East African Painter Theresa Musoke: Uhuru or Freedom

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EAST AFRICAN PAINTER **THERESA MUSOKE:** UHURU OR FREEDOM

Betty LaDuke

heresa Musoke is best known for her poetic paintings of Kenya's abundant wild life. Her interpretation of the animals' diverse forms, rhythmic movements, and harmonious integration within the environment also provokes our own longing for this primal experience of uhuru, or freedom.

The aesthetic vision and professional goals of Theresa Musoke are unique among East African artists. Stylistically, Musoke considers herself a "semiabstract painter" whose thematic concerns include people as well as nature. Her mixed media images reveal aspects of her Uganda-Kenya heritage, exposure to a broad world view, and awareness of diverse aesthetic systems. Musoke has also explored feminist themes that include: women at market; self portraits that probe her own multifaceted psyche as artist, mother, and teacher; and the controversial theme of family planning.

I realized during my 1987 interview with Theresa Musoke (Fig.1) in Nairobi, Kenya, that East Africa's history of tribalism, colonialism, nationalism, and, more recently, women's determination to take charge of their own lives are all components of her personal story. Musoke is a significant pacesetter and role model. This was confirmed by Elimu Njau, director of



Fig. 1: Theresa Musoke. Photo by Betty LaDuke

the Paa-Ya-Paa Gallery, the only African-owned gallery of contemporary East African art in Nairobi, who told me, "Theresa's career was launched in 1965 when she became the first Black woman artist in Kenya to receive a show."1 She was then 21 years old. In the 22 years since this exhibit, she has assertively continued to develop her professional career and has gained international recognition.

I first learned of Theresa Musoke

from Elsbeth Court, an English-Kenyan art educator and member of the International Society for Education Through Art. She considers Musoke "the most significant Black woman painter in East Africa." Most other women artists of Musoke's generation have had to submerge their artistic goals for family responsibilities or teaching careers, and they have not had the opportunity to develop the confidence and assertive qualities necessary to compete within

the limited, East African, whitedominated gallery system.

It is also necessary to consider that, in the past, images and themes related to the experiences of Black people were of little interest to the white colonial settlers or tourists that could afford to buy art. Even since their independence, art has not been a priority among the growing class of Black professionals.

As soon as I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, and entered Musoke's light and spacious studio apartment, I was overwhelmed by her productivity, exemplified by the enormous quantities of paintings that were not only displayed on the walls but stacked under beds, stored and piled behind furniture, and in closets. This was no surprise, as en route from the airport, Musoke, a petite woman with a large smile, readily confessed, "I don't know what I would do if I didn't paint. Maybe I would go mad. I know I paint all the time." During my week-long visit with Musoke and our long hours of intense dialogue, she spoke candidly and often with humor of her life and art. She also introduced me to some unique aspects of East African culture, past and present.

Early Years

Thereas Musoke was born in 1945 in Kampala, Uganda, the fifth child in a family of 19. Musoke relates that her father, Simon Musoke, was a Sasa tribal chief, but since he became converted to Catholicism, his tribal traditions were not transmitted to his children. Musoke remembers her father as "a very kind, religious man," proud to have sent his 17 surviving children to the Catholic Mission School. Education was considered synonymous with progress or advancement as people moved from rural to urban areas.

During colonial rule the goals of formal education were primarily the spread of Christianity and minimal vocational training for producing semiskilled workers. Most of the Musoke children went beyond these limitations to become university graduates with diverse professional careers in Kenya, England, Germany, and the United States. The family grew apart, but were

briefly reunited in Uganda a few years ago for Simon's funeral.

At age five Musoke was sent to the Catholic Mission Boarding School where art was integrated within the curriculum, as saints' day celebrations, holidays, and children's birthdays all necessitated special decorations. The nuns frequently called Musoke from class, saying, "She's so good ... Come draw for me." Musoke also realizes that "African schools are full of children who never see a picture (oil painting on canvas), since it is an art form developed in Western culture.

Among the approximately 100 tribal cultures of East Africa, diversified forms of expression evolved in relationship to their particular traditions, survival, and spiritual needs. However, only in recent years, after centuries of derision, destruction, and looting by the west has African tribal art begun to be appreciated and even exhibited in the United States in museums of art rather than those of anthroplogy.

