

MAKONDE ART

AFRICAN GENESIS IN EBONY

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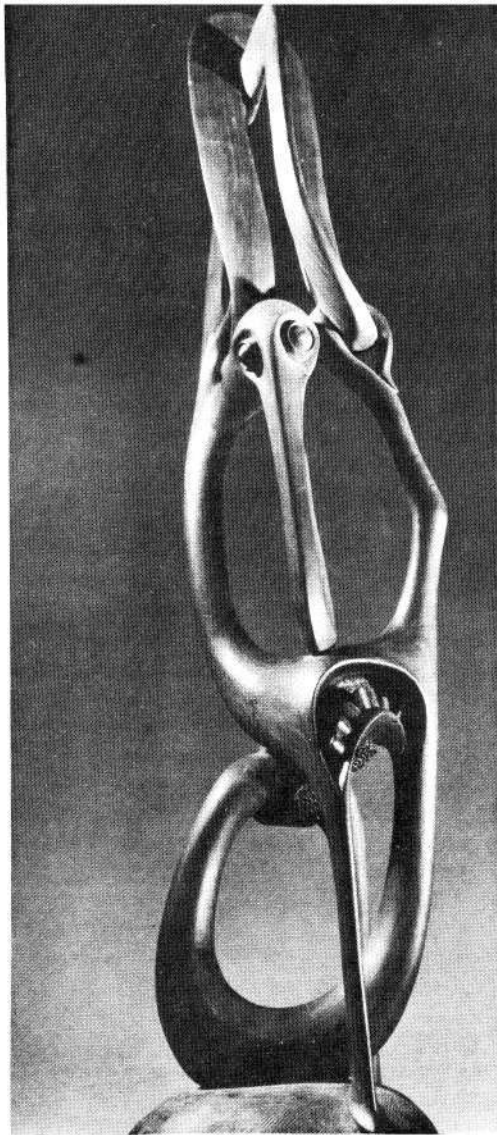
All photographs are the work of Gerard Dufresne and appeared in the UNESCO Courier.

The Makonde, a Bantu people of East Africa, live on a 5 000 sq. km plateau astride the frontier between Tanzania to the north and Mozambique to the south and bisected by the wide valley of the Ruvuma River. Colonial partition in Africa brought the Makonde under the rule of different European powers. In 1964, with the creation of the Republic of Tanzania, the Makonde to the north of the Ruvuma became free citizens of the new state. Those still living in Mozambique remained subject to Portuguese control. Makonde resistance to colonial rule began in 1960 but was brutally suppressed. In the armed conflict that followed, the Makonde gave many freedom fighters to the war waged against the Portuguese by the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). At the same time thousands were forced into exile in Tanzania where two-thirds of the 500 000 Makonde people now live. On its isolated plateau, the ancient Makonde culture has brought

