

**FIDELIS ODOGWU; A CONTEMPORARY METAL DESIGNER UNIVERSAL
STUDIO OF ART, LAGOS, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The existence of schools and workshops of learning art in European cities centuries ago, led to the advancement of their societies particularly in checking the rate of unemployment and restiveness in the society. These centers of youth and adult participation groomed both formal and informal participants. In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, schools and workshops of art apprenticeship has grown to an appreciable stage that many youths and adults have benefitted. The activities of the Igun and Igbesanmwun guilds of bronze casters and wood carvers, the Mbari-Mbayo, the Oye Ekiti experience, the Abayomi Barber school, the Ife, Ibadan and recently Universal Studios of Art, Lagos. The existence of these citadel of art expressive knowledge, groomed apprentices in painting, sculpture, metal design, graphics, bead-making, tie and dye, batik and other forms of artistic expression. In these centers, youths and adults both formally and non-formally trained would go fully skilled to get engaged in the society. Notwithstanding, their professional trade will keep them busy and even working to sustain their individual families, and by so doing, it would be of immense benefit that more schools and workshops of apprenticeship be established in the society.

Keywords: Schools and workshops, Groomed formal and informal, Participants, youths and adults, Experiences and experimentation

Introduction

In Nigeria and the world at large, arts and culture translates the heritage of the people. Traditionally, these two expressive ways of life, constitutes a factor of identity of any group from the age long. Art as a culture is not a matter of doubt that flourishes with the present schools and missionary churches scattered around the country. These centers accommodate the practice of sculpture, painting, ceramics, textiles, photography, metal design, pottery, bead-making and others. These centers of apprenticeship have disseminated artistic knowledge, skills and practice among the people, and as such many graduates are located in different parts of the city centers practicing art to make a living. The studios and workshop theory is growing to a meaningful level. As Erhabor Emopkae, Dick Idehen, Festus Idehen, Felix Idubor under studied masters at Igun and Igbesanmwun, so Abayomi Barber graduated through self practice, Bisi Fakeye was assisted by his father and later by his uncle Lamidi, Bruce Onabrakpeya attained

professionalism ideas through consistent effort in studio works, while Joe Musa, Alex Nwakolo and others had a brief stint at the Universal Studios of Art to improve on their artistic skills. This article focuses on the symbolic cultural interpretation, metal assemblage of specifics of Fidelis Odogwu's metal sculpture as a meaningful result of studio and workshop training.

HIS EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Fidelis Odogwu, from Owa Agbor, in Delta State of Nigeria, was born in 1969. He had his primary education at Ngala Primary School, Agbor from 1974-1980, and enrolled for his secondary education at the Gbenoba Grammar School, Agbor from 1980-1985. While in secondary school, his art teacher, Mr. Igwe, gave him encouragement in the art of sketching human figures. He told him that only few students would like to paint, not to say the least to sit and draw. His closeness to Mr. Igwe further gave him the opportunity to attend, at the weekends, free drawing classes that he organized privately to help talented students to discover themselves. Odogwu's professional training as an artist began at Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi from 1986-1991. He visited Felix Idubor's gallery in Benin and also attended lessons organized by traditional sculptors from Igun Street and Igbesanwan near Sapkonba road in Benin City. He was also inspired by the works of late Ben Osawe a famous Benin based sculptor and draughtsman. He studied the latter's works with keen interest and enthusiasm. He had his Industrial Training (IT) in 1987 at Ben Osawe's studios, off Siluko Road in Benin City. Odogwu developed his skills in the theory and practice of sculpture under Ben Osawe.

Osawe offered him an accommodation in his residence to boost his desire and zeal to sculpt. His industrial training, which was to last for two months, was, however, extended to four months by the Rector Auchi Polytechnic due to his hardwork and dedication to duty. Odogwu returned to Auchi after acquiring myriads of experiences in traditional carving methods. He obtained a National Diploma (ND) and later a Higher National Diploma (HND) in sculpture in 1991. He was posted to Makurdi, Benue State, for his National Youth Service. On completion, he moved to Lagos to search for greater opportunities. In Lagos, he opened a small studio at Iponri, a suburb of Lagos. His constant exploration of modern possibilities for traditional sculpture attracted to him several commissions. Private companies patronized his metal sculptures before he decided to practise as a full time artist in the Universal Studios of Art in 2005. According to him, "Sam Ovranti, a prominent painter based in Lagos, assisted him to market most of his works in metal to his clients at the National Council of Nigerian Crafts (N.C.N.C), an important art outfit in Lagos and to Eko Meridian Hotel's management staff". His works were also sold to the owner of an art outfit called "Colours of Africa". These works were produced with classical metal materials. After the rendition of these works in metal rods and plates, he follows these key processes that are explained below.



