Now and Forever

The Ugandan artist Wilson Lukenge stuck with his Nabutono motif, leaving a powerful pictorial legacy

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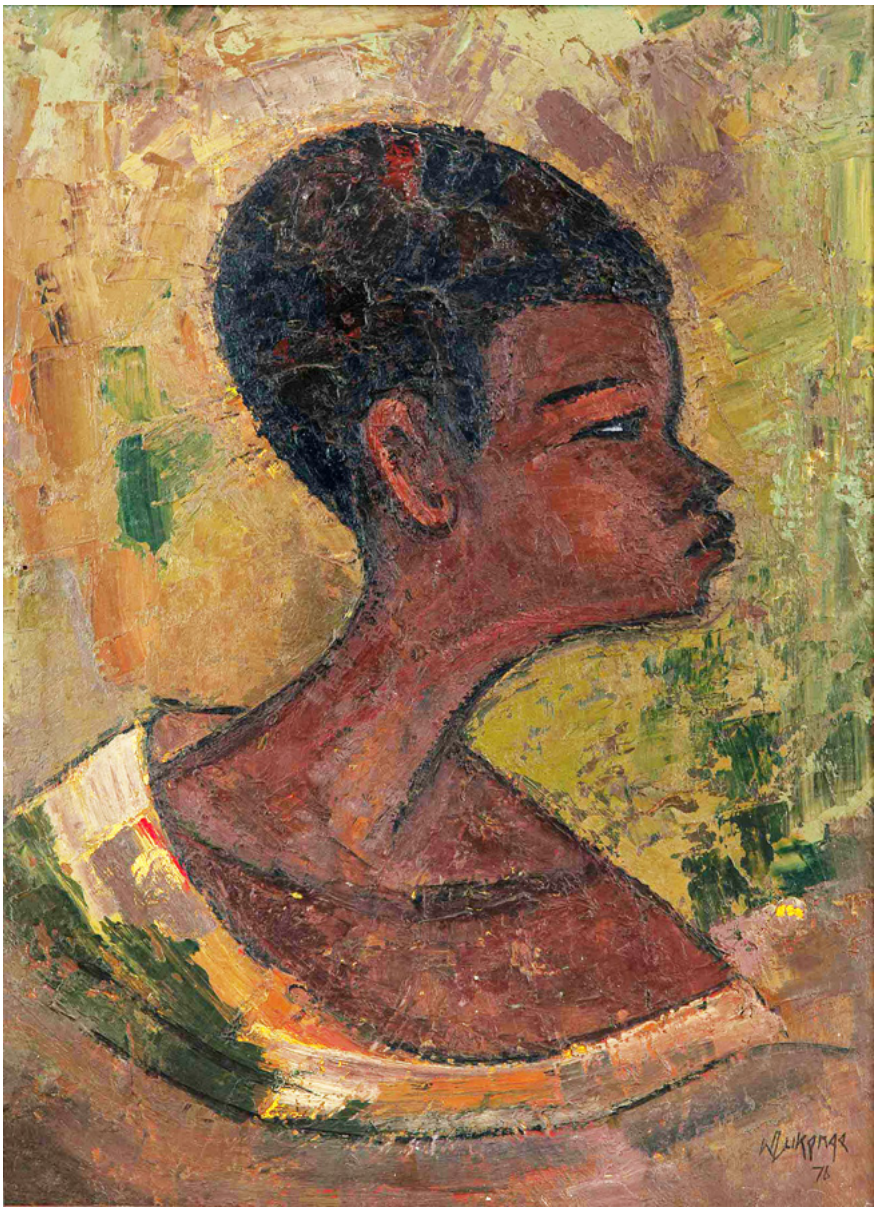
In 2022, when Wilson Lukenge had only three years left to live, a 1976 painting by him was auctioned in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, by the Circle Art Agency. The untitled painting was described as the portrait of a princess, and it sold for $3,000. The piece, executed with oil on board, had been signed by *WLukenge*, misattributed in the auction catalogue as William Lukenge. Although Lukenge as a young man had once gone by the name George William Membe Lukengere, not unusual for Ugandans of his time, especially those trying to survive violent political times, the artist's name was unequivocally Wilson Lukenge.

