

## Report: Reclaiming Black Art History in South African Galleries and Museums

Elizabeth Rankin checks and balances issues related to the discourse on the history and policies of the selection of "black art" by established public art galleries and museums for their permanent collections.

Though the article adequately rates for publication, I am unconvinced by the various cursory overviews of intrinsic questions touched upon in ~~the article~~. Figures and graphs pertaining to whom is taking the lead in the so-called affirmative action when it comes to purchasing works by African artists remain vague. On what premises do the various collectors acquire these pieces and to what extent do enterprising commercial galleries contribute?

*what has been bought*  
*makes interesting reading but on matters related*

Why has African art been neglected in our public art galleries? Does it not correspond with the status of South African art history in the past at some South African universities? When were students at English universities introduced to the art of South Africans? For too long opinion making individuals were submitted to the exclusive study of ancient Greek and Roman, Italian, English and French art. When African art studies were introduced at Wits in the 70s the emphasis was laid on the art of West and Central Africa and not local expression.

Rankin entertains the reader with her narratives of shifts in emphasis. Zondi's **Flute player** was not acclaimed as a work of art "per se" in the National Museum, Bloemfontein yet she seems oblivious that this museum was also responsible for a very enlightened **Oranje Exhibition of Pan African Arts and Crafts** in 1952. On that occasion not only "tribal" art from all over Africa was included. Contemporary South African artists like Elza Dziomba, John Makhafola, Samuel Makoanyane, George Pemba and Paul Ramagaga were also invited to exhibit. The purpose of the exhibition was to show "the astonishing range of African Art as it has survived into recent times" and moreover "Africa has its Old Masters even as Europe".

The following postulations are not substantiated:

1. By purchasing Sekoto's **Yellow houses**. A street in Sophiatown JAG "was following market trends" (:8). Is it so difficult to give Sekoto his due, didn't his painting just conform to the norms set by the selecting committee of 1940? Should there be reasons to the contrary, why withhold them?
2. That the Polly Street group show of 1960 launched what was to be known as "township" art (:8). Nowhere in the catalogue of that exhibition is there mention of "township". Skotnes in the preface differentiates between "serious painters and sculptors" and "leisure-time artists". Did the press invent the label?
3. If "artifacts of white settlers" be considered to have "aesthetic value", "it would be placed on display in the hallowed spaces of an art museum" (:7)?
4. How substantial was the hearsay interest of the ANC's cultural desk in Sekoto's art?

Alexander (:6) not only refers to Kumalo and Sekoto but also to Louis Maurice, Louis Maghubela and Gladys Mgudlandlu (**Art in**



South Africa/Kuns in Suid-Afrika). Moreover I would like to see one alteration for publication. In the light of Rankin's care to acknowledge people, Lesley Spiro as writer of the well researched catalogue for Sekoto's retrospective exhibition in JAG should be mentioned.

Elza Miles

The statistics and graphs ~~do~~ impress but they do not convince.

*Penha  
Hungwani*



C/C  
**RECLAIMING BLACK ART HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICAN GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS**

Elizabeth Rankin

2 Art museums have not anywhere succeeded in being ideologically neutral, but this fact takes on a particularly abhorrent significance in South Africa. Art museums there have provided all too accurate a mirror of South African society, for they have reflected the country's social, economic and educational inequalities, and its disregard, even suppression, of African culture. It is the aim of this paper to document the past failure of South African art museums to be representative in the true sense of the word, and to explore a few case studies of recent attempts to give recognition to the work of black artists in South Africa and to reclaim their history, concentrating initially on art in the western paradigm, but later incorporating traditional art, so critical in the context of African art history. To this end I have surveyed all South Africa's major art museums through a series of questionnaires. Because the permanent collections of museums most tellingly reveal their commitments, I shall make these my focus, although acknowledging fully that the nature of display can and does modify the meaning constituted by a collection. 1

Apartheid legislation following the election of the National Party to power in 1948 undoubtedly entrenched the negative characteristics of South African art museums, but it must be recognized that they were first and foremost a colonial invention. The first public art institutions were established under British rule, with the Cape Town collection that was to form the nucleus of the South African National Gallery, inaugurated in 1871.<sup>1</sup> The earliest specifically planned gallery building in South Africa, opened in Johannesburg in 1915, epitomised the cultural agenda of the time, in both its imperial neo-classical design by Sir Edwin Lutyens, and its initial collection, assembled in 1910 by an agent

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<sup>1</sup> The South African National Gallery was inaugurated through civic initiative in the collection of the South African Fine Arts Association in Cape Town in 1871, and appropriated by the Cape Colonial government by an act of parliament in 1895, although the gallery was not built until 1930. In Natal, the Durban Art Gallery collection was started in 1892, and the Tatham Gallery in Pietermaritzburg in 1903.



in Britain.<sup>2</sup> Art museums in centres that were more strongly linked to Afrikaner culture, established after South Africa had become a Republic, did not reflect this colonial legacy, and focused on South African art from the outset, as did Pretoria when it opened its art museum of ostensibly neutral modern style in 1964.<sup>3</sup>

Research into the early acquisitions of major South African art galleries and museums demonstrates a profound neglect of black artists. The Johannesburg Art Gallery was the first to acquire a work by a black artist when it purchased a painting by Gerard Sekoto in 1940. It seems a somewhat dubious primacy when one considers that this was thirty years after the establishment of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Johannesburg Art Gallery was established by Lady Florence Phillips in 1910. In this singular instance, the sponsorship of the Rand magnates made possible the timely building of a special gallery in 1915. As stated by Sir Lionel Phillips at the time, the project was aimed at "the cultivation in Johannesburg of a spirit of enlightenment and refinement, which according to its degree marks the position of all communities in the scale of civilisation". (Quoted from the Lady Florence Press Clippings in the Strange Library, Johannesburg, by Joyce Ozynski in a review of 'The Neglected Tradition', South African Journal of Cultural and Art History 3(3): 276-284, 1989, p.277.) In taking London's South Kensington museums as a model (a museum of industrial arts as well as an art gallery was originally intended), and employing Hugh Lane to assemble the collection in Britain, the Phillips made clear their belief that British culture was at the apex of that scale. When other centres founded art galleries later in the century, colonial links were more tenuous but still influential. For example, the art museum established in Port Elizabeth in 1956, was named the King George VI Art Gallery, commemorating the royal visit many years before when the idea of the gallery was first mooted. Moreover, it was decided that, since Port Elizabeth had been "the scene of the first British settlement of South Africa, it would be appropriate for the City to adopt British art as one of its major interests." (Quoted from a report by the first director, Mrs E K Lorimer, in the Gallery's Mission Statement of August 1990.) Other art museums that opened in the middle of the century were the Ann Bryant Art Gallery in East London (1948), and the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley (1952).

