

ALAN DONOVAN DEFIED THE ODDS UP UNTIL THE END

By Star Special Correspondent (posted December 10, 2021)

The Star readership must already know that Alan Donovan, who passed on peacefully at his Mlolongo home on Sunday morning, December 5th, loved to create displays of African beauty in many shapes and forms.

Through African Heritage, he cultivated it in music, fashion, jewelry, models and muscular men who'd be part of an entourage that Donovan would take on tour around Europe and the US. He'd take them on fashion shoots and shows where the women would wear gowns made of indigenous textiles that Donovan himself collected during the years when he traveled on 'shopping sprees' to 20 regional countries for African Heritage. The men would wear West African head gear and ritual masks that made them look regal and statuesque. And the musicians included great ones like the late Ayub Ghada aka Job Seda and Jabali Africa used their experience with Donovan as a stepping stone into wider worlds.

But long before he met Kenya's first Vice President Joseph Murumbi and launched African Heritage Pan African Gallery with him in 1970, Donovan had developed a keen interest in all things African. From childhood, he'd collect images of African wildlife from his family's National Geographics. In college at UCLA, he majored in African art and Journalism; and when he joined the US State Department, his first job of choice was to work in Nigeria as a relief officer during the Biafran war in 1967.

Donovan left that job the following year but he didn't leave Africa. Instead, he went to Oshogbo where he bought his first pieces of African art, paintings by Muraina Oyelami which he still owns to this day. After that, he took a short break in France, then bought a Volkswagon van and drove across the Sahara, arriving in northern Kenya in 1969.

Charmed by the Turkana people, he spent the next three months gathering one of every element of their everyday material culture. From containers and cooking utensils to headrests and jewelry, he assembled them all and took them down to Nairobi where he was invited to exhibit his things at Studio 68 on Standard Street.

It was at the exhibition opening that Donovan spotted the one African man in attendance. Joseph Murumbi was so intrigued by the Turkana collection, he

enlisted Donovan to go back and get him a duplicate copy of everything he had on show.

Donovan's follow-through cemented a friendship that last 30 years, 20 until Kenya's former Vice President died in 1990 and 10 years more working with Murumbi's wife Sheila. Together they worked to fulfill Murumbi's dream, to promote African arts and culture, particularly through the gallery and through a Pan African research centre for international as well as local and regional students researching African culture.

Building such a centre is one of the projects Donovan left pending at his passing. But he was able to sort out many of the Murumbis' collections of everything from African art and first-edition books to stamps, home furnishings, indigenous weaponry and attire. Some are in the National Archives, others in Nairobi Gallery, and one is even at City Park where Donovan designed a sculpture garden complete with works by four of Murumbi's favorite sculptors.

The other major achievement of Mr Donovan's was designing and building his own monument to African culture. By amalgamating elements of indigenous West African architectural designs, he constructed the African Heritage House which stands at the edge of Nairobi National Park.

At one point Donovan was running AH shops all over town, from Libra House and the Carnivore to the central gallery on Kenyatta Avenue. He had outlets selling AH designs all over the US and Europe. But meeting all of those demands was a challenge, especially after the I&M bank wanted the Kenyatta Ave land, compelling African Heritage to move out.

Donovan had a history of outwitting adversity. When African Heritage Gallery had to close, he opened AH House. And when he went into a coma and many thought he was gone, he defied the odds and revived to live another three years. In those years, Donovan developed a whole new vision for his and Murumbi's African research centre. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to fulfill this one last dream. But he left graphic blueprints so that others might complete the plan that he began.

Alan Donovan will be buried December 13th at 11am in a private service. There will be memorial service and celebration of his life early next year.

