On Collecting Southern African Art:

Interrogating private collecting practices and the construction of ‘traditional’ southern African art as ‘national’ and ‘cultural heritage’.

Leigh Deborah Blanckenberg
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Abstract:

This dissertation critically engages Karel Nel’s personal/private collection of southern African art in relation to other collections to which he is connected. An examination of Nel’s collecting practices is conducted, after an extensive comparison with the public collections held by both the Wits Art Museum and the Johannesburg Art Gallery. I then investigate the degree of influence between his private collecting praxes and the collecting praxes of the selected public institutions. It is argued that this helps to establish the degree to which private collecting influences the creation of what is understood as ‘national’ and ‘cultural heritage’ in public collections of southern African art.
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Chapter One

Introduction

In contemporary world cultures, it is the case that importance and economic value is given to certain types of visual art, whereas a lack of significance is attributed to others. Prevailing value systems as well as largely unequal economic and social value systems persist within the ‘art world’ in southern Africa, dominated as it is by western discourses. I argue that present definitions of art (in particular the range of definitions that relate to collecting southern African art), while benefiting collectors and dealers, may exclude others, especially contemporary makers. It is important to investigate the social constructs that give rise to such exclusivity because of this imbalance. More importantly, this study will address attitudes towards collecting for South Africa’s national archive, by noting those objects collected for institutions that have been conserved as parts of Southern African ‘national heritage.’ A critical examination of, and a comparison between Karel Nel’s private collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art and the ‘traditional’ African art in the public collections at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) and the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), will be undertaken in order to explore the issues raised above.

Very little literature or documentation can be accessed on what is defined as ‘traditional’ aesthetic material from southern Africa that precedes the 1970s. Despite a lack of
referencing, there is however a sizeable body of documents and literature from the late 1970s onwards. It is thanks to only a small handful of scholars that ‘traditional’ southern African art has been brought into the public domain; and thanks to these same scholars that southern African material has, and continues to be investigated. However, the question of the way in which it has been defined and valued requires further exploration. In this study, I undertake to approach that question within a broader investigation of what has been collected as southern African art.

In order to narrow the scope of my study, I have chosen to focus on what has been termed southern African ‘traditional’ art, by previous and current art scholars. How this is defined will be explained in more detail in chapter two of this study. The terminology of ‘traditional’ southern African arts are understood here as those objects produced in Africa, in any region south of the Zambezi river, dating mostly from the 19th and 20th centuries to the present, and those that have been categorised in broader scholarship on African art as ‘traditional’ art. Most importantly, artworks are defined by what is classified in public and private collections of southern African art as ‘traditional’. The word/concept ‘traditional’ is placed in parentheses throughout this paper to indicate that its use is taken as a questionable construct.

In order to establish the significance, or lack thereof, given to southern African ‘traditional’ art, I aim to understand how the canon of ‘traditional’ southern African art has been constructed - looking specifically to Southern African ‘traditional’ art included in private and public collections. Thus, central question of this study is: What influence does the process of private art collecting have on notions of ‘national’ and ‘cultural heritage’ in a Southern African context? In asking this question, I intend to argue that the hierarchies of ‘art’, which
are constructed through private collecting practices, have been claimed by these same collectors, to constitute a ‘national heritage’ in the specific case of historical southern African art, and to trace how this definition then feeds into public collecting practices.

In the second chapter, I provide an overview of major literature and theories surrounding collecting, and specifically on the collection of art. In order to unpack collecting practices, and determine whether there are specific collecting practices within a southern African framework, there not only needs to be an initial understanding of how collecting is viewed and understood as a whole, but also, an examination of the role of the collector in interpreting norms in relation to their collection. I will argue that the canon of collecting is largely defined by societal values and ideas. In other words, the collector cannot be seen as independent in his/her act of collecting, as the process of collecting is influenced by the society in which he/she collects. This is the case even when that same collector selects objects from cultures outside the society in which he/she is based. The object chosen for collection is provided with significance or value based on how the collector, and that collector’s society, views that object. Thus I will unpack what constitutes the collectors society and in what way that society effects collecting practices in a southern African context.

In order to further examine the social constructs underlying definitions of southern African ‘traditional’ art, I focus on two significant and different ‘traditional’ southern African art collections in the third chapter. These are the ‘traditional’ southern African sections held at the public art institutions, Wits Art Museum and the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the collections held at these respective institutions, in order to provide an accurate context in which to view their material. Chapter 3.1 and 3.2
consists of brief critical analyses of the content of WAM and JAG’s ‘traditional’ southern African section, followed by an extensive analysis of interviews held with the two institutions curator’s: Julia Charlton and Fiona Rankin-Smith of the Wits Art Museum (hereafter WAM), and Nessa Leibhammer of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (hereafter JAG).

At the end of a synopsis of each of these institutions, an in-depth discussion of an accompanying exhibition from each of these collections will take place. The importance of these two exhibitions and the collections they displayed is that they both lay claim to showing elements of southern African ‘cultural heritage’ as constituted by ‘traditional’ Southern African art. The first exhibition is *Ten Years of Collecting (1979-1989): Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art, University Art Galleries’ Collection of African Art and selected works from the University Ethnological Museum Collection*, an exhibition of ‘traditional’ southern African material held at the Wits Art Museum in 1989. The second is *Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst collection of Southern African Art*, an exhibition of ‘traditional’ southern African material held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1991.

It is important to note here that there is no existing literature on Karel Nel’s private collection and his influence on public collections. In Chapter 4, I argue that Karel Nel is not only a prominent private collector of southern African art, but that he is also seen as an influential academic, artist, writer, and that he acts as an advisor to other collectors within a South African framework. My initial examination of Nel’s collection will establish what kind of objects he sees as being important and collectible. This will then be followed by a critical
analysis of the interview held with Karel Nel regarding the importance of his collection, as well as his involvement in the collections held by both WAM and JAG.

In chapter 5, by comparing Nel’s collection to the public collections held at WAM and JAG, I argue that it is possible to examine the extent to which Nel’s collection reveals his influence on the directions taken for other collections and wider collecting practices in Southern Africa, particularly in relation to claims made about the construction of these art collections as ‘cultural heritage’ for South Africa as a nation. Initially, the term ‘cultural heritage’ will be unpacked with regards to a Southern African context in order to establish how it has come to be defined in relation to southern African ‘traditional’ art. What is also important to establish is the extent to which these public collections and other outside factors may have influenced Karel Nel’s collecting practices and object choices. The way in which both WAM and JAG choose to utilise notions of ‘cultural heritage’ will be critically examined. This is followed by a comparison of similarities and differences between those public institutions and Karel Nel’s collection.
Chapter Two

Overview of literature and theories surrounding collecting art

I. Collecting from individual to society

In order to understand collecting practices in southern Africa in depth, it is important to look at theories and literature that focus on collections and the collector. It is argued here that the category of ‘traditional’ or ‘historical’ southern African art has been constructed largely through the adoption of western art frameworks of the types analysed by Susan Pearce (1995) and James Clifford (1988), western collecting processes, and thus requires analysis. It is particularly relevant to note that the majority of southern African art collectors come from western backgrounds. The initial question asked here is then how a collection may be defined. According to Pearce (1995: 4) a collection should be seen as:

> a set of things which people do, as an aspect of individual and social practice which is important in public and private life as a means of constructing the way in which we relate to the material world and so build up our own lives.

Pearce (1995) and Clifford (1988) focus on defining collecting processes within what they refer to as a European framework. They argue that in the past, material culture has largely been documented from Eurocentric viewpoints. Furthermore, it is European society that has
placed, and continues to place, significance on material goods. Clifford (1988) argues that the collectors’ identification of collectables is not independent of external influences. He goes on to claim that the identification of these objects is based on a certain western ideal – that is, the ideal to possess or accumulate in order to create an identity, an identity he postulates to be based on wealth. However, it is not only western culture that attaches value to objects. Whilst the definitions of value may vary in different cultures, all cultures assign value to material objects. A select group of material objects is invested with particular symbolic meaning and hence ‘cultural capital’ is created for their society through these objects (Bourdieu, 1993).

Pearce (1995) and Clifford (1998) refer to a perspective that could be argued to be most relevant when discussing southern African collecting. They argue that theorists in this field have focused on collecting as a means to understanding the ‘material culture’ which develops within a particular society and how that ‘material culture’ affects that society. “Objects are seen as essentially cultural, and capable of engaging in cultural dialogue with human individuals from which social changes will emerge” (Pearce, 1995: 10). However, when it comes to the collecting of objects as art within a southern African framework, there is a greater focus on the aesthetic qualities of the objects rather than on their utilitarian or the symbolic significance with which they were originally invested, something which would be reversed if they were considered as ‘material culture’. Similarly Pearce (1995) argues that art collectors acquire objects initially because of their appearance and only then do they refer back to ethnological information. She goes on to argue that this “information” has often been constructed on the basis of a series of assumptions, rather than on extensive research - an issue that will be explored further in later chapters through an analysis of the three collections chosen for this study.
Pearce (1995) states that, because objects may exist within multiple temporal contexts and because they can be possessed by individuals - their contexts can and do change in a process of accumulation, storage and ultimately collection. Furthermore, she suggests that an object becomes part of ‘material culture’ through acknowledgment of its importance to its society of origin and in relation to other objects within that society.\(^1\) Thus, she argues that objects exist and function socially, and furthermore, that their import can manifest in three ways: as artefacts, as signs or symbols of society, and as having acquired moral and economic value. She claims that the final of these three significances accorded to objects is the most common, acknowledging however that all three are interdependent. So, in order to understand motivations for collecting and general trends in collecting practices, it is necessary to understand the relationship an individual who chooses to collect may have to society generally, as well as to the particular society whose objects that individual collects.

Arjun Appadurai (1986) argues that the importance or, as he calls it, “value” assigned to an object, can be defined as the judgement assigned by a subject, often through economic exchange: where that object is sold or bought by individuals or institutions. An art object is judged by individuals as of high aesthetic value following a set of norms such as workmanship, design and proportion. Once there is sufficient agreement by a society regarding these norms - norms by which the objects can be judged, an object can be accorded a particular kind of ‘aesthetic value’. Furthermore, because there are relatively few objects that fit within these particular parameters aesthetic value is often caught up with rarity.

Despite the acknowledgment by Appadurai (1986: 5) that the meaning attributed to an object is dependent on its interaction with humans, he also argues that “it is the things-in-motion

\(^1\)“Objects are, therefore, socially meaningful, but their meaning is produced by arranging them in sets both mentally and physically” (Pearce, 1995: 14).
that illuminate their human and social context.” If the value of an object is defined in these terms, it follows that the identity given to a collection of works is dependent on established ideas and acts of collecting that provide particular value systems and definition to those works. Furthermore, the meaning or identity given to collections is influenced by time. As values and definitions are challenged by society, new identities for collections are created.

Pearce (1995) argues that a collection is generally viewed as a group of objects that are valuable in the relationship they have with each other, rather than individually. I argue that the relationship that objects have with each other is the constructed ‘aesthetic quality’ that each is said to bring to the collections in question. Pearce (1995) proposes that the difference between a collector and an individual who simply accumulates, is that the collector usually follows a “rational purpose” (Pearce, 1995: 23). This does not necessarily mean that once a collector begins with a particular purpose, his or her collection will remain directed by that same purpose, because the intentions of the collector may change as new interests are engaged. In other words, a collection has been viewed and determined by how the collector sees the world. In fact, Pearce (1995) acknowledges that the intentions of the collector may change several times as a result of his/her forming new interests once the collecting processes have already begun. She argues that the collection will change its ‘rational purpose’ and therefore its formation accordingly. In her argument, Pearce (1995) is no doubt referring to the collecting patterns of the individual collector: what I aim to explore further in this dissertation is whether her argument can hold for public collections of art. It will be established here that just as the private collector influences his/her own collection, when theories relating to art alter due to new academic research, the purpose or the reasoning behind the public collection will change accordingly.
Pearce (1995) claims further that objects, when collected, often move from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred. Their value or significance as objects is increased by the importance given to them by the collector. Pearce (1995: 24) uses the analogy:

They (objects) are wrenched out of their own true contexts and become dead to their living time and space in order that they may be given immortality within the collection.

Thus, objects, previously seen as functional aspects of society, are now seen as reflections of the collectors’ idea of value through the collectors “conscious preservation” (Pearce, 1995: 25). Pierre Bourdieu (1993) forwards a similar argument, that the meaning given to an object is dependent on how that object is seen by society, and then how that object is viewed by society in relation to other objects. He argues that it is problematic to view a cultural object as historically, economically or socially isolated. He refers to authors such as Foucault, who acknowledge that no cultural object can exist by itself, but should rather be defined in relation to other cultural objects. Thus, in order to establish the meaning of an artwork, one needs to establish the “history of the procedure of canonization and of hierarchization” related to that object (Bourdieu, 1993: 177). He (1993: 178) argues that this “external mode of analyses is based on Marxist research, as scholars in this field attempted to “relate works to a world-view or to the social interests of a social class.”

Authors such as Appadurai (1986) Bourdieu (1993) and Clifford (1988) all argue, in different shades of nuance, that any object that outlives its original use has left the context in which it was first created. The purpose for which it first existed then becomes less important as it moves through other contexts, whether regional, societal or historical. Thus the meaning that an object acquires, changes as it moves through time and space. They all argue further that objects, when collected, move from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred - or the
other way around. Their value or significance as objects is increased by the importance given to them by the collector. In other words, objects previously seen as functional aspects of society come to represent the collector’s idea of value. Thus, one could assume that the reasons why certain objects are chosen for collections while others are not, is largely dependent on notions of value, which are always variable and culturally defined. They go on to argue that how and why an object may enter a collection, or simply be seen to have little value and therefore be excluded, is dependent on a complex system made up of social customs, individual subjectivity and societal meaning given to each object.

II. Unpacking ‘Traditional’ southern African Art and ‘material culture’

In their discourse over collecting, a strong relationship emerges between the meanings that a collector’s society places on objects and what he or she will include in or exclude from his or her collection. In this section I focus on establishing the perspective from which one can analyse southern African Art collections; exploring what an ‘art’ or a ‘heritage’ collection represents in this context. This is a contested terrain in places like South Africa where objects taken out of their original context, be that historical or cultural, are placed within a collection. It is important to note that how the collected objects are viewed is further influenced by how the collector chooses to classify such objects. Clifford (1994) argues that the meaning of a collection is constructed, and therefore creates an illusion of representation. I argue that collecting ‘traditional’ southern African art for a private collection is based on the subjective view of the collector. Furthermore, that subjectivity is heavily influenced by the societal ideals to which the collector may be seen to subscribe.
In order to establish how a collector is influenced by these ideals, it is necessary to examine how the material that is collected is viewed within its existing context. In the following chapter, this context will be explored in order to establish the particularities in collecting practices of southern African art and to understand what is seen as significant ‘material culture’ and why. To set the scene for this, I give a historical overview of how ‘traditional’ southern African art has come to be defined and then, following the postulate that collectors are affected by contemporary society’s definitions of ‘traditional’ southern African art, I give a brief analysis of critical texts and exhibitions that have contributed to the understanding of this definition.

a) What is ‘material culture’?

One cannot assume the term ‘material culture’ to have universal meaning because there are multiple contexts in which objects can be read and defined. Working with Keith Moxey’s (1994) notion of ‘deconstruction’², I argue that an object must be seen as having significance within a socio-political and historical context. Furthermore, such contexts may be defined in terms of past or present societal values that have been attached to the material in question. In other words, an object is largely affected not only by how it is interpreted, but also by whom, and when. It is important to realise that an object may not only be indexical of a set of pre-existing cultural values, but also that new meanings are added to an object as time goes by. In other words, ‘cultural value’ is not an inherent quality, rather it is placed there through historical narratives past and present. Therefore, if one is to see objects within our society as imbued with symbolism, one has to accept that no object can be seen as detached from

² Moxey (1994) in his text ‘The Practice of Social Theory’ acknowledges that historical narratives cannot be seen as objective. Rather they are hugely influenced by history, politics and society.
historical and socio-political context. Cultural meaning is constructed for an object in its original context, but in the subsequent process of semiotic\textsuperscript{3} unpacking, it becomes constructed as part of a society’s ‘material culture’. Moxey (1994) argues that not only is an object embedded with socio-political and historical symbolism, but also that hegemonic or dominant discourses exist in relation to how ‘material culture’ is perceived within societies. Therefore theories relating to ‘material culture’ as it includes art, should be continually re-examined and critiqued.

Pearce (1995) argues that an interest in culture that emerged out of Marxist and Freudian theories resulted in a focus in Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology, on collecting an accurate representation of various communities and it was this trend that resulted in what is now understood as the notion of ‘material culture’. She goes on to suggest that the notion of ‘culture’ and the ability to analyse it grew in significance from the 1960’s to the 1990’s and in so doing, critical paradigms emerged. It is acknowledged that there are multiple constructs of the concept of ‘material culture’ in different theoretical contexts. This study will focus only on those forms of ‘material culture’ identified as art, specifically, ‘traditional’ southern African art. According to Moxey (1994: 39) museums and educational institutions are some of the social organizations that determine what forms of ‘material culture’ can be determined as art. He goes on to suggest that these institutions, by determining what is classified as art, tend to create dominant discourses that then inform the canon that determines ‘great’ art, which in turn affects the market. This, Moxey says, can be done both through collection and exhibition of material that public institutions choose according to determined criteria. 

Similarly, Clifford (1994) points out that objects, once perceived as examples of ‘culture’,

\textsuperscript{3} “Semiotics views the work of art as a system of culturally and historically determined signs. It conceives of the work as a part of a system of communication in which the artist makes use of conventional signs…in order to construct a cultural object that articulates and disseminates the attitudes of the society of which he or she is a part” (Moxey, 1994: 31).
can be elevated to the status of ‘fine art’ often due to the movement of objects from their place of origin to the gallery space. Thus, the category in which an object is placed can never be fully determined. As time passes, opinions and therefore values change and objects may shift from one category to another.

I argue that one should also see private collectors as influential in this regard. For example, through the act of collecting, private collectors tend to influence what is sold on the market and in turn create a value that attaches itself to objects and elevates them into the canon of ‘greatness’. In other words, while Anitra Nettleton (1995) argues that some objects are privileged over others by museums, both in terms of the cultural significance and monetary value, I argue that private collectors are likewise implicated in this process.

b) A Historical Overview

When analysing the definitions of ‘traditional’ southern African art the same theories as those discussed above, apply. I argue that it is museums, educational institutions, and private collections that shape what is understood as important ‘traditional’ southern African art. Objects chosen by these agents and defined by them as culturally significant come to have monetary value and as a result are defined as ‘great traditional’ art and are ranked higher than other objects. Furthermore, this can be seen not only in what has been collected publicly and privately in the past, but also through what continues to be collected. To justify this claim, I provide a historical overview of how ‘traditional’ Southern African art has been represented/constructed/constituted by public and private institutions. It is important to analyse the history of both private and public collections in Southern Africa and establish how and
why these collections have developed in particular ways. This is to see not only how the collecting canon has been established, but also at what level collectors (both in public institutions and the private individuals) have been instrumental in the establishment of collecting preferences. This dissertation will look at the history of specific collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art, examining how they have taken shape and form over time. In doing so, perhaps one can discover why particular material objects are selected to represent ‘traditional’ southern African art and are valued above others.

As Clifford (1994: 221) states “the critical history of collecting is concerned with what, from the material world, specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value and exchange.” He goes on to argue that historically, non-western objects have been collected by the western world in two ways: first as scientific artefacts representing ‘culture’ and second as aesthetic artefacts representing a culture’s creativity or art. He also acknowledges that in the past, all objects outside of western culture were demoted to the category of ‘curio’ and were often described as ‘tourist art’. He posits that what has therefore been included and excluded from African art collections is highly influenced by questions of authenticity. It would then follow that what is included or excluded from ‘traditional’ southern African art is also influenced by notions of ‘authenticity’. Therefore, the discourse of authenticity needs to be briefly examined.

It is the case that previously African, and in this case southern African, art had been framed as authentic based on a series of culturally specific definitions of art. Authors such as Sidney Kasfir (1992) and Larry Shiner (1994) have explored and discussed the problems inherent in previous notions of ‘authenticity’ in relation to African art. Despite the validity of their
arguments, there still seems to be a framework in which southern African art is persistently defined using these very distinctions that have been shown to be untenable. In order to unveil how ‘traditional’ art is seen in southern Africa, I briefly explore the ways in which these definitions have been critiqued. Shiner (1994) argues that what was previously termed ‘primitive art’ is now simply termed ‘traditional art’ - in an attempt to be more politically correct in a post-colonial, democratic setting. By changing the terminology used to identify art from Africa (and in this case, more specifically southern Africa) as ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional’, authors, collectors, dealers and scholars of art are able to side-line critical issues that have emerged when analysing the idea of the ‘primitive other’.

According to Kasfir (1992) and Shiner (1994: 226), the first criterion used to judge an ‘authentic traditional African artwork’ according to the current understandings of ‘authenticity’ is as an object created by a “small-scale” society in order to fulfil a purpose within that society. This may be utilitarian or ritual in character, although the latter carries more weight. It is also why older examples are preferred, as they are seen as pristine, and without influence of modernity. This then constructs a legitimate, ‘traditional’ African society as one that exists without any external influence from other societies. This view of African society is clearly reductive and by now anachronistic to art history. Art historians now acknowledged that the construction of art in any society cannot exist without outside influences from the rest of the world.

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4 “The idea that before colonialism, most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent, and highly integrated” (Kasfir, 1992: 41).
Furthermore, it is now understood that this criterion is problematic, as it restricts what is deemed symbolically and economically valuable art. If these criteria are enforced, many objects fall into the category of the ‘inauthentic’ and as a result, are likely to be excluded from private collections and art institutions alike. African art is thus labelled ‘inauthentic’ if it does not fit into these criteria. Kasfir (1992) argues that what was, and to some degree still is, seen as the vehicle for initiating a threat to the ‘authenticity’ of African art, is the advent of colonialism. Before African cultures were affected by Western societies through colonialism, it was believed that art was produced only in order to be used by the same community that created it. Thus it is the criterion of “traditionally functional” that is used to qualify an African artwork as ‘authentic’ under these criteria. This argument relies on an assumption that African artworks remained static or unchanging until the influence of colonialism, and only pre-colonial objects seen as valid. Once an object has been ‘tainted’ by a modern western society through colonialism, it is no longer seen as ‘authentic’.

Authors like Steiner (1994), Kasfir (1992), Clifford (1988) and Shiner (1994) argue that western views of ‘authentic’ African art are largely based on this assumption of a pre-colonial origin, but also on the attendant assumption that all the unique ‘traditional’ objects have already been discovered and moved into a European context. Thus, the value placed on African art is dependent on what had been collected by Europeans in the 19th and early 20th centuries, excluding many objects made or collected later. A corollary of the pre-colonial criterion of ‘authenticity’ in African art is the requirement that an ‘authentic’ African object be ‘old’. In addition, authenticity is also accorded when an object comes from what is assumed to be to a ‘vanishing culture’. Legitimate status is provided to the object by justifying its role in preserving a culture that runs the risk of dying out as a result of the processes of modernisation. By limiting what is ‘authentic’ to a ‘dying culture’, art traders are
able to inflate the value of certain objects by claiming a ‘limited supply’ (Steiner, 1994: 105). Previously, the tendency of African art scholars has been to focus on objects and their aesthetic qualities in a particular ethnographic setting, with the assumption that an ‘authentic’ object is one that exists without external influence of any kind. This assumption of cultural isolation has since been argued by Kasfir (1992) and Shiner (1994) to be flawed and an acknowledgment of the inevitability of outside influences on artists has been accepted by academics. However, this is not necessarily acknowledged by collectors and connoisseurs.

Thus it is the collectors’ subscription to notions of ‘authenticity’ that creates exclusionary notions of artistic quality. Through this overview of how African art has been defined and given ‘authenticity’, one can see that meaning for African objects as “art” is conferred by western curators, collectors and critics and the western art context in which African artworks are placed, subsequent to their removal from their original contexts.

It is also important to note that, by defining southern African Art within the old African ‘authentic’ rhetoric discussed above, certain objects are permitted to be deemed more valuable than others. Thus, art dealers, collectors and historians are able to control what is included within the art market, through a clearly, and particularly exclusive, conservative notion of ‘authenticity’. These definitions of art are severely problematic when it comes to construing a collection of southern African art as ‘heritage’, because of what is excluded. The restrictions placed on collections and collectors by the employment or rejection of these categories of authenticity and tradition will be examined further in my discussion of the case studies.
After discussing the notion of ‘authentic’ African art as a whole, the question that follows is what is seen as ‘authentic’ southern African art and why. In the past, there have been certain ways in which southern African art and the history of its making have been viewed and defined. Similar to the arguments outlined above, Nettleton (1989) argues that the definition of southern African arts has happened largely in relation to how ‘art’ as a whole has been defined. She argues that African objects such as free-standing figures, detailed wood carvings, ceramic sculpture and wall decorations that seem to go beyond functional use are those that have previously been acknowledged as ‘art’. Furthermore, Nettleton (1989) acknowledges that because of particular definitions of ‘art’ at certain periods in history, southern African art had previously been excluded from major art narratives. In order to ascertain why these exclusions occurred, it is necessary to examine the literature on and histories of southern African art, so that reasons for the current growth in interest in this area can be established.

Nettleton (1989) argues that there has been an increasing interest in and value accorded to ‘traditional’ art in the southern region of Africa since the 1970s. Similarly, Sandra Klopper (2004) argues that this trend only occurred when an interest emerged among art collectors for South African ‘traditional’ art, and that the acknowledgment of its aesthetic significance pushed up the monetary/commercial value of such items, that southern African ‘traditional’ art (carvings and woodwork in particular) began to emerge on the market and at auctions. Before then, she claims, southern African art was regarded as of little artistic importance and was not widely bought and sold.
Existing written histories surrounding southern African ‘traditional’ art seem to remain largely unknown outside academic circles. Nettleton (1989) shows that missionaries and travellers in the 18th and 19th centuries documented the production in southern African communities of what they viewed as ‘craft’. During this period, southern African craft, although recognised as the work of talented craftsmen in some ways, was largely regarded as curio, often as primitive and thus not deserving of the title ‘art’ in western terms. In fact, she claims that these objects were often used as proof that, despite the apparently ‘uncivilized’ nature of indigenous southern African communities, decorative ‘crafts’ showed the potential of their producers to be ‘civilized’ by the west.

However, Nettleton (1989) argues that, by the 19th century and well into the 20th century, the notion that southern African communities were unable to create ‘true art’ was seen as a well established fact, and previous attempts to convert such communities to the ‘civilised’ seemed to have been abandoned. She highlights a few possible reasons for this. First she argues that a hierarchy of southern African communities’ cultural importance within the 19th century was established with regards to their abilities in battle, rather than their abilities to produce aesthetically. Nettleton (1989: 25) then states that:

> One can understand, then, that writing about material culture of southern African black peoples in the nineteenth century, being largely a side-issue, in general descriptions of their cultures as a whole, served certain interests and reflected the ideas of the times.

The interests she speaks of are that of colonial rule. Aesthetic practices were mobilised in the argument to justify the fact that southern African peoples were not developed enough to continue to exist or function without the supervision of the western world.
She goes on to argue that it was only in the late 19th and early 20th century, with the publication of two books regarding South African ‘art’, that objects from southern Africa began to be recognised in a different light. These were *L’Industrie des Cafres du Sud-Est de l’Afrique* (n.d), authored by Muller and Snellemann and *L’Art dans l’Afrique Australe* (1911) by Christol. She argues that both books challenged understandings of aesthetic norms at the time and appealed to the reader to view the objects as aesthetically pleasing. Yet Nettleton (1989) argues that despite the acknowledgement by these authors of artistic qualities within the objects presented, there was still no comparison to what Europeans believed to be ‘high’ art. Rather, it seems that the objects were viewed as art belonging to the ‘primitive’.

It is Nettleton’s (1989) argument that the attitude towards southern African art portrayed in these publications has changed very little, even today. In fact, she claims that it was only in the 1950’s that the constituency of southern African ‘black art’ emerged as an area of academic investigation. Even so, academic research and publications that emerged on the topic of what was then termed black South African art was often misguided and filled with unjustifiable assumptions. Nettleton (1989: 27) goes on to argue that the text *The Art of Africa* (Battis, Grossert, Junod, & Franz, 1958), despite its problems, was the first book to “attempt to redress the balance in acknowledging the artistic traditions of black South Africans.” However, yet again, the texts fail to see ‘traditional’ southern African art in its own terms, but rather tend to view it within fixed, ahistorical and linear definitions. In the 1980s, attempts to address and challenge such approaches by academics such as Schneider (1986), Klopper (1992) and Nettleton (1989) appeared, in the process calling into debate the definition of ‘art’ as a whole.

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5 “The major problem in all of this literature, however, in spite of its good intentions, is its failure to see that South African black crafts have a past, that they are situated in historical time, and that one cannot talk about them as absolutes” (Nettleton, 1989: 27).
I argue that the new-found interest in southern African objects that began in the 1980s was based on new definitions of African art, and the previously examined rhetoric of authenticity. For example, Clifford (1988) and Steiner (1994) both argue that from the 1970s, west and central African art became more difficult to acquire or afford, and a slump in the African art trade occurred worldwide. This they suggest was a result of the idea that ‘authentic’ African art no longer existed on the continent and it led to collectors and traders turning their interests elsewhere, like southern Africa, for collectable material culture. This raised further issues of authenticity and more importantly, perhaps, the question of who has claimed the authority to define these terms, as previous definitions of ‘authenticity’ are no longer relevant.

What is now realised is that definitions of art are affected by influences that move across ethnic boundaries, that any art produced is largely affected by interests within world economic systems, the influence of adopted world religions into African culture, and the modernisation of objects through the adoption of western cultures into ‘traditional’ circumstances. Steiner (1994) argues that it has since been acknowledged that there has been an over-emphasis on context and that ethnographic boundaries cannot be fixed. For example Steiner (1994: 11) states that:

> It was discovered that art objects were not only created for local use, but were also borrowed and traded among ethnic groups within a wide geographic terrain—both art and artists moving from place to place, crosscutting and penetrating an array of so-called ethnic boundaries.

He goes on to argue that the category of African art (and therefore southern African art) is constantly expanding due to new understandings of authenticity. He is critical about the term

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6 “Hence, the study of the African art trade uncovers not only a complex economic system with its own internal structure, logic, and rules, it reveals also an elaborate process of cross-cultural exchange in which the image of Africa and its arts are continually being negotiated and redefined by a plurality of market participants spread out across the world” (Steiner, 1994: 10).
‘authentic’ and how it has generally been applied to those artefacts that can no longer be produced (pre-colonial objects). Collectible art has become inclusive of objects that were previously excluded from the category of “legitimate” African art. I argue that southern African art has become more highly valued in recent years because of this inclusivity. It is thus a clear instance in which the object is transformed into a work of ‘art’ by particular social and economic influences.

Sandra Klopper (2004) argues that besides redefinitions of the ‘authentic’ African artwork, the former lack of interest (prior to the 1970’s) in southern African Art, could have been the result of a combination of many factors. These range from a possible previous lack of documentation, literature and therefore academic focus on art in the southern regions of Africa, to an apartheid assumption that African art is inferior and therefore unimportant. In agreement with the previous authors, Klopper (2004) argues that southern African ‘traditional’ art has remained largely unknown up until the 1990’s. The initial reasons for this lay in the Eurocentric focus on western and central African art as a result of an interest by western art academics and collectors on the figurative art forms of these regions. Also, she suggests that very little literature focusing on southern African art existed.

