

ABSTRACT

This research report is a critical analysis of the Free State¹ art scene from 1950-1989, conducted primarily through an account of the Bloemfontein Group. It argues that this period is a significant indicator of a shift in the city's art scene, from an earlier, formalist focus to a more conceptual orientation in the art scene in Bloemfontein. An important aspect of this research is the significance of the formation of the Bloemfontein Group, and the extent of their role and influence during this period, which together can be seen as a key catalyst in the shift to conceptual art.

Through extensive archival research, I have constructed a visual timeline of the art scene in Bloemfontein, including significant events in the wider Free State region. The construction of the timeline is a crucial part of the unravelling and interrogation of undiscovered conceptual developments relating to museum practices in the Free State. This is in turn informed by conversations and debates about the history of exhibitions, the origins of an art collection, and more specifically, how an art phenomenon such as the Bloemfontein Group not only contributed to a contemporary artistic identity in the Free State, but was also the driver behind the establishment of the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein.

The methodology in this research report is based primarily on archival research and interviews:

- The Free State archives (newspaper clippings from the *Friend* newspaper were the most useful);
- Oliewenhuis Art Museum research library (where invaluable information was found on the Group itself, including more newspaper clippings, information on the individual artists, with specific emphasis on Professor Fred and Mrs Dora Scott);
- William Humphrey's Art Gallery's research library where I found additional archival documents on the Group's exhibition at the gallery in 1966.
- The Johannes Stegmann Art Gallery archives at the University of the Free State² and
- Louis, Willem and Fred Scott's personal archives

¹ Formerly known as the Orange Free State.

² Formerly known as the University of the Orange Free State.

Interviews were conducted with the following individuals with the aim of gathering further insight into the timeline. The interviewees were selected on the basis of either their involvement during the timeframe under question, their being descendants of the Scott family, or a surviving member of the Bloemfontein Group:

- Rina Lubbs (surviving member of the Free State Art Society, Social Committee and *Volksblad* art critic from 1969-1984);
- Anna-Rosa Witthuhn (surviving member of the Free State Art Society and Social Committee);
- Doctor Fred Scott and Professor Louis Scott (sons of the belated Doctor Frik and Dora Scott);
- Eben van der Merwe (surviving member of the Bloemfontein Group);
- Stefan Hundt (former curator of Oliewenhuis Art Museum from 1993-1997) and
- Professor Suzanne Human (Head of Department of History of Art and Image Studies, University of the Free State).

Throughout the Research Report I refer to different terminology that enabled me not only to construct a consistent discussion but also to demonstrate the systematic methodology I formulated to conduct the research. By using archival documentation such as newspaper clippings as primary resource to enable research on a time frame, which had never been researched before, I was prompted to apply the terminology to categorize and sort the archival material and also to explain to the reader the methodology to some extent.

Visual map: I commenced the Research Report with a visual map of artworks made by the Bloemfontein Group. I used the word 'map' deliberately to outline/map/illustrate visual examples of the Bloemfontein Group's artworks. The function of the visual map is to introduce the reader to artworks produced by the Bloemfontein Group on a whole without limiting the artworks to 24 pieces that were donated to Oliewenhuis Art Museum. The works are not placed in a particular order as the map merely serves to visually introduce the reader to the nature of the artworks of the Bloemfontein Group.

Timeframe: Primary resources used to conduct the research were archival material. This mostly included newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, official museum records, exhibition invitations and press releases. Therefore

my methodology included a large amount of ordering, numbering and systematising archival material sourced. This enabled me to order the research in different timeframes e.g. 1950, 1960, 1970 and 1980. The timeframe assisted me in examining the archival material intently and to uncover a narration of the Bloemfontein art scene within the specific timeframe. I realised that this specific timeframe indicated the majority of the art-related progression in Bloemfontein and was a crucial process as the ordering of the records lead me to design a chronological timeline within the timeframe.

Chronological timeline: The methodology and my process further progressed as I ordered the timeframe into a chronological timeline that included exhibitions held in the timeframe, important progressions of art related events and important individuals that steered the mind-set of artists, art patrons and art supporters. By ordering and systematising the events and exhibitions within a specific timeframe, I was aided in my understanding of the narrative that emerged within the timeline I designed. The unravelling of the exhibitions and happenings held within a timeframe also assisted me to illustrate the timeline.

Illustrated timeline and exhibition timeline: By illustrating the timeline I attempted to add imagery viz: artworks produced for specific exhibitions or illustrations of artworks produced that align with the timeframe, exhibitions or exhibition openings, exhibition invitations and photographs of leading societies or individuals. This was vital as the newspaper clippings very rarely offered imagery of artworks or exhibitions that took place. This extremely time consuming task was an essential part of the research as it enabled me to understand the timeline better and to initiate visual debates about the local art environment versus national art-related debates. Due to the lack of imagery available, some illustrations were repeatedly used also to emphasise a statement or to make the image emblematic of developments specific to the Bloemfontein region.