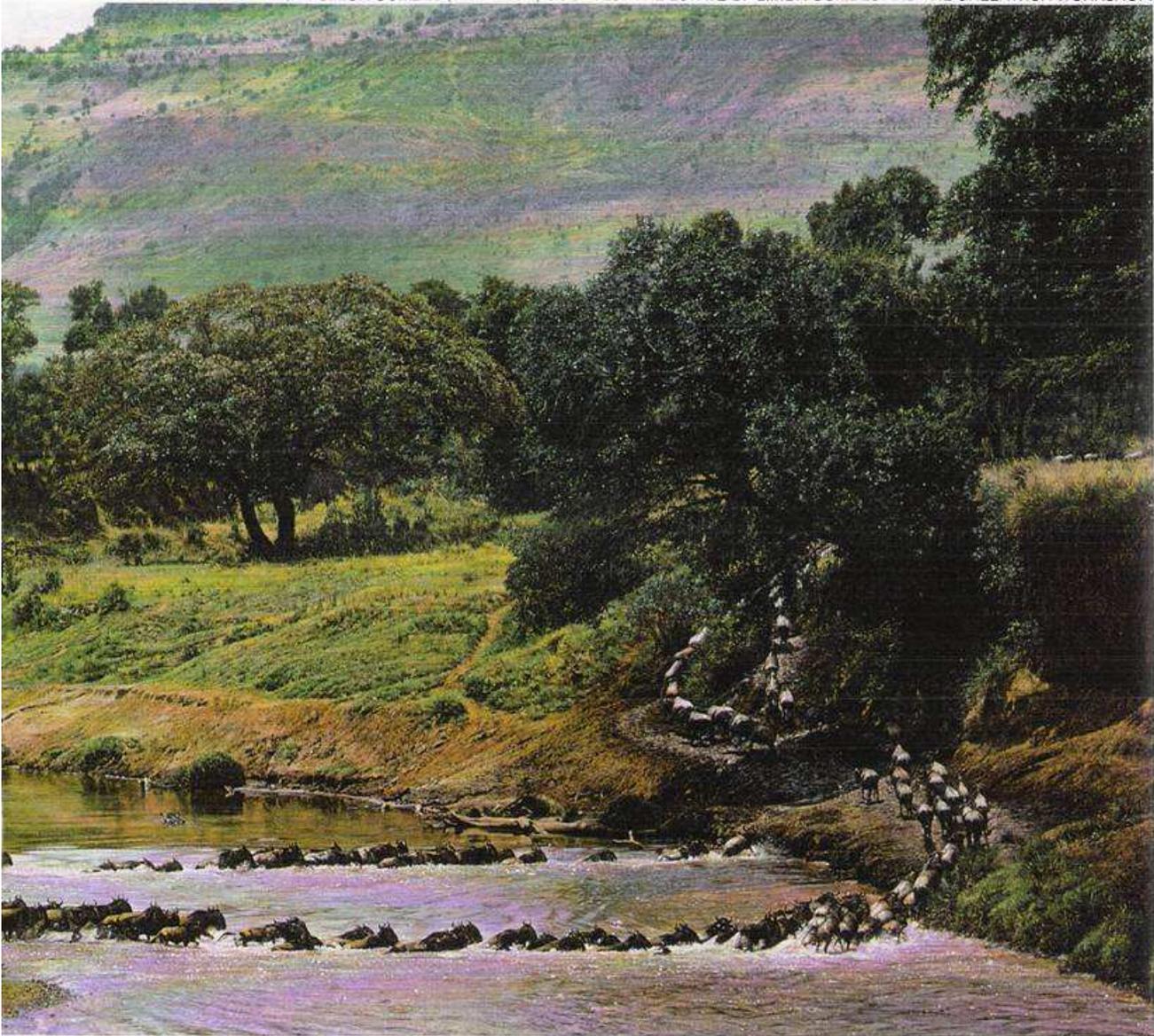




Simon Combes

The ultimate price of art. by Brenda Clifton



The hunters stood in the November drizzle with their Brittany spaniels and basset griffons as the priest recited the “Benediction of Dogs” on this the Feast of Saint Hubert, the patron of hunters. When the red-coated French-horn players sounded “No More Light,” the chasseur’s equivalent of “Taps,” the newest widow wept. “At least he died doing what he loved,” we reassured each other about Jean-Paul’s premature heart attack while checking his deer feeders in the autumn-colored woods of the Marne.

Was it any consolation that 64-year-old wildlife artist Simon Combes had died in 2004 doing what he loved? Combes was killed by an unprovoked Cape buffalo while on walkabout with cheetah-

expert Mary Wykstra near his home in Nakuru, Kenya—terrain he had roamed since age six. It felt as though Africa were extracting her price for his years in her embrace, mastering the details of animal anatomy, expression, behavior, habitat, and social interaction. Fans can find comfort in his illustrated autobiography, *An African Experience: Wildlife Art and Adventure in Kenya*, which describes the nine lives he crammed into one while becoming among the most successful and beloved artists of our time.

Combes acknowledged that his life was “blessed,” starting with his boyhood move from England to Kenya’s Great Rift Valley, where his father farmed 800 acres. Encounters with wildlife peppered his youth as he developed the bushcraft that, com-

bined with a stint at England's Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, served him well throughout life. Commissioned in the King's African Rifles, he later commanded Kenya's airborne unit after the country's independence in 1963, including a tour chasing Somali bandits in the remote border wastelands. There, to pass stretches of empty time, he began to sketch.

