

# The Sanlam Art Collection

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Sanlam Life Insurance Ltd

## History

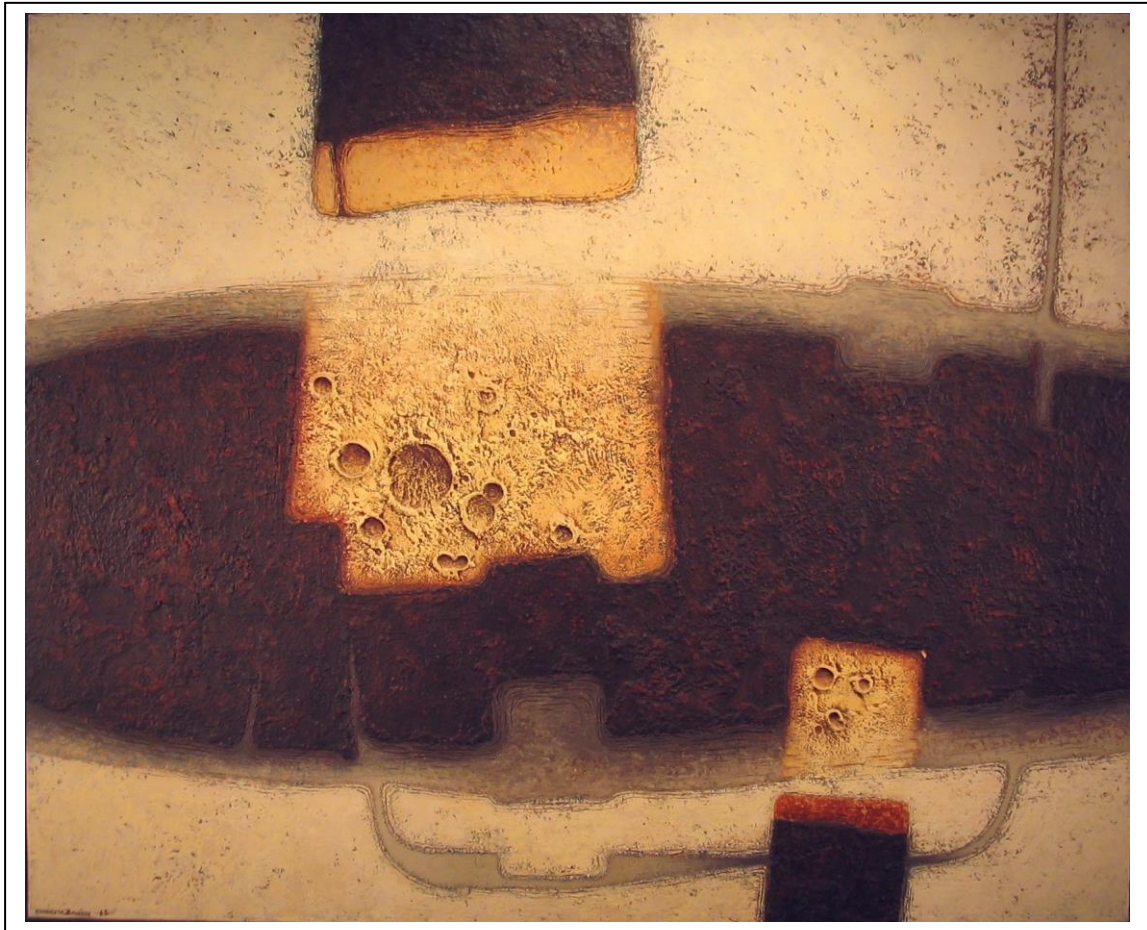
Like many corporate collections, the Sanlam Art Collection had its modest beginning with the purchase of paintings by South African artists for the decoration of the executive offices in its head office located in Bellville. In contrast to most



