

# **The African Art Collection in the Iziko South African National Gallery: Past, Present and Possible Futures**

**Sophia Olivia Sanan**

This dissertation investigates acquisition and exhibition histories of parts of the Permanent African Art collection of the Iziko South African National Gallery. The ISANG, which is South Africa's oldest state art museum, began growing its African art collection in 1967 at the height of the apartheid era. With an institutional life that spans from 1872 to the present, the ISANG has been shaped by legacies of settler colonialism, but also by the imperatives of the post-1994 cultural project of nation building. The dissertation traces continuities and discontinuities with colonial legacies in the epistemic frameworks that shape the African art collection. It makes use of sociological approaches to art through the concepts of value, 'taste', and power. Evident in the knowledge archive produced by the African art collection at ISANG, is a reliance on unstable and perhaps unsettled notions of tradition (and by implication of ethnicity). Given South Africa's history of settler colonialism, there are political stakes in defining tradition(s) in the context of art and aesthetic histories. With a focus on epistemology, this project investigates the construction and potential deconstruction of traditional African art as an historical category, and the consequences this may have for opening-up foreclosed temporalities and mobilities in South African art history. The particularity of the South African art institutional context, entangled as it is (and has been) in multiple epistemic paradigms, offers a critical vantage point through which to view the category of traditional African art. By analysing an institutional framing of this contested category within the South African context over many decades, the project aims to contribute to wider debates around African art and its attendant epistemic politics.

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#### Declaration

I hereby declare that the work on which this thesis is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

Signed by candidate

Sophia Olivia Sanan

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## INTRODUCTION

### African art in the Iziko South African National Gallery as a question mark

The Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG)<sup>1</sup> in Cape Town, which is South Africa's oldest state art museum, began growing an African art collection (called the Permanent African Art Collection) in 1967. The collection today is cared for and owned by the Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections, or Iziko Art Collections. The very first artworks accessioned into the Permanent African Art Collection of the Iziko Museums of South Africa (from herewith the PAA collection), were a selection of West African figurative wooden sculptures purchased by assistant curator Bruce Arnott in 1967. The kinds of artworks subsequently placed in the PAA collection, hinged (mostly) on two implicit and contingent requirements: first that artworks were made by Africans but also that they expressed something about African ethnocentric traditions or histories. Hence, the PAA collection is ostensibly a historical collection, differentiated from contemporary and modern 'African' artworks collected by the ISANG since 1964. The collection comprises largely of works by unknown artists, with many that have rough or vague attributions of time and place. By maintaining these implicit requirements, the collection points towards shifting notions of 'tradition' and 'history' regarding art from Africa, without expressly defining either of these terms. As such, this art collection, treated as a research site, presents a compelling starting point to unravel thorny questions around the historicisation of African art in a post-settler colonial context; the epistemic inheritances of art collections and the decolonial impulses that animate contemporary South African museum practice.

As I use the (contentious) terms African art, and (in some instances) traditional African art, to engage with this collection, I present a brief outline at the outset, of a few key debates to make evident how this research project approaches these terms. First, the notion (invoked in the chapter title) of African art itself as a question mark, is based on the argument by Valentine Yves Mudimbe (1986) that the term emerges from a Western epistemic project of order and categorisation, rather than a cross-cultural engagement with aesthetics, histories and epistemologies. Mudimbe argues, "(w)hat is called African art covers a wide range of objects introduced into a historicising perspective of European

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<sup>1</sup> In most instances in this dissertation, I refer to ISANG. This is reflective of how the institution is known today, and importantly incorporates the name: Iziko (which means 'hearth' in isiXhosa, one of South Africa's 11 official languages) and was affixed to the South African National Gallery (hitherto SANG) in 2001 when the Iziko structure was created under the democratic government of South Africa as a state entity which runs several museums and heritage sites under this umbrella. The history of the change from the SANG to the ISANG is therefore significant and indicative of precisely the kinds of symbolic gestures towards Africanisation that this project engages with. As Bongani Ndhlovu and Ciraj Rassool explain "this repositioning and renaming were an intentional means for the museum to turn its back on its colonial foundations, through an attempt to foreground African narratives" (2022: 229). There are times however, when referring to moments in the history of the institution when it was still known as and written about as the SANG, that I will also defer to this erstwhile acronym. I also refer to the ISANG (mostly) as a museum, as its engagement with historical narratives and state mandate position it as an art museum under the name of the 'national gallery'.

values since the eighteenth century” (1986:3). Consequently he wonders whether “understood in their initial form and significance, [these objects] would not have created a radical “mise en perspective” of Western culture” (Mudimbe, 1986: 3). The radical epistemological potential of African art, which has been systematically evacuated by dominant knowledge economies, lies in the fact that recognising ancient traditions of art and visual culture in Africa (and the ontological and epistemological consequences that follow from them) challenges the false premise that African history begins only after the colonial encounter.

Historically, museums played a substantial part in maintaining this false premise - displaying and interpreting African art and cultural objects within the frame of ‘natural history’, frozen in an endless ethnographic past, until as recently as the 1980s. This helped the discipline of art history (as it emerged from Europe) to largely side-step the potential epistemic disruption posed by African art by relegating the study of African material culture and art to the discipline of anthropology. In the case of the ISANG, until the 1990s “(b)esides a few exhibitions that included Central and West African sculpture, “non-Western” art was treated as ethnography and housed in the appropriate collections of the South African Museum across the park.”<sup>2</sup> The emergence of this category in the SANG in the 1970s itself calls for a closer analysis than has hitherto been attempted. What did such an entry into the formal cultural establishment of the SANG mean, and what were its consequences and legacies? This is in part what I aim to unravel through the dissertation.

The fact that much of what is now considered African art, was until relatively recently collected, displayed and interpreted through anthropological frameworks that relied on ethnocentric concepts, points to a second set of debates around how to engage with tradition and history in relation to museum collections of African art, and more specifically how to better frame and engage the historicity of the Iziko South African Museum’s PAA collection. The market definition of traditional African art (variously substituted in commercial use with ‘classical’ or ‘historical’ African art), presupposes an ethnic context in which objects are made and used, not as ‘art’ but in some other function (sometimes utilitarian, sometimes ritual or mystical). The majority of pieces in the PAA collection (but not the entirety), have adhered to the rules that guide this contentious market definition. Since at least the 1980s, contemporary academic convention and museum practice evidences more critical and reflexive understandings of the constructedness (and implicit colonialities) of such expectations of authenticity (evidenced clearly by Ogbechie, 2011; Forni and Steiner, 2015; Forni, 2016; Basu, 2015, 2017, Salami, 2008 to name a few). Mudimbe points out the ethnocentric bias woven into colonial modes of knowledge production and its consequence for art from Africa, invoking Franz Fanon’s caution against the ethnocentrism of European culture which operates under the guise of ‘universality’ (Fanon, 1967 in Mudimbe, 1986).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iziko.org.za/collection/african-art/>

By looking into the early construction of the PAA collection, it is not difficult to demonstrate the ways in which Africa was fabricated and appropriated (in similar terms to the European construction of the primitive) in ways that buttressed a white settler identity in the South African context. This research seeks to start with such a demonstration, but perhaps more crucially, to study the aftermath of this constructed and imposed 'Africa' (which is both hyper-visible and under erasure), and the remaking of its limiting logics far beyond the post-colonial moment and beyond the dismantling of apartheid. By exploring the epistemic frameworks embedded in the history of this collection, I probe whether their exploration might help to address the ambiguity surrounding African cultural heritage represented by the ISANG and later the Iziko Museums of South Africa.

Ambiguous responses are evident in reviews of exhibitions but also in the paucity of engagement with this archive. Nessa Leibhammer, in her study of 'traditional' artworks from Southern Africa in the Johannesburg Art Gallery (2016: 80), argues that, "because of its association with oppressive regimes; its particular history of appropriation into colonial discourse and institutions and its association with imagined heathen practices", the 'traditional' is rendered in contemporary South African museum practice as a site of anxiety. This research in part tests Leibhammer's proposition around traditional African art as a site of anxiety within institutional spaces, and considers possible and emergent positions in relation to this collection that might be more productive and generative.

Contemporary scholarship (particularly from the Global South), has questioned the legitimacy of invented and imposed notions of African cultures and traditions as they emanated from colonial vocabularies and imaginaries and were expressed through ethnocentric concepts<sup>3</sup> (Mamdani, 2010, 2020; Hamilton & Leibhammer, 2016). Moreover, Hamilton, Leibhammer and multiple contributors to the 'Tribing and Untribing the Archive' project (2016) have specifically focussed on so called 'traditional' material culture from Southern Africa in museum collections, and studied in detail the mechanisms through which academic and museum practice has circumscribed their hermeneutic possibilities (Leibhammer, 2016:79). Expressive of such critical developments in South Africa and much further afield, is the fact that many institutions and discursive paradigms have abandoned the term 'traditional' with reference to African art, and attempt either to negotiate the problems around history, tradition and periodisation by simply referring to 'African art', or via an engagement with 'classical' or 'historical' canons of African art. This does not entirely solve the problems posed by these interpretive legacies. Indeed, the burden of disproving the arrogant imperial interpretation that African art emerged only as a result of European colonial intervention (or that it is unfathomable or unknowable outside of Western epistemic frameworks) has continued beyond the interpretation of 'traditional' and precolonial art forms. Scholars of art like Okui Enwezor (2010) and Chika Okeke-Agulu (2010, 2012) have debunked the prevalent and problematic notion that modern (as the

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<sup>3</sup> As a clear example of this line of argumentation, which the volume 'Tribing and Untribing the Archive' surfaces through a number of scholarly essays and interventions (2016), Nessa Leibhammer argues that "the 'tribal' was not something that colonial powers found in South Africa, but rather something that they produced and it is a heritage linked to the notion of 'subject', rather than 'citizen'" (2016: 81).

precursor to contemporary) art in Africa was catalysed purely by formal and artistic intervention by Europeans through colonialism. Their critical historical work has bridged the chasm created by colonial modes of knowing between historical and contemporary African art, emphasising the relation between artistic subjectivity and political liberation<sup>4</sup>.

Despite work in this field, there remains a need for critical scholarly interventions that bridge the constructed chasm between the radical ‘newness’ of African art as it appears in global art fairs and the distant past to which many African aesthetic traditions have been relegated through the erstwhile conventions of anthropology, art history and museology. While it is now well recognised that museums had (and sometimes still have) a strong hand in establishing a false dichotomy of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, it is also evident that the epistemic legacy of this false divide remains a problem in need of creative responses. Indeed, the phenomenon of self-identification with colonial concepts continues to haunt many African art collections in African museums (many of which still refer to ‘arts’ of Africa rather than art). In addition, the art market which remains intertwined with museums and academia, has its own logics that complicate academic conventions.

Cognisant of these complex legacies, I embark on an engagement with African art and traditional African art (used without scare quotes) from the PAA collection in order to make evident the interconnected logics of the aesthetic, the political and the economic. What is evident in the category of African art (imbued depending on context with ideas of radical contemporaneity, modernity or conversely of tradition and age) as it circulates in the art world and as a type of commodity in broader global networks, is a tension between old, racist, colonial ideas which have not been fully acknowledged, transformed or set aside, and the supposed universalism and implied ethical higher ground that the art world takes.

### Why study a South African ‘African art’ collection?

Artworks created by Africans, in the racialised sense of the word, were by varying degrees excluded from the ISANG (in keeping with wider art museum norms in the country) from the 1870s well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first black South African whose work was exhibited in the national gallery was Moses Tladi, whose landscape painting was exhibited in 1931. Gerard Sekoto’s *Street Scene* (1945) was purchased in 1964, at a time when Sekoto was living in exile in Europe and had already been ‘acknowledged’ by other formal art institutions like the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG). This was the first artwork purchased by the ISANG created by a black African artist. Neither of these artists are included as part of the PAA collection. At the same time, evident in the ISANG’s wider art collection

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<sup>4</sup> In the seminal publication and exhibition steered by the esteemed Okwui Enwezor, ‘The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994’ (2001), art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu argued that “(i)f the development of modern art in colonial Africa seems to have been rather slow (that is, if we ignore some of the indigenous sculptural and performance practices mentioned above), this may be because modern artistic subjectivity is linked to political independence” (Okeke-Agulu, 2001:29).

is a long history of the aestheticisation of Africa within artistic traditions and canons dominated by white South African artists. These include bodies of work in the landscape genre, the exoticized Africa of celebrated modernists like Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser, African-‘inspired’ abstract works typified by artists like Cecil Skotnes, Walter Battiss, and Alexis Preller. These works are also not part of the PAA. Significantly, the first artwork that the ISANG purchased by a South African artist was a bronze bust titled *Head of a Zulu* by white South African artist Anton van Wouw in 1926.



Fig 1. Sculpture called ‘Head of a Zulu’, by artist Anton van Wouw (1926), on display at the ISANG 2022 (source: photograph by the author); Fig 2. Gerard Sekoto’s *Street Scene* (1945) on display at the ISANG 2022 (source: photograph by the author)

Critical scholarly work studying South African art collections remains charged with the responsibility to address the racialised legacy of the periodisation and canonisation of (South) African art. In his seminal publication ‘Postcolonial Modernism’, Okeke-Agulu powerfully dismantled the spurious idea that colonial education and Western influence should be seen as the genesis of an African modernist aesthetic. Instead, Okeke-Agulu, traces the influence of philosophies and social movements (such as Pan Africanism and Negritude), as well as the struggles against colonial oppression, as a more illuminating lens through which to read 20th Century aesthetic histories in Africa<sup>5</sup>. Closer to home, is the trajectory of Gerard Sekoto, today recognised as South Africa’s most celebrated modernist, but in the midst of apartheid racial prejudice was given a marginal place in South African art history. As a

<sup>5</sup> Okeke’s seminal study of Nigerian modernists, “sets out to disentangle artistic modernism from this supposed colonial imagination, returning it to the long history of anticolonial, self-affirmative theories, practices, and visions that began at the turn of the twentieth century. For it is all too clear, as I detail in the first chapter, that with the entrenchment of formal colonialism on the continent, African and black intellectuals in fields as diverse as religion, sociology, literature, art, and politics set for themselves the task of imagining an African modern subjectivity defined primarily by their own need for self-assertion and their visions of political and cultural autonomy. Even when this task was not vociferously anticolonial, it often staked a claim to an alternative position at odds with the schemes and propositions of colonial regimes and their apologists. This will to self-definition -which characterized the African anticolonial and decolonization movements- laid the grounds for the work of that generation of artists in Nigeria and elsewhere who participated, midcentury, in the making of what this book calls postcolonial modernism” (2012).

consequence, the intellectual and institutional work to revisit and re-interpret Sekoto's legacy through a historical lens that is not distorted by racism is a project that is still underway. This is but one example of the epistemic injustices that mark the field of African art history, and the production and circulation of art in South Africa<sup>6</sup>. These legacies are evident in the machinations of the art-market, the economies of knowledge and artistic production and the development of epistemic frameworks through which to interpret, historicise and value art created by Africans.

Sales by leading auction houses (such as Strauss & Co and Steven Welz & Co) indicate that, while black modernists in South Africa are (with concerted scholarly and curatorial efforts) being recognised at institutional levels and gaining market value, paintings produced within the apartheid endorsed settler vision of Africa (via artists like Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, and Jacobus Hendrik Pierneef) until now continue to command the highest market value in the *historical* category of art<sup>7</sup>. This kind of circulation conditions the language of taste. In a study of University art collections in South Africa, Bongani Mkhonza (2021: 1) argues: "because of the legacy of colonialism in Africa, the tastes and aesthetics of art collected by university art collections are still largely influenced by Eurocentric epistemologies and their imagination of Africa". An observation made on the Iziko Museums of South Africa website echoes this sentiment, pointing out that the traditional art/anthropology divide meant that until the 1990s, the ISANG "excluded the important visual traditions produced by much of South Africa's population, resulting in an intellectual and visual conservatism that to this day characterizes South African popular taste"<sup>8</sup>.

In relation to economies of knowledge production, while the PAA collection gestures through its name beyond the borders of South Africa, since its beginnings in the 1960s until quite recently, there has been a distinct paucity of African artists, writers, thinkers, curators, and researchers that participated

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting here that while much of the reparative South African art history of the post apartheid era (for example the *Visual Century* publication, 2011) is focussed on the question of modernity and redefining the modern in relation to (South) African art, this study consciously approaches the problematic epistemic terrain of African art with an emphasis on 'tradition' rather than 'modernity'. This is in part as a response to established literature around 'traditional African art' (for example Nettleton, 2020, 1989, and Nettleton and Charlton, 2003) which utilises a strategy of responding to and attempting to overturn the implicit racialisation and hierarchy in constructed divisions between art/craft and modern/traditional classificatory divides in African art by insisting on 'modern' as a much more accommodating term which encompasses almost all 20th century artistic production without a racial bias. These arguments have been valuable to shift a biased dominant discourse in South African knowledge production (also via important exhibitions like *Tributaries* in 1985 and the *Neglected Tradition* in 1989), from an ethnographic to an artistic framing. Many decades later however, I feel it may be more productive to move forward on the premise that such scholars have worked hard to establish - that is their insistence on the contemporaneity of works created across social, racial, spatial, class divisions. It is my conviction that there is limited value in reiterating these insistences via the notion of modernity in particular, but rather to explore the consequences of thinking about particular art collections based on the premise that historicity has been a compromised concept.

<sup>7</sup> This, for example is evidenced by a record auction price hit by South African auctioneer Strauss & Co who "sold celebrated modernist painter Irma Stern's devotional scene, *Children Reading the Koran*, from her 1939 artist trip to Zanzibar, for R22.3 million (\$1.227 million) to a bidder in the room at its premier evening sale of modern and contemporary art on 28th March (2023) in Cape Town.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.iziko.org.za/collection/african-art/>

in or engaged with any of this art once it was accessioned into the institutional registers (first SANG, then ISANG and now the Iziko Museums of South Africa). This has contributed to a paucity of available tools to contextualise, historicise and interpret this collection. Given the historical dominance of settler cultures in the institutional art world, the validating ideas and (relatively few) interlocutors who *have* shaped what is and was deemed authentic and traditional African at the ISANG, call for closer observation than they have been given in existing literature and research in this field (for example histories by Martin, 2019, and Tietze, 2015). Determining ideas and interlocutors of this collection are traceable not only in the ISANGs' exhibition history, but in the less explored stories of its collection and acquisition practices.

As the collection stands today, implied knowledge about sometimes imagined geographies and ethnicities has not been adequately engaged in recent years by the Iziko SANG. Furthermore, recent exhibitions (2020, 2021, 2023) have (perhaps more subtly) maintained implicit relationships between African aesthetic traditions and ethnic identities. This dissertation unpacks and studies these implied relations and their legacies in the art world. Read in light of a history of epistemic erasure, the Iziko Museums of South Africa's PAA collection is an under-examined cultural legacy of South Africa's past. Existing literature on public art institutions with colonial heritage in South Africa leaves under-explored the social and cultural impacts of various formulations *and* denials of African-ness enacted by dominant cultural institutions such as the ISANG. This study explores the key epistemic frameworks evident in the histories of acquisitions, exhibitions and knowledge production associated with the PAA collection. It approaches African art as an unstable construct, and the context of the post-settler colonial art museum in contemporary Africa as a destabilised location. This dual instability presents potentialities for reframing the thinking of this artistic category within art institutions.

Within the collection histories, the concepts of authenticity and originality in relation to the category of African art emerge as pressure points. The fragile operative concept of authenticity in relation to the PAA collection, not only destabilises the cultural authority assumed by the idea and practice of the modern museum, but also opens up alternative readings of historical moments. Perhaps most critically, alternative readings can point to possibilities for the museum's future. The idea of authenticity in this museum collection of African art is a loose thread in a complex tapestry of meaning that has been created and hauled over different dispensations, and one that this project aims to tug at.

## The Urgency of Historicising African art and the Decolonial impulse

The question of how African art is historicised, given these unresolved legacies, is globally under pressure at present. This in part can be related to the global restitution movement largely focussed on African material culture. There is both practical and intellectual scrutiny placed on the conditions under which objects in this category were brought to Europe and North America, and constructed as fodder for the European story of cultural modernity. Issues around the ethics of ownership and cultural appropriation have entered into public discourse after being obscured for many decades by powerful cultural (and colonial) interests, partly initiated by the Sarr-Savoy report on restitution (2018) out of which a myriad of projects and processes relating to African art objects have emerged. Critiques of the museum, rooted in critiques of coloniality, should be read in relation to smaller and more targeted social movements such as the decolonising higher education student movements (#FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, #decolonisethisplace) and much larger international civil rights movements like #BlackLivesMatter. As Malik Ndiaye writes, “(t)oday, the colonial collections are under the fire of strong public attention induced by the intense discussions around the restitution of African artefacts, which are linked to other struggles (movements against racism and police violence, the unblocking of colonial monuments, environmental justice) and give rise to multiple museographic, academic and artistic initiatives around the world” (Ndiaye, 2021). These historical shifts are impacting interpretive frames for historicising African art.

Theories about art, tradition and African aesthetics emanating from Africa have long added depth and complexity to the reductive temporalities imposed on traditional African art by dominant art historical discourses. These intellectual traditions are well established (advanced by thinkers like Aime and Suzanne Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Anthony Appiah and VY Mudimbe to name a few), but have long been side-lined in dominant cultural discourse. These traditions have been built upon by contemporary scholars such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Rizvanna Bradley. While the functioning of art museums remain entangled with dominant social structures and power dynamics, the project of decolonisation as it emerges in museology today, foregrounds the urgency of addressing the racial biases of the art world and its mechanisms of knowledge creation. New appointments of leading art world positions, impactful curatorial and intellectual projects by African proponents indicate the emergence of new discursive paradigms.

Hitherto authoritative voices in the *disciplinary* field of ‘African art’ bemoan this shifting balance of power. At the heart of laments about African art as a discipline losing relevance; manifesting in the ‘dying out’ of African art experts, ambiguities about how to (and whether to) exhibit traditional

African art, how to write about, periodise and name historical art from Africa, the abandonment of traditional scholarly protocols of fieldwork, a reclamation and celebration of terms like black art; are critical issues of race, gender and exclusion that the art historical discipline and museums have struggled to address. As Drew Thompson observes, in the field of African art, the “politics of expertise is about resources and cultural capital” (Thompson, 2023). These fault lines appear magnified in the context of contemporary South Africa. This is because the entanglements between African-ness, cultural tradition, African aesthetics, blackness and race are unavoidable in a context as racialised and unequal as South Africa. The particularity of the South African art institutional context, entangled as it is (and has been) in multiple epistemic paradigms, offers a critical vantage point through which to view the category of traditional African art. By analysing an institutional framing of this contested category within the South African context over many decades, I aim to contribute to wider debates around African art and its attendant epistemic politics.

This study occurs within a social and cultural context strongly shaped by discourses of decoloniality. The idea of decolonising institutions as structurally and culturally entangled with the colonial project as the ‘modern museum’, remains a contentious one, and yet contemporary research engagements with museum collections are framed so frequently as decolonial work that some scepticism and critical engagement with this term and its affordances is warranted. In a recent conversation between museologists George Abungu and Peter Probst, the two scholars discuss the frequency with which decoloniality is invoked as a guiding methodology in Northern academic institutions (2022: 247-249). This presents the (problematic) illusion that academics engaging with museums in the Global North are more committed to this imperative than their Southern counterparts (Probst, 2022: 248). Quite to the contrary, researchers based in the Global South, with arguably much more at stake in the transformation of cultural institutions, face a complex analytic field in which the museums we work in and study contain multiple and often conflicting political possibilities.

In the Global South, we commonly witness that the colonial is alive in new (dis)guises, that decolonial and postcolonial positions are also prone to manipulation and abuse of power, and the quest for reparation, healing and building of more inclusive futures is a practical and not only a theoretical concern. While Northern institutions may publish more papers featuring the word ‘decolonial’, this is no indication that the real (messy) work of forging decolonial positions and possibilities is not happening as much in the Global South. This research project is one that commits to identifying vestiges of (settler) coloniality within the museum as archive and as public institution in order to produce counter-positions, practices and vocabularies. Through this project then, I align myself as a researcher to a decolonial agenda, in so far as my intention is to detangle the colonialities of power embedded in the ways in which traditional African art in the South African context is valued,

interpreted and housed in public institutions, precisely in order to produce, imagine and envision alternative, decolonial possibilities.

For Njabulo Ndebele, the decolonial impulse in the 2015-2017 student movements in South Africa came from a need to reconfigure the relationships that produced the dehumanising project of colonialism – a project that dehumanised both oppressors and the oppressed (2017:104). Ndebele read the burning of colonial portraits in the University of Cape Town art collection by students in 2016 as driven by the need to surface the inhumane, uncivilised dimension “buried deeply in the heart of the self-proclaimed ‘civilised’” (2017:104) via an engagement with symbols and representations of coloniality and whiteness. The construction of traditional African art in the settler colonial context carries evidence of what Ndebele identifies as the projection of the ‘uncivilised’, onto other humans, and the ossification of this projection as the essence of the ‘other’. Unlike the self-important colonial portraits which can be identified as emblems of a colonial conceit, the Permanent collection of African Art as it has appeared in the ISANG occupies a more ambiguous position vis a vis the decolonial project. As such, its analysis, which has not been attempted in any structured way, and has been largely side-stepped by existing research on the institution (for example by Barben, 2015; Crampton, 2003; Martin, 2019; and Tietze, 2015), is an important component in the project of making sense of South Africa’s public cultural landscape.

## African art in the ISANG: Past, present, and possible futures

The dissertation moves sequentially through more than a century of the institutions existence, during which time the museum’s organisational structure and relationship to the state underwent multiple transformations. Nevertheless, until the dismantling of apartheid, certain key features of museal governance remained somewhat consistent. The organisational transformation that took place when the SANG became part of Iziko Museums of South Africa however, requires a little more contextualisation at the outset, as some of these substantive changes were around how the museum and its collections are conceived and operate. The amalgamation of various separate museums in Cape Town into the Iziko Museums of South Africa<sup>9</sup> in 1999, was actualised through a complex re-assessment of museum sites and their collections, and a careful regrouping of different collections: “the formation of Art Collections, Natural History Collections and Social History Collections departments” (Ndhlovu & Rassool, 2022: 231). This was in fact one of the first times that a museum

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<sup>9</sup> As Ndhlovu and Rassool explain, “Iziko Museums of South Africa (formerly known as Iziko Museums of Cape Town and before that as the Southern Flagship Institution, or SFI) was constituted through the promulgation of the Cultural Institutions Act No. 119 of 1998, one of the first laws about cultural structures passed in the democratic era. This act and policies that flowed from it brought together eleven national museum collections and sites that were located in the city of Cape Town, and that had colonial or apartheid origins, under a single administrative structure.” (Ndhlovu & Rassool, 2022: 225-226)

anywhere in the world had abolished colonial classificatory structures at this level (Ndhlovu & Rassool, 2022: 231). The ISANG did not only receive a name change, but fundamental reorganisation as an exhibition site and separately as the Department of Art Collections (through a merging of its collection with the Michaelis Collection) (Ndhlovu & Rassool, 2022: 231). This should be seen as part of addressing the colonial origins of the museum, and laying foundations for new conditions of practice. This is also in some sense a process of Africanisation, which is of concern more generally to National Museums in Africa as discussed in Chapter 2.

Once it had become the ISANG, the gallery functioned as a part of a much larger organisation rather than an autonomous gallery, and correctly speaking, responsibility for higher level decisions around exhibition, research and collections management would lie with the Iziko Museums of South Africa. At the same time, the concept of the ISANG as it existed pre-1999 was importantly maintained by cultural expectation and private funding (most notably through the 'Friends of the SANG' organisation), and remained a fixture referred to in public discourse well past 2010. Hence, I continue to refer to ISANG, though I am cognisant of the larger governing structure of Iziko (addressed in more detail in the final chapter). In fact, despite these important organisational changes that were motivated by decolonial and transformative impulses, this dissertation argues that important intellectual work of engaging with collection histories, and dismantling the operative concepts in a collection like the PAA, as it sits under new management, remains an ongoing and open-ended project.

As it stands in 2023, the ISANG's art collection, acquisitions board, and acquisition policies reflect some years of responsiveness to over a century in which black and African art was ignored. This exclusionary history was first acknowledged by the institution in the 1980s, on the eve of democracy. Subsequently, the discursive and practical implications of addressing histories (and legacies) of racial inequality and injustice have come to hold centre stage in South African art discourse. The majority of artworks created by *known* African artists that are owned by ISANG are not part of the African art collection, but are considered as part of modern, contemporary, or other categories. In this way, the curatorial and discursive practices in the ISANG are in keeping with global developments in the evolution of African art, which today (as any online search will confirm) is used primarily to talk about contemporary art made by Africans on the continent or as part of the African Diaspora. Riason Naidoo (Naidoo, interview: 2023), who occupied the position of director of Iziko Art Collections and indeed the first black director working at the ISANG, made clear not only the enormity of the backlog of exclusion but also the active resistance to change experienced as recently as the last decade.

The role of black curators and directors at the ISANG constitutes an important subtext of this research project. It is significant that the ISANG has only ever formally been headed by one black professional (Riason Naidoo who led the institution from 2008 - 2015). It is also significant that the only person to hold the title of curator of African art was a white woman, and that the position has not been filled for the last 8 years. At present, the staff composition of curatorial and other staff at ISANG has moved away from the historical dominance of whiteness in the institution. The overall staff composition and leadership structure of Iziko Museums of South Africa (an agency of the National Department of Sport, Arts and Culture) that manages ISANG as one of its 13 museums, has placed a strong focus on (and has been successful in) developing more demographic representation of contemporary South Africa.

One of ISANG's past curators of contemporary art shared in an interview, their perspective that African art has been and remains a constrictive and de-historicising category which requires creative and multidisciplinary methods of re-imagining. Part of the aim of this dissertation is to closely observe and understand the obstacles to re-imagining this category in the context of ISANG. This research project highlights the paucity of black African voices in the African art collections' archive, and in reflecting the lack of voices also risks perpetuating their silences. It aims however, to raise this risk to the forefront, and to bring into conversation implied notions about Africa, art histories, and the production of 'expert knowledge' embedded in the African art collection's archive with perspectives of contesting voices.

New acquisitions at the ISANG are more reflective of an African context, a black majority population and, perhaps most importantly, a heterogenous and complex amalgamation of identities that might claim South-African-ness, to the extent that the very notion of African art as a separate framing begins to appear incongruous. It is high time for the implicit requirements for African art in the ISANG to be sketched out in detail, for the subjects and objects captured by this term to be engaged. Within the ISANG, there has been a progressive disinvestment in the category of (traditional) African art for the last decade (in terms of curation, public interest, and intellectual production). It seems possible to consider a future in which the PAA collection may be dismantled entirely, moved from its place at the ISANG, and/ or re-allocated into different collections. What is at stake in the resurrection of African art as a category, or its potential loss or deconstruction? What new potentialities emerge in its dismantling and reconstruction for how African aesthetics, repressed histories, and African cultural heritage are approached in the South African context? What concepts and terms might forge new relational possibilities between African cultural heritage and the South African (and wider) publics?

## Potential Histories of a National Art Museum

The ISANG's history speaks of the political nature of aesthetic projects. As Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (2015: preface) point out, the art museum has been co-opted by diverse forces in colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary contexts, and studying these manifestations helps to articulate "the incertitude and messiness of both imperial governance and postcolonial projects of nation-building". While recognising the aesthetic as entangled with the political, I take an approach that argues against the scholarly convention of naturalising the relationship between the art museum and the nation state. This construction not only re-affirms the consecrating power of the museum to represent people and cultures: to include/ exclude, recognise/ ignore; it also does not account for the more subtle entanglements between public institutions and localised cultural economies which themselves cross borders and cannot be contained by the idea of a nation.

Reflecting on recent histories about the Iziko South African National Gallery (Martin, 2019; Tietze, 2015), Lesitaokana, (2019: 39) points out that prior to 1910 the story of the gallery reflected the politics of the Cape Colony, while after 1910 it became dominated by fractures between Afrikaner and British identities as the project of an independent South Africa intensified. Lesitaokana (2019: 39) argues that since South Africa became a republic "the gallery has been concerned with promoting black African heritage, maintaining inclusiveness and celebrating the African continent through innovative culture". This dissertation is critical of such sequential positioning of history, arguing that the framework of shifting nationalisms serves to maintain analytic blind spots. These blind spots include the core functions of the museum and the ways in which colonialities of power may remain embedded in these practices: collection and custodianship, research, and exhibition. Instead of taking these functions as natural and given tasks to be performed by the museum and its chosen representatives, a critique of the museum as embedded in an imperial logic, rather than guided by changing nationalisms, enables possibly more productive analytic tools. The notion of unlearning and of potential history present analytic tools that help to make sense of the questions raised by the PAA collection. Using these tools, I engage with the PAA collection and more broadly the ISANG's history as a site of knowledge production that carries epistemic potential and burdens.

Through the concept of potential history, Ariella Azoulay advocates for an interpretive frame that tries to identify and unlearn imperial conceptions of sequential time and progressive order. For Azoulay (2019: 11), "[u]nlearning becomes a process of disengaging from the unquestioning use of political concepts – institutions such as citizen, archive, art, sovereignty, and human rights, as well as categories like the new and the neutral, all of which fuel the intrinsic imperial drive to 'progress',

which conditions the way world history is organised, archived, articulated and represented”. A key example of this is Azoulay’s (2019: 61) critique of the imperial logic embedded in the dominant conception of art that not only produces problematic categories but also reproduces limitations in agency:

“[a]rt became a way to avoid engaging with the world shared with others; it is now a field of expertise ruled by imperial principles that have little if anything to do with care for the shared world. Even the expansion of the term art was destructive because it led to a devaluation of many practices, practitioners, and objects now subjected to hierarchical dichotomies of high and low, primitive, and modern, art and ethnography, art and artisanal, canonical and vernacular, master-piece and craft, original and copy, authentic and touristic, and art and nonart”.

What Azoulay asks us to consider, is how the very discipline of art history, enmeshed in the imperial project, has obscured other ways of thinking of, practising, and consuming art. Potential history is not a perspective that provides an *alternate* account of history outside of imperialism, but rather “a deliberate attempt to pulverize the matrix of history, to disavow what was historicized by making repressed potentialities present again within the fabricated phenomenological field of imperial history, present to be continued” (Azoulay, 2019: 288). Invoking an imperial frame is important, because despite the post prefix marking the end of colonialism (and in South Africa, also the end of apartheid), the world remains re-moulded in formative ways through imperial logics. On the one hand, legacies of colonialism remain inscribed in various realms of being, and on the other, new manifestations of imperialism require careful identification and analysis as they are remade in different guises. In the case of African art, the struggle is both to identify colonialities of power embedded in the creation and circulation of this kind of art, and an epistemic struggle against the limiting ways of thinking about art as primarily valuable as a commodity that are imperial inheritances.

Museums, as agents of empire, have contributed, as Ciraj Rassool (2020: 339) argues, to the ways in which societies “and people of the world have been collected, classified and made knowable”. The impacts of these ways of knowing, both in first and third, Northern and Southern worlds, are legible in the “epistemic struggle to change the colonial frames through which we understand societies and people” (Rassool, 2020: 339). This epistemic struggle involves unlearning and rebuilding problematic ways of knowing and seeing people and societies that the museum has helped to reproduce, both within the museum and outside of it. The museum, understood as an epistemic space, has a special role to play in this struggle. From Michel Foucault to Achille Mbembe, scholars have offered tools to understand museums as epistemic spaces. According to Mbembe (2017) “[a] museum properly

understood is not a dumping place. It is not a place where we recycle history's waste. It is first and foremost an epistemic space". Nick Aikens (2017) consequently asks us to view the museum as both an epistemic and epistemological space. By recognizing it as such, we may expect of the museum both "epistemic possibilities and responsibilities" (Aikens, 2017: 10). This dual expectation of the museum forms a premise of this research project.

As a site of epistemic struggle, the art museum holds the potential to engage its own history and reference processes that it has been part of in ways that can contribute to a larger project of unpacking and moving past legacies of oppression. Nancy Dantas (2017: 3) argues that the museum and archive affords a range of opportunities that might lead to "the desired place of co-presence" which in her thinking is the outcome of decolonial practice. In this desired place "both worlds will not have disappeared, but the formerly invisible will have full presence and occupation of the museum and polis" (Dantas, 2017: 3). The notion of co-presence, of different worlds coming together, and of the invisible being visibilised resonates with Azoulay's focus on presence and repression. Given the tools of potential history, objects like those in the PAA collection, long presented in the service of de-historicising paradigms, might be approached in ways that lay bare questions about cultural values, repressed histories, the logic of institutional rules, and the social role that art museums can play. A focus on co-presence and on the traces left by acts of erasure provide the methodological impetus to choose certain examples and leads in the PAA collection to follow and illuminate.

Chapter 1 foregrounds the ISANG's first framings of African art within the epistemic paradigm of primitivism in the 1950s. While this epistemic paradigm has been largely de-legitimised and replaced with more complex understandings of temporality and the constructedness of culture and identity, the central (paradoxical) logic of primitivism remains economically and politically expedient and is thus remade in new guises the field of cultural production (through museums, markets, auction houses etc). As a consequence, traditional African art operates as a category of instability and productivity in the terrain of art history. Its' analysis requires an engagement with its' circulation outside of the museum and the logic of commoditization that the art museum seeks to provide refuge from but remains entangled with. I show how the analytic concepts and research methods that I have chosen might help to navigate some of the problems that emerge in the study of African art as it appears in the ISANG. Chapter 2 reaches further back, to ISANG's originating collections of European art, bequeathed by wealthy industrialists linked to South Africa's diamond and gold mining boom. Given the decolonial impulses animating the cultural sphere in South Africa, ISANG's imperial roots in an extractive colonial capitalist economy render it culturally fragile. This chapter sketches a longer history of fragility and anxiety in the project of the modern museum. The historical context of the mutable

museum, stubborn in some ways and ever changing in others, makes a strong case for the epistemic possibilities and responsibilities vested in this cultural form.

A key contention guiding the fieldwork, has been that the objects contained within the African art collection, exceed the frameworks of meaning that the institution is able to produce. As such, they leave traces of epistemic unruliness, their presence (and faint hints at provenance) gesture at an excess of meanings that the social and political moments of their inclusion were unable to contain. By tracing the story of the inclusion and construction of African aesthetics in the context of a racialised social hierarchy (formalised and institutionalised through colonial and apartheid eras), this study is also maps the construction of exclusionary borders. These borders are always more porous than history suggests. In Chapter 3, I trace the evolution of the ISANG's relationship with black artists, I question some of its' constructions of whiteness and African aesthetics before the 1950s. This is done by working through examples of artworks that carry traces of alternative experiences of social realities by marginalised figures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cape, a world dominated by conservative aesthetics and white male authorities, as a way of exploring potential histories. The work of Moses Tladi and Ewa Meyerowitz, constitute examples of unruly presences in the ISANG archive. This chapter also examines the roles that San Art and Rock art were made to play in framing Africa, Africans, and African history within the various versions of the settler colonial narrative and the haunting presence they carry today.

Chapter 4 traces moments in the lives of few West African artworks that formed the basis of the Iziko South African National Gallery's Permanent African Art collection, which were purchased by assistant curator Bruce Arnott in 1967, from their entry into the museum until the present. The repressed histories embedded in these works relate to their potential in-authenticity which was questioned in a scholarly investigation in the 1980s. The West African artworks are shown to carry qualities that may potentially subvert processes and ideas that the museum (and its imperial notion of art) attempts to repress. These qualities represent counter-narratives that expose modes of cultural production, exchange, ways of knowing, and ways of organizing space that are not easily contained by the formal projects of imperialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid nation-making.

Chapter 5 maps out some of the journeys taken by Ndebele and Xhosa beadwork pieces in the PAA collection. In drawing out some of the texture and narrative around the accumulation of some pieces of Xhosa and Ndebele Southern African beadwork (aprons, necklaces, belts, bags) accessioned into the ISANG in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it becomes apparent that the objects reveal much more than their limited archival footprint suggests. Interviews with beadwork dealers and buyers, as well as analyses of the performative role those exhibitions played in staging an institutional transformation as

part of the new “Rainbow nation”, provide the material for analysis. I probe assumptions around authority, the use of ethnicity in the creation of African tradition and question the ethics of ownership and museological care under conditions of deep social inequality. Finally, Chapter 6 reflects on the role that both the notion of authenticity and the concomitant conditioning and control of space has on how African art is valued and interpreted in the present. The appearance of traditional African art in the context of the ISANG should not be read as divorced from a larger network and politics of space, mobility, and value in the city. In fact, the very ‘utopic’ insistence of a separation between spaces of aesthetic contemplation and real-world spaces is an unhelpful myth based on a politics that endorses a differential way of valuing and coding people and things.

In different ways these chapters explore the connections between the artworks that have found their way into this African art collection and the ideas, life worlds, process and value systems that have shaped these objects. These (sometimes intentionally severed) connections offer an opportunity to invite into the museum conflicting and contrasting narratives, and to invite the possibility of a heterology. The art museum, by acknowledging its own complicity in replicating unequal social structures rather than on the assertion of its own cultural authority, holds the potential to manifest a much needed public space of reflection and contestation. The rewriting, reoccupation, rethinking of the epistemologically bunkered space of the Iziko Museums of South Africa’s PAA holds the potential to offer different institutional outcomes, and different possibilities for the framing of publics.

### Methodology: Unlearning, limitations in the archive and striving for polyphonic methodologies

This study reads the objects in the museum storeroom in relation to the intricacies of the market and the perspectives of traders and sales-people whose archival traces are more faint than directors and curators. In doing so, I aim to present a more complex picture of the interlocutors and validating mechanisms that have shaped what has entered the museum collection, and what has been perceived as beautiful, valuable, authentic, and connected to indigenous knowledge and practice. To explore some of the initial questions around how African art evolved as an operative category in the art museum, objects in the PAA collection were read through an engagement with networks of people, specialised economies, and practices of the African art trade that seemed to play an integral role in the growth of the African art collection but were absent from its official records. As such, the study also responds to “the pressing need for more comparative approaches to the study of museums, and a rethinking of the available analytical tools within art history, anthropology, and cultural studies, to name a few of the fields of inquiry relevant to a cross-cultural account of museums and their histories” (Mathur and Singh, 2015:3).

Since it is difficult (in most cases) in the PAA collection to ascertain the exact identity and the exact timeframe of an artworks' creation, the notion of authenticity that presupposes the inclusion of works in this collection, carries particularly high stakes. Linked to the problematic category of African art as entrenched in ethnographic frameworks, the notion of ethnic 'expertise' and its incumbent colonial baggage also surfaces in this history. I worked through records from within the ISANG archive that would present a picture of the purchase of African artworks (acquisition records and meeting minutes), the exhibition of what was deemed African art (catalogues, reviews, exhibition programs), and secondary literature about the ISANG. The analysis of this material is discussed in detail in a somewhat chronological manner.

I conducted interviews with museum staff, artists, and activists involved in the ISANG at different moments, people who collected work and sold objects to the ISANG, and people who collected and traded works in the same genre as the objects I was researching. Over a period of 3 years, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews. Some participants were interviewed on multiple occasions, a few consisted only of brief conversations. Those interviewed included 2 past directors of the ISANG, 2 past curators at ISANG, a past long term employee of the ISANG, a curator and scholar of South African art and institutional history, 2 art dealers who sold to the ISANG, 3 traders of African art who sold to art dealers, 2 owners of luxury African art boutiques, a writer, editor and cultural activist involved in the African art trade in Cape Town, and 2 artists involved in the ISANG at different junctures. In some instances, these interviews are used to approach silences embedded in this institutions' history - particularly in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 which address collection practices and exhibitions from the 1960s until the present. Some interview participants allowed me to use their names in the dissertation (those who are named generally had roles in the institution that were widely known and carried a strong imprint in the written archive of the institution), others have been presented anonymously, but their relationship with the ISANG has been indicated.

The staff at ISANG were generous, open, and willing as they helped me access the storerooms and the archives. This speaks very highly about the willingness towards transparency, critique and introspection that should be attributed to the Iziko Museums of South Africa. Every effort to access the archives and engage with both its dominant and less audible voices was made possible by the institution's commitment to researchers and critical knowledge production. I was able during my research period to not only access archives on multiple occasions, but also to attend the disassembling of exhibitions. These are processes which were closed to the public. The openness and willingness to converse about a contentious history is not taken for granted here, and I have tried in the writing and interpretation to respect the generosity of the participants who enabled me to observe, engage, and

scrutinise their work. While I present a highly critical view of the dominant voices in this archive, I also acknowledge the *intentions* of care and respect implicit in the collection of African art. Many voices that emerge either in the ISANG archive, or within the world of South African art history, are engaged throughout this dissertation. While the dissertation is critical of particular moments, choices, and perceptions expressed by interview participants, I am wary of pinning more general attitudes on particular interlocutors, but rather have tried to engage their voices as ways of grappling with the archival inheritance of the African art collection.

The research process also required me to reckon with my own assumed epistemic frameworks, forms of deafness and blind spots. Rachel Baasch, Stephen Foláránmí, Emi Koide, Angelo Kakande and Ruth Simbao (2020: 2) articulate the epistemic challenge facing scholars of art in the African context and the importance of self-reflection in this pursuit:

“[e]xisting epistemological frameworks inherited from colonialism must be dissected, examined, and revised within the subject of art history. Furthermore, our own practices as researchers influenced by dominant Eurocentric education and knowledge production systems must be reflected on and carefully considered. Situating the self, consciously, in relation to one's study or research is essential if one is committed to producing self-reflective revisionist art histories from Africa and the global south”.

As a white South African woman, educated with an undergraduate degree in art history from a former ‘whites only’ apartheid university (University of Stellenbosch), I view myself as in part a product of a Eurocentric educational paradigm. African artistic traditions were barely featured in my university curricula. Engagement with art histories of racial exclusion were also framed through the language of post-colonialism and post-modernity - highly theoretical frameworks that served to distance the realities of continued cultural apartheid in South Africa. As such, I am aware that there are levels of unlearning and learning anew that I have had to practice. In the former case this has partly been facilitated through an understanding of how the logic of race is inscribed in the very operational concepts of art which carry purchase in international circuits today, in the latter case I seek to address the shortcomings of my Eurocentric undergraduate studies through a commitment to a continued process of unlearning and learning.

I view myself as a beneficiary of settler colonialism and apartheid, and as such partly a product of the culture that I critique. The question of overstating or understating white culpability in the ISANG archive haunts this research, as I follow Dantas’ (2017: 3) caution to be wary of an intellectual “move to innocence” through a critique of dominant or oppressive cultural forms. In chapter 1, I underscore

the importance of identifying and dismantling raced logics implicit in established notions of art, and at the same time remain wary of perpetuating a monolithic reading of whiteness or the west as an immutable epistemic centre. Here I think of Gayatri Spivak's (Spivak in Culler, 1982: 224-225) understanding of a deconstructive methodological approach which recognises:

“provisional and intractable starting points in any investigative effort; its disclosure of complicities where a will to knowledge would create oppositions; its insistence that in disclosing complicities the critic as subject is herself complicit with the object of her critique; its emphasis upon 'history' and upon the ethico-political as the 'trace' of that complicity - the proof that we do not inhabit a clearly defined critical space free of such traces; and, finally, the acknowledgment that its own discourse can never be adequate to its example.”

To simply point out the constructedness of the National Galleries' encounters with 'Africa' through art, would be to reaffirm the existing epistemic erasures and forms of violence. These sensitivities are necessary to understand and reconstruct the possible encounters and processes that shaped the African art collection and engage with the ways in which this material connects to discourses, questions, and practices of art and culture on the continent in the present. In pursuit of this, I have focussed my attention on the ways in which African cultural material (and its attendant possibilities for revealing repressed histories), has been epistemologically appropriated by certain forms of elite (mostly white) culture. At the same time, I seek to show the ways in which some objects brought into the art museum, and designated as African, can be read as resistant to appropriation and capable of unsettling institutional norms and assumptions.

## The 'Syndrome of Preservation' and a Critical Reading of Value

Finally, as a way of framing the conceptual and theoretical approach utilised in this dissertation, I provide an outline of two key critiques that have helped guide engagement with the PAA collection. First is the 'syndrome of preservation', the second is a critical reading of 'value'.

Born at the height of British imperial rule in South Africa in 1871, the ISANG can be shown to have long been haunted by anxieties about its own irrelevance to a highly heterogeneous and deeply unequal society. This anxiety has in part propelled many of its transformations and can be seen as a fragility and a strength. As it evolved with social transformations from its instantiation in the 1870s to the present, the ISANG can be seen to make constant efforts to overcome and transcend the limitations of inherited paradigms for conceptualising art and engaging publics. At the same time, it has relied on well-established and globally practiced museal logics, most pertinently captured by what

Ciraj Rassool (2020: 352) calls the museum's "syndrome of preservation". At the root of the syndrome of preservation is a problematic relation constructed within Western epistemic frameworks between the movement of time and development of societies. A key function of the knowledge production of the modern public museum was to instruct publics how to understand cultures and people in relation to time and thus create a kind of desired sequential logic or narrative (Jasanhoff, 2005; Coombes, 1994; Foucault, 1986). Foucault (1986) posits this historicity as a quintessential characteristic of modernity and sees the museum as a physical embodiment of this mode of knowledge production.

The power exerted by this form of knowledge production was in asserting control of visions of the future by taming and rationalising the past. As anthropologist James Clifford (2002) argued, the notion of time central to modernist discourses sought to deny the possibility of coevalness between Europe and its colonies. This manifested in what Clifford (2002: 160) called the "salvage complex": a "geopolitical, historical paradigm that has organised western practices [of] 'art - and culture - collecting' [to become] ... a pervasive ideological complex". The salvage paradigm helped (alongside the disciplines of art history and anthropology) to create dichotomies of peoples *with* or *without history*. According to the salvage complex, collection and display can become heroic acts of conservation, of evidence, and of practices and traditions that would otherwise 'die out'. This is the logic at the heart of the syndrome of preservation.

As Paul Basu (2015: 5) explains, "[h]istorically a corollary of the colonialist's civilizing mission, which sought to deliver primitive peoples from their savage state, was a nostalgia for the very lifeways that it would make extinct". The sanctioning of this logic is implied in the protocols of standard museum practice. Sven Lindqvist and Adam Hochschild have identified the perversity of this logic in the brutal examples of German occupation in what is now present-day Namibia and Belgian occupation in Congo, both of which partook in genocidal strategies of control at the same time as setting up mechanisms to record and 'save' cultural artefacts. Examples of ISANG's acquisitions of African art from the 1950s to the 1990s expose some of the implicit work of the museum's continually evolving syndrome of preservation.

These are traced in sequence through this dissertation from the expression of a crude racialized logic encapsulated in the 'primitivism' discourse in the 1930s to 1950s, to the paternalistic (and tenuously substantiated) framing of the 'world cultures' model in the 1960s and 70s, to the liberal humanist salvage paradigm activated in the 1980s and 1990s around South African traditional art. Through these examples I have diagnosed in the chapters of the ISANG history that I review, a kind of institutional schizophrenia: in its very attempts to preserve, celebrate, and care for art and the people

who made it, it operated through epistemic frameworks that ossified rather than challenged entrenched social hierarchies and differences. There is a productive tension in what the museum says and the thinking that informs what it does – this becomes apparent as acquisition histories are read alongside exhibition histories. This tension is read as a productive space, a space of *potentiality* through which the PAA collection could be re-imagined.

The syndrome of preservation stunts and limits polyphonous and heterogenous strategies for the telling of history; as such, it retains values of exceptionalism and rarity in art rather than democratise its enjoyment, presences, and meanings. Simon Njami (in Jules-Rosette and Osborn, 2020: xiv) argues that most museums have failed to create what Michel de Certeau called conditions of “heterology” in which dialogue happens and instead have remained shackled to a model in which “the other becomes objectified, ceases to be human, and is transformed into a case study”. The ISANG’s approach to (African) art specifically, mediated through the syndrome of preservation, has not created an inclusive and inviting engagement with history and requires an overhaul. As Rassool (2020: 339) argues, “the frames of stewardship of collections for future generations may be insufficient to maintain and defend the old museum in the face of powerful new arguments in favour of restitution and new approaches to museum as process and the interrogative museum”.

