Rehearsing the Future

Notes on the fierce urgency of collecting

Rodney Muhumuza

Quite regularly I am asked why I collect art and I have to clear my mind for a thoughtful response, one that's at once compelling and laconic. It should be enough to just respond with the equivalent question of my own – *why not collect*? – but that's too defensive and it doesn't put me in the position of authority I want to assume when talking about art. Because there are very few Ugandans who collect pictures with any degree of seriousness, it is an awesome responsibility to be able to explain the importance of keeping our artistic heritage at home. And so, to those who ask, I speak of our shortcomings as a nation and as individuals.

As a nation there is much to be ashamed of. As individuals we don't, generally, seem to care.

Which is why others of us must do something, anything, to rectify that?

In the past year it has been revealed that the Uganda Museum, an institution built by the British colonial government more than a century ago, is to undergo a refurbishment that had long been overdue. The Uganda Museum's holdings are mostly ethnographic items, tribal pieces assembled from a range of traditional institutions spread across the country. It has, for all intents and purposes, never been equipped to serve the purpose of a national gallery in the universal sense of the term. The museum doesn't have an acquisitions committee and neither does it have a budget, as far as I know, which makes one wonder why and how it's allowed to persist in such a state. In any event, it seems that the people in charge of the museum were somehow able to secure funding for its refurbishment, and it came, not surprisingly, from the World Bank. The project will increase the museum's exhibition space, digitally

document its holdings, and, of course, upgrade the plumbing system. This is all in order, but how can we talk about giving the museum a facelift without diversifying its contents? How can we even talk about renovating the museum without making a plan to make it more attractive to visitors?

Not far from the Uganda Museum, on Nakesero hill, is Nommo Gallery, which, at its inception in the 1960s, was conceived as the kind of national gallery we are today asking for. Legally established in 1964 by the national assembly as the first art gallery in eastern Africa, Nommo was championed by Barbara Lapcek, an American woman who was its founding curator and who, with Rajat Neogy, helped produce *Transition* magazine in its Ugandan heyday. Nommo has put on dozens of exhibitions over the decades, but it survives not with evolutionary strength and tenacity but with decay and exhaustion, in the same run-down building next to the state lodge. Elly Tumwine, the one-eyed military general who died in 2022, for many years made Nommo his personal headquarters, but the gallery, even as it maintained a semblance of programming, never seemed to benefit from the general's proximity to power. Not long before he died, Tumwine was being pressed by the parliamentary speaker to pay the government what he allegedly owed for the personal use of Nommo and to vacate the gallery. Tumwine, who was a formally trained artist, responded by saying he had been using the gallery not as a commercial tenant but as an arts patron. Nommo is still there, bushy compound and all, but it doesn't have an art collection and it isn't the national gallery some of us think it is or want it to be.

What's one to make of the fate of the Uganda Museum and Nommo Gallery? At least two things: one, that our government isn't to be depended on when it comes to looking after our national treasures and, secondly, that our leaders have let us down in such a bad way.

In the past two years I've had the opportunity to travel in Europe as one fully possessed of an abounding love of art, so that when I traveled to Belgium last year to spend time with my brother a major motivation, as my brother knew, was not to celebrate his doctorate but the opportunity to visit art spaces such as the Magritte Museum in Brussels. When I wasn't with him in his

Muhumuza at the Magritte Museum in Brussels

studio in Antwerp, we were visiting places such as the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, which I didn't want to leave, or walking by the sea towards the Rubenshuis and finding, to my disappointment, that the museum dedicated to Rubens was closed for renovations. Later I spent a week in Paris wandering the streets, hopping from one museum to the next, from the Musee Picasso to the Musee de l'Orangerie, and there, while I viewed some masterpieces of modern art, from Monet's monumental water lilies to Soutine's carcasses, it dawned on me that our cultural poverty was of our own making.

The Musee de l'Orangerie is one of Europe's treasures, and its existence shows the great lengths to which European governments, notably the French one under any leader, have gone to retain what is theirs and even what isn't. The museum houses the collection of Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume,

some 147 paintings acquired effectively by force between 1959 and 1963 from an unsavoury socialite who had been married first to Guillaume, a famous art dealer, and then to Walter, a successful architect. Domenica Walter-Guillaume survived both men to possess this wonderful art collection that the state was also deeply interested in. At some point the French government began investigating Domenica for her possible role in the death of Walter – but also possibly in the death of Guillaume before Walter – and as the authorities closed in on her she made a deal with Andre Malraux, the culture minister. Compelled to sell the paintings to the Republic for a tiny fraction of their monetary value, she wasn't even present when Malraux inaugurated the revamped exhibition spaces in 1966, and she rejected his offer of the Legion of Honor.

