

A History in the Making:

The Rhodes University Tapestry

The *Rhodes University Tapestry* is a magnificent work of art which has been commissioned and produced for the Council Chamber of Rhodes University. Completed and hung in October 2011, it narrates a history of Rhodes University. The tapestry was made by the Keiskamma Art Project, an income-generating initiative including about 130 members which had been established in 2000 by artist and medical doctor, Carol Hofmeyr, in the town of Hamburg in the Eastern Cape. Incorporating embroidery, appliqué and beadwork, the work is comprised of four panels which, together, are 22 metres in length. Project member Noseti Makubalo did all the preparatory drawings and supervised the embroiderers while Hofmeyr worked with her on the overall design.

The commissioning of the work was the outcome of a series of debates and discussions that had occurred over a two-year period. In late 2008, Dr Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, received a letter from the Gender Action Forum, a Senate sub-committee, which mooted that various portraits that had been hanging in the Council Chamber since the 1960s should be relocated. Dr Badat tabled the letter for discussion at the various faculty boards in February 2009, and debate continued at a colloquium on institutional culture convened later in the year. At a meeting on 13 May 2010, Council supported a decision on the part of Senate to remove the portraits provided that plans were made to display these works elsewhere in the University rather than keep them in storage in the long term. It was agreed that the walls of the Council Chamber "be left bare until replacement artworks are secured, and that this serve as an important statement that Rhodes University is in the process of shifting towards a more diverse academic and institutional culture".

Council also stipulated that "a Working Group chaired by Professor Brenda Schmahmann be established to present ideas to the Senate and Council on possible new artworks". The works chosen, it was indicated, should be "sensitive to the University's aim to assert an African identity". The Working Group "should try, where possible, to choose works which have thematic content which is pertinent to the core purposes of the institution" and it was observed that images "which refer to the Eastern Cape and its histories would be welcomed, as would art which speaks to knowledge production in disciplines and fields taught within the University". Following a presentation to Council and Senate on 9 September 2010 and the submission of a written synopsis of that presentation to Senate in October 2010, the university supported the Working Group's proposal for a *Rhodes University Tapestry* which would explore the history of the institution in all its complexity. Such a proposal clearly met the various stipulations and recommendations made by Council on 13 May.

But while the commission developed out of debates about the appropriateness of the images being displayed at the institution and suggestions that the university should look towards commissioning art which could assist in reconfiguring the campus into an arena more sensitive to diversity, the decision to approach the Keiskamma Art Project specifically was because works that this project had undertaken previously were of exceptional quality and were indeed an impetus for the concept of a "Rhodes University Tapestry". The Keiskamma Art Project had become well known and received numerous commendations for their large-scale embroideries, amongst them the *Keiskamma Altarpiece* (2005) which toured the United States, United Kingdom and Canada between 2006 and 2008, the *Creation Altarpiece* (2007) in the collection of the

1904

Rhodes University College is founded with monies from the Rhodes Trust. Its first professors – George Cory, G.F. Dingemans, A. Stanley Kidd and Arthur Matthews – conduct their classes in accommodations provided by St. Andrew's College.



University of South Africa, and the *African Guernica* (2010) in the collection of the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth. But it was primarily the first large-scale work by the Keiskamma Art Project, the *Keiskamma Tapestry*, which prompted the *Rhodes University Tapestry*. Completed midway through 2004 and comprising 73 panels that, together, are just over 120 metres in length, the *Keiskamma Tapestry* had been purchased by Standard Bank and placed on permanent display in Parliament in Cape Town in 2006.¹

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 (1779-1878). It thus suggests, as Carol Hofmeyr explained in an interview, "a correlation of the Norman conquest of England and the British conquest of the Xhosa people".² The *Rhodes University Tapestry* would also rework the *Bayeux Tapestry*, but in the context of a work depicting the history of Rhodes University this reference would acquire different implications. If the *Bayeux Tapestry* represented an event which had resulted in the privileging of Norman cultural ideas over those of the English, its parody in the *Rhodes University Tapestry* could signify a critical response to the impact of British imperialist ideas on visual culture and practices within the institution.

