

Reviews

Images of a Revolution

(Mural Art in Mozambique)

by Albie Sachs — published by Zimbabwe Publishing House

It has long been part of the perennial culture of Southern Africa for people to paint pictures on the walls of their homes. And again, historically, the paintings on the walls and floors in the rural areas were never simply pretty patterns for the people living in those areas. The patterns were infused with meaning. They symbolised the universe in which a peasant family grows and farms and dies. But our people have been forced off the land, forced to live in matchboxes they could not own, or tin roofs patched with cardboard and plastic; forced to work in factories they cannot control, doing alienating and mind-dulling work. They are permitted to gaze at the ominous and dominating marble facades of the oppressive state. We do not own the walls around us; hence the need for painting on the walls has left us, is leaving us.

But in Mozambique in 1975 the people took back control over their destiny. They took back the walls. And they covered these walls with the expression and understanding of their struggle; first with spontaneous slogans and symbols, later with more formal murals. A new art was born.

This birth is the subject of the book, *Images of a Revolution*. The book begins:

“Revolution is a highly conscious act. It permits the unthinkable to be thought, the inconceivable to be imagined, and the unspoken to be shouted out loud. When Independence came to Mozambique in 1975, people celebrated not only the end of centuries of portuguese colonialism, but also the unfolding of a deep process of internal transformation, the sudden flowering in bright sunlight of all that had been hidden in darkness and fear.”

Images makes a first attempt to describe and explain the development of mural art within the context of the Mozambican revolution. In doing so, it puts all our graphic work in a new perspective. It forces us to look again at the pressures acting upon our art, to think where we may begin to go in future. Find a copy and read it, look at it. This is a new road in front of us, stretching to the ends of our imaginations, and beyond.

But having said that, we must ask: what are the lessons we can learn from this book? What does the graphic work from Maputo teach us? How well does it succeed?

The overwhelming lesson of *Images* is the intimate link, indeed the harmony, between cultural work and the liberation of the people. “Opening the doors of culture” is not a sweet liberal sentiment. It is a matter of hard material fact and concrete political direction.

To paint murals on the walls you must first take over the walls. And you must have paint.

Images points out that the first wave of Mozambican wall-painting subsided with the growing paint shortage. Again, tragically, the beautiful revolutionary posters of the late 1970s in Mozambique have had to be curtailed because there is no paper to print them on. This sad fact alone shows that art is not separate from political and economic reality. But the second fact in the development of Mozambican art lies in the sponsorship. The murals were intended from their earliest conception to have an audience of the whole community, “the people”. They were commissioned by the people’s republic. They were painted in public places, on the walls of the people’s state. They were not hidden in galleries or museums or sold to the private collections of the rich, or an alien audience far away.

Working from this premise (at the time when they had paint) cultural workers in Mozambique began to develop new symbols and imagery to express the richness of their revolutionary experience. In our unliberated societies, we are taught that art can only explore our private perceptions; and that we will succeed as artists only if we can present such perceptions in an individualistic manner differing from every other human being around us. But in *Images* we find the graphic artist struggling to express the deep knowledge of history, the conscious awareness, that has overcome the people of Mozambique. The picture drawn on the walls epitomises all that every Mozambican has seen and known; they are soaked with the reality which cultural workers and people there share together.

“New images and symbols appear everywhere, soldiers with rifles over their shoulders returning home, mission completed, workers in town and country, formerly seen as sources of cheap anonymous labour, as ‘natives’ now portrayed as producers of the nation’s wealth”.

The cultural worker can again turn to the roots of his experience, to his people, to his community; the stream from which art feeds and is nourished.

This new understanding not only inspired the creation of new symbols; it gave birth to new styles. Particularly here we would like to emphasise the role of the narrative in the murals. The visual arts encouraged by the Western world concentrate on taking instants of seeing out of time, snapshots with meaning only in terms of the artist’s private way of interpreting colour or form. The murals that have begun to develop on the streets of Maputo, on the contrary, show us the image and the symbol as part of the process of the community’s day to day activities. In the Hero’s Circle mural, for instance, one image led to another until victory, the establishment of people’s power. Again, our culture has long acknowledged the indispensibility of the story line as a vehicle for understanding. The narrative element manifests itself strongly in language and song. Therefore welcoming the narrative once more into the graphic arts opens many new possibilities.



A MOZAMBICAN MURAL

As a part of the struggle to find new meaning, cultural workers must also look for new ways of working together. This implies finding a new manner of living together as a people. The murals of Maputo were painted mostly by mural collectives. The contents were discussed collectively. They were painted often by groups of people who did not consider themselves artists, working under the supervision of a more experienced cultural worker. One point of interest is that as the murals become more formal commissioned works, an experienced graphic artist tended to take responsibility for ensuring a consistent style throughout the mural.

The text of *Images* tells us in detail how the conceptions, styles and methods of Mozambican mural art were worked out, showing clearly how the direction of the people's struggle determined and infused the development of the revolutionary graphic. But *Images* breaks new ground, and in doing so unfortunately stumbles in places. In saying this we do not intend to condemn the book, for it is a starting point, it is all we have from amongst us. Merely we look to future direction. In saying this again we can say that the Southern African artists have found a new weapon. Like the Angolan novel, *Mayombe*, like the much-needed rain, *Images* is here with us.

But we wish in particular to question how the book handles the visuals. As we said, as the text demonstrates, the mural art of Maputo is narrative, burdened with a consciousness of the process of struggle. Yet the photos in the book tend to take symbols and images out of context, to amputate one limb here or one portrait from the body of the whole mural. For example, the Hero's Circle mural is presented in a series of disjointed images, of detainees, of Machel, of victory, and only a very small reproduction of the postage stamp series based on the mural gives us some indication of how these images are linked. Separately the pictures are interesting paintings. But only in their inter-relationship do we see their significance as a cultural statement.

And again, only two pictures (the Museum mural and the Ministry of Agriculture mural, both shown with plants in front of them) even begin to show the environment of the murals, that this is public, monumental art, open to all. Surely we might benefit from seeing visually the relationship of the image to the community.

Further (and again in the context that the book is a starting point for the new art): we question that the presentation seems to accept all styles and content without distinction, as

