

In July 2011 the Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation invited sculptor Michael Cooper and myself to visit Uganda and spend three weeks working alongside local stonecarvers. Ruwenzori's directors Rungwe Kingdon and Claude Koenig had visited the Karamoja region in the far east of the country the previous year to find out whether the only indigenous sculpture tradition in Uganda still existed. In their possession were a small number of beautifully conceived little head and animal stonecarvings from the 1960s. Over the succeeding fifty years however, Uganda had experienced a general breakdown of traditional practices, not least as a result of many years of war. It was uncertain whether anyone was still making sculpture in the old way. Travelling through Karamoja and making enquiries along the way, Rungwe and Claude identified the Tepeth people, gathered around Moroto mountain, as the source of the carvings they owned.

RSF appeared to have arrived in the nick of time. In Moroto they were introduced by the mayor to an old man who disappeared into his house in a slum on the outskirts of town to return a minute later with a cloth bag containing several stone and wood carvings. As far as anyone could tell, this man was one of only two who still made sculpture. The long tradition of Karamojong carving had been reduced to its last whisper.

Flying into the airstrip at Moroto one year later, we drove through town and straight up to the campsite set up for us by RSF. Certainly initial impressions did not suggest that the local Karamojong were prospering and it was hard to believe that any aspect of their culture remained much of a source of pride. Daily survival in Moroto and the countryside around it looked hard. There was a small amount of goldmining but this involved a desperately perilous form of employment for local men, tunnelling underground through narrow unpropped passages for pitifully meagre returns. The work required continuous supplies of water. As we bumped along the dusty road toward camp we could see lines of barefoot women and girls threading their way up winding tracks toward the mines, bearing great jerrycans of water on their heads and as often as not upon their backs, the most recent of their children.

We were to be joined the next day by two old local carvers and a young, less experienced man.. An awning had been erected in camp and a sturdy workbench built but first of all we had to find suitable pieces of stone to carve. Half a mile down the road piles of white marble spilled from hillside workings for collection by local traders. Testing the material with hammer and chisel suggested that it was reliable stone but that it would be hard going to

carve it. Even tougher were some completely intractable pieces of grey igneous rock – picking at it with hammer and chisel we felt like mosquitos jabbing at a rhino. One reason why the tradition of stonecarving was limited began to be apparent; good workable stone was in short supply. More friendly however were the russet-pink limestone boulders we were led to higher up the hillside. Lifting them from the ground involved a tentative inspection of their undersides which as often as not sheltered some rather cross-looking scorpions but soon we had carried a good pile of these stones down the mountain and were attacking them with hammer and chisel. And getting nowhere. After hours of work some jagged crack would appear in the stone so that further progress could only be made with extreme caution. It was soon obvious that these rough boulders would defy any attempt to express subtle sculptural form.

It took the Karamojong carvers to sort us out. Quiet, charming and serious of disposition, they knew from long experience which of the smaller pink rocks would yield reliable results. They showed dubious interest in our hammers and chisels (rightly so as the blows delivered by our tools were often more than the frangible stone could bear), relying instead on the paring action of their pangas or the gentler abrasions of the rifflers and rasps we'd brought with us. Where we were happy working at table height, a practice copied by Marco the younger man, the two older carvers, Henam and Loriko, preferred to squat on their haunches holding a stone on the ground with one hand and chopping at it with the panga in the other. Small stones tend to run away from a carver who is pursuing them with a hammer and chisel but the panga as a one-handed tool provided an obvious solution as it left one hand free to prevent this happening.

Sometimes Henam and Loriko would sit on the ground and hold the stone between their sandalled feet while belabouring it with the panga (at considerable peril to their toes). The forms they created proved beyond doubt their awareness of the Tepeth carving tradition they had inherited. Small simplified carvings of human heads and numerous birds, pigs, snakes, hogs, crocodiles and monkeys began to appear at hourly intervals. Each piece contained some delightful sculptural shorthand, a latticework of crossed lines to indicate a shell, a cow with horns joined in a loop or a bull with stumps for legs (but no less clearly a bull for all that). The sculptures were charming, decorative, robust, simple and utterly free of self-conscious mannerisms. In the inheritance of their tradition they were producing forms that were exactly suited to the tricky material to hand. Now and then, driven

to distraction by yet another piece of stone that had given way under my hands I would pick up from the pile on the ground what appeared to be a more promising boulder, only to see Henam wagging his finger at me to indicate that once again I was making the wrong choice. Michael was progressing a lot more quickly, had stopped cracking his stones and was beginning to roll out the first of a beautiful menagerie of animals and birds. Andre Beavis, who had come out from Pangolin Editions (RSF's parent foundry in England) to assist us and like some 21<sup>st</sup> century titan had carried the largest boulders into the workshop, was executing the first stone sculptures he'd ever made. Rungwe himself carved a delicate little pangolin in the pink stone. I myself had only managed to squeeze out a couple of cracked little heads and a bewildered-looking fish. But our workshop was humming with activity. At regular intervals we would all stop to applaud as a new piece joined the growing ranks of finished carvings laid out on the grass.

