

Contextual material for the exhibition Textile Memories

***An extract from the article “Following the path of the labyrinth:  
The attribution of the Mancoba Textile”***

By Winnie Sze and Johanne Løgstrup

Mediation and editing: Åse Eg and Johanne Løgstrup

Graphic design of the tables: Åse Eg

Editing: Camma Juel Jepsen

## Introduction

This exhibition focuses on a number of artists working with memories and narratives found in textiles. Textiles are often seen as utilitarian objects with a decorative function, but they may also serve as vessels for knowledge. Textiles carry stories that can be passed on – through symbolic motifs in a rug, for instance. The exhibition presents a number of artists exploring specific textiles, where some of the narratives come out of personal experiences, others from social and political relations.



A central element in the exhibition is the Mancoba textile (1951), which is most likely a collaborative work by Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911-84) and Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002), made when they were living in Denmark.

This contextual material is an extract of research carried out by Winnie Sze and Johanne Løgstrup in 2018-20. Together they wrote the article, “Following the Path of the Labyrinth: The Attribution of the Mancoba Textile”.

This text is an experiment in how a contextual reading of the Mancoba textile may add new artistic knowledge about Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and Ernest Mancoba. The text should be read as a mix of biography, art writing and social critique, for in our point of view no single method can speak conclusively in the present.

## Background

In the storage of the Jorn Museum is a white-and-black patterned textile said to be by Ernest Mancoba. As Mancoba is best known as a painter and no other textile-based works are known, how did this work come about?

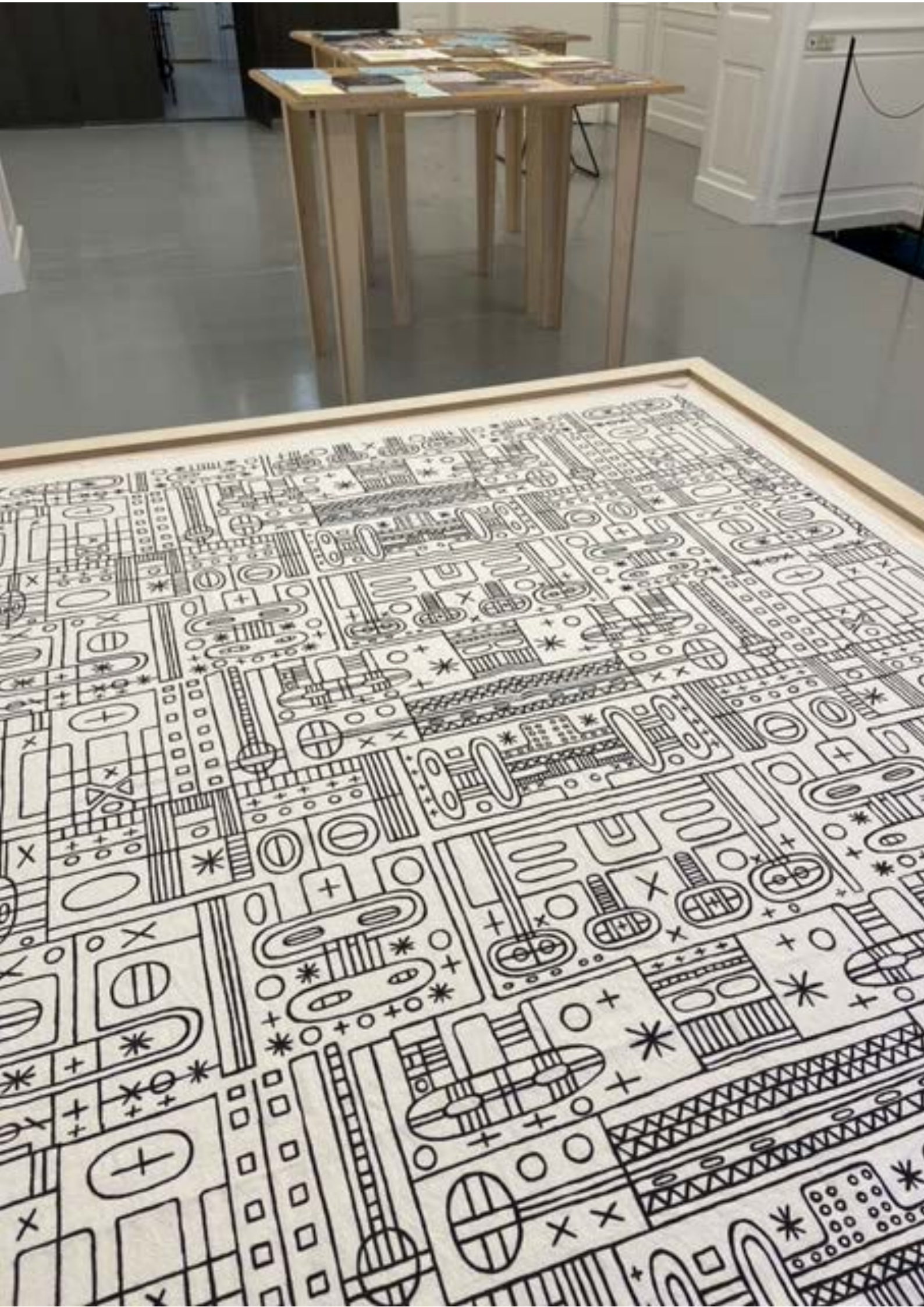
Mikael Andersen, a long-time friend of the Ferlov-Mancoba family and chair of the artists' estate, believes the museum's attribution is a mistake, and that the work is by Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. He has a shirt in his personal collection with what appears to be the same pattern, and a photo of Ferlov Mancoba wearing it is known. Meanwhile, former director of the Jorn Museum Troels Andersen (1940-2021) defends the attribution, pointing to the textile's formal qualities.

