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Out of the ^{Mandela} Darkness

There can't be many people in the world who have never heard of **Nelson Mandela**. But how many of us suspected he was also an artist? Clare Buttery speaks to his gallerist ahead of an exhibition of his work to celebrate his 91st birthday

Anna Hunter of the Belgravia Gallery was quoted in 1997 as saying that the reason sales of The Prince of Wales's watercolours were so successful was because "there are only three people in the world whose artwork, were it sold for charity, would attract so much interest: The Pope, The Prince of Wales and Nelson Mandela."

Little did she know that five years later she would be approached by the publisher of Nelson Mandela's work and invited to handle it in the same way she had done the watercolours of HRH The Prince of Wales.

It was in February 2002 that Hunter learned of Mandela's intention to participate in a project that would have him drawing a series of work "whose sales could achieve great results." By February 2003, £4 million had been raised for the Prince of Wales' Charitable Trust Foundation from the sales of lithographs based on his sketches.

The drawings are bold and simple, with confident, instinctive black lines and considered use of colour that, in Mandela's own words, attempt to reflect the positive light in which he views Robben Island, where he was imprisoned for nearly 20 years. His work is bright and, contrasted with the weight of the subject matter, it makes for a most moving experience. For Hunter it conveys "a man who is determined that his art would mirror his personal philosophy – showing grace and conciliation, while not forgetting the past."

"It is true," writes Mandela in his handwritten motivation, a lithograph of which is included in the series, "that Robben Island was once a place of darkness. But out of that darkness has come a wonderful brightness; a light so powerful it could not be hidden behind prison walls."

Before his incarceration on Robben Island, Mandela had only drawn as a child. "When he was in



M. Mandela

LEFT Nelson Mandela, *The Cell*, lithograph, 65x50cm

ABOVE Belgravia Gallery's Anna Hunter **ABOVE**


RIGHT Nelson Mandela, *Hand of Africa*, lithograph, 65x50cm **BELOW** Mandela revisiting his cell on Robben Island in 1994 with photographer Jürgen Schadeberg

prison there were no materials for drawing. Any paper there, which was from cement bags, was used to smuggle out information."

The anti-apartheid activist started to draw in 2002 for the charity project. He revisited Robben Island with a photographer, then began making colour sketches back home, under the tutelage of artist Varenka Paschke. Instead of creating a final image, he made several colour separations that, when combined, formed a final picture.

Hunter and gallery manager Laura Walford met Mandela when he signed 400 lithographs at his Johannesburg home. They sharpened his pencils and chatted to him about his life after prison. He told them how he was inspired to help AIDS sufferers by Diana, Princess of Wales, who did much to dispel myths surrounding the condition by visiting an AIDS hospital. "People said if a princess can actually shake hands with AIDS sufferers and sit down with them, then there's nothing in this superstition."

Did seeing his work inspire the same feelings in Hunter as being in the company of the man himself?

"Yes," she says without hesitation, "because he is a very joyful person to meet. He is warm and funny, upbeat and informal, and I could see very well how these pieces of art were a reflection, perhaps, of how he dealt with the terrible adversity of Robben Island." 

Nelson Mandela at 91 will run at the Belgravia Gallery, London W1 until 31 July. (020) 7495 1010; www.belgraviagallery.com



Nelson Mandela in his cell on Robben Island. (c) 1994

Jürgen Schadeberg