

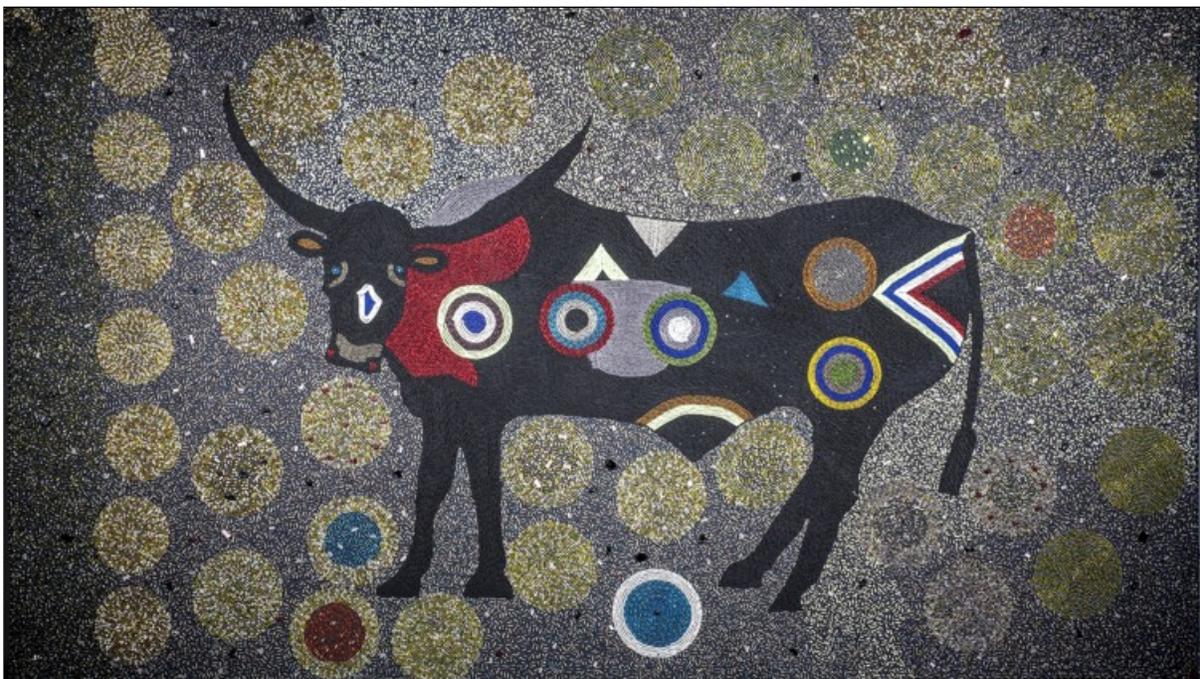
UPDATE:

I-70 fatal crash: What we know about the Beavercreek family

Amazing beadwork means independence for South African women

New Dayton Art Institute exhibit showcases shimmering work of Ubuhle women

LOCAL By Meredith Moss - Staff Writer



The Dayton Art Institute's summer exhibition, *Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence*, showcases a new form of bead art, the *ndwango* (cloth), developed by a community of women living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. CONTRIBUTED

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Behind the shimmering beaded artwork now on display at the Dayton Art Institute is the inspiring story of a group of South African women who are gaining dignity through the work of their hands and their life in an exceptional community.

The touring exhibit, which makes its first stop in Dayton, showcases a innovative form of bead art known as *ndwango* (cloth). It's created by stretching plain black cloth into a canvas, then creatively covering it with pictures formed by thousands of colored Czech glass beads. Subjects range from landscapes and abstract designs to a monumental crucifixion scene.

The artists responsible for coming up with this fresh take on an age-old sewing tradition live and work together on a farm in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

“Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence” opens this weekend at the DAI and will be on display through Sept. 10. Be sure to allow time to watch the inspiring 15-minute video filmed on location at the South African artist collective. You’ll get a close-up look at the beading process — Zulu and Xhosa women seated on the ground with black cloths in their laps and piles of colorful beads close at hand. There’s a wonderful segment in which the women are interacting with a group of bulls that become the inspiration for the pieces you’ll view in one of the exhibit galleries. In their culture, bulls are a symbol of wealth and prestige.

