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Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911–1984) ***Artworks for Community and Solidarity***

Renate Wiehager

“What really matters is not the sculptures, but the spirit of fellowship which one tries to express. I would say that the things themselves are only a means to an end. The value of the pieces lies in the moment when they have a direct bearing on life, when they help us to see more clearly, give us heart, help us to get to grips with life. But the pieces are not life. They are a reflection of life.” (Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, 1970)¹

“A person is driven by an innate urge to express themselves through the material. And gradually you enter into a dialogue with what you are creating – a dialogue that in turn provides the impetus for new ideas. As long as the piece seems alive to me, talks to me, I can and must keep going ... This can go on for years before I reach the point where I feel that from here on it can only go downhill, the point where it is impossible to pare away any more, because all you do could now would be to add on again.” (Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, 1973)²

Over four decades, and often under the most difficult of living conditions, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba created a sculptural oeuvre of the greatest concision, intensity, and concentration. Her work both contains traits of yet transcends the classifications of modernism, primitivism, surrealism, and the post-war avant-gardes, having moved

¹“Sonja Ferlov’s store dag’: interview med Virtus Schade, Berlingske Tidende, May 30–31, 1970,” in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: Skulpturer / Sculptures*, Anne Christiansen, Folke Kjems, and Nina Hobolth (eds.), Aalborg 2003, 26, 43.

² Quoted in “‘Kunstneren er et middel for folket’ (‘The artist is an instrument for the people’): Interview med Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Jyllandsposten, September 23, 1973,” in *ibid.*, 25, 43.

instead towards a sculptural embodiment of inner experiential worlds that can be translated across cultural, political, and linguistic boundaries.³

The fact that Mancoba has recently come to the attention of art historians as one of Scandinavia's most important woman sculptors of the 20th century is due to a coincidence— as is the case for many such rediscoveries in recent history. Around 1960, the art historian Troels Andersen, who was working on an article about the Danish artist group Linien, found himself repeatedly coming across the name “Sonja Ferlov.” He contacted the artist Ejler Bille and the collector Elise Johansen, who were able to provide him with Sonja's address in Paris. A lively exchange of letters began, and, in 1979, Andersen published a monograph on her. This was the first step towards lifting her work out of oblivion. At the same time, the basis was created for the Mancoba family estate, established by her husband Ernest Mancoba and their son Wonga after the artist's death in 1984, and with the help of gallerist Mikael Andersen, to hand over a comprehensive collection of her surviving plaster sculptures to the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen in 2023. In 2021, the estate announced plans to create a museum focused on her work, designed by architect Tadao Ando, whose completion is scheduled for around 2030. In another favorable turn of events for her reception, the Danish writer Anne-Vibeke Holst has brought Mancoba's life and work into the present in the form of a novel published in 2022. The following essay will focus on the Mancoba's sculptural work.⁴

Sculpture 1940–1946: *Intimate Manual Journal, or a Monument to Recent History*

Paris. In 1940, the political situation in the French metropolis was characterized by oppression, fear, and growing persecution since the German occupation in June of that year. For people from other countries, the city that was once considered a place of freedom, creativity, and cosmopolitanism had become dangerous terrain. The situation for foreign artists and intellectuals was precarious. Though Paris long served as a haven for creative minds from all over the world, under the occupation the avant-garde was seen as subversive and was confronted with repression and violence. People were forced to flee or survive underground. Many artists from the circle of surrealists around André Breton and Marcel Duchamp were already finding their way into exile. Galleries and museums were placed under surveillance by the German occupying forces, who confiscated works collected by Jews or works classified as subversive.

Sonja, 29, and her future husband, the South African painter Ernest Mancoba, 36, also had to make their plans to flee Paris, in this case for Sonja's home country of

³ On the “invention” of primitivism in the context of modernity in relation to Mancoba's work, cf. Pierre-Philipp Fraiture, “African Art: From Primitivism to Art Premiers,” in *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: Mask and Face*, Cecilie Høgsbro Østergaard (ed.), Copenhagen 2019, 156–168.

