

IFA LETHU

Ifa Lethu was formerly launched on November 19, 2005 in Sandton, where Arts and Culture Minister Dr Pallo Jordan gave a keynote address. The organisation aims to repatriate struggle art, popularly known as township art, taken out of the country during the apartheid years. Ifa Lethu's offices are located in Groenkloof, Tshwane. Ifa Lethu's Project Manager Brown Maaba talks about the organisation's work.

Tell us about the work that Ifa Lethu has done so far?

The Foundation has so far repatriated more than 150 artworks. This is a remarkable achievement, considering that the organisation was only launched in November 2005.

Why is it important for Ifa Lethu to return South African artworks?

It is very important for the Foundation to repatriate these artworks mainly because the pieces are part of the country's heritage and reflect the socio-political situation of South Africa during apartheid. These are rare pieces which tell our history. So for us as a nation to heal our souls and spiritually banish apartheid demons we need to turn to our heritage, in this case the struggle artworks. During apartheid black artists sold most of these artworks for next to nothing mainly because they had pressing family demands. Many children from the artists' family have no idea what kind of artworks their parents produced. As a result, many questions remain unanswered. Even the artists themselves often wonder about the whereabouts of their artworks.

Which project has been most difficult so far?

So far it has been slightly difficult to establish who has these artworks in their possession. Remember that the very same people who bought these artworks later returned to their respective countries and are difficult to trace. Recently, we had a Repatriation Breakfast at the Pretoria Country Club. We invited the diplomatic community and appealed to them to help us identify structures and individuals in their respective countries and asked them to consider returning South Africa's tangible heritage.



A repatriated artwork by Lucas Mahome

How is the project funded?

The project received seed funding from the Department of Arts and Culture and BHP Billiton.

What future projects is Ifa Lethu planning to embark on?

We have secured a Mobile Gallery, funded by Goodyear, for the purposes of an outreach program. The repatriated artworks will be taken to the country's rural and disadvantaged communities, especially schools. We hope to launch the Mobile Gallery at Fort Hare University on March 21, 2007, on Human Rights Day. By using the Mobile Gallery, we are in many ways taking a museum to the marginalised. Remember that

the apartheid government deliberately built museums and art galleries in cities and towns and these are out of reach for many of our people. But, also through the Mobile Gallery, we hope to emphasise the fact that education is not just a classroom matter. We are thus bridging the gap between what is taught in class and the outside world, thus furthering the aims of outcomes based education. We also have other plans in the pipeline. Next year is the 30th anniversary of the death of Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko. The Steve Biko Foundation plans to host a series of cultural activities marking the death of this great son of the soil. We have been approached by the Biko Foundation to exhibit some of our artworks as part of the commemorations. We have agreed to do so. After all, most of the repatriated artworks depict black suffering in apartheid South Africa, including during the era of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s.

How can the general public help Ifa Lethu in its projects?

The public could also help Ifa Lethu to achieve its objectives. We would like the public to come forward with more names of the struggle artists whose work left the shores of this country during apartheid. We would also like disadvantaged communities, especially schools, to receive us with open arms and work with us as the Mobile Gallery reaches out to different parts of the country.

Who are the staff of Ifa Lethu, and how do they work together to make the project a success?

The Foundation is headed by Narissa Ramdhani, who, as the head of the ANC archives, successfully repatriated the ANC's consignment from 33 missions across the world. Today, the ANC archives at Fort Hare are open to scholars for writing purposes. So Ramdhani is not new in the field of heritage repatriation. I am the project manager, and I am a historian with publications in history, heritage and education. I have worked as head of research at the Govan Mbeki Research and Development Centre at the University of Fort Hare. The Steve Biko Foundation and Freedom Park Trust. There is also an active and supportive Board with Dr Mamphela Ramphele as Chairperson.

To contact Ifa Lethu call 012 346 2985.

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