



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM  
COLLEGE of ARTS & SCIENCES

JACK RASMUSSEN, PHD  
DIRECTOR AND CURATOR

## **PROPOSAL:**

### ***Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists***

**2017-2018**

The American University Museum requests sponsorship to develop and present a traveling exhibition titled *Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists*. The exhibit will showcase the vibrant, varied, and dynamic masterpieces created by pioneer artists from East Africa. This will be the first such exhibit to bring together important works by African artists who are widely acclaimed but remain unknown in the USA. The exhibit will challenge the common misperception that Africa is culturally homogenous by highlighting some of the many different cultures that comprise the continent. The proposed exhibit will explore the multiple cultural encounters and challenges that have taken place in post-colonial East Africa and how these have been captured and expressed by historic and contemporary artists.

*Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists* will showcase the works of artists who struggled to develop their careers in art after the time of independence in the 1960s and 1970s against all odds, when art was not considered a viable career choice. At that time, there was little interest from the rest of the world in African art beyond West and Central Africa, as many connoisseurs of art believed that East Africa had no artistic tradition worthy of their critical attention.

In 1973, then-Vice President of the Republic of Kenya, Joseph Murumbi, and transplanted American designer and collector Alan Donovan, recognized the importance of supporting the small but highly talented community of local East African artists. They acknowledged the quality of the artwork, but understood the artists' potential could not be realized in the current environment. Together, Murumbi and Donovan opened the first Pan African gallery in 1972, the African Heritage, with the goal of promoting all forms of African art and culture. Through African Heritage, they bought art and organized exhibits, including cultural festivals, which traveled the world, which were aimed primarily at promoting pride in African culture and art in all its forms.

The artists whose masterpieces will be featured in the proposed exhibition at the American University Museum were 'discovered' during this early period. Some, like Magdalene Odundo, went abroad; others, like Francis Nnaggenda, spent time overseas, but eventually returned to Uganda and trained the current community of fine artists there.

Now in their 60s through 80s, many of these artists still live in borderline poverty. Their artistic achievements, while highly acclaimed, have not made a difference in their daily lives.

The goal of *Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists* is to unite these artists, bring their work to a wider audience, and recognize and honor their contributions to East African and global artistic traditions. The project will include opportunities for the artists to discuss their work and a book that will contain scholarship on the larger importance of the exhibition. We are also pursuing separate funding for a documentary film featuring the artists in *Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists*. It is the intention that the exhibition

will travel to other museums and galleries in the USA after this first exhibition in Washington DC. in 2017.

The curatorial team for *Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists* includes:

- Alan Donovan, Director, African Heritage House, Mombasa Road, Nairobi and Chairman of the Murumbi Trust;
- Chapurukha Kusimba, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, American University;
- Jack Rasmussen, Ph.D., Director and Curator, American University Museum.

## **BACKGROUND/HISTORY OF PIONEER EAST AFRICAN ARTISTS**

### **FRANCIS NNAGGENDA**

Until he retired a few years ago, Francis Nnaggenda served as chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Makerere University in Kampala. Born in 1936, Nnaggenda left Uganda in the 1960s to study art in Germany. He supported himself by working part time as a musician and sculptor's assistant. It was during his time in Germany that Nnaggenda encountered the legendary art of West Africa, which had already inspired many of the incipient modern artists earlier in the century. Upon completing his studies, he returned to East Africa in 1968 and joined the University College of Nairobi as lecturer in Art. While teaching at the University of Nairobi, he met the Honorable Joseph Murumbi, who became one of his most ardent admirers. When Murumbi and Alan Donovan opened the African Heritage Gallery in 1973, some of Nnaggenda's finest works were exhibited there. During

the opening exhibition, Murumbi urged Margaret Kenyatta, the mayor of Nairobi at the time, and the Nairobi City Council, to support Nnaggenda's monumental works. Murumbi said he was the only African to buy Nnaggenda's works and he owned 5 of them. This appeal was not headed and Nnaggenda later moved to Texas, where he stayed until returning to Makerere University as Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts.

Nnaggenda's masterpieces include an enormous metal sculpture that stands at the Murumbi Peace Memorial, a mammoth wooden statue now at the Murumbi Gallery at the Kenya National Archives, and a smaller sculpture at the Nairobi Gallery at the Old Provincial Commissioner's Office. His highly acclaimed "Mother and Child" in granite stands in front of the National Museums of Kenya. A gigantic blue sculpture titled "Three in One" is located at the Alan Donovan African Heritage House near Nairobi. Many more works are found in U.S. Museums and gallery collections.

