

# Arts and Culture in the ‘Royal Residence’

Traditional arts in Zimbabwe include pottery, basketry, textiles, jewelry and carving. Among the distinctive qualities are symmetrically patterned woven baskets and stools carved out of a single piece of wood. Shona sculpture has become world famous in recent years having first emerged in the 1940s. Most subjects of carved figures of stylised birds and human figures among others are made with sedimentary rocks such as soapstone, as well as harder igneous rocks such as serpentine and the rare stone verdite. Some of these Zimbabwean artifacts being found in countries like Singapore, China and Canada. i.e. Dominic Benhura’s statue in the Singapore botanic gardens.

Shona sculpture in essence has been a fusion of African folklore with European influences. World renowned Zimbabwean sculptors include Nicholas, Nesbert and Anderson Mukomberanwa, Tapfuma Gutsa, Henry Munyaradzi and Locardia Ndandarika. Internationally, Zimbabwean sculptors have managed to influence a new generation of artists, particularly Black Americans, through lengthy apprenticeships with master sculptors in Zimbabwe. Contemporary artists like New York sculptor M. Scott Johnson and California sculptor Russel Albans have learned to fuse both African and Afro-diasporic aesthetics in a way that travels beyond the simplistic mimicry of African Art by some Black artists of past generations in the United States.

Several authors are well known within Zimbabwe and abroad. Charles Mungoshi is renowned in Zimbabwe for writing traditional stories in English and in Shona and his poems and books have sold well with both the African and European communities. The book *The House of Hunger* by Dambudzo Marechera won an award in the UK in 1979 and the Nobel Prize-winning author Doris Lessing’s first novel *The Grass Is Singing*, the first four volumes of *The Children of Violence* sequence, as well as the collection of short stories *African Stories* are set in Rhodesia.

Internationally famous artists include Henry Mudzengerere and Nicolas Mukomberanwa. A recurring theme in Zimbabwean art is the metamorphosis of humankind into beast. Zimbabwean musicians like Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mtukudzi, the Bhundu Boys and Audius Mtawarira have achieved international recognition. Among members of the European minority community, Theatre has a large following, with numerous theatrical companies performing in Zimbabwe’s urban areas.

Zimbabwean art includes decorative esthetics applied to many aspects of life, including art objects as such, utilitarian objects, objects used in religion, warfare, in propaganda, and in many other spheres. Within this broad arena, Zimbabwe has several identifiable categories of art. It is a hallmark of African cultures in general that art touches many aspects of life, and most ethnic groups have a vigorous and often recognizable canon of styles and a great range of art-worked objects.

These can include masks, drums, textile decoration, beadwork, carving, sculpture, ceramic in various forms, housing and the person themselves. Decoration of the body in permanent ways such as scarification or tattoo or impermanent design as in painting the body for a ceremony is a common feature of African cultures.

Spoken or musical art is also a prominent part of Africa generally. Various instruments including drums, lamellaphones and stringed bows have been used in Zimbabwe, while oratory, poetry, fable telling, praise singing and ethnic ritual chants are also prominent. And in recent decades Zimbabwe has become widely recognized internationally for its sculpture.

## **History**

It is useful to examine Zimbabwean art through time, by area, by main ethnic division and as indicative of recent historic and political changes. There is an artistic tradition in Zimbabwe that can be traced back to pottery of the Early and Late Stone Age and rock paintings from the Late Stone Age. Many rock paintings produced by San artists between 10000 and 2000 years ago are found in cultural sites in Zimbabwe and these demonstrate a high degree of skill in drawing. Many depict recognizable animal figures and use shading and color to enhance the visual impact. The archaeology of Zimbabwe includes numerous pottery finds, which assist in the reconstruction of linguistic and cultural groupings within what is here termed Shona.

The pottery indicates that the people of the Late Iron Age were settled agriculturists and they have been categorized as forming groups such as the Harare culture and the Leopard's Kopje culture: the latter established in 980 AD in a site called K2. This group moved to Mapungubwe where they used stone walls to separate the ruling class from the rest of the population. This settlement was abandoned in the thirteenth century at around the time that a now much better-known site was developed by others who lived on the Zimbabwean plateau. This was Great Zimbabwe, which dates from about 1250–1500 AD. It is a stone-walled town (Zimbabwe means "royal residence") and shows evidence in its archaeology of skilled stone working: the walls were made of local granite and no mortar was used in their construction.

