

Modern African Art

CHIKA OKEKE[★]

African modernism cannot be broached merely by invoking European modernism, for it is not, as some historians have claimed, simply an African manifestation of twentieth-century European art.

Chika Okeke

This essay by Chika Okeke establishes a conceptual and historical foundation for the texts that follow. It reverses the hegemonic Eurocentric viewpoint of art historiography and offers an authoritative history of African modern art from an African perspective. Okeke views modernism as essentially “a project of subject formation,” an idea he links to the rise of modernity on the African continent. His story of modern art begins with the colonial period and translates key value terms of Western modernism – progress, originality, artistic freedom, individualism, alienation, paradox – for application to African art. He gives us a picture of modern art in Africa as a fusion of many sources, an amalgam the author appreciates as postmodern *avant la lettre*. For the larger project of understanding modern art from multiple global perspectives, such local viewpoints will add up to an overall revaluation of values: a radical expansion and restructuring of modernist epistemology.

Questions for reading: How does Okeke explain the debates around critical modernist concepts? According to the author, what is the fundamental paradox of this history? How, when, and where does he say modernity and modernism emerged on the continent? What part did Paris and cosmopolitan expatriation play, and what three factors brought African artists and intellectuals together, especially on the continent, during the independence decade (1955–65)?

[★] Chika Okeke (2001) “Modern African Art.” In Okwui Enwezor (ed.) *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* (pp. 29–36). Munich, Germany: Prestel.

Further Readings

- Harney, Elizabeth (2004) *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mount, Marshall W. (1989[1973]) *African Art. The Years Since 1920* (with a new introduction by the author) New York, NY: Da Capo Press.
- Ogbechie, Sylvester (2008) *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

African modern art has been an anomaly on the map of twentieth-century artistic modernity. It has been with us from modernism's inception, and yet, in a kind of cyclical ritual, it time and time again has seemed to need validation within the study of twentieth-century art. [...]

Whether or not colonialism unwittingly planted the seeds of African modern art, the extent to which that art remains accountable to European methodologies remains a subject of intense debate. [...]

The view of colonial education as the agent of African modern art's emergence faces a number of contradictions and a paradox. First, although the introduction of European art education in non-Islamic parts of the continent brought about a change in the attitude of colonized to colonizer, the colonial mission was by no means the main agent of artistic output there. In fact it initially paid no attention to the visual arts, being mainly concerned with fulfilling the colonial powers' need for low-level manpower – for clerks, for example, in the civil service. Wherever art did feature in the colonial curriculum, it was restricted to the notion of craft. The inclusion of art in the syllabus began only when educated Africans demanded it.

Therein lies one contradiction; another is the existence during the colonial period of a large body of sculptural and performance practices that engaged the colonial project with trenchant critique, humor, and empathy, exploring above all what the modern condition implied for Africans in terms of alienation. This alienation was double, existing first on the level of subject matter: a whole category of performance

