

ESTHER Mahlangu



ESTHER Mahlangu 2.6.12.1998.

2003

ESTHER Mahlangu

UCT Irma Stern Museum,
4 - 22 November 2003

This exhibition celebrates the work of Esther Mahlangu, internationally acclaimed South African artist, born in 1935 and still actively painting and teaching in her hometown of Weltevreden (Mabhoko) in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.

F R de Jager
A G Loots



Vgallery cc
Cape Town

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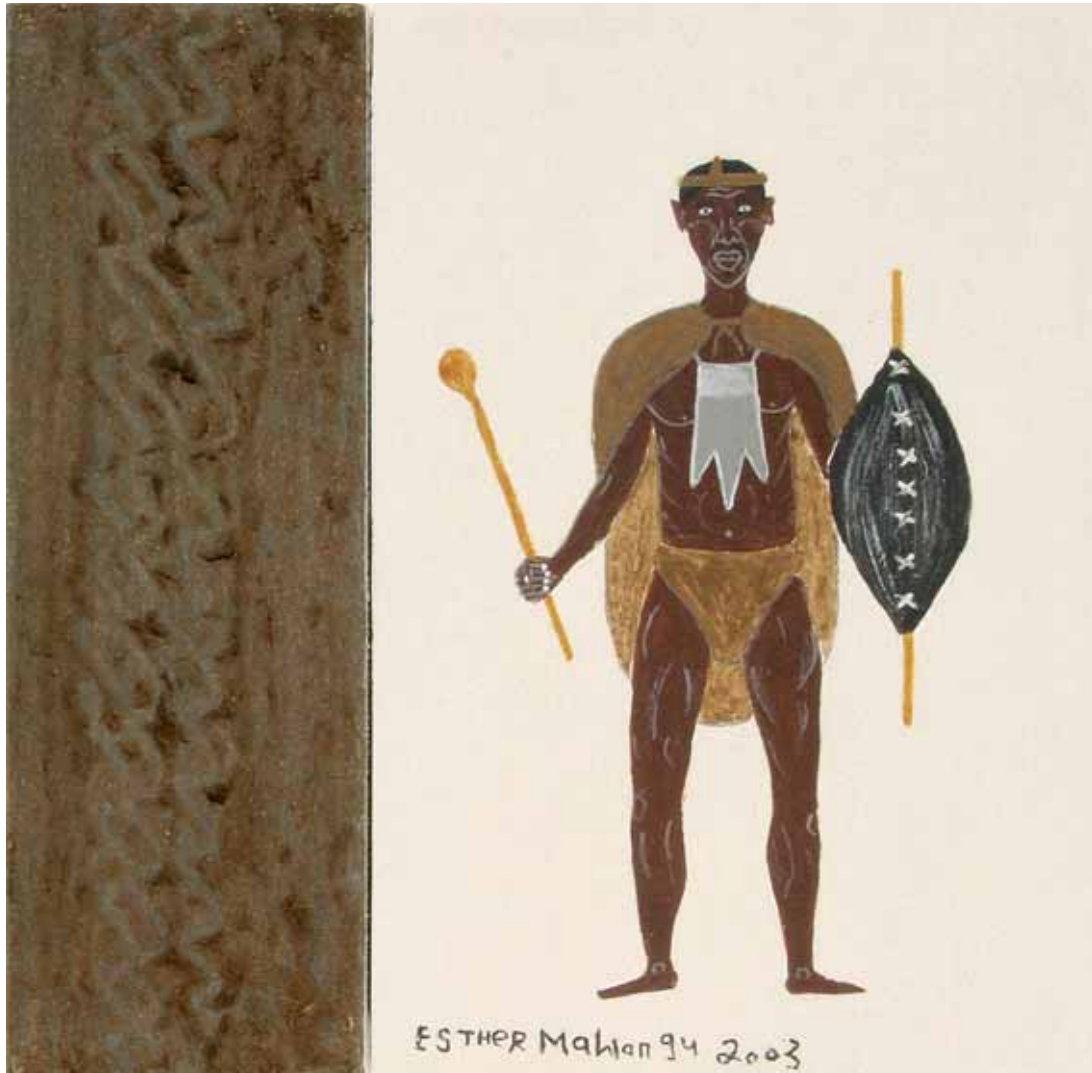
Printed by Scan Shop, Cape Town

First Edition 2003
ISBN 0 620 30600 9

Front Cover: *Untitled*, 1998
Mixed media and cow dung on canvas
123 x 190 cm

Back Cover: *My BMW*, 2002 (detail)
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 80 cm





Induna, 2003 (two sections)
Natural Pigment and cow dung on canvas
60 x 61 cm

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The artist's bridged decorated gateway or *iblogho* provides entry through a decorated wall that encloses the courtyard in front of her homestead or *umuzi*.

1. Foreword

The traditional-contemporary Esther Mahlangu

What distinguishes contemporary art from traditional art? Video and computer art would clearly fall under the rubric of contemporary art. Most art historians would categorize a nineteenth century Zulu snuff container and an early twentieth century Dan mask as traditional art. Yet is this a distinction that is black and white or are there shades of grey? What of an artist who is working in the present, but using the skills and techniques passed down for generations? In much of Africa wood carvers, ceramicists, and others produce excellent works of art based on techniques developed by their forebears. However, because much of this artwork is produced for the tourist trade it is not considered by most as 'high art' and hence is often considered unworthy of taking up space in galleries, museums, or well-known private collections. This last point is, of course, debatable and we do see fine examples of 'tourist trade art' making their way into many important museum collections.

The work of Esther Mahlangu poses an interesting, perhaps difficult, perhaps challenging example of this dichotomy between the traditional and the contemporary. The techniques Ms Mahlangu uses (including using feathers as brushes) are the same as those used by generations of Ndebele women. However, Ms Mahlangu presents traditional Ndebele semi-abstract geometric designs in modern ways, including painting an entire 1991 525i BMW car. This work was exhibited at the 1992 Documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany, an art festival widely regarded as one of the top international

contemporary art exhibitions in the world and one in which four, perhaps five, South African artists have ever exhibited.