corporations, Sanlam decided to see its purchases as forming a collection<sup>1</sup>. In 1965 a proposal made by the then general manager of Sanlam, Dr Andreas Wassenaar, that an art collection be established, was approved by the board of directors.<sup>2</sup> The following year Dr Wassenaar decided to change the already long established theme of “Road Safety” of the Sanlam calendar to the reproduction of paintings by well known South African artists from the Sanlam Art Collection.<sup>3</sup> The enthusiastic reception of the calendar encouraged the company to pursue the art collection with more vigour and by 1968 the collection had grown to over 100 items. In 1969 Sanlam began with the first public display of its collection with an exhibition of a selection of 55 works at the Pretoria Art Museum and South African National Gallery.<sup>4</sup> This inaugurated a travelling exhibition programme whereby a selection from the Sanlam Art Collection being exhibited across South Africa and the then Rhodesia in the larger cities and in many smaller rural towns on an annual basis. The rigorous travelling schedule was not kind to many of the paintings and it was decided in 1993 to discontinue the countrywide travelling exhibitions.<sup>5</sup>

The Sanlam Art Collection is located at the Sanlam Head Office at 2 Strand Road in Bellville. The Sanlam Art Gallery located at the head office in showcases the collection. Exhibits are changed approximately every quarter interspersed with exhibitions by invited artists. Visiting times are Mondays to Fridays 09:00 – 16:30. Visitors are welcome to make an appointment with the curator to view works located in the building and in storage. Contact details tel: 021 947 3359 fax: 021 947 1602, [sanlamart@sanlam.co.za](mailto:sanlamart@sanlam.co.za)

Although no collecting policy was formally recorded at the time, the idea of buying good quality works by established artists seems to have been a guiding principle. From the outset Sanlam sought the advice of knowledgeable people. F.L. (Fritz Ludwig) Alexander<sup>6</sup> was the first consultant to advise Sanlam on purchases from the inception of the art collection until 1971. By this time the



collection had expanded considerably and a decision to review the collection was implemented. Two consultants were appointed, Prof. J. du P. Scholtz, an acknowledged collector and academic, and Mr. Danie van Niekerk then secretary for the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns*, who formed an Art Advisory Committee tasked with responsibility of selecting artworks for the collection. In the introduction to an early exhibition catalogue on the Sanlam Art Collection, Prof Scholtz (source) listed three reasons for the establishment of the collection:

... to support and promote art in South Africa; to decorate the offices of members of staff with original works; to own paintings for the reproduction in Sanlam's art calendars.

Prof Scholtz (source) elaborated briefly on the need for the collection to fill in gaps as “regards older artists where representative works become available” and the “acquisition of important work by younger artists and those of the younger



generation”. This formed the basis of a collecting policy that is still largely applied today with an emphasis on representative quality.

As the collection grew this policy experienced a number of reformulations. A resolution to restrict the collection to a about 200 works was implemented in conjunction with the idea of keeping the collection ‘relevant’<sup>7</sup> by selling off works considered no longer appropriate for the collection. This was systematically done from 1973 until 1987.<sup>8</sup>

The formulation of a collection policy remained an issue of importance for subsequent committees that included Victor Holloway, Ellen Davis, Johan van Rooyen and Nel Erasmus. Policy reviews were conducted annually at meetings where the direction of the art collection should go, was discussed. From time to time, because of public complaints regarding the purchase of certain art works by members of staff and the





public, Sanlam's management advised the committee to take into consideration that by and large the greater part of Sanlam's clientele were from rural backgrounds and had very little exposure to art and that these were factors to be considered when deciding on a purchase. Besides these occasional "interventions" from the side of the company, there is no record of any interference by senior management in the decisions made by the committee.

