

## **BEN ENWONWU AND THE RECREATION OF THE IMAGE OF THE ARTIST IN NIGERIA.**

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### **Abstract**

*The pioneers and heroes of Nigerian formal art education have not been given their due recognition in the history of Art Education in Nigeria. A lot of scholars have paid great attention to their works without highlighting their outstanding contributions to the development and growth of formal art education in Nigeria. In view of this problem, this study selected one Nigerian pioneer art educationist, Ben Enwonwu, who alongside Aina Onabolu stood out as undisputable pioneers of Nigerian formal Art Education. In addition to providing Enwonwu's biography, the study highlights his pioneering efforts and contributions towards art teaching and learning in Nigerian schools. The study reveals that most of the works and contributions of this artist to Nigerian art have not been given scholarly attention hence the need for this work to fill the gap. No doubt this work will stimulate the interest of many scholars who are interested in Nigerian formal Art Education.*

### **Introduction**

In the light of the proceeding analyses, one can deduce that one is confronted with an artist of value. It is however important to state that though an artist is first and foremost an individual; he operates within a societal context as it relates to his dealings with other individuals and his activities and interaction with the artistic (creative) society within which he exists. It is thus necessary to define the extent to which this artist has left his mark within that society. The questions this paper tends to answer are: what are the roles of Ben Enwonwu as the pioneer of art education in Nigeria. What can one cite as his contributions to the progress of this experience? What should he have done that he failed to do? Only when answers to these and other questions have been sought and found can this writer then proceed to accord Enwonwu a place in the art historical account of modern Nigerian art education.

Aina Onabolu was the acclaimed father of Nigerian Modern Art whose contribution in this regard was unsurpassed. Onabolu's aesthetic philosophy left a problem for the emergent modern Nigerian artists. This problem is that of identity or as (Oyelola 1979) puts it "how can a Nigerian artist use European technique to express Nigerian reality without imitating European styles" Enwonwu, as an artist sought to resolve this problem by incorporating African forms into his paintings. Today he has been accused of "merely using African motifs to clothe western concepts of art and society". Whether Enwonwu's art is biased in favour of western aesthetic traditions is beside the point here. What is important is that the desired Nigerianisation of European techniques of expression in modern art had to start from somewhere, and it was this artist who provided the impetus that described a path to the ultimate solution of this problem by the Zarianists in the late 1950's. He had the courage to deviate from the western ideals

which he imbibed so thoroughly that they are still discernible in his forms. And even if one agrees that his times favoured this deviation, one at least has to acknowledge what this courage meant at that time. In the history of world art, men with such courage have defined the course of art. Like the phenomenon of Onabolu's appearance as the bridge between traditional and modern Nigerian art, Enwonwu's actions helped to chart the course of this modern experience in Nigeria.

There is no doubt that within Enwonwu's person, this problem of identity was not fully resolved. It seems as if the artist had been trapped within a duality of existence in such a way that he cannot settle down to adopt any particular mode of expression. By his dilemma however, he strikes a chord in his attempts to resolve this problem of identity. His dilemma was plain for all to see, thus it provided the generation of artists after him with a living example of that struggle for personal identity in creative expression. One can then say that Enwonwu's struggle was an inspiration to later artists even if they perceived that inspiration by being dissatisfied with his efforts.

### **Recreation of the Image of the Artist in Nigeria**

Enwonwu recreated the image of the artist which in Nigeria of the 1940s to the 1960s was one of ridicule. According to (Oloidi 1986) at that period of modern Nigerian art history, there was a conception of fine art as "a subject or career meant only for 'people of hands' whose brains were not meant for other theoretical subjects under the sciences and arts". His recognition by the colonial administration brought respect and dignity to the profession while Enwonwu's own personality endeared him to many people who suddenly began to admire his art and art in general. Thus, in Enwonwu's persona, one sees a culmination of Onabolu's gallant struggle to win recognition and respect for the contemporary Nigerian artist and for artworks in general. Enwonwu gave visibility to the visual arts through this recognition accorded him, and one must not forget that he would not have won that recognition were his art not worthy of notice. This does not imply that Enwonwu was isolated in his struggle for recognizing the creative arts since the equally commendable efforts of Aina Onabolu the pioneer, Akinola Lasekan, C.C. Ibeto and several other beneficiaries of Onabolu's didactic efforts must be noted as well.

