

The State of the Records of the Federation Union of Black Artists at the Johannesburg Art Gallery: An Overview

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Abstract: In this paper, the author asserts that the Johannesburg Art Gallery has also done remarkably well in preserving archival material in the field of black visual art. Such documents shed light on the operations of the visual art industry in South Africa before the democratic dispensation of 1994. He argues that heritage practitioners, artists, and scholars can immensely enhance their knowledge through study of these records. The author also thinks that it is crucial for this unique collection to be digitized for preservation and access.

Résumé: Dans cet article, l'auteur montre comment la galerie d'art de Johannesburg a particulièrement bien préservé ses archives dans le domaine de l'art visuel noir. De tels documents illustrent les activités de l'industrie des arts visuels en Afrique du Sud avant l'avènement de la démocratie en 1994. Il soutient que les praticiens du patrimoine, les artistes et les universitaires pourraient considérablement améliorer leurs connaissances en étudiant ces archives. L'auteur pense également qu'il est crucial que ces documents uniques soient numérisés pour en faciliter la conservation et l'accès.

Keywords: FUBA, Archives, visual art, artists, gallery

The Johannesburg Art Gallery, in the heart of Johannesburg, has been an important landmark in the city for many decades. It was established in 1910

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and has survived ever since. This building, built as an art gallery from the beginning, was skillfully designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens whilst Robert Howden was the architect.¹ This heritage site houses artworks of some of South Africa's renowned artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Walter Batiss, and Ezrom Lagae, as well as works by celebrated artists from elsewhere, such as the French impressionist Edgar Degas.

The Johannesburg Art Gallery has also done remarkably well in preserving archival material in the field of visual art. These documents came from the Federation Union of Black Artists (FUBA). The initiative to compile this collection was started by FUBA in February 1992.² FUBA, which represented initiatives in many fields such as music, drama, and music as well as the visual arts, was undoubtedly aware that the history of black visual artists would be important in liberated South Africa following the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the unbanning of the liberation movements.

The history of black oppression and subjugation in South Africa is known and well covered in many books and journals. Apartheid oppression prompted the formation of structures, such as FUBA, which created self-help programs and initiatives that would somewhat restore the dignity of black people by offering skills and opportunities in the arts.

That FUBA donated this consignment to the Johannesburg Art Gallery means that it had faith that this institution would properly preserve this unique and important collection. The material sheds light on the activities of black visual artists during neo-colonial and apartheid times and the challenges they faced, as well as illuminating the structures and institutions of visual art. These include the Polly Street Art Centre run by Cecil Skotnes in Johannesburg, Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre in Natal, the Jubilee Art Centre under Bill Hart and the Alexandra Art Centre, both in Johannesburg. Some of these documents overlap the democratic dispensation of 1994 and onward. This is because, in many instances, programs that were planned by different art organizations either spilled over to or were scheduled to take place after 1994.

Though the Johannesburg Art Gallery houses an increasing number of works by black artists, a great deal of work is still needed to transform this art gallery, and others, to reflect adequately the profound changes in the country's orientation. Housing the FUBA collection was surely part of the transformation agenda, which hopefully would see researchers from different backgrounds utilizing this archival collection that portrays the work of black artists in the midst of revolutionary change.

Visiting the FUBA archive will also enable researchers to interact with the various artworks in the gallery, largely a preserve of privileged Whites in apartheid South Africa. They will now experience a space where black visual

¹ Jillian Carman, *Uplifting the Colonial Philistine: Florence Phillips and the Making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006), 1–15.

² Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Bhen-gu's File, letter from Elza Miles to Tunde Hall, 27 July 1992.

art organizations are presented with opportunities to exhibit. Whether they perceive their work as in opposition to or in continuity with western artistic traditions, contemporary South African artists can see their work in relation to a collection that until relatively recently emanated from such traditions. An example of this interesting apposition is the exhibition of Soweto students' artworks at the gallery organized by the Ifa Lethu Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) established to repatriate township art from abroad.³

The Johannesburg Art Gallery should strongly consider digitizing this collection. This now familiar modern technology would enable it to be preserved and make it widely accessible to a broad audience. The fire in April 2021 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which gutted the Jagger Library, destroying much of its rare and valuable collection and rendering even surviving documents inaccessible while sorting and restoration takes place, illustrates the dangers that physical deposits can face.⁴ Digitization of archival material has gained ground in South Africa and in different parts of the world. Notable examples of digitization in South Africa are Digital Innovation South Africa (DISA) which focused on the digitization of liberation struggle records and the recent initiative by the National Archives of South Africa to digitize its records. The Johannesburg Art Gallery can draw lessons from such initiatives. It was brought home to the writer of this paper, as it will have been to many scholars, just how vital digital material can be in crises such as the lockdowns accompanying COVID-19.

