
EXHIBITION REVIEW: Mandela Poster Project Collective: *Mandela: Icon lost and regained*

Mandela Poster Project Collective

The Mandela Poster Project Collective, in partnership with the University of Pretoria, presented an international exhibition of 95 posters celebrating the life of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela between 17 and 26 July 2013. The exhibition was the first public display of the poster collection, which at the time of writing is also going to travel to various venues in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The exhibition is also going to travel internationally, including to Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, the UK, and the USA.

The Mandela Poster Project, initiated by two South African designers in May this year, initially aimed to collect 95 original and exceptional posters in 60 days as a tribute to Mandela in light of his birthday on 18 July. What started off as a small project grew dramatically over the following weeks. The initiative received a great deal of media attention and culminated in more than 700 submissions from international and national contributors.

According to Jacques Lange, one of the initiators of the project and an Information Design alumnus from the University of Pretoria, 'the entries offered many different narratives and interpretations that,

in some cases, are a clear representation of the history and social structure of their countries or origin.' He further stated that, 'different countries had legacies of poster design, such as Poland, Cuba and Mexico, where posters were used in the past to change political structures.'

The submissions were curated by a team of volunteers, called the Mandela Poster Project Collective,¹ and 95 posters were printed for the exhibition via a



Figure 1: Roy Villalobos (USA). 2013



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Figure 2: Advocate Yvonne Mokgoro, Chairwoman of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and former Justice of the Constitutional Court at the Mandela Poster Project exhibition opening, 2013. University of Pretoria, Department of Visual Arts.



Figure 7: Ana Ivette Valenzuela (Mexico). 2013.



Figure 8: Carlos Andrade (Venezuela). 2013.

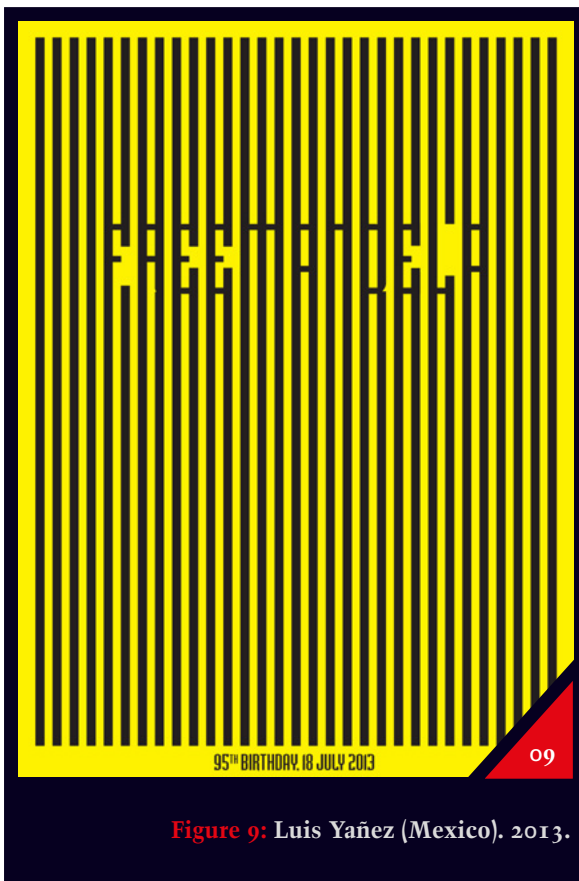


Figure 9: Luis Yañez (Mexico). 2013.

