

THE ART OF IDENTITY

Wedding Ensemble | Ndebele region, South Africa



Artists unidentified. *Wedding Ensemble*. 1980s. Ndebele region, South Africa. Composed with Gifts of Caroline Popper, Baltimore, and Marie-Claude and Eric McKie, Baltimore, in Honor of Frederick Lamp, Curator, Arts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, 1981–2003, BMA 1991.369.1, 1991.369.2, 1990.195, 1991.371, and 2004.177

A cape, a fringed veil, a decorative skirt apron—these and other garments form the wedding ensemble in a style popular for a Ndebele bride in the 1980s. Certain garments were only used for the wedding itself; those include the veil and the bridal train that hangs from the back of the outfit. However, after the wedding, the bride would continue to wear elements such as the cape and the five-paneled apron to signify her status as a married woman.

The graphic, abstract designs embedded in the complex beadwork of these pieces reflect the way in which Ndebele men and women of South Africa asserted their identity through visual means. With the official South African policy of Apartheid (1948–1994), racial segregation and racial discrimination became law. It was during this time that Ndebele women began to fill their ceremonial clothes with colorful, abstract designs. This was both an act of resistance and ethnic pride, a visual statement that Ndebele identity and culture were worthy and valuable.

The origins of these designs date back to the pre-Apartheid period, making them potent symbols of ethnic pride and resistance. Older beaded garments featured small geometric designs in a large white field of beads. As time went on, the designs became more detailed, filling up the entire garment. Ndebele women also began painting these designs on their houses.

The intricate beadwork required to make these remarkable garments is done by married Ndebele women—a skill they pass on to their daughters. The ability to create this complex beadwork, in addition to affirming the Ndebele cultural identity, can also serve a more practical purpose—as a source of income for the artist.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Clothing and external decoration as markers of identity is a concept that is likely to be familiar to most students. Have your students explore this idea by examining and discussing *Wedding Ensemble* in its historical and cultural context. Then have students reflect on the ways they communicate their identity through their clothing choices. As an activity, ask students to alter garments (provided by the school or the students) such as T-shirts or other pieces of clothing by manipulating the fabric, changing the fit or shape, and taking away, changing, or adding decorative elements to best reflect their own identities.



Wedding Ensemble, 1980s

Artists unidentified. *Wedding Ensemble*. 1980s. Ndebele region, South Africa. Composed with Gifts of Caroline Popper, Baltimore, and Marie-Claude and Eric McKie, Baltimore, in Honor of Frederick Lamp, Curator, Arts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, 1981–2003, BMA 1991.369.1, 1991.369.2, 1990.195, 1991.371, and 2004.177