

RED ON BLACK

Historical points of reference constitute an important aspect of a people's heritage. One does not have to be a philosopher to know and understand that the voice of the artist has always been, and will always be, an integral part of the energies that enhance a people's determined efforts to create and recreate themselves through their lived experience and their sense of identity, from the useful and inspiring aspects of that experience as they build their future.

“Where are you heading?”

“Forward and left.”

“Destination?”

“The life of today with its needs and aspirations. Helping to shape the moral and social climate of tomorrow.”

In a nutshell that is how Leon Schiller, a leading figure in the Polish theatre, expressed his credo in 1928. And essentially that credo is what moves and guides any sensibility involved in the production of images with a sense of social responsibility.

The publication of **RED ON BLACK** is a significant milestone reflecting the visual culture of our struggle. This book, as its sub-title states, is the story of the South African poster movement. The images you are about to look at are informed by our history of struggle and in turn that history is revealed in and through them. But who made the posters in this book? What purpose were they made to serve? When and why?

Here I cannot resist quoting Chidi Amuta, a distinguished scholar and hard-nosed literary critic I respect highly: “Literature and art have a commitment to freedom and can only thrive in a free state. In a situation bedevilled with unfreedom, the primary responsibility of art is to enlist in the service of freedom and aspire to profundity within the context of this active process. To brush aside this primary responsibility and go in search of artistic excellence in spite of the struggle for freedom is to indulge in theoretical prodigality and abstract formalism.”

It seems then that it should be clear that there can be no serious discussion or assessment of images without taking the categories of their context, content and form into consideration. Context refers to human action and interaction, the political and ideological framework, at whatever period of history is being looked at and into; in this case resistance and mass struggles for national liberation, on various fronts. Content is gesture, movement of life, the social experience captured and projected by the artist. And, of course, form would then be how the artist handles and renders images, symbols, and other devices, to make content visible. Clearly, then, content and form are inseparable fellow-workers in the production of images.

The historic Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival, involving people and organizations engaged in arts and culture structures in the South African democratic movement, was hosted by Medu Art Ensemble in Gaborone in 1982. The Culture and Resistance poster, with logo, by Thami Mnye, is included in this book. In my keynote address there, I stated categorically that we were not interested in how it was to be an artist; we were interested (and still are, by the way) in how it was to be alive: “Fascist tyranny and barbarism in South Africa is a reality that even the most limpminded need not be reminded of. To be fired with the spirit of freedom, to be determined to fight and destroy that tyranny, to usher a new chapter of life where there is peace, progress and happiness, this we see as our mission, our duty, our ultimate responsibility.” That sentiment, expressive of our commitment to struggle for freedom and affirmation of life as creative activity, is what informs the story of the South African poster movement.

The questions I ask above are answered in the introduction to this book and the text that complements the posters. They were unapologetically utilitarian, produced to serve a struggling people’s needs and demands. In these posters, and through them, we are given a clear grasp of how people lived and struggled and made tremendous sacrifices to bring us to where we are today. These posters constitute necessary memorial points of reference. The determination and commitment to life reflected through this slice of the visual culture of our struggle, should enable anyone interested in where we have come from to feel and sense the spirit of those times.

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