Archival collections of this magnitude and nature relating to black visual artists in South Africa are rare, making it very important that the scholarly world and those associated with the field of art should know about this collection lodged in the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Some of the artists represented in the collection have passed on and others are elderly: nevertheless, these records, to some extent, substitute for interviews and enable scholars with a keen interest in the subject to obtain insights into the work of these artists.

Black visual artists whose files form part of this collection at the gallery include the likes of the following: Fikile Magadlela, a self-taught artist and mixed media specialist; Albert Adams, whose important work, *South Africa*, forms part of the collection at the gallery, and who studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London and subsequently went into exile following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960; Bhekisani Manyoni who cut his teeth at Rorke's Drift under the tutelage of Belgian-born artist, Leon de Smet; and Eric Mbatha, an expert in linocuts and etchings, who also went through Rorke's

³ For more on Ifa Lethu Foundation, see Brown Maaba, "Challenges to Repatriation and Preservation of Tangible Heritage in South Africa: Black Art and the Experiences of the Ifa Lethu Foundation," *South African Historical Journal*, 60–3 (2008).

⁴ Janine Dunlop, "Hopefully, It's All Been Digitised..." *Mail & Guardian*, 24 April 2021.

Drift thanks to his mentor, Skotnes, who secured funding for him to study at this renowned institution.⁵

Regrettably, these are files of mainly male visual artists. This can be easily misconstrued to mean that there were no female visual artists. There were, of course, female black visual artists during apartheid, though few. They include renowned artists such as Noria Mabasa, Helen Sebedi, and Bongzi Dhlomo. In fact, Dhlomo is mentioned in this paper as some details of her activities are captured in the records. That female artists were few explains why FUBA ended up without the files representing women in its endeavor to preserve this archive. This implies strongly that more work needs to be done in South Africa and elsewhere to preserve and profile the history of female artists. Also, it can be added, more needs to be done to encourage women to consider a career in this field.

Surveying the work of some writers in this field, there is little sense that they are aware of this important collection, which can add considerable value to scholarship. Significant recent books such as Diana Wylie's *Art + Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele, South African Artist*, Prince Dube's *Dumile Feni: The Story of a Great Artist*, and the book edited by Hayden Proud, *Revisions, Expanding the Narrative of South African Art: The Campbell Smith Collection*, would have been greatly enhanced by drawing from this collection. Wylie's biography of Thami Mnyele, an artist and a political activist exiled in Botswana, would have benefited from the primary sources in his file which form part of the FUBA collection. Dube's book covers the life and works of Dumile Feni, a self-taught artist exiled in the US. Though the book uses primary sources, it would have further benefited from Feni's file available at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. *Revisions* profiles black visual artists including the likes of Leonard Matsoso, John Mohl, Ben Arnold, and Joe Maseko. The FUBA collection contains the files of these four artists, and the primary sources would have enhanced Proud's edited book.⁶

The clutter with which Johannesburg has come to be associated nowadays due to urban decay may result in researchers being unwilling to venture into this part of town. However, I can assure them that a visit to the Johannesburg Art Gallery in search of these primary sources is worthwhile. This is, beyond doubt, an important and unique collection.

A researcher may sometimes laugh out loud whilst combing this collection. This was the case when I was going through the file of Lucky Sibiyi, a woodcut specialist, who came under the mentorship of Skotnes at the Polly Street Art Centre. Sibiyi was not only an excellent and well-known artist but also a

⁵ For more on these artists, see their respective files at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

⁶ For more on these three books, see Prince Mbusi Dube, *Dumile Feni: The Story of a Great Artist*, 1 (Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust: Houghton, 2010); Hayden Proud, *Revisions, Expanding the Narrative of South African Art: The Campbell Smith Collection* (Unisa Press: Pretoria, 2006); and Diana Wylie, *Art + Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele* (Jacana: Auckland Park, 2008).

charming, colorful, and playful fellow. Chris Barron, the journalist, recalls an encounter between Sibiya and Prince Philip at the prestigious Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg, “So, you’re a king?” Sibiya asked with a big smile on his face, grabbing the hand of the astonished prince in the process. Phillip made an effort to explain to Sibiya that he was not quite exactly a king but married to the queen instead. Sibiya interrupted, “Oh, I know all that.”

