Malangatana: Mozambique Modern

Works in the Exhibition

Artist, poet, and revered national hero Malangatana Ngwenya (1936–2011) was a pioneer of modern art in Africa. Born in Mozambique, in southeast Africa, Malangatana depicted vivid allegorical scenes that draw from local religious practices, his cultural background, and life under colonial rule. This exhibition presented a selection of the artist’s early paintings and drawings, made between 1959 and 1975. During this period Malangatana embarked on bold formal experiments that coalesced into a signature style characterized by dense compositions of human, animal, and monstrous figures.

Malangatana’s early career coincided with Mozambique’s liberation struggle, in particular the armed resistance against the Portuguese in 1964, which was spearheaded by the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO). A Portuguese colony until 1975, Mozambique was among the last countries on the African continent to gain independence. Malangatana explored the rapidly changing world around him and addressed the country’s social and political context in his paintings and drawings. These works exemplify the confluence of artistic innovation and political liberation that has shaped the history of modern art in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century.

A HYBRID EDUCATION

Growing up in the village of Matalana, Malangatana encountered local art and craft traditions such as pottery, basketry, and painting before moving to Mozambique’s capital, Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), to find work. Racial and social barriers of the colonial system limited black Mozambicans’ access to formal art education. However, colonial policies promoting integration through assimilation—pressuring the local black population to adopt the language, religion, and values of the Portuguese—made art classes available to Malangatana at the Industrial School as well as the Art Center of the Colony of Mozambique in the late 1950s.
At the Art Center, Malangatana encountered European styles of painting and met Portuguese architect Amâncio d’Alpoim Miranda “Pancho” Guedes, who became a significant mentor and patron. Guedes encouraged him to leave the Art Center in order to avoid, in Malangatana’s words, “pollution” by a formal education anchored in European painting traditions. Guedes gave Malangatana studio space and a salary, and commissioned a large number of paintings in the years prior to the artist’s first solo exhibition in 1961.

Cat. 1

The Small Dentist (O pequeno dentista), 1961. Oil on hardboard; 61 × 40.3 cm (24 × 15 7/8 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.

Cat. 2

Large Nude of Luisa (Nu grande de Luísa), 1960. Oil on hardboard; 121 × 90 cm (48 × 35 7/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 3

The Day of the Divorce (O dia do divórcio), 1960. Oil on hardboard; 39.7 × 60 cm (15 5/8 × 23 5/8 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.
Cat. 4

The Blue Woman (A mulher azul), 1959. Oil on hardboard; 45.5 × 35.7 cm (17 7/8 × 14 1/16 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.

Cat. 5

Story of the Letter in a Hat (História da carta no chapéu) I, 1960. Oil on hardboard; 69.8 × 40.4 cm (27 1/2 × 15 7/8 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.
MYTHOLOGY AND RELIGION

Many of Malangatana’s works from the late 1950s to the early 1970s refer to the artist’s Mozambican roots, specifically his Ronga cultural background. The paintings in this section feature Ronga folklore, mythology, and healing rituals. Frequently the artist included Catholic symbols, signs of the pervasive Portuguese influence in Mozambique. Malangatana’s exaggerated depictions
of Ronga culture verge on the satirical, and his references to Christianity are similarly unflattering, suggesting a critique of Portuguese colonial rule.

Malangatana’s work demonstrates how he carefully balanced all aspects of life in Mozambique, from colonial influences and indigenous customs and practices to the struggle for independence. These experiences—as well as his art education and the structures of patronage he was embedded in—were layered and complex, subverting the clichéd notion of the self-taught African artist who, unspoiled by foreign influences, finds inspiration in “primitive” practices and beliefs, an idea that persists in the art history and reception of modern African art.

Cat. 9

Bloody Scene (Cena sangrenta), 1959. Oil on hardboard; 46 × 46.5 cm (18 1/8 × 18 5/16 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.

Cat. 10

The Virtuous Woman and the Sinner (A virtuosa e a pecadora), 1959. Oil on hardboard; 50.5 × 51 cm (19 11/16 × 20 1/6 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.

Cat. 11

The Witch Doctor or The Purification of the Child (O feiticeiro or A purificação da criança), 1962. Oil on fiberboard; 76.5 × 121.9 cm (30 1/8 × 48 in.). Terrell Main Library, Special Collections, Oberlin College Libraries, Ohio, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lloyd H. Ellis Jr. in memory of Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane (OC 1953).
Cat. 12

Nude with Flowers (Nu com flores), 1962. Oil on canvas; 94 × 58.8 cm (37 × 23 1/8 in.). Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, Gift of Volkmar Wentzel, 80-8-7.

