

One hundred years

The fortunes (and misfortunes) of the Tatham Art Gallery collection

Introduction

The fortunes (and misfortunes) of the Tatham Art Gallery collection is a fascinating and complex story, set in the context of socio-political and economic changes in KwaZulu-Natal from shortly after the Anglo-Boer War to the present. It is a story in which visionary belief in the power of the visual arts to enrich people's lives has been the crusade of a few dedicated and tenacious individuals, often against enormous resistance born of ignorance, suspicion and short-sightedness. The centenary of the Tatham Art Gallery collection is indeed an event to be celebrated, and the story of its founding and development offers encouragement to those who continue in its service that their efforts are not in vain. It is also cause for celebration for those who have learned from and been inspired by visits to the collection.

Although the story of the collection's founding and development is closely linked to the history of the Gallery's accommodation, that aspect is not the focus of this centenary. Efforts to have a dedicated building for the collection date back to the years shortly after

The present Tatham Art Gallery



1918, when it was proposed that such a building on the Market Square should form Pietermaritzburg's memorial to those of its sons who had died in the First World War. That proposal lingered on until 1939 when it very nearly became a reality with the laying of a foundation stone by General Smuts. Hopes of fulfilling that dream were dashed, however, by the outbreak of the Second World War, and inevitable public outcry that the £20 000 earmarked for the project would be better spent in alleviating the effects of the war on the welfare of people in the city. It was only in the 1970s that the idea of separate accommodation for the collection was raised again, this time the proposal being that the Old Supreme Court building over the road from the City Hall be acquired by Council and converted into an art museum. That proposal came to fruition in 1990 with the entire collection accommodated in custom-designed museum conditions.

The accommodation and storage of the collection has played a significant role, and those aspects pertinent to its development will be discussed. This article concentrates, however, on the collection itself, its formation in 1903 and aspects of its growth to 1963. Whilst a straightforward chronology of acquisitions would be inadequate to reflect the complexities of this development, the sections which follow are loosely chronological. Mrs Ada Tatham's initiative in founding the collection provides opportunity for discussing Victorian taste and sensibility in a time of colonial activity in Natal. The generous gifts of Colonel Robert Whitwell between 1923 and 1926 included works in a variety of media, from paintings to *objets d'art*, introducing a wide spectrum of creative production, and notably a distinct modernism in the choice of works by British and French artists. An attempt is made to contextualise the unfortunate dispersal of over one hundred works from the collection in 1963.

Victorian taste and sensibility

The Gallery collection owes its origins in 1903 to Mrs Ada Susan Tatham (née Molyneux), who came to Natal with other members of her family in 1881. In 1887 she married Frederick Spence Tatham, barrister, soldier and politician. Apart from assisting in her husband's election campaigns, she was active on the Relief Committee in 1899 to find homes for refugees during the Second Anglo-Boer War, and was keenly interested in history and art. She was clearly civic-minded, belonging to and serving on various bodies such as the SPCA, the Girl Guides and the Pietermaritzburg Art Society¹. Wealthy and well-connected, she held a position of some influence in society, which she used with great energy in the formation of a permanent art gallery for Pietermaritzburg.

The history of the Victorian works and of the Tatham Art Gallery was written with characteristic forthrightness by Mrs Tatham in a 1949 article in which she hoped '...it may be of use to this and future Councils of Pietermaritzburg Municipality to know something of the origin of its Art Gallery...'². She was interested in founding an art gallery and set about collecting donations from friends and the public for this purpose early in 1903. The City Council matched the £500 collected, enabling Mrs Tatham to purchase a number of paintings during her visit to Britain the same year. Her task was made easier by the fact that Sir William Blake Richmond RA was a cousin of her husband's. An introduction to Sir Edward Poynter, President of the Royal Academy, made the acquisition of interesting works possible. Among these were works by Lucy Kemp-Welch (1869-1958), John Frederick Bacon (1868-1914), Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919), John McWhirter (1839-1911), Edgar Hunt (1876-1953), Joseph Farqu-

harson (1846–1935) and Charles Van Havermaet (fl. 1903–04). Many of the works were acquired at substantially discounted prices as a result of the contacts opened to Mrs Tatham, and her own persuasiveness in convincing the artists of the merits of founding an art gallery in so far-flung a colony as Natal. The whole exercise apparently caused some considerable stir in the British art world through the publicity given to it in various art journals.