¹ For discussion of the *Keiskamma Tapestry*, see Brenda Schmähmann, "After Bayeux: the *Keiskamma Tapestry* and the Making of South African History". *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture* 9 (2): 158-192, July 2011.

² Brenda Schmähmann, Interview with Carol Hofmeyr in Hamburg, 1 June 2006.

Detail of *Bayeux Tapestry* (c. 1070s or 1080s), City of Bayeux.



Members of the Keiskamma Art Project working on the *Keiskamma Tapestry*. Photograph by Robert Hofmeyr



Keiskamma Tapestry (2004), Detail of Panel 44 representing the Battle of Grahamstown (1819). Photograph by Robert Hofmeyr



1905

Rhodes University College acquires the military grounds in time for the start of the academic year. Classes are conducted in the Old Drostdy which Piet Retief commenced building in 1822.



The content of the *Rhodes University Tapestry* was devised in response to input from the university community. A series of calls for ideas were disseminated electronically to the university's staff, students and alumni, and written suggestions and reference images that individuals within these groups provided were made available to the Keiskamma Art Project. Taking cognisance of these suggestions, Noseti Makubalo also based images on objects and elements she observed on campus, various source material in the Cory Library for Historical Research, reproductions in Richard Buckland and Thelma Neville's lavishly illustrated *A Story of Rhodes* which had been published to mark the Centenary of the institution in 2004,³ as well as motifs which had resonance to her personally. In the course of producing the work, she and Carol Hofmeyr had frequent meetings with the Working Group to approve choices that had been made or to discuss ideas for the form and imagery of the tapestry.

When read in a clockwise order and commencing with the panel on the north back wall of the Council Chamber, the four panels comprising the *Rhodes University Tapestry* provide a chronological account of the institution's history. The first panel, while invoking reference to the pre-colonial presence of Khoisan people within the region where Grahamstown was established in 1812, focuses primarily on the city in the nineteenth century. The second panel in the sequence, placed on the south back wall, traces the history of Rhodes University College from its founding in 1904 until

³ Richard Buckland and Thelma Neville, *A Story of Rhodes: Rhodes University 1904 to 2004*, Johannesburg: Macmillan, 2004.

1913

Rhodes University College is granted its coat of arms. It incorporates the insignia of Colonel John Graham who, following his ruthless expulsion of amaXhosa across the Fish River in 1812, set up military headquarters on an abandoned Boer farm which Governor Cradock named "Graham's Town". It also incorporates elements from the coat of arms of Cecil Rhodes whose Trust provided the college with start-up monies.



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 of the Council Chamber. The fourth panel, placed on the north front wall, explores the history of Rhodes University since 1994.

Each individual panel does not, however, necessarily order events in a strict left-to-right chronological sequence. Instead, it may set up a series of juxtapositions which provide a sense of a variety of occurrences that happened within the era. Thus in the second panel, for example, a team of sportsmen (derived from a photograph from 1909) forms a visual counterpoint to an air training squadron (included to signify the contribution and death of many associated with the institution in WWI and WWII). And in the third panel, a protest against apartheid is combined with Rag drum majorettes as well as references to student publications, thus conveying a sense of both the serious and lighter sides of student life during the period. Or motifs may be repeated to invoke a sense of visual unity. This is true of the representation of Gavin Younge's *Life Cycle* sculpture commissioned on the occasion of the Centenary of Rhodes University, which is duplicated in the fourth panel, or the university clock tower which is depicted a number of times in the top border of second panel. Or motifs may be constituted and located in such a way that there is unity between different panels. For example, the image of Nxele drowning when endeavouring to escape Robben Island in 1820, in the first panel, is reiterated in the round shape of the fresco painted by Sister Margaret in the apse of St. Mary and All the Angels in the 1920s, in the second panel opposite it.



