



Kiure Francis Msangi, Tanzanian (1937 – 2003)

A Retrospective, 9th September – 10th October

Kiure Francis Msangi was a painter, printmaker, graphic designer, illustrator, calligrapher, educator and scholar whose career spanned Tanzania, Kenya and the United States. He belonged to a generation of East African artists who came of age around independence, when questions of culture, identity and the role of art in a newly self-determined Africa were being debated.

Msangi was, by all accounts, a colourful character: intellectually curious, sociable, flamboyant in his dress, deeply spiritual, disciplined in his practice and endlessly interested in the world around him. He loved books and newspapers, followed politics and current affairs closely, enjoyed music, and was fascinated by people. He was also a committed teacher who believed that art should not be confined to artists, galleries or museums, but should be part of everyday life.

This retrospective offers an opportunity to look at Msangi's life and work: from the landscapes and figures of his early career, through to his experiments with printmaking and his political and socially driven works.

A young artist from Usangi

Msangi was born in Usangi in the Pare region of northern Tanzania. His relationship with art began early. Family recollections describe a boy who would draw in the soil while accompanying his mother as she worked, turning whatever was around him into an opportunity to make visual art.

Usangi and the surrounding landscape remained important to his imagination throughout his life. The region's mountains, flora and fauna

and rural communities formed part of the visual language from which he would later draw.

He studied at Makerere University in Uganda, graduating in 1964 with a Bachelor of Fine Art and Diploma in Education. He was awarded the Trowell Prize for top performance, placing him among the most accomplished artists of his generation to emerge from the influential Makerere Art School.

Makerere was an important environment for Msangi. It brought him into contact with a generation of artists who would become major figures in East African art, including Sam Ntiro, Elimo Njau, Elias Jengo and Theresa Musoke. The relationships formed there were part of a lively exchange of ideas, techniques and artistic approaches that helped shape the development of modern art in East Africa.

For example, *Cat*, a print from Msangi's Makerere period, bears striking similarities to work being produced by Musoke at around the same time. It is a reminder that artists working in East Africa during this period were viewing each other's work, borrowing, experimenting and learning together.

A colourful man

The recollections of Msangi's family provide a particularly vivid picture of the man behind the paintings.

He loved colour both in his artwork and in his life. His clothes were distinctive and flamboyant, with brightly patterned shirts, strong blues and oranges, and the large collars associated with the stylish shirts of the era. His hat became part of his recognisable appearance.

His family describes him as colourful not simply in appearance but in character and thought. He was highly articulate and could engage passionately with almost any subject. He read constantly and spent considerable amounts of money on books and newspapers. He wanted to know what was happening in the world.

His flamboyance extended beyond his clothes. After graduating from Makerere, when he worked as a teacher in Beya, Msangi drove a very flashy Mercedes-Benz. It was a perfect car for him: distinctive, confident and somewhat extravagant, matching his flamboyant personality almost perfectly. The image of the young teacher arriving at school in such a car captures something of the theatricality and self-assurance that were characteristic of him.

This curiosity found its way into his work. Msangi was not an artist who withdrew from contemporary life. Politics, social change, religion, education, nature and human relationships all interested him. He could be playful and sociable, but he was also serious about his work. His family recalls his considerable discipline in the studio.

Landscape and the natural world

Landscape is one of the most persistent themes in Msangi's work. He was fascinated by nature, and by the relationship between people and their environment.

Few motifs are more closely associated with Msangi than the baobab.

The significance of the baobab becomes clearer through the family history surrounding his work. Although baobabs are not characteristic of Usangi itself, they are abundant around Taveta, Lake Jipe and the surrounding areas familiar to Msangi's family. The tree is deeply embedded in local life. Its fruit and leaves provide food and medicine,



while the tree itself can become a place of gathering, social interaction and prayer.

The baobab is perhaps the clearest intersection between the different aspects of his thinking; nature, memory, community and spirituality converge in a single form.

The human figure

Msangi returned repeatedly to portraits, groups of people, dancers, workers and the nude. His early training at Makerere, where the study of the figure was fundamental, remained influential.

Women appear frequently in his work, sometimes individually and sometimes as part of communal activity. *Pounding Maize (Tanzanian Women)*, now held in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, depicts women engaged in an everyday task through a stark black-and-white linocut.