MORE THINGS TO DO: Tickets now on sale for ‘Little Mermaid’ Broadway tour in Dayton

“When I was doing this bull, I thought I was doing me because each and everything in here is me,” explains Zandile Ntobela. “Even the colors I put it here because they are strong and I am a strong woman. I have three children with no father and I am on my own.”

Although a few of the pieces are collaborative, most of the 36 beaded panels were designed and created by individual women. One of the women in the film admits she can’t believe what her heart and hands have created. That realization encourages her to do more.

An artist statement accompanies each panel. “At home where I grew up there was a peach tree,” writes Zondile Zondo. “My mother loved it and ... she used to take out her sewing machine and sit under the tree. ...When planning this *ndwango* I had a sudden memory of that tree where my mother used to sit when we were extremely poor. We didn’t even have our own home and my mother was striving so that things would be OK for us, but we had this peach tree and when it bloomed it was blazing ... blazingly beautiful.”

How it began

The roots of the exhibit can be traced to two enterprising women — Bev Gibson and Ntombephi Ntobela — who co-founded Ubuhle on a former sugar plantation in 1999. (It has since moved to what’s now known as the Little Farm.)

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Ubuhle means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that has spiritual significance. The initial project aimed at creating employment for impoverished rural women by using a traditional skill that had been passed down for generations and teaching it to others. At first, their shop sold everyday objects — bedcovers, pillows, jewelry — but the beadwork eventually began to take on an artistic life of its own. Much of the credit goes to Ntombephi, a master beader who is known as “Induna.” (Leader).

Gibson does not bead but provides the farm where she and her children host the artists, giving them a safe place to live and work. “Working with the artists has given me a purpose,” Gibson says. “Seeing their work exhibited in institutions that acknowledges the mastery of the work and gives them the recognition of artists, gives me an incredible sense of achievement and pride.”

Gibson says that although the project has required huge compromises and personal sacrifices, it has provided life-changing moments for her own family. “I believe they have made us less judging, kinder and wiser in understanding people who come from different backgrounds and embrace every opportunity given to them,” Gibson told me. “My children have always known Ubuhle as part of our lives. The artists and my children have a bond in knowing and understanding the experience we have shared as privileged, western-educated, white South Africans and traditionally educated, poor black South Africans. The realization that values cross economics, race and education. “

Coming to the States

In 2011, Gibson came to the United States in the hope of introducing the special beadwork to a larger audience. The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum in Washington, D.C., signed on and introduced the unusual exhibit in 2013-2014.

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"We were overwhelmed by the beauty and artistry of the work, the scale of the pieces and intricacy of the beading," says the museum's Marcia Baird Burris. "But the remarkable story of the Ubuhle collective in KwaZulu-Natal that co-founders Bev Gibson and Ntombephi Ntobela brought to us was most compelling."

What impressed her museum staff, Burris says, was that women artists were able to transform a traditional art form to build a self-supporting community empowering local women to take care of their families and ensure them a better life for generations to come. "Their powerful narrative is just the type of social issue the Anacostia Community Museum seeks to present in our exhibitions," she adds. "Stories of how everyday people come together and innovate to solve problems — in this case through the arts. The issues around women's empowerment are relatable and universal whether here in D.C., Dayton, Ohio, or in ZwaZulu-Natal, South African."

Curators, Burris says, sought to create an exhibit that uses the cross as a focal point, honors the beading tradition, pays homage to those who died from AIDS and explores the artists' life stories, creative interests and awakening as creators.

Local interest

When she first saw the exhibition a couple of years ago, DAI assistant curator Katherine Siegwarth was immediately intrigued. "From our visitor surveys we see that people were asking to see more contemporary and modern art as well as Native American and African art," she says. "And we do try to have special exhibits that complement our permanent collections."

MORE ARTS NEWS: See what Dayton Funk legend Keith Harrison is up to these days

Siegwarth says the type of beading that's on exhibition is unique to this group of women. "They are unlike any other South African beadwork," she notes. "They are not meant as adornment in the traditional sense."

