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THE CYRENE PAINTINGS

An extraordinary collection of over 600 watercolour and gouche works from Southern Rhodesia c.1939-45.

DIMENSIONS: 39.2cm (15^½"") High, 460cm (181") Wide, in mount with 23No. Pictures of various sizes framed

STOCK CODE: 41291_1

HISTORY

In 1978 LASSCO purchased an extraordinary lot at a church clearance auction in East London - two large folios and a large box full of colourful paintings. The paintings, over six hundred of them, proved to be the earliest collected works of the Cyrene Mission - a remote Mission School in Southern Rhodesia, twenty-odd miles south-west of Bulawayo.

Cyrene was founded in the late 1930's by a Scot, Canon Edward (Ned) G. Paterson (1895-1974), who had grown up in South Africa and England before turning to the church and in due course accepting the challenge of creating a new mission school. He was an accomplished watercolourist and took the view that Art should be a compulsory part of the curriculum. He was firmly against imposing Western artistic tradition on students and no reproductions were put up on walls. The boys, generally drawn from Mashonaland Bantu tribes with little history of two-dimensional artistic production beyond stone and wooden carvings, textile and costume, were presented with paper, pencil, paint and pen and told to draw the world around them. Some of the results of this output, spanning 1939-45, were stuck into the folios that resurfaced in East London in 1978.

With the Cyrene Mission established and Art at the centre of the weekly lessons Paterson drew wonderful results from his charges.

The paintings have a direct association with the landscape and surroundings of Southern

Rhodesia. The topography there is punctuated with distinctive rocky outcrops and the young artists have captured the vibrancy of the African colours, the fauna and even the grumpy Reverend Paterson with their own style. The discernable style demonstrates a delicate economic line, an obsession for detail (sometimes every leaf of every tree is drawn) and a strong sense of composition. How much of the artists' technique was nurtured and how much came naturally is of debate - exactly the debate that Paterson was consciously examining at the school.

Interest in the Cyrene paintings grew on the back of exhibitions held in Bulawayo from 1944 and then, spurred on by an impromptu royal visit from H.M. Queen Elizabeth to the school in 1947, exhibitions in Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg followed. Ultimately Paterson himself brought the works to London in 1949 and held an exhibition at the Royal Watercolour Society Gallery in Bond Street. The pictures were met with fascination and acclaim; the show was packed. The collection of Cyrene Art toured England for three years before being shown in Paris and then America. The folios form part of this collection which originally comprised two hundred large watercolour drawings, twelve hundred small drawings and two cases of woodcarving and sculpture.

We know that Paterson was actively selling some of the works as they toured so some were dispersed but, of the original collection, later folios dating to around 1945 have been acquired by The Bodleian Library in Oxford UK and at The Smithsonian Institute in Washington. A scrapbook of a further 200 paintings dating to the early 1950's is held at the library at Central St. Martin's School of Art in London. Paterson had studied there in the 1920's. Between these collections and the LASSCO folios, which comprise the earliest works from 1939 when the mission was founded, it must be assumed that the main body of the original collection is accounted for - the rest dispersed.

Paterson evidently observed the boys' progress carefully. He had them decorate the walls of the Mission Chapel with extraordinary murals of Biblical scenes with African themes - it was an honour to be selected as a muralist and add to the work that Paterson had started. The chapel still stands, the murals having survived a fire in 1962. Some of the boys went on to become noted artists in Bulawayo, Harare and beyond. Disabled boys at the school were permitted to spend more time in art lessons and some of their works are particularly accomplished and are

found within the collection. At its outset there was no age restriction for education at the Mission; the boys were in their teens or early twenties. Their work is generally signed in what we take to be Paterson's hand.

Paterson left Cyrene in 1953 for a stay in England before returning to Harare (then called Salisbury) to build up two successive Art Centres there. He died in 1974. The school moved to Bulawayo in 1978 during the Liberation War and the property was taken over as "Fort Godwin" by the Rhodesian army. More recently the property has been a boarding school. The adorned chapel was declared a national monument in 1987 and is still used for active worship.

LASSCO hopes to keep this collection together and find a buyer who will preserve this poignant record of young Africans and their unfettered response to the world around them in mid 20th Century Rhodesia.

The paintings may be viewed by appointment at LASSCO Three Pigeons, Milton Common, Oxfordshire UK +44(0)1844 277184

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There is ongoing research into Cyrene paintings currently underway in Illinois.

Three of the works herewith were exhibited at "Legacies of Stone: Zimbabwe Past and Present" from November 1997 to April 1998 at the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium and are illustrated in the catalogue (pp.165-168).

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