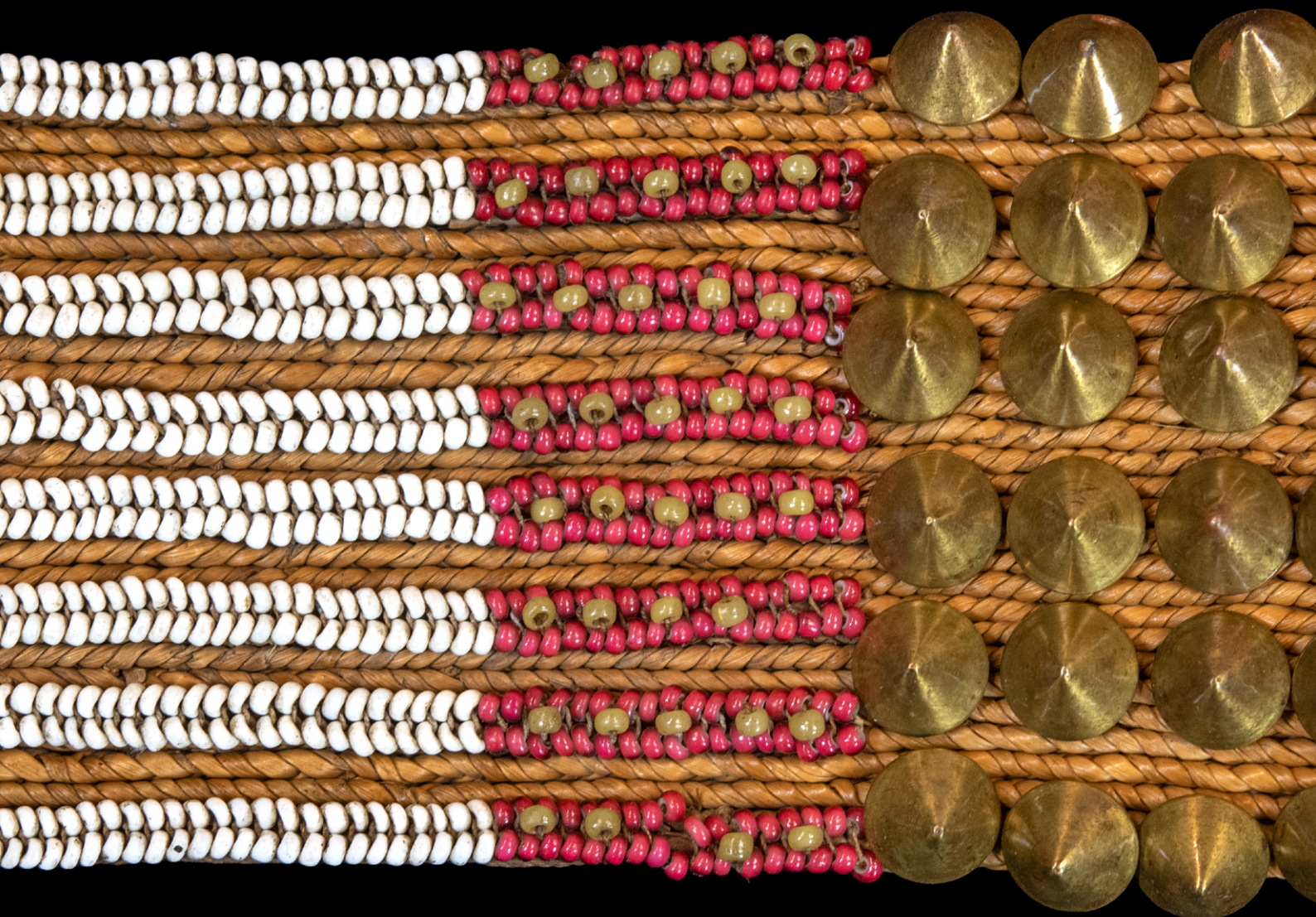




Beaded belt. © Dundee Art Galleries and
Museums Collection (Dundee City Council)

Participatory Practice and South African Collections

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Introduction

This report is one outcome of the partnership project *Reveal and Connect: Participatory Practice and South African Collections*. Funded by Museums Galleries Scotland, the project was led by a consortium of National Museums Scotland; Glasgow Life Museums; The Hunterian, University of Glasgow; and University of Aberdeen Collections. The group has worked in partnership with Iziko Museums of South Africa, four organisations across Scotland that hold South African collections (David Livingstone Birthplace Museum, Dumfries Museum, Perth Museum, and The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery and Museum), and an advisory group of heritage and community representatives in Scotland.

This project was designed in response to findings and partner feedback from the original project, *Reveal and Connect: African and Caribbean Collections in Scottish Museums*, also funded by Museums Galleries Scotland. Running from 2022-24, the first phase revealed collections of African material culture in Scottish museums through a national review and published report; and created a network that connected collection holders with museums and communities in Africa, and people of African descent in Scotland. The initial project was intended as a starting point for future research, partnerships, and dialogue. *Reveal and Connect: Participatory Practice and South African Collections* represents a second phase of this ongoing work.

South Africa was chosen as the focus of this second project due to the large quantity of its material culture held in Scottish museums. The first review identified over 23,000 objects from 53 African countries in 32 Scottish museum organisations. Approximately 2,500 of these objects are South African, held in 22 museum collections. This makes South Africa the country with the second largest amount of material in Scottish museums, after Nigeria. However, South African material in Scottish collections is generally poorly documented and little understood, which provided a basis for this phase of the project to explore through new research and participatory practice. This project also builds on ties established with Iziko Museums of South Africa during the first phase of *Reveal and Connect*. Iziko Museums is a key institutional partner due to its custodianship of historically significant collections, leadership in addressing colonial histories and legacies, and established engagement with descendent communities. This focused project provides an opportunity to maintain and strengthen this partnership.

