Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

Bruce Onobrakpeya
Nigeria (b. 1932)

Ekpevwe (Thanksgiving Dance)

The development of contemporary art in Nigeria, as in many African nations, is inextricably linked to the country’s path towards independence and the development of a collective national consciousness. Often referred to as post-independence or post-colonial, Nigerian contemporary art fuses modern Western techniques with the country’s diverse indigenous heritage. Contemporary Nigerian artists have cultivated a uniquely African art that questions Eurocentric assumptions in an attempt to write their own version of their history and create a collective sense of national identity. Drawing on cultural traditions from around the country, Nigerian artists weave their country’s rich indigenous aesthetic traditions and narratives into their own cultural, political, and social concerns to create a new narrative and a mythology upon which to base the future.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, a pioneer of contemporary art in Nigeria, is a leading figure in synthesizing the cultural and aesthetic tradition of his own heritage with the modern techniques he was taught. In a career that spans more than 60 years, Onobrakpeya’s work includes paintings, sculptural installations, collages, and prints. In addition to Nigerian folklore, his often highly textured works also borrow elements from Christian iconography, Greek mythology, and other cultures, proving that while his art is grounded in Nigerian lore, the artist takes a universal approach and recognizes that he is part of a greater world. He often borrows from the mythology of other nations. An example of Hydra, the Greek mythological monster, wanting to reference the economic, social, religious, and political challenges that Nigeria had to face upon liberation, a metaphor that also lends itself to discussing the problems of humanity at large.
The work titled *Ekpevwe*, a word of the Urhobo language meaning *Thanksgiving Dance*, on metal foil plastocast, is created from the used plastograph plates, which have sculptural low relief effects. Along the bottom, the plastocast depicts 13 abstract, yet heavily African style figures engaged in a dance of gratitude to God for what the artist calls the “gifts of health, wealth, love, friendship, long life, and children.”

The figures are set against a display of letters of the Ibiebe, the Urhobo word for letters or alphabets. The Ibiebe alphabet represents not only the music that accompanies the dance in *Ekpevwe*, but was invented by Onobrakpeya himself to help form words and express ideas and concepts that reflect the Urhobo world view.

**About the Artist**

Considered one of the founders of modern Nigerian art, Bruce Onobrakpeya was born into the Urhobo people in 1932 in Delta State, in southern Nigeria. His father was an Urhobo carver. He was brought up as a Christian, but also learned Nigeria’s traditional beliefs, myths and legends, elements which he later incorporated into his art. His family moved to Benin City where he attended Western Boys’ High School and was introduced to art. With a government scholarship, he studied art and education at the Nigerian College of Art, Science, and Technology, Nigeria’s first formal art school, located in Zaria, northern Nigeria, where he was trained in the Western tradition of representational art. After graduation he taught art at his former high school.

While Onobrakpeya’s formal education was in painting, he is also a sculptor and is considered Nigeria’s foremost printmaker. Over his long career, he invented printmaking techniques of his own as well as experimented with existing ones. Most notable are his plastographs, a technique that he invented. A deep etching technique, the plastograph consists of engraving on a low relief surface made of zinc or similar material, and printed in the intaglio style, where the image is incised or etched into the surface capturing the ink, embossing the paper upon which the work is printed.

Onobrakpeya is a founding member of the Zaria Art Society, established at a time when many African countries were struggling to gain freedom from colonial domination, and aimed at celebrating indigenous Nigerian cultures and freeing the country’s visual arts from almost exclusive emphasis on Western artistic traditions. The goal was to blend indigenous art traditions with those from Western cultures to forge a uniquely Nigerian aesthetic.

Onobrakpeya is also a founding member of the Society of Nigerian Artists, and has taught at numerous institutions in the United States, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. His works can be found at the Tate Modern in London; the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C; the Vatican Museum in Rome; among others in Sweden, the Netherlands, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Germany.