

JUDITH MASON: a prospect of icons

A learner resource on the art of Judith Mason

By Philippa Hobbs and Emile Maurice, with contributions from Nhlanhla Ngwenya



Judith Mason

About Judith Mason

Judith Mason was born in Pretoria in 1938. She studied at the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1950s, obtaining a BA Degree in Fine Art in 1960. Her first solo show was held in 1964.

In the 1970s and 80s Mason was highly visible in the South African art world at a time when the country was isolated both politically and culturally from the rest of the world. Even so, she was chosen to represent South Africa at the Venice Biennale, and at international art fairs, like Art Basel. In the early 1990s Mason returned from living and teaching in Florence, Italy. At this time, her work became part of the South African school and university curricula and she also taught history of art, drawing and painting at the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town.

Mason is still prolific well into the 21st century and is represented in major public collections in South Africa, as well as in collections in Europe, the USA and Australia. Her public commissions include tapestries in collaboration with Marguerite Stephens for The Royal Hotel in Durban, and stained-glass window designs for the Great Park Synagogue in Johannesburg. Apart from producing a large body of work over the decades, Mason has published her work in books, sometimes in collaboration with poets. She lives and work in South Africa, and has a studio in the United States of America.



Judith Mason, *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg* (triptych), 1987. Mixed media. Collection: Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg. Photo: Justin James

Judith Mason is one of South Africa's most renowned artists. Her latest exhibition, *A prospect of icons*, is testimony to a lifetime with art. It includes paintings, drawings, installations and artist's books. The title is taken from an essay by Mason, in which she discusses the use of religious imagery in painting, an important feature of her own work, particularly with regard to Christianity and eastern religions.

While Mason's work draws extensively on religion, it is also informed by her exploration of mythological creatures. Animals like the leopard, hyena, ape and monkey feature widely in Mason's work, and one understanding of them is that they symbolise our lower instincts. These creatures are represented in works like *Resurrection at the Taxidermy* (1999) and *Leopard of Delight* (1965). Another important feature of Mason's work is the fusion she creates between beauty and ugliness: a beautifully drawn or painted face often gives way to a gaping, snarling monster. This, according to the curator of the exhibition, Wilhelm van Rensburg, 'is no other than an expression of how awful pain is.' Mason's work, which is sometimes informed by poetry, includes numerous self-portraits, as well as reflections on socio-political issues, such as homeless people, street children, HIV/Aids, abortion, war mongering and the politics of conflict under apartheid.

One of these works is an engrossing assemblage of found objects and painted images – *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg* (1986), a response to Johannesburg and its mining history.

The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent
 Mason's story
 This work was partly inspired by a story Mason heard on the radio in 1995, at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. It was about the execution of a liberation-movement cadre, Phila Ndwandwe, who nating her in a kneeling position. Before Ndwandwe was killed, she made a pair of panties for herself out of a piece of blue plastic. Later, when Ndwandwe's naked body was discovered in a shallow grave, the thin piece of plastic still covered her private parts. The first part of the title refers to another cadre, Herold Sefola, who asked to sing Nkosi Sikelel' Africa before he was executed.

Note on assessment: We recommend that teachers develop assessment activities based on this learning experience. Assessment ensures that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills. It also provides teachers with indications of achievement. When assessment is focused, say in the form of continuous feedback over a year, learners understand more clearly what they are required to know. Self-assessment helps learners set personal goals, evaluate performance and build self-confidence. Peer assessment encourages a sense of responsibility. When planning an assessment programme, school teachers need to refer to Learning Outcomes and Standards for the Visual Arts, as envisaged in the National Curriculum Statement.

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This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition *A prospect of icons*. In it, artworks are explored by means of thought-provoking questions, fact files, glossary words and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, style, subject matter and theme. The questions also refer learners to other African and European art styles, drawing on previous booklets in the *Gallery Learner Series*. This text booklet is designed primarily for grade 10 – 12 learners, but is easily adapted for younger learners. It is designed to be a stand-alone reference on Judith Mason, beyond the exhibition that it accompanies.

The exhibition *A prospect of icons* is on view at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, from 2 October – 6 December 2008.

Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, house-wifey thing to do ...

(Judith Mason's text on the dress in *The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent*.)

1. Study Mason's triptych (or three-part) artwork, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent*, and invent a story for it. Share your different interpretations with your group.



