary for the depiction of truth. The symbolism in his speech and actions had great potency. In a lecture entitled “Metaphor and Truth,” J. Alan Groves (2000) paralleled the metaphors used by Jesus and the metaphors found in art. He concluded with the statement: “Metaphor pierces the heart. Perhaps the way to the mind is through the heart.”

If symbolism and metaphor are found to be effective, as they were in Christ’s parables, Hackett (1994:196) has a good point when she observes that even works of art which do not exhibit obvious religious themes or titles may still have religious significance to the artist. She goes

further to say that biblical stories may be presented in traditional idioms, making use of oral literature. An example of such is Kennedy Wesongo's 'Baboon,' where Lot's wife turns into an ape, after disobeying the order not to look back. Some will say inexplicit symbolism opens the door to erroneous interpretation. In response I say all symbols, including words, are open to misinterpretation but also capable of effective communication.

South African artist Maud Sumner had it right in 1945 when she expressed her opinion that religious pictures should without question be more than mere representation; they should inspire reflection, rather than give the last word (Harmsen 1997:108). Melville Herskovits might have told Maud not to worry because he did not believe any work of art could achieve complete realism (Olson 1988:11). In other words, all art is an approximation, a statement or an expression of individual or communal perception. If that be the case, characteristic symbolism and metaphor in art makes it a useful tool for the expression of faith, if for no other purpose than to make one search for meaning.

#### 2.3.3.3. Art is Visible

This line of thought continues with Paul Klee's (Olson 1988:11) perception that true reality lies invisible beneath the visible, the visible being but a suggestion, a possibility, a makeshift. According to him, art does not reproduce the visible. Instead, it makes visible the invisible. Many other writers and artists, such as Corita Kent, Kimon Nikolaides (Steward *et al* 1992:24) and C. P. Maus agree. According to Maus (1938:7), the artist serves to reveal something not seen or only partially realized. The artist becomes an interpreter, a teacher, calling attention to a side of some truth never before noticed. Perhaps Mbatha (1998b:56) would interject here that a part of himself, even, lies beneath water. What people see is only a portion of his face. He says that what is seen in his drawings comes from the hidden part of himself. Are artists the only people who have unseen sides? Or are they just the fortunate ones who have found a way to express their deepest thoughts?

The question may be posed: Is the visible depiction accurate to the invisible reality? What assures that the viewer's interpretation is consistent with that reality? Perhaps another question

should be: Can the artist's ability to perceive reality correctly be trusted? All such efforts are approximations. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (I Cor. 13:12). The reality sought is God. He cannot be seen face to face or known as he knows until the viewer is made perfect. Until that time there is the gift, the birthright, the freedom to creatively imagine what that Reality is like. In the process, the creative seeker is drawn into closer relationship with the giver of the gift. God's mission is at work. Perhaps the ambiguity of art is its strength. It necessitates searching.

#### 2.3.3.4. Art is Mysterious

That which is known in part is a mystery. Scripture asserts that human knowledge is incomplete and spiritual matters will remain a mystery for the time being. But it does not say believers must be content and accepting of the situation. Jesus admonished his hearers to ask, seek and knock (cf Mt. 7:7). And Solomon wisely advised: "Lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:5-6). Acknowledge the mystery. In Karen Mains' (1993:137) opinion, the forms which best communicate mystery are dance, painting, music, sculpture, poetry and drama (in other words, the arts) and they should therefore be used to share, articulate and nurture religious thought. She quotes J. H. Westerhoff:

The function of artistic expression is to illumine and draw us deeper into life's depths. The arts incarnate our experience of mystery, wonder and awe and thereby aid us to encounter the holy or sacred.

Engraver and bookmaker Barry Moser recently designed, illustrated and produced a new version of the Bible. It is entitled the Pennyroyal Caxton Bible. According to Moser, it is in the process of pursuing the unknown, walking around it and taking its measure, that much of his art is created. And it is in this process, Moser says, that he "confronts God" (Glasheen 2000:21).

C.S. Lewis tells about looking along a beam of light shining through a crack at the top of the door in a dark tool shed and seeing nothing but the particles of dust floating in it. He then stepped into the light to look at its point of origin. When he did he saw green leaves moving on



the branches of a tree outside the door and beyond that the sun (Hooper 1984:196). Art helps one step inside the beam of light to study its mysteries and discover its source.

#### 2.3.3.5. Art is a Way of Knowing

Art thus

represents a way of knowing which is different from mere verbal communication. The finest examples . . . are revelatory, opening a window to eternity, engaging the spectator in a kind of communication which is holy communion, in which the spectator becomes a participant not only in the work of art, but in the meaning, the essence the work reveals (Booty 1989:17).

Parker (1997:19) labels this way of knowing as experiential, allowing one to enter into a scene and learn for oneself. If it is true to its task art is a means to an end, not an end in itself. And it is not a cognitive system alone, but, according to Victor Turner, it is ““meaningful experience and experienced meaning”” (Hackett 1994:302). It is stepping into the light, not observing it from afar.

Especially in oral societies reflection and concretization take place during participation (Hayashida 1998), so experiential expression of the gospel becomes powerful and meaningful. In almost any society it is recognised that experience is the best teacher. Herein lies an area at which darts are often hurled. Those who place supremacy of the Scriptures above experience would warn that art could lead one astray. As with all aspects of the Christian life, experience must be weighed against Scripture, prayer and Christian tradition.

#### 2.3.3.6. Art is Incarnational

Precisely because of the experiential nature of art, it can bring meaning to the incarnation of God in Christ. C.S. Calian (1968:142), in *Icon and the Pulpit* likens art to the incarnation as concrete events with transcendent meaning. In his words, “The tangible and visible are the home and residence of the spiritual and the eternal.” This is what Klee meant when he spoke of art making

visible the invisible. Calian also quotes Colossians 1:15 where Paul spoke of Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”

When asked if drawing a picture of Jesus was blasphemy, William Stafford’s (1997:15-16) reply was “No. In Jesus, God was flesh. God was speakable. God was visible. God was circumscribed. . . . So words can capture what no word can capture; paint can fix what cannot be bound.” He goes on to ask, “What does it mean, to my sisters and brothers in the Sudan, holding a small wooden cross in their hands, when they are cornered by soldiers? Because of Jesus, it means God is there.” Stafford, Calian and Klee are all saying art can incarnate God because Jesus did. Had he not put form to the attributes of God, the artist could not.

Wande Abimbola (1989:24-25) states that the Yoruba do not make images of their High God, Olodumare. The images which they do make of their Orisa (or lower gods) are intended to reflect an aspect of the thought processes and values of Olodumare. And Lois Snook (1991:47) relates the commissioning of Zimbabwe artist Mukomberanwa by San Francisco Theological Seminary to render a *Black Christ*. When he was reluctant, saying “No one can do Jesus,” it was suggested that he try to sculpt his response to Jesus. Snook says the result brings viewers to their knees. Art can serve to incarnate Jesus, the Gospel story, God’s mission, just as Jesus incarnated God and because Jesus incarnated God. If Jesus made God visible, so can art.

#### 2.3.3.7. Art is Devotional

Bringing to the knees in devotion is indeed what art can do, in the home as well as the sanctuary, on a week-day as well as on the Sabbath. In the devotional life of the individual as well as the community, art serves numerous functions. Nathan Corbitt (1998:18-20) describes music functioning as priest, prophet, proclaimer, preacher, teacher and healer. These activities can also be attributed to other forms of art, including the visual.

##### 2.3.3.7.1. As Priest

Corbitt (1998:17-18) credits music in its priestly function as serving a unifying role in the

worship of the Christian community. He further describes it as a carrier for inner spiritual activity as it finds outward physical expression. I would add that music and other forms of art, including the visual, also serve as priest to carry the believer or seeker inward to the altar, the throne of grace, the feet of Jesus.

#### 2.3.3.7.2. As Prophet

Corbitt (1998:19) goes on to describe music as providing a “convenient avenue for modern-day prophets to warn, cajole, penetrate, and prophesy.” M. Takenaka (1986:43-45) in *God is Rice* emphasises the prophetic task of art as it inspires people in their struggle for justice and peace. He gives the example of the Korean mask dance which encourages common people to take steps towards liberation. Acting like a prophet the symbols used in the dance open up the realities which have been hidden and offer hope for the future.

Creativity sensitises artists to interpersonal relationships and to the relatedness of issues heralding ‘the signs of the times.’ Accustomed to seeing perceptively and without preconceived notions, artists are often intuitive to what lies beneath the surface. Sensitivity combined with expressive ability results in prophecy, whether blatant or subtle. In Sam Gore’s opinion, artists must decide what they want to express in their art. Some are called to comfort the afflicted and others to afflict the comforted (Raad 1997:5). Often, as is the case with other prophets, artists are rejected and their artistic statements misunderstood.

#### 2.3.3.7.3. As Proclaimer, Preacher, Teacher

Describing music as proclaimer, Corbitt (1998:17-19) acknowledges it as a powerful medium of communication which heralds “the good news in melodious tidings.” Characterized as preacher by the words and texts which reflect active theological beliefs and teacher by the education and training it effects (Corbitt 1998:20), music and art in general can be used to effectively communicate the gospel message. I have elsewhere dealt with art serving to communicate, giving abundant support for this thesis.

#### 2.3.3.7.4. As Healer

Corbitt (1998:19) mentions music therapy as an example of music functioning as healer. The term 'art therapy' is used more and more these days. A few universities offer specialized studies in the field and some others allow students to do their own crafting for such a focus of study. But art functioned as healer long before these terms were coined. Scripture gives account of God's command for Moses to make a bronze snake and place it on a pole in the camp of the Israelites. When bitten by one of the snakes which God had sent as punishment for the disobedience of the Israelites they could look at the bronze snake and live (cf Num. 21:6-9). The visual image did not heal. God did the healing when faith was acted upon by looking at the image. Yes, there were other times when God condemned the use of images. But punishment came, as in the case of the golden calf, not because Aaron made it but because of what the Israelites did with it (cf Ex. 32:35). The image must never be an end in itself, only the means to an end.

The Southwest Community Enrichment Centre Brochure (1999) speaks of the use of art as "a means of healing and transformation through the development of the imagination and creative thinking." And artist Elmer Yazzie, a "Calvinist Navajo" speaks of artists as healers whose work can be therapy for themselves as well as for others (Mulder 1998a:86). Art can effect healing as it sets relationships in order, be it relationships with self, other people or God. Such healing can be experienced physically and mentally as well as spiritually.

Other writers characterise healing through art and religion as bringing order out of chaos (cf Glasheen 2000 and Oshun 1998:2). Oshun's (1998:7-8) paper describing healing technologies practised by Aladura Pentecostals among the Yoruba of Nigeria highlights the atoning sacrifice of Jesus as the Ransom or agent for restoration or renewal and expressed through the symbols of oil, water, candles, incense, crucifixes, staffs, laying on of hands, prayers, ringing of bells and other symbolic rituals. Joyce Scott ("Dream with Your Eyes Open" 2000) says "we can each choose to be healers whose art making is part of our medicine." That choice is available because of the gift or birthright of creativity from God.

### 2.3.3.8. Art is Relative to Pain and Struggle

Part of the healing efficacy of art for the artist is achieved as it identifies internal struggles and resolves conflict (Jacques 2000:4). But there also seems to be a direct correlation between the degree of pain and the quality of the art. Dan G. McCartney (2000) of Westminster Theological Seminary says “The more suffering an artist experiences the greater are the works.” And Sister Helen David Brancato (1999) gives the example of South African artists doing powerful work as a result of their repression. In her opinion an artist needs pieces to put back together, comfort is death to an artist, tension is a catalyst to creativity and anyone can have technique but the real artist needs rage. She goes on to say art takes courage, courage to move ahead without despair.

Zimbabwe rock sculptor John Takawira describes the creative process as giving birth, struggling and feeling pain. He maintains if he is suffering, he is producing a good piece. As an artist, he is helping the rock tell its story (Snook 1991:43). Eichenberg (1984:22) notes that Paris in the midst of turmoil produced Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Heinrich Heine, Charles Dickens, Hans Christian Andersen, Schumann, Berlioz, George Sand, Liszt, Chopin, Musset, the Goncourt brothers and Turgenev. When my son describes playing rugby as an expression of all that God has given him he talks of dependency on God in the wake of fear and limitations and of deep emotion required to expend his all.

Why is it a struggle to make beauty (Mains 1993:137) when the end result brings great joy? The prophet and the psalmist (Isaiah 40:28 and Psalm 121:3b) both state that God does not grow weary (Buttrick, *et al*), yet scripture says he took the seventh day of creation to rest (cf Gen. 2:2). There was a reason God took that day as he desisted from his work. Perhaps it was to mark the end of a magnificent endeavour. Perhaps it was to enjoy his creation. God may not have needed physical rest but he chose to take some time off. The creative process seems to require a commitment or effort which, although it did not tire God, it caused him to mark the completion with a day of renewal. The human body, weakened by sin, does grow weary so the process may indeed be painful or tiring, yet it is also exhilarating enough that a time of rest becomes more a time of enjoying the creation than recovering from exhaustion.

### 2.3.3.9. Art is Community-Building

Stories are often told about how tragedy, pain and suffering bring people together. As a community struggles to overcome a disaster or help someone in need, walls of division crumble and boundaries of prejudice are transcended. The Stories also abound which tell of communities coming together through art. Perhaps the struggling aspect of art is part of what pulls them together, or maybe it is the exaltation in the finished product.

The city of Philadelphia has many such stories to tell. Through its Mural Arts Program over 2,000 murals have been painted on the outside of buildings, on walls and fences. In each case the local community has met to decide what they want depicted on the wall and then residents have assisted professional artists in the actual painting. Community mural projects provide positive forums where neighbours can come together in a context of communal pride to work out differences and define common goals. Murals enable communities to communicate their hopes, values, and memories (Zeigerman 2000:1).

Community participation in festivals where art objects, music and dance intermingle has long been the norm in Africa and Asia. Alfred Quarcoo (1990:493) of Accra, Ghana emphasizes that the renewal of the people is a vital priority and focus in these festivals. He describes the art objects used as facilitating the transmission of culture between generations. In his opinion, proof of the efficacy of the teaching and learning process through art forms is apparent. Takenaka (1986:48) writes that Asian religions hold joyful festivals and community celebrations, not inside the temple or shrine, but outside in the open space of the community. He sees this as biblical and advocates for an open, pilgrim, celebrating church, where the people of God do not close themselves in, or close themselves off, but are willing to be with people in the community -- even as Christ shared his life with all people.

Perhaps Mbatha (1998b:56) has touched on another aspect of the community-building nature of art when he writes:

The artist sees things in a fuller, more integrated, fashion because they are seen

through eyes which belong in the group with which the artist identifies. In reality, then, it is not his vision, but that of his clan, which the artist expresses.

If this is true, that the artist sees through the eyes of the group or clan, then his/her work will naturally draw that community together with strengthened self-identity and confidence that their voice is being heard.

#### 2.4. Conclusion

Art, as creativity, is an excellent medium for expression of the gospel. Relationship required in the creative process is analogous to the relationship exemplified in Christ. Furthermore, was not the message Christ preached and lived communicational, metaphorical, visible, a way of knowing God, incarnational, devotional, relative to pain and suffering and community-building? Did not Christ serve as priest, prophet, proclaimer, preacher, teacher and healer? Cannot his message continue to live through the arts which have these same characteristics? I propose that it can and does. But not only is the message expressed and the story told. God's mission to bring wholeness to his creation is accomplished magnificently in the process.

## CHAPTER THREE

### EMBARKING ON AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN ART

#### 3.1. Introduction

Crossing the boundaries of culture my focus shifts from art as defined in the West, to African art and South African art in particular. I find it to be all that I defined art to be in Chapter Two: communicational, metaphorical, visible, mysterious, a way of knowing, incarnational, devotional, relative to pain and suffering and community-building.

Seemingly what is unique is that in surveying the history of art in Africa one is impressed to find art participating in all aspects of life more so than it does in the West. In Rubin's (1989:149) opinion, Euro-American art separates form from context whereas the arts of Africa, Oceania and native America situate the forms squarely in the middle of the context. He goes on to describe their art, like Olson does, as being less about the objects than about the people, less about the forms and gestures chosen than the fact that the combination of which they are a part 'works' for experiencing the universe. Could this perhaps be one of the strongest contributions African art has to make to the rest of the world, the efficacy of art for all of life? It would certainly be why Verster categorises African art as conceptual, avoiding the naturalistic and manipulating scale, proportion and detail to stress feelings (Thorpe 1994d:42).

