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Semiotic Interpretations and Cultural Significance of Found Objects in the Creative Practices of Zulu Artists in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract: The aim of this paper was to examine the creative use of found objects in the artistic work produced in the Zulu community of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The research, therefore, focused on determining the cultural significance and semiotic interpretations of these found objects in the Zulu community of KZN. By engaging with these works in museums and cultural centres, this study identified found objects that were historically used and objects currently used in the creative production of art by indigenous artists in KZN. It then compared these to European modernist approaches. The theoretical background of this study is situated within Roland Barthes' Theory of Semiotics, which examines the cultural and symbolic meanings of objects. This paper was approached from a decolonial perspective. This positions the study within the context of current trends in contemporary art discourse and highlights how Eurocentric narratives have historically marginalised indigenous innovation and often presented African artistic production as inferior.

Keywords: decolonial; found object; semiotics; Zulu art

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Introduction

'Found object' is a strategy in contemporary art practice that employs everyday objects from people's ordinary lives as art media. It is defined as an existing object or artefact that was originally not meant as art or an artefact that was found or bought that is considered to also have some aesthetic or symbolic value for the finder (Kearney, 2016). This form of art was made popular in the twentieth century by Marcel Duchamp and other artists of the Dadaist movement. Towards the middle of the century, other movements also employed this strategy, *e.g.* the Surrealists. Duchamp first used the term readymade in 1914 to refer to already-manufactured and mass-produced items with minimal or no modification made to them that he presented as art (Iversen, 2004). This modification was, in most cases, merely in the way the object was placed, which may contradict how it was designed to be positioned in order to serve its intended function. However, the use of found objects could also involve manipulating the object as art material. Other Modern artists, such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, had earlier used everyday objects in their art to challenge the social and cultural values of bourgeois society (Akpang, 2021). Since the Renaissance, European art has traditionally relied heavily on one-point perspective, realism and ideals of

beauty. By incorporating materials from mass culture, European modernists challenged established artistic hierarchies and indicated new possibilities for artistic experimentation. These materials were often considered crude, ordinary, or inartistic. Kearney (2016) highlights that found objects have become part of the art-making praxis in the post-modern world, from installations to sculpture and performance.

The innovative context of the found object is often tied to its exploration by European modernist artists, who embraced the art genre as a radical, subversive form of artistic expression, and employed it as a change agent (Akpang, 2021). The scholarly narrative of the found object as strictly a product of European modernists has been criticised as problematic and Eurocentric because of the approach to understanding its ramifications. This Eurocentric narrative further classifies the exploration of the found object by artists outside the European art space as mimesis.

While Duchamp and the Dadaists are credited with its formalist exploration, various contemporary studies continue to highlight that the found object predates its European institutionalisation (Akpang, 2021). Akpang (2014) notes that the concept of found objects was practised by many African communities long before the use of this technique in Western art. He points out the various materials and objects used by many pre-colonial African communities to build shrines and ritual objects, so lending credence to his point. Moreover, African artists who explored the found object after its institutionalisation in European art history did not necessarily encounter its modernist expressions. Thus, the use of found materials developed along distinct trajectories that were shaped by different cultural contexts and artistic priorities. According to Kearney (2016), the use of found objects can no longer be understood from a single framework which is informed by its exploration in the early 20th century by Picasso, Braque and Duchamp. Far from mere mimicry, Kearney (2016) further insists that every exploration of a found object must be understood in its own terms as a new inflexion.

The aim of this paper was to examine the cultural significance of found objects explored by artists of Zulu origin living in the KZN province of South Africa. This study focused mainly on indigenous Zulu art, rather than mainstream contemporary art. The Zulus are one of the major tribes in South Africa. While the amaZulu are found in other Southern African countries, they are predominantly settled in the KZN province in South Africa (Mbatha & Cebekhulu, 2022). The study also sought to highlight the exploration of found objects by Zulu artists and how this contrasts with its appropriation in European modernism. The importance of this objective stems from a decolonial responsibility to highlight instances of indigenous innovation in African art, which is often silenced in Eurocentric readings. Thus, this paper examined the distinctions in the approach to found objects by Zulu artists compared to European modernists. The third objective of the paper was to investigate the challenges of documenting African Art in cultural institutions properly.

To guide this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How are found objects incorporated creatively into the artistic practices of Zulu artists in KZN?
2. What cultural significance and semiotic meanings do these found objects hold in the Zulu community?
3. What challenges are encountered in the documentation and representation of Zulu art when utilising found objects in local cultural institutions?
4. In what ways do the approaches to found objects used by Zulu artists differ from those of European modernist artists?