At Trinity College, a secondary school which Musoke attended from 1955 until 1960, she recalls, "The nuns didn't mind if academic exams weren't passed. They wanted you to become a good person, " which meant to Musoke consideration for others." She feels that these spiritual guidelines are sorely lacking in the world today.

Fortunately, Musoke grew up in a time in Uganda when opportunities for broad artistic exploration, and expression were possible. This was due to the pioneering efforts of Margaret Trowell, and extraordinary English educator who had respect for cultural diversity. She taught art in Kenya and Uganda from 1929 to 1958. In a recent article by Elsbeth Court in the journal Art Education, she describes Trowell's art program as based on "seeing the visual world through African eyes...and trying to understand their spiritual and social attitudes towards their own works of art." In 1945 Trowell's efforts to establish a School of Fine Art succeeded, and this school later integrated with Makerere University at Kampala, Uganda. During the Colonial period Makerere was the only university in all of East Africa (Uganda, Kenya and

Tanzania) until independence was achieved in the 1960's.

In teaching art, Trowell believed the "imposition of Western techniques would only promote a derivative style..."The form grows from content. The content is not invented as an exercise in form." She struggled to "rethink in light of the African's needs" which methods were most suitable to bring out "their imaginative faculties and to help keep their strong sense of design and craftsman's skill."

Musoke was fortunate to be a recipient of Trowell's progressive art education philosophy when in 1960 she was one of five students to pass the competitive examinations for the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art. There, all her art teachers but one were English, but Musoke happily recalls, "They 'encouraged art by their own example of creating and experimenting and insisting that we work and work.' They opened the door for me to become a painter." In one of Musoke's early paintings, "Nativity," her individual style, based on expressionistic brush strokes and symbolic use of color, is apparent. In 1962 at age 17 Musoke won the Uganda Development Corporation Christmas Card Prize.

Musoke's interest in animal themes began as an undergraduate. She told me, "I drew lots of cats, animals, skulls and bones. One of our tutors took us to the zoology department to draw monkeys and then to a slaughterhouse." However, Musoke firmly told her instructor who wanted to further his students' understanding of anatomy and muscle structure, "I'm not going...I'll quit school!" when he insisted the class visit a morgue.

Besides winning the Margaret Trowell Painting Prize in 1965, Musoke had a one-person exhibit at the Uganda Museum of Art. Jonathan Kingdon, a Makerere University professor, wrote a review of Musoke's Uganda Museum exhibit which points out some unique qualities of her early work that are apparent even 22 years later. Kingdon's comments emphasize the positive contribution of her feminist perspective in portraying African wild life. She avoids the "vulgarity and corniness"

associated with this theme "through the dreadful painting of the businessmen who are called 'wild life artists.'" He writes:

There is a continuous thread of vision that runs throughout all her paintings; an essentially feminine sense of the mystery and of the 'presence' of living things...With Theresa we have perhaps the first East African painter who is sensitive to that wildness, that otherness, that mystery that is outside and beyond us and our affairs, She returns to us that vision that most of us lost at an early age...before we learned the arrogant he that everything that creeps upon the earth wherever there is life, has been given unto us for meat...

If anyone wants proof that a woman can have a special view of life and can do things that men cannot, Theresa's unique sensitivity and vision are here and we may be thankful in a materialistically functional world for a reminder of gentler things.

Musoke emphatically states, "I don't think of myself as a woman, just as an artist; and I encounter my problems as an artist." Nevertheless, it is apparent that in the course of her life she has made many decisions related to being a woman-artist.

From 1965 to 1966 Theresa Musoke continued her post-graduate studies at Makerere University in the Department of Education. While a student she also received her first commission to paint a mural on the theme of "Birth" at Makerere University. After graduation Musoke taught briefly at the Tororo Girls School in Uganda, until she received a post-graduate scholarship to attend the Royal College of Art in London, from 1966 to 1968.

In London Musoke encountered a prime crossroad between her career and personal life, necessitating a clear solution. In her personal life there was now a major addition as Musoke's son Kenneth was born in London in 1968. She then made the decision to raise her son alone, but to return to Uganda to do



Fig. 2: "Zebras" 1983, mixed media, 30" x 36", by Theresa Musoke.

it where her mother could temporarily help. During this period Musoke taught art at Mount Saint Mary's School. She continued to paint and exhibited at the Alliance Francaise in Kampala, Uganda.

