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STONE SCUPTURE IN ZIMBABWE
TENGENENGE SCULPTURE COMMUNITY

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STONE SCULPTURE IN ZIMBABWE: TENGENENGE SCULPTURE COMMUNITY

This essay seeks to give a brief outline to readers who in most cases are encountering the subject for the first time. Although it may seem superficial to more informed people, I hope this will be considered a short but useful starting point for further research.

I would like to initially present a historical overview in order to contextualise the cultural climate and provide an insight into museum policy and programming until the 1950s. I will then outline the historic and current importance of the Tengenenge Sculpture Community focusing on the first generation of artists and the foundations they laid for this new art. I will conclude by briefly looking at the way in which young sculptors are moving away from a traditional cultural stance to explore and develop their work through new mediums and by referring to issues that are closer to contemporary life in Zimbabwe.

Dawson Munjeri states that museums defined their role as the collection and storage of objects of cultural and educational value. Africans recognised the educational role of the museum and began to frequent them to the alarm of the museum authorities who witnessed the increase in African visitors to 160,000 in comparison to only 40,000 Europeans. Until 1950, the indigenous population was actively discouraged from visiting the museum by limiting their attendance to a single day per week even though the shows had a deliberate historic European bias. This began to change in 1957 with the construction of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) and the arrival of its British director, Frank McEwen who was to become the catalyst for the development of Stone Sculpture in Zimbabwe. The National Gallery had been conceived as a showplace for European art and the inaugural show From Rembrandt to Picasso contained over 350 works on loan from museums in Europe. The African art in the exhibition, juxtaposed with the borrowed work only served to highlight its influence on Picasso and other modern artists.

Frank McEwen felt that some form of exhibit which included the participation of the indigenous people was needed. He believed that there was a need for cultural expression by a people who since the building of Great Zimbabwe have found an outlet for their creativity in music and orature, but who during a century of colonial rule had found their own culture largely devalued and misrepresented. McEwen started an experimental school in the gallery that initially concentrated on painting, but gradually moved to stone by experimenting with steatite, a very soft stone and by encouraging the artists to look for their source of inspiration in Shona mythology. This resulted in the coinage Shona Sculpture - a term which seemed adequate at the time for this new art form. Most of the first sculptors had received little no formal education and they include well known names such as John and Bernard Takawira, Nicholas Mukomberanwa and Joram Mariga. By the mid 1960s the reputation and the number of artists had increased considerably and in spite of being the target of constant hostility by the White population this new art continued and developed unabated resulting in exhibitions of the work.

On November the 11th 1965, the white minority government of Ian Smith made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain. This political development changed the situation drastically. This resulted in the isolation of Rhodesia through international sanctions and to increased racial tension and segregation which finally deteriorated into a 15 year war of liberation orchestrated by the indigenous population. During this period Tom Blomefield, a wealthy farmer, affected by the

economic sanctions was looking for an alternative source of income. He discovered on the suggestion of an artist from Harare that instead of selling his farm it would be possible to use the extensive source of serpentine there to create a carvers' village. After the first few experimental but successful years with amateur artists like Lemon Moses, he established a more permanent carvers village at the foot of the Tengenenge Mountain in 1966. Some of the first artists to arrive there were Sylvester Mubayi, Henry Munyaradzi, Fanizani Akuda and Bernard Matemara. The workshops, out of doors and often in a family and domestic surrounding meant that the sculptor was able to pursue his work in an atmosphere congenial with his traditional way of life.

The artists and the work.

Tengenenge in spite of its location and the majority Shona population, consists of several artists from the neighbouring countries of Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Angola who crossed the borders initially in search of employment creating a multicultural multiethnic community from the Yoa, Chewa, Mbunda and Shona tribes.

An appreciation of stone sculpture and the artists intentions can be found in the cultural origins which have shaped it. As Celia Winter-Irving asserts Stone Sculpture in Zimbabwe largely reflects the sculptors conceptualisation of customs and observances, which sustain traditional beliefs and the spiritual dimension these beliefs give the natural world (pg23) She believes that it is only when an understanding of the beliefs of the societies represented by the artists is reached that the sculpture can be fully understood through publications that have dealt with this aspect in a more detailed way

(Characteristics.)

A feature that is characteristic of the work, especially with the Shona artists is the primacy of their relationship with the material - serpentine, springstone and steatite. Oliver Sultan describes the

work as a "slow refining process, a determined advance towards the heart of the stone, in search of the perfect form contained within it. Underlying this process is the conviction that the stone is a noble, compact, demanding material which, through its very hardness, echoes the secret mission of the artist." (pg14) The Shona believe there is a magic in the stone, a spiritual force which guides them and which is represented in terms of its effect upon the natural and tends to be presented in anthropomorphic terms. like Bernard Matemara's Blind Man or Rhinoceros Girl (1978) Whereas Yoa and Chew artists like Josia Manzi or Amali Mailolo tend to resort to images and in particular objects used by dancers in secret societies.

Outside of Tengenenge and within the wider national cultural landscape, the younger generation of sculptors see their art as a way of influencing what happens around them. Although the medium remains essentially the same, other mediums and themes are evolving. The younger artists like Tapfuma Gutsa, Eddie Masaya, Brighton Sango and Agnes are more experimental and their outlook is international. The themes represent freedom from the established convention of stone carving (pg77) and have little to do with mythology, tradition and folklore. Tapfuma Gutsa, for example believes in the re-interpreting of African culture in a contemporary manner. His sculpture deals with African consciousness, wildlife preservation and the celebration of freedom. This is the new cultural and artistic identity being forged. However, thirty years later, Tengenenge continues to be a thriving community of artists, friends and family. Its function remains multivalent: as a social experiment, an experiment in art education, community arts and development and rural development. Celia states that Tengenenge will go down not only in the annals of Zimbabwe art but also in its cultural history.