The history of the South African National Gallery since its inception in 1871 has been a cyclical tale of state neglect, indifference and frustrated vision. Without the dedication and resourcefulness of its Directors, Staff and Friends' Organisation over many years, little would have been achieved. Much needs to be done to remove the obstacles which have stunted its potential, and to enhance and support its key role as our premier museum of the visual arts.

Our National Gallery: The 'Book' of our Art?

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.
John Ruskin (1819-1900)

"...museum people serve not only the public, but the artist, whether that artist's work is in the collection or not, by a scrupulous adherence to high artistic and intellectual standards. This discipline is not quantifiable, but it is or should be disinterested, and there are two sure ways to wreck it. One is to let the art market dictate its values to the museum. The other is to convert it into an arena for battles that have to be fought – but fought in the sphere of politics. Only if it resists both can the museum continue with its task of helping us discover a great but always partially lost civilisation – our own.
Robert Hughes: Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America[1]

The idea of a "national" gallery

Ever since Napoleon opened the doors of the Louvre to the public in 1793, "national" galleries, wherever they now exist, have become bound up with "national" aspirations. His gesture signalled a new, self-conscious awareness of art as history and as contemporary expression, as well as the assumption of responsibility by the State for its display as an expression of national identity and pride. As indicators of a country's self-esteem, national galleries can differ markedly in character. Britain's National Gallery in London, founded in 1824, is largely a showcase for European painting between 1250 and 1850. The main responsibility for "national" British art in its various aspects is spread over other London institutions. Other national galleries, founded in emulation of the London exemplar in Britain's former colonies, like Canada or Australia, tend to reflect a specific and emerging national cultural identity. Despite its largely foreign collection, London's National Gallery has yet been a focus of British pride. In 1861 Anthony Trollope said of it that: "I conceive that our National Gallery should be a subject of self-congratulation to every Englishman who sees it; that every Englishman should say, in the pride of his heart, that in collecting it in so short a time his country has done what no other country could achieve"[2].

Hayden Proud was born and educated in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. He initially studied for an art education degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT, later switching to a fine arts degree followed by a Higher Diploma in Education. While teaching at UCT he completed an Honours degree in art history at UNISA. In 1991 he was appointed as Curator of Historical Paintings and Sculpture at the South African National Gallery (Sang). He also read for an MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. After the Sang's amalgamation within Iziko Museums, he was appointed to the curatorship of the Michaelis Collection. He has curated many exhibitions with substantial publications.

Trollope's admiration for the political will that made Britain's National Gallery an actuality in a relatively short time is evident. By contrast, the realisation of the present Iziko South African National Gallery (Sang) was a drawn-out affair that took 80 years between the first conception in 1850 and the eventual opening of its own custom-designed building in 1930. By 2011, that gracious "Cape-Mediterranean" building in Cape Town, is now redolent of another era's imperialist rhetoric and definition of art. It is internally constricted by its growing functions and a critical lack of space. By international standards it falls short of expectations. Exhibition spaces are having to be used to store collections or converted into much-needed – and never planned-for – public facilities. The ubiquitous gallery restaurant and shop, now de rigueur in every art museum, were as-yet unimagined requirements back in 1930. Plans are in place for a new building now that the Sang is a functional part of Iziko Museums.

The Sang has endured successive regimes whose interface with art has been fundamentally indifferent. On the other hand, the resourcefulness, creativity and determination of its staff over many years has sustained an energy and vision for the institution which does not seem to have been fully appreciated by the State. Resentment about this has surfaced from time to time over many years.

Museums are, without exception, perennially short of funds. However, in the Sang's case the situation is more complex than it seems. Since its inception, the annual State subsidy has only ever covered salaries and basic running costs, with little left over for acquisitions or the funding of exhibition and education programmes. Because the State gives an arms-length overall grant it fails to see why it should in fact be held responsible for such specifics as acquisitions. A problem lies with the fact that the grants are inadequate and that this has a cumulative effect. Tax incentives to encourage donations in cash or kind to the institution have never existed. This also reflects the lack of any political will to support the visual arts, and the lack of will also has its origins deep in the country's fractious, economically-exploitative and racially-divided history. The Sang has endured successive regimes whose interface with art has been fundamentally indifferent. On the other hand, the resourcefulness, creativity and determination of its staff over many years has sustained an energy and vision for the institution which does not seem to have been fully appreciated by the State. Resentment about this has surfaced from time to time over many years.

