

Makonde Art

The Makonde Plateau, which lies in the District of Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, just south of the Rovuma River and the border of Tanzania, is the original home of the Makonde tribe. Due to the specific geographical characteristics of the area the tribe was somewhat isolated until the military occupation of Mozambique during World War II. Subsequent infiltrations by Catholic missionaries and emigrant Europeans, and border skirmishes between the Frelimo Liberation Front and the Portuguese along the Tanzania border caused a general exodus to the north. Some Makonde fought with the Frelimo and proved ferocious fighters, re-earning their old nickname, "Mawia" or "the angry people". Over the years those Makonde who migrated to Tanzania have become culturally and linguistically distinct from those still living in Mozambique.

Both groups of Makonde tribesmen have produced such artifacts as boxes and pipes for their own use. The southern Makonde are also known for a distinctive style of face and helmet mask still used in tribal ceremonies. But modern Makonde sculpture was developed by those migrant peoples who now live in southern Tanzania and Dar es Salaam.

schematic concepts. Early carvings represented people from everyday tribal life: the drummer, the smoker, the water-bearer, the mother with child. Most of the images were of set design, as with much of traditional African art, and only subtle variety distinguished works of a single design.

An immense stylistic release came with the introduction of *shetani* images to Makonde art forms. *Shetani* are legendary spirits or witches who can help or hinder man according to their whims. *Shetani* can be brutal or serene, sometimes wildly playful, and can take animal, human or monster form. This new type of sculpture freed the artists to express many more personal and involved feelings; often artists created weird creatures from their own dreams. *Shetani* figures are strong on literary content and an artist will usually provide an involved explanation of their meaning. These new sculptures are about twice as tall as the earlier works, measuring some 15–18 inches high. *Shetani* and early Makonde carvings come in a wide range in quality. Lately the Tanzania Government has begun to monitor prices and to distinguish works of superior quality by higher prices.

A second stylistic innovation in Makonde carvings is the “tree-of-life”, consisting of a totem of dozens of interlaced figures rising sometimes to over 4 feet high. The tree-of-life presented new challenges in technique. The figures on the totem can be carved in relief on a solid core of wood or in three dimensions leaving spaces between the figures.

In another departure in Makonde art, modern imagery such as telephones appeared. Artists began to express what was happening about them as well as delving into traditional folklore and dream imagery.

Cooperatives have enabled carvers to bargain collectively and to earn a fairer percentage of the selling price. In 1969, 100 Makonde carvers near Mtwara and Rovuma in southern Tanzania formed the Makonde Carvings Cooperative Society. In 1970 it was affiliated with the Mtwara Cooperatives Union which sold Makonde carvings in eight village buying posts. From the buying posts wholesale buyers take the carvings to Society

Region African Carving Cooperative Society, opened in 1972 and now has over 600 members. Entry fee is 5/=, shares 25/=. Salaried employees do marketing research and carvings are exported to Kenya, Zambia, Australia, Canada, U.S., West Germany and Saudia Arabia. Another 30,000/= worth of carvings is sold monthly to the National Arts of Tanzania.

In 1970 Makonde carvers in Tanzania came under the supervision of the National Development Corporation. They employ several dozen Makonde artists full-time at the National Arts of Tanzania Gallery workshop in Dar es Salaam. Many of these artists once worked for Mohammed Peera, who was for many years owner of the largest outlet store for Makonde carvings in Dar es Salaam. Peera played a large part in the commercial boom of the Makonde art market.

Makonde art has been shown in museums and galleries all over the world. In 1968 Makonde sculpture was exhibited by the Smithsonian Institute at the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum in Washington, D.C., and 24 works were contributed to Washington's Museum of African Art. In the same year two Makonde exhibits opened in Nairobi, at the New Stanley and Paa-ya-Paa Galleries. In 1970 Makonde artists carved at the Tanzania Pavilion at Expo '70 in Japan. Their popularity netted them some 500 sales a day. In 1971 over 400 Makonde sculptures were shown in Stuttgart, Germany, and thirty works were sent on a two-year tour of the U.S. with the Smithsonian's Travelling Exhibits Department. Gallery Watatu and Paa-ya-Paa in Nairobi also launched major Makonde exhibitions in 1971.

Makonde artists did not until recently begin signing their works, but some carvers have been known by name from the beginning. The earliest of these is Samaki, the artist who introduced the *shetani* mode to the art movement. His works possess a unique inventiveness which sets them apart from the rest, and many Samaki sculptures are in the N.A.T. Gallery's permanent collection. One of the most commercially successful artists

is Pajuma Alale. He first attracted attention at the Tanzania Pavilion at the International Tourist Fair in Berlin. He went on to London to set up a carving workshop in the East African Airways office; his trip was sponsored by the Tanzania National Tourist Board and East African Airlines. Alale was one of those sent to Expo '70 and has worked with the Tanzania National Development Corporation in standardizing Makonde prices. In 1971 Kiasi Nikitiwie had a sell-out one-man show at Paa-ya-Paa Gallery in Nairobi. Makonde artists Edouard Tingatinga and January Linda exhibited the first Makonde paintings. Tingatinga was famous as a teacher of the art and his untimely death in 1973 was widely mourned.

Many Makonde artists make a living solely by carving. Groups of artists may be found living and working together outside Dar along Morogoro Road, and in Bokko Village. Some find they can earn from 200/= to 4000/= a month. But this is unusual. The artists have had difficulty in gaining much marketing control, but it is hoped that cooperatives and the N.A.T. will help alleviate this problem. The Tanzania Government is well aware of the cultural and economic potential of the Makonde art movement and has given the artists protection and publicity. In an unusual experiment Makonde artists were asked by the Ministry of Health to work at Muhimbili Hospital in Dar es Salaam carving figurines of patients with specific illnesses. The carvings were used in a travelling health programme to help educate rural Tanzanians in the appearance and danger of certain diseases. Makonde artists were also engaged to teach wood carving in Tanzanian prisons.

Much individual and collective talent has emerged within the Makonde art movement and much more is yet to be realised.