Over the last decade, critical paradigms to rethink art museums, colonial collections, and public archives have been developed. These critical paradigms include: ideas around unlearning imperial logics and thinking outside of naturalised concepts like art, nation, and citizen (Azoulay, 2019), methodologies of object dissection and the laying bare of the inner assessments of value made by museums (Sakkurai, 2020), critiques of object-obsession, and calls for the reinstatement of human values over object values (Verges, 2014; Umolu, 2019). Equipped with some of these perspectives, I analyse parts of the African art collection as inheritances that reveal more than they have been allowed to say. As more than case studies, sub-collections of Ndebele and Xhosa beadwork and West African sculptures and masks offer sets of unanswered questions and under-explored relationships. Once invited into the museum, these questions might have a productively destabilising effect.

In relation to value - in an interview with curator and scholar Clementine Deliss, Frederick Keck, the director of the Department of Research and Education at the Musée du quai Branly, explained that in terms of protection and preservation, the institutional ‘protective’ priority given to ethnographic objects is because of their value in the art market (Deliss, 2019). Keck (in Deliss, 2019) explained that collections in reserves are classified “according to the event for which everyone is getting ready, namely, the River Seine flooding”, consequently “the value of objects is reclassified in relation to their exposure and risk”. With prescience, Keck suggested that this is analogous to stockpiling medicine

before a pandemic. Hedging bets on future disasters as a way of attributing value is a mechanism that might be more closely scrutinized in the art market and indeed points to a central logic of the museum: preservation in anticipation of future disaster. This idea might be viewed as a more recent expression of the syndrome of preservation and as part of the perversity of this syndrome: to simultaneously protect and partake in destruction.

Consider the different value systems invoked by Azoulay's idea of African art objects as "relational passports" for refugees and migrants from African countries from which the quai Branly's valuable ethnographica were extracted. Instead of holding financial value as rare objects on the 'tribal art' auction circuits, to be bought for massive sums of money by a global elite, these objects could hold different values, but are pressed into exclusive forms of circulation by various actors. This perspective asks us to consider the African art housed in European museums and the generations of diasporic Africans in Europe and the ongoing trauma related to migration from Africa into Europe in relation to each other. Masses of African material heritage in museum storerooms and Africans seeking better lives in Europe are not entirely distinct features of contemporary European cities. In fact, the idea that museums may have to hinge their future relevance on the extent to which they can materialise their responsibilities to the places and people from whom they obtained its collections is very much part of the restitution discourse at present (Karina, 2022).

Analogously, what would it take to re-think the masses of Xhosa beadwork aprons acquired by the ISANG in the 1990s and currently stored in boxes in basements, as relational passports to people in Cape Town who have connections to these regions? For a start, could we imagine the ISANG displaying these connected histories that are embodied in the objects by laying bare their stories of acquisition and mapping out the travel of objects in relation to the restrictions that the apartheid government placed on the travel of bodies? From decades of colonial violence and oppression that shaped the country to the limitation of movement through apartheid's homelands strategy to the transformation of life-worlds that happened in democratic South Africa: Xhosa beadwork aprons in the museum do not only speak of past traditions, practices, cultures or rituals, but also of the mobility, restriction, and immobility of people, ideas, and practices. What are the relationships between these histories and the legacies of spatial apartheid that continue to structure the city of Cape Town today? This could be a response to Leibhammer's argument that, "putting objects back into the contingent flow of history necessitates bringing together the strands of their making, being and acquisition" (2016: 84).

Basu and Modest (2015:8) show ways in which heritage and development industries were informed by policies that emerged as the imperial powers began to recognize the effects of their 'development'.

They go on to point out that the notion of endangerment is key to the authority of the discipline of anthropology, which in its early formulations justified itself by documenting the sacrifices made in the name of progress<sup>10</sup>. The contradictions embedded in the museal syndrome of preservation are a manifestation of this logic. One of the aims of understanding and analysing the syndrome of preservation is to show how certain ways of packaging the past are recycled, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes despite contrary intentions<sup>11</sup>. The project of rethinking museum collections could ideally result in new relational formats: between people and their material heritage, between institutions and their publics, and between collections of objects and the knowledge produced about them. Within this project of rethinking, questions emerge about how the ‘old’ is to be defined, engaged, and transformed (or unlearned), and conversely what constitutes ‘new’ or useful approaches. Given the inventedness of traditions, what and who should be informing practices of care in the museum? What are the consequences of the problematic power relations that undergird the histories of museum collection for the present meaning(s) and value(s) of material heritage and African art? The analysis offered by this dissertation is directed to this end – not only as a critique of the limitations of recycled colonial logics, but as an opportunity to think about how the art museum could engage its own history and local context in more productive and relevant ways.

## Chapter 1

### Exploring approaches to tradition in African Art through sociology, aesthetic theory and art history

*“African realities become, within anthropological frameworks, objects of knowledge; they are understood, classified and defined as cultural signs from the perspective of the Western cultural and epistemological tradition. Subsequently, according to the socio-cultural rules of this new perspective and its matrix of cultural values or, more generally, from what is considered as a general and universal set of cultural values, some of these realities are given a financial value and, thus, become part of an economic process” (VY Mudimbe, 1986:3)*

In the history of the ISANG, the recognition (in the 1950s) and later celebration (in the 1980s) of African art and aesthetics has carried high political stakes, and manifested in contradictory ways, because these moments occurred against a history of racial oppression and an attempted cultural erasure of African cultural traditions and life-worlds. In this chapter, the contradictions at play in the

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<sup>10</sup> This logic fuelled the ‘collecting frenzies’ that filled up many of the world’s ethnographic museums (typified by the “Scramble for African Art” described by Schildkrout and Keim, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Nick Aikens (2017:10) responds that to move away from the tendency to recycle history and maintain practices within this mode: “[the] first task would be to acknowledge the path on which the museum as institution has navigated its journey”.

construction of African art in the ISANG are contextualised within the history of settler colonialism that characterises South Africa, but are also read in relation to a larger global story about African art, which too is characterised by contradiction and epistemic instability (evidenced for example by the story of the Musée du quai Branly). African art was initially incorporated into the discipline of art history via the concept of primitivism. It is within this framing that African art was first articulated in the SANG in 1955. Primitivism as an artistic category has been thoroughly critiqued since the 1980s and is often used in present museological discourse and practice in a self-conscious way, or with reference to past historical paradigms. The concept however, as Sally Price (2017) has observed, has mutated through various discursive paradigms and continues to be put to work in art museums in ways that naturalise a fabricated cultural and racial hierarchy within the history of art. Scholars Nkiru Nzegwu (2019) and Ariella Azoulay (2019) show how the supposedly universal language of aesthetic theory that shapes art museums and art historical discourse of the present, contains implicit ideas about race, status and power.

At the same time, in the marketplace, the idea of the primitive thrives in less self-conscious ways, as a fictionalised and de-historicised ethnic (primitive) Africa animates the trade of traditional African art (in a way that resonates with the rare-ification of many indigenous and traditional art forms). The market value of traditional African art in turn is supported by the validation of institutions like museums and universities, which implicitly maintain (or at least do not challenge) the fabricated primitive Africa (sometimes whether they have abandoned the word traditional or not). What is evident in how we talk and think about traditional African art, is the mutation and remaking of racialised colonial ideas which remain embedded in the supposed universalism and implied ethical higher ground of the art world. As such, the art world is exposed as complicit in ways of knowing that re-enforce the existing status quo more often than they produce alternatives for it.

This nexus of museums, the discipline of art history and the market have together tended to limit and de-historicise African aesthetic traditions by framing them within stilted notions of ethnicity, authenticity and imagined geographies, as opposed to a framing that is subject to the political, social, environmental and economic transformations that shape history. This reproduces ontological and hermeneutic problems, as philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2020) and writer Wole Soyinka (2019) point out, as the epistemic contributions of aesthetic traditions from Africa remain incarcerated by these frameworks. As a consequence, studies of traditional African art, or traditions in African art, require an analytic engagement that is not only conscious of the constructed nature of the term, but also invites processes, ideas and knowledge that has been side-lined by dominant epistemic frameworks.

One example of this is by engaging with the circulation and commoditization of African art that the art museum seeks to provide refuge from but remains entangled with. This argument has been made by African scholars for decades (for example Appiah, 1990 and Mudimbe, 1986) and has produced paradigms for engagement with traditional African art that attempt to overcome some of these epistemic limitations (for example studies of collections and traditions of African art that examine the construction of value that supports the circulation of African art by Ogbechie, 2011; Forni and Steiner, 2015; Forni, 2016; Basu, 2015, 2017, Salami, 2008). The methodology of this project draws inspiration from this tradition of scholarship. I close this chapter with an argument for the use of sociological frameworks of value; ideas around mobility, circulation, seriality (and the concept of ‘fakeness’) and mutability as concepts that offer ways of destabilising dominant de-historicising paradigms for African art.

### Framing African art in the Settler Colonial context

Historically there has been an inherent dislocation between art from the African continent and (formalised) knowledge produced about it. Rachel Baasch, Stephen Foláránmí, Emi Koide, Angelo Kakande and Ruth Simbao (2020: 2) argue that “[o]ne of the travesties of colonialism, and one of the reasons it was so effective, had to do with the erasure of many African intellectuals and knowledge bearers, thus weakening resistance to the epistemic violence that accompanied this sustained period of oppression and dehumanization”. In the context of the ISANG, there is evidence of this dislocation, in as far as the colonial project was guided by the logics of empire and the disciplinary protocols of western museums were at the outset the benchmark for the ISANG’s evolution. At the same time, its rootedness in the African context meant that the ISANG’s history of engagement with African art also needs to be read through the lens of settler coloniality, and the paradox of visibility and erasure that this entailed.

The formation of a European identity, as many historians of empire have shown (Said, 1978; Coombes, 2002; Jasanhoff, 2012; Azoulay, 2019), was intimately tied to the construction of cultural others. Museums played a key role in this construction, specifically via imperial articulations of time and space (Clifford, 2002; Basu and Modest, 2015; Mathur and Singh, 2015; Foucault, 1984). Coombes (2002: 89) argues that in contexts with histories of settler colonialism however (such as Australia, Latin America, South Africa, Palestine, and Canada), the definitive self/other modernist paradigm invoked in the theories of representation associated with the project of empire requires a further step of theorising. Jimmie Durham (2002: 103) argues that: “[f]or the peoples of Europe the ‘Other’ may be a foreigner, the person from another place. For those Europeans who have established permanent colonies ... it cannot follow that the ‘Other’ is the colonised person ‘here at home’, because

that would call into question the very legitimacy of the colonial state. In these states the ‘Other’ must be denied one way or another”. Complex and contradictory patterns of recognition, denial, visibility, and erasure follow this logic. A problem in the narrative of settler colonialism is its difficulty in allowing in evidence of a history that predates settler presence, which disrupts the version of history that justifies oppression. At the same time there is an impulse to present a ‘deep history’ of the settler colonial identity and connectedness of the settler community to the land (also via the concept of indigeneity) precisely to justify oppression and possession. The settler culture derives legitimacy and authority through its imagined proximity to Europe, but also through its rootedness in the colony – this is an uneasy balance in which African art plays an ambiguous role - sometimes supporting a dominant narrative and sometimes unsettling it.

Studies of visuality and power that address the role of representations of black women, or representations of Muslim in South African visual culture, are helpful to understand the ways in which the ISANG’s historical denial of African art and simultaneous ‘affinity with the primitive’ can be contextualised. The apartheid era saw a proliferation of art that featured (and exoticized) black women. The renowned South African modernist Irma Stern produced an enormous oeuvre of works depicting black women and women of colour from all over South, West and East Africa. Recent studies on Stern and her work by Sean O’Toole (2020) and LaNitra Berger (2021) point to a central paradox in the settler cultural identity that is both attracted and repelled by those it constructs as cultural others, and both appropriates and denies the culture of ‘the other’. As Berger (2020:3) writes “Stern and other South African artists’ embrace of race or the ‘close affinity with the primitive’ both defined modern art in South Africa and illustrated the country’s embrace of racial segregation and the form of white supremacy known as apartheid”.

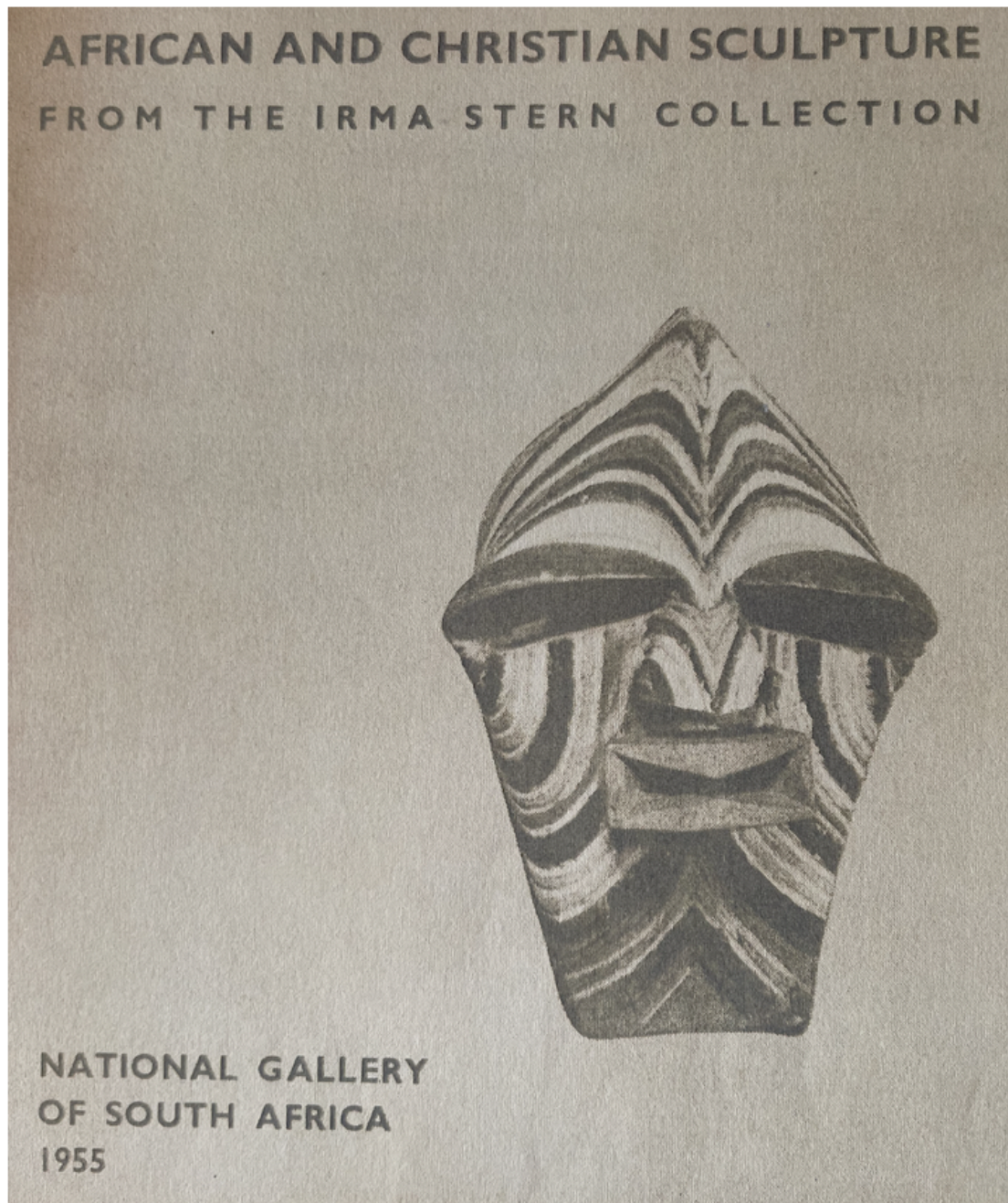
Art created by black women in South African however (as explored by Portia Malatjie and Nontobeko Ntombela in their exhibition *When Rainclouds Gather*, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, 2022), and representations of black women by black artists more generally, remained marginalized and subjected to forms of erasure throughout the apartheid era. Gabeba Baderoon analyses the ways in which representations of Muslims in South African history, popular culture, literature, and art have hinged on an equally contradictory mechanism. Baderoon (2014: 156) argues that “South African images of Muslims form part of a sense-making mechanism that has generated a crucial sense of belonging for white settlers, and disarticulated the relation of indigenous Africans to the land”.

Berger argues via an analysis of Stern’s focus on black bodies, that the “provincial white South African audience, (...) was paradoxically both deeply attracted to aspects of Black culture but afraid to acknowledge the basic humanity of Black people themselves. This ethos contributed to apartheid’s

development and entrenchment” (Berger, 2020: 13). The selective appropriation of visual signifiers of Africa and black culture by white institutions played a critical role in remaking a social order that affirmed white superiority. The separation of art and culture, naturally facilitated by the format of the art museum and its racialized gaze was used to validate both class and racial hierarchy in the Cape Colony. For the first century of SANG’s life African art was not considered as correctly placed in the art museum (Dubin, 2007) since African objects that were collected from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and later incorporated as African art were located in cultural and anthropological museums across South Africa. When it did first emerge in the SANG, it was via the concept of the primitive.

### Naming and framing African art in 1950s SANG

The earliest record of African art being framed as such in the SANG was in 1952, when the SANG staged an exhibition called *The Meaning of Sculpture* (1952). The exhibition showed a few borrowed pieces of African art from private collections alongside sculptures from European artists. There is little archival material (in terms of reviews, essays or catalogues) from the exhibition to better understand this exceptional moment. A few years later however, in 1955, the SANG staged another exhibition called *African and Christian Sculpture* from the Irma Stern collection, an exhibition that showed pieces from Irma Stern’s personal collection of art that she purchased on her travels in West and East Africa in the 1930s – 1950s. The *African and Christian Sculpture* exhibition was opened with a lecture titled “European Appreciation of African Art”. A copy of the lecture is available in the ISANG archives, though the author/speaker is left anonymous. The lecture transcript provides a clue around the initial framings of African art in the SANG.



*Fig 3. 'African and Christian Sculpture' Exhibition Brochure, ISANG, 1955 (source: ISANG archives)*

Evident in the language of the 1955 lecture at the SANG was an attempt to convincingly portray a fiction of a distant, romanticised Africa. The notion of primitive art provided a comforting barrier between art created in the present and art from the past. Over the following three decades museal norms both within South Africa and globally would undergo drastic changes, as the very basis of the ethnographic episteme would be dismantled as colonialism crumbled all over the globe. Between the 1920s and the 1980s, primitivism was the primary paradigm to understand and articulate African art within the international museum world. While critical scholarly material began to be produced in the

1960s, it was the critiques produced by Clifford (1988), Price (1989), Torgovnick (1992) that worked to discredit this category in practical terms. In the South African context, the term primitivism was in use by most gallerists and critics in application to both historical African art and contemporary black artists well into the 1970s and early 1980s (Nettleton, 2020).

The term primitivism was invented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the height of European colonial expansion and contains a much written about paradox. As Martin Porr argues, if art as presented by Western history, is “supposed to represent the highest achievements of humanity, human free will and independence” (Porr, 2019: 156), then how can it be ‘primitive’ at the same time? Porr argues that: “to escape this contradiction the art of other cultures was and is regarded as an early and incomplete manifestation of human artistic abilities – and its producers are not even aware of its significance for the human condition. In this way, the curious situation is created in which artistic abilities are ascribed and denied at the same time” (Porr, 2019: 156). As such, it produces a destabilising effect on historical narratives and the practice of periodisation, and also produces questions about historical agency. This has posed considerable problems for the telling of art histories in the African context.

This is evident in the example of Fort Hare University which developed South Africa’s first institutional collection of African art under the name ‘Contemporary South African Black Art’ in 1964. In the foreword to the collection’s catalogue, anthropologist EJ De Jager provides some insight into the difficulty posed by dominant frameworks for art history to connect contemporary art by black South Africans with historical traditions. He writes that the collection was started “first as a kind of extension, but later also as a reaction to its very old, extensive and valuable ethnological collection of South African indigenous tribal arts, crafts and artefacts” (1992, preface). De Jager doesn’t say more about either the extension or reaction that the collection of contemporary artworks by black South African artists presented to these specific ethnographic collections, he thus leaves the historical links vague and abstract.

However, in the section ‘The Black Artist: Past and Present’, De Jager creates a conceptual link between what he calls ‘*classical African art*’, (which he refers to as the art of the societies found along the two great river systems of West and Central Africa, the Niger, and the Congo rivers) and the contemporary black South African art collection under discussion. De Jager problematically refers to a small cluster of Western scholars to validate broad sweeping statements about the nature of African societies and the ways in which art was produced in these heterogeneous societies. The conclusion that he comes to is that “the reason for the existence of classical African art was, therefore, of a social and spiritual nature rather than an aesthetic and artistic one” (1992: 2).

Within this context, according to De Jager, artists were circumscribed by rules and strictures of traditional society. His argument is that “under the new conditions brought about by contact with European culture the gifted Black artist is freed from the tribal chores and duties that bound him under the old system. His art now offers him a means of subsistence and monetary reward, and thus independence” (1992: 3). Consequently, according to De Jager, ‘he’ is economically, socially, and creatively a free agent. In this argument, De Jager relies on the well-worn narrative of civilisational linearity in which art appreciation is a marker of progress and freedom. As Porr (2019) explains: “(w)ithin this framework, the element of ‘art for art’s sake’ was elevated as a reflection of mental freedom and free will, which was supposedly only fully developed in the ‘White races’” (Porr, 2019: 155). In fact, it is an imperial and capitalist notion of art that continues to hold dominance in contemporary discourse.

The author/speaker of the SANG lecture of 1955 warns that: “we must be careful when we insist on our interpretations. To us these formal aesthetic values exist. We make literature out of our feelings about them. The African shows great surprise when we explain our feelings to him and is only too ready to destroy his traditional sculptor’s skill by pandering to our two-dimensional tastes and flat pictures (look at the tourist objects he now produces) and to barter it for our cheap tin trays” (“A European Appreciation of African Art”, ISANG archives, 1955). This patronising perspective insists that there are separate epistemic frames that can divide ‘our’ aesthetics from ‘theirs’. In a way, the speaker makes evident the argument that philosopher and art historian Nkiru Nzegwu critiques: that there are distinct modes of apprehension, ways of seeing art and that the power to create these conditions implicitly lies within dominant cultures, without which art cannot be encountered. While the patronising and racist language of the SANG’s 1955 lecture can be understood as representing views of a bygone era, Nzegwu argues that the fundamental premise that in arts from diverse cultures, epistemic differences carry implicit hierarchy in the construction of what we understand to be art, remains present in contemporary aesthetic discourse. As a consequence (as Britney Cooper argues), art history itself has been a fertile ground for the dissemination of the racist idea that “Black people occupy space asynchronously; an argument that is often used to legitimize extreme forms of violence” (Britney Cooper in Matsipa, e-flux, 2021).

## Race and Aesthetic Theory

Nzegwu makes a compelling case to demonstrate the racialised logic that remains embedded in aesthetic discourse, despite the claims to universality at the heart of aesthetic theory. Nzegwu (2019) makes this argument by applying a deconstructive approach to the highly influential idea expressed by curator Susan Vogel and art critic Arthur Danto (in the late 1980s) that Africans do not distinguish

between art and non-art. The implication of this claim is to falsely assert unjustified and debilitating notions of backwardness on African knowledge systems as an inevitable fact. The ways in which such arguments found purchase in global art institutions and discourses, indicate the pervasiveness of an implicitly raced theory of aesthetics. To elaborate further, Nzegwu critiques Danto's (1988: 32) argument that "opticality penetrates [Western] consciousness of art so deeply that we ... have no access to African artworks save through our eyes". This observation may appear at first as culturally sensitive, but in effect it insists on the necessity of the staging and framing that a raced aesthetic schema maintains control over: only in the white cube, the 'proper' setting, can we access meaning, otherwise an encounter with art is impossible. For Nzegwu, the implicit racialisation she identifies in dominant discourses on aesthetics remains as pertinent a problem in 2019 as the moment in the 1980s that she discusses in her essay. This is because there has not been a fundamental re-ordering of who produces authoritative knowledge about African art (academics mostly based in the West), and how this knowledge is validated through established modes of research and analysis from within Western academia.

The consequence for Nzegwu (2019: 367), is that the "epistemic logic and theories arising from this racialised structure of knowledge universalise Western modes of seeing, thinking, reasoning, and understanding the world. The concept of art inherent in the knowledge system underwrites raced theories of art and aesthetics". In addition, she shows that "the West's conception of art and creativity presupposes white racial hegemony, even when race seems marginal or absent" (Nzegwu, 2019: 368). For Nzegwu, the stakes for recognition of many of the false claims that underlie the category of African art, are high. The value in identifying and then dismantling what she calls legacies of modernity and Enlightenment is that it can potentially lead to much more than a self-consciousness in language and a reflexiveness around the constructed nature of African art (the use of scare quotes in exhibition catalogues). What Nzegwu aims for is the epistemic space clearing made possible by resisting the racialisation of art: a process that has been naturalised within seemingly neutral concepts like interpretation, aesthetics, and creativity.

Art historian Sylvester Ogbechie (in Klein, 2013:10) argues that "the implicitness of whiteness in [art historical] knowledge production results from an absorption of art made by black artists into an art history that is almost exclusively structured by Western thought or that is maintained by the development of *a separate African art history*". What this epistemological control does is to transform art into a synonym for white cultures. The interpretive gaze of the dominant form of aesthetic theory ensures a form of displacement, in which the intended or embedded meanings of art objects are subsumed by a language that has already categorised and pigeonholed the meaning itself. This interpretive gaze can be dismantled only through an "epistemological shift from the social ontology

created by racism” (Nzegwu, 2019: 368). What is at stake is the suppression of art as a kind of language that communicates across cultural boundaries, and the risk of erasing “the ontology and philosophies of life of peoples” (Nzegwu, 2019: 368) contained within art. What Nzegwu’s perspective seems to offer is the deconstruction of certain accepted, apparently universal but in fact racialised notions of art and aesthetics. This methodology is in service of identifying the mechanisms through which Africa is turned into an empty vessel that is then “filled with racialised terminologies, periodisations, definitions, and interpretations so that Western art constitutes the only art out there” (Nzegwu, 2019: 375). In the place of this empty vessel, Nzegwu proposes the evolution and application of existing terms and concepts drawn from African philosophical traditions (specifically from the Yoruba artistic scheme) to art forms today.

Scholars have argued in different ways for decades that the study and canonisation of classical African art, and the story of its ‘emergence’ via Western institutions, is underwritten by a West-centric knowledge system (Mudimbe, 1986; Appiah, 1991; Ogbechie, 2008; Nzegwu, 2019). In his much-quoted essay “African art as a question mark” referred to in the introduction, Mudimbe reflects on the implications of the project of uncovering the West-centric bias in established modes of understanding art and figuring out what this means for how to approach African art. For Mudimbe (1986:4) “the conceptual framework of African studies is both a mirror and a consequence of a hegemonic experience”. The recognition of Western epistemic dominance is potentially a trap because it does not necessarily provide inroads to new ways of understanding. This has ensured “an absence of serious philosophical debate on the significance of this culture and its art, and the consequences for their meaning and integration into Western epistemological categories” (Mudimbe, 1986: 4). He points out the problem of forging new frameworks of understanding this highly misunderstood and appropriated category, which has been overburdened by ethnicised readings (and fabrications) by generations of Western specialists.

Mudimbe (1986: 4) asks about the appropriation of African art objects in the narrative of Western modernity and what would have happened had their disruptive potential not been circumscribed. More than two decades later, Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2020) suggests that this is precisely what African objects did. They played key characters in the drama of a modernity that far outpaced the confines of Europe, and who is to say that it was not the intention of their makers that they would go out into the world as forceful agents in their own right, rather than pawns in a game:

“A word about the radical rupture that most often would have been the forced migration to the museums of the colonial scientific expeditions, the ethnographic museums and, finally, the museums of the primitive arts. However, this is only a mutation whose possibility was indeed

carried by the work in its infinite plasticity. These transplanted objects did not become mute in spite of this. Their mutant quality was expressed in the language of the ›negro revolution‹. Who will say that it was a misappropriation, that these works were made to speak against the intention that gave birth to them? The term primitivism renders them inert by making them the creation of Europeans who, weary of ‘their ancient world’, sought out a primitive that was in part their own invention. No, these objects acted as mutants and found their own way into a modernity they helped to create” (Diagne 2020: 109–110).

One of the questions that Diagne raises through this description of African art as mutant in character, is the extent to which an epistemic hegemony is still present in the ways that Mudimbe described in the 1980s. Could the invocation of a different perspective, one that understands African art as catalytic and mutable, respond adequately to its history of epistemic capture? In some ways I think it does, as it both dismantles the key effect of (still operative) terms like ‘primitivism’ as a fiction and posits African artworks as agents in the co-production of modernity.<sup>12</sup> What is clear when surveying the field of African art history, however, is that the deconstruction of limiting paradigms, and the reconstruction of more productive analytic tools, is an ongoing project. The Eurocentric/sequential view of history that undergirds the discipline of Art history is structured in a way that cannot account for a more complex story of African art, its colonial and postcolonial entanglements, and the afterlives of imperialism. The RAW Material companies’ 2019 symposium on African art histories asked “[i]s it enough to make room for examples of African art in the grand chronologies of academia or shouldn’t we rather encourage a complete reconstruction of existing art histories?” (Condition Report, 2019). Some of the complexity of the project of reconstruction lies in the interdependence of art museums, universities, spaces of ‘higher learning’, and art markets.

### Afterlives of Primitivism: Art Museums, Ethnography and African art

Under the banner of new museology, imperial conventions around constructing ‘ethnic others’, particularly through the model of the ethnographic museum, were largely de-legitimised and museum ethnography is itself a discredited field and practice. Writer and curator Clementine Deliss points out that “post -structuralism had succeeded in demonstrating the bankruptcy of museum ethnography and declared no further methodological use for material artefacts” (Deliss, 2015). What has emerged in its place, some argue, is the ‘world cultures’ museum model of the multi-cultural, neo-liberal democracies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kros, 2014; Dias, 2008; Szymczyk, 2020). From the 1980’s, the renaming of ethnographic collections as ‘art’ collections (popularized through exhibitions like

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<sup>12</sup> As such it builds on a tradition of scholarship that has responded to colonialities of knowledge pointed out by theorists like Amin (1989), Dussel (2000), and Quijano (2000).

‘Magiciens de la terre’, 1989 and ‘Primitivism’, 1984) became a widely replicated museal strategy. Many museum collections of African art, globally, have undergone a taxonomic (and often physical) shift from ethnography to art.

Let us take a moment to consider however, the diverse impulses that animated these shifts as presented from within Western institutions. The discourse of new museology underscores the importance of post-structuralism as an epistemic shift that demonstrated the imperial, white supremacist logic that underwrote the othering of culture through the knowledge machinery of museums and related disciplines (art history, anthropology in particular). Nzegwu argues that from the 1950s, if not earlier, western museums faced mounting pressures to return national treasures back to newly independent African countries such as the Congo, Nigeria as well as Egypt and Ethiopia (2019: 371). In the 1960s and 1970s there were extensive campaigns by calls for decolonisation to repatriate works of art, campaigns that mobilised a series of conferences, meetings, publications that questioned the misunderstandings of African art and African material culture by western institutions. The First World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal, 1966, followed by the Second World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture in 1977 (FESTAC 77). These pressures, which created powerful incentives for western museums to swiftly reassess and reposition their attitudes towards what constitutes art, are subtly under-acknowledged in the literature of new museology. As Nzegwu argues, western museums responded by reviewing their openly racist colonial era definitions of art in a bid to appease and silence further criticism (2019: 371).

However, shifting conventions of display that African art collections have been subject to, have often failed to address or transform any of the fundamental critiques of the colonial logics that condition the epistemic framing and care of African art. The case of the Musée du quai Branly, (explored in detail by scholars like Kros, 2014; Dias, 2008, Price, 2013), is instructive in this regard. As part of the scramble for museums in the Global North to carefully reposition themselves in relation to their publics, and to reposition their engagements with the aesthetic production of ‘other’ cultures, the vast collection of the renowned anthropological Musée de L’Homme and the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et l’Océanie in Paris became the Musée du quai Branly. It opened in 2006, as an art museum, recognised as a presidential legacy project by Jacques Chirac that “holds over 300,000 objects from Oceania, Asia, Africa and the Americas” (Kros, 2013). This ‘anti-ethnographic’ move was read as a political gesture that sought to realise the multi-cultural agenda articulated by the UN, UNESCO, and many European countries around that time. In an opening address, Jacques Chirac said: “there is no hierarchy among the arts, and no hierarchy among peoples” (Chirac, 2007 in Kros, 2013). This statement constitutes a denial of the art/artefact distinction, presents a new genealogy of

cultures in the name of multiculturalism, and presents an attempt to impart on the concerned publics a 'new gaze' that attempts neutrality.

Critics have asked to what extent the stress on equality of creations, rather than contributing to the acknowledgement of the cultural diversity, erases cultural particularities (Dias, 306: 2008) and indeed erases the colonial history of loot (Kros, 2013). Nelia Dias argued that the assertion of cultural equality in the quai Branly museum comes to stand in for the inequality amongst cultures within France, and the elision of colonial history that is present in the objects themselves. Indeed, "(b)y claiming to defend cultural diversity through the display of objects, the Musee du quai Branly operates a sort of division between people who produced the objects and the humanity to which those cultural items come to belong" (Dias, 302: 2008). An assumption of cultural hierarchy underlies the political move to reinvest 'dignity and respect' in living cultures through the elevation of the status of de-contextualised cultural objects. By doing this, the "Musee du quai Branly intends to speak in the name of the 'humiliated people' for the benefit of humanity. It is as if non-Western people didn't have a voice in this matter and why should they, because France the Civilisation for excellence can speak for other civilisations?" (Dias, 308: 2008). Apparent in the case of quai Branly are the high stakes in the presentation of African cultural objects within the Global North, and the implications for agency and cultural representivity.

On a discursive and academic level, thinking about representation, creative work and authenticity have evolved beyond the narrow confines of the salvage paradigm (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997:3), and authenticity in cultural expression has been "re-conceived as hybrid, creative activity in a local present-becoming-future" (Clifford, 2002: 162). New museology has infused contemporary museum practice with a critical self-awareness and mandate to address these problematic tropes. The notion that "(l)ocal structures produce *histories* rather than simply yielding to *History*" (ibid, 163) became institutionalized within the museum world. And yet the decolonial crisis facing museums in the present moments attests to the extent to which key power relations between those are represented and those who stage representations have not been radically transformed.

### Afterlives of Primitivism: Art-Markets

Problematic categories and ways of framing African art are also kept alive by the art market. For example, addressing the 'murky' business of artistic categories, Hannah O Leary, head of Modern and Contemporary African Art at Sotheby's, explains that for her, African art contains within it a spectrum of the classic, modern, and contemporary. While classical African art contains the 'made for another purpose' clause, for O Leary "[m]odern is work that deals with independence and those kinds of fresh

ideas about post-colonialism whereas contemporary is having left that behind” (Imodara Report on the African Art Market, 2022: 14). To reduce ‘Modern art’ in Africa to independence (post 1960s for most countries) evacuates and undermines crucial chapters in visual and cultural history. The complex and overlapping temporalities that are ignored in this kind of commodity packaging are impactful on the cultural landscape because of the capital resources that someone like O’ Leary mobilises through her interpretation of African art. Such perspectives strongly impact commercial activity in the art world and can straight-jacket cultural production in problematic ways. Gitti Salami (2009: 78) emphasises that frameworks for African art history are moulded by problematic conceptions of ‘tradition’ which are pitted against the contemporary. Globally, the ‘primitivism’ model remains dominant in the sale of tribal art from African art to Adivasi art. These uses (in Sotheby’s catalogues and luxury décor services) are evidence of the afterlives of colonial epistemic frames.

Tracing the connections between the sale of traditional African art, scholarship on African art, and African art in museum collections, scholars like Sally Price (2013), Shelley Errington (1998), and John Monroe (2019) have convincingly argued that art museums betray an inclination to cling on to invented Africas and support the mechanisms of the market. Yaelle Biro (2019) argues that one of the primary challenges in studying African art is to move beyond disclaimers about this term that relegate it as a subcategory in the history of art proper (a discursive problem which ensures that much interpretive work remains stuck in conservative academic spaces). Critiques of the category of African art as a Western construct have become embedded in the meaning of the term as it is found in use in the present. John Monroe (2019: ix) argues that since the late 1960s “a new self-consciousness began to emerge among Western connoisseurs, alternative designations for this distinctive category have proliferated: *tribal art*, *ethnographic art*, *non-Western art*, *arts premiers*. Sotheby’s and Christie’s [...] now opt for the cumbersome – if more neutral – “Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas”. The website of a leading African Art dealer and appraiser based in Houston, Texas, by contrast retains and invests in the ethnocentric aspects of the term ‘African art’ (2022) without self-conscious repositioning.

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Fig 4. Christie's Auction poster, 2020 (source: Christie's Instagram account) and website of a leading African Art dealer and appraiser based in Houston, Texas (source: screenshot from website)

Appiah (1991: 347) argues that “primitive art is judged by universal aesthetic criteria in a modernist paradigm. In a postmodern paradigm by contrast, they cannot be judged by ‘culture and history transcending standards’”. These standards have been dismantled, and new terms have come in their place. However, despite emerging from a revisionist academic paradigm, terms like neo-traditional and transitional art, which try to acknowledge an articulation of modernity in colonized subjectivities, can reinscribe old rules and paternalisms. Pfunzo Sidogi (2022) argues that decolonial perspectives have not yet presented definitive methodologies to respond to and create new epistemic frameworks for engaging with art and aesthetics with respect to the dominance of Western epistemes, and that this process remains unresolved and active. He calls for a ‘de-Africanisation’ of African art in response. For Sidogi the term African art has been irredeemably appropriated and requires a complete rejection in order to reconstruct meaningful categories.

## Contemporary African art and Traditional African art – approaches to the practice of historicization

Part of what is at stake in politics surrounding African art, are histories of commodification which connect the practice of slavery and indentured labour with the commodification and trade of objects – first framed from a Western perspective within ethnographic ways of knowing and then reframed as art. Recent scholarship draws compelling connections between African bodies and African art objects, calling attention to the histories of dispossession, theft, and slavery that undergird the West’s engagement with African art (Monroe, 2019; Azoulay, 2019; Bradley and da Silva, 2020). Such research has significant implications for the epistemologies that guide aesthetic theory and its implicit assumptions about race (Nzegwu, 2019). Scholars Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2021: 3) observe: “Blackness (as object) unsettles the (aesthetic) ground upon which the transparent I emerges”<sup>13</sup>. What sediments settle given these histories of (what Wole Soyinka calls) aesthetic abuse of ‘African art’? As Diagne (2012) argues, while it may be unproductive to ask questions about original meanings of African art: we may ask about its meanings, potentialities, and powers in the present. For Diagne, there is yet much to say and understand about ‘African art’ as a source of ontology and philosophy.

Drew Thompson (2023) argues that “[w]e are in a moment when a Western institutionalized construct like African art is losing its legibility, relevance, and import. Artists who the field of African art has

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<sup>13</sup> Thinking of the role that black art played in the story of modern art, Bradley and da Silva (2021: 3) argue that the avant-garde art movements were characterized by a performance of refusal: the rejection of ‘modernism’s gridded dispossession’ is an example. However, despite the enlisting of black art into the avant garde through aesthetics, “these performances are both denied to and refused by blackness”, which for the authors, “throws into sharp relief the radical disjuncture between these respective modalities and traditions of artistic labour”.

long shunned and relegated to the ‘contemporary’ foreshadowed this moment when they were left to debate and face the impact of conversations on multiculturalism in museums in the 1980s and 1990s”. Rasheed Araeen (2002: 342) was an important voice in these conversations on multiculturalism. He argued that the unflinching focus on ‘contemporaneity’ by the art institutions of the Global North has resulted in the project of the “globalisation of world cultures”. In its new multicultural global ambition, the reach of the global art institution extended to embrace (or subsume) willing participants from the Global South. Araeen (2002:340) argued that some of the key challenges and ideas presented by postcolonial cultural theory “have now been appropriated by institutions which use them to reinforce their colonial idea of the Other. This has helped them to redefine the postcolonial subject as the new Other, but also to predetermine their role in modern society”. The consequence for Araeen (2002:340) was that “any art activity which does not conform to or defies this new definition is looked upon as inauthentic and is suppressed”. Araeen’s argument critiqued the responsibility imposed upon artists from what he called the Third World, and its diasporas, to wear a badge of cultural specificity - the need to create art as an African - and all that might mean. This is not expected of white artists or artists from the Global North, whose cultural specificity is allowed to be subsumed by more ‘important’ aesthetic concerns. This problem is tied to “the representivity of African cultural production vis-a-vis ‘Africa’ or African identities in our shared global context of a knowledge capitalism that has been institutionally and epistemologically shaped by the norms and structures of whiteness” (Arseneault, D’Adamo, Strauss, and Kashope Wright, 2016: 470).

Rustom Bharucha (2002: 295) suggests that the increased appetite in the global art market for contemporary Asian (and in our case African) art may be a “camouflage for the diffidence in dealing with loot”. Ashraf Jamal, too, draws parallels between contemporary African art as a market phenomenon and the imperative of repatriation of African art and artefacts that many western institutions are facing at present. He argues that in the contemporary art market, black artists are hyper-visible and Black portraiture has become “the defining current trope of taste and value” (Jamal, 2021: unpaginated). Furthermore, in this present context, is it a coincidence that “the inflation of contemporary black portraiture occurs at the precise point when the West confronts the looting of African artworks and, now, their repatriation?” (Jamal, 2021). Noting dominant cultures’ capacity for contradiction, Jamal is wary of how to interpret the prominence of Africa on the global art market at the same moment that the West begins to acknowledge the cultural implications and legacies of its extractive colonial past. “A case of reconciliation? A need to right a historical wrong, reboot the art canon, ensure diversity and inclusivity?” asks Jamal (2021), or perhaps the brokering of black portraiture is an effort to “save face, not only to right a wrong”. As Jamal (2021) insists, “one cannot consider the stratospheric rise of black portraiture in the West without recognizing a prior oppressive and extractive imperial history”.

As part of their conference and publication ‘Condition Report 3 (2018), RAW Material Company ([http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/\\_2238](http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_2238)) asks “[t]o what extent does Africa have a say in the way it is produced and consumed? To what extent are the nuances of Africa as a thriving space conveyed in the knowledge produced about Africa that serve interests elsewhere, be it for academic promotion or intellectual legitimation?” The RAW Material Company and other continental institutions such as the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art have clear curatorial and intellectual agendas that respond to these questions. Projects like *When we See Us* (curated by Koyo Kouoh at the Zeitz MOCAA, 2023) and *Black Aesthetics* (curated by Same Mdluli in 2019), to use two localised examples, attest to the strengthening of the strategy of foregrounding Blackness as the key historical subjectivity that speaks back to the de-historicising frameworks that have long shaped African art.

It is worth considering Diagne’s engagement with the ways in which the Negritude movement mascotted African art to further unpack the complex entanglements of race and African art. He refers to Jean Paul Sartre’s *Black Orpheus*, the preface for Leopold Senghor’s anthology of African poetry, in which Sartre argues (2011: 41) that: “the enterprise itself of announcing ‘the sum total of the cultural values of the black world’ is, ultimately, an ‘anti- racist racism’, a negation of negation that could never be authentic affirmation”. While Diagne is himself critical of the essentialism implicit in Senghor’s project, he rejects Sartre’s disregard of Senghor (and by implication an investment in the idea of ‘African art’) based on a racial argument. Diagne rejects the idea that African art as a romanticised or essentialised idea constitutes a kind of reverse racism. To my understanding, this is because race occupies a central position, as a political concept, in the historicization and the future articulation of African art. For Thompson (2023), the future of the field of African art lies not in the “specific and limiting prison” that the erstwhile western African art experts have created. Instead, the challenge will be “to continue and build on field-defining scholarly traditions, like Golden’s curatorial concept of “post-black” and Suzanne Césaire’s writings on surrealism, that have long unfolded outside of the field of African art”.

## Art, seriality and circulation - exploring methods in sociologies of art and object lives

Ways of knowing African art have been strongly shaped by paradigms of visibility. Diagne (2020) offers a reading of the museum gaze as enabled by a kind of mortification: “[t]he gaze is in fact the very symbol of an approach to reality that freezes and separates in order to know. You cannot know movement or think about time if you do not first immobilize them, petrify them, transforming movement into a juxtaposition of stillness and time into a series of moments”. Scholars like Nzegwu

and Salami invoke the importance of alternate paradigms: performance, embodiment, music, and language as modes of expanding upon the epistemic frameworks for art from the continent. Saloni Mathur (2019) has pointed out that in the last two decades theory from the Global South has ensured significant methodological shifts within the discipline of art history towards more dynamic ways of relating spaces, events, people, and objects: expanded understandings of geography and time and a shift away from a focus on great masters, canons, and the individual artist as the locus of meaning. The notion of object lives (as coined by Ivor Kopytoff, 1986) has been instrumental in thinking through limitations presented by the de-historicising implications of dominant art historical frameworks (critiqued by Nzegwu, 2019; Salami, 2008, etc) as they are differentially applied in majority world contexts and have structured new paradigms of collection research.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and sociologist JPS Uberoi (see in particular Uberoi, JPS 2008. *Sociology of Commerce and Industry, or the Three Lives of Things*), have advocated a reading of objects that has been consequential for imagining museum objects and their metamorphosis of meaning through changing structures of value. Appadurai's (1986: 15) notion of the social life of things is based on the argument that "persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations. Thus, today's gift is tomorrow's commodity. Yesterday's commodity is tomorrow's found art object. Today's art object is tomorrow's junk. And yesterday's junk is tomorrow's heirloom". Scholars Rashmi Varma (2013), Silvia Forni and Christopher Steiner (2015) and Paul Basu (2015), have taken these methodological approaches to push forward thinking about the mechanisms by which categories like Adivasi, tribal, and African art are put into production, circulated, and valued. Movement and migration have emerged as important concepts in art historical studies.<sup>14</sup> A range of African museum projects exist that aim to untangle and reveal histories of exploitation and appropriation embedded in African art objects.<sup>15</sup> IFAN Diop's research project and academic journal *Trouble in the Collection*, 2020, serves as an experiment in how erstwhile ethnographic objects are engaged with through writing and performance, their conditions of display, and the methods for research on their origins.<sup>16</sup> Methodologies for postcolonial provenance research are being taken up by many African museums<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Evidenced, for example, from the prolific outputs of art histories guided by this theme in the Congress International Historia del Arte (CIHA) on Migrations (2022).

<sup>15</sup> For example, the National Museum in Lome, Togo, 2020; Musée National de Guinée, 2020 (museum-futures.com).

<sup>16</sup> The research work conducted by Ndiaye et al (Ndiaye et al, 2020) aims to contribute to "the destabilization of the words, concepts and taxonomies that have long conditioned the interpretations and modes of conservation of these material traces of the past, it reflects on ways to re-interview inherited categories, including the one that opposes 'Western' and 'African', without evacuating colonial violence and its current effects".

<sup>17</sup> See International Inventories Project Kenya, (2019), <https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/about-iip> and the ANO project in Ghana: <https://www.anoghana.org>

often in partnership with European museums or cultural bodies.<sup>18</sup> Concepts like the post-museum and object ecologies describe the intention to re-formulate the firmly lodged operating systems that define museum spaces and shape public engagements with historical art.

Through the course of examining parts of the PAA collection, the question of whether works were authentic recurred frequently. The PAA's collection histories contest the fabricated 'imaginary geographies' that many of the objects have been compelled to represent. For example, archival documents questioning whether a wooden carved sculpture can be called Senufo and is (or was) really from the Senufo people (from present day Côte d'Ivoire) destabilise assertive wall texts that link this West African sculpture to the mysticism of the Senufo. Such moments of destabilisation beg the question of how to engage more relevant information exists, even if this information compromises its mysticism and points to living economies that sustain a particular aesthetic tradition.<sup>19</sup> It also begs the question: what are considered the legitimate drivers of tradition and culture? Whether they were indeed extracted from productive social worlds in which they carried varied meanings and values and later proclaimed as *art*, or whether they were made for the market, 'traditional' African artworks may be seen as hostages in museums, held within a framing that they cannot ultimately manipulate. Sociologist Bennetta Jules-Rosette and semiotician JR Osborn (2020:1) base their recent study on African art on precisely this question: "[i]s African art held hostage by art critics, auction houses, cultural brokers, and museums that have served as the arbiters for its authentication and value on and beyond the African continent, or does it speak for itself in other terms?"

Azoulay (2019) refers to Hannah Arendt's notion of worldliness to argue that in the category of African art in particular, histories of violence inflicted by the de-worlding of places from which objects were extracted are carried as memories in these objects. In the case of the PAA collection, there are examples in which the very question of 'source communities' or originating contexts remains nebulous, evolving, and hard to define. This is the case with many African art objects that question the tenuous divide between terms like real and fake; authentic and constructed. What of the world that produces traditional aesthetics, not as embedded cultural objects, but as commodities? Are these worlds worth considering and raising to the fore within the context of the museum? Are they not sociologies worth remembering and vulnerable to the processes of change just like other cultural formations? What are the memories in the replica - the object created in the form of the traditional, but made for the market? The 'made for market' artwork is one that the museum tries its best to keep outside, as the museum acts as a gatekeeper in the nebulous territory of real and fake.

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<sup>18</sup> UNESCO, HKW, and the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, Goethe-Institut.

Walter Benjamin (1935) and Anthony Appiah (1991) have in different ways exposed the contingency of the idea of the original and the authenticity of the existence of the copy and by extension the fake. Bradley and da Silva pursue the critique of the original/ fake dichotomy as a foundational logic in art, by exploring notions of seriality and deformation in aesthetics. Rather than viewing these characteristics “as formal deviations from the major paradigms of modernist art”, they ask whether they can be considered as “aesthetic practices which enact the decomposition of the art historical canon, and of canonicity as such” (Bradley and da Silva, 2020: 3). The serialised African art object, which is troublesome to the system of value that attributes monetary value to the ‘authentic’, poses questions about the mechanisms of authorization, and the place, value, and circulation of art in the world as well as the hierarchy of expertise implied in the very idea of discerning real from fake. At whose expense is the fake defined? It is this unusual but prolific category of the fake in the museum that recalls John Armstrong and Alain de Botton’s observation that “[t]he true purpose of art is to create a world where art is less necessary, and less exceptional; a world where the values currently found, celebrated in concentrated doses in the cloistered halls of museums are scattered more promiscuously across the earth” (Armstrong and de Botton, 2013). It is in recognising the promiscuity of art as a value rather than a condition of rarefication, that a new set of values and possibilities may be invited into the art museum.

These ideas are galvanised here as a way to respond to Diagne’s prompt to take up a multi-dimensional way of approaching African art. Through this approach, the African art objects in the PAA collection can be read as saturated by the material and epistemic eco-systems that they invoke: whether they were extracted from ‘original’ contexts and met requirements of authenticity or whether they were created in the tradition of ‘extracted’ objects and sold through negotiated deals. The idea of African art objects as mutants (Diagne, 2020), offers inroads to trace-able afterlives, transmutations, and reincarnations beyond the art museum and beyond the interpretive paradigms that hold objects hostage. These provide a productive way out of the cul de sacs offered by theories and counter-theories of Africanness and its claims to specificity, and instead invite a thinking about the changing production of sight, value in space and time, and the entanglements that produce art and material culture.

