

ONE

---

*The garden*

In the summer of 2002 I invited the renowned South African artist Cecil Skotnes to lunch at my house in Cape Town. I had long admired his work, his mastery of the woodcut, and the way he had elevated the woodcut panel itself (from which the print would be taken) to a work of art in its own right. I had admired, too, his poetic insight, and his perception of universal themes in Africa. For years I had kept on the mantelpiece in my study a simple postcard with a print of Skotnes's painting of the Last Supper, done for the church of Santa Sophia in Pretoria, as I found it deeply moving and felt it to be a masterpiece.

In the 1950s, at his Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg, Skotnes had nurtured and launched many black artists who would become established figures, and some of them famously so. I had recently heard that Moses Tladi had attended Polly Street, and I wanted to ask Cecil about this, hoping that he would remember Tladi, the elusive black artist whose life I was researching.

Cecil and his wife Thelma arrived bringing a gift, a book recently produced about his own life and work. Skotnes was exhibiting worldwide at this time, and had received particular recognition in Norway, the country of his birth.

Sadly, Cecil had no recollection of Moses Tladi. But after lunch, and some of my "story-telling" about Tladi, I showed my

guests slides of the works found so far, and also some images of the landscape around Tladi's birthplace in Sekhukhuneland. We then went into my study to see the three original paintings by Tladi that I had hanging on the wall.

Cecil examined them carefully.

"It's amazing," he said, "he moved from nothing, straight into the field of international art."

I MUST, SURELY, HAVE MET MOSES TLADI. At the time of my first visit to Lokshoek, as a new baby, Moses was living there, where he had long been employed as gardener by my grandfather, Herbert Read. I often ponder the relationship between an Englishman and his gardener. It has long seemed to me to be something very subtly "other". A garden is a living thing, and cannot flourish simply by being kept in order, dusted and polished. It needs disciplined yet tender care. This involves imagination as well as perspiration, and over time the garden becomes a reflection of the personalities involved. I still think of the gardeners I used to meet as a cub reporter in England, at the routine shows of the Royal Horticultural Society, in its halls in London – old and benign they seemed, always ready to chat, and full of sagacity and stories. I once rented a house near Cambridge, from Dr de Bruyne, a fellow of the Royal Society who was fed up with socialist England and had gone off to America in a huff. His gardener, Mr Pettit, was a dear man, old and scruffy, very well-read, and a lover of flowers. He would never come into the house. He had a shed, which was his sanctuary, filled with all the old tools and tins and bits of wire and string and heaps of old scrap that gardeners always need. He brought his own lunch, and thermos of tea, and his wife also supplied a secret store of little cakes, to keep my small children from starving when they visited him for long hours of serious discussion. He knew his garden, and would never listen to instruction, and the garden flourished, but only in obedience to him. He had his own style and that was that. I never dared contradict Mr Pettit, who always "knew

best". Our relationship was little different, in fact, from that of the 19th Century Duke of Devonshire and his gardener, Joseph Paxton, except that both men thought they knew best, and the garden in question, Chatsworth, nourished a relationship which swung stormily for years between happy partnership and all-out battle. The Duke and his gardener loved each other. Paxton designed and built for the Duke a greenhouse so wonderful that he was asked to make another one for London's Great Exhibition of 1851.

My grandfather Herbert's case was far removed from this, of course, but I felt he had built his garden, and his relationship with his gardener, on a similar pattern of discipline (and self-discipline at that) and tender care, nurturing a benign, creative partnership. He was an Englishman of professional background. Born in 1875, he had grown up in the fashionable area south of London near the Crystal Palace, from whence his grandfather, and then his father, commuted by train to the City, where both in turn were administrative officers of the Old Bailey, the leading criminal court of the British Empire. Herbert was privately educated, and as a young boy became a keen photographer. Roving the countryside around his home he developed a love of landscape, and of its depiction in art, and an awareness of the composition of a picture. He refused to follow his family into the legal world, and qualified as an accountant. His father's second marriage led to much unhappiness, and in the early 1890s he and his two younger brothers left England for South Africa. The rush to the goldfields of the Witwatersrand was in full swing, and within a couple of years Herbert found a position in the administrative offices of Rand Mines, at that time the world's largest mining company. Thus, when the machinations of his employers, Julius Wernher and Alfred Beit, and their conniving with Cecil John Rhodes and the British government led to the Jameson Raid, and then the Boer War, Herbert found himself at the centre of things. As he had fallen in love with a Boer girl, this made his life rather complicated, but love conquered even British generals, and he married Lily Visser at the height of the hostilities and settled in Johannesburg.



