A Conservation assessment of the Joan Broster Beadwork & Clothing Collection, at the Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, Eastern Cape

Introduction

Regina Isaacs, of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), requested June Hosford to conduct a conservation assessment of the Joan Broster Beadwork & Clothing collection, which forms the major part of the special collections, housed in the Library building at the Walter Sisulu University. The purpose of the assessment was to determine its conservation and storage needs, and whether the collection should be declared by the SAHRA. The assessment was carried out between the 23rd and 25th June 2009.

It was understood that this assessment should focus on the Broster collection, but that all recommendations made for storage and exhibition, will also apply to the collection of traditional objects collected by Professor Lamla, during his research for his PhD, in 1976/77.

Mthatha is situated inland, about 220 km north-west of East London. It falls in the summer rainfall area like East London, but experiences higher summer temperatures (ranging from 11° - 29°C, but can rise to 35°C), and winters that are generally drier and colder with temperatures ranging between 8° and 20°, sometimes dropping to 0°C. Because of warm, moist onshore easterly winds that prevail in Mthatha, rainfall occurs between October and March. The average annual rainfall in this area is 550 mm, with the highest being 1400 mm and the lowest 250 mm.

Almost two-thirds of the collection, which numbers almost 3 000 pieces, is made up of beaded ornaments for the head, neck, body, arms & legs. However, many of the arm ornaments are of solid metal, or metal wire wound round a foundation, as well as bangles of plastic and rubber seals from the lids of bottles.

The rest of the collection comprises clothing and accessories, such as skirts, headdresses and cloaks, and different kinds of cloth and skin bags. All the clothing and accessories are decorated with beadwork and/or pearl buttons.

Background to the Broster collection

The collection was purchased from Joan Broster, in the 1980s, by the then University of Transkei, (now Walter Sisulu University). The collection, which is mainly from the Qebe area, was made by Joan Broster (nee Clarke), between 1952 and 1966.

Joan Broster's grandfather pioneered a trading business in the Engcobo district of the Transkei in 1875. Four Clarke generations lived among the Thembu before Joan Broster, as a young bride, moved to the village of Qebe in 1952, to run a family trading store. There she studied Thembu traditions, developed a passion for beadwork, and collected and annotated local costumes that demonstrate how minutely beadwork mapped social identity within this Xhosa-speaking community.

She also used her contacts with the network of traders in the region, to collect beadwork from other Xhosa-speaking groups - the collection also has a small quantity of Mpondo beadwork in it. At Qebe, a refugee Xesibe group that had settled among the Thembu in the early 1800s, adopted Thembu customs and dress.

The Xesibe were interesting in that they were staunch traditionalists and refused all offers of schooling and Christian religion. They adhered to their old pagan ways, which they expressed by the wearing of red ochre, revered by the ancestral spirits. Ochred clothing signified religious and cultural continuity.

It was also noted in one of her many publications that the ochre colour '... varies from the palest orange to the deepest red-brown. Each tribe [sic] has a particular colour preference and will use no other.' The variety of ochre shades is clearly shown in the many items of clothing in the collection.

The current storage location

The special collections, i.e. the Broster and Lamla collections, were originally housed on the third floor of the old library building, and in 2005 were moved out and accommodated in their present locations in the new library building. The main part of the Broster beadwork collection is currently housed in a corner of the Africana & Special Collections Library, on the lower ground floor, and is the responsibility of the head librarian, Mrs Mazvita Lusu (Fig. 1, floor plan).

The beadwork fills the four desktop display cases, as well as part of each of five closed cupboards with glass doors. The rest of the cupboard space is filled with items of clothing and some accessories, such as cloth bags, headdresses and two fine examples of beaded skin tobacco bags (Figs. 2 - 5). The other two closed cupboards with glass doors, are filled with items of clothing, pottery of the kind that was made for sale, four carved wooden animals, as well as several South Sotho hats, and a few baskets. The contents of one of these two cupboards are part of the Lamla collection (see below).

