

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. This is Arts and Africa and today we're visiting an exhibition which has been arousing enormous interest outside Africa. A travelling exhibition called "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria - A Legacy of 2000 Years" has been touring North America and now is finishing several exciting months in Britain. It's London address has been the prestigious one of Burlington House, Piccadilly. That's the home of the Royal Academy of Art and it's to Burlington House that visitors have been flocking to see this remarkable exhibition displayed in a really impressive way.

One of the most famous areas of traditional Nigerian art has been the bronze heads and other castings from Benin City. Some go back to the fourteenth century and they are very impressive in their naturalism, imaginative quality and extraordinary skills of execution. But they are so well-known that today we're concentrating on the contents of some of the other rooms that the exhibition has taken over. The human heads of the Nok culture do indeed go back more than 2000 years and it's there that Taiwo Jegede and Florence Akst began their tour. Taiwo Jegede, is himself a Nigerian sculptor who uses wood and bronze and he comes from Ekiti, Ondo State, Nigeria, that's within the region all the exhibits come from. It was Taiwo's second visit and Florence asked him where on his first visit his interest had been captured.

TAIWO JEGEDE

I was a bit surprised by some of the work, the technicality, the spacial content behind it and the skill behind it and the high achievement of the artistic work. Some of the work I have seen before.

FLORENCE AKST

Where? Here in London?

TAIWO JEGEDE

In Nigeria. But some of them I've not seen before. This is the first time I've seen a collective work of African heritage in different forms of artistic expression shown together. I was greatly taken aback by the standard of what I see. I think it has exposed my eye to see and to learn more of what has been achieved in the past, and for me to aim for a higher development of my own work.

FLORENCE AKST

Which was the first exhibit where you actually stopped with amazement? We're standing in the first gallery that you enter and it has on the left hand side exhibits from the Nok culture which goes back, in fact, to 500 B.C. so that's 2,500 years ago. Now which was the first one?

TAIWO JEGEDE

The first one I stopped at was the head in the left-hand side of the room and this is 2,000 years old done in terra cotta. I also work in terra cotta but seeing the skill of this one, it shows me that I have a lot to learn from what has been achieved in the past in Africa. I was very impressed by this. It's very strong and very powerful and the texture on the woman's head is very detailed and at the same time it is very, very refine indeed.

FLORENCE AKST

Now could you just give listeners a very rough sketch of what it looks like, how big it is?

TAIWO JEGEDE

It's about twelve inches high and about eight to twelve inches in diameter. The faces are similar to the people from where that sculpture has been obtained.

FLORENCE AKST

Where are the Nok, they aren't called Nok any more?

TAIWO JEGEDE

There are none now but it's around the Jos area of Nigeria.

FLORENCE AKST

And this head has those curious holes. There are holes right through into the hollow of her head for the pupils of her eyes, for the mouth, for the nose.

TAIWO JEGEDE

I think this is to help with the drying out of the clay because when you are drying terra cotta there should be air ventilation that goes through the form of the sculpture. These days we use needles but I think in those days they had their own technique of using holes to develop more the design of the sculpture and at the same time helping to dry out the clay.

FLORENCE AKST

But doesn't it also make her very much more alive? Somehow it looks as though her mouth is open as though she is just going to say something.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Yes, it adds more to the quality of the work. Also looking from there I was highly impressed with this small, tiny figure of two and half inches high and about three inches in diameter. It's a complete figure. I love the sculpture and it's one of the best works I like in this Nok section because of the totality of the work and the feel that you want to hold it. Although it is very small and the detail is very refined, there is more emphasis on the head which, to me, is probably a symbolism of my work. I concentrate a lot on heads and all my emphasis, all my expressions are based on the head area because I believe the head is the most important part of the body. Without the head the body is useless. In this sculpture the way the textures, the beads, everything is contained within a small area, everything is so impressive sculpturally with the full totality of the beauty of a good sculpture. This is a kneeling man and it's from Ebwari (phon) near Abuja where the new Nigerian capital will be, where most of these works come from.

FLORENCE AKST

Right, well we're crossing over now to the area that's given over to the Igbo Ukwu discoveries which are much later. They are a culture of ten centuries ago, and not twenty five centuries ago. This is a small piece. You like the small ones!

TAIWO JEGEDE

I like the small one again because being a sculptor myself I am somebody who works sometimes in small scale bronzes and using wax to do the sculpture. So when I see work which is well refined and the technicality, the artistic achievement, the spiritual side of the work comes out in the work I know what the work entails. The beauties of this fly-whisk handle which is somebody riding on a horse ...

FLORENCE AKST

That's sitting on top of the metal end to the handle.

TAIWO JEGEDE

.... and then the fine work, looking very close to the work, the fine texture, the distribution of forms within a small area of space, I think that is a very high achievement of artistic work.

FLORENCE AKST

Now this is a figure again with a huge head. It's sitting on a little horse or a little animal but even so you can see the muzzle and the halter round the animal's head.