In art historical writings, Mancoba's craft and design are only briefly discussed, and there is no mention of the textile. Turning to the artists' oeuvres, we saw aspects of the textile's form in both but could draw no firm conclusion.

While Winnie Sze is specialized in Ernest Mancoba's work and Johanne Løgstrup in Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, as we got to know the "other" artist, we came to realise how much each impacted the other. This ultimately led us to conclude that the textile must be a joint effort by both artists. We believe the textile was made by Ferlov Mancoba with significant and possibly equal artistic input from Mancoba.

Considering Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba's artistic lives in Denmark and the general social and historical context during the post-WWII years, it was likely created to be sold as curtains, tablecloths, and general homeware in the hope of supplementing the family's income.



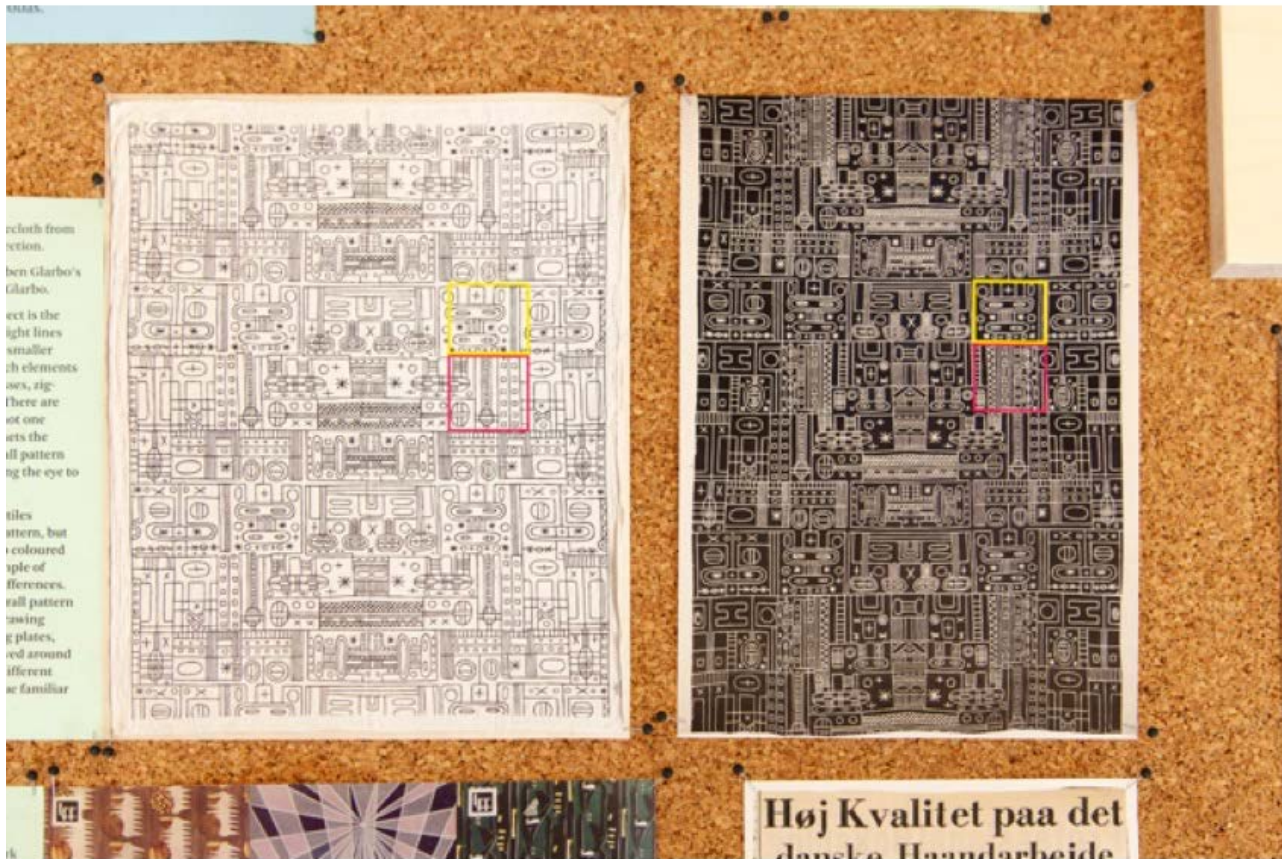






