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## ESSAY REVIEW

### CONTRASTING VIEWS OF SHONA SCULPTURE\*

REMARKABLY LITTLE HAS been written on the artistic and material culture of the Shona and what little there has been is either superficial and extravagant, as in the case of writers on art like McEwen and Kuhn who were seeking to popularize rather than analyse,<sup>1</sup> or severely utilitarian, as in the case of archaeologists like Schofield who were seeking to date and classify rather than appreciate.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper comment on Shona sculpture, which began to be exhibited some twenty years ago, has generally been uncritical in its praise.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, it is of great value to have Arnold's book on Shona sculpture which, although sympathetic to the subject, is analytical and academic (being, in fact, based on her M.A. thesis). Her conclusion is that Shona sculpture is not really traditionally Shona but 'has a complex identity and is the product of a transitional society' (p. 138), in which the motivating influences have been commercial and European (pp. 39, 136-7).<sup>4</sup>

Arnold qualifies this judgement somewhat by referring to Shona supernatural beliefs that influence the iconography (pp. 38, 137), but there is little evidence in

\*Recently published is the first serious study of Shona stone sculpture: M.I. Arnold, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture* (Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1981), xxvi, 230 pp., 66 illustr., Z\$31.75. The views of the editor of *Zambezia* which follow immediately are, perhaps, too drily analytical, if not philistine, and for this reason he has invited experts in art and in Shona literature and mythology to put their views as well (R.S.R.).

<sup>1</sup>F. McEwen, 'In search of art in Rhodesia', *Horizon* (1960), II, vi, 32-4; *New Art from Rhodesia* ([Salisbury, The National Gallery, 1965]), [1]; 'Return to origins: New directions for African arts', *African Arts* (1968), I, ii, 25, 88; 'Shona art today', *African Arts* (1972), V, iv, 8-11; The National Gallery, *The African Workshop School* ([Salisbury, The Gallery, 1967]), [2]; J. Kuhn, *Myth and Magic: The Art of the Shona of Zimbabwe* (Cape Town, D. Nelson, 1978). Also in this category, although less extravagant, came the more recent handouts and publications of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe; see, for example, P. Wood, 'Rhodesian art: A general survey', *Arts Rhodesia* (1978), 18, and *Insight* (Apr. 1980), I, [7].

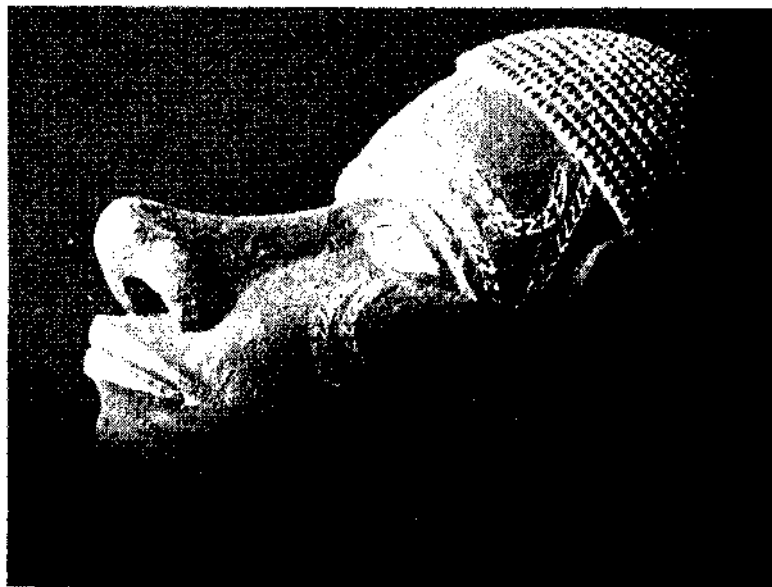
<sup>2</sup>J.F. Schofield, *Primitive Pottery: An Introduction to South African Ceramics, Prehistoric and Protohistoric* (Claremont, The South African Archaeological Society, 1948); see also E. Goodall, 'Rhodesian pots with moulded decorations', *NADA* (1946), XXIII, 36-49; R. Summers, *Human Figures in Clay and Stone from Southern Rhodesia* . . . (Salisbury, National Museums Occasional Papers, III, xxi A, 1957), 61-75.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, *Diário de S. Paulo*, 26 July 1962; *The Sunday Times* [London], 24 Feb. 1963; *The Times*, 26 Feb. 1963; *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 25 Sept. 1963; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 20 May 1964; *The Illustrated London News*, 25 Sept. 1965.