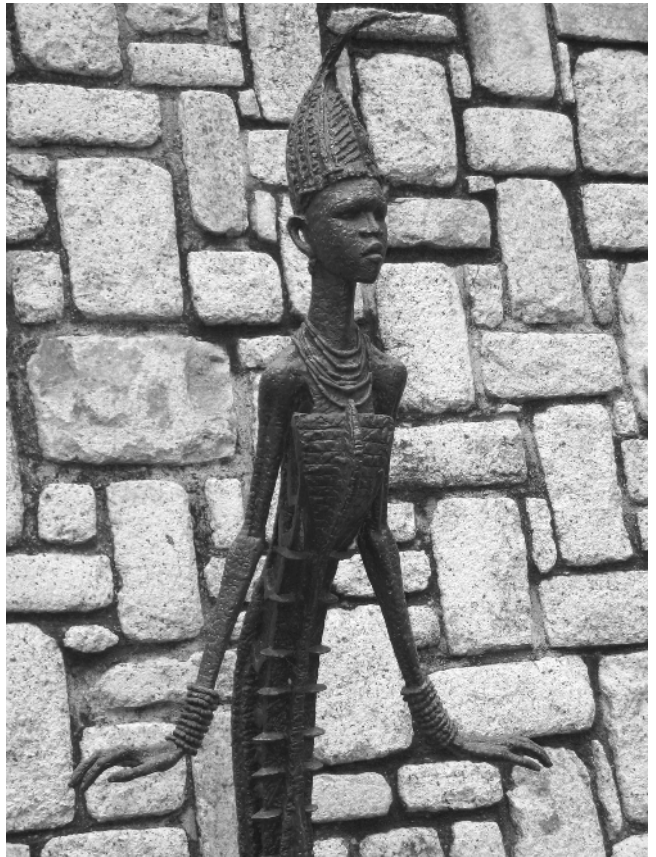


Figure 1.1 Ben Enwonwu *Anyanwu*, bronze (detail), 1954–5. National Museum, Lagos, © Ben Enwonwu Foundation. Photo Sylvester Ogbechie.

genres examined the figure of the colonialist, often parodying his presumption of control over African subjective productions. A second alienation emerged through the alteration of the traditional canon within which this critical insertion took place. What made these local interventions into the colonial space powerfully poignant and modern was their construction of a field in which a dialectical discourse on power relations was played out, with the audience immediately recognizing what the colonial caricature meant within a classical African corpus. And here the colonial officer experienced a deeper alienation, for he was barely able to decipher the critical codes of actions in which he was sometimes a guest of honor.

This brings me to the paradox within which modern African art operates. Contemporary Western scholars and artists generally acknowledge that one of the sparks for European art's paradigmatic change in direction in the twentieth century occurred as Western artists encountered African and Oceanic "ethnographic" objects and recognized the possibilities they offered for formal shifts in European painting and sculpture. From Cubism to Surrealism, from Pablo Picasso to Paul Klee, Georges Braque, Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Amedeo Modigliani, Julio González, Wifredo Lam, and so on, the case has been sufficiently made. But the obverse of this discovery by Western artists was the discovery of European art by African artists born in the same period. In southern Nigeria, for instance, the Christian missions that were established in the mid-nineteenth century eschewed art education completely. It was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that the region's first modern artist, Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), began his lone crusade to convince the colonial administration in Lagos to establish an art course in secondary schools. Similarly, although many Western artists visited Islamic North Africa in the nineteenth century, especially during the Romantic era (after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 had opened the region to European colonialist expansion), and although a number of these artists settled in Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco, French and British colonial administrations did not encourage the establishment of art training in the Maghreb. It was Prince Yusef Kamal – a member of the Egyptian National Party, which advocated independence from Britain – who established the first art school in colonial Egypt: The School of Fine Arts, Cairo, which opened in 1908.

It appears, then, that modern African art became a reality not so much because of Western-style education as because of a few individuals to whom art as an autonomous practice became a medium for expressing their subjectivity and coming to terms with their sociopolitical circumstances – with their own emergent modernities. If the development of modern art in colonial Africa seems to have been rather slow (that is, if we ignore some of the indigenous sculptural and performance practices mentioned above), this may be because modern artistic subjectivity is linked to political independence. The notion of artistic freedom was antithetical to the ethos of colonialism. Predictably, the first, clear, sustained modernist art in Africa appeared in Egypt, which experienced an early political

independence and established a nationalist discourse before World War I.¹ For the rest of the continent, and despite the pioneering efforts of a few individuals, it would take the aftermath of World War II to set the stage for modern art. As imperial Europe, debilitated by war, counted its losses, and as its prospects of retaining its colonies dimmed, African artists and intellectuals sought to challenge the idea of progress inherent in modernism's conception of its mission (an idea not just formal but political, as can be seen in the cases of the Mexican muralists and of the avant-garde of the Russian revolution). Reflecting upon the emergent postcolonial condition, they engaged the issues of what it meant to be individuals and artists in societies experiencing dramatic social, political, and cultural change.

