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First Edition, July 2021

## THE MAPULA EMBROIDERY TRUST

Dear friends and supporters,

As Mapula Embroideries celebrates *30 years of existence*, we reach out to all of you with news of our progress. Many of you will have bought our embroidered textiles over the years and we'd like to stay in touch with you.



Some of you will have visited the Winterveld and experienced first-hand the difficult conditions under which our resilient women work. The Covid pandemic has brought the world to its knees, but Mapula is moving ahead and we'd like to share with you the spirit of creativity that propels us forward.

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## 30 Years, 30 Stories

As part of Mapula's 30 Year Celebration we are celebrating Thirty Mapula trailblazers, and therefore introduce you to Rosina Maepa.

Rosina Maepa is one of the first members of the Mapula Embroidery Project, and has continued to help build this creative community for the last 30 years. Rosina Maepa had arrived in Pretoria from Sekhukhuneland in 1982, looking for a job. Very soon she realised that education was the way forward and she decided to further her studies by completing her matric. When she heard about Mapula she saw an opportunity to work as an embroiderer while she studied. By 2008 she was leading her own group and recruiting other women to join her. Sister Majella of the Sisters of Mercy helped stretch her finances by offering her additional work cleaning rooms at the school and this enabled her to educate her four children. By now, two are qualified teachers, one is a policeman and the fourth is still studying at the University of Johannesburg. What a proud record! Rosina attributes this success to the support of Mapula and pays tribute to Sister Majella and Janetje van der Merwe and the Soroptimists who stood by her all the way. When members of the Soroptimist International Club of Pretoria went to the Winterveld in 1991, the intention was to improve the economic circumstances of the women in this neglected and underdeveloped area. Rosina said that Mapula opened doors for her introducing her to new people and exposing her to their cultures. She has travelled internationally representing Mapula, in places as far apart as London and Rwanda where in 2015 she taught her skill in embroidery to marginalised women and helped launch a project in Kibeho. Thirty years on, Rosina says that Mapula is her life and she can't live without it. She encourages other women to work hard and get involved and achieve their goals.

**“Mapula is my life and I can't live without it.”**

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## Mapula – Keiskamma collaboration

Offering hope against fear during this pandemic

“For the first time they could visualise each other’s circumstances and developed a drawing of their perception of the other’s life”



*Vero's life in Hamburg during Covid-19, by Rosina Maepa (2020)*



*Knowing you through embroidery, Rosina, by Veronica Betani (2020)*

In 2020, Covid-19 took the world into lockdown and fear gripped the people as the infection spread throughout the world. This was particularly felt in the Winterveld and Hamburg where it had a severe economic impact on the livelihoods of these vulnerable communities. There was a much-reduced market for their work, people’s lives shrank and tourism stopped completely. It became urgent to find a way forward and to offer hope. To this end, a collaborative project was developed between the Keiskamma Art Project in Hamburg, Eastern Cape and Mapula Embroideries of the Winterveld. The idea was that pairs of women, one from each community, would get to know each other using WhatsApp messages and photos. As the women, who had never met, visualised each other’s circumstances, they each developed a drawing of their perception of the other’s life. The artwork would then be embroidered in the distinctive style of each woman’s embroidery group. Eight pairs of women, one from each community, got to know each other using WhatsApp messages and photos. For the first time they could visualise each other’s circumstances and developed a drawing of their perception of the other’s life. Sixteen artworks emerged, each embroidered in the distinctive style of each woman’s embroidery group.

The project started off slowly at first, with women shyly contacting each other, but the conversations gathered momentum as hopes and fears were shared together with photos of community life, homes, gardens, children and livestock. With one group living at the sea near a river mouth, the other inland on the dry Highveld, there was much to learn. Two embroiderers, Veronica Betani from Keiskamma Art Project and Rosina Maepa from Mapula Embroideries, were honoured by having their work chosen for an online exhibition at the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck School of Arts, University of London. Although the exhibition took place in September 2020, a YouTube film of their WhatsApp conversation is still available.

**'I see you Vero, I see you Rosina: finding our common threads' by Veronica Betani and Rosina Maepa**

To view this short film [click here](#)

Planning for an exhibition of all 16 artworks is underway. It will be held at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) in Johannesburg: opening on the 13th of September and running to the 30th of September 2021. A professionally produced video of four of the cell phone exchanges will complement the artworks. Showing the video with the artworks will add context and deep meaning to the process of making the art and enable viewers to engage with what true resilience is in the face of poverty and pandemic.

There are also plans for exchange visits, with training opportunities for the Keiskamma and Mapula artists, COVID and funding permitting. Fundraising for this experience will commence soon.