Herbert Read, Tladi's employer, with his elder daughter Martha (Matty), now detailed to leave her job and take care of her widowed brother's children. Taken in the garden in 1939, when Tladi was still at Lokshoek. In the background, the enormous cactus, Queen of the Night, the night-blooming cereus.

In 1903 Read acquired from his employers the plot in Parktown, on which he built a house. Lokshoek was designed by Harry Clayton, one of the first architects to establish a practice in Johannesburg. Clayton had trained in England in the orbit of Norman Shaw, a leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The house had many features typical of this style, but its main advantage was that it faced north, which many houses designed by the fashionable and successful Herbert Baker did not.

Our own house was in Linksfield, at No 3 Club Street. Although our small house was quite old, even by 1930s standards, the area was little developed. Numbers 1 and 2 Club Street must have existed, but beyond us the road stretched empty until one reached the Old Johannian Club. Our house was situated on a slope and surrounded by bare veld, with almost no garden to speak of. With land rolling away into the distance it had a lovely view, and my father bought the stand below so that it should never be spoilt. When he built a new room onto the house as a nursery for the children, this faced westwards, so that it was a treat in winter to have supper, already in pyjamas and dressing-gown, sitting by the window to enjoy the view and the beautiful landscape as the sun set.

Thus the awareness of garden, and landscape, and “the view” began early in life. In good weather (and in that Highveld climate, bad weather was infrequent and never long-lasting) the daily routine was punctuated by morning tea at ten or eleven, and afternoon tea at three or four, always enjoyed in the garden. Outings, which were rare, were mostly to other people’s gardens, and very occasionally there was a family picnic, where the most important decision was where to stop so that the rugs could be spread out and everyone, while eating, could enjoy the view.

MEMORY IS CAPRICIOUS. Memory is a dark place, soft as fog yet much more dense. One can move about in it, as if physically roving and searching, and sometimes finding either what one

seeks, or something completely different and surprising. At times, an image caught can be coaxed forward in the mind's eye to an astonishing brilliance, yet at other times no effort is persuasive enough to reveal what remains elusive and soon fades away. I do have very early memories of my grandfather's garden, clear pictures of the drive, the circle of lawn in front of the house, the big stone ledges enclosing the steps to the front door. I see long vistas of grass path, and my grandfather moving about among the plants and shrubs. Many of these were long-tended and mature by the time Moses Tladi arrived, and further adorned by the fruitful Read-Tladi partnership before I myself first saw the garden as a small child.

Sometimes, within these images, there is another figure, a dark man blending in as part of the company: tending the ferns, wheeling a barrow along the grass, tying and trimming. He seems serene, and is certainly a benign presence. I cannot see this man's face. However, I can see my grandfather, in that amazing place, the greenhouse, set deep in the earth, all hung about with baskets of ferns like some magic forest. Here he is again, on the big lawn, cutting a bloom from a great rose tree far above me, and tucking the rosebud into the buttonhole of his coat. My grandfather is tall, with a bald pate and trim grey hair. He also has a neat grey moustache, which is bristly, and which prickles fearfully when I am kissed. I can smell him from far away: his coat smells of tobacco, for he smokes a pipe. One of the most vivid memories is that of him tending the fig tree, moving about carefully, often hidden among the leaves as he ties little red cotton bags over the figs to prevent the birds getting them. The bags still have the tobacco company pictures printed on them in black. They come with their own little drawstrings and are therefore perfect for the purpose. My grandfather's dark, benign companion is here too, moving gently among the pungent leaves. But he is further away. In memory he remains a shape, a shadow, and it is only when seeking out these images after many years that I know him – he is Moses.



