

# Miscast

## in History

an who allowed resin moulds to be taken are now dead, yet their images have been captured for immortality. As the arms and legs protrude from the "mass grave" of plaster it becomes a sad symbol relating to the demise of this indigenous tribe.

Walking into the display titled *Miscast in History*

*A pile of plaster-of-paris body casts  
creates an eerie welcome to the  
controversial new exhibition on the  
San tribe being held at the South  
African National Gallery in Cape  
Town as Janet Brice found out*

is quite a numbing experience. It sets out, and achieves, to challenge and erode the stereotypes of the San – perceived as acultural, unintellectual, ahistorical and wild.

The San – known to Europeans as Bushmen – were nomadic hunters and gatherers and should not be confused with the Khoikoi (Hottentots) who were semi-nomadic hunters and pastoralists. However, both tribes were closely related hence the

term Khoisan which is widely used.

It is believed the San existed around the Cape of Good Hope for more than 40 000 years as the earliest dated painting is about 28 000 years old.

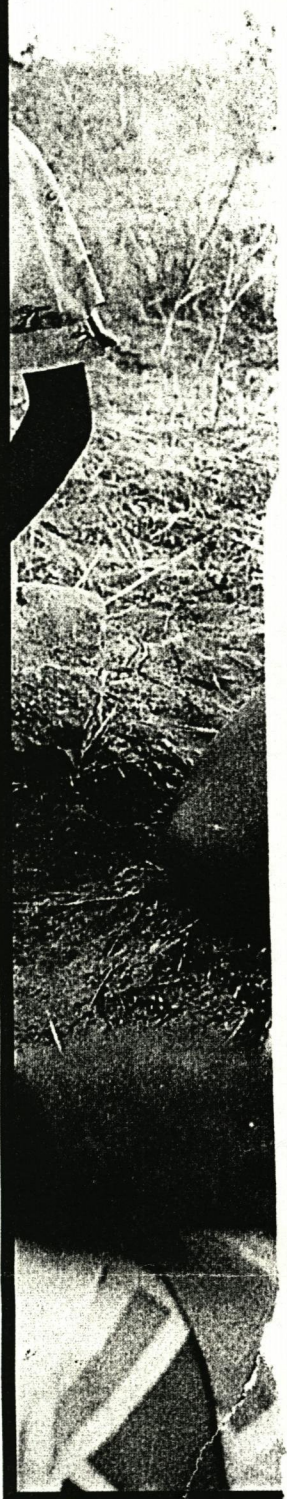
As a group they were generally shorter (140 cm) than the Khokoi but both groups are characterised by fairly light, honey-coloured skin, well-developed buttocks which could store fat reserves, high cheekbones with almost an Asiatic cast to their faces and with hair that formed tight black curls.

There was also a close relationship between the San and Khokoi's language which formed the origin of the "clicks" common in today's South African languages. For centuries the two tribes inter-married and co-existed in relative harmony until the white colonists first arrived.