Artistically, Musoke focused upon print-making, intaglio and lithography. Though she enjoyed these techniques, due to the limitations on supplies and equipment in East Africa, these media of expression were impossible to continue.

Once again, Musoke was to travel abroad alone as she successfully competed for a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. She attended the Graduate School of Fine Art and Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania from 1969 to 1973. There she focused upon drawing, painting, and graphics while realizing, "When you're away from home, you become more aware of the things you miss. What you like becomes much more important and, therefore, you struggle to retain them," she reminisced, referring to her family and artistic themes related to African life. "You can't take them for granted as you do when you find them all around

you."

At the University, Musoke had her own studio and found the interaction among the students, faculty, and guest professional artists and art critics very stimulating. Their feedback was positive, and she enjoyed the fact that "they came to you, in your studio, to find out what you were doing." Later in Kenya she was to miss this rich exchange.

I wanted to know if, in the United States, Musoke had encountered racial prejudice, and surprisingly she told me, "It was the first time I thought about being Black, but I never experienced any prejudice. I bypassed all that. People said, 'That's not realistic', but", she emphasized, "the fact that I was Black and the only Black student in graduate school didn't make any difference at all, not even once." She also added, "Sometimes while growing up, maybe you're protected and not exposed to the fact that these things do exist, but all my life — the nuns at the Mission School, the teachers at Makerere University, were White — and it never made a difference."

In the United States Musoke exhib-

ited at the Hampton Institute in Columbus, Ohio, and Rockefeller Center, New York. Her work was well received, and when she returned to East Africa, her self assurance was strong. Musoke told me how "I came to Kenya, alone, with my paintings, and went to Gallery Watatu and looked around. I liked the gallery. Then I said to the director, 'I want an exhibit." After the White women directors' initial shock, as few Black men or women artists could pursue their professional careers beyond tourist craft production, they looked at her work and were impressed. Indeed, they gave Musoke an exhibit in 1974 and many others in the years following.

Before leaving Uganda with her son Kenneth in 1976 to settle permanently in Kenva, Musoke did teach at the Margaret Trowell Fine Art School. She was also commissioned to paint a mural at Uganda's Entebbe Airport. However, the brutality of Idi Amin's regime had penetrated the university system, resulting in many "random victims, the killing of a faculty member, and guns all over the place." Therefore, when she went to Kenya in 1976 to exhibit. Musoke made the decision: "I'm going to stay." Having been to Kenya many times before, as well as to London and America, she added, "it was quite easy to make that change."

In Kenya opportunities began to unfold in both her teaching and art careers. Her goals were clear: "I just want to be able to paint and to control my life and do what I want."

An interesting detail related to English colonial influence upon women was the subculture she encountered in Kenya of the crocheting of doilies. Both White and Black women were obsessed with this. "I found a doily everywhere," Musoke said. "I saw doilies in all the houses. They drove me insane. I wanted to pick them up and throw them away." Doily production was synonymous with educating women to be ladies, idly sequestered in their homes, not at all the reality of many Black African women, and definitely not of Theresa Musoke.

Uhuru — Freedom Paralleling Musoke's creative goals is her need for personal freedom. She

proudly tells me: "Holding onto my freedom is my greatest accomplishment. I don't have to depend on anyone; I'm not tied down . With my freedom I can travel and work when and where I want."

Musoke's work process is innovative and experimental as she develops her mixed media paintings. Working from the abstract to the concrete, Musoke first impregnates the cotton canvas with a random tie-dye stain. She then allows the stain to suggest an image which she pursues with oil or acrylic paint until it becomes a unified composition. She usually defines forms with a suggestive outline and frequently uses white as a highlight. With a minimum amount of oil or acrylic paint her images seem to emerge from the canvas with ease.

Musoke says, "I have to work with more than one painting at a time, or I get impatient and spoil them, " and smilingly adds, "Sometimes the back of my painting is better than the front..." Occasionally Musoke draws with dye before tying and dipping the cloth into another color of dye which causes a soft bleeding of the image or "kills something." Then she says, "The artist is challenged to bring up something new, which is always a magical part of the process."

