

Art OF THE HUNT

BY TODD WILKINSON

Solid As A Rock

Mopho Gonde, once a diamond in the rough, today ranks among the finest wildlife art carvers in world.

Rising next to Mopho Gonde is another beauty born by months of intricate reduction: An elegant portrayal of two bull elephants. Positioned back to back, the massive tuskers seem to be charging off the base beneath them. Ears fanned wide and supplely waving, trunks curled and emitting trumpets, there is both action and an exquisite sense of design.

Everything about the composition flows forward in motion, pleasing to the eye and magnetic in its attraction. From across the room, this artwork titled “A Shot in the Air” glistens as if it were a polished classical bronze carrying a patina from centuries’ past. But it isn’t bronze, nor was it created by an Old World master.

The truth is Gonde has never ruminated much on how his astounding wildlife figures might stack up against sculptors of the Italian Renaissance or 19th century European animaliers. When it is mentioned to him that a well-regarded painter from South Africa considers Gonde “the Michelangelo of African big game carving,” he merely shrugs, his ego inflated not an iota.

“You know, I am honored that people like my work, but I am not in a position to judge if I have a place in art history,” he laughs in his deep baritone voice. “I don’t need to tell you that Michelangelo lived a long time ago and he wasn’t Ndebele!”

“Mopho Gonde is a creative genius,” says Tulsa, Oklahoma entrepreneur Burt Holmes, an avid art collector who owns four major Gondes. “His art is world class, and it’s the backstory of his life that makes him all the more extraordinary.”

Gonde is Ndebele, a legendary warrior tribe. He also is an enigma and unlike any other artist who comes to SCI working professionally in

three dimensions. His preferred medium isn’t metal or stone. Largely self-taught and incredibly insightful in his understanding of animal form and anatomy, he’s never attended studio classes at a prestigious fine art college in New York, London or Paris. Nor has he been a taxidermist as so many other great animal sculptors are.

Emanating from Gonde’s sculptures is also a value-added secret unknown to the casual observer and tied to the natural history of his native bushveld.

Technically speaking, Gonde is a wood carver but the rare material he uses—leadwood—is hard and heavy, more akin to rock. Leadwood can grow to be a millennium old, its tree rings tight and dense due to the harsh climate that steels it against the elements. Across the lowveld, elephant, giraffe and a range of other animals, including kudu, impala, grey duiker and red lechwe, eat leadwood leaves.

Pachyderms bend the trees and sometimes topple them to the ground, killing them. When that happens, the trunks don’t rot and decay. Often, they absorb minerals leaching out of the soil, leaving the wood in a petrified state.

Gonde began working in leadwood decades ago and prefers to incorporate the beautiful patterns and nuances of the preserved trees into his designs. Adhering to the direct-carving method, he doesn’t compose by crudely plying chisel and mallet. Instead, he employs tungsten carbide burrs to penetrate the hard surfaces inch by inch. He works slow and methodically to avoid making mistakes because, like marble, leadwood is an unforgiving medium.

“Mopho is highly selective about the quality of leadwood he chooses for his sculptures and distinctive bases. He’ll spend days in the bush searching for material that meets his standards,” says Ross Parker, founder of Native Visions Call of Africa Galleries that has been at SCI for three decades and has gallery spaces in both Naples and Jupiter, Florida. Parker is Gonde’s sole representative.

“For Mopho’s larger pieces, he’s had to find leadwood that has been sitting out there for a couple hundred years,” Parker says. “When you think about it, this was leadwood that grew and had been foraged by elephant, giraffe and other wildlife well before the first Europeans arrived in southern Africa.”

I had heard about the phenomenon named Gonde when he was a young emerging talent in the late 1990s. A few years ago, I visited Gonde in the town where he lived outside of Bulawayo in southern Zimbabwe. He has since relocated to Botswana because of ongoing social tensions in his homeland.

I watched him gently separate a massive leadwood trunk weighing more than a ton into two pieces. Eventually, they were transformed into a Cape buffalo (he is especially revered for his depictions of buffalo) and a rhino.

continued on page 136



The mule had not much pace (speed), but when an elephant gave chase, he surprised me in the way he could leg it. He also, if we approached too close to an unseen elephant, would give a slight sniff to show both his disapproval and at the same time put me on the alert.

So, back to the story. The Syce and gun bearer turned up and after we had finished arguing as to why the bearer fired my second gun and therefore left me with an empty gun and at the mercy of an enraged elephant, we started out again after the old elephant. By this time the natives, having had enough of this, had all departed for home. As they passed other villages they told everyone that I had been killed. The news travelled quickly and reached the Belgian Post at Wadelai, who sent out an Askari for confirmation. (I would be able to inform him that it was unfounded.)

