SAM ADE BABARINSA
Nigerian Painter-Soldier
The Best of Africa, Toronto
April 5, 1981-May 2, 1981

The Best of Africa hosted an exhibition last spring by a rather unusual African artist who will bear watching in the future. Samuel Ade Babarinsa is not only a painter of above-average talent but also a captain in the Nigerian Army. His Toronto exhibition was arranged courtesy of Victoria Scott (formerly Mundy-Castle), who has written extensively on the Oshogbo artists (see African Arts, vol. 6, no. 1, 1972).

Babarinsa’s career as an artist has followed a rather rocky and circuitous path. He was born in 1945 in the small Ekiti Yoruba town of Okemisi. According to Babarinsa he was an “artist” even as a small boy, constantly drawing, decorating, making pictures everywhere and on anything. He tells the story of how he followed his grandmother to the family shrine when she renewed its wall decorations. Wanting to emulate her he proceeded to similarly decorate the walls of the family home. For his efforts our future artist was given a sound spanking.

In those days (the late 1950s) art was not the sort of career a respectable family wished for its sons. It was hoped that Babarinsa would continue in school and eventually join the civil service. However, at the age of 16 he chose a career that put him in the family’s bad graces: he ran off to join the army. Babarinsa soon saw service as an infantryman in a Nigerian unit serving in the Congo and later, as an officer, he fought in the Nigerian civil war. Ms. Scott relates his stories of going into battle with his sketch pad and drawing during lulls in the fighting. He even tells of drawing on cigarette packages when his supplies of paper had been exhausted. Later on Babarinsa was involved in the Nigerian Army publication Soja, and he has designed numerous cards, calendars, and posters for the military.

Babarinsa’s career as an artist took a major turn for the better when he was posted to Oshogbo in 1972. One can imagine how being in contact with people like Twins Seven Seven and Buraimoh would influence an aspiring artist, especially seeing the possibility of seriously developing his art into a full-time profession. Quartered in a compound next to Twins’s, Babarinsa began painting in earnest. Having placed highly in several regional art competitions in which he represented the Army, he was given several years off to paint in preparation for FESTAC. Babarinsa produced a large number of works and, more importantly, was in contact with a much wider artistic community. Although currently stationed in Jos, he maintains a residence in Oshogbo where he can paint, receive visitors, and be contacted (P.O. Box 228).

My interest in Babarinsa was sparked by a desire to see what is coming out of Oshogbo that is new. It is certainly premature to speak of the “death” of the Oshogbo school—still, some of the artists who have been known longer are now engaged in sterile repetitions of their own, earlier creations. But visitors returning from Nigeria frequently bring me examples of vigorous work by younger or as yet undiscovered artists. This new group owes much to the first wave of Oshogbo artists but seems to be trying to find its own individual paths.

Stylistically, Babarinsa is rooted in the Twins Seven Seven-Z.K. Olorontoba method: leave no space undrawn upon and add a plethora of fanciful detailing. Babarinsa shows a slightly greater interest in perspective and has used the plywood cut-out “sculpture-painting” techniques employed to great effect by Twins Seven Seven. Largely working in ink on paper, he has a characteristically West African sense of strong colors, a cursory stylization of human figures in masquerade group scenes, and a strong, untutored sense of design that at times has the direct whimsicality of folk art.

For subject matter Babarinsa draws on local themes. Pieces in his Toronto show dealt with traditional masquerades from his hometown, portraits of “big men,” and everyday Nigerians (e.g., Fulani Milk Maid and Flying Acrobat). Although I found the portraits more a rendering of the trappings of office and less a conveying of the person’s character, the other two groups were handled more effectively. His masquerades were an insider’s sympathetic view of what was visually important in the masquerade—everything from the “mask” itself to the tennis shoes on the performer’s feet!

It is encouraging to see that energetic Nigerians continue to consider art a worthwhile profession. Babarinsa himself seems to possess a great deal of professional curiosity, a willingness to learn from other artists (a quality noticeably lacking in other Oshogbo artists), and a desire to experiment with various
media. I suspect that Babarinsa’s best work is still to be done, and his career bears watching.

The other side of the coin is that as shows at the Best of Africa go, this was a mediocre exhibition. By now our clients are past the novelty stage—we have presented too many first-rate African artists, and the fact that an African can paint is not much of an attraction. He may cause a stir in other cities, but here in Toronto (and this is not meant to be snobbish) any new African artist will be compared with established masters: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Skunder, Papa Taal, or El Salahi. And it was here that Babarinsa’s work fell short.

