

## THE LIFE AND ART OF ERHABOR EMOKPAE: A CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL THEATRE.

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### **Abstract**

*Erhabor Emokpae was involved in street decoration for the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977 (FESTAC '77). He fulfilled the task of environmental embellishment as one of the functions of sculpture. Among such sculptures of late Erhabor Emokpae are the mural sculpture at the entrance of the National Theatre, Igbamu Lagos. The artist's life history and works will be discussed and reviewed in relation to his past and present relevance in Nigerian art. The previous works done by the artist and all his commissioned ones will be critically analysed in such a way that they will be of benefit to most people and especially sculptors who are interested in understanding the materials he used in achieving those classical works.*

### **Introduction**

It is necessary to emphasize that my use of culture in this paper does not encroach into the expansive discourse of culture as a worn-out concept in academic disciplines. Rather I deploy culture to mean localized lifestyles applied to specified contexts. Almost seeming that no other concept could qualify the particularities of individual practices in their different locations, 'culture' seems to emerge as the single befitting tool needed to explain such practices that are peculiar to certain individuals. A change in a 'culture' often results in a change for the reason of creation of art. It is possible to suggest that there are four primary reasons for the existence of any art form. These could be physical, spiritual, intellectual or for expressive reasons. The physical reason could be the mechanical properties which may be symbolically or psychologically related. The intellectual reason may involve the deployment of abstract ideas, perhaps, for the purpose of analysis, interpretation or prediction. The spiritual reason may deal with improvable beliefs such as religion or superstitions. The expressive reasons are those which are as a result of the emotional nature of humans and may include fear, pleasure, hate and patriotism, to mention only a few. A culture may require sculpture as evidence of its maturity or interest in the cultural aspects of civilization. It is obvious that sculptures cannot exist beyond the intellectual level of culture. The development of sculpture is also limited by spiritual concepts because a culture which has God as a structural basis for the explanation of its existence may evolve religious-oriented sculptures that imitate the supernatural being. A sculpture work that is oriented towards culture is functional for the culture in that the individual within the culture are able to absorb the sculpture in their existence without conscious effort. This point brings to note the essence of decorations or decorative embellishment in the country as a contributory factor of sculpture to the culture of the society and Nigeria as a whole. Erhabor Emokpae paved his potency in the art world through gigantic works he produced in public places during FESTAC in 1977 and the decoration, the embellishment of both the interior and exterior of the National theatre. Focusing on his works, his techniques, especially his sculptural murals, it will be seen that the artist worked more in fibre glass medium. He was one of the sculptors who popularised the use of fibre glass as a medium in art production. It is important to

state that this write up is based purely on information got from oral interview with Professor Agbo Folarin.

### **Biography of late Erhabor Emokpae**

Late Erhabor Emokpae was born on 9 May, 1934 in Benin City. He hails from Irede Local Government Area of Edo State. Late Chief Emokpae was a son of the late Chief Ogieve Emokpae. He started his education at Government School Benin in Edo State and ended up at Technical College Yaba, now Yaba College of Technology Lagos, (YABATECH). Emokpae joined the Federal Ministry of Information as a commercial artist in 1953 after leaving school. He was later transferred to Enugu, the information service in the same year. He worked as a trainee in 1953 and then as a commercial artist 1954-1958. He got married in 1957 and finally left ministry of information Enugu in 1958. On leaving there, he moved to Lagos and joined the West African Publicity (now Lintas West Africa, Lagos) where he was employed as a creative Visual Artist in 1958. He was promoted to the post of Senior Creative Advertisement Visual Artist in early 1966 and later became the Creative Director of Lintas in 1973. Thereafter, he formed his own outfit which is called ASA production Nigeria Ltd. ASA production was based in his own house, on Josephy Shingle Street where a lot of people are working with him. According to Folarin (2000) a lot of exhibitions have been held by Late Chief Erhabor Emokpae since 1954. He held exhibitions in Enugu in 1954, 1955 and 1956 while in Lagos. He also held exhibitions in 1959, 1960, 1961 and 1964 and in West Germany in 1960, 1962 in London and in Brazil.

He took part in many joint exhibitions in 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1963 in Lagos. He was Kunst aus zentral Lafrika as travelling Arts from Africa of our time Phelps strokes fund New York all from December 29 to January 1961, more so in London 1962, 1969 and 1970 and between 1965 and 1966 in Canada. Other joint exhibitions he participated in include 'the Contemporary African Art,' Camden Art Centre, London from August to September 1969, 'the Contemporary Nigerian Prints and Painting' 'the 4<sup>th</sup> Ife Festival of the Arts Gallery of the University of Ife' (O.A.U) in December, 1971 and lasting offerings from the God's Society of Nigerian Artists, Lagos State chapter, June-July 1985. The later was a posthumous exhibition.