Msangi's fascination with the nude was also longstanding. His wife remembers spirited discussions about nudes, and his insistence that the human body should be understood simply as part of nature rather than as something inherently shameful.

His attention to people could be intimate and personal. *The Kiss*, for example, is a work depicting Msangi and his wife. Unlike his more overtly social and political works, it offers a glimpse into his private world, revealing how the people closest to him could also become subjects of his art.

At the same time, his interest in human relationships could be playful and observational. *His First Lady (My First Wife)* is a comical work that may also be read as a playful reference to Msangi's fascination with his

Mercedes-Benz. Given how closely the car suited his flamboyant personality, it is tempting to imagine this work as a humorous personification of the prized possession that so perfectly matched his character.

Printmaking

Msangi worked in linocut, woodcut, hardboard cut and etching, moving between black-and-white and colour. Printmaking allowed him to work with a different visual language from his paintings.

He began to work more in print when he worked at Kenyatta University, as he wanted to encourage his friends and colleagues to begin collecting work and to provide affordable options for them. Printmaking therefore became a means of making art more accessible to the people around him.

Politics and the world around him

Msangi was deeply engaged with the society in which he lived. He followed current affairs closely and was deeply interested in the political and social changes taking place around him.

His generation worked during a period of enormous political transformation: the independence of Tanganyika in 1961, the creation of Tanzania in 1964 and the development of Ujamaa. His work *Ujamaa (Arusha Declaration)* is particularly significant within this context, reflecting the political and social ideas that were shaping Tanzania at the time. He also produced several works that sharply criticized the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in supporting it.

His approach was that of an observer, recording and interpreting the world around him.

Spirituality

Msangi's Christian faith was rooted in his upbringing within the Lutheran tradition, yet his spirituality extended beyond formal religious practice. Family recollections suggest a broad and open worldview in which Christianity, meditation, an appreciation of nature and a wider sense of spiritual connection existed alongside one another.

He practised meditation throughout his life, reflecting a contemplative side that was closely intertwined with his curiosity about people, politics, art and the natural world.

Building Art Education in East Africa

Education was central to Msangi's life. After his training at Makerere, he taught in Tanzania before being invited to Kenya as part of the development of the region's university system.

His time as a teacher in Beya was significant as the beginning of his teaching career. Msangi got along well with his students and interacted freely with them, unlike many teachers at the time. He was approachable and engaged with them as people, rather than maintaining the distance often expected between teacher and student. He left a lasting impact on many of those he taught.

Early in his career, he produced a handbook for teaching art in schools. He later developed a blueprint for integrating traditional artisans and craftspeople into the school art curriculum, an idea he set out in the



PhD dissertation he completed and filed with the Stanford School of Education in 1987.

He was involved in the formation of the Fine Art Department at the University of Nairobi, and later taught at Kenyatta University, where his work increasingly focused on educating teachers and developing methods through which art could be taught more widely.

Msangi believed passionately that Africans should be able to appreciate and love art, and that art should be understood as part of life rather than as something reserved for a specialist minority.

He taught generations of students, many of whom would go on to become artists, designers and educators themselves.

More than twenty years after his death, Msangi is re-emerging as an important figure in the history of modern East African art.

His retrospective is an invitation to viewers to look closely, ask questions and find different meanings in what they see before them.

Biography

Kiure Francis Msangi received his early teacher training at Mpwapwa Teachers' College before studying Art and Education at Makerere University, Uganda, where he was awarded the Trowell Prize for top performance and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art and Diploma in Education (1964). He earned a BFA in Graphic Design (1975) and an MA in Art Education with Distinction (1977) from the California College of Art and Craft in San Francisco, before completing a Doctor of Education at Stanford University (1987). He exhibited both locally and internationally throughout his lifetime.



Msangi was also an author and illustrator, publishing *Art in East Africa* (1972), *Art Handbook for Schools: Guide to the Non-artist Teacher on How to Teach Art* (1975) and illustrating the children's book *Samaki Mdogo Mweusi* (1981).

His work has been documented in *African Arts Magazine*, and is held in collections including Stanford University, San Jose State University, the late Maya Angelou's collection, as well as many others.

He taught at Kenyatta University from 1986 until his death in 2003.

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Opening Times
Weekdays 10am - 5pm
Weekends 12pm - 5pm
Closed and by appointment only on public holidays