

The Mancoba Textile: Marriage, Friendship, Collaboration

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Abstract

The search for the authorship of the so-called “Mancoba textile” reveals more than whether its artist was Ernest Mancoba (South Africa/France, 1904–2002) or Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (Denmark/France, 1911–1984), who were husband and wife. The textile speaks of their artistic relationship and the influence each artist had on the other. While other examples of artist friendships may not be as close as theirs was, considering how Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba worked together may shed light on how artists generally “see” the works of other artists and incorporate aspects of that into their own works. This essay offers a research approach that gives greater nuance to ideas like “influence”, “collaboration”, “pastiche” and “appropriation”.

In the art storage facilities of the Museum Jorn (Silkeborg, Denmark) we came across a white and black patterned textile said to be by Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002, South Africa/France) and printed by Helga Foght in 1948.^[1] However, showing us a shirt and a photograph of Ferlov Mancoba wearing it, the Chair of the Estate of Ferlov-Mancoba believes the attribution to be a mistake, and that the textile is the work of the artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911–1984, Denmark/France), Mancoba’s wife.^[2] The Museum Jorn’s attribution cannot be easily dismissed as it must have come from the Museum’s former director, Troels Andersen, who curated exhibitions of work by both artists.^[3] Textiles are not associated with either though: Mancoba is best known for paintings and Ferlov Mancoba for sculptures. Besides the question of who made the work, we must also ask how this work came about.

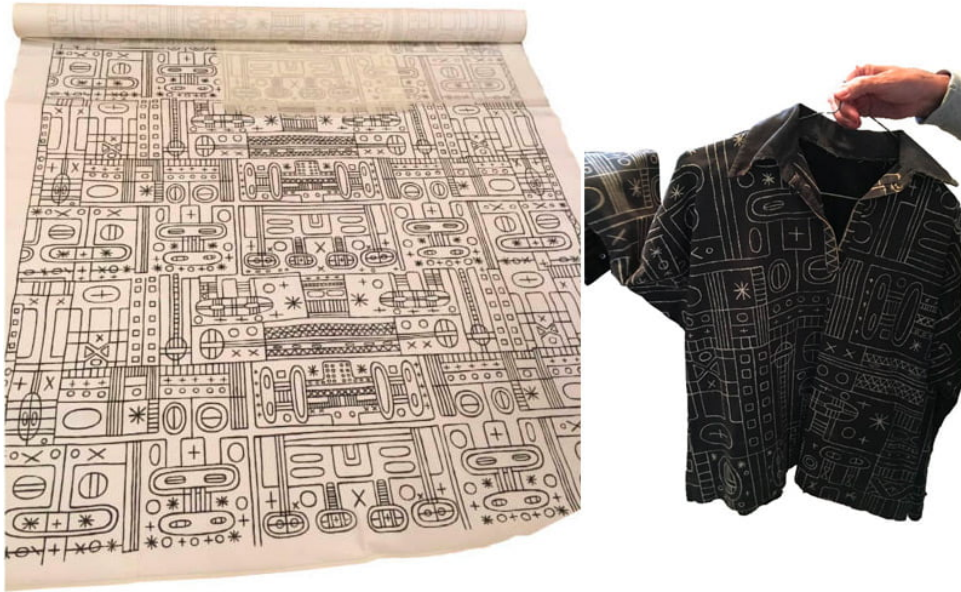
Our own research trajectory proved to be not straightforward and required us to deviate from customary art historical praxis. Firstly, art historical writings only briefly discussed either artists’ work in relation to craft and design, and there was no mention of the textile.^[4] Turning to the artists’ artistic oeuvres, we could see aspects of the textile’s form in both their works but could draw no firm conclusion. This was further complicated by us “changing our minds” as we shared our relative expertise with each other. For instance, when Løgstrup pointed to Ferlov’s drawings and her symbolic use of “stars”, Sze found herself switching from Mancoba to Ferlov; when Sze showed Løgstrup images of the geometric patterns painted on the homes of the Ndebele and South Sotho, which Mancoba would have been exposed to during his teaching year in Pietersberg, South Africa, Løgstrup agreed it could be a source of formal inspiration. As we got to know the “other” artist, we came to realise how much they each impacted the other’s work. It is from this realisation that we came to our conclusion that the textile must have been a joint effort.

A second issue that puzzled us was why there only seemed to be a single textile work. Our answer came from considering Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba's artistic life in Denmark, and the general social and historical context during the post-World War II years. We believe the fabric was created to be sold as curtains, tablecloths and general homeware in the hope of supplementing the family's income.^[5] Our research experience raises the question of whether widening art historical praxis by, for example, considering artists' biographies can further art historical understanding. Traditionally, biographical details and social contexts are relegated to side notes in regards to artists' practices, although recently these factors have begun to occupy a more prominent role. On the other hand, a biographical approach risks replacing focus on the artistic practice with selective biographical attributes. However, focusing on the "identity" of the artist is seen as a way to prevent Western art historians from defining and thereby subjugating art made by those marginalised by the establishment.^[6] What the right balance is when writing about Ferlov Mancoba, a white Danish woman, and Mancoba, a black South African man, to recognise their artistic contributions and not just as identity politics "ciphers", is a key concern.^[7]

The textile was destined for curtains and other homeware, situating it as an object of design or craft. But we found that analysing it in the same way we would an artwork helped us see not only the textile, but also both artists' artistic language in greater depth. This is not to disregard the difference between art, craft and design, but, taking an interdisciplinary approach, also recognise their similarities. It led to our final consideration, on artistic autonomy versus common practice. While Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba maintained their own individual practices, they also shared a great artistic affinity and engagement in each other's work. Terms like "influence", widely used to acknowledge and sweep away the details of such relationships, is insufficient to recognise the mutual impact on both their work. There are arguments to consider the work of each in the context of the other, as well as their mutual interest in the art, and their experiences of, living in other cultures. We write this article as an experiment on how a wider contextual reading may be able to add new artistic knowledge about Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba. If our paper reads as a mix of biography, art writing and social critique, that is intentional, for we feel no single method is able to speak conclusively in contemporary times.

The Textile(s)

Let us begin with the textile: in actuality, there are two. Fig. 1 is an image of the textile in the Museum Jorn and Fig. 2 shows the textile made into the shirt in Mikael Andersen's collection. The dominant formal aspect is the pattern, which consists of straight lines that border and carve out smaller environments within which elements such as circles, ovals, crosses, chevrons and "stars" appear. There are no primary focal points, no one environment or element that sets the direction, rather the overall pattern reads as a labyrinth, causing the eye to chase its lines.