Lukenge almost certainly never found out that his piece had sold for that much, and neither did Owekitiibwa Nuwa Wamala Nnyanzi, the great artist who was his friend, know this fact, because Nnyanzi was surprised when I let him know recently. My sense of sadness for Lukenge was twofold: that some culturally important people did not know who he was, hence the misattribution, and that his brilliance was never really celebrated in his own time. Although this is the fate of a great number of artists with exceptional merit, Lukenge's case is especially poignant because one suspects that the only praise he regularly received came from the mouth of Nnyanzi, who collected his works over the years, doing so sometimes to reassure the artist that his work wasn't in vain and to protect him from lapsing into depression.

Lukenge died in 2025 after suffering cruelly from diabetes and high blood pressure. He was at work until the very end, executing pieces that he thought Nnyanzi would admire and acquire. Nnyanzi, in a brief obituary published by the Daily Monitor newspaper, said of his friend, whom he first met in Kampala in the 1990s, that he was "a prolific and highly creative visual artist of international repute. His art is widely celebrated and collected." That's true to a certain extent, but to the end, throughout his lifetime, Lukenge's fame was nowhere near his immense talent.



Wilson Lukenge, *Untitled (Portrait of a Princess)*, 1976, oil on board

I first saw Lukenge's work in Nnyanzi's studio, which is domiciled in the arts and crafts village of the Uganda National Theatre. The studio is packed with rare art by many artists, and while I looked around one day I saw a striking semi-abstract painting of cattle by Lukenge. The long-horned cows had been joined together in a sort of circular shape, a powerful image and obviously the work of a master. I wanted to buy the painting and even went so far as reserving it, but I was slow to make a deposit and the painting was sold to someone else.

