

# without. prejudice<sup>®</sup>

SPOTLIGHT ON  
ENERGY  
LAW





## Constitutional Court Art Collection/cover

# Inspired by The Ancestor

## THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT TRUST

**T**he handwoven tapestry by Joseph Ndlovu that forms part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC), and is reproduced on the cover of this issue of **without prejudice**, is based on Ernest Mancoba's (1904–2002) oil painting *L'Ancêtre*, seemingly abstract but rich in depth.

*L'Ancêtre* pays tribute to Mancoba's ancestry and to the heritage of South Africa, the artist's land of birth. Mancoba drew inspiration for his painting from a story his mother, Florence Mancoba, told him about his great-grandmother. According to Elza Miles, this story left an indelible impression on Mancoba:

"When the Mfengus could not come to terms with the despotism of King Shaka (c. 1787-1828) they searched for and found a new home among the Xhosas in the Transkei. There they, who called themselves 'destitute wanderers', made a success of cattle farming. Among the Mfengus who fled with the Zulu forces in hot pursuit was the Mangquangwanas, Mancoba's maternal kin. In their group was an aged great-grandmother. She was so old and weak that the younger members had to carry her. When after a few days she realised that she was an impediment to the flight of her people, and that the distance between her and her pursuers was decreasing, she ordered them to leave and to proceed without her. Mancoba said: 'She stood and they walked. She waved and she waved. It was the last they saw of her... because she saw that she hindered quicker, practical progress. So she sacrificed herself.'"

Mancoba, who left South Africa for Europe in 1938, very seldom gave illustrative titles to his pieces, *L'Ancêtre* was one of the few exceptions. He added the title when the Johannesburg Art Gallery acquired the work for its permanent collection. Mancoba commented that the lines and colours he used for his work, which are closely mimicked by Ndlovu, came directly from his subconscious without deliberate intervention in a manner that he described as "almost Freudian". Correspondingly, the final meaning is that which develops in the consciousness of the viewer. "Once the image begins to speak to you, then the message is there," Mancoba said.

The Art & Ubuntu Trust (AUT) recognised that this work could translate well into a tapestry and commissioned Ndlovu to create the woven piece in 2016. It was donated to the CCAC by the AUT in 2017. The weaving of *L'Ancêtre* by Ndlovu was the final artwork he completed before falling ill. He died in 2019. Notably, in 1994, Justices

Albie Sachs and Yvonne Mokgoro commissioned Ndlovu to produce the very first artwork of the CCAC, titled *Humanity* (1995).

On the 29th of November 2021, the Constitutional Court Trust (CCT), custodian of the CCAC, and the AUT hosted a webinar titled *African spirituality, humanity's heritage* focussed on the interpretation of Mancoba's philosophy. The event was also a celebration of AUT's donation of Ndlovu's weaving and Dorothy Randell's *Bust of Mancoba* (1930, recast in 2016) to the CCT. Filmmaker Abdulcadir Ahmed Said's six minute video artwork *Reading the Ancestor*, donated to the CCAC by Tomas Films in 2021, was screened during the webinar as it enriches the interpretation of these works. The full recorded webinar can be watched here: <https://ccac.concourtrust.org.za/news/2021/watch-african-spirituality-humanity-heritage-recorded-webinar> ♦

