

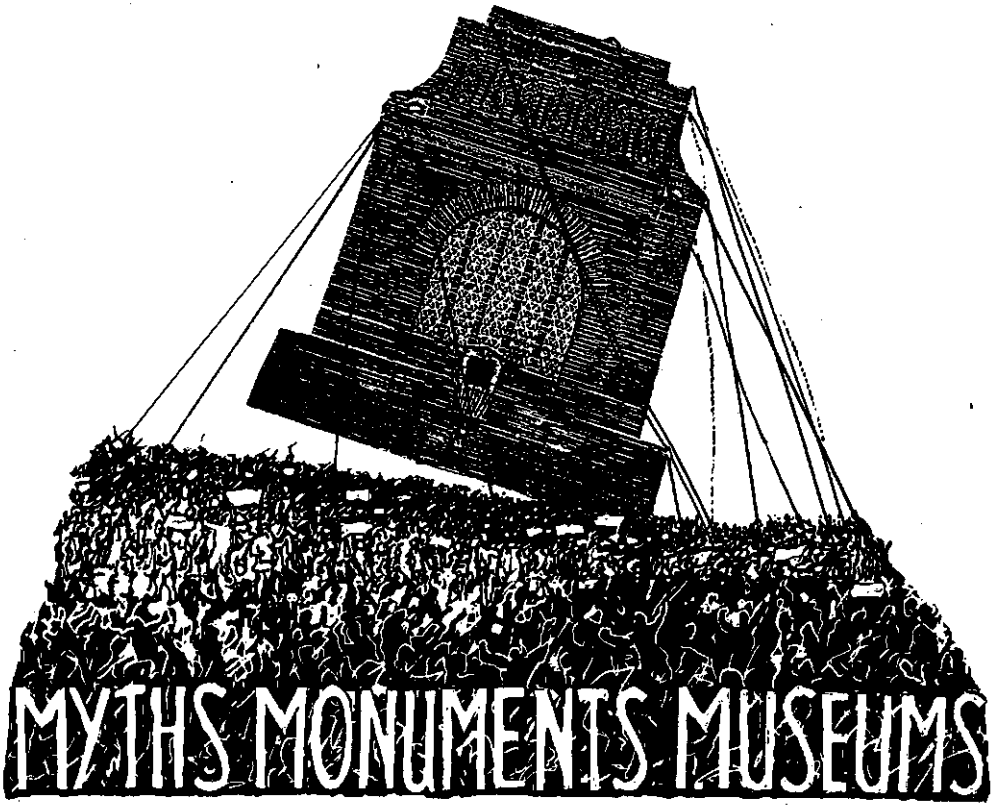
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16 - 18 JULY 1992

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
HISTORY WORKSHOP

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THE BRENTHURST DISPLAY AT THE
JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

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AFRICANA

A CLASH OF IDENTITIES?: THE BRENTHURST DISPLAY AT THE JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

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The display of the Brenthurst Collection marks the first time a sizeable quantity of southern African Art has been displayed in a South African art museum and, because of this, it is a momentous event. However, the idea of a collection which draws from the pre-colonial past at a time when we are celebrating our new future, is not unique. The Brenthurst collection may be contextualised within a new wave of cultural festivals from third-world countries that, wittingly or not, aim to change the negative stereotypes of their countries into positive ones in the eyes of potential foreign investors and attempt to establish diplomatic ties with key world-powers. The way culture is manipulated in most of these cultural festivals is consistent with the way it operates in the Brenthurst Exhibition. A harmonious, seamless, ahistorical and exotic past is constructed that unites or represents a nation's new perception of itself and which makes the future of such a nation seem elegant, untroubled and limitless.

The current exhibition is exquisite to look at, of that there is little doubt. This paper suggests, however, that often the exhibition falls between two stools primarily because these traditional objects have different meanings for the contemporary municipal gallery in the New South Africa and the ethnographic and artistic concerns of scholars. Again, these differ from the meanings invested in the objects by collectors and dealers. While this in itself is not a serious problem, the way in which the exhibition tries to address all these audiences means, arguably, that they do not really address any of them seriously nor are they able to make their aims and their positions clear to the visitor to the exhibition.