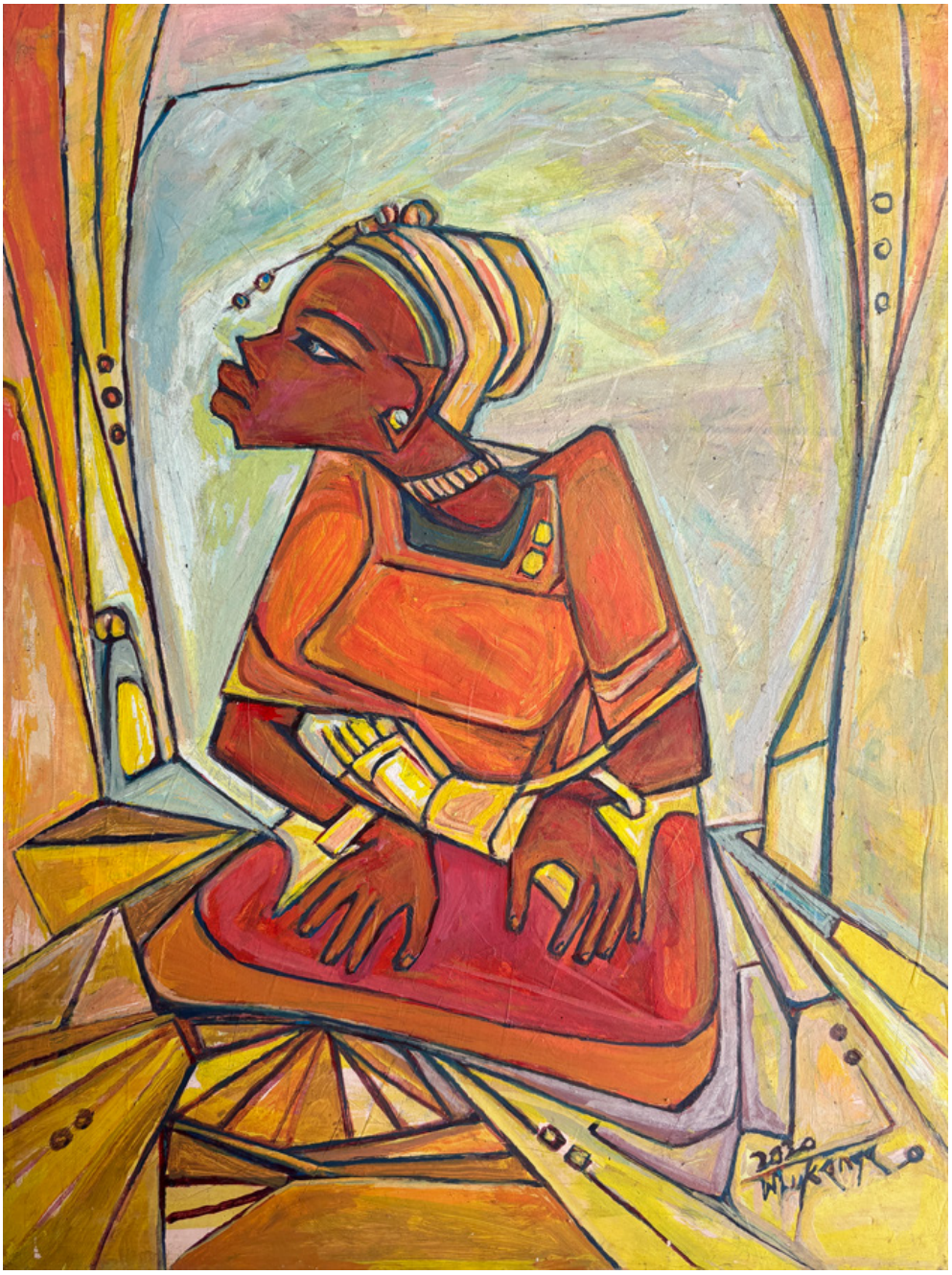
My loss turned out to be an opportunity for discovery. Nnyanzi's assistant Brenda showed me what else they had acquired from Lukenge, and while she pulled the canvases from storage I felt like a kid in a candy shop. It was beauty galore, and there was a remarkable constancy – and consistency – in the artist's image-making. The princess in the 1976 painting auctioned in Nairobi had been recreated in multiple pictures, in the same profile view, with

the same poise and dignity of the woman Lukenge himself thought of as his Nabutono. The word refers to a petite woman in the Luganda language, and it acquired almost spiritual significance in the last century when the singer and composer Elly Wamala sang of *Nabutono*, his homage to the physically small but spellbinding woman. Contemporary singers like Willy Mukabya have recorded their versions of *Nabutono* – less interesting and more sensational than Wamala's lyrics, of course – but the message is more or less the same: that there are mysterious wonders in petite women, cosmic secrets even.

In art, in Ugandan art, Lukenge took the motif and made it his own, so that his legacy finally has to be Nabutono and the immense pictorial opportunities in the recurring image of the woman who may or may not have been his lover. Nnyanzi told me that Lukenge was married twice, and that the side-ways facial description of Nabutono may have been based on the reality of a woman Lukenge knew. At some point even Nnyanzi felt Lukenge had overdone the Nabutono motif and asked him why he kept repeating the same image and whether he could try something different. Lukenge's artistic response was certainly no, because he kept at it. On the authority of his oeuvre, which includes batiks as well as works on barkcloth and canvas, it is impossible to argue with Lukenge.