So how, one might ask, did these artists respond to their contact with Europe? The fanciful notion of mimesis, or mimicry, comes to mind. [...] The concept of mimesis found easy expression in anthropology, but its implications have also percolated in Western scholarship's view of African modern art. In 1964, for instance, William Fagg and Margaret Plass described a "'contemporary' African art which for all its merit is an extension of European art by a kind of involuntary cultural colonialism."² The argument of Fagg and Plass – and of generations of art historians worried by what they see as a lack of "authenticity" in modern and contemporary African art – is quite pernicious, for it denies any possibility of agency on the African artist's part. It assumes that because Africans have appropriated techniques or expressive media often associated with European art, they cannot create anything different or original. Nor can they even be involved in the aesthetic debates taking place in other far-flung outposts of the European imperial process.

Artists are not alone: similar arguments have been made about the literature of Negritude. For Fagg and Plass, "the suppositious philosophy of *négritude* ... is a product of Parisian existentialism and has no roots in Africa, for which reason we should prefer to call it *blanchitude*."³ Many other critics, especially Anglophone Africans, including Wole Soyinka, have echoed this assessment. Yet for young, Paris-based African intellectuals from the French colonies in the 1930s and '40s, Negritude was an expression of their dissatisfaction with colonialism, its emasculation of their culture, and its deferment of their freedom. In a strategy that signaled the beginnings of a modern postcolonial subjectivity, the poets of Negritude, on a quest for a critical voice, adopted aspects of French Surrealism and rhetorical strategies from France's political and intellectual left. Yet their cultural and political agendas obviously differed from those of the French; they were, so to speak, cotravelers, in a parallel time, heading to different destinations.⁴ For Europeans the enemies were fascism and reason gone amok; for African and Caribbean writers the enemy was unquestionably colonialism. Thus the poets of Negritude, despite loose alliances with Surrealism and the Paris left, created a literature quite distinct from the work of their French counterparts. Viewing Negritude as a mimicry of European literary forms, Fagg and Plass fail to appreciate the subtleties of its poetics and politics. They also fail to see that artistic modernity is rooted in a reordering process of quotation, and that Negritude is a product of this process – as

becomes especially clear when we pay attention to its strategy of mixing tropes of otherness and “foreign” methodologies, its ordering of complex (and, as Soyinka has argued, sometimes conflicting) ideological and aesthetic propositions founded on the appropriation of fantasies of Africanness, and its anticipation of the hybridity of today’s postmodern ethos.

Négritude extended beyond literature. A philosophy of black consciousness, it sought expression in all spheres of artistic production. What is the *Nègre* in Negritude if not the principle of making Africanness (whatever that may entail) part of the repertory of modern art? A conference organized by Alioune Diop, the founder of the literary journal *Présence Africaine*, in 1956 in Paris called on “negro” writers and artists to embrace such notions in their work. That the artists and writers gathered there almost a half-century ago are today considered some of the most important practitioners in their field suggests how successful Negritude became as a model of self-conscious repetition.

Given this history, and the more dominant history of European modernism, how can we discuss art from Africa, which has always been perceived as outside the scope of modernist aesthetics? What does modernism mean in the context of twentieth-century African art? First, modernism here is tied to the rise of modernity in the African continent, which is in turn connected to the colonial experience. In other words, as colonialism made European material culture and ideas more available, artists from the colonies invented new artistic expressions that reflected Africa’s encounter with Europe, and also with the rest of the globe. Whether through an essentialist nativism or a supposedly progressive adoption of patently European aesthetic styles and propositions, the resulting work bore the unmistakable mark of the artists’ *twentieth-centuryness*. Much as in the heyday of Paris in the early twentieth century, artists from all corners of the world converged in the French capital in the interwar period to share philosophies and aesthetic positions. In the climate of an art and intellectual world peopled by émigrés (Picasso, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Fanon), the work evolved out of diverse colonial conditions, past the ravages of colonialism, and finally through the dramatic experience of decolonization. African modernism is defined by the conflation – rather than by any single one – of these episodes, and by the art forms and aesthetic ideas associated with them. The obvious implication is that African modern art does not propose a particular narrative of modernism, as the triumphalist European version did. In Africa one can even speak of a range of modernisms specific to the continent’s different countries. In other words, African modernism cannot be broached merely by invoking European modernism, for it is not, as some historians have claimed, simply an African manifestation of twentieth-century European art – even though we will certainly find many instances of artists consciously adopting, adapting, quoting, decomposing, critiquing, and even transgressing European avant-garde strategies, creating work that dramatizes the restless intellectual encounters of artists engaged in a continuously evolving project of subject formation.

