

Modern Makonde Sculpture

The Renaissance Society Gallery, 1050 East 59th Street, at the University of Chicago, presents

Modern Makonde Sculpture

from the collection of ***Izaak and Pera Wirszup***

Opening October 9 through November 9, 1967

Members' preview Sunday, October 8 from 3—5

Lecture by J. Anthony Stout, October 17 at 8 p.m. in Classics 10 on Makonde sculpture, 1050 East 59th Street

Renaissance Society annual meeting October 23 at 8 p.m. in Classics 10

Gallery hours Monday through Friday 10—5, Saturday 1—5, 108 Goodspeed Hall, Chicago 60637

The works of man are myriad and ever astonishing. It scarcely seems possible that a new rich vein of creative woodcarving should spring from East Africa, stimulated by commercial enterprise, yet controlled aesthetically by a tribal heritage of independence and skilled craftsmanship. Yet here is just such a revelation, called to the attention of the Renaissance Society more than a year ago by Izaak and Pera Wirszup from whose remarkable private collection this second American exhibition of modern Makonde has been selected.

The Makonde are Bantu Africans, a distinct people, some of whom survived in northeastern Mozambique virtually untouched by outside powers until well into this century. While the Makonde in southern Tanzania fell victims to slave traders, their fellows in Mozambique continued their independent life, protected by distance from administrative centers, a hostile environment, their isolated and well-defended settlements, and their reputation for fierce aggression.

Now the Makonde, in common with other East African peoples and all of Africa, have experienced the confusion and upset of contemporary life. Many have moved to urban centers where they continue to live together, maintaining their identity. The limitations imposed on traditional Makonde artists, directing their production to serve the needs of tribal rites, have been removed for the younger sculptors. But while other talented and skilled African woodcarvers are engaged in making reproductions, mainly of the well-known West African work, the Makonde artists hold to elements of their tradition while elaborating inventions of their own, aided by a market provided by tourists and collectors who appreciate original sculpture. Although African woodcarvers, including some Makonde, have succumbed to mass production for export to a world market, these modern Makonde sculptors who have produced the pieces in this exhibition, all within twenty years, maintain a stubborn originality, rarely repeat themselves, and explore the fecund world of

imaginations infused with tribal memories.

As do other woodcarvers since World War II in deference to collectors' tastes and dealers' requirements, the Makonde work in hard and intractable ebony. Prized for its dark beauty, ebony has a durability not found in the soft woods preferred by ancient Makonde sculptors. The young artists' distinction lies in the freedom with which they invent new forms that translate vital aspects of their heritage into an original contemporary idiom. With a wealth of ancient lore to draw from, concerned largely with the forces personified that were needed to explain the many hazards and annoyances of life in forest and jungle but also with some of the humor and fantasy of happier moments, the modern Makonde sculptors have created a new vocabulary.

While it is tempting and would be easy to find in their work resemblances to contemporary western art, particularly in surrealist directions, it is a serious mistake to undertake interpretation in such alien terms. Just as the point of view and language of western religious thought, when applied to native African religions, can distort and falsify their meaning, so the theology of modern art can blind the eye effectively to the quality and character of Makonde sculpture, which deserves to be met on its own terms.

Likely to be discounted or disregarded on first acquaintance because it does not conform to expectations developed through experience with West African art, modern Makonde sculpture also lacks the support to understanding that could be provided by research and study of tribal customs and lore. Not enough knowledge has been assembled to distinguish the strands in the web of folklore, native religion, personal invention, and probable foreign influence that may enter into any one of these contemporary works.

Nevertheless, the integrity, unity of composition, and the vitality of the woodcarvings, by sculptors most of whom remain unidentified,

are clearly there to be seen, enjoyed, and respected. Certainly the carvers are remarkably free from conventions in handling wood, as they are wise in respecting the requirements of its grain and tensile strength and skilled in the use of their tools. Their astonishing and sometimes grotesque combinations of figures and forms are surely imaginative interpretations related to traditional lore and not fantasy alone, however much individuality the sculptor may introduce. Inert ebony is given life in their hands in forms expressing profound biological relations, the hierarchy of the family, fearsome combinations of human with animal shapes, especially the bird and the snake, and even the realms of magic and sorcery.

In the words of Izaak Wirszup who has lived with this sculpture that he loves, "The Makonde's is a humane art, expressing the dynamism and cyclic transformation of life, and giving sensitive interpretations which range over the whole scale of human emotions: from tragic, cruel, and frightening to gay and humorous."

It is to be hoped that modern Makonde sculptors will have the coveted freedom to develop their art with a minimum of economic and cultural interference and direction. East African governments are taking some much needed measures to preserve and encourage native arts and customs. Yet even the highly original and independent Makonde artists face the danger of having their best pieces reproduced and bowdlerized by dealers, to the detriment of artistic integrity and also to the sculptors' financial ruin and eventual discouragement. So real is this danger that it could put a stop to these young workers, which makes it all the more important to bring their art to attention through exhibitions such as this one.

The Renaissance Society acknowledges with gratitude the generosity of Izaak and Pera Wirszup who have made their collection available for this pioneer exhibition.

Harold Haydon



















