



## **Variation and Innovation in Zimbabwean Mother and Child Abstracts**

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### **Abstract**

This presentation discusses the ubiquitous Mother and Child, Dancers and Happy Families or Togetherness sculptures – henceforth termed flow sculptures. Usually, these are considered to be meaningless, mass produced kitsch - the ultimate in airport art. However, on closer examination, they exhibit an unexpected aesthetic sensibility and symbolic value, considerable variation and significant stylistic innovation.<sup>i</sup> In fact, contrary to the highbrow aesthetic prejudices which dominate the reception of African art in the elite museum world, these sculptures can be seen to have a refined harmonic sensibility, to convey significant if simple and unambiguous meanings, and to evoke sentimental reactions. In short, they are truly the People's Art.

### **Introduction: At The Second Street Extension People's Market Harare, 1990-1992**

The sculptors and middlemen who produce and sell the range of works shown in are usually considered to be anonymous African craftsmen purveying mass produced indistinguishable tourist art of little aesthetic or economic value. Nevertheless, Comrade Chipiri (then working for Gladman Zinyeka), Tago Tazvitya and Davison Mpofu, three Second Street People's Market artists and middlemen, assured me that though the works may look alike to the untrained observer, the artists and middlemen are for the main part able to recognize who carved each piece, just as the more acute dealers can.<sup>ii</sup>

Such works used to be sold at Second Street extension near the University of Zimbabwe in northern Harare and at other sites across the city. Over a period of two years from 1990 to 1992, I photographed and sketched the works available at such sites in order to detail the evolving range of semi-abstract and realistic (naturalistic) forms available in the larger production of Zimbabwean stone sculpture. In the process, I found that though the flow sculptures are typically found displayed alongside realistic African heads and wild African animals and are distinct from the semi-abstract figurative sculptures classically known as Shona sculpture (see Zilberg 1995), over the years, the flow sculptures have become fully incorporated into the Shona canon. In any

event as far as black Zimbabweans are concerned – these are the real forms adored (see Zilberg 2006).

Week after week, month after month, I surveyed the entire Harare sculpture market while focusing on this site in particular and comparing the works here to those at Vhukutiwa, an elite gallery nearby in Miton Park. I scrutinized the evolving variation of the range of sculptures on sale and attempted to document rates of reproduction. On my last visit to The People's Market at Second Street, after over a year and a half of sustained intensive study, Tago Tazvitya laughed with me about what probably appeared to be a bizarre and pointless venture. Though I had been at pains to always bring sufficient beer with me, and to periodically buy sculptures, Tago concluded our farewell discussion by making this comment on my acquired ability to discriminate between the works – “You learned cheap!” Indeed, over that extended period, I came to respect the acute business acumen of these middlemen, none of whom I ever observed sculpting.

### The Flow Sculptures

Within this market described above, the highly stylized rhythmic sculptures considered here can best be termed *flow sculptures* as the term captures the basic aesthetic sensitivity of the forms. It is useful to coin the term as to date there is no accepted generic term in use. Moreover, they have not been commented upon in the extant academic literature on the tourist arts. The flow sculptures are produced in workshops, co-operatives and homes scattered across the high density suburbs as well as in the rural areas, particularly in Guruve in north-eastern Zimbabwe and in Mutare in eastern Zimbabwe.<sup>iii</sup>

This market has been described in depth in Clive and Maricarol Kileff's post-modernist text *Street Sellers of Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture: Artists and Entrepreneurs* (1996).<sup>iv</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting that though the Kileff's have also published examples of flow sculptures being sold in these contexts, see Kileff and Kileff (1996:51-2), they do not mention these particular sculptures in their classification of the variety of forms available. In a more lavish presentation, Laura and Anthony Ponter, in *Spirit in Stone: Zimbabwe Shona Sculpture*, have provided the most carefully orchestrated presentation of such work as “tribal” art objects, or what the post-modernist African art historian Donald Consentino would term “afrokitsch” (1991).

The case in the coffee-table promotional book *Spirit in Stone* is, I believe, the first published example in which flow sculptures were explicitly represented as Shona sculpture (see Ponter and Ponter 1992, pp.76). This constitutes a special case of the commercialization of the tribal discourse in the commodity sphere in which the flow sculptures are presented as conveying the unique Shona “tribal” value of *ukama* – family, sometimes translated as “togetherness”.<sup>v</sup> It has also been found in the Smithsonian Institution's gift catalog where the jewelry company Relios has been marketing these sculptures for over a decade.

As the Ponters have it:

“*Ukama*, which means together in close family relationships, is a central belief and practice in traditional Shona culture. Family ties are all important to these people, and from birth through death and beyond, Shona families are bound together in the mutual respect, support and love that is the greater extended family-*ukama*”(ibid.).

