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MUSEUM OF ART  
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

# Artwork Information Sheet **35**

## **BEN OSAWE'S BRONZE BIRD**



*The Pelican, Ben Osawe, Bronze, 50cm x 29cm x 16cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.*

## INTRODUCTION

**A**rt is not always centered on abstract concepts nor is it compulsory for Arts to have a complicated meaning. Art can simply be about nature and a means to appreciate nature.

Prolific for his versatility and influence on Nigerian art history, Ben Osawe's art style reflects his African-European background. Although mostly known for creating sculptures of human and abstract figures, Ben Osawe's bronze bird sculpture displays the multifaceted nature of his artistic expression as he appreciates the Pelican.

## ARTIST'S PROFILE

Benson Nosakhare Gabriel Osawe was born in 1931, in Agbor, Delta state. He was one of Nigeria's foremost sculptors, having come from a notable family of artisans and craftworkers. His father served as a carver under the court of the Oba Eweka II of Benin. His father also taught him wood carving, ushering him into his Art career. He played a huge role in Nigeria's post-independence (contemporary) Art history.

Ben Osawe initially hawked the figures he carved for income until 1956 when someone encouraged him to improve his craft. This advice pushed him to save up some money and in the same year, he moved to London for formal training, to expand his artistic horizons at the School of Graphic Art where he spent about three years. In 1960, he transferred to the Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts and concluded a five-year study.

While abroad, Osawe took part in multiple exhibitions in Europe. One of such exhibitions was the 1965 Commonwealth Festival Exhibition in Glasgow where he was one of the five artists to represent Nigeria. He also took part in the exhibition of the Artists' International Association in London.

In 1966, Ben moved back to Nigeria where he began teaching at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and shared a studio with Felix Idubor. In 1979, he moved to Benin City from Lagos where he launched his new studio. His decision to move from Lagos to Benin came from his desire for a quieter environment, away from the hustle of Lagos where he can concentrate on his craft (Tajudeen 2011). Some of the Nigerian exhibitions he took part in are "Exhibition of Works by Contemporary Nigerian Artists 1977", "National Art Exhibition 1980", "Silver Jubilee National Art Exhibition 1985", amongst others.

Although Osawe's style and technique is mostly European and modernistic, his motif pieces reflect his African background giving his Art an African-European aesthetic. He is a versatile artist whose works have featured in various prestigious exhibitions in Lagos, New Delhi, New York, Senegal, Istanbul, and other parts of the world. His artwork spans across different media, including wood, metals such as welded alloys and bronze, and cement cast. Notably, Osawe's sculptures predominantly feature abstract busts and human heads, strongly influenced by African tradition, particularly the Benin culture. He made sculpted portraits of Obas, in the form of busts and heads to show respect and preserve the African cultural heritage.

Osawe employed the lost wax casting technique in creating majority of his sculptures. This method involved the initial molding of clay, which was then cast with materials such as plaster of Paris or cement. Notably, Osawe's artistic style involved the intentional accentuation of specific features on his figures for symbolic or aesthetic purposes. It is with regret to note that he passed away in June 2007 at his Benin residence at 76.

## THE PELICAN



**Fig. 1. The Pelican, Ben Osawe, Bronze, 50cm x 29cm x 16cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.**

The bronze sculpture of a bird with an elongated beak, which is part of our collection, is a tribute to the pelican. The artist has skillfully portrayed the bird's features with a smooth and graceful surface texture, deeply incised lines to depict the contour of the wings and eye, and accentuated feathers and beak with pliable lines. Notably, the sculpture's head is exaggerated compared to the body, which is smaller in proportion. The contrasts between the dark and light parts of the brown surface and the engraved lines create a visual effect that can lead one to mistake the sculpture for wood. The eye of the sculpture stands out, drawing the viewer's attention to the intricate details of this remarkable artwork.

Osawe has shown his artistic prowess in sculpting bird forms using both wood and bronze materials.

Among his notable bird sculptures are the Owl, Duck, and Woodpecker, alongside the Pelican, which serves as the subject of the sculpture in question. While the reasons for Osawe's choice of the pelican as a subject remains unclear, it is typical of his art to select subjects based on underlying qualities, which he then interprets in a modernist fashion. The Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus Onocrotalus*), predominantly found around freshwater and alkaline lakes in West Africa and other regions, is likely the species Osawe depicts. This enormous bird has a mostly white plumage, short legs, and a massive, broad, very long pink and yellow bill, with a dull pale-yellow gular pouch.

Typically, the male species have a downward bend in the neck, while the female species have a shorter, straighter beak (Aladdin, Great White Pelican n.d). While Osawe's sculpture likely depicts a male version of the bird, exaggerated features are clear, with the beak's length equaling the height of the whole figure, smaller eyes, and longer wings. The emphasis made by Osawe possibly compliments specific characters and strengths of the pelican.



**Fig. 2. Male *Pelecanus Onocrotalus*, © SA-Venues.com**

The sculpture in question, like many of Osawe's works, is a testament of his ability to create art that is both refined and expressive. This is because of his mastery of line works and his ability to employ

different shades and patterns of lines in unique ways, depending on the sculpture and the specific part being depicted. Osawe's signature artistic technique involves using deeply etched lines in various shades and designs, which form a significant part of his artistic style.

## CONCLUSION

Osawe was a leading Nigerian artist who belonged to the modernist movement. His formal art education facilitated a systematic approach to the application of written and oral rules of design and form in traditional art to modern art. Despite exploring modern themes, Osawe's artwork remains rooted in traditional aesthetic principles, which he employs to great effect. His work is an illustration of how the fusion of African and European aesthetics and styles can lead to exceptional visual art (Egonwa, 2005).

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