Private collectors began to show interest in what had previously been considered as ‘minor’ forms; objects which had been sidelined to the category of curio or souvenir. Furthermore, Klopper (2004: 21) notes that the interest in form has been significant in shaping private collectors’ practices in South Africa and “in this view, the simpler and more abstract these forms, the better.” The lack of interest in ‘traditional’ southern African art that was found among collectors prior to the 1980s could also be seen in South Africa’s public domain. Only
recently have public institutions in South Africa begun to display aspects of their collections. According to scholars such as Klopper (2004) and Nettleton (1989) a new focus on southern African ‘traditional’ art was initially due to the interest provided by the private collectors, like Vittorino Meneghelli and Egon Guenther, in southern African forms for example. Academics publishing literature and organizing exhibitions from the 1970s onwards, all played a role in bringing what was newly understood as southern African ‘traditional’ art to public attention.\(^7\)

Thus, from the late 1970’s and 80’s ‘traditional’ southern African art began to make more numerous appearances in public institutions. Perhaps this was fuelled by the political climate at the time, created by the demise of apartheid, which forced many scholars in South Africa to acknowledge previous and continuing racial prejudice and a concern amongst scholars to preserve the nation’s ‘cultural heritage.’ In other words, in the post-apartheid era, especially during the 1990’s, a question of ‘heritage’ emerged and some private collectors, curators, and academics began to argue a need for “repatriation” of South Africa’s ‘cultural heritage’, thus ‘traditional’ southern African art began to make appearances in public institutions (Till, 1994: 22).\(^8\)

However, the public art domain is restricted by a lack of resources or funding, and therefore cannot truly compete with the private collectors to regain South Africa’s ‘cultural heritage’. Therefore, although private collectors essentially opened up the market for, and the resultant interest in, South African art, private collectors also compete with public collections and

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\(^7\) What is understood as ‘traditional’ in this regard will be discussed in detail in the next section.

\(^8\) “The clamor to repatriate indigenous art forms for “heritage” collections became increasingly intense” (Klopper, 2004: 23).
affect the growth of interest, range and value of public collections. Thus, what private collectors choose to collect, cannot be the only factor that affects the market. I claim that what is collected as southern African ‘traditional’ art is also largely influenced by a surge of key southern African art exhibitions over time. Not all of these exhibitions can be addressed, but to provide justification, I will briefly discuss two examples in order to see how they provided significant influence to how southern African ‘traditional’ art is viewed and therefore defined.

The first exhibition, titled *The Neglected Tradition*, was held at The Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1988. According to Nettleton (1995) the exhibition was aimed at creating a new understanding of contemporary South African art. The curator, Steven Sack, was actively involved in the anti-apartheid movement, with close ties to the ANC and the UDM. Nettleton (1995) argues that what made this exhibition significant was that previously there was no substantial display or collection of southern African art within most South African art institutions, and there was a need to create an accurate representation of this particular body of work with the art historical narratives of the nation, especially given the impending change in political climate. Thus, there was a pointed focus on black artists in an attempt to rewrite art history, with these previously neglected artists included in the narrative. Other artists who did not fit this racial category were included to acknowledge their significant contribution to the education and promotion of previously disadvantaged southern African artists, i.e. teachers of black artists such as Cecil Skotnes and Walter Battiss.

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9 Nettleton (1995: 65) argues that “the way in which art-historical discourse in South Africa has been shaped by exhibitions, acquisitions of collections and catalogues of both, has been part of a process of staking claim to, and exercising power over, the construction of a national art history.”
Nettleton (1995) argues that what was problematic about this exhibition was that the majority of artists selected were those taught in the western traditions of art practice and whose art was targeted at a largely white, western art market. Thus “the exhibition was organised in terms of ‘significant’ works by ‘named’ artists whose places within a mainstream were thus acknowledged” (Nettleton, 1995: 65). Furthermore she points to the fact that the layout of the exhibition and catalogue were in period-manner, that resulted in history being represented as a fixed linear sequence of events, and the art was framed by a curatorial conception of ‘reconciliation’, which was a dominant socio-political concept in South Africa at the time.

Nettleton (1995) posits that the reason for this narrative was strongly tied to how JAG itself wished to be perceived at the time. As she (1995: 65) states: “the gallery was attempting to re-define its role within a changing political scene, and to move from its former position as a symbol of white elitism to a more inclusive constituency.”

The second exhibition that needs to be highlighted for its influence on the way in which southern African art was portrayed was titled *Images of Wood*. As with the previous exhibition discussed, it was held at JAG and was curated by Elizabeth Rankin (1989). Nettleton (1995) claims that Rankin rejected notions of racial classification for works in this exhibition. She goes on to say that the reasons for the focus on wood as the medium are unclear. However, Nettleton suggests that it may have been a result of sponsorship that came from the Merensky Foundation, as the foundation was financed by the timber industry. The focus was therefore not mainly on a neglected minority and their art production, but rather on the neglected practice of wood sculpture, and therefore included all people that produced such work. Of interest here was that for one of the first times examples of ‘traditional’ southern African woodwork was included in order to ballast and define a history of woodwork production in southern Africa. As Nettleton (1995: 66) states:
this exhibition and its catalogue constitute a further step in making a ‘history’, a ‘tradition’ which could be called ‘South African’, because it was inclusive rather than exclusive, although there were relatively few women represented in the exhibition.

Thus a new ‘history was created that represented an idea of heritage, one in which race was secondary. Nettleton (1995) claims that like The Neglected Tradition, this exhibition focused more on named artists than the more ‘traditional’ items whose makers were unknown. However some anonymous pieces were shown. It is notable that there remains a focus, in the field of Southern African ‘traditional’ art, especially among private collectors, on woodwork. By focusing on woodwork, this exhibition helped to construct a ‘history of traditional southern African art’ largely consisting of woodwork, and as a result, as much as it attempted to be more inclusive, it ultimately excluded a vast amount of artwork that did not fit into this category.

c) Who determines what counts as ‘traditional’ southern African art?

A historical overview enables me to be able to highlight the influence of public institutions on what is seen as ‘traditional’ southern African art. In order to elaborate on this point I have chosen two maps included in recent publications directly linked to exhibitions of ‘traditional’ southern African art. Each map shows the regions in which ‘traditional’ southern African art is seen to exist which is problematic as one of the major issues established through the authentic debate was that African art and therefore southern African art is reduced to over-simplified ethnic boundaries. It is important to note that this is by no means proof that these particular publications determine what is seen as ‘traditional’, but is used to merely highlight
the relationship between these institutions and what is consequently valued as ‘great traditional’ material.\textsuperscript{10}

As discussed previously in relation to the ‘authentic’ rhetoric, since the inception of scholarly writing on African art, researchers have concentrated on particular ethnic groupings to discuss the art, because there is an assumed link between art production and other aspects of culture (Kasfir, 1994). Furthermore, such scholarly writing largely follows a pre-existing trend in scholarship on African art from across the continent. As was the case for the question of authenticity with regards to African art outlined above, this assumption has since been rejected, largely because of a recorded history of outside influence on artistic production in southern Africa. It is now held that what is accepted as ‘art’ includes objects affected by influences that moved across ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, any art produced was (and still is) considerably affected by factors that include interests within world economic systems, the influence of adopted world religions into African culture, and the modernisation of objects through adoption of western cultural forms into ‘traditional’ circumstances. Furthermore it has since been acknowledged that there has been an over-emphasis on context and that ethnographic boundaries are not geographically fixed.

The figures and the publications \textit{Ubuntu: Arts et Cultures d’Afrique du Sud} (Joubert and Valentin, 2002) and \textit{Africa: The Art of a Continent} (Philips, 1995), define ‘traditional’ southern African art as all artworks produced below the Zambezi river. Most are believed to have been produced in the 18\textsuperscript{th}, 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. There is a predominant focus on woodwork and sculpture in each publication, which can also been seen in many other

\textsuperscript{10} See Figures 1 and 2.
publications relating to southern African ‘traditional’ art.\textsuperscript{11} It is clear from the way in which the maps isolate and arrange the peoples of southern Africa into distinct groups and geographical areas, that artworks in the southern African region have been placed into a series of strict ethnographic categories. Furthermore, the information falsifying such ethnic categorisation has been available at least since the 1980s in published form, yet the old rhetoric of authenticity has been, and continues to be, used in writing, seen as recently as 2002\textsuperscript{12}. One can see from examining these two maps that problematically, the old rhetoric of authenticity seems to find currency in contemporary southern African art discourse.

Collectible art has become inclusive of objects that were previously excluded from the category of “legitimate” African art and as a result, southern African art can be argued to have accrued value due to this inclusivity. However, if this is the case, why then is southern African ‘traditional’ art so often presented in cultural isolation?\textsuperscript{13} It seems that acknowledgment of the inevitability of outside aesthetic influence has been accepted by academics, but not necessarily by collectors and connoisseurs.\textsuperscript{14} Not only this, but as Nettleton (1995) argues, and as the maps in question clearly suggest, the construction of an art historical narrative for ‘traditional’ objects has occurred through the kinds of exhibitions, acquisitions and catalogues mounted by public art institutions. As Nettleton (1995: 67) states, “what has been displayed or collected by museums has been used to construct ‘traditional’ southern African art history and consequently, what is understood as “the cultural heritage of the New South Africa.” In order to highlight this point further, one must look at the kinds of

\textsuperscript{11} This will be discussed in relation to the ‘Ten years’ and ‘Art and Ambiguity’ publications at a later stage.

\textsuperscript{12} See Figures 1.

\textsuperscript{13} See figures 1 and 2 as examples of this.

\textsuperscript{14} This will be discussed in greater detail in relation to the collections explored as case studies.
exhibitions that are held by public institutions claiming their collections as representative of ‘national cultural heritage.’
Chapter Three

Collecting for Public Institutions

In examining the collections at the Wits Art Museum (WAM)\textsuperscript{15} and the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) and their history, I will engage a more complex understanding of the practices of collecting ‘traditional’ southern African art. After a brief historical overview of each collection, I will describe and critique the content and provide a critical case study of an accompanying exhibition. Finally, I will undertake an in-depth analysis of interviews held with Julia Charlton, Fiona Rankin-Smith (the current curators at WAM) and Nessa Leibhammer (one of JAG’s curators, responsible specifically for the African collection). This will be undertaken towards a comparison of these public collections with Karel Nel’s (private) collection.

My interviews with Charlton, Rankin-Smith and Leibhammer were all based on the same template (appendix 5). The questions were used to extract information in relation to WAM and JAG’s ‘traditional’ southern African art collections. All interviews conducted were returned to those interviewed after transcription for ethical purposes and were thus mediated. The first section of this chapter considers the collecting of southern African ‘traditional’ art for the WAM and JAG collections and the content of each. This is followed by an in-depth discussion on the importance of these collections, and how they have been influenced and/or become influential. Third, the three curator’s understanding of ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to southern African ‘traditional’ art will be examined in order to highlight how the term has

\textsuperscript{15} Previously known as Wits Art Gallery.
come to be defined within these institutions. Finally, I will discuss what is seen as ‘valuable’ southern African ‘traditional’ art and unpack notions of ‘value’ in relation to how it affects what is collected for WAM and JAG’s southern African ‘traditional’ art collection. The process followed in these interviews and in the analysis of both WAM and JAG was the same. I attempted to create a format in which the similarities or differences between the two public institutions and Karel Nel’s private collection could be measured.16

The following collections that I will discuss have been shown in public exhibitions and are claimed by their curators, collectors and authors to stand for southern African ‘material culture’ in a manner that reflects South Africa’s ‘national’ and ‘cultural’ heritage. This can be seen not only in catalogue texts and website and advertising campaigns for both institutions but also in reviews and academic texts. For example, Nettleton (2009: 137) argues that the Standard bank African Art collection [held at WAM] is a group of artworks that have “national and international significance that bears testament to Africa’s unique cultural heritage.” Whilst in a review of the exhibition Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst Collection of Southern African Art held at JAG, Elizabeth Schneider (1992: 93) argues that the exhibition that displayed JAG’s ‘traditional’ southern African collection of art was important, among other reasons, so far as it contributes to the “new South Africa”.

The two exhibitions that I will discuss are: Ten years of collecting (1979-1989): Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art, University Art Galleries’ Collection of African Art and selected works from the University Ethnological Museum Collection and (1989) and Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst Collection of Southern African Art (1991). They have been argued to be key exhibitions that resulted in a new perspective on southern African ‘traditional’ art. What I wish to question is whether these collections and their exhibitions accurately reflect southern African material culture and what they contribute

16 These similarities and differences will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.
towards the notion of ‘heritage.’ Embedded in this question is that of asking who has the authority to define what is seen as ‘national’ or ‘cultural’ heritage for this region?

3.1 Wits Art Museum (WAM)

I. A Historical Overview

According to Freschi (2009) the contemporary South African art collection held at WAM originated in the 1950s through the collecting campaign of the then Professor of Fine Arts and Art History, Heather Martienssen. By the 1960s the collection had grown to the extent that it attracted the attention of patrons such as Norman Herber and Gertrude Posel. In fact it was Posel’s donation that provided the finance for a gallery at the university where the collection could be exhibited. The Gertrude Posel Gallery opened in 1975 in the Wartenweiler Library, but moved to Senate House when a split between Architecture and Fine Art occurred, and a gallery was custom-built for the collection. The gallery was situated in this space until 2003, “when the ground floor of Senate House was reconfigured to make way for the Student Enrolment Centre” (Freschi, 2009: 63). A new art museum is currently under construction and is expected to be complete by May 2012.

The collection of African art at the WAM truly began in 1979 when Standard bank agreed to provide a yearly grant to the University in order to establish an African Art collection.17

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17 Freschi (2009) argues that interest in African art was sparked by the course in African Art set up by Anitra Nettleton post 1977 in an attempt to provide teaching examples.
According to Crump (1989: 1) the reason that the Standard Bank chose to provide the grant was their interest:

in preserving a fast disappearing cultural heritage of enormous diversity and creativity; disappearing not only because of urbanisation of the Black populations and the resultant relinquishing of traditional skills, but also because of the accelerating interest of foreign dealers and collectors who have been removing the works from their country of origin.

The university’s motivation to agree to such a partnership was that the collection provided a teaching platform and the ability to provide a representative reflection of ‘African material culture’. Nettleton (2009) acknowledges that the time of the grant was extremely significant, as it came during the nation-wide anti-apartheid uprisings. Thus it was that the first African Art collection in South Africa began before African cultures were generally accepted by the apartheid dispensation of the time to have produced art in any sense. As she states, “no African art was considered worthy of study or preservation, except as it provided evidence of difference and of lesser status” (Nettleton, 2009: 138).

The collection began with a focus on central and western Africa, as well as on Venda and Shona wood-carving, due to Nettleton’s own field research (Freschi, 2009). However it was only in the early 1980’s that WAM began to include southern African objects into the collection. Crump (1989) claims that the change in focus from Africa more generally to southern Africa was an acknowledgement that there were very few collections of southern African art at the time and that there was a need to assemble one that would reflect southern African art. He suggests that the adjustment towards a focus on southern African art is twofold. On the one hand, it became difficult to afford African art from central and west

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18 Nettleton (2009: 138) states that “indigenous art from southern Africa was generally ignored by European and American academic scholars and collectors of historical African art.”
Africa, due to an increase in interest and therefore economic value of such objects. It therefore made sense at the time to acquire more affordable objects, i.e. southern African art. Second, over the time Standard Bank provided grants to the University for collecting in an acknowledgment of a need to preserve and disseminate African culture in a time of discrimination and exclusion.

It should not be assumed that there was no such thing as southern African ‘traditional’ art before the collection was established. Rather, as Nettleton (2009: 138) suggests, the previous focus on central and west African art was due to the fact that more value was placed on “bronze portraiture, masks and free-standing figures” and, due to the fact that most southern African cultures did not have any of those artistic traditions, their work was largely ignored, despite its existence. She goes on to say that among the curators involved in the creation of the Standard Bank African Art Collection, there was a change in focus, as they viewed the art from southern Africa as historically significant and therefore collectable.\(^{19}\)

According to Charlton (2009), the importance of the Standard Bank African Art Collection is that, through examining its inception and formation, one is able to account for issues in southern African art studies, collecting and exhibiting that include power, ownership and representation. Charlton (2003) argues, unlike Crump (1989), that the original reasons for Standard Bank’s involvement lay in opposing the notion that southern African art is a part of a ‘vanishing culture’ and rather to create a reputation for themselves of commitment to a

\(^{19}\)“We nonetheless regarded the historical art of the southern African region as a vitally important collecting focus and made a concerted effort to build up holdings in these pieces” (Nettleton, 2009: 139).
South African heritage.²⁰ Through academic involvement, notions that restrict what is considered to be ‘authentic’ southern African art are confronted and, as a result, works that stand outside previously accepted historical forms are included. Now that it has been established that the collection of ‘traditional’ southern African art is dependent on a grant provided by the Standard Bank, what needs to be established is how this collection has been constructed as a result.

II. The ‘Traditional’ southern African art held at Wits Art Museum

The ‘traditional’ southern African art held at WAM is largely restricted by the terms of the grant provided by The Standard Bank of South Africa Limited. As a result there are limitations on what is collected as Standard Bank do not allow the purchasing grant they provide to be used outside the parameters of what they have identified to be ‘traditional’ southern African art. The conditions attached to this grant have, however, changed from its initial inception in 1978. The latest reworking of the agreement was in 2004. Initially, the grant ensured that the artworks acquired were largely older and more ‘traditional’, in order to develop and preserve the ‘cultural heritage’ of South Africa, and Africa.²¹ The new conditions of the grant now allow the inclusion of works that are not ‘traditional’ in the sense of their being old, but which draw on ‘traditional’ references.²² The primary aim here is to

²⁰ This commitment to the nation can be seen further within the texts of the catalogue ‘Ten Years’.

²¹ This can clearly be seen within the written agreements between The Standard Bank and WAM; however, for reasons of confidentiality are not included here.

²² In addition, what is interesting about this collection is that whilst one of its primary aims was to collect a comprehensive reflection of historical southern African ‘traditional’ art, a collection of contemporary southern African art was also prioritised. However this will not be a major focus of this dissertation, which focuses on what is seen as ‘traditional’ southern African art.
reflect changes over time in the genre of ‘traditional art’. Initially, this expansion included what was labelled primarily as ‘transitional art’, those works created by ‘traditional’ artists using ‘traditional’ means of production and drawing on their own cultural backgrounds. This particular term has since been abandoned and the is category now defined as contemporary artworks with historical and/or traditional reference.

Because of these changes in the conditions attached to the Standard Bank grant, WAM has chosen to collect a wide range of artworks, creating a collection that contains a variety of mediums and styles over an extensive period. This can be seen initially in the collection’s fine examples of older figurative pieces, previously thought during a colonial past not to exist in a southern African context. Whilst a large part of WAM’s collection consists of works in wood, it is not an overbearing majority. Furthermore, the content of this category varies greatly. It includes both old and more recent examples of figurative and abstract carving seen on staffs, headrests, stools, spoons, doors, drums and weapons. The grant nevertheless also allowed for the inclusion of other categories of artworks often excluded from public and private collections. According to Nettleton (1995: 67), it allowed the inclusion of items such as beadwork, basketry and pottery. In fact she argues that WAM holds the most extensive collection of southern African beadwork extending much further than artworks of the Ndebele or the Tsonga which, as will be noted in later chapters, predominate in both Karel Nel’s as well as in JAG’s collection, and can be seen in works from a variety of southern African groups.

Whilst WAM does hold examples of 19th century ‘traditional’ art, most of the collection is comprised of 20th century material. Nevertheless, these artworks can be used to track

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23 See Figure 3.
different styles and forms across time and ethnic boundaries. As a result, artworks within the collection often reveal influence of events such as colonialism, the effect of missionaries on southern Africa, and a cross-pollination between southern African groups throughout their history. An example of this can clearly be seen in WAM’s wide range of southern African child figures. This range includes not only old examples from almost all southern African traditions, but also modern adaptations of the tradition, seen clearly in the use of decorated contemporary dolls as figures. Thus, it can be claimed that the WAM collection attempts a representation of both ‘tradition’ and change among southern African child figures over time and place. Through this exploration of tradition and modernity, the WAM collection reveals that southern African stylistic norms are not given and fixed, but flexible and dynamic. Thus the collection has become a reflection of art from southern Africa, as well as being historically informative in relation to the region’s artistic trends. In order to get a better understanding of why WAM has chosen to create a collection in this manner, I will explore one of the exhibitions of the works contained within it. This will facilitate further examination of how this material may be/has been defined as ‘cultural heritage’.

III. Ten years of collecting (1979-1989): Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art, University Art Galleries’ Collection of African Art and selected works from the University Ethnological Museum Collection

An important text with regards to the southern African art collection owned by Wits Art Museum (WAM) is Ten Years of Collecting (1979-1989): Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art, University Art Galleries’ Collection of African Art and Selected

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24 See Figure 4.
Works from the University Ethnological Museum Collection. In order to commemorate ten years of collecting, in collaboration with Standard Bank, an exhibition was held in the Wits Art galleries in 1989, accompanied by a catalogue edited by Hammond-Tooke and Nettleton (1989). According to Crump (1989: 1), in his introduction to this catalogue, the southern African collection exhibited was one of the largest of its kind, as well as being unique in the sense that it combined the “private enterprise” of collecting with the ability to educate the public about such art. By the time of the exhibition, the collection had grown over ten years and there was a stated need to focus on exhibiting the material. As Crump (1989:1) expressed:

If this is a teaching collection, (and what other justification could a University collection have), then only exhibiting a small fraction of the works is unacceptable. Our aim in the future is to display as much as 75% of the collection at any one time, notwithstanding changing exhibitions or the serious lack of exhibition and storage space.

The focus of the exhibition was southern African material and the catalogue was divided into sections depending on cultural group: Venda, Tsonga-Shangane, Pedi, Ntwane, Ndebele, Zululand, and Cape Nguni, as well as what is controversially termed ‘Transitional art’ and ‘Urban Art’. The catalogue includes an abundance of images highlighting selected masterpieces of the collection. There is clearly an attempt through the accompanying catalogue text to educate a previously ignorant viewer about the arts of some of the diverse cultural groups of southern Africa.

According to Nettleton (1995: 66), the exhibition and accompanying text were strictly limited to “objects made only by black people in South Africa.” In response to this restriction, she claims that this exhibition took as its mandate the construction of a new history and therefore

25 See map Figure 5 from the exhibitions accompanying catalogue.
‘heritage’ for southern African art. Nevertheless, she does acknowledge that this new historical narrative that the exhibition created is its own construction. Thus one should not view the content of the catalogue as a perfectly representative example of ‘traditional’ southern African art, and therefore heritage. What the exhibition managed to portray was a collection jointly owned by The Standard Bank and the University of the Witwatersrand. Nettleton (1995) argues that by focusing on the body of work on display as a collection, the exhibition was acknowledging that the historical narrative that was provided to the viewer was in fact constructed. As she (1995: 66) states:

What was shown on the Ten Years of Collecting exhibition was not fortuitously assembled, but the construction of history in this case had different, much deeper, and more lasting reverberations.

The ‘lasting reverberations’ Nettleton (1995) speaks of were seen in the opportunities offered to scholars and curators, at the time of the exhibition, to use the collection of ‘traditional’ southern African art and to educate further in this regard.

According to Nettleton (1995) the exhibition was the initial moment in which the public was exposed to the museum’s southern African art collections. WAM had managed to collect, in just 10 years, sufficient material of southern African origin to dedicate an entire exhibition to it. Nettleton states (1995: 67) that Ten Years shared WAM’s “emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of the works rather than their contextual significance.” This may be due to the fact that the aim of the Wits Art Gallery (at the time) was to present the works as art rather than as simply anthropological or ethnographical evidence. Thus the exhibition is significant, as it legitimised many ‘traditional’ practices of southern Africa as examples of art. However, Nettleton (1995: 67) argues that there were a number of criteria that resulted in an item being chosen for the exhibition other than purely aesthetic merit: “these included
Nettleton (1995) goes on to argue that the problem with this exhibition was that there was no focus on the process of collecting. In other words, there was no examination of the collection’s restrictions or acknowledgment of its construction. She claims that the Ten Years exhibition, along with the collection it represented, was problematic as it was still used to construct an ‘accurate’ example of ‘cultural heritage’. As Nettleton (1995) states: “the fact is that this cultural heritage is being constructed, rather than reconstructed.” In curating these objects, whether these items could or could not be seen together within their original contexts becomes irrelevant. Their new context creates a sequence of categories that we view as ‘cultural heritage today.’ What is excluded from exhibition for various reasons, including that they are unavailable, results in artworks unknown to us, artworks that very well may be examples of heritage: however we will never know as they cannot be viewed. I argue, therefore, that there needs to be a constant revaluation of existing collections as examples of ‘cultural heritage’, no matter how inclusive they attempt to be: because they are constructs that cannot ever claim to be fully comprehensive in their scope or point of view.

IV. Critical discussion of WAM interview

Interviews were conducted with Julia Charlton (Senior Curator) and Fiona Rankin-Smith (Special Projects Curator) separately. However, due to the fact that both are curators of the WAM collection, they will be discussed in conjunction, highlighting similarities and differences.
differences in opinion where needed. As previously mentioned, the parameters for acquisition of material for the ‘traditional’ southern African section of the WAM collection are controlled by the Standard Bank Annual Purchasing Grant. Furthermore, the collection is constructed by an acquisitions committee. Both Charlton and Rankin-Smith as curators of WAM belong to this committee, and thus play a key role in the construction, exhibition, and classification of the collection. As Charlton states, what is chosen for the collection by the committee is not necessarily dependant on a majority vote, but rather a “consensus decision” between members. Rankin-Smith suggests the same committee is involved with selecting what and how southern African ‘traditional’ art will be exhibited. Thus, what is presented to the public as the southern African ‘traditional’ collection when the Wits Art Museum is opened, will be dependent on the opinions of the select group of scholars, administrators and collectors belonging to that committee. Despite this limitation, it is necessary to point out that the committee consists of several voices at any one time. As a result, what is chosen for the collection is representative of a group of individuals with particular knowledge and expertise with regards to the arts.

Charlton argues that what is included in the collection is not only based on the object itself but also how that object can be seen in relation to, and how it strengthens, what already exists within the collection. She states that the current collecting focus is on broadening what has already been collected, as well as “representing changes as time goes by.” This, as discussed previously, is due to a current interest by academics and WAM staff in comparing older examples of ‘tradition’ with the new. Similarly, Rankin-Smith states that WAM tends to collect what is seen as ‘classical’ examples of southern African ‘tradition’, as well as “comparative pieces, be they contemporary items that show how modernity relates to the older, more traditional versions, thus filling gaps.”
Despite the particular focus discussed above, Charlton argues that WAM views almost all southern African ‘traditional’ art as important and collectable. Her justification for this claim is that the curators of the WAM collection and associated academics are interested in unpacking not only what was made in southern Africa, but why it was made. Furthermore, she suggests that, by focusing on the changes in art production in southern Africa over time, one can unpack this question and establish possible solutions. She goes on to argue that, whilst classical notions of what should be seen as important and collectable should not be ignored, those examples that contradict previous notions should be considered as equally important. Another reason for the inclusion of unconventional material is due to the fact that, as Charlton recognises, by limiting the collection to classical conventions of southern African art, one is trapped by the boundaries of the notions of fixed, isolated cultures. Charlton argues that these artworks should be seen rather in terms of “cultural interpretation, individual expression and change over time.” Furthermore, she states that:

The kind of classical canonical examples of what is made are usually externally imposed rather than internally imposed and might be convenient from a collectors’ perspective or a categorising perspective but aren’t necessarily an accurate reflection of what is made and why.

On the other hand, Rankin-Smith acknowledges that there is a general focus by WAM on art material from “Ndebele, North and South Sotho, Pedi, Tsonga, Zulu, Hlubi, Venda, Tonga and Makonde.” She argues that the reasons for this are largely a result of academic focus in those particular fields by members of academic staff associated with WAM over time. She states that the focus on the southern African section of the collection only became serious during the 1980’s, not only because of the cost factors discussed earlier, but also due to a new interest in the material by South Africans as a result of the political tensions of the last decade of apartheid. Thus, it is clear that what is seen as important and collectable for WAM is based
on a number of factors. However this does not address the extent to which outside factors influence what WAM collects.

Charlton and Rankin-smith both argue that WAM’s collecting practices are also dependant on what is offered for sale by dealers and what is placed on the market. This is because the WAM staff does not undertake primary field research and WAM is therefore dependant on what others choose to collect. Charlton acknowledges that what dealers choose to collect is largely based on what scholars, academics, and collectors publish as important. As she states:

What has been quite interesting to track over the years is how there have been academics who are at WITS, researching different aspects of African art, whose research impacts on what we buy. Then to track it even further to what they then publish, or what gets published in scholarly journals, filters down into a wider audience and gets picked up by the dealers and the dealers look for examples of those things that have been published and then those then get brought back.

Also both Charlton and Rankin-Smith acknowledge that what is seen as important and collectable southern African material on an international level affects what WAM can collect. Charlton provides the example that Zulu headrests accessed or sold abroad are too expensive for WAM. Thus, interestingly, European notions of collecting southern African art result in objects being excluded from the WAM collection as they are prohibitively expensive. An example of this is provided by Charlton when she states that WAM would ideally like to include a carved Nguni Horn into the collection, however, that they are unaffordable.27

Rankin-Smith acknowledges that not only is the WAM collection influenced by western notions of aesthetics southern African art, but already established collecting practices and

27 See Figure 6: See image of Nguni Horn.
norms have helped to define the WAM collection. As she states: “there are certain conventions that apply in collecting.” In other words, how the institution has chosen to document and classify objects and distribute information and theory around the collection are based on existing understandings and conventions in museums at home and abroad.

There are, thus, many factors that influence what is collected as ‘traditional’ southern African art by WAM. From yearly grants, political climates, scholarship, dealership, to international perceptions and markets. How then does the private collector and practices of private collectors affect what WAM chooses to collect? Both Charlton and Rankin-Smith acknowledge that Karel Nel has had significant influence on the southern African ‘traditional’ collection of art held by WAM. They view him as a knowledgeable individual in the field and look for his guidance when collecting. Despite acknowledging his role in the formation of the collection, they also recognise that he is not the sole influence. Rather he is one member of a diverse committee and can only be influential to a certain degree. Rankin-Smith goes on to point out that Nel’s private collecting interests may, in fact, affect what he chooses to reveal to WAM or JAG, however she believes he has the interests of both institutions at heart. Through the discussions with Charlton and Rankin-Smith, it is unclear exactly how Nel’s own collecting policies influence WAM, however what can be established is that what Nel understands as important southern African ‘traditional’ art has certainly played a part in the construction of the WAM collection.

The question that follows is, what southern African ‘traditional’ art is construed as valuable in WAM’s collection? The way in which Charlton and Rankin-Smith define value brings into view the operating notion of ‘traditional’ southern African art as has been constructed
within the WAM collection. What is seen as valuable is largely dependent on what is viewed by the committee that construct the collection as ‘authentic’ southern African art. Charlton acknowledges that previous understandings of ‘authenticity’ have been challenged and as a result, objects that would previously have been excluded from the collection are now considered. Thus she argues that artworks are no longer necessarily excluded based on criteria such as production for sale; production for outside communities; modern versions of pre-existing traditions; objects with different techniques from previously collected examples; and finally, whether an object is produced with different or modern materials. As she states: “I don’t think it has to be a particular material, or a particular date, or a particular person, or a particular function.” This new attitude towards ‘authenticity’ in art has resulted in a more inclusive collection, that provides a greater understanding of ‘traditional’ southern African art ‘heritage’.