1937

The main building of Rhodes University designed by Herbert Baker, which replaced the demolished Old Drostdy, is complete. But a need to impact savings affected the university's allegiance to the plans, and much of its exterior is in plastered brick rather than in the combination of local sandstone and lighter stone from Bathurst that had been envisaged.

Work being undertaken on Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry*. Photograph taken on 3 May 2011.



Detail of Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry*.



Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry* in its early stages of production. Photograph taken on 3 May 2011.

Work being undertaken on Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry* by Noseti Makubalo, Photograph taken on 3 May 2011.



Detail of Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry*.



Noseti Makubalo working on Panel 2 of the *Rhodes University Tapestry* on 3 May 2011.

The tapestry makes evident the roles of arch imperialists Cecil John Rhodes and Leander Starr Jameson within the early history of the university by representing them alongside the institution's four founding professors. In 1903, a committee of Grahamstown citizens aiming to see a university established in the city sought funding from the newly established Rhodes Trust. Although Lewis Michell, Rhodes' former banker and one of two trustees living in the Cape, was not in fact persuaded of the value of the initiative, Jameson - the other trustee in the Cape - simply promised funding from the Trust and, as Paul Maylam observes, "Jameson's pledge, in effect, forced Michell's hand".⁴ While, as Maylam reveals, the name Rhodes University College seems in fact to have been used as an expedient device to get funding from the Rhodes Trust and Cecil Rhodes himself had no aspirations to start a university in Grahamstown,⁵ the institution would end up perpetuating its benefactor's values and would set out to become, as a journalist writing for the *Grahamstown Journal* in 1909 remarked in a report about the unveiling of a bust of Alfred Beit bequeathed to the university college where Jameson was guest speaker, "a veritable Oxford for South Africa in the City of the British settlers of 1820".⁶

In addition to including Rhodes and Jameson, the second panel shows how imperialist sentiments manifested themselves through the coat of arms granted the university in 1913 - a design which coupled insignia derived

⁴ Paul Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip, p. 65.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anon., "Rhodes University College. Unveiling of Beit Bust." *Grahamstown Journal*, February 18 1909, p. 2.

1951

The institution acquires independent university status and is inaugurated on 10 March through a ceremony held at the Commemoration Church.



from the crests of Cecil Rhodes and Colonel John Graham who, following his brutal discharge of amaXhosa across the Fish River in 1812, set up military headquarters on an abandoned Boer farm which Governor Cradock named "Graham's Town". It also gives particular emphasis to the plans for the university which were devised by Cecil Rhodes' favourite architect, Herbert Baker. Baker's company, Baker and Kendall, won an architectural competition to design new buildings for the institution, and their plans were published in *African Architect* in 1911. While the university lacked the capital to commence building immediately, in 1935 the Old Drostdy was demolished to make way for the new architecture and all the buildings except the north wing were completed and ready for occupation by 1937.

If the tapestry is open about the imperialist origins of the university, it is similarly transparent about occurrences in which the institution conducted itself shamefully and in ways that are the source of profound regret. For example, while the third panel indicates how a number of students (and staff) were active in protesting apartheid, it nevertheless also reveals how Rhodes University awarded an honorary doctorate to the State President, C.R. Swart, in 1962 – an event that resulted in the resignation of the institution's first Chancellor, Sir Basil Schonland. Additionally, this panel includes an image of Bantu Stephen Biko (he is shown together with Donald Woods),⁷ making implicit reference to another occurrence in which the university conducted itself badly. Ten days before a congress of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) at Rhodes in 1967, Council – fastidious in upholding the letter of the law – decided not to provide

Detail of Panel 1 of the Rhodes University Tapestry.