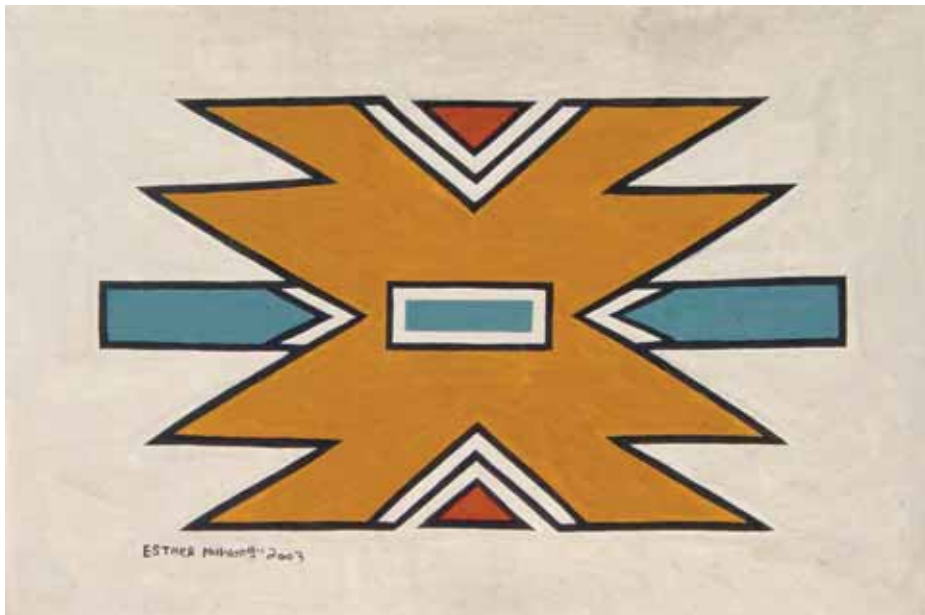
It is then somewhat puzzling that Ms Mahlangu has not received the same sort of recognition in South Africa that others who have exhibited at Documenta have received. Perhaps it is because the others, including William Kentridge and Marlene Dumas, are closer to the tastes of those who curate and collect contemporary South African art. Perhaps it is because non-figurative painting does not fit the tastes of many interested in contemporary South African art. Perhaps it is because Ms Mahlangu's work is too 'African'.

In the broader context of abstract geometric contemporary art, however, Ms Mahlangu's work seems to fit squarely into the type of work produced by a number of top international artists such as Sol LeWitt and Damien Hirst. In the case of Sol LeWitt, with whom Ms Mahlangu has exhibited in Europe, the similarity is in the use of strong, bold colours and striking geometric patterns to evoke a mood, a feeling. In the case of Damien Hirst, his series of circle / dot works, such as *Opium* and *Valium*, are also carefully placed, boldly coloured geometric figures. Both Mr LeWitt and Mr Hirst have created large wall installations which, when purchased, are painted directly onto the buyer's wall. This sounds remarkably similar to what Ms Mahlangu and hundreds of other Ndebele women have been doing for decades.

Beyond the purely geometric, Ms Mahlangu often incorporates imagery in her paintings. In many of her works the centrepiece is a stylized razor blade, an object important in many Ndebele ceremonies and used for activities ranging from shaving hair to male circumcisions. However, the hallmark of her work is a simple concept: infinitely modulating and recombining simple, striking, and boldly coloured geometric forms. Ms Mahlangu generally relies on traditional Ndebele colours which determine meaning in various ways. She is a dramatic colourist and her paintings, while being very flat and two-dimensional, possess a playfully mesmerizing quality. As a body of work, her paintings evoke a history and a culture that spans generations.

Perhaps Ms Mahlangu's expressions are those of South Africa in 2003: traditional and contemporary. There is a firm footing in the past combined with a willingness to adapt and to change. The challenge to the viewer is how to view the two together without diminishing the importance of either.

Kyle D Kauffman
Whitehead Professor of Economics
Wellesley College and WEB DuBois Institute
Harvard University



Abstract, 2003
Natural pigment on canvas
89 x 139 cm



ESTHER MAHLANGU: A spatial engagement

In this area in the interior of South Africa what makes an overwhelming impression on the onlooker is not only the vast width of the open countryside with its low horizon but also the hugeness of the sky above it. The space is open, high, amazing, inviting all kinds of reflections & daydreams.

The enactment of historical experience has taken place in the seeming age-old stillness here. Through this area, this space, people have moved this way & that way, sometimes hastily, bitterly, in the form of forced removal. This area has known both peace & conflict. Esther Mahlangu was born into the tradition & customs of the people here, the Ndebele....

Esther Mahlangu's colourful exploration & defining of space & spaces has taken her name a great distance.

Clarke, P. 2003

3. About the artist and the exhibition

This slim volume accompanies the first, long overdue, solo exhibition in South Africa of works by Esther Mahlangu, one of our great artists.

Various factors have altered Esther Mahlangu's art over the last few years although she has personally remained unchanged by her artworld 'discovery', which happened in 1989. Exposure – to new materials, different techniques and to the collecting artworld – has brought about new reasoning behind her work and political issues continue to influence the ways in which she produces her art.

While her stylistic vocabulary is deeply embedded in memory and tradition, innovation plays an important part in Esther's art making. If 'style' is defined as an artist's unique solutions to visual problems, then we may think of 'great' artists as those who create not only unique solutions, but also unique problems to solve. Esther is one of those artists. In addition to being a great visual artist who enjoys her share of the international limelight, she loves teaching people about her culture and her art.

Not many artists working within the Ndebele culture break away from convention. The majority avoids stress and conflict by remaining well within the comfort zone of known designs. Esther has set herself apart with her objective to show the world her painting. Like this one, all her exhibitions have presented her with unique and new challenges which she has approached bravely without discarding the constraints of her traditional culture.

Art is one of the most equivocal forms of human behavior and so it is impossible to predict where Esther's career will lead her. Her current style, although very different from her original form of domestic decoration, still adheres to tradition but has metamorphosed as a direct influence of her exposure to the outside world and her connections with other cultures and art forms from around the world. We have strived to illustrate her ongoing artistic transformation in this exhibition by including works from various styles and periods and in different media, juxtaposing the old and the new. The *piece de resistance* of the exhibition, however, is undoubtedly Esther herself in traditional dress – a living installation and performance piece!

The fact that this exhibition is staged in the house of one of our most renowned artists accentuates the significance of Esther Mahlangu in her own country. Irma Stern, who found inspiration from Africa and its people, would certainly have approved.

