

## **From Past Heritage to Future Creativity: Empowering South Africa's Soul**

The Ifa Lethu Foundation has used repatriation of heritage such as visual art works from abroad, to inspire and develop the country's future creative entrepreneurs

During apartheid's dark years of the 60s, 70s and early 80s, local black and so-called township artists were not allowed to exhibit their works of art in white galleries or public places. Deemed to have 'no commercial value' and to be inferior to white artists of the time, they struggled to make a living for themselves and their families. Similarly, 'black' music was confined to the no-go areas of the townships. But jazz loving diplomats and foreign business executives risked arrest to hear the exciting rhythms and beats they knew could be experienced if you were brave enough to risk going into the 'locations'. Gradually, visual artists brought their works to these musical events and many were bought by art-lovers for small amounts of money. Indeed, diplomats like Australians Bruce Haigh and Diane Johnstone were entranced by the vivid colours and images depicting everything from township life to the ongoing struggle for freedom.

Fast forward to 2004 when local journalist Tom Nevin contacted the two now-retired diplomats back in Australia with the idea to repatriate this missing link of our heritage to share with the nation and the world. This idea, generously supported by Bruce and Di, resulted in their unselfish donation of their extensive collections and Ifa Lethu was born.

Meaning "Our Heritage", Ifa Lethu, under the steady, guiding hand of then chairperson Dr Mamphela Ramphele, was on the journey to identify and bring home these unique lost pieces of struggle art. Today the collection features more than 330 pieces from countries such as Spain, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom France and many others. The works are regularly featured at small events as well as the new world tour exhibition "Home & Away: a return to the South" – recently visited in Johannesburg by over 4000 people from numerous countries during the World Cup. Currently on show in Cape Town, it moves to Durban in January 2011 before embarking on a world tour to Chile, the USA, UK and Australia.

### **The next generation**

Over the past three years, Ifa Lethu has used the struggle era works to inspire and train young creative entrepreneurs on how to improve their artistic skills and to gain business skills in order to take their works to market and sustain themselves and their families. Says CEO Dr Narissa Ramdhani; "Our development programme has already produced income-earning young entrepreneurs in both the fashion and arts sectors."

The new Ifa Lethu Art Incubation Studio will open in Soweto at Ubuntu Kraal in November and welcomes visitors to see these young people at work and to buy investment pieces.

Ifa Lethu has not only brought an important part of our cultural history and heritage home, but has used the inspiration of previously unrecognized artists to spur a new generation of talented youth to take their places on the local and world stages of art, fashion and culture.

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