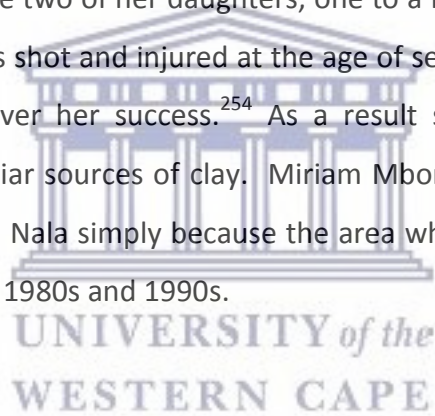


changes that ceramists make to their work, in a quest to hold on to purist ideals. Juliet Armstrong, one of the most ardent champions of rural ceramists, expresses the complexities involved in the changes to ceramic vessels: “I think that [ceramics] is alive and well, but it may soon die if the art of producing work within the context of culture is not promoted and given its true worth.”²⁵² Here, even Armstrong expresses the need to contain Zulu ceramics within the boundaries of a mythical tradition with a concern that the works will be “commodified and bastardised”²⁵³ by entrepreneurs.

What is perhaps more disturbing than a desire to retain works and the artists that make them in the framework of “traditional”, is the difficult lives that many women have – despite, and sometimes even because of, their recognition. Nesta Nala died in 2005 without running water or electricity in her home, despite her awards and international recognition. After her death she would lose two of her daughters, one to a fatal shooting by a boyfriend. Azolina MaMcube Ngema was shot and injured at the age of seventy because of unresolved family issues and jealousy over her success.²⁵⁴ As a result she had to leave her home permanently, losing her familiar sources of clay. Miriam Mbonambi received less publicity than her contemporary Nesta Nala simply because the area where she lived was embroiled in the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s.



²⁵² Juliet Armstrong, “Zulu Pottery”, *Indilinga African journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 4, no. 1 (2005): 345.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 344.

²⁵⁴ Perrill, “Indigenous knowledge Systems”, 14.

Despite their numerous challenges these ceramists have persevered and been acclaimed, although it was really only from the 1980s that South African and international audiences and connoisseurs began to document the artists and their work. Of course, the task of documentation is not a simple one, as vessels are stored in museum and gallery basements often with no record of their makers or where they were from. Vessels have moved from homestead to roadside to gallery, and have been classified as artefact and then as fine art. They have travelled across the ocean to live in foreign environments without any identification or provenance, sometimes even the incorrect ones. In the following chapter I will explore the ways in which vessels have stoically held their ground in the rarefied, hushed environment of the exhibition space, complete with bright lights, shiny glass and personal security guards.



CHAPTER THREE

CERAMICS IN THE GALLERY: CERAMIC VESSELS IN THEIR FINAL RESTING PLACE – OR NOT?

The idea that museums are not free from employing social control, dominant voices and distorted history is an unsettling one, especially since these institutions appear so venerable, authoritative and hence trustworthy. Susan Vogel, herself a long time curator of exhibitions, admits that “the museum exhibition is not a transparent lens through which to view art, however neutral the presentation may seem”.²⁵⁵ Museums and art galleries, and by implication their exhibitions, are active in the carrying out of ideological and political messages, which are imparted to the public that visits them. In the rarefied environment of the exhibition room the Zulu ceramic vessel can be silenced as never before. Its communicative powers within the homestead and its activity within the market are hushed. It becomes an object for contemplation and any information about it is either filtered through the authority of the institution, or intentionally minimized to enable the private dialogue of the viewer to take precedence. Patricia Davison succinctly observes that: “Viewers bring their own meanings to displays and ambiguity characterises the museum experience.”²⁵⁶ There is no single way of seeing an exhibition or understanding its story as a viewer, so I must state that the reflections in this chapter are my own unapologetically subjective impressions of two select exhibitions.

This chapter is an exploration of how museums and art galleries create a story about Zulu ceramics that is readily perceived as believable, through the way that objects are housed, displayed and written about. But this chapter also asks the questions: who is writing the story, why, and for whom are they writing? This chapter will make use of Margaret

²⁵⁵ Susan Vogel, “Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections” (New York: Museum for African Art), 1988, Reprinted with permission of the Museum for African Art, 210.

²⁵⁶ Davison, “Material Culture”, 91.

Lindauer's essay "The Critical Museum Visitor" in *New Museum Theory and Practice*.²⁵⁷ Lindauer offers methods by which to look at how and why things are presented in the way that they are. Lindauer's method of critique provides a device through which the exhibition, "Fired: An Exhibition of South African Ceramics", at the Castle of Good Hope will be analysed and then contrasted with work shown at the South African National Gallery (SANG) in the exhibition, "Hidden Treasures". My critique will look at the haunting question of how an artefact metamorphoses into an art piece and how we recognise the difference. How do the processes of exhibition collection, production, and design create the exhibitionary meanings intended? As opposed to our previous explorations into the communicative power of pots in the homestead and the diverging ways in which their makers are utilising vessels to give them a voice in the market, what happens as the pot balances precariously on its pedestal behind glass? Furthermore, how does a particular exhibition or museum function to disclose wider considerations about public history, curatorship and the role of expertise? But firstly, let us go on a short tour to visit the institutions where the abovementioned exhibitions are being held and provide a description of their content.

"Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics" and "Hidden Treasures" – Two Exhibitions Investigated

The exhibition, "Fired: An exhibition of South African Ceramics", is on show in the Granary at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town and has been there since 2012.²⁵⁸ The works in the exhibition are from the Social History Collections Department of the Iziko Museums.²⁵⁹ Although all the museums are amalgamated under the banner of Iziko, each museum nevertheless retains its own specific research and curatorial character. The "Fired ..." exhibition is based predominantly on the collections of the South African Museum and the dominant curator of the exhibition is from this institution, which is essentially what might be

²⁵⁷ Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor", in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

²⁵⁸ Please note that the exhibition was briefly closed in 2015.

²⁵⁹ The five state-funded museums in the Western Cape which include the South African National Gallery and South African Museum were amalgamated under the Southern African Flagship which was officially renamed Iziko Museums of Cape Town in July 2001.

described as an ethnographic museum.²⁶⁰ In contrast, the exhibition, “Hidden Treasures”, is distinctly part of the South African National Gallery and is being held at this institution. In this chapter, there will inevitably be a disproportionate discussion of the “Fired ...” exhibition versus the “Hidden Treasures” exhibition. This is because the former is a dedicated exhibition of ceramics (with a large number of extremely impressive vessels), while the latter is a mixed exhibition of objects from different countries in Africa (with a few ceramic vessels) whose primary theme is to reflect the “innovation, virtuosity and originality”²⁶¹ of Africa’s art.



Fig 3.1: Front of the South African National Gallery, Author’s Photograph

²⁶⁰ With the formation of the Iziko Museums, all of the former separate collections from predominantly the South African Museum (now called Iziko South African Museum) and the former South African Cultural History Museum were amalgamated to form the Social History Collections Department .

²⁶¹ Panel description: “Title panel” that introduced the whole exhibition at the entrance to the exhibit.