When excavated, six soapstone birds and a soapstone bowl were found in the eastern enclosure of the monument, so these Shona-speaking Gumanye people certainly produced sculpture. Each object was carved from a single piece of stone and the birds have an aesthetic quality that places them as genuine "art".

## **Stone Age**

In prehistory the area was widely settled by the Kung people, the so-called Khoikhoi or San, Hottentot or Bushmen, who were hunter gatherers. They often lived in caves and made various artworks, including beading from shells for personal decoration, incising designs on ostrich shells and utilitarian objects such as clay water straws and also on the cave walls themselves. These dynamic and varied cave paintings date from around 10000 BCE and depict humans hunting many kinds of animals, warfare between humans, mystical and other unidentified marks, landscape and ceremonies where the humans are obviously decorated or in costume. The colors vary from black through brown, red, ochre, yellow and white. The pigments used are unknown; though presumably contain a mix of local materials such as earth oxides, fat, vegetable juices and possibly fluids from larval insects. Certainly they have lasted for thousands of years.

Their descendants, who live mainly in Botswana and Namibia, sing a variety of uniquely structured and tuneful songs, accompanied sometimes by a plucked or struck bow. They also have a repertoire of dances, and there is no reason to suspect their ancestors did not do the same thing.

## **Iron Age**

The Stone Age people were supplanted by Iron Age Nguni-derived pastoral and farming peoples migrating in from the east and north around 2000 years ago, who became the ancestors of the WaRozwi/Barotse people and by derivation the Amashona peoples. The art of these people can be seen in many decorated first-fired clay pots, where typically a repeated dhlo-dhlo (linear herringbone) motif or similar edging was applied. Other artwork is harder to source, though it can be assumed that they decorated the body and had beadwork and other art styles related to typical styles of the East and Central African Nguni peoples. A recurrent motif in Shona art is the transformation of a human into an animal of some kind.

## **Later Prehistory**

At around the same time as the earlier incursions of these people (200BCE) there were sporadic expeditions by South-East coastal dwellers, probably by the Savi/Save river or over the Inyanga/Chimanimani mountain passes, into the Zimbabwe area to obtain gold for trade with Arab traders trading as far south as the mouth of the Savi. They built stone forts extending into the interior at one day's march from each other, with the final one being the complex now known as Great Zimbabwe. To service the coastal trade a town called Sofala was established at the mouth of the Sofala river on the east coast. It had its heyday in around 700 AD/CE and served the Mwenemutapa/Monomotapa Kingdom, whose capital was Great Zimbabwe. Arabs took up residence in Sofala around 900AD/CE.

## **Early Sculpture**

Archaeology at Zimbabwe has shown several distinct phases of building and styles of stonework. It is likely the original complex was rather functional – essentially a fort and trading post only, and the later and more elaborate building occurred when the complex became the central administrative and royal centre of activity for the area. Some of the architectural features are probably linked with styles of coastal Swahili architecture and some are uniquely local. Chinese pottery shards, ivory, glass objects, local gold objects, Arabic and local beads, copper ingots, iron ingots and other trade items have been found at Zimbabwe. The herringbone and other stepped linear forms of decoration in the walls are a feature of the most recent stonework. Similar stonework is seen at the Khami ruins, a fort built on the way to Zimbabwe. However, the most impressive and unique feature of Zimbabwe are the huge soapstone birds, the so-called Zimbabwe birds, depicting a bird of prey perched on a zig-zag base motif. These birds are possibly based on the Bateleur eagle or maybe a vulture species and might have had something to do with a religious society or indicative of a totem animal for the ruling people at the time. Most of these sculptures are still in the country, but one is in South Africa where it still adorns Groote Schuur an official residence, once the home of Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902). Another unexplained motif at Zimbabwe, which like the birds were mounted on the perimeter wall of the Great Enclosure, were stele or tall narrow rectilinear pillars of rock (probably natural fracture artifacts) set at intervals round the top of the wall. The Zimbabwe bird is the most prominent motif of the current Zimbabwe flag.