We caught up with the elephant again, going very slowly. On winding us, he made a half-hearted attempt to charge but I emptied the contents of both rifles into him, Simba not letting me down this time. The tusks proved to be exceptionally large and weighed respectively 145 pounds and 137 pounds. Although I have shot many over the 100 pound mark (including one that dragged on the ground and made a trail like a bicycle wheel), those were the largest I have ever shot.

In conclusion, harking back to the nervousness of the native who accompanied me on this particular hunt, the reason turned out to be that the elephant had already caught and killed two natives who were endeavoring to drive him out of their maize fields.

Art of the Hunt

continued from page 44

For nearly a week, Gonde, Parker, his father, Dick and I explored nearby Matobo National Park. We hiked on foot through tall savanna grass taking photographs of a white rhino. We visited a cave filled with ancient animal petroglyphs. And we conversed with game guards armed with AK-47s. They were under strict orders of shoot to kill any suspected poachers.

Along the way, I grew to admire Gonde's knowledge of the behavior of wild bush animals and his remarkable prowess with making his subjects appear to come to life. For Gonde it's about a connection to nature that he's always had since he was a boy. He gets stir crazy, he says, basing himself in the city.

Born in 1968, Gonde grew up in the rural village of Macingwanga near Plumtree not far from the Botswana border. His given name emanates a powerful inference: "Mopho" is a word meaning "blood" in Zulu and "Gonde" refers to a tall tree species with golden leaves that grows prominently along the Zambezi River below Victoria Falls.

Gonde is deeply concerned about the scourge of poaching taking a toll on the animals he strives to celebrate. "The crazy people who are destroying Africa don't even think about the next generation," he says. "We are creating deserts without animals in them."

When we were in the Matobos Hills, Gonde began every day with a ritual of cleansing his body. In search of water, he picked his way down slope through a jumble of hoodoos—distinctive rock formations that have made the Matobos globally famous.

When we reached the bottom of the ravine, he knelt beside a spring creek where the fresh tracks of predators and prey were indented in the sand. "The rhinos come to drink here," he said. "So do eland and impala. And, as you can see from these tracks, so do leopard."

Authenticity is an aspect of Gonde's work that left a deep impression on collector Graham Hill. "I lived and worked in West Africa for several years. The African art I became acquainted with was of a very primitive variety," Hill explains. "Of course, some of it today is very valuable and you can view it in museums around the world. But I never saw anything being done that had the quality of Mopho's work. Most people who encounter it for the first time think it's bronze."

Hill praises Gonde's sophisticated approaches to portraying animal gestures, each one projecting a personality and individual spirit. Most impressive, he says, is that unlike sculptors who work in clay and bronze who can fix compositional imperfections before going to the foundry for casting, Gonde must get it right the first time.

"We have two of Mopho's Cape [buffalo] pieces, one small and another that's large. I wouldn't say that they rank just among his finest, but among the finest portrayals of the animal I've ever seen by anyone," Hill says.

The notion of Gondes being treated as heirlooms isn't abstract for the Holmes family. Businessman and art collector Jeff Holmes, the son of Burt, says they've had many father-son conversations about what makes great art. Jeff knows that one day the Gondes that have delighted his dad will reside in his home.

"He is able to suggest the effects of detail in his work that other artists could only imagine," Jeff Holmes says. "I've noticed an evolution of fluidity taking place in his work over the years. That said, the attention that he pays to small details that are amazing when you look closer and then come together when you step back."

When Gonde flew into Las Vegas for SCI this past winter from Botswana and made a guest appearance, he was stunned by the number of people—collectors and others familiar with his work—who showed up to meet him. Joining him were painters David Langmead and Jaco Van Schalkwyk who have accompanied Gonde into the bush on research gathering adventures for their artwork.

"I'm not a person who makes compliments lightly," says Langmead who drew the Michelangelo comparison. "Black or white, most other wildlife sculptors are just not able to convey the feeling and drama that Mopho brings to his subjects. What he does is extraordinary. If he had been born and raised in America he'd be much more widely known."

When I spoke with Burt Holmes, who has tracked the artist's career for two decades, I noted that Gonde's been regarded as a diamond in the rough. "Well, he is a diamond, but he's not in the rough any more," Mr. Holmes said. "He's being discovered for the talent he is."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Art of the Hunt columnist Todd Wilkinson has been writing about sporting art for more than a quarter century. He is author of "Last Stand: Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet."

Buy Hunting Books Directly
From The SCI Website

Visit
www.shopsci.org
and select
Safari Press Books or
Trophy Room Books.

More than 30 of the
best hunting books
on the market
are available there.