

Mandela art captures struggle for South Africa

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The American Tobacco Campus evokes an era in Durham's history when racial inequality, and the fight to overcome it, dominated the city's cultural landscape. But now the site is host to an exhibition documenting another struggle for racial justice, the South African anti-apartheid movement.

Nelson Mandela: A Light So Powerful, an exhibition of Mandela's artwork and historical materials from the nation's first free elections, opened last Friday in American Tobacco's Strickland building.

"What's really remarkable about this exhibit is the combination of art, history and historical artifacts," said Karin Shapiro, associate professor of history and a contributor to the exhibit. "It's a really interesting blend that deepens and enriches all the parts."

Sandwiched between an information desk and a cluster of offices, A Light So Powerful is structurally little more than a length of wire fencing. But displayed within it is a rare collection of artifacts from the apartheid era.

The exhibit's centerpiece is a set of five etchings drawn by Nelson Mandela during his 18 years in South Africa's notorious Robben Island prison. Depicting scenes such as the view from a prison cell, a jail yard and a bright orange church, the collection is accompanied by a handwritten dedication letter from Mandela.

"It is true that Robben Island was a place of darkness," he wrote, "But out of that darkness came a wonderful brightness, a light so powerful that it could not be hidden behind prison walls, held back by prison bars or hemmed in by the surrounding sea."

Across from Mandela's paintings hang a series of 12 election posters, which range from boldly-colored designs celebrating the candidacy of Nelson Mandela and his party, the African National Congress, to black-and-white photographs with somber warnings to would-be voters.

"All people have choices, use yours carefully," warns one poster in English and Zulu.

The mix of hope and caution apparent in the collection is something Dollie Burwell, who lent materials for the exhibit, remembers acutely.

In 1994, Burwell traveled to South Africa with approximately 360 others from around the world to serve as peace monitors for the election. As violence simmered across the country in the weeks before the vote, she and her group worked to inform voters in the Natal region about the democratic process.

"We went to potential polling places and identified the places that would make good voting stations," she said. "We had to make sure it wasn't dangerous for people to get into and out of those places."

Shapiro, a South African citizen, also lent materials to the exhibit, including a gold miner's helmet painted in ANC colors that she bought from a protesting miner on the streets of Johannesburg.

"[The 1994 election] represented for me the first step in the quest for dignity for all South Africans," she said.

Burwell and Shapiro's collections were chosen to accompany Mandela's paintings because they provide local perspective on a global movement, said Paul Pope, general manager of the Shoestring Creative Group—the marketing firm that built the exhibit. He added that the display is an informative way to learn the basics of modern South African history.

But it is not the facts and dates that concern Burwell.

"I hope [A Light So Powerful] will really give folks an idea of how passionate people were about the voting process," she said. "It's an opportunity for people here to share in a real feeling of what happened in South Africa."

Nelson Mandela: A Light So Powerful will be on display until April 30. It is open every day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.