⁴ For a selection of Sonja Ferlov Mancoba's paintings and graphics, cf. Østergaard 2019 and *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: Sculptures, dessins, collages*, Jonas Storsve (ed.), Paris, 2019.

Denmark. Ernest, however, a South African-British dual citizen, was considered by French authorities to be an enemy conscientious objector, with South Africa under British control, and was refused entry to Denmark. He was forced to return to Paris alone, to his small studio in rue Hippolyte Maindron that his friend Alberto Giacometti had arranged for him in 1938, located directly above his own. Although Sonja was able to catch the last ship leaving Belgium for Denmark, after just a few months away she decided to return to Paris in February 1940. She would be the only Danish artist to spend the five years of the war in the city. In July, Ernest was interned in a German camp, La Grande Caserne in Saint Denis, north of Paris, and remained imprisoned there until the end of the war.

Sonja was therefore on her own in her small studio of just a few square meters in the rue du Moulin Vert, very close to the studios of Ernest and Giacometti. In the summer of 1940, she began to work intensively on what would become one of her most important works, entitled *Skulptur (uden titel) / Sculpture (untitled)*. It was later dated “1940–1946,” as she did not consider the process of developing its form to be complete until 1946 (hereafter *Sculpture 1940–1946*). The sculpture reached a first provisional completion when Ernest returned from his internment and cast the original clay mold in plaster. This marked the completion of a major work for Mancoba and of surrealist sculpture of this period in general. It could also be said to have marked the beginning of her own artistic life. Around the same time, her son Wonga was born.

A photograph from 1946, taken by her Danish friend, the artist Richard Winther, makes it possible to experience the physical concentration of materials and objects in her studio, at the center of which are two versions of *Sculpture 1940–1946*. Rows of small canvases lean against the back wall, reminders of Mancoba’s training as a painter during the early 1930s. Working with clay or loam requires one have a tub of water at hand, as well as spatulas and tools for working and smoothing the material. You can literally see, feel, and smell the fact that Mancoba relied entirely on an intuitive interplay of material, mind, and hand. No sketches on the walls, no models, no photos.

Throughout the war years, Mancoba worked almost exclusively on the compressed form of *Sculpture 1940–1946*, an expansive, wedge-shaped volume that takes on a figurative appearance through an upper opening, like a magical third eye in its forehead. The compactness, naturalness, and autonomy of the form only allow its inner tensions and opposing energies to be perceived upon a second glance. Its ponderous form, which resembles a deep-sea fish, emits the sense of an almost animate blindness that contrasts with the beacon-like ascendancy of its eye shape. The sheer force of its extensive form, seemingly in an act of resisting any movement of itself in space, is counterbalanced by its diagonally upward-sloping slenderness and the sensitive, even vulnerable eye socket. Mancoba’s *Sculpture 1940–1946* attracts attention with an almost mystical force, as one can readily sense, for example, in the large sculpture hall of the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, where the work stands amidst abstract and figurative bronzes by many other, better-known artists.

To give the pictorial inventiveness of Mancoba's sculpture some important intellectual and artistic context, some key works by Constantin Brâncuși and Alberto Giacometti from the 1920s and 1930s should be pointed out here. Like Mancoba, both strove for sculptural condensation, a tendency the art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Hubermann has described as "abstract anthropomorphism."⁵

The Romanian sculptor Brâncuși had arrived in Paris in 1904 and became known by 1910 for his extremely reduced visual language, which revolved around a small number of themes and object associations: archetypal figurations; the motif of the bird or fish as an abstract, slender form occupying a space charged with metaphorical significance; the human bust as an ovoid, abstract volume; and abstract, pedestal-like works, that are like endless columns. Mancoba already knew of his work from magazines and publications and visited the admired artist after her arrival in Paris. Other role models for her at the time were the sculptors Henri Laurens, Jean Arp, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, all of whom she also met in their studios.

