

AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Mfengu people, South Africa

Married Woman's Dress

Late nineteenth–mid-twentieth century

Wool, leather, beads, metal, rubber, mother-of-pearl buttons

On mount: crown of hat to bottom of skirt, 63 in. (160 cm)

On mount: shoulder to bottom of skirt, 51 in. (129.5 cm)

Museum purchase, funds provided by the Caroline Julier and James G. Richardson

Acquisition Fund

2003.35

All the elements of this Mfengu woman's dress and accoutrements signify her status, wealth, and connection to her ethnicity, family, and ancestors. Her wool garments are saturated with red ocher, a pigment that is sacred to the Mfengu people and signifies Mfengu identity. The dress style, embellishments, and varied accoutrements are illustrative of the interaction with and assimilation of foreign fashions and materials.

The close-fitting skirt, flowing cape, and embroidered turban were patterned after late-nineteenth-century Victorian dress. Accents of glass beads and mother-of-pearl shell buttons, precious and costly imports from Europe from the nineteenth century onward, adorn the hems and edges of the garments and show that the wearer is a woman of refinement and means. The beaded panel pins and necklaces, called "keepers of the heart," are gifts from her husband. An hourglass motif on the keeper of the heart pin portrays the woman as a dancer. Smaller abstract shapes on the pins may signify the number of children she has, or the number of cattle paid for her bride price. The long, multistrand necklaces of dark blue, red, pink, turquoise, and white beads were awarded to her in her youth to show that she had made the appropriate offerings to her ancestors.

The color combination of the beaded strands is typical of Mfengu beadwork and is another sign of ethnic affiliation. Color preferences also varied according to age group and were expressions of fashion sense and personal taste. The weightiness of the beaded garment reminds the wearer that she has a right and also an obligation to carry on the traditions of her predecessors; thus they may be seen as metaphoric of legacy, commemoration, and entitlement. Modern accoutrements, such as rubber anklets made from gaskets and jar seals, were gifts from her husband, perhaps when he was working in the mines to get money for her bride price. Wearing these anklets was a testament to her husband's devotion and to the couple's affluence.