The two textiles' overall design can be said to be essentially the same, but certain elements within them differ. This suggests that the overall pattern was not made from one drawing but from multiple printing plates, where the plates were moved around and/or replaced to make different compositions a technique familiar to printmakers.^[8] The textiles also differ in palette and material, which has consequences for the formal qualities. The textile in the Museum Jorn, consisting of black lines on white fabric, feels synthetic to the touch, whereas the textile in Mikael Andersen's collection, with white lines on near black, has a more natural and textural feel. As a result, the lines of the former appear crisper and the lines on the latter softer.

Both textiles were printed by the textile printer Hanne Danielsen, of the Helga Foght studio in Denmark. Helga Foght was a highly respected textile artist and her studio printed not only her own work but also that of others. Danielsen recalls printing them in 1951, challenging the dating by the Museum Jorn (which dates the textiles to 1948). She is clear about this as she had been living in Sweden prior to 1950. She also recalled that it was Ferlov Mancoba who approached the studio, with the intention of selling the textile as curtains or tablecloths.^[9]

That the textiles were destined for homeware is credible, as patterned curtains were in demand in 1940s Denmark.^[10] They were popular with the younger generation, and promoted by the likes of the Kunstindustrimuseet, which hosted competitions and exhibitions to educate consumers' taste and encourage new Danish designs.^[11] According to design historian Louise Skak-Nielsen, textile companies such as L.F. Foght were working with artists and designers to launch *kunstneriske tekstiler* (artistic textiles) such as curtains, upholstery and carpets for the Danish modern home (see Figs. 3 and 4).^[12] We do not know how much of the Ferlov-Mancoba 1951 textiles were printed or sold, but they do not seem to have become commercially successful.^[13]



Ferlov Mancoba and Helga Foght had previously worked together on a textile for the 1947 exhibition at the Kunstindustrimuseet (today's Danish Design Museum) of textile works by the Haandarbejdets fremme (Danish Crafts Association).^[15] The catalogue lists "Helga Foght Haandtrykt Stof, tegnet af Fru Mancoba" (Helga Foght printer of a handprinted fabric designed by Mrs Mancoba; see Fig. 5). Asger Jorn (1914 1973, Denmark) also exhibited a weaving at the exhibition.^[16]

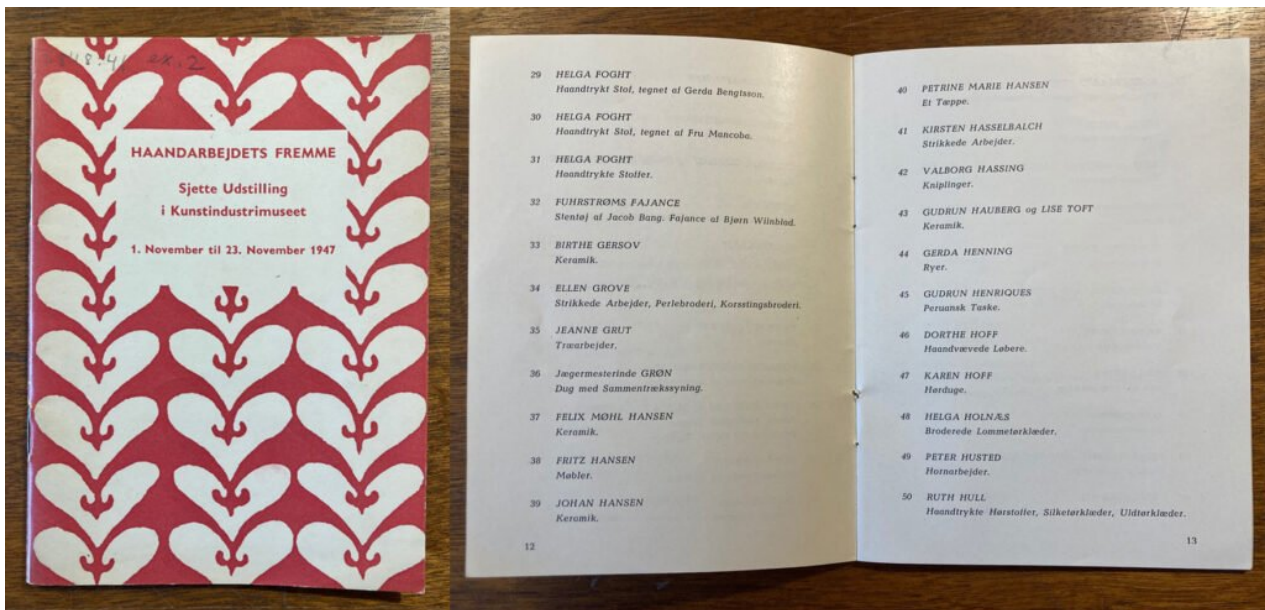


Figure 5. Exhibition catalogue of the sixth edition of the Danish Kunstindustrimuseet with a page listing a textile designed by Sonja Ferlov, source Danish Design Museum library

Both Foght/Ferlov Mancoba's and Jorn's works were explicitly mentioned in an article in the newspaper *Politiken* review of the exhibition, "Høj Kvalitet paa det danske Haandarbejde" (The high quality of Danish craftwork). The Foght/Ferlov Mancoba textile is described as "Blandt de trykte Dekorationsstoffer bemærker man et smukt brunt, lidt negroid Mønster af Fru Mancoba, trykt af Helga Foght" (Among the noteworthy printed cloths is a beautiful brown slightly "negroid"-patterned one by Mrs. Mancoba, printed by Helga Foght; see Fig. 6).^[17]



Figure 6. Scan of Politiken article covering the sixth edition of the Danish Kunsthåndværksmuseet, source Danish Design Museum library

Ordinarily, the Håndarbejdets Fremme exhibited only objects made by its members, but this restriction was suspended for the 1947 exhibition, possibly because the association wanted to broaden support for the textile industry during the difficult post-war years.^[18] Troels Andersen believed that the Chair of the Kunsthåndværksmuseet Fru Gertie Wandel invited Asger Jorn, as they had a long-established friendship.^[19] Is it possible that Jorn shared the invitation with his artist friends, including Ferlov Mancoba?^[20]

Ernest Mancoba and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Denmark, 1947 1952

Writings about Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba's time in Denmark, from 1947 to 1952, focus on their association with Høst, and through that, their association with CoBrA, suggesting a time of rich artistic companionship. If this was the case, why forsake full attention of their art to branch out into a world such as homeware design, in which they had presumably little experience? It turned out that after the auspicious start with Høst and CoBrA, the couple's artistic lives became a struggle. Their friend Ejler Bille, who had returned to Denmark from Paris when the war broke out and had joined the art association Høst, arranged for Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba to be special guests of the Høst 1948 annual exhibition.^[21] Ferlov Mancoba was also invited to be a special guest of Linien II's exhibition that year.^[22]