Focus group feedback from the first phase of *Reveal and Connect* stressed the importance of appropriate consultation with stakeholder communities. Key areas identified for future work were collaborative community research, knowledge exchange, new interpretation, and safer spaces for engagement. In response, this project had two central aims:

- To support Scottish museums in developing skills around participatory practice approaches, specifically digital methods of engagement with communities outside Scotland.
- To use these approaches to improve knowledge and management of these collections, and to develop community engagement. This has been achieved by conducting a trial remote viewing attended by Scottish museum partners and Iziko Museums staff, and by conducting research visits to partner museums in Scotland to record and research South African material.

This project is part of a broader movement to proactively address and better understand Scotland's involvement in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery through museum collections and museum spaces.¹ It responds to growing calls for the international museum community to move away from extractive and exclusionary practices, towards ethical stewardship and participatory methodologies.

Summary of activity

Reveal and Connect: Participatory Practice and South African Collections was originally designed as a 12-month project. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the timeline of the project was reduced to three months. The aims and objectives were revised accordingly and approved by all partners. This report summarises what has been achieved in this compressed timescale and outlines areas which could be developed in the future.

The project was completed between April and July 2026. It began with a knowledge exchange event held at National Museums Scotland on 28 April 2026. Annelize Kotze (Iziko Museums) met with the Scotland-based project team and visited the National Museums Collection Centre in Edinburgh. An updated project plan was agreed, the remote viewing technology was demonstrated, and a selection of South African material was viewed. Additionally, following consultation of museum records from the first phase of *Reveal and Connect*, Perth Museum was identified as the preferred collection for the trial remote viewing. The event was hosted at Perth Art Gallery, and staff from the other three Scottish partner museums were invited to attend.

The first stage of the project involved a more detailed desktop review of digital records supplied by the four participating museums during the first phase of *Reveal and Connect*. From these, lists of South African material were extracted and shared

¹ *Reveal and Connect* has been informed by, and contributes to, a spectrum of ongoing work, including but not limited to: Museums Galleries Scotland's *Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums* project (2020-2022); *Exchange: Community-Led Collections Research*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2021-2022).

with colleagues at Iziko Museums, who identified material of interest based on three main criteria:

- Material that was familiar and potentially similar to material at Iziko Museums, so more information could be added to current records.
- Records that displayed basic inconsistencies that might be remedied. For example, descriptions that record an object as both a cloak and a costume, or from two places, such as Johannesburg and Umtata.
- Object records with colonial-era terminology that could be updated with more appropriate and accurate descriptions and the correct term in the language of origin, such as Xhosa, Zulu or Pedi.

Following this, the Project Curator conducted visits to the four museum partners: Perth Museum on 12 May, Dumfries Museum on 22 May, The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery and Museum on 25 May, and David Livingstone Birthplace Museum on 26 May 2026.

During these visits, South African material in the collections and displays was viewed, with a specific focus on objects of interest identified by colleagues at Iziko Museums. Record shots were taken, and museum records, historical registers, and correspondence folders were consulted where possible to locate any additional archival data. Following the visits, record shots were shared digitally with Iziko Museums for comment. The Project Curator also conducted limited desk-based research to ascertain if further associated information could be located in Scotland. The outcome of this research is detailed in four short summaries in the following section of the report, listed in order of visits conducted.

The second stage of the project involved organising and holding the trial remote viewing. This took place on 12 June 2026 at Perth Art Gallery. It was attended in person by two members of staff from Perth Museum, one from David Livingstone Birthplace Museum, and three from National Museums Scotland. Four staff members from Iziko Museums attended remotely. It was agreed that, due to time constraints, this session would serve as a trial run between museum colleagues, laying the groundwork for potential future digital consultations with community elders in South Africa. This decision was based on the understanding that relationship and trust building requires time and commitment from all partners to establish meaningful and restorative engagement. A selection of 25 objects was pre-selected by Iziko Museums and the Project Curator, based on the visit and record shots from 12 May. The meeting lasted approximately two hours, and 21 objects were seen during this time.

The viewing began with a brief introduction from the project team, and all partners introduced themselves. Iziko Museums staff shared their expert knowledge about terminology, materials, origin, and usage, in addition to how objects should be

treated in storage. Museum staff in Scotland shared the information currently held in records and observed how this material relates to other collections across Scotland. They also provided specific information about material qualities of the objects that could not be conveyed through remote viewing, such as the weight or location of hidden fastenings. Following the consultation, at least 12 object records can be updated with more accurate terminology, location, and usage information. Two objects were identified as potentially secret/sacred and Iziko Museums staff advised that these should be stored separately. This was also relevant for similar objects held at David Livingstone Birthplace Museum. A cloth hat was identified as not from South Africa, and Iziko Museums staff proposed to consult another expert on one piece of beadwork that was not recognised by those present. Staff at Iziko Museums also reflected on the challenges and opportunities that such a session would pose with community elders present. Reflections on this event will follow later in this report.

Additional outcomes

As part of the project, remote viewing guidance was created (see separate document, *Remote Viewing: Facilitation and technical guidance*). It covers aspects of facilitation, hints and tips to get the best from the process, and a series of checklists, as well as outline technical guidance to support successful remote viewing.

An online training event for Scottish museum partners, facilitated by the West of Scotland Regional Equality Council (WSREC), included Annelize Kotze from Iziko Museums of South Africa. During this session, participants focused on decolonial collections consultation work, including terminology, safer spaces, and trauma informed practice.

