

Esther Mahlangu was born in Mphumalanga Middlebur in 1936. She is from the Ndebele ethnic group. From age ten, through her mother and grandmother, she learned about painting architecture. This is true for the majority of Ndebele women who work on the buildings on their own lands. To continue this tradition, Mahlangu directed a women's school with in her tribe, Kwa-Ndebele. The women passed on to their daughters the art of painting the walls of their homes.

This type of painting was done to announce a wedding or some other important event that was tied to their tradition. It was also done to communicate some problem or even as a form of protest.

The men from this same tribe are involved with the Initiation Ceremony known as Wela. The women celebrate their own adult initiation by painting their homes. They begin this process of covering the walls with a specific preparation using cow dung and gesso. They then go on to paint the walls with geometric motifs. This is done both inside and outside. Particular attention is paid to the entrance of the house.



The Ndebele women, along with these signs, use a traditional vocabulary that they continuously modernize. The colors that they use though come from their earliest traditions. They are simple natural pigments made from cooked minerals and plants.



Naturally the Mahlangu style is strongly influenced by its ethnic roots. The style tends towards geometric abstraction and is based on the interrelationship of forms and colors. This creates a language that appears to be simple on the surface, but in reality is often much more complex.

Another source of inspiration for Esther Mahlangu comes from the decoration of traditional Ndebele clothes. These include large necklaces that frame women's heads which are often shaved. Then there are small, painted pearls of glass, decorated pieces of fabric and mats. These recount a matriarchal society, using the same geometric forms that decorate the houses. This

society, even today, is not particularly influenced by tourist consumerism or globalization.