

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ROBERT PAUL

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about the fossils being collected should be placed in a well documented geological context - there is no value in a fossil out of context.

'In particular I was anxious to ensure that the fossils being collected should be placed in a well documented geological context - there is no value in a fossil out of context.'

Richard Leakey, "One Life".

early years in England. The name Richard Leakey, "One Life".

The staff at the British Library of African Studies... their collection of Robert Paul's work.

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This work is dedicated to my Parents whom I know are anxious about my adopting the lifestyle of my subject. I wish that I could reassure them with a measure of his ability.

1 December, 1985

## INTRODUCTION

When Robert Paul died in 1980, his daughter Colette Wiles gave her father's art materials to an artist who was very close to both Robert and his wife in their last years - Dian Wright. The materials consisted of five different pigments and brushes cut into different shapes to suit the artist. This is remarkable when one considers his proficiency in a variety of media and his accurate portrayal in the far reaching studies he executed of the Zimbabwean landscape. Yet, it is characteristic of his resourcefulness that Paul could make 'something out of nothing'.

Paul welcomed the opportunity of new landscape when he arrived in Rhodesia in 1927. Against the backdrop of a chosen isolation from the British Isles, Paul developed his own personal tracks in spite of any early influence through John Piper with the English Southern Landscape idioms of the 1920s. This was a fruitful isolation where the creation of his art retained influences but were manipulated according to his needs and unleashed with a proficiency sometimes equal to his peers, who later found fame under the term 'Neo-Romantics'. Paul remained an individual in Africa.

Yet the isolation imposed upon him by Sanctions in 1965 (as a result of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence) resulted in a detrimental effect on much of his later work. The Rhodesian community was equipped with only a mildly developed notion of art; they were hardly able to appreciate new developments in art when

they had become introverted as the result of being cut off from the rest of the world. With the artistic climate retaining a strong hold on 'the chocolate box' and 'kitsch' art, Paul inevitably stooped on occasions. Yet he retained his integrity in that he was aware of what he was doing and never fooled himself. It did however mar the output of his better work in later years.

My intention in this essay is three-fold; first, to illustrate the effects and influences of 'chosen' and 'enforced' isolation on his work. Secondly, I wish to determine the extent of the influence that Piper and the Neo-Romantics had on Paul and to illustrate mostly with anecdotes his life and life-style. He was no mean character. His life-long obsessions with art, alcohol and women were played out with a flair and dry humour which few emulated in his era.

Although a strictly academic approach can be applied to the assessment of his work, his life followed thoroughly unorthodox lines. As Bradshaw noted when he wrote the forward to the Catalogue of Paul's Retrospective in 1976, he (Paul) had no historical interests in the accepted sense of the word.

Bearing in mind these limitations and the vacuum of both historical and personal information, I have had to approach the study of his life by using anecdotes to indicate and embellish aspects of his personality and evidence of historical fact. As I am the first person to write anything longer than a magazine

article on Robert Paul, there is a great vacuum of historical data which I needed to include.

I concluded that the best possible way of doing this would be to work systematically through the many anecdotes I have collected either by correspondence, personal visits or tape-recorded interviews. Paul took great pride in being a rebel and an extrovert and I have tried to allow this aspect of his character to come through. He was always true to himself as a person and as an artist. I tried to record this as faithfully as possible. At times, it may appear that I tend to emphasize the problem of alcohol or another point too much. Sadly, Paul was an alcoholic - he admitted it in as much as he once said that the point of existence was "to get drunk and stay that way". Drinking was important to him and it was an integral part of his painting and his life. It is not my job to be moralistic about these issues but merely to record them in as even a light as possible and this is what I have tried to do.

Robert Paul was remarkable as a painter in that against a backdrop of chosen and later enforced isolation, he made personal tracks into the Zimbabwean landscape defying eclecticism as he was too great a man to be narrowed by the parochial pitfalls of regionalism. In short, he was a living testimony to Waugh's maxim "Noli Illigitimes Carborundum" and history may one day show that the ground for which he stood (with its meagre five pigments) might brilliantly withstand the test of time.



CHAPTER 1

The early life of Robert Paul is not always clear. We know a few details from friends and his contemporaries who are still alive, yet even their memories conflict with each other at times. Paul's great friend was Miles Marshall. Both of their families were from Sutton in the county of Surrey. Paul was born in 1906 as Robert Fowler-Paul (he later dropped 'Fowler' and made mention of the fact that he felt he would have been much better known in his lifetime if he could have signed his works as 'Bert'). Both Paul and Miles Marshall were educated at Monkton Combe, near Bath in Somerset. This was where they first met, Paul being a year senior to Marshall.

Marshall recalls: "It was therefore not until after we had both left school and bumped into one another through mutual friends in Sutton, Surrey where our families lived, that we eventually became intimate friends."<sup>1</sup>.

Although Marshall does not recall Paul's early interest in Art as a schoolboy<sup>2</sup>, Paul entered the Daily Express Young Artists Competition, won it and sold his winning entry to the Wellington Club in London. Apparently, at this time a Royal Academician W. O. Wiley who was a seascape painter took an interest in Paul's work and advised his parents never to allow him to have formal training.

1. Marshall, M. Letter to C. Johnson. 28 October, 1985.

2. Ibid.

On leaving school, Paul returned home to Sutton where he worked for a time in a commercial Art Studio in Holborn. Feeling that this had little to do with Art as he understood it, he left this job and moved to a "very humble clerical job in a dreary Wine Importers office in the city (London)".<sup>1</sup>

Although the job may have offered Paul the opportunity to cultivate his palette and be a foretaste of things to come, the drabness of his job and England at this time encouraged him to look further afield and it was in 1927 he left for Rhodesia to join the British South African Police. The subsequent details of his life are dealt with in the following chapters. What I would like to deal with in the rest of this chapter is Paul's return on leave in the early 30s and his meeting with John Piper through their mutual friend Miles Marshall and the important implications of this, friendship.

Marshall recalls that he met John Piper in 1926 during the general strike when he found himself as a volunteer bus conductor on a bus which John Piper was driving.

"John and I fairly quickly became very close friends but at that time he was a trainee solicitor and it was sometime before he gave that up and went to the Richmond School of Art".<sup>2</sup>

1. Marshall, op.cit.
2. Ibid.

Exact certainty of dates is nebulous here, but Marshall recalls that: "It was probably the late twenties and early thirties that Robert and I corresponded in lengthy letters of many sheets of the thinnest airmail paper and small writing, covering every inch about the theory of Painting and the work of the Post Impressionists - The Bloomsbury Set, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, the Bells and all that....It was people like that, that I should think may have had some influence on Robert rather than the much younger men you mention who were our generation".<sup>1</sup>.

Although Marshall may be correct in suggesting that the artists whom they corresponded about may have had an influence on Paul (as indeed Piper must have absorbed their ideas too), Paul's later work when he began painting seriously in his retirement is indebted to John Piper and his friend Ivon Hitchens. Nevertheless it appears that Marshall's memory is insistent that it was alcohol rather than art which was the pretext of their first meetings.

"Looking back, and after discussing this period with John Piper, I think that he and Robert probably first met when in the early thirties, prior to the above described esoteric correspondence (on art techniques), he and I motored down to Worthing to see Robert when he was on leave and staying with his parents. Anyway, John's recollection of his first meeting with Robert was not as a fellow artist but as a beer-drinking pal of mine. He recalls a trip to Chanctonbury Ring on the Sussex Downs which the three of us made

1. Marshall, op.cit.

but it was not a sketching party, just a walk to encourage our thirsts for Sussex Ale. I don't suppose we even mentioned painting then".<sup>1</sup>

In a letter received before Marshall's, Piper appears more sober and serious: "We made several trips to Sussex together and talked a lot about painting".<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the correct account is, it appears from this early time that Paul was caught in the middle between the lure for Art and thirst slakers. Certainly it seems strange that more of them talked about Art if all three were to some degree involved with it. Marshall comments:

"Piper's work then was exploratory and immature and I am sure that it was much later, even after the war that Robert developed his considerable admiration for John's paintings which were not of course Post Impressionist for by then John had developed the very particular style that was to make him so famous. Robert I know corresponded with John, long after I had given up all attempts to instruct him".<sup>3</sup>

Marshall's remark that Paul was probably only influenced by Piper's mature style which had evolved after the Second World War

1. Marshall, op.cit.

2. Piper, J. Letter to C. Johnson. 30 September, 1984.

3. Marshall, op.cit.

(when Paul returned to England for a visit in 1948), may contain some truth in it. However, another contentious issue is whether Paul met some of Piper's contemporaries who were later to become famous like Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore, Ivon Hitchens and Ceri Richards. Both Marshall and Piper are certain that Paul never met them. Yet a great friend of Robert Paul's, Peter Birch, mentions in a taped-interview<sup>1</sup> that Paul did meet some of them and that his familiarity was a contentious point in itself.

Apparently he had tried to bed Ceri Richards' wife (decorum prevents me from further research on this point) and that he knew Hitchens who in Birch's opinion should have "got knotted rather than knighted".<sup>2</sup>

In the interim, whilst Paul served with the B.S.A.P. and the Rhodesian Army until his retirement, he painted, and his correspondence with Piper shows that he was still active and curious about Art. Certainly his trip to England in 1948 must have been a time of great influence and absorption of the work of artists who were to be called the Neo-romantics. I discuss this in later chapters. To give it some background, it may be beneficial for the reader to be aware of who the Neo-Romantic artists were, what they stood for and a definition of Neo-Romanticism itself. I am not inferring that Paul was a Neo-romantic but it is important to assess his work in the light of theirs.

1. Birch, Peter. Taped-recorded interview. September 1984.  
2. Ibid.

It has been said that this 'feel' or 'spirit' was strongest in the war years in Britain between 1940 and 1949.<sup>1</sup> Other artists of a similar conviction had produced work which showed the possibility of an English movement, nebulous in exact definition, but which for the sake of Art History Robin Ironside, an Assistant Keeper at the Tate Gallery and an artist himself referred to as 'Neo-Romanticism' in a publication 'Painting Since 1939'. This was a blanket term used to cover a great number of individual artists whose work contained the same spirit.

In his forward to the exhibition catalogue "John Piper and English Neo-Romanticism" Peter Cannon-Brookes notes that "attempts to define the tradition more narrowly and to draw its boundaries have been unsuccessful, not least because Neo-Romanticism is above all a question of spirit and the selection of the forms to express that spirit is thus of lesser significance".<sup>2</sup>

Although Stanley Spencer was not involved in the Neo-Romantic movement, he describes in a letter to James Wood a feeling which he was constantly trying to capture in his work. The painting he is referring to here is "Mending Cows, Cookham":

'I can quite understand you having some misgivings when you saw it as it has a sort of "suppressed emotions" tendency. But I did that thing not because of the "composition" it made; some people

1. Ironside, R. Painting Since 1939. p.31.

2. CannonBrookes, P. Foreword to Exhibition Catalogue. John Piper and English NeoRomanticism. 1982.

might say it had a "fine sense of solid composition" - such people know nothing of the feelings that caused me to paint it. There are certain children in Cookham, certain corners of roads and these cowls that all give me one feeling only. I am always wanting to express that'.<sup>1</sup>

Although the 'feeling' that one gets from Spencer's work may be different to the spirit of Neo-Romanticism, it is something equally strong, abstract, and undefinable. And it is important to note that this term 'Neo-Romanticism' is used with the intention of covering a number of different styles and different approaches by artists and that the seed of English Neo-Romanticism could be sown into one who could take it to Africa and develop it there.

This is essentially what Robert Paul did. With the influence of Piper, Hitchens and Ceri Richards and for the sake of comparison with Victor Pasmore, we are able to make valid comparisons between the works of these artists and with Robert Paul's. The most obvious comparisons can be made between John Piper and Robert Paul not only with their work; they were also in personal contact with each other throughout their lives.

Both John Piper and Robert Paul shared a similar interest in painting buildings and landscapes. Although this connection may seem facile, one must remember first that one of the reasons Paul

1. Spencer, Stanley R.A., Letter written to James Wood in May 1916.

went out to Rhodesia in 1927 was to find new landscapes. It is not surprising then that the profound influence which Piper had on Paul would have left its mark in their mutual attraction for landscapes and buildings.

As far as techniques were concerned, Paul absorbed all that Piper taught him. The use of gum resist and its effect in oil or mixed media was especially important to Paul in that it helped him to achieve complex textural properties inherent in the African landscape and also to articulate the varying forms of colonial buildings which Paul also probed with this technique. He acknowledged his gratitude to these painters like Piper: "When Robert Paul paints a scene, he looks at it for much longer than he paints it. 'That I picked up from Piper', he says. 'Look for nine minutes and paint for one. I really learnt a lot from those boys'".<sup>1</sup>

Marshall recalls that in Paul's early years in England,<sup>2</sup> the medium he used was watercolour. What is interesting to compare between Piper and Paul with this medium is not so much the style (although there are occasional similarities) but rather the range that the respective artists sought to deliver into their works. Both of them were gifted drafstman, and the probity of their line can be seen in their respective ventures here. Piper in his

1. Raath, J. "A bottle and a brush" The Rhodesian Herald, May, 1976.
2. Marshall, op.cit.



series at Thomas Jones' Hafod in 1939<sup>1</sup> for their penetrating and romantic portrayal of the landscape. These works set the pattern for a later series at Renishaw and Montegufone.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Paul's watercolour studies of the Transkei coastline are notable for their lyrical, flowing line and fine compositional structure. Their exquisite draftsmanship and mood anticipate his mature work in watercolours and mixed-media of Inyanga.

These comparisons are born out as the essay progresses. It is possible to perceive connections in paint application and technique between Piper and Paul. One cannot underestimate the impact that Piper had on Paul, both in correspondence and in their meetings. Particularly important was Paul's meeting with Piper in 1948 by which time the latter had evolved his mature style and Paul was ready to embark on a career as a painter. Paul's perception of Piper's artistic development was thorough, and when he returned home to Rhodesia, his output reflected his absorption of complex intellectual information which he tried to relate to his African environment.

As I have said, the connections will be dealt with in greater depth as the essay progresses, but a brief and cosmetic example of this link in technique can be seen in Paul's use of line in watercolour and mixed media. Piper's work relies much on his very resourceful linear properties. Paul used line in his drawing and with great effect, particularly in two watercolours and line

1. West, A. John Piper, p.84.

2. Ibid.

sketches he did of Hove, in Sussex around 1947.<sup>1</sup> More often than not, he uses line most successfully when it articulates texture and hints at a detail over the blocks of colour that give mood and form to his landscapes. An example of this can be seen in *Inyanga* 1968<sup>2</sup>, a mixed media painting of phenomenal linear quality. The basis of the painting is two basic colours blocked in, describing the earth and sky.