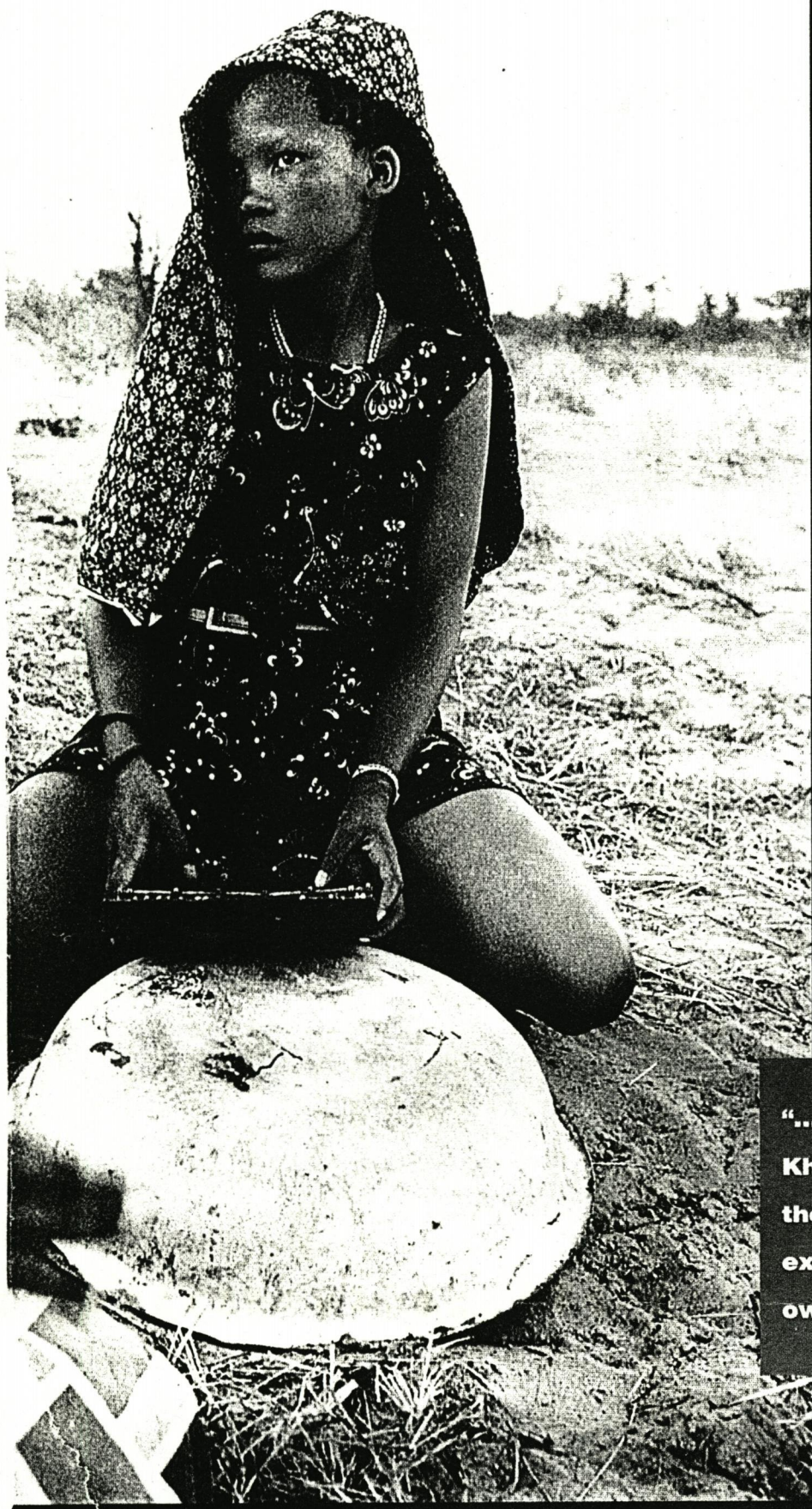
The inevitable confrontations between the whites and Khoisan were disastrous. San were driven from their traditional lands, decimated by introduced diseases and destroyed by superior weapons when they fought back.

Most survivors were left with no option but to work for the Europeans in a form of bondage, little different to slavery. They were exploited both for labour and sex. The offspring of these unions formed the basis of today's Cape Coloured population.

Dozens of black and white Khoisan portrait







The driving force behind the San exhibition and the gallery's new-found vitality is director Marilyn Martin who joined six years ago from the Department of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Martin is a firm believer that the gallery, which is situated in the peaceful surroundings of Cape Town park, should not be detached from society, or be elitist, but should reflect the outside world at every opportunity.

Although the new San exhibition focuses upon part of the country's turbulent past, the walls of the cool, marble-tiled gallery also feature a modern mixed media display which looks at the spirit of the new South Africa.

One outstanding model is the Presidential Inauguration by the artist Monani Jackson Nkumanda which shows President Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk raising their arms in a symbol of unity. This colourful, papier-mâché style model is typical of the new trend of art coming from keen, young people living in South Africa.

As a passionate advocate of South African arts and culture Martin is delighted with the success of the first major international exhibition focusing upon the art of the continent.

Conceived as a journey around Africa it features work not only from this country but also all the way up to Egypt and into Ethiopia. *Africa 95*, whose patrons include Queen Elizabeth II and President Mandela, has already toured Berlin and London and

**"... Dozens of black and white Khoisan portrait photographs line the walls of this mesmerising exhibition - each face telling its own story of hardship ..."**

from June 1996 will be on show at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Martin said: "I think Europe has woken up to African art. It is looking for artistic revitalisation and I think has found it from the third world countries.

"However, African art tends to be associated with the past while change and innovation are reserved for the West. Therefore if young South African artists want to be included in more international exhibitions they must please the prominent art critics and curators with their work."

