

Life's Fragile Fictions

The Drawings and Paintings of
Moyo Ogunديپه



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Preface and Acknowledgements

Ohioma I. Pogoson
Editor/Curator

This catalogue accompanies Moyo Ogundipe's first major exhibition in Nigeria since his return from self-exile in the USA, where he lived for some 15 years post-General Babangida.

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, first of its kind in the Institute, are made possible by the generous support of Professor I.O. Albert, Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

There are countless other people that have contributed immensely to the success of this exhibition and its accompanying publication. But since space cannot permit me to mention them all, may I just point to a few: I am especially grateful to His Excellency, Governor of Ekiti State, Dr. Kayode Fayemi for identifying fully and totally with the project from the outset. He has also made time to be at the opening ceremony and donated generously towards the success of it. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Kayode Obembe, President of Christ's School, Ado Ekiti Old Students Association who is our special guest. He generously served as the fulcrum that propagated the show among the artist's colleagues from his *alma mater*. I am grateful to the Royal Fathers, *Kabi'esi* Akarigbo of Remo, Orangun of Oke Ila, Elepe of Epe and Onirele of Irele Ekiti. Some of the others that must be mentioned include the entire staff of the Institute of African Studies, students of the Visual Arts section and Ganiyu Adebisi, creative printer and a wonderful guy!

To the contributors listed at the back of this publication, I say a big thank you! You all worked hard under heavy pressure! Dr. Peju Layiwola's own contribution which does not necessarily deal with Moyo Ogundipe as the others, exposes the varied capacities of Nigerian contemporary artists to draw ideas from everywhere and anywhere. Even though it may be hard to find many a Nigerian artist that has travelled to or worked in Greece, or even studied Greek culture and philosophy (I am at least aware of none), we are informed of their use of Hellenistic images in some of their works. This is an indication of the extremely wide possibilities of our modern artists' repertoire of imagery. Janine Sytsma, PhD candidate, Art History and Fullbright-Hays DDRA and Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Art Foundation Fellow, has been a long-time friend of the artist and had curated Moyo Ogundipe's first exhibition in Nigeria at Terra Kulture in Lagos (2008). Janine continues to make the artist and his paintings a matter of academic discourse. She has experienced Moyo in both locations that seem to be his strongest pull and thus is well poised, perhaps more than some of us, to discussing the artist and his objects as a worthy subject. It was she who also facilitated the inclusion of Dr. Moyo

Okediji's article in this catalogue. Moyo Okediji is himself an accomplished and successful art historian and painter here and in America.

I thank my *Egbon*, my neighbour, Professor Niyi Osundare who readily agreed that we use his essay on Moyo Ogundipe. Professor Bode Sowande, like Moyo Okediji and Niyi Osundare, enlightens us with insights into the character of the artist. All of them have had, at different times, strong and well-tested personal relationships with the artist.

Finally, in this section, my thanks go to my student, Mr. Akande who co-authored our contribution and accompanied me to Iwo on several occasions when we went hunting for information from the artist as we worked out the logistics for the exhibition.

I wish to thank Professor Yomi Durotoye (Bro Yom) for his quick mind and perceptiveness. He wrote the beautiful "must-read" Foreword. *Egbon*, thank you always.

I am grateful to the artist, Uncle Mo! He has made Iwo a very short distance to travel and I am glad he is finally showing off his pride and life's work.

Finally, I thank the Vice Chancellor, Professor I.F. Adewole, for providing the atmosphere for this form of scholarship during his tenure and for sharing some of his busy time with all of us.

April 2001, Ibadan.

Syntheses of Cultures and Sensibilities: The Expressions of Moyo Ogundipe

O. I. Pogoson
A. O. Akande

Moyo Ogundipe appears to be a simple man in his manner of dressing and speech. However, such simplicity can hardly be perceived in his paintings. This dichotomy between the artist and his art seems to find fusion in the claim of the artist himself. He describes himself as merely a medium of expression being used by forces larger and more demanding than he.¹ If Ogundipe is merely a medium, then what are these forces giving impetus to his beautiful yet complex works of art?

