

THE MYTH OF 'SHONA SCULPTURE'

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Abstract

'Shona sculpture' has always relied heavily for its commercial success on its supposed authenticity and autonomy. However, the genre is neither rooted in the spontaneous expression of traditional Black spirituality, nor is it an autonomous contemporary Black art form. The sculpture is easily explained as a deliberate product of the modernist tastes of White expatriates during the 1950s and 1960s and, in particular, those of the first Director of the National Gallery.

THIS ARTICLE ARISES from reflections on the way in which, over time, views originally thought to be daringly radical and avant-garde become incorporated into the general stream of thought. Here their brilliant lustre fades and they congeal into the solid rock of the commonplace. The myth of 'Shona sculpture' is an illustration of this process.

Thirty years ago the notion of a serious, non-functional and non-ritualistic contemporary Black art would have been given little popular credence. During that time, however, 'Shona sculpture' has earned itself a secure niche in the art galleries and markets of the developed world and is collected on a large scale, exported by the tonne by galleries and private dealers, exhibited in universities, museums, galleries and parks in the West and is the subject of numerous journal articles and a few monographs. It has been the making of some reputations and a few fortunes.

The extraordinary success of 'Shona sculpture' both as a commodity and as an aesthetic object derives in large part, although not entirely, from its supposed authenticity, its rooted connection with African modes of thought, and in its African aesthetic. Some commentators, for example, hint at a connection between 'Shona sculpture' and the stone birds of Great Zimbabwe¹ produced some four centuries ago. Most writers point to the spontaneous flowering, *ex nihilo*, of stone carving skills of Shona artists: it is the spontaneity of this renaissance which is the source of wonder. Many critics emphasize the artists' lack of training and models to drive home the message of natural, untutored, authentic skill. Those who admit that labels like 'Shona' are inaccurate² and that the sculpture does not represent specifically Shona culture are still determined to affirm that

¹ Arnold, for example, devotes the first two chapters of her thesis on Zimbabwean stone sculpture to a discussion of the soapstone birds of Great Zimbabwe as 'the only extant examples of large-scale, early Shona sculpture'; see M. Arnold, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture* (Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1981), 1.

² Many of the artists are not Shona speakers. Some are Ndebele; others are migrant labourers from neighbouring countries, especially Malawi and Mozambique.

it expresses Black culture and, in terms of content and technique, is therefore authentically indigenous.

But it is my contention that 'Shona sculpture' owes its origin, form and content to the then avant-garde aesthetic sensibilities of an Englishman: it was and is a wholly European, modernist art form taken over and used by Black artists for their own ends. This article attempts to show how the tenacious myth of authenticity became established as a commonplace truth, and to expose the reality lying beneath it.

SHONA SCULPTURE

The force behind the generation of 'Shona sculpture' was Frank McEwen, the charismatic, iconoclastic Director of the Rhodesia National Gallery from 1957 to 1973. McEwen had trained in Paris in the 1930s. His parents were art collectors and dealers and had introduced him, at an early age, to West African art. As a young man he numbered leading artists and sculptors of the Ecole de Paris³ among his friends. His early exposure to art was radical: a classical art history background combined with personal acquaintance with some of the great, revolutionary modernists, in a city which was the virtual birthplace of modernism. He shared with other modernists an appreciation of African art, together with some of their misconceptions⁴ regarding this genre.

His education in art naturally inclined him towards the avant-garde, early modernism and, in the context of Rhodesia, African art. McEwen's goal was to promote a completely new African art form, thereby disdaining the work produced by Black craftsmen for tourists, which McEwen scornfully labelled 'airport art', and the small but extant 'petty bourgeois' White art. This naturally set him at odds with the ruling class: lightly educated White farmers, industrialists and civil servants. The Gallery milieu, the glamorous, upper-middle class, mainly English group of connoisseurs, shared his aesthetic, and his political opposition to the lower-middle and working-class government of Ian Smith.

Nevertheless, both White groups shared fundamental assumptions about African tradition and culture. These included the idea that Africans were somehow more authentic and closer to nature than Whites. They also believed that the less educated and less urban were Africans, the more they were in harmony with nature and primeval forces; the deeper and more compelling their religious beliefs and the more binding their

³ O. Sultan, *Life in Stone* (Harare, Baobab Books, [1992]), 2.

⁴ For the misconceptions, see Robbins on Kandinsky's notions of 'spiritual affinity' in W. Robbins and N. Nooter, *African Art in American Collections: Survey 1989* (Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 38.

social structure.⁵ But if crass White Rhodesians thought that Africans were primitive and therefore ignorant, McEwen thought they were primitive⁶ and, therefore, closer to the well-springs of creativity than trained artists. The Director of the National Gallery was well placed to kill two conservative birds with one stone: in promoting a Black gallery art he could expect aesthetic reward⁷ while at the same time subjecting White political and cultural backwardness to indirect, although painful, critique.

According to Sultan, McEwen began his curatorship by 'travelling throughout the country getting to know what he could about its folklore and traditions'.⁸ This ethnographic adventure might seem surprising in an art director. It was, nevertheless, completely in harmony with the foundational components of the 'Shona sculpture' myth. McEwen supported Jungian theories of the relationship between 'primitive minds' and art.⁹ These assumed the existence of a 'collective unconscious'. 'Primitive man', left to his own unschooled talents, is able to grasp and communicate universal themes through the medium of art. Universal themes expressed by untutored minds emerge from traditional folk-tales, spiritual and religious beliefs; that is to say, from the realm of the sacred rather than the secular.

McEwen's quest was, therefore, typical of avant-garde of the time, seeking in 'primitive' art documentary evidence for cognitive and ethnographic concerns.¹⁰ It was based as much on a popular theory of human nature and the human mind as on aesthetic considerations. In an early description of the Workshop School art (now called 'Shona sculpture') McEwen says:

One of the strangest inexplicable features occurs in the early stages of development through which many of the artists pass, when they appear to reflect conceptually and even symbolically, but not stylistically, the art of ancient civilizations, mainly pre-Colombian. We refer to it as their 'Mexican period' which evolves finally into a highly individualistic style.¹¹

⁵ For example, Paterson 'felt the rural African's life "more complete" than ours' (i.e. than urban Whites); D. Walker, *Paterson of Cyrene* (Harare, Mambo Press, 1985), 55.

⁶ Although McEwen avoids the term 'primitive', he is happy to describe the work as 'adult child art', R. Guthrie (ed.), *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: Nicholas Mukomberanwa* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1989), 6.

⁷ Beier reports that McEwen was determined to try 'to create new artists in the cultural desert of Rhodesia', quoted in F. Willett, *African Art* (London and New York, Thames and Hudson, 1971), 256.

⁸ Sultan, *Life in Stone*, 5.

⁹ See, for example, Sultan, *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Considering that McEwen was of necessity working with contemporary people, one implication of this thesis is that contemporary Africans possess 'primitive' minds.

