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## **MEDIA RESPONSE**

**Date: 23 January 2025**

### **RESPONSE TO THE CURRENCY ARTICLE ON THE JAG LOAN CURRENTLY EXHIBITED IN SOUTH KOREA**

The Johannesburg Art Gallery is an institution that has one of the most revered collections of art on the continent and arguably in the world. For this reason and the fact that the JAG has items in its collection that link with various exhibitions being planned around the world, it has led to loans from various cultural institutions.

The JAG like other museums in the country and the world grants and makes loans of artworks based on formal requests from institutions that comply with the City's loan requirements. These requirements include approval from the Legal and Contracts Department in the City, the Finance Department, the Executive Director: Community Development as well as the MMC: Community Development. The loan of artworks is in line with international museum practice and as outlined in the guidelines of the International Council for (ICOM). For instance as part of the conditions of loans the borrower must pay for transportation of artworks, pay for transit insurance, ensure that artworks clear customs at the port of arrival, that they submit a facilities report. In the case of international loans there is also a condition that the borrower must facilitate the travel of a courier in order to supervise the uncrating of the artworks, update the condition reports and in special cases, to supervise the installation of the artworks in the exhibition spaces.

In 2021 a policy was developed as an intervention to regulate the administration of loans for all City managed museums because no policy existed before. It is therefore false to suggest that there was a policy that was changed in any form as much as it is false to suggest a single official is "in charge" in terms of the current policy.

The provisions of this policy are structured such that they ensure all items of the collection that are loaned to other cultural institutions are packaged, transported, insured and kept in conditions that align to international museum standards. Under the current management of Arts Culture and Heritage in the City and including that of the JAG, there has not been a single incident of loss, theft or damage to objects that have been sent out on loan. Contrary to false claims by the journalist, JAG does not and has not sold any of its works on loan.

The staff and management have similarly also complied with all internal approval requirements in the processing of loans. To create an impression that approval processes are not followed is to deliberately promote falsehoods.

The article written by Guiletta Talevi opens with a blatant lie when it states *"The jewels of the Joburg Art Gallery, including art from Picasso and Monet, have spent the past decade out on loan. Yet the city won't say why nor who really benefits"*.

The works that are currently exhibited in South Korea were sent from the JAG in 2023 for an exhibition in Gyeongju with a follow-up request from the City of Busan for another exhibition. Due to the great reception of this exhibition, there have been more requests by other reputable cultural institutions to host the exhibition.

This is a vote of confidence for the quality of this exhibition and curatorial excellence. All necessary steps to comply with the policy requirements to process these loan requests have been followed including obtaining permits from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). This exhibition has enjoyed wide publicity and therefore the claim that there is mystery surrounding it is an attempt at feeding a false narrative and perpetuating malicious gossip devoid of facts.

We are of the view that Giulietta Talevi is not interested in the truth because in the same article, she claims to have interviewed a member of the SAHRA advisory body and a former Heritage Officer at SAHRA who correctly stated that "SAHRA's process is rigorous". Mr. Cuan Hahndiek further states that "Every permit I did when I was there had an advisory panel [which] consisted of a range of expert advisers – curators, art historians [and others]. They would provide input and the decisions would be based on the recommendations of the panel."

Instead of accepting this as fact which disproves the imaginary "mystery" Talevi wishes to popularise, she ignores these facts. The same official, advisory panel or even the institution would easily have confirmed that these collection items were rigorously assessed by a full SAHRA advisory panel prior to the finalisation of the loan sent to South Korea in 2023.

Instead, to feed the lies that opens her article, she chooses to report about an assessment that took place in 2015. Again, to feed the lies in her article, Talevi creates the impression that this "surprising haste" she alleges is attributable to the current Director of Arts, and Heritage, Mr. Vuyisile Mshudulu. Based on her previous articles on the same institution, Talevi is fully aware that Mr. Mshudulu was not in the employ of the City in 2015 and therefore could not have been party to this "surprising haste" that is alleged to have been central to the processing of the loan. This article contains errors relating to timelines that conflates different loans and different role players. Events before the incumbency of current staff are conflated with decisions of staff that have long since left the organisation.

