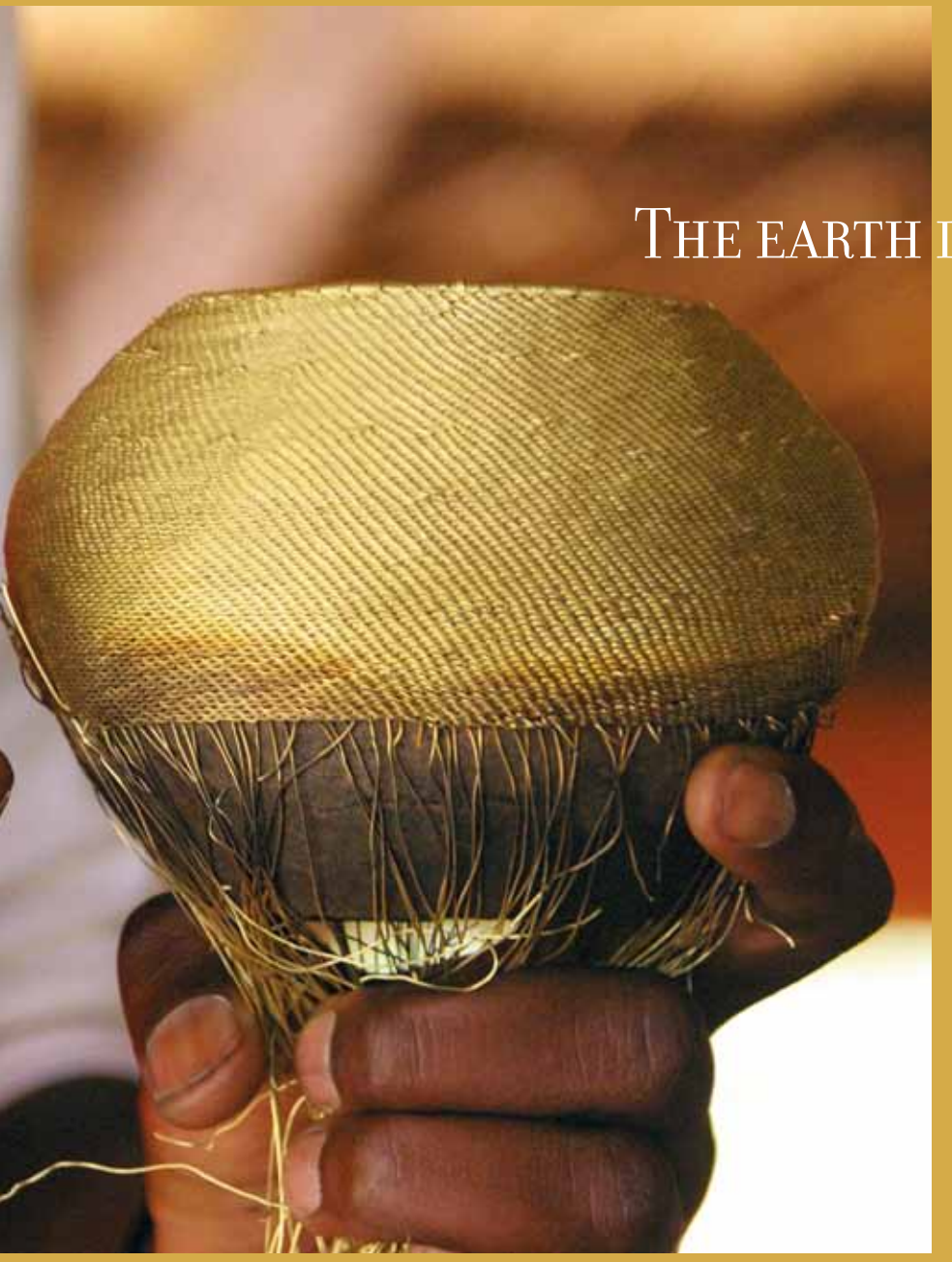
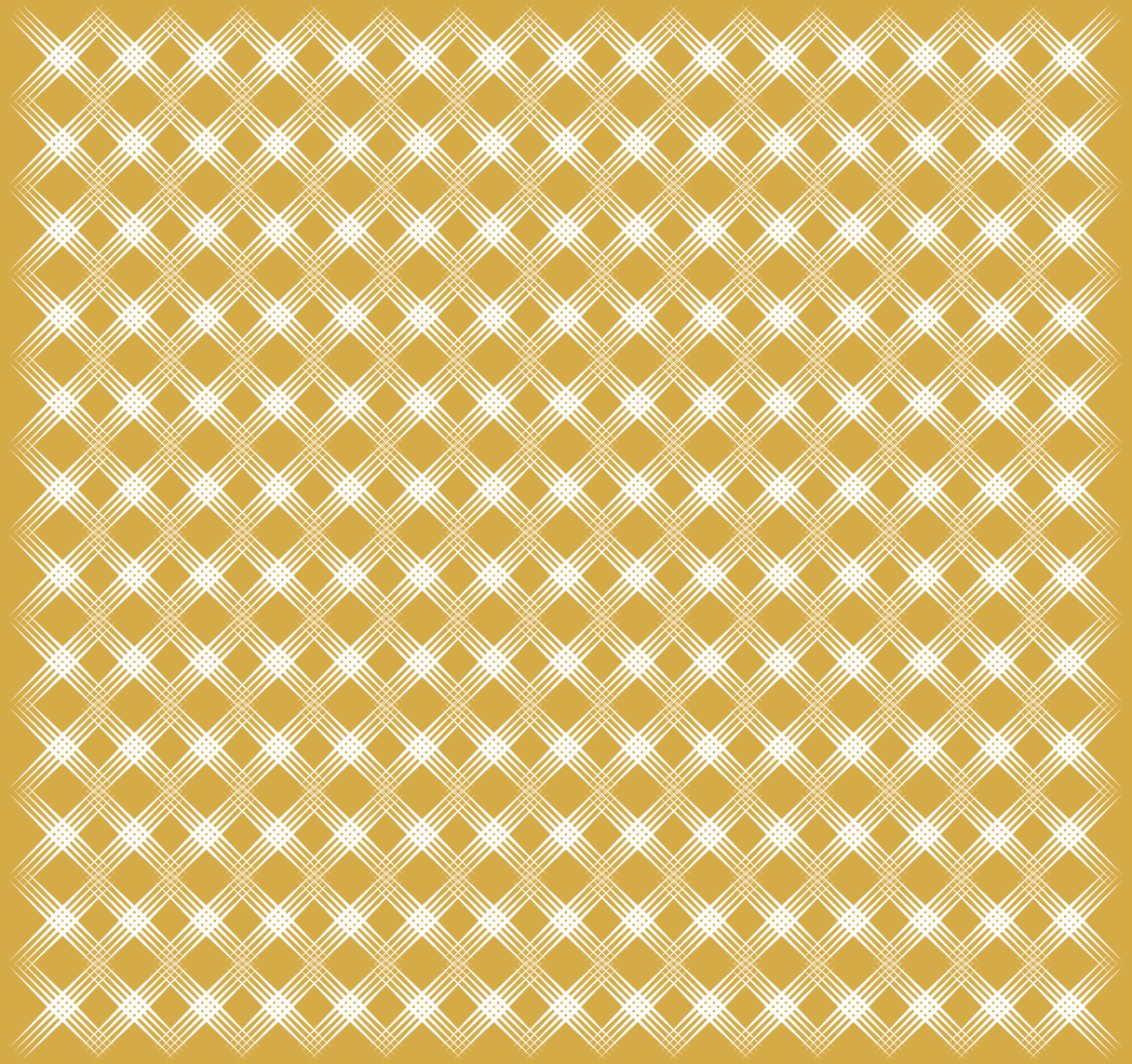


