

Minneapolis Star Tribune - September 8, 2002

Zimbabwean Art Carves Out A Niche

By Mary Abbe

Half animal and part human, the carvings of Bernard Matemera stand out even among the hundreds of African sculptures crowding the narrow aisles of Rex Mhiripiri's namesake gallery in Edina.

Disproportionately big heads with beaky noses and hooded eyes on Matemera's figures might suggest a freshly hatched chick, while hooved or round feet might hint at wild boar or mutant elephant. Standing erect on stubby legs, the improbable figures are undeniably human. Their bulging eyes and pouty lips are simplified but enormously expressive, conveying emotions from proud disdain to skepticism and tenderness.

Mhiripiri recently imported a dozen of Matemera's massive sculptures from Zimbabwe, the homeland of both artist and gallery owner. Standing up to 5 feet tall and sometimes weighing more than 700 pounds, the sculptures are immediately recognizable. Their sleek, undulating surfaces of black or mottled green serpentine stone invite touching while their unusual shapes suggest science-fiction mutations, shamanistic figures or even the work of 20th-century European artists such as Joan Miro.

"Bernard Matemera's sculpture was so original that even many in Zimbabwe thought it ugly and wouldn't have it," said Mhiripiri said. "They're beautiful in the most ugly way. He was not afraid to really go in his carvings. Some people's eyes will bulge from fright, but his will triple bulge. Others will eat till their bellies swell, and he shows that. His blind are really blind, his ugly really ugly."

That originality helped propel Matemera to international recognition before his death in March at 56. He was a leader among the first generation of Zimbabweans who began carving stone in the 1960s after the country shed its colonial name, Rhodesia, and declared itself independent. He showed regularly at the National Gallery in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, and as early as

1968 was included in a pivotal African art show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Over the years, his work has been featured in major galleries and museums throughout Africa, Australia, and Europe.

A Zimbabwean newspaper obituary noted that Matemera had grossed nearly \$3 million in just one month last year, but he continued to work at Tengenenge, a rustic outdoor sculpture park about 100 miles outside Harare. Despite international travels and acclaim, the obituary said, he had remained a modest, beloved figure “full of goodwill.”

In Edina, Matemera’s sculptures range in price from about \$20,000 to \$150,000.

Significant stone sculpture is a relatively new phenomenon in Zimbabwe, Mhiripiri said, even though stone carving was highly developed there at least a millennium ago. The word “Zimbabwe” means “the great house of stone,” referring to a now-ruined 1,000-year-old city built of handcrafted granite “bricks.” A few relief sculptures of birds were found in the ancient city, but scholars disagree about their influence on the country’s contemporary artists.

Zimbabwe has no tradition of making masks or wood carving that are common elsewhere in Africa, Mhiripiri said. Artful objects have always been made for home and religious use, and animal figurines and other tourist kitsch—locals call it “airport art” —are common. Missionaries and colonial administrators introduced European-style art education before World War II, but it wasn’t until the mid-1960s that a more indigenous style of art emerged in outdoor sculpture workshops.

Tengenenge, one of the most famous, was started by a white tobacco farmer, Tom Blomefield, whose business collapsed when Zimbabwean products were boycotted internationally after the country’s 1965 independence. Blomefield provided food, shelter and tools for his farm workers and encouraged them to take up sculpture. Matemera was one of the most successful.

Born in Zezuru, Zimbabwe, in 1946, Matemera had no formal artistic training but even as a child showed skill at carving and working clay. As his artistic fame grew, he became a “natural leader” at Tengenenge, acting as “paterfamilias, wise elder, peacemaker and mediator,” according to a history of the park.

To American eyes, Zimbabwean stone sculpture might seem similar to certain European modern art, especially the work of Henry Moore or Pablo Picasso. Both of them, however, were influenced by African art early in their careers. So the question of who influenced whom and what is “authentic” African art is complex.

“What makes me think these artists weren’t greatly influenced by the West is the fact they couldn’t read,” said Mhiripiri, who graduated from high school in Zimbabwe and was trained as a chemical analyst before emigrating to the United States in 1966.

While such education was available in the country, virtually none of the sculptors got it.

“If you said, ‘Do you know Picasso?’ they would have said ‘What is that?’”