Seen in broad perspective the acquisitions policy pursued by the Sanlam Art Collection remained the assembling of a "representative collection of South African art."<sup>9</sup> By the late 1980s the South African art world was experiencing some significant changes. Amidst the political turmoil of this decade the art market saw a considerable revival.<sup>10</sup> Prices for South African works were increasing rapidly as art interests turned closer to home in the light of fiercer international political isolation and the growth of art competitions funded by large corporations.<sup>11</sup>

In her article "Kuns en die groot korporasies" at the end of the 1980s, Elza Miles<sup>12</sup> surveyed the field of the arts and the investment by large corporations through the mechanism of collecting, sponsorship and competitions. Her review of the role of the

corporation in the arts in South Africa was not flattering. The corporate art collections fair badly in her estimate and result in nothing more than self-aggrandisement and self-promotion. Public criticism such as this combined with the lack of an adequate budget for the purchase of works, put the Sanlam art advisory committee under some pressure to reassess the collection's status and progress. Acquisitions made during the latter part of the 1980s reflect a shift in consciousness amongst the committee members towards more contemporary artists and the realisation that there were serious gaps in the collection with regard to works by black artists. Despite budgetary constraints, the committee was able to acquire some significant works during this period.

By 1988 the art collection consisted of just fewer than 300 works and marks the beginning of a number of watershed years. The collection policy and its funding was reviewed substantially. At the same time the company was contemplating the purchase of the Helmut Silberberg collection.<sup>13</sup> This purchase altered the character of the Sanlam Art Collection significantly by the addition of 1200 works, most of which were by historically well-established artists. Almost overnight the collection moved from a small selection of artworks reflecting the time and place of their origin to a collection that was heavily weighted historically and by the choices of a singular but well informed art world personality.







The Silberberg acquisition also forced the corporation into rethinking the housing of the collection. Until then, the collection had been either on display in the corridors and offices of the corporation's head office or on tour most of the time, and therefore required little storage space. Serious consideration now had to be given to its management. Fortunately there were already plans for the renovation of the head office building and a plan for a suitable storage facility and art gallery were included.

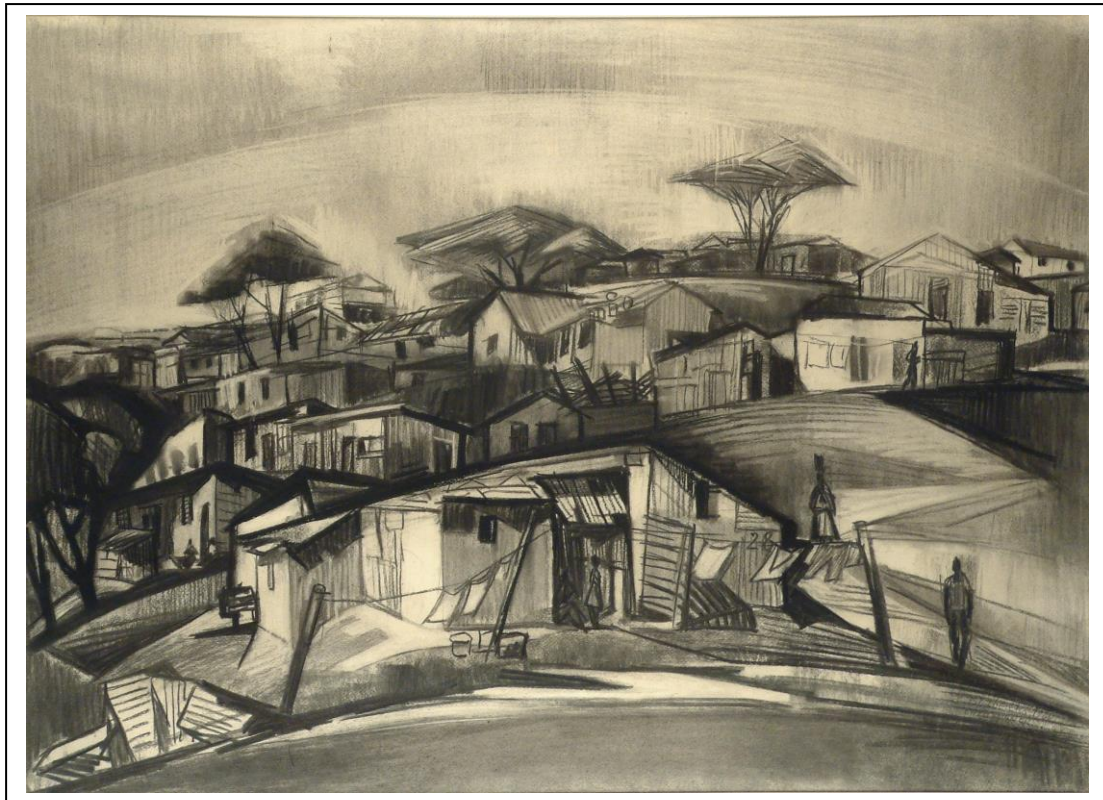
Subsequent to the Silberberg purchase Sanlam, under the direction of Mr Fred du Plessis, also decided to acquire six late paintings by Thomas Baines.<sup>14</sup> In comparison with previous years, in a period of less than two years the company had allocated more funds than ever before. The completion of an art gallery at the head office in Bellville in 1991 cemented the company's commitment to the support of a corporate art collection.