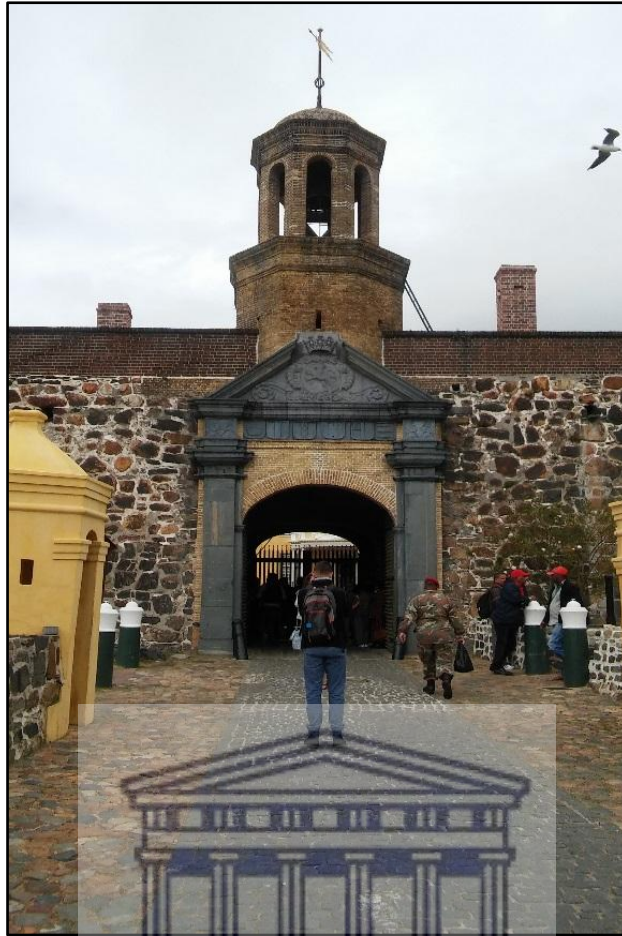


Fig 3.2: Front of the Castle of Good Hope, Author's Photograph

To begin with the “Fired ...” exhibition, I find the location of the exhibition intriguing and even obscure. What is the relationship between ceramics and one of Cape Town’s oldest settler buildings, a 17th century fort, (see Fig 3.2) built originally to safeguard Table Bay? Why is the exhibition not being held at one of the Iziko museums? Why did the curators choose this specific venue? Unfortunately, there was no mention of the exhibition on either the Museum’s website or on the Castle’s website at the time of my research. But let me firstly describe the exhibition itself.



Fig 3.3: Interior of “Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics” at the Granary, the Castle of Good Hope, Author’s Photograph

As mentioned, the exhibition is held in the granary of the Castle (originally a storage facility for grain, see Fig 3.3 above). The room is vaulted like a storage cellar (similar to a very old wine cellar), and you feel that you need to bend your head, but it also has a tomb or womb like feel and is actually quite cosy. The walls are immaculately white, both necessary to lighten the atmosphere and to create a sense of space which is essential in such a confined setting. The room itself is long and narrow and the visitor is compelled to walk from the entrance to the rear and then back again to the entrance which then also serves as the exit. As you enter the exhibition there are large explanatory or didactic panels running the whole length of the right-hand wall. Immediately on the left are a group of pots situated in a

“grotto” or small cave, and directly in front of you the floor has been excavated to reveal layers of soil and clay, and covered in plexiglass. If you are standing facing into the exhibition to your left around a small corner is another “grotto” with a video loop of ceramic production in rural environments. Directly in front of you the space is broken up into an array of differently shaped display cases (tall, short, multi-layered and flat) containing ceramic ware. All the items are in clear glass or plexiglass display cases on plinths of various sizes and heights. The boxed items also include two very large terracotta lions at the far end of the room, finishing the exhibition like a pair of bookends. As per a panel description, the lions once adorned the gates of the Castle until they were damaged toward the end of the twentieth century.²⁶² Why they are part of the exhibition is not explained. Is it a convenient storage space to provide protection against further damage, or are they an intentional part of the exhibition? Given that they are also in a glass box and labelled, one would surmise that their presence is deliberate.

The floor of the exhibition is terracotta tiling which complements the very substance that all the items displayed are made of. The exhibition showcases a large and representative cross-section of ceramic production in Southern Africa and moves from archaeological fragments, to the trade that brought ceramics to South Africa, through to symbolism and ritual. There are also panels dedicated to contemporary ceramics, production pottery and studio pottery.

There are large didactic panels accompanied by pictures which give detail on symbolism and ritual in ceramic works and the earliest existing production of pottery in South Africa. The panels also describe the different methods of pottery construction, from the making of a shape, to decoration, to the firing of pottery. There are also timelines giving the dates or time frames in which archaeological evidence of ceramics appeared around the world and similarly when ceramics was found in archaeological digs in Southern Africa. The scope of items in the exhibition is substantial. The introductory panel states that the exhibition is “focusing mainly on ceramics made or used in South Africa. The exhibition brings together the work of African potters, local studio pottery, imported wares of historical significance

²⁶² Panel description accompanying the pair of terracotta lions in the exhibition.

and contemporary ceramics.”²⁶³ On first reflection the exhibition appears to be a straightforward linear and historical account of when and how ceramics were made and the different methods of production that occurred in South Africa. The exhibition is clearly intended to educate the viewer on the history of ceramic production in South Africa and to celebrate the diversity of work.

In reviewing the exhibitions “Fired ...” and “Hidden Treasures”, the contents of the display cases and the detail of the didactic panels will be dealt with in depth, as and when they are relevant. I will focus very specifically on my concern about how objects are signified to the viewer as either artefacts or art objects. This focus will be pursued in order to delve into some of the larger questions about how and why these definitions arose historically. With this in mind I will pay particular attention to the presentation, display and labelling of ceramic work which originate from rural environments, or are categorised as African pottery. I have done this because in South Africa there exists a sense of division between the urban and rural ceramist, similar to a perceived and enacted division between African objects and Western objects. The urban and rural potter is thought to utilise different production methods and may have different intentions for doing the work they do. It also enables questions to be asked about whether these objects are ethnographic artefacts or art. In taking this very specific approach to the two exhibitions, it is to be noted that I will not deal with all the material on exhibition as it is too broad.

