

DONOVAN, A CHAMPION OF AFRICAN ARTS, MOVES ON

By Margaretta wa Gacheru

Alan Donovan, 83 who died peacefully Sunday morning, December 5th at his Mlolongo home, was a champion of African arts and culture for more than half a century.

His passing leaves pending many cultural projects and plans he had devised since his own revival from a six-months stay in ICU in a coma in 2018. It also leaves his African Heritage House with its treasure trove of Pan African art, textiles, and artifacts in limbo without the cultural caregiver who invigorated the Kenyan art scene since 1970 with the establishment of the African Heritage Pan African Gallery followed by his African Heritage House.

Donovan's commitment to the region had been a lifelong one. Growing up on a ranch in Colorado, and reading stories on Africa in the family's 'National Geographic', he majored in African Art and Journalism at UCLA before taking up a US State Department job working in war-torn Nigeria in 1967. He quit a year later [in protest of Nixon's presidential election] and made his way across the Sahara in a Volkswagen van until he reached northern Kenya. After that, the rest is history, most notably found in the first of Donovan's two autobiographies, "My Journey Through African Heritage". The second one just came out, entitled 'An American in Africa'. And his third book, 'Black Beauty through the Ages' is coming out early next year.

Donovan loved to tell the story of how he met Joe Murumbi. After collecting Turkana artifacts up north and exhibiting them at Studio 68, the only African at the opening was the former VP. Murumbi who was so enthused by Donovan's work, he sent him back up north to gather a duplicate collection for himself. After that, Murumbi shared his dream with Donovan of strengthening global appreciation of African culture both on and outside the region. African Heritage Pan African Gallery was born. But Murumbi also hoped to establish a Pan African Research Centre, something Donovan was still working on when he died.

The American had originally only planned to stay one year in Kenya. But then, his true calling as a designer of African fashion, jewelry, and even front-of-shop windows became an obsession. He built African Heritage into a brand that was

selling African designs both locally and to the biggest department stores in the USA. Traveling to no less than 20 countries to collect indigenous culture for the Gallery, Donovan assembled many artifacts which are no longer in existence today. Some were sold, others retained in the Murumbi collections, and some at the AH House.

For Donovan, being true to Murumbi's vision inspired him to promote African Heritage music, fashion, jewelry, and models who he took on tour all over Europe and the States. At the height of his energy, he established an annual African Heritage night which was a grand affair, happening everywhere from the Hotel Intercontinental to Kenyatta Conference Centre. And once Joe Murumbi passed in 1990, Donovan established a Trust in Murumbi's name so he could assemble Joe and Sheila's collections for display at the National Archives, Nairobi Gallery, and even in the City Park where the two are buried. Donovan tried to build a sculpture garden containing Murumbi's four favorite East African sculptors' works. But vandals, unappreciative of the artworks' value, have been trying to destroy them ever since. His requests for government security fell on deaf ears.

While African Heritage was in its heyday, particularly in the 1980s, Donovan was planning ahead. He designed his African Heritage House while operating three local AH galleries, one in town, one in Libra House on Mombasa Road and one other outlet at the Carnivore. Drawing upon decorative elements from West African palaces, his African Heritage House is as he says, 'the most photographed house in Africa.'

Yet Donovan's legacy is much more than just one house. His design work can be found everywhere from Strathmore Law School to the National Archives. His original jewelry designs have been copied by scores of local jewelry makers. But Donovan didn't mind being plagiarized since he was always coming up with new ideas. He also knew he was inadvertently contributing to job creation when his art inspired others to imitate his work.

Ultimately, Donovan's departure from the local cultural scene leaves a gap that will not easily be filled. But if he has enhanced Kenyans' appreciation of the African arts by his work, then I suspect he will rest easy and be at peace.

Alan Donovan will be buried at his house, next to the Nairobi Game Park on December 13th.