Sibiya looked at one of his works and asked, “Tell me, ...what do you think of that?” The prince responded by saying that he hated the work. But Sibiya was not to be put down easily and further surprised Philip, “That’s the thing about you royalty,” he said, “you are only interested in things that shine and glitter like gold and diamonds.” At this point, Philip was boiling at these affronts to his dignity. Sibiya, who was drawing satisfaction from it, crowned it by laughing at the prince, leaving him in a state of fury and astonishment, wondering what kind of a fellow Sibiya was, showing so little respect to royals.⁷

Such is the character of many artists: that of a free lifestyle and humor and a not-so-caring attitude that could even take royals of Phillip’s caliber by surprise.

The Location of FUBA Archival Material at the Johannesburg Art Library

It is important for the reader to get a sense of where exactly the FUBA collection is located at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, as well as its nature. This consignment that sheds light on the visual art industry in South Africa is lodged at the art gallery’s library which is in the basement of the building. The library also keeps books, mainly on visual art, making it ideal for these archival records to be lodged there. Though a researcher could be visiting with the intention of combing the archival material, it might also be an opportunity to go through this book collection, which is strong in the area of South African art, as might be expected.

However, this paper will not focus on the library as such but rather provide an overview of the FUBA collection and how it is organized and stored. These files are well arranged in the storage shelves, according to art organizations and institutions as well as with the individual files of black artists. They vary in size, some bulky, others thin, depending on what was collected and preserved at the time they were assembled. However, all are important considering that they are unique and also taking into account the varied concerns of researchers. Though these records are well arranged on storage shelves, they have been placed in plastic pockets. This is not ideal. They should be put in acid-free folders and boxes, as per recognized archival standards.

The documents are mainly in English except for a very few in Afrikaans. Most of the material in the FUBA collection is typed, but some is handwritten as with Sekoto’s letters. I will cite and quote from a few of these documents to

⁷ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Lucky Sibiya’s File, Chris Barron, “A Great Artist Who Left His Insecurities Behind Him,” *Sunday Times*, 7 March 1999.

try and whet potential researchers' appetite and also to provide a sense of the nature of this archival material. In addition, this collection should be used in conjunction with deposits in other archives in South Africa, which may have material relevant to artistic matters amongst papers devoted to other themes. An example well known to this author is the liberation movements archive at Fort Hare in which there are documents that reveal aspects of visual art activities in exile.⁸

Records on Visual Art Organizations and Institutions

One of the organizations whose material can be found in the collection is Art-in-Motion, simply known as ARTIMO. This was an association of African artists whose Project Coordinator was Sydney Selepe and its Exhibition Manager Nhlanhla Xaba. ARTIMO's aim was to expose African artists to galleries inside and outside the country, organize exhibition spaces in the country's various townships, and run seminars, symposiums, and conferences on a number of issues including copyright laws and curatorship. It also aimed at launching a journal on African Art.⁹

Documents in the ARTIMO file also include the organization's reports and correspondence between it and other structures. For instance, in a letter from Jose Braganca of the Horizonte Arte Difusano in Maputo, Mozambique, to Selepe, the former requested Selepe to send two artists from South Africa to exhibit their paintings in the African Arts Festival, scheduled for August 1989 in Maputo and Beira, respectively. Artists from other African countries including Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Angola, and Ghana were also expected to exhibit their work in this exhibition.¹⁰ In his response, Selepe requested Braganca to consider allowing at least three of ARTIMO's artists to take part in this African Arts Festival.¹¹

A report in this file covers an exhibition held by ARTIMO at Shareworld, an entertainment facility in the south of Johannesburg. The report explains that the ARTIMO exhibition succeeded in exposing African artists to the wider community and that it also played a valuable educational role. The report also highlights that in 1981 and 1982, ARTIMO artists including

⁸ For more on the liberation archives at Fort Hare, see Tim Stapleton and Mosoabuli Maamoe, "An Overview of the African National Congress Archives at the University of Fort Hare," *History in Africa* 25 (1998), 413–422; and Brown Maaba, "The Archives of the Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness-Orientated Movements," *History in Africa* 28 (2001), 417–438.

⁹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ARTIMO File, ARTIMO: Origins and Focus.

¹⁰ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ARTIMO File, letter from Jose Braganca to Sydney Selepe, 20 June 1989.

¹¹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ARTIMO File, letter from Sydney Selepe to Jose Braganca, 27 June 1989.