### **EXPEDITO MWEBE KIBBULA**

Expedito is an exceptionally talented and innovative artist, designer and builder. His works include interior design, painting, architecture, industrial craft design, and environmental art. Born in Uganda in 1952, Expedito graduated from Makerere University with a B.A. in arts in 1975. He has taught art at several colleges in Uganda and Kenya. His extraordinary works can be seen throughout East Africa, most notably in the Samburu and Keekorok Lodges in Kenya. He created the collection of extraordinary wooden panels at the Bambara Lounges in the Nairobi Serena and Kampala Serena Hotels. In the 1980s, Expedito had an atelier at African Heritage's industrial area workshops in Nairobi. Later, he completed two phenomenal sculptures in honor of Joseph and Sheila Murumbi. The

first, titled *The Meeting Place*, is a sculpture in stainless steel, and represents all of humanity in its quest to achieve and improve itself and the environment through the dignity of artistic creation. *The Meeting Place* is now the centerpiece of the Nairobi Serena Hotel lobby. The second piece is completely different. Carved in stone, *The Universal Couple* is a fitting tribute in stone to the late Joseph and Sheila Murumbi. It stands at the Murumbi Peace Memorial in Nairobi.

### **JOHN ODOCH'AMENY**

One of Africa's most prolific artists, John Odoch'ameny taught many of East Africa's leading sculptors while Sculptor in Residence at African Heritage House in the 1980s. His imaginative black molten metal works are familiar to East African gallery goers, but he also produces stunning works in stone and other materials. "Odoch" has a very recognizable style, yet he continues to come up with exciting, innovative works like his *Mass Communications* series, created from the debris of the twentieth century industrial revolution such as typewriters, printing presses and telephones. His more recent series includes laptop computers and cell phones. Now based in his native Uganda, Odoch continues to delight us as one of East Africa's most interesting and innovative artists. Two of his molten metal sculptures are on permanent exhibition at the Murumbi Gallery, Kenya National Archives, and there are others in facades at the entry of the Nairobi Gallery, in the Old PCs Office building in Nairobi, as well as at Alan Donovan's African Heritage House.

## **MAGDALENE ODUNDO**

Professor Magdalene Ayango N. Odundo's clay vessels transcend the confinements of pottery, craft, or function. A Kenyan artist, based in the UK, her clay works have entered into an ethereal realm of contemporary art that can only be described in terms of beauty. They blend multiple associations of meanings and functional references that speak evocatively of past ceramic traditions and heritage, while at the same time appearing utterly contemporary.

Magdalene's ceramic vessels have a deliberate association with the age-old pottery traditions of Africa, and reflect the artist's thorough knowledge of the world's ceramic history. Professor Odundo is acclaimed as one of the world's leading ceramicists, and is probably Kenya's most famous living artist. She comes from an area of Western Kenya that is renowned for its pottery traditions, but she has also traveled to Nigeria and many other parts of the world to study the ways women produce pottery, using traditions of hand-building and firing that are thousands of years old. Upon returning to the London area, where she still lives, Odundo completed a master's degree in ceramics, and maintains an intuitive technique distinctly her own. She continues to teach ceramics at the University College for Creative Arts, previously known as the Surrey Institute of Art and Design. After numerous exhibitions around the world, including a successful pioneer exhibition at the original African Heritage Gallery on Kenyatta Avenue during the United Nations Decade for Women conference in Nairobi in 1985, collectors, museums and galleries around the world now seek her magnificent vessels. In recent years, her pots have brought record prices whenever they appear at auction. Magdalene was given an OBE by the Queen of England for her outstanding work in ceramics, the only Kenyan to receive such an honour.

Magdalene's quest to contemplate, articulate and shape each pot is a process that may take months; her quest for perfection is passionate, restless and gratifying to her and the viewers. Each of her works is unique and defies easy categorization. Today, one of her pots appears at the entry of the British Museum in London. Another is on loan from the Murumbi Trust to the Nairobi Gallery at the Old PCs Office Building in Nairobi, the oldest building in the city. There, it inhabits a place of honor at the foyer of the gallery at "Point Zero," the point of the city from whence all measurements to other cities and locations are taken.

## **ELKANA ONGESA**

Born in 1944, Elkana Ongesa comes from a long line of traditional stone carvers from Kisii, in Southwestern Kenya. He was the first in his family to combine his innate skills with the broadening influence of training through Fine Arts at Makerere University in Kampala and the University of Nairobi, where he completed his post graduate thesis on stone carving in East Africa. Now his sculptures grace many spaces around the world, including the United Nations Headquarters in New York, UNESCO in Paris, Coca Cola in Atlanta, Caltex in Houston, and Changchun City in China.

