

Return to Africa for artwork that escaped apartheid

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A nation's heritage is going home, writes Alexa Moses.

He knew the black activist Steve Biko and helped smuggle the journalist Donald Woods out of South Africa in the 1970s. Now the retired Australian diplomat Bruce Haigh is sending some South Africans home.

The Mudgee resident is donating 25 artworks to the Pretoria Art Museum. The works were created by black township artists at a time when apartheid was at its peak, and black artists couldn't freely exhibit their work.

"I'll miss them, but it's good for South African youngsters to see these works," says Haigh, who bought the artworks in the late 1970s when he was second secretary at the Australian embassy in South Africa. "I'll be sad, but it's right."

Haigh's collection, estimated to be worth \$200,000, includes pencil drawings, woodcuts, lino prints and ink sketches by artists including Lucky Sibiyi and Michael Maapola, who lived in townships such as Atteridgeville, Garankuwa, Mamelodi and Soweto.

The project was sparked by another retired diplomat, Diane Johnstone, who was the Australian embassy's third secretary in South Africa from 1974 to 1976.

Like other diplomats, Johnstone held private exhibitions of black artists' work in her home. Haigh continued the tradition. Diplomats and journalists bought the art for their collections.

"It would turn into a weekend party," Haigh says. "A lot of music and parties; everyone, including the artists, would come."

At Johnstone's first exhibition in 1974, she promised the artists she would give her collection of 17 works to South Africa when the country had black majority rule. Although a black majority government took power in 1994, it took years of organisation before the establishment of the Homecoming Foundation to oversee the repatriation. Johnstone gave the works to the Pretoria Art Museum in 2003 and now Haigh is following Johnstone's lead.

The two hope to inspire other diplomats and journalists who bought artwork to donate it to South Africa.

The chairwoman of the Homecoming Foundation, Dr Mamphela Ramphele, a former director of the World Bank, is pleased the art is coming home.

"If we had not the kind of environment that undermined the creativity of the majority population, we would not have lost this art," she said. "We lost it because we didn't appreciate how good it was. We measured how good it was by the colour of the producer's skin, rather than the quality of the work."