

Graphics drawing on African motifs find universal appeal, recognition

Story: CORINNE ABATT
Photos: DICK KELLEY

For several years now, everytime Mathias Muleme exhibits his graphics, he almost sells out.

There is something about his easily identifiable intaglios of mothers, children and couples, done in soft earth tones, that touches many collectors. And aside from his appealing subject matter, the workmanship is so obviously first class that these qualities coupled with modest prices, make his work highly desirable.

Muleme (three syllables) and two other artists, Susan Gold, landscapes, and Jim Lutowski, ceramics, opened an exhibit at Troy Art Gallery. It will continue through Nov. 18.

Ontario has been home for Muleme since he arrived from his native Uganda 11 years ago. He studied at the University of Guelph in Ontario and completed his master's in fine arts at Wayne State.

"Since I graduated from Wayne," he said, "about 85 percent of all my work has been sold."

WHILE CONTEMPORARY in approach, his work clearly has direct roots in his native land. He incorporates African symbols for family, love and home in his backgrounds, often with a raised, dimensional effect.

"But," he commented, "if you went to Africa and looked for the symbols, they would be hard to find because it is now so westernized."

There has been a dramatic difference even since he left his homeland. He was raised in rural Uganda, but at about age 10 left to attend boarding

school in Kampala. At that time, there was lots of competition to get accepted in school. Now, there is less and children start school earlier and are more easily accepted.

Muleme came originally to attend college and intended to return home after he completed his degree. But, the political situation grew so dire that he didn't consider returning.

Now, he and his wife, Agnes, also from Uganda, and their two children live in London, Ontario and he has his studio in his home. Soon he will expand his creative undertakings to include sculpture. He plans to begin to do bronze figures in the lost wax process as soon as possible and promises that by next year he will have some pieces of sculpture to show.

The plan could progress even faster if he had an assistant to help with the printing. Presently, Muleme does all of the graphic work from making the copper plates to pulling all of the limited edition prints himself.

While making the plates—digging in with his needle and applying the acid for just the right amount of time, getting the perfect consistency of ink—is all very painstaking work, it is this creative process which he loves.

Very often his studio working day runs to more than 14 hours at a stretch while he works on the tiny lines that eventually will form the symbols and patterns in his work. Copper plates give him a cleaner, clearer line than other metals, he said.

THERE WAS LITTLE DOUBT that the young man growing up in Africa would be anything other than an artist if he could help it.

"I used to draw pictures in the dust and the mud," he said. "After high school I had a one-man show of paintings at the Uganda Museum."

It was then that he knew the direction he wanted to take. He recalled he did his first print in 1970 and finally devoted all his time to printmaking after 1975. He hopes someday to return to painting, but he said it would be foolish to take time away from his printmaking at this point in his life.

At Wayne, he worked under Stanley Rosenthal and Tom Woodward in the art department and he found their approach ideal for what he wanted to learn.

Now, 36, Muleme is a gentle spoken man, who judging from his conversation as well as his art, has a deep reverence for life. Someday he and his wife would like to take their children to visit Africa. Until that is possible, Muleme will bring as much of the warmth and tenderness he remembers as he can through his art.

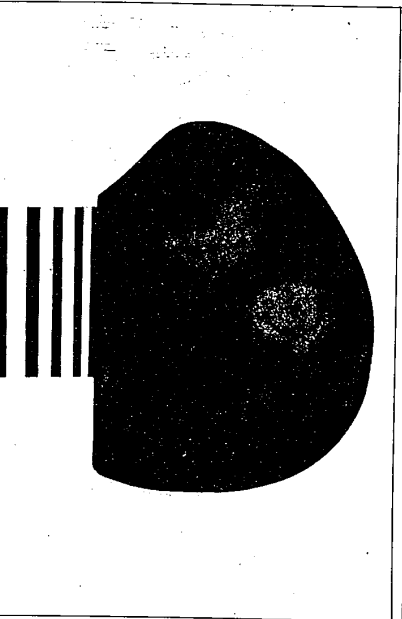
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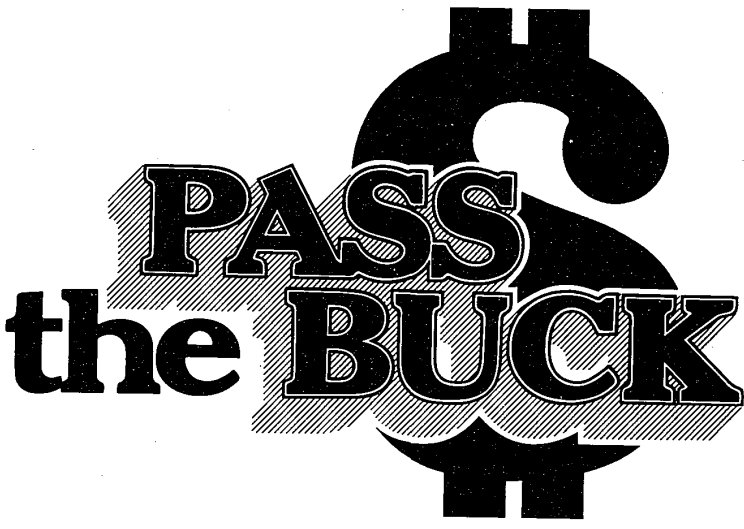
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