

THE MURALS OF MAPUTO

Revolution is a highly conscious act. It permits the unthinkable to be thought, the unimaginable to be imagined and the unspoken to be shouted out loud. When independence came to Mozambique in 1975, the people celebrated not only the end of centuries of foreign domination, but also the unfolding of a deep process of social transformation, the sudden flowering in bright sunlight of all that had been forbidden. In a wave of enthusiasm to express what had been denied and affirm what had seemed reachable only in fantasy, thousands of Mozambicans in every part of the country got out their paint pots and emblazoned the walls of their towns and villages with an infinite profusion of slogans and paintings. DOWN WITH IMPERIALISM ! DOWN WITH RACISM ! LONG LIVE FRELIMO ! The former "terrorists" now appeared as heroes, the previously most despised and downtrodden of all Mozambicans, the workers and the peasants, were now extolled as the leading force in society. DOWN WITH EXPLOITATION OF MAN BY MAN ! LONG LIVE THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN ! LONG LIVE THE UNITY OF THE WORKING PEOPLE OF THE WORLD ! New images and symbols appeared everywhere, soldiers with rifles over their shoulders, returning home, mission completed; workers in towns and country, formerly seen as source of cheap anonymous labour, as "natives", now portrayed as producers of the nation's wealth (See picture - gathering corn).

The old colonial images were generally not removed, they were simply overshadowed, rendered out of date - the angels and madonnas on mediterranean tiles at the gateway to a mission hospital; the mythical handsome founders of the Portuguese nation with large square brows and long tresses of hair flying in the breeze as they float on the walls of banks and pharmacies; a giant Pepsi Cola advertisement occupying the side wall of a tall block of flats; huge abstract designs on many buildings, looking strangely meaningless in this period of intense meaning; an amalgamation of the mystical with the commercial to sell heaven, colonialism and soft drinks.

At one stage, sections of the population began to topple and smash statues of hated colonial conquistadores, but FRELIMO stepped in and quietly at night removed the offending sculpture and placed it in museums

The slogans and pictures produced in this phase of popular outpouring of art represented something far more substantial than a flag hung out to greet a new ruler, it was something deeper, more permanent, proclaiming a new power that had arrived and wished to express itself. It was an act of affirmation not merely one of loyalty, signalling a new kind of society, new values (see picture - TRABALHO - Work. At the bottom is the symbol of FRELIMO: a book, a gun, and a hoe, inside a workers wheel). It was confident and exhortatory (see picture - WE WILL PRACTISE PHYSICAL EDUCATION - note the non-racial character of the Mozambican nation).

It was largely but not wholly spontaneous, in that it reflected and corresponded to the great public debate being conducted at the time on the question of : who was the enemy? Was it an alien race, defined by its skin colour or origin; or was it a system of exploitation, that knew no colour or frontier? Based on its own experience of internal struggles, FRELIMO insisted on the latter view, saying that exploiters came in all colours - this political proposition had its artistic counterpart in that the heroes and villains in the pictures could not be distinguished by race but only by activity.

The unprogrammed nature of this first wave of public art was both its strength and its weakness. It convinces because it is simple, the silhouettes are honest, it appears everywhere and reflects an immense variety of hands and emotions. But it is an art that quickly fades. The letters peel away, the images become blurred, what was formerly a message becomes a fragment. The slogans lose their daring, shed their provocative character, and what they proclaim is either achieved or else shown to be in need of solutions for more precise, for more concrete, than those contained in the once brave generalisations. Something - the context having disappeared - the words even seem puzzling : STOP THIS TRADE IN DEATH ! - who now even remembers that once (as long past as six years ago!) the kind of funeral a person had depended on the size of his or her family's pocket ?

In any event, the spontaneous effervescent phase was coming to an end, partly because the number of walls was limited, partly because the country was running out of paint. Spontaneity was not enough, could even be harmful, could lead to dispersion of forces and to disillusionment.

