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Back to Africa

By Steven Edwards <>

A former Canadian envoy to South Africa is among the first to answer that country's call for the repatriation of artworks by black Africans during the apartheid era. Career diplomat David Gillett, right, bought 13 works in the early 1970s when his duties at the Canadian Embassy in Pretoria included visiting South Africa's black townships to gauge the level of unrest among the disenfranchised black majority. He was one of an unknown number of diplomats, businessmen and anti-apartheid activists whose purchases helped sustain the artists through the years of oppression under white minority rule. Mr. Gillett, 58, has arranged for his collection to be returned to South Africa following his death now that post-apartheid South Africa has launched a campaign to reclaim the works. Leaders of the campaign hope his gesture - one of just a handful - will help them locate thousands of other works that are believed to be in boardrooms or private collections in countries that maintained links with apartheid-era South Africa. The "lost" works are believed principally to be in Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany and the United States. "These were not acts of plunder, but acts of altruism in the purest sense," said Narissa Ramdhani, head of the Ifa Lethu (Our Heritage) Foundation, which is spearheading the recovery project. "They bought works from the black artists to help them continue their work of recording life in the townships." The subject matter of Mr. Gillett's collection - bought for a few hundred dollars, but estimated by the auction house Christie's to be worth as much as \$20,000 U.S. - is typical of the themes the artists depicted. One is of a black prisoner tethered by chains to a wall. Another, titled "Celebration," depicts a festival. Still others are simple renditions of life in the townships, such as one showing a bicycle in a street. "I bought them because I liked them, not for investment or posterity," said Mr. Gillett. "But they are now a very important part of their history, and I feel strongly the collection should go back to South Africa." Pretoria was Mr. Gillett's first posting with the Canadian foreign service, and after arriving in 1973 he was quickly dispatched to a number of black communities around the country, including the widely known Soweto township outside Johannesburg. "In theory, if we wanted to go to the townships, we were supposed to ask for permission from the South African authorities," Mr. Gillett explained. "In practice, none of us did." He recalled that in addition to himself, diplomats from the Australian and U.S. embassies were the most frequent visitors to the townships. "At the time, commercial art galleries in Pretoria were buying the township art very cheaply, and reselling it at market value," Mr. Gillett said. "This was of no benefit to the black artists, so a group of us - Diane Johnstone from Australia and Tom Maher of the U.S. Embassy - decided to hold an art show on the artists' behalf. I volunteered my house. We helped the artists price the stuff at market value. And over a Saturday and Sunday people came and bought everything being shown." Customers were mainly foreigners, but a few white South Africans showed up, Mr. Gillett recalled. He said the artists, all men in their 20s and 30s, received between \$50 and \$100 U.S. for each of their works. That was significant money both at the time and for their circumstance, and about five times more than they received from the commercial galleries. "It was a patriarchal society, and that perhaps explains why I never saw any women artists," Mr. Gillett noted. "They were artists rather than political activists, and all had second relatively menial jobs." Mr. Gillett said although the South African authorities never overtly bothered him, they harassed Ms. Johnstone. "I knew they were following my movements, but they gave her - a tall, blond woman - a lot of hassle," he recalled. "She knew her apartment had been searched." Like Mr. Gillett, Ms. Johnstone ended up with a significant collection of township art, and essentially kick-started the current repatriation drive by being the first major donor. The former Australian diplomat is now working closely with Ms. Ramdhani and others in Ifa Lethu, whose title is drawn from the language of South Africa's Xhosa people, to help locate additional purchasers of the art. Ms. Ramdhani said negotiations are under way with several major U.S. companies believed to possess significant collections, while Ifa Lethu is also contacting 12 Canadian former anti-apartheid activists who may have additional works. "The Canadian connection is interesting because we are talking mainly about activists who may have been able to sneak in and out of the country - perhaps through Swaziland - and who then utilized this material to help create awareness of the plight of the majority of South Africans," Ms. Ramdhani

said. She declined to name the companies contacted, saying the issue was "sensitive," but said they include major banks or mining concerns. "This kind of heritage was created during the dark and dangerous years of apartheid," she said. "It's extraordinary, and the fact that it was preserved and can now be returned to South Africa is a minor miracle." Ms. Ramdhani's own story reflects some of the injustice that occurred under apartheid. Though South African born, her ethnicity is Indian, which was one of the system's racial designations, alongside black African, coloured and white. But it was her academic writings against apartheid that brought her to the attention of the authorities. "The state considered it subversive writing. My life became extremely difficult. My family was threatened," she said. By 1986, the pressure had become so great she felt it best for her family if she lived abroad. She moved to Connecticut, leaving behind her husband and daughter of just a few months old. The move towards majority rule accelerated following the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela, and Ms. Ramdhani returned to her homeland in 1993 ahead of the election that made him the country's first black president. The repatriation of township art is part of a wider effort by South Africa in recent years to recover other aspects of its heritage from abroad. For example, the African National Congress, the main political party that led the anti-apartheid struggle, has for years been recovering archival material from the 33 offices it had around the world. More recently, efforts have been launched in the Netherlands to recover radios built from metal scraps by people in the townships. "They show the sheer ingenuity of the people of the townships," said Ms. Ramdhani. "They couldn't afford to buy radios. They built them from nothing. Someone bought them and took them to the Netherlands, and we are trying to get them back."