This essay begins by outlining the official aims of the exhibition. It then continues to deconstruct these official statements to show that, while they were probably conceived with the best intentions, and while they claim that the objects on the exhibition may be separated from contemporary political meanings, they still defend powerful, cultural positions that play an important role in the way power is being mapped out in the cultural politics of the city. I suggest that these objects have a current significance which outweighs their traditional meanings and that these new meanings are clearly expressed in the exhibition of the Brenthurst Collection.

As I have already said the display of the Brenthurst Collection marks the first time a sizeable quantity of southern African Art has been displayed in a South African art museum. This accounts for the CELEBRATION. After years of marginalisation, it took over 3 years, a big-budget display and a gala opening, for the art of southern Africa to make its debut to the Johannesburg art world.

The people involved with the exhibition have expressed a

number of different purposes for displaying the objects. None of the aims are contradictory though and so, on one level, there is quite a clear, direct and coherent statement of intent from the organisers: to inform us about the objects, to celebrate them, to admire and commemorate them on the one hand and, on the other, to actively engage and connect with the works and the way they have been displayed.

The Brenthurst Collection has been placed firmly within the context of ceremony and rejoicement. The advertising flyer for the exhibition brings these two components - the commemorative function and the challenge to traditional art historical methods of display and audience reception - together in a paragraph which reads: "the Brenthurst Collection is of great importance in that it provides an historical document of the cultural production of southern Africa's black people". In this way it highlights the commemorative function of the display. It continues to read, "it is a highly valuable cultural resource and its exhibition will have the effect of re-evaluating the manner in which southern African art is viewed world-wide". This part highlights two points with regard to traditional art historical interpretation. First, that African art history has tended to neglect or, even dismiss, southern African art in favour of the arts of north and west Africa, an imbalance the exhibition hopes to redress. Second, that the organisers of the display hope to encourage the audience to view the objects as art rather than as artefact and in this way challenge traditional definitions of art.

Christopher Till and Es'kia Mphahlele in their introductions to the catalogue both underline the exhibitions commemorative aspects. Till, who speaks in a language that parallels the language we are used to hearing in the political arena, welcomes the return of the art of southern Africa to this continent from the auction houses of Europe. In the same rhetoric that describes the return of the exiles, these wooden exiles are greeted and received for the first time by the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) as art rather than artefact. The flyer to the exhibition claims that "the event marks the significant return of these objects to their country of origin" while Till makes reference to Harry Oppenheimer's generous assistance in the return of the objects. Till also recognises their new, elevated status when he writes that "the relocation of material from ethnographic to art museums is not a new phenomenon. However, in South Africa the opportunity to exhibit this collection in an art museum context has sharpened the focus on the art of this region"[1] Till praises the new status of the objects to the realm of art and shows that one of the aims of the display was precisely to isolate and privilege the aesthetic qualities of the work. He writes of the display that "there is a response to the form and a conscious presentation of this as a major factor" and he notes that this is "in keeping with the function of the art gallery and a recognition of a particular aesthetic"[2]

Mphahlele too, responds to the form of the works. He places them in the wider context of African art from the rest of the

continent and postulates an aesthetic unity between cultural products of southern Africa and the rest of Africa. He expands Till's celebration of the objects themselves to a celebration of African life in general. For him, the works point to the dignity of African life and to a holistic concept of life. For him, the African artist "created out of a sense of organic unity between the spiritual forces, the material wants, the concrete materials used, temporal and spatial dimensions, reverence for life and for the creative act: part of what we refer to as African humanism"[3] He wraps up his tribute to African creativity, which the Brenthurst Collection represents for him, by writing that "the stillness of this universe of art accentuates the sense of being rather than self-conscious movement. A stillness with its own inner rhythm. A rhythm with its own inner echoes. Echoes with their own inner poetry"[4]