It was at this stage that the second wave of murals began to appear quite different in character, yet not inconsistent with those they tended to overshadow. These were larger murals, more complex in design with a wider range of colours painted by skilled hands with the approval of the authorities on specially chosen sites. They too represented a special kind of enthusiasm, this time not only of Mozambique, some of whom had been planning large-sized murals for nearly two years, but also of Chilean exiles arriving to live and work in Mozambique and, after years of trauma and displacement, feeling themselves useful and active once more. Doctors, engineers, political scientists - none of them professional artists but some of them veterans of Popular Unity cultural activity in Chile - began in an organised manner to attack selected walls with their paint-brushes. Their first target was the side of a small building in the General Hospital complex. This was a period of upheaval and struggle in the hospital, in which voluntary work on Sunday was seen as an important method of achieving unity amongst the different sections of hospital workers. One Sunday in 1977 about 100 volunteers took part in a campaign to tidy up the grounds of the hospital, and as part of their effort to create a more attractive environment for workers and patients, a group attached themselves to a team of Chileans working on the murals. By the end of the morning the mural was complete, having been painted under the guidance of Chilean landscape gardener, Moira Toha, with participation by Mozambicans and persons of various other nationalities working as co-operants (co-operators) at the Hospital. (See picture: Murals with flags and fists). Against a backcloth of floating Mozambican and Chilean flags fists are raised in declaration of struggle and unity. The swirling close-up quality of the images, their compact, bloc-like character, each impinging on the other, gives the mural an urgent, dream filled quality. There is no place for the eye to rest, the struggle is hard and it continues - this would seem to be the message - but the strength of the people organised will triumph in the end. The eyes below the clenched fists are open and vulnerable; emblems of the workers' power are scattered through the design - a hammer, a sickle, a hoe and a gun - but what dominates in the human hand which in the words of President Samora Machel, is the "only source of miracles" in Mozambique. The brown and red tones situate the scene in Africa and Latin America, while

the elongated red star floating overhead and echoing the white star in the Chilean flag, establishes an overall internationalism. A new kind of mural had appeared in Maputo, more painstakingly planned, more imaginative, more thought about, a picture without accompanying text, carefully painted by non-professionals hailing from all six continents.

The second mural of this period is calmer and more lyrical in character (see mural : Three heads, plants and machines). Painted at the side of the Cinema Matchedge in the downtown area, it is seen by hundreds of persons on their way to and from work each day. The scene is dominated by three heads squashed together, huge and out of scale with the symbols of agriculture and industry that surround them. Their headgear indicates that they are workers, one at least being a woman, while the distribution of fruit, flowers and cereals on the one side, and machines, derricks and cogs on the other, suggests that they represent, in lyrical terms, the worker - peasant alliance. Designed by Cladio Reis, a Chilean agronomist, and Madalena, his Mozambican wife, both of whom were employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, it is full of intricate and interesting detail, an idealised version of reality, in the sense that food is still far from abundant in Mozambique and industry faces many problems, but an affectionate rather than triumphalist representation, tastefully depicting an honestly held vision

The third mural of the series (see picture : Ministry of Agriculture) is the largest and most spectacular of this group, a radiant cry of happiness occupying the full side of a small building in front of the Ministry of Agriculture. It is sprinkled with fun, its lines radiate in rainbow ribbons in all directions, they are light and aerial in character, and the whole conjunction is on the move, even the sun is smiling. Yet in the bottom right hand section we see grave figures emerging from a coal mine, a man has his head upside down, we notice that there is also suffering and sadness in this world; man toils, life is hard, and the sun smiles only in metaphor. The overall design, dizzy with happiness, was in fact done by Moira Toha who, collaborating with a team made up largely of Chilean volunteers, was responsible for most of the mural. But at a certain stage she was joined by a well-known Mozambican artist, Malangatana Ngwenya, who, introducing his own intense, anguished and highly personal style into the painting, added drama and tension to the

total panorama. The writer of this note was one of the volunteers, and it was paradoxical to see joyous fruit and footballs and flying fish coming from the brush of the Chilean exile, whose brother-in-law had been hanged by the fascists, while sad and uncertain faces emerged from the strokes of the Mozambican, a jolly person living in his own free and independent country. Yet what the upper part of the picture was expressing was the joy, even ecstasy, that suddenly surges in an exile when optimism is regained, while the bottom half was answering that optimism is not self-realising, that the victory of the revolution creates only the conditions for happiness not happiness itself. Then, as if to unite the two contrasting themes, the artists, with great shared enjoyment, proceeded to fill in large objects of everyday life on the painting, so that passersby - the wall fronts on a footpath used by hundreds of workers and school children each day - would exclaim: Look, there's a hen ! Look, at that that this bus ! Look at those lovely flowers !