I want to look first at the aspects of life touched by art when Africa is spoken of traditionally. Secondly I will seek to trace some of the historical influences on African art. And thirdly I will look at recent developments and trends in South Africa which have affected the art scene there. All of this will prepare for an investigation into the works of Jackson Hlungwani in Chapter Four.



### 3.2. Traditional African Art

When I refer to traditional African art I follow the definition given by Ladislav Holy (1971:19) of *Zambian Information Services*: “Objects . . . made by the artist for the use of members of his own society and culture.” In other words, I am not speaking of art produced for selling to tourists or displaying in museums.

Traditional African art is sometimes called ‘functional’ art because of its practical function in everyday life. Not only does this term refer to the aesthetics of useful objects such as cooking utensils, headrests and hair combs, but also the usefulness of what Westerners would term aesthetic objects such as masks and sculptured images. According to Meyer (1992:197) in *Black Africa*, even embellishment with abstract designs on objects for everyday use has more than merely decorative value. It has other purposes as well, usually that of giving visual information about the owner’s social standing and adding to his or her prestige. In other words, all of these forms serve a function. In addition, it can be said that African art traditionally inter-relates its art forms, communicates messages and documentation, instills group identity and social control, delineates social status and authority, communicates with the less visible (super-natural) world and accompanies through life’s transitions. Each of these aspects will be explored more fully in the following pages.

#### 3.2.1. Traditional African Art Inter-relates Art Forms

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, traditional African art is created to be experienced. This is what Victor Turner calls “meaningful experience and experienced meaning” (Hackett 1996:15). Art objects participate either in daily activities or in ceremonies and rituals rather than hang on walls in museums. Likewise, says Ruth Stone (1995:267-268), music is intimately bound to the visual and dramatic arts as well as the larger fabric of daily life including games, dance and words. It is not a thing of beauty to be admired in isolation.

The interconnectedness and reinforcing of visual and verbal forms (proverbs, aphorisms, fragments of folktales) led Cole and Ross to label the artistic system found in Africa “the

visual/verbal nexus” (Rubin 1989:129). It can be seen graphically in the Asante culture of Ghana which incorporates thousands of proverbs into the motifs and symbols found throughout Asante art on funeral fabrics, King’s regalia, jewelry, carvings, and utensils (Rubin 1989:135). Having spent several years in Ghana as a child, I recall learning some of the proverbs and recognizing the symbols which depicted them, especially on the vibrant Kente cloth for which the Asante are famous.

The Yoruba art of Nigeria is likewise appreciated most by recognising that it is integral to ritual (Hackett 1996:126). In fact, for the Yoruba (as well as many other peoples) the process of creating an art object does not cease with the carving and painting. It is in the subsequent arts of masquerading, ritual or ceremony that the creative process continues. A sculpted mask or headdress is only one element in a complex assemblage of creative input from carvers, painters, weavers, embroiderers, tailors, dancers, musicians and singers (Hackett 1996:41-42). African art inspires ideas and emotions, attracts attention, impresses people. It is designed for impact and effect. Its articulation of symbols and images is intended to make the viewer pause and respond (McNaughton, *et al* 1995:255). Situation of the visual and verbal in experience is what gives power to art as communication in African cultures.

### 3.2.2. Traditional African Art Communicates Messages and Documentation

Perhaps most easily understood is the way art is used in Africa to transmit messages within the community, either on a day to day basis or from generation to generation. Sculpture is often done and kept as a record of history, a documentation of authority, lineage and land ownership. It supports and is supported by orality (Lorenz, *et al* 2000). It becomes a carrier of culture, transmitting information from one generation to another and participating along with other art forms in communal life.

Additionally, a vast communication network is accomplished by the West African “talking drums” used to send messages and make announcements (Lorenz, *et al* 2000). I remember as a child, on the occasion of the death of a prominent leader in the Congo, hearing his name enunciated repeatedly by the drums in Ghana. “Lumumba. Lumumba.” In reality, the creation

and sending of messages and documentation can be seen in all of the art forms discussed on subsequent pages.

### 3.2.3. Traditional African Art Instills Group Identity and Social Control

As a carrier of culture, art also becomes an essential element in identity formation. According to Rubin (1989:29-32, 149), much of art in Africa serves to define and focus on group identity, reinforce the sense of community and establish networks of collective responsibility. He describes “ecstatic combinations,” “experiential complexes” and “transcendent states” which serve to elevate participants to another level of reality, not as an end in themselves but as a means to the end of bringing social oneness and harnessing energy for the benefit of the community. What outsiders may see as distortion and extreme stylization in the art is a process of demarcation and reinforcement of group solidarity. In these situations “art may be said to be created by the entire group for the entire group, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Rubin 1989:15-16).

In Mali, youth associations stage masquerades to help communities celebrate their agricultural labour. Some performers use their characters to demonstrate social knowledge. Others use them to make critical satirical commentary, while still others perform just for the fun of it or because it is expected (McNaughton *et al* 1995:254). On other occasions masks are used in ceremonies to locate and single out wrong-doers and troublemakers (witches) in the community. They thus become “instruments of social control” (Lorenz *et al* 2000).

In the areas of divination, protection, healing, witchcraft and sorcery, artistic expression plays an important role in mediating and transforming potentially threatening spiritual forces. Diviners act as artists by creating aesthetic objects and then using them, along with music, dance and ritual to impress clients, diagnose problems and illness, suggest solutions to problems and illness, offer aesthetic antidotes to please the spirits, act as mouthpieces for invisible spirits, bring beauty into difficult circumstances, or store, transmit, conceal and reveal knowledge, which is believed to be available only to certain people (Hackett 1996:119-123). In these ways artistic forms become effective communicators of societal values and builders of community as well as identity.

### 3.2.4. Traditional African Art Delineates Social Status and Authority

Continuing the role of establishing identity are display-objects which also serve as markers to proclaim the social status of the wearer or owner (Rubin 1989:37). The prestige spoon given to a generous woman would be one example and could join the vast array of what is described as life-affirming art objects (Lorenz, *et al* 2000). There is, in fact, a great diversity of materials and forms used to express ideal qualities, dramatize rank, and generate power and status for leaders and institutions (Hackett 1996:96).

The most notable examples can be seen in the regalia which accompanies the Asante king and his court, such as state swords, staffs, golden rings, Kente cloths, umbrellas and stools. The symbolic art forms are used to proclaim, aggrandize and enhance the capacities of the leaders. Perhaps the most powerful of the forms is the golden stool which represents the soul and unity of the nation and its citizens (McNaughton, *et al* 1995:253). A calabash with etchings on its surface symbolises containment of the powers of kingship. An umbrella represents and even promotes spiritual peace and coolness. And the various stools express the powers and mysteries of leadership (Hackett 1996:73). Quarcoo emphasises that ceremonies surrounding the stools highlight the quest for community and continuity, along with the need for periodic renewal of identity (Hackett 1996:81). And Rubin (1989:138) says the vast array of meanings carried by these objects represent the richness of visual-verbal communication as the regalia can be read on a number of conceptual planes: symbolic, historical, mythological and proverbial. It becomes obvious that art objects, with their aesthetic 'powers' to exalt, uplift and bring to life serve effectively to communicate social status and authority, not only in Africa, but in other cultures as well.

### 3.2.5. Traditional African Art Communicates with the Less Visible (Super-Natural) World

#### 3.2.5.1. Objects

Numerous rich and imaginative visual forms are used in the process of making visible not only the power and authority of natural beings, but also that of super-natural beings. Statues, carved

posts, altars, stools, pots, textiles and masks serve to give what Hackett (1996:56) terms as substance and life to the spiritual world. Once again of note are the masks. Their effectiveness seems to lie in their ability to reverse what is normal (Hackett 1996:51). People are normally visible and spirits invisible, but behind a mask the person becomes invisible and the spirit is made visible. The spirit is thereby released to do its work of discerning and disciplining evildoers, conveying messages or solutions to problems.

### 3.2.5.2. Shrines

Also of importance in art related to the spirits are shrines, or sacred places. Shrines may be described as “recreations on earth of an ontological reality” (Hackett 1996:147). Or, as the Yoruba say, a shrine is the face (*ofu*) of the divinity or the face of worship (*ojubo*). It is the place of meeting, coming face to face with the gods and positioning oneself in relationship to them (Hackett 1996:157). A shrine may be located in a grove of trees, a building, a home, or even one’s own weaving loom (in other words, one’s personal space). Hackett (1996:156) notes that weavers often liken their weaving to praying. Is that not what other artists say of their art?

### 3.2.5.3. Commissions

Within the shrines, or placed around them are artistic forms and objects. Often they have been commissioned by the priests and priestesses of the shrine. An example can be seen in the Obaluwaya shrine in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. On the walls of the shrine are “mythomurals” done by women painters who were commissioned by the priestess. In an annual festival lasting several weeks women come and stay and become the artists-in-residence. The mural from the previous year is painted over and then each woman, working along-side other women, depicts her ancestral totem, be it snakes, birds, cows or leopards and thus gives expression to her own identity. Songs are sung by the women as they learn techniques from one another and receive divine inspiration. The festival is seen as placating the deity, but also as a spiritual occasion for the women (Hackett 1996:158-159).

In the Edo Kingdom of Benin clay figures are commissioned by priests and priestesses who have

had a dream or vision of Olokun's demand for a shrine. The clay chosen for use is not clay used in domestic activities, but clay which Osanobua, the father of Olokun, used to mould the first human beings. Ben-Amos insists that in this ritual and symbolic space where gender differentiation breaks down, the artist becomes "not only a moulder of the gods, but a moulder like the gods" (Hackett 1996:147). Can it be that these people have caught a glimpse of what it is like to be made in the image of God, to become a creator like God, to possess and utilize the creativity he has instilled in his creation? I think so.

#### 3.2.5.4. Inspiration

The inspiration through dreams and visions mentioned above seems to be more common than one might think. According to Hackett (1996:24), increasingly, ethnographic study gives evidence that dreams play an important part in mediation between the spirit world and artists. Many artists, such as David Omoregie of the carvers' guild in Benin, speak of the ancestors directing them or of seeing things in their sleep which they have never seen before. Some would not liken it to being possessed by the spirits, rather as the imparting of artistic knowledge (Hackett 1996:24-26), while others would say their hands are simply being used and the pictures are actually being painted by the deities (Hackett 1996:158). Is this unlike the inspiration described in Chapter Two? Hackett (1996:40) maintains that the special status, strangeness or otherness of artists in many societies is attributed to their closeness to the spirit world and religious specialists.

#### 3.2.5.5. Experience

African art works are rarely believed to have spiritual power themselves. They must be activated by sacrifice, event, performance, medicines, herbal preparations, accessories, association with a person of ritual authority, either in a one-time activation, or repeatedly. Such activation may involve numerous artists, agents and audiences (Hackett 1996:46). As seen previously, this is consistent with other forms of African art, in that the power of the aesthetic is experiential and communal. As Hackett (1996:166) says of the shrines, the physical structures can only be understood when one considers the "light, movement, sounds, prayers, music, location, and

actors which inhabit, construct and activate them.”

So what is African art's function in relation to the less visible, super-natural world? It has been described in many different ways as: negotiation between humans and deities (Hackett 1996:76); presentification whereby the invisible becomes present (Hackett 1996:48); accumulation of energies and forces (McNaughton 1995:252); revelation of the interrelatedness of the divine and human (Hackett 1996:157); unification of the world, humans and God (Hackett 1996:17); elevation of the human to the spiritual realm (Hackett 1996:15); communication with the spiritual world (Hackett 1996:56); embodiment of spirits so they can be put to work (McNaughton 1995:251); inducement of spirits to behave, to use their powers positively, to maintain harmony (Lorenz, *et al* 2000). Having already recognised art to be a creative process based on making relationships, it is not surprising to find it integral to relationships on all levels.

### 3.2.6. Traditional African Art Accompanies During Life's Transitions

Another form of “life-affirming” art is that used to assist Africa's people through life transitions, be they passing from childhood into adulthood (initiations), passing from this world to the next (funerals) or passing from tribalism to globalization.

#### 3.2.6.1. Initiation Rites

Within initiation rituals artworks, along with proverbs and songs, become means of educating as well as emblems of rank and status. These include wooden and ivory figures, masks and non-figural objects (McNaughton, *et al* 1995:253-254).

The use of masks in initiation rites is prominent and their symbolism powerful. According to Hackett (1996:105) they portray inaccessibility through their ambiguity, fearfulness and various textures, they symbolize power and they depict wisdom. Hackett documents the value the Mande people put upon masks as the most significant, potent and sacred aspects of their lives when she tells about the creative process for producing them. The carver retreats to the bush during the process and chooses special wood and precise herbal components for use. The community

avoids the spot where the work is done, fearing the power unleashed there. During the ceremony, when dancing and drumming provide the necessary energy to bring the headdress to life, only the carver wears the mask for he alone has the strength to wear it.

Hackett (1996:97-98) gives descriptions of African initiation by Dominique Zahan and Donatus Nwoga which assist with an understanding of how art participates in the rites and rituals related to it. Zahan depicts initiation as a gradual transformation of the individual, a passage from “exteriority to interiority,” a growing awareness of one’s humanity. And Nwoga singles out identity as the essential human component and statement of reality for the Igbo people by highlighting the part initiatory rites play in releasing identity for heightened performance. God’s gift of the creative process, employed in the masquerade performance and other elements of initiatory rites, plays a large part in freeing and giving realization of expression to the individual’s identity and potential.

Initiation rites for girls seem not to be as common or elaborate as they are for boys. Zahan attributes this to the belief in some societies that women naturally carry knowledge within them (Hackett 1996:100). I wonder if this has to do with the creativity women’s roles allow them to express more freely than men’s roles allow or require. I think of their daily chores of making utensils, decorating their houses and preparing meals and see in them opportunity for self-expression. Perhaps motherhood is identity-defining as well.

Where there are female initiation rites the arts seem to fall in the category of body art and coverings. The Mende attribute great “communicative power” to women’s hair. Well-groomed hair identifies women with the female principle of God, Maa-Ndoo, the Great Mother Earth, whose hair or “verdure” suggests life, profusion and prosperity (Hackett 1996:112-115).

### 3.2.6.2. Funeral Rites

The transition from life to death is another significant point where identity and communication within the community is vital. Hackett (1996:188) believes that for many people, to be forgotten is worse than death so art plays an important role in the quest for immortality, historicity and



cultural memory. Meyer (1992:11) labels this “perpetuating ancestral memory.” Some of the finest art produced is funerary art, which, situated in ceremonies like all African art, serves to explain and express the mystery surrounding death and alleviate the disruption caused by the loss (Hackett 1996:167).

The media and forms of funerary art are described by Hackett (1996:167-185) as: 1) cloth used for burial which makes use of symbols associated with proverbs to denote prestige and status, 2) cloth worn by people attending the funeral which uses symbols to express proverbs addressing the insecurities of life and correcting behaviour; the wearing of the cloth confirming relationship and honouring the dead, 3) terracotta pots and figures which serve as containers for spirit beings and commemorate or communicate with the deceased, 4) multimedia events including dance, sculpture, costume, music and song which depict dramatically the nature and quality of the deceased’s life, provide closure and ensure the transition to ancestorhood, 5) altars which make important statements about relationships and serve as channels of communication between the living and the dead.

These artistic representations serve to facilitate communication and understanding between the living and the dead. Their use in ceremony and ritual give expression to respect and relationship. They give visibility to the invisible memories and relationships which go together to establish identity.

### 3.2.6.3. Globalization

The changes which have occurred in Africa during the twentieth century, such as colonialism, missionization, political independence, post-colonialism and global market trends have been the occasion for yet other transitions. According to Hackett (1996:193), artists “provide creative channels for the interpretation, contestation and adaptation of the changes people face in their religious and cultural environment.” The creative process has the power to do exactly that. More than ever, the exercising of the creative birthright or the gift of creativity is needed in Africa. In fact, it is essential all over the world in this age of rapid change which undermines culture and self-identity.