Though what Mancoba may have most directly felt as an inner affinity with Brâncuși's work was their new way of spiritualizing the material, their shared understanding of the relationship between work and space was also apparent. In their formal concision, Brâncuși's works, such as his important late sculpture from 1930 *Le grand poisson / The Large Fish*, which Mancoba would have seen in his studio, articulate an active energy in the exchange between sculptural body and surrounding space, a quality Mancoba would also come to recognize in the work of Jean Arp. Brâncuși understood formal reduction not as abstraction, but as realism, as a real visualization of "the essence of things."⁶

No less significant for the young artist in Paris was her personal encounter, immediately after her arrival in 1936/37, with Alberto Giacometti, whose works she had also been able to admire in art magazines in the preceding years. However, her first visit to his studio, alongside some Danish artist friends, brought surprises, as Giacometti had by then abandoned his surrealist work and turned to working with models from his surroundings:

"Of course, we had already formed an image of Giacometti as a sculptor (based on reproductions of his works). So it was a bit of a shock for us, who were immersed in surrealism and abstract art, when we realized that Giacometti worked with tiny heads that were deeply carved and executed with many lines and small raised parts. But all around the room, to our relief and great delight, we found all the things we had dreamed of (and many of which were just lying around) [...]. It was a great moment for

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Der Kubus und das Gesicht: Im Umkreis einer Skulptur Alberto Giacomettis*, Mira Fliescher and Elena Vogman (eds.), Berlin 2015, 135

⁶ "What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things. Starting from this truth it is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface." Constantin Brâncuși, quoted in Paul Morand, "Preface to the exhibition," in *Brâncuși* (exh. cat. Brummer Gallery), New York 1926.

all four of us, there was an atmosphere in the room that was completely new to us. Questions were asked and answers were given. Giacometti was obliging and willing to tell us things [...]. But I don't think any of us understood what he was actually trying to do with his work. We were certainly very disappointed to see him working on sculptures of human heads.”⁷

The “essential” realism of a Brâncuși and the abstract fragmentation of material fantasies and obsessions of a Giacometti—these key works of cubist and surrealist sculpture she experienced in Paris flank Mancoba’s *Sculpture 1940–1946* in both art historical terms and in their mentality. She would later write in detail about the significance of these men’s work for her oeuvre:

“[*Sculpture 1940–1946*] never reached a consummation of intensity, but it was my faithful friend and gave me courage during the four long years of war. I confided so much in it and was heard. The work taught me to be patient in the face of life. It is self-contained, like a bud that has not yet blossomed, it carries hope for the future. It is probably the work that has taught me the most about working with sculpture, and it is the mother of everything that comes after, for me it is a stepping stone, a point of no return. It started very small, it’s as if it contained many, many sculptures, each of which had to give way to the next because the speed at which things happened was faster than my ability to capture the expression in the material. It kept changing, in a new attempt to realize the impossible. It always had to find new answers to new problems. This continued after the war, and it wasn’t until our son was born in 1946 that my husband cast it for me.”⁸

Another, no less significant, geographical as well as artistic and intellectual context should be pointed out here, one which is central to our exhibition. While Mancoba was working on the completion of her *Sculpture 1940–1946* in her Montparnasse studio, on the other side of the Seine, near the Parc Monceau, Aimé Maeght opened his eponymous gallery on rue de Téhéran 13 in October 1945. In the summer of 1947, this was to be the venue for one of the most important exhibitions of the surrealist movement of the time, *L’exposition internationale du surréalisme*, co-curated by Marcel Duchamp and designed by his friend, the artist, architect, and designer Frederick Kiesler. Among other things, Duchamp was responsible for the content of the “Salle de

⁷ Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, “Alberto Giacometti 1901–1966,” in *Billedkunst* no. 1/2 (1966), 10–12, here 11, reproduced in Christiansen et al. 2003, 42. On the significance of Giacometti’s work for Mancoba, cf. Dorthe Aagesen and Mikkel Bogh, “Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: Figure, Voices and Space,” in Østergaard 2019, 26–121, here 74f.

⁸ Quoted in Troels Andersen, “Sonja Ferlov Mancoba,” in *Signum*, no. 3 (1962), 42–52, here 43. For a detailed interpretation and contextualization of *Sculpture 1940–1946*, cf. Aagesen/Bogh in Østergaard 2019.

pluie,” where rain sprinkled down on boat hulls covered with earth and a billiard table on which Maria Martin’s 1946 sculpture *The Impossible* was prominently positioned. Installed in front of black walls in the same room were three *Constructions* by Isabelle Waldberg.

