Welcome

We hope you will enjoy our second issue of Msanii, the new magazine for modern art in Kenya. If you are already a subscriber you will see that we have grown: this issue is 50 percent bigger. You will find a new regular page, International Update, as well as features on Kuona Trust, one of the main movers and shakers on the Kenyan art scene, and Art Affair 2002, a highlight of the visual arts calendar.

You can subscribe to Msanii by becoming a Friend of RAMOMA. Your membership will entitle you to the magazine four times a year and give you special privileges including invitations to private views and discounts on works of art. At the same time, your support will help us to promote the arts in Kenya. Full details of the scheme are available from RAMOMA which is located on the ground floor of Rahimtulla Tower, Upper Hill Road, Nairobi. The telephone number for more information is (02)2729181-2.

Thank you to our many existing subscribers and our advertisers for their support and a warm welcome to those of you who are new to Msanii.

Moira Tremaine
Editor

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Moira Tremaine
Editor
This December sees the opening of a unique exhibition of Kenyan art in America. The exhibition takes place at the Barbara Archer Gallery, Atlanta in December before moving to the Ruth Hunt Wood Gallery in Kentucky in January 2003. The art is the work of a group of young Samburu children from Ol Malo Ranch in the Laikipia district of northern Kenya. What isn’t immediately obvious is that their charming watercolour paintings of life in the manyattas hide a tragedy that threatened their very existence.

From 1999 to 2001, northern Kenya experienced the worst drought in living memory: the rains failed for two years in a row, leaving the ground bare and watering holes dry. The Samburu, traditionally nomadic cattle-owning pastoralists, lost 80% of their livestock, their sole source of food and livelihood. The herders with surviving animals were forced to leave their grazing areas and take their cattle, sheep and goats long distances in search of new pastures, leaving their women and children to cope with the increasingly harsh conditions at home.

The drought brought a severe decline in the living conditions of the Samburu. Without rainwater, they could not repair their huts and were deprived of shelter. Without water, the children had nothing to wash in and became vulnerable to disease. With so many cattle dead, the children were deprived of milk – their staple diet – and many of the mothers grew so thin and malnourished they were unable to breastfeed their babies.

Rocky and Colin Francombe, who have built their eco-lodge Ol Malo near the Samburu, saw the deterioration and realised something had to be done. They gave the children the milk they lacked, treated them for diseases like scabies and slowly they began to recover. But there was another problem. It is customary for the children to look after the calves, lambs and goats, but with so many animals dead, they were left with nothing to do. The Francombe’s daughter Julia, having returned to Kenya after completing an art foundation course in England, came up with the idea of teaching the children how to paint.

'The drought kicked me into action,' she explains. 'All the men had left to find grazing and the women and children were left behind with nothing to do. There was a need to keep them busy and raise money to buy food, water and medicine for the community, so I dug out my old art school materials and gave the kids paints, brushes and paper and the opportunity to see what they could do.'

The children have a natural affinity for red, traditionally the dominant colour of the Samburu, but also like to use colours like blue and green, which are spiritual/religious colours representing water and pasture. The result is a fascinating portrayal of life in the bush through the eyes of a Samburu child.

The painting project started with a handful of children and has grown to more than a hundred. Foreign visitors to Ol Malo Ranch began to buy the paintings and the idea of an exhibition in the USA was born. The travelling show will feature more than 300 paintings by the group, focusing on the work of four exceptionally talented youngsters aged from five to eight: Mikam, Sikiti, Lenala and Kotoris. Any money raised through sales will be ploughed back into the community, which is slowly recovering from the ravages of the long drought.
The biggest art sale of the year brought together one thousand works of art at RAMOMA gallery. Art Affair 2002 presented paintings, prints, photographs and sculptures by leading Kenyan artists and newcomers alike with a price tag of not more than Ksh25,000 on any one piece.

Leading artists including Justus Kyalo, Sebastian Kiarie, Mary Collis, Timothy Brooke and Peter Ngugi showed their work alongside unknown painters, many of whom were represented for the first time. Art Affair 2002 proved extremely popular with the public who bought a hundred works of art during the three-week event. It was attended by Kenyan art lovers and the expatriate community including the Austrian Ambassador and other members of the diplomatic community. The British High Commissioner and the French and German Ambassadors all bought works of art.