¹¹ F. McEwen, *The African Workshop School* (Rhodesia National Gallery, Salisbury, [1968]), 1.

These founding ideas have struck deep roots and many flourishing shoots have sprung from them. These ideas can be traced in the choice of artists, the type of training they received, the content and the form of the art works they produced. They can be found in all kinds of developments for which McEwen was not directly responsible, but for which they proved the groundwork: the Tengenenge school,¹² the romantic religiosity imputed to the work, the development of a mass export market in 'Shona sculpture', its use as a symbol of Black creativity, its symbolic political force, and its economic success. Here I shall deal only with the first four aspects.

SELECTION

The artists were initially all men and were drawn from the rural or uneducated urban working class.¹³ It is still the case that most Black Zimbabwean artists, unlike their counterparts in the West, are men from rural or semi-rural backgrounds¹⁴ with little formal education. The first to be handed paints and paper were Gallery attendants.¹⁵ They were followed by friends or relatives of the initial group, that is, either relatives or people from the same area, such as the Nyanga craftsmen known to Jorum Mariga. They were thus partly self-selected and partly chosen at random from a particular socio-economic group.

The class position of these men, together with their relative lack of formal education and exposure to external influences, made them particularly vulnerable to the values and tastes, either expressed or implied, of their educated, cosmopolitan White liberal patrons. In a hostile world of disintegrating rural society and violent urban township life on the one hand, and a brutal racist regime on the other, a powerful and enduring form of dependence evolved between the art patrons and the new artists, and this dependence was transmitted to succeeding patrons and artists.

¹² Established in 1966 on Tengenenge (a former tobacco farm) by the naïve visionary farmer, Tom Blomefield. At Tengenenge a flourishing art business has developed. Many of the important sculptors of the region started working here; for example, Henry Munyaradzi, Brighton Sango and Silvester Mubayi.

¹³ This is in contrast with novelists who come from the urban middle class and are significantly better educated than their peers. See F. Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers; A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare, Baobab, 1993), xii, 353.

¹⁴ For example, Tobayi Dube was a potter's assistant, Jorum Mariga and Bernard Takawira were rural agricultural demonstrators, Nicholas Mukomberanwa was a policeman, and Thomas Mukarobgwa and Paul Gwichiri were gallery attendants. Some sculptors (at Tengenenge) were farm labourers, others drifted in and out of employment.

¹⁵ Rowena Burrell, personal communication, 1990.

TRAINING

This dependence was accentuated by the fact that McEwen was opposed, in principle, to art education and provided no formal training for the workshop artists. Recently he remarked:

In our workshop I had to expel young ex-art school students who had been deformed in London, New York or elsewhere. In their misunderstanding, these youngsters tried to 'teach' our artists — had they succeeded in arresting individuality there would have been no Shona Art today — but only a copy of a copy¹⁶ of Western productions. What is instinctive must be nurtured to come forth, not nipped in the bud.¹⁷

Models and examples were consistently withheld. McEwen still believes that education creates a barrier between the unconscious mind and its self-expression. To show artists art picture books is, therefore, to encourage them to emulate second-hand subjects: particularly dangerous if the artistic tradition is not your own. Naïve artists must come to plastic expression with uncluttered minds so as to solve artistic problems afresh, without a background of stale tricks to help them through. '(T)his sculpture', McEwen observes, at some time during 1968, 'without art schools is like this architecture without architects — born directly, locally, from natural elements in the virgin ground'.¹⁸

The celebration of the unschooled and 'spontaneous' nature of 'Shona sculpture' continues today and forms part of every hagiography. In 1989 McEwen writes:

Zimbabwe artists at no time borrowed from abroad. They relate exclusively to their own mystical folk traditions and to early African styles and they are instinctively aware of the millennial foundations of their ancient culture.¹⁹

And in an exhibition pamphlet dated some time in 1991 he observes:

In their sculpture, the artists of Zimbabwe have given us, carved directly in rough hard stone, symbols of this spiritual hunger, with superb untutored craftsmanship. Such is their skill they rarely make a mistake in execution or depart from their inner vision.²⁰

¹⁶ It is part of the aim of this article to show that what was produced was, in fact, a 'copy of a copy'.

¹⁷ F. McEwen quoted in R. Guthrie (ed.), *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: Bernard Takawira* (Harare, The Gallery Shona Sculpture, [1990]), 4.

¹⁸ F. McEwen, catalogue of *The African Workshop School*.

¹⁹ F. McEwen in Guthrie (ed.), *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: N. Mukomberanwa*.

²⁰ F. McEwen, introduction of a catalogue for an exhibition of Shona Sculpture, (London, [1991]). See also Guthrie (ed.), *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: B. Takawira*, 14–15.

Because it is held to be unusually free and original the sculpture is therefore believed to be true, both to the 'inner vision' and to the heart of African culture. It is to the absence of formal training that promoters of this genre ceaselessly point when defending its authenticity and its specifically African nature.²¹

But these claims are, as I shall show, the result of wishful thinking. 'Shona sculpture' displays its stylistic and iconographic limitations in any collection of the works that can be assembled. From interesting and lively beginnings quickly unfolded a pedestrian homogeneity which has scarcely altered significantly over the last 30 years. This lack of originality shows its source to be, not primarily in African life, but in the influence of an imported, early modernist aesthetic and anthropology, which is its hallmark.

The sculpture has a formulaic quality which is evident in any study of the work. The stone is treated as a pure and solid block, isolated in space, something to be incised, carved or hollowed, usually as a semi-naturalistic figurative object. The techniques used to finish the surface of the stone have been standardized. Sculptors deal with a narrow range of subjects, materials and tools.²² Variations exist within this range but they are variations on a defined theme from which they do not stray. The exception is the work of Tapfuma Gudza, which I exclude from this discussion since most of this analysis does not apply to him.²³

MCEWEN'S INFLUENCE

The artists have, despite the myth to the contrary, all been trained. Informally, they have trained each other.²⁴ Many have attended some kind

²¹ This dichotomy creates difficulties. McEwen thinks he recognizes the universal unconscious in the sculpture and he refers to its similarities with the art of Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, Easter Island and New Guinea. He claims both that the symbols are purely African and that they are universal; unlearned and spontaneous, yet reflections of forms found elsewhere.

²² See [R. Guthrie (ed.)], *The Magic of Henry*, (Harare, Jongwe Press, [1987]), 60, *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: N. Mukomberanwa*, 160, *Prominent Sculptors of Zimbabwe: B. Takawira*, 79. Guthrie uses the same illustration to show the limited range of tools used by Munyaradzi, Mukomberanwa and Takawira.

²³ Gudza trained abroad. He produces beautiful drawings and experiments with a wide range of materials and techniques, combining stone, metal and wood by carving, welding and tying objects together. His subjects include humorous and political topics. Gudza is conscious of sculpture as a process of working with material objects. He has, for instance, produced a series of surrealistic 'musical instruments' including mandolins and 'bells' made of stone and leather. In his best work Gudza neither represents nor imitates reality: his art has no narrative character. The contrary is the case in most 'Shona sculpture'.

