



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet **04**



**AINA
ONABOLU**

Awaiting Verdict, 1932, Charcoal on paper, 60 x 75cm
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AINA ONABOLU

Representing the ingenious artistry that is Aina Onabolu within Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art (YSMA), are some of his figure drawings, one of which is “Awaiting verdict” (1932), a human composition drawing in charcoal on paper. Onabolu executed this work in the colonial period when Nigerian art was slowly being influenced by the European style of art after his successful effort to include art in the school curriculum. The work epitomizes the artist’s knowledge of human anatomy and his adoption of the “European” art media. Aina Onabolu, in the scrupulous production of his realistic paintings and drawings, was on the quest to defy the European conviction that the African artist could not produce naturalistic art. His notion and efforts, although criticized by a few as a submission to western art imperialism, propelled the dawn of “modernism” in Nigerian art and introduced formal art education in Nigeria.

ONABOLU’S ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Aina Onabolu was born on the 13th of September 1882 in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun state, to Jacob Onabolu, a successful Ijebu merchant, and Oshunjente Onabolu, a trader. Aina began his education at St. Saviour Primary School, Ijebu-Ode in 1892. In this period, it was fashionable among African Christian converts to take English names as a sign of their spiritual membership. Therefore, the Onabolu family changed its surname to Roberts, at some point.

In primary school, Aina Onabolu, known as J. Aina Roberts developed a strong passion for art and practiced by imitating photographs in European magazines and books. Onabolu had become a skilled illustrator who designed visual aids for school teachers at a young age of 12 (Onabolu, 2019).

In 1895, Onabolu moved to Lagos, where he further studied at Caxton House School and lived under the roof and mentorship of Dr. JK Randle, who inspired his belief in “African ingenuity and potential for sovereignty”, which became the driving force of his

life’s work (Onabolu, 2019). At the end of his secondary education in 1900, he continued to practice art on his own and held an art salon at JK Randle’s residence in 1901 and by 1902, art was a means of his livelihood (Iriwieri, 2010).

FORMAL TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL ART PRACTICE

The year 1920 was an eventful year for Onabolu. Before his departure to school, from 27 to 30 April 1920, he held the first major exhibition titled Pictures of Onabolu at the Empire Hall, Lagos. This exhibition of paintings he made from 1909 to 1919 was accompanied by the paper, Short Discourse on Art, a publication that was more than just an exhibition catalogue, it was a statement of his art preferences, his hopes for Nigerian art and plans for formal art education in Nigerian schools (Onabolu, 2019).

Onwards, he set off to study art at St. John Wood’s College where he obtained a diploma in art. He also schooled at Académie Julian in Paris, and the Royal Academy of Art in London, where he also obtained his certificate of proficiency in oil painting and fine art, all from 1920 to 1922. He returned to Nigeria within the same decade and set out to lay a foundation for art education in colonial Nigeria by advocating its inclusion in the school curriculum (Ezuluomba, 2016).

Initially, Onabolu taught informally because his first application to teach art in Nigerian schools in 1915 was rejected by the colonial administration. However, upon his success in the introduction of art education to the school curriculum in Nigeria, he began teaching a few prestigious schools such as King’s College, Lagos and CMS Grammar School, Lagos. His teachings comprised perspective drawings (the art of point of view), human figure drawings and watercolor paintings. His works led to the evolution of Nigerian art. To aid his creative enterprise, he adopted a European art teacher in the country named Kenneth C. Murray (Worldartreview, 2018).

Onobolu died in Lagos on the 3rd of February 1963 at 81. He was still entertaining commissions till he died. In his studio, he is said to have left an unfinished portrait of Adebayo Doherty which he was working on before his demise. Some of his notable works are, a portrait of Mrs. Spencer Savage, (1906), Portrait of Dr. Randle, Portrait of the Rt. Rev. Oluwole, a portrait of Sisi Nurse, Adam and Eve, amongst many others.

HIS IDEOLOGIES

Contrary to the typical perception of what African art was at the time, Aina Onobolu had a different perspective of what African art could be. He believed that African art was a living, developing phenomenon, not an activity. (Okeke, 1979:14). He, therefore, thought strongly that African art could evolve and so, he adopted the sciences of perspective, proportion, color technology, and chiaroscuro in his art and teachings of art. All these were innovations of colonialism. According to Okeke-Agulu (2015), Onobolu in his pamphlet, *A Short Discourse on Art*, identified with the realist tradition of Western art and he claimed, toward the end of the essay, that Yoruba traditional masks, sculptures, and drawings were “still crude destitute of Art and Science”.

Therefore, Aina applied what Olu Oguibe called “Reverse Appropriation” in his work, “Reverse Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art” which involved his manipulation of western art ideologies to the favour of African art. Emeni (2015), while elaborating Oguibe’s work explained this “Reverse Appropriation” thus:

“African art before colonization was conceptual or idealistic. It was dominantly not mimetic or realistic. With colonization, we adopted the academic tradition which is mimetic. In the same token western art with abstraction embraced conceptual art that dominated practice in Africa. The re-adoption of what the west took from Africa by practicing modern artists like Aina

Onobolu is an instance of reverse appropriation.”

In essence, Oguibe (2002) observed that through this, Aina Onobolu had gained a tool to express African ingenuity and potential for sovereignty. It was also proof that the arts of drawing and painting were not culture-specific and could not manifest the superiority of one culture or people over another.

This gave birth to Onobolu School or philosophy of art which exposed Nigeria to fully developed Western forms of art and art education. Onobolu was part of an African current of modernization, from which arose advocates of African nationalism and progress. He is referred to as the father of Nigerian modernism.

COGNIZANCE OF THE WORK



Fig 1. Awaiting Verdict, Aina Onobolu, 1932, 60cm x 75cm, charcoal on paper © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

Awaiting verdict is unique among Aina Onobolu’s works within YSMA, this is because it is unlike his regular photographic realism portrait painting style. It is proof of Onobolu’s dexterity and versatility as an artist. Besides paint and paintbrushes, he could also manipulate charcoal. The asymmetrically organized drawing depicts male human figures in profile view within an auditorium. The two men in the foreground seem to be standing while the others are sitting. The closest human figure in the foreground is depicted in almost silhouette but for

highlights that give away more details of his form and garment. Onobolu combined hatching and crosshatching shading with a smudging technique that gives the work an overwhelming chiaroscuro effect. His bold strokes chisel out the forms of the men and outline the doors and windows while blurring to give them volume. The title of the work suggests that the subjects are probably at a trial, awaiting some sort of judgment.

CONCLUSION

From a simple beginning of making illustrations by copying images in magazines and textbooks, Aina Onobolu developed a self-drive and a consistency that enabled him to lay a foundation for Nigerian modern art. Through his life and art, subsequent artists and art schools could confidently and freely develop ideologies that mirror their society and contribute to its development. Despite being judged by some as “anti-African art”, Aina Onobolu’s art was nothing more or less than African art. The father of Nigerian modernism used borrowed technique to express African themes and subject matters and if that isn’t African enough, then what is?

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