A fractured identity

A flaw in the notion of a "national gallery" in South Africa has been the absence of a commonly-held coherent sense of "nation", at least until 1994. The situation prior to Union in 1910, with war between rival settler cultures, rampant capitalism and the wholesale destruction of indigenous visual traditions, was antithetical to the shaping of a shared vision and a reasonably-funded national institution for the visual arts. The creation of such an institution in emulation of the British model in South Africa embodied, in its day, the triumph of the "civilising" power of colonial culture. However, as much as the concept of such an institution is a colonial implant, and reviled for its assumed superiority; so it is now, perhaps for the first time in its history, being claimed as a space and a focus for our "national" art. The enframing architecture of the Sang, gracious as it is, has become a straight-jacket in which many contesting artistic traditions and diverse forms are now awkwardly contained and constrained.

A Protracted foundation

The idea of a public gallery in Cape Town became an actuality 1871 when Thomas Butterworth Bayley willed his collection of 45 paintings and a small sum to the SA Fine Arts Association. The constitution of the "South African Art Gallery" enacted by the Cape Parliament in 1895 garnered some meagre funding to support and to grow the collection, but it lacked a building. Exhibited in temporary premises in Queen Victoria Street, by 1897 it was relegated to two gloomy back-rooms of the SA Museum. An account of the poor conditions under which it was held there appeared in a retrospective Government report published in 1947:

> The two rooms at the back of the Museum in the Gardens did duty for South Africa's national gallery for about thirty years. Here, up the staircase, were crowded together a portion of the collection, with pictures of all sorts indiscriminately mixed up with plaster casts. Only a few of the exhibits could be seen properly, whilst many others had to be packed away behind the scenes in grim darkness. Surely no other city in the British Empire of the importance of Cape Town could have been so neglected in the matter of an Art Gallery![3].

The report highlights another anomaly; that the City of Cape Town, the "Mother City" with pretensions to being the nation's "cultural capital", is actually the only major municipality in South Africa that does not support its own public art museum. Over the years the Cape Town City Council – in tacit acknowledgment that it had actually escaped responsibility for maintaining such a public amenity – used to award the Sang a small annual grant. By the early 1990s it was an insignificant R22,000.00; subsequently withdrawn with the creation of the Cape Town Unicity. The City's disinterest calls to mind remarks made in *The Cape Argus* in the 1860s that Cape Town was always a place careless of the visual arts; that "the Cape was a country that may give an artist breath, but it cannot give him bread", and "[In Cape Town] art of all kinds is but poorly appreciated and supported"[4] Although the Cape Town City Council does have a small art collection of mixed quality, it primarily serves as office décor. Certainly, the rate-payers of Cape Town have little opportunity to see it.

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The Sang had its saviour-benefactors in the past, but they are now an extinct breed. Seeing the abandoned foundations of the gallery in 1926, some twelve years after they had been laid in 1914, Alfred de Pass, a wealthy Cape Town-born art collector who had returned from Britain, used a "carrot and donkey" tactic with the Government to get some action. Work began again in exchange for his offer to replace antique furniture and paintings destroyed in the Groot Constantia manor house fire a year earlier. Largely thanks to De Pass, the Sang finally opened in November 1930, its collections bolstered with gifts presented by De Pass from his own private collection in Britain. It was he who inaugurated the Sang's very first acquisition of works by South African artists. The point of stressing this early history is to demonstrate that inspiration and action in terms of furthering the institution have never been forthcoming from the State, but from selfless individuals, of whom De Pass was but one. The independent Friends of the Sang, founded in 1968, continue this tradition by providing vital but limited support for acquisitions and educational and outreach initiatives. A question at stake now is the total absence of inspired benefaction today.

The South African Randlords of the past did not set many precedents worthy of emulation, but what of the newly-emergent entrepreneurs of the present? An art market patronised by the latter booms, while the national collection is starved.

A history of missed opportunities

It is a little-known fact that the Sang was only able to set aside funds for a recurrent acquisitions budget as late as 1949. In 1962 this stood at a mere R600.00, but in 1963 it was increased to R14,000.00, which for a time allowed the Gallery to make up some of the backlog in its collections. Before 1949 then, the Sang collection was almost wholly dependent on ad-hoc grants and bequests and presentations for its growth. This renders as largely inaccurate the claims often made that State largesse was lavished on the purchase of the European works now in the collection. These were in fact mostly given freely by notable benefactors like De Pass and Sir Edmund and Lady Davis, or through donor-agencies like the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) and the National Art Collections Fund (NACF) before South Africa abandoned the Commonwealth in 1961. Works by significant artists loaned to the Sang from the 1940s to the 1960s which were never retained included Johannes Vermeer, Velasquez, Goya and Murillo, to mention only a few.