See also local reports: 'African talent sets art world buzzing', *The Evening Standard* [Salisbury], 25 May 1962; 'Rhodesian art show creates a record', *The Rhodesia Herald*, 17 April 1963; 'Rhodesian art is "greatest in the world"', *The Rhodesia Herald*, 29 July 1967; 'World collectors "clamouring" for local sculpture', *The Rhodesia Herald*, 13 Aug. 1968; *The Sunday Mail*, 1 Dec. 1968; C. Style, 'The Tengenenge art school', *Chirimo* (1969), II, i, 5-12; P. Larman, 'World fame for Shona artists', *Radiopost* (Feb. 1974), 2-3; M. Peppiatt, 'Shona sculpture: An African renaissance', *Art International* (1972), XVI, iii, 20-1, 62.

Following the ending of sanctions in 1979, there has been a resurgence in interest abroad, most of it as uncritical, inaccurate and uninformed as before; see, in particular, G. Norman, 'Rhodesian art: A wide open field', *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1980; 'Plastik in Afrika . . .', *Art* (Nov. 1980), 36-9; S. Day, 'London raves over Shona sculpture', *In Flight*, (1981), I, v, 36-7; *The Herald*, 31 July 1981; G. Garb, 'Zimbabwe: Stone sculpture thrives again', *Africa now* (Aug. 1981), 75-6.

<sup>4</sup>For somewhat similar views, see J.B. Nyoka, 'The role of art in Zimbabwe', *The Herald*, 21 Oct. 1981.



*Plate 1: MELANESIAN PROW-HEAD.*



*Plate 2: BOIRA MTEKI: GRANITE HEAD.*



Plate 3: RICHARD MTEKI: LIMESTONE HEAD.

her work that it is such beliefs that are being visualized in the sculpture; and indeed her treatment of both the history and the religion is rather uncritically based on a hodge-podge of secondary sources that do not inspire confidence. Thus the problems of relating form to iconography are doubly difficult. A baboon, for example, may be a *mutupo* and can give rise to a *shave* spirit, but its popularity as a subject for sculpture is not demonstrably related to the attributes of a totem (whatever they may be) or of a spirit; and its varying representation, resembling a Red Indian totem pole (by Fanizani), or greatly incised or ribbed (by John Takawira and Moses Masayo), or naturalistically rounded (by Phineas Moyo) surely owe more to Western-derived models, in the first three cases, or to the stone medium, as in the last case mentioned. The question of medium and form is, of course, much easier to decide than questions of influence. Carving in stone has no long tradition among the Shona (at least, not since the creation of the Zimbabwe Birds) but it is the very nature of the medium that largely dictates the predominantly non-functional form and its 'compactness, solidity and static nature . . . which evoke timelessness and a universality' (p. 137).

But in Zimbabwe medium and influence worked together in the form of Paterson's influential work which Arnold rather discounts in favour of McEwen's later influence and innate Africanness. Paterson's own work at Cyrene has a

simple, romanesque-like quality ideally suited to carving in stone by sculptors with little experience or skill, a style that allows, for example, the arms to be left integrated with the torso. And it was to such simplified forms, which McEwen also encouraged, that Shona sculptors have equally been encouraged (again because of McEwen's influence, as Arnold half admits, pp. 34, 137), to fit African names and explanations—and as time passed these were increasingly found, allegedly, in Shona religion or folklore.<sup>5</sup> But one suspects that the iconography is as dubiously traditional as the expressionism is derivatively Western. Thus one doubts if it is coincidental or entirely due to their greater use of wood as a medium that Africans introduced to carving under different and less aggressive Western influences, at Cyrene and the Canon Paterson Sculpture Centre in Harare, Serima, St Faith's or even the Internal Affairs' Rowa Training Centre, are often more representational, more didactic, as in African tradition, and, except perhaps at Serima, more individualistic.<sup>6</sup>

