

Alan Donovan had an affinity for Africa long before he established African Heritage House or African Heritage Pan African Gallery with Kenya's second vice president, the late Joseph Murumbi back in 1971.

And even before he'd double-majored in African Art and Journalism at UCLA, he had grown up on a ranch in Colorado, reading about the continent in his family's National Geographic [magazines].

He once described how he used to create scrapbooks filled with all kinds of African animals, as if he'd already foreseen at an early age that his future life would somehow be connected with Africa.

[How appropriate then that he wished to be buried right next door to the Nairobi National Park, a place he used to watch from his balcony whole herds of wildebeests, elephants, and zebras roam the land, unlike today where the trains cut across the wildlife's former stomping grounds and herds are rarely ever seen.]

[But in light of his early affinity for Africa], it's no surprise [then] that soon after earning a masters' degree, Alan applied to the US State Department for a job that took him to West Africa where he served as a relief worker in war-torn Nigeria.

That was 1967, the 50th anniversary of which Alan celebrated a few years back.

Apparently thinking that 50 was a good round number on which to end his African Heritage journey, he went into hospital a few days after that. After six months in a coma, he miraculously regained consciousness to the relief of his friends. And he seemed to come back stronger than ever, and just as prone to planning new projects he would be in a hurry to complete. Many of them are still pending.

But back in 1968, Mr Donovan decided to quit his government job. He claimed it was his way of protesting the election of a president he believed was a war-monger. But before he left Nigeria, he made his way to Oshogbo where he met artists like Twins Seven Seven and his younger sister Nikki. He also met Muraina Oyelami, the first African artist whose works he liked enough to buy. Three of Muraina's paintings were going to cover one great wall that Allan had planned to be in the Murumbi Pan African Research Centre, which is one of his pending projects [and which he renamed the Gurunsi Memorial House].

Donovan was done with the State Department but he wasn't done with Africa. After a brief sojourn to France, he returned in an old VW van to drive across the Sahara and eventually reach the northern 'frontier' of Kenya. That would turn out to be a major turning point in his life.

He had been in no hurry to return to city life, even if it was African city life. So he spent his next three months roaming around Turkana-land, living among the people, and collecting one of every piece of material culture that people used on an everyday basis. He collected all sorts of hand-made containers and cooking utensils, headrests, jewelry and other adornments.

He already knew Sherry Hunt, the Nairobi-based gallerist and owner of Studio 68, who asked if he could have an exhibition of that collection at her gallery. This would be the first of many shows that Alan curated, not so much for himself as for up-and-coming young East African artists like Elkana Ong'esa, Expedito Mwebe, and John Odoch Ameny.

One of Alan's favorite stories is how he met Joseph Murumbi who was the only African face to show up at the opening of that first exhibition of Turkana artifacts. Murumbi was so impressed by Alan's collection that he asked him to go back and duplicate it for Murumbi to have his own.

Here was one of Africa's leading art collectors and cultural advocates (who had specifically left politics to promote African arts) asking Alan to retrace his footsteps out of appreciation for one of Kenya's indigenous cultures.

It would mark the beginning of a beautiful friendship that would last until the day Murumbi died in 1990, and additionally, another ten years until his wife Sheila passed in 2000. For in those years, it was the three of them who shared the Pan-African vision that Kenya's second vice president had, which was to create institutions that advanced indigenous African culture and the arts.

The African Heritage Pan-African Gallery was Murumbi's dream. Alan had only planned to stay in Kenya a year to help start up the Gallery. As it turned out, he never left and African Heritage blossomed into everything from a gallery, garden and a band to an international tour featuring original gowns and jewelry (mostly designed by Alan) and the African Heritage House. Finally, the name became a brand that featured in some of the best up-market stores and hotels in the world.

During his years working with the Murumbi's, Alan traveled to over 20 African countries, collecting art, artifacts, and textiles and bringing them back, first to show his copartners, then to exhibit and adapt for sale on both international and local markets.

These were the years that many of us met and got to know Alan. These were the years when we marveled at his indefatigable energy, amazing multiplicity of designs, be it in jewelry, fashion, architecture, and even front store windows which never failed to entice one to come in and see what were the latest designs in Kisii stone sculpture and Kente cloth gowns.

The Murumbi-Donovan gallery was a formidable presence for years on Kenyatta Avenue, so it was a sad day when it had to close shop. The I&M Bank now stands on land where the gallery and outdoor garden used to be.

Fortunately, Alan was always planning ahead, which is why he'd started building his 'most photographed house in Africa' back in the late 1980s. Lifting designs from West African kingdoms, he worked with local masons and builders to implement his grand ideas. These included not only constructing his own African Heritage 'castle', but creating African showcases in hotels like the Sheraton in Kampala and the Serena in Nairobi. He would even showcase African beauty abroad, both in Europe with his band, models, and fabulous fashions and across the US, including in the acclaimed San Diego Zoo.

And as some of you may know, Alan always loved a party, which is one reason why, starting in the mid-seventies, he established his annual African Heritage Nights. He'd stage them everywhere from the Intercontinental Hotel to the Jomo Kenyatta International Conference Centre. It was always a grand and glorious event in which the models whom he had trained wore gorgeous gowns which he also primarily designed. Plus, his male models were often award-winning body-builders who looked regal and statuesque in their colorfully plumed ceremonial masks from Cameroon and Mali.

Alan Donovan was many things to many people. To some he was elusive, abrupt, and sometime erasable. To others he was ingenious, inspired, and incredibly generous when it came to assisting aging artists like Jak Katarikawe, Expedito Mwebe, and John Odoch Ameny. One of the projects that Alan did not complete

was establishing a fund that would continue helping older artists who, like Jak, had problems paying his rent or Expedito covering his medical bills.

Alan is most closely associated with African Heritage, but in addition to his House and the Gallery, he's been responsible for curating the ground floor of the National Archives and the Nairobi Gallery. He tried to turn a portion of Nairobi City Park into a sculpture garden where the works of four of Murumbi's favorite sculptors were on permanent display there. Unfortunately, vandalism made that project almost impossible. But Alan persisted. His desire to keep the spirit of the Murumbis alive has been a prime factor in fueling many of his initiatives. It's through his efforts that Murumbi's biography, 'A Path Not Taken' was published.

Alan has gone on to publish two autobiographies of his own, 'The Journey through African Heritage' and 'An American in Africa: 50 Years Exploring African Heritage and Overcoming Racism in America. Now his final publication, entitled 'Black Beauty Through the Ages' is scheduled to come out early next year. But like all the lofty plans and projects that Alan designed since his miraculous 'resurrection' in 2018, it's not clear how many will materialize.

Nonetheless, for all that he accomplished in his 83 years, including being made a Yoruba chief, Chief Babalaje of Ido Osun, we are grateful to have known this marvelous man whose home is treasure trove of African culture and art.

All we want for him now is that he rests in eternal peace. Thank you all for coming to remember and honor this amazing man whose love of beauty and African culture has given us all so pleasure and joy.