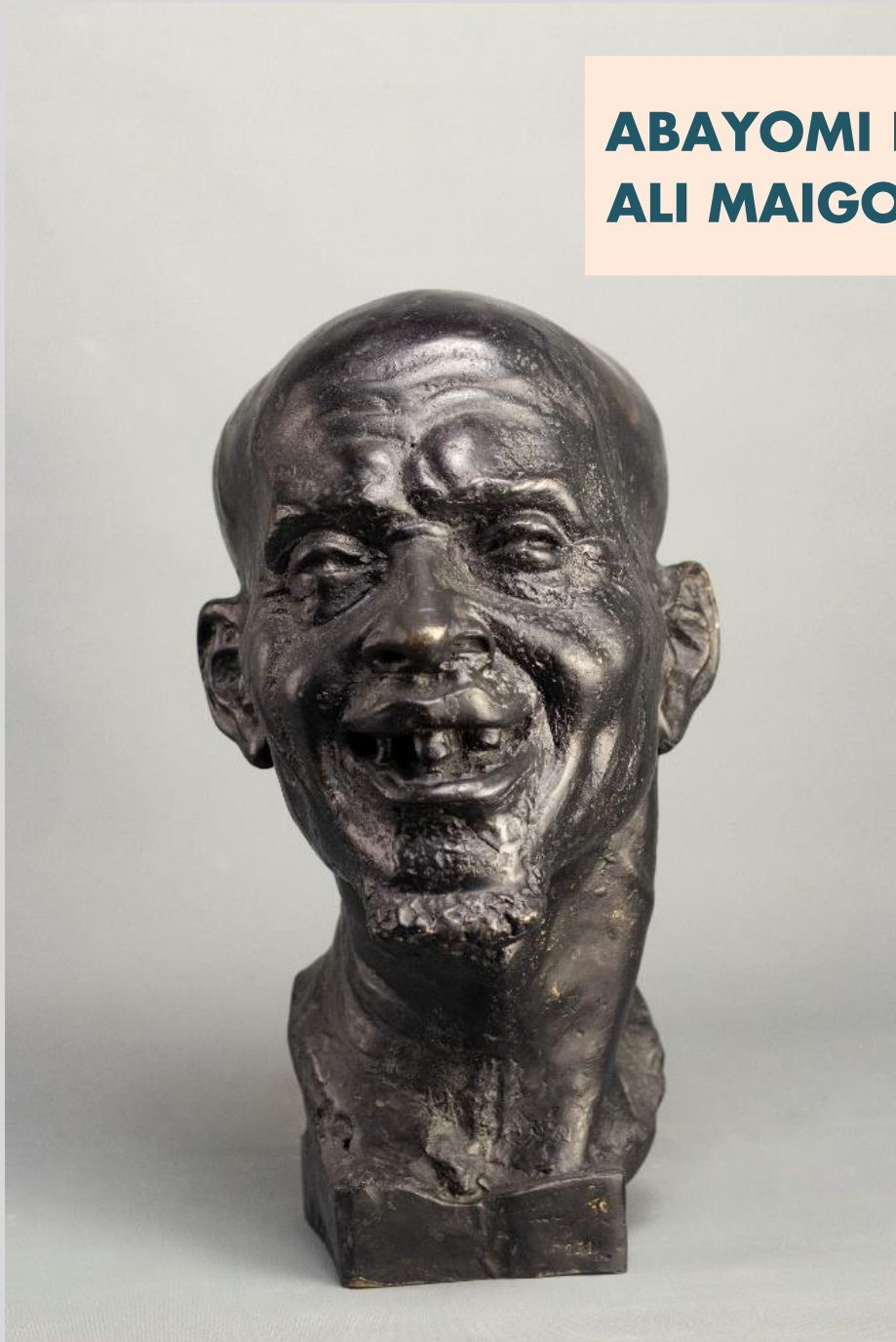




Artwork Information Sheet 11

ABAYOMI BARBER'S ALI MAIGORO



Ali Maigoro (6/7), Bronze, 43x25x37cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

Bust portraits have been an integral part of Nigerian art since the Ancient arts of Nok, Ife, and Benin. Some of the sculptors portrayed realism, a skill that Westerners deemed impossible by African Artists. Sculptor and painter, Abayomi Adebayo Barber (b.1928) felt that artists of his time produced Art that supported this Western misconception. He, therefore, positioned his artistic ideologies against Western perceptions of African authenticity as 'primitive', 'crude', and 'unskilled'. Consequently, Abayomi's works were centered on naturalism and surrealism. Just like the father of Nigerian modernism, Aina Onabolu, Barber's art is often viewed as not exuding Africanness. Contrary to these insinuations, Barber's subjects and theme are mostly drawn from his Yoruba heritage. Usually, he expresses African people and environment and Yoruba mythology in his works. Before he became a painter, Barber's first love was sculpting. One of the sculptures representing his Artistry in the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is Ali Maigoro, the bust of a humored aging man which epitomizes the potency of his ideology which birthed the Abayomi Barber School of Art.

