
Word and image in dialogue: Peter Clarke's collages and *Fan* series

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Abstract

Both a writer and an artist, Peter Clarke (born 1929) tended to follow his chosen careers separately, but he has, since the end of the 1970s, begun introducing texts systematically into his artworks. Initially words appeared as seemingly randomly placed, usually collaged elements in paintings, often taking the form of graffiti on the surface of increasingly abstract images of walls. These works provide insight into Clarke's interaction with the pictorial tropes of Modernism and also reveal a political content in his works, which were previously considered chiefly as unmediated, naturalistic renderings of Cape people. More recently, in Clarke's *Fan* series, the words make up authored texts which are equal partners with images created on semi-circular fan-shaped formats, now exceeding 150 independent works. Each represents an individual from history, literature or Clarke's South African environment, and the texts are written as monologues, or dialogues between the author-artist and the subject, who is also referenced visually in the imagery of the fan. This article documents the diverse range of subjects and global scope of his references, whether textual or pictorial, which not only provide an enlightening glimpse into the versatile imagination of the artist, but challenge stereotyped views of the contributions of black artists of his generation.

Key words: Peter Clarke, collage, text/image relationships, fans, South African art, artist's book, Modernism

Introduction

Peter Clarke is both a writer and an artist. Yet, although he was illustrator for many other authors, and had drawings and prints published in journals that he wrote for, such as *Contrast*,¹ he very seldom illustrated his own words. Even in the publication of his own poems, in the slim volume *Plain Furniture* (1991), the illustrations are independent and not directly linked to the words he had written. But, if Clarke's images seldom cohabited with his texts, texts were to invade his images in a distinctive way, occasionally in prints but most often in the medium of collage.² This article investigates aspects of Clarke's use of collage, particularly when combined with text, and considers the insights this offers into the artist's relationship to Modernism. The second part of the article focuses on Clarke's *Fan* series, initiated in the 1990s, documenting this little-researched but extensive collection of some 150 works, which form a significant part of Clarke's late *oeuvre* that brought together his writing and his investigation of collage.

Collaging content

Although Clarke does not have clear memories of his first experiments with collage, he associates them with

working on the front room table of the Clarke family home in Simon's Town, not long after he had left his post at the naval dockyard, following his decision to become a full-time artist in 1956 when he was already 27. His use of collage was undoubtedly inspired by twentieth-century European artists and particularly their exploration of *papier collé*. Although excluded from a formal art school training, Clarke nonetheless became familiar with a range of early Modernist artists not dissimilar to what he might have encountered in such courses, because, in pursuing self education, he utilised very similar source material – the relatively limited publications on twentieth-century art that were available in South Africa in the mid-century – which he perused assiduously in bookshops and bought at second-hand stalls in Cape Town from an early age.³ Although initially drawn to the stylised naturalism of early British Modernism that was popular in the publications, and that was likewise the approach favoured by most of the South African artists that he was able to meet,⁴ Clarke was fully aware of the European avant-garde,⁵ and recalls the impact of the collages of artists such as Schwitters, Dubuffet and Picasso.

In one of his earliest collages, made in 1958, he quoted Picasso's silverpoint drawing of a *Rape*,⁶ utilising it as a prototype for a witty cross-cultural encounter by the addition of the collaged head and torso of a black body-builder, clipped from a magazine, to the equine body of the centaur who abducts a struggling fair-skinned woman (Figure 1). As well as 'modernising' the Picasso drawing by translating it into the less conventional medium of Craypas and collage, he infuses it with social critique; in both form and content the work anticipates much of Clarke's oeuvre, where ideas drawn from European source material were deployed to new ends.⁷ His relationship to such material provides an unusual twist on African Modernism, itself a new take on twentieth-century Primitivism.



Figure 1: After a silverpoint drawing by Picasso, 1958. Pastel, ink, pencil and collage, 200 x 254. (Artist's collection).

Clarke's encounters with Modernism parallel those of African artists across the continent, who, while largely self-taught, often developed their artmaking in informal workshops led by white mentors, as did Clarke (Hobbs & Rankin 2011:34-36). Yet there was a striking difference in his case. Those leading such workshops often encouraged African artists to draw on their 'roots', the art forms of their ancestors. This engendered a new turn in Modernist Primitivism, which had customarily involved European artists drawing inspiration from the arts of so-called 'primitive' cultures, but now reversed the situation, authenticating it by placing such appropriation in the hands of artists who could claim it as their own heritage, linking them back to pre-colonial times. In contrast, one might say that Peter Clarke's heritage has been a product of colonialism, whether one considers his maternal grandfather and great-grandfather who were Kru sailors from West Africa visiting the Cape as employees of the Royal Navy, his paternal ancestry in British St Helena, or his maternal great-grandmother who referred to herself as a 'slawe kind' [slave child].⁸ There was no single antecedent source

for Clarke to refer to in his art, but rather a rich range of possibilities to inform the choices he made: this may well have diluted the pressure some other artists seemed to have felt to emulate white Modernist counterparts in their adoption of African-inspired art forms.

In speculating about Clarke's inspiration, however, one cannot discount the influence of his immediate heritage in social terms and in the expectation set up by the South African art market that black artists make representational art with subject matter reflecting, and often romanticising, their 'own communities'. But although Clarke could hardly escape these pressures, and has certainly supported himself over the years through works that met market expectations, this has not stopped him seizing new ideas, whether in the development of innovative processes in the printmaking for which he is best known, or in his readiness to investigate other media and take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about art, particularly the art of his own time. It is rather ironic that, while Clarke has achieved considerable success and recognition for the artworks that were congruent with expectations of the South African market, his collage and other constructed works have had far less acclaim. Yet they have been a constant part of his *oeuvre*, at least since the later 1970s.

Clarke's early experiments with collage were intermittent, however, as he concentrated on painting and printmaking while he established his career. It was only during the 1970s, after his family's forced removal by the apartheid authorities to the euphemistically named township, Ocean View, that he began working decisively with collage. This may have been prompted by exposure to twentieth-century art while he was travelling abroad during that decade, visiting the United States in 1975 to take up a fellowship in the

International Writers Programme at the University of Iowa in the United States, and then Norway in 1978 for a residency at the Atelier Nord in Oslo. Perhaps the additive, and undoubtedly liberating, process of building an artwork from disparate visual languages and sources might also have been cued by his experience of collaborating on painted triptychs with two other artists in Iowa, in a cumulative process where each contributed a panel to the whole.⁹ Yet, if the use of collage was prompted by new experiences and new opportunities to absorb international art, it was used in works that referred to South African experience, as though Clarke was reviewing fragmented memories, piecing together recollections of a life torn asunder by apartheid. If collage in the hands of the Modernists had been prompted by an interest in exploring diverse modes of representation and the imaging of reality, here the concept of collage was a forum for irreverence, defiance, or revisionist enterprises.

