Art on West Campus
The West Campus, home to 6 000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (FCLM), has been transformed over the past two years.

*Kathy Munro and Natalie Knight*

Since 2008, the FCLM has made a concerted effort to upgrade each of the six FCLM buildings and to assemble a coherent art collection in the public spaces of all its schools. The Faculty has taken the initiative to enhance the interior walls of the principal buildings with quality art, complementing the existing sculptures in the gardens, to provide a new look and feel on the Campus.

Natalie Knight, a Wits University alumna, curator and well-known art consultant, has applied her knowledge and experience to assemble an incipient and modest art collection with a view to enhancing students’ learning environment.

“We are adding another dimension to the students’ Wits experience,” says Knight. “One of the aims of the FCLM is to feed the souls and sensibilities of our students.”

The starting point was the FNB Building, which was extended and redesigned by architects Savage and Dodd. The building, dating back to 1936, was the original state pavilion, built for the Empire Exhibition in Cape Dutch townhouse style, writ large. Through nearly 50 years, the building remained the showcase exhibition space for government enterprises and departments.

In the 1980s, the building was adapted to academic purpose with the support of Barclay’s Bank, becoming a space for lectures, tutorials and staff offices for the then Commerce Faculty. A few years ago it was realised that a radical reinvestment was required. With the support of the Department of Education, the FirstRand Foundation, PricewaterhouseCoopers and other private donors, architect Heather Dodd added two large lecture rooms in a semicircular dome to the south of the old building and created additional study, teaching, office and computer space.

Attention to detail demanded that art was selected with love and care.

The Faculty, through the offices of Acting Dean Kathy Munro and Financial and Business Manager Landi Dreyer, provided a modest art budget. In embarking on this project, Knight and Dodd were conscious of the fact that the prospective viewers would not be art aficionados, but commerce students.

Says Munro: “Remember, the great patrons of the arts in the Renaissance were the bankers and successful business leaders of their times and we would like to educate our students to become the art patrons of the future.”

The selected works are visually accessible, colourful and likely to appeal to students, while raising some questions about visual communication. Due to budgetary limitations and security concerns, the collective decision was that no one work of art would be extraordinarily valuable, but that the works should delight and inspire the students.
To stretch the budget, posters and prints were used and, in some cases, artists donated works or offered them at reduced prices. The aim was to include the works of Wits University alumni, including Karel Nel, Jenny Stadler, Judith Mason, Nils Burwitz, Norman Catherine and William Kentridge. Also included were the works of Ansel Krut, a former art student, and Susan Woolf, a current Wits University postgraduate student whose Taxi Hand Signs were selected for the issue of an official stamp series in 2010.

The Faculty was fortunate to obtain an early (1973), limited-edition festschrift portfolio dedicated to the late Professor Heather Martienssen. Professor Martienssen nurtured and mentored several major artists, including Cecil Skotnes, Gordon Vorster, Nils Burwitz, Maurice Kahn, Judith Mason, Larry Scully and Erica Berry.

Jane Makhubele’s topical beadwork on the theme of recent South African history was an ideal choice for the large, high walls, and a few original artworks were obtained from David Koloane, Roy Ndinisa and the late Thomas Kgope. Beaded wirework sculptures of South African wildlife hang over the entrance to a lecture theatre.

Six lithographs by Sam Nhlengethwa, a series of tributes to South African artists, also enabled reference to artists whose original pieces were beyond the budget, such as Marlene Dumas, William Kentridge and Dumile Feni.

“I was thrown a curved wall on the first floor, next to Sam’s works,” says Knight. “As it was impossible to hang artworks in this large, curved space, the solution I chose was to create a permanent wallpaper of almost all the works which we had placed throughout the building. In addition, the images on the wallpaper included the outdoor sculptures by Ernest Ullmann and other sculptors. These sculptures have become such familiar landmarks to the students on the West Campus that they are no longer seen as artworks, but as meeting points.”
On the ground floor, a glass cabinet contains art books and exhibition catalogues that document the art on display. Students can read about the art around them and so connect in a meaningful way with the new environment. In addition, a catalogue is being prepared for all artworks of the West and Parktown Campuses to provide a photographic record of Wits University’s living art treasures and to enhance appreciation and understanding of what has been assembled. It is a collection for the 21st century.