William Shibambo, Matsemela Manaka, and Anthony Makou were invited to exhibit their work in England, West Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.¹²

There is also a letter from Manaka to his colleague, Mr. Dube, raising his concerns that black art was only exhibited in galleries in white areas. Manaka asserted that this was one of the main reasons why Blacks knew little about visual art. To Manaka, popularizing art in the townships was a priority and a space had to be secured for such activities. He also emphasized that Whites who were interested in black art needed to find their way to the townships to interact with such work.¹³

There is a file on the Alexandra Art Centre. The center was in a dire financial situation in 1993, creating low staff morale and affecting the day to day running of the institution.¹⁴ In this file, there is, for example, an undated copy of a newsletter, the *Alexandra Art Centre News*, an important piece of the center's history that has been salvaged. Covered in the newsletter is a report highlighting the role of the center's ceramics and fine art departments on different projects including one called Raku. Through Raku, art students were provided with an opportunity to witness "and be actively involved in the glazing, decorating and firing processes so intimate to ceramics. The ceramics students have, for their part, been exposed to basic metal casting processes."¹⁵

There is also a poem entitled *Alexandra* in the newsletter written by Mochalatsi Martin from the Fine Art Department of the institution. It partly reads:

Alexandra
 ...When you were still a friend
 Already you belonged to the Landlords
 Suddenly your children are re-arrested
 Arrested under section twenty-nine
 The arrests that before were reserved for Msomi
 In you our mother-land-Alexandra!¹⁶

The fact that Martin, who was in the Fine Art Department, wrote a poem on Alexandra, demonstrates that some artists are broad minded and rounded,

¹² Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ARTIMO File, Report Back on the Results of the Exhibition.

¹³ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ARTIMO File, letter from Matsemela Manaka to M. Dube, 21 September 1983.

¹⁴ Ivor Powell, "Cultural Oases, But the Well Have Run Dry: Alex Art Centre, Alongside Other Once Vibrant Cultural Initiatives, Facing What May Be Its Final Crisis," *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 3–9 September 1993.

¹⁵ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Alexandra Art Centre File, *Alexandra Art Centre News*.

¹⁶ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Alexandra Art Centre File, Mochalatsi Martin, "Alexandra," *Alexandra Art Centre News*.

and do not limit themselves to their area of expertise but explore the arts as a whole.

It would have been ideal if a series of the *Alexandra Art Centre News* had been saved for posterity. However, those charged with running institutions are often concerned about day-to-day operations, rather than preserving documents for a possible future archive. A great deal of education needs to be done to educate communities about the collection and preservation of documents.

In this file, there is also a document written in Afrikaans by Elza Miles, South Africa's renowned art historian. In it, she provides background details and describes areas of expertise of Alexandra artists such as Rhoda Madlope, Neol Sithole, and Stephen Maqashela.¹⁷

Also of interest in the FUBA collection is a file on the Africus 95: First Johannesburg Biennale which was a visual arts initiative conceptualized in 1993. Its intention was to organize a unique visual art event in Johannesburg, geared toward celebrating and reintroducing the country's art sector to the international community, following the dismantling of apartheid in 1990 and onwards. In this file are various minutes of Africus 95 meetings including its first consultative meeting, which took place in Johannesburg on 18 May 1993. The meeting was chaired by an experienced arts practitioner, Christopher Till, and attended by many in the arts fraternity including Willem Boshoff, Dhlomo, Durant Sihlali, Anna Varney, and Selepe. The meeting envisaged that during the forthcoming event, South African artists would exhibit their work alongside their counterparts from southern Africa.¹⁸ Also of interest in the file is a report on a trip to different parts of the country by members of the Johannesburg Biennale Committee to introduce and unpack the Africus 95 initiative and its significance to different art stakeholders.¹⁹ Sadly, there is a letter from Miles in this file dated 11 June 1994 in which she announces her resignation from the Africus Johannesburg Biennale, unhappy with how some of the things were handled by the structure.²⁰ This demonstrates that no matter how positive most were about initiatives of this nature, differences did arise and, in the case of Miles, led to her resignation.

The African National Congress (ANC), Africa's oldest liberation movement and the ruling party in South Africa today, also has its own file in the FUBA collection. The ANC's approach to the arts was all encompassing, not

¹⁷ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Alexandra Art Centre File, Alexandra-kunsonder "township"-tjaps.

¹⁸ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Africus 95 File, Minutes of the first consultative meeting of Africus 95: First Johannesburg Biennale, 18 May 1993, Minutes of the Education Committee, 15 November 1993.

¹⁹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division FUBA Collection, Africus 95 File, Report on the trip to Port Elizabeth, Alice, Grahamstown, East London, Pietermaritzburg and Durban by members of Africus 95, Bongi Dhlomo-Matlou and Thomas Mulcaire.

²⁰ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Africus 95 File, letter from Elza Miles to Christopher Till, 11 June 1994.

only focusing on visual art but the arts as a whole, including aspects such as music, drama, and dance. A fascinating item in this file is a letter from an ANC official, Jessie Duarte, dated 14 July 1992, to the rank and file of the organization. In it, Duarte proposed to the ANC in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area (PWV Region) that they should establish regional Department of Arts and Culture structures in an effort to revive the arts.

