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**OLABISI ONAWALE FAKEYE: A RENOWNED CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN
SCULPTOR AND ART EDUCATOR**

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Abstract

The dearth in modern Nigerian Art, coupled with lack of interest and commitment, sculpting was relegated into obscurity. This trend continued until a foremost contemporary sculptor and an artist of various fields Ben Enwonwu developed interested artists in sculpture, drawing and other fields of the arts to move contemporary Nigerian Art to enviable heights. Other renowned sculptors of repute of his time were Ben Osawe, Isiaka Osunde, Felix Idubor, Festus Ogiamen, and Dick Idehen among others. Sculpture as part of visual arts, is an art form which is as important as Graphic design and Metal design. Bisi Fakeye a contemporary Nigerian sculptor, ranks among the first in Nigeria known for his giant size sculptural pieces rendered with great draughtsmanship. This paper therefore focuses on his style and his contributions to the growth and advancement of sculpture in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Sculpture, Visual Arts, Draughtsmanship, Contributions*

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, the development of the artist starts from the primary, secondary to the university. The tradition art starts from workshops and studio practices under great masters of art. Workshops and studios have produced countless artists who executed sculptural pieces of administration for example in the palace of the Oba of Benin. Besides, many artists have worked unnoticed under masters in studios and workshops to improve their skills. The Abayomi Barber School exposed the youth to modern Nigeria art tradition after his experience both overseas and at home under credible masters. Bruce Onabrakpeya with his modernistic approach to art, has invited both informal and formal art participants nationally and internationally, after his experience in the university and through studio practices. In all, knowledge dissemination that characterized the workshop centres is the same with that of the Universal Studios of Art: a centre of creativity where Bisi Fakeye was able to impose on apprentices who practice under him, his wealth of experience assumed under his uncle Lamidi Fakeye, this article focuses therefore on Bisi Fakeye a traditional sculptor who had successfully, over many years, operated between traditional and modern sculptural styles, he is well known for his huge art works.

2. His Early Life and Educational Background

Bisi Onawale Fakeye, a sculptor and woodcarver, was born on the 8th of March, 1942, at Ila-Orangun in the present Osun State. He is of Yoruba percentage. He was born to David Adeosun Fakeye and Alice Adefunke Fakeye. He trained as a wood carver and sculptor. Bisi Fakeye hailed from the six generation of carver's family that engaged in apprenticeship system at the family compound. According to Adedeji (2000: 9), Fakeye's creative interest as a child, and his constant work experience in his late father's workshop, rekindled his pursuits to be a renowned carver. He further stated that he enrolled at Saint Matthew's Anglican Primary School, Ila-Orangun, between 1949 and 1950, (Ibid: 10-11). After his primary education, he enrolled at the Local Authority Secondary Modern School Ila-Orangun from 1957-195, (Ibid: 12-13). In the secondary modern school, Onwuka (2001:10) affirms that Fakeye's creative knowledge which he derived from the father's workshop helped to broaden his expressive thoughts. He again enrolled to further his education at the Divisional Teachers' Training College, Ile-Ife, in 1960 where he obtained his Grade 11 Teacher's Certificate. (Ibid: 11).

Bisi Fakeye survived many difficulties in life. He discontinued the higher educational pursuits to concentrate on workshop practice. This rekindled his desire for more experimentation with much vigour and a burning passion to appropriate what, to him, is an ancestral legacy. His uncle, Lamidi Fakeye, encouraged him to perfect the method of manipulating delicate carving instruments like chisels, knives and other sharp objects to define his carving techniques. (Ibid: 11-12). His Uncle's inspirational talks, drills, assignments on huge works, put Bisi at a disadvantage position because he could not have time to rest and also have time for other contracts outside his studio apprenticeship. Very fortunately, these drills gave him advantage in his future carrier. Sometimes, his Uncle will deliberately on countless occasions, apportion difficult works

to him, while asking other apprentices secretly without his knowing, not to assist him from the start to the end . According to Olojo (2004:22-23), the training he received under his Uncle Lamidi Fakeye helped to sharpen his artistic skills. During the preparation for the Nigeria’s independence anniversary art exhibition of October 1 1960, Bisi Fakeye assisted his uncle Lamidi Fakeye in putting works and materials in the right perspective. This opportunity enabled him to carve a twelve foot wood-work, which became a focus at the exhibition stand. His versatility and radical approach to work after the exhibition made his uncle to extend his apprenticeship under him for another five years Olojo further confirms (Ibid: 24).