Roedean girls in their "djobbah" uniforms, blazers and thick stockings in a frosty winter garden. Matty and Moog Read, taken at the time when they "discovered" Moses Tladi.

I was always aware of the garden at Lokshoek. Even inside the house, viewed from windows, it was a presence. I particularly see one Christmas day. I was three years old, and after Lunch came Rest. I was taken upstairs to a small back bedroom, where there was a bed so high I had to climb onto a chair first to reach it. I was tucked in under the bedspread and left there alone.

In the heat of midsummer, the room was dark and cool. The curtains had been half-drawn, but much more shadow came from the oak tree outside. It was enormous and its branches came close to the house. The windowsill was below the level of the bed, so I could lie on my side and gaze out into a world of green leaves. They moved, fluttered a little and rustled, creating small shafts of light that winked and bobbed, and within the sound of the leaves there were other rustlings, and the soft coo-froo of pigeons. I lay in this musical cave of green until it was time to be “got-up”, and taken down to see the Christmas tree. This tree, undoubtedly brought inside and put in place by Moses, stood in the centre of the nursery, where it stretched into the darkness of bare beams under the roof of wooden shingles.

My dreams later were filled with the green light and green music of the garden. All these were very early memories. I have asked myself why I cannot see Moses any more clearly, and the only answer I can find is that perhaps I was taken to visit Lokshoek mostly at weekends, a time when my father would be free from work, when family visits were customary, and when Moses was probably at home elsewhere with his own family.

At the end of July 1939, my brother was born. Within weeks, political crisis tore the family apart, war was declared, and my mother died in an accident. The new baby, so suddenly bereft, was in mortal danger. My father's sisters took over the household of their brother, who remained remote in his despair. A new, Dutch, nanny appeared. One aunt departed for The War. The other aunt remained, giving up her own blossoming career in journalism in order to bring up her brother's children. For the next few years,



The drawing room at Lokshoek – 1920s.  
On the walls are Henry Salt's view of the  
*Roode Sand Pass*, and Bejot's *Pont d'Austerlitz*,  
both of which would have been seen by Tladi.

through the agonies of wartime, Aunt Matty was the mother figure in my life and that of my younger brother.

Three years later, soon after my grandfather's death in 1942, we went to live at Lokshoek. I have no recollection of Moses being there. My memories of this period contain only Andries, the cook, who reigned over the coal stove in the kitchen, and baked delicious scones for tea.

Pictures were hung all over the house. I could read with ease by now, and it was a delight to walk up the staircase, whose walls were filled with prints of the *Cries of London*. The landing halfway up the stairs was a fearsome place, however, for the charming views of people in long-ago clothes selling cherries or fish were interrupted by *The Battle of the Centaurs*, a scene of horrible violence. It was perhaps the animal figures in this picture that inspired the conviction that a leopard lived on the landing, especially at night, always ready to pounce on little children.

Downstairs, in the hall and drawing room, there were old maps, old pictures of the Cape mountains and sea, two watercolour paintings of ships with black and red hulls and funnels, and several other pictures of "views". I particularly liked one the grown-ups referred to as "the Wiles"; a wonderful view of the sea at sunset, done in pastel. The dining room was entirely hung with etchings and engravings. A painting of Lokshoek, as if

seen from the front gate, with the jacaranda trees in full bloom, hung elsewhere in the house.

I always loved looking at pictures. I also drew a great deal, but most of my efforts depicted princesses with flowing clothes and hair, wheeling their babies in prams.