## Chapter 2

### ISANG as a space of (political, cultural, and epistemic) fragility and possibility

This chapter foregrounds the history of ISANG's foundational collections of European art, bequeathed to the burgeoning institution in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by wealthy industrialists linked to South Africa's diamond and gold mining boom. I provide a brief sketch of historical migrations of Europeans to Africa, of diamonds and gold to Europe, and of European art to the tip of Africa. Reflecting on the fact that these imperial (extractive) mining capital roots are exposed in the public eye in the post-Fallist era, I argue that the ISANG's settler colonial history renders it culturally fragile as so closely tied to symbols of white oppression. Yet the ISANG's very survival in the present indicates its potential value as a cultural archive that traverses pre- and post-apartheid moments. The cross-section of South African history revealed in the under-examined archive of the African art collection speaks of entangled histories and complex cultural constructions, rather than re-affirming polarising ethno-centric historical narratives. So while the very idea of African art is a concept vulnerable to ossification and ethnocentrism, viewed in the context of the museum as an unstable and mutable space, the objects contained in this category may yet generate new historical perspectives and connections. Drawing from the case of the burned Brazil Museum in Rio de Janeiro in 2019, this chapter argues that it is precisely the impossibility of the representational task of the museum (to represent a nation for example), that generates unanswered questions, the unravelling of which may be productive in the context of post-(settler) colonial epistemic struggle.

Art museums in Africa are often empty spaces, filled with objects and devoid of people. This fact has contributed to the idea of museums as dead spaces, in which cultural and artistic objects that spoke of living traditions and practices have been enshrined in an epistemic mausoleum. Vested in multiple contemporary museum projects that explore methods to overcome this epistemic freezing, is an assumption that this transformation is possible within the context of the 'museum' rather than a complete abandonment of the idea of the museum, and a reconstruction of new cultural institutional formats. What is it then, about the format of the museum as a space to construct and reflect and perhaps even question historical narratives, that is so enduring? The historical context of the mutable museum, stubborn in some ways and ever changing in others, makes a strong case for the epistemic possibilities and responsibilities vested in this cultural form.

## African Art Museums and Questions of Temporality and Change

On the African continent, there are numerous galleries and museums that house art collections, both contemporary and historical (in Kenya, Senegal, and Egypt to name a few). However, in many cases, objects that would be now housed in European museums as African art are often housed as part of cultural history exhibits and broadly organised under the category of ‘arts’ rather than ‘art’. Nettleton argues that “the arts and crafts of the local populations (...) are now housed in national museums of arts and cultures. The latter include national museums in Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, and Egypt. They are far more numerous than independent national “art” galleries or “art” museums such as those in South Africa, Zimbabwe and, nominally, Namibia” (Nettleton, 2013:5). The distinction between art and arts is still informed by “ideologies that emerged in the German rational and critical philosophical tradition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, separating “art” from other cultural manifestations” (Osborne, 1970 in Nettleton, 2013: 2). As a way of addressing the problematic epistemic histories associated with the collection and classification of arts and crafts from the African continent, the Iziko Museums of South Africa relocated African art objects from various sites and collections into its Social History Collection as part of the creation of the Iziko institution (Ndhlovu & Rassool, 2022: 230). These objects are separate from the Permanent African Art collection which is still part of the Iziko Art Collections and primarily displayed in art exhibitions at the ISANG.

The historical form of the art museum as an apparatus of the state, as developed in Europe, seemed to take root in African countries with settler colonial histories. In South Africa and Zimbabwe in particular, the art museum proliferated in capital cities and regional municipalities alike. Nettleton notes that in the rest of the African continent, the “presence of art museums in other African countries generally coincides with the presence of art schools, as the relationship between the academy and the museum is tight” (2013:4). More recent examples of art museums on the continent include the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art in Lekki which is based on a private collection now housed in a museum located in the Pan Atlantic University of Nigeria. Older examples include the Academie des Beaux Artes in DRC, Kinshasa<sup>20</sup>. In contemporary South Africa, the proliferation of the private model of the art museum (Zeitz MOCAA, Javett Art Foundation, Norval Foundation), attests to the shifting forces of social and political power that inhabit and utilise the space of the art museum. Danielle Becker (2017) argues, “museums created to represent the nation of South Africa, and specifically those that show historical African art, find themselves without support in the historical moment of democratic

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted though that the theme of art education and related institutions (which in some cases include museums) on the African continent, both historical and contemporary, is an expansive one that has received much scholarly attention (RAW Material company, Wolukau-Wanambwa etc) and requires attention beyond the scope of this chapter.

South Africa while private institutions whose offerings focus on contemporary, globally applicable practice flourish”. To attend to this disjuncture, we need to look to the broader context of museum practice, and national museums in and African context.

Mathur and Singh recognized how museums in post-colonial contexts would often resemble ‘a museum of the colony’: they would employ familiar imperial strategies of display and categorisation which essentialised ethnicities and ‘cultures’ by freezing them in conceptual time. By doing so, social hierarchies instated through colonialism were re-inscribed in the museums’ publics: those that could observe history, culture, and art in a detached way and those whose realities and customs were on display. Particularly within the African museum context, racialized colonial inheritances and in many cases, stagnant and patronising state-driven post-colonial agendas tend to reproduce alienating cultural and historical narratives. At the same time, as a manifestation of the path towards modernity and national independence, the post-colonial art museum presented possibilities of resistance and a space to realise and visualize decoloniality - in its representational strategies vis a vis rewriting historical narratives, its engagement with and creation of publics and its socio-cultural impact on art production and consumption (this is evident in histories of National Museums of Kenya and Ghana for example). In many cases museums in post-colonial contexts partake of both strategies and hence operate as sites of considerable instability and contestation, housing multiple and often conflicting temporalities.

Political scholar Mamadou Diallo argues that the humanist (and secular) premise of the museum in Africa raises questions both about the viability of the bourgeois habitus (in which only a small proportion on the continent are at home) embodied in the museum (Diallo, 2022), and the implications of attending to objects in the way that a museum asks of its audiences. Scholars argue that African museums, have been practising and formulating new and imaginative ways to move past Western Museum models since the 1960s (Middernacht, 2018; Arinza, 2007; Clifford, 1997; Abungu & Probst (eds), 2022). In particular, the idea of community museums, and museums focussed on people over objects (Abungu & Probst, 2022: 247) has been surfaced recently as the particular innovation and contribution of African museum practice. At the same time, the difficulty of realising collaboration and change beyond deeply inscribed North/ South grooves and between dominant and oppressed populations has emerged again and again also because of the disappointment of what new forms of inequality materialized through the globalization of neo-liberal politics have delivered (since the 2000s). The extent to which new ‘African’ models of the museum have really been actualised is an unfolding story, and the extent to which National Museums (as opposed to their privately funded counter-parts) occupy a position with enough autonomy for critical and self-reflective museological practice is an enduring problem.

In post-colonial contexts, the imperative for museums with colonial foundations has been to not only acknowledge their colonial roots but to embark on projects of unlearning and to rebuild epistemic frameworks and find new ways of serving their constituencies. It is this process that requires new tools and strategies, that the nationalist impulses of many post-colonial museums have not managed to articulate. Abungu and Probst engage with the power dynamics that continue to shape thinking around ‘object’ fixation, North oriented professional training programs and knowledge economies that tend to replicate Eurocentric models as the dominant frameworks for museum practice (Abungu & Probst, 2022: 247). The advent of restitution proposes distinct possibilities of radically overturning (or at the very least impacting), well established hierarchies of knowledge and expertise in African museologies.

The ISANG itself, has been reshaped by successive colonial, apartheid and democratic national agendas in ways that have not necessarily destabilized its ‘old museum’ foundations. To tackle these inheritances, the layers of history that give this institution its form in the post-colonial context, and its ability to create narratives, meaning and authority requires careful un-peeling. Evident in the colonial history of the ISANG are the economies of extraction associated with the South African diamond and gold mining industries that funded the first shipments of European art that constituted the SANG. These are silently woven into the story of the art museum’s collections. Despite this, internecine politics about the identities and political affiliations of wealthy patrons, beleaguered directors, and collectors remain dominant in the historical record and institutional archive. Instead, as I explore below in an overview of the early collection practices and politics of the SANG in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are connections between the elite activity of art collection and the brutal and extractive nature of colonial capitalism. Though these histories are well known and well researched, they underscore the point that in the South African context, as in so many others, the cornerstone of the ‘national’ is deeply intertwined with conflict and exploitation.

## Unearthing Colonial Ghosts: Mining Fortunes and European Art in Africa

In 1871, a colonial official called Abraham de Smidt<sup>21</sup> (1829 – 1909) penned an influential article “An Art Gallery for South Africa” in the Cape Monthly Magazine (1871) which became the basis of the

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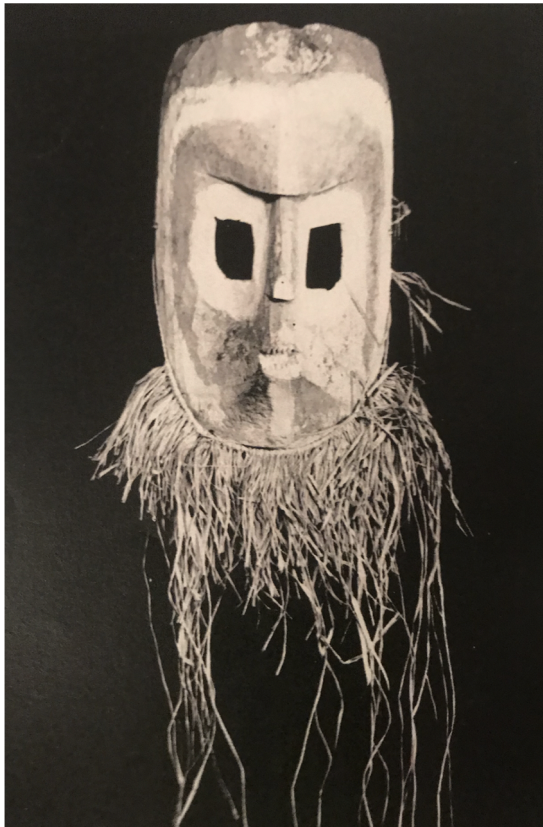
<sup>21</sup> Abraham de Smidt was born in 1829 in Cape Town, South Africa. According to a profile on him by absolutart, “[h]e followed a family tradition by entering the Cape Colony Civil Service at the age of 17. De Smidt had a successful career as a surveyor, culminating in 1873 when he became Surveyor-General of the Cape Colony, a post he held with great distinction until his retirement in 1889 when he left for England, where he later died. De Smidt was one of the few Cape art connoisseurs of his day” (absolutart.co.za).

formation of the South African National Gallery<sup>22</sup>. De Smidt was also an art connoisseur and an amateur landscape artist. He was part of the social and cultural elite of the country: a combination of powerful individuals with European heritage that dated as far back as the 1650s as well as more recent European immigrants. The proposed colonial gallery described by De Smidt would house works of fine art and plaster casts of ancient Roman and Greek sculptures<sup>23</sup>. The express aim of the gallery would be educational: for De Smidt, in keeping with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century views on the art museum, it was through art that social and cultural values were most aptly and efficiently translated and imported. Reflecting on the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian master Giovanni Battista Salvi il Sassoferrato's painting *Mater Dolorosa*, a copy of which was in the burgeoning collection of European art that belonged to the Cape Fine Arts Society, De Smidt (1871) felt that "even in the wilds of Kafirland the deeply hidden emotions of the soul would be stirred by beholding such a picture". The assumption was that European art encapsulated legible, desirable, and, most importantly, much needed values which would be of use in the project of civilisation as it was unfolding in the colony. In 1875 the constitution of the "South African Art Gallery" was enacted by the Cape Parliament and in 1897 a small collection of European art was housed in two back rooms of the South African museum (which itself was established in 1825).

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<sup>22</sup> It is widely recognised that the South African National Gallery can be traced back even further to a proposal for the idea of a gallery by the Cape Fine Arts Society, which later became the South African Fine Arts Association (SAFAA).

<sup>23</sup> Maya Jasanhoff's observations about the Marble Palace provide a compelling parallel to the early SANG. The Marble Palace is a mansion in the heart of Kolkata owned by an orthodox Hindu family who lay claim to India's "first museum of Western art". The palace is part residence and part public museum: filled to the hilt with objects and artworks from Europe. Jasanhoff (2005: 4) wonders what it means to make sense of this space on its own terms and suggests that it presents itself as a "site genuinely embedded in the cultures of both East and West, a vestige of empire still very much alive". The Marble Palace was a documentation of Europe created in post-colonial India, and as such it offers an unusual perspective of an 'othered' (but also revered) Europe: almost like a visualisation of Chakrabarty's provincialising Europe (2000). It is tempting to imagine whether the ISANG's colonial art could be reconstructed in a way that reflects this musealization of the colonial, rather than the spectral quality it holds today in South African institutions.



*Fig 5. Mask from African and Christian Sculpture exhibition ISANG, 1955 (source: ISANG archives); Fig 6. Giovanni Battista Salvi il Sassoferrato 'Mater Dolorosa' (source: artnet.com)*

Scholars like Gillian Carman (2006) and Anitra Nettleton (2013) have maintained that the development of art museums in South Africa was part of a wider societal civilising project in which the hope was that through exposure to 'real' (European) art there would be moral improvements in colonial societies that were judged (according to the standards of European society) to be morally and culturally backward. The art museum in South Africa offered "an education in aesthetic discrimination through exposing its audience to the very finest art" (which meant products of white European culture) and at the same time would offer "an education in history by presenting works which reflect their time and place" (Tietze, 2017: 11). The value of art was understood to be appreciated first by the upper classes and as a secondary consequence, to provide a social education to a divided colonial society. This was the transcendental argument for the value of art. About the impulses to establish an art museum in the Cape Colony, former director Marilyn Martin (2019: 12), reflects: "although the Cape Colony lagged far behind Europe in the appreciation of the arts, there were individuals, some recent settlers, other locals with experience abroad, who believed that they could emulate European culture and bring about change in a distant colony". The distant colony that Martin refers to was also at that very moment (1870s) the beating heart of the most voracious

exploitation of land and labour in the British Empire through the gold rush and the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly (first uncovered in 1867).

The Randlords, capitalists who controlled the diamond and gold mining industries in South Africa from the 1870s up to World War I, were key actors in this chapter of imperial history. Randlords with notable art collections included Sir Joseph Robinson, Sir Julius Wernher, Sir Lionel and Lady Florence Phillips, Sir Otto Beit, and Sir Max Michaelis. The latter had a significant impact on the establishment of the SANG via the bequest of his personal collections (of almost entirely European art). In fact, the personal art collections of Alfred De Pass, Thomas Butterworth Bailey, and Max Michaelis formed the cornerstone of the SANG collection. Many Randlords bought homes in Europe, particularly England, where they were able to live second lives as refashioned British citizens. Many also came from European and Eastern European immigrant families so while resourced, were not guaranteed a place in aristocratic British society.

In this context, art collections were a mechanism through which to appear as part of the imperial elite, although these acts were not always convincing to British elite society. Zaza Hlaethwa (2018: unpaginated) presents a compelling argument that after purchasing both property and art in Europe based on fortunes made in South Africa, “[t]he negative perceptions of the Randlords living excessive lifestyles after stripping the colony of its minerals was exacerbated by the British upper class’s prejudice towards those from German or Jewish backgrounds. As outsiders, their efforts to fit into the upper class were rejected. To counter this, the Randlords set up donation channels back to the British colony”. Hlaethwa (2018) explains that part of the motivation to purchase art collections was also because:

“the aristocrats [in Britain] were adjusting to the decline in land value under the Settled Lands Act of 1882 and 1884. Before this period wealth was linked to land ownership but the demise of agriculture caused the value of land to drop. To meet tax demands, the rich sold their art rather than their land. Art became more valuable than land because its value was readily realised by asset assessors. Randlords quickly bought up respected artworks by the “old masters” (Da Vinci and Michelangelo, among others) to create enviable collections”.

The collections of European art that formed the basis of both the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the South African National Art Gallery were sent from Europe to South Africa under the auspices of “returning some of the mining profits to the country, along with improving the presence of art in the union” (Hlaethwa, 2018). Studies of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (Carman, 2006), and more

generally the cultural self-fashioning by the wealthy Randlords (Stevenson, 2002) reveal the tensions between the political, the cultural, and the economic elite who were jostling for authority in the ecosystem of the empire. From an economic perspective, Stevenson writes about men who amassed fortunes from the gold and diamond rush, and “acquired and displayed properties and possessions that symbolised wealth and power in Europe” (Stevenson, 2002: back cover text) both to establish cultural prestige within the colony and perhaps more importantly in the homeland of Empire. It is intriguing that recent research on the histories of early imperial collectors in India and Egypt (Jasanhoff, 2013) also strongly reflect patterns in which art and cultural artefact collection becomes a mechanism to affirm the collector’s insecurities about the authenticity of their aristocracy and the social legitimacy of their wealth.

De Pass and Bailey were both lifelong friends with two other significant industrialists and art collectors who played important roles in South Africa’s colonial and economic history: Julius Wernher<sup>24</sup> and Alfred Beit.<sup>25</sup> Historians have pointed out that both Wernher and Beit were closely tied to the infamous colonist Cecil John Rhodes, both through shared business ventures (De Beers Mining Company) and as friends (Meredith, 2014: 347-348). Beit, Wernher and the profits from the shared business schemes were closely tied into the political history forged by Rhodes. Beit went on to become lifelong director of other companies such as Rand Mines, Rhodesia Railways and the Beira Railway Company. These financial and political alliances played important roles in the violent historical chapters of the Jameson Raid and the Boer War – these are flows of capital that tie together the elite activity of art collection and the brutal and extractive nature of colonial capitalism.

1850 – 1950 was a century of intense movement of African art objects (and in the construction and mobilisation of this term) on a global circuit: museums in Europe were flourishing with all the objects that they were receiving from colonial plunder, the international African art market peaked (Monroe, 2016; Azoulay, 2019) and the slave trade had been abolished. The last century of colonial rule saw European states and businesses reformatting new mechanisms for extraction and exploitation on the African continent via a global capitalist system, often executed through periods of extreme brutality and violence against indigenous populations in Nigeria, Angola, Namibia, and South Africa (as documented in detail by historians like Sven Lindqvist, 1992; Adam Hochschild, 1998; and Martin Meredith, 2014). The art museum is itself a product of imperialism, which enabled the idea of the art

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<sup>24</sup> Sir Julius Wernher was a South African mining magnate of German origins. Along with Alfred Beit and Cecil Rhodes he amalgamated the Kimberley diamond mines by 1888 and enabled *Wernher, Beit & Co.* to acquire a controlling interest in De Beers Consolidated Mines.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Beit (1853 – 1906) was an Anglo-German gold and diamond magnate in South Africa, and a major donor and profiteer of infrastructure development on the African continent.

museum as a bridge between the European homeland and the colonial periphery to take hold. The art museum in the settler context was formulated around the construction of a modern identity, which was modelled on the European enlightenment subject, but required different tools for its formulation. The construction of the settler colonial museum required a kind of reverse object migration: of art from Europe and the ‘homelands’ out to the colonies, just as masses of African artefacts (including from South Africa) were making their way across the Atlantic to museums in Europe. The flows of art objects and the values and worlds that they represented should be read in relation to the dominant economies shaping the social order.

The Bailey, Michaelis and De Pass collections occupy a contentious place in South African public imagination. During Riason Naidoo’s time at ISANG, he created a panic within the liberal media in 2010 by his decision to dismantle the Bailey sporting collection (one of the largest collections of British sporting art held by any public art museum in the world) which had been on permanent display in a designated room since 1947 and was designated through a legacy contract to remain on display in perpetuity. These European collections (and their notoriously chequered attribution) have caused consternation by not being important and European enough, or being offensively imperial and in need of removal. The Bailey collection has held a dominant space both in the physical museum until recently, as well as its imprint in the archive. What can or should be said about these colonial inheritances, except perhaps a celebration that their reclusion from the public view might make room for other artists and canons? On the other hand, what would it mean to decolonise the Iziko Museums of South Africa’s art collections, given these deep roots into the settler economy of Southern Africa?

What is the potential in South Africa to heed Sundar Sakkurai’s (2020: 62) call for the museum of the future to expose its own insides, to exhibit “the insides that create value for objects – as much as it displays the valued objects”? Alirio Karina (2022: 658) argues that, if anything, the museum of today might be able to put *itself* on display rather than attempt to recontextualise anything it holds in collection. For Karina (2022: 658), putting itself on display, the museum might “invite visitors to consider their consumption and to look at the once easy context for their enlightenment with crueller eyes, and ask them to question what should be done with the museum”. What is the implied relation or dislocation between the museum as a physical space, and the collections it holds? Could there be value in exploring these flows of capital and art from the minefields to the auction houses of London, back to the art museum in the colony and perhaps someday back onto the private auction circuit?



Fig 7. Photo of artwork *Boomstonetown Sabbath* (2015) by Johannes Phokela exhibited in 'Breaking Down the Walls' (2022) (source: photograph by author)

In a recent exhibition commemorating 150 years of the ISANG in 2022, curator Andrew Lamprecht used this work called *Boomstonetown Sabbath* by Johannes Phokela precisely in order to make visible the roots of the colonial art collections through mining fortunes. In an article based on a walkabout with the curator, Lamprecht is quoted as saying that he chose to situate the painting in a room commemorating the private capital that has helped shape the ISANG collection over generations. This work by the prolific South African artist and satirist Johannes Phokela is “based on a photograph of mining magnates sitting around being very proud of themselves. Then, you’ve got this Black miner in the background. He’s naked and is holding his mittens, which they were required to wear. When they were digging for diamonds, they had to go naked and wear gloves which prevented them from stealing anything. It’s a kind of poignant reminder of, ultimately, where this collection comes from.” (Lamprecht, 2022).

### Fears and possibilities around cultural loss in South Africa

In the post-Fallist South African cultural landscape (and given the expectations within public discourse that colonial institutions should be decolonized), there is a high degree of scepticism about

the authority of the once colonial art museum, and thus about the ISANG. As indicated in the previous section (and as multiple volumes of scholarship have explored), decolonizing museums in post-colonial contexts is a very large, unruly task animated by complex impulses. The tenuousness of the ISANG's social and cultural position can in part be attributed to the perception that once-colonial institutions are not adequately engaging their problematic histories, nor are they adequately transformed in structure, logic, and practice. This perspective, applied in relation to the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), is articulated by Same Mdluli (2017: 90) who argues that:

“[t]he process of decolonization as noted by Khwezi Gule, is thus not just about a change of guard nor is it an optional extra. It is the imperative of our time, and we have to admit that museums and other art institutions no longer have the authorial voice. By confronting this, it is hoped that such a discussion will offer a means to raise, probe, and address some of the incongruities and contradictions of celebrating such institutions that up until today continue to harbour colonial ghosts of the past”.

Despite or perhaps because of the compromised authorial status of many once-colonial museums in post-colonial contexts, including the ISANG, these institutions constitute cultural archives that remain necessary to engage with considering the stakes of ongoing epistemic struggles. How it should be done, by whom, and for who remain charged and contentious questions. Shuddhabrata Sengupta (2020: 91) asks “[w]hat indeed can one hear under the crackle of different epochs rubbing up against each other in a museum collection? Does it tell us a story in which all the pieces fit neatly together like a solved jigsaw puzzle? Or is the story it tells an amalgam of serrated, uneven, uneasy edges?” What should be done with the ghosts of the past that South African museums harbour, and what is their role in the institution of the future? Are we better off without them? Should they be pulled out of the basement into the sunlight, sold to the highest bidder, and left to natural decay? How should we approach them? Who is a ghost and who is an ancestor? In the South African context, these questions are marked by tensions between very different and charged responses.

Evident from within the ISANG and its supporters is a complex and sometimes contradictory discourse (which broadly fits within the liberal humanist tradition) that has lamented both the loss of ‘traditional’ cultures and the loss of cultural authority in spaces like art galleries. Within this discourse (which manifests around art museums in South Africa more broadly), there appear to be a few problematic assumptions: that the value of cultural heritage held in custody by institutions like the museum is shared; that cultural heritage should be in the care of the museum; and that the museum faces external (rather than internal) obstacles in the proper execution of its task. This perspective is articulated in the following excerpt from a newspaper article written in 1994, titled “Save the

Gallery”, which outlined two possible scenarios for the future of the Johannesburg Art Gallery: the first – “the gallery is left to moulder away, unvisited, unloved, and under-funded”; the second – “someone suggests that a museum of contemporary art be built. Funds are quickly raised from big business, and it is built - in Sandton” (Ozynski, 1994: unpaginated). The obstacles to social relevance are posed in this article as either lack of support from the state, or an overshadowing by private art ventures. With hindsight, both scenarios played out (as evidenced by the observation above by Becker about the proliferation of private institutions and state museums are reported to be neglected). What this perspective fails to address however (and perhaps the real source of its anxiety), is the spatial and racialised legacy of the art museum in the South African context, and the idea that in its evolution it may require more than funding to remain relevant.

In her study of the ISANG, Shashi Cook (2009: 84) points out that post 1994, “[m]useum professionals were anxious to emphasise the historical importance of [historical] collections, for fear that entire collections would lose validity and currency, or perhaps even be sold off, even though this was illegal”. Journalist Denis Beckett (1994) probed this insecurity in the following charged and highly problematic statement, suggesting “they could give those smarmy Randlord portraits to the park hoboes in lieu of blankets”. A struggle for power over who can place value on art, and whose authority remains intact in the face of radical social change is one that can be traced throughout the ISANG’s history.<sup>26</sup> Published histories of the ISANG (e.g., Tietze, 2015; Martin, 2019) bolster this lament of loss in different ways. Hadyn Proud, an historian, curator, and long-time employee of the ISANG (from 1988 until 2021) presents an argument that is continuous with the perspective described above. Proud (2009: 37) writes:

“[t]he history of the South African National Gallery since its inception in 1871 has been a cyclical tale of state neglect, indifference and frustrated vision. Without the dedication and resourcefulness of its Directors, Staff and Friends’ Organisation over many years, little would have been achieved. Much needs to be done to remove the obstacles which have stunted its potential, and to enhance and support its key role as our premier museum of the visual arts”.

In this article, Proud identifies these obstacles as primarily revolving around funding, he decries the “extinct breed” of “saviour-benefactors” (2009:39) who in previous eras saved the museum from state

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<sup>26</sup> Consider as an example of this, Marilyn Martin’s critique of her successor Riason Naidoo’s decision to remove the Abe Bailey collection of British sporting paintings from its permanent display site where it had been hung since 1945. Jayne Kelly Crayshaw Hall (2020: 245) summarises Martin’s perspectives on this matter: “Martin criticises Naidoo’s decision to replace and rehang the existing permanent collection features. Martin argues that this is indicative of Naidoo’s lack of knowledge around the history of the SANG, and considers this an attempt to “impugn SANG’s reputation and that of his predecessors”. Naidoo’s decision to take down some of the inherited white elephants like the Bailey sporting collection would likely be read more favourably in public discourse in the current climate of ‘decolonising collections’, and perhaps the implicit continuity between Martin and her predecessors would also come under greater scrutiny.

neglect, a pattern which he is concerned to see in decline. Given the stakes in the personal self-fashioning and tax benefits enjoyed by the wealthy industrialists who donated collections of European art to the gallery, Proud's recollection of these individuals as 'selfless' is surprising. Considering that the fortunes that purchased the cornerstone collections were amassed through extractive, racially oppressive business ventures on massive and historically unprecedented scales (such as the Kimberly diamond mines), his assertion is problematic. While he recognises that the "South African Randlords of the past did not set many precedents worthy of emulation", he asks "what of the newly-emergent entrepreneurs of the present" and bemoans their absence in supporting the acquisitions of the SANG (2009:29). Proud presents a curious position: simultaneously criticising and valorising the dominant social class whose taste's shaped the original state collections by lamenting the continuity of private support by the wealthy.

This ambiguous perspective is one that contemporary curators and ISANG museum workers seem to question, as is evidenced in the ISANG curator of historical collections Andrew Lambrecht's provocation about the 150 year centenary of the ISANG's existence marked in 2022. In a public colloquium, Lambrecht asked "are we celebrating or saying sorry" and went on to emphasise his sense of responsibility to acknowledge a history of white supremacist ideas embedded in the ISANG's archives, as well as the fact that the ISANG is built on land that was stolen from its indigenous inhabitants. This kind of premise marks a contemporary consciousness about history, social justice, and race in public discourse that is relatively new. Proud's perspective could be more easily dismissed in a post-Fallist popular discourse that is animated by concepts of decoloniality than when he penned the article in 2009. While it is tempting to dismiss a perspective that calls for the appreciation and value of colonial European collections in the unequal and divided context of contemporary South Africa, it might be more productive to view this position as part of a lineage of institutional anxiety that has long haunted the ISANG. This anxiety has the potential to push forward quite radical, inclusive ideas and to drive change – both intentionally and unintentionally. It also has the capacity to do the opposite.

Articulations of fears around cultural symbols and loss emerged during the #RMF protests in 2016 and 2017. There was a highly publicized moment during which protesting students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) burned what they perceived to be some of the universities colonial art collections. This event elicited polarized responses: for some the burned artworks represented emancipatory gestures, for others these actions were able to legitimize a complete dismissal of the students' social and political project of decolonisation which, they argued, carried fascist overtones. Over time, these polarized responses have evolved into new perspectives. As Njabulo Ndebele wrote of the student protests, the burning of portraits was about identifying signifiers of an imperial legacy

which the students said were “still so overwhelming it seems to snuff out the possibilities of their own future. They were unable to breathe, they said, being suffocated by a legacy of ‘whiteness’ whose grandeur to them was, at that moment, equal to the ashes that the plaque was about to become” (2017: 102). At stake in this attempted erasure of the representations that caused such pain, is the creation of new narratives and forms of agency. As Ndebele asks: “what was the memory of the past whose representations were being burned and the memory of the future that would rise out of the ashes?” (2017:103). Ndebele is concerned about the construction of the social public – a responsibility that he places at the feet of all young South Africans, and asks what informs the ‘black’ and ‘white’ identities at play in these protests and their aftermaths. His warning against the rage and destruction of fire, is based on an argument that “the assimilative nature of powerful oppressions can be reproduced by those who fight them” (2017: 108).

In another story of fire, regeneration and loss, a recent exhibition (*Of Smoke and Ash*, 2022) held at the Hiddingh Campus of UCT commemorated the losses resulting from an uncontrollable (climate change accelerated) wildfire in 2021 that burned many parts of the university campus including a precious archive of African cultural material in the Jagger Library. In this exhibition, a wall text (2022) accompanied a photograph of burning artworks at UCT in 2016 during the #RMF protests. The effect produced was a larger timeline of fire related loss and its existential implications. The wall text stated:

“[f]iery destruction has been a part of UCT's recent institutional history. In February 2016, during the Shackville demonstrations, artworks were set afire, including those of the first Black student to receive a master's degree in fine art at UCT Richard Keresemose Baholo, as well as a research vehicle belonging to the UCT Plant Conservation Unit, both pictured here. This was a sad and tragic loss, and historic event in the recent process of institutional change”.

In this case, an accounting of loss is politicised: the stakes involved in interpreting the histories represented in the archives are high and the thematic linking of a climate change related wild fire with the burning of artworks in a gesture of protest should be carefully assessed. The suggestion of loss through ignorance is an argument that has the capacity to support a highly problematic and denigrative perspective towards the student protests and their intentions. A complication of the idea of loss is necessary and emergent within discourses on decolonisation and change in museums. These emerge in critiques of the way that perceived loss (through ideas like ‘vanishing cultures’) are central to the museums’ syndrome of preservation and the liberal humanist discourse that partakes in the cultural destruction that it aims to preserve; loss in relation to concerns about the sometimes

destructive impulses expressed in the framework of decolonisation (such as the burning of artworks at UCT and the removal of colonial statues the world over); and, finally, loss in relation to unexpected and sometimes climate crisis related conditions of social and environmental fragility.

Here I am thinking of fears about decay, floods, and infrastructural collapse in the ISANG and JAG expressed in the last few years. Even the burning of part of the South African parliament in early 2022 could be interpreted in relation to narratives of a corrupt, narcissistic, and untrustworthy state, fears around social instability, and a loss of material heritage. The liberal inclination to decry the state's inadequacy in the democratic South African context carries racialized overtones and connotations of entitlement, privilege, and settler ideology. This itself can be polarizing and can undermine legitimate critique of the radical social and political failures of the postcolonial state.

An article written in 2018 by Melvin Minnaar cultural writer and erstwhile board member of the ISANG, can too be read in the light of a tradition of arguments about failed cultural leadership in the South African art context. Minnaar (2018) conflates Riason Naidoo's complicated exit from the ISANG in 2014 with a narrative of broader institutional decay in a problematic way: "the SANG – by its very nomenclature a supposed treasure house of the finest art of our land – has fallen victim to bureaucracy. Navigating the maelstrom of political correctness on the one hand, and lack of proper funding on the other, it has lost the imperative of its name and status [...] Yet, the system has failed the SANG. And the appointment of Naidoo five years ago was arguably part of that failure".

In Minnaar's statement there is a default away from conversations about race, privilege, education, class and indeed the racial baggage embodied by an institution like the ISANG, by critiquing 'political correctness' on the one hand, and drawing a historical continuity of struggle against 'the state' on the other. It is curious that in Minnaar's critique of Naidoo, his task as the first black director to address an inheritance of a century of erasure of black art and culture, was not raised once. Minnaar insists that his critique is not racially motivated, but rather colour blind and based upon supposedly neutral notions of 'quality', 'expertise' and perhaps most problematically 'taste'.

In the case of the ISANG's history, there is a need to address the racialised undertones of critique that bolsters the narrative of post-colonial decay, if we are to succeed at all in moving towards spaces of collective public cultural expression and successfully critiquing and improving problematic aspects of the post-colonial state. There is an unclarified assumption in Minnaar's argument about what kinds of curatorial insight and museological 'expertise' are valuable in a South African public institution or what is meant by artistic discernment. These hidden assumptions build the foundations of what the museum can be and to whom it can be something meaningful, and hence they should be unpacked.

There remains an urgent need to contextualise such discourse, and its dependence on notions of expertise, scholarship and curatorial insight, within the broader critiques that the settler museum faces today.

### What Emerges out of Burned Archives?

In the South African context, which is not unique in this way, there are historical and racial tensions around who is legitimately able to identify, interpret, and fear (cultural) loss and around what kinds of publics are exposed and constructed in the face of loss (both cultural and historical). The notion of the museum as a shared cultural project that is for the benefit of a collective public in many post-colonial societies, is a strained one in need of healing and reimagining, rather than (only) vindictive critique. Very recently in the South African cultural landscape, the burned Jagger library and the *Of Smoke and Ash* (2022) exhibition raised a host of issues around heritage, race, loss, and care. A student contribution displayed in the exhibition read: “Jagger library housed such vast collections of knowledge, pieces of puzzles which we could use to pick apart the legacies of the spaces we occupy. The destruction and devastation of the fire cannot be disregarded, but the opportunity for change, for development, is here. It is not enough anymore to put a band-aid on an infection- it must be carved out of the wound in order for it to heal”. The idea that even violently precipitated change can be harnessed to rebuild a more equitable and ethically grounded future resonates with positions taken by other scholars in the field of museums and archives: there is a perspective that sees release and potential freedom in the crisis of authority, infrastructure, and meaning in museums via visions of object free museums (Yesomi Umolu, 2020) and museums as social infrastructures (Abdoumalik Simone, 2004) which have different consequences for dealing with burned archives. There is a perspective that perhaps colonial collections, laden as they are with histories of pain, dispossession, and violence, are better left as ashes.



*Fig 8. The Brazil Museum on fire in Rio de Janeiro (2019) Leo Correa/Associated Press (source: New York Times online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/02/world/americas/national-museum-brazil-fire.html>)*

The fire that consumed the Brazil Museum in Rio de Janeiro (2019) raised a host of questions around the custodianship of historical material, the meanings and value of musealized cultural material in the context of deep socio-economic inequality. As Marcelo Rezendes (2020: 135) writes, “the presence of the symbolic promise that the institution has projected onto Brazilian culture [was] something that made the National Museum, on many occasions, both a mirage and metaphor for a particular turmoil originating from the nation’s colonial experience, racial policies, fantasies, authoritarianism, violence and force”. This painful set of contradictions epitomized in its collections, now burned, and lost, elicited diverse responses. Rezendes recalls representatives from indigenous nations heard on Brazilian TV, asking why their things were taken, only to be locked away and then burned. He also paraphrased right-wing then president Jair Bolsonaro’s response as “it is burned now – what am I supposed to do about it?”

On the one hand, “the mathematic of loss is virtually infinite” in the case of the loss of material through the Rio fire, and its meanings to multitudes of people. On the other hand, as Rezendes (2020: 135) argues, the narratives presented by the museum have “become crystallized in inaccurate, normative thought on history, heritage, and identity”. The pressing question that remains in the

smouldering ashes is: “what might [the museum] symbolize as a potentiality that was never actually realized, beyond its material dimension?” (Rezendes, 2020: 135). The idea of an unrealized potentiality animates Rezendes to imagine what could be built on the ashes of the burned Rio Museum. Azoulay’s concept of potential history is precisely to practice the potentiality that Rezendes perceives in the face of loss, in relation to the objects, epistemologies, and infrastructures that already exist and which have not been burned. Key to unlocking this potentiality is to recognize the long-term mutability and fragility of the museum itself. Rezendes (2020: 134) asks about the Rio Museum, “what set of circumstances, what context could have led the National Museum to such an utterly fragile state?” His response to his own question points to a long history of fragility in the museum project in Rio de Janeiro. It is the tracing of institutional fragility, as a source of change and mutation, that motivates my reading of the ISANG’s history.

In critiquing the museum’s syndrome of preservation, its ethic of accumulation and its justification of the paradigm of ownership, the idea of the object-free museum is appealing. This appeal is exemplified in Yesomi Umulo’s (2020) invitation to “view our cultural institutions through a different lens—one that compels museums to relinquish their claims to authority and objectivity and extend a hand of care to their publics as well as artists and objects”. Karina makes a case against the museum’s ownership of anything through the notion of unproven innocence, which places in question the conditions under which any collection by the modern museum happened. For Karina (2022: 658), “an accountable museum cannot display objects of unproven innocence, to which it has no claim. Nor can it hide - through display of token purchases from living makers, or visiting shows, or space rentals, or a pivot in scientific genre - that its store cupboards ache with things to which it has no claim”. Could there be value in re-linking these very collections of objects, acquired under transforming and shifting institutional logics, to people and processes by making explicit histories of production, exchange, creation, and trade that have been made less visible by the art museum? Even if such visibilisation would lead to contesting claims for ownership and potentially disperse collections, the museum might play a key role in this process.

## Chapter 3

### Politics of the Picturesque, the Rooting of Settler Coloniality and Potential Histories in the Colonial Art Museum (1920s -1970s)

In this chapter, I draw on literature on the inscription of race in spaces in the Cape Colony, and the ways in which an ideology of natural beauty dominated settler aesthetics. Against analyses that explain the Cape Colony's obsession with the landscape genre as a sign of parochialism and the Cape's pre-apartheid institutional art culture as marked by 'informality' and 'unprofessionalism' (Tietze and Botha, 2013; Martin, 2019), I suggest that there were deeper tensions legible in this institutional history that are glossed over by these accounts. These were tensions that emerged out of a society characterised by the permanent insecurity of an elite minority who exercised political, economic, and social control over an increasingly resistant majority. Questions of social inequality, decoloniality, and land ownership remain important and unresolved socio-economic realities in South Africa. This remains evident in the realm of visual culture and evident in the collection history of ISANG.<sup>27</sup>

The appearance of a landscape painting by Moses Tladi in 1931 in the SANG, the first artwork by an African artist to be exhibited in the National Gallery, is located within this context as the first of many objects that entered the institution under a particular frame, but carried traces of destabilising narratives, worlds, memories, and experiences. While arguing against a discourse of exceptionalism in the case of Tladi, often hailed as 'the first black artist working in the western tradition', I argue that Tladi's painting in the ISANG archive should be read as (an exceptional) trace of the collective experience of dispossession and loss, memorialised in the exclusionary space of the apartheid art gallery. I consider the story of Eva Meyerowitz, the wife of the Jewish artist Herbert Meyerowitz who was commissioned to create the extensive Liberman memorial (1931-34) carved with imported Burmese teak and embedded in the ISANG of today around every door frame. The quiet alterations made by Eva Meyerowitz, to carve African figures in the place of a Jewish matriarch and patriarch, remain as permanent fixtures in the gallery. Eva Meyerowitz's own engagement with African art histories and subsequent experiences in east and central Africa add another layer of complexity to the archive. These two examples hint at the alternative visualisations performed by marginalised figures

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<sup>27</sup> For example, despite intellectual developments in critical art history, the language of wealth and power is still expressed through a taste for precisely the landscape genre developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its critiqued protagonists. Jacobus Hendrik Pierneef remains the second highest priced (or most-bankable) artist in South Africa, after the modernist Irma Stern.

in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cape, a world dominated by conservative aesthetics and white male authorities. As such they are read as part of the potential history of the ISANG.

From 1948 – 1962 when the European John Paris directed the SANG, the institution was said to have moved towards ‘professionalization’ and ‘internationalization’. Within this period, Western museal practices and European art historical frameworks were brought to bear on the SANG more strategically, and Paris’ leadership was recorded by art historians as a progressive shift beyond the conservative aesthetics of previous directors who represented (by and large) a narcissistic and parochial colonial society. Under Paris’ leadership, exhibitions that included art from ‘other cultures’ such as West Africa (African and Christian sculpture, 1955), Japan (Japanese Prints and Contemporary Graphics), Malaysian art and Chinese ceramics appeared for the very first time in the gallery. From 1962 – 1973, under the leadership of the first Afrikaans director Matthys Bokhorst, a construction of a distinctly *South African* art history emerged. The acquisition and exhibition histories of the post-war period continue however, to largely tell a story of racial exclusion, in which South African art history was interpreted through the outputs of a very narrow segment of society. Rock-art constituted an important exception to this norm within the SANG’s project of historicisation from the 1960’s onwards, one that invited a set of troubling questions into the institution.

On the one hand, assisted by the language of archaeology which neutralised and deracialized the contributions of ‘early humans’ as a distant chapter in the story of man, Rock art could be safely included into a Eurocentric art historical schema within the SANG. On the other hand, including Rock art as part of the narrative of South African art, the institution risked acknowledging the violent erasure of indigenous people in South Africa, whose state sanctioned murder formally remained a feature in South Africa until the 1930’s. Indeed, it risked exposing some of the paradoxes at the foundation of notions of primitivism and modernity. This tension never explicitly manifested in the apartheid years at the SANG: Rock art (usually cushioned within anthropological frameworks that held intact colonial logics) appeared sporadically in exhibitions without causing much stir. However, I suggest that, in tracing the flickering presence of Rock art in the institutional history of the SANG through the apartheid years, some context is provided for the host of complex public responses to the highly problematised exhibition about indigenous cultural histories of the Cape called *Miscast* which was held by the SANG in 1996. The paintings of Moses Tladi, the relief carvings of Eva Meyerowitz, and the inclusion (and construction) of Rock art, have left faint but critical traces of suppressed narratives in the ISANG’s history that haunt the museum today.

## The SANG and other invented traditional spaces in the Cape Colony (1880-1920s)

Given the roots of the art museum in the capital flows and cultural aspirations of a small and powerful capitalist class, we should further consider the mechanisms by which the art museum was constructed as a space of wider social and public relevance. The construction of the SANG's public was from its formative years shrouded in uncertainty – was this space to uplift the masses and interpolate a large, unequal, and heterogeneous society, or was it expressly for a social and racial elite? The very idea of a public mass was in fact a threatening notion to the dominant classes (Baderoon, 2014) and in tension with the European idea of the museum as a space of civic development and consciousness. As scholars Pumla Gqola (2010) and Gabeba Baderoon (2014) have shown, slavery has shaped the history of South Africa, and Cape Town specifically, in ways that have often been overshadowed by the grander narrative of apartheid and its dismantling. As Greer Valley (2021: 257) has put it, “the psyche of the Western Cape, particularly, is still deeply rooted in the relations between master and slave”. Deep ambiguities and anxieties existed around the perimeters of social control, and the imperial ‘civilising mission’ at the heart of the art museum project was always more internally fraught than it appeared. The Cape Colonial society was threatened by art and cultural expression outside of a narrow mode of the picturesque. This was evidenced by the establishment’s vehement dismissal of modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and its various attempts to cling onto visual paradigms that were swiftly losing ground in war-altered Europe.

In terms of its initial aesthetic project and its architectural history, the development of the SANG can be seen as part of a broader movement to invent traditions and spaces of significance that rooted the white settler identity within the geography of Cape Town. In part, this invention of tradition was accomplished through the invocation of a European motherland, but it also required an emphasis on the local and the vernacular. In this latter aspect, the presence of local, vernacular, and indigenous cultures and traditions that contested the belonging of white settlers were resolutely excluded. This presented a considerable space of instability for the settler project. Aside from the imported European art which was to fill the halls of the earliest SANG exhibitions, the Cape Colony’s own artistic production has been characterised as devoted to the picturesque, with a particular affinity for landscape as a genre.



*Fig 9. A corner of the South African Art Gallery in the South African Museum, 1910; photographer T.D. Ravenscroft (source: Martin, 2019, *Between Dreams and Reality*).*

Tietze and Botha (2014) argue that there was a discursive tension within the Cape Colony between the two key arguments for art galleries that were being articulated both in Europe and its colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Animated by enlightenment ideas, the one argument was that art galleries were necessary and valuable because art had transcendental powers: “art and its exhibition spaces offered the viewer a means of rehearsing politeness and civilised behaviour, and a sense of belonging to an historical tradition” (Tietze and Botha, 2014: 1180). On the other hand, an argument in the service of working-class consumption, art galleries could be spaces of entertainment firstly and moral guidance secondly (Tietze and Botha, 2014). For the authors, while the Cape paid lip service to the first argument, the art that was created, valued, and made visible in the colony was art that would fit the latter category: genre art, a-historical art, and above all landscape art. By providing images of beauty, the social elites had endorsed the idea of art as reprieve and pleasure rather than endorsing the model that seeks moral lessons from art (for example those incorporated in history paintings).

For Tietze and Botha, this mismatch between discourse and practice betrays a true inclination within the colonial elite that was anti-intellectual and anti-historical in its practical refusal of the Western classical traditions. This was contradicted by a theoretical insistence that it was part of these very European traditions. In their diagnosis, Tietze and Botha (2014: 1191) list four factors that underscored this condition and the Cape’s “meagre art world”: “indifference and lack of funds from government, an insufficient interest among the public, a paucity of private benefactors and, underlying

it all, a pronounced local taste for images of the land, with a concomitant suspicion of grander visual traditions”. This reasoning over-emphasises lack of funds and interest and the paucity of private benefactors (a point underscored by a comparative analysis of the far wealthier Australian galleries of the same period) and underplays the ideological weight of the colonial elite’s aversion towards the visualisation of *historical events* and the focus on visualisation of (mostly completely un-peopled) land.<sup>28</sup> Coetsee (in Walker, 2011:2) writes that “the contentious character of landscape painting found its greatest derivation in the struggles over land between the country’s “ascendant white-settlers minority and a defensive black indigenous majority”. These defining aversions and tastes speak of an elite society complexed by an exploitation of black bodies and natural resources as a defining element and as such, a strong suppressed subtext of the social fabric of the Cape Colony.

Bickford-Smith (2008: 1768) notes that despite his glowing admiration for Cape Town’s sites of beauty (Table Mountain, Lions head, the Atlantic beaches), famed travel writer Anthony Trollope (1877) reported that Cape Town was not faring well as regards a “civilising agenda” and boasted only modest “cultural riches” (2008: 1768). At around the time of Trollope’s travels, paintings made in the Romantic tradition of Table Mountain from the perspective of Table Bay by white artists like Thomas Bowler and Thomas Baines gained renewed circulatory power with the advent of photography and the postcard. This view of the mountain as emblematic of the city persists to the present.<sup>29</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Cape Town Castle and the wine producing farms of Groot Constantia and their Cape Dutch architecture were recruited as more cultured, historical sites that Cape Town could offer to rich citizens and visitors. In fact, structures built by the Dutch, called ‘Cape Dutch’, are until today problematically referred to as vernacular (Valley, 2021: 248), and remain as potent symbols of colonialism.<sup>30</sup>

This list grew to include further sites to counter the (visitors’) idea that Cape Town was not cultured, and the South African Library (1860s), the Houses of Parliament (1880s), and the South African Museum (1890s), where the National Gallery and its collection was initially housed, were added to the city’s formal cultural infrastructure (Bickford-Smith, 2009). Later, more invented sites of white

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<sup>28</sup> In his extensive treatment of the subject of landscape paintings in South Africa, Godby (2011: 9) reflects on the origins of this genre of artwork, remarking that Dutch landscape paintings talked about a landscape that they didn’t have and thus, in a way, linked aesthetics and possession.

<sup>29</sup> It can be found on numerous Instagram accounts, travel blogs, corporate visual material, tourism marketing material, and logos (such as the City of Cape Town’s logo).

<sup>30</sup> In fact, the very term “vernacular”, (according to Merriam-Webster dictionary) “had been in figurative use in Classical Latin as “national” and “domestic”, having originally been derived from verna, a slave born in the house rather than abroad”. While formally its meaning is still closely tied to a concept of locality in language, the more metaphorical use of vernacular in relation to architecture, history, and, more loosely, aesthetics brings into view an obscured history of slavery.

South African tradition were added to this list, though many like the Town Hall (built by imperialist Cecil John Rhodes with British symbolic value) and the Koopmans De Wet Huis (with strong Afrikaner ties), presented potentially divisive symbolic meanings amongst Cape Town's white population. Bickford-Smith notes that the trend of utilising the natural beauty of the Cape as a space of commonality and shared heritage continues to the present. He points out the example of the establishment of the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens as middle ground for English and Afrikaans white South Africans in the 1930s and the creation and marketing of Table Mountain National Parks in 2004 as a space to physically and symbolically galvanise commonality amongst the national population more generally.

A recent study by Melanie Boehi (2020) explores the history of Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and its relationship with a large racially mixed community that lived adjacent to the Gardens in a neighbourhood called Protea Village. Many community members had lived in this neighbourhood for generations, and had been involved in building and maintaining both the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and the nearby University of Cape Town. The community was forcibly removed and had their homes destroyed in the 1950s following the apartheid Group Areas Act. This removal of an entire community made way for a greenbelt in the middle of the "whites only" residential areas of Bishopscourt and Fernwood, Newlands. In its 'rewilded' state, more than 70 years later, there is no hint of the old building structures. In the verdant plot traces of this violent removal have been unnervingly erased. At the time of writing, building plans are underway in this historic plot for 86 of the original families to rebuild their homes, following a successful landmark restitution case for the community.<sup>31</sup> Privileged and influential Bishopscourt residents are thought to have blocked the case from succeeding for many decades. The crafting of 'publicness' in the Cape from the official institutions carries a painful, violent, and exclusionary history. Spaces, objects, and activities focussed on beauty and pleasure were carefully controlled and reserved for an elite white population. This legacy remains visible in contemporary Cape Town.

The SANG was part of the white built heritage that was married to the idyllic backdrop of natural beauty that acted as a veneer over a society characterised by inequality and exploitation. The discomfort of this jarring juxtaposition sticks to the present and unleashes the notion of the 'scandal of beauty' as articulated by Meg Samuelson, Achille Mbembe, Grace Musila, and Sarah Nuttall (2011). This notion describes the shameful history of segregation and oppression dressed up to be consumed again and again in the present along the same hierarchical lines. The plaque outside the District Six Museum in central Cape Town, urges passers-by to remember the history of forced

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<sup>31</sup><https://proteavillage.co.za>

removals in the area, and to feel ashamed, a shame that Mbembe et al argue has been repressed beneath the veneer of beauty for many generations. In postapartheid South Africa, built heritage and the formal artworld was burdened by a fractured history and identity differences. As Okwui Enwezor (1997: 23) observed, “nowhere is the ideology of this racial fundamentalism more potently manifested, especially around the shaping of national identity, than in the arena of sports and visual arts: modes of culture which, according to Edward Said's definition in *Culture and Imperialism*, occupy the realm of pleasure and leisure, albeit coarsened by brutal exclusion and primitive racial determinism”.