Given its social focus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the incorporation of collage was accompanied by the inclusion of lines of text, which, as with the pictorial material, are sometimes his own, and sometimes drawn from another source. The introduction of text in artworks was an innovative move for Clarke. Although his sketchbooks of the 1950s had included extended inscriptions, detailing clothing of the people he drew, for example, or identifying the West African artifacts he encountered in the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg,¹⁰ they had been conventional descriptions, firmly in the service of documenting the visual. Now his texts took on a more proactive role, and provide clues to Clarke's intentions in these less familiar works.

While views on the significance of the written text in Picasso's collages that inspired Clarke are diverse,

and it is still a point of contention whether these clippings were introduced by Picasso purely as visual markers or because of their textual content (see, for example, Krauss 1981), one feels no such ambivalence when viewing text in Clarke's works. Possibly because he is himself a writer, he did not downplay the messages suggested by the collaged texts he incorporated, any more than those of the hand-written additions with which he supplemented them. It is obvious that Clarke was aware of the more decorative visual possibilities of text, given his deployment of different fonts and his frequent use of his own distinctive handwriting, but the content never seems to be incidental. Yet, while his use of text is more obviously programmatic than Picasso's, this is not to say that the words in his works narrate a coherent linear message with a singular focus. Clarke delights in incongruous juxtapositions and in the ideas that are generated in the interstices between the different elements: scholarly texts and political polemic keep company with private missives and poetry, as well as colloquial interjections of the kind often found in graffiti scrawled on the surface of walls – an idea made manifest when Clarke began to use painted images of walls as a support for his collages and inscriptions.

Wall as matrix and metaphor

The walls that Clarke introduced into his works in the late 1970s are high parapets, white-plastered and capped with cornices, reminiscent of historical Cape architecture. They stretch from side to side across the pictorial format, blocking a view beyond. The walls are a potent metaphor for the divisions of apartheid South Africa, where they were also often a matrix for overt and covert graffiti messages in the public domain: Clarke talks of walls being reminiscent of actual structures in Simon's Town, but he also

speaks of their being formidable obstacles to communication, as being 'like the Group Areas Act – a barrier' (Hobbs & Rankin 2011:143).

These artworks were initiated when Clarke was working in Europe in 1978 to 1979. During his residence at the Atelier Nord, he made *Afrika which way?*, where a continuous wall prevents a view of the distance but allows the assembling of poster-like images and informal inscriptions on its surface; while these elements were largely autograph in this work, the clouded sky was shaped in part with torn scraps of paper, and the sun was a clipped image from a Munch museum pamphlet. Clarke came to favour collage for imprinting the wall's surface as well. Alongside this, the walls became increasingly schematic, with their insistent surfaces pushing closer to the picture plane, as in his *Homage to Dumile* (Figure 2), created when he visited his friend, the photographer George Hallett, in the South of France in the spring of 1979 on his way home. There he enjoyed access to a range of literature unavailable to him in South Africa, not least the writings of Amílcar Cabral, for whose *Unity and struggle* Clarke joined forces with Hallett to design the book cover. It might be said that being away from South Africa had made Clarke all the more aware of the constraints of apartheid,¹¹ spawning this new iconography. His personal experience confirmed the views of writers interrogating colonialism and apartheid, countering romantic concepts of Africa as the illusory 'dark continent', which had captured the imagination of Modernist writers and artists alike; as he remarked recently, 'There is so much we need to know instead of it being an imaginary continent'.

From a purely practical point of view, working in Europe was also a time when he had more space and bigger sheets of paper to work on, which facilitated these