²⁴ In the catalogue *1989 Zimbabwe Heritage Exhibition*, (Harare, Creative Publications, 1989); 6 sculptors were described as being students of Thomas Mukarobgwa, 4 as students of Mariga, 9 as having studied at Mzilikazi Art School in Bulawayo, 18 as having studied at the BAT workshop in Harare, 28 as having trained at Tengenenge, 10 as having trained at the National Gallery, and 94 were self-taught.

of art school. Most have learned the lessons of the market. In the beginning the artists were powerfully influenced by the modernist taste of McEwen and his fellows, for the good reason that the Gallery provided the only market-place for their work. And, although picture books were withheld, a significant collection of masks, textiles and other artefacts from Zaire and West Africa, collected by McEwen, were permanently on display in the Gallery, thus providing a model for the 'spontaneous' development of a genuine African style.²⁵

McEwen influenced sculptors partly through his monopoly of the market via his gatekeeper role of selecting artists and pieces for promotion, partly by denying the artists access to models other than his collections of African art, partly by opposing formal art education, and partly by promoting 'high', rather than popular art. Zimbabwean sculptors soon formed a prestigious and economically successful group which was able to turn its back on 'township art' and 'folk' art. As a result of their contact with the Gallery, they have clung to financially rewarding, non-realistic forms of expression and are, therefore, unlikely to find a market amongst the local Black population. This population has, in any case, little interest in the fine and plastic arts²⁶ as genres; music and, to a lesser extent, the vernacular novel, being exceptions to this rule.²⁷

There were also two influential art schools where some of the originators of 'Shona sculpture' were trained. The first of these schools was at Cyrene, outside Bulawayo, started in 1940 by Canon Paterson. The other was at Serima, started by Fr. Groeber.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CYRENE

Paterson trained at the Central School of Art in London from 1920–1923.²⁸ Unlike McEwen, he was a dedicated teacher. His taste was formed from an odd amalgam of influences; ancient Chinese²⁹, Vorticist³⁰ and the Arts and Crafts Movement, a peculiarly British response to Victorian aesthetics which developed in the mid-19th century. His students were encouraged

²⁵ Another model was the prestigious first International Congress of African Culture Exhibition held in Salisbury, at the Rhodesia National Gallery in 1962.

²⁶ Visual education is as limited for Black Zimbabweans as it is for their middle and working class White contemporaries, whose tastes they often share.

²⁷ The fundamental difference between musicians and plastic artists in Zimbabwe is that music has living roots in the daily life of the people, whereas sculpture has none. Ignoring these differences, McEwen notes, 'Music (in Africa), like art, is not taught: it is inbred and natural.' (McEwen, *The African Workshop School*). McEwen is wrong on both counts. Africans, like other people, do have to learn to play musical instruments, to sing and to dance.

²⁸ Walker, *Paterson of Cyrene*, 9–12, and B. Wall, in the article 'Canon Paterson of Cyrene', *Arts Zimbabwe*, No 2, (Harare, National Arts Foundation, 1981/2), 27–38.

²⁹ Walker, *Paterson of Cyrene*, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

to draw from observation and from their daily experience. Nevertheless, it is clear that he provided substantial guidance, imposing his own aesthetic sensibilities and providing models from which his students could work. The five main paintings around the altar at Cyrene are his own work: the alter-piece was painted before Cyrene School was opened.³¹ He also censored students' work.³²

Paterson promoted a highly decorative style, withholding the teaching of perspective but encouraging bright, clear colours laid flat, the use of black paint to outline forms and the use of patterning techniques reminiscent of Rousseau and the early Matisse, on the one hand, and medieval iconography on the other. The students' paintings which have, on the whole, great charm and vitality, show a variety of individual responses to the rather dull work produced by Paterson himself. Some of the paintings at Cyrene, for instance the St. Christopher, are executed with a classical naturalism, others like the St. John the Baptist, verge on the expressive. The majority are fauvist in style.

This aesthetic formed the basis for many of the best early paintings of the Workshop School, examples of which can be found in the work of Thomas Mukarobgwa and Kingsley Sambo. This is not surprising. In 1953 Paterson moved to Salisbury and established an art school, Nyarutseso. Here he influenced more artists, including the two painters just mentioned.³³ It was also here that 'he discovered soapstone as a new medium for sculpture. The stone . . . proved easier to carve, being softer than the Wonderstone and Portland stone'.³⁴

Paterson was not a purist like McEwen. His aim was as much to encourage the 'development of skilled craftsmen'³⁵ as to promote art for art's sake, and his students were encouraged to deal with everyday subjects such as political disturbances.³⁶

GROEBER AND SERIMA

The other influence on African art was the Catholic Serima Mission at Driefontein. The modernist architect/priest in charge of Serima, Fr Groeber, who trained in Switzerland before the Second World War, taught the drawing and carving of masks, 'guided . . . with illustrations of Congolese

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31–2.

³² The current *Visitors' Guide to Cyrene*, [1990], 7, quotes Paterson asking artist James Ratumu to replace a 'most potent-seeming ram' with an innocuous lamb in painting the parable of 'The Good Shepherd'.

³³ Walker, *Paterson of Cyrene*, 68.

³⁴ Wall, *Arts Zimbabwe*, 36.

³⁵ Walker, *Paterson of Cyrene*, 38.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

and West African masks'.³⁷ This teaching resulted in the production of didactic and narrative sculptures which now adorn the church. Following the avant-garde view that Christianity in Africa must express itself in a purely African iconography, the pillars, statues and bass-reliefs at Serima contain all the elements supposed typical of indigenous art; that is, they are formalistic, geometric, immobile and non-naturalistic.

The stylistic uniformity which developed under Groeber appears to have been imposed by his notions of what an African iconography should contain and his selective use of models, together with the formal requirements for a consistent aesthetic for the church interior. There was a set routine for the teaching of drawing which focused the students' attention on the geometry of three-dimensional forms. When students had grasped this they were allowed to draw their forms on to the wood to be carved. The act of cutting with a chisel was the last stage in the process of artistic creation.³⁸

RESULTS OF 'WITHHOLDING TRAINING'

Far from withholding influence, it is clear that galleries and missionaries deeply influenced their students. Although the art produced at all three centres has distinctive characteristics³⁹ it is unvaryingly modernist in idiom, with an overlay of 'African' styles originating from McEwen's collection and Groeber's West African and Zairian models. The continuities between their work are thus as explicable in the light of mutual influences between the artists, the demands of the market and the modernist tastes and training of McEwen, Paterson and Groeber as by any presumed cultural similarity or mystical artistic ability. Using Occam's razor, Robbins drily remarks, '... in those many instances where there is, in fact, abundant evidence of direct derivation, it is not necessary to resort to the "collective unconscious" as an explanation for similarities'.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, artists were not trained in the history of art or in critical appreciation of their own and others' work. This meant that producers were able to appreciate their work only in terms of being pleasing or displeasing to their patron. The promoters of naïve, modernist Black art were unaware that the very act of selection, or of censorship, constitutes a powerful form of aesthetic criticism. Their methods thus imprisoned the

³⁷ A. Plangger and M. Diethelm (eds.), *Serima. On African Christian art in Rhodesia* (Harare, Mambo Press, 1974), 15.