However, Charlton and Rankin-Smith both argue that what is considered when collecting artworks with regards to ‘authenticity’, is whether the object is fake or not. Objects that are produced to deceive are rejected by the acquisitions committee. Furthermore, if the price of an object is inflated, despite its legitimacy, it will not be considered for inclusion into the collection, as it will affect the budget provided for collecting objects. It is important to note that they both argue that if an artwork is expensive but does not fit the criteria of the museum, it will not be included into the gallery. In other words, there is not a one to one relationship between an object’s monetary value and its perceived value to the collection, rather there are limited funds with which WAM has to work with and as a result they choose carefully.
Charlton and Rankin-Smith argue that the aesthetic value of southern African ‘traditional’ art is important when considering an object for the collection. This aesthetic, according to Rankin-Smith, is initially based on ‘classic conventions’ of what is seen as “the best, the finest, sensitively carved, beautiful elements” and is often seen in older examples. However, they both argue that these criteria are not strict. In fact, Charlton argues that the aesthetic value attributed to artworks is highly problematic, as ideas of aesthetics are different depending on the observer. This, she argues, is why members of the committee will resort to persuasion in order for the objects they deem as significant to be included. Charlton goes on to argue that there are disadvantages to the various aesthetics at play within the collection as the content is at risk of losing direction or focus due to the multiple narratives and different purposes that the members of the committee wish the collection to fulfil. She argues that the limitations on acquisitions imposed by Standard Bank grant has allowed the collection to remain focused to a certain degree, and as result the necessary focus is maintained.

Charlton and Rankin-Smith argue that the heritage and documentary value of an artwork is as important as its aesthetic value. As Charlton states: “something that may be unremarkable to look at, but is highly prized as particularly valuable in the community, we would collect.” Thus, occasionally the object will be of little aesthetic and therefore artistic value in terms of previous and often western understandings, of aesthetics. Yet WAM often chooses to include those objects if they hold significant social and cultural significance and deem them highly important examples of ‘traditional’ southern African art.

Overall, Charlton and Rankin-Smith acknowledge that there are multi-faceted notions of value and all have to be considered when choosing objects for the ‘traditional’ southern
African section of the WAM collection. Furthermore, they acknowledge that existing understandings of value are based on western notions and that objects with the most documentation, provenance, and heritage are more highly valued than those whose main attraction is purely aesthetic. By doing so, they have been able to challenge notions of value, authenticity, and therefore what is seen as ‘traditional’ southern African art from a previously western perspective, offering a more local understanding and significance of such material.

3.2 Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG)

I. A Historical Overview

It is clear from the discussion of the collection at WAM that artworks defined as ‘traditionally’ southern African, are further claimed as ‘cultural heritage’ by this institution. This claim emerges in various ways as problematic. I will address these in a consideration of the similarity of the collections of the WAM and the JAG. I will provide an in-depth overview of the content of JAG after initially establishing a brief museum ethnography. Nettleton (1995) argues that after The Neglected Tradition (1988) JAG began to redefine their art history to become more racially inclusive. This came in the 1990’s during a politically-charged South African context with a more equal democratic climate in mind. However the shift in the focus of their collecting, although partly due to the political climate of the time, can also be argued to have been a result of two major acquisitions of private collections to the gallery. One, the Jacques collection, consisted primarily of headrests from the then Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province). Collected by Reverend A. A. Jacques,

28 An example of this incentive can be seen in the exhibition ‘Art and Ambiguity’ later discussed.
a Swiss missionary, it was sold in the 1980’s by the Jacques heirs. The Anglo American Corporation provided a donation that allowed JAG to acquire it. The second was the Brenthurst Collection, a private collection assembled by Jonathan Lowen, a Johannesburg-born barrister living and working in London. According to Nettleton (1995: 68), it “consisted of objects from southern Africa, largely bought in London at the auction houses of Sotheby’s and Christies.” Thus the latter collection comprised mainly 19th century artworks that had been moved from southern Africa to England, largely by “missionaries, colonial administrators or military personnel” (Nettleton, 1995: 68). It was purchased from Lowen by the Oppenheimer family and loaned for display in a public space (JAG).

Davison (1991) states that, by collecting southern African objects, Lowen attempted to elevate them to the aesthetic status of art, as defined from a largely Eurocentric perspective. Following Appadurai (1986) and Clifford (1988), she argues that although several meanings attach to any artwork, the current context of the object, as a text in itself, enables some meanings or readings that take precedence over others. For example, African objects, in the past, moved from ethnographic collections to gallery spaces, and in doing so moved from artefact to art status. It is therefore not the object that defines itself as art or material culture, but the way in which it has been framed. So, what is the meaning of the collection as it exists in a public sphere? Curators and academics that are involved in the construction of the collection (from those belonging to the acquisitions committee to those involved in writing and displaying such material) have determined what is chosen as valuable for display from the collection, and for reproduction in the catalogue. As a result, a process of inclusion and exclusion of African art has occurred. Whilst Davison (1991) does acknowledge that the collection included artworks that previously were not framed as ‘art’, she does explicitly not acknowledge that the collection itself was selected in a particular way by Lowen, who excluded works he considered non-aesthetic. She does acknowledge that by moving the
collection from private to public sphere, the objects have been elevated to the status of art, following generally accepted categories.

Nettleton (1995: 68) argues that Lowen claimed that his reasons for collecting were based on his interest in what he understood as a southern African art aesthetic and “investing in objects which would appreciate in value as an awareness of the aesthetic and historical dimensions and depths of southern African art traditions broadened.” She also points out that the collection was sold only after it was categorised into regions and types determined by Margaret Carey. The ideal was to sell it to a southern African institution in order to reclaim the nation’s ‘cultural heritage’, however there was a high price for the collection and therefore for this heritage, and she claims that if it was not for Harry Oppenheimer’s purchase of the collection and long time loan to JAG in the 1980’s, the collection may have found its home in the USA or Japan. Thus, through the acquisition of these two private collections, a significant collection of southern African art began to be consolidated at JAG. However, the contents of the collection require further examination.

II. The ‘Traditional’ southern African section held at Johannesburg Art Gallery

The origins of its parts are important to note, because it shows that this ‘public’ collection consists primarily of previously private collections. I will argue that the adoption of such private collections has deeply affected the understanding of what comprises southern African art and ‘cultural heritage’. This requires a discussion of the overall content, followed by an analysis of current grant parameters and an examination of how JAG presents and defines their collection of southern African art.
The majority of the JAG collection consists of works in wood. As discussed in the previous chapter, wood as a medium was often, and to some extent still is, regarded by African art collectors and dealers as the most ‘authentic’ form of African art. This is perhaps the reason why the private collectors that constructed the JAG collections chose to focus primarily on wood carvings (and, as a result, on a male production domain). Although this cannot be confirmed, what has resulted is a bias towards wooden objects within this public collection. This led to an underrepresentation of other mediums and, therefore, it has led to issues such as gender exclusion. However, with the inclusion of 500 beadwork pieces through the acquisition in 2004 of the Brodie collection, and later, a significant collection of Tsonga beadwork exhibited on the Dungamanzi/stirring waters: Tsonga and Shangaan art from Southern Africa exhibition (Leibhammer, 2007) a reasonable amount of art made within this medium by women is represented. It does not, however, compare in scope and size to the collection of wood carvings at the JAG and is yet to be more accurately represented through display and exhibition.

These private collectors, in making their collections of traditional’ southern African art, tended to focus on objects created mainly in the 19th and early 20th century. This has resulted in JAG having a strong representation of material from these periods. While this focus has been valuable, the relative lack of interest shown by this public institution in objects from other periods means that they are unable to provide a more comprehensive representation of a ‘national art history’, especially as that is what the curator of African arts at JAG claims the collection aims to achieve. It is clear in the interview with Nessa Leibhammer that, because

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29 See Figure 7: Image showing examples of woodwork held in the JAG collection.

30 The exhibition Evocations of a Child: Fertility Figures of the Southern African Region (1998), held at JAG, was a display of child figures, and is said to be an attempt to expose southern African women artists’ work, however only 13 child figures in the exhibition belonged to JAG (Liebhammer, 2010).

31 See figure 8: Image showing examples of beadwork held in the JAG collection.
the committee members of the JAG acquisitions committee are guided by the parameters of The Anglo-American Johannesburg Centenary Fund, the collection continues to grow in strength, particularly in terms of 19th century pieces. I will discuss my interview with Leibhammer in greater detail in the next section, but first I need to examine the exhibition which at first foregrounded the collection.

III. Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst collection of southern African Art

The catalogue *Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst collection of southern African Art* (1991) accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. It showcased the Brenthurst collection, which was claimed to be the first of its kind - as no other known exhibited collection of southern African art displayed a similar number of objects in as great a variety (Till, 1991). The essays within the catalogue dealt with issues such as the movement of objects from original contexts to gallery spaces, as well as with issues of identity and authenticity. Most of these essays acknowledged that attention to a certain aesthetic occurred not only when they were made, and later when they were collected, but also in how they were chosen for display. The catalogue essays thus engaged with ambiguity of meanings attached to artworks in the collection. The exhibition was also an acknowledgment of these objects as artworks, thus challenging prevalent attitudes that saw southern African art as really just craft.

Nettleton (1995) argues that little history of the collection itself, how it was created and by whom, was provided in the catalogue text. Once again curators failed to inform the viewer that the collection is a construction, and therefore should be seen as an interpretation
constructed via art historical narratives. Because the Jaques collection was included alongside the Brenthurst collection, the impression was created that all the content of the exhibition belonged to one collection. The reason for a large focus on wood carving in the exhibitions was, according to Nettleton (1995: 68): “a result of the personal preferences of the collectors of the objects: Lowen collected objects which he could identify as works of art, and Jacques collected headrests.” However this was not mentioned in the exhibition or the catalogue, and as a result, the viewer was left to assume that artworks made of wood are primary examples of ‘great’ southern African ‘traditional’ art and more so, viewed as an example of southern African ‘cultural heritage’.

Nettleton (1995) goes on to argue that there was a focus within the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue on the aesthetic and formal qualities of the artworks. This was largely seen in the way items were displayed. i.e. “minimal labelling gave little idea of original contexts or histories of the objects” (Nettleton, 1995: 68). As discussed above, a claim was made that southern African heritage was represented; however the artworks were shown in a “monolithic ‘art’ tradition” (Nettleton, 1995: 68). As a result, the exhibition delivered a restricted image of southern African cultures and their artistic traditions.32 Nettleton (1995: 68) goes on to argue that the exhibition was heavily criticised as one that “washed over differences and hid them in sediment of nation building sentiment.” In other words, by claiming, through this exhibition, that the Brenthurst collection (as well as the Jacques) were emblematic of ‘cultural heritage’, the cultural diversity of southern African ‘traditional’ art was, and to some extent still is, reduced to what was selected by a few private collectors. As Nettleton (1995: 68-69) states:

32 Please see Figure 9: The map that accompanied the exhibition in the catalogue. It clearly shows the “monolithic ‘art’ tradition” Nettleton speaks of.
This was a form of heritage exhibition where ethnicity was confined to, sometimes only vaguely accurate, attributions on the labels and where works by predominately Tsonga and Zulu-speakers came to represent the past of South Africa’s art.

From the discussion above it is clear that through ‘Art and Ambiguity’, JAG used the Jacques and Lowen donated collections to convey the private collectors idea of what constitutes southern African ‘traditional’ art in an effort to substantiate their cultural legitimacy in a time of political change. A simple example of such substantiation can be seen in the catalogue when Till (1991: 2) argued that the exhibition was “the first time that such an important collection of southern African material (was) being shown in an art museum.” This is in fact not true as the Jaques collection was exhibited in Johannesburg during the 1940’s. However, largely due to lack of research regarding southern African ‘material culture’ the exhibition was ultimately more restrictive and reductive than culturally inclusive. As Nettleton (1995: 69) states:

the contexts and histories of the objects on the exhibition and their relationship to a broader picture of woodcarving in South Africa were available only in the catalogue essays, not in the display, and, far from reinforcing the notion of a seamless past, the catalogue essays questioned the validity in others, all the time pointing to a complexity of diachronic and synchronic inter-relationships which were completely ignored by the exhibition installation.

It is her argument that by using ‘cultural heritage’ as a guise, Art and Ambiguity as an exhibition helped to substantiate certain positions or ideas of ‘valuable’ art. Furthermore, due to the collection consisting of private collections, there was a very narrow representation of history.

Thus southern African ‘heritage’ as we were shown in the above exhibition, consists of objects created in a single century- the 19th century. Furthermore it limited ‘authentic’
southern African ‘traditional’ art to artworks, largely made of wood, and those items that
certain private collectors have chosen to collect. Instead, and as Nettleton (1995) argues, what
should be acknowledged is that southern African art displayed in *Art and Ambiguity* consisted
of Jonathan Lowen’s interpretation of southern African art ‘heritage’, rather than an objective
reflection from a broader southern African art perspective. It was he that constructed a
collection of what he viewed as ‘great’ examples of art. Furthermore, those artworks were
exhibited alongside Jacques’s selection of headrests as representing a canon of southern
African art.

IV. JAG Interview Analysis

As previously discussed, ‘traditional’ southern African art is purchased for the JAG museum
collection, not from city council funds but through a private yearly grant. For the purpose of
this study it is important to highlight a brief outline of the role Nessa Leibhammer plays in
the construction of the ‘traditional’ southern African art collection held at JAG. Leibhammer,
like her precursors, is held responsible for providing JAG’s established collecting
committee with potential acquisitions of southern African ‘traditional’ art, upon which they
decline as a group. She is also responsible for researching those items and what is in the
existing collection, making sure that what is added to the collection does not duplicate
already collected objects. Leibhammer is a member, along with Karel Nel, of the JAG
acquisitions committee. Therefore, she plays a key role in what is selected and included as

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33 See Appendix 2.

34 Namely Diane Levy, and Veliswa Gwintsa.
‘traditional’ southern African art for the museum. What is important to keep in mind is that, as she states:

Generally Karel Nel and I are the people who make the decisions because nobody else on the committee really feels that they have enough specialised knowledge about the traditional collections. Both Karel and I have studied and worked with the objects for many years. The committee will generally go with our decisions.

According to Leibhammer, what is chosen for collection is based on the committee’s (in other words, mainly Nel’s and Leibhammer’s) understanding of objects that are of “fine aesthetic qualities, good provenance and significant meaning.” Whilst Leibhammer does acknowledge that notions of the aesthetic, significant meaning and value are highly contested, she explains that she, as the curator of African materials, defines these terms in relation to her understanding JAG as a fine art institution. In this context, the aesthetic value of the object is the most important factor. The reason Leibhammer provides for the collection of ‘traditional’ material within an art institution, is to “preserve the objects for future generations, for the public and for people who have specialised interests such as scholars and people who want to do research.” She defines objects with ‘significant meaning’ as those objects that have “spiritual, political, cultural, or historical” meaning.

Initially Leibhammer claims the southern African ‘traditional’ art collection held at JAG to be first and foremost an art collection, and second, a reflection of culture. Thus her account deems the ‘significant meaning’ of the art to be less important than how it looks. What is unclear is how aesthetics are defined at JAG: Leibhammer nevertheless acknowledges that what is seen as aesthetic and included into the collection is largely based on ‘Eurocentric perceptions’, and she argues that the reason for a western-centric aesthetic bias is based on the fact that, again, JAG is first and foremost an art institution. As she states:
Your determining criteria are going to be aesthetic first and significance second. If we were an ethnographic museum, then the aesthetics would not be as important - as the cultural significance would be prioritised.

It is unclear why a western-centric focus is used to determine the aesthetic qualities of a southern African ‘traditional’ art collection held in a South African Gallery. As a result, what is presented as ‘traditional’ southern African art is a selection of objects based on disputed notions of ‘authenticity (discussed in the previous chapter). Instead, what should be acknowledged by JAG within the selection process, is that there is no set definition of aesthetics. Thus the aesthetic significance of a southern African ‘traditional’ art object should not only depend on an entirely western-centric aesthetic value system, but should also be considered in relation to those of cultures belonging to southern African regions.

Leibhammer states that the JAG collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art is regarded as a specialist collection of the art from a southern African region. This claim was further solidified through the exhibition Art and Ambiguity. Before then, she argues, “people hadn’t put the material together in a comprehensive way or got a sense of what the dynamics in making, using and collecting” were. This, however, can be disputed after looking at the Ten Years exhibition that pre-dated Art and Ambiguity by two years. In fact the WAM collection pre-dates JAG’s collection of ‘traditional’ southern African art by ten years. Leibhammer argues that the majority of southern African ‘traditional’ art seen as important and collectable for JAG is mainly objects claimed to have been made in 19th and early 20th century, because that is what comprises the collection already, and should therefore be strengthened. However artworks from the mid and later 20th century are still evaluated and collected. Whilst she does acknowledge that JAG collects later 20th century material, it is difficult to understand why JAG would choose to build and strengthen the existing collection, as she claimed it to be an
excellent representation of southern African ‘traditional’ pieces from those periods. Collecting and adding to an already well-built section of the collection could be argued to risk neglecting other important examples of southern African ‘traditional’ art that was not produced in the 19th or 20th centuries. Furthermore, the focus on these periods in southern African history could easily lead to duplications or multiples within the collection - something Leibhammer suggested was to be avoided by JAG as the institution aims to collect prime examples of all southern African ‘traditional’ art, as opposed to duplicates of certain kinds of material.

Leibhammer states that what she would like to add to the JAG collection is early 19th century examples of both beadwork and sculpture. She argues that the reason for this is her personal interest in this particular era and the research she is currently involved with. This acknowledgment is interesting, as it shows clearly how she as a scholar may influence what is chosen for collection. Thus, what is chosen for collection may not necessarily reflect what accurately represent southern African art. She also argues that more attention to pottery is needed. Leibhammer acknowledges that there is a male production bias that exists within the collection, which results in a dominance of wood carving. She argues that the reason for this is that previous collectors such as Lowen, who constructed the Brenthurst collection, prioritised work in wood - a male-dominated craft. As Lowen (10 December, 1984) explained to Christopher Till in a letter:

> Most of the collection is devoted to the art of the carver, who worked in wood and bone and rhino horn. The reason is that beadwork and basketry and the potter’s art has not ceased entirely and the decorative traditions may still be found. As an art collector, I have been more interested in sculptural quality and, of course, rarity.

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35 Considered by Leibhammer and seen in texts with regards to JAG’s collection by JAG. See ‘Art and Ambiguity’.
This quote, provided by Leibhammer, is an excellent example of how the attitudes and collecting policies of previous private collectors have influenced what is seen as southern African ‘traditional’ art at JAG. For Lowen, to simply assume that woodwork ‘traditions’ cease to exist was largely ill-informed and biased towards outdated notions of authenticity. The traditions may in fact exist, but merely in different forms or for different purposes, than during the 19th or early 20th century. There is evidence that many traditions still existed in the 1960s and 1970s, the period in which Lowen was collecting – beadwork, ceramics and carving – and this is to be found in the work of Nettleton (1989), Friedman (1986), Klopper (1992), Schneider (1986), and Becker (1989), among others. I argue that, overall, what has resulted through the adoption of certain private collections into JAG is a collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art that portrays some private collectors’ prejudices. Perhaps an inevitable consequence of particular funding policies brought on by a lack of national agenda. None the less, the Brenthurst collection is based on Lowen’s subjective perception of aesthetics and collecting, therefore it should not be represented as being fully representative of southern African art from the 19th and 20th centuries. Rather it should be viewed, as is the case with any private collection, as a biased understanding and reflection of an aspect of a larger mass of potential material. The same can be said for the Horstmann and Brodie collections (most of this collection comprising of 20th century material), as these parts of the JAG collection were also based on the preferences of the private collectors that amassed them.

Despite Leibhammer’s acknowledgment that defining southern African ‘traditional’ art in terms of ethnicity is highly problematic, the JAG collection is still presented in this manner through publications and exhibitions, like Art and Ambiguity (1991), that have been created
from it. Leibhammer argues that artworks categorised by ethnicity ultimately result in cultural isolations, over-simplification of various cultures, and are greatly misleading. She also argues that those ‘tribal’ categorisations are a result of a lack of interest in ‘other’ cultures by collectors in previously colonial settings. Leibhammer claims that the solution to this previous neglect, which will result in a better understanding of and ultimately pride in southern African ‘traditional’ art, is research into the history and provenance of such objects. This can be best done by situating “objects into more appropriate historical and social context resource”, for example by re-examining oral histories. Leibhammer suggests that by extending histories one has a better understanding of the material collected and that material is no longer seen in such a depersonalised manner as those of previous museum classificatory processes. She thus acknowledges that there needs to be a re-examination of how southern African ‘traditional’ art is presented to the public and more research should be conducted in order to effect how it is understood. As she states:

In actuality, these objects are the markers of a vibrant heritage with a complex symbolism and identity politics attached. It was part of a history that was as dynamic as any other history. However, the information needed with which to bring out this history is largely missing.

Leibhammer argues that the private art collection she is most familiar with is Karel Nel’s, and that what he has chosen to collect as ‘traditional’ southern African material is of the highest aesthetic quality. As she states, “the aesthetic eye in which he [Nel] has done the selecting, are exceptional.” Leibhammer’s high regard for Nel’s collection is evinced when she states that “his collection is a good example to hold up as a model for JAG.” She also acknowledges, as previously mentioned, that he plays a large role in what is chosen for the JAG collection. The content and focus of Nel’s collection will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter of this dissertation. It is important to note, however, that owing to the strong
influence of Nel on Leibhammer and JAG, what Nel views as important and collectable has, and continues to influence what JAG collects. This is problematic because Nel can be argued to have subjective collecting biases like any collector of art, for example seen earlier when discussing what was chosen for collection by Lowen, whose collection interestingly was brought to the attention of the JAG by Nel.

Overall, one can see from the above discussion that the parameters of the JAG collection of ‘traditional’ southern African art is largely defined by collections that have moved from their private origins into the public domain and continue to be framed by the contexts in which their previous owners defined them. Although there is no explicit state policy that claims the artworks held at JAG as ‘traditional’ southern African art should reflect ‘national cultural heritage’, it can be seen that these artworks are clearly perceived to be significant examples of heritage and thus explicit acknowledgement of their original context as part of previous private collections needs to occur. In doing so, JAG would be acknowledging Leibhammer’s argument noted above that there are gaps to be filled and these gaps need to be addressed before making a claim that these artworks reflect ‘national’ and ‘cultural heritage’. Furthermore the evidence of subjectivity seen in Leibhammer’s personal interests and the strong involvement of the private collector Nel, provide evidence that viewing any collection of ‘traditional’ southern African art as a representative selection of art and cultural heritage for a nation is problematic.
Chapter Four

Private collecting: Karel Nel’s southern African Art Collection

I. Introduction

Karel Nel’s private art collection is large and covers a wide range of objects within a wide range of geographical locations, however, for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to focus only on what is defined by Nel as ‘traditional’ southern African art within his collection, as this provides a pertinent sample for my case study of the formation of ‘cultural heritage’ through southern African art collections. The catalogued content of Nel’s collection in Appendix 4 is the result of research I conducted over 15 months. For the purpose of my argument, I have given a brief overview of what is held to be southern African ‘traditional’ art by Nel within his collection, followed by a focus on certain categories and aspects of the collection that I will later use to highlight the relationship the collection has with WAM and JAG. Before giving a critical analysis of the interview with Nel conducted for this study, I will discuss the way in which he can be seen to have collected and classified southern African ‘traditional’ art and whether his definition and his collection match one another.

36 Whether Nel’s whole collection should be considered in this regard is questionable and should perhaps be considered in later studies.
II. Nel’s private collection

In this section I explore the content of Nel’s collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art. Before engaging with Nel’s collection, it is important to note that the way in which the collection has been catalogued was decided by Nel himself. The cataloguing process was one in which I worked closely with Nel, but he always took the final decisions on how the collection should be framed in the catalogue. Also, the southern African artworks were classified as ‘traditional’ by Nel and were subsequently included in the catalogue based on Nel’s definitions. The way in which these objects were then documented was decided by Nel and modelled on documentation formats seen in both WAM and JAG archives.

A large portion of the content of Nel’s collection consists of wood carvings including the following: ‘ceremonial staffs and weapons’; ‘wooden figures’; ‘divination objects’; ‘headrests’; ‘meat platters’; ‘milk pails’; ‘snuff containers’; ‘spoons’; ‘drums’ and ‘stools’.

In general, works that can be categorised as examples of figurative and abstract carvings in wood comprise of almost half of his ‘traditional’ southern African collection. The remaining categories in Nel’s collection are ‘baskets’; ‘child figures’; ‘gourds’; ‘personal objects’; ‘tins’; ‘beadwork’; ‘currencies’; ‘grass mats’; ‘stone’ and ‘vessels’. Of these remaining categories, the largest by far are beadwork and clay vessels. Most of the objects in the collection fall within what is conventionally accepted as ‘traditional’ southern African art, discussed in chapter two above, by collectors, scholars and curators. However, there are objects in Karel Nel’s collection that are exceptions in relation to the canon that is constituted in publications and other collections, whether private or public.

37 See catalogue: Appendix 4.
38 See ‘Personal’ section in catalogue: Appendix 4.
What Nel chooses to classify as ‘traditional’ “southern African” art is important to note because he includes objects that are not only found south of the Zambezi river, but in fact are more common further north on the east coast of Africa. Furthermore, in various categories Nel decided to include artworks that were, in the past, categorised as ‘transitional’ art by institutions like WAM and the larger art world in South Africa, as well as artworks by contemporary southern African artists. Works such as these are now accepted as ‘traditional’ by Nel, as they reveal a level of influence from previous ‘traditional’ practices, and therefore the adoption and adaptation of the ‘traditional’ within modernity. For example, Nel chooses to include a wide range of more contemporary wooden sculpture included in the category ‘Figures’ within the catalogue.

By briefly looking at Nel’s writings on the subject I aim to deconstruct the ways in which he employs his parameters of the so-called ‘traditional’. Similar to Klopper (2004), Nettleton (1995), et al. discussed in chapter two, Nel (2002) argues that existing understandings of ‘traditional’ southern African art have been considerably homogeneous and monolithic in a European paradigm, for example, describing most of the art produced as ‘Zulu’. He acknowledges that this highly reductive form of categorisation has since been exposed as being problematic as there is a complex history within southern Africa. He suggests, somewhat problematically, and without historical references, that the many southern African cultures and peoples are difficult to research, as there have been a “series of migrations rather than of settled kingdoms” (Nel, 2002: 13). He goes on to argue that the art found in southern and eastern Africa is significantly different from west and central African art. Furthermore, he opines that southern and eastern African art share a series of similarities that is largely due

39 See figure 10: These staffs are all found in Tanzania east Africa and are included into his catalogue. There are many more examples that can be found when examining the catalogue.

to “the well-developed and articulated world-view of the cattle-owning pastoralists” (Nel, 2002: 14).

In other words, Nel (2002) suggests that what links the art practices of southern and eastern Africa is that their communities were inclined to follow their cattle and as a result only produce what could be carried with the individual. As Nel (2002: 14) states:

To be sure, people are only prepared to carry things which are functional, and preferably pleasing to the hand as well - otherwise it is easier to discard the thing and make a new one at the next stopping place.

He goes on to argue that because objects needed to be carried, those that were kept and therefore remain for us to view at present must have had significant social meaning and value. From his writings, one can see that what he views as important and collectable is based on the opinion that the object existed in a functional context and contained “a spectrum of beliefs and values.” He does acknowledge that there are differences in production styles within southern and eastern Africa, which he attributes to geographical regions. However, he argues that these regions should not be seen as having fixed boundaries but rather that “the identity of groupings seemed to have been much more fluid, more permeable than our contemporary construction of group identity allows” (Nel, 2002: 14). Nel’s definition of southern Africa is thus not entirely based on geography nor on who lives in the area, but on ethnological categories that have been very loosely applied to the peoples involved and possibly misunderstood.

Through the examination of Nel’s text I have not been able to determine what the exact reasons are for Nel’s inclusion of objects from east Africa into a category of “southern” Africa. Certainly a clear contradiction emerges in at least one of Nel’s texts (2004: 17). On
the one hand he recognises how problematic previous standardisation of southern African art is, for example defining all artworks from southern Africa as ‘Zulu’. On the other hand he argues “a need to establish some form of broad identity or shared aesthetic for the southern African material in order for it to find its rightful position beside the other broadly delineated complexes within African art.” The style that can be recognised, according to Nel (2002), is shared across southern and eastern areas of Africa. He recognises the many different styles in production but argues that they are closely linked to each other. He states:

Objects such as sticks and headrests moved when the people who owned them herded their cattle to greener pastures. Objects moved when a bride went to live at the husband’s family homestead. Carvers travelled and applied their trade wherever they were. The source of an object may have been far distant from the places where it was ultimately collected” (Nel, 2002: 35).

The above quote implies that his justification rests on an assumption that culture was transhumant and that carvers travelled. Nel (2002) aims to strengthen this claim by arguing that there is a relationship between southern and eastern African art through a series of formal and symbolic similarities. Most of these claims cannot be substantiated. While communities in southern and eastern Africa should not be viewed as isolated and were sure to have influenced each other, his use of an argument of nomadism to explain those similarities is limited. This is because not many southern and eastern African communities and cultures were “migratory-pastoralists.” In fact, the only truly migrant pastoralists were the Khoen communities, unlike the vast majority of Bantu-speakers, whose occupation of specific areas can be traced back for a number of centuries and who did not move their dwellings in order to
follow their cattle (Hammond-Tooke, 1993). Therefore in order to understand more clearly why Nel has chosen to define what he collects in this way, I turn to my interview with him.

III. Interview Analysis

As with the interviews held to examine the collecting practices held at both WAM and JAG, the process I followed in interviewing Nel is important because it has shaped the critique which I was able to mount. After the interview was conducted and transcribed, for ethical reasons (and as was the case with the interviews with curators of the public collections), the end result was given to Nel for editing. This involved two extensive tranches of edited material which means that his responses were mediated. In this discussion, the first section will cover Nel’s collecting of southern African ‘traditional’ art and the boundaries he set. Here Nel’s reasons for what and how he collects southern African art are explored and critiqued. I follow this with a discussion of the importance of Nel’s collecting of ‘traditional’ southern African art in a broader heritage context, and a critique of how it has been influenced by public and other private collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art. In the following chapter I will then establish Charlton, Rankin-smith, Leibhammer and Nel’s understandings of notions of ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to southern African ‘traditional’ art in order to highlight how the term has come to be defined. Nel’s understanding of ‘cultural heritage’ is important in understanding the relationship between his collection and the public.

41 Also see Maylam (1986)

42 See Nel (2011), Nel (2000) and Nel (1998) in Evocations of a child: fertility figures of the southern African region for more examples of Nel’s writing.
collections held at WAM and JAG and how that has resulted in the attribution of ‘value’ to particular works.  

Nel states that one of the primary reasons that he has chosen to collect art is an interest “in how the values of society are deeply encoded in the art that is produced.” Thus, on a whole, he collects art that he thinks expresses aspects of different cultures and societies. Consequently he has attempted to present the southern African ‘traditional’ art section of his collection as what he terms, ‘a visual form of thinking’. This he defines as: “a way of accessing and understanding others through the visual forms of production.” He attempts to achieve this through constructing what he argues to be a series of, or an evolution of, “tendencies” within the making of southern African ‘traditional’ art. He states that what he perceives through his collecting policy is a series of patterns in visual production that identify the expression of various artistic cultures of the southern African region. He argues that, influenced by his profession as an artist, he is particularly interested in how southern African ‘traditional’ material expresses aesthetics. Yet, whilst claiming that he is in no way an anthropologist, what is aesthetically pleasing is also intriguing to Nel because, he claims, it “very often reflects the identity of the maker, of the group and of the culture.”