TAIWO JEGEDE

And the texture which is very common with the Igbo Ukwu pieces of art work.

FLORENCE AKST

Have you seen this one before?

TAIWO JEGEDE

I've seen this one before in the Nigerian museum in Lagos.

FLORENCE AKST

But there are some much bigger exhibits in this area.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Yes. Standing in front of this bowl you can see they coil wax and within that small coil of wax of about quarter of an inch they detail this and this is made into about one thousand pieces, made and coiled onto this pot to give it a very good structural quality and also a textural quality.

FLORENCE AKST

The appearance is as though it was ribbon threaded through in different directions round the outside of the bowl. But it's metal and not ribbon.

TAIWO JEGEDE

It's metal instead of thread.

FLORENCE AKST

And there are three of these very big bowls. This one's enormous. It's about, what, two foot?

TAIWO JEGEDE

About two foot in diameter and it's cut as if you were cutting through a calabash bowl.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes, it is isn't it. But, again, very decorative.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Very decorative and although I don't know what is used for, the quality, the time-absorption of the work, it's really taken me aback and shows that we in Africa as new artists, we have a lot to learn and we have a lot to do to achieve in our modern way the standard they achieved in their own time.

FLORENCE AKST

I would like to raise the point of who would commission or pay for this. Because the workmen must have used many, many months, I would have thought, of labour, and who is going to make it worth his while, make him stop going out and growing his food and trading in order to concentrate. Society must be pretty prosperous.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Yes, I think so because if not, for an artist to sit down and spend months and months to produce a bowl ...

FLORENCE AKST

And to have spent so much time learning techniques because that's not a beginner's piece of work...

TAIWO JEGEDE

No, no this is not because for me to do this now, I think it would take me at least six months or perhaps nine months. But again I would find it difficult to do because now time is money and you think of how to feed your child. So it is very difficult now to repeat this sort of work.

FLORENCE AKST

Let's move into the next chamber. Now we've walked down through the columns of wood and we're in the Ife collection. Ife is a university town, a university city in Nigeria and it's also important to the Yoruba people.

TAIWO JEGEDE

To the Yoruba it's the special home of the Yorubas and it's the base of the Royal Family of the Yoruba, the base of the most important of them, the Oni of Ife. Most of the exhibits here are sculptures of princes and princesses and kings and other things like that. But apart from being a royal theme there is still the freedom for the artist because I'm seeing here one of the first beautiful abstract art objects I've seen in many years.

FLORENCE AKST

It looks very odd to me.

TAIWO JEGEDE

It's called 'Cylindrical representation of a human head'. It's about six inches high.

FLORENCE AKST

In fact, it looks like an arm from the elbow standing straight up with little blunt fingers.

TAIWO JEGEDE

And here is a face on it, a hole, but there is nothing much to it as compared with most of the works here which have more details and are more refined, especially looking at the princess which is next to the one we're talking about. It's a princess's head.

FLORENCE AKST

And nothing abstract at all.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Nothing abstract. It's very realistic.

FLORENCE AKST

Now this room is mostly of heads isn't it? There must be twelve I suppose. This is what people mostly think to be the works of Ife, don't they?

TAIWO JEGEDE

Yes in some of Ife but in Ife itself there are a lot of wood carvings apart from this head because as I said this is a royal sculpture which is mainly the heads of princes, princesses and kings but apart from that there are some works which are not royal because even though you are employed by the kings to work for them, you still have freedom to do, sometimes, your own choice of work. So within an African artist's mind, you have the freedom to interpret what you are portraying. You have the freedom to express it the way you see it, and at the same time you have the freedom to interpret it the way you see it. It is two different things.

FLORENCE AKST

Taiwo, there is a great deal more here. We're not going to go everywhere because we're not going to be able to get all the comments into the programme but just standing here where the galleries all meet at this point, what is your last impression?

TAIWO JEGEDE

My last impression is about the architecture. Being brought up as a young boy in a palace, it reminds me of our old palace when I was a little boy. It's made of mud and although the forms are different to this, the stylization of the structure of the architecture reminds me of it because you have the courtyard and you have the little passage round the courtyard before you have the rooms. I think the architecture has given a great impression to the works.

FLORENCE AKST

And constructed just for this exhibition.

TAIWO JEGEDE

Just for this exhibition. It has created a sense of mystery which because of its age, the works need a lot.

FLORENCE AKST

Taiwo Jegede, thank you very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Taiwo Jegede at the exhibition - Treasures of Ancient Nigeria - talking to Florence Akst. And I know that Taiwo is one of many Nigerians anxious that these beautiful and historically important objects should tour African countries as well as going overseas.

Our closing music today was recorded at Ife. It's the music of the Gelede dancers and with it I say goodbye. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping you'll join me next week for more Arts and Africa.

MUSIC

GELEDE MUSIC.