

How one artist is weaving symbolism into HIV and Aids communication

Lwanga wanted fabrics that could enter homes naturally as cushions, curtains or personal items. He aimed for designs that do not shout but gently pose a question

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

For most people, fabric is a simple shirt, wrapper, curtain or a household item. For Elvin Lwanga Mutebi, it is a language and firm voice that holds truth where words sometimes fail. It is also the ground on which he is building a path in HIV/Aids communication in Uganda.

Lwanga, a student of the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University, who majored in Fashion, Jewellery and Textile Design, is determined to use textiles to spark conversations about HIV and Aids.

His final project is titled, 'Textile design as a medium for HIV/Aids awareness: Enhancing visual communication and reducing stigma in Uganda.' This is more than just a collection of fabrics. It carries conversations and a reminder that art can still speak as a voice of change.

Journey rooted in art

Lwanga's artistic journey began long before he understood textile design as a field of study. In secondary school, he practiced simple drawings and discovered that he could express emotion through visual form.

"That early foundation grew into a deep commitment to the arts and eventually shaped my decision to pursue industrial art and applied design at university," he shares.

He describes fabric as something more than a surface. To him, it is a social object that lives with people.

"Textiles carry identity, tradition, memory, and emotion in subtle but powerful ways. From the traditional barkcloth to the bold patterns of *kitenge*, textiles shape how people express themselves and how communities tell their stories," he explains.

As he grew into the discipline, Lwanga began to notice a gap. HIV and Aids communication in Uganda has relied heavily on mediums such as posters, pamphlets and radio messages. Useful as they are, they rarely tap into lived culture, invite conversation or soften the emotional ground needed for honest dialogue.

"My lecturers had been pioneers in using art for HIV/Aids awareness, and their work sparked questions for me: What if cloth, not paper, became the medium? What if symbols, not slogans, became the first step? What if proverbs unlocked conversations that would otherwise remain shut? These questions became the centre of his project.

Elvin Lwanga goes about his work in Kampala. One of the strongest pillars of Lwanga's project is its quiet battle against stigma. PHOTO/GLORIA IRANKUNDA

Symbolism as a medium

Lwanga's collection is built around symbols, motifs, proverbs and familiar colours. Recurring motifs like condoms, visually reframe prevention as an act of strength and shared defense.

The integration of proverbs rendered in Luganda serve as a direct call to collective responsibility.

"Phrases like *Kafumita bagenda* (It pricks those on the move) do not merely warn, but activate communal wisdom passed through generations," Lwanga explains.

The footprints illustrate journeys and choices. They represent interactions, intimacy and consequences without pointing fingers. They allow a viewer to join the conversation without feeling accused.

Use of thorns instead of explicit warnings reflect natural environments without shaming.

"When paired with colour and pattern, they transform into compelling metaphors that invite thought rather than fear," he says.

This is crucial in a cultural context where direct discussion of sexuality or disease can be uncomfortable. The metaphor creates a safe intellectual and emotional space, bringing people closer to the subject matter while lowering defensive barriers.

Dialogue and human connection

Bringing a textile to life during Lwanga's project involved studying Ugandan art and proverbs for symbols,



SYMBOLISM

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sketching, creating digital iterations and developing patterns using tools such as pencils, Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop.

"Next was material dialogue which is choosing cotton, mixing symbolic colours, screen-printing for lighter designs and, digital printing for intricate layers, and turning flat printed yardage into three-dimensional objects like cushions and curtains," he explains.

Lwanga's colour palette carried deep meaning. Orange for urgency. Green

for hope. Brown for heritage and grounding.

"Together they formed a visual language that is alert but not alarming, bold but not harsh, modern but still Ugandan," he mentions, adding that he wanted fabrics that could enter homes naturally as cushions, curtains or personal items.

He aimed for designs that do not shout but gently pose a question, patterns a grandmother would recognise and a young person would still find stylish.

The magic of this approach became clear through feedback. Classmates interpreted the work in ways that surprised him.

"When a classmate said, 'This feels like something my aunt would have in her house in a good way,' it confirmed the cultural familiarity I was striving for. When another asked, 'Why footprints? Are we talking about walking away or walking into something?' it affirmed that the metaphors were provoking thought," he shares.

Addressing mother-to-child transmission (MTCT)

Among all the pieces, the design that addresses mother to child transmission holds Lwanga's emotions most.

To him, MTCT is the most painful transmission route, because a child enters the world with a burden they did not choose. He sees it as a contradiction of nature nurturing a child and passing risk at the same time.

"The design is meant to spark conversations in homes where decisions about antenatal care, treatment and protection are made. It is a gentle reminder that preventing MTCT is not only a policy goal but a moral one, shared by families and communities," he explains.

Challenging stigma

One of the strongest pillars of Lwanga's project is its quiet battle against stigma. Rather than confront stigma head-on, he lets people see the symbol first, then the meaning.

A cushion with a Luganda proverb becomes a conversation starter. A fabric with footprints becomes a gentle mirror. A curtain with symbolic thorns becomes a reminder of risk without judgement.

"In doing so, stigma becomes less frightening, less foreign and less shaming," he says.

As he prepares to step into the professional world, Lwanga sees his designs in community halls, clinics and in schools as educational aids.

"I plan to turn designs into accessible formats: not just cushions, but tote bags, wearable pieces, and installation fabrics that can be used in workshops, exhibitions, and public spaces," he shares.

He envisions cross sector collaborations through potential partnerships with NGOs like The Aids Support Organisation (TASO) or Reach Out Mbuya, health communication and even government awareness campaigns.

His long term goal is to build a practice that uses textiles to address other layered issues such as mental health, gender dynamics and community wellbeing, whether through a social enterprise, a community studio, or further research.

"I am committed to keeping cloth at the centre of conversation, care, and change.

Cloth is intimate. It lives with people. And for that reason, it can carry messages that transform society quietly but powerfully," he shares.