

Press Release

South Africa: the art of a nation

27 October 2016 - 26 February 2017
Room 35

*Sponsored by Betsy and Jack Ryan
Logistics partner IAG Cargo*

This autumn the British Museum will host the first major UK exhibition on South African art that explores a 100,000 history through archaeological, historic and contemporary artworks, which look at the long and rich artistic heritage of the country.

South Africa: the art of a nation is sponsored by Jack and Betsy Ryan and will use art to tell the story of the region's deep history, the colonial period, apartheid, the birth of the 'rainbow nation' and South Africa today. Objects from the British Museum's own South African collections will be displayed alongside contemporary acquisitions. There will also be significant loans in the exhibition, including objects coming to the UK for the very first time, thanks to the exhibition's logistics partner IAG Cargo.

The exhibition will shed light on the varied artistic achievements of South Africa with around 200 objects arranged chronologically across seven key episodes from the country's history, from ancient history to the present day. Each section is illustrated with artworks by contemporary artists that provide new perspectives regarding South Africa's past. One example of this approach is a new acquisition that the British Museum has made to its permanent collection for this exhibition, Karel Nel's 'Potent fields' (2002). Nel created 'Potent Fields', with its two planes of red and white ochre, in the same year as the discovery of the approximately 75,000 year old cross-hatched ochre at Blombos Cave in the Western Cape. This discovery repositioned southern Africa, not Europe, as one of the earliest sites of artistic thought and creation. The tension in the piece between white and coloured planes echoes the colour divide of apartheid. Nel collected the ochre in Nelson Mandela's ancestral lands in the Eastern Cape, and so the artwork also acknowledges the balance that Mandela dedicated his life trying to create among all people in post-apartheid South Africa.

One of the most significant loans is the gold treasures of Mapungubwe, four of which are leaving South Africa for the very first time. From AD 1220 to 1290 Mapungubwe was the capital of the first kingdom in southern Africa. These gold figures, discovered in three royal graves there, are among the most significant sculptures in Africa today. They depict animals of high status – a cow, a wild cat and a rhinoceros, and objects associated with power – a sceptre and a bowl or crown. The only one of the Mapungubwe treasures to have travelled to the UK before is a gold bowl which underwent conservation work at the British Museum. The golden rhino is now the symbol of the Order of Mapungubwe, South Africa's highest honour that was first presented in 2002 to Nelson Mandela.

The gold treasures of Mapungubwe are evidence of new developments in artistic production at the start of the second millennium around the time of the creation of the first southern African kingdoms, as society shifted towards more hierarchical styles of rule. These archaeological artworks are important in contemporary South Africa for many reasons, not least because they are evidence that complex societies existed in the region immediately prior to the arrival of European settlers. This history was hidden during the apartheid era when the colonial concept of 'terra nullius', the myth of an empty land, was used to legitimise white rule. In the exhibition, gold treasures of Mapungubwe will be displayed alongside a modern artwork by Penny Siopis and a sculpture by Owen Ndou that encourage the viewer to challenge the historic assumptions of the colonial and apartheid eras.

The British Museum has been collecting contemporary African art for over 20 years, and this exhibition presents an opportunity to showcase

some of the pieces acquired from South African artists. A recent acquisition to the British Museum's permanent collection is a stunning 2 metre wide textile 'The Creation of the Sun' (2015), a collaborative piece from Bethesda Arts Centre in South Africa. The artists at the centre are descendants of South Africa's first peoples, San|Bushmen and Khoekhoen who have been inspired by archival recordings of their ancestors' beliefs to produce contemporary representations of their founding stories, such as the creation of the sun.

South Africa has a dynamic contemporary art scene with a rapidly growing global reputation. A variety of contemporary works are coming on loan to the British Museum from a self-portrait by Lionel Davis' to video featuring Candice Breitz, and a 3D installation by Mary Sibande. These pieces conclude a show punctuated throughout with pieces by artists including Willie Bester, William

Kentridge and Santu Mofokeng. This exhibition will open the eyes of visitors to the long and diverse history of South African art. Through the exploration of key episodes and objects from throughout the country's history, it will reveal unique insights into South Africa today.

Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum said **South Africa: the art of a nation** is a chance to explore the long and diverse history of South African art and challenge audience preconceptions in the way our visitors have come to expect from a British Museum exhibition. Temporary exhibitions of this nature are only possible thanks to external support so I am hugely thankful to Betsy and Jack Ryan's continuing commitment to sponsoring projects at the British Museum. I would also like to express my gratitude to our Logistics partner IAG Cargo who are safely transporting incredible loans that will allow audiences in London to see the unique and powerful stories these objects can tell."

Note to editors

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British Museum

Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG

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The development of this exhibition was supported by a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund.

Tickets £12.00, children under 16 free

Group rates available

Booking fees apply online and by phone

britishmuseum.org/

+44 (0)20 7323 8181

Opening times

Saturday –Thursday 10.00–17.30

Friday 10.00–20.30

Last entry 80 minutes before closing time.

A full public programme will accompany the exhibition. More information is available from the press office.

Follow updates on the exhibition via Twitter with #SouthAfricanArt and follow the Museum @britishmuseum

The beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogue, 'South Africa: the art of a nation', by John Giblin and Chris Spring will be published in October 2016 by Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum. Hardback £40, paperback £25.

About IAG Cargo

IAG Cargo is the single business created following the merger of British Airways World Cargo and Iberia Cargo in April 2011. Following the integration of additional airlines into the business, including Aer Lingus, bmi and Vueling, IAG Cargo now covers a network of over 350 destinations. IAG Cargo has a longstanding relationship flying freight from South Africa to the rest of the world. With a specialist team dedicated to the careful handling of valuable goods, IAG Cargo is a proud logistics partner of the *South Africa: the art of a nation* exhibition.

For further information, please visit the IAG Cargo YouTube channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/IAGCargo> or alternatively, visit the IAG Cargo website: <https://www.iagcargo.com>

For further information on the British Museum

Please contact the Press Office
on +44 20 7323 8394 / 8583
communications@britishmuseum.org

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