

South African Contemporary Art
Ndebele Paintings - The Alain Guisson Legacy



PATRICK & ONDINE
MESTDAGH

Patrick & Ondine Mestdagh Gallery
Brussels



Alain Guisson and his son Alexandre in Zulu land, 1998.

If you've ever met a man whose knowledge seems infinite but humble in any occasion and a man who is eager to learn more every day, then you've probably met my father. Alain Guisson was a man driven by beauty in life. He knew how to enjoy anything he considered as art, from a strangely shaped rock to a perfectly carved wooden masterpiece.

He was always willing to explain what he knew and share his knowledge with others. He helped me understand the importance of art in society as well as societal evolution through art and its overall presence.

This helped me to choose my calling with confidence later on in life.

I have numerous recollections of our adventures together. When I was eight he took me on one of his famous trips through the Zulu lands. For two months, we roamed from village to village to find «the» one piece. After this quest, he finally found the piece he was looking for (the one which would satisfy his need for adventure) plus 6 dozen others. This was our first big trip together, others followed.

These are memories that have bound us and that I will never forget. Neither will I forget the joy, the danger, the beauty of life and all the lessons taught.

He passed on to me his love for humanity and art, and for that, I will always be thankful.

Thank you, Dad.

Alexandre Guisson

Monumentality On Paper

Ndebele - The Art of an African Tribe, a book whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Written by Margaret Courtney-Clarke and published in 1986 by Rizzoli International Publications, it came to our attention in Belgium in 1991 via the French edition issued by Les Éditions Arthaud, crashing in on the world of lovers and collectors of African Art (of whom there are quite a few in the Low Countries) like a bolt from the blue. As it happened, the intervening period had seen the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* taking place in Paris (in 1989, to be exact) – a legendary event in that, for the very first time, contemporary art from all around the world was on show, with non-Western artists being given equal status with Western and being raised out of anonymity. Sweeping such contrasting, Western concept pairings as ‘plastic/applied’, ‘artistic/artisanal’, expressive/decorative’ aside, moreover, the exhibition rapidly gained reference status, a great impression being made by the Ndebele artist Esther Mahlangu from South Africa. Book and exhibition thus served to introduce to a wider public the colourful and constructed art of the self-aware people of KwaNdebele, the homeland of the Ndebele in Transvaal, South Africa.

Franzina Ndimande painting in Maastricht, 1991.



Courtney-Clarke’s book, with its brilliant text and photographs, was lent out by the Dutch artist Hans van Drumpt to his countryman, architect and town-planner Jo Coenen who had been commissioned by the University of Limburg (now the University of Maastricht) to design a new lecture hall. This was completed in 1991 and Coenen was able to persuade his client to have the interior embellished with work by Franzina Ndimande, one of the artists dealt with in the book. Arrangements were completed by the summer of 1991, whereupon Franzina came over, accompanied by her daughter Angelina and husband Daniel. The two women began work on the murals in their customary fashion: painting directly on the walls without a preparatory design; help in filling in the coloured spaces was given by Daniel. The result was a huge success, albeit that it was not a European première, as Franzina had shortly before painted a mural in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.



Franzina painting a black-edged composition.

It would have been at the end of the 1980s that Alain Guisson first travelled to South Africa, eager to bring less well-known art forms to the attention of his circle of interested collectors. He returned often, visiting – as a matter of preference – Zulu and Ndebele cultural areas, and always with a friend as travelling companion. From the Zulus, he brought back innumerable terracotta maize-beer pots, wooden meat platters and clubs, leather shields, red-coloured hats and bead-work; among the Ndebele, he collected chiefly the refined bead-work as liberally applied to clothing, jewellery and dolls. Their universe corresponded to his personal taste and his great admiration for ‘applied’ art in simple terms. It attracted him intellectually that our Western concepts of pigeon-holing art were thrown into confusion. Furthermore, he was buoyed by the fact that these art traditions were upheld by the womenfolk and passed on from mother to daughter. The fact that women did not go out to work during the period of Apartheid resulted in their becoming the guardians of their culture - unlike their men, who commuted to ‘white’ areas to work - and allowed them to throw up a dam against the threatening loss of their culture.

Among the Ndebele, this found masterful expression in the painting of the architectural structure of their houses. On the occasion of a child’s initiation, another ceremony or commemoration, the women paint their dwellings in the recognized style: black-edged compositions in bright colours, abstract, with sometimes a familiar motif, generally symmetric in form, but asymmetric in the application of colour. Alain was crazy about it and also pointed out the transitory nature of the decoration and the fact that it was continually over-painted.



Alain Guisson in front of a completed wall painting of the Ndimande artists.

One day at the beginning of the 1990s, he asked me what I thought about the idea of asking Franzina and Angelina Ndimande to transpose their painting to paper. I suspect now that he got the idea of transposition from Esther Mahlangu, who caused a stir in 1991 by painting a car, her first *BMW Art Car*. If a Ndebele artist could so confidently decorate a car with typical Ndebele motifs, what would prevent her from making a painting on paper? I gave the idea my wholehearted support and off he went, armed with sheets of fine paper and tubes of acrylic paint. But would the smaller scale and somewhat artificial interpretation hold up in artistic terms? Fortunately it did. The works on paper exude the same artistic integrity and monumentality as the architectural painting. One recognizes the style of the individual artists, and the link with the architecture is abundantly clear.



Accompanied by her daughter Angelina, Franzina Ndimande in front of four of her own works in Galerie Robert & Partners, Oostende, 22 July 1994.

Franzina painting, her husband in the back ground.

There is such a thing as the 'Limburg feeling': in other words, the fellow feeling among the people of Belgian Limburg, Dutch Limburg and the adjoining area of Germany. It may well have been this that resulted in Alain Guisson from Hasselt, Hans van Drumpt from Maastricht and Jo Coenen from Heerlen getting on well together. Whatever the case, their shared fascination for the Ndebele bore fruit and led in 1994 to two further projects with Franzina and Angelina: in Het Kruithuis – the City Museum of Contemporary Art in 's-Hertogenbosch (now the Design Museum Den Bosch) – mother and daughter turned once again to painting murals; and within the scope of an initiative launched by the Europees Ceramisch Werkcentrum, they also decorated vases made by the ceramist Norman Trapman. In addition, their works on paper were displayed in Oostende, the result of Alain's involvement. As a friend of his, I had arranged for an introduction to other friends of mine, Bob van Aalderen and Lou de Vel who run the Galerie Robert & Partners and who agreed to exhibit the works there. The superlative hanging, the presence of the artists and the fine weather contributed to the exhibition opening on 22 July 1994 being a veritable feast. Five of Franzina's works and one of Angelina's went to private collections; none of the remainder have been exhibited publicly since. On their verso, most of the works bear Alain's oval stamp, his signature and the date 2/93, following my insistence that his pioneering role be made explicit and that the works be anchored on the time line of the European chapter in the story of the two artists.

Bart Suys



From left to right - Lou de Vel, Bob van Aalderen, Franzina Ndimande, Hans van Drumpt, Angelina Ndimande, Alain Guisson and Bart Suys in front of Galerie Robert & Partners, Oostende, 22 July 1994.

BMW Art Cars and Esther Mahlangu

The BMW Art Car Project was introduced by the French racecar driver Hervé Poulain, who invited an artist to create a canvas on an automobile. Poulain commissioned American artist Alexander Calder to paint the first *BMW Art Car* in 1975. Since Calder's work of art, many other renowned artists throughout the world have created *BMW Art Cars*.

The 12th *BMW Art Car* was the first to have been signed by a woman artist. South African artist Esther Mahlangu coated the bodywork of the car with the bright colors and clearly distinguishable ornamental shapes typical of her ethnic tribal Ndebele art. The BMW 525i painted by Mahlangu is a transfer of tribal tradition to modern technology.

Born in the Middleburg district in the Transvaal province of South Africa in 1935, Mahlangu learned traditional Ndebele painting from her mother. The striking and instantly recognizable Ndebele mural painting of huts, undertaken only by the women of the tribe, is well known in the country of her birth.

Mahlangu is recognized as a leading exponent of this art form in South Africa and she is now permanently attached to the Botshabelo Outdoor Museum near her birthplace. She has exhibited her work throughout South Africa and gained international recognition when she was asked to exhibit in Paris.

Esther Mahlangu's *BMW Art Car* made its first appearance at three exhibitions in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, South Africa in late 1991. Thereafter, it traveled to Germany and then exhibited elsewhere around the world together with the rest of the collection.

