

MEDIA RELEASE

UP and US Embassy host ceremony to launch Mapungubwe Archive

PRETORIA – The University of Pretoria (UP) and the Embassy of the United States of America in Pretoria recently hosted a ceremony to open the Mapungubwe Archive as a research repository held under the curatorship of the UP Museums. A plaque was also unveiled during the event to acknowledge the US Embassy’s partnership with UP in the preservation project, which was carried out between 2018 and 2021.

In November 2018, the US Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation research grant was awarded to the Mapungubwe Archive at UP during a signing ceremony with the Registrar of the University of Pretoria, Prof Caroline Nicholson, and the US Embassy. The grant assisted the University to conserve and preserve important archival records from Mapungubwe, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“Despite the many trials during the pandemic, this project was carried out successfully, with more than 60 000 irreplaceable historical documents and an incalculable amount of unique historic photographic records preserved for postgraduate research and future generations of researchers, both locally and globally,” said UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor Tawana Kupe.

The UP Museums officially curate the Mapungubwe Archive. This contemporary repository manages, maintains, preserves and conserves a nationally significant collection of historical material; photographs and negatives; artworks; newspaper clippings; documentation such as letters of correspondence and formal reports; and other research-related material. The archive continues to expand, and includes both electronic and digital records, cartographic records and ephemera. It also houses one of the most comprehensive Mapungubwe reference sections, called the Mapungubwe libraria, which is used for research purposes.

According to Dr Sian Tiley-Nel, Head of the UP Museums and of the Mapungubwe Archive, the repository identifies, collects and preserves records of archival value relating to the history of Mapungubwe and that of research by UP from 1933 to the present. “The archive forms a crucial part of the institution’s memory bank, where historical and current records are held in perpetuity and preserved; the University’s stewardship of the Mapungubwe collection is a national and global responsibility,” she said.

The archive also acquires both public and private records by transfer, gift, bequest, exchange or any other transaction to be held in trust for future generations. Preservation priorities include monitoring the repository, assessing archival holdings and the appropriate storage of archival historical records and materials, as well as performing maintenance and security measures. Access is provided and archival standards are upheld according to the procedures and policy of UNESCO's International Council on Archives, to which the Mapungubwe Archive has become a signatory.

“This archive is not merely a historical or research resource – it is also a process and a space that aims to be remembered, recreated, reconsidered and reimagined and will form part of a digital curatorial strategy for 2026,” Dr Tiley-Nel said. “This contemporary archive demonstrates UP’s social contribution to managing, curating and preserving finite archives, and its wider contribution to the arts, culture and heritage sector of South Africa. UP is committed to preserving the country’s cultural heritage by developing the Mapungubwe Archive for future researchers to reach new insights into our shared history. This archive is the only one of its kind in the country and the UP Museums are proud to have developed this repository, which is now available to all, with the support of the US Embassy.”

The US Embassy’s support for this project, quarterly site visits and willingness to grant extensions is greatly appreciated, Prof Kupe said. “Our gratitude also extends to the archival team, which dedicated themselves to the preservation of these treasured resources throughout the pandemic with commendable professionalism, resulting in the only Mapungubwe Archive in the world.”

“The United States proudly marked the 20th anniversary of the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) in 2021,” said US Chargé d’Affaires Todd Haskell at the ceremony. “The Mapungubwe Archive is part of a constellation of more than 1 000 cultural heritage preservation projects worldwide, including 19 in South Africa alone.” The Mapungubwe Archive project joins the AFCP 2013 project, which aided in the conservation of the University’s Mapungubwe organic collection. The UP Museums was twice the recipient of this grant. “Whether it is improving access to information through this world-class archive or bringing our people together through educational and other exchanges, we are grateful to be partners of the University of Pretoria,” Haskell added.

For more information on the Mapungubwe Archive please email maparchive@up.ac.za or museums@up.ac.za.

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About the University of Pretoria

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business

Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked top in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. The QS World University Rankings also placed UP among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and UP is in the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences), according to the Web of Science Essential Indicators.

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33,000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond University and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za