



## Mbatha's Bible-story woodcuts

IT MUST BE five years since I first discovered Azaria Mbatha during a visit to the African weavers of the Swedish Mission at Rorke's Drift in Natal. It is the same mission that served as one of Chelmsford's bases during the Zulu War in 1879 and was the scene of a short but bloody siege.

Mbatha was not at the Mission when I paid my visit but I saw a great deal of his work and I was astonished and charmed by his natural ability.

His is pure art with no gimmicks and it is untrammelled by contact with European trends. He studied art at Rorke's Drift under Peder Gowenius, who guided rather than taught him. His cutting technique is excellent and his composition is faultless.

Curiously enough he carries his designs in his head and never prepares them on paper before cutting. Occasionally in those which are horizontally lineal his ideas carry him over into the next line below! The effect is

rather like reading a book from page to page.

This is particularly noticeable when he is telling a story, and somehow his composition always "fits in".

As will be seen from the picture above of "Noah's Ark", his work is delightfully realistic and objective. Usually it tells some story, generally from the Bible. Some may scoff at it as being purely illustrative, but I find it much more interesting than those pictures which have little but technique to recommend them.

Azaria Mbatha, who was born in Zululand in 1941, is at present studying art in Sweden where a bursary was made available to him for a year.

Although the exhibition now at Gallery 101 is his first show in Johannesburg, his fame has already spread abroad, and in 1967 two of his works were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.