

Romancing the stone

Historically, a variety of primary materials are used in African sculpture and although wood was obviously the most prevalent and readily accessible – it was the African stone sculpting movement that gained momentum with art lovers and collectors since the early fifties and sixties, slowly making inroads onto the international art scene ever since.

African stone sculptures are often described as monumental as the figure or form is not separated from the stone from which it is carved – giving it a feel of heavy permanence.

Traditional or tribal African sculpture may typically be religious or spiritual in nature, dealing primarily with the human form, animal (real or mythical) and displays a creative spirit and skill exhibiting good balance, craftsmanship, attention to detail and finish.



The purposes for creating these stone carved sculptures vary from asking for rain, good harvests or bringing fertility, warding off disease and evil spirits or helping with social decisions and judgments, commemorating important events or making political statements. These sculptures can also demonstrate the unity between our two worlds, the physical and the spiritual. These incredible stone carvers hold firm to the belief that every stone and every thing has a life spirit. It is that 'life spirit' that influences what sculpture that stone will become.

Most African stone sculptures are known as Shona sculpture or Zimbabwe Shona sculpture because they are hand

carved by the Shona of Zimbabwe who have been hand sculpting stone into works of art for many many years. Even though the craft is ancient, the style has continually evolved and the carvings created today are even more beautiful and elegant and come in such a variety of shapes and sizes – one has difficulty in choosing a favourite.

The stone used is normally serpentine and is found in Zimbabwe with colours ranging from black and green to yellows, orange, grey, red and even purple. There are no factories for such art. Each piece is unique, both in the expression made by the sculptor's tools and in the natural patterns in the rock formed millions of years ago.



The Shona people are normally very community oriented and maintain a culture that does not believe in personal wealth or gain but only in what is best for the community. Therefore, the earnings that the stone carvers make from their art contribute to support everyone in their home village – not just the artist.

Ironically, most African sculptures were not created with the intention to be sold as desirable pieces of art, but were produced for a specific role which was generally to celebrate or honour an important occasion or ritual, and/or to represent religious ideals. Through fascination with the mysteries of Africa and then acquired by foreigners, these sculptures created their own marketplace in the Western art world and gained significant monetary value.

Should you be interested in romancing a stone or two – the work of various stone sculpture artists from Southern Africa have made their works available at the Garden Boutique in Johannesburg North and can be viewed by appointment. [dw](#)

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