

# **Making culture mobile: A case study of an outreach project by the Iziko Museums of Cape Town**

Laura Kate Gibson  
University of Toronto, Faculty of Information Studies

## **Abstract**

The Iziko museums of Cape Town's mobile museum programme is contributing positively towards South African museums overcoming their reputation as elite institutions representing colonial culture. Since the Iziko museums are physically located in the city centre, visiting them becomes both a time-consuming and expensive exercise for anyone living in the township communities that skirt the edges of the city. This is a real problem when it is these financially disadvantaged children that the Iziko museum strives to incorporate to satisfy its mission to see things differently and empower and inspire all people to celebrate and respect South Africa's diverse heritage. The mobile museum bus, which travels out to underprivileged schools in the Western Cape, is a step towards simultaneously sharing the diverse aspects of the region's culture and showing children that they play a significant role in contributing to its richness and diversity. This paper is concerned with the ways that the mobile museum makes achieving this goal possible. It looks at how children are taught about the natural history of their surrounding environment using, for example, specimens of local sea life, mammals and reptiles to illustrate points. More importantly, the lessons and explanations are delivered in a variety of languages so that learners can access this body of knowledge in their first language, which emphasises cultural inclusivity. Equally significant is the presentation of basket and bead works as examples of art, rather than craft, which goes some way towards undermining the elite "white" connotations that the term assumed in colonial and apartheid South Africa. As well, the objects related to astronomy that are carried by the mobile museum facilitate lessons that focus on indigenous knowledge of the solar system and incorporate KhoiSan explanations of the universe alongside Western analysis, thus challenging the idea that this science has always been a European domain. By assessing the current and potential achievements of the Iziko mobile museum programme to reach disparate audiences and so develop an egalitarian understanding of culture that is both diverse and inclusive, this paper will provoke further debate and research into the ways that this and similar outreach projects might develop and succeed in empowering all children in Africa.

## **Paper**

Iziko is an umbrella museum organisation, comprising of thirteen sites across the city of Cape Town. "Iziko" is an isiXhosa word for "hearth" and since the hearth in homesteads throughout Africa is often the centre of cultural activity, this name seems particularly apt. Iziko brings together art, natural history and social history institutions, most of which existed independently of one another before the year 2000. Two of the institutions now under Iziko, the South African National Gallery (SANG) and South African Museum (SAM), came under heavy criticism in the late 1990s for failing to effect transformation and continuing to represent non-white people and culture in a derogatory fashion. The bushmen diorama at the South African Museum and the *Miscast* exhibition, curated for the Gallery in 1996, elicited particular disapproval from certain

sectors for their representation of the KhoiSan people.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, exhibition texts and catalogues continued to be produced in English and Afrikaans rather than any of the other official languages of the new South Africa. Subsequently these institutions appeared to reinforce a notion that culture was the domain of the elite, rather than a tool for empowerment and development of all. In this way culture seemed to be a resource that facilitated exclusivity rather than inclusivity.

President Nelson Mandela addressed this issue in his heritage day speech in 1997 when he criticised certain South African museums for being stuck in the past. Many inferred his speech as an indirect attack on Cape Town's museums, particularly the Gallery and the South African Museum.<sup>2</sup> While the issue of transformation in Cape Town's museums has arguably not been fully resolved, for example in June debate flared once again at the Gallery over the way the exhibition *Tropics* bastardised and essentialised certain "cultures," the Iziko museums have responded to calls for cultural inclusivity and accessibility, mainly through public programmes.

One of the most pressing challenges to Iziko in terms of its desire to expand and diversify its audience is the geographical location of museum sites in the city centre. While the South African Museum may offer underprivileged visitors a reduced entrance rate of R5, the cost of taking public transport from, for example, the Khayleitsha township to the city centre museums is a R20 roundtrip, which is the equivalent of a loaf of bread, pint of milk and bag of sugar and so makes the visit unfeasible.<sup>3</sup> This is a real problem when it is these financially disadvantaged children that the Iziko museum strives to incorporate to satisfy its mission to see things differently and empower and inspire all people to celebrate and respect South Africa's diverse heritage.<sup>4</sup> In terms of current discussions about culture and youth development, it is difficult to encourage children that by participating and engaging in the country's cultural industries they can play a central role in developing and improving South Africa if what is presented as national culture appears so far removed from their immediate day-to-day experiences.

This is where the mobile museum bus offers a practical solution since it makes the museums and the culture that they guard a presence amongst a greater number of people, especially people who were previously excluded. Conceived as a possible way to increase access to and use of educational resources shortly after the Iziko amalgamation, the museum bus, funded by the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund, finally commenced operation in April 2005.<sup>5</sup> It is a customised van equipped with ten interactive modules that form a complete exhibition. Each module is supposed to form a snapshot of the tangible and intangible heritage exhibited at the immobile Iziko sites since the bus's physical capacity makes it impossible to achieve anything more. The advantage that the museum bus does have over the physical museum buildings is the absence of an imposing facade. It is less intimidating for children to walk up to the table displays laid out around the museum bus than it is to enter the colonial structures of the gallery and museums in town and access the elaborate displays within.

