

I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about the magnificent *Rhodes University Tapestry* now in the Council Chamber. As you know, the *Rhodes University Tapestry* was made by the Keiskamma Art Project, an initiative in Hamburg, and it is a great privilege and pleasure to have present here today the many people who worked on it. It was designed by Noseti Makubalo and Carol Hofmeyr. Noseti Makubalo also did all its drawing, and was responsible for the coordination of its embroidery. Its beadwork was organised by Caroline Nyongo. The backing and binding of the work was undertaken by Nkosazana Betani.

The university's decision to approach the Keiskamma Art Project was because works that the project had undertaken previously were of exceptional quality and were indeed an impetus for the concept of a *Rhodes University Tapestry*. Their first large-scale piece was the *Keiskamma Tapestry*, a work over 120 metres long and comprising 73 panels which is on permanent display in Parliament. A response to the famous *Bayeux Tapestry* which represented events leading up to the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the *Keiskamma Tapestry* depicts the history of the Eastern Cape and focuses especially on the impact of the Frontier Wars. The *Rhodes University Tapestry* also reworks the *Bayeux Tapestry*, but in the context of a work depicting the history of Rhodes University this reference acquires different implications. If the *Bayeux Tapestry* represented an event which resulted in the privileging of Norman cultural ideas over those of the English, its parody in the *Rhodes University Tapestry* can be read as an engagement with the impact of British imperialist ideas on visual culture and practices within our institution. This in turn means that the Rhodes work has particular relevance to a university which has begun looking analytically at the kinds of images displayed on campus and at ways of curating them and reconfiguring them so that they might be more sensitive to diversity.

Arranged in a clockwise order, the four panels comprising the tapestry provide a chronological account of the university's history. The first panel, on the north back wall, invokes reference to the pre-colonial presence of Khoisan people within the region where Grahamstown was established in 1812 but focuses primarily on the city in the nineteenth century. The second panel, placed on the south back wall, traces the history of Rhodes University College from its founding in 1904 until 1951, when it acquired independent University status. Rhodes University's history from 1951 until the demise of apartheid forms the topic of the third panel, located on the front south wall. The fourth panel, placed on the north front wall, explores the history of Rhodes University since 1994.

The tapestry celebrates the many milestones and achievements within the university's history, and its fourth panel includes such details as the honorary doctorates awarded to Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela as well as the Order of the Baobab which Thelma

Henderson was awarded by Thabo Mbeki. The work also, however, makes evident the imperialist origins of the university. Cecil John Rhodes and Leander Starr Jameson are represented alongside the institution's four founding professors, for example. And it is similarly transparent about occurrences in which the institution conducted itself shamefully. For instance, while the third panel indicates how a number of students (and staff) were active in protesting apartheid, it also reveals how Rhodes University awarded an honorary doctorate to the State President, C.R. Swart, in 1962.

Interestingly, the *Rhodes University Tapestry* refers to its own history as well as the circumstances which surrounded its commissioning. The top border of the fourth panel includes a representation of Carol Hofmeyr's motorcar alongside the words: "The white golf distributes the tapestries to Rhodes University from Keiskamma Art Project." It also represents the removal of the portraits of university officers from the Council Chamber some months before the work was commissioned. Prompting one to remember how the space looked prior to the tapestry, this can in turn have implications for how a viewer might read its imagery. If one were to imagine the portraits as spectral presences remaining in the Council Chamber, one might perhaps also envisage the individuals whom they represented responding to events that took place during their governance or thereafter. Some of these might be the cause of some regret: one imagines this might be the sentiment of Thomas Alty, whose portrait was formerly on the north front wall of the chamber, if he – and not just his representation – were to be obliged to face an image of himself conferring an honorary doctorate on Swart in 1962. But others might perhaps feel satisfaction. For example, John Kotze, the university's first Chair of Council whose portrait was formerly on the south front wall, would surely be delighted to face an image of the institution flourishing a century later.

While a "tapestry" is strictly-speaking a weaving, the term has come to be suggestive of a large-scale work in needlework which depicts events of enormous import. The *Rhodes University Tapestry* is a "tapestry" in the latter sense, with the history it represents invoking a sense of how the institution has been caught up in momentous events in a larger social and political arena. Yet if it encourages audiences to reflect upon the ways in which the university constituted itself in light of imperialist ideas or how it responded to apartheid, the *Rhodes University Tapestry* also delights because of its aesthetic inventiveness. Encouraging those attending meetings in the Council Chamber to be cognisant of the past when discussing how to take the university forward into the future, it is simultaneously a compelling and innovative work of art which will intrigue a diverse institutional community for many years to come.