

George Pemba

grocer and artist



Bailey's African History Archive

Art and Letters as Historical Sources

In this lesson plan, learners will be encouraged to appreciate the originality of Pemba's portraiture as well as the difficulties that faced a black artist in the period. They will decode pictures and letters to find out more about Pemba's talent and the ways in which he had to work around the system to become an artist.

"Few artists can combine a grocery business with their calling in the same way that 44-year old George Milwa Mnyaluza Pemba of Port Elizabeth, is trying to do." DRUM, May 1955

In the same article the Drum writer quotes Pemba saying that the artist must relate his art to the business of making his everyday living. Have a discussion with your class about whether or not the government should subsidise artists.

George Pemba (1912 - 2001)

George Pemba was born in 1912 in Korsten on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth. Although his mother wanted him to work towards having a reliable job, Pemba's brother and father encouraged his artistic tendencies. When his father was killed in an accident, Pemba and his mother had to move to New Brighton township in Port Elizabeth. This township is often depicted in Pemba's art.

Pemba enrolled in the Lovedale Teacher Training College in Alice in the Eastern Cape in 1931. He worked as a teacher for 7 years and then took a better paying job at the Native Commissioners Court. A teacher at the University College of Fort Hare was so impressed by some of Pemba's sketches that she showed Robert Shepherd, the principal of Lovedale College. Shepherd tried to help Pemba further his career.

In 1937, Pemba did a short course as an external student at Rhodes University and the Professor decided to enter some of his work in a competition. Pemba won the competition, beating Gerard Sekoto, who came second.

In the same year, Pemba was married for the second time to Eunice Mnidi. They were married for 47 years. They had six children to care for as well as the children of a deceased friend and brother. In order to support the family, Pemba went to work as a clerk for the New Brighton Department of Native Administration. But he hated the work and resigned. Together with his wife, he set up a spaza shop called Gabby's Store. He also continued to paint and exhibit his work as well as writing a play about the Xhosa prophet Ntsikana.

Pemba was friendly with Sekoto and also the Sowetan artist, John Koenakeefe Mohl, both of whom gave him encouraging advice about his painting.

Fort Hare awarded Pemba an honorary degree in 1979 and, following that, so did the universities of Zululand and what was then Bophutatswana. But he was only recognised by the mainstream art community in the 1990s. In 1996, the National Gallery showed a retrospective of his work. In 2004, he was posthumously awarded the Order of the Ikhamanga for achievement in the field of art and culture.

Source A



Pemba's portrait of Chief Luthuli DRUM, May 1955

Temperance Hotel
King William's Town
3rd Feb, 1936

Dear Sir,

Once more I am communicating to you information regarding my progress in art.

I am sending in accompaniment five of my latest pictures. Two of these pictures show American Negroes, Leslie Hutchinson and Martha Thomas, the former a singer and the latter an actress. These have been copied and enlarged from newspapers. The other two are altogether original and from imagination - the Abyssinian and "The Birth."

After perhaps a circulation of these according to your wish, I would like them sent to any exhibition that you may think of. I also wish to apologise for my troubling you. If possible, I would like Mr. and Mrs Yergan to see these pictures. I am earnestly desirous of furthering my knowledge of this hobby. So far the fees that have been charged by the institutions I have consulted have been rather beyond my means as I have to be of great help to our big family and other concerns.

With good wishes and kind greetings for a new year,

I remain

Yours very sincerely,

Geo. M. Pemba.

Letter from Pemba to Robert Shepherd, principal of Lovedale, Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown

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*All communications should be addressed to:
The Lovedale Press,
P.O. Lovedale C.P.*

7th April, 1936.

J. D. Rheinallt Jones, Esq.,
S.A. Institute of Race Relations,
P. O. Box 1176, JOHANNESBURG.

Dear Mr. Jones,

I thank You for Your letter of 3rd instant regarding George M. Pemba. I have given considerable thought to this Young man's position and have endeavoured to do what I could to help him but without much success. I took with me overseas samples of his work and showed them to Dr. Jesse Jones and others in New York and on more than one occasion to Miss Wrong in London. At Lovedale we have more than once given him illustration work to do and it seemed he was to have a further outlet through the Religious Tract Society of London. We got into correspondence with them and submitted samples of his work. They commissioned him to do twenty illustrations for the PILGRIM'S PROGRESS. Mr. Cullen Young at first wrote enthusiastically of Pemba's work but when the twenty illustrations were received only four were accepted for which fees were given that seemed to us on the small side.

I feel very much that Pemba is in need of a course of training and perhaps this could best be given in South Africa. The suggestions made by Professor Oxley if they can be carried out seem to point the way. It appears to me that the question boils down to this - If Pemba were in a city like Durban or Maritzburg could he have assistance from the staff of a school of art? If an affirmative answer could be given to that question the matter might be pursued further through such as Mr. Malcolm.

Yours sincerely,

Robert B. W. Shepherd.

Source D

Temperance Hotel,
King William's Town
28th July, 1937.

My dear Sir,

I think it will interest you to know that I have returned from Rhodes University where I had been studying art for four months.

I did not take any examination but in lieu of this the Principal of the Art School, Prof. Wintermore, is providing me with a certificate.

It is my opinion and of those who have seen my latest work that I have made improvement.

The Principal expressed the view that my bent is in illustrating. He has in his hands a few of my pictures which are my best. These he will frame and enter for competition the coming one at Fort Hare in October.

Sir, I beg at the same time, the favour, of you, of introducing me, as before, to institutions which can provide jobs for me.

Thanking you in anticipation,
Yours obediently,
Geo. M. Pemba (note it looks like Pember).

Source E



Isizwe – An Independent Journal, Vol 1, No.1 June – July 1959, Mayibuye Archives

TRANSLATION:
*God anointment, the
assagay is coming.*

Learner Activities

- What does Pemba's portrait of Luthuli in *Source A* say that a photograph wouldn't?
- Study the letters in *Sources B, C and D*. (Rheinallt Jones was the Adviser to the South African Institute of Race Relations). What kind of men do you think he and Shepherd were? Why did Pemba have to rely on them? What do you think could be the reason that the Society in London didn't like most of Pemba's pictures? Was it just because he lacked training?
- It was said that Pemba was not interested in politics. But if you look at his cartoon of Verwoerd in *Source E*, what would you say?
- Do you think that Verwoerd would have liked Pemba's portrait of him?
- Pretend to be Verwoerd and write in to Isizwe commenting on the cartoon.

Other Ideas

Find out about Pemba's contemporary and the man he beat in the art competition mentioned in *Source D* – Gerard Sekoto.



George Pemba in action outside his home in Port Elizabeth Bailey's African History Archive, 1955

Criteria for Assessment:

- Learners are able to comment on Luthuli's qualities conveyed by Pemba's portrait of him.
- Learners are able to identify Rheinallt Jones and Shepherd as liberals / Christians.
- Learners will be able to say that Pemba needed to depend on white liberals for help in the 1930s because of discrimination against black people.
- Learners will be able to think of reasons for Pemba's failure to impress London missionaries with his art.
- Learners will be able to say that the 'portrait' of Verwoerd is a caricature meant to make him look ridiculous.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 3
LO 2, AS 1 & 2
LO 3, AS 3

Grade 11 Content Link – How was segregation a foundation for apartheid