

FEATURED ARTIST

GERARD BHENGU

*A valuable
view of
the past*

*Below:
Fire is a recurring theme
in his work.*

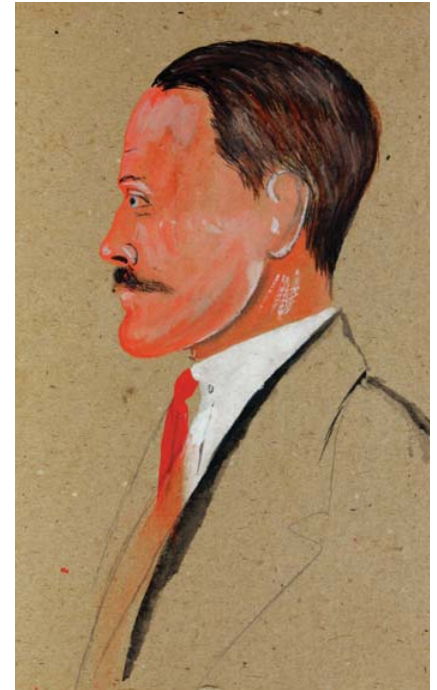
*Right:
A self portrait of Bhengu as
a young man.*



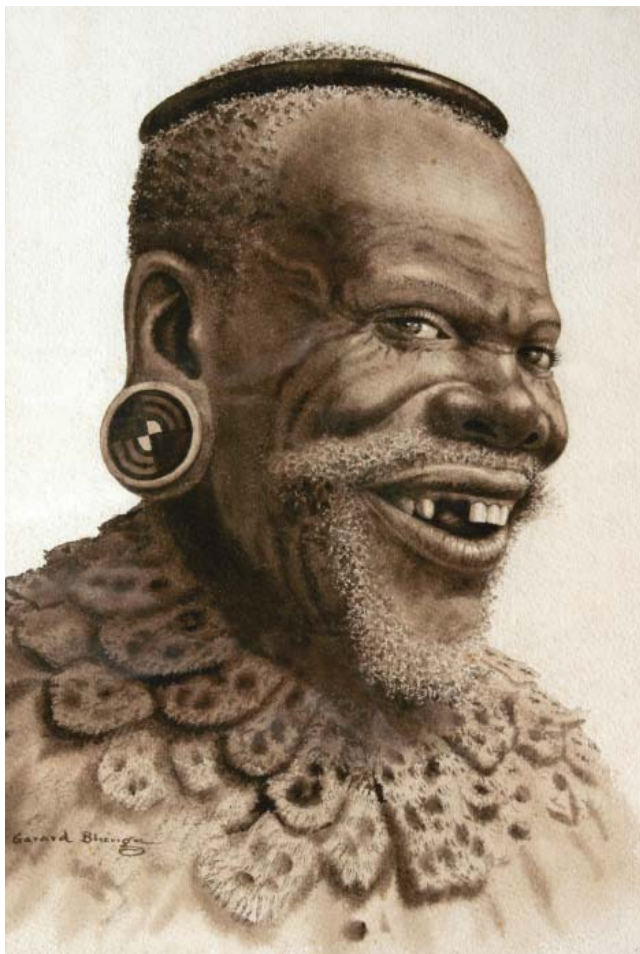


If you travel west from Creighton towards the southern foothills of the Drakensberg mountains you will encounter a small valley filled with a collection of red-brick buildings. This is the Centocow Mission which was established by a group of dedicated Trappist Monks 120 years ago. It might seem an unlikely place to find an art gallery and museum. However, the mission is the birthplace of one of South Africa's pioneering artists. The First Church at Centocow is now being restored to house the Gerard Bhengu Gallery and Museum.

Right:
A portrait of Dr Max Kohler who was to have a profound effect on Bhengu's introduction to art. This portrait was probably done by Bhengu around the time of his recuperation from tuberculosis when he was in his early teens.



Left:
Often working in sepia, portraits like these were popular with the public and tourists in Durban.



Bhengu was born at Centocow in 1910 and at an early age displayed significant artistic talent when he began using charcoal from the fireplace to draw on the walls of the family home. He attended primary school at the mission and his talents were encouraged by a teacher who gave him a set of coloured pencils. His early drawings impressed even the local Schools Inspector who presented the young artist with his first set of watercolour paints. This was to be his preferred medium for the next 70 years.

As a teenager he contracted tuberculosis and was treated by Dr Max Kohler who encouraged Gerard to peruse his interest in art. During his long recuperation a strong bond developed between doctor and patient, with Dr Kohler introducing him to the works of the old masters. Until then, the only art the aspiring artist had seen were the religious paintings in the Catholic Church at the Mission.

In his spare time Dr Kohler was doing sociological and ethnographic research on the local Nguni language tribes in the area. He commissioned Bhengu to illustrate his notes which were later published in two separate books.

By the time he was twenty years old news of his talent had spread and there were efforts by members of the Education Department to get him into the Natal Technical Collage to further his art studies. This request was refused because of his colour, and instead he attended English and Art classes at the Edendale Vocational Collage.

