

A short history of the William Humphreys Art Gallery

With other public buildings in the Oppenheimer Gardens in Kimberley's Civic Centre, the William Humphreys Art Gallery epitomizes the post-war renaissance of the city after a period of virtual stagnation. In it have been brought together works of art and antique furniture of a standard and diversity which surprises and impresses those who see them for the first time. How, they wonder, does a collection of this calibre come to exist in a comparatively small mining city as Kimberley, situated as it is so far from the artistic hub of the country?

The history of the art gallery and its collection, maybe traced back to well before 1952 when the art gallery first opened its doors to the public. Kimberley was fortunate in having, even in its early days, men with foresight and an appreciation of things other than the purely material. The history of the city's cultural organisations in the early years of this century was the Kimberley Athenaeum, formed to promote all aspects of culture in a town which was geographically divorced from the main stream of the South African cultural activity.

The art section of the Kimberley Athenaeum was particularly active. Under the chairmanship of Mr William Timlin, assisted by the secretary, Mr Arthur Pett, the idea was conceived of collecting South African works of art which, which it was hoped, would one day grace the walls of an art gallery in Kimberley. Over a period of almost forty years this collection, which included the work of such pioneers of South African paintings as Frans Oerder, Pieter Wenning, J.H Pierneef, Nita Spilhaus, Clement S  n  que, and William Timlin himself, was brought together. When the Kimberley Athenaeum was disbanded in 1940s the collection of artworks was given in trust to the Kimberley City Council and eventually found a permanent home in the art gallery of which these two men had dreamed so many years before.

The second collection to find a home in the art gallery was that bequeathed to the city by Dr Max Greenberg, a Johannesburg physician who had been educated at Christian Brothers' College in Kimberley. This collection, which comprised 55 works of art, included paintings by Pieter Wenning, Frans Oerder, J.H Pierneef, and Gregoire Boonzaier, and four bronzes by Anton van Wouw and one by Moses Kottler. Held in trust for the city by the Kimberley City Council, these were initially displayed in the Kimberley Public Library until, on completion of the art gallery building, they were permanently housed there. Some years later, trusteeship of the collection was formally transferred to the Art Gallery Council.

The last and most magnificent collection in the art gallery was that given by Mr William Benbow Humphreys, then member of parliament for Kimberley. The deed of donation signed on 15 October 1948 by William Humphreys and the president and the secretary of the Northern Cape Technical College states that William Humphreys in consideration of his long association with the public life of the Northern Cape and his desire to further the interests of he said region gave to the college pictures and other works of art which were selected from his private collection by Mr P Anton Hendricks, then director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. With this gift, which comprised painting by Flemish and Dutch masters of the 16th and 17th centuries, paintings by English and French painters as well as pieces of antique furniture and other *objets d'art*, was an undertaking by Mr Humphreys to contribute a sum of  5 000 which would be paid to the college when required for the construction of a suitable gallery to house the collection.

This donation was a paramount importance because of its composition and because the gift was coupled with the condition that a suitable building be constructed to accommodate the collection. this put the onus on a recognized, established, and government-funded body to bring such a project to fruition. Had this not been so, it is likely that the Humphreys Bequest would have continued to hang indefinitely on the walls of the Northern Cape Technical Collage.

In addition to these large collections, many excellent works of art have been donated to the art gallery over the years.

The art gallery, which bears William Humphreys's name, was opened by Mr Harry Oppenheimer on 6 December 1952. Although an appendage of the Northern Cape Technical College, it was run independently by its own committee with Mr Humphreys at the helm of affairs in his capacity as chairman of the Art Gallery Committee. In the absence of professional and clerical staff, he managed the gallery with the help of his son Basil, sub-committees to attend to such matters as finance, the acquisition of works of art and temporary exhibitions, as well as many enthusiastic and able volunteers.

So keen an interest did William Humphreys take in the development of "his" art gallery that he frequently brought from his home in Carrington Road additional works of art to fill gaps and enhance the collection already there. Eventually this large collection, similar in composition to the bequest, became known as the Humphreys Loan Collection and added to the stature of the gallery.

On his death in July 1965, the loan collection was, with the concurrence of his brother and sisters, bought from William Humphreys' estate by Basil Humphreys and given to his son Anthony to ensure that it would be retained in Kimberley. During this period, it was known as the Anthony Humphreys Loan Collection. Some five years after Basil's death in 1971, the art gallery was again in danger of losing the collection when it was offered for sale. Neither the institution nor the Department of National Education had funds available to purchase it and an approach was made to De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd to come to the aid of the art gallery. With customary generosity, they bought the collection and in 1977 an agreement was signed by the company and the Art Gallery Council wherein it was agreed that, subject to certain conditions, these works of art would be lent to the gallery for an indefinite period and would be known as the Humphreys Collection on loan from De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd.

This then, was the nucleus and the solid foundation upon which successive Art Gallery Councils have been able to expand and consolidate the collections, with the emphasis being placed on the acquisition of South African works of art.

Sooner after establishment, it became obvious that unless the art gallery was to become a static monument, it could not function indefinitely on ad hoc public donations. If it were to develop and its future be secured, a steady income was important. Subsequent negotiations with the then Department of Education, Arts, and Science resulted in the art gallery becoming a state-aided institution on 1 October 1957, a status it would share with the South African National Gallery in Cape Town and several other museums and cultural institutions which derive their income from the central government. Although the subsidy was not lavish, it was regular, and generally the art gallery could only benefit from its new status. This was the beginning of a new era.

