"Visionary Leadership in the Arts in Africa"

Kenya's African Heritage recently won an achievement award from the Pan-African Broadcasting, Heritage and Achievement Awards based in South Africa, for "Visionary Leadership in the Arts in Africa" and for nourishing the ideals of Pan-Africanism. Here the company's founder Alan Donovan tells us about himself, his ambitions and the ups and downs of African Heritage over the 30 years of its existence.

Q: Alan, when did you come to Africa and what did you do?

After graduating from UCLA and working in the US State Department, I was sent to Africa in July 1967 as a Program Assistant for the USAID Program in Nigeria until the Biafran/Nigerian War when many Americans were evacuated from Nigeria. I then became a relief officer trying to get food to starving Biafrans.

By 1968 I had decided I did not want to be a bureaucrat as the food relief planes were being shot down, babies were dying on powdered milk dropped to them and convoys of relief trucks were being hijacked by the Nigerians for military purposes. At the same time I was working with the Ambassador's Self Help Fund on small projects and was introduced to weaving and handicraft projects. I met a lot of Nigerian artists then who are still friends. I realised that with very little money one could make a big impact just by introducing small changes, especially for handicrafts or other items destined for the export market.

An Interview with Alan Donovan of African Heritage

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

I was sent back to the USA to coordinate relief aid and was then reassigned to Tunisia in 1969. On a ship enroute to Paris to learn French for my new assignment, I got a bit tipsy and wrote a letter resigning from my job with the US government. So when I arrived in Paris I had no job, but I decided to study French anyway for three months as I wanted to travel through Africa before going back to the United States. I then bought a VW bus and drove from Paris to Morocco and crossed the Sahara Desert to Nigeria, camping on the border until the Nigerian civil war ended. Mine
was one of the first cars to enter Nigeria after the war. I visited with old friends and saw Lagos for the first time when there was not a blackout. Then I drove across the Congo to Uganda where I stumbled into a small border war between the two countries. I finally made it through and arrived in Kenya in the early 1970s.

Q: What happened when you came to Kenya?

While in West Africa, I had collected a lot of beads and on my trip through Africa I continued to buy a lot of body adornment like pendants, rings, earrings, mainly because there was no space for big objects on my bus, but I also found these objects beautiful and fascinating. When I got to Kenya, I decided to stay for a while and spent three months walking around Lake Rudolf (as Lake Turkana was then called). I made many trips studying the designs and material culture of the Turkana. I used to pay Turkana blacksmiths to make earrings and other items, including melting down cooking pots and making ornaments in clay moulds. I started to put together the earrings into necklaces that could be worn by western women.

I decided to learn more about jewellery making, and Holland Millis, a US Peace Corps volunteer producing jewellery at the Bombolulu Workshop for severely traumatised and disabled people at the coast, taught me how to make hooks and other simple jewellery-making techniques. There I collected Giriama wedding necklaces made of tiny brass or aluminium beads from the Giriama people. Their jewellery was dying out and I encouraged them to make these beads. Now these beads are a big export item from Kenya as they are used as spacers by jewellery designers all over the world.

Q: How did your interest in African jewellery expand?

In October 1970 I had an exhibition in Nairobi called “Artefacts from Kenya’s Northern Frontier” at the old Studio Arts 68 on Standard Street which was run by a lady named Sherrie Hunt. I lectured several time a day on Turkana artefacts and designs, and I met Joe Murumbi, retired Vice President of Kenya, and his wife, Sheila, who later became my partners when we opened African Heritage. I also met Doria Block and she was very interested in my collections and the jewellery I was making and eventually I designed and operated shops for Block Hotels at their lodges. I also made a collection of Turkana items for John Browse who later became our agent in the USA.

While at the coast where I was designing jewellery from all the beads and bits and pieces I had collected, I met Errol Trzebinski who encouraged me to exhibit them. I set up a small jewellery workshop and then had an exhibition of my jewellery designs at Studio Arts 68. A Texan, George Perutz, came in on the opening day of the exhibit and started taking things from the walls. He said he wanted to buy everything, including the boards the jewellery was displayed on and even the walls. He took it all on a travelling exhibition through galleries and museums in the USA for two years. This created a big interest and demand for the jewellery.

I went to the USA in 1971 touring seven cities, reaching more than 20 million Americans through radio and TV shows, lectures, newspaper and magazine articles and features. Hardly anyone had seen African jewellery in America then. Interest exploded. I met Jesse Jackson and had an exhibition of African culture in the Chicago Amphitheatre for “Black Expo”. Aretha Franklin and other black
stars were singing there and school-children would run through the five rooms of exhibits every day, completely flattening them. I was producing a show on a stage every three hours, and was finally put into hospital to recover.