To get this initiative off the ground, the movement planned a conference in Johannesburg for 27 July 1992.²¹ It was now possible for the ANC to make such a public call inside the country and to formally hold gatherings as the movement had been unbanned in 1990 by the apartheid regime. After all, some of these cultural workers including visual artists, such as Thami Mnyele who was killed by the South African Defence Force in Botswana on 14 June 1985 during a cross border raid, were members of the ANC.²² Though some artists had no political affiliation, some of their work was intertwined with the South African political landscape as they depicted political scenes or scenes with political implications.

Also of interest in this file is a document from the ANC calling for the Culture and Development Conference scheduled for 25–30 April 1993. Earlier, the organization had held three major cultural conferences whilst still in exile. These were held in Botswana, London, and Holland, respectively. The aim of the fourth conference, just on the eve of the democratic dispensation, was

- Declaring ANC policy on key aspects of transformation in the sphere of arts and culture for broad consultation;
- Presenting draft policy on the role of a democratic government in the sphere of culture;
- Placing the issue of the cultural dimension of development decisively on the national agenda;
- And establishing, after the conference, Cultural Development Project(s) whose task would be to implement strategies and policies arising from the conference.²³

There are also some documents on FUBA itself in the Johannesburg Art Gallery consignment. One of these is the 1991 annual report of the organization. The report does not hold back on the state of the establishment:

1991 will remain in our minds as the year we continued to climb the dizzy heights and also endured chilling lows. We are happy to observe the

²¹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ANC File, letter from Jessie Duarte to “Dear Comrades,” 14 July 1992.

²² Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Thami Mnyele’s File, “Struggle Hero’s Remains Coming Back Home,” *The Star*, 15 September 2004. For more on Thami Mnyele, see Wylie, *Art + Revolution*, 117–146.

²³ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, ANC File, Department of Arts and Culture: Culture and Development Conference.

recognition of our work by many people: we are seen as the house of the arts; eye opener and a stimulus for self-expression.

Furthermore, it was reported that

We have tested the low ground when staff salaries were delayed towards the last quarter of the year. Fortunately, Fuba has now finished thirteen and a half years without missing one month's salaries of teachers. For us it is a feat of no means dimensions. But the struggle for survival once more made us take a hard look at reducing the expense of running the project. Thank God, a black company that has the muscle to back up its word.

The report also covers other challenges faced by the organization in 1991 including downsizing of staff and setting aside its matriculation project, which was geared toward educating students on the arts. But it also covered some FUBA positives. This included a successful student exhibition held towards the end of 1991, funded by the De Beers Group Chairman's Fund. The French Embassy also came through for FUBA by making a donation of R15 000 for art material.²⁴

Artist Records

It would be unjust to sample and provide insights on some of the files of well established and famous artists, whilst ignoring those of the not so famous. Striking a balance is important particularly since the unwritten rule of history is that it is not just about kings, queens, and presidents. Lesser known artists whose files form part of the FUBA collection include the likes of Ranko Pudi and Mandla Mlotshwa. Those who became world acclaimed and whose files form part of the collection include Sekoto, Ben Arnold, and Gerard Bhengu.

In Mlotshwa's file, there is a letter from him to a person identified as Elsa, penned on 28 April 1993. In this, Mlotshwa informed Elsa that he could not resume his community project in Madadeni Township in Natal due to lack of funds. Mlotshwa also apologized to her for not updating her on his envisaged trip to Cape Town where he was expected to learn more casting skills. Instead, his trip to that city had to be shelved due to lack of funds.²⁵ In Mlotshwa's file are also funding proposals from him. One was aimed at establishing a casting project in Madadeni, which would also benefit the surrounding areas such as Osizweni and Ladysmith. In the proposal, Mlotshwa explained that:

²⁴ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Fuba File, Fuba Academy Annual Report.

²⁵ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Mandla Mlotshwa's File, letter from Mandla Mlotshwa to Elsa, 28 April 1993.