This chapter began with Susan Vogel’s assertion that museums are not neutral places and Tony Bennett would certainly agree with her. In *The Birth of the Museum* Bennett likens changes to museums to the reforms in prisons during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Bennett describes how social hegemony went from public displays of punishment by hanging to more subtle forms, which were private and focussed on the reform of the individual in an enclosed prison environment. Bennett perceives an alignment with Foucault’s notion of “carceral archipelago”. He states: “The scaffold and the body of the condemned, which had previously formed part of the public display of power, were

²⁶³ Panel description: “Title panel’ that introduced the whole exhibition at the entrance to the exhibit.

withdrawn from public gaze as punishment increasingly took the form of incarceration.”²⁶⁴ Margaret Lindauer suggests starting the critique on a museum/gallery by looking at the museum’s architecture and “what unspoken messages are sent”²⁶⁵ to the viewer. It is not without irony that the Castle of Good Hope, although a fort for protection, was also a prison, and the architecture certainly conveys these “messages”. The entrance is imposing with stone walls indicative of military might and punishment, with huge impenetrable and intimidating doors (see Fig 3.2 above). Bennett explains that social reformation is meted out in prisons and museums, although opposite methods are exercised: “Museum expositions realised some of the ideals of panopticism in transforming the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating and, as the historical record suggests, consistently orderly public – a society watching over itself.”²⁶⁶

Museums were and still are architectural sites that operate as a civilizing mechanism, prompting Lindauer to ask: “How do you feel as you approach and enter? Are you calm ... Do you feel cultured, sophisticated, herded, under surveillance, or enlightened?”²⁶⁷ With regards to the Castle of Good Hope, the building itself is intimidating and was designed to be. It is a building of surveillance and one that enacted violence both on the internal prisoners and the external threats. It seems therefore a most unlikely place to hold an exhibition of ceramics, and would be rather better suited to exhibit ghoulish instruments of torture, or military uniforms of the 18th century, or something similar.

The “Hidden Treasures” exhibition is housed in the South African National Gallery, which was purpose built in 1930 by the Public Works Department with funds from Government and the City Council. It is clearly a colonial building and akin to a temple elevated above the ground, with Grecian columns surrounding the entrance way (see Fig 3.1). The analogy of temple-like building would certainly have been purposeful, to create “a combination of aesthetic and spiritual authority, implicitly conferring credibility on their collections and on the knowledge conveyed within them.”²⁶⁸ The Gallery is part of the Company Gardens’

²⁶⁴ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 60.

²⁶⁵ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 207.

²⁶⁶ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 68.

²⁶⁷ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 207.

²⁶⁸ Davison, “Material Culture”, 94.

complex and placed at the head of a promenade of formal fish ponds and formally arranged gardens. Unlike the Castle with its ominous ambiance, the Gallery is grand and stately, but clearly colonial in the style of its building. Davison's commentary that exhibitions "imbue the past with present intent, they re-make the past and re-present it in another context"²⁶⁹ is pertinent here. This is relevant to the "Hidden Treasures" exhibition which actively states that it is doing just that, making amends for past indiscretions and silencing, as an accompanying didactic panel explains. This panel states that the works "can be viewed as an official post-apartheid attempt to redress past omissions and exclusions."²⁷⁰ The same panel also refers to the work on display as "some never previously exhibited, others newly re-discovered."²⁷¹ Perhaps there is an intention in this because some works were not previously considered worthy of exhibition and have been "newly re-discovered" purely out of a move to be politically correct in a changed South Africa. These are strange words indeed for an exhibition which consists of very little South African work: most of the objects are from elsewhere in Africa. Does the SANG take responsibility for Africa, or is it simply "inspired by the global interest in African Art,"²⁷² as per the descriptive panel? But on reflection, what if these buildings are alluding to an even more sinister idea, that of the triumph of the colonial powers over the indigenous population, with indigenous material culture still under its control in glass boxes? Is it possible that this could indeed be the message that was intended when such buildings were built and then used as exhibition areas?

It is relatively straightforward to end up asking the above questions if you review the ways in which the early Western museums displayed objects in order to convey and convince their publics of the correct way to think about social order. Before the Great Exhibitions of the 19th Century, "natural and artificial objects gathered from the conquest and exploration of foreign lands were arranged together in 'cabinets of curiosities' belonging to Europe's elite."²⁷³ In the second half of the century these "cabinets of curiosity" entered public buildings and carried with them their cultural elitism as they became displays for public

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 90

²⁷⁰ Description on exhibition Panel entitled "Hidden treasures from the Permanent Collection" of SANG.

²⁷¹ Ibid as above.

²⁷² Ibid as above.

²⁷³ Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 108.

consumption. At the same time academic disciplines began to want independence from each other and recognition as “serious” fields of study. One of these disciplines was anthropology which “began to evolve from amateur avocation to scientific enterprise”²⁷⁴. Objects from around the world were not only public, they were arranged in order to be seen in particular ways. The Western museum exerted social control over its publics and it located this public in a hierarchy of achievement. Much anthropological and art historical work was grounded in the “Hegelian notion of progress.”²⁷⁵ According to Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, this was “the idea of progress in history (which) closely parallels the belief in the historical evolution of human material cultures”²⁷⁶ discussed previously in Chapter One. As Tony Bennett maintains, objects from other nations were subordinated to imperial powers, through the ordering of objects²⁷⁷. By ranking the objects on display in terms of progressive stages of manufacture, the museum could reduce non-Western culture to the bottom of the scale of evolutionary theory and educate the Western viewing public of their rightful place at the top of the human developmental ladder.

The discipline of anthropology was also responsible, not only for claiming “discovery” – or as the South African National Gallery states, the “re-discovery” of objects made by other cultures – but for saving these very cultures and their objects from extinction. Is this pervasive idea what is meant in the wording of the “Hidden Treasures” exhibit? To this day museums often reveal this tendency for a reverence of the past as an indicator for the viewer to register objects as authentic, traditional, or from a “pure” state of existence by referring to objects in the past tense. A critical examination of the text featured in the “Fired ...” exhibition reveals that most of the didactic text is in the present tense, except for the panel titled “Symbolism and Ritual” and a panel describing Khoesan ceramic work. These panels use descriptors that are in the past tense regarding ritual use of ceramic vessels, indicating that ceramics is no longer ritually used and the people who made them no longer exist, perhaps because of contact with Europeans? Either way the past tense

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 108.

²⁷⁵ Ruth B Phillips and Christopher B Steiner. “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1999), 8.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 9.

²⁷⁷ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 81.

leads us to believe that the work on display or depicted in photographs is genuine and authentic because it is from a pre-contact past.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, notions of the “traditional” are frequently applied to people, and the photograph of a Zulu woman (see Fig 3.4 below) in “traditional” dress is indicative of placing someone permanently in a static past rather than in current attire or modern surroundings. An accompanying picture of a “white” potter shows him in a modern studio (see Fig 3.5 below), similar to those used by the likes of Thembi Nala or Clive Sithole, for example, who are urban-based black ceramists.



Fig 3.4: Image from the didactic panels at the exhibition “Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics”,
Author’s Photograph



Fig 3.5: Image from the didactic panels at the exhibition “Fired – An exhibition of South African Ceramics”,
Author’s Photograph

As Richard Handler and Eric Gable infer, current scholarship about museums have a common set of concerns: “First, are questions about cultural representation, how do museums collect, classify and display material artefacts to convey images of various human groups understood to be culturally different?”²⁷⁸ In conjunction, the exhibition “Fired ...” is being reviewed not only on the grounds of how the “other” is viewed (in the South African context of rural and urban or black and white), but also by what means pieces are articulated, as artefact or art. Lindauer suggests that the way to gain an understanding of the museum’s representation is through looking at the display. Here it is important to understand the separation of artefact and art and how this occurred, particularly in relation to non-Western objects.

