

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to ARTS AND AFRICA. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in this programme we concentrate on two art exhibitions - one, a display of Ethiopian jewellery and the other, a collection of prints by a young artist now teaching Fine Art at the University of Nigeria.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY

At London's Turak gallery, an Australian girl Angela Fisher has just put on an exhibition of what she calls 'Ethnic Jewellery' from Ethiopia.

Angela, can you tell me what this exhibition consists of?

ANGELA FISHER

Well the exhibition is primarily an educational exhibition of ethnic jewellery from Ethiopia and Yemen and its the result of a trip, at least several trips, done by myself, and the last trip done with a friend of mine, John Hawkins. John and I went across to Yemen and Ethiopia in October and November of this year and we went at the suggestion of the Government in both countries out into really the remoter areas, into the villages, and we walked from one village to another asking through an interpreter that we had with us, if we could look at the pieces of jewellery that were kept in the village and worn by the women and also if it was possible to take photographs. We got a very interesting collection together and accompanied with the photographs came back to London and decided that it would make probably a unique thing for Londoners and the other Europeans coming to London to see at a time when ethnic jewellery is really becoming of great interest.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What material is the jewellery made from?

ANGELA FISHER

Most of the jewellery is made out of silver. There is some brass and they're the two main metals but of course silver is the absolute main one.

The silver comes from a coin called the Maria-Theresa dollar which comes from Austria and they use this dollar as a source of silver which is about eighty per cent pure silver. They melt it down and then make either silver balls or crosses or Koran holders or whatever is actually relevant to the people at the time.

TETTEH-LARTEY

How much of this is based on traditional religions of Ethiopia, say the Coptic Christian or the Islamic or both?

ANGELA FISHER

There's very strong significance of the religion in the jewellery that is worn. Ethiopia is divided into two areas mainly the highland Coptic Christian and the lowland Islamic people. In Harar for instance you see all the lowland people coming in and they will be wearing things like prayer beads maybe in silver or amber, Koran holders and anything that is literally significant to the Islamic faith. You have prayer beads sometimes with a decoration of a different coloured stone or they'll have wool tassels or this type of thing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you show me an example here?

ANGELA FISHER

Yes indeed. This lovely piece of amber here which is probably about six feet long is a prayer bead necklace and next to it is a silver bead necklace with a very colourful woollen tassel hanging at the bottom. You'll notice that this bead at the bottom is seen on a lot of Islamic jewellery. It has a particular significance to the faith and any prayer-bead necklace usually has this shape bead at the bottom. When they are saying their prayers they count the number of beads as they say their prayers and they know how many beads are in the necklace so then they know how many times they've said their prayers. This board here shows a very wide collection of Ethiopian crosses which are fairly well known now as people have collected them for a long time. They are usually made by the 'lost wax' method and they are all made from Maria Theresa coins. The crosses themselves show that a woman who is wearing the cross comes from either one area of Ethiopia or another. For instance this cross here with four small birds on and a rather lovely basketwork design in silver, this comes from Lalibela. Lalibela is an area which is famous for its rock churches in Ethiopia and if you see a woman wearing this cross around her neck you know then that she is a Lalibela woman. This one for instance is an Axen cross. It has an arch at the top of it and is also another famous cross in Ethiopia. Again it's the same thing. They are original crosses, they are Christian crosses, but if you see somebody wearing a particular cross you immediately identify where she comes from.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is all the jewellery of religious significance then?

ANGELA FISHER

No, it isn't but with the various tribes they specialise, and some tribes specialise in ivory, some have more amber than others, some like red glass beads and you can tell a Danikal woman because she is wearing either brass or brass and leather or brass and leather and red glass beads.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Angela Fisher talking about her exhibition of Ethiopian ethnic jewellery which has just opened in London.