Based on these questions, the paper sought to provide a nuanced analysis of the intersection between material, context and meaning in Zulu artistic production.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this paper was based mainly on Barthes' semiotic notions of first-order denoted meaning and second-order connoted meaning. Roland Barthes was a French literary critic and semiotician, who become one of the major cultural theorists of the twentieth century (Jadou & Al Ghabra, 2021). Barthes made a prolific contribution to the development of modern critical thinking. He holds that the individual meanings we attribute to objects and images are not based on what we see. According to Curtin (2006), peoples' understanding of images is not universal, so the meanings we ascribe to images and objects are influenced by our cultural associations. Barthes was of the opinion that semiotics is the most appropriate method to be used to analyse cultural phenomena, and pioneered the application of semiotic ideas in the study of visual images(Aiello 2020).

Barthes explained that the meanings we accord to visual objects are not wholly based on what we see (Jadou & Al Ghabra, 2021).

In Barthes' terminology, the denoted meaning is the immediate visual interpretation attached to the object or image, while the connoted meaning refers to the meaning given to the object or image by cultural associations (Barthes, 1964). Denotation (denoted meaning) is defined as the literal meaning attributed to a sign on first encounter or the obvious theme that a sign represents. The art historian Erwin Panofsky (1970) further explained that denotation refers to the common interpretation ascribed to a visual image by viewers, regardless of culture or time. Connotation (connoted meaning) refers to the personal and socio-cultural ideologies associated with a sign. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, race and class influence how the interpreter perceives a sign. At the connotation stage, which is the object's second order of signification, a sign is opened up to a wider range of interpretation than at the denotation level (first order of signification) (Gries 2020).

Barthes explains: "The signification of an object begins when it is produced and consumed by a human society". Most objects signify themselves, and the function of an object, more often than not, becomes its sign (Barthes, 1964, p.183). There is, however, also the possibility of an object connoting a meaning independent of its function (Barthes, 1964). Art critics have attempted to understand the dynamics of African art and the particular symbolic representations embedded in it. Sarapik (2013, p. 89) argues that "art is one of the suitable arenas for the activities of semiotics". Since semiotics is interested in the process of sign creation and interpretation, and seeks to comprehend them from different cultural perspectives, a semiotic approach to this study was again indicated as being pertinent.

Additionally, a decolonial framework was also employed in this study, which helped to situate the study within the pressing concerns of the representation of African art since the emergence of globalisation. Thus, the adoption of a decolonial approach in this study was informed by concerns regarding the representation of indigenous Zulu art in South African museums, many of which were historically shaped by the apartheid ideology of segregation and racial discrimination (Mdluli, 2017). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019, p. 14) defines decoloniality as the dismantling of power dynamics and "conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies". Decolonial theory is an ongoing project with an ethico-political and epistemic focus. It aims to disrupt colonial structures that continue to shape modernity.

Methodology

An interpretivist research paradigm informed the design of the study. This paradigm emphasises that knowledge acquisition is possible by reflecting on individual experiences (Aguzzoli et al., 2024). The interpretivist research paradigm highlights the importance of understanding how individuals interpret the world around them, thereby emphasising the viewpoint of the subject being observed, rather than that of the observer (Aguzzoli et al., 2024). The paradigm complements the qualitative approach to the study by focusing on experiences and subjectivity (William 2024).

A purposive sampling method was used to select the institutions where the research was conducted, which allowed for "handpicking of supposedly typical or interesting cases" (Blaxter et al., 2006). This enabled the researcher to select art institutions that aligned with the research aim and focus. There are about thirty art galleries and cultural museums in KZN. However, data was gathered from four selected institutions that focus on artworks by local artists: Phansi Museum, Durban Art Gallery, African Art Centre and Killie Campbell Museum. Data collection involved both participant observation of artworks and artefacts made from found objects in the KZN province, and documentary research done at selected museums and cultural institutions. The participant observation method enabled the researcher to observe, record and analyse events of interest (Blaxter et al., 2006). The works held in the collections of the four institutions provide a vast number of Zulu artefacts that are helpful in studying how Zulu Art has evolved over the years. The enormous collections house artefacts that vary in terms of materials and the time periods in which they were made. This enabled the researcher to engage with the works critically, and to make the necessary comparisons. It also helped in tracing the historical development of methods and techniques used in the found objects of Zulu art.

