



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **02**



**IGBO
UKWU
BRONZE**

Igbo-Ukwu snail vessel, (side view), Bronze work, 31x16x13cm
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INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOVERY OF IGBO-UKWU BRONZE ART

The Igbo-Ukwu bronze sculptures are dated back to the 9th century A.D. They are known as one of the earliest productions of bronze art in West-Africa. Their aesthetic features left their discoverers doubting the ability of African craftsmen of that period to create such artworks. Their artistry was as masterful as the Ife and Benin arts, yet more intricate.

According to Shaw (1984), five hundred years before Columbus discovered America, Igbo-Ukwu community was producing bronze castings of amazing virtuosity in South-Eastern Nigeria. The bronze art was first discovered in 1939 when a farmer named Isaiah stumbled upon several bronze objects as he was digging a cistern near his house. The bronze works discovered were made of utility objects such as fly-whisk handle, vessels, pendants, crowns, breastplates, swords and staff ornaments. These valuables were discovered from Igbo, in the Awka Division of Eastern Nigeria, about twenty-five miles south-east of Onitsha in three different sites labeled Igbo Isaiah, Igbo Richard, and Igbo Jonah (Shaw, 1960). These three sites, which were named after the owners of the compounds, were excavated, uncovering hundreds of ritual vessels and ceremonial objects of bronze or leaded bronze that are among the most innovative and technically accomplished bronzes ever made (Apley, 2001).

In 1959, Mr. Bernard Fagg, the Director of the Nigerian Antiquities Department commissioned Thurstan Shaw to excavate the three sites (Uzuegbu and Ikegwu, 2014). The first site, Igbo Isaiah, represented the burial chamber of a personage of great status. The second site, Igbo Richard was also a burial chamber that depicted the remains of a storehouse of ritual vessels and ceremonial objects. Both sites housed large bowls, pear-shaped bowls, scabbard supports, pieces of clothing among others.

Similarly, the third site, Igbo Jonah produced intricate bronze castings. Its excavation was sponsored by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

The circumstances surrounding the creation of Igbo-Ukwu bronze sculptures were unclear because they were largely undocumented until the intervention of archaeologists and ethnographers who made efforts to study the bronze works. One of Igbo-Ukwu's uniquely sculpted products, the ornate snail vessel sits within Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art. Although it is uncertain how old it is because no dating test has been carried out on the work, it is on display for art enthusiasts and the general public to experience the ancient bronze art culture.



Fig 1.1 *Igbo-Ukwu snail vessel*, unknown artist, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

WORK DESCRIPTION

According to Shaw (1960), this elaborate vessel is a model of Igbo-Ukwu's 9th-century bronze found in the first site, Igbo Isaiah. The patina coated object, presumed by researchers to be a ritual vessel is largely opined to be shaped like a land snail. Radiocarbon dates associated with Igbo Isaiah show that the deposits were made in 890 AD (Nwabueze, 1989).

The vessel Shaw found is made of leaded bronze and his analysis of the bronzes' metallic composition shows that the leaded bronze had low tin contents - 93% copper, (5 - 13)% lead, (1-2) % tin and 1%

arsenic copper (Ebighgbo, n.d.). Shaw's analysis further revealed that the vessel was either of a conch or the large African land snail. According to Dewey (n.d.), experts have identified it as a triton shell from the sea but it is a wonder since the coast is some 100 miles away from the sea. The shell possesses intricate thin strands of linear and curvilinear patterns on its surface which is typical of the Igbo-Ukwu bronze art. The largest part of the shell is divided into columns of various patterns, while the remaining sections have dotted patterns and vertical lines. These scarifications, according to Ebighgbo (n.d.), are "Ichi" symbols which are attributed to the royalty of the Nri people.



Fig 3. Ichi scarification, unknown photographer, ©<https://www.legit.ng/1175406-igbo-tribal-marks-meaning.html>

On the surfaces of Igbo-Ukwu snail vessels are irregularly placed relief adornments resembling insects. Such insects appeared on several other Igbo-Ukwu bronze vessels. These insects in the opinion of Dewey (n.d.) are "relief sculptures of crickets and flies". The dome-like end of the snail shell is also decorated with symmetrical relief sculptures of amphibians, better described by Dewey (n.d.) as "four frogs being swallowed by four snake heads".

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORKS

According to Uzuegbu and Ikegwu (2014), the burial chamber in Igbo Richard is unique compared to other sites due to its content, purpose as well as other religious and social implications. The structure of the grave, the goods recovered from the grave and the presumed position of the deceased indicate that the burial was that of a noble person in the society. Shaw (1960) during the study of his finds in Igbo Richard opines,

"What is the significance of all these rich finds? It seems likely that they are connected with a former 'Eze Nri' - the priest-king of the Umueri clan, which appears to have brought an intrusive culture into Igbo land; for I discovered that the sites we excavated used formerly to be in Orieri, not in Igbo, and Orieri is one of the two places which is particularly associated with the Umueri clan and has an 'Eze Nri'."

This observation points to a centralised system of government of the people in that area unlike other areas of the Igbo people, dissolved into autonomous communities (Ottenberg, 1983). The imagery on the bronze objects also indicates ritual worship. According to Dewey (n.d.), the insects, such as flies, locusts, grasshoppers, beetles or spiders, often depicted on Igbo-ukwu bronzes, may have reflected the importance of controlling such insects on the yam crop or illustrated a now-forgotten metaphor.

PRODUCTION TECHNIQUE

The people of Igbo-Ukwu, the earliest Smiths of copper and its alloys in West Africa produced their metal through hammering, bending, twisting, and incising (Apley, 2001). They practiced lost-wax casting also known as Cire Perdue. This is a metal casting method where a clay core is first formed, a wax layer is added and sculpted to shape, including fine details. Then chaplets, wax spruce, and vents are added. It is, furthermore, invested in clay and then fired. During the baking process, the wax is melted

out, creating a hollow around the clay figure then molten metal is used to fill the hollow and is left to cool. After the feeders, spruce and vents are removed and the sculpture is formed (“Everything You Need”, 2017).

“This shows that the Igbo-Ukwu smiths were not only superb craftsmen but they also had a practical understanding of the metallurgy involved. The Cire Perdue bronze castings are made of an alloy of copper, tin and lead, which is ductile and casts well, but objects of copper, which does not lend itself easily to casting, have been wrought by hammering, bending and chasing, which you can do to copper more easily than you can to bronze (Shaw, 1984).”

The shell vessel is a result of this sculpting technique. The decorative parts were cast separately and carefully attached unto the shell’s body. Acknowledging their expertise, Dewey (n.d.) says that the bronze casters were confident in their techniques as hardly any flaws can be seen.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of Igbo-Ukwu’s bronze art brought the people’s artistry to the limelight and also elevated the art from a demeaning level. It shows the Igbo-Ukwu people’s appreciation of arts and portrays the intelligence of the bronze sculptors in their abilities to capture their patron’s perceptions. Through the artworks, we can perceive the taste of their patrons, the complexity of the sculptor’s tools and the materials at their disposal. This is a totality of what art should mean to its society, which is, mirroring and interpreting its values.

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