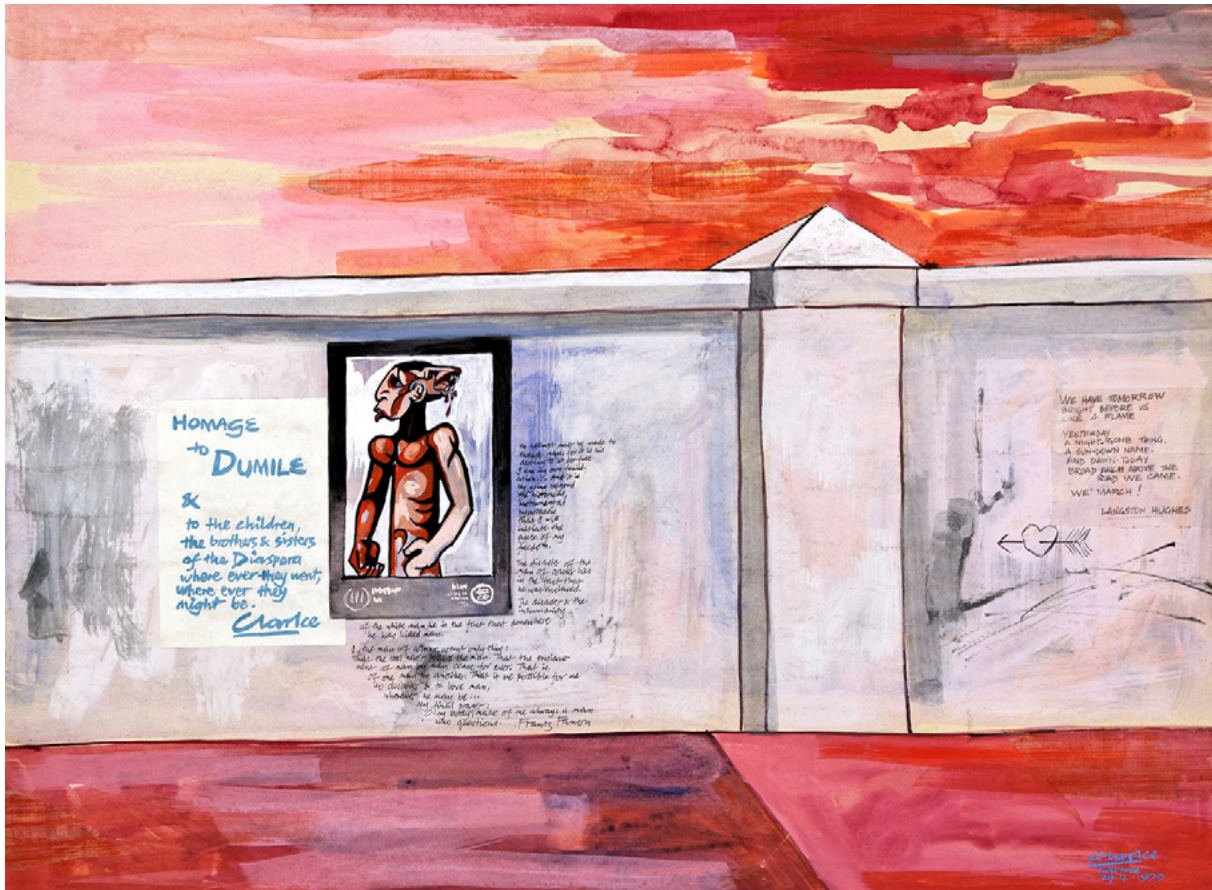


Figure 2: Homage to Dumile, 1979.
Gouache and collage, 497 x 650. (Private collection).

more complicated compositions. Once he returned to South Africa, Clarke met this prompt to work on larger scale by conjoining A2 sheets in diptychs and triptychs to overcome the limitations of the confined working spaces in his Ocean View home. He continued working with the theme of inscribed walls in the 1980s in a series called *Ghetto Fence*, in which he was increasingly conflating the surface of the pictured wall with the surface of paintings, marrying autograph and found images and texts with painterly marks that unified the forms and emphasised the picture plane as field. This increasing abstraction was stimulated by his attendance at the first Thupelo workshop in 1985,¹² which encouraged participants to produce experimental works that echoed the vast canvases of Abstract Expressionism. Both the shift of

scale and the foregrounding of the surface in Clarke's works reflect his engagement with American Modernism, building on earlier contacts with African-American culture that dated back to his early interactions with African-American writer, Langston Hughes (who included an essay by Clarke under the pseudonym Peter Kumalo in *An African anthology* in 1961), and Clarke's encounters with the work of William Johnston and David Driskell in the 1970s, prior to his American fellowship in 1975, which further developed these links.

Like most of his counterparts in the United States, Clarke remained deeply invested in subject matter. The form of his large collages, such as *Transition* (1992) (Figure 3), a triptych of collage and paint on three sheets of A2 paper, might seem to show the influence



Figure 3: *Transition*, 1992.

Triptych. Mixed media and collage, each panel 640 x 493. (Artist's collection).

of Abstract Expressionism – with an ambiguous title that could refer to his own adoption of formal visual phenomena that preoccupied American Modernists. But the title equally connotes political change: these abstract collages are far removed from a Greenbergian understanding of Abstract Expressionism as the apogee of Modernism, in what Greenberg saw as its focus on the fundamental principles of painting and rejection of representational subject matter.

Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – ... came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly (Greenberg 1993:86).

Clarke may have been exploring the medium of painting and his works were certainly no longer dependent on naturalistic representation, but he was still creating narratives, not generated by descriptive images but by his marrying of evocative visual and verbal forms. His subject matter resonates with concerns

generated by the oppression of colonial Africa, specifically apartheid South Africa. The *Ghetto Fence* series pictures the expansive spaces of walls with peeling posters and graffiti as palimpsests of protest, their disintegrating words a muted reminder of voices of dissent.

In Clarke's *Trojan Horse*, created in the early 1990s, which commemorated the three youths killed in an ambush in Athlone in 1985, fragments from newspapers and posters contextualise the tragic event in a culture of resistance (Figure 4). There are lines of hope in a small replica of Clarke's colour reduction print, *Homage to Langston Hughes*, which records that poet's words: 'Hold fast to dreams / for if dreams die / life is a broken-winged bird / that cannot fly'. But, as a message within a message, that affirming enjoinder is played off against newsprint reports of political unrest, the sardonic inclusion of a stamp with the national motto, 'Eendrag maak mag', and the charged protest poetry of Wally Serote, *A wish to eye god*, transcribed in Clarke's hand in insistent capitals. The opening lines of the poem read:



Figure 4: *Trojan Horse*, c.1990. Diptych. Mixed media and collage, each panel 700 x 470. (Constitutional Court, Johannesburg).

GOD
 MAY IT HAPPEN THAT ONE DAY
 WHEN THE SUN WIPES ITS FACE
 AND THE MOON SHAKES ITS SWEAT LIKE A
 DOG REMOVING FLIES
 I WILL NO LONGER WRITE ABOUT PEOPLE
 DYING ON THE STREET & BLEEDING THROUGH
 THE EARS & EYES
 AND BABIES SUFFOCATING IN SUITCASES IN
 MUDDY DONGAS;
 LORD
 I AM NOT PLEADING OR PRAYING
 I AM JUST POLITE
 CHOKING MY SHOUT FROM RUSHING OUT¹³

There is also a typed quotation from the writings of Nikolai Chernyshevsky that Clarke transcribed from a periodical, *the UNESCO Courier* (1978:30):

Political authority, material well-being and education are inseparable from each other. No one who lives in poverty can develop his mental capacities; no one whose intellectual capacities are stunted can participate in the exercise of power; No one who is deprived of political power can free himself from oppression, that is from poverty and ignorance.¹⁴

The scale and abstract marks of Clarke's collage paintings may surprise viewers who think of his work as small-format, naturalistic records of life in Simon's Town and Ocean View. But it is probably the content of these works that seems the most unexpected, as political defiance was not often overt in his earlier works. Yet, while Clarke's texts in the collage works reveal his stance unambiguously, he constantly shifts the register of his quotations,

avoiding the construction of a monolithic concept. This is further complicated when he intersperses longer quotations with his own cryptic and sometimes tongue-in-cheek comments that relieve the seriousness of tone, such as the pieced-together printed and inscribed words in *Trojan Horse*, 'OH, Death where is Thy Story Line?'. In addition he attached the packaging of a popular glue brand that sums up the event in the single ironic word, 'clear'. The challenge set for the viewer is to disentangle the diverse meanings implied by the texts and related images, and to navigate the palimpsests, ephemera and overlays that act as a symbolic language evoking human upheaval, dislocation, dispossession, ghettoisation or migrancy. Through collage Clarke becomes a historian, and his constructed surfaces an inventory, or archive, of (South) African experience. His collages contest the narratives of official political and cultural histories, not only through what is readily observed and clearly stated, but also through the scraps and vestiges that collectively suggest the scope of knowledge that has been lost or has yet to be reinstated.