## The textiles

The textile in the Jorn Museum and the shirt in Mikael Andersen's collection seem to share the same pattern. But in fact they differ. The first one consists of black lines on white fabric and feels synthetic. The second one, made of white lines on an almost black background, has a more natural, textural feel. Thus, the lines of the former appear crisper and the lines on the latter softer.



*The dominant formal aspect is the pattern. It consists of straight lines that border and carve out smaller environments within which elements such as circles, ovals, crosses, zig-zags and “stars” appear. There are no primary focal points, not one environment or element sets the direction, rather the overall pattern reads as a labyrinth causing the eye to chase its lines.*

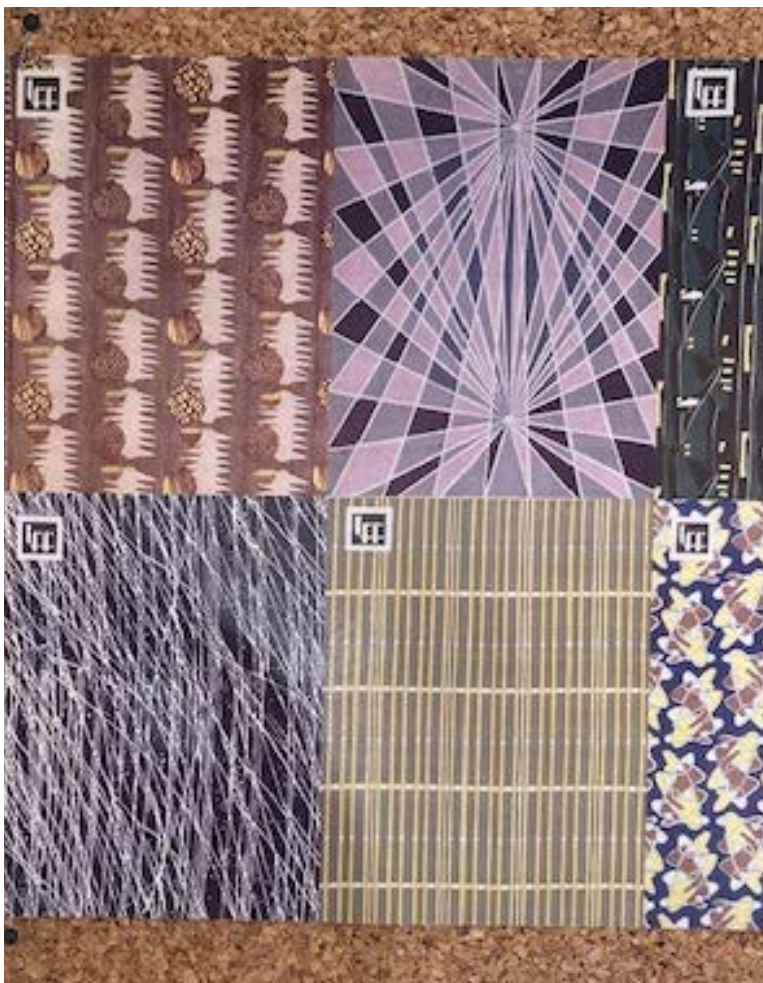
*At first glance, the two textiles seem to share the same pattern, but in fact they differ. The two coloured squares highlight an example of the similarities and the differences. This suggests that the overall pattern was not made from one drawing but from multiple printing plates, where the plates were moved around and or replaced to make different compositions – a technique familiar to printmakers.*