If African artists are to compete on the international art market—even against other African painters and printmakers—their works must meet international standards. In particular, African artists must pay attention to: (a) “quality control”—rejecting pieces that are inferior to others or that simply don’t work; (b) presentation—works must be in good condition, not folded or torn, and with margins suitable for framing and/or hanging; (c) realistic pricing—art is not sold by the square inch, and artists unknown in North America should not expect prices comparable to those of established artists. If contemporary African artists paid more attention to these points they would give themselves—and those trying to promote their work—a better chance of reaching a larger audience.

Bob Barde
The Best of Africa

ASANTE: KINGDOM OF GOLD
Museum of Mankind, London
Opened February 19, 1981

When, in 1970, the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum moved from its overcrowded Bloomsbury galleries with their old-fashioned, glass-fronted cases to larger but still far from perfect premises in Burlington Gardens, behind Piccadilly and the Royal Academy, it was to be expected that the then Keeper, William Fagg, would give pride of place to the wealth of Nigerian material in the collections. Sure enough, in December, 1970, he put on an exhibition entitled “Divine Kingship in Africa,” in which most of the finest examples of the art of Benin among the museum’s holdings predominated in a setting of the Oba’s palace with shingled roof and shrines to the royal ancestors. In 1974 this was replaced by “Yoruba Religious Cults,” mounted by William Fagg and John Picton and arranged in and around the replica of a small Yoruba temple with central impluvium. These two exhibitions were designed to present the majority, if not all, of the greatest examples of Benin and Yoruba art in the museum’s collections in a way that would attract the attention of scholars (most pieces were on open display and could be very closely inspected, though they were securely wired to a highly efficient alarm system) and, through a reproduction of their natural setting, still appeal to the general public.

With the advent of Malcolm McLeod as Keeper in 1974, the museum’s African inter-

est shifted westward, as was again to be expected, to Ghana and especially Asante, where McLeod has done fieldwork. In 1978 he put on a fascinating display of Asante goldweights and their accessories from the museum’s enormous holdings, which include Rattray’s collection. It was followed in 1979 by an exhibition of the Armitage Collection, which was formed before the First World War in what was then the Gold Coast, and later became part of the Cockin/Barclay Collection. This was a very important recent museum purchase and was probably little known to most Africanists except from photographs in books, particularly those by Leon Underwood.

This Ghanaian interest is now confirmed by a large new exhibition entitled “Asante: Kingdom of Gold,” which replaces the one devoted to Captain James Cook and takes over the entire ground floor of the Museum of Mankind except for one small room displaying “Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico.” This is an ambitious project that makes use of designers’ reconstructions, blow-ups of photographs, taped music, and of course a wide selection of objects ranging from court art to folk or peasant crafts. To celebrate this grand occasion the Asantehene himself, with attendants, was invited over (I wonder how they got their Dane guns through customs) and welcomed at the opening reception by a packed and jostling throng of mainly Europeans peering over one another’s shoulders for a glimpse of a real black African king, and by a group of Africans performing the shoddiest drumming and dancing I have ever heard or seen.

Although it is nowhere explicitly stated, it is clear that the reconstructions interspersed with conventional displays of objects in glass showcases have been planned to contrast the village in the bush with life at court. One enters the exhibition along a bush path through the forest to reach a room in which a generous selection of goldweights, many of them very fine indeed, demonstrates the manner of trading with gold-dust as currency. Off this room is a reproduction of a tiny village compound with three huts and an altar to the Sky God (nyamiedua), the forked post bearing a pot containing offerings. A hearty glance through the doorway of one of the huts and one passes on to a stretch of window displays of village arts and crafts. (A word of praise here: the accompanying descriptive notes are mercifully brief and to the point; I was told by the museum director, though I did not put this to the test myself, that the earlier Cook exhibition had included enough reading matter to hold the attention of the conscientious visitor for seven hours!) Here are black, coiled, open-fired food bowls, ritual vessels and funerary terracottas, clay figurative pipe-bowls, some large and fine carved wooden combs, a few rather mediocre stools and ouare boards, aku’a’mma (but why was no mirror placed behind them to show the intriguing and unexplained designs on the backs of the heads?), ladles, and a group of rough-hewn manikins collected in fairly recent times.

There is a selection of adinkra and kente (or ntama) with a few adinkra stamps, but this display is disappointing when one thinks of the prolific exhibition “African Textiles” of two years ago. The reason given is that, apparently according to Venice Lamb, the majority of the museum’s holdings of cloths collected in Asante are of Ewe manufacture. Even if this is so, they were adopted into Asante culture and I do not see why they should be excluded, especially since, when we come to court art, we find a case containing the two 14th-century English ewers found by the British in a courtyard of the royal mausoleum at Bananta in 1896, a 17th-
Sam Ade Babarinsa: Nigerian Painter-Soldier
Author(s): Bob Barde
Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3336013

UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to African Arts.