Andries Loots and Fred de Jager
CURATORS – ESTHER MAHLANGU EXHIBITION
UCT IRMA STERN MUSEUM,
ROSEBANK, CAPE TOWN
4 November 2003

Opposite: *Abstract*, 2003 (six triangular sections)
Natural pigment on canvas
Diameter: 100 cm



4. Biographical sketch

Esther Nikwambi Mahlangu (NaGiyana Nostokana), the first of nine children, (six girls and three boys), was born in 1935 on a farm near Middelburg in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.

Esther's mother, like her grandmother and great grandmother before her, was a simple traditional woman who looked after her family and occupied herself with traditional wall painting and beadwork. Her father was a small-scale farmer tending his cattle and crops.

Houses were decorated during winter. This was a busy time for most Ndebele women in the surrounding areas, vying to outperform each other with their painting skills. It was an uncomplicated lifestyle where time was abundant and women walked kilometers to collect different types of clays, cow dung and other natural materials from which they made various colours to decorate their houses. Their designs were austere and uncluttered, handed down by tradition from one generation to the next. Drawing and painting were done with fingers; brushes were unknown. Under such unhurried circumstances Esther started her painting career.

My mother and grandmother taught me to paint when I was ten years old. I have been busy with it ever since and have always liked it. When I am painting my heart is very wide, it reaches out. It makes me feel very, very happy. The artist.

Esther got married and had three sons. But life was not easy; she lost her husband and two of her sons. In the absence of a daughter, Elias, her only remaining son, now helps his mother with her painting and assists her in her many travels overseas.

Today Esther lives in the village of Mabhoko or Weltevreden (Afrikaans for *well satisfied*) in the KwaMhlanga district in Mpumalanga Province. Whenever she is not touring or exhibiting overseas, she stays at home, walking around the house bare-foot, tending her small patch of corn and keeping busy with what she likes most, painting.

Her passion in life is to educate and teach not only people from around the world about her culture and art but also the local girls, ensuring that this fragile culture won't disappear. She has started a 'School for Ndebele Art' which she funds herself with no outside financial sponsorship or other assistance.

Esther is a remarkable woman. Against all odds she travelled and exhibited overseas in 1989, a time when political turmoil at home and sanctions abroad made international participation only a dream for all but a few South African artists.

Opposite: The artist in her lounge / showroom, dressed in traditional finery without her ceremonial blanket or *ikumbesi*.





The artist's fondest memories of her visit to Paris in 1989.

Souvenir de Paris, 2003
Mixed media on canvas
92 x 141 cm

5. How did it all start?

In 1986 researchers from the Pompidou Centre in Paris travelled through the world to document and research traditional art, cultures and homesteads. The idea was to invite specific artists from around the world to exhibit together in the Pompidou. They visited Weltevreden, took some photographs of Esther's eye-catching house with its vibrant exterior decorations and set about tracking down Esther, who was working at the Botshabelo Ndebele Museum near Middelburg at the time. Astonished at their photographs of her house, she confirmed that she was, indeed, the owner-artist.

An invitation to travel to France arrived some months later. Esther had many questions. She had never flown in an aeroplane before, she could barely speak English, let alone French, she had no concept where France was and she worried that she might not find mealie meal with which to prepare her traditional meals in Paris. Her fears were allayed when it was agreed that her son Elias would accompany her as English interpreter. But two days before she was to leave she received urgent notification that their flight would depart a day earlier than arranged due to an Air France strike. Unable to contact Elias at such short notice, she intrepidly went ahead on her own, accompanied to the airport by some family members and the mayor of Middelburg, Mr Piet Bezuidenhout and his wife. As a farewell gift, the town council of Middelburg had given her a brand new suitcase and R800-00 spending money. A 50 kg bag of mealie meal was checked in with her luggage.

The large buildings and throngs of people at Johannesburg International Airport all but overwhelmed her, coming as she did from a humble rural background. But Esther bravely took all the new and frightening experiences of international travel in her stride, assured that Elias was to arrive on a delayed flight a week later.

Her arrival in Paris could hardly have been more stupendous: at the Pompidou Centre she was presented with a replica of her own house! Complete with roof, outer wall, gate, windows and door, the reconstructed house lacked only the brightly coloured painted murals she loved so well. She had to wipe her eyes to make sure that she was not dreaming. Esther was requested to decorate the house in traditional Ndebele fashion, just like her real home back in Africa. Amid wide television and press coverage her career as internationally respected artist commenced as thousands of spectators came to watch her work. Before returning home five weeks later on 1 June 1989, she also decorated an inner wall at the local museum of Angoulême.

Her comments afterwards:

The people were very good to me, they loved me, the place is very big, I enjoyed my stay I just missed my children and my home... but the place was very beautiful.

6. The 1991 BMW Project

In 1975 French auctioneer and racing driver, Hervé Poulain, approached BMW with his dreams of combining his two passions, motorsport and art. The idea caught on and Alexander Calder was commissioned to convert Poulain's BMW 3.0 CSL into a fiery artwork for the 4-hour race in Le Mans. This car became the first in a series of BMW Art Cars.

The concept proved to be a hugely successful promotional tool, inspiring BMW to continue commissioning famous international artists to decorate special racing cars. The Art Cars designed by Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol also raced at Le Mans before finding their way into well-known museums such as the Louvre in Paris, the Royal Academy in London and the New York Whitney Museum of Modern Art.

In 1991, Esther Mahlangu was invited to paint a prototype of the new BMW 525i model. Esther's car, eleventh in the Art Car Collection, was the first to be decorated by a woman artist. Not only her gender, but also her race made this fact all the more exceptional: a black woman artist from a little-known South African community had been included in a prestigious international artistic line-up, placing BMW in the spotlight of cross-cultural, out-of-Africa art promotion.

Esther took a practice run on the door of a different BMW before painting 'her' Art Car. Within a week, she transformed the 5 Series saloon into a masterpiece of

Ndebele art, establishing her proud place as first woman in the line-up of international Art Car artists.

Unlike the first cars in the BMW Art Cars Collection, Esther Mahlangu's BMW will never be subjected to driving on the road, but, according to the Collection Catalogue, will exist exclusively as a work of art. Johan Walker, in his 1990 publication *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (p. 57) maintains that in this project,

... the mass produced item (the BMW car), of an industrial designer has been made into a unique work of art. What was already a status symbol was given the status of Art.

