
MODERN SCULPTURE AND SCULPTORS IN EAST AFRICA

by

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It is possible, by a superficial appraisal of the increasing number of books which have been published since the beginning of the century on the Arts of Africa, to be left with the impression that Africa in the past was a rich treasure house of artistic production. A more careful scrutiny will reveal, however, that these masterpieces of the past were produced within certain geographical areas and that other parts of Africa were artistically barren, or nearly so.

Archeology may in the future somewhat modify this picture, but it is most likely that whatever is found of the ancient cultures in these barren areas will be of more interest to the archeologists than to the artist or art historian.

East Africa can make no claim to an artistic tradition of the past in any significant measure, and whatever of importance occurs in the field of the Fine Arts today does not rely upon, nor is it fortified by a sense of continuity in styles or forms that have their roots in past or surviving traditions. Therefore what can be seen of modern sculpture in East Africa is, in no sense, a Renaissance, but is rather a new birth, an upsurge of creative activity that belongs to this day and age.

We may expect to find influences from the Western World and elsewhere, both past and present, making their presence felt; and although the present pattern is fluid, everything produced is informed with an expressive energy and vitality that is recognizably African.

The pattern of life and progress in modern East Africa is inevitably geared to education, both academic and technical. The educated man is becoming the leader in every field and it is not surprising to find that whatever is new and growing in art has its origin in general in higher education. Modern sculpture has stemmed in the main from a generation of young Africans who have worked at the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda.

It is of signal importance to the Arts of Africa that there exists, within a University, a school devoted to the development and propagation of the Fine Arts when there are so many other pressing and diverse demands in modern Africa. The originator and first Head was Margaret Trowell, after whom the school was named, and much of the development of East African Art today is due to her pioneer work and inspired leadership. The artists who are mentioned in this article have all been associated with the School of Fine Art at Makerere.

Without doubt the most important sculptor in East Africa today is Gregory Maloba. Born in Kenya, at one time a student at Makerere, he is now Senior Lecturer in the School of Art. He has achieved a reputation far beyond the bounds of his own country. He works in wood, stone, terra-cotta, cement and bronze. Although he has worked impressively in association with architecture, his most important and chosen field is that of the portrait, and in this he is reacting to the influences of modern life. The interest and the individual, the specific and the personal is something new in African Art. The cinema, the novel and modern drama have helped to switch vision from the abstract to the specific. The human form in the hands of the African sculptor of the past achieved a tremendous impact by its impersonal, abstract or symbolic stylisation. Maloba, in the portrait form, despite the demands of mere 'likeness' sustains this impact, this existentialism. He does more than represent, he presents; based on actuality the image exists independently.

Three examples of his work in this field are illustrated. "Mukairi Wamala" a terra-cotta (Fig. 1); "Ham Mukasa" a bronze (Fig. 2); and "Shelley" a cement fondu (Fig. 3). Wamala is an attenuated figure whose sensitive, aged head supported on the fluted neck growing from the long rectangle of the torso, is echoed by the delicate, nervous hands at the base. It is an essay in stillness and repose. In contrast is Ham Mukasa—a squat and powerful form which pulsates restrained energy. The massive head with powerful brooding features is sunk in the broad bulwark of the shoulders. Shelley—a half length of a child—is tender, contemplative and still; a sensitive study of youth presented in a manner worthy of a goddess. Figure 4 is a recent cement panel in high relief designed for the new Bank of India building in Kampala. Not without a quiet humour it shows an African family storing their crop away in a granary, safe from the depredations of the mouse. It happily symbolises the need for economy and safekeeping.

A younger artist, Rosemary Karuga, though less prolific in her output, has produced two works of high emotional impact. "The Annunciation" (Fig. 5) in terra-cotta is a simple monumental form radiating an aura of expectancy and acceptance. "Burial" (Fig. 6) in bronze is an agitated rhythmic group, the forward leaning figures meshed together by triangular forms and the descending line of the corpse.

The animal form in whatever aspect of art in Africa has always been treated with understanding and invention; and although the technical approach and the style is more diverse in East Africa today this capacity, the ability to distill the essence of spirit of the creature, is still as vital. "The Frog" (Fig. 7) and "Fish and Cormorant" (Fig. 8) are by Brother Anthony, respectively in stone and cement. The former dilated with pride, a 'King Log', massive and chunky, is rich in textural contrasts whilst the latter is a graceful exercise in poise. Theophile Nshiku's "Wild Bull" (Fig. 9) in terra-cotta is a furious expressionist conception of animal energy, in nice contrast to the wary, snug compactness of George Kakooza's stone "Guinea Pig" (Fig. 10).

