

WELCOME

Welcome to Birdwoods and to our display of works by many of Zimbabwe’s leading stone sculptors. Carved and polished by hand, they include large and small pieces, abstract and figurative, polished and rough-hewn - all are works of particular beauty and resonance, and we hope you enjoy the sculptures and our setting here at Birdwoods. Following is some background to both the history and the current state of sculpting in Zimbabwe, and information on the stones and carving techniques.

SELECTING AND PURCHASING THE STONE SCULPTURES

Each year we travel back to Zimbabwe to select and purchase sculpture, textiles and a wide range of functional and decorative arts for Birdwoods Gallery. We have particularly enjoyed the relationships we’ve developed with the sculptors and have gained an increasing understanding of, and appreciation for, this unique art form and the artists themselves.

Life for Zimbabweans remains uncertain and difficult, and particularly so for the artists who battle to make a living from their work given the disintegration of Zimbabwe’s economy and infrastructure and the consequent collapse of tourism, as well as the huge drop-off in international buyers which has been amplified by the world economic downturn. All in all, pursuing a life as an artist in Zimbabwe makes for a very tenuous existence and it always moves us to see how committed and tenacious so many of the sculptors are in the face of such difficulties.

The majority of Zimbabwean sculptors work and live in sculpture communities. These provide them with access to shared facilities and tools, to a collective approach to the purchase of stone and to transport, and, importantly, to mentoring, training and inspiration from other artists. For buyers like ourselves, the sculpture communities provide centralised locations for viewing a wide range of work. Each sculptor maintains their own outdoor area or garden in which they display their work and they either pay a monthly rental or a small percentage of their sales to the community body. The key sources for our selections are Chitungwize Sculpture Community just outside Harare, Dominic Benhura Studios and Tsindi Sculpture Group in Harare, and Tengenenge Sculpture Community which is about a three hour drive from Harare.

It is very important to us that we deal with all the sculptors personally – that we have the opportunity to discuss their work and lives and to negotiate with them and pay them directly. Some international sculpture dealers use agents or intermediaries and much of the work they purchase is targeted at the tourist market and produced to order in bulk volumes and standard styles. Each year we would view thousands of sculptures, only to select perhaps 100 pieces. We strive to find sculptures that have integrity and express the unique artistic viewpoint of each sculptor and are committed to trading fairly and respectfully with the artists.

These works are truly ‘Spirits in Stone’ – they not only reflect the sculptors’ traditional spiritual culture but also the amazing and indomitable spirit that every sculptor demonstrates in continuing to create their art. We hope you find them inspiring.

Louise & Bruce Stobart

OVERVIEW OF ZIMBABWEAN STONE SCULPTURE

Zimbabwe is now the stone carving capital of the world and their sculpture has become the singular most collected form of African art internationally – it is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Rodin Museum, and the homes of the Rockefellers, the Prince of Wales and Sir Richard Attenborough.

Zimbabwean stone sculpture, despite the country’s political and social and instability, remains a truly contemporary art force. With each piece hand carved using only a hammer, chisel, file, water and sandpaper, the Shona’s beautiful stone sculpture is powerfully human and imbued with intense spirituality.

“It is extraordinary to think that of the ten leading sculpture carvers in the world, perhaps five come from one single African tribe – the Shona. These sculptors from Zimbabwe speak for Africa, but they also speak for us all.”

The Sunday Telegraph

“... a great national art, capable of communicating about the whole of Creation, from personal and family to the soul and self... a thrilling adventure of contemporary art.”

Arts Review, London

THE HISTORY OF ZIMBABWEAN STONE SCULPTURE

African stone sculpture from Zimbabwe is often called Shona sculpture, named after the largest tribe engaged in sculpting. The Shona are the oldest tribe in Zimbabwe and are believed to be the legendary guardians of King Solomon’s mines.

Zimbabwe - derived from the Shona word dzimbadzamabwe which means ‘house of stone’ – is the only country on the African continent that has large deposits of stone suitable for sculpting.

In ancient times stone was used extensively for building and for decorative purposes. The Great Zimbabwe settlement, now a World Heritage Site, is testimony to the skill and artistry of the ancestors of today’s sculptors. Built between the 11th and 15th centuries, at a time when Europe was just emerging from the Dark Ages, these accomplished stonemasons used hand-hewn granite blocks to painstakingly and precisely build ornate towers and enclosures – all free of mortar. Parts of the settlement combine natural rock formation and dry stone construction – the two blending aesthetically and functionally.