Now in its fifth year, the Art Affair is one of the highlights of the art calendar in Nairobi. It was launched in 1997 by Carol Lees, the curator of RAMOMA, and interior designer cum artist Andrew McNaughton and is now officially a RAMOMA event. Prices range from Ksh5,000 to Ksh25,000. Says Carol:
‘The thinking behind it was that we felt we needed to take art to a wider public. Art Affair is our best exhibition of the year in the sense that it has the biggest selection of affordable art on show. We put a ceiling on the prices so that people not normally in a position to buy art can do so.

‘The advantage of an event like Art Affair is that we have never had a selection process, so we get artists taking part who we have never seen before and sometimes discover exciting new talent. It’s also a great way for a new artist to test the market. Because there is such a wide selection of art on show, the event appeals to a wide variety of tastes and this is reflected in the diversity of the art that people buy.’

Talents like Rainy Anderson, Peter Ngugi and Jimnah Kimani have emerged from previous Art Affairs and the biggest seller was the Sudanese artist Kojour, who sold twenty paintings at the debut event in 1997 for a total of approximately Ksh200,000.

Dancing - Sebastian Kiari
An interactive toilet stole the show at a recent exhibition of the work of two of Kenya’s promising young artists. It was part of a provocative installation by Michael Soi who constructed a cubicle round the toilet and pasted the walls with newspaper cuttings of a political nature. The piece was labelled *Polling Booth* and visitors were encouraged to fill in voting slips & drop them in the toilet, which had a label above it that read ‘cast your vote here’.

Soi, the son of the famous Kenyan artist Ancient Soi, also presented a number of new collages heavily influenced by Andy Warhol and the Pop Art movement. The majority featured photos of modern women combined with magazine cuttings and scraps of fabric on backgrounds consisting of symmetrical blocks of colour that immediately brought Mondrian to mind. Soi’s favourite colour is yellow, which he likes to use with complementary tones of blue and red, and a significant number of his collages feature a trademark swirl in lieu of a signature.

The exhibition, entitled *God’s Kitchen*, was held at The Contemporary Gallery at The National Museum. Michael Soi’s pieces were influenced by a workshop he attended recently in Birmingham, England. It was held at Vivid Media laboratory and the artists had to set aside their traditional tools and use cameras, computers and other modern media. Two six-minute video installations presented by Soi at *God’s Kitchen* reflect this experience. He is wary of labelling his art in terms of genre but says he admires contemporary South African artists Pat Maoutlox and Wayne Barker.

‘What I am doing now is completely different from what I did last year’, says Soi. ‘My collages are experiments – I am trying to do something new. I find it boring doing pictures of women carrying pots. Most of my work is based on fashion, youth and lifestyle. I prefer flat colours and recently started working with acrylics’.

Acrylic paint is also the favourite medium of fellow artist Thom Ogonga who exhibited a collection of prints at God’s Kitchen featuring people in city life scenes like bars and discos. Better known for his paintings, etchings and monoprints, Ogonga began to focus exclusively on printmaking after attending a print workshop with artists from other African countries. Thom, self-taught and an active member of Kuona Trust, says:

‘It is always good to work with other artists even if the techniques are already familiar – you always learn from it, so it was a good experience. Mostly I do block printing using wood and lino, but lately I have been using cardboard, a technique I began to experiment with after meeting a printmaker from Namibia who specialised in block printing on cardboard. What I like about it is that you can get many different effects from the medium’.

Purity Senewa, curator of The Contemporary Gallery, feels Thom Ogonga has become bolder as he experiments more with colour and detail in his prints, and points to the obvious progression of his work when comparing older pieces like *Sitting Naked* with the latest – The Kiss. ‘He is one of Kenya’s most well established painters and this exhibition was very different from his usual work’, she says. *God’s Kitchen* has been very good for the artists: they needed the show in order to move on professionally and it was the right time for them in terms of their personal development and recognition’.

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Far right: *Every Fisherman’s Dream*  
*Thom Ogonga*

Right: Chert  
*Michael Soi*
Kuona Trust

When you approach the old Nairobi Commissioner's House at the National Museum in Nairobi, the last thing you would expect to find is a hive of creative activity. But this is home to the thriving community of artists who belong to the Kuona Trust. Inside, the rooms are stacked with row upon row of paintings, some finished, some in progress. Their work not only fills the interior but also spills out into the courtyard, which is littered with wooden and metal sculptures. Up to a dozen artists can be found here at any one time, working on new canvases or offering critical advice to fellow-painters.