*Image of textile in Torben Glarbo's collection. Photo: Torben Glarbo.*



Both textiles were printed by textile printer Hanne Danielsen, of the Helga Foght studio in Denmark. Danielsen recalls printing them in 1951, disputing the dating by the Jorn Museum (which dates the textiles to 1948). She is clear about the date, as she had been living in Sweden prior to 1950. She also recalls that it was Ferlov Mancoba who approached the studio, with the intention of selling the textile as curtains or tablecloths. We do not know how much of the Ferlov-Mancoba 1951 textiles were printed or sold, but it did not seem to have become commercially successful.

Typically, the Håndarbejdets fremme exhibition featured only objects made by its members, but this practice was suspended in the 1947 exhibition, possibly because the association wanted to broaden support for the textile industry during the difficult post-war years. Troels Andersen believed that the chair of Kunstindustrimuseet (the Museum of Decorative Arts) in Copenhagen, Gertie Wandel, invited Asger Jorn, as they had a long-established friendship. It is possible that Jorn shared this invitation with his artist friends, the Mancobas.



*That the textiles were destined for homeware is credible as patterned curtains were in demand in Denmark in the 1940s. They were popular with the younger generation, and promoted by the likes of the Kunst-industrimuseet (the Museum of Decorative Arts) in Copenhagen, who hosted competitions and exhibitions to educate consumers' taste and encourage new Danish designs. According to design historian Louise Skak-Nielsen, textile companies such as L.F. Foght were working with artists and designers to launch artistic textiles for the Danish modern home – for curtains, upholstery and carpets.*

*Extract of pages in Det påklædte hjem showing patterns for curtains printed by the company L.F. Foght from the 1940s (source: Skak-Nielsen, Luise (2017) pp.300-301).*



Foght/Ferlov Mancoba's work was explicitly mentioned in an article in the newspaper Politiken reviewing the exhibition, "Høj Kvalitet paa det danske Haandarbejde" (The high quality of Danish craftwork). In the article, the Foght/Ferlov Mancoba textile is described as follows: "Among the noteworthy printed textiles is a beautiful, brown, somewhat 'negroid' pattern by Mrs Mancoba, printed by Helga Foght".

Scan of Politiken article covering the sixth edition of Kunstindustrimuseet (Danish Museum of Decorative Arts) (source: Danish Design Museum library).

## The art of Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and Ernest Mancoba

Writings about Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba's time in Denmark, from 1947 to 1952, focus on their connection with the art association Høst, and through that, their association with CoBrA, suggesting a time of rich artistic companionship. In 1949, Mancoba and Ferlov Mancoba were elected to be full-time members of the Høst association. But that year also saw the association effectively dissolve amidst artistic rancour. An artistic debate on how art should continue, in an intuitive or rational direction, had escalated. Sonja Ferlov Mancoba did not believe there need only be one direction; they could both be embraced in a dialectic artistic interplay.

The Høst association, which began as a group of mainly landscape artists soon became known for its avant-garde members – the 1948 exhibition showed the last of the landscape artists. Besides Bille, Ferlov Mancoba would have known Richard Mortensen and Carl-Henning Pedersen, as she worked closely with them during her formative years as a young artist, and she and Mancoba were to (re)establish a friendship with Asger Jorn – and of course, meet the Dutch members of CoBrA, Constant, Corneille and Karel Appel.



# The art of Sonja Ferlov Mancoba and Ernest Mancoba

Working closely together, Sonja and Ernest Mancoba created a remarkable body of work in the 1930s and 1940s. Their collaborative efforts were rooted in a shared vision of art as a social and political statement. They sought to challenge the traditional boundaries of sculpture and painting, often using found objects and everyday materials to create their works. Their art was deeply influenced by the political and social conditions of their time, particularly the impact of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism in Europe.

