SOUTH AFRICAN BEAD ART ON DISPLAY
AT THE DAYTON ART INSTITUTE THIS SUMMER

‘Ubuhle Women’ exhibition tells a luminous story of independence, migration and memory

(DAYTON, OHIO) – June 21, 2017 – The Dayton Art Institute will be the first museum in the United States to host the new touring exhibition Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence.

Ubuhle Women presents a spectacular overview of a new form of bead art, called the ndwango (“cloth”), developed by a community of women living and working together in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The special exhibition opens June 24 and will be on view at the museum through September 10.

Ubuhle (pronounced Uh-Buk-lay) means “beauty” in the Xhosa and Zulu languages and describes the shimmering quality of light on glass that for the Xhosa people has a special spiritual significance. From a distance, each panel of the ndwango seems to present a continuous surface; but as the viewer moves closer and each tiny, individual bead catches the light, the meticulous skill and labor that went into each work—the sheer scale of ambition—becomes stunningly apparent. A single panel can take more than 10 months to complete.
“Like all art, the works on display in *Ubuhle Women* are products of their context, providing guests with an opportunity to experience a new perspective,” said Katherine Ryckman Siegwarth, The Dayton Art Institute’s in-house curator for the exhibition. “These artworks present various topics relevant to the artists’ lives—financial stability, health issues, and importance of family, as well as how artworks can serve as memorials to those lost. These themes are universal and relatable topics to our guests, making the artworks accessible as well as impactful.”

The plain black fabric that serves as a foundation for the Ubuhle women’s exquisite beadwork is reminiscent of the Xhosa headscarves and skirts that many of them wore growing up. By stretching this textile like a canvas, the artists use colored Czech glass beads to transform the flat cloth into a contemporary art form of remarkable visual depth. Using skills handed down through generations, and working in their own unique style “directly from the soul” (in the words of artist Ntombephi Ntobela), the women create abstract as well as figurative subjects for their *ndwangos*.

Migration has defined the history of modern South Africa. The late-19th-century discovery of gold and diamonds—and, to a lesser extent, the cultivation of sugar cane—transfigured South African society with its demands for a large, flexible workforce of able men. As workers left their homesteads in rural areas to earn cash salaries, traditional social systems based on direct production from the land began to change. Low pay and harsh working conditions forced many cane cutters to live apart from their wives and families for up to nine months of the year, which led to a breakdown of family life and traditional values. Ubuhle was conceived in response to this social and cultural transformation.

Established in 1999 by two women—*Ntombephi “Induna” Ntobela* and *Bev Gibson*—on a former sugar plantation in KwaZulu-Natal, Ubuhle began as a way of creating employment for rural women by combining traditional skills and making them profitable. By incorporating a skill that many local women already had—beadwork, a customary form of artistic expression for generations of South African women—and teaching it to those who did not, they began to provide women with a private source of income and a route to financial independence.

Since 2006, the Ubuhle community has lost five artists to HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, nearly halving the number of active artists. Many of the *ndwangos* thus function as memorials to Ubuhle sisters who have lost their lives. Remembering the dead is a key motivation for the creation of many of these artworks, and it imbues them with a spiritual significance.

Due to the slow, meticulous process of creating a *ndwango*, the act of beading itself becomes a form of therapy: a way of setting down the issues that are closest to the artists’ hearts; a way of grieving; and a place to encode feelings and memories. In a sense—through their presence in the artist’s thoughts during the act of creation—the deceased enter the very fabric of the work, and so the *ndwango* becomes a site of memory.

The Ubuhle community exists today due mainly to the determination of Bev Gibson and Ntombephi Ntobela. Ntombephi is a master beader from the Eastern Cape whose tremendous skill, both as artist and teacher, has been the foundation block of this community. Ntombephi is known as “*Induna,*” which means “leader,” a term of great respect in South Africa. The title also suggests the responsibility she feels for the community as guardian of its future. Bev herself does not bead, but she has created the space for Ubuhle artists to explore, experiment, and transform the traditional art form.
Bev has also been an indomitable source of energy and persistence in the emergence of Ubuhle’s growing vision. She and Ntombephi each bring their own unique skills to the establishment of the community, and it is largely thanks to them that these works exist at all.

