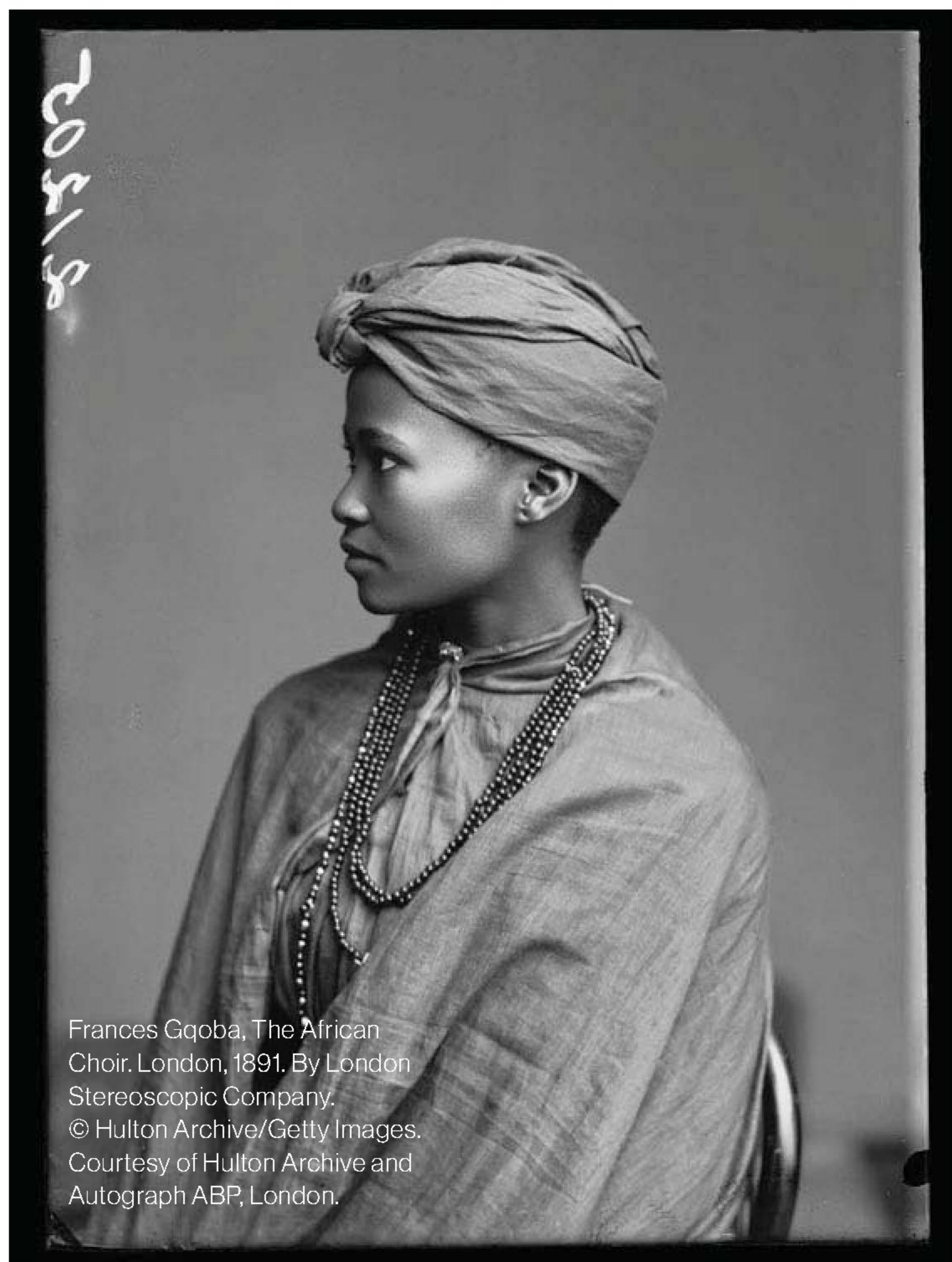




Charlotte Maxeke (née Manye),
The African Choir. London,
1891. By London Stereoscopic
Company. © Hulton Archive/
Getty Images. Courtesy of
Hulton Archive and Autograph
ABP, London.



Frances Gqoba, The African
Choir. London, 1891. By London
Stereoscopic Company.
© Hulton Archive/Getty Images.
Courtesy of Hulton Archive and
Autograph ABP, London.