Wilson Membe Lukenge was born in 1944. His talent was already undeniable in high school. According to the story recounted by Nnyanzi, for his imaginative composition paper at Lubiri Secondary School, where he earned his Cambridge School Certificate, Lukenge and his classmates were asked to write an essay about a defiant goat and illustrate their work with sketches. The assignment was to "imagine a goat that has defied its owner all day by refusing to be taken to pasture." Lukenge had grown up in a rural setting and had looked after many goats, no doubt coming face to face with some unruly ones. His challenge was to thoughtfully describe one in a way that was unique and compelling. While his classmates scribbled fast and furious, he took his time and was slow to get going, exasperating the invigilator who knew that Lukenge, among the best in his fine art class, was not supposed to struggle. It took him half an hour to get going. What he produced that day was phenomenal, and his work was referred to Cecil Todd of the art school at Makerere University. The professor was impressed, and Lukenge was admitted to Makerere University to earn his bachelor's degree in fine art.

To the extent that Lukenge was not widely known among art collectors, it's possible to say that he was underrated because he earned his living as a teacher, not as a painter. He taught



Wilson Lukenge, *Nabutono (Waiting)*, 2020, acrylic on canvas

many students at Ntare School, Makerere College School and his alma mater. During a brief period in exile, in the 1970s, he was also an art teacher in Kenya, where he earned an early reputation as a creator of exquisite batiks.

But it's Lukenge's paintings that I return to again and again – for their colorful virtuosity, for their abstract tension, and for the artist's faithful and relentless efforts to force us to see more in Nabutono, into which he condensed mass and feeling. I have two favorites: *Nabutono (Waiting)* and *Bird Watching Over Musicians*. These are late-career, post-COVID works that affirm Lukenge's status as one of the great artists of our time. In *Nabutono (Waiting)*, executed in 2020, Lukenge describes a woman elegantly attired in a gomesi and sitting in front of a giant TV screen, as if waiting for someone or something



Wilson Lukenge, *Bird Watching Over Musicians*, 2024, acrylic on canvas

to materialize. Her beauty is regal in the Kiganda way, and yet again Lukenge resists the temptation to give us a frontal view of the woman's face. In this regard Lukenge was a playfully *selfish* artist and man, as indeed he was supposed to be. It's as though he's giving us only a tantalizing view of Nabutono while keeping the rest of her for himself, as though to give us the full facial expression is to let the genie out of the bottle. If he had done that, if he had reversed his thinking, then all of his life's work would have been in vain – because the image of Nabutono would have lost its force and vitality.

The same pictorial strategy is applied in *Bird Watching Over Musicians*, executed the year before Lukenge died. There are two Nabutonoesque figures, or perhaps it's a mirror image of the same figure, and the women are locked in dance while a bird watches over them like divine grace. This is a picture that forces the viewer to pay close attention and try to understand the artist's intentions, and it's not so easy now that Lukenge is gone. My sense is that the artist is telling, or rather warning, us that everything he wanted to say had gone for shelter in the small form of Nabutono. And, by extension, it could also be said that, at any moment, now and forever, one woman suffices to bring order to the life of he or she who needs such ordering. If Lukenge made no claims for his art, we owe it to him to make justifiable claims for his art, based on the remarkable quality of works that gave expression to everything from traditional camaraderie to sensual love.

The history of modern art is filled with artists who constantly reinvented themselves, to critical acclaim (like Pablo Picasso) or to relative obscurity (too many to cite). But even with Picasso, although everything he ever made is now desirable and worth a lot of money, in the end it was his fragmented distortions of Cubist art that made him famous. Lukenge is important because he showed the way for other regional artists who, seeking fame and fortune, could easily get distracted by curators and others operating according to the whims of collectors. Lukenge refused to conform to established visual narratives of his time, seeking to construct a version of reality steeped in local tradition, cultural symbols, and his own idiosyncrasy.

Lukenge seemed to be saying, *Nabutono speaks for herself, and if you don't like her you can go to hell*. The artist stuck with his peculiar motif through thick and thin, through poverty and ill health, through fatigue and boredom. We owe a great debt to the example of Lukenge's painting, which ranks among the most powerful achievements by a Ugandan modernist artist.