In the Arts and Artists, A Catalogue on Modern Visual Arts (December 2010-March 2001: 66) also affirms that during this period of apprenticeship, Bisi’s creative ingenuity was located by art connoisseurs, and this created greater opportunities for him “to explore, to investigate and to pattern a unique style of woodcarving”. The originality in his work and invention of unique techniques attracted large patronage in the former Ondo Province in 1964. As the years went by, he became more forceful and prolific, while he also refused to hold rigidly onto traditional themes that were identifiable with his Yoruba people of South-Western Nigeria; of course, his works generally acknowledged the cultural heritage of the Yoruba group, (A personal interview with Bisi Fakeye, September, 2008).

3. His Experimentations

His new aesthetic vocabulary was widely accepted because of his basic Yoruba formalistic idiom. On his arrival in Lagos, within three years, he had featured in two major exhibitions in 1973 and 1975. Before he was officially introduced to the management of National Gallery of Art by Sina Yussuff, he had already been recognized widely as one of the most creative artists in contemporary Nigeria. He carried this image and status into his membership of the Universal Studios of Art (USA) while he also made his creativity more focused in the subsequent years of his art practice in Lagos, (Resurgence: An Exhibition Catalogue 2006:8-9).



Plate 1: Bisi Fakeye’s Tools.
© Universal Studios of Art.

Bisi Fakeye’s sculptural pieces always betray his love for subject-matters relating to the race, culture and lore of the Yoruba people. As a traditional woodcarver, the Catalogue further concludes that he still utilizes modern formalism to invent an

independent language. His indigenous forms and symbols are admired by art connoisseurs who are ready to learn from the pristine primordial messages derived from the Yoruba cultural heritage. His stylistic and technical progressions are attributable to self discipline and mastery of his working tools (Plate 1). His tools respond not only to the functions he intends them to perform, but also to the visual aesthetics that he advances in his visual imagination. The way he handles the instruments determines the quality of his artistic renditions and output. He classifies his tools into different categories in which the smallest ones are used to carve delicate areas of the wood, while the big ones are used to carve hardest portions of the wood. The chisels that he uses in carving are eighteen in number, and they are always kept neatly, well sharpened, oiled and lumped together to prevent rust, in another (A personal interview with Bisi Fakeye September, 2009).

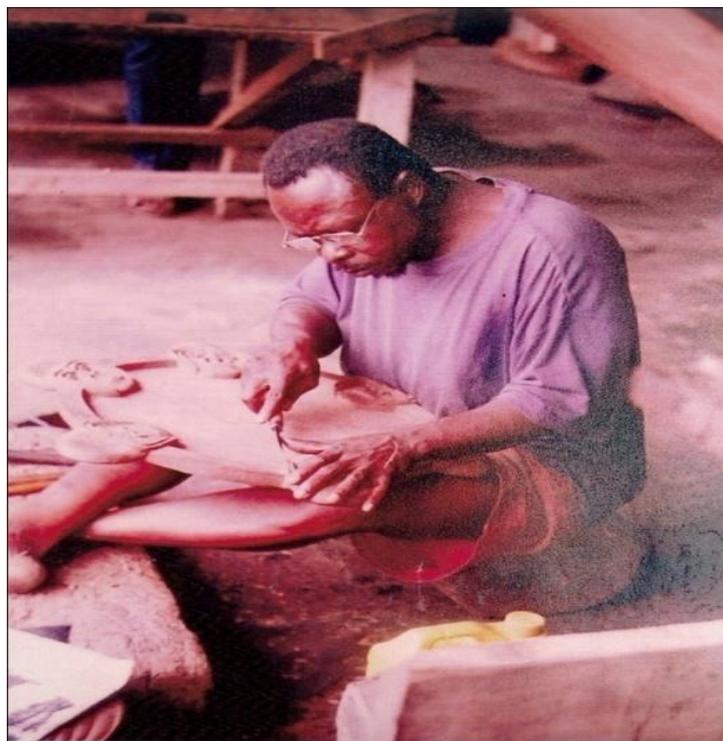


Plate 2: Bisi Fakeye at work.
© Universal Studios of Art.

