

IZIBONGO

Celebrating Art in Africa and the Diaspora

Issue 60 - 2018

Saluting

Ben

Enwonwu

including review of
Ben Enwonwu: The Making Of An African Modernist
by Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie

Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

Every public figure, especially a pioneering one, will have their detractors; so it was with Ben Enwonwu. But what is undeniable, is his massive contribution to Modern Art - and the mastery of the materials he used.

I pay homage to this truly trailblazing figure, in *Saluting Ben Enwonwu*, which is a revised version of a previous work, entitled *Song for Ben Enwonwu*. Revised, in that a few verses have been added and words and sentences here and there, have been changed.

This issue also includes *The Necessary Song*, my review of *Ben Enwonwu: The Making Of An African Modernist*, by Professor Ogbechie.

Here's what the featured artist says about **Anyanwu**, one of his great offerings in bronze...
"My aim was to symbolise our rising nation. I have tried to combine material, crafts and traditions, to express a conception that is based on womanhood – woman, the mother and nourisher of man.

"In our rising nation, I see the forces embodied in womanhood; the beginning, and then, the development and flowering into the fullest stature of a nation – a people!

"This sculpture is spiritual in conception, rhythmical in movement and three dimensional in its architectural setting – these qualities are characteristic of the sculptures of my ancestors."

From Nigeria, I am happy to present to you, BEN ENWONWU.

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from *This Day Live*

Benedict

Chukwukadibia

Enwonwu

Saluting Ben Enwonwu

1917 – 1994

to the Ben Enwonwu Foundation, Professor Ogbechie;
and to the memory of Aina Onabolu.

Verse for the First Teacher

to Odigwe Emeka Enwonwu

If I sing a song of you Ben,
There must be a verse for your father.
Before the classroom of Kenneth Murray,
Workshop of the Master Carver.

Your father told you of wood,
Immersed you in the culture.
He told you of the Igbo,
Of their past and their forever.

African

St. Joseph in Onitsha,
St Theresa Umuahia;
Going to school in the shadow of the saints.
St. Mary Port Harcourt,
St. Patrick Ibusa;
Took Western input with an African constraint.

School Teacher

They must have missed you when you left,
I imagine the weeping of one and two.
I see them waving saying,
"We'll miss you Mr Enwonwu"

The Visionary

For Ibadan and Umuahia,
I give thanks for Kenneth Murray.
Teacher and mentor,
Exhibition facilitator;
I give thanks for the visionary.

Ben and Pablo

Did it make your face glow,
To know the place where you were first exhibited,
Picasso's paintings would hang there also?

Zwemmer

Although you were not there, I imagine if you had been..

Your heart pounding, stepping from the famous street, into that legendary gallery.

An African artist in a Western gallery. Only Albert Lubaki was there before you. Both
Gerard Sekoto and the Makerere students came two years later.

Your heart pounding that day in 1937, as you stepped from Charing Cross Road, into the
Zwemmer Gallery; representing your culture, your country and your continent.

Remembering Harold Moody

Did Dr. Moody go to Zwemmer?
Was it featured in the *Keys*?
If not to his house in Peckham,
You must have known of the L.C.P

Prayers to Anyanwu

You must have felt the cold Ben, that first winter at Goldsmiths. Prayers to Anyanwu.

Did you curse the elements, the first time that you forgot your gloves? Prayers to
Anyanwu.

I hope you weren't badly hurt, the first time you slipped and fell, because of a piece of ice.
Prayers to Anyanwu.

When you left in the morning, you must have petitioned the sun deity of the Igbo, to bring a
little something of what she represents, if only for a little while. Prayers to Anyanwu.

Lewisham Way

For those who walk by everyday, it will mean nothing; but for me, it is certainly something.
That I trod the same pavement in Lewisham Way going to Goddis Lodge, as you did, going
daily to Goldsmiths College.

Caribbean Voices

During the war years,
Did you tune into Una Marson?
With her *Caribbean Voices*.

You must have seen the film clip,
Featuring Leary Constantine,
Talking of contribution choices.

Necessity

One day when waking,
You found yourself,
Going to a place called necessity.
From London to Oxford,
Slade to Ruskin,
Your turn as evacuee.

