

Gérard and Sylvaine - Creators and Proprietors of Sobobade

By Zan Lombardo, based on her informal interviews

When one meets Gérard Chenet for the first time, one is struck by the sculpture of his face. It is instantly apparent that he is a man of vision, in fact, such great vision that it has physically manifested in his features, moving all expression forward on his brow to emphasize his golden eyes. Gérard, a native of Haiti, came to Toubab Diallow and began building Sobobade in 1946. He began with just a small workshop in which he made his sculptures and slept near the cliff overlooking the ocean. He chose the name Sobobade from the Haitian voodoo god of thunder and lightning, the god who holds court for all the other gods and goddesses to attend and be entertained. It was his intention to create a space to attract artists, musicians, dancers and theater people and he has succeeded.

Gérard himself is a modern day renaissance man, contributing simultaneously as a prolific sculptor, romantic poet, inspired architect, lush green landscaper, and gifted playwright. He met Sylvaine, a beautiful woman with the most gentle and considerate nature, when she came to Senegal from France to teach physics and chemistry. They were married for a time and had children, one of whom is a beautiful dancer and talented performer at Sobobade. They are now divorced but still manage Sobobade jointly, and Sylvaine says their relationship is like that of a brother and sister. She claims that she only helps with the business end of Sobobade, but all the plans, designs, and ideas for the center have been and are carried out solely by Gérard.

I was interested to note that with all the beautiful accommodations available at Sobobade, Gérard chooses to live simply in the office with a daybed next to his computer and Sylvaine dwells in one of the smallest rooms in the corner of the second floor. I also noticed how well they treat their employees, most of whom are also dancers, musicians, teachers, and performers at Sobobade when they're not working.

One of the amazing facts about Sobobade is that all the tiles used for the courtyards, steps, amphitheater, banisters and mosaics were made and fired in the large kiln there. Gérard himself also made all of the sculptures gracing the grounds of Sobobade. Sobobade has what Gérard calls "concordance of rhythm" which creates harmony at every turn, in every staircase and balcony, on every

table, in the curve of every rooftop, in the shape of each window as well as the vistas they look out upon. We were amazed at the genius of the architecture in the amphitheater, which kept the stage and dance floor in constant sunlight throughout the day, yet always offered some comfortable seating in the shade for those who needed it.

Many of the archways along the walkway and ceilings in the restaurant are studded with seashells, creating a rich textural delight for the eye. Gérard's sculptures are tucked in under the bougainvillea bushes, next to the hammocks, over the doorways, in fountains, on the walls, and all around in the courtyards. He is a prolific artist whose visions continue to manifest (see the story about [horseback riding](#) past his newest colony, Hyena's Hole) and whose ideas are as fresh and exciting today as they were when he started bringing his visions to life sixty years ago.