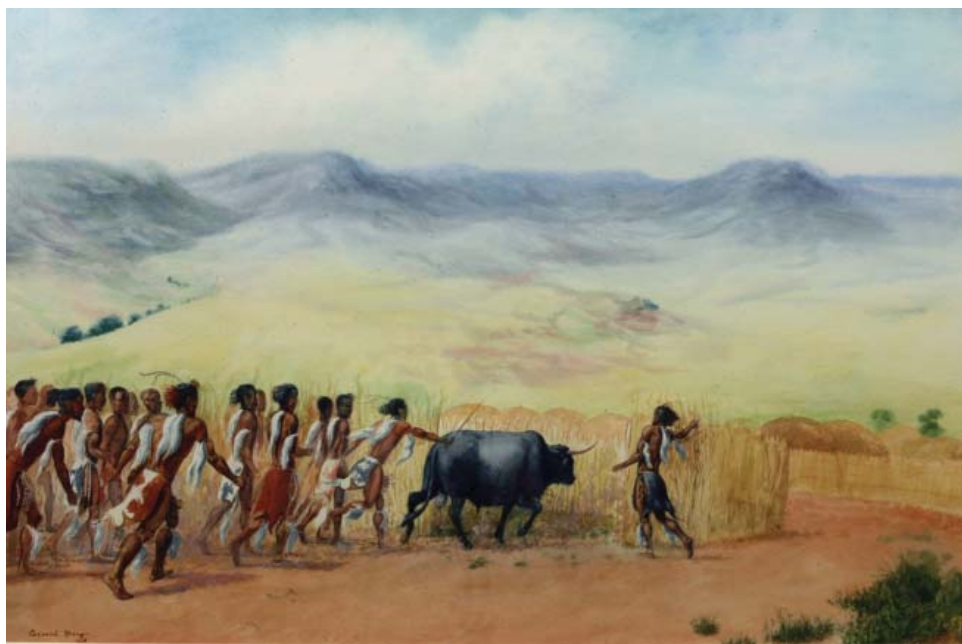
In 1938 he move to Durban to become a full time artist and was soon supplying work to the Payne Brothers department store. He was given space to set up a studio in one of the store's warehouses and a sign in the window invited customers to watch the "Celebrated Zulu Artist" at work. At the time, the idea of a talented black artist was something of a curiosity. His detailed scenes of rural life and portraits of African people were popular with the public and tourists visiting Durban.

His work caught the eye of Margaret Roach 'Killie' Campbell, the daughter of the Natal sugar magnate, Sir Marshall Campbell. She spent her life collecting Africana and in

particular items relating to Natal and the Zulu people. She bought many of Bhengu's paintings for her collection and over the next two decades commissioned him to produce specific works depicting scenes of traditional rural life, ceremonies and dress. Today the collection comprises some 268 original paintings and drawings.

In 1962 he provided the illustrations for the book 'Xhosa Fireside Tales', a collection of stories compiled by author Phyllis Savory. Prompted by the publisher, Savory and Bhengu collaborated on his biography 'Gerhard Bhengu - Zulu Artist', which featured 28 paintings and illustrations. An exhibition of his work was held at the Royal Agricultural Show in Pietermaritzburg to celebrate the launch of the book.

During the 1970's and 1980's he participated in several group and solo exhibitions in Johannesburg and Durban. Gerard Bhengu died in 1990 from diabetes. He was 80 years old and is buried in Umlazi outside Durban.



Right:
These two watercolour paintings depict the 'First Fruits Ceremony' and are examples of the illustrations of culture and tradition that were commissioned by Killie Campbell for her collection. It is this collection of Bhengu's work that will be on display in the new gallery and museum.

Preserving an important artistic heritage

Gerard Bhengu, a pioneering South African artist is being honoured with the establishment of a gallery and museum that will be home to a permanent display of his work and tell the story of his life. The valuable collection will be housed in the first church built at Centocow Mission in southern KwaZulu-Natal which is now being renovated.

“This project is important on two levels” says Dudley Smith who is managing the R4.4 million project. “Firstly it will secure the future of the historic First Church building at the mission, and secondly it honours the memory of one of the Province’s important artists.”

Below:
The First Church at Centocow Mission is being restored and will house the Gerard Bhengu Gallery and Museum.

The original church building, built in the Neo Gothic architectural style, embraces all the simplicity and austerity that typified the German Trappist monks who built it. It was constructed in 1890 and over the past 120 years the elements have taken their toll. Many of the clay bricks are crumbling, and the tall steeple tower has cracked and was in danger of collapse.

“It was important for us to preserve this historic building and since the artist Gerard Bhengu was born at the mission it is the natural home for a collection of his paintings,” says Smith.



Born in 1910, Bhengu spent his formative years at Centocow and went to school there. He was encouraged by his teachers and staff at the mission to pursue his obvious artistic talent. He left Centocow as a young man and moved to Durban where he worked as a full time artist until his death in 1990.

A combination of Government and private funding has made this ambitious project possible.

The Ingwe Municipality managed to raise R4.425 million to have the Church building restored and transformed into the Gerard Bhengu Art Gallery and Museum. The funders of this project are; the National Lotteries Board, Joan St Leger Lindbergh Trust, the Sisonke District Municipality , the Ingwe Municipality, and the University of KwaZulu –Natal Campbell Collection.

The project will also benefit from the ongoing financial support of the Department of Arts & Culture - Museum Services which will allow for the appointment of a curator and provide funding to cover the day-to-day running costs.

Centocow is one of the largest mission centres established by the Trappist brothers in KwaZulu-Natal and is part of the complex of monasteries and missions the monks created across the province from Mariannahill outside Pinetown to East Griqualand and the valleys of the Midlands.

These missions, and the intriguing story of Abbot Franz Pfanner and the Trappist monks who came from Europe to introduce monastic life to the people of south eastern Africa, are an important part of the tourism industry in the area. Work on the building is expected to be completed by July this year, and the gallery should be open to the public by September.



Above:
The mission station at Centocow was one of 26 established by the Trappist Monks at the end of the nineteenth century.



Right top and bottom:
The restoration work is extensive, with parts of the building having to be reinforced, and in the case of the high steeple tower, virtually rebuilt. Restoration work is expected to be completed by July 2012.