This conjecture is not borne out of an attempt to characterise the artist, but it arises from the sheer overwhelming and awesome number and the complexity and sizes of his works. For an over 60-year old, this feat is astounding. Thus, this essay is only an attempt to see the artist *in toto* in tandem with his creations.

It is not surprising that many^{2,3,4} who have written about him have had to take a glimpse into his biography. This is not an unusual method. Therefore, this essay will also take a look at the artist's background training, and careers whether in broadcasting, teaching or as artist before, during and after his sojourn in the United States of America. Perhaps this will shed some light on the works that he has created and continues to create for mankind.

Moyo Ogundipe was born in Ado Ekiti, Nigeria, in 1948. He attended Christ's School, Ado Ekiti, where his father was once a teacher. At this time, Ogundipe had started his art career for he offered Fine Arts in School Certificate examinations and was the cartoonist for the school's magazine. After his secondary education, he studied art at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University. After Ife, he went into broadcasting and became a producer with the Western Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in 1974. In 1979 the military took over the government of Nigeria and caused political and economic instability and insecurity in the country. Ogundipe felt highly insecure because of his close association with Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the famous Nigerian social crusader-musician who was habitually antagonising the government through his popular brand of music. Ogundipe decided to migrate to the United States to "hide his head", so to say. On getting there, he went straight to register at Syracuse University to study film production, majoring in directing. In the early 90s he again attended Maryland Institute College of Arts for an MFA degree. He then joined the University of Colorado, Denver, as a professor of painting and drawing. He remained in this position for close to ten years before finally

returning to Nigeria in 2008. Presently, he teaches Communication at Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria. In all his over fifteen years in the United States he returned home only once, for the burial of his elder brother. In all the time he continued to paint and express himself artistically.

One of the major aims of this essay is an attempt to analyse three of his paintings from the point of view of his cultural background and varied experiences. The paintings were selected based on the revealing cultural imageries exploited in them by the artist. Generally speaking, Ogundipe's works can be classified into three, based on his use of imageries. There are:

- (a) paintings with imageries borrowed from western culture,
- (b) paintings with strong Yoruba imageries, and
- (c) paintings with an admixture of cultural and cosmic imageries.

The paintings selected for this study are therefore models with which his other paintings can be studied. The selected paintings to be discussed are "Soliloquy: Life's Fragile Fictions" and "The Serenade". These two works appear like extremes in the artist's use of cultural images. In the first one, the artist made use of strong Yoruba images in the composition of his imagery. The major images in the second painting appear to have been borrowed from western cultures. The third painting, "Celestial Migrants" contains an admixture of images from the artist's numerous other colourful cultural and cosmic experiences.

"Soliloquy: Life's Fragile Fictions" is an acrylic on canvas painting. It is about 126 by 197 cm, making it one of the largest works by the artist. At the centre of the picture is a nude, black woman holding a bird in her left hand. This central figure, is shown in a three-quarter view, and faces the right hand side of the canvas; she appears to be looking at the bird she is holding. It is the largest human figure on the canvas. To the right side of the canvas is an equestrian. On the left hand side are a number of images like snake, bird, a kneeling woman (*Olumeye*, Plate 3), and others.

The nude female figure is rendered in a dark green colour. The very dark nature of the colour suggests that the artist is presenting a black woman. Otherwise, the artist may be symbolically suggesting the fecundity of women as mothers. Green is the colour of plant life, it therefore symbolises fertility and growth. The scarification on the body of the figure, though characteristic of Ogundipe's works, may on this occasion suggest the African origin of the woman. On the cheek of this figure is a Yoruba facial-mark, *gombo*. According to Michael O'Sullivan,⁵ "the woman wears her hair in thick, ropy braids", typically worn by African women. Hair in Yoruba art and culture continues to be a fascinating topical issue. In total, a woman's hair is believed to reflect her state of mind or important phases in her life. It is therefore not uncommon to find a female with scattered hair depicting an insane woman in today's Nollywood film. Christening ceremonies, chieftaincy installations, marriage, and the various festivals in honour of the *Orisa* are events

for which women dress their hair gorgeously for in Yorubaland. In the past, a widow was required to undo her braids, leave her hair dishevelled and remain indoors until the completion of her husband's funeral rites, which sometimes lasted as long as three months. At the end of the mourning period, her head may be shaven clean to mark a symbolic separation from her deceased husband and a return to normal life.⁶ The happy looking, braided female figure in Ogundipe's painting is reminiscent of the African attributes of love and fertility of the African woman.