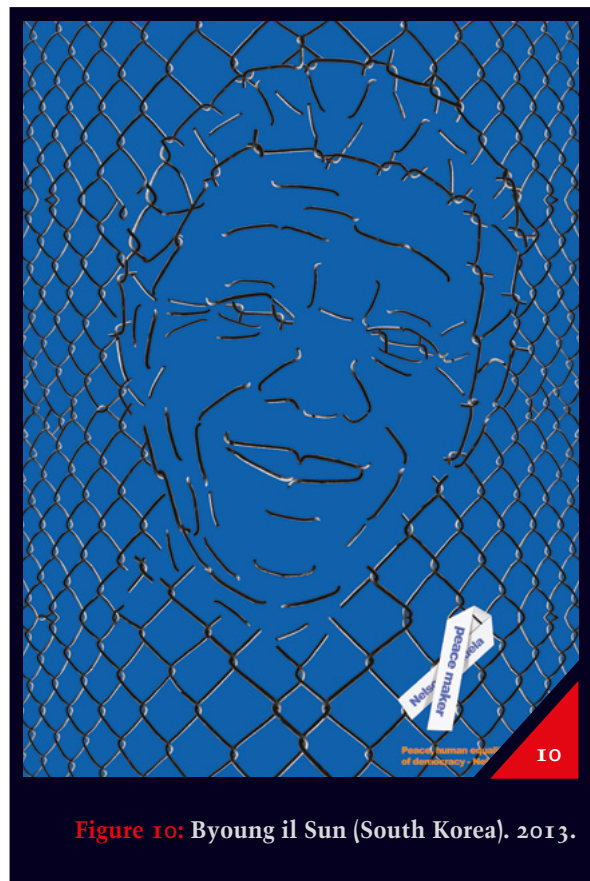


Figure 10: Byoung il Sun (South Korea). 2013.

sponsorship from Hewlett-Packard. A single limited edition set of the final collection will be auctioned to raise funds for the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital Trust and a second limited edition set will be donated to the Hospital to be used as part of its interior design.

Owing to the high quality of submissions received, plans are also underway to collate 500 poster submissions into a limited edition publication. The Mandela Poster Project is an independent volunteer initiative and carries the endorsement of the International Council of Communication Design (Icograda) as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations. According to Marilena Farruggia, managing director of Icograda: 'One can truly appreciate the contribution that a person can make through an initiative such as The Mandela Poster Project. ... [It] gives palpable form to words expressed by Mr Mandela himself: "A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special." ... Someone special inspired something special and it now resonates worldwide in the design community.'

Mandela: Icon lost and regained

Amanda du Preez

Freedom. Peace. Justice. Humanness. Africanness. Anti-apartheid. Father of the Nation. Forgiveness. These are some of the terms used to describe Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. In the same breath it must also be acknowledged that after Coca-Cola, Mandela has become the best known brand internationally. It means that Mandela/Madiba/Tata Mandela, or however South Africans prefer to refer to the great man, one

cannot simply talk about the man without also implying the global icon that he has become. Mandela is a complex cultural icon, an international brand, but more importantly he is the frail old man who, at this time, fights for his life a few blocks from where I write this piece.

The rise of the popular cultural icon is one of the by-products of the increasing mediated and globalised world we live in. Whereas icons of old were endowed with metaphysical and religious allure, the new global icon or 're-auratized' (Ghosh 2011:1) image spreads viral like by means of visual technologies and is more attuned to commercialisation than any religious connotation. Derived from the Greek term *eikon* (image or portrait), icons 'give tangible shape to intangible ideas' (Nachbar & Lausé 1992:171) and as such can be viewed as express carriers of beliefs, myths and archetypes. Even though they differ in intent, both religious and secular icons provide meaningful clues to a specific world-view as they embody ideas honoured by a particular culture. Although icons have become shorthand for an idea, it would be a misjudgement, however, to interpret them as mere 'signs' for they represent 'deep-seated, significant messages ... [that] impart magical powers for those who venerate the icon' (Nachbar & Lausé 1992:171). In Mandela's case it is not difficult to grasp why he turned into an esteemed icon since he acted as the magical bridge that consolidated democracy in South Africa.² In fact, he is even suspected of possessing extraordinary powers or what is commonly referred to as the 'Madiba magic' – usually denoting his charm, height and excellent memory (Boehmer 2008:3). Mandela's iconic cultural capital probably dates back to the Rivonia Trial in 1964 (although his image was banned afterwards by the apartheid government) and was sealed as a globalised icon upon his release from prison in 1990. Mandela was iconised quite rapidly and globally thereafter.