Much harm has been done in the process of these changes by those who have condemned African art without taking time to understand it. Kraft (1996:255) tells of an important tribal group in West Africa having blocked Christianity because their art which is so important to them was regarded as pagan by the missionaries. The creative spirit within each individual and community must be protected and nurtured. It has become abundantly clear that this gift walks Africa's people through the transitions of life. It needs to be preserved and utilised as a means of seeing them through the transitions of the globalization process as well.

### 3.3. Influences on African Art

#### 3.3.1. The Nature of Change

To progress in an understanding of African art one needs to look at the influences which have brought changes to it through the centuries. Even before colonialism, missionization, post-colonialism and globalization, art in Africa, like all aspects of culture, was subject to change. Reasons for cultural change were noted in Chapter Two. Kraft described them as imperfect learning, borrowing, making mistakes, choosing alternatives and creativity. Borrowing and choosing alternatives as applied to art are called appropriation by Hackett (1994:297) and examples given by Duncan (1966:107) are the nail-studded figures of central Africa, perhaps influenced by the nail-studded hands of Christ on the cross and mother and child statues in Benin, perhaps influenced by the Madonna and Child figures, both out of 15th century Europe. But another reason for cultural change which Kraft did not touch upon is destruction.

#### 3.3.2. Destruction

Although difficult to comprehend, history, when it has been truthful, has recorded the destruction of art along with culture in many places -- including Africa. According to Duncan (1966:108), with colonialism came more curiosity than respect for the beauty of form and emotion evoked from a piece of wood by African sculptors. And with early mission policies came the effort to destroy all that seemed to be part of tribal religion. In fact, it seems in each century a disservice has been done to African art. Moyo Okediji (1999:4-6) characterizes the displays of African art

in the 15th and 16th century as curiosity cabinets, in the 17th century as mysterious fetishes, in the 19th century as ethnological objects, in the early 20th century as primitive raw material to be harvested and possessed.

In Küster's (1995:96-97) opinion, prejudice against Third World art has been three-pronged. It arose out of the hostility towards graven images which the Reformation, Calvinism and Pietism fostered. It was fanned into flame by the fact that the majority of Protestant missionaries came from lower-class families who shared anti-elitist feelings of resentment toward art. And, in his words, "colonial cultural chauvinism, which identified Christianity with Western culture, despised indigenous cultures and denounced them as heathenism."

Duncan (1966:108-109) lists other devastating influences on African art as slave raids which burned and pillaged significant works and stole away artists themselves; rain, humidity and insects which continually brought destruction; the shift from a barter to a cash economy which discredited or negated the use of art items to seal transactions such as the bride price; industrialization which made the African less dependent on old systems for holding his tribe together, made the African dependent on things European and made it easier to sell to the tourist than to one's own people.

Underlying all of these destructive forces has been a fear of the unknown, a failure to view and experience art in context, learn the intended meanings and acknowledge the image of God and gift of creativity in all of humankind. As Meyer (1992:9) says, "in order to experience the full beauty of a work we must understand its origins and its aims, its mythic sense for the African who created it and for those who experienced it." Perhaps this takes more time and courage than some have been willing to give.

### 3.3.3. All is Not Lost

Fortunately not all was destroyed in the pillaging of Africa. As noted earlier much African art found its way to "curiosity cabinets" and Western museums. Some of it is now being "repatriated" (Leibhammer 1996:45) back to African museums. And many of the missionaries

who went to do the educating discovered that they were “being educated in return” (Hurley 1993:5). According to Hurley, who writes of early missionary work in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa, some of the missionaries began to realize they did not have a monopoly on culture and that their work of evangelization was being subjected to interculturalization. The Gospel showed its willingness to undergo a change of clothing and the result was a flowering of art in which religion and culture found expression together.

What Hurley and Leibhammer describe is encouraging, but I sometimes wonder if it is good enough. In the next few pages I will do a case study of Christian art in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa. I will then trace recent developments in secular art, thus setting the stage for the emergence of Jackson Hlungwani on the scene.

#### 3.3.3.1. The Beginnings of Christian Art in KwaZulu-Natal

The Natal region of South Africa was an early site of western colonization along with Christian proselytizing. Conflict with the Nguni culture and religious systems created strong resistance but finally resulted in an entrenched Lutheran, Catholic and Methodist following as well as “neo-Christian religious traditions” such as the Zulu Congregational Church (1896), iBandla lamaNazaretha (Shembe) Church (1911) and African Congregational Church (1917) (Leeb-du Toit 1993:6).

Leeb-du Toit (1993:9) notes that most early missionaries were Protestants so images were largely absent from their churches, but the Anglican and Catholic missionaries included images in both their churches and their instruction. She goes on to tell of missionaries who became avid collectors of Zulu art objects in spite of their disapproval of Zulu cultural practices, particularly in the early 20th century when interest in ethnography and anthropology grew. Recognition by the missionaries of craft-making skills and abilities among the Zulu resulted in art training centres, patronages, commissions, a steady market and exposure to the broader public.

### 3.3.3.1.1. Training Centres and Patronages

Art training centres of particular note were Mariannhill, Ndaleni and Rorke's Drift. Mariannhill was established in 1882 by the Trappists, and turned over to an independent group in 1914 (Leeb-du Toit 1993:12). Influenced by Mariannhill were artists such as Michael Zondi, Durant Sihlali, Franz Hodi, Michael Mbebe, Patrick Mokwane, Joseph Dhlamini, Duke Ketye, Titus Bhengu (Cormick 1993:7-8). Ndaleni Teacher Training College was begun in 1952 by the Methodists. It closed in 1981 (Leeb-du Toit 1993:13-14). Artists Albert Ndlovu, Thomas Nkosi (Cormick 1993:7-8) and Dan Rakgoathe (Leeb-du Toit 1993:13), as well as others received encouragement there. The Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre was established by the Swedish Mission at Rorke's Drift in 1962 (Rankin 1989:30), and encouraged artists such as Azaria Mbatha, John Muafangejo and Vuminkozi Zulu (Cormick 1993:7-8). In 1953 the Bantu Education Act forced even independent schools such as Mariannhill to stop teaching art as an examination subject so it became extra-curricular (Leeb-du Toit 1993:12).

Patronages of note were Gerard Bhengu by Dr. M. J. Köhler of Centecow Mission, J. Dlamini by Sr. Pientia Selhorst of Mariannhill and Bernard Gwensa and Ruben Xulu by Fr. Edwin Kinch of Hlabisa (Leeb-du Toit 1993:9). In a patronage situation the artists were usually afforded the use of tools, work space and materials, as well as a network for the sale of their work. In most cases the patron influenced the choice of subject matter. And in many cases the patron gave instruction.

### 3.3.3.1.2. A Critique

I would never question the artistic abilities of the above artists and find among their works many which intrigue me as well as exhibit the spark of creativity which draws me to God. I am thankful for any encouragement of the creative process. But I also find reason here to stop and ask, is this as good as it gets?

I recognise the aspirations of the church as given by Leeb-du Toit (1993:10) because they have been my own. Christian images, translated and conveyed by Zulu artists would be more

comprehensible to Zulus, encourage conversion, and would indicate the assimilation of biblical influence. Hence, I am also sensitive to the edge of criticism as she notes that in the process the church would gain prestige as a community benefactor, reinforce its religio-cultural authority and modify its otherwise critical attitude toward Zulu culture. Leeb-du Toit further observes that the benefit for the artists was the development of an indigenised art form, new markets for their work and a multi-cultural audience. The disadvantage was that their skills were clearly adapted to suit the priorities of their benefactors.

Duncan (1966:108) made the observation in 1966, away from KwaZulu-Natal, but applicable there, that as African artists try to explore the plastic arts using Christian themes 1) they often move away from the forms of art vital to their own community and its well-being, 2) they are dictated to by European criteria, 3) creative expression suffers as they lose their community contact, 4) they work to please a foreign market and 5) they become a parasite of a culture foreign to them. And Johanna Agthe (1994:386), in her discussion of contemporary East African art, observed that what she saw of the personal beliefs of Christian artists was much more intense than what is seen in their biblical or Christian scenes. Their deep beliefs are often expressed more in works that on the surface seem to have nothing to do with religion. What does this have to say for the case at hand?

Some of the artists coming out of the mission schools or supported by patrons in KwaZulu-Natal remained in the service of the church, such as Bernard Gwensa and Ruben Xulu. Cormick (1993:9) describes their work as representational because it is intended to narrate and be easily understood. The biblical characters come alive when the scenario is in the cane fields of Zululand. But I wonder how much of their own experience is in their carvings. Cormick (1993:8) states that Bernard was unwilling to give African features to his religious figures and Ruben always made a point of clarifying prior to beginning a commissioned carving if it was to be a white person or a black person, but was apparently pleased when he was asked to make Christ and the Madonna as Zulus.

Others of the KwaZulu-Natal artists came to see their function in terms of the ideals of Black Consciousness. Their work catalogued and contributed to liberation in South Africa (Leeb-du

Toit 1993:19). Mbatha, for one, has always been in the process of reconciling Christian values with the myths and realities of his African heritage (Danilowitz 1998:31). I wonder if this is not more in line with God's mission to bring wholeness in the struggle for identity and give authentic expression to the gospel.

As he discusses the challenge before Christian artists in Africa and Asia, Küster (1995:96) says: "In the ideal case, the encounter of Christianity and the respective traditional art will result in a new type of iconography." That is as good as it gets.

### 3.3.3.2. Tributaries of Art

The process may be a gradual one, however. Cormick (1993:9) relates that at first local people did not like the carvings of Gwensa and Xulu, their neighbours, because they were unwilling to relinquish the "sentimental European plaster art and lithographs" which the missionaries had introduced. Colonialism seemingly did a good job of supplanting African art with Western art and making African Christians believe their faith must be expressed in Western terms and with Western art forms.

But perhaps the trend is not irreversible. Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa (1997) gives hope:

As it was their lifeline from time immemorial, traditional craftspeople from the rural areas did not stop producing artefacts and utilitarian items when these were plundered during colonisation two centuries ago. Like the aptly titled exhibition, *Tributaries*, which brought some of these works into focus in 1985, these artists emerged in the mid-1980s as a flow of creativity that ran into the mainstream of artmakers. . . part of an ancient river that was submerged by history and circumstances and resurfaced to be joined by tributaries of artists from tertiary institutions and alternative art centres to make one mainstream of artists. . . . It is a river of creativity that flows across South Africa's entire landscape.

I will highlight here some of the factors which seem to have contributed to the resurfacing of this ancient river of creativity. Dhlomo-Mautloa refers to the repatriation of artefacts by art galleries and museums which I mentioned earlier. She also recognises the activity of tertiary institutions and alternative art centres. And she credits the political changes taking place in recent years for

the new values placed on the country's heritage. I will add to her list the effects of consumerism.

#### 3.3.3.2.1. Political Changes

Perhaps one of the strongest precipitators of change in the art scene of South Africa has been the political changes of recent years. Indeed, this could be said for countries across Africa. Okediji (1999:2) credits the transformation taking place in the "imaging of Africa" to the independence from colonial rule and the arising of new African nations. When he says the African object is suddenly the subject asking questions he refers to Africans providing alternative interpretations to ethnocentric Western imageries of Africa. He also credits Western scholars for reexamining how the West has represented Africa over the last several centuries, but I wonder if this would have happened if Africa had not found her own voice. And could it be she found her voice because the tributary of creativity continued to flow in spite of oppression?

In South Africa the cultures are working together to forge a 'rainbow' nation and these efforts are being exemplified in the arts. In February of 1999 a new art display was unveiled on the walls of the legislature. Parliament's internal arrangements committee, advised by staff from the South African National Gallery, chose art work to depict the rich cultural diversity of South Africa, including "pieces by well-known artists such as Jackson Hlungwani" as well as "lesser-known" artists. This exhibit replaces the Art Against Apartheid exhibit which for the past three years has "served as a daily reminder to politicians of the country's dark days of oppression and torture" (Ludski 1998).

#### 3.3.3.2.2. Art Galleries and Museums

Also participating in the effort to represent a rainbow citizenship are the country's art galleries and museums. Nessa Leibhammer (1996:41) reveals that South African galleries only began to collect and exhibit traditional African works from the late 1970's. She says this is because people who made the choices did not know much about Africa and did not think that objects made in Africa belonged in galleries. Their thoughts were: African objects did not look like those already in galleries; they have remained the same for centuries so are not unique; artworks are



made to be admired, not used; African people are 'uncivilised' and 'primitive' so their history is not as important as Western history. Also, in South Africa the apartheid government valued and promoted things produced by white people.

Why then did South African art galleries begin collecting and exhibiting African art? In Leibhammer's (1996:42-43) opinion, as European artists began using ideas, shapes, forms, colours, and patterns from Africa, African objects became more familiar and as people around the world learned more about one another they came to understand they are equal even though different. She also, like Okediji, credits Africa's insistence on her right to speak out for herself.

Leibhammer was writing on behalf of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and its Traditional Southern African Collection. Also of particular note are the African collections at the Durban Art Gallery, Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, South African National Gallery in Cape Town, King George VI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria Art Museum (Cohen 1993:34).

As well as its on-going exhibit of traditional African art, which includes an installation of Jackson Hlungwani's works, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, in conjunction with the First National Bank, organised the FNB Vita Art Prize and Vita Art Now Exhibition in 1986 to bring established as well as relatively new artists to the attention of the public (Till 1989:4). Each year around 35 artists are chosen from current exhibits, their work is on display from April to June and the R20,000 FNB Vita Art Prize is given to one of these artists. The winners since 1987 have been as follows: 1987 - Karen Nel; 1988 - Robert Hodgins; 1989 - Jackson Hlungwani; 1990 - Jackson Hlungwani; 1991 - Karen Nel; 1992 - Andries Botha; 1993 - William Kentridge; 1994 - Jane Alexander and Kevin Brand; 1997 - Willem Boshoff; 1998 - Steven Cohen; 1999 - Jo Ractliffe (Murinik 1999). It can be noted that the FNB Vita Art Prize was instigated following the 1985 Tributaries Exhibition mentioned by Dhlomo Mautloa.

#### 3.3.3.2.3. Tertiary Institutions

According to Karin Skawran (1997), the establishment of art collections at tertiary institutions came about informally, due to a dearth of visual teaching and research material for students in

the area of art history and fine arts. As was mentioned, prior to the 1980s public art galleries and museums provided little representation of black South African, European, American and Indian art so art educators were forced to provide their own. During the 1960s and 1970s individual professors such as Otto Schröder at Stellenbosch University, E. J. de Jager at the University of Fort Hare and Karin Skawran at the University of South Africa initiated such collections. Similar acquisition took place at the University of Durban-Westville and the University of the Witwatersrand while the Universities of Pretoria and the Western Cape benefited from donations.

However, Skawran, like Dhlomo-Mautloa, credits the 1985 Tributaries exhibition as influencing institutions of higher education to break down barriers between high art and crafted objects by exhibiting them side by side. Guidelines have now been established for acquiring African cultural artifacts and an attempt is made to reflect the cross-cultural currents and diverse creative talents prevalent in South Africa. Such collections can now be found at most South African universities.

University patronage of black sculptors is of fairly recent origin and is some of the first outside of the mission context, according to Rankin (1989:26). An example given was the University of Cape Town's commissioning of Jackson Hlungwani's *Fish* for the African Studies Centre in 1986.

#### 3.3.3.2.4. Alternative Art Centres

Besides support for the arts from the missions, galleries and universities there have been numerous other organizations and individuals who have played their part. My listing could never be exhaustive. One of note, however, is The African Art Centre, which was initiated in 1959 by the Natal Region of the South African Institute of Race Relations. In 1982 the Art Centre began operating independently of the Institute (Thorpe 1994a:6). The Art Centre's purpose was to promote and market products from individual artists as well as art projects subsidised by churches or other non-commercial organizations (Thorpe 1994b:55).

Jo Thorpe, called by many "The Culture Broker," was integral to the Art Centre until her

retirement in 1991 because she believed in the value of African art and craft, and was committed to getting it recognised as an authentic art form and means of communication between people (MacGregor 1994:1). According to Andrew Verster (1994:3) “Her mind was in tune with Africa, which accepts without question that when something is made, be it a headrest, a walking stick, a house, a stool, a basket or a village, it must be made well and it must please all the senses.” He also said her belief in the liberative power of art gave hope to countless people before their political liberation became a reality.