Danish artists associations were founded in the nineteenth century in opposition to the established art academy, where only few exhibitions took place at the behest of one selection panel. Groups of artists with like-minded views on art and social engagement self-organised, with the associations providing an opportunity to enter an otherwise exclusive art society. The associations' annual exhibition also offered the artists the possibility to earn income. By the twentieth century, the associations, which by then had proliferated, showed more contemporary art than the conservative larger institutions.^[23] The Høst association, which began as a membership of mainly landscape artists, soon became known for its avant-garde members the 1948 exhibition was the last to show Høst Danish landscape artists. Besides Bille, Ferlov Mancoba would have known Richard Mortensen and Carl-Henning Pedersen, as she worked closely with them during her formative years as a young artist, and she and Mancoba were to (re-)establish a friendship with Asger Jorn, and of course meet the Dutch members of CoBrA Constant, Corneille and Karel Appel (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Image of Høst members, 1948, published in CoBrA magazine issue 1, drawings added later by Carl-Henning Pedersen

In 1949 they were elected to be full-time members, but that year also saw the association effectively dissolve amidst artistic rancour. An artistic debate on how art should continue, whether in an intuitive or rational direction, had escalated. On one side of the divide was Mortensen, advocating the path towards geometric rationality, “hard edge”. On the other side was Asger Jorn, whom Ferlov Mancoba described as the “most radical representative of the spontaneous method in Danish Art”.^[24] Jorn, together with Appel, Corneille, Constant and Jon Erik Nyholm, overpainted a Mortensen painting; in protest, some of the artists walked out of the Høst 1949 exhibition, taking their artworks with them, effectively ending the association.^[25] Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba, living in the village of Kattinge, were late to realise this, only finding out after that their artworks had been taken down and left outside the exhibition hall.^[26]

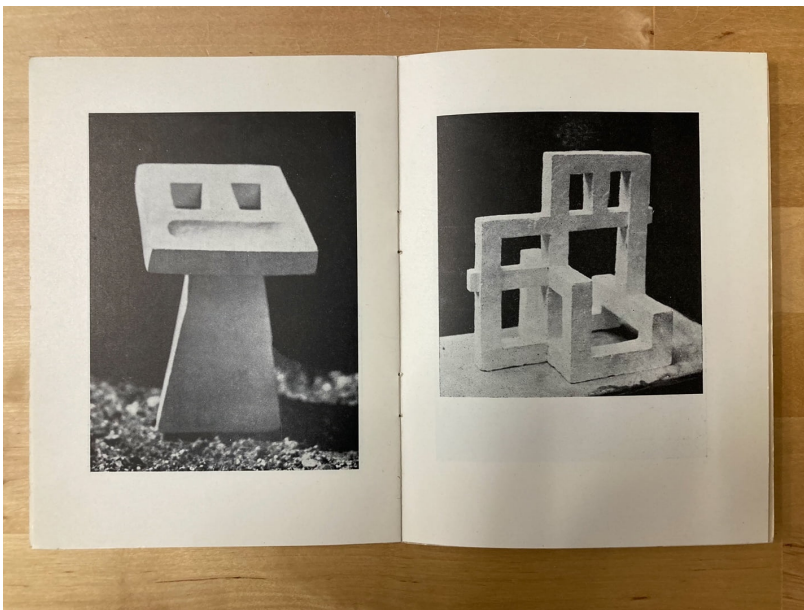
Ferlov Mancoba tried to bridge the rift, including writing letters to the artists.^[27] However, this may have backfired on her. Mancoba observed that there was “a certain irritation towards Sonja for repeatedly insisting on the movement”, which together with racism towards him led to a decline in invitations for exhibitions.^[28] After Høst, Mancoba did not join another association, though he participated as a special guest in some of their exhibitions.^[29] Ferlov Mancoba did not continue with Linien II, though much later she became a member of Den Frie.^[30] Because the Danish art associations were such a vital part of being part of a Danish artistic community, the couple may have felt even more isolated in their small village outside Copenhagen.^[31] Moreover, without the annual exhibitions, sales came to them more haphazardly.^[32] Their CoBrA association led to Mancoba being invited to the 1949 Stedelijk Museum exhibition, although he did not participate. Ferlov Mancoba was the subject of one of the *Les Artistes Libres* books. But as the movement was short-lived, it did not end up helping the artists at that point either. Thus, with their artistic networks providing no support, designing curtain fabric may have seemed a plausible way of supplementing their increasingly precarious income.

We could stop here and present the textile as an interesting footnote in the artists’ histories. However, its intriguing form compelled us onwards, to consider both artists’ artworks at that time, and eventually to how their work impacted each other’s.

On the Art of Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba

For Ferlov Mancoba, the Danish avant-garde artistic argument spurred experimentation in both directions. Mancoba said that Ferlov Mancoba did not believe there needed to be only one direction, that intuition and rationality could be embraced in a dialectic artistic interplay. In works such as *Maskeskulptur (Lillemaske)* (Mask sculpture [Little mask]) (1948) (Fig. 8) and *Opbygning (Sculpture)* (1948) (Fig. 9), she seemed to explore a constructive and geometrical approach. *Maskeskulptur (Lillemaske)* also revisits the masks that she was making in 1939, but this time the head turns upwards rather than face forwards, allowing the interpretation of an African ritual stool.^[33]

