



OBJET TROUVÉ Tales from across a land

TEXT JAMES GREEN

When one thinks of Zambia, straddling as it does such a central swathe of the African continent, bounded in by a total of seven nations, one does not immediately think of the sea, nor the fabulous creatures that live there, like the mermaid for instance. Yet this meeting post depicting a mermaid was carved in ocean-less Zambia, sometime in the late 19th or early 20th century.

The tail and facial features are brought to life using a poker-mark technique, where a boiling point of metal has been used to scorch the hardwood into black lines. On her head she wears a magical velvet pouch containing relics, which were believed to encourage order and goodwill within the village community.

She sits rather grandly on an iron rod and would have been used during the meetings of the village elders. When a man wished to speak he would have had to first place the mermaid on the ground before him, saying to the group by this action: "It is my turn to speak, and your turn to listen."

Although the sculptor who carved this may never have seen the sea he must surely have heard of mermaids, for ideas are like currents in the way they move and sway from one group of people to another, and like tides in that they invariably move back out again. It is in this way that tales cross and re-cross land masses.

Mermaids are a pretty big deal in West Africa, and this is perhaps where this mermaid has her cultural genesis. The mermaid Marmy Wata is one of West Africa's most popular modern deities. She is a vixen creature who, with a flick of her tail and a smile from her inscrutable lips, can bestow good fortune or wreak personal disaster upon her supplicant. In return for some kind of relationship, often understood as sexual attraction, creams, mirrors, perfumes, sweets and flowers and all manner of objects are placed at her altar.

She is often Indian in appearance and her image is based on an 1883 German print of an Indian snake charmer, which somehow made its way into West Africa around the time of its publication.

A snake charmer in India inspires an artist to make an etching, which is printed in Hamburg and published in London. The print makes its way to the West Coast of Africa, probably via an English newspaper, where its appearance alerts the look of local gods. Tales of this mermaid god travel across Angola and the Congo, up the Zambezi river, until a sculptor in Zambia hears of them and carves this piece... a miracle, no?

Mermaid meeting post, R5 100
Email Green at jgreen@gmail.com



EAST SIDE STORY Field Office

TEXT ALEXANDER MATTHEWS PHOTOGRAPHY LAURENCE

Dwarfed by a monolithic Telkom office, Barrack Street in Cape Town's East City Precinct was previously known merely for endless queues outside the Home Affairs branch and that certain strip club. Since September last year however, its custom end has been home to Field Office, the showroom for Pedersen + Lennard.

The space is not merely an excuse to flaunt the design partnership's furniture. In an area fast gaining a reputation as a home for creativity and design, Field Office lures in a steady stream of office-less creatives with its fresh coffee, pastries and free WiFi. Indeed, on busy mornings, it must have the highest density of Apple MacBooks and skinny jeans per square metre in the country.

Field Office is doing its bit to support homegrown design, with a selection of products from emerging talent on sale.



While the café's sofas and tables are made of the basic plywood and Formica that formed a staple of Pedersen + Lennard's first range, it is the partnership's new Ingar range of flat pack furniture that is turning heads.

Simple and sleek, the pale Scandinavian birch pieced together with exposed screws evokes wooden aeroplane fuselages of days gone by. Made in Pedersen + Lennard's Salt River factory, the range includes chairs (R1 400), a dining room table (R5 200) and long benches (R2 200). The bucket stools (R950) dotted around the café manage to combine quirkiness with comfort. Considering the time spent on them by some of Field Office's patrons, that's just as well.

Field Office, 37 Barrack Street, 011 461 4199,
www.fieldoffice.co.za



This Zlakabusba couch turned heads at the Milan Furniture Fair in April. Ardmore Design Collection and Maxromac have collaborated on this unique and fun piece of furniture, which we spotted at the Food Wine Design Fair last year. Now in production, it heralds an exciting development in functional design for Ardmore, just as the name suggests — Zlakabusba translates as 'new beginnings' in Zulu. Only 40 of these couches will be made worldwide, at R55 000 each, making them a highly collectable item.

To order call Jonathan Berning on jon@ardmoreceramics.co.za or 072 495 2248