

Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art: A New Development in the Lagos Art World

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Abstract

The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art (YSMA) located within the premises of the Pan-Atlantic University, Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos is the first privately built and funded university museum in Nigeria. It provides the much needed well-run museum in the Lagos art world that has become one of the leading, fastest-growing art worlds on the African continent. The museum has a large collection of traditional, modern and contemporary artworks by mostly Nigerian artists. Most of the works were donated by Prince Yemisi Shyllon, an avid art collector and patron, who built the museum. YSMA was opened to the public in 2020 with two exhibitions, *Making Matters: Materiality and Technology in Nigerian Art* and *Mirroring Man: Society and Politics in Nigerian Art*. Being a university museum, the main aim of YSMA is educational: to use the artworks in its collection to teach. This article uses the works in the museum's collection to construct a brief narrative of modern and contemporary art practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Lagos art world, university museum, Nigerian art

Introduction

The Lagos art world is one of the leading, fastest-growing art worlds on the African continent today. Most of the significant developments it has recorded in recent years include the establishment of auction houses, artists foundations, residency programmes, and art fairs, but it still lags behind in the area of museum development and management. Museums form a critical part of every well-established art world both in the Global North and Global South. Since the modern period, art museums have played a major role in showcasing and promoting new trends and movements in the arts. Hans Belting (2013) has noted that, “Museums were of central importance for the formation of the modern art world... . ‘The MoMA made us modern,’ to quote Arthur C. Danto who epitomized the importance of the institution for a new canon of art and aesthetics” (pp. 249-250).

In the postmodern period, museums of contemporary arts have been very much involved in the promotion of contemporary art practices in different parts of the world through their collecting programs, exhibitions, publications, artists residencies, lectures and talks. These activities have given great value and relevance to contemporary art and artists. It is noteworthy that the dynamics of the contemporary art world have given rise to greater interest in museum development. In the last couple of years more contemporary art museums and institutions have been built in new and emerging art worlds in places that were previously considered the *peripheries*, that is, outside the old West, China in particular is experiencing a museum boom, and their artists are some of the top-rated artists in the global art market today (Belting, 2013, p. 252). Globalization and its consequences have caused a decentralization of the power and control that art capitals in the West once monopolized.

There is no place on the African continent where the kind of expansion in museum development that is happening in China can be found; however, the Lagos art world has recorded expansion in its audience base and the market in the new century. The establishment of auction houses and the concomitant development in the secondary art market is one of the most significant developments in the Lagos art industry in recent times. The first auction house, Arthouse Contemporary, was founded by Kavita Chellaram in 2007. The primary art market has grown considerably due to the establishment of new standard galleries and art fairs. Some of the new galleries are Art 21, Rele Gallery, Red Door Gallery, and TerraKulture; and the leading art fair, Art X—the first international art fair that covers the West African region—was started by Tokini Peterside in 2016.

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There are also new art/cultural centres, alternative spaces, institutions and foundations that promote contemporary art such as the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) founded by the late Bisi Silva in 2007, the African Artists Foundation (AAF) established in 2007 by Azu Nwagbogu, and the Revolving Art Incubator founded by Jumoke Sanwo in 2015. These new additions and developments in the Lagos art system have greatly accelerated the growth of the art industry; even as it continues to lag behind in museum development.

Lagos has a national museum and a gallery—the National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and the National Gallery of Art (NGA). These two government institutions established in 1957 and 1993, respectively, have their specific responsibilities: the NCMM collects, conserves, and displays traditional arts; while the NGA collects, preserves, documents, and promotes modern and contemporary Nigerian art. The NCMM has its own building at Onikan which is quite old and lacks the features of a state-of-the-art museum. The NGA's National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) is located within the National Arts Theatre building at Iganmu. The space is not ideal and the gallery is not run professionally. The National Museum and the National Gallery of Modern Art are usually without electricity and their visitors are forced to learn “how to see a work of art in total darkness,” which Darby English (2007, p. 1) says is impossible “except in the most extraordinary circumstances, such as when darkness itself forms the condition of the work's visibility.” The poor state of the National Museum and the National Gallery of Modern Art has been widely expressed.

