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## People Go To Mhiripiri Galleries For 'Serious' Sculptures

*By Berit Thorkelson*

Rex Mhiripiri stands in his new gallery in Edina, an offshoot of his long-standing Mhiripiri Gallery, now located in LaSalle Plaza in downtown Minneapolis.

He's leafing through a coffee table book while standing in front of a round, contemporary stone sculpture that is similar in style to the seven others surrounding it. He speaks the name of the sculptor, Henry Munyaradzi, then goes on to make his case as to the authenticity of the work and the prestige of the artist.

In the book, Munyaradzi's title is "world-renowned sculptor." A long list of gallery showings includes the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Rodin in Paris. Mhiripiri gently lays the book at the base of the sculpture, then retrieves some pictures he's taken in Zimbabwe. The man in the pictures is obviously Munyaradzi. The sculpture is obviously the same work sitting in front of me. The book Munyaradzi is holding is the same book now sitting on the floor. The woman in the picture, says Mhiripiri, is his wife.

"Do you know why my wife is in the picture?" he asks rhetorically. "To prove that we were there."

I don't doubt Mhiripiri. Photo after photo shows Munyaradzi and his work, then Munyaradzi's home and outdoor studio. They were taken during two of Mhiripiri's trips back to his native Zimbabwe – one while Munyaradzi was alive, and one after his death.

"I'm a good salesman," says Mhiripiri, "but you don't need me. You need to know what we're doing is real. You need to decide for yourself because this is a higher-end purchase. I show you the facts, then you have the proof to surround the credibility of your investment."

The two Mhiripiri galleries comprise the largest collection of Zimbabwe Shona Stone Sculpture in the world outside of Zimbabwe. The galleries feature at least nine “big-name” African sculptors and many more that have shown internationally and are developing a name for themselves. Richard Mteki, Mhiripiri points out, has work in Prince Charles’ art collection. Colleen Madamombe, he explains, is one of the few well-known women Shona Stone sculptors.

Zimbabwe Shona Stone Sculpture in itself is actually redundant, explains Mhiripiri, since “Shona Stone” and “Zimbabwe” go hand-in-hand.

“Something most people are surprised to hear is that {basically} all stone sculptures in Africa come from Zimbabwe,” he tells me. “For masks, the last place you’d go is Zimbabwe. They are not serious masks in Zimbabwe. For these, you’d go to Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Mali, Congo. But for serious stone sculptures, you go to Zimbabwe.”

And Mhiripiri is serious. He’s built a life in America painting and importing stone sculptures for his galleries. His first storefront opened in 1986 in Butler Square in Minneapolis. After eight years, he moved to the high-traffic area on 11th and Nicollet. When Target Corporation bought the building, he was forced into an early move. He signed a five-year lease for his spot on Sixth and Nicollet in 1996, but only two years he was forced to move once again, which led to rental of his newest downtown space in LaSalle Plaza.

“Many people regard being forced out as being a negative thing. I don’t,” he says. “I’m a man of faith, and I believe that this door closes in order to cause you to look at that door. A forced move, for me, is an opportunity for growth. It’s a time to look around and really find out what is going on.”

This forced movement coupled with determination mirrors the early part of Mhiripiri’s life when he was living in Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia. In 1958, Mhiripiri left Rhodesia and sought relief from his political exile in Kenya. He eventually came to the US in 1966 on a State Department scholarship for African refugees, which brought him to Minnesota. It was here that he met his wife, Julie. The two were married in Kenya in 1972 and lived there for the following

four years. The Mhiripiris have since traveled and lived around the world – from Australia to Italy and eventually back to Rhodesia after it became the independent state of Zimbabwe in 1980. Mhiripiri Gallery's clientele comes from at least as many countries as its owners have seen. The location on Nicollet Mall, as well as word-of-mouth and the Internet, have given the gallery a world market. Pieces from the gallery now reside in countries such as Japan, Venezuela, Monaco, and all around the United States.

Business continues to flow in since the move to LaSalle Plaza. At the opening of that store, the 23 tons of stone sculpture for the second store in Edina were on their way from Zimbabwe by boat. Mhiripiri's son, Mudzingwa, took over the downtown store and his parents now run the store in Edina. The two stores have roughly the same size showroom with the same makeup: a large collection of Zimbabwe Shona Stone sculptures are spotlighted on the floor and paintings and African masks decorate the white walls.

The official Grand Opening for the Edina store runs from Sept. 23 through Sept. 25. Mhiripiri already has plans in the works for yet a third gallery, featuring smaller, less expensive pieces, somewhere in the Twin Cities.

Mhiripiri credits his ongoing success when faced with challenge both in business and in life to his faith, but it's also reflected in the attitude he says he's held as far back as he can remember.

"I've never believed in failure," he says. "I've never believed that it was a real chance that I would fail at anything. I've always felt that if I was going to set my mind to something, then I was going to succeed. And I've been very fortunate."