The freely blocked-in masses of colour are probably derived from the influence of Ivon Hitchens was ten years senior to Piper. They met in 1924 and Paul met Hitchens through Piper shortly after that.

John Rothenstein describes the implications of Hitchens' influence on Piper: "Piper's new friendship with Ivon Hitchens forged in 1924, brought Piper into close contact with a highly independent artist who had just evolved his mature style based on freely brushed-in masses of colour liberated from the restraints of linear boundaries".<sup>3</sup>

This information was gathered by Paul, stored and used later as one of the basic structures to his approaching a painting. It is first seen to our knowledge in his slightly abstracted version of a 'Quarry' which he started in 1947.<sup>4</sup>

1. See Chapters 3 and 4.

2. See Chapter 2.

3. Rothenstein, J. Modern English Painters. Vol.3, p.92

4. See Chapter 2.

Another point of comparison, although not of similarity is the question of balancing the intuitive and the intellectual sides of Piper's personality which Hitchens placed great emphasis on. Piper credited Hitchens with helping him to "affirm the instinctive and non-rational side of his personality and he realized the vital importance both in bringing its intuitive and intellectual sides into balance and discontinuing the attempt to make one the master of the other".<sup>1</sup>

Paul on the other hand was freely endowed with an affirmation of the instinctive and non rational; he was also a very intelligent painter. His imbalance was not so much an internal suppression of a particular side of his personality but rather external factors which disturbed him. He never really had confidence in his work or his ability as an artist. He was exhibiting to a public which was largely uneducated in art, particularly modern art.<sup>2</sup> There was little to boost him except for a few like-minded painters in the 1960s and 1970s but none matched his own abilities although he was always ready to learn from them.<sup>3</sup>

The result of this was that he depended much on his intuitive nature to keep himself painting. When his drive for his work waned, he would lapse into long periods of stagnation when he would not paint. This accounts for much of his mediocre and inconsistent work. As Frieda Harmsen noted in her criticism of

1. Rothenstein, loc.cit.
2. See Chapter 4.
3. Ibid.

Paul's Retrospective Exhibition in Pretoria - "Robert Paul is an intuitive painter and gifted though he may be, intuitive painters seldom display a consistent or cerebral development of style. An intuitive artist works solely as his mood dictates and either deliberately or involuntarily he works in various styles."<sup>1</sup>. This is true of Paul's inconsistency and because of this it is difficult to trace a development in style. Yet in the 1960s up to the early 1970s, Paul produced a series of paintings of Trout Streams in Inyanga of remarkable delicacy and evidence of what Bradshaw referred to as "a wealth of accumulated experience".<sup>2</sup> Victor Pasmore, another Neo-Romantic (but one with whom Robert Paul had no contact) in the mid 1940s produced "a series of landscape paintings of quite extraordinary delicacy depicting scenes around Chiswick and Hammersmith, revealing a power of evoking a gentle, radiant, misty vision of nature unapproached for acuteness of perception or for sheer poetry by any of his gifted generation".<sup>3</sup>

If one was to change 'Chiswick and Hammersmith' for Inyanga, the same appraisal could be given to Paul. Inyanga is open to the immense vulnerability of kitsch as it has a landscape of mountains, fresh water stream of larger forest areas. Yet Paul never stoops. Even in his mediocre work he escapes it, he was too good an artist. What is interesting to note is that Paul arrived

1. Harmsen, F. "Robert Paul", Lantern Vol. XXIX No. 4. December 1980.
2. Bradshaw, B. Foreword to Catalogue for Robert Paul's Retrospective at the National Gallery of Rhodesia in 1976.
3. Rothenstein, op.cit. p.151.

at these visions having gone through motions towards an abstract period, whereas Pasmore's abstract period led on from his realist paintings.

With Ceri Richards, he shared the ability to explore subject matter more and more deeply. His recurrent involvement with areas in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe showed how his work could lead from realism and progress to an analysis of the landscape verging on the early stages of cubism.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up: in using comparisons of Paul's work with Neo-Romantic artists, we can see he shares influences and developments of directions in his work with theirs. The most outstanding difference is that his intuitive drive betrayed a rational and disciplined approach which led to much mediocrity in his work. Yet he is certainly a Romantic artist and Piper's definition of Romantic art is a fine description of what Paul's work would become.

"Romantic Art deals with the particular....(It) is the result of a vision that can see in things something significant beyond ordinary significance, something that for a moment seems to contain the whole world and when the moment is past, carries over some comment on life or experience besides the comment of appearances".<sup>2</sup>

1. Rothenstein, loc.cit.

2. Ibid. p.94

It is necessary to review Robert Paul's work in the light of Neo-Romanticism for three reasons. First, the introduction to Piper, Hitchens, Richards and other members of the Neo-Romantic artists laid within Paul a direction and a striving after the quality and spirit of the Romantic tradition which he was to foster for the rest of his life. Second, Paul's ability to select and define - he was able to absorb the influences around him, quickly find the pertinent, dismiss the rest and use the knowledge gained to his advantage. The combination of his direct approach and swift ability to select help to make him a perceptive artist.

The final reason is to do with his range as an artist - "Equipped as he was with Piperesque and English Southern Landscape idioms of the 1920s, he did not merely exploit a vein of aesthetics in new exotic climes. Paul laid tracks for personal development. He knew how to use medium. How to control it. And how and when to unleash control of it. He had a grasp of what the French call *metier*".<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, it may be his resourcefulness that eventually made him the foremost painter in Rhodesia.

1. Bradshaw, op.cit.

CHAPTER 2

In the previous chapter, I dealt specifically with the influence that artists like John Piper and Ivon Hitchens had on Robert Paul's work and how it is possible to trace a comparative development between them. In this chapter, I would like to illustrate how the physical characteristics of the country and the colonial ethos of the time had an impact on Paul when he arrived in 1927 to the time that he left the Army in 1951. It is necessary to piece together this information through the use of anecdotes which are either handed down or given to me first hand by his contemporaries. Although this is not always reliable, it is the only way that I am able to assemble the information with a modicum of historical continuity. Anecdotes invariably focus graphically on high and low points. These are not without this exception. Yet it would be wrong to think of Paul solely as a man with an appetite for alcohol and a keen eye for a pretty girl. There were a great many more important facets to him which he carefully hid from public view. What these anecdotes can possibly achieve is to illustrate as lavishly as possible his irrepressible dry sense of humour - a vital aspect of his personality which should not be overlooked.

Paul came out to Rhodesia by boat from England together with many young men who were probably looking for a change from England and a chance to live beyond the confines of the English System. Paul, who had been working as a wine and spirits dealer, said he had 'grown tired of temptation in Hollborn' and reviewed the British

Isles geographical location as 'a waste of bloody good sea'. He looked forward to the prospects of new landscapes with much enthusiasm and journeyed out on the boat in very high spirits with a handful of contemporaries from England, also wishing to join the Police.

As Bradshaw noted in his foreword to the Retrospective: "Paul came to Rhodesia from England in 1927 to join the Rhodesian Police. It is difficult to grasp the subsequent details of his career with the Police and the Army because Paul has little, if any, 'historical' interests - or at least, interests in the usually accepted historical terms".<sup>1</sup>

The subtle deflection of meaning in his last sentence is a very apt remark when referring to Paul. Many of Paul's contemporaries (those who are still alive) are able to remember with some clarity the significant historical details of those years. Colonel Bazil Spurling, a retired Commissioner of the Police (B.S.A.P.) remembers: "When I joined the B.S.A.P. in April 1929 there was a Paul but, because he was neither a Senior Trooper or possibly a Junior N.C.O. I barely knew him. A recruit in those days didn't dare address a Senior Trooper unless spoken to! He was a well built, fairly tall man (about 6ft or a little over) had, as far as I remember lightish brown hair and seemed to be a bit reserved. Paul, as I seem to remember, was on the Staff. He was very good

1. Bradshaw, op.cit.



at drawing maps which in those days, was a matter of some importance since we all had to understand something about a map, because we had to use them to find our way over the veld.

On completing recruits course of training (6 months) in October 1929 my Squad, No. 3 of 1929 and No. 4 Squad were sent out on what was known as a mounted column. There were about 40 to 50 of us under the command of Captain H. T. Onyeth M.C. We were, of course, mounted and were out for six weeks and marched some 500 miles from Salisbury through Buhera to the Sabi river. We went to the Matenderere Ruins. I seem to remember that Paul might have been on that column in his capacity as a 'map-maker'<sup>1</sup>.

This gives an indication of the type of journey Paul undertook in the veld. Paul mostly spent time in the Midlands patrolling and charting through many miles of bush with his pack horse, a cavalry sketching board strapped to his waist and a compass latched to the board. Apparently, he said he only got lost twice. He was based in Gwelo for a while and drew all the original maps of the Fort Victoria area. He used to sketch from horseback and keep his materials in his pack. There is no doubt that the influence of the Midlands landscape - vast undulating grassy plains interspersed with kopjes and tree belts - had a profound influence on Paul. Perhaps it was this lasting impression of space and valid content in that space which held a fascination for Paul. He was able to see pertinent variety in the subtle rearrangement of

1. Spurling, B. Letter to C. Johnson, October, 1985.

form, colour and composition. Here was a new landscape uncharted by the contemporary eye with far more vibrant colour and rugged form than its demure English counterpart.

Paul would spend up to six weeks at a time patrolling in the veld and then return to camp for perhaps a month before setting out on another patrol. It took its toll in various ways and he could recount endless anecdotes of those early years in the Police. He once spent a night up a tree when a lion frightened away his mount and he had to wait until the morning when the lion left. On another occasion, after a long patrol he returned from the veld feeling 'bush-wacked'; he made his way straight for the nearest bar, mounted the stairs and went in and ordered a double brandy still in the saddle. There are scores of these anecdotes which embellish the image of a frontier spirit which prevailed at the time. The country was still very young and underdeveloped. Only 37 years before Paul arrived in the country, the Pioneer column had raised the British Flag at Fort Salisbury for the first time.

Some of the photographs illustrate the surroundings of Paul and his cronies. The first photo shows Paul astride his mount and was taken in 1927. The second taken in 1928 shows horses being off-loaded for recruits to be trained on. The next photograph is of a B.S.A.P. March Pass on Armistice Day in 1928. Others show Paul and his contemporaries in typically exuberant form. They were taken by Algy Porter, a good friend of Paul's in the Police with him.



It must have been a very harsh and lonely life for a Mounted Trooper. Everything was underdeveloped and the vast, uninhabited landscape must have contained a minimum solace even for a person like Paul who would appreciate pure landscape. When a vacancy in the topographical section at Headquarters (Salisbury) was offered, he applied immediately and obtained the post because of his reputation as an accomplished draftsman. In 1933, many members of the Police Force were seconded to what was called the Staff Corps which was the nucleus of the Southern Rhodesian Military (Permanent) Force. Paul was then employed on clerical duties with the Pay Corps based in Salisbury.

It is unlikely that Paul did much painting at this time - he had sketched a great deal on horseback and probably would have done some sketching over the week-ends in town. Sadly, nothing remains from this period. He was more pre-occupied with the frontier town revelry which he and other young N.C.O.s were a part of; three of them in particular (all of whom had a surname beginning with P)



B.S.A.P. MARCH PASS



ROBERT WITH LATEST ROOKIE

earned themselves a reputation under the collective nickname "The terrible Ps". They were Algy Power, Chris Paling and Robert Paul. As bachelors, most of their social life revolved around the pubs in Manica Road which was the main shopping centre.

On pay day, they would make a hasty headway to the pubs in the Manica Road Hotels - the Masonic and the Castle Bars and proceed to liquidate their earnings on alcohol. After a night out, they would hire rickshaws to take them back to Barracks. This scene epitomizes the colonial spirit, as invariably they would race one another having placed bets on the rickshaw drivers. When they reached the Police Camp Gates in Montague Avenue, an argument would ensue about payment which would be settled eventually by the loser and the same rickshaw drivers would be hired for the next evening out.

They also used to frequent the Police Club over the week-end in the days when pay was small. The regimental institute allowed them 'to put it on the slate' and have their appropriate amounts deducted from their pay cheques before being issued them at the end of the month. At one month's end, one of the three received a cheque for 3d (a ticky); whoever it was, he had it framed.

Terence McCormick, a contemporary of Robert's from the Police remembers Robert's antics at the Police Sergeants' Mess:-

"In appearance, he seriously resembled the conventional image of Jesus Christ; and one of his tricks exploited this resemblance.

With the members of the mess well plied with beer, he would produce a crayon from his pocket and draw a heavenly halo on the wall. Then he would drape himself with the white billiard table cloth and stand with his face framed in the halo. The resemblance to the biblical image of Christ was startling, particularly with Robert reciting parts of the Good Book while the mess members bowed their heads in reverence before him.

Another performance for which he was famous was his personal version of the snake dance. Jumping with great agility from chair to chair and on and off the billiard table, he would strip himself to his underpants, all the time chanting a Hindu melody".<sup>1</sup>

In these early days, there were no houses between the Police Camp and 'town' leaving a distance of a few miles to be covered. Thus rickshaws, bicycles and motorbikes were the order of the day. At some stage, Paul acquired an elegant sports car. All his friends would borrow it to take out "their dates". During this time, Paul met a young lady by the name of Maizie English. They were married for a short while but separated and divorced not long afterwards and Paul returned again to bachelorhood, a state much more suitable for him at the time.