Songs of the Igbo

The only African artist there,
In 1946,
At the Modern Art Museum in Paris;
Presented by UNESCO.
But you held your head high,
You spoke and walked around;
While in your head,
You sang the songs of the Igbo.

Ife

In your time of terracotta,
Adventure with fired clay.
You sang of gilded history,
Golden verses of Ife.

Time With The Edo

I heard you went to Benin,
To those who know of bronze.
Where else would you go?
You went to Benin,
To the guild of the casters,
Gone to spend time with the Edo.

Uli

In your time at Slade,
They taught art history.
But they omitted Africa:
They did not teach of Uli.

First

The first African to graduate from the Slade,
Came away with a degree of the highest grade.

Scholarship

Afewerk Tekle arrived,
Just after you'd left,
Sent by Haile Selassie.
As you were funded,
By The British Council,
And the Shell Petroleum Company.

WASU Celebration

I imagine the WASU students, streaming in through the door of the Berkeley Gallery:
beaming with pride. Streaming in, through each and every exhibition you had there, as well
as those at the Piccadilly Gallery. Beaming, to see a fellow African West African, a young
man like themselves, presented in such a setting. Was Nkrumah still there? I know your
first Berkeley exhibition was 1947, which was the year he returned to Ghana.

I see the students back at the Camden Hostel, talking of potential and toasting a pioneer:
pouring libation to the ancestors, raising a glass to you.

A Time To Join

1948 was your year of invitation and acceptance: fellowship and membership. The Royal
Anthropological Institute; Royal Society of British Artists; the Hampstead Arts and Artists.
Was it through the latter that you got the studio in Hampstead? Where those classic shots
were taken, with you in a white lab coat.

Lagos

That 1949 Lagos exhibition, was that your first in the homeland? Did all the peoples of the
country come through the door.

The Tiv, Ijaw and Ibibio;
Hausa, Fulani and the Edo
Ebira, Igala and the Igbo.

I hope that over that two week period they all stepped in, to recognise achievement; to join
the celebration of a fellow Nigerian.

Jacob and the Yoruba Girl

As soon as he saw her, he knew he had to have her. 1950 was the year that Jacob Epstein
fell in love with - and got the the Yoruba Girl.

Hallowed

In 1950, America called you. So off you went - to New York, Washington and Boston, exhibiting and teaching. Howard University in Washington, where so many of the greats had studied or taught, or both.

Did you meet Alain Locke?
Converse with William Hansberry?
My William the Conqueror,
Founder of African Studies.

You were in some hallowed company there. Howard nurtured so many leading figures, in such fields as education, literature, music and civil rights.

Roberta Flack, Amiri Baraka:
Harlem Heroine Zora Hurston.
Ralph Bunche, Andrew Young:
Nobel Laureate Tony Morrison.

Milan

Summertime in Italy,
Another step on the jewelled stair.
The July and the August,
Gallery Apollinaire.

Iroko

From the UK you received an MBE,
Commission from Ibadan University.
So you gave them the *Risen Christ*,
From the trunk of an iroko tree.

He Gave Us

On Judgement Day they will say
"He gave us *Anyanwu*,
Let him go through."

Aaron and Arturo

1956, back again to America, courtesy of Howard University. In April you went to Fisk. Did you talk with Aaron Douglas? If you did, I know you must have spoken of his African travels. I imagine you both, two pioneering artists, both well travelled, talking of creativity, movement and Movements, of Lois Jones and Gerald Bhengu - and of the continent and the diaspora. June found you in the Shomberg Centre. Although he had left us physically by the time you got there, did you feel a touch of that energizing spirit. Did you hear a whisper from Arturo Shomberg?

Buckingham Palace

From Kenneth C. Murray,
To Masters in Anthology,
Into Time Magazine.
Student days Ibadan,
Exhibition Japan,
To a bronze sculpture of the Queen.

Treasures of Igbo Ukwu

What did you speak of,
In time at the palace,
When Queen Elizabeth sat for you?

I imagine you smiling,
Proud to tell her,
Of the treasures of Igbo Ukwu.

Tate

1st Voice: Your paintings have hung

2nd Voice: In the great galleries of the world

1st Voice: The Smithsonian

2nd Voice: The Goethe Institute

Voices: Your *Queen* on a chair at the Tate.