### The Politics of the Picturesque and the Exceptionalising of Moses Tladi (1931)

Commenting on the nature of art discourse in South Africa during colonial occupation, Michael Godby (2011:74) observed that until the middle of the nineteenth century “the discourse around art concerned mainly its likeness to nature and there were no academic institutions that could accommodate more philosophical issues”. This observation is in concord with other studies of the cultural landscape of the Cape Colony (e.g., Bickford-Smith, 2009; Donaldson, 2012; North, 2020) that have emphasised a parallel obsession with natural beauty and a conservative view of art. The obsession with the picturesque left a strong legacy on the Cape’s visual vocabulary. Art historian Sean O Toole (2020: 71) proposed the following analysis of the art world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cape Town: the fact of the city’s geographical isolation, fed “its persistent anxieties about contemporaneity. While cosmopolitan, it is also deeply conservative. Change is suspicious. Cape Town’s art practices circa 1920 reflected all this. In the main, its artists were a mix of jumped-up amateurs and latter-day Victorians, most of them peddling versions of the picturesque”. Its most prominent artists, Edward Roworth (1880-1964) and Robert Gwelo Goodman (1871-1939), were “skilled landscapists working in the nineteenth-century traditions of naturalism and impressionism. Their opinions were influential in shaping vexed discussions about “a genuinely national school of South African art” (O Toole, 2020: 71). Roworth was president of the South African Society of Artists (SASA), a fierce critic of the highly popular Irma Stern, and an anti-modernist. In 1939 he became the (first official) director of the SANG until 1948. His tenure was mired with controversy, as he went through a period of selling off many of the early bequests received by the SANG.



*Fig 10. Painting by Robert Gwelo Goodman, 'City Hall, Cape Town' 1917*



*Fig 11. Painting by Edward Roworth, Table Mountain from Milnerton*

Lanita Berger (2020: 57-8) explains that “[w]hile modern European art gained acceptance in South Africa in the 1930s, the Nazi government began its campaign to eliminate modern art and its influences in Germany” Cape Town was home to a sizable Jewish population and reflected a heterogeneous political context in the 1930s. While directing the SANG, Roworth advanced a “campaign against South African modern art by blocking acquisitions and dismissing modern work as “degenerate ballyhoo” (ref).” In a 1940 lecture at the University of Cape Town, Roworth appeared to support the Nazis’ purge of “degenerate” art from state collections, intensifying the growing divide between traditional (English) and modern (Jewish) South African artists” (Berger, 2020: 60). Although Roworth’s politics sometimes provoked rebuke and resistance within the art world (particularly from the more liberal Jewish community), he was tacitly and sometimes explicitly supported by the SANG board members, who ultimately were responsible for inscribing and maintaining the lines of inclusion and exclusion in the gallery context.

In 1944, Gerard Sekoto, recognised today as South Africa’s most prominent black modernist and third most ‘bankable’ South African artist in contemporary circuits of value, had three paintings rejected by the said board, with no reason noted in the acquisition committee meeting minutes. The silence in the archive around exclusions such as Sekoto’s weighs heavily on the symbolic meaning of the pieces that did navigate past these aggressive gatekeepers. As Lanitra Berger (2020: 8) argues, the term “modern art” in South Africa “describes the painful period when white artists were celebrated and Black artists were neglected at best and persecuted and tortured at worst”. It was 1931 (and again in 1933) that the first artworks by a black South African were exhibited at the SANG: a landscape painting by painter Moses Tladi titled *Spring*.



*Fig 12. Painting by Moses Tladi, 'Spring' (1931), private collection (source: Martin, 2019, Between Dreams and Reality). This was the first artwork exhibited in the SANG by an African artist.*

The case of Moses Tladi's work is worth elaborating, given these observations about the politics of the dominant visual paradigms. Tladi was an artist with a primary interest in landscape as subject matter. He also spent many years working as a gardener and a landscaper for a wealthy industrial family in Johannesburg. A friend of Tladi's employer, Howard Pim (an industrialist who was also involved in setting up the Johannesburg Art Gallery and Johannesburg Library), became a patron of Tladi's. It has been recorded that his employers noticed his self-taught skill in painting and encouraged the creation and sale of his works as a part time venture. It was in this context that Tladi's works were assessed, admired, bought, and made visible to influential people who were involved in the Johannesburg art world. Tladi was the first black South African artist *and* the first black African artist to exhibit work in the SANG.

Tladi travelled to Cape Town in 1931 for an exhibition of South African art organised by the South African Fine Arts Society (SAFA) called the Exhibition of National Contemporary Art at the SANG (Read Lloyd, interview with Tladi's daughter, 1999) and again in 1933. Before this he had exhibited in 1929 at the tenth Annual Exhibition of the Johannesburg Academy. At the time of Tladi's work

being displayed at the SANG, the art museum had no clear director, had recently been inaugurated in its own building in the Company Gardens (1931), and was managed by a board. The fact that Anton van Wouw's *Head of a Zulu* had been purchased by the SANG only 4 years prior (1926) as the first South African work in the collection, should contextualise the hitherto Eurocentric orientation. His work was shown in a context in which abstract and modernist aesthetics were being aggressively excluded or even jettisoned from the SANG's holdings.

Tladi's works primarily depicted landscapes: some suburban but mostly wild, many 'plein air' art works created in the veld and open hills around his house in Kensington. Interpretations within Tladi's own lifetime revealed racialised views of 'a native working in the European tradition', a perspective that was later revised in more recent interpretations of Tladi as an "African romanticist" (Lloyd Read, 2009; Coetsee, 2013). However, as Coetsee (2013:5) argues "[p]ower struggles over artistic autonomy (as well as for land and land ownership) fashioned the conception of the South Africa landscape and landscape painting as primarily political, even though such a reading was not given of Tladi's work during his lifetime". Instead, while Tladi gained relative prominence in South African art history as a prolific painter in the romantic landscape genre it was primarily through a framing of exceptionalism.



*Fig 13. Painting by Moses Tladi, 1939, on display in 2022 (source: photographed by the author). This was (the first painting by Tladi purchased by ISANG.*

In 1956, Tladi's property came under threat by the apartheid government, which was busy with a large-scale project of land theft and displacement under the Group Areas legislation. Angela Read Lloyd, the daughter of Tladi's erstwhile employers, extensively documented and studied Tladi's legacy through his artworks and engagements with remaining members of his and her family. Writing about the final chapter in Tladi's life, she writes "the original Tladi dwelling had grown over the years as extra rooms had been built on; the orchard was productive and the garden full of mature trees and shrubs. It was a considerable establishment, full of children and paintings" (Read-Lloyd, 2009: 33). In 1956, after years of mobilisation and pleas from Tladi, his family, and the Read-Lloyd family, to leave the Tladi property and family in peace, Tladi's property was expropriated, and the family told to "pack up and move to a desolate area far away, where they were to look for a 'toilet with a number on it' and build a shack there" (Read-Lloyd, 2009: 33-34). They moved to Soweto and built a house there, but Tladi never painted again. Read-Lloyd (2009: 34) observed in relation to this story that "[i]n the forty years of Apartheid rule following 1948, division and separation was enforced through vigorous legislation, creating as result a white core, comprising 87% of the land, and the black periphery in the remaining 13%".

Tladi's experience of dispossession and de-worlding is shamefully commonplace amongst black South Africans who lived through and beyond the apartheid era. The ubiquity of this experience contrasts with Tladi's visibility within the South African art world within his own lifetime. The perception of 'exceptionality' in Tladi's case poses problems. Within his lifetime, the record indicates a patronising admiration and amazement of his Tladi's 'exceptional' skill as a 'native'. This reading itself can retrospectively be seen as the product of a deeply unjust social structure, in which the oppression and exclusion of black artists (from places like art museums but also from educational opportunities and social resources more generally) was naturalised to the extent that the 'recognition' of talent was framed in a language of exceptionalism. A 2015 retrospective exhibition of Tladi at the ISANG titled *Unearthing Moses Tladi* elicited a reading that speaks of the problem of hermeneutic injustice at play. Nkule Mabaso (2015) questioned the curatorial tactic of positioning Tladi amongst fellow landscape artists, in particular JH Pierneef, in a bid to recontextualise him within this visual tradition, as an equal proponent.

JH Pierneef (1886 -1957) was one of South Africa's most prominent modernists and most well-known landscape painters, whose distinctive aesthetic has become a symbol of apartheid ideologies and narratives that justified theft and appropriation of land. The title and framing of Riason Naidoo's century long view of South African art history in his exhibition 1910 - 2010, *Pierneef to Gugulective* (ISANG, 2010) is indicative of the symbolic potency of Pierneef's association with white settler culture, contrasted with the work of the Gugulective - a collective of young, black artists from Cape

Town's Gugulethu township. In relation to *Unearthing Moses Tladi*, Mabaso (2015: 2) reflects: “the one to one Tladi to Pierneef relation – a tree for a tree if you will – feels like a set-up in which Moses is intended to be proven as a modernist. And to prove his exception, an exercise he never had to demonstrate in his own time of practice”. The discomfort with the constructedness of redress presents itself in Mabaso's reading. The symbolic act of inclusion into the canon by the ISANG, though 'well meaning', holds the danger of occluding the very social conditions that created the inequality and oppression that rendered Tladi exceptional in the first place. We might begin to dismantle this, firstly by presenting Tladi to viewers on his own terms, and without the visual parallels.

There are well established arguments that connect the settler culture's preoccupation with landscape aesthetics with attempts to justify appropriation of land (Coetzee, 1988; Foster, 2008; Leeb du Toit 2008). The mechanism of depicting a 'terra-nullis' by erasing signs of the people who occupied the depicted landscapes is one identified in settler-colonial cultures around the world. In fact, it may constitute part of what Zoe Samudzi calls a “settler colonial internationalism” (2022), which remains alive in the present in discourses around landownership in places like the USA, Australia, South Africa, and Israel. Auction house sales in the categories of 'historical' or 'pre-war' art in South Africa (through entities such as Strauss & Co and Aspire Auctioneers) indicate that the era of South African landscape painting described in this chapter remains in high circulation amongst the wealthy. This context is relevant, and the story of Moses Tladi – his successes as an artist and his radical losses and suffering as a black South African – are important dimensions of his work. While his paintings conform largely to the critiqued aesthetic of the picturesque, which played an ideological role in the settler identity, to contextualise their making in radically different ontological circumstances has an impact on how they might be read in the future.

### Eva Meyerowitz and the Liberman Doors (1925-1931)

In 1925, Hebert Meyerowitz, a Russian-German Jewish artist, was called to Cape Town on a residency, to execute a complex architectural and artistic tribute to Cape Town's first Jewish mayor Hyman Liberman (1904 - 1907). While he only served for a short period as mayor, Liberman's leadership was significant given the strong tides of political change during his service and the hitherto (important but) marginalised role that Jews had played in colonial politics in South Africa. As Lanitra Berger (2020: 57) argues “[i]n their struggle for hegemony, British and Afrikaners argued over which language, religion, and social history would represent South Africa, marginalizing Black, Jewish, and Coloured voices on the subject”. Jewish identity treaded some racially ambiguous territory, as its claim to whiteness came under more and less scrutiny at different moments in South African history (Shain, 1994).

With little family surviving him, upon his death, Hyman Liberman bequeathed a large sum of money to build a memorial for him in the city that would commemorate and beautify the capital. It was decided that the memorial could be reinterpreted as part of the construction of the new building that would house the contents of the South African National Gallery, which up to that point had been housed mostly in the South African Museum (Balakema, 1975). Herbert Meyerowitz, a Russian Jew who studied art (with his wife Eva) in Berlin, was commissioned to carve the memorial in multiple parts as door frames, doors, and insets within the rooms of the gallery. He lived in Cape Town from 1925 - 1930, until the completion of the SANG building. Herbert has been credited with most of the carvings, the thematic of which was Biblical and treated in detail Old Testament narratives concerning the migrations of the Jewish people. This theme and its role in expressing a racially and culturally narrow segment of the population of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cape Town are discussed in more detail by Proud (1994) and critiqued by Lilla (2018). What is of more relevance to this study of African art and aesthetics in the ISANG is the story of Eva Leonie Meyerowitz (née Lewin-Richter), who was commissioned to carve the nude neo-classical reliefs on the façade of the building, but also was found to have had a greater hand in the wood carving than is usually credited.

Eva was born in Berlin in 1899 where she studied with Herbert, whom she married in 1925. Together they moved to Cape Town, where he taught at the University of Cape Town and was engaged (with the assistance of students) in the Liberman carvings. Her activities in Cape Town have not been extensively documented. However, after this period, the couple moved to Lesotho where Herbert was credited with making a study of crafts (*A Report on the Possibilities of the Development of Village Crafts in Basutoland* (Moriija Printing Works, 1936) and organising an exhibition of African arts and crafts in Zimbabwe. Subsequently, they moved to Ghana after “Rev. H.M. Grace, the Principal of Achimota College in the Gold Coast, offered Meyerowitz the job of arts and crafts supervisor. Achimota College had been founded in 1927 as a selective boarding school to train an African élite” (Cardew, 1989:125). After this, the Meyerowitz’s made a survey of the indigenous crafts of the Gold Coast, which they found to be “in decline”. The Meyerowitz’s seemed to hold a critical approach towards the patronising norm of imposing Western aesthetic practices as a gold standard. At Achimota, Herbert is said to have “replaced Western-style art classes based on academic drawing with an arts and crafts approach based on local skills and traditions” (Cardew, 1989: 125).

In 1944, Eva became involved in “assisting the king of Tekyiman state in its struggle to regain nine villages which the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) government had incorporated into Asante territory in 1935” (<https://www.britishmuseum.org>). Shortly thereafter, Herbert, who had been recorded to have suffered with a severe mental health condition, committed suicide after learning about his mothers’

death in 1945. After his death, Eva returned to Ghana and lived there for forty years in the Bono-Tekyiman State, where, in 1950, she was reported to have been made Queen Mother (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term>). After the death of her husband, Eva published extensively on art, cultural practices, the political and social history of the Gold Coast and Ghana, and West African aesthetic traditions. She died in 1994, leaving a legacy of scholarship in her name. A full survey of her publications would give a deeper insight into Eva's life and unusual engagement and embeddedness in the West African context. This knowledge bears upon the fact of her compelling aesthetic choices that are still visible in the ISANG's architecture today.



Fig 14. Preliminary drawing for the for the Liberman room created by Herbert Meyerowitz (Source: *Made in Wood exhibition catalogue*, 1999). Fig 15. Photo of the final carving completed by Eva Meyerowitz, (Source: *Made in Wood exhibition catalogue*, 1999)

Hayden Proud (1993: 23) suggests that the difference between a preliminary drawing for the Liberman room created by Herbert (left), and the final carving (right), is suggestive of Eva's influence. This is evident in her carving style, shown here in the reliefs on the façade of the building. In the drawing, the figures on the actual doors as well as those in the rectangular panels below, suggest an initial plan to place a Hebrew matriarch and patriarch in each upper section. These were replaced by regal African figures. Other depictions of African and 'Malay' figures in other parts of the carving (for example, the *Races Abiding in South Africa* panel) are framed within an ethno-racial visual typology.

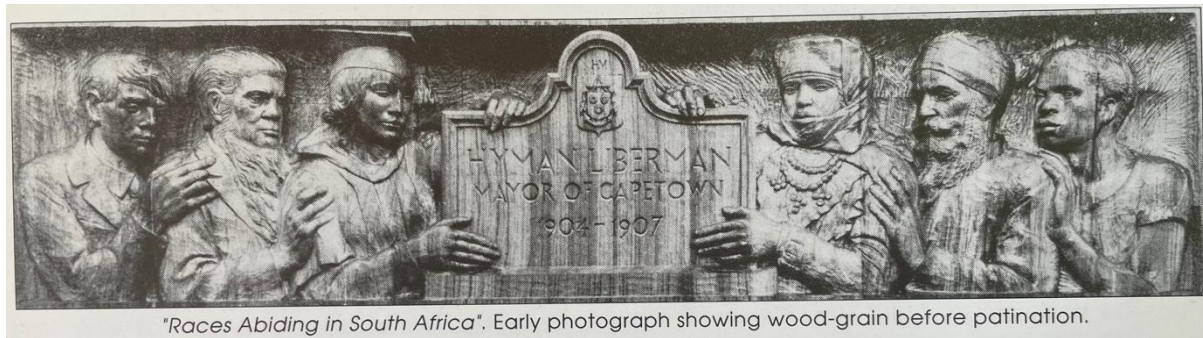


Fig 16. Photo of inlay (Source: *Made in Wood* exhibition catalogue, 1999)

Eva's representation of an African matriarch and patriarch appear in harmony with a visual coding that, as Quanita Lilla (2018) argues in her analysis of the carvings, places indigenous people as curiosities or objects that are part of "the land of milk and honey", set apart from the Jewish (white) historical protagonists. In subsequent years, Afrikaner Nationalism galvanised a self-serving version of biblical stories of "the chosen people" in a powerful visual and ideological campaign for white supremacy. It is difficult *not* to read the Liberman sculptures in this light and thus cast them as historical traces of a violent and racist cultural project. However, it is worth considering that some of these aesthetic choices were made by protagonists such as Eva Meyerowitz, who may have had more complex motivations. This anecdote speaks to the fragility of the myth of a homogenous whiteness, a myth that the apartheid state worked hard to forge. Instead, embedded in the visual history of this archive are also stories of repressed desires and ambitions, and unexpected engagements with African aesthetics. The paintings of Moses Tladi and the relief carvings of Eva Meyerowitz have left faint but critical traces of suppressed narratives in the ISANG's history that haunt the museum today. Another important exception to dominant narratives about art history as constructed by the ISANG is the case of Rock art.

### History of the Settler or history of the Native? Rock Art in the SANG (1950s -1970s)

In his essay about the character of the colonial gallery at the Cape, one of SANG's founders, Abraham de Smidt (1871: unpaginated), expressed that in South Africa "more light has been cast on the habits and character of the Bushmen and their own rude drawings in caves and on rocks in various localities, than by all the books that have been written about these people". Aside from this fleeting reference, art by indigenous South Africans bore no mention in the National Gallery until 80 years later. As per the explicitly racist imperial framework that governed the creation of the South African Museum (and influenced ideas around the Colonial Gallery), indigenous populations both of South Africa and the continent, were engaged with through the lens of natural history, anthropology, and ethnography and

not through art. However, from the late 1950s onwards, Rock Art began to feature as an interest of two subsequent directors of the SANG: John Paris (1949 – 1962) and Matthys Bokhorst (1962 – 1973) and a particular interest to assistant director Bruce Arnott (1962 – 1972). Paris raised the idea of indigenous South African art in theory more than in practice. His vision for the national gallery was illustrated in the schema pictured below.

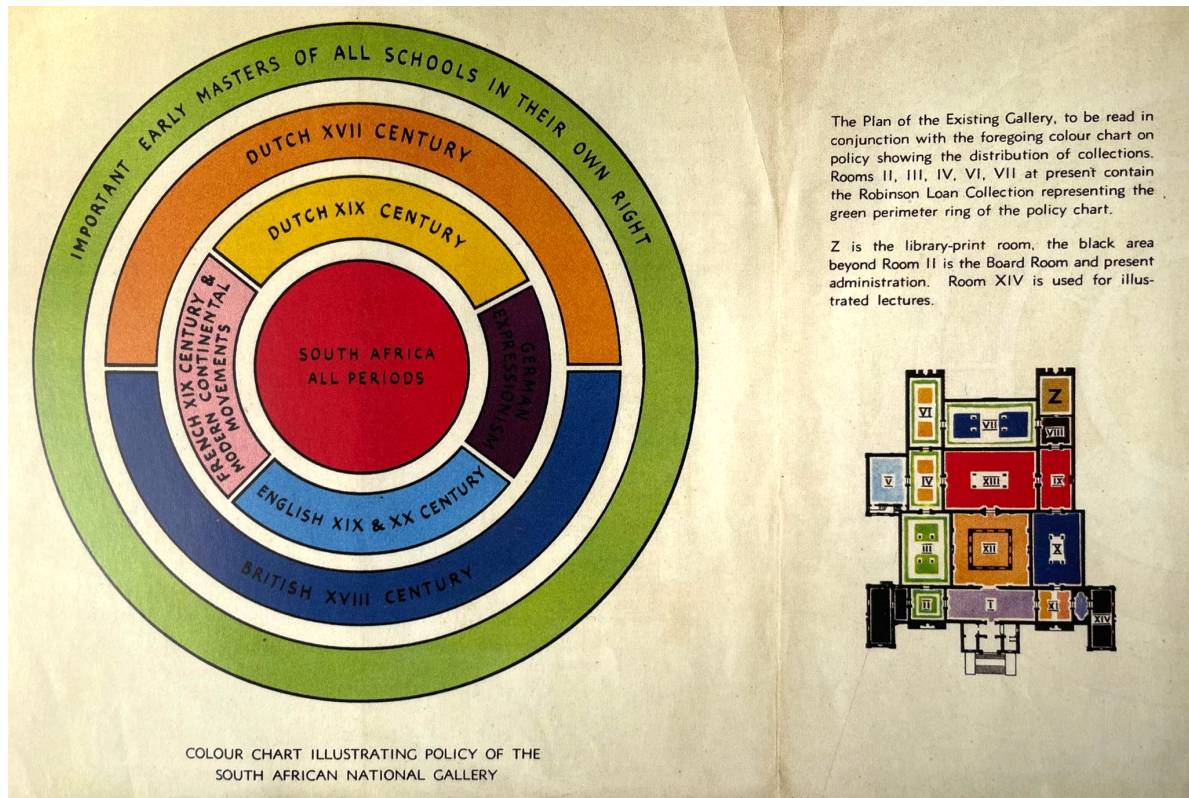


Fig 17. Graphic by Alfred Honikman, *Colour Chart illustrating Policy of the South African National Gallery*, (1958) (source: Martin, 2019, *Between Dreams and Reality*).

Surrounded by layers of European art history (in European nations that had direct colonial contact with South Africa), Paris had placed a symbolic centre representing South African art from all periods. His construction of this South African canon was articulated in more detail in a memorandum to the trustees, dated 29 September 1950. As Martin (2019:54) recalls, Paris presented in his vision a combination of “specific artists: Africana (Thomas Banes and Thomas Bowler); pioneers (Frans Oerder, Pierneef and Pieter Wenning); groups and schools (for example South African impressionists, the New Group); trends and movements (contact with contemporary trends abroad and artists who have ‘sought out new idioms for themselves or tried to discover a style indigenous to the country’); predictions (accomplished young artists whose reputations were still to be made); and prehistoric and native, primitive and indigenous”. Evident here is the inclusion of black and African art under the

rubric of prehistory, nativism, primitivism, and indigeneity. Despite this policy shift, there were no purchases by the gallery that spoke to the need to grow a collection of prehistoric, native, primitive, or indigenous art.

This (attempted) inclusion of indigenous and native history into the SANG's story of art in the 1950s should also be read in relation to significant shifts in museums through the formal dismantling of European colonialism. In the decades following the second world war period, Azoulay (2019) argues that the language and logic of imperialism that had hitherto shaped and justified the modern museum was reconfigured around the notion of the rights of man and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Azoulay (2019) describes the visual kit used in a mass global education drive which illustrated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She argues that the images therein "create continuity between different events now classified as human rights violations, while at the same time testifying to a universal human creativity through images of artworks from antiquity to the present that illustrate the path to progress" (Azoulay, 2019: 496).

The museum and the very concept of art was enlisted in this project of constructing chronological coherence. The global human rights narrative that Azoulay identifies is one of commonality and diversity in humankind, and the contradictions of this new world order were engulfed in this narrative. An example is how slavery is presented as a violation of human rights, and the abolition of slavery as the triumph of human rights. Instantiations of violence (looting, slavery, conquest) were presented as belonging to a bygone time even though formerly colonised populations continue to suffer their consequences. The narrative around human rights became a powerful link between the openly differentiating logics of imperialism which accepted an inequality in the status of people as a given, and the more covert naturalisation of inequality and reliance on differentiated categorisation of people in the post-World War II world order. Artefacts from former colonies that filled European museums had to be re-contextualised from colonial spoils to educational showcases of cultural diversity.

From 1962 – 1973, Matthys Bokhorst led the SANG as the first Afrikaans and self-identified South African director. During his tenure, resistance towards white cultural domination in South Africa was being articulated all over the country, with support from many parts of the world. The cultural boycott initiated in the late 1950s by the then banned ANC,<sup>32</sup> gained momentum internationally during this

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<sup>32</sup> "The ANC's original call for an academic and cultural boycott occurred in December 1958 at the All African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana. This initially called for an academic boycott to protest South African Apartheid. The call was repeated the following year in London" (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/south-africas-academic-and-cultural-boycott>).

period.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, in the wake of independence from colonial rule, there was a movement through the African continent to redefine the terms of cultural and artistic authority and the terms of engagement with African art. These manifested in a series of key moments in Accra (1962), Kampala (the 1962 Negritude conference at Makerere University), Dakar (1962, Negritude conference) amongst others, in which new terms for engagement with African aesthetics were mapped out. The South African art establishment was contending with an increasingly critical West, focussed (hypocritically) on espousing the cultural values of human rights and equality and an increasingly post-colonial African context, as well as an entire population that had hitherto been oppressed and whose histories and aesthetics had been expressly excluded from the emerging cultural canon. Under these circumstances, the nation building project of the National Art Gallery was riddled with contradictions.

In these ambiguous and unsteady times, the stakes in forging an official South African visual culture were high within art establishments such as the SANG. Greer Valley (2021: 258) argues that during apartheid, art was “used to remind Afrikaners of their Dutch roots and worked to engender a sense of history and cultural heritage and to link the Afrikaner to European identity and therefore, with whiteness and racial purity”. The tasks that art was used to fulfil were quite complex and contradictory. Reminding the Afrikaner citizenry of their Dutch roots was not easily paired with the appropriate ‘sense of history’, and, post-World War II, in the newly forming world order, to be understood as culturally European was also not straightforward or desirable. To articulate a ‘national culture’ of the South African in the apartheid context, was always a contradictory task, as it involved exceptionalising certain identities (Afrikaner, Cape Malay, or Indian) at the very same time as attempting their generalisation. The very term ‘Afrikaner’ speaks of a paradoxical appropriation of being African as an exceptional and racially specific identity.

On the one hand, it was under Bokhorst’s leadership that a focus on *South African* art as a special category emerged - this tentative category constructed via the art museum was neither European nor African. Bokhorst self-published a written piece called “From our own soil” in which he “stressed the importance of South African art for the national art museum – an art that had, for him, particular qualities that distinguished it from that of other countries with colonial histories” (Martin, 2019: 70). His invocation of land and earth as a metaphor for settler belonging is congruent with Afrikaner nationalist claims that Afrikaners are in fact the true ‘natives’ of South Africa, bonded to the land

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<sup>33</sup> This reached an institutional or formal high point in 1980, when the UN General Assembly constituted Resolution 35/206, which stated that (Summary): “The United Nations General Assembly makes the request to all states to prevent all cultural, academic, sporting and other exchanges with South Africa. This is also an appeal to writers, artists, musicians and other personalities to boycott South Africa. It urges all academic and cultural institutions to terminate all links with South Africa.” (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/south-africas-academic-and-cultural-boycott>).

through their sacrifice and struggle and protected in this right by their religious beliefs. On the other hand, fighting against its parochial origins, the SANG couldn't afford to completely ignore the shift in European art museums to partake in the construction of cultural others through the inclusion of hitherto ignored art-forms and cultures. Consider a reflection written about Bokhorst's travels abroad to museums in Europe and the USA in 1971 recorded in the SANG annual report of that year:

“[...] all those American museums which now collect traditional primitive art and integrate it into their collections of contemporary art by the same people. This was being done in the cases of American Indian, Mexican, South American Indian and Eskimo art. This strengthened [Bokhorst's] opinion that the same integration could be applied to traditional Bantu art and contemporary Bantu art in the S.A National Gallery” (SANG, annual report, 1971).

During Bokhorst's directorship (1962 – 1973), the inclusion of African art was framed by an epistemology of (supposedly benign) othering. This was a project underwritten by the support of other powerful nations. Exhibitions of 'world cultures' were “largely sponsored by foreign governments” such as “Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada and France. The open-ended approach to what was deemed appropriate for a national art museum that started with Paris, was explored and reinforced with exhibitions such as Rock Art in Southern Africa, Rhodesian African Sculpture, African Art in Metal, Ceramic African Heads from Lydenberg, Indian Sculpture through the Ages etc” (Martin, 2019: 69). Despite these visiting exhibitions however, until the 1980s, by and large, art made by Africans remained buried in ethnological museums.

In her book about the ISANG, Martin makes an intriguing observation that indicates the tenuousness of racial categories and their constant slippage within the apartheid administration. She points out that in the institution's terminology during Paris' leadership: “'Native' was used to describe the work of living black artists, while 'Indigenous' referred to the rock paintings and engravings of the San. This may explain why the word 'Native' was replaced with 'Indigenous' in the minute books, as the former would encourage the acquisition of work by contemporary black artists” (Martin, 2019:56). This seemingly small terminological shift hints at much deeper tensions in the history of African art at the ISANG. Mahmood Mamdani's thesis on the interdependent nature of the identities of 'native' and 'settler' in the South African apartheid context is relevant here. Mamdani (2020:145) argues that “[t]he native is the settler's invented other: the settler claimed not only to be defined by history but to be its maker, at the same time stigmatizing the native as an unthinking captive of unchanging custom and a product of geography”.

Seen through the lens of the settler construction of history that Mamdani refers to, San and Rock Art appear to be enlisted to play a particular role in the SANG and in the larger story of South African art history in the 1960s. In 1963, assistant curator Bruce Arnott curated an exhibition Rock Art in Southern Africa, which comprised “274 paintings and engravings borrowed from the South African Museum and the South African Archaeological Society”, and which intended to “present both the *scientific and aesthetic* aspects of rock art”. This was the first time that this kind of art was exhibited in Southern Africa and the exhibition was widely viewed and considered a great success. Reviewing the scholarship produced about ‘African art’ during the apartheid era, Anitra Nettleton (2020:8) highlights the paucity of institutional interest in African art in South Africa, save for Rock art, which “attracted a disproportionately large following amongst linguists, artists, archaeologists, and various amateur enthusiasts”.

The problems around Rock Art recall the paradox at the heart of the notion of primitivism: the simultaneous ascribing and denying of artistic ability. This is also because Rock art presents its own special disciplinary problems, as archaeologists and art historians have distanced themselves for different reasons from *aesthetic* questions about Rock art, and it is the realm of aesthetics that invites questions around the political. From an art history perspective Rock art was “seen as being tainted by functional dimensions and, more importantly, the suspicion of a connection to supposedly primitive beliefs and magic” (Porr 2013: 15). As such, it was seen as falling under the purview of the discipline of archaeology. Shepherd (in Lilla, 2018: 41) argues that within the South African context “archaeology is especially incongruous since it is centrally about black people and their past while being completely indifferent to the African present. In this way, the past is objectified, properly distanced as conventional research methodologies require, and therefore also sterilised to make it free from contestation. The past is seen as a blank canvas waiting to be reconstructed through white scientific endeavour”.

At the same time, art history continued “a long-standing fascination with these forms of art, which also included the well-known engagement of Western artists with non-European artefacts” (Pfisterer 2008, and Staszak, 2004, cited in Porr, 2019: 15). Nzegwu’s critique directed towards Arthur Danto’s defense of the standard sequential logic of art history and its impact on the discourse on African aesthetics is pertinent here. The canonical art historical timeline is an “expression of the underlying racialised assumption of the Western knowledge scheme that treats African cultures as primitive and ranks them far down the evolutionary scale” (Nzegwu, 2019: 372). The repeated and sustained efforts to erase African Art history from this global trajectory, by insisting on the Egyptian and then Greek origins of modern aesthetics ensure that “from the normalisation of Africa’s primitive status, it is but a short step to seeing African artworks as primitive” (Nzegwu, 2019:

372). What is at stake in these contorted timelines are claims to intelligence and superiority, as Egypt, Rome, and Greece are appropriated as ancient cultures that serve as the basis of ‘universal’ culture and aesthetics and Africa is expressly left out of this world history and geography (Nzegwu, 2019: 373). There is a euro-centrifcation of the roots of aesthetic theory embedded in these timelines, which has been contested by debates around the *Black Athena* for example.

During the apartheid era, Rock art could be presented by the SANG as a recognition of the arts of the ‘othered’ native, and thus protect the implied cultural and moral authority of the museum within the human rights focussed post-imperial order. It also provided an avenue to forge narratives about the deep history of settler identity via a focus on South African art history. Accounting for the popularity of Rock art during the apartheid era, Nettleton suggests “[t]he fact that there were almost no surviving descendants of the Khoisan speakers who had produced these paintings in the Republic of South Africa provided a gap, a buffer, between their historical claim to the land and the white settlers’ accumulation of land and wealth by appropriation. As a result, it could be argued, this art could be studied and admired by the settlers because it posed no threat to the white settler community or colonial power” (Nettleton, 2020:8). The genocide of indigenous populations by the settler communities in South Africa, referred to here in passing, should be read as a suppressed subtext of the inclusion of indigenous Rock art in the South African ‘story of man’.

Considering that until 1936 (and possibly even later), permits to hunt and kill indigenous people classified as ‘bushmen’ were still issued by South African authorities to hunters,<sup>34</sup> the idea that there was a ‘buffer’ between Khoisan<sup>35</sup> Rock art and the living descendants of communities that produced such art, is highly questionable. The implausibility of this settler fantasy - that Rock art presented a closed and cut off chapter in the story of man, rather than the cultural heritage of indigenous people who were purposefully hunted and exterminated by the settlers - unsettles the narrative of continuity and shared humanity via the story of art. These hauntings returned to the gallery in the 1990s, with exhibitions like *Miscast* (1996) and *Moon as Shoe* (1992), during which time Khoisan descended communities visited the SANG and expressed great consternation about the modes of representation that their ancestors were subject to. The history of indigenous communities in the Cape and their engagements with the ISANG is a complex and layered one that deserves its own focus, and not one that I will enter in depth in this research project. Instead, my intention is to flag the long history of

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<sup>34</sup> See Mohamed Adhikari, (2010) *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples*, Ohio University Press .

<sup>35</sup> It should be added linguists argue that Khoisan was never a term of self-identification for anyone living in Southern African prior to colonial conquest. Both terms existed in the languages spoken by these people but not in the sense of their being names of groups or cultures. It remains a category in the present that carries with it colonial baggage. Thank you to Emma Daitz for pointing this out to me.

contesting epistemic projects that the ISANG has dedicated itself to, and to make a case for the necessity of engaging with this difficult archive and its traces of untold pain and suffering, as a way of grappling with its meaning in the present.

Today, Iziko Museums of South Africa presents a substantial body of engagements with indigenous South African communities (more about the engagements around the SAM's 'bushman diorama' in chapter 5). A recent exhibition at the Iziko SAM in 2023, called *The Evolution of Indigenous Art*, is presented with the intention to "allow indigenous peoples to have their voices heard in the space, to have the expressions of self-seen in the space and to have engagement with difficult histories and narratives of indigenous peoples in museums, but especially the Iziko South African Museum (ISAM)."<sup>36</sup> The struggle against apartheid and the project of social, political, and legal reconstruction post-apartheid served, according to Mamdani (2020:145), to deconstruct the native/ settler construction through a reconfiguring both as survivors. This reconfiguration has only been partial however and is an unfinished and ongoing project. While "colonial authorities created, and both colonial and apartheid authorities exploited, two kinds of distinction between settlers and natives: racial distinction and tribal distinction [t]he struggle against apartheid, and the new South Africa that followed, have made inroads against the politicization of race. Yet today tribe remains a supposed African tradition. Thus, settler and native identities have been dismantled in some respects and retained in others" (Mamdani, 2020:145). The afterlives of tribal identities in the post-apartheid context is a theme taken up in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

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<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.iziko.org.za/news/the-evolution-of-indigenous-art-2/>

## Chapter 4

### An Unruly Presence: Classical African Art in the Apartheid Gallery

In 1967 assistant curator Bruce Arnott purchased a few West African artworks that formed the starting point of (what was then) the SANG's PAA collection. The West African pieces were ostensibly embraced in the institutional fold as an expression of the 'internationalisation' of the gallery, which in the 1960s was expanding its narrow focus on European visual arts and white South African canons to include the arts of 'other' cultures. The SANG considered as its peers other national galleries in the Global North, and ironically expressed this Eurocentric orientation in the formation of its first African art collection. African art, as it was mobilised and put to use in the early moments of the SANG's PAA collection history via concepts of authenticity (and its ally, provenance), tradition, and the canon, tended to have an ironically de-historicising effect. And yet, the suppressed ideas contained in the West African pieces continue to hold a disruptive capacity that, when drawn into the foreground of the art museum's history, indicate alternative frameworks for placing value on art and for re-imagining the very term African art.

Once in the gallery's halls and storage spaces, the West African artworks can be seen to have left a legacy of epistemic unruliness and disobedience that this chapter aims to describe. Viewed as mutants (Diagne, 2020) that exceed the epistemic frames through which dominant art institutions attempt to contain them. The disruptive capacities of the West African artworks, in particular a few artworks that gained an internal nickname of "the young ones", are read both through an interpretation of the physical and discursive presence of the works (in exhibitions and in academic inquiries) *and* indications of significant absence and silence (evident in a paucity of archival documentation and lack of knowledge about the artist's and the object's pre-institutional lives). These absences and presences require methodological flexibility and speculative enquiry. The analysis has been drawn from existing literature and research on the ISANG, original archival research on exhibition histories and educational programs, and interviews with past ISANG directors and curators, cultural workers, art dealers, and buyers in the field.

#### Trade, scholarship, and the circulation of traditional African art in apartheid South Africa

Arnott purchased around 50 figurative wooden sculptures from West Africa in 1967 from the Gallery International, a local commercial art gallery trading in historical and contemporary art in Long Street, Cape Town (acquisitions logbook, SANG archives). While Johannesburg constituted the centre of the

African art trade in South Africa from the 1940s onwards, Gallery International seems to have been one of the few Capetonian spaces in which traditional African art was displayed through the apartheid years.<sup>37</sup> The West African pieces were *not* the first artworks (ostensibly) made by black African artists to be purchased by the SANG (the first was a painting by Gerard Sekoto purchased in 1967), but the West African pieces constituted the beginnings of a new artistic and collecting category within the institution: ‘African art’.

Besides their purchase from Gallery International, the West African pieces of interest in this story have no paper trail or recorded provenance attached to them which could help to trace their pre-institutional lives, or indeed the exact place of their creation and their first buyers. Although we cannot know exactly who procured the ISANG’s West African pieces from the hands that made them, and exactly where they were made and for whom, the dominant actors in the trade of traditional African art appear as some of the most obvious (and best documented) links between artworks from within the African continent to places of sale in South Africa such as the Gallery International. For this reason, I lay out briefly the landscape of the African art trade in apartheid South Africa.



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<sup>37</sup> Recording the history of the African art trade in South Africa, Nettleton (2020:19) describes: “[f]rom 1967 onwards, historical African art appeared in the art media of Johannesburg, largely in short articles published in the local art magazine Artlook. The first notice in Artlook’s gallery listings was for an exhibition called African Tribal Sculpture at the Gallery International in Long Street in Cape Town”.

*Fig 18. Baga dance Mask (origin possibly Guinea), on display at the Hidden Treasures: Pieces from the Permanent African Art Collection (2019-2020), ISANG. (source: photographs by the author). Fig 19. Senufo Bird Sculpture (origin possibly Cote d'Ivoire) on display at the Hidden Treasures: Pieces from the Permanent African Art Collection (2019-2020), ISANG. (source: photographs by the author).*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, while European museums were bursting at the seams with collections of African objects (first gathered as ethnographica and later sold as art), the trade of traditional African objects in South Africa was minimal. Through travellers, soldiers, and merchants there was circulation of 'curiosities', 'souvenirs', 'relics', and 'trophies' (Stevenson and Graham Stewart, 2005:4). However, the art world, at that point, "was dominated by people of British and Afrikaner descent who focused on collecting European art" (Girschick, 2019: 85). Art in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa meant European art, or art in European traditions and it was this kind of art that was hotly traded across the Atlantic. It was in the 1930s and 1940s that West and Central African objects "began to be sought after, displayed and taught in art classes" in the South African context (Girschick, 2019: 85).

Girschick's study of the African art market in South Africa identifies prominent actors in this trade in the 1930s and 1940s: the modernist artist Irma Stern, intellectual and teacher Maria Stein Lessig, and the Ivy family (Girschick, 2019). The traditional African art market in South Africa emerged in the 1930s and, much like its trajectory in Europe, its products and key actors moved over time from peripheral and alternative to more mainstream social positions. All the while, however, the trade remained a socially elite pursuit. The shift from social periphery to centre was not a racially or politically progressive one. Instead, as I aim to show in the next few chapters, traditional or historical African art as it was defined, collected, exhibited, and traded via the ISANG, served to reaffirm social boundaries through race and class.

By the 1950s, two collectors and sellers held pre-eminence in the South African market for historical or traditional African art: Egon Guenther a German immigrant, and Vittorio Meneghelli, an Italian immigrant (Girschick, 2019: 87). The migration of West African artworks into South Africa in the first half of the century was thus closely tied to the mobility of European immigrants, many fleeing to South Africa from war-torn Europe. Guenther and Meneghelli were influential (from the late 1970s until the later 2000s) because they were traders and collectors; they travelled in Africa extensively to purchase works, they both had galleries which hosted exhibitions, and they engaged with artists and scholars in the field. The focus by art museums on the cultural production of white South African and European art forms, was reflected in a segregated society in which European cultural forms (opera, ballet, fine art) slowly gained pre-eminence and wider audiences. By the 1960s these forms were

dominant in white urban South Africa. Within this context, the cultural activities related to the African art trade were significant in their class-based influence of taste within urban white South Africa, as they moved from the realm of the market to the gallery, to the museum, and by proxy, to the university.

Guenther and Meneghelli were important because they broached the seeming divide between curios and fine art in their engagement with the trade.<sup>38</sup> This difference between curios and authentic pieces is one anxiously policed by cultural gatekeepers. The predominance of European buyers and sellers in this market was over subsequent generations replaced by white *South African* buyers and sellers. Around the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a simultaneous growth of African art in market circulation and academic production and institutional ‘acceptance’ of the very idea of African art history. This indicated the beginning of a close relationship between the trade of historical African art in the South African market and the South African art establishment’s engagement with African aesthetics that the subsequent chapters trace.

Around the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a shift in academic production on the theme of African art history. The West African canon was built around figurative pieces from West Africa which were incorporated into South African pedagogy more comfortably and swiftly than the complex terrain presented by South African art history. Reflecting in an interview on her own art education through the University of South Africa in the 1970s, former SANG director Marilyn Martin (1990 - 2008) recounted: “the UNISA degree was *superb*. It was devoid of anything South African but not of Africa because Walter Battiss was there: we did rock art with Walter Battiss – there was another man Hilary Graham at UNISA and we did some sculpture from West Africa so it was this weird thing that there was no South African art in the syllabus but there was this other stuff” (Marilyn Martin, interview, 2019). The violence of this epistemic erasure marks the field of South African art history to the present.

In fact, in Martin’s (2019: 71) own book about the history of ISANG, she recounts how former director Matthys Bokhorst made a consistent case for art history to be formally taught at a tertiary level in various South African universities. His compulsion stemmed from the perceived need for correctly educated museum staff. Some sixty years later Martin (2019: 71) remarked in her book about the ISANG’s history that “[u]nfortunately the teaching of art history - as Bokhorst, his

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<sup>38</sup> Many pieces in Meneghelli’s collection ended up in the Wits Standard Bank collection in the late 2000s, and his focus on the conversation between the past and the present seemed to influence both the scholarship and the exhibition history of the Wits art museum (see “Transforming Modernities”, 2007). Guenther’s collection on the other hand was modelled on the classic African Art canon, as it has been established through prominent Western institutions.

predecessors and some of his successors understood the subject, and the concomitant value that it has for professional museum staff - has lost some of its importance and is increasingly threatened by disinterest and retooling of the discipline under the rubrics of 'visual studies' and 'decolonisation' of curricula". Martin draws a line of continuity between Bokhorst, his predecessors and *some* successors (in which category she herself is implied) via a shared commitment to the discipline of art history that she perceives to be threatened by terms like "visual studies" and "decolonisation". While she is critical of the racial exclusion practiced in the ISANG in the apartheid years at the level of acquisitions (chapters 2 and 3 in her book *Between Dreams and Realities*, 2019), Martin presents a legacy of intellectual continuity in this statement about art history and its fading relevance. This statement is indicative of the anxiety pointed out in previous chapters, which haunts the ISANG archives, around the fragility of cultural authority as it emanates from the museum. At stake in the policing of the disciplinary borders of art history, and the panic of the dissolution of borders, is the knowledge capital in circulation.

Martin, Carol Kaufmann (curator of African art at the ISANG from the late 1980s – 2016), and advisors like Karel Nel (South African curator and artist),<sup>39</sup> who would go on to shape the ISANG and its engagement with African art profoundly in the late 1980s and 2000s, all referenced the same circle of African art dealers and gallerists as strong influences in their professional interests and tastes. Their insights shared in interviews, were very helpful to gain a picture of the African art trade and its intersections with South African art institutions. Kaufmann (interview, 2020) reflected on the influence of this social circle in Johannesburg in the 1960s and 1970s:

"I grew up in a family that collected art, loved art, studied art and I went to all the big shows in Johannesburg of Cecil Skotnes and the black modernists and my parents' milieu. They all collected art and they competed against each other and some of them were big Johannesburg art dealers: Meneghelli and Guenther. When I was little my father, because of his work – I went to lectures and events with Phillip Tobias – he was a friend of my father, and we went to Sterkfontein so right from childhood I was exposed to early anthropology and archaeology and stuff, so I was always – it was in my fabric you know?"

An early interest in archaeology became Kaufmann's disciplinary entry point into the field of African art history. The disciplines of archaeology and art history in South Africa were strongly shaped by

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<sup>39</sup> Nel (interview, 2019) observed in an interview that the African art collectors' circles described by Girshick provided his entry point into this field as an artist, scholar, and collector of African art: "As a young boy I went to visit [Egon Guenther's] collection many times and he taught me much of what I knew early on about African art, so at least I was seeing real things. Not what was appearing in curio stores. Later I met Vitorino Meneghelli, and he was Italian, and he was passionate about African art – but not classical art".

both amateurs and professionals from the white population who would formulate their ideas within “universal western schemes of knowledge” and created knowledge *about* Africans and not *with* Africans (Shepherd, 2015). As explored through the example of Rock art, the knowledge politics of these disciplines were animated by the complex impulses of settler colonial society. Further describing the roots of her passion for African artefacts, Kaufmann narrated some of her own family history in the Congo, where her (Belgian) maternal grandfather served as an engineer under Belgian colonial rule. She recalled how her French mother and aunt were driven down from (then) Elizabethville to the University of Cape Town in a Citroen “with all their belongings in leather suitcases and wearing a leopard skin cape [and] leopard skin pillbox hat” (Kaufmann, interview, 2019). While in the Congo, her grandfather had started a collection of African art, which was inherited by her mother and eventually bequeathed to a museum in Canada by Kaufmann and her siblings. This story hints at the extent to which the trade of African art was historically organised through what Azoulay (2019) has referred to as a differential allocation of rights and an imperial modality of art. This differential allocation violently determined the limits of mobility, ownership, and freedom.

There is a contradiction that must be noted in the enthusiastic ‘Afrophiliac’ disposition which sits together with an indifference (at best) or at least silence towards the actual struggles of the very communities who have produced the objects of fascination<sup>40</sup>. The character Father Huisman in VS Naipaul’s 1979 novel *A Bend in the River* presents a compelling interpretation of this contradiction. Father Huisman is a (well liked) Dutch missionary in an unnamed Central African town (at a bend in the river), who collects masks and artefacts from the local villages along the river. His collection, housed in a small and musty gun-storage shed in the town, draws ambiguous but intrigued responses from the local town inhabitants, including the novel’s protagonist Salim (a shopkeeper of Indian origin who moved to the town on the bend in the river from the East Coast of Africa).

Following one of Father Huisman’s collection expeditions along the river, he disappears. Shortly thereafter his dismembered body is discovered floating on a canoe, and he is presumed to have been murdered by people in one of the villages. After his death, which is mourned by the townspeople, perspectives about his collection begin to change: “[w]hile he lived, Father Huisman, collecting the things of Africa, had been thought a friend of Africa. But now that changed. It was felt that the collection was an affront to African religion, and no one at the lycée took it over. Perhaps there was no one there with the knowledge and the eye that were required” (Naipaul, 1979: 94-95). The idea that

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<sup>40</sup> As an example of this, Kaufmann explained that the insights offered by the historical book by Adam Hochschild ‘King Leopold’s Ghosts’ about the depth and breadth of the organized colonial violence against and genocide of Congolese people in the Belgian Congo, came as a shock to her family who had lived in the Congo during the time of many atrocities committed by Belgian colonial rule (interview, 2019).

the objects were held within a certain system of meaning and value through a particular gaze (the eye), speaks to the ocular-centrism of the imperial modality of art.

After Huisman's death, "the masks began to deteriorate and the smell became more unpleasant" (Naipaul, 1979: 95). It is as though Huisman had held these objects in an epistemic frame, through his conviction, and without the presence or remaking of this gaze and its attendant modes of care, the objects appeared as hostages, captured in a space that ensured their deterioration. For Azoulay (in Fletcher, 2019: 284), "[s]patially, both museums and archives institute a 'differential allocation' of access and rights to communities from whom cultural artefacts and resources were historically looted or appropriated; a 'structural division of roles and positions' that is 'constantly, globally reproduced [...] in the present'". These institutions temporally disavow the perpetuation of imperial violence by placing it in the past, treating time itself as something that can be objectively viewed and ordered (Jasanhoff, 2013; Foucault, 1986; Clifford, 1988, 2002). Experts and scholars unwittingly reinforce (through performative gestures) the differential status imposed by imperial forms of order. This can be read in relation to who creates archives in the first place, who is granted access to an archive, what kind of institutional affiliation and paper-trail is expected as a guarantor of rights.

In the case of Father Huisman and his collection of masks, the disinvestment in the imperial mode of apprehension rendered the extracted objects unmoored – without an appropriate epistemic home. No longer representations of a timeless Africa, they were objects belonging to living communities, now disused and rotting. The musty gun storeroom in which they were once observed and cherished by Huisman became a prison (recalling Sarr and Savoy's analysis of museums as carceral spaces, 2018). Salim described how over time the town received more and more visitors from different countries who took interest in the collection and began to pillage it. Finally, the bulk of it was shipped off by steamer by a young American: "who was more ready to put on African clothes and dance African dances?", who took the collection of masks which would become "the nucleus of the gallery of primitive art he often spoke of starting" (Naipaul, 1979: 95). The story reads as an allegory for the ethnographic museum, as it makes evident the performative work involved in the collection and framing of something like 'African art' and its historical enmeshment with both ethnography and the concept of the museum. It also hints at the violence embedded in unrecorded stories of object extraction, and the intergenerational work of maintaining and remaking epistemic frameworks. In Naipaul's story, once extracted from the villages the masks could not simply be returned. They accumulated new meanings in their very extraction, some of which were irreversible.

## West African artworks enter an apartheid cultural institution (1967)

As the apartheid regime of the 1960s and 1970s continued to weave the logic of separate development into all aspects of life in South Africa, race-based colonial era separations between material culture and art, and between ethnography and traditional African Art, were maintained in art institutions. Art historian Elizabeth Rankin (1995) argued that in the 1960s and 1970s the scarcity of examples of public collections acquiring work by African artists or of African art was contrasted by the commercial success of quite a few black South African artists (Sydney Kumalo and Gerard Sekoto in particular). Examples of public institutions making exceptions to their implicit policies of racial exclusion<sup>41</sup> could be traced to particular individuals. These included curators such as Bruce Arnott at the SANG, anthropologist EJ de Jager at the University of Fort Hare, and Albert Werth, the director of the Pretoria Art Museum (whose doctorate of 1972 explored the influence of ‘primitivism’ in the visual arts and who made purchases and hosted exhibitions of African art from 1968).

