

**THE TRANSPARENT CABINET:  
EXHIBITING AFRICAN ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND,  
JOHANNESBURG, 1979-2020**

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1979, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the Standard Bank Investment Corporation came together to form the Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Tribal Art, the first public collection of its kind in South Africa, which fundamentally re-shaped public and institutional perceptions of historical black art in the country. Its collection and display, at first in Wits Art Galleries (1977-2002) and then in the Wits Art Museum (2012-present), formulated a canon of black African art that represented the artistic identities of the nation inclusive of the art of the majority black population as an explicit political statement. This dissertation traces the development of the Standard Bank Collection, examining key developments at critical moments in South Africa's dramatically changing political climate.

Chapter One begins with the founding of the Standard Bank Collection in 1979, and its inaugural exhibition, *African Tribal Sculpture*. Under the thematic rubric of African sculpture, Wits responded to European and American collections, which preferred wooden masks and sculptures from West and Central Africa and placed black South African objects in dialogue with

them. Wits thereby authenticated black South African objects as “art,” both in South Africa itself and within the broader field of African art history. Chapter Two takes on the racially charged climate of late apartheid, situating Wits’ collecting in relationship to other Johannesburg art museums. Wits curators employed and politicized the labels ‘traditional’ and ‘transitional’ in their classifications of African objects in order to distinguish their own curatorial practices and scholarship from those of other institutions at a critical juncture in the nation’s political transformation. Chapter Three jumps to the post-apartheid period and the new Wits Art Museum in 2012, and considers the politics present in exhibitions inclusive of historical art forms that addressed themes relevant to popular urban culture – such as style, fashion, and adornment – seen as central to the presentation of post-apartheid black identities. By examining the types of objects Wits collected and the kinds of exhibitions it mounted, this dissertation illuminates how the art museum’s cultural authority represented and grappled with the changing racial politics in the nation over three decades.