Many years later, he married Doreen Hawkins who was a well known tennis player. She was the daughter of 'Ma' Hawkins, a rather imposing figure and owner of a considerable amount of property in

1. McCormick, T. Letter to C. Johnson, 21 November, 1985.

Salisbury and also in Bond Street, London. When Paul and 'Dreen' as she became known were married, they moved to 110 Livingstone Avenue which was the original farm house in the area. Theirs was not a marriage typified by colonial suburban bliss. They were both eccentrics and she was a fine foil for Robert. A friend of theirs remembers Dreen ostensibly coming to collect Robert from the Pimms Bar "where he was brilliantly rude to anyone who dared to ask stupid questions and, worse still, to attempt to patronize him. Dreen would be seen walking very straight, very slightly awry, in that careful way the cautious drunks do, in search of him. Her efforts were met with torrents of abuse. I have no doubt though, that this was all a complex ritual behavioural scene purely for the benefit of the appalled/delighted spectator, and that they were very dear to each other in an angry way".<sup>1</sup>

Their married life was perhaps unorthodox but Dreen appeared to have her husband in harness, particularly when it came to keeping a check on his roving eye: "I know when he went to visit a redhead, Dreen followed with his luggage, burst into her abode and said 'If you want him, you can have him'. Both Robert and the girl were so appalled by the possibility that he returned home! I do know that in the year before he died he decided to take sex hormones in an attempt to capture his youthful zest. His enthusiasm certainly hadn't wained!"<sup>2</sup>

Dreen was probably one of the few women who knew how to cope with

1. Gray, D. Letter to C. Johnson, 6 October, 1985.

2. op.cit.

Robert Paul. The other was Dreen's mother who Robert stood in awe of, namely 'Ma' Hawkins.

She became an important figure in Paul's barrage of abuse about people whom he disliked, though it would be wrong to say that he disliked her for he had a very healthy respect for her. Frequently, he threatened to send her a gift voucher from Mashfords for Christmas (Mashfords being a local funeral parlour).

However, on one occasion it was 'Ma' Hawkins' turn to see that the joke was on him. 'Ma' made a surprise visit to her daughter's house in Livingstone Avenue. Robert had just left to go to an Army Mess Night. This would mean he would return very late and somewhat under the weather. As the evening wore on and Dreen noticed that her mother had no real intention of moving, she suggested that her mother stayed the night and could sleep in the main bedroom. Being a lady of ample bosom, she gratefully accepted the welcome breadth of the double bed. Dreen in the meantime waited up to tell Robert about the change in sleeping arrangements but eventually fell asleep in the spare room. At length, Robert returned after an evening of imbibing bilious quantities of liquor. He unsteadily made his way to the bedroom in which he was accustomed to sleeping. Not wanting to wake his wife, he courteously lurched over to the double bed in the darkness, got undressed and slapped his mother-in-law hard on the buttocks saying 'Move over, you old cow'. This one didn't budge. Although Paul has been accused of having a reputation with women,



this was the first and last time he nearly slept with his mother-in-law.

Fortunately, Paul did not have to serve overseas in the Second World War. His earliest existing painting was done in 1940 of Prince Edward School. People had begun to push him to paint again. He had apparently done some murals on the inner wall of a thatched rondawel at King George VI Barracks Officers Mess in Salisbury. One of them was entitled 'Victoria Falls' and depicted Queen Victoria toppling ungraciously off her throne. Others came under the heading of 'Muriels', unfortunately, the rondawel was razed by fire.

Colin Style, one of the foremost Rhodesian poets and nephew of Major Chris Paling (one of the terrible Ps), remembers as a small boy whilst playing with some friends: "at the 'Chlenry - the old house 'My Grandfather's house'. We saw Robert one late afternoon standing on the crest of the hill. He was doing a watercolour of the view of the fields below, stretching down the Makabus River at the time it was almost completely built. We went up to him and stood in a circle practically breathing down his neck. Robert was not only completely unruffled but seemed pleased to have an audience. As he worked, he chatted away telling us what effects he was aiming at. I must say to us young Philistines then, his notions seem highly eccentric and we stood around grinning broadly and tapping our skulls significantly. For example, he painted the sky a wash brown as he said 'to reflect the fields'. Objectively, the sky seemed its normal blue to us, and this was the thing about

Robert Paul. He never acted, I don't think intensely or artistically but fitted easily into the milieu of the small town Colonial Society".<sup>1</sup>

Style remembers him then 'as a spare, reserved man. Very English in appearance - the colonial official or officer type. Which, of course, he was in a way.'

He goes on to discuss another side of Paul: "Another bacchanalian story is that a wild party was being held - I can't remember where. Robert could not be found at the end of the party, so a search party was instituted. Someone saw what looked like fireflies at the bottom of the garden. On investigation, it was found to be Robert. Too inebriated to move, he was lying on his back, lighting and tossing matches into the air as distress signals."

In my writing, it appears that alcoholic anecdotes almost form the core of his existence in the early days. Indeed, it was. It bound people from various stations of life and strains of English Society onto a common footing; it was also very hot and often a very depressing life. Peter Birch recalls how: "There was a group of them - the last of the early colonial types with a frontier town attitude - all wild west, still mad and daring, but they needed a bit of booze to make them a bit mad and daring and they

1. Style, C. Letter to C. Johnson, September, 1984.

were irritable without it and nasty with it. They were just right with two and if they slept it off in the afternoons."

In this, Robert was no different from the others. According to Peter Birch - "He had a wonderful charm which possessed him whilst he was sober and if he had had a few. But when he had had too many, then he became obscene and crude and the opposite to what he was normally like. Stone cold sober, he was gruff and impatient. Drunk - he became obscene and embarrassing."

"When you knew Robert, he was a very sensitive and very kind person. Women always wanted to cuddle and care for him. He was a frightened sort of person and he needed reassurance."<sup>1</sup>

Birch suggests that one of the reasons why Paul drank so heavily is because he was an insomniac and suffered from nightmares when he did sleep. He used to rise at about five sometimes earlier for the reassurance of the light.

Paul had two children by his second wife Dreen - a son Paul and a daughter Colette. Neither showed the same artistic direction as their father; instead, the son became a lawyer and is now with a leading firm of solicitors in Harare and their daughter Colette had a career as a successful ballet dancer.

1. Birch, op.cit.

Birch notes: "How they brought up two wonderful children is a mystery. How his daughter managed to court any boyfriends was also a mystery. He didn't like any of the boyfriends. Robert must have frightened everyone away from the house. After lunch was a bad time. The evenings were worse - he'd be back at nine if he had remembered where he had left the car."

As the years pushed towards his retirement from the Army in 1951, Paul began to take more seriously the implications of painting regularly. He was professional by nature but needed to become more so in outlook. A small sketch from 1942 of Selous Avenue shows that Paul was still drawing, and drawing well. There is a confidence in his lyrical line, an omittance of peripheral detail, a strong central composition with a focal point of a house at the end of the avenue. It works; in his drawing, he hints at what his watercolours can become - succinct and lyrical observations of nature.



1. Selous Avenue, 1942.

In the early 1940's, Dreen took their daughter Colette over to England for a holiday. Robert went over with their son Paul a few years later and stayed a month or two over there. This visit was to be an exceedingly important one for Paul. It was now that he was able to assess the mature work of Piper, Hitchens and other Neo-Romantic Artists who had just come into their own. His perceptive observations were relayed and assimilated into his own work. He renewed his acquaintance with Piper (they had kept up a correspondence in the interim) and brought back to Africa several paintings by Piper including one of a churchyard with an inscription on the tombstone dedicated to Paul.

One cannot underestimate the importance of this visit in terms of artistic benefit to Paul. It was on the eve of his retirement (1948 was the year when he went over) and it laid the intellectual ground for the direction of his work from here. He also found time to do some painting himself in England; they are mostly watercolours and ink and watercolour sketches of Hove in Sussex.



2. Hove, Sussex. November, 1948.

3. Hove, Sussex. 1948.



4. Hove, Sussex. 1948.

They are distinctly English in ambience, colour, and tonal control. In essence, they are everything he left behind him to paint in Africa except for the quality with which he executed them. Nevertheless they portray his ability to adapt to the scene before him and capture its characteristics and subtle nuances in a very economical way. The careful tonal graduations and the soft light are noticeable features in them. Certainly the ink and watercolour wash of Hove, Sussex done in November 1948 is a more dynamic work than the others. There is a vigour and confidence in the line; and the perceptive, controlled understatement of the muted colour is not unlike some of Piper's work.

These works are essentially a warm up for what Paul would be doing in a few years time with much more empathy, fluency and success. They stand as an introduction to his career as an artist, and more essentially an artist of Rhodesian landscape. The trip to England must have refurbished his memory of discussions and painting trips twenty years earlier and stimulated him

sufficiently enough to return and paint with a passionate involvement in his work.

One often wonders how Paul would have fared in England as an artist there. Peter Birch relates an anecdote told to him by Paul about the sketching week-end Paul went on with his brother in Southern England (his brother was also an artist). They started on the Friday and did a lot of travelling; occasionally they saw scenes which interested them, but one would suggest they carry on a little further to see if there was something better a little way on. Eventually in the three days they had covered about four counties without actually having painted at all. He told this to Peter Birch because he believed he had all the subject matter he needed in his back garden (which was very overgrown). Paul was never one to stay with something which didn't hold anything for him. England didn't, so he left. Piper's and Hitchens' influence did and so he retained that.

He returned to Rhodesia and three years later in 1951 retired from the Army where he ultimately reached the rank of Captain. He took a seasonal post at the Tobacco Auctions which helped his finances when they were dwindling. At the age of forty four, he started his career as an Artist.

CHAPTER 3

In this chapter, I intend to deal with two directions in Robert Paul's work which run concurrently from 1947 to 1966. The first direction follows the work he completed in the Transkei on holidays after leaving the Army; it takes us from 1950 to 1957. The second direction is concerned with the formal problems that he encountered with abstraction from 1947 until the early 1960s; these paintings were mostly completed in his studio. Although there are other works dating from the same period, they follow from the knowledge he gained through abstraction and I will deal with these works in the following chapter.

The 1950s in Southern Rhodesia was a time of great change and for the most part, optimism. The flood of immigrants which entered the country at this time anticipated a prosperous young nation like Rhodesia to be the solution to the post war depression in England. It was towards the end of the 1950s that the Rhodes Centenary Gallery was built. This Gallery was later to be the National Gallery of Rhodesia and under the Directorship of Frank McEwan; great encouragement was given to Rhodesian artists, both black and white. Their work was shortly to be hung in London, Paris, and American cities.

Introduction to and the links forged with major art centres gave Rhodesian artists the opportunity to break from the narrow boundaries of style and subject matter which resulted from their previous isolation. The opportunity to experiment helped them to



gain new ground in their work. This was true of Robert Paul's work at the time of his retirement in the 1950s; the opportunity and encouragement to experiment (without the later constraints of isolation resulting from U.D.I)<sup>1</sup> was to be an important time when he searched for a visual grammar that was to bring him to the forefront of landscape painting in his country.

The work completed in the Transkei shows his ability to handle a vast range of media and a developing perception at handling a new subject, the sea. According to the Catalogue of his Retrospective Exhibition at the National Gallery in 1975, he painted at least thirty four works of the Transkei between 1950 and 1953. He used ink and wash, pen and wash, watercolour, gouache, mixed media, oil and gum resist, oil and egg tempera and oil by itself. All these mediums he could adapt to a specific style which would suit the work he was doing at the time.

A gouache he executed in 1950 shows his newness to the subject by his difficulty in handling both the medium and the scene. Entitled 'Qolora, Transkei', it shows a typical coastline scene with hills in the background, sea and rocks in the foreground. He has used a blue sky which is unusual for his work in that he regarded the colour blue with disdain. He referred to it as the colour of cheap swimming pools and Kodak prints.<sup>2</sup> The blue sky was probably used as a contrast to the clouds.

1. See Chapter 4.

2. Birch, op.cit.

The same colour with more intensity is repeated in the mountains. The sea and rocks, because they are not soundly observed enough, are hastily put down, and the marks are not descriptive of the properties which the bush investigates. The tidal pool in the foreground imbalances the composition and destroys the atmospheric perspective by the inclusion of muddy colour. Although it is the least successful of the illustrations from the Transkei period, it has a freshness and a vigour that both helps it to be convincing, but because of technical fumbling, excludes it from his better work.



1. Qolora, Transkei. 1950.

2. Qolora, Transkei. 1951.

A painting of what appears to be the same scene executed in 1951 entitled 'Qolora, Transkei' corrects all the mistakes, that the previous work I mentioned, has. It is noticeable for its freshness and ease of execution. There is no fumbling with technique here. Paul's grasp of metier here is complete. Compositionally, the tension between the foreground, middleground and the sky is well realized and it leads comfortably to the horizon and beyond. He hints at some cloud formation in the sky which reiterates form diagonally across and down on the left hand

side of the painting in the waves. Here his use of brown in the blue of the sea has much more impact and purpose and the rocks in the middleground have a sense of structure which they previously lacked. Perhaps his use of tone within the colour is what helps to give the painting a feeling of freshness.

Another watercolour entitled 'Qolora, Transkei' has in contrast a much more brooding quality about it compared to the previous painting which is almost flippant in character. There is an even distribution of sombre colour, occasionally highlighted by clouds, waves in the sea, which bring out the profile of a large rock into relief; and also a fleck of white, painted in a slight diagonal on the rocks, in the right hand side of the watercolour. This may have been a compositional device to make the rock pool and the main rock in the centre of the painting more the subject of the watercolour. The way he has handled the rock on the bottom left hand side of the painting is really Piperesque in feel and not dissimilar to some of the iconography Piper developed at Thomas Jones' Hafod.<sup>1</sup>

A watercolour and a gouache are of roughly the same coastal scene and show a much more developed personal idiom of free, unworried brushstrokes and a calmly resolved handling of colour and meticulous composition. It is difficult to compare them with

1. In 1938, Piper produced a series of beautiful watercolour works notable for their unique iconography in landscape at Thomas Jones Hafod.



3. Qolora, Transkei.

anything of specifically Neo-Romantic tendencies. The first, a watercolour of the Qolora coastline entitled 'Qolora' shows the windswept coastline from a high vantage point looking down to the estuary. It is a remarkably fresh piece of work with all composition, colour and line perfectly under control with notable economy and the perfect placing of colour, shape and the use of line in trees to describe the wind blowing through them. It is one of his most successful watercolours.



4. Qolora, 1951.



5. Transkei, 1957.

The Gcuache 'Transkei' done in 1957 may well have been executed from memory and other sketches. It lacks the freshness of the previous painting; what it loses in the lack of direct observation, it gains in its superbly resolved handling of paint and strong rhythmic composition. He uses cattle pens in the foreground which wind their way over sand dunes down to the sea. Their lines are reiterated in the brushstrokes which describe the breakers moving towards the beach. Whereas the colour integration in the previous painting is quite harmonious, their painting lacks the same blending, and the pure greens and the blue of the sea are more colours by themselves rather than an integral part of the painting. Nevertheless, it has an atmospheric quality to it and the rhythmic composition gives it a very peaceful character.



