



Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi and the world of art

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This story is about a South African artist who is famous around the world.

If you want to learn about art, you must learn about Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi.

Her story begins when she was born in 1943 in Marapyane, Mpumalanga.



When Mmakgabo was growing up, her grandmother taught her many traditional crafts.

Mmakgabo learned how to work with mud walls to create murals, and how to paint floors using cow dung. She learned pottery and beadwork.



Grandmother Metato also taught Mmakgabo how to knit, sew, and embroider.

Mmakgabo was from a poor family, and she had to find a job at the age of 16.

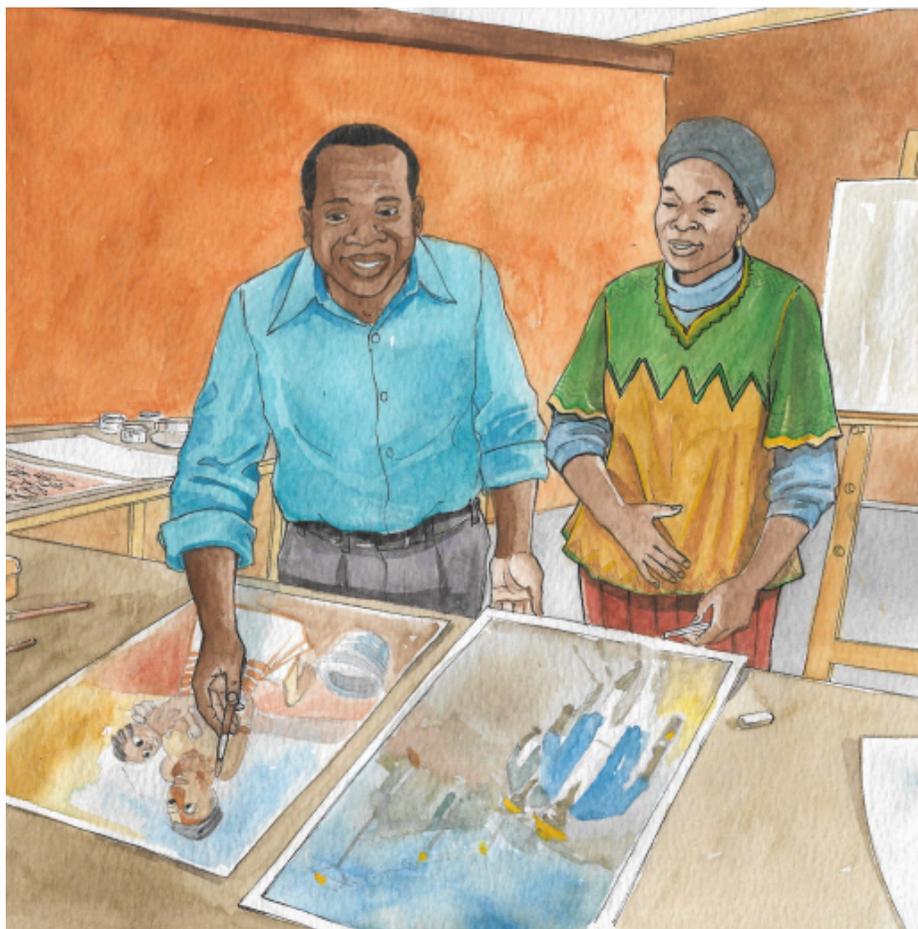
She moved to Johannesburg and started working as a domestic worker.



One day, Mmakgabo became interested in the art created by her employer. He bought her the first oil paints she ever used.

She continued to paint on her own.

Her employer was amazed by her talent and encouraged her to take art classes.



Mmakgabo realised that she needed formal art lessons.

She enrolled in art classes at White Studio in Sophiatown.

