

The Significance of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) Collection

The Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) holds one of the most significant art collections on the African continent in terms of its breadth, scope and historical significance.

Established in 1910 by Lady Florence Phillips with the intention of creating for the citizens of Johannesburg the opportunity to “own a picture collection, to possess works of art, [and] to be able to enjoy their own fine things,”¹ the gallery’s collection has grown over the past century grown to become a significant cultural resource, playing a crucial role in the development of Johannesburg as the diverse and vibrant cultural centre that it is. As with any public art collection, the JAG collection reflects the socio-cultural life of the city and the country. It is a visual narrative of Johannesburg’s—and by extension, South Africa’s—complex history. The collection tells stories of colonialism, apartheid, resistance, and the ongoing struggle for equality and justice. In this way, the JAG collection is not just a series of art objects; it is a cultural repository that speaks to the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of the people of this extraordinary city.

As a repository of artistic heritage, the JAG collection is invaluable, both in its material worth and its cultural, social and educational importance. From the traditional southern African art of the Brenthurst Collection to South African traditional, modern and contemporary art, through Dutch and Flemish paintings, prints and furniture, to nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French paintings, watercolours, sculptures and prints, to contemporary international art, the collection is as impressive in scope as it is in substance, bespeaking a commitment from curators through the decades to representing in all its complexities and contradictions the fabric of Johannesburg’s – and by extension South Africa’s – cultural and social life.

From the outset, the collection has also been a vital educational resource, part of what was once a powerful research institution that contributed significantly not only to celebrating the riches of the collection, but also to reclaiming and honouring artists marginalised by colonialism and apartheid. Thus, apart from the material value of the

¹ Thelma Gutsche, *No Ordinary Woman: The Life and Times of Florence Phillips*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1966, p. 6.

collection, the fact of its existence is a beacon of cultural and historical significance, both for the city of Johannesburg and the broader understanding of art, society, and history in South Africa.

It is difficult to overstate the material value of the JAG collection in terms of the current art market. Many works are internationally significant pieces that would be all-but impossible for the Gallery to acquire today due to their astronomical cost – not least, a number of oil paintings by French Impressionists including, Bonnard, Derain, Monet and Signac – as well as important oil paintings and sculptures by canonical South African artists like Irma Stern, Maggie Laubser, J H Pierneef, Ernest Mancoba, Gerard Bhengu, George Pemba and others. In addition to the artworks, and in keeping with Florence Phillips’s injunction that the collection should contain “craftsmanship of every form so that the people could both enjoy beautiful things and learn to adapt them to their own materials and workmanship,”² the collection also comprises European and South African antique furniture as well as Oriental ceramics, textiles, fans and Japanese prints.

Beyond its material value, the JAG collection and the building that houses it is a historical artifact in its own right. The gallery was among the pioneers of modern art museums globally, established to educate the citizens of Johannesburg, then a burgeoning colonial city, about contemporary European art. As collections policies over the years changed to keep up with the challenges and possibilities of the changing political, economic and social fortunes of Johannesburg, the collection has come to offer a window into the artistic and social evolution of the country, making the gallery an essential part of South Africa’s cultural heritage. Ideally, the fact that these works are housed within a public collection amplifies their importance, as they should offer the people of Johannesburg and visitors alike the valuable opportunity to engage with works of considerable cultural and aesthetic importance that might otherwise be confined to private collections or inaccessible to the public. This accessibility is crucial, as it democratizes art appreciation and allows for a shared cultural experience. We are poorer as a city without it.

² *Ibid.*

Furthermore, the inherent educational value of the JAG collection is immense. Like any great public collection, it should serve as an important resource for teaching history, society, and politics in a nuanced manner. In the past, through its diverse programme of exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and other educational initiatives, the gallery provided a platform for critical engagement with the collection. The collection allowed students, scholars, and the general public to explore complex themes and histories, making it a crucial tool for learning and reflection. The gallery's library and archives, which include important collections like the Federation Union of Black Artists (FUBA) archives, further enhance its role as a research institution. These archives have generated significant new knowledge about South African art and have reclaimed for history many artists who were previously marginalised or overlooked.

Public art collections, like that of JAG, serve as mirrors to the societies in which they exist. They reflect the evolution of thought, cultural dynamics, and historical events that have shaped the city and the nation. The JAG Collection is no exception; it captures the diverse and complex socio-cultural landscape of Johannesburg, from its colonial past to its vibrant present. Ultimately, the JAG Collection belongs to the people. It is a public asset that should be enjoyed, challenged, and engaged with by everyone. Like any significant collection in a thriving democracy, the collection exists to inspire challenge, uplift and provoke – qualities that are essential in any vibrant, dynamic society.

However, it is increasingly apparent that the JAG collection is under threat. The almost 100-year-old Sir Edwin Lutyens building that houses the gallery is in dire need of renovation. Indeed, the sandstone façade is so damaged, the roofs so full of leaks, and the general structure so badly neglected, that it may soon reach a point of no return; a 'demolition-by-neglect' and the consequent loss of an irreplaceable piece of significant cultural heritage. While plans for complete renovation have periodically been proposed, to date these have not materialised. As a result, both the building and the collection it houses are deteriorating. In some cases, the damage to artworks is irreparable. Allowing this collection to languish and decay is reprehensible; it is an injustice to future generations who deserve the opportunity to engage with this cultural and artistic heritage and make up their own minds about what it means to them and to the city.

Ultimately, the JAG collection belongs to the people of Johannesburg, and by extension, to all South Africans. It is a public treasure that should be accessible to everyone, allowing the public to enjoy it, be challenged by it, be offended by it, be inspired by it, and be uplifted by it. The role of art in society is not just to please but to provoke thought, evoke emotion, and inspire change. On the eve of our celebration of 30 years of democracy, the JAG collection has the potential to fulfil this role magnificently, offering endless opportunity to celebrate our diversity, cherish our freedom of choice, and affirm our common humanity.

In the final analysis, the JAG collection is an irreplaceable asset of immense material, cultural, and educational value. It is a vital part of Johannesburg's history and a beacon of South African art. Its 'fine things' belongs to the people, and it is their right to have access to it, to learn from it, and to be inspired by it. Preserving this collection for future generations is not just a responsibility; it is a moral imperative.

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