We have identified the place. It could be in a rented house at House Number 1027 at Madadeni. The owners are giving us a garage, three rooms a courtyard and a storeroom. The garage could be for casting and one extra room. The two rooms be for people converting it to a workshop. We have access to phone and it has water and electricity and two toilets.²⁶

Another funding proposal in this collection is that of the Singabantwana Arts Project aimed at benefiting the children of Madadeni between the ages of 4–10 years old. The project, which Mlotshwa funded from his own pocket, had become popular with children and parents in the area. There was a great need to extend it to include weekends and for it to be funded, argued Mlotshwa.²⁷

Pudi's file contains his profiles, a newspaper article from *Pretoria News* and photocopies of his work. Pudi was the contemporary of Ike Nkoana and Michael Zondi, South Africa's renowned black sculptors. The two helped Pudi to hone his sculptural skills. Of interest in one of his profiles is that Pudi, originally from Makapanstad north of Pretoria, picked up his sculptural skills from his grandfather, Motladi Pudi, a carpenter. In one of these profiles, he writes:

I became interested in art at a tender age. I used to work with my grandfather who was a carpenter. I enjoyed playing with his work and axe. Sometimes he became angry with me because I damaged his work, but mostly he was encouraging me. Used to give me a small piece of wood and a small axe to play with so that I should not disturb him.²⁸

Ben Martins hailed from Alexandra and was better known as a politician than as an artist. His career as an artist started in 1975 at the height of the Black Consciousness Movement, and he was imbued with its ideology. Moreover, Martins was a member of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the military wing of the ANC, leading to his arrest and ultimately imprisonment on the notorious Robben Island. There are some letters in his file that cover some aspects of his activities as an artist and as a member of MK. In a letter from him to a writer, Lesley Spiro, Martins revealed that he was requested by the Botswana Museum and Art Gallery to be South Africa's visual art National Coordinator for the Culture and Resistance Conference held in Gaborone in 1982.²⁹ The

²⁶ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Mandla Mlotshwa's File, Application for Funding to establish a Casting Project.

²⁷ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Mandla Mlotshwa's File, Application for funding: Madadeni Community Arts Project.

²⁸ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, RankoPudi's File, Aaron RankoPudi profile, see also another profile of Pudi, About Ranko Pudi, the artist of Makana.

²⁹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Ben Martin's File, letter from Ben Martins to Lesley Spiro, n.d.

festival was attended by South African based cultural workers and those in exile.³⁰ Writing to a certain Ms. Charlton, Martins stated that, whilst in prison, he continued to produce works of art. One of these was entitled *Medium A*, after a section in Johannesburg Prison where he was imprisoned.³¹

James Mbatha's file is rather different. It does not contain details about his life but rather documents on the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Conference. The documents in Mbatha's file include papers that were presented by cultural workers who attended the conference, including those of Keorapetse Kgositsile and James Matthews.³² In this file, there is a document providing background information on why an exhibition was held at the Gaborone festival. It reads:

The idea of staging an Exhibition of South African Art in Gaborone was conceived initially two years ago among a number of South African artists living in Botswana. The idea developed within the context of a number of individual exhibitions that were held by South African artists at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Gaborone.

The document went further:

It was felt among the cultural workers here in Gaborone that it would be of great value to stage a wider exhibition of South African Art so as to give more cultural workers in South Africa a chance of exhibiting here in Botswana. From this initial idea others followed and in time the idea of bringing cultural workers together with their work, enabling them to meet and exchange ideas emerged. So, today, two years later, we have come to the point of a major Exhibition, Symposium and Festival.³³

Arnold, who became a well-known sculptor, also came under the mentorship of Skotnes at Polly Street Art Centre. His file largely consists of correspondence between him and others in the arts fraternity, his profiles, and testimonials. Some of the correspondence is between certain individuals pertaining to Arnold's work. For instance, there is a letter from E. Lefkowitz, the Honorary

³⁰ For more on this festival, see Brown Maaba and Narissa Ramdhani, "The Role of Visual Artists in the Struggle Against Apartheid (1980–1990)," in South African Democracy Education Trust (Sadet), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, 1980–1990*, 4 (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), 1523–1549.

³¹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Ben Martin's File, letter from Ben Martins to Ms. Charlton, n.d.

³² Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, James Mbatha's File, "Culture and Resistance in South Africa" by Keorapetse Kgositsile, "Is Black Poetry Valid?" by James Matthews.

³³ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, James Mbatha's File, Background Information to the Exhibition, Symposium and Festival of South African Arts-Gaborone, 5–9 July 1982.

