

AP1999_12_18

Saving artefacts — in the nick of time

Margaret von Klemperer 18/12/99

Filched items from museums and art galleries in South Africa fetch good prices at auctions in Europe — and sophisticated thieves have been at work in the city.



by MARGARET VON KLEMPERER

ART theft is big business — globally the trade in stolen art and artefacts is second only to the drugs trade as an illegal money-spinner. And South Africa is increasingly being drawn into the problem.

It is the big thefts of famous paintings from major galleries that hit the world headlines. We've all read about them — a daring thief evades the high-tech security and vanishes, along with a Rembrandt or Van Gogh. But those are the exception. Most theft is of smaller, more portable and less easily identifiable items. And with African art sought after in the rest of the world, South Africa is becoming a target and a conduit for pieces stolen in the rest of Africa.

In 1997, artefacts from the Natal Museum's collections became news when they were found being offered for sale in Howick. Police investigated but charges against the suspects were dropped. With hindsight and internal investigation, museum director Jason Londt is now sure he knows how the theft happened, though proving it will be another matter.

"We had visits to the collection some years ago by art and antique dealers and they were allowed access to photograph pieces which we hold in storage. We now believe that some of these guys came in and took

out objects, probably in their camera bags." Londt believes the collectors tried to implicate members of his staff in the theft as a smokescreen to protect themselves when the police closed in. Londt admits that, because the collectors were known to staff, they were possibly not supervised as closely as they should have been. And, because the collections are so big, thefts can go unnoticed for a long time. When the museum staff did a complete stocktaking at the time of the incident in 1997, they discovered that about 10 items were missing. All but two are now back in the museum — although some are officially still police evidence. For their safety, they are in a cupboard in the climate-controlled surroundings of the museum — and the police have the key. Still lost are two valuable and very rare brass Zulu arm-bands. "If 10 of them are known to be in collections, it's a lot," says Londt. "We had seven of them."

If the arm-bands ever turn up again, the museum will be able to identify them as it has photographs. But in many cases, the museum and other institutions do not and Londt says the museum has just acquired a digital camera to record the most valuable pieces. Two of the items that the police recovered, from a container in England, were Zulu sticks. "We think they are know how many carved sticks there are? Without a photograph, it's impossible to be absolutely sure they are the ones taken from here."

Tatham Art Gallery director Brendan Bell also admits that his collection has lost some items — though none in the last year. The gallery does an annual stocktaking and then reports to the TLC on the state of the collection.

"Three pieces are missing. One is a little watercolour by R. R. Roberts which vanished in 1993." The second is a sculpture which disappeared

in transit while being returned from an exhibition and the third is a Zulu dancing mace which was missing when the gallery staff were putting up a display. Bell says stocktaking is vital for any institution and is determined to ensure that the entire collection is recorded photographically as an extra safeguard. Efforts to combat art theft and illicit artefact trade in South Africa are recent. The first workshop on the problem was organised in November 1996 by Gillian Berning, then director of the Local History Museum in Durban.

'Still lost are two very rare brass Zulu arm-bands.'

"I organised it as a result of a theft of medals from the museum. You go through a mixture of disbelief, anxiety and embarrassment, particularly when you realise things have not gone missing as the result of a break-in. It had to be an inside job."

One alarming piece of information to come out of the workshop was the value of the illegal trade. This is confirmed by figures from Captain Bernadine du Preez of the police. She is the country's "art policeman", the official title of her office being "Cultural Historic Investigations". It is a part of the Endangered Species Unit, as stolen art and illegal ivory are often smuggled together. Asked about the value of art stolen in South Africa, Du Preez said that in just three of the case dockets on her desk, it is about R5,6 million. And, of course, some items would be priceless, unique and irreplaceable.

Du Preez began work in April last year. Her first step was to establish a database by contacting museums and galleries and asking for information about thefts or losses. From there, she could start to see if any pattern emerged. "Two things have come to light," she says. "Items which

are ethnic — snuff boxes, Zulu beads — are being stolen and smuggled and also items which have bearing on the Anglo-Boer War, such as medals, swords and uniforms." Her findings suggest that most items are being taken abroad. This is born out by Berning who says that of the pieces from the theft at the Local History Museum that were traced, 80% were located in the south of England, centre of the world's art and antique market.

"Often auction houses, where these things turn up, deal in good faith, with people who bought in good faith," says Berning. It was when she began to try to backtrack the medals and reached the South African police and customs that she hit a problem. At that stage there was no expertise and not much interest. So Berning is delighted with the appointment of Du Preez, even though she is working alone.

Du Preez has made a discovery of considerable concern to museum curators. The would-be smuggler identifies someone within a museum or gallery, contacts them and gives descriptions of the items he wants. The contact will then steal the items. Museums have to trust their staff but, with the value of and demand for art and artefacts rising each year, it is probably time for the gloves to come off and stringent measures to be put in place — regular stock-taking, strict record keeping and policing of collections — to prevent South Africa's heritage from being smuggled out of the country.

Caves mapped for heritage:

The Gauteng budget included a R3.8-million allocation to Sterkfontein Caves, west of Johannesburg, to support a bid to have the caves declared a World Heritage Site. The funds will be used to prepare a detailed conservation management plan in support of the World Heritage Site application to Unesco. A final decision on its acceptance as a World Heritage site will be announced in December.

Replay on the cards for Sarfu vs Mandela

CARMEL RICKARD 24/12/99

Court to decide whether they can find in favour of Mandela despite any bias. If so, that would be the end of the matter. If not, the matter should be referred back to the High Court and another judge.

Mandela's lawyers will argue that Judge de Villiers approached the President as though he were "just another witness" in an ordinary case. They will say the court took no account of the political context, or of the "indignity" to which he was subjected in the hearing. According to them, Mandela emerged from a long jail sentence as an international icon of reconciliation. The Sarfu case was one in which he was brought to court by rugby officials identified with the old order. It was therefore a politically controversial issue, involving administrators accused of trying to maintain the status quo which was the product of a "racist past".

In this context, Mandela was ordered to be cross-examined. This suggested that Mandela's earlier written evidence could not be believed, even when there was nothing to contradict him. "It was made, at the insistence of a litigant who symbolised the old order, by a judge of the old order who was reputed to have been one of its ardent supporters."

Their argument is that the cross-examination was prolonged, repetitive and irrelevant, and it was understandable if Mandela expressed indignation. But his behaviour could never be said to have shown a lack of honesty and candour, as the judgment suggested.

THE lengthy, acrimonious and politically controversial court case between the South African Rugby Football Union and President Nelson Mandela could end up back in the Pretoria High Court to be heard from scratch by another judge.

That's one of the options which will be put to the Constitutional Court by Mandela's legal team when the appeal is heard, starting on May 4.

Mandela is challenging the outcome of the case, initiated by the then boss of the rugby union, Louis Luyt, in which Sarfu contested Mandela's decision to set up an inquiry into Sarfu's affairs.

Judge William de Villiers, who heard the case, found that the inquiry was wrongly established. He had harsh words concerning Mandela, the Minister of Sport and Recreation, Steve Tshwete, and the director-general of that department, Mthobi Tyamzashe.

Mandela's lawyers claim the judge's order cannot take effect until it has been confirmed by the Constitutional Court.

The President's legal team has now lodged a 410-page summary of the argument they will present. It reveals they have combed the case records to demonstrate their claim that the decision to set up the inquiry was properly made and that the judge was biased.

The lawyers have suggested several outcomes. One is for the Constitutional