There was a big show at Chicago’s Playboy Club using black models there for the first time. I also had a street festival in New York. The clothes for my show did not arrive from Kenya and I was getting desperate. I had a lot of African fabrics and with the help of a costume designer from the Lincoln Center Opera I got some of my designs made up. This was the first time I had ever designed clothing using African materials. We still are producing those early designs.

In Denver, I did a show at the United Nations Center. Thieves broke in through the roof of the exhibit and a lot was stolen, so when I was on the morning television programme we talked about theft in Denver. My jewellery was exhibited all over America.

Q: How did you and Joe Murumbi get together to start African Heritage?

In 1971, Joe came to one of my exhibitions in Nairobi and saw a Nimba fertility mask from the Baga tribe of Guinea and he wanted it for his collection. I had already sold the mask to an Asian trader who was going to export it to Germany. He agreed to take his money back and I sold the mask to Joe – and later it became our logo for African Heritage.

In 1972 Joe Murumbi told me that it was his dream to set up a Pan-African Centre to show the arts from all parts of Africa where African artists could meet from different countries. He had made collections during his travels to various African countries as the first foreign minister and roving ambassador for Kenya. I had exhibited jewellery and produced a Nigerian festival with African models showing all African textiles during the first Pan-African trade fair in Nairobi that year. Irene Mugambi was my first head model. We also did a festival from Madagascar with performances at the City Hall and exhibitions at Studio Arts 68 and Gallery Watatu.

Joe and Sheila were very keen on all these events and after our meetings about the Nimba mask we decided to open the first Pan-African gallery in Africa: African Heritage. Margaret Kenyatta, the then mayor of Nairobi, opened the gallery officially in January 1973 and she has opened every gallery of African Heritage since then.
Q: African Heritage had a disaster in 1977?

In 1977, a fire burnt it all down. The fire was caused by an electrical fault in the telephone. The American Embassy sent over trucks and moved whatever we could retrieve to the American Embassy Residence grounds and for weeks the women from the East African Women’s League and the American Women’s Association helped us to sift through the ashes and to repair things. We then had a big fire sale in the old Ford showroom (the Hughes Building), which helped us to buy more beads for my workshop and more artefacts.

Edith Hughes, a great friend of African Heritage, gave us the building on Kenyatta Avenue to continue our gallery until the building destroyed by fire was rebuilt. African Heritage then moved back into its old location.

Rolf Schmidt and Omar el Haj (of the Red Bull) set up the first African Heritage café which Charles Njonjo opened, just behind the gallery on Banda Street. I no longer kept my workshops next to the gallery after that fire, and moved all the workshops and stores to the Industrial Area.

Q: Comment on some of your memorable orders for jewellery.

An American company called The Banana Republic asked me to supply all their jewellery for their catalogues and a chain of stores in the USA. It was to be marketed under the name “Global Jewellery”. I set up workshops in India, Bali, and other countries as well as Kenya, combining techniques, beads and traditions from various cultures. The company planned to open a hundred jewellery stores in America and I was to be in charge of the jewellery operation. Then, another company, The Gap, bought out the original Banana Republic and
when I arrived back in San Francisco from Tokyo with samples for my first major spring and summer collections, the original owners were thrown out. There was chaos!

However it had been a nightmare trying to do the huge orders for them. For instance they wanted Turkana aluminium jewellery like the original pieces that were made by the Turkana from melted-down cooking pots. It was the biggest order in my history, with 50,000 pairs of earrings and many thousands of necklaces, belts, and bracelets. The first few items were produced but then the Turkana ran out of cooking pots. I sent up new pots and aluminium bars. These just did not work. The pieces looked like shiny tin cans. I tried mixing ashes with the molten metal and all sorts of things, using acid. Nothing worked. They had to be made from the old sufurias (cooking pots). So I got a lorry and went around from village to village, from Thika to Gabra Tulla, trading new cooking pots for old charred ones. (Even today at some villages, women run out to me with their old cooking pots.) Because the roads were impassable to Turkana, I then had to have the pots dropped by air. The pilot asked, “Aren’t we going to spoil them?” to which I replied, “No, they are full of holes!” He must have wondered who this sadist was, dropping old cooking pots in the desert!

I had to employ a hundred more jewellery craftsmen in Nairobi while I was away and many turned out to be unsavoury characters. Unfortunately, the Gabra blackssmiths who were also working on this order, collected their first payment and went away for a seven year circumcision ceremony and I never saw them again. Needless to say I never finished the order and lost money trying to produce the things.