Whenever he is commissioned to produce an art piece, Fakeye mostly makes a Marquette or a small sample of intended work, which serves as a model before embarking on the real project. While working on a large art piece, he usually marks the areas that he will chip off with white chalk. This technique allows him to remove unwanted parts around the space he has marked with the white chalk and the technique equally acts as a guide to avoid mistakes. During the carving exercise, he lays down the wood flat on the ground or in an up-right position while chiselling out the unwanted parts

one after the other. With a broad hammer, he chips and chops out unwanted flesh of the wood. He recalls that:

The agha and agben chisels were among instruments in vogue used by traditional artists of Ife and Benin because of its accuracy. Among my instruments today though modern, they have resemblance to what my father used as I was growing up. (Ibid).

Bisi Fakeye's sitting position in Plate 2 determines the style he wants to achieve with his chisels while at work, Omeife (2006: 29) writes. He has always been inspired by the carvings of Felix Idubor, Ben Osawe, Igbinovia Idah and many other Benin carvers. No wonder, the Universal Studios of Art presently accommodates two Benin woodcarvers as members, they are Monday Akhidue and Osatuma Iyomona. These two woodcarvers use styles and techniques that are typical of Benin traditional art, and both of them have been working closely with Bisi Fakeye than any other carver in the studio. Fakeye's innovative challenges are enormous in terms of the new techniques he has to impart to pupils learning directly from him. It is, however, good to mention according to Omeife (2006:30-31), that he equally learns from his pupils in the studio. He is fond of incorporating Yoruba mask on the panel doors and free-standing pillar post that he carves. The art works he has produced in this technique are in high demand by corporate bodies and land developers in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria.

One of his master art pieces has been adopted for use as African house-logo in Havana, Cuba. His major commissions are also in private and public collections in Nigeria, Italy, Switzerland, and other American and European cities. Bisi Fakeye participated in over one hundred exhibitions between 1963 and 2000 in Nigeria, the United States of America and Germany. His carvings are bold and full of vigour. They are huge and monumental in nature. Traditional Yoruba influences are easily recognizable in many of his works that are either imaginative in expression or universal in formal appearance.



Plate 3: Hope for World Peace.
Bisi Fakeye, Cam Wood, 2003.
© Universal Studios of Art.

His works are sometimes complex, gigantic in size, yet tender in outlook; as seen in his *Hope for World Peace* (Plate 3) which he sculpted in 2003. His versatility in the use of cam wood is evident in this work. He carefully and neatly carves the beautiful hairdo of his subject and makes the figure look mature with broad shoulder blade that he was able to align and balance with the size of the base. He carves the wrapper by moulding a simple fold that hangs on a thin waist. He, however, pays a greater attention to the studying of the flared nostrils, wide mouth, and the flat rendition of the palms and arms of the human figure, which is typical of the Yoruba carving styles.



Plate 4: Germination.
Bisi Fakeye, Cam Wood, 2000.
© Universal Studios of Art.

The work titled *Germination* (Plate 4) conceptually gives an impression of a long emerging neck that symbolizes a growing plant that terminates around the ball-shaped head. The folded shapes that meet at the bottom of the base are representing the hands that planted the seeds from the base. In the work, Fakeye recalls the early stylized technique which he had used mostly in his works in the early 1980s.