THE STORY OF US

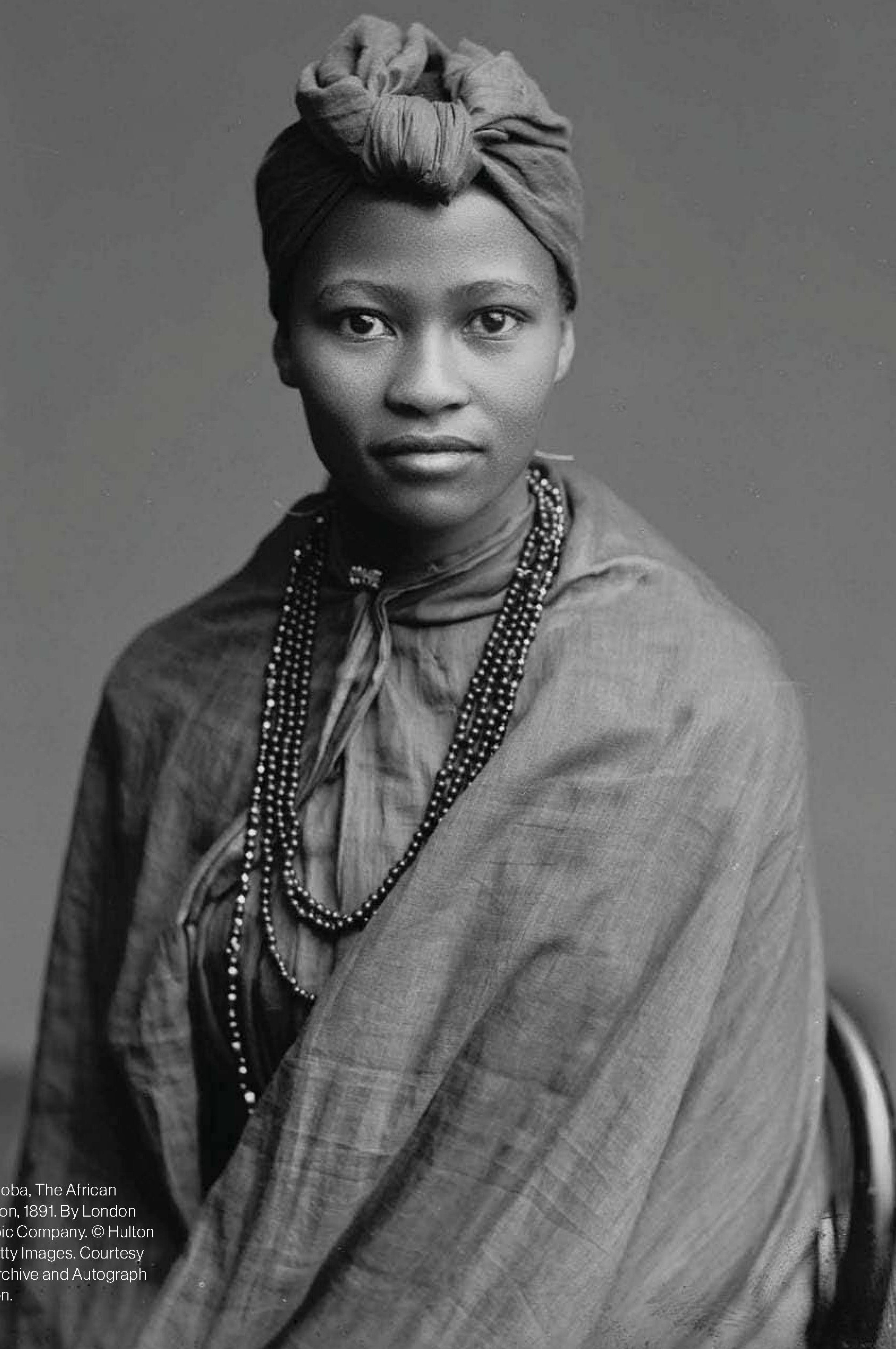
Compiled by
Sheena Adams

A unique audio-visual exhibition at the University of Johannesburg's FADA Gallery called *Black Chronicles IV*, on show until late May, combines a fascinating selection of Victorian-era photographs of African people. Included are evocative portraits of The African Choir who toured Britain between 1891-1893. Curator Renée Mussai of Autograph ABP in London tells us about the significance of the work and Ingrid Masondo, curator of New Media and Photography at Iziko Museums, gives us a local perspective.

