

Hezbon Owiti,
Ostriches, 1965



Who is the artist?

Hezbon Owiti was born in Kenya in 1946.

Hezbon **taught himself** to be an artist. He started when he was just a little boy, making toys with whatever he could find and using them to tell stories to his friends.

As a young man Hezbon visited an **art centre in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi**. The art centre was called the **Chemchemi Creative Centre**. Chemchemi is a word in the Kenyan language, Kiswahili, which means 'fountain'. It was set up in the 1960s to be a place for artists to gather, learn and share their work.

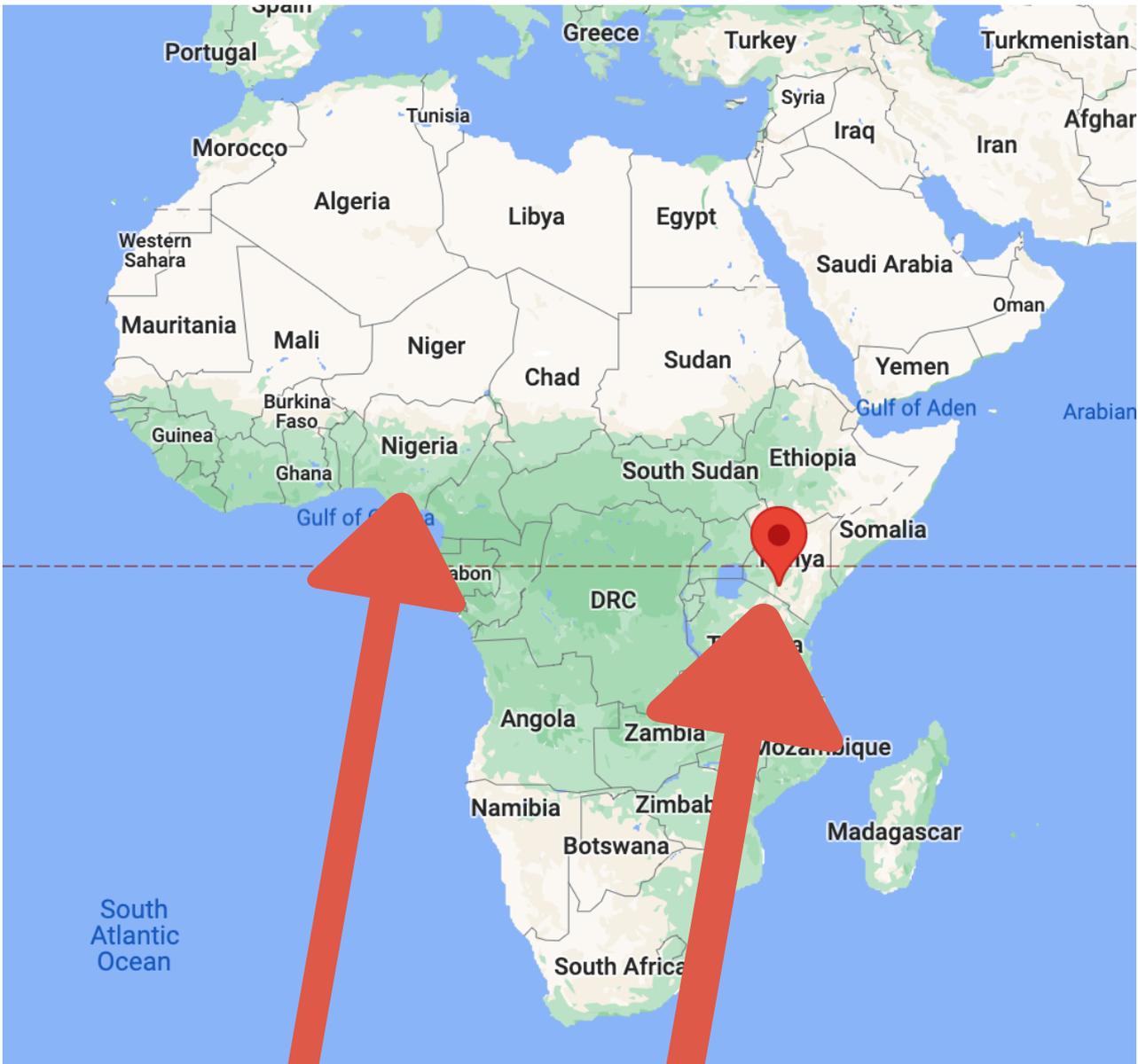
The man who ran Chemchemi was a writer called Ezekiel Mphahlele. Ezekiel thought Hezbon was very talented and arranged for him to visit Nigeria to attend a workshop about painting and printmaking.

