



Women
in the
spotlight

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The day
the Atlantic
turned
black

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IT WILL doubtless come as a revelation to many that, in one way or another, the National Gallery has always been a site of struggle.

From its founding by early Cape art enthusiasts in 1875, the gallery has had to navigate always shifting currents of taste, economics, politics, conceptions of what art is, notions of identity and belonging, and what to exhibit in a way that is meaningful, worth valuing and popularly acknowledged. It became a properly national institution in 1895 when the government took it over under the SA Gallery Act.

All of these shifting currents are canvassed in fascinating detail in a new, provocative and challenging book by cultural and art historian Anna Tietze.

A History of the Iziko South African National Gallery: Reflections on art and national identity is a critical examination of the National Gallery's history and of South African society's ways of seeing. The gallery emerges as a telling barometer of history's weather changes.

But, in the light of South Africa's contemporary setting – with its perhaps plural, small struggles (in many ways, not much different from those of the past) as much as its digital-age opportunities – Tietze's account throws out a challenge for a thrilling reimagining of what a gallery is, and what the National Gallery might be.

The book is a significant contribution to the conversation about society, belonging, what it is to be human in a continuing history, and how art – or “art” – might shed light on these things beyond earlier assumptions about its capacity to enhance lives merely via – in Tietze's phrase – “benign contagion”.

Tietze pays ample tribute to curators and directors of the past in building the collection in seemingly always straitened circumstances, resisting or matching national imperatives – from white republican nationalism to post-democracy inclusivity – and, here and there, testing the boundaries of art and the very notion of what a national art institution's function really is.

In particular, Tietze acknowledges the role of director Marilyn Martin, who, as apartheid was being dismantled, led a process of broadening acquisitions and exhibition policies in what became “a watershed period for the gallery, as for the country”.

Yet, for all the excitement about the prospects for the gallery in the context of the “almost missionary sense of the possibilities of South Africa's future”, the institution has since had to contend with the expectation of contributing to nation-building and social cohesion, and the reality of woefully inadequate funding.

The National Gallery's difficulties are set in sharp relief when contrasted with the new and plentifully funded Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa at the Waterfront, with its glam setting and an acquisitions budget to die for – a museum which, along with other fine art galleries in the commercial sphere, makes “unashamed connections between art and the commercial and consumerist world” and whose “architecture and image attracts art lovers through the devices of scale, modern materials, colour and lighting used by the department store, and the worlds of fashion and interior design”.

Tietze writes: “This is a major dilemma for the gallery as it moves into the future: How does it attract not just its core public but also a wider, restless audience, one more distracted and impatient and ‘scanning the cultural horizon for... intense forms of entertainment?’”

Here, the gallery was “caught between two largely contradictory forces: the need to attract a public entranced by the style and glamour of the commercial, and the pressure to meet the ideological demands of government for museums dedicated to and reflective of the ‘community’”.

In Tietze's view, though, this need not be the no-win situation it might seem to be.

The challenge in the coming years for Iziko Museums and the gallery itself would be to “maintain an independence of vision and position themselves as cosmopolitan, international institutions as well as being fully representative of the nation”.

While the inevitability of the Zeitz Museum's occupying the “centre stage of any account of contemporary art collections in South Africa”, and the National Gallery's being compelled to “increasingly position itself as the repository of a specifically historical archive”, the Iziko Gallery could claim attention and generate excitement through innovation.

Recent exhibitions – the controversial 2017 *fuckwhitepeople* wall; chair and goldendean boots installation, and the equally controversial *Our Lady* exhibition, demonstrated the gallery's scope “as a site of vital dialogue”.

But it could do much more by exploiting modern technologies and pioneering approaches, Tietze believes.

For instance, where the Zeitz Museum, with its “nine floors, 80 exhibition areas, education centres, restaurants and entertainment venues... is a site of spectacle and well equipped to hold a rapidly expanding collection”, digitising the National Gallery's substantial collection (much of it languishing in storerooms for lack of exhibition space) had the potential to expand the gallery's reach significantly.

“A complete digital database of a



Abraham Cooper's *The Day Family*, of 1838.

PICTURE: PAM WARNE

The shifting currents of art in SA

A big re-think about its future is at the core of an important and comprehensive history of the country's pre-eminent art museum, the Iziko South African National Gallery, writes **MICHAEL MORRIS**

museum's collection, virtual exhibitions and interactive displays offer an answer to the shortage of physical space.”

In addition, the “digital world is the new route to educational empowerment and democratic access, enabling personal experiment. It is a great leveller too, offering the potential for a significant check on the dominant voice of the museum expert and an enhanced public intervention in the way in which works are understood and related to each other”.

Stored collections of paintings and artefacts could “be the subject of online exhibitions which explore new exhibitionary techniques not possible in the physical space of the existing building”.

Beyond this, Tietze argues, exhibitions could be conceived in wholly different ways, integrating wider Iziko holdings encompassing art and social history collections.

“To this end, it is also worth rethinking models of exhibitionary space, even encompassing prototypes from the domestic or commercial world.

“The subdivision of large gallery rooms into small intimate spaces, the inclusion of comfortable seating with books for reading, the encouragement of the public to remain at leisure within exhibition spaces – all these would alter the message conveyed by a gallery and, more effectively than people-centred educational activities, signal that the institution is a place for public use.

“Too often at present, the rules governing the art gallery sap the vitality of exhibited works and that of the visitors too.”

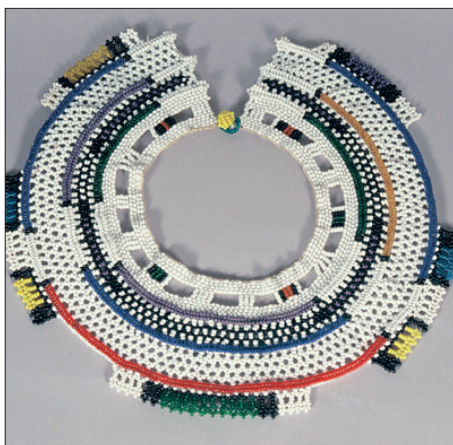
There could be exhibitions “which demystify and reveal a world behind the scenes, that in effect offer an anthropological view of creative traditions... (or) exhibitions of how works are conserved and restored and forgeries detected; studies of the operations of the art market and the means by which public collections acquire and select their acquisitions; inquiries into how technological and material developments affect creative practice; studies of the theory and practice of art education; interrogations into questions of quality and aesthetic judgement; and histories of the notion of ‘bad art’”.

“There might be recreations, in period rooms, of works from the collection showing how they functioned in their pre-gallery lives; reconstructions of the curiosity cabinet; studies of the history of



Street Scene, by Gerard Sekoto, painted in 1945.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED



Ndebele beadwork, purchased by the gallery in 1991.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED

exhibition display.”

Other exhibitions “might dynamically explore a broad realm of creative expression across cultures: costume and modes of body adornment; the art of the garden; practices of book design and illustration (fictional, medical, botanical, philatelic); interior design and the social uses of furniture and indoor space; the design, production methods and use of industrial goods and ‘street furniture’; the sociology of mass or popular arts; the art



The Story of the Money Pig from around 1899, by Thomas Gotch.

PICTURE: NIGEL PAMPLIN



Mary Sibande's *The Reign*, and (right) resin-cast heads from the 1996 *Miscast* exhibition.



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