In Lagos there are also a few privately founded “museums” such as the Didi Museum, a place that primarily functions as a commercial gallery that was started in 1983 by Chief Newton Jubunoh at his private house at Victoria Island. At its inaugural exhibition, over 75 works of two painters—Kenny Adamson and Adam Ajunam—were exhibited. Ekpo Eyo, the former Director-General of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments, commented that Didi Museum “was an excellent first attempt of this kind of venture by a private citizen” (<http://didimuseum.com/about/>). Didi Museum was the leading art exhibition venue in Lagos until the late 1990s. It still hosts exhibitions, albeit infrequently. Recently an artist, Uchay Joel Chima, established the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) at a rented place—where he also has his studio—at Anthony Village on Lagos Mainland. It was incorporated with the Corporate Affairs Commission in 2016 and opened to the public in 2018 with a group exhibition that involved seven artists. Chima mentioned how the idea to establish the museum came from the late Bisi Silva who specifically told him to think about opening such a place (personal communication, February 1, 2020). It is the lack of well-run museums, the desire to preserve some private collections, and the need for museums that specialize in contemporary art, that have caused a few individuals to venture into museum establishment. However, none of the efforts in this direction resulted in a standard museum until Prince Yemisi Shyllon proposed a university museum at the Pan-Atlantic University, Ibeju-Lekki, and his proposal was accepted. Today we have a purpose-built museum at the university called the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art (YSMA), the first privately built and funded university museum in Nigeria (Figure 1).

YSMA is a standard museum that is run very professionally. It was opened to the public in 2020 with two exhibitions, *Making Matters: Materiality and Technology in Nigerian Art* and *Mirroring Man: Society and Politics in Nigerian Art*. YSMA recently received the Apollo Awards 2020 Museum Opening of the Year from the London-based international magazine, Apollo, founded in 1925 (<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/museum-opening-of-the-year-winner-apollo-awards-2020/>). This award attests to the international standards the university museum upholds in its activities.



Figure 1. Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art at the Pan-Atlantic University, Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa



Figure 2. Prince Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon

YSMA: From Idea to Reality

The idea to build a museum for his collection came to Prince Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon (Figure 2) in 2008 after showing some works from his private collection at the National Museum, Lagos in March and November of 2008. Shyllon is widely reported to have the largest private collection of Nigerian art that includes the traditional, modern and contemporary arts. Shyllon was named one of 100 top art collectors in the world by Artnet News in 2016. At that time, he had more than 7,000 works in his collection (see <https://news.artnet.com/market/worlds-top-100-art-collectors-part-two-513953>). Shyllon started collecting art in 1975 when he was a second-year undergraduate engineering student at the University of Ibadan. Before the building of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, works in his collection were kept in his private houses in Maryland, Lagos and Abeokuta (Ogun) which limited their accessibility. Although Shyllon had the habit of inviting people (both Nigerians and foreigners) to his home to see his collection, he strongly desired to have his works housed in a museum where anyone who wanted to see them could easily do so. Shyllon fully understood the relevance and necessity of museums in the art and culture sector; particularly in Lagos where there were no standard, well-managed museums. He said: “My goal is to leave a lasting legacy... We don’t have well-managed museums in Nigeria, even though there are thirty-five of them” (Y. Shyllon, personal communication, August 30, 2019).

In 2015 he signed an agreement with the management of the Pan-Atlantic University (PAU) for the museum, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, to be built at the Ibeju-Lekki campus of the university. PAU is an institution that has shown great interest in the art of Nigeria. The university has promoted Nigerian art through exhibitions and publications; and it once had an online educational resource: Virtual Museum of Modern Nigerian Art on the university’s website. Their mutual interest in the visual arts made it easy for the idea of a university museum to become a reality within a short period of time. Construction works for the museum started in 2018. Shyllon provided the seed money for the project, and eventually had to fund the project singlehandedly after the university was unable to get the funds it was expected to raise. Shyllon is also subsidizing the cost of running the museum which will last for ten years.