The project helped to support additional photography of some South African items in partner museums' collections.

A remote viewing 'kit' was purchased as part of the project. As a lasting legacy of this work, National Museums Scotland will be rolling out a training session in 2027, *Remote Viewing: Facilitation and Technical Introduction*, as part of its National Training Programme. Once staff have undergone training, participating organisations will be able to borrow the kit and work on their own remote viewings. This training will also utilise the guidance formed as part of this project.



Zulu double headrest. © David Livingstone
Birthplace Museum CC BY-NC-ND

Participatory Practice and South African Collections Summary of Collections

Summary of Collections

Perth Museum (Culture Perth and Kinross)

Size of collection

112 objects currently recorded as South African

History of the collection

The earliest collections held by Perth Museum were formed by the Perth Literary and Antiquarian Society, which was founded in 1784. In 1824, the Society opened a library and museum building which is one of the UK's oldest purpose-built museums. In 1914, it was gifted to the City of Perth by the Society. It is likely that some South African material dates to this early history of the museum. The earliest recorded accession date for a South African object is 1873. South African material from Kinross Museum was incorporated into the collection in the 1970s.

Summary of South African collection

According to current records available, there are an estimated 112 objects of South African origin in Perth Museum's collection. Only one of these objects is currently attributed to a particular cultural group (shield, Zulu, 1980.38), although three are recorded as being collected in 'Zululand'. It is possible that some of the objects do not originate from present day South Africa, but nearby regions in Southern Africa.

Around 60% of the collection is comprised of objects that could be described as personal dress items. These are predominantly beadwork, currently recorded under terms such as 'girdle', 'necklace', 'collar', 'belt' and 'apron' (eg 1978.821). Other dress items of note are what appear to be a set of five garments made of heavy woollen cloth and decorated with hide and beadwork. Other notable groups of material include objects that could be described as weapons, such as four 'clubs' and 14 spears. There are four items described as 'staff' and another three described as 'walking stick'. The collection also holds around ten domestic utensils, such as strainers, cups, and spoons. Little information is available about how and when this material entered the collection and much was formally accessioned for the first time in 1978.

Four objects currently have clear provenance recorded. These are two 'iron and cane spears' (1980.39+41) donated by William Duncan in 1881, one recorded as being taken from the 'Battle of Isandlwana' of 1879; a 'walking stick' (1980.97) donated by Buchanan Whyte (no date) recorded as belonging to Field Cornet Du Voits and used during the South African War (1899-1902); and a 'wooden club' donated by Captain Nimmo in 1873 and recorded as being 'brought home by a south sea whaler'.

75% of the South African collection does not have a recorded acquisition source and 86% does not have an accession date. This project has conducted some limited research into possible South African connections of named acquisition sources (Miss Glass, William Duncan, Major GL Thomson, Captain Nimmo) but, at the time of writing, no additional information has been found.

During the digital consultation, conducted in May 2026, staff from Iziko Museums were able to identify several objects and provide more accurate information to update records. These include two beadwork items previously described as 'collars', both with distinctive colour combinations that indicate their origin and usage. 1978.810 was identified as a Venda headband and 1978.785 as a decorative necklace that would have been worn by women or girls. Two clubs were identified as an Isagweba (K1972.362) and an Ibhunguza (1977.2427). Iziko Museums staff questioned whether one of the spears (1980.39), recorded as being taken from the 'Battle of Isandlwana' of 1879, was for combat. Due to its long shaft and wide blade head, they suggested it may be Iqala and that would suggest a family/ spiritual spear, discoloured by smoke from being stored in the rafters of a home.

A set of five garments (1981.750.1-5), described as three cloaks, a skirt, and a costume, were of particular interest. Iziko Museums staff confirmed they most likely originated from Umtata, not Johannesburg as suggested in the record, and might be from the AmaMpondo people. They observed ochre staining, which suggests the garments had been worn, and were able to identify the material as coarse 'hospital' blankets through examination with the digital microscope.

Attention was also drawn to two sets of beaded beetle carapace (1978.786 and 1978.795), which were described in records as cosmetic bottles. Staff suggested these could potentially be spiritual objects, used by newly initiated traditional healers to store medicine. They advised these should be stored separately to the other objects, and further consultation should be sought. This has direct relevance for very similar items at David Livingstone Birthplace Museum. Iziko Museums staff did not recognise 1978.801, which is described as a 'woven grass pendant ball' and features similar beadwork to the beetle carapace. Subsequent desk-based research has identified similar objects in other museums and suggests this may be a decorative waist ornament worn by men from Malawi.² Similarly, a cloth hat (K1972.209), recorded as South African, has subsequently been identified as Madeiran.

² See Af1915,-.66 and photographic prints Af,B12.9 and Af,B12.16, all at The British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1915-66 ; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_Af-B12-16; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_Af-B12-9, Accessed 30.07.2026



1978.821, 'Woman's Apron'



1978.810, Headband, Venda



1978.785, Necklace for women or girls



1980.750.2, 'Costume'



1980.750.1, 'Cloak'



1977.2427, 'Wooden Club'



1977.2427 (detail), 'Wooden Club'



1980.39, 'Iron and Cane Spear'



1980.39 (detail), 'Iron and Cane Spear'



1978.801, 'Woven Grass Pendant'



1978.801 (detail) 'Woven Grass Pendant'

Dumfries Museum (Dumfries and Galloway Council)