³⁸ Conversation with Cornelio Manguma, at Driefontein, some time in 1984.

³⁹ In her review of Kuhn's 'The Art of the Shona in Zimbabwe', *Zambezia* (1979), VII (i), 111-4, Jean Danks wonders why the Serima carvings are 'so different in concept from the Shona stone carvings when they are both of Shona source'.

⁴⁰ Robbins, in Robbins and Nooter, *African Art in American Collections: Survey 1989*, 26.

artists in a terrible blindness:⁴¹ they knew that criteria were being applied to their work, but not what these criteria were, so they could not apply them themselves. When they were asked to produce 'traditional' or 'religious' subjects, that was what they did: in the required modernist idiom.

Much can be explained by this fatal lack of awareness on the part of art promoters. Untrained artists are less adventurous and less innovative than those who have been exposed to a wide range of art. They are likely to cling to tried and trusted forms which they know will sell, and less likely to explore interesting themes falling outside the parameters laid down by dealers and promoters.⁴² They are also less able to apply cognitive as well as aesthetic criteria to their own work and the work of others.

Untrained artists are vulnerable to the limitations placed on their creativity such as this advice given early on: '(McEwen) advised them to abandon realism and to express Shona myths or the "images they bore in their souls" in their carving.'⁴³ Such people must work as craftsmen rather than autonomous agents. Instead of being able to explore the rich range of possibilities of contemporary and classical art, they are restricted to reproducing the artistic taste of someone else.

This vulnerability has facilitated the bowdlerization of modernism which has developed throughout the country, for artists who do not know the significance of the modern movement cannot be expected to grasp it.

In a small and insular society such as exists in Zimbabwe, the aesthetic sensibility of the patron dominates. The sensibilities of first McEwen, then Blomefield, the farmer-founder of the Tengenenge art movement,⁴⁴ have consolidated into overriding criteria to which the works are still referred. The establishment of conventions has restricted the development of 'Shona sculpture'. Since there is no formal difference between working for the tastes of a patron like McEwen and working for the equally unknown and mysterious world of (mainly) American art dealers, the spiral into commercialization and homogeneity⁴⁵ has been inescapable.

⁴¹ Although artists speak through interviews, the interviewers and commentators are invariably White. Black Zimbabweans have yet to produce an independent aesthetic critique of Shona sculpture.

⁴² One such dealer is Ponter, a Zimbabwean-turned-American businessman, who is currently engaged in large-scale export of 'Shona sculpture' and is described as one of the 'charlatans who are re-writing history and creating their own myths' in Sultan, *Life in Stone*, 1 and 16 note 3; c. f. R. E. S. Cook, 'Donations should not be used to mask artistic realities', in *The Sunday Mail Magazine*, [Harare], 10 Oct., 1993.

⁴³ Sultan, *Life in Stone*, 9.

⁴⁴ A number of dealers and art promoters, private and public, including Guthrie and Cook, owners of sculpture galleries in Harare and tireless promoters of this genre, still encourage these sentiments.

⁴⁵ Willett early notices this homogeneity as he observes; 'different carvers have produced very similar works' Willett, *African Art*, 254.

AUTHENTICITY AND APPROPRIATION

The claims of authenticity have an air of desperation, rather than of truth to them. In *African Arts* 1976, Willett provides a 9-point scale to measure the authenticity of traditional African art. The second most inauthentic type of traditional art is that made by an African in a non-traditional style for sale to an expatriate.⁴⁶ This is the type of art to which 'Shona sculpture' belongs, in my view. 'Shona sculpture' does not derive from any kind of indigenous tradition: it is an appropriated style working in a doubly-borrowed idiom: firstly, from early modernism, and secondly, from West African traditional art via European modernism. The fact that the earliest appropriation was from an African source does not make the twice-borrowed idiom any more genuine. And, while appropriation is a perfectly legitimate method of developing an art form, we may not pretend that borrowing and 'quotation' are not taking place. In addition to this, aesthetic judgements about 'Shona sculpture' should not rest on the precarious foundation of authenticity.

There is good reason to suppose that the Zairian and West African models thrust in front of the sculptors may have been alien to Zimbabweans who had had a minimal living tradition of ritualistic or decorative artworks. Cultural continuity across huge stretches of Africa which have become isolated from each other over generations and through disparate historical and political developments cannot lightly be assumed. It is unlikely that significant connections will be found to justify such an assumption. The Zairian and West African traditions of material culture are spectacularly different from anything which can be found south and east of Zambia.

We have no idea what a spontaneous Zimbabwean art would have looked like without the modernist influence of McEwen, Groeber, Paterson and others. 'Township art' and other types of folk art, that is, art produced for and bought by local people, scarcely exists in Zimbabwe.⁴⁷ It is mainly used for signposts, home-made advertisements and murals in bars and Black restaurants. Unlike contemporary and traditional music and literature in the vernacular, (encouraged by the African Literature Bureau since

⁴⁶ Quoted in Robbins and Nooter, *African Art in American Collections: Survey 1989*, 14.

⁴⁷ Since Independence, art and craft training co-operatives have been set up throughout Zimbabwe. These attempt to engage people, particularly rural women, in income-generating activities for a mainly overseas market. They have resulted in movements as charming and contrived, though not as successful or long-lived, as Shona sculpture. Having been developed by creative outsiders, they lack their own inner dynamic to sustain themselves once the initiators are withdrawn from the projects. See, for example, I. Noy, *The Art of the Weya Women* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1992). Noy, a German volunteer, worked with a co-operative at Weya from 1984 to 1991, teaching women different forms of painting and embroidery. Their artistic products were an instant commercial success but the project has stagnated since Noy's departure.

1953)⁴⁸ which have a genuine popular indigenous following, plastic artists have always produced for a non-vernacular, predominantly overseas, market. This, combined with the refusal of curators to educate the artists, has had unfortunate results, the worst of which is that artists producing for Western tastes must turn their back on indigenous patronage. This is partly a matter of cost: the sculpture fetches world-market prices out of the reach of most local buyers, White or Black. Lack of local patronage also results from the fact that the sculpture is not much liked by indigenous people.⁴⁹ The artists are therefore compelled by market forces to remain within the known tastes of overseas buyers and are constrained to produce 'high' art with noble but mysterious themes.

