

MURAL ART IN SOUTH AFRICA

Gosiame 'Amy' Goitsemodimo



Representation of Ndebele house in the Museum. (Photo: National Museum)

Mural art is an ancient tradition that was practised in most parts of the world. Well known are works by Renaissance artists Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Titian and Pietro Perugino displayed in churches, museums and other historical sites in Europe. This art commonly depicted Roman Catholic traditions and religious images (e.g. saints, Mary/Madonna, and stories from the Bible). Although such paintings of religious subjects are considered works of art today, they were seen originally as devotional objects and were painted for incorporation into rituals associated with Catholic masses. Egyptian and Indian mural art also depicted symbols related to belief systems. Egyptian paintings of gods, for example, were perceived as a way of introducing the deceased to the gods.

The Basotho (South Sotho), North Sotho (e.g. Bapedi) and Ndebele of Southern Africa are also well known for their mural art, displayed on courtyard walls and the exterior of their homes. Interior and exterior floors are also often decorated. Mural art, like beadwork and pottery, is traditionally done by women. Mural art patterns of most cultures are inspired by the designs and patterns on traditional dress, beadwork and pottery. The Sotho mural art tradition is believed to have been influenced by pottery motifs, while that

of the Ndebele resembles their beadwork. The art tends to be symbolic as it often yields insight into the socio-cultural values of the groups.

The mural art tradition of the Basotho is known as *litema* (word derived from "ho lema", meaning to cultivate). It involves four techniques: engraved patterns, mural paintings, bas-relief (relief mouldings) and stone mosaic. The engraved patterns are created on wet mud plaster, usually by hand, and often represent cultivated fields or animals that are associated with clan totems. The Basotho believed that the art appealed to their ancestors for blessings, particularly for rain. The colours have strong symbolic relevance and religious significance. Red, for example, symbolises the earth and fertility, while white represents purity and black is the colour of the ancestors. *Litema* is not permanent and may fade as a result of exposure to the sun or being washed away by heavy rain. Therefore, it is common for Basotho women to re-apply the designs, especially for occasions such as weddings or certain religious ceremonies.

The patterns of the Bapedi, on the other hand, are given names of traditional clothing worn by women during the different stages of life. *Ntepana*, which refers to a pattern of inverted



Pedi mural art patterns on hut. (Photo: Megan Loftie-Eaton)



Sotho house with mural paintings. (Photo: National Museum)



Patterns around windows were believed to prohibit evil spirits from entering the home (Sotho). (Photo: National Museum)

triangles above a chevron, is also the name for a short beaded skirt worn by pre-ignite girls. The 'W' shape of the *ntepa* (a longer rear skirt that marks a change from pre-ignite to initiated woman) represents female genitals and is a symbol of fertility and child-bearing.

It is believed that the Ndebele learned mural art from their Sotho neighbours during the times of *Difaqane*. The motifs, patterns and colours in their art closely resemble those in their beadwork. Beadwork and mural art were usually done in the late autumn and winter months when the women had completed the planting, weeding and harvesting of sorghum and maize crops. Beadwork, however, was not seasonal and was also done in other months. There is conflicting information regarding which Ndebele group originally excelled in mural art. Some mention that it was the Manala and others suggest that it was the Ndzundza. Nonetheless, it has come to be known as an art of the Ndebele and will be referred to as such in this article. Decoration of houses is an important part of the Ndebele culture and most women learn it from their mothers or other female relatives. Outsiders who marry into the group are also taught the art, especially the patterns as they are different from those done by Sotho groups. The Ndebele patterns are more angular, while those of the Sotho include curvilinear elements. Women who did not decorate their homes were often regarded as lazy and not fit to be married, as mural art was considered a skill needed as preparation for married life.

Records kept by Rev. John Campbell when he visited the Bathaping in 1813 and Bahurutse in 1820 show that the Batswana also practised mural art. Other groups, such as the Tsonga, also decorated their homes. Today mural art is seldom practiced by any of the ethnic or cultural groups in South Africa, but it has gained popularity in modern popular culture, where it is known as graffiti and regarded as a form of expression of social and political messages. Graffiti is also associated with the hip hop culture and in some instances gangs use it to mark their territory or to serve as an indicator of gang-related activities.

References

- Becker, P. 1979. *Inland Tribes of Southern Africa*. London: Granada.
 Magubane, P. 1998. *Vanishing Cultures of South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik Publishers.
 Schneider, E.A. 1985. Ndebele Mural Art. *African Arts* 18(3): 60–67.
 Van Wyk, G.N. 1998. Mural Art of Basotho Women. *African Arts* 31(3): 58–65.
 Vogel, C.A.M. 1985. Pedi Mural Art. *African Arts* 18(3): 78–83.
www.history.com/topics/renaissance-art (16.08.2016).



Ndebele murals. (Photo: National Museum)