6. House on the Qolora Coastline, 1951.

The paintings of similar character and style which are also of the Qolora coastline were executed in 1951. They have all the vigour and intensity of English Neo-Romanticism at its best. The brooding sky, the use of dark colours against lighter ones

articulating their forms brilliantly in landscape together with a descriptive black line. Certainly this is evident in the first example in 'House on the Qolora Coastline' 1951. This may be a scene at dusk. The graded wash of the sky is reiterated in the tonal diaphony of the horizon and parts of the middle and foreground. A sudden burst of green or ochre or red brings the colour alive and the drama of the work is heightened by the simple blocking in of the house and the energetic linear work which is channelled towards the focal point, the house overlooking the coastline.



7. Qolora, 1951.

The second example is a remarkable combination of vigour, technical virtuosity and empathy with a subject. On seeing this work, it becomes quite understandable why the Royal Academician said to Paul's parents when Paul was still young that he should have no formal training. It is fresh, direct and unpretentious. What it lacks in compositional strength is adequately made up for in its commanding linear properties, wholly descriptive of the landscape.

In discussing the seven illustrations I have used from his Transkei period, it is easier to notice a variation of style and mood rather than a specific progression and development in a certain style. What does progress and develop enormously are his qualities as a draftsman and his ability to compose. There are no concrete comparisons which can be made with Neo-Romanticism here. The work seems to be mostly in his own intuitive manner rather than a direct link between specific artists imposing a specific influence on him.

During this time and before it (from 1947), he had been trying to resolve the formal problems presented to him by abstraction. Groping away out of the mainstream, he was trying to resolve concepts that were probably introduced to him by Piper. In 1947, Paul embarked on a series of abstract and cubist influenced paintings soon after the war, shortly before visiting Piper in 1948. In these paintings, he was wrestling with the integration of two often conflicting approaches. He was trying to assimilate abstract and cubist tendencies (which Piper and Hitchens had introduced him to through the works of Picasso and Braque) with 'the wealth of accumulated experience' he had gained of the Rhodesian landscape in his years as a mounted trooper in Mashonaland.

The textural properties of the veld with their vivid colour and strong forms were often difficult to sublimate purely into the realms of shapes and composition for a man whose knowledge of the veld was overpoweringly intimate. An example of this knowledge

and attraction to the veld is a small ink and wash sketch of a district Police Camp somewhere in the Mashonaland bush. It seems that the scene evoked a strong sense of nostalgia within him. 'Police Camp' has a strong 'photographic' composition in that the tree frames the painting in the same way that a few of Cezanne's paintings of Mont Saint Victoire use the same device. There are three basic colours, a brown, an orange ochre and a blue which is used to create shadow in the work. The brush strokes are very lyrical in feel and describe the scene with obvious affection. This feeling of nostalgia was to return in the work he did in the 1970s when he was no longer able to paint directly from the site because of the war.



8. Police Camp, 1952.

It was this struggle to assimilate his abstract and cubist knowledge into his visual memory that extended his range well beyond the merely physical properties of landscape painting. His knowledge of form and composition overtook that of his immediate contemporaries and he became open to problems not easily solved by fluent draftsmanship. Instead, his painting became as much a



thought process as a visual challenge; this cleared his mind of periphery detail and helped him to avoid the many pitfalls and in particular, the pitfalls that the African landscape can attract.

Paul started 'Quarry' in 1947; it is the first record of his concern with applying a three dimensional subject into a largely two dimensional composition. The composition itself seems slightly unresolved and it is as if he has had to resort to the use of outlines to affect a balance between the shapes. He is reluctant even to use masses of freely brushed in colour. Instead he dabs hesitantly at the canvas like a quarryier digging stone. On the right hand side there is a mass of colour which helps the mood of the painting, but does not fit in with the uneven distribution of paint on the rest of the canvas. The beacon accentuates the ambivalence of a two and three dimensional



9. Quarry, 1947 - 1956.

painting; he paints it the colour of a northern sun and it recedes into the painting, almost detached from the subject and

allowing the two large boulders in the foreground to become the subject.

If the painting succeeds, it is not because of the composition or handling of paint which is very erratic; it may succeed because of the mood it achieves and because he is beginning to extend himself into an area which is helping his work. He finished 'Quarry' after nine years of deliberation in 1956.



10. Rock Pool, 1947 - 1958.

'Rock Pool' is another oil painting which he started in 1947. He has carefully arranged a very successful composition into a series of horizontals broken by a vertical on the left hand side which is in shadow. He has simplified the forms into their most basic shapes and has chosen mostly neutral colours so that he can concentrate on the arrangement of formal elements in the composition. Here and there he articulates the largely monochromatic colour with a hint of flesh orange or viridian red. If it were not for the white which he uses effectively on one strata of the horizontal above the pool and in the reflection, the

painting would be very drab and lifeless. He is slowly learning when to hold back and how to unleash colour.

'Rock Pool' which he finished in 1958 is very Neo-Romantic in spirit and could even be the title of one of their paintings. But 'Near Hot Springs' which he painted in 1954 is a painting very much of the African continent and the subject - a landscape with a baobab tree - is a very hackneyed theme amongst African landscape painters. He avoids the pitfalls by simplifying the scene into its most basic form of shape and colour. If it were not for the trees, the landscape would almost be unrecognizable as such. He uses reality simplified into its most basic form, similar almost to the beginning phases of cubism. These areas of freely brushed in colour without boundaries but descriptive of the landscape can be attributed directly to the influence of Ivon Hitchens. The steel grey blue of the sky the orange ochre of the sand and the burnt sienna of the undergrowth and trees and shadow are all he needs to describe the effect of the heat on the dryness of this landscape. The composition is made up of bands of horizontals from shadows and undergrowth which recede towards a mirage where the skyline blends into the landscape; this is broken by the strong vertical of the baobab in the foreground. The colour integration is effected by the use of strong browns but subdued orange/ochre in the foreground; from the middle distance on, the browns are played down and the orange ochre brought up. It is a very successful painting and leads on to one of his most successful paintings: 'Landscape-Buildings'.



11. Near Hot Springs, 1954.

With the advent of the Federation and subsequent boost in population and industry, Rhodesia began to find itself in a position of economic advantage. This manifested itself in the form of high rise buildings springing up around the capital and changing the skyline from its modest colonial rooftops to high rise blocks of flats and office buildings.

Robert Paul was quick to notice this contrast and it provided material for one of his most successful works in the phase of his semi-abstract, cubist period. Entitled 'Landscape-Buildings' and painted in 1958, it not only provided the opportunity to show the contrast between old and new (if anything, that is a secondary theme to the painting); it enabled him to convey with a perfect compositional structure the use of interlocking shapes into a townscape unaffected by organic form. He simplifies the subject immensely and uses the bare minimum to convey the contrast between the old colonial buildings and the high rise buildings.



12. Landscape Buildings, 1958.

His palette is very simple - he uses an Indian red and a brown for the sky and for the colonial roof tops; for the background he uses a variety of greys, which are made lighter in the high rise buildings to bring them forward. He articulates the middle distance with cerulean blue and a brighter red for the chimney. To lift the colours from being too drab, he uses white both as a colour and a compositional device. It brightens the painting and emphasizes the interlocking theme of the composition which is emphasized by the structure of the high buildings. This is an immensely successful work of carefully controlled colour, topical subject matter of the time, but above all; it is the high point of this period for him and the composition which is immaculate is to give him confidence for later work with organic form being the subject.

His largest painting was 'Livingstone Avenue'. It was completed in 1961 and in a sense follows on from 'Landscape-Buildings' in two ways. It follows artistically in that he uses the method of

interlocking shapes through the boundaries and much more defined in the painting. Here much of the subject is organic form - the trees in the Salisbury Avenues and these control the dark mood of the painting with its sombre palette of dark blues, greys, browns and whites.



13. Livingstone Avenue, 1961.

The composition is complex in that although the road leads one's eye into the painting, there is nothing that takes it effectively along horizontal planes which are blocked by the simplified forms. It is quite claustrophobic and the inclusion of a house with a window, door and a pillar is a confusing aspect of this work unless we interpret the painting through the inclusion of the house.

The house is an awkward intrusion into the composition and its integration with the rest of the painting is not successful in that its forms are dissimilar and do not relate to the others. It could be that the artist was trying to say how these houses (some of which had been built in the very early part of the twentieth

century) were no longer considered important (even for their historical value) in the light of the sudden progress brought by the Federation.<sup>1</sup> If this is what he was trying to say, the use of a very dark and subdued palette and a slightly claustrophobic composition suit his intentions well.

The 'Inyanga Mural' of 1964 and his 'Abstract 61' of 1966 bring this phase of his work to an end in 1966. He reviewed this period in a negative light - 'I had my abstract period without success.'<sup>2</sup>

He may have been correct in that he was not an abstract artist. As a colleague and friend of his from the later years of his life Ms. Dian Wright said: 'Robert's abstract painting wasn't really there. On the other hand, he abstracted brilliantly but as an abstract of reality - all of his paintings contain this.'<sup>3</sup>

It is correct to suggest that Paul's simplification of form is more akin to the early stages of cubism rather than abstraction although abstraction does come into his work a great deal. Either way, his ability to perceive shapes, colours and line in its simplest and most pertinent way was the foundation for his phenomenal range as a landscape painter. He was too physically involved with the landscape for it to be sublimated into pure

1. Because of the old buildings being pulled down, Paul completed a series of gum resist prints of old buildings in the 1970s.
2. Black, C. "Hose that Canvas Down" Illustrated Life Rhodesia, 9 April, 1970.
3. Wright, D. Tape-recorded interview, September, 1984.



abstraction or cubism. His landscapes had much to tell about the years of patrolling the veld, and his subsequent understanding and appreciation of his surroundings to be certainly purely within the limits of the slow and mannered progression of pure abstraction.



14. Inyanga Mural, 1964.

15. Abstract, 1966.

It is worth pointing out that this was Piper's experience in that having absorbed a catholic understanding of the vast number of styles and groups in the thirties, he steered towards the conviction that a more literal depiction of the landscape had more value.

"Any Constable, any Blake, any Turner has something an abstract or a surrealist painting cannot have.... Read Constable's letters, or a poem of Blake's, or look at an early glass painting. Each 'means' far more than itself alone. It 'means' the life of the artist - but beyond that, the life of his time.... (his) whole



existence and surroundings, and it fixes the whole passion of his age...."<sup>1</sup>.

The same conviction appears to have affected Paul in that having assimilated an understanding of the simplification of form, he uses this basis in his lesser works to affect a more visual interpretation of the landscape.

Before discussing the possibilities of development, it may be worthwhile to consider the technical approach to his work. For although his work has an apparently loose handling and simplicity, his method was rigid. I have discussed in previous chapters the effect of new language with its wide system and dramatic light on Paul, and how he assimilated aspects of Piper's and Hildebrandt's influences into his painting method. These were integrated together with the artistic perception to achieve impressions of landscape which are deceptive to their accurate simplicity. This deceptive simplicity arrived through the development of an extremely concise set of formal formulas which he worked out for himself through the aid of books and of anatomically inclined painting friends like Giovanni Segantini.

1. Rothenstein, op.cit. p.93.

CHAPTER 4

Having dealt in the previous chapter with the first stirrings of Paul's serious output, it leads us on to discuss the work he completed roughly at the same time he was concerned with abstract and artist inclinations in his work. This period which covers the dates from 1950 to 1973 enables us to trace a development of a certain approach to his landscape painting. Any specific development in Paul's work is confusing as he was essentially an intuitive painter who worked with various styles. Nevertheless, this phase of landscape painting does evolve alongside his abstract period, when he was concerned with the arrangements of forms in a composition with a subdued palette.

Before scanning the possibilities of development, it may be worthwhile to consider the technical approach to his work for although his works have an apparently loose handling and simplicity, his method was rigid. I have discussed in previous chapters the effect of new landscape with its wide spaces and dramatic light on Paul, and how he assimilated aspects of Piper's and Hitchen's influence into his painting method. These were integrated together with the artists perception to achieve impressions of landscape which are deceptive in their apparent simplicity. This deceptive simplicity evolved through the development of an extremely complex set of formal formulae which he worked out for himself through the aid of books and of academically inclined painting friends like Francois Roux. A

notable aspect of Paul's character was that he was always ready and willing to learn from others.

From sketches and slides, he would work out a composition on a piece of paper using the golden section, drawing in the lines usually curving from a focal point. Having worked everything out in advance on the paper, he would transfer the image on to canvas as accurately as possible with a system of grids. This rough work was normally done in charcoal. Sometimes to accentuate outlines, he would go over the charcoal with ink and brush. An example of this primary stage of the painting can be seen in the illustration below which looks like it might be the outline to a painting of Inyangani in the background and a trout stream in the foreground.

Having completed the compositional structure of the painting, Paul would then lay in the underpainting. This was an exceedingly important part of the painting as he often used the underpainting in the finished painting (ie. he allowed it to come through in the finished work). Yet it is noticeable that he did not see this technique in his more commercial works. Each stage of the painting was vitally important to the finish, he even used to prime his own canvases.

Paints were always scarce. Although Paul may not be credited for meeting any particular break-throughs in his work, his resourcefulness was phenomenal. He made many of his own paints - oils and tempera and hardly ever relied upon expensive equipment. Dian Wright remembers how he had about eighteen brushes which he

used and all of these were cut into the shapes that he wanted from simple, hardware store brushes. When Paul died in 1980, his daughter Colette gave Dian Wright his painting materials. Wright remembers with astonishment that the nucleus of his palette was five basic powder colours. Here was a fitting eulogy for a craftsman - creating something out of nothing. Over the years he had established his palette according to his needs and moderated them according to the limitations of available paint.

(Apparently, Piper once sent him (Paul) a tube of green paint that he used in a number of famous Pipers. Robert didn't care for it at all. He had already established his colours and couldn't really experiment much as everything was in short supply. <sup>1.</sup>)



1. An Example of Paul's Preparatory Work.

From underpainting, Paul went on to laying blocks of colour and working up to the final image. This was also a careful process as

1. Wright, op.cit.

he advocated a method of looking at the subject for nine minutes and painting for one. Examples to illustrate this approach so far show 1) how he approached a painting with no underpainting and 2) his approach with underpainting. He always used the same colour for underpainting. It was a flesh/ochre that lent itself well to the Rhodesian landscape.