This was just a small part of the artist Malangatana's mural painting commitment at the time. His main job was to complete a large mural in the gardens of the Natural History museum at the other end of town, and he was making slow progress there. Everything about this museum is interesting, from its exotic Portuguese medi-aeval-style architecture, to its displays of wild animals and birds and its collection of elephants foetuses, to the large stone dinosaurs in the garden outside. Recently cages of monkeys and snakes have been added to the gardens so the painting of a giant mural could be as just one more piece of exotica, consistent with the unfolding atmosphere of wonder and surprise. The theme given to Malangatana to develop - and also to an outstanding sculptor named Chissano (See picture of sculpture - carved from a single tree using branches and roots as well as the trunk) was: Man's struggle against Nature. It was not clear exactly what was holding Malangatana back, but he seemed paralysed by an internal inertia quite out of keeping with his normally brilliant and intense activity. He had volunteered for the work, but for a year or more he had paid occasional visits to the wall, dabbling a bit in the left hand corner but producing little. Then, after nearly two years had passed he suddenly attacked the project, with immense energy and within a few weeks finished it. Exactly what produced the change is not known but directly or indirectly the sudden breakthrough appears to have been associated

with his attendance at a prolonged and intensive session of analysis and self criticism by some hundreds of former prisoners of the Portuguese secret police, a session that lasted for over a week and involved extensive dialogue with the leading figures of FRELIMO. All the prisoners had suffered for their anti-colonialist beliefs but not all had conducted themselves with the same degree of bravery. A small number had become total traitors, another group had resited to the death, while the majority had been guilty of small vacillations. One of the main purposes of the session was to help these who had been guilty of small compromises to lift the weight of their ambiguous conduct from their shoulders. Malangatana was just one of many intellectuals involved in this meeting, and the exact participation of each is not publicly known, but what is clear is that the unblocking of his energy coincided with the ending of the session, and the result was his master-work.

A brilliant fresco of human and animal figures stares out at the viewer across three adjoining walls, a giant mirror of paint fracturing the spectator's own face into a hundred images looking back at him or her, all manifesting varying degrees of surprise.

Basically Malangatana paints faces; his studio at the back of his house in one of the poorer districts of Maputo, is filled with canvasses of his earlier years, portraying faces, faces and more faces, large eyes looking almost straight at the viewer, anguished brilliant mysterious faces surrounded by animals and cloths and plants of Africa, faces resting with their astonishment and their hatred, the rosaries and crosses and forced labour being imposed on them. The mural is like one of these canvasses but expanded forty or fifty times, the lava of his vision erupting beyond the edges of its normal frame to flood the vast space of the wall. Unlike most murals, it has no perspective, no depth for the eye to rest, no long swirling lines of continuous movement from one side to the other, just these faces and arms and animals jostling with each other at the surface, as though simultaneously entranced by the wall and unable to get out. The colours are brilliant and the juxtapositions vivid so the eye dances hither and hither responding to the detail to the pained humanity of each individual, to the brilliant colouring; but, for all this visual activity, the people are still, inanimate, just looking ahead with slightly averted gaze. And yet ... compared with his pictures of colonial days, there has been change. The anxiety

is there, but less of it, the wounds ache, but not as much as before. There are even little pools of serenity where before the anguish had been limitless. As in all his pictures the animals are scaly and spiky and reptilian, but somewhat they are less menacing than usual at times even affectionate almost inviting the viewer to stroke them. The people are alone, protected neither by the cross nor by ancient belief, their skin is naked, they are vulnerable, life is still without triumph, without even sanctuary; but there are little touches of hope, ribbons of FRELIMO colours twirling overhead and an incipient relaxation in the many faces. This is a giant impetuous dream of colour and symbol crowding the three walls. The lines move but the people are still trapped in the commotion swirling around them asking questions of the viewer, looking uncertainly at the world which is changing all around them, wondering about their ancestors, about faith, about the Revolution. The colours may dance, there may be movement, vitality, brilliance in the scene, the garden of humanity may be vibrant; but the people are silent, and their eyes are sad, Though life may be rich and full and variegated, there is no easy pathway to happiness, no simple exit from suffering; we must go gently with the people since they have suffered; much and the trauma has not finally lifted.