Susan Vogel argues that an object in a museum is “not material that ‘speaks for itself’ but material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular

²⁷⁸ Richard Hander and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

presenters at a particular moment in time.”²⁷⁹ This is most apparent in the consideration of whether pieces are artefacts or art. Once non-Western collections moved from private collections and were placed in museums, most were initially classified as ethnographic objects. Objects were considered ethnographic because they were seen as utilitarian and did not fit in with the Western criteria of what was designated art, which was “optical naturalism”, or painting and sculpture as I discussed in Chapter One.

A second important characteristic that enables something to be free of its ethnographic label is the requirement that the object is for contemplation and enjoyment. Monni Adams argues that “this aesthetic attitude promoted an understanding of art as something uniquely free of worldly imperative, the very opposite of tool.”²⁸⁰ Similarly in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Sally Price explains that in order to designate something as art “what should ‘happen’ between the object and viewer is relatively constant; the museum visitors task-pleasure, for both Primitive and Western objects, is conceptualised first and foremost as a perceptual–emotional experience, not a cognitive-educational one.”²⁸¹

Pots on a Pedestal - The Beginning of the End of a Journey

I will now look more closely at these debates and investigate how they play themselves out in the relevant exhibitions and the ways in which vessels have spoken and been spoken about. As the vessels have moved from homestead to gallery, the dialogue has gone from pots being interactive and purposeful at home, to being utilised by makers to assert themselves in the market place. But do vessels end up having their life blood removed by the time they are on display? In “Fired ...,” the work that caught my eye as being displayed in a manner that designated the pieces as ethnographic objects were contained in four separate boxes, each with 4 or 5 pots in them, all framed by a large photograph of a kraal structure, with faces carved into the kraal posts and a thatched rondavel in the background (see Fig 3.5). The cattle kraal immediately references these pots as rural and African and

²⁷⁹ Susan Vogel, “Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 201.

²⁸⁰ Monni Adams, “African Visual Arts from a Historical Perspective”, *African Studies Review*, 32, No 2 (1989): 58.

²⁸¹ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83.

they become artefacts from several points of view. Firstly, they are contextualised by the photograph of the kraal (in the background of Fig 3.5 below) which stipulates that they come from a particular place, signifying to the viewer thereby that they are “ethnic” and “tribal”.



Fig 3.5: The Display entitled “Embodied Earth”, Author’s Photograph

The pots are also displayed close to ground level and clustered, another technique designating them as artefact. As Susan Vogel points out, anthropologists gathered vast collections of objects based on their similarity. As they “sought what was typical of culture rather than what was unique, they often exhibited ... vast series of closely similar objects, often arranged typologically.”²⁸² The display of the work close to ground level both contextualises them as “closer to the earth” and is actually the intended way of viewing, using and appreciating them. Most pots from a rural environment were meant to be seen from the top – as they were placed on the ground in beer drinking. The decoration

²⁸² Vogel, *Art/Artifact*, 211.

significantly is also on the top half of the pots as Juliet Armstrong argues because it is useful for “facilitating a firmer grip on the vessel when picked up for drinking.”²⁸³

Interestingly, the whole display is categorised by its label “Embodied Earth”, which makes reference to the rural production of ceramics and rural people being closer to the earth, more in touch with nature and living a life which could be viewed as more instinctual, harmonious and free. Price asks with reference to African art: “Are artists in conscious control of the aesthetic choices they adopt? Or are they rather producing objects through some combination of instinctive behaviour and inherited tradition?”²⁸⁴ In the art versus artefact debate “[a] common ingredient in Western conceptualisations of Primitive Art is that it is produced more spontaneously and less reflectively – with less artistic intentionality.”²⁸⁵ One could well ask whether linking rural and African works to the earth is making this sort of statement about them. The reference to earth is of course a general association of clay being sourced from the earth, but it does also have deeper connotations with reference to African women. Dieter Reusch, when referencing Zulu ceramics, points out: “Gender divisions also have a cosmological underpinning ... there is an interesting connection between the sky, earth and the ancestors ... Sky lord is perceived as masculine and the earth as feminine.”²⁸⁶ Similarly the exhibition associates Zulu vessels as being symbolic of earth, fertility, female fecundity and of course pregnancy and child birth. This is directly referenced by the label on the works stating: “Some of the vessels and sculptures on display here are resonant with the shape of the human body ... [they have] curved lines and rounded features which are reminiscent of the human shape.”²⁸⁷ On another label titled “Archaeological Fragments,” there is direct reference to the fact that “smelting and forging were technically and symbolically linked to making and firing pottery and both were symbolically linked with giving birth.”²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Juliet Armstrong, “The Magwaza Family”, 42.

²⁸⁴ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 88.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

²⁸⁶ Reusch, “Imbiza Kayibil”, 19.

²⁸⁷ Display panel called “Embodied Earth” situated next to the three show cases of Limpopo pottery with terracotta and graphite decorations.

²⁸⁸ Display panel called “Archaeological Fragments”.

Another common feature of objects and particularly African objects is that those assigned to being artefacts are deemed anonymous as I discussed in Chapter Two. In the display of “Embodied Earth” (see Fig 3.5), several of the pots are labelled “unnamed Venda artists”. There is an important technical difference between the connotations of unknown and unnamed. If they are unknown, it is because perhaps there was no record and no memory of who made the work. But does unnamed suggest a disturbing intent to not recognise the maker?²⁸⁹ The appreciation of an artist also has connections with the conception of the named individual, with a known life history and a place within the literature of art, where they exist at a “specific point in the evolving history of civilization.”²⁹⁰ On the other hand, “Primitive Art” is often regarded as tied to the stipulations and restrictions of ritual and ceremony. As Sally Price articulates: “[the] anonymous maker is thought to have operated on the basis of the community, that precluded artistic reflection or the innovative solution to design problems.”²⁹¹ The display in the SANG foyer of an unknown Zulu vessel is therefore questionable (see Fig 3.6). The label is titled “unknown maker 1900” and the designation is KwaZulu-Natal. It is surprising that SANG displays an unknown vessel given that there are only three ceramic vessels on display in the whole gallery and that they must have a collection of them that are from known makers. In fact, we are aware from Chapter One that Anne Lawton’s collection of ceramics from her research would now be incorporated into the Social History Collection. Does this imply a degree of disrespect, counter to the claims of “redressing past imbalances?”²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 83.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* 88.

²⁹² I do also acknowledge that SANG could well want to give a sense of equality in display by not only showing works that are signed or have a record of the maker.



Fig 3.6: Unknown maker 1900 – KwaZulu-Natal, South African National Gallery, Author's Photograph

Furthermore, in the “Hidden Treasures” exhibition the only two pots on display are problematic from a number of points of view. The larger black pot is labelled as being “Nala Family Ceramic Workshop” (see Fig 3.7 below). What is meant by ceramic workshop is unclear, but to not know which member of the Nala family made the vessel is also odd. It cannot be Sipiwe Nala (Nesta Nala’s mother) as she was dead by the date given as 2000. It was indeed Nesta Nala who reverted to working in the *ukhamba* genre and who by this date was no longer making for ceremonial purposes (so she is a distinct possibility). Her daughters did distinctly different styles, so it is unlikely to be them. Furthermore, Nesta Nala’s daughters are still alive and could surely have identified the vessel. So why were they not consulted? Similarly, to label it as “*Ukhamba/Ceremonial Vessel*” is strange as it is clearly too large to be used in any beer ceremony: it would be very heavy to use once filled with liquid. The small vessel in the middle in the picture (Fig 3.7) below would be more akin to those used in a beer ceremony.



