

Why these bequests are heartening

Amid the arts funding crisis in Cape Town it is heartening to see some patronage of the galleries still exists.

GORDON RADOWSKY
looks at the Bequests and Presentations exhibition at the National Gallery

SEEMINGLY every week one receives another piece of evidence of the dire state of the arts in Cape Town.

Capab is continually quoted in the press as having to cancel new works, such as Verdi's *Un Ballo In Maschera*, that was to have been mounted later this year, in favour of warhorses from their repertoire that are less costly and are guaranteed to put "bums on seats". The extremely valuable Jacobs-Liknaitzky Gallery was forced to close at the end of last year, ending one of the few venues that encouraged young artists. The reason was quite simply that the market for worthwhile art is too depressed to sustain a gallery of this sort. And now one learns that the venerable Gallery International, which opened in the salad days of the 1970s and afforded first solo shows in Cape Town to such luminaries as Andrew Verster, William Kentridge, André van Zyl and Beezy Bailey, is also packing up its tent.

All of which makes the *Bequests and Presentations* exhibition on at the National Gallery a most heartening event. It is to be remembered that South Africans receive no tax rebates for donations of artworks to public collections.

Consequently, vast numbers of works that might have made their way into museums have either been auctioned off, all but disappearing into corporate and private collections, or in the case of ethnic art (this country's sole tradeable genre internationally), our national heritage is now largely dispersed between London, New York, Los Angeles and other emigré destinations. It is a bitter irony that if tomorrow the Minister of Education and Culture were to get the picture it would be too late — the picture is already lost.

For this reason the altruism, for to be sure that is what it is, that made this exhibition possible is to be commended and encouraged by whatever means possible. Mary Reynolds, the daughter of painter Dorothy Kay (1886-1964), has given her entire collection, comprised of her mother's work as well as several splendid (and valuable) works by Fred Page, for example, en bloc to the National Gallery.

Among the works are several late paintings of unusual quality, almost monochromatic still lifes of objects such as an angle-poise lamp and a salon hairdryer, that hold a central position in South African realist painting of the last 40 years. This holding will prove of enormous value to generations of art lovers and scholars to come.

Another splendid act of generosity is that of Fernand Haengggi, the force behind the now defunct Pelmama (Pelindaba Museum Of African And Modern Art) Museum. His gift consists of fine works by contemporary black artists, including Isaac Nkoana, whose work, previously unrepresented, is now on show in the form



A painting lady ... Dorothy Kay, whose work *The Elvery Family: A Memory* (1938) is part of the Kay Bequest to the National Gallery

of several graphics, including *Tribal Totems*, an excellent wood-cut.

Also in the presentation is a small, but nevertheless unaffordable, collection of limited edition prints by Pop artists James Rosenquist and Claes Oldenburg, and two distinctive silkscreens by ex-Bauhaus guru Josef Albers. These works alone represent a dollar value in the tens of thousands, and fill an important gap in the Gallery's collection that, were it not for this act of philanthropy, would have remained unfilled.

On show are eight small landscapes by South Africa's leading *plein-air* painter, Hugo Naude. They were donated by the artist's nieces, Margaret and Nancy Dick.

They too carry a rand value in the tens of thousands and represent a major fleshing-out of the Gallery's holdings of this most important of South Africa's formative landscape artists.

None of these donors is super-rich, or is acting out of a sense of *noblesse-oblige*. The works they have donated are all of obvious personal significance to them, works which they probably acquired privately or were given by the artists. It cannot have been easy to hand them over.

What, then, do they get out of the act? Firstly, they are assured of conservation and documentation supplied by an institution with the resources of the National Gallery. Secondly, they, through the works

they donate, enjoy the cachet and immortalisation that philanthropy affords. No shame in that.

But lastly, and one hopes this is the underlying reason, they are of the stripe that believes that works that they have been fortunate enough to enjoy temporarily, belong, in a civilised country, finally in the public domain. For this example the public owes the donors a debt of gratitude.