New breed of African artist resurrects interest in painting

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MAPUTO, Mozambique — The revolutionary artist squinted into the reflecting white sand to study the talent of the next generation. His thick, tangled beard stirred and he smiled. Malangatana liked what he saw.

The sand-scape was covered with helicopters and parachutes, landing planes and speeding motorbikes, blooming flowers and happy children — the stuff of a child's world in a teeming African barrio at the end of an airport runway.

Paper, pencils and paintbrushes are rare commodities in war-torn Mozambique. So every Sunday, the country's most famous artist and about 50 neighborhood youngsters use rocks, glass and pastel-colored sand to paint on the canvas of a small, empty lot.

Dulci Cuambe, on her hands and knees, poured some colored sand from an old Coke can to draw a house, a sun with red-sand rays, and a girl like herself.

"This is art we are doing here," the 14-year-old explained. "Malangatana teaches us many things we don't know."

This informal school is one sign that African painting, a form of art that all but disappeared from this continent centuries ago, is coming alive again.

A new generation of respected African painters is emerging and the popularity of painting is growing across the continent.

"Twenty years ago, I would take African paintings to galleries in the States, and people didn't want to hear about contemporary African art. They'd say, 'If it's not a mask, it must not be African.' But that's all changing," said Alan Donovan, whose store, African Heritage, in Nairobi, Kenya, is a major seller of art in East Africa.

African painting began as far back as 5000 B.C. with the rock paintings of bushmen. But for reasons no one fully understands, the art form quickly declined, replaced by more functional art such as the sculpted idols and ceremonial masks.

"Basically, the idea of a picture to stick on the wall is very un-African," said John Povey, editor of African Arts, a magazine published by the African Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The cultural history of Africa is rich in sculpture. In fact, African sculpture was a source of inspiration to European painters such as Pablo Picasso.

But indigenous African painting began to re-emerge in the 1940s, when a few colonial benefactors discovered talented young black African artists, such as Malangatana in Mozambique.

Now Africa's schools are beginning to offer training for budding artists, as well as for art lovers. An art program at Nairobi's Kenyatta University has grown from 10 to 40 students in the past year, and art education is now compulsory in Kenyan primary schools.

For painters in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, money is the key to survival. Families put pressure on their children, especially the educated ones, to help support an extended family that frequently includes dozens of siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts.

"The question for young people in developing countries such as ours is what job are you going to do," said Catherine Gombe, head of the graphics department at Kenyatta University. "You cannot survive without money. And people wonder: What can art offer you? The society we deal with thinks like that."

In their attempt to create art that sells, African painters have often borrowed heavily from the world's great painters.

"A lot of our own people look out, to London and Paris and New York, rather than in," said Elimo Njau, a successful Kenyan painter and curator of the Paa Ya Paa Gallery near Nairobi.

"Some of us are more British than the British," Njau said, shaking his head. In fact, a Swahili saying for high-quality merchandise is "*kitu kizuri kama cha kizungu*" — "as good as European."

Unfortunately, the mainstream of African painting has been overloaded with contemporary riffraff, a chewing of the cud of recent contemporary stuff just to make money," Njau said.

"Do not copy. Copying puts God to sleep," admonishes a sign that Njau painted on his house.

Africa's painters face other hurdles as well. Materials, training and role models are in short supply. And despite international acclaim for its sculpture, the continent's best-known artifacts are still the carved wooden salad utensils, soapstone elephants and other trinkets popular with tourists on safari.

Until recently, art experts considered even the best African paintings to be weak copies of the European masters. But growing numbers of African painters are studying abroad and, upon their return, adapting those skills to their feeling for African tradition — without resorting to borrowing.

"I encourage my artists to develop their own eye," said Ruth S. Schaffner, an American who owns the Watatu Gallery in Nairobi. "I tell them to paint whatever they want to paint even though every tourist wants the British-style wildlife scenes."

One of Schaffner's proteges, Sane Wadu, 33, tried writing poetry, playing guitar and farming before he began to eke out a living as a painter. His works recall Picasso, although Wadu says he's never seen a Picasso.

"Farming wasn't earning me anything," said Wadu, whose oil paintings sell for as much as $1,000. "I needed freedom. I paint for freedom. Other fields of work will just keep you tied down."

A few African painters already have gained some international recognition. Among them are Twins Seven Seven in Nigeria, Skunder Boghossian in Ethiopia, and Malangatana Valente Ngwenya in Mozambique.

"Sculpture in Africa is still very strong. But now indigenous painting is growing with the new generation," said Malangatana, a leader of that new generation of painters.

Malangatana's paintings, which have been shown throughout Europe, now command $2,000 to $10,000 apiece.

As a child, Malangatana used charcoal and crushed fruit to paint on the sides of houses. His career was launched while working as a tennis ball boy at the Lourenzo Marques Club, the meeting place for Portuguese high society in colonial Mozambique.

Augusto Cabral, a painter and sculptor, spotted Malangatana drawing and gave him watercolors and paper. Eventually, Malangatana moved into the home of a Portuguese architect and began painting full-time while meeting the white poets and artists then living in Portugal's colony on the Indian Ocean.

Malangatana's angry canvases, which contrast sharply with his gentle demeanor, later drew the ire of colonial authorities and he was jailed for two years in the 1960s on political charges.

One of his most famous paintings, "25th of September," commemorated the day that Mozambique's black rebels launched their struggle for independence from Portugal.

Mozambique won independence in 1975 and installed a Marxist government. But an opposition guerrilla movement emerged and the resulting 13-year war has claimed thousands of lives, scarred the countryside and forced 5 million people out of their homes.

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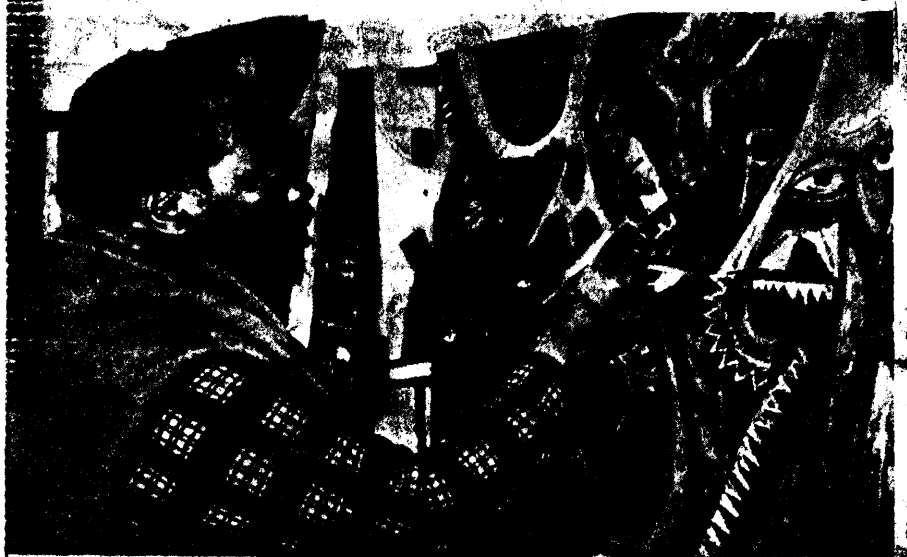
Elimo Njau, a successful Kenyan painter and curator of the Paa Ya Paa Gallery of Nairobi, worries that some Kenyan artists are "more British than British."



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Mozambican painter Malangatana Valente Ngwenya, shown at his studio, commands up to $10,000 for his paintings and runs an informal art school for neighborhood poor children.