

South Africa: the Art of a Nation

A Review of an Exhibition

Philip Allsworth-Jones

Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield

An exhibition with the above title opened at the British Museum in London on 27 October 2016 with the expectation that it would continue until 26 February 2017. To coincide with this event, a conference in Cambridge and London took place from 27 to 29 October under the title "The Pasts and Presence of Art in South Africa: Technologies, Ontologies, and Agents". It was organised jointly by the Centre of African Studies and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge and the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the British Museum. Presentations were given by a total of 21 speakers, most of them from South Africa, and there were contributions from others as well. Full details about the exhibition are given in the well-illustrated catalogue (Giblin and Spring, 2016) and it was also well publicised in the press (e.g. Durrant, 2016).

Art is a subject which appears constantly in the pages of the "Nigerian Field", with particular reference to West Africa, and it is felt that the contrasting experiences of South Africa will be of interest to readers.

Earliest manifestations

Right from the start the exhibition did attract controversy, not least because it was originally to have been launched under the title "South Africa: Three Million Years of Art" (Sanderson, 2016). That claim rests upon a pebble recovered from Makapansgat cave in 1925. It does have depressions in it which look remarkably like a human face. There is no suggestion that these depressions were caused by anything other than natural agencies, but the fact that the stone is not local means that it must have been brought in from outside. The remains of *Australopithecus africanus* found in the cave date to about three million years ago, and this is the basis for the claim that we have here an art object dating back that far. Unfortunately it is likely that the Australopithecinae were present in the cave for no other reason than that they were the prey of carnivores, and whether for that reason

or not, the organizers evidently felt that this was a claim too far, and the title was changed to the current one, which in itself (as John Giblin remarked to the conference participants) is not altogether unproblematic.

We are on much firmer ground if, as the authors of the catalogue say, we take as our "point of departure" an age of about 100,000 years ago for the "earliest known artistic tradition in southern Africa". This evidence comes from Blombos cave on the Cape Coast, where pieces of worked or incised ochre in a sure archaeological context date back to this time period. Particularly interesting are a series of perforated shell beads (some of which are on display in the exhibition) dating back to 78-75,000 years ago. It is claimed that these represent "the earliest firm evidence for symbolic bodily ornamentation anywhere in the world". Not that we need give up entirely on the idea of "manuports" – that is, unworked pieces that nonetheless attracted attention, prior to this period, as pointed out by Michael Chazan at the conference. At Wonderwerk cave he and his colleagues have noted certain objects found at the back which appear to have been deliberately brought in by the late Acheulean inhabitants about 180,000 years ago or more (Chazan and Horwitz, 2009). These objects include quartz crystals, slabs of ironstone, and pieces of specularite. Not humanly modified artefacts clearly but objects of curiosity to the inhabitants, who in this case were certainly not mere carnivore victims.

San rock art

The first appearance of figurative art in South Africa comes much later in the form of painted images depicted on the walls of caves and rock shelters. The visitor to the exhibition is immediately confronted by one of these, in the form of a large slab showing what are presumed to be hunters and a herd of eland. This slab was discovered in 1912 in a rock shelter at Zaamenkomst, lying face down on the ground, in two pieces, suggesting that it had fallen from the wall of the shelter. By the time of discovery there were, however, no traces of painting on the wall, and it is presumed that it was only the fact that these pieces fell face down in an ash deposit that ensured their survival. It also ensured that they could be displayed in this exhibition, since there is general agreement that *in situ* parietal (that is, wall) art should not be dislodged from its original position. Depictions such as this are common in southern Africa and have been extensively studied, among others by Leo Frobenius, who conducted an expedition to the area in 1928-1930. He and his team made reproductions of over 2000 paintings, mostly in watercolour, and they also took more than 3000 photographs of the sites, a collection which is today housed at

the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt. Most of the presentations at the conference which were concerned with this subject dealt with its final phase, when the hunters appeared alongside incoming pastoralists and even European settlers, but most of the depictions are not of this nature, and there is reason to think that they go back well before the contact period.