It is clear that Nel professes an interest in anthropology, which accounts for the use of anthropological concepts in his collecting practices. In fact, using artwork as a tool to explore cultural identity is a fully anthropological concept. His interest in anthropological concepts creates the assumption that what he collects is not purely subjectively motivated and should

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43 The following interview between Karel Nel and myself is based on the interview template seen in appendix 5. Like with interviews conducted with JAG and WAM curators, the questions were used to extract information in relation to Nel’s ‘traditional’ southern African art collection only.
be seen as a result of more than his intuition. However, Nel adopts a collecting practice that is far from anthropological as many of the objects contexts are either poorly, or not at all, researched, so their social and cultural contexts are not established. 44

As a result his collecting practices appear to rest on a more intuitive process: his writing, the way in which he chooses to display (see ‘Art and Ambiguity’), and further discussions within our interview, I argue, to support this conclusion. He presents himself, as an ‘authority’ on southern African cultures and this view is echoed by others like Nessa Leibhammer. As a result his collection could potentially be perceived as largely ‘culturally’ authoritative. I argue that one should be cautious of assigning such authority onto his collection, as Nel’s collecting practices reflect, as he states in the interview, objects chosen based largely on his own artistic intuition. Whilst these objects could, be claimed, with some validity, as examples of southern African “traditional” art and therefore cultural heritage, like any collection of art, it should nevertheless be acknowledged that Nel’s private collection of art is predicated entirely on what he chooses to collect. At no point can his right to collect in this way be challenged. However, Nel may or may not exclude important examples of ‘cultural heritage’ without having to consider questions of representivity. His practice as an authority on southern African cultures does not, therefore, necessarily coincide with his role as a private collector. Because his role as a private collector is thus entirely subjectively framed, the consequences of his subjectivity can be traced in the following examples based in an analysis of his collection in relation to his interview.

44 See Appendix 4: The lack of information about artworks seen in the catalogue clearly shows gaps in research.
The first example of subjective bias is evident where he describes the aesthetic that he searches for within his collecting practice as belonging to objects that have been produced by artists with a certain “intelligence in their hands.” He defines these artworks as those objects that are made with “skill, intelligence, care, love and with very clear intent.” How he comes to “know” this about the objects is unclear, yet, possibly because the purely formalist response that Nel admits to, it is also one he is cautious of acknowledging too openly. Whatever the reason, as a result of this belief, he states that he always looks for objects with a provenance in the community in which it was produced. In doing this he seems to imply that an art object requires a greater significance than pure form in order to be aesthetically valuable. Thus Nel’s collecting is not only based on his artistic notions of the aesthetics of form and execution, the artwork’s functionality in a cultural context is also relevant. The ‘original’ cultural significance of southern African artworks is extremely important to Nel. For example, he argues that because he has a personal, artistic, interest in the “unseen world” or notions of the sacred, he often focuses on objects that have a relation to the symbolic.\(^{45}\) Thus he will select objects that function as a link to the ancestral, or as he states, the “numinous realm.”

Another reflection of such subjectivity can be seen when Nel argues that his original reason for collecting southern African ‘traditional’ art was his inability to afford the more costly artworks from west and central Africa. Also, and similar to Lowen discussed earlier, Nel states that most of the significant southern African artworks were brought to “London and Paris since much had been removed during the British-Zulu wars, by soldiers, missionaries and early tourists in the 19\(^{th}\) century,” and he has focused his collection on artworks found in

\(^{45}\) It is important to note that I am aware that symbolic tendencies may not necessarily relate to notions of the sacred: however Nel links the two within the interview.
the western world and from that century. He goes on to argue that he perceived a bias towards wood carving in previous southern African ‘traditional’ art collections in both the private and the public realm, so he has “tried to collect to counter focus on the male domain.” He has collected a considerable number of artworks produced by women, particularly the “ceramics, beadwork, basketry and the child figures”, in an attempt to create a more equal balance in representation of ‘traditional’ art for southern Africa. In addition, he argues that this can be seen in his writing about southern African child figures seen in *Evocations of a Child: Fertility Figures of the Southern African Region* (Nel, 1998). However Nel’s claim that he aims to contradict previous biases towards works in wood within southern African art collecting is not accurately reflected in the proportional representation of object types in his collection. Almost half of his entire collection consists primarily of works in wood and can be classified as male produced objects. However, in support of Nel’s claim, he has numerous southern African artworks made by women and whilst not all are as well represented as categories such as headrests, ceremonial sticks, and meat platters, all of which are made of wood by men, there is a significant number of child figures, baskets, clay vessels and beadwork items.46

It seems as though there attempt to rectify a previous wood bias within Nel’s collection occurred later in his collecting praxis. In fact of all the categories in the collection, Nel’s beadwork collection is the largest. It however consists largely of Ndebele and Zulu pieces and does not represent southern African beadwork on a broader scale. Furthermore he chooses to focus on collecting only older pieces that contain more abstract geometric shapes, with only a few examples of modernisation: this is clearly a reflection of his own interests.47


47 Nel’s’ collection of vessels are well represented, however there is a focus on Zulu examples. He also has a significant amount of basketry.
However, it is clear that Nel’s collection of beadwork is far larger than that collected by earlier private collectors such as Lowen, whilst Jacques did not collect beadwork at all. On the other hand, the private collector of southern African art - Maritz (2008), collected a large amount of beadwork that far outnumbered the wooden objects in his collection. However, this beadwork was far less valued by Maritz compared to wooden objects and was subsequently donated to WAM as opposed to valued and sold like his collection of wood carvings. 48

Evidence for the claim that Nel’s collecting practices are subjective rather than based on academic research can be seen further through his argument that the reason that such a large component of his collection is made of wood is that it is what has been ‘available’ to him. If availability were the issue, surely the female-produced objects would hugely out-weigh the remainder of his collection. Beadwork, ceramics and basketry objects had previously been considered of little value and therefore were not as avidly collected or taken overseas. In the 1970s and 1980s they were still to be found in rural areas and on the urban markets in southern Africa, and the prices of good quality pieces were, and today are still, comparatively low. In reality, artworks produced by women such as beadwork are often examples of hybridising interactions with colonial powers and reveal modern influences. This was previously viewed as a thread that threatened notions of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘authentic’ and therefore prevented their full entry into collections. 49 Thus, what should be acknowledged is that beadwork, ceramic vessels and baskets have been more readily available to the private collector in the last 30 years, due to the fact that they are continuing

48 See the catalogue: “Relics of War: A collection of 19th Century Artefacts from British South Africa and Southern Rhodesia” (2008) to see what Maritz included as significant southern African ‘traditional’ art.

49 See Figure 11: Ndebele beadwork reflecting images of modernity.
traditions, and as a result they ought to reflect just as strongly within Nel’s collection if availability were the primary means of restriction determining what Nel collects. What should be argued, is not that work produced by women has suddenly become ‘available’, but rather that it has come to be seen as more artistically significant within recent years, now receiving attention from private collectors like Nel, in contrast to the neglect that resulted from the application of challenged notions of ‘authenticity’.

Finally, it is interesting to note that later in the interview Nel recognises what he terms a Swazi aesthetic preference within his southern African ‘traditional’ collection. His admission to a focus on this region of southern Africa reflects a personal aspect to his collecting choices, revealing an aspect of his collection that is completely subjective. Therefore what is substantiated above is that with Nel, aesthetic preferences can not only be seen with regards to ‘Swazi’ objects, but also because he describes preferring to collect geometric forms as opposed to figurative forms, and to finding objects that are related to the sacred or ancestral realm particularly fascinating.

I argue that the subjective aesthetic preferences revealed in the above analysis of Nel’s collection reveal the nature of the private collection on a more general level. In other words, Nel is presented as an example of a private collector, constructing a collection that focuses on a particular category/ies of objects, betraying an aesthetic preference towards some objects and, ignoring and often excluding (perhaps unintentionally) objects that he does not consider as fascinating. However it is not the fact that the collection is constructed through such subjectivity that is problematic, but rather that the collection is presented and perceived as

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50 See Figure12-14: Showing examples of Swazi material Nel holds in his collection.
culturally authoritative, that could be potentially damaging. As Nel’s collection is not presently available to the public, how it is viewed is not relevant, except insofar as it is presented to our side scholars and select individuals from the South African arts community. However if a private collection such as Nel’s can be unpacked and such subjectivity can be revealed, and given that other private collections are assembled in a similar manner, it allows us to consider more critically the status of private collections that have moved into a public sphere.

Furthermore, it has been well established that Nel himself plays an influential role on both public collections under discussion. It is therefore also important to establish what influences Nel’s collecting practices. Doing so, will, I argue, enable one to establish the extent to which subjective aesthetic preferences, such as those held by Nel may, affect what is defined as ‘traditional’ southern African art held by public institutions such as WAM and JAG. What is most interesting in the case of Nel is that these specific interests or aesthetic preferences, have resulted in a particular construction of southern African ‘traditional’ art that parallels the construction of the collections of the JAG collection and in the WAM collection.

Nel claims his collection to be original in the way in which it presents objects in a particular “sequence”. As he states:

I think my collection very often tries to look at almost a sequence of solutions within a particular group of objects. So that one can see broad trends and be able to look at pieces from Mozambique in relation to Zulu pieces, down to Xhosa pieces and to see that there is a similarity, and a difference.

The sequence which Nel refers to is one of categories that move from tradition to those objects that include elements of modernity; that thus reveals change, rather than an ahistorical construction of objects into ‘cultural heritage’, an approach that is paralleled by that in the
WAM collection. Perhaps his position can be explained by the influence of WAM’s decision to, as Nel states, “focus on the interface between tradition and change.” Although seen along shorter timelines to WAM and not as extensive, categories like ‘figures’, ‘basktry’, ‘ceremonial staffs’, ‘headrests’ etc. are all constructed by Nel to show this particular development. In fact most categories in his collection show a development over time, although some categories only cover one or two centuries and do not continue into the present. The influence of modernity on artworks can be seen in the use of plastics, fabric and foil (often sweet wrappers) to create ‘traditional’ style Ndebele aprons.\(^{51}\) External influences can be seen further in Nel’s acknowledgment of the influence of other private collections, stating that he is inspired by those collectors with a particular focus in what they are collecting. In particular Nel acknowledges the influence of Egon Guenther on his early collecting practices.

Another example of influence can be seen where Nel himself compares his own collecting practices to those of museums, arguing that often what is seen within private collections is based on a “personal kind of intent”, whilst museum collections can often be directionless and thus over-crowed with material. He then refers to the Lowen, the Horstmann, and the Jacques collections as examples of this ‘personal intent’. All of these collections are now housed in the JAG as part of a public institution. Furthermore Nel claims that he is not affected by European notions of collecting, especially those policies adopted by European museums, because, he argues, they know little and hold hardly any good southern African art. He goes on to argue that “the most important collections in the world are located at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and at Wits”.

\(^{51}\) See figure 15: Example of a ‘traditional’ Ndebele apron made from modern materials.
Nel then claims that the collections within WAM and JAG “have really been defined by a small group of astute private collectors.” He identifies himself as being one of these collectors and claims that the relationship between these private collectors and the institutions is highly influential. He then acknowledges that his influence on what has been collected for JAG and WAM in terms of ‘traditional’ southern African art is considerable. As he states: “my work with the collections and with the acquisitions amongst South African public collections has been longstanding and committed.” He goes on to highlight his involvement with the movement of the Brenthurst and Horstmann collections into JAG. He recognises the strong relationships he has had with past and current curators at JAG and WAM.\(^{52}\)

It is clear that, while Nel chooses, in some cases, to follow established definitions of southern African ‘traditional’ art to categorise his collection, in others he chooses a more personal approach, collecting and classifying in a manner that reflects his personal opinion of how southern African ‘traditional’ art should be defined. Furthermore, Nel’s somewhat idiosyncratic definitions of ‘traditional’ southern African art should be recognised as not being bound by generally accepted geographical distinctions of linguistic, cultural entities, flows and cross-pollination on the African continent. It is clear that Nel’s collection cannot ‘represent’ the ‘cultural heritage’ of southern Africa when it is assembled in such a largely subjective manner, and in no way does he claim that it does. However, through the examination of the collection and accompanying interview issues surrounding the cultural authority of private collections as a whole have been revealed. The next chapter will therefore include a critical examination of how Nel defines ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to his own

\(^{52}\) Nel states that he has also contributed to understandings of southern African ‘traditional’ art through exhibitions mounted by JAG and WAM and in written texts [see Nel (1998)] for JAG.
collection. Also, acknowledging the clear relationship between Nel and both public collections held at WAM and JAG, it is important to consider to what extent Nel’s arguments influence understandings of ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to both collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art in both public institutions, and their curators’ views of the issue.
Chapter Five

Southern African Art Collections: notions of a ‘national’ and ‘cultural’ heritage

I. Introduction

In the previous chapters I discussed the content of each collection under study and critically examined their collecting practices where necessary. Now I will compare the three collections in order to establish to what extent the collecting trends between these public and private collecting practices influence each other. This is crucial in order to establish to what extent notions of ‘traditional’ southern African art collections are constructed as ‘cultural heritage’. Whilst in no way are WAM and JAG national museums, it has been clearly established in previous chapters that they do make claims to speak for the ‘national.’ Thus, before I embark on a critical analysis of these three public and private collections it is important to examine how ‘cultural heritage’ has been defined for the South African ‘nation’ and how these definitions have been constructed to include southern African art. This chapter will unpack four main themes that have developed in the construction of southern African ‘traditional’ art as ‘national cultural heritage’. First, what needs to be confirmed is what is being referred to, for the purpose of my study as ‘cultural heritage’ for the ‘nation’ and how southern African ‘traditional’ art is classified in this regard. Second, questions of the importance of medium in defining southern African ‘traditional’ art will be examined. Third, issues surrounding the display of southern African art and how this affects what objects are viewed as ‘cultural heritage’ for the ‘nation’ will be explored. Finally, I look at how art is
defined as ‘national cultural heritage’ due to the qualifier status of the museum in South Africa, particularly in relation to the state.

II. Notions of ‘cultural heritage’ for southern Africa’s ‘public’

a) Classification of material as ‘cultural heritage’.

What is at issue here is how the term ‘cultural heritage’ is used by the galleries, museum curators, private collectors and scholars within South Africa and the reasons they have come to a specific definition of ‘cultural heritage’. Hoffman (2006) argues that, because the world is made up of complex societies, one should realise that objects which belong to these societies will also be complex. Therefore issues relating to culture and the ownership thereof, will always be related to broader societal issues such as politics, ethics and globalisation. Thus Hoffman (2006: 9) states that:

The context in which cultural heritage is generated and preserved is important to its meaning, and the terminology not only varies depending on the cultural community from which the term and definition emanate, but also depends on the purpose and strategic use for which the term and definition are developed. A definition of “cultural property” or cultural heritage is not politically neutral.

In other words, the definition of ‘cultural heritage’ is variable and contingent on context. There can be no universal understanding of the term and to assume that there is, is problematic. What is included in the category of ‘cultural heritage’ is dependent on the context in which it is being classified. Therefore, for the purpose of my study I will focus on ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to art in southern Africa, keeping in mind that the term ‘cultural heritage’ differs not only from one place to another, but also that the category broadens all
the time. I go on to argue that, because ‘cultural heritage’ is often so vaguely defined, the term can subsequently come to define whatever one wills and what results is a term that ultimately serves the interests of whoever chooses to utilise it.

‘Cultural heritage’ is defined in the glossary of Hoffman’s (2006: 508) text as “any thing or concept considered of aesthetic, historical, scientific, or spiritual significance”. Furthermore, Hoffman (2006) argues, particularly in the case of art (which is more relevant to this dissertation), there is no exact definition of ‘cultural heritage’. However what makes art different from all other ‘cultural property’ is that it holds a relation to some or all of the following: “expressive value, politics, religion, and utility” (Hoffman, 2006: 14). In defining ‘cultural heritage’ in this manner, Hoffman (2006) attempts to provide a universal definition of the term. I argue that a universal definition of ‘cultural heritage’ cannot be achieved as specific instances of cultural heritage are dependent on the specific societal, religious, political and linguistic contexts in which it is current. The term is thus inclusive of difference and thus multivalent. In referring to ‘cultural heritage’ for this dissertation, I have used it in relation to southern African ‘traditional’ art specifically. I argue that this material’s significance follows from the relationship it has with political, religious, historical, social or functional contexts within particular cultural settings.  

53 For example, Nettleton (2008: 3) argues that the way in which art museums and galleries in South Africa and in general are distinguished from culture history museums, anthropological museums, and natural history museums is clear. The reasons for the separation she notes as historically complex and largely based within colonial constructs and western ideologies.

54 See Bourdieu (1993) and his concept of symbolic capital which explains this further.
b) Classifications of notions of the ‘public’ and the ‘nation’

The notion of ‘cultural heritage’ here refers to a southern African art context where objects circulate in the public domain and end up in national repositories. According to Michael Warner (2002) the notion of the ‘public’, although integral to societies, is entirely based on imaginations. He argues that the notion of the ‘public’ allows individuals to make sense and order of the world around them. As he (2002: 8) states:

If we did not have practical sense of what publics are, if we could not unself-consciously take them for granted as really existing and addressable social entities, we could not produce most of the books or films or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture; we could not conduct elections or indeed imagine ourselves as members of nations or movements.

But, ultimately Warner (2002) argues that notion of the ‘public’ has become so vague that it has no longer a real definition. He argues that because, behind one’s understanding of a ‘public’ there are complex histories the notion of a ‘public’ is based on current and historical contexts that make it impossible to establish a universal meaning for the term. Thus, if one has to speak of ‘traditional’ southern African art as ‘cultural heritage’ for southern Africa’s ‘public’, one is not only referring to a particular context relating specifically to southern African art history: one is simultaneously referring to a specific community of individuals within a southern African context and a complex set of histories. Not only this, but this southern African public’ is claimed to be part of a ‘nation’. Warner (2002) claims that the idea of a ‘nation’ can be argued to be as decontextualized and vague as that of a general
‘public’.\textsuperscript{55} Thus, it is important to establish what is understood as cultural heritage for the ‘nation’.

When referring to claims for the ‘national’ throughout this dissertation I acknowledge that it is a term not easily and clearly defined. Furthermore I am aware that notions of a ‘nation’ are based on complex historical, political and social contexts current within South Africa. Thus, I argue that it is claimed, by the individuals and the institutions under discussion, that the ‘cultural heritage’ in the form of ‘traditional’ southern African art belongs to those individuals who claim their own identity as a South African. It is those individuals that are referred to as a ‘nation’ and their collective identity is more than the sum of their individual contexts.

c) Questions of medium

The question that follows then is, what can be said about southern African ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to southern African art collections claimed to be ‘cultural heritage for the nation’.

Some key texts which consider ‘cultural heritage’ may offer some answers. An example of this in South Africa is highlighted by Nettleton (2008: 5) who states that:

\begin{quote}
The granting of ‘national’ museum status to some museums has been decided in line with current cultural policy to establish regional ‘flagship’ institutions with a number of satellites and thus create a ‘national’ consciousness of cultural heritage.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Similarly Anderson (1996: 1) argues when referring to ‘nationalism’ that “it is hard to think of any political phenomenon which remains so puzzling and about which there is less analytic consensus. No widely accepted definition exists.”
She goes on to argue that, of those public institutions, art galleries and museums and their collections are seen as particularly significant, based on the fact they are framed within a western value system. What results is a western-centric context in which art is viewed within the art institutions of South Africa, resulting in certain implications for the construction of ‘heritage’ in this context. What has resulted is that, in the southern African ‘traditional’ art context, the notion of ‘cultural heritage’ has become not only complex but also contested.

Nettleton (2009) defines ‘cultural heritage’, in relation to southern African art, as a series of tangible objects that have been given symbolic significance through their relation to a historical narrative, which in turn provides those objects with authenticity. In terms of art collections, she argues that ‘cultural heritage’ can be described as those objects chosen for a collection that provide examples of culture from previous generations. By arguing that an art collection is an example of ‘cultural heritage’, Nettleton (2009) is firstly allowing the collection to reflect the culture of past generations as well as providing justification for continuing the collection as a form of conservation for future generations. However, as I noted earlier, because there is an art hierarchy in the west, some objects are seen as more significant than others. This results in some objects being seen as more significant and therefore seen as ‘art’, compared to those that are seen as purely functional. Nettleton (2009) acknowledges that art collections are assigned symbolic values by the society in which they exist. Furthermore, she suggests that the symbolic values assigned to southern African art by western collecting practices, have had more to do with aesthetics and issues of authorship than with their original cultural significance.

Nettleton (2009) goes on to argue that in current southern African art historical studies there is a new perspective on artworks that is no longer constrained as strongly by these western categories. Rather “the ways in which objects were made, by whom, for whom, and when are
now considered important” (Nettleton, 2009: 137). Therefore she claims that art objects that were initially created as culturally significant pieces continue over time to accumulate value because they are recognised as examples of ‘cultural heritage.’ Nevertheless, whilst there are apparent shifting notions of ‘authenticity’, and there is no doubt that the historical documentation of heritage objects has become more important in recent years, what has been chosen as important material culture has remained largely the same within collections since the start of colonialism. An example can be seen in the JAG collections, where the focus remains on works in wood, as opposed to artworks like beadwork or ceramics, which are, in turn, historically relegated to the domain of craft. Wood pieces not only belong to a male domain, they have been and continue to be seen to approximate sculpture, and thus they appear to have greater longevity.

Nettleton (2008: 7) further argues that southern African museums and galleries have been modelled on and have continued to follow western ideologies surrounding, ‘material culture’, art and ‘heritage’. She argues that:

> The template is problematic because separations between art and material culture are not easily established for those objects whose meanings are embedded in the classification systems. The template is drawn according to rules of scholarly taxonomies outlined in the west: art history and anthropology are the western disciplines most complicit here. When art historians and anthropologists take on the study of non-western material culture as ‘art’ or even as ‘heritage’, they accord that material culture a dignity similar to that given to segments of western material culture, but they are also fitting others’ objects into a mould in which they are awkwardly crushed. For what it means to be an ‘art’ work in this system is often not the same as what it means to be a heritage object.

She goes on to argue that, through public collections, for example what is being collected at WAM (from the beginning of 1979) and JAG (beginning in 1990), southern African ‘traditional’ material was either exhibited, referred to as art or both. This resulted in an
elevation of those objects to collectable items and therefore to their being considered as examples of artistic cultural significance and, subsequently, ‘heritage for the nation’.

This change in attitude toward indigenous peoples’ material culture was and continues to be significant, as previously ignored material is now consciously recorded and preserved. Moreover, those objects have been attributed the status of ‘art’ and have significantly elevated in symbolic (and commercial) value as a result. The way in which ‘traditional’ art objects were attributed an ‘art’ status is what I find problematic. As discussed in previous chapters it has to do with definitions of ‘authentic traditional southern African art’. These objects have been defined as ‘traditional’ in a way that is based largely on medium and leaves little room for modern influences or change. This is a problem that is addressed at WAM as it will be discussed later, however other South African institutions do not pursue the matter so adamantly.

As one can see, Nettleton (2008) argues that the criteria used to class an object as an example of ‘cultural heritage’ for southern Africa are dependant on what the symbolic value of that object was and how it has transformed over time. Thus the differing value placed on objects such as beadwork, woodwork and ceramics from the 19th and early 20th century, to provide an example, held in both public and private collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art, exists initially as a result of the colonial endeavour to catalogue and classify. Furthermore the historical focus on 19th and 20th century artwork in these three categories has led to a predominance of these objects as examples of ‘cultural heritage’ in collections. Thus, what is constructed as ‘cultural heritage’ in relation to ‘traditional’ art is dependant on a series of historical circumstances, and what follows from this is a need to establish how to construct ‘cultural heritage’ so that it is more inclusive and less bound by previous prejudicial notions of southern African art.
d) Question of display

Becker (2004) defines ‘cultural heritage’, following the UNESCO convention, as something that is either tangible or intangible, but can be interpreted as a physical marker of time. She argues that in a new southern African democracy, art is viewed in a post-colonial context and thus histories can be re-written. She acknowledges further, that crucial to how one views the past through art, is how the material is presented to an audience. In other words, artworks that belong to historical collections are often classified and displayed in a certain manner, depending on how the institution that owns it chooses to present it to the public. An example of this is how older ‘traditional’ artworks are often presented as valuable, mystical pieces through display tactics such as elaborate stands, powerful lighting focused onto the object and encased in glass, creating what’s known as the ‘vitrine effect.’ As Becker (2004: 273) argues “colonial indifference, reinforced by apartheid thinking in naming products, seems to linger and informs display appearances.”

Thus, how those collections are exhibited constructs their historical narrative and therefore influences the wider construction of ‘cultural heritage’. Becker (2004: 273) argues that “artworks are often displayed with a minimum of text and are frequently de-contextualised from their social and historical contexts.” When objects are placed into the gallery or museum space they are legitimised as art, but the contexts of the objects’ histories are thus excluded through this perspective. There is usually no additional text within an art exhibition.

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56 Van Wyk (1994) provides an excellent example of the ‘vitrine’ effect.
The works are expected to, but cannot speak for themselves. By not explaining contexts, or acknowledging interpretations, the curators leave the viewer to assume that how they see the artwork is how it has always been. It can thus be argued that ‘traditional’ art cannot be seen without a historical context and that the relationship between the two gives significance to artworks. Becker (2004: 273) realises that one cannot “make a pictorial history, nor an art show without a context.”

Not only is there a problem with display, but also the debate surrounding how objects should be accessioned has begun amongst art scholars. Despite this, the classificatory traditions have changed very little. Becker (2004) argues that there needs to be a redress of classifications of art. However, it is acknowledged that all classificatory systems are by definition arbitrary and therefore taxonomies are always constructed. Despite this, I agree with Becker (2004) that one should be tentative whilst constructing classifications of art. For example, one needs to acknowledge that classification does not imply the isolation of one ethnic group from another but rather should be viewed in relation to the present southern African contexts within which these works exist.

One can see from the above discussions that a new democratic dispensation has certainly resulted in a re-analysis, by both the above scholars, of what is understood in South African collecting circles as southern African art as ‘cultural heritage’. Constructed notions have been challenged, but what needs further analysis is what is seen as ‘national cultural heritage’ from a South African perspective.

e) The status of museums claims for the ‘national’ in relation to the state.
I argue that once a collection is claimed by those that gather and preserve it to represent ‘cultural heritage’, an image is constructed for that collection as belonging to a particular ‘nation’, whether or not the objects in the collection indeed find their provenance there. The fact that collections are acquired by the state and housed in ‘national’ museums also confers particular status on those collections. The claim for South African collections and their southern African objects to be seen as part of a South African ‘cultural heritage’ is critiqued in the discussions by Nettleton and Becker, and all four interviews discussed in the previous chapters.

I argue that the claim made by scholars, academics and curators that southern African ‘traditional’ art collections held at WAM and JAG reflect aspects of ‘cultural heritage’ for the nation is problematic. Despite the fact that these public art collections have accumulated what can be seen to be more broadly southern African material in the last 20 years, a gap exists between the scholarship around what constitutes ‘traditional’ art in southern Africa and what is contained in both these collections. First this is a result of the fact that, all acquisitions, systems of categorisation and every method of displaying these public collections are constructed based on the subjectivity of those involved in their production. Therefore one cannot assume any collection to be a comprehensive representation of ‘national cultural heritage’. Second, by claiming these collections for the ‘national’ there is a risk that the collections might be considered ‘complete and artworks that could yet be incorporated are excluded and subsequently ignored.

Moreover, according to a variety of scholars like Nettleton (2008), Cummins (2006) and Becker (2004), there is a complete disjunction between what is seen has important and collectable with art institutions such as WAM and JAG, and what is focused on as important
‘cultural heritage’ by the government. Nettleton (2008) argues that the reason for this is due to a lack of understanding the historical contexts from which these artworks have arrived in the collections as well as the contexts in which these objects previously existed. In fact she argues that ‘cultural heritage’ material should be redefined through an incorporation or relating of such material to contemporary Southern Africa. In doing so, a greater interest and an urgency in preservation of Southern African ‘traditional’ art can be created.

Cummins (2006) argues that, throughout the histories of countries affected by English colonialism especially, there is a significant lack of interest in the notion of ‘cultural heritage’. This Cummins (2006: 47) claims is due to:

Patterns of destruction and power that have so structured the history of these countries that it has been difficult to arouse either pride or respect for their culture and heritage as a legitimate basis upon which to build new national and regional identities.

Cummins (2006) is referring to attitudes among the ex-colonised, and although generalising heavily, provides a possible reason for a lack in interest in relation to Southern African ‘traditional’ art as ‘cultural heritage’. She goes on to argue that the neglect of artistic ‘cultural heritage’ in such nations results in a focus amongst public and private institutions (particularly those institutions with artistic interest) making themselves responsible for guarding such ‘heritage’. This ‘museum responsibility’ appears when looking at Nettleton (2009) and Becker’s (2004) arguments discussed above. I argue, like scholars before me, that the effects of Apartheid on South Africa have led to similar attitudes. It is clear from the above discussions that what should therefore be the focus when analysing notions of ‘cultural heritage’ is the role of the museum and academic scholars in the construction of this category.
Netleton (2008) notes that the concept of the museum is itself a construct based on western notions and practices. She argues that museums within South Africa are predominately based on colonial paradigms. Across the world contemporary understanding of the functions of the museum have shifted and the museum is seen as institutions where research, documentation and exhibition of objects occurs, as well as being sites for representing notions of ‘community, nation and self’, however this may be defined, as opposed to merely displaying work in relation to ‘the other’. However, what has been constructed as ‘cultural heritage’ has been defined by the themes discussed above and has led to certain objects being viewed as more valuable than others in this regard. Thus, despite post-colonial paradigm shifts, I argue that it is still critical that we not only constantly revise what as understood as ‘traditional’ southern African art, but also challenge the way museums collect and display their collections.

Lastly, the public institutions that hold the collections under discussion are not officially designated as ‘national’ museums, yet their curators still claim that these collections constitute aspects of South African ‘cultural heritage’. I argue that the reason for WAM and JAG’s claim to represent ‘national cultural heritage’ is based on an attempt to raise awareness and attract funding for the maintenance of these collections and the institutions themselves. South Africa is at present battling economically, struggling to provide basic infrastructure such as hospitals and schools to its citizens. Because of the attendant limited budgets, museums are not given priority status and are often forced to find alternative funding. In an attempt to generate public interest and the kind of funding acquired, many art institutions will take a political standpoint and represent their collections as being important for the ‘nation’. This can be seen clearly around the formation of the two museum collections belonging to WAM and JAG. Both institutions are dependent on non-governmental grants and have, in a
sense, marketed their collections as examples of ‘national cultural heritage’ in order to generate interest and incentives for financial support alternative non-governmental investors.

This could perhaps be attributed to an incentive that Abungu (2006) argues can be seen throughout Africa, where there is currently a need for more public investment in the notion of ‘heritage’ in order to empower and engage with individuals so that ownership of such material is felt. It certainly seems, when looking through various Southern African museum publications, that the same incentive has been implemented for southern African art. According to Abungu, (2006) most African museums have adopted the notion that they are custodians of the nation’s ‘cultural heritage’ and that through this they are able to improve their status in that country and create a larger interest. As a result, African museums are changing roles, from “temples of the state” to be more inclusive public institutions that engage with the people represented (Abungu, 2006: 392).

III. WAM, JAG and Nel’s collections as examples of ‘National Cultural Heritage’

In the previous chapters, I outlined the major issues within the construction of ‘traditional’ southern African art collections for WAM, JAG and Karel Nel, respectively. I then argued that construing these collections as a representative overview of ‘traditional’ southern African art, and therefore as ‘heritage’ for the nation is a limited enterprise. In fact, all such enterprises are going to be fragmentary and partial as one cannot reconstitute the past in a total picture. In this section I follow up the issue of how these public institutions and private collectors have defined ‘cultural heritage’ and establish how the collections have been affected by or used to illustrate this. It is important to acknowledge that a body of historical
research around southern African ‘traditional’ art exists. What needs to be kept in mind throughout the next section, especially in the case of Nel’s collection, is that the knowledge of this existing historical research has informed the collections, even though it is not overtly acknowledged in the interview format. Initially, I will highlight, for the purpose of my argument, the differences between WAM, JAG and Nel’s ‘traditional’ southern African art collections. This will be followed by a discussion around the curators’ and collector’s understandings of ‘authentic’ southern African art in relation to ‘cultural heritage’. Finally, I will discuss how the display of ‘traditional’ southern African art affects how it is defined as ‘national cultural heritage’.

a) Reinforcing the differences between WAM, JAG and Nel’s ‘traditional’ southern African art collections

I have previously outlined the content of collections held and collecting practices followed at WAM, JAG and by Karel Nel. However, it is important now to flesh out the similarities and differences between these three collections, in order to highlight how influential they have been on each other. The formation of WAM’s collection began with older ‘traditional’ artworks found either on auction in the west or in the field by researchers. Reasonably early on and ten years before JAG, WAM moved to collecting more modern material with an intention to portray the influence of modernity on ‘traditional’ southern African art. The narrative of the relationship between tradition and modernity continues to remain a constant theme that informs the WAM collection. On the other hand, JAG’s collection is based on pre-existing private collections with more recent acquisitions, including some beadwork. The

focus of collecting at JAG remains primarily on 18th and 19th century work. This can be seen clearly through examining the content of JAG’s collection.

