

People

Nelson Mandela Was an Artist, Too, and Now His Family Has Revealed Never-Before-Seen Artworks to Mark His 100th Birthday

Nelson Mandela turned to art after retiring from politics, but these works have never been seen before.

Sarah Cascone, July 18, 2018



Nelson Mandela. Photo by Grant Warren courtesy of WeTransfer.

Today is the 100th anniversary of the birth of South African anti-apartheid revolutionary and politician [Nelson Mandela](#). In honor of the beloved leader's milestone birthday, [House of Mandela](#), a company started by his daughter and granddaughter, is pairing up with the file-sharing company WeTransfer to reveal a series of [previously unseen drawings](#) by Mandela.

"These sketches are not so much about my life as they are about my own country," Mandela once said of his artworks, which he began making after his retirement from the presidency in 1999, in part as a way of making sense of his historic life. "I hope that it will give you as much pleasure as I have had, in creating these images," he told his viewers.

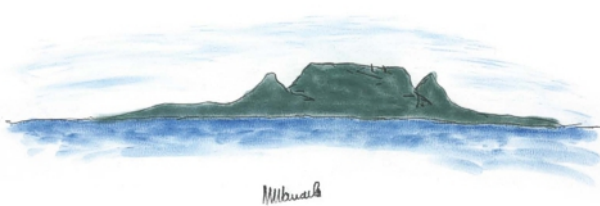
Mandela worked in charcoal and pastels, inspired by memories of Qunu, the village he called home, and Robben Island, where he was imprisoned from 1964 and 1982. (He was finally released from prison in 1990.) Overall he created some 40 works over the course of his lifetime, and today House of Mandela has for the first time made public his elegiac "Homeland" series, created between 2002 and 2003.



A drawing from Nelson Mandela's "Homeland" series. Courtesy of House of Mandela Art.

According to House of Mandela, the leader's "first works were inspired by [John Lennon](#). The simple lines and content of John's works is what gave Mr. Mandela the confidence to continue this new found ability." He enjoyed starting something new so late in life, the organization told artnet News in an email.

"The 'Homeland' collection was inspired by his love for the peace and tranquility of Qunu. It was his spiritual home," House of Mandela added. "During his latter years he would spend time watching the cows grazing; this made him immensely happy. Not many people know that he loved farming and growing vegetables. In essence it bought back fond memories; it was here where he was born and it is here where he rests today."



A drawing from Nelson Mandela's "Homeland" series. Courtesy of House of Mandela Art.

"These never-before-seen works give us a new insight into one of the defining figures of the 20th century, and how he saw the world," WeTransfer editor-in-chief Rob Alderson said in a statement. "We are honored to celebrate his centenary with this project and bring these simple, but fascinating sketches to the world."

Behind bars for almost 30 years for opposing the government's policy of segregation, Mandela went on to help bring an end to apartheid, becoming South Africa's first black head of state.

He documented his life's journey in a series of simple drawings called the "Struggles" series, which see each stage of Mandela's life elegantly reduced to a sequence of evocative hand gestures. A clenched fist, recalling his revolutionary activities; two fists in handcuffs, representing his long imprisonment; the shackles breaking, to show his release; one person's hand grasping another, for unity; and a child's hand in his, setting forth into a better future.

"These hands are not so much about my life as they are about my country," Mandela once said of the work. "I chose hands because they can hurt or heal, punish or uplift.... In time we broke loose the shackles of injustice and joined hands across social divides and over oceans knowing that even if age makes us wiser guides, its the love and trust of the youth that reminds us of love trust and the value of life"



A drawing from Nelson Mandela's "Homeland" series. Courtesy of House of Mandela Art.

WeTransfer is also presenting a series of works titled "Unity" that were inspired by the "Struggles" drawings. The company's content platform, WePresent, displays reactions to these artworks by Lene Pienaar, Shen Jiawei, Anna Bella Geiger, Charlie Mackesy, Thornton Dial, [Gabrielle Pool](#), and 33 other artists that Mandela personally invited to artistically respond to his "Struggles" series in 2003 and 2004.

High-resolution digital copies of Mandela's *Unity* drawing are available for sale from the House of Mandela for \$10. The online exhibition includes an interview with Makaziwe Mandela, the late president's daughter, and a selection of Mandela-themed desktop wallpapers.

Also in remembrance of the anti-apartheid icon's birthday, South Africa has declared June 18 Mandela Day. The country tapped former President Barack Obama to deliver the 16th Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture on Tuesday.



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