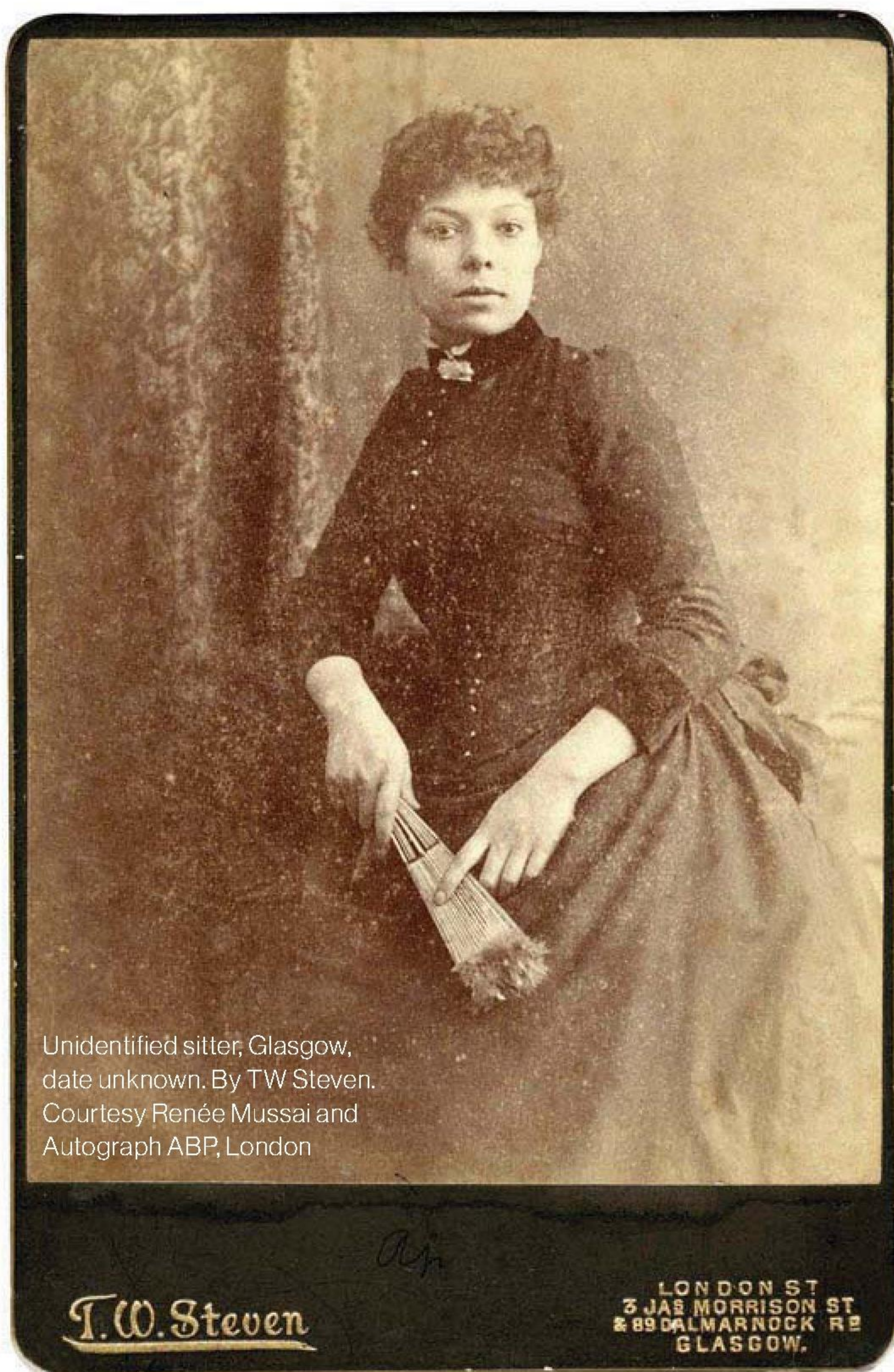
How would you describe the impact and efficacy of photography as a medium of cultural communication?