The earth is watching us

Threads of Africa



Still, the dark red, orange, umber, or mineral landscape
is stretched before us like the foreshadowing of a vision. […] The burnished terracotta of the pots
reflects the light […]. The texture of each vessel's surface is equal to our own.
For the earth is watching us….

Nimrod Liane (poet and philosopher, born in Chad 1959,
in Terres cuites africaines, un héritage millénaire – Musée Barbier-Mueller and Somogy éditions d'art)

The earth is watching us

Exhibition at the Gold of Africa Barbier Mueller Museum, Cape Town
3 February – 31 March 2011

Threads of Africa

A collaboration between Mdukatshani Development Trust and Julia Meintjes Fine Art
www.threadsofafrica.com

A man in Australia had a dream. He dreamt of a golden bowl. A little bowl, hand-woven. He owned a copper wire bowl woven in the Thukela Valley, KwaZulu-Natal, and his engineering background and interest in metals set him thinking about strands of gold.....Who were the weavers? Where did they obtain their wire?

There are difficulties in weaving with 18-carat gold wire, and the first little bowl was an experiment. It began in 2002, when Julia Meintjes was assembling an art collection for a Sydney-based company, RFC Corporate Finance, which offers investment and corporate advice in the resources, energy and industrial sectors. The company has clients in the South African mining industry, and when the MD, Rob Adamson, saw a woven copper bowl by an artist from Mdukatshani in the Thukela (Tugela) Valley, he asked whether a similar bowl could be made in gold wire.
The commission was given to Mzonzima Dladla, and because of technical, creative and logistical challenges, it was more than two years before that first little gold bowl was completed.

Other bowls would follow, some in 18-carat gold, some combining gold with various coppers, silver, brass and shakudo. In 2008 the University of Stellenbosch commissioned a special edition of six bowls, which were presented to a select group of their donors - and the project was formally named Threads of Africa.

Mgongo Ngubane, Rob Adamson and Mzonzima Dladla at the factory in Johannesburg.

When Mzonzima completed the first gold bowl on a trip he and Mgongo made to Johannesburg, they explained to their fellow weavers "But, when the bowl was finished it felt like a stone. Not like copper. Heavy."