In terms of data analysis, each artwork or artefact was documented using field notes, catalogue descriptions and photographs, where permitted. The paper employed a theory-driven analytical strategy. Semiotics was applied to the study and guided the analysis of the artworks and the interpretation of the findings. Barthes' framework

was operationalised in three stages. First, the materials and construction (denotative features) of the selected artworks were recorded. Next, the cultural connotations were examined. Lastly, interpretations were synthesised to highlight the construction of meaning through the interplay of material, context and references. This multi-step approach to data collection and analysis was intended to ensure that the interpretation of each artwork was grounded in both direct observation and an understanding of its cultural significance.

Findings

Traditionally, the Zulu are known for using conventional materials in artistic production, including raffia for weaving mats and baskets, wood and bone for carving, clay for pottery, and cowhide as an important material in various forms of artistic expression. Many of their historical artefacts were produced for functional purposes (Addleson 1990), ranging from ornamentation and communication to domestic uses. They also used materials such as metal, wood, horn, ivory and bone for making musical instruments (Addleson 1990).

While Zulu artists have worked with a wide range of found materials, this study focuses on two that have become particularly prominent: telephone wire and beads. The significance of these materials lies in their evolution into established modes of artistic expression within Zulu visual culture, with both materials now widely available and commonly purchased for use in artistic production. The urban migration that South Africa has been experiencing since the early 20th century greatly influenced the materials chosen by Zulu artists. This resonates with Akpang's (2014) notion that the quest to try new things has always been an important part of African art. The Zulu artists of the 20th century embodied this notion in their work.

The use of telephone wire and plastic beads by Zulu artists provides a compelling example of how found materials function as signs within a culturally embedded visual system. At the level of denotation, these materials appear as industrial products incorporated into objects such as decorated walking sticks, baskets and sculptural forms. However, through a semiotic reading that was informed by Roland Barthes, these materials can be understood as signifiers whose meanings extend beyond their immediate material presence.

Beadwork

Like many other civilisations across the globe, intercontinental trade introduced a range of products to Zulu communities. As a result, Zulu artists have explored using imported materials from other parts of the world as materials in art (Viduka 2012). Prior to this, Zulu artists were fond of incorporating diverse materials found within their immediate environment into their art. Take, for instance, Zulu necklaces. Addleson (1990) explained that the earliest necklaces made in traditional societies were made of readily available materials such as seeds, bones, grass and shells. However, these were gradually replaced by glass beads, which were introduced into the African market over time (Addleson, 1990). In addition to glass beads, Zulu artists now also use studs of different shapes and sizes. These studs are mostly gold or silver in colour, and are made of aluminium and other metals. Some Zulu artists have explored using random objects such as padlocks, safety pins, thumb-nails, bicycle parts and so on (Figures 1–3). Hence, plastic beads have come to function as conventional media in Zulu artistic practice, while artists continue to incorporate other found objects into beadwork. In this process, the beads themselves are treated less as found materials and more as established artistic media within the evolving visual language of Zulu art. For the Zulu artist, these objects connote new meaning. Barthes (1964) argued that whenever objects are assembled into a composition, the composition becomes the object, and individual objects may no longer have independent meanings.

Beadwork adorned with found materials like padlocks and metal keys (as illustrated in Figure 2), transcend their industrial origins. The objects have been explored as repeated patterns, and the context in which the padlocks are incorporated, convey notions of protection or value. In this instance, the universal connotation of the padlock as a tool for safekeeping is juxtaposed with the social and personal narratives of the beads.

Zulu artists have explored these objects beyond their original functions. In other words, since the objects have experienced a change in function, there is likely to be a change in what they connote. Barthes (as quoted in Curtin, 2006) argued that our understanding of objects is generally not universal. This implies that the meanings we attach to objects are largely influenced by cultural associations. Barthes (1964) further explained that an object may acquire a meaning independent of its function. This is the case with the thumbnails, for example (Figure 3). Aside from their function as thumbnails, they have gained an artistic and ornamental function. The

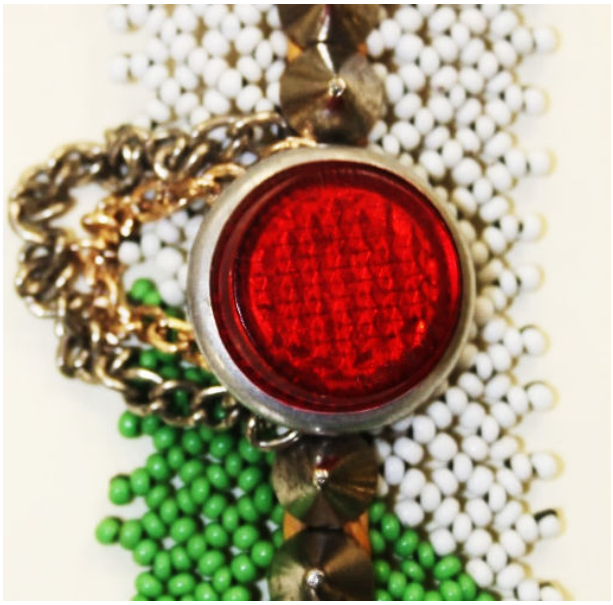

Figure 1. Multicoloured beadwork embedded with bicycle parts and silver-plated studs (Durban Art Gallery).

