

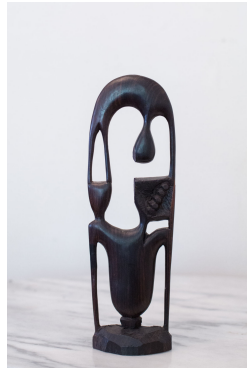


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African sculpture exhibit to raise awareness for Port Marker Project

By Laura Damon | Staff writer Aug 13, 2017 0



NEWPORT — The Newport Middle Passage Ceremony and Port Marker Project aims to have a marker placed in Newport honoring the lives of those enslaved and lost on the Middle Passage, a transatlantic human trade voyage to the City-by-the Sea.

“When I went to high school they made us know Newport history but they never included the Black History,” said Victoria Johnson, a retired Rogers High School principal and chairwoman of the project committee. “It’s time that it came out, it’s time that we know.”

The Makonde African Sculpture Exhibit on display at the Newport Historical Society today through Wednesday will help to raise awareness to the project, committee members said.

The exhibit is free and open to the public. The hours for viewing are today from noon to 4 p.m., Tuesday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon.

Approximately 30 sculptures are on display. Most pieces are carved rosewood sculptures and are dark — nearly black — in color.

The carvings were done by the Makonde, an African tribe, and they come from Tanzania.

The sculptures are part of Cynthia Hamilton’s personal collection. A professor emerita of African and Afro-American studies at the University of Rhode Island, where she taught from 1992 until 2014.

Hamilton lives in Newport and serves on the project committee.

“I went to Tanzania in 1969, and it had an incredible effect on me, I just fell in love with the art,” Hamilton said.

That year, while she was helping to enhance a school in an area south of the city of Moshi, a few street vendors and their creations caught her eye, she said.

The Makonde sculptures have a distinct style.

“The Makonde all use what they term the ‘tree of life’ style, there are always faces that are connected, and that’s what I really like about it,” Hamilton said.

The faces and figures are distinct enough to be recognized as humans, but they blend and fuse with others on the sculptures.

“It looks like an ancestry pool, and that’s what I think is remarkable,” Hamilton said. It’s almost as if the carvers said “we will immortalize them (our ancestors) in these carvings and they’ll always be with us.”

The tree of life is a predominant theme, she said, but individual pieces also depict men and women executing tasks like carrying water and chopping wood.

The exhibit is the first of its kind in Newport, Hamilton said. There was a slavery art exhibit at URI earlier this year, in which several contemporary artists contributed original works.

“At some point we may bring that exhibit to Newport, we’re hoping,” she said.

In the meantime, Hamilton offered her personal collection for the exhibit at the Newport Historical Society to raise awareness of the importance of placing a marker in Newport to honor those lost and to remember those who made it to the shores of Aquidneck Island and turned the tides of oppression, she said.

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