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Exhibition: Staten Island Children's Museum, March - August 1998



Art by Kenyan youngsters in Children's Museum

- *Exhibit shows that youngsters around the world have a great deal in common*

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The Staten Island Children's Museum's current collection of children's artworks from the Makueni and Machakos Districts of Kenya, West Africa, is hardly what one might expect from such a collection.

True, it is examples of children's art- and quite good ones, at that- that are featured in the exhibit, but a closer look at these works shows just how much America's children have in common with these Kenyan youths, along with the obvious cultural differences.

The 20 creations on display were selected from 200 drawings and paintings were made by primary and secondary children from Makueni and Machakos.

There is a brief photodocumentary showing some of the students who are represented in the exhibition.

The show was designed by American artist/ photographer Mark Scheflen, who visited Kenya with a handful of crayons, water colors and other art supplies with the goal of returning home with authentic African artworks created by youngsters.

The children's artwork focuses mainly on their day-to-day life, interacting with each other, their families and pets, and their environment.

More than a few animals indigenous to Kenya appear in the children's works, which is part of the fun.

Whether wild or domestic, these creatures are represented as seen through the eyes of children who live in a country where often don't have to refer to literature to see what a water buffalo or even a leopard looks like.

Even so, the use of these animals varies from work to work. In one drawing, six black-and-white leopards are juxtaposed with blue and pink-colored birds. In another, a leopard looks up menacingly from its kill while elephants parade by in the foreground and multi-colored birds pass overhead.

The presence of huts, cows and barbed wire fences in many of the drawings also provides us with a child's-eye-view of many of the elements typical of their surroundings.

Yet despite the cultural elements that are unique to Kenya, there are those universal themes that shine through; in one drawing by student Richard Maluia, two children run happily toward a father figure returning home.

One image that could be said to be representative of the collection is a collage of a typical hut, created by student Musyimi Muema of the Utaati Primary School in Kenya. It uses actual grass for the roof, which may not seem impressive until one considers that this type of roof construction is still used in the child's homeland.

Another work sums it up best, with a quotation that would certainly ring true to other youngsters, whether American, Kenyan or otherwise: "East and West, home is best."

The exhibition of children's art work will remain up through August 30, at the Staten Island Children's Museum, located on the grounds of Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Livingston.

Viewing hours are Tuesday through Sunday from noon to 5 p.m.