

Exhibition of beadwork on stamps at Iziko Gallery

Two years ago, the South African Post Office released a series of stamps featuring artworks executed in traditional African beadwork. The original beadwork pieces selected and the newly issued stamps can be seen at the exhibition entitled The 8th Definitive Series of Stamps: The luminous beauty of South African beadwork on Stamps at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town until 11 November 2012.

The beaded works of art used on the stamps and other philatelic products were selected exclusively from the permanent collections of the Art and Social History Collections departments at Iziko Museums of South Africa. The 8th Definitive Stamp Series of Stamps acknowledges the beauty and aesthetic value of South African beadwork. The exhibition showcases seven stamp designs, postcards, an aerogramme, different self-adhesive stamp-booklets and an illustrated coffee-table book, as well as commemorative covers and cancellers.

Culturally significant items

The entire series was designed by the Philatelic Services of the South African Post Office. "The stamps portray culturally significant items over time in South African society," says Johan van Wyk, head of Philately at the South African Post Office. "They range from a traditional Tsonga fertility figure, to a modern bead cellphone rendered in beadwork." Iziko Museums of South Africa is proud of the seven-year collaboration to select, advise, research and facilitate the photography of the beadwork adornment from its collections, which is also on display.

Photographed by Sasha Lipka, the stamps focus on detail rather than the whole item. "The small stamp format lent itself best to photographs focusing on selected details of a particular item, instead of images of entire items," says Van Wyk.

Glass replaced natural materials

Glass beadwork dates back to the 1600s or even earlier, when tiny glass beads were imported from Europe to South Africa as a means of exchange. Their colour and luminosity made them instantly desirable to local populations, and swiftly replaced the natural materials used to decorate clothing. Glass beadwork rapidly developed into a popular art form practiced almost exclusively by women.

"In South African culture, the art of glass beadwork is as valuable as figurative carving in other African societies," says Carol Kaufmann, curator of African Art at Iziko Museums of South Africa. "These stamps will spread awareness of these cultural treasures all over South Africa - and the rest of the world - at an affordable cost."

All philatelic products and the coffee table book are available from the South African Post Office (Grand Central, Cape Town) or online at www.virtualpostoffice.co.za.

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