

**International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)**  
**Bahir Dar- Ethiopia**

Vol. 5(3), S/No 18, June, 2016:132-135

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i3.11>

---

**Personal Aggrandizement: An Insight into Ben Enwonwu's  
Privilege Position in the Evolution of Nigerian Art**

**Oladesu, Johnson O.**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Olabisi Onabanjo University,

Ago-Iwoye, Ibogun Campus

Ogun State

Email [joladesu@yahoo.com](mailto:joladesu@yahoo.com)

**Abstract**

This paper titled Personal Aggrandizement: An Insight into Ben Enwonwu's Privilege Position in the Evolution of Nigerian Art, looks at the first trained artists. How the artists were classified by their styles either in the naturalistic, the abstract or the expressive imageries. The study examines and compares the contributions of some Nigerian artists like Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwonwu, T. A Fasuyi and B. Akinbola who were one time privileged to have held a post as an adviser to the Federal Government of Nigeria. An interview with Professor Jimo Akolo revealed another dimension to the paper.

**Introduction**

The evolution of Nigerian Art can be traced back to art works produced by the first trained artists. These artists can be classified by their styles. These styles were either in the naturalistic, the abstract or the expressive imageries. Some artists have more than a style.

The naturalistic approach was first obtained and developed outside Nigeria. It started as a result of contact with the European culture. Naturalistic style could also be traced back to African Cave Art. Artists such as Aina Onabolu and Ben Enwonwu works in these styles.

The abstract approach deals with stylization, simplification or organizing forms and images that are not naturalistic. Abstract came about as a wrong notion of the West that African art works are static, but looking at the works of Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Ablade Glover Sam Ntiro, Gani Odutokun and Ben Osawe their works nullified this claim.

The expressive style uses symbols and metaphor, which appear in forms that cannot be explained visually. This style is a new direction that has interested many Nigerian artists like El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, and Clary Nelson-Cole among many.

For easy discussion, this paper would try to look at Aina Onabolu's contributions to Nigeria art and compare it to Ben Enwonwu's privileges, and also look at T.A. Fasuyi who took over Enwonwu's post as an art adviser to the Federal Government.

Aina Onabolu could be referred to as the Father of Nigerian art. Egonwa (1994) writes that "he is the grand patriarch of modern African art, who appeared in the scene of plastic art at a time when such disciplines were hardly recognized". He was a self-taught artist who later went to overseas for Western training. After his Diploma in Art, he came back to Nigeria to be an inspiration to many young African art students. He taught art at the C.M.S. Grammar School, Lagos; Wesley Boy's High School; The Eko Boys' High School; King's College and Christ Church Cathedral School. While teaching, Onabolu did many commission works and experiments. To Onabolu, his private practice was not important to him, he was more conscious of western art in Nigeria. Oloidi (1998) states that "according to him, he was conscious of over working and over- stretching himself but because of his determination to make academic art a reality in Africa, he did not feel the strain". Also in the Nigerian Journal of Art Volume 2 No 1 and 2 January 1997 December, 1998, the Deputy Director of Education in the colony, F.H. Harward, wrote:

But it has been generally accepted that there is one barrier he (an African) cannot surmount, one door he is unable to open; that in the sphere of art he (an African) is not capable of reaching even a moderate degree of proficiency. Mr. Aina Onabolu has once and for all broken down that barrier and opened the door.

These two quotations above show that Onabolu made a lot of efforts to develop art in Nigeria. However, he did not rely on his own effort alone. In 1926, the workload on

him was much; as such he contacted the Board of Education to get European artists to teach art in colleges. In 1927, Kenneth Crosthwaite Murray was invited to Nigeria. Murray taught in Lagos, Ibadan and Umuahia. Some of his students were Ben Enwonwu, Uthman Ibrahim and C.C. Ibeto.

Ben Enwonwu was born to a traditional wood-caver. He was one of the second generations of Nigerian artist. Apart from the fact that he studied under Kenneth Murray, he was privileged to study in overseas through a Shell Company Scholarship in Britain.