Size of collection

13 South African objects

History of the collection

Dumfries Museum started life in 1835 when the Dumfries and Maxwelltown Astronomical Society purchased the current site, a derelict windmill tower, and converted it into an observatory with a telescope and camera obscura. Members began to donate 'antiquities, curiosities and bygones' and in 1862 the Main Hall was constructed as an extension to accommodate the growing collection. In November 1862, The Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society was formed and collected a large body of historical material that was exhibited in the extended space. A historical inventory of Scottish museum holdings from 1888 lists the 'Museum in Maxwellton [sic], Dumfries' as holding African items. By the early 1930s the Astronomical Society's finances were failing and the Town Council of Dumfries acquired the building and grounds with an agreement to finance what became the Dumfries Burgh Museum. At this point, much of the non-local material in the collection was dispersed. In 1948, Alfred E Truckell was appointed Curator and took an active interest in building up the non-European material once again. Truckell acquired material from other museums and local house sales, including the Royal Scottish Museum (now National Museums Scotland), Stranraer Museum, Langholm Museum, and Dr T B Grierson's Museum in Thornhill. This project has confirmed that South African material was included in at least one of these transfers.

Summary of South African collection

This review has identified 13 objects that are likely South African. The majority are items of beadwork, including a holder for a gourd container, four bags or pouches, two bead covered cotton spools, a bead covered compact mirror, and small squares of beadwork. Other objects include two bone snuff spoons, possibly Zulu, and a knobkerrie. In addition, seven objects were seen that are potentially of South African or Southeast African origin but require further research. These include a string of beads recorded as 'Matabele', a quiver and arrows, two metal bracelets, and three 'walking sticks'. Further consultation is needed for all objects. Future research should also consider a further four knobkerries and two walking sticks, which were viewed during the first phase of *Reveal and Connect* but not seen during the visit in May 2026. The collection also contains one basket from Lesotho (1967.156).

At least one South African object was transferred to Dumfries from the Royal Scottish Museum in 1966. DUMFM:1967.155 is recorded in deaccession registers at National Museums Scotland, described as an 'Apron or Sporrán made of hide and decorated with numerous tags and a band of clear trade beads. Cape Colony.' Cape Colony was a British colony on the southern tip of the African continent, in present

day South Africa. The object's original accession likely predates 1910, when Cape Colony united with three other colonies to form the Union of South Africa. The deaccession register at National Museums Scotland also suggests that at least four objects recorded as 'assegai' (spears) were transferred to Dumfries in 1966. These have not been located during the first or second phase of *Reveal and Connect*.

DUMFM:1962.69.38 is described in the accession register as a 'Small semi-circular heavily-beaded purse'. However, it appears to be a covering for a gourd container, possibly for snuff. It is recorded as originating from the collection of Marchfield House. Marchfield is a category C listed building in Dumfries and was built by the Houston family in 1878. The Houstons were local ironmongers. The house was sold in the early 1960s, which is potentially when the collection entered the Museum. British military records suggest that members of the extended Houston family in Dumfries and Galloway served in regiments active in the South African War (1899-1902). It is therefore possible that this object was collected during that conflict.

1964.150.34 appears to be a beaded compact mirror case, with the mirror either missing or removed. Similar objects can be found at The British Museum and are recorded there as Xhosa from Southeast Africa.³ It has been suggested that mirrors, along with purses, safety pins, snuffboxes, and whistles were beaded by Xhosa teenage girls as tokens for potential partners.⁴ The collection at Dumfries Museum also contains a pair of beaded cotton spools (1964.1953.7) and a pair of bone snuff spoons/combs (1964.139.33). Similar spoons can be found at The British Museum, described as Zulu snuff spoons from South Africa.⁵ These three objects are part of a group of 47 accessions from a Miss Kerr in November 1964. Her grandfather was the local blacksmith in Lochfoot (near Dumfries) in the mid 1800s.⁶ Included in the large accession is a 'set of family photographs, S Africa, early 1900s', which suggest these objects could potentially have been received from relatives living in South Africa. The photographs are dated 1898 and are annotated with place names, including East London, King William's Town (present day Qonce), and Cape Town (Wynberg and Rondebosch). One image (1964.80) is annotated 'Royal Army Medical Corps barrack room, K.W.Town. My curios and bed are on the right, looking at it'. The photograph depicts a wall covered with objects, including animal skins, spears, and at least one piece of beadwork. This suggests a military connection, and

³ For example, see Af1978,17.7 and Af1978,17.6.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1978-17-7; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1978-17-6. Accessed 30.07.2026.

⁴ Margret Carey (1986). *Beads and Beadwork of East and South Africa*. Princes Risborough: Shire Ethnography 47.

⁵ See Af-Cf-12 and Af-Cf-11. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af-Cf-12, Accessed 30.07.2026. For further information on South African snuff bottles, spoons and smoking pipes see: Giblin, J, & C Spring (2016). *South Africa: the art of a nation*. London: Thames and Hudson 126-140.

⁶ Email from Joanne Turner, Dumfries Museum, to Project Curator, 10.06.2026.

highlights that the author had an interest in collecting. The accession also contains 1964.150.14, viewed during this review, but described as a 'large bundle of Matabele necklaces', suggesting origin in Zimbabwe. There are several other objects potentially relating to Africa in this large accession, and both the objects and photographs would benefit from further research.

DUMFM:1973.134.3 (a beadwork bag) is associated with Mr McKay, Swordwellrigg, Annan, but nothing has been found to link this individual to South Africa.

One object (DUMFM:1973.139.1) associated with Mrs Elder, Hawick, was previously recorded as South African, but this review has identified it as a small animal hide 'tandu', or Hausa container, from Nigeria.



