

linocuts

graphic art production in the the transvaal, natal and the western cape

A report by the Visual Arts Group of the Cultural Workers' Congress, [CWC] Cape town.

While not an everyday sight, it would not be unusual to find someone carving out a linocut in a third class compartment of a train. This means of creative expression and production is a living tradition amongst many black artists in the Western Cape. Almost without exception it is used to explore and reflect the daily realities of people's lives - a scene in a train or shebeen, a domestic scene, police harassment, even "cops and robbers". While the images may be abstracted to heighten their expressive qualities, it is very rare to see a purely abstract lino. These works, therefore, speak to many of our people as a direct expression of our lives.

Why has this tradition arisen? Generally lino is small, they can be held on a lap or worked on, at a kitchen table and machining is not necessary for the printing of the image. Where people are living in cramped conditions, often without electricity, these factors are crucial.

In economic terms, lino or wood is relatively cheap and the print image is duplicated. Duplication has a two-fold impact.

[a] one work can be sold to many people at a much cheaper price than, for example, a painting which would generally be too expensive for the majority of working people.

[b] the duplicated image ensures a much wider audience - one work can communicate with many people.

In Cape Town, the growth of the tradition has been nurtured by the **Community Arts Project**, a non-formal educational institution which has been in existence for the past thirteen years, providing skills, training and access to resources to communities which are economically, politically and socially marginalised. Most producers of linocuts have passed through **CAP** or are currently working there.

One linocut producer spoke of the fact that lino is a medium which enables him to express himself despite a limitation of skills in drawing and a practiced understanding of colour. People often work directly on the linocut rather than from a drawing and the image "develops from itself". The cutting of a lino is a totally absorbing test. Through this "dead thing [i] bring to life" striking and dynamic black and white images. These are created to assist both producer and viewer to make sense of our South African reality.

A report by Paul Sibisi for the Natal Visual Artists' Organisation, [NAVAO] Durban.

1. Ndalemi Art School

Art specialist teacher trainees had their first hand experience of working in any graphic media during the 1960s at this Art School. I clearly remember when we made a potato print/avocado pip print at Ndalemi Art School for the first time. We also printed with other objects such as waste materials: bottle tops, corrugated cardboard, cotton reel tops, strips of twined ropes etc. After this experience, we were introduced to linoleum cutting, incising a lino block with sharp tools, this fascinated us when we realised the variety of marks we could obtain. We test printed on newsprint, and designed logos on linoleum. We were then introduced to fabric printing, using lino, imprinting the design on white calico with fabric inks. Materials used were rollers, coates inks [usually black] and spoons. We rubbed with a spoon at the back of a print to make the imprint. We also made use of chalk powder to avoid tearing off a pressed print. All this served as an introduction to a graphic media and techniques for use in Primary Schools.

2. Rorke's Drift Art School

This Fine Arts course during the 1970s, presented further possibilities for varied productions of graphics. We worked in studios with such facilities as copper plates, etching presses, acid baths, burnishes, gas stoves, lamps, linoleum blocks and wood cut blocks. Techniques were taught, such as how to spread coates ink using a roller on a glass slide; how to construct our own tools [out of wire] to scratch marks on a copper plate; also how to use wood-cut tools. We tried using different kinds of paper when printing for editioning proofs. We learnt to use more than one block, to print a colour print. Artists developed individual and expressive styles which were widely sought after.

3. Post-Student era i.e. Natal Technikon Graphic Studies

This period provided me with new influences, better working space and technical efficiency in production. There were also broader cultural influences: the work of European artists - Rembrandt, Dürer, the German Expressionists and the approaches of modern art. Lack of facilities in our community areas forced us to appeal to lecturers at Natal Technikon for printing lino/wood blocks. We still continued to use the spoon rubbing technique. To express the conditions under which we live we prefer to use stark monochromes.

A report by David Koloane, Johannesburg¹

The linoprint technique is one of the most accessible mediums available for artists living in the crowded social conditions of the township. The technique does not require elaborate space facilities and sophisticated equipment. One of its primary virtues is that it can be executed in any place and at any time. It is this portable quality which enables the township artist to persevere in his creative experience.

The cutting tools for organizing a composition on linoleum support can be improvised in the absence of standard tools.

The linoprint techniques has for this reason become an integral aspect of tuition in the informal art centre structures such as **FUBA, FUNDA, Mofolo, and Katlehong**. Some of the tutors presently teaching in the centres are graduates from Rorke's Drift Centre (**ELC**) in Natal. The Rorke's Drift Centre was the first institution to give expression to the linoprint technique, a factor which enhanced the reputation of the centre nationally and internationally. Younger artists are engaged in exploring colour in linoprint.

The subject matter of linoprints within the art centre context is socio-realistic and genre scenes.

Alternative Materials

"... the non-specialist casual approach and the implicit belief that the workers have, that any one can do anything well in the workshop, tends to demystify art.

To produce art of a reasonable standard is not necessarily dependent on a well-equipped studio or workshop. It is often the resilience of the artist with the materials at hand. Granted, a well-equipped studio does facilitate the process of image-making to a large extent, yet it is essentially the artist's ingenuity in manipulating material which finally determines the aesthetic quality of the product.

The plight of the artist living in the township in the virtual absence of adequate facilities and tuition leaves him very few options as described earlier. He is often compelled to resort to unorthodox methods - which means coming to terms with his desolate surroundings.

¹ Extract from a dissertation for a diploma in museum studies certificate, 1985, University of London, Press.