

Renate Wiehager: *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911–1984). Biography*, in: **text booklet “In Her Hands. Women Sculptors of Surrealism”**, Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg (Feb. 21. to June 1, 2025), with translations of the original texts from the exhibition catalogue “In Her Hands. Bilderhauerinnen des Surrealismus”, ed. by Katharina Neuburger and Renate Wiehager, Hirmer Verlag, München 2025. This exhibition catalogue is published in German. ISBN 978-3-7774-4494-9. Translation from German by Everett Forrest Mason. German p. 42–49. English p. 16–19.

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba

Biography

Renate Wiehager

1911

Sonja Ida Ferlov, who, after her marriage, will be known as Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, was born on November 1, the daughter of secretary Minna Emilie Caroline Osten (1883–1942) and perfume industrialist Niels Ejnar Jørgensen Ferlov (1871–1934). Along with her older brother, Børge, (1907–ca. 1983), she grows up in Charlottenlund, in the north of Copenhagen.

1921

Through her parents’ acquaintance with Carl Kjersmeier (1889–1961) and his wife Amalie Kjersmeier (1891–1967), who own a large collection of African art, while still a child Sonja becomes acquainted with the sculptural innovations and ritual traditions of African culture.

1930

Graduates with a degree in modern languages from the Ordrup Gymnasium.

1931

She attends the Copenhagen School of Arts and Crafts, where she studies painting in the Impressionist tradition under Jacobine (Bizzie) Høyer (1888–1971). Here she meets the artists Ejler Bille (1910–2004), Richard Mortensen (1910–1993), Gertrud Vasegaard, née Hjorth (1923–2007), and Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen (1909–1957). Sonja becomes friends with the artist Birgitte Utzon-Frank (1916–2000).

Through Bjerke-Petersen, who had studied briefly at the Bauhaus in Weimar, and a guest teacher from Germany who had also worked briefly in Weimar, Sonja comes into contact with the innovative teaching methods of the Bauhaus, which had been founded in 1919. Students would learn the basic principles of design—color scales, drawing, collage—based on natural motifs.

1932

Sonja, Bille, and Mortensen enroll at Copenhagen's Det Kongelige Akademie (Royal Academy) to study under, among others, professors Aksel Jørgensen (1883–1957) and Kraesten Iversen (1886–1955). Here they meet the artist Hans Øllgaard (1911–1969). Bjerke-Petersen also joins the group. From him, Sonja learns some fundamental painting techniques and discusses the teaching principles of Bauhaus teachers Paul Klee (1879–1940) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) with him. In conversations with her artist friend Richard Mortensen, Sonja also learns about the first prominent exponents of psychoanalysis in Denmark, Sigurd Næsgård (1883–1956) and Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), who cause controversial debates with their books and university lectures and strongly influence the expressive painting of this artist circle.

1933

In Copenhagen, Mortensen, Bille, Bjerke-Petersen, and Øllgaard—in friendly collaboration with Sonja—found the artist collective Linien, which aims to introduce surrealist and abstract tendencies into Denmark. The following year, in the Charlottenborg Palace, they will open their first exhibition, to which the artist Henry Heerup (1907–1993) is also invited.

They publish a magazine, also bearing the name *linien*, which, in the years from 1934 to 1939, becomes an important forum for the exchange of ideas. The Danish poet Gustaf Munch-Petersen (1912–1938) publishes his poem *Det underste land* [*The Lowest Land*] in the magazine's first issue. Sonja will go on to frequently refer to this poem, which is considered a seminal work of early Danish surrealism.

The first issues of *linien* offer the publication of works by those artists—Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), Henri Laurens (1885–1954), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Le Corbusier (1887–1965), and others—who will soon become important for Sonja during her time in Paris.

1934

Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen's (1909–1957) book *Surrealismen: Livsanskuelse, Livsudfoldelse, Kunst* [*Surrealism: Philosophy of Life, Expression of Life, Art*] is published. The book leads to an internal division among the members of the Linien group over the approach—rational versus unconscious composition—to their art. Sonja's father dies.

