

Azaria MBATHA (1941-2018)



AZARIA J.C.MBATHA - Did You Know?

Azaria J. C. Mbatha is a South African, born 1941 in what was then Zululand, but by now citizen of Sweden since the late 1960s. Sometimes the name appears as Azaria Mbatha or Azariah and Azaria J.C.Mbatha. This is a biographical documentation that allows us to go back again and know Mbatha as it was for the first time. The biographical series sees the Author/Artist Azaria J.C.Mbatha visiting his birth country South Africa after 30 years living abroad as a citizen of a foreign country, Sweden, which today is his home country.

Young men of Azaria Mbatha's 20 years of age in South Africa discovered that virtually all of the achievements of African young men especially seemed to have come about through the missionary work of the Church after their ancestors had failed to defend the country.

Mission School became a sort of a ticket to success. Azaria J.C. Mbatha's father was born 1880 and his mother 1906. Both parents were converted to Christianity as adults. Azaria's father could write and read and mother could only read. Education for African children in South Africa was not compulsory for all African children. Parents had to pay all the costs for educating their Children, even harder for educated Africans to get jobs if they were educated.

Bantu Education: This brings us to a more general point about the linkages between politics, culture and religion in South Africa; linkages which clearly emerge from the work of Azaria J.C. Mbatha. The function of African education is of special significance. In pursuance of the policy of apartheid and National Party, the Bantu Education Act had been aimed at reconstructing the system of educating Africans, so that it will conform to the pattern of apartheid and impart sufficient knowledge to adapt African children to the form of society accessible to them in South Africa. The new system was explained by the Minister of Native Affairs in 1954. He said that the previous system was based on mission or church schools and that by blindly producing pupils on a European model, vain hope was created among natives that they could occupy posts within the European community despite the country's policy of apartheid [Senate Debates, June 7, 1954]

Azaria Mbatha continued studies via correspondence courses during his spare time in South Africa after his secondary school's certificate. It was towards the end of 1950s when he left Ceza Secondary School and began working as a clerk in Vryheid in 1960 (in one of the coal mines) which was a pure coincidence for an African young man from rural area to get that job; The linkage to Sweden was established in 1961 and was one of these coincidences that sometimes happens and which in the end contributes to the enrichment of life itself, not only for Azaria J.C. Mbatha but for all of us who love culture. In 1961 Mbatha met Peder and Ulla Gowenius. Azaria Mbatha had been admitted as a patient where Gowenius were doing therapy practice at the Mission hospital and before the day of discharge from the hospital, Azaria asked if he could attend the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) Art and Craft Centre, which they had planned to start at that time and would be attended mainly by female students. Gowenius agreed, first at Umpumulo (later known as Mapumulo) and then at the Centre's permanent home at Rorke's Drift, as the only male student. Mbatha became interested in drawing although it was not considered a 'useful' technique in planning and therefore was not encouraged at the Centre. Mbatha was introduced to modern printmaking and was supplied with drawing material. The school had two directions; therapy training for young women that would later work at the Mission hospitals and the second a workshop which employed elderly women doing weaving. Azaria made links between these two directions. He could sell his drawings designs to the Centre's workshop that produced tapestries which helped financially running the School. Azaria J.C.Mbatha later worked as a teacher at the Centre. Many big tapestries were designed by Azaria J.C. Mbatha and sold abroad. His academic interest didn't stop when he started drawing. He had continued with correspondence courses since the date he left the school. But during this first phase, he put most of his time first as a clerk and later as an Artist, drawing and printmaking block print (wood - linoleum cuts) for his living. He got married with one of the students at Rorke's Drift in 1964.

The Swedish Art School (Konst Fack) in Stockholm awarded Mbatha a scholarship and he studied art at Konst Fack Art School in Stockholm between 1965 and 1967. The Rorke's Drift School Mission Station had nothing to do with Mbatha's studies and his later permanent stay abroad. After the studies Azaria Mbatha returned to South Africa and introduced the modern technique of textile printing. Towards the end of 1969, he left South Africa with his family.

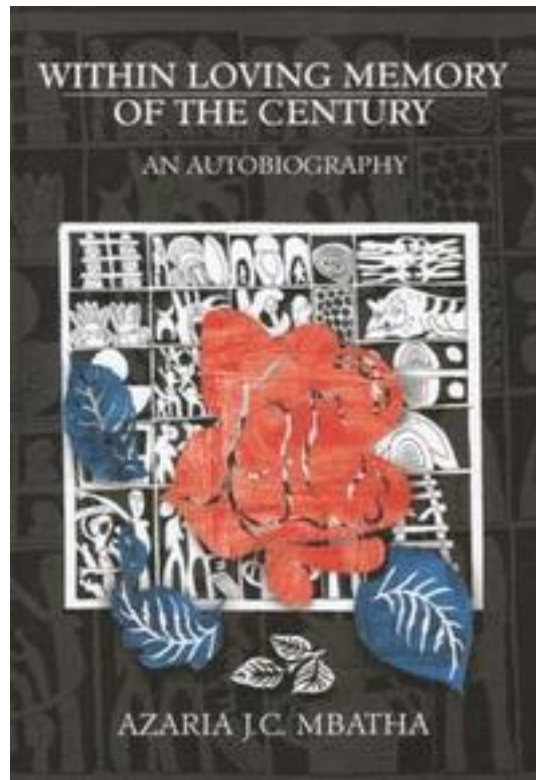
Mbatha's early academic interest studies led him to study at the University of Lund, and one year at the Teachers College in Malmö in Sweden. ... Most of Mbatha's time since the 1980s was in writing following his heart operation.

Article and images dated 8th October, 2013

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See obituary in <https://northernnatacourier.co.za/86790/azaria-mbatha-artwork-escape/>

<http://www.art-archives-southafrica.ch/MBATHA.htm>

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