After that workshop Hezbon came home to Kenya and made this painting of Ostriches, along with lots of other paintings and prints. He was inspired to make pictures about animals and to think about **animals as symbols of different things**.

Even though he never had an art teacher, he had his pictures shown all over the world.

This is a print called **'Horses'**.





This is Nigeria, where Hezbon went to study, How far do you think it is from Kenya?



This is Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. Nearly 5 million people live here!

Color & Paint

Let's look at how the artist has made this painting:



What do you think this painting would feel like if you touched it? How can you tell?

In this painting, Hezbon uses **impasto**. Impasto is a way of painting where you put lots of paint on the canvas to make it rough and bumpy. It makes the animals and plants in the painting seem to almost pop out of the surface!

Do you think the ostriches and the background here look like real life? Why or why not? Does it matter if they look real if we can still tell what they are?

Hezbon does not add a fine detail to his birds. Instead, the fluffiness of feather is suggested by bits of white paint. Hezbon uses **texture** to suggest different parts of the bird and the background. Can you see different textures here?

What kind of lines do you see here? Are they curvy or straight? Thick or thin?

Curvy lines make the shapes of the ostriches, the grass behind them, and the sky. They suggest some movement, which isn't surprising: ostriches can run as fast as a car!

Hezbon uses **colours and lines** to make the shapes in his painting. He uses red for the sky, white for the birds, and green and yellow for the grass around them. If you look closely, you can see that different colours are in every part of the painting. There is green in the sky, white in the grass, and orange on the birds. This brings the painting together.

What are the main colours in this painting? How do they make you feel?

There is a lot of red, white, yellow and orange in this painting. These are warm colours. Why do you think Hezbon chose those colours?

Ostriches

Ostriches live in different places across Africa, including Kenya where Hezbon lived. They lay huge eggs and grow to be big, tall and strong. They are the fastest birds in the world, but they can't fly because of how big they are.

Even though they can't fly, their feathers are very important and different ethnic groups in Kenya have used ostrich feathers for important clothes and decorations.



One important group in Kenya are the **Maasai people**.

They use ostrich feathers to decorate the headresses of their warriors, just like this.

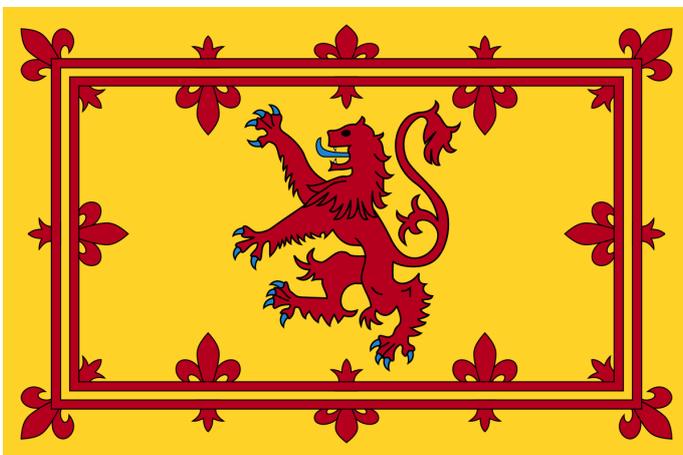
As well as being amazing birds, ostriches are also **symbols of power and importance**.

Can you think of other examples of animals as symbols of things?

In **America**, the **bald eagle** is used as a symbol of **freedom**.