Secretary of the Bramson Branch of the Johannesburg Women's ORT, a skills development NGO, to Arnold dated 30 September 1971. ORT focused on teaching various trades to the youth. In the letter, Lefkowitz could not hide her joy as she heard that Arnold was willing to give a talk to the ladies of ORT Art Group and also teach them some aspects of sculpture.³⁴ In a letter from L. Lawrence from Social Services Association to Arnold dated 6 April 1971, Lawrence briefed him about the organization's intentions to raise funds through exhibiting works of South Africa's established artists. The organization focused on crime prevention as well as the rehabilitation of offenders. Lawrence informed Arnold that, should he want to enquire about this proposed exhibition, he should ring members of its organizing committee.³⁵ In a testimonial written by Skotnes as the president of the South African Council of Artists, on 9 February 1968, he speaks well of Arnold:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Mr. Benjamin Arnold studied painting and sculpture under my guidance at the Polly Street Art Centre from 1958 to 1965. He was always an outstanding student, both as an artist and as a man, and his development over the past three years, as a professional, has more than justified his high premise as a student. I have no doubt that a study period abroad is desirable and can only further establish his abilities. I unhesitatingly support his application for a scholarship.³⁶

Bhengu's file consists of correspondence between him and other individuals. There is also correspondence between individuals other than Bhengu in connection with his work. In a letter from Bhengu to the well-known collector of African books and other material, Killie Campbell, on 8 December 1947, one is able to establish that lack of funds to buy art material stifled Bhengu's progress. He informed Campbell that, "With regard to my artistic work I find a great difficulty arising from the shortage of papers only. Because of that my financial position has become very bad." Bhengu went on:

I have an idea that I must do a dozen or two oil paintings depicting Zulu customs. Will you please madam do something in the line of lending me some money once more to buy the first time canvas, oils and brushes. I still remember that I owe you and willing to repay you all that after the sale of my pictures. While I am still waiting for papers I must do something for my living.³⁷

³⁴ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Ben Arnold's File, letter from E. Lefkowitz to Ben Arnold, 30 September 1971.

³⁵ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Ben Arnold's File, letter from L. Lawrence to Ben Arnold, 6 April 1971.

³⁶ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Ben Arnold's File, Testimonial from Cecil Skotnes, 9 February 1968.

³⁷ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Bhengu's File, letter from Gerard Bhengu to Killie Campbell, 8 September 1947.

In this file, there is a 1992 letter from Miles to Tunde Hall who was based in London, informing her about the death of Bhengu. Miles also sent Hall some material on the artist. She believed that this would give Hall a good idea on Bhengu's work.³⁸ On 13 August 1992, Hall responded to Miles' letter, thanking her for sending information on Bhengu. Interestingly, Hall was fascinated by Bhengu's background and informed Miles of her wish to work on his biography.³⁹ There is also a newsletter in this file with Bhengu's profile written by Miles following his death on 20 February 1992.⁴⁰

Durant Sihlali, the eldest son of Sonwabo and Agnes Sihlali was born on 5 March 1935 in Dukathole in Germiston, East of Johannesburg. His parents originally came from the Transkei and settled in Germiston in 1931. At the age of five, Sihlali was sent to Cala in the Transkei to live with his paternal grandparents; and whilst there, he discovered his artistic skills. There, he was introduced to and was fascinated by the wall painting traditionally done by women. From this rural experience, a great artist was born.

Sihlali's file consists of his profiles, his obituary and most importantly his unfinished autobiography. In it, Sihlali talks about his experience in the Transkei:

As a child of five years I was sent by my parents from our home in Germiston on the East Rand where I was born to my grandparents at Cala... Here I was introduced to the murals and floor paintings carried out by young Xhosa women. My grandparents placed in my care the tending of lambs and whilst carrying out my duty I had the opportunity to observe very closely the young married women showing their skills at colour and design when they decorated the family homestead with their murals.⁴¹

Sihlali subsequently became an established watercolor specialist and sculptor, won several awards, and ran a studio in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. Between 1983 and 1988, Sihlali was the Head of the Fine Arts Department at FUBA.⁴² He passed on in 2004.⁴³

³⁸ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Bhengu's File, letter from Elza Miles to Tunde Hall, 27 July 1992.

³⁹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Bhengu's File, letter from Tunde Hall to Elza Miles, 13 August 1992.

⁴⁰ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Bhengu's File, Elza Miles, "Gerard Bhengu (1910_1992)," *Newsletter*: September-October 1992.

⁴¹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Durant Sihlali's File, unfinished autobiography of Durant Sihlali.

⁴² Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Durant Sihlali's File, Durant Sihlali's obituary.