Nobody knows when the first gold wire was hammered into strips on the South African veld. A thousand years ago? In 1933 the first evidence of handmade gold wire was unearthed in graves at Mapungubwe, a rocky hilltop near the Limpopo River.

Now a world Heritage Site, Mapungubwe would yield spectacular finds of gold artefacts, including gold beans, gold foil, and the famous gold rhino. Gold wire anklets and bangles, however, were the most important from a technological point of view. The wire appears to have been hammered out by hand and then smoothed off with sand or stone, before being wound into a helix.

Who were the goldsmiths, and where did they find the gold? The answers have been elusive. Mapungubwe was briefly occupied between 1220 AD and 1290 AD, a period that was part of the Late Iron Age, when African metalsmiths were already skilled at the art of extracting metal from rock. They had little interest in gold, however. It was too soft for utility, and it had no song. It was copper and iron they were after. They needed iron for weapons and hoes, and copper was used for

The earth is watching us is an exhibition of contemporary bowls and bangles woven in fine 18-carat gold wire, as well as silver, shakudo, copper and brass. The weavers come from the Thukela (Tugela) Valley, KwaZulu-Natal, and their metalwork is exhibited alongside earthenware pots which have been collected across the continent. The pots belong to the Social History Collections of Iziko Museums and highlight the traditional relationship between metalsmiths and potters in Africa.

decoration. Copper was the "red gold" of Africa, the prestige metal, offered to the gods, and buried in the graves of Africa.

Early metallurgists worked with fire and, a thousand years before Mapungubwe was settled, forgotten men had been testing their minds on how to set fire to draw molten iron from rock. You can pick up the slag of their furnaces today. It lies on the surface of our modern landscapes, the scattered debris of ancient fires that mark the radical changes of the Early Iron Age.

It was an age of innovation and settlement. By 300 AD a new way of life had spread from the Limpopo south into Natal, and the well-wooded valleys of the Thukela River. Almost every village had a smelting site, and there were shallow pits where village potters used fire to bake earthenware pots incised with pretty decorations.

There are still potters at work in Thukela valley today, digging into ant heaps to scrape shallow pits which are used as simple kilns for firing. The pots are made to order, or sold along the road on pension days – a local trade based on the need to use clay pots for beer in any ritual involving the *amadlozi*, or family spirits. Some of these potters supply the clay bowls which are used as moulds by the weavers of the Threads of Africa project.

Although wirework has been described as a 'quintessentially Central and South African craft' practiced by different tribal people over hundreds of years, there is no evidence of gold wire baskets or bowls in Africa's archeological record.

Facing page:
Phalaborwa potter, Limpopo Province, South Africa, collected 1980 *(SAMAE* 11831*)*

Code numbers end each bowl's caption. For more information about the bowls and bangles: www.threadsofafrica.com

Left to right:
Mzonzima Dladla, 18*-carat gold bowl,* 317.75 *g (*02500*)*
Mzonzima Dladla, *First* 18*-carat gold bowl,* 280 *g (*01945*)*
Mzonzima Dladla, 18*-carat gold bowl,* 738 *g (*02444*)*
Misi Mvelase, 18*-carat gold and uncoated copper bowl,* 135.85 *g (*06642*)*
Mgongo Ngubane, 18*-carat gold bowl,* 315 *g (*02443*)*

Above left to right:
Gcinani Duma, 18-*carat gold and sterling silver bowl,* 622.3 *g* (06659)

Misi Mvelase, 18-*carat gold egg,* 49.73 *g* (06643)
Mzonzima Dladla, *First* 18-*carat gold bowl,* 280 *g* (01945)

Facing page top left: **Mzonzima Dladla**, 18-*carat gold, coated and uncoated copper bowl,* 160.15 *g* (04215)

Facing page top right: **Mzonzima Dladla,** 18-*carat gold bowl,* 738*g* (02444)

Facing page bottom left: **Ntombizini Mbatha,** 18-*carat gold, coated and uncoated copper bowl,* 317.19 *g* (06638)

Facing page bottom right: **Mgongo Ngubane,** 18-*carat gold and sterling silver,* 312.08 *g* (06636)

Iucingo – Zulu wirework

Tim Maggs

The first African farming communities to arrive in what is today KwaZulu-Natal, nearly two thousand years ago, brought with them skills in metallurgy. Almost every village could produce the iron and steel to make the tools they needed to clear the land, build their homes and till the soil. Coming from tropical Africa they were used to the characteristic savannas with sweet grass growing under the scattered thorntrees. These provided good grazing for their cattle and sheep, timber for building and fuel, while in the major river valleys there were extensive bottom lands ideal for crop cultivation.

In KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape the belt of savanna bushveld becomes increasingly narrow southwards, pinched between the coastline and the higher altitude grasslands of the interior. But the deeply incised basin of the Thukela River and its tributaries makes an exception, allowing the savanna to extend far inland. The Early Iron Age farming communities were thus able to spread inland as far as Mdukatshani farm and even further up the Thukela one and a half thousand years ago.

