

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. It came as a pleasant surprise to discover that the Royal College of Art here in London was displaying African pottery. But it was more dismay than surprise to find out that it was the work of an African student who was studying the art of pottery not at home in Kenya, but in Europe. After all, as far as I'm concerned, pottery is very much an African craft or even art.

The potter, Magdalene Odundo, comes from Nairobi and her work is part of the exhibition of work by final year students at the Royal College of Art. The mystery of coming from Africa to England to study pottery was one of the things Florence Akst had to solve when she met Magdalene at the college, but first they talked about the display of fifteen or so wide and narrow necked jars from thirty to forty centimetres high. Far from the coarse pottery of every day use these were delicate in texture and shape. But they were quite plain. Florence asked Magdalene if it would be fair to call them 'straight-forward' pottery.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Oh I think it is the right description to some extent, I'm interested in very, very simple pottery, in the sense that I am interested in forms and the material.

FLORENCE AKST

Well lets give people an idea of what they look like. They're all jars, would you call them, what are they?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Well in terms of ceramics I would say they are containers, because they are closed forms they could contain something.

FLORENCE AKST

But did you make them to contain?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I did not make them to contain specific things, therefore my work is not functional in that sense, because I don't perceive a function before I make them, but because I'm interested in space, form and enclosures. I tend to actually think of the whole form in terms of containing, even if it contains air.

FLORENCE AKST

So you don't think, I need a container for my meal, for my sugar, for my water.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

No, because I think there is a section of society that can make functional wear better than I do, and I'm more interested in exploring forms in terms of shapes, what they do, and balancing them in terms of visual

FLORENCE AKST

So you are making them primarily for people to look at.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

And when I see them I think they're very beautiful and satisfying and you have a notice saying don't touch but I would in fact and also I have the feeling that if I did touch them, for instance if I ping them, will they make a ringing sound?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Yes, if you touch that particular one, do you want to try it? (laughing)

FLORENCE AKST

And what about the others do they make a different sound? Ah, that's quite different! Does that mean they are made of different material? Because one is red and one is black.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I use exactly the same clay but I treat each individual pottery to different firings and its the firing quality that, or the firing process that gives all the different tonal values in the finished pot.

FLORENCE AKST

So that one that has a marvellous burnished mark at the bottom, a reddish glow at the bottom, actually is black the rest of the way up.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Yes it is and that's because of a firing technique that I used where that particular section that is red was purposely re-oxidised to bring back that rich red so that it just does something to the whole pot.

FLORENCE AKST

Now some of these are almost circular, that one there with the sort of special neck as though it were separate and almost screwed on; that's a very lovely curve beneath it and so's that neighbour the smaller one. How do you achieve the curve, is it a potter's wheel?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

No it isn't all my work is hand built.

FLORENCE AKST

What sort of pottery did you make back home in Kenya?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I didn't make pottery when I was in Kenya. I originally trained, or apprenticed, in an advertising agency at home in Nairobi.

FLORENCE AKST

Not in pottery!

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Not in pottery, in commercial art. And then worked as an assistant, in a neon sign manufacturing company, designing signs.

FLORENCE AKST

What for, soft drinks and night clubs?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Well, generally for night clubs, shops, roads, and they did huge contracts for the government.

FLORENCE AKST

Well, that's so removed; the glare of neon signs, from the very tranquil art of pottery.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Well when I came to England, I originally came to try and do a general art course. Because I was interested in art in general and I hadn't had the full benefit of trying other crafts or other arts rather than what I was doing in commercial art. And I came here and did a year of foundation course, and I still then thought I wanted to do graphics. So I did a year in graphics and then I really did not like it, I just didn't settle.

FLORENCE AKST

Does that mean you consciously turned to an African form?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

No, when I turned to ceramics I knew nothing about clay - in 1973, and I went to Farnham in Surrey, in South of England and I didn't know anything about clay and I got there and I just wanted to try something to do with moulding, with creating, what I call creating. Which I didn't find in graphics.

FLORENCE AKST

But you must have been conscious that some of the best potters in the world are African.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Not at all, I had not actually consciously made any effort. It had never occurred to me to do ceramics.

