

# DIVERSE TECHNIQUES OF STORYTELLING IN EAST AFRICAN ART BY STEPHEN MBATIA

**Crystal A. Obare**

crystalobare@gmail.com/aderocrystalobare@students.uonbi.ac.ke

University of Nairobi

**Joyce A. Akach**

jakach@uonbi.ac.ke

# Diverse Techniques Of Storytelling In East African Art By Stephen Mbatia

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Works of art often tell stories. Artists can present narrative in many ways—by using a series of images representing moments in a story, or by selecting a central moment to stand for the whole story. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010) **Objective:** The main objective of this paper is to establish the ways in which techniques in creating art can aid in conveying the message of the artwork and the benefits of considering which techniques to use to convey messages and tell stories through artworks and designs. **Design:** The study used qualitative methods to obtain relevant data for the research and used the objective to guide the process. The collected data was analysed using content and visual analysis to determine how different techniques were used to convey different messages, themes and tones. **Setting:** The study was carried out in Nairobi, Kenya at the University of Nairobi. **Subject:** The subject of this paper is Stephen Mbatia—an accomplished painter, sculptor and draughtsman—and his works, inspirations and techniques. **Results:** the art is inspired by nature with paper patchwork and paints being the medium of visual communication. Apart from self-expression, Mbatia also aims at inspiring young people through art and design. **Conclusion:** This paper concludes that techniques and methods used to create artwork and designs can improve upon the message that the artist or designer wants to convey. Further study on the relationship between design and art techniques and messages conveyed in the artworks and designs is recommended.

**Keywords:** techniques, storytelling, East African art, diverse

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Works of art often tell stories. Artists can present narrative in many ways—by using a series of images representing moments in a story, or by selecting a central moment to stand for the whole story. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010)

This paper aims to find the ways in which techniques in creating art can aid in conveying the message of the artwork and the benefits of considering which techniques to use to convey messages and tell stories through artworks and designs.

## 2.0 THEORY

### 2.1 Stephen Mbatia

Stephen Mbatia is an accomplished painter, sculptor and draughtsman. He was born in Murang'a, Kenya, just before the independence of Kenya, in 1963. He spent his early years in Murang'a and attended Thika High School and Kenya Polytechnic. In 1988, he earned a Bachelor's of Education in Fine Arts from Kenyatta University. (True African Art, 2010)

His early life and environment were quite nourishing and motivating for a young artist in his formative years. Materials were easily available – from mud for modelling, to paper for drawing. Teachers and parents encouraged him although they wouldn't hear anything about becoming a professional artist. They later had to accept this. (Buford's Art Gallery, 2015)

“Elimo Njau, Professor Kariuki and Professor Mwaniki from the Kenyatta University were his main mentors in Art.” (Buford's Art Gallery, 2015)

Stephen moved on to teach at Thogoto Teachers College up to 1993, for about five years, before deciding to open an art studio in Ngong. He did so, as he was convinced art was his future and delved full time and became a full-time artist in 1995. (True African Art, 2010)

He has exhibited his artwork in Kenya at the Art Panorama, Signature Gallery, French Cultural Centre and the British Council. He has been accorded a solo exhibition by the Nairobi National Museum. Mbatia has recently exhibited internationally in both New York and Tokyo. (Inside African Art, 2002) He opines that “the best part about being an African artist is seeing his students really engaged in their art, getting their techniques and learning from what he teaches them.” (True African Art, 2010)

#### *2.1.1 General Themes and Inspiration*

Stephen Mbatia is well known to Nairobi art lovers. Being a keen observer of life in Kenya, his paintings communicate his fascination with the people of his homeland and his concern for issues that affect them. (Inside African Art, 2002)

He works with a variety of media styles such as watercolours, collage, sketches, charcoal and oil on canvas for his paintings while he uses stone and wood for his sculptures. He can shift media with ease which allows him to explore different themes with his works.

He enjoys travelling to the Masai Mara to watch the annual wildebeest migration and make sketches. Ngorongoro and Amboseli in Tanzania are his favourite places for sources of inspiration, especially for his animal paintings. (Buford's Art Gallery, 2015)

## 2.1.2 Works by Mbatia

### 2.1.2.1 Collages

The collages are made very intricately with photos and colours from magazines to create a final product. To make these paintings, Stephen first makes a sketch with a pen or pencil on a board of what he wants the final product to look like. He then tears colours or subjects out of magazines using his fingers, puts it all together on the board with glue that also acts as a varnish that gives the artwork a glossy, shiny finish. (Mbatia, 2009)

'Busy Market', as shown in figure 1, is a collage artwork using the above-mentioned technique. The artwork is extremely detailed showcasing the nature of a busy market with various activities being carried out. It depicts people carrying out various economic and social activities such as buying and selling and conversing with each other. The painting shows day-to-day life in a market setting.