Following the renovation of the head office building from a typical example of 1950s architecture with discreet office spaces to highly modern open plan office layout, the art collection was moved out of the general office areas for practical and security reasons.<sup>15</sup> The Sanlam Art Gallery became the main facility for the exhibition of works from the collection. By 1993 Sanlam had scaled down its travelling exhibition programme to only showing a selection of the collection at festivals and other suitable venues, while the gallery was used for the display of the art collection and invited artists.<sup>16</sup> A suitably equipped storage facility, a desperate necessity by this time, was completed in 1993.

By the 1990s Sanlam had compiled a large collection of works by South African artists. The art advisory committee continued to pursue a policy of compiling a representative collection of South African art. The “gaps” in the collection were constantly on the agenda of meetings and endeavours were made to fill these. What was becoming evident by the time of my appointment as curator in 1997, was that the committee was no longer in touch with the rapidly changing South African art scene. The approach that the art committee had adopted and adapted over time still reflected the entrenched views that the members held stemming from their education and experience of the past thirty years that could be described as similar to the one that Esmé Berman championed in her book *Art and Artists of South Africa*.<sup>17</sup> A rigid perception of who were significant artists in the past and to some extent in the present, was combined with notions of what was considered “appropriate” for a corporate art collection.<sup>18</sup> What was also important at the time was that some consideration had to be given to the investment value of the art works as the company was using funds acquired from policyholders.<sup>19</sup>

A new committee consisting of Willem Boshoff, formerly head of the Fine Arts department at the Technikon Witwatersrand and Hayden Proud, curator for painting and sculpture at the South African National Gallery, was appointed in 1999. Dr Jillian Carmen, formally curator at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, was invited to join the committee in 2004.

Since the appointment of the new committee a review of the acquisitions policy takes place annually. The compilation of a representative collection of South African art remains the broad aim although the scope has widened considerably. Although

