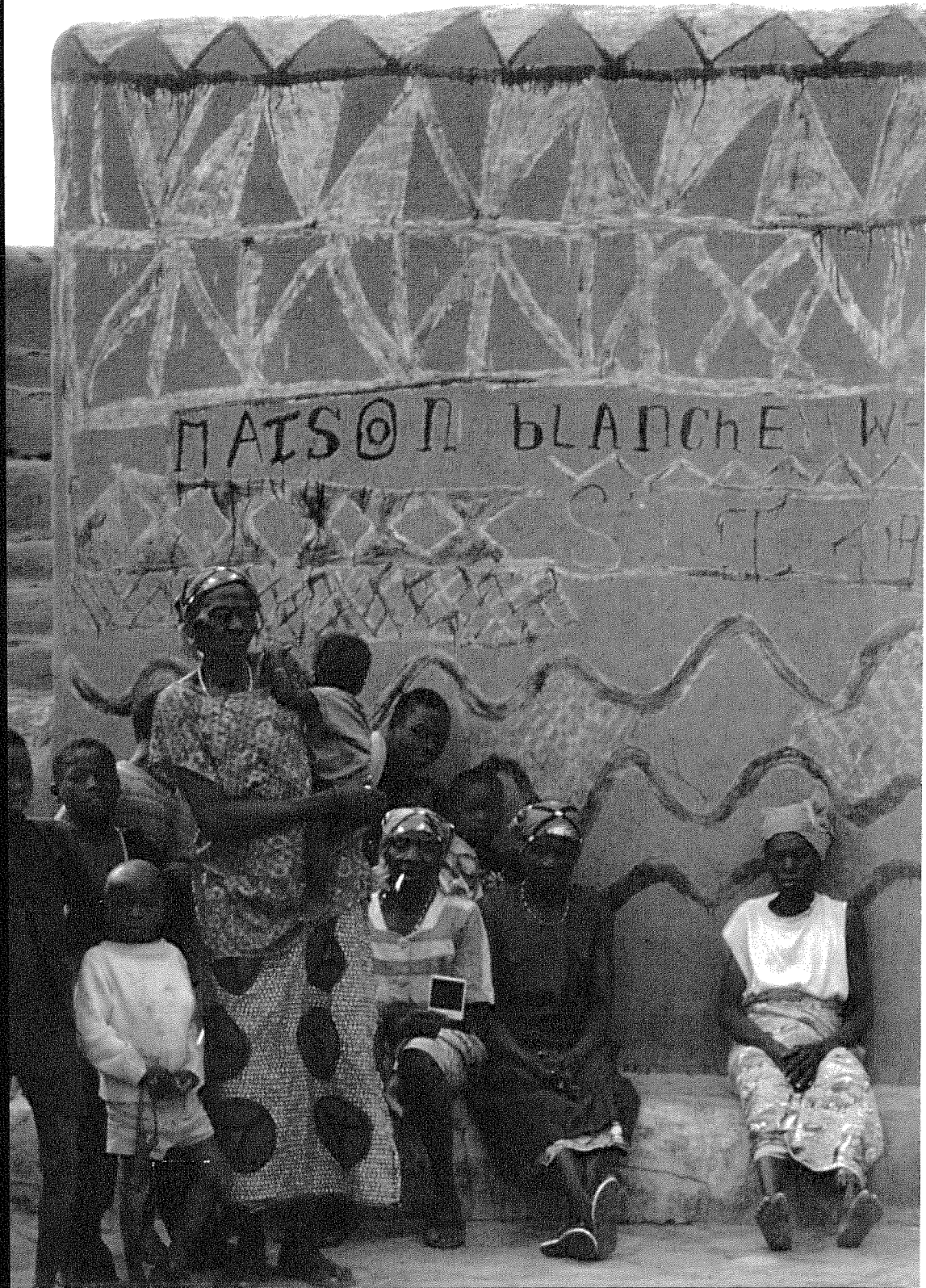


## The Writing on the Wall

*Leslie Rainer*

The ancient tradition of painting and decorating the surfaces of earthen buildings is dying or virtually extinct in many parts of the world. But in the southern province of Nahouri, Burkina Faso,<sup>1</sup> in west Africa, the women of the Kassena<sup>2</sup> people still decorate their earthen houses with painted designs that reflect objects from their everyday life and their surrounding environment.