Mancoba, Martins, Waldberg—three of the outstanding contributors to surrealist sculpture in Paris in 1947, two of them part of the most important surrealist exhibitions of the time, or, in the case of Mancoba, toiling undiscovered in a small studio—all three artists created in a kindred spirit. Art history, however, has largely overlooked their works to this day or has only begun to appreciate their specific quality and significance.⁹

Sculptural Images for the Community and Masks of Horror: The Early Work 1935–1939

At the beginning of the 1930s, the young Copenhagen academy student Sonja Ferlov found herself part of a circle of like-minded artists who would work together until 1940 and then again in the immediate post-war years in the form of joint exhibitions, magazine publishing, and trips. But it was in 1935/36, during two stays on the island of Bornholm and in Rørvig, North Zealand, Denmark, where she created her first sculptural works, having previously only worked as a painter. From the flotsam and jetsam she collected there—wood, stones, dried vegetation, found objects—she first created figurative assemblages, of which the small wooden sculpture *Levende grene / Living Branches*, from 1935 has survived. This work, the earliest known sculpture by the artist, was inspired by assemblages and collages with natural materials she had seen illustrated in surrealist publications and magazines. Here, Mancoba worked with six elements, a flat base plate with a right-angled wedge resting on it, on which a branch element leans diagonally, as well as three upright pieces of wood. This is the first time that the motif of symbolic solidarity and a community of individual, partly abstract, partly figurative forms, which will be present up through her late work, is realized.¹⁰ Here, one can imagine delicate young birds turning towards each other, watched over by a towering, vertical form.

In the Bornholm studio of ceramists Lisbeth and Gertrud Hjorth, the Copenhagen circle of artist friends experimented with various materials and techniques. It was there that Mancoba first began to work with clay. *Fugl med unge / Bird with Young* and *To*

⁹ Only Maria Martins and Isabelle Waldberg have been presented in a few of the prominent survey exhibitions on surrealism since 1950. It is significant that even one of the most knowledgeable authors on the significance of women in the context of surrealism, Whitney Chadwick, does not discuss all three of the artists in our exhibition. Cf. Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, London 2021, 299.

¹⁰ Marianne Barbusse emphasizes the aspect of solidarity as a motif and theme in Mancoba’s work with reference to African models in the art of Sudan and the Ivory Coast. Marianne Barbusse, “Sonja Ferlov Mancoba’s African and Pre-Columbian Sources of Inspiration,” in Christiansen et al. 2003, 59–75, here 74.

levende væsener / Two Living Creatures, both from 1935, already possess a consummate individuality and coherence with regard to the natural coalescence of these bird-like creatures, an intimate unity within duality. In one, a bird holds its young in its lap and seems to want to release it into its own selfhood. The two “living beings” are connected, are one, and yet retain their individuality, friendly and loving towards each other. Mancoba later recalled this in conversation with her biographer Troels Andersen:

“I often ask myself why the fierce desire to work with clay was so strong. I was able to get a large lump from the cellar [of the Hjorth sisters]. I molded the figures very quickly, then they stood for a long time to dry. It is thanks to Lis Hjorth, who took them and cast them in plaster, that they are preserved as sculptures today. For me, making them had a meaning, like an inner liberation; something had changed in my mind and I held on to that. The dialogue I had with these sculptures lay deep in my subconscious, but the things themselves I had already somehow pushed out of my consciousness [...]. I don’t know how they came about—something flowed through me, I wasn’t looking for them. [...] Suddenly they were just there, as if from a feeling of complete harmony with the universe around me.”¹¹

A plaster sculpture from 1936 entitled *Ugle / Owl*, which has only survived in photographs, possesses emphatically wide eyes that already hint at the mask sculptures that would be created shortly afterwards. After the outbreak of war, Mancoba lived in Denmark for a few months, as mentioned, while her husband was forced to stay behind in Paris. Sculptures from this period point far ahead to the group of works from around 1965 with the dominant motif of masks. Three decisive biographical aspects pave the way here.