Esther described her combination of her art form, handed down to her by her foremothers, and modern automobile technology in clear terms:

My art has evolved from the tribal tradition of decorating our homes ... The patterns I have used on the BMW marry tradition to the essence of BMW.

Today the BMW Art Cars Collection contains fifteen automotive works of art. Significant artists from nine countries from every continent are represented in the collection. BMW's sponsorship of artistic interaction with the world of technology is aimed at creating intercultural dialogue as an instrument for tolerance and understanding in a culturally diverse world.

Artists included in the BMW Art Cars Collection are:

A Calder, 1975

F Stella, 1976

R Lichtenstein, 1977

A Warhol, 1979

E Fuchs, 1982

R Rauschenberg, 1986

K Done, 1989

MJ Nelson, 1989

C Manrique, 1990

M Kayama, 1990

E Mahlangu, 1991

AR Penck, 1991

S Chia, 1992

D Hockney, 1995

J Holzer, 1999



Alexander Calder, 1975



Frank Stella, 1976



Roy Lichtenstein, 1977



Andy Warhol, 1979



Robert Rauschenberg, 1986



David Hockney, 1995



Esther Mahlangu, 1991

*What was already a status symbol was given the status of Art
(Walker, J. 1990: 57)*

7. Ndebele Painting

Ndebele painting's design and symbols are a derivative of century-old beadwork forms and patterns. (Levinson, R. 1985: 40-45)

South Africa's Ndebele people are widely known for their colourful wall painting, a distinguishing cultural practice retained from their Zimbabwean ancestry. Ndebele house decoration transcends the status of craft; it is a spiritually charged expression of identity and belonging, and a celebration of important social occasions. Their brightly coloured modern incarnation, made possible by industrially produced paints, is no older than fifty years or so. It is an innovative adaptation of ages-old domestic decorative schemes which initially consisted of geometric patterns manually incised into thickly applied layers of mud and cow dung.

House decoration is traditionally women's work, done in the dry winter season. Summer rains would wash down the natural pigments, necessitating redecoration each winter. The complexities of house decoration are transmitted from mothers to daughters in an informal apprentice system: young girls assist their mothers by preparing the pigments, paints and wall surfaces prior to the decorative work being carried out. During rites of passage or initiations, pubescent girls are prepared for womanhood in a three month period of isolation. They are taught the basics of married life and good motherhood and they receive intensive instruction in traditional techniques of mural painting and beadwork.



Self-portrait, 2003 (detail)
Natural pigment on canvas
60 x 40 cm



To this day, it is believed that old designs, prescribed by the ancestors, possess sacred protective powers. Dutiful obedience to these prescriptions results in an overall uniformity of style and design which, however, allows wide scope for innovation and personal interpretation. Rivalry between women tend to be strong in polygamous societies like the Ndebele, so women strive to show off their creative powers and their domestic skills by creating and personalizing their unique designs, colours and motifs. This practice was greatly enhanced with the introduction of industrial paints in the 1940s. Not only were their palettes extended and brightened, but their mural decorations gained a measure of durability unknown before.

During the 1950s, Ndebele mural art became increasingly bright and innovative in concept and design. But as the brutal displacements and forced removals of apartheid scattered Ndebele families far and wide, symbolic affirmation of identity became one of the prime functions of these decorations. Many Ndebele were now effectively in poverty-stricken exile in their own country, alienated from their ancestral lands and their traditional means of subsistence. As the realities of poverty set in, the symbolic value of colours was diluted as their use became determined largely by availability. In recent times, in addition to being used as indications of specific family occasions, house decoration also gives artistic expression to issues like social status, domestic competence and, increasingly, purely aesthetic concepts of beauty.

Over the decades, figurative elements gradually proliferated in Ndebele mural painting. Objects like

aeroplanes, animals, light bulbs, cars, houses and people made their appearance in response to interaction with tourists, government officials, anthropologists, visitors; in short, the 'outside world'. Houses universally represent dreams and aspirations, and as the social landscape of the Ndebele changed, so their sorrows, losses, hopes and desires entered the iconography of their highly stylized designs.

A good example is the razorblade (*itjhefana*), adopted by Esther Mahlangu as her personal trademark. Her initial fascination with the empty geometric space in the centre of razorblades was quickly assimilated into her painting style and she realized only later the symbolic importance of blades in her every day life as well as in tribal rituals.

Painting as a modern, commercially-determined practice hardly existed in Ndebele culture before the 1990s. Esther Mahlangu pioneered the artistic transference of Ndebele designs, till then virtually exclusively reserved for wall paintings, onto canvas. In this way, not only did she personally capitalize on Ndebele mural painting in an innovative way, she effected world-wide exposure and art-world commodity currency for her people's art. Says Esther:

... not everybody could come to see our houses and therefore I decided to put the painting on the canvas and boards and take it to them...

Collectors the world over can now own authentic pieces of Ndebele painting. Purists may deride this as near-sacrilegious adulteration of tradition, but Esther the survivor believes in cultural adaptability and growth in the ever-changing global economy.

Originally, the Ndebele artforms of beading and house painting were restricted to domestic utility items. Today Ndebele beading and painting enjoy lively economic currency alongside their traditional uses. Through her visual art and her insistent use of traditional dress, Esther perpetuates Ndebele culture in her own community as much as in the outside world. Her works on canvas reach an international audience where its status is equal to artworks by other visual artists.

Her understanding of the international art market within which her works circulate puts her in economic control, and empowers her as a woman, as an artist and as an individual. She has been an important agent in conscientizing other Ndebele artists to their legacy as well as their economic power. They are well aware of the difference between items they value as traditional artifact and items made specifically for the tourist market or for the contemporary art market.

Sadly, Ndebele art tends to have more popular appeal in countries other than South Africa. The reasons for this are complex, but may be generalised to a persistent view among South African art patrons of Ndebele culture as a curiosity rather than a vibrantly progressive artistic legacy.

Medium

The meanings of any artwork result from complex interrelationships between concept and material. This holds true for Ndebele artwork as much as any other, and an understanding of Ndebele use of materials in historical context enhances the viewer's appreciation of their art.



Esther, dressed in traditional attire with her goatskin cape or *linaga*, trimmed with beads in front of her now famous razor blade design or *itjhefana* which she has adopted as her own.



The traditional palette comprise of white limestone, ochre clay, ash mixed with water, black clay, red clay and cow dung. Chicken feathers and twigs are utilised as brushes.