## **Amandebele Incursions**

The origin of the Amandebele speaking peoples in southern Zimbabwe received its main impetus from settlement around 1840 under Mzilikazi, a Khumalo chief who rebelled against Zulu rule. However, it is likely that such groups began crossing the Limpopo sporadically from about 1800 onwards. Amandebele conflict with the Amashona drove them northwards into what was dubbed in colonial times Mashonaland. These Amandebele/Matabele peoples had several distinct art forms differing from the Amashona: in pottery styles, bead aprons and headpieces, house decoration, carving and decoration of war implements such as clubs/knobkierries and shields.

## **19th and Early 20th Century**

Art in Zimbabwe lost most of its spiritual power with the conversion of the majority of the population to Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries. Missionaries harmed the local cultures by demanding destruction of anything they regarded as anti-Christian, in particular masks or carvings thought to have votive powers, that is, to be appealing to some god that was not the Christian one.

By the Second World War most art objects produced in Zimbabwe were simply that: produced for tourist and local European settler consumption. With the advent of guns, animal skins prepared and decorated with small panels of other hides also began to appear more frequently in the early 20th century, as well as 'karosses' or fur blankets influenced by BaTswana styles from Botswana to the south.

As for travelers to the area during the Victorian period (in the history of the UK, the era of the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 until 1901), they used art, especially painting, to depict some of what they saw there. This art of the colonial period took landscape as its main theme and many of the European artists were present as part of expeditions that aimed to inform the public in Europe about life in Africa. For example, Thomas Baines joined the Zambezi expedition led by David Livingstone in 1858 and in 1861, one of the first to make oil paintings of Victoria Falls, and in 1893 John Guille Millais spent six months sketching and hunting in Zimbabwe.

In the 1940s a Zimbabwe philanthropist named Jairos Jiri began to teach disabled people various artistic skills and centralized their production for sale in several outlets nation-wide. These proved very popular and returned money to persons otherwise excluded from normal commercial activity. Jairos Jiri centers remain an important part of the artistic output in Zimbabwe. Typical items include tiles, tiled tables and wall plaques, basketwork, beading, carvings in wood and stone, jewelry and paintings.

### **Prelude to Independence**

In the mid-1970s the nationalist guerilla incursions resulted in several atrocities against people in rural villages, including the sawing off of the upper lip of those perceived as collaborating with the government forces. The European government collated photographic images and a text list of these events into a propaganda booklet called '*Anatomy of Terror*'. This was designed to show the brutality of the nationalists against innocent rural people.

Other art from the European minority during the civil "Rhodesian Bush" (1968 – 1979) war consisted mainly of depictions of indigenous fauna and flora and landscapes. These subjects had always been popular and remain popular to this day among European artists. No individual European artist expressed any significant political sentiment during the civil war era. However, many film, still and sound clips celebrating the government forces' role during this time are currently available on YouTube.

## Painting in the 20th century



While there were many well-known European artists in Rhodesia prior to independence in 1980, there were relatively few Black artists of note, such as Kingsley Sambo (1932–1977), who started to paint at the Cyrene Mission where Canon Edward Paterson taught art (two of Sambo's paintings are in the MoMA), and others like Thomas Mukarobgwa (also a leading sculptor) and Joseph Ndandarika (his "Magic Bird: 1962 mixed media at the left).

Although the Workshop School of the National Gallery supported and encouraged painters from 1957, Rhodesia had few Colleges for Fine Arts. The Bulawayo College of Fine Art and Design trained artists in fine art and graphic design for Rhodesian industry and it was not until 1963 that Alex Lambert set up the Mzilikazi Art School in Bulawayo specifically to encourage local people to take up art.

The National Gallery has, since 1986, promoted local artists by hosting an annual exhibition of contemporary visual arts called "Zimbabwe Heritage". Patronage from Zimbabwean companies – the Baringa Corporation (for paintings, graphics, textiles, ceramics and photograph) and the Nedlaw Investment and Trust Corporation (for sculpture) – initially supported the expense of having an international panel of judges come to Zimbabwe to assess the works and make Awards. Later, the sponsorship of the event grew to include international companies such as Mobil, Lever Brothers, The BOC Group and Longman. Early winners of Awards of Distinction in the painters and graphics category included Berry Bickle (1987), Bert Hemsteede (1988), Rashid Jogee (1992) and Tichaona Madzamba (1992).