While there is evidence of the West African pieces as anomalous, inclusions into the SANG,<sup>42</sup> their accession in 1967 should also be read in the context of the growing international pressure through the cultural boycotts against the apartheid regime. The SANG was anxious to maintain international standing amongst its institutional peers in the Global North and began to incorporate ideas of ‘internationalisation’ which would broaden its acquisitional scope beyond a predominance of European and white South African visual traditions. Director at the time Matthys Bokhorst (1962-1973) released the following policy statement in 1971: “the last decade has seen an ever-growing number of works by contemporary African artists added to the collection. A few years ago, the Board of Trustees accepted the consequences thereof, thereby giving the green light for collecting traditional African Sculpture, which in the past, had almost solely been the domain of ethnographic museums” (SANG Annual Report, 1971). As such, the institution perceived advantages to extending its reach beyond a narrowly cast settler visual culture. This would make way for the re-orientation that the SANG would take in the late apartheid era towards the care and salvage of the very traditional African cultures that it had long ignored.

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<sup>41</sup> During Bokhorst’s tenure, the notion of quality was to stand in as a mechanism to justify exclusion on racial terms. The SANG board member Neville Du Bow reflected in an interview by Emma Bedford and Jane Taylor in 1996, on how business was conducted in the 1970s: “there was general consensus among most of the members of the Board about what was good taste and what was not and I think that there were hierarchies of values which were generally not challenged”.

<sup>42</sup> Having completed an undergraduate degree at Michaelis in the 1960, which was still under the conservative spell of Roworth, Arnott completed a master’s degree at the Courtauld institute in the United Kingdom in the 1960s. It is certain that the curriculum at Michaelis included no reference to art in Africa. In Arnott’s words “[a]s a result of my studies in Europe I was attuned to African sculpture, my guiding interests being aesthetics and art history”.

In terms of the West African works, the exhibition record suggests that no publicised exhibitions directly followed the entry of these pieces into the museum. The West African pieces are *likely* to have appeared in the Motifs from Africa (1976) exhibition that featured Cecil Skotnes, Walter Battiss, and Alexis Preller.<sup>43</sup> Martin's book indicates that some of Arnott's purchases (including the gold weights) appeared in a 1983 exhibition (without a catalogue), after the gallery hosted the Standard Bank Foundation Collection of Tribal Art in 1981. What might their reception, between the walls, have been like? What might have been the whisperings between Abe Bailey's British sporting paintings and the Baga dance mask? Or in the storerooms between the Greco-Roman cast male and female nudes (shipped from Britain under pressure from Rudyard Kipling and Cecil John Rhodes in 1910) and the Côte d'Ivoirian masks? Subsequent to their anomalous and quiet inclusion into the apartheid nation's foremost art institution in the late 1960s, was an episode in which their presence left more definitive and ambiguous archival traces.

In their reading of the historical record, Rankin (1995), Tietze (2017), Martin (2018), and Nettleton (2020) endorse the idea that Arnott was for particular reasons given leeway to pursue his own interests and tastes via these purchases. After Arnott's buying of traditional West African artworks, he continued to add to the African art collection. These additions included "a number of Rhodesian (sic) [Zimbabwean] stone sculptures and works by Sydney Kumalo and Michael Zondi, ceramics and tapestries from the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift were purchased, with additional works presented by the Centre, the Friends of the Gallery (founded in 1968) and artists such as Peter Clarke and Dumile Feni, who generously augmented acquisitions of their work" (Martin, 2019: 74). The next contributions to the Permanent African Art Collection happened in 1987 when two pieces of beadwork were purchased. This came to be a core buying focus for Martin when she took up the directorship 2 years later in 1989.

According to Martin (2018: 118), Bokhorst's successor director Raymund van Niekerk, had no interest in acquiring *historical* African art. However, during van Niekerk's tenure (1976-1989), a number of artworks by contemporary black South African artists were purchased. In particular, in the year 1987, "the following contemporary black artists entered the collection: Albert Adams, Tyrone Appollis, Sipho Hlati, Austin Hleza, Jackson Hlungwani (three sculptures), Ezrom Legae, Thami Jali, Sfiso Ka Mkame, David Koloane, Sydney Kumalo, Noria Mabasa, Richard Mabaso, Fikile Magadlela, Billy Mandindi, Johannes Maswanganyi, Titus Matiyane, Tommy Motswai, Bekhi Myeni, Roy Ndinisa, Tony Nkotsi, Lucas Seage, Johannes Segogela, Dr Phutuma Seoka, Sithembiso Sibisi

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<sup>43</sup> These three white artists, forging an 'African aesthetic' as discussed in detail by Nettleton and others, have gone on to become some of the highest selling South African artists on both the local and international art markets.

and Lucky Sibiya” (Martin, 2019: 95). Martin (2019: 95) recalled a direct recommendation from the acquisition committee to the board to purchase “transitional art”, a new category that sought to escape the complexity of recognising the inherent racism implicit in operational concepts of ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’. During van Niekerk’s directorship of over a decade, the inverse relation between the collection of contemporary black art and the collection of historical art is telling of the ideological complexity of temporalising art within a context of radical racial oppression.

### “The Young Ones”: Provenance and Authenticity in the PAA collection

In an interview, Marilyn Martin (interview, 2019) explained Arnott’s choices and motivations in his purchases of West African artworks, by way of introducing their compromised status as potential fakes:

“we didn’t have the finest examples of West African art in the collection, remember that Bruce Arnott – he didn’t have the kind of expert knowledge - he was a sculptor. He purchased the pieces because they were good sculptures – in a way like Picasso did. He didn’t care about the provenance or whether it was a good example or whether it was authentic or anything like that – he collected his hundred pieces of art because of how the work spoke to him and Bruce writes about how they spoke to him as sculpture. So, Karel [Nel] called some of them “the young ones”.

Debates about what constitutes authentic African art as opposed to tourist art or curios, and disputes in this category of art, are commonplace in scholarly and museum discourse. In congruence with Martin’s observation above, Picasso’s personal collection of African art objects was famously written off by art critic William Rubin as non-serious, inauthentic, and possibly fake (made for the market) in 2007. Forni and Steiner (2013: 13) explain the problem with authenticity in African art in their frequently quoted argument: “[a]uthenticity in African art is often predicated on negating the concept of that of the economic value of art production and art marketing. Objects that were created for consumption or export are summarily dismissed as inauthentic because any affiliation with a market economy is seen as a threat to the collector’s fragile notion of an art created purely for ritual or religious purpose”.

Contemporary scholarship on historical African art is acutely aware of the fragility of the notion of the authentic (as argued by Larry Shiner, 1994), but despite rigorous academic critique, as Rishad Majeed (2019: 5) argues, “[t]he market critically sustains this definition of authenticity” and indeed, “commodification of the authentic object is, with few exceptions, not adequately integrated into the reception histories of African art”. Two points require elaboration here: first, how authenticity is

understood in relation to African art in a differentiated way. Second, why and to whom this differentiation is useful at different political moments. The very concept of authenticity is for both Walter Benjamin and Anthony Appiah, intertwined with the fact of mass reproduction. Appiah (1991) observes that since its instantiation, the category of 'African art' is enmeshed with a market logic: a logic which creates a bridge between imperial powers that defined a universal notion of 'art' in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the neo-liberal post-colonial present. Appiah's argument does not suggest that the consequences of this economization of social and cultural life has only affected the circulation and global lives of African art, instead that it is this category that carries the burden of shrugging of the history of commodification, enmeshed as it is with extractive forms of colonialism and modernity.

Consider Walter Benjamin's very similar observations about Western art. In his famous thesis on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, he argues that the core notion of authenticity and originality that undergird Western art, are upon closer inspection reliant on the practice of reproduction and trade. Benjamin (1935: 20) argues that: "[p]recisely because authenticity is not reproducible, the intensive penetration of certain (mechanical) processes of reproduction was instrumental in differentiating and grading authenticity. To develop such differentiations was an important function of the trade in works of art [...] To be sure, at the time of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not yet be said to be 'authentic'. It became 'authentic' only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one".

In the post-industrial age then, a global concept of art proliferates and can retrospectively designate objects that were never made as art, with the status of art. There are contradictory requirements for African art to be authentic in different ways from Western art, which enables an association with constructed notions of 'mysticism', 'tradition', and 'magic'. Appiah (1991: 356) argues that within the working conception of art (as aesthetic appreciation), "[a]n ideology of disinterested aesthetic value (the baptism of Negro art as Aesthetic) meshes with the international commodification of African expressive culture, a commodification that requires (by the logic of the space clearing gesture) the manufacture of Otherness". The requirement to have validation of authenticity through professional expertise is beneficial to those occupying seats of power in this discursive field (art dealers, curators, scholars), as the system enables the validation of certain kinds of knowledge about objects over others.

Anxieties about authenticity in the ISANG's European art collection are abundant in the archive. One such example already emerged during Edward Roworth's tenure during which time he sold off many of the pieces of art from the Randlords that had questionable attribution to the scandal of many. A critical difference though in the negotiation of authenticity in the European and African collections is

the character of the expert. At the heart of the very discipline of art history is the figure of the connoisseur, the expert, whose particular skill is visual analysis, and whose judgments can be the final word in valorising or dismissing works of art. Within the context of colonial South Africa, the circulation and exhibition of European art was already taking place outside of the imperial epistemic centre. The colonial anxieties about cultural belonging manifest in panics about the authenticity of an old master, or the potential humiliation presented by the fake master. The story of the Michaelis collection footnoted in chapter 2 is worth remembering here. In the case of African art in the ISANG collection, the apartheid context must be considered when we ask - who were the institutionally validated experts on African art?

Besides the validation from the art expert, the other validating mechanisms within the trade of African art, is the notion of provenance. As Petridis (2020: 17) observes “a Western collection history is usually the only primary information associated with an African work of art” and these records rarely reveal the original maker or owner, and in fact typically they “[do] not even confirm an object’s place of origin in Africa and consequently [have] extremely limited potential to help determine an artwork’s rightful owner, whether individual or collective”. This observation is consistent with literature<sup>44</sup> that observes the paradoxical foundations of the historical African art canon, captured by Forni and Steiner’s (2015: 30) observation that “objects become more valuable and “authentic” the further they are removed geographically, historically and conceptually from the human interactions in Africa that determined their creation, appreciation and circulation”.

This paradox has pointed to the shadow of imperial power relations that still operate in the creation of knowledge about traditional African art, the accordance of value to African art and the influence of the politics of valuation on its consumption and production. Provenance relies on tracking objects within a certain sphere of exchange, in which identity becomes significant. And ironically in this system, the only confirmed identities are the (mostly) non-African purchasers and owners. This points to the stakes surrounding African art objects: histories of commodification which connect the practice of slavery and indentured labour with the commodification and trade of objects – first framed from a Western perspective within ethnographic ways of knowing and then reframed as art. It is no coincidence that the stringent requirements for documentation accompanying African art objects are for the most part almost impossible to meet. Provenance can be a way of wiping clean an historical record, only acknowledging certain forms of documentation (paper trails) as valuable and thus de-historicising art from the African continent or at least muting its capacity to speak in its own terms.

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<sup>44</sup> Scholars like Olu Ogbechie (2011), and Silvia Forni and Christopher Steiner (2015) have explored some of the contradictions evident in the idea of provenance in African art.

## Authenticity as Performance (1981)

A document in the ISANG archives from the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) Department of Art History, written in 1981 by Anitra Nettleton and addressed to Ms Lucy Alexander at the SANG, lists 16 pieces from the African art bought by Arnott. It is not clear who initiated the inquiry. The primary rationale, however, was to understand whether they should or should not be exhibited, and if they were exhibited, what kind of information should accompany them. In the document, Nettleton refers to several pieces that Arnott bought from the Cape Town Gallery International, along with italicized comments: 'Kifwebe figure', 'figure' from Mali (which "*shows an iconography unthinkable to a Dogon*"); Dogon 'ladder'; Senufo mask; Dogon Ancestor figure ("*unlike anything ever seen in the literature or European museums*"); Baule figures ("*they didn't use bronze at all for figures of this type in Akan art generally*").

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Enquiries Wan

Date 8 August 1985

Ms Lucy Alexander  
South African National Gallery  
P O Box 2420  
8000 Cape Town.

Dear Lucy

Sandra asked me to reply to your queries about the "authenticity" of the African art in the S.A. N.G. collection. I would suggest that some pieces are highly suspect and I do not think that you ought to show them:

"Kifwebe figure" 83/43

"Figure" from Mali 71/9 - this shows an iconography unthinkable to a Dogon (etc) - i.e. a female figure wearing a mask.

Dogon "Ladder" 71/56 - The Dogon do make ladders, but I have never seen a genuine one that looked so much like Paolozzi!

Senufo Mask 70/36 - Fianello is right!

Dogon Ancestor Figure 84/13 - Unlike anything ever seen in the literature or European Museums.

Baulé Figures 70/40 - They didn't use bronze at all for figures of this type in Akan art generally, including Baulé.

Of the others I would suggest that the following pieces be displayed with a note that they are probably of recent manufacture but they do display traditional stylistic characteristics.

1. The Baga Mask 70/102 - there are only a very few old pieces in the world.
2. The Kifwebe Mask 70/100 - not made in Europe, but it is recent.
3. The Tji-wara (Bambara) 70/34 as above.
4. The Bambara Merekum 70/103 - a marionette not a mask - exact function not known. The older ones do not appear to have used attached shiny brass coverings.
5. Bakongo Nail fetish 83/42 - is suspect, particularly in the treatment of the head, the darkness of the wood and the kind of patina.

Fig 20. Facsimile sent from Wits to ISANG in 1985 (Page 1), (source: scanned by the author from the ISANG Archives)

6. Senufo bird 71/54 - I think Fianello is talking rubbish. There are older examples in Western collections - see Goldwater, R. Senufo Sculpture from West Africa. Nevertheless this one is probably a more recent example.
7. Dogon mask 70/38 - This piece looks genuine in style, but from the slide singularly unused.

I do not have a real problem with the Kurmba mask 69/54 - they are found in the most impeccable European collections. See the Rietberg Museum in Zurich (Leuzinger, E.)

The Yoruba Gelede mask 70/16 is fine - there is no problem there - follow Sandra.

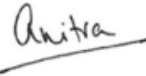
The Yoruba Staff head 70/15 is like some I have seen in Europe - certainly Fianello made a fool of himself as he didn't suss out the medium.

The Bamileke figure 70/14 I can see no problem - I do not know why it should be "worn" - the figures were not "handled" in a way that would cause such "wear"!

I would not question the authenticity of any of the goldweights.

I hope that this helps you in sorting it all out.

Regards



Anitra

*Fig 21. Facsimile sent from Wits to ISANG in 1985 (Page 2), (source: scanned by the author from the ISANG Archives)*

There was no discussion about the nature of the place where Arnott purchased the works, and their possible trajectory from their place of creation to the place of purchase – it seems that this was taken as a given and perhaps even served as the source of the inquiry. As a consequence, the nature of the investigation was visual analysis. The authenticity investigation of the West African pieces suggests that the network of experts and professionals in the established South African art scene did not expect

use of the objects in their 'original contexts'. There are other important visual and network-based attributes that form the crux of the evaluation. For example, European institutional collections of African art presented authoritative indicators of what belonged in the African Art canon and what styles were considered important.<sup>45</sup> The substance of many of the Wits letters was about visual signs of age and recognised visual characteristics ascribed to particular styles in the physical objects themselves (as opposed to related information or records about the objects histories). Consider the following excerpt from the text: "The Baga Mask (see figure 5); Kifwebe Mask (*not made in Europe but it is recent*); Tji-wara (Bambara); the Bambara Merekum; Bakongo Nail fetish (*is suspect, particularly in the treatment of the head, the darkness of the wood and the kind of patina*)".

5. Bakongo Nail fetish 83/42 - is suspect, particularly in the treatment of the head, the darkness of the wood and the kind of patina.

Fig 22. (Detail) Facsimile sent from Wits to ISANG in 1985, (source: scanned by the author from the ISANG Archives)

A circular logic is produced, as those in the academy and under the tutelage of influential voices, have their ability to see the real thing validated. Nomusa Makhubu reflects on how terms like 'fetish', 'magic' and 'custom' have been used to "construct the cultural otherness" of African art and to further distance African art from Europe and taxonomically connect it with the Pacific Islands and Native America (Makhubu, 2017: 10). As Makhubu suggests, however, there is an internal contradiction in this assertion. Who exactly is performing magic in this capitalist and imperial context of the art institution? Marx's observation of "the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities" (Marx and Engels [1977] in Makhubu, 2016: 19) is congruent with Appiah's suggestion that commodification is not necessarily a rational process but rather one that is accompanied by its own performative logics. At stake in identifying authenticity within the museum context, is a recreation of the boundaries of cultural authority.<sup>46</sup> What happens when the commodification of this artform is acknowledged and taken seriously, is that a different network of agents – sculptors, dealers, and traders – gain prominence and legitimacy in a world

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<sup>45</sup> Another example of this in the text is mentioned in a third list of works that include: Yoruba Gelede mask; Yoruba Staff head; Bamikele figure; gold weights as well as the 'Kurmba mask' which Nettleton (ref) explains are "found in the most impeccable European collections". What is clear here is that key in the network of references used for the project of authentication are a network of expert individuals (Fianello, Klopfer) whose opinions have weighed into this discussion.

ordered by curators, academics, and directors. Azoulay (2019) argues that there is a connection between the extraction of African art objects and their required papers of authenticity and the control of African mobility via papers and identity documents. Commenting on the trade of African art before the end of apartheid in South Africa, writer, thinker, and *Chimurenga*<sup>47</sup> editor Ntone Edjabe (interview, 2020) speculated:

“[t]here were no networks, there were no Africans travelling to South Africa officially for the majority of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was illegal for us to be here, so the kind of negotiations you had to get into to obtain these (historical art) objects, made them precious. Maybe authenticity is a kind of another assignment to have read them, with our increased presence here they were not”.

By “our increased presence”, Edjabe refers to his identity as an African, which is significant in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. It is significant because of the complexity of the concept of Africans as foreigners in South Africa, who are often referred to as ‘foreign nationals’. Edjabe refers to the strict and violent borders that policed movement across South Africa’s borders, which intensified through the apartheid regime. Azoulay’s point about differential rights at the heart of the imperial project may be recalled here, as well as Mamdani’s argument around the afterlives of tribal identities as ‘African’ in the South African context. Given the common lack of paperwork attached to African art objects, the logic of authenticity defaults to a secondary tier of knowledge creation and interpretation: the somewhat mystified visual skill based on experience which is inherited from other respected voices in the field. Visual stylistic attributes are the key to attribution and authenticity. This means that historically, research on canonised forms are often themselves arbitrary and reflect the personal tastes of wealthy Euro-American collectors such as Norman Rockefeller whose whims were foundational in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s African collection.

Drew Thompson (2023: unpaginated) reiterates the absurdity of idiosyncratic tastes of Western collectors constituting the ‘academic’ basis of what forms ‘traditional African art’ canons: “[a]s the Brooklyn Museum and Met examples show, many objects of African art that form the basis of US museum departments of African art came through private donations from wealthy patrons and not specific acquisitions made by curators, as is the case today. These donors were not trained academically and/or curatorially in this field of African art. Yet, to this day, the objects they donated to museums determine what gets studied and exhibited”. These canons in turn reaffirm the very rules by

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<sup>47</sup> “Chimurenga (“Struggle for Freedom”) is a Pan-African publication of culture, art, and politics based in Cape Town. It provides an innovative platform for free ideas and political reflection by Africans about Africa” (<https://contemporaryand.com/publication/chimurenga-magazine/>)

which copies can be made: the criteria for authenticity become the blueprint for the fake. As Majeed (2019: 5) observes: “(t)he fake takes its brief from the taste of the collector; it is a mirror of what we expect to see when we are looking at the “authentic” object”. A curious logic is revealed: a loose thread in the fabric. Forni, Steiner, Basu, and Ogbechie have conducted research projects aimed at surfacing the voices of the dealers and ‘middlemen’ who were traditionally ignored by art scholarship on traditional African art. The creative and aesthetic input of the network of individuals who actually create and bring these works to an established market in the development of certain trends in artistic production and the classification of certain styles is now recognized as the performance of a sophisticated form of inter-cultural dialogue – in which the projected desires of the foreign buyers to find a certain ‘Africa’ in the art they sought – was fed back through the production of faked ancient ‘authentic’ works. Edjabe (interview, 2020) reflects further on the economy of knowledge implicit in the search for authentic African art:

“it’s not only the reproduction of the object, the craft is about getting the object to match the desire and the fetish: the age, the ‘authenticity’. The real craftsmen and women are the people who can make the objects appear authentic. That is a specific technology: aging. There is a lot of knowledge in that. I grew up around these people [in Cameroon]. It takes a lot of learning and technology to give it that appearance because that is its commodity value. So, this is a trade that the traders know a lot about, they know a lot more than the collectors will ever know. They manipulate this economy – they are not victims”.

In this reading, the creation of authenticity is itself a performance that is reiterated in many moments and by various actors. The trade of historical African art is also the trade of narratives, as the myth of pure, precolonial Africa is a valued commodity. In his observations about the sellers of ‘traditional’ African art that he encountered in the 20 years he spent in Long Street at the Pan African market, Edjabe (interview, 2020) pointed out that:

“Some of the traders at the market for example will familiarize themselves with the knowledge that the buyer will have acquired. They will read the books and get a sense of what you know, so they know how to talk to you about what you know. You will not know what they know, they know a lot more. They must understand the knowledge base that you are working with so that they are able to say what will produce the verification that you have read in an art history book, for you to be reassured that yes: this is the real deal”.



Fig 23. Photograph of Moussa Karim's personal book collection in his African arts market stall, African Women's market, 203 Long Street, Cape Town (May 2020). (source: photograph by the author).

This subtext rarely appears in any official records, museum paperwork, or exhibition information. At stake in reiterating the expectations of authenticity as 'objects that had a non-art use' in the museum context, despite a distinct lack of concrete information that could possibly prove this, is the ability for the curator to perform the transformative gesture, to recognise unruly objects as art. This power is troubled if the objects are cast in an ambiguous light – to be known as a fake, to be revealed in its self-conscious creation as art, as “the young ones” may have been. Copies and fakes play an important role in providing examples of what the authentic object is not – whether in material or style, for collectors their creation reaffirms the value of the 'original'. Jiaying Tu (2021: 380) argues that “copies are therefore crucial for the maintenance of a system of value that continues to privilege the colonial invention of authenticity”. Their unwarranted presence in a museum, which by self-appointment distinguishes the 'real' from the 'fake', has a productive effect.

The connection between knowledge networks, value, and social privilege warrants a deeper study than this chapter allows. However, it is relevant to underscore the tight interdependence of academic

knowledge, market value, and museum validation. In her observation about the growth of historical African art collections in South African institutions in the 1980s and 1990s (such as Wits, UNISA, and ISANG), Nettleton (2020: 17) confirms: “many of the museums purchased directly from auction houses like Oldman, Sotheby’s, and Christie’s, as opposed to collections by museum staff ‘in the field’”. This close enmeshment is often taken as a given in the art world, and not raised to the surface as part of the publicly available story of art works and art collections. Instead, the problem of a shortage of money, and the struggle for state sponsored institutions to compete with private capital, is a narrative that vastly overshadows these interesting relationships (this theme is highly prevalent in Tietze, Martin, and Proud’s writing about the ISANG’s history).<sup>48</sup>

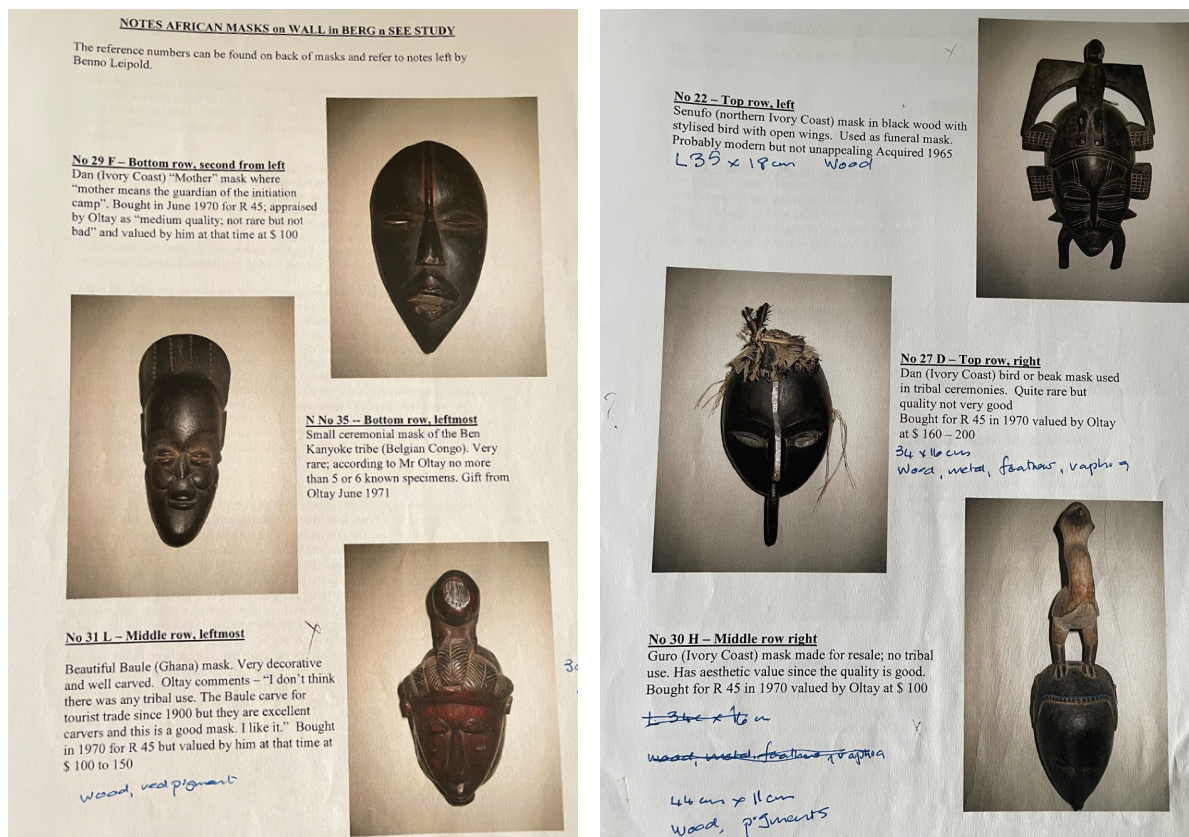


Fig 24 & 25. Documentation of the Benno Leipold Bequest, (source: scanned by the author from the ISANG archives, 2022).

<sup>48</sup> For example, when asked about the impetus to begin collecting African art, Marilyn Martin (interview, 2019) found the need to emphasise the issue of quality and authenticity, over any other aspect: “the work (the gallery) could afford was not of the best quality because the collection started so late [...] We started in the 1990s whereas Standard Bank had started in the 70s and that made a huge difference in terms of affordability”.

I would like to bookend this story about authenticity with the Leipold bequest of West African masks that the ISANG accepted in 2018. According to institutional records, “the collection was fully documented and was put together in the 1940s and 50s by Mr Leipold's father, the late Benno Leipold. Carol Kaufmann was impressed by the quality of the objects and their provenance. She strongly recommended the acceptance of the intended bequest, and this was also approved by the Iziko Art Collections Acquisitions Committee” (SANG archives, 2019). Most of the works are acknowledged as made for the market, but they are old, and they were given institutional approval.



Fig 26 & 27. Benno Leipold Bequest on display at the Hidden Treasures exhibition, ISANG 2021 (source: photographed by the author)

This example is used to illustrate the enduring practice of authentication as an activity that reaffirms certain knowledge networks and actors in the field over others, and that it is not a ‘neutral’ professional process. It also contains within it signs of the unacknowledged subtext of the complexity, messiness, and impossibility of this demand. An obvious problem demonstrated in this chapter is the prominence in these modes of archiving, buying, and ‘preserving’ history of the voices of the (white) elite. The articulation of these voices emerged through *encounters* which must be surfaced as a first step to dismantling existing hierarchies and imagining a museum and art ecosystem that is

undergirded by a less hierarchical and colonised relational infrastructure. As argued via Appiah, Benjamin, Mudimbe and Makhubu, the world that we have built and inherited reinstates the circulation and valuation of art as above all a commodity. This analysis opens the field to the potent question posed by the RAW Material Company (March 2022): “what if the value of art was based on its human and social impact rather than its value as a commodity? Fundamentally, can we imagine infrastructure that would be permeable to and informed by methodologies of artistic practice itself, in a reversal of today’s prevailing, dominant model?”

### Picasso in Africa: Unstable Binaries (2007)

Motivated by Ngwezu’s deconstructive analytic approach in her analysis of Susan Vogel and Arthur Danto’s exchange on African art, I examine in detail the catalogue essay co-written by Marilyn Martin and Lawrence Madeline about the exhibition. I examine these in relation to remarks made by Martin about the exhibition when I interviewed her. In light of the critiques that unsettle the comfortable (and distant) idea of historical African art as it is employed by the ISANG, this analysis aims to read between the logic presented by the institution, and ask whether there are openings to be spotted, in which ambiguous objects such as “the young ones” might present new ways of having themselves read. The exhibition consisted of a collection of Picasso’s works “which contain and communicate those moments when Picasso surrendered his talent to the characteristics of classical African art” (Madeline, 2006:17) as well as examples of original African works that may have been part of his private collection. Picasso’s own sketches, paintings, and sculptures are all originals while the African counterparts have been “sourced from South African collectors” (Madeline, 2006:17).

Not unusually, the African works that acted as inspiration for the artist, were easily interchangeable with replicas while the sanctity of the European component was protected by the presentation of the original works. In a deconstructive reading, the authority invested in the concept of the original points to the privilege of presence that characterizes a logocentric world view. In this exhibition, originals (Picasso’s works) and copies (objects *like* Picasso’s collection) of original fakes (consider Rubin’s assertion that Picasso’s African art collection was indeed fake) cohabited the museum. Martin (interview, 2019) explains: “I knew what we were looking for because I knew what Picasso was looking at – we couldn’t find those white Fang masks – so we did our best with what we could find. And we borrowed a very fine sculpture – Bambara – from Karel Nel”. Conceptually this is an intriguing dimension, treated ambiguously in the catalogue itself. A distinction is made in the catalogue essay between found objects and art objects, in relation to Picasso’s work and his collection of African work. Madeline describes Picasso’s contribution to the Cubist practice of bricolage or making work with ‘found objects’. He explains this process as “examples of fragments, everyday

scrap, being raised to the level of a timeless work of art” (Madeline, 2006:25). In this reading, the found objects used by Picasso are invested with meaning through the art-making process (or presence of intention) and thus become made ‘art’ objects. What remains questionable is whether the African works exhibited are treated as found objects or art objects.

The Picasso in Africa catalogue text also highlights some of the tensions around mobility and imagined geographies that emerged in the discussion around the fabrication of authenticity earlier. The opening paragraph quotes Picasso’s infamous remark “‘African art?’ Never heard of it!” (Madeline, 2006:19). The text at once establishes an understanding of Africa as a European construction and at the same time includes the suggestion of an alternative understanding. The essay begins by describing the relation between Picasso and Africa as predominantly fictitious. The title of the essay is a reference to the French writer Raymond Roussel’s poem “Impressions of Africa” (1983). A quote by the writer precedes the essay: “I have never put anything from any of my travels into my books. I thought this needed to be pointed out because it so clearly shows that for me imagination is everything” (Madeline, 2006:19). The well-known fact that Picasso never visited Africa himself attests to the notion that the Africa described and presented both in the catalogue and the exhibition is a distinctly European invention. What remains unclear is whether the concept of Africa allows itself to be completely appropriated and assimilated into a hierarchical relation with Europe or whether the very attempt to suppress its alterity undermines the hierarchy.

There are moments in which the text betrays an uncertainty in the distinction between Picasso and Africa. Madeline (2006: 23) explains the way in which Picasso appropriated foreign styles during his different ‘periods’ of production. Picasso “appears, in the first instance, to be taking as his own a certain formal stylistic vocabulary, and then in a second stage, to be using it even to the point of plagiarism in order to see how far he can be African himself. Once the crime of plagiarism is committed, the experiment taken to its most radical extreme, Picasso was able to free himself from the influence and become Picasso again” (Madeline 2006: 23). The possibility of becoming the other presupposes the distinction between self and other. Picasso “can be an African himself”, because there already is a self that can “become Picasso again” after the imitation ends. But an imitation must be imperfect to be an imitation, a perfect plagiarism no longer pretends to be what it is not, but it simply is something else. Picasso therefore cannot become an African without not being himself. This reversal undermines the possibility of a clear distinction between the two.

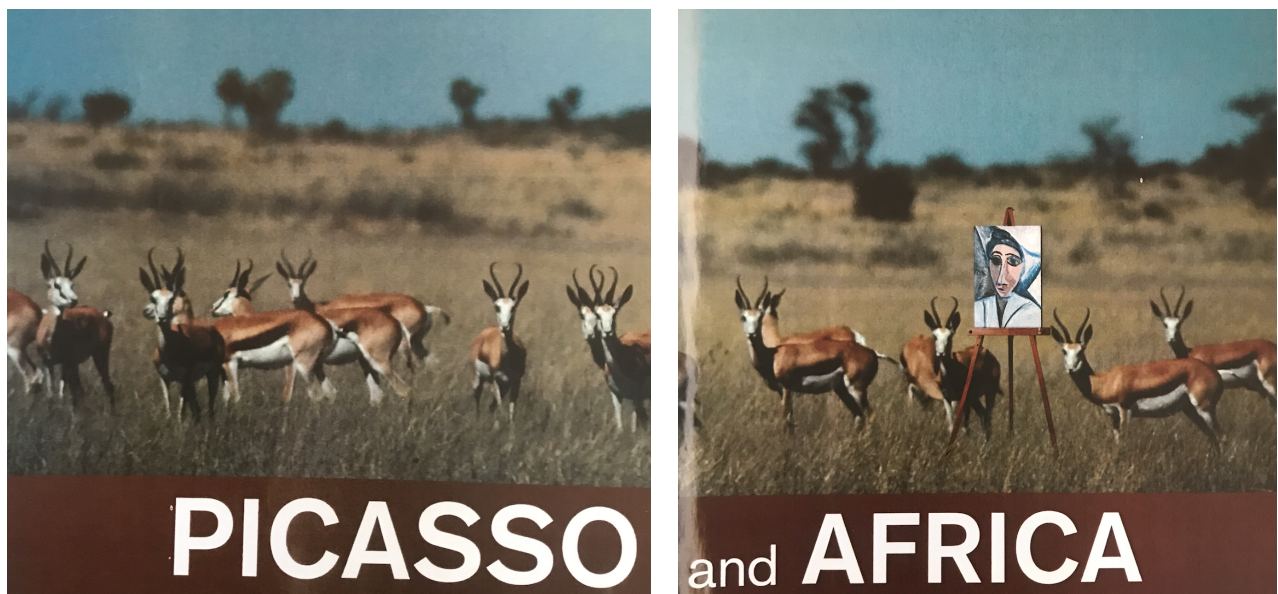


Fig 28. Advertisement for the 'Picasso in Africa' exhibition, sponsored in part by Standard Bank, (source: ISANG archives)

The exhibition was organized around the aim of creating a “dialogue between the African continent and the artist whose work encompasses more of the art of the previous century than any other” (Madeline, 2006:17). However, it becomes clear that the Africa contained within the relation that structures this project cannot speak for itself upon ‘equal grounds’. This is reflected both by its assimilation into an hierarchical order within the text, as well as its subordinated position outside of the text. However, it is exactly in the attempt to close the relation between Picasso and Africa through the project Madeline partakes in, that the concept of Africa resists complete interpretation and representation. The conflict between Picasso’s Africa and an Africa that exists outside of the relation is never resolved. This indicates that the apparently oppositional relation between Picasso and Africa is not stable and determinate. It is never quite clear which has been constructed and thus authorized by the other. This is the legacy of unruliness that the West African pieces leave for the researcher of tomorrow, a promise of a future not yet foreclosed.

### Potential beyond Authenticity

Da Silva and Bradley (2020: 3) theorise about “seriality and deformation not as formal deviations from the major paradigms of modernist art, but as aesthetic practices which enact the decomposition of the art historical canon, and of canonicity as such”. My understanding of this idea is that lodged in the very basis of notions of originality, innovation, creativity, and artistry that the art world tries to present as neutral and universal, is the suppression of oppositional ideas. They go on to explain that “[s]uch decomposition is achieved not by a method of subversion, but by the accumulation of surreptitious re(turns), which gather ruinously beneath the sign of the authoritative artwork” (Bradley and da Silva, 2021: 3). In this process, the autonomous artwork is exposed as nothing more than “a contaminated assemblage of citations and de/formations” (Bradley and da Silva, 2021: 3). The

subversion of the dominant narrative and practice of canonisation cannot be achieved by a gesture within the rules of art, instead it is the acknowledgement of these alternate forms of making, creating, and being that can be acknowledged as already present.

I suggest that in the Picasso in Africa exhibition, African art objects were treated both as found objects which carry meaning only once they have been ‘raised’ up out of obscurity by the Western tradition, and at the same time they are presented as autonomous art objects, the meanings of which are perhaps inaccessible to Western frameworks of understanding. These two seemingly irreconcilable positions characterize the way in which Africa is represented throughout the catalogue text and the exhibition. There is an epistemic instability in this curatorial project that uses key concepts in art historical language to contain and explain the Picasso and Africa story. I suggest that the presence of these unruly objects is the source of this instability. Consider an observation from Martin (interview, 2019) in the context of explaining the exhibition:

“And just to get back to the so-called authenticity – you know it’s such a funny word – what is authentic and what is not? So Karel called many of the works that Bruce collected – he calls them the young ones because they were maybe made for the tourist market and not for the ... but that’s neither here nor there – but the young ones could come out of the annex for Picasso! The masks and the sculptures – they were in the annex for the project that Sandra Eastwood ran for the blind and people could touch them and that’s such an important part of the history of the institution from the 70s.”

When the rules of art are broken as part of a curatorial decision, the very subversion is acknowledged as an important and valuable statement. Perhaps more revealing however, are moments when the rules are quietly glossed over, bent, or softened. I believe that the anxiety around “the young ones”, and their correct institutional and historical place presents such a moment. “The young ones” were pulled out of the annex for Picasso in Africa, where they had been living somewhat more active lives than some of their fellow African art objects gathering dust in the basement since Arnott had purchased them. Evidently, since the late 1970s “the young ones” played an important role as objects of care, physical engagement, and learning through the education department at the ISANG. Their audience in the annex, as well as their epistemic framing, was quite contrasted to the way they were expected to behave in the museum. The SANG’s education department, which was headed by Emile Maurice in the 1990s, engaged extensively with local schools and particularly parts of the Cape Town population that were intentionally marginalised by apartheid policies. This itself posed a compelling counterpoint to the more circumscribed lifeworld of the museum in its engagement with schools. Emile Maurice came up in many interviews and conversations, but there is not very much written about him in either

of the substantial histories of ISANG. It is significant however that he was one of the first black employees of the ISANG. He was known as “an artist, curator, author, educator and Nation builder. Maurice's work within arts, history and heritage almost always had a social aspect, investigating poverty, peace building and communal space. His primary research interest pertained to the rewriting of South African cultural history with a view to greater equity and representation in the context of colonial and apartheid marginalisation” (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/emile-maurice>).

The lives of “the young ones” in the annex were not governed by protocols of ‘look don’t touch’, plinths, lighting, wall texts, and other alienating display mechanisms. This part of their object lives recalls Molemo Moilola’s argument for the decentralisation of the object as a way of rethinking the museum in Africa, and the perversity of care for objects over care for people (Moilola, 2020: 358). She references Yesomi Umolu’s concern about the museum’s “historical care of the object taking precedence (sometimes violently) over care for the humans from whom these objects emanate – a colonial and capitalist inheritance of value for things over people, particularly people of colour” (Moilola, 2020: 358). As potential fakes, there are important subversive qualities in “the young ones” that the carefully controlled space of the museum does its best to repress: their seriality counters the idea of uniqueness and originality intrinsic in the imperial modality of art. Implicitly coded cross-cultural and cross-generational conversations about desire, fetish, and possession may speak up against the voices of museum experts who have decided the geographies and cultures that these objects represent. Ambivalent origins refute politicised discourses of collective heritage. These qualities represent counter-narratives that expose modes of cultural production, exchange, ways of knowing and ways of organizing space that are not easily contained by the formal projects of imperialism, apartheid, and postapartheid nation-making.

## Chapter 5

### Custodianship and Dispossession: Buying and exhibiting beadwork at the ISANG (1983 - 1994)

This chapter attends to the details around the acquisition of two sub-collections of beadwork in the ISANG's African art collection, acquired from communities in the Eastern Cape and Northern Mpumalanga, to show that the objects reveal much more than their limited archival footprint suggests. One significant sub-collection of beadwork, recorded as Mfengu, was purchased between 1983 - 2003. Many pieces in this collection were displayed in an exhibition called Ezakwantu: Beadwork from the Eastern Cape (1993). The bulk of the ISANG's large collection of beadwork recorded as Ndebele was primarily purchased in the early 1980s, many of these pieces appeared in an exhibition called the Igugu IamaNdebele: Pride of the Ndebele (1994). In this chapter, I present analyses of interviews with two art dealers who purchased and sold many objects in these sub-collections to the ISANG. A reading of the object that is not separated from its journey into the museum shows that collection is not a neutral process. This is a reading that works against what Yesomi Umolu calls the "fiction of the emancipatory power of the cultural/art object" which allows museums to pose as "spaces of respite away from real politics and social injustices" (2020).

These collection histories place in question the ethics of ownership and stewardship in the historical context of South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period marked by enormous social and political upheaval and violence. The timing of this amassment in conjunction with the disintegration of the apartheid and homelands systems in some ways echoed the "scramble for African art"<sup>49</sup> in central Africa around the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which Azoulay (2019) and Monroe (2019) have read as the simultaneous collection of things and dissolution of life worlds. Coined by James Clifford and discussed in previous chapters, the paradox of the salvage complex is that the same rubric of 'advancement' justifies the claim to be able to 'protect', 'preserve', and 'appreciate' cultural artefacts and simultaneously laments the loss and cultural dissolution which this advancement precipitates. It is here that the question of care arises: how is cultural material cared for by an institution, and what are the implied judgments of the museum as the authority on care and how does this influence its publics?

In the case of the beadwork collections at the ISANG, the pursuit of the authentic, rare cultural object and the implied vulnerability of cultural material to change, appear as the primary justifications for the

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<sup>49</sup> In the much-quoted anthology edited by Schildkrout and Keim called *The Scramble for African Art*, the contributors present various ethnographies of art and object buying from West Africa towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that happened at the height of the Belgian King's regime of colonial violence. Wyatt McGaffey and Johannes Fabian (1998) connect these parallel events and problematize the history of collecting as rooted in a colonial political economy of extraction.

accumulation of material, both from the perspective of the collectors and the museums. I argue that the logics of collection are guided by what Ariella Azoulay (2019) calls the imperial modality of art, in which material cultures deemed ‘ethnic’ garner experts who identify their “best samples”, which are then appropriated, purchased, or looted. Simultaneously, the modern museum is part of a greater social infrastructure that is complicit in the “force exercised to prevent the colonized from pursuing their own modalities of art” (2019: 62). These contradictions, argues Azoulay (2019: 62-63), “are not incidental but indicative of the imperial modality of art”. Through processes of appropriation and simultaneous social repression, there is a cultural attrition or de-worlding that happens.

The subtle perversity of museal collection is explored here – in that the liberal, democratic art museum can be seen to partake in a process of “de-worlding” under the guise of cultural preservation and custodianship. In the case of a national museum, the museum claims to be a custodian of collective heritage and public property<sup>50</sup>. Rashmi Varma, in her discussion of the primitivisation of Adivasi art, calls for a materialist perspective that is “resolutely grounded in the material conditions that produce primitivism in the first place such that the primitive is first colonized, then annihilated and then appropriated as a loss” (Varma, 2013: 752). Likewise, African art is subject to these material conditions. There is evidence to suggest that woven into the history of the beadwork collections in the ISANG are histories in which material cultures flourished, were ruined, and then reconstructed as the background, what is called a context, for a ‘lost’ or ‘vanished’ culture that can be appropriated as the terrain of experts. And yet, despite this history of dispossession, these collections present evidence of more than ethnicised identities or lost worlds, but could be read as palimpsests of multiple layers of expression, appropriation, resistance, and cultural (re)production.

### Re-Classifying Beadwork and Women’s work: a new (liberal) democratic gaze (1980’s)

As explored in previous chapters, West African sculpture and Rock art, along with a few artworks by living black South African artists, constituted exceptions to the ISANG’s erstwhile rule of ignoring African art. This changed significantly in the 1980s when *Southern African* art came under the gallery’s acquisitory gaze. It has been noted in scholarship that during the 1980s, in many South African public art institutions, objects like beadwork, basketry, woodwork, clay work etc were re-

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<sup>50</sup> Consider the revised SANG mission statement of 1991: “The South African National Gallery is an art museum which holds in trust an historical and contemporary art collection on behalf of the people of South Africa. We provide a cultural and educational resource, encourage involvement in the visual arts, and nurture a culturally diverse but shared national identity” (Mission statement, 1991, ISANG Archives).

assessed as *art* rather than craft or artefact.<sup>51</sup> Historian Marion Arnold (2005: 13) explained that “South African revisionist art historians and exhibition curators, abandoning reliance on western definitions of art, expanded creative concepts of visual culture to accommodate African artefacts and aesthetics as well as objects defined as ‘women’s work’”. In the 1980s the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) collection policy was re-assessed (Charlton, 2003; Rankin Smith, 1995). The Wits Art Museum, with support from Standard Bank, had begun collecting African art in 1979 (Charlton, 2003). In 1991 the JAG hosted *Art and Ambiguity* in which numerous items previously categorised as ethnography were displayed. Ricky Burnett’s *Tributaries* (1985) and Steven Sack’s *Neglected Tradition* (1989) exhibitions exemplified the revisionist paradigm and have held a place as ‘watershed’ moments in South African art history.



SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL GALLERY  
SUID-AFRIKAANSE NASIONALE KUNSMUSEUM  
IGALARI YOBUZWE YOMZANTSI AFRIKA



21 September 1995

Fig 29. Logo for SANG in 1995, (source: scanned from a letter in the ISANG archives)



Fig 30. Exhibition Opening in 1999, (source: scanned from the ISANG archives)

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<sup>51</sup> Reflecting on the shifts within art institutions in the apartheid era, artist and activist Omar Badsha emphasised that there were movements, projects, and institutions whose work indicated progressive paradigms in the 1960s and 1970s in their engagement and interpretation of African aesthetics, craft, and art long before this turning point.

Discursive and academic shifts had direct policy implications. The 1980s and 1990s was an era of acquisitions for many public institutions including the ISANG. Aside from a huge increase in purchases of work previously considered as craft or ethnography (including the beadwork collections), from the late 1980s the ISANG also acquired more contemporary art created by Africans, a curator of African art was appointed, and numerous events in the service of articulating, exploring, and displaying both 'Africa' and South Africa were staged. New symbols and mechanisms for engaging greater publics (such as a regular newsletter called *Bonani* and a new logo) were created.

Evident in the literature that explores the South African art world during the last decade of apartheid is a narrative that these changes within public cultural institutions were driven by growing political awareness and progressive thinking emanating from within these institutions (e.g., Rankin, 1995; Martin, 2019; Tietze, 2015). Rankin (1995: 78) praised South African galleries for "sloughing off the skin of colonial elitism, and attempting to acknowledge a wider community of artists and to speak to new audiences" and notes that "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". For artist Kendell Geers (1993), transformation of perspectives on art were galvanised by "[c]omplex feelings of guilt about the atrocities of Apartheid" which "led academics, critics and art historians to argue that the distinctions between art, craft, curio, kitsch, folk and traditional art were the products of Apartheid and as such should be ignored". Geers (1993) lamented this change as indiscriminate and politically motivated, the cost of which was "the distinction between good art and bad art". He specifically referred to Marilyn Martin's role in this discourse: "[d]iscussing our re-entry to the Venice Biennial, Marilyn Martin encourages us to call into question 'traditional boundaries between high art and low' and to operate without preconceived ideas of excellence or theoretical constraints" (Geers, 1993).

From Martin's perspective there was a gendered dimension to dismantling the mechanisms through which existing categorical boundaries had been policed. In a catalogue for *Made in Wood*, an exhibition hosted by the ISANG in 1993 that featured artists from the Western Cape in wood, Martin (1993:12) wrote: "our vocabulary is filled with the terminology of marginalisation and control. Words such as 'standards', 'quality' and 'excellence' are the making of a mostly white male heterosexual establishment, designed to keep the Other out. This is being challenged from all sides". While this feminist stance was itself progressive in some ways, Martin's legacy in the art world also speaks to the contradictions and problems presented by white feminist role-players in South Africa. This problem was taken up in 2006, 2011, and again in 2022 by South African artist and scholar Sharlene Khan, who argued that the primary change in the post-apartheid visual arts sector was the replacement of white men by white women in positions of power. This "'change of guard' continued systems of

White privilege inherited from apartheid and perpetuated some misguided sense that White women were able to relate to all forms of oppression, a situation which often resulted in White women speaking ‘about’ and ‘for’ Others” (Khan, 2011: unpaginated). This problem was already evident in the critiques of the *Pride of the Ndebele* (1994) exhibition, which was criticised for precisely this ‘speaking for’ that white liberal women were doing on behalf of black, rural, South African women. The persistence of this issue was raised by Khan at a 2022 symposium around the exhibition *When Rainclouds Gather*, which centralised black women in South African art history.

Emma Bedford, past curator at the SANG, hinted at deep structural inequalities that undergirded debates about transformation and redress in the late 1990’s: “[i]f works by black artists represent one percent of the acquisition’s expenditure, even though they make up thirty percent of the works acquired [...] these questions raise issues about how one makes redress” (Bedford, 1997: 32). Artist, activist, and cultural worker Omar Badsha, who was involved in the ISANG in the early 2000’s in an advisory capacity, too presented a narrative that emphasised the lack of structural change that accompanied the discursive and representational shifts that the ISANG concerned itself with. In an interview, Badsha (2021, interview) highlighted the crucial and under acknowledged role that cultural organisations that were part of the liberation struggle played in the push for institutional change at the ISANG in the late 1980s:

“the debate about transforming the institution and reflecting a more inclusive art, collection and history and promoting that all these things were sort of raised in, in the 80s. By some of us, who were cultural workers. Congress was made up of a lot of the so called progressive culture organizations in Cape Town, from CAP to UNITE ... So, we pushed (Marilyn) Martin, and them to change, but not only change, we wanted an equal say in the administration, or in the policymaking. We wanted an equal number of people on that board. And she did everything to, to well, put obstructions in the way”.

Marilyn Martin replaced Raymund van Niekerk as the museum’s director in 1988 and many of the purchases of African art in the 1980s (the Eastern Cape beadwork, for example) were purchased by Martin with funds from the apartheid government’s National Department of Education.<sup>52</sup> Rankin (1995) talks about the stakes in the project of inclusion, and ‘celebrating’ hitherto excluded and denied cultural forms. Differences between *integrating* and *including* histories were considered more broadly in art discourse in relation to exhibitions in these transitional years. This language signalled a

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<sup>52</sup> Lilla (2018) has pointed out complicity with apartheid structures that Martin kept close (particular ministers in the Department of Education) in the last years of apartheid. This was something she was also criticised for in the 1980s in sexist terms by the very white liberal art institution that she represented.

shift from an adamantly institutionally apolitical one to one that acknowledged the political implications of art. Bongani Mkhonza (2019: 5) asks whether revised museum policies that are motivated by the imperative to ‘include’ really “query the epistemology that privileged, and may continue to privilege, the acquisition of art” and argues that these gestures to “merely fill the gaps in the already existing exceptional art collections [...] are patronising and provocative”. In my interview with him, Mkhonza (Mkhonza, interview, 2020) went further to invoke Lewis Gordon in asking “what happens when one side carries the burden of proof: in response to the claim that African Art is not Art, to say ‘we are human! Our art matters! Look at these objects!’, where does that place us in terms of agency?”

