

A 'colourful' PNG artist sells well in Europe

With all the big money and even benefactors like Mollie Gowing at the Art Gallery of NSW now behind the Aboriginal art "scene", the quiet success in London, Glasgow and Germany of a 50-year-old native New Guinean artist, Mathias Kuage, takes one back 15 years. The mixture of incredulity and appreciation for the first New Guinea artist to sell his work in Europe is a reminder of how we greeted contemporary Aboriginal art with warm astonishment not so long ago.

From the 12 acrylic-on-canvas paintings in Kuage's first London show at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, four were bought by the still-to-open Glasgow Museum of Modern Art for more than £10,000 (\$A21,700). In fact one of those four — *Baku War*, depicting Buka soldiers of the Bougainville island independent army and selling for £4000 (\$A8600) — was also sought by the Australian Museum in Sydney: Glasgow just got its cheque in first.

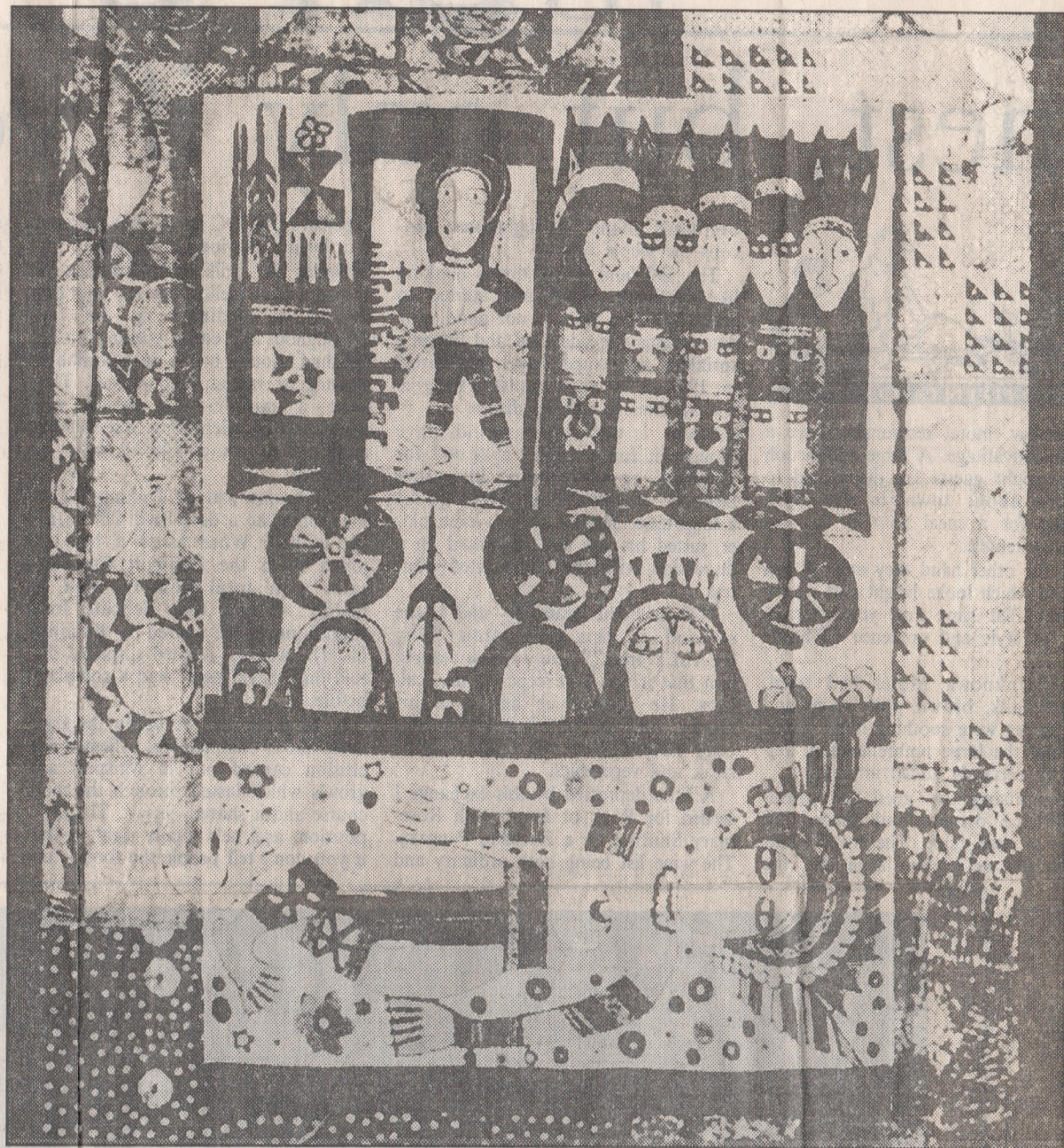
Even without seeing the bright reds, aquamarines and yellows of Kuage's canvas you can imagine why the

Mathias Kuage's themes, passion and simple explanations, have struck a chord with art collectors, says Michele Field in London.

at the opening, she sent a truck to bring a party of black labourers. Kuage, who was about 18, was in that truck.