While Till and Mphahlele celebrate the commemorative role of the display, the art historians who were involved in selecting the works and who contributed interpretive essays in the catalogue concentrated their praise on the curated nature of the display. Patricia Davison summarises the intentions of the art historians for the display. She questions the display of objects in a way that pretends to preserve their original meanings. She notes, validly, that when objects of use are removed from their original contexts they "become part of other contexts, in which they are invested with new meanings and associations"[5] Because of this, she urges the viewer to conceive of the exhibition as "a visual interpretation" of a collection of objects by a group of curators. We are encouraged not to look at the works in the vain hope of establishing what they once meant, but we are invited to interpret the meanings they hold for us in their present context. In this way, Davison proposes that one of the aims of the display was to promote an interactive process of viewing. She writes that "an implicit aim of the exhibition is to evoke creative viewing and to stimulate participation in the interpretive process".[6] She admits that the objects may have been decontextualised by being placed in a western context, but notes, idealistically, that the objects may be regenerated and enriched by the new meanings they evoke in the sensitive and responsive viewer. She makes her position clear when she says of the objects that "some might say they have been culturally appropriated into the rarefied realm of high Art. However, this would be to take a limited view of the exhibition, and would not allow that the exhibits may be 'humanised' by the responses they evoke in viewers".[7] She insists that "the gap between lived experience and the exhibited object is closed by the responsive viewer" and that this is the modern function of the museum.[8]

The purpose of citing the statements of the organisers has been to demonstrate that the overarching aim of the exhibition is CELEBRATION: to endorse the objects from the past as art and to honour a pre-apartheid past. But it also celebrates the present and the future South Africa. It does this by downplaying the issues raised by the objects and underlining their form.

The display doesn't address the biography of the individuals who made the objects; it doesn't address the context or the time period in which they were made; it doesn't address who owns the objects or why they are placed in an art gallery. It does, however, place them in beautiful glass cabinets which provides a focus for their formal qualities. The message that envelops the display is that while we may still have our cultural differences in the New South Africa, we can transcend these differences through an aesthetic project which neutralises ideology. Here is art in the name of Mphahlele's HUMANISM. Here is art that appeals to a common spirit that we all share and which is witnessed in a so-called pure 'creativity', in 'imagination', in 'form'. Here is an art that transcends time and history. There is no doubt that this reverence for the material products of a pre-apartheid past and this plea for an aesthetics beyond politics is, in spite of itself, ideologically motivated. The rhetoric of the exhibition that I have cited is in line with the rhetoric of 'nation-building' that surrounds us. Leroy Vail has already suggested, in an analysis of other parts of Africa, that the scholarly concerns of nation-building include the recovery of the pre-colonial past and an exploration of anti-colonial resistance and its flowering into progressive nationalism.[9] His analysis may be translated almost word-for-word to the South African context.

It may be argued that the display of the Brenthurst Collection at the end of 1991 and beginning of 1992, may be viewed as one more cultural project in the reconstructive process. It is 'affirmative' of our past; it is 'inclusive' in the way it draws different traditions into a western context and the way it attempts to draw the public into the gallery space. It is an exhibition that bears the stamp of 'reconciliation', 'tolerance', 'unity'.[10] While a project that participates in the process of nation-building is to be applauded, there is a distinction to be made between nation-building and creating a nation for sale on an international market and the problem presented by the Brenthurst Collection lies in this distinction.

We know from the writings of Edward Said and others, that nationalism is always constructed. This means that there is no essential 'New South Africa',that has been simmering for years and, which is now ready to burst out. Rather, an 'New South Africa' has to be created and culture offers one way of inventing and expressing the unity of this new nation. This is the important and necessary step that South Africa is undergoing now. Said suggests this in the following statement and, while he writes generally, almost every word seems applicable to South Africa. He writes that "at some stage in the development of every national group there is a need for nationalism. The establishment of nationalism includes the refurbishing of one's past, the invention of traditions and the recapturing of cultural, geographical or political territory that was taken by others".[11] The process of manufacturing a group identity is vital, and this is the reason that we need to be especially vigilante of who is empowered with the task of representing this new nation and we

need to be aware of the visual signs they are using to represent us. It may be argued that the Brenthurst Collection participates in the wider project of cultural reconstruction but, it may be counter argued, that its organisers comprise a handful of culture brokers whose representation of the nation has not been undertaken together with other democratic structures and rather than sharing their aims the Brenthurst Collection seems to fall in line with common contemporary international cultural strategies.