The museum was designed by Jess Castellote, a Spanish-trained architect and art historian with specialized interest in Nigerian art. Castellote, who is the museum’s first director, has been living and working in Nigeria for many years. The museum has a simple, minimalist design on the outside. It is like a box that references the concept of a fridge. It measures 30 x 30 x 11 meters. The structure has heat insulators that help to control the inside temperature. The outside monolithic walls with grid design have rusty, earthy orange hues that were achieved by staining. The entrance space and the inside are painted grey. The museum has two floors. Many of the partitioning walls neither touch each other nor the ceiling.

This enhances the circulation of air, and helps the visitors to better experience the openness of the interior space. This character of openness allows one to view different parts of the interior space and the artworks from many angles and positions. “This is something that enriches the architectural experience,” says Castellote (personal communication, September 2, 2019).

The partitioned and designated spaces create a complex but seamless network through which visitors to the museum experience the artworks on display. The museum is easy to navigate, without a feeling of been lost in it. Being a university museum, the main aim of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is educational: to use the artworks in its collection to teach. The object-based pedagogical methodology will educate the participants in its programmes, who would be mostly young people, about the precolonial and postcolonial art, artists and their societies. The museum’s educational programmes are also designed to help the participants to develop critical thinking (J. Castellote, personal communication, September 2, 2019).

The YSMA Collection and Related Narratives of Art Practice

The major artworks that constitute the museum’s collection are 1,000 works that Shyllon donated to the museum. These are traditional, modern and contemporary works by mostly Nigerian artists in various mediums collected over a long period of time. The museum’s collection also includes Nigerian art that the university has acquired over the years. The traditional pieces in YSMA collection are from the Yoruba, Benin, Nok, the Igbo and the Nupe. The Ife royal head (Figure 3) dated 14th century is a beautifully sculpted realistic head with vertical scarifications. This particular piece is similar to some well-known Ife artifacts, such as the Ologun head excavated in early twentieth century and acquired by Viktor Leo Frobenius, a German ethnologist. Seth Quartey (2010, p. 12) reports that Frobenius “considered the Ologun [head] and many other terracotta heads as non-African because of their quality”; the writer sees this as one of the conscious efforts by Western ethnologists working in the colonial period “to deny any sign of civilization and culture in all aspects of African history” (Quartey, 2010, p. 13).



Figure 3. Yoruba. Ife royal head, 14th century, bronze, h. 28 cm.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa

Ife sculptures are some of the best examples of naturalistic art in traditional African art practice. Radiocarbon dating shows that fully articulated artworks were being produced in Ife between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries (Eyo & Willet, 1982, as cited in Quartey, 2010, p. 11). The metal casting technique employed in the production of the Ife pieces shows the high level of advancement in the use of metal that the people had.

Another remarkable metal piece in the museum's collection is the Benin royal head (Figure 4), a generic royal portrait. This is a popular genre in Benin traditional art. "Royal portraits in Benin are commissioned to enhance the reputation of the rulers and to preserve the established order" (Blackmun, 1990, p. 69). Most royal portraits are produced in bronze by the royal guild of bronzecasters known as *Iguneronmwon*.



Figure 4. Benin. Benin royal head, 17th–18th century, bronze, h. 30 cm.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa



Figure 5. Yoruba. Gelede headdress, 20th century, wood and pigment, h. 47 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