Judith Mason, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent* (triptych), 1998. Mixed media. Collection: Constitutional Court



Judith Mason, *Leopard of Delight*, 1965. Oil on board. Collection: The Pretoria Art Museum



Judith Mason, *Resurrection at the Taxidermy*, 1999. Oil on board. Private collection

2. Now read the story behind this work (at the back of this booklet). How do your own interpretations differ from Mason's? How do they all add interest to your experience of the artwork?
3. What parts of the story has Mason shown, and not shown? Why do you think she has done this?
4. What different feelings do the real dress and the picture of the dress give you?
5. What is beautiful and what is ugly in *The Man who Sang and the Woman who kept Silent*? What feels familiar and what seems alien?
6. What are your ideas about beauty and ugliness in art?
7. Canine and feline animals constantly appear in Mason's work. How does she construct these animals? List the materials, body parts, colours, patterns and facial expressions, for example.
8. Find out about some of the attitudes people have to hyenas, leopards and dogs. What do you think these creatures represent?

9. Mason also uses a triptych (three-part) format in *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg*. How do you think this format influences the way we 'read' artworks like these?
10. Find out about legends, ritual celebrations and histories about Egyptian pharaohs.
11. Think about some legends and ritual celebrations in your own community or family.
12. How could you work with some of these ideas in your own artworks? Draw some of your thoughts in your workbook.
13. *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg* is a work Mason made about the Randlords of Johannesburg. What do you think she tells us about these early mining magnates when she compares them to ancient Egyptian royalty?

FACT FILE

The Randlords

The Randlords were powerful European entrepreneurs who controlled the South African diamond and gold mining industries in their early stages from the 1870s to World War 1. In order to maximise their profits, they supported legislation, like job reservation laws, that forced Africans into a cheap labour pool. Some notable Randlords include Sir Abe Bailey, Barney Barnato, Samuel Marks, Maximilian Michaelis, Sir Lionel Phillips and Cecil John Rhodes. Their architectural patronage left behind a legacy across South Africa. Florence Phillips, wife of Sir Phillips, championed the establishment of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

14. What ideas can you see about death, the preservation of dead people, or the way different cultures represent death? Ask your life skills group to give you some more ideas.
15. How does Mason use assemblage to make her messages more powerful? How could her work remind us of artworks from different cultures, such as Minkisi power figures from central Africa, or Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Woman* (Olga Picasso)?
16. How could *Tombs of the Pharaohs of Johannesburg* show some different art styles and traditions? To help you, look also at other booklets in the Gallery Learner Series, such as those on Cecil Skotnes (3/2008) and Christine Dixie (3/2007).
17. Make a list of all the objects you see in Mason's works that could be symbolic. Talk about how these could stand for different ideas and experiences. For example, what could the images of chicken feet mean? Or the braziers? What about the nails?
18. How could you develop some symbols of your own in your artwork? Sketch some ideas in your workbook to use as a resource in future.
19. Think about Mason's exhibition title, *A prospect of icons*. How has Mason turned figures such as Phila Ndwandwe, the Randlords and Ghandi into icons? What kind of icons are they? How are Mason's icons similar or different from other icons in art, like the legendary hero Shaka – the icon in Cecil Skotnes's work?

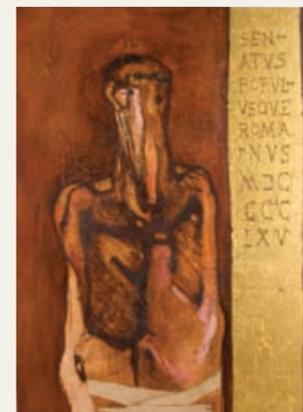


Artist unknown, Yombe. Power figure. DRC or Kabinda (c. 1900) Wood, iron, shells and mixed media

FACT FILE

Assemblage

This art form is a three-dimensional equivalent of a collage. The process involves making sculpture or relief work by assembling pre-formed objects and materials that were not originally manufactured for the purposes of art making. Artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963) were pioneers of assemblage, working in this mode from 1913 onwards. Some contemporary South African artists who use this approach are Willem Boshoff (1951-), Pat Mautloa (1952-), Usha Seejarim (1974-) and Willie Bester (1952-).



Judith Mason, *Christ at the Column*, 1965. Oil, paint, wire and cloth on board. Collection: University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries Collection



Judith Mason, *Gandhi*, 1986. Oil on board. Collection: Dr J P Nel

Glossary word: symbol

A form or image that represents something else, beyond its immediate meaning.

Practical project

Make a garment as a memorial

Think of someone in history who could be called an icon. What parts of their story impress you the most? How could you create a wearable artwork that is a memorial to this person? As you plan your work, think about the materials or objects that would express your ideas best. How could the garment conceal or reveal things? Where should it be placed? Who should wear it and when?