

# Formidable icons of culture and art

**S**ome people spend their lives moaning and complaining: Why aren't things the way they should be? Why was I born in the wrong century? Why is the government so awful?

Others just get on with it, allowing nothing stand in their way. They inspire others to follow them, and they belong to all races – black, white, brown.

The tables have turned in such a way in parts of Africa these days that white people are frequently hated purely because of their colour.

They are treated with great suspicion, though their role in major events like the apartheid struggle may have been immense and positive like that of Albie Sachs, Ruth First and Helen Suzman.

"They are white therefore they are colour-seekers and slave-drivers. Period."

Their merits are not examined individually. I want to tell you about four non-whiners of differing races who greatly inspired me at Kenya Museum Society evening last week: two are white Americans, one is an Australian and the fourth is a Kenyan living in the UK.

Where they have come from is somewhat incidental, apart from the fact that they have all benefited from distance. What do I mean?

The thing that is hardest to see in life is the nose on your face. Even if you look in the mirror, you can only see a reflection.

For these people, the fact that they have gained some distance from their origins has enabled them to fully become themselves, and in the process, leave behind rich legacies of different kinds.

Let me begin with Alan Donovan who created "African Heritage" over 30 years ago, and who puts me in mind of the legendary fashion designers like Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and Emilio Armani who loved women in a very particular way.

Donovan, an American by birth, found himself in Kenya in the seventies and turned his considerable talents and energies to gathering a collection of jewellery, textiles, artefacts, sculptures, crafts many of which are unique and housed in his abode on the Athi River Plains.

Most of all, through his innate kindness and generosity, he enabled other people to blossom: models like Iman who wore the clothes and jewellery he designed, weavers who wove the materials, painters, actors, musicians and dancers who travelled the world to show off the collections.

To read his recently published book *My Journey Through African Heritage* (published by Kenway) is to feel the most extreme joy and pain – the former, for the

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beauty, the latter for the sense of tragic loss.

But he has been lucky enough to live his dream, and is now adapting a part of the Kenya Archives to house the work which he painstakingly collected together with former Vice-President Joseph Murumbi.

He describes the vision Murumbi had of a Pan African Institute of Studies, but one by one, with disasters like the fire in the first shop on Kenyatta Avenue, and the downturn in the economy following the ethnic clashes in the early 1990s, African Heritage, which had become by then a world-wide phenomenon based in Kenya, fell upon hard times.

Mr Murumbi is said to have died of a broken heart after the house which had been bought by the Government for his collections and books was demolished, and the priceless Africana has, since the death of his wife, Sheila, been rotting away in storage instead of being proudly shown to the public to whom it really belongs.

## Mr Murumbi died of a broken heart after the house bought for his collections was demolished

To Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith, I owe a personal debt because it is exactly 10 years since I was first riveted by their portraits of African women at a small gallery in London. Their photographs had such a powerful effect that I was driven to leave home and family to come and see it for myself.

I have studied their extraordinary books: *African Ceremonies*, *African Ark*, *Africa Adorned*, amongst others, and now their latest, *Faces of Africa: Thirty Years of Photography* (National Geographic) which is a personal account of their 30 years in Africa.

On Saturday, March 5, House of Treasures at 70 Dagoretti Road will be celebrating the book with an exhibition of prints and jewellery which Angela has made specially.

Some of the ceremonies they witness are in danger of disappearing forever, so their record is vital for posterity. But most of all, their books make you wonder how on earth two very attractive women managed to establish the trust and rapport which they so

obviously did in so many communities in order to be allowed so close – in some cases to film secret rituals. How did they fight their way past the men?

Speaking as if with one voice, they recounted an incident with the Surma people of Ethiopia, one of whom made a request they couldn't refuse: he wanted to see their breasts! In private, counting to three quickly, they whipped up their T-shirts like a pair of embarrassed, giggling schoolgirls.

Their cameras seem to be invisible, lending a sense of spontaneity which belies the years of work, and the careful process of selection.

Last, but certainly not least, is the potter, Magdalene Odundo, whose new book entitled *Magdalene Odundo* (published by Lund Humphries) coincides with an exhibition at the now relocated Nairobi British Council for the next three months, where it will be refreshing to see a different kind of Clay.

Magdalene left Kenya in the 1970s to study in Britain, and has achieved great distinction, having sold her work to major institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Her pots, made entirely by hand without a wheel, hark back to the earliest forms of this art and benefit from her profound knowledge of ancient Chinese, Greek and African pottery.

She says in her preface that hers has been

a quest for "perfect simplicity, for natural forms."

The works are indeed simple, but like their maker, very human. Hour-glass vessels remind you of the female form, and have loops at their "waists" which, she says, she was motivated to create by watching housewives gossiping with their arms on their hips.

When she speaks, she radiates a sense of humility and gratitude especially to her foster mother who made it possible for her to fulfil her gifts.

For her, living in London has proved not to be a loss: "You can work from the African tradition and also view it from a distance. That was my culture shock: I thought I had left behind something that was mine, whereas I had actually gained something new."

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