Indeed the idea of an art exhibition which exploits the past to construct a new nation is not unusual. Brian Wallis has recently tabulated many such exhibitions held in America which usually form one part of a more extensive cultural festival which 'sells' a nation, usually to the U.S.. The 1987-88 **Turkey: The Continuing Magnificence**, the 1990 **Festival of Indonesia** and the 1991 **Mexico: A Work of Art** are all examples of art shows which invent nations and then display them to a foreign market. The Brenthurst Collection exhibition is constructed in the same way as these festivals but rather than portraying the South African heritage to an American audience on their home turf, we are portraying and constructing our national heritage for ourselves first. Of course we aim to attract visitors to view the exhibition at the same time, but primarily this exhibition aims to provide a local audience with a sense of heritage. In the light of this, it is imperative to note that Christopher Till, who largely masterminded the organisation of the Brenthurst Exhibition, when he was still director of the JAG, hoped that this would only be the first stage of exposing these artworks and has expressed the hope that this exhibition will finally be seen in an international forum.

He writes in the catalogue that

> there are fine examples from this area in collections world-wide and an exhibition featuring the best of these is seen as the second part of the initiative to put southern African art into context by bringing these examples together for an international exhibition in the future

This would mean, implicitly, that the Brenthurst Collection would duplicate the concerns of the exhibitions mentioned previously and would market our heritage to international consumers. This may or may not be a good idea, but it is a decision that needs to be made only after widely consulting with democratic structures whose aims it may be contradicting. It is also important to note that in his new position as cultural director of the city, Christopher Till is investigating the possibility of a cultural festival for September 1992 which aims to promote the city and to advertise it as being the cultural mecca of South Africa. Christopher Till and representatives from TWS, the advertising agency that is helping to promote the interests of the new director of culture, both confirm that even if nothing as structured as a cultural festival occurs in September, there will be an informal focus on culture, which again aims to earmark

Johannesburg as a 'destination city'. In this way, he would again be situating culture within the broader context of the international cultural festivals that Wallis describes.

Art has been used in the service of ideology from time immemorial as Wallis points out. He writes that the heritage exhibition and "the festival concept only signals a more aggressive assertion of nationalism and a greater inclination to manipulate the manifold powers of the culture industry"[12]

What is even more interesting about the Brenthurst Collection, in relation to this statement, is the source of the images that are being used to represent our past and to construct a national identity.

While we are 'refurbishing' the national past we are doing so with images that are, in fact, part of a private collection. These images are only on loan to the municipality and are still the private domain of mining magnate , Harry Oppenheimer. Brenthurst is the name of the Oppenheimer family home and, so, while we celebrate a national heritage, we celebrate a private patron, a private collection and the values of connoisseurship. While I think it is certainly a valid project and a brave one for a wealthy collector to declare his property publicly so that the public can see the enormous wealth that is owned in this country, we should be aware that this is still a private collection. What this means, is that while the JAG hosts a major show of traditional southern African objects, it still has not officially committed its budget to purchasing such objects. JAG has committed itself in principle to filling this gap, and should be commended on the steps it has taken in this direction. The creation of a post for an african art curator is testimony to their sincerity, but as yet, only the Jacques collection of headrests and a few other items have been purchased in this area. In many ways the gallery still reflects the needs of its rate-payers, but the new Johannesburg with its new residents should be made aware that this collection is not owned but on loan and should be able to make their needs for a cultural heritage heard and met by the municipality.

So, we are building an image of ourselves with a private collection. But more than this, Oppenheimer bought the collection from Jonathan Lowen who selected and purchased the works from London auction houses. Jonathan Lowen is South African in origin. He now lives in London where he practises as a Barrister. His interest in these objects is the interest of the collector rather than the ethnographer or the art historian. This accounts for the kinds of objects that are included in the collection as well as the way they have been catalogued. While I do not deny that he is passionate about African Art and I certainly do not question his knowledge about African Art, it is important, when dealing with issues of nationalism, to bear in mind that Lowen's primary reason for collecting these objects was "to sell them" for a good price. Lowen himself recognises that his aims for collecting and cataloguing these objects was at odds with the cataloguing

needs and the cultural needs of the organisers of the exhibition. In a letter dated 5 March 1991, he wrote to Rayda Becker that

> there is no easy substitute for effort, experience and time invested. I think there is a very different approach between art collectors and ethnologists. The collection should provoke questions, as well as provide answers. The card index does not pretend to be an ethnographical thesis.

