

Ugandan visitor brings her world of art to Canada

By Constance Scrafield

It is an annual trek to Canada from Uganda that Carol Neumbe has been making for 12 years. She brings suitcases full of African (Ugandan) art to sell in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond, every year to support the women in her country who are the artists. She told us the story in 2008 when we first met her, five months pregnant at the time, at the CNE: "Some ladies and I decided to do something for the economy. There are 12 of us. All over Uganda, there are many women artists who paint the beautiful batiks and make many things. But there are not enough visitors coming to the countryside there to see them and buy their work."

The 12 colleagues divided the world amongst them, you might say, taking major cities in Europe, America and Canada, to carry, ship, and sell in those places. It has been a lot of work and, of course, money is always an element in the beginning to make a success of the whole.

Ms. Neumbe has family in Toronto to whom she can ship loads of stock. When she comes, via Italy, she brings suitcases full as well, to have a stand at the CNE and, sometimes, other shows. She sells to shops here too.

What she brings with her is wonderful, a deeply satisfying reflection of African life - full of the intense colours of that tropical land - no dull greys and browns in that world.

The batiks, painting done with wax on a heavy white material, talk about life in villages and musicians and dancers- sweethearts and children - market places and families at home. Each piece is simplistic in style, yet full of detail and richly coloured. Ladies with baskets on their heads, babies held by shawls on their backs. There are earthenware pots full of vegetables that we here do not know well; there are thatched roof houses and geese with their chicks and men in hats.

"We go around the countryside to our artists," Ms. Neumbe explained. "We collect the things from them and tell them what has sold the best where each of us is travelling. We talk about the colours people like the most and the subject matter."

The artists make much more than batiks: beautiful jewellery, sometimes of intensely hand crafted Paper Mache beads, strung into neck wear and earrings. They carve and colour cow bone, also for jewellery, and make tight beautiful weavings of small glass beads into discs, likewise for earrings and as pendants.

The tightly woven strings of beads is an art form also used in the broad collars that the Masai women make further east in Kenya and Tanzania.

There are bowls and animals and masks carved in wood, often teak. They weave grass to make bags, bigger and smaller, which they line with fabric.

All of it feels like the tropics, like Uganda.

The wide African landscape with its rich wildlife is painted into the batiks and carvings as well. Herds of elephants and groups of giraffe, gazelles, zebra feature in them, more wonderful than the best photographs.

After these years of hard travelling with heavy loads, plus all the work in setting up and doing the shows, we asked Ms. Neumbe, who was visiting friends in Hockley, if it is worth the effort.

She was philosophical: "It is worth it but it takes time to build up a clientele to buy for their shops. People like this work so much - anyone might buy but, sometimes, the crowds at the shows are not big enough for good sales. Other times, it is very good.

"Still, we are able to provide those ladies with some income and that is very good."

Ms. Neumbe was clear about that.