Through the assistance of Sir Edward Poynter, Mrs Tatham was able also to organise a loan collection of one hundred paintings by contemporary British artists which, together with works already purchased, were sent out by Pietermaritzburg's London agent, Mr Sydney Ford, who also donated a work by Charles Sims (1873–1928). Once in Pietermaritzburg all the works were exhibited in the rooms of the Natal Society for a year, and the show was complemented by weekly lectures on art and music by local experts, including the editor of *The Natal Witness*, Dr Allan Miller, from which we may assume that Mrs Tatham's intentions were not merely to amass a body of work in order to improve the cultural 'image' of Pietermaritzburg, but also to educate about art. Local citizens were encouraged to purchase works for donation to the core collection and 'we were able to buy pictures from this loan collection, pictures to the amount of £600 contributed by the Corporation and also £400 given to me by firms in England who were in touch with our Council here'.³

At the end of the exhibition, those works remaining in Pietermaritzburg were housed in three rooms in the City Hall – the Council Chamber, the Supper Room and one other identified only as Room II, which may have been the councillors' ante-chamber. Included in the Supper Room was a collection of engravings by artists such as Raphael (1483–1520), Veronese (c.1528–88) and Tintoretto (1518–94), and a 'priceless' engraving of the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci (1452–1519). From this inclusion and the fact that some of the weekly lectures during the loan exhibition were delivered by Mrs Vivanti Denby, 'an Italian who had lived long in Italy among its Art and culture'⁴, it may be concluded that Mrs Tatham's intentions with regard to the art education of Pietermaritzburg's citizens went beyond a simple appraisal of current trends in British painting. Indeed, the educational function of the collection and of art in general were contributing factors to her desire to form the collection, as she later repeated a call for lectures to encourage people to visit the collections and 'children [be] helped to learn from them'⁵. Further, she wrote an article for the *Natal Diocesan Magazine* of February 1904 in which she argued that, for young people, 'the best way to train the eye to look over and appreciate the beauties of Creation is by the study of pictures'⁶.

Also related, and remarkable at this time, was the institution of an annual art competition which ran for nine years from 1904, with categories for all ages. Proceeds from the competition were used to purchase works by South African artists for the collection, a most interesting and noteworthy move, which proves a tangible appreciation of art produced locally.

An attempt to analyse Mrs Tatham's taste in art and her interest in its educational function is useful in providing some idea as to why certain works were chosen by her for the core collection. A lecture delivered in 1940 provides the clearest evidence⁷. It is an attempt to scan the whole of two-dimensional art production, from cave painting in Europe to the 'story picture' of the Victorian era and follows a linear model not unfamiliar even today in more simplistic versions of art-historical development. There is the

notion that art is a reflection of a nation's progress and culture, and the Neo-Platonist view that art reflects 'something of the beauty that is in the world'. English landscape and animal painting are seen largely to have been influenced by the Flemish and Dutch schools, and there is a pervasive notion that climate had a considerable influence on landscape painting of the nineteenth century generally. French art appears to end with Millet (1723–1875) and it is to Turner that Mrs Tatham attributes true artistic spirituality, Turner 'who spiritualised all the scenes that he painted – his whole soul part of the beauty he saw'. Reynolds (1723–1792) is relegated to having founded the English school of portraiture, 'not influenced by any other school', whilst 'Raeburn, Romney and Lawrence painted English men and women who were part of the Nation's history'⁸.

It is the 'story picture' of the Victorian era with which Mrs Tatham ends her survey. Works by the Pre Raphaelites, Millais (1829–96) and Holman Hunt (1827–1910) are mentioned, works which primarily embody a Christian theme, such as *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop* and *The Light of the World*. G.F. Watts (1817–1904) is also mentioned as one who 'painted pictures of the soul's life – Hope – a fragile girl figure, crouching on top of the world, blind-folded, and listening for the faint sounds of music from the one remaining string of her lyre'. The allegory is related to the message of St Paul about hope, that it is not something seen and that if this be realised, we have the patience to wait for it. It is not surprising that Mrs Tatham then introduces some of the Victorian story pictures in the Gallery's collection for comment. She mentions William Blake Richmond's *Ten Virgins*, Briton Riviere's *Sympathy [Regrets]*, and Dolman's *Christ in the snowy fields of Flanders [A.D. 1919]* all of which carry a symbolic message underpinning Christian values. The final word on the subject of Mrs Tatham's lecture is given by Wescott, whom she quotes in a hand-written postscript dated 1946: 'Art should interpret nature and life as revelation of God, leading from things that are seen to the contemplation of the spiritual Thus its inspiration must be the Spirit of God'⁹.

