

East Gate  
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#### Lucas Sithole

Lucas Sithole is the product of an urban environment. His father was a Zionist priest. He was born in 1931 in Kwa-Thema, Springs, in the Transvaal, where he still resides. He has seven children. He studied under Cecil Skotnes for a year, at the Polly Street Art Centre, after having attended St Louis Catholic School and the Middleburg Training College.

On first viewing Lucas Sithole's sculptures, particularly the figurative human pieces, the viewer is impressed by the universal humanity expressed, while at the same time it captures the pulse of Africa. Sithole succeeds in bringing together two worlds which reflect the common humanity characterizing all cultures. This synthesis, often very difficult to express in visual shape, he successfully captures in his sculptures.

His subjects are his fellow-men and wild creatures rendered in simplified semi-abstract and extraordinary shapes from which emanate a striking vitality. His work is extremely sensitive and the human figures, in particular, are markedly warm and sympathetic. His sculptures are strongly indigenous in form and con-

cept and in total harmony with both traditional Africa and acculturative Africa. Although an important analytical source, Sithole does not confine himself to traditional Africa, and his work also symbolises in important ways contemporary Africa. Sithole's art is based on human and social insight, an understanding of the dilemma of modern man which he depicts with tenderness and compassion. It is this contemporary dimension which makes his art indigenous and relevant to our time.

There is no doubt that Sithole primarily draws on mysticism for the creation of his human figures. These sculptures contain the penetrating significance and meaning of ritual in Africa, and are in fact ritualistic expressions and images drawn from the sacred aura which surrounds African ritual.

The viewer is constantly aware that it is the visual that counts and that Sithole actually wants one to see deeper and more than just the external form. This requires an introspective vision to observe that expression is given to qualities and feelings which are more than a mere total of the sum of constituent parts. In his sculpture Sithole achieves a configuration, an integration, which results in spiritual sensualism and satisfaction. This sensualism has always been an essential and integral part of African ritual for those who perform and participate in it. Another quality of African ritual which Sithole portrays successfully is its sacral aspect. His sculptures are of a religious nature, with man as the centrifugal force strongly in the fore-ground. African ritual as drama and performance is very much evident in his human figurative sculptures.

When seen collectively these figurative sculptures become a visual vocabulary of qualities and moods inherent in African ritual. It becomes a rhythm of the ages, a view in depth of primeval emotions and experiences, symbolically captured in the stance of a foot, the nod of a head, the sway of a body. Physical attitude used as a symbolic expression of emotion and feeling, characteristic of African ritual, forms an important part of Sithole's sculpture. Those values expressed in Sithole's art which are not obvious are thus visually revealed, namely, that the essence and true being of man is disclosed through his emotions. Love, sorrow, fear, hate, joy, wonder, all inherent ingredients and qualities of African ritual, thus assume universally human connotations.

Yet, these sculptures are not isolated; they are not merely spectres from the past, but are pulsating realities of today. Sithole achieves an integration and synthesis of the old and new, past and present, at the base of which undoubtedly lies similarity of human existence at all times and in all places. This results in a spiritual communication, a quality which Sithole successfully actualizes in his art.

Sithole's human figures have the simplicity and strength of early Gothic art. He creates, in fact, a type of 'African Gothic'. The vertical is strongly emphasized and is sympathetically executed. It evinces a noble serenity and transcendent quality, and contains a rhythm of simple outlines and shapes with a slim and strongly elongated upward spiral.

Sithole has a creative ability entirely personal and his own. Although Sithole's favourite materials for sculpture include hard woods, stone and liquid steel, his human figurative sculptures are mostly carved from wood. This medium and technique lend themselves ideally to the personal and intimate manner in which he

executes these sculptures, revealing also his concern with the creative process. His polishing of the surface is ample evidence of this. In the correct light the sculptures reflect a subtle and highly effective play of light and shadow, contributing to the mood of the pieces. The use of light and shadow defines and strengthens the sacral and mystic aura which surrounds the sculpture giving it strong iconographic connotations.

Sithole works in both the carving and modelling techniques. The success and beauty of his sculptures lie not solely in the spiritual qualities which they contain, but also in the technical proficiency with which they are executed. He has a good understanding of what is applicable in scale, composition and mass. His art consequently contains highly successful elements of form, rhythm, balance, etc., which are mutually well integrated. He always works within the canon of good sound aesthetics.

Sithole has held nine one-man exhibitions in South Africa, *inter alia* in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. He has also participated in a number of group exhibitions such as: 1960, *Artists of Fame and Promise Exhibition* in Johannesburg, where he won second prize; 1965, Picadilly Gallery, London; 1969, *Art South Africa Today*, Durban; 1974, *Art 5'74*, Basel, Germany. His work was included in the South African collection submitted for the 1968 *Venice Biennale*. His work is represented in leading private collections in South Africa, Canada, USA, England, Japan, etc. It is also included in numerous public collections, one of which is the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Sithole has also executed several public commissions. His work is today in great demand and he is now receiving well earned recognition.

Republic Festival of Art Exhibition  
Durban, 1981  
290. Untitled, wood 650(h)