Wits to open its own art museum

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This is exactly what Wits University is doing, in a dream come true for the custodians of this extraordinary art collection. That dream has been in the making since 2005 and is to be called the Wits Art Museum (WAM).

And where better to put it than in the university's cultural precinct on East Campus, at the former University Corner, on the corner of Jan Smuts Avenue and Jorissen Street in Braamfontein. It is here that the university's theatres are located, as is the Digital Arts department.

The senior curator of WAM, Julia Charlton, says Wits has managed to raise R38,5-million for phase one of the project, which began last week. It involves the conversion of three buildings, and is due to open in April 2011. The full project will cost R68-million.

WAM will take up several floors, with an entrance from the converted old Shell Garage on University Corner. "Upon completion, the museum will have six world-class exhibition areas, research and teaching facilities, museum storage facilities, prime ancillary and commercial event space and administrative and support facilities," says Charlton.

"Future phases will depend on continued progress to raise the additional funding for display furnishing and equipment, the upgrade of the facade and foyer, and expansion of the art and culture precinct."

Of the 5 000m2 space, 60 percent will be for storage of the art, leaving 2 000m2 for display space, seminar rooms and workshops. Students will make use of WAM, using it as a library but also learning the practical skill of curating their own art.

Art collections

Wits' art collections go back to the 1920s, when the Anthropology department started collecting African art pieces for its ethnography teaching. It consists of some of Africa's rarest and finest artworks.

Its fine art collection began in the 1950s, with works collected for teaching purposes. In 1972, the late art collector Gertrude Posel donated money to the university to be used for acquiring contemporary art.

The university opened its first art gallery in Senate House in the early 1970s, in the space today occupied by the Concourse coffee shop. Two further small galleries were added nearby, one created from money left by Posel. Their works are the core of what will make up the content of WAM.

"Wits was the first in South Africa to collect African art objects not merely for their ethnographic interest but more importantly for their aesthetic value. Wits was likewise the first in South Africa to include African art in its teaching programme, in 1977," explains Charlton.

Since 1978, the university and Standard Bank have collaborated in acquiring art. With a budget supplied by the bank, Wits has undertaken to buy and administer the African art collection, at the same time using it for education. The collection is jointly owned by both institutions.

In the same year, a generous donation was made to Wits by the late gallery owner, Vittorino Meneghelli. A purchasing grant from Wits goes towards acquiring contemporary art, but other sources are from donations, artists themselves and a range of other organisations.

Art is collected from south, north, west and central Africa; a smaller portion comes from east Africa. The biggest segment of the collection is from South Africa. Works are bought from auctions, galleries and other sources, like Congolese dealers, who know what the university is looking for.

It loans a lot of work out to other institutions, such as Museum Africa, the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Iziko South Africa National Gallery in Cape Town.

But it makes the art available on campus as well. The Wits Art and Literature Experience in 2009 asked for pieces to be showcased as part of the festival. When its Institute for Social and Economic Research or other departments hold symposiums and seminars, an art exhibition often accompanies the proceedings.

"The collections provide a powerful basis for offering the public an unrivalled experience of African art. Wits has prioritised the need to optimise the experience through the establishment of the Wits Art Museum, and in particular to achieve the vision of contributing to a common sense of nationhood through art," says Wits the vice-chancellor and principal, Loyiso Nongxa.

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