Underlying Mrs Tatham's taste, then, was an adherence to Christian values held dear by the Victorians generally, compounded by an equally Victorian adherence to the belief that the spiritual may be discerned in nature and representations of nature, as for example in John MacWhirter's *A Fallen Giant*. It would appear to have been, therefore, the spiritual enlightenment of the citizens of Pietermaritzburg which underscored Mrs Tatham's pursuit of establishing a collection of artworks for the city. It may be argued further that her taste and beliefs were commonly accepted by those citizens of Pietermaritzburg who contributed to the establishment of the collection. The core collection of the Tatham Art Gallery, therefore, represents the taste and values of a part of the society for which it was formed.

Patriotism: Colony, Empire and beyond

Mrs Tatham was equally Victorian in her patriotism, her belief in the notion of colonialism and Empire. We have already noted her belief that art is a reflection of a nation's progress and culture, and the Van Havermaet copy of Queen Victoria may be used as an example. Van Havermaet was Mrs Tatham's choice of artist to copy the state coronation portrait of Queen Victoria for the new gallery collection. Sir Edward Poynter was asked to request permission for a copy of the original in St James's Palace to be made. As impressive as the painting is the frame, a magnificent gilded construction gesso-moulded with the royal coat-of-arms at top centre and coats-of-arms of Natal

and the Borough of Pietermaritzburg at each top corner.

It was significant to Mrs Tatham that the original Winterhalter (1805-1873) portrait dates from 1846, the year after Natal became the first colony added to the British Empire during the reign of Queen Victoria. Mention is also made in the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Gallery* dated 1905 that 'Victoria came to the throne in the year 1837, the same year in which Piet Retief and his band of pioneer settlers, crossed the Drakensberg, and began the colonisation of Natal ...'¹⁰. Also significant was the fact that the money for this commission was collected from the women and children of the Midlands and Northern Natal, a symbolic gesture of loyalty and reverence for the Queen-Empress as 'Mother, Wife, and Queen'. Patriotism for Mrs Tatham extended further, to a wish that Pietermaritzburg itself should become a focus of civic pride, particularly in the extension of the collection, so that 'by degrees the patriotism of Natalians will provide a collection worthy to be ranked with some of the more beautiful collections to be found in every city of importance in Europe'¹¹.

The painting and its frame had, therefore, immense symbolic significance for the people of Natal in general and Pietermaritzburg in particular, enshrining notions of feminine protection and nurture in the personage of Queen Victoria and of colonisation, not only the colonial expansion of the British Empire under Queen Victoria, but the idea of colonisation generally as a worthy pioneering activity, as suggested by reference to Piet Retief. In this respect also, then, Mrs Tatham must be considered a true Victorian at heart, and the painting of Queen Victoria a reflection of Victorian norms and attitudes prevalent in the colonial community at the time.

The portrait of Queen Victoria currently hangs in the main stairwell of the Gallery and will be joined by an equally impressive portrait of King Cetshwayo kaMpande of the Zulu following a national portrait competition held during 2003. The latter is an important acquisition to the Gallery's collection in that it attempts to redress past imbalances by a policy of inclusivity. Placing portraits of Queen Victoria and King Cetshwayo adjacent to one another reinforces the Gallery's current policy that its collection and displays attempt to reflect the histories and cultural production of different, interdependent peoples. This is perceived as a more balanced approach and will be dealt with more extensively elsewhere. All histories have relevance, no matter how painful, and extreme caution should be exercised in suggesting the dispersal of works from the collection on the grounds of political ideology, or, for that matter, of taste. Political climates change, so does public taste; to relegate works to storage or worse, to deaccession them from the collection on these grounds is tantamount to arrogant censorship, something the Tatham Art Gallery has had to contend with on more than one occasion during the hundred years of its existence. The dispersal of over a hundred works in 1963 on grounds of their lack of artistic merit is a case in point which will be dealt with in more detail later. Of interest here, though, are the wide-ranging ramifications of such an undertaking which, in addition to a general lack of curatorial management and documentation of the collection in the first sixty years of its existence, makes it extremely difficult to answer with any certainty questions which would have a bearing on the artistic taste and visual arts practices of the white citizens of Pietermaritzburg during the period.