In the first example, Paul is dealing with the subject of a rock pool and foliage or trees surrounding it. In both the paintings from this example, Paul selects blocks of colour with a well-defined edge; these built up with several coats of underpainting would result in the finished painting. The two paintings of 'Rock Pool' are halted in preliminary stages. In the first painting this is especially recognisable as there are only two colours - a dark green and a burnt sienna and white mixed. There are subtle lines beneath the underpainting showing the mapping out of the drawing. The image is largely unrecognisable.



2. Rock Pool n.d.



3. Rock Pool n.d.

In the second painting, the forms are sharply delineated with the artist's strong sense of line. There are a few thin layers of paint worked in to suggest growth and the swirl of water. Although the painting is not yet finished, it has already the atmosphere of a rock pool, almost Cezanesque in feel and reminiscent in parts of early cubism. Perhaps this is what Marion Arnold meant when she said: "He creates an independent unit of expression associated with but never dominated by the visual experience. His work is a tribute to the natural world and in no way a mechanical copy of it. He is attracted by the complexity of textural detail, thrusting life, force and unpredictable light and shadow patterns".<sup>1</sup>

The next example of the paintings showing this approach to painting is commissioned work for Mr. Dan Hogan of Mazoe. It is a view across a dam looking at a house amongst some trees. The paintings show in sequence his deliberate approach to the subject



4. Hogan's House, 1979. 5. Hogan's House, 1979.

1. Arnold, M. Critique, The Rhodesian Herald, 1 May, 1976.

in hand. Both commence with an underpainting of flesh ochre which he used in many of his paintings; from there blocks in with a well-defined edge all the shapes. In the first painting we are able to see the outlines of the forms, probably drawn in with Indian Ink. The colours are very basic - green, brown, blue and a pink for the roofs of the houses. The underpainting adds a cohesive quality to composition in that the artist allows it to come through in various places thus reiterating and linking a colour unity. The use of blue in the sky was a device which Paul used reluctantly and for commercial gain, particularly after his retrospective to attract more pedestrian trade. This painting was executed in 1979.

Paul had varying approaches to his work but amongst the oil and tempera work he did, this was the most consistent. He would work on about six paintings at once. In this way, he managed to get the most out of the subject. His formulae worked because of all the trouble he went to before he started the painting. He knew a lot about different mediums and he had a good school in this through people he had painted with over the years. He was always interested and collecting knowledge on the subject of techniques and pigments.

As a colourist, he was remarkable in his ability to render so close an exactness with such a frugal choice of colours. Perhaps it was the frugal choice which made him such a correct colourist. As a landscape painter in the regions where he painted, he was versatile and sensitive to the nuances of light that can change

colour so rapidly in mountainous regions. Marion Arnold in the critique of his Retrospective at the National Gallery in Harare wrote of him: "He is essentially a landscape painter who responds to space, light and atmosphere. Subject is the motivation and source of reference for his work but his power as a painter lies in his ability to translate reality into paint."<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, we can turn to the landscape work he began in the 1950's and observe how he begins to introduce textural properties to explain surfaces in his landscapes. The most widely used technique he employed at this time was one he learnt from John Piper, namely gum resist. He uses this technique with great effect in two paintings 'Inyanga Landscape' (1950) and 'Summit of Inyangani' (1967).



6. Inyanga Landscape, 1950.

1. Arnold, op.cit.



The 'Inyanga Landscape' of 1950 is characteristic of the countryside in September when the Msasa trees which are indigenous to the area change from green into a brilliant variety of shades of red, amber, brown and pink. It is the obvious splendid sight for the Sunday painter and with Rhodesia harbouring many then, prodigious quantities of these works could be seen on show everywhere.

Paul cleverly avoids these traps by the use of understatement. Instead of specifically delineating tree forms, he hints at organic matter with broad sweeping brushstrokes and uses the technique of gum resist to give an irregular pattern and texture to the foreground. This leads the painting on into the middle distance with the aid of a vertical white stroke against a dark backing which might be a waterfall. This device leads the eye into the spacial variations of colour and form in the middle distance. The thin streaks of white which follow the contours of the landscape in the middle distance below the mountains suggest that it is probably painted before ten in the morning or late in the afternoon when the sun is not potent enough to lift the ground cloud.

It is a landscape full of motion - the clouds sweeping overhead, the ground cloud sitting below the mountains and the trees turning into their spring colours. The painting is very much concerned with the stirrings of spring and his use of understatement enables the viewer to use his imagination, giving the painting a visionary quality which is the quality of his best work.

Brian Bradshaw, who organised Paul's Retrospective at the National Gallery in Harare in 1976 noted in his introduction to the catalogue: "I remember Paul telling me about a particular English landscape that met his eye and mind some fifty years ago. He described it in great detail, even to the effect of the dew on the grass, for it was early morning, and the view awoke to his eyes and has remained in his mind ever since. It was not merely a storage of memory. It was a vision, and the best of Paul's works are such visions."<sup>1</sup>

Much of his best work was completed in the traditional combination of oil and tempera. It would be wrong to overlook the many small works completed in mixed media and watercolour which were of an equally high standard. Paul never spoke highly of any of his work but he seemed to reserve particularly strong criticism for his watercolours. Perhaps it was because the paint was less manipulative and unpredictable compared to the mixed media and oil and tempera, a more pliable medium. Nevertheless he achieved some fine results with it.

is a technique that Piper uses particularly in his mixed media works. It succeeds here in giving the painting 'Mare Dam' and 'View from Rhodes Inyanga Hotel' done in 1960 and 1961 are two examples of his success with this medium. In 'Mare Dam', Paul captures the effect of the light from a storm and how it changes the colour of a hillside from green to prussian blue. It is dramatic but with a gentle lyricism in its fine articulate

1. Bradshaw, op.cit.

details of roads and trees and the dam in the middle ground. The dam is the centre of the composition.



7. Mare Dam, 1960.

In the foreground he refers back to the mood of the sky and the dark shoulder of the hill allowing the middle ground to create the tension between them. He reiterates the shapes of trees in the undergrowth and there is suggestion of rocks with the fine line of a pen on the left hand side at the bottom of the painting. In the foreground, he also uses a wash of cerulean and white over the dark landscape. This is a technique that Piper uses particularly in his mixed media works. It succeeds here in giving the painting a feeling of wetness in the landscape. He uses this technique again in the foreground of 'Crusader Rock' (n.d.).

The drawing for 'View From Rhodes Hotel' is done beneath the watercolour in a blue ball point pen. It is not obtrusive, but the work is more classical and carefully handled than 'Mare Dam'. The pink roof of the house in the centre of the painting is the focal point and around this, Paul paints carefully modulated tone



8. View From Rhodes Inyanga Hotel, 1961.

in the undulating landscape leading up to the mountains on the horizon. It is classical both in ambience and treatment, a secure piece of work, affirming his qualities as a draftsman and his ability to put a medium through its paces.

Paul was still experimenting (as he did throughout his life) with combinations of medias, inclusions of new techniques (or gimmicks as he called them) and much of his early work shows this enquiry and resourcefulness at this time. Yet he was constantly unsure of himself and always seeking the advice of others. His son, Paul Paul remembers: "I remember clearly how he would bring the painting that he was working on into the lounge in the evening and discuss it with the family. The next day he would go and change colours and shades, frequently to the detriment of the painting, as it would become messy, particularly with watercolours."<sup>1</sup>

1. Paul, P. op.cit.

Two paintings completed in 1960 show a contrasting approach. Both are executed in oil and tempera. 'Inyanga Scene With Huts' is an excursion into cubism with his handling of huts in a landscape with a storm behind it. The drama of the storm with its contrast of prussian blue against the vivid ochres in the grass is heightened in the use of black and white in the huts. I have some reservations as to whether the use of white in the foreground detracts from the ominous character of the painting. His handling with an impasto and palette knife work succeeds in parts but is less confident in others.



9. Inyanga Scene With Huts, 1960. 10. Road to Inyanga Village, 1961. On the other hand, 'Road to Inyanga Village' also painted with oil and tempera in 1960 bristles with a confident touch. Everything appears to have a purpose in the work. It is a remarkably successful composition, carefully arranged with a vanishing point leading through a gap through to the horizon. This is emphasized by the use of a road, telegraph poles cutting through some grass. He tends to use browns in his colour and occasionally articulates areas with pure colour like the orange ochre of the road.

Sometimes the use of a white line succeeds in breaking a vertical or the monotony of a colour field. The paint is thinly laid down and he has made use of sharp linear work in the trees on the left hand side and the brisk and almost abrupt clean edges of the shapes he uses in the landscape.



11. Inyangombe River, 1962.

Aspects of these works done in 1960 combine to anticipate a small mixed media work 'Inyangombe River' painted in 1962. The use of oil, tempera, gum resist and inks on paper combine with the subject and his handling of it to produce a simple, small painting with the inherent quality of a vision. The subject is reduced to its most simple in shape, colour and composition. The river leads up the centre of the painting and is surrounded by grasses and trees on the bank. The brushstrokes under and over the gum resist convey an enormous range of subtleties thus avoiding a blandness in its simplicity. Above the river bank looms the profile of the mountain Inyangani with its strong, brooding prussian blue reflected in the river. The colour of the sky (a mixture of yellow ochre and white) is repeated in the centre of the

composition above the river. The use of pink orange infiltrating from the right hand side lifts the tone above a concentrated play on gloom; although it allows the viewer some room for introspection, it still reminds one of the grandeur of the scene. The work triumphs in its combination of simplicity with the masterly way in which he underplays forms, textures and linear qualities of the landscape.

It was around this time that Paul met two artists with whom he exhibited, Francois Roux and Peter Birch. Francois Roux was from South Africa where he had received an academic training in Fine Art. Paul gratefully obtained much knowledge of Art on academic lines from him and on several occasions went painting with him. In 1953, they shared a Two Man Show.<sup>1</sup> Peter Birch had studied at the Royal College of Art and had come out from England to take up a teaching post in Salisbury.

They combined with others to form a contemporary group which met initially at Dulcie Wessock's Studio. Other members of the Contemporary group were Tom Maybank, Robert Hunter Craig, Trevor Wood and Dulcie Wessock. A sense of the modern, and willingness to go ahead and experiment, was the healthy artistic atmosphere which prevailed in the early part of the sixties before the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Peter Birch and Robert Paul had a Two Man Show in December 1960.

1. Wiles, C. Letter to C. Johnson, 21 November, 1985.

In the 60s, Paul took the opportunity to paint much in the landscape and would make excursions into the countryside often with fellow painters. Birch remembers how on one occasion, they both took a trip to Inyanga together and stayed at the Rhodes Hotel. He remembers what amusing company Paul could be until he started painting when his mood would switch to being serious and focusing his thoughts entirely on painting. When he was away from his work he inferred it was a waste of time. His son would join him on trips and whilst his son, a keen angler would fish, Paul would paint. Paul Paul took many slides on these occasions which would later prove to be an invaluable reference when the civil war escalated and precluded the possibility of country outings.

This chapter serves mostly as an introduction to the next which is concerned with his most successful works in his maturity as an artist. It gives an idea of his lifestyle and work which was enthusiastic and productive in the years before the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965.

1. Arnold, W. "Four Contemporary Painters" *Arts Magazine* No. 2  
1951/52 p. 45-50.



CHAPTER 5

With the advent of Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Rhodesia Front Party in 1965, Art enjoyed a greater interest with the Rhodesian public than before. In an article on four Contemporary Painters in Zimbabwe, Marion Arnold surveyed their reactions to the isolation from the international community and how it affected their work. In the same article, she probes the quality of the renewed interest in the visual arts at the time.

"A survey of Art shows that remarkable developments took place since 1965. The numbers of people involved in the visual arts increased enormously as did the number of exhibitions held annually. Whilst many of these were of a poor amateur standard with a commercial bias, even they had proved that there was a growing awareness of pictorial issues. It is sad that a real search for knowledge did not accompany a flirtation with picture making."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the renewed interest in the visual arts, the general standard of the amateur probably stooped lower than before due to commercialism. This can be attributed to various factors: U.D.I. enhanced the need for the embodiments of a national image. One outlet for this was an immense pride in the physical character of the landscape. Whereas before, reverent focus had been set on England, emphasis now shifted to the immediate environs. This

1. Arnold, M. "Four Contemporary Painters" Arts Zimbabwe No. 2 1981/82 p. 46-54.

shift of identity did have its good points especially in that the public became and were made more aware of their environs. What is questionable is the depth of this awareness. This is reflected in the copious quantities of 'Rhodesian scenes' executed by Sunday Painters of whimsical calibre. Although this may sound harsh, it introduced a problem in that this was the level of Art that most Rhodesians came to accept as 'Art', and in that as 'good' Art.

In an essay on Auden, Francis Scarfe made what is at first sight the rather surprising remark, "the climate of poetry at any time is not decided by the great poet, but by the level of the work of its minor poets."<sup>1</sup>

If the same quotation is applied to Art instead of poetry, and the tone of the minor artists is equal to that of the commercial Rhodesian Scene painter, then this factor is worth considering when examining the later works of Robert Paul. It must be remembered that with sanctions came a cultural embargo so whereas before Unilateral Declaration of Independence, artists enjoyed the flow of international art through their country's border, this dwindled and aided a parochial arts structure.

Before Unilateral Declaration of Independence, Paul's reference was the influence of Piper and other Neo-Romantic artists together

1. Scarfe, F. Auden and After quoted in an article by Brettell, N.H. "Rhodesian Poetry of a Decade or So", Arts Rhodesia No. 1, 1978 p.32

with his wealth of accumulated experience in the veld and a few serious artist like the Contemporary Group.

He was accustomed to a self-imposed isolation as he desired to seek new landscapes in virgin territory. U.D.I. brought a subtle but malicious irony; his self-imposed isolation (which was always open ended) became not an individual but a national isolation, constricting both his outlook as an artist and that of the public's. Marion Arnold noted of the public that: "Isolation, allied with the realities of a society labouring under economic difficulties and contending with a war situation, bred a sense of insularity and a 'survival' mentality in Rhodesia's European population. This was not a healthy atmosphere for the output of experimental art, which by definition, challenges entrenched values and attitudes."<sup>1</sup>.

She continues: "Artists who maintained their productivity as a serious and non-commercial endeavour, did not in the face of indifference, ignorance and prejudice prevalent amongst a public sheltered from the incursion of new ideas."<sup>2</sup>.

