



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **27**

BEN ENWONWU'S AFRICA DANCES



Africa Dances, Bronze, 127cm (H), Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Modern Nigerian Art would be incomplete without the mention of Ben Enwonwu, an artist who achieved impressive heights in his career. As one of the first known academically trained artists in Nigeria, his life and work are important to Nigerian Art history. The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is proud to feature works from this reputable artist in its collection.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1917 in Onitsha, Ben Enwonwu was the last child of Omenka Odigwe Emeka Enwonwu and Iyom Nweze Enwonwu. His father was a technician at the Royal Niger Company and also a sculptor while his mother was a successful cloth merchant. Enwonwu was introduced to carving at a young age by watching his father carve images such as Okwachi (vessel of the soul), Osisi (staff of office for members of Agbalanze society in Onitsha), and Ikenga (symbol of identity) for the shrines in Onitsha.

In 1926, Enwonwu began his education at St Joseph's Elementary School Onitsha where he was trained by Kenneth Murray his Art teacher. From July to August 1937, Murray exhibited the works of his students at Zwemmer Gallery, London and Enwonwu was recognized as the most creative of all the exhibited artists (Ogbechie, 2008). Based on the success of the exhibition, Enwonwu and his colleagues received teaching appointments in the colonial Civil Service.

Enwonwu, on Murray's recommendation, was appointed to teach at Government College Umuahia where he taught till 1939. In the same year, he was awarded a bronze medal and prize money for a painting titled *Umuahia College Dining Hall*, Watercolor, 1938. He was also awarded a joint scholarship from Shell and the British Council to study Art in the United Kingdom through the

efforts of L.N. Harford who was then the director at Shell Company of West Africa.

He attended the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London in 1944, and the Ruskin School, Ashmolean, Oxford University, where the Slade had been transferred during World War II, in 1945. In 1947, he graduated from the Slade with a first-class diploma in fine art and enrolled at the University of London for postgraduate studies in anthropology (with a focus on West African ethnography). Enwonwu finished his studies in 1948 (Ogbechie, 2008).

Soon after graduation, he was appointed as Art Supervisor and artist-ambassador to the Colonial Government. This position projected him as the official artist of the Colonial Government who executed commissions and represented the country in diverse international art events. He was awarded the order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1954 for his contribution to the arts and a year later he received permission to sculpt the queen. This placed him at a level only a few artists of his time had attained.

PRELUDE TO AFRICA DANCES

Exposed to art as a child, Enwonwu came to understand the traditional philosophy of art in the Igbo society, which entails a mixture of physical and spiritual entities. According to Cole & Aniakor (1984), (as cited in Akpang 2016: 181) "in Igbo culture, the practical purpose of art is to channel its spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of rising forces...art must interpret all human experience". This gave lining to Enwonwu's artistic practice.

Similarly, Enwonwu's teacher, Murray encouraged his students including Ben to draw scenes from everyday life, using them to develop their styles by observing their environment and capturing it in their way. He inspired "Enwonwu to reengage with his culture and revolutionize it, taking into

cognizance the conditions of Nigerian modernity” (Akpang 2016).

While in Europe, Enwonwu faced the tide of racism that was prevalent in the society he found himself. There, artworks done by African artists were seen as copycats when they follow western standards and modules. The art of the African man was expected to look primitive and fetish, not realistic, or following canons of western art. All of these encounters and realizations welled up in him a nationalistic mindset and drive. Drawing from his involvement in political movements like the Oxford Union and the London-based West African Students Union (WASU) he understood the complex nature of the colonial administration and its numerous loopholes. He adopted the ideology of Pan Africanism from which Negritude emerged as its cultural arm.

“Articulated by Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal and Aime Cesaire of Martinique, Pan-Africanism stressed the need to capture the self-expressive manner of African cultural life, and under-score the importance of self-pride as a basis for personal liberation” (Nzegwu 1998). These movements were aimed at fighting for African liberation from colonialism. Students of African descent who were involved in these movements saw it as an outlet to express a new identity for modern Africa through literature, visual arts and other modes of self-expression. Enwonwu was in turn influenced by these ideologies.

Throughout his life, Enwonwu constantly expressed the theme of “dance” in his works. He painted and sculpted a lot of iconic pieces with this theme. The image of the black woman was a cultural icon of Negritude and Enwonwu vividly used it in his dance series although he clearly stated that his use of the female figure was an invocation of “the feminine force of the earth (Igbo: Ala/Ani) and not the generic images of womanhood in negritude art” (Ogbechie, 2008). Nevertheless, in his later works, he promoted Negritude themes. “In the Africa Dances Series (1972-75), Enwonwu reworked the formal

structures of his paintings, eliminating all suggestions of physical and contextual boundaries by setting his dancing figures in an ambiguous pictorial space” (Ogbechie, 2008).

He began exploring this theme while he was a student in London. It was the genesis of a new phase in Enwonwu’s art. In this period, his art acquired a more conceptual and abstract orientation which became more evident in his later works. “His sculpture of dancing figures metamorphosed into highly organic forms whose precise lines hinted at barely contained energies. He produced many bronze sculptures of male and female dancing figures between 1980 and 1984” (Ogbechie, 2008). He used these dance figures to represent his ideal of African culture.

AFRICA DANCES



Fig 1.1 **Africa Dances**, Bronze, 127cm (H), © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

In figure 1.1, a graceful figure of a female dancer is poised; the head sways backward while the knees bend as the body moves as if to a rhythm. The piece of cloth around the waist squeezes up in folds in response to the body movement. One arm is suspended mid-air as if in motion while the other

rests beside the figure. This work is part of a series of works called “Africa dances” which the artist produced. It has been observed from studies of Enwonwu’s works, that he began to make paintings and sketches of dance forms in the late forties and he continually returned to this subject matter in the later years of his career. What gives this piece more importance is the fact that there are sketches by Enwonwu of people in the same or similar postures as this exact piece. Based on information gotten from Neil Coventry, a Collector and Art Historian who is well versed in the works of Enwonwu, it has been gathered that Enwonwu read a book published in 1935 titled “Africa Dances”.

This book was written by Geoffrey Gorer, an English author and anthropologist who accompanied Feral Benga a famed Senegalese dancer on a dance research journey through West Africa, to gather material and recruit dancers for a company in Paris. This dancer who was a performer in Paris had also influenced or inspired other artists like Carl Van Vechten, Richmond Barthe and George Platt Lynes all of whom were part of the Harlem renaissance. It was an intellectual, social and artistic movement that took place in America in the 1920s. It is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance and art. This movement which began in America extended to other places like Paris and it was here that Enwonwu had contact with other artists who were part of the movement.

CONCLUSION

Considering some of the circumstances which surrounded Enwonwu’s life and career, it is obvious that different elements influence an artist’s output. For Enwonwu, these circumstances were pivotal instruments in his creative process. As an important work in his artistic oeuvre, “Africa Dances” portrays vividly the relevance of events to the creative process and highlights Enwonwu’s relevance as a modern Nigerian artist who portrayed an ideal of African culture in his works.

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