The very fact that a pretence for neutrality by the institutional art world could have been maintained throughout the decades of cultural boycott, apartheid rule, and popular resistance is itself worth questioning. Lilla (2018: 126) points to the absurdity of the proposed tension between art and politics in South African institutional discourse in the 1980s: “[i]deas of academic art versus political art came up repeatedly throughout the 1980’s. It is astonishing that at the height of apartheid, artists and academics could think that art produced in South Africa could be apolitical, that their work could be unaffected by the country’s political realities”. Retrospectively it seems that the ISANG’s project of inclusion was compromised in the absence of concerted efforts to acknowledge the injustice of cultural domination and privilege, a reluctance to rethink the gatekeeping policies that maintained this privilege and most critically the absence of actually engaging wider constituencies at the top organisational levels<sup>53</sup>. The ISANG’s efforts to serve and define entirely new constituencies in the post-apartheid era, demonstrated the necessity of working beyond the representational realm and engaging new perspectives on the collection and care of material heritage.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> While I am presenting an overview of the ISANGs institutional history, it should be stressed that the art world context itself was underwritten by problems of inequality and injustice. South African art historian Mario Pissaro (2009) argued that a key problem in the ‘transformation’ discourses was that they did not center the problem of decolonisation. He argued that ‘With decolonisation omitted from the discourse on transformation, a cynic could be forgiven for inferring that for the elite members of the visual arts community, liberation from oppression has simply meant freedom from the cultural boycott and a ticket to Venice. Post 1990, the de-facto ‘foreign policy’ of the South African art world has been an uncritical, opportunistic re-entry into the so-called international art community. This has been at the expense of developing alternatives to imposed and entrenched neo-colonial networks. For example there has been no priority given to engagement with African countries, as well as other parts of the so-called developing world. Where such contacts exist they tend to be neo-colonial conduits to the West”.

<sup>54</sup> Rankin (1995: 71) records examples of a number of South African art galleries that claimed “that they had been including the work of black artists in their acquisitions since the 1960’s in a colour-blind policy that operated in terms of quality alone [...] an ‘equal opportunity policy which they felt to be more balanced than ‘affirmative action’”. Rankin noted that acquisition records indicated that “this was more honoured in breach than observance” (1995: 71), and that work by African artists even once acquired often settled in basements rather than gallery walls.

## Buying beadwork in rural 1980's South Africa: framing the conditions of 'collection'

In her historical study of the ISANG, Quanita Lilla (2018) argues that the ISANG's first acquisitions of Southern African beadwork collections were bought with apartheid money. Furthermore, she argues that the "fact that the collections of black women's art arrived out of no-where, as gifts from the apartheid state makes me highly suspicious. Knowing the brutality of the apartheid state, I assume that these art pieces are the remnants of unscrupulous exchanges at best, and war booty at worst" (Lilla, 2018: 259). As the ISANG staff have (understandably) insisted, given the public stakes in matters of art acquisition and justice, the acquisition records indicate that the beadwork objects in question were purchased consensually, and cannot be marked as loot or war booty. The conjecture that the SANG beadwork collections may be considered as loot itself bears scrutiny as a loaded accusation. At the same time, it is clear the context of their purchase raises questions around the ethics of exchange and ownership, value, and the notion of cultural custodianship.

I have outlined some of the political and inter-institutional shifts that can explain the interest in South African beadwork as art in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In terms of the market context, the idea explored in chapter 4 that the establishment of culturally authoritative voices rely on processes and networks of collaboration, corroboration, and selective exclusion surface again in the context of understanding how, and through whom, traditional Southern African art became institutionally valuable for the ISANG. Sandra Klopper (2004: 20) underscores how scholarly information on the Ndebele disseminated by Suzanne Priebatsch and Natalie Knight (1978 and 1979) helped to create a "secure framework in which private and corporate transactions could begin".

Roy Sieber's books *African Furniture and Household Objects* (1980) and *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (1972) impacted both buying patterns and museal attitudes (Klopper, 2004: 20) towards Southern African handmade objects. In her study on the history of African art collection in South Africa, Klopper (2004: 21) directly connected these publications to the sale of large amounts of Southern African artifacts to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC and to the Local History Museum in Durban. Only in the 1980s did the market prices within the auction house circuit for headrests, staffs, and Southern African carvings begin to increase (Klopper, 2004: 19). Klopper uses the example of the prolific buyer of Southern African artifacts, Jonathan Lowen. As a South African living in London attending Sotheby's and Christie's auctions, Lowen only started to be outbid in the late 1970s. The few collectors who were trading in these goods until that time held a monopoly. The rush for beadwork (both on an international auction circuit and within South Africa) followed a

similar though slightly belated trajectory, as the majority of collecting what the market recognised as ‘authentic’, had passed its peak by the late 1980s.

Through my engagement with acquisition records related to the ISANG African art collection, there were a number of buyers of Southern African beadwork whose contributed to the growth of the African Art collection over a 20-year period. Through further research, I was able to contact two buyers who purchased beadwork directly from artists, creators, and beadwork custodians in the 1980s in rural South Africa and sold beadwork to several museums (both local and international) including the SANG. I conducted in-depth interviews with two buyers (whose names have been substituted by pseudonyms), who shared significant narrative details and photographs with me about their collection experiences. While I present critical analyses of their narratives, and read them through the lenses afforded by current critiques of museal ethics, I acknowledge that these buyers were operating with ‘good intentions’. That these intentions were informed by institutionally and culturally sanctioned knowledge and attitudes of their times is what makes the accounts interesting sociological material. Hence, I do not engage with their narratives as a way of critiquing them personally, but rather put forward their personal accounts as a way of engaging in the process of the institutional acquisition of material culture – a process which often remains muted in the obscuring bureaucracy of accession cards and spreadsheets.

Rural South Africa at the point of both collection stories, was structured by the Homelands system. The apartheid separate development policy attempted to assign every black South African to a ‘homeland’ according to their ethnic identity. To accommodate this, “[t]en homelands were created to rid South Africa of its black citizens, opening the way for massed forced removals. In the 1970s, the government granted sham independence to South Africa’s black homelands. This served as an excuse to deny all Africans political rights in South Africa. Between 1960 and 1994 over three and a half million people were forcibly removed to the homelands. Their land was taken away from them and sold to white farmers at very low prices. People were unable to make a living in the homelands, and many had to work as migrant labourers in the cities of South Africa” (<https://www.apartheidmuseum.org>).

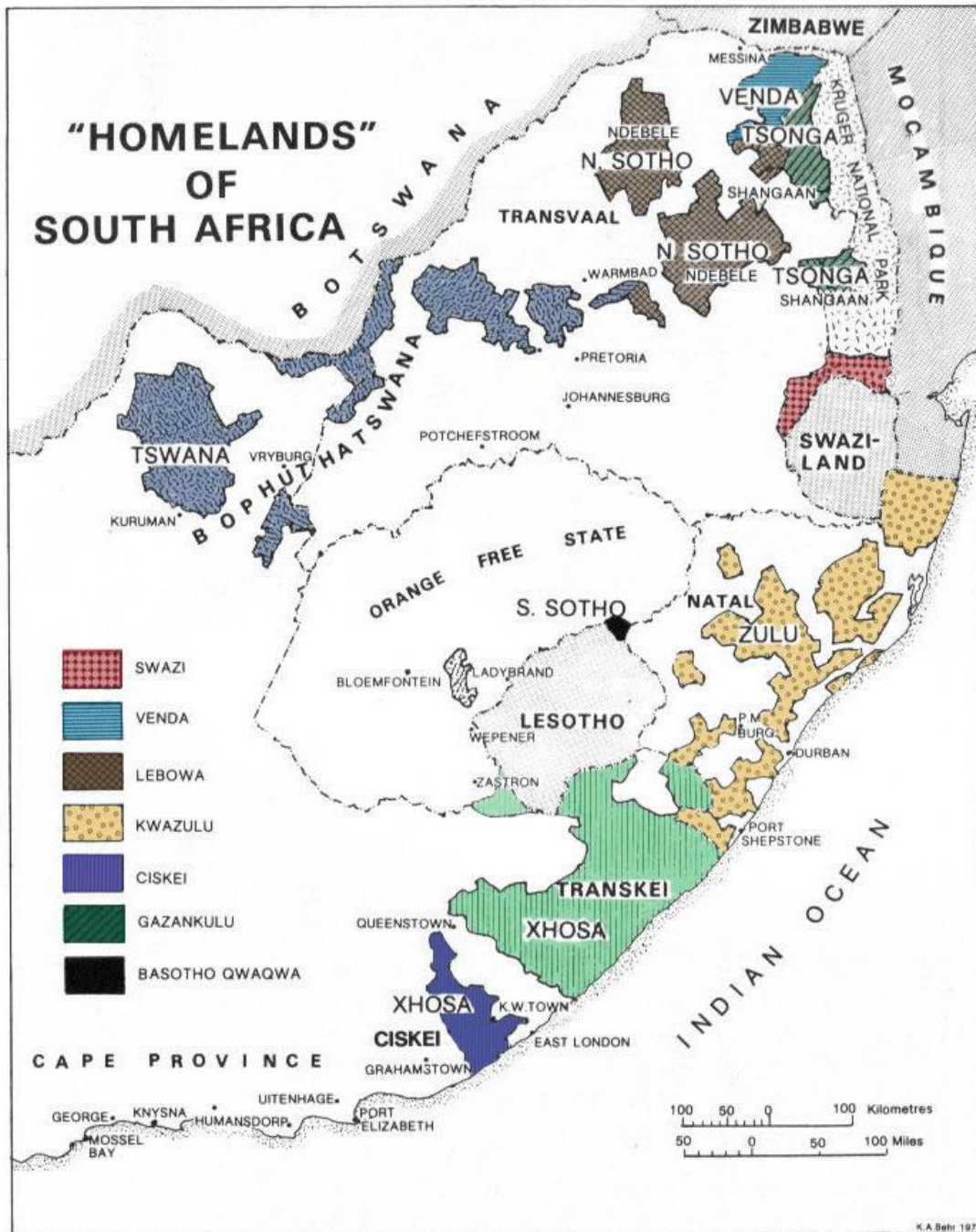


Fig 31. A map of the Homelands areas from Christopher Saunders, *Historical Dictionary of South Africa*, (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1983), xvii. (source: wikicommons).

Of interest to this study and framing the questions I have posed around unravelling interpretive frameworks for the beadwork in the ISANG basement, are themes of mobility, identity, and authority. Some of the recorded transactions indicate that family heirlooms travelled from rural villages into the basements and display cases of museums. Azoulay (2019: 100) argues that the inscription of differential rights is at the centre of the trade of objects, their handling (study, conservation, and observation) by powerful institutions and the communities from whom the objects came: “[a]rt

museums [...] enabled the materialisation in and through objects of a distinction between two classes of people that imperialism created: those whose rights to objects and the skills and knowledge to engage with them are recognised and those whose rights to them are denied”. The vast socio-economic disparity, as well as the political implications around identity and authority that influenced freedom of movement during the politically fractious and violent period of collection (1983 – 1993) constitute part of the suppressed history of these objects.

Johannes Fabian argues that the very word collecting neutralizes and defangs the power relations that often undergird this process. Collecting evokes the leisurely pursuit of the connoisseur and the taxonomic pigeon-holing of the naturalist – the latter both advertises scientific legitimacy and suggests “epistemic analogies between gathering specimens ‘from nature’ and assembling tokens from culture” (Fabian, 1998: 88). The idea of art *collection* as opposed to *trade* places agency with the buyer, and is useful to the self-effacement of the museum, which hides behind its protocols. There was a confidence in mobility, authority, and entitlement to possess that was available for a white citizen of the South African state and was denied to black citizens. This history of privilege and restriction based on identity should be underscored in reading these movements and motivations and underwrites the seemingly innocent practice of ‘collection’ in the context of apartheid South Africa.

### Escapades of an ‘Ordinary White’ - buying Beadwork in the Eastern Cape (Buyer Interview One)

I interviewed M. David in Cape Town in 2020. David grew up in Cape Town in the 1960s, and unusually for a white Afrikaans child of his era, he learned to speak isiXhosa under the tutelage of an elderly man who lived in his neighbourhood, a suburb of the City of Cape Town. This man, who himself was not of Xhosa descent but spoke the language, also had a small collection of beadwork from the Eastern Cape. The language would prove to be David’s key in accessing interactions, spaces, objects, and stories that may have otherwise remained in-accessible. This access would pave the way for David’s emergent status as an expert (and authority) on Xhosa beadwork within the museum world, and as such, a source of large quantities of objects and information. The beadwork objects featured in David’s narrative as personally coveted items which represented (amongst other things) a world that he wanted to be part of. David (interview, 2021) reflected: “it wasn’t easy for me as a white kid in Cape Town to meet Xhosa people. So, he [his language teacher] was like the closest link that I had to that universe, somebody who knew about the culture, and you could speak the language”. He described a wild, un-urbanised area of bushland on the outskirts of a residential neighbourhood, where he would roam around and find animal bones, teeth, and skulls as well as plants and other organic objects of interest which he would sell at school. He also recalled accessing Czech beads, which he

fashioned into beadwork pieces and sold to school friends. It was in the bushland adjoining his suburban neighbourhood that David also came to meet and befriend Xhosa men working on upcoming construction sites, who would purchase some of his creations which combined found dog teeth and beads.

David's interest in these objects was precipitated by school trips to the South African Museum and reading that he had done about beadwork and South African indigenous cultures more generally. Available to him at that time was material produced through anthropological frameworks by people like E.M Shaw.<sup>55</sup> He also referred to the notorious Khoisan diorama<sup>56</sup> at the South African Museum (the creation, display, and deconstruction of which has featured in numerous scholarly and artistic projects) and the musical instruments (as well as sound clips) and tools on display in the museum. When he first began to make journeys to the Eastern Cape as an adult, David first visited the South African Museum to make 'shopping' lists, which initially comprised objects like milk pails and grinding stones which he thought would be longer lasting and easy to find. On arriving in the Eastern Cape, he was told that he was much too late, people would insist that "my grandparents had these things, they don't exist anymore", and he would be offered beadwork instead. This was his cue to focus more specifically on beadwork.

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<sup>55</sup> A widely referenced museum professional working in the South African Museum who created an interpretive and classificatory scheme for a wide range of indigenous South African objects taken from communities across the country, which was used across the South African museum world.

<sup>56</sup> Former Head of Digitization at Iziko, Paul Tichmnan (2017) describes most succinctly the story of the so-called 'Bushman diorama' (either so-called or scare quotes; not both) and its closure and removal in 2017: "After many years of discussion and deliberation the controversial Ethnographic Gallery at Iziko South African Museum was finally de-installed on 15 September 2017. The response to the decision elicited an interesting and conflicting range of responses. Several members of the public, including Khoisan descendants, complained about the closure, while a number of Khoisan chiefs and Khoisan descendants commented that the closure was overdue". See also, Patricia Davison, "The Politics and Poetics of the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum", *The politics and poetics of Museology*, ICOFOM Study Series, 46 (2018): 81-97, <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.921>

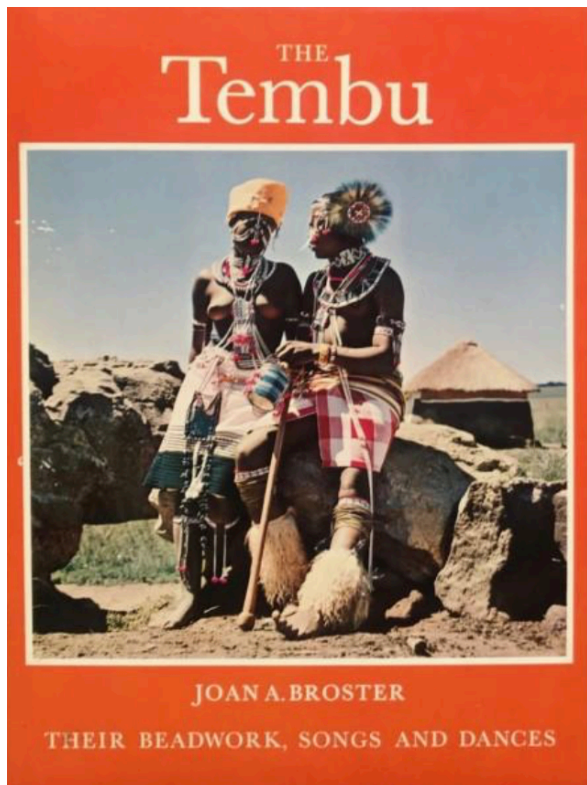


Fig 32. Photograph of Joan Broster's book 'The Tembu' (1976) and Fig 33. Photograph of Joan Broster and Alice Mertens' book 'African Elegances' (1973)

David mentioned books by Joan Broster and Peter Baker, which he would take out of the school library and pour over in detail, as seminal influences. Candice Steele (2021: 46) points to a legacy of visual representations of the Eastern Cape exemplified by colonial photographer Alfred Duggan-Cronin and Joan Broster, as well as artist Barbara Tyrell, whose depictions “buttress the illusion of ethnic delineation and spatial designation, thereby configuring the rural as a placeholder for unchanging tradition”. She argues that their preoccupation with images of ritual and tradition (particularly traditional healers and initiation rites) “become conventional signifying tropes of Xhosa culture in a discursive practice that parallels Donna Haraway’s ‘colonial-nostalgic-aesthetic’” (Steele, 2021: 46). For David, these books were in many cases the entry point into discussions about particular styles, specific villages, and certain traditions and rituals that he would ask about when entering into communities in the Eastern Cape. The visual language that is now so tainted by its ideological association with apartheid expressed itself on a very personal level. David (interview, 2020) reflected that:

“[...]my gran had like a slice of some type of tree trunk with a so-called native scene painted on it. It was a scene depicting the village of Hampstead in the Eastern Cape with those cactus

plants, thatched huts, and two women with the three-legged pots or whatever. And there was some attraction that I had to that painting ... And I remember thinking to myself *I'm going to go to that area* and I don't know why that attraction was so strong”.

Over two decades, he seemed to be seeking out the bucolic scene described above, sometimes finding it, and more often finding something radically different. He recalled moments in which this idyllic vision manifested, particularly in the village where Joan Broster had lived, where he described a dramatically beautiful landscape in which a traumatic and violent encounter took place, as he was hijacked and nearly shot in 2003. There were stark contrasts between the dreamed-of Xhosa village that he envisioned as a schoolboy and the volatile context of 1980s South Africa, particularly as he moved along the fraught boundaries of rural and urban spaces that the apartheid state sought to control, both physically and ideologically.

The vocabulary for David's acquisitive negotiations and collection impulses was formulated outside of an established social milieu like the world of the Johannesburg art-trade. Instead, David developed a language for acquisition through conversations between existing narratives produced within a colonial frame, and an engagement with people who identified with forms of Xhosa culture and engaged with David about depictions of (their own) cultural practices. He recalled how as a schoolboy, walking in the bush adjacent to his home, he would befriend and spend time with herdsmen caring for sheep, who hailed from the Eastern Cape. Through them he came to learn more about beadwork, and he would take the library books with him and study the photographs together with a particular herdsman whom he befriended. When he asked his friend whether he would bring back some beadwork for him when returning from his annual journey to the Eastern Cape, his friend responded that he wouldn't dream of it: “he said, ‘My neighbours wouldn't believe that I'm collecting beadwork, to sell to a white guy in Cape Town, they would think that I want those items myself to bewitch them’ [...] And so that was one of the first eye openers for me, you know, into the culture and so many other things that he mentioned over the years. This is something I've never read in a book” (David, 2020, interview).

This confluence of perspectives, motivations, and desires suggest that the colonial frames put into use by the apartheid ideological apparatus (such as Broster's books) themselves were products of encounters that are neatened and edited in the performance of history. This is not to suggest that the violence of representation should not be taken as such, rather that the representational act is the end point of a more ambivalent process. As David's journey as a collector progressed, the beadwork itself, seemed to become loaded with the weight of these conversations, mysteries, and revelations that came from the spaces between books, images, and experiences that contradicted, deepened, and

complicated beadwork objects: “I’d see a village in the distance and I would think to myself, ‘I wonder what interesting pieces of beadwork are there that I haven’t already seen?’ That will become like a driver, you know that I wanted to get there and see what they had” (interview, 2020). What David does not acknowledge in this statement, is that it wasn’t just about seeing, it was also about acquiring and driving away with whatever interesting pieces he hadn’t already seen, without a regard for the precarious consequences of this trade for the communities from whom he purchased beadwork. What were the conditions of transformation from heirloom to commodity in the case of the beadwork that David was acquiring? Azoulay (2019: 8-9) highlights how “discussions around the looting of [art] objects are reduced to conversations about the deprivation of these communities of their own objects *as art*, rather than the consideration of how these objects may have functioned within these communities’ worlds—and thereby how the removal of these objects contributed to these worlds’ destruction”. What Azoulay’s arguments compel us to consider in this case is both the conditions of sale, and the consequences of the commodification of cultural objects for the communities in the Eastern Cape.

In the 1970s, after matriculating from high school, David was drafted into the army and sent to the Angolan/ Namibian border to serve the South African state in the ‘border war’. Recognised as having a talent for languages, he was sent on a Portuguese language course so that he could act as a translator. David explained how on an early collecting trip in the 1980s to Mozambique, once his army service was over, these language skills came into use. While he could ascertain that local people had artefacts and were even willing to sell them, the violence of the context was brutal, and he did not collect “enough to make the trip worthwhile”:

“[...]because of the Civil War, and all the fighting over the first between the Portuguese and FRELIMO, and then FRELIMO and RENAMO they were constantly on the move. So, they said all those artifacts that they used to have, they had to just flee and leave whatever they had at home. And then when I came back after a week or whatever, like the entire village will be burned down, you know, everything would have been destroyed” (David, 2020 interview).

The idea of art ‘collection’ in the wake of war and terror has resonance with British, Belgian, and French looting expeditions (to Benin, in the Congo basin more widely, in Egypt to name a few) which have only in the last few decades become part of a wider public discourse within the context of repatriation debates. However, on a more local historical level, there is evidence of a similar history of loot connected to beadwork collections that sit in international museum holdings. In 1980, anthropologist D.L Jones (1980: 4) wrote an article called “Towards a Developmental Approach: South African Beadwork” that upon assessing the holdings of various European museums stated “it is

fairly clear that different types of bead work were collected at different periods roughly coincidental with the British advance northwards, through the Xhosa and other lands of Kaffaria, the various Zuluised groups of Natal to Zululand itself. Thus in practice the formidably wide range of possible sources of beadwork tends to resolve into a number of choices between a limited number of types". It is clear that Jones' concern was not so much the context of collection but the ascertaining of a correct timestamp in order to 'scientifically' categorise these aesthetic traditions. Specific types of beadwork were collected/ became collectable even through different historical periods, among many sociolinguistic groups. This limited typology speaks of the ossification and even fabrication of ethnic identities.

These violent circumstances in which artefacts and heirlooms were looted are important backdrops to the assumption that fair trade could take place at a later date. It is telling that, as Ivor Powell (1995:113) notes "[e]xamples of the oldest Ndebele beadwork that *has come down to us* [...] date from around 1880 to around 1920. It is one of the mysteries of research into the Ndebele that no older pieces have come to light, though one possible explanation is that before Mapoch's War, a woman's beadwork was buried along with her". In fact, the very timeframe that Powell suggests as covering the evolution of Ndebele identities and visual traditions is questionable in its monolithic representation. In Powell's quote I have emphasised the phrase 'come down to us' because of its ambiguity and suggestiveness. Is the 'us' the academic and research community of which Powell is part, is it a broader national 'us'? Who are the inheritors of this legacy, and what are the implicit claims to ownership being made? I think that there is more to this history than pieces being unavailable to research because they are literally buried, but that there may have been resistance (which the museum world would always have an interest in downplaying) to parting with these 'pieces' in the first place. There is an embedded imperial nostalgia and an implicit support of violence as a fact of history, which weaves itself seamlessly into the liberal language of custodianship and protection of African traditions.

The erasure of the contexts of violence in the name of science and more-over protection and custodianship is one of the defining practices of museums. Francois Verges (2014) describes the need to move away from a logic of accumulation and ownership that underscores the conception of cultural preservation. Imagining a new kind of museum, Verges (2014: 25) says "the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others. It belonged to a narcissistic meaning, making visible one's identity and social status". The paradox of the salvage complex is most evident in such contexts of violence, as the 'protection' of objects as the direct result of the destruction of communities and life-worlds is most difficult to disguise as co-incidental. David described his first collection trip in the

Eastern Cape during a break from army service, as he hitch-hiked from the Angolan/ Namibian border into the Ciskei. At that point (1983), this area was a Homeland. A series of mishaps on this trip that saw David getting chased by local policemen and finding his way back to Cape Town with a travelling German tourist, lead him to reflect that he was taking quite a risk travelling without the proper permit as an army personnel:

“[...]because the apartheid government wasn't issuing permits as easily as you know, the only way you would really get in legally was if you were a registered trader or missionary or government official. But they didn't want ordinary whites wandering around because they didn't know what you're up to” (David, interview 2020).

While apartheid police may have been suspicious of his intentions as an 'ordinary white', David was still able to exercise his freedom to move and to explore and to pursue the fantasy village. The point being that an 'ordinary white' had extra-ordinary privilege and power in a system of oppression and patronage that protected him as a white man. Despite the personal risks, the trips were worthwhile for David, whose ability to operate as a supplier of information and objects certified his value to cultural institutions to whom he sold. More than this, the very risk involved was the certification of authenticity. Between 1983 and 2003, David made multiple trips to various villages and areas in the Eastern Cape, during which he bought large amounts of beadwork which he sold to shops, private collectors, museums, and galleries both in South Africa, Europe, and the USA. From his narrative, his compulsion to do this work was driven by personal interest above all else, and the beadwork purchase and sale negotiations with the sellers and makers of beadwork would be guided by their ability to fund more trips.



Fig 34. Ezakwantu exhibition catalogue (source: ISANG archives)

According to his record, profit margins were not very high: the purchase price of the objects would have been marginally less than the sale price to museums and collectors. As there were not many competitors, the prices could remain low enough that it didn't appear as a lucrative endeavour to others, and the rarity of items increased the plausibility of David's authoritative statements about them. This is not to say that they were incorrect, but rather that their value was directly linked to a lack of other voices and interpreters who would impart meaning and deepen interpretive frames

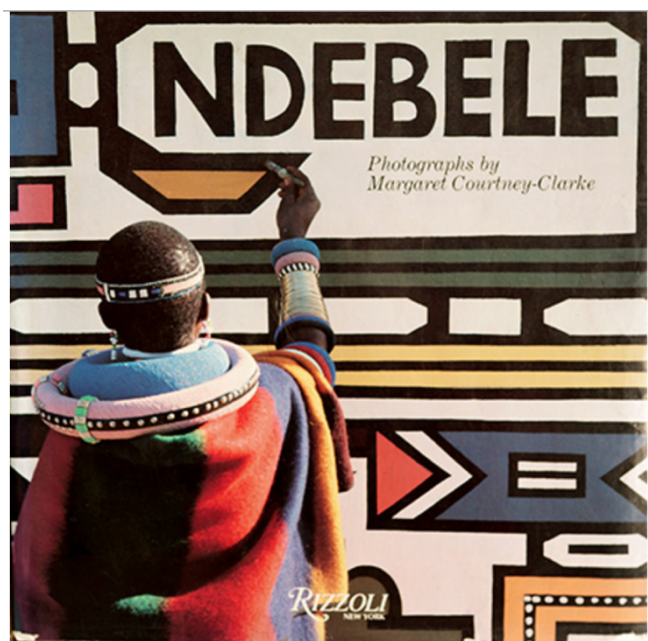
through the transactions around the objects themselves. David acted as a self-appointed interlocutor between the worlds from which the beadwork traditions had come and the museum worlds that sought them out. The question of hermeneutic justice arises again, in relation to the ways in which the language and epistemic frameworks to receive and care for beadwork were shaped by such interactions in institutions like SANG. By the mid 2000s, both the willing sellers of heirlooms and new producers of beadwork had shifted substantially such that it no longer made sense for David to make these trips. The ISANG sat with the objects collected in a ‘golden era’ of collecting.

In the case of the encounters between David and the people who sold him their inherited beadwork collections in the Eastern Cape of the 1980s, we may reconstruct to some degree the radical power differentials in the conditions of sale which might make us view differently their relocation to the museum. However, the socio-cultural consequences of their transformation from heirlooms to commodities would require much deeper engagement with source communities. Scholars have raised the question of whether engagements that re-link severed relations between people and their cultural artefacts should be considered as part of the work of the museum. Alirio Karina (2022: 653) has argued against the possibility of ethical encounters in colonial museal collections and insists that the charges against all museums are so severe that “[t]he conditions of encounter delegitimize all collection”. Consequently, she argues, “all museums are obliged to bring source communities to their collections” (Karina, 2022: 658). I believe that the former charge requires a very careful unpacking of what constitutes colonial, post-colonial, neo-colonial, and decolonial conditions which in turn have implications for the possibilities of ethical encounters. I strongly agree, however, with the latter, but consider without romanticism that the process of identifying owners and claimants of cultural heritage or indeed ‘source communities’ is one steeped in difficult and sometimes entangled power dynamics. This could (and should) be addressed as part of the work of the museum of the future to create the conditions to understand and map out such relations and facilitate such reconnections.

### Beadwork, Beauty and Worldlessness (Buyer Interview Two)

I interviewed P. Woods in Cape Town in 2022. For Woods, the motivation to purchase Ndebele beadwork was not rooted in childhood experiences but emerged later in life and seemed to mark only a few years of her career as a collector. Woods described a family trajectory influenced by World War II and characterised by movement between Europe and South Africa. She talked about a family furniture business in Indonesia that disintegrated post-World War II, and interest in travel that seemed to motivate the South African collecting trips that precipitated a career of artefact collection that traversed many parts of Southern, Northern, and Eastern Africa between 1983 and the 2000s. She lived in Johannesburg and owned an art gallery during the period when she and her partner conducted

visits to what was at the time known as KwaNdebele to purchase beadwork which they would sell to collectors, academics, tourists, and later museums. On her interest in the Ndebele beadwork in particular, she mentioned influential spaces that formed part of her landscape of African artefacts: “the Africa Museum, which we used to go to quite often, and there was the Standard Bank collection and you could also go into town – I have forgotten the name – you go right into town and under certain highways you find this market, which sold all kinds of African things, including Muti and stuff”. Besides these, Margaret Courtney Clarke’s book on Ndebele traditions was a ‘trigger’. The world that Woods described resonated with Kaufmann, Martin, and Nel’s descriptions of a Johannesburg cultural milieu in which African art and craft had been traded since the 1940s.



*Fig 35. Photograph of an exhibition of Ndebele works hosted by Woods in Johannesburg, 1986 (source: photo supplied by interviewee); Fig 36. Book cover of Margaret Courtney Clarke’s ‘Ndebele’ (1986)*

Reflecting on the 3–4 years (from 1985) during which that she made frequent trips between her Johannesburg home and the villages near Groblersdal and Bronkhorstspuit, amongst others, Woods described how she would make use of a translator, request to see beadwork and be greeted with many women willing to sell. She explained that they would learn things about the beadwork from the women selling but understood that many things were secret. Permits to enter the homelands were not needed by Woods and her partner, and she described a “joyful” experience of moving back and forth with a car full of beadwork each time. In the purchasing of works, prices requested by the sellers

were, in Woods' view "very reasonable"<sup>57</sup>, and carefully logged in a notebook she kept to balance travel expenses and purchases and which she allowed me to photograph. While there were other competitors, they rarely crossed paths, and the social and cultural networks that Woods had access to as a gallery owner, ensured access to academics, tourists, and museum people. However, her relatively short period of collection indicates that unlike the longer period in which David's (privileged) access to the Eastern Cape remained intact, the commercial value of Ndebele works shaped a different trajectory for this tradition of production. In addition, unlike David, she did not develop the same kind of interlocutory position between the communities that she bought from and those that she sold to.

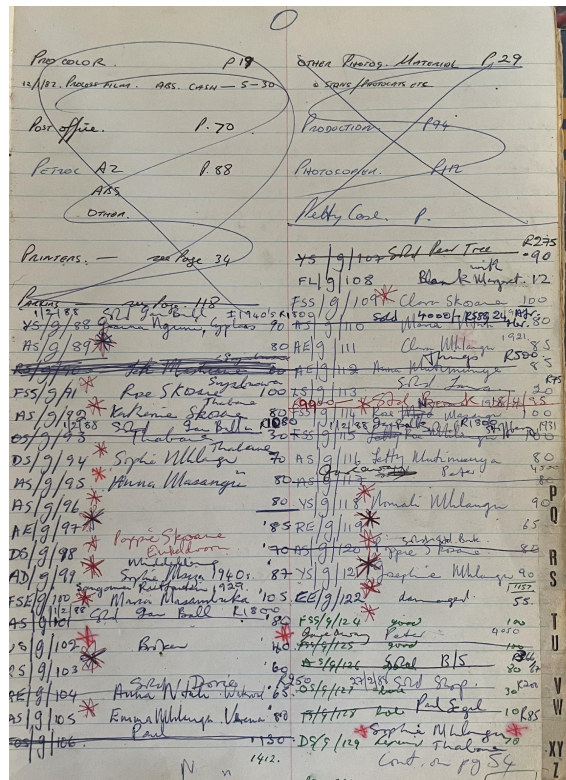
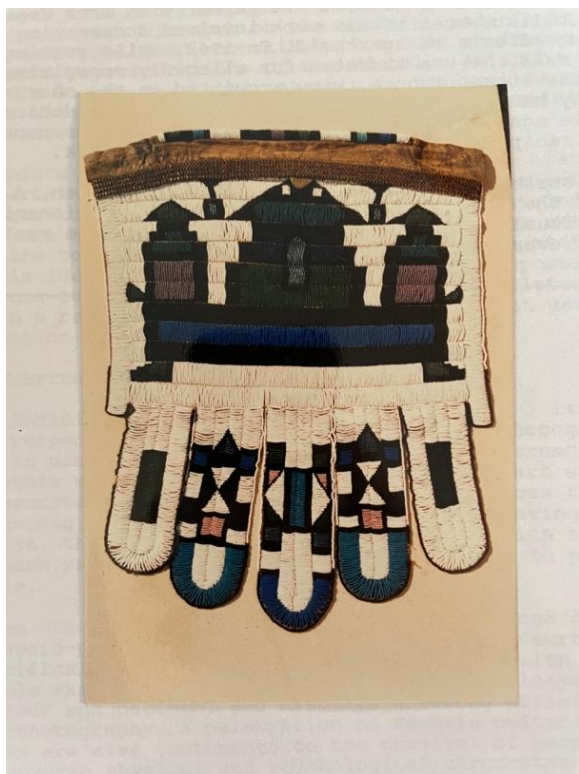


Fig 37. Photograph of a Ndebele apron sold to ISANG (source: photo supplied by interviewee); Fig 38. Page of Logbook of purchases in 1985 ( source: photo supplied by interviewee)

The symbolism of Ndebele beadwork as part of a larger story of cultural resistance against the apartheid state that sought to circumscribe every aspect of life, and the trading of this symbolic value has been pointed out by Ivor Powel. Powell (1995: 8) writes that “[m]ost writers on the subject have tended to stress the proliferation of beadworking and wall painting after the 1940s as a powerful assertion of an African identity in defiance of the encroachments of Western civilization, and thus to

<sup>57</sup> A glimpse at her logbook indicated that on one collection journey, aprons were purchased for between R85 and R120 each.

emphasize the exoticism of Ndebele art”. The following excerpt from the ISANG’s 1994 exhibition Igama Ndebele’s supplement indicates the framing of the ISANG’s purchases of Ndebele beadwork pieces to the new democratic South African public precisely within this discursive trope:

“[t]his exhibition is concerned with the culture of the Ndebele. It tells the story of their strength, how their identity was forged through their arts and shows how they survived oppression, thanks to the creativity of women. Most artworks on view were made between 1940 and 1970, the high point of Ndebele art. These are drawn from SANG’s Permanent collection, and private and other public collections” (ISANG exhibition supplement, edited by Emile Maurice, 1995).

Powell suggests a more ambivalent approach to his history and historization of tradition, that pays attention to the fluidity of the value chain instead of the moments in which this aesthetic tradition is fixed with certain meanings and identities. By 1998, when Powell published his illustrated book *Ndebele, A People and their Art*, which coincided with Peter Magubane’s *Vanishing Cultures*, the trade of Ndebele beadwork had been irrevocably changed. As Powell (1995: 126) described it:

“[...]the artists of the Ndebele have been turned into mass-producers of beadwork, operating on a quick-turnover basis for a dangerously undiscerning market. Not only has the production of beadwork largely shifted away from its traditional forms towards the making of trinkets with a sufficiently ‘African’ look to catch the casual tourist’s eye, but the production of those items long sanctioned by custom has also been affected”.

The question of the commodification of heritage as a kind of de-worlding emerges here again. Woods narrated this change in terms of the disappearance of the authentic pieces (particularly marital aprons), and the simultaneous influx of competing buyers. She talked about the growth of ‘commercialised’ forms of beadwork, as the heirlooms of the previous generation had already been traded out of the communities, and beadwork was being created for the market. Operation Hunger was an NGO that worked with women to create and sell beadwork to address a deepening crisis of inequality and poverty. Woods referred to this program as having a perceptible impact on the ‘quality’ of the beadwork. Powell’s (1995: 126) research reiterated this reading that “[f]or the most part the beaded aprons of today are made in a broadly worked geometric style pioneered by Operation Hunger”. The question of to whom and in what ways this aesthetic transformation is valuable, and to whom the metamorphosis is viewed as a loss, is raised by Powell (1995: 126) who states that “[i]t is difficult to take this work seriously in any terms related to the aesthetics of beadworking” and yet, he urges caution because “Ndebele women themselves have a different, though ambivalent, perception of

the new beadworking style”. Powell related how in the fieldwork for his book, they encountered many women who insisted that they no longer owned family heirlooms, and moreover that they preferred to make beadwork in the new styles which were disparaged by collectors (and reaffirmed by scholarship) as too far removed from the original authentic styles.



*Fig 39. Photograph of a village near Bronkhorstspuit, Mpumalanga, South Africa (around 1986) (source: photo supplied by interviewee)*

As Woods (interview, 2022) stated: “old beads are so beautiful in comparison to new beads. The old beads would have been tiny, tiny, tiny beads”. Powell (1995: 126) disclosed what he presented as a surprising fact, that: “[m]ore than a few of the women keep hidden - from their peers as much as from would-be buyers and researchers - a special piece of beadwork. These pieces are used specifically for the purposes of communicating with the ancestors, since, as was explained by more than one informant, ‘The ancestors do not recognize the new party-style beads. They only know the old styles’”. This ‘surprising fact’, unsettles the colonial assumption inherited and passed on through the museum’s ways of collecting, knowing, and seeing, that not everything is available to be seen, sold, documented, and known. The disregard for autonomy and privacy in the name of science, culture, and art is evident in this instance. Moreover, the ability to declare cultures and practices alive or dead, presumes a certain vantage point and operates as a way of claiming authority. Sam Tlhalo Radithlalo (2001: 250) asks:

“Do cultures simply open themselves up for a ‘vanishing act’? Who concludes that a culture is susceptible to vanishing? For a culture to ‘vanish’ implies a number of assumptions: that it cannot adapt to the new, that no trace of it would remain except in museums, that those who relied on it for an authentication of their identities would be lost souls”

The material consequence of the vanishing cultures narrative is that the museum is the saviour. This, for Azoulay (2019), is part of the remaking of imperial logic. Asked about whether the museum feels like the ‘right’ place for these beadwork traditions, Woods (interview, 2022) responded: “[i]n a way, I think it’s a good thing to have it in museums. At least they are being looked after”. Her view echoes perspectives that take as a given the museum’s capacity for care and rejects any criticisms of its mode of ‘care’ as absurd and irrational (as if care for collective heritage is about air conditioning and temperature control of storerooms alone). This technocratic position that seeks to maintain the neutrality and authority of the museum is being mobilised widely against the calls for repatriation of heritage. The disavowal of tactility in the museum world has been read by some as a practice justified by science to covertly discourage real engagement with the unruly objects of ethnographic collections (Deliss, 2015).



*Fig 40. Photograph of beadwork from a village near Bronkhorstspuit, Mpumalanga, South Africa (around 1986) (source: photo supplied by interviewee)*

Lotte Arndt (2021), a cultural theorist, studies the use of chemicals to ‘preserve’ such objects and “questions the aporias of museum conservation that extend the lifespan of objects in order to safeguard them through a supposedly neutral device, while significantly modifying their uses, and separating them from a living cultural environment”. The idea that cultural objects may be given an extended lifespan by reducing tactility is questionable precisely in the case of the older kinds of beadwork that Woods was seeking out. One of the ISANG staff disclosed to me while packing away beadwork from the Hidden Treasures exhibition in January 2020, that it was well known that the animal sinews that held together the beadwork in some of the aprons, required the moisture and grease applied through human touch for its longevity. Without being handled, they could become brittle and fall apart. These small shifts in museal modes of care are significant.

The notion of ‘care’ (and attentiveness to the etymology within the word curation), has multiplied in contemporary curatorial discourse as a way of describing a possible alternative ethic within museum worlds.<sup>58</sup> This alternative ethic is presented as a response to the violent origins of modern museal norms and practices, and in many cases invokes ideas of social justice and planetary well-being as ongoing political projects. While its potential over-use in curatorial discourse is recognised, it is worth considering the ISANG through the frame of care and how this is different from being a custodian. Some of the questions that arise through this case study of beadwork are around the ethics of inherited modes of collection and the responsibility of contemporary curators and audiences to confront problematic collection histories. Some points for further consideration are whether confrontations with difficult and painful histories manifest as a form of care, and pose an alternative trajectory to disregard and irrelevance? How are the dangers of the perpetuation of epistemic erasure countered in these cases?

Woods’s sense that the museum was indeed the correct caregiver to these precious objects carried another facet however: the idea of a museum as a kind of mausoleum where vanished cultures are entombed. She (Woods interview, 2022) reflected: “at the same time, it is a mixed feeling. Because I remember as a child seeing a lot more people in traditional dress. And when I went up to the town to visit the aunts and uncles and looked up at people in traditional dress. And then slowly but surely, you know, they began to vanish. Yeah, I think that’s very sad”. I asked what was sad and she responded: “the loss of skills and the beauty. They were so beautiful in those clothes. Yeah. Compare that to some of the sort of rags they wear these days. Not all of them wear rags, of course, some are very smartly

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<sup>58</sup> Exemplified by Yesomi Umolu’s (2020: unpaginated) concern about the museum’s “historical care of the object taking precedence (sometimes violently) over care for the humans from whom these objects emanate – a colonial and capitalist inheritance of value for things over people, particularly people of colour”.

dressed but it's losing the skill, knowing it's not going to come back. It won't come back. I'm sure it won't come back" (Woods, interview, 2022).

The gesture of lamenting the disintegration of beauty indicates that it is (perversely) it's very loss that is valued. The biting comments about 'rags' hint at the darker aspects of the lament that Woods partakes in. Who stands to lose in this view, and with the benefit of hindsight, what has really been lost and to whom? Wole Soyinka's (2021: 77) idea of the "retrieved object", as a special category helps to explain the idea of value in retrieval or near loss: "[o]ne must recognize also the obvious: that the histories of the object of contemplation differ from, and often control the aura that surrounds the retrieved object - mostly surreptitiously. For suppressed cultures - suppressed for whatever causes or histories - one readily admits the external addition of the very act of retrieval".

The timing of the period of beadwork collection suggests that the control of the homeland spaces worked to the advantage of art collection. The collection trips came to an end when the supply had been exhausted and crucially, when beadwork started to be created in response to its market. The dissipation of the closely controlled borders between urban and rural, cities and homelands, precipitated a freedom of movement (of people and objects) that was in direct competition with the highly valued notion of authentic tribal life that produced the beadwork. Attached to the idea of authenticity in the case of the Ndebele work is the idea of extinction and vanishing. This is the hidden cost attached to this rarity. Reflecting on the wider trade networks of African art more generally, Karel Nel (interview, 2019) suggested that the opening of the South African borders to its neighbouring countries, transformed the market and eventually destroyed the value of this category:

“[...] prior to SA opening its borders there were two, three dealers in Johannesburg that dealt with African art, in Cape Town there were four or five [...] who went out to collect in Zululand and different areas. They were linked to African Image – the national gallery bought from them. It doesn't exist anymore”.

The structures of control of movement (for people and goods) that were dismantled and reconfigured with the end of apartheid, both within South African borders (the internal homeland system) and on South Africa's national boundaries had significant impacts on the art trade and the museum ecosystem. Following the unbanning of the ANC, repatriation policies emerged. In 1995 the ISANG acquired the African Art Heritage Collection purchased by the German government and South Africa's Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, displayed at the first Heritage Day (September 24, 1995). This was presented as a “way to address the problem of cultural difference in South Africa”. The National Resources Heritage Act (1999), which protects heritage resources of

national significance, had a direct effect on the value of beadwork, amongst other items classified as belonging to certain aesthetic traditions: “objects of ritualistic and symbolic significance and personal adornment such as beads, leather, or metalwork” from 1999 onwards could not be exported at will. This positively impacted the value of the ISANG’s holdings of South African beadwork, and certainly would have impacted the value of heirlooms long sold to avid collectors.

It is in the interest of the authoritative status of the art museum, to endorse a framework that insists on the persistence of cultural production ‘out there’ that is unaffected by the activities of the museum as an observer, a ‘collector’, and interpreter of material culture. These core museal activities are justified primarily by the concept of ‘art’, which the art museum claims a unique ability to see or not see. The idea that the status of art may have deeply insidious effects and may not innocently and simply designate an elevation of cultural status and economic value is one of Azoulay’s core arguments in her analysis of the African art trade in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019). She asks us to consider: “the reduction of the life of objects to art from a polysemous set of practices endemic of diverse communities to a unified activity producing exchangeable objects, destined to be interpreted and cared for by experts according to allegedly neutral procedures that now constitute the transcendental condition of art” (Azoulay, 2019: 58-59). For Azoulay, the injustice that belies the “viewing objects as art” is not easily rectified by return of objects alone. In reconsidering the practices and logics of the art museum, we cannot lose sight of the implication of museal work in “depriving people of their material worlds” (Azoulay, 2019: 59). She argues (2019: 59) that:

“[d]eprivation should be understood simultaneously as the production of entire communities, whose material and spiritual worlds were spoiled, plundered, and dissected now made almost worldless; and the self-fashioning of cosmopolitan modern citizens through these looted objects now recognized as art while disavowing their complicity in imperial genocidal enterprises”.

The sentiment that despite it all, museums are the most appropriate custodians of cultural heritage, and by implication that the creators of these traditions are not, reverberates in white liberal discourse. With reference to Azoulay’s argument, this sentiment can be read as part of the self-fashioning of the cosmopolitan modern citizen: able to appreciate the art of ‘others’ and lament their loss, while participating and potentially even benefitting from its demise. Bianca van Laun (2020) interprets Azoulay’s idea of worldlessness as a reference to “the worlds left behind as *missing*, and continuing to miss, these objects - a missing-ness that can perhaps not be so easily repaired by the restitution/ repatriation of the objects. This is where Azoulay argues for not just restitution but a return to the moment of their being rendered missing”.

While this is a compelling lens, the dualistic nature of Azoulay's argument: that the self-fashioning of the modern citizen happens at the expense of the worldless-ness of the deprived community presents some problems that require thinking through. It is essential to recognise the relation between modern self-fashioning of some and the deprivation of others, however, the problem lies in the consequences for resistance to the mechanisms of deprivation and the possibilities of re-worlding. Fletcher (2019: 286) argues that Azoulay's thesis depends on a conception of worldliness that is rooted in pre-imperial communities and formations, which presents limits for the politics of change possible in her view. The yearning for pre-colonial communal forms as the site of imperial resistance for Fletcher is a trap. He explains that: "a notable consequence of Azoulay's rejection of a progressive and future-oriented conception of politics is to limit the potential vectors of political struggle to individual, and largely symbolic, ethical acts of rejecting or reversing the historical legacies of imperialism, from various movements for reparations to the recovery of pre-imperial political formations and indigenous traditions" (Fletcher, 2019: 286).

What Azoulay excludes are "cultural practices and forms of resistance that are the immanent products of modern imperial and colonial history, and which therefore constitute distinct countercultures of modernity" (Fletcher, 2019: 286). She leaves out the "complex temporalities produced by imperial and colonial projects, which, as with modernity itself, are multiple and contradictory" (Fletcher, 2019: 286). In omitting these contradictions, Azoulay could re-affirm the problematic historicist narrative that imperialism tells about itself. The over-emphasis on pre-colonial modes of living and cultural expression as the only legitimate site of resistance and change can be stunting. When this is not developed together with a co-ordinated economic and political project of renewal, these forms are not "in and of themselves, capable of realizing the ideals of a post-imperial future" (Fletcher, 2019: 288).

The case of Ndebele and Eastern Cape aesthetic traditions and the social positions that they afford and generate, point to complex and continuous entanglements between forms of imperial exploitation and manifestations of resistance. Should the women that Ivor Powell talked about, who said they preferred the "new party style" of Ndebele marital aprons and would keep certain items away from the collectors' gaze, be interpreted only as members of deprived, now worldless communities or also as self-fashioning South African citizens? The ways in which the South African National Art Gallery accumulated, stored, and celebrated these objects as part of the newly constituted 'Rainbow Nation', and in the ways that these objects were publicly interpreted, further circulated and valued, indicated complex temporalities and identities at play. Fletcher reminds us of the importance of keeping these in view in our reading of the colonial archive and in the project of unlearning imperialism and its manifestations.

## Exhibiting Beadwork and Bead-workers in the New South Africa (1990s)

Once objects enter the museum, a certain metamorphosis occurs. Jyontindra Jain (2011:1) asks “to what extent does a material or embodied museum object, isolated from its cultural context, represent its own identity? Was there ever one identity or one life of a cultural object? Wasn’t the object, even while being part of a living tradition, passing through many lives?” Legacies of power struggles, between indigenous actors and colonial aggressors, are legible in both Xhosa and Ndebele aesthetic traditions, and in the very categorisation of the traditions themselves. In the case of Ndebele aesthetic traditions, Powell (1998) points out that historians and cultural institutions have selectively emphasised the narrative that that Ndebele art forms represent a form of cultural resistance to oppressive colonial and apartheid rule and manifest the continuation of African traditions in the face of erasure. While not disputing the long history of resistance embedded in the aesthetic history of Ndebele artforms, Powell advocates for a more ambiguous reading that considers the forces of the art market (and by implication museums) and tourism, the direct support for aesthetic activity by the apartheid state and the mass internal migration and urbanisation affected by the Homelands system. The plea to recognise the embeddedness of aesthetic forms in specific social and political contexts, and the state of metamorphosis that all identities exist in, is a warning against the romanticisation and fetishization of resistance - the danger of this is precisely the ossification of tribal identity upon which the apartheid state traded.

The invocation of both Xhosa and Ndebele aesthetic traditions by cultural institutions in the attempted construction of a new, rainbow South Africa in the 1990s, has been critiqued primarily through concepts of identity (Radithlalo, 2001; Leibhammer, 1995; Lilla, 2018). More specifically, what emerges in the stories of accumulation (collection) and exhibition of these forms of beadwork by the ISANG are issues around the gendered nature of beadwork traditions, and the role that black women have been made to play as the bearers of ‘vanishing’ traditions. Lilla (2018) and Leibhammer (1995) both questioned the gesture of profiling black women’s work within the art museum context at ISANG, while simultaneously supporting the representational tropes that suppress their voices. I agree with this critique, and through a reading of the institutional paradigm shift in 1980s South Africa, suggest that the institutional ‘recognition’ and celebration of Southern African art and material culture by art museums was performed in parallel with an invisibilising/ neutralisation of whiteness.

