

A brief cultural history of Table Mountain

This selection of 12 paintings around the theme of Table Mountain and its surroundings is part of a tradition of visual representations of Cape Town that has a history as long as – or, actually, longer than – the history of European settlement at the Cape. The tripartite form of Devil's Peak, Table Mountain and Lion's Head (although the outer two features are variously named in the early records) served to identify Cape Town as a nautical sign of the southern tip of Africa on the one hand and the southern portal to the continent on the other. Many early depictions were obviously imaginative creations, drawn from either travellers' tales or existing visual records. But, whether invented or eye-witness accounts, early representations of Table Mountain tend both to exaggerate the height of the mountain and to include Table Bay in the foreground: This point of view identifies the scene as a traveller's account, clearly rendering the landscape from the outside, and so effectively connects the Cape to Europe. Similarly, the tendency to emphasise the structure of the Dutch fort in the foreground of these scenes conveys the idea of European conquest.

Of the 12 paintings in the Reserve Bank Collection only Otto Verhoef's *Cape Town* (1974, p.114) uses the iconic form of the Table Mountain group – but he reduces the apparent height of the mountain and replaces Table Bay with a ridge covered with vernacular architecture. However, George W Pilkington's *Nosing her in* (1946) – incidentally, the very first painting to be acquired by the Bank – shows the characteristic form of two of the three mountains and asserts the idea of connection to Europe in the image of the ship entering the harbour. Similarly, Clement Sèneque's 1925 view of *Devil's Peak* from Table Bay, with the city of Cape Town represented as a very narrow strip between sea and mountain, would appear to be another colonial view of the perilous hold of European civilisation in Africa: Significantly, Sèneque's view of the mountain is almost identical to Charles Bell's well-known *Landing of Van Riebeeck at the Cape* (1852), which is a key image in the colonial history of South Africa, reproduced in countless school textbooks.

Opposite:
Sèneque, Joseph Charles Louis (Clement) (1896-1930)
Devil's Peak 1925
Oil on compressed board, 24.5 x 33 cm





Above:
De Jongh, Marthinus Johannes (Tinus) (1885-1942)
View of Devil's Peak across the Liesbeek River Undated
Oil on canvas, 36.5 x 44 cm

Opposite:
Pilkington, George William (1879-1958)
Nosing her in 1946
Oil on canvas, 94 x 137 cm

Recent landscape theory would claim that Tinus de Jongh's *View of Devil's Peak across the Liesbeek River* (undated) is also a colonial depiction of the Cape, in spite of the change in form from the iconic tripartite mountain formation. Instead of the view from outside into the Cape settlement, De Jongh represents the farmland and suburbs from near the Observatory as signs of European expansion. Moreover, his unnaturally high viewpoint over the prospect could itself be construed as an assertion of control over the landscape. Later paintings in the group share De Jongh's interior view of the colony: They are all made by artists who identified the Cape as their home. But they all replace the device of the extensive prospect with picturesque anecdotes of different aspects of life at the Cape.





Left:
Verhoef, Otto (b.1918)
Cape Town 1974
 Oil on board, 30.5 x 36.5 cm

Right:
Boonzaier, Gregoire Johannes (1909-2005)
Bare Trees and Table Mountain 1964
 Oil on board, 36.5 x 47 cm

Opposite:
Prowse, Ethel Ruth (1883-1967)
Street Scene under Table Mountain 1963
 Oil on board, 38.5 x 30.5 cm

In works by Verhoef, *Cape Town* (1974), Gregoire Boonzaier, *Bare Trees and Table Mountain* (1964), and Ruth Prowse, *Street Scene under Table Mountain* (1963), the mountain maintains a significant presence in the scene, but attention is directed to aspects of life lived in its shadow. In fact, the life that is represented is shown not so much as a social experience, but a certain vitality in aesthetic form. Verhoef and Boonzaier, for example, find interest in the irregular forms of vernacular architecture, and the decorative potential of tree limbs and colour patches; and Prowse combines the sense of landscape grandeur with traditional architectural forms to evoke nostalgia for a more natural order of being.

However, the majority of later representations of the Cape Town landscape in this Collection, and generally, locate the picturesque unambiguously in the former designated coloured – or Malay – suburbs of Bo-Kaap and District Six. In these paintings, the mountain formation either plays a minor role or is completely absent. Attention is focused instead on the exotic quality of the scenes identifiable through a mosque, or other cultural marker, but apparent more generally in the decorative treatment of poverty and urban decay. In place of grand natural scenery, these artists were looking for a decorative prettiness; and in place of dramatic contrasts – of nature against culture, of conquest and dispossession – they contented themselves with an anodyne sentimentality: To render poverty picturesque is to present it as neither too painful to those who experience it, nor too threatening to the social order. The tragic irony of these paintings, of course, is that they were made at the same time that District Six was being destroyed.