[...]

The Art of Independence

At the Pan-African Congress of 1945, in Manchester, England, the assembled representatives of the colonies sanctioned African anticolonial movements, marking the end of Europe's imperial age. The postwar period was also significant in African art history, for it witnessed an intensified migration of artists to European metropolises. Colonial administrations in most parts of Africa had been reluctant to establish a system of art education, but a few artists had traveled to Europe for training, often with private sponsorship. In Egypt and South Africa, art academies had been established before the start of the war, but racial conditions in South Africa foreclosed any possibility of black artists benefiting from the institutional structures available to their white counterparts. If they wanted to escape the artistic Bantustan to which they had been banished, emigration was the only choice. Some of South Africa's pioneering black artists, including Ernest Mancoba (born 1904 [died 2002]) and later his friend Gerard Sekoto (1913–93), were forced to emigrate to Europe.

Mancoba left for Paris in 1938. There he met the Danish artist Sonja Ferlov, who introduced him to her circle, including Giacometti. During World War II, interned by the German army (he carried a British passport), Mancoba married Ferlov, and after the war he moved to Denmark. In 1948 he participated in the *Høst* exhibition, the inaugural show of the emergent COBRA group, led by Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Corneille, and Constant. Although his work is often omitted from COBRA literature, he brought the group in contact with African ethnographic material, and gave them guided tours of the Trocadero museum – an experience that would have a far-reaching impact on the work of Jorn and Ejler Bille.⁵ Furthermore, Ferlov's and Erik Thommesen's sculpture seems to have been directly influenced by Mancoba's own early wood sculpture, which has a primal, monumental simplicity. His association with COBRA may in turn have helped shape his abstract style, his palette, and, in his drawings, his exploration of what Elza Miles calls "the relationship between the autonomy of an image and the power associated with it."⁶

Like Mancoba, Sekoto began his career in South Africa but recognized the impossibility of furthering his art beyond the limits set by the system for black artists. The creation of townships for black migrant workers, and the laws curbing the movement of black people, created pseudo-urbanized spaces marked by prisoncamp-type layouts, but there was a thriving black culture here, and the simple yet powerful portraits of blacks and "coloreds" that Sekoto produced before his 1948 emigration to Paris document life in the squalid streets of Sophiatown and District Six (townships in Johannesburg and Cape Town respectively). Although he never returned to South Africa, he continued to paint pictures of the townships as he remembered them.

On his way to Paris Sekoto stopped in London, where Peter Abrahams, a South African novelist also self-exiled, introduced him to the Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu (1918–94).⁷ Enwonwu was a student of the British art teacher and museologist