As opposition to apartheid grew in the 1980s, tension mounted between the Sang and the Government as to which constituency it served. Resisting classification as a "white own affairs" institution, much to F.W. de Klerk's annoyance, the Sang opted instead for "general affairs" status. It was penalised financially as a result.

These works were in the Beit, Robinson/Labia and F.D. Lycett-Green Collections of Old Masters which never found a permanent home at the Sang. Poor relations with the lenders and Government indifference were ultimately to blame. Lycett-Green's collection ended up in the York City Art Gallery in England. The Beit Collection with its Vermeer came to rest in the National Gallery of Ireland. The Robinson-Labia Collection, offered for sale in 1966 to the Government, was rejected by Education Minister Johannes De Klerk. It was subsequently dispersed abroad at many times the asking price. De Klerk's son, FW de Klerk, performed little better. As Minister of National Education like his father, he accepted the donation of the Natale Labia Museum in Muizenberg in 1985, partly to satisfy ancient political loyalties. He compelled the reluctant Sang to adopt it as an additional responsibility between 1987 and 2001, yet failed to provide any increase in the Sang's subsidy for this purpose.

Between 1948 and 1994 the idea of one institution serving and reflecting the diverse visual cultures of South Africa was anathema to the National Party creed of "separate development". Thus, the concept of a *national gallery*, though ostensibly "born" in 1871 in the Cape Colony, before "South Africa" even had its identity, was, in effect, still-born; or at least a prematurely-born one. The policy of the National Party towards matters artistic was truthfully and bluntly summed up by by Dr Gerrit Viljoen, another former Minister of National Education in 1984: "Die Staat bedryf nie kultuur nie"/"The State is not in the business of culture"[5]. Starving the Sang of funds became a form of retribution for non-compliance with State policy. As opposition to apartheid grew in the 1980s, tension mounted between the Sang and the Government as to which constituency it served. Resisting classification as a "white own affairs" institution, much to F.W. de Klerk's annoyance, the Sang opted instead for "general affairs" status. It was penalised financially as a result. More compliant museums, such as the former SA Cultural History Museum, received a more generous subsidy and perks. At this time the Sang building was in need of

renovation. De Klerk recommended to Raymund van Niekerk, Sang's then-Director, that he deaccession and sell parts of the collection to pay for it.

The "selling" solution

The idea of putting parts of the Sang collection on sale is often posed as a solution to its shortage of funds, but this would be a self-defeating and short-term move. It would strike at the heart of what an art museum actually defines itself by: its permanent collection. Given that the Sang collection has been consistently under-funded, and that its most valuable pieces are either gifts or bequests, selling is not really a viable option. Liquidating bequests made in good faith would be a breach of museum ethics and discourage any future benefaction. In 1947 there was a scandalous "clear out" sale from the Sang involving Director Edward Roworth and the artist Gregoire Boonzaaier, then a Trustee. It generated such public opprobrium and legal fall-out that Parliament became involved. A Commission of Enquiry resulted in legislation to make all Sang acquisitions inalienable. In the debates around the rationalisation of State-funded museums post-1994, surreal ideas of selling off the collection and using the Sang building as an "international exhibitions venue" were bandied about. The expedient target of such talk was, of course, the supposedly "irrelevant" art representing the European artistic tradition, as if some kind of mental, historical and financial enema applied to the Sang Collection could retrospectively remove all guilt about the institution's colonial origins.

A State of indifference to art

In 1980, in a news article headed "Forget art, camping is culture", Sang Director Raymund van Niekerk declared his exasperation at the "hostile, indifferent and ignorant" apartheid bureaucrats who administered a cultural budget of R16.5 million that year[6]. This money was for "the preservation, development, fostering and extension of the culture of the white population of the Republic" in the name of "cultural advancement". Aside from millions allocated to the former Performing Arts Councils, R107,000.00 was spent on "the erection and maintenance of camping sites", while another R62,000.00 was given to campers under the heading of "land service and other youth work". Revealing that the Sang was only given R30,000.00 to spend on acquisitions, Van Niekerk compared this to the Australian National Gallery which received the equivalent of R1.8 million for the same purpose. "I have reached the stage", he said, "that when overseas visitors ask me what our purchasing grant is, I reply 'nothing'. This has, I believe, a bleak dignity which would be destroyed if I told them what the amount really was". Creative artists, he added, received little or no financial help from State sources. "Instead", he added, "money is given to the advancement of amateur art, home crafts and who knows what other unimportant activities of the uncritical". "I would like to buy a Bacon or a Hockney – but at between R45,000.00 to R80,000.00 for a single work, these are out of range for the South African taxpayer, whose money instead is spent on furthering Aunt Susie's amateur watercolours in Clocolan or the Colbyn East's needlework society". Van Niekerk was threatened with retribution by officials for being so outspoken and FW de Klerk tried unsuccessfully over the following years to have him fired.