Between farm and military life, Combes experienced his share of stealthy leopards attacking livestock and vipers gulping chicken eggs, of culling sick or wounded animals and hunting game to feed staff—fertile grounds for nurturing a future professional hunter. Instead, Combes turned his talented doodling into a livelihood after his first show, in 1969 at Nairobi's New Stanley Art Gallery. His career began with commissioned portraits and wildlife subjects for remorseful safari clients trying, he reckoned, to resurrect their dead trophy animals.

He returned to the U.K. for his children's education, but still spent three months each year in the African bush, guiding photo safaris to maintain his contact with wildlife while building a library of fresh images.

Although Africa can be generous to great talent, Combes attributed his success more to 30 years of hard work, painting eight hours a day regardless of inspiration, just as artist David Shepherd taught him. Or as Zimbabwe artist Larry Norton describes it, "You get up every day and paint like it's your job."

Combes was basically self-taught, learning his anatomy from models and skeletons in the field rather than the studio. He picked up occasional art books, where he learned about the theory of warm and cold colors. A photographer taught him the "principle of thirds" in composition; and throughout his career, in his horizontal works, he largely stuck to it, placing the main subject either one-third of the way left or right rather than the dead center typical of beginners. Warned early of black paint, "which can create a hole in the picture," he used browns and blues instead. Ultimately, his palette held six basic colors, which worked well in Kenya, where art supplies were always limited. Even cadmium yellow, widely used in Europe and the States for more than 125 years, he discovered only in the 1970s from American wildlife artist Bob Kuhn. It was like "squeezing sunlight out of a tube," and it

profoundly influenced how Combes handled light.

Confessing mixed feelings about his work looking "photographic," he admitted that photos are an easy, convenient tool as well as a decent substitute for the countless hours of sketching required to gather the equivalent knowledge. Photography not only helped him freeze ideas; it also allowed Combes to study the effects of light on foliage and fur, and to extract details that otherwise might be missed. Thus, dappled light on an ancient gray baobab is likely Combes's representation of it rather than his impression of it.

Although he considered "breaking out" to a freer style, one senses in Combes's work his moral commitment to conserve in art a disappearing Africa. His panoramic paradises like *African Oasis*, based on Tanzania's Tarangire National Park, are testaments to a wilderness dense with game that hardly still exists. He records for all time wildlife's great behavioral imperatives, like the wildebeest migration in *The Crossing*. He meticulously archives his subjects' ecological niches and family structures. And his strong animal portraits preserve every possible mood, move, and attitude of species from gerenuk to elephant, but especially the African cats.

Combes did the same for other cat species, such as snow leopard, Bengal tiger, and jaguar. He traveled to Thailand, India, Mongolia, Siberia, Venezuela, and North America to gather authenticity of setting and untamed expression, because captive animals simply aren't the same. His book from that journey, *Great Cats: Stories and Art from a World Traveller*, is both beautiful and hilarious. (Think Siberia, game wardens, vodka, snow, and tigers.) A gifted storyteller, Combes recounts the circumstances and observations that went into the creation of these works, which helps viewers understand and appreciate his motives as a factual painter rather than as an expressive artist.

Accuracy is a calling few artists accept. But Combes described himself as "a sucker for a challenge, whether thrown at me by another person or self-imposed and muttered under my own breath." Even the 20,000 animals in the 150-foot digital re-creation of his painting, *The Wildebeest Migration*, in Parker, Colorado, stands up to scrutiny.

The works with fuzzy backgrounds that recall a

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photograph shot with a wide-open aperture are the ones I like least. But Combes didn't take the shortcut of painting fuzzy. Instead, he sometimes painted the background in detail and then, while the paint was still wet, he'd "stroke it boldly in one direction with a large brush, thereby dissolving most of the detail and leaving an impressionistic, low-key background for a strong foreground subject."

He created tension and drama by making his works ask visually unanswered questions: Where are the elephants going? What do the cheetahs see? Why are the giraffes running in the heat of day? His works often resonate with the unspoken, imminent tragedy between predator and prey. Even in his most static moments the wind still bends the grass, carrying scent to the carnivore.

Combes's life was further blessed with awards, commissions, exhibitions, appointments, and a 25-year association with The Greenwich Workshop. But artists like Larry Norton will remember him because "Simon stood out in an art world where integrity and humility are easily eroded by the marketing and self-promotion that success seems to demand."

Combes's works will forever give voice to his love of Africa's wildlife and wild places, despite his knowledge that lovers of that bloody continent often end up footing the bill: think Dian Fossey. Combes's father's devotion was repaid with polio, failed crops, and cattle stricken by foot-and-mouth disease. Nevertheless, Combes felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to the animals that brought him such success, bathing in stunning landscapes "where quiet, contented patience reaps its natural reward." He also knew of the danger from these animals, of the "tenacity, intelligence, ferocity, and cunning" of Cape buffalo that will double back on their own tracks to ambush from behind.

Combes repaid that debt with his life. That's Africa, Bwana. ■

Brooke dedicates this piece to (nonsmoking) IUCN Antelope Specialist Group member Rod East, who died of lung cancer decades before his time. "He is sorely missed by all."

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