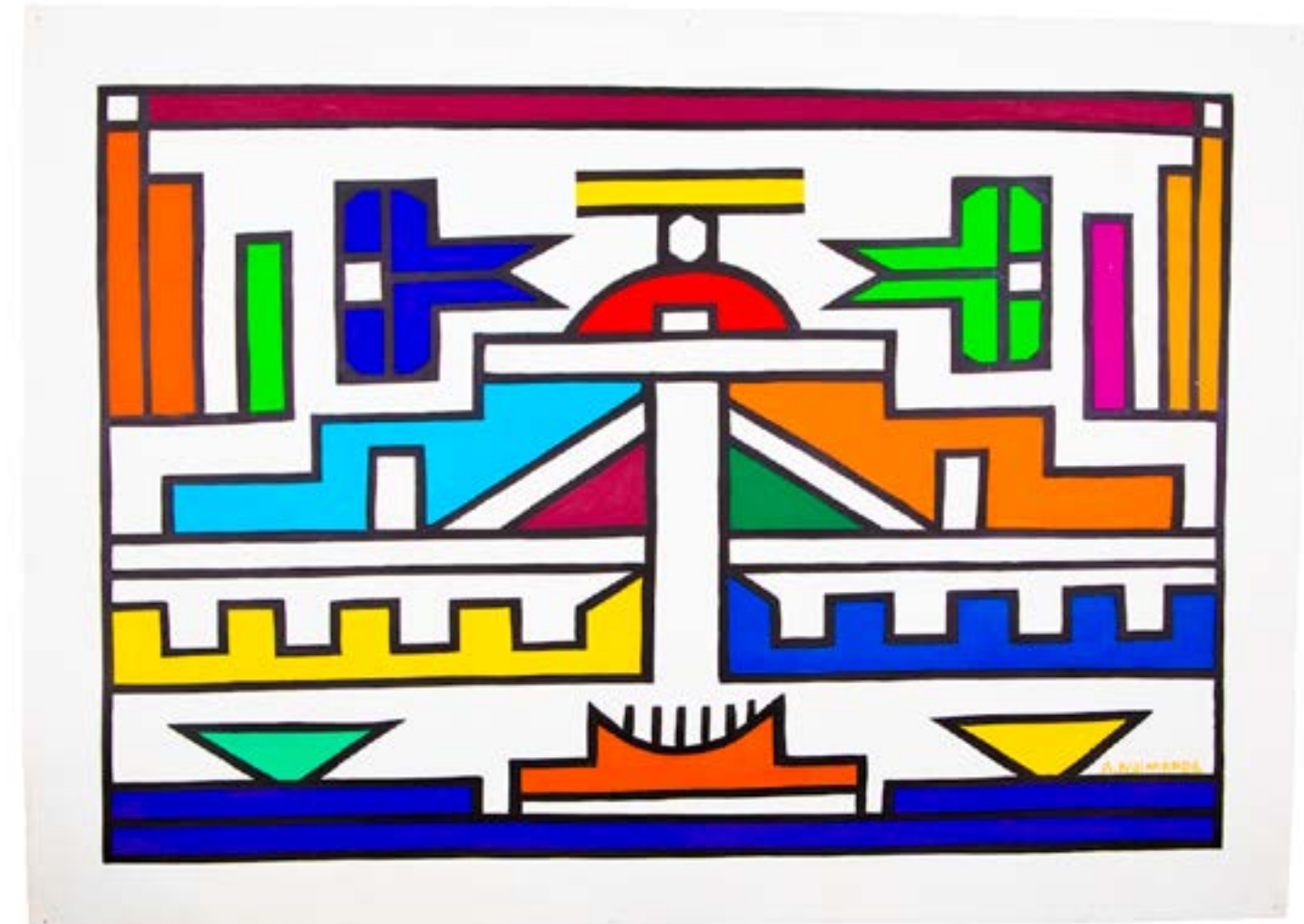


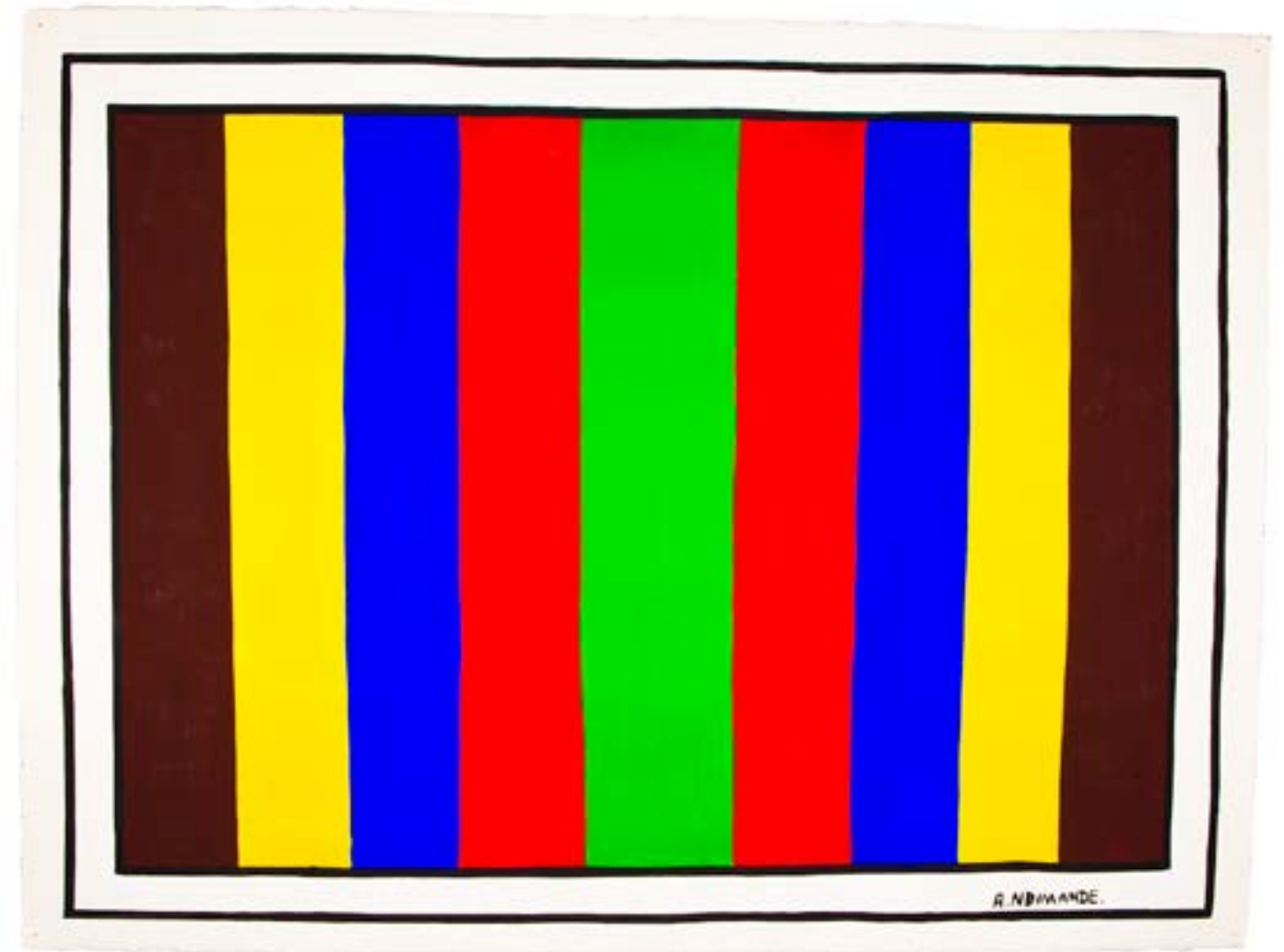
The first *BMW Art Car* 1975.

