

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of "Arts and Africa".

In today's programme we report on a world record auction price for a piece of African sculpture, and a Ghanaian sculptor and musician tries to explain how he transforms his ideas into concrete works of art.

We start, though, with an anniversary. It's two years now since the Soweto uprising in South Africa, when several hundred people were killed in the student demonstrations against the school system. Throughout Africa those events sparked off a remarkable outburst of poetry, drama and music.

MUSIC

In Zambia a musical play called simply "Soweto" was first staged by the Takwisa Theatre Group back in August 1976, and was taken to Nigeria as Zambia's entry to FESTAC at the beginning of '77. Since then the piece has taken on a new life, changing and developing as the company's perception of Soweto has grown. In October of last year it became "Soweto Revisited" and now, to mark the second anniversary of the uprising, it is staged in Lusaka in yet another form, "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow". Producer of the play is Zambian lawyer Mumba Kapumpa and he explained its metamorphosis to Ceciwa Khonje.

MUMBA KAPUMPA

In the first stage of Soweto we merely laid down what we thought were the facts and figures surrounding the suffering of the black man in South Africa. Now in "Soweto Revisited" we went a little further. The idea was of Takwisa Theatre revisiting the place where Soweto had occurred, and seeing what actually caused Soweto in the first place. So besides

KAPUMPA

setting out the facts and figures to the uprising, we determined that it was the Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, plus the political system which were the pillars of the system in South Africa.

KHONJE

Now the third stage in the play's metamorphosis is the staging of "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow". This is the incoming version. Now, of this ever growing play, what will be the story at this stage?

KAPUMPA

Yes. "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow", is now the combination of the original "Soweto", the second episode "Soweto Revisited", and this third episode which is now currently being produced, fortunately by me again. We are combining these three to call them "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow". Now the idea is that although Soweto occurred, people died, and people are still dying, (still school children are continuing with their resistance against the system), we are now saying that despite the depth, despite the very strong military strength that the regime has, out of the blood of the killed children of Soweto there will grow this new South Africa which is being symbolised by the flower growing out of the dead Soweto children.

KHONJE

The music in the play is very moving, and a lot of people have said so around Lusaka, but it isn't all South African music.

KAPUMPA

No, no, no, because, you see, we in Takwisa Theatre are now saying that Soweto is no longer just an occurrence in South Africa. We have this universality of the problem of racial conflict. As a result we are using music from Namibia, we are using music from Zimbabwe, we're using music from Zambia itself, and, of course, then music from South Africa. So somebody who is able to identify the particular pieces of music will realise that in fact the problem is no longer a local problem of South Africa. The music is now an international system that we are using to portray the universality of the problem in Soweto.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Takwisa Theatre Group from Zambia in a song from "Soweto - Flowers Will Grow". Incidentally they'll be taking it with their Producer, Mumba Kapumpa to the World

TETTEH-LARTEY

Youth Festival in Cuba.

I'm not sure that the participants in that festival would approve of an event that has taken place in London recently. At the world famous auction rooms of Christies a carved figure was sold for the highest price ever paid at auction for an African work of art.

The amount was no less than - wait for it - two hundred and twenty thousand pounds - £220,000! A staggering figure, paid, needless to say, by an American dealer and it indicates by the way, a level of demand among western collectors that can be no comfort at all to those who are trying to clamp down on the smuggling of art objects from Africa. But what was so special about this particular piece? Before the auction I went to Christies and heard from their consultant on African art, the renowned specialist William Fagg. He was very matter of fact.

WILLIAM FAGG

Well it's 16 inches high, carved from very hard wood, and it's a very impressive carving of the great Chief of the Lunda people in Angola or Zaire (they spread across both these countries).

TETTEH-LARTEY

The style of the carving immediately identifies that region it comes from. It's both realistic and formalised. The body, for instance, is short in proportion to the rest of the figure and the legs, bent almost into a sitting position posture, are thick and stumpy. And the eyes too, large and unseeing, are formalised into, something like the shape of a mango seed. On the other hand the feet, and the hands clasping a staff and a horn are so life-like you can almost see the callouses on them. But what really gives the statue its grandeur is the curling sweeping headdress, piled high on top and sweeping out to the sides like the horns of a buffalo. Clearly it's a carving of a very eminent personality. But, as William Fagg explained, it's not the only statue of him.