As a child, Mancoba had become acquainted with the sculptural innovations and cultural traditions of African culture through her parents’ acquaintance with Carl Kjersmeier and his wife Amalie, who owned a large collection of African art. Mancoba was so fascinated by the collection of around 1,500 objects that she would later introduce her artist friends from Copenhagen to the Kjersmeiers.¹² Through art magazines in the 1930s and her first visits to exhibitions and studios in Paris from 1936 onwards, she came into indirect contact with the motif of the mask as an aspect of cubist and surrealist art. After meeting Ernest Mancoba in 1938, Sonja’s intensive conversations about African art and culture in Paris and the couple’s joint visits to museums led her to engage with indigenous artifacts from a wide range of cultures, particularly through the holdings of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris.¹³

¹¹ Troels Andersen, *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba*, Copenhagen 1979, 14, 17.

¹² For details on the Kjersmeier Collection, cf. Barbusse in Christiansen et al. 2003, 71; Agesen/Bogh in Østergaard 2019, 58f.

¹³ On the early masks of 1939/40 and the motif of masks in Sonja Mancoba’s late work as an expression of a “rigid” primitivism, cf. Mikkel Bogh, “Tribal Language and Mass Culture:

One of her mask sculptures from 1939, *Mask (Krigens udbrud) / Mask (Outbreak of War)*, already contains in its title some of the immediacy that will be part of the politically motivated turning point in Mancoba's work. Without resorting to artistic, material, or creative finesse, in this work the artist directly addresses the immediate physical, sensory, and mental threat posed by the approaching war, which threatened to dissolve individuality, class, or ethnic affiliation and plunge people into a kind of torpor. Various interpreters of Mancoba's work have identified possible sources of inspiration for her pictorial invention in antiquity or in non-European art, but also from artists of her time such as Jacques Lipschitz or Max Ernst.¹⁴ In any case, there is no doubt that Mancoba was engaged in an inner dialogue with a wide variety of historical and as well as contemporary sources. At the same time, her works speak very much their own language in their indissoluble interweaving of aggression and horror, of outcry and invocation.¹⁵

Retreat into Gentleness, Martial Gestures, and Visions of a Communal Awakening: The Work of the 1950s and 1960s

After Ernest Mancoba's release from internment camp and the birth of their son Wonga, the now stateless couple found themselves in a kind of vacuum in Paris: contact with their Danish artist friends had been broken off and the people in their artistic circle in Paris had not yet returned to the city or had chosen to remain in exile. Their financial situation, as always extremely precarious, precluded any real creative restart. All this led the couple to decide to return to Denmark in May 1947, where they found a home for five years in the village of Kattinge, near Roskilde. They were subsequently invited to exhibitions by the artist groups Linien and Høst, were involved in the beginnings of the

Three Danish sculptors on the Threshold of Another Age," in Christiansen et al. 2003, 90–97, here 93f.; Marianne Barbusse provides references to African models for the mask motif in Mancoba's work in *ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ Cf. Rolf Laessøe, *Stille vækst: Sonja Ferlov Mancobas skulpturer*, Copenhagen 1992; Barbusse, in Christiansen et al. 2003; Pierre-Philipp Fraiture, "African art: From primitivism to Art Premiers," in Østergaard 2019; Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Mancoba, Ernest" (2002), in *Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, vol. 1*, Thomas Boutoux (ed.), Milan 2003, 560–573; Bogh, in Christiansen et al. 2003

¹⁵ In her essay *No More Play*, first published in 1985, Rosalind Krauss discusses two contrasting forms of primitivism in modernist art: "hard" versus "soft" primitivism and a relaxed versus an excessive form of appropriation of motifs and forms from non-European art. Krauss criticizes the romanticizing and colonial view that many European artists associated with the "primitive." In an analysis of the work of Alberto Giacometti, she explores the question of how he succeeded in providing a thoughtful response to the idea of the primitive through formal reduction. Rosalind E. Krauss, "No More Play," in *ibid.*, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge/London 1985, 42–85. Cf. Dorthe Aagesen and Mikkel Bogh, "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: Figure, Voices and Space," in Østergaard 2019, 76f.

