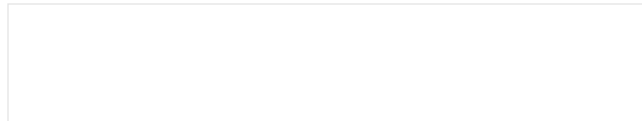


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Traveling exhibition of South African beadwork opens at Springfield Art Museum



Zondile Zondo, I am ill, I still see Color and Beauty: Jamludi The Red Cow, 2012. Glass beads sewn onto fabric. 50 3/4" x 67 3/4".

SPRINGFIELD, MO.- [The Springfield Art Museum](#) welcomed Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence. This traveling exhibition presents a spectacular overview of 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 plain black fabric that serves as a foundation for the Ubhle women's exquisite beadwork is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts that many of them wore growing up. By stretching this textile like a canvas, the artists use colored Czech glass beads to transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Using skills handed down through generations and working in their own unique style "directly from the soul" (in the words of artist Ntombephi Ntobela), the women create abstract, as well as figurative subjects for their ndwangs.

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Ubhle means "beauty" in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and well describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that for the Xhosa people has a special spiritual significance. From a distance, each panel of the ndwango seems to present a continuous surface; but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny individual bead catches the light, the meticulous skill and labor that went into each work—the sheer scale of ambition—becomes stunningly apparent. A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.

Migration has defined the history of modern South Africa. The late-19th-century discovery of gold and diamonds—and, to a lesser extent, the cultivation of sugar cane—transfigured South African society with its demands for a large, flexible workforce of able men. As workers left their homesteads in rural areas to earn cash salaries, traditional social systems based on direct production from the land began to change. Low pay and harsh working conditions forced many cane cutters to live apart from their wives and families for up to nine months of the year, which led to a breakdown of family life and traditional values.

Ubhle was conceived in response to this social and cultural transformation. Established in 1999 by two women—Ntombephi "Induna" Ntobela and Bev Gibson—on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, Ubhle began as a way of creating employment for rural women by combining traditional skill and making them profitable. By incorporating a skill that many local women already had—beadwork, a customary form of artistic expression for generations of South African women—and teaching it to those who did not, they began to provide women with a private source of income and a route to financial independence.

Since 2006, the Ubhle community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the ndwangs thus function as memorials to Ubhle sisters who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance. Due to the slow, meticulous process of creating a ndwango, the act of beading itself becomes a form of therapy: a way of setting down the issues that are closest to the artists' hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. In a sense—through their presence in the artist's thoughts during the act of creation—the deceased enter the very fabric of the work, and so the ndwango becomes a site of memory.

Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Washington, DC, in cooperation with Curators Bev Gibson, Ubhle Beads, and James Green, and is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists, Washington, DC. The exhibition tour stop is underwritten in part by the Edward F. Hilbruner Irrevocable Trust and the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency. Additional support for this exhibition was generously provided by Sally & Rob Baird.

See Ubhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence through November 10, 2019.