Negotiating a South African Inheritance: Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century 'Traditional' Collections at the Johannesburg Art Gallery

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The early twentieth century saw the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) begin its life as a colonial institution devoted to modern European art. Its express intention was to convey the ideology of the 'civilised' and to act as an aspirational example for what its founders considered to be the uncouth white inhabitants of the nascent town of Johannesburg. From these grandiloquent but inequitable beginnings, JAG has continuously redefined itself in response to changes in society. From the syphons onwards, it has reflected in its collections the political transformations occurring in South Africa. It now possesses one of the major collections of art in the global south and, undoubtedly, the finest collection of nineteenth and early twentieth-century objects of southern African expressive culture in the world. This essay is focused on a specific aspect of JAG's collection. It explores the acquisition, institutionalisation and display of the so-called 'traditional' collections of southern African art at the JAG and how, as far as the positioning of this material is concerned, the project of modernism has faltered.

A symptom of this faltering is perhaps evident in the fact that while in the last 25 years there have been a significant number of black curatorial appointees at the JAG, in only one instance has a black curator been appointed to these 'traditional' southern African collections. In this essay I speculate that both black and white curators largely avoid...

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1 Despite these exceptional collections, the JAG has become an attractive destination for art love, browsing traffic, urban and their city dwellers in significant numbers, and has emerged as a central attraction for both locals and tourists. The gallery has for many years been systematically underfunded by its owner, the City of Johannesburg.

2 Regional Lent: Possessing Power (1994-95); Thebe Dukwana, Marikana: Extinction (1994-95) and Siboniso Thabethe, "Collection" (1996-97); Prasa Dance, Cotton, Unlimited (1996-99); Yvonne Saven, "Couture of Traditional Southern African Art" (1997-2000) and Acting Head of the JAG (2004); Mawu Ndhlovu, Assistant Director (1997-1999); Vilakazi Shezi, "Gourd" (1999); Elizabeth Gluck, Curator; Contemporary Collections (2001-05); Mavou arm (2005-2010); Colin Campbell, "Couture of Traditional Southern African Art" (1997-2000); and Acting Head of the JAG (2004); Mawu Ndhlovu, Assistant Director (1997-1999); Vilakazi Shezi, "Gourd" (1999); Elizabeth Gluck, Curator; Contemporary Collections (2001-05); Mavou arm (2005-2010); Colin Campbell, "Couture of Traditional Southern African Art" (1997-2000); and Acting Head of the JAG (2004).

3 There has been no black appointment as the head of the JAG (except for director as Acting Head in 2014), however, its curator, Mosque, Africa, has been deemed 'peripheral' at all high-profile events and is often left in the shadows. This is particularly so in the case of South Africa's most important collections, where black curators have been woefully underrepresented.