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Constitutional Court Art Collection / cover

A rainbow dress bringing together art and justice at the Constitutional Court

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The Constitutional Court Art Collection

The Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC) is more than an aesthetic addition to the Constitutional Court building. It provides a visual interface between art and justice for the public entering the highest court in South Africa.

In 1994 when the first eleven Justices were appointed to the Court, Justice Albie Sachs and Justice Yvonne Mokgoro were given the portfolio of décor. They were asked to use a minimal budget of R10 000 to decorate the temporary courtroom with the dignity befitting the people who would move through it.

Justices Sachs and Mokgoro used that budget to commission a single artwork – Humanity, by Joseph Ndlovu (fibre, 1995). Since then, hundreds of artworks have been donated to the CCAC. Many other works are integrated into the architectural fabric of the building itself, which became the permanent home of the Constitutional Court in 2005.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, described the CCAC as being “imbued with the spirit of emancipated humanity, it is the most vibrant collection I have seen in any courthouse in the world”.

It is a unique collection of predominantly South African artworks, many of which are internationally acclaimed, that stimulate and enrich education, critical debate and research on the transformative role of the Constitution and the Constitutional Court of South Africa, based on the values of freedom, dignity and equality.



Amsterdam Rainbow Dress – Photograph by Neo Ntsoma, 2018, taken in front of the Constitutional Court of South Africa

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The collection explores and interrogates the themes of transition, social justice, human rights, constitutionalism, reparation and reconciliation in the South African context. Many works in the CCAC portray the political agency and lived experiences of the artist(s), others are more abstract and traditional, using form to evoke emotion and understanding – and to celebrate cultural diversity.

The CCAC consists of paintings (including the famous “Blue Dress” oil on canvas and multimedia installation by Judith Mason, Robert Hodgins, Albert Adams, Peter Clarke, Penny Siopis *et al.*), drawings and prints (William Kentridge, Dumile Feni, Sandile Goje, Marc Chagall, Kim Berman and others) photographs (David Goldblatt, Greg Marinovich *et al.*), sculptures (Noria Mabasa, John Baloyi, Willem Boshoff, Wilma Cruise, Handspring Puppet Company *et al.*), textiles (Marlene Dumas’ monumental triptych *The Benefit of the Doubt* amongst many other iconic works), beadwork, some posters and video.

Artwork donations from the generosity and goodwill of artists, galleries and donors see to the strategic and sustained development of the CCAC – now following a more structured approach than the initial serendipitous and haphazardly eclectic way of collecting.

The CCAC is managed by the Constitutional Court Trust for the benefit of the public, tending to its preservation and presentation through conservation and curatorial programmes. It is dependent on grants and donor funding to carry out this work. The Trust is an independent non-profit organisation established in 1995 that promotes human rights and the rule of law, constitutionalism and judicial independence in South Africa and Africa. It does so through artistic expression, public education, legal scholarship and exchange programmes, and library and information initiatives.

The Amsterdam Rainbow Dress

One of the recent projects of the Trust was entering into a partnership with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in South Africa in presenting and photographing the Amsterdam Rainbow Dress at the Constitutional Court, together with students of the Market Photo Workshop.

The Amsterdam Rainbow Dress is a work of art made from the flags of

all countries in the world where homosexuality is illegal, which is changed to a rainbow flag when such legislation is changed. It aims to create awareness of the persecution of LGBTI+ people.

Through this project, the Trust sought to address the representational gap in the CCAC of artworks speaking to the lived experiences of queer persons. Our Constitution guarantees dignity and equality and outlaws persecution of sexual and gender identities. South Africa was the first African country to legalise same-sex marriage in 2006. Across Africa, official persecution thrives, while in South Africa itself, too much homophobia still persists. Celebrating diversity falls within the core objectives of the Trust and the ethos of the CCAC.

Limited edition photographs were produced by photographer Neo Ntsoma, with model and activist Yaya Mavundla. A print of this artwork will be donated to the Trust by the Dutch Embassy, making it one of the recent acquisitions of the CCAC.

During the reception of the project on the 10th of December, International Human Rights Day, Justice Edwin Cameron, a long-standing committed guardian of the CCAC and trustee of the Trust, addressed the fact that in too many African and other countries it remains criminal to express same-sex views or engage in private, consensual same-sex conduct. He spoke of the persistent violence and abuse towards LGBTI+ persons. He also lauded the work of Simon Nkoli, an openly gay anti-apartheid activist who died of AIDS in 1998. Many artworks in the CCAC speak about the historical plight and stigma of those living with HIV/AIDS.

According to Justice Albie Sachs, “[the] CCAC shows how art and human rights overlap and reinforce each other. At the core of the Bill of Rights and of the artistic endeavour represented in the Court is respect for human dignity. It is this that unites art and justice.” ♦

A rotating selection of art from the collection is shown publically at the Constitutional Court at no charge, and monthly walkabouts are presented by the curatorial team, assistant curators Francois Lion-Cachet and Thina Miya. More information about the art collection, Trust and its environment and workings can be found on ccac.org.za and concourttrust.org.za. The CCAC can be followed on Instagram and Twitter at @concourt_art.



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