The equestrian figure (*see* Plate 1) is also not an unusual imagery in Yoruba woodcarving. Indeed, it is an abundantly used one in Yoruba and African art. The proportion of the head of the horseman to his body reflects an associated format of Yoruba woodcarvings. Scholars have discussed equestrian figures in Yoruba and indeed African art. Thomson⁷ demonstrates that the image of the mounted figure is widely found in West Africa as an expression of domination. Among the Yoruba, carved wooden figures of horsemen honouring warriors are kept in the house of veterans of military exploits. Ben-Amos⁸ observes that in Benin today, figures on horseback are associated with Oranmiyan, the mythical founder of Benin and Yoruba dynasties, as well as the great warrior-kings – Ewuare, Ozolua, and Esigie. Cole⁹ views the representation of mounted horsemen in African art as a fusion of human intelligence with animal strength, creating an awesome presence far greater than the sum of its parts. He further states that,

The strength of this unit is daunting enough when the horse stands still, but when catalyzed by motion and speed, it unleashes superhuman power. It is no wonder that all over the world, equestrian images have glorified the lives of emperors, heroes, and warriors even if they never rode horses!

Plate 1
Yoruba Carved Wooden
Equestrian Figure



Another writer, Morton-Williams,¹⁰ points out that the “motif” of the mounted warrior, usually in wood and rarely in ivory, is usually placed in several settings by the Yoruba. It can sometimes be found in temples or shrines of gods (*Orisa*); in the palaces of kings and the abodes of high-ranking chiefs. He notes that this usage could also be found in the superstructure of some *Epa* masks (Plate 2) from Ekiti-Yoruba, the region from where the artist hails. Morton-William traces the origin of the motif to the Yoruba cavalry of the Old Oyo, a historically important Yoruba town, sacked c. 1835 in the course of civil wars. This figure, he explains, takes the form of an Oyo-Yoruba cavalryman of the highest military grade, it may even be the representation of the *Alaafin* (king) of Oyo's commander-in-chief (the *Eso*).¹¹



Plate 2
Epa Mask from Ekiti Region

Source: African art in motion:
Icon and act in the Collection of
Katherine Coryton White¹²

From the various discussions, it is clear that the man on a horse is a symbol of strength, authority, and superiority. The figure on the horse identifies as aggrandised, affluent and forceful. He is superior to the unmounted, psychologically impressive and thus in more commanding position.

Still on the same painting, a kneeling woman carrying a bowl with a bird in her hand is known as *Olumeye* (One who knows respect) (see Plate 3) in Yorubaland. The image the lady with a bowl like this is in Yoruba mythology and has been apotheosised to the level of an icon in Yoruba art. In the Ekiti region of Yorubaland, carved wooden bowls portraying female figures holding chickens are traditionally offered to guests as a gesture of hospitality and generosity. Yoruba woman holding a bowl of a carved chicken form on the cover is symbolic, because the picture of the chicken can be linked with a Yoruba mythological creation story. In the story, *Oduduwa*, the creator, descended from the skies on a chain. He brought along with him from heaven a container of earth and a five-toed chicken.

On getting to Ile-Ife, Oduduwa poured the earth on the primordial water and placed the chicken on it to spread the earth. The chicken is thus seen in Yoruba belief as the animal that laid the foundation of the earth.

Plate 3
Olumeye

Source: http://www.randafricanart.com/Yoruba_offering_bowl.html



At the top of the nude figure is a coiled snake. The posture of this snake is similar to the manner in which snakes are represented on Yoruba pattern-dyed fabric (*Adire eleko*, see Plate 4). In Kunle Filani's¹³ analyses of Yoruba forms and motifs, he points out that the coiled snake symbolises the continuum of the Yoruba. To the left hand side, in between the centralised woman and Olumeye is a bird, viewed from back by the observer. The long and fanned-out tail of the bird gives one the feelings that it's a peacock. The imagery in this picture are incontrovertibly called from deep Yoruba culture and thus an incisive reflection of the extent of the experiences of Oḡundipe, an Ekiti-Yoruba.

