

Peter Magubane

"I used my camera as a gun. I did not want to carry a gun, and kill people. I used my camera as a weapon, and I think I was very successful." - Peter Magubane

The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa featured its seventeenth icon of its second season: Peter Magubane, an internationally acclaimed photographer known for documenting the rise and fall of apartheid and both the dramatic events and daily life during these brutal times.



21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers.

Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."

Steirn's portrait of Magubane appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. He has nominated a charity of his choice to be the recipient of the funds.

The portrait is shot in Alexandra, a typical township setting, similar to where Magubane took many of his photographs. It features Magubane taking a photograph with his camera placed inside a hollowed out loaf of bread to dupe the police into thinking that he was eating the bread to avoid arrest as he had done in the past at many major political events during Apartheid.

Inspired by photography

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Magubane talks about being inspired by photography at an incredibly young age. Born in Vrededorp, now Pageview, a suburb in Johannesburg and growing up in Sophiatown, he started out doing

photography using a Kodak Brownie as a schoolboy. "I used to take shots of my schoolmates and I realised that I could do something with this."

Incredibly inspired by the works of great photographers of the day, he used to buy *Life* magazine, *Time* magazine and *Die Spiegel* and devour the images of Robert Capa and others. An opportunity arose at *Drum* magazine as a driver and wanting to be like the American photographers this was his one shot to get there. Starting out as a messenger and driver three months later he made his name known to layout artist Jürgen Schadeberg who trained him to be his darkroom assistant until he was given his first assignment as field photographer to cover the 1955 ANC convention in Bloemfontein.

Wanting to refine his skills, initially he was not capturing images for political reasons. After a meeting with Bob Gosani and Father Trevor Huddleston, Magubane realised he wanted to be a narrative photographer and worked hard for the opportunity to be sent out with reporters Hendry Nxumalo, Can Themba and Nat Nakasa.

He remembers being instructed by his editor, "No one dictates terms to you. You go there, come back with the pictures. Don't tell me that you were not able to get the pictures because there were too many police or this and that, no. I want my images."

Magubane covered many important political events during the 1950s, including the treason trials and demonstrations against the Pass Laws. "I went to Rustenberg and some members of the women's league were arrested for not carrying their passes. *Drum* was the only magazine that went to Zeerust and captured the scene of these women being put into police vans. I bought half a loaf of bread, and placed my camera inside the hollow loaf of bread as a disguise. I pretended that I was eating but instead I was taking the pictures. I successfully managed to get the photographs and *Drum* was the only magazine that had pictures of the arrest."

He adds, "They were dealing with social issues that affected black people in South Africa. I wanted to be part of that magazine."

Covering political events

Between 1955 and 1963, Magubane covered most of the major political events in the country and befriended the leading political figures of the liberation movements, in particular Nelson Mandela and he later became Madiba's official photographer in 1990 to chronicle South Africa's transition to a new political dispensation.

He was the first Black South African to win a photographic prize in the country when he claimed the first and third prizes for Best Press pictures of the year in 1958. He then left South Africa to work as a freelance photojournalist in London in

1963 and during this time he held an exhibition of his work at the London School of Printing in 1964, becoming the first black South African to ever do this.

After his freelance years, Magubane came back to South Africa in 1966 and started working for the *Rand Daily Mail* until 1980. From 1969 to 1976, Magubane was repeatedly arrested and interrogated for his activities, jailed or kept in solitary confinement for months at a time, and banned from his position at the *Rand Daily Mail* for five years.

In June 1969, he was arrested while photographing protesters outside Winnie Mandela's jail cell where he was interrogated and held in solitary confinement. The charges were dropped a year later but he was banned from taking any photographs for five years. "I was not allowed to take pictures. It was even worse because I was black. Now I was fighting, I was fighting for my rights and to get the picture for the newspaper."

He was arrested again in March 1971 and spent 98 days in solitary confinement, and then jailed for six months. When the banning order was lifted he resumed work for the *Rand Daily Mail* and documented the Soweto student uprisings. He was imprisoned again and then released in December of 1976.

Received countless awards

From 1978 until 1980 he was also employed as a correspondent for *Time* magazine. In 1980, he left South Africa for New York but shortly after he returned because he wanted the world to see what was going on in South Africa. "The only way to show the world is with the pictures. You can write a whole book, but I'll give you one picture that will show the whole world the extent of apartheid, and the kind of beast it is," he tells Steirn.

Coverage of the June 16 student uprisings of 1976 earned him worldwide acclaim and led to a number of international photographic and journalistic awards, one of which was the American National Professional Photographers Association Humanistic Award in 1986, in recognition of one of several incidents in which he put his camera aside and intervened to help prevent people from being killed.

He has received countless accolades and awards and his photographs have appeared in *Life* magazine, the *New York Times*, *National Geographic* and *Time* magazine.

Peter Magubane has always lived by simple words, adopted from a former editor: "If you want a picture, you get that picture, under all circumstances."

"Photography is very important and just as important now in South Africa, for instance the lens portrayed what was happening at Marikana. Photography will never change...Let the people eat through your eyes" he tells Steirn, "We are able to see how the world operates through images. When you hear of people starving in Somalia, Ethiopia, those places there, if you don't see pictures you just say, it isn't real. But when you see the pictures... it was the first time in my whole photographic career to see people starving like they were in Ethiopia and Somalia. This woman was walking. Her feet at the back here have cracks. Both legs have cracks, the distance that she had been walking. And then there's another elderly woman, her face caked with flies. You look at that woman once; you don't want to look at her twice. Now that images goes around the world and people see that there are starving people. People who have money contribute the food that has to be taken there. Photography plays a very important role in our society."

In recent years he has become an art photographer, documenting the surviving tribal ways in post-apartheid South Africa.

With an impressive 21 books and seven honorary doctorates Magubane is still behind the lens working on various projects. "I'm doing sunsets, the beauty of sunsets."

Programme synopsis

Adrian Stern talks to Peter Magubane about his career as an internationally acclaimed photographer taking him into the

heart of the anti-apartheid defiance campaigns and treason trials. Today he concentrates on documenting post-apartheid culture and publishing books on this.

About 21 Icons South Africa

21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.



Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.

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