

## Lamprooning Colonialism

### The Work of Zambian Artists

The Zambians were in town again in a follow up to the Henry Tayali Exhibition (*Africa Event*, April 1989). But this time it was a patchy affair, with quite a lot of the paintings being of the “I’ve been to Africa/I come from Africa” sort.

Such paintings always refer to an Africa that has been packaged for tourists and which can be hung on walls, as evidence of one’s acquaintance with the continent.

There was the ubiquitous suckling child (a perennial favourite), women with pots, an idyllic rural scene with some dancing – paintings which do their utmost to debase the genre instead of exploring or adding to it. We have seen too many of these. But there were enough exceptions, such as works by Steven Kappata, Patrick Mweemba and Enock Ilunga.

The latter’s textured canvases of *Fishermen* and *The Return of the Fishermen* require at least 15 metres to appreciate the whirling colours. It is a completely different treatment to that of the Ghanaian artist, Kofi Setodji, who sees patterns everywhere; but its depiction of movement makes it a contribution that is as valuable as Setodji’s to the genre.

The best of Patrick Mweemba’s work is slightly off-centre, so that it requires a second look to find the unexpected, as in *Haley’s Comet* which has a figure – presumably the equivalent of a mother nature – dwarfing the landscape.

*Music African Design* is a red, green, yellow and black linocut that juxtaposes a chevron pattern, a face and a musical instrument. It shows how much Bruce Maclean, the British artist, owes to African design.

*Clean My Shoes*, a linocut print, makes full use of the medium by juxtaposing white against black, unlike most of his other prints on show. But *Vomiting in the Toilet* shows that Mweemba is capable of a wry approach, which should be further explored.

But it was Steven Kappata who stole the show. Not because he paints within what is usually termed the naive tradition, a mode of depiction that is over-rated in the West, mainly because it represents easily digestible ethnicity, but because every painting of his tells a story which, in case the viewer misses it, is carefully summarised in capitals on the upper half of these small boards.

And even when the subject is *District Messengers Parade During British Rule*, he manages to add a touch of humour that, in his hands, is a more effective weapon than anger. It is also perhaps the most effective strategy, considering that 25 years have passed since Independence. In this instance, he lampoons the British District Commissioner by giving him a large belly, shorts, a pipe, a hand in his pocket, and a wife in a frock, with a dog in tow. By making the figure seem ridiculous, he denies any legitimacy to colonial rule.

*Colonial Yoke* has a similar effect. This time the dog rides with the District Commissioner in a hammock, which is being carried by labourers. His wife is free to do her sunglasses and ride a horse in the background. Kappata’s point is that the stereotype is very close to reality. He is one of the few Africa artists to look back to

colonial rule, a historical period which has been neglected partly because of the necessity of forming a national identity.

My favourite is *Why Have You Not Cooked My Food? What Time is This? Who is That One?* – sentiments that are expressed daily all over the world.

Here a man, pointing at his watch, castigates his wife who has been drinking; another man (her lover?) creeps away. Kappata locates him in the same plane in the foreground as the other two figures, instead of positioning him in the background, as we would expect. We realize he is creeping away because of his stance. Depth and perspective here become unnecessary; time is distorted by simultaneous depiction. The sophistication of Kappata's use of these pictorial devices, which are derived from (one of) his traditions, makes him a painter we look forward to seeing more of – especially if he turns his attention to the contemporary situation.

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