Constructing artist's books

Alongside these assertive collages, which allude to concepts of cultural revisionism, Peter Clarke began creating more personal and intimate works that are less confrontational, perhaps as respite from political commentary, perhaps in response to the greater freedom that seemed imminent, with South Africa on the brink of democracy. He made many intricately folded concertina books, using waste materials that he had long collected and recycled in his personal environmental drive to address pollution, again giving a more personal twist to his use of collage.¹⁵ The books range in scale and construction, from the size and format of scrapbooks or photograph albums to

his many tiny concertina books that are small enough to be compressed into diminutive box containers. Some include letters of the alphabet and written texts, but it is the visual effect of the abstract patterns created by the collage that predominates in their colourful pages, paradoxically reconstituting the book as a pictorial rather than the more customary language-based form, and creating what might well be considered Clarke's most conventionally Modernist works.

Possibly Clarke's first systematic exploration of the combination of image and text with equal weight is to be found in a more conventional book form entitled *Miscellania*, which is dated 1980. For it, he assembled works made on offcuts of paper that would have been discarded at the Atelier Nord, when he was visiting in 1978, had he not retrieved them and inscribed each with a pictorial motif (occasionally in the form of a collage) and a commentary. His fellow artists at the studio so admired these entertaining observations and images that Clarke decided to mount and bind them as a book when he returned to Ocean View. Despite their significant written component, like the collage books already alluded to, these works seem intended to generate enjoyment rather than to offer serious social commentary, with texts that are thoughtful but light-hearted.

Fan as format

This engaging spirit is also found in Clarke's *Fan* series, first exhibited at Michael Stevenson Cape Town in 2004 (Clarke & Stevenson 2004), and now numbering over 150 works. It is in this series that Clarke's practice as an artist has intersected most consistently with his practice as a writer. In them he has invented his own genre, drawing on two decades of working with collage and gradually introducing text, sometimes continuing



LADY WITH A CHIFFON SCARF
IN HER MOUTH

Clarke

"Hm-m-m. Class," I thought to myself, that first time he arrived to make use of my services. "A real gentleman."
But once my clients have removed their garments it's always the same — they are left with only what is basic — an erection. However he was so well-endowed it was amazing!
Inexperienced, he knew only the usual. So I did the most wonderful slippery unexpected things with him & to him. How he sighed, whimpered, moaned, roared in turn.
"My little lion," I thought. "Big cock."
After that first time he became a regular.
There was one day when he said, "Why don't we marry?"
"Me?" I smiled. "Really?"
I could imagine him telling his high class parents about me, the shock of it all.
"What? Marry a prostitute. Are you insane?"

Figure 5: Lady with a Chiffon Scarf in her Mouth, 2007.

Fan series: folded paper with ink and watercolour image and inscribed text, 500 x 350.

(Artist's collection).

to use them as a vehicle for social comment, but sometimes pursuing directions that read as personal aphorisms.

These works, on a standard format of approximately 500 x 350 mm white paper, with affixed fan shape

above hand-written texts, evoke oriental fans, the floating world of Japanese prints and origami, both in the folding of the paper and the imagery that is collaged, inscribed or painted on their diverse surfaces.

Clarke's oriental inspiration had roots in his early life. As far back as 1954, while still a dockworker in Simon's

Town, he visited a memorable exhibition of Japanese prints at the South African National Gallery and acquired the exhibition catalogue, and even earlier than that he recalls coming across Hokusai's prints in the journals such as *Studio* made available to promising pupils at Livingstone High by his art teacher, Hendrik Esterhuizen. Just as early Modernists had found inspiration in the formal qualities of Japanese prints, so Clarke too delighted in their translation of the observed world into pictorial forms, particularly well-suited to the medium of woodcut. These encounters, which were so important for Clarke's print-making, resurface here in a different way, as he shaped paper into folded arcs to form a substrate for collaged and painted images. A number of the fans pay tribute to their eastern source directly, dedicated to Japanese personae, such as *Basho, Sei Shonagon (10th century Japan), After Sharaku (18th century artist of the Kabuki theatre), and The Butoh Dancer, Khazuo Ono (90 years)*. Others portray less specific figures, often with erotic implications, in *Lady with a Chiffon Scarf in her Mouth (Figure 5), Geisha, The Lady Ono No Komachi (9th century Japanese poet), and The Corpulent Khama Sutra Couple*, drawing on Clarke's memories of Japanese prints to conjure up an exoticising view of the Orient.

From a European perspective, fans evoke the demeanour of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ballrooms and drawing rooms where they were a part of the social codes of those elegant times. As well as complementing elaborate dresses and costumes, both male and female, they acted as a covert form of communication. Messages that could not be spoken might be conveyed by the way fans were held and deployed – messages of invitation or rejection, flirtation or real affection. The messages conveyed by Peter Clarke's *Fan* series are more explicit, for each work is

mounted on a sheet of paper which is inscribed with an accompanying text written in his own hand.

Every fan represents an individual, recorded in the title of the work: invented personalities, characters from literature and legend, historical figures from the distant past and the near present, conceived as though in conversation with the artist-author. Sometimes they speak in the first person, and sometimes Clarke talks with or about these characters in imagined dialogues that straddle time. They are remarkably diverse. Through his fans Clarke is able to hold whimsical exchanges with *Whistler's Mother*, summon an intimate moment of conversation between *Mrs Tutu* and her famous husband, or take on personae ranging from *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* to *Superman*. Although the image for Mozart is no more than a reproduction of a hand-written score from an auction house catalogue, the text evokes a more personal idea of the young musician, whose voice Clarke adopts:

In retrospect I must confess I am of the opinion that I had a peculiar & unsatisfactory childhood. It was an abused childhood even though there was a great deal of admiration received from persons in important positions in society, the well-off, the famous, prince-bishops, aristocracy, royalty.

It was wonderful having admiring receptive audiences for our playing where ever we went, but it was tiring this always having to get into yet another coach to go and perform in halls in mansions, castles, palaces in one city after another & from one country to another.

Sometimes I wished that I could stay at home to play top, a game of marbles or hide & seek with other children of my age instead of going off again to play a sonata for yet another important person I did not know.