DUMFM:1962.69.38, 'Leather and Bead Apron' DUMFM:1962.69.38, Beaded gourd cover



1964.150.34, Beaded compact mirror case

1964.153.7, Beaded cotton spools



1964.139.33, Bone snuff spoons/combs

DUMFM:1973.134.3, 'Beadwork Bag'



1964.80, Photographic print



1967.156, 'Coiled Basket'

The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery and Museum (Leisure and Culture Dundee)

Size of collection

123 South African objects

History of the collection

The origin of the current museum and collection lies in the establishment of the Watt Institute in 1824, which gradually built up a library and collection of objects, before closing in the mid-1800s. The collections were taken over by the Town Council in 1869 and a purpose-built museum opened in 1872. The first museum inventory was started in 1874. It is likely that non-European material was part of the original collection. Significant loans of African material are known to have been added to displays in 1898 and 1902. Today, the majority of African material on display is in the *Dundee and the World* gallery, which focuses on the City's international collections and highlights Dundee's long involvement in overseas trade.

Summary of South African collection

According to current records, there are around 123 objects recorded as South African in the collection. Around 60 of these objects are described in the records as Zulu, including 1937.241.1 (see images below). These attributions need further review and consultation to confirm accuracy. Approximately 35% of the collection is material that could be described as weaponry, although usage may have varied. For example, around 24 spears including some described as 'assegai', six shields including 'Ishulungu', four arrows and a bow, eight knobkerries, and a rhinoceros hide whip. Around 25% of the collection is made up of objects that could be described as personal dress items. These include many beadwork items, with descriptions such as belt (1983.242 AB), girdle, necklace (1979.133 AB), necklet, band, and headdress (9999.1111).

Some accessions appear to have names recorded in the language of origin, including items recorded as 'Umutsha' (1979-132 AB, 1937-241-1), 'Isambozo' (9999-1112), 'Ibheqe' (9999-1107) and 'Umgingqo' (9999-1106). There is also one item described as a 'male dress' or a 'Sinene' made of cat fur (1966-197-2); an apron or 'Bayshu' of fur covered hide (1966-197-3); a 'blanket' decorated with beadwork that may have been worn (9999-1397); and a six-strand necklace of 'golden-brown ants eggs' (1941-445-1). The collection also contains around six bracelets of various designs in metal. Other notable collections of material include around 13 pipes, including examples made from wood, stone, and horn; ten domestic utensils, such as spoons, ladles and pots; and around five snuff containers and spoons. Other items of note include two 'figure staffs', a large-scale model of a

trek wagon reportedly made by a Boer prisoner of war captured at Paardeberg, and a tapestry by L Mahlaba of V Mncube Arts and Crafts Centre, presented by the Burgh of Dundee, Natal, South Africa, to the City of Dundee, Scotland, in 1967.

The entire collection would benefit from further consultation and research. During this project, two items previously recorded as South African have been identified as a Maasai waistband from Tanzania or Kenya (1919.402.1) and a coffee pot stand from Northeast Africa (temp 1224). It is likely that more inaccuracies could be corrected with further attention. A starting point would be current records that contain discrepancies. For example, a beaded calabash that is recorded as 'South Africa' in the production place field but notes West African origin in the description field (1935-56-6); a fur hat recorded as 'South Africa' in the production place field but notes Zimbabwe in the description field (1966-197-4); and two pots described as both milk pot and pot for mixing grain in different parts of the record (1955-348-7 and 1955-348-8).

Two objects in the collection are described as charms or amulets and would benefit from expert consultation regarding their status and storage. One is described as a 'charm/ amulet' in the form of a horn covered in skin with strings of cowrie shells and filled with 'pellets' (9999-1247). The other is described as a copper band or bracelet with a 'collection of amulets' (1965-274-6). It is recorded as being made by 'Muachio, Medicine man to chief Ranahjeopa, Lutzenberg Transvaal in 1911' and being used as a 'cure for fits'.

Perhaps the best researched part of the South African collection is a group of 13 objects that are attributed to the battle of Gingindlovu (uMgungundlovu) of April 1879. These were given to the Museum by two Dundonians who took part in the battle. Lt Lindsay (1847-1890) served in the Royal Navy and was second in command of a naval brigade that was part of Lord Chelmsford's column. John Morty (dates unknown) had emigrated to Natal in 1876 and was a civilian transport conductor for the military campaign. More information about their biographies and details of the conflict can be found in a catalogue produced by the McManus in 1994.¹ Seven objects are associated with Lt Lindsay and were donated in November 1879: a loincloth/belt or 'umutsha' made of long strips of fur and hide; two spears or 'assegai' and a scabbard; two knobkerries; and a shield or 'Ishulunga'. Six objects are associated with John Morty and were donated in July 1879: two shields, recorded as 'Zulu warrior's shield' or 'Ishulunga'; two 'powder horns' made of twisted black animal horn with wooden stopper and hide strap; and two spears or 'assegai'.

Just over half of the South African material has a named source recorded in the database. These names provide starting points for traditional archival research in the future but, due to the time constraints of this project, it has not been possible to explore these fully. In the time available, research has focused on brothers Charles Alexander Air (1879-1915) and David Air (1876-1960), who donated 17 South

African objects to the Museum in 1913, 1953, and 1955. The Airs are the most prolific donors of South African material to the Museum, followed by Lindsay and Morty. The objects they donated are five pipes, three necklaces (1913.83.4) and an armlet, three spears, two pots for milk or grain, a knife, a shield, and a calabash rattle. Both brothers appear to have worked for their father's firm, David Air and Company, historic export agents based in Dundee.⁷ Originally established in the 19th century and involved in the jute industry, from 1903 the firm maintained the 'Cape Department' which focused on trade with South Africa.⁸ It acted as the British buying arm for entities like Wilson and Company, manufacturers of confectionery and chocolate, East London.⁹ It is plausible that the Airs collected material during business trips to South Africa, and further highlights Dundee's long involvement in overseas trade.



