



Metal and plastic supports, labels and a Perspex ring used to display 'traditional' objects from southern Africa, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2015. Photograph: Shannon Ferguson

## 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 set an aspirational example for what its founders considered to be the uncouth white inhabitants of the nascent town of Johannesburg. From these grandiose but inequitable beginnings, JAG has continuously redefined itself in response to changes in society. From the 1980s 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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

1 Despite these exceptional collections, the JAG has become an unattractive destination for art lovers. Surrounding traffic chaos and inner-city decay, with its attendant criminal activity, has impacted on the JAG's popularity as a destination of choice. To add to its constraints, the JAG has, for many years, been systematically underfunded by its owner – the City of Johannesburg.

2 Reginald Letsatsi: Professional Officer, Education (1990–3); Thembinkosi Mabaso: Curator, Exhibitions (1994–5) and Senior Curator, Collections (1996–2002); Prince Dube: Curator, Exhibitions (c.1996–2006); Veliswa Gwintsa: Curator of Traditional Southern African Art (1997–2003) and Acting Head of the JAG (2004); Pitso Chinzima: Assistant Exhibitions Officer and later Curator, Exhibitions (1997–2006); Tshidiso Makhetha: Curator, Exhibitions (2002–10); Khwezi Gule: Curator, Contemporary Collections (2004–10); Nontobeko Ntombela: Curator, Contemporary Collections (2010–12); Rhesma Chhiba: Curator Exhibitions and later Registrar (2007–13); Musha Neluheni: Education Officer (2010–14) and Curator, Contemporary Collections (2014–). There has been no black appointee as the head of the JAG (except for Gwintsa as Acting Head in 2004). However, its sister institution, Museum Africa, has had Dawn Robinson and Ali Hlongwane as heads. All these individuals, except Neluheni, have moved to other positions in the arts and culture industries. Of all these, only Gwintsa has worked with the 'traditional' collections. All others have favoured working with contemporary or Western-styled art. Information sourced from the JAG records by Jo Burger and Joyce Mashile and pers. comm. from Musha Neluheni, 16 January 2015. In 2009 artist, writer and member of the deadrevolutionariesclub, Sharlene Khan, wrote in 'Doing it for Daddy', *Art South Africa* 4(3), 2009: 56 that instead of seeing radical change after 1994, white women have replaced white men in occupying crucial positions in the arts. The substantial list above indicates that this is not the case at the JAG.