

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 how about some highlife music to set us in the mood for today's programme ?

MUSIC

E.T. Mensah and his Band, and later on we'll be hearing from someone who's written a Highlife Symphony... Adam Fiberesima. But first, a fellow Nigerian. He's an artist not a musician, and not long ago I went along to an exhibition here in London where he was showing a number of his pictures. Jimoh Buraimoh has an international reputation and he's exhibited in many countries from Germany to Japan, but the sort of work he does was new to me. Not the etchings but certainly the pictures which he makes with quantities of beads... each block of colour is composed of a mass of beads. And as Jimoh Buraimoh walked round the exhibition with me I had to tell him that I found it difficult to know how to describe his pictures.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One can't really describe your works as paintings could one ? I mean they look to me more like head-craft.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Well, I call it bead painting. If you call it craft I cannot agree with you because it is quite a contemporary art, you know, because beads are meant for crown making. And from crown making I diverted them into this kind of art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this a popular kind of art in Nigeria ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

It is very well known now, after several years since I invented this kind of art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So you are really the originator ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Yes, in the whole of Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's extremely inter-sting.

Jimoh's work, especially these bead paintings, have been a great success internationally. They've been shown in Europe, India and the United States and Jimoh had the distinction of being one of the few Nigerian artists invited to exhibit their works at FESTAC, in Lagos. From all this I would have expected Jimoh to have been an artist from his earliest days so I was surprised when he told me he'd trained first of all as an electrician. And as a lighting technician for the stage he joined Duro Ladipo's National Theatre and with that group he toured Africa and beyond. Then his interest in colours led him to the famous and influential art group led by Ulli Beier in Oshogbo, the Mbari Mbayo.

The technique that Jimoh uses quite obviously demands a great deal of skill so I tried to find out how he transferred his thoughts onto canvass.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

I first put my sketch down on paper and from that I transfer it to any appropriate plywood that I think would be proportional with my drawings. After that I have to select the colours that I want to use and from there I put on the glue and then start to work little by little.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you mentioned that a few things that I would like you to give me a little more detail about. First of all, the beads - do you have them specially made for you or do you just buy them in the market ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

I normally travel round the coast in West Africa to look for beads. I used to go to Ghana - Accra, Togo - Dahomey, to look for beads because they are imported to those countries and some in Nigeria too.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, it's very interesting because if one just passes by these paintings, one might just think they were just various colours put together. Having a closer look one sees the amount of tremendous detail and the amount of technical skill you've put in selecting these beads to bring out these various shades.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nowadays an artist can choose between traditional colours and the new synthetic ones, so why chose beads instead of paint ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Beads, these are meant for crown making for our kings, shoes, walking sticks, and I thought we could use something of that in painting. I thought beads are meant for the kings but now we cannot stick it to the Kings alone, we have to bring it into a contemporary use and this is how I started.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it very expensive ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

They are very expensive to buy mostly because it's been sold to kings for rituals, ceremonies and so on and so forth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But what about the pictures themselves ? If beads are a traditional form of decoration I half expected the themes to be traditional, but I found I was wrong.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Most of them are not traditional, most of them are emotional. You can see the painting here there are a lot of birds there eating the dead bodies I call them The War Victims and this was during the war in Nigeria where I had to go to Port Harcourt, and I saw a lot of birds eating the dead bodies.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Also I can see the vultures sitting on top there.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

You can see one there, on there, and another one right on the dead bodies eating them, while other ones are still flying over.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The birds of prey were certainly a grim reminder of the War and of contemporary history... but, although the bead paintings were what first caught my eye in the exhibition there were also a number of multi-coloured etchings also done by Jimoh Buraimoh.

We stopped in front of one that showed a scene that didn't look at all Nigerian.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

This has just happened on the way to Frankfurt from Cologne to Frankfurt and there is a river called the Rhine. By the side of the river there is a lot of boats waiting to collect wine. It's a wine city.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about this man on a bicycle - this little figure ?

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Well he's just going to the wine place. You can have as much as you want to taste and without even buying anything. You may even feel dizzy or intoxicated after sometime, so you can see him - he's going to the wine cellars to see whether he can taste some ...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So this picture brings back very happy memories.

These very attractive prints were made from etchings and although I know how to make line cuts I was pretty sure Jimoh's technique was much more sophisticated than that and how right I was! This is how he described the process to me.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

Well, I always make my own plate by myself. Instead of using zinc directly I have to use another glue on top of it, cut through and then print it later.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You cut the thing on the glue and then you put the paper on top, and then you press it down so that the figures come out on the paper. I see, and then you colour them later.

JIMOH BURAIMOH

No, no, no, no. I have to colour the block itself first and then print it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see!

All too technical for me, I'm afraid, but I did enjoy the chance to see Jimoh Buraimoh's work.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, E.T. Mensch again with his Highlife Band to prepare you for Adam Fiberesimo's Highlife Symphony.

MUSIC - Highlife Symphony.

ADAM FIBERESIMA

The main thing is the use of highlife themes, popular songs known by most Nigerians, but symphonic in nature. Instead of the usual strong, regular beat it's symphonic, it falls and rises, falls and rises and then brass and woodwinds and the strings enter, with the tympanies and so forth. That's the difference between a highlife symphony and a highlife piece.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Adam Fibresima talking about his Highlife Symphony. And choosing the title 'symphony' does that mean he sees himself as a classical composer in the European manner ?

MUSIC

ADAM FIBERESIMA

I write serious music in a Nigerian vein. I use folk material, mainly for my serious works. The folk songs of Nigeria are sort of used in a classical form but I don't follow the classical pattern.

MUSIC

I've written two operas, two major operas, two full scale operas. There's a dance in it, large orchestra, large chorus, a prima donna and, you know, all the pre-requisites that make up a good opera. The first one was a tragedy, and the other one not quite a tragedy, but it's something that has a sort of pageantry - it has two phases, as a matter of fact, one in Nigeria and one in London, and that is "Opu Jaja".

MUSIC

MARGY BREARLEY

How did you come to write this kind of music, I mean, it's the kind of music which is normally associated with Europe isn't it ?

ADAM FIBERESIMA

Yes, I studied here in England. I went to Trinity College of Music and did a fellowship there. I did composition after some years and in actual fact I'm a trumpeter.

MARGY BREARLEY

Oh really!

ADAM FIBERESIMA

Yes, I played trumpet and I use to play trumpet in the school orchestra. And when I'm less busy I play the modern jazz stuff, you know, on the trumpet.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Adam belongs to a generation of Nigerian musicians who are attempting to combined African and European ingredients to make music that has meaning for the world at large. Adam received his training in London, but as he told Mergy Brearley, there is now a music college giving the some sort of training at home in Lagos.

ADAM FIBERESIMA

We have a Conservatoire now in Lagos which is developing gradually, and we hope to have another one in Port Harcourt, that's where I come from, actually. And within a year or two I suppose we'll have enough students in the Conservatoires, in the two different ones, and may go and teach. I hope to because my intention is to train younger musicians and encourage the younger ones you know to do something much better than what we've done.

MUSIC

ALEX:TETTEH-LARTEY

Another composition by Adam Fiberesims and this he's called the "Wind Of Change". Each part is a sound picture of the various regions of Nigeria and we've chosen the part dedicated to the people of the maritime villages of the Niger Delta to end the programme. For now it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey until next week. Goodbye.