

Home is where the art should be

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SOUTH African artist Peter Sibeko's paintings decorate homes and corporate headquarters around the world — and now a government-funded agency wants them returned.

The Soweto-born artist is among a list of contemporary black artists whose work, depicting life in the townships, was collected by foreign diplomats and art collectors.

It was shipped out of the country more than two or three decades ago.

Now the Ifa Lethu Foundation, launched 18 months ago, is scouring the globe to recover the priceless works.

Chief executive Nariassa Ramdhani has already combed the US, Australia, Britain, Canada, Spain and Germany, and so far her team has traced 196 works of art.

"It's been a phenomenal success ... and now the foundation's repatriation efforts have been broadened to include other areas of South African heritage such as music, films and documents," said Ramdhani.

She added that Ifa Lethu was locked in negotiations for the repatriation of a personal collection of historic documents and a film collection from the US.

The foundation's project manager, Brown Maaba, said the historic documents included incomplete manuscripts by South African writers who died abroad and film footage of the 1980s political uprisings.



MOVED BEYOND WORDS: Artist Peter Sibeko in his Johannesburg gallery

Picture: MUNTU VILAKAZI

"After 1994, many South Africans were in such a rush to return home that they left boxes and boxes of documents and other material behind," he said.

The government wants the artworks and historic artefacts retrieved because they form a valuable part of South Africa's heritage, according to the foundation.

Although Ramdhani is hes-

itant to put a value on the 195-piece collection, management at some of Johannesburg's private galleries say that the paintings were priceless since many collectors don't want to part with them.

"How can one place a monetary value on a collection which has such historic value?"

"The fact that this art was created and preserved is in itself

a minor miracle," Ramdhani said.

The artists who produced the art works include Ezrom Legae, Michael Masopola, Ezekiel Madiha, Solly Malope and Winston Saoli.

Sibeko said many of his fellow artists had died "penniless" even though their paintings were now worth a fortune.

Some of his earlier paintings,



PRICELESS HERITAGE: This untitled painting by Peter Sibeko, created in 1987, is one of 195 works of art that have been found and returned to South Africa by the Ifa Lethu Foundation

which were sold for a mere R50 to American and British art collectors in the 1960s, were sold for about \$16 000 around 1995.

"Some of my paintings were about my mother. My paintings also expressed life in Soweto, more especially the life we lived. There were some good times," he said.

Sibeko, whose work has been exhibited in Britain and the US, opened his own gallery, the Soweto Art Gallery, in the 1970s and started buying paintings from other artists in the township.

"In those days white people couldn't go into Soweto."



So he would collect paintings from other artists and sell them in his gallery.

Foreign embassies would also invite Sibeko to exhibit and sell his work.

Asked whether the Ifa Lethu Foundation could estimate how many paintings were taken out of the country, Ramdhani said: "We'll not even attempt to guesstimate that ... We keep uncovering our lost treasures."

To fast-track the process, the foundation plans to recruit a researcher to conduct a comprehensive international audit of all artworks out there.

But, for now, an international advisory body, the Global Advisory Council, has been set up to trace the historic artefacts.

The foreign diplomatic community in Pretoria has also pledged its support.

The project started when Australian diplomat Diane Johnstone donated — to the Pretoria Art Museum — a collection of art she had collected during a posting here in the 1970s.

That inspired the Department of Arts and Culture to launch a wider hunt for similar works.

Sibeko said it felt strange seeing some of his earlier work after more than 30 years.

"I was left speechless. I still can't find the words to describe how it feels," he said.

The artist, who still owns his gallery in the city centre, said the work of artists of the period had been compared to that of legendary artist Gerard Sekoto, who died at the age of 80 in Paris in 1993.

In May last year, a South African art collector splashed out £117 600 (R1.3-million) for one of Sekoto's pairings in London.

Another '70s artist, Sipho Ndebele, whose paintings captured festive celebrations in Soweto, said it was still difficult to believe that his work and that of his contemporaries was being recognised as a part of SA's heritage. He still remembers that one of his paintings of Soweto was sold to a diplomat from the Italian embassy.

"Rich people bought our paintings ... You know rich people — the Germans, lawyers, doctors, estate agents," he said.

Ramdhani said the foundation had not yet been forced to pay for any of the art.

Collectors who have generously handed over their township art include former Australian diplomat Bruce Haigh, former Canadian envoy Dave Gillett and Johannesburg attorney Steve Itzikowitz.

However, Ramdhani said there had been cases where a collector had refused to return a collection.

"In these instances we use other mechanisms to continue to engage donors such as members of the Global Advisory Body, the Department of Foreign Affairs, foreign missions in South Africa and so on. When all else fails we appeal to their conscience," she said.

The Ifa Lethu collection is housed at the Pretoria Art Museum in Tshwane, from where it will tour the country.