Fig. 1 Students at work.
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Fig. 2: Hot Afternoon.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2008.

© Odogwu's Collection.



Fig. 3: Milk Maiden.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2008.
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HIS EXPERIMENTATION AND WORKS

Odogwu exposes his works to the weather for at least nine months to allow oxidation; that is, allowing the metal rods and plates to turn brownish. This is followed by intensive cleaning of the metal surfaces with a hard metal brush in order to eliminate the brownish dust. As soon as the brownish dust is eliminated, he uses engine oil to remove the remaining brown dust. This is followed by the use of thinner, a solvent, to cover the metal rods and plates before the application of vanish with brush to achieve a glittering surface. His works are very unique; little wonder, he works with some students as seen in Fig. 1. This mentoring strategy highlights his level of commitment to develop budding artists in Nigeria. Generally, his works are stylistically diversified with unique and expressive language of abstraction and naturalism.

In *Hot Afternoon* (Fig. 2) he tries to depict a critical weather condition in the tropical region of Africa. The work is symbolic in the sense that “every hot afternoon requires an umbrella to protect the heat and rays of the scorching sun”. As a former graphic designer, who switched to metal sculpture, he graphically presents the umbrella the figure holds in the left hand with some vents and a handle. This presentation creates a feeling of human body in motion. His conceptual, philosophical, aesthetic and stylistic

tendencies have improved after many years of practice. This is evident in the work titled *Milk Maiden* (Fig. 3).

The work displays a good sculptural formalism in the body movement and dynamic way the maiden supports the container on her head with the right hand. There is also a gestural action, which gives the work an expressive look. The *Water Bearer* (Fig. 5) confirms his creative ability in metal work. It symbolizes the frequent search for the basic human needs in the Nigerian society. Other basic amenities that are lacking in the society include electricity and good roads, among others; all these are his major focus of artistic rendition. The basic principles of artistic designs such as proportion, balance and rhythm are used to project a big hat that is cast on the water bearer. The hat is used to prevent heat from the sun. The water bearer holds two tins that are suspended with a strong baton that rests on his shoulder.



Fig. 4: Water Bearer.
Fidelis Odogwu. Metal, 2007.
© Odogwu's collection.

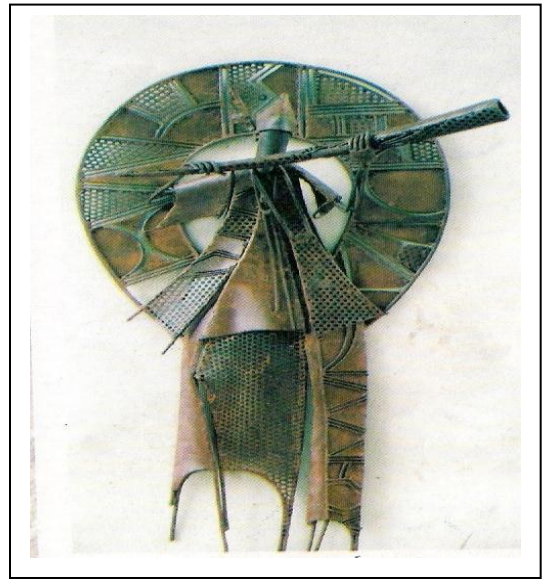


Fig.5 : Heritage.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2007.
© Odogwu's collection.

Heritage (Fig. 5) depicts African heritage and the preoccupation as well as the abundant culture of African people. Horn blowing is typical of African musical ensemble; the work has a form of a man blowing an instrument that is probably carved out of a ram horn. The figure has an expressive pose, along with his traditional attire, which flows from the neck and covering the body as well as the two legs protruding from the base. Odogwu's skillful use of metal materials is noticeable in *Cross Road* (Fig. 7) where he manipulates the figures of kings and princes at a cross road on a cast metal grill. He separates the kings' figures from those of the princes that he arranged in a sophisticated portrait display method. He varies the sizes and attires of the figures of the

kings and princes in the mesh of cast metals. *Fishing Festival* (Fig. 8) is another dimension of portrait display method.