Rankin (1989:37) highlights the valuable roles community art projects played in South Africa during the time when state education reinforced what she calls the “cultural hegemony of the ruling class, depriving the disenfranchised majority of knowledge and confidence in their own heritage.” Ones she mentioned were located in Katlehong, Cape Town, Nyanga, Durban, Johannesburg (Bill Ainslee’s studio which later became Johannesburg Art Foundation) and the Thupelo Art Project. Conferences such as The State of Art in South Africa in 1979 and the Botswana Art Festival in 1982 had a similar focus and played valuable roles in allowing the African voice to be heard.

#### 3.3.3.2.5. Consumerism

The final element to be mentioned here which has contributed to the public promotion of African art in recent years is consumerism, as Kendell Geers (1990:B5) labelled it in his thought-provoking article entitled “The Consumption of Meaning.” Otherwise known as the tourist trade, it has long been on the scene in Africa with the production of countless objects not for social function but for sale in alien First World markets. According to Rankin’s (1989:11) information, examples of such art date back to the 1890’s in Natal and the Transvaal .

In 1979 the Standard Bank Foundation of African Tribal Art began using the term “transitional art” for such objects “in motion between traditional and modern forms” (Geers 1990:B5). However, at the 1987 Southern African Museums Conference in Pietermaritzburg efforts were made to eliminate the term by pointing out that art is always in a state of transition (Thorpe 1994c:88).

Meanwhile, the BMW Tributaries exhibition in 1985 was the first time for works by formally uneducated rural black artists to be exhibited alongside urban white artists, many of whom were university graduates. According to Geers (1990:B5) the result was instant success in South Africa and later Germany but the new market demands placed on these artists in most instances proved fatal to the production of socially meaningful objects for their respective communities. Rankin (1989:47) agrees that the discovery, promotion, growth and new talent were good results, but a repetitive style of high-turnover production and the promotion of less capable artists was not good. As she says, "Capitalism and art do not always make ideal bedfellows."

### 3.4. Conclusion

For that matter, have mission patronages, political independence, art galleries, tertiary institutions and alternative art centres actually helped or hurt the cause for traditional African art? They have brought it to the attention of the world but in the process it has been taken out of context. The result is what Geers (1990:B5) termed "the consumption of meaning" in that the artist's intention when producing the work and the meaning produced in its consumption out of context are two different things. Does this mean art has no value out of context? What does it say about exhibits in galleries and museums? Does it mean traditional African art cannot be effective or participate in the broader world of art? Does it mean Christian art cannot communicate across cultures?

Perhaps an answer will be found during a look at the artist Jackson Hlungwani and his sculpture. His works were some of the ones on exhibit at the 1985 Tributaries Exhibition spoken of earlier. In fact, Geers (1990:B5) says: "The great difference in meaning between the artist's intention when producing the work and the meaning produced through the consumption of that very same work is nowhere more apparent than in the work of Jackson Hlungwane."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### VISUAL EXPRESSION OF THE GOSPEL AS SEEN IN THE SCULPTURE OF JACKSON HLUNGWANI

#### 4.1. Introduction

Following a look at visual art's qualifications for expressing the gospel, an overview of traditional African art's value to the community, and a recognition of recent influences on the art scene in South Africa, the focus shifts to Jackson Hlungwani's sculpture in the context of South Africa as well as the context of Christianity. The question is, "Does his sculpture express the gospel and in so doing participate in God's mission?"

In the coming pages will be a look at Hlungwani's use of his sculpture (*The Ministry*), what led him to sculpt (*The Man*) and how the wider audience has reacted to his works (*Reactions*), in reverse order. But first, how did the world learn of this obscure artist from the small village of Mbhokota, located in the Gazankulu region of northeastern South Africa?

According to Elizabeth Rankin (1989:44), the Tsonga people of the Gazankulu area have long used figurative carving to produce images for didactic rituals of initiation as well as for sale to the tourist market. However, the work was scarcely known outside of rural confines until it attracted the interest of researchers, first for academic investigation and later for exhibition.

#### 4.2. Discovery

Evidently Anitra Nettleton was one of the first outside of those confines to learn of Hlungwani in the course of her research into Tsonga art for a degree from the University of Witwatersrand in the early 1980's. When Ricky Burnett, art adviser to BMW (South Africa) began putting together the *Tributaries* exhibition for its 1985 opening she passed along to him the information she had obtained. Burnett located Hlungwani and included one work by him, *Crucifix*, in that

exhibition (Spiro [sa]:65). As noted in Chapter Three, this exhibition changed the art scene in South Africa like nothing else ever had.

From 1985 through 1989 Hlungwani's work appeared in fourteen exhibits throughout South Africa (Markovitz 1989:23), such as solo exhibits in elitist art galleries, the Cape Town Triennial "avant-garde" exhibit in 1988 (Rankin 1989:44), a two-person exhibit with Nelson Mukhuba at the Market Gallery, an exhibit of Tsonga sculpture at the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, a First National Bank Vita Art Now Exhibition ("Talk to the Voluntary Guides. . ." [sa]:1), and the Neglected Traditions exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989 where his "visionary work" was referred to as being part of a new generation of South African sculpture (Markovitz 1989:23). He was also featured prominently and called an "enigmatic visionary" in Gavin Younge's book *Art of the South African Townships*, published in 1988 (Markovitz 1989:23).

Appearing along with Hlungwani's piece at the 1985 Tributaries exhibit were works by other established Tsonga artists Nelson Mukhuba and Doctor Phuthuma Seoka. They have since been joined by other artists such as Hendrick Nekhofe, Albert Munyai, Albert Chauke, Richard Mangoma and Noria Mabasa, creating what some have called the "Venda Renaissance" (Rankin 1989:45). The Ditike Craft Centre was established by the Venda Development Corporation about 1986 with David Roussouw assisting and promoting the work of the artists and Sibasa, in Venda, serving as an outlet for sales (Rankin 1989:44).

But the event which seemed to do the most to launch Hlungwani onto the world art stage was a major retrospective exhibit of his works in late 1989 which was organised again by Ricky Burnett, funded by BMW (South Africa), and staged in a warehouse at 140 Bree Street in Newtown, Johannesburg. According to Bruwer (1991:18), the exhibit incorporated more than 240 pieces of wooden sculpture, the result of about ten years of concentrated work. It ran for five and a half weeks and saw over 8,000 visitors (Rankin 1990:75).

### 4.3. Reactions

At the opening of the exhibition attended by more than 500 people, Professor Allan Crump, professor of Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, called Hlungwani's works the best he had ever seen (Man with a Vision. . . 1990:114). Similar reviews came from the desks of newspaper art columnists and art critics as well as the general public.

#### 4.3.1. Newspaper Reviews

The titles of reviews done by South African newspapers on the retrospective exhibition say much about the reactions to Hlungwani's art: "Power and Gentleness," (1989); "Towering Exhibitions," (1989:15); "Art Reaches into the Hearts of all Peoples," (Klaaste 1989b); "Resplendent Icon of South Africa's Fine Art," (Berman 1989); "Hlungwani, Benchmark for South African Art," (Geers 1989); "Hlungwani, a Sculptor Who Serves His God," (Witthaus 1989); "Carving a Niche," (Markovitz 1989:23-26); and "Man with a Vision: Hlungwani's Soaring Genius is Finally Recognised," (1990:114, 116).

Out of these reviews came statements like ". . . one of the greatest sculptors the world has ever produced" ("Power and Gentleness" 1989); "Critics may dismiss his beliefs, but his art cannot be ignored" ("Man with a Vision. . ." 1990:114); "Despite the humble form, we come to venerate the creative principle in him" (Klaaste 1989a: 25); "This is not your common or garden art exhibition" (Berman 1989); "Jackson Hlungwani is a man driven by the prophet motive. He serves God, not Mammon, and his sculptures bear eloquent testimony to his spiritual vision. . . . [They are] chaotic celebration" (Witthaus 1989); ". . . Jackson Hlungwani, possibly South Africa's greatest artist yet" (Powell 1990:66); and

Thoroughly magical, electric with meanings which remake the world in unexpected though resonant ways, Hlungwani's work at its best is the product of the kind of remote, unfathomable intelligence which we like to call genius . . . . It is work which is nothing if it is not visionary, spiritual and vitalist to its essence. It is clear and vivid and knows exactly what its own world looks like (Powell 1989).

It would seem the reporters had nothing but good to say about the art of Jackson Hlungwani.

#### 4.3.2. Art Reviews

Among other reviews a few criticisms of Hlungwani's work can be found, but most critiques end in praise.

##### 4.3.2.1. Criticism

Rankin (1990:76-79), in the *South African Journal of Art and Architecture* states that Hlungwani does not sustain the highest level of performance in every example, yet she concedes that this is common to other artists as well. She does credit him with "remarkable plastic and visual conceptualization." But in her opinion, Hlungwani's recognition may be due to the rise of post-modernism in South African art which is typified by a revolution of taste, art historians no longer focusing on just the "high" or "fine" art, accommodation of artists previously perceived as working outside the institutions of art, "transitional art" seeming to have arrived, and artists becoming aware of the power of a wide variety of art and frequently drawing on it.

It will become clear that Hlungwani would not have plotted such a course. His original intention for the sculpture was far removed from the gallery or exhibition halls. It may be that his recognition came with the rise of post-modernism, but that says more about the art world than Hlungwani's art.

Likewise, the category of "transitional" put upon his art as "undergoing transition from one form or context to another, away from a purely tribal, ritual or domestic usage, . . . situated midway between primitive artefacts and modern artistic creations" (Schneider 1989b:8) was a label imposed upon it by the art world. As I indicated in an earlier chapter this label was actually repealed in 1987 in South Africa. And for good reason. I agree with Schneider when he goes on to say there is a deeper and more dynamic meaning in Hlungwani's works than a derogatory "transitional" label connotes.



Rankin (1990:79) continues with remarks of a critical nature when she says “As an untrained sculptor working outside the art establishment, Hlungwani cannot, therefore, be assessed in the same terms. His works are produced not so much as art, but as manifestations of a belief system.” However, she contradicts her own statement by drawing parallels between Hlungwani’s belief system and Archaic European, Mediaeval European and Traditional African art, all of which, she says served a didactic and symbolic purpose within their societies and their respective belief systems. Likewise, she refutes her statement that there seems to be evidence that Hlungwani may draw at random from a range of visual images collected in a scrap book when she says these images are pressed into the service of highly personal meaning which radically transforms them (1990:78). In the end, Rankin’s critique is more positive than negative.

Other critics also took note of similarities between Hlungwani’s works and those of Blake or Beuys (Geers 1989), calling him “a sort of one-man history of art, making Assyrian sphinxes, Indonesian trees of life, Brancusi-like bowls, cubist Christs and stormtroopers by Barlach” (Van Zyl 1992:119). However, like Rankin finally did, Van Zyl (1992:120) acknowledges that Hlungwani may have “dipped his hand into the teeming sea of images that make up the cultural history of the world,” but he then shaped the creatures into his own. Of this characteristic Burnett (1989b:4) makes the statement: “Hlungwani’s images cause one to recollect other things seen in other places made at other times. . . . His images, like flint to the imagination, set off sparks of recognition.” My questions are, Who is copying who? and Does it really matter? I wonder as well, is it similarity between images that sets off the sparks of recognition or is it the universality of creativity?

#### 4.3.2.2. Praise

Raymond Van Niekerk (1990:47-48), former director of the South African National Gallery, in *Leadership South Africa* acclaims Hlungwani as “sculptor of genius,” describing his compelling power, mature creative talents, command of medium, diversity of scale and subject matter, and change of mood from sombre to lighthearted, grotesque to lyrical. He goes on to praise Hlungwani’s profundity, imagery and wry humour. Tuch-Gabay (1992) reports that Van Niekerk

also described Hlungwani as an artist of world stature.

In Chapter Three I listed Hlungwani as a recipient of the First National Bank and Johannesburg Art Gallery Vita Art Now award in both 1989 and 1990. It is worth noting here that in 1989 the statement was made by the gallery that it was a unanimous decision to recognise the contribution and impact of Jackson Hlungwani's exhibition as the most important of the year (Till 1989:4).

And finally, as arts advisor to BMW (South Africa), curator of the Tributaries exhibit in 1985 and again of Hlungwani's retrospective exhibit in 1989, Ricky Burnett credited Hlungwani as one of the most inventive sculptors the country has ever seen, due to his ability to mix Christian ideology, Tsonga heritage and influences of the modern world into a coherent, pictorial and sculptural language (Tuch-Gabay 1992).

The consensus seems to have been from art desk reporters, gallery directors, art professors and exhibition curators that Hlungwani should be included among the art world's best. What about the public? What did they think? And more importantly, what did they feel when viewing Hlungwani's sculpture?

#### 4.3.3. Personal Reactions

From the various reports it seems the general public agreed that the Jackson Hlungwani Retrospective Exhibition was the most important show to be seen in many years. Powell (1990:66) describes workers in overalls coming from the nearby Newtown factories and businessmen in grey suits coming from Diagonal Street, along with domestic workers, street kids and school children, socialites from the Market Theatre across the road, and an occasional hobo from the vacant lots nearby.

Throughout the exhibit Hlungwani sat perched on a low stool in the balcony, chipping away at one piece of wood and then another. He was seemingly unperturbed by the flurry about him or the continual interruption by troubled community members seeking spiritual advice, who took their turns in line with eager art patrons anxious for aesthetic elucidation. For Hlungwani, the

two were one. With Bible in hand and his traditional “Hallelujah” greeting echoing through the room, Hlungwani welcomed all with equal enthusiasm, equal humility and explosive “*joie de vivre*” (Berman 1989). Van Zyl (1992:119) describes the visit to the exhibition by a “Very Important German Person” from the top ranks of BMW (South Africa):

Very Important Person looks down gravely at Very Insignificant Sculptor. Jackson looks up, eyes twinkling. ‘Helloo,’ he coos. The VIGP is impressed. He recognises authority when he sees it. After all, he deals with it every day. He shakes the proffered hand. Everyone gives a sigh of relief. Two strong men have taken each other’s measure.

Then there was Burnett’s story of an old man who shuffled into the exhibit, looking obviously intimidated to enter what he perceived to be the domain of the privileged. But he gathered his courage and went around the gallery in a daze. When he was through he said he had just watched part of his life unfold in front of his eyes. He obviously did not know what it all meant, but Jackson Hlungwani’s work had touched a chord in him (Klaaste 1989b), as it must have done in the taxi driver who said to Burnett as he left: “‘I just want to say thank you. You reminded me who I am’” (Van Zyl 1992:119). According to Witthaus (1989), visitors to the exhibition smiled a lot and shouts of recognition and laughter would erupt every now and then. Viewing the exhibition became, as Hlungwani had intended it, a spiritual experience not soon to be forgotten.

It seems to me that these reactions would not have been elicited by sculpture which had lost its power when removed from context. It obviously communicated between cultures as well as out of context during the five and a half weeks it was on display in Johannesburg. And it evidently did the same as it travelled abroad.

In March of 1990 the evocative sculpture was on display in Windhoek, Namibia, concurrent with the independence celebrations there. And in June of 1991 they were taken to Zimbabwe’s National Gallery in Harare. Hlungwani was the first South African artist to be exhibited there (Sher 1991:16).

But the appeal of the sculpture was not only to African audiences. Transnet Corporation of

South Africa sponsored Hlungwani and his sculpture for an exhibit at the Watarium Museum for Contemporary Art in Tokyo in 1994 (Transnet Culture Desk 1995:67) and the Edinburgh College of Art included him in their Scotland-Africa 1997 celebrations. In a review given there it was said: "Despite his apparent lack of concern for representation . . . Jackson manages to capture the essential spirit of his subject in his sculpture" (Edinburgh College of Art 1997).

What is that "essential spirit" which appeals to young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated? As a Christian, I believe it is the obvious creativity, that 'spark' which puts one in touch with oneself and one's Maker!

#### 4.4. The Man

And who is this man who seemingly does not see colour, age, gender or stature? Surely he sees, but he pays no mind. Who is he that he would want the exhibition of the fruit of his labours to be a spiritual experience rather than a lauding of his skill?