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## With Needle and Thread

In May 2021, the Association of Arts in Pretoria hosted a joint exhibition showcasing the work of three rural community art projects. Mapula Embroiderers were proud to share the platform with the work of women from the Keiskamma Trust (Hamburg, Eastern Cape) and Kaross (Letsitele, Limpopo).





Cloths from Mapula were used to explore the trauma of Covid whereas Keiskamma displayed work illustrating Marguerite Poland's recent book "Sin of Omission". In contrast, Kaross presented embroidered portraits of members of their team. Talented women from Mapula Embroideries were present at the opening and enjoyed the opportunity to tell visitors about their work and answer questions. They also studied closely the work of other community projects and learned from the exposure.

From the Association Of Arts exhibition flowed a wonderful opportunity to have Mapula pieces displayed as part of the Design Jhb Collective. Below are images of Mapula art cloths on display as part of the Collective, showing again how well these pieces blend into contemporary settings.



## Sisterhood And Solidarity

“Women from the city and women living in poor settings shared their ways of ensuring a clean, managed and litter-free environment...”

Women from the Mapula Embroidery Project in the Winterveld and Hammanskraal and Soroptimists from the Pretoria-Tshwane Club got together for a Saturday morning to share what they do to care for the environment. They learned good practice from one another and in the process conceptualized three textile artworks which will be designed and embroidered over the next few weeks. These artworks will reflect the efforts of women living in entirely different contexts and illustrate how, no matter our diversities, we know what is right, and, instinctively as women, we want to nurture our planet. Women from the city and women living in poor, under-serviced rural/peri-urban settings shared their ways of; ensuring a clean, managed and litter-free environment; doing away with single-use plastics; recycling and re-using containers and other materials; being water-wise; making compost and having food-gardens. The Spekboom was introduced as a ‘Proudly South African’ plant which contributes towards reducing carbon in the atmosphere and mitigating climate change as well as having many other health and wellness benefits. Once again, the resilience, strength and solidarity of South African women was experienced and served to inspire.

Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo! (When you strike a woman you strike a rock!)

The artworks emerging from this collaboration will be for sale.

In addition, smaller items on a botanical theme are in production.

Commissions are accepted.

[FIND OUT MORE ABOUT OUR COMMISSIONED CLOTHS](#)

## 2020 Through the eye of a needle

A Commemorative Tapestry by the Mapula Embroidery Project

"...documents and commemorates both the challenges and tragedies of 2020"

In keeping with a long-standing tradition of telling momentous histories through embroidery that was made famous through the *Bayeux Tapestry*, the Mapula Embroidery Project in the Winterveld in Gauteng has produced *2020 Through the Eye of a Needle*. Through 12 hand-embroidered panels representing each month of the year, *2020 Through the Eye of the Needle* documents and commemorates both the challenges and tragedies of 2020 and other South African stories which almost went unnoticed in the midst of the pandemic.

While 2020 posed enormous terrible challenges to people in reaching audiences in the face of lockdowns and closures, the Mapula Project's long experience in articulating difficulties, hardships and life in general through their embroideries also meant that the year presented circumstances that called for representation.

We hope and trust that, apart from constituting an important legacy series, this commemorative tapestry will yield sales that will help towards ensuring the project's sustainability and addressing the precarious livelihoods of its women.

*2020 Through the Eye of the Needle* will be exhibited for the first time at the gallery of the offices of the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg.

*DATE:* 1 to 30 September 2021.

*EXHIBITION OPENING:* The opening will be held online on Wednesday, 1 September at 17h00. Please contact Neelofir Nagdee [nnagdee@uj.ac.za](mailto:nnagdee@uj.ac.za) for the link.

*VENUE:* Offices of the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg, 33 Twickenham Avenue, Auckland Park, Johannesburg.

*TIMES FOR VIEWING:* Monday to Friday, 8.30 am – 3.30 pm

*TEL:* 011 559-7221



July 2020 by Kelelo Maepa, Phindile Gumede and Christinah Mabasa.

Photograph by Paul Mills

## PEOPLE OF NOTE – CHANNEL 102.7

On 13 December 2020, Janetjie van der Merwe was interviewed on the radio channel 102.7 by **Richard Cock** in his programme *People of Note*. She spoke about the production of the Commemorative Tapestries during the Covid pandemic and activities at Mapula over the years. She really brought the projects to life with her lively presentation so we invite you to relax and enjoy this podcast. It lasts for about one hour but unfortunately the eclectic and inspiring choice of music is not included.

We hope you find our first Mapula newsletter inspiring.

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