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**THE EMPHATIC WOOD SCULPTURES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BENIN
- THEIR CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL
CONTRIBUTIONS TO NIGERIAN ART SPACE:
AN ARTICULATION OF AFRICAN AESTHETICS**

Introduction

Among the several materials used by both amateur and professional artists for their self expression, wood stands out as a material to be trusted. Of all the artists in Nigeria, those from the southern part of the country make extensive use of wood in their visual pontifications. In the University of Benin Fine and Applied Arts Department, such materials like bronze, fiberglass, plaster of paris (POP), metal and terra cotta are used for realizing visual expressions in sculpture. Of all these materials, it is wood that is lavishly used by both students and teachers alike. This is as a result of the textural and fascinating contour inherent in wood; and because they are the cheapest materials for sculpture productions in recent time. Such wood as mahogany, thick, Afara, masonia,

ebony, Iso, Iroko and Opepe are used extensively by the students in executing their individual assignments.

Today, in the rich art gallery of the department, wood sculptures intermingle with other genre of art. These very profound arts genre include – paintings, bronze, metals, fiberglass, sculptures, textiles, graphics, ceramics and metal designs. However, of all the wooden sculptures easily identifiable and of great significance is the one executed by a lecturer, Franklyn Egwali, in the Department, he called it *Life in Phases*. It was executed in 1996. It is about 1m in ht and with a special type of wood called Thick. It is an elegant piece of sculpture comprising three stone-like faces in deep contemplation and meditation. It is an elegant head mask in the round with critically defined forms. Here the lecturer (Franklyn Egwali) in defining and appraising the forms, employed two principles of design; plane and lines. Observing the overall framework of the composition, Egwali profoundly led us into his critical world of design using lines, this time very sensitive ones. All that we observe are lines, each running into one another gracefully, elegantly and contextually. As these sensitive and delicate lines runs into one another, they thereby give value, bite and potency to each other. For instance, we can enjoy the radical yet flexible and illuminating line that ran from the nose of one of the faces to the top of the head. This line which has heralded the firm nose also uncovered the various ruminations and contemplations in the eye of the mask while to the top of the head, it asserted quite poignantly the three bunch of exquisite, charming and enchanting Uba motif of Benin culture. Here, we savour the delicately weaved motif which according to Izevbigie represents life without end, continuity of existence, power and strength in nature.

Of very great significance in this visual configuration is the method Egwali uses by allowing the motif to spread into two of the faces of the mask. By allowing this, it gave vitality, intensity and a kind of authoritativeness into the overall composition.



*Fig. 1, Life in Phases, seen from different perspectives.
Here, we appreciate the various faces of the artform.*



The Uba Motif from Fig. 1 – Life in Phases



*One of the well defined eyes of the faces in
Fig. 1 – Life in Phases*

Fig. 2 (Shame) was executed by David Adeogun in 2008. It is a 1.3m ht ebony sculpture of a woman that has wrapped her hand round her breast in shame, in degradation and dishonor. As affirmed by the artist, the piece of sculpture represents our lost society, a society that had no shame and so could not stand up for integrity, purity, probity and uprightness. According to

Adeogun, all these virtues have suddenly been obliterated by a negative and radical wind of change to the detriment of the society. In realizing this profound wood sculpture, Adeogun also used lines and rounded forms. As we can observe from the head of the sculpture, the hand that is wrapping round the bosom is in round shape while the stomach of the artform itself comes with a rounded form. To add uniqueness and peculiarity to this artform, the artist slightly perforated the middle of the two legs so that space can be seen dividing the two legs and by so doing Adeogun added vigour, intensity and energy to the entire composition and configuration. This is also a mark of showing his knack for thorough articulation of form and material. Not also to be taken for granted is the delicate, sensitive but pleasant and exquisite line running from the side of the artform, i.e. from the lower leg to the side of the hand. This is profoundly remarkable as these lines aptly add to the veracity and outstanding aesthetics of the sculpture.



Fig. 2, Shame.

Here, we appreciate the various configurations of the artform

In the area of texture and contour, Adeogun took his entire audience to a higher realm as he adroitly texturise the entire composition. But of significance is the texture and a concave surface he created on the back and armpit of the artform. According to Vogel (2003), Caroline (2002) and Kosenevich (2002), these thematic tools of designs and construction add value and strength to the art form itself as they contextually harmonized all the entire department and compartments of the artform.

What does the artform, *Life in Phases* (Faces) represents? It exemplifies the various stages of our existence and the various challenges confronting us at every stage of development. These challenges are very daunting especially in developing countries like ours and they border on finances and societal expectations.