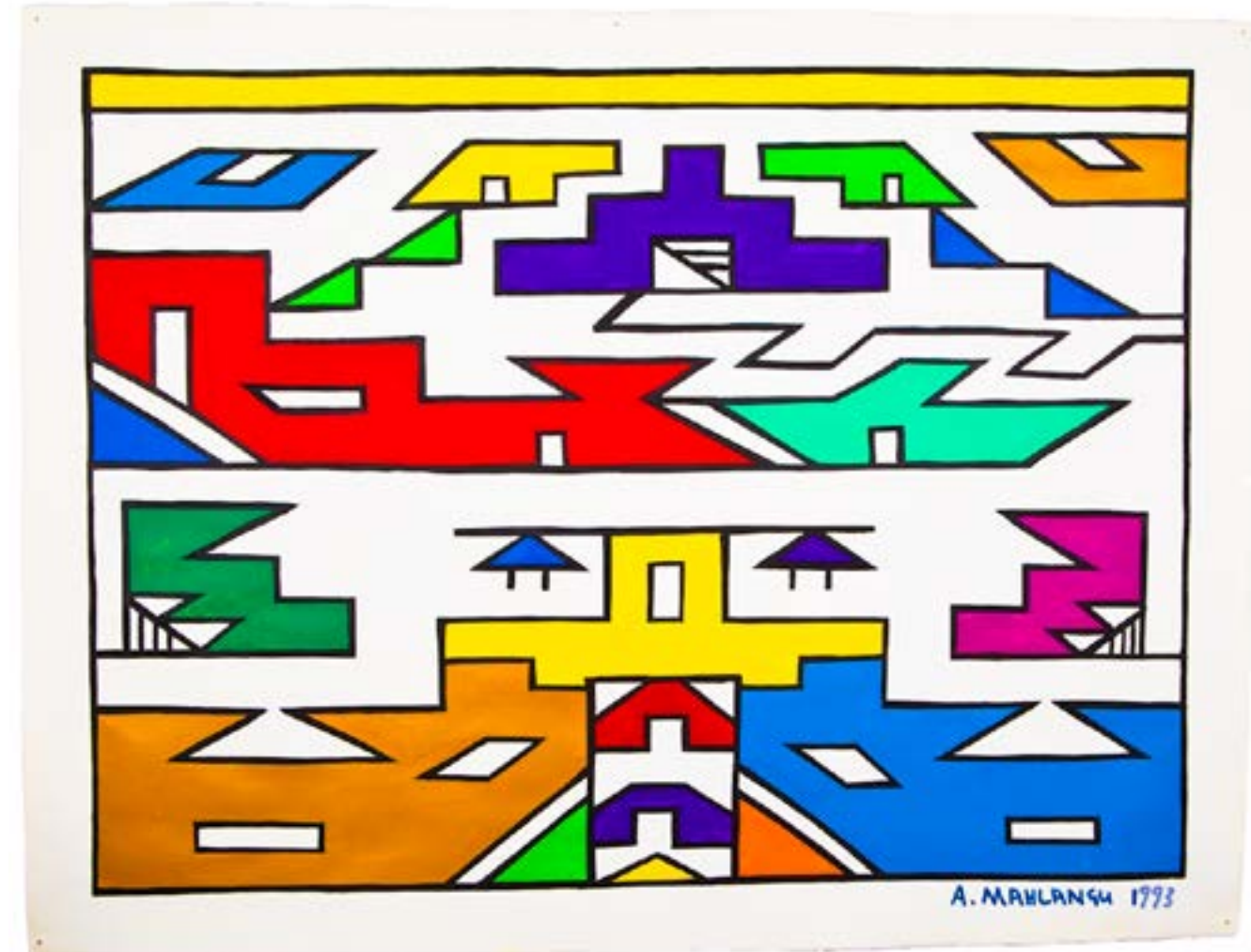


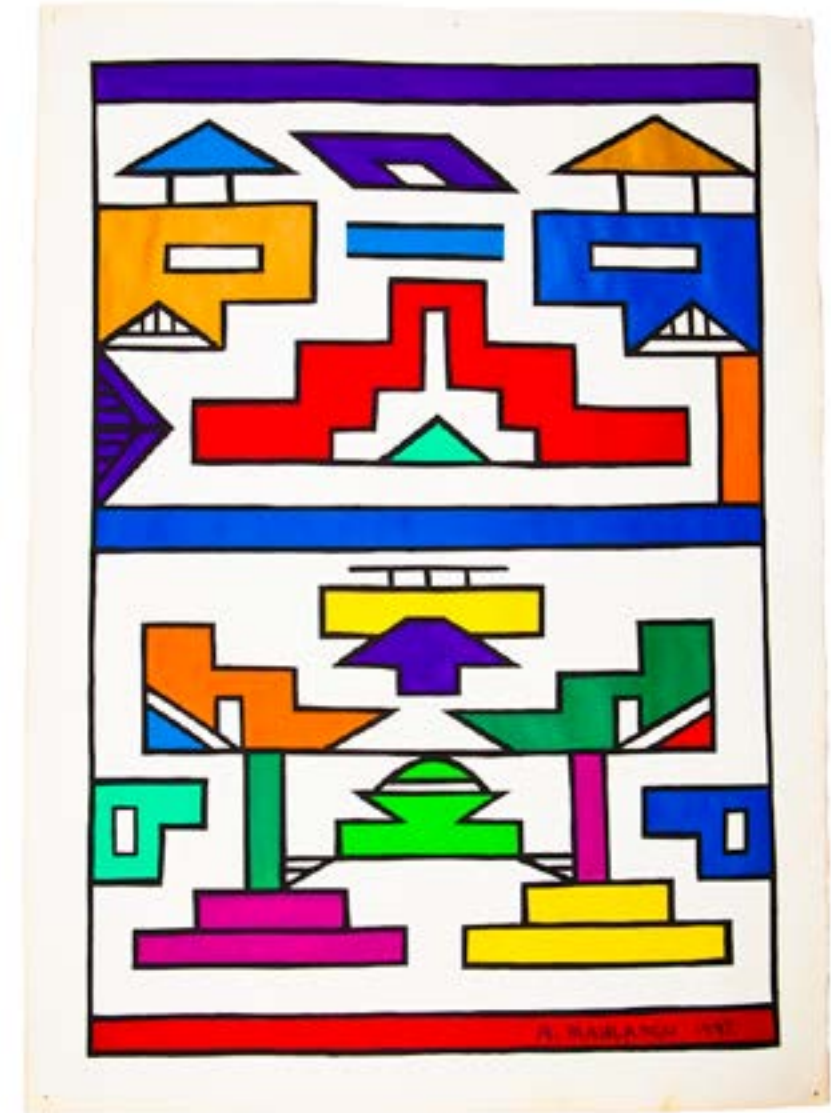
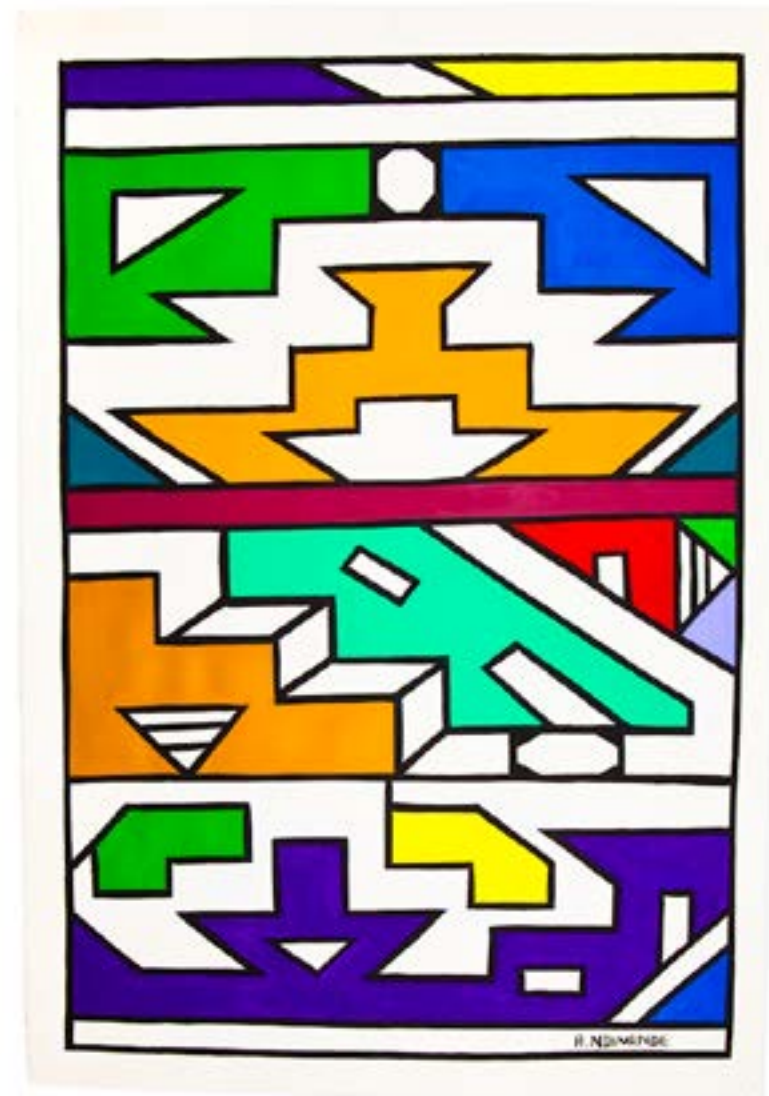
Esther Mahlangu painting.

