

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

The town of Oshogbo is in Oyo State, Nigeria. For generations Yoruba people have come to the shrine on the banks of its river, the river Oshun, to worship and to ask for favours. But since the early 1960's, it's also been the home for a community of artists so that Oshogbo has become famous way beyond the frontiers of Nigeria. Its Mbari Mbayo Club included not only the German scholar, Professor Ulli Beier who provided organization and enthusiasm, but the playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka and a theatre director, the late Duro Ladipo. The group encouraged all kinds of cultural activities and especially Yoruba painters and sculptors.

One of the best-known of all the Oshogbo artists is Twins Seven-Seven. But when he first left school, Twins Seven-Seven made his living as a singer and dancer. He had his own group, the Golden Cabretas and here's the sort of music they were making.

## GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - TOTBIROKO

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Totbiroko" from Twins Seven-Seven's early days. Now Anne Bolsover has recently been to Oshogbo for Arts and Africa and she made a point of meeting Twins Seven-Seven. He told her about his days as a musician, and then about a day in 1964 when he first met Ulli Beier and other people belonging to the Mbari Mbayo simply by gatecrashing a party!

## TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

There was a party in Mbari. I wasn't really invited to the party but because of my love for dancing I went in there to start to dance, and some people, people like Professor Wole Soyinka, Professor Ulli Beier and so on and so forth were at that party. These are people with sound educational background. And I went in there and everybody said: "Who is this guy?". From there Ulli took note of me and he invited me over to come and work for Duro Ladipo's National Theatre. I refused at that time because I really didn't want to leave the work I was doing, until early June '64 when I came into art school.

ANNE BOLSOVER

So you joined first as a dancer, as an actor?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

Yes, I joined as a dancer and an actor. Yes it is true, before they organised the work-shop. And even by the time I was painting, I will tell you the truth - I was just playing. It's like playing, I just take up my pen, because everybody was painting in Picasso style and I requested pen and ink, which Ulli gave to me. And come the Berlin Art Festival in September 1964, the late Duro Ladipo would not take me to Germany, and I think the agony and the unhappiness of not being taken on my first European trip, that must have inspired or gingered my energy to get what I started doing then done, which I would call God's gift, which is the style I am doing now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Before we go any further with the conversation I'd like to describe the kind of pictures that subsequently made Twins Seven-Seven famous. Well, a typical one would be drawn on a piece of cloth, say all red, all orange or all white, about three foot long and four foot wide. He draws free-hand using a pen and black ink but lately has been adding a greater variety of colours. His themes are often figures taken from local mythology or strange creatures born of his own imagination. The tremendous detail on every canvas and the intricate look of every drawing bear the mark of concentrated attention. But, nobody would guess this from Twins Seven-Seven's description of how he sets to work.

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

In my own case I lie down on the floor - it's like playing. I was really being lazy in the class, and it turns out to be an authentic new style of art in this part of the world.

ANNE BOLSOVER

And how did it go from there? How were you discovered as one of the greatest painters from Gshogbo?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

Well, after they left me behind, and I was not taken to Germany, I was so sad, very, very sad. And if I had had my way I should have committed suicide. You know what it is - the dancer who would have had his first opportunity to go and perform in Berlin was dropped for no just reason. So I started to paint as well. By the time they came back from Germany, I'd got about twenty four black and white drawings. So, I would say what really motivated me more than the fact that somebody was trying to punish me was that some power was giving me the energy to paint, to have imaginative feelings. At that time there was no thinking about cars, no thinking about women - nothing. Ulli was amazed by what I had done and when Ulli came back they put those works in an exhibition and from then on, lots of letters started pouring in from everywhere in the world asking me for an exhibition or asking me for a painting.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Were you surprised by that instant kind of reaction to what you were doing?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

I was surprised, but I was not badly surprised because I knew that's how it's going to be.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

His first drawings were in black and white, not the deep colour he often uses these days. These black and white drawings were the first pictures he exhibited at the Mbari Mbayo Club and, as it turned out, he had good reason to be confident.

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

After my first exhibition in 1965 which I did for the Mbari Mbayo Club in Yaba, Lagos, all my etchings were sold out. So, after that I decided to go into gouache painting and when I heard people's response I continued. Every time I do different kinds of things. Sometimes I don't plan them, sometimes they come by accident and luckily out of maybe twenty paintings I've never had anyone who has said that one of my paintings is not good.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - OLOMI MAJE A JA.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Olomi Maje a Ja" and the voice of Twins Seven-Seven. That's the name on the disc label and that's how he signs his pictures. It's a strange name, isn't it? And that's what Anne Bolsover thought, too, so she asked how he'd got his name.