One artist who has achieved international recognition is Willem Boshoff who created *Blind Alphabet* and reversed

photographs line the walls of this mesmerising exhibition - each face telling its own story of hardship. To complete the picture of the San a visit to the neighbouring South African Museum is essential where the dead plaster-of-paris body parts have been brought to life in a visual display.

The resin moulds have been painted honey-coloured for the skin, clothed and placed in a replica of their exact environment evoking a picture of life before the intrusion of white colonists.



the power relations between blind and sighted people.

To the sighted the installation of 76 units of the letter "C" resembled a cemetery of boxes and were only able to "see" the words if assisted by a blind guide as each shape is hidden in a wine mesh box with a braille information plaque on the lid.

The sighted experience frustration as their expectation at being able to see is thwarted and are dependent on the

goodwill of the blind guide's highly developed sense of touch.

"We were so impressed with this exhibition we have purchased half the letter C from the artist and I believe the letter A has been sold to Atlanta for the Olympic Games," said Martin.

In a bid to promote new and exciting art of this quality the gallery is aiming

**"... We hope to stimulate visual literacy among people who may never have experienced the viewing of artworks and encourage a new audience with a love and appreciation of art ..."**



**Above and previous page** Photographs by Paul Weinberg – from his "Footprints in the Wind" portfolio, which is incorporated in the "Miscast; Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture" exhibition.

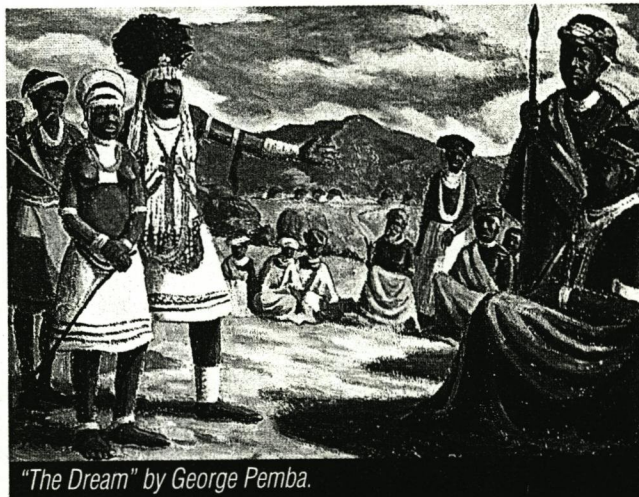
to establish an Outreach programme which will go into the townships.

Marilyn Martin continues: "Our aim is to show our collection in the new community centres which will be created by the RDP.

"We hope to stimulate visual literacy among people who may never have experienced the viewing of artworks and encourage a new audience with a love and appreciation of art."

Sadly, the gallery itself has only the capacity to show ten per cent of its entire collection at one time and is desperate for more space.

The present building, which lies in the shadow of Devil's Peak within tranquil gardens, was officially opened on 3 November 1930 by the then Governor General, the Earl of



*"The Dream" by George Pemba.*

Athlone. Funding came from the Government, city council and the Hyman Lieberman estate. A property in New Street, now Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town, was previously used before being taken over by the Cape colonial Government for educational purposes.

Today, the white-walled, red-roofed building with its seven main display rooms which are regularly re-hung needs more space specifically for the many touring exhibitions.

"I hope that by the turn of the century we have raised enough money for an annex in which we can house our temporary displays," said Martin.

"I would also like to see the restoration of the gift shop, restaurant and lecture workshop. After all we aim to present as complete a picture of the history of South Africa as possible. This is very difficult when only a small part of the permanent collection is on display at any given moment.

"The only compensation is that the walls of the gallery are ever-changing which means regular visitors always have new works to view."

Martin carries her hopes for an annex into the next century along with her faith that African art will be appreciated around

the world.

In the words of Uxolo Nokuthula (Peace and Goodwill):

"To those who ask:  
What does your art mean?  
To them I say  
It means that I am African  
What that means  
I do not know  
But what that is  
I know  
because  
I am."



South African National Gallery, Government Avenue, Cape Town 8001, Tel: (021) 45-1628, Fax: (021) 461-0045.

Visiting hours: Mondays – 13h00 – 17h00, Tuesdays – Sundays – 10h00 – 17h00. Entrance is free.

San Exhibition runs until 15 September 1996.