



## My View by Robyn Sassen

THE ARTS AT LARGE BY ROBYN SASSEN

PHOTOGRAPHY

# Beyond the Mandela truisms, in photos

BY ROBYN SASSEN ON JULY 3, 2018 • ( [LEAVE A COMMENT](#) )



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YOUNG lion: Nelson Mandela in the 1950s. Photography courtesy UWC Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives.

YOU MIGHT SIGH audibly with a feeling of satedness if not blatant boredom, when you think of the idea of the centenary of Nelson Mandela's life being celebrated this year. What more could be said about this icon who defined so much for so many? The question seems rhetorical, but when you enter the FotoZa gallery space, you very quickly dispossess yourself of these assumptions. The collection of archival photographs and documents on display here sweeps any old clichés rapidly off the table.

There is a body of archival photographs that the media never did get its hands on, over the years, handpicked from several significant repositories of historical photographs. From 1938 – the earliest known photograph of Mandela, until 1990, when he left prison, the man in all his dignity is represented in this elegant and well-considered exhibition.

And while you will recognise some of the images, as you stand in front of others, you will find yourself considering what made Mandela such a giant among men. Was it his dignified posture? The clarity of his emotions? The directness of his presence? Either way, as you walk along the walk and gaze at this astonishing chronology which put South Africa on the global map in a good way for so many years, you will reflect on the notion of hero as you will recount so much that happened in this important span of life.

Photographs have a strange way of linking into our memories. The photographs that populated the newspapers and all the expected scenarios have seemingly been hardwired into our brains. But this is something completely different: There's a young, suave bearded Mandela in the 1950s. He's like a young lion with his sense of self. There is an astonishingly fine composite work of all the accused in the 1956 Treason Trial, and another two images of Mandela gleefully burning his *dompas* in 1960. The wedding photographs of Nelson and Winnie Madikizela Mandela will make you weep – they're doors to so many stories of youth and disappointment, of challenge and courage.

The *pièce de résistance* in the exhibition is, however, the calendars. There's a selection of photographs of desk top calendars with which Mandela was issued while he was on Robben Island. They're not complete, but they offer ciphers into where he was, emotionally, as he depended on the visits of others to make sense of time, life and the future. There are few words written on these, but they're poignant ones.

The exhibition is as much an historical one as an aesthetic one. It's hung with a sense of wisdom and compassion. You hush yourself as you enter the space, perhaps readying yourself for a historical foray you think you've done before. But you'll be mistaken: this is a photographic exhibition of Mandela's life like no other. And you'll leave with a sense of where we, as South Africans, once were, in the world.

- *Nelson Mandela 100* is an archival photographic exhibition curated by Reney Warrington at Fotoza gallery in Rosebank Mall, until July 31.

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