Gerard Sekoto And His Influence On African Artistic World

Introduction

In an effort to analyze the ways Gerard Sekoto has contributed to the visual art world today, this essay will look into the artist's background, his works and the art movement he was part of in an effort to sum up and portray his impact. The content of this essay will investigate and outline the cultural context as well as the cultural significance of the artworks, their formal qualities and finally their function and purpose. In doing so, an effective analysis of the art world (focusing on Gerard Sekoto as an influence) in South Africa can be made, perhaps other regions that the artist is recognized in as well. Being an HL Visual Arts student, knowing how the art world works or it's influences in this case is of high interest to the author as well as the fact that the author himself is South African makes it exciting for him to find out more about this historical artist in his country. Whenever someone talks about South Africa's history, it's always about how bad slavery or apartheid was. The overall aim of this essay is to present the influences of a black South African man in the local and international art world, especially during the time of apartheid and how he was able to capture these vibrant urban environments before and during apartheid while successfully portraying the non-white struggle during this time. This is significant as most people don't look at this time period in South Africa unless it's an investigation solely upon Nelson Mandela and/ or the Apartheid, with Gerard Sekoto's paintings we can see the beauty of life and the South African community through visuals before 1948 as well as the hardship that ensued.

Who Was Gerard Sekoto?

Born on September 9th, 1913 in Botshabelo, a township in South Africa today, but originally a mission station established by the German missionaries, Jan Gerard Sekoto is recognized as the father of urban black art and social realism in South Africa. "Gerard Sekoto is widely recognized as the pioneer of black South African art", (Reid). His art journey began when he was young, from molding clay from the river outside his home to constructing chalk drawings on the slate used in school. Even though he became a teacher, musician and artist, he is most known for his legacy in the world of South African visual arts. With an eighth-grade education, he went on to study to become a teacher at Diocesan Training College near Pietersburg (South Africa) in 1930. In 1938 he won second prize in a national art competition at the University of Fort Hare. This was a turning point in the famous oil painter's life because it is at this moment that he made the decision to quit teaching, move to Sophia town and invest in his painting full-time. He spent a year in Senegal in 1966. He began to exhibit his works during this period (after winning the prize in 1938) and received an honorary doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand on December 13, 1989. He sadly passed away 4 years later in 1993 at the age of 79 in Paris. In his honor- in 2004, a mural of Sekoto was unveiled in Sophia town- painted on the northern exterior wall of the Anglican Christ the King Church. "The mural depicts Archbishop Trevor Huddleston walking the dusty streets of Sophia town, with two children tugging at his cossack, as well as Sekoto's famous "Yellow Houses", it was painted by 12 apprentice artists under the patronage of the Gerard Sekoto Foundation." (Brand South Africa, 2004). As time went on throughout his lifetime, "His work became less about recording views of his environment or observed reality, and more about using line, form, shape and colour as

expressive means in and of themselves” (NLA Design Visual). Today he is recognized internationally and exhibited in places like, Paris, Stockholm, Venice, Washington, Senegal and of course, South Africa.

Gerard Sekoto’s Artworks and Analysis

Below is an analysis of only four of Sekoto’s major works, just to give the viewer a taste of what his art entailed.

Yellow Houses

His most well known piece, “Yellow Houses, District Six” composed of oil on canvas, was sold in 2011 for ZAR 10,970,850, thus making it the most valued piece by Gerard Sekoto. It is also the first work by a black artist to enter the Johannesburg Art Gallery collection. It depicts a relaxed afternoon in District Six in 1942. District Six is a former inner city residential area in Cape Town, South Africa. Over sixty thousand of the people living there were forced to move out during the 1970s by the apartheid regime (Wiki). This artwork was created 6 years before the start of Apartheid (the Apartheid system started in 1948).