Modern Shona sculpture, therefore, has, as Arnold admits with some hesitancy, more in common with twentieth-century Western sculpture<sup>7</sup> than with African art and is in fact much of a muchness stylistically with mannerisms copied (cf. Plates 2 and 3) to such an extent that it often degenerates into 'airport art' (particularly when soapstone is employed). Thus for me the main academic interest in Shona stone sculpture is not artistic but socio-historical. For example, of the exhibiting 'Shona' sculptors, usefully and carefully listed by Arnold, from a quarter to a third are not Shona at all but mainly Malawian or Mozambican; originally linked to McEwen's Workshop School of the National Gallery in Harare and producing for the market in Harare. Similarly, of the Shona sculptors, about two-thirds were 'trained' at the European-organized National Gallery Workshop, Tengenenge, or the Inyanga-Juliasdale Workshops. Consequently the vast majority of all Shona sculptors, whether actually 'trained' at these places or not, come from a narrow area bounded by Guruve, Chinhoyi, Harare, Rusape and Nyanga. Thus if we except a handful of men trained at Cyrene or Serima, there are hardly any Shona sculptors from the rest of the country.

<sup>5</sup> This was not generally the case in the early days, as can be seen in pieces like Chigwanda's *Man*, Ndararika's *Woman with Four Children*, Dube's *Head of a Woman*, and Likoto's *The Old M'Lozi* (in wood); and these were praised in Europe precisely because they owed nothing to African traditions: see *The Sunday Times* [London], and *The Times*, 24 and 26 Feb. 1963, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> A good illustration of these qualities is the work, in stone, of Nicholas Mukomberanwa who was associated with Serima and who does not invoke mythological symbolism. It is a weakness of Arnold's book that insufficient attention is given to the wider background of carving and sculpture in Zimbabwe, notably the work of Canon Paterson.

<sup>7</sup> 'Western' is used, I think, rather loosely, meaning in some cases contact through Western media with other forms of art; for example, it is difficult to believe that Boira Mteki's prognathic heads are not derived from pictures of Melanesian canoe-prow heads in Western museums (see Plates 1 and 2). This is the view even of Ulli Beier who was the most vigorous admirer of these works and popularizer of McEwen's approach (who equally believed that Thomas Mukarobgwa's paintings were prompted by those of German Expressionists). U. Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (New York, Praeger, 1968), 75–88. For less enthusiastic conclusions from the same facts, see M.W. Mount, *African Art* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1973), 123 — conclusions which Arnold rather peremptorily dismisses, partly because she generally underestimates Paterson's romanesque influence and partly because she does not consider what art books may have been seen by the early Shona sculptors; the similarities between much Shona sculpture and widely published illustrations of South Pacific, Central and North American art are often striking.

These facts must throw some doubt on generalizations about the essential Shona nature of the carvings and their intimate relationship with Shona religion and traditional culture (particularly with Great Zimbabwe far to the south and the Mwari cult far to the southwest). What is indicated, unfortunately, is a 'hot house' of European-inspired production motivated by commercial or 'arty' considerations, in a small segment of the country conveniently focused on Harare as the art and curio centre of the country. That much of the activity springs from short-term commercial needs rather than dedicated artistic expression is probably also the reason why so many 'artists' are related to one another and drift in and out of production—some twenty per cent of those who have exhibited, for example, no longer sculpt.

The real achievements of Shona material culture have been in representational carvings (like the Zimbabwe Birds, happily restored to us), and attractive geometric decoration (as in the chevron pattern) and anthropomorphic or zoomorphic embellishments of functional objects. It is earnestly to be hoped that, when the cultural programme of the Ministry of Education and Culture gets under way at the proposed Culture Houses, it will be such indigenous traditions that will be encouraged to develop rather than the Western art establishment's tired expressionism decked out in dubious folklore.