Iron and steel were mainly used for practical purposes, but even at this early time the smiths could produce wire, of various types, both from iron and copper. Since KZN lacks copper deposits, and because delicate iron objects have not survived the relatively wet climate, there is little direct evidence from this early period in the region. But further north at this time we have well-preserved metal jewellery, notably from arid Botswana. Here the smiths were producing both iron and copper wire, sometimes in round, or rectangular or ribbon-like cross-section. Sometimes iron and copper wire was combined on the same item. On some items the wire was wound around a fibre core. On others short pieces of wire were bent into clips or circles to form a variety of decorative forms including bangles, rings and chains.

Fast forward for a thousand years and the first written accounts from KZN are the tragic tales of shipwreck survivors from Portuguese and other European maritime nations. They encountered Nguni-speaking communities – those in what is now the Eastern Cape desperate for iron, but those further north being interested in cloth and copper. Copper, and particularly brass, became highly sought-after to the extent that brass came to be virtually a royal metal in the Zulu kingdom. A British crew, wrecked near modern Durban while Simon van der Stel was governor at the Cape, survived with ease by selling heavy brass rings to the local people. These bangle-like rings were merely the imported raw material which local smiths turned into a variety of decorative and high prestige items. These included necklaces and bangles as well as the large round beads, *indondo*, to protect the mother and her unborn child. Zulu kings awarded the *ingxotha*, a heavy, decorative arm band to important men of the realm.

During the nineteenth century wirework extended from jewellery onto weapons. An *iwisa* (knobkerrie) might now sport intricately woven bands of wire on its handle; likewise the shaft of an *umkhonto* (spear) might now gleam with contrasting metallic lustres. Spear blades were traditionally hafted to the wooden shaft by means of raw hide from the tail of a cow or by woven plant fibre. Skillful wirework on a spear shaft would surely have accorded prestige to the bearer.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth new wire became available. To the industrially produced iron, copper and brass wire of the earlier period was now added aluminium. Zulu craftsmen (it seems that metalworkers were always men) continued to use these materials until recently to produce a wide range of jewellery and other decorative items.

Advances in telecommunications in southern Africa provided high-tech, multi-coloured, plastic-coated wire as a commercially available material for all kinds of objects. Artists in both rural and urban areas transformed their traditional skills to supply new markets, particularly a western market in cities and the growing tourism industry. Present day ease of movement has influenced the exchange of ideas. Working with wire is no longer the domain of men. The exact origin of this kind of work is not known, although the fact that security watchmen (Zulu men have historically worked as night watchmen in the cities) have practiced this craft, and still do so, may be a clue. Few artists have continued to work in pure wire, and the reasons for this are also unknown, but the allure of brightly-coloured telephone wire is one consideration. Market forces, ease of access to (and cost of) materials, and the technical challenges which exist in working in pure metals must surely affect this trend.

The belated international recognition of the Zulu potter and the African metal-worker as artists means that only recently has there been an environment where their respective aesthetic achievements can be truly appreciated. Art in wire is no longer restricted to men and male paraphernalia. Neither is the age-old art of the potter confined to women, although they are still the main proponents. Today we are witnessing a fusion in which wire-work and ceramic forms (male and female elements) merge to form a new, yet ancient and timeless art form.

It takes patience and skill to weave in wire which is hard on the weavers' hands. Weavers progress to making bangles and bowls in metal wire only. Experience makes for even stitching and, with confidence, a weaver starts to contribute to designs. Most weavers work at home, delivering on deadline before collecting wire for the next assignment.

Sithelephi Mtshali (above left) is highly strung, with an artistic hand to match her temperament. Married with two children, she is one of the finest weavers in the group, her work slow and always perfect. Gcinani Duma (above right) is the mother of one child. Her husband, Doboza Dladla, who is unemployed, speaks of her work with pride. The son of one of Mdukatshani's original bead crafters, Phaniwe, he grew up in a home where handwork was important, and he has watched his wife become a star.

Mgongo Ngubane *weaving a bowl in sterling silver bowl and uncoated copper at his home,* 2010

Facing page left to right: Detail of **Mgongo Ngubane's** *bowl;* **Sizani Mbatha**, *Coated copper bowl* (06668)*;* **Mgongo Ngubane**, *18-carat gold and sterling silver,* 189.58 *g* (06655)

An experienced weaver may progress less than one centimetre a day, depending on the intricacy of the design and the size of the bowl or bangle. Weaving starts from the top (unlike a grass basket). The correct tension is vital to ensure balance and proportion, and is complicated by the fact that each metal has a different density, even if the wire is the same thickness. To widen or narrow the form, strands are added or removed, while maintaining the intricacies of the design.

Mgongo Ngubane was six years old when his father, Mayoyo, was killed on duty, working as a nightwatchman in Johannesburg. His body was brought home to the stony hills of the Thukela Valley, which was then the centre of the gun trade in South Africa.