CoBrA group, and exhibited together for the first time in Denmark, at the Birch Gallery in Copenhagen.¹⁶

Sonja began to work with clay again, pursuing, on the one hand, the aspect of condensed figuration and, on the other, experimenting with abstract spatial structures, two strains which nevertheless allowed for associative links in terms of content. *Sculpture 1940–1946* is the culmination, in one work, of both these tendencies. Only eight sculptures from the five years in Denmark are known, a fact which points to the fact that the artist had to devote nearly all her energy to the everyday needs of her small family.

They spent the summer of 1951 in Gudhjem on the island of Bornholm. Here Mancoba created the important figure *Den lille nænsomme / The Little Gentle One*. It is a direct continuation of *Sculpture 1940–1946* in its self-contained, compact form that seems to close in on itself and, like the earlier work, has an eye socket that renders it vulnerable and suggests a shy approach toward the world outside. For this work, Mancoba attempted a new treatment with small pieces of clay, as she had learned to do in Giacometti's studio. The resulting relief-like surface of the work obscures the outline of its form, making it appear more "painterly" and opening up the figure to the effects of light in the space.

The compressed torso of *Den lille nænsomme* takes up the evocative expressive form of its predecessor from 1946. And seemingly abstract work *Uden titel / Untitled*, which was created at the same time, takes up the diagonally-rising, overall gestalt of *Sculpture 1940–1946*, though now as a transparent, dynamic volume that opens up to the room.

Retraining to France, the Mancoba family found modest accommodations in the small town of Oigny-en-Valois, about 80 kilometers north of Paris.¹⁷ Their still extremely precarious economic circumstances at the time are probably the reason why no sculptures are known from this period up until 1958.

In 1961, the family decided to return to Paris proper, moving into a disused store at 153 rue du Château in Montparnasse. Here, Mancoba began to work on large sculptures, including that year's *Le combattant* and *Stående mand / Standing Man*.

Le combattant was one of the first sculptures she created in her new studio. It is also one of the first major works and, more than many comparable works of the time, displays a clearly figurative language. One might see in it a rider with a weapon, with the three legs perhaps suggesting the idea of a horse. The shape of its "head" dissolves into two large, eye-like openings. Despite the skeletal thinness of the figure, it possesses a forward-oriented, kinetic energy. The sculpture has an air both contemporary and ancient, and reveals the influence of Mancoba's deep knowledge of indigenous masks

¹⁶ For Sonja and Ernest Mancoba's connection to the CoBrA group, see Karen Kurczynski, "Expression for Everyone: Ferlov, Mancoba and Cobra," in *ibid.*, 142–155.

¹⁷ For details on Mancoba's time in Oigny, cf. Hanne-Vibeke Holst, "My Dear, Dear Clarisse: Letters to Clarisse Penso 1952–61," in Østergaard 2019, 246–259.

and figures. However, it appears less a warrior bent on aggression and attack than perhaps a participant in a ritual dance.

One of her main works, one that is at once a credo, a sculptural manifesto, and a confession, was created in 1963: *Effort commun / Shared Effort*. As a formal discovery, as an abstract and highly significant formulation, and as an idea and vision of unity and community, it is one of Mancoba's most important works. In it, two slender forms with figurative overtones stand together in a firm union, simultaneously near to one another and keeping their distance. It is only via their duality and solidarity that each of them can "stand," as they seem to hold each other up. Their heads are connected by a strong horizontal line; at their hip level they appear to be holding hands. The narrow figure on the left stands, vertically, on one leg, while the one on the right stands on two firm, column-like legs with forms that extend into the space around it. The bulge between their heads could be the suggestion of a child, an indissoluble bond between male and female. There is a motivic connection here to one of the most important objects from the Kjersmeier Collection, a 19th century headrest showing two figures with sweeping coiffures caught in an intimate embrace.¹⁸