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The apartheid State's disregard for culture as well as its limited notion of art as a "therapeutic" activity for amateurs and the "uncritical", sadly persists today in various forms. This needs thorough and critical reassessment. The former Minister of Arts and Culture, Ms Lulu Xingwana, for example, well-known for her views on art that does not support "nation building" or "social cohesion", speaking at a Moral Regeneration Conference Gala Dinner in 2009 said:

> In partnership with other departments, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) will continue to support cultural projects, which promote positive values. Art can greatly help even in the rehabilitation of offenders. Art can help those who are in pain to express themselves. Art can help our nation to heal its wounds that come from so deep in our past. Art can provide a space for national contemplation and strengthen dialogue and allow us to see different ways of thinking in order for us to bring it all together.[7]

Extolling the "healing power of art" as a remedial agent for the treatment of social, spiritual or emotional disorders is, as one critic has noted, "positively Victorian", and is often an expedient and sentimental strategy that "handily fudges the failure of politics"[8]. Xingwana's stance unfortunately suggests that the State will never see the Sang's inability to build its collection as a serious matter of concern. Also limiting is the more recent fiat from DAC that financial support will only be made available for projects that support government-determined focus areas such as "youth development" and "Aids awareness". Funding for works dealing specifically with HIV/Aids has previously been awarded by DAC to the Sang along such lines. Unfortunately in terms of the future of the national cultural estate, a much-needed quality oil by George Pemba, a superb wood carving by Job Kekana (an artist as yet unrepresented in the Sang collection) or a rare etching by John Muafangejo would all fail to meet such criteria.

A lack of understanding

There is evidence of little real understanding by Government of the role played by the Sang in providing recognition and career-enhancement for artists. This has been clear when Arts and Culture representatives have visited the Sang in the past. Few of them visit the Gallery regularly, and there seems to be a poor understanding of the purpose of acquisitions and the relationship between the institution and way in which it ought, if it had more funds, to more fully support the careers of emerging artist-practitioners; especially those from disadvantaged communities. Acceptance of an artist's work into the Sang collection is considered a stamp of approval and signals to collectors that his/her work has investment potential. This can lead to significant increases in the value of an artist's work, providing them with work and a steady income. The Sang thus plays a pivotal role in stimulating the art market by helping artistic careers and recognising achievement. In this respect the Sang has, in the past anyway, exercised considerable influence, if not power. However, it can only exercise that power if it has the financial means to make significant purchases of works of the highest standard. The benefits extend well beyond this too, towards forging a richer national identity, building institutional profile and enhancing understanding and education at every level.

A broader vision meets contracting expectations

The reassessment of the Sang's vision to bring it into accord with the democratic dispensation under Sang Director Marilyn Martin after 1990 was encapsulated in an inspired and broader acquisitions policy approved by the Sang's Trustees in 1996. However, this much-broadened and inclusive vision for the institution's collection was wholly undermined by an inverse contraction in its purchasing power. As Martin noted: "From 1984 to 1997 the acquisitions budget remained at approximately R200,000.00 per annum. Between 1997 and 2003 there was nothing and since then the Art Collections Department has received R150,000.00 each year; for the current financial year we have R200,000.00"[9]. Were it not for the Friends of the Sang, the Lottery and a number of donor artists who came to the rescue, the Sang's *Decade of Democracy* exhibition of 2004 would have been a poor show indeed, given that for five years of that decade it had zero funds.

A proactive stance on the part of the Sang's staff made at least some acquisitions possible, but a lack of financial reserves for purchases hampers its ability to act timeously and strategically in a competitive art market. As Martin relates:

> We have raised funds for isolated works from the National Lottery Board (NLB) and allocations from the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), but we have to apply for specific purchases and awaiting an outcome can take many months. Under

such circumstances it is difficult to act quickly and to augment the permanent collection in a strategic and consistent manner. As a result, the national art museum and the country are losing important historical and contemporary works and the many of the gaps inherited from our apartheid past remain unfilled[10].