It was a hard place to grow up. Every community had an armoury – just in case. There was a police Firearm Squad at Tugela Ferry, a temporary squad in a temporary camp, that would be temporary for 46 years. Conflicts were commonplace, death was close, and the hills were much too arid for agriculture.

Like his father, Mgongo made the best of it. He hung out with the older boys, and worked. He fixed roads, moved rocks, cleared bush, and questioned everything. He had his father's charm, a quick intelligence – and style. Although there was no money to go to school, he attended literacy classes at Mdukatshani, and drifted into crafts. He didn't intend to stay long. Weaving wire was a pastime, but it was something he could do while he waited.

In the past few years that has changed. With his work in galleries and private collections, he is being recognised for his fine work.

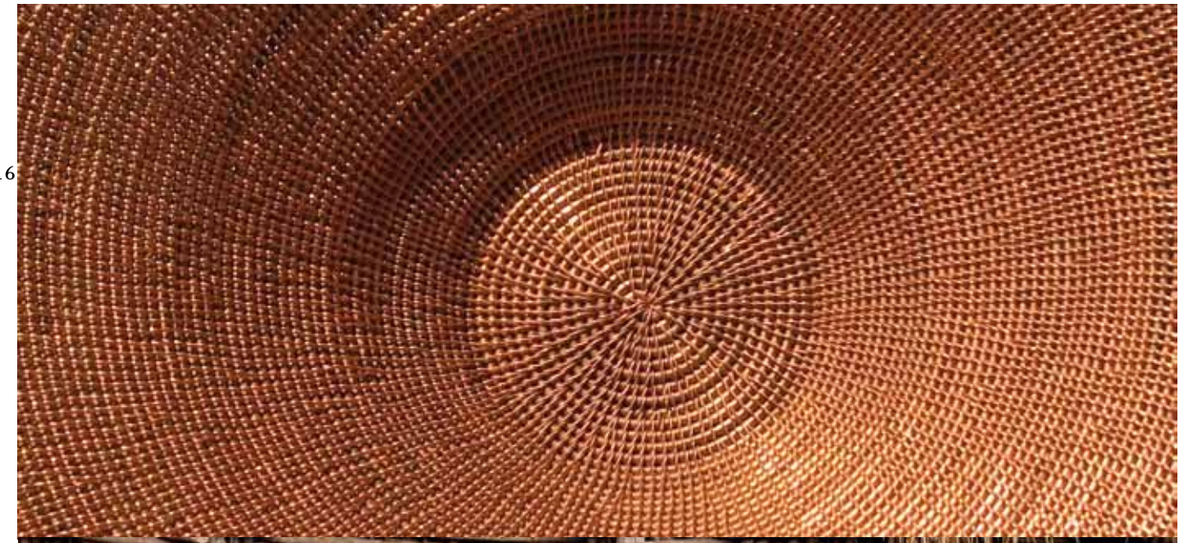
Top row left to right: **Misi Mvelase**,*Coated copper bowl* (06680)
Lindeni Dladla, *Sterling silver and shakudo bowl* (06684)
Bandile Mtshali, *Coated and uncoated copper bowl* (06682)

Bottom row left to right: **Mgongo Ngubane**, *Sterling silver, shakudo, brass and coated copper bowl* (06692)
Jobe Sithole, *Sterling silver bowl* (02501)
Sizani Mbatha, *Shakudo bowl* (06707)

Above Left: **Makonde potter**, *Mozambique, pot for water, collected* 2001 *(SAMAE* 14966)

Above right: **Zulu potter**, *KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, pot for storing beer, collected* 1997 *(SAMAE* 14784)

Shakudo is a Japanese term for a low gold content alloy - usually two to seven percent gold, and the rest copper. It oxidises naturally to a durable purple black. Mgongo Ngubane made the first bangle using shakudo and remarked that it did not go black immediately, as he worked with it, but turned black over a few days.



Elias Mtshengu has always worked with his hands, and he was making mud houses for a living when a stray order from Paris got him busy on a copper *sungulo*, a large, coiled bowl. In 2000 one of his bowls won a first prize in a Contemporary Zulu Basket Exhibition in Johannesburg. He has continued to make *sungulo* bowls on order, despite a long struggle with throat cancer.

Two *sungulo* bowls made by Elias Mtshengu are displayed on The earth is watching us, the one made in copper and the other in sterling silver stitched with shakudo. Each bowl is made of a continuous length of thick wire, coiled and laboriously stitched with finer wire.