Their collaborative work was characterized by a strong sense of social and political commitment. They believed that art should be a means of social critique and a way to engage with the public. This is evident in their choice of materials and their often provocative titles. They were part of a larger movement of artists who were using their work to address the issues of their time, and they were deeply involved in the political and social life of their community.

A key aspect of their collaborative work was their shared commitment to social and political activism. They were not just artists; they were also writers, poets, and political activists. They used their art as a platform to express their views on the world and to inspire others to join them in their struggle for social and political change. Their collaborative work was a testament to the power of art as a tool for social and political transformation.



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**Miguel Angel Hamad**

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*Image from Høst 1948, published in CoBrA magazine, issue 1. Drawings added later by Carl-Henning Pedersen. Their friend, artist Ejler Bille arranged for Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba to be special guests of the Høst 1948 annual exhibition. Ferlov Mancoba was also invited to be a special guest of Linien II's exhibition that year.*

A visit with their Høst and CoBrA artists friends to mediaeval churches seemed to have introduced Mancoba to a new art direction. He was fascinated by the fading and peeling paints of the murals which left colours of varying intensity and revealed parts of the church wall alongside the mural. This may have impacted his thoughts on perspective. His Danish-era paintings and drawings could be read as colour fields with depth dependent on colour contrast rather than linear perspective. He also used unprimed and unpainted parts of the paper and canvas as “marks”. This approach was to continue through to his best known Kota-esque paintings. As he made more drawings and paintings, he eventually left sculpting behind, with his last known sculptures dating to 1951.





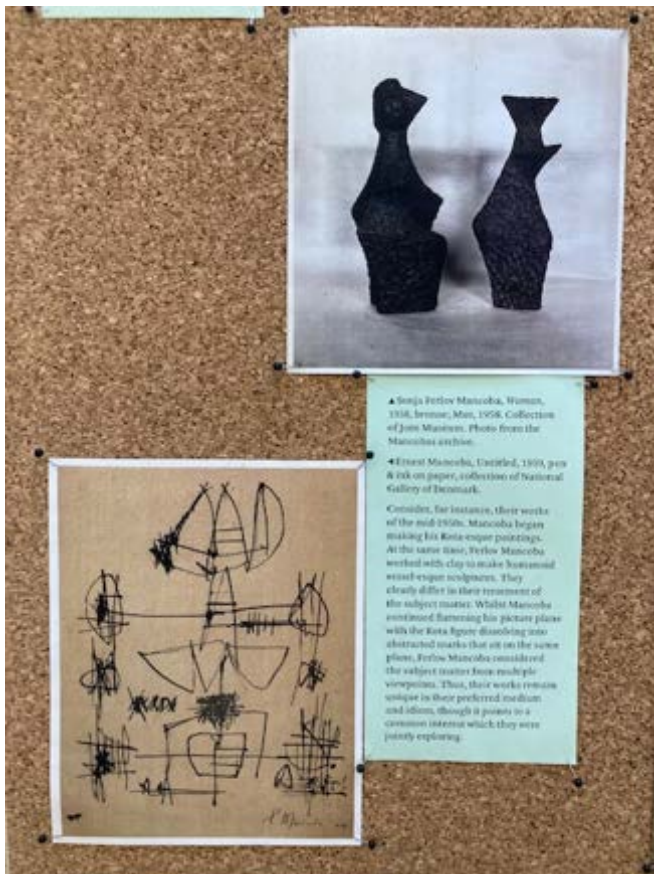


## Transnational exchange and motivation

The textiles' form cannot be said to directly correspond to either Ferlov Mancoba or Mancoba's oeuvre of this time, though it clearly touches on aspects of both artists' work. The textile's pattern is rather a pattern of patterns, with no single viewpoint or line that directs the gaze, like in Ferlov Mancoba's *Opbygning* (Structure) (1948) and in Mancoba's obliteration of perspective in his colour field paintings.

The textile pattern is made up of elements, notably the circle, oval, cross, "star", zigzags and straight lines. Some of these – such as the circle/oval and star – are lexicons in Ferlov Mancoba's abstract two-dimensional works, creating the central subject matter(s). Their use, however, is not obvious in Mancoba's works.





*Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Woman, 1958, bronze; 'Man' 1958. Collection of Jorn Museum. Photo from the Mancobas archive Ernest Mancoba, Untitled, 1959, pen & ink on paper, collection of National Gallery of Denmark.*

*Consider, for instance, their works of the mid-1950s. Mancoba began making his Kota-esque paintings. At the same time, Ferlov Mancoba worked with clay to make humanoid vessel-esque sculptures. They clearly differ in their treatment of the subject matter. Whilst Mancoba continued flattening his picture plane with the Kota figure dissolving into abstracted marks that sit on the same plane, Ferlov Mancoba considered the subject matter from multiple viewpoints. Thus, their works remain unique in their preferred medium and idiom, though it points to a common interest which they were jointly exploring.*



*Ernest Mancoba, Untitled, 1939, ink on paper; Untitled, 1940, ink on paper, collection of Jorn Museum.*

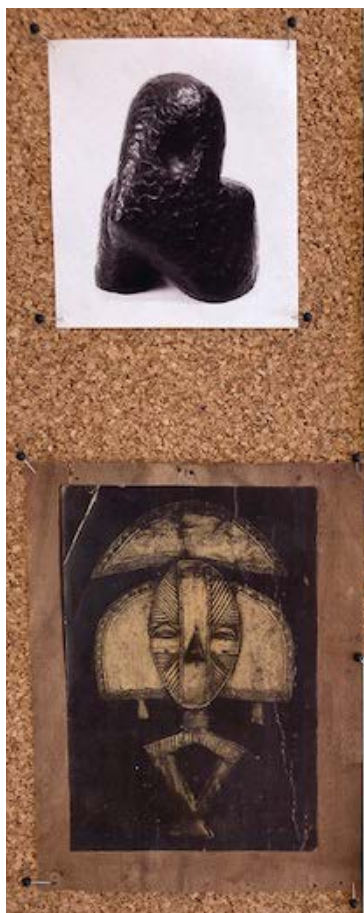
*Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, *Komposition med tegn* (Composition with figures), 1939, National Gallery of Denmark; *Komposition*, (Composition), 1940. ARoS.*

*It is known that Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba's artistic closeness began when they first met. The two were inseparable, visiting each other's studios nearly every day and, together with Ejler Bille, often visiting the newly opened Musee de l'Homme and galleries showing modern art and art of the day. Mancoba scholarship also revealed that Ferlov Mancoba and Bille shared artistic techniques such as automatic drawing with Mancoba. Setting Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba's 1939 drawings side by side, it is clear to see what the two artists had in common as well as the uniqueness of their individual praxeses. The works read not as one artist copying the other, but each looking closely at the other's work and making a response, having an artistic dialogue.*

The lost “Kunstindustrimuseet textile” was described at the time as “negroid”. It should be stated that use of the term is, of course, not intended to reinstate it as a valid description of the textile. Instead, it is part of the historical framework. And certainly, the two 1951 textiles’ composition is atypical of Western compositions, which rely on vanishing-point perspective rather than a syncopation, or rhythm, of multiple viewpoints.

Both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba had exposure to and interest in African forms. As a child, Ferlov Mancoba had access to Carl and Amalie Kjersmeier’s collection. As Mancoba describes it, “as a little girl, instead of dolls, she had been sitting with African masks and sculptures on her knees. This had developed in her an intimacy, a feeling for African sculpture – but also for Oceanic and Mexican expression as well – that was unique” (Obrist, p. 130). In a film made about her in 1984 by Torben Glarbo, Ferlov Mancoba holds a jar made in Mali featuring four figures holding hands, and states that she sees “fellow feeling, humanity, unity and solidarity”.

The importance of this theme, and her perception of its manifestation in African objects, is one reason for Ferlov Mancoba’s exploration of masks.



