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## Ubuhle women found hope through their art. Now their work is coming to the Chrysler Museum of Art

By Denise M. Watson

Staff writer

Nov 25, 2018



Susana Raab, Anacostia Community Museum/Smithsonian Institution

"The African Crucifixion."



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Ntombephi Ntobela is now known as “Induna,” or leader, among her art group.

Years ago, though, she was hand-stitching beaded items to supplement the small amount her husband made as a cane cutter on a South African plantation.

She sold them to a man who wouldn’t pay her a decent wage, the equivalent of \$3 a month.

“It was a pittance,” said Bev Gibson, now a friend and partner of Induna.

In the late 1990s, Gibson met Induna, saw her talent, and asked her to teach other women the tradition Induna had learned from her grandmother.

The group, the Ubuhle, produced work that was so astounding that it got the attention of the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. It is now a traveling show, with a stop at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk. It is on exhibition until Feb. 24.

The show, “Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence,” has become greater than its collection of more than 30 pieces, brilliantly colored and designed with thousands of tiny beads. Most are smaller than a grain of rice.

It is a triumph for the women who come from rural areas rampant with poverty and oppressed by the residuals of racial apartheid and disease. South Africa has the largest epidemic of AIDS in the world, according to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

Since 2006, the small cluster of women has lost five of its members to AIDS or other diseases, two of them Induna’s sisters. Six women remain active in the group.

But the women have found hope. “Ubuhle” means “beauty” in the women’s languages, Xhosa and Zulu. The women first showed up to learn the skill as a way to feed and shelter their families. They have since woven new lives of self-confidence and financial independence.

“The women want to be recognized as artists,” Gibson said during a phone call from South Africa.

One artist, Zandile Ntobela, one of Induna's sisters, said in a video that even she was stunned when she stepped back and looked at the first piece of work she created.

"I didn't know it was mine," she said.

The tradition of African beadwork goes back thousands of years with the first pieces made from stone, bone and ivory. Europeans later introduced glass beads and women often embroidered the shiny pieces into decorative garments and jewelry.

Later, it was a thread of work for women who were marginalized among a larger marginalized group.

Apartheid laws of racial segregation from the late 1940s separated the races and clamped restrictive regulations on blacks. One of the most onerous was the government's stripping of property from black landowners, which continued until the end of apartheid in 1994.

Black men worked as migrant farmers, making very little, but also having to leave their families for months.

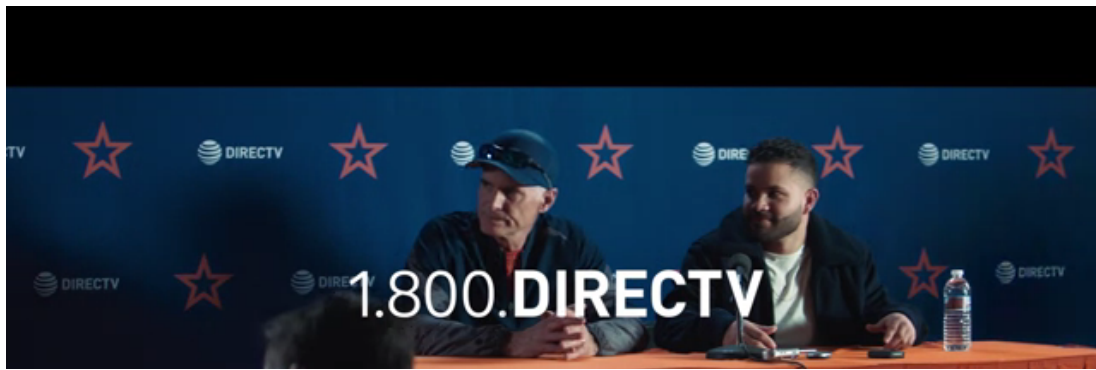
Gibson and her husband owned a sugar cane plantation, and Induna was the only woman who moved with her husband there as he worked.