The YSMA collection has many Yoruba masks that were mostly produced in the twentieth century. The Gelede headdress (Figure 5), is a resplendent feminine mask with a complex superstructure showing different birds, animals and reptiles. The polychromatic colouring further enlivens it. Gelede masks are worn by men in masquerade performances that celebrate Iyanla, the primordial mother, and other mothers and female ancestors of Yoruba peoples. The museum also has a few notable ivory works; for example, the Benin royal gong (Figures 6a, 6b) dated 17th–18th century. This object has an image of an Oba with two attendants dressed in beaded attire at his right and left. The “supporting triad” is one of the most common motifs found in Benin ivory carvings (Blackmun, 1987, p. 82). On the other side of the ivory carving, an image of an Oba with mudfish legs holding two crocodiles represents the fourteenth-century Benin King, Oba Ohen who was the father Oba Ewuare the Great. “Ohen was lame because in some unique way he was an incarnation of Olokun. Ohen came to Benin from the spirit world, *erinmwin*, to bring peace and riches to the nation” (Blackmun, 1990, p. 69). The royal guild of craftsmen known as the *Igbesanmwan* carved the ivories that were looted by the British soldiers in their invasion of Benin in 1897. The artifacts looted by the British soldiers were sold in Europe, and consequently, the artistry and craftsmanship of the Benin people became known to many.



Figure 6a. Benin. Benin royal gong, 17th–18th century, ivory, h. 23 cm.



Figure 6b. Benin. Benin royal gong.

Photo: Courtesy of Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation (OYASAF)

Old traditional works produced before colonialism have greater value and are highly sought by dealers, collectors, and museums more than those produced under the colonial and the postcolonial modernist conditions. George Ellis in his contribution to the topic, “Fakes, fakers, and fakery: Authenticity in African Art,” argues that “The monetary worth of an African work is predicted on rarity, aesthetic excellence, use and age” (Ellis, 1979, p. 25). Traditional African art objects are considered authentic if they were made and used by the natives in the ritual practices and performances that they were traditional produced for. Western experts in traditional African art are always interested in the authenticity of traditional objects in museums and private collections.

To deal with the question of authenticity that is often asked about the traditional objects in his collection, Shyllon in 2006 sent some of his pieces to Laboratory Ralf Kotalla, Haigerloch, Germany for thermoluminescence analysis used to determine the age of an object. The Ife royal head (Figure 3) dated 14th century was one of the objects analyzed.

The strength of the museum's collection is actually in its modern and contemporary art which includes the works of such notable modern and contemporary Nigerian artists as Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwonwu, Akinola Lasekan, Uzo Egonu, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Abayomi Barber, Ben Osawe, Obiora Udechukwu, Kolade Oshinowo, Ben Osaghae, Duke Asidere, Kainebi Osahenye, Rom Isichei, Abiodun Olaku, Lara Ige-Jack, Ndidi Dike, Peju Layiwola, Peju Alatise, and a few foreigners who have lived and worked in Nigeria such as Susanne Wenger and El Anatsui. Consequently, YSMA has a sufficiently comprehensive collection of modern and contemporary Nigerian art to construct an encyclopedic narrative of modern and contemporary art practice in Nigeria.



Figure 7. Aina Onabolu. *Portrait of an African Man*, 1955, watercolour on board, 48.5 x 38.5 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

Modern Nigerian art practice started in the colonial period with Aina Onabolu (1882–1963). Onabolu was an autodidact who later acquired formal education of art in the West. Onabolu was a naturalistic painter who produced portraits of some Nigerian elites of the twentieth century that have assumed an iconic status. One of such portraits found in the museum's collection is titled *Portrait of an African Man* (Figure 7). The man in the painting holds a rolled-up paper – a symbol of Western education – in his left hand, while his right hand rests comfortably on a backrest. His voluminous flowing gown, *agbada*, is a dress associated with politicians and wealthy men. The brown background colour of the textile reflects the colour of his skin, and the diagonal stripe design of the cloth is echoed in the diagonal structure of the backrest. Onabolu also effectively used muted gray and blue in the background and foreground. The most celebrated artist after Onabolu is Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994). Enwonwu was one of Kenneth Murray's students who was taught to explore indigenous African arts and themes. His works are characterized by a synthetic approach that reflects his Igbo cultural heritage and modern identity. His painting in the museum collection, *Ijo: Africa Dances* (Figure 8), shows three masquerades in performance. The central masquerade with a fish headdress mask exudes a frenzied exuberance enhanced by the warm colours in which it is painted. The work shows an effective attempt at stylization rather than realistic representation. This piece belongs to Enwonwu's *Africa Dances* series. According to Sylvester Ogbechie:

