

Traditional Transitions

The subject of traditional Namibian art and its transition to modern marketable crafts has yet to be thoroughly researched and documented. The rich cultural heritage of Namibia has been severely neglected and while many concerned individuals and community based projects have contributed to promoting this art form, a comprehensive and systematic study of the art and artifacts produced by indigenous Namibians is lacking. Traditional artifacts, utensils and craft works which can be seen at museums around the country include headdresses, masks, sculpted animal and human figures and a variety of body adornments. Musical instruments form a significant part of these collections and include drums, rattles, thumb pianos, xylophones and string instruments. The elaborate ornamental jewelry and symbolic body adornments produced by the Himba, Zemba and Hakhahona people of the northern Kunene Region and Bushmen of the eastern regions are the most obvious examples. The creative expressions of these groups of semi-nomadic pastoral peoples are evidenced in the manufacture of personal items such as belts, bracelets, anklets necklaces and body coverings. Sniff containers, pipes, combs, leather pouches and bags, stools and walking sticks also form part of this group of traditional, personal artifacts. The *ekipa*, an ivory button worn on a leather belt as a signifier of wealth, has become a prized object for collectors of African art and artifacts.



Aprons (unknown, Otjozondjupa Region) Belt and rings (unknown, Kunene Region)



Beads (unknown, Kunene Region)

By far the most prolific creative expression is found in the carving, weaving, moulding, sewing and crafting of utility articles. This includes baskets, pots, bowls, textiles, ladles and spoons, mortars and pestles and other household items. Using traditional methods of production, the form of these articles is determined entirely by their function, their decoration informed by traditional culture and value. The manufacture of these utilitarian articles has been in part accelerated by the demands of the growing tourism industry.



Clothes basket (Joyce Lichaba, Caprivi region)

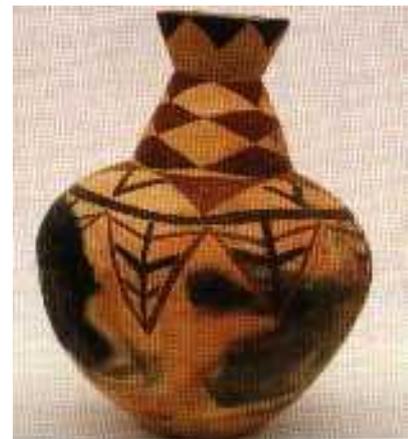


Beer strainer (unknown, Angola)

The art of ceramic pottery has reached a very high standard in the villages along the banks of the Chobe River in the Caprivi Region. Here, traditional potters have access to abundant river clays and secondary clay deposits. Shaped by hand and pit-fired, these elegant pots are used mainly for beer and water storage.



Water pot (Ellen Masule



Caprivi Region)



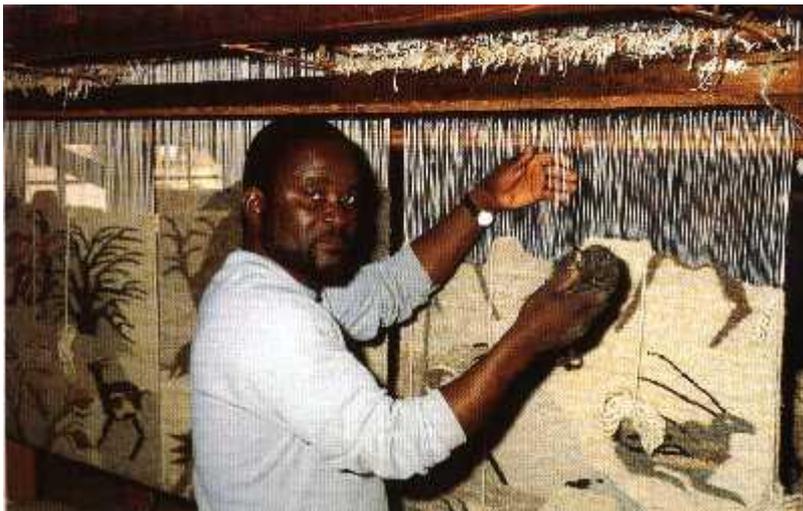
Mukeke (food bowl, Zambia)



Duck food bowl (Allen Majena, Caprivi Region)

The lush vegetation of the northern regions of Namibia has enabled woodcarvers to flourish in the shade of indigenous trees such as teak and mukwa. The traditional utilitarian articles produced by carvers in the Kavango and Caprivi Regions include food bowls, storage jars, drinking cups, spoons and ladles in enormous varieties. Sculpted depictions of animals are also continuously transformed after the success of the endless parade of hippos, elephants and giraffes.

A very distinct example is to be found in the economically viable items of embroidery, patchwork and appliqué, being created by communities of women in the arid southern and central regions of Namibia. Fashioned into duvet covers, table cloths, napkins and wall hangings, these articles have enjoyed tremendous success and provide numerous women with a cash income. Mention must be made here of the group of marketable articles of contemporary design which have been introduced by various individuals and groups. Innovative use of a variety of untraditional materials such as tin, plastics, wire and paper have been crafted into articles that appeal to the modern consumer.



Weaver with Ibenstein carpet