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Becoming Ndebele: The Decorated Homes of Matabeleland

by Brenda Molife



I was born in Zambia and lived there until I was three, at which time my family moved to the United States, the country of my mother's birth. My father was born and raised in Zimbabwe, and a large number of our relatives still live there in the capitol city of Harare. In 1990, I went to visit these relatives, and a few days before I returned to the



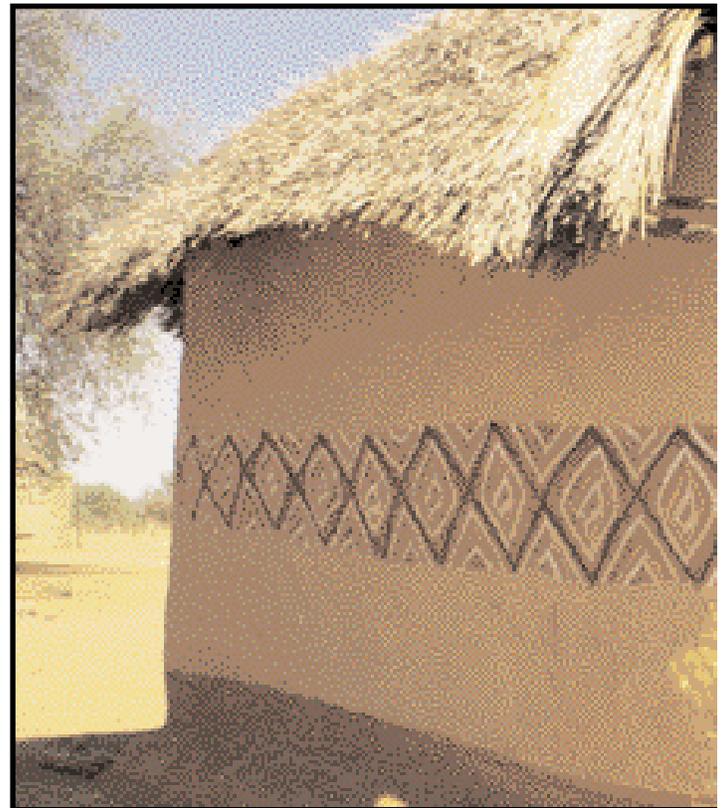
Left,
Band motif

States I decided to pay a trip to Victoria Falls. I rented a pick-up truck, loaded the cab with all my touristy gear, and began driving cross country. It was mid-December, the peak of Zimbabwe's rainy season, although a drought was in progress, and it had not rained for over a year. The parched earth was cracked and sandy brown. Withered plants dotted the landscape, their sparse leaves being nibbled by emaciated goats. By the time I neared my destination, five dreary hours later, the world seemed devoid of beauty. And then I saw a flower. It was painted on the side of a house. It was a remarkably striking thing to see in such a barren environment. Who had painted it, I wondered, and why?

In 1996, I returned to Zimbabwe with these and other questions in mind, and fifteen hundred miles, 500 photographs, two hundred interviews, and one flat tire later, I had obtained the answers.

Located in the southern half of Africa, Zimbabwe shares its borders with South Africa to the south, Botswana and Namibia to the west, Zambia to the north, and Mozambique to the east. Zimbabwe is approximately the size of Montana, and its geography is extremely diverse. You can find semi-arid conditions, savanna grasslands and mountainous regions all within a few hours' drive. The country is known for its stone ruins, most notably Great Zimbabwe, and for Victoria Falls. Throughout the land are several well-known game reserves, such as Hwange and Chipangali. Zimbabwe's population of approximately eleven million consists of several ethnic groups, including a small but economically powerful number of Europeans and Asians. Among the indigenous peoples are the Venda, Kalanga, and Tonga. However, the culturally and numerically dominant group is the Shona, who comprise 71% of the population and live in the east in what is called Mashonaland. The second largest ethnic group is the Ndebele. They make up 16% of the population and reside mainly in the west, which is called Matabeleland and is the home of the remarkable house painting tradition known as the Zimbabwe Ndebele mural.