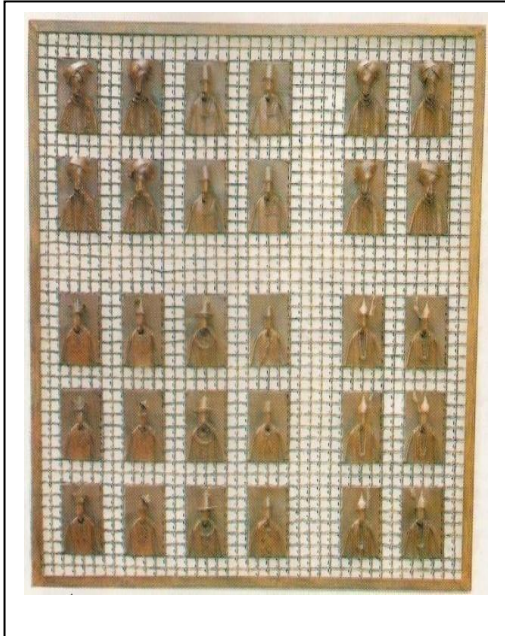


Fig.6: Cross Road.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2006.
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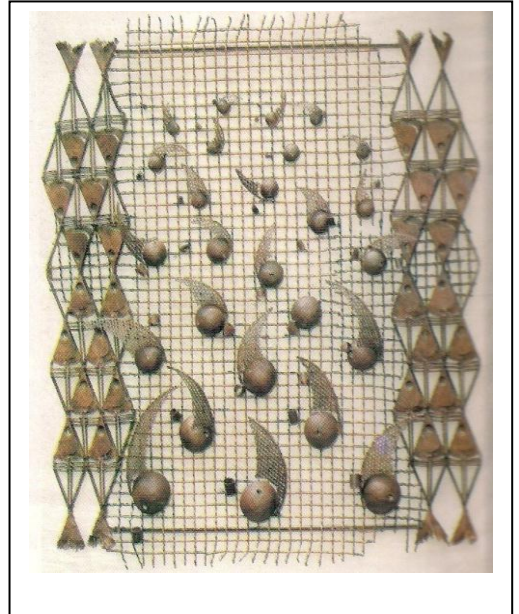


Fig.7: Fishing Festival.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2006.
© Odogwu's collection.

In it, he casts into the grills many fishermen who are fishing by using calabashes in an open space. In the middle of the metal grill are designs of fishes that can stimulate awareness of the public to this great fiesta that is popular in the Hausa/Fulani society. Odogwu presents the *Royalty* (Fig. 8) with the same technique. Just as in the *Cross Road* (Fig. 6), he manipulates the grill with a long metal structure and displays portraits of kinsmen in one of the Nigerian localities.



Fig.8: Royalty.
Fidelis Odogwu. Metal, 2007.
2007.© Odogwu's collection



Fig. 9: One People.
Fidelis Odogwu. Metal,
© Odogwu's collection.

The grill in the work titled *Royalty* is arranged in sequential order, and this permits a complete visualization of the metal illustration. *One People* (Fig. 9) is also rendered by using metal construction with grilling approach. It is good to mention that Odogwu alters the approach and mode of presentation in the work. Instead of using the grill technique, he selects his portraits and arranged them on a plain metal in high relief method. He conceptualizes the objectivity and visibility of each portrait to show that 'no matter the diversity all people are one.'⁶ He details the portrait of the heads from the down to the bust region with a brownish background that is used to project each personality. The *Fertility* (Fig. 10) is symbolized with an egg. At the background of the work are lined tissues running from the top to the base. This also symbolizes the wall of womanhood where fertility occurs.



Fig. 10: Fertility.
Fidelis Odogwu, Metal, 2007.
© Odogwu's collection.

Fidelis Odogwu joined the Universal Studios of Art in 2005. He has no solo exhibition, but has participated actively in national and international group exhibitions, which include those in Caracas and Quotas by artists of the Universal Studios of Art. The group was invited specially by the government of Venezuela to celebrate her independent anniversary. The exhibition was organized in collaboration with the French Embassy and Total a French petroleum company. According to the artist, “change is the only constant phenomenon in art practicing. As such, one must change along with time”. He is presently the Financial Secretary of the Universal Studios of Art, and he belongs to the Society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A.). He is blessed with children.

Conclusion

It is clearly revealed that the benefits of schools and workshops of apprenticeship, has tremendously helped to some extent the advancement of society in employment of not only the formally, but also the informally educated in the society. The efforts of Rev. Fr. Kevin Carroll remains fresh in the development of the Oye-Ekiti community, not forgetting the part played by Aina Onabolu and the British art sducatioist Kenneth Murray in the up-lifting of art in Nigeria. It is obvious going by observations that art, as a profession.has come to stay no doubt in the contemporary Nigerian society. The Universal Studios of Art and its leader Olabisi Onawale Fakeye despite all odds, forged ahead to create a conducive place where Fidelis Odogwu trained as an apprentice and now an exceptional instructor through whom countless participants have benefitted from and would continue to benefit from his creative art experiences and experimentations.

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