Van Zyl (1992:116) says:

. . . he is an artist like no other. He is a sculptor of the most consummate skill. But he is also a visionary, who believes he was called by God . . . . Like the ass that carried Mary and the unborn Jesus into Bethlehem, he is a humble servant of God.

##### 4.4.1 Early Life

Jackson Hlungwani, sometimes calling himself Xidonkani (little donkey) and sometimes signing himself Xagani (Shangaan) was born of Tsonga ancestry in Mashampa Village in Venda (Markovitz 1989) about the year 1923 (Schneider 1989b:9). His grandmother said it was during the time of the Kaiser's war, the European war of 1914-1918 (Burnett 1989b:4). The Apartheid Act of 1948 later forced the removal of his family from his birthplace in Venda to the Gazankulu homeland (Powell 1990:69).

As was told by Jackson to Théo Schneider (1989b:10), Jackson's father, Mundunwazi, was the last-born of Bhandi Pavalala, who died a week before Jackson was born, but reappeared in Jackson. Hence, Jackson was given his name. Jackson's paternal grandmother would share her food with Jackson when he was young and tell him about his grandfather. Pavalala was a gunsmith and knew how to catch wild animals by digging game pits. Jackson's father worked first in a diamond mine and then a railway workshop where railway coaches were assembled. He taught Jackson how to sharpen iron tools, use blacksmith bellows and work with wood, making bed stands, chairs, tables, boxes, doors, mortars, pestles, spoons, porridge stirrers, scoops, sticks and head-rests. As a boy, Jackson observed birds, animals and fish when he was herding cattle, oxen, goats, donkeys and sheep with his brothers. He never attended school. In Jackson's own words, ". . . as far as school education is concerned, such as reading, my only teacher has been Christ" (Schneider 1989a:58-59).

In 1941 Jackson began working for a tea and coffee merchant in Johannesburg (Cohen 1993:1). In 1944 he lost a finger in an industrial accident at the coffee factory. He was laid off from his job without compensation, having performed a skilled job at unskilled wages. He chose to return home to Mashampa village to look after his ailing father, work for himself and, in his own words, "make my soul better" (Younge 1988:85). In 1946 he was ordained as a priest in the African Zionist Church. He later broke away to form his own church called *Yesu Galeliya One Aposto in Sanyoni Alt and Omega* and God told him to go to Mbhokota and build "New Jerusalem" (Smuts 1997:23). Not much has been recorded about the next twenty years. Evidently they were spent in raising a family and working at erecting the stone structures which served as the centre of his ministry and life.

In about 1978 Jackson had an experience while working as a labourer on the Levubu River irrigation scheme near Louis Trichardt (Schneider 1989b:11), which he describes as Satan shooting arrows through his legs. He managed to shake off one of these arrows, but the other one remained inside his leg, disappearing into his body and becoming a snake, the result being that he was left with a wound which would not heal. He told Schneider (1989a:59), "Nobody in this world has suffered like I did."<sup>1</sup>

I found no information on how long Jackson endured this pain, only that it came to the point where he made a plan to commit suicide because he could bear it no longer. His father was away at work. His mother had gone overnight to attend an exorcism ceremony. Only his two sisters were at home so he planned to tell them the next morning to go look for some very rare and special stones where the N'wenedzi and Xipisa streams meet. While they were away he would drag himself to a specific *nkondze* tree where he would hit the tree with sticks, break open its bark, suck the poisonous sap and then fall into the ditch nearby to lie unnoticed until he died (Schneider 1989a:59).

#### 4.4.2. The Vision

But on the eve of the enactment of his plan, Jesus appeared to Jackson, accompanied by two other persons. They came from the northern horizon, stepping down firmly as they came. They were not black, nor white. They had no particular colour. "They were just human beings" said Jackson in response to Schneider's questioning. The two companions were dressed like ordinary people. Jesus was dressed in red. The two companions lifted Hlungwani by the armpits to a sitting position.

In Hlungwani's own words:

Jesus stretched out his right arm and grasped my right hand. Then he began to make solemn promises to me, while holding my hand. While speaking, he would emphasize his words, by pointing at me with his left hand to emphasize his word. Then, he gave me his message. Number one, he said: 'You see, today you are healed, you will not die.' The number two: 'You will serve God for your whole life.' Number three, he said: 'You will see God himself. Look over there.' He was pointing in the direction from which they had come. I did not, in fact, see God's full stature. I only saw his legs, from the knees down . . . . What I saw of him were the legs stepping down, although they were not touching the ground but moving slightly above it . . . . Jesus said to me 'Now you have seen God' (Schneider 1989a:60).

When Jesus and his two companions had gone Jackson remained sitting up. Then a downpour of hot, blood-red water came down on him from above. The water rose to his loins. He then

heard a voice and knew it was Jesus. The voice came from above and said: ““You should know that this water is my blood. I will heal the whole world with it.”” Hlungwani became drowsy and slept for a while. All of a sudden, he woke up, and jumped as high as the roof of the hut. When he fell back he found himself standing on his two legs which would not have held him before (Schneider 1989a:60).

The healing of the leg was not instantaneous, but evidently the healing of the soul was, for Hlungwani did not take his life the next day. He told Marcelle Manley ([sa]:9) that by 1981 he was able to move around. In 1989 Markovitz (1989:24) recorded that Hlungwani regards the continuing sore as a test of strength in his battle with the Devil. “Next year it will be better” he says. When my husband and I met Jackson in 1997 an open wound was still visible on his leg but it was not being warmed by a fire as other visitors have noted. He spoke to us of the Devil having shot darts through his legs, but did not belabour the point.

#### 4.4.3. The Results of the Vision

Very little is known about Hlungwani’s ministry prior to his vision. All that he talks about seems to relate to it. Manley ([sa]:8) wrote of Jackson’s story: “Such an experience comes but once in a lifetime, and to the visionary life can never be the same afterwards.”<sup>2</sup>

A few early pieces of sculpture were done by Hlungwani in the 1960's, indicating he already had an “acute visual sensibility, respectful feel for material and an intuitive understanding of the transfer of meaning from mind to material,” but the vision, it seems, gave focus and purpose to his already existing talent (Burnett 1989a:31-32). The bulk of his sculpture was produced over the next ten years, featuring prominently in his ministry at New Jerusalem.

### 4.5. His Ministry

#### 4.5.1. The Setting

Perhaps the most vital element to a full understanding of how Hlungwani’s sculpture contributed

to his ministry is the most difficult aspect to convey. That is the setting in which it all took place. From the “Talk to the Voluntary Guides on the Jackson Hlungwani ‘Installation’”(1991:2) at the Johannesburg Art Gallery the information comes that Hlungwani’s sculpture was created for and formed a permanent part of a series of open air rooms and corridors. They served as essential elements of a religious environment which both gave expression to Hlungwani’s religious vision and belief system and served as a locus for activities and rituals of everyday life.

I have wished many times that I could have seen the sculpture in place among the rocks and crevices of New Jerusalem. I am fortunate to have seen what I did of the abandoned chambers encased in foliage. I can only recreate the scene from descriptions given by others. The most complete description comes from Peter Rich, himself an architect, who, with a perceptive eye, guides the reader through New Jerusalem, which Hlungwani called “the New country home of God and Christ.” On the following page is a diagram provided by Rich. According to Rich (1989:27), evident in Hlungwani’s architecture is a definite return to his Tsonga roots as he used the cone and cylinder hut forms to articulate the “negative outdoor room.” Rich also said clues to the architectural images held in Hlungwani’s mind can be found in pictures pasted in his scrap book. The pictures are of circular building types such as the Globe Theatre in London, the Amphitheatre of Epidauros in Greece, the Penthouse Theatre in Seattle and the Apache Crown Dance.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1950's Hlungwani discovered on the top of a hill in Mbhokota a collection of dolerite boulders which had an iron-enriched red colour and texture. A 1930's aerial photograph suggests that this was the site of an Iron Age settlement. Hlungwani says it was his wife, Magdalena, and his brother-in-law, Ngobeni, who helped him position the rocks as they are today (Rich 1989:27).

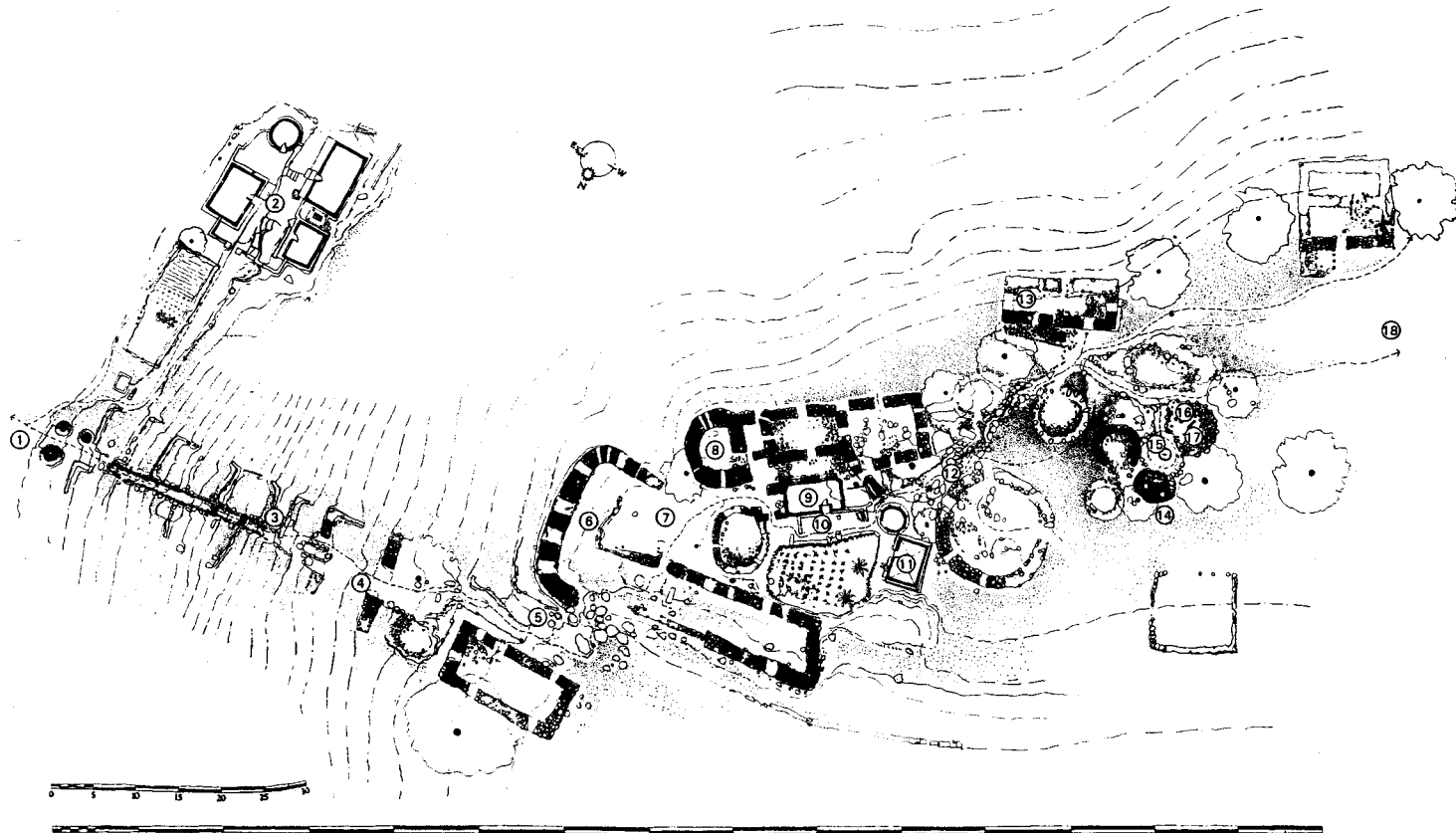
#### 4.5.1.1. A Pilgrimage Route

New Jerusalem was laid out as a “pilgrimage route,” depicting mortal life as a journey, and portraying Hlungwani’s dualistic worldview: first and last, beginning and end, life and death, entrance and exit, male and female, left and right, good and evil. The route began at the foot of the hill at Jackson’s son’s homestead (Rich 1989:27), where my husband and I met Jackson’s



# The New Jerusalem

1. Entrance pylons.
2. Typical neighbourhood  
Tsonga homestead.
3. Stone ramp.
4. Multiple entrance pylons.
5. Ante chamber.
6. The Healing Rooms.
7. Acropolis arrival forecourt.
8. Christ's Office.
9. The Labyrinth
10. Storage room.
11. Bedroom.
12. The Dual Route—the sunken passage.
13. Workshop.
14. The Altar of Christ.
15. The Chapel.
16. The Altar of God.
17. The Aerial of God.
18. Route of the Temple of Jupiter and Golgotha.



daughter, Relandu, during our visit in 1997.

Half-way up the hill stone pylons demarcated the entrance, followed by an inclined, raised stone ramp and then more pylons. The first area to be reached was a grouping of four healing rooms for treating varying disorders. They were demarcated by semi-circular dry-packed stone walls, two metres thick and three metres high (Rich 1989:29).

The route then passed between two sunken circular open-air rooms, one never completed, the other designated as "Christ's office." The walls were one metre thick and two metres high. It was a space for looking into through periodic windows, rather than entering. Inside was one free-standing piece of partially carved wood (Rich 1989:29).

Passing Christ's office one entered the "labyrinth," a narrow courtyard where much of the socializing, cooking and activities associated with daily living took place. Three detached, roofed mud buildings provided for the modest sleeping and storage needs of the Hlungwani extended family. "The co-existence of the sacred and the profane speaks of the omni-presence of the Spirit in everyday life" (Rich 1989:29).

From here one was presented with a choice of two routes. The left, sunken, zig-zag passage signified the route of the devil. The right, upper, straight passage was the path of Christ. Both routes led into the Chapel area which housed the Altar of God (for women) and the Altar of Christ (for men). Embedded in the floor of a circular walled enclosure was a receptacle for the symbolic "blood of Christ" used in healing ceremonies. Beyond that was the Altar of God (Rich 1989:29-30).

#### 4.5.1.2. The Altar of God

On this knee-high raised circular stone platform about five metres in diameter was the largest collection of sculpture to be found on the acropolis (Rich 1989:30). According to Becker (1999) there were thirteen pieces carved over a period of three years, from 1983 to 1986. Some have obviously Christian symbolism, others do not. But, in Becker's opinion, it is in the co-existence

of a liberal amalgamation of Christian and African beliefs, that an entry into another world view is provided. Dominating all was *Christ* with a disk-plow halo and a hollow eye. There was a tall *Cain* holding a shield; a small *Abel*; *Gabriel* the warrior with outstretched double right arm and shield in the left hand; *Seth* holding two tablets, one in each hand;<sup>4</sup> two smaller *Shangaan Warriors* (Shangaan being Hlungwani's clan); a fish, called the *Jonah Fish*, which stood on a short carved pole; two carved panels, both entitled *God and Christ*; a boat-like *Christ's Aeroplane*,<sup>5</sup> *Map for God and Christ*; and the *Aerial to God*<sup>6</sup> (Becker 1996:100).



Fig. 1 *Christ*



Fig. 2 *Altar of God*

The *Aerial to God* towered above the trees which enclosed the chapel area, extending upward from the centre of the Altar of God. A reclaimed silver and red radio antenna, its vertical heavenly gesture served as an extension of the axis of the world, the middle point of the compass, the still point in a turning world and symbolised the three realms of life described by Hlungwani as “the upper, the middle and the lower and the imminent descent of the upper to the lower” (Burnett 1989b:5). Rich (1989:30) further explains the aerial's significance to Hlungwani as a symbol for the energy of prayer as it is beamed heavenward but its meaning is also broadcast to humankind.

#### 4.5.1.3. The Altar of Christ

To the right of the Altar of God was the Altar of Christ, situated on the highest of the circular stone platforms. It stood two metres above the sunken dance area where a crucifix demarcated the centre of the chapel complex. A formal composition of sculpture, palm leaves, wrought iron and pewter found objects, vases and crucifixes gave the altar a marked frontality. The frontality was maintained by a semi-circular wooden branch which also served as a balustrade to the raised platform behind, from which Hlungwani preached (Rich 1989:30).