By the end of five days we had completed an impressive collection of carvings. The workshop concluded with an appeal from Rungwe to the local mayor to help make provision for the carvers and to foster their trade. RSF donated seed-funding to them and bought from them a number of sculptures for the RSF collection. In a poignant moment, Henam thanked Rungwe for reminding them of the value of their Karamoja culture. RSF has pledged to return to give further encouragement and to check on progress.

Marco, the young carver, had advanced by leaps and bounds in the short period of the workshop. His final carving of a coiled snake was a delight. He had told us a bit of his story. His father had been murdered in a cattle raid and his uncle had also died a decade beforehand. On his deathbed the uncle, a sculptor himself, had beseeched Marco not to give up on his carving. Marco had loved our workshop and yet we feared that these were slight shoulders on which to rest the future of a tradition. Each of the carvers had nonetheless proved resourceful. RSF had reminded them, crucially, of the possible financial benefits of their talents. Among a people afflicted by such poverty of opportunity, this could be seen as a stone built into the wall of their pride and self-respect.

The landscape around Kyemihoko where RSF has built its bronze foundry in the far west of Uganda is quite different to that of Moroto. Arid scrub gives way to green grassland, dry air to a more humid heat. Arriving there after a week in Karomoja is like coming from a version of the wild west to a better-known vision of Africa. Kyemihoko is some ten miles outside Kasese at the foot

of the Ruwenzori mountains and not much more than a stone's throw from the Congo border. The foundry that RSF has built there is a thriving concern, giving employment to a couple of dozen local people and with all the necessary facilities for a self-sustaining foundry built on principles of care for the environment and energy efficiency. While we were there we celebrated the opening of a medical clinic built on RSF land and witnessed the final stages of the construction of a new gallery and visitor centre. During our fortnight Andre was to bring his long experience of casting to bear on RSF's new work and photographer Steve Russell, who had also accompanied us to Karomoja, was further to document life at the foundry and the abundant fauna of the region in a series of remarkable images. Michael Cooper and I were to work in the newly inaugurated studio with two young Ugandan sculptors who already had an association with the Foundation, Peter Oloya and Isaac Okwir. Some daunting piles of rock had appeared on site, transported all the way from our Karomoja quarry, including among the harder blocks of white marble and grey boulder, some small pieces of green soapstone. There was also a supply of the pinky-brown rock that had required such delicate care and vision in Karomoja. Michael had found his way with these challenging materials and within the first days an exquisite white marble lizard had appeared from under his chisel. He went on to carve from the most mercurial and challenging pieces of raw pink limestone an owl, a genet cat and a snake, of a scale, delicacy and individuality that few other sculptors could have contemplated in the limited time available. It was fascinating to watch Isaac, on the banker next to Michael's, gradually picking up from him the patience and tenacity of purpose required for work of this kind. As before, the stone we were using was behaving in unpredictable ways, cracking without warning, delaminating, laughing at us. Mike showed Isaac that a refusal to be defeated and an adaptability to circumstances would see him through. A stonecarver goes for the long haul – it was particularly pleasing to see Isaac blending his youthful wit and jokiness with a growing seriousness of intent.

Peter Oloya has already established a name for himself as a sculptor in a variety of media. For him this was an opportunity for a fortnight of concentrated stonecarving. Humorous and watchful, Peter has a quietness that is regularly interspersed with fits of giggling. While at Kyemihoko he carved a sublime head in white marble, serene and translucent. What was so remarkable about this piece was the contrast it gave to much of the rest of Peter's work which is powerfully informed by the terrible experiences he underwent as a young person during the war years. The sculptures he makes

from his childhood experiences, expressive of the horrors and tragedy he witnessed, are powerful and personal, very far from the easy ornaments that a struggling sculptor might be tempted to make for a tourist market. While we were there Peter also made a remarkable carving in greeny-brown limestone. A figure kneels in despair or prayer, its hands held over its head, its stone surface alternately smoothed and pitted as if subjected to the full range of human feeling. It is at once a traditional stylised African carving and a modern piece of work, emotional and robust, expressive of the rock from which it was carved and yet a piece that is fully resolved and complete.

I myself had not made any sculptures in stone for some years and needed to pick up ideas I had left unresolved a long time before. My usual work is figurative and representational but I thought that for this very different place I should make very different sculpture. I knew that I didn't want to carve human or animal representations and I knew that whatever I made was also going to be very small. The only stones I felt comfortable with were the small slippery-surfaced fragments of soapstone that were appearing here and there in the pile of limestone. In working these stones I gradually came to realise how much over recent years I had been missing an aspect of sculpture that was essential to me – how it feels in the hand. Where normally I make big sculptures for looking at, now I wanted to make tiny sculptures for holding, for feeling the weight of. I didn't want them to be "of" anything. They needed barely to be sculptures at all, more like semi-formed tools or curious stones you might happen to notice lying abandoned on the ground. I carved one little piece after another, each in response to the one before. To me this was the only way in which I could reflect a few of the new things seen in our brief time in this country, to give a small, almost gestural response to the extraordinary unforgiving landscape of thorn and rock and bush we had seen in the east, of leaf, tree and jungle in Ruwenzori, of the savage tooth-and-claw beauty of the animals and birds we'd looked at and of the reduced-to-basics lives lived all around us, as if in this awe-inspiring land of crater lakes and rift valley and vast panorama stretching as far as the eye could see, only sculpture of extreme simplicity might have a place.