Comparing the content of the WAM and JAG collections against Nel’s collection, reveals the degree to which Nel was influenced by Lowen, and by WAM’s early collecting practices. Nel began collecting artworks from the 18th and 19th centuries following a pattern set by Lowen whose collection passed on loan to JAG with Nel’s advocacy. As a consequence, Nel’s collection comprises mainly older examples of ‘traditional’ southern African artworks. However, Nel eventually moved away from collecting older material and began collecting a considerable amount of material that JAG would initially have rejected as too modern. Thus Nel holds a significant collection of beadwork, ceramics, and 20th century artwork that combine tradition with modernity. Nel’s change in collecting policy was clearly influenced by WAM’s collecting practices. This can be seen through comparing examples of beadwork seen in both WAM and Nel’s collections. Although late to include beadwork, JAG does now have a collection. This inclusion could be argued to be a result of the strong influence both of Nel on JAG’s collecting practices after his attitudes changed towards modernity.

The point that is, is that the collecting practices and principles held for each collection under discussion cannot be seen as separate. They have been closely influenced by one another. Furthermore, the changing collecting practices seen among all three collections have been largely based on a shifting understanding of what constitutes authenticity. What is seen as ‘traditional’ southern African art is constantly being renegotiated, and how the objects are

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58 A comparison between Nel’s section ‘Beadwork’ in Appendix 4 with the ‘Ten Years’ (1986) catalogue can reveal such influences.
viewed within public and private institutions affects what is included and excluded in the debate. If patterns of collecting within WAM, JAG and Nel’s collection are so heavily influential on each other as interview participants have all suggested, then the opinions of those involved in the collections formations must be surmised to have been influential as well. It is thus important to look at how the curator’s and the collector’s ideas of authenticity effects how ‘cultural heritage’ is defined in relation to ‘traditional’ southern African art.

b) Shifting notions of ‘authenticity’ and therefore ‘cultural heritage’:

The construction of southern African ‘traditional’ art at WAM, JAG and within Nel’s private collection is based on a range of factors, and although these institutions have been influenced by one another, they also vary. How each collection is particularised is, in part, a result of how varying interpretations of shifting notions of authenticity affect the construction of each collection. Thus I will highlight the different ideas held by the curators at WAM, JAG, and Nel, about ‘authenticity’ and its relations to their ideas of ‘cultural heritage’.

Charlton, Rankin-Smith, Leibhammer and Nel all aim to have their collections as in some way representative of a selection of southern African material culture. They also acknowledge that there are always gaps to fill in order to claim a collection as fully representative of such material. For example, Nel argues in his interview that his collection has significance in a wider social context, in so far as it can contribute to a “national lexicon of objects as they get combined with existing and developing and perhaps more focused
collections, enabling one to understand the drift of how objects were produced over time.”

Thus, what is clearly established in the interviews is that all curators and Nel claim their collections to be representative of southern African material culture and therefore ‘heritage’. However, they have differing views on who has the authority to define southern African ‘traditional heritage’.

Charlton, Rankin-Smith and Leibhammer argue that their collections can be claimed by anyone as their ‘cultural heritage’ as all are involved in the collections creation. This claim implies that any individual has the authority to define what is seen as ‘cultural heritage’ for a southern African nation. These curators have the tendency to make this claim and certainly, in principle perhaps this would be the correct response to such a question. In reality the general South African public enjoys little access to the negotiations over culture and heritage in relation to these archives. After examining how the JAG and WAM collections have been constructed, I have to assert that what has been established as ‘traditional’ southern African art is largely based on the subjective opinions of a select committee of southern African art scholars, collectors, and curators affiliated with both WAM and JAG. It is these academics and curators that play a dominant role in conducting research that results in the operating definition of ‘cultural heritage’ in this regard. This is even pointed out by Leibhammer, who goes to contradict herself when she argues that those with a scholarly background in a ‘traditional’ southern African context, have the authority to define what is viewed as ‘cultural heritage’. In the case of Nel’s private collection, it is far easier to identify subjective collecting practices and because the collection is private it is not expected to reflect ‘traditional’ southern African art as ‘cultural heritage’ for the ‘nation’. I argue it is necessary

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59 See Appendix 3.
to constantly revisit and interrogate notions of art as ‘cultural heritage’ within public institutions in order to reflect the material as inclusively as possible.

According to Charlton and Rankin-Smith, ‘cultural heritage’ can be defined as any tangible or intangible object that preserves and expresses forms of culture. They define art (which Charlton specifically refers to as ‘visual forms of cultural heritage’) as aesthetic objects that people make over time, that in a sense visually records culture. On the other hand, Leibhammer describes ‘cultural heritage’ as the “culture we inherit”. She argues that by displaying southern African material culture in an art context, JAG is able to provide a “meaningful heritage” for a southern African public. Nel argues that the term ‘cultural heritage’ belongs to material that holds evidence of the culture as part of which it was produced and thus provides insight into past and present societies. As he states:

...these objects become a nexus of values and ways of living. When we understand that in terms of the personal, of the societal, of the broader cultural context that’s when I think one understands what ‘cultural heritage’ is.

These open-ended definitions of ‘cultural heritage’ are beneficial to each of those who makes the definitions, as they allow for the inclusion of certain art objects based on the interests of each curator/collector. How the term ‘cultural heritage’ is utilised in this regard can be seen with regards to the ‘value’ each curator/collector then places on southern African ‘traditional’ art.

For example, a clear contradiction reveals itself in the way in which Leibhammer claims JAG places value on southern African ‘traditional’ artworks. Leibhammer’s argument initially suggests that an object is deemed valuable by JAG based on how well it reflects ‘heritage’,
yet documentation, heritage and ‘significant meaning’ of an object are argued to come second to its ‘aesthetic value’. Similarly, Nel argues that what makes a southern African ‘traditional’ art object ‘authentic’ is its relationship to the society in which it was made and how it would have functioned in that society. However, Nel’s collecting practices are in no way intended to produce a comprehensive collection of ‘cultural heritage’ as he states in his interview:

My collecting informs what I make and what I make informs what I collect. There is very specific and interesting dialogue between my collecting and my making. I tend to collect objects that form an archive of creative thought and form in the world and I draw on this archive.

This statement would suggest that Nel’s collecting is not informed by notions of ‘cultural heritage’ in any way and that his collection is chosen due to a more personal idea of aesthetics relating to his role as an artist.

Furthermore, Nel argues that what determines a ‘great’ southern African ‘traditional’ art object is problematic, as it is difficult to determine the range of such definitions. He goes on to argue that the best way in which to determine such ‘greatness’ is by going “with what one knows experientially of the material from extensive and careful looking, and with trusting your eye, intuition and knowledge.” Finally, Nel argues that what makes a southern African ‘traditional’ object valuable is not only based on aesthetic and monetary value, but also “knowledge, taste, fashion and on the individuals in museums and on private collectors” as well as “national importance” that is placed on those objects.
It seems that, for Leibhammer and Nel, the crucial element to the ‘value’ of an object is aesthetics, but aesthetics based on the old rhetoric of ‘authenticity’. I argue that JAG’s collecting practices, like Nel’s way of separating valuable objects from the mediocre, is arbitrary and subjective. It is therefore problematic to assume that the public collection held at JAG is constructed through establishing the cultural or symbolic significance of pieces in relation to its importance as an example of ‘heritage’ for the nation. Instead of reacting to aesthetic qualities alone, it would be better to research each object in question, as well as to look at the range of objects available in a particular category. Through extensive research JAG would then be able to establish a more inclusive representation of significant southern African ‘traditional’ art, rather than reflecting the opinions of a select few collectors, curators and gallery managers.

On the other hand, Charlton and Rankin-Smith do acknowledge that the WAM collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art is only a particular construction of ‘cultural heritage’. Charlton acknowledges that not all of southern Africa’s visual culture can be included into the collection, as it goes without saying that they cannot collect everything. She goes on to argue that if there was even an attempt to be comprehensive with the collection, it would result in too much information and little guidance and direction. Charlton argues that collected items should be “deliberately chosen to provide another perspective.” In other words, whilst it can never represent an entire ‘cultural heritage for the nation’ or be representative of all southern African art historical narratives, the collection can provide an interpretation of some. As she states: “it gives a good slice of a certain aspect of material culture.” Similarly Rankin-Smith argues that even though WAM may not be able to provide an exact cultural heritage from an artistic perspective, the collection can provide aspects of this. She provides the example of ‘traditional’ dress, claiming that WAM has a representation
of ‘traditional’ material in this regard. By focusing on such categories as ‘traditional’ dress, she argues that “the collection offers a vehicle to gain a deeper understanding [for a contemporary southern African] of their groups, their ancestry, their roots, their history and their context” in this regard.

It is clear that any collection might include aspects of ‘cultural heritage’ when defined in the open-ended manner described by Leibhammer, Charlton, Rankin-Smith and Nel. Thus it is important that they as curators and Nel as a collector acknowledge that the ‘cultural heritage’ created through the construction of the collection, is exactly that: a creation. What is then clearly established is that what is constructed as ‘cultural heritage’ in these collections is based on the research and judgement of a small, elite group of curators and academics. But there are arguably other dimensions through which ‘traditional’ southern African collections are viewed as ‘cultural heritage’: one of these is largely dependent on how the objects in the collections are displayed.

c) Issues of Display

Nel acknowledges that the status of objects as ‘cultural heritage’ is difficult to convey when they are displayed in exhibitions. He further argues that southern African ‘heritage’ is not valued by current southern African society because there is a lack of access to these objects within public museums and there is, therefore, a need to establish ‘pride in cultural heritage’. He states: “there is a powerful state negligence in valuing the real and deep and perhaps historical cultural heritage here” and that there are problems associated with “who makes
those collections, who defines what ‘cultural heritage’ is, and how it is to be collected, selected and shared.” He then acknowledges his own attempts, and those of WAM and JAG, to address these issues through critical texts. Later he goes on to argue that, although the collections are reflections of southern African material culture, these public institutions do not display the objects to the public in a fully representative or accurate way. Thus, despite owning the material, because the museums lack the means with which to display such objects to the public, the scope of their collections cannot ever come into full view.

Certainly, no matter what a public or private institution, holds in its collections, it cannot be claimed to represent ‘national cultural heritage’ if it is not available to the southern African public. The primary vehicle through which one can view such material is through exhibitions and published articles on the collections. It is not what an institution holds that can be defined as ‘cultural heritage’ but what is displayed and how it is shown to the public that is in the end translated as ‘cultural heritage’. I do not think the collections themselves should be dismissed as they are crucial because they are significant repositories for material culture. It is how the present their material holdings, and how they represent cultural heritage that is problematic. Both WAM and JAG have certainly aimed to expose the importance of southern African ‘traditional’ art through significant exhibitions and texts over the years, Ten Years and Art and Ambiguity being only two examples out of many. WAM, JAG and Nel’s collections are, however, not consistently displayed to a greater public, and this limits their ability to contribute towards an understanding of what can be said to be ‘cultural heritage’.

Initially some of WAM’s collection of southern African art was on permanent display from 1979 to 2002 in the Gertrude Posel Gallery. Since the closing of the gallery space, the
permanent display is no longer available and WAM has had to rely on exposure through a few select exhibitions, texts, and by providing artworks on loan to alternative spaces and exhibitions. Hopefully, with the opening of the new museum space in 2012, the permanent display of ‘traditional’ southern African art will be reinstated and permanent exposure to the public will result. However at present, and largely due to limited funds to support WAM, the collection is inaccessible to the public.

The display of JAG’s collection remains intermittent. Depending on certain exhibitions, more of the collection can be seen at some times than at others. Currently only a space in the east wing of the gallery has been provided to display JAG’s African art collection. According to Leibhammer, this is because of limited funding for secure display units, therefore only a small selection of artworks from Africa is permanently available to the public. These objects are seldom rotated. However, space has previously been provided to southern African ‘traditional’ material at JAG. For example, *Art and Ambiguity* took up the whole of the bottom floor of the building. In Veliswa Gwintsa’s tenure at JAG, one of the upper floor galleries was dedicated to this southern African material. ‘Dungamanzi’ (2007) occupied one entire side of the basement and most of those works were from JAG’s collection. Nevertheless the current lack of focus on ‘traditional’ collections in display areas of JAG negates the idea that JAG’s collection of southern African art functions properly as a ‘cultural heritage’ collection. Leibhammer argued in her interview that the social significance attributed to the ‘traditional’ southern African section of JAG’s collection is that it provides a “creative heritage” in which South Africans can take pride. She argued that “JAG is committed to continue presenting the traditional material in new and innovative ways so that it may be respected and understood as an important part of South Africa’s heritage.” This is certainly not the case at the moment with the current display.
Finally, despite a few artworks on loan, both in South African institutions and abroad, Nel’s collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art affords no public access. However, the way in which he has constructed his collection around his own notions of southern African aesthetics has filtered into spaces that influence more public collections. It is Nel’s influence in this regard that feeds into public exhibitions, texts and other displays of southern African ‘traditional’ art. The same can be said for the subjective views of any other committee member, scholar, and curator involved in the construction of the WAM and JAG collections if they are not based on critical reflective research. Through influence of views such as Nel’s, which, by his own admission rests on intuition rather than research, what results is a problematic representation of southern African ‘traditional’ art as ‘national cultural heritage’.

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60 See Appendix 4: Catalogue-Karel Nel’s collection of southern African ‘traditional’ art.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

Initially this dissertation explored some of the literature and theories relating to the collecting of art not only on a private/individual level, but also in relation to public institutions, particularly within a southern African context. What was established is that no collection can be seen as separate from societal influence and therefore, what is collected for both private and public collections is based on how southern African ‘traditional’ art has been defined by academics, curators, collectors, important texts, and institutions - historically and at present. Problematic issues such as racism, resulting from the social practices of colonialism and Apartheid, have shaped how we have come to define ‘traditional’ southern African art. The outcome lies in prejudicial methods of categorising and displaying southern African material, largely based on the old rhetoric of ‘authenticity’. Despite new definitions of authenticity that are more inclusive, ‘traditional’ southern African art is still often viewed and judged according to these criteria, largely as a result of either insufficient consultation or insufficient circulation of existing literature by the academics and curators involved in its formation.

Through the study of the content of collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art held at WAM, JAG, and by the private collector Karel Nel, along with a critical discussion of accompanying interviews held with Charlton, Rankin-Smith, Leibhammer and Nel - this
study was able to establish that what is held within these collections is important - in so far as that, if these collections did not exist, there would be little if any evidence of southern African ‘traditional’ art. This is because these collectors, collections, curators and academics were working against colonial and later apartheid views that determined artistic value based on racial categories. In fact, without these collections we would have very little evidence of this material, as it would not have been recorded in a consolidated way - only as an aspect of ethnography and material culture, and to a far more limited extent.

However, the way in which those that are involved in the formation of each collection have come to understand, and therefore define, southern African material culture has resulted in what has been included and excluded from each collection, respectively. What is problematic with this is that, especially in the case of JAG, what is presented as southern African ‘traditional’ art is based on old notions of ‘authenticity’. Furthermore, as all three collections are claimed by those involved in their constructions and display, as exemplars of ‘national cultural heritage’, it could be argued that it is necessary to ensure that they are all inclusive of southern African material culture, using collection criteria that are not based on exclusive definitions.

Nel’s particular emphasis on his idea of ‘aesthetic’ southern African ‘traditional’ art has, however, manifested itself in both the public collections examined. In a reciprocal move, however, the collecting practices of the public institutions WAM and JAG have fed back into Nel’s collecting through an insistence on questioning of the boundaries of definitions of art. The high level of influence that Nel has, not only in the private collecting realm, but also in public institutions such as WAM and JAG shows that one should be cautious of assuming
these as comprehensive collections of ‘traditional’ southern African art and of how they have been interpreted as ‘cultural heritage’ for the nation.

If those few involved in constructing collections of southern African ‘traditional’ art are assumed to be ‘experts’ beyond reproach when it comes to decisions over what should be included as ‘traditional’, it may exclude alternative notions of this operational concept. What may have resulted, in JAG in particular, is a collection based purely on ‘aesthetics’, as opposed to those grounded in additional research, and in such circumstances notions of ‘cultural heritage’ could be significantly compromised. In other words, a particular understanding of aesthetic value, which may be different from another, may have resulted in JAG’s collection in the exclusion of material that measured by other criteria, could be considered significant examples of ‘cultural heritage’. This study has revealed that the focus on individual and subjective notions of aesthetics still exist within JAG’s collecting praxes. On the other hand, WAM has been more rigorous in grounding objects through extensive research, and thus the collection may be argued to be more legitimate with regards to reflecting parts of southern African ‘cultural heritage’ however cannot be claim to reflect ‘cultural heritage’ on a whole.

Some may argue that the goal of an art museum like that of a private collector is to provide examples of art rather than aim to create a reflection of aspects of southern African ‘cultural heritage’. This argument would perhaps be valid if the curators and owners of these collections, both public and private, did not claim them to be important because of their ability to reflect elements of ‘traditional’ southern African art for a southern African nation and thereby deem them important examples of ‘cultural heritage.’ The label of ‘cultural
heritage’ may merely be one way in which to claim state interest in a time of a developing country with little income to invest into museums and collections. Nevertheless, if this is what WAM, JAG and Nel claim as the overall motivation for their collections, the creators of these collections should take pains to interrogate their operational concepts more carefully. Furthermore, it is clear through this study that an exact reflection of ‘national cultural heritage’ cannot be achieved in a collection of art and to argue that it does would be in itself largely paralysing as there would be no way of giving any focus to the collections made and every object would potentially have equal value. Therefore the best these collections can provide is to acknowledge, and then exhibit, a part of ‘cultural heritage,’ exposing this art to a South African audience as it was previously hidden, owing to a long history of prejudice and oppression.

I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation that the collections held by WAM, JAG and Karel Nel are constructed in different ways. Furthermore, I assert that the public collections discussed in this dissertation are not comprehensive and I argue that the construction of these collections is in varying degrees influenced by the subjective aesthetic preferences of the private collectors whose collections have been acquired, or whose advice has been sought. Because the aesthetic is only one dimension of objects, I conclude that ‘cultural heritage’ cannot be viewed as the equivalent of art. Instead art should be viewed as a significant category of ‘cultural heritage’. Lastly it needs to be acknowledged that, ultimately, how institutions, particularly public ones, categorise and display their collections heavily determines how the art in those collections is interpreted as elements of ‘national cultural heritage’.
Bibliography


Appendices 1-5

Appendix 1a: Interview: Julia Charlton, 22 November 2010

Leigh Blanckenberg: With the questions I will ask you now. I would like you to know that I am only referring to what is deemed ‘traditional’ southern African art within WAM’s collection as I cannot cover the entire collection due to the restrictions of my dissertation.

LB: What is the meaning of collecting to you?

Julia Charlton: Collecting on a general scale?

LB: Yes, the idea of collecting?

JC: There is an issue about whether collecting can only occur around tangible objects or whether you can collect intangibles, like ideas perhaps. For me collecting [centres] around objects, and there is something about how the physical objects have, embedded [with]in them, certain ideas. They become [a] concrete form of philosophy, thought, language, or love. These intangibles I find compelling. So for me, collecting is about preserving those intangibles in concrete form. The actual act of collecting preserves objects, and [is] therefore attached [to] ideas for future use.

LB: How does WAM decide what items to collect?

Julia: We have different policy documents for different acquisition funds and other sources of collecting - as we accept donations. Both the purchases and the donations get processed through a committee. It is, essentially, a committee decision. However it is a consensus decision rather than one arrived at via a majority vote; the different committee member’s debate why they think a particular object is important for the collection. Depending on who is on that committee, these individuals have quite a lot of sway over what is collected. However it is always bounded by the written contract, for example, in the case of the Standard Bank African Art Collection. That written contract has changed over time. WITS has different reasons for collecting what it collects [when] compared to other institutions, but the formal process is a committee decision.

LB: And particularly for southern African art on a traditional level...

JC: …What are the parameters for that?

LB: Yes.

JC: That part of the collection is funded primarily, but not entirely, by the Standard Bank Annual Purchasing Grant - which is spent in accordance with a particular purchase agreement. There are therefore parameters, in terms of the grant, that determine what it gets

61 The current committee members are the following: Shahid Vawda, Hilton Judin, Jeremy Wafer, Anitra Nettleton, Barbara Freemantle, Federico Freschi, Zen Marie, Karel Nel, Walter Oltmann, Fiona Rankin-Smith, and Julia Charlton.
spent on. Over time, since 1978, those parameters have shifted quite dramatically. At the moment, they are still quite tightly controlled. The purchase grant does not talk about southern African material in particular. It includes all African material. It changes, and has changed because when the university started collecting, there wasn’t much of an African art collection, and now there is a very big African art collection. As a result, what we collect now is seen in relation to what we already have in the collection. If one is considering a particular object, it’s not seen only in terms of its own identity, but also how it extends, deepens, broadens, compares - or doesn’t, what else is in the collection. At one stage WITS was focusing on southern African material from the then Transvaal region, because it was working with the other institutions who were working in their [respective] regions. Durban Art Gallery was then collecting from KwaZulu Natal, thus we would then not focus on KwaZulu Natal in an attempt not to duplicate. In addition, all the public institutions had such scarce funds that it made sense to specialise in certain areas, rather than all [of us] collecting the same objects. At this stage, we are one of the few who do still have an active purchasing grant, and our collections are very representative across different regions. Now we collect across the country and don’t specialise on a regional basis.

LB: So you are just broadening the range of what you have now?

JC: Well, and representing the changes as time goes by. For example, we might have very nice Sotho sticks from 30 years ago, but the Sotho sticks that are being reproduced now are quite different, and so we would buy those because we would not be duplicating what we already have, and because we would like to portray a comparison between old and new.

LB: In terms of southern African art, because that is the focus of my dissertation, what kind of objects does WAM see as important and collectable? Why?

JC: A huge range. We see almost all of them as important and collectable, I think.

LB: And why? Why would that be?

JC: They are evidence of concretised thought in whatever form. That is something that we think is worth preserving, collecting and teaching from. The differences in what is made and why it’s made are things that we think are important in terms of collecting. This includes classical ideas of what forms are made but equally the kind of works that overturn those classical ideas. We don’t stay within the boundaries of what is defined as being canonical for one particular group, one particular language group, or one particular class of people, whatever it is. These things are made by people and therefore they are always open to personal interpretation, individual expression and change over time. We think that is important. The kind of classical canonical examples of what is made are usually externally imposed rather than internally imposed - and might be convenient from a collectors’ perspective or a categorising perspective - but aren’t necessarily an accurate reflection of what is made and why.

LB: How do you think WAM is affected by already-established collecting practices and norms?

JC: Local ones?

LB: It could be local, it could be international...

JC: Well what gets published, sold on auction, researched and exhibited in all contexts does obviously play a huge part. Also, what gets collected [plays a huge part]. We are quite
dependant on dealers out there who are collecting particular things and who are doing most of the leg work in terms of field work and research. Therefore, what they are framing as important filters down to what we ‘land up’ collecting.

LB: So that would be in response to a market, then?

JC: To some extent, but also in terms of research conducted by academics. What has been quite interesting to track over the years is how there have been academics who are at WITS, researching different aspects of African art, whose research impacts on what we buy. Then to track it even further to what they then publish, or what gets published in scholarly journals, [it] filters down into a wider audience and gets picked up by the dealers, and the dealers look for examples of those things that have been published, and then those then get brought back. So I think that it’s a kind of multi-way relationship, it’s not just a single relationship.

LB: It can never just be one factor.

JC: No, despite South Africa’s isolation no longer being what it used to be post 1994, we still are a long way away from the big international collections and the big auction houses. The opportunities to see what gets put on in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, for example, are still fairly restricted. We are reliant on catalogues, on the internet, and so the influence of European and North American models, I think, is relatively restricted.

LB: And do you think, in terms of European notions of collecting, when it comes to southern African art, how do you think WAM is influenced in any way by those?

JC: In the early 1980’s it became clear that it was too expensive to be buying from international sources and up until that stage a lot of the buying was of West and Central African material, but not from African dealers, from international markets through some of the big dealers or through auction. I think it was in 1984, there was a big purchase from New York Sotheby’s, for us. The objects were so expensive, the exchange rate was so unfavourable, import charges were so big and the transport costs were so big that the those objects ‘landed up’ being (I think it was two figures and a staff) really, prohibitively expensive. In direct reaction to that experience, there was a decision to focus more on South African material. It was more affordable. It was more easily available. It was more affordable because the big international markets were not looking at southern Africa at that stage. Since then, however, the importance of southern African material has shifted. It is now increasingly seen as highly collectable and the prices have gone up dramatically as a result. Still not the ‘funky’ material, beadwork, or the contemporary material - to a certain extent, but the kind of classical canonical examples of southern African art has increased in international value.

LB: Since that has happened and there has been an interest in southern African art, there are items that you just can’t collect anymore?

JC: Absolutely. For example, if Zulu headrests come up on Sotheby’s they are usually just prohibitively expensive.

LB: What would you wish to add to the southern African section of the WAM collection? And why?

JC: In a South African sense?

LB: Yes.
JC: We would love one of those beautifully engraved horns, Nguni horns. We have never been able to get one - as they are just too expensive. Really these objects are kind of the top objects of collecting.

LB: What do you mean by that?

JC: They are the highly sought after, collectable, very well recognised as being superb, glossy examples.

There are also those (are they Swazi... are they Nguni?) striated, big vessels. It would be fabulous to have one of those in the collection. To be able to ask those kinds of questions about what they are and about whom they were made for? Debunk some of the current theories.

LB: Because those are hugely contested aren’t they?

JC: They are hugely contested. Well, what’s hugely contested is what they are and why they were made. I don’t think it is contested that they are very beautiful and very desirable. So it would be lovely to have some of those.

LB: And there is some speculation that they were made for tourists?

JC: Anitra has tracked them right to the empire exhibitions, and they were produced for exactly those purposes - rather than used in the community. All of those issues surrounding ‘authenticity’ and who made them and for what purpose, make them interesting. It is also the criteria that people use for attributing value, essentially. If you’re a collector who’s not so interested in tracking the change or using the collection for education purposes, if you were a private collector, perhaps and wanted to collect for aesthetic or investment purposes, you wouldn’t be so keen on the idea of pursuing [the fact] that these things that were made for sale to the colonialists - because it goes against the grain of ‘authenticity’. However, that isn’t a reason to put Wits off.

LB: Do you think that WAM’S collection of southern African art has significance within a wider social context? If so, in what way?

JC: A wider social context being outside the world of art and collecting?

LB: Yes

JC: I do. I think for huge numbers of people in South Africa the awareness of our cultural production over time is really limited. A lot of people grow up and spend their lives completely unaware of the making of this material. There are quite a lot of interesting examples whereby things are still used in home environments, but the kind of extent of these are limited. The understanding of this material is also pretty limited. What a collection like this (WAM) offers are the opportunities for people to rediscover their roots - a kind of cliché but none the less, I think all sorts of issues around heritage, and pride, and identity, emerge in relation to this material. Knowledge is tied up in who you are, where you came from, what you made, and being able to be proud of all of that. It is important to have that as something to celebrate - not something to be ashamed of. I think artworks are one way of doing that.

LB: Would you say that Karel Nel has influenced the formation of WAM collection of southern African art?
JC: Yes. He has been involved in it for very many years and he is on our committee. He is informed about what is out there and how much it costs.

LB: Would you say that he has also influenced JAG collection of southern African art? If so, what way?

JC: Yes, he is on their committees too, in the same way. I worked at JAG for five years - I think and worked with him there. One of the first things I did was help install an exhibition on the Brenthurst collection, which he was instrumental in helping to place; and the *Art and Ambiguity* catalogue for that was highly influential. He is even influential outside of JAG.

LB: What is your understanding of the term ‘cultural heritage’?

JC: Well the definition of ‘culture’ is as wide open as you need it to be. I have even heard somebody calling parliament, the structure of parliament, a ‘culture’. ‘Material culture’, to use the anthropological term, is a kind of tighter definition I think. We are not really concerned here about parliament structures and how those reflect people’s cultures. So in terms of our work, ‘cultural heritage’ I think extends across all sorts of different forms. The form that we are concerned with is ‘visual cultural heritage’ as opposed to performing or musical or any other kind. And it is around aesthetic objects that people make and have made. I think there is a temporal definition, as well as a conceptual one.

LB: Who do you think has the authority to define what is seen as ‘national’ or ‘cultural’ heritage for this region?

JC: Which region?

LB: southern Africa.

JC: The people in it. I don’t think they are necessarily going to be the same definitions but I think southern Africans have the authority to define that.

LB: Would you agree that public collections such as WAM build a particular ‘cultural heritage’ for the nation.

JC: Build a particular one? Yes, inevitably, what is collected and what gets left out plays an influencing role. It’s one of the big issues around archives, the decisions about what doesn’t get collected and what gets left out. It is quite a responsibility that you have to make when you are deciding what to collect. At the same time, you can’t collect everything and it would not be useful to collect everything either. There is a discernment that has to take place - between what you don’t collect and what you do collect. There is this book out at the moment which I aim to look at. I have just read the reviews of the radio program [that] the book was based on. Produced by the BBC (BBC 4, I think), who challenged the head of the British Museum to choose a hundred objects that tell the history of the world. The book that has been produced is ‘A History of the World through a Hundred Objects’. The head of the British Museum chose each one and then talked on each episode about what he had chosen and why he had chosen it. Obviously, the British Museum has a huge collection stretching over continents and centuries. Also he must have been helped by his specialists in each and every department. The opportunity to tell narratives and tell history through objects is very clearly and powerfully illustrated in that particular project. Something struck me about his description of what he chose and why he chose it. He deliberately set out to choose things that did not belong to the victors. He argues that history is written by the victors. You know, “you win the war you get to write the history”. The history from the perspective of the losers
is not written because they are vanquished. What are left are the objects that they made. He was choosing objects from across time and across cultures; and that told the unfamiliar narratives.

LB: A new history, in a sense?

JC: Well, not new. It still happened - but it is the ‘less expected’ stories. He could have done it another way. He could have chosen any hundred objects, but the things that he chose were quite deliberately chosen to provide another perspective. I think collections offer that. One example that I can think of is a little gold llama which is from one of the vanquished peoples of South Americas. Apart from describing the object, what it looked like and what role it played in that particular community, he also then spins off into talking about llamas as less efficient animals of war than horses, which were what the opposing army was using, and the role [that] the llama played, or didn’t play in the battle. I have never thought about llamas as battle animals at all.

LB: That is interesting though, because that is one museum director’s opinion. So, because of his position - so hugely influential - it has been published a book, and that book is there forever as an idea of what the world’s ‘cultural heritage’ could be in a hundred objects. That’s not the world deciding - that’s one person deciding.

JC: I don’t think it is one person - it’s his institution’s decision.

LB: Yes, well, one institution then. You get the same thing here, then, with public institutions.

JC: Because in a sense, public institutions are the ones writing the narratives.

LB: Yes, so even though technically you would like South Africa to choose what its ‘cultural heritage’ should be in a visual sense…

JC: …Well, I think they do.