The point, if you excuse the injection of such necessary background, is the extraordinary steps Malraux took to make the collection of Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume the property of the French state, just as others before and after him harassed artists, with malicious tax claims and other measures, to maintain France's status as the all-time European capital of culture.

Malraux was a representative of the French government, but there were other Frenchmen and women of the day who were taking similar measures, making moves that would make it easier, in fact, for Malraux to do his work. Paul Guillaume, when he embarked on amassing a personal collection, hoped to be able to establish a private museum of art that would be open to the French public. While he hoarded canvases by avant-garde painters ranging from Modigliani to Matisse, he didn't know that he would die young, or that the Musee de l'Orangerie, which fulfilled his vision in a sensational roundabout way, would stand today as a monument to the vision of those who see the future clearly.

Why, you wonder, do I write this way? It is because of the way we are. Ugandans spend hundreds of millions of shillings building nice homes – nice homes, that is, if they are storied structures with crooked walls – and furnish them not with beautiful art but with calendars and gilded ornaments made in China. And when they step into a house like mine, filled with books and

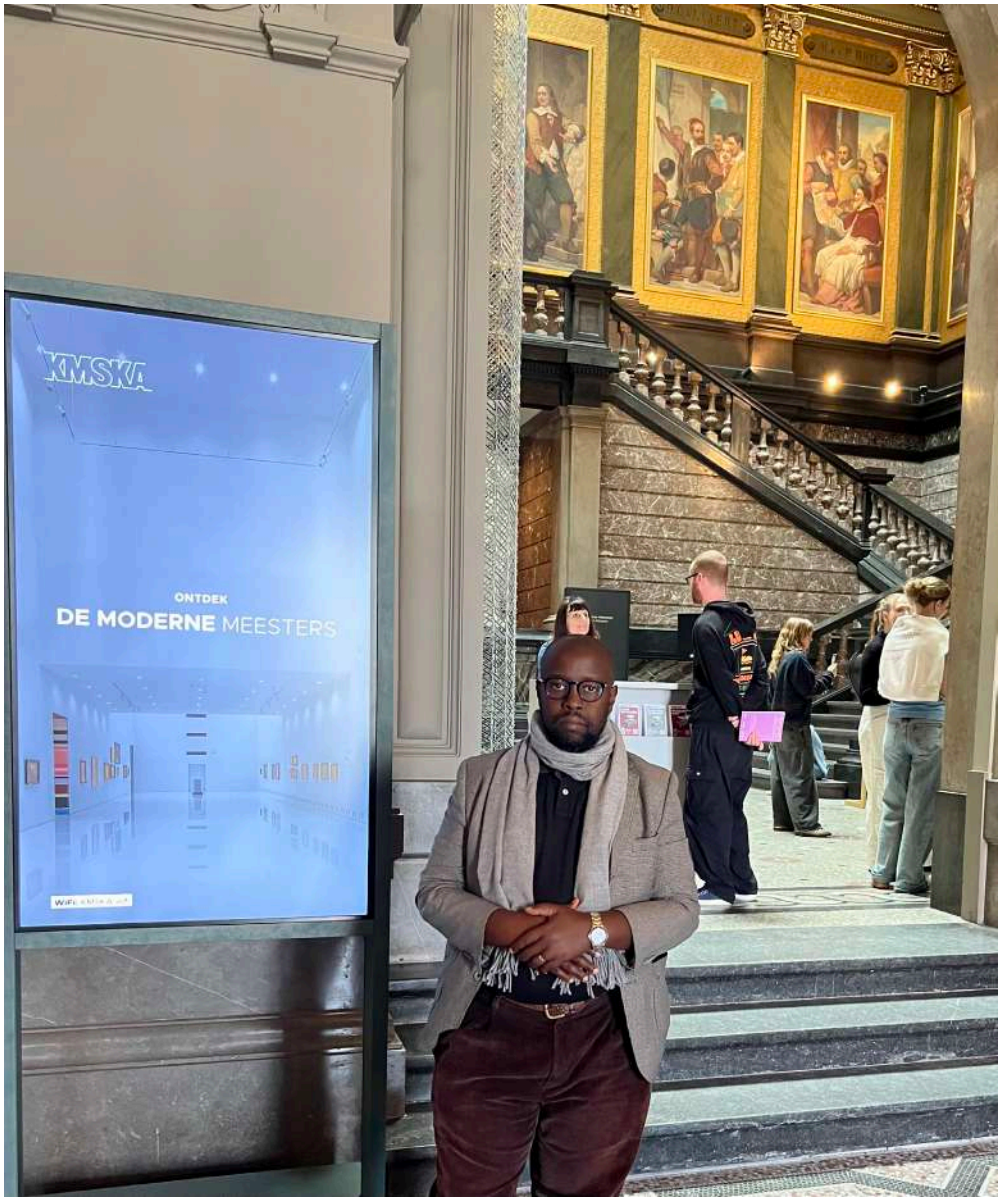
Muhumuza at the Courtauld Gallery in London

pictures, they can look confused and out of place. Some even dare to ask, *Now how much did you pay for that?* They have an idea that the pieces may not be cheap, but they are looking for confirmation that money has been wasted and I am waiting to confirm my fear that, as solid and educated as they may be, they are not cultured people. At such times I think, rather arrogantly, that one person, just one, can have the uber-consciousness a million Toyota-loving Ugandans don't have.

