Namibian artist John Muafangejo (1948-1987)

Professor E J de Jager of the Department of African Studies, University of Fort Hare, discusses the life and work of one of Southern Africa's most important modern artists

Namibia has produced a number of noted artists, especially painters, several of whom have achieved national recognition. Names such as Hans Aschenborn (1888-1931), Adolph Jentsch (1913-1977), Fritz Krampe (1913-1967), and more recently Joos Nelli (born 1935) and Ulrich Schwanecke (born 1923), immediately come to mind. These artists have all been inspired by the atmosphere and expansive landscape of the region. The only Namibian artist to have dealt with the human and social situation, and who was not preoccupied with landscape painting, was the Ovambo artist John Ndevasia Muafangejo. A graphic artist, who produced mainly linocuts, woodcuts and etchings, he was also the first black Namibian artist to achieve fame.

John Ndevasia Muafangejo was born in 1943 near Oshikango, a village close to the border between Namibia and Angola. From about 1963 he attended the school and teacher’s training college of the St Mary’s Anglican Mission at Odibo, in Owambo. In 1968 he enrolled as a student at the Arts and Crafts Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Mission at Rorke’s Drift, in the province of Natal, South Africa. As Arnott points out, Muafangejo was an intense and sensitive person. The extended absence from his home in Namibia, the strain of severe application to his work, together with intense self-absorption, led to a state of nervous exhaustion during his first year at Rorke’s Drift, and he had to be admitted to the Madadeni Hospital in Newcastle, Natal. After his recovery he returned to Rorke’s Drift in 1969 and completed his course. In 1970 he returned to Owambo, to the country
which he loved so deeply, to teach and to apply himself to his own art. From 1970 to 1974 he taught art at Odibo in Owambo where he himself was educated. In 1974 he was invited back to Rorke’s Drift, as “artist in residence”. After this he returned to his spiritual home, St Mary’s Mission, where he worked full-time on his art. In 1977 he moved to Windhoek where he settled in the adjoining Katutura township. He died suddenly from a heart attack in December 1987, at the age of 44.

Muafangejo was an intensely religious person who found himself most at home in a mission environment. In such surroundings he felt secure and protected and best able to concentrate on his art. It was as if such a religious and spiritual environment facilitated the expression of what he wanted to say through his art. His perspective was, therefore, always a deeply religious and human one, aimed at reconciliation, not only as far as it affected himself, but also between other people. His art portrayed a message of faith and hope which he wanted to convey to the world.

Stylistically, Muafangejo can best be classified as belonging to the genre of so-called “naive” art. His work has all the most important qualities of “naive” art; his style is completely unaffected and there is no endeavour towards special effects — it is simple, direct, bold and spontaneous. His art is introspective, personal and about himself and his involvement with the world. That is what he communicated. He made little distinction between reality and fantasy.

Apart from these general qualities, his work has in common with “naive” art the following particular characteristics of his style are also worthy of comment. Muafangejo’s work remained completely two-dimensional. Formal composition is absent and the style is characterized by disproportion between the objects depicted. The artist used strong delineation in outlining form. There is also bold use of form, stressed by the way in which he contrasted the colours black and white. There is repetition of rhythms and forms in many of his works, as for example the forms of beads, bricks and vegetation. There are strong decorative qualities achieved through, for example, a variety of patterns. His work is narrative in nature, and in many of his pictures he employed direct writing as explanatory text and to reinforce his pictorial images, as well as to create certain decorative effects.

When considering his total oeuvre it becomes clear that from the point of view of content his pictorial output can be classified into six main categories. These are briefly as follows.

— Works dealing with everyday life in Zululand (from the time of his stay at Rorke’s Drift), Namibia and more particularly in Owambo. These include day-to-day relationships between people, birth and death, hunting, ploughing, weddings, activities such as stamping corn and making sour milk.

— A second category of work deals with historical events such as the Battle of Rorke’s Drift, the history of the Kuanyama tribe and their last chief Mondume ya Ndemufajo.