1935

Sonja spends the summer in Gudhjem on the island of Bornholm with her fellow artists Bille, Mortensen, Øllgaard, Munch-Petersen, and Sigurd Vaasegard (1909–1967). The small group lives in the house of the ceramic artists Lisbeth Hjorth (1909–1997) and Gertrud Vasegaard (1913–2007).

Carl Kjersmeier publishes the first volume in his series on stylistic epochs in African art, *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* [*Stylistic Centers of African Sculpture*]. With it, Sonja is able to expand on the experiences and knowledge she acquired early on spending time in Kjersmeier's collection. She also introduces her friends Mortensen, Bille, and Asger Jorn (1914–1973) to Kjersmeier and his collection of around 1,500 objects, introducing important new influences for the Linien and CoBrA artist groups. On Bornholm, she creates ephemeral sculptures and assemblages out of natural materials. From this period, her small wooden sculpture *Levende grene / Living Branches* is preserved and is exhibited in *Den surrealistiske udstilling* [*The Surrealist Exhibition*] in Odense. She also works on her first clay sculptures, *Fugl med unge / Bird with Young*, and *To levende Væsener / Two Living Beings*. The preservation of these sculptures is thanks to plaster casts made by Lisbeth Hjorth. Mancoba also produces paintings and drawings with nature motifs during this time. In the collectively published magazine *linien*, Sonja contributes her translation of a prose poem by Giorgio de Chirico, "Sur le silence" ["On Silence," 1934], under the Danish title "Om stilhed."

1936

Sonja spends the summer in Rørvig, on the northern coast of Zealand, with Bille, Mortensen, Utzon-Frank, and Øllgaard. She is 25 years old when she travels to Paris for the first time in the autumn with the intention of settling there. In November, she moves into a studio on Rue du Moulin-Vert in Paris, close to Alberto Giacometti and his brother Diego (1902–1985), who have been living and working together at 46 Rue Hippolyte-Maindron since 1925.

She continues her studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where she will remain enrolled until 1942. During these early years in Paris, she finds important inspiration in artists such as Joan Miró (1893–1983), Max Ernst (1891–1976), whom she meets in person, Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959), Jean Arp (1886–1966), Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975), and Man Ray (1890–1976), whose works she encounters both in exhibitions in Paris and in contemporary art magazines.

The plaster sculpture *Ugle / Owl* from this year is exhibited in Copenhagen. It is destroyed shortly afterwards by the artist herself.

1937

In the spring, Sonja's Danish artist colleagues Bille, Mortensen, and Øllgaard come to Paris. She helps to open the doors to many studios in the metropolis, as the group will jointly select works for an exhibition in Copenhagen in the autumn of that year. They visit Max Ernst, Joan Miro, Henri Laurens, Alberto Giacometti, and Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), among others. After her friends' departure in May, Sonja is a guest in the studios of Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943).

Arp and his wife offer support by arranging for additional artwork loans and Sonja then prepares the selection and transportation of the works. In this way, she becomes the most important mediator between Paris and Copenhagen for artist groups active in the context of surrealism and abstract art.

In September, the internationally-oriented exhibition project of the Linien group entitled *Efter-Expressionisme, Abstrakt Kunst, Neoplasticisme, Surrealisme* [*Post-Expressionism, Abstract Art, Neoplasticism, Surrealism*] opens in Copenhagen. In addition to the above-mentioned and other Danish artists, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), and other international artists are represented. Around ten sculptures from the years between 1937 and 1940 are known from Sonja's drawings and photographs from this period, though five of these are considered lost.