Pressure in the form of public opinion affected Paul in some ways. It heightened his uncertainty about certain things. For example, he denied the value of his encounters with abstraction and cubism and said he was glad to be out of it.<sup>3</sup> Abstraction was taboo

1. Arnold, op.cit.
2. Ibid.
3. Black, op.cit.

with Rhodesian White society as they equated it with the liberal-minded 'free world' who had enforced the evil of sanctions upon them. By the time he had retired from his seasonal post with the Tobacco Auctions in the late sixties, he became solely reliant on his pensions and the money he earned from the paintings he sold. It may be for this reason that the hints of a division appear in his work.

Yet he never bluffed himself. He knew when he was 'pot boiling' and catering for public taste. Both Dian Wright and Peter Birch vouch that he was honest about this and acknowledged his occasional preference to paint for the public rather than himself if money was short. He was also aware of this failing in others and was critical of it. Trish Broderick, a librarian at the National Gallery remembers his surprise and horror at Piper's commercial ventures: "He knew that Piper pot-boiled and when he received a Piper screen-print of a fishnet-stockinged girl he was outwardly horrified and called him a dirty old man. No doubt Piper had sent it to amuse Robert but I think one part of him was a bit shaken that such a thing had come from Piper."

With Paul, this division was a cognitive process. Before it had asserted itself to the detriment of his work, Paul painted a series of paintings between 1966 and 1973 remarkable in their intensity of vision. They act as the high point of his mature work, striking in their simplicity and the competent development of his individual technique. In a sense they are comparable with

Pasmore's sublime phase<sup>1</sup> excepting that Pasmore's sublime phase of landscapes anticipates his involvements with abstraction whereas Paul's sublime mature phase acts as a coda to his earlier ventures with experimentation.



1. "Inyanga, 1966"

'Inyanga' 1966 is a potent description of the landscape in late August/September. Masterfully simplified in form and line, he has depicted the landscape at the change of a season. His ability to underplay and allow the viewer a broad definition of the mood of the painting is evident here. He expresses the dryness of the landscape anticipating the rains. In the event of waiting below a sky slack with doubt, the first stirrings of the cyclic regeneration of spring appear in the foreground of the painting.

The foreground is loosely assembled in a mixture of browns and ochres, behind it there are passages of black which give a feeling of solidity to the undergrowth where a tree on either side of the painting frames the view in a photographic composition.

1. Broderick, P. Letter to C. Johnson, October, 1984.

The most striking aspect of the linear qualities in the foreground is his loose but accurate handling of the branches in the trees and his articulation of grass stalks which he has achieved by scratching the paint off with a knife against the brown, ochre and black of the undergrowth.

Through the use of a 'V' shape in the middle of the foreground, we are led into the middleground which is a series of sensuous, curvular shapes describing the contours and the content of the landscape in the middle distance and horizon. The use of his colours are very exact and correct for this time of the year. He separates the bands of musasa trees from the veld with a thin line of white and this lifts the painting, inviting the viewer's eyes to rest ultimately in the centre of the composition. The sky is an off white/grey typical of that time of the year due to the frequency of bush fires. It is an accurate and succinct description of the landscape at the turn of the season but lacks the visionary capacity inherent in 'Summit of Inyangani' an oil and tempera work which he completed in 1967.

'Summit of Inyangani' was done from memory and with the aid of a slide taken by Paul Paul looking down the mountain from the summit. Inyangani is the highest mountain in the country and is bequeathed with a fair share of legend. Many people have disappeared in the sudden mists which can descend on the mountain; some of these people have never been seen again. Some are lost for days and are unaware of the amount of time they have spent in the mist. 'Summit of Inyangani' is probably Paul's best known



2. Summit of Inyangani, 1967.

work, it is also one of his most successful paintings. It is a synthesis of accumulated experience, accomplished technique and an accuracy of colour which has brightened with a new vibrance into his palette.

He uses a complex composition of the golden section and diagonals bisecting one another in the middle of the composition where the focal point is. It is carefully worked out so that the subject rests comfortably in the structure. The quality of the colour in the sky sets the romantic tone of the painting - a mixture of purple, yellow and white subdued in a haze which sparkles and lights the rest of the colour and tone into a mystical romantic drama of texture, simplification of form, line and precise tonal control. The mountain in the far distance recedes into the mist but remains solid as do the hillsides on the left and right hand sides of the painting. He brings the left-hand hillside into the composition by using the same colour but with more intensity and

repetition of shape. The shoulder of the hill on the right hand side not only gives the painting a sense of leading up to the summit but also a sense of volume and an intensity of colour added to a tonal range which strengthens the work.

His palette is unusually bright in that although he does include a fair amount of black, he moves away from the use of earth colours to cleaner colours and orchestrates his tonal values from there. He uses repetition of colour as a compositional device as well. The greys on the rocks in the foreground are repeated on the left-hand hillside and in the mountain in the background. The yellow which describes some of the organic form in a line along a central horizontal in the painting, he also repeats on the rocks. He uses the green of the right hand mountainside in between the rocks.

The painting has an immensely strong feeling for organic form because he has simplified trees, bushes, rocks and understates them in a powerful way. They are still recognisable as such; the effect of the mist is so strong that one feels the painting may even be an underwater scene. He has used the technique of gum resist with great effect on the rocks and the grass. The grass on the left hand side is seemingly carelessly etched in and makes the whole painting shiver with dew. The trees and bushes convey the same impression.

The whole painting has an almost primaeval quality which is enhanced by the undefined, dark form above the rocks and below the



trees left of centre in the composition. It is reminiscent of a tomb or a cave where the Africans bury their dead. Certainly this painting is the summit of his later phase and together with 'Inyanga with Wattles' combine to form the peak of his major works in this period.



3. Inyanga with Wattles, 1969.

'Inyanga with Wattles' is the work of a mature and confident artist who has explored the avenues of technique, composition and accumulated visual experience to make his painting look facile but fascinate the viewer. 'Inyanga with Wattles' was painted in 1969, two years after he completed 'Summit of Inyangani'. Its greatest strength lies in the overall simplicity and the ease of its handling. The road and profile of the mountain lead the eye to a vanishing point just outside the composition on the right hand side of the painting. It has a startling simplicity when one realizes it is comprised of four areas - the vegetation on either side of the road, the road itself, the mountains in the background and the sky.

He achieves a depth of field by using bands of light and dark - initially with the sky full of cloud against the sombre profile of the mountain. The cloud coming over the mountain throws the mountain in shadow and also some of the vegetation which comprises of the middle distance and the foreground. It is in this central area where he has achieved a remarkable depth of field by setting colours off against one another and using contrast of tonal values. It is an intensely romantic painting caught in a moment in time when the sun has come out of the clouds and lightens up a part of a dark landscape still allowing the contrast in it to give an artist a brief vision of something he wants to make lasting in a painting.

The bands of light and dark running from left to right towards the vanishing point help to give this momentary feeling. He has used very thin, almost opaque paint to achieve this and his brush strokes which are most broad and vigorous combine with the paint to suggest that the wind is blowing through the landscape.

Towards the end of the road on the right and on the bottom right hand corner, the landscape is thrown into shadow. This brings out the road which has a warmth reflected in the colour of the clouds. In the dark areas, he etches outlines suggesting the sprightly feel of the undergrowth and wattle trees.

The use of a wattle branch with its buds bursting into bloom give the painting a focal point in the centre of the painting. It is an ingenious device handled fluently and with aplomb. The leaves

are articulated against the sandy road and the flowers against the belt of wattle trees on the other side of the road. This breaks lines converging towards the vanishing point and add to use of contrasts lifting the painting above the gloomy light pervading in the landscape.

The use of gum resist in the leaves and parts of the foliage give an added emphasis to both the texture and the tree dimensional effect of the painting. His choice of media (oil and tempera) is much suited to the subject in that both the fluidity of tempera and the rich intensity of oil are used to maximum benefit of the painting. Alongside 'Summit of Inyangani' it is perhaps the peak of his best work. In both works, he unleashes a range to his vision of Romanticism which enforces Piper's quote about Romantic Art. Through dealing with the particular, he contains within the second vision a broader and universal significance than can be dwelt upon beyond the comment of more appearances.

Piper noted in an essay on British Romantic Artists about British Romantic painting: "Abiding also in the romantic painting of this country is the sense of drama in atmosphere, in the weather and the seasons. As a race we have always been conscious of the soft atmosphere and the changeable climate of our sea-washed country, where the air is never quite free from mist, where the light of the sun is more often pale and pearly than it is fiery. This atmosphere has sunk into our souls....It has inspired the sharp

outlined visions of Blake as well as the vague adumbrations of Whistler's nocturnes." <sup>1</sup>.

Paul's sensitivity to atmosphere is of primary importance in his work. His greatness lay in his ability to cope with landscapes from 'the sharp outlined visions of Blake' to the vague adumbrations of Whistler's nocturnes but to remain himself through it all. His range as an artist was remarkable.

Two paintings follow 'Inyanga with Wattles' in 1970 and 1978 thus concluding the sublime phase of his mature period. In 'Inyangombe River' of 1978, he is conscious of the strong visionary qualities the scene evokes. The composition is made up of interlocking shapes and he uses his subdued palette occasionally articulating areas with bright colours. It does not have the variety the other works contain and although his reduction of form is the strength of the work, its weakness lies in the fact that he has not



4. Inyangombe River, 1970.

1. Piper, et.al. Aspects of British Art p. 78.

concerned himself enough with presenting convincing information within the simplification.



5. Mission Bend, 1978.

'Mission Bend' of 1978 was done in oil and tempera on hessian. The strength of the work lies in its composition and the artists ability as a colourist. He uses the white line as a dividing line between forms with the same success as he did in his painting 'Inyanga 1966'. His use of understatement in every part of the work is poetic in its magnificent description of the landscape's character. In a predominantly ochre based painting he uses orange and yellow to lift the work above monotony. A master of articulation in landscape, he uses a tree set solitarily against a sky in the bleak landscape. Careful not contrived inclusions like these may have prompted Frieda Harmsen to note: "Though man does not appear in Robert Paul's works, the paintings have the power to bring us to introspection, a self examination most profoundly concerned with mankind."<sup>1</sup>.

1. Harmsen, op.cit.

CHAPTER 6

It was around 1970 that Paul's palette changed from a previously subdued and earthy colour to the use of more vibrant colours. He attributed this change to the influence of two artists - Pierre Bonnard and the English painter Patrick Heron. Coupled with this change was a tendency in some of his oil and tempera work to strive for a closer likeness (in the sense of a photographic likeness but not precise, exact reproduction) to the scene. It may be that some of this work was geared towards a commercial market. Nevertheless, he still employs an artistic proficiency and makes new developments with colour in these works. These factors merit their consideration.

Trout streams were often the subject of these works. Some of them may have been executed on site when he and his son went up there (Inyanga) and Paul Paul would fish. Perhaps one of the first hints of this was in a painting in 1967 done of the 'Matenderere River'. He uses extremely thin washes of oil and tempera on canvas; on close examination the paint is so thin it looks as if he has barely stained the canvas. From this point of view it is remarkable in that the paint is hardly worked and nearly everything he has put down has been left there without correction.

He uses a central composition with the river converging to a focal point in the centre of the painting. The stream meanders along the central axis out towards the base of a hill and the horizon. He employs the contours of the landscape to act as a compositional

device to follows the diagonals stretching from the four corners of the canvas bisecting in the centre where the focal point is. The mountain on the top right hand side lacks some of the conviction that the rest of the work retains. But the finely orchestrated use of pink, red, blue, white and the tonal variety in the work is unusual for him.



1. Matenderere River, 1967.

2. Pungwe River, 1968.

Often the colour will predominate the mood of the painting as in 'Pungwe River' of 1968. He has explored the use of blue with varying intensity and tone in the middle and background. It fails to convince the viewer of the artist's affection for his work. Paul Paul discusses this aspect of his father's work: "Occasionally he would paint to please the customer. Examples of these would be paintings at the Montclair Hotel and the painting which hangs in Harare Sports Club. He did not enjoy the work or like the paintings. He never praised his own work and throughout

his life appeared to be frustrated in trying to achieve the perfection which he wanted to."<sup>1</sup>.

It is not worth dwelling on these works as they simply have one characteristic in common - they lack the spark his better work has.

He found an outlet for a more personal stamp in his mixed media work of the mid 60s and early 70s. Four pieces alongside the work discussed in the last chapter review the nobility of his line, the accomplishment of his technique and his ability to condense complex landforms into a meaningful simplification of the landscape without a loss of expressive power.



3. Vegetable Garden, n.d.

'Vegetable Garden' is very Piperesque with its individual iconography of squiggles and lines. It is appealing in its

1. Paul, P. Letter to C. Johnson, 5 September, 1984.



graphic departure from his norm. The horizon is too sudden in the composition and does not contain all the information below it comfortably. Some of the colours and iconography are very similar to Piper's work of landscape in Wales executed in the 1940's.

The next two mixed media are of Inyanga and illustrate his approach to painting and the enormous success of his understated work. He imbues these works with a sense of speed as if the artist has painted them whilst rushing past in a car in the late evening.



4. Inyanga, 1968.

5. Inyanga, 1970.

'Inyanga 1968' is especially noticeable for the vigour of its line. Using three basic colours - a flesh tint in the sky, a warm orange/ochre for the earth and a black to articulate form and movement, he creates a landscape complete in its simple state. If it were not for the intense vigour of his line, the painting might well seem stilted. Instead the sense of speed creates an unusual spatial dimension in the work. It is almost cubist in the sense that because of the spatial dimension, one has a feeling of being

able to travel through the landscape and see it from all sides. It explains his technical approach succinctly.

In 'Inyanga 1970', one has the feeling of seeing the landscape from a high vantage point and looking across a plain. Here the artist has relied on the lines used for the compositional structure to give definition to the work. Beyond this, the underpainting and an occasional nuance of tone gives a hint of body to the form. Only the sky is painted over the underpainting leaving the clouds probing into the landscape from the left hand side to remain the same colour as the landscape.

This introduces an interesting concept in that the clouds become the focal point and the viewer tends to move with them across the landscape creating a new spatial dimension in this work but of a different nature to the previous work.