Through the years, a recurrent theme for Musoke has been her poetic portrayal of animals. In Kenya, with sketchbook and camera she visited the extensive and protected animal reserves to observe and record the hundreds of diverse animals that roam the vast plains and migrate seasonally to different locations. For Musoke, this experience represents "the essence of life," and I appreciated her work even more after my own visit to the Masai Mara Reserve. I could agree with

Fig. 3: "Brown Giraffes" 1982, mixed media, 24" x 36", by Theresa Musoke.



Musoke's observations: "At the game park at first you don't see, but then your eves begin to pick up the animals, just like that! Your eyes must focus, because you don't see the animals singularly; they become large shapes of color and movement. You can see them one minute, but the next they're not there."

It is shocking at first for people accustomed to viewing animals in zoos to encounter giraffes, ostriches, and gazelles freely walking about on the road just outside Nairobi, a modern capital with many skyscrapers. In addition, one can see the proud nomadic Masai tribal people, wearing brightbeaded necklaces and other body adornments, herd cattle, goats and sheep. At the game park the elephants, monkeys, zebras, wildebeests, antelopes, and rhinoceroses appear in massive numbers, all peacefully grazing until stalked by their predators, the leopards or lions. Like the magical fascination of looking through a kaleidoscope, the varied animals with their subtle colors and body markings are constantly moving and changing.

In contrast to most European paintings of wildlife, Musoke's paintings, suggestive rather than realistic, evoke a magical and mysterious

essence. For example in her painting of "Giraffes" (Fig. 3), the numerous giraffes appear as a single massive unit of warm brown and orange spotted tones. The negative space between their legs and long lean necks is left refreshingly white, except for a delicate scattering of brush strokes that suggests tree branches and leaves, a subtle merging of animal and environment.

One of Musoke's most fluid and abstract paintings is "Chains of Flamingoes". The flamingoes' deep pink forms are linked together like a group of comrades strolling arm in arm against the cloud-patterned blue and white sky. In contrast to this generalized treatment of forms, Musoke's "Lions" (Fig. 4), a mother with two cubs, is carefully sketched with umber brown paint and superimposed upon a light beige-stained canvas.

In Musoke's three paintings of "Zebras" (Figs. 2 and 5), her method of abstraction and experimentation is evident. Beginning with a group of three striped and carefully detailed zebras serenely arranged upon a yellowgreen, stained background, she then explores in her second painting the cubist fragmentation of form. This style unifies the vibrant zebra movement and

their striped patterning with the background. In the third painting an underlayer of bright green stains penetrates through the superimposed black wash that suggestively defines the zebras' fleeting forms. In a very playful way, white, ribbon-like stripes, as if blown by a gentle breeze, wrap around or embrace the zebras' prancing forms.

In a March, 1977, interview with the magazine Africa Women, Musoke elucidates her creative methods:

I like the excitement of the way animals are formed and move. I watch them all the time...giraffes, flamingoes. I never paint while I watch. I digest the whole thing and form my impression. Then I go and paint from memory. Sometimes I can get up in the middle of the night and work from memory until I get it right. But you know, the artist's choice of his subject is almost incidental. It is what he says about the subject matter, how he interprets it.

Another discovery for Musoke was the thorn tree. This occurred in 1980 when she got a commission from Nairobi's prominent Stanley Hotel to create two large paintings on this theme. Musoke admitted, "I had never looked at this tree before. When I did, I fell in love with it." Since then the thorn tree appears frequently like strands of long hair, somewhat tangled and windblown above groups of animals such as wildebeests or guinea hens as they feed beneath.

Musoke is also very adept at drawing the human form. She especially enjoys market scenes with rural women wrapped in their bright patterned traditional cloths or Kangas. Once again, her paintings range from detailed images such as "Market Woman Selling Baskets" (Fig. 6) to more abstract renditions in which the women, their patterned cloth, baskets, and produce seem like a dynamic flurry of bright designs and color. However, even when color and pattern dominate the composition as in "Women Selling Cloth" (Fig. 8), her individualized portraits of the women's features form a strong pictorial

Fig. 4: "Lions" by Theresa Musoke.

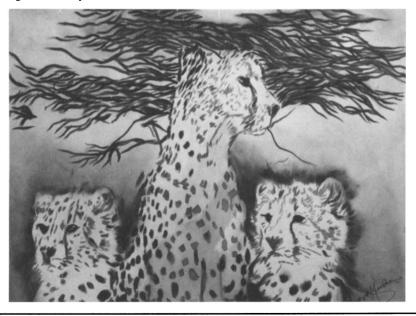




Fig. 5: "Zebras" 1983, mixed media, 24" x 36" by Theresa Musoke.



