

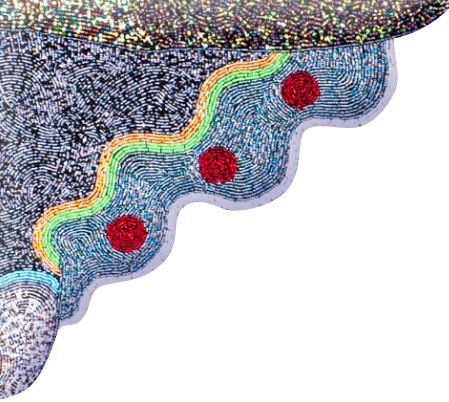
# UBUHLE WOMEN

Beadwork and the Art of Independence

Traveling Exhibition Service



INTERNATIONAL  
ARTS AND ARTISTS



**U**buhle 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. The black fabric on which the Ubuhle women work is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts which many of them grew up wearing.


Stretching this textile like a canvas, artists can transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form with colored Czech glass beads. Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style “directly from

the soul,” according to artist Ntombephi Ntobela, the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their ndwangos.

Ubuhle means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and it describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that for the Xhosa people has a particular spiritual significance. From a distance, each panel seems to be formed from a continuous surface, but as each tiny individual bead catches the light, the viewer becomes aware of the meticulous skill that went into each work and the scale of ambition: a single panel can take more than 10 months



- 1 Detail of Bongiswa Ntobela, *Funky Bull*, 2006, glass beads sewn onto fabric
  - 2 Bongiswa Ntobela, *Funky Bull*, 2006, glass beads sewn onto fabric
  - 3 Detail of Thando Ntobela, *Ankoli Bull*, 2013, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- Front Cover Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela, *My Sea, My Sister, My Tears*, 2011, glass beads sewn onto fabric



*“The reaction of our members, staff and volunteers has been overwhelmingly positive....The dazzling **ndwangos** provide guests with an opportunity to experience a new perspective, yet also present universal and relatable themes, making this exhibition accessible as well as impactful.”*

*Katherine Ryckman Siegwarth,  
Kettering Assistant Curator of  
Collections and Exhibitions,  
The Dayton Art Institute*



# History



- 1 Detail of Sthembile Majola, *The Darkness*, 2008, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- 2 Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, *Tree of Life*, 2006, glass beads sewn onto fabric

to complete.

**M**igration has defined the history of modern South Africa. The late 19th-century discovery of gold and diamonds, and to a lesser extent the development of sugar cane plantations, required a large flexible workforce of able men. As men left their homesteads in rural areas to earn cash salaries, the traditional social systems based on direct production from the land began to change.

Low pay and harsh environments forced cane cutters to leave their wives and families at home. They often would not see them for up to nine months each year, resulting in a breakdown of family life and of traditional values.

The artist community Ubuhle was conceived in response to this situation. Established in 1999 on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal by Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson, this artist collective aims to combine skills and to create employment for rural women.

By commercializing a skill that local women often already had—beadwork has been one of the primary means of artistic expression for women in the region for generations—and by teaching those who did not, Ntobela and Gibson began to provide women with a private source of income and the route to financial independence.

Since 2006, the Ubuhle community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the artworks thus function as memorials to Ubuhle sisters who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and imbues them with a spiritual significance. Due to the slow and meticulous process of creating a ndwango, the act of beading itself becomes a form of therapy.

Beading becomes a way of recording the issues that are closest to the artists’ hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. Through their presence in the artists’ thoughts during the





# The Curators

**T**he Ubhle community exists today largely because of the determination of two women: Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson. Ntombephi is a master beader from the Eastern Cape whose tremendous skill, both as an artist and as a teacher, is the foundation block of this community. Bev does not bead herself, instead creating the space for the artists to explore, experiment, and transform the traditional art form. Bev has also been a source of energy and persistence behind the emergence of Ubhle’s growing vision. They both bring different skills to the community and it is thanks to both women that these works exist at all.

1 Detail of Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela, *Tree of Life*, 2006, glass beads sewn onto fabric

2 Tshengi Duma, Sihembile Majola, Nontanga Manguthsane, Nonhlakanipho Mndiyatha, Kalipha Ntobela, Ntombephi Ntobela, and Themhani Ntobela, *The African Crucifixion*, 2008, glass beads sewn onto fabric

*"I am overwhelmed by the generosity of the American people. The reception that **Ubhle** has enjoyed and the success of this exhibition is largely due to the support, encouragement and incredible hard work of the Americans that we have met, from the wonderful people at the Smithsonian and IA&A to private individuals."*

Bev Gibson  
co-founder, Ubhle Women





# The Artists

**ZANELE MUHOLI** is a South African artist who works predominantly with photography. She describes herself as an “activist artist” and uses her artwork to champion women’s rights in South Africa. She is highly acclaimed for her images of African LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] communities, who face considerable discrimination.