1938

The artist Ernest Methuen Mancoba (1904–2002), born in the Transvaal near Johannesburg, South Africa, moves to Paris to study at the *École des Arts Décoratifs*. He initially moves into a studio in Rue Daguerre. The ceramic artist Christian Poulsen (1911–1991) introduces him to the small group of Danish artists in Paris. Sonja and Ernest become a couple, with their first encounters already characterized by their shared fascination with motifs and themes from pre-Columbian, Oceanic, and African cultures.

At Alberto Giacometti's suggestion, Ernest moves into a studio in Rue Hippolyte-Maindron, directly above that of the Giacomettis.

The couple repeatedly visit the ethnographic collections and exhibitions at the *Musée de l'Homme*.

In works from this period, Sonja explores, on the one hand, organic, dynamic forms and, on the other, motifs and figures from the inorganic, symbolic world—a charged zone that will characterize her entire oeuvre. The theme of masks appears in her work for the first time in this period.

1939

Sonja and Ernest spend the spring and summer in Paris engaged in artistic research and visiting artists to whom they feel close: Henri Laurens and Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957), Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. However, with the outbreak of war in September 1939, they make a plan to go to Denmark. Ernest, a South African/British citizen, is considered a hostile conscientious objector. He is refused entry by the Danish consulate in Antwerp and must return to Paris alone. Sonja finds a place on the last ship leaving Belgium for Denmark.

In September, Sonja takes part in the final exhibition of the Linien group in Copenhagen, along with artists including Ejler Bille, Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998), and Richard Mortensen.

1940

In February, after only six months away, Sonja decides to return to Paris from Copenhagen with the help of funding from the Richard and Franciska Wilstrup Foundation. She will be the only Danish artist to spend the five years of the war in the city. In July, Ernest is interned in the German-controlled Saint-Denis Internment Camp, also known as La Grande Caserne, north of Paris, and will remain in captivity until the end of the war.

Sonja begins to work intensively on what will become one of her most important sculptural works, entitled *Skulptur (uden title) / Sculpture (Untitled)* and later dated 1940–46, as she did not consider the process of its formal creation to be complete until 1946. Further mask sculptures are created in this year, of which only one has survived. Sonja takes part in the so-called “Autumn Exhibitions” in Copenhagen in 1939/40.

1942

In June, Sonja and Ernest marry in the Saint-Denis internment camp. She changes her surname to Mancoba. She can only visit her husband occasionally and with permission and, for her own part, lives in complete destitution, often receiving her only meal of the day from aid organizations.

1943

Sonja’s mother dies.

1945

In August, Ernest is released from the internment camp. The couple become stateless after the war.

1946

Marc “Wonga” Mancoba (1946–2015) is born on June 6.

The Danish artist Richard Winther (1926–2007) visits the family in Paris and photographs them in their home.

1947

In May, the family moves to Denmark to a farmhouse in the village of Kattinge near Roskilde.

Beginning in 1942, the Høst artists’ group emerges from the former Corner & Høst association as an important forum for exhibitions and discussions in Denmark; its members included Ejler Bille, Asger Jorn, Else Alfelt (1910–1974), Carl-Henning Pedersen (1913–2007), Henry Heerup, as well as Ernest and Sonja Mancoba. These artists take up themes and motifs from Scandinavian folk art and mythology, while aspects from Expressionism, so-called Naïve Art, and Art Brut also make their way into the group’s works.

This year sees an intensification of exchange with artists from Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, such as Pierre Alechinsky (*1927), Karel Appel, or Madeleine Kemény - Szemere (1906–1993) and Zoltán Kemény (1907–1965), all of whom were dealing with similar issues, and were drawing on their own cultural traditions. These exchanges will form the basis for the founding of the CoBrA group in November of the following year. Around this same period, Richard Mortensen was developing a more constructive visual language out of the context of the Høst circle. Artists such as Richard Winther, Ib Geertsen (1919–2009), Albert Mertz (1920–1990), Anna Thommesen (1908–2004), Bamse Kragh-Jacobsen (1913–1992), and Niels Macholm (1915–1997) founded the Linien II group. Sonja exhibits with both groups, although subsequent controversies will arise between them.