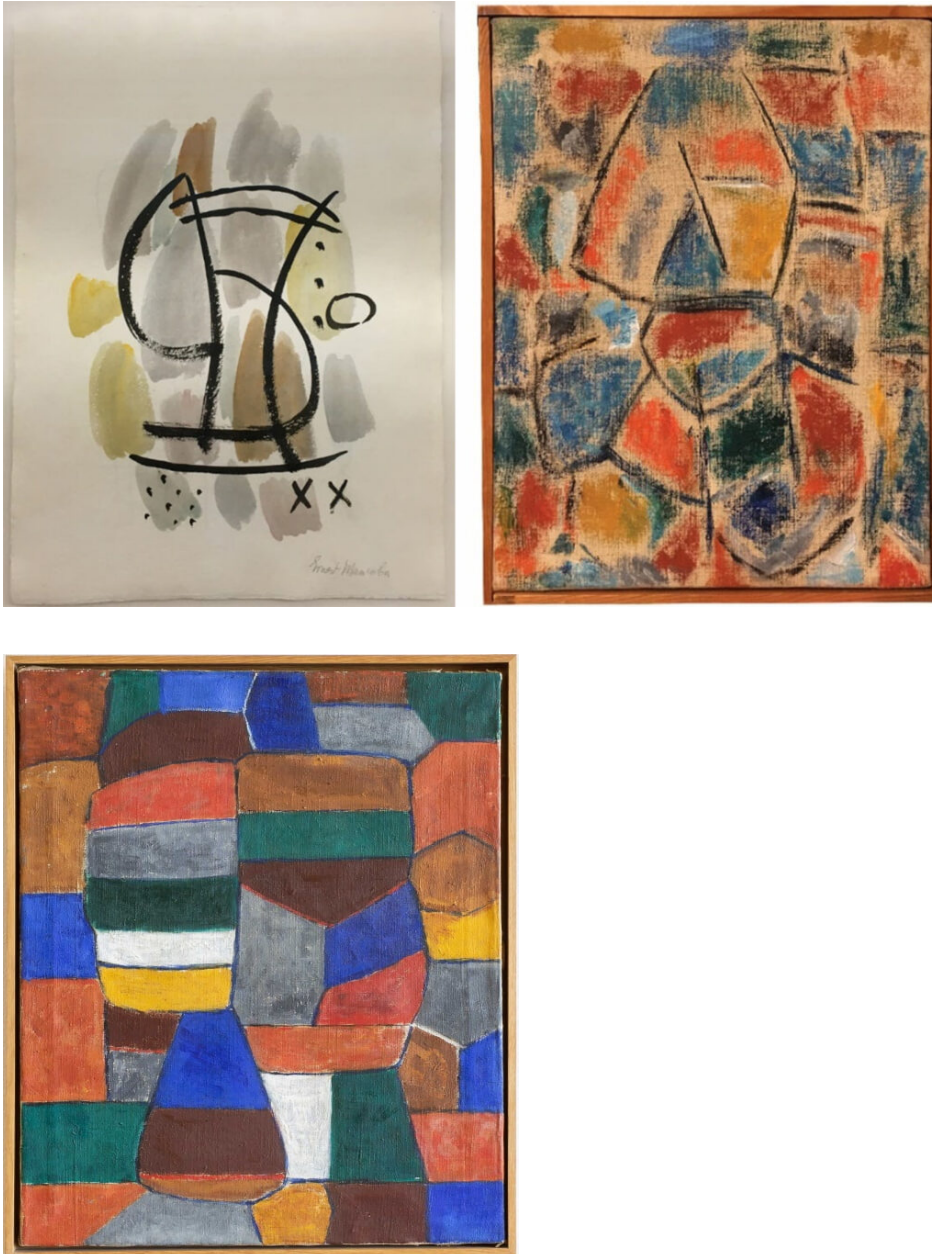
Opbygning (Sculpture) (1948) has an architectural character. Sadly, it has been lost and we only know it from the photograph (Fig. 9), but even from the one given angle we can see that the sculpture does not appear to have a front but is multi-faceted like the textile. In contrast to these works, *Den lille nænsomme* (The little careful one) (1951) (Fig. 10) is a more organic and centre-based sculpture. The artist described it thus: “It seeks, through its inner power and tension, built like a fortress, to stand up despite its small stature” a description that curator of a Ferlov Mancoba retrospective Dorthe Aagesen sees as corresponding to the work in its “clumsiness and vibrant potentiality”.^[34] Later works by Ferlov Mancoba which drew on the tension between the constructed and the organic may have drawn from the lessons of this time.





Figures 8 10. Top left-hand side of catalogue: Ferlov Mancoba, *Maskesulptur (Lillemaske)* (*Mask sculpture [Small mask]*) (1948); Top right-hand side of catalogue: Ferlow Mancoba, *Opbygning (Structure)* (1948), source Sonja Ferlov, København, Cobra Bibliotheket, 1950, photo Johanne Løgstrup; Bottom: Ferlov Mancoba, *Den lille nænsomme (The Little Careful One)* (1951), images courtesy Estate of Ferlov Mancoba

A visit with their Høst and CoBrA artists friends to mediaeval churches seemed to have introduced Mancoba to a new art direction. He was fascinated by the fading and peeling paints of the murals, which left colours of varying intensities and revealed parts of the church wall alongside the murals. It may have impacted his thoughts on perspective. His Danish-era paintings and drawings could be read as “colour fields”, with the depth dependent on colour contrast rather than linear perspective (Fig. 13). He also used unprimed and unpainted parts of the paper and canvas as “marks” (Figs. 11 12). This visual language was to continue through to his best known *kota*-esque paintings. As he made more drawings and paintings, he eventually left sculpture behind, with his last known sculptures dating to 1951.



Figures 11 13. Top left: Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, ink and watercolour on paper, private collection, image Winnie Sze; Top right: Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1950, oil on canvas, collection Museum Jorn, image Winnie Sze; Bottom: Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1951, oil on canvas, private collection; image use of all courtesy Estate of Ferlov Mancoba

The textiles' pattern cannot be said to directly correspond to either Ferlov Mancoba's or Mancoba's oeuvre of this time, though it clearly touches on aspects of both artists' works. Take, for instance, perspective: the textile's pattern is rather a pattern of patterns, with no single, or few, viewpoint(s) or line(s) that direct the gaze, as seen in Ferlov Mancoba's *Opbygning (Sculpture)* (1948) and in Mancoba's obliteration of perspective in his colour field paintings. The textile pattern is made up of elements notably the circle, oval, cross, "star", chevron and straight lines. Some of these such as the circle/oval and star are lexicons in Ferlov Mancoba's abstract two-dimensional works, creating the central subject matter(s). Their use, however, is less obvious in Mancoba's works.

The lost "Kunstindustrimuseet textile" was described as "negroid", ^[35] and the composition of the two 1951 textiles is certainly atypical of Western painting compositions, which rely on vanishing point perspective rather than

syncopation, rhythm, or multiple viewpoints.^[36] Both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba had exposure to and interest in African forms. As a small child, Ferlov Mancoba had access to Carl and Amalie Kjersmeier's collection.^[37] As Mancoba describes it, "as a little girl, instead of dolls, she had been sitting with African masks and sculptures on her knees. This had developed in her an intimacy, a feeling for African sculpture but also for Oceanic and Mexican expression as well that was unique."^[38] In a 1984 film made about her by Torben Glarbo, Ferlov Mancoba holds a jar made in Mali featuring four figures holding hands, and states that she sees "fellow feeling, humanity, unity and solidarity".^[39] The importance of this theme, and her perception of its manifestation in African objects, is one reason for Ferlov Mancoba's exploration of masks.