Mancoba's abstract adaptation of this motif suggests a supra-individual, politically and philosophically grounded reading for the work. In an important interview, Ernest Mancoba pointed out that he and his wife saw themselves as artistic ambassadors in a world of historical upheavals and in an intellectual space that existed beyond art-historical classifications and isms:

"Sonja and I stood up for values such as social harmony and spiritual commitment. This led to us being marginalized at the time (both in terms of the arbitrary imperial concentration of power and in the horizon of a pseudo-Marxist dogmatic materialism). We faced realities that excluded us from any possibilities of cultural impact and national politics, as most pursued an agenda that did not coincide with the universality of our vision. The very fact that Sonja and I came together—as extremely diverse as we were—contradicted the prevailing attitudes, and the price we paid was a certain isolation."¹⁹

Guardians of our Heritage: The Masks 1965–1984

Mancoba's friendship with the Danish art historian Troels Andersen from 1960 onward and his first publications on her work led to influential figures in the Scandinavian art world such as Knud W. Jensen, the founder and long-time director of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, becoming aware of the little-known artist. Mancoba received grants and awards, was able to travel, and could now have her plaster works cast in bronze. The first purchases of her work were made by museums,

¹⁸ Cf. Aagesen/Bogh, in Østergaard 2019, 62.

¹⁹ Obrist 2002/2003, 573.

and she had her first solo exhibition in Paris at the Maison du Danemark in 1970. An important parallel event had been the publication of the first comprehensive monographic study of her work by Robert Dahlmann-Olsen in 1963.²⁰ The highlight of these developments, certainly for the recognition of her work in Scandinavia, was a documentary film about her shot by Torben Glarbo in Paris in 1982.²¹

From the group of Mancoba's approximately 60 documented works from the period from 1965 to 1984, pieces that take up once again and continue many of the motifs and themes of her work, though now at an even higher level, the most important examples from the group of masks will be discussed here. It should be remembered once again that the first examples of mask motifs from 1939/40 were the result of her intimate knowledge of African art. Ernest Mancoba later recalled this:

"She came from a middle-class family in Copenhagen. From her early childhood she had developed a deep understanding of the African language of form, as her parents had a friend who was an important collector and connoisseur of African art, Carl Kjersmeier. As a little girl, she therefore had African masks and sculptures on her lap instead of dolls. As a result, she had developed a unique familiarity and feeling not only for African sculptures, but also for the formal language of Oceania and Mexico. I don't know which path of fate led me to this ideal person and the right group of artists with whom I experienced a fruitful dialogue and genuine cooperation. They were very interested in learning more about the continent that had produced these works they so admired. But few wanted to hear more about the actual conditions under which people lived in South Africa."²²

It should also be noted that, in addition to her involvement with African art, Mancoba always kept in her studio space reproductions and publications on many other aesthetic and spiritual forms of expression from a wide range of cultures and times: from early Christian sculptures and Egyptian cult objects, ceramics and sculptures from ancient Greece and the Cyclades, to pre-Columbian and Indonesian objects, as well as cultural artifacts of Nordic folk art traditions. On the walls of her studio, reproductions of non-European art hung in inspiring proximity to postcards and prints of Christian art and works of the various avant-gardes of the early 20th century.

"We live in the twentieth century and have all cultures in time and space before our eyes. So if we want to express ourselves today, we have to draw on the wealth of experience of the people and societies that came before us," wrote Mancoba in a letter to Troels Andersen in 1962.²³

In his 1992 monograph on her work, Rolf Læssøe pointed out that Mancoba felt her role as an artist was similar to that of a shaman in primitive religions: "Every object

²⁰ Robert Dahlmann Olsen, "Sonja Ferlov Mancoba," in *Arkitekten*, no. 15 (1963), 492–495.

²¹ *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: En dansk billedhugger i Paris*, directed by Torben Glarbo, (1983).

²² Obrist 2002/2003, 565.