1948

On November 9, the weekly magazine *Billedbladet* publishes an article on the Ferlov-Mancoba family under the headline “Abstrakt Afrikaner i dansk Landsby” (“Abstract African in a Danish Village”).

Sonja is closely involved in the discussions and planning surrounding the founding of the artist group CoBrA. Though she herself will not take part in the group’s exhibitions until 1951, to this day she is regularly presented in this context by exhibitions and publications. Her sculptures and paintings are reproduced in various issues of *Cobra* magazine, which, published from 1948 until the dissolution of the group in 1951, will consist of ten issues in total.

Sonja and Ernest take part in an exhibition of the Høst Group in Copenhagen, along with Karel Appel (1921–2006), Constant (1920–2005), and Corneille (1922–2010), among others. Sonja takes part in an exhibition of the Linien II group.

She becomes acquainted with the work of French author Antonin Artaud (1886–1948) and reads his text *Van Gogh Le suicidé de la société*, published in 1947.

1949

She takes part once again in an exhibition of the Høst group in Copenhagen, as do Ernest and Carl-Henning Pedersen, among others. Shortly thereafter, however, the group will disband. The magazine *Cobra* publishes its first issue, edited by Asger Jorn, in which Sonja’s sculpture *Owl* is reproduced.

Asger Jorn and the curator of the *CoBrA* exhibition this year at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam try in vain to include Sonja and Ernest in the exhibition, but are met with resistance from the artist group.

1950

A fascicle on Sonja’s work, with a text by Christian Dotremont (1922–1979), is published as part of the portfolio *Artistes Libres: Première serie du bibliothèque de COBRA*, edited by Asger Jorn.

1951

The Mancoba family spends the summer in Gudhjem on the island of Bornholm. Here she creates the clay sculptures *Uden titel / Untitled* and another important work, the small figure *Den lille nænsomme / The Little Gentle One*. Her friend Lisbeth Hjorth creates plaster casts of the works, thus ensuring their preservation.

Eight sculptures originating during the five years spent in Denmark are known, works which oscillate between abstract, spatial structures and implied figuration.

1952

Sonja and Ernest exhibit together for the first time in Denmark, at the Galerie Birch in Copenhagen, alongside the artist Grete-Inge Petersen (1946–2022). Racist intolerance, the break-up of their small circle of artist friends, and a lack of a shared vision within the circle lead to the couple's decision to leave Denmark and return to France.

The family settles in the village of Oigny-en-Valois, about 80 km northwest of Paris. The village's approximately 200 inhabitants work predominately in forestry and agriculture, and Sonja will later describe living with the villagers as being part of an intact, mutually helpful community. For a long time, their small house is without any modern comforts, initially lacking a telephone, heating, or running water.

The house had been made available to them by their close friends Marcelle Renée "Clarisse" Pensa (1917–2006) and Joaquim Pensa (1909–1974). Sonja and Clarisse had been corresponding for many years, ever since their meeting in Alberto Giacometti's studio in 1937/38.

Sonja loses contact with the Danish art scene until around 1960.

She works mainly at night. Only a few completed sculptures from this period are known. She will later describe the landscape around Oigny as a constant source of inspiration and her experiences there as forming the basis for her entire subsequent body of work. She discovers a yellowish clay, which becomes her preferred material during this period.

1960

Sonja and the art historian Troels Andersen (1940–2021) begin an exchange of letters. This correspondence and their friendship will last until Sonja's death.

She presents her sculptures to the owners of the prestigious Parisian gallerist Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1884–1979), his step-daughter Louise Leiris (1902–1988), and Claude Bernard (1929–2020) and receives a positive response.

She devotes herself primarily to sculptures in smaller formats and, for the first time, begins to extensively use a dynamically haptic treatment of the sculptures' surfaces, a technique she encountered in Giacometti's studio and had first attempted towards the

end of her time in Bornholm. Among the more well-known sculptures from this year are *Daggry / Dawn*, *Kvinde / Woman*, and *Mand / Man*.