Cat. 13

Last Supper (Última ceia), 1964. Oil on hardboard; 55 × 121.5 cm (21 5/8 × 47 7/8 in.). Calouste Gulbenkian Museum–Modern Collection, Lisbon, Portugal, Inv. PE13.

Cat. 14

Final Judgment (Juízo final), 1961. Oil on hardboard; 121.5 × 149 cm (48 × 58 5/8 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Wilson L. Mead Trust and N.W. Harris Purchase Prize funds, 2021.33.

Cat. 15

Adam and Eve in front of Lourenço Marques Cathedral (Adão e Eva em frente da catedral de Lourenço Marques), 1960. Oil on hardboard; framed: 130 × 98.7 × 3 cm (51 3/16 × 38 7/8 × 1 3/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
BEYOND PAINTING AND DRAWING

Malangatana was also active as an educator, muralist, sculptor, and writer. He frequently published in journals and corresponded extensively with peers and friends all over the world. In addition, he wrote poetry, at times to accompany his paintings. Malangatana drew from personal aspects of his life in his poems, some of which were presented in an issue of the African literary journal *Black Orpheus*. 

Cat. 16

The Fountain of Blood (*A fonte de sangue*), 1961. Oil on hardboard; framed: 119.4 × 147.3 cm (47 × 58 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lloyd H. Ellis, Jr., 2012.67.

Cat. 17


Cat. 18

Nude with Crucifix (*Nu com crucifixo*), 1960. Oil on hardboard; 47 × 83.9 cm (18 1/2 × 33 in.). Guedes Family Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.
In 1995 Malangatana started building a cultural center in his birth village of Matalana to host art education and community events. The center’s architecture combines the geometric logic and industrial materials of Bauhaus design—inspired by the work of Malangatana’s friend and patron Pancho Guedes, a renowned modern architect—with elements such as circular windows, teeth, grids, and figurative wall reliefs (fig. 1). The grid design of this exhibition borrowed from the center’s architecture (fig. 2).
In 1965–66 the International and State Defense Police (PIDE) imprisoned Malangatana for 18 months because of his suspected involvement with the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO). While incarcerated, the artist began a series of drawings that he continued to work on after his release. The works capture the harsh conditions of life in Machava Central Prison through striking realism interrupted by fantasy scenes and dreams, their tension amplified by distorted bodies and monstrous figures.

In 1961 mentor and patron Pancho Guedes introduced Malangatana to Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane, the founding president of the movement FRELIMO. Malangatana hoped to go abroad for international opportunities and exposure, but Mondlane encouraged him to stay in Mozambique and use art to contribute to the anti-colonial struggle. The artist’s growing political awareness during the 1960s is apparent in the increasingly political tone of his work. He also expressed dissent by withdrawing from the 1964 exhibition Artists in Mozambique to protest Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment and by refusing to represent Portugal at the 1965 São Paulo Art Biennial.
Cat. 21

Devouring (Devoragem), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 42.4 × 42.4 cm (16 11/16 × 16 11/16 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.16.

Cat. 22


Cat. 23

PIDE’s Punishment Room (Sala de castigo da PIDE), 1965. Graphite and black ink on cream wove paper; 43.5 × 32.5 cm (17 1/8 × 12 13/16 in.). Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the generosity of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, 72.2021.

Cat. 24

Moral Support for Those Beaten in Cell IV (Apoio moral aos espancados da cela IV), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 40 × 43.5 cm (15 3/4 × 17 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 25

Scene of Ugly Chico (Cena do Chico Feio), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 40 × 43.5 cm (15 3/4 × 17 1/8 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 26

Ugly Chico the PIDE Punisher (Chico Feio o espançador da PIDE), 1965. Graphite and black ink on cream wove paper; 43.5 × 40 cm (17 1/8 × 15 3/4 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 27

The Cell (A cela), date unknown. Pen and black ink over traces of graphite on cream wove paper; 43.5 × 32.5 cm (17 1/8 × 12 13/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 28

Prisoner Sleeping on the Ground of the Guarded Cell (Preso dormindo no chão da cela vigiada), 1965. Blue ballpoint pen on cream wove paper; 32.5 × 20.5 cm (12 13/16 × 8 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 29

Prisoner Sleeping with Meal Tray in Foreground (Preso dormindo com tabuleiro de refeição à frente), 1965. Blue ballpoint pen on cream wove paper; 32.5 × 20.5 cm (12 13/16 × 8 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 30

Suicide of the Prisoner I (Suicidio do prisioneiro I), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 39.3 × 20.8 cm (15 1/2 × 8 3/16 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.17.1.

