

**Shona Sculpture** By F. Mor. Harare, The Author, 1987, 160 pp., 100 col. pl., Z\$26.00.

The third and most recent publication on the stone sculpture of Zimbabwe is the book *Shona Sculpture* by Fernando Mor, written while he was the Italian Ambassador to Zimbabwe.\* This local publication appeared simultaneously with the Italian original in Italy, and the author's intention is to introduce the sculpture movement to the foreign public, basing his work on 'notes, reflections and conversations on Shona sculpture' during his time in Zimbabwe.

Mor has attempted to summarize the phenomenon of what he terms the 'Shona sculpture movement', firstly by analysing the movement's historical and cultural relevance from an art-historical perspective, secondly by analysing the work itself in terms of aesthetics, and thirdly by examining the motivations behind the artists' drive to creativity.

The issue of defining the contemporary sculpture movement in terms of its relevance within the cultural and historical context of African art generally is contentious and has occupied critics since the beginnings of the movement in the early 1960s. Mor's factual knowledge of contemporary African art and the historical background to the arts of Zimbabwe in particular is insufficient, and he does not present the reader with any clearly-defined perspective which could facilitate a more perceptive response to the work. He claims Shona culture is interesting historically only from an 'anthropological and human' point of view (p. 13), and dismisses or ignores any aesthetic traditions which preceded the modern. The most innovative art movement will reflect what has gone before in the very process of focusing on new dimensions; in fact, Mor himself states in a later chapter 'all true form is metamorphosis, the reflection of the past and of becoming' (p. 61). However, he makes no reference to the precedents of the Zimbabwe Birds (found at Great Zimbabwe and other similar ruins), or to any other evidence of the traditional use of sculptural form, as may be found in media such as clay and wood.

Mor's historical summary also contains inaccuracies, including referring to the 'beautiful graffiti' on the walls of caves in the context of Shona culture (pp. 13, 17) although these are creations of the San people. He also makes the curious announcement, in referring to the students of the National Gallery's BAT Workshop, that he has 'never seen in their hands a book or illustrations of plastic arts' (p. 22). Here he erroneously uses the term 'Workshop School', a phrase used to describe the loose association of sculptors who centred their activities around the National Gallery during the 1960s and 1970s.

From a rather shaky attempt at a historical perspective, Mor examines the work in its cultural context. To what extent is it rooted in an 'ethnic' culture, and what has been the influence of the European model? He points out that the movement arose 'without any specific heritage', that it surpasses 'the ethnic element... the figure or mask that has often degenerated into mass produced craft which satisfies tourists' facile tastes for the exotic (p. 38.) He sums up his

\*The other two are J. Kuhn, *Myth and Magic: The Art of the Shona of Zimbabwe* (Cape Town, D. Nelson, 1978), and M. I. Arnold, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture* (Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1981); see the essay reviews 'Shona sculpture', *Zambezia* (1979), VII, 111-14, and 'Contrasting views of Shona Sculpture', *Zambezia* (1982), X, 49-57.

perspective by saying, 'It is African sculpture that nonetheless unconsciously expresses itself in modern terms, akin to the European sensibility' (p. 38.)

The problem that a contemporary art movement can flourish in the heart of Africa without obvious links to an ethnic tradition continues to perplex many Eurocentric critics and historians. During a recent discussion which took place in Paris following the opening of a major exhibition of Zimbabwean sculpture, museum directors, critics and historians were concerned almost solely with obtaining an explanation as to how the work was related to a 'tribal' origin. When an explanation could not be given in obvious terms — such as, perhaps, that the Shona worshipped stone images — the movement was dismissed as derivative of European traditions, although it was acknowledged that the work itself was extremely successful in aesthetic terms. An artist and sculptor showed greater understanding with the comment that 'there has been nothing new in art since the stone age' — in other words, the deeper currents of aesthetic creativity flow on irrespective of the superficial changes wrought by time and culture.