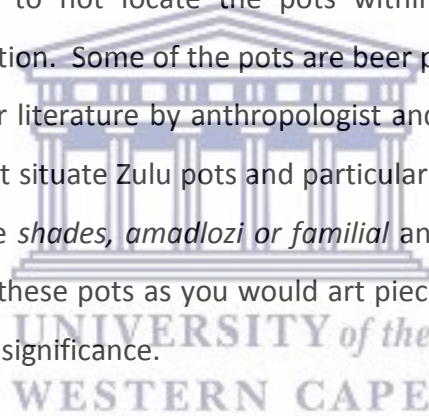
Fig 3.7: Display of Vessels in the “Hidden Treasures” Exhibition, Nesta Nala’s vessel on the right, Author’s Photograph

In the entrance to the “Fired ...” exhibition there is a small “grotto” with several pots both named and unnamed in it (see Fig 3.8 below). This is an intriguing set up, as the pots are situated just behind a raised lip and placed at various levels within the enclosed space. Some of these vessels are *izinkamba* or beer pots, but the space itself does not have any didactic labelling. The pots have what Sally Price describes as the “dog collar,” which is a short sharp description with the credentials of the artist and name of the piece.²⁹³ Usually the smaller the label, the more the work is intended to be seen as an “art” work rather than an ethnographic object, because it is free of a context and is thus “art for art’s sake”, not a

²⁹³ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 83.

utilitarian object. This, as Sally Errington points out, “constitutes the object as a mere representation of a model of the world rather than a part of the world.”²⁹⁴ So devoid of ethnographic labels that describe “geographic origin, fabrication, function and esoteric meaning ... elucidated at length,”²⁹⁵ the piece becomes closer to art than artefact. As a viewer I am subconsciously aware that the piece is art not artefact because of the length of the label. However, it is also pertinent to ask why these pots are situated in such a place. It is hardly by accident because as we have seen, all display has an intention.

I can only assume that the symbolism of the “grotto” with the raised lip at the entrance is a direct reference to the *umsamo*, which is located at the back of a designated rondavel in some rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Such a clear reference to the pots situated in a “sacred” space would need explanation. But conversely, the lack of labelling other than “storage vessels” seems intentionally to not locate the pots within their social context, ritual significance or utilitarian function. Some of the pots are beer pots and there is a researched and documented link in other literature by anthropologist and art historian, Dieter Reusch and Juliet Armstrong et al that situate Zulu pots and particularly blackened beer pots within ceremonies that venerate the *shades, amadlozi or familial* ancestors of a household.²⁹⁶ It seems contradictory to label these pots as you would art pieces and yet situate them in so obvious a context of “sacred” significance.



²⁹⁴ Shelly Errington, “What became of Authentic Primitive Art”, *Cultural Anthropology* 9, 2 (1994): 210.

²⁹⁵ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 84.

²⁹⁶ Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw, Dieter Reusch, “Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*”, *Southern African Humanities*, 20 (2008).



Fig 3.8: Group of vessels in a "Grotto" at the entrance of "Fired ...," Author's Photograph

The most obvious signifier of a piece of work being art rather than artefact is, as Margaret Lindauer states, "a room with white walls and pedestals upon which individual objects are placed, spatially isolated from one another to accentuate aesthetic qualities."²⁹⁷ In the exhibition "Fired ..." there are several such examples, where a singular object or pair of objects have significant space around them, are perched on a white box and caged in glass. As Sally Price indicates, "The isolation of an object both from other objects and from verbose contextualisation carries a definite implication of value."²⁹⁸ But minimal labelling and situating works separately does something more, it directs the viewer to engage with the aesthetic principals of a piece rather than its social context or meaning. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett articulates succinctly that "the written label in an exhibition was a

²⁹⁷ Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor", 209.

²⁹⁸ Price, *Primitive Art*, 84.

surrogate for the words of an absent lecturer.”²⁹⁹ But in the case of designated art works, the label and therefore the lecturer are all but absent. Without a label descriptor the viewer is enabled to perhaps engage in some “higher realm”. In order for many artefacts to become works of art and be appreciated purely for their aesthetic qualities, they were stripped of soft parts, rendering them “modern looking and preserving or creating a particular aesthetic.”³⁰⁰ The art of other cultures was most prized for what Western art determined were formal aesthetic qualities that defined a piece as art by “ignoring the indigenous systems of value and meaning attached to objects.”³⁰¹

In contrast to the *umsamo* gathering of pots, which should have a contextual label, is a grouping of Nala family (Nesta and her daughters Thembi and Jabu’s) works, which has a relatively long explanation. There is contextual explanation labelled “Inspired by the Ancestors”, and although this might immediately indicate to the viewer that the display is all about pots and ritual purpose, none of these women made vessels for ritual use. Given the date of the Nesta Nala piece as 1995, we are aware from the previous chapter that she was distinctly making vessels for an exterior “art” market at that stage of her career. And although in the genre of *izinkamba*, the vessels were not intended for use, the label states that “The offering of beer in earthenware vessels continues to form an integral part of important cultural rituals,”³⁰² This is not incorrect as Chapter One attests, but the label does finish the explanation with wording which states that indeed vessels are created not only for ceremonial but also for decorative or decor use.³⁰³ However, the descriptors still do not mention that they are “art”. To me as a viewer, the term “decor” reads as shallow and frivolous and is often linked with “craft”, whereas the word “art” connotes something serious and more meaningful.

²⁹⁹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 395.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 204.

³⁰¹ Phillips and Steiner, “Art, Authenticity and Baggage”, 7.

³⁰² Text on label “Inspired by Ancestors”.

³⁰³ Label “Inspired by the Ancestors”.



Fig 3.9: Display of Nesta, Jabu and Thembi Nala's vessels, Author's Photograph.

In the exhibition "Fired..." there are several pieces that indicate to the viewer that they are "art" through their placement, display and labelling. One such striking piece is a large vessel indicative of an *ukhamba* but larger than that which could be used for drinking. The pot is black as per a "traditional" pot, but it is decorated with red enamel paint around the opening and bordered by a string of blue beads. (It is hard to determine if these are applied glass beads or clay in the shape of beads). The label for the pot is: "**Kgwarane German Mahlase Vessel named after the Zulu Queen Nandi, Cape Town 2004**".



Fig 3.10: Kgwarane German Mahlase – Vessel named after the Zulu Queen Nandi, Cape Town 2004.

This is clearly a “dog tag” label with no ethnographic contextualisation of the vessel’s use or significance. The piece is out on the open floor and spotlighted, and displayed low, so one can look down at it. But the detail of the label is cryptic. Is the name Kgwarane German Mahlase the artist, or does it state the name of the famous Zulu Queen, Nandi (King Shaka’s mother)? It is difficult to determine what is being referred to unless you know the names of Zulu queens. But it is not a Queen’s name so therefore it is the artist. Despite this, it is interesting to see how this piece in particular, which pays homage to more “traditional” shape and design but utilizes “modern” substances and style of decoration (enamel paint and glass beads), is signified to the viewer as an art object. The question is: does a piece like this get designated as art because it ceases to indicate by its presentation a cultural context? Or more to the point, is it art when it begins to take on a more Western and modern aesthetic in the form and materials in the decoration (the enamel paint)?