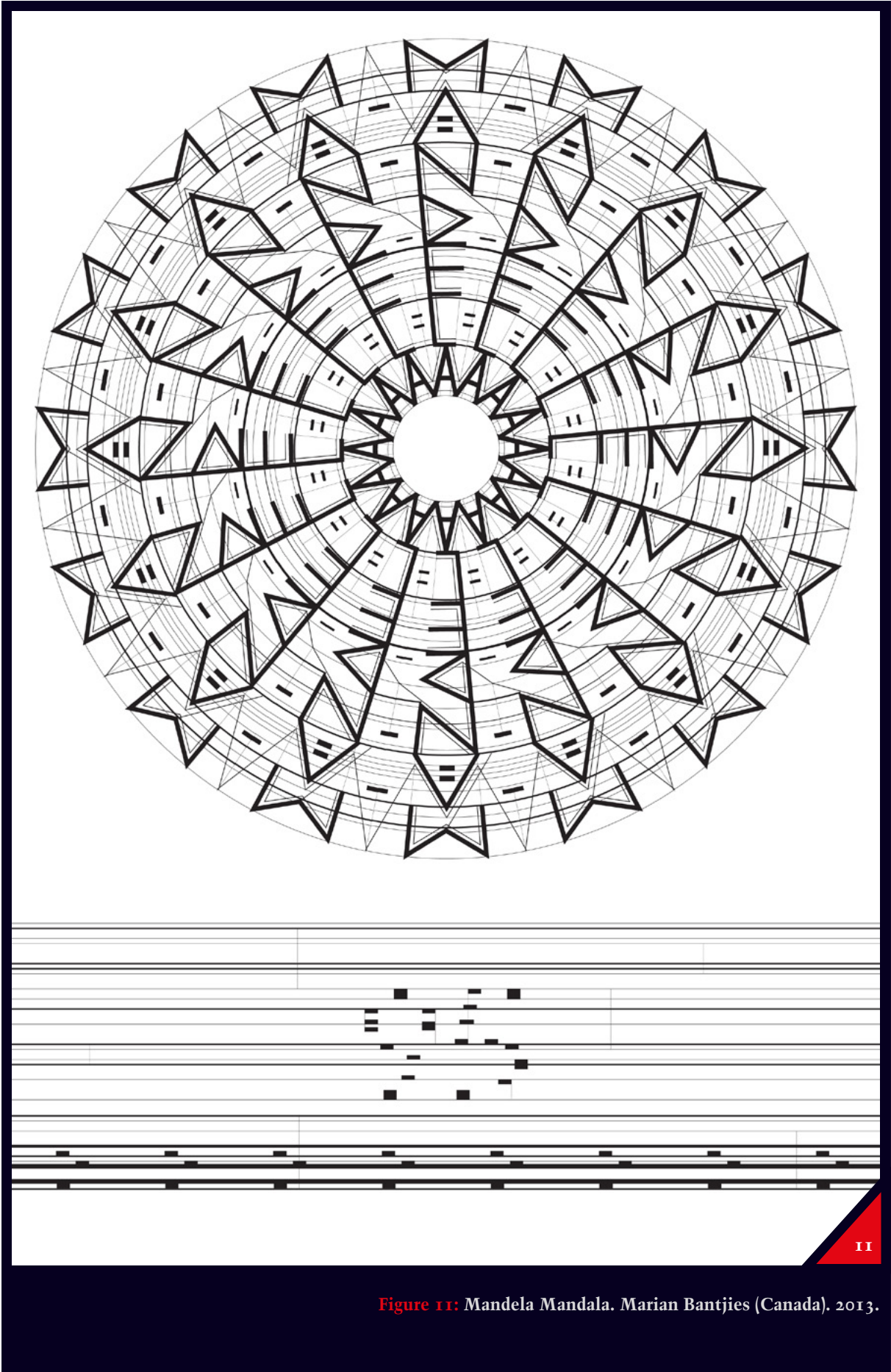


Figure 11: Mandela Mandala. Marian Bantjies (Canada). 2013.

Iconisation is a process whereby the original object or person's appearance remains the same but is encoded with qualities that are not intrinsically part of it (Tomaselli & Shepperson 2009:20). Thus it is a process by which the object or person iconised (Mandela in this case) is stripped from a particular reference to history and all contradictions that may be contained in the image are eliminated. This indicates that the process of iconisation 'occurs in the continuous present, so that icons can be appropriated to many kinds of discursive (re-)engineering' (Tomaselli & Shepperson 2009:20). The icon is therefore an enduring symbol that can 'accommodate shifts and reversals in meaning' and accordingly, Mandela can be considered as a 'living sign', whose iconic status is far from being fixed (Tomaselli & Shepperson 2009:20). However, recent events suggest that the commercialisation of the Mandela icon into a powerful brand sold through merchandise ranging from soft toys, a range of clothing LWTF (Long Walk to Freedom), the House of Mandela wine range and even a reality TV show ('Being Mandela') may just leave the last unfortunate imprint on the process of iconisation of this legendary figure.