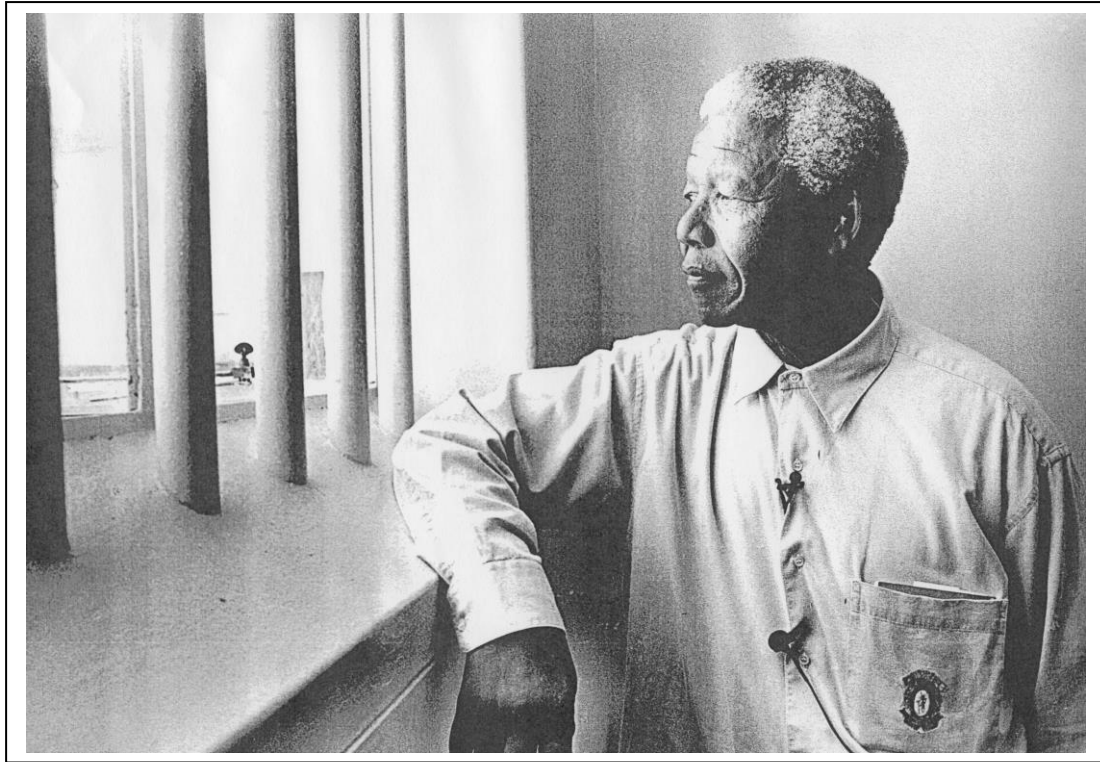


contemporary art works enjoy some priority, the acquisition of works augmenting the historical collection is still pursued. Given the fashion vagaries of the South African art market the collection has been able to acquire works by artists not represented in the collection for very reasonable prices.

The collection now consists of more than 2000 items, mostly paintings. A corporate collection with an emphasis on works that should be displayed in an office environment operates within constraints that militate against the acquisitions of sculpture of any great size and therefore this component of the collection remained relatively small. With the opening of the Sanlam Art Gallery the acquisition of installations and artworks requiring space, projection, television monitors and sound equipment became a feasibility, and a number of works of this kind have been acquired over the past few years.

Over the past decade, South African artists have explored a diversity of different media and the combination thereof. The tradition of categorising a collection according to medium has become progressively inappropriate in the development of an acquisitions strategy. Photography, for instance, has become an increasingly





significant part of art production in South Africa. Previously photography was excluded from an acquisitions strategy, because of the notion that photography constituted a separate medium outside the fine art traditions and that by including photography, this would necessitate the acquisition of suitable historical examples as well to retain a representative collection by medium. . Such a narrow categorical perspective ignores the fundamental changes that have taken place in the production of art. The Sanlam Art Collection acquisitions strategy has therefore expanded its purvey to accommodate art works in any medium, yet is constrained by practical considerations determined by exhibition and storage facilities.

