

Figure / Ground:

Selected works

The following section of the book features the figure/ground selection. Single 'figure' works are reproduced on the right-hand side of each double-page spread, and up to three 'ground' works are reproduced on the left-hand side. In some instances details of artworks are reproduced over two pages for further emphasis. The figure/ground selection offers three connected readings of the South African Reserve Bank Collection. Firstly, it swings a spotlight onto 142 artworks in a Collection that comprises over 600 works, and offers these works for fuller consideration. Secondly, written biographies, short essays and extended captions hold smaller groupings of works together for relational consideration. Through the particularities of its structure and weighting, the writing's form and content bring additional inflections to the priorities of the figure/ground selection. And thirdly, this figuring of a selection offers a new way of grounding the inherent strengths and broader priorities of the Collection as a whole.

Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993)

Gerard Sekoto was born on 9 December 1913 at the Botshabelo Lutheran Mission in present-day Mpumalanga. The subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, art books and biographical studies, he has been in the public eye in South Africa since the late 1980s. Sekoto's devotion to art started in earnest in 1939, after he abruptly ended a short spell as a school teacher in Polokwane (Pietersburg), relocated to Sophiatown, Johannesburg, and started his career as a full-time artist. Between 1939 and 1945 he lived in Sophiatown, District Six and Eastwood in Pretoria. By the time of his departure to Cape Town in 1942, he had attracted the attention of some established artists (including Ernest Mancoba, Alexis Preller and Judith Gluckman), gallery owners, and media and art collectors. What was most remarkable at the time was the rapidity with which he had become the recipient of both critical acclaim and some financial success. Rising above the travails of the racial prejudice of pre-1948 South Africa, he produced work during his South African phase that remains to this day at the pinnacle of his life-long artistic achievement.

The Train Crowd (c.1945) reveals the remarkable aesthetic and narrative power of Sekoto's pictorial vernacular of the early 1940s. In this work in the Bank's Collection and other outstanding works of the time – *Boy with the Candle*, *Sixpence a Door*, *Song of the Pick* and the family portraits of the Eastwood period – Sekoto brings us face to face with his remarkable powers of composition, execution and characterisation, bringing to life the goings-on and drama of the characters in his paintings. What captures our attention and interest, aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually in *The Train Crowd* is Sekoto's meticulous attention to the proportions of his subjects, the tone and texture of the colours, the effective use of perspective, the balance of light and shade, as well as the visual and psychological prominence of the figures in the foreground. The emotional interest and concern of the adults for the child in the centre of the picture are forcefully represented, and so is the plight of urban African women, men and children who were always on the move. In this painting and other works of his late South African period, the viewer encounters the artist's deep understanding and visual representation of urban black life in South Africa under conditions of white oppression during the 1940s. *The Train Crowd* is an excellent example of Sekoto's mastery of his craft at the height of his power towards the close of his South African period.

In September 1947, fearful of prospects for his art, Sekoto left South Africa to start a life-long exile in Paris. In post-war Paris, the first two years turned out to be the unhappiest of his life. Homelessness, exhaustion from moonlighting as a jazz musician in Parisian nightclubs, creeping poverty and two unsuccessful solo exhibitions in December 1948 and April 1949, drove Sekoto to utter desperation and regular abuse of alcohol. Consequently he was hospitalised for several weeks at the asylum of St Anne in Paris. In a remarkable display of tenacity, a trait that became an abiding source of strength in later life, Sekoto turned adversity into opportunity by using his stay at St Anne to work on a substantial body of drawings of hospital patients. A substantial part of this work, recognised as his first successful treatment of French subjects and known today as the *Sowetan Collection*, is housed at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Upon his discharge from hospital, Sekoto secured an apartment and work studio in Saint-Germain-des-Près, at that time the heartland of the Parisian gallery district. Three decades of hard work followed and, consequently, Sekoto held numerous solo and group exhibitions in France, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States and Senegal. Identified later in his professional life with social realism, a pioneer South African artist, and an African internationalist, Sekoto's most overtly political work followed the 1976 Soweto massacres and the death in detention of Steve Biko in 1977. His last major work, *The Smoker*, is currently housed in the Constitutional Court of South Africa in Johannesburg.

His talent was recognised from the earliest days of his life when, as a schoolboy at Botshabelo, he won the competition for the design of the school emblem in 1924. The first prize earned him a Bible and five shillings. Much later in his life, his achievements as an artist earned him numerous awards, including the XIXe Grand Prix International de Peinture de Deauville (1968), an honorary doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand (1989), and the Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts des Lettres, awarded by the French government in 1990. Gerard Sekoto died in Nogent-sur-Marne outside Paris on 19 March 1993, a year and a month before the liberation of the country and people he loved so dearly. **Chabani Manganyi**

Opposite:
Sekoto, Gerard (1913-1993)
The Train Crowd c.1945
Oil on hardboard, 45.5 x 35.5 cm



Opposite:
Van Wouw, Anton (1862-1945)
Miner Undated
Bronze (Rome cast), 12 x 5.5 x 13 cm