True to the quasi-ethnographic writing on the tradition initiated by Frank McEwen (1967, 1972), furthered by Joy Kuhn (1978) and significantly advanced in a scholarly fashion by Marion Arnold (1980), the Ponters expand even further upon this tradition by moving on to explain the Shona totem system (ibid.:76-77).

Despite this ingenious presentation, though such ‘airport art’ [is] often condemned as meaningless, repetitive, uncreative, and unoriginal, the flow forms are exceedingly popular, may be meaningful, creative, and even exhibit an unexpected degree of innovation. Moreover, in my view, there are two significant anthropological reasons which explain the local popularity of these sculptures. First, these flow sculptures are emotionally and symbolically potent because of their

central message – love and because they are affordable and make wonderful gifts. Second, there is a surprising potential convergence with Shona aesthetic values. However, on not so loving a note, an ugly legal battle over who “owns” the flow sculptures is now playing itself out in Philadelphia.

### **Gloster Global versus Relios: The Internet, Patent Rights and Legal Conflicts**

Today Western designers and trading companies such as Gloster Global have become directly engaged in the production process in Zimbabwe. In doing so, they have in cases added qualitatively new ornamental dimensions and exerted rigorous quality control. True to the nature of the market, all successful innovations are quickly adapted by other businesses and artists despite Gloster Global’s express warnings against copyright infringement.<sup>vi</sup> Needless to say, Gloster Global cannot possibly claim to own the copyright of any of the forms considered earlier in this monograph as all these forms existed in the public domain prior to the alleged patent and the ensuing legal suit now in process as detailed in *The Herald*, April 13 2005. In fact, precisely because the patent issue has recently entered into the all important legal domain and the court date for Gloster Global versus Relios is now set for September 2006 in Philadelphia. Regardless of what the jury decides, the fact of the matter is that the flow sculptures as a genre predate Gloster Global’s patent by at least forty years as detailed below.

Contrary to Gloster Global’s claims in *The Herald* that they invented the genre in 1992 with none other than Nicholas Mukomberanwa, one of the most famous of the first generation of Shona sculptors, an article titled “Talking stones link sculptors with the past” which appeared in *The Herald* on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1984 shows that the genre is not new at all. The photograph of the works then on display at the Kubatana Arts and Crafts Co-operative shows several somewhat unimpressive examples of flow sculptures alongside the usual if somewhat depauperate array of wild animals, realistic heads and semi-abstract figurative classic Shona sculptures.

In that article, two of the sculptors, Edward Mugumwa and Albert Magadhula, recount that they had started the co-operative in 1977 after having learnt to carve at the Canon Paterson Craft Center in Mbare, Harare. What is especially interesting about their account, beyond the information on the likely origin of the genre in Canon Paterson’s Craft Center, is that by 1984 Zimbabwean sculptors carving tourist art were already presenting their works as mystically inspired Shona sculpture – many years before the California “spirit in stone” market was established.

As Manguma put it there: “The stones are spirit forms, characters from Shona stories ... the stones themselves tell a story.” The writer added to this by explaining how “According to him [Manguma] commercialization has the benefit of preserving and encouraging dying tradition.” For instance, the sculptor revealed:

“When we discovered that animals we made through our imagination perhaps from the fireside stories our grandfathers told us, were selling fast, more imaginations of the dying traditions came and are still continuing to come up in our minds.”

It is clear here the idea that the market could serve to stimulate cultural identity as well as the sales strategy of blurring or collapsing the Shona and airport genres, a ploy which was said to be threatening the international reputation of Shona sculpture in the 1990’s (see Zilberg 1985), had actually been initiated by local entrepreneurs long before the American dealers learnt to do so.

However, though the above-mentioned article proves that such sculptors had learnt how to make these forms in the Canon Paterson Craft Center in Mbare as early as the mid 1970’s, further research will be required to establish exactly when and where these forms first emerged. The questions remain as to who designed the original prototypes and which workshop school first produced them as introduced below.

Fortunately, the literature shows that these forms were first produced in the very early 1960’s and perhaps even earlier. In an article titled “The Arts in Africa: The Visual and the

Aural”, Hugh Tracey, then the pre-eminent South African ethnomusicologist of his day, provided the earliest documentation of the form. Though he did not specify exactly where the workshop school was nor who was running it, he provides us with enough evidence to be certain that these were indeed the first flow sculptures and that they were indeed inspired by Henry Moore if only in the generic sense of incorporating negative space within sculptures.