Though Mancoba encountered African objects formally through European museums, he could also draw from his memory of lived culture in South Africa.^[40] This included the patterns decorating the pots his mother made as part of the family's mFengu culture,^[41] and the distinctive and complex geometry of lines and chevrons that decorated the houses of the Ndebele people, which he encountered while he was living and working as a teacher in Pietersburg (now Polokwane), South Africa.^{[42] [43]} Despite this, there are no other Mancoba works with as obvious African patterning. Though we focus on Africa, it should be acknowledged that syncopation in a pattern is not a uniquely African characteristic; it can be created by breaking up the picture plane, and is used in other cultures. This, however, further muddies the attribution of the textiles as both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba were interested in arts of different cultures and times. On the walls of their joint studio on 153 Rue du Château, Paris, hung numerous images of art and objects from many different contexts and eras. Such was their interests that it is difficult to argue to whom which image "belongs" (see Fig. 14).

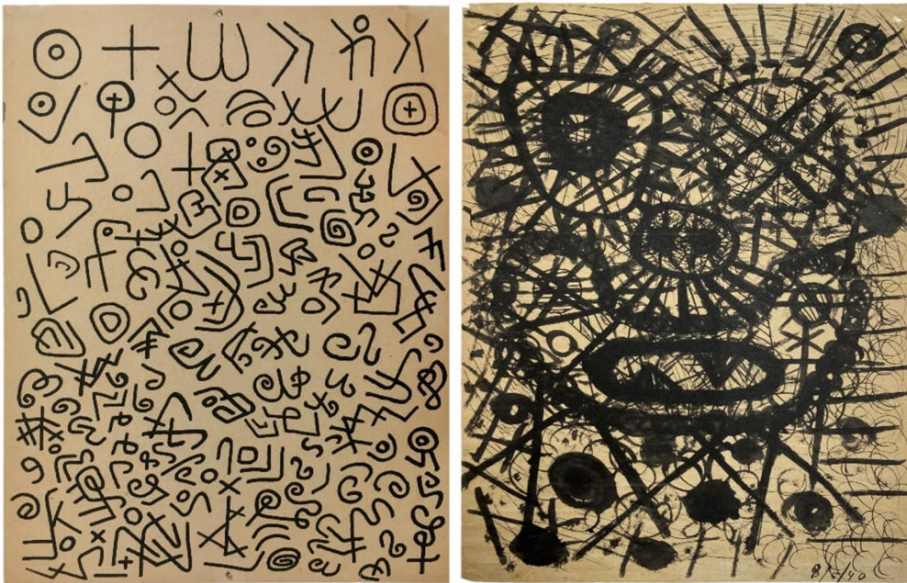


Figure 14. Images found in the family studio and home, photograph Anders Sune Berg, image use courtesy of National Museum Denmark (SMK)

On balance, we believe the textile was made by Ferlov Mancoba with significant and possibly equal artistic input from Mancoba. Having come to this conclusion, our natural next direction was to query whether they made further works together, and generally, how their work influenced each other's. This was not an obvious question, since neither recent retrospectives or scholarship has suggested this as an option, let alone provided answers^[44].

It is known that Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba's artistic closeness began when they first met. The two were inseparable, visiting each other's studios nearly every day and, together with Ejler Bille, often visiting the newly

opened Musée de l'Homme (now Musée Quai Branly) and galleries showing modern and contemporary art. Mancoba scholarship also revealed that Ferlov Mancoba and Bille shared surrealist artistic techniques such as automatic drawing with Mancoba.^[45] Setting Ferlov Mancoba's and Mancoba's 1939 drawings side-by-side, we can see what the two artists had in common as well as the specificity of their individual voices. The works read not as one artist copying the other, but each looking closely at the other's work and making their own work as a response, having an artistic dialogue (Figs. 15 16, Ferlov Mancoba; Figs. 17 19, Mancoba). Their isolation in Kattinge would have enhanced their natural closeness. After they left Denmark for France, the couple and their son Marc, known as Wonga, essentially became a unit artistically and socially. It was not just that they shared a common living and studio space, but that they came to rely on each other for artistic and intellectual company, to the degree that the family became almost recluses. One could say they became their own artistic "association" in the Danish art association way of like-minded artists supporting and engaging with each other's work, not in the CoBrA way of Jorn and his collaborators making works jointly. The exception being the 1951 textiles.



Figures 15 16. Left: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, *Komposition med tegn* (*Composition with figures*), drawing, 1939, National Gallery of Denmark; Right, *Komposition* (*Composition*), 1940, drawing, AROS, image use courtesy of Estate of Ferlov-Mancoba



Figures 17 19. From left to right: Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1939, ink on paper, 26.7 x 20.3 cm; *Untitled*, 1940, ink on paper, 26 x 21 cm; *Untitled*, 1939, ink and watercolour on paper, 26.7 x 20.6 cm; all collection of Museum Jorn, images and use courtesy of Estate of Ferlov

Mancoba

Consider, for instance, the couple's works of the mid-1950s. Mancoba began making his *kota*-esque paintings. Two of the earliest are shown as Figs. 20 and 21. At the same time, Ferlov Mancoba worked with clay to make humanoid vessel-like sculptures (Fig. 22). They clearly differ in their treatment of the subject matter. While Mancoba continued flattening his picture plane with the *kota* dissolving into abstracted marks that sit on the same plane,^[46] Ferlov Mancoba considered the subject matter in the round, from multiple viewpoints. Thus, their works remain specific in their preferred medium and idiom, but nevertheless point to a common interest explored jointly.



Figures 20 21. Left: Ernest Mancoba, *Untitled*, 1958, gouache & ink on paper, 41.6 x 29.6 cm; Right, *Untitled*, 1959, pen & ink on paper, 32.5 x 25.1 cm; both collection Danish National Art Gallery, images Danish National Art Gallery, use courtesy of Estate of Ferlov Mancoba



Figure 22. Left: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, *Woman*, 1958, earthenware; Right: *Man*, 1958, earthenware; both collection of Jorn Museum, image use courtesy of Estate of Ferlov Mancoba

What that common interest was is humankind's relationship to humankind. Ferlov Mancoba did not forget the selfish interest that drove formerly artistic comrades to break up Høst. It must have seemed even more dispiriting following the horrors of World War II. Mancoba, having grown up in a country where segregation limited the opportunities of a people and finding both kinship and prejudice in his new home, understood that if humans did not find a way to live together, they would continue to tear themselves asunder. They came to believe that the role of art was to help society find what connected them. Mancoba told curator Hans Ulrich Obrist:

[Sonja's and my creative works have] always been a problem for ethnocentric categorizations and fears, as it disturbed and moved established boundaries and the classifications imposed by the perspectives of a particular time or the bias of a certain critical intellectualism, often motivated by other considerations than Art. In spite of such [a] hostile environment, it has stood up for and, constantly, kept as a priority the integrity of the human expression. Neither Sonja, before she died, nor I, today, can accept to be separated from each other, as far as the significance of our work and common engagement is concerned, because it would be the negation of our very lives.^[47]

Conclusion

When we began this research, it was a way for us, separated geographically Løgstrup researching Ferlov Mancoba in Denmark, Sze researching Mancoba in South Africa to pool information on the artist we were researching and come to our own answers about who the artist of the textile was and why it was made.^[48] Working from our own interests, we felt able to deviate from traditional art historical praxis by considering the artists' lives, their interest in craft and design and Danish society. This approach led us to the conclusion that the textile was jointly made by the two artists.