My father's dressing room also served as a study. There was a big carved desk, and a table always covered with papers. Near to these, in an important position on a main wall, hung a large picture. It was a view. It hung high above me, and I would look up at it every time I went into the room. I could see houses with red roofs, some dark green trees, some strangely shaped mountains, and then some clouds in a blue sky. One day I asked my father about it. I was standing directly in front of the picture, and straining to look up at it. Edward was a tall man and towered above me, his face level with the frame. "This," he said gravely, "is by Moses."

I wondered who Moses was, but did not ask. On another occasion, the painting was explained to me: the houses in the picture were mine buildings, and the mountains were mine dumps. This information put the painting firmly in my father's world, for I knew that he worked in an office in town, and somewhere beyond this office were the mine dumps, which I had seen from the train window when travelling to the Free State with my Aunt Matty. Again, I wondered who Moses was. He was clearly someone important, yet the only Moses I knew of was in the Bible story of Moses and the Bulrushes, and I kept this confusion to myself.

The dining room opened onto a passage that led past the dressing room and the cupboard-under-the-stairs to the kitchen at the back of the house. Food was brought to the dining room along this passage, either carried by a servant, or on a trolley, which made a special noise as its squeaky wheels rolled unevenly along the linoleum floor. In a corner outside the dining room door was the drinks cupboard with its shelves and pigeonholes housing all sorts of mysterious bottles. It was a low cupboard, useful also for setting down loaded trays.



ALPHONSE LEGROS

*Portrait of Tennyson*

Bought by Herbert Read through Howard Pim from the London dealer Gutekunst in 1910, and hung in the dining room at Lokshoek, where it would have been seen by Moses Tladi.



MOSES TLADI

*No 1 Crown Mines*

Signed M Tladi bottom left.  
Oil on canvas board, 35 x 50cm

EXHIBITED:

*Land & Lives Exhibition*, Pretoria, 1991;  
*Land & Lives Exhibition*, Johannesburg Art Gallery;  
Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg;  
King George VI Art Gallery, Port Elizabeth;  
S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town, 1997-1998  
*"The Advancement of Art" – The South African Society  
of Artists and its exhibitors, 1902-1950.*  
S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town, 2002-2003

PRIVATE COLLECTION

The scene was identified by Edward Read as a view of the Robinson Mine change-house. The old Robinson mine was part of Crown Mines, and Herbert Read had access to the area, both as a senior member of staff, and as chairman of the Exchange Yard, the mine-timber company, whose premises were also in this area. It seems most likely that Herbert Read suggested this arresting view to Tladi, and made it possible for him to paint on site.

One of Tladi's major works, this painting has attracted wide attention and praise. While the picture does not appear to be deliberately composed, every detail has been carefully observed – the contrasts of light and shade, the angles of shadows, the sunlight on the window panes, the tonal weight of the dark dump in the centre. The variation in brushstrokes on sand and grass, foliage and tree trunk, the distant outlines and the horizon and sky, shows an instinctive feel for the actual handling of paint. The strange, geometric shapes of the mine dumps, and their sombre, brooding bulk suggest a perception that goes beyond mere representation – an enquiry into the heart of things, and exploration that is "modern" in its intensity.

A large picture hung above this cupboard. It showed a lot of rocks in the foreground, some of them very dark, others a pale brown, where they seemed to be catching the light. Beyond these rocks there were patches of glowing, pinkish sand, then more rocks, dark ridges, blue mountains, and sky. I thought it was a place by the sea.

In the adjacent wall, at right-angles to this landscape, was a small window, which should have let light in but did not, because it faced a glassed-in stoep that had been built on to the side of the house. On the windowsill was an important object, the telephone. The necessary directories, and collections of cut-up envelopes for messages were placed nearby, as well as a chair for comfort, and thus people sitting and chatting had a view of the landscape in its dull gold frame. Yet no-one paid much attention to it: the picture was simply on that shadowy wall, as if it had always been there.