R.S.R.

Traditional African sculpture has had a great impact on the West since its 'discovery' in the first decades of the twentieth century. The powerful expressionism contained within the stylized wooden masks and statues particularly of West and Central Africa, had a significant influence on the early developments of 'modern' art. The basic motivation for these works was religious or social, and they functioned as a dynamic means of re-inforcing the religious or social order. The sculptured forms were characterized by pronounced stylization, natural form being distorted in order to achieve a powerful symbolism.

There is a distinct geographical division formed by the Great Lakes and Rift Valley, between the sculpturally rich areas of West and Central Africa and the comparative poverty of sculptural traditions in the areas to the East and South, one major exception being the rather commercialized Makonde carvers of Tanzania. The reasons why almost no sculpture was produced in this part of the continent lie buried in the nature of the traditional societies themselves, and the factors which shaped their histories.

As is pointed out above by Professor Roberts, within known Shona traditions aesthetic expression is manifested in the decorative embellishment of utilitarian items. Basketry, pottery, woodcarving and beadwork carry patterns which show a strong sense of design essentially geometric in nature. The various cultural groups in Zimbabwe, including the many sub-groups under the umbrella term 'Shona' are characterized by district styles of pattern. The craftsman/woman works within a generally accepted format of technique and design, and individual variations keep within the overall character of the style. If a purpose over and above a simple pleasure in design and embellishment is to be found behind this type of activity, it seemingly functions as a statement of group identity. In reaffirming a cultural identity, the security of its members is strengthened.

This overall characteristic of traditional African art, that it serves as an expression of a common cultural identity, is in direct contrast to the basic motivation behind contemporary Zimbabwean sculpture, which is the expression of the thoughts and feelings of the artist as an individual. However, one element which links contemporary Zimbabwean sculpture to an African tradition is the use of strong expressionistic form. Traditional African sculpture achieved a forceful symbolism by stripping form of superfluous detail, retaining and emphasizing only those elements most evocative of the intended imagery. This strength and vitality of form is equally evident in Zimbabwean sculpture. Here we find equally no evidence of naturalistic proportions, and a simplification and distortion of natural form in order to express more powerfully the essence of a particular concept.

It was this elemental force of vision which attracted such interest in the West, when Zimbabwean sculpture was first exhibited overseas in the early 1960s. During this formative period, sculptors were experimenting with form, as yet unsure of the formal qualities of their material. They had not yet attained the mature sensitivity to the qualities of line, mass, weight and tension inherent in stone, a sensitivity which is evident in those same sculptors' work today. However, these early works possessed a vital force, an identity which proclaimed itself in no uncertain terms, and which demanded a response from the viewer.

Arnold has stated that ideas expressed in Zimbabwean sculpture reflect on the whole a specifically Shona iconography: their inspiration is drawn from the imagery pervading Shona folklore, mythology, and traditional religion. This is disputed by Roberts, who makes the valid point that many sculptors, specifically from the Tengenenge community, were of Malawian, Moçambican and even Angolan extraction. The contemporary sculpture movement, rather than being a cultural phenomenon specific to the Shona appears more broadly based, reflecting cultural elements characteristic of African societies in this part of the continent. Zimbabwean sculptors, certainly in the formative period of the movement, were men with strong ties with rural communities where cultural traditions remained comparatively strong. Many worked in the rural environments of Vukutu and Tengenenge. The pull of both traditional and of Western values were equally significant in shaping their lives and characters. The expression of any artist is a microcosm of his material and psychic environment, and will reflect to some degree his social background. The themes of Zimbabwean sculpture tend to reflect or comment on the general nature of man as a social and spiritual being, and on the birds and animals in his natural bush environment, particularly the manifestation of the spiritual in these forms. The idea expressed in each sculpture, however, tends to be one man's personal vision. I do not see evidence of an overall system of iconography through which sculptors visualize generally accepted tribal or religious concepts. I believe that the so-called 'spiritual' iconography is not born of tribal or religious dogma, but of the sculptor's attitude of mind towards his environment, conditioned by his social background. There is no overt attempt at representing universal principles of a social or religious nature. The sharing of a common environment and social history naturally results in the commonality of certain themes. The representation of certain animals, for example, which do have significance in cultural traditions. However, ten sculptures of baboons would demonstrate ten different interpretations of the character or symbolic significance of the baboon.