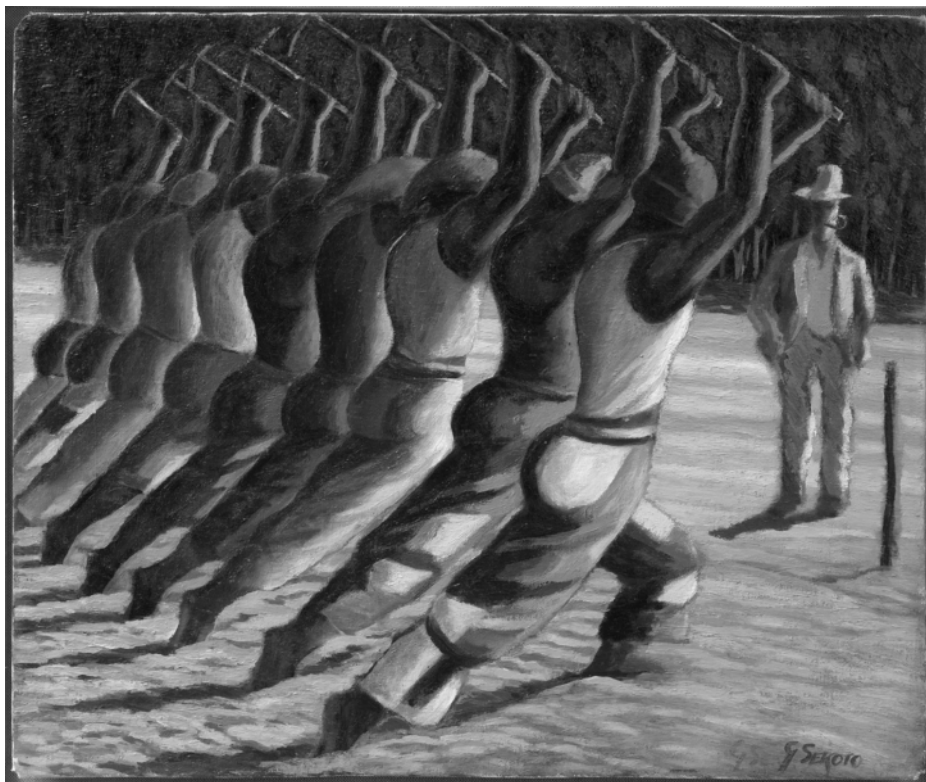


Figure 1.2 Gerard Sekoto, *The Song of the Pick*, 1946–7, oil on canvas, 49 × 59.9 cm/19 × 24 inches, © The Gerard Sekoto Foundation.

Kenneth Murray, who, in 1927, had been invited by the colonial government to teach art in Nigerian secondary schools.⁸ In 1944, a year before his younger compatriot Uzo Egonu (1932–94). Enwonwu had left for England with a joint scholarship from the Nigerian government and Shell Petroleum. His career was unprecedented: after graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art and Goldsmiths College, as well as attending Oxford, he became, at least in the popular press, “Africa’s most famous artist.” In 1957 Queen Elizabeth visited his studio, to sit for a controversial portrait statue commissioned by the colonial government. Many of Enwonwu’s pictures from the early 1950s depict contemporary Nigerians engaged in social activities or participating in cultural ceremonies. He was in touch with debates on colonialism and African independence, and participated in the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne, organized by *Présence Africaine* in 1956, and, with Sekoto and Sam Ntiro (born 1923 [died 1993]) of Tanzania, in the 1959 Rome Conference, for which Sekoto designed the poster.

Enwonwu’s reputation in London was matched in Paris by that of the Ivory Coast sculptor Christian Lattier (1928–78).⁹ At the age of ten, Lattier had left for France, where he had joined the order of Marist Brothers. Leaving the order in 1945, he entered art studies at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, Saint-Etienne, the

following year. In 1947 he transferred to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where, departing from the academic tradition of modeling in plaster, he began experimenting with woven wire sculptures, for which he won the Chenavard Prize in 1954. His first experiments with wire seem to resonate with the copper-wire reliquary sculptures of the Bakota. He later employed woven fibers, recalling the basketry and other fiber arts found in many African cultures.

Sekoto and Mancoba never went back to South Africa to live, but many others returned to their home countries after training in Europe. This should not surprise us. Conditions in South Africa under apartheid made the return of its black artists ill-advised,¹⁰ but artists elsewhere often went home to work as art advisors or teachers in their respective countries, whether colonial or postcolonial. Enwonwu, for example, served as federal art advisor in Nigeria; Kofi Antubam (1922–64) was special assistant on cultural affairs to Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana; Ntiro became the Tanzanian high commissioner to Great Britain; and Iba Ndiaye (born 1928), who had gone to Paris to study architecture in 1949, was invited by the Senegalese government to organize the painting section of the Maison des Arts du Senegal, later renamed the Institute National des Arts du Senegal. Unlike his colleague Papa Ibra Tall (born 1935 [died 2008]), who was more favorably disposed to Senghor's Negritude aesthetic, Ndiaye adopted a painterly expressiveness reflecting his association with the Groupe de la Ruche, a group of young postwar Parisian artists bound by a distaste for abstraction.