HOWARD PIM, A ONE-TIME MAYOR of Johannesburg, and a noted philanthropist, was a neighbour of my grandfather, and in 1928 he brought Moses Tladi into the public eye for the first time by reporting to the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* his discovery of a "Native genius". It seems such a fortunate coincidence that Moses should have found himself in the company of these two men – my artistically-inclined grandfather as his employer, and Howard Pim, an influential collector and patron of art. This would have been an advantage for any young artist. The attitudes and temperaments of both men led them to do all they could to nurture the newly-discovered talent, and they inevitably did so in a way that reflected their European roots. However, it seems that while exposing Moses Tladi to the influences and techniques of many centuries of Western Art, they displayed sensitivity and respect towards their protégé's natural tendencies and budding talent. Above all, these three men seem to have shared a love of beauty, and a love of the depiction of the natural world.

Going through Herbert Read's papers in the early 1990s, I found his letter book of 1905 (the year in which Howard Pim built



MOSES TLADI

*River Scene*

possibly Sekhukhuneland  
Signed M Tladi bottom left.  
Oil on canvas, 51 x 61cm

EXHIBITED:

Exhibited as *Mountain Scene, Sekhukhuneland*,  
Land & Lives Exhibition 1997-1998

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Taken by children to be a seascape, this proves on careful examination to be a view of a river bed, dry and rocky, with hills in the background. The exploration of rocks and sand and blue distance is clearly the work of a mature artist. This painting too has been much admired by later artists. Tladi here seems to be in full command of his technique. Again, there is no sense of an imposed "composition" – the completely natural "placing" has an immediate spontaneity, and suggests an instinctive sense of form and organic line. Meanwhile, the balance of mass in foreground and centre, and the way the viewer is "pulled" towards the background of hills and sky, has an almost classical completeness and harmony. The rocks are worked with a tireless exploration of colour and tone, while the merging into soft distances of blue suggests a mastery of idea and technique, and a joy in execution that is poetic but also profound.

his house, Timewell, at the other end of Federation Road). Interspersed with business letters to friends or strangers concerning mining projects, his investments, his bank account, and the inventions of different kinds in which he was continually involved (often with misplaced optimism) there were orders for suits and boots and all sorts of lesser pieces of apparel.

These purchases were modest compared to what he was prepared to spend on books, and even more so when it came to his garden. In February 1905 he ordered a collection of choice sweet peas with names such as Romolo Piazzini, and Black Mistral, “as advertised in *Garden Life*” from Henry Eckford Esq. in Shropshire, and from Carter Page at London Wall “1 doz. carnations as advertised – 7s.6d. – not sent too wet, they seem liable to damp off ... 1/2doz. single begonias, 5s.6d., ditto double, 7s.6d. – if you know they will travel by post – 1 doz. perennial phloxes 5s.6d. and 1/2doz. orchid flowering cannas 5s.6d.”

Later pages showed that the carnations did indeed damp off and that my grandfather asked for a replacement.

In March there was a list to Carter Page for seeds – acquilegia, alstromeria, cineraria, gloxinia, lobelia cardinalis, papaver bracteatum, and primulas, six varieties of campanula, celosia, digitalis, fransia ramosa, humea elegans, heuchera sanguinosa, mostly at 6d. a packet; and “aralia qumquefolia (the American ‘ginseng’ of commerce – 2s.6d. if necessary please procure this from America – full instructions as to cultivation)”. He even ordered a pound of Northern Star potatoes at 3s.6d., “to be sent when ready, with directions”.

All these of course had to come by sea, and then by train up to the Witwatersrand. There was no stinting where the garden was concerned. I got the impression that there were no nursery gardens or suppliers yet to be found, certainly not in the Transvaal, able to provide what Herbert wanted for his creation. But this was hardly surprising, for he seemed to be creating an Edwardian Englishman’s garden. With the contacts that both Herbert, through



MOSES TLADI

*Study – House among trees*

Unsigned. (Possibly unfinished)  
Watercolour on board, 20 x 29cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION

A sketch, possibly for a later oil painting, such as that of the House in Kensington B (page 136). If it is indeed Tladi's beloved house in Kensington B, it is interesting to note the spacious piece of land on which it stands – isolated, but sheltered by already mature trees.

his company, and Lily, through her family, had in the Cape, it would have been easy to get plants already much in use, such as oak trees, jacaranda, hydrangea, roses, and the indigenous agapanthus.