Prior to 1940, the Ndebele of Mpumalanga Province made use of natural materials from their immediate surroundings to construct their dwellings. Walls were generally built from sun-hardened mud bricks, roofs were made of reeds and grasses and wall paintings were coloured with natural pigments.

Women would walk as far as a hundred kilometers in search of desirable pigments with which to decorate their houses. Deep red soil came from the Rust de Winter area, black was made from a mixture of soot and dark soil from the banks of the Elands-, Wilge-, and Olifants rivers, or otherwise from charcoal from kitchen fires. Ochre, brown and pink clays were gathered from the surrounding areas while limestone was the main source of white. Wet balls of clay were carefully dried and stored. When needed, they were reconstituted to a workable consistency, mixed with cow dung, a strong binding agent, and then used like thick, opaque paints for wall decoration.

The Ndzundza Ndebele clan is credited with being the first to start using commercially manufactured paints during the second half of the 1940s. Today acrylic paints are widely preferred, mainly because of their durability and relatively easy availability.

Esther Mahlangu uses a variety of materials when producing artwork on board or on canvas. In some cases she still uses traditional materials, though unless required for specific artworks, such materials are mostly unsuitable for packing, transportation and exhibition abroad. She experiments constantly with new products to improve the durability and range of her work. She is comfortable with artist's acrylics which she now uses extensively, as she

appreciates the freedom of colour choice they present.

Though she loves modern paints, Esther prefers chicken feathers to brushes for intricate paint application. She uses commercial brushes only for filling in really large areas on wall paintings.

Design

Like most Ndebele paintings, Esther's paintings appear 'flat' in their use of unmodulated colour. Shading and other devices for creating the illusion of three-dimensionality are absent; indeed, a virtually complete lack of perspective is a distinctive quality of the work. Rhythm is created through repetition of colour, line, contrasts and intervals, interspersed by thoughtfully placed irregularities.

As design elements, shape-size, direction and pattern were traditionally of greater importance than colour. The Ndebele artist is acutely aware of her environment, but she seeks out geometric elements to incorporate in her traditional designs.

Alternatively, she may stylize images of natural or manufactured items. These abstracted images are imbued with symbolic significance through repetitive use, and they become icons in her visual vocabulary.

Ndebele artists are natural masters of geometry. No rulers nor any other mathematical instruments are used to produce straight edges and parallel lines; layout drawings are virtually unknown. Painting is mostly unceremoniously commenced directly onto prepared surfaces.

Ndebele geometry stems from design principles of the traditional home (*umuzi*) where the entrance (*izimpunjwana*) forms a central focal point from which the rest of the home radiates. Bold striped patterns are prominent in most designs and are enhanced by areas of strong contrasting colour and delineations of white next to black.

Esther's compositions, although considerably developed and individualized, still adhere to the basic traditional elements of unity, rhythm, symmetry and balance. These she uses in fine interaction to create her distinctive compositions.

Her designs characteristically form a unit, boldly defined by black lines on white or coloured backgrounds. Rhythm is created by repetitive elements, especially in border areas, where they encourage the eye to move spontaneously around the painting. Symmetry, an important element in Ndebele design, is strongly evident in Esther's work. She creates symmetry by visually harmonious relationships between various design elements and by the use of mirror images. Rhythm and symmetry co-exist in complementarity. Symmetry remains the anchoring element and rhythm creates variation dictated by concept and design.

Esther's unique artistic alphabet contains large areas of colour as well as smaller images which she combines to form strong and complicated structures.

Style

Two very distinct styles are present in current Ndebele design.

Abstract

Ndebele paintings may primarily be described as abstractions. The older form of painting or decorating which predates large-scale westernization was little more than linear patterning executed manually into newly applied wet mud. The designs were done symmetrically and geometrically and had little significant symbolic meaning apart from the specific belief that it served as protection from evil spirits. These designs still appear in their original monochromatic colours today, often as 'endings' or contrasts to brightly coloured segments, or to differentiate between old and new parts of a domestic complex.

The Nebo murals are predominantly black and white, and resemble step and diamond-type motifs which are more typical of Pedi and Ntwane murals.

(Van Vuuren, C. 2001: 88)

Semi Figurative

As the Ndebele became increasingly industrialized and women entered the urban labour markets of Pretoria and Johannesburg, they came into contact with new design elements. It is therefore not strange that images like cars, people, animals, aeroplanes, lights, lampposts and light bulbs increasingly found their way into their painting. These images are almost always stylized to fit the geometric shapes of the art.

Some of the most salient reasons for adaptation of traditional styles may be the following:



Abstract, 2001
 Acrylic on canvas
 51 x 72 cm
 Private Collection, Cape Town



Abstract, 2001
 Acrylic on canvas
 60 x 80 cm



On the way to the Initiation Party, 2002
 Acrylic on canvas
 40 x 60 cm
 Private Collection, Cape Town



Around the Home, 2001
 Acrylic on canvas
 52 x 72 cm
 Private Collection, Cape Town

- a) introduction of electricity opened up the 'outside world' and new objects like light bulbs, telephone poles and light switches appeared;
- b) employment in the cities lead to less time for decorating the traditional home and stylistic economy became necessary;
- c) the growing and demanding tourist market lead to the production of small artefacts in large numbers, necessitating changes in design and colour;
- d) global and domestic travel opened up new horizons to artists;
- e) political changes in South Africa foregrounded ANC colours and those of the new South African flag;
- f) corporate patronage lead to the inclusion of popular logos like Coca Cola and BMW in designs.



Abstract, 1993 (ANC colours)
Acrylic on canvas
83 x 130 cm

8. Beadwork

Beads and beadwork were mostly made and worn to indicate different life stages in Ndebele culture. The early white clay and seed beads were replaced after the 1940s by colourful glass beads. Exposure to European influences bring continual change to traditional beadwork.

According to Lindsay Hooper (1988: 12 – 15):

... In beadwork women have a more personal expressive form. Beads are used to decorate or even to form, clothing. Men, who mostly work on farms and in industrial centres, generally wear beaded clothing and ornaments only at infrequent occasions such as initiation ceremonies. Women too are increasingly employed away from home and wear their beadwork less commonly. But wherever beadwork may be worn, it has been made by women who use this medium to make known their personal and family status, and to demonstrate their own creativity...

