

## ROBIN ANDERSON

No conversation of Pioneer Women Artists of Kenya would be complete without the name of the late **Robin Anderson**, the co-founder of the first major gallery in Nairobi to show contemporary arts from East Africa. **Gallery Watatu** opened near the New Stanley Hotel in the Nairobi city centre in 1968 with co-founders Yony Wai-te (ne Jony Waite) and graphic artist David Hart. Only **PaaYaPaa Gallery**,



founded by the venerable Elimo Njau, originally from Tanzania, and the **New Stanley Art Gallery** were showing local art works at that time in the city centre before PaaYaPaa moved to the suburbs of the city where it remains today.

Robin was born in 1924. The house that Robin lived in was very near the Nairobi City Park where Robin used to spend time sketching birds and monkeys in the indigenous forests and listening to concerts at the City Park band stand. The Spanish/California style stucco house with tiled roof had been built by a big game hunter named Klein, who allegedly kept a lion in it. The house was then sold to a surgeon in Nairobi, Dr. G. W. Anderson, Robin's father. He built an extra wing on the house for Robin's mother, who was a cripple. It was on journeys around the country with her father that Robin encountered the various peoples of Kenya and the abundant wildlife which had a lifelong effect on her art, principally her batiks on silk. She developed this technique by first drawing outlines and silhouettes which she then screened on the silk before adding colours and batiking it with wax. She was a forerunner of what became a burgeoning industry of batiks in East Africa. She also attended Heatherleys Art School in London, although this experience did not deter her from returning to Kenya to continue her career of depicting the peoples, flora and wildlife of the country.

During the 1940's, before he went to serve during WWII in Somalia, Joseph Murumbi would peer through the gates and admire the house. In later years, Murumbi was still in love with the Muthaiga house, and after he had resigned from politics as the second Vice President of the country, he managed to make a down payment on the house which Dr. Anderson accepted. Eventually the Murumbis lived there until he sold the house to the Kenyan National Archives in 1976 following a devastating fire that destroyed the first Pan African Gallery in Nairobi, African Heritage, that had opened in 1972. He sold the house on condition that the government would transform it into an Institute of African Studies. UNESCO agreed to provide funds for a library, kitchen and hostel for visiting scholars. However, the house was allowed to deteriorate and eventually was torn down thus shattering the dreams of Murumbi. However his legacy remains intertwined with that of Robin Anderson.

Although Robin is most famous for her elegant silk batiks, she also produced a great body of oil paintings and watercolours during her career. The African artists that gained prominence at Gallery Watatu included an artist from South Africa who had taken refuge in Kenya during the Apartheid Years in South Africa -- **Charles Sekano** -- as well as a young artist who was discovered painting colourful scenes of local culture in his vegetable stall in the citymarket, **Accent Soi**. Murumbi later judged one of Soi's works as the prize winner in an ESSO calendar competition and Soi won another contest for the OLYMPICS which brought international fame to the artist. Both these artists were favoured by Murumbi. Their works, and works by Robin Anderson and Jony Wai-te are in the Murumbi Collections at the Nairobi Gallery and the Kenya National Archives. Robin passed away in 2012.