Cat. 31

The Suicide of the Prisoner II (Suicidio do prisioneiro II), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 39.3 × 20.8 cm (15 11/16 × 8 3/16 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.17.1.
Cat. 32

Suicide of the Prisoner III (Suicídio do prisioneiro III), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 39.5 × 21 cm (15 9/16 × 8 1/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.17.2.

Cat. 33

The Suicide of the Prisoner IV (Suicídio do prisioneiro IV), 1965. Pen and black ink on cream wove paper; 39.5 × 21 cm (15 9/16 × 8 1/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.17.2.

Cat. 34

Searing Sun (Sol calcinante), 1965. Brown, red, and green porous-pointed pens and pen and black ink on cream paper; 35.2 × 49.5 cm (13 7/8 × 19 1/2 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 35

Untitled, 1965. Graphite on cream wove paper; 32.5 × 20.5 cm (13 7/8 × 8 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 36

Untitled, 1965. Blue ballpoint pen on cream wove paper; 20.3 × 32.5 cm (8 × 13 7/8 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 37

Imagining the Escape (Imaginando a fuga), 1965. Blue ballpoint pen on cream wove paper; 32.5 × 20.5 cm (13 7/8 × 8 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 38


Cat. 39

Untitled, 1966. Pen and black ink over traces of graphite on cream wove paper; 20.5 × 15.8 cm (8 1/16 × 6 1/4 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 40

The Food Has Arrived at Machava (A comida chegou à Machava), 1966. Pen and black ink over traces of graphite on cream wove paper; 20.5 × 16.2 cm (8 1/16 × 6 3/8 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 41

The Prisoner (O prisioneiro), 1969. Pen and black ink on paper; 42 \( \times \) 29.8 cm (16 9/16 \( \times \) 11 3/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Margaret Fisher Endowment Fund, 2021.15.

ARTIST OF THE REVOLUTION

After receiving a yearlong scholarship in 1971 from the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Malangatana explored new media and pursued exhibition opportunities across Europe—before returning permanently to Mozambique in 1974. There he continued experimenting in his art by elongating limbs, introducing opaque colors, and moving further into abstraction with thick outlines and flattened compositions. The titles of his works during this period, such as The Cry for Freedom and Remember Those Who Entered Bleeding?, reflect the focus on the war for independence and the sense of urgency Mozambicans felt at the time: in 1974 a ceasefire ended the war, followed by ten months of negotiations and the country’s independence on June 25, 1975.

After independence Malangatana was embraced as an artist of the revolution, and his work, including state-funded murals, was recognized as an exemplar of Mozambican culture. In addition to holding multiple roles within the newly formed government, he was appointed ambassador of peace during Mozambique’s civil war (1977–92) and UNESCO Artist for Peace in 1997. He was also instrumental in establishing Mozambique’s National Museum of Art in Maputo. Malangatana continued working as a civic leader, educator, poet, and, foremost, as an artist until his death in 2011.
Cat. 42

Big Monsters Devouring Small Monsters (Monstros grandes devorando monstros pequenos), 1961. Oil on hardboard; 122 × 154.3 cm (48 × 60 3/4 in.). Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation / Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 43

25 of September II (25 de Setembro II), 1968. Oil on hardboard; 121.6 × 160 cm (47 7/8 × 63 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 44


Cat. 45

Remember Those Who Entered Bleeding? (Lembras-te daqueles que entravam a sangrar), 1974–75. Oil on hardboard; 121.8 × 183 cm (47 15/16 × 72 1/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.
Cat. 46

The Tree of Love (A árvore de amor), 1973. Oil on hardboard; framed: 127 × 116.5 × 3 cm (50 × 45 7/8 × 1 3/16 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 47

The Poet as a Child (O bebé poeta), 1963. Oil on hardboard; 122.4 × 64.8 cm (48 3/16 × 25 1/2 in.). Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lloyd H. Ellis Jr., in memory of Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane (OC 1953), 2013.37.

Cat. 48

The Dawn (A aurora), 1974. Oil on hardboard; 121 × 181 cm (47 1/2 × 71 1/4 in.). Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation, Maputo, Mozambique.

Cat. 49

How to Cite


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