By 1950, Enwonwu's divergent styles coalesced as he began to explore myriad forms of symbolic imagery in African culture. These experiments resulted in his *Africa Dances* series, which he started working on while still a student at the University of London, as an intellectual reaction to Geoffrey Gorer's book, *Africa Dances*. (Ogbechie, 2008, p. 95)



Figure 8. Ben Enwonwu. *Ijo: Africa Dances*, 1957, oil on paper, 25.5 x 7.5 cm.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa

Stylization and synthetic formula in art making became a major impetus among the next generation of artists following Enwonwu. This generation mainly consisted of former students of the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) who formed the Zaria Art Society in 1958. The museum has the works of most of the major members of that group who are referred to as Zaria rebels or Zarianists: Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and Simon Okeke. The group's philosophy of Natural Synthesis was aimed at achieving "a synthesis of ideas, approaches and techniques. Okeke and the Zaria Society proposed cultural reorientation for modern Nigerian artists who sought a legitimate identity that could be found in past cultural experiences" (Péri, 2010, p. 51). Uche Okeke's *The Burning Bush* (Figure 9) is an experimental work that drew heavily on *uli* aesthetics. Okeke has used the characteristic curvilinear line used by the traditional *uli* female artists in a style that appears expressionistic in giving character and form to the burning bush. The cadmium red portrays the raging fire.



Figure 9. Uche Okeke. *The Burning Bush*, 1962, oil on paper, 56 x 46 cm. Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

Bruce Onobrakpeya's *14 Stations of the Cross* (Figure 10) tells a biblical story with artistic elements, motifs and style that are unambiguously African. Joan B. Waite in her analysis one of the prints (Figure 11) writes: "Veronica approaches Christ to wipe his brow with a veil while a Roman soldier stands guard. The background and clothing reflect traditional fabrics" (Waite, 1987, p. 66). Father Kevin Carroll of the Society of African Missions who promoted the use of traditional Yoruba art styles in expressing Christian themes at Oye-Ekiti in Nigeria acquired a set of the *14 Stations of the Cross* in 1972 which is now in the collection of the African Art Museum of the S.M.A. Fathers, Tenafly, New Jersey, USA.