The language ranges from the introspective to the colloquial, from these personal memories of the young Mozart (perhaps suggesting Clarke's insight into the minds of children gleaned from the art classes he ran for youngsters in Ocean View for so many years), to his more robust Superman monologue, which combines supernatural fantasy with down-to-earth humour and astute common-sense observations on contemporary society.

Thank goodness for Kryptonite. Without it my performance would be severely hampered. Not that I don't feel at times that all this rushing into action with an Up, up & away isn't becoming absolutely tedious. There is just no end to it. It really seems as if there's more crime now than ever before. There are so many crooks about, such a variety of them, so much dishonesty.

To make matters worse, telephone booths aren't made the way they used to be made because of all the vandalism. These days I have one hell of a time finding a decent place to slip out of my Clark Kent clothes & into my Superman outfit. In actual fact the world has become such a crowded place with people everywhere that even making a phone call isn't private any more. Every second person has a cell phone these days – almost as if they need to be in touch or contactable at any given time. But with all this crime going on I wonder how many of them actually care enough to make a phone call to the cops instead of waiting for others to phone first. Many don't bother. They just leave things up to SU-UPERMAN!

Here the painted Superman logo, graffiti-like text and bold contrast of complementary vermillion and blue that are added to the collaged clipping from a PlayStation game on the comic book hero, match the vigour of the text and the expletive inscriptions on the fan itself, as opposed to the more delicate

calligraphic markings of the monochromatic hand-written score on Mozart's fan.

Dialogues of image and text

The words of the text and the visual forms are so interdependent in Clarke's fans that it is not usually possible to know which came first, as the texts elucidate the images, while they in turn add associations to the texts. Sometimes it seems that Clarke's hoarded litter prompted an idea. For example, it seems likely that it was Rooibos packaging that suggested a *Fortune Teller* reading the teacups, for which slivers of a box of Freshpak teabags were composed into a fan shape. Similarly, books of matches and matchbox labels, again arranged to fit into the semi-circular form, reminded Clarke of the story of the *Little Match Girl* that he had read in a treasured childhood book, a Standard Three handwork prize that he still owns (*Fairy tales [sa]*).

On another occasion, to create an irreverent fan for *Queen Victoria*, Clarke's impish humour led him to draw condom wrappers, inventions which he then painted and collaged, fanned out against a cross-hatched ground, giving them amusingly suggestive trade names – 'Coronet condoms', 'Gold Coast condoms (XL)', 'Golden Cockerel small size condoms', 'Jumbo Plus' – as well as using 'Freshpak', culled from a tea packet and put to different use from those in his *Fortune Teller*. The accompanying words contextualise the collage in his imagined dialogue between monarch and consort:

Discreetly, English history does not record the fact that when Victoria, finding herself in the family way yet again, remarked to her consort, 'Albert dearest, I think it's time that you started using French Letters,' the prince replied, 'But, my

dear Victoria, you know I'm German. How would
I look wearing one of those French outfits?'

Sometimes examples seem to have been instigated
by texts such as two fans where washes of colour
portray the blue of distance. One relates to a Taoist
saying attributed to Lao-tse, which he found in his
book, *Tao Te Ching*:

The wise man looks into space
& does not see the great as
too big
nor the little as too small
For he knows that there is no
limit to dimensions.¹⁶

Another was inspired by one of NP van Wyk Louw's
short poems entitled 'Klipwerk' in his *Nuwe Verse*,
where lines devoted to the colour blue led Clarke to
create a fluidly painted cerulean fan for the Afrikaans
poet, and to invent a sly rhyming pun on his name,
which he inscribes as 'Van Wyk Blouw'. Clarke was
familiar enough with the poetry of Van Wyk Louw
to inscribe the lines he recollected without referring
to *Nuwe Verse*, although his memory took some
liberties with the text:

die wereld is vandag
puur blou
dis pieringblou
en bosduifblou
en rondom kleinkatoogse
blou.¹⁷

As well as referring to literary figures, Clarke creates
fans dedicated to historical protagonists, some of
mythical stature, others derived from myth – *Alexander
the Great, Comrade Lenin, Don Juan, Theseus, Icarus*.
Women from the pages of biblical and political history
are well represented too, and equally diverse –
Nefertiti, Salome, Bathsheba, Lot's Wife, The Queen

*of Sheba, Princess Yung T'ai, Marie Antoinette and
The Duchess [of Windsor]*. It is a reflection of Clarke's
imaginative world that real figures from history receive
the same attention as those derived from legend,
and that his interest ranges across cultures from
many different lands and periods. A number of fans
have a focus closer to home as they capture moments
of South Africa's history. These fans are not concerned
with the dominant discourse of great leaders and
their consorts, or battles won and lost, but recollections
of less recognised even marginal figures, both
named and anonymous, for whom Clarke claims an
equally significant place – *Helen Martins*, known for
her Owl House in Nieu Bethesda, for example, but
also *Die Lappiesman, Big Sister/Little Mother (Aids
Orphan), Refugee*. The generic titles suggest Clarke's
use of synecdoche, where the individual represents a
larger group, and his process of collage is equally
metaphoric, evocatively suggesting the way history
and biography are stitched together from the scraps
of memory.

Commentary from the margins

Clarke's interest was particularly captured by the
Khoi-San and their rock art which provides clues to
lost practices of their history. For one fan devoted to
a *Bushman Artist*, where dappled oranges and
browns allude to the hot, dry expanses of the interior,
Clarke quotes from 'The Peoples of South Africa', a
chapter from the *Official Yearbook*, 1985: 'As late as
the 1860s a Bushman shot during a punitive expedition
after a cattle raid, was found to have pigments &
materials used for rock paintings'. He notes that
this was a mere footnote in the publication,¹⁸ which
did not acknowledge the man's full life as 'artist – holy
man – witch doctor – seer', and goes on to remark:

image of a sailing ship suggests the voyages that brought slaves to the Cape. The accompanying written lines reflect the more personalised voice of the freed slave who married her master, as Maria tells her story, recreated in the artist's mind. The liminal state of these figures was something that Clarke could relate to on a personal level, not only because of experiencing the demeaning effects of being 'coloured' in apartheid society, but because of his own heritage, reaching back to his slave ancestry.