1937.241.1, 'Beaded Belt, Umutsha'

⁷ <https://www.greatwardundee.com/entry/air-charles-2/>
https://www.archive.highschoolofdundee.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/DUNDM1960_Iss_128jun.pdf

Accessed 31.07.2026

⁸ https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/David_Air_and_Co Accessed 31.07.2026

⁹ https://artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes_mob.php?bldgid=3999
Accessed 31.07.2026



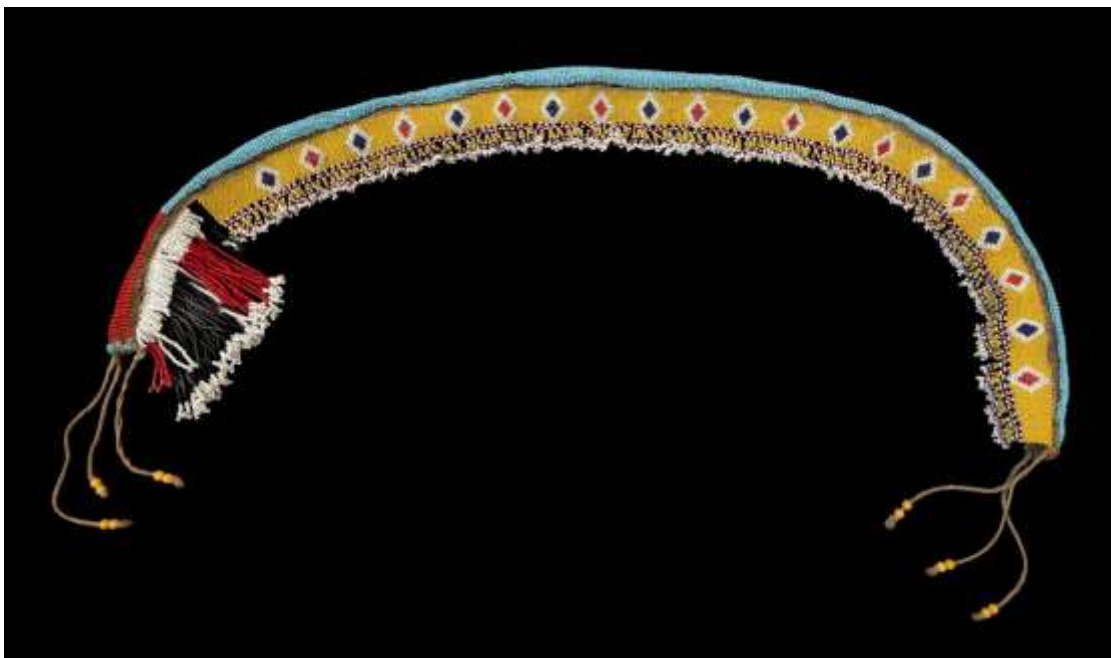
1983.242 AB, 'Beaded Belt'.



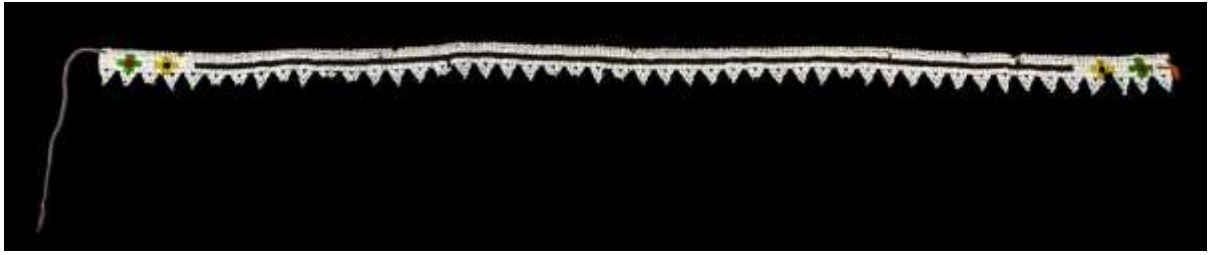
1979.133 AB 'Beadwork Necklace'



9999.1111, 'Beaded Headdress'



1979.132 AB, 'Beaded Girdle, Umutsha'



9999.1112, 'Beaded band, Isambozo'



1913.83.4, 'Bead Necklace'

David Livingstone Birthplace Museum

Size of collection

14 objects currently recorded as South African, actual total likely much higher

History of the collection

The David Livingstone Birthplace Museum is dedicated to the life and work of the Scottish traveller, missionary, and abolitionist David Livingstone (1813-1873). In recent years, *The Birthplace Project* reinterpreted Livingstone's story for a new generation in the context of Scotland's role in slavery and colonialism. The David Livingstone Trust was established in 1927 with the ownership of David Livingstone Birthplace, which includes the building where Livingstone was born and surrounding parkland. The Museum holds a collection of 5,000 objects which were acquired from the 1920s onward through public calls for donations. Ostensibly, all objects in the collection have a connection to Livingstone, although this is based on reported information from donors. Some material was collected by Livingstone himself, but the majority is associated by place and missionary connections. Livingstone travelled through 14 southern, southeastern and central African countries, and this geographical focus is reflected in the collection. The majority of the material appears to come from southern, eastern and central Africa, including objects from present day Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa.