Some three-dimensional works were needed to complete the interior and a practical solution was found. Instead of sculptures, hardwood, carved art benches were placed on staircase landings and open areas.

It is a source of great pleasure to see the students sitting on the benches or to hear heated discussion around the group of five signed Kentridge posters in the foyer. The selection of art for public display is always a subject of debate, as people’s tastes and levels of art appreciation differ. Not all works are equally well liked, but the fact that art is now a subject of debate among our students is gratifying.

The foyer of the CLM Building, another building that started life as an exhibition area for the 1936 Empire Exhibition, changed its tone completely through the purchase of new artworks. In this area, Knight placed works from an art portfolio published by Wits University in honour of the late Professor GR Bozoli (fondly remembered as “Boz”). The portfolio includes works by artists Judith Mason, Andrew Verster, Giuseppe Cattaneo, Norman Catherine and Nils Burwitz. Prints by Ezrom Legae, as well as carved and painted wood panels by Roy Ndinisa, were also included in the foyer.

A large wall hanging from the Keiskamma Art Project graces the south entrance and the passages are decorated with a variety of art posters.

From the top; left to right:
Thomas Kgope,
The Ndebele Kingdom
Jenny Stadler, Lido
Norman Catherine
(from the Bozoli portfolio)
Roy Ndinisa, The Poet
Ephraim Ngatane, The Musicians
Susan Woolf, Game Plan,
from the Jacobs Ladder Series
...there is a sense of calmness that makes the routine of coming to work very pleasant.

Upstairs, near the Duncan Reekie Committee Room, colourful works by Thomas Kgope, Margaret Vorster and Billy Molokeng have been hung.

The Wits Plus Building - originally the AECI Rand Easter Show Exhibition Building, dating from the 1960s - incorporates works by the late David Mbele, a striking embroidered tapestry and several works by Norman Catherine. A feature of the collection - the theme of the second-floor conference room - focuses on the excitement of the 2010 World Cup in art. The challenge of revamping this building was filling four floors with quality works using a modest investment.

Diane Levine was commissioned to produce an inspirational mosaic, entitled ‘Striving’, for the exterior of the building. Levine has also used her own photographs of the unique Wits Plus circular staircase as an art installation. The unique circular staircase, created by Peters Stairs in 1999, is a symbol for upward aspiration and individual development.

Wits Plus is the centre for part-time students and is very much alive at night, offering older, working students the opportunity to earn a degree or extend their knowledge through a short course.

“The art is meant to inspire and encourage our students to themselves achieve and create through their studies and personal growth,” says Munro.

The New Commerce Building, overlooking the Charles Skeen Stadium, is a functional building of lecture halls and offices of the School of Economic and Business Sciences. Built in the 1980s, it has been completely transformed and the foyer is now a source of pleasure, with brightly coloured walls and artworks.

“What pleasure I and other members of staff now feel in walking through the foyer,” says Professor Harry Zarenda, Acting Head of the School, of the building’s transformation. “In the past few years, before the renovation was done, most staff members would walk round the outside of the building to avoid the shabby and drab foyer. I have noticed that everyone now (students included) walks through the foyer with a sense of pride. Aesthetically, in approaching our workplace first thing in the morning, there is a sense of calmness that makes the routine of coming to work very pleasant.”

The main wall contains a portfolio of six giclée prints of watercolours by Ephraim Ngatane, entitled ‘His Moods and Memories’. A special feature is a series of six wall panels designed by Knight, who curated Ephraim Ngatane: ‘Symphony of Soweto’, a major Ngatane retrospective exhibition, for the Standard Bank Gallery in February 2010. The wall panels illustrate the life and work of the artist, who died at the age of just 32, in 1961.
From left to right; top to bottom:
Sam Nhlengethwa, Tribute to William Kentridge
Curved Art Wall in the FNB Building
Giuseppe Cattaneo, The Gable
Ephrain Ngatane, Seated Man

The students have shown great interest in these wall panels, which are designed to stimulate their awareness of the art and the artist.

In addition, the works of several current Wits University art students were selected for the large wall areas, providing the students with an opportunity to gain exposure. The students are Natalie Monk, Naadira Patel, Kate Lewis, Sheekha Kalan and Jacqui Carney.

