

NEWS RELEASE

UP Museums textiles exhibit picks up the thread of women's stories



Some of the artworks on display at the "Bokgabo ba mašela: The Art of Textiles" exhibition.

PRETORIA - The [University of Pretoria \(UP\) Museums](#) is proud to present a new, thought-provoking exhibition that brings together a selection of textiles from across the globe, showcasing both the simplicity and complexity of the medium, and highlighting its historical and cultural significance.

[Bokgabo ba mašela: The Art of Textiles](#) opens to the public on 7 March and runs until 17 October 2025, and can be viewed at UP's Bridge Gallery on Hatfield campus. The exhibition reveals the power of textiles to tell long-forgotten stories, and speaks to the profound role they have played in shaping the lives and experiences of women throughout history and the present.

"Textiles are often overlooked as a medium of artistic expression, yet they have been central to shaping our history," says exhibition curator Uthando Baduza. "This exhibition aims to elevate textiles as an art form, while acknowledging the powerful

narratives of women's lives that have been woven into every piece. It is through the threads, the fabrics and the weavings that we gain a deeper understanding of both individual and collective histories. From 12th-century Mapungubwe to the haute couture fashion designs of South African icon Marianne Fassler, these textiles continue to carry with them stories of resilience, culture and identity that need to be heard and appreciated in the context of art history – all well placed within a university museum."

Textiles from all over the world form a blend of voices that have long been unheard. Signature works include iconic pieces such as the Keiskammahoek Guernica from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, as well as works by notable South African artists like Allina Ndebele, Nandipha Mntambo, André Naudé, Amita Mikan and Christo Coetzee, among others. Neels Hansen designs of dresses worn by opera diva Mimi Coertse are exhibited, as are her 20th-century showstopper costumes. Also on display are recognisable cultural materials such as Basotho blankets (courtesy of the Sanlam Art Collection), Ndebele attire, Zulu grass mats, a kaross, a Basotho *mokorotlo* hat and UP's gargantuan Kaross centenary tapestry.

The exhibition draws from its institutional permanent collection. Many of the textiles have not been exhibited to the public and were relegated to storage for decades, which is one reason why this theme was selected. Fundamentally, this exhibit brings historical threads into the contemporary sphere and examines the development of textile art as a practice that transcends boundaries and cultures, and connects people from different parts of the world. It questions the role of textiles within the canon of art history, reflecting on how contemporary textile practices resonate in our ever-shrinking, interconnected world.

The exhibition also pays tribute to the feminist movements of the late 20th century, which challenged the historical exclusion of textiles from scholarly enquiry and elevated the significance of women's work in the art world. Scholars have long argued that the study of textiles unveils the profound impact they've had on various facets of life, from social, political and economic to ethnic and cultural spheres. Scholar Jennifer Goggin articulated "just how deeply the needle has pierced" these areas of human existence. The exhibition seeks to engage with the materiality and textuality of textiles, posing questions about the social bonds formed between women, makers and their communities, while encouraging reflection on how these narratives can be understood in deeper, more meaningful ways.

"We often think of textiles as mere functional objects, but they are so much more," Baduza says. "They hold memory and history; in that sense, they have the power to speak to us across time, linking ancient practices with contemporary narratives."

Baduza adds that the exhibition plays a role in elevating the marginalised voices of black female artists. UP Museums placed historical textiles – such as archaeological fibres from Mapungubwe to Paul Kruger's presidential silk sash – on the same public platform as iconic pieces on loan from women empowerment projects such as the Mapula Embroidery Trust, the Mogalakwena Art Centre, Kaross Foundation, Rorke's Drift, Masana Tapestries and many more.

"This exhibition highlights how textile art in South Africa and around the world has served as an essential form of storytelling, especially for women of colour, who have often turned to this medium to document and reclaim their experiences, identities and histories, which have been excluded from mainstream narratives."

Bokgabo ba mašela: The Art of Textiles invites visitors to reflect on the rich and complex histories embedded within the artworks. The pieces not only provide a window into the human experience, but also offer insight into how textiles can excavate fragments of visual narratives, creating spaces for healing, empowerment and the restoration of communities wounded by the weight of their histories.

The exhibition underscores how textile art can contribute to understanding the intertwined, multi-layered histories of people and places, and allows indigenous knowledge practices to be foregrounded in a museum-art context. It further aims to celebrate the diversity, depth and inclusiveness of what a university museum ought to exhibit in carrying out its social responsibility and sharing its collections.

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For information about tours and admission, contact Steven Motena on + 27 12 420 2178 or email him at 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 its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers 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 the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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