

Traveling Exhibition of South African Beadwork Opens at Springfield Art Museum

August 29, 2019



SPRINGFIELD – The Springfield Art Museum is pleased to welcome Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence, opened on Saturday, August 17. 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 Ubuhle 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 ndwangos.

Ubuhle 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.

Established in 1999 by two women — Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela and Bev Gibson—on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, Ubuhle began as a way of creating employment for rural women by combining traditional skills 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.

Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Washington, DC, in cooperation with Curators Bev Gibson, Ubuhle Beads, and James Green, and is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists, Washington, DC. This 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 Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence through November 10, 2019.

The Springfield Art Museum is located at 1111 East Brookside Drive.

Admission is always free.

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