"Aspiration" in cement (Fig. 11) by Petson Lombe is a large monumental group designed as part of a new academic building at Makerere. Here form and content are an exciting unity. The parent figure crouched close to the earth strains his gaze upwards. From his loins two youthful figures spring with fingertips tense, outstretched to reach the heights. By the same artist "Death" (Fig. 12) in wood is a hollow cave of fear, an engulfing cavern whose skeletal arms clasp an agonised head. "Masai Warrior" (Fig. 13) also in wood, is a more academic exercise in close combination of elliptical forms.

Closer to the past in style, not regional in inheritance but due rather to romantic response or an intuitive desire to echo the psyche of a bygone age are Eli Kyeyune's "Musamba" in terra-cotta (Fig. 14), a Janus faced image and Juma Waziri's Ceremonial Pot (Fig. 15).

It augurs well for the future to record that the majority of these artists are teaching art in schools and institutions at various levels. Their example and inspiration will do much to ensure that this energetic birth of modern art in East Africa will have a continuity and be significant beyond the bounds of purely local interest.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 6.

Fig. 10.

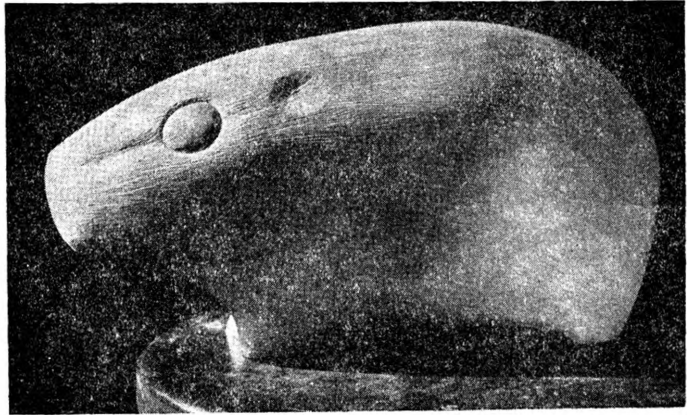


Fig. 9.

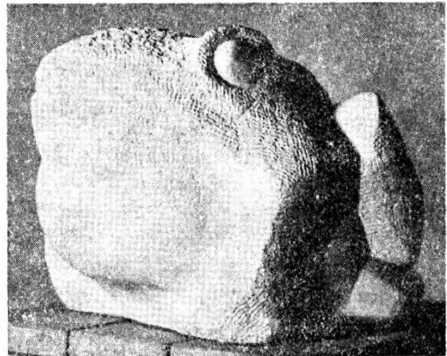


Fig. 7.

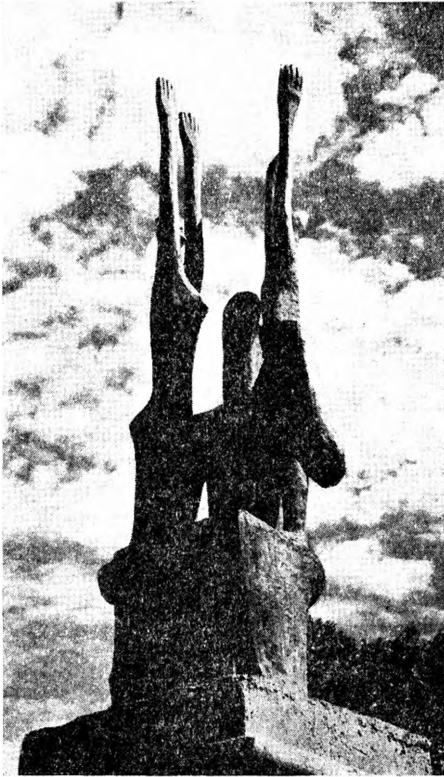


Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.

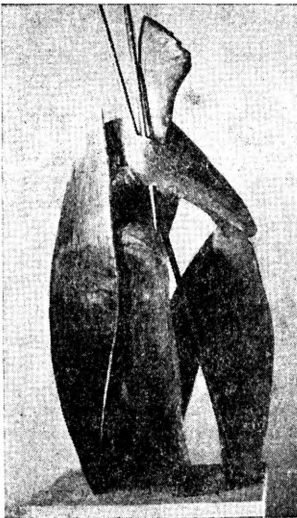


Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.