Centuries later, in the late 1950s, Frank McEwen, the founding curator of the National Gallery of what was then Southern Rhodesia, recognizing the Shona peoples’ affinity with stone, and their innate desire to express themselves creatively, established a sculpture workshop at the Gallery and invited the participation of aspiring artists. There was no attempt to instruct. Those who were interested were simply given the tools and the stone. As McEwen described it, their work revealed “the images they bore in their souls”. No technical training was given – the sculptors learned from one another and taught one another. This mentoring tradition continues today with aspiring artists learning by watching the masters, by observing the stone, and finally by picking up the tools and applying themselves to the stone.

In the words of Bernard Matemera, one of the founders of this movement: “The spirits are everywhere in the air, in the rocks. A rock is like a fruit – like an orange or a banana. You don’t eat them without peeling them first. It needs to be opened to be eaten. I open the rocks. The fruit is inside.”

Artists draw extensively for inspiration on traditional culture: the mythology, folklore, rituals and beliefs in ancestral spirits that remain strong strands even in contemporary, urban Zimbabwean life. Women are also a significant source of inspiration: the nude torso, the dancing girl, mother and child are depicted in a myriad of ways. The natural world and man’s relationship with nature is another important theme, which reflects the country’s deep rural roots.

In the late 1960s the world recognized that a new art movement had been born in Africa and leading international collectors started buying Shona sculptures. The works first became popular in the UK, Holland and Germany and

more recently across Europe and America. Shona sculptures are in the permanent collections of the Rodin Museum (Paris), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Museum of Mankind (London), National Gallery of Zimbabwe (Harare), Museum of Modern Art (Frankfurt), and the Kresge Museum (Michigan).

Around 600 of the 8+ million Shona are sculpting today and Zimbabwe is now the stone carving capital of the world. This art movement has also attracted sculptors from surrounding African counties – Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia – so while the Shona people are still predominant, other cultural influences have enriched the creation of the sculptures that bear their name. Traditionally, most of the Shona artists have been men. However, more recently, many women have started carving and have received national and international recognition.

CARVING & POLISHING TECHNIQUES

Unlike formally trained Western artists, Zimbabwean carvers are primarily self-taught and they do not plan or pre-draw their sculptures but are inspired by the stone itself. After quarrying the raw stone with pickaxe and pry bar, carvers use simple, handmade tools to release the spirits held within the multi-coloured stone. Sculptors often say the spirits of their ancestors come to them in their dreams and reveal the spirit that dwells within the rock.

Generally living and working in specific sculpture communities, Zimbabwean sculptors carve entirely by hand and work outdoors. Many artists show an ingenious ability to make tools from scrap metal to form their carving equipment. While urban carvers now use chisels, punches and chasing hammers, even these simple tools are expensive and difficult to find, so many carve with hand-made tools from recycled scrap and often use carpentry nails for chisels.

Carving techniques are not necessarily passed on from generation to generation. While many carvers are related to each other, the only prerequisite for learning seems to be desire and time. The skills are not hoarded, but openly shared with anyone wanting to learn.

To transform rough surfaces, artists will hand-sand with wet sandpaper or use river sand on a rag. Traditionally carvers have used plant or vegetable oils to polish their works. More recent techniques include 'firing the stone' by heating the completed sculpture by a charcoal brazier and applying layers of hot wax, usually carnauba plant or beeswax.

THE STONE

The Great Dyke, a 310-mile ridge of 2.5 billion-year-old hills laced with chrome, platinum, gold, copper, emeralds and other precious metals, forms the backbone of Zimbabwe. The longest linear mass of volcanic rock in the world and once believed to be the repository of the wealth of legendary Ophir, the dyke never yielded the dreamed-of mountains of gold. However, carving stone is plentiful. From scintillating white granites to brilliant serpentines – reds, greens, maroons, greys, yellows, and vibrant oranges – the stone is a visual catalogue of incredible mineral wealth.

More than 225 specific colours and combinations of serpentine have been identified in Zimbabwe. It is the complex combination of these minerals that create the stunning colour palette so unique to Zimbabwean carving stone.

Following are some details on the various stones used by carvers. Note that the hardness refers to the Mohs scale of mineral hardness where a diamond is rated as 10.0.