“The Serenade” (Love song) is another painting done by the artist. It is oil painting on canvas, measuring 181 by 242 cm – another very large one. The central image in this work is a centaur blowing a saxophone, Fela's favourite instrument. A bird is perched on its shoulder with two mermaids in front. All around the centaur are flowers of different colours and shapes. In the lower part of the extreme left hand side, three birds are again depicted.

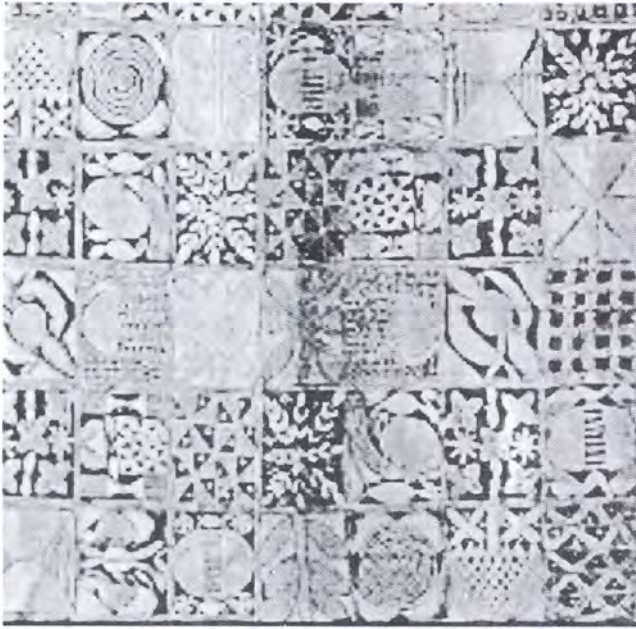


Plate 4
Yoruba *Adire Eleko*

Source: <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/adireintro>

The central images in this painting are mythological creatures. The centaur is a Greek mythological creature with the head, arms, and torso of a man joined to the body of a horse at its neck. The mermaid is a mythical sea creature with the head and upper body of a woman and the tail of a fish, instead of legs. In the western world, flowers and birds because of their beautiful colours, are symbolically associated with love. This painting has a dominant blue; blue is a symbolic colour of love in western Europe and America. The imagery in this painting appears therefore largely from the western experiences of the artist. But the artist argues that there is duality in the physical world of the Yoruba as well. He cites Olokun, water goddess reputed to share both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic features and believed to live in water.

One of Ogundipe's paintings that reflects an admixture of imageries from his Yoruba and non-Yoruba other experiences, alongside his deep thoughts about the universe is his "Celestial Migrants". Here, the central figures are intertwined male and female figures. The female figure holds on one hand a strange animal. The animal might be imaginary considering that it has a body like the back of a tortoise; head is like that of a crocodile and tail like that of a chameleon. The man holds on his right hand a wand that looks like a sceptre of office. The sceptre-like wand looks like the ones portrayed on the hands of Benin royal figures. On the other hand is a bird. At the extreme left-hand side of the canvas is representation of a typical Yoruba carved veranda post (Plate 5). The base of the post has three female (because they have breasts) figures. Surmounted on these figures is an equestrian figure. On the lower part of the canvas are varieties of sunflowers. The painting is rendered with a series of blacks, reds and yellows. This might once again symbolise his kaleidoscopic ages experiences.

Plate 5

Yoruba Veranda Post, by Agbonbiofe Adeshina (d. 1945)

Source: <http://www.ackland.org/tours/classes/adeshina.html>



One of Ogundipe's strongest points is that, he can on one canvas use totally non-African imagery and on the other, very African imagery and on yet another, he combines imageries from his and other cultures with his personal imagination and creative genius. It is evident that the subjects of the paintings of Moyo Ogundipe are a culmination of his total experiences as a Yoruba, an American-trained artist and a philosopher of the universe. His picture compositions are juxtapositions of a multiplicity of icons and images derived from a multiplicity of cultural experiential exposures. The subjects of his paintings are all drawn from the totality of his life's experiences and sensibilities; meaning that we are yet to see more, since he still yearns with enthusiasm for new experiences. Ogundipe is indeed "a man of the universe" and a man of high culture.

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