### **Highlights in the Sanlam Art Collection**

Although the Sanlam Art Collection strives to be representative of South African art this does not necessarily imply that the collection attempts to hold a work by every celebrated artist in South Africa. Like any collection, it has its weaker or stronger aspects. The collection of 98 works by Maggie Laubser ranging from earliest endeavours in painting to some of her last works, provides a representative sample of her best work, is one such stronger aspect. Also notable are: a collection of 30 works by Harry Trevor; a complete series by Christo Coetzee; a representative selection of

early works by Kenneth Bakker; Alfred Krenz and Pieter Wenning. Besides these the Sanlam Collection holds representative examples of artists including Irma Stern, Wolf Kibel, Stratford Caldecott, Pranas Domsaitis, Jean Welz, Alexis Preller, J. H Pierneef, Frans Oerder, Anton Van Wouw, Nel Erasmus, Stanley Pinker and many more. In many of these instances, the artist is represented by more than one work and in different media. Where justifiable and feasible the collection augments the holdings of a single artist's work to demonstrate developmental changes over his/her career.

The perception that the Sanlam Art Collection is only representative of "Afrikaner" taste – in other words, old art by predominantly white artists supported by the previous government – as expressed by some of my fellow art professionals, is unfounded.<sup>20</sup> That the collection is heavily weighted towards historically celebrated artists is to be expected given its history. This may also perhaps be its strong point in the future, as few corporate collections have this advantage. In his introduction to the Gencor (now Billiton) Collection, Kendell Geers (Geers 1997: 15) remarks appropriately that:

While it may seem ironic to speak of history in relation to contemporary art, it is essential to understand that the present has not only been influenced by the past, but is at the same time continually constructing further histories for the future. If we are to fully understand the contemporary we must search for clues in the past.<sup>21</sup>

Geers was justifying the acquisition of work by "historical artists for their influence on the present" in the context of a collection compiled to reflect the transition of South Africa to a democracy and devoted chiefly to contemporary art. The implication of Geers's statement is that even a collection devoted exclusively to contemporary art would need a suitable sampling of historical works to give it credibility.

In common with many corporate collections in South Africa, in its earliest phase Sanlam neglected to collect works by black artists. By the 1990s, this was acknowledged and serious efforts were made to acquire good works by acknowledged black artists although still constrained by the incumbent committee members' over-all rather narrow approach to art. Sanlam has since acquired significant examples by

artists such as: Gerard Sekoto, Leonard Matsotso, George Pemba, Alfred Thoba, Sam Nhlengethwa, Helen Sebidi, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae, Johannes Segogela, Meshak Rapalalani, Job Kekana, Durant Sihlali, Willie Bester and Gerard Bhengu.

The collection has grown substantially since the 1990s, with the addition of over four hundred works over the last five years alone. Fortunately, the collection had acquired two early drawings by William Kentridge in 1987 and some larger etchings before the price boom of the late 1990s. The purchase of works by contemporary artists progressed only slowly within the framework of a fairly narrowly defined acquisition strategy outlined earlier. As a result, the collection missed out purchasing significant works by artists such as Penny Siopis, Derborah Bell and Robert Hodgins.. Over the past five years, acquisitions have been diverse; filling in significant gaps in the historical collection as well as works by contemporary artists ranging from a 1901 landscape by Hugo Naudé, to installations by Jan van der Merwe (2001) and Gavin Young (acquired in 1999).

“Burdened” with a mandate to acquire works historical as well as contemporary, the acquisitions committee has a difficult yet exciting task. Without an imperative to purchase contemporary works, the committee is able to acquire works by artists who are presently unfashionable or forgotten at exceptionally reasonable prices. There is no doubt that there is a persistent pressure in the South African art world on the one hand for corporate and public collections to demonstrate their commitment to transformation by actively purchasing works by neglected, predominantly black artists, and on the other hand there is as much pressure to demonstrate an active commitment to contemporary art production. Both these pressures have resulted in a substantial increase in prices in both areas as dealers have actively exploited this situation. The auction market has also been responsive to these pressures with the added factor that there are always some treasure hunters out to find trophies for their private or corporate dining rooms.<sup>22</sup> While the market focuses on these two components a new ‘neglected tradition’ has begun to emerge of artists who no longer fit the politically correct demands made by critics and curators. While public institutions tasked with conserving South Africa’s visual arts heritage become seemingly less committed to this function with regard to particular categories of



artists and periods in South Africa's art history, the role of the Sanlam Art Collection as a conservator of this heritage becomes increasingly significant.

