

# Art in Mamelodi

"... the urban landscape is a mirror reflecting the society which produces and maintains it" (Johnston and Herbert, 1978:7).<sup>1</sup>

The above thought struck a chord with Mr Geoff Mphakati, art promoter for the Mamelodi Association for Advancement of Creative Artists (MAACA), compounding all his feelings on the inadequacy of facilities for Black artists in an urban Black community such as Mamelodi. Mr Mphakati is of the opinion that several of the mechanisms within township life cause many young people to become apathetic. This is why he and Mr Motlhabane Mashiangwako decided to make art more accessible to the young people of Mamelodi.

Mr Geoff Mphakati was born at Highlands, Garstfontein in February 1940. He moved to Mamelodi with his family in 1958, where he attended the Kilnerton High School for three years. Unable to stay at school, owing to quantity surveyors in 1961. Mphakati had always been aware of the fact that Black children and adults had no outlet for the expression of any artistic talent. His concern for the promotion of the arts in the township prompted him to approach the American Embassy for help. His efforts were rewarded, and in 1972 the first exhibition for Black artists was held on diplomatic premises. In 1972 Mphakati also started the Pretoria Jazz Appreciation Society to broaden their scope, and many music festivals followed.

In 1973 a major art exhibition was staged, with artists from all over the PWV area exhibiting. The extent of the exhibition made it a significant event at the time. The same artists held another exhibition in 1975 and thereafter exhibited in a number of European countries.

Geoff Mphakati believes that visual artists reflect all other art forms in their work. He believes that by promoting visual artists, publicity for musicians, actors a



Picture produced by one of Mashiangwako's pupils. (Photo: Madeline Munnik)

writers and poets will follow.

At the same time that Mphakati began promoting art, a young artist, Motlhabane Mashiangwako moved to Mamelodi and joined the group of artists, who, due to a lack of facilities in Mamelodi met at Mphakati's home to paint. In this setting Mashiangwako met people such as Winston Saoli, Lefifi Tladi and Fikile, who encouraged and inspired him. He exhibited his first three works at an exhibition held at the home of an American diplomat, Jim Baker.

Mashiangwako was born in May 1945 in Potgietersrus. He enjoyed doodling in the sand, but these images were always being erased by wind and rain and had no permanence. But when he began attending school on the farm where his family lived, it became possible for him to make more permanent drawings with pens, pencils and paper. He particularly enjoyed to draw with colour pencils and Indian ink. He drew at every opportunity; on his textbook covers and on odd pieces of paper. He managed to buy materials such

as oil paints and began experimenting with oil pastels. He used ink on his sketches, then changed to pencil alone because of his success at creating different tones.

Mashiangwako has experimented with all media. He modestly says that he is master of none. He believes that an artist reflects his surroundings in his art, either subconsciously or consciously. The natural beauty of the clay and the earth are represented in his art. Mashiangwako uses art as a window to life; his feelings and surroundings are ever-present in his art.

In 1975 Mashiangwako began conducting art workshops for children in Mamelodi East. Shocked at the waste of talent around him, he decided to extend his workshops to Garankuwa. However, Mamelodi remained his base, where he stayed with Mphakati.

In 1983 Mashiangwako saw the opportunity for which he had been waiting. The YMCA had erected a centre in Mamelodi with a community hall and classrooms and he obtained permission to use one of the classrooms as a studio. He



Mshiangwako and some of his pupils.

(Photo: Madeline Munnik)

began conducting workshops for children and other artists with the help of Geoff Mphakati.

This was the beginning of the Mamelodi Art School. The MAACA with the unrelenting help of Ora Joubert began a fund-raising campaign which brought in approximately R2 000. With this money they were able to provide paints and paper for the art school. Next they circulated a newsletter to school principals and students, advertising the art classes. There seemed to be a positive response from the children, but only 30 pupils attend art classes on Saturday mornings at present. Mphakati and Mshiangwako believe that the relatively small number of pupils attending classes is due to a parental attitude that art is unnecessary. Many parents, living just above subsistence level, believe that formal academic education and training is more important for their children than training in art. This limited view is one of the mechanisms within township life leading to apathetic attitudes toward aesthetic matters.

Mshiangwako is now able to provide a facility for some of the children, who, like he, could only scribble in the sand. They have the use of solid colours for their drawings. Mshiangwako encourages the children to create their own colours, basic shapes and forms and

avoids placing an emphasis on formal composition, and thus preserves their freedom to work from their own perspective. He has noticed that although most of the children attending his classes were born and raised in urban areas, their art reflects rural images such as the open veld and trees. This is due to the fact that, very often, the children are influenced by the media and the stereotype images presented to them. Mshiangwako tries to remove these stereotypes and helps them to discover their own creativity.

The MAACA plans to build an independent art centre in Mamelodi West and hopes to develop the association on a multi-dimensional basis, to include a centre for performing arts, a literature library, and a music library with African traditional and contemporary music. This is absolutely necessary because of the limited space available at present. The MAACA has only two classrooms at the YMCA, one of which doubles as an art classroom and a studio for Mshiangwako.

The second classroom houses the architectural school, which is part of the Y-Design Services. This is run by Samuel Pauw Architects who became aware of increased building activities in the Black urban residential areas. This has meant that many of the local inhabitants are in need

of architectural services as they attempt to extend their existing four-roomed houses. The Y-Design Services was established to meet this demand by training local draughtsmen.

The Y-Design Services also hopes to provide a housing bureau for prospective house-owners. Here local inhabitants will be able to obtain advice on many technical and legal matters pertaining to home-ownership, free of charge. The draughtsmen who are trained by the Y-Design Services provide sketchplans for home-owners. A qualified architect acts as supervisor for the design centre and the design school. At present, there are six students attending classes.

Together Mphakati and Mshiangwako have provided the start of a valuable community service. Their future hopes and aspirations will need much support from the public and dedication on their part.

## Reference

- 1 Johnston, R J and Herbert, D T, 1978: "An introduction to spatial processes and form" 5-18, in D T Herbert and R J Johnston: *Social areas in cities*, vol 1, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester.

(H Brougham-Cook)



One of the draughtsmen being trained by the Y-Design Services. (Photo: Madeline Munnik)