THE ARTIST

It is no coincidence that Abayomi Adebayo Barber became inclined to art at a very young age. His artistic philosophies are also not far-fetched as he comes from and grew up in Ile-Ife (present-day Osun State), the cradle of the Yoruba people, and the home of the naturalistic, stylized bronzed heads. This is evident in his relationship with the throne as great Grandson to the mother of the Once Ooni of Ife and familiarity with the palace where many Yoruba art forms abound. In Odibo (2003) Abayomi himself states that at the tender age of two, he could already differentiate between art that was graceful, and art that was grotesque and unrefined as he recalled being terrified by the brightly coloured Yoruba carvings situated at almost every corner of the Ooni's palace. As a child, he recalls also being inspired by the Education week organised for school children to

experience historical places and objects in Ile-Ife. After visiting ancestral groves, Barber was particularly fascinated by the naturalism of the works. According to Ughiamo (n.d.), he began imitating his sources of inspiration and he excelled across several forms of art, showing a growing proficiency in the rendition and crafting of visual forms in both two and three-dimensional forms.

Growing up, Barber had little interest in school. In primary and secondary schools, he would leave class to go to the bush to observe nature and imitate it (Odigbo, 2003). Because of his interest and constant practice, by the time he began his tertiary education, Abayomi had created a portfolio that was outstanding amongst his peers. He began tertiary training in Yaba College of Technology, Lagos where he enrolled in a sculpture program. He was later sent to the United Kingdom by the Nigerian Government to study art under a unique government art scholarship, through his encounter with the premier of the Western Region, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. From 1961 to 1971, he lived in the UK, occasionally attending art seminars and working on Obafemi Awolowo's sculpture and painting. In 1971, he returned to lecture at the University of Lagos and became the mentor for an informal afro-surrealist school of art, known as the Barber School (Igweze, n.d.). The School of art was established on a foundation that debunked the idea of tagging their art "African" not only because of the demeaning expectation of such art by the Europeans but also because they believed that "art" is the universality of individual artists' experiences (Odibo, 2005). This does not mean that their work was not "African". On this note, he further explains,

This underscores his reason for maintaining an approach that he has stamped indelibly upon the art of the Barber school, and that is painstaking realism with an affinity for a detailed super realistic finish. Attributes of Yoruba culture establish emphatically the character of the works as African, whether portrait or landscape. Themes are often centered on folklore, mythological personalities, events, and settings. Generally,

the ideas center on common folks, without pretensions of being elitist.

Among his many works that have stood out in the industry are his famous Yemoja paintings, his Ali Maigoro sculptures and his surrealist landscapes, some of which are displayed at some art institutions such as the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art. (Uwaezuoke, 2019).

THE WORK



Figure 1. *Ali Maigoro* (7/11), 2011, Bronze, 43x25x37cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

This dark hue bust of a smiling aging man is an art piece that was most likely created by Barber from a mold of either clay or cement. The name “Ali Maigoro” was a name made up by Barber to match his Northern subject. The bronze cast art epitomizes Barber’s philosophies of naturalism and his penchant for depicting non-elite people. He created every single feature of the man in realistic proportions, emphasizing the aging features of the simpleton such as the wrinkles around his smiling eyes and his forehead, the hollows around his smile and his deteriorating teeth. In a nutshell, the bust was executed in the most naturalistic way that Barber knew how. The sculpture exudes a certain friendliness and warmth from the old man through

his contagious laughter. According to Igweze (n.d.), this sculpture was not entirely judged alluring by everyone. He wrote in an Hourglass gallery brochure of four sculptures by Abayomi Barber,

It’s the sort of sculpture that means different things to different people. When the then President of Nigeria, Yakubu Gowon, saw a version of the sculpture at an exhibition organized by the National Gallery, he was fascinated by it, but also worried that it seemed to give the wrong impression of the North as illiterate and uncivilized.

According to This day live (2020), the iconic bust of a wizened gap-toothed northern Nigerian man titled “Ali Maigoro”, evoked nostalgic memories of the simple life and warmth he left when he arrived in London. According to Igweze (n.d.), For Barber, the idea of Ali Maigoro may have been like a blanket on a chilly night. Homesick in London in the early sixties, he fantasized about Nigeria, the peace, the simple life, the people, and the warmth. He decided to create a sculpture to capture these feelings of warmth and simplicity. Indeed, something about a grinning, rustic, old man exudes so much joy and cheerfulness, which somewhat reenacts the easy charm of his fatherland. Despite producing several versions of the sculpture over the years, he later completed the smallest version in 1972 after his return to Nigeria. Subsequently, more versions of Ali Maigoro were produced, with our subject being one of them.

CONCLUSION

Ali Maigoro is one of the works that is very special to Abayomi Barber not just because it reminded him of home while he was abroad, but because he was proud of his successful attempt at capturing home while he was there. All his works, including Maigoro, countered many artists’ notion of ‘Authentic’ modern Nigerian art. In the opinion of Okwuosa (2014), his art belongs to an alternative modernism that most Western critics and scholars have not given space in their African art historical narratives, believing them to be mere parodies of Western art, and so

inauthentic. Barber exemplifies artists who are bold enough to go beyond boundaries even though this move incurs accusations of appropriation by the west.

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