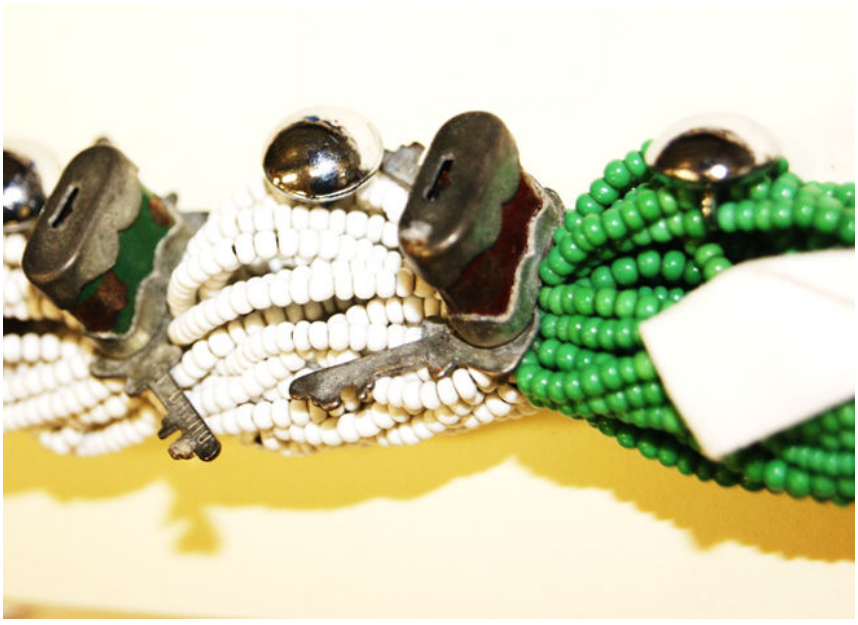

Figure 2. Padlocks and keys used as art material in jewellery making (Durban Art Gallery).

manner in which they are arranged also connotes new meanings, as Zulu artists often explored patterns as a means of communication.

One might conclude at this point that one of the factors that informed the artists' decision to substitute traditional materials for imported materials, such as glass beads, was, in many cases, durability. Since the glass beads appeared to be more durable than the seeds, the artists used them instead. The earliest glass beadwork made by artists was exclusively for royalty. It was commonly worn by kings, rulers and the rich, who could afford it. However, glass beads have now been replaced by plastic beads, which are more affordable, and which are also available in various colours, shapes and sizes, much like glass beads.

According to Van Wyk (1994), Southern African art is often associated with beadwork, and is sometimes viewed as having a "subordinate position" in African art. Van Wyk (1994) believed that this notion is informed by the works' "cross-cultural contact, it is women's work, and because it is associated with the craft side of the arbitrary

Figure 3. Detail of thumbnails used to adorn belts made of grass and beads (Durban Art Gallery).

art/craft dichotomy". According to Nettleton 2014, sculpture and carving were essentially masculine art forms, while beadwork was a female art form. However, Van Wyk (1994) argued that the works are rich in the aesthetics of colour and texture, which are similar to those of modern Western painting, although this is rarely recognised, since the bias in African art is "overwhelmingly in favour of sculpture".

Barthes (1964) explained myth as a system of meaning in which cultural ideas and ideologies are presented as natural truths through images, objects and representations. Myth hides the historical and political origins of these ideas, which make them appear normal or unquestionable. The representation of Zulu beadwork as inferior in Eurocentric interpretations illustrates the ideological operation of myth in which particular worldviews are naturalised and presented as universal truths, rather than historically constructed perspectives. In art history, this concept helps reveal how colonial narratives shaped the interpretation and classification of African art.

Zulu artists now employ beads as mainstream art materials with significant semiotic connotation - a form of aestheticism, reminiscent of traditional wall decorations. In addition, they use beads to create belts and embellish clothing and other decorative items, extending their function beyond purely ornamental purposes to structured, symbolic artistic expression.