6. Mare River, 1973.

The last of these mixed media paintings is a small work done in oil and ink on paper entitled 'Mare River'. It was painted in

1973 in a seemingly brash and uncalculated manner. Yet it is a meticulously observed composition with five basic interlocking shapes - the sky, the mountain, the far bank, the river and the foreground. He uses this green as the basic colour in the painting and is entirely descriptive of the landscape at this time of the year of heavy rains. The river curves sluggishly around the base of the hill reflecting the sky and surrounding greens. Paul varies tone of the landscape with the use of Indian Ink washes which he employs in the foreground.

The profile of the mountain and the hill in the background are beautifully understated leaving the focus to be directed on the river which curves sluggishly around the base of the hill. His observation of the effect of hard rains and the run off down the hillside into the river is remarkably penetrating and his brushstrokes recreate this with masterly ease. Sometimes he uses a broad brush to achieve this; sometimes it is merely a single stroke. But each stroke plays a part in the overall composition to achieve one of his freshest and most notable works.

Before ending this chapter, some paragraphs should be devoted to the work Paul did of old buildings in the late sixties and early seventies and the studies of Beira which he did on holiday there also in the seventies.

The series of old Pioneer buildings executed in sepia and gum resist commemorated some of the oldest buildings in the country, many of which Paul would have seen erected in the late twenties.

The use of gum resist suited these works admirably and Piper himself used this technique on his work of buildings as well.



7. View Down Manica Road, 1967. 8. The Arnold Building, 1971.

'View Down Manica Road' is a well structured, solid academic study of an industrial site which captures the regular character of the scene. The composition is classical, ordered and appealing, the balance of light and dark suited to the scene with the large grannery looming on the horizon.

'The Arnold Building' painted in 1971 displays eloquent draftsmanship with the tracery on the front of the house. It captures the character but lacks the strength of composition which the previous print has. He was commissioned by Syfrets to do all old colonial buildings which were being taken down at this time. It was a profitable commercial venture for him.



9. Beira, circa. 1970s.



10. Lighthouse and Wreck, circa. 1970s.

In the late sixties and seventies Paul went on several holidays to Mozambique and stayed at the coastal port of Beira. Unlike the work of old buildings which were imbued with a certain amount of nostalgia, the work Paul executed in Beira shows his contact with the unfamiliar present. Nevertheless, his perception does not desert him. A watercolour and an oil and tempera of the lighthouse show how he handles the same scene with different approaches.

In the watercolour, he concentrates on the wreck of a ship and the lighthouse which lie in close proximity to one another. The pier determines the horizontal with the sea and he organises the composition so that the sky sets the mood for the subject. He handles the sky with a dramatic and seemingly uncontrolled watercolour effect. The colours he uses in the sky are repeated in the sand.

The oil and tempera painting of the same scene is set further back allowing a band of trees entering the composition from the left hand side to draw the eye to the focal point of the lighthouse just off centre of the composition. The colours are very simple - he makes use of the underpainting allowing it to seep through into the sky as clouds which express the heat of the day. The belt of trees and shadows on the beach are handled very simply in almost a monotone. He makes use of gum resist in the shadows on the sand - a useful device which gives the viewer a feeling of pathways through the shadows created by leaves and draw the view along to the focal point creating visual interest at the same time. It is the strength of simplicity in this work which makes it succeed.

Another painting he executed in Beira was 'Beira Beach' of 1970. It appears to be unremarkable with a wave about to break out off on the left hand side of the composition. In the distance he articulates the work with the inclusion of two sail boats, red and white. Perhaps the shadow in the foreground creates an unresolved



11. Beira Beach, 1970.

tension in the composition and this fault does worry. Yet the competent handling of paint, particularly the scraping in the sea to suggest small waves and reflection from the sun is admirable work.

But these are flippant side tracks which bear little weight in comparison to the kernel of his work in Inyanga. It was the intensity and range of these Inyanga works, whether in mixed media or oil and tempera, which prompted Brian Bradshaw's consideration of organising an exhibition at the National Gallery in Salisbury for Robert Paul. It was to be the only Retrospective held for an artist there, in his life time too. Paul gladly accepted.

When I became Director of the National Gallery at Salisbury I looked into the situation of Rhodesian artists and as far as painting was concerned, Paul was the most professionally proficient. He had not been painting for some time (years ago?) preferring to 'put the bottle'. I arranged to see him, look over his existing work and said he should take up the brush again and get going because I was going to fix a show for him in ten months time at the National Gallery (the first time a local artist had been given such opportunity - but in his special case justifiable as it was at the start of a separate PAR system). Paul responded well and produced. The exhibition was well attended. He will well. And it was the beginning of a successful career for him.

CHAPTER 7

This chapter is concerned with Paul's work from 1976 until 1980. It was through Brian Bradshaw's appointment as Director of the National Gallery in the mid 1970s that Paul was offered the opportunity to have a one man exhibition at the National Gallery (the first show of its kind) in 1976. Bradshaw had been Professor of Fine Art at Rhodes University for fifteen years; trained at the Royal College, he was also a Prix de Rome Winner. Essentially an etcher of outstanding merit, he later became involved with Painting. In Bradshaw's words:

'When I became Director of the National Gallery of Rhodesia, I looked into the situation of Rhodesian artists and as far as painting was concerned, Paul was the most professionally artistic. He had not been painting for some time (years maybe) preferring to 'hit the bottle'. I arranged to see him, look over his existing works and said he should take up the brush again and get moving because I was going to fix a show for him in ten months time at the National Gallery (the first time a local artist had been given such opportunity - but in his special case justifiable as it was not the start of a sequence for others). Paul responded well and produced. The exhibition was well attended. He sold well. And it was the beginning of a successful career for him.'<sup>1</sup>

1. Bradshaw, B. Letter to C. Johnson, 24 September, 1984.



Two hundred and fifty five works were presented at the Retrospective; this took up all the space offered on the upper floor of the National Gallery - a sizeable amount of room. It referred to work as far back as an oil painting of Prince Edward School done in 1940 up to the work he had done prior to the Retrospective in 1976 - a period of thirty six years (and some of the time he didn't even paint for months, sometimes years).

Assembling enough work for the Retrospective was no mean feat. In as much as Paul had no real sense of historical interest (in the accepted sense of the word), nor did he have any real understanding of the value of his work. He kept no records of where his paintings went to<sup>1</sup>; the Gallery advertised in the newspaper asking all owners of Robert Paul's paintings to permit them to be exhibited on his Retrospective - the public was very forthcoming. Those who had collections of his work were also supportive.

The Rhodesian public were predictable but it was Paul who was revealing on this occasion. Members of the Gallery Staff (amongst them was Chris Till<sup>2</sup>.) went to visit Paul at his house to see if they could locate more work which the artist may have over-looked. Paul's house was still the same one he had lived in with his wife Dreen since 1938 (the garden was over-running the largely run down

1. His daughter, Colette Wiles has a comprehensive record of his his works.
2. Previous Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, then Curator.

farm house). Amongst this convivial deluge of disorder, Till discovered several piles of work hidden in unusual places - one pile was found underneath his bed: one on the garage roof and the other on the farm house roof. It is possible that Paul put the pile underneath his bed there himself: the piles on the roof tops were put there by his wife, Dreen.

Dreen was aware that Robert never held a high opinion of his work. She, in fact, did. Thanks to her, much of the work he produced survived because she hid it from him. When the mess became unbearable on the verandah or bedroom where Robert painted, he would gather it up and throw it in bins. Dreen would then take it from the bins and hide it, usually with the aid of the notorious step-ladder <sup>1</sup> on the roof or a similarly inaccessible place. Much of this work had been damaged by the elements or general lack of care; the task of restoring it to a presentable state went to Stan Trice at the National Gallery - a mammoth undertaking which he remembers with little affection.

For Paul, the accolade of national recognition as the foremost painter in the country must have been a great boost to his low confidence as an artist and to dwindling finances. Yet he responded with the same dry, cool-headedness as he had done roughly fifteen years earlier when Frank McEwan had referred to

1. Birch refers in his tape-recorded interview to Dreen Paul's habit of falling off step-ladders whilst climbing on to the roof, occasionally to hide the paintings from her husband.

him as the best painter in Rhodesia, if not Southern Africa. Paul brushed it aside with a glibe "Why not say 'the bloody world'".

It had taken a long time for fellow artists and public alike to acknowledge his artistic credibility. It was something which his whole career as a painter had suffered largely from the incredulity of fellow artists or the public, or both.

Dian Wright remembers Paul's resilience to his contemporaries tight, conservative outlook: "Whenever he put any of his work on the National Gallery Annuals, they used to roar with laughter. He was upset by this but it was painting that was important to him. He was very much a painter of his time. He did take a lot of ridicule and a lot of contempt. He had to deal with growing up in a very old-fashioned, straight-laced 'Old-Rhodie' society who couldn't appreciate him. If there hadn't been Doreen, that would have wiped him out. He had taken a lot of criticism, and he was bitter."<sup>1</sup>.

Much criticism was made of him by the public. Most people stood slightly in awe of him. Yet even critics were slightly intimidated by his Art, and reporters would find it impossible to get him to talk about his work. Very few critics were equipped to assess his work with an informed and trained eye. But no one could be more critical of his work than himself - so much so that he actually threw away the bulk of his output. Paul had a good

1. Wright, op.cit.

critical eye and a strongly analytical mind. Dian Wright likened him to Francis Bacon in that he could take things and people to pieces bit by bit.

It is strange that built into this perception was an imperceptive assessment of his own work (perhaps he set his standards too high). He even allowed his dog to lift his leg on a painting which he had just sprayed with a hosepipe. Paul's comment was 'you can't fool the expert critics'.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the painting was later praised for being vigorous and strong in tone when it was viewed privately in South Africa by several collectors.

This dichotomy in Paul's character was extremely contradictory. When he was painting, he was utterly serious about everything he was doing yet when he was away from it he did not seem to care about his achievements or the quality of his work. This care or the lack of it could carry itself into every aspect of his personality. (For example with clothing he was capable of carrying himself with an impressive military bearing, or paint in a grime and dirt stained Camel hair dressing gown. When Dian Wright saw the gown, she made Paul buy some overalls. Undaunted, Paul bought a pair of emerald green overalls contrasting with electric effect to his bright pink complexion).

Paul was consistent in certain aspects of his work. One consistency was his frequent if not obsessive interest in specific

1. Black, op.cit.

areas of the Inyanganga landscape. The aspect of stylistic and thematic variation which Paul projected into his work was a conscious effort to elicit as much of the enigma from a scene as possible to him. Being constantly dissatisfied with his work, this is perhaps another reason why he would attempt six paintings at once - to see if he could come closer to his aims by the sixth canvas. It is also worth remembering that the landscape he painted was very variable in light and season. Within a day one could paint the same scene several times and evolve at least five remarkably different paintings because of the possible changes of weather. There were also sites which Paul particularly enjoyed painting.



1. Inyangombe River, 1975.      2. Inyangombe River, n.d.

One of these was the profile of Inyangani Mountain from a section on the Inyangombe River. He painted this scene countless times - in varying moods and styles. The first painting shows the landscape on a slightly cloudy day in winter. We can tell this because trees on the side of the river have no leaves and the

landscape is handled in predominantly browns and ochres - colours characteristic of the winter landscape. He has used a very academically constructed composition of lines converging towards a focal point at the base of the mountain. His palette is simply browns, blues and greys articulated occasionally by flecks of orange and red to bring the colour up more.

It is a work descriptive of the colours, the textures and the mood of the landscape at that time of the year. It refers to the two-fold sensual appeal that Marion Arnold noticed: 'the tactile sense is aroused by evocative depiction of rough scrub and luminous water or cool skies and the eye delights in textural, tonal and linear qualities of the richly vibrant surface.'<sup>1</sup>

This stands in complete contrast to the handling of a similar scene further up the river. There is an impasto quality to the paint here which suits the torrid mood of the painting. He has used again a carefully constructed composition with a neutral focal point. He has used blocks of colour but worked into the thick paint giving a sense of textural detail to the painting.

"He does not get lost in irrelevancies because he has the abilities to disassociate the abstract power or surface richness from the physical characteristics of the object".

1. Arnold, Critique.

In the second painting, he seems to project the feelings of snowswept landscape in South of England <sup>1</sup>. The mountain appears to be covered in snow and the whole feeling of the painting is slightly foreign to the ambience of Inyanga - even in winter.

Another series of paintings that he did of the same subject in different years and styles were of 'Rocks at Inyanga on Inyanga Rusape Road'. They are remarkable in that they span thirteen years and illustrate magnificently his versatility as an artist. They are of precisely the same scene - probably done from sketches and a slide.

The first painting was done in 1967. He uses a vertical composition on its side with great effect as the road gives the



3. Rocks On Inyanga-Rusape Road, 1967.

1. Bradshaw, Letter.

painting a greater depth of field with lines converging to a vanishing point on the far right hand side of the painting. Here he makes supreme use of the underpainting (in its ochre/flesh colour) particularly in the fore and middleground. He works everything out in blocks of colour. The painting of the rocks is essentially cubist in handling, more particularly early cubism. It is a perceptive well-constructed analysis of a difficult subject.

Again his palette is simple blue, grey, browns others green and white. He has used very thin paint and the handling of the scrub in the foreground has an ingenious simplicity which breaks up the surface in a casual and unrestricted manner that becomes the painting. It is one of the best examples of his oil and tempera works at this time.

The next painting was done in 1969 also in oil and tempera and in a horizontal, rectangular shape. His palette is minimal here it



4. Rocks on Inyanga-Rusape Road, 1969.



merely accentuates tone in his underpainting. He uses the same colour in his underpainting as he did in the previous work and thereafter uses brown, ochre and white to articulate with strong contrasts the forms in the landscape. The band of rocks running along the horizontal is the subject of this dramatic painting. He uses dark browns to give them the solidity and the brightness of the clouds against the looming forms throw the rocks into a sharp relief against the sky. There is much vigorous painting and we are immediately caught up in the dramatic mood. The brushstrokes have a restless urgency which enhances the drama.

He takes this painting further than its predecessor in that he is not merely concerned with the formal properties of the landscape but engages himself in depicting the texture of the rocks and the foreground without calming the intensity of the mood. He achieves this with the use of gum resist. The rocks stand pitted and rugged against the sky giving them the essential character of the landscape. In the foreground the grass is etched in along the roadside.