There is no reason to assume that Mrs Tatham's efforts regarding the formation of the Gallery collection ended with the publication of an annotated catalogue in 1905. She lost two sons in the First World War and may well have been involved in canvassing for

a dedicated art gallery building as a memorial to those who had fallen, similar to that in Port Elizabeth. For some years she was a member of the Art Gallery Committee and honorary secretary of an art society for 'competitive exhibitions held annually to encourage the study of art amongst young students and exhibitions of their work, as well as pictures by well-known South African artists'¹². Works by local and other South African artists such as Allerly Glossop (1870–1955) and Elizabeth Mary Butler (1845–1937) were acquired for the collection. It is indeed ironic that the pruning of 1963 has necessitated the subsequent acquisition of works by many artists originally represented in the collection. One work of note by a South African artist which survived the pruning was Gwelo Goodman's (1871–1939) *Morning Glory: Valley of a Thousand Hills*, acquired in 1919. Whilst there can be no doubt that Mrs Tatham's own acquisitions and the majority of those made during the period she was involved with the Gallery were distinctly Anglophile, it is important to remember Gallery support of local art and artists, which may be lost in a cursory examination of the Gallery's current holdings.

Subsequent to 1905 and before the generous gifts of Colonel Robert H Whitwell in 1923 at least forty-six works were acquired for the collection, the majority of them probably purchased with City funds. Unfortunately no records have yet revealed who these works belonged to prior to their acquisition for the collection. It cannot be presumed, therefore, that they were sourced in Britain or that they were part of local private collections. If the latter, it would suggest that there were some fairly extraordinary artworks in the Colony, although the size of some, such as John F Tennant's (1796–1872) *On the Banks of the Thames* and Richard Ansdell's (1815–1885) *The Stalker* makes one doubt whether they would have hung in private homes.

Mrs Tatham was still concerned about the Gallery as late as 1949 when she wrote her article on the history of the collection. Along with others she would have been delighted with the Whitwell gift in the 1920s, which expanded the size and scope of the collection to proportions she probably didn't dream of. Without her energetic work in the early years of the twentieth century, though, Whitwell would not have had a collection to view in Pietermaritzburg in 1919, a collection he obviously felt deserved support through additional acquisitions.

The Whitwell Collection

In July 1923 the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, Mr D. Sanders, received two letters from Sir Thomas Watt in Pretoria. One letter was official, the other private, and both outlined an offer of art works to Pietermaritzburg from a Colonel Whitwell, then resident in Jersey. Watt had met Whitwell in Cape Town some years previously, and Whitwell communicated through him in order to gain access to the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg. Sanders was reminded of Whitwell's gift of art works to Durban in 1919, a collection which he had seen, and was asked to handle the matter in the strictest confidence, as Whitwell had been upset by the publicity in the Durban press. Sanders took the latter instruction seriously, not even raising the matter with the Town Council-in-committee, but informing councillors individually of the offer. All councillors consulted were unanimous in agreeing to accept the offer on Whitwell's terms, and negotiations were instituted. This led to a lengthy relationship between Whitwell and Pietermaritzburg, resulting in the city receiving by instalments over four hundred art works and *objets d'art*.

Few facts are known about Whitwell except that he had been a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Indian Army Medical Corps, possibly having retired in 1900. He had a pension and an annuity with which he was able to travel and indulge a life-long interest in pictures and art, for which he was 'blessed with a strong natural flair' by 'visiting all the galleries of Europe, from St Petersburg to Madrid.'¹³ 'By the end of World War I he had been deprived of 'all connections [he cared] for, so [he] decided to pass on [his] knowledge as a torch to others less fortunately placed ... and choose some place which would be the better for a few pictures.'¹⁴

What is known about Whitwell's likes and dislikes, tastes and attitudes has been gleaned from his correspondence with the Mayor and Town Clerk of Pietermaritzburg, correspondence which begins formally but becomes less so after his visit to the city in 1924. During the period 1923 to 1931 he appears to have lived at the Victoria Club on Pietermaritzburg and at St Helier in Jersey, with occasional visits to France and England. He frequently complained about his state of health, suffering from symptoms of a strained heart as a result of 'septic pneumonia'.

Whilst this preoccupation with health may suggest in Whitwell a tendency to hypochondria, the overriding impression is of an aged bachelor with few friends who thrived on being acknowledged and treated with sympathetic regard, something the Mayor and Town Clerk of Pietermaritzburg supplied in good measure, which no doubt spurred him on in his generosity. He was also a man of strong opinions about a number of issues besides art. And there is something rather touching about his concern for the keeper of the Pietermaritzburg Gallery, having purchased a clock by Thwaite's in Cape Town, which he hoped would 'help the Keeper of the galleries to start punctually for home every day'¹⁵.

