

# The Revolutionary Murals

Mozambique's greatest achievements in plastic arts now call for careful conservation efforts

Public art as expressed in posters and mural paintings is one of the areas where the public mind most often gives vent to its yearning for freedom. Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola and Mozambique are countries where such public art has reached significant heights.

In the first years of Mozambican independence, local popular art went through a phase of euphoria. Covering entire walls were paintings associated with the order of the day which mobilized the population, reflecting a wide variety of emotions and pictorial styles. Such art was typically unplanned, wherein resided both its strength and weakness. If on one hand it was extremely varied and creative, on the other the paintings soon faded or were washed away, their messages becoming fragmented and lost.

The fragile work of this initial phase was soon replaced by another type of mural painting belonging to what might be called a "second movement". Its essential characteristic was that it had been performed by a professional artist or group of artists who, motivated by the national revolution, were intent on leaving behind a more universal and enduring message. The compositions are larger, executed in a broader range of colors, often with the prior authority of local officials.

## Optimism and humor

Typical of this second phase is the participation of exiles who, having returned to Mozambique after years of involuntary absence, once again felt they could make a contribution to their homeland. In 1977, approximately 100 volunteers finished the first of this series of murals on a wall of the country's largest hospital complex. The work had the general coordination of Moira Thoa, a Chilean painter, but Mozambican artists — and even part of the hospital's staff — cooperated in it.

Claudio Reis, another Chilean, and his Mozambican wife Madalena, also painted an enormous mural in the capital's *baixa*<sup>1</sup>, at a strategic spot where thousands of port workers pass by daily.

Both murals have a clearly revolutionary content. Its elements convey a lyrical and optimistic vision of a revolution which was to prove more difficult than their originators had imagined. Both are delicate and generous anticipations of a brighter future. The central theme of one of them is the human hand, "the only source of miracles in any revolutionary process" (Samora Michel); the second is a combination of industrial and agricultural elements, symbolizing the fundamental alliance which the Mozambican movement is expected to bring about.

A third mural covers the entire side wall of a low building belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture. Its humorous composition is animated by curves suggesting a rainbow, but some of the human figures wear a grave look and fixed stare, conveying a more serious message on the real conditions facing all Mozambicans. These apparently contradictory elements are harmoniously brought together by the mural's unique process of execution.

This third mural's upper

<sup>1</sup> The word *baixa* is applied to the lower section of the Mozambican capital, along the port and not far from downtown Maputo.



section was executed by Moira Thoa, a Chilean exile whose paintings have a thoroughly optimistic overtone. The lower part is the work of a well-known Mozambican painter named Malangatana Nguenha, whose intense and pathetic style is responsible for the mural's dramaticity and tension.

Malangatana would later make an even greater contribution to mural painting as he tackled the execution of a huge mural in one of the gardens surrounding the Museum of Natural History. Its theme is "Man's Struggle in the Context of Nature" and, unlike the other murals mentioned above, its political message is more subtle and concealed.



The result of a collective artistic effort, the mural at *Praça dos Heroes* is almost one-hundred meters in length

It is a brilliant afresco showing human and animal figures that gaze at the viewer from three adjacent walls. There are no poles or perspectives, so that the viewer's eyes wander from left to right and from right to left, responding rather to the detail than to the overall composition. Fortunately the men then in charge of enforcing the new cultural policy did not require Malangatana and others to express an optimism which did not exist in their pictorial universe.

On the same level as Malangatana is his contemporary Mankeu, another well-known Mozambican painter. Until inde-

pendence, Mankeu was known for his somber canvases, often showing skeletal figures in dry, brown tones. Thenceforward, however, he took to using more varied and bright colors, such as those of a mural he painted on one of the walls of the Popular Fair, a location visited by thousands of Mozambican citizens on weekends. The mural shows people frolicking and engaging in Mozambican traditional dances — an entirely new theme in the painter's work.

Another mural in this new phase of Mozambican art was painted in the gardens of the presidential palace by a number of artists who, while preserving

their individual styles, achieved a wholesome assembly. It is a giant afresco showing a multitude of human figures; tortured faces are set side by side with smiling ones, as if conveying the wide emotional response of an entire people.

#### Mondlane's tomb

The greatest achievement of the Mozambican revolution in the area of plastic arts is also the most important landmark in its "third movement" — typified by the fact that building walls were planned to receive murals. We refer to the mural in Praça dos Heróis, on a curving, 96-meter

long, 5-meter high wall.

When Eduardo Mondlane was killed, the Frelimo leaders pledged to transfer his body from Tanzania to Mozambique. After independence, steps were taken to build a monument in honor of Mozambican heroes who had died for the cause of freedom. A simple tomb was designed, shaped like a five-pointed star in the middle of a large public square. As a visual and emotional counterpoint, a long, wavy wall was built where a mural was to be painted. The mural was to describe the odyssey of the Mozambican people from the early days of colonial submission, through slavery, forced labor, fascism, the emergence of an armed struggle, the war of liberation, to triumph and the new society.

The mural was the result of a collective effort on the part of such artists as José Freire, João Craveirinha, José Forjaz, Malangatana Nguenha, Eugénio de Lemos and António Quadros. For all participants, the work was an unforgettable experience, a triumph in mutual interaction; the work produced has a quality and scale that surpass anything else ever achieved in the country in artistic terms.

#### Conservation

Mural art seems to have attained a privileged position in Mozambican plastic arts. Plans are being made for painting a large collective mural at the Port of Maputo and for the construction of a public square whose surrounding walls will be decorated by some of the most outstanding national painters.

The problem is now preserving such works of art, some of which may be damaged by the weather. Mozambican authorities are aware of the problem, and support is being sought for conservation purposes. (*Albie Sachs and Sol Carvalho*) ●