

REPORT OF THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION, ARTS AND CULTURE TASK TEAM

Background and context

In 2010 a task team, chaired by Professor Brenda Schmahmann, was established to consider aspects of the university's visual representation, arts and culture. The specific aspect requiring immediate attention was the possible relocation of the portraits of former vice chancellors, chancellors, and council chairpersons – portraits that had for long been hanging on the walls of the council chamber. As a result of the task team's recommendations these portraits were removed and hung in areas outside the chamber, and replaced inside the room by a tapestry depicting the history of the university, crafted by the Keiskamma Art Project. This tapestry has been much admired, and is held up as an example of how the university's visual culture might be transformed.

The task team temporarily fell into abeyance following the resignation of Professor Schmahmann. In October 2013 an *ad hoc* sub-committee, chaired by Dr Badat, met with a view to resuscitating the task team. This move was in part prompted by an Old Rhodian's complaint about the removal of photographs of Rhodians killed in war – photographs that until some years ago had hung in the front corridor of the main administration building.

At this October meeting the composition and brief of the task team was agreed upon. Its brief was as follows:

- To formulate general principles and processes to guide the development and transformation of the university's visual culture.
- To make recommendations on specific aspects of this visual culture.

The task team comprised representatives of a number of different university constituencies, and was composed of the following members:

Paul Maylam (chairperson); Sibusiso Mtshali (Equity and Institutional Culture, and secretary of the task team); Noluxolo Nhlapo (Director, Equity and Institutional Culture); Ian L'Ange (Director, Infrastructure, Finance and Operations); Deborah Seddon (GENACT); Ryno van Rooyen (NTEU); Lindokuhle Zungu (SRC); Zakade Vena (NEHAWU); Russell Kaschula (Chairperson, Language Committee); Lebogang Hashatse and Juliana Jangara (Communications and Marketing); Lynette Steenveld and Simon Pamphilon (Journalism and Media Studies); Dominic Thorburn and Maureen de Jager (Fine Art); Patti Henderson

(Anthropology); Vashna Jagarnath (History); John McNeill and Hugo Nel (Aesthetics Committee).

The operation of the task team

The task team met on six occasions – on 26 November 2013, 24 March, 9 May, 2 June, 8 August, and 12 November 2014.

A questionnaire was sent out to staff, student bodies and alumni to canvass opinion. There were about 65 responses to this questionnaire. The vast majority of these responses were submitted anonymously, so it has been difficult to ascertain from which quarter they came. It is evident, though, that most probably came from alumni.

The questionnaire invited opinion on certain existing symbols and insignia associated with the university, such as the university crest/coat of arms, and the representations of 'Physical Energy', asking whether they should be retained, eliminated or modified. There was also an invitation to comment more generally on the university's visual culture and the principles that should underlie it, as well as to offer suggestions as to how this culture might be modified, if at all.

The vast majority of respondents (who represented a very small minority of the university community) were largely content with existing symbols and insignia, with some objecting strongly to the idea of any change at all. Among the latter were a few potential or actual donors who indicated that they would cease to donate funds if changes were made. Only a small minority believed the crest/coat of arms and 'Physical Energy' to be inappropriate for Rhodes.

These responses posed a problem for the task team, most of whose members believed that such symbols and insignia are inappropriate for Rhodes at this time, and that there is a need to create a more inclusive visual culture as the university community becomes more diverse in its composition.

The most constructive aspect of the feedback from the questionnaire was the largely positive response to the idea that existing, long-standing visual items should remain on display while being juxtaposed with something new, so as to bring together the past and the present. This would be a way of preserving the university's history and traditions while also transforming its visual culture.

It is not possible to encapsulate in this report all the views expressed by respondents. There was a general concern that in the university's visual culture respect should be shown for Rhodes' past and traditions. Some suggested that cosmetic change should not be a priority. But there was an openness to the introduction of new visual matter to be introduced without the old being replaced. Respondents also suggested principles and values that should underlie the university's visual culture: academic excellence, an emphasis on learning and hard work, respect for diverse cultures and traditions, environmental sensitivity and sustainability, to name a few.