Telephone wire work

The use of this material by Zulu artists was first explored in the 1950 s (Wells et al., 2012), when artists from Zulu communities and other settlements who had migrated to the cities began to weave the PVC-coated telephone wire onto their walking sticks and bottles (Figure 4). The earliest Zulu artists who explored telephone wire sourced it from construction-site waste piles. However, PVC-coated telephone wire is now readily available in stores, and is used in various designs today. It is commonly used to weave an *imbenge* (a bowl) (Figure 5), which was formerly made of grass. According to Nettleton (2010), many of the artists who have explored the wire technique in recent times aspire to make it an artistic representation. This standard is generally characterised by the increasingly flattened form the bowl takes. Nettleton (2010) further states: "The new designs are characterised by dramatic contrast or simple, geometric figuration, both of which reinforce the notion of the 'traditional' as bold and unsophisticated".

In Addleson 1990 view, this shift in materials used establishes the creative ability of the artists who have succeeded in transforming the grass-made bowl "from an item used in everyday life into an essential non-functional art object". Another feature of telephone wire of particular interest to the artist, is that it is available in various colours (Figure 5). The reason why telephone wire was originally coated in different colours was of little concern to the Zulu artists, since the denoted meanings ascribed to the colours also change once they are

Figure 4. Walking stick with PVC telephone wire woven around it artistically (Phansi Museum).

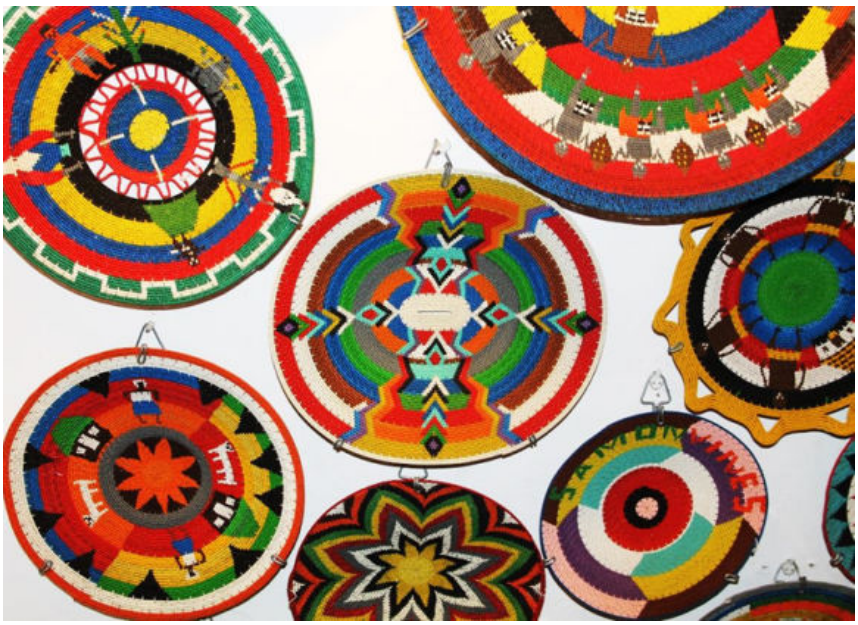

Figure 5. Different *imbenge* designs made from PVC-coated telephone wire (Phansi Museum).

incorporated into an artwork. Barthes (1964) explained that the meanings we ascribe to an object are not natural, but are constantly influenced by our culture and beliefs. Colours have always been a significant part of the Zulu community and its art, and this may also have had a significant influence on the original incorporation of glass beads into Zulu traditional beadwork.

It was also observed from the artefacts studied that Zulu artists had used found objects (such as PVC-coated telephone wire) alongside traditional Zulu art materials (such as leather, grass and ivory) in their artwork. Roland Barthes (1964) believed that when different objects are juxtaposed, new meaning is formed. Within this context, the found objects explored by Zulu artists can be interpreted as part of a dynamic visual language that assists in the production of meaning and the need for communication. The creative use of found materials, such as plastic beads and telephone wire does not connote a departure from tradition when incorporated into conventional Zulu materials, but rather highlights the ability to adapt existing visual systems to new material environments. As

Kasfir et al. 2008 observed, African artistic practices often demonstrate a capacity to incorporate new materials while maintaining continuity with established aesthetic and symbolic traditions.