FAGG

There are in fact eight of these altogether in the world - this one is the eighth to come to light - and they're well known as representations of a particular man, at least a particular legendary hero named Ilunga Katele who was nicknamed Chibinda, the hunter. So he is known as Chibinda Ilunga Katele. He was a Luba who was the founder of the Lunda empire back in the 15th century. I suppose that the cult for which they were made was an ancestor cult which was probably maintained by the chiefs of the Lunda, the Mwata Yamvo. This name which is still borne by the King of the Lunda but which was first borne by the son born

FAGG

to this Luba chief Ilunga Katele, who married a Lunda Chief back in the 15th Century.

TETTEH-LARTEY

But the carver of the statue was neither a Lunda nor a Luba. For important commissions their royal families turned to the Chokwe people, who were the pre-eminent artists of central Africa. But what do we know of the individual who carved Chibinda Ilunga Katele?

FAGG

We don't know the name of the person. We don't know when he carved it, in fact, though it must have been quite early in the 19th century or possibly late in the 18th century. But the Chokwe or Jokwe are a tribe which are very much associated with the Lunda and usually did the carving of such pieces required by the Lunda. So I think if this was made for the Mwata Yamvo it would be made by the best available carver.

TETTEH-LARTEY

So let's hope that when it gets to America it will go on public show and not be locked up in a private collection.

Mind, the creative process, the making of art, is a very private affair, especially in the case of sculpture. At any rate that's the view of Saka Acquaye, who is one of Ghana's leading sculptors. He makes most of his income from sculpture, and yet he's most widely known as a musician. He composed the folk opera "The Lost Fisherman" for FESTAC last year, and more recently some songs for his group Welomei.

MUSIC

With songs like Kunte Kinte, and indeed his writings, Saka Acquaye demonstrates the many sides of his talents. But it's sculpture, he says, that he finds most absorbing and most demanding. He makes objects of many kinds and on many different scales some of them are enormous. And he uses a number of different materials, steel, wood, and as he told Florence Akst, what he finds most satisfying - clay.

SAKA ACQUAYE

If you have, say, a figure in mind something must have attracted you, you know, in the figure. So you go blindly like searching in the dark, using your feeling - it's very difficult to explain. But as you go along you - get to be in the clay. You just put your feeling at your finger tips into the clay, so the clay should live. You try to recapture the feeling you have when you see a figure or a face, maybe a broken nose, you know, or a huge head, and

SAKA ACQUAYE

something attracts you. Or even the eyes, the eyes get you, and you want to know what is behind the eyes, and that's where you begin to move. You try to sculpt all that personality, what makes the personality - I don't know.

FLORENCE AKST

In fact you would have found it much easier to have shown me, rather than to talk about it. I think.

ACQUAYE

No, I would say no. You see, in working I become too conscious when somebody is standing by. I get a break and my thoughts are cut.

AKST

So it's partly will power. It sounds almost as though you use your will to make the object come alive.

ACQUAYE

Yes, that is very true. It's very exciting, very exciting; very difficult to explain, but it's very peculiar to try to come out into reality with that which you felt. It's an exercise that I think you'd spend your whole life trying to perhaps enjoy, but it's also very painful.

AKST

Do you find composing and being a musician as demanding as being a sculptor.

ACQUAYE

No, comparatively, no. You see, when I'm composing I don't use any instruments, I just listen in the mind. Sometimes the melody is short, maybe two, three, four notes, but how to extend it and retain the same short feeling is where the discipline comes in. But you do it. The very joy, the pleasure that you get from the very short original thought keeps you on. You enjoy it so much that the hard work, perhaps, is minimised.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Saka Acquaye from Ghana. And to end this edition of "Arts and Africa" here is more of his song "Kunte Kinte". Till next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC.