

# Book Review

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## *Picturing change: Curating visual culture at post-apartheid universities*

## > Brenda Schmahmann

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Brenda Schmahmann's own involvement in changing the visual image of Rhodes University coincided with the writing of this book, in which she takes a look at the way South African universities reconfigured their visual representation in the era of transition from the 1990s to the present.

In the first chapter, she focuses on the monuments and sculptures that no longer represented the new visions and constituencies of universities; how they were moved, removed and recontextualised. Her discussions raise the issue of how universities intermittently acknowledge, underplay, challenge and accept their inadvertent complicity in imperialist, colonialist, nationalist and capitalist projects.

In the second chapter, Schmahmann focuses on institutional insignia and shrewdly comments on the revision of institutions' coats of arms. Not only was this considered a necessity for universities to discard outdated, unrepresentative and discriminatory symbols, it also offered an opportunity for rebranding in a time when university education has become increasingly commodified. Hence the replacement of many a coat of arms with a logo that might place the institution in a better position to attract the better students and the better academics, which in turn might make it eligible for more resources in the national competition for a larger chunk of government subsidy.

The third chapter looks into the acquisition of new art, not always to replace the old, but often to juxtapose, counter, ironise and question. Chapter Four is entitled "Portraits of university officers"

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and traces the ways the proud rows of portraits of the people who had led the universities came to be seen as an embarrassment owing to the absence of racial and gender diversity up to the 1990s. This chapter raises issues about feminist critique from within universities, but also the extent to which artists' agency enabled negotiation with a legacy which could not be downright discarded.

Lastly, Schmahmann discusses a number of prominent controversies that illustrate the interplay between student and lecturer artists, university leadership, politicians and the media when it comes to making meaning of visual art. Kaolin Thomson's *Useful Objects*, Kevin Leathem *This is not Paul Kruger*, the child rape etches from Diane Victor's *Disasters of Peace* and Richard Sagan's *Top Ten Atheist Retorts* are drawn upon to illustrate the ironies in universities' self-censorship post-1990: it sometimes even trumped the apartheid government's measures of the previous era.

Allusions in this section to politicians' and administrators' inability to understand art, opens room for contemplation. That universities of all places ought not display art as adornment, but rather as encounters for critical reflection, is an important point. But the knowledge basis and the cultural frame of reference – the kind of education which is exacted from the viewer to make 'proper' sense of art, speaks to the heart of the university's predicament: engagement with the new still presupposes an intimate knowledge of the Eurocentric legacy, still presumes a memory of the previous canon (not only its content but also its practice) which has supposedly been discarded.

Schmahmann concedes in her conclusion that issues are opened up rather than resolved in this book, which has to a large extent been the result of her personal journey through the censored waters of South African academia: from art history to critical visual culture studies; from her 1986 article in *De Arte* being shelved because of an image of an erect penis, to her key role in the making of the Rhodes University Tapestry as replacement for the row of portraits of white male power figures in the university's Council Chamber.

Schmahmann's autobiographical positioning of herself in the book is apt. Her personal position and self-critical role offers the history she relates an honesty in the sense that it does not claim to be comprehensive or conclusive. In the process, however, the narrative remains strongly focused on South Africa, although one should argue that what had been undertaken in this book was a first step: it placed the author's first-hand experience of displaying, managing and acquisitioning art for Rhodes University in a national context. It might be insightful now to compare the South African transformation experience with other visual histories of transformation in neighbouring, and further-off, parts of the world. The book under review has laid a welcome foundation for such an investigation.