RM: Photography, by virtue of its immediacy and ubiquity, is a fascinating and complex medium, especially when it comes to politics of self-fashioning, cultural identity, representation and as a political tool of social change. Photography is also deeply contradictory and multi-faceted in its ability to “liberate” and “capture” simultaneously. Photography and identity politics are intimately linked in the way photography both fixes and unfixes identity, the way the act of photographing mutates, immortalises, violates, heals, elates, elevates and imprisons. Susan Sontag famously described the act of photographing as “subliminal murder”.

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Frances Gqoba, The African Choir. London, 1891. By London Stereoscopic Company. © Hulton Archive/Getty Images. Courtesy of Hulton Archive and Autograph ABP, London.



Unidentified sitter, Glasgow, date unknown. By TW Steven. Courtesy Renée Mussai and Autograph ABP, London

Are there specific exhibits or collections you've found particularly cathartic or impactful?

RM: In terms of recent exhibits, Zanele Muholi's ongoing living archive of self-portraits entitled *Somnyama Ngonyama (Hail, the Dark Lioness)* is for me one of the most ingenious contemporary engagements with photography and self-representation, imbued with a socially conscious and political, activist agenda. I've had the pleasure and privilege of collaborating closely curatorially with Muholi for several years.

Tell us about the creation of *Black Chronicles IV*. What sparked the exhibition?

RM: *Black Chronicles* is a long-term project rooted in many years – decades, rather – of continuous investment, research and advocacy in photography, race, rights and the politics of difference at Autograph ABP. The specific curatorial work for the exhibition series began in 2014, in partnership with the Hulton Archive, a division of Getty Images, whose support was instrumental to our mission. Other research partners include the Royal Collection Trust and the National Portrait Gallery.

Its underlying impetus was to to gently disrupt or destabilise the idea that a watershed post-war moment of “arrival”, such as the *SS Empire Windrush* in 1948 [which brought some 500 Jamaican settlers to England], signalled the “coming of the diaspora”. We wanted to expand the narrative of migration and representation to the early days of photography through archival excavation researching national and private collections of photography.

How and why is such an exhibition important to current discussions about colonial legacies in SA?

IM: There are many issues regarding the enduring colonial project (and attitudes) that we haven't even begun talking about. How is it that many current discussions about the curriculum don't include discussions about archives? For me, the exhibition raises questions about the kinds of “subjects” (and subjectivities) and institutions that are produced by colonial contexts, up to the present, locally and in the “North”. Locally, these issues have been addressed by artists such as Santu Mofokeng. His well-known project, *The Black Photo Album*, negotiates related issues of visibility, mobility and aspiration, but also leads us to other photographic sources, like personal/family archives. But such sources are also vulnerable: when people are scrambling for living space, how do we expect them to have storage space for photographs?

How do the images speak to the idea of defying cultural stereotypes?

RM: One could argue that they both defy and conform to cultural stereotypes, which makes the large body of images brought together in the wider *Black Chronicles* project so intriguing as a collective presence – from Sarah Forbes Bonetta, rescued as a young woman from slavery and raised as a protégée of Queen Victoria as a member of the British aristocracy, to Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian Member of Parliament in London in the late 19th century, or a Caribbean-born lion-tamer photographed in a remote village in the Scottish highlands during the 1870s! The diversity of people represented is astounding. They evidence – through photographic portraiture – that there's not only a long and varied history of black people in Britain, but also a deeply diverse presence, with fascinating and complex personal stories. One of my favourite portraits in the exhibition shows two young South African boys, Albert Jonas and John Xiniwe of the African Choir, playfully posing in the studio of the London Stereoscopic Company in 1891. The image was recently rediscovered at the Hulton Archive, amidst 40 000 glass plates wrapped in brown tissue paper and string. A wonderfully poetic, powerful and unique photograph, given the time and place in Victorian England, which also poses important questions about agency and subjectivity in a wider context.

A highlight of the exhibition is *The African Choir 1891 Re-Imagined*, a sound and image-based installation comprising portraits of the original members of the African Choir. These striking images are accompanied by an evocative five-channel soundtrack of songs composed and arranged by South African composers Thuthuka Sibisi and Philip Miller as a creative interpretation of the choir's 19th-century concert programme.

How do you hope *Black Chronicles IV* helps reframe debates about colonialism and liberation?

RM: We hope that the exhibition series will inspire people to ask questions and look closely, and critically, at the intimate connections between the visual, the history of the British Empire, through the presence of those photographed. These “presences” are, of course, intimately connected to colonial and imperial politics.

