

News

Racist paintings are covered up

MATTHEW LEWIN | Friday 9 November 2001 |  0 comments

When a new wave of South African diplomats arriving in London to work at the country's High Commission found the building crammed with murals and paintings, it was soon realised they were an embarrassing reminder of the country's racist past.

The art on display at South Africa House in Trafalgar Square included idealised images of landscapes from which black and mixed-race towns and people had mysteriously disappeared, inaccurate portraits of indigenous people in supposedly traditional dress, and even natives bowing contentedly at the feet of white masters.

There were calls for the murals to be painted over - but art historians and conservationists pointed out their artistic and historical value, and a compromise has been reached. The most offensive works will be covered by removable panels that will be used to display contemporary art, it is hoped, more relevant images of life in South Africa.

Lorna de Smidt, the South African political scientist and art historian given the job of overseeing refurbishment, said the murals do show black people only in deferential roles, but added: "We had to acknowledge the past, and accept that it is there. You can't just airbrush things out of history and pretend they didn't exist."

The murals are a legacy of the old South Africa. One former ambassador, Carel de Wet, even banned any images of black people in contemporary settings from the building.

Chief among the works to disappear from everyday view are the paintings of Jan Juta, generally seen by art experts as a second-rate painter who only obtained his commission through nepotism. Juta's images show scenes such as indigenous people kneeling before early Dutch settler leader Simon van der Stel, symbolically offering him the soil of the country.

More accomplished but still objectionable are landscapes by English-born Gwelo Goodman. One depicts an apparently attractive view of the Kirstenbosch mountain area near Cape Town - conveniently leaving out the mixed-race town that was on the plain in the foreground.

"A lot of white painters of the time focused almost exclusively on landscapes almost as if they had to keep saying to themselves, "This land belongs to us";" said Ms de Smidt, who under the apartheid regime once shared a prison cell with outgoing South African High Commissioner Cheryl Carolus.

Other items are to be subtly revised: a wall plaque which refers to the coming of "white civilization" will be covered in a glass sheet etched with inverted commas to sit around the phrase.

And some images will actually be restored after it was decided they were not as offensive as first appeared. Murals by Eleanor Esmonde-White and Leroux Smith Leroux depicting Zulus had caused consternation, but were reappraised in isolation from other works and Ms Esmonde-White, now 85, will be helping supervise restoration of her work next year.

Ms de Smidt said: "Within a matter of weeks people began to see this work differently. There is an integrity in these pictures the others just don't have."

English Heritage is also happy with the South African approach. Architectural historian Susie Barson said: "We have a good working relationship with them and we think that their proposals are a very reasonable compromise. They are doing it sensitively and elegantly. This is a very good piece of modern design." ■

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