

## **The life of a gentle anarchist**

In 1906 Walter Whall Battiss was born in Somerset East, a Karoo town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

After receiving his teaching diploma in 1933, Battiss started working at the Park School in Turffontein, Johannesburg. In 1936 he was appointed art master at Pretoria Boys School, where he would work for most of the next 30 years.

Battiss became a founding member of the New Group; and the only member who had not studied in Europe. In 1938 he visited Europe for the first time and met Abbé Henri Breuil.

He married Grace Anderson, a renowned art-educationalist, in 1940. It was at this stage that Battiss' previously realistic style of painting began to take on a hieratic, symbolist character.

While exhibiting a collection of South African art with the International Art Club in Italy in 1949, Battiss had his first meeting with Pablo Picasso and the futurist Gino Severini. Both these artists made strong impressions on him, and the influence of their work can be seen in his art.

1955 welcomed the appearance of calligraphic forms in Battiss' work, as well as the introduction of animal and human abstractions. The influence of Ndebele bead work in his art also became clear at this time, and he began to experiment with coloured woodcuts.

In 1962 Battiss began exhibiting numerous canvases using palette-knife colour mixing with graffito delineation of forms. As a result of his growing interest in Pre-Islamic culture, he took several trips from Central Africa to the Middle East.

Between the years of 1966 and 1968, Battiss made several trips to Greece; and thus began the influence of islands on his creative thinking. It was during this time that he published a hand-printed book of texts and serigraphs titled 'Nesos'. By 1969 he was working on serigraphy with Chris Betambeau in London, and in 1970 he organised the first South African exhibition of serigraphs.

When Battiss retired from his position as Professor of Fine Arts at UNISA in 1971, a special issue of 'De Arte' was published in his honour. In 1975 his wife, Grace, passed away.

In 1980 Battiss designed four stamps for the Botswana postal service. The Walter Battiss museum opened in Somerset East the following year, and remains open today.

On 20 August 1982, Battiss was struck down by a sudden heart attack and passed away. He was 76 years old.

When Battiss was 11 his family moved to Koffiefontein in the Free State province of South Africa, where he became interested in archaeology and, importantly, rock art. This indigenous art form would influence Battiss' work throughout his life.

Battiss did a lot of pioneering field work, research and publication on rock art. With his book "The Amazing Bushmen", published in 1938, he helped to bring rock art to the attention of a wider public.

In 1944, Battiss became the first South African artist ever to represent rock art from a purely aesthetic point of view through his exhibition of copies of rock paintings. Four years later, in 1948, he ventured out to the Namib Desert where he lived among the Bushmen. It is perhaps little wonder that Battiss became known as 'the Bushman Painter' in the 1950s.

Battiss' so-called Fook Island concept has its roots in his extensive travels to relatively remote areas in America, the Middle East and Europe. After a lengthy visit to the Pacific Islands in 1976, Battiss began to travel frequently to more remote and seemingly exotic areas.

Born from a hunger for a different and more simple and unspoilt kind of society in which to live, the concept presupposed an area or community with a unique and independent identity. Battiss created 'fooklore', stamps, and the Island's own currency – and thus attracted local and international adherents and Fook Island 'citizens' like Norman Catherine, Janet Suzman, Esmé Berman, Jani Allan and Linda Givon.