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

My parents believe in reincarnation. My mother had several sets of twins. I was the first one of the last set of twins. According to what she told me, she said when I was very young, I used to do a lot of unusual things like going to the forest and bringing in lively snakes, playing with insects and at that time they used to beat me. My mother had refused to go out and dance - at that time when you had twins you had to go out and beg for alms in order to survive because that's one of the traditions that kept twin babies alive. So, because my parents refused to do this, this is why they keep losing babies. So, my mother stopped anyone from beating me, and so I call myself a kind of a spoiled child, in that sense. I carried this special belief throughout my life. So, when I start painting, I used to sign my work "Ibeji Meje-Meje". How many

Africans buy art-work? How many Africans, at that time, appreciated what I am doing. So those who really come to my exhibitinns are ex-patriates and I thought it might be too hard for them to pronounce "Ibeji" which stands for "Twins", and "Meje-Meje" which stands for "Seven-Seven" and I started to sign my paintings Twins Seven-Seven and even my records, Twins Seven-Seven. So, that's the name. But it comes from the fact that parents had seven sets of twins and they believe that I'm the same child that comes back in seven places.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The support and encouragement that the Mbari Mbayo Club gave to the artists working Oshogbo allowed them to experiment in subjects and in techniques. Twins Seven-Seven's work has always been easily identifiable but never static. At present it is his themes that are changing.

#### TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

These days I think I'm more into people, I'm more into talking politics, I'm more into paintings that are more realistic, because I think I should keep my special aspect of my way of arts to myself for my old age period. I'm hoping one day, if I'm rich enough with enough connections, enough energy, I want to go and live on a mountain, where I wouldn't have to deal with people, I wouldn't have to deal with cars, I wouldn't have to deal with public relations. No politics, no business, nothing. I will go back to how I started. But, right now I'm into a lot of commercial things; house-decorative things, politics, paintings about political events in the country. I used to depend mostly on mythological beliefs of the people, and because I want that value to be retained for the later part of my life, I decided now to go into places where there will be a lot of commissions so that it should not be my way, my way all the time. In the beginning I used to paint freely; I would have my imaginative things, and I would paint them and people liked them. But when I realised that that is my metier, that's what makes me what I am, so I like keeping what little energy I have and try to work for people. Sometimes people would say; "Would you paint me scenery about Oshun?" or, "Paint me political events that happen during political campaigns" and things like that, which I donow.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Twins Seven-Seven has been a prolific artist and his pictures hang in art galleries around the world. Anne Bolsover, remembering his big output, asked him:

#### ANNE BOLSOVER

Out of all your works so far, which to you, has been the greatest, the one that means the most to you?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

It's too bad that I don't remember my paintings.

ANNE BOLSOVER

You don't remember them at all when you've done them?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

After I finish, no, because my paintings never stay too long with me. The only painting that stayed too long with me lived in an exhibition for six months. Whenever I do a painting it's gone. The only thing that makes me remember is my signature. Nobody can forge my signature, even though people forge my technique, they cannot forge my signature, they cannot forge my real, real styles. And I find it very hard to reproduce any painting done yesterday, and even in my music I don't sing or play the same music twice.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of music are you involved in now?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

What I do is still to sing in the traditional form. I go back and sing in my authentic Yoruba form even though the music is a bit westernised. Before, I used to call my sound the "bamboo system" but now I have no name, I just call it 'music'. Ten years ago my music used to be authentic Yoruba music because I had no guitar; no horns, but right now I have to move with the times, which means if I'm in London tomorrow and Osibisa was backing me I would sing. I'm just a musician who would play with anybody on stage.

ANNE BOLSOVER

We're sitting in the Oshogbo shrine now. What does this place mean to you as an artist?

TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN

This is my source of inspiration. Oshogbo people, as you know, they worship this river and during the festival both Christians and Moslems, everybody participates in this festival and this place where we are staying is the source of my inspiration. If I have any problem this is my church, this is my temple, this is where I talk to my Creator. I used to be a church-goer, I used to sing all the hymns in the hymn books, I used to read all the psalms in the Bible, but right now, for about eighteen years that I have been in Oshogbo, this is my only temple. This is where I pray and I don't come here for monetary gain. I come here whenever I'm going to lose my special touch like at midnight by myself, or in the morning or on Sundays after all the tourists have gone. I stay here because I know water is very important to the body and I do what you people do - you call it meditation, whatever you call it - I do my