Like several artists in this exhibition, Elkana's first major exhibition was the opening exhibition of African Heritage Gallery in 1973. The Director General of UNESCO, Amadou M'Bow, was most impressed by Elkana's sculpture of a bird at the Honorable Joseph Murumbi's house in Muthaiga (it is now at the Murumbi Gallery at the Kenya National Archives). Consequently, in 1978, the Kenya government made a special gift to UNESCO of a giant bird sculpture by Elkana (see photo). For the Murumbi Peace Memorial at the

Murumbi gravesite in Nairobi City Park, Elkana selected a huge black and white granite boulder from Lukenya near Nairobi, which he formed into the image of a monumental "Bird of Peace, Emerging from the Stone of Despair" (which echoes a Martin Luther King speech on Peace). The mother bird is sheltering two smaller birds and an egg under her wings, a fitting tribute to the Murumbis, and to the peaceful future of Kenya. Another remarkable sculpture from Elkana's premier exhibition at African Heritage Gallery in 1973 is *Dream*, his interpretation of freedom in South Africa from the shackles of Apartheid. This sculpture was retrieved from a fire, which destroyed the African Heritage Gallery on Kenyatta Avenue in 1976. His most mammoth work to date, *Dancing Birds*, is a 30-ton granite work that stands at the entry to the United States Embassy in Nairobi.

## **SANAA GATEJA**

Sanaa Gateja, locally known as "The Bead King," was born in Kisoro, Uganda in 1950, where he completed his early education. In 1970, he moved to Mombasa where he opened his first art gallery across from the port at Mombasa Old Town called Studio Sanaa. This gallery expanded to Fort Jesus Museum in 1974. His gallery was among the first to concentrate on exhibiting the traditional arts of Kenya, including the functional arts of Northern Kenya and Lamu and basketry and jewelry from the East African coast. He worked closely with other pioneer art organizations in Mombasa, such as Bombolulu and Mombasa Home Industries. In 1976, he opened the first major art gallery in the Mombasa city center where he exhibited works by East African artists and craftsmen. He also redesigned the Lawford's Hotel in Malindi in Swahili style.

In the 1980's, Sanaa relocated his studio and workshops to Nairobi. He founded a



brass workshop where he created and produced brass lamps, traditional coffee pots and other brassware, including the unique lampshades in the Nairobi Serena hotel lobby. He held several exhibitions at African Heritage Gallery in Nairobi, at the National Museums of Kenya and the Kenya National Archives. Sanaa then trained as a gold and silver jewelry designer in Florence, Italy, after which he worked in the art and jewelry trade in London for six years. In 1986, he held a major solo exhibition of both jewelry and paintings at the African Centre in London to celebrate Uganda's liberation.

In 1989, Sanaa returned to Uganda where he founded Kwetu Afrika Art and Development Centre based in Lubowa, Kampala, Uganda. Here, Sanaa used easily available local materials to research, innovate, and create art as a means of fighting poverty. One of his unique contributions was the practice of recycling paper into beads. This medium, which he began using in 1990 at his Kwetu Africa Studio and which has spread throughout East African communities, provides a livelihood to many jobless persons, specifically, women and youth. His Centre exports many products made of handmade paper beads, employing dozens of skilled female workers full time and many others on a part time basis.

### **MODALITIES OF THE EXHIBITION**

Sponsorship from US and Kenyan companies and institutions will be used to send the curatorial team to East Africa to select and photograph important works from the artists discussed above. Funding would allow the team to interview and videotape the artists, to identify willing lenders to the exhibition, and to arrange for packing, shipping, and insuring the works.

The highlight of the exhibition will be a collection of paintings mixed with computer parts on wood by Francis Nnaggenda. These will be selected, packed, and shipped from

Kampala, Uganda. A series of carved wooden panels from Expedito Mwebe will also be shipped from Nairobi, Kenya.

Works by Magdalene Odundo will be requested from the Smithsonian Museum of African Art and sourced from Kenya.

Two small stone sculptures from Elkana Ongesa's first exhibition at African Heritage Gallery will be shipped from the Alan Donovan collection in Los Angeles, California. We will also select and ship other important works of his from Kenya, and from the USA.

Many of Odoch'ameny's works can be found in Southern California or elsewhere in the USA. Other works will be selected and shipped from Nairobi.

## **BUDGET**

### **Narrative**

We anticipate total direct project costs for *Masterpieces of Pioneer East African Artists* will be \$200,000. These costs do not reflect the indirect costs, usually computed at 40% of the direct costs, which will be borne by American University.

Part of the budget will be allocated to transporting art back and forth from Kenya and Uganda to Washington after the curatorial team makes their selections and gets firm estimates from shippers for packing, transporting, and insuring the work. In addition, we are not yet sure how many of the artists will travel to Washington or other cities to give lectures and for special educational programs. Finally, we have not included the cost of filming and producing a video to accompany the exhibition. We will seek separate funding for this aspect of the project.

**APPENDIX**

**FRANCES NNAGGENDA**



**EXPEDITO MWEBE KIBBULA**



**JOHN ODOCH'AMENY**



**MAGDALENE ODUNDO**



**ELKANA ONGESA**