<sup>3</sup> The art collection at Pretoria had been inaugurated with predominantly Dutch works in the 1930s. Bloemfontein too was collecting art from this period, but a separate art gallery in the refurbished official residence Oliewenhuis opened its doors only in 1989. This was to be the third state-funded art museum, together with Cape Town and Kimberley.



collection in 1910, but it has to be acknowledged that there were relatively few black artists working in western techniques in the first half of the century. However, Johannesburg made no further purchase in this area until 1972, thirty-two years later. By then other museums had effected a number of acquisitions, including the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, which had been collecting art for over ninety years when it acquired its first work by a black artist in 1964. The art museums in Durban, Kimberley, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and Pretoria also made their first purchases in this area in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> But even once public institutions had begun acquiring works by black artists, the process was very slow. At the National Gallery, for instance, the 1970 catalogue lists only six works by black artists out of 160 South African paintings and sculptures purchased in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> These figures were typical and improved only marginally in the 1970s, when Pretoria acquired sixteen works by black South African painters and sculptors, Johannesburg ten, Kimberley nine, Port Elizabeth seven, and East London two. Pietermaritzburg acquired

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Durban collection, this was more than seventy years after the museum's initiation in 1892, while at the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley, and the King George VI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth, both established in the 1950s, it was about a decade. Interestingly, at Pretoria the acquisition was in the year it opened, 1964. Stefan Hundt, Curator of the Olievenhuis art collection at Bloemfontein, has brought to my attention that Zondi's Flute Player, acquired by the National Museum (before the establishment of a separate art gallery) when it won a prize at the African Art Exhibition during the Republic celebrations there, was displayed initially in the context of Zulu culture in the National Museum, not as a work of art per se.

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on a rough count of acquisitions in the catalogue, South African Painting and Sculpture, South African National Gallery, 1970, as the gallery was not able to supply figures. The Gallery also apparently acquired three Rorke's Drift tapestries, five prints and two drawings by black artists in the 1960s. Pretoria Art Museum purchased six works by black South African artists between its opening in 1964 and the end of the decade, Port Elizabeth and Kimberley four each in the 1960s, Durban Art Gallery nine and the National Museum at Bloemfontein one (see footnote 4 for the status of this acquisition).



none until the 1980s, although it led the field in that decade.<sup>6</sup> Durban Art Gallery seems to provide the single exception, as it acquired works steadily throughout the period; it lists 54 works by black artists acquired in the 1960s and 1970s, from a total of just under 300 South African works added to the collection at the time, and 103 in the 1980s - a figure that rises to 452 if craft works are included.<sup>7</sup> The silence created by the near absence of African artists in public collections in South Africa was critical, in view of the seminal role museum collections play in shaping a concept of what constitutes the standard corpus of art. Black South African artists, marginalised by the social order and excluded from art schools and universities, were given no sense of the status of their work by public collections either.

To avoid over-interpreting the neglect of black artists, however, it is important to consider it in the context of general disregard for South African art in the first half of the century. In most art museums with their colonial aspirations far fewer works were acquired by South African than by overseas artists. The Johannesburg Art Gallery, for example, acquired only six works by South African artists during its first two decades, eighteen in the

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<sup>6</sup> There were extensive purchases of works by black artists at the Tatham Art Gallery in the 1980s, with some 105 items listed, the highest number for that decade.

<sup>7</sup> Johannesburg Art Gallery increased its buying in this area to 28% of all acquisitions in the period 1980 to 1991. Generally speaking, however, despite attempts to rectify the perceived imbalance in collections, the number of works by black artists remains a small percentage of total holdings. For example, Pretoria Art Museum has some 130 works out of a South African collection of over 2500, and Bloemfontein lists about 33 out of 393 works. The Tatham Gallery in Pietermaritzburg numbers 164 items by black artists out of 539 South African works.

For information such as this about their collections, I have been dependent on the curators of these and other art museums in South Africa, for whose generous cooperation I would like to express my gratitude.



1930s, and twenty-three in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> Even the art museum in Cape Town, which had its beginnings in the collection of the local Fine Arts Association, obtained few South African works during its initial years as a National Gallery, although from the 1930s acquisitions in this area of the collection began to grow rapidly, and doubled in the 1960s at the same time as the first works by black artists were purchased.<sup>9</sup> Although acquisition policies were broad, not to say vague, early acquisitions in South African art museums invariably focused on French and especially British art, intended to represent the great heritage of western culture,<sup>10</sup> and also underlining South Africa's links with the imperial motherland. Protests in the press in 1946 about the acquisition policy of the Johannesburg Art Gallery related to the neglect of Afrikaner, not African art.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to recall today that at that time

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<sup>8</sup> A South African room was opened only in 1947. Figures cited by Jillian Carman, 'Acquisition policy of the Johannesburg Art Gallery with regard to the South African collection, 1909-1987', South African Journal of Cultural and Art History 2(3): 203-213, 1988, p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> A rough count from the 1970 catalogue of South African Painting and Sculpture shows a very slow pattern of acquisitions in the first decades of the century (1900s - 0; 1910s - 4; 1920s - 10), but a substantial increase after 1930 (1930s - 61; 1940s - 102; 1950s - 82; 1960s - 160).

<sup>10</sup> This is clearly reflected in the collecting policy of the Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, for example. British and French art were considered the core of the collection from the outset, and Lorna Ferguson recalls that South African works were actually sold off (as were some Victorian pieces) to "rationalise" the collection (1961-3). Even when local art was included, it was in terms that made the committee's prejudices clear: "exceptional works by South African artists of the early and mid-twentieth century having strong links with British and continental schools, and which relate to the permanent collection, should continue to be acquired." (Quoted in an unpublished paper by the present director, Brendan Bell, delivered at the Crafts in Education conference, University of Natal, September 1992.) Happily the Gallery's Advisory Committee rephrased this in October 1992, encouraging the purchase of South African art in a broader way.

<sup>11</sup> According to Jillian Carman, the full controversy is recorded in the Acting Town Clerk's report to the Art Gallery Committee of 24 January 1947 ('Acquisition policy of the Johannesburg Art Gallery with regard to the South African



Afrikaners were perceived as the downtrodden group, disadvantaged economically and undervalued culturally, and were fighting for recognition.

