

Artwork Information Sheet **18**

YUSUF GRILLO'S ABE NU GONGO



Abe nu Gongo, 1993, Oil on Board, 123 x 62cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian modern artists aimed to integrate indigenous cultural elements and forms with Western elements in their work. Painter and art educator, Yusuf Adebayo Cameron Grillo, is no exception. As a member of one of Nigeria's most popular visual arts groups, 'Zaria rebels', his works are deeply influenced by his Yoruba "cultural heritage and philosophies" (Bolarinwa, 2019). A distinctive favour for the colour blue often complemented by purples and greenish blues give away his regularly vibrant and sometimes subdued pallet. Grillo's works are characterized by abstract depictions of the human figure that suggest geometry in their form and attire, producing an atmosphere that conveys a stained glass effect all within prosaic Yoruba culture compositions.

The faces of his subject possess ghoulish expressions that resemble African traditional masks, especially the Yoruba carving style. His cubist style of manipulating shapes, juxtaposing sharp edges against soft subjects, line after line, shape after shape, until it takes form, is easily identifiable. One of such works is his "Abenu Gongo" a quarter pose profile portrait of a Yoruba middle-aged man, whose potent charm adorns his chest.

THE ARTIST

Yusuf Grillo is a well-known, influential figure in Nigerian art history, owing to his highly expressive, more abstract than naturalistic paintings. Grillo, born in 1934, was brought up in Lagos. Filani (n.d.) states specifically that "he grew up in the core Lagos metropolis; an urban settlement historically christened Brazilian Quarters". According to Filani, Grillo's family settled there after his grandfather returned from Brazil to their African homeland following the abolition of the slave trade. Grillo, thus, grew up in a "mix of socio-cultural diversity." Having Yoruba (Egba) and Brazilian roots, Graves (2015) identifies him as "Egba-Brazillian". Grillo learned about art as a child in Lagos, thanks to the influence

of his then-peripatetic teacher, Aina Onabolu, a pioneer of modern art in Nigeria.

In 1956, Grillo went on to the Nigerian College of Art Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, which is now known as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he received his Fine Art diploma and later his postgraduate education diploma. Grillo and his contemporaries were educated using the Royal Art School Curriculum as undergraduates, resulting in a very "Western" art education.

This, combined with the yearning for independence inspired Grillo and his contemporaries in Zaria to propagate an ideology called "Natural synthesis" which is a fusion of local content with western art techniques and style. With this goal in mind, Yusuf Grillo along with others like Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Okeke and Jimoh Akolo, formed the Zaria Art Society.

Yusuf Grillo incorporates Yoruba traditional elements in his paintings to achieve his goal of "natural synthesis." His works are often compared to Yoruba sculptural wood figures, which is most likely where he gets his figurative inspiration. Hence, Grillo's works are void of any "Photographic realism" and are characterized by elongated features, slimness and elegance (Bonhams, 2011). His affinity for the colour blue is also reminiscent of his Yoruba heritage as it resembles the 'adire' (resist-dyed textiles) common among the Yorubas in Nigeria (Bolarinwa, 2019). Since his subjects consistently mirror the Yoruba culture and people, they are often dressed in the traditional "iro" and "buba" for females and the males, in "Agbada" attires. Grillo depicts them carrying out mundane activities, making merry, in festive and religious scenes or simply striking poses. He usually features drummers in his body of work and creates his subject's features using fascinating and bold geometric elements. Their backgrounds are usually cubic, and he seldom incorporates naturalistic elements, and when he does, he merges them with geometry. It is unknown if Grillo has an individual in mind when making his works because their abstract existence lacks realistic features, but they retain their humanity, according to Filani (n.d.).

According to Filani, Grillo's lecturer, Clifford Frith told him as a student that the linear angularity of his paintings reminded him of stained glass. His later venture into stained glass art was influenced by the cubist nature of his works. Filani also notes that art collector, Kavita Chellaram first suggested that his paintings be re-represented in stained glass. Grillo did not simply copy his paintings into stained glass but restructured them creatively to suit the medium (Filani, n.d.). Describing the outstanding nature of his stained glass artistry, Graves (2015) evaluates his work as an arrangement of forms that reflect symbolic expressions of the Nigerian cultures from which his imageries were drawn, and a distinctive expression of a new style in Christendom's art. Today, Grillo's stained glass art is in many institutions in Nigeria.

Yusuf Grillo's decision to return to NCAST, Zaria, in 1961 for a postgraduate diploma in education after completing his Fine Art diploma was influenced by the government's encouragement of artists to pursue careers as professional educators. Afterward, he taught at Kings College in Lagos before moving on to lecture at Yaba College of Technology in Lagos, where he eventually became the head of the School of Art and Printing. He was instrumental in bringing together the College's enviable academic art program. Grillo is also the founding president and fellow of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA). While pursuing his academic goals, Grillo kept up a vigorous art practice, exhibiting and selling his work both in Nigeria and abroad.

THE PAINTING

The phrase "Abenu gongo" literally means "protruding blade mouth". This Yoruba saying is commonly used when referring to a potent charm called "Oogun Abenu gongo" (powerful charm). Grillo personifies this phrase in a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and an expressionless look. A stern brow rests atop a soulless eye valley, surrounded by mountains of sharp cheekbones and a comical forehead. His nose is broad, lips embellished by a short mustache, tower above the goateed jaw. His head, resembling a combination of a cube and

pyramid, is mounted atop a tree-trunk-like neck. Dressed in purple Yoruba traditional "agbada", complemented with a vibrant greenish-blue triangularly patterned cloth draped upon his left shoulder, the man's whole attire is accessorized by a colourful pendant of small objects' assemblage hanging from thin-lined strings across his neck. This assemblage, as the title entails, is probably a potent charm.



Figure 1. **Abe nu Gongo** (Detail), Oil on Board, 123 x 62cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

It's unclear if the man created the charm he proudly wears, since not only medicine men but also their patrons, wear charms. As a result, the subject of the painting may be a medicine man (Babalawo) or a Babalawo's patron. Charms and amulets were created by those proficient in mysterious knowledge beyond the ordinary. These medicine men were believed to commune with spirits and ghosts and were able to tap into spiritual powers. Grillo uses a dark blue background with soft hints of light by using vibrant colours against the background and upon the subject's features to suggest that he poses within a dimly lit room. The dimly lit atmosphere emphasizes

the stern look of the subject. This and the domineering position of his figure within the board's frame could connote the subject's confidence in his powerful charm.

In pre-colonial Yoruba land, charms and amulets did not correlate with piety, holiness or evil as claimed today. Instead, they were used to make life easier for people, for "protection, fortune-seeking, winning wars, and conquering empires". The charms were also used to solve everyday issues like curing sicknesses, hunting, and making travel easier (Soetan, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Grillo's art is distinguished by his ability to produce distinctly naturalistic abstract shapes. His work and that of artists like him are instrumental to the preservation of the Yoruba culture. Grillo has managed to inadvertently combine comical features with a serious topic and atmosphere in "Abenu gongo," in addition to epitomizing Yoruba culture.

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