CONTENT : ART AS ETHNOGRAPHY

A precedent for the rational aesthetic discussion of African art was set at least 30 years ago by Fagg and Plass. Their aim was to examine:

some African sculptures in relation to some of these European concepts of art and to see how far . . . they are applicable . . . (This) attempt . . . may help us to free ourselves from the preoccupations which we unconsciously harbour about the exotic arts.⁵⁰

There is no reason why terms of aesthetic criticism, developed within a fully articulated tradition of appraisal such as that of Western art history, should not be applied respectfully and accurately to any art emerging from any culture, whether tied to tradition or not.

Critics of 'Shona sculpture' seem unaware of this possibility. Commentators try to elucidate the genre as if it were a cultural artefact rooted in daily practice, even when they know it is not.⁵¹ This approach is guided by the idea that African art works are comprehensible only as part

⁴⁸ Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers*; 72.

⁴⁹ Plangger alludes to this distaste *vis-à-vis* the works at Serima in the following remark: 'The response by many "educated" Africans is far from enthusiastic. They speak of a "step back into tribalism". Others simply ask, "Are we Africans so ugly?" These are understandable reactions of people who need to rediscover their own cultural heritage'. Here Plangger takes a stand against educated Black people and their considered, justified judgements, in favour of uneducated rural folk and a mythological 'African tradition'; see Plangger and Diethelm, (eds.), *Serima. On African Christian art in Rhodesia*, 21.

⁵⁰ W. Fagg and M. Plass, *African Sculpture: An Anthology* (London, Studio Vista Ltd., 1964), 5.

⁵¹ In any case, the demarcation of disciplinary boundaries creates problems. Art historians are seldom equipped with the analytic anthropological tools for tracing connections between contemporary and traditional artifacts. Anthropologists are rarely art historians and thus unlikely to be able to make informed aesthetic judgements. The failed attempt of Winter-Irving, to relate traditional material culture to the current practices of living Zimbabwean artists points to the problem inherent in the task; see C. Winter-Irving, *Stone Sculpture in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Roblaw Publishers, 1991), 29-39.

of a larger whole; and that whole is the traditional context. But this approach confuses two quite separate methodological traditions: the ethnographic approach to exotic genres, and the aesthetic and historical approach to contemporary arts.⁵² More seriously in relation to the latter approach, art which addresses genuinely contemporary issues appears to be considered inauthentic by promoters and buyers alike.

Sculptors were encouraged to deal with Shona religious⁵³ and folk beliefs and domestic subjects; with metamorphosis, trance, spirit forms and folk-tales.⁵⁴ The content of Shona art was thus defined in advance by external agents, particularly McEwen, as originator and facilitator. It was to be rural in topography, traditional (in the sense described above) and atavistic in scope. In expression it has turned out to be non-erotic, non-satirical, non-humorous and non-political at a time of major social and political turmoil. It seems strange that no previous commentator has remarked on the extraordinarily non-political and non-urban nature of the sculpture.⁵⁵ The exceptions to the general formula were the paintings which poured out of the Workshop School in the early years and which are now never exhibited and never discussed.

For the Jungian, it is obvious that, just as an under-educated rural class are more likely than educated urban people to yearn for the past, their concerns are also more likely than those of city dwellers to be rooted in the collective unconscious. In a hierarchy of values, the more serious the subject-matter, the closer to the universal experience. Conventionally, thoughts about God and Life occupy a much higher plane than those about politics, social conflict and humour. By choosing lightly educated rural men to spearhead the new artistic movement, McEwen found fertile ground for his advice that artists work from within the terms of their traditions. In this way their inspiration could not be contaminated by the vulgar taste.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The earliest monograph on the sculpture, that of Arnold, stresses as does McEwen, the religious and spiritual content of the sculpture. This view is

⁵² It is worth noting that the inner significance of much expressionist art is unavailable to the viewer. It may, therefore, be pointless to insist on the meaning of any art, traditional or not. A non-subjective vocabulary elucidating aesthetic appreciation may be universally required. See Robbins and Nooter, *African Art in American Collections: Survey 1989*, 8 note 2.

⁵³ Religious themes from Christian teaching were unacceptable although most contemporary Africans profess some form of Christianity.

⁵⁴ Arnold, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture*.

⁵⁵ This a-political, anti-urban stance contrasts with much vibrant and eclectic black South African art which does not shrink from township/urban/political themes, the exploration of consciousness or even of African Christianity. See, for instance, R. Burnett (ed.) in the catalogue to the exhibition *Tributaries* (Johannesburg, BMW Communications Department, 1985).

side-stepped only by Sultan who provides a largely historical account of the development of 'Shona sculpture', claiming that there were two distinct periods to the works: the 'Shona' or 'spiritual' period and the contemporary period. It is hard, however, to place much weight on this claim since he mentions, briefly, only three features: the development from an 'archaic' to a non-mythological subject-matter, for which I have seen no evidence, from softer to harder stone, and certain stylistic developments. Predictably enough, the supposed former 'period' coincides with McEwen's curatorship of the Gallery.⁵⁶ The Winter-Irving and Mor accounts, together with the biographical works on Munyaradzi, Takawira and Mukomberanwa, dwell extensively on the supposed spirituality and traditional content of the works.

In order to test whether stone sculptors focus, spontaneously or not, upon religious and spiritual themes, I have undertaken a specimen content analysis.⁵⁷ My method of classification is deliberately crude. I exclude reference to the artist's intention, since it is not what the artist, but what the art says, which is important. If verbal descriptions are essential to the appreciation of an art work, this admits either to inadequacy of realization on the part of the artist or the observer's lack of perspicacity. Any act of interpretation that insists on inserting itself between the art object and the viewer displaces the three-dimensional object, rendering it superfluous. Description should not supersede execution.

The corpus was selected from monographs and catalogues published in the last five years, with the exception of Arnold's selection, which was published in 1981. Table I indicates the proportion of works in each group as a percentage of the total given in column A:

⁵⁶ Sultan, *Life in Stone*, 12.

⁵⁷ Figures are classed as spirits only if either the title specifies some magical or spiritual element and/or something like transformation appears to be taking place. Other figures are similarly treated. I have included with Class 1 material belonging to Christian iconography, for example the Good Samaritan. There are only about four of these. Figures count as female if they have female characteristics, and/or if the title specifies they are female. Included as 'female' or 'male' are 'traditional' authority figures (e.g. the chief, the *ambuya*, the *tele*) and also, so long as they are executed in a semi-figurative style, titles such as 'Thinking' or 'Patience', which would otherwise place them in Class 5.

All human groups, except mother and child groups and the occasional father and child, are placed in Class 4. In some cases it has been difficult to classify a work, for example to determine whether a mother and child is a religious or a domestic piece.

