MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:
http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with



Michigan State University
LIBRARIES

Scroll down to read the article.

Zambezia (1979), VII (i).

ESSAY REVIEW

SHONA SCULPTURE

THERE HAS LONG been a need for a comprehensive book on Shona sculpture and it was with anticipation that this book by Joy Kuhn was received.[1] Unfortunately, it deals with only one aspect of the sculpture — that of the background legends and myths which are the sources of the schematic figures typifying this art form. As a book about sculpture in all its aspects, which one would expect from the title, it fails dismally.

It reads like the personal description in a travel brochure covering a brief visit to the country, confined to Tengenenge at Sipililo, and African Art Promotions in Salisbury. The emphasis is on recorded conversations, character studies of people and descriptive of places which, although evocative and interesting in another context, are totally irrelevant to a sculpture. The idea propounded that myth, dreams, and magic form the basis for Shona sculpture becomes unconvincing, for the author does not make comparisons or correlate them with the sculpture at all and the superficial treatment does not leave one convinced that mysticism is a vital component in the life of the contemporary Shona.

The style of writing could be described as impressionistic and is inclined to be repetitive with the text full of topical and trivial detail such as the description of 'drinking tea — or coffee — or something cool in a comfortable chair' at African Art Promotions (p.64) or whether Tom Blomfield had included meat with the provisions (p.46).

The short sometimes incomplete sentences and innuendos of the ex-script writer lack continuity and flow and there is no concentration of purpose. Ideas are dispersed throughout the book without being questioned or followed through with any sense of depth or understanding of a profound subject. The vocabulary is, at times, naive with quoted comments containing trite colloquialisms such as 'any old time' (p.79), 'so you know where you're at' (p.52), or 'He's as chirpy as can be' (p.52). Even the chapter readings are evocative of children's literature.

The format of the book is satisfactory in size and quality of materials, and the photographs are excellent. However, there is nothing more irritating to a reader than photographs with no captions and having to refer constantly back to an index. It is noted by the author that 'emphasis has been placed on the mood and meaning of sculpture in relation to the text', but this would appear to be an excuse to use photographs that were availble and have no particular relation to the text. There is no indication as to who the people photographed with the sculptures are, and the selection would seem even more arbitrary in that three of the artists who have a chapter each devoted

[1] J. Kuhn, **The Art of the Shona of Zimbabwe** (Cape Town, D. Nelson, 1978), 111 pp., illustrated, R15,00.

to them, Sylvester Mubayi, Ephraim Mushambi, and Bernard Takawira, are not illustrated at all. Further information lacking is that twelve of the photographs have no acknowledgement to the artist in the index and none have any indication of dimension, the present location, or type of stone used in the sculptures.

One very unnecessary and provoking feature of the book is the constant snide and negative criticism in a racial context concerning the recognition and appreciation of Shona sculpture by the European. (There is no mention of the effect upon the African population.) The condemnation of, or lack of reference to, what has been done in a positive way, such as the good teaching and encouragement at mission schools at Umtali and Serima, demonstrates a political bias which again has nothing to do with the art form. Her claim that Shona sculpture was derided as 'Kaffir art' (p.12) or 'African junk suited only to a souvenir stall' (p.23)) gives the erroneous impression that this was the general reaction to it; but this is just not so, for it was accepted with great enthusiasm by those who were able to recognize its potential, as evidenced by the high sales of local exhibitions for private collections and for the very large collection at the National Gallery. Any antipathy can be blamed on a universal tendency to neglect art appreciation in education so that a majority of any given populace would not fully appreciate a non-representational, mystical type of contemporary art. The aesthetic sensibility of many people is limited to a concept of 'beauty' formulated during the last century in academic circles; and the sculpture of some of the greatest twentieth century artists, Henry Moore, for example, was hardly appreciated generally. This approach also applies to the special qualities of an 'artistic' personality such as Frank McEwan where the author labours the point that he and his promotion of Shona sculpture were regarded with disdain and dismissed (p.23); and while this may be true in some cases, it is not true of a great many discriminating people in Rhodesia. While she does credit McEwan's great contribution in promoting and gaining recognition for Shona sculpture, she chooses to ignore the more recent efforts in both National Galleries (Bulawayo and Salisbury) to provide materials, equipment, workshops and venues for exhibitions, while exhibitions of Shona sculpture are regularly sent abroard and works purchased for permanent collection.

She gives the impression that nothing good has come from the European settlers — neither an appreciation of the African people and their art — or an understanding of them in educational matters (pp.57, 60) in an effort to demonstrate the difficulties the sculptors had to work against. Not only is this impression erroneous and biased, but it has little to do with Shona sculpture as an art phenomenon.

Her ignorance of art is illustrated by the remark: 'the white artist stands fascinated by a source of ancient magic to which his soul no longer responds' (p.26). This is contradictory and fallacious, as it is the realization of this 'ancient magic' which is the source for much of contemorary art. European artists like Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore recognized the energy in West African art and tried to recapture it in their own art, which caused a revision of academic values of the time.