Tracey’s text provides us with the earliest documentation of the flow genre and he intimates that the teacher who introduced the new form came from London. He presents us across the decades with the only existing data on the early history of the flow sculptures:

Apart from the fact that curio manufacture provides a certain amount of employment, culturally speaking I believe it to be a first class tragedy which is often confounded by the introduction of the techniques of overseas instructors with their “art school” outlook and their accent upon the popular, *avant-garde* fancy of the moment. As an American said to me recently in East Africa when we were discussing the myriads of little light brown statuettes that emanate from the Kamba carvers of Kenya and which can be bought today in every curio shop in Africa and even in New York . . . “You know” he said, “these chaps are getting out of date. They haven’t learnt to make holes through them like Henry Moore. But they will . . . they will”. How right he was. A short air trip away, I visited an African art school and there they were . . . “our students work” . . . horrific and holey . . . a new kind of Moorish invasion of Africa by way of Russell Square” (1962:22-23).

Later, the success of the form, in its reception as art rather than craft, is best captured in an article in *The Natal Witness*, February 14, 1969 titled “Rhodesian sculpture features traditional African symbols.” The article, which reviewed the first comprehensive exhibition of Rhodesian stone sculpture in South Africa, concluded thus: “Finally, the small couplet of a mother and child (No. 3) with the superbly reversed postures of the two interlocked stylized figures aptly sums up the essence of the exhibition as a whole – it is delightfully surprising and easy to respond to.” Accordingly, in some degree, the incorporation of the flow sculptures into the Shona genre is really a matter of re-incorporation or historical recapitulation.

### **On the Relevance of the Flow Sculptures to African Art History**

The triumph of the flow forms in the market, and in their being the only form of Shona sculpture to have become patronized by black Zimbabweans, constitutes the realization of two important aspects of Canon Edward Paterson’s dream. Paterson’s idea was to promote the arts and crafts as a medium for self-help and for meeting the spiritual need people have for attractive objects and pleasing domestic environments (see Gronn 2003, Walker 1985:10, Zilberg 1999). Simply put, the flow sculptures are in my view the legacy of Canon Paterson and his many students – in fact – they embody in stone the implantation of the ideals of the British Arts and Crafts movement into Africa. It is thus because of Paterson and his training in the arts and crafts in Britain, that thousands of Zimbabweans, including the flow sculptors either directly or indirectly, have come to earn a decent living from their skillful and industrious labor (see Morton 2003, Walker 1985, Randles 1997, Zilberg 1996:26-80).<sup>vii</sup>

Strangely enough, there is an unlikely conjunction between the flow sculptures and traditional Shona sculpture as studied by William Dewey. Dewey’s analysis of the inherent conservativeness of traditional Shona aesthetics offers a great deal to a culturally contextualized interpretation of the skill and aesthetics involved in the flow genre. For example, he writes that in the traditional realm, the skill in replication involves “the ability to create recognizable, acceptable variations of a shared stylistic, formal, and aesthetic norm . . . [T]he definition of skill

must be enlarged to include the expectancy of the familiar, which results in acceptance and approval of the familiar and rejection and disapproval of the unfamiliar (Sieber in Dewey 1991:66).

The surprising relevance of William Dewey's classic art historical studies of aesthetics does not end there. For example, in Dewey's analysis of Shona aesthetic evaluations of traditional objects such as headrests, he notes that some of the criteria for excellence were "formal simplicity," "surface finish or smoothness" and the "overall shape and straightness" rather than crookedness (1991:83, 223). Moreover, he describes how traditional aesthetics are connected to "utility, prestige, embellishment and religion" and the fascinating thing is that the aesthetics of the flow sculptures thus makes a perfect fit with tradition.

### Conclusion

The most important ethnographic discovery here, ultimately far more important than the methodological clarity of a model for form types and their evolution, is that the flow sculptures are meaningful to the Shona and to Zimbabweans at large. This is in stark contrast to the semi-abstract modernist figurative works which are purported to be icons of Shona cultural heritage.

The flow sculptures have emotional prestige value in that they are typically gifts from loved ones, many being bought for mother's and Valentines Day and birthdays. In fact, they are even passed down as heirlooms just as are traditional objects of ritual prestige such as head-rests and ceremonial knives though not within the same frame of significance. However, they can be seen as "religious" or "cultural" if broadly understood in terms of their framing as cultural and spiritual vehicles for Shona family values.

In addition to Tracey's observations of the genre in 1962, the flow genre is unlikely to have been in existence prior to the early 1960's as this was when the sculptors first turned to using the newly discovered soapstone from Nyanga which is so easy to carve through (see Walker 1985:66, Zilberg 1996:76). Before this time, Paterson's students had relied on imported wonder stone, granite and marble, materials which are exceedingly difficult to penetrate. Similarly, as we know the Kamba carvers in the Rhodesias were importing their works from Kenya and not carving them locally, it is not at all likely that they had turned their hands to such carving (see Elkan 1958).