In Class 5 are found the increasing number of works of political and social comment, as in the catalogues of the two *Heritage* exhibitions; see catalogues of the *1989 Zimbabwe Heritage Exhibition*, (National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1989) and *1992 Zimbabwe Heritage Exhibition*, (National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1992). Titles within this classification include such works as 'Destitutes', 'Orphan Beggar'. I omit all deeply ambivalent works, although there are not many of these. I have, as explained above, at all times omitted reference to the work of Tapfuma Gudza.

The virtue of this system of classification is that, although crude, it is consistent. The data has been extrapolated within a short period of time, according to uniform principles. More sophisticated analysis is unnecessary for current purposes.

Table I

CONTENT ANALYSIS AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL NUMBER OF WORKS IN EACH COLLECTION: TOTAL NUMBER = 869 SCULPTURES

<i>Reference</i>	<i>A</i> <i>Nos. of</i> <i>works</i>	<i>1</i> <i>spirit</i>	<i>2</i> <i>female</i>	<i>3</i> <i>male</i>	<i>4</i> <i>group</i>	<i>5</i> <i>abstract</i> <i>political</i>	<i>6</i> <i>animal</i>
Arnold	46	45,6	8,7	17,4	6,5	2,2	19,6
Winter	41	24,4	4,9	31,7	4,9	9,8	24,4
Mor	96	15,6	9,4	22,9	10,4	10,4	31,2
Sultan	49	28,5	30,6	22,4	4,1	6,1	8,1
Heritage '89	259	15,0	15,8	23,2	10,4	12,3	23,2
Heritage '92	142	11,3	19,0	20,4	14,0	16,9	18,3
Munyaradzi	46	19,5	2,2	23,9	8,7	2,2	43,5
Mukomb'nwa	131	25,9	20,6	24,4	14,5	3,8	10,7
Takawira	59	10,2	13,6	30,5	5,1	28,8	11,9
Average as a percentage of total <i>œuvre</i>		21,7	13,9	20,1	8,7	10,3	21,2

1) The predominance of spiritual and religious material

It can be seen from Table I that spiritual and religious themes are less dominant than current mythology suggests. The proportion of works directly 'spiritual' or 'religious' ranges from forty-five per cent of the total corpus (in Arnold's seminal book, widely quoted and shamelessly plagiarized) to ten per cent in Takawira's work.

2) The traditional and cultural nature of human subjects

A large proportion of female subjects portray classical themes: romantic love, the virtues of a good woman, pregnancy, non-sexual physical beauty and mother and infant groups.⁵⁸ Men are represented as lovers and husbands, as workers, as thinkers and as authority figures. A number of all male and female subjects centre on an idealized family, broadly conceived as a nuclear, Western family and on domestic social relations (obedience, discipline, marital and parental love). Remaining non-religious authority figures such as chiefs form a small part of the total *œuvre*, as do group

⁵⁸ A new development has been noticed in galleries in Lusaka and in the popular market of Mbare Musika in Harare. It is represented in the material under review by Kuvenguhwa's 'Shona Woman' and Tahwa's 'Mother of the World', both of which won awards in the 1992 Zimbabwe Heritage Exhibition, of which see catalogue, *ibid.* Their work is distinctly pornographic in approach.

subjects: only Nicholas Mukomberanwa displays a sustained interest in the latter. The groups are almost invariable human groups, executed in a semi-naturalistic style.

It is pure mystification to insist that these male and female figures and groups represent an unusually deep spiritual and cultural commitment. There is nothing more ordinary than portraying subjects of everyday life. What is extraordinary is that the everyday life depicted is universally idyllic, rural and agricultural and excludes all reference to present realities.⁵⁹ It is as if the sculptors have peeled every aspect of contemporary life from their consciousness and rely on half-remembered visions, dreams or primary school stories to reproduce the 'traditions'.

The world of the sculptor is a purified and largely invented world. Zimbabwean stone sculpture depicts, for a market of jet-setting, bourgeois, foreign city-dwellers, a stable and harmonious rural life which has structured hierarchies of authority and innocent, respectful and humble women. It is this phenomenon, so far removed from the harsh realities of life in the communal lands, characterized by poverty, dispersal, destabilization, crime, the destruction of family life, urbanization, modernization and the collapse of authority, which needs explanation. However, the romantic depiction of life is likely to be more in keeping with the tastes of promoters, markets and sycophantic commentaries, than in the real life experience of the sculptors.

The only way to preserve our faith in the sculptors themselves is to concur that they are forced into working with this kind of subject-matter. There is no other reason why a whole generation of crafts people would spontaneously engage in the falsification and romanticization of rural life and find in this meretricious activity an immediacy which their real experiences lack.

There is therefore, as apologists claim, 'cultural content' in this *œuvre*. Nevertheless, it is an essentially idealized and conservative culture.⁶⁰ The sculptors' cultural awareness lacks social consciousness and a social conscience. It is neither committed, critical nor reformist. With the

⁵⁹ Discussing the escapism and idealization of pre-contemporary society in the vernacular novel Gaidzanwa suggests that, in general, the images 'reflect the values and norms of the image-makers', rather than social reality itself. See R. Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women* (Harare, College Press, 1985), 99. The same may be true in the case of sculpture.

⁶⁰ It is instructive to compare this genre with the Zimbabwean novel. According to Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers*; 152 and Chs. 8-14, early writers, who were the contemporaries of the first sculptors, were concerned with the transition to modern life, rural poverty and the dislocation of urban dwellers from traditional values, together with reasonably open criticism of racism and White rule. Writers in English tend to articulate social and political critique while the less-well educated vernacular writers, under the patronage of the politically-motivated Literature Bureau, produce sentimental tales of domestic love, domestic problems and folk-tales. In terms of content, Shona sculptors use these resources even less critically than the vernacular writers.

exception of 'political' art, representing perhaps five per cent of the total, there is nothing in it to attach it to the concerns of the modern world. This approach is at odds both with the vitality of an African art produced for ritualistic purposes which, whether stylized or not, possesses disturbing power as well as formal excellence, and the modernist framework which sets out to challenge convention and replace it with the fruitful, the passionate and, especially, the true.

3) Ambiguous animals

Animal subjects form as large a part of the total *œuvre* as religious ones, representing twenty-one per cent of the total. If we include as animal subjects those only ambiguously human, the number is larger.

The most piquant aspect of the genre is the universal tendency of sculptors to sculpt figures which are only ambiguously human; their faces and heads being either hominoid or drawn from those of stylized lesser primates, especially baboons.⁶¹ The *œuvre* includes a number of quite tender and romantic pieces with baboon faces (Mariga), lemur faces (Bernard Takawira and Henry Munyaradzi), Easter Island profiles (Boira Mteki) and gargoyle heads (Matemera). The tendency is exaggerated by the hordes of lesser artists competing for public attention and financial reward.

This vogue is more likely to originate in folk-tales told to children than in seriously held spiritual or cultural beliefs. It is tempting to suggest that the focus on animals and ambiguous figures is the stylistic result of a practical joke played by craftsmen on infinitely gullible collectors, or to explain this phenomenon with reference to the romantic founding beliefs of McEwen and succeeding commentators. However, the phenomenon probably deserves more specific and detailed attention than it can get in this article.