We have also come to believe that a wider reading may help in opening up the discussion on contemporary art history writing. For one, it raises the issue of autonomy and common practice. In traditional art historical writing, an artist's work is considered in near isolation, with terms like "influence" used to acknowledge the impact of the works of other artists. Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba's artistic relationship goes beyond this. While we do not believe most artist friendships are as close as theirs, researching how Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba worked together may help us see how artists generally "see" the works of other artists and incorporate aspects into their own works. This research offers an example of bringing greater nuance to words like "influence", "pastiche" and "appropriation".

Moreover, the unquestioned position of artistic autonomy leaves little room for discussion on both artists' engagement with other cultures. Writings acknowledge the artists' interest in the arts of other cultures, but the discussion is limited. To be fair, such brevity follows similar treatment of the influence of African art on Picasso's and other European modernists' work, and one could argue that Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba are being treated no differently. However, unlike the modernists who seemed to have been attracted purely based on form, both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba have spoken about how deeply they felt about other cultures. Should this not be interrogated? How did Mancoba see the Danish Inuit, or indeed the West Africans whose art he first studied from a book and later in museums?^[49] In what way did the art of the Aztecs and Africa inform Ferlov Mancoba's work besides eliciting her interest in masks? In our contemporary society, where we struggle to bridge an ever-widening divide, could considering how these artists see "the other" help us understand the successes and failures of our own navigation?

Thinking more broadly also leads us to suspect that craft and design were not a marginal aspect of Ferlov Mancoba's work. The formal quality of the 1951 textiles suggest that she was interested in them as an artistic object as much as a design object. Their predecessor, the lost 1947 textile exhibited at the Kunstindustrimuseet exhibition, would seem to have been made in the same artistic spirit that Jorn made his. There is extensive scholarship on Jorn and craftwork. Why is there nothing on Ferlov Mancoba? Although we did not discuss Ferlov Mancoba's work with clay in this paper, we note that both her breakthrough sculpture *Levende Grene* (1939) and her change to the organic form of *Den lille nænsomme* (*The little careful one*) (1951) after the geometric rigour of the likes of *Maskeskulptur* (*Lillemaske*) (*Mask sculpture* [*Little mask*]) (1948) came during her time on Bornholm, with access to the clay studio of the Hjorth sisters.^[50] Could working with clay and the plates for the textiles have helped Ferlov Mancoba find a release in new artistic thinking?

Finally, despite having argued our conclusion, we acknowledge uncertainty. Even with extensive research in archives, archival information cannot but reveal a mere sliver of information, and we must necessarily interpret it through our frames of reference. While traditionally such a risk was seen to offset the new knowledge it might otherwise bring, we argue that if done in a scholarly and open manner, these approaches can address some of the charges levied against classical Western art historicism. For us, open reading versus absolute determinism led to greater self-awareness and critical positioning. Thus, in stating that our reading may be frail and unstable, we do it in the service of inviting disagreement and discussion, in recognition that our reading of the textile is but one "path" along the textile's labyrinth of many different, intersecting, paths.

Footnotes

1. According to the Museum Jorn records. [↑]
2. Mikael, Andersen. Interview with Winnie Sze, 9 March 2019, Copenhagen. There are also photographs of Ferlov Mancoba wearing the shirt while cutting her son's hair, included as images 194 and 195 in Hanne-Vibeke Holst "My dear, dear Clarisse: Letters to Clarisse Penso, 1952–61" in *Ferlov Mancoba: Mask and Face*, Copenhagen, SMK. 2019. The catalogue was produced in conjunction with the "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba" exhibition at the National Museum Denmark (SMK), which took place from 9 February until 5 May 2019. [↑]
3. Troels Andersen. Interview with Winnie Sze, 11 March 2019, Silkeborg. Andersen pointed to the textile's formal qualities when explaining the attribution. [↑]
4. For Ferlov Mancoba, Sonja, see: Troels Andersen, editor, "Ingen skaber alene", in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Breve 1960–1984*, Copenhagen, Anagram; letters written to Troels Andersen by Sonja Ferlov Mancoba; Gertrud Købke Sutton "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba—Et forsøg på en karakteristik" in *Kunst og Kultur*. vol 61. 1978, pp. 79–90; Dorthe Aagesen and Mikkel Bogh, "Introduktion til" in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maske og Ansigt*, Copenhagen, SMK, 2019; and Yvett Brackman, Johanne Løgstrup, Pia Rönicke, "No One Creates alone: Past and Present in a Common Reading of Artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba" in *Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries, 1900–1960*. Ed. Kerry Greaves. London: Routledge. 2021. On Ernest Mancoba, see Elza Miles, *Lifeline Out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba*, Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1994; and Elza Miles, *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Black Artists*. Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1997. On both artists, see Winnie Sze "Je est un autre" in *Wij kussen de aarde (We kiss the earth)*, pp. 62–91, exhibition catalogue Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amstelveen, Waanders Uitgevers, Zwolle. 2023 and