LB: To what extent though?

JC: Well, I don’t mean that they choose it to get deposited into national museums; although you do get bequests and donations of what people see as important. But people choose their own stuff and what they choose to collect and what they choose not to collect or discard and what they value or don’t value in their personal lives. The fact is that that choice doesn’t get translated into a public institution as such. Why do think popular culture is so powerful?

LB: Would you say that WAM and JAG adequately reflect southern African material culture?

JC: No, I really think that you need to define your terms more specifically, because I think southern African material culture is probably just as much about drag racing and bling at Sandton City. It is absolutely much wider than what appears in the public galleries. I think that it gives a good ‘slice’ of a certain aspect of material culture. I mean, one of the things that is so depressing about the British Museum project is that the things [which] he chose to represent the contemporary world. In fact so depressing that I can’t really remember them. I think one of them was a cellphone and one of them was a credit card. Something kind of telling about where we are now, but certainly not handcrafted or beautiful or aesthetic. Well, I suppose a Blackberry® is aesthetic to people who like those sorts of things and I suppose it is an artwork to those people who think those things are artworks, but when you compare the gold llama with the cellphone technology… He then shifted from his intention to use objects
that tell the history of the vanquished, because I think cellphones and credit cards are very much about the victors.

LB: What do think has been included and excluded from the WAM and why? If you look particularly at southern African art.

JC: What has been excluded is traditional South African art from white people. There are collections in cultural museums in Pretoria and Stellenbosch and places like that collect for example, Boer prisoner of war objects that were made. Lovingly handcrafted inlaid bible covers and lace, and those sorts of crafts or artworks which sort of, depending on your definitions, are also made by southern African people. Hand-made, aesthetic objects, so in a broader definition could be included in this collection.

LB: Why do you think they have been excluded here?

JC: One reason is budgetary, because the Standard Bank purchasing grant specifically excludes them. What has also been excluded is traditional art made by South African people of Asian descent or Indian descent. It’s really only black African people. That was a very specific intention from the 1978 document, which was focused around a sense of urbanisation at the time and industrialisation. There was a real sense of a disappearing way of life. As people became urbanised and industrialised they were moving away from their traditional craft and there was a sense this was going to disappear forever. They called it ‘salvation anthropology’: if you don’t archive this stuff it’s going to disappear.

LB: So there was a fear that it was going to vanish?

JC: Yes. Of course, the thinking has shifted since then, but there are other institutions which do collect the ‘Afrikaner cultural material’. So, maybe it’s around not duplicating that.

LB: Since 1978, have there been discussions about extending the limitations of the grant?

JC: Yes.

LB: So those things discussed can be included?

JC: No, not specifically, so those can be included - but quite a few changes have been made. The 2004 document is quite substantially different from the [19]78 document. There have been various attempts to broaden the scope of what is collected, but it is mainly around a more representative contemporary focus. [Of] which, five percent of the collections’ grant can be spent on contemporary work. Even that, however, is restricted to black contemporary South African artists, not white South African artists - and under very specific conditions.

LB: And have Standard Bank given you reasons for this?

JC: Yes. They have a corporate art collection which they spend money on and see no reason to duplicate the same kinds of artists that would be collected in the corporate art collection within the Standard Bank African Art Collection.

LB: The corporate art collection - is it more contemporary then?

JC: They don’t collect ‘traditional’ African art at all. They only collect historical and southern African art.

LB: They leave that up to the WAM then?
JC: Yes. Even the kind of extension into the five percent of contemporary work has to be work which is arguably related to, or connected in some way to, the traditional art practice.

LB: So a continuation of the traditional?

JC: Yes. For example the linocuts from Rorkesdrift were purchased with that grant because they were seen to be a kind of connection to pokerwork and wood relief carving, although the linocut process is in fact a contemporary art practice. Or something like the Colbert Mashile water colours - that deal with issues around initiation as a cultural historical practice even if it is in a contemporary art form. There are also other areas that were excluded. We specifically don’t collect musical instruments. There are exceptions; we have a very large drum collection. But musical instruments as a category are something that we don’t specifically set out to collect. That’s because there are other specialist museums that collect musical instruments.

LB: Karel, in our recent interview mentioned that as a focus WAM has only recently looked at weaponry.

JC: We don’t look at weaponry. Specifically, weaponry is another area that is excluded, unless, they are especially beautiful, embellished, ornate objects that are actually artworks.

LB: So why do you choose not to focus on weaponry?

JC: We do have weapons. We do have staffs, but the ones that we have are really in some way also ceremonial or symbolic power objects - as opposed to things [with] which you are going to kill somebody else. We wouldn’t actually set out to collect an object that is an executioner’s club, for example. There are people who collect weapons, who have a particular interest in actual weapons. That collecting is for different reasons than seeing it as art. That is the critical difference, that WAM is an art collection. In some cases weapons can be art, but in other cases they are not art [and are] things which we are not interested in. Also things which are, we try to follow the ICOM rules, which define what you are allowed to collect. So, things which are proscribed in other countries, and should not be sold. There are specific categories of stuff, such as archaeological objects that should not be sold outside their country of origin. They are ‘heritage’ objects that should stay there. So we don’t buy things like grave markers for example. We don’t buy Nok terracotta’s. There are ethical reasons, and we try and stay within those parameters. South Africa, I don’t think, is an official signatory to this agreement at this stage, but from ethical perspectives we don’t collect this material. Whereas, a lot of private collectors do. They don’t have the same obligations as public collections do, perhaps.

LB: Obligations to whom?

JC: To the nation. It is really important that public institutions do the right thing. I think it is important that individuals do the right thing too, but they are not accountable, I suppose, in the same way. So also to the extent that we can, we are careful about provenance. Where do things come from? Every now and again we get offered things which would be very nice to have but the papers involved are not available, the seller can’t provide papers to show that the object was acquired legally and with all the necessary customs claims and clearances or whatever, then we don’t buy them - however much we really want them.

LB: We have discussed this briefly before, how a lot of the stuff that is collected is dependent on a particular focus that an academic has been working on. So some areas must be better represented than others?
JC: Definitely. Also the fact that it is a teaching collection influences what gets purchased. So, sometimes something comes in which people are pretty convinced is a contemporary thing, even if the dealer is pretending that it is a genuine original ‘from the King of Zululand’, or whatever. If the committee thinks it is interesting enough and aesthetic enough and of sufficient quality to warrant buying, we would still buy it - even if it was what others might call a ‘fake’. Whereas a classical collector person would not do that. They might get duped, but they wouldn’t knowingly buy something they knew to be not ‘authentic’, whatever that means.

LB: What is seen as ‘authentic’ southern African art and why?

JC: It sort of depends on who’s asking, doesn’t it?

LB: It does, but you can give your own opinion.

JC: [Well], I suppose it has to be made by South Africans. I think it is easier, maybe to answer with what I don’t think makes it inauthentic. I don’t think that making it for sale renders it inauthentic. One of the criteria around ‘inauthenticity’ is sometimes that it should be made for use within the community by a community member. However, I think that something that is made by somebody outside the community for use within that community can also be authentic. I think something [that] is made by a person within a community for sale can also be authentic. I think what is made now, in a kind of perceived tradition or mode of making that been inherited over time, can be authentic. I think something that is made using different techniques but in the same kind of form, or using different materials for the same purpose, I think all of those things don’t exclude something from being authentic. So, I don’t think it has to be a particular material, or a particular date, or a particular person, or a particular function.

LB: So even in some cases, where one would definitely see an item as ‘fake’ - if it’s beautifully made, in a sense, then you see it as authentic?

JC: Yes, what you wouldn’t do is want to pay the price of an old item when you know very well that it wasn’t [one]. We have bought and continue to buy things, for example, from craft centres that are unashamedly made now and are not pretending to be ‘antique’.

LB: How does the price of an item affect your collecting choices?

JC: Well, if we haven’t got the money we can’t buy it. The most obvious effect. If it is something that is worth the price and we have the budget, we will buy it. It isn’t really a deciding factor. We try not to pay prices that are too ‘way out of whack’. If somebody on the committee knows that these same items are available for half the price then we would try and get the dealer to reduce their price or buy them from the other source. To try and be responsible about spending the money. If it’s something that is ‘worth it’ and expensive, we will still buy it. If it’s something that is cheap and isn’t ‘worth it’, then we won’t buy it. So it is an effect in terms of limited funds, and we try to be responsible.

LB: So then, the aesthetic of an item on your collecting choices?

JC: Plays a huge role. Except that aesthetics are so different, depending on who is looking and different members of the committee have very different ideas of what is pleasing. Quite a lot of what we choose has an ‘anti-aesthetic’ going [on]. Especially contemporary artworks are made in ‘deliberately ugly’ ways. With choosing an object for purchase the committee tries to get a consensus. People will try and persuade each other. I don’t think we have had a
situation where someone says “over my dead body will we add that to the collection.” If the argument for buying is very persuasive, or there is a reason for buying, no one is unreasonable. I think there is recognition, first of all, that there are lots of aesthetics at play, and there are disadvantages to that. I think that an individual that is assembling a collection will end up with a very ‘different-looking’ collection from that assembled by a committee.

LB: …Because they have a particular idea of how and what they would like to collect and as a result a particular narrative that they would like to portray. When you have a group of people you end up with multiple narratives.

JC: …Or maybe different purposes that they see the collection fulfilling. Again, with all the kicking and screaming that comes with the legal agreements that come with a sponsor, and the attempts to change that, I think it has ‘landed up’ being one of the strengths of this collection - that it is bound by that agreement. It has its own identity. It is not as tightly defined as an individual collector would have [it], but it has none the less a specific area of focus.

LB: What effect do you think the heritage would have on your collecting choices?

JC: Heritage of the object? What do you mean?

LB: More like the significance of the object on a historical level.

JC: Huge. I think it plays a really big role. So for example, something that may be unremarkable to look at but is highly prized as particularly valuable in the community, we would collect.

LB: Do you have an example of that?

JC: Things like hut tax tokens. We have a little collection of hut tax tokens, which have such political symbolism and historical symbolism, but which in themselves are perhaps not so visually remarkable. Or some of the initiation objects. They are not particularly fabulous looking things but they are so laden with significance and have such important symbolic value and cultural value. That is why you need so many informed people to tell you about these things.

LB: So, often it is also about documentary?

JC: Often in this field that’s what is very lacking. Often, particularly in the past, the collectors did not think it was important to collect that kind of information - about who made it, where and why it was obtained, and ‘all that’. So it is something that comes into the collection without that entire provenance. Then, its value as a research tool is much more limited. Its value as an aesthetic object is still absolutely there, but without that background knowledge about what it is and why it is and who made it etc., it is to some extent compromised. Of course, the issue around authorship and who made it and the identity of the artist is, to a large extent, historically a western position and does not necessarily have the same value in a local context. To some degree, for example, a local carver would be well known to everybody, but the individual identity of the maker was not as important as the identity of the chief for whom it was made, or the function of the mask, or whatever [the case may be]. So it’s complicated/nuanced.

LB: So, for the collecting choices with WAM, when you look at the documentation of an item, it does not necessarily need to be about who the artist was, it’s more about its history as an object, or …?
JC: You know, the orientation now is that if you do know who the artist is, then it adds enormous value - but I suspect that that might be kind of a contemporary criteria.

LB: And in a sense a western influence then?

JC: Yes. When we find something that has a signature or an item that can be identified as belonging to a particular specialist carver through seeing the things in a book or whatever [the case may be], that does add significantly to an appreciation [of] what the thing is. In as much as we try to apply ideas, we nonetheless remain who we are. We are products of our own society and time, and so we are always influenced by those.

LB: How would you define the value of an artwork? Or what makes an object valuable? When you are looking at ‘traditional southern African art’.

JC: I think there are so many different forms of value. Sometimes this is monetary value, and that has a lot to do with quite defined criteria of rarity; and provenance; and named makers; and whether the person is dead or not; all of those kinds of factors. But I do think that there are other criteria that are also really important. Those have to do with things like aesthetic value - which is not necessarily related to provenance, or symbolic value. I think symbolic value is huge. Educative value. Something which is valuable as an object through which a philosophy can be taught. I mean, any kind of value, narrative value, contemplative value, religious value; there are all different forms of value. We have lots of all of those. They are not all the same object either.

LB: So an object may show one of those values more than another, but is still seen as just as significant?

JC: Well, I suppose for different purposes. For insurance purposes the high financial value would be the most valuable. The most useful to a history of art lecturer in terms of the course he/she is teaching might not be the most financially valuable one.
Appendix 1b: Interview: Fiona Rankin-Smith, 23 November 2010

Leigh Blanckenberg: With the questions I will ask you now, I would like you to know that I am only referring to what is deemed ‘traditional’ southern African art within WAM’s collection as I cannot cover the entire collection due to the restrictions of my thesis.

LB: What is the meaning of collecting to you?

Fiona Rankin-Smith: As an individual or as a professional working in a museum?

LB: Both.

FR-S: Well that’s quite a broad question. I think collecting is about gaining an understanding of various conventions, for instance the ability to differentiate ‘authentic’, ‘classic’, ‘important’ objects from those that are not authentic - ones that are less well-made or exquisite. When I started working at the Wits Art Galleries in 1984, there were very few examples of beadwork and other items from southern Africa in the collections. However, after 27 years of being involved in the growth of the collection, I think I can say that I am significantly more knowledgeable now. For example, my experience ensures that I am able to identify Zulu beadwork from a particular area of KwaZulu-Natal - as styles within many of the language groups shift in colour and patterns from one region to the other, even though the language may be the same. The more you work with collections and the more you look at varieties within a collection, the more sophisticated you become in identifying similarities and differences, typical and unusual elements, etc.

People who do collect things, generally collect what they are interested in. I am interested in people who collect, whether they collect dried flowers, or pictures of cats or whatever. I suppose, for me, it’s about having a sense of objects and liking visual objects in the world. It shows a sensitivity.

LB: How does WAM decide what items to collect?

FR-S: There is a management committee that is responsible for how the collections are run and when we are re-opened, they will also be consulted on which exhibitions are approved for the annual programmes. Items are put forward to the committee, who meet and debate on their merits for the collections. When an object is presented for purchase, it is looked at in the context of other things in the collections. If it is a piece from the African art collection - it generally tends to be something that is within the parameters of what we collect. We tend to collect southern, central, west African art that relates to classical pieces, but not from all the existing communities. There are some groups that we tend to collect and those are related to the teaching courses that Anitra does. More recently, in the last 8 years or so, we have been dealing with African dealers, who have been collecting material from East African regions, so we have been integrating East African groups into the collection. In the last few years, we have had to load new communities into our database. We tend to collect within existing groups that we have collected and then we look to find interesting comparative pieces, be they contemporary items that show how modernity relates to the older more traditional versions; thus filling gaps. We like to look at the collection in terms of something that is always changing. Even though they might not be old, even used in a way, they are still authentic. Sometimes we buy copies by mistake.
LB: Is it never intentional?

FR-S: No, I mean, we have bought ready made things but that is about making a point. For example there are some ready-made dolls dressed in the clothes of a particular group that make a comment about modernity in relation to the more abstracted ‘child figures’ that are traditionally made. Sometimes people present us with material that they claim to be old and authentic, and it’s so hard to tell.

LB: So, in terms of ‘traditional’ southern African art. What objects does WAM see as important and collectable, and why?

FR-S: The main language groups from southern Africa we tend to collect include Ndebele, North and South Sotho, Pedi, Tsonga, Zulu, Hlubi, Xhosa, Venda, Tonga, Makonde. In the early 1980’s we had very little southern African beadwork, made up of mainly bodily adornments. The early African art collection consisted of West African and central African material and included a number of wood carvings, including masks and figures. During the 1980s, which was also the period of the cultural boycott, the value of [the] rand started to drop because of the political climate. At the same time, foreign collectors began showing interest in the material culture of southern Africa and people started paying unusually large sums of money for local material. The South African Museums community began to focus on collecting local material for this reason and also because the prices that were being paid for items from other African communities in America and Europe were in dollars and pounds, which were too strong for the rand. For example, we started to collect Ndebele material and mainly material related to communities close to the Gauteng area or the Transvaal; as it was. In 1985, we acquired a significant amount of Ndebele beadwork. Then in 1989, Rayda Becker joined Wits Art Galleries. She was doing her PhD on Tsonga woodcarving. Through her informants, she got to know some Tsonga speakers, which led to important, seminal research into Tsonga material culture. The Tsonga beadwork collection grew substantially from the mid to late 80’s. The same could be said for most of the material culture in the collections from the southern African regions. In 1988 I had to do a research paper for a course I was doing at Unisa and I researched the interest of the local art market in collecting wood carvings from self-taught sculptors in rural areas, particularly in the Limpopo area. People were just clamouring for objects. Ricky Burnett had curated a ground-breaking exhibition called Tributaries, which led to a sudden slew of shops that opened, such as ‘African Magic’ in Yeoville, selling carvings from the Northern Province. ADA magazine, which was a survey of arts performance music and architecture had many features about all this art. I remember the first time I ever saw Jackson Hlungwane’s fish from the Altar of God (that we now own). It was one of the first times that I had seen anything like that. I was bowled over by it. It looked like something from Papua New Guinea. It was so extraordinary and poetic. Everyone was scrambling to buy all these sculptures and there was a new, huge creative world that had been discovered. I think apartheid did a pretty good job of keeping these black artists out of the mainstream. Steven Sack curated The Neglected Tradition, an exhibition that showed a number of artists who had formerly been overlooked in the South African art scene, and never really been brought into the museum fold. In 1984, we purchased a group of objects from Sotheby’s in London. A Waka San Figure from Cote D’Ivoire, two carved wooden Zulu sticks, and a pair of 19th Century Tsonga figures. Those were the last items we were able to purchase from London, as after that, prices became
completely prohibitive due to the weakened rand. That began the ‘scramble for Africa’ by local dealers, mainly.

LB: How do you think WAM is affected by already established collecting practices and norms?

FR-S: I think there are certain conventions that apply in collecting. The way in which you document your collection, or house your collection, the way in which you disseminate information about your collection. Working with collections is like working in a library. We have cataloguing systems that are workable and can be used as a reference; that you can use to cross-refer to things. In the 1980s, we used a card system and attached black and white contact prints of each item to the card and also gave a physical description of the piece. Other sorts of information were included, such as administrative information, as well as empirical information, and anything related to the field research associated with a single item. This system was replaced with a data-based electronic form of capturing, which was stored on the university’s mainframe system. More recently, we have worked with the computer centre at Wits and have developed a web-based electronic database which embeds a digital image in each catalogue entry, so the works are easily identified by their accession number, as well as an image and an individual physical description.

LB: What do you wish to add to the WAM collection? Why?

Fiona: I would prefer the committee to collect single rare and important items that augment the treasures of the collections at present, rather than collecting a number of less expensive pieces that repeat many similar examples already in the collections. When we are researching a particular forthcoming exhibition, we sometimes purchase specific items for the collection that would be used in those exhibitions.

LB: And in terms of southern African traditional art, is there anything that needs to be added?

FR-S: No. I really wish we had more money for contemporary art. I would like to get [a] much more significant budget for interesting emerging contemporary art. It’s just a case of, once we are up and running, there will be a new interest in us and hopefully we will be able to secure a fund and donations from [more] places.

LB: When something is donated to the gallery. Is it also put in front of the committee and then included like those that are purchased?

FR-S: Yes. I mean it’s difficult because often it comes with tricky subtexts, [such as] the Hurwitz donation that we have just received (Professor Hurwitz was an important WITS academic). The donation was interesting, it had a lot of documentation, but quite a lot of it we would never buy. It is difficult to single out only the relevant items from large donations, but sometimes we have to and we do. Also, because we are not in the position to buy anything we want, and when donations do come our way, we generally do try and accept them if they are relevant to the collections. Sometimes there is stuff that is absolutely outside of our area, that we can refuse more easily.

LB: Do you think that WAM’s collection of southern African art has a particular significance within a wider social context? If so, how or in what way?

FR-S: I think our collection is hugely significant and I think anybody in the world can benefit from it. I think that that’s what our new aim should be. One of our primary aims for our new gallery is to present the importance of the collection and the diversity and the richness and the
scope of it, not only to us and as heritage to our people, but as an important reservoir of material and knowledge for everybody - for the world. The more we extend what we have in different ways, I think the centre for African art’ position is a really good way to expose - through research - what we have to a global audience. We must not just have this great building and hope that somebody comes off the street and looks. We should be educating people.

LB: To what extent do you think that the canon of established private collections and collecting practices and trends has effected what WAM has and does collect?

FR-S: Probably to have somebody like Karel on the committee is good, because he is so passionate about art and he is familiar with many collections around the world. However, to a certain extent, I suppose there is a bit of a conflict then, because he is collecting for himself and he is on our committee. If you are working with a collection that is not a private collection like ours, I think you should be mindful about what the focus of your collection is and what the parameters of the collection are. We have grown this collection over more than 30 years and we have a strong sense of where we want it to grow and what we want to focus on.

LB: Would you say Karel Nel has influenced the formation of WAM’s collection of southern African art?

F-RS: I think he is well informed about what is available for purchase, as many of the collectors are known to him. He advises both the JAG collection and our collection, and I would like to think he has the best interests of both collections at heart. However, he also has his own interests to consider, which I have already alluded to. I think he is not singularly responsible for the collection though.

LB: Do you remember how long he has been on the committee?

FR-S: Ever since I have been here. He is always on the committee when he is here.

LB: What is your understanding of the term ‘cultural heritage’?

FR-S: It’s about documenting and collecting information and disseminating southern African culture and the Heritage of southern African speaking peoples. It doesn’t only have to be about collecting - it can also be in other forms of culture. Whether its dance or music or poetry. So I suppose, it’s a way in which culture is recorded and presented, both to a South African public and beyond.

LB: Who do you think has the authority define what is ‘cultural heritage’ for the southern African nation?

FR-S: Well I don’t think it should be restricted to anybody. I think everybody should be allowed to express. I don’t think it can be restricted to only ministers or school teachers, everybody has a right [to define it].

LB: Would you agree that public collections such as WAM and other public institutions like it build a particular ‘cultural heritage’ for the South African nation?

FR-S: Yes. I think that we have a really interesting depth of ‘material culture’ for..., dress. Different forms of dress, across southern Africa. The objects in our collections that deal with traditional dress and other forms of daily life and domestic life and objects associated with ritual and ceremony all add to a greater understanding of cultural heritage. So, for young
people who have grown up in a contemporary South Africa, preserving heritage through collections offers a vehicle to gain a deeper understanding of their groups, their ancestry, their roots, their history and their context.

LB: So it contributes?

FR-S: Yes, hugely.

LB: What do think has been included and excluded for WAM’s southern African art collection and why?

FR-S: Well I think that, for instance, we don’t collect traditional Indian stuff, but we are an African collection and we don’t teach Indian studies. However, Indians are a huge part of southern African culture. I grew up in Durban and the Indian population is vast in Durban. We do not collect that, I mean, I don’t think we need to, but it is something we have chosen to exclude. We haven’t been all-inclusive. There is a huge Chinese population now, but we don’t collect that either - but I don’t see it as a weakness, I see it as a side of our focus. I think within the collecting that we have done, I am sure there are things that we don’t know about, that we haven’t got. For instance those hats that we recently acquired through the soccer exhibition.

LB: Which ones?

FR-S: Those Zulu beaded women’s hats from the Ndwedwe and Valley of a Thousand Hills area in KwaZulu Natal. I thought those had been made specifically for the soccer world cup and in fact I was looking through a book the other day, trying to find something on Zulu beadwork, and I found these hats. It seems that they have been made for a while, and I have never seen them before. Anitra showed them to us last year when she went to a conference in Durban. They are made by Zulu woman and they are an extension of the female Zulu hat. They are completely outrageous. We had never seen them. So, I think when we come across things that we don’t know and we think are nice, or important, or valuable for the collection we then try and acquire them. I suppose there is a whole ton of stuff that we don’t know about and I imagine that’s an area we need to develop in and what we have to do is, once we have researchers, we send them out or we go out with them on field trips to look for things that we have skipped over.

LB: So, you think there should be more field research when it comes to this collection?

FR-S: Yes, our work experience has been seriously curtailed over the last few years. We’ve been completely hamstrung by this process. There will be things to explore and things to develop and new research to engage in. I certainly think that there is a whole lot of material that we haven’t even been able to engage with both locally and further afield.

LB: Due to collecting guidelines provided by Standard Bank, the Wits Art Museum’s collection of southern African art has been restricted to certain definitions of African art. What have these restrictions meant to your understanding of the collection as a collection of African Art?

FR-S: Well, it’s a collection with a particularly specific caveat. It’s about the regions that we have selected to collect, which are mainly southern, west and central. Every time we have tried to include more contemporary African art or tried to extend the collection into southern African contemporary art, there is a very strong sense that it will lessen the focus of the collection, as the Standard Bank’s vision of it being African art. The Standard Bank allows us
to use 5% of their annual grant to collect contemporary work by black South African artists. For the future though, I think that there is nothing stopping us from getting another donor that only deals with contemporary work by artists that produced work in the last 3 years - if we want. I think it would be better for the collection as a whole if we had the ability to buy more contemporary work, but I think we wouldn’t go beyond our focus, which would include contemporary southern African and African art. I don’t think we will buy international contemporary art. I don’t think we need to. There are enough places out there where these kinds of collections are available to be seen.

LB: What is seen as ‘authentic’, ‘traditional’ southern African art, and why?

FR-S: I think it’s easier to not get stuck by the fake market, because there isn’t a huge woodwork convention. I think that the whole ‘fake thing’ is much murkier when you are looking outside southern Africa. There isn’t such a market for copying beadwork, for example. I think that some of the beadwork you buy on the side of the road in Durban is made for sale. It is Zulu, for example the necklaces you buy, they are made for sale and they are not as beautiful as the old pieces are. People make them all the time, and they make them to sell, and they are authentic because they are made by Zulus, but they are not collectable or authentic. They are not classic pieces that are documented in books by people like Barbara Tyrell, and they are not in the old collections - so one wouldn’t tend to buy them as older, collectible items.

LB: What effect does the price of an item have on WAM’s collecting choices?

FR-S: Those kinds of things would be specific to particular items. If it was a beautiful piece that was absolutely exquisite, and say, from the Kim Sacks gallery. It would be hugely overpriced and it would be better to get the same piece before it gets to her. She often chooses really well, and because she knows she has a good piece, then marks it up substantially. Some people totally inflate their prices, and often we don’t purchase them as they are too inflated. I think that we’re constantly on our toes about paying too much. We don’t go out and do the research. We don’t go out and buy the material ourselves. I think people do the field work, and I suppose, are entitled to charge - having found the item probably from a number of less significant examples. Sometimes prices go through the roof. We are often at the whim of collectors in many ways because we are not out there doing the collecting, and we haven’t got runners doing the collecting. So very often, when the guys come here, Karel will say, we should offer them less than half of what they are asking.

LB: What effect does the aesthetic of the item have on WAM’s collecting choices?

FR-S: [It has an effect] in terms of classic pieces. The best, the finest, sensitively carved, beautiful elements of a piece are the most significant criteria - but often if we have older, more classical pieces already - then we look for variations. I suppose we don’t always want to replicate. If something has been offered to us as a classic piece and it’s clearly been copied, you don’t even want that near your collection. It’s like vermin. That’s where your sophistication around a conventional type of thing is good to know. To be able to identify a good Zulu headrest from a copy is very important. I went to an auction in Durban, called ‘Zulu Treasures’ (Amagugu), showcasing the best of Zulu carving. Soon after that, the African Art Centre had these sales. All the museums would rush there, and it was a complete bun fight. I went to one of them. They would let you in for an hour to view the objects. Then you would leave and come back to quickly buy what you wanted. Looking under pressure and everybody trying to buy the same things. I bought one that I thought was a fantastic piece. I brought it back to the gallery and it had been made for sale. It was made to look like a
19th century piece, and I, of all people, got duped. I was furious! I was furious with the African Art Centre for selling it as old when they knew it wasn’t.

LB: But was it still a beautiful piece?

FR-S: Yes! It was but it was a fake, a copy. I was furious and I hate it. I don’t want to put it out and I wanted to send it back. I felt like a fraud that I, of all people, was cheated.

LB: What effect do the heritage and the documentation of an item have on your collecting choices?

FR-S: As much as possible we would urge our people who go into the rural areas and get as much information as possible. Which village it came from, and who was the maker, when it was made or how it was used. Any photographic documentation. These would all enhance its overall value - because it’s got more information. If [the information is] not there and it’s a beautiful piece that we think is authentic, but we don’t know, we tend to buy anyway. The more we tend to know, the easier [it is] to sign the check.

LB: How would you define the value of an artwork?

FR-S: I think what I have just said. How the information is associated with it. How as an object it relates to the conventional canon. The quality of it, damage, broken, scuffed, moth eaten, detracts from a fine example. So the quality, the look, the proportion, the scale. We were once given a 19th century headrest, but it was too big. It was beautiful. It looked right, but we questioned that. It depends how it is in relation to its peers; [in relation to] its others in its group. Overall quality of it, associated documentation and provenance. Often provenance pieces in Sotheby’s, in England, often pedigree is important.
Appendix 2: Interview: Nessa Leibhammer, January 2011

LB: With the questions I will ask you now, I would like you to know that I am only referring to what is deemed ‘traditional’ southern African art, within JAG’s collection, as I cannot cover the entire collection due to the restrictions of my thesis.

LB: What is your influence on the collecting of southern African art for JAG in the past and the present?

NL: I look at what is available and bring it into the gallery for the acquisitions meetings, where it is presented to a committee. Some are selected and some are rejected, depending on collecting criteria. Before I present at the acquisitions meeting, I go through the collection to see whether we have anything that is similar. I photograph everything. Then I present this information to the committee so that they know what’s there and we don’t duplicate as we don’t collect multiples of things. Generally Karel Nel and I are the people who make the decisions, because nobody else on the committee really feels that they have enough specialised knowledge about the traditional collections. Both Karel and I have studied and worked with the objects for many years. The committee will generally go with our decisions.

LB: What is the meaning of collecting to you?

NL: It depends what kind of collection you are collecting for. If I was collecting at Museum Africa, I would approach the collecting differently - as the rationale behind the collection would be different. Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) is an art gallery. So what we collect has to hold its own within the paradigms of a fine art institution. So, for me, collecting is to preserve the objects with the highest aesthetic value that we can find of the genre. Obviously, as I said, we don’t collect multiples. It is to preserve the objects for future generations, for the public and for people who have specialised interests, such as scholars, and people who want to do research. The objects must have value. What that value is, is a complex question. It has been said that these ‘traditional’ things are not art, but are craft. Given western aesthetic criteria, they do not fit seamlessly into the art gallery context. However, these criteria are not stable and, for me, the ‘traditional’ objects fit in because they have significant meaning. The question is then raised as to what is significant meaning? Significant meaning could be spiritual, political, cultural or historical. So, I would collect objects that have aesthetic value and significant meaning.

LB: How does JAG decide what items to collect? What collecting policies do you have when it comes to southern African art?

NL: There is a budget. Our collecting budget comes not from the City Council, but from a fund - the Anglo-American Johannesburg Centenary Fund. There is an allocated amount each year. We have to buy within those budgetary constraints, and this amount includes the ‘traditional’ and everything else. During Clive Kellner’s time as head of the JAG, we prioritised objects with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. However, there are significant traditions that don’t feature anthropomorphic or zoomorphic elements, and so these are also collected. We collect the objects with fine aesthetic qualities, good provenance and significant meaning.

