ALMINE RECH

Dr. Esther Mahlangu
Where two rivers meet

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“I love art. It is part of me and I can’t separate it from who I am…but making art is not a job to me, it is a major part of who I am and I will continue to paint as long as I am able.” — Esther Mahlangu.[1]

Art was a calling from a very young age for the artist. Even when Mahlangu was too young to be painting walls — the exclusive privilege of married Ndebele women — she defied traditions and was eventually granted the freedom to continue. “At ten years old, she used to watch her mother and grandmother painting their house. Longing to join them, when they took a break from painting, she would try her luck without their knowledge. But when they returned, they scolded her telling her never to do that again as her lines were skewed. ‘Every single afternoon when they went to have a nap, I’d try to paint. I got into trouble every day until eventually they realized that in my heart I wanted to paint.’ Gradually her mother and grandmother granted her a small space at the back of the house to paint, with daily inspections, and as her artwork improved, she was allowed to paint the front of the house.”[2]

Historically, the geometric patterns on the exterior of traditional Ndebele homes and walls reflect the beadwork designs in their garments. In Mahlangu’s signature style, the symmetry, motifs, replication of patterns and colors painted on the one side are most often diagonally inverted like a mirror reflection on the opposite side. The black lines and white spaces unify the composition and hold the different elements together.

The elaborate graphic arrangements composed of rectangle, triangle, chevron and diamond shapes signal news of important life events such as a birth, death or wedding. The razor blade motif, for example, that has multiple uses in everyday life, reveals how western influence and technology have penetrated Ndebele iconography and symbolism. Other commonplace symbols of an era, so often taken for granted, reflect the changing times from one generation to another.

The straightness of the painted lines, color combinations and symmetrical designs were important criteria in the artist’s early years. “When you get married, you paint your first house,” recalls Mahlangu of times gone by. “It’s very important to have straight lines and not zigzag lines because your family members will come and look. If your lines are perfectly straight, then you are a very good wife and can look after your family.” [3]

Within this tradition there is space for individuality where a mural artist is distinguished from other women by the style of her wall decorations, the choice of colors and its construction technique.[4] This tension between tradition and innovation is marked by its originality and creativity “in a skillful game of respect for traditional aesthetic conventions and of taking distance from this common register.”[5]

It is in this dexterous play between custom and invention that Mahlangu excels. Initially working with natural pigments and cow dung that were limited to yellow, white, ochre, black and red hues, the artist started using industrial paints for the wall painting. “Acrylic paints have allowed me to use many more colors than I could have with natural pigments.”[6]

Embracing new techniques, materials and surfaces on which to apply her skills, the artist reimagined her paintings onto canvas, ceramics, sneakers, bicycles, motorbikes, skateboards and automobiles (BMW, Rolls-Royce, FIAT commissions), reaching global audiences and much acclaim.

The South African artist "knows how to adapt to different occasions and demands, while remaining rigorous in her style," observed curator Jean-Hubert Martin.[7] This captures Mahlangu's philosophy and attitude to life. On the one hand the artist is an ambassador for the Ndebele traditions of beadwork and wall painting, on the other she is a pioneer adapting to the demands and stimuli of the contemporary world around her, both locally and globally.

Now 87 years old, Mahlangu has no intention of slowing down. The artist founded a school where she teaches young girls and women in her local community in Mpumalanga how to paint. "I am teaching them and I love doing that. This is my way of passing the knowledge to the next generations to come."[8]

— Riason Naidoo, curator and writer

[1] "5 life lessons we've learnt from Esther Mahlangu" by S Mag, *Sowetan Live* – 20 November 2021.
[2] Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, "Esther Mahlangu, One of South Africa's Most Famous Artists, Perpetuates Traditional Ndebele Painting" - FORBES, 7 June 2019.
[3] Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, Ibid.
[4] Margaret Courtney-Clarke, *Ndebele* (1987), Rizzoli, New York.
[5] Sophie DULUCQ, "Margaret COURTNEY-CLARKE, Ndebele. The art of a tribe in South Africa", Arthaud, 1991, 204 p.", Clio. History, women and societies [Online], 6 | 1997, Online since 01 January 2005.
[6] Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, Ibid.
[7] Jean-Hubert Martin interviewed by Marie Maertens on the occasion of Esther Mahlangu's exhibition at Almine Rech in Paris in November 2021.
[8] Naledi de Wee, "Iconic Ndebele artist Esther Mahlangu to 'go solo' in Paris", The South African, 3 November 2021.

Biography

Born on 11 November 1935 in a farm located outside of Middelburg, Mpumalanga, South Africa, Esther Nikwambi Mahlangu is globally acclaimed for her striking abstract paintings inspired by the Ndebele artistic traditions.

Mahlangu has spent almost eight decades practicing her technique. She first attracted the world's attention during the landmark *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition shown at the Centre Georges Pompidou and Grande halle de la Villette in Paris in 1989.

The groundbreaking artist became the first woman and first African to be commissioned to create an art car in the BMW Art Car Collection in 1991, alongside prominent artists such as Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein, and Frank Stella. The car was exhibited at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington in 1994 and the British Museum in London in 2017.

This has led her to other well-known collaborations with global brands, the likes of Belvedere Vodka, the Smithsonian Museum, South African Airways, Freshpak Rooibos, and singer John Legend, among other.

Mahlangu participated in documenta 9 (1992), Lyon biennale (2000), 3rd Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art (2009), and numerous solo and group shows in galleries and museums in the USA, Mexico, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Switzerland, Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Slovakia, Serbia, Japan and Australia, to mention a few. The painter has exhibited in the London art fairs of Frieze and 1:54 and on several occasions at the Cape Town Art Fair.

Her work is represented in several public collections in South Africa — such as the South African National Gallery, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, William Humphreys Art Gallery, University of Cape Town — and internationally, in museum collections as the Centre Georges Pompidou, Brooklyn, Hirshhorn and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, emanating from a residency there. Renowned private collections such as Jean Pigozzi Contemporary African Art Collection and corporate collections like the World Bank list oeuvres by Esther Mahlangu. Oprah Winfrey, Usher, John Legend, Trevor Noah, David Bowie and Iman, Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys, Black Coffee, are some of the celebrities who have collected her artwork.

In 2006 South African President Thabo Mbeki awarded the artist the Order of Ikhamanga (silver) for excellent achievement in arts and culture. Mahlangu was presented with two honorary doctorates in 2018, from the University of Johannesburg and the Durban University of Technology. An award from the United Nations followed in 2019. In the same year she was decorated as Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French Ministry of Culture.