Over the past forty years the Sanlam Art Collection has largely met its aim of compiling a representative collection of South African art. Few corporate collections can present such a broad diversity of art over a period stretching from the late nineteenth century to the present. Gaps are continuously identified and where possible are being filled. 'Representative' is of course historically determined and depends on the company's ability and willingness to continue collecting should it wish to sustain this into the future. Although the collection has no aspirations of becoming a museum, it fulfils some similar functions by default rather than by design. In the present context of under-funded public heritage institutions and their prevailing biased politically correct acquisition policies, the collection will continue to play a role in the preservation of the country's heritage. This can however only be sustained in co-operation with heritage institutions. There is already a significant level of co-operation with public art museums with respect to loans and travelling exhibitions. Considerable potential for collaborations exist and need to be explored if our under-funded museum wish to fulfil their mandates into the future.

The Sanlam Art Collection has grown beyond its function as office decoration or as a marketing tool for the company and has become an appreciated and appreciating asset. Critical for a successful corporation is the ability of its employees to think freely, creatively, and to present new ideas and criticism without fear of being ignored or reprimanded. In the office environment symbolically at least the display of artworks that challenge preconceived ideas about what art is, indicates management's commitment to the free and creative thinking. As the curator of the Sanlam Art Collection I can at least confirm that art in the workplace is rarely passively accepted. A painting may become the object of an employee or client's but this is usually easily resolved and more often than not reveals an underlying contentious issue relevant to the company's diverse staff complement.

As long as the art collection continues to grow with the acquisition of artworks that, exemplify South Africa's rich artistic heritage and its rapidly transforming present, it

will retain its relevance to company and the society the company operates in. The Sanlam Art Collection I believe is well positioned to fulfil its mandate to do just that.

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<sup>1</sup> Many corporations end up with “collections” that are little more than the result of the vicarious buying habits of senior management over a period of time, such as the early Standard Bank Corporate art collection, where: “The bank’s policy of acquiring art works is decided upon by one individual, namely the chairman of the Bank” (Crump 1990:9)

<sup>2</sup> Most of the literature on the Sanlam Art Collection, both public and private, dates the origins of the collection to 1968, linked to a decision by Dr Wassenaar to replace the road safety themed Sanlam calendar with one featuring reproductions by South African artists. This is incorrect and seems to have become company lore.

<sup>3</sup> The first calendar featuring works by South African artists was published in 1966. Subsequent calendars continued featuring works from the Sanlam Art Collection and other collections until 1970 when this was partially discontinued.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Werth, director of the Pretoria Art Museum and Matthys Bokhorst, director of the South African National Gallery, jointly selected the works for the exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> In 1976 – 1977, a selection from the Sanlam Art Collection and some private collections was lent to the department of Foreign Affairs for an exhibition in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

<sup>6</sup> F. L. Alexander served as art consultant to Sanlam and the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Foundation. Educated in Germany as an artist and art historian, Alexander immigrated to South Africa in 1936 where he taught and worked as curator for the Jewish Museum. Later he worked as art critic for *Die Burger*.

<sup>7</sup> The meaning that ‘relevance’ had, in the opinion of each of the committees reflects a particular disposition towards the history of art and the art world that each member maintained. The analysis of this alone would be more appropriate for another essay. It seems clear though that during the period of Prof Scholtz’s tenure that there was move towards buying more contemporary artworks, using the proceeds from the sale of older works, which were perhaps considered “stale”.

<sup>8</sup> Until 1987 Sanlam regularly sold off works from the collection. Records show that works were sold at auction and from time to time within the organisation. Only a few of the works acquired in the first five years of the Sanlam Art Collection’s existence are still present in the collection.

