



## About Esther Mahlangu

Dr Esther Nostokana Nagiyana Nikwambi Mahlangu is a celebrated South African contemporary artist known for her innovative work that pushes boundaries beyond the traditional mural. Widely recognized as one of the most influential artists across generations, Mahlangu began her artistic journey at the age of ten under the guidance of her grandmother and mother, learning the traditional techniques of Ndebele mural painting. Her contemporary works which span a wide variety of non-traditional surfaces, found objects as well as automobiles, build upon this rich tradition.

Mahlangu's participation in the exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre" (1989) in Paris, shot her to fame, marking the launch of her transition from a communal practice into her own agency as a contemporary artist. Shortly thereafter, in 1991, she became the first woman artist and African to paint a BMW Art Car. Mahlangu has exhibited in over 20 different countries, sometimes with multiple solo shows in at least seventeen different cities. She has painted murals across eight different countries and participated in residency programmes with institutions like Project Row Houses (2005), L'Associazione Culturale Colonos (2009) & Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2014). Some of her more significant engagements include Documenta IX (1992), the 5th Biennale of Contemporary Art (2000), the 1st Malindi Biennale (2006), the 3rd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2009) and Art Basel (2023). Mahlangu has also worked on projects with fashion brands like Comme des Garçons (1991), shoe companies Melissa (2009) and EYTYS (2015). She created the Belvedere (RED) bottle design, which helped fund a campaign against HIV/AIDS (2016). In 2024 Mahlangu was selected to participate in the 60th International Art Exhibition—the Venice Biennale, curated by Adriano Pedrosa. The Iziko Museums of South Africa present "Then I Knew I Was Good at Painting": Esther Mahlangu. A Retrospective until August 11, 2024. The exhibition, curated by Nontobeko Ntombela, highlights Esther Mahlangu's over 50-year long career and her meteoric rise as a contemporary artist, earning her global acclaim. Mahlangu's works are represented in well over 27 public institutions' collections. And she has been collected by many more private individuals worldwide. She continues her artistic career to this day.

## Past collaborations between BMW and Esther Mahlangu

Esther Mahlangu's collaboration with the BMW Group, spanning over three decades, represents a remarkable blend of traditional Ndebele art and modern automotive design, demonstrating an evolving and deep-rooted partnership.

**BMW Art Car:** The journey began in 1991 when Mahlangu, as the first woman to do so, designed a BMW Art Car. She adorned a BMW 525i with vibrant Ndebele patterns, connecting South African art with automotive design. This project not only showcased her unique artistic style on an



international platform but also marked a significant cultural and technological crossover, transitioning from mural painting to the canvas of a modern vehicle.

**BMW 525i (1991) by Mahlangu:**  
six-cylinder inline engine; 4 valves per cylinder; displacement: 2494 cm<sup>3</sup>;  
power output: 250 bhp; top speed: 221 km/h.

**BMW Individual 7 Series by Esther Mahlangu:** In 2016 Mahlangu once again partnered with BMW. This time, she lent her distinctive style to the interior of a BMW 7 Series. Her iconic motifs were meticulously integrated into the wood trims of the luxury sedan, exemplifying a seamless blend of traditional art with contemporary luxury. This unique vehicle, symbolizing the enduring collaboration between Mahlangu and BMW, was revealed at the Frieze in London and later auctioned for charity.

**The Mahlangu Phantom:** The collaboration took a luxurious turn in 2020 when Rolls-Royce commissioned Mahlangu to create an artwork for the Gallery of a Phantom, named "The Mahlangu Phantom". This project elevated her art to the pinnacle of automotive luxury, affirming her status as a respected cultural icon and artist.

**50 years BMW Group South Africa:** In 2023, as part of the 50th-anniversary celebrations of BMW Group South Africa, Mahlangu was invited to design a commemorative logo. This logo, infused with her artistic essence, symbolized the half-century milestone of BMW in South Africa and highlighted the long-standing relationship between Mahlangu and the BMW Group.

**The Electric AI Canvas:** Also in 2023, Mahlangu's artistic journey with BMW reached a new dimension with the "The Electric AI Canvas" project at Art Basel in Basel. Here, her traditional art was transformed through technology, as AI-generated animations based on her designs were projected onto the fully electric BMW i5. This innovative display merged Mahlangu's cultural heritage with the forefront of digital technology, showcasing the dynamic potential of combining traditional art forms with modern innovation.

Throughout these collaborations, Mahlangu's work with BMW has not only elevated her art to a global audience but has also served as a beacon of the harmonious blend of cultural artistry with automotive design, illustrating a unique and enduring relationship.