Ndebele murals are painted almost exclusively by females, and a girl learns this art form from her mother. There is never a single moment when a girl begins to learn this tradition; rather, she is under instruction virtually from birth. It is not uncommon, for instance, to see two- and three-year-olds huddled quietly beneath a





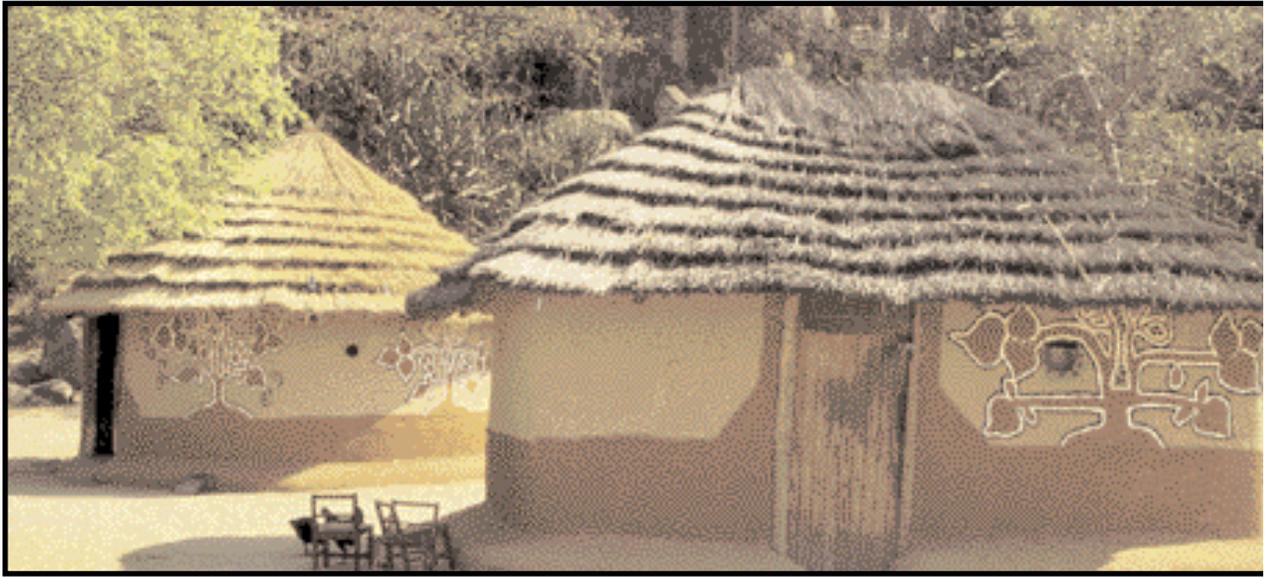
Left, Step motif.

Directly below,

Plant motif.

Bottom,

Geometric motif.



mango tree, attentively watching their mother transform a dull brown house into a thing of beauty. You may, on any given day, see an eight-year-old helping stir a container of paint. Or you may encounter a ten-year-old sketching in the sand, practicing the designs she would have seen her mother paint countless times before. With this kind of on-going training, it is no wonder that, by the age of eleven, a girl will be a competent muralist. And in all probability, by the time she turns twelve, she will have been delegated the responsibility of decorating an entire compound.

A young girl just assuming this responsibility will often imitate her mother's designs, but it will not be long before she decides to test her own creative wings. When she has a new idea for a mural, she will sketch it for her mother, and only after it has been approved can its likeness be applied to a wall. In school, she is exposed to a wider range of design possibilities; many girls told me they got their ideas for designs from books and magazines they saw at school. Other girls credited their powers of imagination. But regardless of a girl's source of inspiration, and no matter what creative prowess she may possess, she will not have total freedom of expression until she marries and moves to her own home.

A muralist will often walk long distances in search of the desired soil color from which to make the paint. The soil's hues include red, orange, black, brown, rust, beige, and khaki. Near a small town called Gwanda, yellow soil can be obtained from an abandoned gold mine, and near the town of Lupane one can find the color pink just beneath the surface of the riverbed. Women also obtain reddish brown and white from the inner soil of ant hills.

A handful of women stated that they purchase acrylic white paint because they want a brighter white than what soil or ash can provide. But in a region of the world where the average yearly income is forty dollars, the overwhelming majority of women cannot afford such a luxury.

When a woman arrives at an area that contains the color soil she desires, she skims off the topsoil and fills her container with subsoil. Transporting the soil home is back-breaking work, as the filled containers often weigh fifty pounds or more. The women manage the load by balancing the containers on their heads, though some women are fortunate enough to make use of a mule and cart.

