

HUNTER'S ★ HORN



MOPHO GONDE

Houston Safari Club's
Artist of the Year

ELEVATES
WILDLIFE
CARVING
TO A LEVEL
WORTHY
OF EUROPEAN
MASTERS

BY TODD WILKINSON





Counter Attack, Leadwood, 2011
27 x 46 x 24 inches

A

t his studio in Botswana, a day's drive across the border from his traditional homeland in Zimbabwe, Mopho Gonde is locked in a zone of intense concentration as he carefully summons a bull elephant out of a massive, almost granite-hard trunk of a petrified tree. He sees the tusker clearly, in his mind; his job, he says, is to help the animal emerge for the rest of the world to behold.

Beside Gonde is an arsenal of tools—classic chisels of the kinds that could've easily been used by 16th century master carvers plying Carrara marble in Florence, but Gonde also takes advantage of the gifts of modernity: electric drill bits with diamond beads capable of making a pachyderm ear appear as supple as a waving piece of silk.

With muscled forearms and calloused hands pressing his points deeper into the slab of ancient leadwood, Gonde, in four weeks' time, will be sending this composition thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean to an eager collector in Texas.

When asked what he thinks of being labeled “the Michelangelo of wildlife carvers in Southern Africa,” Gonde halts his focus only briefly, allowing a wry smile to cross his face as he considers the accolade and then returns to his subject. Thinking about the question, he turns and answers, “For me, Michelangelo was the greatest sculptor who ever lived. I would have liked to know him. I would have liked to see him in his world. And I think he might have enjoyed seeing wild Africa.”

Gonde, the 2017 Houston Safari Club Artist of the Year, is a testament to the convergence of both raw innate talent and a classical eye. He was “discovered” by art deal Ross Parker of Call of Africa's Native Visions Galleries nearly two decades ago.

“I am Rhodesian-Zimbabwean born and raised,” Parker says, “and I know how some outsiders condescendingly regard the native carvers of Africa. Because those who go on safari may have encountered soapstone trinkets at a roadside stand in Harare or Bulawayo, they think all of the art being produced in the region is crafty folk art. But, like the Mashona animists whose stone carvings are represented in the most prestigious museums in the world, the top native wildlife artists of Africa similarly execute at a superior level.”

Thinking about it for a moment longer, Parker adds, “Here's the thing: I have profound respect for North American sculptors who are creating wildlife, but most of them couldn't do what Mopho Gonde does. He has rare God-given talent, the kind that can't be replicated simply because one goes to art school.”

A few years ago, I joined Gonde and Parker on a research trip to Motobo National Park located near the border between

Zimbabwe and South Africa. On foot, we encountered black rhinos, Cape Buffalo, elephant, hippopotamus, and zebra. Later, we visited a wildlife rehab facility that offered temporary shelter to rhinos, leopards and dozens of lions injured or left orphaned by poachers.

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Gonde is Ndebele, a legendary warrior tribe. He also is an enigma and unlike any other artist, working professionally in three dimensions. His preferred medium isn't



Sable Sojourn,
Leadwood,
18½ x 20 x 11
inches



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. Like teak, leadwood is extremely hard and when polished turns a rich reddish color, giving it a wonderful earthy look. Mopho's animal sculptures are painstakingly created by hand and capture the very essence of each animal in exacting detail. Because of the degree of workmanship that goes into creating each piece, we only receive between 17 and 20 pieces a year. This puts Mopho's work in demand as serious wildlife art collectors recognize his great talent.

"You can go into almost any gallery in the world and see artwork that can be duplicated by other artists. With Gonde, no one else on the entire planet can replicate what he does because of the degree of difficulty," Parker says "Not only are his carvings one of a kind but so too are his bases which he hand-harvests in the bush. The bases alone are works of art and can take him weeks to complete."

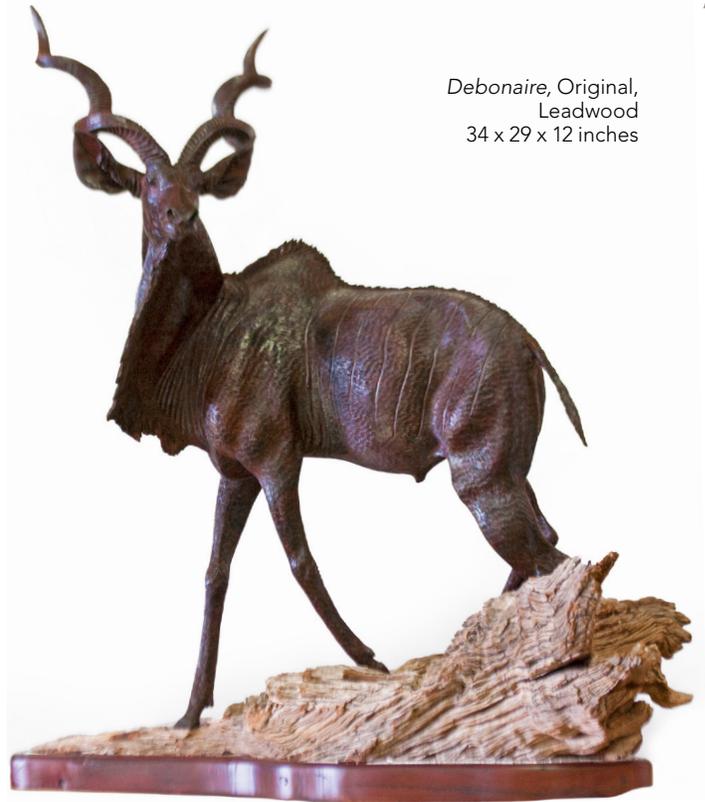
Adhering to the direct carving method, he doesn't compose by crudely plying chisel and mallet. Instead, he employs tungsten carbide burrs to penetrate the hard surfaces inch by inch. He works slow and methodically to avoid making mistakes because, like marble, leadwood is an unforgiving medium.

"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," explains Parker who is Gonde's sole representative with galleries in the Florida art towns of Naples and Jupiter.

"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 an elephant, giraffe, and other wildlife well before the first Europeans arrived in southern Africa."

I heard about the phenomenon named Gonde when he was a young emerging talent in the late 1990s. Later, 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



*Debonaire, Original,
Leadwood
34 x 29 x 12 inches*

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Grey Ghost, Leadwood



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were transformed into a Cape buffalo (he is especially revered for his depictions of buffalo) and a rhino.

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 grow 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 with animals in them.”

When we were in the Matopos Hills, Gonde began every day with a ritual of cleansing his body. In search of water, he picked his way downslope through a jumble of hoodoos—distinctive rock formations that have made the hills 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 Capes [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 Gonde pieces 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.

Under Foot, Original,
2013, Leadwood,
33 x 58 x 27 inches





“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 is amazing when you look closer and then come together when you step back.”

When Gonde visited the USA a few years ago, 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 is regarded as a diamond in the rough. “Well, he is a diamond, but he’s not in the rough anymore,” Mr. Holmes said. “He’s being discovered for the talent he is.” ★

Southern Sable,
Leadwood



Thank you Ewert Vorster and everyone at

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