Fig. 3 *Altar of Christ*

At each end of the bent wooden branch was a pit or hollow. The one on the east end, in the direction of the rising sun, symbolised Christ. The one on the west end symbolised the devil and the setting sun. The arc of the branch followed the course of the sun but also corresponded to heaven as is found in the traditional thought patterns of the Tsonga. For them heaven is an immense solid vault which rests on the earth. Suspended from the arched branch was a sculpted fish which further depicted the perception of the sky as a vault when reflected in water. Also dangling from the solar arc were strands of string, the imagery being taken from a Tsonga song which says: “What a rare thing is a string. Oh, how should I love to plait a string, and go up to Heaven. I would go up there to find rest” (Miles [sa]:1).

The Altar of Christ consisted of six parts: the *Solar Arc* described above, the *Fish* hanging from the arc, the *Angel Gabriel*, *God*, a metal *Cross* and *Christ Playing Football*.<sup>7</sup> *God*, whose oblique view was hardly touched by the sculptor's tools and whose features were non-descriptive save for the deeply carved recesses of a star and a cross gives a distinct feeling of a downward thrust, whereas the *Angel Gabriel*, standing on a corkscrew or spiral shaped pedestal has a definite upward lift and does have carving on its oblique side (Miles [sa]:2). The piece *Christ Playing Football* is described by Rankin (1990:82 ) as depicting "a modern-day hero" and by Van Zyl (1991:120) as "the playful Christ" who created both fish and birds, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Golgotha and Jerusalem. The preacher in Jackson calls up the polarities of life. The sculptor in him gives them life. Van Niekerk (1990:50) gives a description befitting the magnitude of this piece of sculpture:

The short, sturdy legs, firmly tensed to hold the ball, contrast with the long arms that are wrapped in a spiralling thrust about the body: the result, a compelling ambiguity in suggested movement and meaning. And the diagonal impulse of the whole upper half of the figure is contradicted by the solid and motionless legs and feet. The logic and purpose of this deliberate tension is found in the strongly modelled head of Christ that bends to contemplate the ball he holds and cannot kick away. The ball is, for Hlungwani, the world and its peoples. With compassion and infinite tenderness in the shadowed, hooded eyes, the Christ figure broods



Fig. 4 *Christ Playing Football*

over the football of humanity in a world irrevocably fallen, eternally the object of his care. And how cruelly Christ too is rent -- a lightening crack runs through his head to a wound over his heart, just above what could be the breast-pocket badge of his soccer club. The badge's emblem is composed of a nest of rounded V's -- a sign as old as the art of Stone Age Africa.

Imagine a worship area so adorned! Sermons and lessons would have come easily to Hlungwani, for he had already enacted them in his sculpting. In turn, the congregation's worship, comprehension and internalisation would have been enhanced by the powerful visual aids.

#### 4.5.1.4. Continuing the Pilgrimage

Beyond the chapel, accessed by a steep stone ramp, was a 1.5 metre rectangular platform which Hlungwani called "Jupiter," perhaps a derivative of "Egipta" in reference to Egypt because Hlungwani spoke of Moses, Pharaoh, Jesus and Pilot. On past Jupiter was Golgotha, at the top of the hill, the termination point of the pilgrimage. Its construction was incomplete, but its symbolism effective, as Hlungwani explained that it was the end of the route but it was also the beginning, in reference to the resurrection. From here one retraced one's footsteps back through the chapel, to the passage, to the labyrinth, the healing rooms and the ramp leading downward to the foot of the hill (Rich 1989:30).

#### 4.5.2. Religious Therapy

It was in this setting that Hlungwani carried out his teaching and healing during the 1980's. Marilyn Martin (1987:9) tells of her visit to New Jerusalem in 1987 and of services taking place under the trees:

. . . quietly and gently, discussions and questions being encouraged rather than preaching. People come and go, lunch is served, books and a Bible are passed around. The rituals and symbolic significance need not be stated, they are enshrined in the rambling structure of complex areas and indentations, and in the sculpted and constructed altars and an enormous mast. The peace and spirituality are palpable.

Perhaps Hlungwani's 'preaching' never was what Westerners consider preaching, a monologue or lecture. His may have been more of a story-telling style, as is traditional in Africa, or, as Martin says, a quiet, gentle discussion style. Also as Martin indicates, the sculpted objects may have made the verbal statement unnecessary. According to Van Niekerk (1990:51), Hlungwani's knowledge of the Bible and the way he quotes its texts, are no more important in his mission than the creation of the sculpture which is used to instruct his followers and enlighten God's word. Van Niekerk (1990:67) goes on to say that Hlungwani is above all else devoted to the service of the people of his community and the nature of their spiritual life. Powell (1990:67) calls that service "religious therapy." Although in Hlungwani's mind and ministry they probably are not separated, Western systematics will be followed by delineating between the teaching and healing aspects of his ministry.

#### 4.5.2.1. Teaching

It was noted earlier what Becker said about Hlungwani's sculpture serving a didactic purpose in his church. Like the figures made by his ancestors, the traditional Tsonga woodcarvers, Hlungwani's works may be considered a collection of teaching aids. He used them to tell the wonders of creation which he observed as a shepherd boy, to translate his spiritual experiences into shapes and figures, to participate in worship, to be pointed at for young and old to behold, to make repeated didactic application and to give the works of heaven a place in the New Jerusalem (Schneider 1989b:12). They were a part of his mission, a part of his teaching. The works themselves were his sermons (Van Niekerk 1990:49).

#### 4.5.2.2. Healing

Hlungwani said that just as his sculpting is the result of God working through him so is his healing (Van Niekerk 1990:49). The symbols he uses in his healing were given to him when Jesus told him "What John the Baptist said about my task, I hand over to you." Thus, he uses water and ashes from fire, based on the water baptism of John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit and fire baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:11) (Schneider 1989a:61). According to Markovitz (1989:24), the ash from the fire which Hlungwani keeps burning by his ulcerated right leg is what he gives out

to his followers.

Sikheto Maluleke and Théo Schneider (1986:25) tell of long drummed night vigils, incantory dances and ritual purifications taking place at New Jerusalem which challenged and replaced the ongoing nightly practices of neighbouring traditionalist herbalists and exorcists. According to Schneider (1989a:62), Hlungwani compares his healing practices to those of traditional healers saying “Magical healing practices are used by Satan, but they can be brought back to God.” Of traditional healers he says, “I heal them and convert them. From then on, their divining bones and their remedies are again at the service of the original order of things described in the Bible.”

Just as the sculpture set the scene for worship, praise and teaching, so would it have set the scene for healing practices. In fact, all would have been a part of the whole.

#### 4.5.2.3. Followers

Marcelle Manley tried to establish the numerical strength of Hlungwani’s following but was unable to do so conclusively. Anna Boloji, a Mbhokota woman, told Manley ([sa]:20) “probably hyperbolically, as African courtesy requires” that his church numbered 1,500 members although she conceded they did not all attend his services every Sunday and Wednesday.

From Elza Miles ([sa]) of the Johannesburg Art Gallery it is learned that Hlungwani’s followers wore uniforms which incorporated “lengths of wool,” reminiscent of the string dangling from the solar arc and the Tsonga song mentioned earlier. And Schneider (1989a:61) explains the three rands required of each member, which Hlungwani calls “the three shillings of the cross”: one shilling for a walking stick to remain from and resist the temptations of Satan, one to beat Satan and prevent him from coming near, and one to show that at any time of the day or night the light has come and chased darkness away. Hlungwani insists he does not want to be paid for his healing or preaching. He says “God is paying me. Jesus told me that people had offered him gifts of thanksgiving, but not payments.”



#### 4.5.2.4. The Shaman

Van Niekerk (1990:48) and Powell (1990:67) both state that Hlungwani's story conforms closely to that of the shaman, the seer and the medicine man. As much a visionary, a prophet and a healer as he is a maker of objects, the shaman is one who has received supernatural powers through his suffering.

It is true that Hlungwani qualifies as a visionary, prophet, healer, maker of objects and one who suffers. However, according to Powell (1990:67), this shaman claims that he is continually advised by Jesus, who is always "in his head." Hlungwani emphatically expressed to Schneider (1989a:61):

'Jesus is telling me just now. Yes, in all my activities, I am in constant communication with him, nothing is left to chance. He comes from above and into me! . . . The Lord told Jesus and Jesus told me. I am simply saying what I have been told to say.'

This is indicative of a worldview which sees no dichotomy between the supernatural and the natural worlds. Just as easily as Hlungwani goes up to be with God does Christ come down to be in him.

#### 4.5.2.5. The Ministry Continues

After the retrospective exhibit in 1989 Hlungwani insisted that the altars which had been in place at New Jerusalem be sold. They had now done their work at Mbhokota, he said, and must continue to proselytise in the city (Dodd 1999), they must be disseminated to spread the message of peace (Powell 1990:69). This is essentially what Hlungwani told me when he said they must now "teach the nations."

Some of Hlungwani's sculpture has been sold for as much as R35,000 each. The money is put into a trust in the artist's name. Hlungwani refuses to make any connection between money and the work he does. He will take what he calls "bread money," but never a direct payment. That

would be to prostitute what God has given him, he says, and he is, before anything else, a man of God. He is much more likely to simply give away his sculpture, as he did to us, than he is to sell it (Powell 1990:69).

Evidently in conjunction with selling the sculpture, in 1990 Christ instructed Jackson to move from New Jerusalem to Kanane, just outside of Mbhokota, to establish a church for his wife and the women, which would be called New Canaan (Manley [sa]:19). By 1993 no pieces of sculpture were left at New Jerusalem (Cohen 1993:3) and the homestead had shifted to New Canaan, the place where my husband and I visited Hlungwani in 1997. As I indicated earlier, Hlungwani continues his teaching, using the pictures in books such as *Revelation: Art of the Apocalypse* (Dodd 1999), *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem* (Manley [sa]:22), *The Androgynes: Fusion of the Sexes* (Manley [sa]:13), a Time/Life flyer, and a Grade One reading book (Powell 1990:69). He more than likely continues his healing ministry as well, but I did not witness that or find recent sources to document such. He definitely continues his sculpting, evidently more now for teaching the nations rather than a local body of believers. His sense of fusing 'mission' with 'visual creativity' can still be seen in his incessant carving and his insistence on sharing, even with first-time visitors, the gospel in pictorial form.

#### 4.5.3. Theology

##### 4.5.3.1. Where Does He Stand?

Schneider described Hlungwani as a person in transition, between the traditional beliefs of his contemporary milieu and the central tenets of ancient biblical texts such as the narratives, the Psalms and the Proverbs; between the Transvaal cities and his rural homestead; between wood-carving and healing; between building projects and worship or preaching sessions; between heavenly work and satirical down-to-earth carvings (1989b:8). I agree that Hlungwani moves between one and the other, but he is not in the process of change as he moves, which is the connotation in the word transition. He seems to have the prophet's ability to be what he needs to be in each situation. In fact, I would say he manages to stand erect with feet firmly planted in both worlds.

#### 4.5.3.2. Syncretism?

In the realm of theology this is often perceived as syncretistic and implies a double allegiance to God and the gods, the Father and the fathers (Schneider 1989b:8). But I agree with Schneider that dogmatic concepts and orthodox definitions are far too static to describe Hlungwani's theology (1989b:9). He appears to transcend socio-cultural barriers and demarcations with his vision of heaven and intuitive embracing of both 'Israel and Africa.'

No, the Bible does not say the devil is my uncle, as Hlungwani does, or that he eats black and white (Dodd 1999). It does not say that Satan was God's first born son and Jesus was his last born and therefore favourite son ("Man with a Vision . . ." 1990). But cannot this imagery depict the truth of man's sinfulness and God's redeeming love? Not many Christians would say God delegates to Jesus and Jesus delegates to them, as Jackson says (Manley [sa]:23) but is that not what Jesus meant when he said "You are my friends if you do what I command" (Jn 15:14)? Most people would look sceptically at a man who said (Manley [sa]:23) God has empowered him to put an end to the world in three weeks if people persist in their evil ways, but many would recognize the authority this commands when he gives the order (Manley [sa]:23) to "Stop all nonsense!"

#### 4.5.3.3. Reality?

Alex Dodd (1999) said of Hlungwani's unconventional combination of Christian and African traditional practice:

These days I suspect there is something in that resignation to contradictoriness, an acceptance of equations that simply don't add up that is integral to my own humanity. And there's something about being African in all of this too.

Here is a man who dares to translate Christianity into the lives of his people in terms they understand, with symbols they recognize and subject matter which reaches them where they are. Manley ([sa]:24) uses Daneel's term "enacted theology" to describe Hlungwani's theology as affirmative, rather than reactive against Western Christian theology. She says it is actually an

unselfconscious disregard of it. And I say art is a good means for doing such an affirmative and enacted theology.

It is not my purpose in this paper to determine whether or not Jackson Hlungwani's theology passes the test of orthodoxy on all levels. My ultimate concern is: Does his sculpture fulfill God's mission in its expression of the gospel? So my question of his theology should be: Is there a firm enough understanding of God's mission and the gospel that it can be expressed through the sculpture?

It would seem that Hlungwani experienced God's mission of redemption and being made whole through his vision if not before. The transformation is evidenced in what Schneider (1989b:8) identifies as Hlungwani's religious motives, sense of mission and dedication to the service of his neighbours. The result is more wisdom, more spirituality, more compassion and more humour than one would expect.

#### 4.5.3.4. Myth?

Manley (1994:27) is helpful when she describes Hlungwani's communication of his religious experience as mythical and emphasizes Cantwell Smith's conclusion that faith without a mythical basis becomes mere religion. Christ the soccer champion is one of Hlungwani's myths. Nowhere does Scripture say Christ played soccer, yet depicting him this way, as indicated in Chapter One, brings him into the lives of South Africans even more vividly than depicting him as a fisherman would. Hlungwani was able to incarnate the power as well as the attentiveness of Christ, whether he dressed him in shorts or placed him on the cross. If one can see beyond the difference in the myths to the 'essential spirit' in the sculpture it becomes a tool for spiritual elucidation.

Could this then be one of the great contributions of art? Described earlier as metaphor and seen in Hlungwani's sculpture as myth, it serves to help the viewer experience his or her faith as well as express the experience. Art animates not only inanimate objects, but faith as well.

## 4.6. The Sculpture

Having looked at the discovery and reaction to Hlungwani's sculpture, as well as his life and ministry, the focus turns now to the sculpture itself. It is, after all, the primary concern in a effort to determine its effectiveness in expressing the gospel.

### 4.6.1. Materials and Technique

#### 4.6.1.1. Wood

With only two exceptions as far as I can tell, Hlungwani's sculpting has been done with wood. In those two instances he worked with metal to produce a *Cross* for the Altar of Christ and the *Aerial of God* for the Altar of God. According to Roussouw (1989:63) the wood Hlungwani uses is, in almost all cases, indigenous to his area. Although he sometimes fells and chooses pieces from living trees, his preference is for dead, dry wood.

Hlungwani believes wood is a precious gift from God, to be used wisely. He sees his sculpting as a way to immortalise or bring back to life dead wood. Sculpting is symbolic of the resurrection of Christ. In conversation with Mabaso (1994:1), Hlungwani pointed to a pile of dry wood, raised his hands and said "These woods are dead, but come next month, some of them will be alive." Does this not fit the definition of art as an object which takes on new life in the hands of the artist? Mabaso (1994:2) goes on to say this also links with the notion of rebirth which Hlungwani preaches: "People must be born again, not physically but spiritually. As sculptors we must preach the truth and peace. God is peace. All nations must come together."

For Hlungwani, wood is more than just a material. It is also a mystery. There are intrinsic meanings hidden within it. Powell (1990:67) relays Hlungwani's perception of his task as an artist being to liberate what is already there as much as it is to make something new. Once he has found the particular life-force within the wood, the work is finished. Again, evidence can be seen of a holistic worldview in which all elements of life are sacred.

#### 4.6.1.2. Tools

Hlungwani constructs his most important tools from found objects. He makes the handles from bicycle frames, pipes and other cylinders while the blades come from old car springs, planes, screwdrivers and rasps (Roussouw 1989:63). Obviously the skills learned from his father are put to good use in the making of his tools as well as his working with wood.