Another example is the gentle bird, the **dove**, which is symbol of **peace**. Here it is holding an **olive branch** in its mouth, another symbol of peace.



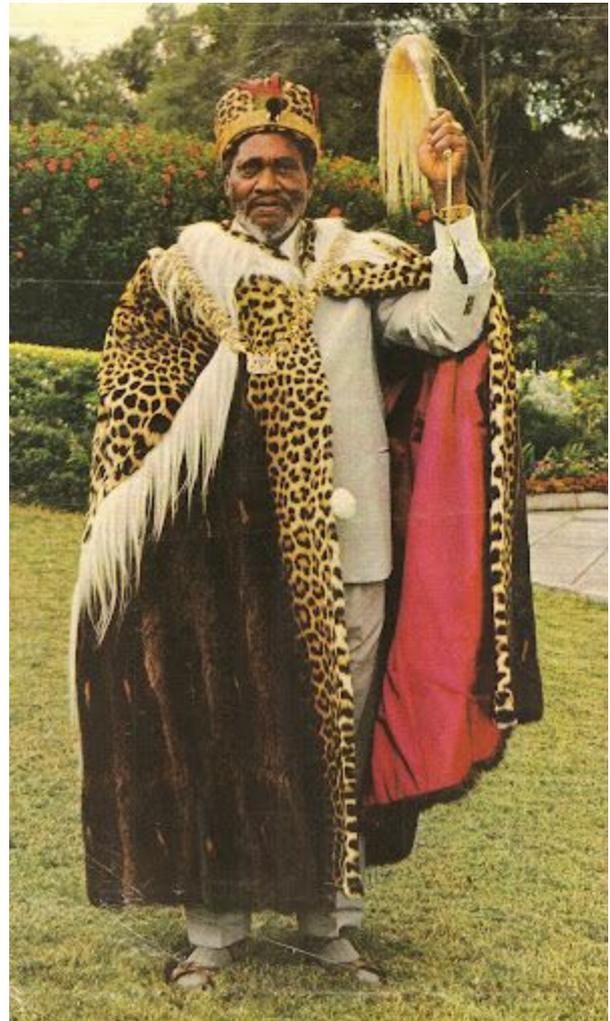
Do you know this flag?

It is called 'The Lion Rampant'. It uses a fierce **lion** to symbolise Scotland. This flag even uses colours similar to Hezbon's painting.

In the 1960s, **Kenya** became a **new, independent country**. Hezbon was very proud of it. His painting of ostriches was part of a series where he made pictures of lots of important African leaders including Kenya's first president **Jomo Kenyatta**.

This is an old photograph of President Kenyatta. His ceremonial clothes include the skin and hair of other animals.

Can you guess which animals? Why do think those animals are so important?



Now that we know all of this, we can see that Hezbon Owiti's painting is not just a picture of some amazing birds, but it also about how ostriches can be symbols of importance and power.

Now that you've learned all about Hezbon's work, here are some ideas for things to try yourself:

1. **An impasto painting:** can you make a painting that uses thick paint to create a picture with **texture**? You could ask a grown up to help choosing the right kind of paint. What else could you add to the painting to create texture? Perhaps you could use sand or feathers or other materials?
2. **Explore animals as symbols:** what is your favourite animal? What could they be a symbol of? Are they a soft, cuddly animal that could be a symbol of kindness and friendship? Or are they a fierce animal? Could they be a symbol of being strong and brave? Make a picture of your favourite animal, thinking about how you could use colour and lines to show what they are a symbol of.
3. **Make a toy!** Hezbon started his career as an artist making toys out of the things he found around him. Can you find some things like plastic bottles, cardboard tubes, bottle caps, etc and think about how you might make a toy? When you make a toy, you first want to **design** it (plan how it might look or work). Then, when you have a design you can put your pieces together and see if it works. Perhaps you could make a car or a rocket?

Research for this resource was prepared by Lauren Kammerdiener a student at University of St Andrews, via the Undergraduate Research Assistance Scheme. Please send any feedback to Kate Cowcher, kc90@st-andrews.ac.uk