1st Voice: In the early days you walked alone

2nd Voice: Opening doors for others

1st Voice: Piccadilly Gallery

2nd Voice: Glasgow Exhibition

Voices: Your *Queen* on a chair at The Tate.

1st Voice: You had culture to share,

2nd Voice: A country to speak of

1st Voice: Songs of the Igbo

2nd Voice: Anthem of the Nation

Voices: Your *Queen* on a chair at The Tate.

Accolade

The late fifties was a time of accolade, wasn't it? The Bennett Prize, given by the Royal Society of British Artists; Commonwealth Certificate, presented by the Royal Institute of Art.

Nigeria

You wanted all of them in your art; such as the Hausa, Yoruba and Urhobo: all the peoples that constituted Nigeria. They were all invited to the workshop of your creation: to sit at the Great Table of Independence.

Ballad in Bronze

When I look at *Sango*,
I think of strength:
Anyanwu of spiritually.
In your interaction with bronze,
We saw facets of our humanity.

The Culture Parade

You told the world of masks,
You shared the masquerade.
You invited one and all,
To join the Culture Parade.

Ben and Howard

1971 was a special year;
As you went back to Howard,
As the Visiting Artist,
Continuing the love affair.

Senghor

Another reason 1971 was a special one, is that Senghor said come – and you went. He invited you to Dakar, so he could confer one of the country's highest honours on you: Officer of the National Order of the Republic. You, who had done so much for Africa. An invitation from a poet to an artist, both believers in the potential and the power of the arts. When he sang the song of Negritude, you joined in on the chorus. Senghor said come, so we can say a public thank you to you.

Academia

University of Lagos, you were made a Fellow. Then honorary degree, from Amadu Bello. Followed by Fine Art Professorship, Obamfemi Awolowo.

Kola Nut and Prayer

You accepted the kola nut offered,
Made a libation with beer.
In your time to become *Agbalanze*,
You offered many a prayer.

Beauty and a Blessing

Your sculpture in Parliament,
Outside of national buildings;
Copies of Tutu in houses and flats.
You embellish the country,
A little beauty for all;
A blessing for the model who sat.

Wole and Chinua

Nine years after Senegal, Nigeria gives you one of its highest honours: National Order of Merit. They've given it to the writers Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe; this year, 2017, they gave it to your fellow artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya.

Nimo Blessings

Did you enjoy working with Uche Okeke, in his home town of Nimo, at the Asele Institute, where you became a Fellow?

Lagos and London

1985, 1987 and 1990, became the years of the retrospective, in Nigeria and England: Lagos and London. It was time to look back and celebrate, while you were still with us.

Ancestors

In 1987,
At the passing of your brother,
You became the *okpala*.
The new man of ritual,
In a sacred role,
Connection to the ancestor.

Gratitude for Eternity

You've truly gone celestial Ben. They've named a crater after you, up there on planet Mercury: Enwonwu Crater.

They say its bright rays illumines the surrounding area: so it was with you. Through your sculpting and painting, lecturing and writing, you enlightened us about the African continent.

We thank you for the light: we thank you for your eternity.

Enwonwu Crater

You've truly gone celestial Ben. They've named a crater after you, up there on planet Mercury.

