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MICHAEL ZONDI - SCULPTOR

His Great Uncle, Bambata carved his nitch in the once turbulent history of Natal - now Michael Zondi, in a more peaceful era has, over the past 10 years carved his way to recognition as one of South Africa's best known and favourite artists. His works, mostly fashioned from the rare indigenous woods of Zululand, such as Mthombothi, Mnaka (Red Ivory) and Wild Olive, have for several years been highly praised and sought after by art collectors from the art centres of this country and overseas. Though fame is certainly not the spur in Mr. Zondi's philosophy (of which more will be said later), perhaps 1966 has been the most significant year in his career for two very valid reasons. This was the year that he gave up his position as Manager at the Appelsbosch Mission Hospital in order to establish his own studio workshop in the heart of Zululand, from where he draws his inspiration and finds the necessary tranquility to contemplate a theme and transpose it into a work of art. The second reason for 1966 being a milestone, although to Michael of lesser importance than the first, is that his carving "Girl with a pitcher" in Imbuia wood, from the collection of Dr. Kurt Strauss, was one of only 7 sculptures selected for exhibition at the famed Venice Bienale. Quite a step from a childhood whittling of wood, at what in those days was a Swedish Lutheran Mission outpost, to exhibiting in a city that houses some of the finest examples of another sculptor called Michael.

Born on the 10th March 1926 in the Msinga Reserve, that vast area of rolling hills and sudden escarpments that lie in the vicinity of the Tugela River, Michael Zondi must have gleaned and stored in his mind from early childhood a picture of the human struggle of all mankind, that were to become discernable in his carvings, whether in representational biblical characters, or in the more impressionistic works depicting the moods and emotions of his contemporaries. In all there is a universality which concerns the inalienable dignity of and respect for all human beings, albeit that the faces and figures that he portrays, are characteristic of his own people.

Michael, however, did not start his woodcarving until he was 25 years old. It is significant that he has never received any formal art training, but after leaving school was trained in woodworking by Mr. Magni at the Swedish Mission Trade School near Dundee and ran his own carpentry shop at Edendale for 5 years until 1949. He then returned to his old school in order to qualify as a woodwork instructor, after which he stayed on to join the teaching staff. It was at this time, and only after he had seen some of his own students at work that he was inspired to spend his leisure time in doing some carving of his own.

From this time onwards Mr. Zondi's art developed at a remarkable pace considering that out of necessity and partly from a strong sense of duty to those who had assisted with his education and given him the opportunity to become a qualified cabinet maker, he could only indulge in this 'hobby' in his spare time. Neither was there so much leisure for Michael Zondi during this period as he continued to widen his knowledge in the teaching field, by private study, and succeeded in gaining certificates in Building Construction and design, with the eventual aim of combining the purely technical with the artistic. This objective was to be put to the test, when Michael felt inevitably drawn to return once again to the Mission Field and was appointed Manager of Appelsbosch Swedish Mission Hospital. Here, with the encouragement of the then Superintendent, Dr. Wolfgang Bodenstein, he designed and constructed the new Chapel, which has been described as staggering in its simple beauty, (see picture). Above the altar, Michael erected a life size crucifix, which he carved from Mthombothi wood. Eminent art critics and experts in Church art

Consider that this representation
of Christ on The Cross
compares with

many in modern European churches, and that the depth of feeling he has expressed could only have been accomplished by a man with sincere religious beliefs and great technical skill.

The mastery which enables Mr. Zondi to so shape a preconceived theme, so that it conveys an easily understood message is commonplace in his work, and is again brilliantly illustrated in another of his best known works "Reunion". This carving is of an obviously European man greeting a man of Africa, each seeking forgiveness after the pointless struggle of years, and is symbolic of Michael's concern for the complexities of our times in South Africa, but one is left with the impression that the message is intended to penetrate further than this country's borders, to an infinite beyond and the coming together of all mankind after a confrontation that has brought nothing but misery. It seems appropriate therefore, that Michael Zondi thought fit to present "Reunion" to Dr. Bodenstein, who until recently was the Medical Superintendent of Appelsbosch Mission Hospital (see picture). The high regard and esteem each holds for the other is well known to their mutual friends in Natal.

Though, during this time Michael had gained a considerable reputation through his works being acquired by those who were fortunate enough to come into contact with him, he did not submit works for exhibition until as late as 1960, when he was awarded a bronze medal at the Republican Day African Arts Festival. Further successful joint exhibitions were arranged by the Curator of the Durban Art Gallery in 1961 and 1962, when this gallery purchased 'The Prophet', one of the two Zondi sculptures on permanent exhibition at the Gallery. After his success at the Art: South Africa: Today exhibition in 1963, a National Exhibition organised by the Natal Society of Arts, Michael Zondi's work became more widely known throughout South Africa and it was at a similar exhibition 2 years later, his "Woman in Ecstasy" in Mthombothi wood was one of only 11 pieces selected from over 60 entries in the sculpture section, for exhibition. This entry won him the Philip Frame Award and was purchased for the National Gallery in Cape Town.