1961

The family acquires French citizenship. In January, they move from Oigny-en-Valois back to the Paris area to Rue du Chemin-de-Fer in Bondy, a suburb of the metropolis. In November, they move again, this time to a former commercial space in the Montparnasse neighborhood of Paris, at 153 Rue du Château.

Sonja begins work on large-scale sculptures again, including *Le Combattant / The Warrior*, and *Stående mand / Standing Man*.

1962

In the early 1960s, Knud W. Jensen (1916–2000), director of the Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen from 1958 to 1993, and the art historian and curator Steingrim Laursen (1931–2007) became important new contacts for Sonja.

Asger Jorn, who had last seen Sonja in 1949, visits her in Paris. At the suggestion of the collector Elise Johansen (1884–1970), Asger Jorn organizes for the plaster sculpture *Uden title (Stræben mod lyset) / Untitled (Striving Toward the Light)*, 1949, from the Johansen Collection, to be cast in bronze in an edition of three. This is the first time one of her sculptures is cast in bronze.

An article by Troels Andersen on Sonja's work appears in the third edition of the journal *Signum*, bringing new attention to the artist in Denmark.

She begins work on small sculptures, which Ernest will cast in bronze and which are created with a view to their sale to some of the Parisian galleries she has become acquainted with in recent years.

She exhibits in various contexts in Paris, including at the 17th Salon des réalités nouvelles and at the Musée Rodin in a group exhibition, *La jeune sculpture*.

1963

The art foundation Ny Carlsbergfondet buys a bronze version of *Stille vækst / Quiet Growth*, 1962, and donates it to the Silkeborg Museum (today known as Museum Jorn).

The important Galerie Denise René in Paris shows her sculpture *Confiance / Trust*, 1963, in a show entitled *Esquisse d'un salon*.

The Galerie Birch in Copenhagen supports her by commissioning bronze casts of her sculptures and finding places for them in museums and private collections.

1964

Knud W. Jensen visits the Mancoba family in Paris. He acquires the plaster sculpture *Effort Commun / Shared Effort*, 1963/64, for the Louisiana Museum and commissions a bronze cast. The bronze sculpture is exhibited at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris in

the exhibition *La Jeune Peinture*. Jensen invites Sonja to exhibit at the Louisiana Museum for a show that was, however, never mounted.

Her sculptures from this period show a qualitatively new resoluteness in making connections between, on the one hand, blocky, anthropomorphic figures and, on the other, more linear, spatially extensive forms. The works can be read figuratively, and their titles convey politically-engaged, social impulses. An important work in this context is *Résistance*.

Her work is shown in other exhibitions at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris and at the Galerie Raymond Creuze, Paris.

1966

Sonja's intensive, decades-long engagement with non-European traditions in sculpture finds a qualitatively new, intrinsically sculptural realization. *Shared Effort* is a characteristic work of this period. In it, two figures, revealing both figurative and biomorphic associations, seem to grab hold of each other. Their physical, corporeal presence suggests themes such as communication, solidarity, unity, and interaction. Sonja receives lifetime funding from the Danish Foundation for the Arts. She gives her first interviews about her work and exhibits as a guest in the context of Den Frie Udstilling in Copenhagen. A permanent member of the association beginning in 1969, she will regularly take part in exhibitions there until 1985.

Her work is awarded the Kai Nielsen Mindelegat (Kai Nielsen Memorial Scholarship).

1969

At the invitation of Steingrim Laursen, she exhibits along with Danish artist Jan Groth (1938–2022) at the Aarhus Kunstmuseum. In the years to follow, Laursen organizes further exhibitions as well as bronze casts of Sonja's works. Working with the artist, he brings her works to the wider art market.