LB: Why the focus? The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic?
NL: These are easier to integrate into the art gallery aesthetic, which is underpinned by Eurocentric perceptions. At the time we were concerned about how the material held its own in the institution. Some years ago I was part of the Wits curatorial team for the exhibition of the collection of William Burton. We went through what he paid for the collected items and there [were] these little ‘sausage-like’ things wrapped up in cloth, with unidentified substances inside, as well as the very fine ‘Kabilia’ figure of a mother and child. Burton paid more for the little sausage things than the ‘Kabilia’, which is valued much more highly in western aesthetic circles. Clearly we valued these objects differently to the people who made and used them. So it would depend on the committees’ judgement. For instance, we at the gallery wouldn’t collect the ‘little sausage things’ even though, in their original contexts, they were highly valued. So ours is a western-determined aesthetic decision, because this is an art gallery. Your determining criteria are going to be aesthetic first, and significance second. If we were an ethnographic museum, then the aesthetics would not be as important - as the cultural significance would be prioritised.

LB: What kind of southern African objects does JAG see as important and collectable now and why?

NL: The Brenthurst Collections, which is on long-term loan to JAG, is largely made up of late 19th and early 20th century material. The Horstmann collection also has many fine early pieces, as does the Jaques Collection of headrests. These form a core, and we have built up this side of the collection with further acquisitions. However it is not exclusive. We collect 20th century and very contemporary as well. Our first choice would be 19th century, but we also purchase contemporary objects that fit the criteria of what we are looking for. The older material is more difficult to find and, obviously, more expensive.

LB: However, you are limited by a budget?

NL: The budget definitely affects our ability to purchase.

LB: How much influence does the European notion of collecting have on southern African collecting practices?

NL: You mean traditional collections in public institutions? The southern African material in USA and European collections is mostly held in ethnographic and natural history museums and was acquired in the late 19th and early 20th century. These were collected largely as trophies, specimens and curiosities. More recently, museums such as the ROM collect more contemporary works, such as Ndebele material from the mid-20th century and later. International art galleries don’t seem to collect much traditional southern African material - they are more interested in contemporary South African artists such as William Kentridge and Tracey Rose. I suppose the question would depend on collecting when? If you were talking about a 100 years ago, compared to now, there are different approaches to the collecting. A century ago, overseas institutions set the standard, but now I believe that the South African museums set the standards for collecting traditional material.

LB: What is in those museums now, how does it effect, if at all, what JAG decides to collect? Are there similarities or differences?

NL: We don’t use them as a reference for collecting, because it seems that there is little specialist expertise regarding southern African traditional collections in overseas museums. Curators are more familiar with West and Central African art. I contacted many museums in England about the 19th century southern African material, and the general answer was: ‘We do have a collection but we don’t know much about what it is.’ If you look at most of the
books published on African art up until the 1970s, most of the expertise is focused on West and Central Africa. There have been few exhibitions of southern African material – the *Art of the Personal Object* at the Smithsonian a few years ago, and more recently an exhibition of southern African material at the Cleveland Art Museum.

A deeper understanding of the southern African art started in South Africa with exhibitions such as *Art and Ambiguity*. People hadn’t put the material together in a comprehensive way or got a sense of what the dynamics in making, using and collecting are. There are a few people overseas that know about South African traditional art - Gary Van Wyk for example. However, he is a dealer rather than a curator. He may be assisting museums to buy and he would give them advice. Generally, we have as good scholarship, if not better, here. For example there is Anitra Nettleton, Karel Nel, Sandra Klopper and myself.

LB: With your project, with regards to finding out what’s there, is there any attempt to bring it here?

NL: Not at the moment. The interesting thing is that there are many things in collections that are similar to what we have here already.

LB: What do you wish to add to the JAG collection, and why?

NL: I would like to add earlier 19th century pieces, both beadwork and sculptural pieces. Those are the rarest and the most extraordinary for me. It also may be influenced by the fact that this is the area I am working on at the moment. I’m working on southern Natal 1730 to 1910. We have a very good collection of headrests and our beadwork collection is very fine. Our pottery collection, on the other hand, could be extended.

A prejudice towards male production can be seen in previous collecting. For example Jonathan Lowen, who put the Brenthurst Collection together, is upfront about the fact that he prioritised male art. This was because he felt that this was disappearing fastest. He explained that in his opinion the arts of beadwork and pottery were still being practiced in the 20th century. There are many pieces of very fine beadwork in the Brenthurst collection but his priority was the sculptural wood, bone and horn pieces.62

LB: So therefore what is here is mainly woodwork?

NL: Yes. We have a strong woodcarving collection. We have beautiful staffs and headrests. I would like to see the pottery and the basketry collections embellished.

LB: Do you think that JAG’s collection of southern African art has a particular significance in a wider social context? If so, how and in what way?

NL: Absolutely.

NL: The collection is important because it shows that all South Africans have a creative heritage to be proud of. That is why it is important to show this material as ‘art’, rather than

62 Lowen explains why carved objects predominate in the Brenthurst Collection: “Most of the collection is devoted to the art of the Carver who worked in wood and bone and rhino horn. The reason is that beadwork and basketry and the potters art has not ceased entirely and the decorative traditions may still be found. As an art collector, I have been more interested in sculptural quality and, of course, rarity” (letter from Lowen to Christopher Till, 10 December 1984).
ethnography or craft. It is also important to house it in an Art Gallery, rather than natural history or ethnographic museums. By separating it from Eurocentric cultural heritage and housing it in separate institutions, an implicit message is given that the makers and users were not at the same evolutionary level as Europeans. This is totally unacceptable and, to continue in this way is to entrench 19th century racist ideas and theories of social Darwinism. JAG is committed to continue presenting the traditional material in new and innovative ways so that it may be respected and understood as an important part of South Africa’s heritage. Much of the negative perceptions around the material have been the result of Christianising missionaries who attempted to stamp out traditional ways of life and beliefs; colonial and imperialist aspirations; and later apartheid machinations.

Heritage is important because it is meaningful now. Much prejudicial baggage comes with and creates a framework in which the material is seen as politically tainted. This is not a reflection on its original context, but rather a reflection on the way material was collected and classified by colonial and apartheid institutions. The legacy of the collecting practices that South Africa has inherited, particularly for the 19th and early 20th century material, is that it has lost its history of emanation and original use. No mention is made of where it was purchased or who it was purchased from. For example much of the southern [Kwazulu] Natal material is classified under the category ‘Zulu’ - which is misleading. It is all radically de-personalised – having lost the names and specific contexts of its original makers and users. So, in the words of Franz Fanon, it suffers from ‘colonial mortification’. In this state it is difficult to redefine outside of the static ‘tribal’ categories it has had the misfortune of being historically lodged.

We are the inheritors of government ethnologist Van Warmelo and SAM curator Margaret Shaw’s methods of classification, in which people from the KwaZulu Natal region, for example, were grouped under the larger umbrella term ‘Zulu’. When you start to unpick and unpack this classification it is largely meaningless. I brought the historian John Wright to see the collection and he remarked that the labels that read ‘Zulu’ were meaningless. To situate objects into more appropriate historical and social context, resources such as oral history must be tapped for information. For example, James Stuart was a magistrate in Natal and in 1916 he interviewed older people in the area - and they gave him oral testimony that reached back at least 80 years. For example Mqaikana kaYenge who was born in 1820 related oral histories about his family, whose chiefs they fell under and how they are related to other people as well as the movements of the group over the 19th century providing information on this turbulent era. Details were provided that included names and accounts of historical progress. Mqaikana is just one piece of a very large and complex piece of history. By extending the history, we reconnect the objects with this information. Even if we only have one case study where we can do this, it counters the very rigid classificatory system that museums have inherited. ‘Radical depersonalisation’ is a way of reducing the stature of a person to that of less than human. When you know a name you acknowledge the owner as a person and through this the artist receives dignity and significance.

The material that JAG from the 19th century is devoid of names and places where the items were collected. The way in which objects are presented will affect how it is understood and we are doing the work to redefine it. We are attempting to uncover the multiple histories that make a collection what it is and why it has ended up as it is now.

In actuality, these objects are the markers of a vibrant heritage with a complex symbolism and identity politics attached. It was part of a history that was as dynamic as any other history. However, the information needed [by means of] which to bring out this history - is largely missing.
LB: To what extent do you think the canon established in private collecting has effected how JAG collects southern African art?

NL: The only private collection that I know intimately is Karel Nel’s. I have seen other private collections, they have their strengths, but the length over which Karel has collected, and the aesthetic eye in which he has done the selecting, are exceptional. He collects from an informed position and he also travels internationally, so has access to a wide range of choices. His collection is a good example to hold up as a model for JAG.

LB: In terms of the collections, which have come in due to donations and loans, were those originally from private collections?

NL: There is one loan collection at JAG which is Brenthurst and one donation collection from Udo Horstmann. Other than that, the collection has been purchased. We have bought a lot of our Eastern Cape collection from the dealer Steven Long. Other material has come from dealers such as Michael Stevenson. The Jacques collection of headrests was purchased by JAG. It was on long term loan at Museum Africa, and we purchased part of it. Donations are a very small part of what we have. However, because our purchases are made through the Anglo-American Centenary Trust Fund, all our purchases are listed as ‘donations’.

LB: Would you say that Karel Nel has influenced the formation of JAG’s traditional southern African art collection. If so, how?

NL: Yes he has. Occasionally he will alert me about something that is for sale that I should look at. I know he has bid at auctions for us and he is part of the acquisitions committee, who make decisions on what is purchased. That covers it, other than what we have discussed before.

LB: What is your understanding of the term ‘material culture’?

NL: I don’t particularly like the term but it’s a useful coverall term that gets us out of the more loaded terms such as ethnography, anthropology, artefact, art object. It levels the playing field because anything can be seen as material culture.

LB: Why is it that you don’t particularly like the term?

NL: Because it is too general. If I was writing about objects I would try to use terms specific to them for the context in which they were being discussed.

LB: Yes that is the next question: Would JAG’s collection of southern African art adequately reflect southern African material culture?

NL: I’m writing about the politics of the collection and classification of this material. So by referring to it as ‘material culture’, the complexity of its existence is largely neutralised. I am looking at when it was called ethnography and why it was called fine art; what were the movements and shifts and attitudes? To call it material culture does not help me to investigate these nuances. We have chosen a term ‘archive’ rather than ‘material archive’ for the southern [Kwazulu] Natal project. This helps us to engage multiple histories and items that may not be considered ‘material culture’ - such as documents, oral history and maps. Archive is everything [that] we have inherited from the past that is relevant – oral histories, objects, publications, music, etc. If we invest the objects with the grammar of the archive, we are able to embed the material in a larger discourse and the resulting scholarship will be richer. So to use the term ‘material culture’ is only partially appropriate for the project I am currently busy with.
Does JAG adequately reflect the material culture of southern Africa?

I think it has a good representative selection of it. In addition to the Brenthurst, Horstmann and Jacques collections, we acquired the Brodie collection to our holdings. [The] Brodie collection is mostly mid-20th century beadwork, that provides a more balanced spread in terms of gender and date. However, there are always gaps to fill.

LB: What is your understanding of the term ‘cultural heritage’?

NL: It is the culture that we inherit. The traditional material at JAG is everybody’s ‘cultural heritage’ because we are all implicit in making it what it is. Cultural heritage is also not just the objects. It’s the oral histories, the music, the legacies of collecting and classification, etc.

LB: Who do you think has the authority to define what is seen as ‘cultural heritage’ for the South African nation?

NL: It is the people who have the knowledge, have done the work and possess the scholarship. It would be exciting if the public was more forthcoming and would contribute opinions and interact with the material. In the end, however, the final decisions rest with the person in the curatorial position at the Gallery and the committee. This person is regarded as the ‘expert’. It is then the responsibility of this person to educate.

LB: Would you agree that certain public collections such as JAG build a particular ‘cultural heritage’ for the South African nation?

NL: Imagine if the material was not here? Imagine what a hole there would be in what people thought South African ‘heritage’ was? So yes, absolutely.

LB: What has been included and excluded from JAG’s southern African collection of art? Why?

NL: We do not focus on weapons unless they have aesthetic features. These would include decorated axes and finely carved knobkerries. Often, these have a ceremonial function. However bows and arrows and multiples of spears that look similar don’t form part of our collection.

LB: Is there anything else you would choose not to collect, as we have already discussed what you would like to include.

NL: I don’t think there is any particular exclusion. As I have said. The criteria are there and things will be presented to the committee and will be discussed. We will collect contemporary - those objects that show shifts and changes, new developments, innovations in ‘traditional’ art, however in the end, the aesthetic will be the deciding factor.

LB: What is seen as ‘authentic’ southern African art? Why?

NL: In an ideal situation, I would purchase only things that were made and used within their original context. If something was made recently, made for commercial reasons, or mass-produced I would not acquire it for the collection. So those objects made to be sold to tourist shops and western markets would be excluded. However, there has been a commercial trade in objects for a long time. For example, there were objects that were produced for the great 19th century Empire shows in London and Paris. In the mid 1800s magistrates were instructed by the [then] Natal government to find or commission objects to be made for these shows. So 150 years ago, people were commissioning things for sale and these have entered collections
and become valuable. Are those objects authentic? I would say we would accept them into our collection because they have an extraordinary history and are significant objects with which to tell the story of southern Africa.

Some staffs and headrests do come in multiples – they look the same and can be found in our and other collections. These were clearly made by the same hand, or were made in a workshop or by a particular family with its own ‘style’. These were made for various clients and I would consider these ‘authentic’.

LB: What effect does the price of an item have on your collecting choices?

NL: Very expensive objects definitely are a problem because of our limited budget. Object on overseas auctions are a challenge because of high prices. But, if you consider it, we are one of the few South African museums which actually do have a reasonable purchasing budget.

LB: What effect does the documentary have on the collecting choices?

NL: Well provenanced items would be our first choice, but older items come with little documentation. However, if we consider it to be authentic and it augments the Gallery collection then it will be considered for purchase.

LB: Whereas an object that does not hold such aesthetic qualities but does hold extensive documentation?

NL: What I would do then is record it by photographing the work and then I make a record of the documentation. You don’t have to have the object in your collection to have the information.

LB: How often does this occur?

NL: We very seldom get documentation - especially with the older objects. With later objects - yes. It’s really the 19th century and early 20th century where there is very little. From the 1950’s onwards documentation is often available. Researchers such as Frank Jolles have been collecting in the field from around the 1980’s, and gave close attention to recording information about makers and users. This was possible because, at the time, there were people who remembered the making and using of the objects in the mid-20th century. Definitely from the 1950’s onwards, we get documentation. This is also largely due to a change in attitude towards the material where people’s names were recorded and their innovation, creativity and aesthetics valued.

LB: How would you define the value of an artwork? What makes an artwork valuable?

NL: Aesthetics, rarity and meaning/significance. What does it look like, how few there are and what does it mean? Then it also depends on what I can do with the object. How can I use it to speak about art and heritage in the past or the present? Material always has a message that is contingent on its context - the question is how I facilitate this communication.

LB: The area that you choose to exhibit southern African material in the ‘traditional’ sense. Why is it such a small area? Furthermore, how do you select which pieces to exhibit?

NL: Previously the JAG did not have a dedicated space for the display of the ‘traditional’ collections. The East Wing is now our dedicated space, so that is a positive development. Objects must be protected from theft and damage and a bigger space would require many more display cabinets, which are very expensive to build and which we have no budget for.
An item is often small and easy to steal and objects (such as beadwork) need lockable cabinets in which they can be placed. It is not possible to hang traditional items on nails in the wall in the way framed artworks can be.

The exhibition that is up now – *Matters of Spirit* – was curated for schools. I have taken Grade 11 and 12 syllabuses and provided them with material they needed to cover. I selected objects that could best illustrate the themes they had to work with and that I also thought the public would enjoy. Some objects were chosen that have rarely been on display before as I try to give the public the opportunity to see different sections of the collection.

LB: How often do you rotate objects?

NL: Not often. *Matter of Spirit* has been up for a year and a half. It is scheduled to come down in 2013. We are in the process of raising money for new cabinets and these are planned to be more versatile than the ones we have at the moment. Once we have these then we can change the displays more often.
Appendix 3: Interview Karel Nel, 01 November 2010

Leigh Blanckenberg: With the questions I will ask you now, I would like you to know that I am only referring to what is deemed ‘traditional’ southern African art within your collection as I cannot cover the entire collection due to the restrictions of my dissertation.

LB: Why do you collect art?

Karel Nel: For me it was almost innate - one of my earliest memories was, as a child of 3 and a half, setting up rows of bottles outside my parents’ veranda and collecting flowers or leaves each day and ordering them in those bottles. I suppose it was a way of exploring the world and making some kind of visual order. I started collecting when I was about 11 or 12, when I bought my first currencies, a Ming knife from 225 BC, and then a number of African currencies. I was interested in the visual qualities of the objects, but also cultures other than my own, from very early on. From about 9 years old, I was fascinated by Egyptian art and very intensely so. All my library books were Egyptian. At about 12, I became really interested in Japanese art and so I collected anything that was Japanese. It was when I was about 13 that I became passionately interested in African art. These 3 interests have remained with me as referents ever since.

I have always been interested in how the values of society are deeply encoded in the art that is produced. So early on, whether I was collecting pictures, or small artefacts, it was a means to really begin to understand a culture. I always found that when I collected an object, I would start researching it, looking at how it fits in relation to others. My collecting has eventually become a visual form of thinking – a way of accessing and understanding others through the visual forms of production - and of trying to trace a series of tendencies in the making of art. It’s looking at one thought that builds on another successively creating a framework or a paradigm. Very much like a scientific practice, or a belief system, social practices or language and linguistic structures. There is this shared pattern of values that become encoded either in word or in visual form that eventually also relates to, or reflects on, identity and culture. I’m not an anthropologist, I am an artist, and therefore I have been interested in looking at the most distilled forms and what I would call beauty - which is obviously a much contested word. There seems to be in our species, this need to create things that are aesthetic, that are useful, and that very often reflect the identity of the maker, of the group and of the culture.

The objects that I have collected reflect the tendency of objects to incrementally morph, one form into another, tracing a certain kind of visual flow that is like one idea following another or one version following the next. I think one of the great aspects of African art - and to a certain degree many so-called early pre-literate societies, is that the art is not essentially about originality, that it is rather about honing the object to perfection by being made again and again. One gets some great carvers who really have enormous skill and yet there are others who make things but don’t have that intelligence in their hands. I’m always looking for that intelligence in the hand, for evidence of things made with that skill, intelligence, care, love and with a very clear intent. Where you know that there is significance to the object and that the creator was not just making something for purely aesthetic purposes. That is very often where great objects have this balance between form and function. For me, especially as an artist, I am interested to see levels of visual problem solving that appear in many of these cultures, as I know from within my own work how an idea keeps developing, extending, until it morphs into new manifestations and variations. Many of these objects have also been the link to the numinous realm; to the ancestral world. In my own work I have been very
interested in the interface between the seen and the unseen world; the manifest and the non-
manifest; between the useful and the symbolic.

My collecting has informed what I make and what I make informs what I collect. There is a
very specific and interesting dialogue between my collecting and my making. I tend to collect
objects that form an archive of creative thought and form in the world, and I draw on this
archive. There is a constant visual dialogue in my studio: as you know, my objects move
constantly, things shift into storage, come out of storage, and if you look at the photographs
of my studio over the years, it changes constantly. I like to live and look at objects when I
wake up in the morning or in the middle of the day, and to glance at something, or see it just
before I go to bed. It sits in my mind; it’s a very different experience to the restricted kind of
looking in a museum. I live in a visual dialogue here in my studio.

I think collecting is a very creative act. I’m always fascinated to look at objects and I have
been privileged to see many important private collections around the world. I can observe
how they reveal the very different sensibilities and impulses that drive how people choose to
collect. There are collectors and there are accumulators. Accumulators are a bit like stamp
collectors who just want a representative example of every type of object. Then you get other
collectors who have a very discerning and particular focus. It might be intellectual; it might
be anthropological, or singularly a very strongly visual focus. That’s quite different to a
museum collection. So, often in a museum one has a committee - and it depends on what is
presented as opposed to what is actively pursued. Whereas many private collectors know
what they are intending to collect. Museum collections can be directionless, unless one’s got
a directed museum curator, who knows what is needed in that collection. It’s a combination
of knowledge and the will to put together a coherent collection. I know focused collectors
who fly half way around the world to go and view or buy an object.

Within my own collection, I see significant pieces, and whilst I can’t always afford them,
there are certain objects that I will go out of my way to try and acquire because they fit into a
particular sequence or grouping that I’m trying to establish.

LB: How do you decide what items to collect?

KN: Well, largely through interest and a growing awareness and knowledge. For instance, as
a young boy I got to know Egon Guenther, who for many years was a mentor to me. It was
fascinating to see Guenther’s collection which was really a high classical collection of
Congolese, Central, and West African material. Whilst he only had a limited Southern
African collection comprising of some head rests, sticks and fertility/child figures, these
alerted me to the significant objects of our region. At that time, when I came across head rests
and child figures, I started to collect them. I couldn’t afford to buy Songe power figures or
important West or Central African material, but was fascinated by the more modest southern
African objects. Similarly, with Vittorino Meneghelli, who I met later, I was exposed to his
mainly West African collection, which, in contrast to Guenther’s classical collection,
reflected his interest in tradition, change and transformation; an eccentric, lively collection of
pieces that challenged fixed norms. Vittorino Meneghelli did also collect some southern
African material, and did go into the field - to Zululand, and collected headrests and other
objects - but it wasn’t his main focus. In contrast to these two seminal collections, my focus
was primarily on the southern African objects.

Of course, much southern African material was mainly to be bought in London and in Paris,
since much had been removed during the British-Zulu wars, by soldiers, missionaries and
early tourists in the 19th century. I didn’t have that much access to that material but I
collected what I could here, and in later years I bought in London, Paris, New York and San Francisco and Los Angeles; wherever I could find the pieces that would fit in to my collecting vision. So it was wonderful, of course, to be able to bring some pieces back to South Africa. I had started my collection as a boy and sadly during those years - and even during my studies at WITS - there were very few African art objects displayed in any of South Africa's museums; and so it was exciting eventually when the Wits University Art Museum and Anitra Nettleton extended the collection to include African art. The Wits collection started with a few small West African pieces and we started to build the Southern African collection, that you know, so it's been special to see that grow too. With the exhibitions that academics including myself were involved in, such as *Art and Ambiguity*, *Evocations of the Child*, *Dungamanzi*, and *Transformed Fibres*, slowly the interest grew locally and internationally.

Our collections at WITS have focused on the interface between tradition and change, and we have acquired historic pieces from international dealers (Michael Graham Stuart, Michael Stevenson, Sotheby's) as well as pieces in the field - collected by a number of dedicated and tenacious individuals including Andre de Wet, Tjeert Vlentge, Ian Ball, Mordechai Brodie, Willie Wales and many others, that collected some very fine material, which found its way into the WITS, JAG and the South African National Gallery collections.

**LB:** In terms of the southern African objects in your collection, what kind of objects do you see as important and collectable and why?

**KN:** Generally speaking, with southern African material, there are certain (perhaps male) collecting biases that have tended to prioritise carved wooden objects that are associated with the male domain of production: head rests, staffs, meat platters, figures, stools, spoons, milk pails, and snuff containers. These objects have been included in important collections, made for instance by Jonathan Lowen, Udo Horstmann and the Jacques family, and they have found their way into museum holdings and have led to exhibitions such as *Art and Ambiguity* and *The Horstmann Collection* at JAG.

In my collecting and curatorial practice, I have tried to counter this focus on the male domain and I have also collected a considerable number of objects which are associated with the female domain - such as ceramics, beadwork, basketry and the child figures. I've attempted to create more of a balance in my collection. *Evocations of the child*, a national exhibition - which I initiated with the intention to counterbalance the dominance of interest in wooden objects - had as its focus, these unusual, and perhaps overlooked, child figures so central to female production.

In my own collection of the child figures, I have tried to trace the incremental changes and the morphed forms amongst these objects. So, I have tried to collect some very early child figures, but I have, for instance, an early Ntwane piece collected by old man Ivy in the 1950s, and I have consistently attempted to collect child figures from this region successively right through to the late 80s, and so my collection enables one to track the changes. My collection also enables one to look at the kind of drifting shifts that also occur amongst the Ndebele and Shangaan, Tonga child figures. I'm looking, very often, at the early form and how it evolves.

**LB:** Whilst you have beadwork, ceramics and the child figures in your collection - there is also a very large component of woodwork. Can you comment on this?

**KN:** I think it very often has to do with availability. I think all our collections are shaped by availability. My headrest collection is made up largely of Shona, Tsonga, Shangaan, Zulu and Swazi examples. So there are headrests, stools, staffs, meat platters, milk pails, snuff
containers, spoons and figures. Examples range from the 19th century to contemporary examples, made by artists such as Paul Thavana and Jackson Hlungwane. One of the focuses of the collection is on the meat platters. I am amazed that in most private and institutional collections the meat platters have not really been seriously considered. They are symbolically very significant, because eating meat from cattle, with their link to the ancestral world, links the present to the ancestral. Cattle are central to their [craftmen’s] economic and belief systems. As a result they are ceremonially slaughtered to mark marriages and funerals. These objects are special - and when you look at the array of meat platters or bowls in my collection, the inventiveness is just so extraordinary. From the proliferation of legs to the addition of unusually shaped condiment-like containers for different types of food, or the addition of handles producing striking graphic forms, punctuated by little legs, protrusions and geometric patterning, which make them zoomorphic. There is an amazing inventiveness that plays through them and I have always been fascinated by these platters. In a more contemporary moment, Jackson Hlungwane carves an enormous bowl based on the meat platters, and titles it ‘bowl for nations’. Carved at a time of apartheid, he makes this great bowl for the world’s nations to eat from, so that brings a contemporary symbolic significance to the platters of the collection.

The great Swazi ribbed vessels, the shallow bowls for example, mainly in public collections, evoke the grandness of the gatherings they were made for. I have been intrigued by, and have collected both African and Oceanic bowls, and I’m fascinated that, traditionally in both these cultures, no tables existed and the bowl was the site of sharing. Bowls were and are powerfully, symbolically, both the site of giving and receiving. Having collected and thought deeply about these wooden objects has meant that they have appeared in several series of my own drawings, that assert their sacred and symbolic significance. Thus, the bowls are a large part of the collection. Small bowls are also part of the Nhunguvanis – supporting the calabash containers with their adorned geometric and sometimes anthropomorphic stoppers.

The staffs reflect a typically southern African tendency to shift between figuration and pure abstraction. My collection of staffs is extensive and is representative of this duality. One pair of rare staffs in my collection is remarkable, because they are embellished, one having a male figure, and the other a female figure. The notion of free-standing paired figures is particular to the southern African region, yet examples of these are extremely rare. Old important examples of these are found in the Brenthurst and Wits collections, and in my own collection, the pair of staffs is the closest to this rare genre. They are so rare and expensive I have just never had the opportunity to acquire a pair, but I do have a large collection of Matano figures that are associated with initiation ceremonies amongst the Venda; small animals and symbolic figures presented in didactic tableaux that seem to me to morph into the contemporary work of Johannes Segogela; and then differently in the work of other sculptors such as Julius Mfete from Pondoland - the smaller more figurative pieces, and some of the small clay figures, that come from the Ntwane and Zulu - which were also part of the initiation ceremonies. My collection has, in some avenues, spilled into a more contemporary direction that then includes Noria Mabasa’s clay figures and some of the larger wooden figures by Johannes Maswanganyi, Jackson Hlungwane and others.

In my collection of wooden objects - the milk pails, meat platters, headrests, stools, and most of the staffs - the emphasis is on the more geometric and abstract. Whilst there is this extraordinary balance in the southern African pieces between the abstract and the figurative – and of course with western taste, the figurative pieces are generally more expensive than the abstract pieces - in the end I think my personal collecting bias is more towards the abstract than the figurative.
I’m trying to think what else is in my collection. There are earplugs, snuff containers, the beaded gourds, which quite often do relate to snuff and to the ancestral world. I have very few pipes, but there are a few smallish ones. I would say that in my collection it is one of the areas in which I don’t have a very representative sample.

LB: Are you as a collector affected by established collecting practices and norms?

KN: Established, [do you mean by that of] the museums?

LB: Yes, there is a museum canon of collecting...

KN: With museums, very often collections can be like a broad scattershot of what has been brought in and what’s been donated. I think that that goes for many museums. The difference between that and private collecting is that the private collections have been made by a personal kind of intent. If I look at my own collection, I have to consider quite carefully what I buy and when. If one looks at Jonathon Lowen's collection - or the collections he has put together, or at Udo Horstmann’s collections, there has been a discerning eye and a honing into objects of importance, I suppose, defined by their rarity, their significance, the skill of their making, and their condition. How they fit into an overall social and economic system, which is represented through the objects themselves. The British Museum has one or two really iconic southern African objects that I know of, and maybe Chicago Art Institute has one great vessel, the Metropolitan Museum hardly has anything. The Dapper foundation in Geneva also has very few southern African objects. Great southern African material is really very rare. The most important collections in the world are located at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and at Wits. Those collections have consolidated the material in recent years. JAG have had the funds through Anglo-American to have acquired both the Horstmann and the Jaques collections, and the Lowen collection bought by the Oppenheimer family has been renamed the Brenthurst collection and is also at the JAG, on extended loan. Nicholas Maritz’s collection and the Conru collection and maybe Ken Karner’s collection, are the few very important collections of 19th century material that are not in southern African Museums, as of yet. Hopefully we can in time negotiate funding for the acquisition of these collections to be housed in local southern African museums. So, I suppose, if anything, the museum canonical collections have really been defined by a small group of astute private collectors. As a group of collectors, we have been influential on each other in searching and looking for the great objects that have been either hidden or unrecognised and not particularly valued until relatively recently. In my essay for the Cleveland Museum, I describe how these collections were made from finds in the flea markets of London to the high-end galleries of London, Paris and New York.

LB: Besides the gap in your collection concerning the pipes, is there anything else that you would wish to add to your collection? If so, why?

KN: I would love to have a really great Swazi/North Nguni ribbed vessel. If one looks at those great vessels - and there are also some very beautiful Sotho containers - most are now in public collections, and were all sourced in Europe; and they are extremely rare and expensive. I have never had the kind of finance to acquire one of those. In a sense, they are an extension into wood of the gourd forms. I have one or two wooden gourds and one sees how those evolve into those great vessels. That is definitely a gap. I’d also love to include a great pair of southern African figures, but again I think it is more important that they go into major public collections, to be more easily accessible to a wider audience.

I have also collected some of the very rare southern African currencies like the ‘Masuku’s’ and the ‘Lerali’s’, which relate to my currency collections. The beautiful Adze currencies
from the Shona and the crosses, the great metal currencies from Great Zimbabwe that extend up into the Luba territories. For me, that ingot (pointing to a long laterally armed copper ingot from the great Zimbabwe region) is just about the most beautiful thing I have, it has a stark visual clarity to it and an unusualness, which I don’t know where or how to place. It looks as though it could be ancient Chinese, yet it also very African. I love the tension of the form and the practicality of it also. One could break off those arms as one needed them, which is different from a solid ingot which you would have to melt to differentiate. It’s a very practical design for an ingot, because its form enables them to be stacked and tied. At the same time, the form is so distinctive that it identifies the group that were making them and the region that they came from. They are very different for example, from the Katanga crosses, which are much less elongated and also a more even and obviously a cross-shaped form. The rare southern African currency that I have, the small Masuku piece, is such an enigmatic object. We know very little about how they were made and how they were used. These pieces are hard to come by, and it’s been wonderful to at least partially fill that gap in my collection.

I have also been intrigued by how there is no real furniture in southern Africa. The stools end at the Limpopo. We have headrests and we have the bowls, the sticks, but there are no stools south of the Limpopo. You would think that you would want to sit on something? There is a beautiful tradition of making sleeping, seating and food mats. Which, I suppose is the equivalent, really, of the beds and the stools.