There is also no doubt that Whitwell enjoyed the sense of power that his collecting afforded him, for he was scornful of established art museums, those who worked in them, and art dealers. He was determined that the Tate was not going to have his Sislely, although he agreed for it to be on loan for a year in 1923/24, and a query from the National Gallery in London regarding the Cotman he purchased for Pietermaritzburg elicited the following: 'Mr Kay is one of the aspirants of the National Gallery and like the rest of his kind is, I suppose, writing a book about what he knows very little of'¹⁶. In forwarding correspondence from Marchant of the Goupil Galleries, congratulating Pietermaritzburg on the works purchased by Whitwell for the Gallery, he was equally cutting, retorting: 'Of course Mr. Marchant, than whom there is no keener man of business, sees a chance for advertising *himself* over the sale of some of the paintings alluded to. He hopes too, but in vain, that I will return to his shop for more. There is this to be said for him, that he has a fine flair, and holds the best stock of modern pictures in Britain. He also charges the biggest prices!'¹⁷

From the correspondence it is clear that there were several reasons for Whitwell's generosity to Pietermaritzburg. A letter from Sir Thomas Watt to the Mayor dated 30 July 1923 provides an official view as to why Whitwell wished to present Pietermaritzburg with this gift:

When in South Africa some years ago he had a great admiration for General Botha and his efforts to bring the two white races of South Africa into one common fold. Colonel Whitwell then conceived the idea of expressing his appreciation of the General's work by presenting

his collection of pictures, etc. to South African Municipalities.¹⁸

As mentioned previously, Watt had met Whitwell in Cape Town, and Whitwell appears to have had some interest in South African politics of the time, supporting the endeavours of the Unionist Government in which Watt was a Cabinet Minister, holding various portfolios, including that of Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, from 1912 to 1924. Watt had joined the South African National Party, subsequently the South African Party as MP for Dundee in 1911, and stuck with the party until ousted by the Hertzog 'Pact' ministry of 1924. The role played by Watt in securing the second instalment of Whitwell's gift in 1924 is significant, and will be referred to again later in more detail.

Although admiration for General Botha's attempts at reconciling Afrikaner and British in South Africa may have been the official reason for his generosity, Mayor Sanders and his Council must have been intrigued to know why he chose Pietermaritzburg in particular. A more personal reason did eventually emerge in 1924. Whitwell was keen that his gift be opened on a St George's Day, as it was on St George's Day (23 April) in 1919 that he had, in fact, visited Pietermaritzburg.

The reason of my request about St George's day is this. In 1919, on my way back from China I visited Pietermaritzburg for a few hours on my way to Pretoria. It was St George's day. A worthy townsman seeing me looking around, with great good will and courtesy, offered to help me to see what I wanted to see. After assuring me with much feeling, that he 'would not be seen dead in Durban' invited me to the concert which I was able to enjoy a part of. I was very moved, and resolved, that if I could do the town a good turn I would. There was another characteristic incident. A Dutch clergyman seeing me looking at the pictures in the town hall, came up to me and asked how long I had been in S. Africa: Ten days I said. I don't believe you, he replied and walked away.¹⁹

Another characteristic of Whitwell which becomes clear in the correspondence is the fact that he thought through his gifts, from conceptualising a collection to the practicalities of its display, with an almost military precision, perhaps not surprising in an ex-army man. This did not, however, limit his methods of acquisition to carefully-considered purchases. Like many collectors he was quite capable of seizing chance opportunities and bargains, revelling in the cut and thrust of quick action. For example, he bought the Cotman 'half an hour after it arrived at Walker's galleries. The same afternoon I was offered double what I had paid...'.²⁰ He fully understood that part of collecting art was that 'you seize the chance of an artist's death or an estate coming onto the market to get more than one work by a certain artist'.²¹ This was not always good for him, as he seems to have become so enthusiastic about a collecting project that 'if I go in for anything and get keen on it, I keep awake at nights, my inside goes all wrong and I go to pieces'.²² Thankfully these symptoms did not stop him defying orders so that he could put together his fourth and final gift for Pietermaritzburg in 1926.

Whitwell's four gifts to Pietermaritzburg each had its own character, and there appears no reason to believe that he intended at first to make more than one donation. That intention grew out of a growing relationship with the Mayor and the Town Clerk, spurred on by the lack of speedy responses from other colonies such as British Colum-

bia, of which more later. What becomes clear is that the later gifts, although distinct, are very much related to the first, and that Whitwell had a clear idea of the scope of the collection as a whole, even if it grew organically from its origins as a collection of mainly two-dimensional works to one which included sculpture and *objets d'art*, no doubt with the intention of presenting a broad range of creative production to whet the appetites and improve the artistic taste of those in the colonies.