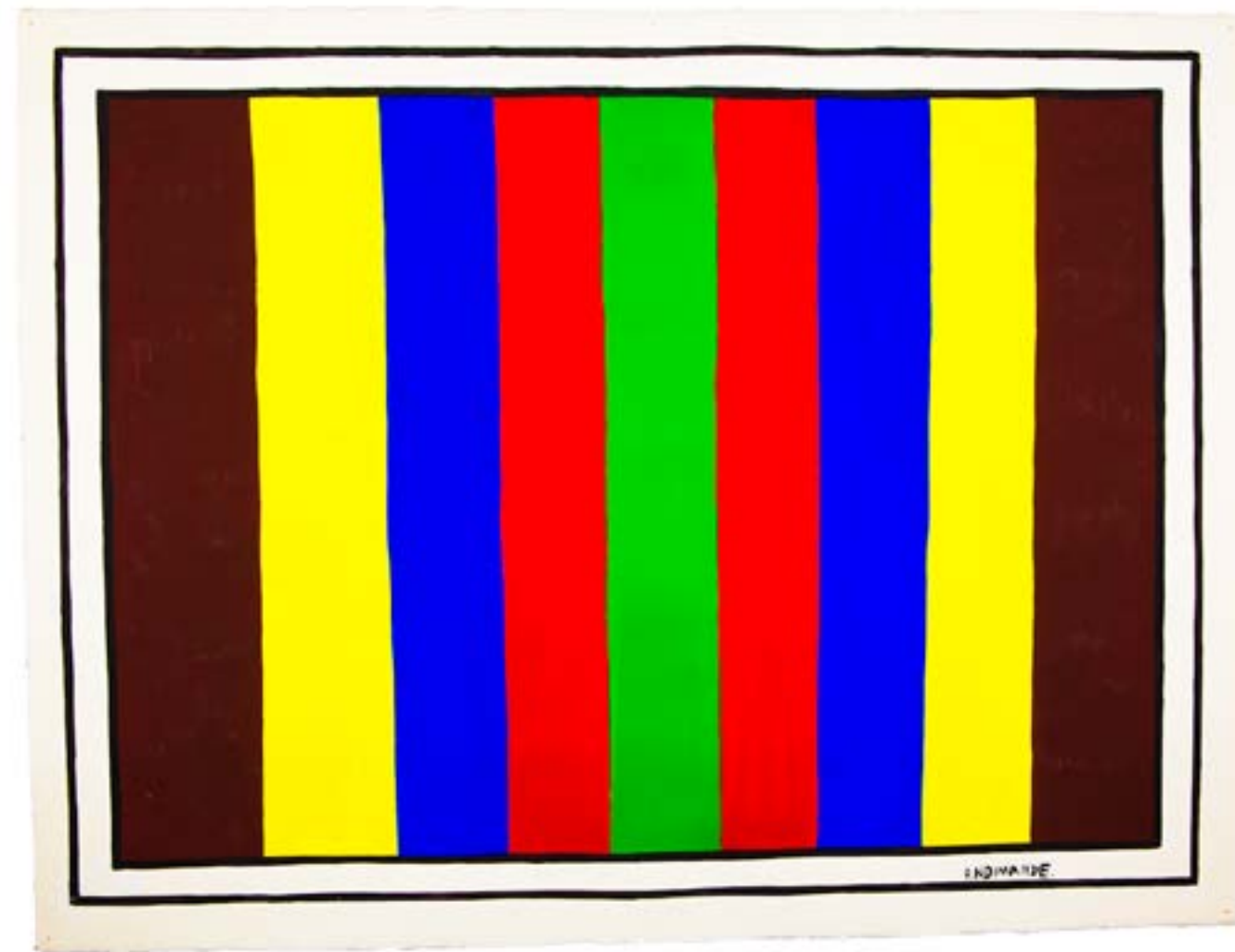




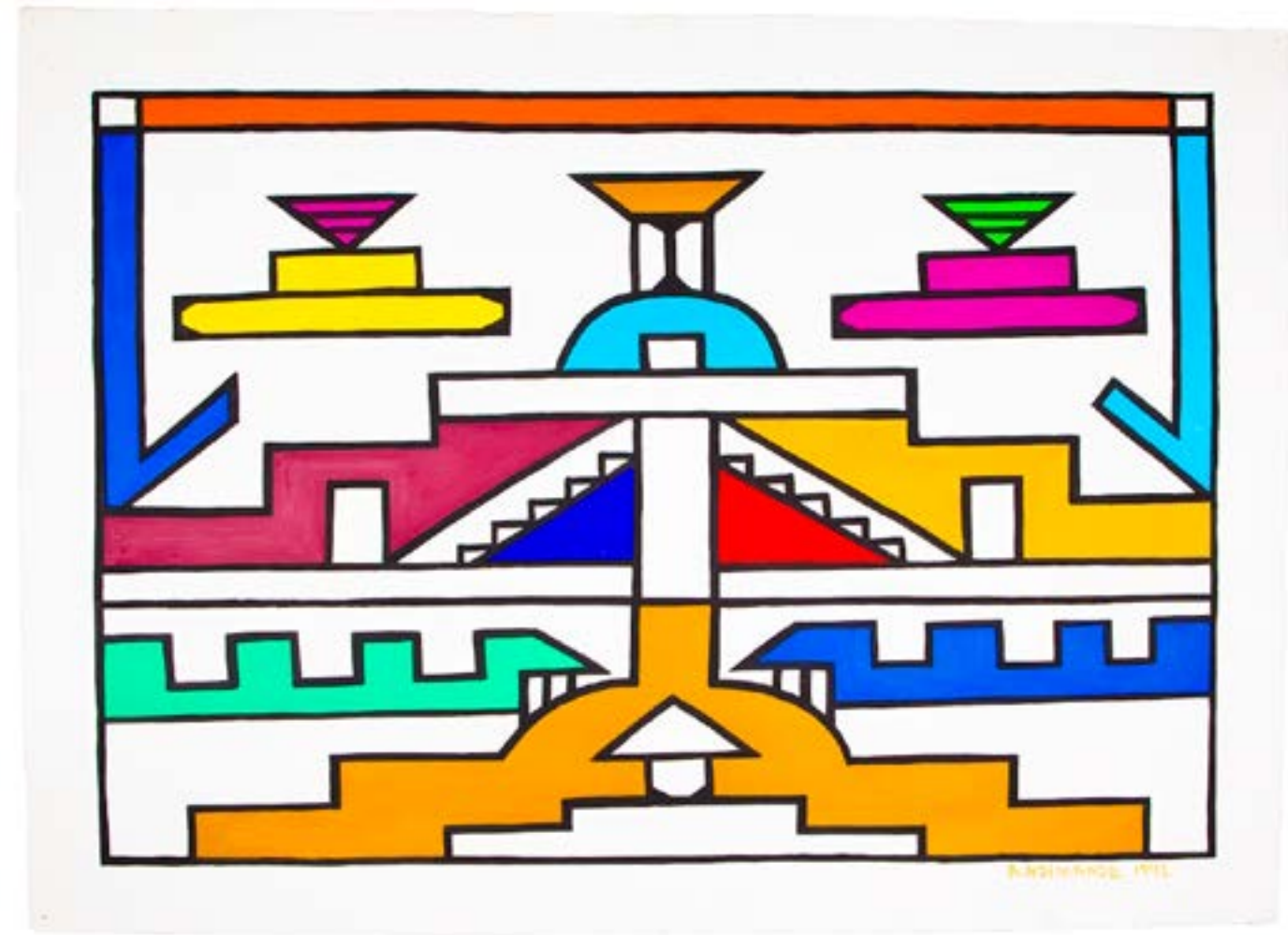


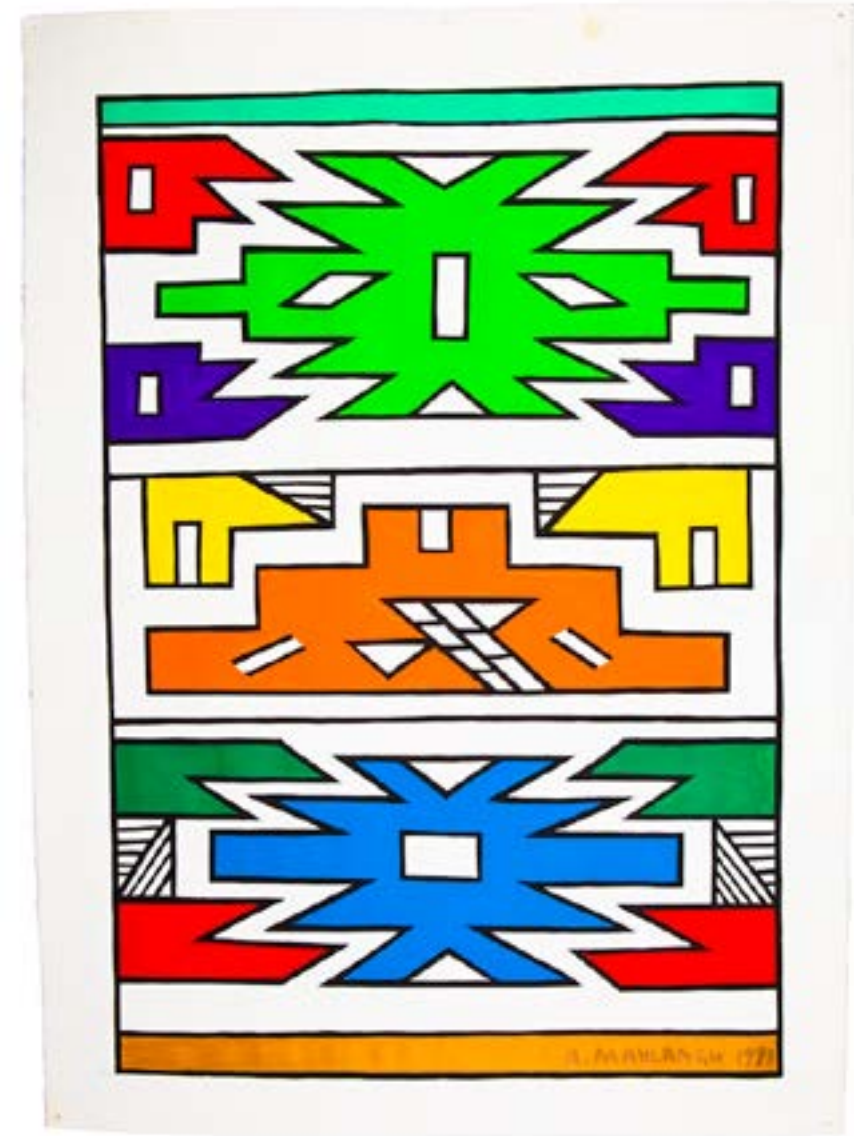