Kuona Trust was established in 1995 to bring artists together for one-off workshops, the first of which was held here. However at the end of the workshop it was clear the artists were reluctant to leave, so Kuona founder Rob Burnet successfully negotiated with the museum to develop an art programme in the building in return for its full-time use and a new type of artists' space was born.

As a practical studio, the building was not allowed to become a selling-space and it was agreed that the artists working there would decide how to use it and determine the direction of the art that was created there. Visitors are welcome to call in to look at their work informally and once a year an exhibition is mounted at the Contemporary Art Gallery of The National Museum to show a selection of the best.

The studio is open to any individual who can demonstrate he or she is a practising artist and as a result it has proved immensely popular. The programmes director of Kuona, Judy Ogana, says the membership has grown from a handful of artists to seven hundred.

The idea of holding workshops where artists could exchange ideas and work together in a neutral space was instigated by the Triangle Arts Trust in London, England. In 1997, a group of artists and members of Kuona organised an international workshop at Lake Naivasha called Wasanii. Artists from a dozen different countries worked alongside their Kenyan counterparts and the workshop became something of a landmark event. Funding was provided by the Dutch agency Hivos and local corporate sponsors and the workshop proved to be the start of many.

Lake Naivasha became the location for an international residency programme: the first residency brought together a group of four artists – from South Africa, Jamaica, India and Kenya, and was followed by three more. Kuona has also organised a series of workshops including several led by Kenyan artists at Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps in northern Kenya. The project arose from a request by the United Nations to help raise awareness of the plight of refugees and the results were shown at the National Museum in Nairobi and at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Holland. Kuona has also collaborated with artists in neighbouring countries to bring about workshops in Uganda and Tanzania.

(Continued on page 10)
‘I am still building and developing the technique’, he explains. ‘It’s essentially impressionistic – the substance of my painting is in the colours. I first create the figures, then I use three or four layers of different colours and apply my scratching technique to create confusion, yet there is a picture within the confusion. Lately my chosen subject matter is animals, but I’m trying to incorporate people as well. I use animals as my models because I am interested in their aesthetic qualities. They also appeal to me because of their variety: there is only one variety of human but a multitude of different animals. I am also interested in plants that have impact which I incorporate into my work – I usually blow them up out of proportion. What I’m after at the moment is to simplify my work as much as possible, so that a plant for example is distilled down to a simple leaf or flower’.

Peter Ngugi has been interested in art ‘almost since I could walk’. He started to draw as a young child and hasn’t really stopped since. A highly original thinker, Ngugi has developed a unique technique that makes his richly textured work instantly recognisable. He applies varnish to white paper and adds to it several layers of oil paint which he partly scratches off while it is still wet to reveal some of the paper underneath; the reason he prefers oils to acrylics for this technique is because they take longer to dry, affording him more time to work on his pieces.

Ngugi began to show his paintings to the public in 1997. He used to take his pictures to the Ethnic Art Gallery in Nairobi and developed his unique scratching technique initially as an experiment to test the market. His early work – largely monochrome – met with such a favourable response from clients that he decided to develop it further and moved from realistic images of people and the motifs of everyday life to more imaginative interpretations. Currently his favourite subject is animals, particularly African wildlife, but he is equally at home with aspects of the urban environment like buildings and matatus.
For someone entirely self-taught, Ngugi has a surprisingly academic approach to his work. He reads a lot of art history books and admires the work of the Impressionists, who were an early influence on his work. But his greatest inspiration of all, he says, is Vincent van Gogh. Elements of this can be seen in Ngugi’s heavily textured backgrounds, which recall Van Gogh oil paintings like Starry Night and Self-Portrait 1889, which are a mass of swirling, gestural brushstrokes; and the pointillist backgrounds of his Fritillarias and People in a Park at Asnieres, both painted two years earlier. But it is Van Gogh’s originality that attracts Ngugi most. ‘When I first looked at Van Gogh’s work, I saw how unique it was. Where I come from, there are a lot of artists, but most of them do realism. What Van Gogh was doing was totally different. I wanted to create a style so individual that it didn’t even require a signature – something which people could instantly recognise as my work’.

