

## **Tribal Peoples of South Africa by Barbara Tyrrell**

*Last updated: 21 June 2021*

Donated to the CCAC by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008

Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015) is known internationally for her detailed studies of the traditional dress of the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa. The ethnographic artist grew up at Eshowe in rural Zululand, where she developed her deep interest in the local Zulu people and became fluent in the Zulu language. After her fine art studies at the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), she spent many years traveling alone in the rural areas of Southern Africa with her small caravan, documenting the so-called “tribal” people’s relations, community and etiquette. Tyrrell drew her initial sketches in the field using a pencil, annotating it with notes on the colour, pattern, and nature of the different items worn by the sitters. She was later joined by her husband, and they covered an area stretching from the Cape to Angola and the Zambezi Valley in the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Her work was supported and collected in quantity by Dr. Killie Campbell whose collections are today housed at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Tyrrell’s donation of 32 sketches in 2008 culminated in a handing-over event on 21 September 2009. Tyrrell wanted the collection to be kept intact and accessible to the public as she highlighted that it is evidence of vanishing cultures. The sketches depict representations of individuals from 10 different tribes belonging to Southern Africa. Tyrrell paired the donation with beadwork of 118 pieces and her handwritten notes accompanying the sketches, providing backstories on outfits worn, their meaning, and their history. Some of the beadwork donated by Tyrrell appears in some of the sketches donated. Tyrrell’s notes have informed the understanding of the research of her collection. Tyrrell collected the beadwork from her sitters whom she paid generously for sitting and for the beads. The sitters are portrayed as individuals, the traditional dress enhancing each sitter's personality – yet most are unfortunately unnamed.

Today, questions of the work Tyrrell was undertaking include issues of representation as there are various perspectives on her work as a white ethnographer documenting the lives of Black Southern Africans. By showcasing these works in the context of the Constitutional Court building, Tyrrell’s work can be investigated and prompts fascinating questions for art practitioners and social historians.

Tyrrell's records of human habitation in Southern Africa are, according to George G. Campbell, former chancellor of the then the University of Natal, “a monumental work of the greatest historical value as it could only be accomplished by one whose devoted application and adventurous spirit took her to the natural habitat and environment of her subject.”



**Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Noble girl – Swazi***(1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 797 x 613 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A girl of noble family has an exclusive right to wear the red bird feathers indicating Swazi royalty. The feathers should be treated with extreme care. The girl's cloth is a favourite worn over one shoulder with the same style cloth worn around the waist by men.*

**0268. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Girl – Swazi***(1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 470 x 565 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Depicted is a girl who has recently shaved her hair as part of her bereavement. She wears bright clothes, a typical and fashionable design at the time of drawing. The small beaded necklace and earrings she is wearing is typical of Swazi culture.*

**0290. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Lady with long beaded earrings hair – Swazi***  
(1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 750 x 557 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Depicted is a girl with fine plaited hair preparing for the built-up hairstyle of marriage, similar to that of the Zulu yet differing in shape and colour (Swazi hair remains black while Zulu hair is red ochred). The beaded wristband and necklace are*



0262. **Barbara Tyrrell** (1912–2015)  
*Sangoma – Zulu* (1944)  
Acrylic and oil on canvas / 470 x 570 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A Zulu traditional healer carries her switch, which is essential in the calling of ancestral spirits. The beaded hairstyle is also important for protection from evil influences associated with illnesses encountered when dealing with patients.*

0280. **Barbara Tyrrell** (1912–2015)  
*Married woman – Zulu* (1944)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 560 x 470 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Detachable hair of marriage (often red ochre) is important for the convenience of women who work in town or westernised situations. The black leather skirt denotes marriage as do the covered breasts. When away from home a married woman covers her shoulders as a form of respect for her husband*

0283. **Barbara Tyrrell** (1912–2015)  
*Zulu – Warrior* (1944)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 575 x 467 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A warrior of noble descent wearing leopard skin with ostrich feathers on a typical gala night. The white tales worn on his ankles indicate a state of war. The man's seated on his back skirt, arms on knees attitude is typical of warriors. His shield and spear lie at his feet.*

