Through the years Wits has installed or acquired many sculptures in visible and public spaces on its campuses.

By Katherine Munro and Natalie Knight
Mindshapes
Sculptures at Wits
The University has recently received a major donation of two large bronze sculptures created by the late Herman Wald.

The donation was made by the artist’s son Louis Wald, a Wits alumnus, and throws the spotlight on the public sculptures in the Wits collection.

A tour of the public works on the Wits Campus should prove to be a source of pleasure and enable the visitor to connect with our heritage. We have surveyed and explored about 30 such artworks.

We hope to encourage the donation of new works of art and see new artists being encouraged by 21st century patrons.

Wits Art Museum, which will be opening in May 2012 in the revamped University Corner (the old Lawson’s Corner skyscraper), has a large selection of sculptures which will be displayed on specific exhibitions. Our focus in this article is to record the sculptural work that is accessible to the public. These works include freestanding three-dimensional outdoor sculptures, incised relief panels on exterior buildings and indoor wooden art benches for use by students. Commissioned busts and statues are not included in this article.

Public art should enhance the environment and serve a purpose. It should provide a reason to pause for a moment to reflect on life. The artwork may recall sad events, delight or inspire, or in its very shape be a point of social harmony and relaxation.
A diversity of materials is in evidence in the Wits sculptures – bronze, stainless steel, travertine, clay, concrete, and wood have all been used.

The East Campus has the Convocation War Memorial sculpture by Moses Kottler. This is perhaps the most dominantly visible and meaningful to Wits. The sculpture consists of three linked bronze nudes larger than life, male and female figures with the left figure raising a hand to the heavens. They represent the sacrifice of war. This work is positioned to the right of the Central Block, overlooking a flowerbed. It commemorates the students, staff and alumni who gave their lives during the First and Second World Wars and the Korean War. Their names are inscribed in a book in the Wits archives. These figures have watched over the changes and transformation in student life over many years.

Kottler was born in Lithuania and was active as a sculptor in South Africa after arriving here in 1915. Together with Anton van Wouw and Lippy Lipschitz he became a leading sculptor of the time. He was a member of the New Group and a close associate of artists such as Terence McCaw and Gregoire Boonzaier. He lived in Johannesburg from 1932 and died here in 1977.

Wits is fortunate to have a major body of the work of Edoardo Villa which contains examples of his development. Villa, one of South Africa’s pre-eminent sculptors, was born in Italy in 1915. After being sent as a prisoner of war to South Africa, he made this country his home on his release in 1947. An artist who kept working and developing until his death at age 94 in 2011, he worked in many different styles.

The earliest Villa owned by Wits is the St Apollonius (the patron saint of dentists), a bas relief figure cast in artificial stone. Dating from 1948, this work was commissioned by John Fassler for the then new and very modern Dental Hospital (now the School of Arts). His relief panels relating to mining activities embedded over the entrance on the east side of the Geology and Mining Engineering building (now Geosciences building) were added in the early 1960s.
Close to the Wits Theatre are two major works by Villa - Reclining Figure 1969 and Two Figures. These works are massively robust and are among Villa’s largest bronzes. Two large Villas will also be permanently on display in the entrance foyer of the new Wits Art Museum.

A smaller sculpture by Villa is housed in the Chalsty Foyer of the School of Law. Red Madonna, donated by the Chalsty Trust, is an abstract representation of the female form.

On the outside patio close to Senate House are several sculptures by South African-born sculptors. Malcolm Payne (born 1946) won the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year in 1984. His sculpture Arc Angel: HomoHarold Bloom is in mild steel and dated 1977. It is a circular motif with sharp juxtaposed attachments of flat iron and angled iron.

In close proximity is the work of Johann Moolman (born 1950). Bourke’s Luck is made of welded steel plates and is an abstract composition.