Painters who have established reputations in post-independence Zimbabwe include Dumisani Ngwenya, Taylor Nkomo and Richard Jack.



“Dancers” (oil on canvas laid to board, 69 x 118.5cm; 27 3/16 x 46 5/8in)  
by Kingsley Sambo.



“Mother and Child” by Thomas Mukarobgwa  
(National Gallery of Zimbabwe)

## Sculpture in the 20th and 21st centuries

Zimbabwe Sculpture: a Tradition in Stone, Atlanta, USA, at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport between concourses at Chapungu Sculpture Park in Harare is currently an important locality for display of (mainly) Shona sculptors and carvers. Another Chapungu Sculpture Park was created in 2007 in the United States, along with a gallery, in Loveland, Colorado. Zimbabwe Sculpture: a Tradition in Stone is on permanent display at Atlanta's airport.

Since antiquity local artists have been using the steatite/soapstone deposits of the eastern Zimbabwe mountain ranges to produce artworks showing, among other things, the common Shona theme of animal/human inter-morphosis. These works became much larger under the patronage of European collectors in the 1960s (though the Zimbabwe birds of antiquity are massive) and now it is common to see monumental soapstone sculptures both nationally and internationally. Noted Zimbabwean artists include sculptor Patrick Mavros, and painters Kim Donaldson, Larry Norton, Brennan Seward, Kefas Gimo, Eric Forlee and Owen Maseko.



Owen Maseko's painting of the 1987 Unity Accord between Robert Mugabe (ZANU) and Joshua Nkomo (ZAPU) which brought the ZANU-PF party into existence. The painting shows a bloodied Nkomo bending over the accord, while Mugabe is the other individual seated

## Music and Dance

Even though the Shona and Ndebele outnumber all the other ethnic groups, smaller groups continue to practice their culture and traditions. For instance, the Shangwe have Jichi, the Kalanga have Amabhiza and the Ndau identify with Muchongoyo. Whereas mbakumba, jerusarema and shangara are usually identified as Shona traditional music and dances, and amabhiza, amantshomane and isitshikitsha are associated with the Ndebele people.

### Traditional musical instruments

A commonality in most Zimbabwean traditional music genres is that they are accompanied by the drum, known as ngoma in Shona and ingungu in IsiNdebele. The drums are just as varied as the genres and they come in different sizes and shapes. In most cases, the bigger drums are played using sticks while the smaller ones are played using open palms. There are some exceptions, however, such as the small drum played to accompany Amabhiza, which is played using one hand as the other hand will be rubbing/scratching the drum using a stick to produce an unusual screeching sound. Muchongoyo music is also accompanied by peculiar drums. These have animal skin on both ends of the drum, which are played using sticks, regardless of the size of the drum. The size of the stick is however, proportionate to the size of the drum.

Besides drums, traditional Zimbabwean music has a variety of percussive instruments, including shakers (hoshu), leg rattles (magaga, magavhu and amahlayi) and wooden clappers (makwa). Mbira musicians also use chikorodzi, a notched stick scraped by another stick, as well as kanyemba, an instrument made of many bamboo strips that are stripped together and filled with small seeds for percussion.

Arguably the most famous of the Zimbabwean musical instruments is the mbira. There are several types of mbiras found in Zimbabwe, which are played during religious and secular activities. Of the many types of mbiras found in Zimbabwe, the most common are the nhare (telephone) or mbira dzavadzimu (the ancestors' mbira) and the nyunga-nyunga mbira. The mbira dzavadzimu has between 22 and 24 keys and is known for its ability to invoke the spirit (Matiure, 2011). The nyunga-nyunga mbira is a 15-key mbira and has been widely popularized by Zimbabwe's education sector, where it is taught from primary school up to university level. Some of the Shona language names for the range of mbiras in Zimbabwe include njari, matepe, mbira dzavandau, karimba/nyunganyunga and matepe/madebe dza mhondoro/hera.

Some traditional Zimbabwean instruments are facing the danger of extinction, such as chizambi, chipendani, tsuri, mukwati wenyere.

Source 1; <http://www.zim.gov.zw/culture/arts-and-culture>; source 2:  
<http://www.zim.gov.zw/culture/music-and-dance>