Very young girls wore an igabe, a small apron with white beaded dressed skin or cotton fringes attached to a front waistband, densely covered with beadwork. After puberty and the accompanying initiation ritual, a young woman wore an isiphephetu, a stiff front apron decorated with beadwork, and she could then wear the isithimba, a long soft skin back apron, which was worn by women of all ages from puberty to old age. For her marriage, a bride

wore an itshogolo, a goatskin front apron, with the lower edge cut into five approximately hand-length flaps. This was worn undecorated for her wedding, but as a married woman grew in status at her husband's home, she enriched her itshogolo with beadwork. She wore it at important ceremonial occasions, such as the initiation of her sons. Another type of front apron, amaphotho, was more generally worn by married women. It was shaped rather like the itshogolo but had a central beaded fringe with two squared-off flaps at either side.

An important item worn by brides was a naga, a splendid panelled skin cloak. This might be heavily decorated with mainly white beads. Blankets of particular patterns were also used as cloaks, and their large expanse provided the basis for some of the richest demonstrations of the Ndebele beaders art.

Beadwork ornaments were worn by all on the head, neck, waist, arms and legs, and might vary according to the age and status of the wearer, and prevailing fashion. The use of certain beadwork ornaments has been more persistent than most items of clothing. In the instance of the beaded ring, isigolwana, these were made on the body of the wearer and could not be removed easily. Young unmarried girls wore a thick neckring, isigolwana, as well as rings on the arms, legs and waist, which were worn by older women as well. These



Esther dressed in her five fingered *ijogolo* apron with beaded *Isigolwana* rings.

rings had a foundation of grass and sometimes cloth, entirely bound with a single strand of beads or with a fabric of beadwork.

Bridal finery included the nyoka (literally 'snake'), a band of beadwork approximately 200mm wide and long enough to trail on the ground behind the wearer. It attached around the neck and was worn over the bridal cloak (naga), apparently alluding to an association with fertility.

Mothers of initiates wore a somewhat similar ornament, linga kobe, at the ceremonies marking the end of their son's initiation ceremonies. Attached to a headband or worn over the ears, was a pair of narrow beadwork bands reaching onto the ground.

Ndebele beadwork and wall painting make an impression on the viewer not only because of their profusion, but also because of the designs and colours used. Older beadwork pieces, from the 1920s and 1930s, show the predominant use of white beads as a field colour, and have scattered motifs in mainly primary colours, and in green and orange. It appears that in time the motifs were elaborated and enlarged, leaving less of the white field. Within approximately the last decade, the design has tended to occupy the entire piece. Along with this change, has been a change in colour preference. Especially among the Ndzundza, the colours currently popular are dark toning blues, greens, purples and black, with touches of white. Little research has focussed specifically on the

selection of motif and colour by the beadworkers. Thus the tentative observation of change outlined above may simply indicate the sweep of fashion and availability of beads, or it may relate to regional and clan differences. It is possible that the significance of motif and colour is different in particular contexts. In some situations they may refer to a group identity; in others as markers of status within a group; or as personal communication codes, for example between courting couples.

The motifs used in beadwork and in wall painting show – if possible – an even greater vitality and dynamic response than the colours. Commonplace items such as letters of the alphabet, especially from car registrations like TP for Pretoria, and N for Ndebele and Ndzundza, are used in their normal form or are elaborated for their design effect. Telephone poles, aeroplanes and the symmetrical geometric patterns of razor blades are similarly employed. Stylised plant forms may express a hope for good harvests in a dry region. Circles are also often used. However the most frequently echoed theme is that of the house. Gables, gateways, steps, rooflines and light fittings, may all be recognized on women's aprons and on walls. These may reflect the conventional interests of women, or may point to aspirations of idealized homes.

Ndebele artistic manifestations whether in beadwork and wall painting, in choice of motif and of colour, or as both bold and subtle forms of communication, can always be seen as a dynamic response to prevailing circumstances.

If materials such as coloured plastic cloth, tape or beads, bright feathers, metal jewellery and commercial paint colours are used by Ndebele women to adorn themselves and their homes, in preference to glass beads and earth colours, these are yet other instances of the adoption of new resources. These materials provide a stimulus for the creative ingenuity of Ndebele women artists, who transform them according to the requirements of their particular situations, into expressive demonstrations of identity.



Esther also learned the skills to produce beadwork from her mother and grandmother and she has been practising this tradition for many years. During her eye-opening global travels, she encountered new symbols which produced endless possibilities of new colours and designs. From 2000, frequent requests for beaded panels led to Esther's inclusion of beadwork in most of her exhibitions. From 2001 she started signing her beadwork and handcrafts with her initials *EM* to distinguish them from other works on the market.



9. Interview with the artist

Andries Loots and Esther Mahlangu in conversation,
10 May 2003

AL How does it feel to be a successful artist like yourself?

EM I am very happy about my success as an artist but most of all to have had the opportunity to show my work and culture to the outside world.

AL Were you always interested in painting?

EM As a small girl growing up in a traditional surrounding, it was expected of me to help my mother and grandmother with chores around the house. It was seen as part of our training for adulthood as there were no formal schools for us to go to. I was helping them decorate the walls of our house from a very early age and I soon realized that I enjoyed painting very much. It makes me feel happy when I am painting.

AL Has the style of Ndebele Art changed a lot over the years?

EM Yes definitely, I grew up with specific designs that were executed in earthy tones and all the paints were self-made from natural pigments that we had to go out and find. The designs or patterns were mostly geometrical lines and shapes with a complete absence of figurative imagery or bright colours. Today the artists use bright colours with figurative images of things that they see around them or that they dream about. I sometimes combine the old and the new as it reminds me from where I came. As I was exposed to

the new modern colours and paints I adapted my motifs. I built up a new vocabulary of designs to speak to the people who appreciate my work.

AL What design do you like the most?

EM Many people will tell you that I have made the razor blade (*itjhefana*) my own; this is not completely correct. I use the image in my work a lot as I like the perfect geometrical shape, but I also appreciate it for what it is. Such a small instrument but it plays such a monumental role in our daily lives. It is used for cutting hair, we cut the thread with it when doing beadwork and it is used for shaving and as a cutting tool in and around the house. In my work however it mustn't be mistaken with the normal square design that everybody does. When I use the *itjhefana*, it will always have the rounded black inner corners of the design.

AL What is your favourite colour?