Fig. 1. Busy Market. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> - Retrieved: 26/12/2021



Fig. 2. Photogenic. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> - Retrieved: 26/12/2021



Fig. 3: Life Gives In and Gives Out. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> - Retrieved: 26/12/2021



Fig. 4: Family Ride. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> - Retrieved: 26/12/2021



'Photogenic', as shown in figure 2, is a portrait honouring the "East African Woman". The painting has a more simple background with a variation of colours to complete the character and her jewellery. The magazine clippings accentuate the shadows and light inside the scene. (True African Art, 2017a)

'Life Gives In and Gives Out', as shown in figure 3, is a more philosophical piece. Some of his works are philosophical as they look at matters beyond the universe and as an artist look at man's inner feelings and subconscious mind. He uses bright colours to achieve this.

'Family Ride', as shown in figure 4, depicts a family of three on a bicycle. The collage is simple, showing the family spending their time together. The pieces used to make the collage give the artwork a sense of texture and depth to avoid it looking flat.

### 2.1.2.2 Batik Fabric Collages

Stephen Mbatia uses pieces of fabric to create collages that predominantly feature wildlife as the subject. (True African Art, 2017b) The artworks are colourful, vivid and abstract as seen in figures 5, 6 & 7.



Fig. 5: Elephant 2. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021



Fig. 6: Rhino Batik. Source: <https://trueafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021



Fig. 7: Hippo Batik. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021

### 2.1.2.3 Paintings

#### Monotype Technique

'Mkokoteni', as shown in figure 8, is a painting that uses the monotype technique that is rare in African art. In this technique, Stephen paints on a piece of glass then places a delicate sheet of paper on the finished glass plate and using a roller, presses the paper onto the still-wet painting. The paper is then removed from the glass and let dry. The result is a wonderful blend of colours with an interesting lack of texture, almost like a print. The use of this technique is an example of Mbatia's quest to experiment with colour and texture, as well as utilizing a method rarely seen in contemporary African paintings. (Inside African Art, 2002)



Fig. 8: Mkokoteni. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021

#### 2.1.2.4 Pen Washed With Watercolours

“His watercolour paintings of animals are unique, using bold background strokes to accentuate the detail of the foreground animals. His portrayals show the fluidity and gracefulness of the animals using a minimum of colour.” (Inside African Art, 2002)

Figures 9, 10 and 11 are paintings that used the pen washed with watercolour technique.



Fig. 9: Elephants in Water. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021



Fig. 10: Ostrich Peril. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021



Fig. 11: Wildebeest Migration. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 27/12/2021

## 3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

The researcher used qualitative methods to obtain relevant data for the research and used the objective to guide the process. Qualitative methods were used to obtain optimal results. The study was carried out at the University of Nairobi located in Nairobi, Kenya. The subject of this study is Stephen Mbatia.



Data was collected from existing sources of data such as data from the internet, various libraries and archives, magazines and newspapers.

The data collected was then analysed using content and visual analysis. Content analysis is used to analyse documented information in the form of texts, media, or even physical items. (Bhatia, 2018) Visual analysis is used to analyse content from photographs taken and images from other sources. It is the science of analytical reasoning supported by interactive visual interfaces. It combines visualization, human factors and data analysis. (Sisense, 2017)

## 4.0 RESULTS

Stephen Mbatia can shift through a variety of techniques for his artworks which allows him to convey different themes and visual elements.

The paper collages are colourful, vibrant and captivating in a way that draws in one's attention while the texture and shiny finish keep it. The paper collages thus feature African culture, day-to-day



Fig. 12: Fun at the Coast. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 13: Early Morn. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 14: Tea Pickers. Source: <https://trueafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 15: Giraffe Batik. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 16: Guinea Fowl I. Source: <https://cdn.shopify.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 17: Estate – Nairobi, Kenya. Source: <https://www.bufordskenya.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 18: Cape Buffalo on the March. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021



Fig. 19: Topi in the Grass. Source: <https://insideafricanart.com> – Retrieved: 28/12/2021

activities and wildlife in an engaging manner representative of the vibrant and diverse African culture that exists as seen in figures 12, 13 and 14.

The Batik fabric collages tell the story of Africa's wildlife in an abstract manner. The patterns and bright colours go above and beyond in making the wildlife more vibrant and energetic. The colours pop and the patterns have your eyes fixated, take, for instance, figures 15 and 16.

The monotype technique that Stephen uses serves well for the artworks with more serious messages such as social commentary as seen in figure 17. The minimal colour and lack of texture bring out the severity of the message.

The pen washed with watercolour technique allows one to focus on the subject matter of the painting without distractions from the background. This technique brings the message of the artwork to the forefront as seen in figures 18 and 19.



## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that techniques and methods used to create artwork and designs can improve upon the message that the artist or designer wants to convey. These techniques can help aid the user visually to further understand the message being delivered by the artist or designer.

The researcher recommends further study on the relationship between design and art techniques and messages conveyed in the artworks and designs.

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