

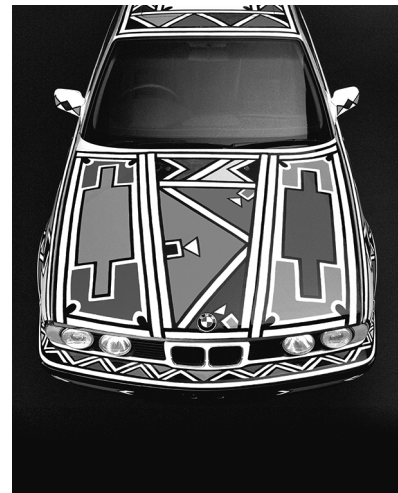
South Africa: The Art of a Nation

1 **S**outh Africa: The Art of a Nation, the latest exhibition to be curated at the British Museum, is a concise yet eloquent and extremely effective show. It embarks on a mission to showcase the age, depth and continuity of traditions in South Africa, against a backdrop of the harsh political conditions that have affected the country for centuries.

2 The narrative of the exhibition is illustrated using archaeology alongside contemporary art to demonstrate the common ideas of what it has meant to be human in the region for millennia. This story begins with some of the earliest art found in the world, through to the arrival of the Europeans and subsequent periods of colonisation and apartheid. Due to this vigorous and well-documented history, South Africa is displayed as a unique case study for the development of human kind.

3 When addressing the colonial period, a refreshingly honest account is offered of the hardships suffered by the local population. As South Africa transformed from a materially under-developed region in the 17th century, to a lynchpin for European global trade, the land and its people underwent great changes, largely without consultation or thought for their welfare. However, this did not go unchallenged, as a succession of wars in the following centuries testifies.

4 At this time, the inspiration for art changed rapidly from scenes primarily depicting local spiritual practices, to European technologies of war. The overall aesthetic of the art becomes more militaristic and seems to convey a newly taught artistic preoccupation with war. This should not be viewed as a new violent society, rather as evidence of a cultural exchange with Europe, where a lengthy history of military painting had been extollingly employed. As trade increased, contact with Asia did too, further expanding the reach for cultural influence.



5 By the 19th century, the abject disregard for those the colonisers had enforced dependency upon manifested itself in the social cleansing of the apartheid. The art from this period rarely forgets the overbearing strains of this racial oppression. For some, the most effective way of regaining personal freedom was to express subtle yet powerful objection through the personalising of everyday objects, like the beaded waistcoat on display at the exhibition. For the more radical, "resistance" art openly criticised the apartheid regime and harshly campaigned for a better quality of life.



6 Now, the country has emerged as a major force in contemporary art, boasting one of the most established markets on the African continent. Much of this art draws on the earlier politics of the region, exploring what it is to be a South African in a modern, increasingly liberal society. The exhibition justly celebrates this exciting time for South Africa, including art by Jane Alexander, Penny Siopis and the world famous William Kentridge.

7 This exhibition comes at a poignant time in South African history, as the country begins to heal from centuries of misconduct and oppression. It delivers justice to a global audience by remembering the millennia of artistic traditions in the region prior to the European arrival, and starkly describing their brutal mission. Along with the 2015 *Indigenous Australia* exhibition, this show ushers in a new era of conscious global curating for the British Museum, where both the negative and positive realities of their collection are acknowledged; one that is much needed in the 21st century.

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