In 1948, Enwonwu became Government Art Supervisor and later rose to the position of art adviser to the Federal Government. Perhaps his position got him the several commissions he executed, for example Anyanwu at the National Museum and Sango at NEPA Headquarters at Marina all in Lagos.

In comparison, Enwonwu attended the best art schools in England, while Onabolu was not western trained but they were pioneer to study art. Both of them obtained chains of commission. The records of Onabolu show that he was much concerned about the development of art in Nigeria if not the whole Africa. Through his effort, many Nigerians have become artists including Enwonwu. Even though Onabolu had chains of commissions and he was experimenting, he never allowed these commissions interrupt the growth of art in Nigeria. He never saw himself as single as Enwonwu. Egonwa (1994) writes: "Enwonwu for a long time enjoyed the singular, though incorrect, reputation of being the only artist from Nigeria. He was ahead of his peers in the profession, but was not by any means the only artist from Nigeria at any time". From the statement of Egonwa, one can perhaps see where both Onabolu and Enwonwu went apart. Onabolu never wanted to remain single and selfish; which made him to bring Murray who taught Enwonwu. If Enwonwu had used his privilege position as an Art Adviser to the Federal Government, he would not have been seen as the only artist from Nigeria. Again with his position, he could have improved the standard of art in the country. For him to have risen to the level that he was seen as the only artist in Nigeria shows that all his advice to the Government were for his personal aggrandizement and not for collective good.

In an oral interview with Professor Jimoh Akolo, he observes that Enwonwu perhaps, must have used his position positively depending on the perspective we want to look at it. Akolo viewed Enwonwu's achievement through the executed monuments for the Federal Government and other commissions such as Anyanwu and Sango sculpture works as credit to him and Nigeriaa artists because it could have been given to perhaps foreign expatriates. However, Akolo gave more credit to Enwonwu's successor T.A. Fasuyi. When took over from Enwonwu, according to Akolo Fasuyi did so many things which have helped to develop art and artists in Nigeria.

First, he was able to persuade the Federal Government to give ten percent of Federal Scholarship to all Nigerian Artists. This enabled many Nigerian artists to study abroad. Secondly, Fasuyi was able to advise the Federal Government on the need to have a Ministry of Art and Culture. This gave him an ample opportunity to operate from an office and for proper documentation for posterity. Thirdly, he started organizing National Art Competition, Children Art and UNESCO Competition in the country.

Another thing that Fasuyi did was that he brought the Minister of Information, External Affairs and Zonal Division of Art together for effective results. Lastly, because his ideas were positive, B. Akinbola who succeeded him carried them on.

In conclusion, one can rightly state that Enwonwu was a famous and a successful artist. His success could be seen through the numerous monumental commissions, which were personal. Despite the fact that he was privileged to be among the pioneer artists in Nigeria; he held an important position as art adviser to the Federal Government of Nigeria but unfortunately; he did not use this position for the collective good as Onobolu and Fasuyi who were before him. Perhaps, that is why Egonwa's quotation is apt. "The ball that Onobolu set rolling was stopped by Enwonwu until Fasuyi took it over."

These artists can be classified by their styles. These styles were either in the naturalistic, the abstract or the expressive imageries. Some artists have more than a style.

### References

- Akolo J. (1999). An Interview with Professor Jimo Akolo on Ben Enwonwu
- Egonwa, O.D. (1994). *African art: A contemporary source book*. Benin City: Gosay Publishers.
- Fosu, K. (1993). *20th Century of African art*. Kumasi: Design Press, University of Science and Technology 3rd Edition.
- Kelly and Stanly (1993). *Nigerian artists: A who is who and bibliography*. London: Zell Publisher.
- Olaidi, O. (1998). Onobolu: Pioneer of modern art in Nigerian: An introduction. *USO Nigerian Journal of Art*, Vol.2 No. 1&2 PP.1-9