Also in the piazza are two works by Gavin Younge (born 1947). To the Dark Rising, a figurative and powerful work made of welded steel, won the Afrox competition of 1978. A second work, Umkhonto, could represent a spear or a new anchor of the future, dating from 1979, a time when Younge was keen to portray current political challenges.

Willem Strydom (born 1945) is represented in two untitled works. One is in mild steel (1977) and the second in mild steel and wood (1980).

The redesign and modernising of the foyer of the Great Hall in the Central Block in 2001 by the architect Henry Paine saw the installation of three powerful abstract wooden works by the sculptor Geoffrey Armstrong. These sculptures, carved from the bluegum tree, make tactile, substantial backdrops for public functions.

Two other works not yet installed are by Alan Crump and Marco Sante Cianfanelli.

Moving over to the West Campus, near the School of Law is the temporary installation of a bronze sculpture by Neels Coetzee commissioned by Wits.
The Bier represents a hollowed skull and was part of a series from the mid 1980s, an intensely productive period for Coetzee. The artist was born in 1940 and was a member of staff in the Wits Fine Arts Department for much of his career. He studied skulls in the Wits Department of Anatomy and made casts from real skulls. Originally intended to rise above a circular pond, this work has been relocated as the pond concept was not sustainable.

The two bronze works by Herman Wald are situated in different areas of the West Campus. Wald, an immigrant to South Africa, was well known in Johannesburg between the 1940s and his early death in 1970. In his day he was a popular and celebrated sculptor. His best-known work was the Stampede of Impalas, now located in 44 Main Street, commissioned by Harry Oppenheimer in honour of his late father, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer. Wald was also commissioned by the Oppenheimers to create a work to mark Ernest Oppenheimer’s life and work in Kimberley. He produced a plaster cast of a miner three metres high. The Oppenheimers selected the work in a smaller dimension and a group of five figures became part of the Diamond Digger’s fountain in Kimberley. The original 3-metre figure was donated by Louis Wald, and funds were raised to cover the cost of casting by the Engineering Department. Titled Unknown Miner, the work was installed at the east entrance of the Chamber of Mines building. The striking, detailed figure recalls the mining roots of the University, noting that the South African School of Mines established in Kimberley in 1896 was a forerunner of Wits.

Mining engineering, metallurgy, geology and geosciences were key disciplines from the earliest days of Wits. Human endeavour of both mental and physical varieties and representing miners of diverse backgrounds is personified in the male form, exhibiting energy, muscle and brain power.

The second work by Wald is Man and His Soul, a sensuous semi-abstract work in circular form, showing interlinked male and female figures. It is cast in gilded bronze and rises above a plinth. It was acquired by the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (CLM), and complements the West Campus art collection built up over the last four
years under the curatorship of Natalie Knight. It is located at the main crossroads below the sculpture Concatenation by Paul Stein.

Concatenation, a stainless steel abstract sculpture dating from the development of the West Campus in 1986, represents the connection between books and the chain of knowledge. It is located in front of the Commerce Library, a popular social spot for students. This work was commissioned by Barlow Rand as a gift to Wits when the company sponsored the development of the Commerce Library. The piece was fabricated in Johannesburg and proved to be a challenge to install.

Another work, recently relocated to the West Campus and the Tower of Light forecourt, is the piece we have entitled Lawson’s Pinnacle. This tall, narrow, tapering spire in stainless steel rising off a tripod was originally in front of Lawson’s Building in Jorissen Street. It was commissioned by businessman Wilfred Lawson in the 1960s to set off his new skyscraper, “Lawson’s Corner”, with its innovative circular revolving restaurant on the 19th floor. It was moved to make way for the building of the art museum.

The West Campus is also the location of four Ernest Ullmann sculptures in cast concrete and travertine that date from the 1960s. Ullmann was born in Germany in 1900 and emigrated to South Africa in 1935. He received recognition in his adopted country when he was asked to design a poster for the 1936 Empire Exhibition. This was held on the Milner Park Rand Show estate, which is now the Wits West Campus. The four pieces are The Family Group, The Pioneer, The Cross Bearers and The Miners.

