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Call to repatriate art of apartheid years

By Carole Landry

Johannesburg – A collection of artworks depicting township life in apartheid South Africa was shown for the first time in decades at the weekend as a campaign was launched for the return of "township art".

The 70 paintings, drawings and sculptures were brought together by the Ifa Lethu Foundation, a non-profit organisation funded by the culture ministry and private corporations to spearhead the repatriation of art that was taken abroad during apartheid.

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

"These are works of that time that haven't been seen. They remind us of our days when everything was hard," said artist Michael Maapola, whose "self-portrayed", an ink drawing he produced in 1975, was shown at the one-night exhibition here on Saturday.

Hundreds of artworks produced by black artists during the 1970s are now overseas, adorning the living rooms of diplomats or in the possession of private collectors, said Ifa Lethu Foundation chief executive Narissa Ramdhani.

"There is a very large gap," Ramdhani said. "South Africa was denied the opportunity to put together and preserve this important heritage."

Already, Ifa Lethu has identified pieces in the United States, Canada, Germany, Denmark and Sweden that it would like to repatriate. But Ramdhani said the foundation faced a "daunting task" in convincing collectors or museums to part with the works without financial compensation.

While South Africa cannot lay legal claim to the works as stolen art, Ifa Lethu contends that the pieces left the country because the white regime at the time suppressed all forms of black expression.

"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 who befriended many artists, Johnstone held exhibitions in her Pretoria apartment during her posting, despite disapproval from her South African government hosts.

"They took a very grim view of my activities because the art was seen as challenging the regime," said Johnstone, who left South Africa in 1976, taking many works with her back to Australia.

"I made a promise to the artists that when black majority rule

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