

# Time to stand up for the South African National Gallery: or, why no one cares anymore...

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*by Mario Pissarra*

*To begin:* why is it that we hear criticism of Zeitz MOCAA, and that the Department of Arts and Culture is routinely condemned for its handling of the Venice Biennale, but we hear next-to-nothing about the ongoing crisis at the South African National Gallery (SANG)? Can it be because Zeitz MOCAA and the Venice Biennale represent power and prospects, whereas the National Gallery has already sunk so low that no one really thinks it is worth fighting for?

*To continue:* why have I sat on this for months? Certainly, in part, because I was involved in a project that included an exhibition at the SANG, and I did not think Iziko's management would know how to separate issues if I'd dropped this then. But also because one tires of raising issues about the SANG, and becomes despondent with the deafening silence that inevitably follows...

So, here we go, again...

The South African National Gallery is, or at least should be, one of the country's premier visual arts institutions. It is, or should be, an exemplary art institution on the African continent, and a significant player in the broader international context. Arguably, it began to play this role in the early 1990s, when change was on the horizon, and the lifting of the cultural boycott made it the one South African pit-stop for international curators. Today, it is unlikely that anyone would claim a leading position for the SANG. Over the last two decades the institution has been steadily disempowered. Today, it is hovering on the precipice of the dysfunctional.

The primary culprit for the sorry state of affairs at the National Gallery is the Department of Arts and Culture, whose idea of post-apartheid transformation led the National Gallery to be bundled into a quasi-corporate entity called Iziko Museums, branded at the time as a "flagship" and now officially accredited as an "agency" of the DAC. The secondary culprits are the Iziko Board of Trustees and senior management of Iziko, under whose leadership the SANG has been severely undermined and incapacitated.

Over the last two decades there have been many signs of the lowly position of the National Gallery within the structure of Iziko. But if this was ever in doubt, consider the (quietly taken) decision to do away with the position of a director for the National Gallery. Before considering the reasoning and implications of this drastic decision, some recent background is in order.

In 2009 Iziko Museums appointed Riason Naidoo as director of art collections, placing him in charge of the National Gallery and the Michaelis Collection at the Old Town House on Greenmarket Square. I will not go into Naidoo's chequered performance here, suffice to note that Iziko Museums decided to not renew his five year contract. At that point Iziko's CEO Rooksana Omar issued the following terse statement:

"Riason Naidoo was employed by Iziko Museums of South Africa on a fixed term contract. From the outset, Riason was aware that his contract would expire at the end of April 2014. Iziko has no further comment. Iziko will continue in future to provide the same exceptional quality art exhibitions that the public have always enjoyed." (Statement from the Iziko CEO, 9 May 2014)

It is public knowledge that Naidoo took Iziko Museums to the labour court and was temporarily reinstated (for one year, backdated to the date of non-renewal of contract). That was not too long after his contract was supposed to have expired. What few people knew was that the matter did not end there. In August 2017 Naidoo notified undisclosed recipients via email that "the labour dispute between myself and Iziko Museums of South Africa was settled in the Labour Court last week." Naidoo attached a joint statement from himself and Iziko: "Pursuant to a restructuring exercise, the position of Director: Art Collections was abolished. An alternative position was offered to the Director, Mr Riason Naidoo, which he declined. The parties have reached a settlement, the terms of which are confidential between them." (Email and joint statement circulated via email by R. Naidoo, 6 August 2017, statement subsequently posted by Iziko, 10 August, 2017).

If one compares the two statements it is clear that reasons given don't add up. Firstly, we were informed that Mr Naidoo's contract had run its course and was not renewed, and that was that. Now, over three years later, we are told that Mr Naidoo lost his post because of a restructuring exercise that did away with his position at the National Gallery, and that he declined another post. Does Iziko credit the public with any intelligence? Or is that they don't expect anyone to read their statements, or think that no one cares anymore?

Apart from employing spin doctors and an internal auditor, Iziko has a Human Resources department headed by a director, Rocco Human. We have long seen that Iziko takes an extraordinary amount of time to fill vacant posts, even when there is ample notice that a vacancy is to occur, and now it seems that someone tasked with contracts skipped HR101. How can a bureaucratized structure like Iziko Museums lack the competency to terminate a fixed period contract? What has this exercise cost financially, and what has it cost the rudderless SANG? Who has been held accountable? And why should a settlement between a public entity and a former employee be confidential? Who pays for this?

