

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I've been to see an exhibition with the title Art from Africa. The exhibition was first shown to the public in West Berlin a couple of years ago. Now they've all come to London, to the Commonwealth Institute, we have the chance to take another look at a collection of paintings and sculpture from Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and several other countries.

Two other people who've paid the exhibition a visit are Louis Mbughuni who's Tanzania's Director of Culture and National Language (by-the-way, he's also a painter, sculptor and theatre designer), and the Head of the BBC's African Service, George Bennett, who's taken a particular interest in Nigerian art over the years. I'd like to welcome you both to the Arts and Africa studio. Now, before we start discussing the impact of the exhibition I'd better explain that the pictures and carvings don't come direct from Africa - they mostly come from Germany. And by that I mean that they were bought by German collectors and now belong to various galleries and museums there. I must say that I found the whole display in a big, brightly-lit hall a feast for the eyes and I see that the art critic of the Times of London said that "It's a show that opens doors".

Can I start by asking you both whether you'd agree with either of those opinions? George Bennett, what was your first impression?

GEORGE BENNETT

Well I don't think it opened doors for me because I'm familiar with a lot of this painting already and I think I can see that it's new and exciting for people who haven't seen this sort of African art before. One of the main things I've felt and I confess I was a little disappointed in the exhibition, was that there was some gaps in it but also it didn't really say whether it was the best modern African painting sculpture or whether it was a comprehensive exhibition which included things like backs of troutrou lorries or hairdressing signs which are not really very sophisticated art but you could call them naive art, I mean they have their own place and they are very interesting and exciting but they are not the same as somebody like Twins Seven-Seven from Nigeria who is a professional artist.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Louis Mbughuni, what do you say about the exhibition?

LOUIS MBUGHUNI

I was a little bit disappointed too. It is not representative of the main streams of contemporary painting in Tanzania and (a whole section of it) I think, would not have been true of the whole of Africa. It leaves out a larger volume of work from trained artist, professional artist. I realised there was one painting by Sam Ntiro but there are many, many brilliant painters, people who have established reputation as painters whose work is not represented here.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So you wouldn't agree that it opens doors in any sense of the word?

LOUIS MBUGHUNI

Not really. It represents one main movement, the self-trained artist, the naive painter but really not opening doors as such because it leaves a lot unrepresented.

GEORGE BENNETT

Well I found it very interesting to come to this exhibition after going to the major winter exhibition at the Royal Academy in London which is called 'A New Spirit in Painting' which is a collection of thirty eight modern painters and the idea is that over the last decade or so, painting has now come round again to people painting beautiful pictures and using paint very creatively for the sheer joy of painting, I mean that's to simplyfy it perhaps but I thought that really this African exhibition showed that much more than the Royal Academy one but the sheer joy of painting and using colours especially with some of these original Tanzanian paintings like Tingatinga who worked with the very bright colours that you would paint cars with. That gives that impression enormously.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I was most impressed by the flood of colour and the vividness of the paintings. Now, Louis, you were saying that certain people in Tanzania have not been represented, important artists. Would you, therefore, say that on the whole it gives a misleading picture of African art?

LOUIS MBUGHUNI

I would say that it doesn't give a true picture of African art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it positively misleading?

LOUIS MBUGHUNI

No, it's not positively misleading. The fact that Tingatinga, for instance, uses acrylic laquer is a result not of his choice but because it's impossible to buy oil paint. In other words most of those artists have been pushed by the actual condition of the non-availability of material to using that kind of material. But the whole movement now using that particular type of material which is characterised by wax painted on screen in bars, nightclubs, hotels, but the style remains naive, that of the untrained or self-trained artist. To be fair to those exhibitions the themes are contemporary, not only on the paintings from Tanzania but even the ones I saw, I think from Nigeria. In that sense, you know they attained some form of authenticity.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you would be arguing then for the sort of things we see at the big exhibitions. George would you describe as a typical art from Africa?

GEORGE BENNETT

No I don't think you can have typical art from Africa. I think it's almost impossible to say African art and sort of draw a ring around Africa because you find in different parts of Africa, art develops in different ways. It's like the very interesting soapstone carvings in Zimbabwe which are represented at this exhibition and are very interesting carvings and very popular with collectors all over the world now and grew up in a completely different way from other sorts of art in different parts of Africa. No I think you've got to give the different artists a chance to develop on their own and sometimes putting them in contact with European art might be a disadvantage. Sometimes it's a big advantage because it allows them to develop their style and have access to different materials and so on but sometimes their style gets mixed up with the western concept of art and people, for example, have said that Jimoh Buraimoh the well known Nigerian artist who actually worked with bead originally. When he went to Germany he started to learn different techniques of deep etchings which were really, some people would argue, pastiches of the European sort of style.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that's rather unfortunate.

GEORGE BENNETT

Well, you could argue about that. No I think you should let people develop in their own way.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Now you are especially interested in the Oshogbo artists of Nigeria, some of them were represented at the exhibition. Among them was Twins Seven-Seven. Do you think the pictures at the exhibition are truly representative of his art?