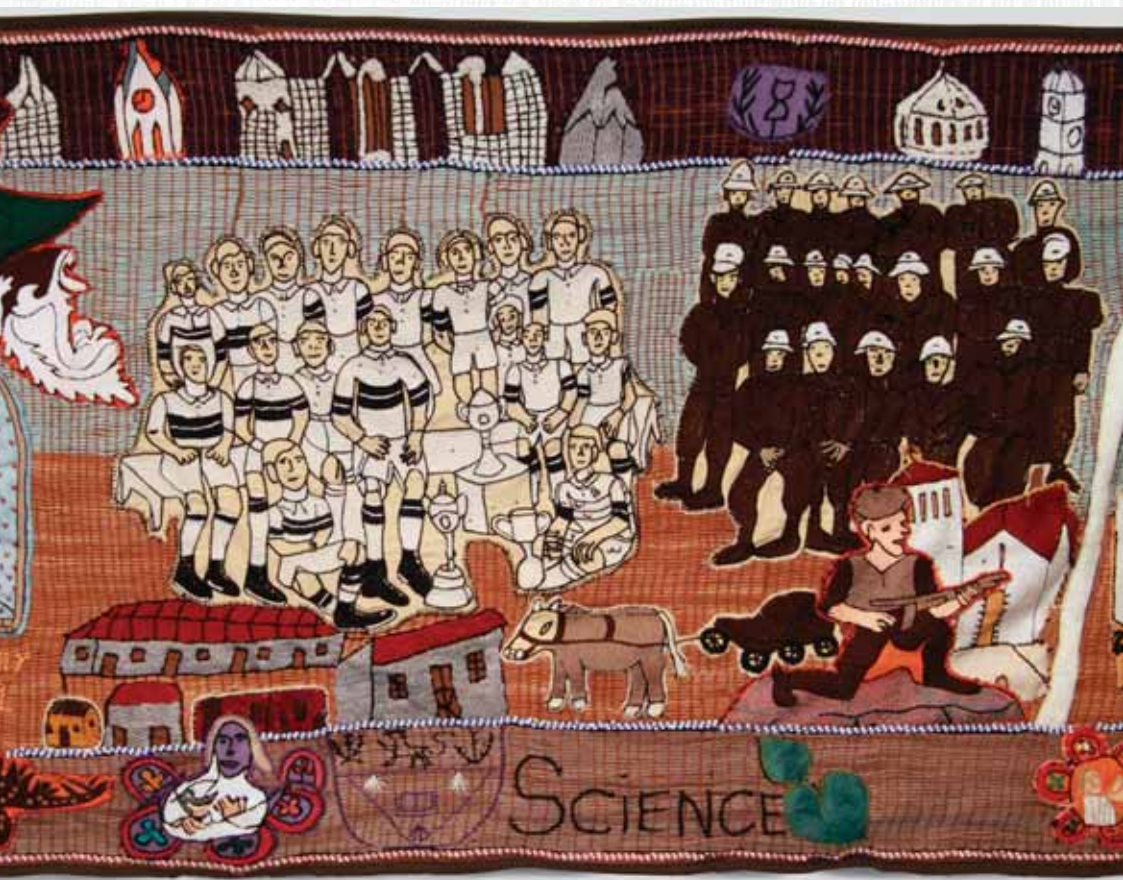
⁷ Donald Woods was awarded an honorary doctorate by Rhodes University in 2001.



1959

Through the University College of Fort Hare Transfer Act of 1959 passed by the apartheid government, control of Fort Hare - which had been affiliated to Rhodes since 1949 - is passed to the Department of Bantu Education. Fifty-three years later, in 2002, the post-apartheid government announces its plans to restructure the education landscape: Rhodes University learns that it is to lose its East London branch (which had been established in 1981) to Fort Hare University.