— A large number of his works deal with his missionary surroundings both at Rorke’s Drift but more particularly at St Mary’s Mission in Owambo. In this category we find scenes of holy communion, life at the hospital, church meetings and missionary activities such as the inauguration of a new printing press.

— An important category of his work deals with biblical and religious themes and subjects such as the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples, the
Muafangejo, John: The Last Supper. Linocut 1978

birth of Jesus, the story of Adam and Eve, and the Prodigal Son. To many of these events he gave personal meaning and interpretation and they became visual images of his personal life and religion.

Muafangejo also turned his attention to contemporary political events in his country, for example, the now famous meetings at the Turnhalle, Windhoek, in the 1970s. Of particular significance here is the way in which he saw black and white people cooperating and sharing problems, a theme encountered also in many of his religious works and works inspired by St Mary’s Mission as well as Rorke’s Drift Mission where separation between the races never existed.

By far the majority of his works are autobiographical. They reveal the man Muafangejo and his religious relationships with the world and with his God. These works are truly introspective, revealing the depth and sensitivity of Muafangejo’s person, life and beliefs. In them we see the personal, religious, ethical, moral, political and social problems and tensions posed by the world as seen by Muafangejo, and he often supplied his answer of reconciliation to these problems. Other pictures are more closely related to his daily life and various incidents from his life, such as an interview he had at the University of Cape Town: in this piece he depicts himself with a silver cup he had won with one of his linocuts. There are also a number of self-portraits, other portraits showing him busy with his art activities, his being welcomed back to St Mary’s Mission in 1975 and the adventure of buying an old car in 1973. All these events from his personal life were significant to him. He communicated them for us to enjoy, as well as to bring relief from personal tensions; they were his way of finding and stating solutions. They can be called his personal “visual confessions”.

Present in the art of Muafangejo is a strong indigenous feeling and a sense of Africa. This is obtained through the cultural activities carried out by the people depicted on his linocuts, their dress and department, the inclusion of typical African symbols and imagery such as in the vegetation portrayed, the cattle and other animals, material cultural objects such as eating and drinking vessels, drums, masks and headresses. Yet it is at the same time also a world of acculturation of the meeting between the indigenous African and European cultures. Of this we are reminded especially by missionary and Christian-religious motifs as seen in garments worn by priests, Christian symbols, such as the cross, the communion vessel, angels, and serpent. Other manifestations of Western culture include clothing, furniture, motor cars, guns and soccer games. Muafangejo thus portrayed the world in which he lived, consisting of many traditional as well as many European things and also of their fusion into the new Africa.

It would not be wrong to describe Muafangejo’s rise from total obscurity to fame as meteoric. Recognition came early, when Muafangejo was still a student his work was included in the Contemporary African Art Exhibition held in London in 1969. His work was also selected for inclusion in the South African travelling exhibition to Canada 1969-1970. He participated in numerous exhibitions, of which only the most important are listed here. He had his first one-man exhibition in Johannesburg in 1975. During 1970 he exhibited at the National Gallery in Stockholm, and again in 1971 with the Society of Graphic Artists in Stockholm. During 1972 he exhibited in Holland, in 1973 in Botswana and in 1976 in Florida and Brooklyn, USA. In South Africa he exhibited in Johannesburg, Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Worcester, King William’s Town, East London and in other lesser centres. The highlight of his career was undoubtedly when he was chosen to represent South Africa at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1971. A retrospective exhibition of his work has held in July at the 1988 Standard Bank Arts Festival in Grahamstown. He was a member of the Arts Association of South West Africa-Namibia. Muafangejo’s work is...
included in many private and public collections in South Africa and abroad. Muafangejo won several awards. In 1981 he won the Republic Festival Graphic Award; in 1983 he won a medal at the 7th International Graphic Exhibition at Frechen, West Germany; in 1985 the most outstanding artist award at the STANSSWA Biennial in Windhoek, Namibia, and in 1987 he was a joint winner of the quarterly award at the Vita Art Now Exhibition in Johannesburg.

Despite his meteoric rise and fame, Muafangejo remained modest and humble, and an example to many. He will be sadly missed and mourned by all who knew him. His death was also a great loss to South African art, an art that he enriched in so many ways.

Sources