Thus the neglect of black artists in South African art museums could be considered part of a broader undervaluing of the culture of the sub-continent. It was, however, far more acute and longer lived than the neglect of other areas. Books which began to appear on South African art from the 1930s, and started to document and shape its history, did not include black artists in any significant way.<sup>12</sup> This omission was no doubt in part a reflection of their absence in museum collections, but would in turn have reinforced that exclusion. If objects made by African peoples were collected at all earlier in the century, it was in the context of historical museums. This reflection of the prejudices of the time was not peculiar to South Africa, however. In Britain and in Europe too, the artifacts of African peoples were collected first as curiosities and "trophies of imperial conquest",<sup>13</sup> then as objects of ethnological interest. The notion that they might be in some

collections, 1909-1987', p.212, n.42).

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<sup>12</sup> The first books published on South African art were in Afrikaans, probably reflecting the Afrikaner struggle for the recognition of South African culture, and made no mention of black artists; for example, A C Bouman, Kuns in Suid Afrika, Cape Town, 1935, and P J Nienaber, Skone Kunste in Suid-Afrika, Johannesburg, 1951. Bilingual publications including brief references to black artists followed, with the first two volumes of Ons Kuns/Our Art in 1959 and 1961 (essay on Sekoto), and F L Alexander, Art in South Africa/Kuns in Suid Afrika, Cape Town, 1962 (references to Sekoto and Kumalo). The first purely English publications, such as Harold Jeppe's South African Artists 1900-1962, Johannesburg, 1963, and Esme Berman's Art and Artists of South Africa, Cape Town, 1970, included further entries referring to black artists. But, although by the 1960s they were included in the literature in a limited way, little attempt was made to integrate black artists into a unified historical discourse. An interesting early publication on the arts and crafts of Africans was The Art of Africa, Pietermaritzburg, 1958, by W Battiss, G Franz, J Grossert and H Juno.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase is Ivan Karp's, from his essay 'Culture and Representation' in I Karp and S Lavine, eds, Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Washington, 1991, p.16.

El Alexander also refers to Louis Maurice,  
L. Maghiepela & Gladys Mgudlandlu



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way equivalent to the aesthetic expressions of western culture was clearly never seriously entertained. Instead antitheses were constructed, of primitive as opposed to civilised peoples, of nature versus culture. In South Africa, artifacts from black groups were often displayed in natural history collections, so that the daily life of the San peoples, for example, might be presented in a diorama in much the same way as the hyena or giraffe families. There was no sense that the lives of African peoples might have a historical dimension. In ethnology museums there was more awareness of an African culture, but it was still largely anonymous and ahistorical. The contrast with western culture was everywhere apparent. If the artifacts of white settlers were collected, it was usually as part of historical reconstruction, invariably linked to a named individual, owner if not maker. And of course if any of these objects were considered to have aesthetic value, it would be placed on display in the hallowed spaces of an art museum. ] ?

But it was in the context of Africana and cultural history museums that African art and craft was first assembled. Items included both traditional objects and those that could be defined as art in western terms, but in neither case were they displayed as objects of aesthetic worth. Nor were the names of their makers recorded other than in rare instances,<sup>14</sup> and usually quite fortuitously. The clay figures of Samuel Makoanyane, for example, were classified as Southern Sotho at the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria in the 1930s, although the name of the sculptor is on record.<sup>15</sup> Dr Killie Campbell, whose private collection of Africana formed the basis of the Campbell Collections of the University of Natal, commissioned works to illustrate Zulu customs

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<sup>14</sup> This was the case with a small basket bequeathed to the South African Museum in Cape Town in 1913, which was made by a wife of the Hlubi leader Langalibalele, called Uvangi, who gave it to Miss Lucy Lloyd in 1887. (Information supplied by Lindsay Hooper, African Studies and Anthropology, South African Museum, 10.2.93.)

<sup>15</sup> Information supplied by J A van Schalkwyk, National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. According to Ann Wanless, the Africana Museum in Johannesburg also acquired works recorded as made by Makoanyane (but classified as Basuto) in the 1940s.



at least as early as 1940 from black painters like Gerard Bhengu, whose historical importance was recognised much later by art museums. While these works were not acquired or displayed as works of art, the Campbell Collection built up rich holdings of works by African artists in Natal, and today boasts some 800 pieces.<sup>16</sup> It is a reflection on the limitations of art collections that this has provided a unique source for art historical research.

Not only Africana museums preceded art institutions in assembling the work of black artists, but commercial art galleries also. When the Johannesburg Art Gallery purchased Gerard Sekoto's Yellow Houses. A Street in Sophiatown in 1940, it was following market trends, for private buyers had been enthusiastic about Sekoto's paintings and they were exhibited for sale in Johannesburg from 1939 at the Gainsborough Gallery and in the South African Academy Exhibitions. From the beginning of the 1960s a number of commercial galleries began to exhibit black artists regularly, reflecting the growing number of practitioners that had emerged since the introduction of the first institutional opportunities of art training for black South Africans in 1952, at Ndalen Teachers' Training College in Natal, and at the Polly Street Art Centre run under the Johannesburg Local Committee for Non-European Adult Education. A career in art was particularly attractive when there were all too few opportunities for black people to train in professions, as the liberal universities were closed to people of colour by government legislation at the end of the 1950s, and job reservation became more intensively enforced. A group show from the Polly Street Art Centre at Queen's Hall Gallery in Johannesburg in 1960<sup>17</sup> launched what was to be known as 'township' art. It

<sup>16</sup> Information supplied by Yvonne Winters, Campbell Collections of the University of Natal (13.1.93).

<sup>17</sup> Fernand Haenggi of Gallery 21, Johannesburg, has made an invaluable contribution to South African art history by documenting the exhibitions at Queen's Hall Gallery, Gallery 101 and Gallery 21 (which were all affiliated to the Haenggi family), as well as the Adler Fielding Gallery. To give some idea of the market at the time, I list the following exhibitions up to the end of the 1970s, picked out by him as including black artists: Gallery 101 6/61 8 artists (incl Hlatwayo)