One would expect from a book on sculpture a consideration of why a particular technique relates to a certain medium. The West African sculptor used mainly wood, which was freely available, and he used a similar tool to an adze which produced a geometric cut and consequently developed a style known as 'Cubistic'. This applies particularly to the carvers of the Nok culture from Northern Nigeria. The Shona artist uses stone, a comparatively

alien medium to the African carver[2] and its availability and potential was promoted by McEwan and Blomfield who also provided the tools and commercial outlets The Shona carver's natural instinct for three-dimensional form and tactile surface — usually smooth in consideration of the stone medium — then manifested itself. What of the Shona sculptor's personal approach to the medium? He is sensitive to its properties and allows it to communicate to him through its shape, size, colouring and markings, the eventual form that will emerge based on his tribal legends. He has an awareness of the abstract qualities of form for its own sake, its solidity, rhythm, negative and positive areas, surface design and so on, which are Western ideals and foreign to the West African carvers who, in contrast, impose their ideals and personality on to the medium and make it work for them, even making use of the shapes and textural quality of seeds, grass, shells and paint to enhance the effect they are striving for. Both approaches are valid as an expression of the culture from which they emerge and it is interesting to note the different intentions, influences and resultant styles of one race. To illustrate the response of Shona sculptors, the recent carvings of Bernard Takawira are not deeply incised or changed drastically from their original shape, but are almost moulded and smoothed off to produce subtle, simplistic sculptures sometimes foetal in concept.

What effect does the climatic and geographical situation have upon the type of art produced? For generations the West African tribes had settled homelands and available materials, the opportunity to develop their spiritual beliefs and play on superstition and legend and they were in contact with sophisticated Arab influences from the north. The Central and East African tribes were unsettled and the climatic conditions forced a more nomadic way of life which allowed little opportunity to develop a singificant art form of their own despite powerful religious beliefs and rituals. Their crafts relating to daily life, including basket ware, pots, carved head rests, etc., were of very high quality. In a world of their own were the wandering, hunting groups of Bushmen who did a high art form of their own as a form of communication and recording between the groups, which convey their mystical attitude to nature. There is plentiful evidence of these Bushman paintings in Zimbabwe Rhodesia and other parts of Africa, but they had no significance for the Bantu-speakers who feel more for the 'presence', or reality, of three dimensional form anyway.

Other questions which could be considered in a book on this subject would include conjecture on the origin of the schematic forms used by the Shona sculptor. Do they emanate from European artefacts or have they seen photographs, or examples of the well known West African sculpture? Why also are the Serima carvings in wood so different in concept from the Shona stone carvings when they are both of Shona sources?

Another feature of great importance would be how the Shona sculptor reconciles tribal beliefs with Christianity. The sculptors featured by Kuhn are Christians and she quotes Bernard Takawira: 'I have been taught to use reason to dispense such thoughts. But, in spite of Christianity I shudder each time I see an owl' (p.14). In another context she suggests that Canon Ned Patterson saw a parallel between Christianity and the old superstitions (p.19) which would be an interesting idea to develop.

[2] See W. B. Fagg and M. Plass, *African Sculpture* (London, Studio Vista, 1964).

The question arises as to whether the sculptors feel the conviction and intense need to express their beliefs in stone, as did the West African in wood carvings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for instance. Illuminating comments on the artists' attitudes include that of Sylvester Mubayi: 'He does not speak lightly of the spirits — but, very obviously he has no problem with them' (p.71), and that of Henry: 'although he accepts the presence of the spirits he actually has no fear at all of what they could do to him. For he is a member of the Mkaila Sect . . . a branch of the Aposolic Church' (p.52), and that of Joseph Ndandarika; 'I lost all that [belief in the witchdoctor] through religion' (p.83). These indications show that the contemporary Shona is not vitally involved in the 'magic' of their ancestors and they have to refer to their elders for information as Joseph Ndandarika points out: 'when I am doing my art, you see, I go to the old people and talk to them about what happened before — about witching — about believing' (p.86). All this could lead to the hypothesis that the old legends have been resurrected for the purpose of producing an ethnic type of sculpture, which could lack the intense conviction required for the revelation of the artist himself and his tribal beliefs. How much does the Shona artist consider his art to be a commercial commodity for he has to consider this when there is a family to keep. He must keep his artistic integrity to allow the sculpture to retain the value that is put on it as an aesthetic and exotic art form. The imagination and creative inventiveness of the Shona sculptor cannot be denied. One could just ask whether it has dynamism of an art which stems from an inner necessity, or is it the 'biological phenomenon' mentioned by Herbert Read.[3] The West African artist felt this deep inner need to put into visual form their beliefs in fetishes and ancestor worship They used a grotesque idiom to create an empathy between the art object and the viewer to strengthen and confirm the beliefs which had portent and presence for the tribe. Fear, ritual and respect were the keys which set off these convictions and it is evident that these emotions are diluted in the Shona sculpture. He has more of the Western consciousness of pure aesthetic forms for its own sake and this is unavoidable in the mass media world in which we live today. His emotion has been subdued by the intellect, and yet he is trying to depict emotional subjects.

Finally, a book on Shona sculpture would not only look in depth to the inspirational sources from which it arises, but it would consider the future development when more finance could be made available and more reciprocity can take place between artists from other countries and those of Zimbabwe Rhodesia. Dangers to beware of in the situation would be the temptation to succumb to other styles submerging that which already exists, and commercialism for its own sake, which has been observed in other African countries where the only art manifesting itself is that for commercial tourism and the craft and purpose of art deteriorates. To avoid this situation the artists should be free of financial worry and this requires assistance from Arts Councils or Government organizations and let us hope the new Zimbabwe can achieve this and maintain and promote significant art forms which characterize this country.

Bulawayo

JEAN DANKS

[3] H. Read, *Origins of Form in Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1965), 174.