Q: How did your jewellery production expand?

My first workshop in Nairobi was in Mathare Valley, a huge suburban slum area. I hired mostly disabled and disadvantaged people from that area, many of whom are still with me today. One day the whole workshop was stolen, including the door and the windows and chairs. I found almost everything in a shop in downtown Nairobi—even my pliers with half a completed necklace, but managed to get very little back. So I moved out of Mathare Valley.

I had shared the workshop with an American nun, Sister Edith Fragoli, who had a nervous breakdown and left Kenya. I eventually absorbed her workshop, set up by the National Christian Council, which produced all brass jewellery. I still produce this jewellery, called “Malaika” at my workshops. I also still have the original “African Heritage Jewellery”, which combines antique beads and components from all parts of Africa.

Also I have “Jungle Safari Jewellery” which was started in 1979 for San Diego Zoo in America where I had a show for 3000 people, the biggest show I’ve ever done, for the opening of their Jungle Bazaar. All the food for the event was cooked in huge trailer kitchens in Los Angeles and trucked down to San Diego. It was a disaster. The ugali was a weak, yellow runny cornbread and the kuku wa nazi (coconut chicken) was cooked with presweetened coconut sauce which they then decorated with Maraschino cherries!

For the “Jungle Safari Jewellery”, I combed the country for local Kenyan materials: This was the first jewellery to use carved wooden animals and Pokot water reed beads, as well as seeds,
seedpods, nuts, ostrich egg shells, porcupine quills, barkcloth, fish bones, goat bones, batiked bones, even fishnets and Kenyan army bullets!

This jewellery proved very popular and nowadays one can see thousands of similar jewellery items with wooden animals in all the markets from here to South Africa!

My fourth line of jewellery is called “Endangered Art”, a name selected for the Banana Republic company, which consists of old silver and gold components from disappearing cultures and traditions, mixed with semi-precious and precious stones.

Fifthly, I started “NALA Jewellery” based on Turkana and Maasai designs like the Maasai brass coils called surutia worn by Maasai married women, combined with tiny Czech glass trade beads. The word NALA was used in the film The Lion King for the lioness, as they had seen it in my catalogue and thought it was a Swahili word, but in fact it is my name, Alan, spelled backwards!

Q: What about your Kisii stone and wood work?

In a study by the World Bank, African Heritage is called the most organised wholesale and retail craft operation in Africa. It called us a “pioneer which has turned souvenir trinkets into objets d’art with world class appeal”. Kisii stone has been one of our major efforts in producing contemporary crafts.

The Kisii crafts people are very skilled, like the Kamba wood carvers, and it is a myth that West African sculptors are more skilled. There are fantastic skills among carvers and other crafts people in Kenya, and this has only recently been developed. The Kisii carving was developed with the help of Catholic missionaries in the 1940s and 1950s. Sherrie Hunt at Studio Arts 68 was the major outlet for Kisii stone in the 1960s, and African Heritage has continued working with many of the original families that produced soapstone items.

I had several top designers, including Joanna Bristow and Suzanne Hallauer (who renamed herself Athi-Mara-Magadi and is now a photographer in Santa Fe). I had several design studios and over six godowns in the 1980s. Over 10% of our gross income was spent on producing new designs. We invested a lot in product development, but in 1997 we had to start dismissing people and from the 500 full-time workers we had then, we now are down to about 120.

We had more than 5000 outside suppliers producing items to our design, mostly in family groups. Now we only have a portion of that number. Our suppliers used to bring in their finished goods and other suppliers would come into the African Heritage gallery on Kenyatta Avenue every Tuesday morning for a huge market. When we had to move out of the Kenyatta Avenue premises because it was being demolished, we no longer had such a large space. The market was disbanded and moved out near the City Market, then down near Uhuru Highway and finally
to the Globe Cinema roundabout. This is now called the Maasai Market and is still held on Tuesdays.

Our wood carvings are mostly produced by Kamba cooperatives and they tell me that about 60% of the designs they produce today are from the original African Heritage designs.

**Q: Do you have a problem with copyright?**

We copyright our designs in America and other countries, but it is almost hopeless to do it here. A lot of our techniques are also copied.

For example, when I was in India, I found very old batikèd bone and agate beads amongst the Naga people there. I could not find anyone in India producing these beads at that time. So I started experimenting with wax and dye to make batikèd bone beads in Kenya, as I already had a bone workshop, carving and dying bone items.