Surrealism is another obvious influence on Peter Ngugi’s work, much of which bears a striking likeness to the work of Salvador Dali. Yet the distortion of objects and creatures from everyday life was something Ngugi had developed on his own. A client who recognised the similarities later introduced him to Dali’s work – and gave him his first commission. The comparison and the commercial appeal of his style gave Ngugi the confidence to continue developing the surreal aspects of his painting. As with Van Gogh, it is Dali’s impact on the art scene of his time rather than his technique that Ngugi admires most. ‘I read the comment of an art critic that Salvador Dali’s The Persistence of Memory was the most memorable picture of the twentieth century, and that really struck a chord. It’s a small painting with huge impact, and I aspire to that’. The painting, which measures just 9.5 by 13.5 inches, fascinated and horrified a New York public when it was first exhibited in 1931 at The Museum of Modern Art and was instantly dubbed the ‘wet watches’ for its depiction of watches draped limply or being devoured by insects in a surreal landscape.

Work by Peter Ngugi has featured in several group exhibitions organised by the One Off Gallery and Kuona Trust, but his first full one-man show was at RAMOMA in October 2002. The exhibition was extremely well received by the public and resulted in the sale of eleven paintings plus another six at the group exhibition Art Affair 2002 which followed it.

‘I believe people have to know your work before you can be a successful artist, and maybe the best way you can achieve that is by standing out’, says Ngugi. ‘I aim for my paintings to be among the most memorable ones’. It looks as if the buying public agrees.
When the idea of a Saturday art workshop at RAMOMA for young children was mooted early in 2002, it was clear that the man to run it was James Mbuthia, a member of the gallery team. James had worked on a similar project with disadvantaged migrant children in Marseilles, France prior to joining RAMOMA and found that not only did the kids he taught love their art classes, they also gained confidence from acquiring drawing and painting skills.

So it was that fifteen youngsters from Dagoretti Children’s Centre were invited to come to the gallery and RAMOMA’s Saturday Children’s Workshops were launched in March 2002. They learn to draw, paint and do crafts where they make things using recycled object and other materials as well as touring the gallery, with James offering explanations to help them understand the art on the walls.

‘I feel personally for the children’, he says. ‘These kids need a lot of love; some are from broken homes, some are orphans, some are disabled. I feel it’s my obligation to show them they can do the things other kids do. I believe everyone is gifted in some way, so I try to bring out their individual skills.’

All kids are welcome to RAMOMA’s Saturday Children’s Classes, which take place from 10am to 12 noon every Saturday. Those interested should call RAMOMA on (02) 2729181 for further details, or e-mail ramoma@africaonline.co.ke

Kuona Trust (continued)

Other projects have involved street children, 60 of whom are invited to a monthly children’s day at the studio. In 1998 they collaborated with the Kenyan sculptor Omega Ludenyi in the construction of a life-size wire baobab tree which was installed as an eye-catching public sculpture in the car park of the Sarit Centre shopping mall in Nairobi.

A more recent public installation was Kuona’s billboard project, created after the devastating terrorist attack on New York’s Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. A group of artists enlarged a news image of the blast, mounted it on a billboard at Aga Khan Walk in Nairobi (near the site of the Nairobi bomb explosion of August 1998) and invited people to write down their comments. They received 2,500 responses.

‘The reaction was incredible’, says Judy Ogana. ‘An artist would be onsite to gauge the reaction of the public and canvas their views as to what issues concerned them. They would then paint a new image overnight. It was very exciting: the billboard changed every day for forty-five days’.

New projects include the development of an internet network for African artists in conjunction with Triangle which will soon be in place in eleven countries in Africa. And plans are being finalised for Kuona to solve its overcrowding problem – by taking on additional space in the form of a go-down in Nairobi’s industrial area. Judy Ogana explains: ‘We’re not moving – we’re expanding. Our location at the Museum is key. But we’ve had difficulty distinguishing between young and established artists. The new space will be for professional artists in a more professional environment – each one will have a separate studio space to call their own’.
A book of contemporary Kenyan art is being published in the first half of 2003. The full colour publication, which is being produced by The Kuona Trust, will feature interviews and the work of 30 Kenyans and other East African artists who have had an important influence on the Kenyan art scene.

While every attempt has been made to advertise the correct dates of exhibition openings, it would also be advisable to confirm them with the relevant venues closer to the time.

News

Amateur artist Brian Kasivi beat 50 others to win this year’s European Film Festival poster competition in Kenya. His clever image, with its relevance to cinema, was published on the cover of the European Film Festival calendar. Brian is a professional acrobat with the Salto Jamboree troupe – the influence of which is apparent in his winning design.

A group of Kenyan artists have been showing their work in the UK. Chain Muthandi & Sane Wadu were among 14 Kenyan painters and sculptors featured at Action and Vision, an exhibition at Rochdale Gallery which also featured the work of artists from Ethiopia and Uganda.
The art of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania came together at the *Trois Pays, Trois Perspectives* exhibition at the Maison Francaise Galleries in Nairobi last month. The collaboration showed the very contrasting work of Kizito Maria Kasule, Chain Muhandi and Mohammed Raza in a series of rooms decorated with dramatic plant displays and strewn with rose petals.