The Law School has also grown its art collection in the Oliver Schreiner School of Law Building. The new works are mainly located in the Chalstsy Centre, the staff common room and the Mandela Institute offices.

In the Chalstsy Foyer, which is open to the public, the artworks are bright and colourful, and have wide appeal. These works serve to decorate and enhance the environment, and they are enjoyed by students and conference attendees. Here, too, many of the works are by artists who have a connection with Wits University, either as lecturers or students. They include works by Douglas Portway, Judith Mason, Norman Catherine, Robert Hodgins and Susan Woolf. In addition, a number of original works by other well-known artists were selected, including Alfred Thoba, Thomas Kgope, Dumisani Sibisi, Roy Ndinisa, Johnson Baloyi and Sipho Ndebele.

In the Chalstsy Foyer – joining the Eduardo Villa sculpture, the Red Madonna, in the centre foyer – is a painted wooden sculpture of Nelson Mandela, entitled Mandela Power, by Johannes Maswanganyi. This work, acquired for the Mandela Institute, depicts a modern Mandela, painted in bright colours, emerging from a plain, solid tree trunk, holding the South African flag.

Artworks in the Law School staffroom include original drawings by Judith Mason and a painting by Alfred Thoba called ‘I don’t want a Judge in my Toilet’. These interesting pieces are topical and slightly controversial, and encourage debate among staff.
This art brings together history and biography, and adds another dimension to the study of law.

The Law School collection also includes some unusual traditional artefacts. There are two rare, beaded sangoma capes, which have been installed as wall hangings in the Chalsty Auditorium. There are also rare examples of traditional beadwork in the niches of the passage outside the auditorium – a cape designed to be worn by a Zulu bride (isikoti) and a modern beaded jacket for a Zulu bridegroom.

For the collection in the Mandela Institute, photographer Jürgen Schadeberg donated two of his valuable, vintage photographs of Mandela – one of Mandela in his law office in 1952 and one in his cell on Robben Island, a re-visit in 1994.

Knight is currently working with a very talented family, the Makhubeles, who live in Giyani, Limpopo. Billy Makhubele is an artist who made wire bicycles but, after an accident, became a collector of old Shangaan beadwork. He saw the potential in the pieces and he, his three wives and seven daughters began creating beaded artworks using the format of the tradition Shangaan capes, called nekaks. They base their works on major newspaper headlines and photographs recording the history of South Africa, particularly since the 1990s.
Naturally, the hero of these pieces is Nelson Mandela. Several of these works, especially the shirts created by Jane Makhubele using gold safety pins, record each of the four elections, and form a cohesive theme in the Mandela Institute’s collection. Other beaded items record major events – both political and personal – in Madiba’s life. This art brings together history and biography, and adds another dimension to the study of law.

According to Law Professor Glenda Fick, “a particularly fine example is the joyous rendering of the marriage of Graça Machel and Nelson Mandela, using gold safety pins on black cloth, which hangs just outside the entrance to the Chalsty Auditorium. The piece manages to capture perfectly the body language of the subjects despite using no more than an outline and the texture provided by the contrast of the gold pins against the stark black cloth.”

An art wall has also been created for the Mandela Institute, showing an assemblage of photographs of Mandela. It is a wonderful collage of important images in wallpaper format displayed on the two walls approaching the Institute’s offices. Photographs by Debbie Yazbek depict Mandela and Machel viewing the works of the 2008 Constitutional Court exhibition that Knight curated for Mandela’s 90th birthday.

The older sculptures in the gardens and pedestrian pathways of the West Campus are another dimension of student life. Sculptures by Paul Stein (Concatenation), Neels Coetze (work from the 1980s) and Ernest Ullmann (four works that were a special commission for the 1960s Union Jubilee Rand Easter Show), together with the Tower of Light (1936), a unique work of enormous architectural importance, reflect the slow evolution of the Campus from exhibition space to educational landscape.

A recent exterior addition is the relocation of an abstract steel sculpture from its old University Corner site to the West Campus. This piece (as yet, the name of the artist is unknown) stood at the entrance to the building when it was the Lawson’s Building (corner of Jorissen Street and Jan Smuts Avenue), with its iconic revolving 19th floor restaurant. (The first reader to identify the name of the sculpture and its creator will receive a year’s subscription to ClassicFeel magazine.)

