

Cash call to help save nation's lost soul

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By Zara Nicholson



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The largest organisation repatriating South African art removed during apartheid faces closure over funding.

Ifa Lethu Foundation chief executive Narissa Ramdhani has told the arts and culture portfolio committee the organisation faced serious funding issues and could only survive another two years.

Based in Durban and Pretoria, the foundation was established five years ago with a mandate to repatriate art and heritage objects, and is largely funded by the Department of Arts and Culture and funding agencies.

Ramdhani told the Cape Times: "Funding is a serious obstacle to our work aimed at creating employment in rural areas and in healing the nation's soul. For Ifa Lethu, as with other creative organisations, this is a major challenge. Major corporations are reluctant to invest their resources in the heritage sector as the prevailing view is that heritage and heritage institutions do not contribute to the economic development of the country".

In the past five years, Ifa Lethu has repatriated 415 artworks from 11 countries. "These artworks represent thousands of paintings, drawings and sculptures by black artists and purchased by foreign diplomats and business executives who were posted in South Africa by their respective countries during the struggle years.

"While these individuals point out that this was a means of helping struggling black artists sustain themselves, they also recognised the artistic value of these collections. Our former

minister of arts and culture, Pallo Jordan, described these actions on the part of the visitors, as altruistic,” Ramdhani said.

Artworks have been returned from countries such as Australia, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, the US and UK. She said buyers were now generously donating the art back to South Africa and were “filling a void in the country’s heritage”.

The foundation needs about R4.5 million each year for core activities, project funding, repatriation and other work required in the process.

Ramdhani said their budgets needed to cover shipping, customs costs related to repatriated collections as well as conservation costs for maintaining the art once it arrived in the country.

“Attempts are being made to introduce initiatives aimed at sustaining the foundation. These include entrepreneurial training programmes and craft development programmes in South Africa.

“But this requires a time span of five years. Until that point we are at the mercy of funding agencies,” she said.

Annelie Lotriet, DA MP and spokeswoman for arts and culture, said she would request an investigation into an alternative funding model for the foundation.

In a statement, Lotriet said: “We cannot allow a situation where significant works of art that provide important insight into a period of our history cannot be repatriated to South Africa. It is important that South Africa’s art is accessible so that it can be enjoyed and appreciated by all South Africans.”

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