Egyptian artists too were drawn to the European capitals, but under different circumstances. Most of the country's pioneering artists trained at Cairo's School of Fine Arts, with a few then traveling to Paris or London for higher studies. Such was the case with Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934), Egypt's first modern artist, who graduated from the School of Fine Arts before enrolling in the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts. His sculpture *Egypt's Awakening* (1919–23) predated his country's independence in 1923: pan-African and proto-Negritude, the work shares qualities with the Harlem Renaissance sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's allegorical *Awakening of Ethiopia* (c. 1914), a work that the art historian Judith Wilson links to the Pan-Africanist novel *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), by the Gold Coast nationalist J.E. Casely Hayford.¹¹ (The Gold Coast is today's Ghana.) *Egypt's Awakening* would become the signal artwork of Egypt's emerging aesthetic, and even of its political nationalism. Perhaps more than those of any other African country, artists in Egypt responded to political events both at home and in Europe during the mid-century. In 1937, a year after the end of the British Mandate and popular demands for free elections, Kamil Tilmissani (1917–70) published a statement calling for a new art founded on ancient Egyptian and folk art traditions, and initiated the Group of Contemporary Art to advance his ideas. In 1939, artists protesting fascism in Europe founded the Group of Art and Freedom. They also rejected orientalism, aligning themselves with the Surrealist movement instead.

Gazbia Sirry (born 1925), a third-generation modern Egyptian artist, chose not to begin her art training in Europe, taking her first degree at the High Institute of Fine Arts for Girls, Cairo, in 1948. Then, in the mid-1950s, she proceeded to

London and the Slade. Early in her career she was associated with Egypt's Group of Modern Art, which favored a post-Cézannean European-style modernism, but in the early 1950s she turned to the Group of Contemporary Art, creating work that was patently Egyptian in character. Then, in the late 1950s, her work began to reflect the political anxieties that had set in after the initial euphoria of Gamal Nasser's revolution.

It might seem paradoxical that African artists were flocking to European capitals while the Manchester Congress was urging decolonization. But, given the realities of colonial rule, this seems less a capitulation to the ingestive power of empire than a necessary process on the part of artists coming to terms with the full meaning of a selfhood defined largely by the encounter between Africa and Europe.

The Independence Decade and Beyond

The independence decade of 1955–65 saw increased interaction among African artists, especially within the continent. Several factors made these contacts possible, but the three most significant were the founding of art schools, which began to turn out more artists; the work of some expatriates; and the political and cultural awareness heightened by the apostles of Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, and Negritude.

With the exceptions of Sudan and Ghana, only Egypt and South Africa had serious art schools, but this would change with changing attitudes in colonial education.¹² With the founding of art schools in Kumasi, in present-day Ghana (1936), Khartoum, Sudan (1946), Makerere, Uganda, and Ibadan and Zaria, Nigeria (1953 and 1955), African artists could finally train in their own countries (although many still went to Europe for further studies, especially during the colonial period). Most of the schools began with curricula fashioned after European prototypes, but nevertheless became sites for interaction among artists, writers, and political activists. At the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, a group of students formed the Art Society, which, led by Uche Okeke (born 1933) and Demas Nwoko (born 1935) and guided by what Okeke called "Natural Synthesis," was dedicated to a pragmatic acknowledgment and fusion of inherited and acquired art traditions. These were often European, but the heritage of many African societies also included Islamic art, and the society's artists embarked on an aggressive recovery of traditional Nigerian art forms in all their historical variants. Combining media and techniques learned in art school, they encouraged less reliance on European subject matter and formal tropes. They were also concerned with the role of the artist in a culture in transition. [...]