EM I was exposed to the new acrylic paints relatively late in my life but I love all the colours as you can see in my work. There is not a specific colour that I prefer above the others. I would not use a colour if I didn't like it.

AL Do you think that Ndebele painting forms part of contemporary art today?

EM I do believe that, yes. Ndebele painting is a unique art-form and that is one of the reasons why I felt so strongly that I had to show my work to the rest of the world as I felt we had to take our place on the 'art stage'.

AL How do you see Ndebele art today?

EM Ndebele art today does not only speak to our own people, we don't use it anymore just to make a statement of who we are and where we live, it serves as an aesthetic commodity to help and to empower women and children from the former disadvantaged communities.

AL Do you find living conditions in South Africa overall better after 1994 and why?

EM Not only the Ndebele people but also every person in South Africa feels happy now. The independent homeland of KwaNdebele was reincorporated into the whole of South Africa and therefore our economy is not separated from that of the rest of the country anymore. We are part of a rainbow nation and everybody can share in the country and the international attention that we deserve.

AL How do you see the future of Ndebele art?

EM It is very sad to say but when I grew up as a small girl there were many 'artists' who were always painting and decorating their houses, but as I grew older they became fewer and fewer. Nowadays you have to go to a museum or a cultural village to see what the different wall paintings looked like.

AL What do you see as your role in the community and in Ndebele culture?

EM Ndebele art and culture is very dear to me as it is who I am, it is part of me and I cannot get away from it. It was because of the demise of our art and culture that I decided to open an Ndebele school to teach the local girls the art of decorating and painting. The mothers all work in the cities and come home late at night, there is nobody and no time to teach the children and that might lead to a complete loss of our

culture. This is a more formalized method for transferring values and skills to the girls which would have been done during the initiation process and I hope that whatever I can do will help to prevent Ndebele art and culture from disappearing. I am positive that there will always be people who will continue doing this although it might be on a smaller scale.

AL The Ndimande family operates a cultural project, the Ndebele Foundation, in your area with the aid of large amounts of foreign funding. How do you see your relationship with this project?

EM Way back I was the one who started the Ndebele School for children. I can't even recall how long ago it was but I know that some of my first students now have children who paint here with me. Then after that the Ndimande family started the Ndebele project and they got a lot of sponsorship from overseas. It doesn't really affect me as I have never worked with them (the Ndimandes). As individual artists we each have our own style and following; I don't think this independence will change in the near future.

AL Many 'outsiders' such as galleries and institutions benefit from Ndebele culture and, by extension, from you as an artist. How do you relate to this fact?

EM I have personally experienced this matter during all of my artistic career. One gets two kinds of people. The first group exploits Ndebele culture and my art by reproducing images in books and other publications of which I never see any benefits. The second group is the good ones who help us by showing our culture and art to the rest of the world. If it were not for them, I would never have become known. If these people also get financial gain out of this it is good, as we all must eat.



10. Curriculum Vitae

Born 1935 on a farm near Middelburg, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa.

Studies

Esther learned the skill of mural painting from her mother and grandmother.

Between 1980 and 1991 she was a resident at the Botshabelo open air museum which presents Ndebele culture to visitors.

Exhibitions and projects

- 2003 First Solo Exhibition in South Africa, UCT Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2002 Passport to South Africa, Centro Culturale Trevi, Bolzano, Italy
- 2002 The Art of Colour, Knysna Fine Art Gallery, Knysna, South Africa
- 2001 Arte Africana Contemporanea, Galleria d'arte Spazia, Bologna, Italy
- 2001 Galleria Cavellini, Brescia, Italy
- 2001 South Africa Today, The Helsinki Fair Centre, Finland
- 2000 5th Biennale of Contemporary Art in Lyons, France
- 2000 Dialogue of cultures, EXPO 2000, Hannover, Germany
- 1999 <<REWIND>>FAST FORWARD.ZA, Van Reekum Museum, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands
- 1998 Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, France
- 1998 Africa Africa, Tobu Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan
- 1997 Exhibit Gallery, Philadelphia, USA
- 1997 York College, Los Angeles, California, USA
- 1997 Mural for National Museum of Woman in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA
- 1997 Ndebele Images Then and Now, National Arts Club, New York, USA
- 1997 Oog op Zuidelijke Afrika, Het Afrika Museum, Bergen Dal, the Netherlands
- 1997 Portal to America, Installation, Spoleto Festival, Charleston, South Carolina, USA
- 1997 African Immigrant Folklife Festival, Washington D.C., USA
- 1996 Parish Gallery – Georgetown, Washington D.C., USA
- 1996 Exhibition for the Congressional Black Caucus, Washington D.C., USA
- 1996 Armour J. Blackburn Centre, Howard University, Washington D.C., USA
- 1996 World Bank, Washington D.C., USA
- 1996 Mural – Ministry of Finance Building, Pretoria, South Africa
- 1996 Mural – Alexandra Township Stadium, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1995 BMW Art Cars and paintings Exhibition, Sydney, Australia

- 1995 Group show, Market Theatre, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1994 BMW Art Cars Collection, National Museum of Woman in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA
- 1994 Mural for National Museum of Woman in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA
- 1994 Mural – Ndebele College of Education, KwaNdebele, South Africa
- 1994 Mural - African Festival, Lisbon, Portugal
- 1994 Mural - European Inventive Business Travel Meetings Exhibition, Geneva, Switzerland
- 1994 Out of Africa, Musée e des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, France
- 1993 La Grande Vérité , Les Astres Africains, Nantes Fine Arts Museum, Nantes, France
- 1993 European Inventive Business Travel Meetings Exhibition, Lisboa, Portugal
- 1993 Geneva International Exhibition, Geneva, Switzerland
- 1992 Comme des Garçons, Tokyo, Japan; New York, USA and Paris, France
- 1992 Out of Africa, Gallery Saatchi, London, UK
- 1992 Fire Screen, Civic Theatre, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1992 BMW Art Cars, Documenta 9, Kassel, Germany
- 1992 Africa Hoy, Groninger Museum, Groningen, the Netherlands
- 1992 Africa Hoy, Cultural Centre of Contemporary Art, Mexico City, Mexico
- 1991 BMW Art Cars, Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, South Africa
- 1991 Painting Columns in Building, Tokyo, Japan
- 1991 Fashion Collection, Tokyo, Japan
- 1991 Ny Afrikansk Billedkunst, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 1991 Africa Hoy, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderna, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
- 1990 Caravan (trailer) Auto Show, Lavante, France
- 1990 Bordeaux Festival, Bordeaux, France
- 1990 Mural Painting, Rosebank Shopping Centre, South Africa
- 1990 Mural Painting, Johannesburg School, South Africa
- 1989 Centre de la Villette, Paris, France
- 1989 Fine Arts Museum, Angoulême, France
- 1989 Mural Painting, Musée e des Beaux Arts – Museum for African Art, Paris, France
- 1989 Les Magiciens de la Terre, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France

