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Shona: Modern African Sculpture

La Salle University Art Museum

Caroline Wistar

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S
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**MODERN AFRICAN
SCULPTURE**

**La Salle Art Museum
February, 1989**

S H O N A
M o d e r n A f r i c a n
S c u l p t u r e

Lent by Benjamin D. Bernstein

La Salle University
Art Museum
February, 1989

The Art of Shona

To the best of our knowledge this exhibition is the first display of Shona sculpture in a Philadelphia museum. And unlike past works of African tribal art seen at La Salle, these contemporary pieces from Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) are not functional objects inspired by and used to observe traditional customs and rituals. Rather, the art of Shona (named after the largest Zimbabwe tribe) finds its source in the present. Its artists, without preliminary study, spontaneously carve out of the stone, semi-abstract bird, animal and human forms, imbued with ancestral and alien spirits and symbols, expressing an integral part of present day Shona folklore and religious beliefs.¹ The works have a variety of form, but any stylistic similarities to Western art is probably coincidental, for most Shona sculptors have never ventured from their home territory nor have they been exposed to traditional art of Western Africa.

Before the 1950's, Zimbabwe, then a British colony, was a cultural backwater as far as the native visual arts were concerned. There were conventionally bland courses given in some of the mission schools and a few self-taught and motivated artists scattered throughout the country. But the evolution of Shona art as a national movement was largely the concern of one Englishman, Frank McEwen, while serving as director of the National Gallery in Salisbury, Rhodesia,

McEwen realized the need for the native population to see and create works of art from their own culture. Thus, in the 1950's he launched a program to seek out the few practicing Shona artists and encouraged them to bring their works to the National Gallery. And his program rapidly expanded.

Though McEwen never imposed a particular content, style, or technique on Shona painters and sculptors, he offered constant encouragement, criticism and eventually studio space in the gallery to develop their creative talents and to display and sell their works. Thus, it seems that Shona artists were and remain free to develop their own style and can be considered basically self-taught.² Like the artists of traditional tribal art, Shona

sculptors prefer to remain relatively anonymous and their work in general reflects their desire to emphasize the collective unconscious of their society rather than the particular identity of the piece.³

Some ten years, later during the political struggles against Ian Smith's white minority government, Tom Blomfeld established an art school on his farm which later developed into a successful art colony called *Tengenenge*. The efforts and achievements here were seriously hindered by the civil war throughout the 1970's. But the stage had been set, and McEwen's efforts of some thirty years were never extinguished. Five or six years after achieving independence in 1980, the art colony re-emerged. Today individual artists of Shona sculpture are gaining international recognition among collectors and museums.

Thus, we come to celebrate Black History month in the La Salle Art Museum with a display of contemporary African art rich in iconography and imagery, but which has yet to be explored. And we give special thanks once again to collector Benjamin Bernstein, who, like Frank McEwen, is an outstanding promotor of individuals working in the visual arts. Here at La Salle we have had the good fortune to witness his encouragement of many artists who later achieve local, national, and international stature (including Elizabeth Frink, British sculptress of La Salle's 'Walking Madonna'). With joy, infectious enthusiasm and always great humor, he generously supports individual burgeoning talent while building life-long friendships with many artists. His loan of Shona sculpture, which makes possible this exhibition, is just the latest instance, on a very long list, of his abundant generosity to the La Salle Art Museum since its beginnings.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

1. Ray Wilkinson, "Romancing the Stone", *Newsweek*, vol. 110, Sept. 14, 1987, p. 80.

2. Beier Ull, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (London: Pall Mall Press; 1968) pp. 80, 81.

3. Celia Winter-Irving, "Contemporary Stone Sculpture from Zimbabwe," *Craft Arts*, February/April, 1986.

SCULPTURE CHECKLIST

All of the Shona sculpture (steatite/soapstone) has been lent by Benjamin D. Bernstein. The African textiles are lent by Mrs. Rosa Lee Smith, Counselor at La Salle University, and Dr. Christopher D'Amanda.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Luizi
<i>Fighter</i> | 9. Baudeni
<i>Family</i> |
| 2. Ramiya
<i>Figure with Long Neck</i> | 10. Luizi
<i>Face with Circles</i> |
| 3. Luizi
<i>Hooded Figure</i> | 11. Luizi
<i>Winking Eye</i> |
| 4. Wndoro
<i>Bird at Rest</i> | 12. Munzi Josia
<i>Bird with Eggs</i> |
| 5. Vitinsi
<i>Smiling Face</i> | 13. Elias
<i>Lady with Open Mouth</i> |
| 6. Bernard Matemera
<i>Young Bird</i> | 14. Luizi
<i>Bird with Pointed Beak</i> |
| 7. Luizi
<i>Serpent Figure</i> | 15. Luizi
<i>Cone Man</i> |
| 8. Edward
<i>Laughing Face</i> | 16. Luizi
<i>Three Eyed Face</i> |