Persons of the profundity of Malangatana, who have shaped their art in a struggle against the torments of oppression, whose whole artistic mode has emerged in conflict with pain, cannot easily adapt to victory. As citizens they can leap to joy in a moment and celebrate as happily and instantly as the rest. But as artists they can transform themselves slowly in keeping with the rhythm of an inner struggle that is much more drawn out. Malangatana suffered all the torments and all the temptations of the colonised man, went to prison for his beliefs, later to be subjected to the patronage and wooing of those who wished to turn him into "a famous colonial artist". Unlike others of his contemporaries, he had not been able to participate in the process in the northern part of the country where as the armed struggle had gradually moved south, liberated zones had been established and the people had begun to exercise new forms of power and release their creativity in new ways. Victory in those zones had been conquered slowly, step by step, and the people there had gradually accustomed themselves to optimism, emerging from the war with immense accumulated confidence. For Malangatana and the others who stayed on in the south victory came suddenly and extremely; though the colonialists may have

decided to flee in a hurry, independence marched only slowly into their hearts. Bit by bit the terror leaves Malangatana's work, bit by bit his colours become warmer, so that the brilliance and vivacity that were always there now start to offer presentments of joy. If his people remain heroes more in their suffering than in their achievement, if they are still shocked by the violence done to their minds over the generations, if they no longer even can find dignity in hatred, but are exhorted to be brothers and to conquer the far more elusive enemy within themselves, they nevertheless do emerge slowly from their trance, they do get themselves organised, they do begin to discover hints of a new humanity. It is a tribute to those responsible for cultural policy in Mozambique that they do not require Malangatana to pretend an optimism he does not feel or to paint objects such as soldiers or clenched fists or tractors which do not enter into his artistic vision; their policy instead is to create the conditions which will facilitate internal change in the artist.

The painting by Malangatana, vast in its scale, and the sculpture by Chissano, extraordinary in its use of branches and roots, represent a notable achievement of the Revolution, in that established artists were given a chance to exhibit their work not in the narrow and alienating confines of a gallery, but in the wide and enduring public space of a museum garden. But the nature of their art, a personal, individual, private vision offered to the world, remained the same. What was new was its volume and siting, its accessibility to a wider public, the honour being done to its and not its nature.

The greatest achievement of the Revolution in terms of what are called the plastic arts, was yet to come, something so different in concept and execution that only the Revolution could have brought it about, a real creation of the Revolution.

The stage was set for the third period of mural painting, for the building of special walls in prominent places to accommodate specially designed and professionally executed paintings. The largest and most accomplished of these is the one on the long curving wall built opposite the Hero's Circle near the airport. When Eduardo Mondlane, founder and first President of FRELIMO was killed by a parcel bomb in Tanzania on February, 3rd 1969, his successor as leader, Samora Machel, vowed to transfer his body one day to liberated Mozambique.



Later he repeated the promise at the gravesides of the others who had fallen in the struggle, and now with the tenth anniversary of the assassination approaching, the moment had arrived to fulfill the solemn commitment. The problem was to create a monument worthy of the occasion, one that would honour not only those who had given their lives in the armed struggle led by FRELIMO, but also the earlier generation of patriots who had suffered torture and humiliation at a time when independence had seemed only a dream. The monument needed to be solemn but simple, in an accessible spot capable of accommodating fair size crowds. A special committee was appointed to handle the project, and it chose as the site a large traffic circle on the road from the Airport into town. The Chief Architect in the Ministry of Public Works - José Forjas - designed a simple tomb in the shape of a five-pointed silver star, each point of which would house a fallen hero. The star was placed in the centre of the circle, and as a visual and emotional counterweight, a long curving wall was built on a shoulder of land across the road, to display the mural. The original idea was to do the design in a mosaic of coloured stone, but time did not permit and paint was used instead. (Fortunately, the idea of the mosaic has not been abandoned - the paint is beginning to fade in parts, and this outstanding piece of public art is in danger of gradually disappearing as nature effects its quiet counter-revolution).

The mural has the fluid quality of a long ripple. It is the most unmonumental of monuments, without the static grandeur or reaching-for-the-sky aspect one associates with monuments. It has no centre no point of repose, no clear perimeters, you cannot take it in with a glance, its base lifts and falls with the slight crests and depressions of the little hill on which it stands, while its panorama of figures veers this way and that way with the curve of the wall. The viewer, coming round the circle, is moving; the wall itself seems to be moving. It does not dominate, it accompanies the scene.

