

# South Africa: Crafting the Economic Renaissance of the Rainbow Nation

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**M**uch has happened since the first democratic elections in 1994 brought freedom to millions of South Africans. Celebrated across the land, the elections changed the lives of South Africans in political, social, and economic spheres. Focus and energy previously directed into the struggle for liberation are now channeled into social and economic action. The elections have brought a particular kind of freedom to artists and craftspeople. No longer engaged in the fight for freedom, artists and crafters now have the time and resources to concentrate on creativity.

At the close of the 20th century, South Africa is witnessing a renaissance of some of the world's oldest living art and craft traditions. Indigenous artists and crafters from all nine provinces are drawing from their heritage to express contemporary realities. They are bringing their culture onto the international stage. Crafters' innovative use of found objects and recycled material is a testimony to this change of focus, the most visible recent development in South African craft. There is a strong nucleus of this kind of work in the program we bring to the Festival.

A wide range of genres, from painting and murals to ephemeral art, is covered in this program. We intend to present South Africa as a world in one new country, a new country in the world, vibrant and colorful, with cultural diversity and artistic expression from diverse inspirations — our history, our geography, our languages, and our ethnic groups.

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An Ndebele woman passing on a traditional art form to the next generation. Photo courtesy SATOUR

Talk about democracy, talk about the struggle for liberation and the unshackling of the mind, talk about creativity — and you are talking about the people who “crafted” South Africa, the mothers and fathers who kept creative fires burning during the fierce days of apartheid. South African crafters, especially women, have been and still are the backbone of families whose young men were recruited to work in diamond and gold mines or in other industries far from home. Through their hard work and creativity, through sales of their crafts, these artists have lifted rural and, to a certain extent, urban standards of living.

The visitor moving through this Festival will be walking along the path traveled by millions of South Africans in search of social, economic, and political comfort. This road will take you from

traditional and decorative murals of rural Venda to contemporary murals influenced by the struggle for liberation and found on walls and bridges in Soweto; from grass woven baskets of KwaZulu-Natal to wares made in Gauteng from telephone wire; from traditional beaded Xhosa cloth to hand-printed banners and T-shirts bearing the logos of political parties. We hope this exhibition widens your appreciation of the quality and variety of South African art and craft, while it accurately reflects the diversity of experience of the country's communities.

We have given care to try to create an atmosphere similar to the one in which most of the crafters work. The sound of the chisel chipping through wood or stone, the humming noise in the shebeen or tavern, the shouts of joy from



children playing their favorite games are a true reflection of these artists' and crafters' daily lives. The beat of the drum, too, is a natural sound in our communities.

Music forms an integral part of South African life. We sing when celebrating and when mourning, we sing when working and when playing. We sing

when we're happy, when we're sad, and when we *toyi-toyi* — a dance we use to express solidarity, especially during mass demonstrations. Traditionally, fighters in Venda have demonstrated their dedication by singing. In the early days, they sang praises to the chief; in the struggle years, they sang freedom songs; now they sing their demands for

houses and other necessities. The tunes have not changed — only the words are different. It is a quintessentially South African practice.

One reason this program is so richly diverse is that crafters are true to their own and their communities' commentaries on reality. No one is demanding a single style that craft dealers think will sell quickly. The imperatives of the marketplace do not often penetrate the rural areas. There, tradition rules, and the ancestors are honored.

*South Africa: Crafting the Economic Renaissance of the Rainbow Nation* is a program intended to serve as a window into the past and future of South Africa's traditional crafters and their crafts. We have attempted to maintain a clear distinction between a cultural trade fair and a folklife festival. We have tried to provide a forum for tradition bearers themselves to communicate their aesthetic and humanistic traditions, their religious perspectives, and their social values with a wider public through song, dance, cooking, architecture, games, and stories as well as through their visual art.

The focus here is on the people and their way of life — communities crafting a new South African identity through participation in national economic life and democratic development. Communities are the focal point for understanding how skills are passed on from one generation to the next, how geography and natural resources influence craft development, and how people can work together to achieve a common purpose.

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The sound of the chisel on wood is the crafter's daily companion. Photo courtesy GCIS