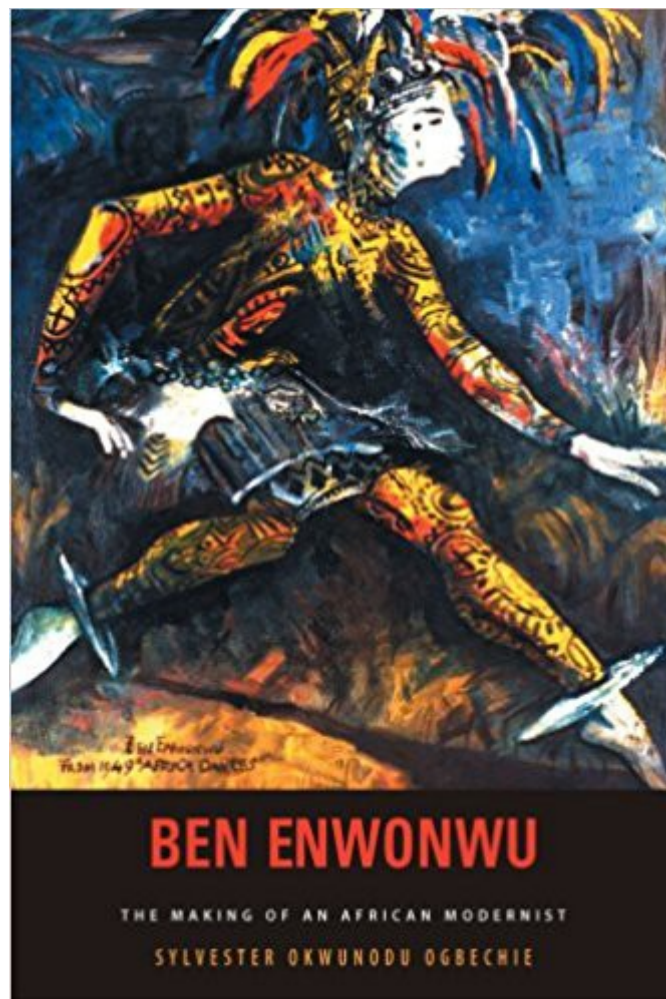
They say its bright rays illumines the surrounding area: so it was with you. Through your creativity, lecturing and writing, you enlightened us about the African continent

We thank you for the light: light eternal. Enwonwu Crater.

In Time To Come

In time to come,
In the time before sunrise and sunset,
We'll still marvel at Mercury.

In time to come,
In the time of gallery and internet,
We'll still marvel at your mastery.



from Amazon UK

The Necessary Song

I give thanks to Professor Ogbechie, for filling the gap.

In the preface, after informing us of the work of the artist, that can be found in private and public collections worldwide, he says "*Despite this broad reach, there is no book anywhere that focuses on Enwonwu's art or on his career as an African modernist*". A sad fact, which no doubt generated the writing of this book, long overdue.

Where is the biographical book, on Aina Onabolu, Oche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo or Bruce Onobrakpeya? At least there's one on Demas Nwoko, which looks at his architecture. But in the order of things, chronologically, it had to be the monograph of Aina Onabolu or Ben Enwonwu, that came first.

What comes out of this one for me, is his commonality. He's always seen as this pristine, professional, ambassadorial figure; but within this encomium, we hear about loneliness, mood swings and depression. I say encomium, because that's what it is. No matter the above and the heavy criticism he faced from certain groupings of varying ages, at various stages in his life, this is an insightful testimonial, a homage to an icon: who was just a man.

A book meticulously researched over two decades, in Nigeria, America and England. When reading the acknowledgements and the fellowships which allowed the research, it reminded me of some of the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, who were able to study and travel in Europe, due to funding from The Harmon Foundation, Rosenwald Fund and the Guggenheim Fellowships.

I'd never really thought much about twins. The reason I say this, is that Enwonwu's twin brother died soon after birth. Here's an excerpt from the first paragraph about his twin and their lost relationship. "*The most obvious effect of such loss is the feeling of incompleteness generated in the surviving twin. Since twin identity is predicated on binarism, a search for complementary identity is at the centre of the personality of lone twins*". Could this have contributed to his personality changes, his times of seclusion? The second of the two paragraphs that focus on this aspect of his life finishes with the following sentence. "*Throughout his life, his divergent personalities, focus on puppetry, introspective nature and propensity to visions and hallucinations indicated that Enwonwu was both himself and an "other"*". Twins have a deep connection, seemingly unfathomable to the rest of us. For example, the early 20th century African American photographers, Morgan and Marvin Smith, married other identical twins on the same day: and divorced them three years later, on the same day.

Some of that loneliness stemmed from often finding himself caught between a rock and a hard place: the expectations of his European patrons and those of his countrymen, especially those of the creative and Igbo communities. They all wanted something. The assumed and enforced responsibility: four hats for the one head. I think that sometimes, rather than having to interact, he simply withdrew.

He'd received his tertiary education in England; first exhibitions were in the UK; he'd been supported or had undertaken commissions by high-ranking figures in British society; made a member of various academic associations; sculpted Queen Elizabeth II – and been given an MBE.

