



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **29**

BEN OSAGHAE'S PRAYER WARRIORS



Prayer Warriors 2, Oil on Canvas, 122 x 122cm, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

Art is a reflection of society and artists often promote this relationship between society and Arts through their works creating art that can identify with their ethnic backgrounds. Unlike these artists who go back to their roots, some contemporary artists like Ben Osaghae prefer to focus on the present. Having left his mark in Nigerian Art History, Ben was not afraid of questioning and deviating from the norm. His work “Prayer Warriors 2” which is part of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art’s collection expresses his ideas as an artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born on June 23, 1962, in Edo State to Rev. F. S. E. and Mrs. Rose Osaghae, Ben was the second of 11 children. As a child, he traced figures on his writing pads and played with his food, molding them into little figures and shapes. He started his secondary education at Edopkolo Grammer School in Benin, in 1974. Here he was guided by skillful art teachers who nurtured his raw talent and encouraged him to harness his creativity. His access to drawing books and crayons also greatly improved the quality of his drawings.

His decision to study Art was reinforced by the Art prizes he had won. At the end of his Secondary education in 1980, he had to wait a year to be admitted to his school of choice. During this wait, he got an auxiliary teaching position at Adodo College, Benin City where he taught Art and Literature. In 1982, he gained admission into Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State (then Bendel State), to study Art.

At the Polytechnic, the Auchi School of Art and Design, initially known as the Department of Fine Art, is popular for its huge metal sculptures and expressionistic paintings. The drawing courses were essential for every student who intended to specialize in drawing or painting while the Art History course was compulsory for all students.

“Auchi in 1982 was mainly about technical skills and expressive individuality, not primarily about the artist and his or her role in society” (Castellote & Adetunji, 2014).

Students were encouraged to express themselves with colour palettes and were introduced to artists from the impressionist and fauvist movements. “The readily identifiable school style of the Auchi Colorists is the impressionistic manipulation of colour and light in a way that shows a mastery of the specific moods of the various colours and their generalized symbolic association in many cultures” (Castellote & Adetunji, 2014).

In 1983 at the end of his National Diploma in Painting, Ben spent the mandatory one-year industrial training on his own. He returned to Auchi for his HND (Higher National Diploma) which he completed in 1986. He majored in Painting and General Art History and graduated top of his class. For this, he obtained the Rector’s Certificate for Excellence. After his studies at Auchi, he was sent to Sokoto for his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) program. In Sokoto, he taught Art at Government Teachers’ College, Bakura, which was on the outskirts of the town.

He returned to teach Art at Auchi Polytechnic in 1990, where he taught life drawing, Illustration, and History of Art in his first five years (1990-1995) as a lecturer at the school. To give more time and attention to his studio practice, he quit teaching and practiced as a full-time studio artist from 1995 to 1999. In the same year, he decided to move to Lagos as it is the Art hub of Nigeria. Here he continued practicing full time until his demise on January 17, 2017.

PRAYER WARRIORS

Figure 1 shows two persons visibly standing before two microphones perhaps preaching or leading some songs of worship. The two microphones are attached to two orange-colored lecterns with a book opened on the first lectern. While we can’t see the

full figure of the person holding the book, there is someone behind the lectern whose hand is visibly placed on the book. This gives the work continuity beyond the picture plane.



Fig 1.1 **Prayer Warriors 2**, Oil on Canvas, 122 x 122cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

There are also two persons in the foreground of the painting; one rests her head on both arms while the other has both hands clasped in prayer. The background color is a dull green with strokes of yellow and orange at certain points. An interesting aspect of the painting is that all the figures are cropped (showing only a part of the entire body or object), with one form in the background showing what seems to be a scarf of perhaps another praying figure in the painting.

This painting falls under the “Religious Series” which includes several other works where Osaghae addresses the use of religion by some self-appointed preachers to enrich themselves. Writing about *Prayer Warriors 2*, he says, “In composing this work, I employ precision, economy, and dynamic space in the crafting of this artwork. Its colors scheme is simple: three raw splotches of cadmium orange, cobalt hue on a bed of light green, with some of the primed canvas showing through. There is a

remarkable interaction between the orange lecterns, microphones and the figures, the last of which constitute an obsessive preoccupation with prayers and spiritual matters” (Osaghae, n.d).

Osaghae’s painting may make one wonder why it looks unfinished but this is a deliberate style influenced by his studies at the polytechnic where students were encouraged to leave their paintings a little loose by not finishing it to the last detail. “A slightly unfinished painting was adjudged better than one which belabored the subject” (Osaghae, n.d). This trend greatly influenced Osaghae who dismembers the figures in his paintings to bits and pieces, leaving only what he desires.

In this work as with other works, he sets the scene and invites the audience to form their judgments. He challenges the viewer to look, think and try to understand his work. His works are like a caricature, he uses seemingly everyday events and occurrences to address real issues in society. Osaghae was also greatly influenced by the works of Edgar Degas one of the European Impressionists.

“Like Degas, Osaghae, after his initial years started looking at figures from unusual angles. Sometimes he shows only the heads or arms or other parts of the body; the boundaries of the “slice of life” seem to be arbitrarily set. The edges finish where they do, but the viewer is left with the feeling that there is much more to be seen.” (Castellote & Adetunji, 2014).

Though Osaghae’s paintings have not always been in this style, they have always tried to address the socio-political ills of the community. Osaghae is a firm believer that the artists’ work should be a tool for social change, striking up debates and conversations on societal issues. He asks “How can somebody continue painting landscapes when we do not have electricity for days?” (Osaghae, n.d). In his first solo exhibition, he recorded few sales but had good attendance. By his second solo show in 1997, his art had evolved some more. First was a shift in the theme;

By then, my focal interest had shifted to social issues because I was convinced that they affect the art industry rather poignantly. Since my art was people-oriented, there was no way I could have distanced myself from the situation, from what was happening around me. I had become more and more aware of the necessity of not simply displaying technical craftsmanship in itself, but also of commenting on the political, ethical, and religious aberrations plaguing the Nigerian polity (Osaghae, n.d).

Three years after his second Solo Show shortly after he moved to Lagos, he held his third solo show. At this time, he had discovered his distinct style; bright colours, thick lines, and cropped forms as portrayed in his work “Prayer Warriors 2”.

CONCLUSION

Should art be perfect and who defines this perfection? Osaghae’s work propels us to think about these questions and perhaps come up with new notions and ideas in response to them. For him, it was never about art for art’s sake but art for a purpose, and art as critique. “I do not think beauty should be limited to paintings executed in naturalistic hues, with glowing photographic, symmetric alignments. Neither do I believe that beauty should begin and end with works in which formalistic excellence or absolute fidelity to the purity of form and coloring is evinced.” (Osaghae, n.d). For him, beauty lies in the expression of a heartfelt conviction.

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