Guiding principles and processes

The Visual Representation, Arts and Culture Task Team has been informed by an understanding that its work is firmly situated in the broader effort to transform a cultural system that has been, and to a large extent, continues to be, exclusionary. The work of the task team has therefore been undertaken as part of a holistic effort to transform Rhodes' institutional culture. This has required a recognition that a change in the university's visual culture that is not in tune with other changes – in, for instance, basic assumptions and beliefs, practices and social relations – cannot be seen in itself as transformation. While a change of institutional artefacts and motifs has the potential to disrupt exclusionary beliefs, assumptions and practices, there is also the danger that such change can be used as a substitute or proxy for broader institutional transformation

In the process of reassessing its existing visual culture, as defined below, and exploring the possibilities of transforming this culture, Rhodes University will strive to place an emphasis, albeit not exclusively, on visual content that

- Relates to the core purposes, values and mission statement of the university.
- Relates to knowledge production in disciplines and fields taught and researched at Rhodes University.
- Expresses a fundamental commitment to human rights, social justice, basic freedoms, and the dignity of all members of the university community.
- Relates to South Africa, its history and its culture.
- Reflects and speaks to the university's location in the Eastern Cape and on the African continent.

The university commits itself to engage in a process of ‘symbolic decolonisation’ by reviewing its existing visual culture in accordance with the above principles. In particular those elements that are associated with colonialism and/or apartheid, as well as those that are gender-insensitive, should be prioritised for review, as such elements are alienating to sections of the university community. It is recognised that this review may lead to different possible outcomes: preservation on display or in storage, or a reconceptualisation of any particular component, or some other form of revised representation. Each individual component will require specific consideration as to how it should be treated.

This visual culture is deemed to have seven main components:

1. Works of art on public display (paintings, drawings, sculpture, photographs, tapestry).
2. Architectural and building styles.
3. Symbols (such as the university’s coat of arms/crest, ‘Physical Energy’).
4. Communication and marketing material (logos, letterheads, etc).
5. Ceremonies and their associated regalia (such as graduation, inaugural lectures, Founder’s Day events).
6. Artefacts (such as items on display in departments).
7. Memorabilia.

Processes and protocols

In order to realise these objectives it is recommended that:

- The present Aesthetics Committee should be disbanded and replaced by a new standing committee of Senate and Council, to be called the Visual Representation, Arts and Culture Committee (VRACC). Its brief should be expanded to include consideration of all aspects of the university’s visual culture, as defined above; and such consideration should be guided by the principles outlined above.
- This consideration should not just amount to a review of the university’s existing visual culture, but should also involve an exploration of fresh ideas with a view to further transforming this culture.
- The composition of the VRACC should be such that it includes representatives from a range of university constituencies. (The composition could be similar to that of the Naming Committee, but

should also include at least one representative from the Department of Fine Art).

Recommendations regarding specific components of the university's visual culture

1. The university coat of arms/crest¹

- It is recognised that this has a long history and that many members of the university community have an attachment to it, viewing it as a traditional feature of the institution. For others its symbolic components are considered to be alien, bearing little relation to the university's current mission and ethos. At the same time it can be said that it has also become empty of meaning for a large number of people (one wonders how many members of the university community would be able to explain off-hand what the various components of the coat of arms/crest represent).
- The task team recommends that the coat of arms/crest be retained, but that the VRACC also initiate a process whereby new symbols/insignia are created and placed alongside existing ones. These new symbols/insignia should be designed in accordance with the principles listed above.

2. The symbolic use of the statue, 'Physical Energy'

- This statue was created by the Victorian artist, George Watts. In the late 1890s it came to be associated closely with Cecil Rhodes' own 'energetic' imperial expansion, and later formed a prominent feature of the Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town. It was, and remains, a powerful symbol of imperialism, and it is an image that has a significant visual presence at Rhodes. It appears at the top of the university crest; an outline of the statue features on the purple-and-white Rhodes car stickers; a miniature replica of the statue is given each year to the recipients of the Old Rhodian Award.
- The task team recommends that this image be gradually phased out, as far as possible, from the university's visual culture. This would mean that the miniature replica should, over time, cease to be given as the Old Rhodian Award. It would also entail the gradual removal of the image

¹ In the coat of arms the black and gold are the livery colours of the Graham family. The inverted triangle is characteristic of the Graham coat of arms, as are the escallops (shells), an emblem of pilgrimage. The lion and two thistles were taken from the coat of arms granted to CJ Rhodes. The crest is a representation of Watts' statue. The open book is a common feature of a university coat of arms.

from Rhodes car stickers. During this process of change the new symbols/insignia should be given increasing visibility.