GEORGE BENNETT

Yes, indeed I think there was some very good pictures by Twins Seven-Seven in this exhibition. Most of them were indian ink drawing on cloth with water-colour overlaid, usually on a coloured cloth. He's now developed his technique a bit from that, he's using oil paints as well as water colour. But Twins Seven-Seven seems to me one of the unique artists in Africa because he is developing what he's doing. He's got a great technique for drawing, perhaps his painting is less impressive but he is developing it and he's interested in his own painting which he does purely for his own interest.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, Louis, I come back to you. I saw some wonderful Tanzanian birds painted in very clear outline. I thought those paintings very impressive indeed.

LOUIS MBUGHUNI

Tingatinga studied that school of painting, - brilliant colours mainly animals and vegetation, very powerful silhouettes and rich colours, again of non-traditional painting material. But what I was really interested in, Alex, is the use of the word 'traditional' and 'authentic'. Fortunately I was there in Tanzania when the actual selection of those paintings were done. There was, at the time the exhibition was being collected, especially in Europe and I think in Germany, the view that there is a genuine and original African painter and an African sculptor, and that style of drawing and that style of painting by Tingatinga according to the people who conceived the idea of picking out the collection, represented the original, the authentic Africa.

Now this is dangerous so I went to register my strong disagreement with this kind of view. Now why should I say that? From the time that we have come into contact with Western civilisation, there has been a lot of give and take and those changes have influenced the African way of life. Now this development should be reflected without any fear or favour in the expression of the visual arts and in the other arts. Now an attempt that takes the African to the traditional style in Mende, in Makende, in Sanussi is, I think degenerative. It forces the African artist to degenerate to his infancy so I reject that attitude. But if it is picked only as a representative, as an active, creative, contemporary

movement, I accept it, in which case I think this is where Mr. Tingatinga's work belongs. He is a contemporary painter and there are other contemporary painters who paint in the realistic and naturalistic style but those, unfortunately, at the time of the collection for the exhibition, were eliminated because they were considered non-authentic. In fact, they have been defined wrongly, it is an extension of western cultural imperialism.

GEORGE BENNETT

I quite agree, I mean there is a way in which the European wants to look at this art and say: "Well, that's from Africa. It's naive, it's just depicting the life in the day of what happens in a village, with a car going in and that's the village and there is a modern car, isn't that interesting?" Then he's summed up the painting in one minute and that's the end of it. I think for a lot of the pictures in this African art exhibition you've got to look at them all very carefully until you decide which ones really have some depth to them, and many of them do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Louis Mbughuni and George Bennett. And as a postscript to the discussion I'd like to mention that Louis Mbughuni trained as an artist at the School of Art at the University of Makerere in Kampala, Uganda. In fact, I think I could safely call the school the premier department of art in the whole of East Africa where painters like Ignatius Sserulyo and Sam Ntiro were trained, as was Gregory Maloba, the sculptor. And it's easy to grasp its influence when I point out that Maloba now teaches Arts at the University of Nairobi and Sam Ntiro does the same in Dar-es-Salaam, while Ignatius Sserulyo is now on the teaching staff at Makerere. Makerere has suffered very much from the turmoil in Uganda of the past few years and an appeal has been launched to help the School of Art find the basic materials it needs for its student artists. John Berry, who taught there from 1970 to 1974, and went there for a visit last year, told Florence Akst on the telephone what he remembers of the Art Department of ten years ago.

JOHN BERRY

It was an extremely aimiable atmosphere, a lot of activity, a lot of research and a lot of enquiry going on.

FLORENCE AKST

What sort of art were they creating?

JOHN BERRY

Well, they were doing obviously drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics and also graphic work.

FLORENCE AKST

And how would you describe the standard of work being done by the students?

JOHN BERRY

The standard was very, very high. Quality was based upon the individuality of the students, upon their own homebackgrounds, very high standards indeed.

FLORENCE AKST

Now you have been back recently on a visit. What did you find?

JOHN BERRY

I found rally that the spirit of the people to rebuild was there but they didn't have the materials with which to do it. There were so many distractions away from creative activity caused by the lack of materials in ordinary domestic life.

FLORENCE AKST

Is there anything that artists or people interested in art in the rest of Africa could do to help re-establish the department?

JOHN BERRY

Oh I'm sure there is if they were to contact Professor G. Kakooza at the Arts School, University of Makerere, P.O. 7062, Kampala, Uganda, then they would be in touch with him and find out what the specific immediate needs would be and what the long-term needs which I think would be in circulation of exhibitions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Berry telling Florence Akst about how the School of Art at Makerere University, Kampala can be helped to re-establish itself. And with that account of one small part of Kampala in the early seventies let's bring the programme to an end with some popular music. Here's Afrege with 'Njatulira'. But for now, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until this time next week. Goodbye.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - "NJATULIRA".