This statement shows clearly that they were bought as commodities from western dealers, yet now they serve as indicators of our cultural heritage. The JAG exhibition again falls between two stools: those of history and investment.

History and investment; knowledge and commodity are also uneasily wedded in the cataloguing of the objects. Cataloguing and labelling objects in an exhibition gives us some insight as to the intentions of the curators. Labels can, for example, tell us who made the objects, or when and where they were made. They can differentiate objects by function, carving techniques, materials used or who commissioned them and where they were placed or, even how the objects have been appropriated since the time in which they were made. The information we are given determines the way we look at the objects and the meanings we assign to them. Yet here, for the most part, the cataloguing of the collector has been retained and the curators have not visibly allowed the information provided to raise questions about art or politics or society or history.

When Jonathan Lowen bought the objects, some of them had no provenance at all and some were catalogued inaccurately. As an example of this, Sandra Klopper describes in her catalogue essay, the way that Lowen employed Margaret Carey, a British ethnologist, to catalogue the collection in the winter of 1983-84. As Klopper shows, she classified many of the objects as 'zulu' simply because of a lack of information about the objects. It is important to recognise that the objects in the Brenthurst Collection come to us as commodities via the dealers, the auctions, the scholars of London and, as such, their original contexts recede into a grave, unknown silence. Jonathan Lowen recognises this. In his letter to Rayda Becker, he writes that

> since everything was detached from its source, a good deal of assumption and guestimate was necessary.

In his letter, he goes on to list 4 main ways that he and Carey arrived at the attributions. It is really interesting for me that all his attributions were made on the basis of other art historical references made by westerners for a western context. The original places and functions of the artworks were never consulted and this once more places the objects in the context of western art history rather than on the continent of Africa. First, he says that he made "comparisons between my items and those in museum collections

where attribution was documented". Second, he made attributions through "a process of judgement based on stylistic relationships and detailing, that is cultural handwriting". Third, he notes that

> in some areas the process was easier - eg beadwork dolls came largely from a collection previously exhibited in the Salisbury museum. The person who collected those prepared the catalogue. I've relied on his attributions

Finally, he writes that

> the information on wooden figures comes from a combination of attributions by museums which possess important items (eg Leyden, British Museum, Neuchatel, were some I visited in Europe), as well as published sources

So art historical references served as the means to catalogue the majority of this collection. I wouldn't necessarily find this problematic if the works were simply being displayed as one private collector's collection. It becomes problematic for me at the point that the people involved with the exhibition claim the works tell us something about African life (as Mphalele insists), about our cultural heritage or, even about the works themselves.

Rayda Becker and Anitra Nettleton provide examples in their catalogue essays that suggest that the way the objects have been grouped can actually mislead people about the objects they are looking at. Becker, for example, shows that while we are privileged to view an impressive array of headrests all at once, the stylistic deductions we draw from the display and the comparisons we make should be cautious and should recognise that

> it is highly unlikely that a carver of headrests in the past or the few who carve such items now ever saw so many as are housed in the JAG, or such a wide range during his lifetime.[13]

She also shows that received art historical traditions have led to inaccurate cataloguing. She notes, as an example of this, that art historians have for a long time considered the 'ears' or 'lugs' placed on the underside of the upper ledge of a headrest as a typically Tsonga characteristic. Because of this, many of the headrests here that have this feature have been designated as Tsonga headrests (for example, cat 250 and cat 296). Yet Becker shows that this stylistic trait has been seen in headrests found among the Shona and the Ndau speakers from Zimbabwe, to name but a few. Her analysis of cat 207 and 208 suggests that although these were initially designated as Tsonga headrests, they are more likely to be Shona headrests because of other stylistic traits that they share with Shona headrests like the flat, planar reliefs of their surfaces. She notes that originally 64 out of 127 of the headrests in the Brenthurst Collection were labelled Tsonga, but that this figure has already been reduced to 56. This uncertainty over

designation is, however, nowhere evident in the display.