The major part of the Lamla collection is stored on the first floor, in what is known as the Seminar Room (Fig. 6, floor plan).

There are a number of shop dummies (adults & children), leaning up against the walls on either side of the entrance to the room, all dressed in clothing and beadwork from the Broster collection (Figs. 7 – 9).

Twelve double exhibition boards have been placed along two sides of the room, and there is beadwork, still attached with adhesive tape, to many of the boards (Figs. 10 – 12).

This beadwork is part of the Lamla collection of traditional objects, as are a quantity of traditional objects, such as beadwork, sleeping mats, brooms, beer strainers, calabash vessels, shields and sticks, which are either lying on the floor, or in cardboard boxes on the floor (Figs. 13 – 15).

Two modelled figures dressed in suits, apparently representing Oliver Tambo & Bantu Holomisa, are 'standing' at the back of the room. Two seated, modelled figures, both dressed as the chiefs, Hintsa and Sarhili, are wearing blanket cloaks, resembling leopard skin, around their shoulders (Fig. 16). On the floor there are also

a number of bottles, filled with possibly the ingredients for traditional medicines. The beadwork and other cultural objects are almost certainly part of the Lamla collection.

Apart from the Broster and Lamla collections, there appears to be another collection of mainly artworks on board, stacked up in the room, as well as several wooden sculptures of different sizes, scattered around the room. This 'collection' will not be included in the assessment (Fig. 17).

Conditions in storage

Climate control

A temperature and humidity control system is operating throughout the library building, which is centrally controlled in a separate building on campus. It allows temperature and relative humidity to be set at levels most suitable for library materials. The climate in the Africana & Special Collections library, however, was unacceptably warm and dry during the period of assessment. Apart from the books & documents in the library, this is where two-thirds of the Broster collection, and some objects from the Lamla collection, are housed. The library also has a number of high windows, only some of which are covered with vertical blinds. The three windows, which face west, above where two of the desktop cases of beadwork are located, are not covered with blinds or any other heat-protective screening. The temperature & relative humidity (RH) can be controlled and adjusted at the central controls building. It is fortunate that the library building is not set in gardens, otherwise the environment that the collections are stored in, would be further adversely affected.

Lighting

Lighting in the Africana & Special Collections Library, is provided by overhead fluorescent tubes which are not covered or screened in any way, to protect the library & Broster collections from the considerable amount of ultra-violet (UV) radiation that they emit. Compared with incandescent light bulbs, fluorescent tubes emit the greatest amount of UV radiation, and can cause serious damage to organic materials. Most of the materials in both collections are of organic origin.

In spite of the climate control system operating in the library, the uncovered windows at one end of the library, allow sunlight through unchecked. Sunlight is the major source of heat and UV radiation, and together they are responsible for most of the damage to organic materials in museum collections.

The lighting in the Seminar Room (SR) is the same as for the Library, i.e. fluorescent tubes without protective sleeves or covers. However, the problem here is that the lights are on all day, every day. That means that the collection material in there is not protected from the damaging UV radiation.

Although the SR is a separate, closed room, within the open plan, first floor, and surrounded by book stacks of the Science, Medical & Economics libraries, the collections in there are exposed daily to damaging fluorescent lights. Unscreened fluorescent tubes are used for lighting the first floor, but there is no isolation switch in the SR, so that the collection material could remain in the dark. Books & documents are also at risk of damage as a result of exposure to the high levels of UV from the fluorescent tubes.

Security

University security is organised internally, but a 24-hour call centre is operated by the external service provider. Installation of an external laser system is currently underway, and when completed, will protect the outside perimeter of the University buildings. Silent intruder alarms have been installed and are monitored by the external service provider.

The collections under review have not been secured from loss or damage, as access to them has not previously been controlled. Mazvita Lusu, the Africana & Special Collections librarian, is currently responsible for the security of the collections, and since the period of assessment, holds all the keys to the room and library area where they are housed. It is also not known whether the University's insurance covers these special collections for damage or loss.