Detail of Panel 2 of the Rhodes University Tapestry.



residence accommodation to black delegates or even to hold a tea party for all delegates, black and white, to welcome them on their arrival. Biko, who was a delegate, proposed that the congress be called off. When this proposal was turned down, he became disillusioned with NUSAS and set about establishing a separate organisation, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), for black students.⁸

Meaning in the *Rhodes University Tapestry* is not created exclusively through narrative elements or the illustration of events, however, but also through the actual form or material properties of the work. One might notice, for example, how the colour of the fourth panel with its luminous brightness contrasts to the more muted hues used to represent events from the apartheid era. The deployment of beadwork adds additional layers of meaning. Beadwork that had been included on the borders of panels constituting the *Keiskamma Tapestry* imitated the angled bars on the borders of the *Bayeux Tapestry* while also making reference to the glass beads on blankets and skirts worn by isiXhosa speakers in the nineteenth century. Reference to the *Bayeux Tapestry* as well as local creative traditions is sustained in the design of the borders of the *Rhodes University Tapestry*, but beadwork – organised by project member Caroline Nyongo – is used simultaneously to differentiate different eras from one another. While the first panel imitates the blue, white and pink of historic beadwork by Mfengu groups, the second deploys beads in the red, blue and white of the Union Jack. The third panel features

⁸ See Paul Maylam, "Rhodes University: Colonialism, Segregation and Apartheid, 1904-1970", *African Sociological Review* 9 (1): 14-22, 2005, p. 19.

1967

Ten days before the congress of NUSAS which took place at Rhodes University, the institution decides it will not provide residence accommodation to black delegates. One of these delegates is Steve Biko. Forty years later, in 2007, Rhodes University renames its Student Union Building the Bantu Stephen Biko Building and apologises publicly to the Biko family.



beadwork in the orange, blue of white of the “old” South African flag – that is, the flag introduced in 1928 and which remained in use until 1994. The colours of the current South African flag, introduced in 1994, feature in the beadwork of the final panel.

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 portraits being removed from the Council Chamber. Adjacent to images of the portraits is a representation of Hofmeyr’s motorcar alongside the words: “The white golf distributes the tapestries to Rhodes University from Keiskamma Art Project.” There is a further self-referential detail in the panel. On the far right, in the location where one might expect a signature, Makubalo has depicted a woman whom she indicates is a self-portrait – thus alluding to her own authorship of the drawings.

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 Council Chamber to be cognisant of the past when discussing how to take the university forward into the future, it simultaneously provides the university with a compelling and innovative work of art which will intrigue a diverse institutional community for many years to come.

This catalogue was produced to mark the occasion of the unveiling of the *Rhodes University Tapestry*, a work of art by the Keiskamma Art Project, on 1 December 2011.

The *Rhodes University Tapestry* was designed by Noseti Makubalo and Carol Hofmeyr. Its drawing was by Makubalo, as was the coordination of its embroidery. Its beadwork was organised by Caroline Nyongo. The backing and binding was undertaken by Nkosazana Betani.

The commission was organised by a Working Group which is constituted as follows:

Chair:	Prof Brenda Schmähmann
Members:	Mr Sakhe Badi (SRC)
	Ms Heike Gehring (GENACT)
	Mr Lebogang Hashatse
	Dr Ashraf Jamal
	Prof Russell Kaschula
	Ms Corinne Knowles (GENACT)
	Mr Matthieu Maralack (SRC)
	Prof Paul Maylam
	Mr Patrick Siphiwo Mpumlo (NEHAWU)
	Prof Jeff Peiries
	Prof Lynette Steenveld
	Prof Pat Terry
	Prof Dominic Thorburn (NTEU)

Text:	Brenda Schmähmann, Professor of Art History & Visual Culture, Rhodes University
Photography:	Paul Mills (unless otherwise indicated)
Design:	Sally Anne Dore, Design Aid



2004

Rhodes University celebrates its Centenary.



