

You can spend hours browsing the rooms. And, for a break, there is an excellent coffee shop outside

BY JOHN FOX

I want to pay tribute to a man who has devoted so much of himself to paying tribute to another. I am talking about Alan Donovan, who has ensured that people will know — and also enjoy — the amazing contribution that Joseph Murumbi made to the appreciation of African art and African culture.

Alan is an American who came to Africa as a humanitarian worker back in 1967. Like so many *wazungu*, he got caught in the magnetic field of Africa, and so he stayed.

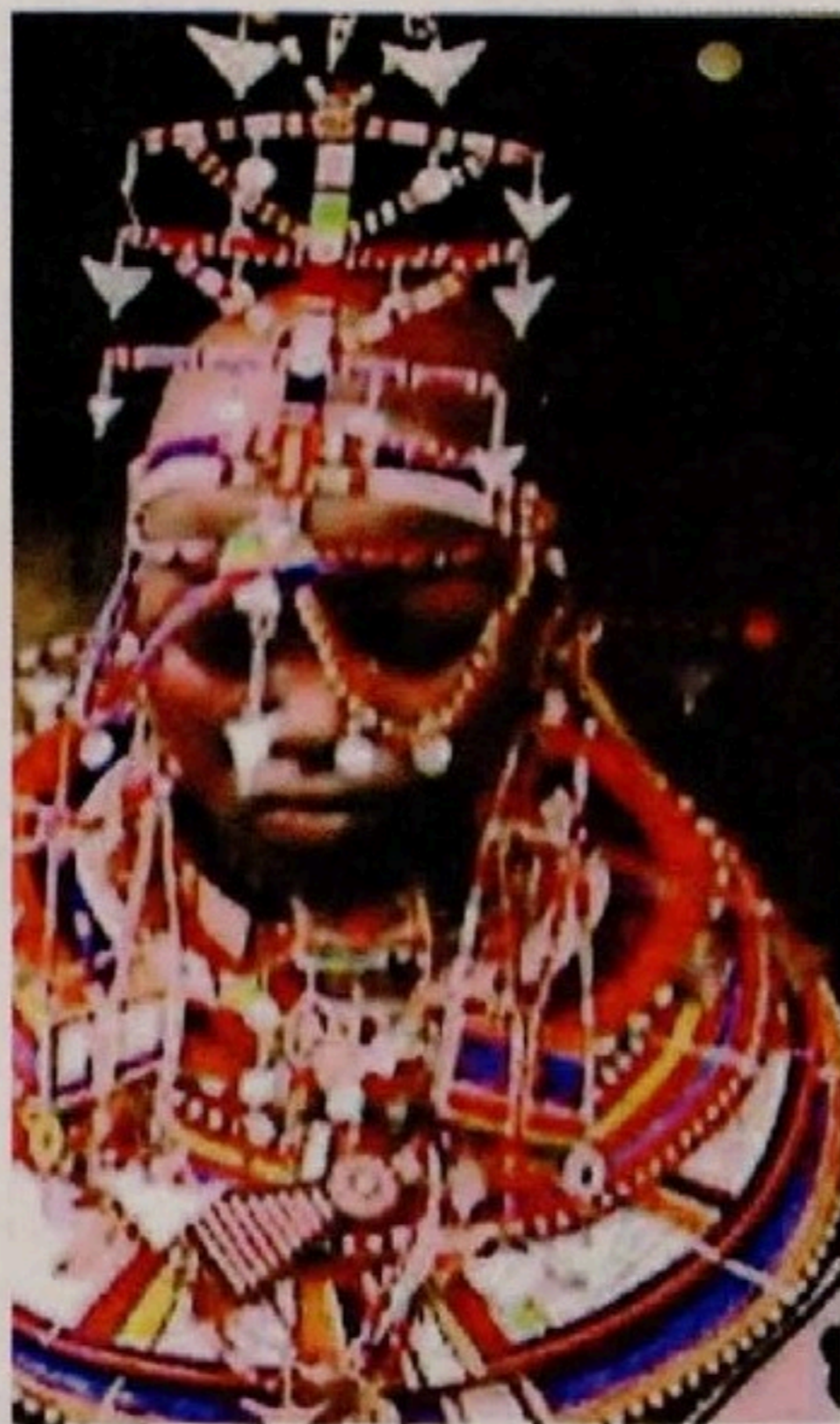
Eventually, he made Kenya his base. He founded here African Heritage, the first Pan-African Gallery on the continent. His partner in that enterprise was Joseph Murumbi, the son of a Goan father and a Maasai mother — and Kenya's second Vice-President.

Murumbi was also an astounding collector of African art. This is not the time or place to tell the story of Alan's long, and continuing, struggle to make sure Murumbi's collection is not only preserved but also displayed.

The focus here is on what you can see of it at the Nairobi Gallery. The focus is also on the gallery's current exhibition of prints by photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher — prints from their new book, *African Twilight: Vanishing Rituals and Ceremonies*.

Most of the space in the gallery is taken up with items from the Murumbi Collection. The gallery might be rather small, but it exhibits big. The collection has paintings and sculptures, artefacts and crafts, beads and textiles, from all over Africa. The variety is great; the colours are rich. It is a showcase of the best of African art and craft — traditional, modern and contemporary.

There is a lot, too, about the life, values and tastes of Murumbi and also of his wife, Sheila. In one section there is a recreation of the sitting room in their Muthaiga house. And there are many books and



The small gallery that exhibits big

papers — from tales of the early missionaries to the stories of Kenya in transition. And so the place is a fascinating museum as well as a quality art gallery.

You can spend hours browsing the rooms. And, for a break, there is an excellent coffee shop outside, with tables set out under the shade of bamboo shrubs. It is called Point Zero in recognition that the old PC's office, which now houses the gallery, was the point in Nairobi from which distances to other places were measured.

But I want to tell you more about the small African Twilight exhibition. As the poster at the entrance to the gallery says, Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher have spent over 40 years travelling across the

African continent, photographing the costumes, ceremonies, rituals and customs of an Africa that is now vanishing. Between them they have produced 17 books. The latest, *African Twilight*, from which the prints on show are taken, will be launched in Nairobi on 3 March.

This will be a spectacular event. A special train, carrying 300 people, will leave the Railway Museum at 2.30pm and disembark at Alan Donovan's African Heritage House, overlooking the Nairobi National Park. The house is designed in the style of traditional mud architecture that was found across the continent, and houses a wonderful collection of African art and textiles.

It will be a reconstruction of the African Heritage Festival which used to travel the world with its troupe of models, musicians, dancers and acrobats — an assembly of stars — to honour Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher.

If you would like to be on that train, then you can make your booking by emailing ahalan@africaonline.co.ke. The tickets are Sh7,500, but for groups of 10 or more they are Sh7,000 each. All proceeds will go towards supporting various projects to secure the Murumbi legacy Which reminds me, I must book my own ticket.

John Fox is managing director of IDC : Email@ johnfox@idc.co.ke