My goal as a collector, and indeed as an essayist and editor, is to help create the conditions that can make intellectual culture contagious, to democratize the love of art. We must harness all opportunities available to create a community of people who appreciate art from a young age. We, those of us who think alike, can achieve this by closing gaps, so to speak, in a national mindset that has swerved inexorably towards cars and real estate at the expense of everything that is intellectual. The task at hand is to get the Toyota Harriers out of people's minds and replace the machines with literature and art. A wholesome embrace of the things that can make us a better community is not, of course, easily accomplished, but we need individuals – and institutions – that grasp this problem and are willing to do something about it.

Showing one's collection of art is a novel thing in Kampala, when it shouldn't be the case, and it may also be considered bold, when I am not exercising any courage. After all, this is a country that doesn't have a single museum of art despite the abundance of artistic production for generations upon generations, when we know that even relatively small towns in the U.S. and elsewhere usually have institutions of this kind.

Exhibiting the Roduza Collection is just the beginning of what I hope will be many years of engagement with Ugandans and others who want to see a better future in the ideal direction: publishing, regular art exhibitions, artist commissions and awards, interviews and dialogues. The collection comprises pictures made by living artists, men and women whose works would hang in the national gallery if we had one. They are, most of them, masterpieces curated with care and the knowledge that the priceless works of art must be kept in Uganda. Almost all of them were acquired directly from the



Muhumuza at KMSKA, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp

artists, many of whom I came to know and even befriended in the course of my work as the top editor of *The Weganda Review*. The literary quarterly publishes prose, poetry and two art portfolios in each issue, and I've written the introductions to all the published portfolios.

The most represented artist in the Roduza Collection is Professor George W. Kyeyune, and it isn't by mistake. Arguably Uganda's greatest living artist, the sculptor and painter has taught for years at Makerere University's art school. Teaching, as we probably know, can give artists the boring academic badge, and make them too comfortable to be seriously productive, but not so with Kyeyune. A prolific Expressionist with his impasto technique, he works like a literary novelist when he renders urban mass in a way that's evocative of our

Muhumuza in conversation with Leonard Kateete, a Ugandan artist based in Kenya

time and place. Some of the works by Kyeyune that I have been fortunate to acquire, like *Abaana ba Kintu* and *Gossip II*, are among the unforgettable highlights of the Roduza Collection, and if the collection is to grow – and grow it shall – there will be more Kyeyunes in it. For Kyeyune, an artist whose humility belies his accomplishments, I have unconditional respect, and one hopes he will remain active for many years.

Leonard Kateete is also well-represented, and for good reason. His depiction of the burial site of a Giriama traditional healer sparkles with color and mystery, with the rugged base of the tree as its point of equilibrium. All of Kateete's powers as a painter come alive in *Totem Tree*, which has been selected as cover art for this catalogue. In this painting, as in others by him, Kateete, a classically trained artist based in Kenya, is able to find a distinct reality in the mundane shape of a tree, evoking the enigma of living things.

But it is, first and foremost, a beautiful painting, one that affirms Kateete as a master of our time. His many portraits of couples in ethnic attire and other sitters rank among the great achievements by a Ugandan painter of any generation.

To collect art is, for me, a necessary quest. It is to rehearse the future some of us envision, one where art is so ubiquitous in public and private places that it is, to paraphrase Kenneth Burke, among the tools of life. I think of my work as rehearsing the future because now, more than ever, things are looking bright. The number of private art galleries in Kampala and outside the city is growing, a trend that mirrors growing interest in art from Africa as global collectors tire of the repetitiveness of contemporary art elsewhere in the world. Kampala is fast becoming an artsy place, if not quite like Paris in 1912 then, let it be said, at least like Kampala in 2025. These are the days, and those of us who are actively collecting, who are hoarding our treasures in the national interest, are performing a service so important that the nature of it, its value and its significance, needs to be explained.

So if you, my friend, still wonder why I collect, this time I will put it to you: *Why not*?

And what's the endgame, you also wonder? To build a collection substantial and influential enough to be the bedrock of the envisaged RODUZA, a permanent and non-profit gallery of art that would be the first museum of its kind in our country.