JONI MITCHELL - JUNGLE LINE from 'THE HISSING OF SUMMER LAWN'S'

The American folk singer Joni Mitchell there singing a track from her new LP, called THE JUNGLE LINE which features the drums of Burundi. The other art exhibition which we're covering this week is a collection of prints by the young Nigerian artist Vincent Chuka Amaefunah who's a lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. When the exhibition closes at the Africa Centre in London Vincent plans to take his prints back home to his gallery in Nigeria. Can you tell me briefly what medium you have used for the exhibition? There were many terms there, you know, lithos and etchings and things like that which I couldn't understand at all.

VINCENT CHUKA AMAEFUNAH

Yes, well you know, my particular, specific area is graphic arts and when we think in terms of graphic reproduction we think of the various media possible. We think of making use of wood-cut, making use of lino-cut, making use of deep-etching. This is a process where you have to make use of nitric or hydro-chloric acid to bite a zinc or copper plate. And then I have to make use of a screen process and then make use of litho-graphing where you have to base your concept on the fact that water and grease do not mix. And so within this range you are able to produce quite a number of mysteries and create a type of illusion of depth which really baffles the eye. And particularly this goes to help my theme which is traditional Africa. Everything is embedded in mystery and belief. So when you interpret these ideas that you have through these media then it sort of helps it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there are certainly a lot of mysteries surrounding many of them. On what do you base your themes?

VINCENT

Well, for my second degree I did African Ethnography. For my thesis I concentrated on that of Eastern Nigeria. And so you can now see the source from which I draw most of my subject matter.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, some of the colour schemes were really beautiful, very subtle. For example, I noticed that in 'The Border Dispute' the print, you use a colourful brown and yellow. And also in the 'Niger and River Kingdom', you use black and red.

VINCENT

You see, one thing with prints is that at times you try out an experiment and you find that before you realise what has happened you have produced something very fantastic.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And you just have to leave it like that.

VINCENT

Oh yes, it's an end product.

TETTEH-LARTEY

It's a very skilled art! Now I noticed that some of the captions didn't make sense to me; the 'Milk and Butter' print for example. It's not quite obvious to me. How do you expect the spectator to be able to connect the ideas on the caption with the prints?

VINCENT

You see really when you arrive there in northern Nigeria the Fulani-Cattle Rearers give the milk to the girls to go and 'hawk'. But these girls are so tempting, really, that you don't know what to buy. Do you buy the girls or the milk and butter? So you see if you look at that print you'll see that it has a feeling of flowing lines, very beautiful breasts and so on. And so you have to place the spectator on a balance to decide whether to buy the milk and butter in the calabash the girl carries or to buy the girl because she looks so slim, so beautiful, so pretty and so on.

TETTEH-LARTEY

So that one needs to have a background before one can appreciate....

VINCENT

No, no, no.. You need to be involved in the work right in front of you, that is what I mean.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, as I understand it, you have a gallery back in Nigeria.

VINCENT

Oh yes. The idea of building up a gallery came as the result of something that happened once. There was an old man who died in my town and the children, when they were trying to replace his rest house almost demolished every precious thing which to me looked really precious and so when I came in and found these things heaped on one side and they were rotting away I decided to pick them up and requested that they should give them to me. So I wrote to my Town Council asking for the people to bring whatever...(they didn't want, were going to throw away).... to me because I knew what to do with them. Initially they dismissed it but when I started to build a gallery and mounted most of these things people came round and really saw the use and since then there has been quite a lot of response. You see what I plan to do is

have a section for preservation of old things, (I'm not encroaching under the Nigerian Antiquities Commission anyway) then to have another section where I can always hold an exhibition of contemporary African and Nigerian artworks. And then another section for documentation where I can put printed materials on African Arts. So this is what I want to do. And this gallery was opened two years ago by my father very informally and I don't intend to give it a very large opening until I have got it properly established.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Vincent Chuka Amaefunah talking about his exhibition of prints which have been on view. And that's all for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping you'll be listening again next week for more ARTS AND AFRICA.

TAPE; PLAYOUT 'LIMPOPO' improvised by JEREMY TAYLOR

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