



# Artwork Information Sheet **06**

## EL ANATSUI'S SISI EKO



**Sisi Eko**, 1990, Wood, [H] 177cm  
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## INTRODUCTION

Within the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of art are the works of Nsukka based Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, one of which is Sisi Eko, an outstanding wood installation piece. It was created in 1990, a period when El Anatsui produced several figurative sculptures engraved with a rhythm of dots and lines. These sculptures were either a combination of uli, nsibidi, (native to the Igbo and Cross River areas of Nigeria) and Adinkra (native to Ghana). He therefore named them *Adinsibuli* symbols or abstract symbols. El Anatsui utilised wood (a traditional material) at the time because it enabled him to create objects heavily based on traditional beliefs, motifs and subjects. To achieve this, he employed a method called “pyrography”, involving the use of fire and heat to create designs against wood surfaces, in addition to the use of power tools. This methodology and concept became very popular and significant to the Nsukka School of Art because of El’s major efforts in its propagation being a lecturer there (Onuora, 2015). El’s sculptural works generally often consists of fragments, assembled into whole pieces, and today, he is popular for his bottle cap installation pieces, or as he often calls them, “metal cloths”. His works, whether wood, clay, or found objects, seek to defy traditional sculpture’s notion of static form.

## LIFE, CAREER AND ARTISTIC IDEOLOGY

El Anatsui was born in 1944 in Anyako in Ghana’s Volta Region, a predominantly agricultural and fishing area, belonging to the Ewe tribe. He was the youngest of 32 children in a polygamous family. His mother died when he was a baby and he was raised in a Presbyterian Mission House by his uncle, a Presbyterian Minister. El grew up and attended primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Ghana. From the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana, Anatsui holds a Bachelor of Art degree and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Art and Education (1969).

In 1975, El Anatsui left Ghana for Nigeria to pursue a career as lecturer in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. There, he met Uche Okeke, Obiora udechukwu, and other artists with whom he shared similar artistic ambitions (Onwuegbucha, n.d). Onwuegbucha also notes that El’s career flourished in Nigeria and his creative drive was better fueled, especially drawing inspiration from traditional visual art. In Turner, (2012), El reveals that as a boy who grew up in the mission house, he was Isolated from his indigenous society and he felt strongly that he wanted to know something about his own indigenous culture. He further said that he remembers coming across a national cultural center in Kumasi and there began to discover Ghana’s “very interesting art forms.” They included “adinkra,” a series of graphic symbols that represent adages.

El has explored a range of art media such as wood sculptures and wall reliefs spanning the mid-1970s to the late 1990s; ceramic sculptures in the late 1970s, as well as drawings, sketches and prints (Nwakunor, 2019). He has the habit of trying as much as possible to perfect his use of each media. Savage, (2005) expresses the vastness and El’s artistic explorations:

*Throughout his forty-year career as a sculptor, El Anatsui has addressed a vast range of social, political, and historical concerns, and embraced an equally diverse vocabulary of media and process. Using anything from Chainsaws and welding torches, to his intricate and meditative ‘sewing process’, he has shaped materials ranging from tropical hardwood, and broken ceramic pots, to grain mortars and evaporated tin lids from cassava graters, and railway sleepers to drift wood, iron nails, and obituary notice printing plates.*

According to Art21 (n.d.), His sculptures in wood and ceramics introduce ideas about the materials

and everyday life (their destruction, transformation, and regeneration), and the role of language in deciphering visual symbols. To further explain the meaning of his 'pyrographic' works, Berk, (2017) elaborated thus;

*For El, the puncturing and burning of the wooden slats and the brutal marks made with a chainsaw refer to the history of Africa and most specifically to the 1884 Berlin Conference, when colonial powers divided the continent.*

Today, El is popular for his bottle cap installation pieces which have become dominant in African art history and beyond. His art has become global as much as it is African.

His rippling metal installations are sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars and have been collected by major international museums. This includes the British Museum (London), the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the de Young Museum (San Francisco), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Guggenheim (Abu Dhabi), Osaka Foundation of Culture (Osaka), the Tate Modern (London), and the Museum of Modern Art (New York). (ZeitzMocaa, 2020).

## COGNIZANCE OF THE WORK



**Fig 1. Sisi Eko (Detail)**, 1990, Wood, [H] 177cm  
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Among other sculptures of El Anatsui, Yemisi Shyllon Museum houses Sisi Eko, one of his wooden installation pieces. The term 'Sisi Eko' is popularly known to mean 'Lagos Babe' or 'Lagos lady' and it refers to a lady who is trendy, classy and always fashionable (FiberRose, 2017). Therefore, the sculpture could be said to depict an elegant African beauty standing tall, adorned with embellishing scarifications.

It is a loose pile-up of linearly designed organic and geometrically formed wooden blocks. Hanging on one of its blocks is an irregularly shaped wooden block with a rope which should connote the lady's handbag. Although there are no specific body parts in this very abstract human figure, the head is clearly identifiable with a pair of eyes, crowned with an elaborate hairdo. Its free standing structure allows for viewers to observe it by moving around it. It was created using pyrography and power tools such as chainsaw and angle grinder. This slashing and burning of wood blocks mirrors El's 'challenge of the traditional notions of sculpture as a static art'. (Berk, 2017). Through its non-permanent nature, El gives its curator the possibility of re-arrangement due to the detachable nature of the sculpture. His choice of wood could also be a way of practicing his mandate of using, according to Binder, (2008), "whatever the environment throws up".

## CONCLUSION

El Anatsui's art epitomizes consistency in evolution as he grew from the conventional to the unconventional. Sisi Eko epitomizes his ability to take traditional methods and materials and recreate or restructure them to match contemporary ideologies and styles. It is a wonder how through his art; he is able to transform the stiff and static to the fluid and flexible. This is mostly characterized in his gin cap tapestries, and in this particular case, traditional wooden sculpture. Through this, he has been able to stand out in a vastly innovative art world and is a typical example of an Avant-garde artist.

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