

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Two beadwork exhibitions in Johannesburg, South Africa

‘Beadwork, Art and the Body: Dilo Tše Dintši/Abundance’ ‘eye hand mind; seeing making and understanding’

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In 2015 Johannesburg’s two public universities both staged beadwork exhibitions. The first ‘eye hand mind; seeing making and understanding’ was hosted by the University of Johannesburg’s Faculty of Art Design and Architecture (FADA) Gallery in association with the independent educational non-profit company ‘Africa Meets Africa’ and opened on Monday 20 July 2015. ‘Beadwork, Art and the Body: Dilo Tše Dintši/Abundance’ followed shortly thereafter opening at the Wits Art Gallery (WAM) on 29 July and remained open until October 2015.

The curators had very specific intentions in mind for their respective exhibitions. Helene Smuts established ‘Africa Meets Africa’ to develop teaching resources for South African educators in subject areas such as Mathematics, History, Language and Arts and Culture by drawing on objects of cultural expression. ‘Eye hand mind’ showcased how the work of South African weavers, beadwork makers, potters and painters can be used as a tool to teach mathematics to rural children. The exhibition was beautifully curated by Helene Smuts and FADA’s Eugene Hön and explanatory wall texts and other information design ensured that the intent of the exhibition was made accessible to all visitors. The didactic approach of the exhibition was unsurprising given the aim of the exhibition and Smuts’s background as an arts education consultant with an involvement in teacher training and Hön’s many years of experience as a ceramics lecturer at FADA.

In contrast, Anitra Nettleton emphatically positioned the beadwork at the WAM exhibition as ‘art’ choosing to exhibit items according to their position on the body, such as ankles, arms, waist and neck, and deliberately avoided ethnographic practices of categorizing items according to ethnic affiliation. Similarly, photographic representations of items in use were circumvented and items were exhibited on transparent Perspex structures giving the impression that they were floating in the air. Currently Nettleton is the Chair and Director of the Centre for Creative Arts of Africa at WAM. She took up this position in 2012 after serving for many years as History of Art Professor in the Wits School of Arts. The meticulously curated exhibition, quality of the beadwork, sophisticated exhibition methods used and gallery environment all supported the aim to elevate the beadwork items to the status of ‘art’. This

elevated status of art was literally expressed on the top floor of the exhibition where the work of a number of contemporary artists working with beadwork was showcased alongside the work of beadwork collectives and contemporary examples of beadwork.

Ostensibly these two approaches, one in favour of beadwork as an expression of mathematical thinking, the other as art, seem to be widely divergent. However, both these positionalities speak of attempts at elevating beadwork from a history in which it was seen as 'other', the work of African women which was devalued as 'craft'. As such the exhibitions offer a critical cultural review of beadwork and raises questions around cultural value and inequality, asking of the viewer to reconsider their conceptions of the roles objects can play and how we assign value to things. Each exhibition emphasizes a specific function for beadwork, thereby concomitantly positioning the makers of the beadwork as 'artists' and 'mathematicians' respectively, positions which are valued within Western epistemology but were denied to South African woman under colonialism and apartheid. These two positions are argued for persuasively and eloquently in both exhibitions, as well as the accompanying catalogue, in the case of the WAM exhibition, and the educator's resource books developed for math teaching and learning by Helene Smuts.

As such the exhibitions demonstrate how the meaning of objects are fluid and can shift given different contexts and positioning and ultimately how what objects communicate is entirely dependent on the structures in which they are given meaning. Beadwork therefore can be viewed in diverse ways, for example as adornment, craft, women's work, ethnographic object, art, a mathematical formula, or as I would like to argue, communication design. However, this is a view with which Nettleton disagrees. She does not consider beadwork to be a language and views beadwork as 'markers' rather than messages. Although she concedes that beadwork communicates non-verbally she does not view it as a language and therefore 'deliberately avoided suggesting anything like this in our exhibition'.

For me the most obvious manifestation of beadwork as communication design is the inclusion of words and letters within the beadwork itself. This is seen in examples such as a bride's wedding apron (Figure 1), or a married woman's cape which includes letters from car registration numbers, thereby indicating aspiration towards owning such an object (Figure 2). The shapes and other formal qualities of the beadwork also communicate messages relating to status, gender and language group. This is clearly seen in the various shapes of the aprons worn by woman at different life stages (Figure 3). To make meaning of these messages relies on a groups' shared understandings of codes and in this way beadwork is no different from any other language.



Figure 1. Bride's wedding apron. Photographer Deirdre Pretorius, copyright courtesy Wits Art Museum.



Figure 2. Married women's cape artist unrecorded Zulu (Ngwane) Marriage Cape. Cloth, glass beads, thread. Mid-20th Century. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum.

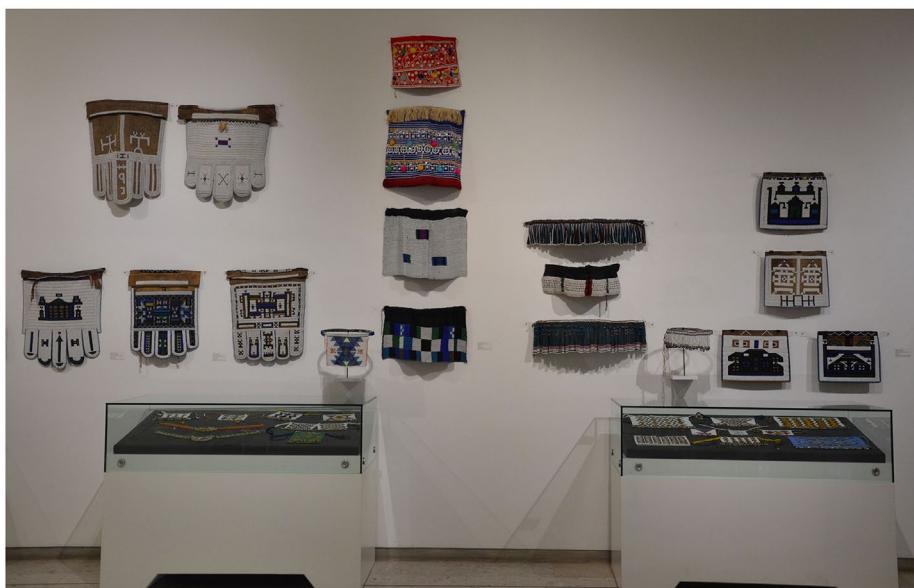


Figure 3. Aprons worn by woman at different life stages artist unrecorded Ndebele iriri (Beaded Blanket). Cloth, glass beads, thread. Mid-20th Century. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum: artist unrecorded Xhosa Beaded blanket. Cloth, glass beads, thread. Early 20th Century. Standard Bank Collection of African Art, Wits Art Museum.

Notes on Contributor

Deirdre Pretorius is associate professor and head of the Department of Graphic Design at the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. Her main research interest is the history of graphic design in South Africa, particularly in relation to printed propaganda. To this end she has published a number of journal articles on the printed propaganda of the Communist Party of South African from 1921–1950. Currently she is researching South African Second World War propaganda posters. She completed an MA in Information Design at the University of Pretoria on South African protest posters from the 1980s. In March 2012 she graduated with a DLitt and Phil in Historical Studies at the University of Johannesburg.