	3/63	101-UAT 1963 Scholarship (incl Sithole)
	5/64	10 Mocambique Artists (incl Malagatana)
	6/64	7 Artists from Katanga
	1/66	Dumile
	10/66	Rorke's Drift
	6/67	Dumile
	8/67	Lucas Sithole
	10/68	Lucas Sithole
	4/69	Enoch Tshabalala and Cousin Walaza
	10/69	Azaria Mbatha
	2/70	Solomon Maphiri and Joe Maseko
	7/70	Tengenenge
	8/70	Makonde Sculpture
	5/71	Tengenenge
	6/71	Cousin Walaza
	?/71	Simon Monaheng
	3/72	Art Labantu
	4/72	25 African Artists
	5/72	Lucky Sibiya
	7/72	David Mbele
	11/73	Thabo Mothudi
	1/75	African Artists
	26/2	Solomon Maphiri
Gallery 21	9/72	Stanley Nkosi
	5/73	Lucky Sibiya
	6/74	Art'74, Basel Switzerland (Sithole)
	9/74	Lucky Sibiya
	10/74	Lucas Sithole
	2/75	African Art from South Africa (London)
	9/75	Lucky Sibiya
	9/76	Lucas Sithole
	5/77	West African Art
	9/77	Lucas Sithole
	10/78	Lucas Sithole
	8/79	Lucas Sithole (retrospective RAU)
	9/79	Lucas Sithole (retrospective PAM)
	11/79	Watercolour Today (Sihlali)
Adler Fielding	3/62	Township Life (Maqhubela; Sekoto; Sithole)
	2/63	Ephraim Ngatane
	4/63	John Hlatwayo
	6/63	African Sculptures from Nyarutsetso
	12/63	Peter Magubane
	12/63	The Year's Findings (incl Sekoto)
	6/64	Ephraim Ngatane
	10/64	Gladys Mgudlandlu
	2/65	Four African Artists (Maqhubela; Sithole; Ngatane; Matjuoadi)
	2/66	Ephraim Ngatane
	4/66	Lucas Sithole
	6/66	Ben Arnold
	9/66	Ben Macala and Cousin Walaza
	10/66	Traditional Zambian Sculpture
	3/67	Louis Maqhubela
	6/67	Modern Benin Bronzes



*But museums  
have always  
been cautious*

soon became fashionable amongst white liberal buyers, and many other profitable shows followed, including the first solo exhibitions in 1962 of the painter Ephraim Ngatane and the sculptor Sidney Kumalo.<sup>18</sup> If the assignment of African art to ethnology museums had relegated it to the category of craft, its successful exposure on the commercial market afforded it the disparaging label of popular art. Yet art museums did follow, albeit very cautiously and selectively, the initiative of art dealers, and inaugurated their acquisitions of works by black artists at this time. The William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley purchased an Ngatane in 1964, then a Kumalo and an Ezrom Legae, also a sculptor from Polly Street, in 1967. The South African National Gallery purchased a sculpture by Kumalo in 1964, and a second in 1966, and two by another Polly Street artist, Ben Macala, in 1969. Oddly enough, Johannesburg Art Gallery, which was best placed to draw on the most developed commercial gallery network in South Africa, did not avail itself of these opportunities initially.<sup>19</sup>

This underlines that commercial exposure alone was not enough to ensure acquisitions. In the absence of strictly defined acquisition policies, buying patterns were shaped above all by the initiative of museum directors, who brought works to the attention of their advisory committees, and persuaded them to ratify new areas of acquisition. Eleanor Lorimer, who had been involved with the Polly Street Art Centre before being appointed director of the King George VI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth in 1956, took an interest in a further training initiative for black artists at the Rorke's Drift Arts and Crafts Centre in Natal, and made the gallery's initial purchase of a black artist in 1967 from the first printmaker trained there, Azaria Mbatha, followed by further Rorke's Drift graphics in 1970. Similarly, the fact that Pretoria

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12/67 Hargreaves Htukwana

<sup>18</sup> At the Lidchi and Egon Guenther Galleries respectively,

<sup>19</sup> The Goodman Gallery, which had opened in the later 1960s, sold seven works on paper by Maqhubela, Matsoso and Shilakoe to the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1972, then works by Kumalo and Legae in 1976.



Art Museum collected works by black artists from its very first year of operation, and, uniquely for a South African art museum at the time, purchased seventeen Central African carvings in 1968 and mounted exhibitions of traditional African art, can probably be attributed to the research interests of its director, Albert Werth, who was to obtain his doctorate on 'The Influence of Primitivism on the Visual Arts, with special reference to Southern Africa' at the University of Pretoria in 1972.<sup>20</sup>

Research and publication has been yet another important factor influencing the buying patterns at South African art museums. I have already suggested close connections between collecting and writing on South African art, and it is hardly coincidental that museum purchases in this area increased as publications gave South African art greater legitimacy. And the earliest essay published on a black artist might explain why at almost the same time three museums from quite different parts of the country (Kimberley, 1962, Pretoria and Cape Town, 1964) decided to buy the same painter as their very first acquisition of a work by a black artist. The painter was Gerard Sekoto, who had left for Paris many years before in 1947, and had had no major exhibitions in South Africa since, but was included in the bilingual publication Our Art II/Ons Kuns II in 1961.<sup>21</sup> The essay was written by another South African painter, Walter Battiss, reminding us that the forward-looking taste of artists like Battiss often prepared the ground for the reception of new art by collectors,<sup>22</sup> as did that of art dealers. When Harold Jeppe of the Lidchi Gallery included six entries for

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<sup>20</sup> The appointment of Bruce Arnott, who had undertaken research on South African art for his Masters degree at the University of Cape Town, as Assistant Director at the National Gallery in 1970 was also influential in a similar way.

<sup>21</sup> This seems to have been the first significant publication on a contemporary black artist in South Africa, although Sekoto was discussed briefly in David Lewis, The Naked Eye, Cape Town, 1946, p.31.

<sup>22</sup> The personal collection of the painter Irma Stern, housed in a museum administered by the University of Cape Town, offered one of the earliest collections of traditional African art on public display in South Africa when it opened in 1972.



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black artists (including Sekoto) in a book on South African art published in 1963, this might well also have encouraged early acquisitions in the 1960s. The interaction between publications and museum acquisitions remains significant, as was seen when a monograph on Sekoto by Barbara Lindop in 1988, followed by an exhibition of the Sowetan collection of his drawings, housed at the University of the Witwatersrand, then a scholarly catalogue together with a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989, renewed institutional interest in this artist, with a resultant dramatic increase in market prices as well as museum holdings.<sup>23</sup>

This exhibition is one of a series of recent attempts to redress the neglect of black artists in the past. Museums like the Johannesburg Art Gallery have taken the lead in putting black artists on the map in a way that commercial galleries could not do, collecting energetically, documenting the work and careers of black artists, and mounting major group shows and retrospectives with researched catalogues. University galleries had, with their greater independence and ready access to academic resources, already been making some contributions in this area.<sup>24</sup> Preeminent among these was the University of Fort Hare. As early as 1964, when public art galleries had just begun making tentative, sporadic purchases of works by African artists, it inaugurated a collection solely of contemporary black artists, beginning with Gerard Bhengu. Situated at one of the universities designated Bantu under apartheid legislation, it could be seen as an embodiment of official policy,

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<sup>23</sup> As is usually the case, these acquisitions cannot be put down to these factors alone, however. The publicity which surrounded the launching of Lindop's book, and commercial exhibitions of his work were also important factors in developing a new market for Sekoto, as too was the interest of the cultural desk of the ANC at the time.