The overall collection of art on the West Campus celebrates our history and cultural diversity. The unifying feature is that all the works illustrate South African artistic talent and creativity. The collection on the West Campus has taken shape remarkably quickly. It brings life, colour and interest into the academic world. The collection also has an important educational function: the idea of the collection, according to Knight, “is to provide an overview of the life and concerns of the artists in our country and to see the variety of experiences and emotions emanating from the walls”.

Says the Faculty Finance Manager, Dreyer, who sourced the funds for the recent acquisitions: “The new art is on its way to becoming part of the culture of Wits; it opens up young minds to new ways of thought and creativity.”

The FCLM would appreciate ideas and funding to help us grow the West and Parktown Campus art collections. Donations of artworks from Wits University alumni that fit with our themes will be received with enthusiasm. Our vision is that the art on the West Campus will provide an aesthetic environment that will be a source of inspiration to enrich and stimulate our students, lecturers and visitors to our Campus.


Neels Coetze, Bier
Alumni tales: the class of 1948 and a prisoner of war diary

Two recently released works by Wits alumni reflect on the extraordinary lives and times of former students.

The mystery of the missing photo

“The class of 1948 greets its alma mater with undiminished affection,” reads a plaque in the Hillman Building, which houses the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering. This “undiminished affection” referred to by the 1948 class representative, the late Norman Barker, is exemplified in Some Reminiscences of the ’48 Class of Civil Engineering – University of the Witwatersrand. The collection of alumni memoirs, produced by Tony Williams, Don Muller and Don Walker, was launched at Walker’s Johannesburg home on 10 November 2010 at a gathering that included the current Head of School, Professor Mitchell Gohnert (PhD (Civ Eng) 1995).

The class of 1948 accounted for the largest crop of civil engineers to enter the South African economy in one year. The 54 graduates comprised predominantly ex-servicemen who were granted bursaries by General Jan Smuts (Honorary LLD 1922).

“They were largely responsible for the tremendous growth, after WWII, in the building of infrastructure … the building of towns … for the burgeoning mining industry which formed the backbone of the South African economy,” the preface to the memoir notes.

The camaraderie of these soldier-graduates, mainly resident at Cottesloe, and their “significant achievements” and contribution to civil engineering would endure for more than 60 years. From triple Wits Blues and medals for bravery, through scaling Kilimanjaro and building the Sydney Opera House roof, to Belgian and English knighthoods, “there is not one soul who hasn’t succeeded,” said Williams of his classmates, 20 of whom contributed to the memoir.

In the memoir, several alumni refer to the mystery of the 1948 photograph, which was absent from the otherwise complete collection of the School’s class photographs. The missing photograph has been steeped in myth.

One alumni claims: “Not all the class was present at the appointed hour … after very late nights of drawing, some had retired to ‘the Dev’ [Devonshire Hotel] to celebrate the momentous occasion of return to real civvy life …”

Another recalls: “Instructions about lining up the group were hard to hear … thereafter chaos continued and the behaviour was perhaps a little unbecoming for such future upholders of the profession – a reaction matched only by the fury of [Head of School] Prof Sutton."

A 1948 class photograph has since materialised, and taken its rightful place in the Hillman Building.

Diary of a prisoner of war

Eight years before the graduation of the inimitable class of 1948, EB “Dick” Dickinson (BSc 1940) signed up for the Second Transvaal Scottish battalion to dig trenches in North Africa.

Captured in Libya in 1942, Dickinson was deployed by the Third Reich as a postal worker in Dresden, at the time Germany’s seventh largest – and as yet un-bombed – city. The 1945 Dresden bombing would later be recognised as one of the worst examples of civilian suffering caused by strategic bombing.

Wits University benefactor Dickinson, who, at 92, is arguably one of South Africa’s oldest surviving World War II veterans, recently released From Jo’burg to Dresden: A World War II Diary, which recounts his experiences through the (forbidden) diary he kept as a prisoner of war.
These days a degree is often not enough if you really want to make your mark on the world. That’s why you should seriously consider studying for a postgraduate degree at Wits. As one of only two universities in Africa ranked in two separate international rankings as a leading institution in the world, and the only university in South Africa to feature in the top 1% in the world in seven defined fields of research, Wits provides you with the intellectual environment you are looking for to enhance your career.

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