In conclusion then, the precise origins of this genre remain unknown though it is clearly associated with an as of yet unidentified "school" in the very early 1960's and with the Canon Paterson Co-operative in Harare at least as early as the 1970's. It was certainly not invented by Nicholas Mukomberanwa in 1992 as reported in *The Herald* in April this year.<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, it is generally understood in Zimbabwe that most of the sculptors producing these works for the tourist market were originally either trained in Paterson's craft workshops or learnt their trade from someone who had.<sup>ix</sup> There can be no doubt then that the flow genre is now nearly a venerable fifty year old Shona tradition

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### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The earliest history of east and Southern African tourist art is the short article "Kamba Carvers" by Andrew Tracey which appeared in the journal *African Music* (1960) vol. 2, no.3, pp. 55-58.

<sup>ii</sup> For photographs and descriptions of these latter two artists, see Killef and Killef 1996, pp. 45, 47.

<sup>iii</sup> For an important study of workshops, apprenticeships and repetition or stylistic uniformity in African art, see Kasfir (1987). For the as of yet unparalleled classical study of tourist art and semiotics, see Jules-Rosette (1984).

<sup>iv</sup> For a positive review, see M.F.C. Bourdillon (1997). For an exceedingly critical review of "an untidy little book [with] an important narrative . . . struggling to escape", Murray McCartney, in his typically hyper-critical fashion, that is, for a critic who has never written anything of any substance, describes it as ". . . an astonishing piece of intellectual flim-flam . . . ."

<sup>v</sup> For a classic example of the new age Shona discourse see the web page "Ukama Family Unity Stone Carvings" at [www.spiritualcharms.com/shonastoncar.html](http://www.spiritualcharms.com/shonastoncar.html) and "African Charms" at [www.spiritualcharms.com/africancharms.html](http://www.spiritualcharms.com/africancharms.html). For its transposition into silver jewelry, see "Loving Family Gifts by Relios" at [www.lvingfamilygifts.com](http://www.lvingfamilygifts.com). For a classic example of the use of the international recognition of Shona sculpture for the sale of the lowly souvenir, see "African stone sculptures from Aabam (sic - Abama) Inc at [www.abama-specialty-shops.com](http://www.abama-specialty-shops.com). It is also the natural culmination of the way in which Frank McEwen invented symbolism to bring local meanings to contemporary sculpture. The web page reads: "Shona sculpture has received worldwide recognition in art galleries and museums throughout the world. Among the most appealing of these works of art are the **Ukama** or "**Loving Family**" sculptures which depict mothers and their children, whole families, and couples embraced in love and dancing in joy. Relationships are an important part of **Shona** culture and these pieces signify the bond between a mother and her children. The bodies and arms are joined to symbolize the strength and longevity of these relationships. Just as a mother will take care of her young, so it is the responsibility of the children to care for their parents and grand[d]parents in later years of their lives."

<sup>vi</sup> The best example of this healthy and massive proliferation of new form types and innovative approaches can be seen in the Abstracts section at [www.shonagallery.com](http://www.shonagallery.com). Such works are available all over the world, in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta at prices reaching to \$1300 dollars for exactly the same sculpture that costs \$130 on the internet. Also see "Stone Age Art Company Marketplace – Shona Sculpture from Zimbabwe" at [www.stoneageartcompany.com/content/marketplace.php](http://www.stoneageartcompany.com/content/marketplace.php).

<sup>vii</sup> The high art discourse dehumanizes the craftsmen who sculpt these forms. Moreover, the sheer volume of work produced arguably attests both to these craftsmen's skills and the long term success of the British

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Arts and Crafts Movement's ideal to revive or stimulate the emergence of new craft industries in the face of industrialization. Nevertheless, it is important to note for the record that specialists in the history of African religion reject this argument of influences tout court (pers. com. David Maxwell, editor of the *Journal of African Religion*). Nevertheless, Elizabeth Morton (Gronn) in her dissertation *Missions and Modern Art in Southern Africa* (2003) builds upon this thesis and provides a preponderance of evidence for the legacy (also see, Devlieger 1998).

<sup>viii</sup> On the mission projects which produced many of the sculptors who went to work in the tourist trade, see Morton (2003), Devlieger (1998), Walker (1985), Plangger (1974), Randles (1997), and Zilberg (1996:26-75 and 1999). On the arts and crafts movement in Britain and its colonies, see Harrod (1999).

<sup>ix</sup> Most of the wooden carving on sale in Zimbabwe before and after the Second World War was made in Kenya by Kamba carvers (see Elkan 1958, Tracey 1962).