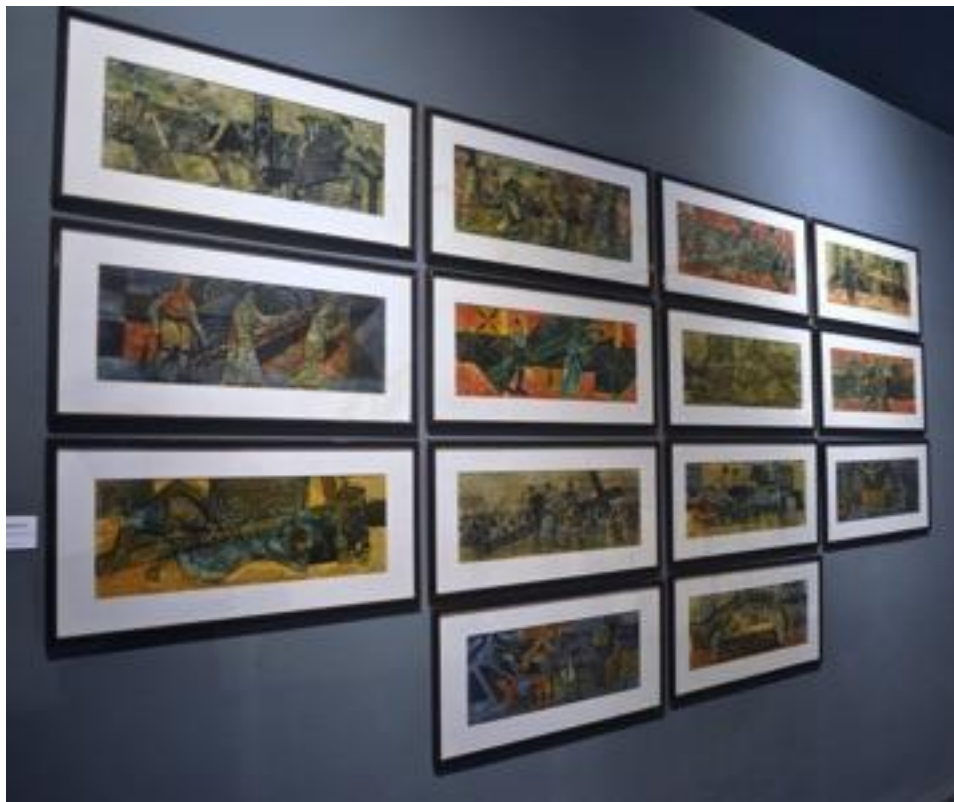


Figure 10. Bruce Onobrakpeya. *14 Stations of the Cross*, 1969–1972, linocut.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa



Figure 11. Bruce Onobrakpeya. *Station of the Cross*, 1972, linocut.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 12. Yusuf Grillo. *Abe nu Gogo*, 1993, oil on board, 122 x 64 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 13. Simon Okeke. *Untitled*, 1965, oil on paper, 22.8 x 26.6 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

The distillation of the concept of Natural Synthesis takes a geometric formation in the work of Yusuf Grillo *Abe nu Gogo* (Figure 12). The face of the male figure has a specific geometric character that is essentially his. In Chika Okeke-Agulu's definition, "Grillo's work, usually generic portraits of Yoruba and Lagos subjects, is characterized by stylized figures and angular, intersecting color planes reminiscent of the compositional vectors and dynamic arcs of cubo-futurist painting" (Okeke-Agulu, 2015, p. 115). The work of Simon Okeke, the first president of the Zaria Art Society, has a textural subtlety, and his effective use of light and shade makes him a master of chiaroscuro. His painting *Untitled* (Figure 13) is a partly stylized image of an African mother and child. This blue monochromatic work shows his iconic style. The Zarianists inspired a whole lot of artists in Nigeria and elsewhere by their work and philosophy. The art practice of El Anatsui, a Ghanaian who was employed to teach sculpture at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria in 1975, benefitted from the experimentation and exploration of *uli* art at the department which was spearheaded by Uche Okeke. In Anatsui's *Sisi Eko* (Figure 14) we see the *uli* spiral motif, *agnolagwo*, that suggests the navel, and numerous other incised patterns found in cultural objects. Among other important works by Anatsui in the YSMA collection are two of his wooden tray works (Figures 15, 16). These two works were among the pieces he exhibited in his first solo exhibition which was held at the University of Nigeria's Institute of African Studies in 1976.



Figure 14. El Anatsui. *Sisi Eko*, 1990, wood, h. 177 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 15. El Anatsui. *Untitled*, 1974, wood.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 16. El Anatsui. *Untitled*, 1974, wood.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 17. Obiora Udechukwu. *Our Own WS*, 1997, watercolour on paper, 73 x 40 cm.
Photo: Tobenna Okwuosa

The arts department of the University of Nigeria has produced many artists whose works are based on the *uli* aesthetic canon; chief among them is Obiora Udechukwu. Udechukwu's works in the YSMA collection such as *Our Own WS* (Figure 17) is a good example of the modernist *uli* style. In *Our Own WS*, he celebrates the creative ingenuity of Wole Soyinka who was the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The composition includes quotations from Soyinka's writings. The interface of *uli* elements with written words is an effective compositional protocol that speaks to the notions of modernity, acculturation, and hybridity.

The Natural Synthetic ideology inspired a group of former students and lecturers of the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University (Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe, Bolaji Campbell and Tunde Nasiru) to start exploring Yoruba indigenous art and design motifs in their art. Their artistic style is called Onaism. Ona is a Yoruba word for design.