In complete contrast the South African National Gallery displays Zulu pots as art if we go by their “dog tag” labels. Yet it groups the objects together (see Fig 3.7) as if they are meant to signify ethnographic objects. Reading the messages of these two different exhibitions is complex. Both institutions move between referencing pieces as art and artefact and vice versa in the same exhibitions. Perhaps this is an indication of the breaking of boundaries

between disciplines of anthropology and art? At the SANG exhibition the lone “unknown artist” vessel mentioned earlier (Fig 3.6) is displayed in a manner distinctly encouraging it to be read as “art”. The pot is alone in ample space and elevated on a pedestal with a small label and artfully lit from above. The irony is of course that a Zulu vessel is meant to be seen standing on the ground (as per the exhibits of “Fired ...”), prior to being picked up, with the decoration at the top half of the vessel for this purpose – as we discovered in Chapter One. Elevated to the status of an art object, it loses its intention, as a conveyor of messages. It is also interesting that the two vessels in the gallery that are of the blackened and burnished variety are decorated with *amasumpa*, indicative of “authentic” Zulu pots, as I have previously debated. Is this a conscious construction by curators? Or is it also an indication of institutions having larger collections of pots with *amasumpa* because they were considered indicative of “Zuluness”?

There is another object in the showcase of Nala vessels mentioned earlier (Fig 3.11), which I shall examine. In the display case are several pots by the Nala family placed next to work by Barbara Jackson (below) titled “Calabash Shape” with a red and white striped top and black and white speckled bottom. There is no descriptive text indicating why this vessel is with the Nalas, apart from perhaps it being a calabash and therefore a signifier of the idea of the “rural.” The combination of “traditional domestic pottery” by Zulu artists from KwaZulu-Natal and a Cape Town artist raises the question: does the traditional ware become “significant” because of its association or proximity to a Western artist?

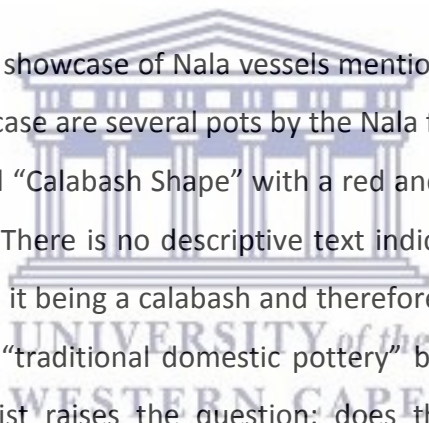




Fig 3.11: Pot by Barbara Jackson, "Calabash Shape", Authors Photograph

If we look at the history of Western art, African sculpture came to the attention or was "discovered" by Western artists such as Klee, Braque, Brancusi and Picasso and by association and appropriation entered the realms of art. When modernist pieces by the some of the above artists were displayed in an exhibition *Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity between the Tribal and the Modern*, they were exhibited with the African objects that theoretically inspired the likes of Picasso and associates. As Sally Price contests:

Primitive Art is elevated in status by being shown in the context of Modern art ... Modern art holds claim to the titles of authenticity and recognised masterpiece status, and much of the popular admiration of Primitive art is based on association with features that first caught our interest through the work of twentieth-century Western artists.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Price, *Primitive Art*, 96.

The label on the works at the “Fired ...” exhibition attests that the Western and non-Western works demonstrate the same features, those of the human body. But nonetheless, is there a Western curatorial perspective that prevails, actually indicating the worthiness of some work because of the presence of others?

It is important to acknowledge, as Errington does in her statement, that “the vast majority of objects found in fine art museums were not created as art, not intended to be ‘art’: they were originally other things ... [M]any of the objects that we count as ‘art’ required a ‘metamorphosis’ in order to become art.”³⁰⁵ Yet the Nala grouping of pots contests this idea, as all the vessels to me were produced as “art” and not for ritual use, despite their confusing labelling. So in an odd twist the curator decided that as rural objects they were not created as “art” but had a ritual function or decor (with associated connotations of being “lowly” craft). Again do we accept the institution as “representing the objective truth?”³⁰⁶ Susan Vogel points out that “we exhibit them (art from non-Western cultures) for our own purposes in institutions that are deeply imbedded in our own culture.”³⁰⁷ Vogel is drawing attention to the fact that the artefacts or art objects are not only “voiceless”, but that they are manipulated by individuals and institutions who perceive and assume authority in a certain way. As Sally Price tells us, “the eye of even the most naturally gifted connoisseur is not naked but views art through the lens of a Western cultural education.”³⁰⁸ Secondly, she states “that many Primitives (including both artists and critics) are also endowed with a discriminating ‘eye’ – similarly fitted with an optical device that reflects their own cultural education.”³⁰⁹ But are we hearing the “voice” of Western perception or of the artist that made and therefore knows the intention of the object?

³⁰⁵ Errington, “Authentic Primitive Art”, 203.

³⁰⁶ Davison, “Material Culture”, 96.

³⁰⁷ Vogel, “Art/Artifact”, 215.

³⁰⁸ Price, *Primitive Art*, 93.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 93.

Curatorial Expertise and Efforts to Convince the Viewer

It is a rare thing even in new museums, to hear the voice of the maker of an object. As Elizabeth Perrill states: “The silence of ceramic artists’ voices surrounding the display, description and inclusion of the ceramic medium in anthropological and art historical museums still predominates.”³¹⁰ The descriptions in the exhibition “Fired ...”, according to Margaret Lindauer, take the form of “truth speak”, which as she clarifies “shows off curatorial expertise while devaluing perspectives among people whose work is on display.”³¹¹ Similarly, in “Fired ...” the “voice” of the exhibition appears to emanate from the external expert or curator and advisors on the subject of South African ceramics. The tone and style of the information does not appear to engage the active participation of the viewer. Lindauer’s following statement is an accurate assessment of the exhibition’s curatorial style: “It situates the visitor as a passive consumer of simple, undisputed information rather than an intellectually engaged participant.”³¹²

Inevitably, such discussions also turn our attention to the role of curators within museums and galleries. Since the 1920s the role of the curator has shifted from someone who took care of the objects in museums and exhibitions to someone who is almost credited with making the objects, through display and labelling, particularly in art galleries. Paul O’Neill has suggested that curatorial practice in the 1960s became an art form in itself, as art could be considered the production of ideas about art. Even those that contextualise and explain art gave the appearance of being producers, by the manner of the presentation of their ideas. By the 1970s curators were no longer simply “carers” for artworks but took on organisational, discursive and creative functions as well, evident in labelling and didactic panel descriptions.³¹³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that, “The ethnographers lecture is a long label, a performed description that elevates what would otherwise be viewed as ‘trifles’. Neither modest specimens nor the dry facts are expected to interest the listener. Rather it is the ethnographer’s own expenditure of time and effort – his or her expertise –

³¹⁰ Elizabeth Perrill, “Ceramic Displays, African Voices: Introduction” in *Interpreting Ceramics*, 17 (2016): 4.