#### 4.6.1.3. Style

Rankin (1990:79-80) describes Hlungwani's work as paradoxically holistic yet extremely diverse

in style. One sculpture may be monolithic, while another will be an assemblage of parts. One piece may be characterised by rawness while another has finely worked surfaces and delicate detail. One may be monumental while another is tiny but equal in potency. She says such diversity makes it impossible to use style as a guide for dating. I have observed that most of the sculpture is in the round and is equally powerful from one angle as from another, but the relief carvings and silk screen prints are exceptional as well, especially when viewed with a perception of depth. An example of such power is felt when one looks at the silk screen print done for the South African Bible Society's Tsonga translation of the Book of Proverbs and entitled *Wisdom Circle*.



Fig. 5 *Wisdom Circle*

Schneider (1989b:9) observes that as a flat graphic it seems crowded, but that one should look at it as if the figures are decorating a conical grain basket or the thatched roof on a rondavel. With that perspective the figures do indeed begin their procession through the cycles of life.

#### 4.6.2. Years of Productivity

Although Hlungwani has continued to sculpt since then, my analysis covers his activity from the early sixties through 1989 because those were the years of activity and ministry at New Jerusalem in Mbhokota when the sculpture served its original purpose. Ricky Burnett (1989a:34) suggests the following “thematic preoccupations” for the work from those years: 1982-84: altar pieces; 1983-85: bowls and sticks; 1986-87: fish; 1989: thrones. However, he does agree with Rankin that variations in style and scale “tend to loop and weave throughout,” not as if Hlungwani is “in search of self” but as if his focus shifts.

I have made observations of my own from the catalogue produced for the 1989 Retrospective Exhibit. It gave the title, date, wood, measurements and ownership for 223 pieces done by Jackson from the early sixties through 1989. In reality, only four of these pieces were done before 1980, so Jackson produced at least 219 pieces in ten years, with productivity naturally varying from year to year. The number of pieces per year were as follows: 1980: 1; 1981: 9; 1982: 8; 1983: 26; 1984: 50; 1985: 4; 1986: 36; 1987: 31; 1988: 6; 1989: 48.

As stated earlier, Hlungwani’s vision occurred about 1978, with perhaps a gradual return to mobility, such that only in 1981 was he really able to move around. This is when his sculpting began in earnest. From all indications the early works were done primarily for use in the worship, teaching and healing taking place at New Jerusalem. Of the sixteen altar pieces mentioned earlier, one was made in 1982, eleven were made in 1983, one in 1984 and three in 1986.

It is not known exactly which other pieces were used at New Jerusalem, but Ivor Powell (1990:66) excites the imagination with:

Around every corner there is a delight for the eye: a crucifixion nestling in the branches of a tree; a Fish sculpture protruding from a niche built into the wall . . . animals, figures from the Bible, ancestor figures or figures from Hlungwani’s private mythologies standing on piles of stones in the open spaces.

And Alex Dodd (1999) reinforces Powell's description with "... New Jerusalem used to be a sight to behold."

As noted earlier, Anitra Nettleton came across Hlungwani in the early 80's. Perhaps as a result, in 1983 he produced the Wisdom Circle silkscreen print for the Bible Society of South Africa publication of Proverbs in Tsonga (Schneider 1989b:9). That same year he did two other silkscreen designs which are in a private collection and the Stellar Panel which he donated to the Bible Society (Schneider 1989b:12). It is easy to assume that from that point his fame began to spread and his work began to be sold. From 1985 onwards his sculpture appeared in exhibits.

I have no information on when items were sold except for the altar pieces. These were not sold until after the Retrospective Exhibit in 1989. At the publication of the Exhibit catalogue 153 of the 223 pieces were already in collections, having been sold or given away. Of the 70 which were listed as still belonging to the artist, 16 were altar pieces and 38 had been done in 1989, meaning perhaps 16 came from their positions in the nooks and crannies of New Jerusalem (Burnett and Brandt 1989).

#### 4.6.3. Themes and Subject Matter

Drawing again from the catalogue and using the categories delineated there I found that of the 223 pieces, 41 were angels, God, Christ or the crucifix, 40 were human figures including biblical and non-biblical characters, 35 were decorative or symbolic pieces, 44 were bowls or sticks, and 63 were animals. The fact that only one piece of sculpture depicted a plant supports L. Meyer's (1992:11) observation that in traditional African art landscapes and plant life are virtually unseen, the human figure is most frequently represented and animals are used to complete, modify or characterize human behaviour. It appears to me that in Hlungwani's cosmology animals take on a sense of the sacred. Indeed, perhaps all of life is sacred to him.

##### 4.6.3.1. Series

Hlungwani's sculpture which exists in series has added impact because of the sense of familiarity



and recognition it instills and because it invites participation in a dialogue of repetition and modification (Rankin 1990:77). I am aware of characteristic repetitiveness in the music of Africa and have a sense that it plays similar roles in both aspects of art.

What should be kept in mind as the replications are listed is that no two of Hlungwani's pieces are alike. Although the subject matter is repeated, each bowl, each fish, each crucifix is unique. Also, most of the repeated themes were, as Rankin (1990:77) observes, not made as individual objects for sale on the art market, but as part of a larger statement. They were made as an expression and a reinforcing of a world view.

Multiple titles and/or subjects are as follows: God: 8; Christ: 12; crucifixes: 6; angels: 15; feet and legs: 5; Seth: 3; Shangaan warrior: 2; Sampson and Boxers: 2; Shangaan Chief: 2; Mr and Mrs Petrus: 2; spoons: 11; walking sticks: 13; Parliament: 4; receptacles (bowls, jugs, platters): 37; thrones: 9; rainbirds: 5; elephants: 5; bulls: 4; vultures: 5; fish: 33.

#### 4.6.3.2. Fish

Out of the 63 animal carvings 33 were fish. The most of any other animal was 5. This says a lot about the importance of the fish in Hlungwani's symbolism. Several suggestions have been made as to what that symbolism might be. Abrahams (1989:15) concludes that Hlungwani's fish "embody and begin to fulfill the prophecy that with the apocalypse the life of creature man will acquire the ease and freedom of fish in their element." According to Van Zyl (1992:8), Hlungwani describes fish as the most important creatures in the water, in the same way man is on land. And Van Niekerk (1993:51) passes on Hlungwani's perspective that fish, like humankind, praise the Lord.

When I learned from Powell (1990:66) that Hlungwani describes his fish with the word "shoeshine," referring to their glistening movements through water, the phrase "Instant shoeshine!" which Hlungwani used several times when we were with him became clear to me. I was puzzled as to its meaning at the time although I felt it was a proclamation of victory and joy. It was said along with Jackson's characteristic thumbs-up gesture and charismatic smile, in

much the same way as he said “Hallelujah!” Perhaps it was indeed another form of praise, connecting man’s praise to the praise of fish and all of creation.

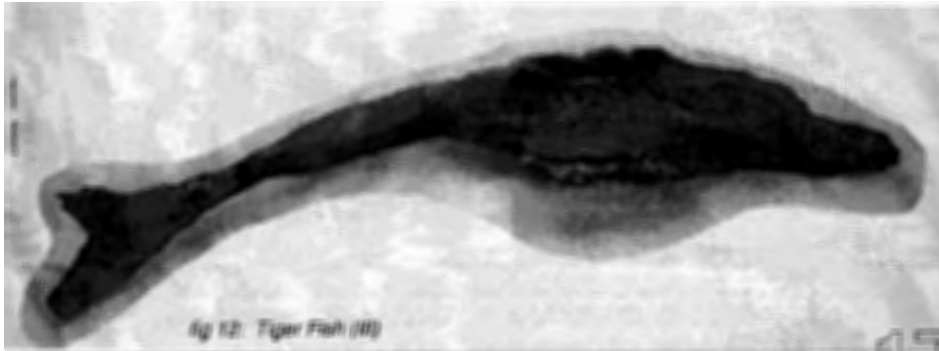


Fig. 6 *Tiger Fish (III)*

Becker (1989:20) and Van Zyl (1992:8) each highlight the Tsonga use of fish images on clothing and utensils and in proverbs and Younge (1988:84) tells of the fish motif having been a symbol in the art of Africa since at least 3500 B. C. Early Christians adopted the fish symbol to depict Christ as “fisher of men” and “Divine Fish” (Younge 1988:84), but Rayda Becker (1989:20) says that to Hlungwani the fish is not the specific symbol for Christ. Perhaps she means that for Hlungwani the symbol is more all-encompassing in celebration, worship and praise to God than just representative of Christ. In this vein, its use could signify the holistic aspect of Hlungwani’s faith since the symbol can be recognised as coming not only from traditional Christianity, but also from his traditional Tsonga ancestry and from his sense of oneness with God’s creation.

#### 4.6.3.3. Crucifixes

Hlungwani makes use of other traditional Christian symbols such as the crucifix, but they are personalised from his own experience or to the context of his community. Each crucifix is rife with unique elements (the inclusion of birds, animals, intentional notches and projections like on my spoon) which make them powerful “didactic tools,” to use Becker’s label (1989:21).

In one crucifix “a hulking figure with jagged features” portrays Christ not as the “prettified and gentle Christ of Western iconic history” but as “the malformed, shocking face of the Christ of Old Testament prophecy” (Witthaus 1989). In many the crown of thorns seems to take the form of the Tsonga ‘headring,’ which is a sign for maturity, wisdom and leadership (Becker 1989:22).

Of particular note is that in most cases the figure of Christ overshadows the representation of the cross. He is obviously hanging on a cross, but either the horizontal beam bends to the contour of the arms or it disappears completely. The arms become a gesture of praise more than an expression of agony. Or, Becker (1989:21) likens it to a gesture of blessing. Hlungwani's crucifixes definitely depict victory rather than defeat.

#### 4.6.3.4. Binaries

Becker (1989:23) emphasises that evident in many of the crucifixion works is a complex set of



Fig. 7 *Large Crucifix*



Fig. 8 *Crucifix (III)*

binaries of which Hlungwani often speaks: man/woman, good/evil, up/down, black/white, Christ/devil, Cain/Abel, new world/old world. In one crucifix duality is represented by the Tsonga images of a bird (good) and a snake (evil). In another, symmetrical placing of like forms represent buildings on either side of Christ to depict Golgotha and Jerusalem, the old and the new. As Becker observes, "Hlungwani has revealed a profound interpretation of the crucifixion" and it is with the help of his Tsonga symbols that "these profundities are explored."

Hlungwani also depicted the struggle between good and evil by his choice of the pieces of sculpture

which he placed on the Altar of God. The shields carried by *Gabriel*, *Cain* and the *Shangaan Soldiers* suggest war, while the fish represents peace. “Fish don’t fight” says Hlungwani. The double right hand on *Gabriel* depicts the aggressive arm of the angel being calmed by that of Jesus. Becker (1999) identifies this as only one of many narratives that Hlungwani could have quite literally demonstrated to his congregants through his sculpture.

The sculpture *Adam and the Birth of Eve* which Hlungwani did in 1989 for the Johannesburg Art Gallery again combines Adam and Eve, along with the feet of Cain and Abel, not so much to represent good and evil, but as a depiction of opposites being brought together. Cohen (1993:21) relays Hlungwani’s explanation that Adam and Eve as a single person refers to his vision of one South African nation rather than separate white and black groups. The egg in Adam’s hand (or is it Eve’s hand?) is an appeal to men and women to treat each other gently -- like eggs rather than stones (Spiro [sa]).

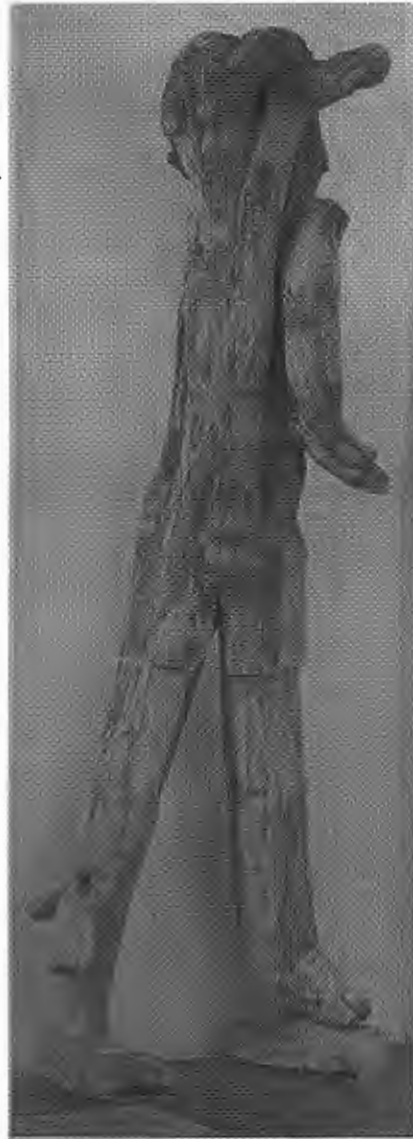


Fig. 9 *Adam and the Birth of Eve*

#### 4.6.3.5. Feet and Legs



Fig. 10 *God’s Leg with Eggs*

Eggs also feature prominently in a piece of sculpture entitled *God’s Leg with Eggs* in which the egg seems to depict peace, healing and new life. Abrahams (1989:15) interprets the eggs as representing the “healing transmutation of malady into meaning, disease into creative energy.” Similar symbolism could perhaps be attached to the protrusions on the extended leg of *Christ, the Soccer Champion*. Representative of eggs, they may speak of the healing and new life which Christ affords when he scores the winning point with his death and resurrection.

I surmise that any depiction of legs or feet has highly personal connotations for Hlungwani because of the vision in which he saw only the feet of God and because of the ulcerated leg which plagues him daily. However, there is the distinct sense that a deeper truth is being depicted in each case as well. In the sculpture *Christ, Right Foot Forward*, Christ's right hand rests on the right leg, as if with a healing touch, or a touch of empathy, or the granting of grace to endure the pain.

Also making use of the foot image is the *Devil's Foot*. But in contrast to the smooth "life-giving forms of the foot of God" mentioned earlier, the devil's foot is made up of "gnarls and weathermarks" (Powell 1990:69). Again, the dualities of good and evil are depicted, as well as Hlungwani's personal experience with them.

#### 4.6.3.6. Receptacles

Symbolism is also rife in the receptacles found among Hlungwani's sculpture. At first one might dismiss his bowls, jugs and platters as tourist art, something to sell to the people who will not buy a crucifix. But one must look more closely. They do maintain the functionality of African art in which even useful items should be made with care. But, also like other African art, they



Fig. 11

fulfill a symbolic function as well. Abrahams (1989:15) would most likely agree because he claims they act as "carriers," yet at the same time are "nutriment for the spirit." This, he concludes, is an example of how Hlungwani's images, like Blake's, are not mere symbols, but also enactments. Again, they encourage experienced meaning and meaningful experience.

I am reminded by these food and beverage receptacles of the images Letty Russell presents in her book, *Church in the Round*, as she talks about "God's welcome table" (1993:181), the

“kitchen table” (1993:75) and the “table spread by God and hosted by Christ” (1993:18). Is Hlungwani welcoming all, man and woman, black and white, to God’s banquet table, the wedding feast? Is he inviting the viewer to drink of the living water?

#### 4.7. The Purpose

The humbleness of form found in a bowl, jug or platter also represents well the purpose, mission and calling of the man Jackson Hlungwani. Gavin Younge (1988:85) reports in his *Art of the South African Townships* that Jackson has said:

‘This work of mine, what I am doing now is not an image, it is not an idea, it is not a fairy-tale. It is truth itself. The reason is that the work does not originate in me.’

To Marcelle Manley ([sa]:1) he said “‘I don’t talk story-story; I show you really-really. A-1, come! I’ll give you life’”. These are the words of one who has seen a vision and been given a mission.



171 *Stellar Panel*

Fig. 12 *Stellar Panel*

Jackson depicted his vision and healing experience on the *Stellar Panel* which he made in 1983 and gave to the Bible Society of South Africa. It pictures a firework of stars and crosses, exploding and spreading in all directions. In the process heaven and earth meet with goats, donkeys, buses and human figures being “thrown to the fringe of the cosmic circle by a quasi-

solar eruption” (Schneider 1998b:12). He also depicted his part in God’s mission on the Wisdom Circle found on the Book of Proverbs. There he identifies himself as the donkey (Xidonkani), the colt which carried Mary to Bethlehem and Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus is represented by the star above the colt. “I am that colt’ says Jackson Xidonkani Hlungwani . . . carrying the Star of Zion on its back” (Schneider 1989b:10).