It should also be borne in mind that Whitwell, on his visit to Pietermaritzburg in 1919, had seen the collection of works made by Mrs Tatham and added to by subsequent acquisitions. Whether out of courtesy or genuine appreciation of what he saw, he never made any negative remarks about the original collection as he did about Durban's: 'They were trying to beautify their museum but they were badly had; what they bought were bad and they were being swindled'. He would have assessed the essential Victorian nature of the original Pietermaritzburg collection and, it may be speculated, considered it to be an adequate reflection of the period, thus in terms of two-dimensional work, allowing himself to indulge in collecting work he appears to have responded to positively, French and British work of a distinctly more modernist approach.

There is evidence that he was acquainted with Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942), whom he held in high regard as a painter. He appears to have had an appreciation of the work of artists such as Spencer Frederick Gore (1878–1914) and Mark Gertler (1892–1939), he was aware of and possibly knew artists such as John Rothenstein (1872–1945) and Henry Tonks (1862–1937), frequented the sale-rooms of dealers such as Goupil Gallery, Colnaghi and The Fine Art Society in London. It may be argued that Whitwell was guided in his choices by these dealers who were known to support the work of artists working in a more contemporary idiom, such as those mentioned above, in the early years of the twentieth century. It could also be speculated that purchasing work by younger artists or those considered to be outside the 'establishment' was both cheaper and more suited to the amounts he had available to spend. He was also very aware of the investment value of his acquisitions, commenting at one stage on his astuteness in purchasing work by Gertler, for example, before that artist's work commanded much higher prices, and before being acquired by the Tate.²³

Despite their monetary value, of course, is the fact that many of the artists Whitwell collected have subsequently become noted as having contributed in no small measure to the development of British modernism. It is unclear to what extent he was aware of this aspect of his collecting, because in the correspondence he was not very forthcoming as to why he chose the majority of the works he did. It is also ironic that he refers on a number of occasions to the value of the works, or at least their potential future value, something he berated Chubb and the Durban press for doing. Where he does express opinions about the quality of the works he chose it is usually in terms of the works being 'of the highest class and will be better appreciated with time and knowledge'²⁴. If anything, this kind of statement reveals a degree of patronising arrogance, of Whitwell placating the citizens of Pietermaritzburg in their presumed ignorance of contemporary trends in European painting. One should remember, however, that one of Whitwell's aims was to educate, and that the sheer generosity of his gifts overrides any criticism of his perception that the citizens of Pietermaritzburg were ignorant of artistic trends. One of the unfortunate results of the rationalisation of the Tatham Art Gallery collection in 1963 is that no visual evidence remains as to what in fact comprised the full collection.

It may well be that works of inferior quality were weeded out, but the lesson for the present and future is that such actions hamper a more objective assessment of issues such as the one under discussion.

Paintings, prints and drawings were not the only targets of Whitwell's collecting. By the time he had completed his gift in 1926 there were examples of many different creative forms, from carpets to glassware, ceramics, ivory carvings, Chinese buckles, even an old Dutch tobacco box. What started off as being 'for your *picture gallery*'²⁵ ended up being a veritable treasure trove of collectables. Subsequent research indicates that at least some of these acquisitions were not in fact what he made them out to be, and this applies also to the two-dimensional works and sculptures. It may be suggested that Whitwell's 'natural flair' and self-tuition had limitations on his astuteness as a collector²⁶. In general, though, his enthusiasm and the breadth of his collecting can only be admired, especially when one considers that he was putting together a number of different collections at the same time²⁷, and that Pietermaritzburg is very much the richer for his generosity.

Whitwell was astute enough to attach certain conditions to the presentation. The collection was to be grouped all together in one or two rooms with nothing else. The porcelain was to be displayed in glass cases with metal edges, the paintings and etchings to be displayed on the walls.

The collection was not to be removed for the purpose of being exhibited elsewhere and the Corporation was to accept the whole collection and not reject any items. A citizen of the town was to be appointed as trustee of the collection. No press notices were to be inserted regarding the presentation of the collection, but, 'if the Corporation so desires, a competent critic might be asked to give a criticism and compile a catalogue'²⁸.