Above:
De Waal, Jan (b.1930)
Chiappini Street, Cape Town Undated
 Oil on board, 52 x 67 cm

Opposite:
Pieters, Jacobus (Jack) (1886-1977)
Chiappini Street, Cape Town 1957
 Oil on canvas, 89 x 115 cm

The 1974 date of Otto Verhoef's view of *Cape Town* confirms that this painting belongs to the period of picturesque renderings of Cape Town's poorer suburbs. But the painting is curiously prophetic. The buildings represented are clearly substantial productions but their broken outlines and dense placement seem to anticipate the proliferation of informal settlements that were to surround the city in the following decades. Moreover, Verhoef's use of the iconic, tripartite form of the mountain group in the background seems both to hark back to earlier colonial use of this motif and to anticipate its reappearance as an image, first in a growing body of tourist-related material and then, in the fine art context, as an emblem. In recent depictions of Table Mountain that are not represented in this Collection, the mountain looms not so much as a real presence in a recognisable landscape space, but as a sign of cultural significance of some kind. Thus artists such as Katherine Bull, David Goldblatt, Cyril Coetzee, Sydney Holo, Willie Bester and Julia Teale cite the mountain formation variously as an indicator of colonial history, a sign of the commodification of nature, a spiritual destination, the political space of the Western Cape, and an enclave of white privilege. Like the first representations of Table Mountain, these artists are not really interested in the physical appearance of the geographical phenomenon, but in what they can make the mountain represent. **Michael Godby**





Left:
De Waal, Jan (b.1930)
Tyne Street, District Six Undated
Oil on board, 50 x 60 cm



Centre:
Legg, Gordon Harold (b.1932)
District Six Undated
Watercolour on paper, 42.4 x 58.5 cm



Right:
Squibb, Ruth (b.1928)
District Six Undated
Oil on board, 71 x 81 cm

Opposite:
Boonzaier, Gregoire Johannes (1909-2005)
Morning, Caledon Street, District Six,
Cape Town 1967
Oil on canvas, 56 x 71.5 cm



Durant Sihlali (1935-2004)

Durant Sihlali was one of the few of his generation of artists still creatively vital and active at the time of his untimely death at the age of 69. In a special, if slightly melancholic way, Sihlali lived for his art; its labour, its materiality, its humane potential, its history and politics, and all its formal/symbolic distinctiveness. The special, irreducible quality of art as art was critically and creatively decisive for Sihlali. He always insisted – often with fierce determination and an independence of mind that marked all he did – that before anything else he was an artist, albeit an artist on a mission.

The persistence of the ordinary in extraordinary times animated much of his work. And it is this devotion to the ordinary (not always popular in politically inflamed times) that is the mark of the artist and the measure of the man. Indeed, one of his studies of what we would probably now call an informal settlement, then generically a 'township' scene, adorns the cover of Njabulo Ndebele's eponymous book of his important essay *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, presented first in 1984, published some six years later and republished recently.¹ This devotion to the ordinary was misread by the white-dominated art market, and Sihlali's work was seen to be a piece of 'township art', a rather superficially attractive kind of *genre* painting.

It was nothing of the sort. This diminished view served the ideological needs of a certain set of interests, market-driven and otherwise. When such work is considered closely and in context, a more complex counter-narrative emerges. This involves the artist as historical witness, and the artwork as a historical document. Both watercolours in the South African Reserve Bank Collection are compelling examples of this; *After the Bulldozer's Demolition, Old Pimville* (undated) and *Old Pimville Motsamoso, Last Remains* (1974, pp.38-39). In these works, and the many others he made during times of political emergency, Sihlali kept the tension between the needs of history and the needs of art, or, put differently, the needs of the political moment and his own sense of artistic agency, alive. Not only this, he used this tension, this instability as a source of creative energy and artistic opportunity. He tells this story of a work very like *After the Bulldozer's Demolition* from around the same period. While out on his painting excursions, Sihlali occasionally encountered a particularly zealous township manager. This man prided himself on quick demolitions, and Sihlali recalls meeting him once more next to the old Pimville hall in Soweto. It was mid-afternoon:

This house was also partly occupied. When he saw me, I think something sparked in him ... 'I want to prove to this kaffir that I'll finish this house off in no time,' and so ordered the man with the bulldozer to do this job. There was no time for me to even prepare a sketch. It was a race against time. I just exploded with my brushes on the surface of the paper. By the time the bulldozer had finished its job, only dust was billowing out. He came by to get a glimpse of what I was doing. To his amazement the painting was already finished. He scoffed and walked away. I enjoyed this because I knew I had won. These were not happy days. I enjoyed the challenges but again it was a painful thing to see people treated in this way. It was my job to record all that because it was part and parcel of our history. The dark one.²

Sihlali has yet to benefit from the kind of historical attention given to other giants of South African modernism. One thinks here of the older generation of Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, both the subjects of biographies.³ It is only recently that an exhibition devoted solely to Sihlali's early work has seen the light of day.⁴ Unusually, Sihlali had a sure sense of history and his self-described "modest" contribution to that history. He kept many works in his own collection which were never shown or sold, as if to anticipate the day when these would be seen with fresh, and perhaps more sympathetic, eyes. That time has come. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are few contemporary South African artists of recent generations not indebted in some way to the person and practice of this remarkable man. His sheer diversity and openness to experimentation – sculpture and installation – his creative work ethic, artistic integrity and imaginative engagement with a radically changing world have given the craft of art practice a new meaning. Sihlali lived through critical decades (1948-2004) in South Africa's history. He was, literally, an artist-traveller in the land of his birth, sensitive to 'traditional' art practices (for example, mural painting, body adornment, utensil patterning, beadwork and the like), while maintaining an openness to the visual culture of a transforming urban world around him. In all this, he played a vital role in the development of modern and contemporary African art. Colin Richards

Opposite:
Sihlali, Durant (1935-2004)
After the Bulldozer's Demolition, Old Pimville Undated
Watercolour on paper, 64.5 x 98 cm