#### 4.8. Conclusion

I am convinced that Jackson Hlungwani does indeed express the gospel of Jesus Christ with his sculpture. He depicts the love of God, the Incarnation, the struggle between good and evil, the triumph over evil, the Crucifixion, the praise of God’s creatures and more. In the process, he participates in God’s mission to bring all of creation to wholeness through that gospel. I see in Hlungwani’s sculpture the elements of joy and praise essential to worship of the God who made a way for salvation from sin. I see in them myriads of avenues for teaching the truths of scripture. I see in them an affirmation of African life as well as an admonishment of sin. I see in them an identification with the particularities of a people in a specific place, yet a universalism which makes them appealing to all.

I still find it sad that New Jerusalem was dismantled. But had it not been, Hlungwani’s creativity would not have touched as many lives as it has. Perhaps that, too, was a part of God’s mission.

## NOTES ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. Of the wound to the leg, Van Zyl says: "At this point it is difficult not to become irritatingly rational or depressingly mystical. Version A: lesion. Lack of vitamin C. Kept from healing by heat. Version B: here is a literal suffering artist straight from the romantic age: Chopin with his TB. Or the modern disassociated self wishing that this too solid flesh would melt: Van Gogh or Gaughin" (1992:119).
2. According to Manley ([sa]:8), Daneel (Daneel 1987:157-158) contends that, among African Independents, such an experience is an essential authentication of prophetic leadership. Dreams and visions include encounters with God himself or his representatives and are confirmed by an injunction in the dream or vision that the time has come for action in everyday life .
3. I wonder: Did these architectural examples inspire Hlungwani or was he noting in them an expression of the ancient circular form found in African art long before such buildings were erected?
4. The 1989 Catalogue of the Retrospective exhibit lists this piece as Cain's Son (Burnett 1989a:41).
5. The 1989 Catalogue lists a piece called Cain's Aeroplane as an altar piece. The two must be the same (Burnett 1989a:45).
6. When the Altar of Christ was sold to Witwatersrand University in 1989 the Aerial was too tall to be housed indoors, so the original was returned to New Jerusalem and a smaller replica was made for the gallery (Becker 1996:100).
7. When the Altar of Christ was sold to Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989 the piece *Christ Playing Football* was sold separately to a private collector by Hlungwani. The Altar is now called the Altar of God by the Gallery (Cohen 1993:24).



## CHAPTER FIVE

### AN IMPERATIVE FOR MISSION AND THE VISUAL EXPRESSION OF THE GOSPEL

#### 5.1. Introduction

With my definition of mission being God at work to bring all of creation to wholeness and with an African lens on how I see God's creation I find myself deeply distressed when I read a statement such as the following:

With the advent of westernism and Christianity, there came the notion that everything African was primitive and barbaric -- a notion that led many an African to a contempt for himself, his ancestry and history, and his cultural heritage (Erivwo 1979:221).

The pain increases as I read Anselme T. Sanon's (1992:100-101) words: "African art, like African culture, despised, commercialized, or condemned, has seen its cultural soul wounded to death." Sanon goes on to tell about an African religious sister whom he first met when she was sculpting in wood and clay faces of Christ which had great beauty and freshness. Sanon asked how she managed to get such beautiful things from wood. Her answer came, "I look at it until I see the face of Christ. Then I cut away the wood, and there he is." To perfect her skills, she was sent to travel in the West, where she naturally came in contact with other forms of expression. Upon their second meeting, Sanon relates that the Sister was so troubled in her cultural and contemplative soul that she no longer sculpted. At their third meeting "She was like a withered plant."

Surely it does not have to be this way! Surely there can be other Jackson Hlungwanis expressing their faith, their experience, the gospel story, in vibrant African forms. Jesus said "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). He came for all humankind and for all of humankind. What Sanon depicted is distressing not only because of the broken spirit

and loss of identity evidenced but because mission and art seem to have played a part in it. Have I wasted the last ninety pages on making a case for the use of art in mission? Evidently just making use of art in mission is not enough. There must be careful and thoughtful use of art as mission.

## 5.2. Art as Mission and the Visual Expression of the Gospel

Art may have all the capabilities for visually expressing the gospel which I have taken great pains to enunciate. It may be communicational, metaphorical, visible, mysterious, a way of knowing, incarnational, devotional, relative to pain and suffering and community-building. But if it has not love it is but a clanging cymbal (cf I Cor. 13:1). When art functions as mission it comes as does mission, from the creator's heart and is therefore full of love and redemption. It participates in making one whole, contributes to self-identity formation, facilitates expression of joy and hope, affords participation in God's activity. Art as mission may even be a medium for experiencing brokenness so that God can come in and bring deliverance. As such it can be a test of faith. But art as mission is also an expression of love toward God. It bears witness to the change in one's heart and gives glory to God. It does indeed express the gospel. But it does more than that. It takes one inside the gospel story to the very feet of Jesus. If art is truly serving as mission, it also brings Jesus to where one is, into the context of one's need.

## 5.3. African Art as Mission and the Visual Expression of the Gospel

Context may indeed be the crux of the issue. And here it is that much can be learned from this look at African art in general and Hlungwani's art in particular. As mentioned earlier, one finds that African art is just as communicational, metaphorical, visible and yet mysterious as Western art. It is also just as much a way of knowing, and can be incarnational and devotional as well. It may be even more relative to pain and suffering and community-building than Western art and can teach much about the efficacy of art for all of life, the value of inter-relating art forms and allowing art to affect social control. Observing how it accompanies during life's transitions in Africa even enlightens one to how art plays a similar role in the West.

What is evident is that African art can be used by God as mission just as Western art can. It is likened to prayer, is a recipient of inspiration, is relational, identity-forming and affirming. It even gives recognition to a creativity like that of the gods. If it has all the characteristics which make Western art useful as mission and even more, there should be no reason why it cannot serve that function as well.

I am confident it is God's intention to work through any person and any medium amenable to his touch. I am convinced he has created all in his image with the birthright of creativity. He is limited only by human sin, refusal or denial. It is the manifestation of that sin which causes one to have contempt for oneself, one's ancestry, history and cultural heritage. When African art is given credence as mission it too can participate in making whole a people who have lost their identity or individuals who have withered in their spirit.

#### 5.4. Jackson Hlungwani's Sculpture as Mission and the Visual Expression of the Gospel

Hlungwani and his sculpture is a prime example of African art as mission. In the process of sculpting, Hlungwani has been the recipient as well as conduit of God's activity. As he has dared to reveal Christ in terms his people understand, with symbols they recognise and subject matter which reaches them where they are, his art has become an affirmation of who they are as Tsongas and South Africans, made in the image of God.

It is evident that Hlungwani's sculpture is a result of God's activity in his life, from the vision which altered his suicide plan to the daily instructions he receives from Jesus. His art is also a result of God's calling and instructions for him to participate in God's activity among his people. The act as well as the finished products are forms of worship, praise, celebration, and proclamation of Hlungwani's relationship to God. In the original setting at New Jerusalem they elicited the participation of the community of believers, bringing the activity of God into their lives. From many reports, they continue to do the same, dispersed as they are, to "teach the nations."

#### 5.4.1. In and Out of Context

This is the point where context again becomes an issue. Giving Hlungwani as an example, Geers (1990:B5) addresses what consumerism is doing to art in South Africa. In his opinion, by taking it out of the community in which it is produced, the meaning changes. He says what originally had a ritual, utilitarian or social function becomes art. If one views art as being devoid of ritual, utilitarian or social function then the loss is indeed tragic. And if meaning is understood to be static then the loss is inevitable. Some months ago I would have grieved with Geers and indeed I have admitted to sadness at the dismantling of New Jerusalem, but this study has given me a new perspective. Hlungwani's unwavering delight that his sculpture now literally "teaches the nations" and evidence of its impact upon the new audience causes me to pause and wonder. I do not debate that issues and contradictions arise when Hlungwani's works are exhibited in the museum context, as was stated in the "Talk to the Voluntary Guides on the Jackson Hlungwani 'Installation'" (1991). But I contend that this may be part of their purpose in God's mission. As they require one to search for meaning within oneself as well as seek to understand the intent of the artist they contribute to bringing wholeness. As they bring new perspectives on ancient themes they contribute to fuller understanding.

In his contribution entitled "Mbhokota is Everywhere" which appeared in the 1989 Exhibition Catalogue, Abrahams (1989:15-19) grants to Hlungwani's sculpture what he calls "aesthetic authority" or the "*sine qua non* of all valid art." He argues that Hlungwani, like Blake, commands attention outside his community or congregation because his images have intrinsic beauty, power, vitality, illumination, originality, tension, delicacy, vigour, intuition, poignancy and mystery. Abrahams grants to Hlungwani's art the characteristic of feeding the soul, the renewal of life through the power of delight, found in all true art. And he draws an analogy between Hlungwani's images and those depicted in Christ's miracle as he fed the multitude with the few loaves and fishes. Both met immediate, local needs, yet, long afterwards and far from the original context, continue to have life and meaning.

#### 5.4.2. To Be or Not to Be

If true art is universal in its ability to elicit response, why encourage indigenous Christian art, inculturation and the development of a new iconography? Why not just continue to take Western art and anticipate understanding and acceptance by the audience? It is precisely because the artistic soul of Africa, among others, has been wounded, hopefully not to death, but deeply, that a new way must be found. The way I propose is one of mutual exchange which gives affirmation to the worth of every individual and their expressions of faith. It is not either-or. It is both-and.

For far too long the North, or the West, has carried its faith and its faith expression to the South, or the East. It is time to recognise that the South and East have Christian perspectives which can also enlighten the North and West. Henry Nouwen (1993:188) says it well:

After many centuries of missionary work during which we, the people of the north, tried to give them, the people of the south, what we felt they needed, we have now come to realize that our very first vocation is to receive their gifts to us and say thanks. If we have any vocation in Latin America, it is the vocation to receive from the people the gifts they have to offer us and to bring these gifts back up north for our own conversion and healing.

Among these gifts may be new Christian symbols or even new theologies depicted in art. Robert Schreiter (1997:72-73) points out that these theologies must be examined not just to assure that they are not wrong, but also to discover how they may be more profoundly right than we had imagined.

Yes, Christianity is a global, not a tribal religion, but as long as there are finite people, living in time and space, there will be a need for worship that allows each to encounter God in their own language, music and art (Dawe 1991:174). Globalization may be bringing people in closer contact with one another, but I hope it never homogenises the beauty of diversity. It is in this diversity that we are able to inform one another's understanding of God. It is also through diversity, or difference, that one's understanding of self is formulated. Schreiter (1997:11 and 1985:63) identifies the role boundaries between cultures play in helping define who a person is

by who he or she is not. He stresses that the establishment of group boundaries and world-view are essential components in identity formation. Self-identity is forged by boundaries, not the lack of them. But these need not be boundaries which keep others out or which denigrate those who are different. Instead, they should be parameters which allow individuals to be secure in their own uniqueness as they appropriate to others the same right. Each should be free to participate in an exchange which enriches both.

## 5.5. The Future of Art as Mission

### 5.5.1. Formation of Self-Identity

In delineating the interconnectedness of societies today due to globalization Schreier (1997:6-11) describes politics as being multipolar rather than bipolar, effecting the power, relationship and interaction between nations worldwide. He labels economics as neoliberal capitalism which ignores national boundaries, moves capital quickly and engages in short-term projects that maximize the profit margin. He highlights the instantaneous nature of communication which compresses time and space, thus discouraging attaching significance to the past and making the future ever more short-term. And he elucidates the extension of Western culture and the effects of modernity to the entire world. He notes that boundaries are so crisscrossed now by the globalization process that they seem to have lost their power to confer identity.

As a proponent of contextual theology, I believe contextual Christian art can help to stem the tide of the globalization process and resulting loss of self identity. If Christians in all cultures feel the freedom to express their faith in their own forms, making use of symbols which have meaning to them, they will be better able to maintain or reclaim their self identity. They must not be led to believe that to become a Christian they must become a Westerner. At a time when Western influence is stronger than ever, the cry for freedom of expression through contextual Christian art must be heard.

### 5.5.2. Appreciation of Others' Identities

Sympathy for such a cry comes only through an appreciation of otherness. Charles Taber and Robert Schreiter acknowledge the experienced voices of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Eric Wolf who are calling for an “understanding” approach to the study of culture and human reality, rather than a “knowledge” approach (Taber 1991:117-118). Schreiter (1985: 28-29) describes that approach as one which listens to discover principal values, needs, interests, directions, and symbols in a culture. A “thick description” of the culture is also developed by looking at it holistically in all its complexity and finding a balance between respecting the culture and acknowledging the need for change within the culture.

Studying the art of a people is an excellent means for discovering the values, needs, interests, directions and symbols of their culture. Yes, it may reveal areas which need to change, but perhaps more importantly, it may generate respect, understanding and even enlightenment to the good that is already there. Learning to respect another person’s expression leads to respecting the person and vice versa.

### 5.5.3. Extension of Witness

Getting to know and respect another person enables one to also know where they have a need which God can meet. Schreiter (1997:128-132) uses the term catholicity to express the wholeness, fulness and communication of God’s witness as it extends throughout the world. Wholeness relates to the fact that all cultures have the right, are capable and still have the need to receive the Gospel in its capacity as a change agent. Fullness relates to the expression of the Gospel in terms which all people can understand and incorporate into their lives. And communication relates to the intercultural exchange and negotiation which is necessary for wholeness and fullness to become reality. When Corita Kent defined creativity as “relating” and “fitting together” she went on to say the artist in each of us, for we are all gifted with creativity by God, is asked to help make the countries of the world fit together in new ways (Steward, et al 1992:4). And then:

If the job is done well, the work of art gives us an experience of wholeness called ecstasy -- a moment of rising above our feelings of separateness, competition, divisiveness 'to a state of exalted delight in which normal understanding is felt to be surpassed' (Webster's) (Steward, et al 1992:5).

Perhaps the relationship which is expressed and experienced in art comes close to what Schreier described as the new catholicity: the hope of wholeness, fullness and communication. This is God's original purpose, that individuals relate to him and then to others, thus discovering their identity and his Truth and presence. Art as mission does exactly that.

#### 5.5.4. Articulation of Theology

But there is more. Küster (1995:95-97), Ndi Okalla (1995:279-280), Duncan (1996:107-113), Bosch (1991:353), Sanon (1992:100) and many other authors have noted the part art has to play in theologising, especially in Africa. Sanon (1992:100) wonders if sacred images, statues, places and materials of worship might be a better entryway into African spirituality than doctrine. Bosch (1991:431) uses the term *poiesis*, defined as imaginative creation or representation of evocative images, and convinces his readers that people need not only truth (theory) and justice (praxis), but also beauty (*poiesis*) as they do their theology. These three terms he also describes as faith, hope and love, all essential elements in the Christian faith. Need I add, that according to Scripture, the greatest of these is love?

Koyama (1976:91-94) confirms what all believers have experienced, that the finality of Jesus Christ cannot be proved. Belief takes place when ordinary hearing and seeing are informed by extraordinary hearing and seeing. It is grace-grasped rather than data-grasped. It is symbolical, sacramental and revelatory rather than comprehensive and comparative. Kritzing (1988:13) agrees with DeGruchy that theological reflection on human suffering is enlightened more by poets and dramatists than philosophers. And Cormick (1992:17) agrees with Miles that many of God's qualities, such as majesty and impenetrable silence, are sensory experiences rather than intellectual concepts. Art has the capacity to make visible the invisible, express what words cannot express and contain that which cannot be contained.



## 5.6. Conclusion

Art as mission has exciting roles to play in identity-formation, cross-cultural understanding, expression of the gospel, articulation of theology and mutual exchange. But most important and essential to all the rest is its role in establishing or enhancing relationship between the Creator and the created.

Using art *in* mission places it in the hands of the created since they are participants in God's mission. But the use of art *as* mission places it in the hands of the Creator whose desire is that all of his creation be brought back to the wholeness he originally intended, in relation to himself. The imperative is a strong one. The gift of relationship through creativity is offered by the Creator to all, both to artist and to audience. It only has to be received. And all will be blessed.

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