- Johanne Løgstrup, *Forestillinger om en udstilling med Sonja Ferlov Mancoba – Om verdenskunsten, den transnationale udveksling og det menneskelige udtryk*, Antipyrine, 2023. On the artists and CoBrA, see Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet, “Primitivism, humanism and ambivalence—Cobra and Post-Cobra” in *Anthropology and aesthetics*, nos. 59–60, spring–autumn 2011, pp. 283–302; and “Universelle udtryk: Ferlov, Mancoba og Cobra” in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maske og Ansigt*, Copenhagen, SMK, 2019, pp. 142–55; Karen Kurczynski, *The Cobra movement in postwar Europe: Reanimating art*, Routledge, 2020. [↑]
5. Aagesen and Bogh mention how the couple would try and make a living out of producing marionet dolls in the years during which they stayed in Oigny. See Aagesen and Bogh, *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maske og Ansigt*, p. 98. [↑]
 6. Sidney Kasfir questions whether Western museums collecting African art are not effectively defining African art in Western terms. See Kasfir, Sidney. “African art and Authenticity: A text with a shadow”, *African Arts*, vol. 25. no. 2. 1992, p. 40, p. 53, pp. 96–97. [↑]
 7. In Winnie Sze, “Ernest Mancoba: Visible Man, Invisible Work”, in *Deviant Practice Research Programme: 2016–2017*, online catalogue 2018, ed. Nick Aikens, research program at Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven). Sze argues that identity politics, which held Mancoba up as a Black symbol, risked relegating him to being a “cipher”, defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as something without “weight, worth or influence”, and his art being ignored or overlooked. [↑]
 8. Mancoba may have studied printmaking as part of his studies at L'Ecole des Arts Decoratifs, Paris. He made prints from the 1960s onwards but not, we believe, during the time of the production of the textiles. [↑]
 9. Hanne Danielsen, interview with Johanne Løgstrup, March 2019. [↑]
 10. Curator Kirsten Toftegaard, Designmuseum Danmark, also suggested that the textile could have been destined for curtains and referred us to the book *Det påklædte hjem (The dressed home)* and the relevant pp 292–303 that explicitly focus on the fashion of window dressing. We thank her for her guidance. [↑]
 11. Johan Pedersen and Nye Gardinstoffer, “A/S Dansk Tekstiltrykkeri’s Konkurrence”, in *Dansk Kunsthandværk (Danish Crafts)*. [↑]
 12. L.F. Foght and Helga Foght are different textile makers, but they were related as Helga Foght’s father and L.F. Foght were cousins. See <https://www.kvinfo.dk> (accessed 2024-05-23). [↑]
 13. One possible reason could be that the Danish industrial textile production had hit its peak by 1950 and was beginning to decline. During the war, limited international trade had protected Danish textile manufacturers from international competition allowing some to even expand their business. This changed in 1950, when the government abolished protectionist trade measures, and the opening of the border to trade led the textile factories—including large ones—to close. [↑]
 14. Louise Skak-Nielsen, *Det påklædte hjem (The dressed home)*, Copenhagen, Historismus, 2017. [↑]
 15. A craft association that was established in 1928 in order to focus and establish Danish textile design, but also on building bridges between artists, industry and hobby craft. See <https://haandarbejdetsfremme.info> (accessed 2024-05-23). [↑]
 16. Jorn’s textile is described as *Leder af Væveværkstedet: Fru Margrethe Buck Mathiesen—Fløstæppe, tegnet af Asger Jorn, 211 x 300 cm* (woven by the workshop led by Mrs Margrethe Buck Mathiesen—weaving, designed by Asger Jorn, 211 x 300 cm). That Jorn participated in this exhibition was brought to Winnie Sze’s attention by Associate Professor Ruth Baumeister, who spoke of Jorn’s textiles at a conference in Johannesburg, in 2019. She did not know about the Ferlov /Mancoba textile but following to her return to Denmark, she arranged for scans of the Industrimuseet catalogue to be sent. We would like to thank her for her help. [↑]
 17. The handwritten date is 1 November 1947, which coincides with the opening of the exhibition. The

- newspaper was retrieved from the Danish Design Museum's library by curator Kirsten Toftegaard. We thank her for sending us the article. [↑](#)
18. The foreword of the 1947 exhibition catalogue states: "Man mente i sin Tid, at det var nødvendigt for at slaa fast, at Danmark havde en Tekstillkunst, fra Tid til anden at bringe et samlet Opbud, og vi er stadig overtydede om, at dette er rigtigt. Ved Sammenslutningen med Foreningen Dansk Kunst og Husflid I 1930 kom der adskillige selvst—ndige Kunsthåndværkere til, og de har, ligesom de enkelte nye Medlemmer der senere er kommet til, alle fulgt os i dette Princip, saaledes at Udstillingen ogsaa i Aar fremtr—der dels med selvst—ndige Medlemmers Arbejder, dels ved Arbejder sat i Gang af Selskabet enfen paa egne V—rksteder eller hos Medlemmerne". Full reference p.3. [↑](#)
 19. Jorn's tapestry for the school. [↑](#)
 20. Troels Andersen explained the prominence of Fru Wandel's role in Danish art and design after the war and her relationship with Jorn. Andersen, interview 2019. Jorn was a great supporter of the work of Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and Ernest Mancoba. [↑](#)
 21. Troels Andersen believed that it was Ejler Bille who invited the couple to be special guests. Andersen, interview 2019. [↑](#)
 22. Linien II was not a continuation of (the original) Linien. While the original Linien was interested in surrealism, Linien II focused on hard-edge geometry in abstraction, following the thinking of Richard Mortensen. Linien II took the name in order to acknowledge their descent from the constructive trailblazing of the first Linien group in the 1930s. The group's founding members included Ib Geertsen, Albert Metz and Richard Winther, who had all visited the Mancobas in Paris in 1946. Linien II remained in existence until 1951, but Sonja only took part in their 1948 exhibition. See Anne Lie Stokbro, "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba" in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Skulpturer / Sculptures* Ed. Anne Christensen, Folke Kjems og Nina Hobolth, Odense, Fyns Kunstmuseum, 2003 (catalogue) p. 45. [↑](#)
 23. Maibritt Borgen, "The Inner and Outer Form of Self-Organisation" in *Self-Organized*. Ed. Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen, London, Open Editions, 2013, pp. 37–49; Torben Weirup, "Solister og sammenhold—et essay om Grønningen I anledningen af sammenslutningens 100 års jubilæum" in *Grønningen 100 år*. Copenhagen: Vandkunsten, 2015 pp. 11–159. [↑](#)
 24. Aagesen and Bogh, *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maske og Ansigt*, p. 90. [↑](#)
 25. Høst continued for one more year but with only one artist in the association. See Høst 1950 catalogue. [↑](#)
 26. Digitalised tape recordings of conversations between Mancoba and Wonga, circa 1990s, accessed in the Ferlov-Mancoba archives, courtesy of the Ferlov-Mancoba Estate; letter from biographer Elza Miles to Dr. Munkvad, dated 5 June 1991, found in the Miles' archive at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. [↑](#)
 27. In a letter to Asger Jorn dated 13 January 1963, for instance, found in the Jorn Museum archive. [↑](#)
 28. Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ernest Mancoba" in *Lives of the Artists, Lives of the Architects*, London: Penguin Random House, 2015, p. 130. [↑](#)
 29. According to a letter from Sonja Ferlov Mancoba to art historian Steingrim Laursen, Ernest Mancoba was invited as a guest three times but was not accepted as member, despite applying. Often members vote for new members and after an artist has been guest several times they tend to be accepted. Letter to Steingrim Laursen, dated 16/17 November 1969. [↑](#)
 30. Sonja Ferlov Mancoba was a member in the period 1969–84, Den Frie catalogues. [↑](#)
 31. Ferlov Mancoba writing to a friend upon her return to Kattinge from a visit: "vi genfandt Landsbyen [Kattinge] her lige saa død som før" (we found [Kattinge] just as dead as before). See Frank Bøggild, "Breven fra Sonja" in *Bornholms Tidene* (newspaper), 1–2 March 1997. [↑](#)
 32. The Munkvad family happened upon Ferlov's sculptures in the Kattinge home's garden and knocked on the door. Source: letter by Birgit Munkvad—daughter-in-law—to Mancoba biographer Elza Miles, 28 August 1991. Accessed in Miles's archive at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. [↑](#)
 33. Anne Stokbro, "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba" in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Skulpturer / Sculptures* Ed. Anne