This painting was done in 1980. It contains aspects of both the previous works. It is more pictorial in vision and has a much looser feel to it. It is a sound painting with a cohesive quality in the handling of paint. The consistency of its apparently loose application is a notable aspect in this work. Again the feeling of motion, moving through a landscape occurs here. It is as if the artist is travelling in the car whilst painting the scene. Clouds move from the left to the right of the landscape converging



5. Rocks on Inyanga - Rusape Road, 1980.

with the road towards the vanishing point on the right. The clouds stand in relief against the imposing granite domes which are the focal point and subject. It has a similar feeling of motion to the previous painting but is much brighter and painted with a more vivid and colourful palette. Nevertheless, the colours are simple. The underpainting is an ochre which he allows to come through in the scumbling of the trees and foliage below the rocks. The colour of the road is blue/grey and is lightly reiterated in the sky. The granite rocks look as if they have been handled with a palette knife, loosely but deliberately. The subject is very successfully handled and it is a fine example of one of his last works.

These three paintings of a similar scene go to show how he was able to elicit as much as possible from a single subject. He was conversant with a number of different styles which he adopted according to the nature of his subject and his whim. It is remarkable how they work. The last of these paintings was done on

a rare occasion when he was painting for himself. Much of his time was spent doing commissions in the late 70s for people who were leaving the country. He did not enjoy this work and it frustrated him to have to do it. In a letter he wrote to Trish Broderick who had been the Librarian at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, he said: "I am selling well but it is not good painting. Stuff that people who are leaving Rhodesia want. However it is money."<sup>1</sup>.

He goes on to mention a Gallery in Philadelphia (America): "Some months ago the owner was over here and bought three of mine for \$1 200 each. He is coming over in two months time and wants more."<sup>2</sup>.

Then: "I'm not happy with my painting either. I am now going to paint as I want to without selling in mind."<sup>3</sup>.

It is equally difficult to trace any amount of Paul's serious work from this period. Perhaps it was snapped up with the same enthusiasm as his more commercial work. This feeling of disenchantment pervaded his whole output - he was never really satisfied with any of his work that remains from this period, (and there is a small combination of the serious and commercial side) there is a consistency in his use of rocks as a focal feature in his landscapes. It is easy to look too much into the symbolic meaning of the rocks and why he used it, perhaps it was merely

1. Paul, Robert. Letter to P. Broderick, 28 April, 1979.

2. Ibid., 18 August, 1979.

3. Ibid., 28 April, 1979.

something which people specifically asked for in commissions. But there is an irony here: the people leaving the country wished to take with them a bit of the old country; rocks could be a symbol of the resilience they no longer exuded. I don't for a moment infer that this was Paul's message - I doubt if any of his work was intended to be symbolic or didactic but I wonder if the irony ever crossed Paul's mind.



6. Inyanga Rocks, 1974 - 1978.

A painting 'Inyanga Rocks' which Paul started in 1974 but finally resolved in 1978 aptly illustrates the continuing theme of rocks in a landscape and his dilemma between personal expression and commercial viability. From the point of view of assessing the painting's worth in terms of artistic merit, it is made more difficult for two reasons. The cognitive change of his palette from a subdued to a brighter, more vital colour is not always indicative of a commercial bend. (He did acknowledge that he included the colour blue in the skies to draw the public to his work.) Secondly, Paul was a good painter and even when he painted for the public his ability shone through.

'Inyanga Rocks' has a strong feeling of solidity about it. He has obviously struggled with the foreground and the middleground as the paint is thickly worked. The colours are deep, as the trees are in shadow. Although the paint is worked, it still has a looseness about it and the rocks are vaguely convincing although they are not the most successful aspect of this work. What gives it away a bit is the sky, more specifically the cloud, which is almost too whimsical for the summer's day it is. It peeps from behind the rocks and whistles past in a very overstated, un-Paul like manner. It is a shame, as the areas which have worked well, as in the foreground, show some successful painting, marred by the sky.

'Crusader Rock' of 1978 also suffers from the same ambivalence I mentioned earlier. Here it is more apparent. The subject:



7. Crusader Rock, 1978.

8. Crusader Rock, n.d.

Crusader Rock is dealt with in a lyrical but defined manner. Again there is evidence of an overstatement particularly in

relation to the foreground which is handled in a brusque, understated and very masculine way. It is as if there are two completely different aspects of the painter's character placed side by side and graphically so in the painting. If the foreground's handling was allowed to continue through the work, I feel sure it would be a more successful work. Yet the ambivalence is too unnerving and it fails.

Paul was getting older now and his will to live was becoming a little shaken by illness which was developing, imminent political change and the feeling that he had probably gone as far as he could with his art and there was nothing more he could do. This did not mean to say he was satisfied with his performance as an artist. He even admitted to taking sex hormone tablets to improve his performance a year before he died. Besides many of his friends were beginning to die as well. There was still a small group of them who had been living in Rhodesia since the late twenties and had stuck stoically together.

He fell seriously ill with emphysema and was admitted to hospital. Doctors said that if he stayed in hospital, he would have survived. Yet Paul's unwillingness to accept orthodox medical practices can be directly attributed to his death. He discharged himself from hospital, horrified at the thought of staying there any longer. He returned home without the knowledge of the medical staff.

A few days before he died, he staggered over to see his friend Peter Birch whose house was nearby in the avenues. Birch was in the middle of taking an Art Class when he saw the unrecognisably aged form of Paul shuffling towards him, breathing with immense difficulty. He sat with Paul for a while who was unable to speak. Paul mentioned something about not wanting to go back to hospital and then shuffled back home.

A few days later, he died.

Brian Bradshaw was on the continent when Paul passed away. He wrote of Paul's death: "He was a good guy - and when he died almost certainly because he had lost the reason to live and let the bottle take him, Rhodesia was short of a great personality. His wife died shortly after, reflecting his reasons and unwilling to bear his absence. I was in Europe.... had an idea I might have pulled him right as I had before - we DID have a rapport. Anyway it was his life in his way."<sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps only the artist himself will know, if he finally achieved his greatest ambition - to paint an Inyanga scene with oils and whisky.



1. Bradshaw, Letter.

CONCLUSION

Paul's output of work was prolific in the years that he painted after retirement. Much of the work he destroyed himself and many of the paintings have been taken as far as America, Australia and England by emigrants leaving Zimbabwe before and after the civil war. In this essay, I am assessing a body of his work known to be the best remaining cross-section of his work in the country. Sadly, I am unable to assess the rest - it is a project for a more in-depth study of the artist than this.

With these limitations in mind, to write something conclusive about the artist invariably has loopholes. It is my hope that others will recognise them and feel able to criticize and correct me. Many people have threatened to write about Robert Paul including Christopher Till, Louis Bolze, Colin Black and others who would or could have been in a better position to do so. Perhaps a strong deterrent is that Paul is not known widely outside the art circles of the Zimbabwean public and secondly that he embodied an age which is no longer fashionable to speak about or identify with.

Paul, it seems to me, was not politically conscious. He was his own man in his own time. As difficult as he is to define, he was an Englishman with his feet planted as firmly on Rhodesian soil as possible. This is the aspect of Paul's character which rings true - he was honest. Whereas many artists in this country find themselves in a dilemma of having one foot on South African



territory and one foot on European or American soil, Paul knew where he was from and where he stood.

He accepted and admired early influences in his work. Piper and Hitchens probed into the English landscape in the same way that Paul stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries in Rhodesia because he did the same. Paul absorbed the modern influences in painting like Picasso and Braque from Hitchens and Piper and he made this knowledge his own. He distilled and adapted it to the new landscape he was confronted with when he appeared in Rhodesia in 1927.

'Robert Paul worked with John Piper and as a young man certainly shows stylistic similarities with both of these artists, especially in his watercolour mixed media works and particularly when using buildings as his subject matter. His use of freely drawn line in delineating the architectural features of the buildings and the structure of the trees with a brush or possibly a reed pen is very like the technique of John Piper, as is the simple wash and the same drawn line in a lighter colour upon a darker background.'<sup>1</sup>

Paul did not copy but adapt. From the influence of the English Southern Landscape School ready at his fingertips, he hurdled the temptation to slip into that vogue and became what he was - an

1. Till, C. Letter to C. Johnson, 14 October, 1985.

individual concerned with new landscape and always seeking a better way of expressing it and refining it, though never to the degree of perfection he had hoped for. One wonders had he painted for the whole of his life time if he would have been able to come closer to a stronger sense of personal satisfaction in his work.

He suffered the drawbacks of every intuitive artist and more so in that he only began to paint with consistency at the age of forty five. It was friends who coerced him into a more serious attitude about his painting. Even at the start, he was ahead of other painters concerned with the Rhodesian landscape as they were fashioned by the conservative, colonial ethos of the day and he had had an impressionable beginning under a brief influence with artists who had become household names in England by the 1950s.

The question of isolation is pertinent here. He chose it in preference to England and it suited him and his painting up to 1965, in that it was an isolation with an open-ended invitation to the mainland (or the mainstream) if he wanted it. This meant that with the general growth and development that took place after the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, there came the possibility of learning about other artists around the world, and the availability of art materials if he needed them (although he mostly made his own). It also meant that he could choose to turn his back on the rest of the world and develop a personal idiom of expression relating to a new landscape without being unduly affected by eclecticism. In spite of a public that was not wholly with an exemplary understanding or broad taste in art, he was able

to make personal tracks in a largely sympathetic atmosphere. Towards the sixties and in the early seventies, a slowly growing number of artists began to acknowledge him as a painter of no mean standing - perhaps the uncrowned champion of landscape painting in the country.

In 1965, when Ian Smith's party declared the Unilateral Declaration of Independence there was a rise of interest in art, particularly landscape painting. I have attributed this to the shift in identity of the Rhodesian people from previously identifying specifically with Britain before U.D.I. and then seeking an identity in their adopted country. When the effect of sanctions took its toll on industry, sanctions on the economy and civil war escalated gradually to a peak before Independence in 1980, and the psychological effect of these forces had a grave effect on the Rhodesian people as a whole. Political change was imminent and until that change took place, many negative facets developed in the country during this protracted interim. A laager mentality developed, utterly resistant to change and was unwelcoming to introduction of new ideas or experimentation. Sanctions restricted the import of art materials and above all the nation was cut off from dialogue in the Arts with other countries, especially America and European countries.

The combined affect of this was brutal on Art. Sadly, it was to happen just as some artists were beginning to mature. Paul did not escape these difficulties. He bowed to popular demand in landscape work. The inertia of enforced isolation took its toll

on both the quality and his output, especially after his Retrospective in 1976. He would go at length into stagnation - not painting for months and then return to his work with a vengeance working on six canvases at a time.

From the work presented on his Retrospective, which showed a cross section of the work he produced from 1940 to 1976, we are able to perceive what Paul strived to represent in his work. The kernel of his theme was a protracted visual mining into the mood, texture, colour and cogent charisma of the Inyanga landscape. He explored it with a depth of familiar understanding and with a range of media and technique which no other painter in the country has equalled. He was not afraid to explore the same scene over again in a variety of styles and medias. Because he was essentially an intuitive artist, a deliberate development of style and progression is often difficult to ascertain.

His initial work was concerned with abstract and cubist influenced landscapes and townscapes, dealing with blocks of colour which normally had an earthiness in the palette; this was reminiscent of early Neo-Romantic work by Piper and Hitchens (who had been looking at the cubism of Braque and Picasso). Pure abstraction did not hold with Paul - he was too concerned with the visual properties of landscape. The understanding of cubist and abstract properties gave Paul a persuasive edge on the work of his contemporaries. His sophisticated viewpoint helped him to overcome formal stumbling blocks which other painters would deliberate over for the rest of their days.

He moved more closely to landscape from here and with a more direct contact with it; this gave his work an authenticity and a freshness. This 'feeling' for the veld never left him. In the 50s, 60s, and early 70s when he was able to travel to the scenes, his work had a freedom and a spontaneity which much of his later work lacked. When he could no longer visit the scenes, his work became imbued with a certain nostalgia for that feeling of the veld and veered towards a closer representation of what was there through the aid of photographic slides. His palette also brightened and he sighted the influences of Pierre Bonnard and Patrick Heron as having affected him.

Perhaps one of the greatest aspects of Paul's work is the consistent fluency with which he handled his paint in his works. A comparison could be made here with a great singer's musical phrasing (the way he shapes the music within the beat the conductor gives him). In his best work, Paul had this same sublime continuity particularly in the high lyric phase of the 60s with 'Summit of Inyangani' and 'Inyangani with Wattles' and also in 'Inyanga 1966'. These works pinpoint his apparent professional ease and natural ability in handling media and translating complex visual material into simple masses of freely brushed in colour, accentuated with an articulate line. This was all subtly underplayed - there is never an overstatement. His work hints, invites and absorbs the vision like mist lifting off a landscape.

In Paul's Retrospective Exhibition at the Pretoria National Gallery organised by Frieda Harmsen, she noted that many of the

more tortured pictures were painted in the late seventies. She questioned whether this reflected the anxiety of the white man for his war-torn country, and concluded that Paul had revealed "a part of that collective unconscious which concerns us all".<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to assess the aspect of politics in Paul's art. Landscape has become a neutral territory where upon one can project religious, political and social messages into the work and allow the genre to carry these messages as a vehicle of expression.

My belief is that Paul was concerned with art for art's sake on a level mostly divorced from these issues. As a person, he was very perceptive of what was going on around him; but art and its personal meaning to him was private. I do not think there is any conscious political comment that comes through in his work; it is possible that he reflected the 'collective unconscious' but I do not think he was striving to do so. He was not politically pretentious or consciously riddled with the moral deliberations of political rhetoric.

Another question that we should answer in the conclusion is the validity of the statements by Brian Bradshaw and Frank McEwan about Paul being the foremost painter in Zimbabwe and "perhaps the best in Southern Africa".<sup>1</sup> He is still acknowledged as the foremost painter in Zimbabwe yet since McEwan relinquished his

1. Harmsen, op.cit.

post as Director of the Gallery, a vast proliferation of landscape painting has been perpetuated in the sub-continent.

It will be some time before Paul's work can be assessed in an equal light in the African context. In my opinion, he will stand ahead of others because he confronted modernism honestly, as an Englishman in Africa. There was nothing pretentious about him.

"Eccentric, alcoholic, philandering, iconoclastically orientated, witty, a man of considerable personal charm. However, if he did not like you, he let you know in no uncertain terms. A person to whom authority and convention meant nothing at all and from whom you could always expect the unexpected".<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it is fitting that such a refreshing personality should for the time being elude the sober categorization of the critics and remain, to quote Leakey "a fossil out of context".

1. Style, op.cit.  
2. McCormick, op.cit.

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