At first glance, the bright yellows of the piece capture your eye- yielding this feeling of warmth, but also peace or tranquility, which is usually associated with cool colours. This is quite interesting considering that mostly neutral and warm colours are used. We see slight hints of cool colours on the woman on the left, on her dress, though that is leaning more to a neutral white or grey. We also see cool colours in the headband of the lady on the right. It’s almost as if everyone is just relaxing on a hot summer afternoon without a care in the world. This could perhaps be a hot night as we don’t know where the light source is coming from. “Light, shadow and colour define and encapsulate the given moment” (Lindop). With our eyes still on the yellow houses, we see the devised architectural structure of the walls, windows and doors, in turn bringing emphasis to the division of the subjects from the left and the right of the painting. Though the piece is frozen in time, capturing the essence of the moment- the woman on the right’s uplifted skirt suggests that there is action and ‘speed of purpose’ (Lindop) in that moment.

The Song of The Pick

The piece above is another oil on canvas piece called, “The Song of the Pick” (1946-47). It is painted in the style Gerard Sekoto is best known for, social realism. To put it into context, this was painted a year or two before the Apartheid regime. The first thing one might notice, from an artist’s point of view is that the layout of this piece follows one point perspective, in the sense that the depth of the image comes from the top left down to the bottom right. What’s really interesting about the piece is the fact that Sekoto decided to include a white male in this image, the artist rarely does this, but in this case, it really adds to the message and impact of this image on the audience. The composition is made up of warm earthy to neutral colours. The subjects are also softened and more attractive than they are in reality, meaning you don’t really see the sweat, dirt, tears and/or agonizing pain in their facial expressions (Esme Berman). Naturally, although this painting is about the black South Africans in the picture, our eyes are drawn to this single white man in the background, dressed in these yellow earthy colours. It feels as if the light is coming from behind him. He is blocking this happy, warm sunshine from the workers who

have more shading on them than the man, adding to this feeling of remorse- trying to draw in empathy from its audience to experience this hardship with them. Though beautiful in its composition and colours, it has quite an emotional element. Sekoto truly excelled in delivering the message of this piece, perhaps leaving the viewers extremely emotional or even angry. Being a black South African, Sekoto truly knew and understood what his subjects were feeling. In creating this piece- he wanted to project their agonizing pain and bring attention to what was really happening in South Africa at this time. It's interesting to take note of that, especially transitioning from the previous piece, "Yellow Houses, District Six", because that piece was created pre- apartheid whereas this piece was essentially created when things were already at their worst. So, though it isn't a major theme in his works, he used it as inspiration for this one.

Prayer in Church

A lot of Sekoto's works are from personal events or things he has seen first hand. Religion or prayer in this case was a big part of his life even though he wasn't seen to be extremely religious. The piece above titled, "Prayer in Church", depicts the inside of a small church probably in Sekoto's home town. There are many theories about this work, one questioning whether the priest is his father or a representation of him. The composition is made up entirely of earthy to neutral colours, there are no real bright tones in this piece. It also captures your typical church setting with great detail- the adults and older children are praying, while the young ones are running around playing. Even though the colours are of such dark tonal values in most of the piece, it has this feeling of innocence and tranquility, but the mix of these faded blues and reds within these earthy yellow walls evokes a mood of sadness, almost as if this is a funeral. The preacher in the background seems to be the focal point of the artwork- catching the eye with that stripe of white across the podium. Although, the oil painting seems to be laid out into a one point perspective composition, thus bringing focus to the white window in the middle of this room, thus rendering the priest an outlier in this image. Perhaps there was a hidden message of Sekoto trying to escape this room he's trapped in, being close to apartheid at this time as well, hardship was something they all knew. One can argue that it isn't a religious piece at all if we purely look at the layout of this image as well as the colours used. In his social realistic piece, we can also clearly see his technique used- he uses fine brush strokes that reminds one of the impressionist brush work with no detailed outlines. "'Prayer in Church' is a testament to Sekoto's love of observing people and portraying their expressions and moods in his sketches and paintings" (WikiArt). Overall, theories put aside, this piece gives the audience insight into what Sekoto's life was like- what he saw, what he felt and even though one can never truly know but assume with everything that was going on around this time- why he felt it.