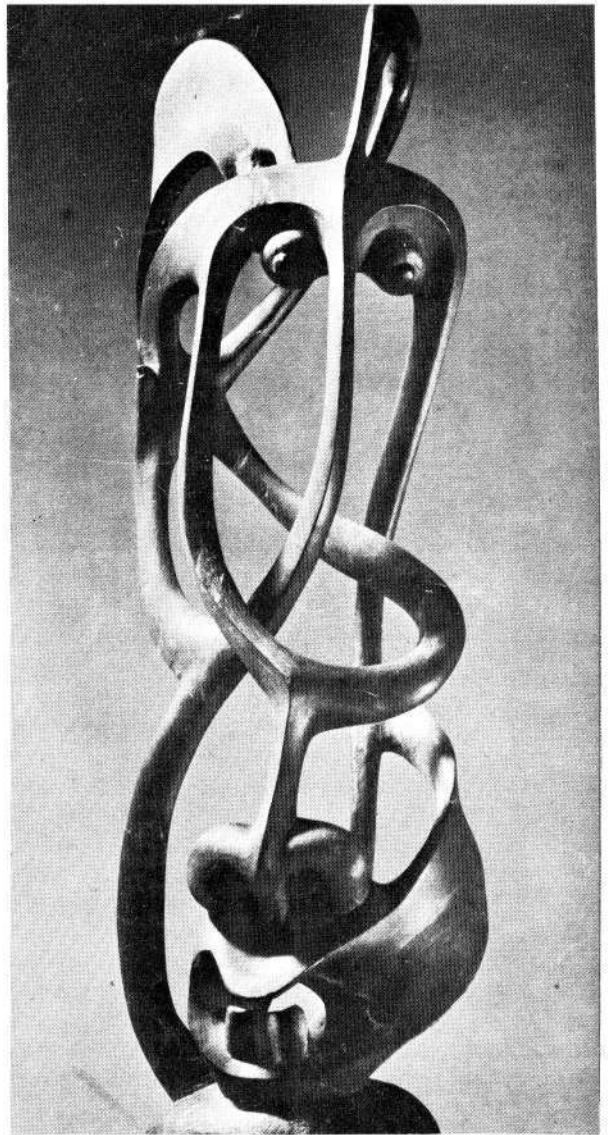
forth a remarkable flowering of sculptured art. A closely knit, traditional farming people, the Makonde have developed their woodcarving skills over many centuries. For them wood is a material imbued with force and sacred meaning, and one of their legends tells how their first father carved with his hands the wood out of which the first mother came to life. Today most of their sculpture is in the ebony that abounds in East Africa, a noble wood but difficult to carve because of its extreme hardness. Using the natural form of branch or root, the Makonde sculptor can conjure forth realistic everyday images or symbols of rare abstraction. Modern Makonde art is a unique achievement as much for its rich variety of styles as for the abundance of works. During the past 15 years it has known an even richer flowering—that of a traditional art delving into its past while realistically adapting itself to modern conditions. We present a few examples of today's Makonde sculpture in wood. □



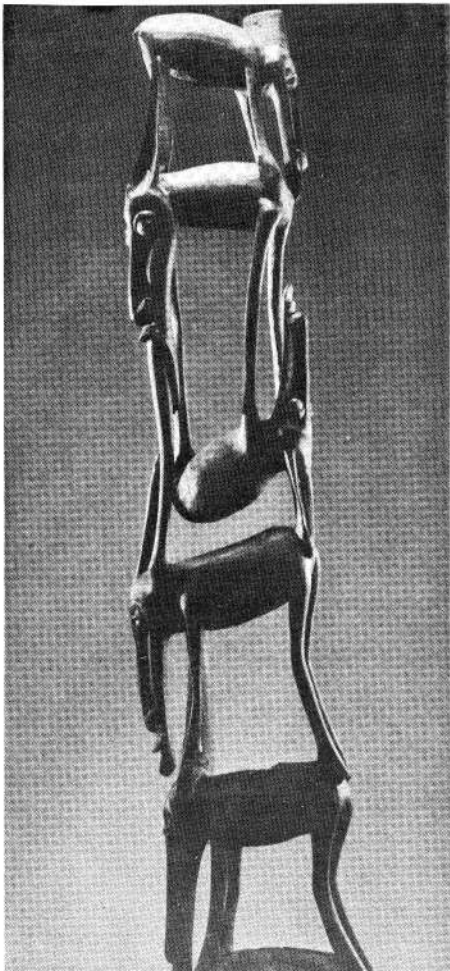
From the root of an ebony tree, the artist has depicted an antelope and a snake (the snake in Makonde mythology symbolically links the worlds of the living and the dead).



1.



2.



3.



4.

1. *Woman, symbol of fertility.*
2. *Stylized ebony head.*
3. *A herd of antelopes (elongated shapes of many Makonde carvings are determined by the sculptor's choice of wood).*
4. *The Cry, a recent carving by a Makonde sculptor from Mozambique.*