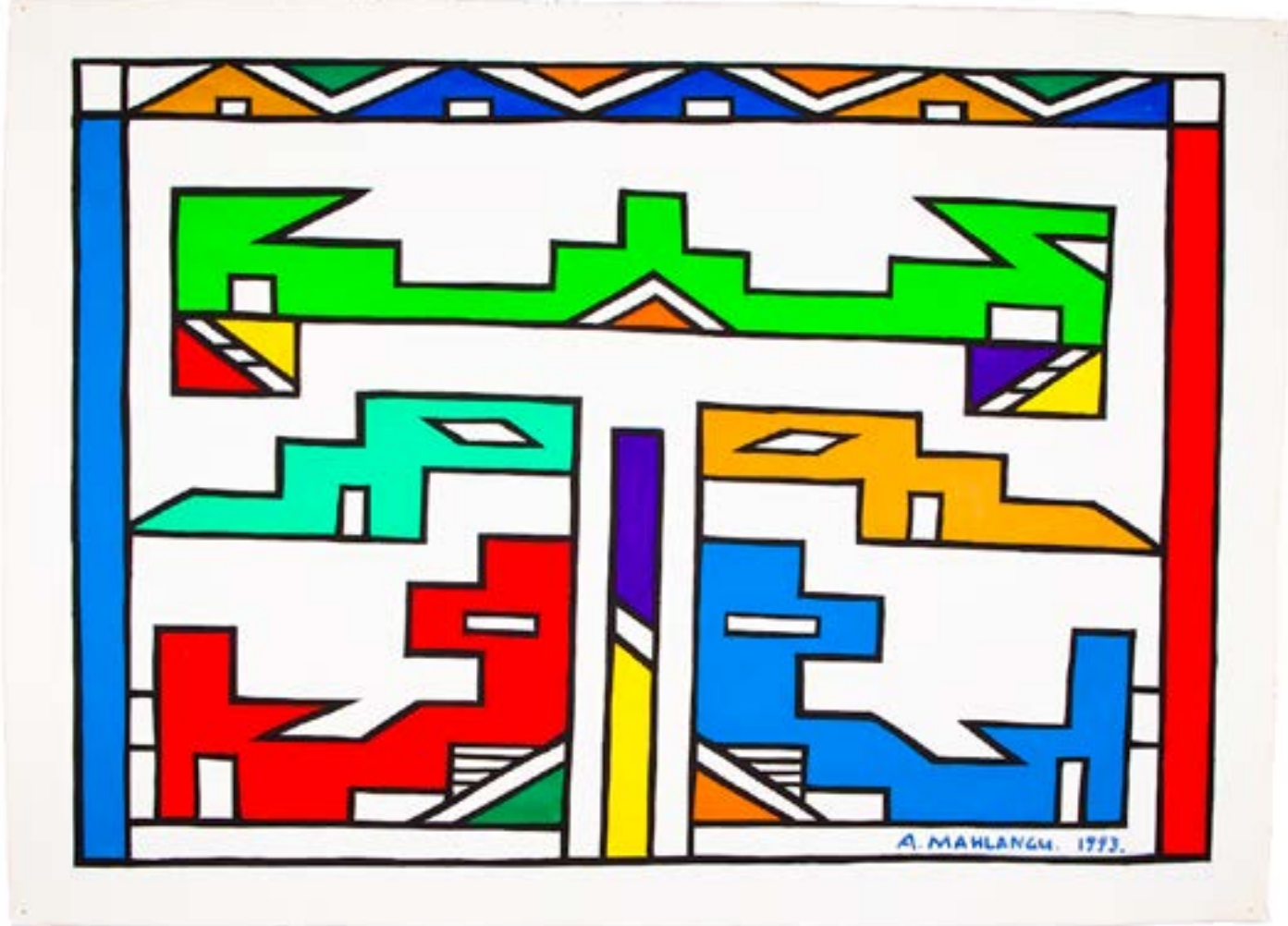
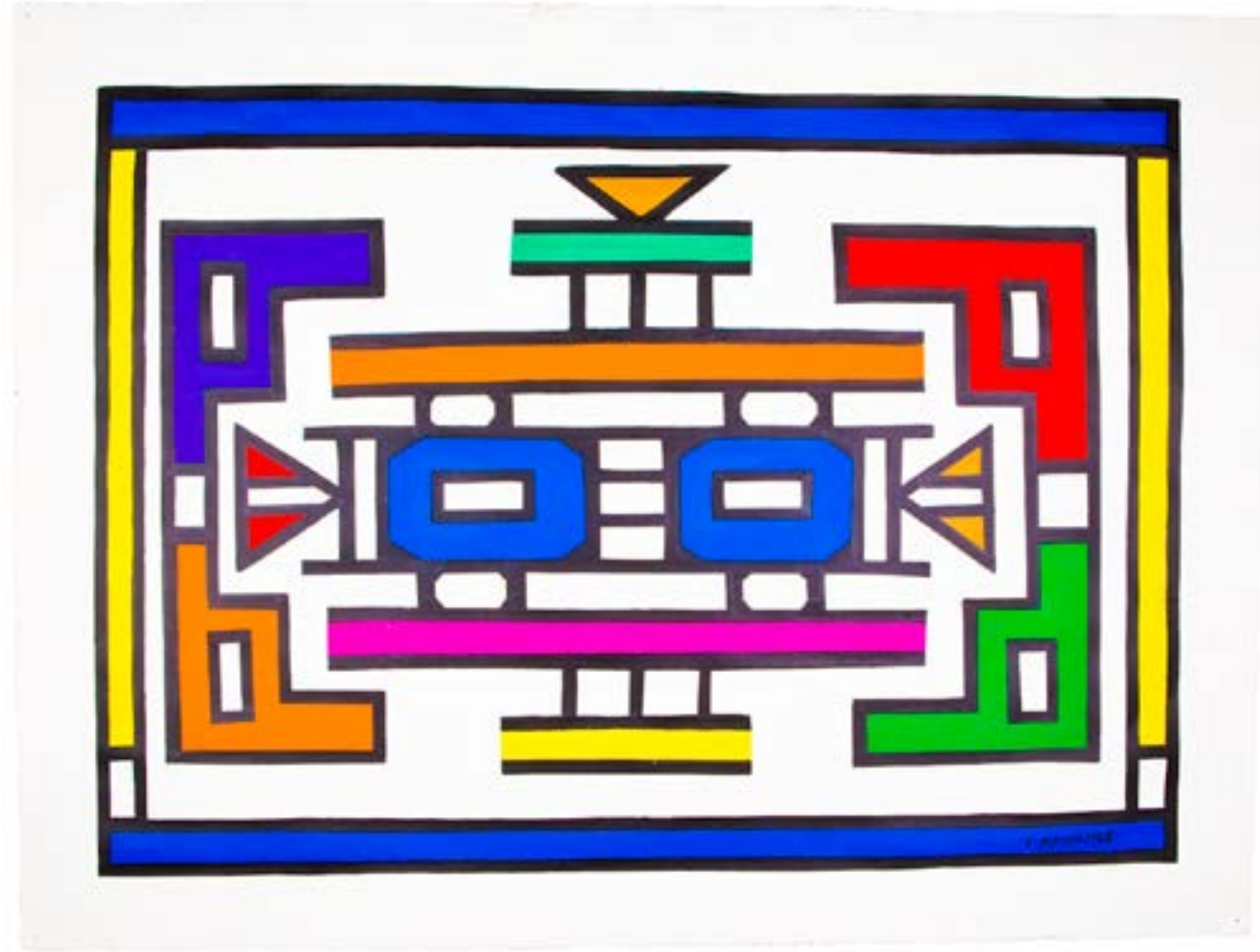