Released from full time duties at Appelsbosch, Michael was able to complete a sufficient number of carvings to warrant a one man exhibition which took place at the Durban Art Gallery in November, 1965, of his new works, and the public was able to see at the same time the magnificent collection of Dr. Kurt Strauss and Dr. Bodenstein, both of whose interest and patronage had sustained Michael during the early period of his carving. It was for this exhibition opened by Councillor Mrs. Maytom at the Durban Art Gallery that Dr. Bodenstein made the following remarks in an introduction to the catalogue.

"Never having received any art training, Michael Zondi spontaneously developed his own very personal and sincere style. Though various people encouraged him, his only teacher was Life, of which he is an intensely committed observer and partaker. The motivating force of his creativity is singularly devoid of considerations of fame and fortune, but arises out of an innate urge to express and interpret human form and experience.

This exhibition was a fitting and deserving climax to Michael Zondi's decision to devote his whole time to the establishment of an Art Workshop in Zululand, and to try to give back something which he had gained typical of his philosophy in this regard is a quotation from a letter written to a friend in Durban at this particular juncture in his life, when he said -

"As you know, my work has been taking me from place to place, there has always been a motive behind. I am a pilgrim, a seeker seeking for a place of peace, a place where I can sow the seeds of love and watch them grow till the time of harvest comes."

the time of harvest comes. The
peace I seek is not that - 3 -

To Thorpe
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finding a cool shade and dozing off to sleep, but that peace found after hard work and having done something for others. I know you are quite familiar with these things for you have walked and are still walking the same path. Unless things go wrong, it does look like I am approaching the end of my journey. I have now started another building project in the Mahlabathini area. I think I can find a place where I may find my dream realised (i.e. that of starting an Art Workshop) where if possible I could seek and find local talent who could work together with me.

Though many people may think this to be a wrong place for such a project, but on the contrary I find this place and its surroundings to be most ideal. The landscape, the people, the animals and its historical background, they are all most inspiring to the painter, the sculptor, the poet and the musician. I had to write you about this because you once mentioned something similar and your opinion or advice is very much welcome".

Looking back on Mr. Zondi's career it could perhaps be said that Michael Zondi is "a Jack of all trades", but unlike the proverbial 'Jack', HE IS MASTER OF MANY.

J.C. Thorpe
African Art Centre

The present Exhibition of Sculpture by Michael Zondi, presented by the Durban Art Gallery from 26th August to 13th September 1965, comprises the following works:-

1. Shikila	43"	Indian Teak	R255
2. Adam and Eve	34"	Indian Teak	R290
3. Nomngqovu	22"	Mncaka (Red Ivory)	R180
4. Shibaza	15"	Mthombothi	R80
5. Samusi	17"	Mthombothi	R70
6. Prodigal Son	26"	Mthombothi	R120
7. Khwela	13"	Kiaat	R45
8. Anxiety	10"	Kiaat	R40
9. Young Man	16"	Mthombothi	R60
10. Singing Girl	13"	Mthombothi	R75
11. Queen of Sheba	36"	Mthombothi	R250
12. Njilo-njilo (Nonqawuza)	26"	Camphor	R160
13. Laughing Duck	32"	Mthombothi	R120

From Collection Wolfgang Bodenstein:

14. Rachel —	37"	Mncaka	
15. Reunion ✓	25"	Indian Teak	
16. Family II	7½"	Kiaat	
17. Love in Bloom	18" x 12"	Peruba	
18. David and Jonathan	20"	Teak	
19. Realisation —	24"	Mnquma (Wild Olive)	
20. Moses —	7½"	Mnquma	
21. Othello	7½"	Mnquma	
22. Memento Mori (sakubona kufa) —	7½"	Mthombothi	
23. Self Portrait —	18"	Mthombothi	
24. Mother and child —	12½"	Mthombothi	

From Collection Kurt Strauss:

25. The Publican —	20"	Stinkwood	
26. Shaka Zulu	14"	Mthombothi	
27. Girl with Pitcher	30"	Imbuia	
28. Bathing Woman	18"	Imbuia	
29. Twins	14"	Peruba	
30. Water Carrier	18"	Kiaat	
31. Mtwana	12"	Mthombothi	
32. Family III	14"	Indian Teak	
33. Madonna	21"	Mthombothi	
34. Herd-boys	18"	Mthombothi	

From Collection John Nixon:

35. Lot's Wife	30"	Umhlali	
36. Delantaba	34"	Mthombothi	
37. Dancing Girl	22"	Mthombothi	
38. The Family I	20"	Mthombothi	

From Collection Heinrich Schlaudraff:

39. Joy of Living	9"	Kiaat	
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From Collection Durban Art Gallery:

40. The Fountain		Mthombothi	
41. The Prophet		Mthombothi	

Acknowledgement: Photos by Hein Schlaudraff, by courtesy of Natal Photo and Enlarging Company, Gale Street, Durban.