Bruce Onobrakpeya


Robert Barde
Onobrakpeya grew up, like most African children, surrounded by art. He was born in 1932 in the western Niger Delta, in what is now Nigeria’s Bendel State. His father was both a carver and a Christian, characteristics which early on obliged Onobrakpeya to cope with two different traditions, two distinct inheritances. Both at home and at school his upbringing was a constant exploration of the values of Europe and of traditional Africa.

From 1957 to 1961 Onobrakpeya attended the Nigerian College of Technology (the forerunner of Ahmadu Bello University) in Zaria, Nigeria. At that time Nigeria was on the threshold of independence, and Onobrakpeya was to become part of the “independence generation” which, over the next two decades, would set the tone of the new Nigeria in every field of artistic endeavor. Following in the footsteps of older artists (like Ben Enwonwu), Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, and Yusuf Grillo set out to create an art that was both modern and distinctively Nigerian. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka were attempting this in literature. Duro Ladipo in theater, Fela Ranson Kuti in music: the visual arts demanded nothing less.
There were, and still are, many pitfalls along the road to a new African (and in this case, Nigerian) art. Exposure to European techniques had the concomitant risk of European intellectual and emotional pitfalls, while reliance on an expatriate-dominated market tempted artists to pander to foreigners' interest in the exotic. Fortunately, Onobrakpeya has an abiding curiosity about, and an abiding respect for, traditional Nigerian cultures, a sense of mission shared by his Zaria confrères Nwoko and Okeke. He says "I try to speak to the present about the future and in the process choose what I wish from the past." Frank Willett, in his comprehensive African Art, points out that "Bruce Onobrakpeya has set the prices of some of his work low enough to attract African buyers, for if Western-trained artists are to remain truly African they must satisfy the artistic needs of their own society."

Although Onobrakpeya has received recognition for his paintings, murals, and illustrations, it is chiefly for his deep-etched printing method that he is known. This technique, which Europeans would call intaglio, was the fortuitous result of his having attended workshops by Dutch printmaker Ru van Russem and, somewhat later, his attempting to repair a ruined printing plate. The repair work entailed using the liquid epoxy Araldite, and the result had such sculptural qualities that Onobrakpeya subsequently took to making his printing plates entirely from this epoxy. This "Nigerian deep-etching" method involves both the building up of forms by pouring the liquid epoxy and the more common aspect of etching with a burin or other engraving instrument once the epoxy has hardened.
The actual printing is performed as Onobrakpeya, described it to me. Background colors are printed with the help of paper stencils. Then the main plate is inked all over with one color, usually black. This is then wiped, as in intaglio printing. Small rollers are then used to roll color onto appropriate areas of the inked block which is now put over the already-prepared background (in the printing paper). And the print is rolled off the press. The process is exactly the same as the traditional intaglio printing. The only difference is the bold relief which stands out for easy sectional inking.

For over ten years now, Onobrakpeya has been producing his deep-etchings, as well as lino-cuts and what must be described as rice-paper rubbings (his term is “lino engraving”) from linoleum plates. More recently he has experimented with printing on thin sheets of copper and aluminum instead of paper, the result is dramatic, almost archaeological.

Onobrakpeya’s work is so varied that it is difficult to categorize. None of the usual isms seem to fit. His prints are decorative and pretty, yet he finds pure decorativeness unsatisfying. Daily life is a frequent motif, yet realism and engagement are inappropriate terms to an artist so concerned with the spirit of things. If a phrase for describing Onobrakpeya’s work had to be coined, I would opt for “a moralist’s window on Africa.” Onobrakpeya’s works as a body call for understanding: for outsiders to understand Nigeria, for Nigerians to understand each other. His genius lies not only in seeing the necessity of such work, but in carrying it out in such a masterly fashion. Several examples from among Onobrakpeya’s prints might shed light on his goals.
In *Emedjo*, with its lively masked dancers, we see Onobrakpeya documenting certain cultural phenomena that are already passing away, underscoring the dignity that has nourished and preserved the Urhobo people, Onobrakpeya’s ethnic group, for many centuries.

*Builders at Work* commemorates, to quote Wendy Lawrence, “the building in Lagos of a Presbyterian church in an extremely modern Western architectural style. While the title focuses on the men involved in the actual daily task of construction, they are so small and lightly drawn as to be scarcely visible. The print is dominated by the skeleton of the church itself, in whose underlying structure Onobrakpeya has discovered a principle of striving beyond human limitations, toward the divine . . . . It suggests a desire to reach above the constraints of this world, and Onobrakpeya has responded to this feeling.’’

Onobrakpeya has drawn not only on his own Urhobo heritage but also on the artistic influence of the Benin. His print *Nomorere*, again according to Wendy Lawrence, “focuses on the Benin attitude towards life and death—the glory of being such an heir. To convey this idea, Onobrakpeya has looked to Benin bronze plaques for organizational strength. His figures all wear the traditional facial expression of stylized serenity, while the central character is presented in the posture and ceremonial garb of chieftancy. The body borne aloft by the figures is shaded primarily in blue, which suggests that its spirit has gone to inhabit another plane of existence—that of the ancestors and potential descendants.’’

*Ota Gbinowe* "shows part of the adventure of a man who succeeded and entered the spirit land", says Bruce Onobrakpeya in “Notes and Comments on 46 Prints”. "On arriving, there, he wandered all over the place and never saw his creator. However, he stumbled into an assembly where someone was addressing a group of people, above whom was a flying spirit from whose underside some recently dead people projected. This flying spirit also held a white chalk with one hand and a sword with the other. The man returned to earth more confused than ever. He then consulted an oracle, who explained that the flying spirit poses the question, *Ota gbinowe?* [Will the future be bad or good?] The oracle said that if the deliberations of the assembly reflected wisdom which was learned from previous experiences, they will be blessed with the symbolic white chalk. But if their decisions showed selfishness, corrupt minds, and unwillingness to learn from previous mistakes, then the sword of destruction will do its work in their midst. The oracle then directed that the troubled man should apply the lesson of *Ota gbinowe?* to his life and his creator will reshape his future."

In these and other prints, we are invited to accompany Onobrakpeya in exploring a theme that will enrich our understanding of Africa and of ourselves. The graphic element is so strong that viewers unable or unwilling to deal with the cultural context of the work may still enjoy a satisfying visual experience. In this sense, Onobrakpeya’s works are a reflection of his life. He has so much to offer to so many people, in his multiple roles as teacher (at St. Gregory’s College, Lagos), artist, advisor on Nigerian culture, and as a proud member of the Nigerian community. His exploration of the frontiers of African art, using techniques unavailable to his Nigerian predecessors, constitutes an enduring legacy to future generations of African artists.