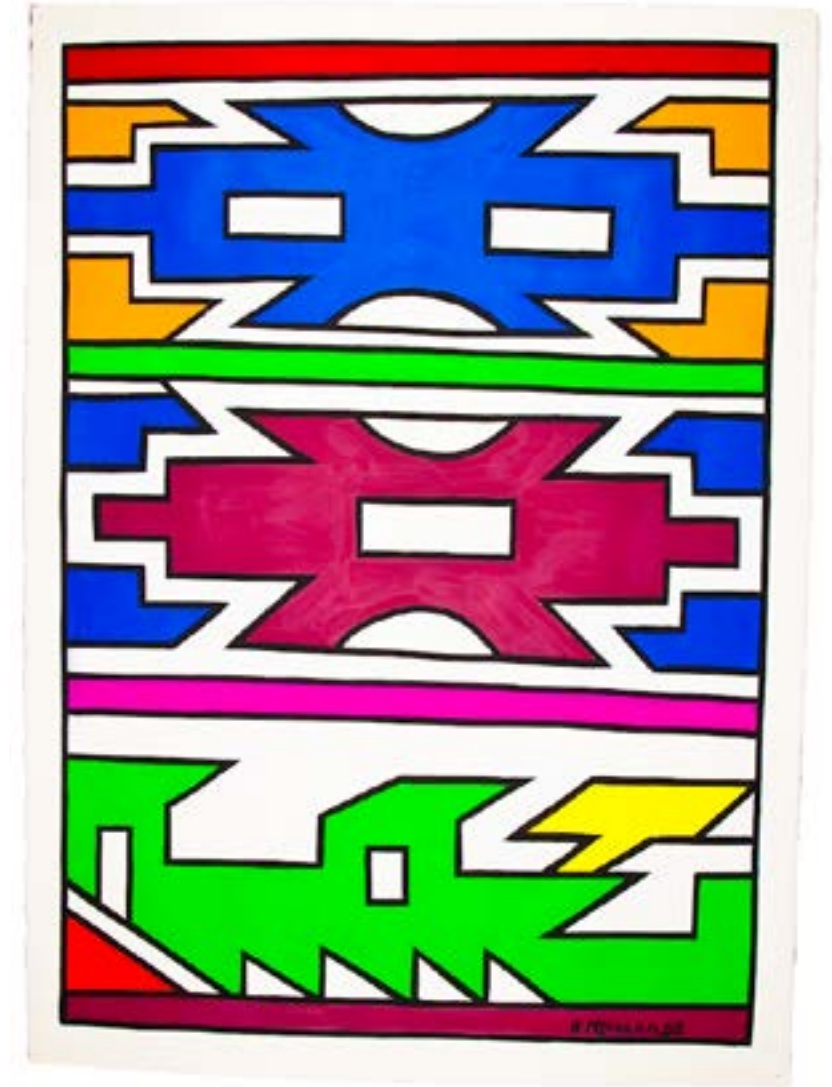
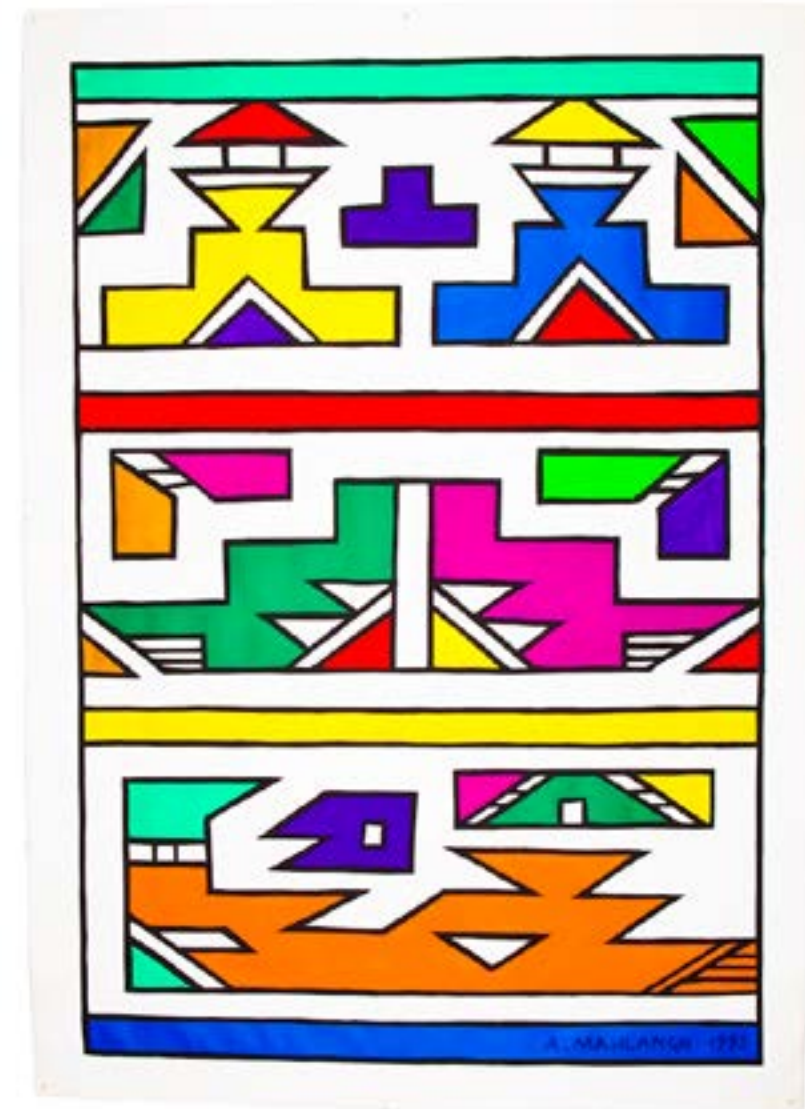


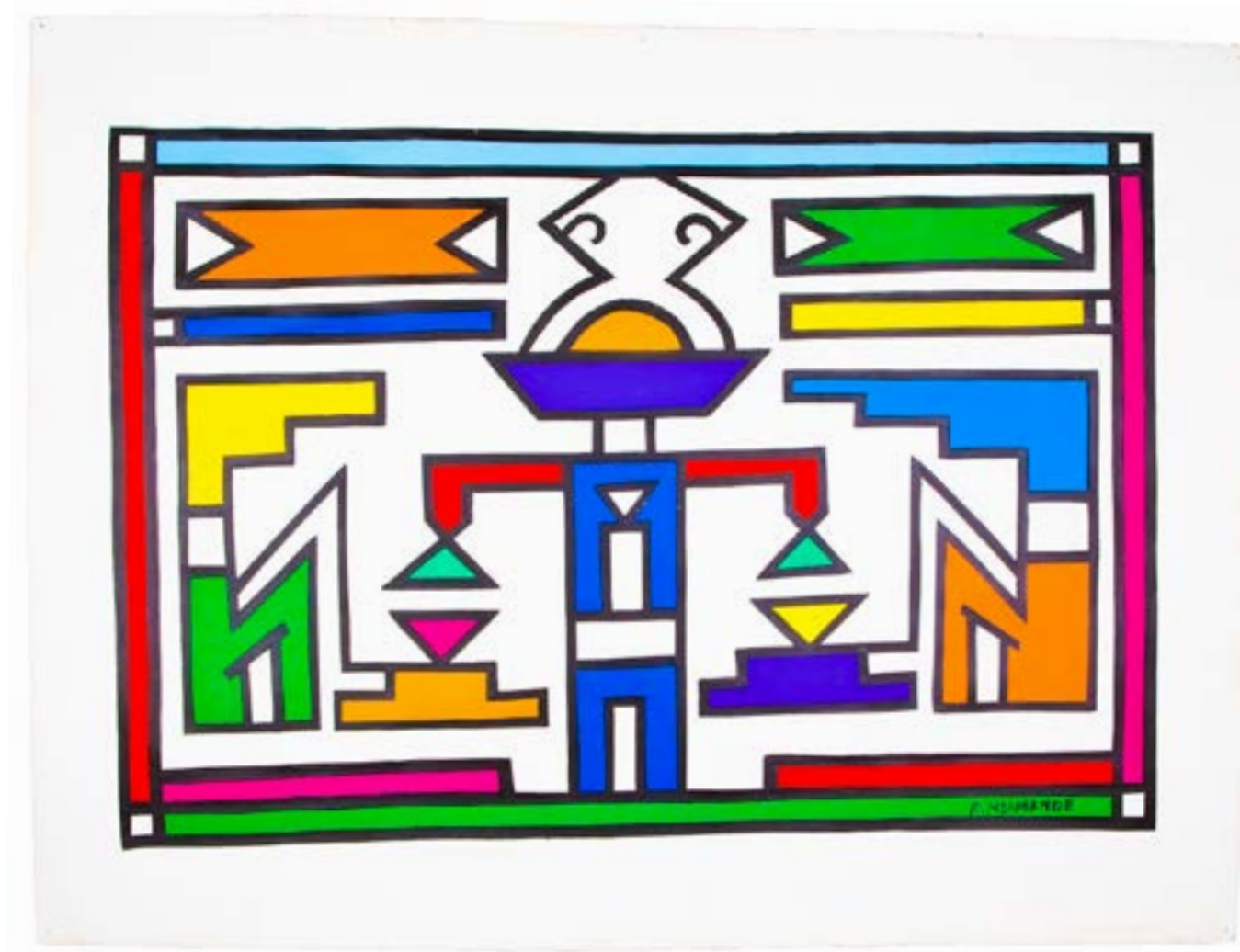
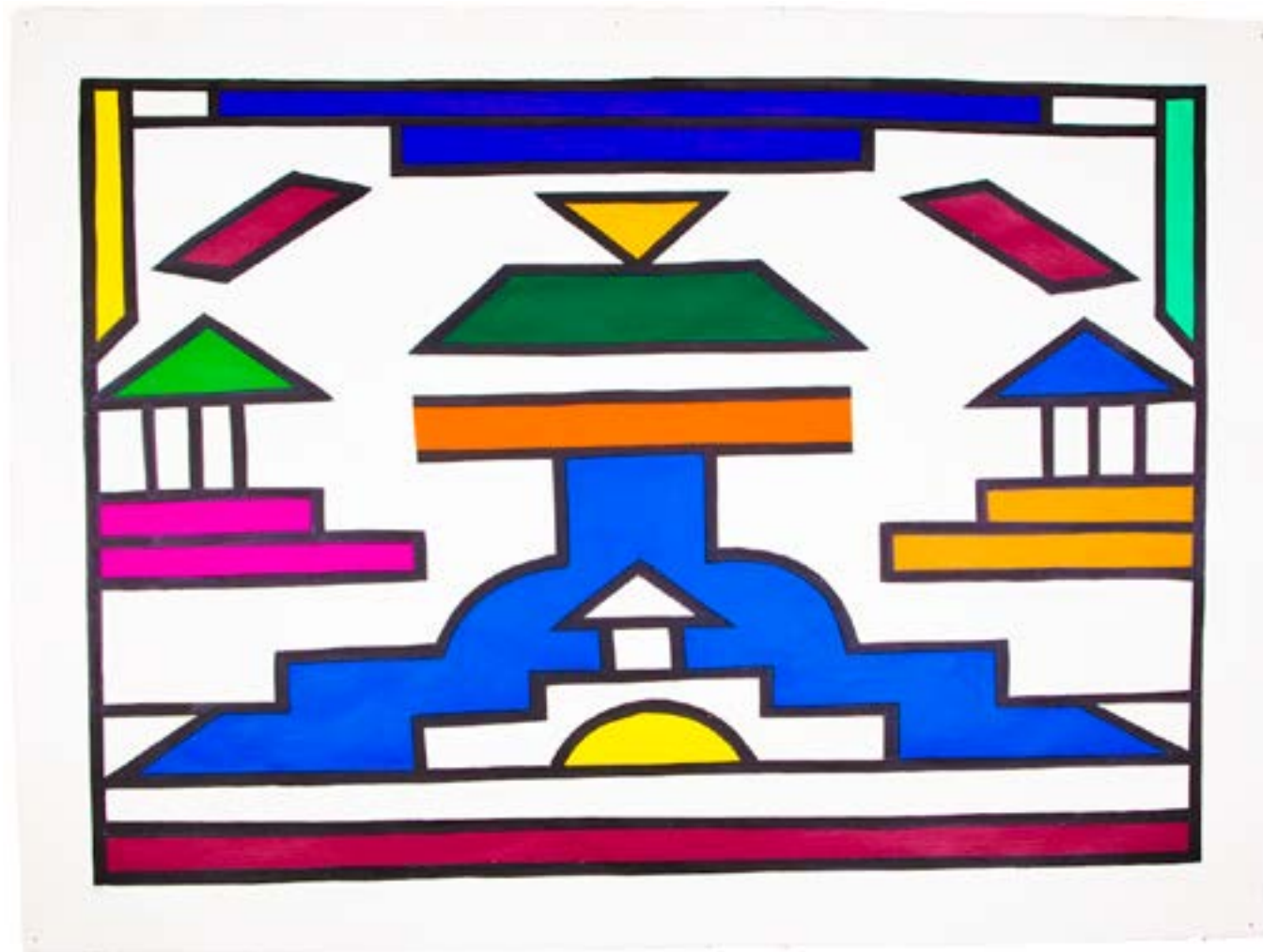