Fig. 6: "Market Woman Selling Baskets" 1986, mixed media, by Theresa Musoke.



Fig. 7: "Women with Baskets", by Theresa Musoke.



Fig. 8: "Women Selling Cloth" 1987, mixed media, 30" x 48", by Theresa Musoke.

component.

Though Musoke's work sells well at her numerous individual exhibits, primarily to European collectors, teaching has remained the foundation of her economic freedom. She taught at Kenyatta University from 1979 to 1980. This university was established in 1967 after colonial independence, but Musoke feels that at Kenyatta the level of student dedication does not compare with her own early experience at Uganda's Makerere University. She sadly notes, "It's so hard to make students feel what it is like to be an artist." Though education is free, "there is much more prestige in being a doctor. Many students have gone through the art training to leave it for another kind of job.'

Musoke also taught at Nairobi University, where the art emphasis was on design related to commercial needs. However, at the university the demand on faculty time was extensive, and Musoke says, "You have to make up your mind to have all the economic benefits for faculty (housing and medical insurance), or to do your painting."

Musoke prefers the artistic integrity

and intensity of young children and therefore left the university system to teach at the Kestre Manor School and more recently at the International School where the children range in age from two to 18 years. She works mornings only and offers Saturday classes at her home studio, which gives her ample time for her own work. Musoke finds children rewarding, especially "when you give them an assignment, they have all the motivation and the time." She exclaims, "They will do it and do it and do it with enthusiasm!"

Musoke's son Kenneth, with whom she has an extremely close relationship, is also a subject for her paintings. At present she misses him very much as he is attending a university in Germany. As a result of this much free time, she is even more dedicated to her work.

In her personal life Musoke admits: "Women do have a tough time, because there is no system for child support. Always it is the woman who carries the burden." She sarcastically adds: "Some women think they have to get married...and attach themselves to these creatures who are no good. They think their worth can only be recog-

nized if they are recognized as Mrs. So and So!" We also discussed many issues related to women, especially as "women single-handedly run about 25 per cent of the total households in Kenya...and do 50% of the agricultural work."

Perhaps Musoke's most sensitive and dramatic series of paintings in 1986-1987 is on the theme of Planned Parenthood. Kenya population jumped from 8.5 million in 1963 to over 20 million in 1987. Abel Ndumbu in *Out of My Rib: A View of Women in Development* notes the "failure of family planning activities" and says that

the group with the largest potential for acceptance of family planning methods is the youth. But in a society where most schools have affiliation to a religious denomination, 'issues of morality' play havoc with the programme.

For the past three years, funding for an annual calendar on the theme of Planned Parenthood has come from the Goethe Institute, affiliated with the German Embassy in Nairobi. The large format of the widely distributed calendar, 20 x 30 inches, features the work of East African artists whose paintings are reproduced in color. Each artist was challenged to illustrate a slogan such as: TOO HEAVY A **BURDEN TO CARRY? PLAN YOUR** FAMILY; AVOID OVERCROWDING AND POVERTY: PLAN YOUR FAMILY; FOR LOVE AND PEACE: PLAN YOUR FAMILY: and A **FAMILY NEEDS SUFFICIENT** FOOD: PLAN YOUR FAMILY. Musoke's slogan was: PREPARE YOUNG PEOPLE TO AVOID TEEN-AGE PREGNANCIES: PLAN YOUR FAMILY.

With Musoke's plentiful energy, rather than limiting herself to one image, she developed a series of paintings on the same slogan to explore various possibilities. In each of her five canvases white is the dominant background color, applied over pale and delicate tie-dye stains. In several of her paintings children are sensitively portrayed as they hold younger siblings or dolls (Fig. 9). The painting selected

for the 1986 calendar features two teenage girls dressed in school uniforms (Fig. 10). Their facial expression reveals their vulnerability as behind them, groups of young boys walk by. In another painting, a child stands before us, holding a large doll in front of her. This stark image, drawn upon an ochrestained background with a spontaneous black line, captures the emotional link between child and doll, a preferable situation to a child and her own baby.