It is not only commoditisation that threatens the integrity of the popular icon, but in the contemporary 'liquid modern society of consumers' (Bauman 2000:47) the drive towards becoming 'ultimate surfaces' signifying nothing more than themselves, is perhaps the most lethal (Blatanis 2003:11-12). As mastered by the greatest iconographer of our time, Andy Warhol, epitomised in his work *Gold Marilyn* (1962), the popular icon becomes more an epitaph at the burial site of the real than a sign of revelation. Warhol's fascination with Marilyn Monroe is, amongst other things, also an attempt to come to grips with the process by which 'a real woman had effectively disappeared behind a screen of representation' (Adams 2004:93). The icon has since been enmeshed with the cult of

celebrity, which does not imply that all celebrities necessarily become icons (Kemp 2012:342). The state of contemporary iconolatry in the age of digital reproduction and endless consumption is foregrounded in debates on the legendary image of Ernesto Che Guevara as captured by the fashion photographer, Korda. Does Che's iconic image still evoke radical politics in the face of pervasive commodification or has it become a nostalgic remnant that is now worn as radical chic? (Larson & Lizard 2007:425). This remains a critical issue also when considering Mandela's visual heritage and the economic and political causes for which his iconic features are utilised. The 46664 project (Mandela's prison number on Robben Island), started in 2002 as a global HIV/AIDS awareness campaign, does, however, suggest that commodification does not necessarily equal de-politicisation (Larson & Lizardo 2007:450).

What makes an icon recognisable or memorable? If iconic images 'are endowed with a special presence, as if some quality of the original is embedded in them' (Kemp 2012:342), it means they are relational by nature and elicit responses from their audiences. It may even be suggested that they are 'something like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites' and actually 'want to be kissed' (Mitchell 2005:6, xvi). They are simply irresistible. The memorability of icons also resides in visual elements such as symmetry and simplicity allowing the viewer to hone in on one of the key features or identifiers. Iconic images furthermore show a tremendous ability to be successfully reproduced: 'however inadequately they are transmitted or however they are traduced during transmission' (Kemp 2012:34), they remain recognisable and identifiable. They are accordingly images made to travel across different media and reproductive processes.

In the 95 poster icons selected for the Mandela Poster Project 95 Collection, the icon 'at work' can be seen. In those posters iconising Mandela's face, the features are reduced and simplified to bare essentials. In contrast to the Korda photograph of Che Guevara, there is not one image that dominates the field of representation, but rather a few images that keep cropping up for example Mandela with raised fist as he leaves prison, young Mandela with box gloves, profile images but mostly a broad generous face smiling. In cases where Madiba is associated with another sign, for example, the continent of Africa, both are unambiguously identifiable. One poster cleverly uses the map of Africa to construct the iconic image of Mandela's face, while two others conjure up the legend's face from words such as liberty, freedom, hope and democracy. In many instances symbols such as the dove, broken prison bars and bird cages are utilised to convey key ideas associated with Mandela such as peace, freedom, liberty and justice. One of the most fascinating examples is a poster wherein Madiba's face appears in a broken fence. The colours used in most cases are black, bold green, blue, red and yellow, echoing the colours of the South African national flag and Mandela's links with the African National Congress (ANC). Madiba's trademark shirts are also well represented, while there are also instances of the clever use of visual and verbal puns, for example, *Mandela Mandala*.

Entries came from Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Germany, Greece, Honduras, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, Slovenia, South Korea, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States of America, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and naturally South Africa.

95 posters to represent 95 years in the life of a global icon. We may just express the hope that in the cases where the man has been lost to the icon, or where the icon has been completely submerged in commercialisation, other iconic examples of re-signification and selfless politicisation may be gained.

These posters form part of such a re-signification.

The complete collection can be viewed at www.mandelaposterproject.org

Notes

- 1 The Mandela Poster Project Collective is made up of Brenda Sanderson (Canada) and South Africans Celéste Burger, Frances Frylinck, Ithateng Mokgoro, Jacques Lange, Jennie Fourie, Karuna Pillay, Kelo Kubu, Marco Cannata, Mohammed Jogie and Paul Taliadoros.
- 2 The metaphor is apt if the Nelson Mandela Bridge in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, is considered an example of a 'living statue' resembling Mandela's political role in South Africa.