Nettleton's essay provides another example that shows that while these objects all seem to come from some harmonious time period in which they functioned in an organic way, we can distinguish, in objects of a similar type, different functions. So, for example, while the standing figure (cat 46) shares characteristics with two other figures (cat 42 and 43), they were made for very different purposes. The figures may share the staring eyes and the bulging legs, but the polished, round forms of the two standing figures as well as the fact that their hairstyles appear to look particularly western and the position of their hands is atypical, suggest that these figures never functioned in the society that produced them and that they were probably made for a tourist market. The wood of the single standing figure on the other hand is marked and scratched suggesting use and the figure is more cylindrical than the naturalistic taste of westerners allowed. So, here again objects of use made for a community have not been differentiated in the display from objects made for a tourist market.

It is telling that we have depleted the international market to refurbish our past, so lost is our own past to us. But while historical points of information are lost in the display, there is another omission, which in some ways is more serious than the lack of historical data. We have seen that the project of refurbishing one's past can be an affirmative project, but that it can also become an uncritical project if the intentions of constructing an identity are not made clear in the display itself. It may be argued that these intentions are not made clear in this display.

Till recognises this and makes no apologies for it. He states in his introduction to the catalogue that the display concentrates only on highlighting the aesthetic form of the objects. For him, it is the job of the catalogue essays to situate the works in their historical context. We have already seen that it is impossible to contextualise these works historically since the information we have about them is limited, but even if such a project were possible, most of the people who saw the display, did not also buy the R50 catalogue. Not only does the display fail to speak about the historical functions of the work, it also fails to speak about the present function of the work. While, as Wallis has commented, "visual representations are a key element, in symbolizing and sustaining national bonds. Such representations are not just reactive (that is, depictions of an existing state of being), they are also purposefully creative, and they can generate new social and political formations"[14]

This is why we have to be especially responsible with the representations of the past that we bring into being. But Wallis goes further to explain how exhibitions construct a past. He writes that "through the engineered overproduction of certain types of images or the censorship or suppression of

others, and through controlling the way images are viewed or by determining which are preserved, cultural representations can also be used to produce a certain view of a nation's history"[15] In this statement, Wallis points to the fact that the meaning of images is always unstable and that images are constantly open to manipulation. Because of this, we need to use images in a responsible way to mould images of the past in South Africa and to bring new social and political formations into being.

The Brenthurst Collection, displayed at this crucial moment of our new national awareness, does not address this problem. Indeed when the objects are investigated more closely, it would appear that certain traditions have been suppressed, while a history of "conquest and assimilation" has, wittingly or not, been presented. First, certain types of objects have not been collected. van Schalkwyk points to the lack of any items of clothing and to the lack of musical instruments and, in this way, questions the representative nature of the exhibition. Second, the objects have been catalogued according to the ethnic group in which they functioned. The concept of ethnicity is never questioned in the display, at least, even though we know that the categories of ethnic groups say more about the way western scholars have categorised black people than the way black people defined themselves. Within these categories, the Brenthurst Collection favours so-called Zulu artefacts which immediately privileges these groups in the remaking of South Africa's past. Third and, perhaps most importantly, the Zulu works that are on show, even where they seem to us to be simple domestic objects seem often to have been part of the objects belonging to the royal homestead and, ironically enough, represent the Zulu king's own project of constructing a national awareness in the C19th. They are not always objects that are 'intrinsic' to Zulu culture, but were designed with the clear aim of consolidating Zulu power in much the same way that the Brenthurst Collection is being used now. The objects seem to have been part of the king's household and were used to entrench the status of the king's supporters.

Sandra Klopper has analyzed this convincingly in her catalogue essay.[18] She notes that when Shaka was expanding the kingdom, he fabricated fictive genealogical links for himself that stretched far back into history so that it would seem as if he was destined to be king. These fictive genealogies underpinned and justified his imperialistic motives as he couched his expansionist actions in the language of reclaiming land that once belonged to his fictive ancestors. At the same time as this, he used culture to redefine boundaries and create hostilities that did not previously exist in the groups who occupied the periphery of the kingdom and this legitimised his exploitation of these groups for cattle and other forms of tribute that he made them pay to him.