PANEL 1: *Grahamstown in the Nineteenth Century*

While invoking reference to the pre-colonial presence of Khoisan people in the area on the far left of the panel, this component of the Rhodes University Tapestry focuses primarily on Grahamstown in the nineteenth century. To the right of the large image of Nxele, otherwise known as Makana or Makhandla, the panel represents the Battle of Grahamstown (1819) which is said to have resulted in the stream by the hillside running red with the blood of fallen amaXhosa warriors. A scene showing Nxele's drowning when he attempted to escape Robben Island in 1820 (he is depicted sprawled within a blue circular form) is followed by a rendition of 1820 settlers in Grahamstown. The Drostdy Arch, on the far right of the panel, encloses a view of the site of the future campus when it was a military barracks. The building on the left is the Old Drostdy which would be demolished to make way for the central building by

Herbert Baker, which includes the Council Chamber itself. Below the large image of Nxele, in the bottom border, are amaXhosa warriors who fell at the Battle of Grahamstown, and immediately alongside them are three ships, referring to the arrival of the 1820 settlers. Both these details reiterate the *Bayeux Tapestry*, which includes images of fallen English at the Battle of Hastings as well as representations of the Norman army sailing to England. People displaced through conflicts with the colony appear on the lower border and the right of the top border. Scenes of cattle in the top border refer to the importance historically of cattle within isiXhosa-speaking communities as well as conflicts between the amaXhosa and colonists over cattle and land to graze them.





PANEL 2: Rhodes University College

The second panel traces the history of Rhodes University College from its founding in 1904 until it acquired independent university status. Showing both soldiers and figures wearing academic gowns within the Drostdy Arch, on the left of the panel, it alludes to the takeover of the military grounds by the institution in time for the 1905 academic year. Immediately to the right of the Drostdy Arch are representations of Cecil Rhodes and Leander Starr Jameson along with the first four professors at the institution (George Cory, Arthur Matthews, A. Stanley Kidd and G.F. Dingemans). The original plans for the campus buildings by Herbert Baker are depicted more or less in the centre of the panel. To their right is a circular form - a reference to the fresco in the apse of St. Mary and All the Angels (later the Rhodes Chapel) that had been painted by Sister Margaret in the 1920s. Immediately to the right of the

depicted fresco is an image of the first Fine Art graduate, Dorothy Randell, sculpting a fountain for the atrium of the art school. A representation of a sports team, based on a photograph from 1909, is coupled with an image of the Rhodes University College air training squadron - the latter alluding to the fact that individuals associated with the institution fought in World War I and World War II. On the far right, a view through the Drostdy Arch represents the new campus buildings, and the top border of the panel includes various images of its clock tower. The bottom border makes reference to some disciplines introduced at Rhodes University College as well as the identification of the coelacanth by J.L.B. Smith in 1939.





PANEL 4: Rhodes University in the Post-Apartheid Period

This panel captures the character and mood of the university since the demise of apartheid. The left of the panel includes a scene of beadworkers selling their work on the pavement in front of the Drostdy Arch. To its right is an image of Thabo Mbeki awarding the Order of the Baobab to Thelma Henderson. A generic image of a graduation is followed by, on its right, images of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in the robes they wore when receiving honorary doctorates from the university - the former in 2003 and the latter in 2002. In the centre and just on the right of the centre of the panel are references to a Photo-journalism exhibition, community engagement initiatives in the Pharmacy Faculty and a photograph of Anthropology staff member, Penny Bernard, with a *sangoma* taken in 2000. Included also is an image of purple and white balloons released during the celebration of the Centenary of Rhodes University in 2004. Various

images in the panel are of details of campus. The fountain in the quad of the central buildings of the institution is represented just to the right of the Centenary celebration scene, for example. The outdoor lights in front of the main buildings are deployed as connecting motifs across the format, as are renditions of Gavin Young's sculpture, *Life Cycle*, which was commissioned to mark the Centenary. Imagery in the bottom border includes various botanical details, an image of hadedas derived from a sculpture on campus by Joss Nell, a unisex hair salon, donkeys and an initiation scene. Referring to the removal of portraits prior to the commissioning of the tapestry, the top border also depicts Carol Hofmeyr's car which was used to deliver the tapestries. Noseti Makubalo's self-portrait appears on the far right of the main panel, in the manner of a signature.









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