²³ Quoted in Aagesen/Bogh, in Østergaard 2019, 64.

slowly takes on the form of a living being,” said Mancoba, “and yet I have the feeling that every touch of the hand determines life and death.”²⁴ The artist saw herself as a medium who could breathe life into her works through the process of gradual creation—or, if they didn’t correspond to her inner ideations or feelings, could let them “die.” The sculptural archetypes are always already there, immaterially present; the artist translates these archetypes into living matter with her hands and thus creates a bridge between intangible spiritual energies and the materiality of our world. A shaman has a sense-based, intuitive relationship with the aura of things, as an expression of the energetic or spiritual essence of an object, living being, or nature. The shaman can perceive energetic fields, interpret them via images and words, and influence them. *Mask*, from around 1965, stands on two legs, which at the same time carry the actual mask face and seem to hold it up towards the viewer. The eye area consisting of vertical indentations is blind, while the circular mouth is reminiscent of representations of intuitive, trance-induced utterances or singing. It is the “divining” mouth that can proclaim death and destruction in equal measure.

The coarse, terrifying physiognomy of *Table Mask*, from 1965–1975, and the chair-like object itself can also be linked to the practices of shamanism. Masks carved into chairs or stools appear as ritual or symbolic objects in various cultural contexts. The rough facial features could be those of a dead person, a spiritual force, or can instead be understood as a kind of mirror. As an object, the chair or table serves as a material location that can bring together and focus the energies of the spiritual and physical worlds.²⁵

The *Krigeren / Warrior*, from 1968, possesses a formal severity and strength, while the open structure of *Vogtere af vor arv / Guardian of Our Heritage*, from 1973, crowned by large, rectangular eye shapes, seems in a gesture of banishment or conquest. In shamanistic traditions, the term “Guardian of our Heritage” refers to the idea of beings or energies that, on the one hand, act as guardian figures to preserve and protect the spiritual, cultural, or natural heritage of a human community. On the other hand, these “guardians” can communicate with ancestors and mediate an energetic exchange with the forces of nature. In a recent essay on Mancoba’s work, Emil Leith Meilvang has discussed the significance of her sculptures as an expression of unconscious energies, as organic self-formations of the unconscious, as it were, and as the artistic imaginings of primordial organisms.²⁶

The abstract, reduced, open structure of the helmet with the title *Krigeren* ties this work back to the artist’s spatial constructions from the late 1940s, while the motif

²⁴ Læssøe 1992, 68.

²⁵ Marianne Barbusse emphasizes the spiritual dimension of the motif of the mask in Mancoba’s work more strongly than the aspect of shamanism, cf. Barbusse, in Christiansen et al. 2003, 73

²⁶ Emil Leth Meilvang, “Soft Bones: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and the Reconfiguration of Anatomy,” in *Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries*, Kerry Graeves (ed.), Abingdon 2021, 99–108.

points ahead to the late “helmets” she will produce beginning around 1980. These latter seem to signal themes of protection and defense, while also expressing a symbolization of the human spirit that transcends cultures and times. Mancoba herself writes in a letter from 1968:

“I’m toying with the idea of doing a thing with masks from all times and places and dealing with masks as forms of human expression. That means juxtaposing the masks of Oceania and Africa etc. with the masks of the Middle Ages, the armored masks of the Renaissance in Europe and whatever else you can find, helmets with a wealth of expression.”²⁷

Maske og figur / Mask and Figure, from 1977–1984, concludes the large group of mask sculptures begun around 1939. What the artist had explored more or less separately over the previous decades—the archaic reduction of the themes of “mask” and “figure”—now came together in a kind of doubly resolved unity. An implied figure with something like a crown on its head holds up a large mask in front of it as a “second” face. Both formally and in terms of its impressive size, the sculpture has a thoroughly “ancient” aura of violence and terror. The same applies to this work, which is unique in its spatial and physical aura, as it does to the artist’s entire oeuvre: Mancoba’s figures, bodies, faces, and masks retain a supra-individual charisma and universal expressiveness, qualities that resist being localized in time. And yet they reflect the changing lights and darkneses of the political and social dramas of the 20th century.

²⁷ Quoted in *Ingen skaber alene: Breve 1960–1984*, Troels Andersen (ed.), Silkeborg 2003.