In order to make his imperialistic strategy work, he invented visual symbols to denote his supporters and through the appropriation of these symbols, other groups could show their support for the Zulu king. As Klopper writes, "material and

other cultural resources were mobilised to underline and reinforce these links and divisions. In many instances, then, cultural resources played an important role in attempts both to define and to maintain social and political boundaries."[17]

Klopper shows the way in which culture was used to foster unity among the disparate groups that Shaka assimilated. She describes the way in which new recruits to the army were sent away to train in the Valley of the Kings so that their induction to the army would take place amongst the graves of Zulu ancestors. As she suggests, this inculcated a fear and respect for Zulu ancestry in the young men who had recently joined the Zulu grouping. Klopper's most visually convincing example describes the use of the Amasumpa or 'wart' motif.

This motif is found on headrests, meatplates, milkpails, claypots and some figurative carvings from both the C19th and C20th. She explains that while this design has come to be described as characteristically Zulu, it originated in Nqabeni, a late 18th/early C19th settlement, near Ginginhlovu, the second Zulu king's homestead. She suggests that the design only emerged at this time and was not a traditional motif, but came to decorate courtly objects. She suggests that it would not have been used on items belonging to ordinary people because it was the "prerogative of a newly entrenched 'Zulu' elite in the early C19th"[18] It was only found on objects that were reserved for the king and his office-holders and the women in the court. Sometimes, it was used as part of a diplomatic package and would be given to the king's allies as a sign of his appreciation and a reminder of his power.

When we look at the objects in the Brenthurst Collection that have this motif like these wooden headrests (cat 223, cat 224 and cat 216), this history of power and domination is made invisible, but we are looking at a symbol of royal patronage and power and not at a seemingly harmless object from an idyllic past. So, while the Brenthurst display seems to or, even claims to, provide us with information about Black art, the black art displayed is a highly selected example of southern African cultural production and the information that has been written would suggest that some of the works served the Zulu royalty's need for a national consciousness. The Brenthurst Collection is about nation-building: the Zulu nation-builder's of the C19th and our own project of nation-building now.

While its title may insist that the exhibition is about **Art and Ambiguity**, ambiguity is the one thing that vanishes all around it. Its functions, its aims, its intentions are all quite unambiguous.

The main aim of these cultural festivals, of which Brenthurst represents a first step, is as Wallis identifies it, "to transform negative stereotypes into positive ones and, in the process, to improve the political and economic standing of their country. These exhibitions are intricate, multilayered

engines of global diplomacy, which, when staged properly, are almost indiscernible as self-promotions".[18]

Brenthurst fits in with this description of the role of the heritage exhibition and it carries out its aim of promoting a positive image of the New South Africa to the world in three ways: First, it aims to expand the role of the museum to attract a wider and more popular, local audience. Second, it aims to attract tourists and third, it aims to establish diplomatic, economic and political connections with major world powers

The Brenthurst Collection hasn't really managed to draw a popular audience, but it is an interesting fact that while JAG hasn't yet managed to bridge the gap between the gallery and the general public, it has managed to bridge the gap between the Gallery and the Academy. Except for three people, all the contributions in the catalogue are drawn from Wits graduates or people currently employed at Wits. The design of the display, the catalogue and the educational programme, including this series of lectures and the tours of the exhibition, are all almost staffed 100% by Wits graduates. So while the exhibition cannot claim to be populist, it can claim to have closed the gap between gallery and gown. This is important, because it is time that the research that occurs in the university, filters through and affects the way exhibitions are displayed. While I commend this initiative, the issues raised in the catalogue essays by academics about the problems inherent in displaying African art in a western context, the problems raised surrounding history and ethnicity have not been brought to fruition in the display where none of these issues are raised in an overt way. But where the Brenthurst display has carried out its aim, is in its informal ambassadorial function.

Writers from all over Africa, who were in South Africa for the COSAW Writers Congress, were invited to the opening of the exhibition and, today, there is a group of people present from Philadelphia, who have been visiting trade fairs in Africa. While these are 'fortuitous coincidences' to quote Till, rather than representing a conscious programme of diplomacy, the Brenthurst exhibition is being viewed by outsiders as a national heritage exhibition.

All images can be manipulated. I am not making a plea here, innocently, for the new South Africa to represent a 'real' past or a 'true' heritage, but we do need to consider how we are being represented to foreigners and by whom. We need to consider whose interests this particular representation serves. The Brenthurst Collection is part of a successful project to attract tourists and establish trade and political links with the international market, but the people working in democratic structures have not been consulted or involved in this exhibition.