Found object as tool for communication and continued Zulu artistic traditions

Another finding of this research is that one of the major functions of Zulu art is to communicate certain messages. Guimarães (2012)) observed that Barthes' interest was "in applying the method of semiotics into the reading of everyday life", because objects are mediators between humanity and the world; *i.e*. objects are basically meant to assist man in his interaction with his environment (Barthes, 1964). Barthes (1964) believed that "every object has a metaphoric depth". In other words, objects are often employed as a means of representation, which determines their meaning (McNeill, 1999). This is evident in the way Zulu artists have explored found objects in their art. One notable observation is that Zulu artists were particularly drawn to found objects that displayed varied pigmentation. These materials were incorporated into patterned designs, especially in the making of *imbenge* and walking sticks. The colours and patterns embedded in these objects carried symbolic meanings and were employed by the artists as a form of visual communication. An example of this is the functional use of telephone wire in Zulu art, with traditional bowls being made with it. They are woven into patterns with various connotations. Additionally, the telephone wire now serves as art material, in addition to the technological use for which it was originally created (Figure 6). According to Barthes (1964), the meanings we ascribe to an object are not natural, but are "always a phenomenon of culture, a product of culture".

Figure 6. *Imbenge* (Killie Campbell Museum).

Furthermore, the colours and patterns evident in the use of found materials appear to have been influenced by established Zulu artistic traditions, including wall painting and mat weaving. The vibrant colours and pattern arrangements created through the manipulation of telephone wire and plastic beads evoke established aesthetic principles within Zulu visual culture. In this sense, the materials operate at the level of connotation by referencing symbolic associations related to identity, status and cultural continuity. Many of the materials now regarded as predominantly Zulu art materials developed amongst a group of artists who explored materials suggested to them by their changing societies. Thus, multicoloured patterns become signifiers of community ties, individual identity and cultural adaptation, as the repeated motifs often reference clan symbols, social status or significant life events.

Twentieth-century artists generally explored materials introduced into their environment by European traders, continuing artistic practices influenced by existing indigenous productions, such as wall painting (Bariki, 2019). This suggests that adopting modern industrial materials does not represent a break from tradition, but rather an extension of existing visual languages. These materials gradually became readily available in the market and have become common in Zulu art. Zulu artists were interested in the components of their choice of materials, and as much as they were open to exploring new materials, they were also particular about exploring objects to reflect a part of their culture, beliefs and everyday life. Engaging with Barthes' notion of semiotics helps bring out these

nuances, as Barthes' form of semiotic enquiry rested on the social and cultural context in which images or art are created and consumed.

The challenge of proper documentation of African art at the institutions selected

The viewer engages with the object from his own perspective. The researcher interacts with the object in greater detail. However, in this study, the scale of some of the work could not be measured due to its fragility. Most of the works were labelled, but the measurements were generally not documented. The Durban Art Gallery has labels attached to the works, while the Phansi Museum provides details on the works in separate documents. The works in the African Art Centre's collection are well documented, which may be because most of the works in their collection are recent compared to those at other institutions. This is also understandable, as the bulk of the works featured at the African Art Centre are for sale.

During the process of critical engagement with the works, it was discovered that, with most of the beadwork in the Durban Art Gallery, the artist's name is unknown, although the collector and the previous owners of the piece are often properly documented. In cases where the production time is documented, no specific date or year is provided; instead the decade in which it was produced is provided, e.g. 1940 s, 1950 s, and so forth. However, the year the artworks were collected is documented. Information is also provided about where the works were made and collected.

The tradition in Western art is that works of art, styles or techniques are attributed to individual artists, which makes it unproblematic for new innovations to be attributed. Such is the case with Marcel Duchamp and his concept of the found object. Contrarily, Oguibe (2004) argues that in African art, works are often attributed to a people or "tribe". From her interactions with French collectors, Kasfir (1992) observed a lack of interest among dealers and collectors in knowing the artist's name, as they believed that associating a piece with a particular artist diminished its authenticity. This explains the conspicuous absence of the artist's name in most documentation on the artistic productions. Local knowledge was perceived as irrelevant by colonialists during colonial times, while knowledge perceived as innovative was appropriated by the colonialists for their own advantage. The colonisers propagated a Eurocentric perception that their knowledge and mode of knowledge production was unique and superior to knowledge elsewhere, which granted them access to sovereign power (Filho, 2024). Oguibe (2004) articulated this argument best: "Until recently, works of classical African art were dutifully attributed to the 'tribe', rather than to the individual artist, thus effectively erasing the latter from the narrative spaces of art history".

In some cases, it may not have been possible to trace the artist's identity, since the works were made for commercial purposes and would have been sold to the party referred to as the owner in the documentation. This resonates with Kasfir (1992) and Oguibe's (2004) argument regarding the lack of interest shown by dealers and collectors in knowing the artist's name. Instead, works by African artists were often attributed to a people. However, it is problematic that the collector's identity and the period in which the work was produced are documented, yet the documentation remains silent about the artist's identity. Oguibe (2004) warns that by omitting the name of the artist, the individual artist is "effectively" erased from the "narrative spaces of art history".