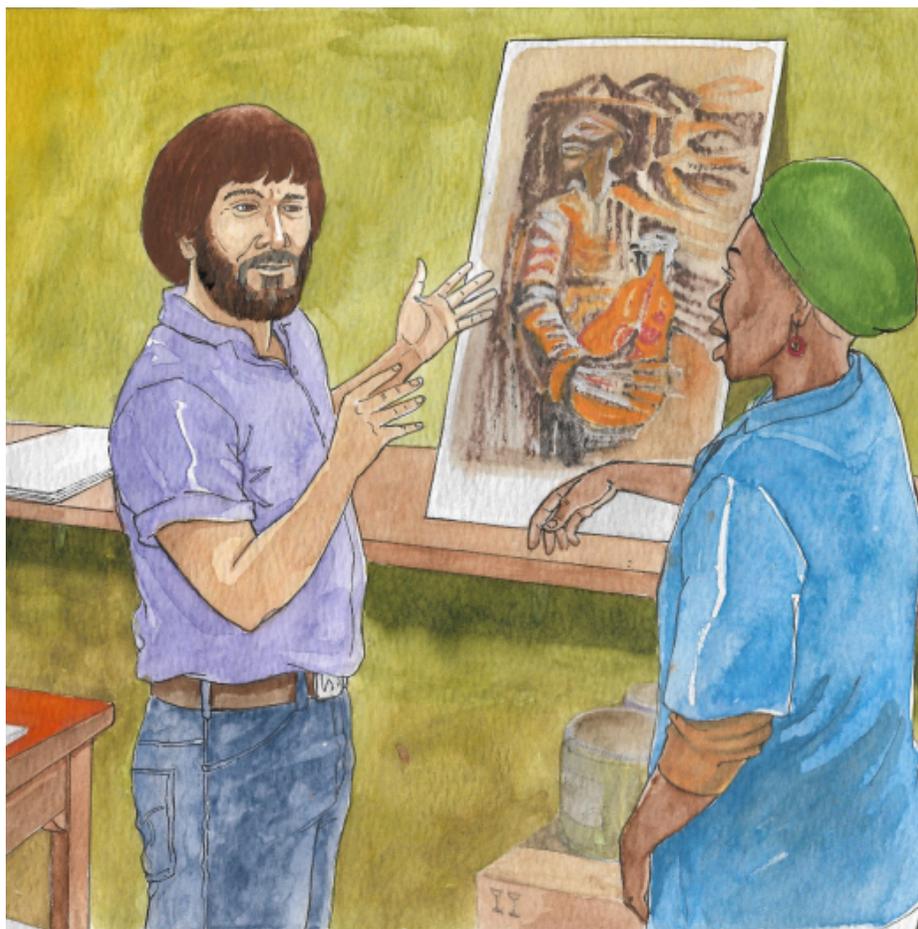
Her teacher was an artist called Keonakeefe Mohl. He became Mmakgabo's mentor and helped her.



Mmakgabo liked to draw scenes from Marapyane, where she grew up.

She drew women coming from initiation school or ploughing the fields.

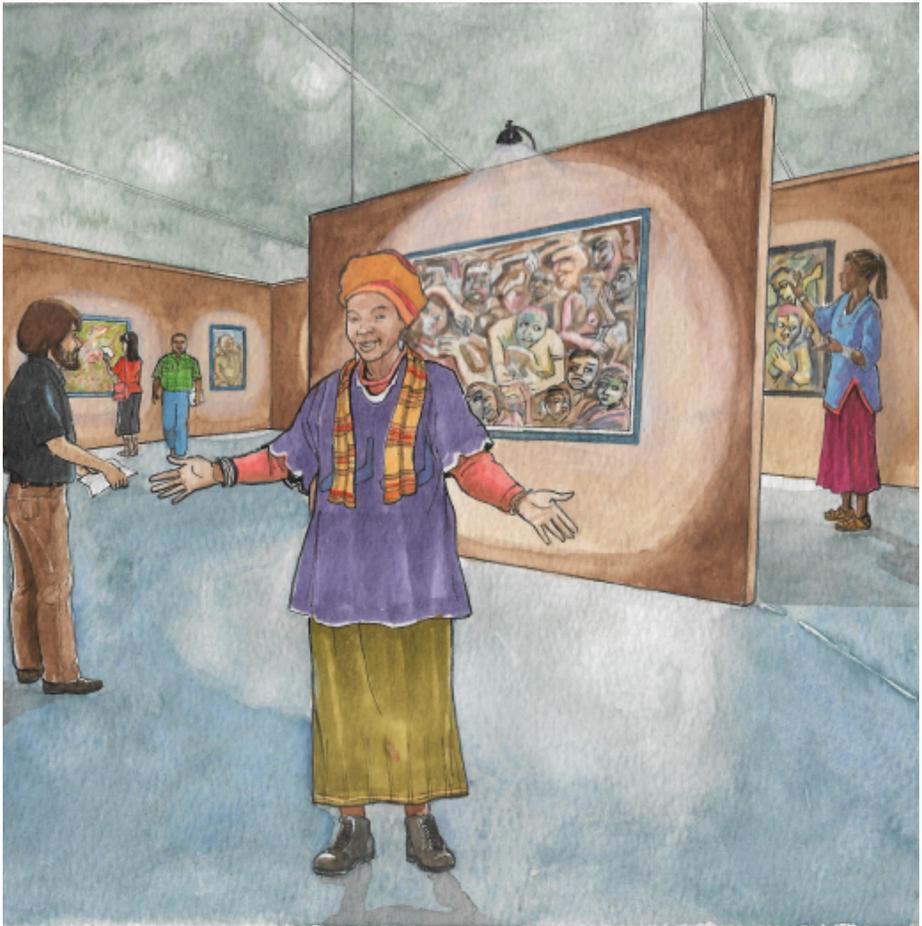
She drew scenes from ordinary life, in a realistic style.



Mmakgabo met an artist called Bill Ainslie, who encouraged her to make abstract art.