Enwonwu's recognition by the colonial administration did create problems for him since it "helped to set him apart from the generality of the people" and it indirectly contributed to his inability to fairly resolve his problem of identity. When he became one of the elites, his art took on a more elitist appearance in terms of the themes he treated and in his relationship to society. The artist however showed recognition of this elitist bent, and he tried to combat it by creating works which reflect a concern with humanism. The degree of his success or failure in achieving this is debatable, but in the course of making this attempt, Enwonwu created a body of work which is of high aesthetic standard and which, today, have art historical value since they represent a stage in the resolution of the problem of identity in modern Nigerian art. Quite a few of these works display aesthetic excellence comparable to those of many European professional artists. Thus, Enwonwu has, by his creative efforts, expanded the language and visual imagery of contemporary Nigerian art and his aesthetic experiments have metaphorically created a foundation for the further advancement of this visual language. Happily, today, individual Nigerian artists are unanimous in pushing the boundaries of this language even further in their search for new forms of expression.

Enwonwu's art has helped to promote the image of the contemporary Nigerian artist abroad. For example, he is the only black artist who has had the privilege of having the Queen of England sit for him for a portrait bust (Plate 1).



Plate 1

The fact that in 1956, the Queen saw a black artist from one of her colonies as being capable of executing her portrait bust via personal sittings in Buckingham palace does mean a lot since it is a statement of how rapidly advanced modern Nigerian art had become as at that time. Enwonwu's subsequent exhibitions in Europe and America helped to promote this new image of modern Nigerian art and to entrench it firmly in western minds as a force to be reckoned with. He thus imbued modern Nigerian art with a vitality which can be compared to the unquestionable vitality of Nigerian art in the pre-colonial traditional setting.

One of the most frequent criticisms of Enwonwu as an artist is his alienation from the search for a "theoretical basis for contemporary Nigerian art". The chief exponent of this criticism is Uche Okeke. In the light of Uche Okeke's Zarianist activities in the 1950s, this criticism boils down to basic differences in the employment of traditional African imagery in modern Nigerian art. This criticism tends to disallow the influence of specific time periods and societal contexts on the creation and manipulation of images in the production of art. The time period of Ben Enwonwu was different from that of the Zarianists.

### **Enwonwu's art and the symbols**

Enwonwu's art was typical of his times both in his concepts of society and in his subsequent representation of that society. The colonial set-up at Enwonwu's time was just beginning to wake up to the fact that the artistic movement started by Onobolu was

becoming very visible. Enwonwu's imagery were conceived as an affirmation of a black identity, and he sought through his art to make statements about the ability and viability of the black man who he felt should be treated as an equal by the colonial overlords. His choice of Negritude as a guiding philosophy may not have been compatible with the spirit of the 1960s when Nigeria gained independence but it was surely compatible with the spirit of his own times when the black communities had begun to seriously initiate a struggle to achieve this independence. Then, Nigeria, and by extension, the black race, needed images which will be symbolic of their struggle. Such images can be depicted in two forms as image embodying the ideals of violence in struggle or as images employing the idea of peaceful, though not helpless, struggle. Enwonwu's choice of "Negritude"- and the symbolism inherent in the image of a woman – is, however, monumental. It is the symbolism of a woman whose femininity is a two edged weapon. Her adaptability and procreative ability are employed as symbols of the victory of the woman (representing Nigeria, Africa, and Blackness) over the transient dominance of man (representing colonialism). Thus, through these symbols, Enwonwu projects political idea of the direction to Nigeria's total independence from western powers. The symbolism even projects beyond the immediate goal of independence to embody projections of what to do with it once it is attained.

