

Mintek produces African jewellery

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With the demand for quality, hand-crafted jewellery increasing worldwide, Mintek's Kgabane Jewellery Programme is hoping to fill a niche gap, combining recycled glass with gold and silver to produce a unique African jewellery range.



A colourful glass lampshade.

It has produced a prototype of items it hopes will be snapped up by local and international markets, which at the same time will empower rural women. Made especially for the Brics summit in Durban in March, the range consists of 24ct gold and silver necklaces and earrings, woven copper and silver bracelets, 18ct gold rings, silver cuff links and tie pins.

Miscellaneous items like finely crafted letter openers, teaspoons, sugar spoons, cheese forks and butter knives are also part of the range.

According to the website, Kgabane, meaning precious, was an initiative of the former Department of Minerals and Energy. The department is responsible for championing the development of the indigenous precious metal jewellery sub-sector. Kgabane does this through fusing ancient indigenous craft techniques and goldsmithing techniques to create a product with a uniquely African signature.

Formed in 2001, Kgabane has a number of programmes on the go, centred on the National Rural Development Programme, which drives small and micro enterprises with the aim of creating sustainable livelihoods in rural and poor urban communities. This includes historically marginalised groups like rural women, unemployed youth and the disabled. It contributes to poverty alleviation and job creation.

"We haven't vigorously gone out to sell the new range yet," says Bernice Dickson-Rabothata, the head of jewellery design at Mintek. Established in 1934, Mintek is the country's leader in providing minerals processing and metallurgical engineering products and services to industries worldwide. The jewellery programme consists of a production and training unit focused on fine-tuning traditional craft skills and integrating them with traditional goldsmithing techniques, at the same

time developing viable craft centres.

"The Kgabane product ranges were created by the women of South Africa, drawing inspiration from the rich legacy of indigenous adornment based upon traditional skills to be found throughout South Africa's rural community," states the website. For now the range will be showcased at exhibitions, conferences and flea markets, says Nirdesh Singh, the manager of Small-Scale Mining and Beneficiation at Mintek.

Amaso

The group is also experimenting with fashion jewellery, using recycled glass to produce beads that are strung to create necklaces, bracelets and earrings, as well as items like coloured glass tableware and glass-beaded lampshades.

"With the gold and silver, the glass beads have been given value," says Christina Magaseng, the head of bead design at Mintek. She says it takes five hours to make a necklace.

Beads have been made in Africa for centuries, using clay, ostrich shells, bone, copper, iron, charcoal, seeds, horn, ivory, brass and gold. But in the late 1800s Arab, Chinese and Portuguese traders brought glass beads to Africa. Later, plastic beads found their way to the continent, and the traditional methods of beadwork were lost.

Mintek recognised that these skills needed to be revisited, and developed a process that uses recycled glass bottles to make beads that resemble traditional African beads for jewellery making. The idea was to take the manufacture of the beads to rural communities, to create jobs and alleviate poverty. The initiative is called Amaso, which is the Xhosa word for jewellery.

Two types of beads are made - transparent and opaque. The former are made from fragments of broken beer bottles or windowpane glass, which is melted in a gas flame and formed into beads of different shapes and sizes. Opaque beads are made from waste beer bottles, which are milled to a fine powder using a bottle crusher. Together with other additives, the powder is made into a paste. This is then individually moulded by hand into different shapes and sizes and placed on stainless steel wires coated with kaolin clay before being fired in a kiln.

Owned by rural women

Mintek, together with a number of other organisations, has established several bead and jewellery projects that are owned entirely by rural women. Small businesses have been set up in Rustenburg and Taung in North West; Dundee, Botha's Hill and Ulundi in KwaZulu-Natal; O'Kiep in the Northern Cape; Qwaqwa in the Free State; and, East London in the Eastern Cape.

Mintek has ambitious plans, which include training street bottle collectors to learn how to crush the raw material and make beads. Favourite beer bottles being recycled are Amstel, Castle Lite, and Hansa. Funding at the moment comes from local municipalities, the Department of Arts and Culture, mining houses, the National Lottery and the National Development Agency.

Mintek

The programmes are driven by Mintek's small scale mining and beneficiation division.

"Our commitment to innovation and our world-class research and development expertise is supported by a physical infrastructure of modern laboratories, pilot plants and workshops. We believe it is our extensive intellectual capital - engineers, scientists and technologists, all of the highest calibre - that forms the most valuable part of our proposition to our customers," states the website.

Mintek is a parastatal, and the chief executive officer reports to the minister of mineral resources. About 3% of its budget

comes from the state, with the balance provided by contract research and development, sales of products and services, technology licensing agreements, and joint-venture private sector companies.

Training

So far, Kgabane has trained rural groups in Kwazulu-Natal, Northern Cape, Limpopo, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Mpumalanga, Free State and North West provinces.

"Each group is treated as a unique entity, taking stock of the availability of indigenous knowledge systems, particularly as these may be apparent in existing cultural/craft practice," according to the website. "This is then followed by a training programme tailored to the needs of each group and which aims at providing an entry point into tested markets having particular stylistic and pricing points."

Once a group has successfully developed a product range which the market likes, and if resources allow, Kgabane can be engaged by the group to undertake further training, research and development into product development and or to assist in the development and launch of a branding strategy for the group and its products.

Some 250 people in nationally accredited skills programmes have been trained and up to 23 small businesses across the country have been established. These businesses, mainly in rural and peri-urban areas, have been given support in production monitoring, quality assurance, design input and basic business skills, as well as assistance with access to markets.

Mintek also runs the Timbita Ceramic Incubator. The incubator helps rural potters to improve their skills and learn the basics of running a small business by giving job training, skills transfer, setting up factories and marketing their products. Twelve projects have been set up around the country. Timbita is the Tsonga word for pot.

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