*Den lille nænsomme (The little careful one) (1951) is an organic and centre-based sculpture. The artist described it thus: “It seeks, through its inner power and tension, built as a fortress, to stand up despite its small stature” (Aagesen and Bogh, p. 95). Later works by Ferlov Mancoba which drew on the tension between the constructed and the organic may have drawn from the lessons of this time.*

*Image of Kota figure from a photo of postcard from Amalie & Carl Kjersmeier to the Mancobas, the Mancobas archive. Reliquary figures such as this are unique to the Kota people in West Africa. The Kota figure [mbulu ngulu] serves two purposes; to guard the relic and to inform the living that the deceased is now an ancestor. In ancestral veneration traditions of Kota culture, ancestors can be summoned to protect the living, but the living must behave in a way that the ancestors would condone. Kota figures come in various forms but some of the best known have an outsized “head” and a geometric lozenge/body, or “arms” held akimbo.*



Though Mancoba encountered African objects formally through the European museums, he could draw from his memory of his lived culture in South Africa. This included the patterns decorating the pots his mother made as part of the family's Fingu culture, and the distinctive and complex geometry of lines, zigzags and chevrons that decorated the houses of the Ndebele people, which he encountered whilst he was living and working as a teacher in Pietersburg (now Polokwane), South Africa. Despite this, there are no other Mancoba works where African patterning is as obvious as in this one.

Though this research focuses on Africa, it should be acknowledged that syncopation in a pattern is not a uniquely African trait. It can be created by breaking up the picture plane, and is a style used by other cultures. This, however, further muddies the attribution, as both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba were interested in the arts of different cultures and times.

We believe the textile was made by Ferlov Mancoba with significant and possibly equal artistic input from Mancoba.



*The Ndebele are a people originally of the Nguni tribe, living predominantly in northern South Africa during Mancoba's time. Aesthetically, they are distinguished – amongst other aspects – by the distinctive decoration of the external walls using thick borders that surround geometric patterns, drawn in freehand. Whilst we associate the homes with bright colours today, commercial paints were not known to have been in use prior to 1940, i.e. after Mancoba's time in the region. The colours Mancoba would have seen would have been earth-toned, derived from natural materials such as ochre and naturally-coloured clay. He would, however, have seen the distinctive outlining and patterning, as these appear to have been adapted by the Ndebele from the Sotho people.*

*Botshabelo, a former mission village but now abandoned in the district of Middelburg, in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Photo by Winnie Sze.*

## Conclusion

The unquestioning positioning of artistic autonomy leaves little room for discussion of both artists' engagement with the arts of other cultures. Writings acknowledge the artists' interest in the arts of other cultures, but the discussion is limited. To be fair, such brevity follows similar treatment of the influence of African art on Picasso and other European Modernists' work, and one could say that Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba are being treated no differently. However, unlike the Modernists, who seemed to have been attracted purely based on form, both Ferlov Mancoba and Mancoba have spoken about how deeply they felt about other cultures. Should this not be interrogated? How did Mancoba see the Inuit art from Greenland, or indeed the West Africans whose art he first studied from a book and later on in museums? In what way did the art of the Aztecs and Africa inform Ferlov Mancoba's work – besides eliciting in her an interest in masks? In our contemporary society, where we struggle to bridge an ever-widening social divide, could considering how these artists see "the other" help us understand the successes and failures of our own navigation?

Thinking widely also leads us to suspect that craft and design was not a marginal aspect of Ferlov Mancoba's work. The formal quality of the 1951 textiles suggest that Ferlov Mancoba was interested in them as an artistic object as much as a design object. Their predecessor, the lost 1947 textile exhibited at the Kunstindustrimuseet exhibition, would seem to have been made in the same artistic spirit that Jorn made his crafts. There is extensive scholarship on Jorn and craftwork; why is there nothing on Ferlov Mancoba?

Both her breakthrough sculpture *Levende Grene* (Living Branches) (1939) and her change to the organic form of *Den lille nænsomme* (The little careful one) (1951) after the geometric rigour of the likes of *Maskeskulptur (Lille maske)* (Mask sculpture (Little mask)) (1948) came during her time on the island of Bornholm, with access to the clay studio of the Hjorth sisters. Could working with clay and the screens for the textiles have helped Ferlov Mancoba find a release for new artistic thinking?

We acknowledge uncertainty. For despite even extensive research into archives, they cannot but reveal a mere sliver of information, and we must necessarily interpret it through our frames of reference. Whilst traditionally such risk was seen to offset the new knowledge it might otherwise bring, if done in a scholarly and open manner, it can address some of the charges levied against classical Western art historicism. This open reading has led the authors to greater self-awareness and critical positioning. Thus, in stating that our reading may be frail and unstable, we do it in the service of inviting disagreement and discussion, in recognition that our reading of the textile is but one path along its labyrinth of many different, intersecting, paths.



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