<sup>9</sup> This was still the stated aim of the collection as described by Evelyn Cohen (1993:xii) in the introduction to a book published in 1993 celebrating Sanlam’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

<sup>10</sup> “Art boom to the test” *Finance Week*, 1-7 November 1984, pg 341. “Smart Money – but is it Art?” *Inside South Africa*, August 1987, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Friedman 1986:18. and Miles 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Miles 1989

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Helmut Silberberg, a judge in Frankfurt am Main in Germany immigrated to South Africa in 1933 after Hitler’s ascent to power. He began a successful antique and art dealership Anthony’s in Johannesburg in 1942, which, he relocated to Cape Town to the Martin Melk house in 1962 and later to a historic home, Mont Bijou in Church Street, Tulbagh during the 1970s. Close to his retirement from active business in 1990, Silberberg sold his entire to collection to Sanlam in 1989.

<sup>14</sup> The six paintings by Thomas Baines were destined for export. In near perfect condition and forming what could be termed a series these paintings presented an ideal opportunity for the company to acquire works by an artist not represented in the collection at the time that were also appealing in a corporate environment.

<sup>15</sup> An open plan office arrangement is poorly suited to the display of art. The modern corporation changes continuously in structure and operating procedures. With a considerable movement of staff, office spaces and locations are changed all the time. Keeping track of artworks in a physically temporary structure becomes risky besides being unsuitable for display purposes

<sup>16</sup> Over the past seven years the Sanlam Art Collection has compiled three exhibitions that have been on tour and were accompanied by a catalogue. *Harry Trevor the South African Years* 1999 (toured in 2000), *Jacques Fuller* 2001 (toured in 2002), *A liberatory Vision: Maggie Laubser from the Sanlam Art Collection* 2004, presently on tour (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Berman, Esmé 1983. *Art and Artists of South Africa*. AA Balkema, Cape Town.

<sup>18</sup> The acquisitions policy spelled out in broad terms what should be considered suitable for inclusion in the collection. However, no direct mention was made regarding what would be excluded. From

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minuted discussions, one gleans that certain types of art works would be excluded. For instance, works that would be considered offensive by staff because: of the depiction of nudity; violence; their direct political statements or their promotion of a particular political ideology or religious point of view.

<sup>19</sup> Until 1998 Sanlam was a mutual company. Stated simplistically, it was a co-operative where each policyholder was a member. Throughout the history of the company sensitivity towards the policyholder was a significant consideration in the deployment of funds.

<sup>20</sup> In most cases where I have been confronted with such a judgement upon the collection, it has come from a fellow profession who has never in fact visited the collection. During the seven years of my tenure as curator only one or two active art historians have visited the collection. As no complete catalogue on the collection has been published, it would seem gratuitous by anyone to pass judgement on the collection without having seen it.

<sup>21</sup> Geers 1997: 15

<sup>22</sup> The recent auction at Stephan Welz and Company on 18 April 2005 saw exceptionally high prices being paid for works by Konakeefe Mohl, a neglected black South African painter from the 1960s; while at the same time a record price was reached for a rather minor portrait by Maggie Laubser.

#### Sources:

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#### Illustrations:

1. Thomas Baines *Gold and Ivory Elephants Charging over Quartose Country*, 1874, oil on canvas, 513 x 667mm, Sanlam Art Collection
2. Pieter Wenning, *Keerom Street Cape Town*, not dated, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 mm
3. Maggie Laubser, *Poplars*, 1922-1924, oil on cardboard, 335 x 400 mm
4. Gerard Sekoto, *Indaba*, c. 1945, oil on canvas, 500 x 605 mm
5. George Pemba, *Harvest*, 1976, oil on canvas, 490 x 730 mm
6. Jan van der Merwe, *Gaste / Guests*, 2000, found materials, rusted metal, TV monitors, video cassette players, dimensions variable.
7. Willem Kentridge, *Untitled*, 1987, charcoal and pastel on paper, 700 x 950 mm
- 8.