

azaria mbatha

I was born in Zululand in 1941 and began my schooling at the age of seven. After leaving Ceza Secondary School in 1961, I worked as a clerk in Vryheid until I became ill and was sent to Ceza Mission Hospital. Mr. P. Gowenius, who had recently come out from Sweden, was teaching art and crafts as part of the therapy at the hospital. I used to sit on the verandah and watch him coaching patients. One day, as he was demonstrating a special technique, I went nearer to get a closer view. Before I was aware of what was happening Mr. Gowenius handed me something to work on. This, without my realizing it, was the beginning of my art career.



When Mr. Gowenius was asked by the Lutheran Church to start an art school among African people, I decided to accompany him so that I could become a full-time student. This was in 1961 and the school was at Umpumulo. Many theological students attended this school and their arguments on theological questions deepened my artistic vision by giving me new ideas and a deeper insight. In 1963 the art school moved to Rorke's Drift, where it has remained to this day.

At an exhibition, sponsored by the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Natal Society of Arts, in 1965, I won a prize for R100 for one of my works which was later bought by the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

The next exciting thing to happen to me was that I was awarded a bursary to Konst Fack Art School in Stockholm, Sweden. My wife accompanied me in order to study textiles. We worked very hard; I designed the tapestries which she wove. We completed many orders. One of our largest tapestries went to the Danderyds Church which is in one of Stockholm's suburbs. I also made many murals and enamel paintings and held a number of one-man exhibitions.

On our return to South Africa I was told by the Institute of Race Relations that New York's Museum of Modern Art had chosen two of my works. These were linocuts and the Museum of Modern Art's committee described them as "excellent, both for their strength and technical skill". The Chairman of the Committee's further comments were that they were especially pleased to add these prints to their collection as they were the very first works of their kind, by an African artist, to be accepted.



I held a one-man show in Cape Town last July and I have also completed many commissions. Some of my paintings can be seen in the Rorke's Drift dining-room, Vryheid's Lutheran Church, the Esiqhomaneni Church near Eshowe and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity at Vosloosrus township, south of Alberton.

I do not only do murals and linocuts but also silk-screen and copper etching. I also teach art at Rorke's Drift. I love helping my people and my aim is to return to Europe to further my studies so that, when I come back, I can give my people even further help in their art studies.

I am holding a one-man exhibition at Gallery 101, Johannesburg, this month. My exhibition opens on October 13 and closes on October 24.