

Masala's new brand of mythical creations is a hit

PAPIER-MÂCHE crafter, artist and sculptor Themba Masala lives and works in a village called Raaswater, 16km outside of Upington in the Northern Cape. His studio measures about 4m x 3m and is laden with his brightly painted creatures.

Visitors will not find much room to move inside, so they wait outside — and Masala arranges his unique crafts on the dusty ground in the sun, like animals in

a surreal menagerie. Masala started making sculptures two years ago after attending an art course in Luderitz, in Namibia, funded by the Rössing Foundation.

His creations have grown from strength to strength. A Cape Town art dealer has just bought 30 of them, and he has secured an order for 4 200 Christmas balls.

Initially, Masala made representational decorated objects, like guinea fowl and porcupines. He has since found his own style

and sculpts a unique brand of mythical creatures, drawing on a sophisticated array of patterns for their hides.

The heads are often reptilian, like those of the myriad variety of lizards that inhabit this part of the world. The bodies resemble the dinosaurs of millennia gone by.

The talent of crafts people such as Masala is being nurtured by the Northern Cape Arts and Culture Council with financial support from the national de-

partment's poverty alleviation funds.

The council has appointed four crafts development specialists to help the crafters. In the Siyanda region, it works with the Khara Mahis mayor's office and local tourism offices.

Craft centres are being established as focal points for crafters. As part of the poverty relief projects, these efforts are aimed at enabling people to harness their creativity and earn a living.

In Masala's case, a specialist helped him develop the range of decorated papier-mâché Christmas balls that were promoted on the council's marketing drive to Cape Town, and won the order.

A purpose-built craft production facility in Raaswater is now under consideration. Similarly, in Andriesvale, 60 individuals from a rural community make up the Khomani S n project. Many of these crafters are making use of their indigenous iconographic

knowledge to burn drawings onto pieces of shaped bone. These are incorporated into ostrich eggshell and beaded necklaces.

Last year, an order for 5 000 handmade ostrich eggshell buttons came from the Ascoli Bottoni fashion house in Milan, Italy. More than 60 jobs have been created in the Khomani S n Project with each person earning an average of R1 500 a month.

Leonard Shapiro