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EARTH|WORLD



THE SPIRIT OF ROCK

Godfrey Zonde,
Zimbabwe's rising star of stone carving,
delights fine art collectors at Call of Africa's Native Visions.

By Todd Wilkinson

For years, millions of people making their way between concourses at Atlanta-Hartsfield International Airport were left stunned on the walkway by a line of polished, abstracted and thoroughly-engaging rock carvings.

So striking, so wonderfully unexpected were they to viewers, the works often caused harried global travelers to stop in their tracks, gazing at the joyful representations of animals and human figures.

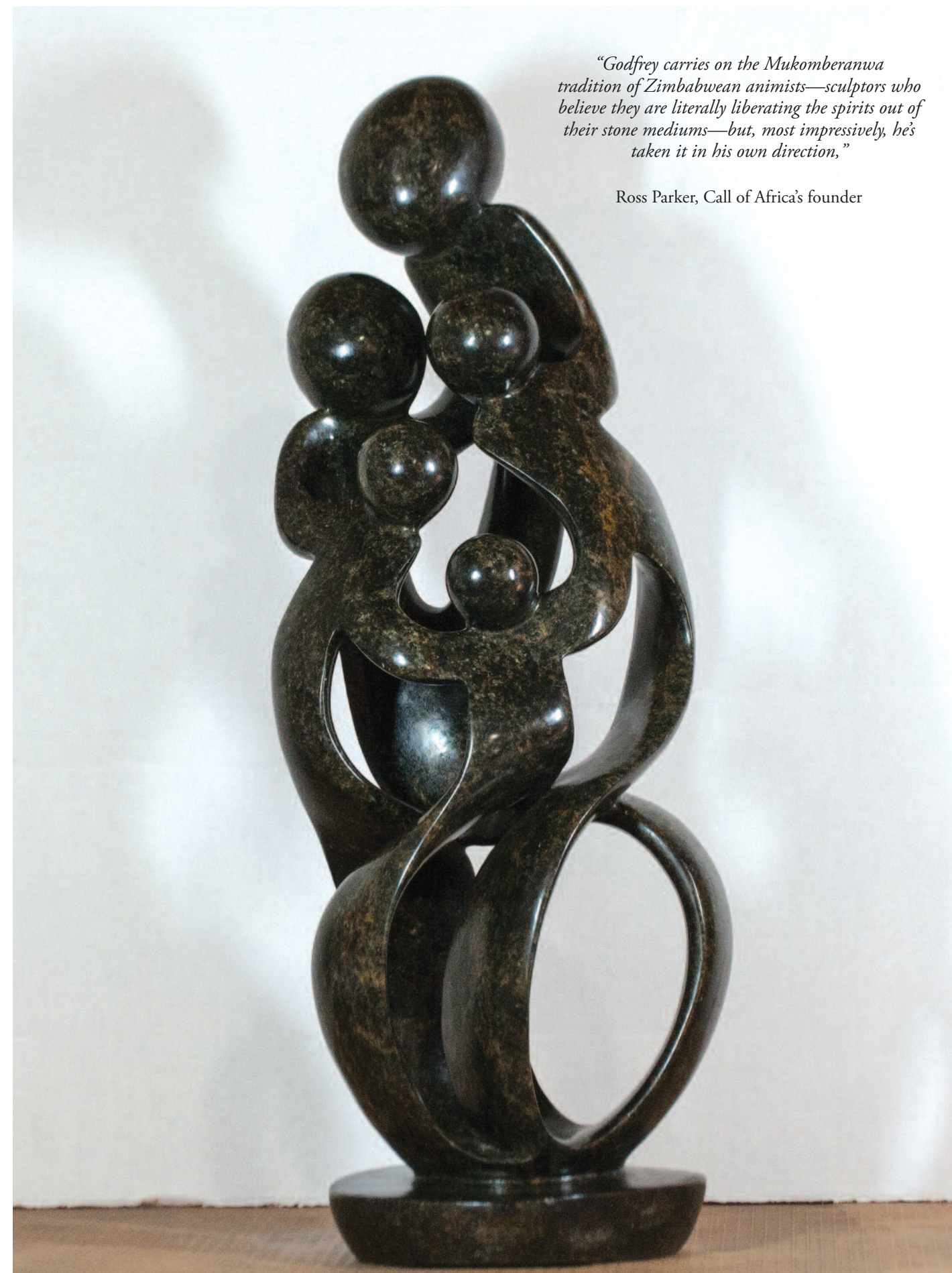
The animist sculptures, created by the late Nicholas Mukomberanwa of Zimbabwe and the school of artisans he founded, were part of a world-class collection, other pieces of which reside in the most prominent contemporary fine art museums from San Francisco to Paris.

Above: *Stork, Original, Springstone*
33x5x4 in.