<sup>24</sup> A good example is that of the University of South Africa, Pretoria, where Professor Karin Skawran began making purchases in the early 1960s, soon after her appointment to the academic staff. She had no controlling committee or fixed budget, and was able to pursue her own agenda of making purchases to encourage young and relatively unknown artists, including Africans, with considerable freedom.



a definitive collection of black art segregated from white South African culture. It is noteworthy that the government funded exhibitions of ethnically defined African art that travelled in Europe, although they were not seen locally, in an attempt to legitimise abroad the concept of separate development. But the initiative to form the collection at Fort Hare seems to have come largely from a single enthusiast, Eddie de Jager, Professor of Anthropology, who indefatigably pursued his personal admiration for contemporary African art, in acquiring works, inviting artists to participate in exhibitions, and bringing out the first book on the subject, Contemporary African Art in South Africa, in 1973.<sup>25</sup> Although distant from commercial galleries, De Jager managed to assemble major pieces, such as Dumile's African Guernica, through a network of supportive individuals who were sympathetic with the unique aims of the collection, and helped him to make appropriate acquisitions from dealers and donors, as well as directly from artists. In 1989, twenty-five years after the collection had been started, the De Beers Centenary Gallery was built to house what must still be the finest collection of works by black artists in South Africa.

The Fort Hare collection is important<sup>26</sup> but it raises a key question about black artists. Should their work be separately addressed or treated as part of a general history? As Fort Hare has long been a centre of African culture and learning, dating back

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<sup>25</sup> De Jager states that the Museum Committee at Fort Hare, of which he was secretary, was seeking ways to extend the ethnology collection. The new direction reflected their interest in culture change, and a belief that acquisitions demonstrating acculturation would give the collection relevance in the future. De Jager has had excellent support in this endeavour from the university administration, and received generous grants from the Council and the Foundation.

<sup>26</sup> It is unfortunate that the out-of-the-way location of Fort Hare has prevented it from being utilised as a resource as much as would be desirable. A selection of works was sent on a touring exhibition to Johannesburg, Pretoria, Kimberley and Bloemfontein in 1979, and De Jager's writing on the collection, now supplemented by a new book, Images of Man (1992), has disseminated knowledge about the work.



to its 1916 inauguration as the South African Native College, it is perhaps appropriate that there black artists are singled out and given stature by this unique focus. The Johannesburg Art Gallery has followed a similar strategy for special exhibitions intended to redress past indifference by concentrating on black artists. While the significance of the first of these exhibitions, 'The Neglected Tradition' of 1988, has been widely acknowledged, particularly because of the important catalogue that accompanied it, there has also been some criticism of this approach, as it seemed to adopt unorthodox criteria for its selection of artists, and failed to integrate their work into South African art as a whole.<sup>27</sup> And an exclusive focus on black artists reinforces a separatism that seems too reminiscent of apartheid policy. Some South African art museums have pointed out that they had been including the work of black artists in their galleries since the 1960s in a 'colour-blind' policy that operated in terms of quality alone, and did not take cognisance of an artist's race - an 'equal opportunity' policy which they felt to be more balanced than 'affirmative action', to use current phraseology.<sup>28</sup>

The Durban Art Gallery provides an interesting example. It both exhibited and collected the work of black artists earlier and more consistently than most South African art museums and integrated them into its general collection.<sup>29</sup> It was also probably the

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<sup>27</sup> The curator, Steven Sack, was himself aware of this, and included a few white artists who had been of critical importance in the development of black art as a token of the desirability of a more integrated approach.

<sup>28</sup> At the Tatham Gallery, which began collecting South African art rather late, a deliberate policy decision was taken not to collect black artists as such, but rather to concentrate on the development of the general South African collection, covering all artists. (Personal communication from Lorna Ferguson, director of the Gallery from 1974-1992.)

<sup>29</sup> Pretoria Art Museum has also had a programme that, from a fairly early date, promoted black artists in independent shows, such as the Sithole retrospective in 1979, and regularly included them in integrated thematic exhibitions, such as 'Looking at our own: Africa in the art of Southern Africa' in 1990, in which black artists featured prominently, without segregation. In



first public institution in South Africa to mount, in 1965, a solo exhibition of a black artist, Michael Zondi, whose carving, The Prophet, had been the Gallery's first purchase from a black artist in 1961. From 1962 it had a number of exhibitions focusing on black artists,<sup>30</sup> but also included them on general exhibitions such as the series called Art South Africa Today. These important non-racial shows, held in collaboration with the South African Institute of Race Relations every two years from 1961 to 1974, drew entries nationally, and numbered black artists regularly among the prizewinners. The Institute played an important part in the Durban art world, particularly in setting up the African Art Centre as a sales outlet for black artists, for many years the only source of work by contemporary black artists in South Africa working outside the conventional western definitions of painting and sculpture. Recognising the interest of such works, the director of the Durban Art Gallery, Jill Addleson, persuaded her committee to set aside a special fund for a study collection, in which she had complete freedom to buy below a certain limit. Her purchases have not been confined to black artists, although they predominate, and include such items as modern variations of traditional objects (like Vuminkosi Zulu's pictorial meat plate), new adaptations of time-honoured techniques (such as the beaded cloth sculptures of Sizikhele Mchunu) and little known artists working in unconventional media (like Derrick Nxumalo's felt pen drawings of urban life). In 1985 the Gallery also set up a special room with displays incorporating craft work and contemporary rural art, and has organised workshops aimed at encouraging dying crafts such as beadwork and grass weaving. While the rustic presentation that was used may seem today to be rather condescending, the display provided a unique resource in a public gallery at the time.

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addition, an exhibition of traditional African art was mounted in 1970, and regular exhibitions drawing on the collection of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria are also held.

<sup>30</sup> These included the interesting 1965 Inter-Faith Bantu art show of works from a mission background, and another early solo exhibition of Dumile in 1966 - his first independent show at an art museum.