Other African artists besides those in the Zaria Art Society took an interest in indigenous art traditions, which was hardly surprising given the political mood of the period. In Negritude, in Nkrumah's concept of African Personality, and in Nasser's Pan-Arabism, rhetorics of revalorized blackness were emerging, and the increasing nationalist fervor in many countries strengthened the resolve of artists

to seek out aspects of their cultures discredited by the logic of colonialism. Thus the Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi (born 1930) and the Ethiopian Skunder Boghossian (born 1937 [died 2003]), after training at home and in Europe, turned respectively to Sudanese and Ethiopian art forms for inspiration. To reestablish links to his Sudanese identity, Salahi studied Islamic calligraphic forms and techniques, as well as graphic designs from Sudanese folk art. The symbolism of his lyrical drawings and paintings goes beyond a specifically Islamic heritage. Boghossian for his part has seen art by Lam, Matta, and Klee in Paris, and was especially fascinated by what he called Matta's "cosmic coordination in space and time and his metallic rhythm."¹³ But he also drew on the symbolic and formal repertory of Coptic art, to which his intricate compositions owe much. Given the hallucinatory quality of some of his early work, his practice has been read – erroneously, one must add – as an African manifestation of Surrealism, but his position is actually quite different from that of an artist like the painter and poet Gebre Kristos Desta (1932–81). Attending a Cologne art school on a government scholarship, Desta was influenced by Wassily Kandinsky's abstraction and by the gestural techniques of Abstract Expressionism, and even after returning to Ethiopia he argued that an Ethiopian modernism contingent upon recuperating local traditions bordered on the retrogressive.¹⁴

The Moroccan painter Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934–67), a descendant of a famous Sufi, became a student of the Koran and a calligraphic master at a very young age. In 1956, however – the year of Moroccan independence – he chose not to study at either of the two Moroccan academies (both of them steeped in orientalist and naïve painting styles, and desperately needing curricular revision) and left for Paris to study graphics at the Ecole des Métiers d'Art. There he met and exhibited with his compatriot Farid Belkahia (born 1934), as well as with other North African artists. Like Boghossian, Cherkaoui admired the work of Klee, and also of Roger Bissière. But his increasing interest in Berber art (his mother was a Berber), and especially in their tattoo and pottery marks, soon eclipsed Klee's influence,



Figure 1.3 Uche Okeke, *Illustration of Things Fall Apart*, 1960–2, pen and ink on white paper, © Uche Okeke.



Figure 1.4 Ibrahim El Salahi, *The Inevitable*, 1984–5, India ink. Acquired through the African Art Purchase Fund, and through the David M. Solinger, Class of 1926, Purchase Fund. Photography courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, © Ibrahim El-Salahi. All rights reserved, DACS 2011.

enriching his work in the process. As for Belkahia, after taking over the directorship of Casablanca's Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in 1964, he incorporated calligraphy and the study of Moroccan handicrafts into the curriculum, and had an immediately palpable influence on Moroccan art. Thus Cherkaoui and Belkahia redefined Morocco's postindependence avant-garde project.

The independence decade also witnessed the emergence of artists from workshops mostly set up by expatriate culture workers and critics, or, in South Africa, by the white establishment. In Mozambique there was Malangatana Ngwenya (born 1936 [died 2011]); in Zimbabwe Thomas Mukarobgwa (1924–99); in Nigeria Twins Seven-Seven (born 1944 [died 2011]); in South Africa Sydney Kumalo (1935–88) and John Muafangejo (1943–87) from Namibia. Ngwenya's early work – encouraged by the Portuguese architect Amancio Guedes, who organized informal workshops for young artists in what was then Lourenço Marques – was vividly realistic and covered a wide range of subject matter, from religion to violent conflict to

witchcraft. [...] Seven-Seven trained in the informal workshops organized by Ulli Beier in Oshogbo, Nigeria, in the early 1960s. His drawings and prints teem with bestial, floral, and human forms, and he often draws subject matter from Yoruba folklore or from his own personal mythologies. [...]