Today, hundreds and perhaps thousands are making a living out of that one technique, batikèd bones like the original salad spoons with dyed bone handles, and much more. Now India is producing beads and other things using this technique and exporting it back to Africa at a cheaper price than we can produce them!

African Heritage has probably had a bigger economic impact on Kenya than many of the so-called large donors, as these techniques have an immediate impact on the grassroots and rural economies and flow into markets all over the world. We have promoted a lot of interest in craft production in Africa. The Giriama beads, as I mentioned, are exported everywhere.

**Q: What are your gross sales?**

Today, 20% of our sales is in jewellery. Our biggest export items are jewellery and Kisii stone. This is due to our opening wholesale and retail galleries in Paris through our agents there, so Kisii stone accounts for over 30% of our total production.

Probably another 15% is in West African art, as we are no longer such a big Pan-African operation as when I used to travel to more than 20 African countries every year doing all the buying.

Probably 15% is in wooden items. The rest is in ethnographic items, bone, pottery, basketry and miscellaneous items. We produce almost no clothing anymore, even though we are noted for our original Pan-African designs. In our heyday back in 1996 our gross sales were around $3 million per year. Sales went up like a rocket from 1970 to 1996, then they plunged to about a sixth of what they were - yet we have almost the same overheads!

**Q: Why have sales fallen?**

Our growth was thanks to the Kenya tourism market. We grew complacent like everyone else in the tourism industry here. Our best year was the last year before the collapse of tourism to Kenya in about 1996, just about the time of the riots and tribal clashes.

The mistake of African Heritage and the country in general was ignoring competition, especially from southern Africa. South Africa opened and promoted its assets, along with the mystique of Nelson Mandela, so South Africa became the place to go and the tourists passed us by. Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana all started doing better things. Kenya did not promote itself to meet the challenge. Secondly, the El Niño rains nearly washed out the infrastructure and tourism was left stranded. Add to that the bad publicity overseas and the ensuing diminished image of Kenya as a prestigious tourism destination, the Julie Ward murder in the Masai Mara, AIDS and the increasing
number of street children, and general insecurity in the city centre.

The economic decline in Kenya has had a huge effect on the crafts people. We are facing a very difficult time and I don’t know if we can continue. We cannot rely on tourism so our only hope is to restructure for the export market. We want to open shops in Austria, Germany and Italy, among other countries, similar to what we have done successfully in Paris. This is our only hope. However this takes a considerable investment. We have found some European investors in Austria who are keen to invest in us, and we hope that even after the tragic events of 11 September 2001 that this goes ahead, so we can open more outlets for Kenyan crafts abroad.

Q: What other work do you do now?

A: I am working with a lot of hotels and restaurants, but producing wall murals and showcases instead of selling to tourists. I have just finished a major design project at the Carnivore Restaurant and I have finished showcases and other décor in the lobby of the Nairobi Serena Hotel. I am doing the same at the Serena Beach Hotel now.

Also I am doing some interior work at the new Tamango Restaurant in Westlands for the Tamarind. We provided décor for the Kenya stand at the World Travel Mart in London in 2001 and dressed the hostesses, as we usually do. We usually dress Miss Kenya finalists and other beauty contestants. Our design for Miss Kenya Tourism won first place in the world.

We have done a lot of décor for the government such as the Kenya stand at the World Expo at Vancouver in 1986 where we did the interior designs. There are plans for us to do a hospitality lounge at the Nairobi and Mombasa airports as well as decorating the departure, arrival, immigration and baggage areas at both airports.

We also still present “Kenya’s African Heritage Festival” at many venues. I recently had a gala night for about 500 people.

World models made famous by African Heritage. Left: The newly-discovered Iman in 1975 at an African Heritage Night in Masai Lodge; Centre: Iman today, from a recent photo assignment for Donna Karan of New York; Right: Khadja Adam as she appeared on the cover of Cosmopolitan in 1986.
at my house for the launch of the new Kenya Airways uniform. We showed costumes and designs from almost every city that Kenya Airways flies to in Africa. I have authentic costumes from all the 20 African countries in our archives from when I used to travel to these countries while collecting for African Heritage. When I stopped this in 1986, the traders from West Africa whom I used to deal with started coming to Nairobi with their goods, which is now on a circuit like New York, London, Los Angeles, so we are no longer unique in selling Pan-African items as we used to be the first 20 years or so; now we concentrate more on our original designs.

Q: **Comment on the models and musicians you have promoted.**

Iman is the most famous African model of all time. She is worth millions on the New York Stock Exchange!

