Public Statement: Current situation regarding the state of the Johannesburg Art Gallery collection and infrastructure

6.12.2024

The Art Gallery Committee (AGC) of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) is a structure established by virtue of the 1913 Deed of Donation through which the original collection of the Gallery was bequeathed to the City of Johannesburg. The Deed makes clear that the Municipal Council/City of Johannesburg is responsible for the management and care of the JAG collection, and that the AGC has an oversight role in the exercise of that duty, which, among other things, specifies that the advice and consent of the AGC is required on matters related to the acquisition, loan or removal of work from the collection. The review and updating of the mandate and composition of the AGC is a matter of ongoing dialogue with the city administration, in ways that would take into account the implications of the passage of time and changes in administrative context and practice. We nevertheless take seriously the essential responsibilities and duties conferred by the original Deed of Donation.

The AGC takes note of communication from the Friends of JAG and the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation regarding the state of maintenance of the JAG collection and infrastructure, and the subsequent ventilation of these issues in the media.

The need to both digitise and relocate the collection has been under consideration by the AGC since at least 2016 in the context of the deteriorated state of the JAG infrastructure, inadequately realised repairs to this infrastructure, and the consequent suspension of acquisitions on the part of the Anglo-American Centenary Trust (AAJCT). Under this general advice, the City has explored various possibilities for alternative housing for the collection, and the AAJCT has expressed in principle commitment to contributing resources to this complex and demanding project. In dialogue with the Friends of JAG, the City has earmarked the Old Mint building (which forms part of Ditsong Museums) as a temporary host for the collection, opening the way for the refurbishment of the JAG building.

Over the past two years, the AGC has provided advisory support to the staff of the Johannesburg Art Gallery in devising an approach and required administrative framework for the relocation of the collection. This work has included advice in the drafting of terms of reference and memorandums required for the successful implementation of the relocation, and the facilitation of potential partnerships. This process has not been without its challenges, but has moved ahead to identify the most viable strategies to protect the collection within both resource constraints and the demanding administrative framework of municipal finance and systems, and in the best interests of the collection and the Gallery more broadly. We believe that there is now a viable framework in place for the City to deliver on the immediate priority of digitisation and relocation of the collection, working together with the Jozi my Jozi initiative, a well-placed consortium of private sector partners invested in the revitalisation of the inner city. We look forward to this cooperative framework providing a basis for the larger project of the refurbishment of the JAG building and the general repositioning of the institution.

We believe that the many valid concerns that have been raised by the Friends of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation regarding the state of the gallery and the collection can now be addressed through a credible and coherent framework of public-private partnership and cooperation, through which their (and other) contributions and those of the AAJCT can also be constructively channelled.

We furthermore believe there should be public transparency on all matters related to the collection (loans, acquisitions, and so on) and encourage the City to make this information available to interested/concerned parties, where this is not in conflict with the duty of care to artworks and safety and security considerations.

We encourage the City's steps to partner with stakeholders to enable the process of relocation, and we will continue to support a framework of constructive accountability for the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and impel the City to fulfil its responsibilities to the institution and the collection.

The members of the Art Gallery Committee of the Johannesburg Art Gallery

Joseph Gaylard (acting chairperson)

Melissa Goba

Molemo Moiloa

Nontobeko Ntombela

Pfunzo Sidogi