Enwonwu's art was thus in keeping with the nuances of his times. In his own way, the artist succeeds in freezing immediate realities and recording it in works which today reflect a humanist concern with the society that gave birth to them. One can then see Enwonwu's work as part of modern Nigerian arts' contribution to the appraisal and reorganization of society through the use of visual imagery. The criticism of Enwonwu's stance in the search mentioned above must then consider the following notions if it is to be valid – Enwonwu's times were typical of identity crisis; Enwonwu's art reflected these crises in the duality of stylistic expression that characterizes his works; Enwonwu's times were flamboyant, his art reflected this flamboyance in the unrestrained exuberance of this artist's imagery. The themes explored by this artist also reflect the situation – themes of dance signifying a sample joy of living, theme of genre typifying the new political consciousness and the assertion of self in the struggle for independence and above all, Enwonwu's recording of the immediate environment which today exist only in the minds of those who lived at that time since the rural nature of these environments have been redefined by Nigeria's modern experience. This essay has attempted to present an encompassing account of Ben Enwonwu's art career and his person. I attempt to reveal Enwonwu's personality through a conceptual analysis of his creative output. Before the study is brought to conclusion, I deem it necessary to reflect on Enwonwu in terms of his activities within the contemporary art scene in Nigeria today.

### **Biography of Ben Enwonwu**

Benedict Chuka "Archer" Enwonwu was born a twin on July 14, 1918 in Onitsha town in what is today known as Anambra State. His father, Odigwe Emeka Ojimba Enwonwu Omenka was a traditional sculptor and dancer who earlier worked with the Royal Niger Company as a "boat engineer". His father died in 1921 when Enwonwu was three years old. His mother Odoje was a well-to-do trader in clothes who Enwonwu barely knew owing to the itinerant nature of her profession. His father was a descendant of Aroli, an Obi of Onitsha; the word, Omenka, prefixed to his name, is an Igbo word

which literally means ‘great artist’ and it is more of title conferred on an individual in recognition of his special skills as an artist (Anizoba 1987).

Ben Enwonwu thus descends from a lineage of art inclined people. His early inclination to drawing can be seen, however, as completely natural response, since his elder brother maintains that Ben was too young to have been influenced by the artistic activities of their father. The creative products of his father which consisted of Ozo title staffs, traditional stools and traditional carved doors, were Enwonwu’s first contact with an art tradition. Enwonwu exhibited an aptitude for drawing at a very early age and his initial efforts at representation were drawings he made on sand (Anizoba 1987).

Enwonwu’s formal education began in 1926 at Saint Joseph’s Elementary School, Onitsha where he spent two years (1926-1928). He went through four other primary schools in Umuahia and Port-Harcourt before rounding off his elementary education at Saint Mary’s Primary School, Onitsha in 1931. The spate of transfers which characterized his primary education was necessary because, his mother was always on the move, and he thus had to live with many of his older ones, who resided in the above mentioned towns. In all these primary schools, his aptitude for drawing was recognized and encouraged by his teachers. At home, this aptitude for drawing was not met with enthusiasm by his mother and other members of his family. Enwonwu’s preoccupation with drawing seems to have met with serious opposition at home since he says he was ‘hated’ because of it. In order to understand this opposition, one must take note of the fact that modern Nigerian art was still boasting of only its pioneer and chief protagonist, Aina Onabolu. Modern Nigerian art was still largely in the throes of implantation, while intending artists and art inclined individual were regarded as oddities. This is understandable for even from the 1940s to the 1960s, there was that misconception of fine art as “a subject or career meant only for ‘people’ of hands’ whose brains were not suited to other purely theoretical subjects under the sciences and the other arts” (Guardian Newspaper 1985 p.35).

In 1933, Enwonwu gained admission into Government College, Ibadan from where he proceeded to Government College Umuahia in 1934. There he studied till 1938. It was at Ibadan that he met and studied under Kenneth Crosswaithe Murray who was to be the single decisive influence on Enwonwu’s choice of art as a career. Murray was then trying to introduce art to Nigeria’s secondary schools and Enwonwu was one of the five pupils selected by Murray as his pioneer art students. When Murray moved to Umuahia to establish art teaching at the Government College, Umuahia, he took his pioneer students with him. Under Murray, Enwonwu and his classmates were taught the rudiments of drawing and painting without the imposition of European conventions of art on them. They were also taught sculpture (Frank 1971).

In July 1937, Murray exhibited the works of his five students at the Zwemmer Gallery in London. Enwonwu was nineteen years old by this time and this exhibition became his first outing as an artist. Although he was not yet a professional, the exhibition at least earned him some recognition (Marshal 1980).