The Ona style is well expressed in the artworks of two members of the Ona group (Tola Wewe and Moyo Okediji) in the YSMA collection. Both artists' works have a geometric character: In Tola Wewe's painting *Untitled* (Figure 18) we see a crowd of stylized figures, and the female figure at the extreme right has facial features and hairstyle that recall the iconic style of human representation in traditional Yoruba woodcarvings. The stylized body of the female figure in Okediji's relief terracotta work *Untitled* (Figure 19) is enhanced with incised complex motifs and designs. Victor Ekpuk, a former student of University of Ife, has a very linear style of art that has visual links with both *uli* art and *nsibidi* ciphers. Ekpuk's quintessential style is seen in *Untitled* (Figure 20). This is one of 5 of his works in YSMA's collection.



Figure 18. Tola Wewe. *Untitled*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 115 x 85 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 19. Moyo Okediji. *Untitled*, 2005–2010, terracotta on board, 80 x 60 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 20. Victor Ekpuk. *Untitled*, 1997, acrylic on board, diameter 80 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

Works of art produced by individuals who discovered their artistic talents through the workshops that took place at the Mbari Mbayo club that was established by Ulli Beier in 1962 at Oshogbo are also in the museum's collection. The works of the Oshogbo artists have a primitivist feel which most early Western collectors loved to see in African art. Some of the major Oshogbo artists whose works are in YSMA are Twins Seven-Seven, Muraina Oyelami and Jimoh Buraimoh. Seven-Seven's *Untitled* (Figure 21) is about fishermen and their catch. In Oyelami *Landscape* (Figure 22) we see a cluster of houses that look modern but rendered in a quasi-primitivist style. In Buraimoh's *Untitled* (Figure 23) we see two human faces within a densely designed space. Buraimoh is known for his use of beads in creating compositions that have very defined contours and edges.

His use of beads continues an old practice among the Yoruba where the Oba's crowns, staffs, and regal attire are produced with beads.



Figure 21. Twin Seven-Seven. *Untitled*, 2009, oil on board, 175 x 79 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 22. Muraina Oyelami. *Landscape*, 1997, oil on board, 60 x 122 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 23. Jimoh Buraimoh. *Untitled*, 2013, beads on board, 120 x 92 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

Modern Yoruba artists such as Lamidi Fakeye (1928–2009) continued traditional woodcarving practice, and YSMA has about 20 of his works. *Obi Lafi Nbe Ku* (The Importance of Kolanut) (Figure 24) is a very good example of Fakeye's style which is often described as "neo-traditional." The museum has other interesting woodcarvings in the modernist style; for example, *FESTAC 77* (Figure 25) by Erahbor Emokpae (1934–1984), and *Untitled*, 1977 (Figure 26) by Ben Osawe (1931–2007).



Figure 24. Lamidi Fakeye. *Oba Lafi Nbe Ku* (The Importance of Kolanut), 2008, wood, h. 74 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 25. Erahbor Emokpae. *FESTAC 77*, 1977, wood, h. 51 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 26. Ben Osawe. *Untitled*, 1977, wood, h. 60 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

YSMA has many artworks in formal representational styles, such as Kolade Oshinowo's *Market Place* (Figure 27) and Olumide Oresegun's *Waiting* (Figure 28). Most of the modern and contemporary works in YSMA display distinct styles characteristic of some academic art institutions and informal art schools, such as the Abayomi Barber art school. Abayomi Barber (1928–2021) worked mainly in a naturalistic style. His sculptures, such as *Ola I* (Figure 29) are very realistic; while his naturalistic landscape paintings, such as *Untitled* (Figure 30), have a touch of surrealism, the foliage morphing into various animal forms.