Facing page:

Unknown Ila potter, Zambia, pot for ritual purposes, collected 1965 *(SAMAE* 9167*(b))*

Unknown Congo potter, Democratic Republic of Congo, collected 1942 *(SAMAE* 6413*)*

Unknown Tsonga potter, Limpopo Province, South Africa, pot for grinding nuts and grain, collected 1970 *(SAMAE* 9987*)*

Facing page, detail: **Elias Mtshengu,** *Sungulo bowl in copper* (06666)

Above left: **Elias Mtshengu,** *Sungulo bowl in sterling silver and shakudo* (06665)

Above: Threads of Africa, eggs in coppers and brass

Transformations

Patricia Davidson

The earthenware vessels on this exhibition were selected for their beauty and their resonance with the woven wire-works made by contemporary artists of the Threads of Africa project. Wire is woven and shaped around clay pots and this support remains latent in the final forms – innovative wire artworks that are neither pots nor baskets but have elements of both.

Innovation may be rooted in tradition and the inclusion in this exhibition of traditional earthenware pots from Iziko's Social History Collections invites viewers to look at them anew and think about the varied narratives they embody.

Although widely associated with agriculture and a relatively settled way of life, pottery was also made by semi-nomadic pastoralists. The history of earthenware in North Africa can be traced back over eight thousand years. In southern Africa it has been found in archaeological sites dating to the first century AD and varying styles of pottery have played a role in tracing cultural affinities and movements of people in the sub-continent. In general, throughout Africa, women are the potters and keepers of the knowledge that ensures the continuity of their art.

The primary narrative of earthenware is transforming raw earth into clay through the work of human hands, the skillful shaping of malleable material into a variety of forms, and the volatile process of firing that creates durable vessels for many domestic and ritual uses. The transformation of earth by fire is both practical and wondrous. Like the smelting of ore in a furnace to produce metal, the shaping and firing of raw clay to create earthenware is metaphorically linked to birth. Once fired, pots are akin to bodies, as reflected in the ways they are described with mouths, necks, waists and feet. Their forms and decoration bear the imprint of the hands that shaped them, as well as the patina of use. Through their special association with women, pots may carry symbolic meanings in marriage relationships, and as containers of offerings and libations they mediate connections with the ancestral spirits. In many places the decorative motifs on earthenware are echoed by patterning on walls and floors - there is a consonance of pottery and place.

No longer in situ, earthenware pots in museums embody narratives of collecting and curatorial intent. If there is a loss of one context, another is gained. Once preserved in a collection, earthenware vessels have the potential to evoke new meanings and, as shown by this exhibition, they may be re-animated by new contexts and conversations.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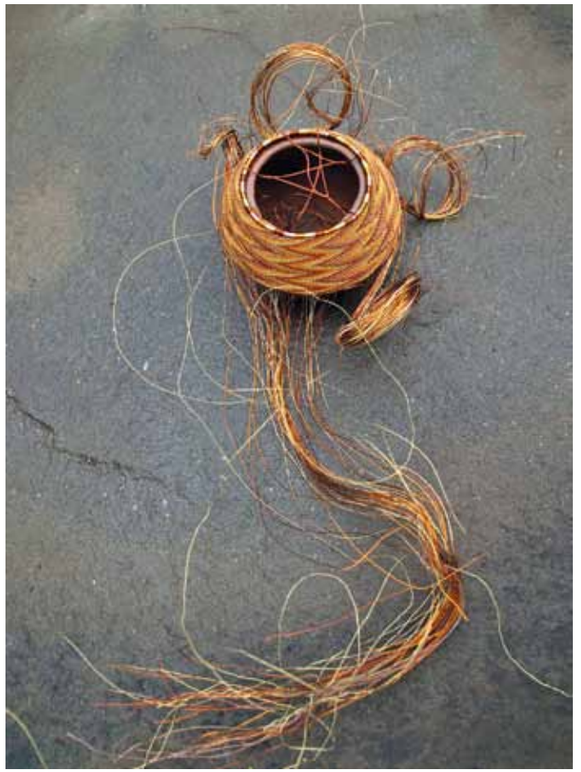
1. Ila potter, Zambia, collected 1965 *(SAMAE* 9166)
2. Tonga potter, Zambia, collected 1957 *(SAMAE* 7606)
3. Swazi potter, Swaziland, collected 1973 *(SAMAE* 10209)
4. Tswana potter, Botswana, collected 1908 *(SAMAE* 1168)
5. Swazi potter, Swaziland, collected 1939 *(SAMAE* 6039)
6. South Sotho potter, Lesotho, collected 1962 *(SAMAE* 8590)
7. Ambo potter, Namibia, collected 1923 *(SAMAE* 4104)

Footnote: Unfortunately the names of the potters were not recorded when the pots were acquired by the Iziko Museums.

Two family groups of Thukela Valley potters make the earthenware pots that are used for moulds for the fine wire bowls woven for the Threads of Africa project. Each pot is individually hand-coiled and therefore unique and even though the project will make designs in editions of six, there is slight variation within the forms of the six.

The large clay *imbiza*, which is used for brewing, has no decoration. The smaller *ukhamba* holds the beer that is passed around for drinking, and the incised decorations are intended to give grip.



