

Breaking the artist's chains

Anne Johnstone

is moved by a remarkable show which is raising consciousness as well as cash.

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community (and) to enjoy the arts."

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

ART has always been close to the core of the work of Amnesty International, Britain's veteran human rights organisation. It's not hard to see why. Art and freedom are siblings. Freedom is central to the artistic impulse.

And yet the worlds over artists are in chains: harried, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Why? Because they have drawn a picture, taken a photograph, written a play or poem, sung or composed a song or simply expressed an opinion, or has disturbed those in power

Wherever people are challenging injustice, artists are in the front line and they suffer for it disproportionately. We rely on their courage and commitment for the communication of the truth. Amnesty's best-known cultural prisoners of conscience were probably Irina Ratushinska, the Soviet poet released in 1985 and the Czech playwright-politician Vaclav Havel. There are hundreds more.

In 1990, to mark Glasgow's designation as European City of Culture, the city's Amnesty groups joined forces to campaign for the release of three of them: Jack Mapanje, the poet from Malawi imprisoned without trial after the banning of his collection of poems, *Chameleons and Gods*; Hong Song Dam, the South Korean artist, creator of stark and violent woodblock who had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for sending a photograph of a mural to North Korea; and Nguyen Chi Thien, the Vietnamese poet, who disappeared following his arrest in 1979, after he had handed a manuscript of his anti-government poems to a foreign diplomat.

Moved by their work, many people joined the campaign for their release. Hundreds of children sent little paintings and drawings to the three men in prison. Almost unbelievably, all three men were freed.

Encouraged by the campaign's success, Ann Drummond of Glasgow City Art Group and Hazel Mills of Glasgow West hit on the idea of a major contemporary art exhibition on the theme of freedom.

What happened next has a lot to do with the second reason why art and Amnesty go together. Almost from its inception, Amnesty found that art is a potent vehicle for their message. Artists realise that too. Many, keenly aware of the restrictions and persecution their work would attract elsewhere, have willingly rallied to the cause. The effect can be devastating. A stark cartoon of a man with his tongue



A CANDLE

A SEED has its own in-built energy to grow and blossom. But for a meticulous gardener even a flower can become inconvenient. Social gardeners like flowers to follow and comply with existing rules and inconvenient flowers are either eliminated or moved away from the well-trimmed lawns of society. Some of these flowers still blossom, leaving a fragrance on our path for generations to come. Their contribution can be compared with that of a candle burning to brighten our path. It can easily be ignored or blown out, yet it has the capacity to light another thousand candles.

Punjabi sculptor **Avtarjeet Dhanjal** His piece 'A Candle' appears in the Freedom Exhibition.

THIS LAND'S NO JOY

This land's no joy. By day they wipe off sweat, and tears by night. To prison camps and barracks they all stream a trickle will come back.

Children look pale and sick, like young banana leaves. Of ploughing women take full charge.

In hamlets not a glimpse of younger men. Death notices drop thick avid fast on thatch. Here all is grief - only loudspeakers will spout joy.

By Jack Mapanja, from Malawi. Prisoner of conscience, freed after the Glasgow 1990 campaign.

SEEKERS OF JUSTICE

Just call us seekers of true justice, Not 'Burman', 'Shan' 'Kachin' or 'Kayah'. Regardless of our nationality.

One shout of 'Our cause' adds up to at least three years behind bars. The distribution of three lines of poetry Makes a 20-year sentence

In this place they now call 'Myanmar'.

Me Thida from Myanmar (formerly Burma), poet and short-story writer, sentenced to 20 years in prison for campaigning for the main opposition party.

nailed to a table did more for my commitment to human rights than many thousands of eloquent words. The Freedom Exhibition started to take shape. Kingston was taken on as curator and began to tour Britain in search of artists and sculptors motivated by the freedom theme and who shared an interest in Amnesty's work. At the same time something was stirring deep in Glasgow's artistic community. "The exhibition seemed to trigger off thoughts in other organisations," says Drummond. Before long "The Freedom Exhibition" had become "The Freedom Festival" and she and Hazel Mills found themselves editing a 16 page guide containing more than 100 events, all due to take place in Glasgow between now and January.

