

Township art finds its way back to rightful home

Carole Landry

A collection of artworks depicting township life during apartheid was shown for the first time in decades at the weekend.

The exhibition, in Sandton, is part of a campaign launched to bring "township art", taken abroad during apartheid, back to South Africa.

The 70 paintings, drawings and sculptures were brought together by the Ifa Lethu Foundation, a non-profit organisation funded by

the department of arts and culture and private corporations.

The works, from the 1970s, portray the turmoil of township life at the height of apartheid, though not all the pieces touch on political themes.

"These are works of that time that haven't been seen," said artist Michael Maapola, whose *Self-Portrayed*, which he produced in 1975, was shown at the one-night exhibition.

Hundreds of artworks produced by black artists during the

1970s are now overseas.

They adorn the living rooms of diplomats or are in the possession of private collectors, said Narissa Ramdhani, chief executive of the Ifa Lethu Foundation.

"South Africa was denied the opportunity to put together and preserve this important heritage," said Ramdhani.

Ifa Lethu has identified pieces in the United States, Canada, Germany, Denmark and Sweden that it would like to repatriate.

But Ramdhani said the foun-

dation faced a "daunting task" in convincing collectors or museums to part with the works without financial compensation.

"People should consider the context in which this art found its way abroad and return it," says Diane Johnstone, an Australian diplomat who donated 17 pieces that she had acquired while posted to Pretoria in the 1970s.

An art aficionado, Johnstone held exhibitions in her Pretoria apartment during her posting, despite the disapproval of her South

African government hosts.

"They took a very dim view of my activities because the art was seen as challenging the regime," said Johnstone.

Her donation, with that of a colleague, Bruce Haigh and that of an American diplomat form the core of the Ifa Lethu collection.

Ifa Lethu's collection is to go on the road in six months as part of a mobile gallery that Ramdhani said would bring the art to the townships where it was produced decades ago. - *Sapa-AFP*