Newly museumified objects like beadwork from the Eastern Cape and Ndebele communities served an important ideological function in the ISANG: to ‘celebrate’ hither-to suppressed and oppressed

identities in South Africa. Herein lay a conundrum that needs some unpacking. The ideology of trusteeship and paternalism which lay at the heart of the apartheid regime was served by a fantasy of (unchanging) bucolic African tribal life.<sup>59</sup> More than this however, as Radithlalo (2001: 255) argues, the Apartheid state operated via a system of control in which identity – either its recognition or denial, was central. Within this system, ethnic identities played an important role, and hence cultural material took on new meanings in the political transition. Between abuse and celebration of cultural difference lay a very fine line that the ISANG was aware of when mounting the exhibitions of beadwork in question.

Radithlalo (2001: 253) asks of the impetus to frame a ‘new South Africa’, “what may be the (newer?) identity of those for whom it was earlier denied – a rarefied ethnic identity of those excluded from common citizenship – as opposed to those who took theirs for granted, such as the beneficiaries of the apartheid state?” In this observation he accurately captures the crux of the representational problem with Eastern Cape and Ndebele beadwork as a sign of Africanisation: in placing these items and histories on pedestals as part of a ‘unity in diversity’ political message, the fantasy of authentic African culture is once again in use as valuable political currency. At the same time, taken-for-granted identities may remain offstage, directing the show. The very act of promoting specific cultural identities, offered the opportunity to invisibilise whiteness and erase the difficult history upon which white privilege is poised.

Radithlalo argues that the selective recognition, denial and essentialising of identity practiced within the apartheid context was socially damaging because it denied agency in the process of identity creation. He explains that “apartheid identities were a very porous terrain in which victims experienced endless, perceptual slippages, thus pointing to the untenable position of an essentialised and immutable identity” (Radithlalo, 2001: 256). To celebrate rural life through the determined exclusion of the urban landscape to which cultures have adapted and migrated is for Radithlalo at the heart of the problem of staging such a celebration and amounts to a resurrection of a ‘noble savage’ concept. This critique emerged specifically in response to veteran South African documentary photographer Peter Magubane’s photographs from both the Eastern Cape and the Ndebele communities in Mpumalanga. Some of these photographs were exhibited in the Ezakwantu exhibition.

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<sup>59</sup> To provide another example, South African artists such as Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern (throughout their long careers) helped to establish a visual vocabulary that described a romanticised and distant Africa which remains highly popular even today. More recent analyses of their work have traced intimate connections between their careers and the apartheid state’s propaganda (O Toole, 2020; Berger, 2020).

A few years later (by 1998), Magubane published a book called *Vanishing Cultures* which included photographic stories from all South Africa's ethnic groups, except for 'coloured', Asian, and white and was prefaced by Nelson Mandela. Magubane's use of Mandela as the ultimate authorising figure, was able to justify the selective appropriation that constituted the lament for cultures that are vanishing. Radithlalo's response is instructive in not only articulating some of the key representational problems in identity construction in relation to the postapartheid moment, but also in his critique of the concept of 'vanishing cultures' which will be examined in greater detail in relation to the purchase histories of the beadwork in question. For Radithlalo (2001: 259), the visual vocabulary of *Vanishing Cultures* connects Magubane with the legacy of colonial photographers like Alfred Duggan Cronin and not with Ruth Motau, Santu Mofokeng, or Zwelethu Mthethwa who were his contemporaries. Where, asks Radithlalo, are the relationships between communities and their environments, real or imagined? What is at stake for Radithlalo is the claim to the country if belonging is predicated on this specific kind of rural belonging. To ignore these tensions, difficulties, and realities in postapartheid South African context is to ignore a whole history of dispossession.



Fig 41 Photograph of the Ezakwantu exhibition, 1992 (source: photo supplied by Carol Kauffman)

On a representational and discursive level, the ISANG presented a reading of beadwork in both exhibitions that was conscious of the problematic role that ethnic identity played in apartheid ideology. In the texts produced by the exhibitions emerges an acute awareness and even anxiety around the danger of inadvertently reproducing apartheid categories. Catalogue essays (Van Wyk, Klopper) and critiques associated with the exhibition footprint in both Ndebele and Ezakwantu were framed in the new museological discourse (guided by key post-structural and postcolonial concepts). In thinking about the re-contextualisation of beadwork as art in one of the Ezakwantu catalogue essays, Van Wyk (1993: 83) pointed out (invoking Hal Foster) that “it is one thing to admit recontextualisation, and quite another to produce ideas with it. Where African objects are concerned, it is insufficient to confirm the colonial (and more contemporary) extraction of this work from its producers in the guise of its redemption as art, without presenting a counter-discourse that points to that exploitative process in which the art museum is a ‘final stage in a series of abstractions, of power-knowledge plays’”. Van Wyk is hopeful that such a counter-discourse would be possible through the work of the museum’s self-recognition as ‘a final stage in a series of abstractions’. Van Wyk (1994: 183) argues for a discourse that is able to “resist seeing the African subjects in [a] nostalgic light, as faded alter-images of Western anthropology, and rather to question the operations of power that turned them into subjects in the first place”.

This framing implied a practice of institutional reflexivity on the part of the ISANG. Consider the questioning format chosen in the educational supplement for Ezakwantu, which featured the two artists who sat in the gallery and created beadwork pieces for the duration of the exhibition. This very curatorial choice garnered critique, as there was no translator available in the exhibition to bridge the language divide between the Xhosa speaking artists and the predominantly English-speaking audience, which leached value from the ‘polyphonic’ potential of this performance and rendered it problematic.

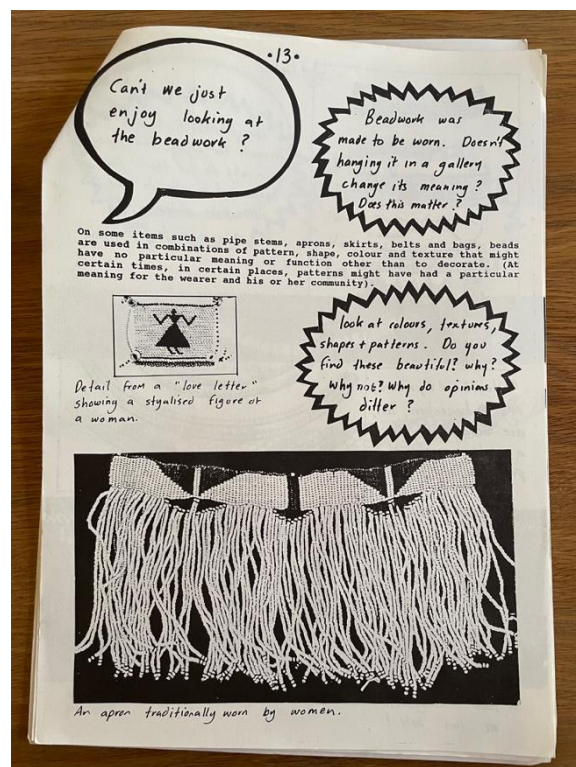
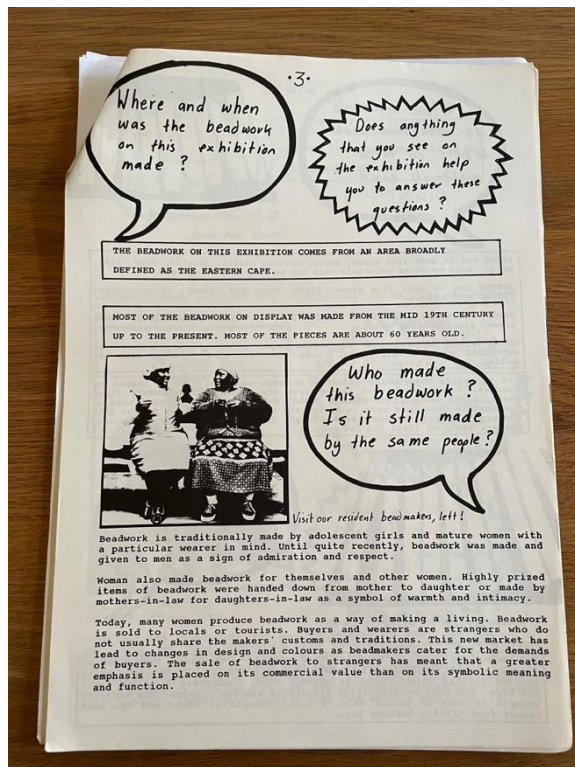


Fig 42. Educational supplement for the Ezakwantu exhibition, page 3 (1992), (source: photograph by author); Fig 43. Educational supplement for the Ezakwantu exhibition, page 13 (1992), (source: photograph by author)

In the Ndebele exhibition, traditional artists were invited to collaborate in the construction of the exhibition, and photography was included in conversation with beadwork and built structures that showcased wall paintings.<sup>60</sup> Leibhammer (1995) and Lilla (2018) have pointed out that these two exhibitions make evident the shallowness of the performance of polyphony and Africanity in the institution. In this very act of visibilising, but not *vocalising* specifically black and African voices, there was the possibility to render invisible white culture and identity as the neutral backdrop of political change. The ISANG was able to claim a progressive stance through its viewing beadwork as *art*, while failing to engage with the violent past that has validated the institution's cultural authority in the first place. While Martin would publicly insist on the balance between white curatorial voices and black community involvement, upon closer engagement there was always a clear and untroubled hierarchy in place (Lilla, 2018: 257). Hierarchy and cultural authority was maintained via the very

<sup>60</sup> The exhibition material stated: "historical and contemporary works showing the social life of the Ndebele by painters and photographers (Margaret Courtney-Clarke, David Goldblatt, Thomas Kgope, Constance Stuart Larrabee, Peter Magubane and Alexis Preller, for example) are on view. In preparing for the exhibition, SANG invited six Ndebele artists from remote areas of Gauteng, formerly the Transvaal Isa Kabini, Emma Mahlangu, Betty Masanabo, Lia Mailele, Sophie Msiza and Anna Matshiyi to work in co-operation with curators and guest curator, Peter Rich from Johannesburg. Over six weeks, and in full view of visitors to the Gallery, they worked on the Ndebele courtyard entrances and sculptures that are a major feature of the exhibition" (ISANG exhibition supplement, edited by Emile Maurice, 1995).

performance of transformation, which was epitomised as the very *act* of recognition and of seeing beadwork as art and producing knowledge via this representational shift.

Leibhammer (1994: 81) asked whether the wearing of “traditional” garments supported ‘the grand “divide and rule’ policies of apartheid South Africa, or is this a sign of pride in ‘African’ values and ideologies? Is it a retrogressive or empowering gesture?’ Two bead-work artists working in the exhibition space, as well as “Xhosa dancers and an imbongi (“traditional” praise poet) were featured at the opening, and Albertina Sisulu, head of the ANC Women’s League, was the guest speaker” (Leibhammer, 1994: 81). According to Leibhammer (1994: 81), “[t]hese all helped to alter the perception that an art gallery is a largely white, elitist establishment”. Connections between Xhosa aesthetic traditions, Xhosa identity, and the ruling ANC were threaded through the Ezakwantu exhibition and were treated in depth in the scholarly essays that accompanied the exhibition. However, in her final assessment, Leibhammer’s reading was that the seemingly earnest pursuit of *authentic* representation, undermined the representational efforts to describe fluidity and complexity. While at a discursive level there was consensus that identity is unstable, cannot be essentialised, is vulnerable to abuse by power structures, a social and political system that violently inscribed cultural difference bore scars that marked the present and rendered this theoretical assertion and representational gestures fragile.

Sandra Klopper (2002: 23) observes that the apartheid state had “actively reinforced ethnic differences and thereby encouraged the production of work that gave expression to these differences, but which also failed to acknowledge the status of this work as ‘art’”. This failure is implicitly one that the art institutions claim to respond to. Klopper laments that this failure is repeated by the post-apartheid state. Evidence of this, for Klopper, is in Mbeki’s famous African Renaissance speech of 1998, in which he references an African aesthetic lineage without mention of Southern African work:

“The beginning of our rebirth as a continent must be our own discovery of our soul, captured and made permanently available in the great works of creativity represented by the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the stone buildings of Axum, and the ruins of Carthage and Zimbabwe, the rock paintings of the San, the Benin bronzes and the African masks, the carvings of the Makonde and the stone sculptures of the Shona” (Mbeki, 1998).

Mbeki’s adherence to a classical African art canon is indicative of the various rebirths of burdened epistemic categories. Mbeki’s idea of an African renaissance may be seen in relation to Senghor’s (critiqued) philosophy of negritude: seeking to resurrect Africa’s civilisations. Ndhlovu and Rassool (2022: 228) explain that “(d)uring its formative phase, and in the midst of then-president Thabo

Mbeki's African Renaissance project, the SFI council saw the new museum structure as an instrument to be used to "awaken Africanism," and to highlight that South Africa was where humans originated. The council therefore positioned Iziko as a flagship and cultural institution that set itself the task of leading the work of heritage conservation not only in South Africa but also on the continent. This saw Iziko's participation in the Timbuktu manuscript conservation project that was championed by Mbeki". This attempt to reinscribe a civilisational narrative into the history of Africa speaks to the ongoing epistemic struggle left in the wake of colonialism.

In Klopper's view, apartheid and post-apartheid governments are equally at fault for their insensitivity to the cultural richness of their constituencies. While this critique may be valid, what it fails to take into consideration is the pervasiveness of constructed ethnic and cultural identities within the discourse, practice, and construction of art itself. The very purchases of beadwork explored in this chapter, reflected a syndrome of preservation, laden with problematic assumptions and practices. While it may be more evident when ethnic and cultural identities are galvanised in political discourse, the story of beadwork acquisition in South Africa and the complex territory that the ISANG found itself in through the performative visual work of 'nation building', attests to the intertwinement of the aesthetic and the political. As argued previously, one of the legacies of apartheid is the project of dismantling and complicating cultural identities.

## Dismantling Apartheid Legacies in Art Archives

Rassool (2020: 341) argues that "in many ways South African history can be understood as a deep, historical contest between the project of race and ethnicity of successive colonial states and apartheid, on the one hand, and the project of imagining a society without race and ethnicity". Accession records in the ISANG, such as those associated with the beadwork sub-collections, provided bureaucratic traces of this contest. Paper trails left in the wake of negotiations between sellers like David and Woods the ISANG expose both systems of epistemic rewriting and erasure, and an anxiousness to overcome these very systems.<sup>61</sup> Attending to trace-able details of some of these object lives, I have

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<sup>61</sup> In such instances, the performance of verification (and the indicators of veracity) is exposed as particularly fragile. The elusiveness of the 'truth': the names of the makers, the real meanings of the traded object, haunt the ISANG archives. Consider this furtive note from a dealer of African art who sold large quantities of Southern African objects that were acquisitioned under Zulu attribution (stuffs, chokers, blankets, and beadwork aprons) by the ISANG in 1992. In his note of sale, he included this promise: "*the majority of pieces are 'artist unknown', in those cases where information does exist, I will track these down in many field notes and supply them to you in a few months. As originally indicated other information including anecdotes or detailed information about pieces will be supplied (along with the same to Wits university) over the next couple of years, as full research is documented*" (ISANG archive). The archive does not confirm whether he kept his word, indicating the value of his promise as a kind of brokerage. The museum is supposed to care about these stories, and perhaps in some cases showing that it *intends* to care in the future, or has a form that *could* record this information, was enough to seal the deal.

sought to investigate Leibhammer’s assertion that “(t)he colonial and the colonised were always intimately and intricately interwoven in hybrid and complex ways. These objects were never specimens of some ‘primitive’ past, but items always enmeshed as integral parts of an ever-changing social fabric - negotiations of the ‘here and now’ - the political present” (2016: 84).

By examining the purchase and display histories of these two sub-collections in the African art collection, I have made evident the ISANG’s historical commitments to certain paradigms, as well as its constant attempts to transcend and move beyond these very paradigms. I have looked at the collection and exhibition histories to raise questions about the roles that these beadwork collections were asked to play in this historical moment, as authentic examples of certain traditions, as emblems of ethnicity. In the case of the beadwork, it is the very requirement of authenticity that objects collected in this category always seem to refuse or elide. This chapter sought to map out some of the material effects of the institution’s gaze that turned traditional beaded objects into *art*.

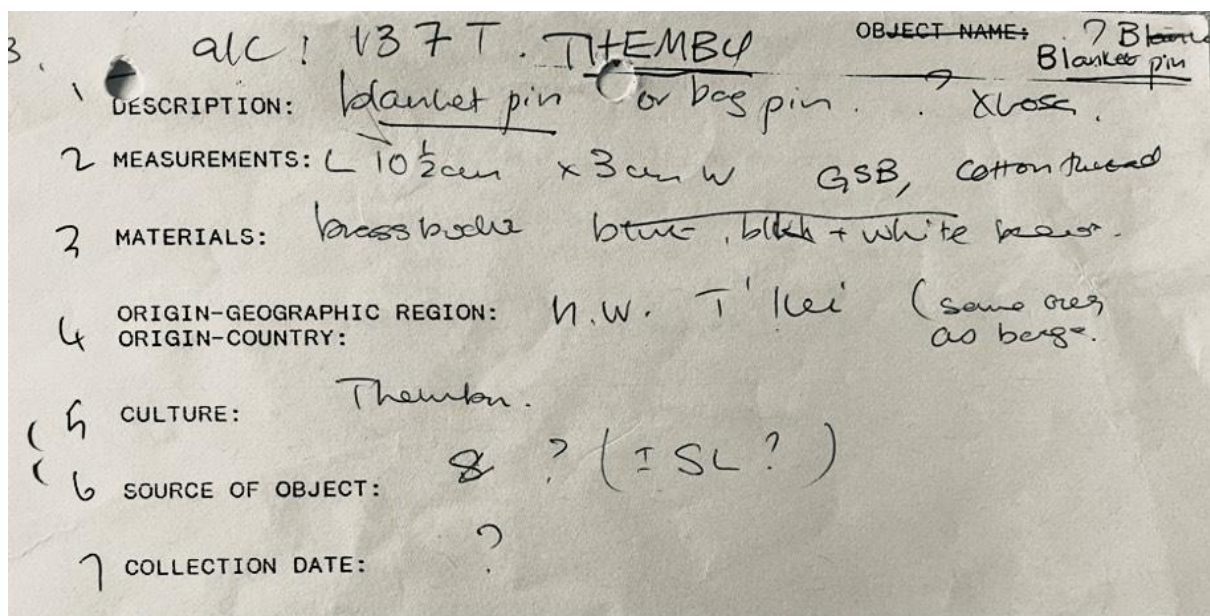


Fig 44. Acquisition card for one the items purchased by ISANG, ISANG archive, 2022 (source: photographed by the author)

The institutional gaze precipitated a mass accumulation of what may otherwise have lost localized cultural value in other unknown ways or remained in culturally valuable circulation and constituted an important and unforeseen role in the communities from which the beadwork was purchased. It can only be speculated what may have happened if the scramble for beadwork had not occurred, and it is worth speculating primarily because this speculation presents an interpretation that does not take museal authority as self-evident. As I have argued in the previous two chapters, the ISANG can be shown to have utilised an understanding of art and authenticity that above all certified its claims to

cultural authority: whether the authority was used to designate cultural others or to perform the representation of new political ideologies.

From 1988 – 1998 there was a period of heightened acquisitional activity at the ISANG. The ISANG had reformulated its racially exclusive acquisitional policies<sup>62</sup> and was galvanized by the political motivation to purchase African art and black South African art as a restorative gesture of inclusion. In addition, market conditions were in the ISANG's favour. The era of local 'field-collection' epitomized by the large acquisitions from dealers like David, Woods and a few others, ensured favourable prices and relatively exclusive access to sites of 'authentic' creative production like villages in the former homelands. The ethics of the collections in these historical circumstances, and the complex and contradictory impulses of the museum, are issues that this research project has aimed to surface. While active purchasing directly from dealers of Southern African art slowed down in the 1990s, acquisitions of African art remained a strong part of Marilyn Martin's agenda during her directorship from 1988 to 2008. In the main, acquisitions of historical African art were (with very rare exceptions such as Ashanti bronze pieces) focused on Southern Africa.



Fig 45. 'Mfengu' beadwork on display at *Breaking Down the Walls*, ISANG, 2022, (source: photograph by the author)

Fig 46. Bone bracelet from the *Natural History* collection at Iziko, attributed to San origin, on display at *Breaking Down the Walls*, ISANG, 2022 (source: photograph by the author)

During Martin's directorship, the majority of the total permanent African art collection was purchased. After 1995 most purchases of African art at the ISANG were made under the auspices of heritage reclamation. These often entailed the bequests or purchases of established collections usually belonging to wealthy South African expatriates living in the UK or the USA or European individuals

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<sup>62</sup> While loose and non-committal policies about 'recognizing African art' had been formulated since the 1960s, action was only taken in the late 1980s.

or institutions. For example, South African academic Gary van Wyk galvanized the ISANG to fundraise from the German and South African governments for the purchase of the extensive African Art Heritage collection, which was repatriated with great publicity (1999) from various European institutional and private collections.<sup>63</sup> The accession records indicate acquisitions and bequests of large batches of material that would previously have been interpreted as ethnographic over two decades (for example hundreds of beadwork aprons and headrests). These came to a marked end when Martin’s directorship expired and Riason Naidoo succeeded Martin in 2008. From 2008 to the present there have been very few acquisitions that have been placed in the permanent African art collection.



*Fig 47. Visitors at Iziko South African National Gallery. Image source: Iziko Museums of South Africa / N Pamplin (2022)*

When asked about the purchases towards the African Art collection during his directorship in an interview (Naidoo interview, 2023), Naidoo explained that his focus as a director was on addressing the enormous backlog of acquisitions of modern and contemporary black art. While there were some acquisitions of African art particularly under the guidance of Carol Kaufmann, there was clearly an investment in addressing the dominant place that European art had held in the ISANG and actively

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<sup>63</sup> As Kaufmann recorded in the wall text for Hidden Treasures in 2019: “[i]n 1994 the SANG made a commitment to the repatriation of art works removed from the country in previous centuries with the acquisition of The African Art Heritage Collection. Purchased for the people of South Africa by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the newly formed Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology the collection comprised fourteen superb works found abroad and returned home timeously for the celebration of South Africa’s first official Heritage Day on 14 September 1995”.

correcting the legacy of black exclusion historically practised by the institution. Naidoo emphasized the following as additional constraints regarding the African Art collection: “some of the challenges at ISANG were inherited, such as having a white curator of ‘African art’ who was not qualified nor specialized in the field, and who relied heavily on being approached by (white) private dealers in Cape Town. I was not specialized in this area either. The curator position needed someone with an intimate knowledge of local indigenous art, and not only the expertise gained from publications" (interview, 2023). Naidoo’s 1910 - 2010: Pierneef to Gugulective exhibition spoke to the urgent rethinking of the ‘South African’ story of art that he took on as director. As such, the African art collection, given its hidden caveats around ‘tradition’, was by default a secondary concern to the exhibition and acquisition of what Naidoo considered omissions of living artists and schools. Once again, the deeply embedded problems in African art as an historical category emerge - as this category cannot seamlessly be incorporated into the problematic epistemic arena of ‘art history’. The stories of black art and African art are intertwined, just as the project of social justice is the condition for the transformation of the museum.

It is telling that in 2022, the most recent curatorial approach to beadwork from the ISANG has been to frame these works within a gendered discourse of ‘women’s work’ (Breaking Down the Walls, 2022). While the pieces remain in display cases, and their labels reflect standard practice (as the images show), I include a photograph used in an article about the exhibition (Daily Maverick), which encourages and alludes to a reading of generational and demographic change in the constituency of the gallery. The chairperson of Iziko Jabulani Sithole remarked “we are at the beginning of a new era of challenging our visitors to see things differently” (Daily Maverick, 2022), which is consistent with a “decolonial agenda”. The current context of the ISANG, shaped by decolonial imperatives and new museological discourse and weighed down by imperial histories, is the premise of the final chapter.

## Chapter 6

### The Spectre of Coloniality in the Spatial Politics of African art: between the museum and the city

Closely observed, the qualities of seriality and fakeness in art expose the fragility of the art institutions' rules and requirements for authenticity, originality, identity, and ethnicity. In so doing, they provide tools to rethink and reshape the rules and requirements of the art institution. So does an engagement with the creation of space both in the art museum and in the trade of African art, which suggests that not only can the art museums' rules of verification and authorisation be exposed as fragile and contradictory, but its rules can be seen as replicated, borrowed, and reapplied outside of the museum and put to use by dominant economic actors. Together, the idea of the fake, and a focus on space, might enable a response to Ariella Azoulay's (2019: 60) argument that "it has become unimaginable to think of art that is not displayed as a detached commodity, bereft of the disaster that produced it as art, not recognised as new in a world made solely of objects salvaged for eternity, and whose modality is not defined by globalised systems such as museums, the media, and the market".

As a response to this charge, I consider in parallel to each other three spaces related to the display of African art in the city of Cape Town: first the ISANG's Hidden Treasures exhibition which was staged between 2019 - 2020, and which featured objects in the Permanent African Art collection. In parallel with the Hidden Treasures exhibition, were the openings and closures of two symbolically significant spaces in the cities' African art trade: the Pan African Market and the Tribal Collective boutique in Long Street, Cape Town between 2019 and 2020. The Pan African Market (established in 1996) epitomised an alternative community-based model of spatial occupation and economic activity that was over time transformed and (somewhat ironically) erased through the encroachment of neo-liberal logics that propelled the 'flourishing' of Cape Town as a design and tourism capital.

I trace a narrative, based on interviews with traders, store owners, and writers, of the evolution and dissolution of this space, which registers the scars left by the recent global pandemic left on the city centre's previous hub of informal African art trade: Long Street. When the three storey Victorian era building in the heart of the city centre, which for 20 years was the Pan African Market, was poached, colonised, and replaced by the luxury homeware and art company Tribal Collective in 2019, the people who animated the trade of African arts and curios were dispensed, displaced, and replaced with what thinker, editor and activist Ntone Edjabe (interview, 2020) called "objects in a well-lit, museological apparatus". The transformation of this space provides a compelling case for Edjabe's (interview, 2020) argument that "[t]he politics in this city is space, it is the main politics and the main

economy. Wherever we can claim space – that is subversive. Just having control of some space - that is subversive”. This final chapter reflects on the role that both the notion of authenticity and the concomitant conditioning and control of space has on how African art is valued and interpreted in the present. The appearance of traditional African art in the context of the ISANG should not be read as divorced from a larger network and politics of space, mobility, and value in the city. In fact, the very utopic insistence of a separation between spaces of aesthetic contemplation and real-world spaces is an unhelpful myth based on a politics that endorses a differential way of valuing and coding people and things. Instead, inspiration may be taken from extant community-based social, artistic, and economic modalities that might better serve the cities and museums of the future.

### Hidden Treasures: Legacies of looking at African Art and a Fragile Heritage (2019 | 2020)

In August 2019, I visited the Hidden Treasures exhibition which featured around 45 objects from the ISANG Permanent African Art collection. The ISANG was completely empty, a status that the visitors book confirmed as the norm. The art selected was diverse, beautiful, and appeared to be sourced from at least 25 locations on the African continent and covered a period that roughly indicated the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to somewhere close to the present. At that moment, I was already viewing the exhibition as a researcher. I had submitted a PhD research proposal<sup>64</sup> that outlined a study of the changing articulations of African aesthetics at the SANG from 1871 to the present. That day I had entered the museum with a framing that took as a given a certain cultural authority vested in the form of the national art museum. This framework slowly dismantled as the research unfolded.

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<sup>64</sup> The proposal conceived a comparative project that traced the historical and contemporary engagement of the Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo, Brazil with African aesthetics alongside that of the ISANG. The shift in focus was partly practical, as pandemic related changes compromised plans for international fieldwork, and partly conceptual, as the linguistic barriers which would impede accurate comparative depth were underestimated. The project was conceptually reframed to think of African art and its shifting articulation within the SANG/ISANG through an historical trajectory, but also in ways that would bring this often inward looking institution into conversation with the continent of which it is geographically a part.



*Fig 48. The Benno Leipold bequest of Congolese and Côte D'Ivoirian masks displayed in the Hidden Treasures exhibition at ISANG (2019) (source: photograph by the author)*

The exhibition was curated by the ex-curator of African art, Carol Kaufmann. Since her resignation in 2016 (after holding the position for 20 years), the ISANG has not appointed another African art curator. This may be read as a disinvestment in this contentious category by the ISANG, and expressive of the ambivalent place that traditional African art holds in the contemporary public imagination. Hidden Treasures showed diverse offerings from the collection: amongst many others there were Ghanaian Kente cloths (purchased in Accra in 1995 by staff member Kim Siebert); the West African wooden sculptures from present day Guinée, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire that we are familiar with as “the young ones” (purchased in Cape Town by assistant curator Bruce Arnott in the 1960s); a soapstone sculpture from Zimbabwe (purchased in the 1960s also by Arnott); wooden headrests from Angola and South Africa (purchased in the early 2000s). The exhibition also included

some of the Ndebele and Xhosa beadwork discussed in chapter 6 as well as newer acquisitions like the Benno Leipold bequest of Congolese masks discussed in chapter 4.

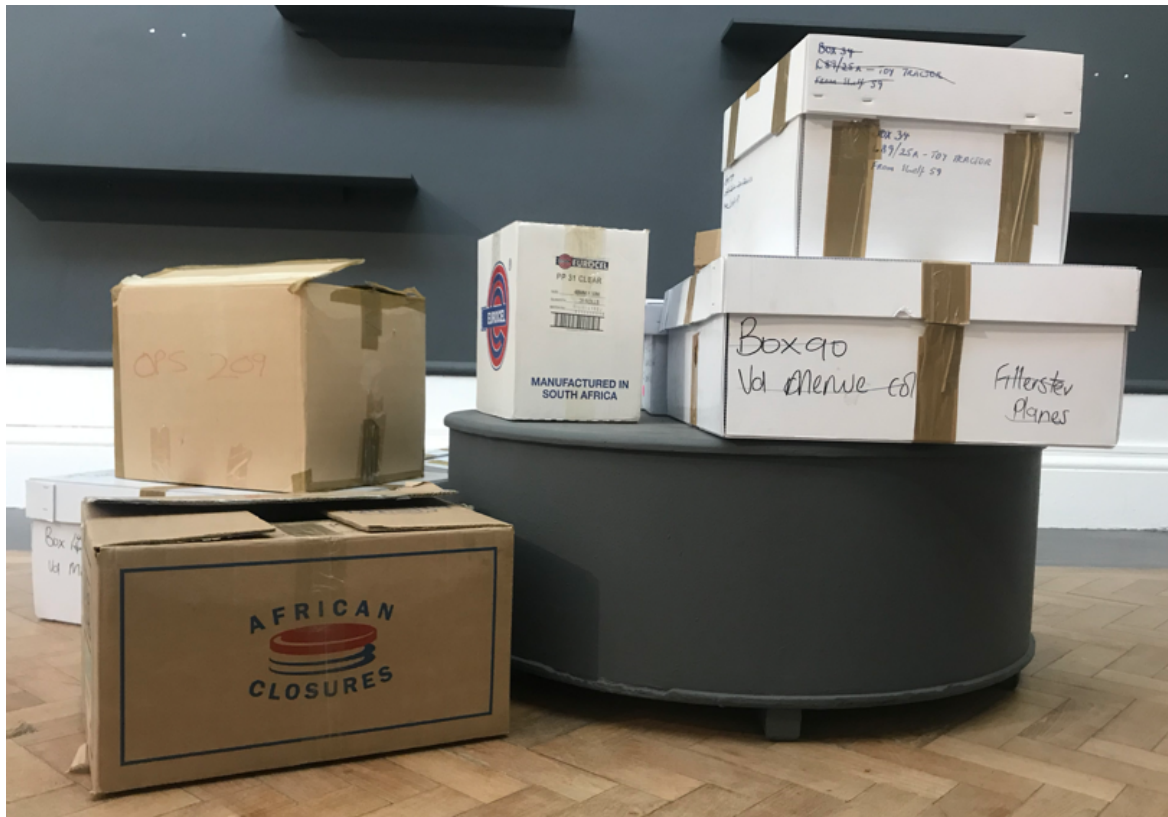


Fig 49. Boxes during the dismantling Hidden Treasures exhibition at ISANG (2020). (source: photograph by the author)

A series of questions tumbled out: how could this encounter with African objects suggest such an interpretive cul-de-sac? What available frameworks were at my disposal to interpret these objects? What ways of seeing had this space, part of apartheid's 'soft edge', inherited and reproduced? Were there signs of disruption posed by the objects on display? Why did the language of national pride and African Heritage ring false in this colonial drawing room? How successful had the language of heritage as utilised by the art museum to talk about its African art collection been in creating shared value? As my research progressed, I came closer towards answering these questions in a more systematic way. The language employed by the ISANG to frame Hidden Treasures attempted to interpolate its audience through nation-based concepts of heritage and democratic values. Consider the wall text introducing the exhibition:

“[u]nlike some of the colonial collections of African art in European museums, the development of the Iziko South African National Gallery collection mirrors the trajectory of our latter history by attempting to affirm our nation's democratic ideals. Inclusivity,

repatriation, redress and the presence of women artists have been some of the core concerns in building the collection”.

It is necessary to briefly outline the trajectory through which (South) African Art came to be framed as ‘national heritage’ in post-apartheid South Africa. By 1999, new policies were instituted both nationally under the new democratic dispensation and internationally through bodies like UNESCO that regarded ‘indigenous’ cultural material as part of national heritage<sup>65</sup>. Such material was with immediate effect subject to different laws of mobility on the international market. Basu and Modest (2015:8) argue that while value is at the heart of the vision of “heritage as a resource at the service of contemporary civil society”, the realm of value is “contested and dynamic”.<sup>66</sup> It cannot be assumed that the value of a material heritage declared to be public (such as a collection of art in a public art museum), is shared or experienced collectively. In fact, the process of value creation often does not work in ways that benefit communities whose heritage has been nationalised, and within the heritage industry there is evidence of the continuity of unequal power relations between rich and poor (Basu and Modest, 2015:8).

Of concern to this study, is to outline more precisely the kinds of value associated with the category of ‘traditional’ African art. In this sub-section, I ask to whom traditional African art, in the post-apartheid context of South Africa, has been made valuable? Further questions follow which might not have clear responses: does the museum devalue cultural objects by treating them as kinds of epistemic hostages, or as incarcerated objects (Sarr and Savoy, 2018)? Could there be modes of display that foreground these questions and present the process rather than the product in the construction of cultural heritage? Does the museum hold an obligation to source communities and the complexity of even defining this term?

The ISANG of today can be located as an instrument of the post-colonial state, with a mandate to serve a national constituency. Heritage (and its concomitant relationship with development) has become a popular way of talking about historical material in the ISANG in the post-apartheid era. The

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<sup>65</sup> Ndhlovu and Rassool (2022: 228) explain in relation to Iziko Museums of South Africa, “(t)he Flagship therefore emphasized the need for the new museum structure to “show our African heritage” and to “define a new South Africanism, an articulation that was also in line with the nation-building project of the Department of Arts and Culture (Southern Flagship Institution 19996). This would be achieved through amalgamation and integration, two processes that were initially seen as similar. While it acknowledged the inestimable heritage value of the more than 2.5 million amalgamated collections as national assets, the council reiterated that its museum sites and collections would be people-centered with an emphasis on their public nature (Southern Flagship Institution 1999a; 1999b; Iziko Museums of South Africa 2017).

<sup>66</sup> There is often conflict in the notion of utilizing or creating values: for example, the disjuncture between heritage tourism beneficiaries who are incentivized to be present in a certain expected version of their past (incarcerated in the ‘repetition of the ancestral’) which enables their future development. However, their desires for a future (and hence present) are more alike to the visitors who are time travelling to see this old world.

collective value of the ISANG's European and white South African material archive remains a highly fragmented topic (more than ever in a post-Fallist environment and within decolonial discourses) and sits more uneasily in heritage discourse. Since the end of apartheid however, the language of heritage has been drawn upon consistently to frame and add value to the institution's collection of Southern African art, and to its permanent African art collection more generally (as is evident in the language used in the ISANG Hidden Treasures exhibition). There are several contesting forces that complicate this usage.

Despite a range of motivations and approaches to heritage emanating from the postapartheid South African state, it can be argued that (following a global neoliberal trend), the theme of heritage is approached primarily through economic perspectives rather than cultural or social ones. Basu and Modest (2015:13) argue that there are limits of translation between different regimes of value: intrinsic, institutional, instrumental, and economic value of material cultural heritage. Furthermore, they argue that "political will has turned attention away from intrinsic value (seen as the preserve of a privileged milieu of academics and experts) toward the other values that again relate to the work that culture or heritage can do for society, whether as catalyst, instrument or generator of social or economic capital" (Basu and Modest, 2015: 13). Within this paradigm, the national art museum remains in a position to maintain a hierarchical (and potentially patronising) educational role in relation to its audiences, dictating the parameters of a new national heritage. As Sarukkai (2020: 62) reminds us however, while "one of the central roles of a museum is this capacity to give value to something through its presentation in the museum [...] this value and the process of the creation of the value is always hidden."

In this way, the art museum can sustain its syndrome of preservation through the politically expedient language of heritage and custodianship as its focus continues to be "the preserved object or practice [that] is transformed in the process of past making" (Basu and Modest, 2015: 7). Heritage laws in principle are formulated to protect and preserve not only things themselves, but the possibility for traditions, communities, and practices to survive. However, as I have explored in detail through the example of Ndebele beadwork and Eastern Cape beadwork traditions, museal practices of collection and research are not neutral, and are shaped significantly by social and political factors. In addition, these practices (sometimes inadvertently) have the capacity to undermine rather than nourish the very traditions that they claim to celebrate. The creation of value through the paradigm of heritage is not necessarily an open-ended or participatory process, but one that can play into existent unequal power relations.

The neoliberal trend dictates that transformed historical objects and practices are readily commoditized and work to construct a past which *consumers*, rather than citizens, or communities, would like to see: one that is safe, sanitized, and simplified. On the one hand, this has heightened “academic anxieties concerning the inventedness of tradition and the erosion of authenticity” (Basu and Modest, 2015:14), which appears in the ISANG’s self-reflexive and academically inclined postapartheid institutional language. On the other hand, “heritage, as the commoditized past” (the object of socio-economic analyses like the enrichment economy) describes the ways in which heritage tourism and heritage consumption has become a lucrative global industry. The logic of the enrichment economy, as I will explore in more detail in this chapter, increasingly incentivises art museums to speak a globalised language rather than a hyper-localised one, or perhaps a localised language framed by a global aesthetic. In the case of the ISANG and the presentation of African art as heritage, the default to generic, globally legible without a critical (or destabilising) component, runs a risk of overlooking “heritages or cultural practices that challenge normative frameworks, resist dominant worldviews or imagine futures (and values) other than those determined by the neoliberal hegemony” (Basu and Modest, 2015:14).

At present, the notion of a shared national heritage in South Africa is a contested and fragile one. The hope of renewal in the ‘rainbow nation’ moment has given way to much more cynical perspectives. Evidence of the Hidden Treasures exhibitions’ lack of impact lies both in the lack of public interest and engagement with this exhibition and with the ISANG more generally and the ways in which the institutions’ epistemic outputs have been eclipsed by other institutions such as the much newer and shinier Zeitz MOCAA (which opened in 2017) as spaces that shape contemporary understandings of African art. There are two entry points to interpret why a contemporary (South) African audience might be resistant to an uncritical acceptance and celebration of this narrative of cohesion and democratic evolution proposed by the Hidden Treasures exhibition, and why these objects fall short in transmitting potential meaning framed in such a way.

First, following Nzegwu’s (2019) argument about dominant discursive frames for African art, the ISANG’s ways of showing African art in the context of the Hidden Treasures exhibition tends to truncate and displace historical meaning. This tendency constitutes an institutional failure to surface the (complex) entanglements of many of these objects in apartheid and colonial histories. In a society that continues to be defined by social inequality and legacies of apartheid and colonialism, such a surfacing could contribute to a project of epistemic or hermeneutic justice that could enable audiences to grapple with the nature and extent of the designated ‘post’-ness of both regimes. The framing of the African art object in 2019 at the ISANG however, indicated that the conservative and de-historicising epistemic framework well woven into the ISANG’s institutional history was defaulted to, perhaps in

response to the complex calls of the present moment. Using the example of Senufo, which may refer sometimes interchangeably to a region or a people, Yaelle Biro (2019: 1) reflects that “when art experts and enthusiasts attribute an object to a whole group of people or a geographic area ascribed to a population, they often buttress the attribution with a single timeless story about the group and the types of objects that the group makes”. Despite recognition of this largely fabricated typology, as recently as 2020, scholars in the field of historical African art have noted that “the map of ethnic and regional styles in Africa has been quite stable and remains a useful tool for organising the arts of Africa and establishing artistic and, by extension, cultural relationships” (Petridis, 2020: 12) which continue to organise scholarship as well as museum layouts such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Chicago Art Institute (Petridis, 2020: 12). Petridis and Gagliardi (2015) produced an exhibition and catalogue based on a collaborative research project ‘Senufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa’, which illuminate the construction of the term ‘Senufo’ via the inter-dependent relationship between museum ethnology and art historical research.



*Fig 50. Senufo bird sculpture purchased at a trade fair in Germany by Weylandts head buyer in 2019 on display at luxury interior and life-style store Weylandts, Cape Town (2020) (source: photograph by the author); Fig 51. Senufo Bird Sculpture purchased by Bruce Arnott from Gallery International in 1967, on display in the ISANG, (2019). (source: photograph by the author)*

The label with which the Baga dance Mask in Hidden Treasures is exhibited falls in line with these traditions. The mask is attributed to both a tribe and a geographic area, and its ‘story’ is generic and significantly, written in the present tense though it seems to refer to something ancient and mythical:

“The Nimba mask headdress is part of a costume worn at ceremonial dances honouring the goddess of abundance. The massive wooden carved mask has a hollowed-out torso which enables it to be supported on the shoulders of the dancers whose body is enveloped by a long fibre dress. Two small holes pierced between symbolic breasts enable the dancer to see. A bird of prey is represented by the exaggerated beak-like projection” (Hidden Treasures, ISANG, 2020).

This interpretive gesture works to reinforce the concept of tribe even as it is abandoned in scholarly and popular discourse and to side-line historical specificity and individual agency. As argued in previous chapters, rewriting labels is an impossibly narrow and conservative way to diagnose the problem, but it remains a dominant institutional approach,<sup>67</sup> and continues to take up space in academic journals and exhibition catalogues both within South Africa (Wits, 2020) and established institutions in other parts of the world (Chicago Institute, 2020).<sup>68</sup> The nostalgia for long-discredited ways of framing history, and couching African history in the language of heritage, betrays an anxiety about the fragility of the notion of authentic Africa, and of historicizing Africa through culture. This comes across acutely in the South African context – entangled as it is with both Euro-American cultural value systems and imperatives to institutionalize more localized and possibly African ways of knowing, seeing, and performing culture.

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<sup>67</sup> Multiple discussions are dedicated to understanding whether European anthropologists, art dealers, and buyers did not consider the objects they were purchasing as art, or whether the lack of recorded names, dates, and information in most cases in African art collections on the continent expressed the true desires of the ‘communities’ since objects were supposed to speak more than the individual. I suggest that perhaps finding a precise answer is less important than sketching and understanding the affordances and power dynamics that belie these conventions.

<sup>68</sup> The prioritisation of this concern is exemplified by an exhibition catalogue chapter titled “Putting to rest the ‘primitive’ paradigm” by Anitra Nettleton as part of the *Seen, Heard, Valued* exhibition hosted by Wits from 2020-2022 that celebrated 40 years of the Standard Bank African Art collection. Nettleton (2020) writes: “by taking the decision at WAM to allow barriers between craft and art to dissolve we were trying to accord equal weight to all forms of creative making, something which was common in some studies coming out of Anthropology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was therefore confined to the study of arts of ‘other’ cultures”. The authoritative claim to put to rest an entire paradigm through a simple discursive substitution bears scrutiny. Moreover, what is the assumed power of the museum and its classificatory system to accord status and more-over *equality* to objects that it has come to own? What is the basis of this claim to equality? The layers of prejudice in the classificatory systems that hierarchically order certain kinds of labour and fruits of labour in gendered, raced, and classed ways cannot be ameliorated in a semantic gesture.

Second, the aestheticising protocols of the art museum are increasingly ubiquitous in a commerce-based late capitalist social order, as a way of displaying value, distinction, and taste. In this social order, cultural institutions by default can work to re-inscribe (or at least fail to challenge) the ever-deepening chasms between those who are able to own and possess things and those who are not. It is not only the lack of historical depth that alienates the African art object from its potential audience, but the very mechanisms of display which have become irretrievably entrenched as part of a global capitalist language of commodification as the only acceptable form of value creation. While the enrichment economy continues to endorse and benefit from stale and invented narratives associated with African art that appear in art museums, the very idea of the enrichment economy's 'other side' offers a way of rereading museum art collections and displays via the counter-story of the inauthentic. Jiang Tu (2021: 380) prompts us to pay attention to "the subversiveness inherent in the making of fakes, and the changing socio-economic environments that enable the destabilisation of the real-fake distinction". This focus connects the museum to a much more dynamic and volatile reality outside its walls. This interconnection raises questions about how objects held in the custody of the museum appear to their onlookers, where their alternative homes may be and what the administration of objects in the museum and the administration of people in the city have in common (Rassool, 2020: 351).

## The circulation of continental art in post-apartheid South Africa

In response to the question of to whom African art was made valuable in post-apartheid South Africa, I turn to the circulation of art from beyond South Africa's borders. Karel Nel (interview, 2019) made the following observation about the implications of the end of apartheid for the cross-border trade of African art:<sup>69</sup>

"When the South African borders opened in 1994, the pavements of Johannesburg were filled with masks, all copies, and that in many ways destroyed the market because this kind of instability around curio and authentic objects became very ambivalent and eventually none of the dealers could deal – no one was interested. The notion of private collecting collapsed. This happened about 5 years after the first election".

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<sup>69</sup> Nel's observation echoes similar claims made about the global African art trade (pointed out by scholars like Monroe, Steiner, and Forni) about a decade earlier (in the late 1970s). This claim has helped to bolster the idea that African art objects found in established and privileged market spaces (like the auction circuit) were (are) the only globally available authentic pieces. As a result, such pieces accrue enormous value because of their perceived rarity. At the same time objects found outside this circuit lost value because they were perceived to be replicas or fakes.

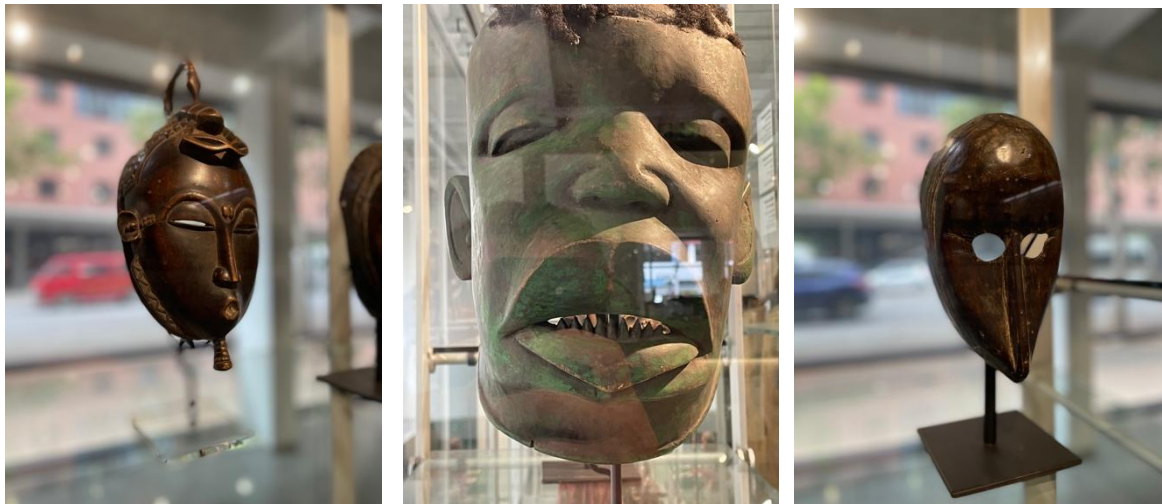
My fieldwork in Cape Town indicated that post-1994, initially much of the trade was facilitated through dealers bringing containers of art objects from Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Senegal, Congo, and Mozambique (mostly through air freight but also shipments). Cameroonian art dealer Aziz Ousman (interview, 2020), who traded in Cape Town since 2002, talked to me about the appeal that Cape Town held for him and members of his family business in the post-apartheid moment:

“In 1996 – when the Africa Cup came to South Africa – the people who come here first during the Africa Cup, they go there, make money and come back and start buying cars, start buying a lot of stuff. It seems nice that side. You work, try to push-push. That way I landed up in Johannesburg, at that time there was the owner of Amathuli, Mark Valentine. He was one of the best buyers, when we get the stuff we take it straight to him”.

In his first few years in Johannesburg, Ousman's dealings with African art collector Mark Valentine (who sold directly to the ISANG and other museums), placed him in a circuit connected to the major art institutions. This network transformed swiftly over the next few years. Ousman explained how upon arriving Cape Town in the early 2000s he realised that collectors were buying from “established channels” (auction houses) and the value of the pieces he brought with him from Foumban, Cameroon, had plummeted. Ousman (interview, 2020) reflected:

“[f]rom the beginning, the price we were selling in Cameroon for the antiques to the collectors was much more expensive than in South Africa. People didn't know about antiques here, they only know about African masks. Now the masks you wanted to sell for 10000 they buy for 1000 [...] That it was a big shock. Can you imagine you put all your savings on this big stock and when you arrive here it is not what you expected? The only person that buys gives you 1000 – you have got no choice. You sell it. You collapse. And you start building again”.

The increased mobility of dealers and the art works that they sold was directly related to lifted travel restrictions, the (beginnings of the) dismantling of a racist political and economic system, and the possibility of increased economic opportunity that these changes suggested in a democratic South Africa. The monopoly that dealers like Meneghelli, Guenther, and others were able to capitalize on, was compromised by increased mobility on the continent. The legitimacy that their (almost) exclusive access to ‘authentic art’ signalled to art institutions was also compromised. The spaces in which the authentic could be identified as such, were transferred to the international auction circuit. It is ironic that this lifeline of opportunity would prove to be so circumscribed by powerfully socio-economic hierarchies inscribed with colonial and apartheid legacies.



*Fig 52. A piece bought from Sothebys, in the Standard Bank African Art Collection, Wits art museum (2022). (source: photograph by the author); Fig 53. A piece bought from Christies in the Standard Bank African Art Collection, Wits art museum (2022). (source: photograph by the author); Fig. 54. A piece bought from Vittorio Meneghelli in the Standard Bank African Art Collection, Wits art museum (2022). (source: photograph by the author)*

The immediate consequence for the ISANG was that the more affordable prices that South African museums in general enjoyed from established local dealers (Meneghelli, Guenther, etc) began to fall away. In a walkabout of an exhibition featuring parts of the Standard Bank African Art Collection, with curator Julia Charlton at the Wits Art Museum<sup>70</sup> in 2022, she explained that by the 1990s many African art pieces were purchased from international auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's and not from local dealers. From the ISANG's perspective, authentic African art objects became unaffordable around the same time.<sup>71</sup> While the ISANG seemed to enjoy an era of acquisition of Southern African art in the early post-apartheid years, its amassment of continental art was certainly curtailed. In terms of acquisitions, loans, and exhibitions, this ensured that the ISANG submitted to an established global hierarchy in which Western museums, collectors, and auction houses were the ones that maintained control of the value, meaning, and movement of authentic African art.

Almost all travelling or loaned exhibitions at the ISANG since the 1990s came from European institutions or collectors. For example, The Pierre Guerre Collection from France, Soul of Africa from Switzerland, Africa meets Africa from the Museum Voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam, are indicative of the close ties between the ISANG and various European art museums, and the reliance of its staff on

<sup>70</sup> The Wits art collection, funded by Standard Bank, was oriented towards representation of the African continent in their collection (this focus could be partly attributed to its' business interest in courting a wider continental consumer base) and was not eclipsed by a political imperative to focus on the national.

