



George Bizos

Photos: © Adrian Steirn

BEHIND AN ICON

Mercedes-Benz, in association with renowned Australian photographer Adrian Steirn, recently hosted an auction where portraits from the 21 Icons initiative were sold to people from across the globe. Twenty-one of South Africa's most revered individuals, some well-known, others not, have been immortalised through these subtle, nuanced and highly reflective works.

Nelson "Madiba" Mandela has cast a "shadow of light" over our nation never before seen in the history of mankind. A man so powerful, simply through his humility and love for everyone, united a troubled nation and brought peace to a land that for years had suffered the injustices of race-based human rights atrocities. Following Madiba's example, many South Africans joined the struggle for liberation and made a contribution to society in their own way that, at the time of big politics and instrumental change, went largely unseen, and un-thanked. Adrian Steirn is a Cape Town-based photographer and filmmaker with a penchant for telling people's stories through the art of photography. His mission for the '21 Icons Portrait of a Nation' initiative was to celebrate and honour those people in South Africa who emulated Madiba Magic in their own lives, and how they had an impact on the world around them. '21 Icons Portrait of a Nation' is a tribute to these people who have a remarkable story to tell in their own right, and influenced the lives of others around them, ultimately shaping the colourful history of South Africa. In a glitzy affair at the CSIR in Pretoria, and surrounded by several high profile South Africans from various walks of life, the original portraits of 21 South African people were displayed in the hallways for everyone to appreciate. Magnificent Mercedes-Benz vehicles chauffeured some of these icons to the venue as guests of honour, and the tone in the air was one of excitement, adoration and appreciation.



Kumi Naidoo



Lillian Cingo



Gcina Mhlope

THE LITTLE THINGS

The buzzword was "Icons", and very quickly the discussion ensued as to what makes an ordinary person an icon. Was it a specific journey they took in their lives? Was it a monumental achievement that accredited them with above-average notoriety? A standout on the evening was Lillian Cingo who for many of us, is not well-known. It was when her story was shared, that the audience understood the meaning behind the 21 Icons initiative. Ultimately, there are no "criteria" one must fill before achieving icon status. Rather, it is the little things that these people did every day, with the utmost humility and care for their fellow South Africans, which fittingly renders them icons of our time.

LILLIAN CINGO

Lillian Cingo qualified as a neurosurgical nurse in London during the Apartheid years and was presented to the Queen as the best neurosurgical nurse in 1975. Her story is a remarkable one. She returned to South Africa where she taught herself how to operate a train, and took to the rural areas in South Africa to administer medical care to those who were unable to reach clinics and hospitals. Her portrait, *It Will Be Better*, projects a person with years of service behind her. Proud in her uniform and impeccably put together, Lillian is represented as the public servant she lived her life to be, perfecting her craft and using it to give back to others.

AN ECLECTIC COLLECTION

From politicians to performers, activist to authors, the range of icons honoured through these images is vast and reflective of the diversity of our Rainbow Nation. Former president, F.W De Klerk assumes the Lotus Position barefoot atop shrubbery in a tailored suit in *A Man Alone*, while holy man and peace activist, Desmond Tutu stands next to a real ballerina's tutu, reinforcing the the artists message in *The World Needs Another Tutu*. In *A Shackled Performance*, actor John Kani sits on a stage, shackled in handcuffs. Each portrait is expertly shot and reflective of the individual's story with imagery that speaks louder than words.

Yvonne Chaka Chaka's beauty can be felt from a distance. When she walks into a room, she is by far the most elegant, radiant and warm individual, often dressed in beautiful traditional African attire. Born in Soweto, Yvonne dreamed of being a singer from an early age. Her portrait, *Her Voice And A Broomstick*, reflects exactly that. Standing next to a piano with a tiara on top of it (referencing the name "Princess of Africa" given to her by Madiba), Yvonne sings into a broomstick as she did as a child filled with massive ambitions. The portrait is striking and emotive and encapsulates Chaka Chaka's beauty perfectly. From Gcina Mhlope carrying storybooks on her

FW de Klerk



Nelson Mandela



Desmond Tutu



John Kani



Yvonne Chaka Chaka



John Kani



Sophia Williams de Bruyn

head in *Between The Lines*, Evelina Tshabalala's transition from sit to sprint in *Moving Forward*, and Karel Benadie's leopard-crawling, tracking pose of *In Pursuit*, the viewer is able to get a sense of what makes these people so remarkable within the context of South Africa's history, and why it was so important for their story to be told through this medium.

FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Included in the evening's auction, was a mirror that Nelson Mandela held while posing for his portrait by Adrian Steirn. All of the proceeds raised were donated to various charities chosen by the 21 Icons themselves, such as The Ahmet Kathrada Foundation, The Gary Player Foundation, Greenpeace Africa, The Sophia de Bruyn and Henry Benny Nato de Bruyn Legacy Foundation, and the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital.

In times like these we are reminded of a very real, and very true sense of the South African spirit that is present in all of us. It is this spirit that has to remain in all who believe in the potential of South Africa and who are proud to call it home. This spirit is known to us all simply as "Ubuntu". ■ Kevin Taylor

The 21 Icons Portrait of a Nation auction was made possible with thanks to Mercedes-Benz. For more information visit 21icons.com

Photos: © Adrian Steirn

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