Gibson's son saw Induna's beadwork and told his mother, who was an admirer of the craft.

Gibson and Induna started Ubuhle in 1999 in KwaZulu-Natal. The artists used high quality Czech beads, which Gibson had to finance. The artists, with no formal education, would not have been able to get a loan, Gibson said. The women started to live, learn from one another, help each other with their children, and create.

The fabric panels are called "ndwangos," and the black fabric base is reminiscent of the headscarves and skirts the Xhosa women wear.

ADVERTISING



The panels, which vary in size from about a 3-foot-by-4-foot piece or larger, can take a year for each to be completed.

Carolyn Swan Needell, the Chrysler's Carolyn and Richard Barry Curator of Glass, came to the Chrysler this spring; the Ubuhle exhibition was her first project. She will give a special tour Dec. 1 in honor of World AIDS Day.

She still gets overwhelmed as she walks through the pieces, which are located in the glass gallery and two other areas of the museum.

The exhibition not only shows that glasswork is more than vases and sculptures, but it is so breathtaking that everyone can enjoy it, Needell said.

"If you know absolutely nothing about art, you can still appreciate the beauty of this," she said.

But there are so many layers to the pieces that viewers should appreciate it for various reasons.

The women portrayed key elements of their lives, such as the sorrow of death, a fantasy of one day living in a pretty white house, trees and gardens that reminded them of relatives. The meticulous, meditative work was often therapeutic, Gibson said.

The artists allowed their personalities to come through in the pieces, in color and by incorporating signature elements in the panels.

In a 15-minute video that runs in the main exhibition area, the women speak of how they want their children to see their artwork when they get older and to see how talented their mothers were.

One artist said she uses bold colors in her work because she feels like a strong woman.

The show includes four panels of Boran and Ankoli bulls, which are central to the South African culture. Bulls represent wealth among the Xhosa and Zulu people and are often given as part of a wedding dowry.

The beaded bulls are spectacular in detail and color, particularly one called “Funky Bull.” The animal is black and majestic, with multicolored spirals woven over its body.

Its eyes stare in a brilliant, aquatic blue.

The artist knew little English, Needell said, recalling the story she heard.

“But she heard the word ‘funky,’ and loved it,” Needell said. “When they asked her what do you want to name it, it became ‘Funky Bull.’ ”

The most riveting piece of the collection, “The African Crucifixion,” includes a cohesive body of panels designed by several women and stretches 15 feet wide and 23 feet high. Needell had a temporary wall built to accommodate it and installed in the tallest gallery in the museum.

From left to right, the “Crucifixion” begins with a story of death and desolation. Light brown and tan beads create a barren land with black and dark brown vultures waiting in a tree, and red ribbons symbolizing AIDS hanging below the tree limbs. The colors brighten as the panels move right. Fish swim in a stream, the tree bursts with beads of green, red and yellows. A brilliant heaven is above.

The center panels are of a thin, black Christ, his arms and legs scarred in beads of reds, greens and blues, but his face is at peace.

Them bani, one of Induna’s sisters, created the Christ, the last major work she completed before dying of AIDS.

Needell said she did the beadwork over and over again because she wanted him to be what she felt.

“She created him in her image.”

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## IF YOU GO

"Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence." Chrysler Museum of Art, One Memorial Place, Norfolk

On display through Feb. 24.

Cost free

Special program on Sat., Dec. 1 at 2 p.m Carolyn Swan Needell, the Carolyn and Richard Barry Curator of Glass, will give a talk of the stories and memories in the exhibition. The event is in recognition of World AIDS Day.

Visit [www.chrysler.org](http://www.chrysler.org) or call 757-664-6200 for more information.



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## Denise Watson

Reporter

Denise Watson, here, and I'm a features writer. I cover the visual arts and people, places and things – anything interesting and oddball (like me). I'm a Norfolk native and have written for my hometown paper for 27 years now.

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