

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts And Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and to-day, modern art in Nigeria and Kenya, captured in photographs.

Inyang Ema is a well known artist in Nigeria and is also Head of the Art and Design Department in the Ministry of Information, Calabar. He came to London recently and I first asked him what his work entailed.

INYANG EMA

Well you know, Ministry of Information is a sort of propoganda Ministry. It's illustrating graphically the Government's policies and its feed-back, being able to suggest best ways to push out Government propoganda. When we say propoganda, we just mean Government publicity. Also, advising the Government on general aesthetics depending on which department. We are more a servicing unit to all ministries in the Government and Government agencies.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, apart from that, you are an artist yourself.

INYANG EMA

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of works have you produced so far ?

INYANG EMA

That's difficult because I started international exhibitions since 1962. I was pretty young then. I've

INYANG EMA

painted, done a lot of sculpture and a lot of design. I represented Nigeria both at the Commonwealth Arts Festival, the All Africa Festival and Festac '77. One of my strongest paintings, one of the ones I hold dear to me, is one called "The Drama", now acquired by the Federal Government. It's not very large, just about 4 feet 6 by three feet. It's a style I've worked on for over ten years. I use a lot of colours, bright colours and complimentary colours, using the bright colours more as jewels to contrast with the main background. In sculpture, I work mostly with texture, playing with light and shade. I work with fine lines and mass like one in Calabar called "Unity", two stylised elephant tusks, linked with the white strings with the two tusks placed in such a way that the strings form a certain kind of lamp like pattern with the sunlight from one side during the morning, casting some shade to give certain forms and in the evening reversing it on to the other side. This is the things I kind of enjoy doing, you know, using nature itself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, it seems to me your subjects are rather universal. I was going to ask if you use traditional themes?

INYANG EMA

Yes. You've heard me mention the elephant tusks. I had my formal training in Britain here, but I was very conscious throughout my five year stay here not to be terribly influenced by European style of painting or sculpture. Whatever you do, it depends on how you are influenced by your surroundings, your understanding of subjects. Take, for instance, a word like "tribe". To an Englishman it's very different from "tribe" to an African. Here in an English context it would mean "primitive, just a large family. Whereas in Nigeria, it means a different linguist group, which is a marked difference. So, if I'm painting the word "tribe", it may not be understood by the English observer unless he understands my background.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, what do you think about the present position as far as art is concerned in Nigeria - modern developments ?

INYANG EMA

Well, as a member of the Society of Nigerian Artists, we carefully avoid using the word "modern" in art in Nigeria. We say 'contemporary', because you actually don't know what is 'modern'. 'Modern' changes every year. In Nigeria, you know how large it is. There

INYANG EMA

are so many linguist groups, there are so many religions and so-forth. Now each artist is influenced by these different phenomenon. So that, if you say "modern art", where do you start? Where do you end? We have different styles, but they are all contemporary.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, as a member of the Nigerian Society of Artists, what exactly does that Society do?

INYANG EMA

Well, that Society is a member of the International Association of Art. They see to the interests of art in general in the country. What they've been trying to do so far is to sift the 'pseudo' artist from the 'real' artist. You have to apply and be seconded and voted for to become a member.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Does it sponsor artists overseas to hold exhibitions?

INYANG EMA

It does sponsor exhibitions, both abroad and inside. It has not yet been big enough financially to sponsor individual artists going outside for long periods. But it does advise the Government on what steps could be taken to help art in the country. The emphasis right now is on science and technology. Art has so far been taken for granted until FESTAC 77. People didn't realise what art was all about, until other countries came into show us how much they value their own art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So it's part of your work not only to show the people what the Government's policy is with respect to art, but to persuade the Government itself that it's worthwhile sponsoring the artist in the country.

INYANG EMA

Yes, that's part of my work and also to show the people that it's worthwhile studying that subject or doing something

about it. For instance, I've been able to influence a lot of small firms and craftsmen to be able to use local materials and make more contemporary things, like using raffia for shoes. I've designed the prototypes and made for them to see what is possible.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And we're looking forward to lots of other exciting innovations! Inyang Ema thank you. Now photography is another art, which is growing in popularity and which has the distinction of being able to capture the real world in an absolute way. David Keith Jones is an Englishman, teaching physics in Nairobi, Kenya, and has just published a book entitled "Faces of Kenya" - a selection of his photographs of the many different aspects of that country with comments and anecdotes. He came to London for its launching and I first asked him how he came to write the book.