The concept of spiritual power was a deeply moving force in much traditional African art, and is a recurring theme in Zimbabwean sculpture. Spiritual vision is translated with a directness of expression, resulting in forms of great strength and presence. Work that is essentially derivative, whose inspiration is not the psychic will-to-form of the artist, but inspired by some secondary force, cannot have the same impact on the viewer. This is precisely how one can describe the mission-inspired carvings, for example of Serima, where all overt symbolism is biblical. Produced within the rigidly imposed iconography of a foreign Christian tradition, the carvings lack the strength of conviction evident in contemporary stone sculpture. Roberts maintains that the 'real achievements of Shona material culture have been in representational carvings (like the Zimbabwe Birds)'. Although representative in overall imagery, the sculptural forms have been stylized to express an idea, rather than simply the natural form of a bird. Natural form has been simplified and proportions altered to achieve a feeling of static majesty. The ability of the African carver to produce highly accurate and clearly observed realistic form is demonstrated by the vast quantity of tourist curios churned out for the trade. However, indigenous carvings demonstrate an affinity with the African tradition of stylization, which can be clearly seen, for example, in Shona carved wooden walking sticks. Each one shows a sensitive rendering of form, often a humorous comment on society, with no attempt at realism in the Western sense.

Frank McEwan was without doubt the man who made the contemporary sculpture movement possible. He was an influential, charismatic figure who made available opportunities to men who in many cases, prior to gravitating towards him, had felt a creative potential within themselves and had produced as a result small soapstone or wooden carvings. McEwan influenced a growing body of sculptors towards finding the source of their inspiration within themselves as individuals. In his own words, 'Artists come to us with their work—we do not teach them at all, but just try to give them courage. Instead of teaching them we try to induce them along their own very personal lines of expression. There is absolutely no enforced obedience to pattern or master.'<sup>1</sup> Roberts maintains that critical comments by McEwan were the sole basis for the particular form and character of Shona Stone Sculpture; but it seems to me that, although McEwan's influence was a motivating factor in the launching of the movement, nevertheless the impetus arose from an inherent ability and will to express ideas in three-dimensional form. The comparative lack of visual symbols in two dimensional form that characterized the cultural background of many sculptors results in a greater ease of expression in three dimensional sculpture. Sculptors have consistently produced aesthetically successful work of a diverse nature over a period of two and a half decades. Moreover, the movement is still vigorous. Individual sculptors continue to move in new directions, break new ground. With the experience of two decades behind them, there is evidence of a greater understanding of sculptural principles, a more sophisticated rendering of form. There is also a greater diversification in the sources of inspiration, as sculptors bring to their work new experiences of war, of life in foreign cities, of the changing tempo of life in independent Zimbabwe.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in D.N. Walker, 'Preliminary Synopsis for the History of the Workshop School' (Harare, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, unpubl., 1978), 197.



The criticism that Zimbabwean sculpture is motivated largely by commercial gain has as much relevance here as anywhere else in the world. Artists the world over suffer from the hugely tempting lures of catering to commercial taste. With its expanding popularity 'Shona Sculpture' has proved extremely lucrative. It is a unique individual who can withstand these pressures. The wholesale churning-out of sculptures for a commercial market has, in some cases, tended to obscure the fact that there is a fair percentage of aesthetically satisfying work produced. Excellence is a comparatively rare commodity in any community of artists. Perhaps it has been the Westerner's taste for the exotic that encouraged sculptors to look for overt explanations in 'tribal folklore' and religion in their work, with the aim of increasing its appeal to a potential buyer. McEwan himself actively fostered this notion, perhaps in an attempt to root the movement in a 'tribal tradition'—in the eyes of the Western art world of the time, the only acceptable basis for any art form from Africa.