It kicks off next Sunday with the Freedom Gala at the King's Theatre, a big musical extravaganza to raise awareness and lolly for Amnesty and celebrate freedom of expression. Highlights will include jazz by Carol Kidd and Tommy Smith and Scottish Opera with a special guest appearance by Donald Maxwell Scottish Ballet's

contribution is Haydn Pieces, based on three Haydn piano sonatas, choreographed by Mark Baldwin. Composer James Macmillan will be there too conducting the Scottish

Artists are tortured and killed because they've drawn a picture or sung a song, or expressed an opinion

Chamber Orchestra lit a performance of his short fanfare for brass and percussion. They Saw the Stone had been Rolled away- It Is based on the section of the Easter story where the women encounter the angels at the entrance to Christ's tomb. "I thought it was appropriate because of the sense of release and resurrection. It seems to fit in with Amnesty's work for individual prisoners of conscience," says MacMillan.

MacMillan is also due to lead a composing workshop at Kelvingrove on the freedom theme. "A good deal of my music is

influenced by some extra-musical starting point. Usually there's some humanitarian aspect so it was only a matter of time before an organisation like Amnesty came in to my mode of operation. My wife is an Amnesty member and tills is something that I am very pleased to be able to do," says MacMillan.

Meanwhile the Freedom Exhibition is taking form at Kelvingrove in preparation for the opening on September 29. Kingston decided to focus her selection on two strands of the freedom theme: "On the one hand there's work by artists who are motivated by a belief in the capacity of art to bring about change. The exhibition juxtaposes this approach with art which makes a bid towards freedom through the language of art. For within abstract art there is a constant testing, a constant impulse to experiment." There will be work by 15 artists. Including Keith Piper and the late Jo Spence. Pavel Buchler, a former prisoner of conscience, now head of drawing and painting at Glasgow School of Art, has produced a new work consisting of a cluster of Microphones. He says: The sculpture will explore the

Suffering in silence: This woodblock print of a chained man eating rice from a bowl is one of the works of South Korean artist Hong Song Dam, jailed for seven years for sending a photograph of a mural to North Korea. Amnesty hopes its Glasgow Artists In Chains, art festival will help to free him and two poets also unjustly imprisoned.

uncertainty of speaking and the difficulty of self-expression: people who choose to speak into the microphones will not know who will be listening, or if they will be understood."

Details of a host of other events ranging from an exhibition of cartoons and a mock human rights trial to a country house chamber recital by members of the Scottish Symphony Orchestra are available in the guide out this week.

Amnesty always needs money to fund its human rights campaigns but the Freedom Festival is more about raising consciousness than cash. The specific aim of the four-month-long festival is to repeat the success of 1990 and hopefully secure the release of three specific prisoners, adopted by Amnesty.

Hwang Suk-yong is a popular South Korean novelist who was imprisoned for visiting North Korea without government permission. He isn't due for release until April 2000. In a recent letter from the Seoul Detention House to those campaigning for his release, he said: "Perhaps someone is suggesting that I hibernate through the dark and gloomy end of this century and wake up in the new century."

Manuel Manriquez San Agustin is a musician from Mexico, arrested without a warrant in Mexico City in 1990. In police custody he was beaten brutally, almost asphyxiated, and received burns and electric shocks. He was forced to sign papers he did not understand and was then sentenced to 23 years' imprisonment on a murder charge on the basis of a "signed confession."

Amnesty international has called for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience.

Ma Thida from Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a well known short-story writer arrested in 1993 and sentenced to 20 years for "endangering public tranquillity". This related to her campaigning work for the main opposition party and the distribution of literature including one of her own poems, criticising the Government's human rights record.

She has been held in solitary confinement for more than a year and suffers from a gastric ulcer and endometriosis.

So the Glasgow Freedom Festival is both a celebration of artistic freedom and a call for it. Artists participating in the Festival have the freedom to give their time and talent for a cause they believe in. Hwang Suk-yong, Manuel Manriquez San Agustin, and Ma Thida don't. As the brochure puts it bluntly: "That is what this festival is all about."