Collections

BOE Bank, Cape Town, South Africa
 Musée e des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, France
 Bothabelo Museum, South Africa
 BMW Art Cars Collection, Germany
 World Bank Collection, USA
 BHP Billiton Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa

Esther's work is also in numerous other important

Awards

- 2001 Arts and Culture Award, Art Promotion
- 2001 Pan African Broadcasting, Heritage and Achievement Award (Pabha)
- 2001 Radio Ndebele Award
- 1999 Mpumalanga Arts and Culture Award
- 1997 Nassau County Commendation, New York, USA,
- 1997 Incorporated Village of Hempstead Citation, Hempstead, New York, USA
- 1997 Ministry of Culture and Communication, Centre de la Villette, France
- 1996 Mpumalanga Sport Premiers Culture Award
- 1988 Radio Ndebele Award

Selected publications

- Courtney-Clarke, M. 1986. *Ndebele*. London: Thames & Hudson. Reprinted in 2002 (ISBN 0-500-28387-7).
- De Jager, FR and Loots, AG. 2003. *Esther Mahlangu 2003*. Cape Town: Vgallery (ISBN 0-620-30600-9).
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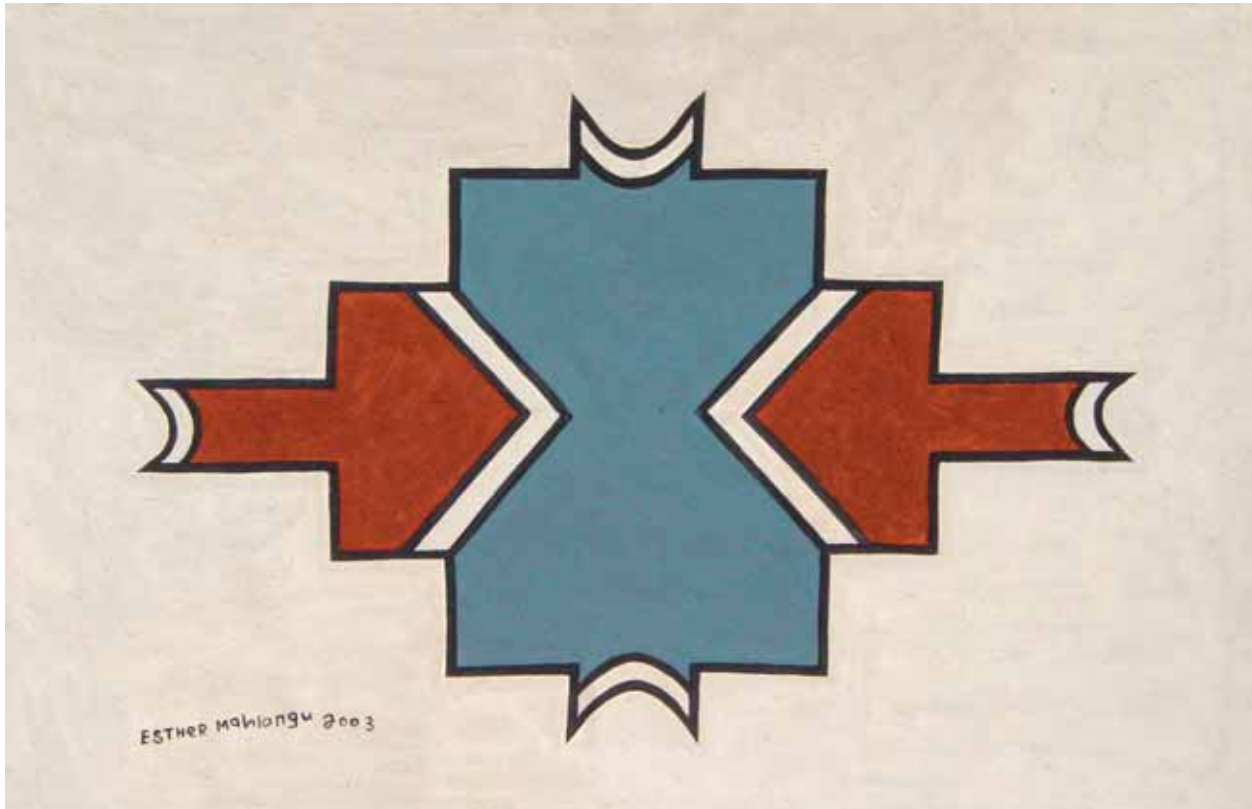
Some of the numerous awards Esther received during her career.



Abstract, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 140 cm

Umuzi, 2003
Natural pigment and cow dung on canvas
89 x 139 cm





Abstract, 2003
Natural pigment on canvas
88 x 139 cm

Pigozzi recollection, 2001
Acrylic on canvas
90 x 140 cm



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Acrylic on handmade clay pots, 2001
Height: 22 cm, diameter: 27 cm

12. Acknowledgements

Our appreciation goes to

Our Sponsors

Department of Arts and Culture
Peake Collection, Johannesburg
Vaughan and Linda Beckerling

Foreword

Kyle D Kauffman

Tribute to Esther Mahlangu

Peter Clarke

Editing

Antoinette Du Plessis

Photography

Zwelethu Mthethwa, front cover, p. 3, 9, 13, 23, 24, 30, 35, 39, 47, 48
Fred de Jager, back cover, p. 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 20, 21, 27, 28, 32, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45
Courtesy BMW AG Public Relations, Germany, p. 17, 18, 19

Information

BMW AG Public Relations, Germany
Iziko Museums of Cape Town, Lindsay Hooper

Collectors who lent work for the exhibition

Vaughan and Linda Beckerling
Louis and Charlotte Schachat
Aat Slot and Di Pickard
Willie and Evelyn Bester

To the artist, Esther Mahlangu, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.





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