It has been something of a tradition for many European writers to fall back on Frank McEwen's considerable influence as first director of the National Gallery in attempting to explain the 'modernity' of Zimbabwean sculpture. Mor subscribes to this view: 'we owe to Frank McEwen . . . the perspicacity which recognised the plastic potential of some industrious artisans in a distant area of the Nyanga mountains . . . (p. 20). He goes on to state that

the clarifying and illuminating work of McEwen did not consist in the imposition of European influences or models, with the attendant risk of an inauspicious acculturation. Instead he offered to talented young artists the arduously reached conclusions of European aesthetics on the concept of Art: understood not as the representation of an hypothetical given exterior, but as a creative spiritual fact (p. 20).

The African artist does not need to be familiar with the paths of European art history in order to reach the same conclusion, for his perception of the nature of art is instinctive, as indeed is the perception of the creative artist from time immemorial. The process of intellectualizing the creative act was a part of the dawning of the 'modern' age in Europe, accompanied by the compartmentalization of life and thought into specific disciplines, and a separation of art from life. This led to a certain spiritual sterility in European art, resulting in the artist grasping after form and technique as ends in themselves.

By contrast, Zimbabwean sculpture is generally accepted as having an immense vitality of expression, the inspiration for which is drawn from the artists' inner reality, a reality which encompasses a rich panorama of beliefs concerning the mythical, the spiritual, and which are their cultural heritage. Mor acknowledges that the unique characteristics of the sculpture have been influenced by the artists' cultural orientation: 'it would have been a serious error to have sought to suffocate the ethnic culture which still survives and is at the origin of the inspiration and authenticity of the Shona sculptors'. However, Mor has no wish to delve into Shona symbolism in his quest to explain the inspiration of the work, as he states that the themes of Shona animistic symbology 'are irrelevant to our aesthetic vision and independent of the works' true artistic value' (p. 40).

The greatest strength of Mor's book lies in his descriptive prose of the aesthetic qualities of the work itself, and in describing the response to art. For those wishing to gain some understanding of the nature of sculpture as an art form, said by

Henry Moore to be one of the most difficult arts to understand, passages of Mor's descriptive, sometimes lyrical, prose can be illuminating, although the proliferation of words and ideas sometimes borders on the obtuse.

The book contains 100 photographs of works in Harare at the time of writing, which together with a biography of artists, gives the most up to date source of reference currently available.

*National Gallery of Zimbabwe*

GILLIAN J. HUIZENGA

**The Commonwealth Observer Group in Zimbabwe** By S. Chan, Gweru, Mambo Press, Occasional Paper Socio-Economic 18, 1985, 93 pp., Z\$4.50.

The first half of this booklet is a personal recollection by a participant while the second half is made up of his letters written at the time to a friend. As such it is a useful, lively adjunct to H. Wiseman and A. M. Taylor's, *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe: The Politics of Transition* (Oxford, Pergamon, 1981, reviewed *ante* (1983), XI, 73, 78). The author emphasizes the lucky improvisation that helped make the group and the elections of 1980 a success; the one politically significant detail is the Group's pressure on the Governor to moderate his increasingly anti-ZANU (PF) stance.

R.S.R.

**Local Government in Zimbabwe** By J. D. Jordan, Gweru, Mambo Press, Occasional Papers Socio-Economic 17, 1984, 92 pp., Z\$3.60.

This booklet is designed as an introduction to the functions of local government. At a time when the structures of local government are being rapidly changed, students will find it useful, and salutary, to be reminded of the basic facts of why local government is necessary, what it does and how. Local government has been a much neglected subject in this country and it is to be hoped that this booklet may help stimulate further academic work on the subject.

**John [R.] Bradburne of Mutemwa [1921-1979] Three Wishes Fulfilled** By J. T. Dove. Gweru, Mambo Press, 1985, 24 pp., Z\$1.04.

**Strange Vagabond of God: The Story of John Bradburne** By J. T. Dove. Swords, Eire, Ward River Press, 1983, 296 pp., no price indicated.

John Bradburne was a mystic, poet and musician, who joined the Third Order of St Francis and came from England to Zimbabwe in 1962. In 1969 he moved to the desolate Mutemwa Leprosy Camp where he lived in total simplicity and dedication. Unlike Arthur Shearly Cripps, Bradburne was a mystic who had no time for the world of politics and publication and devoted himself entirely to the lepers. He did not endear himself to the local people and it seems that they