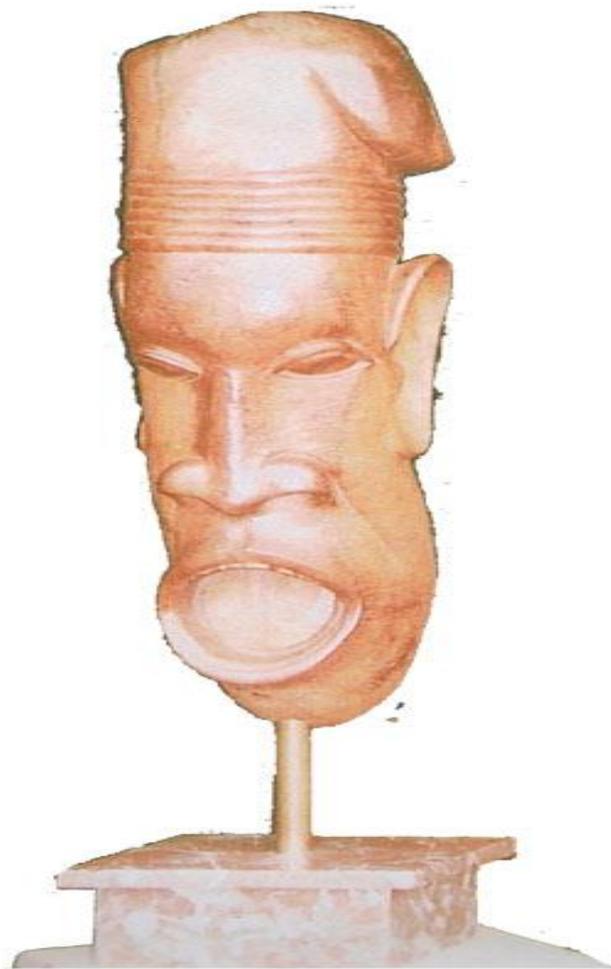


Plate 5: June 12
Bisi Fakeye, Camwood, 2003.
© Universal Studios of Art.

Bisi Fakeye's work, produced in 2003, and titled *June 12* (Plate 5), depicts the discomforting pains and discontent that engulfed Nigeria as a nation during the June 12 socio-political impasse in 1993. Fakeye painstakingly renders the curves around the jaw to the lips of the human head, which probably symbolize those of Chief MKO Abiola, the acclaimed winner of 1993 Presidential elections in Nigeria. The high level of draughtsmanship in the sculpting of the cap (*Fila*) that is worn by the figure shows intricate rings of discord that are laced down to the flabby ear region of the human head and connecting it to the big flat nose and the wide-uneven opened mouth representing the notable morphological structures of late Chief M.K.O. Abiola.



Plate 6: Regeneration.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 2006.
© Universal Studios of Art

In *Regeneration* (Plate 6), Bisi Fakeye does not present a very huge figure as he used to do in the past. He carefully renders two figures that are revolving on a round base. The figures on the either sides are acting as a pivotal support to the other with a central dome unifying them. Fakeye has described the finesse of this wood work in the following Yoruba words: “Gbegi gbegi ti gbegi tan, oku gbenu gbenu”, meaning “the carver has done his best; the rest is up to the commentators”.



Plate 7: Confidentiality.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 1998.
© Universal Studios of Art.

The wood work that was produced in 1998 and titled *Confidentiality* (Plate 7) betrays Fakeye's creative ability in using undulating outlines and flowing curves. The work depicts a female figure that rests her not well defined hands and fingers on a protruding stomach. The carefully rendition of two arms holding firmly to a protruding stomach that is carrying the unborn child with tender care symbolizes a period of caution, carefulness, meditation and eternal conversation between the mother and her yet to be born baby. Fakeye carefully romanticizes the anatomical structure of the mother to conceptualize the word *Confidentiality*. He tries to depict the secret that no one sees during the conception period, but he, however, presents this as a secret that will be unveiled on the day of delivery.

Maduka (1999:10) explains that the *Town Crier* (Plate 8) echoes the traditional settings where the use of a *Town Crier* remains the primary medium for disseminating socio-political information and advertisement messages. The positioning of the *Town Crier* appears significant to the contemporary media world in which information is carried above-the-advert-line and below-the-advert-line in the attempt to reach a large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience. Fakeye depicts one leg crossing the other in order to give stability to the base and at the same time, the two hands above the head

are also criss-crossed to let the Town Crier effectively strike the gong to the hearing of everybody in the community.



Plate 8:Town Crier.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 2003.
© Universal Studios of Art.



Plate 9: Evolution.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 1998.
© Universal Studios of Art.

Bisi Fakeye returns to total abstraction while creating the *Evolution* (Plate 9) in 1998. The work is characterized by simple curves and Yoruba aestheticism. Fakeye reveals his dedication to wood carving in his handling of *Contemporary Mask* (Plate 10). In it, Fakeye depicts a smooth mask that has delicate jagged edges with serrated forms. The treatment of the eyes, nose and the mouth is typical of Yoruba wood sculpture tradition.



Plate 10: Contemporary Mask.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 2007.
© Universal Studios of Art



Plate 11: Kolanut Tray.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 1997.
© Universal Studios of Art.