⁴³ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Durant Sihlali's File, Notes on Durant Sihlali, see also Colin Richards and Sandra Kloppe, "The

There is a series of letters in Sekoto's file mostly written by him to other people, particularly to Barbara Lindop who wrote two books on him, *Gerard Sekoto* as well as *Sekoto: The Art of Gerard Sekoto*. Sekoto was in exile in France from 1947 until his death in 1993.⁴⁴

Sekoto's letters to Lindop cover details about his artworks and life including education and his career as an artist, both in South Africa and Paris. One gets an impression that some of these letters were meant to provide Lindop with detailed information about Sekoto's life, enabling her to write about the artist. Details on the ANC's wish to purchase Sekoto's work for posterity are covered in some of these letters.⁴⁵ Even though Sekoto had contacts with the ANC, his position on politics was clear, and he explained that to Lindop, "By the way Barbara," he wrote, "I am not a political exile. I came on my own to be here, and had never dreamed of gold—except only spiritual gold, at all costs. Therefore I have never suffered from nostalgia of home-sick although I think always of home happenings, and of course feeling concerned, as a South African."⁴⁶

In another letter, written on 8 November 1986, Sekoto informed Lindop about the recent visit of FUBA's head, Siphso Sepamla, to Paris:

We spoke for a short time while with Sephamla [*sic*] on the retrospective show, and he is hundred percent agreeing, as its outcome could be beneficial to all, especially to those young black talents that stay hidden away in isolated parts of our country, like Soweto and many more others that are found even in much worse conditions! At the same time the white population could be awakened much more to the existence of these hidden black talents which (in altogether)—the different races and ethnic groups could gradually get to build up-somehow.⁴⁷

Even some of the letters written by Sekoto to Spiro provide details about Sekoto's life, including some background on his parents and his fellow artists, such as his old friend and colleague, Ernest Mancoba, who also settled in France. Spiro needed such details from Sekoto for research purposes pertaining to his life.⁴⁸

Double Agent: Humanism, History, and Allegory in the Art of Durant Sihlali (1939–2004): [With Commentary], *African Arts*, 39–1 (2006), 60–67.

⁴⁴ Noel Chabeni Maganyi, *A Black Man Called Sekoto* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001), 22–47.

⁴⁵ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, letter from Gerard Sekoto to Barbara Lindop, 8 January 1987.

⁴⁶ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, letter from Gerard Sekoto to Barbara Lindop, 20 February 1984.

⁴⁷ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, letter from Gerard Sekoto to Barbara Lindop, 8 November 1986.

⁴⁸ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, letter from Gerard Sekoto to Lesley Spiro, 10 January 1989, letter from Gerard Sekoto to Lesley Spiro, 20 April 1989.

Apart from these letters, there are a few others. One of these is a letter written by Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele who taught at Khaise High School in Johannesburg together with Gerard Sekoto and Mancoba. In it, he gives background details on Sekoto's life as well as his paintings and also details on Mancoba and L. P. Makena, another fellow teacher at Khaise. Of Sekoto he said, "Gerard Sekoto did not talk much. He expressed his philosophy of life throughout his paintings... He still does so today. He led a normal social life. He caused no social problems for himself. He indulged in no way excessively in the so-called man's vices."⁴⁹

In this file, there is also an opening speech by Njabulo Ndebele, Nimrod's son, during Sekoto's exhibition at Cassirer Fine Art on 28 February 1988. In it, Ndebele junior describes how Sekoto's works, which his father had secured from the artist, decorated the walls of the family home. He also stressed that "these paintings have become part and parcel of my life, part and parcel of my understanding of the problems of this country because of the kind of things which Sekoto attempted to depict in those paintings."⁵⁰

Conclusion

The FUBA papers at the Johannesburg Art Gallery are an important component of the institution. The archival collection is important for those interested in the field of visual art, the operations, and the nuances of this industry. A great deal of scholarly work can be produced from this material, including newspaper articles as well as the profiles of artists. As mentioned earlier, the Johannesburg Art Gallery should strongly consider digitizing this collection. Also, the Johannesburg Art Gallery needs to arrange with the National Archives of South Africa to capture this archive in the National Archive electronic (NAAIRS) database. For enquiries on the FUBA collection, contact

The Curator
 Johannesburg Art Gallery
 Cnr Klein and King George Streets
 Joubert Park
 2044
 Phone Number: (011) 725 3130
 e-mail: khwezig@joburg.org.za

⁴⁹ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, letter from Nimrod Njabulo Ndebele to M. Figlan, 07 August 1983.

⁵⁰ Johannesburg Art Gallery, Library Division, FUBA Collection, Gerard Sekoto's File, Opening Speech of Gerard Sekoto's Exhibition at Cassirer Fine Art, 28 February 1988 by Njabulo Ndebele.

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Archival Material

Federation Union of Black Artists Records:

(i) **Files on art organizations and institutions**

- a) Minutes
- b) Correspondence
- c) Newsletters
- d) Background documents on art organizations and institutions
- e) Reports

(ii) **Artist Files**

- a) Artist profiles
- b) Correspondence
- c) Newspaper cuttings
- d) Funding applications
- e) Background documents on art organizations and institutions
- f) Testimonials
- g) Newsletters
- h) Autobiographical notes
- i) Artist obituaries
- j) Speeches