

COVER STORY

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Some 375 kilometres west of Uganda's capital Kampala and at the foot of the imposing ranges of the famous Mountains of the Moon, lies a unique art gallery and production house. Probably the only one of its kind in the region.

Welcome to Rwenzori Founders, an art centre, sculpture gallery, foundry and coffee bar. Located 11 kilometres north of Kasese town off the Fort Portal-Kasese Road, the centre at Kyemihoko is pioneering the art of bronze sculpting in the region as a full-fledged bronze sculpting centre.

"I have just cut off the unwanted metal parts on this guinea fowl sculpture by Isaac Okwir," Julius Mbugheki tells a team of journalists.

Mbugheki has just switched off the loud angle grinder that he has used to cut off the protruding parts of the art piece.

I had many questions on bronze

David Bwambale's bronze sculpture titled "Crane couple" Pic: Morgan Mbabazi



"WE HAVE TO DECIDE WHETHER THE SALEABILITY OF AN ART PIECE MAY BE OF MORE VALUE IN ITS ORIGINAL FORM OR IN BRONZE. WHEN WE REALISE THAT IT WILL BE OF MORE VALUE IN BRONZE AND IT'S THE TYPE OF PIECE SOMEONE WILL WANT TO BUY, THEN WE GO AHEAD

sculpting and also about the choice of the remote Kasese district to locate the foundry in a country and region whose appreciation of art is still so low.

But Mbugheki is less bothered about location and more interested in speaking about his work. So he explains some more: "After this I am going to remove these remaining stumps or protrusions using a linisher machine and then I will recreate the texture according to the original art piece. If I find a hole on the surface I will wield the hole with bronze and compact the welded part," he adds. Mbugheki, 32, is a metal mechanical fabricator.

The upright guinea fowl sculpture, weighing about 3.5 kilogrammes will then go through the final bronze casting stage of patination that involves polishing and addition of colour through oxidation.

Mbugheki is one of a handful of skilled craftsmen at Rwenzori Founders. The first of its kind in Uganda, the bronze foundry and gallery was established in 2008 by the United Kingdom-funded Rwenzori Sculpture Foundation and Ugandan artists have been working with European artists to create remarkable sculptures that are gaining recognition around the world.

A selection of sculptures are always on show and for sale in the gallery. Bronze and Moroto soapstone and marble by the Karamoja Sculpture Group (located to the far northeast of the country) are the primary materials here. The sculptures have been created as a result of workshops and residencies supported by the foundation.

The award-winning Rwenzori Sculpture Gallery and Bronze Foundry held an exhibition at the Uganda National Museum in Kampala in October under the theme "Made in Uganda" with a price tag of between \$40- \$5,000 per item for the piece on display.

The sculptors whose pieces were shown were Ann Christopher, David Bwambale, Emmanuel Basaza, Eria Sane Nsubuga, Isaac Okwir, Jon Buck, Jonathan Kingdon, Peter Oloya, Steve Mwesigwa and Sue Freeborough.

Buck has researched and designed over 30 clan totems based on local traditions and tribal symbols some of which were displayed at the "Made in Uganda" exhibition.

"In making these clan totems, I knew they would be interesting to the public. My idea is to make sculptures on an important part of this Ugandan culture. Everybody has a clan and we hope these sculptures mean a lot to them and can blend modern and traditional cultures," says Buck.

As well as the totem series, Buck worked on site with the Rwenzori Founders team to create the largest bronze sculpture to be cast at the centre to date. Completed in late 2014, the imposing *Bird in the Bush* weighing half a tonne is now installed outside the gallery.

Okwir's bronze sculptures were on display at the Uganda National Museum. They were *Gorilla Stance*, *Crane 3*, *Uganda Kob*, *Elephant*, *Female Cob* and *Cranes*. But his outstanding piece also installed outside the gallery is titled *Lango Mama*. It's of a mother carrying a baby on

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RWENZORI SCULPTORS SHINE IN BRONZE ART



Jon Buck's imposing bronze sculpture 'Bird in the bush' installed outside the gallery in Kasese. Pic: Morgan Mbabazi

her back, with the traditional calabash covering the baby's head as is common with the people of Lango region in northern Uganda. The calabash is a multi-purpose home appliance and is essential in the hygienic and healthy growth of a child.