This was different to the style she used for drawing scenes from village life.

Mmakgabo worked hard and practiced her drawing and painting.



Mmakgabo taught art to children at Katlehong Arts Centre.

She trained many other artists, while continuing to develop her own style with paint and other materials.

She exhibited her pictures with other artists and sold her work.



Mmakgabo's work shows the difficulties of life in South African townships and rural areas.

She deals with social and political issues. Her work during apartheid showed Black people's suffering.

One of her most famous pictures is a collage called 'Tears of Africa' (1988).



Mmakgabo had her first solo art exhibition in 1986.

She was the first Black woman in South Africa to have her own art exhibition.

This successful exhibition was in a style called abstract realism.

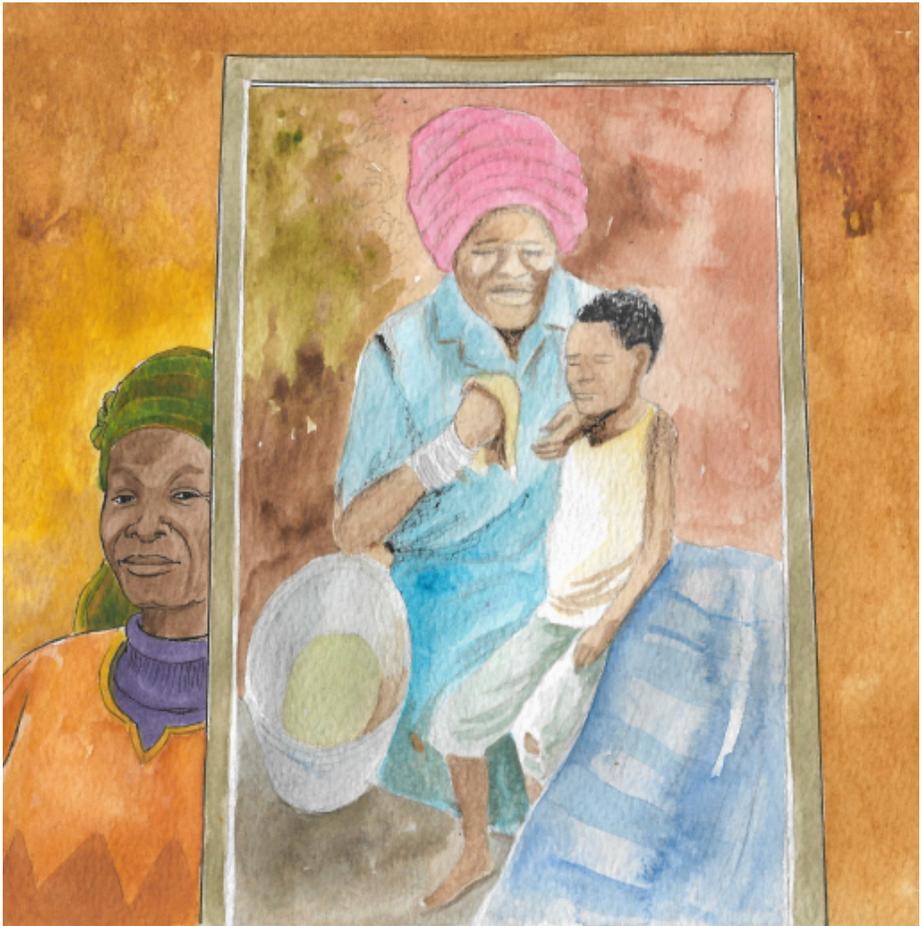
Mmakgabo became known for this style.



Mmakgabo was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study in America.

The scholarship helped her to focus making art and developing her career.

Mmakgabo's artwork was exhibited in Europe, England, and America.



Mmakgabo's paintings and drawings hang in museums and galleries all over the world.

She is a respected and influential artist.

Because of her contribution to art and crafts in South Africa, Mmakgabo was awarded the Presidential Order of Ikhamanga in 2004.



Mmakgabo proved that you can become what you want to be.

And listening to her grandmother helped her to succeed.

Mmakgabo said, "My grandma, who reached the ripe age of 115, taught me everything I know."

—Questions

1. What did Mmakgabo's grandmother teach her?
2. How did Mmakgabo start painting?
3. Why do you think was she successful in her art?
4. What do you like about Mme Sebidi?
5. Draw or paint a picture of something or someone important to you.

—This storybook was created and written in Setswana, as part of the Zenex Ulwazi Lwethu reading materials project in 2021.



Ulwazi Lwethu is a Zenex Foundation funded and initiated project to develop a series of graded and leisure African language readers and teacher support materials. This project is targeted at teaching and supporting learners in the Foundation Phase to improve their home language reading and understanding. The readers have been originated in nine African languages in collaboration with Molteno Institute for Language and Literacies, Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, Room to Read South Africa, and Saide. All resources are developed as Open Education Resources (OER).



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