Sang's acquisition budget for 2005 – 2006 was a mere R 141,000.00. Seen against the prices demanded in the market place, this figure is insignificant. It does not compare to the acquisitions budgets of two other very much smaller State-funded art galleries in South Africa over the same period: the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley received R 776 966.00 and the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein R 200,000.00.

The Sang has been successful in making inroads towards addressing the huge backlog of marginalised art histories in South Africa. Yet its very success in this ironically undermines its ability to collect. A case in point illustrates this well. In 1995, during research for the George Pemba retrospective, the Sang was offered two excellent watercolours from the artist's 1946 period at R5,000.00 each. The R10,000.00 required was not available and it had to decline the offer. The works were then purchased by a private collector and included on the exhibition as loans. Ten years later, having secured a special grant to purchase a work by Pemba, the Sang had to pay R140,000.00 for one watercolour of the same date and quality: 28 times more than what had been asked for ten years previously. The Sang thus, in a way, becomes the victim of its own success. Art dealers – there are exceptions – care little about this; they are neither supportive of the institution, nor sympathetic to its plight. For them it's a matter of what the "market" demands and the practice of "business".

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Why Collect?: an exhibition as Agitprop

As a response to the evident lack of understanding as to what the function and role of the Sang as the State art museum is, it was decided in 2007 to mount an "agitprop" exhibition to elucidate the role it plays and to highlight the problems of inadequate funding by exhibiting both what had and had not been acquired over the period 2004-2006. This resulted in the exhibition *Why Collect?* One strategy was to hang empty picture frames on the walls to highlight the notable gaps in the Sang collection. Other issues, such as the case of the Pemba watercolours, were highlighted. Another agitprop strategy was to quote facts and figures and make comparisons to highlight the low status accorded the visual arts, such as:

- R 52 Billion for the Arms Deal
- R 13.3 Billion in 2007 for 2010 Soccer World Cup
- R 90 million for our President's new security fence
- In 2006 only R 141 000.00 for the Iziko South African National Gallery to purchase works of art, plus zero tax incentives for donors to our museum and galleries.

The exhibition was the subject of a full-page report in the *Weekender* newspaper entitled "National Gallery's pleas for funds fall on deaf ears"[11]. Apart from

enthusiastic response expressed privately on the part of other curatorial and museum professionals around the country, it passed without much further notice or public debate. Few seemed willing, possibly because of a fear of retribution, to take the protest reflected on the Sang's very own walls outside.

Referring to this exhibition in a recent conference paper in 2009 on the crisis facing museums in the face of the current economic downturn, Stefan Hundt, curator of the Sanlam Art Collection observed:

> Indifference describes adequately what the reaction to this exhibition and the highlighted state affairs of the [Sang] had been. Indifference perhaps as the result of years of neglect and a lack of growth which had made the part played by the [Sang] in the South African art world less than relevant … A national art museum that cannot fulfill its core function in terms of collecting also starts to lose its relevance in the art world. Missed opportunities and gaps are accumulating to such an extent that the collection is at risk of losing its representation of South Africa's art history. A failure to acquire will lead to the collection becoming dated and irrelevant. The Sang is thus at risk of losing its status as the pre-eminent art collecting institution in South Africa.[12]

To return to Ruskin: what will future generations of South Africans be left with, if so many pages are missing from the book of their art? The past indifference that has characterised attitudes towards the Sang haunts a future that seems perpetually deferred. The time has come for the private sector to forge more meaningful and fruitful partnerships with the State to help it invigorate an institution that should be as much a shared national icon as any of South Africa's sporting teams. As Ruskin concludes: "The acts of a nation may be triumphant by its good fortune; and its words mighty by the genius of a few of its children: but its art, only by the general gifts and common sympathies of its people".

This article is written in the author's private capacity.

NOTES

1 1993:203
2 Levey 1990:8
3 Carman 2006:24
4 Bokhorst 1971:3
5 This remark was made in 1984 by Viljoen and is referred to in published articles by artist Andrew Verster of that date in the Durban press.
6 De Villiers: 1980
7 Opening remarks by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Ms Lulu Xingwana MP at the Moral Regeneration Conference Gala Dinner Birchwood Hotel 26 November 2009.
8 Knight: 2001
9 Martin: 2007
10 Martin:2007
11 Thurman: 2007
12 Hundt: 2009

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