"I did this work in the 'foreign land' of Kasese far away from Lira District to show the people of Kasese my culture. This is special and a very common scene in Lira and unique only among the Langi. You can't miss a woman walking or riding a bicycle

with a baby covered with a calabash on her back it you went to Lira," Okwir said.

Okwir was born in 1983 in Lira to a family of nine children. He attended Makerere University School of Industrial and Fine Art from 2004-2007, majoring in sculpting.

His distinctive style of animal sculptures have earned him regular invitations for residencies at the foundation.

Inspired by a recent residency at Rwenzori Founders, Freeborough

returned to her studio in the UK and created a series of works exploring the human condition in an African context, using a variety of Ugandan materials including barkcloth and salt.

Freeborough exhibited her unique sculpture titled *Misfortune* depicting the story of the birth of twins which was taken as a misfortune among the Bakonjo of the Rwenzoris centuries ago.

"The birth of twins was a misfortune among the Bakonjo because you paid double dowry and the village could not hunt for a month. They said it was a mis-

fortune but for me it isn't because I am a very happy twin. We are two girls," Freeborough told *The EastAfrican*.

The foundry offers sculptors including visiting resident artists the opportunity to have their work cast into bronze in well-equipped studios and with skilled craftsmen on hand at every stage of the process.

According to Basaza, also one of directors, when an artist makes an original art piece in whatever material (clay, stone work, plaster or wax), "they bring it to us and our job is to decide whether it is



Left: Isaac Okwir's 'Lango Mama' installed outside the gallery in Kasese. Pic: Morgan Mbabazi

Below: Julius Mbugheki, a metal mechanical fabricator Pic: Morgan Mbabazi

castable or not, that is when our craftsmanship comes in."

"We have to decide whether the saleability of an art piece may be of more value in its original form or in bronze. When we realise that its saleability will be of more value in bronze and it's the type of piece someone will want to buy, then we go ahead and cast it in bronze. This is through the traditional lost-wax casting process where the original wax art piece is lost in order to gain the bronze art piece," Basaza explains.

The reproduction of sculpture through the traditional lost-wax process begins with the rubber moulding stage which is followed by waxing; wax pouring; runner; investment; firing and flaming in the kiln; melting and pouring in the investment; clean fettling; metal working; and patination.

Getting raw materials

According to Basaza, the foundry needs two tonnes of bronze to run throughout the year. "We are currently importing the bronze from the UK. We hope to be able to use cooper from Kilembe Mines to make bronze here in the future."

The foundation runs a clinic near the arts centre helping to integrate the foundry and its activities with the local community. It also revived a government gravity water scheme serving seven villages in the area. In addition, it grows trees to make the centre as eco-friendly as possible which has attracted rare birds. "When we started there were only 26 species of birds today there are over 178, says Baraza.

This rural centre for the arts employs 18 permanent workers and 30 casuals. The 68 acres of land on which the foundry is located boasts a short stretch of River Sebwe and climbs 300 feet up the Rwenzori Mountains.

London-based Kilburn Nightingale architects designed the center using local contractors and indigenous materials after a successful competition. The main buildings (the foundry and gallery) are arranged around a raised terrace which forms an open-sided courtyard, commanding views across the site and the valley beyond.

The walls and columns were made of adobe mud, compressed laterite blocks and bricks using clay from the site and fired in situ. Render made of a mixture of clay and cow dung was decorated with



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naturally pigmented clay slurry. The timber was from locally grown eucalyptus. The roofs are covered with flattened out oil drums which were recycled from a major road building scheme in the region.

The gallery building won the 2013 Architects' Journal Small Projects Sustainability Award.