Both Eva and Maria speak of the discrimination they have suffered, demonstrating that the fans, too, could convey political messages. But through the voices of both women musing on the future, Clarke offers a positive reading of their rich legacy, which would make their offspring, 'in truth new South Africans'. Maria, for instance, says:

Together with the blood of ancestors who came from Holland, France & England they have the blood of slaves who came from God alone knows where all flowing in their veins. My husband says we won't live to see it, but the time will come when it won't matter who our forefathers were. It won't matter at all. Perhaps our offspring will even be among those regarded as prominent people in this country.

Considered together, the two fans for Eva and Maria, as with the two dedicated to the Khoi-San, suggest that Clarke was also thinking about links between different works in the *Fan* series, establishing the possibility of conversations between the fans and their subjects, although in this case leaving the viewer's imagination to provide the dialogue.

Clarke's fans accumulate the vestiges of recent history also, creating visual metaphors of social situations. When he pieced together a collage of newspaper photographs for *Unknown Youth, Soweto 1976* (Figure

8), fracturing images to suggest disruption but including a recognisable image of the iconic photograph of the carrying of Hector Pietersen's body, he did not focus on the young martyr, reputedly the first to die in the Soweto uprising, but on the one who bears his body, addressing him directly:

You are a youth catapulted ever so suddenly into manhood. Panic-stricken, confused, you move through space into the unpredictable future. We look at this little group of young people on their bloody journey, held for ever visually within the time frame of the picture depicting a specifically violent historical moment. Who are you?

You are nameless. But simply because of your spontaneous expression of compassion you have become forever a noble being. In retrospect there will be those who will wonder not only about Hector Petersen [sic] & his sister Antoinette but also about you.

Artists, authors and autobiography

Some fans relate to less brutal encounters that nonetheless demonstrate the invidious controlling power of apartheid. In *Censor*, Clarke reflects on the invasive surveillance of apartheid and muses on its apparent replication in custom restrictions in the present, conjured up by the South African Revenue Service stickers that are recycled here. *A Revolutionary Writer* gathers together typed refusals from publishers, expressing polite regret, or responding that subversive literature does not fit into their policy: 'We do not publish politics'.



Figure 8: *Unknown Youth, Soweto 1976*. Exhibited 2004. *Fan* series: folded paper with paint, penwork and inscribed text, 500 x 350. (Courtesy Warren Siebrits Modern and Contemporary Art, Johannesburg).

The writer, eventually absolutely discouraged, has placed his books, a huge pile, in his dingy moss-damp toilet. Each time nature calls he uses pages he has torn out. Afterwards he pulls the chain, flushing subversion on its way.

His book is traveling, going places underground after all.

It seems there might be some autobiographical experience reflected here, albeit with comic overtones: one can hardly avoid noticing that, unlike the despondent character this work conjures up, Clarke has used his *Fan* series as a novel way to 'publish politics'. Autobiographic comment is also suggested by Clarke's rather cynical comments on the questionable value of fame in *A Great Artist*¹⁹ (Figure 9):

In the end when the dignitaries as well as the nonentities shovel soil over you in your very expensive coffin with its ornate fittings will it

matter that you were known as one of the world's truly prominent artists?

When you, supposedly one of the so-called greatest artists, lie silent & silenced for ever under several feet of cemetery soil, will it matter if in actual fact you weren't really all that great after all?

This fan mimics the Abstract Expressionist painterliness of artists such as Jackson Pollock, whose name is one of many inscribed amongst the fluid patches of colour. The acknowledged artists range from the best known, such as Michelangelo and Picasso, to more unexpected inclusions, such as Grandma Moses. The myriad names in lists, sometimes random, sometimes alphabetical, do not forget Clarke's own countrymen, who are included from Atkinson to Zungu.

This work is an example of how, even though the fans seem in many ways a unique part of Clarke's oeuvre, they can pick up on themes in his 'mainstream' works. Both in its free style of painting and its inscriptions, this work echoes one of his large collages, *The Contributors*. Initiated in 1986, this triptych paid homage to black South African artists, from the rock artists of the Khoi-San to present day practitioners. The work continued to grow in step with the increasing knowledge about artists who had long been overlooked,²⁰ with more and more names being inscribed on its surface, a process only halted when Clarke finally agreed to sell the work to the William Humphreys Art Gallery in 2008.

It is clear that Clarke was also thinking of the colloquial meaning of 'fan' when he made these works, for many of them are individually dedicated to artists that he admired, such as *Gauguin, Franz Kline, Miro, Mondriaan, Isamu Noguchi, Jackson Pollock* and *Mark Rothko*, an indication of his wide-ranging



Figure 9: A Great Artist. Exhibited 2004. *Fan series: folded paper with paint, penwork and inscribed text, 500 x 350.* (Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town).

knowledge of Modernism. These fans mimic the style of the artist that he honours, with a wrapped fan for *Christo*, for example, and a collage of miscellaneous fragments and tickets for *Schwitters*. Yet by transposing styles onto the semi-circular fan shapes and linking the visual forms to a text, as though they are illustrations, Clarke subverts any conventional reading of Modernism. He also expands the twentieth-century canon by creating fans for South African artists, such as *Christo Coetzee*, *Faith Loy Plaut*, *Nicolaas Maritz*, *Jane Young*, *Kagiso Mautloa*, *The Holo brothers*, *Walter Battiss*, and *Sam Nhlengethwa*, whose name is spelt in cut-out letters echoing that artist's explorations of collage.

Another admiring fan is dedicated to *Matisse*, drawing on Clarke's memory of seeing the French artist's huge collage, *Snail*, at the Tate Gallery when he visited London in 2001. The scraps of overlapping coloured tissue on the curved format of the fan recall that

work, when Matisse – as Clarke himself was to do – had turned to the use of collage in his old age, as the text relates:

Ceasing to be the old ailing artist that he is, mentally he becomes transformed into the personification of youthful energy & enthusiasm, all lovely, colourful, joyous innocence & ideas & expression.

Welling up in him like a fountain, creativity drives him on. His drawings, paintings, collages never cease to glow with its own very individual & unforgettable illumination even long after his departure from this earth.

Clarke, who often speaks of the sheer pleasure of making artworks, seems here to acknowledge the 'art for art's sake' that underpins Modernism. But elsewhere he recognises the potential of humbler creativity and its social role. While the disorderly crowding of his fan titled *Shack Dweller* evokes squalid settlements and acknowledges that 'dignity cannot exist where there is a lack of opportunity', in *An Interior Decorator* he conflates the making of his collage with the recycling of scrap materials to line makeshift dwellings, and muses sympathetically about the dreams and aspirations of the unknown shack artist.