It soon became apparent that the existing building would not be large enough to accommodate the rapidly expanding collections. The first of the additional wings was added in 1956. Built to accommodate the English paintings, a stained-glass window depicting Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* was imported from Lancaster in England and incorporated in the east wall of the new building. This extension only temporarily relieved the desperate need for space, and in 1960 a second wing was added with considerable financial assistance from Mr Harry Solomon after whom the wing was named.

In time the art gallery's increasing activities and expanding South African collection called for further extensions which could accommodate temporary exhibitions, lectures, film shows, and concerts. With characteristic enthusiasm and determination, Basil Humphreys, who in March 1961 had succeeded his father as chairman of the council, embarked on raising the required funds for his building which the department had agreed to finance on a rand for rand basis. Once again, De Beers Consolidated Mines

Ltd came to the aid of the institution and guaranteed half of the funds which the gallery was obliged to fund. The South African Permanent Building Society contributed a quarter and the remainder was donated by citizens of Kimberley. The new wing was opened by the Secretary for Education, Arts, and Science, Dr J.J.P Op't Hof, on 21 May 1965. In his opening address, Dr Op't Hof referred to the fact that the people of Kimberley has done more than their share in developing such an institution as the art gallery. 'In doing this,' he said, 'Kimberley has set an example of public-spiritedness which will be very difficult to match by even some of our larger cities. Not only had they contributed generously to building costs, but above all had to be exhibited and enjoyed by all the visitors.'

Unfortunately, little provision was made by the planners of the gallery for such essential facilities as storerooms, workshops, offices and library. Storage space in the basement was after some years found unsuitable because a spring on which the gallery had been built subjected the area to intermittent flooding.

Initially the art gallery was run on a personal basis and was often referred to by the Humphreys family as 'Dad's gallery'. After having run it almost single-handed for nine years, Mr Humphreys's health began to determine, and it was decided that the time had come to appoint a full-time director/secretary. Mrs Dora Fock assumed this capacity in March 1961. Her wide knowledge of Western culture and art, her energy, and her enthusiasm made her the ideal incumbent of this post which she held with distinction until her retirement in September 1962. The position was filled by Mrs Hilda Smuts in November 1962, and under the able chairperson of Basil Humphreys, the art gallery went from strength to strength. The collection expanded dramatically and the gallery actively engaged itself in becoming the foremost cultural centre in Kimberley and indeed, in the Northern Cape. Although the staff complement remained small, lectures, film shows and concerts were presented in addition to an average of nine or ten temporary exhibitions which were held each year. On leaving Kimberley in February 1978, Mrs Smuts resigned and was succeeded by Mrs RJ Holloway who had been on staff since June 1962 in a part-time capacity.

Not content to become a mere repository for works of art, the gallery has done everything possible to promote art in all its forms. If it were to fulfil a valid function, it would have to cater for the cultural interests of broad spectrum of the community. Temporary exhibitions have, therefore, covered widely divergent aspects of the arts from more conventional exhibitions of painting and sculpture to ceramics, tapestries, furniture, illustrated books, child art, basketwork, cartoons and photographs. Certain exhibitions, such as 'The Treasures of my Home' exhibition, were mounted to encourage community involvement.

Children's workshops, started two years ago, have become very popular and have brought children of all races to the art gallery, exposing them to art and art museum environment at an early age. Every encouragement has been given to cultural organisations to use the facilities offered by the art gallery. The Kimberly Theatre Repertory Players' production, *The First Gentleman*, was another of the art gallery's unique undertakings. Described as 'progressive' theatre by the producer, the audience moved with each act to another hall, giving the opportunity of viewing the exhibits which were disturbed as little as possible for the performances. This venture brought to the gallery many who had not previously visited it.

As the only art museum in the Northern Cape and indeed as the only art museum in the central region of the country, the institution has an awesome task to fulfil. Vast distances prevent most people in the area visiting it. In an effort to overcome this problem and focus the attention of the public on the institution, it was decided at the beginning of 1983 that works of art from the permanent collection should be taken to the people. This would be achieved by holding small exhibitions in the country. Due to limited staff and facilities the programme has to be restricted to a degree. Transport and other

assistance, however, is provided by the Cultural Affairs Branch of the Department of National Education in Kimberley, whose co-operation in these ventures is invaluable.

The first of these exhibitions was held at Barkly West. The response was sufficiently encouraging to consider mounting similar exhibitions elsewhere. Equally gratifying is the fact that since then approaches have come from cultural further afield inviting the art gallery to present similar exhibitions in their towns.

Few institutions are fortunate enough to have in their formative years men as dedicated to their welfare and progress as were William Humphreys and his son Basil. Until their deaths they gave unstintingly of themselves to the art gallery.

William Humphreys remained a member of the Art Gallery Council and visited the art gallery several times a day, never wholly convinced that his precious charge was in competent hands. To Basil, even when he was deeply involved in creating his own monument which was the Kimberley Mine Museum, the art gallery remained a cherished family concern whose interests he served with boundless enthusiasm until his untimely death in July 1971. It may be said that Basil was the man who nurtured and breathed life into the institution which his father had conceived. Although many men and women have contributed to the progress and development of the institution, the William Humphreys Art Gallery remains a living memorial to the vision and inspiration of its founder and the determination and dedication of his son.