**NTOMBEPHI “INDUNA” NTOBELA** was born in Bizana in the Eastern Cape. She is a member of the Mpondo Xhosa. Her great skill as a beader was the initial impetus that led her to co-found Ubuhle with Bev Gibson in 1999. Ntombephi is known as “Induna,” which means “leader,” a term of great respect in South Africa. The title also conveys the responsibility she feels for the community as the guardian of its future.

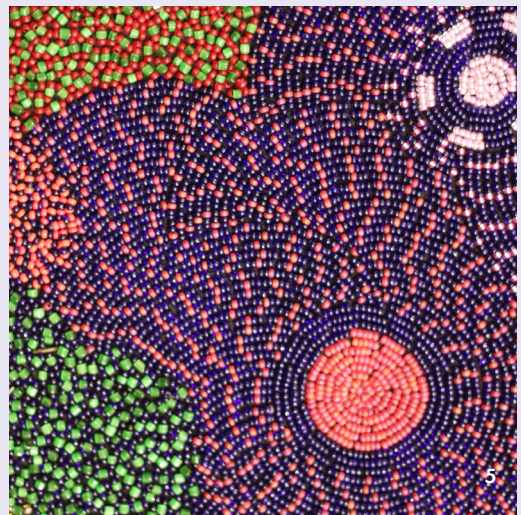
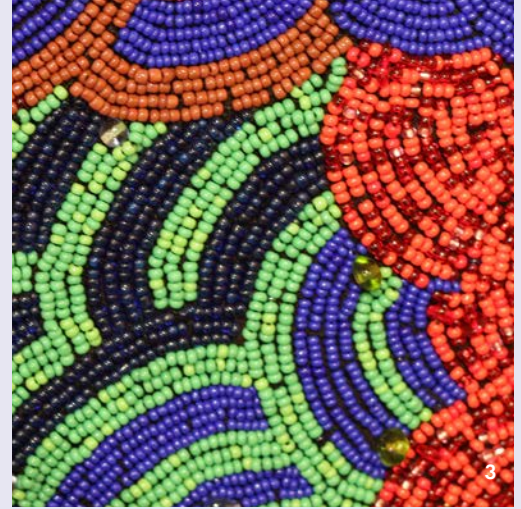
**ZANDILE NTOBELA**, a member of the Mpondo Xhosa, was born in the Eastern Cape. Zandile is an accomplished beader and one of the community’s most successful artists. The annual flowering of the ornamental Japanese cherry tree in the community’s garden has been a major source of inspiration for Zandile, and she has invented a pattern to represent these flowers. It appears as the signature of her work.

**THANDO NTOBELA** was born in Bizana in the Eastern Cape and is Zandile’s full sister and Induna’s half sister. Thando has recently taken charge of the Ubuhle shop, a place where the artists can sell jewelry and smaller beaded panels as a means of earning a steady monthly income. In charge of the shop books, she also keeps track of the supply of beads. These beads are ordered from cards produced by the glass bead manufacturers in the Czech Republic; the acquisitions process has not changed greatly since the height of the bead trade to southern Africa in the late 19th century.

**NONHLAKANIPHO MNDIYATHA** was born near Bizana in the Eastern Cape. Nonhlakanipho’s signature pattern is a white house, a traditional Xhosa rondavel, which appears in nearly all of her works.

**ZONDLILE ZONDO** is currently the only Zulu member of the group, and her cultural heritage is reflected in the distinct style of her beadwork. Her confident use of primary colors and her bold patterning exemplify Zulu traditions of beading, which use much brighter colors and a broader palette. Her work has inspired other artists and has been crucial to the development of this new art form.





- 1 Detail of Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, *Sangoma Bull*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- 2 Zondlile Zondo, *Flowers for the Gods*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- 3 Detail of Zondlile Zondo, *I am ill, I still see Color and Beauty: Jamludi The Red Cow*, 2012, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- 4 Detail of Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela, *Tribute to My Sister Bongiswa*, 2010, glass beads sewn onto fabric
- 5 Detail of Thando Ntobela, *Ankoli Bull*, 2013, glass beads sewn onto fabric



Installation at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, 2014

## EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

### Number of Works

Approximately 31 beaded mosaics,  
6 photographs, and a video

### Organized by

The Smithsonian Anacostia Community  
Museum, Washington, D.C.

### Curators

Bev Gibson, co-founder of *Ubhle  
Women*, and James Green, co-curator

### Requirements

Moderate security; 250-300 linear feet

### Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay  
outgoing shipping within the contiguous U.S.

### Booking Period

12 weeks

### Tour

June 2017–January 2021

## CONTACT

TravelingExhibitions@ArtsandArtists.org  
9 Hillyer Court NW. Washington, D.C. 20008  
Tel: 202.338.0680  
ArtsandArtists.org