Clarke's collages are not restricted to paper, but utilise fabrics as well, sometimes culled from his sister Eleanor's sewing basket. Gold filament evokes the twine that helped *Theseus* find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth, and delicate net masks pale flowers and words of betrayal to represent Dickens' *Miss Havesham*. Despite the romanticising imagery, there is more than a hint of impatience with her maudlin behaviour in the text, which provides amusingly acerbic recommendations for the protagonist to pull herself together, and take comfort in a nice cup of

Rooibos tea and a piece of her wedding cake, so that there can be a happy ending to her tale. We are reminded that Clarke is a voracious reader and as interested in literature as in the visual arts. Another literary figure he includes is *Dorian Gray*, who has a fan that offers commentary on cosmetic surgery, and *Robinson Crusoe*, whose fan is composed of ragged cloth and leather scraps to complement his goatskin garments, although Friday scoffs at such sartorial ambitions on a desert island where there is no one to see the cast-away. Recycled fabrics can also be more soberly metaphoric as when Clarke's textured fan surface refers to the art of *Alberto Burri* and his use of sacking and old rags to evoke 'the blood-soaked bandages he had seen in wartime', words quoted from Edward Lucie-Smith (1969:80).

Encountering death

It is the bandages themselves that we find in *Lazarus* (Figure 10). Here it is not Clarke's environmental interest in recycling that is suggested by the collage, but the renewal of the biblical story of Lazarus miraculously restored to life. Traditionally Lazarus is depicted as shrouded for burial. But Clarke's image comprises only the wrappings, which he describes as conveying 'death-bandaged odours', drawing on the reader's olfactory sense to enhance the sight of crumpled, frayed strips of a pall, the stains in visceral pinks, putrid browns and thick white paint deposits seeming to suggest seepage of body fluid. The immediacy of the experience is reinforced by the telling of the story in the first person, the writer inserting himself into the mind of Lazarus. Clarke's words capture the emotional struggle of a man already departed who resists being raised, but is forced by the determined faith of his sisters to return to earthly life, forgoing the 'silent darkness of Eternity':

Having reached that stage
when completely possessed,
defeated by sickness, pain, distress
& helplessness,
I did what was obvious
& gave up the ghost.
Into the silent darkness of Eternity
I slipped away.
The day
when finally He came
in answer to my sisters' frantic plea
it should have been too late.
They'd had to wait so long.
But faith was strong.
Anxious,
curious spectators surround me
where I lie.
Responding to His call,
death-bandaged odours,
I awake, reply,
arise
before astonished eyes.

While the reluctant Lazarus is cheated of death, *Charon, the Ferryman* is defrauded of money (Figure 11). In Greek belief, the ferryman of souls collected the coins laid on the eyes or mouths of the dead in exchange for rowing them across the rivers Styx and Acheron to Hades. The myth reminded Clarke of how he and his siblings were intrigued by glimpses of the 'ollap' old people put on the eyelids of the deceased, heavy copper pennies to close the eyes. In Clarke's text, Charon recalls the origins of the practice and how it is no longer honoured:

Ancient in its origins, this custom existed in order to pay my fee for ferrying those deceased across the dark waters of Acheron & into the eternal silence of the underworld. Sometimes even out of date coins with no current value were used for this purpose. The symbol, not the substance, was more important.



Figure 10: Lazarus. Exhibited 2004.
Fan series: folded paper with with cotton bandage, paint and inscribed text, 500 x 350. (Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town).



Figure 11: Charon, the Ferryman. Exhibited 2004.
Fan series: fabric, coins and buttons with inscribed text. 500 x 350. (Courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town).

But these days, when I ferry the shades across the waters of Acheron they are unaccompanied by coins. The money is elsewhere, in savings accounts & in a variety of investments, worldly goods, antiques, paintings, property, even pyramid schemes & Swiss Banks. Things & attitudes have really changed. It is modern times. These days, the ferryman, unthought of, receives no fee for the service he renders.

The artist recalls drolly that when he made the artwork he, like his ferryman, suffered a shortage of coins, and resorted to buttons to augment the exotic coinage scattered across the simple black arc he created to evoke the dark river crossing.

Clarke's fan, *Out-patient, False Bay Hospital*, suggests that the ferryman was repeatedly cheated of one of his passengers by the medical treatment that keeps the patient alive (Figure 12). The work is a wry comment on old age, of long waits 'for the doctor & for death',

and, on closer examination, the viewer realises that it refers directly to the artist, as the medical docket that are refashioned into a fan shape carry Clarke's own details. The inscription concludes matter-of-factly:

He will see the doctor. Afterwards, from the dispensary, he will obtain the packets of pills for various purposes which, in reality, he sees as basically representing delaying tactics on the way to the grave.

Clarke has commented that the *Fan series* expresses an 'obsession with space/spaces'. In *Charon, the Ferryman*, the subject crosses from one existential place to another, while *Out-patient, False Bay Hospital* captures a liminal space between life and death. There are also many fans representing far-flung places and a number devoted to refugees, wanderers and travelers, as well as others to figures that are distant in time. Their subjects seem constantly on the move, criss-crossing different histories, cultures and existential

and his writing, moving fluidly between image and text, text and image. The facture of the fragmentary collaged elements, interspersed with painting and combined with text, seems a metaphoric commentary on memory, oral tradition and historical writing, and their disconnections and incompleteness, not only for the lives of those who are largely undocumented, but even for those who are celebrated. Clarke makes a quietly subversive statement by treating both the famous and the unknown in the same way in the *Fan* series, leveling the playing fields of history. Moreover, if the fans seem gentle, non-confrontational works that avoid grand narratives and the more abrasive assertiveness of the images and texts in Clarke's large collages, they nonetheless remind us of the political implications of the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people – and of the challenges faced by an artist who, despite his opportunities being curtailed and controlled by apartheid, succeeded in living a life beyond such constraints in his creative mind.