<sup>71</sup> Confirmed both in interviews with Carol Kaufmann and in Martin's written account (2019).

existing Western institutional frameworks for African art. There have to date been very few exhibitions that connect with African institutions or explore relationships and intersections between South Africa and other countries on the African continent. When this question was raised in my interview with her, Martin explained this as solely a result of skewed North/ South funding relations which made inter-African institutional exchanges entirely impossible because of a reliance on Northern funding (Martin interview, 2019). While being under-funded is certainly a common characteristic and rallying call from within a wide range of African museums, the deferral to Western institutional standards and protocols (both in the museum and market) as the authority on African art points to a more pervasive postcolonial legacy of epistemic dependence.

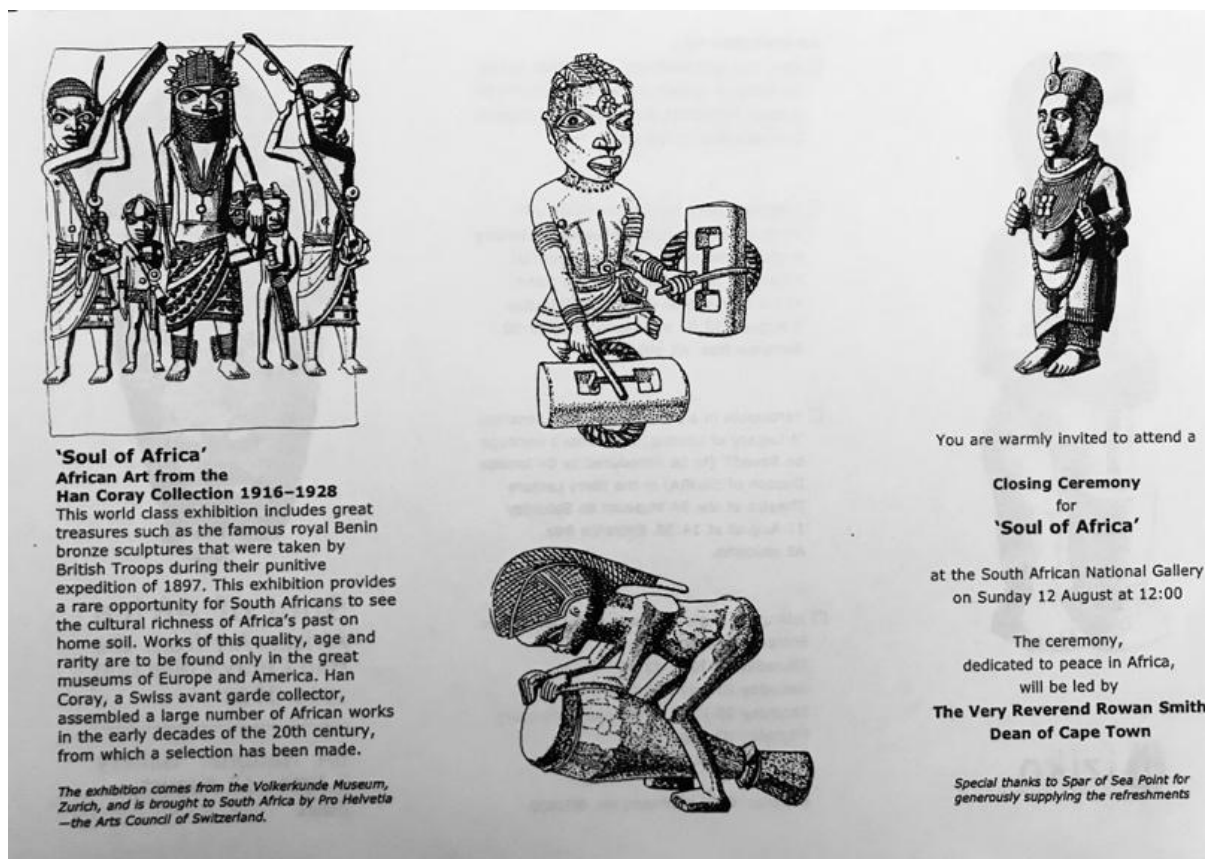


Fig 55 Exhibition write ups for the Soul of Africa from the Han Coray Collection in Switzerland, featured in Bonani, SANG's newsletter (source: photograph by the author)

## The Enrichment Economy's appropriation of African art

It cannot be seen without some cynicism that the opening of South Africa's borders to a continent poised for engagement and the 'Africanisation' of the city of Cape Town did not provide an opportunity to invigorate new modes of museuming and thinking about African art objects and histories. Trends that emerged in the engagement with art from the continent evident in the ISANG in

the 2000s were indicative of trends at work in the broader city context. In describing the slow dissolution of the Pan African Market in Long Street in the late 2000s, Ntone Edjabe (interview, 2020) observed the ways in which the city of Cape Town hedged its bets on the economic developmental model at the expense of other forms of urban development, and what this meant for the ways in which the city could be understood as African:

“[i]ncreasingly, the only Africa, (and I will even extend that to black), activity that was permitted publicly in this city became that of representation - your only value to this city is that you connect this city for someone coming from Germany: ‘we will allow you to be standing on the corner because your presence signifies that this city is African’. This city is not African because the majority of people in it are African, this city is African because there is a trader from Zimbabwe selling crafts at the corner”.

These broader global trends that shape the (monetary) value and circulation of African art, are framed by Azoulay as part of a constantly remade imperial logic. However, Azoulay has been criticised for romanticizing the idea of pre-colonial ‘source communities’ or life-worlds from which much of the African art in circulation was wrenched. To assume that museum collections of African art can be traced back to an extant source community, would be to miss out on their potential value and meaning as objects that speak of processes (albeit highly unequal ones) of exchange, trade, and acculturation. To unpack the continuities and discontinuities of the colonial trade of African art with its manifestations in a late capitalist global economy, the idea of the enrichment economy is useful.

Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) have pushed forward Pierre Bourdieu (in ‘Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, 1979) and Roland Barthes’ (in ‘Mythologies’, 1957) preoccupation with the implications of commodification and consumerism on social relations which they argue has been left to the purview of economists since the 1960s. They argue that “there is a strong circulation between the art market, the luxury industry and tourism, and this is the core of the enrichment economy” (explained by Esquerre in an interview with Pablo Larios, 2019: unpaginated). The creation of value in the ‘enrichment economy’ is contingent on the creation of stories: from tribal objects to eco-farms, to fine cheese and wine, price is justified by an elaborate performance of storytelling that weaves together meaning, status, and value for a global-elite.

Who owns, interprets, defines, and places value and significance on African art objects? These questions are under written in the global African art market and museum world by deeply unequal power relations between wealthy and poor, between Africa and the West. As Akinwumi Ogundiran (2020:19) writes “the capacity of a New York collector to own a Bura mortuary piece in his or her

house is political. The love for African aesthetics may have been the motivator, but the ability to acquire the object derived from the power that European and American empires and nation-states granted their citizens, especially the White people of the world”. The implication of scholarship that drives up the value of African art objects is reflected on extensively and cynically within the scholarly community, but also often with an assumption that this process is inevitable, and a given right of the knowledge producers. Commenting on the publication of images of Bura mortuary pieces in the academic journal *African Arts*, (an act that in itself directly endorses and raises the object’s potential auction values), Ogundiran (2020:19) says “the public, especially the colonized and marginalized global public (the so-called poor people), deserve to know who is profiting from their labour and creativity of their ancestors and the desecration of their mortuary”. The existence of these relations which continue to determine the nature of the trade and the signification of objects, might dangerously reify spurious Western/ African binaries.

Within this paradigm, history is appropriated primarily as a marker of value (through age). Esquerre (2019, unpaginated) argues that “[t]he economy of enrichment exploits history, but requires new narratives around the past. If it’s only conservative, you stop this development. [...] If the narrative of the past has no future, it stops. The past must always be enriched. The question is: who controls the stories?” Given this lens, it is possible to take a view of the circulation of African art objects traced through this dissertation as strongly shaped by a sequencing of history that benefits certain actors in the network of circulation. Dominant concepts of authenticity at play in the ISANG echo a globally useful narrative that employs authenticity in African art as a sign of scarcity, rarity, and a symbol of an irretrievable African past. This concept, and the narratives that have employed it, privilege the art museum, the wealthy collector, and the auction house, often at the expense of other actors in the ecosystem.

1. Cimier ciwara, Bamana, Mali | Bamana Ciwara headdress, Mali  
 Estimate: 15,000 - 25,000 EUR  
 LOT SOLD: 113,400 EUR

2. Tête miniature, Fang, Gabon | Fang Miniature Head, Gabon  
 Estimate: 40,000 - 60,000 EUR  
 LOT SOLD: 69,300 EUR

3. Masque ikwara, Punu, Gabon | Punu ikwara Mask, Gabon  
 Estimate: 180,000 - 250,000 EUR  
 LOT SOLD: 201,600 EUR

Fig 56. Items of African art sold in a Sotheby's auction titled "Splendeurs: Chefs-d'oeuvre des Arts d'Afrique" (8 June 2022). Source: Screenshot from Sotheby's website.

In this narrative, the value of the authentic is pitted against the simultaneous proliferation of objects perceived as copies, fakes, and inauthentic pieces, the value of which falls in relation to the rise of the 'authentic'. Walter Benjamin's theory that the replica is a condition of the notion of originality helps to expose the foundations of this concept. The prices commanded by Sotheby's auctions have a direct relation to the proliferation of the relatives of these pieces in warehouses and on street-corners. The determination of what objects are indeed real, truly 'African', and valuable, is not necessarily based on any objective truth embedded in the object itself, but rather on what Arjun Appadurai (1986: 21) calls the "tournament of value".<sup>72</sup> Imposed notions of authenticity have been utilized by multiple actors in this trade with varied payoffs. As Ousman (interview, 2020) explained: "tourism lets people lie. Let us say you come from Germany and you say 'I am looking for something typical South African', suddenly everything in my shop becomes Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele".

<sup>72</sup> Geismar argues in her ethnography of a tribal auction, that value is accorded through a series of communally sanctioned judgments. Through this process, objects are reborn "acquiring new value, new owners, new definitions, new histories" (Smith 1989: 79). However, communal sanction is a lot messier than theory suggests – struggles for economic power, hierarchies of knowledge and disagreements in the attribution of meaning are the very method by which the price of an object is set (Geismar, 2001: 29). The unpredictability of price exemplifies the "ever present potential for alienation, slippage or loss" (Keane, 1997: 230) of economic consensus within the public interaction of persons and things (Geismar, 2001: 26).

A key dimension in the tournament of value is the creation and control of space<sup>73</sup> as well as narrative. A focus on space, makes evident the integral connection between the presentation and display of African art and its valuation and circulation. For Appadurai (1986: 29), “all exchange of objects is fundamentally rooted within a ‘tournament of value’ – a precise, singular place of economic activity”. These spaces keep evolving, as do those who endorse them. Consider this Instagram post by the luxury interior store Weylandts featuring popular South African writer Angela Makholwa framed by interior objects and African masks and a photograph of the interior of artist and African art collector Karel Nel’s home featured in an online interior décor magazine.



Fig 57. An Instagram post by the luxury interior store Weylandts featuring popular South African writer Angela Makholwa framed by interior objects and ‘African’ masks (2018) (source: Instagram)

<sup>73</sup> As a departure from the Bourdieusian idea of the inscription of social and cultural value into objects (as part of the performance of authority and power) and building on theories of space and urbanism developed by De Certeau and Harvey, Hannan et al argue that it is *space* and its management and conditioning, not an inherent characteristic in things themselves, that creates the *possibility* for value.



Works by Karel Nel lean against the working wall of the studio-lounge, a space punctuated by tall Pacific pieces and a long refectory table that doubles as a dining table and work surface.

*Fig 58. The interior of Karel Nel's home featured in Visi online (2020) (source: screenshot from Visi website)*

The art museum is an important actor in this tournament of value. Azoulay (2019: 61) illustrates the performative work of the museum in the tournament of value as she asks us to imagine a museum strike to illustrate the perversity of some of these patterns of value creation and value loss: “[i]magine that all those [museum] experts recognise that the knowledge and skills to create objects the museum violently rendered rare and valuable are not extinct. For these objects to preserve their market value, those people who inherited the knowledge and skills to continue to create them had to be denied the time and conditions to engage in building their world”. She goes further to imagine the experts “no longer recognizing the exceptional value of looted objects, thus leading to the depreciation of their value in the market and the collapse of the accumulated capital” (Azoulay, 2019: 61). Azoulay’s prompts raise the following questions: what tools do we have to take care of things if preservation has been shown to be so closely linked to extermination? How can we take care of things, people, art in a society that turns everything into a commodity?

The shifts described by the economy of enrichment reverberate in the South African artworld more generally too. A recent report analysing the South African art market found that Cape Town as South Africa’s “African art capital” is dependent on 70% of international buyers. Its ebbs and flows of capital and the production of its artists thus remain tightly linked to international luxury tourism and

‘swallows’ (a term referring to Europeans who spend a few months a year in a second or third ‘southern’ home). The report (Corrigan, 2019) confirms a weakened local museal authority, in terms of the factors that most contribute to the price of artworks, explaining that while historically local museums held some validating authority, today commercial galleries are the defining *local* validators for contemporary art in South Africa. Art museums in the Global North however remain the ultimate authority in validating price. Gallerists respond to the market and the market for African art is determined more and more by capital and tastes emanating from Europe, North America and in a smaller part China, which cynically confirms patterns of appropriation and value creation pointed out for many decades in the history of this category. The determination of artistic production via the tastes of the wealthy is a theme explored in the sociology of culture. The enrichment economy is a reflection of extremes of inequality, in which a stratification of value echoes the ever-increasing gaps between social groups both globally and in South Africa. The theory helps to understand the way in which the traditional African art surfaces in the ISANG of 2019 as a rarefied, alienated, and financially valuable object.

At the same time, the museum is an actor within a complex ecosystem of cultural production, and it is entangled in the social, political, and economic in contradictory ways. While problematic epistemic frameworks can be shown to have guided frameworks of value for African art (which work in the favour of an economic and cultural elite), there are instances in which counter-narratives and subversive meanings are at work within the institution and are trace-able in its archives. For example, “the young ones”. Diagne asks us to read as embedded within the African art object the material and epistemic eco-systems that it invokes, and in this very history see the objects’ meaning and value. While their exhibition history since the 1970s speaks of a recycling of old colonial narratives (from Picasso in Africa in 2007 to Hidden Treasures in 2019), their other lives as educational objects in the museum’s annex speak of an alternative occupation of space and a potential alternative modality for art that is not primarily shaped by its commodification. In addition, their ambivalent origins link these museal objects directly to the layered economies that constitute the trade of African art, both high and low, real, and fake, authentic and curio, in the city of Cape Town.

### Pan African Market becomes the Tribal Collective (2019 - 2020)

Around the same time that the Hidden Treasures exhibition was staged, the Tribal Collective prepared to open its doors to the public. Tribal Collective, a luxury African art trading store clearly aimed at an international market, is lit with large chandeliers, and filled to the hilt with African art objects. When I visited the store, I observed that the sales assistants were middle-aged white women, and the owner, who I was able to identify and have a brief unrecorded conversation with, a white South African man

from a long lineage of African art sellers (and collectors). The distinction between dealers, traders, and collectors (and its racial and class based presuppositions) was impressed upon me in our first and only ad hoc conversation, in which he confessed that the trade for real African art was not what it used to be, in fact quite non-existent, that authentic pieces could no longer be stumbled upon and “bought for a song as in the old days” (unrecorded conversation, 2020).



*Fig 59. The Tribal Collective in 2019, Long Street, Cape Town. (source: photograph by the author)*

The location of the three floor Victorian building in the centre of the city was previously the Pan African Market, home to up to 30 traders of African curios, art, clothing, accessories, hair products, restaurants, and the *Chimurenga* publications' office on the top floor, since 1996. The transformation from the Pan African Market to the Tribal Collective was unsettling and took me by surprise. The last time I had visited had been 18 months prior, when the entire building was still operating as the Pan African market. This was the form in which I had known it and frequented it for the last 15 years. In this particular building, there had been an emptying out of people, small trading posts, a diversity of skills and offerings, and a replacement by similar objects displayed in a way that was closer to a hybrid between museum and marketplace. I contacted the editor of *Chimurenga* and former co-founder and manager of the Pan African Market, Ntone Edjabe, for an interview to understand more about the conditions of the market's closure.

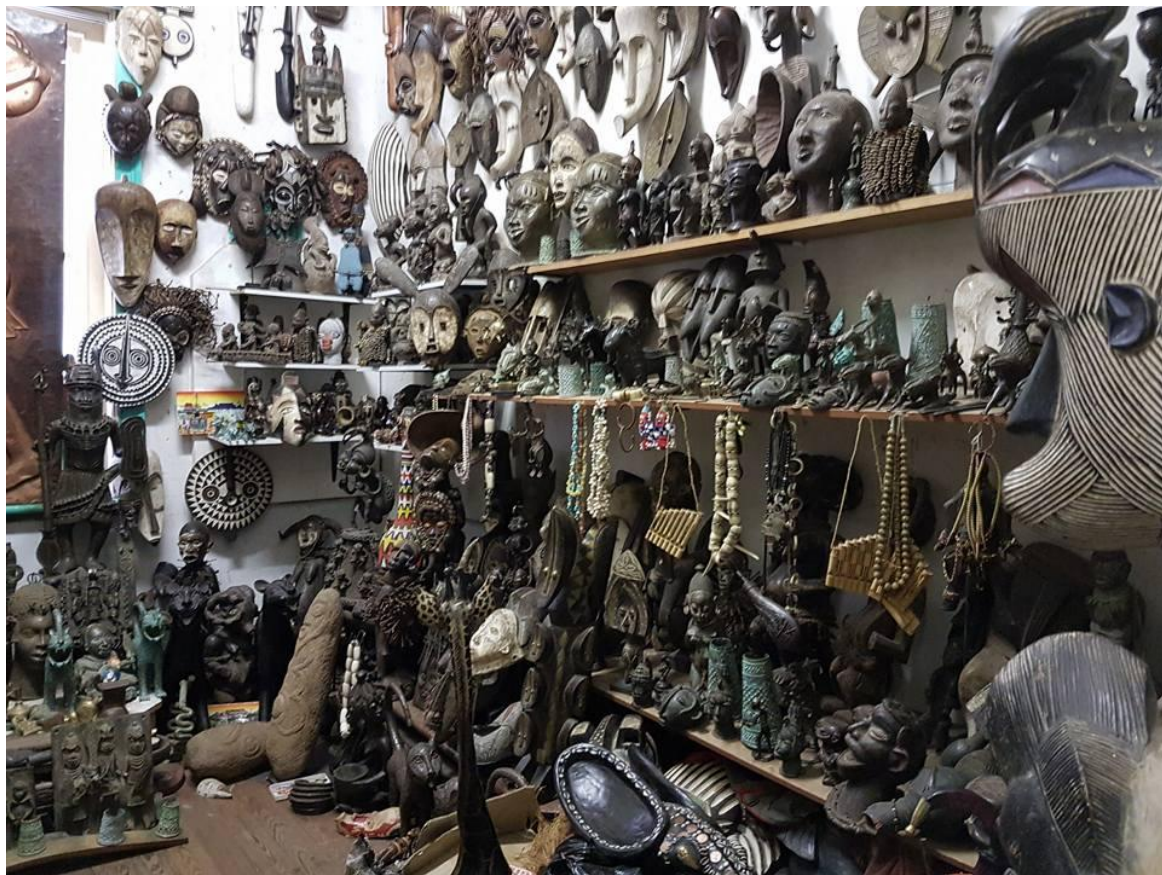


Fig 60. Photo of Pan African market in 2009, Long Street, Cape Town (source: Pan African market Facebook page)

Edjabe described how the lease for the space was taken by a South African artist in 1996, who had a collaborative studio project in mind, in which artists and traders (from the Green Market Square which operated as a kind of flea market) would occupy and work from the space. He named the place the Pan African Market. After engaging Edjabe and a business partner in this process, the South African artist had to leave the city for personal reasons. The taking over of the lease was significant, as Edjabe

insisted, because as an African foreigner in Cape Town this would not have been possible for him. Subsequently, Edjabe and a business partner took the helm and consciously grew the community of traders and artists in the space. In his words “the Pan African market from the get-go, was dedicated to the sale of African Art and objects generally and cloths, hairdressing, studios, a tailor – it was all very practical. Various economies building one upon another”. In the first place, Edjabe’s (interview, 2020) engagement in this space was motivated by a feeling that:

“there was something subversive about the reproduction of things that may have been considered unique objects, the entire illusion of the art world and the commerce around it. So, it was an intellectual interest in how these objects are really mass manufactured in places like Western Cameroon and are disseminated around the world and create whole new economies of desire, fetish, and all of that”.

While there were very few traders in the Market who traded in ‘authentic’, Edjabe (interview, 2020) underscored the dynamic and relational nature of the economy that defied the strict parameters of real/fake that the museum insists on:

“the market was more of a curio – that’s more the kind of decorative stuff and souvenir economy for people who are visiting town or the country or Africa for the first time and they want to take something home. And they expect that thing to be relatively inexpensive. At the same time at least in appearance that kind of stuff is linked to this other kind of economy, which is authentic and rare, the traders can fluctuate between these two depending on who they are talking to. So, it’s very much a kind of juju economy – it’s about reading who you are talking to and interpreting their desires and their experience.”

From around 1997 into the late 2000s, Edjabe described a period of growth and evolution. Incidentally, this was the very time that the prolific and revered writer Binyavanga Wainaina ran a cafe and catering business serving a range of traditional African cuisines with a friend from out of the Pan African market (Wainaina, 2022). Multiple economic layers coalesced in this space: the trade of African art in its spectrum of authenticity and in-authenticity, the creation of a Pan African space that “may not necessarily have been object based, it may have been more around the café, the consumption, production, the hairdressing, the clothing” and connected with a desire of “mainly [...] black South Africans to acquaint themselves with the production, with the people, with the culture” (Edjabe, interview, 2020). The office for the publication of *Chimurenga* formed the final layer: poised on the top floor of the Pan African market, the point of this publication was “to interrogate and produce language about all the activity going on in this space. This space itself being a

microcosm of the way that we operate in the world – in the way that we make life”. This was a complex space, which had “a cultural component, a social component and the life making component [...] it wasn’t just a glass which we are selling some image of Africa.” (Edjabe, interview, 2020)

As the space grew and traders expanded their businesses, many of the traders in the Pan African market started other businesses and in new spaces, for example in the city’s Waterfront area, the upmarket Green Point neighbourhood, or the Bo Kaap. The market “retained its symbolic value for the traders” (Edjabe, interview, 2020) and became a highly replicated model. Aziz Ousman was one of the traders who was based for many years in the Pan African market, and subsequently opened his own store on the same block, which now neighbours the Tribal Collective. Edjabe (interview, 2020) marked a shift in the economic flows post 2010. There was an oversupply of goods and a high level of replication of the Pan African Market model: “there was that sense of multiplying the opportunity – not necessarily by doing something different but by doing the same thing in several different places. The tourist becomes this rare person you want, if you meet them here you will catch them there – it’s like a hunt for the tourist. I think it was in the later years that it acquired this cynical overtone – I mean its business after all”. But there was more to this process than a downturn in the economy. I quote here at length Edjabe’s (interview, 2020) description of the reformulation of the city’s relationship with the Pan African Market that exemplifies the logic of the enrichment economy and the commitment of the city’s management to narrow economic models of growth:

“In the years leading to the 2010 FIFA World Cup there was an acceleration of ideas of redesigning the city and reproducing it for the influx of tourists that would be coming. So where would the Pan African market fit within that – how do we direct people that the entire city becomes a kind of shopping mall? How do you move people so that in between games, where will they buy their souvenirs? Ok, this is the role that this Pan African market will play. The city then started to talk to us at that point and we said: “fine, if all you want from us is representation, we don’t care. As long as you give us some support – because what we are struggling with is paying our rent every month”. But there are no terms of engagement possible at that level – there is no political project, it is only commercial. In a way, what has become this kind of shopping mall for authenticity is really what they always wanted. They were not interested in the complex actual cultural community. And it became a battle for us with the landlords and the agents as well as the people who managed the city. There was pressure for us to modernize to enter this whole big game. The Pan African market remained undisciplined in that regard, it could not conform quickly enough to this project and jump into this project and say, “oh look, we are the Africans you are looking for – look how clean our place is”.

The concerns that had emerged in my reading on the history of the compromised and troubled category of African art included: the de-linking of African art objects from African creators and African bodies; the appropriation of meanings as a precondition for the enrichment of object value; and the control of space as a precondition for the creation of market value. These themes were writ large in Edjabe’s narrative about the Pan African Market. Nzegwu (2019: 370) shows how aesthetic rules and principles, presented as neutral, unequivocally assert that “there is a correct way for being and for presenting art; that Africa lacks this mode of being and presentation; and that this fundamental difference establishes the absence of, or at the very least, the underdeveloped nature of, art in African cultures”.



Fig 61. Display of Pende Masks, Weylandts Interior Store, Cape Town (2020). (source: photograph by the author); Fig 62. Collection of Congolese artworks, Irma Stern Museum (2019). (source: photograph by the author)

The weight of the issue of presentation and display of African art is that it supports the false contention that Western aestheticizing practices present a superior form of engagement with African art. This in turn supports the “false epistemological claim that Africans do not distinguish between art and non-art” (Nzegwu, 2019: 369). This is a spurious claim that is used to justify the right to take, to own, to appropriate, and to attribute value. As Edjabe (interview, 2020) points out: “people become totally dispensable because you are now able to put these objects in a well-lit, museological apparatus

and you can still take it home, so we have never been as dispensable as we are now”. From 2017 to 2018, following a few more years in which the struggle to survive economically and to make the rent continued, all the traders in the building were asked to leave. The Tribal Collective, which had already started renting space on the same block on either side of the Pan African Market, “put a lot of pressure on the agents, who were initially fine but then they saw the possibility of making money. We were ejected – we were given a deadline to leave”, while the Tribal Collective “moved in and colonized not only the space but the idea” (Edjabe, interview, 2020). Edjabe was cynical about the implications of this urban imperialism, given the forces of capitalism and the lack of political will to engage and support spaces like the Pan African Market:

“you will not have the Pan African market again – ever. The idea died with the transformation that happened in this city. If it sounds pessimistic, that is [...] the last ten years, at least for me, were a struggle – staying there even as *Chimurenga* was part of that struggle. Insisting that this project would not be reduced to just the kind of vitrine. For these objects, there must be production involved, there must be lives – some kind of contestation, it just became untenable”.

### The scars of the ‘enrichment economy’ and the possibilities for new relational networks in the African art economy

At the time of writing in 2022, Aziz Ousman had returned to Cameroon after 20 years in South Africa, in sadness and under the duress of a business which he felt would not survive. He had decided to sell all his artworks to other traders for wholesale prices and investigate different lines of business. I looked back at the interview transcript from my conversation with him in June 2020, conducted while South Africa was still under an economic freeze of the COVID pandemic lock down, and Ousman’s shop was one of the few places open in an otherwise quiet and deserted city centre.



*Fig 63 and 64. Objects for sale by African Art trader from Mali in Greenmarket Square, City Centre of Cape Town, (2020). (source: photograph by the author). These photos were taken during the nationwide lockdown implemented as part of a response to the global Corona Virus pandemic. The trader was attempting to sell his stock in order to buy a bus ticket to leave South Africa, driven by fears around xenophobia and homelessness.*



In response to a question about the future of his shop, and the other traders from the Pan African Market that had been ousted into one floor of a crowded building across the road, he said:

“To be honest, African story, this business will slow down but it will never die. Few people have been in Africa, few people know African stories and each and anyone tried to tell their own part. The African story is too big (...) there are many that have never been to Africa, in time people will fall more in love with Africa and African art business will keep growing” (Ousman interview, 2020).

Considering his subsequent return home, this was a poignant remark, perhaps underestimating the accelerated logic of economic stratification that the COVID pandemic and energy wars were to have on the global economy or perhaps a precursor to another phase of rebuilding and adapting that Ousman will embark on. When asked about the future of many of the traders in the Pan African

market, Edjabe (interview, 2020) explained that many of them “still have the knowledge of the networks and ways to acquire the objects and so on, they have taken this position of middle people who supply the objects to the nice, shiny shops and make a business of that. So, they are trading to the traders”. This observation raises questions about the evolving nature of the African art economy, and the potential subversion of the control of space and aesthetics through new networks and social infrastructures. As I established in previous chapters however, to put it very simply, decolonising the museum is not possible without decolonising the world. The re-ordering of the museum’s superficial logics of display is meaningless if the seller and trader and the valuation procedures are dictated to by the current dominant cultural-market logic which has its intellectual and epistemic basis in imperialism. It is according to this logic that it makes more sense for traders from the African centres of famed artistic traditions (Cameroon, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire) to be marginalised into pockets of poverty while chic boutique empires buy them out as the international luxury tourist trade and interior design market flourish.

A more global example further illustrates this idea. At some levels, the global African art market still trades on a colonially rooted conception of authenticity that privileges established collectors and institutions which until recently have been Western. However, collectors and institutions from China, the UAE and Africa are challenging this Euro-American hegemony (Tu, 2020). These significant shifts point to the need to attend to the transformative capacities of concepts and processes rooted in coloniality and their ability to remake themselves and continually create new protagonists in an evolving world system. Suzana Souza makes a compelling argument about Sindika Dokolo, the late Angolan art patron who embarked on a project of repatriating African art to museums in Africa. By using his foundation’s private funding to purchase African art objects that appeared on the market and gift them to African museum collections, Souza (2020: 383) argues that Dokolo’s repatriation project evades an important restitutive and ethical dimension of the very argument for repatriation:

“Although recognizing the value of the return of the objects to its community of origin, the process established by the Foundation Sindika Dokolo has a bitter taste as it overpowers the state and the existing legal procedures, granting a final authority to the market. The process also erases the role of justice, preventing therefore any kind of reparations or even the establishment of an ethical relation, since this must be based on the recognition of the roles of each part”.

Souza’s argument is that limiting the enactment of restitution to an engagement between a museum and a market structure (an auction house), the possibilities for the remediation, re-evaluation, and interpretation of returned objects remains out of reach for most people (and for whom the works are

being returned in the first place). The closed loop between the museum and the market limits the reinvention of stories. On the other hand, Ntone Edjabe (interview, 2020) offers a different reading:

“I like what Sindika is doing because he is like the trader who knows more – he is speaking that language and getting lawyers involved and he is using political histories – the circumstances in which these objects were acquired and bringing them to be a factor in the negotiation to return them. As a private collector he is using the legitimacy of a state to engage with western institutions and collectors – so I like that. That’s gangster. He is not alone: Johnson from Benin who is setting up a museum there who is doing a similar thing, more specifically French. So, each one using their network”.

The story of the Pan African Market attests to both the ways in which the commodified gaze that erases complexity and dissonance remains dominant in the African art economy in the South African context. At the same time, there is the possibility of continual remaking and reconstitution of meanings, values, and practices that will adapt along known paths but also created new positions, networks, and opportunities. Writing about African art, as it had just been infamously ‘premiered’ on the institutional art-world stage of the MOMA’s 1984 Primitivism exhibition, Susan Vogel (1988:16) posed the following problem:

“[o]n the one hand, the increasing presence of African figures and masks in fashionable interiors and museums halls lends these objects a spurious familiarity. As their forms become familiar (aided by a superficial resemblance to the art of our own century), African sculpture runs the risk of becoming banal without ever having been understood on its own terms. On the other hand, to insist on the obscurity of the cultural context of African art is to push it again outside the realm of the world’s art”.

In retrospect, Vogel’s remark rides on an assumption of the enduring ‘otherness’ of Africa. This assumption is contingent on a monolithic reading of Africa that violently attempts to over-ride and commodify a complex reality. As such, the meanings and symbolism assigned to Africa and African art that Vogel’s remark attaches itself to, will always produce friction and slippage. This vision of Africa has reached its sell by date and should be overcome to make way for new narratives.

### Destabilising the museum by inviting in the market

In an anthropological study of African art markets in Togo and in China, Jiang Tu recalls Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2009:12) argument about the stereotypical ‘geography of fakeness’. This is an idea

constructed and maintained through a dichotomy based on developmental narratives that compare the Global South and the Global North: the former being where frauds are produced and flourish, whereas the latter is perceived as “a place of ‘authentication’, order and ethical practice” (Tu, 2021: 384). Tu questions the replication of this idea in African art markets by exploring notions of authenticity articulated outside of the dominant value chains. Tu explains how ‘authentic’ for local dealers in Togo is a future characteristic that their objects might hold. They explained how in the future they hoped that the objects they traded would become “more expensive, more marketable and more profitable rather than being tribal or of ritual origin”, and thus “more authentic”, pointing to the importance of concepts of time in the generation of value (Tu, 2021: 381). For Tu (2021: 381), the dealers suggested an alternative temporality: “a vision of time in relation to objects that are not characterized by linear progression without a promise of renewal (through which collective singularization is achieved), but with a circular reinvention and the co-production of novelty and authenticity”.

The linear progression that Tu refers to, endorses a concept of authenticity tied to an irretrievable past precolonial moment. This vision of time lends value to the very act of ownership in that the object is the last remaining signifier of that time itself. The ‘vanished’ life-worlds and cultures that originated the art objects are in a way trapped by the fantasy of the authentic, which does not make room for new forms of authenticity. Ivor Powell’s comments on the use of plastics in the Ndebele aprons (1999), which were rejected by collectors but initially still used by Ndebele women, points to an attempt to control the authentic as linked to a fixed and linear conception of time and to deny its evolution. Tu (ref) argues that “as ‘fakeness’ as the anti-thesis of the authentic belongs to a narrative that has long devalued African art and rejected African’s claims of control over their own culture and production, I believe the notion of the ‘fake [which] will become authentic’ also poses a bigger question about whether we can truly move beyond the replicating circle of colonial storytelling” (Tu, 2021: 384).

The art museum plays an important role in the storytelling process, as it is supposed to occupy a position of neutrality, uninfluenced by market forces and able through its practices of acquisition and knowledge creation to establish veracity. Consequently, the destabilization of its authority suggests the possibility of “moving beyond the replicating circle of colonial storytelling” (Tu, 2021: 384). In addition to alternative notions of time that might upset the North/South/ fake/authentic dichotomy that the Comaroff’s point out, I would add that the moral and ethical footing of Western museums as spaces of ‘authentication’ has been placed in question by several inquiries and discourses around restitution and loot (e.g., Moilola, 2020; Umolu, 2020; Savoy and Sarr, 2018). This destabilization presents an opportunity for rethinking.

Within the context of the art institution, the idea of the serial, the hidden, the archivally obscured aspects of the African art object could be made visible in ways that counter the dominant narratives that determine their presentation. It is important however to remain wary however, of the risk that counter-narratives from outside the museum are incorporated into the museum in ways that leave museal authority intact, that leave the final representational choices with curators. The emphasis of this analysis therefore is not only to propose potential representational changes that could be made in the ISANG when displaying African art objects in its collections It is also to invite alternative, speculative implications based on the connections between the art museum and the art trade in the ISANG, which might impact how knowledge about African art is produced and even shift thinking about this very category. For example, Azoulay's (2019) provocation that looted art objects should constitute a type of relational passport to members of dispossessed communities; or the art business LOOTY (2022) which makes NFT's out of images taken of looted artworks in Western museums and forwards proceeds to artists working on the continent. One might consider at the same time the potential conflicts in the mutation of once sacred objects into an NFT. The NFT could be seen as a highly individualised and inflated commodity which may be in direct conflict with the ethos of an object of collective spiritual value.

In keeping with the exploration of the subversive potential of the serial or the fake African art piece, Azoulay presents an imagined scenario that is even more fitting to the context of the ISANG. She asks us to imagine museum experts (curators of African art for example): "going on strike until they are allowed to open the doors of their institutions to asylum seekers from the places from which their institutions hold objects, inviting them to produce objects similar to the looted ones, and letting the "authentic" ones fade among them" (Azoulay, 2019: 160). A space like the ISANG could subvert both the narratives and logics endorsed by the aestheticised 'white cube' African art object by, for example, inviting the traders from the dismantled Pan African Market and the desolate Green Market square to sell their wares in the ISANG, or to co-create exhibitions on African art, or to do both at the same time.

The ISANG, through engagements with a multitude of histories through objects *and* people, could offer a potential space in which people's own experiences of living in post-apartheid South Africa can be brought into conversation with the contradictions of the project of historicization. In the case of the African art collection, rather than recreating and redressing an opaque Africa as the source of a collective national heritage mapped out with ethnological co-ordinates, critical engagements with the collection could yield potentially meaningful outcomes from the museum's publics. For example, guided by the idea of mobility and an engagement with geography as a political science, the array of objects presented in the Hidden Treasures exhibition, their supposed origins, claims to authenticity

and provenance records could itself be a fascinating curatorial starting point. Such a starting point would inevitably lead to the incorporation of local and continental knowledge networks rather than supposed expertise of African art as an historical discipline: it may invite socio-economic perspectives on how mask styles change over time, what impacts the value of particular carving or casting traditions, how do shipments of African art travel into and out of Cape Town and through whom? The Iziko South African Museums's PAA could also act as a catalyst for a cross continental scholarly project on rethinking traditional art in the context of critical heritage studies, contested meanings of citizenship and Pan-Africanism. Ideas that have emerged in this research project of mobility, seriality and plurality could present alternative avenues to explore object histories, beyond tribal taxonomies, and invite new voices into a (hitherto) limited archive.

Could the gallery find ways to invite the spectator to reflect on the aesthetic conditioning of space and the influence of their own spectatorship on value creation by documenting and questioning the markers of taste and value indicated by white walls, plinths and minimalist museal aesthetics? What if the maximalism of the marketplace, the seriality that is the condition for rarity – were playfully invoked in the space of the ISANG? This could be through performance, through an opening up of the museum as inclusive of store-rooms, through interviews with artists and traders, through a visual and textual mapping of the trade and its intersection with the ISANG's own history. Viewing the city itself as an expanded archive to explore stories about African art, an exhibition could include walking tours with local guides that draw connections on foot between the spaces of creation, sale and spectating. These prompts are themselves not immune to recoding existing biases, and would be subject to critique just the ISANG's various engagements and repositioning's of African arts have been scrutinised in this project. However, they emerge from the available discourses of the day, and speak of a commitment to the idea of a mutable museum as a valuable public resource.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

#### Decolonial Impulses and Research in Museum Collections

Political scholar Mamadou Diallo observes that if a Western Museum is tasked with ‘decolonisation’, it could “satisfactorily mean to contest their relations of property to assets acquired in contexts of colonial domination” (MuseumFutures Publication, 2022: 87). While the practical and ideological consequences of such reassessment may be complex, the course of action is in the initial step clear. What it means for a museum in an African context to decolonize, however, is not so clear. The question of the extent to which colonial museums really were remade, rethought, and more-over reconfigured to serve new constituencies in post-colonial contexts is a haunting one for the ISANG. Chika Okeke-Agulu’s (2021) reflection on the postcolonial museum captures the idea that perhaps this project was never realised, and that the postcolonial African museum is a museum of the future:

“[...]precisely because the Colonial Museum was from inception corrupted and scarred by the epistemic violence of colonialism but also was unable to establish its relevance in the shifting, post-independence civic and cultural imagination and experience, the Postcolonial Museum must be conceived as a radical break from this past and as a new space for rethinking, repairing and reanimating histories of African societies and for weaving the rich tapestry of life in the present through art and artifact old and new”.

The gesture that Okeke-Agulu makes of postponing the work of recreating the museum as a future project is also problematic. The romanticisation of the radical break from the past obscures the ways in which the past is woven into the present, and the ways in which neoliberalism has in many ways restructured socio-economic orders in ways that reproduce colonial processes. As Njabulo Ndebele argues “the mechanisms of maintaining an oppressive society can be reproduced as a feature of political and social behaviour” (2017:105). What should be expected of the museum, given the intractable depth of the legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism? Is the expectation of a decolonised museum a misplaced one, and (to paraphrase a question asked by many scholars), what is a decolonised museum?

The idea that the project of decolonisation can be practiced on an institutional level alone has been widely critiqued by Zoe Samudzi (2020), Ariella Azoulay (2019), and Greer Valley (2020) amongst others, who argue that decolonizing the museum must be part of a larger project of decolonizing society. Yesomi Umulo (2020) describes the current condition of museums and the implications for

work to be done, which must be connected to a wider, embedded view of the museum as part of a social infrastructure: “[i]f we have now arrived at acknowledging the genealogy of violence and injustice in our institutions, public spaces, and personal lives, then the hard work of the days and months to come is to unlearn the practices and behaviors that have emerged from this condition, and seek to build a new along antiracist and decolonized lines”. Umulo’s suggested roadmap indicates that it is not plausible to respond to the critiques of museal practice only through interpretive gestures or performances within the representation plane (i.e., inviting new voices in the interpretation of objects, or displaying transparency in the accumulation histories of collections). Instead, it calls for a questioning of the mechanisms of cultural authority employed by the museum; its financial, ideological and political support structures, and its continual refashioning by those in positions of power through different regimes. In essence, questioning and reconfiguring established hierarchies of authority, power, knowledge and expertise must infiltrate the nuts and bolts of the museum itself.

Most museums have struggled to heed the imperative born out of calls to share authority and have not yet begun, as Robin Boast advocates (Boast, 2011:67), to let go of their resources “for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control”. While there have been powerful community engagement models practiced in museums (e.g., the Medellin project in Colombia; the District Six Museum in South Africa), participatory programming and decolonial intentions have also been applied in superficial ways as part of a bouquet of offerings by the neo-liberal, post-colonial museum<sup>74</sup>. In the African context, Diallo questions whether the transformation of colonial inheritances into useful pieces of a postcolonial infrastructure can be done through a kind of ‘undoing’. He argues “(t)o decolonize museums in Africa seems to mean something like preserving a colonial artifact while disposing of its heritage and birthmark. At the end of such a process of decolonization, there will always remain something of the colonial will to civilize, to remake the “savage” into its own image” (Diallo, 2022: 88). What I take Diallo to mean is that understood as an ‘undoing’, the logic of decolonizing the museum may unwittingly re-employ a colonial logic in that it will be haunted by the structure it has attempted to erase.

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<sup>74</sup> The very existence of museums in a post-colonial context talks about processes of appropriation, mutation, and change. Thinking about the ‘new Asian museum’, Rustom Bharucha (2002: 294) argues that the “Indian museum remains caught between an obligatory need to generate ‘mass recreation’ through visual stimuli and the advocacy of ‘specialised knowledge’ perpetuated through an unconsciously grotesque parody of orientalism”. Providing another example from South Asia, Jyotindra Jain (2011: 54) explains that in India “the term ‘museum’ not only possesses an aura of depth and legitimacy with regard to history and tradition but also enjoys a certain secular claim”. The colonial institution of the museum “as repository of art and culture”, never really took root in India, Jain argues. Instead, this signifier ‘museum’, “has begun to find other uses – sectarian and political in nature with strong nationalist concerns” (Jain, 2011: 54). Using the example of the heritage/ spiritual/ tourism complex Akshardham on the outskirts of New Delhi, Jain argues that Hindu religious activity is replaced with the ‘celebration’ and spectacularisation of Hinduism as ‘culture and heritage’ and tied to a nationalist narrative through its presentation as a secular form of cultural consumption.

For Karina (2022: 657), the project of ‘undoing’ through a claim to decolonise the museum is a pretence: “the problem was never the values that structured the early museum, that those values and that structure might be cleansed of the history they were incidentally caught up in, to make a museum much like the one we already see everywhere, except perhaps a few looted treasures poorer, and a little embarrassed about its role in an injustice it has nevertheless found a way to situate firmly in the past”. For Karina (2022: 657), the museum’s inheritances render it “faulty and ethically compromised”, and as such its search to represent, to narrate the past, to be a space of memorialisation, is fundamentally compromised. I take a position that views a greater degree of mutability in the form of the museum and view the museum as having tangible and epistemic connections to legacies of injustice that continue to structure the social fabric. Recognising and exploring these entanglements is key within a public space, even if that ‘public space’ is tenuous, fragile and politically fraught.

In their analysis of Iziko South African Museums, Ndhlovu and Rassool (2022: 239), compellingly point out: “it should also understand that the decolonization of museums above all involves ongoing epistemic work”. An example they raise as evidence of such work was a performance in the Iziko South African Museum in 2017, "of live art in the space of the African Cultures Gallery (also referred to as the "ethno-wing"), which contained dioramas of South African "tribes" as named and governed through the work of the former state ethnologist, N. J. van Warmelo. Unlike previous interventions and instances of interference that sought recontextual-ization, such as through the struggle for land, now the artists and activists declared that the African Cultures Gallery was a "colonial crime scene" (Kasibe and Blackmore 2017). This powerful performance was conducted during the deinstallation of these displays, following a decision by executive and Core Functions management committee to deinstall and permanently close the dioramas in the African Cultures Gallery”.

A national museum holds an unusual position in its attempt to represent a civic project and a public commons, and as a space that is not necessarily determined by logics of capitalism and commodification. While there is much legitimate critique to point out the ways in which the creation of a common based on the colonial idea of the museum is doomed to fail, I have also made a case for the (fragile post-settler colonial) museum as a space of instability that can invite and house dialogue, dissent and conflicting ideas. The idea of the museum as a nodal social infrastructure (Moilola, 2020; Verges, 2014) in a society with sparse manifestations of commons, as a conduit rather than resting place for precious things, is a hopeful one.

This research project has aimed to surface the cultural entanglements implicit in such a collection and make evident the high risks of replicating de-historicising interpretive frameworks even in a post-

colonial, post-apartheid context. In so doing, I have tried to show how the art museum has played an important role in reinstating value systems and ways of seeing and knowing through its continual remaking on “both sides of colonialisms history: by a rapacious and violent empire of plunder and pacification, as well as by empire as ‘benevolent colonisation’, humanitarianism and trusteeship over people and things” (Rassool, 2020: 340). I have motivated for strategies that do not read the art museum in the terms that it wants to be read on, namely through art historical and museological discursive frameworks which explain its transformations and mutations in ways that leave its cultural authority intact, and which rely on ideas of art, nation and citizen that do not sufficiently trace the continuities and discontinuities between imperial and late capitalist social systems.

The Clarke Conference (2023) in Williamstown, USA themed “The Fetish A(r)t Work: African Objects in the Making of European Art History 1500–1900”, is a recent example that points to the enduring focus on African art in historical discourse via a focus on Western epistemic dominance and the subjection of African art objects to appropriative histories. The research presented in this thesis serves as a counterpoint to the continued intellectual hegemony over the terms of debate of African art, as it presents under-explored perspectives of the construction of African art from a non-dominant cultural context. The post-colonial, post-apartheid context of South Africa makes clear the mutability of colonial logics evident in the construction and circulation of traditional African art, logics perhaps more easily viewed from the vantage point of Europe and the USA as part of a distant chapter of political history.

This project has also made a consistent case for the imaginative and interpretive possibilities embedded in the African art collection that can relink severed objects from distanced interlocutors (the supply chain of West African art on the continent for example) and from distanced and (sometimes intentionally) ‘vanished’ life-worlds (the cultural ecosystems from which much of the South African beadwork was sourced). A methodology of tracing an object’s journeys to the museum’s storage, has raised critical questions about the value systems at work in the construction of tradition and heritage. If I consider Njabulo Ndebele’s analysis of the decolonial impulse as motivated by a quest to uncover the human aspect that was lost in the logics of coloniality (2017:104), national inheritances like the Iziko Museums of South Africa’s PAA collection might be viewed as a catalyst for such analytic work.

The notion of de-worlding presents another set of ideas ripe for further thinking and research within South African artistic traditions and beyond. As the politics and protocols for repatriation gain pace over the next decades, methodologies to analyse the origins of dispossession in the name of art and the alternative epistemologies erased and eclipsed by the imperial modality of art will be important.

The methodologies explored in this thesis respond to this need. Reactionary politics around the historically ethnographic can be reductive, and the notion of loot can also truncate historical and epistemic complexity. Returned objects, as Azoulay (2019) reminds us, are different from re-homed objects. The ISANG's beadwork collection represents the starting point for further work on the intergenerational nature of cultural production and calls for deeper analysis of the impacts of cultural loss. As the 'preservation' impulse of the museum (evident in colonial and liberal humanist frameworks) is questioned more systematically via the discourse of restitution and return, what kind of processes, returns and dialogues might become attractive for the ISANG? The museum offers lessons about the mutability of the syndrome of preservation, which is pertinent in the face of cultural discourses around planetary well-being as various factors weigh in on looming anxieties about cultural loss. What will the museum's preservation impulse mean in the era of extinctions and climate change?

### The Possible Futures of the Iziko Museums of South Africa's Permanent African Art collection

An exhibition titled 'Breaking Down the Walls', which commemorated 150 years of the ISANG's existence, was on display at the time of the completion of this thesis. In some ways, the curatorial concept spoke to Sundar Sakkurai's call to expose the museum's insides (2020). Curator Andrew Lampbrecht sought out various ways in which the institution's contradictory impulses and violent roots could be exposed and placed contemporary works into conversation some of the colonial collections. For example, renowned South African artist Mary Sibande's 3-metre sculpture of a woman dressed in a house-maid's uniform mounted on the back of a rearing horse (called *The Reign*, 2010), carries a potent black feminist challenge to oppressive colonial patriarchies embodied in some of the infamous British sporting paintings from the Bailey collection besides which her horse rises up. At the same time, there was a clear side-stepping of the problems presented by the contentious category of traditional African art and its attendant questions of appropriation, mutation, and epistemic disobedience. A few Ndebele wall panels and Mfengu beadwork pieces appear in the narrowly contextualized "women's work" room, which is dedicated to a cross sectional study of art made by women or representative of feminist politics. In this very exhibitionary context, to reveal something of the purchase histories of these pieces may point to the potential of repressed histories in historically truncated objects like the Ndebele and Mfengu beadwork.



Fig 66 & 67. Visitors at Iziko South African National Gallery. Source: Iziko Museums of South Africa / N Pamplin (2022)

Press around the exhibition released by Iziko museums and published in the *Daily Maverick* (see photographs) speaks to the ISANG's perceived need to demonstrate a young audience primarily made up of people of colour. I read this as a tacit response to the fact that the core private financial (and

perhaps cultural) support for the ISANG remains strongly situated in a retired white liberal demographic (as evidenced in the make-up of the “Friends of the Gallery”). Generational changes are occurring swiftly, and the mutation of the museum into an attractive place for Cape Town’s heterogeneous population of the 21st century is visualized as a tangible possibility by such photographs. However, as this thesis has explored, the art museum operates in an ambiguous space between reflecting and constructing publics and histories. Its work of exploring potentiality has only just begun. Projects like the ‘occupation’ of the JAG by a group of artists, writers, and activists in late 2022 that aimed to stimulate public discourse about the legacy of colonial and apartheid ghosts in public institutions like the JAG speak to the work to be done in the ISANG.

The future of the African art collection emerged often in my interviews with museum staff, past and present. Whether it could be physically re-homed and re-contextualised within another of the Iziko buildings, whether it might find a separate place of display or whether (a sentiment expressed with tinges of dismay, spite or remorse) it might languish in irrelevance in some institutional hiding place. Rather than remain buried in irrelevance through unjustifiable interpretive paradigms and strict protocols of display, the African art collection could be opened up as a resource to catalyse conversations and projects about tradition, heritage, ownership, collection ethics, art histories. Who might be invited to bring new interpretive life to the collection? Projects and initiatives like ‘African Digital Heritage’ and ‘Open Restitution Africa’ are evidence of the cultivation of a new ethos around participation, knowledge creation and activism in relation to heritage and African museal collections which challenge hitherto dominant paradigms of expertise. New relationships and social infrastructures might be developed through such opening – for a start on a practical level this could begin with a photographic assessment (digitisation with a participatory design), student research projects, collaborations with other African institutions and collectives interested in reframing interpretive paradigms for the traditional.

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