Popular subjects for many East
African artists are the tall, lean and
nomadic Masai tribal people whose
survival depends on their hunting skills
and cattle raising. Though missionaries,
government policies, and climatic
changes such as drought have brought
some Masai closer to settled communities, most have maintained pride in their
traditions and refused to be mainstreamed.

Unfortunately, the bountiful portrayals of the Masai in the medium of wood carving or painting produced for the tourist trade, a mainstay of the Kenya economy, have frequently been reduced to stylized clichés. Therefore, it was refreshing to see Musoke's 1987 painting, "Masai Women at Market" as the women focus on selecting cloth. The subtle, thin washes of warm brown, red, and yellow tones which envelop the women still permit Musoke's linear drawing of their facial features, body adornments, and hand gestures to remain evident. Musoke also allows the rhythmic linear patterning of the cloth wrapped around the women's shoulders to merge with the cloth they are seriously considering for purchase.

Musoke attended the 1985 Women's International Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, and during the conference had a one-person exhibit of 50 paintings at Gallery Watatu. Though Musoke was disappointed that she did not sell many paintings, her work was well reviewed. Headlines in Nairobi's *Sunday Nation* of July 7, 1985, announced, "Women Painter Forges with Determination." Eva Ndavu then states:

Theresa forges ahead with some 50 oil paintings and metallic gold wild life sketches...She is one of the most



Fig. 9: "Family Planning: Children with Dolls" 1985, mixed media, 30" x 36", by Theresa Musoke.



Fig. 10: "Family Planning: Young Adults" 1986, mixed media, 30" x 36", by Theresa Musoke.



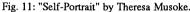




Fig. 12: "Self-Portrait" by Theresa Musoke.

productive and industrious artists around. You can seldom find her without a paintbrush in her hand unless she is teaching some of her many students a new technique or introducing them to a new medium.

Simultaneous with Musoke's Gallery Watatu exhibit, the Armory Pre-Selection exhibt also opened in Nairobi, hosted by Mrs. Javier Perez de Cuellar, the wife of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The prestigious "Armory '86" exhibit, featuring the work of nine international women, including Musoke, was seen at the Armory in New York City in 1988. In her review for Nairobi's Sunday Nation of July 14, 1985, the art critic Kathy Eldon notes:

Like the Armory Show Exhibition of 1913 which introduced the Modern Art Movement in America, the exhibition will undoubtedly make a large impact on the history of modern art. All the women represented are outstanding artists and each one has a strong viewpoint based on her own culture.

Musoke's work is now under consideration for purchase by the American Women's Association of Kenya's National Museum, to present as a gift to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.

During the past 11- year period of stability and maturity in Musoke's life and artistic development (1976-87), she has not only raised her son Kenneth alone, but has taught art from the university to kindergarten levels, painted incessantly, and then reached beyond her studio to exhibit and achieve professional national and international recognition. These accomplishments are indeed enormous for any artist, but even more extraordinary for a Black woman in East Africa, where African culture and traditions have been the focus of over 200 years of colonial oppression and attempts at elimination.

Musoke has successfully bridged the gap between her art training in contemporary Western aesthetics and her visual or thematic inspiration rooted in her African heritage. Musoke's success is partially due to her realization that "since art is now a commodity, it is not possible to paint without being reminded of the market. But a good artist will never let it dictate his or her style and purpose. With her creative energies always alert to life's challenges, I am sure that there are many more themes Musoke will tackle in the future that will continue to result in images that are

universal in their urgency and appeal.

Occasionally, Musoke is personally introspective, as in her self portraits (Figs. 11 and 12), of which she says, "They're more difficult. I keep on painting while I'm thinking inside." I particularly like her multiple self-image of 1987, in which her face seems to rotate in different directions, perhaps a reference to time past, present, and future, or to different stages in her life. It would be wonderful to see these facial images extended as full-length autobiographical studies - a kaleidoscopic version symbolically incorporating aspects of her childhood missionary experience, travel, and exposure to a broader world view, and finally the mature woman, taking charge of her life, striving for *uhuru* or freedom. \Box

The author expresses her gratitude to Elsbeth Court, INSEA member and delegate from Nairobi, Kenya, for making possible the interview with Theresa Musoke.

The book Africa Through the Eyes of Women Artists by Betty LaDuke has been accepted for publication by Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey, in 1991.

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