Summary of South African collection

At present, the majority of object records do not have a specific country attribution. In the time available, getting an overview of material that originates from present day South Africa has been challenging, partly due to historical movements of people and changes to colonial-era borders across the region.

Fourteen objects in the collection are currently recorded as originating from South Africa specifically, but the total is likely much higher. These include: five spears, including one decorated with wirework recorded as Mashona from 'North Transvaal' (BLTDL 22092); four shields, including one recorded as Nguni and made of zebra hide (BLTDL 22092); a double 'bowl' or 'Ugqoko' described as a meat platter (BLTDL 20467); a staff topped with a carved human head recorded as 'Shona (Zulu)'; a carved wooden stick recorded as 'Shona (Zulu)'; a pair of antelope horns (probably dik-dik) on a canvas mount; and a wooden milking pot (BLTDL 21835). Although recorded as South African, the milking pot is annotated with a historic label in Livingstone's handwriting that claims it is from 'Basutoland' (present day Lesotho) and was made by Doda, son of Puthi leader Morosi (d.1879) who led a revolt against the former Cape Colony in 1878-1879.¹

A starting point for future research could be to search for cultural group instead of country in current records. For example, around 40 records contain the term Zulu and by reviewing these individually it may be possible to build up a more

comprehensive picture of the South African holdings. It has not been possible in the time available to conduct this work, but the project visit did highlight several unprovenanced objects that are potentially relevant to this project and further viewings, remote or in person, would likely identify many more. These include at least five knobkerries and a double headrest recorded as Zulu (BLTDL 22144).

Records suggest there are over 100 items of beadwork that deserve particular attention. During the project visit in May 2026, a small selection of these were viewed, and it is likely that many originate from South Africa (eg, BLTDL 21884). At present, many are recorded in group accessions simply as jewellery. Due to the paucity of historical records, this collection would particularly benefit from further expert consultation.

During the project visit, several objects were identified that are comparable to objects at Perth Museum. These were beaded beetle carapaces and beaded balls made of woven grass (BLTDL 21818). During the remote viewing, it was highlighted by staff at Iziko Museums that the beetle carapace are potentially spiritual objects and should be considered for separate storage. The David Livingstone Birthplace Museum holds other objects that should be considered in this way, for example, at least two collections of 'traditional healer apparatus', one recorded as Zulu and sent by Rhodes-Livingstone Museum in 1947.



BLTDL 22092, 'Spear'



BLTDL 22092 (detail), 'Spear'



BLTDL 21545, Nguni shield



BLTDL 20467, 'Dish, Double Bowl Uggoko (meat platter)'



BLTDL 21835, 'Wooden Milking Pot'



BLTDL 22144, 'Zulu Double Headrest'



BLTDL 21884, 'Beadwork'



BLTDL 21818, 'Jewellery'

Reflections on the remote viewing

Dr Nikki Grout, Project Curator, and Dr John Giblin, Project Director, Reveal and Connect: Participatory Practice and South African Collections

The trial remote viewing demonstrated how effectively this type of consultation can bring together colleagues and collections in different countries, where travel is often impracticable. It established a constructive connection between international museum colleagues that may be developed through future projects. It also stimulated discussion of how this technology could be used at a local scale between museums and communities in the same country. Participants were engaged and positive about the potential of remote viewing. The digital microscope allowed close examination and identification that would otherwise have been impossible. The event enabled the sharing of a collection that has received little attention to date and improved knowledge and management of these objects. It raised awareness of the challenges faced by staff in Scottish museums in the absence of reliable records and expert guidance. It also generated discussion that broadened common themes of classification and terminology, encouraging museum staff in Scotland to consider the spiritual nature and needs of objects. More broadly, the event generated avenues for desk-based research that yielded new information about objects. This suggests that digital consultation can work well in combination with more traditional research methodologies.

The primary difficulty experienced during the trial viewing was low sound quality. Despite employing conference room technology with multiple microphones, sound quality remained poor. This negatively affected conversation and communication and was managed by one participant at Iziko Museums and one in Perth taking responsibility for repeating and conveying key parts of the discussion. The chat function was used effectively to share key pieces of information but was not a substitute for verbal communication. This issue could potentially be remedied with more effective microphones and requires further trial. Additional test runs would also allow participants to become more familiar with manipulating cameras and digital microscopes to ensure the best viewing experience for remote partners.

Future consultations would benefit from participants adhering more strictly to defined roles. During the remote viewing, one participant was responsible for setting up and managing the remote viewing equipment and one participant was responsible for leading the discussion with remote partners. In practice, however, roles slipped between those present, which made the viewing less efficient and effective.

Ahead of the trial viewing, objects of interest were identified and photographed. Images and an object list with record data were then shared with all partners. Ideally, all participants would have had a chance to review these before the event to utilise the consultation time most productively, but this was not possible due to limited

capacity at partner museums. The trial consultation also highlighted the importance of having objectives understood by all in advance, to manage expectations and to ensure that roles did not slip. A list of questions from all partners was compiled and shared before the event. This made the process more transparent, allowed participants to prepare, and provided an informal structure to the viewing. Making this part of the advance preparation could be advantageous going forward but needs to be carefully considered in the context of community consultations because it could potentially limit the space for spontaneous discussion and direction.

Dr Mark Hall, Collections Officer, Perth Museum, email correspondence with Project Curator, 19 June 2026

What do you think went well?

A: As a collaborative enterprise it worked well and facilitated meaningful communication across museums.

What could have been better/what can we improve?

A: Sorting out the technical glitches and broadening out to include [descendent] community representation alongside [museum staff from descendent countries]; maybe long term it could even facilitate cross-community dialogues in Scotland and elsewhere in the world.