He became one of the renowned members of the Society of Nigeria Artists. He was known to be very hard working during his life time. His justified attitude started off since the late 50's 1956-1959 to be precise during which he helped to organise the Eastern Nigerian Festival of Arts. Due to his perseverance and dedication to work, he was unquestionably in one of the founding members of the Society of Nigerian Artists. He became the Secretary of Lagos Arts Council in 1965 and Society of Nigeria Arts from 1967-1975. Folarin (2000) states that, his commissioned works also launched him into the art world, through the mighty and gigantic works he did in the public places. His name became a household one within Nigeria and beyond especially during FESTAC '77. The street decorations and the embellishment of both the interior and exterior of the National theatre made him popular. Also the notable ones among his works are the mace he designed for the University of Benin in 1970, murals on Nigerian Institute of International Affairs on Kofo Abayomi Street Victoria Island and mural for Standard Bank now First Bank Western House and many more.

Further still, the Festac '77 festival symbol a work he produced in 1973. He also did bronze frieze and the decorations at the National Theatre Lagos in 1973 and 1974. Emokpae would be remembered for his great contributions to the street of Lagos and his responsibility and coordination of the interior of National Theatre. He was honoured for all these with the Officer of the Order of the Niger (O.O.N) by the Federal Government. His hobby was reading. d on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, 1984.

### **Themes and styles of Erhabor Emokpae's works.**

According to Folarin (2000) since drawing is referred to as the fundamental elements of the search for individuals expression, Late Erhabor Emokpae noticed that when he was young, the only thing he was good at was two dimensional drawing and also engaging himself in moulding forms in

clay which made him to believe that an artist has the potentials of visual communication with the public without verbal approach. With this, most of his works at the entrances of National Theatre could be said to be representation of human day to day activities. The range at which he expresses himself is more varied, but the information on the images or the relief sculpture in its unity of representation and styles remain unaltered. Emokpae can also be said to have extensively experimented with interchangeability of positive and negative elements in his relief sculptures.

Folarin (2000), during an interview on his idea about the originality in art, asserts that “Originality in art is simply an illusion although such an illusion in a debate could create and bring up diversified interpretations”. He believes that all experiences whether artistic or otherwise are reflections of what was before, that is all things in art have been in existence beforehand. According to Folarin (2000) late Erhabor Emokpae was both a spiritualist and traditionalist, and with this, all the traits were consciously or unconsciously manifested in his sculpture murals at the entrances of the National Theatre.

### Erhabor Emokpae’s works



Plate 1: ENTRANCE “A” OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

The sculpture mural at the Entrance “A” of the National Theatre which can be referred to as most outstanding of the four works at each entrance can be said to deal specifically with the transfer of black culture to the world. One could notice the lovely ivory mask which is attached to the skirt of Ovoranhwen in 1897 when Benin Empire was burnt down. The Ivory head was taken to Britain after Ovoranhwen was imprisoned. Looking at the mural, the map of the world surrounded the different local heads, while the Ivory head was centralised, which shows that African culture can be said to be very important among other cultures.



Plate 2: ENTRANCE “B” OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Entrance “B” shows Emokpae’s abstraction of African mask figures and Motifs. Most of the Masks are like *Akuaba Doll* of Ghana. The abstracted masks are the heads of African people in diversity-ethnic groups and it shows that the heads or the figures are different from each other. This means that the different heads represent different African dignitaries.



Plate 3: ENTRANCE “C” OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Entrance “C” shows the mask of the masquerades, faces of people and few traditional paraphernalia and drums. This mural could be said to be depicting a festival or masquerade day in African culture in which a masquerade is followed with his entourage. The sculptural mural styles are repeated on the same panel, most of the figures are elongated and with the same African mask.



Plate 4: ENTRANCE “D” OF NATIONAL THEATRE.

Entrance “D” sculpture murals show the theatrical performance of the group of performing artists. Musical instruments are shown being played by different people such as the figure of a flutist quite visible in the work. A drummer is depicted and faces also seen with agape mouths shouting or miming to the music played. All the figures are also in African mask or African heads.

### **Conclusion**

This paper briefly highlights Erhabor Emokpae’s life and works. While the paper does not claim an entirely formalistic interpretation of his works, it goes on to underline the location of the works to the development of modern Nigerian art. Emokpae’s works are expression of his personality. He was a gentleman and an ardent artist indeed. He could also be said to be an embodiment of tradition, a motivator and a dualist to the core. Looking at the achievement of Late Erhabor Emokpae until his death, one can see that an artist should not be particular about making money at the initial stage, but his primary aim should be to make name, and money could follow afterwards. Emokpae fits into an old adage that says “*A prophet they say is never recognised in his own land*”. Emokpae can be said to be a prophet of duality and a perfect abstractionist. No wonder why his Festac ‘77 designs arrested the attention of viewers as they wished and strived to see more of his works. This point brings to note the essence of decoration and embellishment as a contributive factor of sculpture to the society as a whole. Emokpae has laid a very good foundation for the upcoming artists or sculptors. His life, time and works remind us of the famous statement by John .F. Kennedy, “think of what you can do for America and not what America can do for you”. Erhabor Emokpae rarely accepts commissions from individuals rather he chose to work for the society and that is why his works are found mostly in publics.

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