Wound bangles and anklets found at the Late Stone Age site at Mapungubwe were made from hammered gold wire or gold sheet, which was cut into strips and helically wound into flexible bangles or anklets. These were wrapped around a fibre core, which recent tests on surviving strands have proven not to be cattle hair as was originally thought, but in all probability, a cellulose plant fibre or even baobab fibre.

(Sian Tiley, Mapungubwe – South Africa's Crown Jewels, 2004)

Left: Wound bangles and anklets from the University of Pretoria: Mapungubwe Collection

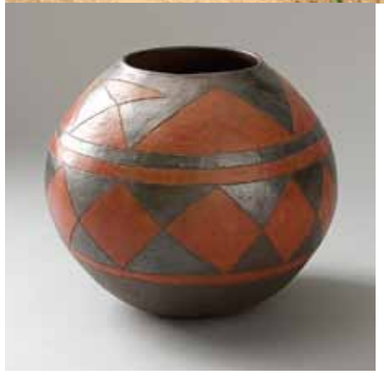
Right: Wound bangles made by Ntombizini Mdlolo, worn on her wedding day, which she still wears for ceremonies, and contemporary aluminium bangles with Threads of Africa sterling silver, shakudo and copper bangles.

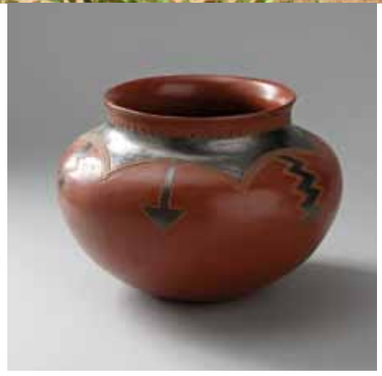
In 2007 Christina Bryer, a South African ceramicist with a jewellery background, cast a mould for the project, so that a precisely-designed series of bowls could be woven. Since childhood she has been fascinated by repeat patterns and the variation found in Nature's patterns on shells, insects, birds, reptiles. As an adult she became interested in the physics of chaos, fractals, tesselations and especially Penrose's aperiodic tiling. Christina carefully calculated both the forms and the designs for the Threads of Africa series so that their proportions related to Nature's geometry. Threading up the rim of the first of the series of nine took Jobe Sithole 11 hours of testing and re-testing.

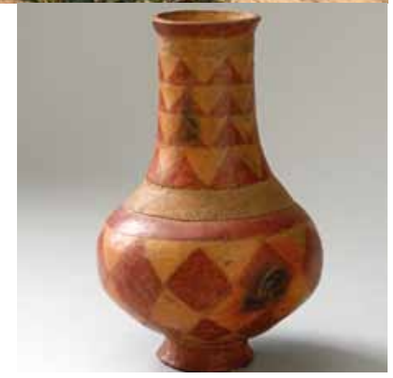
Series of nine bowls in sterling silver and uncoated copper by Christina Bryer, Jobe Sithole and Mgongo Ngubane (04354)

Mpondo potter, Eastern Cape, South Africa, beer pots collected 1932 (*UCT* 32/37)

Pre-Dynastic or early Dynastic Egyptian potter, about 3500 *BC,* acquired 1913 (*SACHM* 2571)







Facing page:

Left: Lemba potter, Limpopo Province, South Africa, collected 1962 *(SAMAE* 8801*)*

Centre: Pedi potter, Mpumalanga, collected 1946 *(SAMAE* 6580*)*

Right: Lozi potter, Zambia, collected 1904 *(SAMAE* 480*)*

Above left: **Fiyani Masondo,** *Coated Copper and brass bowl* (05837)*, coated copper and brass bowl* (06667)

Above: **Threads of Africa bangles; Bandile Mtshali**, *Coated and uncoated copper and brass bowl* (06675)

There is power embedded in everything. It is a neutral power, but it remains power. Even a stone has power....African art often has a strong functional, a utilitarian value, but in addition the object often has a spiritual value. If something is destroyed, therefore, the spiritual value can be transferred into something else, which will replace the object. Power enters, and leaves again. The maker of objects may work with this awareness – and the awareness directs the form, not simply the market.

(David John Moon)

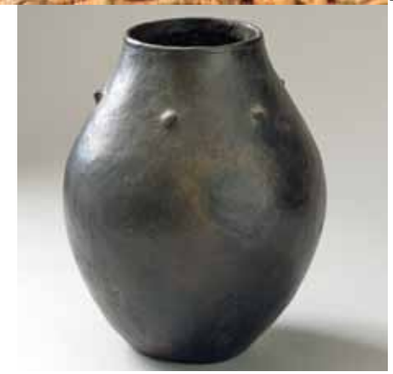
Above left: **Gwinya Mbhele**, *Uncoated copper bowl* (06698)
Above right (left to right): **Gcinani Duma**, *Coated copper bowl with brass beads* (06690); **Mgongo Ngubane**, *Sterling silver, shakudo and uncoated copper bowl* (05764); **Lindeni Dladla**, *Coated copper and brass bowl* (06684)

Facing page:

Left: Sotho potter, Lesotho, drinking cup (SAMAE 12093)