In 1974, she was at the University of Nairobi and working in a travel agency. She wanted to be a model and joined us for our third anniversary African Heritage Night. Peter Beard then asked to photograph her wearing my African Heritage jewellery and costumes. We organised for her to get a visa to America to participate in a show we were doing in Hollywood on the “Influence of Africa on Fashion Designs”. The New York newspapers had already gotten hold of Peter Beard’s photographs and they ballyhooed her arrival as the “Most Beautiful Woman on Earth”. There was also that story put out that she was found herding goats along Lake Rudolf. Of course this all added to the publicity and hype of her coming out. She never made it to our show in Hollywood and the guest of honour, the first black mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, among others, were left awaiting her arrival.

Another success story was Khadija Adam, a Somali girl from Nyeri. She was selected as Miss Kenya in 1984 and then was the first Kenyan to win the Miss Africa title. She flew from an African Heritage Night direct to Paris where she modelled for Yves St. Laurent and *Newsweek* magazine described her as the most beautiful African Queen.

Fayel Tall, a Malian, was also photographed by Peter Beard, and went on to model for the most famous photographers in the world, and there were many others.

Several members of the original African Heritage Band, which broke up finally after a European tour in 1986, went on to become successful musicians in other countries, notably Job Seda, who changed his name to Ayub Khan, and Samite, a Ugandan who tours around the world doing one-man shows. Also the last band to tour with us in Europe, who used to play in the garden of African Heritage on Kenyatta Avenue, “Jabali Afrika”, went on to the USA after our 1995 tour where they remain today.

Q: **Should African countries have their antiques returned from museums overseas?**

I sympathise with Nigeria in their wish to get back their treasures, but I am also realistic. In many African museums,
Built on a site overlooking Nairobi National Park, the African Heritage house has been featured in Architectural Digest, which called it “one of the extraordinary properties of the world”. The design is inspired by traditional African mud architecture and the house is filled with traditional and contemporary African art and materials.

Q: Is there a museum of African art in Kenya planned?

Not that I know of. My wish is to establish a permanent exhibition of the best pieces from the Joe Murumbi collections. His was one of the first collections of Pan-African art originating in Africa, and this would be the best way to pay tribute to him and his legacy.

I hope that the Murumbi collections (now mostly in the National Archives) will be gazetted so that they cannot be exported. There are many things in storage since Sheila Murumbi died. Joe wanted their house in Muthaiga to become an Institute for African Studies, and this was the plan, but the property was misappropriated and the plan came to naught.

I want to help produce a Murumbi Memorial Gallery at the National Museums, who have welcomed this idea, as his wife Sheila wanted to do, but she died before it was started or before the collection at the National Archives was ever properly displayed and it remains in disarray today.

Q: What about exports of antique art from Africa?

I don’t think the export of antiques from Africa need to be prohibited, except for something very rare, such as a 19th century Lamu door or a rare Giriama grave post. Antiques in Africa may only be 20 years old. I see a lot of “antiqued” copies (not necessarily fakes as no one pretends they are antique pieces), especially from West Africa, but in general this is good as it keeps the traditional carvers producing things when they lose their traditional clientele as ceremonies requiring such things vanish from the cultures.

Q: Tell us about your house.

I built my house from 1989 to 1994 on the edge of Nairobi National Park. The view is one of the most magnificent in the world and the house has appeared in many prestigious magazines such as Architectural Digest, which has designated it as one of the extraordinary properties of the world.

Enroute to Kenya back in 1969, I first saw in Mali the towering mosques made of mud. I went to Yemen, Morocco,
Q: What has been your major contribution professionally?

My major contribution has been to present and expose African art, encouraging people to understand and appreciate the contribution Africa has made to the world of art and crafts. I have improved the appreciation of African art, culture and fashion globally, through our international shows, by showing African textiles, for example, in a contemporary way which has helped to preserve and expand their manufacture.

Kente cloth has some of the most complicated weaves in the world which we have shown in galleries as well as on the catwalks where it has been discovered, revered and revived by others.

The same with jewellery. Look now at the young African artists and designers. They have an interest in African art and materials. Thirty years ago, I was considered to be eccentric because I used such things as barkcloth and porcupine quills in my designs, but now young designers use these things as a matter of course. African college and school students come to see my house which I hope inspires them.

Q: What is your major disappointment and what are your plans for the future?

My main disappointment professionally has been to come toward the end of my career in such a shambles.

We had 25 good years employing hundreds and thousands of people and creating markets for hundreds and thousands of others, and now we are facing collapse. As we cannot rely on tourism as our main market, we must succeed in building up export markets, and for this we need investors or serious help from foundations or the government.