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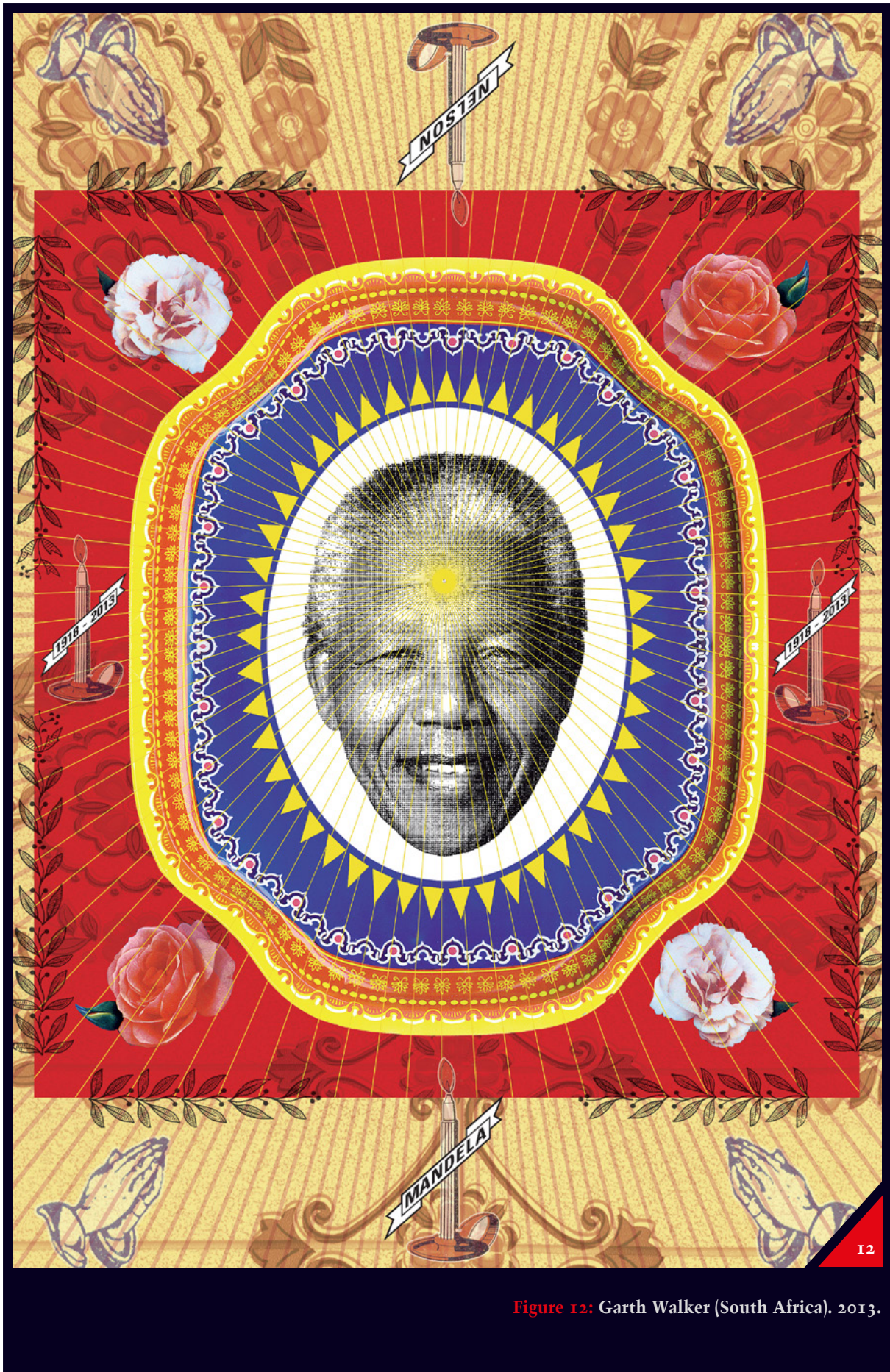


Figure 12: Garth Walker (South Africa). 2013.