3. Communication material

- The university logo should as far as possible be standardised for official usage (and it should be noted that the 'rhodent' is a mascot, and not part of any university logo).
- Guidelines for the use of the logo should be drawn up by the Communications and Marketing Division in conjunction with the VRACC.
- The letterheads and fonts used in official university communications should be carefully reviewed by the Communications and Marketing Division, in consultation with the Department of Fine Art and the VRACC, with a view to refining them and ensuring that they do not take on a corporate style.

4. Artworks and artefacts on campus

- It is recommended that:
 - a. A sub-committee of the VRACC be established to take responsibility for overseeing the university's collection of artworks. This would entail (i) compiling an inventory of all works in this collection, and (ii) ensuring that the works are properly maintained, secured, and insured, whether on display or in storage. These tasks will require a member of the university to act as custodian of the collection.
 - b. An art fund be created for the purchase of artworks for the university collection, and that priority be given to purchasing works by Rhodes students and staff and other local artists. The sub-committee of the VRACC should take responsibility for this. (Some years ago the university used to purchase annually a work deemed to be the best produced by a Rhodes student in that particular year).
 - c. A policy determining the acquisition of artworks for the university collection should be drawn up by the sub-committee.
 - d. The practice of commissioning painted portraits of vice chancellors, chancellors and chairpersons of council should be

subjected to review. Future consideration should be given to the medium in which these persons are portrayed, and to the location of the portraits.

5. The display in the foyer under the main clock tower

- The task team recommends that this display be totally revamped, believing that the existing items on display are rather stale, bear little relation to the university's vision and mission statement, and offer little inspiration. The task of initiating and overseeing this process should be entrusted to the VRACC.

6. A space for reflecting on the university's history

- In a number of responses to the questionnaire sent out by the task team the view was stated that the university's history should not be erased. The task team shares this view. It is not proposing that visual representations of the university's colonial/segregationist past be obliterated. Instead it recommends that a space be created on campus for past and present visual material to be displayed in creative, reflective ways that show the trajectory of the university's development as well as its vision for the future. Among items that might be displayed in this space could be the marble bust of Cecil Rhodes (which once stood in the main entrance, but is now in storage) and/or the sketch of Rhodes in the foyer. These could be accompanied by explanatory notes. The VRACC should initiate a search for a suitable space, and oversee the creation of displays.

7. Memorialisation and commemoration

- Memorialisation and commemoration at Rhodes take various forms, such as:
 1. The war memorial in front of the Great Hall.
 2. Ceremonies and lectures (such as the DCS Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture).
 3. Photographs (see below).
- Photographs of Rhodians/Old Rhodians killed in war.

A. For many years black-and-white head-and-shoulder photographs of Rhodians/Old Rhodians killed in war hung on the walls of the passage at the front of the main administration building. These were removed some years ago (it is believed, at the behest of NEHAWU, on the grounds that the display included photographs of Rhodians killed in the border war). Some months ago an Old Rhodian wrote to the university expressing her dismay at the removal of the photographs. She has not requested that they again be placed back where they were, but she has offered to donate money for a plaque commemorating those who were killed in the two world wars.

B. The task team recommends that:

- a. This offer be accepted.
- b. The plaque should commemorate Rhodians/Old Rhodians killed in the two world wars.
- c. The plaque be placed in the newly created space (see above).
- d. A small number of the original photographs also be hung in this space.
- e. Consideration also be given to commemorating Rhodians or Old Rhodians killed, or personally afflicted in some way, as participants in external or internal conflicts fought out during the apartheid era. Such commemoration would focus on both those who took part in the liberation struggle and on white conscripts.

7. University ceremonies

- Responses to the questionnaire revealed a very positive attitude towards Rhodes' graduation ceremonies. This is borne out by the very high, enthusiastic attendance of graduands and their families. The task team does not recommend any significant changes to the graduation ceremony, except for the following minor suggestions:
 - a. Some parts of the graduation programme should be trilingual.
 - b. Future consideration should be given to the possible re-design of some university regalia.

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