“The Dayton Art Institute is thrilled to be the first venue for this new touring exhibition, which was originally developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum,” said The Dayton Art Institute’s Director and CEO Michael R. Roediger. “Not only is the artwork beautiful, but the stories of the artists are also extremely moving. These dazzling artworks will amaze everyone who sees them—you do not want to miss this exhibition!”

The Dayton Art Institute’s presentation of *Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence* receives support from Benefactor Sponsor Premier Health; Patron Sponsor Macy’s; Supporting Sponsors Liberty Health Care Corporation, Miller-Valentine Group and Synchrony Financial; Community Partner Central State University; Media Partners Dayton Daily News and WHIO-TV; with additional support from American Medical Response, Bead Stash, Dayton Chapter of Links, Inc., and Dr. Grace L. DeVelbiss, Frownies Skin Care, IGS Energy, School of Advertising Art, Taft/, and University of Dayton; JPS Preview Reception Sponsor is Jessup Wealth Management.

A number of events and programs will be held in conjunction with the exhibition, including:

- ARTventures: Beaded Butterflies, July 8, 1–3 p.m.
- Vine & Canvas Wine Tasting Series: Women & Wine, July 14, 6:30–9 p.m.
- Draw from the Collection: Contemporary Beading, July 15, 1–3 p.m.
- Curatorial Conversations: *Ubuhle Women* Exhibition Tour, July 20, 6–7 p.m.
- Tony West and the Imani Dancers, August 12, 1–2 p.m.
- Behind the Scenes of *Ubuhle Women*, August 31, 1–3 p.m.

For more about the exhibition and related programs, visit [daytonartinstitute.org/ubuhlewomen](http://daytonartinstitute.org/ubuhlewomen). Use the hashtag #UbuhleWomen to join the conversation on social media.

Admission to *Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence* is free for museum members. Non-member admission is $14 adults; $11 seniors (60+), students (18+ w/ID), active military and groups (10 or more); $6 youth (ages 7-17); and free for children (ages 6 & under). Prices include admission to the special exhibition and the museum’s permanent collection. Guided tours are available for individuals, groups and schools. For more information or to schedule a tour, contact Rique Hagen, at 937-223-4278, ext. 332 or [schooltours@daytonart.org](mailto:schooltours@daytonart.org).

Tickets for the exhibitions and related programs may be purchased at the museum’s Guest Services Desk or by phone at 937-223-4ART (4278) during regular hours, or online at [daytonartinstitute.org](http://daytonartinstitute.org). Connect with The Dayton Art Institute on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest for additional information, behind-the-scenes photos and exclusive offers.

*Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence* was developed by the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Washington, D.C., in cooperation with Curators Bev Gibson, Ubuhle Beads, and James Green, and is organized for tour by International Arts & Artists, Washington, D.C.
ABOUT THE DAYTON ART INSTITUTE
As one of the Miami Valley’s premier fine art museums, The Dayton Art Institute offers a full range of programming in addition to exhibiting its collection. Gallery hours are Wednesday – Saturday, 11 a.m. – 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon – 5 p.m., with extended hours until 8 p.m. on Thursdays. Suggested general admission to the museum’s permanent collection is $8 adults, $5 seniors, active military and groups. Admission is free for museum members, students (18+ w/ID) and youth (17 and under). Some special exhibitions, programs and events may carry an additional charge and include admission to the museum’s permanent collection as part of that price. Free parking is available at the museum and the facility is fully accessible to physically challenged visitors. The DAI’s Museum Store is open during regular museum hours. Leo Bistro serves lunch Wednesday – Friday, 11 a.m. – 2:30 p.m., Saturday, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m., and Sunday, noon – 3 p.m. Leo Bistro also serves dinner on Thursday evenings, 4:30 – 7 p.m. For more information, please visit www.daytonartstitute.org or call 937-223-4ART (4278). The Ohio Arts Council helped fund this organization with state tax dollars to encourage economic growth, educational excellence and cultural enrichment for all Ohioans. The DAI also receives support from the Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District.

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL ARTS & ARTISTS
International Arts & Artists in Washington, D.C., is a non-profit arts service organization dedicated to increasing cross-cultural understanding and exposure to the arts internationally, through exhibitions, programs and services to artists, arts institutions and the public. Visit www.artsandartists.org

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