The artefacts themselves are physically accessible. Children are encouraged to pick up and examine the jars that contain specimens of sea creatures and reptiles suspended in formaldehyde. A particularly popular activity is unrolling the snake-skin specimen. These interactions never fail to elicit further questions and the children's interest is further assured when they are told that these creatures live in their immediate environment.

As important as provoking these questions is that the mobile museum is equipped with staff able to answer them. There is no silent or absent curator at the mobile museum. Staff stand beside the exhibition modules and assume the roles of curator, educator and interpreter all at once. As significant is that explanations are offered in the children's first language whenever

possible. Thembe, the South African Museum astronomer who regularly accompanies the mobile museum, speaks Xhosa and English fluently as well as being competent in several other official languages. The large groups of children that gather around his three-dimensional exhibitions of the solar system and constellations are treated not only to mainstream scientific explanations of how a star is born or how planets revolve around the sun. They are also privy to Thembe's teachings of indigenous knowledge of the solar system, such as KhoiSan myths about the constellations. That a figure of authority not only offers alternative explanations but delivers them through the more creative but familiar mediums of storytelling and oral histories is highly effective in terms of allowing children to assume a sense of ownership over cultural knowledge.

Sadly, not every aspect of culture represented by Iziko is exhibited quite as effectively as natural history is. Social history and art currently seem to be somewhat neglected. I was impressed that basket and beadwork artefacts were explained as works of art but the staff attending the mobile museum do not specialise in art history or the fine arts. For the mobile museum to reach its full potential, my suggestion would be that other Iziko institutions engage more fully with the outreach project and regularly send their educators out with it. That they do not is symptomatic of a wider level of sometimes wilful miscommunication between departments.

Of course, it is always difficult to quantitatively measure the impact of a museum or its public programmes; if Thembe is able to encourage one child to pursue an active interest and possible career in astronomy that deters him or her from engaging in criminal activities, that is surely as significant as exposing hundreds of children to the same story if they will forget it within minutes of hearing it. Assessing annual report statistics to measure the mobile museum's success comes with this caveat. Yet, in terms of simply understanding how many people have been exposed to the Iziko museums through the mobile museum, the statistics are encouraging. The mobile museum has visited schools in many parts of the Western Cape, including both primary and secondary schools in the Southern Cape, Karoo, West Coast, and Boland. Between May 2007 and March 2008, 49,310 learners engaged with the mobile museum bus.<sup>6</sup> The 2008–2009 figures, which are still unofficial at this stage, are slightly down at 42,274. This drop might explain why Iziko has decided to review the feasibility of the mobile museum project objectives in the upcoming financial year.<sup>7</sup>

What is impressive about the 2008–2009 figures is the number of learners exposed to the museum through the mobile bus at career fairs. I worked on the mobile museum bus during the SABC Education Careers Fair in Bellville for Grades 9–12, which was attended by 35,000 learners over three days in May this year.<sup>8</sup> Giving the museum a presence amongst other stalls that represent the medical professions, financial sector and legal services legitimises the cultural heritage industries as a career option for young people. Moreover, the creative ways that the mobile museum staff uses the cultural heritage resources immediately at hand presents it as a field with exciting employment possibilities and opportunities to engage with wider issues of identity and empowerment. The Iziko mobile museum cannot overcome all challenges faced by Iziko. It has, however, played a significant role in expanding audiences and reaching areas that are geographically and economically isolated from the permanent museum sites. Children interact with the artefacts and develop a level of intimacy with them so that national culture becomes something within their domain and grasp. Objects are not left to stand on their own but are incorporated into stories and oral histories that mobile museum staff share with learners and so creatively transmit and endorse indigenous cultural knowledge. The museum bus's presence at career fairs also emphasises the cultural heritage field as a field of employment as well as an

area of interest. For these reasons the Iziko mobile museum bus, which takes cultural heritage to people beyond the museum's physical walls, is a truly creative outreach program that offers opportunities for youth empowerment and subsequent development.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pippa Skotnes, "Introduction," in *Miscast*, ed. Pippa Skotnes (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Steven C. Dubin, *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication between author and Sthembele Harmans, South African Museum, 10 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Iziko, "Iziko Museums of Cape Town," *Iziko*, <http://www.iziko.org.za/> (accessed 25 October 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Iziko Museums of Cape Town, *Annual Report 2003–04* (Iziko Museums of Cape Town: Cape Town, 2004), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Sthembele Harmans & Wandile Kasibe, *Iziko Mobile Museum Report April 2007–March 2009* (Ongoing Report, Iziko, 2009), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Iziko Museums of Cape Town, *Annual Report 2008–09* (Iziko Museums of Cape Town: Cape Town, 2009), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Harmans & Kasibe, *Iziko Mobile Museum Report April 2007–March 2009*, 8.

## References

Dubin, Steven C. *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Harmans, Sthembele & Kasibe, Wandile. *Iziko Mobile Museum Report April 2007–March 2009*. Ongoing Report, Iziko, 2009.

Iziko Museums of Cape Town. *Annual Report 2003–04*. Iziko Museums of Cape Town: Cape Town, 2004.

Iziko Museums of Cape Town. *Annual Report 2008–09*. Iziko Museums of Cape Town: Cape Town, 2009.

Skotnes, Pippa, ed. *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996.