Robert Legatt’s Dig Man is a highly tactile work in bronze overlooking the Dig sports fields to the north of Barnato Hall on the West Campus, dating from the 1980s. This work was commissioned by the company Dig & Associates, involved in the Dig Fields development. Legatt was born in Pretoria in 1963 and specialises in bronze, stainless steel and silver.

The West Campus also has a number of carved wooden sculptural benches in the First National Bank building. These include the Crocodile Maiden Bench and the Swan Bench by Azwifarwi Ragmana. The Parliament Bench has been moved to the first floor of the New Commerce Building (NCB). Two additional benches, The Lion and Lioness, are now in the downstairs area of the NCB. Some of the benches were purchased by Wits’ CLM Faculty and others were a gift from Gallery 181.

Azwi was born in 1962 in Limpopo and starting sculpting at the age of 15. He says he receives his inspiration from his ancestors and the spirits. In addition to benches he carves musical instruments, mainly drums, and he has also carved major works with biblical themes.

At the north entrance of the CLM building on the ground floor are two benches by Johannes Maswanganyi, The Fish Bench and The Kings Bench. His painted wooden sculpture Mandela Power is on view in the Chalsty Foyer next to the Edoardo Villa and a wood carved head of Man Signing the Constitution by the late Samson Makwala.
Maswanganyi was born in 1948 in Msengini village near Giyani, in Limpopo. He comes from a family of wood carvers and has been exhibiting nationally and internationally since 1985. His preference is to work in leadwood to create functional pieces used by sangomas. Several of these works are currently on show at Museum Africa.

The entrance foyer of the Donald Gordon Centre contains a magnificent sculpture by Deborah Bell, Rising from the Ashes II, made in terracotta clay and set on an engraved pedestal. Created in 1999, the work provides a focal point for the art collections of the Parktown campus. This work was presented by Christopher Seabrooke, chairman of Sabvest, with funding from Business and Arts South Africa, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of WBS (1968-1998).

At the Health Sciences campus in Parktown, close to the Medical School, is an important memorial sculpture by Johannesburg plastic surgeon and artist Dr Laurence Chait. This work commemorates the acceptance of the Medical Faculty’s Reconciliation Commission manifesto in February 2000. The sculpture comprises two figures holding books, portraying medical students. The one on the left looks down and represents the years of shame when students of colour were not allowed to participate fully in the training at the Medical School because of the apartheid laws. The sharp barbs represent the pain and embarrassment suffered by these students at the time. The figure on the right is a student looking upwards and forwards towards the future and represents a united and non-racial Medical School. The words on the plaque express the pain and the hopes of generations of Wits staff and students but also convey the anticipation of a different and better future.

The Origins Centre is home to a major work by sculptor Walter Oltmann (born 1960). This installation is a giant world map, hand-woven from aluminium wire, with Africa at the heart of the design and showing the movement of humankind into all continents.

In the indigenous garden at the entrance to the Origins Centre is a stone bird-bath in the shape of Africa, in memory of the life and work of Raymond Dart.

On the Education Campus is a large leadwood sculpture by the late John Baloyi (1964-2006) titled The Guardian Angel. It is dated January 2006; Baloyi died shortly thereafter. This work celebrates the life and work of Peter Hunter (died 2007), who was a dedicated educator at Wits.

Sculptures, because of their public location, carry a certain amount of risk. It is not possible to protect them totally against the ravages of time and the weather. A sculpture that represents a single political viewpoint may divide and figures of political leaders may invite destruction. At Wits we have lost the work by Paul Stein in the First National Bank building entitled The Wheel to theft.

The sculptures at Wits are a rich reminder of our difficult and contested past; they celebrate life and achievement and, set in the gorgeous gardens of Wits, are a fine tribute to the University’s people.

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