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Review of 'Miescher, G. and Henrichsen, D.: African posters: a catalogue of the poster collection in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien'
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African Posters: A Catalogue of the Poster Collection in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. By GIORGIO MIESCHER and DAG HENRICHSEN. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2004. Pp. 301. CHF 85 (ISBN 3-905141-82-5).

KEY WORDS: Southern Africa, apartheid, arts, decolonization, popular culture.

It is difficult to do justice to this beautiful and deeply moving book, which, strictly speaking, is no more than a catalogue of the poster collection held by Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB), also known as the Namibia Resource Centre – Southern Africa Library in Basel, Switzerland. The collection, of nearly one thousand posters is centred on Southern Africa and Namibia in particular, although there is also a substantial amount of material relating to West Africa and the Horn. Thankfully there are still institutions that are prepared to invest in the compilation, production and printing of gems such as *African Posters*, which BAB hopes will lead to the 'further engagement with posters as a part of African visual history' (p. 5).

The catalogue has been divided into eight thematic chapters, each with a short introductory text that sketches the historical context, the selection and the organization of the posters presented. Over 900 full colour reproductions are magnificently presented, and grouped within chapters dealing successively with: liberation movements and exile; solidarity and anti-apartheid; elections; nation building; awareness and health; economy; knowledge, information, belief; and leisure and pleasure.

Deeply moving are the posters of struggle in the 1970s and 1980s in countries as diverse as Angola, Eritrea, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Posters that bear within them the joy, hope and the firm belief in a better and attainable future. At the same time, with the benefit of hindsight and changed attitudes towards 'power that comes from the barrel of a gun', many of the posters are troubling in their glorification of the armed struggle, weapons and violence. A poster of the Zimbabwe African National Union of 1978 is, quite frankly, chilling and prescient with its exhortation, 'Correct ideological education, permanent armed struggle and work ... these three, forever!' (p. 46). None the less, although the work covers much more than merely posters of the struggle, I choose to see the catalogue as a fitting monument to the many who died for a better world, amongst them the people who worked for the Medu Art Collective in Gaborone Botswana (pp. 21, 75, 135).¹

There will be those who will seek to criticize this work by claiming that it is nothing more than a jumbled collection of printed public images. It is true that it is very difficult, not to say impossible, systematically to collect and collate the posters of Africa in a manner that would be acceptable to all the many and varied wishes of academia. However, it cannot be denied that without the efforts of Miescher and Henrichsen scholars would be so much the poorer. Quite simply this book is the perfect gift for each and every contemporary Africanist.

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JAN-BART GEWALD

¹ On 14 June 1985 the South African Defence Force launched an attack on the homes and offices of members of the South African Exile community in Gaborone, Botswana. Medu Art, which had been set up by South African exiles, was specifically targeted.