A remarkable discovery was made in 1969 by Erich Wendt at a rock shelter in Namibia, which he called Apollo 11, after the successful lunar mission of that year, although the original name for the locality is Goachanas (Wendt 1976, Rifkin et al. 2016). Wendt conducted excavations at the site in 1969 and 1972, as a result of which he found seven small painted slabs, which (unlike Zaamenkomst) had never formed part of a wall decoration, in a clearly defined archaeological horizon. On the basis of three radiocarbon dates from this horizon he estimated that the slabs dated to a time between 27,500 and 25,500 years before present (BP), but, relying on further dates obtained in 2007, this estimate has now been corrected to about 30,000 years BP. The paintings (predominantly in black, red, white and yellow pigments) show (as Wendt suggested) a zebra and a rhinoceros, but also a combined human and animal figure, the fore part possibly a feline (*Raubkatze*) and the rear part two legs of human appearance. This figure clearly is not a naturalistic depiction, and it seems it may have to do with a shamanistic performance. There is a considerable gap—probably 20,000 years or more—between the age of these fragmentary depictions and the main body of figurative art, and archaeologists including Wendt himself have been cautious about claiming continuity. Nonetheless, my impression, based on the style of the paintings, and the likely shamanistic interpretation that can be given to them, is that there is indeed continuity between the figurative art at this site and its later manifestations.

One such site to which attention was directed at the conference is the rock shelter of Ezeljagdspoor, recorded for the first time in 1835 (Lewis-Williams 2003). Since then, many different interpretations have been given to this site's rock art, most commonly in terms of fish-tailed water-maidens. It is a general assumption that this art must have been created by South Africa's first recorded inhabitants, the San (otherwise known as "Bushmen") people. Our knowledge of these people, their language and beliefs, owes a lot to two individuals who studied them in the 1870s and 1880s, Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, whose extensive records are preserved at the University of Cape Town. Lewis-Williams and his colleagues have used these records and other sources to construct a different narrative for the site, in which shamanism is a key construct. One of Bleek and Lloyds' informants already referred

to the fish-tailed figures as rain-makers, and one long, elongated figure may be a representation of an effect of an altered state of consciousness, whereby the shaman seems to rise up above and beyond his surroundings. The water-maidens become swallows who are connected with the prediction of rain. Clearly it is difficult to be sure about all this, but what is undoubted is the dramatic effect this has had on the entire field of study, ie, the reconstruction of the meaning of these images "from the inside".

What about the San people themselves? Following the start of European colonization, theirs has been a tragic history, and the question of how to represent them in a museum context is fraught with difficulty. A well known attempt to do so was made at the South African Museum (now one of 12 Iziko Museums of Cape Town) in the early years of the 20th century (Davison 2001, Jackson and Robins 1999) and the story of this attempt as told to the conference by Wendy Black is instructive in many respects. Following a visit to South Africa by the Cambridge Professor A.C. Haddon in 1905 (the then director of the South African Museum), a "modeling from life" project was initiated, whereby life-sized plaster casts would be made of members of the San community, on the assumption that this community was on the verge of extinction. This work was undertaken by James Drury over the years 1907-1924, resulting in the production of 64 such casts. Little is known about the process, or the degree to which the participants were willing or not, but it is generally agreed that the casts themselves are very accurate. They were displayed in the museum from the 1930s onwards, but without any attempt to provide context. This changed in 1959, when a diorama was constructed, whereby the people were depicted as part of an early 19th century hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo. The scene was actually based on an aquatint by Samuel Daniell dating to 1805. In 1988, an additional showcase was installed, explaining how the casting process had been carried out, but the diorama itself remained unaltered.