In some ways - the simplicity of southern African production, to me, is very similar to the Japanese, with its focus on small, transportable, exquisite objects. There is this absolute paring down to the minimum. In southern African migratory cultures, one would probably only own 5 objects or so, which one would travel with. When one steps into a traditional Nguni hut, that bare hemispherical space is so exquisite in its own right - in its complexity of the tying of the grass and the bent, almost parabolic wattle stems. When you’re in that space with the beautiful floor and the small little ancestral shrine at the back, maybe with a pot or two, some rolled mats, and a headrest, a few pieces of personal beadwork attached; it’s very minimal and that’s its great beauty. Those objects are special - they are honed, and the aesthetic is simplified. It’s streamlined so that one is not weighed down by what one owns but your stick or your bowl or your spoon says as much about who you are as anything else - in that it reflects taste, and personal history. It’s a very different kind of focus that emerges when value is located in cattle rather than in material possessions. There are no masks; there are no ancestral figures, the figures that we know of look as though they are only used for didactic purposes in initiations. There are no temples, there are no solid structures. It’s this extraordinary culture that is constantly on the move. The cattle are the site of value. They are the economics and they are the link to the ancestral world. They are like a living temple, that herd, that people move with and around; and in some ways the cattle define existence, prompting people to move when grazing was depleted. There were therefore no established cities or stone buildings amongst the Nguni. It’s very different to our sedentary lifestyle. There is something very powerful about being nomadic. The way it changes human interactions and our interaction with the physical world of architecture and of artefact.

LB: Do you think your collection of southern African art has a particular significance on a wider social context? And if so, how, or in what way?

KN: It’s a bit like what I was saying a bit earlier - in relation to having seen other private collections, in the making of my own. I think my collection very often tries to look at almost a sequence of solutions within a particular group of objects. So that one can see broad trends and be able to look at pieces from Mozambique in relation to Zulu examples, down to Xhosa
pieces; and to see that there is a similarity, and a difference. So, yes, my collection tries to engage the ways in which a southern African aesthetic is present all the way up the east coast of Africa, and this reflects trade, reciprocal influence and change.

Very often we have pieces in our collections that don’t fit the pattern. I think for example that Maritz’s collection of Xhosa staffs is extremely good, but he doesn’t have a figurative staff. They are extremely rare now. There are strengths in his collection and there are other areas that one would love to fill in, but hopefully they eventually become a part of a national lexicon of objects as they get combined with existing and developing and perhaps more focused collections, enabling one to understand the drift of how objects were produced over time.

We have started to recognise particular styles, carvers and workshops and to be able to understand and name, for instance ‘the baboon master,’ or ‘the master of the small hands’ – identities coined by academics such as Sandra Klopper and Anitra Nettleton and others. In my writings in the publication *The Art of South East Africa* I specifically look at how variations in the style of carving is attributed to particular carvers or schools, and that starts to give insight into where, when and by whom particular pieces were made, and I posit that there is much conjecture. In terms of my own collection - it’s consolidated, it’s broad, there are some extraordinary pieces in it, there are some good pieces, and there are some ordinary pieces. But they all make up a pattern. I suppose, like the collection at WITS, the link to the contemporary and the living culture for me has been important also. I selected works for an exhibition with Alan Crump for the Grahamstown festival many years ago, focusing on Venda carving - so I spent considerable time in the region and that’s when I bought the big Venda square bowl and Paul Thavana sticks. That was a great privilege to move amongst some of the great carvers and to know Jackson and to meet Segogela. It’s certainly a waning tradition; partly because the objects do not have a traditional function anymore, in that those cultures have been urbanised so fast. At the same time they take on other forms like for instance with Johannes Maswanganyi, who carves for many different needs and patrons. He will carve Njamasoras for the Nyanga’s and the Sangomas of Soweto, examples of which are in the Wits collection, and simultaneously he was carving sculptures of Verwoed. I remember saying to him ‘what on earth are you carving Verwoed for?’ and he said, “Oh well, up here in the northern Transvaal, I’ve got a market for Verwoerds.” He was too carving biblical pieces for shows here in Johannesburg, so it was like he was adjusting the pieces for the market - and that’s intriguing. I’ve always wanted to write about that, particularly in relation to his work. Again, I think that’s partly what happened to other carvers like the Baboon Master, where a market evolved, both in the Western tourist market, but they were also required and used by some local black South Africans. There are pieces with genuine patinas on them acquired through use and over time, and then there are some in London, which have been polished and varnished. Inevitably all objects and collections reflect specific moments in time, and reflect specific collecting and making concerns, within broad social contexts.

**LB:** What do you think your influence has been on the JAG and the WAM collections?

**KN:** I think I can’t single out my influence as we really have been so fortunate to have worked as a group who have been looking, thinking and learning together. Working with individuals such as Anitra Nettleton, Rayda Becker, Sandra Klopper, Nessa Liebhammer, Janie Van Skalkwyk, Di Newman, Fiona Rankin-Smith, Julia Charlton, Tom Huffman, Merilee Wood, and many others that have shaped the way in which we have shaped this material. For instance, the curators of African art at JAG have been Nessa Liebhammer and Veliswa Gwintsua, both were trained in the Wits History of Art department. So, they gained their initial knowledge there. There have always been close links between JAG and Wits;
[between] Anitra, Alan, myself - and we have had significant contact with the successive directors of the JAG. I have always been a close colleague and friend of Christopher Till. With Christopher we really tried to push for the Brenthurst collection to come back to South Africa. Ricky Burnett also had input on that, and all of us dearly wanted the collection to return to South Africa. Thank goodness the Oppenheimers made it possible. Later, I worked with Rochelle Keene and with Alan Crump in an attempt to repatriate the Horstmann collection. I twice visited Switzerland to assess, and then advise. We unfortunately missed the second Jonathon Lowen collection, as nobody came to the table - so it was dispersed. Fortunately a significant number of these pieces ended up in the Maritz collection. So it’s gratifying that it’s at least here now, in part Jonathan Lowen’s third collection - mainly of headrests - became available, and again JAG was interested. We tried to get funding from the state and Lotto. That fell through, and we were going to lose the collection. I eventually approached Graham Beck to assist and I flew over to London three times to try and negotiate that. Eventually he agreed that he would fund half of it, if I could raise the balance. I couldn’t. We continued discussions while I was in America and he suggested we meet in London to look and reconsider the collection. Beck eventually agreed that he would buy the collection in its entirety on the condition that I oversee the packing and crating of the objects. I spent three days with the packers, making arrangements for getting it to South Africa. We had hoped to build a small Museum for it in Cape Town, but he passed on a few months ago. So we hold our breath, but at least it is here. It is a sad situation that we don’t really have a dedicated African art museum, but hopefully WAM will form that focus.

I think that Christopher Till had a very strong influence, and when he invited me to install Art and Ambiguity, it meant that we worked together with Rayda Becker, Anitra Nettleton, Sandra Klopper, Janie Van Skalkwyk and Patricia Davidson. It’s been interesting to see how these scholars have worked together to try and consolidate these collections, and the knowledge. When we did Evocations of the child there was so little writing on the child figures, and just to say to people, “Okay, well, let’s try and put together the few fragments that there are,” - it was amazing to see just how much we were able to consolidate. I’d always hoped that every third year or so, we would do a publication of that order at JAG, that it would become part of a series, but it’s an enormous amount of work and there was just not enough funding.

Almost since its inception, I have been an advisor with Anitra Nettleton to the Standard Bank collection of African Art that is housed at, developed and looked after by the WAM. I have also worked closely with Fiona and Julia over the years on exhibitions produced for the Standard Bank Gallery and for the Grahamstown Festival, and these have raised awareness of the material. I have also been an advisor to the development of the African collections at the JAG and also, in a less formal capacity, I have advised the SANG and for a period the William Humphrey’s Museum in Kimberly. So, my work with the collections and with the acquisitions amongst South African public collections has been longstanding and committed.

LB: I know you have touched on this before, you talk about this influence and there is obviously a canon amongst public collecting in the public institutions, but how much do you think that what has gone into their collections has influenced your collecting directions; how you have chosen to collect things?

KN: I think that the museums have chosen to collect more broadly and in much more depth and they have been in the position to buy large, named collections - which means that they have great objects, but they perhaps also have objects which don’t readily fit into the collection. What I’ve tended to do to buy an available piece that fits into my own interest in tracing how objects change, shift, and morph into other objects, styles, genres - I’ve had to be
quite focused in the way I have done it. So it’s been an accumulation, piece by piece over many years. It’s sometimes meant extending myself beyond my means, but it’s been important to do.

LB: Working at the Art museum at Wits, I have found that there are general trends of collecting - where a certain academic or a certain person has found an interest in something. And then there is all of a sudden a flurry of collecting that sort of thing, and you can even see it now with the soccer world cup - and what Fiona collected for her exhibition, there is all of a sudden an increase in soccer-related objects. When that has happened, over the history of having a relationship with WAM, has that not influenced you to collect items that have sparked an interest for you as a result?

KN: It’s interesting that you say that because the strength of WAM’s collection for instance is Venda and Tsonga-Shangane both through the direct influence and knowledge of Anitra and Rayda Becker, whereas the Zulu collection is good - but not as in-depth as the other material we have. I suppose I have been particularly interested in Swazi culture, my research and writing has often reflected this interest; and so, yes, I have collected with a Swazi bias. I was up in that region with Carolyn Hamilton and I met Matsibula, the royal historian. I have attended the little Nkwala ceremonies and [been] to the Reed dance ceremonies. I spent time in some of the rural areas and in the markets specifically collecting bowls in the Nkomatie valley. I’m always so sad that the museum in Swaziland is so poor. It’s not as though one needed big money to make a significant collection. If you just travelled up the Nkomatie valley every year or every 3rd year and bought a bowl, one could see how it’s changed and one could see the beauty of the carving that still continued.

So, Swazi definitely is a bias in my collecting, and you will see amongst the Swazi child figures I have a large number of them because I did the research for Evocations on them and they were very rare and people hardly knew anything about them at all. I went up into the field and slowly gleaned and built up information. I suppose that has increased my bias. By extension, one could say that most collections have some kind of personal or individual bias that has driven them.

LB: When you look at a public collection though, and there is a group of people deciding what to collect, and they all have their particular biases or interests, it works quite well because you get a spread and ...

KN: However one of the things that do drive collections is availability. I know that Anitra has always had an uncomfortable relationship with other dealers or collectors, as do many anthropologists, in terms of pieces being removed from the culture. Exhibitions we have mounted have generated interest, and have led to a surge in field collecting and trade. It’s very ironic then that many of the pieces that we have recently acquired for the WAM were originally studied in the field by our scholars and left on site, only later to be collected by others and now we have had to purchase them at great expense from the museum collections.

LB: What is your understanding of the term ‘cultural heritage’?

KN: Well, it’s politically complex. In terms of looking at the historic southern African material, I think it really is the sort of residual legacy which is evident in the form of cultural practices - in languages that are spoken, stories that are told, values that are embodied in artefacts, and possessions that give us insight into the nature of the society that produced them. For example, cattle are an economic index - yet they are also related to the ancestral world, affecting values and many social transactions - as for example with lobola or bride wealth and funerary rites. Eventually these social values impact on the architecture, the
artefacts which are made in this society to be used and at the same time, are symbolic and transformational. With the architecture, for example, the very temporary nature of the dwellings is defined by the centrality of the cattle-based culture, and the need to migrate for grazing. With the artefacts, for example, the staffs in some groups were given to the young men at the time of coming back from initiation, which changes their position in society. This rite, and the staff, affirms their own identity, and in some ways talks about their link to their fathers and their great grandfathers, to the ancestral. So these objects become a nexus of values and ways of living. When we understand that in terms of the personal, of the societal, of the broader cultural context that’s when I think one understands what ‘cultural heritage’ is. These complexities of value that I understand as cultural heritage are not captured by simply putting a snuff container in a vitrine. Of course there is importance in making representative collections which talk to the greatness of the cultures that historically existed, but many people within the communities that produced these objects have lost the ability to know their significance and this is partly because the ‘traditional values’ have been so eroded by colonialism and by apartheid. There seems to be a sense of shame around the cultural artefacts rather than a pride and that is for me one of the great tragedies of our country. I hope at some point, that the shift will happen where there is recognition of the values, the objects and of the past that can be integrated and enable a pride in ‘cultural heritage’. When I go to Greece, for example, I get excited just thinking ahead to seeing the Kouros and the Pantheon, and Greeks are passionate about that. When I have curators and guests flying into South Africa, they say to me, “Show me the objects of historical significance, things that have been produced in this region, talk to me about African culture.” But there is nothing open to the public - there is not a museum that allows me to show them.

LB: Yet there are public collections and public institutions that claim they have a representation of cultural heritage. But then, who do you think has the authority to define what that is? A ‘national cultural heritage’?

KN: Well, there are small secluded holdings of the material, not easily accessible, and certainly not present in the public imagination, here and internationally. People who visit this country visit for ‘the big five’ and Sun City. So, there is a powerful state negligence in valuing the real and deep and perhaps historical cultural heritage here. Our art galleries, in the western sense, try to [speak] to what the contemporary cultural production is and because those are sites of supposed significance in our own society - those are the sites in which we have attempted to relocate these collections of objects: moving them from ethnographic museums into art museums. So these objects have changed their status from ethnographic objects into art objects. I mean, that was the shift that happened. And it’s still quite contentious - I mean, what is art? It’s very different in these two societies, because art is a way of life and these artefacts are a part of that. Whereas, for westerners, it is very often something that we view as separate, as external, and kind of as a reflection of society in a self-conscious way. So we will show a Jogolo – an Ndebele beaded marriage apron - in an art gallery, but galleries and museums won’t show a wedding dress by Marian Fassler. So, what are these differences? It’s complicated.

LB: Then, would you agree, in any way, that the public collections held at WAM and then JAG could be seen as ‘cultural heritage’?

KN: yes, of course, they are. The question is really, who makes those collections, who defines what ‘cultural heritage’ is, and how it is to be collected, selected and shared. I think the WAM and JAG collections have tried hard to develop their holdings, addressing the deep cultural history of this country long before the first elections. And, with many of the exhibitions we have done at the [South African] National Gallery, and at Wits, we have
asserted our history in the broadest sense, yet museums have nonetheless been criticised for failing to do this. I wonder if it is not because throughout Africa, there really is not a tradition of museums. Objects are used until they are broken and are no longer of any use. Then they get eaten up by the ants and then they are gone. It’s really an oral and lived tradition. So, the archive is an oral archive as far as I can understand. Not one of storing objects for classificatory purposes. So there is a tremendous difference in how ‘cultural heritage’ is retained. In the West it is retained by writing history and putting it in books, and using museums as a repository, an archive or library. I always think of my own collection as a library. It is an archive.

LB: Would you consider your collection as ‘cultural heritage’ from a southern African perspective?

KN: Yes. There are very few collectors of African art in this country. There are very few collectors of southern African art. Inevitably this is a core cell of objects; which are part of a residual series of artefacts; which reflect a cultural body of ideas. So, yes, it’s like having a library of books on southern African history. Each of these objects talk of personal lives, personal ways of inscribing skill and identity into objects; as well as talking more broadly, in an overall sense about the nature of this society. Any collection is really a part of the visual and mental focus of the institution or of the private collector. I have always wanted to do an exhibition of a hundred of the greatest southern African objects, drawing from multiple collections.

LB: How do you determine what is great? Who gets to decide what constitutes a ‘good’ object? Is it not problematic?

KN: Of course it is! As with anything, in carving, there are talented carvers, there are ordinary and mediocre carvers. There are also bad carvers. Really ugly carvers, where there is just no skill. What Egon would call ‘ethnographic wood’! Then you get exceptional objects, where even if you don’t know anything about the objects, you can see that it is something special. It’s very difficult to always define that range. Is it the Western eye or is it an African eye, or are you misreading? How does one know? One can only really go with what one knows experientially of the material from extensive and careful looking, and with trusting your eye, intuition and knowledge. That’s how a museum director works, or a curator or a collector, if they are good.

LB: Do the collections held at WAM, and then JAG, adequately reflect southern African material culture?

KN: At present, neither does, because even if they have significant holdings they don’t have the means to seriously display it, so they can’t possibly hope to reflect the material culture. Three quarters of the JAG collection is permanently in storage. Nessa Leibhammer has tried very hard to put up a permanent display in the one edge of the museum, but it’s always an apology, and always compromised by being displayed in an overwhelmingly colonial-style space. Wits’ collection has been in a basement for the last 9 years. If that’s how we represent our ‘cultural heritage’, I think it is frightening. It has nothing to do with WAM, Anitra or Rayda, or Fiona; it has to do with circumstances - and the same at JAG. If it has such a low priority, nationally, I think it’s tragic. I think for me, what’s interesting about the two collections is that at Wits we really try to focus on tradition and change and the collection has a kind of edginess to it. Which I think is exciting, because it looks at its link through to contemporary art. It has something to do with also our limited funding. Whereas JAG has had
major funding, this has enabled it to buy a very expensive collection which consists mainly of 19th century material. So the collections themselves are slightly different.

LB: So the collections themselves are adequate representations of material culture - it’s just that they are not accessible?

KN: Yes, those are the two best collections of southern African art in the world; I have no doubt about it. But they need to be supported and given the chance to present the material in an appropriate, powerful and respectful manner.

LB: It goes back to that sense of pride you were talking about earlier.

KN: Yes. Why does the state not come to the table and buy the collection from Nicholas Maritz and use it as the focus of either the Wits collection, or a museum, which is set up in this country, which looks specifically at southern African art? We don’t have a major African Art museum on this continent. Paris has got a better museum of African art than anywhere in Africa. I think that’s a travesty. So, our West African collection at Wits couldn’t be shown in Paris or in New York, it is just not significant in the way that their collections are, but our Southern African collection is really world class, so I think that’s really what we have to focus on.

LB: Due to collecting guidelines provided by Standard Bank, the Wits Art Museum’s collection of southern African art has been restricted to certain definitions of African art. What have these restrictions meant to your understanding of the collection as a collection of African Art?

KN: Well any collection restrictions that I am aware of and that we tried to work with or against, have been that Standard Bank has been supportive of ‘traditional’ African art, and we have been able to buy almost anything we deemed significant, but it’s at the outer reaches, where objects move into the contemporary, where they have not been always that happy. So that has understandably capped the collection in terms of the contemporary. The university and the Goodman Gallery, under the directorship of Linda Givon, have come to the table and tried to help us on that side. But, absolutely, the Standard Bank has been the major source of support, and without them we wouldn’t have a collection. Their commitment has been extraordinary; and it’s been ongoing. It really has enabled us to remain consistent. And to make an African art collection, even with their proviso, it has meant that we have made an important collection with a particularly traditional southern African bias.

LB: What has been included and excluded from southern African art collections and why?

KN: Well, with the WITS collection, the one thing that has been excluded so far has been metalwork, currency and weapons. I think it has been a blind spot, because the metal working has been absolutely central to the southern African cultures. This gap has been addressed to some degree by the newly-acquired Maritz collection. I think that we have not focused on this area, because there has been, amongst the committee, a bias around weaponry.

LB: Why do you think that there is a bias around weaponry?

KN: I think it was seen as part of war booty, and then weapons and also currency have both been seen as peripheral. They have not been seen to be about aesthetics. But in southern African cultures, or in most of Africa, the blacksmiths have been central. The blacksmiths - seen as being too powerful - were often separated from society. Their specialised
manufacturing skills were associated with the ancestral realm and they embodied the nexus of the technologies that created the all powerful spears for hunting and warfare, hoes for agriculture that enabled farming and currencies and high status objects such as the ndondos or brass beads, that formed part of the bride-wealth exchange.

LB: There is also a ceremonial aspect to the weaponry.

KN: Yes, it does get used ceremonially. I think Maritz is one of the few collectors who took it on board and who has really understood its value and significance, and in his collection has made a case for the position of that material in the larger context. It does challenge Western norms of art. We don’t normally put guns and rifles in our art museums. But what is intriguing is that those western rifles and guns get carved into wooden pieces that we have in the Wits collection where, inert, they can be considered appropriate for an art museum collection and where they function as signs of power. So there are interesting cross-overs there that I think would be really fascinating to curate and to do a show around; especially since the WAM collection is hinged on the transformed manifestations of cultural objects.

LB: And weaponry in the JAG?

KN: Both the JAG and the National Gallery have generally not collected weaponry. All these collections do include traditional weapons - but in the form of ceremonial objects, which are more staffs of office or links to the ancestral world, rather than objects of combat. The adzes in these collections are a sign of military presence or of ancestral presence.

LB: But then again, with the Maritz collection, a few of those combative objects have come through.

KN: There are very few, perhaps five. It’s interesting to consider why some objects have tended to be more popular in the collections, both private and public. JAG and WAM have so many head rests and sticks, but comparatively few meat platters and milk pails. WAM have collected some very good ones - as have the JAG, but not anywhere near as many as they collected headrests. Figures and headrests.

LB: Why do you think this is so?

I think there is something very special about the headrests, because they were identified with a particular person. They are like portraits, and a more direct link to the ancestral world through sleep and dreams. Whereas meat platters were not perceived in quite the same manner. So, headrests were highly valued in society.

LB: What do you see then as authentic southern African art, and why?

KN: Well, ‘authentic’, for me, would really revolve around the notion of objects that have been used and have been part of the society and have been made for the society. Then, in contrast, there are traditional objects that have been adapted to western taste; traditional staffs made into walking sticks for example, or meat platters that have been morphed into fruit bowls, making them at worst, into curio objects, and at best – and this can be really interesting - into a new kind of contemporary transformation of traditional skills and practices. For me, what is unacceptable, in terms of inclusion in a collection, are those objects made to deceive – presented as made and used by a particular society. There is a workshop in [Kwazulu] Natal currently making such earplugs, ivories, snuff containers, meat platters, and headrests and presenting them as old, and used. There is something really unnerving for
building a serious collection, about those deceptively-made objects. So, yes, that would be the main pivot for me around what is seen as ‘authentic’.

LB: What effect does the price of an item have on your collecting choices?

KN: There are many items I would love to have in my collection that I just don’t have the means to acquire. It’s a similar issue that we have at Wits. There are pieces that come up [at] auction that would be really important to have, but it’s quite difficult to acquire them at those prices.

LB: So it does limit your collecting choices?

KN: I think it does and I think it’s a good thing. I have bought objects that have really stretched me, and so I prefer to buy an important object that fits into the sequence that we spoke of earlier. I’d rather buy carefully than buy twenty other mediocre objects. I keep saying to JAG and WAM - rather than buying average items, let’s save our money and wait to buy a few really extraordinary objects. Whereas, if you have a really remarkable object, it becomes iconic for the collection. I think that’s really how we need to think.

LB: How strongly have your collecting choices been based on aesthetic considerations then?

KN: Hugely.

LB: I mean, would you choose an object that may not necessarily be considered as valuable in terms of price, but aesthetically you acknowledge it as valuable?

KN: Yes, you know, rarity very often pushes up price, but sometimes rare objects don’t necessarily appeal to me. You know, I might prefer a Swazi object that has been carved by a great contemporary carver, than a very old one that doesn’t have much aesthetic force for me. So, those are the kinds of decisions that I would make.

LB: I suppose what I am really trying to get at is this idea of ‘value’ that people speak about. What that actually even means.

KN: Well I suppose monetary value, is really, what people are prepared to pay; and what the competition for acquiring objects leads to in the market. When we curated Art and Ambiguity and published a catalogue, it alerted collectors around the world to the existence of a profound tradition of southern African art, which led to a rise in interest, and concomitant rise in prices for these objects around the world. Museums internationally, such as the Metropolitan in New York and the Cleveland museum in Ohio amongst others, are slowly trying to acquire Southern African pieces to augment their collections. That of course pushes up the prices. But the prices are often pushed up by private collectors, who are most probably more determined very often than museums. As in auctions, the price of a piece can be pushed into stratospheric realms by just two competing collectors. Value is varying and it can depend largely on knowledge, taste, fashion and on the individuals in museums and on private collectors. When national importance is put onto the art, that will also affect monetary value, and of course cultural value involves a broader public imagination. I believe that more important historical southern African pieces have been repatriated to South Africa in the last three decades, than have left the country. The export of pieces is now vetted by the South African Monuments council, in an attempt to stem the so-called ‘tide’ of objects leaving the country. Many collectors also do recognise the importance of keeping the material in South African collections, as was the case with the Maritz collection, which has been partly bought by Wits University. The remainder of the collection having been offered to the [South
African National Gallery and the JAG will probably leave the country, as these institutions have been unable to raise state or private funding to acquire the collection.

LB: Lastly, what effect do you think that both the heritage and documentation of objects have on your collecting choices?

KN: Historical context always acts as a backdrop to the objects, which themselves form a kind of documentation of a heritage when you know how to read them. One can only understand the object when one understands the history and what shaped the nation or the psyche or the economy. So it’s crucial to the understanding of objects in terms of where they are and how they are. The fact that a huge amount of Zulu material ended up in Britain is interesting historically and the fact that it moves back to SA is also historical, and adds another layer to what the object embodies. They track the political moment, and so these objects are now loaded with notions of repatriation, return from exile, reclamation of a past and of identities which have been erased. Whilst such tracking can record and reveal important histories, the documentation of South African objects, where they came from, where they were taken from is sadly almost nonexistent. And the fact that there is so little recorded, attests to the colonial mindset, and their particular values or views of Africa. With most of the pieces that have been collected - we don’t know where they have come from, who they belonged to, who made them or who collected them. So it’s a puzzle that we have been working on over the last two or three decades. To try and understand the region of objects, the identity of groups, what their relationship is to each other, what constitutes a core style in relation to the hybridity that emerges where one group abuts another and what various migrations brought with them. So it is a matter of reconstructing the probable position of objects in a geographic sense, and also within a cultural milieu, and then within a much broader sweep of the cultural movement up the east African coast. And I think that the big challenge for all of us at present is investigating the complex nature of material production up the east coast; and how it keeps shifting and moving; and how it has distinctly different characteristics to those objects made in West and Central Africa.

I think I have pointed this out to you, but you can see with the Swazi headrest on the top shelf and the Ngoni headrest below it [pointing] – they have a family resemblance. But the Ngoni left Swaziland and went up into Malawi and lived in that region and there you can still see the residual form of the Swazi headrest. For me that is so fascinating - how a form can lodge itself so deeply in the cultural mind. Much like a species slowly adapting to its environment. It’s like bird species that I have seen in SA and in Madagascar. They are the same, they look almost exactly the same, but the Madagascan ones developed along their own lines. And so they are the same but they are different. For many of us it is important to try and understand what the interlocking patterns are, because for instance in Swazi culture, there are strong characteristics that are both Sotho and Nguni. The political borderlines that define Swaziland – as with most countries - are really an artificial overlay; they isolate or contain groups who in fact culturally and historically spill over into Zululand and into Limpopo province. The map boundary has really very little to do with the material culture – or the deep social and historical systems that gave rise to the forms and objects that are so much more varied and rich in what they have to tell us. And this case alerts us to the myriads of cases that are deeply complex and have a profound effect on interpreting, understanding, and knowing - that needs to inform any serious collection for future scholars and citizens.
Appendix 4: Catalogue

*Karel Nel’s Private Collection of ‘traditional’ Southern African Art*

Please see Excel document attached via CD.
Appendix 5: Interview Template

Parameters of collecting:

1. Why do you collect art?
2. How do you decide what items to collect?
3. What kind of objects do you see as important and collectable? WHY do you see these objects as important?
4. How are you as a collector affected by established collecting practices and norms?
5. How much influence does the European notion of collecting have on southern African collecting practices?
6. What do you wish to add to your collection and why?

Influence:

7. Do you think your collection of southern African art has a particular significance in a wider social context? If so, how or in what way?
8. Would you say that you have influenced the formation of WAM’s collection of southern African art? If so, in what way?
9. Would you say that you have influenced the formation of JAG’s collection of southern African art? If so, in what way?

Cultural Heritage:

10. What is your understanding of the term ‘cultural heritage’?
11. Who do you think has the authority to define what is seen as ‘national’ or ‘cultural’ heritage for this region?
12. Would you agree that public collections such as WAM’s and JAG’s build a particular ‘cultural heritage’ for the South African nation?
13. Do you feel that your collection is an accurate reflection of ‘cultural heritage’ for the South African nation?

Authenticity:

14. Do the collections held at WAM and JAG accurately reflect southern African material culture?
15. What has been included and excluded from southern African art collections and why?
16. Due to collecting guidelines provided by Standard Bank, the Wits Art Museum’s collection of southern African art has been restricted to certain definitions of African art. What have these restrictions meant to your understanding of the collection as a collection of African Art?
17. What is seen as ‘authentic’ southern African art and why?
18. How would you define the thorny question of ‘authenticity’ in relation to southern African objects?
19. What effect does the price of the item have on your collecting choices?
20. What effect does the aesthetic of the item have on your collecting choices?
21. What effect does the heritage of the item have on your collecting choices?
22. What effect does the documentary of the item have on your collecting choices?
23. How would you define the value of an artwork? Or, what makes an object valuable?
FIGURES:

Figure 1: Map of southern African ‘traditional’ art from “Ubuntu: Arts et cultures d’Afrique du Sud” (2002), pg. 64.
Figure 2: Map of southern African ‘traditional’ art from *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (1996), pg. 178.
Figure 3: Artist Unknown. Initiation Figure, male and female. Pedi. circa 1930. Ochre, wood, hide. 54x17.5x15cm. Wits Museum of Ethnology (Wits Art Museum). WME/012-013.
Figure 4: LEFT: Artist Unknown. Gimwane (Child Figure). Ntswane. 20th century. Plastic, grass, glass beads, string, polish, leather, metal chain, plastic buttons, thread. 31x15.5x10cm. Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art (Wits Art Museum). 2004.16.04.
RIGHT: Artist Unknown. Umdwana (Child Figure). Ndebele. 20th Century. Plastic Doll, bead, fabric, nylon. 30x8x4.5cm. Presented in 2001 by Rayda Becker to Wits Art Museum. 2001.19.01
Figure 5: Map of Southern African 'traditional' art in *Catalogue: Ten Years of Collecting (1979-1989)*, pg. II.

Figure 6: Image of Horn, North Nguni. circa 1879. Cow horn engraved with scenes of the Anglo-Zulu war, 50cm. Attributed to the engraver of the Natal Museums. In *The Mlungu in Africa: art from the colonial period, 1840-1940* (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart, 2003), pg. 36-37.
Figure 7: Images of 19th/early 20th century Southern African ‘traditional’ wood work held in the Brenthurst collection (long-term loan to JAG). In *1910-2010: 100 Years of Collecting: The Johannesburg Art Gallery* (2010). Pg. 90-91.
Figure 8: Images of 20th century southern African ‘traditional’ beadwork held in the JAG collection. In 1910-2010; 100 Years of Collecting: The Johannesburg Art Gallery (2010), pg. 109.
Figure 10: LEFT: Artist Unknown. Figure Staff. Tanzania. Unknown Date. Wood, bead. 100x7x4.4cm. Collection of Karel Nel. K.N.CS.120. RIGHT: Artist Unknown. Figure Staff. Tanzania. Unknown Date. Wood, bead, metal. 106x61x3cm. K.N.CS.121.
Figure 11: Ndebele Blanket not only depicting beaded images of modern housing with electricity but also made from modern materials. Artist Unknown. Ndebele. Unknown date. Blanket, bead, thread, glass, plastic. 97x158cm. Collection Karel Nel. K.N.BW.190.
Figure 12: Artist Unknown. Staffs. Swazi. 20th C. Wood. Collected by Karel Nel for his Collection. K.N.CS.43-49.
Figure 13: Artist Unknown. Child Figure. 20th century. Swazi. Nylon thread, beads, metal wire, buttons. 82x9x6cm. Collection of Karel Nel. K.N.D.62.
Figure 14: Artist Unknown. Headrest. Swazi. Unknown Date. Wood. Collection of Karel Nel. 14.2x42x9.
Figure 15: Artist Unknown. Apron. Ndebele. Late 20th century. Plastic, fabric, lace, foil. 64.1x56.5cm. Collection of Karel Nel. K.N.BW.215.