Fire detection/prevention

A fire detection and prevention system is in place throughout the University, and is organised and monitored by an internal fire department. The University does not, therefore, have to be dependent on Mthatha's municipal fire department, and in the event of a fire, delays would be minimised, and serious disasters would be averted. The fire prevention system uses carbon dioxide, which is effective for preventing fires, but extremely dangerous for humans, if the procedures are not followed correctly. Fire drills are held at regular intervals.

Pest control

A pest control programme is in place to keep the University relatively pest free. The pest control schedule provides for four treatments a year by the service provider, Budget Pest Control. Only environmentally- and human-safe chemicals are used in the libraries, for example, a gel for controlling cockroaches, a bait block for rodents, and a residual, pyrethroid-based insecticide spray to control all other insect pests that could be a problem for both the Broster and Lamla collections.

Other environmentally-safe products, such as pyrethroid-based sprays, gel, as well as aerosol flushing agents are used to keep the catering departments and hostels pest-free.

Maintenance of buildings

Building maintenance is carried out regularly at the University. Checking and maintenance of roofs, gutters, down pipes and drains, in particular, is done once a year in August, before the rains begin.

The state of the collections

Africana & Special Collections Library
The *Broster beadwork collection,*

The four desk top cases are crowded and stacked haphazardly with beadwork, making it impossible to examine the pieces. Furthermore, all the beadwork in each desk top case is inaccessible, because of the fixed glass tops, and the only access is

through two narrow, rectangular, hinged flaps on the side of each desktop case (Fig. 18).

An attempt was made, within the limited time available for this assessment, to remove beadwork from plastic bags, untangle long fringes and strings of beads, and re-distribute the beadwork pieces as far as they could be reached, given the inaccessible nature of the desk top cases. There is also some evidence of active corrosion on a metal & beaded waist band.

The glass shelves in the six cupboards with glass doors are unsuitable for the beadwork and clothing stored in them. The shelves are narrow and less than a metre wide, resulting in the beadwork being packed in a jumbled fashion, with no regard for the many fragile pieces. The items of clothing are folded tightly and stacked between the beadwork and other accessories, in a rather haphazard way. Two fine skin & beaded tobacco bags had been folded and stuffed into cloth bags, but have since been removed from the bags and laid out on top of other beadwork & clothing already filling the shelves. It is hoped that the distortions will eventually relax out.

After a cursory dusting of the glass shelves, re-distribution and re-organisation of as much of the beadwork and clothing was done in the time available. A Thembu skirt showed evidence of insect attack (identified as *Tineola bisselliella*, the webbing clothes moth, pers. comm. David Pinniger, Aug. 2009). The two decorative fur strips around the bottom of the skirt, had been eaten, leaving lots of frass along the line of the skin strips, and some fine impressions of larvae in the heavy cotton of the skirt (Fig. 19, 20).

Some of the other items of clothing have also been squashed into cloth bags, presumably made by Joan Broster. Approximately 30 - 40 of these cloth bags were found, consolidated into three of the larger bags, and removed from the cupboard.

The only advantage of the desk top cases and closed cupboards, is that at least they give the collection some protection from dust.

The Seminar Room (SR)
Broster & Lamla collections, an artwork collection

The impression one gets when first entering the SR, is that the material in there has been dumped with no regard for the safety or cultural importance of the material. To the left and right of the entrance are a number of adult and child shop dummies 'dressed' in clothing and beadwork from the Broster collection. One of the female dummies is wearing, over a cloth skirt, an apron/skirt of furred skin tails which has been badly damaged by insects – also possibly the webbing clothes moth (Fig. 21).

It is understood that the items of clothing and beadwork on the dummies have been 'dressed' for a number of years, putting both the clothing and beadwork under considerable physical strain, not to mention UV damage as a result of daily exposure to fluorescent lighting. Light damage may certainly have affected the mainly organic materials in the room.

The pieces of beadwork, from the Lamla collection, are still attached to the exhibition boards as remnants of a much earlier exhibition. They are also under physical strain