**Battiss, Walter (1906-1982)**

Walter Battiss was a distinguished South African artist whose contributions to the broad disciplines of painting and print-making were ground breaking. His artistic beginnings began with his interest in archaeology and South African rock painting in the early 1920s. Although Battiss’s initial formal training was brief in 1927, he showcased his first solo exhibition in the same year. He then developed an extraordinary repertoire of group and solo exhibitions until the 1970s. Battiss’s technical innovations in the discipline of print-making in the 1930s was marked by the referencing of indigenous South African cave art in the subject matter of his painting, and as well as in his technical considerations in the execution of his artwork. 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 present in his various mediums of expression clearly referenced 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 on African soil. He contributed greatly to education and created forums to document art histories and creative practices in South Africa.

Battiss was a leading South African painter, printermaker, author, educator and academic, who is well known for his non-representational oil paintings, impressionistic water colours and symbolic prints. He was born in the Cape in 1906 and educated in his artistic practices 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. His formal and academic career as an artist developed alongside his secular career as a clerk in the magistrate’s office in 1924. In the 1930s, he graduated as a teacher, and he retired as professor at the University of South Africa 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*.

In 1927, Battiss held his first solo exhibition and over the years exhibited in more than 100 solo and group exhibitions, both nationally and internationally. He represented South Africa in the Venice *Biennale* in 1950. He travelled widely throughout his extensive and illustrious career, and evidence of European and African experiences are clearly demonstrated in his oeuvre. It was his travels to Europe, between 1966-1969, and his meeting with the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) which is highlighted as a pivotal and an affirming point in his career. This was significant by virtue of the magnitude of Picasso’s contribution to the art scene in Europe in the Modern period, and parallel and individual explorations by both artists with indigenous African and Iberian art. The point of commonality was their defiance against the conventional use of linear perspective as shown in*Cave Dwellers,* 1949, as a means to define pictorial space. Arguably, in 1937, Battiss was the first South African artist to exhibit an abstract painting.

Looking to nature was a consistent source and inspiration - the rural landscape and its multiracial inhabitants. But of all his subjects, Battiss 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. His convivial and robust personality was reflected in his ever-experimental pursuits in his artistic creative practices. Technically, his use of the printmaking technique of silk-screening was perhaps ground breaking in his 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.

**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