But he was born in Nigeria; his father a master carver, his mother a textile merchant, both highly respected in Onitsha. As well as a Nigerian, he was also Igbo, with a connection to the Edo. He loved the shrines and sacred groves, the masks of the masquerade. At the death of his oldest brother, he would be the next lineage head. Wherever his education and travels had taken him, there was still tradition to follow.

He was the first, there was none who went before him. The Congolese carver/painter Albert Lubaki had his work exhibited in 1929, in Brussels, Rome, Paris and Geneva, but was forced to stop painting in 1936. But he hadn't been trained in French art schools, or had the strong support from the French elite or artistic communities: his paintings didn't sell well, although Coco Chanel was said to have been a buyer of his work. Royalty didn't pose for him, his name didn't appear on any academic listings or a recipient of national decorations. So when Enwonwu stepped onto the world stage, there was no precedent, no role model or manual to follow: he was the first.

Could he be accused of elitism? Could the charge of snobbery be laid before him? When reading of his non-appearance at scheduled events, non-interaction with younger artists, his Nigerian exhibitions held in "high places", his refusal to engage in this and that, the answer is arguably yes. Had education, connections, travel and world applause, raised him too much above the average Nigerian? When at home, he appears to have spent much of his time "*ensconed behind the high walls of his Ikoyi residence*". But there was also his mission in the colonial era and after, as Art Supervisor and Advisor, to upgrade art provision and materials in Nigerian schools, which generated frustration and left him in continual limbo. An ambassador for his country abroad, he wanted to do the best he could internally, but he kept coming up against that ubiquitous brick wall.

But whatever criticism he faced, whether from Uche Okeke, the unnamed artists, members of the Ugbo and wider Nigerian community, he put African art – its modern version - onto the world map. The first African to graduate from the Slade; probably the first African – amongst four fellow students - to exhibit in a UK gallery; the first African to sculpt a European monarch. What might seem commonplace now, was monumental then. He opened the doors: because he was highly skilled in the use of bronze and wood, watercolour and oil. The book gives a little retrospective of his great skills; from an earlier offering, a watercolour from 1935, entitled *Coconut Palms*, exhibited at the 1937 Zwemmer Gallery exhibition, to a 1989 oil, called *Ogolo*. When we talk of bronze, who cannot be impressed by the elegance of *Anyanwu*, the emanation of strength that comes from *Sango*; the dignity of the *Portrait of Nnamdi Azikiwe*. He had deepened his knowledge of bronze, from time with the master casters of Benin.

One of my favourite oils, is *Storm Over Biafra*. The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, is blessed to have it within their collection, as the National Gallery of Modern Art in Lagos, is blessed to have *Mother Africa* in theirs.

In watercolour, I keep going back to *Ogulu*, with its confident stride and playful visage; to

Madonna and Child, with their African physicality. Good to see the *Risen Christ*, a wood sculpture, as a work in progress and in its magnificent completion. Enwonwu's father would have been proud to have seen the door for the Church of the Apostolic Delegation, with its carved, story telling features: a work of pure devotion. When you look at his creations, you can see why he continually received commissions throughout his life, from Nigerian as well as British clients. You can see why his sculpture adorns government buildings and international venues.

One of the things I respected him for, was his Pan-Nigerian thought, where he sometimes fused elements from other ethnicities of his homeland, into his artwork; such as those of the Yoruba, Hausa, and the Urhobo. That was his way of celebrating the potential of Independence, of saying "yes, we can do this together". When you look at his artwork in terracotta, they are like libations to the spirit of Nok.

I have two regrets about his life. One, is the lack of enthusiasm of the governments – colonial and post-colonial – so he wasn't able to implement his vision for art education in Nigeria. Would have liked to have seen that blueprint come to life. The other is his refusal of the Chair of Fine Arts, at the University of Nigeria. Imagine the great legacy of teaching he would have left; like Uche Okeke at Nsukka and Demas Nwoko at Ibadan. But we cannot have everything: we have the art.

Loner? Eccentric? Recluse? He's not the first creative figure to be described that way – and he certainly won't be the last. For those interested in Modern African Art, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making Of An African Modernist*, is a must. The author is like a performer at a celebration of life, singing the necessary song. So I give thanks again, for Professor Sylvester Ogbechie.



from *Tail Slate*

Sylvester

Okwunodu Ogbechie