³¹¹ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 213.

³¹² Ibid, 216.

³¹³ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 2-18.

that creates value.”³¹⁴ This certainly appears to me the viewer to be what is implied by the didactic and other panels in the “Fired ...” exhibition. I certainly left the “Fired ...” exhibition being very impressed with the amount of knowledge that had been gathered and the manner in which it had been disseminated and I did indeed admire the curator and advisors for that. However, the curator involved appears uninterested in posing alternative perspectives or posing provocative questions. This methodology of curating situates the audience as passive receptors of expert knowledge. The exhibition is framed in such a way as to be someone else’s point of view. Yes, although it was very informative, highly educational and I the viewer as a ceramist learnt a great deal from it, it did not reveal much of the hidden and complex debates about the place of objects in South African art history.

The assertions of the experts including curator and advisors in the exhibition “Fired ...” and “Hidden Treasures” (although lacking much text) is clear, by the nature of the directive text panels and absence of open ended enquiry. Although the educational aspect deals with ceramic production in South Africa, it neglects to delve into any issues of political inequity among people of diverse social, economic, cultural or racial histories. As a viewer I was highly impressed by the attempts at integrating rural/urban and black/white makers and their work. However, more enquiry or “shared enquiry” might have resulted in something akin to curated exhibitions which exude a dynamic and engaging social interrogation, in addition to information. The question is whether there is a place for these types of exhibitions to “challenge the racist, exoticising rhetoric of the ‘primitive’ ... [that] art historians, curators and anthropologists in particular, have employed to distance and dehumanize native peoples and people of colour?”³¹⁵ Although this may seem a harsh criticism or beyond the scope of these exhibitions, there is much potential to explore the debates around colonialism and its impact, even just with regard to ceramic objects. As we have seen, ceramic objects have been part of people’s lives for a very long time, “twenty one centuries” according to Gavin Whitelaw. Whitelaw’s essay argues that ceramics vessels from KwaZulu-Natal have been dated from 150 BC to AD 300.³¹⁶ Ceramics are physical

³¹⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography”, 396.

³¹⁵ Maurice Berger, Jennifer Gonzalez, Fred Wilson, “Collaboration, Museums and Politics of Display: A Conversation with Fred Wilson” in *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, (Baltimore MD: Centre for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore, 2001): 11.

³¹⁶ Whitelaw, “Twenty One Centuries”, 3.

objects that have not only been spectators of South Africa's turbulent and eventful past, but active participants within it, and they offer an obvious opportunity to give a "voice" to those less represented. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the "Hidden Treasures" exhibition did state its intent to "address past inequities". But this very same didactic panel opens in the second paragraph with "Inspired by the global interest in African art ..."³¹⁷ I as the critical viewer wondered whether they (the institution) did this exhibition because "Africa is flavour of the month", or because they genuinely want to celebrate the beauty of all of South Africa's art makers?

At the beginning of this chapter there was a review of the Castle as a prison and a fort and there appeared to be a disjuncture between the ceramics on display and the building. One of the didactic panels in the exhibition poses a wonderful opportunity to incorporate the symbolism of the building and ceramics, and open a vibrant discussion or pose some uncomfortable questions. The panel titled "Of Khoesan Origin" states: "This type of [Khoesan origin] pottery was still being made in the south-western Cape when the Dutch arrived, and fragments have been found in the lowest layers of seventeenth century archaeological sites, including the Castle."³¹⁸ This is such a shockingly passive statement describing such a calamitous event. For the Khoekhoe herders, their culture, way of life and means of existence were literally buried under the foundations of colonialism! Granted, I as viewer did now understand the symbolism of having this exhibition in this venue – as fragments of ceramics were found in the foundations – but the opportunity to "dig" deeper was lost.

In Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine's publication there is a valuable distinction about museums, having two sides: "the traditional one of the museum as temple and the newer one of the museum as forum. As temple ... the museum plays a 'timeless and universal function, the use of structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions.' In contrast, as forum, the museum is a place for

³¹⁷ Didactic panel "Hidden Treasures" exhibition.

³¹⁸ Didactic panel "Fired ..." exhibition.

‘confrontation, experimentation, and debate.’”³¹⁹ Although the exhibition “Fired ...” is not the whole experience or the only presentation of the Iziko museums, it is nonetheless an example of one of its voices to the public. I would have thought the type of objects in this exhibition offers an opportunity for the display to operate as a forum for larger debates or to raise more open-ended questions about human interactions in South Africa. The “Hidden Treasures” exhibition is even more frustrating because as a Gallery it tells one so little.

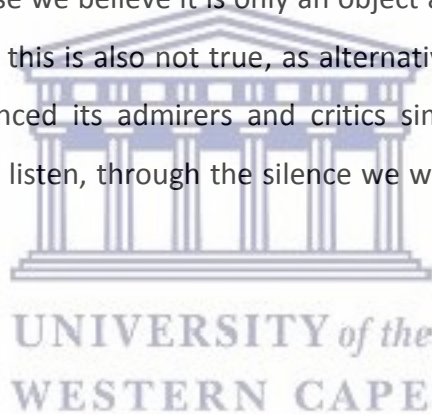
Conclusion

Susan Vogel rightfully points out that “if the original African experience was variable and can be only imperfectly simulated outside its culture, then a museum presentation can be arbitrary and incomplete.”³²⁰ This could, of course, be said of many cultural groups and their objects, not just African. But it does articulate that display is often a veil that obscures complexities, secrets, misinformation and lies, both internal and external to the museum itself. Museums and art galleries present objects in buildings that exude authority. They similarly exert conviction by the manner in which they write about displays and how and what they display. Museums and galleries, are in fact entities that can be considered material culture. Yet, as has been demonstrated, museums and galleries are also actually “smoke and mirrors”, artfully constructing stories they or an expert wish to tell. Of course the museum visitor will critique, interpret and respond to the museum objects according to their own vision of the world. As much as a museum is an arrangement of items, the visitor carries with them a concept of how the world should look and they will interpret the display accordingly, sometimes despite every effort to encourage them to see differently. And in saying this, I am fully aware that as a visitor I have done the same and may have missed salient points or information. But this is exactly what happens in the interface between visitor and institution. I acknowledge that both parties are subject to the possibility of misinterpretations of each other.

³¹⁹ Ivan and Steven Lavine, “Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3.

³²⁰ Vogel, “Art/Artifact”, 214.

The Zulu ceramic vessel has traversed many different types of space in this journey, from a house, to market shelf to white walls. In this, its final visiting spot, the Zulu ceramic vessel has never been as exposed and yet oddly never been so quiet. It has many a story to tell from its travels. It has seen and done many things. Yet it has become an object for contemplation and all information about it is either filtered through the authority of the institution, or intentionally minimized to enable the public's interpretation to take precedence. The vessel seems somehow depleted of its wealth of experience, sucked dry of all the exuberance of the human lives it has accompanied, its vitality sapped and dissipated. Perhaps this has occurred as a result of its long, tiring activities. Or is it the effect of the "tomb-like" place it has ended up in? But this is of course just an opinion. I too am the viewer and can only begin to understand the exact spirit and voice of the pot, according to what other people have presented and told me. The vessel like many objects appears to be denied its voice simply because we believe it is only an object and has no inner life, none of its own stories to tell us. Yet this is also not true, as alternatively the vessel could actually just as well finally have silenced its admirers and critics simply by its presence on the pedestal. And if we stop and listen, through the silence we will hear what it has to tell us, simply by looking.



