

MUKHUBA, Nelson

Tshakhuma, Venda, 22 August 1925 - Tshakhuma, Venda, 15 February 1987

Artist

ANY FAMILY DETAILS? PARENTS? SCHOOLING? As a small boy Nelson Mukhuba learned how to carve porridge bowls and spoons and maize stampers. He attended school until Standard Six and was subsequently employed in various kinds of work, including stage carpentry and electricity, gardening and house painting. During the 1960s Mukhuba formed his own band called *Nelson and the Phiri Boys* and later formed a traditional dance troupe called *Mahlombe a Muthandabinyuka*. In his rural community Mukhuba practised as a traditional African doctor and he was also active as a carver of wooden *domba* figures, which are three dimensional, representational figures traditionally used in initiation schools. Mukhuba's sculpting for a Western market began in 1958. He subsequently exhibited his work in Venda and Johannesburg in the early 1980s. During this time three of his sculptures were reproduced on an issue of Venda postal stamps. But it was not until the *Tributaries* exhibition in February 1985, curated by Ricky Burnett, that Mukhuba's work drew significant critical acclaim. This exhibition, which has been cited as a turning point in South African art, assessed South African art in its entirety. For the first time an attempt was made at a pluralist definition of existing culture. The exhibition incorporated works of urban white and black, and rural traditional and rural transitional artists.

Mukhuba's sculptures, made for a Western market, are largely indistinguishable from those made for use in the *domba*. There is a concern for the mimetic representation of detail in the *domba* figures since initiates were supposed to believe that the figures were actual people. Perhaps

Mukhuba's sculptures were more readily accepted, indeed sought after, by the Western market *because* the observer is confronted with a sufficiently convincing semblance of nature. Communication is thus facilitated without the artist having to alter his style for the Western market, and it is perhaps here that one locates the power of his works: they are rooted in his spiritual, traditional belief system. They have not been significantly altered to accommodate western tastes. Both the figures made for use in the initiation schools and those made for sale have been executed primarily in Marula and Jacaranda woods and have been collected by art galleries and museums. Collections include: Africana Museum, Johannesburg; Durban Art Museum; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria; and the University of the Witwatersrand..

Mukhuba's presence in the transitional art 'movement', which today is acknowledged as having ushered in the changing approach to South African art history, is undeniable. The transition from rural to urban, and the subsequent shift in focus and purpose of production; the move into a capitalist world of dealers and galleries and the promotion and 'discovery' of rural artists, has undoubtedly been one of the most difficult aspects of change for transitional artists to bear, given the differing value systems and needs of two distinct communities.

Leaving the rural community to seek employment in the big cities demanded a great and difficult adaptation. Encountering harsh living conditions, poverty, exploitation and the loneliness that seemed to have been the lot of migrant labourers in an apartheid regime, and then returning home, altered by the city experience, was no doubt equally as difficult.

Undoubtedly there have been many different contributing factors in the premature, and tragic, deaths of so many black artists but the impact of apartheid and the inferior living conditions

inflicted on black people are surely a major contributing factor. Nelson Mukhuba committed suicide in February 1987.

His inclusion in the exhibition *The Neglected Tradition*, curated by Steven Sack, in 1989 affirms Mukhuba's place in the context of South African art history. His work serves to illuminate a very rich historical tradition of carving and his work also bears testimony to changing cultural attitudes in South Africa. Between 1980 and 1989 he participated in at least nine important exhibitions in South Africa.

Mukhuba was married. His wife is no longer living; it is unclear from the available literature how many children they had.

E. Dell, Transitional sculpture, *Ten years of collecting (1979-1989)*. University of Witwatersrand, catalogue, 1989; - A. Nettleton, *The traditional woodcarving of the Venda and Shona*, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984; - Venda art, *Ten years of collecting (1979-1989)*, University of the Witwatersrand, catalogue, 1989; - E. Rankin & E. Dell, *Images of wood*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, catalogue, 1989; - S. Sack, From country to city: the development of urban art, *Ten years of collecting (1979-1989)*, University of the Witwatersrand, catalogue 1989 (i); - S. Sack, *The neglected tradition*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, catalogue, 1989(ii); - S. Williamson, Resistance art in South Africa, Johannesburg, 1989.