There is some irony in the fact that this innovative collection has recently been criticised as a product of apartheid, demeaning to black artists.<sup>31</sup> For the collection posed a significant question by challenging whether it is appropriate to represent African artists only within the frame demarcated by western art collecting. To do so may seem to have the virtue of even handedness, but it neutralises and co-opts African art, denying it difference and suppressing its independent history. Using solely a definition of art developed in a western context to form collections creates the impression that African art began only under the influence of colonial culture, which it then strove to emulate. If art museums in South Africa were to avoid these patronising overtones, they had to broaden their definition of art and develop more inclusive acquisition policies.

In this context the University of the Witwatersrand has played an important part. Contemporary black artists were already represented in the university collection of South African art, and this has been maintained and developed. But when the Department of Art History introduced studies in traditional African art in the 1970s, a subject that had been entirely overlooked in South Africa, other than as a part of material culture in anthropology studies,<sup>32</sup> the university began collecting traditional pieces also, with the support of the Standard Bank African Art Foundation. A number of special exhibitions were mounted from 1979 onwards,

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<sup>31</sup> See Dan Cook's art column in the Sunday Tribune, 15 September 1991.

<sup>32</sup> An exception that should be mentioned is the study of San rock art, which has been a focus of attention for many years, although chiefly amongst archaeologists and anthropologists. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that admiration of the art of a virtually extinct people did not threaten any of the preconceptions that were entrenched in South African ideology about the lack of visual culture amongst Bantu-speaking peoples. (See, for example, Anita Nettleton, '...In what degree [they] are possessed of Ornamental Taste': a History of the Writing on Black Art in South Africa', in A Nettleton and D Hammond-Tooke, African Art in Southern Africa, Johannesburg, 1989.)



both in the university gallery and at other centres.<sup>33</sup> The collection and the accompanying catalogues gradually focused more on southern Africa and incorporated primary art historical research that has made an important scholarly contribution in this little explored area of traditional African art, developing a taxonomy of the artifacts of the sub-continent. The collection was also innovative in including contemporary rural art, the significance of which was recognised by scholars pursuing field work to document traditional art.<sup>34</sup> Exploring the connections between these works and historical rural art as well as urbanised western forms demonstrates explicitly that African art is neither an unchanging tribal heritage, nor a mere derivative and dependent offshoot of imported influences, but a living art with a constantly evolving history.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A number of these have been in collaboration with the Standard Bank, which as sponsor of the National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, and associated travelling exhibitions, has played an important part in disseminating knowledge about traditional and contemporary African art. The first African art exhibition at the National Arts Festival, drawn from works at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Fort Hare, was held in 1985, followed by an exhibition on the art of Venda in 1987 and of Zulu art in 1988. In that year a black artist was chosen as guest artist for the first time, John Muafangejo, and Helen Sebidi was the Young Artist Award winner in 1989. Bonnie Ntshalintshali and Cyprian Shilakoe featured in 1990, Dumile in 1991, Motswai and Mbatha in 1992. Special exhibitions, drawn from the Standard Bank Collection at the University of the Witwatersrand have been mounted in 1990 and 1992, and are now planned as a regular feature.

<sup>34</sup> The University of the Witwatersrand Art Gallery has continued to assemble work by both black and white South African artists of all kinds (with 626 works by named black artists, out of a total of 1763 works, over and above traditional pieces), so that it has achieved a well-balanced collection of the country's art on a very modest budget, although it has been most influential in the collection and documentation of traditional artifacts.

<sup>35</sup> BMW played an important initiating role in this area by sponsoring a dynamic and influential exhibition in 1985, called 'Tributaries', which integrated art and craft, urban and rural, black and white, in a highly innovative way.



This rich diversity is now being reflected in most art museums, which have not only extended their definitions of contemporary art to embrace new forms, but in many cases have begun collecting traditional pieces also. But while all now seem committed to notions of accountability and representivity,<sup>36</sup> there are still many different approaches. Each has claims to validity, and each shapes a different identity for black art in South Africa. Some museums are determined to make no concessions, and apply the same criteria for all artists, seeking a holistic view of South African art. This has the advantage of creating well integrated collections free of any sense of tokenism. But, in a country where formal art training was denied to black artists for so long, the unquestioning application of established selection criteria continues to limit acquisitions, and can render black artists well nigh invisible. It can also be asked whether this 'homogenised' view is a true reflection of art production. In my own research for an exhibition on South African sculpture in 1989, called 'Images of Wood', my determination to write an undifferentiated history encompassing black and white sculptors on the same terms was thwarted by divergences in art forms which mirror profound differences in economic and educational opportunity. Just as in any other society there are distinctions between urban and rural, professional and untrained artists: but in South Africa these have tended to form along racial lines. A decision to collect in only a certain area, therefore, which might seem a neutral academic choice in another context, has deep political implications in South Africa. Even the conventional division of art and ethnology museums is seen to enshrine apartheid.

*à en France ?*

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<sup>36</sup> A resolution to this effect was taken at the 51st Southern African Museums Association Conference in 1987. The key clause reads as follows: "That South African museums sincerely strive to be seen to belong to all South Africans irrespective of colour, creed or gender." Some museums have been interpreting their social roles more widely than simply in the framework of the visual arts. Many have opened their doors to cultural pursuits like concerts and choirs to try to draw a wider audience into the gallery ambience. For example, Johannesburg Art Gallery offers training for art teachers, at Kimberley literacy classes are hosted in co-operation with Operation Upgrade, and Durban Art Gallery arranges programmes for street children.



If no groups are to feel excluded, it is necessary to modify definitions and expectations. Some museums have been challenging accepted practices, as in the South African National Gallery's exploration of new ways to constitute and present exhibitions, substituting community interaction for the authority of the museum. In 1992, for instance, for their Hans Merensky project entitled 'Made in Wood', sculptors were called upon to submit works for selection in the exhibition, and to take part in workshops with invited artists. There was also an educational display about the making of sculpture in wood at the Annexe Gallery. 'Made in Wood' seems to have been aimed at least as much at encouraging sculpture as documenting it, and has brought new artists to public attention, particularly those from communities neglected by the institutions of art. This provides opportunities for previously unknown artists to enter public collections, for South African museums have become eager to redress the under-representation of black artists in their collections. Most have also shown themselves willing to extend their range very widely to collect all manner of made objects by historical and contemporary black producers. While this open-minded attitude seems laudable, it could of course raise a new problem of reverse discrimination, particularly in the area of craft, for similar objects made by whites are invariably ignored and may form a neglected area for retrieval at a future date.