CONCLUSION

I began this study because I wanted to express my admiration for the astounding vessels made by the women ceramists of KwaZulu-Natal. But admiration is one thing. I also wanted to understand how such vessels were subtly able to negotiate the different contexts in which I encountered them, and how they spoke back to the constraints of such contexts. Despite the economic and social hardships faced by many of these women, they have competed and excelled in a complex web of global dynamics.

In this thesis I have revealed the manner in which vessels have spoken and been spoken about. I have used the concept of voice literally and metaphorically, as I have also used the notions of space, momentum and travel. As ceramic vessels made by women (and some men) of KwaZulu-Natal have moved out of the homestead, have stopped at the roadside and then perhaps proceeded to a museum or public gallery, the dialogue that they have conducted with such stops has changed. Vessels began by being seen only in relation to their domestic usage. They then moved to the centre of assertive debates by makers and buyers in the market, and finally ended up rather aloof (sometimes physically elevated) but nonetheless serene and beautiful in the quiet and dignified space of a gallery.

Before beginning to investigate precisely what ceramic objects were telling us in their originating environments, I investigated the way that pots were written about from 1910 onward. South African studies at the time were amateur at best, and they categorised objects in a style that gave the loudest voice to colonial opinion and need. Ceramic pieces were found in archaeological digs throughout KwaZulu-Natal and attributed to distinct tribal and ethnic groups. Hierarchies of human development and the movement of groups into and within South Africa were mapped out from the shards of vessels and remains of human habitation. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, these methods became more honed and distinct methodologies of understanding other cultures were developed. Yet despite considerable categorising and differing levels of sophistication being applied to investigations, it was only just prior to the turn of this century that ceramic vessels were viewed differently. From the 1980s a new generation of researchers and scholars understood vessels as dynamic participants in the social and spiritual relationship between makers and users, as well as being items with aesthetic properties that have purpose and communicate various

messages. As with most shifts or changes in perceptions or adjustments of the way in which objects are talked about, these new viewpoints were a result of complex political, social and academic developments. An enormous shift in South African political orientation enabled reflection into the nature of post-colonial and post-apartheid identities which meant challenging white cultural dominance and reviewing national distinctiveness from other viewpoints. It also gave rise to shifts in preconceived values and paradigms coincident with the development of African centred curricula, cross-culturalism and cultural realignment.

No less complex are the interactions that vessels have within the chain of supply and demand. Simplistically, someone makes a vessel and then someone buys it. Or does the buyer want it and then someone makes it? A good marketing text book will instruct an entrepreneur to “make what the market needs”, which means that the buyer wants it and someone makes it. But Chapter Two convinces us that this is not entirely correct. In this chapter I explored the complex dynamic of vessels within different markets, firstly as tourist art and then as art or collector’s pieces. But as my investigation revealed there are less differences between these types of wares and the buyers than we thought. And as for the original question of which came first, the vessel or the buyer, it appears that neither did. Ceramic artists became known through the publications that featured them, the exhibitions that presented them and the awards they won. As a consequence, collectors began to desire them. The consumer, be they individual patron or institution, impacts upon the formal attributes of their vessels, although not as a straight forward transaction. Through case studies of specific ceramists, I revealed that despite competing pressures and demands, these vessels are not voiceless, passive or inert in these negotiations, despite their rural and some might think naive origins. The concept that an artist has of their personal and social identity is powerful and provocative and affects the attributes of pots.

In my third and last chapter I reviewed museums and art galleries, and by implication their collections through two particular exhibitions. This chapter was a personal perspective on how institutions are active in carrying out ideological and political messages, which are imparted to the public that visits them. I reviewed how the processes of exhibition collection, production, and design create certain meanings. Furthermore, I explored the ways in which a particular exhibition or museum functions to disclose wider considerations about public history, curatorship and the role of expertise. Similar to the vessels

represented in them, exhibitions have a history which continues to evolve and be reviewed as their larger contexts change. Objects from around the world were originally collected and displayed in private homes as “cabinets of curiosity”. Collections then became important instruments of instruction and education and were put in public institutions where artefacts were arranged and ordered in particular ways. The Western museum exerted social control over its publics and it located this public in a hierarchy of achievement, through the manner in which objects from other countries and peoples were shown.

I then investigated two South African institutions and two exhibitions; one dedicated to a history of South African ceramics and the other to a display of objects from all over the African continent. In reviewing these, I discovered that display is often a veil that obscures complexities and secrets, and reveals hidden, subliminal agendas of curators and institutions. Museums and art galleries present objects in buildings that exude authority; they similarly exert conviction by the manner in which they write about displays and how and what they display. Yet as I have demonstrated, museums and galleries are actually artfully constructing a range of narratives. Similarly, the museum visitor will critique, interpret and respond (as I did) to the museum objects according to their own internal stories. As much as a museum is an arrangement of items, the visitor carries with them a preconditioned arrangement of how they see, filtered by their education, upbringing, ethnicity, gender, age, political affiliation and religious beliefs. Museums can either situate the visitor as a passive consumer of simple, undisputed information or challenge them as intellectually engaged participants, inviting them to participate in the stories being told.

I believe that vessels will continue to be the focus of differing ideas about their origins, their place in the homestead and their purpose within it, and I propose that even the most utilitarian artefacts or objects are invested with social value that goes beyond domestic function. I also believe the so-called mighty market is not that powerful and even a distant voice can be heard.

In the end, I would hope that this study would contribute in a small way to encouraging more accurate documentation and records of individual makers. In all honesty, I feel that ceramics in general is still considered craft, and I would be happy if this study could help in

enlarging the critical reception of Zulu ceramics as an art form of convincing validity and presence.

I have found ceramic vessels to be both beautiful and elusive creations and it has been my purpose to discuss them in a manner which both unveils and veils. These vessels are not reducible to tools or objects. They are in essence other to me, and despite my best efforts I cannot wholly understand them since the language they speak is ultimately mysterious.



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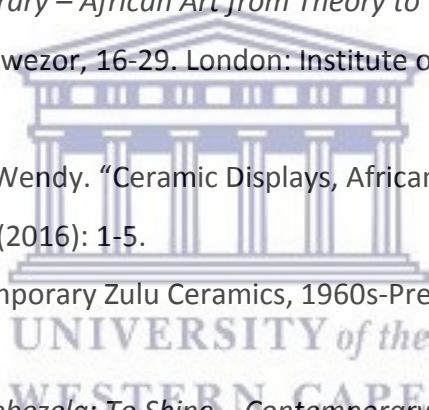
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EXHIBITIONS

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2. “Hidden Treasures”, Iziko Museums in The South African National Gallery, Cape Town 2018.

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