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BHP Billiton grants R1m to Ifa Lethu

The BHP Billiton Development Trust (BBDT) has contributed R1 million to Ifa Lethu, a body established in 2004 for the repatriation of South African artworks from all across the globe. BHP Billiton is the first company to fund this venture, making it a founding member and corporate patron of the foundation.

Ifa Lethu, chaired by Dr Mamphela Ramphele, chair of Circle Capital Ventures (Pty) Ltd and former managing director of the World Bank, is a Section 21 company that retrieves township art and artefacts which were lost to South Africa during the apartheid era. Hundreds of artworks were bought in the townships by diplomats based in South Africa between the early 1970s and the late 1980s, at a time when few South Africans were buying township art.

“Our aim is to bring home our art and other depictions of our struggle for freedom so that South Africans can celebrate them,” says Dr Ramphele.

The project began with the donation of a historically important collection of South African artworks by Australian diplomat Diane Johnstone, who served in South Africa in the 1970s. She built strong links with artists who suffered under the regime, and her intention had always been to donate her art collection back to the people of South Africa once the political system had been transformed.

After Johnstone’s collection had been donated, it became apparent that there was a significant body of artwork – produced over two decades at the height of apartheid, and of great cultural value to South Africa – residing in overseas collections.

The Foundation received R4,5 million over the next three years from the Department of Arts and Culture, the proviso being that this is matched with private sector contributions. It was on the strength of this commitment that the foundation, backed by the Australian High Commission, decided to approach BHP Billiton.

“BHP Billiton is recognised internationally for its support of the arts,” Dr Ramphele says. “The fact that the project has a strong Australian link made the BHP Billiton Development Trust an obvious first choice for us to approach as a sponsor, as the company’s headquarters are in Melbourne. Through its strong support for the project, the company has demonstrated its commitment to creating a positive and conducive environment for business growth in this country.”

Ifa Lethu aims to bring this art back to South Africa and use it to teach younger generations about our heritage. Already, more than 170 pieces have been identified and pledged.



The cheque was handed over at a ceremony in Johannesburg, to Dr Ramphele and newly appointed Ifa Lethu CEO Narissa Ramdhani. Speaking at the handover, Dr Ramphele said: “We are delighted that BHP Billiton’s generous patronage serves as a platform for the work of the foundation under the leadership of Ms Ramdhani. As former head of the ANC archives, Narissa is ideally poised to take Ifa Lethu into the next phase of its existence and operation. Patronage such as that of BHP Billiton is essential to our ability to bring these important works home.”

“This is an important sponsorship opportunity for a major corporate such as BHP Billiton,” says Sam Seepei, senior manager of the BHP Billiton Development Trust. “Furthermore, we want to continue to play a role in mobilising business support for the project so that funding will be sustainable. We believe this is a most worthwhile cultural project, and one that will contribute to the process of healing in our country.”

The initial collection will be housed at the Pretoria Art Museum, and will subsequently be rolled out to art museums across the country.