

Protecting Cultural History and Heritage By Caring for Art

Project Title: Conservation of the Art Collection of the Constitutional Court of South Africa
Grantee Institution: Constitutional Court Trust
Principal Investigator: Ms Marion Dixon
Duration of Grant: 3 years (2017–2019)

“The preservation, restoration, and care of artworks are critical components of celebrating South Africa’s incredibly rich and diverse cultural heritage. Unfortunately, this has been lacking in public collections in South Africa, and numerous important works have been lost as a result of environmental wear and tear, damage from the elements, incorrect display, and storage. This is why this funding is so important,” says Melissa Goba, member of the Artworks Committee of the Constitutional Court Trust.

Goba is part of the team working on the conservation of the art collection of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. The three-year project, from 2017 to 2019, includes conservation framing, restoring, cleaning, and correctly displaying and storing the extensive art collection housed at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg.

Former justices Albie Sachs and Yvonne Mokgoro started this collection. They were allocated \$1 000 towards artwork for the Court, and with this funding they commissioned Joseph Ndlovu to create a tapestry. Apart from that piece, almost all the art in the collection, in excess of 400 works, has been donated, with some pieces on long-term loan.



Images of South African History No. 3 by Siphon Ndlovu. Photo courtesy of the Constitutional Court Trust and Iziko South African National Gallery.

According to Catherine Kennedy, manager of the Constitutional Court Trust, “The collection at the Constitutional Court certainly has profound historical and contemporary significance. Many of the works deal with South Africa’s past and the struggle to end the apartheid state; others tell the story of the struggles for justice and accountability that we continue to face in South Africa, through works such as Khehla Chepape Makgato’s moving and impressive linocut series titled *Marikana Memoria* (2014/15), his interpretation of the shocking Marikana Massacre of 2012. That said, the collection is not only one of struggle art – it also speaks to the respect for the dignity and interconnectedness of human beings that sits at the heart of our Bill of Rights, as is reflected so beautifully in the foundational tapestry of the collection, Ndlovu’s *Humanity*.”

Goba concurs, “It is of the utmost importance that we do justice to the work of the artists, and the country’s artistic record, by taking proper care of the work. Conservation and conservation framing is a specialised field within the art world and the expertise is rare in South Africa. Private



Diana Hulton, *Mountain XII*, 137.5 x 158.5 cm, centre canvas of *Mountain Triptych*, oil on canvas, 137.5 x 568.5 cm, 1985–1991. Photo courtesy of the Constitutional Court Trust and Iziko South African National Gallery.

galleries often have their own conservation specialists but collections managed by non-profit organisations like the Constitutional Court Trust simply cannot afford to retain in-house conservation expertise. To remedy the situation, we applied for funding from Mellon so that we can receive training on how to begin to properly care for the art,” says Goba. The curatorial team has been receiving conservation training and mentorship in order to create and implement a strategic plan for the ongoing maintenance and preservation of the art collection.

“This includes an ongoing environmental conditions survey, assessing the kind of light, humidity, heat, and moisture present in the exhibition and storage spaces at the Constitutional Court. A specialist conservator has submitted a report looking at the collection in its entirety, but also at the condition of each individual work. This is an extremely valuable guiding document to

inform us about which of the artworks can be displayed in various environments, how and when they should be stored, and also which works needs specific care and attention. Understanding the environmental factors we are working with will help us to protect the art and ensure its longevity,” says Francois Lion-Cachet, one of the two young assistant curators who have been appointed to look after and promote the collection.

Thina Miya, also assistant curator, states, “An important part of this programme is skills transfer through training and mentorship. While we are busy with the preservation and conservation of the artworks of the Constitutional Court, this knowledge gained must be shared with other public art institutions in South Africa. They can learn from our process, and hopefully follow suit by putting the necessary focus on preserving our amazing artistic legacy.”