What did you find most useful about the digital consultation?

A: The chance to be in dialogue with colleagues in South Africa who clearly had knowledge and understanding to impart and the facilitation of contact where travel is often impossible.

What did you find most challenging about the digital consultation?

A: I guess the technical glitches which meant the sound was not always as clear as it could be; but all correctable through use and experience.

Would you consider using the remote viewing technology again?

A: I think it demonstrates a great way forward and could develop into multiple institutional attendees; though if it becomes popular one can imagine a pivot point is reached where capacity becomes an issue.

Annelize Kotze, Social History Curator, Iziko Museums of South Africa, summarised from Teams meeting with the Project Curator, 18 June 2026

This event highlighted what a big focus we place on seeing, but hearing is vitally important too. The poor sound quality was frustrating. A big part of connection is having a discussion, hearing everyone talk, and this was missing. Despite attending the meeting in a boardroom with professional equipment, the sound quality remained poor throughout the event. Chat features and one person reporting could only go so far. If community elders had been in attendance, it is likely they would have become

frustrated and left. If we invite a community in, we need to be absolutely sure that the technology is working. Our relationship depends on being trusted.

Going forwards, more practice sessions are needed to ensure the sound is working. We need more test runs, perhaps trying alternative platforms to Zoom. Other platforms give different viewing options, so we can change the view around.

When the digital microscope was in focus it was incredibly clear. The close-up views were very exciting and helpful. However, when used incorrectly the view was not in focus, it was blurred, and this was very uncomfortable to watch and try to follow. More practice with technology is needed to ensure a smooth viewing experience. It has huge potential.

During the viewing we saw objects that need to be moved and kept with other spiritual items. Museum staff need to be aware of this. Traditional healers have certain objects that only they can touch, and other objects can't be touched by women. We often discuss the need to change catalogue entries, terminology, etc, but we also need to change the way objects are being treated. We need to take a more spiritual approach to objects.

Despite the substantial challenges, this consultation meant that significant corrections could be made to records. For example, we immediately and unanimously agreed that one hat we viewed was not South African. Without this session the hat would have remained incorrectly catalogued in the collection. Another example was an object recorded as originating from 'Umtata near Johannesburg'. These places are far from each other, and we confirmed it likely originated from Umtata. Perhaps someone in the future can further narrow down provenance to a village. We can view this as improving catalogue entries for future refining. We also now know which objects to move to separate storage, which ones were worn by women, what would have been worn on the neck, waist, etc.

We need to clarify who is leading. Who do you ask a question to? Everyone got excited and talked over each other, and we need to be aware this may happen with community groups.

Staff were excited, enthusiastic and motivated by the remote viewing. Colleagues were phoning spiritual healers and their cousins to gather information about the objects. It was very exciting and we never got bored in the whole two hours.

We would take part in remote viewings in the future, but with more trial runs like this one before inviting communities to the viewing. We would like advice about the equipment and could potentially use it for consultations in South Africa, in rural locations for example.

Conclusion

Reveal and Connect: Participatory Practice and South African Collections has further highlighted the scale and variety of African material currently held in Scottish museums. It has contributed to wider access and engagement with these collections and trialled new modes of research and museum practice.

This project has delivered a concise, focused study of four diverse collections containing over 260 objects. These findings allow us to begin to sketch an outline of this material. For example, they illustrate that the beadwork and dress items appear to make up the majority of South African collections examined, closely followed by weaponry and domestic utensils. Objects were obtained from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, and it is likely that much entered collections during colonial-era conflict in the region in the late 1800s. However, this project has also highlighted how much more we still have to learn and how much more work there is still to do.

Future research and knowledge exchange will partly depend on accurate collection information being made available. This project has confirmed that a large percentage of South African material in Scottish museums is currently unidentified or potentially identified inaccurately. It has illustrated only a small sample of inaccuracies and inconsistencies in current museum records. Like any other colonial-era archive, these are also marked by absences and silences. The paucity of these records demonstrates how research quickly reaches the limits of more traditional, archive-based provenance research. This remains a key area for future work, and an opportunity to further develop ethical and consultative research practices. Consultation with descendent communities is an ethical obligation, but also a necessity for museums that have reached an impasse with traditional archival methods.

This project was originally designed to include digital consultation with descendent communities in South Africa. Due to the reduced timescale and lack of reliable records, it was agreed that the one remote viewing should instead serve as a trial between institutional partners, serving as a preliminary step for future work with community elders. Co-research with community members remains essential to future work around these collections. Despite this obvious limitation, this project has delivered several key findings. The trial remote viewing demonstrated the potential this technology holds to facilitate meaningful communication and connection, and to make significant improvements to object records and management.

This project responds to calls for museums to become more proactive in addressing colonial histories and legacies and establishing engagement with communities of origin. However, it has also highlighted the challenges that proactive museum work such as this presents. Consortium partners in Scotland are now well set up to

respond reactively to self-defined descendent community groups who approach them with an interest in specific material. Museums in Scotland have considerable experience of facilitating access and positive engagement in these cases. However, this project illustrates how challenging it can be to reach out to groups who have yet to be identified, when much of the material held in Scottish collections is currently unidentified or identified inaccurately. Additionally, it highlights the difficulty of maintaining engagement and momentum with institutional partners who have multiple responsibilities, competing priorities, and often limited capacity.

As an outcome of this project, National Museums Scotland acquired a remote viewing equipment kit, funded by Museums Galleries Scotland, for loan to museums across Scotland. Alongside remote viewing training, we hope this will support Scottish museums to facilitate future consultations and engagement around these collections.