Centre: Zulu potter, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, collected 1965 *(SAMAE* 9222)

Right: Bhaca potter, Eastern Cape, South Africa, collected 1948 *(SAMAE* 6986)



Above right (left to right): **Jobe Sithole,** *Coated and uncoated copper and brass bowl,* (04197)*;* **Mgongo Ngubane,** *Coated and uncoated copper and brass bowl* (05936) **Mgongo Ngubane,** *Coated and uncoated copper bowl* (05935)

Above right (top): **Hlekisile Mtshali,** *Coated copper and brass bowl,* (06685)
Above right: **Zamani Madonsela,** *Coated and uncoated copper bowl* (06687)

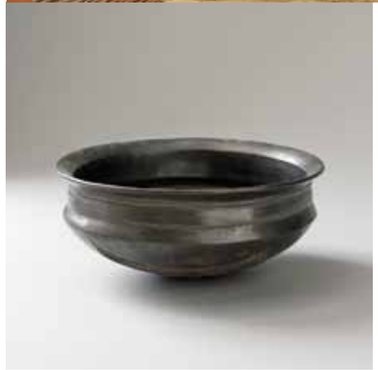
Above left: (from left to right): **Ntombizini Mbatha,** *Shakudo and coated copper bowl* (06705)*;* **Zamani Madonsela,** *Coated and uncoated copper and brass bowl* (06686)*;* **Jobe Sithole,** *Coated copper and brass bowl* (06074)

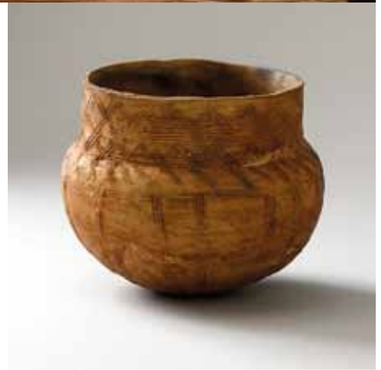
Above right: Series in coated and uncoated copper by **Christina Bryer** *and* **Mgongo Ngubane** (06697, 06700, 06791)

Below left (from left to right): **Siphokuhle Mvelase,** *Sterling silver and coated copper bowl* (06683)**; Siphokuhle Mvelase,** *Uncoated copper and brass bowl* (06710)*;* **Gcinani Duma**, *Large sterling silver and shakudo bowl* (06659)*;* **Gwinya Mbhele,** *Coated copper banded bowl* (06703)*;* **Misi Mvelase,** *Coated copper textured bowl* (06680)

Below right: **Ginsela Mtshali,** *Coated copper bowl with brass beads* (06706)

Facing page, left and centre: Mozambique potter, collected 1891 *(SAMAE* 1966*) Far right: Kuangari potter, Namibia, collected* 1963 *(SAMAE* 9025*)*





"They embraced the shape and kissed the thickness.
And they knew what heart's ease lay in gentle deformity."

Soetsu Yanagi The Unknown Craftsman

Threads of Africa: The artists.

1 Ntombizini Mbatha
2 Sithelephi Mtshali
3 Hlekisile Mtshali
4 Nonhlanhla Shezi
5 Siphokuhle Mvelase
6 Gcinani Duma
7 Gejeni Khumalo
8 Misi Mvelase
9 Fiyani Masondo
10 Ntombizini Mdlolo
11 Jobe Sithole
12 Sizani Mbatha
13 Mzonzima Dladla
14 Elias Mtshengu
15 Gwinya Mbhele
16 Thembile Choncho
17 Bandile Mtshali
18 Lindeni Dladla
19 Ginsela Mtshali
20 Winnie Mchunu
21 Zamani Madonsela
22 Siziwe Mchunu
23 Rauri Alcock
24 Mgongo Ngubane

GOLD OF AFRICA BARBIER-MUELLER MUSEUM | ANGLOGOLD ASHANTI | iziko museums

Threads of Africa thank:

Rob Adamson, RFC Corporate Finance
Christina Bryer
Mark Cutifani, AngloGold Ashanti
Patrica Davison
Eugenie Drakes, Piece
Simon Kelly
Mark Laing
Tim Maggs
David Moon
Liezl Norval-Kruger
Mark Pool, AngloGold Ashanti
Mark Rosin
Peter Upton

Our wire producers:
Global Gold – especially Noel and Jennifer Duncan, Matthews Mandazi, Frans Makgetha and Morne Pretorius
Five Star Electric Motors - especially Colin and Justin Hemingway
Linmar Wire

For the exhibition:

Gold of Africa Museum: Christopher Till, Nadia Harris, Bridgette Hendriks
Exhibition design: Genneth Lyn
Collectors who loaned their bowls
Media: Rabbit in a Hat
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University of Pretoria: Mapungubwe Collection

Design by: Cybergraphics www.cybergraphics.bz
Printed by: Marvick Printers
Photographs of Iziko pots: Michael Hall Photography
All other photographs: Rauri Alcock

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