The first hurdle here is the challenge of schooling and educating oneself from the kindergarten (acara school for those of us not privilege to attend the nursery school) to the University. This can be very daunting especially for those whose parents are financially inferior and on the lower side of the ladder of existence. Occasionally, one is forced to either abandon school or perhaps suspend it temporary. The next phase is marrying and rearing children and this on its own can be daunting in this era of economic meltdown. As a result, most men keep procrastinating the idea of settling down and before long, they are old and weak. And finally, the last phase of this existence is old age and death. Unfortunately, this stage comes so fast and so quick. No wonder William Shakespeare once enthused and poignantly asserted regarding death – “out out brief candle, life is but a walking shadow”.

Fig. 2 (Shame) is undoubtedly exemplifying the enormous shamelessness among some members of our society. Today, our society has been desecrated, defiled and ruined morally as nothing matters anymore. Men and women of honour are almost extinct as they seem not to be here any longer. Everywhere we turn to, we see it steering at us – in politics, universities, churches, mosques, in films and fashion industries.

How on earth should pastors be found sleeping around with parishoners' wives to the point of impregnating them? Why will armed robbers constantly be

invading the churches and shamelessly looting the altar of God and promising to return back for more loot? On the other hand, why will some parents be at the forefront of helping their children to cheat during examination, some even go as far as helping the children to buy examination question papers. While in the universities, some lecturers compel their students to part with huge sums of cash to enable them score good grades.

At the home front, some parents have been found sleeping around with their daughters. Others shamelessly sleep around with the wife of their children in the name of pleasure and perhaps for ritual purposes. What about parents who secretly and openly smoke marijuana and sniff hard drug in the full glare of their children? What moral example are they teaching their children? In the larger society, there have been terrible discoveries. Last week, according to the Guardian Newspaper of 5th June, 2009, two middle-age men were caught with a large cellophane containing human parts (eyes, tongues, nose, male and female private parts, etc). These two Nigerians were shamelessly selling them to ritualists when an irate crowd rounded them up and burnt them to death.

Fig. 3 (*Life is a Scuffle*) is a 7cm ht patinated mahogany wood sculpture. It was executed by Martins Aigbogun in 2003. It is a convoluted sculpture of two friends locked in a fierce battle. As asserted by the artist, the ultimate end of these fighters is to kill. In appraising this subject matter, Aigbogun in an interview with this writer in Benin posited that he decided to allow rounded form take the centre stage because of his love for circle forms. All we can savour in this composition are convoluting forms, emerging and submerging into one another gracefully. Observing the sculpture from the frontal perspective, we observe a figure holding the other rigidly and firmly as if determined to physically suffocate the other out of existence. As can also be observed in the composition, Aigbogun gave it a realistic and stylized colouration as we can glean from the artform as it is here represented with rounded circle forms. One very profound and significant feature of this composition is the potency and intensity of the forms. We also notice the energetic and poignant nature and stature of the two forms holding themselves. Indeed, we appreciate the ruggedness and vehemence of the entire construction.

Far and above this, is the very expressive and emphatic nature of the sculpture. Without much explanation, we can decode and understand quite significantly what the sculpture is all about – two people fiercely locked in battle.



Fig. 3, Life is a Scuffle.

Here we appreciate the various structure, texture and contour of the art form seen from different angles

What Does this Work Represent?

It exemplifies so many unnecessary and needless adventures of man. Why for instance do we engage in battle to kill one another when it can be resolved amicably with an honest hearted discussion? Why should nations, states or even families embark on a battle against one another, and in the process, lives and properties are destroyed. Families, ethnic group(s) and nations have crumbled like a pack of cards as a result of unnecessary hostilities against each other. The

time spent destroying and switching off each other's light will not make our own light more brighter and illuminating.

Analyzing the Thematic and Structural Rightness of the Sculptures

In Fig. 1 (Life in Phases), we admire Franklyn Egwali's use of lines to demarcate and weave the forms together. This corresponds with what Gardener (1995) and Patrick Welberg (2003) called sensitive and robust adroit lines of realism. These types of lines add to the overall aesthetic sensibilities of the entire composition and construction.

Looking at this piece of sculpture, we observed the principles of design emerging quite remarkably in the definition and articulation of forms. According to Russell (2002), they include such principles as composition, contour, texture, unity, rhythm, balance and proportion. All these principles add to the overall construction and compartmentalization of the various forms that defines each art piece. Not to be taken for granted in all these appraisal and analysis is the obvious usage of lines. As asserted by Lucie-Smith (2003), Hopkins (2001) and Paul (2003), lines play remarkable and predominant role in the elevation and definition of each form. According to these writers, it is the usage of lines that allow each form to resolve and dissolve into each other effortlessly. Corroborating this ideology, West (2001), Bowen (1992) and Dube (2002) posited quite strongly that lines add vibrancy, potency and depth to a definite work of art. For example, in Fig. 1, we appreciate how the artist used lines to create and poignantly define the popular Uba (rope) motif. This indeed becomes an eloquent testimony and phraseology to the usage and articulation of line in a given creative construct.