But whatever the approach adopted, South African history has left a legacy of problems that have to be addressed. For example, if curators agree that aesthetic quality is paramount in art museums, how are they to address the technical deficiencies and indifferent materials in works produced by black artists who have lacked access to appropriate training? If it is agreed that traditional art should be included, should art museums collect only particularly fine pieces, when the close relationship of function and meaning seems to indicate a need for more representative collections? The more orthodox processes of art history also have to be modified to retrieve information about undocumented artists and works made outside the conventional boundaries of art. And integrating exhibitions of works whose meaning depends on a



specific social context with autonomous art made for display presents further difficulties, when the aim of curators is to create a sense of equity - both because the quality of the works demands it, and to atone for past discrimination.

By and large South African museums are adopting a far more progressive approach than was the case only about a decade ago, and thus providing a broader and more inclusive canon for art in South Africa. They are sloughing off the skin of colonial elitism, and attempting to acknowledge a wider community of artists and to speak to new audiences. Fortuitously, the 'new' art history, with its consciousness of social context and interest in a wider range of art forms, has made this approach academically legitimate, just as much as it is politically imperative. It might be asked though whether the art museums of the ex-colonial powers have yet addressed the same issues as vigorously.

Social circumstances in South Africa have inculcated political awareness and forced even conservative institutions to recognise that collections entrench the hierarchical power structures of society and that museums have become contested terrain. But how best to redress a heritage of discrimination remains an area of controversy. It is problematic that those who have enjoyed privilege in the past are best equipped to begin to retrieve the history of the disadvantaged. While consultation has become standard practice, some feel that it is only acceptable for black researchers and curators to reclaim their own art history, although there are as yet few trained to do so. But others resist prescriptive new controls to replace the old. Perhaps the ideal would be cooperative projects espousing flexible and transparent aims, acknowledging the value both of seeking a holistic vision of South African art and of offering special opportunities for bringing black artists forcibly to public attention in separate presentations to compensate for past neglect. It is interesting that similar debates have surrounded attempts elsewhere to recuperate the art of marginalised groups, as in the case of



Hispanic or Native American art in the United States.<sup>37</sup> But the key difference lies in the fact that the American exhibitions were aimed at instating the art of minorities, while exhibitions at South African museums are retrieving the art of the majority. There is some irony in attempting to reclaim an art that is destined to predominate.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, I Karp and S Lavine, eds, Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Washington, 1991, and I Karp, C Muller Kreamer and S Lavine, eds, Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture, Washington, 1992. It is interesting that an exhibition of graphic art by black South African artists was mounted at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, in 1976, with a catalogue by Sylvia Williams.

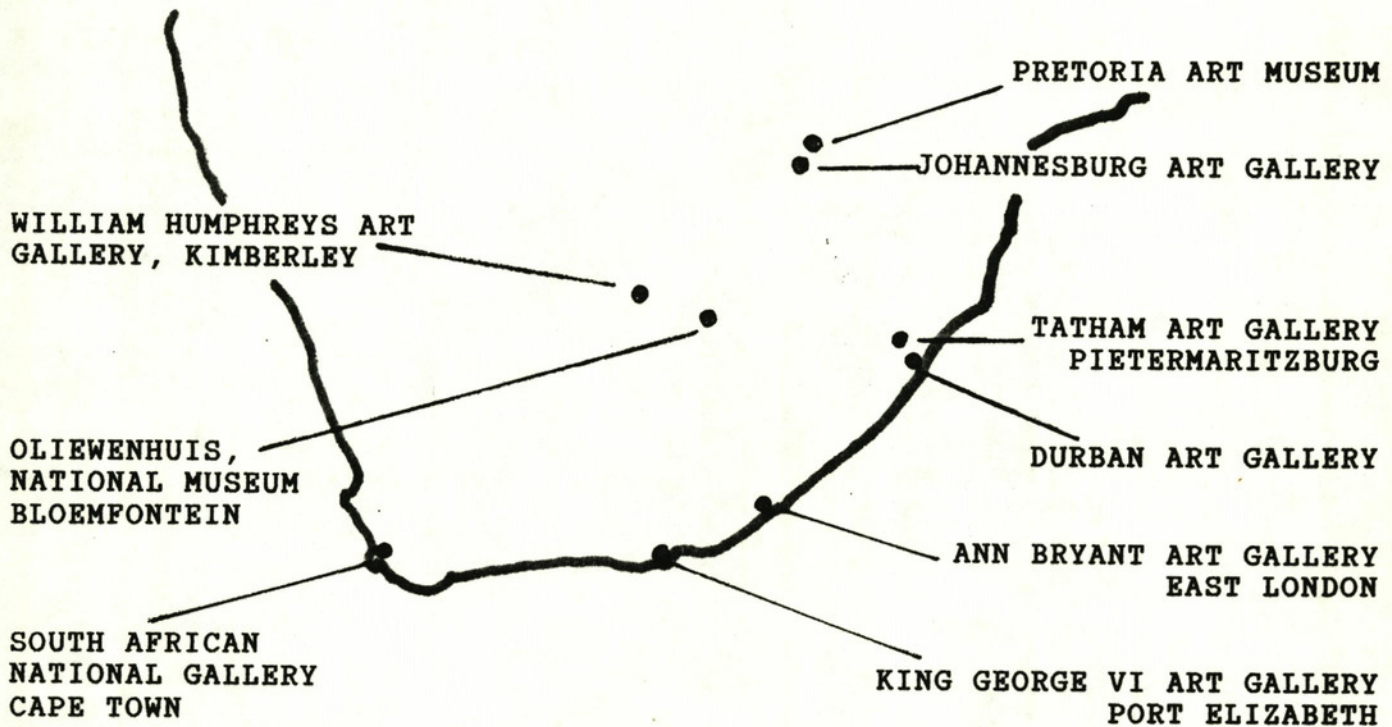
Other useful publications are the catalogue of the 'Art/Artifact' exhibition at the Center for African Art, New York, 1988; B Jules-Rosette, The Messages of Tourist Art, New York, 1984; J Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, Cambridge Mass, 1988; M Trogovnick, Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives, Chicago, 1990; and S Price, Primitive Art in Civilised Places, Chicago, 1989. Also of interest is the recent publication of the International Council of Museums, What Museums for Africa? Heritage in the Future, Icom, 1992, although little attention is given to art museums.