There is a hint of arrogance in the works having to be displayed together 'with nothing else'²⁹ and also that the Corporation would be obliged not to reject anything, but much sense in keeping the works together and having a trustee appointed. These conditions resulted later in a Deed of Gift which protected Whitwell's collection from the rationalisation of 1963. Aside from attaching conditions to the gift, Whitwell made many suggestions and requests over the years, most of them relating to matters of display.

The reorganisation of the gallery in 1962 and the dispersal sale of 1963

Repeated mention has been made in this essay to the dispersal of over one hundred works from the collection in 1963. The events leading to the sale of works have their origins in a letter from the Mayor of Port Elizabeth requesting the loan of paintings for display in the King George VI Art Gallery, which had been established four years previously and which had few permanent works in its collection. The request met with Council approval and negotiations were put in the hands of the Town Clerk and Mrs Eleanor Lorimer, Director of the King George VI Art Gallery. Mrs Lorimer initially suggested that the choice of works to be loaned be left to Professor Jack Heath, Mrs Jane Heath and Mr John Hooper of the Department of Fine Art, University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, but eventually decided that she would undertake the selection herself.

The Town Clerk requested that, since Mrs Lorimer would be in Pietermaritzburg to select works, she undertake a valuation of the collection as a whole, something which had not been done for a considerable time. This was agreed to and Mrs Lorimer undertook the selection and evaluation in November 1960. She was very complimentary about

the collection in general, and the exhibition of eighty-one works in Port Elizabeth and thereafter East London was by her account a great success.

In attempting to present detailed valuations of all works in the collection Mrs Lorimer found much to be desired. She was unable to locate accurate records and of necessity had to compile 'a true record of the collections, together with notes regarding condition, artistic value and so on, so far as I was able to judge them during the short time at my disposal'³⁰. This was far beyond her original brief, and despite being undertaken with the best intentions, led her to initiate the idea of dispersal in her report of February 1962.

Whilst Mrs Lorimer's assessment of the works in the collection in this report was based largely on her assessment of their value for insurance purposes there is, nevertheless, a strong indication of an aesthetic judgement, based on the fact that, according to her, many of the works 'are by artists whose fame, if any, died with them'³¹. Again, many of these paintings 'by unknown artists are not really suitable for an art gallery demanding a good standard'³². Her assessment of the Royal portraits is that they have a historical interest, but that none of them 'is valuable as a work of art. They are either copies of portraits by well-known artists, or are by artists whose reputations have not outlasted their period'³³. She comments further on the British paintings as 'varying in quality and style; a number of them are frankly bad and should be discarded – possibly sold for what they would fetch'³⁴. There is no further detail as to what Mrs Lorimer objected to in these works and any further speculation is difficult owing to lack of visual evidence of the works. The report went further, commenting on the accommodation and administration of the Gallery, with suggestions for their improvement. Her comments and suggestions indicate the state of neglect into which the Gallery and collections had fallen.

This galvanised the City Council into action. An Art Gallery Ad Hoc Advisory Committee comprising City councillors agreed with Mrs Lorimer's suggestions, and she was invited to undertake the selection of works for dispersal and to oversee the redecoration and reorganisation of the Gallery and collections. The 'weeding out' was undertaken during October and November 1961 and in the meantime work proceeded with redecorating the Gallery in preparation for a new rehang. Mrs Lorimer again returned to Pietermaritzburg in late January 1962 for a month to supervise rehangings of the collection. The first Curator, Mrs Lorraine Raab (née van der Riet) was appointed in August of that year and the 'new' Gallery was officially opened on 21 March 1963 by the Honourable Mr Justice A A Milne, Judge President of the Supreme Court, Natal Provincial Division. The Gallery's name was changed from the Pietermaritzburg Municipal Art Gallery to the Tatham Art Gallery in honour of Mrs Ada Tatham and the Tatham family for their support and efforts with regard to the Gallery.

In Mrs Lorimer's report dated 9 November 1961 on the reorganisation of the Gallery, the entire collection of artworks was classified by group, with no indication as to what criteria were used except a simple classification as to what should be retained or sold, and how to deal with each class of work. Mrs Lorimer enlisted the assistance of Professor and Mrs Heath, Mr Hooper and Miss Currie, a local art teacher, in grouping the works, and it must be assumed that informed discussion took place and that decisions were not taken lightly. At this time, however, it can only be presumed that evaluation of artworks in the collection was based on contemporary aesthetic debate, particularly a modernist aesthetic advocated by the Heaths in their teaching, which

favoured an appreciation of the formal qualities of artworks above historical, social and political considerations. The evaluation also occurred at a time when appreciation of Victorian narrative and genre painting was at a low ebb. The knowledge that Mrs Lorimer's plans for rehanging the remaining collection favoured a single row of works in the limited space available must also have had an impact, as space constraints in the rooms allocated in the City Hall were a major consideration, especially as little storage space for artworks was available.

