

Constitutional Court flies the flag

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The Constitutional Court in Johannesburg has a new artwork – a beautifully beaded and embroidered South African flag, positioned above the judges' seats in the courtroom.

Measuring 6 metres by 2.5 metres, the hand-stitched flag with its bright colours, hangs in a wave shape, a striking counterpoint to the muted, earthy tones in the courtroom. Its fine detail of neatly stitched beads, sequins and embroidery attests to months of meticulous work.

Completed in March this year by a group of six KwaZulu-Natal women, led by Leonie Malherbe, it took around five months to finish and is described by her as a task equivalent to “swallowing an elephant”.

The flag had been commissioned last year by the artworks committee of the Constitutional Court, made up of judges Albie Sachs, Yvonne Mokgoro and Johann van der Westhuizen. The [art collection](#) of the court consists of 200 works, collected since 1994 when the court came into being.

Malherbe approached the project with some trepidation, daunted by the enormity of the task. With fellow seamstress Hlengiwe Dube, they spent an exhausting day cutting and taping strips of brown paper as an experiment to see how the real thing was to be done.

“At the end of the day I stood up and looked at this pattern which filled the main gallery of The African Art Centre [in Durban] – I took fright at the enormity of it and felt a panic approaching – how was this to be tackled? How do you swallow an elephant? I asked myself,” said Malherbe. “Some deep breaths, prayers and positive thoughts gave me the answer – of course – cut it up into bit-sized pieces.”

The two women were so stiff from pattern-cutting, they could hardly walk for three days.

She decided to give each seamstress – Agnes Mbatha, Sphindile Nkosi, Greta Nkosi, Zibuyisile Zulu, Dube – half-metre lengths to work with, using one colour at a time. That meant buying cottons and beads in the same colour. “It was the only way to digest the elephant,” she says.

Buying the materials was also a tricky job. “I explained to the bead shop about the project and said that I had no idea of quantities to buy – they were very co-operative, as were all the other shops I dealt with, by agreeing that if I bought too much of one colour, I could swap the beads for the next colour as the job progressed,” she explains.

First workshop

Their first flag-making workshop was held on 18 November last year, in the main gallery of The African Art Centre.

“I explained to the group the importance, honour, seriousness and enormity of the project and showed them a picture of the wall in the court where the flag will hang – over the judges’ heads. I also showed them other artists’ work displayed in the court.”



The impressive flag adds colour to the muted tones of the courtroom (*Photo: Lucille Davie, City of Johannesburg*)

The first colour chosen was red. Malherbe had brought along red beads and red thread, needles, scissors, pencils and fabric panels. Straight running stitch and blanket stitch were to be used, in six strands of thread.

Malherbe had got the materials ready – cutting the panels and stabilising fabric, ironing them into 10cm pleats, pinning along the folds, then machine stitching along the lines, and finally, preparing the templates for accurate stitching and beading.

One of the seamstresses, Greta Nkosi, “a competent and imaginative embroiderer”, was so overwhelmed by the vastness and importance of the task, that she forgot how to do simple running stitch. Eventually Malherbe marked dots on her fabric, and demonstrated how to do it. After several anxious tries Nkosi got going on her own.

After a lunch stop, Malherbe explained how important it was to stitch the beads on securely – stitching “each bead three times and finishing the threads off at the back”.

After the workshop, the seamstresses took the work home to return again in a week, on 25 November, with their completed panels. This time different bead designs were chosen as “we wanted alternating

patterns to form one strip of colour to emphasise pattern and texture and also the reflective light from the transparent beads”.

Dube was appointed quality controller, a job she took very seriously, often working past midnight so that she could get the women to rectify any imperfect areas during the workshops.

Meanwhile, Malherbe had bought the blue fabric and beads, and these were handed out by Dube, who by now knew how many beads were required for each panel.

Malherbe found that to keep up with the pace, she had to get up at 5am most days. “The flag project seemed to be getting bigger and taking longer than I imaged it would – it felt all-consuming.”

More workshops

More workshops were held, and eventually on 9 December architect Janina Masojada (of OMM Design Workshop in Durban, a partner in the design of the court) was called in to check progress. It was nerve-wracking.

“I stood, hidden, outside the gallery peeping at her as she walked in – I waited for a genuine reaction – she stood silent, looking down at the panels and my heart sank. She then looked up with tear-filled eyes and proclaimed it rich and wonderful. I hugged her in relief as the responsibility is awesome and please God – let her like the completed job.”

Masojada suggested that the names of the seamstresses appear on the flag. Malherbe wrote the names on the green panel, then stitched them, with the date of completion, 2006.

In the meantime, an unlikely convert had joined the group. Mbatha’s grandson, Tholani, who had been helping her stitch at home, was given the green light and allowed to join the group. But then, Malherbe spotted, with horror, that there were wax drippings on his green panel. The explanation was simple – he had worked at night by candlelight. “These marks distressed me a lot, but we managed to remove them and beaded over other areas,” says Malherbe with relief.

The work settled into a pattern. “We had a routine now – check work, critique and correct, continue work, lunch, hand out materials, collect completed work, payment and set date for next workshop.”

By January 6, 2006 the red, blue and green panels were complete, and one person had dropped out, while Mbatha and her grandson were paid and not re-hired. The team was down to four: Malherbe, Dube, Nkosi and Zulu. Only the white, yellow and white strips were left.

A week later it was time to get a sense of the finished product.

“We laid the whole flag out to pin the panels together. This job was exhausting – the fabric pulled and stretched and we had to constantly measure widths, which kept changing. Barefoot we had to carefully walk on the beading because of the size of the panels. Kneeling on the beads was torture, so we used cushions and these had to be moved each time we move[d] a few centimetres. Pinning was also difficult as pins bent because of the weight of the fabric. Everything had to be tacked which was murder on the fingers.”

The next day Masojada and fellow architect Andrew Makin arrived to discuss how the flag was to be hung. It was decided to use 20cm sleeves, top and bottom, with PVC strips inserted into them, which would then be screwed onto a metal beam on the wall.

Malherbe went to an awning and tent company who stitched together the panels and the backing.

It took two days to cut, pin and stitch the backing fabric to the flag, and Malherbe had expert advice from the tent company.

“Anthony Joseph and Brenda David, the machinist, were very patient and helpful with a job none of us had ever done before – we felt our way together. Anthony, with his years of experience, had lots of practical tips and suggestions and Brenda convinced me to relax, as he knew what he was doing.”

Malherbe was advised to stitch the flag carefully to the backing, a job that was impossible to do with a machine. So she sat down to sew the backing to the flag, row by row, 10cm apart. It took nine days to do, eight hours a day.

On Wednesday, 15 March, the flag was finally finished. “Hemming all round and stitching the sleeves, took all day. I was so tired at night I could not eat – but – finally – the flag was FINISHED!”

The flag was hung shortly after it was finished. It joins the court’s wonderfully varied art collection.

The elephant had been successfully swallowed.

Source: City of Johannesburg