It then begs the question, how is it that these artworks would be on loan for a decade if they were at the JAG in 2023?

The City's museums have a mandate to promote heritage and the exposure of its collection through various exhibitions in line with our mandate is a benefit to the City. This allows for the profiling of our cultural institutions globally and catalytic in building solid bridges for cultural exchange with various cultural institutions. The exhibition of works also results in the further interpretation and writing on the collection which enriches the knowledge resources on the collection and benefits South African, African and global researchers who often collect information on our collections for their academic or other interests. This is another important benefit that Talevi would perhaps not know about because by her own admission, her focus and that of her publication is not art but finance. Many of the benefits that come from loaning artworks are less tangible but no less important. Loans afford the JAG curatorial staff an opportunity to observe and learn from professionals in international institutions.

It is acknowledged by ICOM the international body for museums globally and by countless museum professionals that the museum loans process contributes immensely to important heritage protection and promotion imperatives, such as improved relations between various cultural institutions around the world, exchange of knowledge and ideas on museum practice and creating greater awareness about the provenance of museum objects. Mark Read is correct that the provenance of the JAG collection is fairly well known, and this is a great

deterrent for nefarious activities relating to the theft or even creation of replicas on the collection.

It is an insult to suggest that the highly knowledgeable, dedicated and suitably qualified staff of the JAG would not be in a position to identify a replica of the collection items that they have been passionately protecting over many years. We have noticed though that through either malicious intent or sheer ignorance, Talevi makes startling allegations about the professional abilities of staff within the City without having any empirical evidence to support her claims.

Despite numerous attempts to explain to Talevi that the City has defined processes of engaging queries from the media, as determined by the City's communications protocols, and that such queries should not be sent to the staff directly, she insists on contacting staff and these actions are bordering on harassment. It is important to emphasise that the employees of JAG and the Arts, Culture and Heritage Directorate that JAG falls under, operate in an environment that is dictated by municipal policies and do operate as independent agents. Professional ethics demand that employees in any organisation should abide by the policies as set by their employer.

The JAG profile has also vastly improved globally and is recognised for the importance of its collection which would otherwise not have been as widely known. The City and the JAG has always been central to the acknowledgements by institutions that loan its collection items as the owner and lender of such items because this is a requirement.

The other benefits that arise from the loans programme are that there is an opportunity for the JAG to loan artworks for its own exhibitions should the need arise because the Curators and other professional staff from the City also get an opportunity to understand aspects of the collections from institutions that build relationships with the JAG.

ViDi is a cultural institution that has been working with the JAG since around 2014 to present exhibitions in different parts of the world. They are an institution that has a reputable track record in historic and contemporary exhibitions. There is no financial contract between the City and ViDi. The initial interaction with ViDi was with the then JAG Chief Curator Antoinette Muddock (MHSRIP).

To create the impression that the current staff created the loans policy to suit themselves or any individual staff member is ridiculous to say the least. The City has a rigorous policy development process that has to follow various steps and interrogation at each stage before it is approved by Council.

The practice amongst institutions in terms of loans is not tied to commercial or financial terms. The false suggestion that there is financial gain by the JAG, or any staff is malicious, slanderous and defamatory. It is clear that against the principle of any or all journalistic principles, Talevi seems to be at liberty to weaponise false and unsubstantiated allegations against certain City officials.

It is quite perplexing that Talevi had access to the actual facts regarding this loan yet chose to propagate misinformation instead. This pattern is evident in her previous articles, raising questions about what agenda may be influencing her writing. Furthermore, it is intriguing that a journalist, who claims to specialise in finance rather than the arts, would dedicate so much effort to spreading falsehoods about a topic that is unrelated to her publication's primary focus or her own area of expertise. The City is inclined to believe what some professionals in the art world suggest may be something sinister at play.

The JAG has a policy in place to administer loans and all loans have been subjected to that policy. Any suggestion to the contrary must be dismissed with the contempt it deserves.

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