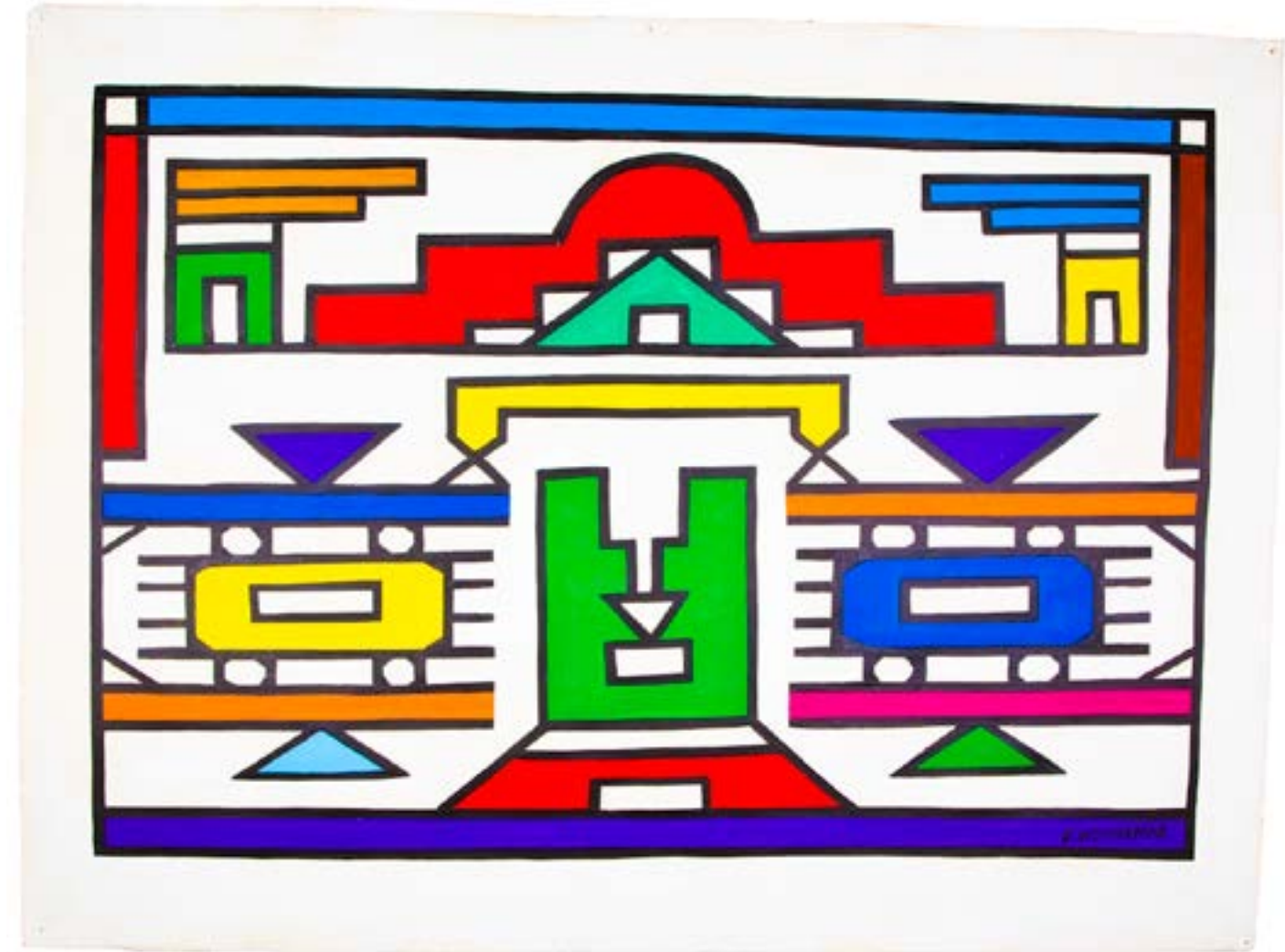
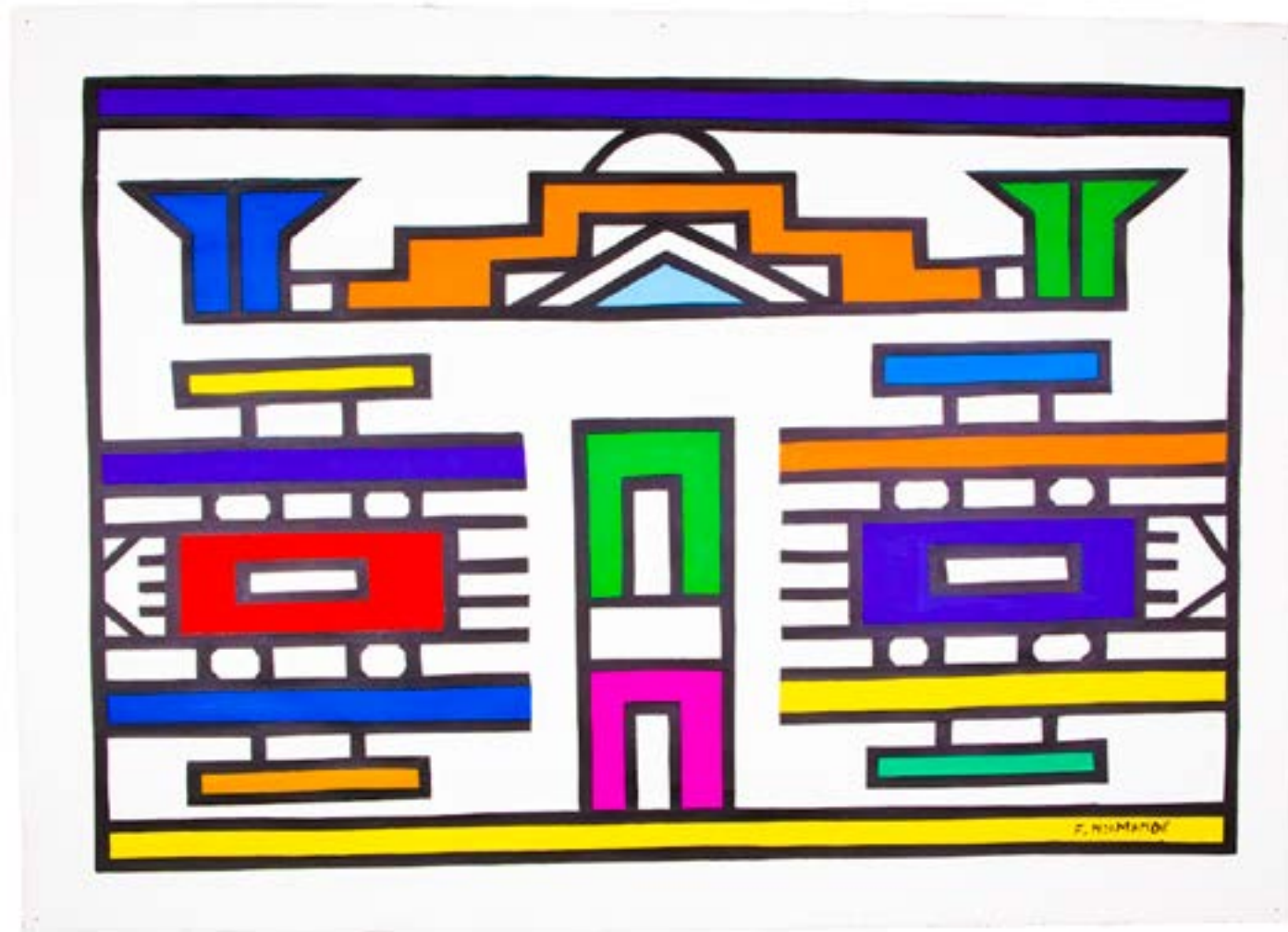