Furthermore, movement and texture is another definitive and cognitive variable which act as catalyst to the essential organization of an art piece. This type of movement and texture can be observed in Fig. 2, *Shame* and Fig. 3, *Life in a Scuffle*. In these two art forms, the artists used movement and texture to define and exact their creative expressions and impressions. In Fig. 3, *Life in a Scuffle*, we also observe the two combatants holding themselves very forcefully

with their body oozing and emitting great energy and vigour. To further add to the already potent and charged composition, the body of the fighters were roughly texturised. This addition of texture added valve, valour and audacity to the entire construction. Fleaming and Honour (1998) and Egonwa (2005) in their separate accounts maintain that there is no gainsaying the fact that movement critically elevate the overall oneness of a composition. It also adds to the expressiveness of both the minor and major forms in a given creative configuration. In the words of Egonwa, “movement and texture when properly applied in a given artistic composition add to the energetic, vivid and forceful visual pontification”.

Speaking on the wood sculptures at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, three senior lecturers – Ononeme, Erimona and Odiboh – stated that what is indeed making the wood sculptures of the department stand out especially during major art exhibitions are the dexterity, particularity and adroit finishing inherent in the manipulation of the forms on each composition. In each concept, we observe rhythm, style, movement, well-arranged and rendered texture, harmony, unity of forms, and the articulation of forms using lines, void and space. These are indeed the vehicle of expression when it relates to wood sculptures at the University of Benin.

Conclusion

No doubt, wood remains one of the means of self expression by artist the world over. In the ancient city of Benin where the University of Benin is located for example, so many artforms have been realized in wood. This became apparent especially with the traditional wood carvers in the city. Such themes like the Oba and his queen, Adesuwa, a hunter carrying elephant on his head, wrestlers, the three wise monkeys, the grazing antelope, local dancers, warriors, drummers and a lot of other themes can be seen in various galleries all around the city. However, the wood sculptures produced by the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin are like the wood works of other artists

that went to college to train. Unlike their counterparts in town that are traditionally taught, the college trained wood carvers like the ones from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts are abreast with those sensitive principles of designs. These principles include lines, movements, rhythm, composition, balance, proportion, unity and variety, intensity, mass and space, etc. Therefore, in the usual creations, all these principles are overtly brought to bear. That is why whenever there are combined exhibition between traditional and college trained carvers, what the college trained carvers learned in school become conspicuous.

However, there are a lot these two groups can discern from each other regardless of the seeming lacuna in their training and appraisal of the principle of design and concepts. One of the gaps in the execution of concept that can be covered up properly is the issue of pattern and motif creation. The traditional carvers appear to be very excellent and superior in this regard as they are closer, nearer to their people rapatour of design, motifs and idioms. In some of their creation, this becomes very visibly and forceful. Secondly, in their overall finishing. The traditional carvers tend to be more careful and detailed with their construction, patination and finishing than the college trained. In some of the creations of the college trained, a lot of innuendos are hidden in a concept under the name of abstraction and stylization. When mistakes are made, the college trained carvers call it abstract, but we indeed know the truth in the overall construction of the artform itself.

Indeed, if the traditional carvers can allow the college trained artists to influence them in their use of electric operated motor saw, especially as it relates to the ripping, slicing and chopping of the monumental wood sculptures the ever expanding wood sculptures will be the better of it as they can also influence the local carvers with their contemporary, imaginative concepts and designs. A regular collaboration between these two groups of artists would contribute to the robustness, self-assertiveness and definitiveness in our ever fertile contemporary Nigerian art space.

Summary

Artists worldwide use various means and materials to realize their visual expressions. In the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, different types of materials can be seen used by students and lecturers alike. Some of these materials are fiberglass, bronze, metals, stone, clay and wood. Of all these materials, wood have come up as one of the most outstanding, dependable and striking. Three very evocative wood sculptures attracting attention and critical review are *Life in Phases*, *Shame* and *Life is a Scuffle*. These three ever powering and fascinating sculptures continue to speak volumes of the shamelessness among our greedy political office holders, the struggle to break even in our ever demanding and corrupt society. Is there any solution in sight for mankind's daunting problems? This and more questions are what this paper seeks to answer and critically establish.

Key words: art, sculptures, visual expression, African aesthetics

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