Figure 27. Kolade Oshinowo. *Marketplace*, 1989, acrylic on board, 72 x 60 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 28. Olumide Oresegun. *Waiting*, 2012, oil on canvas, 90 x 76 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 29. Abayomi Barber. *Ola I*, 1961, bronze, h. 57cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 30. Abayomi Barber. *Untitled*, 1997, oil on canvas, 87 x 60 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF

Beyond works created using conventional and traditional mediums, the museum also has works made from unconventional and discarded materials. Although some artists in Nigeria and other parts of Africa have experimented with unconventional materials and techniques in the past, the renewed interest in recycling or upcycling in art comes from the experimental art practice of El Anatsui whose bottle top pieces have received wide acclaim globally. Anatsui's art making technique of tying small objects and units to make a massive whole is applied in one way or another by the new crop of artists producing recycled art and installations. Two of such examples are Olumide Onadipe's *Pure and Simulated II* (Figure 30) made of plastic bags and rings, and Peju Layiwola's *Stamping History* (Figure 31) composed of small square foam blocks carved with motifs used in stamping designs on *adire* textiles.

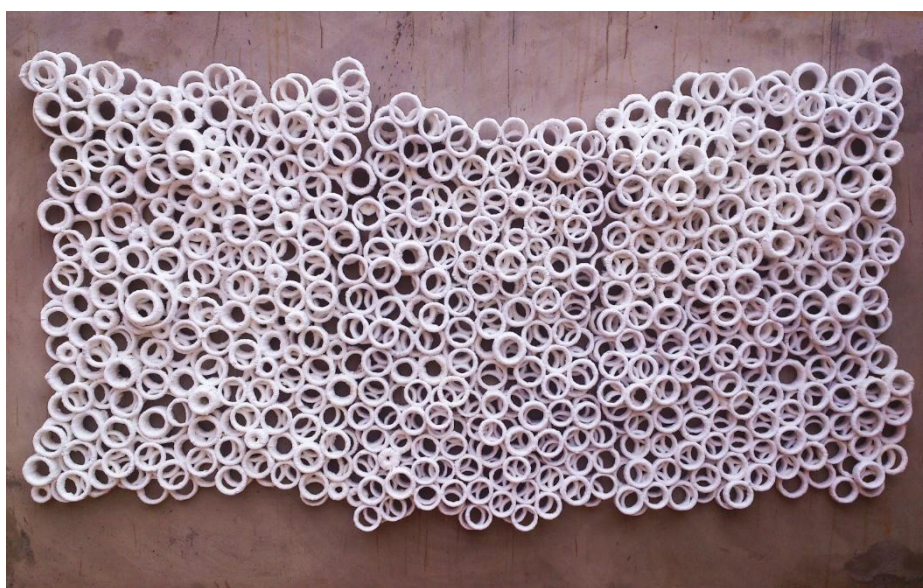


Figure 31. Olumide Onadipe. *Pure and Simulated II*, 2014, plastic bags and plastic rings, 153 x 275 cm.
Photo: Courtesy of OYASAF



Figure 32. Peju Layiwola. *Stamping History*, 2018–2019, Styrofoam.
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

Conclusion

The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art is a standard university museum with a broad range of works that could be used to teach and learn about the cultures, traditions, and histories of many ethnic groups in Nigeria's precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods. Through the works, a comprehensive historical narrative of colonial and postcolonial artistic practice in Nigeria can be constructed. The two inaugural exhibitions of the museum curated by Iheanyi Onwuegbucha are quite educative. *Making Matters: Materiality and Technology in Nigerian Art* told the story of how artists from the precolonial period to the present time have used various materials and artistic technologies in the making of their art works. *Mirroring Man: Society and Politics in Nigerian Art* showed how traditional and modern artists have reflected their cultures and experiences in their creative work, as well as using them to project their nationalistic ideals. The exhibition established art as a very important commentary on society. The future exhibitions and educational programmes of the museum will definitely draw more people to the museum, and gradually, the Yemisi Museum of Art, a university museum located at the Pan-Atlantic University, Ibeji-Lekki, will become one of the major destination for tourists, art lovers, and scholars/researchers interested in Nigerian art.

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