And can the public please be enlightened about this so-called "restructuring exercise"? When did it begin and when was it concluded? What rationale underpinned it, and what was the considered reasoning for concluding that the National Gallery did not need a director? May we read the report, or is it also confidential?

Looking at the Iziko management structure on its website does not shed much light. Three directors' posts appear on the organogram under core functions. They are titled "Research and Exhibitions", "Collections and Digitization" and "Education". Try match these *three* posts (departments) on the organogram to the *four* directors' positions listed *below* the organogram. Education corresponds, but your guess is as good as mine which Director of "Natural History Collections", "Social History", and "Art Collections" corresponds to "Research and Exhibitions" and "Collections and Digitization". What appears clear is that Dr Hamish Robertson heads Natural History and that the directors' posts for Social History and Art Collections are "under review". Presumably, it is one of these that has been "abolished" some time ago, maybe even as early as 2014, since this is one of the reasons given for Mr Naidoo's exit. In trying to pin down the SANG post in the bureaucratic maze that is Iziko, one recalls an earlier observation by Melvyn Minnaar, a former board member of the National Gallery, that "the SANG director job disappeared into the organogram". Indeed, what is the point of an organogram if it does not provide clarity on the structure?

What has become clear to the public is that Dr Robertson has been tasked to ensure "the same exceptional quality art exhibitions that the public have always enjoyed". I can't comment on whether Dr Robertson is a suitable director for natural history collections (effectively the South African Museum), but it is pretty clear that he knows very little about the visual arts. If you think this is unkind, consider his candid acknowledgment at the opening of Lionel Davis' retrospective exhibition that he did not know anything about Lionel Davis! Since Davis is one of the best known figures in the arts and heritage sectors in the Cape, one can only wonder what else Dr Robertson does not know about the visual arts that he should, certainly if he is now the *de facto* director of the SANG.

Concurrent with the musical chairs being played by management, what we have had for some time now, i.e. since Mr Naidoo stopped clocking in at the SANG, is a system of 'rotating' leadership at the National Gallery, with curators taking turns to be 'in charge', six months at a time. Where, in a hierarchical structure like Iziko Museums does anyone practice participatory democracy? Is this unusual arrangement reserved for the SANG, and if so, why?

And dare one ask, where is the Iziko Board of Trustees in all of this? Or are these political appointments so ill-suited for their role that they do not even know that a crisis is unfolding on their watch, presumably with their consent?

Unless Iziko can provide compelling reasons to the contrary, cynics may be forgiven for thinking that the decision to do away with post of director of art collections was little more than a ruse to 'settle' the Naidoo affair. We may be forgiven for speculating that the costs of the labour dispute are now being 'recovered', and that the doing away of this post (possibly along with that of a director for social history) is in part a means to sustain the 'competitive' packages earned by Iziko's top brass. Cynics may also be forgiven for concluding that Iziko has no interest in the visual arts, and that the same sorry conclusion applies to the DAC.

It is also an indictment of the visual arts community that there is no public outcry about the implications of Iziko's effective demotion of the SANG to a pathetic unit. The Ministry and Department of Arts and Culture have been taken to task for their

handling of the Venice Biennale, and there is something of a critical debate about Zeitz Mocaa, but there has been barely a word on the decapitation of the National Gallery. Many people have long been aware of the rot that is Iziko, and of the slow death of the SANG, but few have said anything publicly. One notable exception is the above-mentioned article by Melvyn Minnaar, written shortly after Iziko 'terminated' Naidoo's contract in 2014. While I do not agree with all of Mr Minnaar's points, I do concur with his diagnosis that, " Today the real crisis of the SANG relates not to the non-renewal of a director's contract, but the bureaucratic structure of its ties to Iziko."