SAYING AND SHOWING

What is clear from even this cursory content analysis is that art commentators make different kinds of selections from the corpus. Arnold

⁶¹ R. S. Roberts, in his review of Arnold's work, focuses on the difficulty of tracing relationships between traditional spiritual beliefs and iconography. 'A baboon . . . may be a *mutupo* and can give rise to a *shave* spirit; its varying representation . . . (surely owes) more to Western-derived models . . . or to the stone medium', R. S. Roberts, 'Contrasting Views of Shona Sculpture', *Zambezia*, 1982, X(1), 49–53. In the same journal, Hodza comments, 'Most of the Shona stone sculptures do not represent traditional spiritual beings or concepts . . . people, particularly foreigners, think anything carved by an African represents African spiritual beliefs, an idea passed on to them by their pseudo-anthropologists . . . during their term of office as District Commissioners . . .' A. C. Hodza, *ibid.*, 56–7.

highlights mythical subjects; Winter-Irving, male figures; Mor, animals; and Sultan, female figures. The Munyaradzi book focuses on animals, the Mukomberanwa contains a balance of male, female and spirit figures, while the Takawira concentrates on male and abstract figures.

These selections purport to provide a basis for analyzing the whole corpus. Because all sources, except that of Arnold, were published within a five-year period (1987–92), the variations cannot be explained in terms of important stylistic developments in the sculpture itself; no new developments having been noted by any of the critics over that period.

In spite of my observations, the texts themselves do not reflect the differences which appear in my content analysis: instead they unite in chorus around the themes of spontaneity, authenticity, and tradition; the very themes of the Arnold book and the basis of McEwen's comments. In fact, the latter's comments have formed an unbroken and unaltered thread over the last 30 years, and have acquired a canonical stature around which later works must disport themselves. There is a tension between what the authors say and what they show in their illustrations. Their inability to recognize their own tastes in art makes much of the analysis misleading, regardless of the fact that the analysis itself strengthens the myth.

FORM

In this section I address three matters: the materials used by the Shona sculptors, the demise of painting which, in the Workshop School, predated stonework in favour of sculpture, and the question of style. I try to show how the formal qualities of the sculpture follow from the ideas of McEwen rather than being the spontaneous result of a mysteriously 'African' style.

Form and stone: the qualities of stone

'Shona sculpture' started as modest and domestic, both in scale and content. The medium, a beautiful Celadon-green soapstone, was quite easily carved with simple tools and lent itself to soft, rounded shapes as well as heavily incised forms. Some charming pieces of the early period were of domestic and non-domestic animals, naturalistically rendered.⁶² As the movement grew, larger pieces with more or less mythical subjects and works which were increasingly abstract, geometric and stylized were added to the corpus.

⁶² See 'Head' by Amani in catalogue of F. McEwen, *The African Workshop School*, and photographs of catalogue numbers 126, 129 and 143 in *International Art Exhibition*, [Lusaka, 1964].

The soft soapstone gave way to stone of increasing hardness and density. McEwen encouraged the use of stone because he thought it would set the art works in a completely separate category from 'airport art'. In addition to this, he believed that the harder the stone, the more difficult it would be to work and the more difficult to work, the less the possibility of commercialization. This has proved to be a misconception. If stone sculptors can earn an income from sculpture, there is no end to the numbers of unemployed people with a limitless amount of time available, willing to try their hand at the task.⁶³

There are other advantages to stone: as a material it is completely 'modern': it is lustrous and glossy, cold, hard, heavy, and 'masculine'. Zimbabwe possesses a wide variety of beautiful stones of varying colours and degrees of opalescence, stones with veins and spots. Unlike wood, stone has a quality as noble as bronze. The material transforms the product of human labour from the commonplace into the special and is available relatively cheaply. Worked stone can be oiled and polished to the liquid finish of bronze or steel, it can be sharply and lightly incised like metal or it can be striated and chipped into chunky patterns to make use of the contrasting texture of weathered and heart stone. Stone is not easily destroyed. It has no fibrous structure restricting its use, as is the case with wood. Stone can as readily accommodate itself to the living-room as the foyer, the park or the garden.

Sculpture and painting

If we compare the skills required in painting, and those in sculpture, it is easy to see why Black artists stopped painting and started sculpting. Apart from financial considerations (the sculpture has realized far higher prices than the painting), artists such as Thomas Mukarobgwa admit that they find painting more demanding than sculpture.⁶⁴

The painter must rely upon the skilful and intelligent application of paint (colour, texture and line) to a two-dimensional surface to bring it to life, to organize themes, create depth of visual field, volume and dimension. To paint is to engage in an intellectual dialogue with relatively simple materials: canvas and pigment. The business of creating, or commenting on illusion, lies at the very heart of painting, whether representational or non-representational.

The problem of illusion and representation bypasses the reductive sculptor: he works with physical objects which possess their own material reality in time and space. Shaping stone along highly stylized lines is a

⁶³ These people are also encouraged to do so by successful sculptors such as Jorum Mariga, who see sculpture as providing large-scale informal job creation possibilities.

⁶⁴ Thomas Mukarobgwa, personal communication some time in 1993.

craft not very dissimilar to the highly worked and modelled craft articles sold to tourists. In this respect, therefore, sculpture is less difficult than painting. Given the form, or the idea of form and an appropriate craft training, the production of the sculptural object, compared with a painting, is a relatively mechanical process. This is why modern sculptors can depend on technicians to reproduce a maquette, to full size and in the desired materials: the execution, as opposed to the conception, of a piece of sculpture is regarded by some individuals as a craft rather than an art.

A further advantage of working with stone is that the sculptor can rely upon mass and lighting to lend the work formal qualities which the sculptor did not necessarily intend. Munyaradzi's works, for example, look in photographs as if a conical section has been cut into the stone from eyebrow to eye. This mysterious quality is entirely a product of the stone's glossy finish under photographic lighting: in actual fact, the space between eye and eyebrow is executed as a flat plane.⁶⁵

Form and 'Expressionism'

Much has been made in the literature of the notion that the sculpture is non-representational and 'expressionist'. In a much-quoted phrase, it is 'conceptual, not perceptual'.⁶⁶ This statement flies in the face of the facts. Most of the work, as I have shown above, has a clear representational, narrative intention.

In order to develop a critique, terms must be defined. Unlike impressionism, expressionism is less concerned with a naturalistic rendition of external reality than with the emotional intensity of the artist's experience, which may result in distortions of line, shape and colour. The dichotomy, however, between naturalistic and non-naturalistic work is useful only as a preliminary step: it fails to recognize interesting gradations and the fluidity of the system itself.