BUTTERJADE	Butterjade has a creamy yellow colour with dark striations throughout and is sometimes also known as Butterstone. Although it is called 'Jade', it is not a true Jade. The striations found in the attractive yellow-green sedimentary rock are actually layers containing fossilized algae. The stone is typically around 50 million years old and between 6 and 7 on Mohs hardness scale.
COBALT	A beautiful stone often purple in coloration with a variation of yellow, white and brown markings and strips throughout. Cobalt is a brittle, relatively rare hard metal, closely resembling iron and nickel in appearance. It has a hardness of between 5 and 6 on Mohs scale.
DOLOMITE	Dolomite ranges from white to shades of pink, yellow, gray or even brown or black when iron is present in the crystal. With a hardness of 3.5-4, its lustre is pearly to vitreous and it has a beautiful transparent surface. Dolomite is associated with calcite, sulfide ore minerals, fluorite, barite, quartz and occasionally with gold.

LEPIDOLITE	Purple in colour, this stone is absolutely stunning, especially in natural daylight. It is greatly prized by the sculptors but increasing difficult to source and becoming prohibitively expensive as a carving stone. This is due to the demand from the telecommunications industry as Lepidolite is a member of the mica group and is a secondary source of lithium. It is also one of the major sources of the rare alkali metals rubidium and caesium.
LEOPARD ROCK	A beautifully coloured stone with yellow and black spock marks similar to a leopard, hence the name. These are inclusions of the ferromagnesian mineral, olivine. Leopard Rock is an olivine rich serpentine (known geologically as dunite) which forms part of a serpentine complex 2.6 billion years old.
OPALSTONE	A beautiful serpentine, opalstone is a very hard, finely textured stone with an almost translucent surface sometimes specked with red, orange and bluish dots and patches. Opalstone is famous for its milky light coloured greens and smooth texture. It is also unique in that it has fewer colour variations than serpentine. Mined at Chiweshe, two hours north of Harare, Opalstone is one of the favourites of sculptors, as it's not as hard as Springstone and other Serpentine, but still polishes to a high finish. On the Mohs hardness scale, Opalstone ranges between 5.0-5.5.
OPALSTONE (GOLDEN)	Found in Domboshawa, Zimbabwe, a fairly hard stone, best kept indoors as it marks easily.
OPALSTONE (LEMON)	Usually featuring a much deeper coloration all over the stone, Lemon Opalstone is harder to sculpt than the usual Opalstone, mostly due to the particles of quartz found within the stone. Lemon Opalstone is easily identified by contrasting yellow striations within the stone. On the Mohs hardness scale, it rates between 5.0-5.5.
SERPENTINE	Found in many deposits throughout Zimbabwe, serpentine colours vary from black to brown to green, orange and variegated. Its hardness level varies from very soft to very hard. Measured on the Mohs scale where a diamond is 10.0, Serpentine ranges from 1.2 up to 6.54. The majority of the sculptors do not carve from soft Serpentine, but rather select deposits of rock that are hard and therefore more durable.
SERPENTINE (FRUIT)	Fruit Serpentine is a lovely colourful stone, with deep veins of varied strata. Because of its beauty and collectability it is one of the most sought after because of its fine finish, durability and hardness.
SPRINGSTONE	Prized by sculptures, Springstone is an extremely hard Serpentine with high iron content and a fine texture with no cleavages, and offering a good resistance to the sculptor. Springstone has a rich outer 'blanket' of reddish brown oxidised rock. They emerge from the quarry like sculptures created by nature millions of years ago and are often a source of inspiration to the artist. There are a few mines where this stone is found, but Guruve in the north, is generally where Springstone is mined. A beautifully dark stone, it polishes to a high shine because of its density.
VERDITE	Verdite, also known as Africa's <i>Green Gold</i> , is particularly prized by some artists for its rich, deep emerald colour, swirling striations and hardness rivaling that of rubies.

CARING FOR ZIMBABWEAN STONE SCULPTURE

Some stone surfaces can scratch very easily so it is important to unpack and handle the stone sculptures with great care.

As a three dimensional art form, sculpture commands and requires space and excellent lighting. As some of the artworks are carved with slim bases, careful and secure mounting is important.

For sculptures with smooth polished surfaces (as opposed to rough/raw stone surfaces), we recommend polishing with a pure wax or oil and a soft cloth. Polish the stone once every six months if it is kept indoors. If kept outside, polish it at least once a month, possibly more if you are in a hot, sunny climate. Do not use any wax or oil that contains additives as they can harm the stone's surface. Do not apply polish to the rough or raw stone surfaces of your sculpture. Should you accidentally apply polish to these areas, gently rub with fine sandpaper.