The Origins Centre is not short of impressive technology, both ancient and modern: alongside displays of stone tools, cutting-edge modern machinery operates, including a projected ‘rain animal’ that snaps at the viewer if it is disturbed, and an award-winning educational computer game. But it is arguably its incorporation of contemporary artworks within the more obviously educational, scientific exhibits that sets it apart in its ability to transport visitors to a different world.

Among the extensive collection of rock art and engravings housed within Origins – including the world's oldest man-made image – are contemporary artworks by leading South African artists that reflect on the themes of the museum.

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Through the Veil: The Art of Origins

For the San, the rock face they painted formed a veil between this world and the spiritual realm. The Origins Centre, a homage to Africa’s heritage as the birthplace of humanity, parallels this. Within a building designed to manifest the idea of the veil, an archival space containing the Rock Art Research Institute’s valuable items runs through all three levels of the building – the present and the very distant past interweave, celebrating that which sets humanity apart from other species – the development of art and technology.

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lead scientists to believe that humanity originated in Africa. Cianfanelli’s memorial outlines a modern human skull within the Taung skull, which in turn lies within the skull of a chimpanzee; the form of the whole resembles the shape of Africa, commenting on Africa’s status as the origin of humanity.

Progressing to the entrance of the museum, the visitor is confronted by Walter Oltmann’s map of the world - rippling silver sheets of woven aluminium, flowing ribbon-like across the museum walls. A thread of copper traces the path of humankind through Africa and into the wider world beyond, simultaneously echoing the thin red line found in many San paintings, the ‘threads of light’ connecting us to the world of the spirit.

These ‘threads’, an image commonly seen in San rock art, form the second motif of the museum; a motif that is given a literal twist in the tallest room of the museum, in which a set of eleven exquisite 2m by 4.5m wall hangings are displayed. Designed by Tamar Mason, and beautifully embroidered with beads, eggshell, glass and safety pins by Emma Mnguni and a team of women from Kwaggafontein, the wall hangings use imagery from contemporary Bushman art, as well as rock art and engravings to chronicle the history of the San...
“Among the extensive collection of rock art and engravings housed within Origins – including the world’s oldest man-made image – are contemporary artworks by leading South African artists that reflect on the themes of the museum.”

people, including scenes of their traditional life, the arrival of black and white settlers, genocide and the AIDS pandemic.

Both threads and light come into play in Willem Boshoff’s *Signs of People*, which floats suspended in space like so many termite wings, a thousand perspex words recording the names given to the disparate South African peoples. These are transmitted by a revolving light, so that the viewer is labelled with ethnic stereotypes. In its resemblance to translucent wings, the work reflects on the transience and vulnerability of many of the indigenous languages of South Africa, gradually disappearing and some already extinct.

The threads of light link this world to that on the other side of the veil; it is there that the shaman encounters the mysterious beings of the spirit world. These are given physical form in Russell Scott’s *Axis Mundi*: a mysterious giant snake of sculpted wood weaves through the length of a display hall, while a host of strange half-animal, half-human creatures protrude from a giant termite...
This is the genius of the Origins centre – the way in which all elements of its construction and design work together to educate, display and comment on themes around the origins of humanity, and the history of the San people, the world’s oldest surviving cultural group.

hill pushing up through the museum floor.

These are just some of the contemporary artworks to be found within the Origins centre, leading the visitor back to an appreciation of the world’s original artworks – those of the San themselves – paintings and engravings of astonishing grace and deftness.

This is the genius of the Origins centre – the way in which all elements of its construction and design work together to educate, display and comment on themes around the origins of humanity, and the history of the San people, the world’s oldest surviving cultural group.