No culture exists in isolation. Cross-cultural assimilation has been a factor of man's development since the Stone Age. How can one deny contemporary Zimbabwean expression any links with Western values, which have had such an enormous impact on the lives of these same artists? Would one have the forms of modern Zimbabwean literature stagnate in epic poems and folklore? If the history of his people has been cataclysmic in its huge leap forward into the twentieth century, complicated by a suspension of cultural growth during the colonial period, it cannot be expected that the contemporary artists' expression reflect a slow cultural growth and continuity.

The role of the artist has changed along with the structure of his society. In West and Central Africa, sculpture in the traditional mould is no longer produced, as it no longer meets the social or religious needs of modern societies; however there has been an upsurge in other non-traditional mediums such as painting and graphics. Perhaps it is time for the Government to validate the role of the artist in independent Zimbabwe by supporting commissions for Zimbabwean stone sculptures to be displayed in public places.

*National Gallery of Zimbabwe*

GILLIAN J. WYLIE

In reading Arnold's book on Shona Stone Sculpture and Professor Roberts's comments on it, I tend to agree with Roberts's scepticism. Most of the Shona stone sculptures do not represent traditional spiritual beings or concepts. According to my knowledge, these carvings are carved by people who want to make money, and so in order to sell their carvings quickly they are bound to create stories behind each object that they carve; and foreigners on hearing this take these stories for granted.

In any case a carver or sculptor is not a trained person for that job in our society but a man who has an inborn instinct. He carves anything that comes into his vision, and what determines the object is the size of the stone that he has on hand. Most people, particularly foreigners, think anything carved by an African represents African spiritual beliefs, an idea that was passed on to them by their pseudo-anthropologists who, during their term of office as District Commissioners, got this far-fetched information from those who were their office messengers and then later claimed the knowledge of everything concerning African beliefs.

However, there are particular birds and particular animals believed to be sacred traditionally, notably Chapungu or Chipungu (bateleur eagle), which the

Shona respect because the elders say that their dead founding fathers transformed into bateleur eagles after their death. Thus, traditionally, when we see a bateleur eagle hovering over our heads while on a journey, we sit down and start clapping our hands saying,

*Tichengetei vasekuru,  
Onai tiri parwendo rurefu,  
Bvisai zvinokuvadza munzira,  
Kuti tifambe takasununguka.*

Look after us, o grandparents,  
Just see, we are on a long journey,  
Remove (for us) from the path all dangerous things,  
So as for us to travel freely.

Only after this recital do we resume our journey.

Similarly *Hungwe* (fish eagle) becomes sacred because of its two colours, namely, white and black. Though not quite white or black, the two colours are likened to two black and white pieces of cloth given to a spirit medium. When the two pieces are sewn together, and have become one, it is called *jira rehungwe* or *fuko remudzimu*. The white colour in this context represents Vari Kunze (the physical world) and these will never be represented by carved statues. Also black lions and white lions are the spiritual lions or rain-makers (*mhondoro dzemidzimu*) and they are harmless, but they can be harmful or very dangerous to those who infringe the laws of the creation (*mutemo wepasi*) and commit incest, sodomy, bestiality or lesbianism (*chimina, mapinahuna, makunakuna, chipini*). The two *jira rehungwe* colours are truly represented here by the two black and white lions.

*Nheveravauya* (Caracal) is also a sacred animal because according to Shona beliefs, it is believed to be guard-servant or personal attendant of the lion spirits. Wherever the lion spirit is, a caracal must be behind it. One can hear the caracal cry, particularly in the evening when the lion spirit is taking a walk.

*Mwangato* is a carved walking stick usually carried by a *svikiro* (spirit host or medium). This particular walking stick has a carved lion claw at the base and a carved human head on the top. This shows the unity between the dead (spirits) and the living.

Apart from these examples, however, there is little in Shona tradition that relates to this so-called Shona sculpture; consequently most of what the sculptors claim and what Arnold ascribes to their work is fanciful.

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