Ugandan artist Kizito Maria Kasule’s art is strongly influenced by world famous artists like Pablo Picasso, Matisse and Paul Gaughin and his formal artistic education is evident in his work. Born to a devout Catholic family in Kampala, Kasule had a strong religious grounding but found the chief appeal of going to church was to admire the statues of the saints. He learned to draw, model and paint at secondary school and at the age of 21 realised that art, not religion, was his true calling. Thus he applied to Makerere University where he was admitted for a BA in Fine Arts, graduating with a First Class Honours degree. Now a teacher there, he has just completed a PhD on the history of art.

Kasule is also a professional painter and his work can be found in the National Museum of Canada in Toronto, the National Museum of Kenya and the Museum of Mankind in Germany. Kasule says the forms of his art are largely inspired by traditional African sculpture and cave painting. He attributes the Western influences in his work to his art education and says his guiding philosophy is to integrate traditional African art values with those of European art to create something universal and new.

"I strongly believe that modern artists should not over dwell on the glorification of the achievements of our forefathers in the name of creating art styles," he says. "Modern artists should endeavour to create their own art language which has relevance to their contemporary visual needs. This is the mission of my art."

Raza Mohammed is one of Tanzania’s best known and prolific artists who has won acclaim both at home and abroad. Born in Tabora in 1946, he recalls his first attempts to draw when, aged five, he was caught by his angry mother sketching in charcoal on the walls of the family home. His chief early influence at school was his art teacher, a graduate of the Slade School of Art in London, England.

Raza ignored his family's attempts to dissuade him from a career in art and became a graphic designer in Dar es
brimming with activity, combining naturalistic forms with abstract elements. The subject matter of much of his painting concerns corruption, alcoholism, sexuality and hopelessness. Born in 1957 in Ngecha Village in Limuru, Muhandi is a founder of the Ngecha Artists Association which was set up in 1995 by a group of painters to encourage and promote local artists.

Chain Muhandi is a moralist: his paintings often make bleak statements about the consequences of irresponsible human behaviour. Among his favourite topics are corruption, helplessness, alcoholism and the sexual peccadillos of priests and the population at large. His painting Campaign Today II is a topical comment on the election process in Kenya: the candidates in his painting are trying to secure votes through bribery and coercion and the campaigner in the centre of the painting is about to be swallowed up by a large fish - a metaphor for the ‘big fish’ of politics.

Kenyan artist Chain Muhandi began his career creating batiks for the tourist market. His favourite medium as an artist is oil paint, which he uses to create canvases

Salaam. He has participated in numerous exhibitions throughout his long and prolific career, helped to found what is now the Mwalimu Nyerere Cultural Centre in Tanzania and has his own gallery at his home in Dar es Salaam. His earliest success was a portrait of the late President Julius Nyerere and his art has featured on posters, postage stamps and medals. Raza has experimented with many different styles but says the most important influence on his work is Cubism. He is also inspired by Tanzania’s Makonde wood carvers.

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Exhibitions

The National Gallery, London, England – Art in the Making: Under-Drawings in Renaissance Paintings. Until 16 February. NB. The National Gallery also houses one of the greatest collections of European painting in the world and entry to see it is free.

Royal Academy, London, England – Aztecs. A ground-breaking exhibition devoted to the cultural riches of the Aztec civilisation who inhabited Mexico from 1427 to 1521. Monumental stone sculptures, ceramics and gold objects – many of them never seen outside Mexico. Until 11 April.

Metropolitan Museum, New York, USA: Richard Avedon, Photographer. One hundred and eighty portraits dating from the forties - an idiosyncratic American 'Who's who'. Through to January 5th.

Barbara Archer Gallery, Atlanta, USA. Art of the Samburu: paintings by Samburu children from Ol Malo Ranch, Laikipia plus sculptures by Ester Wakaba. All proceeds to Ol Malo Trust. 7 to 21 December.


Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Long Island City, USA. To be looked at: painting and sculpture from the collection. Throughout December.

Grants

The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation
Description: award for upcoming figurative or representational artists working in drawing, painting, sculpture
Medium: all media
Available to: international artists who are training or have completed studies at an established school of art
Country: Canada
Contact: The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, 1814 Sherbrooke Street, Montreal West, Quebec, H3H 1EA, Canada. Fax: +1 (514) 937 0141. E-mail: egreen@total.net.