0287. **Barbara Tyrrell** (1912–2015)  
*Married woman – Zulu* (1944)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 750 x 557 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*The beadwork and ornaments as part of this woman's hairstyle match the designs and style of her area. The headband is an essential part of showing respect towards her husband and his family. Respect is key in families joined by marriage and in the matter of age.*



0284. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Mother – Ndebele***(1946)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 560 x 472 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Shown here is a mother of a son who attended circumcision school, as indicated by the wearing of long headband streamers of beadwork – a proud statement of a boy now man. She kneels while pouring traditional beer from a calabash into a beaded calabash mug, typical of the Ndebele.*

0285. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Married woman – Ndebele***(1946)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 669 x 562 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A Ndebele woman's apron denotes her status in life. A bride usually wears a heavily beaded apron of five vertical, rounded panels. A married woman's apron is made from whitened leather with smaller beaded panels at each side.*

0286. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Young woman – Ndebele***(1946)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 750 x 557 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Young Ndebele women in traditional striped blankets also wear beaded neck rings, today more often detachable. In former times, these rings would be worn around the neck, arms, legs, and waist. The ceremonial blanket is usually edged with white beads.*







0265. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Married woman – Bhaca (Present-day Durban)*  
(1945)

Acrylic and oil on board / 555 x 578 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Tyrrell captured what she called a “seemingly sad old woman” in her home village, while she was shopping. She is dressed in a style older than that of her generation, relating to her ancestors. Her red ochre hair is hanging over a crown made from black draped*

0263. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**

*Married woman – Bhaca (Present-day Durban)*(1945)

Acrylic and oil on board / 645 x 545 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*The head knob worn by the woman is a sign of marriage, the head pins and beaded necklace are usually worn for special occasions. Tyrrell made the artwork during festivities unrelated to this woman in her home area.*

0288. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Married woman – Bhaca (Present-day Durban)*  
(1945)

Acrylic and oil on board / 750 x 557 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A married Baca woman with a head knob with pins and a necklace worn during gala occasions. Some pins are skillfully constructed of grass, wool and wood to replace shortages of beads for waistline skirts. The beadwork design is typical to her area Richmond, KwaZulu-Natal.*

0278. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Married woman – Bhaca (Present-day Durban)*  
(1945)

Acrylic and oil on board / 567 x 470 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Depicted is a married woman in full attire. The diamond shaped piece over her forehead is to strengthen love. The hair is red ochre because lobola was paid by her husband; it is stranded and at first worn concealing the eyes, later divided after a child has been born. The beadwork design and ornaments*



0271. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)  
*Married woman – Ntwana (Present-day  
Limpopo)* (1950)

Acrylic and oil on board / 655 x 510 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Depicted is a married woman with a helmet-  
like hairstyle  
with beaded hoops, apron, black skirt and*



0270. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)  
*Older lady- Sotho* (1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 615 x 600 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Tyrrell writes that a German trader brought blankets from Bali to South Africa, which became sought after by the Sotho, as seen worn by the woman stirring the pot. Balinese influence still remains as do*

0275. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)  
*Lady with pink and brown blanket – South Sotho* (1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 747 x 575 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*The colourful Basotho blanket is worn by all ages and genders. A woman's blanket is pinned up to the chin for the convenience of her work while a man's blanket is worn over the right shoulder. The open weave sun hat is usually worn by women when not wearing a headscarf*

0275. Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)  
*Elderly man – South Sotho* (1949)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 747 x 575 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*An elderly South Sotho man donning the simpler style worn by his age group. He is on a long journey by foot, accompanied by his personal music to entertain himself. According to Tyrrell, the man produced a soft rhythmic tickle with his*



0267. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Traditional doctor– Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 720 x 639  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in  
2008**

