

In May of this year South Africa lost one of its oldest and most influential sculptors, Edoardo Villa, who passed away at the age of 95. With the help of Gerard de Kamper, Villa's personal friend and collection manager, **Christine Grové** pays tribute to the father of modern sculpture in South Africa >

ITALIAN
VILLA



Looking back, one of the best things about studying at the University of Pretoria had to have been the beautiful campus with its rolling green grass patches, ancient Jacaranda and Oak trees and magnificent old architecture. Biased though I am, you will be hard-pressed to find another university campus in South Africa to rival this one's beauty. One particularly striking feature of the campus is the amount of artworks and sculptures scattered across the grounds. Clearly UP's best-kept secret is the fact that it holds, amongst others, the largest collection of Edoardo Villa sculptures in the world. In fact, I clearly remember obliviously sitting on one every day, outside the Visual Arts building during my time as an undergraduate. The Edoardo Villa Museum, also on the main campus, houses the permanent

collection of 143 important pieces which Villa donated to the university.

In a country punctuated with hundreds of these sculptures, it is only right to take a step back and admire the workmanship of the artist, the intriguing tale behind his craft and of course the importance of the great impact that his works had on the South African art world as a whole. In 1985, Villa donated his first sculpture to the University of Pretoria and in 1991 was made honorary professor in the Department of Fine Arts and Art History.

Born in Bergamo, Italy, Villa started showing an interest in art from a very young age. While studying sculpture in Milan in 1939, Villa was conscripted into the Italian army for two years, at the outbreak of World War II. After being posted in North

Africa, where he was injured and captured by the English, he was sent to South Africa as a prisoner of war. During his time in the military, he formed the "Da Vinci" group where he recruited his fellow soldiers to paint and sculpt, but after being released, Villa fell in love with South Africa and remained to continue his calling as a sculptor.

Now mostly known for his abstract steel and bronze sculptures, starting out, like every budding sculptor, Villa created figurative portraits and heads such as "mother and child" out of plaster of paris in the 1940s. Being penniless after the war, he began working in a foundry and lived in a room next to a chicken pen. After finishing work at the foundry every day, he would sculpt by candlelight, therefore not going into much detail, which is possibly where he started playing with the idea of abstraction. "There is no evidence that he ever worked from a reference," says de Kamper; "he would just break off and add until he felt his work was perfect. I have only ever seen one sketch made by Villa."

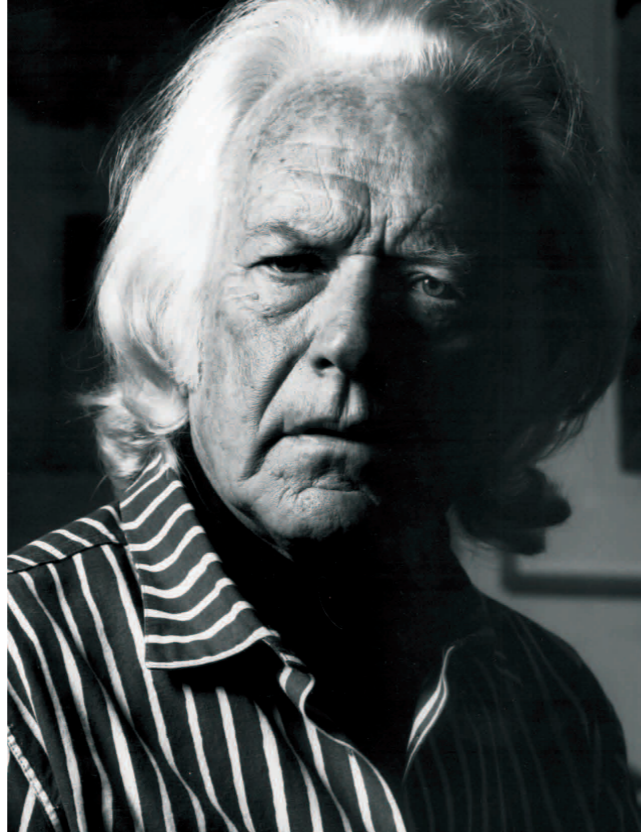
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"Although being a 'typical Italian' – loud and passionate in his nature, Villa adopted South Africa as his home, and very rarely returned to Italy," says de Kamper. Villa felt that Europe was over-saturated with art and sculpture and that everything had already been done. Africa was in need of work and as the challenge was presented to him, he was deeply inspired by what he saw around him. Throughout his sculpting career Villa expressed a love for the human form and condition. The striking contrast between the organic flow of the abstract subject >



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matter and the rigid material of steel or bronze it is made from, presents the viewer with a battle between form and emotion.

All of his works, although dominantly abstract, carry a discourse of classical fluidity. The development from his figurative works, with roots in his European influence, to the steel sculptures follow a similar trajectory to that of European art in the 1900s in general. His African influences are widely evident in his steel sculptures, which portray the harshness of Africa, as opposed to the flowing, decorative art from Europe.

In the 1960s, along with Cecil Skotnes and a few other artists, Villa began the artist group "Amadlozi", which developed into the largest school for black artists in the country. This marks one of the many

significant contributions Villa made to the development of art in South Africa. His passion for African culture is distinct in every work. "His work was an extension of who he was, he was always creating. I remember I went to see him a few years ago at his home, and before me was this ninety-year-old man on a ladder, sculpting away," says de Kamper.

Villa's works can be found all over the world, including 60 to 70 private collections in the USA, universities in Israel and in the Museum Villa in Bergamo. The Edoardo Villa Museum at the University of Pretoria is in the process of organising a monumental Villa tribute exhibition in August 2012, which will be a showcase of 340 of Villa's bronze sculptures.

For more information on this treasured artist, visit www.up.ac.za