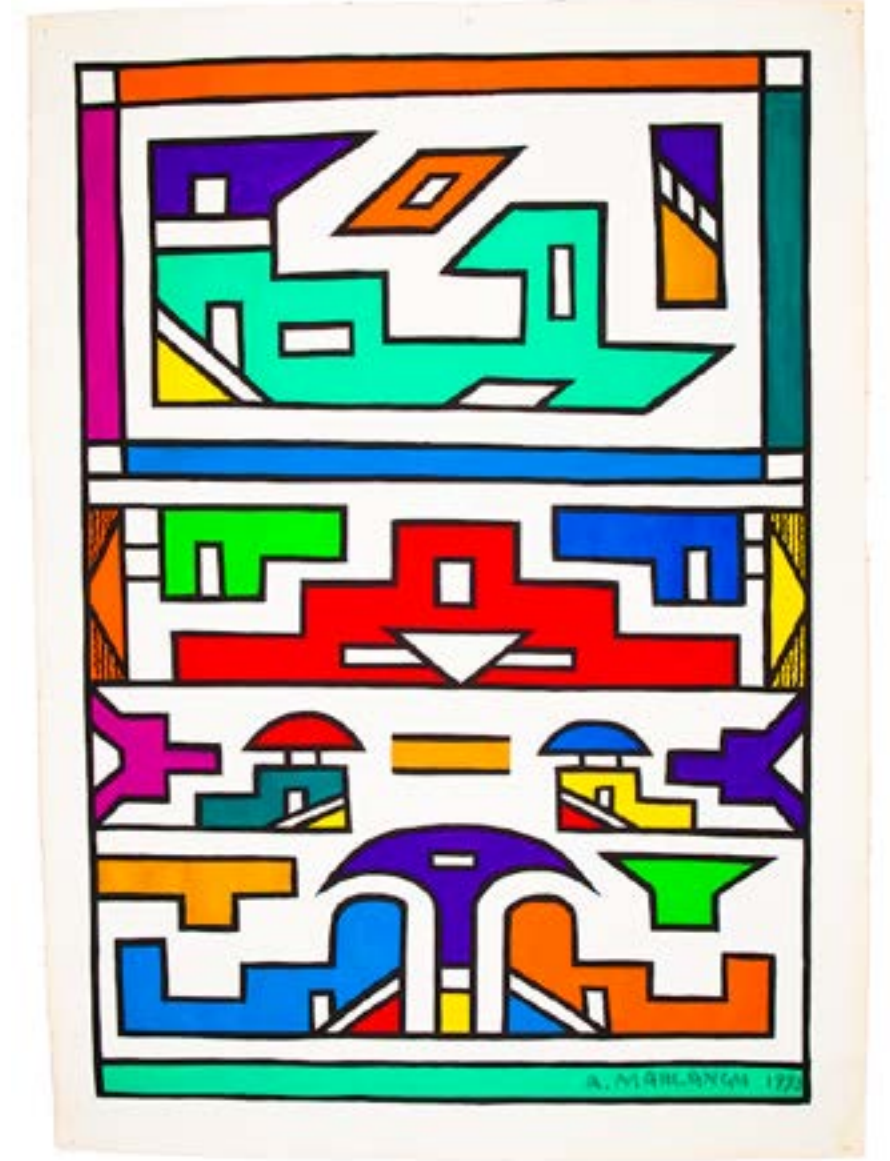
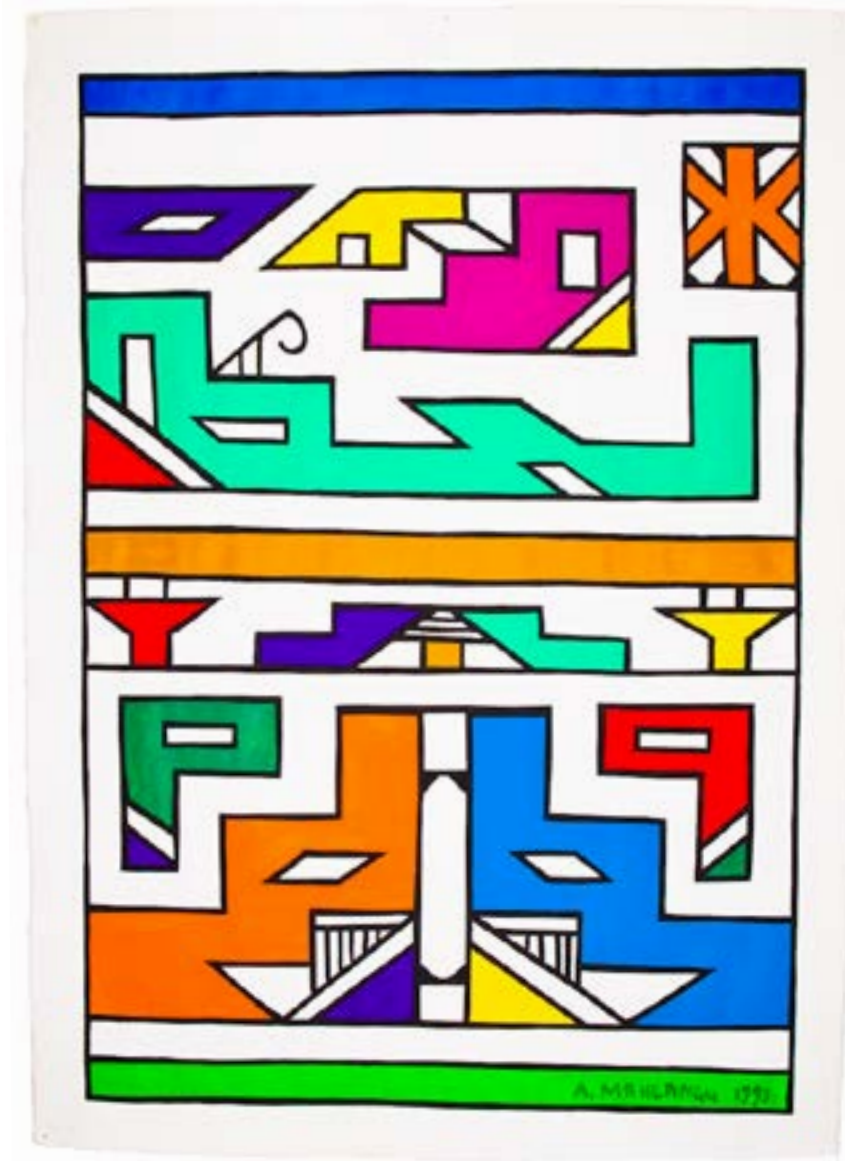














Franzina Ndimande

Franzina Ndimande was born in South Africa in 1940.

She's a South African Contemporary artist.

Esther and Franzina are the driving force that brought international recognition over this form of art (ethnic identity), active for more than 4 decades, they shaped the Ndebele painting style like we know him today. She has had a great career, she was the founder of several local and international projects and exhibited in numerous countries like Britain, Germany, USA, Belgium, the Netherlands...

Angelina Ndimande, probably the same person signing with A. Mahlangu

Angelina Ndimande is the daughter of the legendary Franzina Ndimande.

From childhood she was initiated into painting and other creative activities.

As her mother was aging she became the main creative force and developed the IsiRayton-Rayton style of Ndebele painting.

She has participated to many international exhibitions and biennials, still active today, she now resides in Mozambique.

All works were made in 1993 with acrylic paint on paper, dimensions 76 x 56 cm, vertical or horizontal.

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| 1. p12, A. Mahlangu | 17. p31, A. Mahlangu |
| 2. p13, F. Ndimande | 18. p32, A. Mahlangu |
| 3. p14, A. Ndimande | 19. p33, F. Ndimande |
| 4. p15, A. Ndimande | 20. p34, F. Ndimande |
| 5. p17, A. Ndimande | 21. p35, A. Mahlangu |
| 6. p18, F. Ndimande | |
| 7. p19, A. Mahlangu | 22. p37, A. Mahlangu |
| | 23. p37, A. Ndimande |
| 8. p21, A. Ndimande | 24. p38, Unsigned |
| 9. p21, A. Mahlangu | 25. p39, F. Ndimande |
| | 26. p40, F. Ndimande |
| 10. p23, A. Ndimande | 27. p41, F. Ndimande |
| 11. p24, F. Ndimande | 28. p42, F. Ndimande |
| 12. p25, F. Ndimande | 2. p43, F. Ndimande |
| 13. p26, F. Ndimande | |
| 14. p27, A. Ndimande | 30. p45, A. Mahlangu |
| | 31. p45, A. Mahlangu |
| 15. p29, A. Mahlangu | |
| 16. p31, A. Ndimande | 32. p47, F. Ndimande |

Who are the Ndebele?

The Ndebele are one of the many Nguni speaking Bantu peoples who inhabit Southern Africa. There are two distinct groups of Ndebele; the Northern Ndebele, sometimes known as the Matabele who inhabit Zimbabwe and the Southern Ndebele who inhabit the South African provinces of Gauteng and Mpumalang and Limpopo.

Both groups came into being in the first half of the 19th century as a result of the expansion of King Shaka's militaristic kingdom which led to what is known as the *Mfecane*, a chaotic time when less powerful peoples fled the advancing Zulu *impi*s and later the arrival of the Voortrekkers (white homesteaders) in what became known as the Transvaal. The Southern Ndebele were one such who fled their traditional homelands and as "refugee" group who established themselves in the underpopulated central regions of Southern Africa that they inhabit to this day.

It is the Southern Ndebele People are renowned for their highly distinctive decorated homes and beadwork both of which are embellished with dramatic and colourful symmetrical geometric designs and patterns. More than anything else Ndebele art is the most outward expression of their identity.

Alan Marcusson



Ndebele apron

Exhibition 4 March – 18 April 2020

Organized as a tribute to our beloved friend Alain Guisson, whose sudden death occurred on 1 March 2019. Musical happening by Alain's son Alexandre Guisson on 19 March 2020.

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