Part of this re-framing also questions why we're only now – in the 21st century – beginning to create a more inclusive visual portrait of a nation in the making. Politics of access, gate-keeping and the marginalisation of histories are particularly relevant to consider here, as is the question of *who's* allowed to interrogate the archive – especially in the light of the emergence of decolonial work across the academy, the museum, etc.



Sarah Forbes Bonetta (Sarah Davies), 1862 by Camille Silvy. Courtesy © National Portrait Gallery, London



Albert Jonas and John Xiniwe, *The African Choir*. London, 1891. © Hulton Archive/Getty Images. Courtesy of Hulton Archive and Autograph ABP, London.

Renée, how would you describe the ultimate role of a curator such as yourself?

RM: I believe our ultimate responsibility as curators is to generate new knowledge through our practice, to critically interrogate and push the boundaries of our respective fields, rather than indulge in simple “celebration rituals”. For me, the provision of a critical context, to find a balance between aesthetics and politics, is key – a sense of urgency and contemporary relevance; a commitment to the future. As a curator of mixed Afro-European heritage, I’m deeply committed to advocating for inclusion, levelling playing fields and championing the work of other female or non-binary artists, scholars and curators of colour working in my field. They’re still too often marginalised and sidelined.

Ingrid, what advice would you offer people for getting into the field and excelling?

IM: Being a curator is largely about building and managing relationships with artists, colleagues, publics, partners, collectors, etc. It’s exciting and demanding. To excel, one has to experiment to find one’s own style, be on the ground and talk to artists. This is in addition to being calm and organised. And passion is key.

Many young South Africans are using social media as a canvas for new photographic work. Why is it still so resonant for our local story-telling heroes and heroines?

IM: I think photography’s power, especially given rapid technological developments, is partly in its potential to disrupt power dynamics within the photography complex. Photography gives us the ability to produce, present and circulate our own images the way we want.

That’s exciting. Literally, everyone can be a ‘photographer’ or make photographs – with varying intentions.

However, there’s a lot of visual noise. Part of it has to do with countering the uses of photography in the colonial project up to the present, where particular people were represented in negative ways – as objects, stuck in time, savage, exotic, etc. Presenting ourselves as beautiful, hip, stylish, cosmopolitan and dignified is necessary, but I fear that we’re sometimes also conditioning ourselves not to see the rest. Visual literacy is critical for these noisy, cluttered times.

Do you find the gallery circuit changing and evolving in SA?

IM: The art sector is seemingly changing and evolving, with many more platforms and people. It’s for the artists and publics to say whether these changes have impacted their perspectives and imaginaries, their lives and livelihoods. From a public gallery perspective, it’s becoming frighteningly more bureaucratic. ▣

• *Black Chronicles IV* is an Autograph exhibition curated by Renée Mussai. *The African Choir 1891 Re-Imagined* is presented by Autograph ABP and Tshisa Boys, also curated by Renée Mussai.



Ingrid Masondo



Renée Mussai

1051/8



Eleanor Xiniwe, The African Choir.
London, 1891. By London Stereoscopic
Company. © Hulton Archive/Getty
Images. Courtesy of Hulton Archive
and Autograph ABP, London.

Publisher's note

Winter has officially arrived – and if the chilly weather's getting you down, we've got plenty of heartwarming features to lift your spirits. There's an old saying: "God couldn't be everywhere at the same time, so He gave us mothers." We agree – and in our cover story (p24), DJ Zinhle and her daughter exemplify the bonds

that keep offsprings linked to their moms not just through childhood, but throughout their lives. With Mother's Day on our radar this month, it's a timely reminder that we may rebel against our moms and spend years trying not to be like them, but when push comes to shove, it's our mothers we look for. Many readers will have discovered that even when we've lost their presence on this earth, they remain an intrinsic part of our existence and simply take up residence inside us, rather than around us. As we get older, it's our mother's voices we hear, their mannerisms we find ourselves mimicking – and their values that we realise were right all along.