Fagg and Plass have provided a fruitful, non-dualistic way of looking at the formal properties of contemporary and classical African art which may help towards a more sophisticated appraisal of the works. Starting with cubism, the two authors show examples of traditional African art encompassing a wide range of styles including abstract expressionism, naturalism, surrealism, assemblage, Gothic and baroque styles. That analysis shows that traditional African art itself is neither primarily nor solely expressionist in character. When we turn to 'Shona sculpture' we observe the same to be the case.

⁶⁵ Visiting professor Helena Nelkin of Fogg Museum, Harvard University, lecturing in Harare in 1989, enthused on the remarkable way in which the stone facilitates chiaroscuro — the rendition of form through the play of light and dark. I make a different point.

⁶⁶ Arnold, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture*, 41.

MODERNIST ORIGINS

Stone sculpture in Zimbabwe, with its cold, sharply wrought planes, the treatment of its surfaces, in the very material itself; its permanence, density, luminosity, polish, its coldness and hardness, its severity and purity, reveals nothing with more clarity than its own origins in modernist aesthetics. Far from expressing some kind of intense and private emotion, the sculpture has an explicit though coded narrative intention, as we have already seen. In formal terms it is a sculpture of concealment.

Sculptors have used, as a vehicle for this concealed narrative, such techniques as stylization, caricature, patterning devices, a cubist type of fragmentation and minimalism. This process of abstraction has simplified and distorted the communicative capacity of the work: our response is accordingly reduced. Few of these works display the taut power of a Bapende fetish or a Dan or a Makishi mask.⁶⁷ Traditional African sculpture derives its strength from a mannerism which results in the perfect refinement of technique and image. 'Shona sculpture', with its reduced and borrowed vocabulary, is ill at ease when compared with either traditional or purely modern art forms.

McEwen and others admire the frontality, the enlarged heads and the verticality of the sculptures. These features link them, according to McEwen, to traditional African expressionism. But the explanation may be even more simple than that. Stone sculptors in Africa do not necessarily address the specific qualities of their material: they simply import techniques developed from working in wood. Among these techniques is the use of the adze, facilitating strong planes and cubist shapes, and use of the grain of the wood itself, which encourages vertical and frontal works.⁶⁸ There is, therefore, nothing particularly mysterious or African about these forms.

My argument is that the 'Shona sculpture' reflects, not traditional African values or forms, but the aesthetic preferences of, firstly, McEwen and subsequently, the market which the Workshop School created. If the stone sculptors use techniques appropriate to wood, but less appropriate to the formal qualities of the medium with which they work, then the explanation for the final product lies more in McEwen's open and often-expressed delight in these features than in any unconscious link with a universal mind.

In the same way, the strikingly architectural compositions of Nicholas Mukomberanwa are easily explained with reference to his early training at Serima, described in general terms above. Similarly, the neglect of 'back'

⁶⁷ See Fagg and Plass, *African Sculpture*, 52-7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-6, and 33.

views, either ignored and left unworked or botched by under-carving shoulders or backs of heads can be understood as the result of an uncritical curatorship, which, encouraged by McEwen's remarks about 'frontality', has consistently overlooked this culpable formal error. If sculptors had been properly exposed to criticism, they would have learned a fundamental fact about sculpture: that it must express itself from every point in space and not merely from one favoured position.

Apart from the surface treatment, the stone itself, as a mass in space and time, is subjected to the most perfunctory of approaches. In 1987 Garlake writes of the sculpture exhibited at that year's Baringa/Nedlaw Exhibition:

The sculpture was disappointing. It was primarily pictorial, concerned with what the surface depicts, rather than with mass, and in most cases entirely lacked that sense of form whose outer skin is expressive of a living core made visible. Sculpture that is alive elicits self-comparison . . . It results from work which is conceived three-dimensionally, which posits an alternative form of existence . . . For the most part the spirit here remained firmly earthbound, the sculpture pieces of stone, altered but untransformed.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show how the myth of 'Shona sculpture' has taken hold. Contemporary notions about exotic cultures, especially Africa, originated in the first two decades of this century when the great and radical promoters of African art were in their formative years. These seminal ideas, initially used as a framework for understanding and identifying traditional art, were employed by McEwen to promote a contemporary art form sufficiently ambiguous as to deceive himself and others as to its character, and thus advance the interests of a group of underprivileged, rural men. What started as an essentially avant-garde enterprise has become a successful commercial industry. The vocabulary of dissent, like much of the liberal vocabulary of the sixties, has become incorporated into the heart of orthodoxy where it forms the central and unexamined core of chauvinistic, political rhetoric.

I have then considered the dogma itself to discover how close it is to the truth. I believe I have found that, in most respects, it is inaccurate. 'Shona sculpture' is not authentically African, whether or not it is produced by Africans, and whether or not it encapsulates 'cultural' themes. The preponderance of the latter has been greatly exaggerated in the literature.

⁶⁹ M. Garlake, *Zimbabwe Insight* 87, Vol. 1 (Harare, The National Gallery of Zimbabwe, 1987).

The works are not uniformly 'expressive': they form a continuum from expressionist to naturalistic, from abstract to figurative. The dominating style is figurative and semi-naturalistic, expressing a limited, perhaps even impoverished, range of bland and secular themes.

Stylistically, there is variation, but it is a timid variation within a narrow range. These formal limitations are explicable with reference to McEwen's and others' sometimes inaccurate notion of the defining characteristics of an authentically African style, such as its primarily 'conceptual' and expressive nature. These limitations can also be accounted for by the economics of art production for an unknown external market, and by the lack of artistic training and exposure to other art forms. The artists were trained — but trained as craftsmen rather than as artists.

Since decolonization began, many attempts have been made by liberals or radicals to establish or re-establish canons of thought or expression in Africa. 'Shona sculpture' is one such attempt. It seems clear after 30 years, however, that such 'traditions' have been misunderstood and have been inappropriately conceived or applied. As a deliberately invented tradition, 'Shona sculpture' lacks roots in a past and a future. Nevertheless, the myth continues to flourish.

In the contemporary world, the market-place dictates what art is to be worth producing and, therefore, what art will be produced. The promoters of this art form have the complicated task of producing criteria to help buyers distinguish between good and bad, authentic and inauthentic works. It is too simple to cite this phenomenon as yet another instance of neo-imperialism, the domination of the peripheral Third World by the rich centre, for there are two differences. The first is that we can scarcely describe the sculptors as 'compradors' of capitalism, nor can we clearly depict them as exploited, although there are aspects of both qualities in their relationships with their countrymen and with their clients. It is hard not to conclude that they are being exploited by the very market which makes their success possible.

The second is that, unlike commodities such as sugar or coffee, which sell despite their real origins, this particular commodity sells only because its imaginary origins lend it an aura bright enough to replace discernment and common sense. It sells, therefore, to a particular section of the middle-class: the educated, liberal and romantic class which has lost its rural roots and, for that reason, seeks to repossess what it falsely imagines are its universal, primeval origins: the genotype in what is solidly contemporary.