FLORENCE AKST

And have you since then studied African pottery?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I have but I have not studied it in isolation.

FLORENCE AKST

So you do see it as a form of cultural expression of a people.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Yes. I think you've got it right. It's my way of saying that I am part of a society. My interest in people because I'm really interested in social structures of people

FLORENCE AKST

And you are obviously speaking to people here because those little red dots mean you've made a sale.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I have been lucky

FLORENCE AKST

And I see quite a lot of them.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Yes, I've sold well but I think - I'm happy I've sold - but what is even more delightful is that I've got exhibition offers and I'm exhibiting in Germany 28th September.

FLORENCE AKST

Now there's one question I would like to ask you very much, and that is, if you had stayed in Kenya, which is a land of pottery in many ways, would you have taken up pottery?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I doubt it, if I had stayed at home I think I would still be in commercial art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Magdalene Odundo talking to Florence Akst.

Now we spend a lot of time talking about the riches of our various traditional cultures but someone who is actually doing something about it is Dick Essilfie-Bondzie. I find it difficult to believe that our musical heritage could ever disappear but it does deserve to be even more widely known and, what's more important, more understood. And it's music of Ghana that's the subject of a film that Dick Essilfie-Bondzie has just completed. Dick is in the studio with me now to tell us about the film.

Dick the first question obviously must be 'what are you calling the film'?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

The film is titled "Roots to Fruits".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did you decide to call it that title?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

We decided to call it 'Roots to Fruits' because the film traces the history of our culture from the beginning before it was exposed to any sort of influence and then we also show what foreign influences, especially European, have had on our culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How did you come to make the film?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Well we stage an annual concert at Accra and from the reception, the press as well as the general public, expressed their desire for us to take it all over the country. And we decided that the best way to do so is to make a film. And with a film one can see it all over the country and probably even outside Ghana as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes I see. Now there's so much music in it how can you get it all into one film?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Well we tried to make a story out of it tracing the roots of our music and dance as well as our religion, and then the effect of foreign influences and then what people see in Ghana now, and also what they hear when they go to dance halls, churches and so on. That is where people gather to entertain and also to worship.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And is there a story line, is the whole thing acted or do you link the story by means of a script?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

There is a story line that comes out from the music and the dances and also from the beginning there is an explanation of the traditional part of the film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now who is the film meant for? Apart from, when you say you want to show it through out the country. Are you thinking only in terms of Ghana? And when you say abroad if you mean you're taking it out of Ghana, in West Africa? In Europe?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Well, West Africa, Europe and America as well we hope. And in fact we are trying to get the media interested here and then we will also try to get other TV stations and whatnot interested.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In other words you are not going to show it only in film houses but on television as well.

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Yes in Europe and America we hope to show through television but in Africa we shall distribute it as a film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How easy was it to make?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

It wasn't all that easy in fact. Although the cast is entirely Ghanaian and also the technicians working on it initially are Ghanaians; we needed, for example, a lot of film stocks which we had to obtain from outside Ghana. And also to finalise the film we had to come here to do the final editing, the dubbing and also to have the film processed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about the performers, the actual performers in the film. are they professionals whom you assembled together specifically for this purpose, or were they people you found naturally performing?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Well the film, as I said, is a musical so the musicians are mostly all professionals. And then the Ghana Dance Ensemble which is the dancing wing of the Institute of African Affairs they did most of the dancing, choreographed by a professional choreographer.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what do we actually see in the film, what sort of instruments, what do the performers actually do?

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

We see both traditional and modern instruments. With the traditional instruments we see things like aperpensuwa, adekim (phon), they are sort of guitars and other wind instruments that we make locally, and then with modern instruments we see things like trumpets, guitars, organs and so on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So we see both. Well Dick Essilfie-Bondzie I must say I hope I'll have the chance to see "Roots to Fruits" and thank you very much for coming along and telling us about it.

DICK ESSILFIE-BONDZIE

Thank you Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And 30's music from "Roots to Fruits" we end today's programme "Arts and Africa" with

MUSIC EXTRACT - "Roots to Fruits"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There'll be another programme next week so why not join me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, at the same time. Goodbye.