Amongst the works which were selected for dispersal were paintings which would now be of considerable aesthetic and monetary value, such as William Blake Richmond's *The Ten Virgins* and Herbert Draper's *A Sea Maid's Love Story*. It is interesting to note that works by South African artists received equally rigorous treatment, with works by Cathcart William Methven (1848–1925) and Rosa Hope (1902–1972) amongst those disposed of. Tenders were called for in the local and national press for purchase of works in June 1963, and the balance of unsold works were disposed of by auctioneers in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Of all the works sold only one has returned to the collection, Thomas Somerscale's (1842–1927) *Seascape*, donated by Errol Tatham in 1990 when the Gallery opened in the Old Supreme Court building.

This article has attempted to describe the events, personalities, policies, and the social, political and economic conditions which influenced what was accepted into the collection, and what was pruned from it. Contextualising the acquisition and de-accessioning of works to the collection cannot be entirely without bias, as the knowledge, experience and taste of those currently working with it and surveying with hindsight from a post-modern and post-apartheid perspective inevitably affects choices and opinions. The visual arts have always provided fertile ground for controversy. Strong positive and negative feelings about choices made in the past are integral to a debate about what should or should not have been included in the collection and it is hoped that careful analysis will provide a broader understanding as to why, in a broader context, those choices were made.

The history of the Tatham Art Gallery collection cannot be isolated as a purely art-historical phenomenon. Even as such it has been subject to, and the subject of, changing perceptions and art historical debate. It has also reflected changing perceptions and practices in the broader context of museology and museum practices both in South Africa and elsewhere, as well as reflecting the changing preoccupations of the artists whose works it has acquired. The Gallery's founding and survival over a century is intimately bound up with political, social and economic issues which have preoccupied the Pietermaritzburg City Council, its officials and art gallery employees, and the communities it has served. These concerns at local government level are symptomatic of provincial and central government concerns, so in the broadest sense, therefore, the Gallery and its collections reflect the complex interrelationship of ideologies and practices which have made, and continue to make the fabric of our society. Acquisitions made during the incumbency of previous and current Curators and Directors from 1963 onwards are grounded in that fabric and in the historical growth of the collection. Further research into acquisitions from 1963 to the present must be viewed against this historical background and the wide variety of issues which have informed acquisitions and museological practice during the past forty years.

NOTES

1. *South African Women's Who's Who*, undated, p.374.
2. Tatham, A.S. 'Pietermaritzburg Art Gallery', unpublished article, 1948, Tatham Art Gallery Archives.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Tatham, A.S. 'The City Art Gallery', in *Natal Diocesan Magazine*, February 1904, pp.281–283.
7. Tatham, A.S. Unpublished lecture, 'Pietermaritzburg Art Gallery', April 23 1940, Tatham Art Gallery archives transcript.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *The Descriptive Catalogue of the Municipal Art Gallery*, Pietermaritzburg, 1905, Tatham Art Gallery archives.
11. Ibid.
12. *South African Women's Who's Who*, undated, p.374.
13. R. H. Whitwell to Sir Thomas Watt, 24 August 1923.
14. Ibid.
15. R. H. Whitwell to Mr Paton, Town Clerk of Pietermaritzburg, 26 February 1925.
16. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D Sanders, Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, 08 December 1923.
17. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 10 November 1924.
18. Ibid.
19. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 18 January 1924
20. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 05 December 1923.
21. R. H. Whitwell to Sir Thomas Watt, 24 August 1923.
22. R. H. Whitwell to Mr Paton, 12 February 1926.
23. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 12 June 1924.
24. Ibid.
25. R. H. Whitwell to Sir Thomas Watt, 24 November 1923.
26. R. H. Whitwell to Sir Thomas Watt, 24 August 1923.
27. R. H. Whitwell to Sir Thomas Watt, 24 August 1923; R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 29 November 1923.
28. R. H. Whitwell to Mr D. Sanders, 21 July 1923.
29. Ibid.
30. Mrs E. K. Lorimer to Town Clerk, Pietermaritzburg, 23 January 1961.
31. E. K. Lorimer, 'Report on the Pietermaritzburg Art Gallery', 21 February 1961.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.

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