1970

She has her first solo exhibition at the Maison du Danemark in Paris. As early as the mid-1960s, she had begun work on a work group of masks. From blocky, linear, and formally reduced head-like forms to objects reminiscent of helmets, she now expands the spectrum of her work to incorporate quite abstract, spatial form complexes that can be read almost architecturally. Her early fascination with motifs from pre-Columbian and Mexican art, as well as sculptural themes dating from antiquity and ones drawing on traditions of Nordic folk art, all become evident. She develops an all-encompassing perspective on aspects of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic traditions.

1971

SFM receives the Thorvaldsen Medal—the most important award in the context of contemporary art in Denmark—as well as the Tagea Brandts Rejselegat award. She travels with Ernest to Florence, Rome, and Venice.

A monograph on her work by the artist Robert Dahlmann-Olsen (1915–1993) is published; it is the first comprehensive study.

1977

Sonja and Ernest's works are exhibited together in a joint retrospective exhibition at Kunstforeningen in Copenhagen, curated by Steingrim Laursen. The exhibition is presented at other venues in Denmark as well as in Stockholm, Helsinki, and Oslo. Sonja is awarded the Niels Larsen-Stevns Medal.

1979

Troels Andersen publishes a monograph on the artist entitled *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba*.

1980

An exhibition of works by her and Giacometti is held at Sophienholm in Lyngby, Copenhagen.

1982

The film director Torben Glarbo (*1949) produces the documentary *Sonja Ferlov Mancoba – En dansk billedhugger in Paris (A Danish Sculptor in Paris)*.

The Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris shows works by Sonja in the exhibition *Cobra 1948–1951*, and her sculptures continue to be frequently exhibited in other European museums in the context of this artist group.

1984

Maske og figur / Mask and Figure, *Squelette de l'esprit / Skeleton of the Mind*, and *Stor hjelm / Large Helmet* are among the artist's final sculptures.

She dies from lung cancer on December 17 in a hospital in Paris. She is buried in the Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen.

Until his death in 2002, Ernest continues to live with his son Wonga at the Rue du Château address the family lived in since 1961. Wonga Mancoba, himself a painter and graphic artist, dies there in 2015.

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba
Solo exhibitions 1992 to 2025

Kopenhagen 1992

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Galerie Mikael Andersen, Kopenhagen 1992

Bornholm 1993

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Bornholms Kunstmuseum 1993

Aalborg 1994

De spontant abstrakte. Sonja Ferlov Mancoba og Erik Thommesen, Nordjyllands Art Museum, Aalborg 1994

Johannesburg/Kapstadt 1995

Hand in Hand. A Retrospective Exhibition of Ernest Mancoba and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1994, und South African National Gallery, Kapstadt 1995

Odense u.a. 2003

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Skulpturer / Sculptures, Fyns Art Museum, Odense, Holstebro Art Museum, Holstebro, Nordjyllands Art Museum, Aalborg, 2003. [Mit einer vollständigen Liste der Ausstellungen und bibliographischen Angaben für den Zeitraum 1935–2003]

London 2019

The Danish Avant-Garde and World War II: The Helhesten Collective, London 2019

Kopenhagen 2019

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Statens Museum for Kunst, Kopenhagen 2019

Paris 2019

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Sculptures, dessins, collages, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 2019

New York 2020

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba | Ernest Mancoba, Aicon Gallery, New York

Kopenhagen 2021

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and Ernest Mancoba, Statens Museum for Kunst, Kopenhagen
2021–2024

Bornholm 2021

Det var først på Bornholm. Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, exhib. cat. Bornholms Kunstmuseum,
Bornholm 2021

Amstelveen 2023

Je est un autre. Ernest Mancoba and Sonja Ferlov, in: *Cobra 75. We Kiss the Earth:
Danish Modern Art 1934–1948*, Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst Amstelveen, Zwolle
2024

Antwerpen 2024

The Small Things | From the Lowest Land: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba + Anousha Payne,
Newchild Gallery, Antwerpen 2024–25