"He brought me drawings, and at first they were very bad," says Beier. "But... I could feel there was a lot in this young man. The drawings were on a lined exercise book, in crayon, copied from kids' comics and crude attempts at realism. He came every night for a beer and once, on one of the drawings, there was a little spider in a corner — the only thing he'd done which was original and wasn't copied. He must have stayed up all night because the next day he brought me 25 sheets of spiders: it was a big breakthrough."

Beier said she did not have an intention to turn Kuage into a commercial artist — though that is what happened, with his first one-man show in



Detail from Mathias Kuage's painting *The Funeral of Iabaki*.

themes, the passion, and his simple, painful paragraphs which "explain" the pictures, strike such a chord with art collectors.

In 1991 the Australian Museum did a show called *Luk Luk Gen!* which looked at the sort of art which New Guinea painters since 1975 (the beginning of "post colonial" painting) were producing. Kuage, who had been painting since the age of 25, was the star of that show.

Kuage is a Chimbu from the Highlands. In 1968, he moved to Port Moresby and was employed as a cleaner at what was to become the University of Papua New Guinea.

Georgina Beier, the painter (and the London-born wife of the oral-literature expert Ulli Beier), had launched something called the Centre for New Guinea Cultures from a shed in her garden. Akis (a very small man who drew beautifully and who died 15 years ago) was the country's first contemporary artist, a Beier protege.

Beier mounted an exhibition of Akis's work in the university library and, because she did not want only whites

Port Moresby in 1969 and several in Australia in the 1980s.

Five years ago, the Beiers moved to Beyreuth, and four years ago Kuage visited them there. That was the beginning of his brilliant career.

Commuting from the Highlands to the art markets of Berlin and London does not phase him. But he doesn't see it as a very good bargain, since the PNG currency is valued so high European art-collectors pay him only half of what he thinks the paintings should cost.

His pictures are usually seen in ethnographic collections in Australia but they hang on art gallery walls in Europe and the States. That has begun to change since 1987 in Australia, when he got the second award in the Blake Prize. When in 1974 he switched from painting in oils in the "Aboriginal" monochrome colours to painting with blaringly bright acrylics — "because they dry quickly" — it was hard to miss his distinctive style. The bright colours, Kuage believes, are more traditional to PNG (he painted his nose bright red and wore

a Bird of Paradise headdress for his London launch party).

In PNG there are no other artists working in bright colours. "They are doing western style art, life-drawing. When I die, it will be the end of this style. My son Andrew is a small boy and copies me, but ..." Kuage shrugs.

THERE is no "group", no "art movement" in Papua New Guinea. Westerners and Africans are now teaching art at the university in Port Moresby, but natives need a second school entrance to go to the university's art school and, Kuage believes, the teachers are discouraging styles like this.

He is not optimistic about art in PNG. When he holds a show in Port Moresby now "only white fellas buy my paintings. However, if the PNG Government wants to give a present to a white man, then they will buy one." Kuage paints in a studio in his own house, and sells some of the paintings from a craft market on the beach or at exhibitions in Port Mo-

resby hotels.

At his party in London, Kuage sat on the floor and played a mouth-flute. He is an exceptionally good singer as well.

After the London show he was travelling to Berlin where an edition of 22 of his screenprints was being produced. In 1990, he painted a Mercedes bus for the gallery in Berlin — "lovely ladies all over it" — but it had a crash recently and he was also going to Berlin to paint a new door for the bus.

Kuage's "lovely ladies", his mixing of traditional images with modern advertising images, or stories of the introduction of white-man's medicine with the comedy of injections, might seem ironic. But it is difficult, talking to Kuage, to know what's a leg-pull and what isn't.

He laughs a lot, especially when I talk to him about his "international" ambitions. When he came through Dover on his way to London, the Customs officer, who had been to New Guinea, recognised the name.

To say Kuage was "chuffed" is an under-statement: he glows all the colours of his headdress every time the anecdote is repeated.