Enwonwu completed his secondary education in 1938 and secured appointment as an art teacher for some time. In that same 1938, he took part in the Glasgow Empire exhibition. In 1939 he was awarded the IBM bronze medal and prize money for a work that is now in the IBM art collection at San Francisco, U.S.A. In 1944, he was awarded a

shell scholarship to study art in the United Kingdom and later in 1944, he travelled to England for formal training in art (Oloidi 1986).

In England, Enwonwu studied art in the Goldsmith College (1944), art and anthropology in the Ruskin College (1944-1946) and art in the Slade College of Art (1946-1948) all in England. His education at this period was based on formal European academic art principles of naturalism and his training centered more on drawing and painting from life with intense studies in anatomy and European art history. The art of African peoples had no place in his curriculum. African art was not even acknowledged as a valid existing art form in spite of the avowed changes being wrought by African art forms on the European art scene (Oyelola 1980).

The twentieth century was being rocked by great formalistic experiments in all facets of European art. Enwonwu was quite obviously exposed in no small measure to the results of these experiments. He moved around Europe for some time, observing and absorbing the styles and manners of European artists. The influences he absorbed during this period was later manifested in some of his own works. By this time, he was experimenting with the manipulation and extension of his academic technique/forms and also in the translation into and use of these techniques in the realization of African forms. This period in his career could be said to be concerned with the process of and struggle for mastery over his medium. It was also the time when nationalistic and emotional reactions to the status of *blackism* and the Black Status were being fermented in him. He was thus solving the problems of professionalism (technical mastery) and identity formation, and it was also during this period that he came into contact with the Negritude philosophy which was to constitute the ideological base for his creative endeavours (Kojo 1986).

Enwonwu had several art exhibitions between 1946 and 1950 notably at the Museum of Modern Art, Paris in 1946, and at the Bekerly Galleries, England in 1947. He also had a one-man show at the Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and also exhibited at the Gallery Appollinare in New York that same 1950. By this time, he was already establishing a professional base, and he was becoming more famous in Europe and America (Beier 1960).

In 1947, he returned to Nigeria to take up the post of Art Adviser to the then colonial Nigerian Government. His post had rather undefined duties and the attendant freedom enjoyed by Enwonwu allowed him to draw his salary, live and work in relative comfort. Between 1968 and 1971, he served as cultural adviser to the Federal Government of Nigeria and he was also associated with the Nigeria High Commission in London. The period 1968-1971 was the period of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Thus while in London, he used his art to preach the position of the Gowon administration as regards the conflict with the secessionist state of Biafra. Earlier in 1960 as the art and cultural adviser to the Federal Government, he had led the Nigerian contingent to the first World Negro Arts Festival in Dakar, Senegal. He was also a special consultant to the Federal Government when Nigeria hosted the second World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977 (Trowel 1978).

In 1971, Enwonwu became a visiting artist to the institute of African studies, Howard University, Washington D.C. Later in the same 1971 he became a visiting professor to the University of Ife in Nigeria where he stayed until 1975. It was at Ife that

he painted most of the 'Dance' series of works which represent his most typical approach to painting in terms of composition, use of motifs and colour work.

Enwonwu belongs to many cultural organizations, and he holds many awards and titles among which are, Royal Artist (Member Royal Society of British Artists), the Nigerian National Award of Merit, several honorary degrees and the traditional titles of Nze na Ozo and Odigwe Omenka. Thrice married with children, the artist divides his time between his Ikoyi, Lagos residence and London (Anizoba 1987).

### **Enwonwu's Works**

Enwonwu's most recent exhibition was in Lagos on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1987. This exhibition constitutes a paradox, since one would expect that by 1987, some two decades after Enwonwu's peak period, he would have gone a long way to resolving the identity problem which beset his expression with echoes of two conflicting cultures. The paradox is that, if anything, the conflict of styles, the duality ever present in Enwonwu's expression has taken on an added dimension of violence. Enwonwu's themes did not really change except that he started experimenting with pushing his prominently curvilinear forms to the point of pure abstraction as evident in Fulani Form (plate 2) and in his rather dubious romance with totally abstract sculptural forms (plate 3). In his academic style, the themes still remain the same – portraits and the representation of immediate environmental realities such as land-scapes.