The art of the past is being used to make the transition from an apartheid state into a bright, new, competitive, capitalist state happen. The new state has to make itself appear as if

it has always been there and to make apartheid seem like a little hiccup in something that was always there anyway. As Benedict Anderson writes, "if nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical', the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future".[20] The reality of South Africa now is not Mphahlele's harmonious humanistic world. Arguably, the cultural festival actively denies those realities. Wallis suggests that "national cultural festivals mask the contemporary situation in the countries, especially the factionalism, by papering them over with catchphrases"[21]

I'd like to conclude by raising the issue of factionalism in a quite unstructured way in a discussion about nationality and ethnicity - the final stools between which Brenthurst falls. Leroy Vail, in his introduction to **The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa**, explains these concepts clearly and with enormous insight. He begins by outlining the problem and defining the terms. He explains that as the southern African states gained independence, the new national governments expected that modernisation would offer a new national consciousness that would bring these states in line with western nation-states. The new national movements emphasised modernisation in the form of greater access to education; improved communications; movement of people from the rural sectors of economy to the bright, developing industrial sectors. They believed and, we believe today in South Africa, that these developments would foster a national, democratic consciousness that would cut through the older, regional, conservative ethnic or tribal groupings. Vail encapsulates the belief of the national movements when he writes that, for them, the parochial ethnic loyalties were merely

> cultural ghosts lingering on into the present, weakened anomalies from a fast receding past. As such they were destined to disappear in the face of the social, economic and political changes that were everywhere at work[22]

He notes the enthusiasm that everyone felt with nationalism when he says

> for almost every observer nationalism seemed progressive and laudable, while ethnicity - or, as it was usually termed, 'tribalism' - was retrogressive and divisive[23]

It may be argued that this is where we are in South Africa now. Those that agree with the democratic structures that are trying to build a national culture that cuts through ethnic difference also agree that movements that stress tribal or ethnic differences consciously hinder the nation-building process. So where does this leave a beautiful exhibition like **Art and Ambiguity** placed in a renovated gallery that equals, if not betters, the standard of any international modern museum yet which displays african objects in a way that emphasises their exotic tribal aspects. They are labelled

according to ethnic groups, with an implied emphasis on so-called Zulu objects; they are decontextualised and frozen in time suggesting that they represent an 'other' - a quiet, harmonious tribal past. This ahistorical, awkward balance between ethnicity and nationalism seems tenuous, if not unacceptable.

** This paper was presented at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in March 1992 as part of their educational programme surrounding the display of the Brenthurst Collection

Endnotes:

1. C Till, **Art and Ambiguity: Perspectives on the Brenthurst Collection of southern African Art**, catalogue (Johannesburg: JAG, 1991) 3

2. C Till **Art and Ambiguity** 2

3.E Mphahlele, **Art and Ambiguity** 9

4. E Mphahlele, **Art and Ambiguity** 9

5. P Davison, **Art and Ambiguity** 14

6. P Davison, **Art and Ambiguity** 13

7. P Davison **Art and Ambiguity** 18

8. P Davison, **Art and Ambiguity** 18

9. L Vail, **The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa**, (London: James Currey, 1989) 5

10. The very fact that Mphahlele, who represents a pan-Africanist position, and Till, who represents the official municipal position, can speak almost entirely the same language demonstrates this point further.

11. E Said, qtd. in 'Art and National Identity: A Critics' Symposium' **Art in America** september (1991):80

12. B Wallis, "Selling Nations", **Art in America**, September (1991):86

13. Becker R **Art and Ambiguity** 58

14. Wallis, "Selling Nations" 86

15. Wallis, "Selling Nations" 86

16. S Klopper, **Art and Ambiguity**

17. S Klopper, **Art and Ambiguity** 81

18. S Klopper, **Art and Ambiguity** 85

19. Wallis, "Selling Nations" 86

20. Wallis, "Selling Nations" 88

21. Wallis, "Selling Nations" 89

22. Vail, L **The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa**, (James Curry: London, 1989) 1

23. Vail, **Tribalism** 2