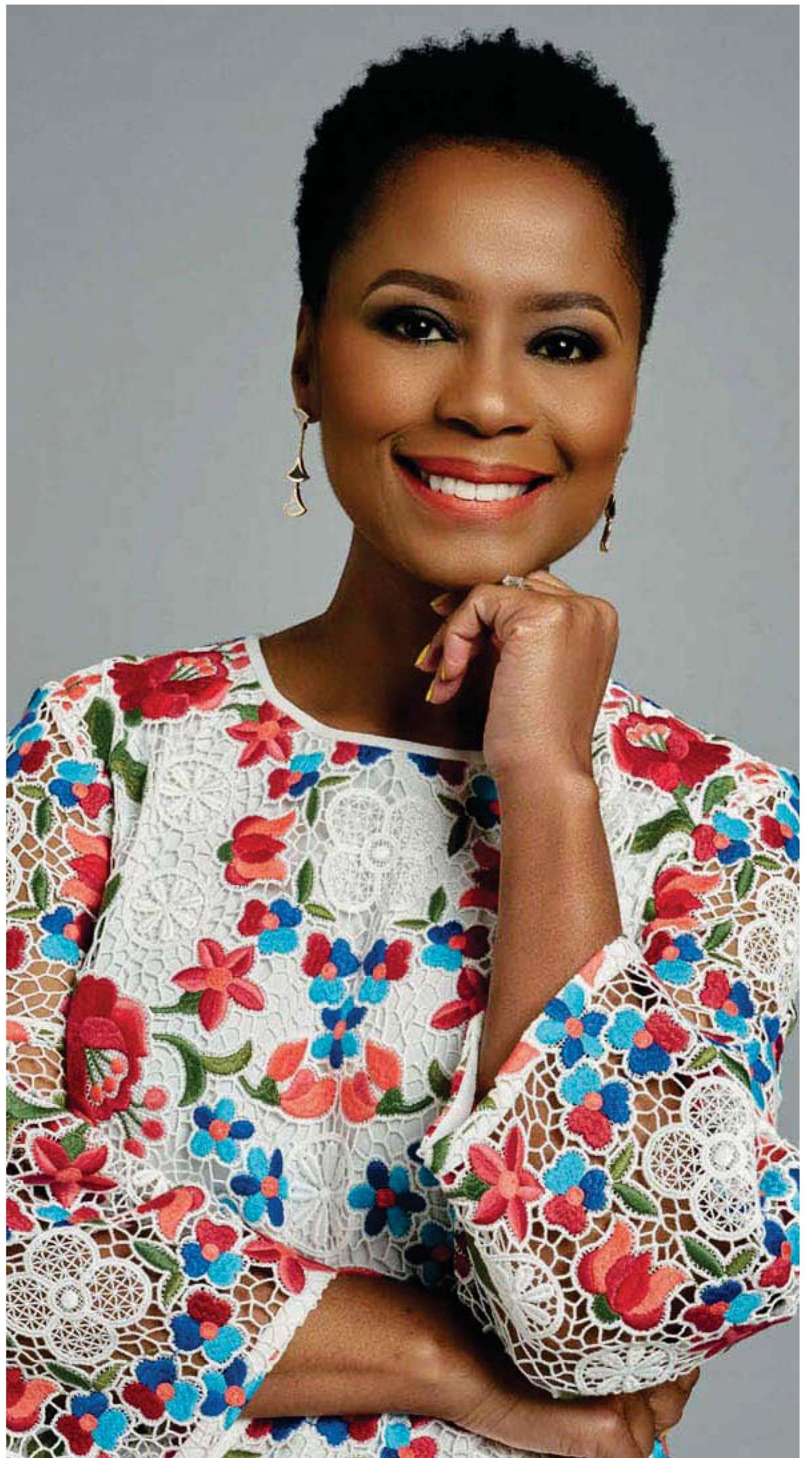
We also showcase a unique and fascinating audio-visual exhibition at the University of Johannesburg's FADA Gallery called *Black Chronicles IV* (p120), which interrogates the way black people have been depicted photographically throughout history. Tragically, those depictions were often internalised and believed by both the viewers and subjects of the images. It's a long overdue project which, through its visual evocations, has much to teach us about our past and, consequently, our present. The exhibition includes portraits of The African Choir, which toured Britain between 1891-1892, at the height of Victorian insularity.

We also offer food for thought in our feature on SA's still insufficient percentage of women leaders in boardrooms (p106) and – of course – fabulous winter styles and products on our fashion and beauty pages.

And if you're still seeking inspiration after all of that, our *Beautiful & Powerful* feature (p41) focuses on amazing female writers, who share their visions, values and voices with us.

Have a great month!

Khadyi



“
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