Sixpence a Door

Gerard Sekoto's most internationally known work is "Sixpence a Door" (shown above). "his painting, 'Sixpence-a-door' was singled out and admired by the Queen Mother at the opening of The Overseas Exhibition of South African Art at the Tate Gallery in 1948. The exhibition travelled from London to Belgium, France, Canada, USA and to the Netherlands between 1948 and 1950." (Gerard Sekoto Foundation). He painted this during the period when he was living in Pretoria. This was right before he left South Africa in self-exile in September 1947, first to London then to Paris. The painting depicts a scene from the township life. On Sundays, Zulu dancers would put up a tent and charge the audience six pence to watch them dance. Those who could not afford to pay the fee would linger around outside in curiosity of the activities

within the tent. The theme reflects his life as well as his vision of Africa, which was different to the way a typical European would have imagined. He had a very positive or glass half full type of attitude to life, which is quite intriguing given his circumstances as a non-white person.

The bright yellow tent is what stands out the most within this image and can be seen as the focal point amongst the orange building and the surrounding contrasting cool greens, blues and light browns of the landscape in the background. The shape as well as the position of the tent, taking up most of the image and blocking the view of what is happening behind it. It leaves the audience feeling excited and drawn to the people and tent as there is a lot of activity in the middle ground. We see a crowd of people gathering in the middle ground as well between the buildings and the landscape. The people surrounding the tent are standing on the ledge of the building to the right as well as creating a barrier around the tent in an effort to gaze upon the dancers within the tent. This creates a feeling of curiosity.

This piece is painted in a distorted perspective, we see this as the lines and forms of the background are just as clear and bright as the foreground, instead of becoming blurrier and faded towards the horizon as it would in a traditional western painting using aerial perspective. The linear perspective on the oramge buildings is not to proportion, this is to emphasize the space between the buildings where the people are gathered to watch the dancers. The same goes for the people watching from the road on the left, because they are almost the same size as the figures in the foreground, but they do not feel further away because their shapes are less distinct and thinner. The road is what leads the viewers' eye into the background. (Wordpress)

The simplified or elementary stylization of the figures surrounding the tent reminds one of the shapes of traditional African art found in caves, they are simple designs but still recognized as humans. The mountains and greenery in the background has been stylized so that they feel like patterns with heavy black outline and shading, almost making them bold as well. The blue colours seen within the vegetation, amongst the mountain range is an arbitrary use of colour because you won't really find blue grass in nature, but it adds to the feel of lush green surrounding in contrast with the warm colours in the foreground. Though an article from Wordpress on this piece suggests it is an unnatural use of colour to contrast the other colours, it could also be seen as a lake or river purposely put there by Sekoto to break up the colours in the background. The forms within the piece have been shaded as well, this is so that you 'feel' real forms rather than looking at flat 2D shapes. Sekoto also uses the same technique for the entire background in terms of pattern and design, his brush work is meant to feel like repeating patterns as this creates a feeling of rhythm, maybe evoking the feeling or vibes of a drumbeat that one would hear during the Zulu dance being performed in the tent. There are five main colours used within this piece, yellow, orange, red, green and blue, a limited palette but effective in provoking a feeling of harmony and rhythm.

Finally, within this piece, we can see Sekoto's use of Romaticism and Social Realism. He shows ordinary people in their normal lives portrayed as these happy people living perfect lives. He does not paint the raw, ugly dirt or explicit details of the image but rather romanticizes the image by painting it more beautiful than it actually was. He also shows the audience his own feelings and emotions towards the subject seen through the eyes of a local South African, although we have to remember, that this was made during the apartheid era, a year before the establishment of the apartness government but still in a society where the racial segregation or separating laws divided the nation.