In 1996, a completely different but temporary exhibition was organized in the nearby South African National Gallery under the title "Miscast". This exhibition attempted to redress the balance by emphasizing the hardships that the San people had endured, the difficult life their descendants now had, and the negative aspects of the casting process. It produced very mixed reactions, some representatives of the San people in fact saying that they preferred the original diorama, since it provided a positive (even if perhaps mythical) view of the life they had had in the past. Nonetheless, perhaps partly as a result of the ensuing furore, the view gained currency that the diorama was demeaning, and it was closed in 2001. The casts have

been classified as human remains, and since no human remains can now be publicly exhibited in South Africa, it is not likely that it will be reopened. The question remains, how to show these people—whose ancestors painted what are universally recognized as great creative works—in a worthy and respectful way?

Since 1652

A few more artefacts in the exhibition, including some remarkable gold figures from Mapungubwe, relate to the early history of South Africa, but for the most part the remainder concerns the period after European settlement commenced in 1652. As John Giblin remarked to conference participants, the exhibition as a whole has a more markedly political slant than usual at the British Museum, but granted the history of the country, particularly over the last 150 years, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. Visitors will have their own opinion of things they think especially worthy of note, so I will do no more than mention three which particularly caught my eye.

First is a work by Willem Boshoff entitled "Bad Faith Chronicles", created in 1995. The story behind it is contained in the exhibition catalogue. Boshoff had a strict upbringing in the Dutch Reformed Church, but he decided to learn the Zulu language, and in doing so he came across the text of Psalm 111 verse 6 as it appeared in the Zulu version of the Bible. In English it reads, "God gave his people the power to take the land of other nations". Boshoff was very much upset by this, and as he relates, he then discovered that the Bible contains the names of 36 peoples of the ancient world whose lands were appropriated in God's name and given to "his people". In response, he created eleven panels, one for each of the eleven official languages in South Africa. At the bottom of each panel is a Bible in one of those languages, open at Psalm 111. Immediately above each Bible are 36 miniature pink plastic dolls, pinned down like insects, and beneath each doll is a label bearing the name of one of the Biblical peoples whose land was taken by God, together with the name of one of South Africa's peoples whose land was also appropriated. The exhibition contained one of these panels.

Second was a photograph of a well known sculptural work created by Jane Alexander in 1985-86 entitled "Butcher Boys". Alexander's sculpture depicts three naked, life-size, white human-like figures with horns and grotesque facial expressions. The sculpture elicits a very disturbing impression. I take it that this is

intended to indicate the dehumanizing effect which apartheid had not only on its victims but also on its perpetrators.

Third is the tableau with which the exhibition concluded, entitled "A Reversed Retrogress", created by Mary Sibande in 2013. This tableau consists of two life-sized figures made from casts (again!) of the artist's own body. On the left is a figure in blue and white and on the right a figure in purple. The figure on the left, named Sophie, represents the past three generations of the artist's maternal family who worked as servants in white households. The one on the right represents the artist's present and future, shown in a kind of dance or tussle with Sophie. Sibande says this highly personal piece is about saying goodbye to Sophie and looking forward. Why purple? This colour was chosen by reference to an incident which occurred in Cape Town in 1989 when protesters seized a water cannon and turned the purple dye, which it contained, on the riot police themselves.



Figure 1. Creation of the Sun.

In addition, shown here (figure 1, from an image available on the Internet) is the work which introduces the entire exhibition, named "Creation of the Sun". This work, in the form of a quilt, was produced by a group called First People Artists at the Bethesda Art Centre in the Eastern Cape in 2015. It shows the story of the

creation as related by a San informant to Bleek and Lloyd in 1871, and as the authors of the catalogue say, it demonstrates —after all—the continuing vitality of the San tradition.

Conclusion

Fittingly enough, the conference proceedings were rounded off by two South African artists whose work also featured in the exhibition, Karel Nel and Helen Sebidi. Karel Nel early on had introduced a possible definition of art which he had heard from a Venda informant as “anything that is carefully made”, a deceptively simple formula no doubt, in view of the many tomes which must exist on that subject. Neither of the speakers had a particularly optimistic assessment to offer of the current situation in South Africa. “A general sense of unease” where “working together has not yet happened”. A downbeat conclusion, perhaps not too surprising in the light of that country’s tortuous past, and one that hopefully is a far cry from West Africa.

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