The *Kolanut Tray* (Plate 11) traces the genesis of Bisi Fakeye's works. He represents a traditional tray with animal symbols that are extracted to symbolize beautifully structured monkey heads. The various curves in the tray are surging after the delicately carved heads of monkeys that serve as symbols of authority. Okolo (2000:120-122) describes vividly that the overall theme of the work is centered on the aphorism, "He, who brings kola, brings life". Fakeye produced this work to define the use of a tray as a symbolic social genre in African traditional society. He uses his cutter blades to remove the unwanted lumps and to smoothen the surface where kola-nut is served.

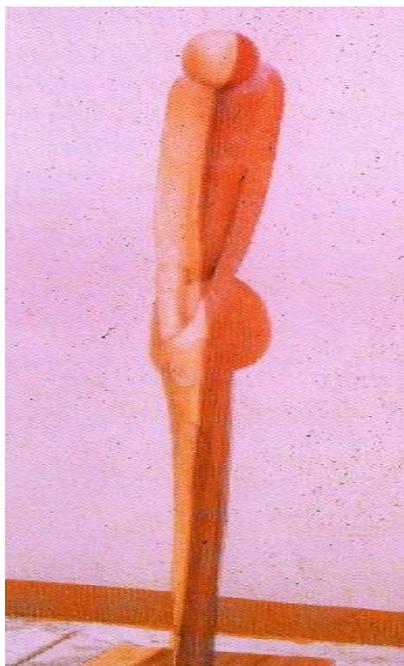


Plate 12: Submission.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 2007.
© Universal Studios of Art.

The work, *Submission* (Plate 12) gives a superb creative translation of a figure to eternal life. This abstracted figure is idyllic in nature, and it is well directed and adequately represented. The tall figure has a stylistic exploration of a small head carved into a well trimmed body that aligns both the hands and the legs. The work shows Fakeye's ability in handling complex postures without difficulty.



Plate 13: Abibamo.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 1996.
© Universal Studios of Art.

Another captivating work, *Abibamo* (Plate 13), shows Fakeye's wealth of experience in the art of woodcarving. *Abibamo* is a solitary figure that can be fearful to both the adults and children. The bearded head has two protruding eye balls without pupils, broad nose and wide terminal mouth that show strong affinity to the Yoruba sculptural experiment. In *Akede* (Plate 14), Fakeye shows the degree and knowledge of draughtsmanship he has attained through hard work. There is a social symbolic meaning in the way he represents the hair-do, the wide earrings and beads on the neck of the elegant lady that he has portrayed in wood. The posture of *Akede* is elegant, beautiful and royal. The *Chorus Leader* (Plate 15) portrays Bisi Fakeye as an astute woodcarver. Unlike his *Town Crier*, the *Chorus Leader* is elegantly carved with accurate curves from the raised hands through the body by adopting economic use of lines from the waist to the base. In Fakeye's opinion, the Renaissance period in Europe happened to be, perhaps, the greatest movement that has influenced him over the years, (A personal interview with Bisi Fakeye, November, 2008). He is still a member of the

Society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A.), Lagos State Chapter. He is married to Victoria Oladele Fakeye and blessed with six children, four male and two female. His first son studied agronomy and works in a Bank, while his first daughter studied English Language and works in a law firm. Sola his second son is on an apprenticeship programme with the Universal Studios of Art. Yemi studied Graphic Design at Yaba College of Technology and Segun has a National Diploma in Art, but, into full-time music. The sixth child, a girl is a graduate of the University of Lagos with a degree in Business Administration.



Plate 14: Akede.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 2000.
© Universal Studios of Art.



Plate 15: Chorus Leader.
Bisi Fakeye, Wood, 1996.
© Universal Studios of Art.

4. Conclusion

Bisi Fakeye is a traditional sculptor who has successfully over the years operated between traditional and modern sculptural styles. His is well known for his huge art works. When he took over the responsibility and leadership of the National Studios of Art, now Universal Studios of Art, the management of National Gallery of Art, probably, did not really foresee his artistic potentials, capabilities and leadership qualities. His exceptional attitude has developed the students' psyche and artistic talents to professional standard. This has remained a factor in the attainment of good standard in the Nigerian art practice. Bisi Fakeye's ability to assist and not to be assisted has given him an outstanding leadership quality and image. He has constantly rejected the people's imposed appellation of "Leader or Director or Rector", but would like to be seen as an apprentice to all. He has trained many who are self-employed and has immensely contributed to the growth of art in Nigeria.

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