- Christensen, Folke Kjems og Nina Hobolth, Odense: Fyns Kunstmuseum. 2003 (catalogue) p. 41. [↑](#)
34. Aagesen and Bogh, *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Maske og Ansigt*, p.95. [↑](#)
35. We want to underline that by using the term “negroid” we do not wish to reinstate it as a valid description of the textile. The term is part of the historical framework that informed Danish readers given its derogatory meaning today. [↑](#)
36. Vanishing-point perspective was developed in Western painting to help create the illusion of depth in representational paintings. In textile works, given the crossing of warp and weft, textile artists privilege the grid over single-point perspective in designs. As Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba are not primarily textile artists, one may assume they approached the textile’s design from a visual artist’s perspective rather than from a textile artist’s, which makes their syncopated patterning unexpected. [↑](#)
37. Amalie and Carl Kjersmeier created the most well-established collection of African art in Denmark, housed today in the National Museum of Denmark (SKM). Carl Kjersmeier not only collected but also wrote about and published books on African art. [↑](#)
38. Obrist, “Ernest Mancoba”, p. 130. [↑](#)
39. Tarben Glarbo, *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba—en dansk billedhugger*, film, Paris: Ebbe Preisler Film, 1983 [↑](#)
40. Sze, 2018. [↑](#)
41. Mancoba described his mother as an artist because of her making of pots with other women of her “age group”. See Miles, “Lifeline out of Africa”, p.66. Though Mancoba identified as mFengu (formerly, *Fingo*), they came to be absorbed by the Xhosa and Zulu peoples. amaZulu pots, made for both practical and spiritual/ceremonial reasons, have a rich tradition, differentiated by shape and decoration. There are no records of the pots that Mancoba’s mother made but traditional embellishments include incisions and impressions to form certain abstract patterns. See Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw and Dieter Reusch, “Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*” in *South African Humanities*, vol. 20. 2008, pp. 513–48. [↑](#)
42. In 1937, Mancoba worked as an English teacher at Khaiso Secondary School. He and fellow South African artist Gerard Sekoto “would spend weekends at the villages of the Sotho (Pedi) and the (Mandebele).” Note that Mandebele is now translated as Ndebele. Miles, “Lifeline out of Africa”, pp. 14 and 26. [↑](#)
43. The Ndebele are a people originally of the Nguni tribe, living predominantly in northern South Africa during Mancoba’s time. Aesthetically, they are distinguished by the decoration of external walls using thick borders surrounding geometric patterns, drawn in freehand, among other aspects. While we associate the homes with bright colours today, commercial paints were not known to have been in use prior to 1940, after Mancoba’s time in the region. The colours Mancoba would have seen would have been earth-toned, derived from natural materials such as ochre and natural coloured clay. However, he would have seen the distinctive outlining and patterning, as these appear to have been adapted by the Ndebele from the Sotho peoples. [↑](#)
44. The major retrospectives on Sonja Ferlov Mancoba at Statens Museum for Kunst (Copenhagen), 8 Feb – 12 May 2019, and Ernest Mancoba at Centre Pompidou (Paris), 26 Jun – 23 Sep 2019 do not consider the impact of the artist’s work by the other. However, a joint exhibition of their works at Cobra Museum of Modern Art (Amsterdam), 27 Jan – 14 May 2023, considered how the artists’ concerns about art and humanity are reflected in how their works seem to be “in dialogue” with one another. Likewise literature has had limited or no recourse of one’s work on the other’s, save Johanne Løgstrup PhD thesis: *Kuratoriske forhandlinger om kunstmuseets rolle under kontemporaneitetens vilkår – udfoldet i en udstilling om billedkunstner Sonja Ferlov Mancoba* (Curatorial negotiations of the role of the art museum under contemporary conditions – Developed through an exhibition about the artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba) ARTS, Aarhus University 2020. [↑](#)
45. Miles, referring to communication with Mancoba in her biography. See Miles, *Lifeline out of Africa: the art of Ernest Mancoba*, p. 35. [↑](#)

46. The kota ancestor figure refers to a reliquary mounted over a basket or bag that contains the skull, bones and certain personal effects of a deceased and is a potent symbol of ancestral veneration. The use of such reliquary was widespread in West Africa but was not common practice in Southern Africa where Mancoba was born and grew up. However, what the symbol represented would have resonated with Mancoba. In his writings he explains that African art is not for art's sake but to help humanity find common ground. (Kota is actually the West African people who made the reliquary and the name they give the reliquary is *mbulu-ngulu* (Bongmba, p. 82), however the West has come to use "the kota" to refer to the reliquaries not only of the Kota people but also those of other West African peoples with similar ancestral worship practices – we follow this practice because most of the existing writings about Mancoba's work uses that description). [↑](#)
47. From an unpublished excerpt of an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, quoted in Folke Kjems and Nina Hobolth "Extracts from interview with Ernest Mancoba" in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba Skulpturer/Sculptures*, Ed. Anne Christiansen, Odense: Fyns Kunstmuseum, 2003, p. 55. [↑](#)
48. Mostly done through interviewing the people working with them, going to the different archives (National Museum Denmark/SMK, the Design Museum and the National Library in Denmark, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery in South Africa), and reading the literature on the two artists. [↑](#)
49. Mancoba scholars have argued over the "African-ness" in his work. While artist and thinker Rasheed Araeen sees Mancoba as the "first" African modernist, Professor Chika Okeke Agulu cautions that most of Mancoba's art came after he left South Africa, at which point he also left behind his socio-realistic approach. If arguing whether Mancoba's works are "African" is important, is it not also important to argue whether it is "European"? Afterall, "his ability to combine an African feeling with a living European culture" is what makes Mancoba's art great, as Ejler Bille writes in a letter to Elza Miles, dated 24 February 1993, found in Miles's archive at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. [↑](#)
50. One of the sisters observed, "[Ferlov Mancoba] worked slowly and almost painfully. She was thorough and something happened, but it surprised me to see how she kind of lost interest in the work when it was finally produced. It was a form of concentration that stuck to the work process itself as the primary and was not aimed at the result, as would be the case for me as a potter". Quoted in Bøggild, "Breven fra Sonja". [↑](#)