

Ernest Cole: House of Bondage

An introduction to the exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery

This exhibition revisits *House of Bondage* (1967), the groundbreaking publication by Ernest Cole who lived from 1940–1990. The book chronicled the brutal reality of Apartheid South Africa. It was one of the first bodies of work to expose the injustices of Apartheid to the rest of the world.

Born in 1940 in a township in Transvaal, as a young Black man Cole experienced the daily humiliations of the system from the inside. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 was introduced while Cole was still in high school and caused him to leave his schooling, instead continuing his education via correspondence courses. His family also suffered 'forced removal' from his childhood home in 1960. Cole stated, "Three-hundred years of white supremacy in South Africa have placed us in bondage, stripped us of our dignity, robbed us of our self-esteem and surrounded us with hate."

In his early twenties, he became one of a small minority of Black South Africans who secured a bureaucratic 'reclassification' from 'Black' to 'Coloured' (also changing his surname from Kole to the less 'African' Cole). This meant he no longer had to carry a 'pass book' for the authorities to check, could obtain a passport, and work as a photojournalist.

Cole photographed the precarious living conditions of Black South Africans, from mine labourers to domestic workers, as well as the state of the transport, education and health systems. He was one of the first Black freelance photographers in South Africa,

documenting everyday life including assignments for Drum magazine and The New York Times, all the while shooting and planning *House of Bondage*.

In 1966, Cole fled South Africa and smuggled out his photographs, travelling through the UK and Sweden before settling in New York. *House of Bondage* was published in 1967 and resulted in Cole being permanently banned from his home country.

This exhibition covers all 15 original thematic chapters devised by Ernest Cole in his book. An additional chapter 'Black Ingenuity', not published in the original edition, has also been included. Almost sixty years since its publication *House of Bondage* continues to exert an influence all over the world.

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Please note that all captions and section texts in this exhibition are the original texts by Ernest Cole for *House of Bondage*, unless otherwise stated. Much of the language is specific to South Africa and the time it was written. Some terms included are offensive today. Statistics quoted from the time cannot be verified.

Ernest Cole: House of Bondage is realised in collaboration with Magnum Photos.

Curated by Anne-Marie Beckmann and Andrea Holzherr, adapted for The Photographers' Gallery by Karen McQuaid, Senior Curator.

This exhibition is supported by Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor-advised fund held at The London Community Foundation.

In 2022, *House of Bondage* was re-released by Aperture with an additional chapter. The book is available to buy in The Photographers' Gallery shop.

Explore more of Ernest Cole's work in *Ernest Cole: A Lens in Exile* at Autograph. It is the first exhibition of Cole's photographs documenting New York City during the height of the civil rights movement in America. Now on until 12 October 2024. Autograph is located on Shoreditch High Street in London.