But Herbert's carefully selected orders from England were all plants for the herbaceous border. Those that flourished could be propagated by seed, cuttings or root division. So, if not the original imported plants, then certainly many of their descendants were in the garden when Moses Tladi arrived there some years later. And further generations bred in his care were flourishing prolifically when I myself, as a small child, arrived in Tladi's garden.

In the early years recorded in his notebooks, I found mention of "a Basuto named Joel Lekobola". Herbert wrote on Lekobola's behalf to a Mr Harrison in Middelburg in the eastern Transvaal, who seemed to have sent some cattle to Lekobola's father, Hosea Rampele, "near Middelburg, close to the Kaffir mission station", to be cared for and fattened up. I saw no mention of a gardener in the papers until Moses Tladi had arrived, and he, of course, had been educated and would not have needed Herbert Read to write his letters for him.

Within ten years of starting with bare veld, my grandparents' garden was maturing and beautiful. Herbert also became interested in the indigenous plant life of South Africa, and collected specimens, which he tried out in the garden. He had for years been experimenting with pruning methods, and enjoyed attempting to grow challenging plants such as types of imported cedar, and the Japanese cherries and maples.

In the mid-1920s, after my grandmother Lily's death, my grandfather remarried. Blanche Goch-Van Niekerk was there when Moses Tladi arrived in Parktown, and thus she too became involved in Tladi's life; a companion in the garden, and an encouraging supporter of his endeavours as an artist.

IN THE LATE 1970s my father Edward began looking at his own family history. He often discussed it when I visited him. He also

began giving things away, to members of the family or others. One day he simply told me to take anything I wanted from a cupboard in the servery, which was full of pictures, most of them etchings that had been removed from the dining room. I took all I could, but never asked him for any of the pictures on the walls of the house.

Edward had two works by Moses Tladi in his study. I thought then of the time when my father bought his second painting of Tladi's, and how we had discussed it. I remember sensing in my father a certain awe and affection for the artist, and he clearly loved the pictures, for even after altering the house they were always hung where he could constantly see them.

On my asking what had happened to Moses in the end, my father told me that he had become ill with tuberculosis and gone away to be treated, never to return. I guessed that this had happened before we came to live at Lokshoek; in other words, before my grandfather's death. I realised that I had inadvertently strayed into years that were an unspoken taboo in the family, for they were the time of my own mother's death. It was a tragic event that was never mentioned, and I did not pursue the subject.





MOSES TLADI

*Cloudy evening (at Kroonstad, OFS)*

Title given by Tladi, written in pencil in his hand on back of painting frame.

Signed M TLADI bottom left.

Oil on canvas stretched over plywood, 35 x 46cm

EXHIBITED:

Land & Lives Exhibition, Johannesburg Art Gallery;

Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg;

King George VI Art Gallery, Port Elizabeth;

S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town, 1997-1998

PRIVATE COLLECTION

The painting bought by Edward when Tladi visited Lokshoek during the Second World War, possibly on leave, or on transfer after his period of service in Kroonstad. In this painting, which as a child I found frightening, the artist's preoccupations do in fact seem unresolved. He seems to be preoccupied with aspects of mass, and light. The field in the foreground, and the willow tree, are painted with freedom, using strokes of colour that echo the uncanny light in the evening clouds. But the artist seems to have struggled with the strange group of branches that fan out, like some desperately spread hand, from the body of trees in the centre of the picture. This whole area, with its stark silhouette against the sky, seems to have been heavily worked, as if the artist repeatedly changed his mind, and kept re-painting, in search of some effect which kept eluding him. There is indeed a sense of brooding unease, which may have been a reflection of the artist's own life, and the sombre wartime period. However, later work by Tladi suggests that he was continuing a search, exploring a heavier use of paint that indeed reflected mood, and was in fact a move beyond straightforward realism.