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The Broster Bead Collection

The UNITRA Collection comprises of:

- The Joan Broster Collection and its incomplete catalogue.
- The entire UNITRA collection of Traditional Objects, comprises of exhibits that show aspects of indigenous knowledge systems, aesthetics, religion, traditional medicine, economic activity and social life in general.
- The African Music Archives (fully catalogued).
- The Africana Library which comprises books on Africa, research reports, dissertations and theses, audio visual materials, archives, etc.
- The published study on clan names of all the Xhosa speaking people entitled Iziduko zabantu abathetha isi-Xhosa (2003).
- The nursery which contains different traditional medicinal plants used for curing different ailments.

The size of the Broster Bead Collection

The information below was drafted by the East London Museum on 29 September 1999 before the SAHRA visit in 2004.

This collection numbers some 3000 objects. It was purchased from Joan Cremer (Broster) by the University of Transkei in the 1980's. The collection which is mainly from the Qebe area was made by Joan Cremer in approximately the 1960's.

Storage and Display (during 1999)

- The collection is stored in an office in the Bureau of Research and Documentation.
- The Office appears to be more secure than the area in which the other collection is stored
- Most of the collection is packed in large flat-topped showcases, in boxes and in cupboards around the room
- Some of the beadwork and clothing is draped on figures on open display. The remainder of the collection is still wrapped in the original plastic bags as packed by Mrs. Cremer.
- Lighting in the office is fluorescent, but lights are not on continuously.

Documentation

- An unbound accession register, compiled by Mrs. Cremer, is kept by Dr. Lamla.
- The information in the register appears quite detailed and covers such aspects as the use, date of use and provenance of the objects. There does not seem to be a catalogue card system for the objects, nor any system of retrieval of the items from storage/display.

Condition

Generally, despite some bronze corrosion, the collections appears to be in very good condition.

Curation

- There is no one person assigned to the collection on a full time basis.
- Dr Lamla, Dr Kuckertz and Ms D. Mayila all play a part in the curation of the collections.
- There was one time a custodian responsible for opening the Broster Collection to visitors but he has since been retired.
- In 1999 there was no policy formulated surrounding the collections.

Suggestions made by the East London Museum during 1999, were as follows:

- Some policy needs to be formulated as to the aims and objectives of the Museum
- A decision needs to be made as to how the collections are able to be handled.
- In 1999 the collections were haphazardly stored and displayed.
- It appeared that one of the objectives of the University was to have an alternative separate display and storage areas. If this was the case then adequate storage and display needed to be found where the collection will be well preserved and conserved, and the acceptable storage practices and display methods followed.
- The services of a full time Curator were also essential.
- Catalogue card and retrieval systems were also required for the collection
- In 1999's report from EL Museum an ethical question existed with regards to the declaration of the Broster Beads Collection as national cultural treasure. It was debatable as to whether the latter collection can be regarded as a true ethnographic collection in that some of the objects in the collection were not used, that is, they were made to order.
- However if one accepts that the Broster Bead Collection is the record of the styles and types of beadwork of those living in the Qebe area in the 1960's in particular, the collection must be seen to have merit.

New Storage and Display Areas

- New areas had been designated as potential storage/display areas for the collections, namely the Reprographics Department and secondly, the 4th floor of the Old Library building.

After the visit in 2004 SAHRA advised UNITRA on possible sources of funding to conserve the beads, to store/display these appropriately and under proper temperature and humidity conditions as well as to draft a Business Plan outlining the following:

- the appointment of a trained curator
- a condition report
- a conservation management plan
- digitization and cataloging

The advice was not followed up on.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

On 29 April SAHRA initiated a meeting to discuss issues concerning the audit preparation of the UNITRA (Walter Sisulu University Collection) collections. At the meeting it was learned that the Broster Bead Collection is currently stored in the Library which is a temporary measure.

SAHRA representatives highlighted the current storage conditions as a major concern and the importance of exploring other options in the interim. It was emphasized that it is important that proper storage space is provided prior to the audit.

SAHRA further stated that other options of making provision for such space should be explored, e.g. relocation to suitable location where it should be curated according to best practice.

The staff capacity was also identified as a limitation towards proper management of the collections. The Walter Sisulu University staff concerned, shares SAHRA's concerns regarding the storage space, controlled environment, etc.

Will the conservation of the Broster Bead Collection be done in the same way as Fort Hare Collection?

The SAHRA Heritage Objects Unit would appreciate it if the same method that has been used by Ms June Hosford concerning the conservation of the Fort Hare Collection is applied to the Broster Bead Collection as well.