Above:
 Kay, Dorothy Moss (1886-1964)
Commerce 1943
 Oil on canvas, 157 x 214 cm

Opposite:
 Kay, Dorothy Moss (1886-1964)
Industry 1943
 Oil on masonite squares, 309 x 239 cm (*in situ*)

The sounds of labour

One of the effects of the introduction of media and technology into visual art is the steady rise in the role and prominence of sound in contemporary art. This presence of sound can extend from the softest background noise in a video to entire sound environments that are often the feature of sound art. One of the more interesting categories of sound art is found sound, in which artists make field recordings drawn from everyday life. The artistic presentation of these found sounds can take the form of anything from non-sequential noises and narrative messages to musical rhythm. Ultra-Red, an alternative sound collective based in Los Angeles, uses ambient sounds to produce powerful artistic statements about human rights.¹ Their interest in ambience is in the ways in which such noises and sounds affect our understanding of space. Of particular interest to Ultra-Red is the ambient sound produced by the body, and more specifically the sound of the body performing labour. The interest in the relationship between the body and labour stems from their belief that this intersection produces the purest ambient sound. Conventionally sound occupies time, most obvious in a sense of sounds from beginning to end. But sounds also occupy and respond to the spaces in which they are heard. They contribute to understandings of spaces, and vice versa. While painting and sculpture are mostly without audible sounds – although there are sounds in this silence – their subject matters and compositional arrangements imply sounds that take up both time and space. These implied sounds take the form of single and multiple sounds, as well as the transitions between sounds.





Above:
Ngcobo, S E B (Unknown)
Labourers 1969
Oil on board, 58.5 x 88 cm

Opposite:
Ainslie, Bill (1934-1989)
Farm Workers Undated
Oil and acrylic on masonite, 90 x 120 cm

Not surprisingly, the South African Reserve Bank Art Collection includes a number of works that address the themes of industry and labour. In Anton van Wouw's undated *Miner* (p.17), a single figure, dressed only in a loincloth, manually drives a chisel into the underground bedrock that rises over his head. It is a sculpture that implies a sharp, methodical sound of metal on metal, followed by the splitting and falling of broken rock. It is a claustrophobic environment of hard rock that rebuffs any sound that hits its hard surface and repels it down narrow underground tunnels. Ironically, but in a compositional mode characteristic of Van Wouw's output, the miner is represented alone. Of course it is unlikely that the miner would have been alone, and the sounds of other miners performing the same actions would have created a criss-crossing of sharp, hard sounds with nowhere to go.



Dorothy Kay's *Commerce and Industry* (pp.18 and 19), both produced in 1943, are collage-like accumulations from history that showcase the kinds of human fervour and productivity typically favoured during World War II. *Industry* and *Commerce* are the two works in this selection that imply strong and direct communication between the human figures. But they are the sounds of words competing against the noises of machinery and marketplaces. There are no spaces of silence in Kay's heavily coloured compositions. Where Van Wouw's composition implies a highly contained sound with nowhere to go, S E B Ngcobo's *Labourers* (1969) suggests a sharper sound that is more easily dispersed through an immediate compositional space in the infancy of construction. It is a clicking sound, made up from rising and falling piles of loose bricks, and the building trowel's loving attention to the placement of individual bricks. Like Bill Ainslie's undated *Farm Workers*, Ngcobo's workers are dissociated, separated without the bonding sound of language. The abstractions of the surrounding landscape in Ainslie's painting, rendered in an awkward palette that undermines a sense of agricultural productivity, reinforce the disjointed divisions between figures. There is nothing of the compositional rhythm of Gerard Sekoto's *Song of the Pick* (1946-47, BHP Billiton Collection), which so strongly implies a song between and over the sound of the grounded picks. But in acts of acute social observation, both Sekoto and Ainslie make a clear distinction between the passive white foreman and the black labourers.

There is an altogether different disjuncture in George Pemba's *New Brighton Cement Works* (1955), which offers a subtle watercolour coupling of nature and industry. The view from the pristine environment of shrubbery and tall trees frames the polluting cement works, creating a disjuncture between the actual experiences of foreground and background spaces. One of the contrasts implied by this composition is that between the sounds of nature and the sounds of the factory. There is a surrealism in looking at the ominous mobility from the factory's chimney stacks while listening to the free sounds of birds. The shuffling of birds crowded into a confined space is not dissimilar to the implied contact between the closely gathered women in William Miko's *Gender Masses* (1997, pp.26 and 27). The repetition of bodies and positions implies a sound that is strikingly similar, interrupted perhaps only by the babies and small children. The density of the group, unstoppping from one side of the composition to the next, is similar in its compositional intensity to Kay's *Commerce and Industry*. But where Kay is explicit in the articulation of their activity, Miko obscures the details of the women's action, drowning out individual particularities under the sound of the crowd. The density of the sound of bodies in acts of labour is closely allied with the sounds of bodies in the city, where architecture and people compete for the meaning of urban space. **Rory Bester**

Opposite and detail overleaf:
Pemba, George Mliwa Mnyaluzo (1912-2001)
New Brighton Cement Works 1955
Watercolour on paper, 24.5 x 34.5 cm