Another reason many artefacts in these institutions don't reflect the name of the artist is that most artworks produced by Zulu artists were considered craft. Various factors may have informed the collector's decision to reach this conclusion. One reason may be that the works were mass-produced, *i.e*. the artists made a number of copies of the same work. Secondly, most of these artists lacked formal art training; hence, collectors could easily categorise their works as crafts. This categorisation may also have been due to the functionality of the works and the ridiculously low rates at which many were purchased. However, Pissarra 2009 asserts that cultural institutions continue to treat the creative postulations of Africa as souvenirs and spoils, merely to serve the curiosity of adventurers and ethnographers. The engagement of European modernists with African art through appropriation did little to transform its perceived status. Rather than elevating African art within the hierarchy of global art, it continued to be associated with idolatry and primitivism or to be perceived as unsophisticated craft production comparable with juvenile creativity. In contrast, European works that originated in similar contexts were readily recontextualised and legitimised in art galleries and museum spaces. African art was rarely afforded this transition, however, and it remained predominantly considered of ethnographic use (Pissarra 2009).

While Pissarra's (2009) argument focuses primarily on Western museums, a similar dynamic can be observed in South Africa as well. Many art institutions and museums in the country were established within the segregationist ideology of apartheid - a system in which the works of indigenous South African artists were frequently regarded as being of less artistic value than those by artists of European origin (Mdluli, 2017). This bias is also reflected in the nature of the collections themselves, which were often assembled to suit the collector's taste and interests, rather than to document cultural history comprehensively. A further similarity lies in the way these collections are labelled and presented. In many cases, the emphasis is placed on acknowledging and glorifying the collector, with exhibitions and catalogues display their names prominently. This practice frequently overlooks the identities of the artists and, in some instances, the communities from which the objects were acquired, thereby obscuring the cultural and historical context of the works.

Although African cultural productions are often discarded as trash due to their utilitarian design, Oguibe (2004) argues that the functional position that much precolonial African art possesses has not robbed it of its artistic impute. In his memoir, There Was a Country, Chinua Achebe (2012) states that the art of any African society cannot be separated from its history and events. In his view, African art, unlike the art of many European societies, is inseparable from the daily realities of the society. This makes the broad definition of crafts as artistically created objects with functional uses rather problematic within the context of African art. Inasmuch as the use of found objects in Zulu art has undergone a series of transformations over the years, the art is still informed by its well-refined ideology: preserving the culture and documenting the lives of the Zulu people of KZN.

However, this is not the case with many of the more recent works housed in galleries and museums, as collectors seem more interested in the artists. In recent times, institutions such as the Phansi Museum have established working relationships with artists. Artists' details are available, as they supply a museum or gallery with artworks and exhibit in their gallery spaces regularly. The researcher was even occasionally able to engage with some of the artists when visiting the institutions. Addressing the issue of change of "status" from craft to art, Nettleton (2010) explains:

> *The emergence of named individuals among these craft workers, through their institutional elevation to the status of an "artist", is a direct index of the increasing romance attached to the handmade object. But as crafters ascending the art hierarchy, the objects they made also changed in function and form; from being beautiful objects useful in an indigenous context, they became largely decorative, beautiful objects sold beyond local communities*.

It was also observed that there are many similarities between the older collections of the Phansi Museum, the Killie Campbell Museum and the Durban Art Gallery. This is because many of the older works at the Killie Campbell Museum and Durban Art Gallery were purchased from the Phansi Museum, as documented. Most of these similarities were prevalent in the collections of the Durban Art Gallery and the Phansi Museum.

Contrasting indigenous Zulu artists and modernist approaches to the found object

This section examines the exploration of found objects and how this practice differs from the modernist approach. Kearney (2016) suggests that found objects, as practised in one part of the world, can be analysed in a manner that allows them to engage in dialogue with how they are approached in other parts. Across the African continent, a range of communities have developed distinctive traditions of working with found materials; for instance, the use of reclaimed metals and plastics in sculptures done by the Yoruba in Nigeria, or the integration of bottle caps and recycled wood by contemporary Ghanaian artists. In Ethiopia, it is common for artists to use discarded items in religious iconography, while in Congo, the Kuba people historically integrated shells and beads as meaningful embellishments in ritual objects (Akpang, 2014; Akpang, 2021). Within this broader African context, it is evident that found object practices are widespread and culturally embedded, with each society adapting materials from external sources to local needs and symbolism. Although Akpang (2021) warns against the tendency among many historians to frame African art in comparison with or in reaction to Western art, this paper adopts a comparative approach to demonstrate how the found objects of Zulu artists have developed independently, with their own distinct trajectory, when compared with their practice elsewhere.