After soil and water have been mixed to a consistency of pea soup, debris is extracted. The first coat, or primer, is smeared onto the wall by hand. This act is similar in tactility to raking one's hand over rough sandpaper. The actual mural is painted by hand and with a homemade brush, such as a toothbrush or a small stick whose tip has been frayed.

The Ndebele generally paint their homes twice a year. Most women paint once in the dry season (roughly from April through October) and again in December. The artists want their homes to look especially presentable in December when family and friends visit to celebrate Christmas. Unfortunately, December is also when the rainy season is in full swing; anything decorated with soil-based paints during this time will be damaged within a few days. Since December's murals



Above,
Plant motif.
Right,
Animal motif.



will not be in pristine condition to bring in the new year, some women paint again in early January.

Murals are found on the exterior as well as the interior of homes. The kitchen is the most commonly decorated interior, as this is the place where family, friends, visitors, and neighbors often gather.

A skilled muralist can paint a single building, inside and out, in about a day. That time will vary, of course, depending upon the elaborateness of the designs and motifs.

Mrs. Dube, a seventy-six-year old artist, told me about three motifs that were common when she was a girl but which are now rare. They were what she called intaba (mountain or hill), isayobe (spider), and ilanga (sun).

Other oral sources described murals that were found only on the walls of kitchens but which are no longer painted. These included images of calabashes, baskets, wooden plates, clay pots and women pounding grain in mortars. I believe that these murals are no longer in use

because, as kitchen-related utensils and/or activities, their function was to distinguish the kitchen from other structures in the compound, all of which were circular. When the Ndebele began using Western-style furniture, such as bed frames and dressers, they changed the shape of the bedrooms to accommodate these rectangular forms. The kitchen is now generally the only remaining circular structure, and, as such, it need not be identified by a specific mural. This, of course, implies that the sole function of these murals was one of identification, and while I do not necessarily believe that to be true, I can think of only one other reason for their having become obsolete; they are simply no longer in vogue.

Today, the most popular motifs are what I call “band,” “step,” “geometric,” and “plant.” These motifs provide the platform from which women launch their artistic expressions, and the styles created range from the minimalist to the baroque.

The rainy season of 1996-97 was particularly brutal. Beginning in November, when the first raindrops fell, hardly a week passed during the subsequent four months that did not bring heavy precipitation. As a result, a great number of homes went unpainted during this time. Nevertheless, I met many women who painted in spite of the rain. These women paint so regularly in the face of so many obstacles, including drought, famine, and illness, that it was no surprise to learn that there was much more at work here than solely aesthetics.

One of the reasons why women paint murals is to garner respect. Artist Colina Ndlovu, for example, whose house you see decorated with the plant motif on page 17, said, “That’s the whole idea, because a beautiful home is respectable. If a woman has made her home beautiful, then she will be respected more.” Many other women gave similar responses, some saying that, when they were growing up, their mothers urged them to paint because that was a way of attracting the right kind of suitor. As muralist Jane Mhlapa explained, “A man who admires a woman’s hard work will make a better husband than one who doesn’t notice.” The desire for marriage in this culture is so great, however, that even if the “better man” does not materialize, then a “less than better man” will simply have to do.

Understanding the importance of marriage is crucial to understanding one of the prime motivations behind this art form. For instance, in the unlikely event that a woman does not marry, she will have to find employment in order to support herself, thereby abandoning her expected role of being occupied solely with household affairs. While that role has been loosened from the hinges of tradition in the urban areas, it remains firmly secure in the rural areas, where the murals are painted.

Once a woman is married, her motivation for painting will remain driven, in part, by social forces. Now she will paint, for instance, because her mother-in-law will expect it. What’s more, the painting competence of the new bride will play a role in the mother-in-law’s assessment of her son’s spouse. This is one reason why new wives who immigrate from communities that do not paint are eager to learn this tradition. In addition, the immigrant bride will be expected to assimilate into her new community by adopting the local customs, or, as artist Mongiwe Ncube put it, by “becoming Ndebele.”

“Becoming Ndebele” by painting murals is a phenomenon I first encountered in 1995. While surveying Matabeleland and the surrounding areas, I noted that there were murals among neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Kalanga and Nambya. Yet when I asked these muralists about their ethnicity, an interesting picture began to develop. A few of the women considered themselves Ndebele, and they did so despite their knowledge that both of their parents were of entirely different ethnic groups. In 1996-97, I heard similar sentiments expressed. One woman, Mrs. Nyoni, proudly stated, “When I was Shona and lived in Mashonaland, I did not paint. But now that I live here and paint my house, I am Ndebele.”