As usual, the DAI staff excels at creating the perfect gallery spaces for the art — in this case some of the accent walls have been painted a vivid orange. You'll recognize the Zulu pieces because they are most vibrant and colorful. The Xhosa are known for subtler pastels.

Each intricate panel takes a year to complete and incorporates thousands of beads. Depending on the artist, a pattern may be drawn before the beading process begins.

The most dramatic piece in the exhibit is so tall that DAI staffers had to find a special place for it. You'll find it in the museum's Renaissance gallery. "The African Crucifixion" was created by seven artists and took nearly a year to finish. Each artist worked on a separate section of cloth laid down on the farm lawn.

"A piece like 'The African Crucifixion' likely has upward of a million beads in it when you when you combine all of the panels," says Burris, who says it's her favorite in the show. "While the piece tells a biblical story, it is informed by contemporary life issues — health, food, jobs and security — faced by the women. It is a wonder to behold."

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Since 2006, the Ubuhle community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, cutting in half the number of active artists. A section of the DAI exhibit, "Remembering Those Lost," is a memorial to those Ubuhle sisters who have lost their lives. In many ways, we're told, the beading is therapy and "by thinking about the deceased during the act of creation the dead become a part of the very construction of the work itself, and so the ndwango becomes a site of memory." Some of the work in this gallery was done by the women who have passed away.

Check out the Museum Store

In conjunction with the current exhibit, the DAI's Museum Store is carrying necklaces, bracelets and tiny purses made by the Ubuhle women that will sell for \$24 each. Store manager Diane Haskell has also assembled an array of African Fair Trade merchandise — from small soapstone animals to colorful and vibrant telephone-wire bowls. You'll see bowls handmade by Zulu women in South Africa who weave industrial copper wire and delicate bohemian glass beads to create baskets.

The colorful Elephant and Rooster on display are handmade with thick steel wire and intricate beads. They each retail for \$29.95 and are made by women from the Kwazulu-Natal province of South Africa — the same province where the Ubuhle women work and live.

The take away

The hope, concludes Burris, is that those who visit the exhibit will see themselves in the dreams and aspirations of these women from across the ocean. "Their art work," she says, "comes directly from the soul."

Gibson says the *ndwango* allow all kinds of people to see a positive story of hope. "A story of people working together and determined to see the good in each other," she says. "To focus on the positive rather than the negative and by so doing to create this extraordinary piece of art that in itself tells a story ... but also to inspire people to come to terms with their own problems and their own hurdles in life."

Want to go?

WHAT: "Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence"

WHERE: Dayton Art Institute, 456 Belmonte Park N., Dayton

WHEN: Through Sept. 10. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Thursday and noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

COST: Admission is \$14 for adults; \$11 for seniors 60+, students with ID, active military and groups. Youth (ages 7-17 are \$6. Price includes admission to the exhibition and the museum's permanent collection.

MORE INFO: www.daytonartinstitute.org

RELATED EVENTS

- Tony West and the Imani Dancers will perform at 1-2 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 12. The dancers, musicians, and actors blend their contemporary experiences with the influences of African heritage. Tickets are \$10/family of four members; \$15/family of four non-members; \$2 per each additional child.
- "ARTventures: Beaded Butterflies," a family event, will be held from 1-3 p.m. on Saturday, July 8. Cost is \$10/family of four members; \$15/family of four non-members; \$2/each additional child.
- "Draw from the Collection: Contemporary Beading," is scheduled from 1-3 p.m. on Saturday, July 15. Participants will explore textile arts through history and around the world from the DAI collection, and sample the beaded embroideries in the special exhibition. After a gallery experience, participants will create a beaded design on bead looms. Cost is \$12 members; \$18 non-members; \$8 ages 12-17. Preregistration required; limit 20 participants.
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"Curatorial Conversations," from 6-7 p.m. on Thursday, July 20. Katherine Siegwarth, Kettering Assistant Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, will highlight the special exhibition. Tickets are \$5 members, \$10 non-members in advance (\$12 at the door).