Leverton Wroxton Grant
Description: annual travel stipend for undergraduate art students to study in the UK. Administered by Fairleigh Dickinson University in the USA.
Medium: all media
Available to: 21 foreign students on basis of financial need
Contact: Albert Schielke, Leverton Wroxton Grant, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1000 River Road H3335A, Teaneck, New Jersey, NJ 07666, USA

Japan Foundation Grant Programme
Description: travel grant for artists and writers to visit Japan to study traditional art and culture.
Medium: all media
Available to: international writers and artists
Contact: The Japan Foundation, 17 Old Park Lane, London, W1Y 3LG, UK. E-mail: info@jpartsfdn.org

While every attempt has been made to advertise the correct dates of exhibition openings and details of grants available, it would also be advisable to confirm them with the relevant organisations

News

Even rank amateur painters can show their work in Britain's top museums – if they have £1 m to spare, according to The Sunday Times. A journalist from the newspaper posed as a wealthy banker who painted as a hobby. He offered major galleries a £1m donation on condition his 'Self Portrait' was hung in a quiet corner. The V&A, the Royal Academy and the British Museum praised the work – but what he hadn't told them was that he had painted it in 10 minutes. The ruse followed rumours that Britain's national art galleries are desperate for funding.

The man who made famous the 'dot paintings' of Australia's Aborigines has died in a plane crash. Well connected art dealer Patrick Courbally Stourton fell into the arts world by accident after he got lost in the Australian desert 125 miles from Alice Springs in 1988 and was rescued by an Aboriginal artist, Nelson Tjakamarra. Stourton was fascinated by the community's bark paintings of wildlife and dream imagery and promoted and exhibited the distinctive Aboriginal art across the world.
Two Going Zebras by Elijah Ooko is one of a series of wildlife pictures painted for the artist’s recent exhibition in Nairobi. Painted in oil on paper, it is instantly recognisable as an Ooko work by its composition, use of colour and the treatment of the subject. Animals – and particularly game – are Ooko’s favourite subject matter and, here as with his other animal portraits, the artist imbues the zebras with a simple charm. They are painted in the artist’s distinctive naive style with tiny, meticulous brushstrokes in brilliant colours to create a picture that seems to sparkle on the paper.

The artist favours oil paint because of the ease with which he can manipulate the medium. His animals and birds are usually set in a simple background of blue sky (like that of Two Going Zebras) or predominantly brown savannah. His pictures have a peaceful, positive feel about them rather like the artist himself. Ooko is a great admirer of the work of Jak Katarikaxe.

Elijah Ooko has been painting professionally since 1997. Entirely self-taught, he was attracted to animals for their aesthetic qualities: their form and their individual characteristics; both the physical and the behavioural. Born in Siaya Alego, Papriang Village in 1968, he drew from an early age and at first used to draw donkeys, cows and goats as well as the ubiquitous monkeys that frequented the locality.

After school, he trained as a welder, and when he was 21 years old he came to Nairobi in search of work. Unable to find a job, he concentrated his efforts on his art. He began to visit Nairobi National Park, where he would study the wildlife then go home and paint it. He was inspired by big cats, gazelles and antelope in addition to ostrich and guinea-fowl, all of which are frequent subjects in his compositions.

'I started to think of drawing wild animals because they had a similar structure to some of the domestic animals I had been drawing for years’, he explains. ‘I love zebras – the zebra is one of my favourite animals. Zebras have a lot in common with donkeys, both structurally and in their behaviour and even in the sound they make. To me a zebra is a “polite” animal: it can coexist even with other animals like antelopes and wildebeest’.

Initially, Ooko painted at his sister’s kiosk in Southlands, often watched by passers-by. The images he created attracted admirers and custom, and he used his small income to buy oil paints and started to paint wildlife more seriously. Before long his unique paintings came to the attention of African Heritage and he was advised to take them to Gallery Watatu. He has participated in eight group exhibitions at the gallery since 1991 and three more at the National Museum in Nairobi.

In 1994 he took part in a highly successful exhibition in Marugame, Japan, where he sold ten paintings. His zebras were so well received that one admirer had T-shirts made featuring one of his portraits of a zebra. Elijah Ooko held his first solo exhibition at Ngong Racecourse in September of this year and also took part in Art Affair 2002 at RAMOMA.
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