

# [Working Paper] Cloaked Communication: Empowering Women through Visual Arts in East Africa



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## Can People Communicate with Visual Arts?

The most important thing about communication is to convey the *meaning*. Generally, language is the most significant tool of communication, because through language, people can convey certain meanings in relatively direct ways.

What else can people use to communicate with others? Various expressions and symbols with transferable meanings can also be great tools of communication. A prime example is the arts. Arts are a great medium through which communication can be initiated. Also, because each art form has a unique way of expressing something, art can be a language.

Many people agree that arts with linguistic factors, such as music, literature, or drama, can be tools of communication. But what about visual arts without any linguistic elements? Can painting, sculpture, photography, fashion, and different kinds of design also be tools for communication?

I believe not only arts with verbal expressions but also nonverbal arts, with all manner of symbolism, can be a means of communication. If a song is language set to a melody, then photography or paintings can be visual languages by which you can communicate a message that is hard to express with words.

Years ago I met a refugee from Sudan. She had lost her capacity for speech from shock after soldiers came to her village to kill people and destroy their homes. She escaped Sudan to live in another country, but she would sit still all day, unable to speak. One day a missionary visited her house and gave her a sketchbook, and things began to change. She still didn't speak, but she started drawing scenes from her memory, and seeing them, the missionary and I were able to understand what she went through and what she was thinking inside. In other words, her drawings became her language to express her emotions and thoughts and to communicate with others.





Figure 1. A picture drawn by the Sudanese refugee woman. She expressed her feelings by painting happy and peaceful memories in color, and sad and scary scenes in black and white.

## Visual Arts in the Bible

The fact that visual arts can be a tool for communication is confirmed in the Bible. One major example is the construction of the tabernacle, from Exodus 25–39, where we see that the process of building the tabernacle was an aggregate of all the visual arts. It included architecture and interior design, and many specific items—woodcraft, metalcraft, sculpture, jewelry design, decorative arts, dyeing, embroidery, textile, and fashion. God himself designed all the items expressed through those art forms and directed craftsmen in how to make them. He was the head designer and art director, and all the items God designed have specific symbolism and convey particular meanings. For example, the lampstand symbolizes the divine presence. Also, the decoration of almond blossom symbolizes life. The lampstand thus communicates the message of “Jehovah’s presence and life.”

What about the garments of the priests? According to Exodus 28:

- The robe was made of fabric of top-quality threads.
- The ephod was a sacred item of the high priest’s garment
- The breastplate incorporated twelve gemstones representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

All these items have various symbols and meanings. Through these garments, designed by God and realized by the artists, God revealed and showed who the priest was supposed to be and the

significant role he had. Those who saw the garments understood and remembered God's message through each of the elements of the clothing and their symbolic communication. Therefore, this passage gives clear evidence that the visual arts can be a communicative tool and medium that transfer and interpret specific messages.



Figure 2. The lampstand, with the decoration of almond blossom



Figure 3. The garments of priests

Having a Conversation with African Women through Fashion

Many outsiders might assume that “poor people in a developing country” have no interest in fashion. Benin, West Africa, is an impoverished country, according to objective indicators show. People unfamiliar with Benin may think its people are far removed from the world of fashion. But when I visited Benin in 2012 for an arts project, I saw that the Beninese had great affection for their attire. Clothing, even for children, was very colorful, and people celebrated regional colors using different fabrics.

Our team led a drawing camp for children and a fashion class for women. The ladies in the fashion class showed great interest and response. The fashion show finale was the climax of the program. We asked the participants to dress up for the fashion show, and so they chose and styled their own clothes, walking through the show like professional models. By their expression of themselves through fashion, I was able to understand each of them better. This also helped us initiate individual conversations by asking questions about their style. Fashion as our common interest became a good medium of communication.



Figure 4. Fashion show for Benin ladies

### Understanding Their Own Culture from a New Perspective

When I conduct arts workshops, I often use visual arts, like fashion and design. They have been a great medium for communicating with African women and encouraging them to see ordinary things from a new perspective.