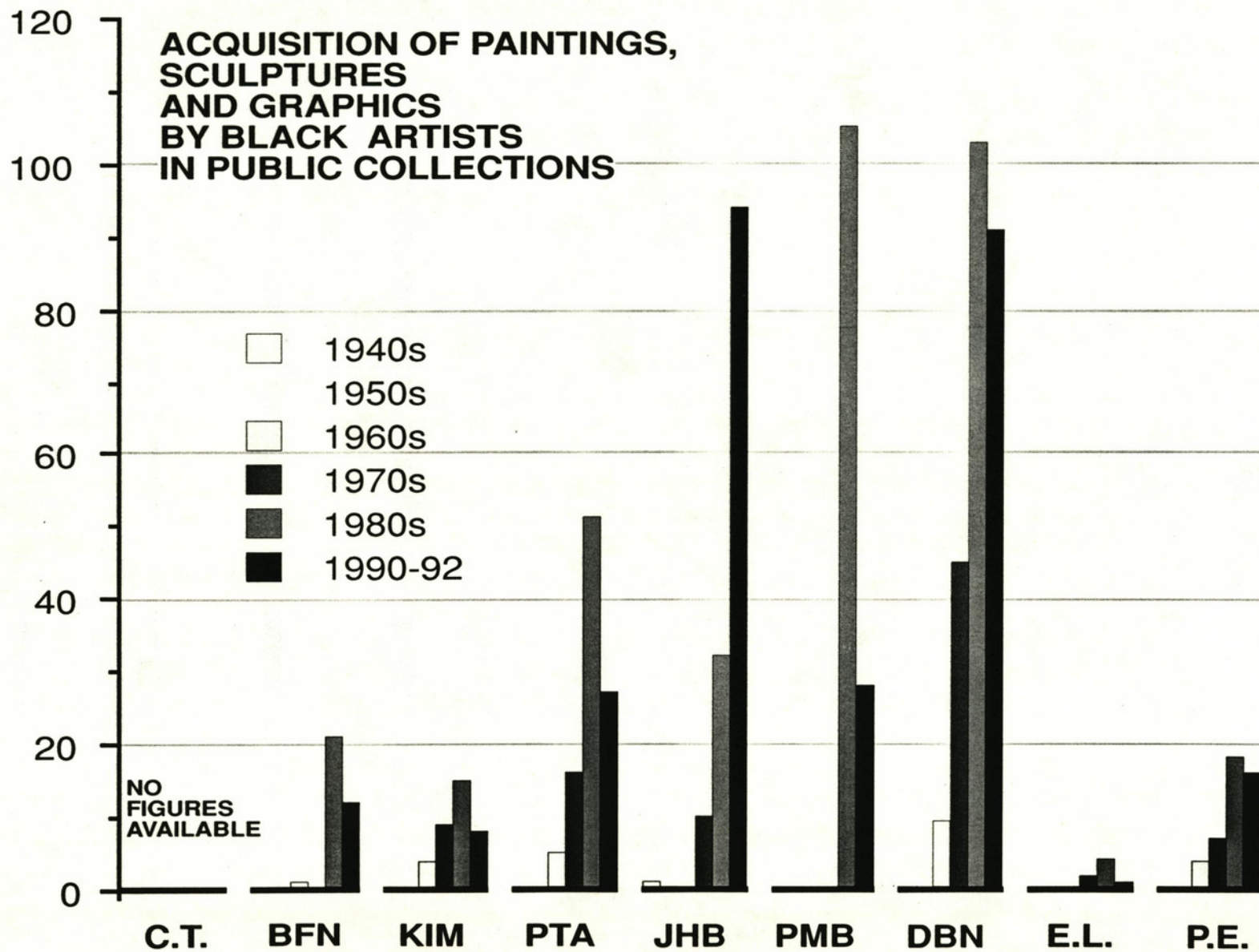
# PUBLIC ART MUSEUMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Report: Reclaiming Black Art History in South African Galleries and Museums

Elizabeth Rankin checks and balances issues related to the discourse on the history of the selection of "black art" by established public art galleries and museums for their permanent collections in South Africa.

Though the article adequately rates for publication, I am unconvinced by the various cursory overviews of intrinsic questions touched upon in the article.

Invariably one asks oneself the significance of the quoted rising figures and statistics when it comes to the latter day interest in acquiring works by African artists. Neither artist nor the type of work which has been purchased is accounted for *and* how it fits within the needs of the museum. On what premises do the various collectors acquire these pieces and to what extent do enterprising commercial galleries contribute? A nasty occurrence in this respect is the pulling of prints from an earlier block as in the case of Azaria Mbatha's prints. In the rush to "reclaim", the integrity of the African printer is dismissed. Has there yet been a change of heart?

Why has African art been neglected in our public art galleries? Does it not correspond with the past status of South African art history at some South African universities? When were students at English universities introduced to the art of South Africans? For too long opinion making individuals were submitted to the exclusive study of ancient Greek and Roman, Italian, English and French art. When African art studies were introduced at Wits in the 70s the emphasis was laid on the art of West and Central Africa and not local expression.

Rankin entertains the reader with her narratives of shifts in emphasis. Zondi's **Flute player** was not acclaimed as a work of art "per se" in the National Museum, Bloemfontein yet she seems oblivious that this museum was also responsible for a very enlightened **Oranje Exhibition of Pan African Arts and Crafts** in 1952. On that occasion not only "tribal" art from all over Africa was included. Contemporary South African artists like Elza Dziomba, John Makhaola, Samuel Makoanyane, George Pemba and Paul Ramagaga were also invited to exhibit. The purpose of the exhibition was to show "the astonishing range of African Art as it has survived into recent times" and moreover "Africa has its Old Masters even as Europe".

The following postulations are not substantiated:

1. By purchasing Sekoto's **Yellow houses**. **A street in Sophiatown** JAG "was following market trends" (:8). Didn't the painting just conform to the norms set by the selecting committee of 1940? Should there be reasons to the contrary, why withhold them?
2. That the Polly Street group show of 1960 launched what was to be known as "township" art (:8). Nowhere in the catalogue of that exhibition is there mention of "township". Skotnes in the preface differentiates between "serious painters and sculptors" and "leisure-time artists". Did the press invent the label?
3. If "artifacts of white settlers" be considered to have "aesthetic value", "it would be placed on display in the hallowed spaces of an art museum" (:7), when and where did it happen?
4. How substantial has the hearsay interest of the ANC's cultural desk been in Sekoto's art?

Alexander (:8) not only refers to Kumalo and Sekoto but also to

*a number of prominent -  
For a long time*

*R. Staller*



Louis Maurice, Louis Maghubela and Gladys Mgudlandlu (**Art in South Africa/Kuns in Suid-Afrika**).

*In conclusion  
I think is fair*  
On publication I would like to see one alteration. In the light of Rankin's care to acknowledge people, Lesley Spiro as writer of the well-researched catalogue for Sekoto's retrospective exhibition in JAG should be named.

Elza Miles  
Fuba Academy

The statistics and graphs do impress but they do not convince.