But there is another and possibly even more compelling reason for the wave-like effect, and that is the way the images themselves inter-relate with each other. This wall was very much the product of collective work. Even the original design of the mural was the product of many hands and many discussions. Essentially it is the artefact of a team of artists and designers at the Department in the Ministry of Information responsible for Propaganda and Publicity (DNPP). Perhaps the strongest hand in the first basic version of the

work was that of João Cravalrinho, a painter known for his visionary colours and brilliant, crowded imagery, for the intense personality of his work, reflecting the earnest and torn consciousness of an artist who rapidly finds certainty and rapidly loses it again. For some years during the armed struggle he had worked for FRELIMO's information section, then suddenly he had surrendered to the Portuguese colonialists and given his skills over to the latter's Psychological Warfare Department, and, finally, towards the war's end, he had surrendered himself to FRELIMO again. After spending a while in "Re-education" he was allowed to return to Maputo, where he was invited on to a team of talented artists working in the DNPP, and today his powerful vision and considerable technical skill is once again at the service of the Revolution, the contribution he made to the Heroes' Monument far exceeding any other artistic achievement of his in the past. The mandate given to him and his fellow artists was to present in summarised visual form the chief episodes from the history of people's struggle in Mozambique, and in their first version they did exactly this, hit too well. There were too many panels, too many figures, a multitude of tiny figures and an infinite number of actions. The work had to be transformed, made less literal; a series of brilliant crowded scenes, too miniature, too halting, too episodic, had to be concentrated into a large flowing wave of images that would sweep the eye of the viewer along, maintaining drama and unfolding surprises from beginning to end; a single, moving story that would hold interest at any point of entry, and project the viewer both backward and forward. To achieve this change, two technical adaptations were necessary - the figures had to be carefully selected and vastly increased in size, and the action had to be more symbolic, less literal. Thus a whole historical episode, involving large numbers of actions and countless actions, had to be reduced to the relationship between two or three giant magnified figures locked in some relationship and surrounded by the instruments of their struggle; for example, years of terrible massacres towards the end of the colonial war are characterised by the one terrible image of the upside-down child, the knife, and blood. The person responsible for "symbol-ising" the design, for eliminating the comic-strip effect of the panels, for opening the work out, simplifying it and giving it its poster-like scale was João Frere, head of the DNPP, a successful designer and painter of abstract art in colonial times who had opted to "accompany" the Revolution. Two motifs were used to maintain a continuity of mood through the various scenes -

flames and totoo marks. Wherever there is colonialism, there is a background of flamb, wherever the people are, there is a frieze of parallel zig-zag lines, representing the continuity of popular culture (these lines are to be found throughout Mozambique, on the faces of older women, in the weave of baskets, on walls, on masks).

Once the design was finalised, the problem arose of transferring it to the wall. Normally this would have been done by making photographic transparencies of the design, projecting them on to the wall, and painting the outlines. But if there is a projector that follows the curve of walls without distorting the image, it certainly does not exist in Mozambique - so a new method had to be invented. It turned out to be quite simple; the design was marked out on a long piece of porous cloth sewn so as to correspond exactly to the dimensions of the wall, the cloth was then strapped to the wall, the marked-out lines were painted, the paint seeped through the cloth, and when the material was removed, the design remained on the wall. Thereafter a small group from the Artists Centre and a larger group of high-school students blocked in the colours according to a prepared scheme. The number of colours available was limited, so the paints had to be mixed to invent new colours, but the relatively restricted nature of the palette probably turned out to be an advantage in that it imposed an inner harmony that helped discipline the violence of the image.

The result is a mural that tells a story, many stories, in an economical and intense form. It is the most self-conscious image of the Revolution produced by the Revolution. To continue the process, images of this image have been used in the design of postage stamps and calenders. When visiting statesmen lay wreaths at the tomb of the heroes, photographs in the newspapers invariably show the mural as a backcloth. It has become part of the landscape of the new M Mozambique. In a sense, this mural is the apotheosis of the spontaneous art of the first effervescent wave like it, being affirmative, direct, literal, speaking from a wall straint to the people in the street. But it is also the complete negation of that early wave, it is not spontaneous, not improvised, not instant, but a total work of art conceived and created from a plan and carried out by professionals or under professional guidance. There was nothing there to begin with, the wall was built to house the picture, the picture was designed to fit the wall. Though intended to be ready to commemorate a particular moment, the mural was meant to transcend its topicality, and to

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