A few years ago, I taught a Biblical Perspective on the Arts seminar in a small town of Northwestern Tanzania. Within that seminar, I facilitated a workshop for the local women. I had proposed the local African textile as the main material, which didn't seem to them to fit the larger concept of *arts* because it was something so ordinary and everyday. I didn't tell them at the time, but I was hoping that through this art activity they would discover their cultural identities as they used local fabrics.

In that region, local fabrics were usually used for making clothes, but in the workshop I encouraged them to create new items, not just clothes. As a result, the women designed and created different fashion accessories, such as bags, hair bands, hats, hair ties, necklaces, and bracelets.



Figure 5. Tanzanian women who participated in the workshop designed what they wanted to and created fashion items.

During a feedback session after the workshop, participants said that they were puzzled at first, because they had to make something new without any training or guidance. But as they progressed, they enjoyed the new challenge. Looking at the outcomes, they felt self-confidence at having designed

and crafted something by themselves. They requested further workshops, to continue honing their skills.

Another woman said, “At first, I wondered why you wanted me to make something out of this ordinary African fabric. There are a lot of good foreign or Western-style materials, and I thought it would be better if we used them. Why do I have to use this plain cloth?” She continued, “I didn’t understand, but after finishing the work, I realized how beautiful our fabrics were.” She experienced a moment when something familiar in her culture seemed new. More importantly, she discovered that her cultural elements could be beautiful. By using the material with their cultural and regional characteristics, they had the chance to appreciate their identity anew.

### Initiating Conversations and Deepening Relationships

In another seminar with Tanzanian women, I led a three-day arts workshop. Each day’s activities focused on the attendees’ stories. On the first day, they drew self-portraits and shared their current life stories. They looked back on their past on the second day and created mosaics and collages based on what they shared, using local fabrics. The third day centered on their dreams, and we used photography to express their visions for the future.



Figure 6. Some of attendees holding their portraits.

Here’s what I learned about why these activities were meaningful:

- *They initiated conversations.* For the main activity was to express their life stories in the art forms, I was able to listen to each of their stories as they were explaining the meaning of their artwork. Telling their stories to each other was a chance to open the door for

conversation. Even though I had known them, it was not easy to hear their personal stories. But through these art activities, they were able to share their stories in a very natural way and I was able to learn more about them. In other words, these visual art activities became a good starting point for conversation and a medium of communication. And they had a good impact on how the women and I could deepen our relationship a bit more.

- *They encouraged meaningful expression.* Before this workshop, all the women who participated had never painted their own faces and never thought of painting portraits. It was the first time in their lives to experience drawing their own faces. Therefore, the art form itself provided a fresh stimulus to the attendees, and they were able to experience a new way of expression through this art form.
- *They helped people see God.* After sharing the sad or painful memories of their past experiences, the mosaic and collage were used to reflect on how their times could be renewed in God.

The process that the participants used to create the mosaic and collage was 1) cutting old or leftover local fabrics into smaller pieces; 2) taking those small pieces and assigning meanings, and thinking about the shapes to put them together; and 3) placing the small pieces, imagining their life that God was about to renew.

The process of seeing how these apparently irrelevant, useless fragments can be combined to become a beautiful piece of art was an excellent way to communicate Romans 8:28 (NIV), “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” I believe that through this process, their relationships with God will grow.



Figure 7. The mosaic and collage artworks designed and created by attendees.  
Left) This woman made a full-leaved, beautiful tree. She might imagine her life becoming like this tree.

Right) By putting the cross at the center, she wanted to express that Jesus Christ is the center of her life.

### Hope and Prayers

In conclusion, I want to suggest that we closely connect visual arts like fashion, design, and drawing to people's lives and stories. How wonderful if we can make use of various art forms as communicative methods and tools in the mission field! How awesome for people to see the beauty of their culture and use it to show the beauty of God's kingdom! Then the mission of God will be accomplished in a more creative way, and the good news and the message of God's love can be conveyed more abundantly. As a visual artist, I hope to see more Christian artists willing to encourage local people to create something new, conveying biblical truth through various visual arts.

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For a brief video of the seminar and workshop for women, see <https://youtu.be/JMbuBLAr3H4>.