

***The Art of Southern Africa: The Terence Pethica Collection.* Sandra Klopper, Anitra Nettleton, and Terence Pethica. Milan, Italy: 5 Continents, 2007. 214 pp.\***

Reviewed by Juliette Leeb-du Toit

Over the last three decades, interest in art from Southern Africa has increased dramatically, resulting in unprecedented collecting by local and international public institutions and private collectors. Coincident with political change in South Africa, little was initially legislated to control the exodus of such items from the country. The exploitation of rural communities by dealers who plundered vast areas in search of “authentic” and “tribal” items was only stemmed relatively recently, by which time much valuable work had left the country. Even today, legislation to protect older works of art from leaving the country is difficult to enforce and the illegal marketing of Southern African patrimony is still ongoing.

Publications on private collections have particular merit in foregrounding items that would otherwise have been seen only by a select few, therefore it is particularly welcome that Terence Pethica has made his collection accessible as well as revealing the motivations for its acquisition and aspects of his collecting process. As will be noted, most of the works were sourced in Britain and Belgium. The importance of a wider exposure of such collections is substantial in that it allows researchers, collectors, and laypersons to accrue visual and textual information on objects from a particular region or cultural group, thereby amplifying an understanding of their significance and function. In relation to artistic production from Southern Africa, such exposure is vital in contributing to the shaping of regional chronologies, the identification of stylistic continuities, and even the ascribing or discounting of possible authorship based on specific features identifiable in previously “anonymous” or unprovenanced work.

Private collections are acquired for different reasons, and any publication on these is determined by the scope of their content. Fortunately the Pethica collection comprises objects from a specific region (Southern Africa), as well as those of a particular type and function. This regional and material-specific collection (it mostly consists of items made of wood) has therefore elicited more substantial and informed contextualization and documentation. A publication on a private collection is distinguished by the caliber of its accompanying information, therefore it is important to invite specialists in the field to provide both annotations as well as texts that contextualize and elaborate on the visual material from such collections. New material and insights contribute significantly to the ongoing identification, interpretation, and positioning of formerly unseen items from collections. In this publication two of the major researchers in the field of South African art agreed to contribute to the text; Sandra Klopper has both conducted an interview with the collector, Terence Pethica, as well as written an essay that addresses issues of authenticity, debates on stylistic identification, and the notion of cultural identity associated with works, while Anitra Nettleton has adapted material from other articles and publications in her superb essay that contextualizes headrests from Southern Africa.

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Much has been said in recent literature on collectors and collecting within the context of museum studies, with increasing scrutiny of their motivations and function. Collecting is prompted not least by mere acquisitiveness, linked further to rarity value, economic power, and prestige, a result of which the collector's intention is often cautiously addressed, marginalized, or suppressed. Many publications on collections provide hardly any or only rudimentary annotations regarding the collectors and the process and motivation for realizing the collections. Klopper elected to include a direct transcript of an interview with Terence Pethica thereby providing a valuable insight into aspects of collecting, his personal encounter with objects and other collectors, and the affinities he has for items selected. Rather than concealing motivations for his collecting, Pethica is honest and often disarmingly naïve in his comments and motives for his actions, thereby providing considerable insight into the man himself. His appreciation for some objects has often stemmed from his mathematical background and consequent interest in the architectural structure of, for example, headrests, or in the patina accrued through use, his interest therefore is not only in their uniqueness, rarity value, and "otherness."

The Pethica collection has a fine representative body of Southern African headrests, including Shona, Tsonga, Nguni, and Zulu examples. Nettleton provides an informative essay that contextualizes them, examines the fascination they have held for collectors over the years, located in debates on the exotic, as well as foregrounds current perspectives on their usage, regional inflections, and even their gendered associations. She closely examines their customary usage, possible regionally based continuities, and the fluidity of geographic boundaries and ethnic origins that could have contributed to some inflections in style and design.

Klopper points out that recent research is concerned with deconstructing and intentionally blurring erstwhile or presumed ethnic and geographic boundaries in relation to carvers and the works' origins. Rigid colonial perceptions and the enforcing of cultural and regional boundaries attempted to consign peoples to areas, thereby controlling their movement and interaction. Consequently Klopper argues that attributions were somewhat biased in keeping with these parameters, suggesting instead that attribution needs to embrace factual evidence related to the movement of peoples in the region, with attributions being more cautiously applied.

Klopper plausibly argues that current attribution of work to a specific "master" or ethnic group should be reconsidered. Contesting notions of an artistic hierarchy as speculative and problematic, she suggests, *inter alia*, that a "master" carver might rather have engendered a group of emulators or followers not necessarily from an ethnically exclusive group. Increasing evidence of the presence of both Malawian as well as Tsonga migrant workers along the eastern seaboard, the adjacent interior, and, of course, on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, could well have included those with carving skills, thereby further contributing to the dissemination, emulation, and furthering of idioms and skills within and beyond any ethnically specific region. This movement across boundaries is supported by evidence not only of laborers but also tailors and peddlers from, for example, Malawi, who plied their trade on an itinerant basis in the region as far afield as the eastern seaboard in areas such as present-day Makhakatana. In this the essays provide important contributions to debates regarding attribution, authenticity, regional styles, and migrancy.

Klopper also reiterates that carvings were valued in both an African and Western cultural context, a Western market having played a role in both supporting and sustaining types of production, such as staffs, since at least the mid 19th century. So too inter-cultural emulation and borrowing occurred, possibly even earlier, in instances such as the Xhosa and South Nguni pipes (plates 96 and 98) clearly reflecting close emulation of Moravian Slavic/Germanic mission prototypes.

As to be expected of authors such as Nettleton and Klopper, the documentation accompanying images is detailed and comprehensive. Perhaps a little disconcerting, though, is the fact that while some items have their vernacular names in brackets, there is a lack of consistency in such inclusions. The isiZulu term for milk pail—*ithunga*—is included in plate 56, but all the staffs, headrests, and other items have no vernacular terms attached. There may well have been a reason for this but I have not seen this explained. I know that the authors are familiar with the vernacular terms and strongly believe that these should have been included. However, perhaps this omission might lie in the fact that there are several terms used to describe specific types of staff in isiZulu, dependant on their function, which might not be known in relation to the specific staffs in the Pethica collection.

The mediation of an interactive experience of three-dimensional objects in a publication is largely conveyed through the exceptional skills of the photographer, and all credit is due to Heini Schneebeli for these striking images. He has foregrounded the items to best effect, using raking light to highlight marks, flaws, patina, and wood grain, in compelling images such as those of the *knobkerrie* (see earlier qualms regarding the use of the vernacular) and its detailed head.

I hope that the caliber of this publication might persuade others to share their collections with the broader public in the interests of contributing to further deciphering and contextualizing art from Southern Africa.

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