**Battiss, Walter**

Walter Battiss **(1906-1982)** was a leading South African painter, printmaker, author, educator and academic, well known for his non-representational oil paintings, impressionistic water colours and symbolic prints. During the 1930s, Batiss made ground-breaking contributions to the disciplines of painting and print-making in South Africa.

Batiss was born in the Eastern Cape of South Africa in1906, and educated in art at home. His mother was instrumental in encouraging his artistic aspirations, and it was her desire for him to study at the Royal Academy in London. This was contrary to his primary objective, which was to remain true to a sense of place and space on African soil. Batiss’ artistic path began with his attention to archaeology and South African rock painting in the early 1920s. In 1924, he became a clerk in the Magistrate’s Court, but his formal and academic career as an artist developed alongside his professional career. Although Battiss’s initial formal training in 1927 was brief, he showcased his first solo exhibition in the same year.

In the 1930s, he graduated as a teacher, and taught at the University of South Africa until he retired in 1972. He also published extensively in scientific art journals on prehistoric rock artists during the period 1939-1948. His influence extended beyond his artistic creative practices and academia to the broader arts and cultural domain. He was instrumental in the establishment of art associations, art societies and the still widely acclaimed art journal *de Arte*.

Over the years, Batiss exhibited in more than 100 solo and group exhibitions, both nationally and internationally. He represented South Africa in the Venice *Biennale* in 1950.

Evidence of European and African experiences is clear in his oeuvre. His travels to Europe between 1966 and 1969, and his meeting with the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso, were a pivotal and an affirming time in his career. Significantly, especially given the magnitude of Picasso’s influence, both artists made parallel and individual explorations of indigenous African and Iberian art. Their point of commonality was a defiance against the conventional use of linear perspective as a means to define pictorial space. Arguably, in 1937, Battiss was the first South African artist to exhibit an abstract painting.

Although he travelled extensively in his lifetime and visually recorded his travels in his artworks, Battiss’ work was clearly rooted in the African continent. The visual signifiers in both paintings and prints clearly reference the South African geography and its inhabitants. His passion for the arts extended to founding art societies and associations that formed the bedrock for an established European art tradition in Africa. He contributed greatly to education and created forums to document art histories and creative practices in South Africa.

Batiss’ convivial and robust personality was reflected in his continual artistic experimentation. His use of the printmaking technique of silk-screening was perhaps ground-breaking in its move away from traditional mediums of artistic expression, and he was documented as the first South African artist to use this medium of artistic expression.

The rural landscape and its multiracial inhabitants were a consistent source of inspiration. Battiss often illustrated his admiration for the work on South African prehistoric rock of the San and the Khoi-khoi in his artworks. His identifiable reference to the indigenous painting of the early San and the Khoi-khoi is the flat use of colour, and the absence of linear perspective in his prints.

**List of works**

Battiss, W. (1975) Self-portrait: detail from Bloomsbury, London.

Battiss, W. (1949) Cave Dwellers, linocut on paper, 11 x 16.8 cm (Private collection).

**References and further reading**

Schoonraad, M. (1976) *Walter Battiss*, Cape Town: Struik.

Fransen, H. (1982) *Three Centuries of South African Art*, Johannesburg: AD Donker.

Battiss, W. (1965) *Art In A Mixed-up World*, Pretoria: University of South Africa.



Walter Battiss, Self-portrait, 1976

Detail from Bloomsbury, London

Schoonraad, M. (1976) *Walter Battiss*

Cape Town: Struik



Walter Battiss, Cave Dwellers, 1949

linocut on paper, 11 x 16.8 cm

(Private collection)

Schoonraad, M. (1976) *Walter Battiss*

Cape Town: Struik