Opposite page: *Family of five, Original, Serpentine*
28x10x9 in.

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Among the stylistic descendants of the Mukomberanwa school is Godfrey Zonde who today is counted among the rising stars of indigenous artisans represented by Call of Africa's Native Visions Galleries in Naples and Jupiter, Florida.

Born near the capital city of Harare in 1970, Zonde hails from Mashonaland province, a region noted for its colorful msasa forests and once was home to wild herds of elephant, rhinos and predators such as lions, leopards and cheetah.

One of its other hallmarks are the stone quarries known for producing distinctive rocks celebrated for its colors and geologic striations such as verdite, corundum, serpentine, opal and springstone.

The accessibility to these extraordinary raw materials, along with mystical spiritual beliefs and a carving culture that has evolved over centuries, has given rise to the reputation of the Shonas. During the 20th century, curators at major museums recognized them as international treasures.

"Godfrey carries on the Mukomberanwa tradition of Zimbabwean animists—sculptors who believe they are literally liberating the spirits out of their stone mediums—but, most impressively, he's taken it in his own direction," says Call of Africa's founder Ross Parker.

Now in its 30th year of operation, Call of Africa has been a leading gallery in America specializing in artwork by indigenous African artists as well as wildlife and landscape paintings inspired by the wildest remaining corners of the planet.

Before emigrating to the US in the 1980s, Parker himself was born and raised in Zimbabwe. He counts Zonde among his most prized discoveries.

"For decades I've make several trips to Africa every year trying to find artists who are making extraordinary work, hoping to bring them to the attention of American collectors," Parker says.

"Godfrey has been an artist who, ever since I started representing his work 10 years ago, has proven up on the promise he demonstrated early on. Nicholas Mukomberanwa, whom I knew, would be proud to count him as one of his stylistic heirs."

Mother & child playing, Original, Springstone
26x9x7 in.

Call of Africa's Native Visions specializes in giving emerging artists, who otherwise might never be known, an opportunity to meet collectors in North America.

"I was attracted to Godfrey's work. He was an artist schooled in the genre of Realism who moved on to doing contemporary work at the highest level," Parker says. "I was really moved by the fluidity of his new works and his careful selection of stone to compliment the works.

Shona sculpture has been described as being kindred to the western movements of abstract expressionism and cubism, though it predates them.

"There is magic in all living things, in the things we see and the unseen," Zonde says. "Their spirits never really go away. We believe that they come to reside in objects that are close to us."

Zonde apprenticed under the tutelage of celebrated Zimbabwe figurative carver James Tandi (another acclaimed artist represented by Call of Africa). His sleek and curvilinear designs, most often flowing out of elegant black and green serpentine propelled Zonde into the spotlight.

Every single one of the stones is hand-picked based upon a particular story that he wishes to explore. "When I choose stones from the mine they come out in different shapes," Zonde said in a recent interview. "I have basic concepts in mind but the stones themselves inspire new ideas and the unique patterns innate in the stone are what determine the direction I want to go."

Besides the shapes and carefully-designed motifs, his desire is to accentuate the personality of the rock which can be more than a billion years old.

Demand for Zonde's work has been growing, Parker says. While his creation of new pieces has been limited somewhat, owed to economic and social strife in Zimbabwe, Call of Africa has been able to exhibit about a dozen new works each year. He is planning to feature Zonde in a special one-man show in 2017, provided he can get a renewed visa. In previous years, Zonde has attracted packed crowds to his receptions in Florida.

Waterspirit, Original, Springstone
21x8x8 in.

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Godfrey Zonde





years and is a contributor to National Geographic and numerous other magazines. He is author of the new award-winning book, “Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek” about famous Yellowstone grizzly bear mother 399—mangelsen.com/grizzly—featuring 150 stunning bear photographs by noted American nature photographer Thomas D. Mangelsen.

Left: Spirit of two, Original, Springstone
26x5x9 in.

Below: Eye of the beholder, Green Serpentine
32x8x6 in.



“Bringing these African artists to the US to meet clients is always a special event for art collectors,” Parker says. “Many collectors have watched their purchases soar in value after an emerging artist starts to gain recognition and knowing that what they make is truly one of a kind.”

Zonde is scheduled to make appearances before Safari Cub events in Dallas, Houston and Las Vegas early in 2017 before major “meet-the-artist” shows at Call of Africa Native Visions in Naples and Jupiter.

“It is a pleasure for me that I can express my love for wildlife and the tribal cultures of Africa through art but I have more satisfaction being able to share it with people in America who are as concerned about the survival of our famous animals,” Zonde says. “Part of the reason I make art is to remind my own children that wildlife is important. When people own one of my sculptures, I hope it reminds them why it matters.”

Todd Wilkinson has been writing about the environment and art for 30