*A healer calls to the spirits of the  
ancestors to assist their client. The  
black switch is woven from the  
Wildebeest, making a sound  
recognised in spiritual realms. The  
white switch, made from a mule  
requires special ritual treatment in  
order to be as potent as*

0274. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Mother with pipe – Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 742 x 447  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A Xhosa mother walks to town on a  
shopping excursion, laden with a  
new baby, goods for trading and a  
smoking pipe for strength. Her  
necklace is made from the tail hairs  
of the family's sacred cow and is  
medicinal for her new baby.*

0264. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Mother – Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 544 x 670  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*The long pipe is usually smoked by  
breastfeeding women for strength.  
The whitening of her and the child's  
face and shoulders indicate that she  
is nursing. Traditionally, this would  
be a time when married couples  
abstain from intercourse.*

0269. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Young girl– Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 464 x 666  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A Xhosa woman is depicted in her  
daily wear, typical beaded necklace  
and turban style headgear of  
intertwined cloths. Head covering is  
important in identifying the status of  
a married woman of Xhosa culture.*

0276. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*Mother – Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 575 x 541  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A nursing mother whitens her  
shoulders and face and her child's  
face with white clay or stone. She  
wears a medicinal necklace for her  
child. The woman depicted is  
wearing one of the most impressive  
ornaments of the Xhosa – a wide,  
open-mesh collar in beads of her  
favourite colours: pink and pale blue  
with white and black.*

0279. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
*A boy ready for “khwetha”  
initiation – Xhosa* (1947)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 630 x 600  
mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in  
2008**

*This boy, ready for ukwaluka  
(circumcision) initiation school,  
wears his customary sheath of  
animal skin and an ochred blanket,  
his beads announcing his  
readiness. In the past, boys  
attended these schools in groups in  
one lodge. Today, for convenience,  
a boy may be the sole occupant of a  
small hut built near his home kraal.*





***Mother - Fengu (Present-day Port Elizabeth)***  
(1945)

Acrylic and oil on board / 570 x 505 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*The woman depicted is a descendant of wandering people fleeing the wrath of King Shaka Zulu, rejected by the Xhosa and who eventually settled on British protectorate. She wears a medicinal necklace made of special wood to alleviate her child's teething pain.*

0277. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912-2015)**

***Mother - Fengu (Present-day Port Elizabeth)***  
(1947)

Acrylic and oil on board / 575 x 541 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A pattern of white lines and dots is typically Fengu, as is the heavily stitched black head cloth which can also be profusely ornamented with white pearls sourced from the British settlers of 1820. Fengu girls wear mostly white short skirts and head cloths.*



0272. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Boy with goat – Tonga (Present-day Zambia)***  
(1945)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 730 x 430 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*A boy living in the heat of the Zambezi Valley would usually wear a strip of cloth between the legs. This boy's name is Poison for some threat associated with his birth; it isn't uncommon for children to be named after a key happening. Here, Poison takes care of a baby goat.*

0260. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Young girl – Tonga (Present-day Zambia)*** (1945)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 390 x 495 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2009**

*Illustrated is a young Zimbabwean Tonga girl smeared with red ochre on her nose for celebrations. According to Tyrrell, a strong thorn was used for the piercing, followed by fine twigs when healed. The nose plugs are removable, which wasn't always the case.*

0261. **Barbara Tyrrell (1912–2015)**  
***Mother and child – Tonga (Present-day Zambia)***  
(1945)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 740 x 555 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*An impande (cowrie) shell is seen on the woman's chest with spirals of brass on her wrists and ankles. In the heat of the Valley of Gwembe, women would ground their grain while smoking gourd bubble pipes and men carved stools.*



0273. **Barbara Tyrrell** (1912–2015)  
*Diviner – Shangaan* (1945)  
Acrylic and oil on board / 760 x 567 mm

**Donated by Barbara Tyrrell in 2008**

*Depicted is a shangaan witch-doctor, working on the smooth side of a goatskin mat with a collection of carved ivory blocks, knuckle bones of animals and cowrie shells. He wears animal skin and an old-styled head ring similar to the Zulu and Swazi.*