Zulu indigenous artists engaged with found objects in ways that differ significantly from the Duchampian or modernist interpretation of the genre. Rather than presenting the found object in its original form, as seen in many modernist practices, Zulu artists often dismantled the objects and reassembled their fragments to construct

new artistic forms. Through this process, the materials were transformed and integrated into the artist's own visual language. The intention behind this practice was not to establish a new artistic genre, but rather to incorporate these materials into existing artistic traditions. Zulu visual culture has long emphasised materials with pigmentation that can be manipulated into patterned arrangements - a principle that resonates with established practices such as weaving and wall painting. Consequently, the incorporation of found objects was guided by aesthetic preferences rooted in these traditions, particularly the creation of repetitive patterns and colour arrangements that reflect broader cultural forms of visual expression.

Conversely, Duchamp's approach to found objects was guided by a personal mandate not to repeat himself, both in his ideas and in the media he used in his work. To achieve this, he often explored different processes in creating his works (Kearney, 2016). This enabled him to explore various materials in a short time(d'Harnoncourt and McShine 1989). Duchamp insisted that the selection of objects he used in his readymade works was informed by his indifference towards the objects. The Surrealists further explored the use of found objects in art and brought the element of chance into their work. The element of chance further differentiates the modernist approach from that of the Zulu artists: the Zulu artists were particularly selective of the objects they explored, and pigmentation, flexibility and the need for repetition guided their choices.

The modernist exploration of found objects involved a reduced emphasis on manual making. Instead, there was a shift away from traditional processes such as manipulating materials on a surface toward the selection, arrangement, and positioning of objects in space (Kearney, 2016). Roberts (2007) described the modernist approach as a form of de-skilling art, because the artist did not necessarily have to physically make something to create an artwork. In this context, the act of arranging objects was considered conceptually comparable to the manipulation of paint on canvas (Kearney, 2016). In contrast, Zulu artists engaged with found objects in ways that closely aligned with their established artistic traditions. Rather than relying primarily on selection or placement, their practice continued to emphasise direct manual engagement with materials. The process of making by hand remained central, as found objects were manipulated, reshaped, and incorporated into artistic forms in ways that were consistent with the treatment of traditional materials.

Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate the cultural significance of found objects in the artistic practices of Zulu artists in KZN, highlighting how these materials are incorporated into indigenous artistic traditions. The use of telephone wire and plastic beads by Zulu artists provides a compelling example of how found materials function as signs within a culturally embedded visual system. At the level of denotation, these materials appear as discarded industrial products that have been incorporated into objects such as decorated walking sticks, baskets or sculptured forms. However, through a semiotic reading, these materials can be understood as signifiers that have meanings that extend beyond their immediate material presence. A semiotic reading, therefore, reveals that the material strategies employed by Zulu artists constitute a sophisticated system of signification, rather than the naïve craft practice they were frequently assumed to be within colonial frameworks.

The analysis demonstrates that, unlike the modernist appropriation of found objects, which often emphasised conceptual selection and spatial arrangement, Zulu artists engage with such materials through processes of transformation and manual manipulation that remain consistent with established artistic traditions such as weaving, beadwork and surface patterning. In doing so, the study underscores the existence of indigenous forms of innovation that have developed independently of European modernist frameworks. By situating these practices within a decolonial perspective, the paper also reveals how Eurocentric art-historical narratives have frequently overlooked or minimised these contributions. The study draws attention to ongoing challenges with the documentation and representation of African art at cultural institutions, where systems of collection and display have historically privileged collectors' interests over the recognition of artists and their communities.

To address these issues, museums and institutions could adopt several reforms. First, comprehensive cataloguing practices should prioritise recording the names and biographies of Zulu artists wherever possible, rather than attributing works only to anonymous creators or communities (Emifoniye, 2025). Institutions could also collaborate with local communities and indigenous artists to correct historical oversights (Emifoniye, 2025). Implementing these strategies would support a more equitable and nuanced understanding of Zulu artistic production and its role in local and global artistic narratives.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study adopted an interdisciplinary approach to the study. It explored semiotics (a linguistics focussed theory) in the study of art and cultural innovation. It also engaged with decoloniality and how it impacts on the field of art history.

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