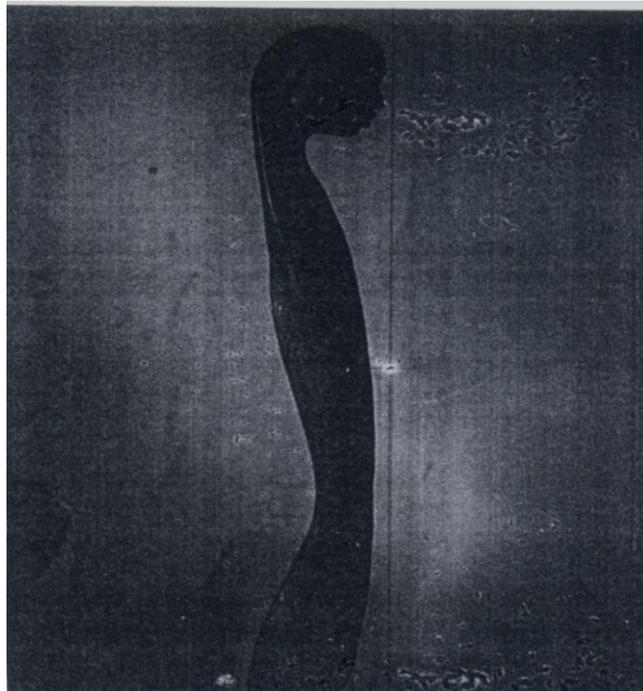


Plate 2

The added dimension taken on by this artist's works was one of intense violence. The artist seemed to be more violently attacking these subjects in a manner which hinted at frustration with his inability to break himself loose from the confines of the limitations imposed on him by the constancy of his artistic themes. When Enwonwu sought to resolve this crisis in his works, his realization of the futility of his actions created despair

which bursts out in violence in terms of paint application and brushwork in painting and in his sculpture, increased exaggerations of forms. The violent brushwork mentioned above is discernible in an unfinished portrait that was produced by Enwonnu (plate 4). Paintwork in this portrait is quite evident and though the colours blend and exhibit an analogous harmony, violence is expressed in the speed execution and in Enwonwu's very act of painting this portrait – he was stabbing at the canvas with his brushes.



Plate 3

Another work that reflects this theme of violent action is a triptych which appeared in Enwonwu's October 1987 exhibition (plate 5). In this work, the idea of intense action is

captured through the strength of the surifit unhesitant lines bunched together all over the picture surface. The painting has an immediacy that reminds one of the works of Wihelm de Koonig both in the violence of line and emergent nature of the forms in the finished work. Although the painting treats an old theme of dance, the subtle colour play and devotion to painterly detail which characterize the earlier expressions of this theme are absent in the latter work. The lines in this work have assumed a graphic quality.



**Plate 4**



**Plate 5**

The examples shown above indicate that Enwonwu is not at a stylistic dead end. Although he has not changed his old themes or even his philosophy of art, his violent expression started to threaten the stability of that theme, and the artist seemed to have started to shyly make fresh thrust in new creative directions. This new attitude may be a conscious reaction to the knowledge that it is time for him to move on, to change and to loosen his perception of art and the world. In any case, it is definitely a sign of artistic maturity.

In Enwonwu's art, woman or the female figure began to assume new qualities. He now tended to abandon his idealistic image of woman and to stress the sexual rather than the spiritual qualities of the female form. This inclination to sensuousness finds concrete representation in "Torso of Womanhood" (Plate 6), and in "Girl Undressing" (Plate 7). It will be interesting to know to what level this artist pushed these evident inclinations to the material seasons as opposed to the spiritually graceful aspects of form in his subsequent works.

Enwonwu was even more withdrawn from contemporary Nigerian art scene. He still contributed his quota to this experience as evidenced by his last exhibition. Paradoxically, it is this exhibition that graphically portrayed how alienated this artist became from the contemporary social situation. The themes of the works exhibited still remained Enwonwu's nostalgic memories of past times and this is an indication that the artist was out of tune with the immediate social reality.



Plate 6



**Plate 7**

**Conclusion**

From the above discussion, one can deduce that Enwonwu has been relevant to the modern art experience in Nigeria. His relevance was here measured by his achievements and by the main criticisms of his person and his art. The discussion of these criticism shows that the artist consciously tried to extend the scope of modern Nigerian art at the height of his own career. Enwonwu's placement in the modern Nigerian art education history is thus second only to that of Aina Onabolu.

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