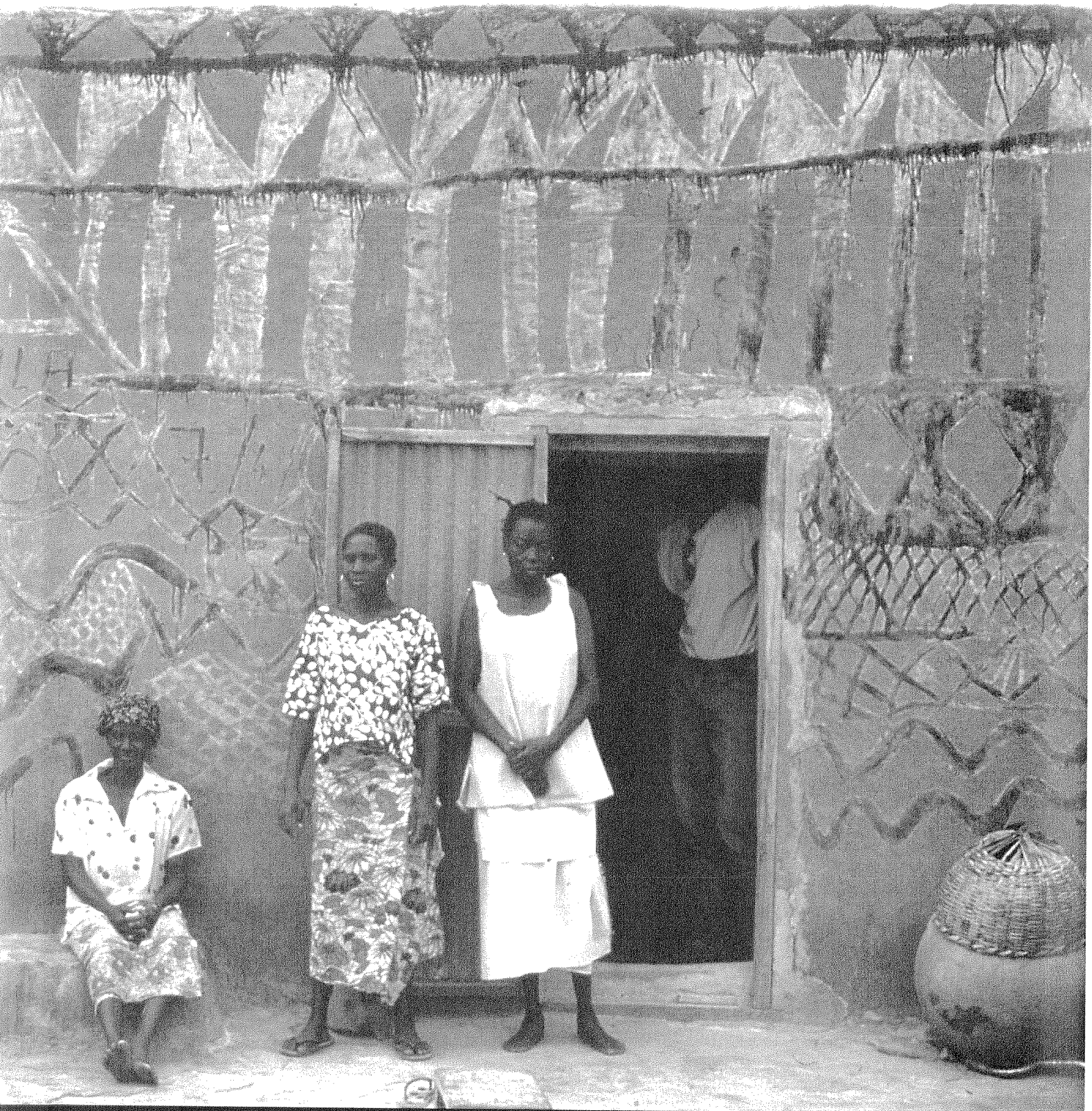
In the village of Pô, women artisans have formed an association, called Assoubouazen, for making baskets, soap and pottery and for painting murals. When they are not working in the fields, they work together to create their wares and decorations. Using traditional materials and techniques, they paint a few houses in the village every year. They accomplish this in the time between the harvest and the planting of new crops.



The women's association in front of a house (*maison blanche*) it painted in 1990.

The women are using traditional materials and techniques to decorate houses that are not built in the traditional manner.

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Painting materials.



Black earth pigment.



Materials for ground layer.





**1. Laterite is mixed with cow dung and water to create the ground layer.**



**4. Filling in white.**



**2. Polishing ground layer.**



**5. Polishing.**



**3. Drawing with black—broken calabash pattern.**



**6. Painting.**

The women make the plasters and paints by mixing clay-rich earth, found in nearby deposits, with cow dung and plant juices. They apply the plaster layers with their hands, then polish the surfaces with smooth, flat stones. Black clay and white talc are used as colors on a red laterite background. The women paint the designs in black and fill in the empty spaces with white; they use paint brushes that are fashioned from millet stalks and chicken or grouse feathers. The work is done while the plaster is fresh, creating a sort of earthen fresco technique.

The paintings are repeated on interior and exterior walls of the houses in the village, and each has its own significance. They describe the life of the village and the life-giving role of the women; the patterns depict broken calabashes,<sup>3</sup> tambours, guitars, millet fields, serpents, the sun and the cycles of the moon. Outsiders have difficulty distinguishing these patterns, but the Kassena easily interpret this imagistic language. The patterns are specific to a very small area; within a few miles different symbols might be used to communicate similar ideas.

By continuing to practice the tradition of decorating houses with specific designs, the Kassena

women are giving continuity to the changing architectural landscape.

Traditional construction techniques and designs are being abandoned as modern building materials become available. Once, houses were built of puddled earth (balls of earth piled up to build walls) and wood beams; they were covered with earthen, terraced roofs and adorned with the painted designs. These traditional houses were round and symbolized the womb; they were adorned with painted designs. Nowadays, corrugated metal roofs, adobe bricks and, in places,

cement blocks are being used in construction. Rectangular buildings are more and more common.

As the population of the villages moves to the cities to seek work and becomes more integrated into the modern workforce, fewer and fewer women remain to carry on the tradition of decorating the houses. According to the older women, the younger women are impatient and do not take the time to learn the techniques and the vocabulary of the painting. If the tradition dies, so will a form of cultural expression and a way of living that is rooted in a sense of place.

The growing economic needs of these people must be balanced by an awareness of the value of their traditional culture. The women who continue to paint are providing this balance. The issue is not only preserving the patterns and the decorations on the walls, but also preserving a way of life.

Traditions cannot survive, of course, without the culture from which they spring. But how can the culture survive without the traditions that define and express it?

## Notes

1. Burkina Faso, formerly called Upper Volta, gained its independence in 1960. The name (derived from two languages, More and Diula) translates as "the land of the honest man." *Burkina* (from the More language): "upright or honest man," and *Faso* (from the Diula language): "the house of the forefathers."
2. The Kassena ethnic group occupies a small region in southeastern Burkina Faso and northern Ghana.
3. Calabashes are gourds that are used as drinking bowls, containers and drums.



A finished house.