Like Clarke's more expansive collages, the fans also make a statement about African Modernism in putting to use techniques and styles related to twentieth-century art movements, but deploying them to new ends. As John Picton (2005:49) reminds us, 'African modernities were invariably framed within the resistance movements that had their origins at the very same time as the imposition of colonial rule. Within the conditions and institutions of local modernity, therefore, modernism in visual practice and resistance as political practice have a common history.' Such overtly post-colonial commentary has been embedded in Clarke's practice since the late 1970s, although often overlooked by those who prefer his more familiar narrative works. Later, in the *Fan* series, Clarke produces works which continue this practice, but does not limit himself to political polemic. In claiming the right to speak of and even for people from other

times and places, from cultures beyond the continent of Africa, he makes in a quiet way a statement of political autonomy and assertiveness in the face of long entrenched restrictions on black voices in South Africa. The *Fans* are testament to the rich diversity of Clarke's imaginative life and of a very personal take on resistance. In their remarkable range of reference, uninhibited by chronological or geographical limitations, the *Fan* series resists the boundaries imposed on black artists by apartheid and its legacy, and challenges stereotypical readings of their work.

Notes

- 1 Initiated in 1960 under the editorship of Jack Cope, *Contrast* was a 'liberal' journal publishing the work of a wide range of South African writers and artists.
- 2 For an overview of Clarke's *oeuvre*, see Hobbs and Rankin (2011). References to Clarke's opinions and ideas are drawn from the many interviews conducted as part of the research for this publication from 2005 onwards, a practice which has continued informally as recently as Hobbs's telephonic interviews with Clarke in February 2013 in relation to this article.
- 3 Clarke's hope to make use of the Simon's Town library in his pursuit of self-education was quashed when he was brusquely referred to the facilities 'for you people' (meaning 'non-whites'), and he decided to build up a library of his own instead. For fuller discussion of Clarke's use of publications in self education, and their emphasis on British Modernism, see Hobbs and Rankin (2011:28-29, 59-60 and *passim*).

- 4 Clarke had met Boonzaier and Lipshitz as early as 1948, albeit briefly, and would have been aware of the work of the New Group of which they were members, which included the most 'advanced' artists in South Africa around the mid-century. He was also an admirer of Gerard Sekoto although they did not meet until Clarke visited Paris at the beginning of 1963. From 1948, Clarke worked alongside other black artists in informal art groups, led by white practitioners, and would have met other white artists during a short period in Katrine Harries' printmaking studio at the Michaelis School of Art at the University of Cape Town in 1961.
- 5 Clarke's interest in these artists would have been reinforced by his brief studies in Amsterdam in 1962-1963, when he was able to visit European galleries and museums, although their impact on his own work was not immediately apparent.
- 6 In this case the book was *Picasso: Sein werk von Frank Elgar; Sein leben von Robert Maillard* (1956), gifted to him in 1958 by Ernst Reinecke, a teacher at the German School in Cape Town, so, although Clarke could not read the German text, he had the opportunity to study the images at his leisure. The silverpoint is reproduced on page 136.
- 7 Interestingly Clarke seems almost to pre-empt Romare Bearden's use of collage here. He acknowledges his awareness of the African-American's work much later in his career, and he wrote of Bearden's collage methods in a *Fan* dedicated to Sam Nhlengethwa: 'With Sam, as with Bearden, often inspired by jazz, there is the cutting, tearing & assembling of bits & pieces of different kinds of paper to make a statement. Yet, amazingly, with what permanence the statement stays behind in the memory of others.'
- 8 The diversity was revealed to be even greater in Clarke's DNA when he participated in the Geographic Project in Sub-Saharan Africa. See Hobbs and Rankin (2011:201); see also Clarke's family tree in Hobbs and Rankin (2011:19).
- 9 Indian artist, Dilip Chitre, and Yugoslavian artist, Ahmed Muhamed Imamovic, who were also participants at the International Writers Programme at the University of Iowa in 1975, collaborated with Clarke on a series of four triptychs. The three men mostly worked independently, intentionally creating triptychs of disparate panels that preserved their own stylistic languages. Their collaboration culminated in a joint exhibition *Triple Triptychs: Painting Multiplied by Poetry*, which opened on 13 December 1975 (see Hobbs & Rankin 2011:134-5).
- 10 Clarke's trip to Natal in 1954/5 prompted him to draw a wide range of new subjects, focused, as his images always were, on different aspects of life and culture of black communities. Making drawings in the museum may have been prompted by his earlier commission to make drawings in the South African Museum in Cape Town for a visiting Canadian anthropologist, and perhaps also by his interest in his own West African heritage (see Hobbs & Rankin 2011:44).
- 11 Clarke has spoken of the revelations of travelling abroad, when, for example, he had access to books that were banned in South Africa that afforded new insights, and also when he became aware of racial issues in the United States that heightened his awareness of some of the insidious ways that black South Africans had been denigrated and exploited.

12 Supported by USSALEP, the Thupelo workshops, initiated by Bill Ainslie and David Koloane, provided opportunities for South African artists who did not normally have access to spacious working conditions and generous resources; led by American Peter Bradley at the first workshop, held in the Magaliesberg, artists were encouraged to experiment with expansive abstract works reminiscent of action painting. Although this experience was ultimately of importance to him, Clarke recalls having felt uneasy at the workshop, to which he had taken pre-selected material suitable for making collages.

13 Clarke took the poem from Wally Serote's *Tsetlo* (1974:41).

14 Clarke did not record the author or title of the article.

15 Clarke recalls that, growing up in a household with limited means, he learnt to keep things that might be useful, and to 'make do': he sees this frugal impulse as the initial motivation for his efforts to avoid polluting the world with rubbish.

16 Although he recalls that he owned the book of this title that he consulted, Clarke cannot remember details of the publication from which he transcribed the extract.

17 The original reads:

die aardryk is vandag puur blou
dis bosduifblou en erdeblou
en rond-om kleinkat-oog se blou.
(Van Wyk Louw 1981:208).

18 The reference is a brief aside, not an actual footnote, in the *Official yearbook of the Republic of*

South Africa (1985:78), another indication of Clarke's wide-ranging reading.

19 Although Clarke succeeded in supporting himself with his art and writing, and had awards abroad, full recognition in South Africa came late. In 2005, at the age of 76, he was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga (silver) by President Thabo Mbeki, and a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. With his customary sense of humour, Clarke remarked in his address at the opening of his retrospective exhibition, *Listening to Distant Thunder: The Art of Peter Clarke*, in 2011 at Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, that it was just as well that his work had finally been recognised in this way, or he would have come back to 'spook' (haunt) the gallery!

20 Clarke acknowledges, for example, how the catalogue of the Johannesburg Art Gallery exhibition, *The neglected tradition* (Sack 1988), made him aware of fellow artists who had been previously quite unknown to him.

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