In 2014 I had the honour of curating an exhibition at the National Gallery. During this process I constantly found that while the SANG staff were all co-operative, dealing with Iziko itself was generally a source of frustration. Consequently, I made repeated written requests for a meeting with senior management, but was ignored. It was only after I resorted, in collusion with some of my colleagues at ASAI, to a provocative series of posts about Iziko that I was finally able to meet with Iziko's director of Institutional Advancement, Susan Glanville-Zini. After instructing me that I was not allowed to report on the meeting, Ms Glanville-Zini told me that my published critiques of Iziko Museums were "vitriolic" and that Iziko (presumably her department) had taken a decision to ignore my criticism. I have never understood why a department set up to promote the image of what should surely be an intellectual project would ignore public criticism, unless it could not defend itself from legitimate arguments?

There was a time when the SANG published catalogues that were important contributions to South African art history. This was done despite the fact that the SANG employs no researchers, unlike its evidently more pampered equivalent at Iziko, the South African Museum. Instead SANG curators must 'find' time (presumably their own) and funding (which would have to go through Iziko), if they want to author texts. Not long ago the SANG had a shop that proudly displayed their publications, along with others. Today, the most recent SANG publication listed on the Iziko website dates back to 2008. Indeed, unless external curators come in with their own funding, the SANG typically has nothing to show for exhibitions when they come down, not even digital records on the Iziko website (surely an obvious strategy for a structure like Iziko?), and no shop (killed by Iziko's "Customer Service Management" department). Not too long ago the SANG library participated in an exchange programme with other museum libraries, nationally and internationally (well, Africa north of the Limpopo still hadn't been discovered, but that is another story). Today the SANG library exchange programme has become a begging basket for donations, the SANG has nothing to offer other museums. And even if it did, as when ASAI tried to donate 60 copies of our book on Lionel Davis (produced to accompany a retrospective at Iziko), you will find that Iziko's management no longer allocates funds for postage for this programme (but typically does not follow through and terminate it). While it is fair to assume that the SANG library still receives occasional donations, the most recent acquisition listed on the website dates back to 2015. The SANG library is evidently understaffed and under-resourced, clearly under-valued by Iziko. And yet Iziko has no qualms claiming on its website that "[t]he Art Collections Library is a major art research resource covering South African and international art serving the gallery staff, researchers, scholars, artists and the

general public.” Yes, this is technically correct, but Iziko’s bluster misrepresents its neglect of not only the SANG library, but of the SANG as an intellectual project.

There is a crisis here and it is about the National Gallery needing a drastic intervention to restore its premier status. It is about the SANG’s loss of autonomy, legitimacy, credibility, capacity and funding under Iziko Museums. It is about the poor oversight exercised by the members of the Board of Trustees of Iziko Museums as well as by the DAC. It is about a dysfunctional, quasi-corporate entity with grossly overpaid senior management who add little intellectual value to our public culture. A cumbersome structure where most of those on top reap the benefits of their positions by shamelessly globetrotting and doing little that is of any real value. Can we see a list of publications arising from the international conferences and events senior management attends, please? Or any evidence of how their travel benefits the museums that they preside over?

To state the obvious: every National Gallery worth anything has a director, not only the Tate and Guggenheim, but also the national galleries of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Namibia. Even South Africa’s *municipal* museums have them! What does the DAC and Iziko Museums know about the management of national galleries that the rest of the world doesn’t?

It is time to stand up for the National Gallery. Time for artists, curators, writers, administrators, organisations and everyone active in the visual arts to let it be heard that Iziko Museums spells death for the National Gallery. Time for the DAC to ensure that those responsible for the unprofessional and costly handling of the Naidoo affair are held accountable. Time for the DAC to see the elephant in the room and address the feasibility of the behemoth they birthed.

First prize for the visual arts will be for the DAC to exorcise the SANG from Iziko, to restore its status and functionality as a national institution. Let Iziko Museums be stripped of the jewel it does not value. Second prize would be to reconfigure the structure of Iziko Museums to ensure that the National Gallery can and does operate at an optimum level, with Iziko taking on the function of an enabling entity, it must stop thinking of itself as management body that, in their language, “operates” national and local heritage sites. Either way, Iziko should not be allowed to continue in its present form, and whether it should continue at all is a moot point.

Failure to act for the National Gallery is tantamount to watching someone drown, or turning away, pretending not to see. That cannot be an option. It is time for all concerned to ensure that South Africa has a real national gallery, one to be proud of.

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