DAVID KEITH JONES

Well, I started travelling throughout Kenya with my family just out of interest and I took a lot of pictures, which I was hoping to bring back to England one day as a kind of family record of our adventures. As the thing got bigger and bigger, I realised that the pictures were perhaps worth using for something. So the idea of doing a book grew gradually.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A lot of it wasn't taken at one stretch?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Oh no. There are photographs in the book that were taken as long ago as 1969 and some were taken this year, so they span about eight years altogether.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I can see some really marvellous shots here of 'instant action', something happening on the spur of the moment. Now, do you carry your camera about with you and then hope that you'll find something interesting to shoot?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Well, there's a lot of that in it. Whenever we go on a safari, I always have the middle seat in the vehicle vacant and it's full of cameras. Then, if we see something, we stop straightaway and I try to take a picture. But there are other photographs, which are the result of a long wait. For example, I noticed. You turned to the page on lions. I followed a group of lions in Nasai Amboseli National Park for five days hoping to get some good pictures of them. So, it's a mixture, sometimes good luck and sometimes patience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what kinds of films do you carry about with you?
Both colour and black and white ?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Yes, I always have two cameras, one with colour film in it and one with black and white film in it. If possible, I take everything on both of those films. Of course, sometimes if its an action picture, you only have time to get it on one film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There are two photographs here which absolutely fascinate me. The first one is of the Samburu Morans with their cows and the other is the Boran men lifting water in giraffe-hide buckets. How did you achieve this beautiful golden colour with the Samburu Morans.

DAVID KEITH JONES

That was a photograph that was very interesting to take. These people were herding cows home late in the evening and the sun is just about to set. The cows had kicked a lot of dust into the air and that's what gives it the golden light. And it's interesting that these two men had never seen a camera before, and yet they didn't mind me taking photographs. I was able to take quite a few. It was also interesting because it's one of the occasions when I knew I'd got a good photograph inside the camera. It really looked so wonderful through the viewfinder, I knew it was going to be a nice one.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about the Boran men, lifting water in the giraffe-hide buckets?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Well, that was an occasion when I had to ask their permission to take this photograph. And after some conversation with them, they agreed I could take pictures. This is a place where they've dug a big hole down for water. It's in a very dry region on Marsabit Mountain, which is surrounded by deserts in Northern Kenya. It's quite a remote place and this is one of the few permanent sources of water. The water is so deep that they have this human chain going right down to the well about thirty-feet down and it's very interesting because they sing a song as they raise the buckets with a rhythmic chant. They are all very clever to keep to the rhythm. They throw a bucket-full of water up with one hand and they catch the empty buckets coming down. Of course, if one man makes a mistake, it throws the

DAVID KEITH JONES

whole chain out. But they can work for about twenty minutes without a single mistake singing this lilting song, which is really very attractive.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, it's a very dangerous thing for them to do. If they tumbled down into the well, it would be quite disastrous, wouldn't it ?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Oh, well I don't know, I suppose they could scramble out again but they'd certainly get very wet!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have here on this page a black and white photograph of lions mating, which is quite a sensitive moment, and yet you were able to take a shot of this. How far away were you from the lions?

DAVID KEITH JONES

We were about thirty yards away from the lions in this photograph. You see, in some of the National Parks, the lions have become used to vehicles, so as long as you are in a vehicle you can get reasonably close to them. Then you can use a telephoto lense and get a photograph. Of course, if you were to be foolish enough to get out of your vehicle, you'd be in very great danger.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You might have some stories about dangers people have encountered taking photographs in Safari parks ?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Oh, yes, I've been chased myself by an elephant, which in fact chased us down the road for about 80 yards on one occasion! And I've also been chased by a rhino and buffalo. Fortunately, I've also been able to change into the right gear and get away quickly, but not everybody is as lucky. One friend of mine was charged by a rhino which put its horn right through the door of his car and carried the car along bumping for a few yards before it shook his head and he was able to drive away. Fortunately, only the door was damaged!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How popular is photography in Africa or, especially, in Kenya?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Well, it's very popular amongst visitors to the country.

DAVID KEITH JONES

The local people themselves don't do as much photography as I sometimes think they should do. Of course, they are often pre-occupied with other family problems. Even a man who has got a good standing and found a professional career for himself is usually trying to help along other members of the family. But at the same time, I sometimes wonder if the Kenyan's themselves have realised what a good opportunity there is for photography of a commercial type in Kenya.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think probably they are thwarted by the fact that photography is an expensive hobby?

DAVID KEITH JONES

I am sure that is a factor, yes. But, of course, I found it an expensive hobby to start with and now it pays for itself because I'm able to sell enough photographs to cover all my expenses and a little bit extra as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you want to represent the whole of the life of Kenya, as you see it, or do you take your subjects as things you are particularly interested in?

DAVID KEITH JONES

Well, I haven't tried to portray the whole of the life in Kenya, because, of course, Kenya is a developing country and it has a very vibrant, modern life in many of its towns and cities. But I was particularly interested in the aspects of Kenya that are not affected, so far, by the 20th Century, and that's what I've tried to show in the book. So the scenes you see at the beginning of the book are the coastal parts of Kenya, where you can still see towns that have flourished there for as much as a thousand years, and even to-day haven't been changed very much by modern technology. And then I was interested in the mountains and the lakes and the scenery, the desert country in the North of Kenya, which, as I say, is unaffected by modern developments. I think this is something that's going to become increasingly precious as the years go by.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David Keith Jones, thank you. I'm sure future generations will treasure this preservation of the old face of the country.

We end this programme with a song entitled "Waya Waya" from Charles Iwegbue and His Archibogs. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. Join us again next week for another "Arts And Africa".