



## THE CREATOR'S HAND AND CURATOR'S IMPRINT

Daniel Herwitz

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They sold their wood sculptures by the side of the road winding from Johannesburg to the Kruger Park, sitting patiently on rusted oil drums under a burning dome of sky.\* Tourists on their way to tented camps stopped to survey the carved pieces of marula wood and asked, 'How much?' 'Fifty rands, boss, but for you twenty-five,' might come the reply. Perhaps haggling would ensue, and if luck was with these roadside merchants they would return to their villages, pockets bulging with money for beer, tea, paraffin and mealies. They were part of the informal economy in the same way as those who rushed to the windows of cars stopped at the corners of Johannesburg streets to offer handmade brooms. Few would have called them artists.

That they were selling their sculpted wares from the dirt on the side of the road already meant momentous changes from their past, for things originally made for use within their villages and rural areas were now being exported as something others called 'craft'. But the carved objects were still being made more or less as they'd been for generations, and some of them for perhaps centuries (although who can know for sure?).

Then in the 1980s, as apartheid crumbled and townships burned, interest in African arts became strong in South African university art departments and museums. The desire was to know and dignify black traditions, to find better ways of describing them than words like 'quaint' and 'craft'. Cultural acknowledgement sometimes precedes civil and political rights in a changing, democratising society, and serves as a first pass at respect. And there was much to respect about the celebration of knotted wood and rough-hewn

\* This chapter first appeared in my book *Heritage, Culture and Politics in the Postcolony* (Columbia University Press, 2012). It is reproduced here with kind permission of the publisher

*Job Seeker, artist unknown, wooden sculpture from Vha-Venda and Isi-Tsonga areas and now part of the private collection of Daniel Herwitz and Lucia Saks. Photograph taken by Peter Smith. Image supplied by and permission to reproduce image granted by Daniel Herwitz.*

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