Along with the general desire for ethnic assimilation, there are important personal reasons for painting. One of these is the need to be recognized and appreciated. Women in this culture do not have a public arena in which to express themselves, and the murals allow women to present themselves to the world, that is to show their worth as wives, as mothers, as neighbors and/or as members of the community. For instance, a woman who is a good painter is, by extension, considered a good person, and here the word “good” does not necessarily mean “talented” but rather conscientious, careful, dutiful, and so forth. Also, a married woman believes that in showing she is taking good care of her

house, she is showing that she is taking good care of her family. This reasoning speaks volumes to these women's sense of pride, as well as to their insistence that their "voices" be heard and their actions seen.

The desire to uphold tradition was also a commonly cited reason for painting. Many women felt personally duty-bound to continue the artistic practices that have been passed down from generation to generation. There were some women, however, who felt no such obligation and who painted for a somewhat less noble purpose; they simply did not want other homes to look better than theirs. In other words, they were keeping up with the Joneses.

Nonetheless, despite all the reasons listed here for why Ndebele women paint, I saw a number of homes that were not painted. These unpainted homes were referred to as eye-sores, and the women who owned them were called such things as lazy and unkempt. I met a few of these stigmatized women, and they were visibly saddened and embarrassed by the state of their compounds. All of them, perhaps by way of apology, wanted me to know why they had not painted. Some women cited the heavy rains. A few complained about the incessant demands on a woman's time. And others spoke about AIDS, telling me how the disease is claiming scores of people, and that the survivors' lives have been tossed into despair and disarray. Who can paint, they asked, under such circumstances?

What do Ndebele men have to say about the murals? In a word: plenty. Men often tease men whose wives are not good painters, while men whose wives are known for spectacular designs jokingly boast that they have chosen superior women, which, the men add, is sound evidence of their own superiority. One man told me that he likes to talk about his wife's paintings to other men, not to tease them but rather to encourage them to send their wives to his wife to learn how to paint. Men also expressed negative sentiments about women who do not decorate their homes. Younger, single men often stated that they would never marry such a woman.

A few of the men I interviewed seemed to be genuine experts on the subject of mural painting. They knew where the best soils could be found, what colors were available in the area, how to mix the paints, and when was the best time to paint. They had learned these things as children while watching their mothers and grandmothers decorate. When I asked these men if they had ever painted murals, they insisted that they had not, and some expressed absolute horror at the mere suggestion.

Women, however, acknowledged that it would be acceptable if a man did decide to become a muralist, but for the first several months that I was in the field, I was told that no such man existed. And then, just weeks before my research was complete, a woman I was interviewing said that she knew of a man who painted. In fact, he lived just down the road. Unfortunately, the owner was not at home. Nor was he at home during any of my subsequent visits. When it was clear that I would never meet this male muralist, I settled for asking women in his community what they thought of him. While they disapproved of his lifestyle, namely the fact that he had married and divorced several times, they admired his decorations and the neatness of his home.

I came across only one other compound painted by a man. It was located just outside Matobo National Park, a game reserve that borders many Ndebele communities and is a favorite destination of foreign tourists. In 1995, I conducted several interviews in this area. At that time, the homes were decorated with band, step, plant and geometric motifs. When I visited in 1996-97, however, I noticed that some of the homes were painted with images of wildlife (animal motif on page 18). The primary subjects were elephants and giraffes, and they closely resembled those that men were carving from wood and selling from the park's gift shop. When I stopped at one of the homes to interview the women, I barely had time to sit before they had produced an astonishing array of items for sale. Knee-deep in bowls, beads and baskets, I explained that I was not there to purchase anything, but rather to speak with the woman who had painted the murals. I was informed that a man had painted the murals and that he was a wood carver employed by the gift shop. He had forgone the traditional motifs, the women explained, in favor of what he felt would be more appealing to tourists.

The long arm of tourism, however, can only reach so many. For the vast majority of artists with whom I spoke, the question was never how to make money from the murals, but rather how to make me feel at home while we discussed them. These women do not paint for profit; they paint because they are Ndebele. They paint because they are industrious. They paint because they are creative. They paint to attract the best possible suitors. And, perhaps most important, they paint because doing so gives them a voice, an outer platform on which to express so much inner pride.

—*Brenda Molife is Assistant Professor of Art*