Seven-Seven's career was in many ways set on its path by Georgina Beier (born 1938), who ran the Oshogbo workshops in the mid-1960s. Disenchanted with formal art training in England, Beier turned away from European artistic trends, although her prints show stylistic affinities with early twentieth-century German Expressionism. Her encounter with Yoruba culture profoundly affected her work, and her practice raises questions about common assumptions of what constitutes modern African art. This is even more true of the work of Susanne Wenger (born 1915 [died 2009]), who has formulated new visual archetypes for Yoruba deities in architectural monuments and in narratives painted on fabric. [...]

If, in Nigeria, informal workshops provided alternative learning spaces, in Southern Africa they were black artists' only option. The most significant of the early South African workshops was the Polly Street Art Centre, established in 1948 in Johannesburg as an art and recreation facility for the black townships. In 1952, Cecil Skotnes (born 1926 [died 2009]), a fine-arts graduate of the University of Witwatersrand, became the center's director, and soon attracted a group of young artists who would become some of the most accomplished on the continent, including Sydney Kumalo, Ben Macala, Durant Sihlali (born 1935 [died 2004]), Louis Maqhubela (born 1939), Lucas Sithole (born 1931 [died 1994]), and Helen Sebidi (born 1943).

[...] Skotnes encouraged his students, many of whom he had earlier introduced to modern European art, to look to Central and West African sculpture for its expressive and formal sophistication and as a way to assert their Africanness – and this at a time when being African in South Africa was an existential burden. Kumalo's work both reflects on classical African sculpture and appropriates tropes of modern European sculpture. [...] At Johannesburg's Jubilee Art Centre in the mid-1960s, Skotnes became involved with Mslaba Dumile Feni (1942–91), an autodidact whose powerful charcoal drawings speak of the dehumanizing pall cast on South Africa by apartheid.

As the white government increasingly came to doubt apartheid's long-term viability, its mounting desperation caused it to adopt more violent tactics of suppression. Artists were involved in the liberation struggle in a number of ways. At a conference at the University of Cape Town in 1979 – two years after the charismatic black leader Steve Biko was murdered – South African artists resolved not to represent the nation abroad until black artists had equal access to state-funded art institutions. Many artists commented on the oppressive sociopolitical climate of the 1970s and 80s in their work, producing art often known as "resistance art": some of this work was polemical while some was subtle, allusive, and circumspect, yet both were potent gestures of resistance to the apartheid ethos. The screenprints of Gavin Jantjes (born 1948) take the former approach, clearly enunciating a conceptualist critique of power; the sculptures of Jane Alexander (born 1959), which suggest a bizarre experiment gone awry, and the

multimedia works of Sue Williamson (born 1941) are examples of the latter approach. These works collectively speak of the darkest moments in South Africa's political history.

[...]

Notes

- 1 South Africa's independence in 1910 preceded Egypt's, but its peculiar political history led to a unique artistic development that has virtually no African parallel. Whereas the white minority population never completely lost contact with Europe, especially in the preapartheid era, the first black artists emerged about the same time as their counterparts from other parts of Africa.
- 2 William Fagg and Margaret Plass, *African Sculpture* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1964), p. 6.
- 3 Ibid., p. 7.
- 4 Alioune Diop and Frantz Fanon, for instance, saw Jean-Paul Sartre's attempt to equate the condition of blacks under colonialism with that of European proletariats as distorting and mistaken. See Bennetta Jules-Rosette, "Conjugating Cultural Realities: Présence Africaine," in V.Y. Mudimbe, ed., *Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947–1987* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 14–44.
- 5 See Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra 3 Dimensions* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1999), p. 16.
- 6 According to Stokvis, the historian of the COBRA group, Ernest Mancoba's work had scarcely anything in common with that of his fellow artists, but this opinion comes as no surprise, for Stokvis was more interested in Mancoba's earlier figurative sculpture, which "showed his African origins." See Stokvis, *Cobra* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1974), p. 356. See also Elza Miles, *Lifeline Out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1994), p. 36.
- 7 Most of the literature on Ben Enwonwu states that he was born in 1921. Research by the art historian Sylvester Ogbechie, however, dates his birth to 1918. Since public servants during the colonial era often had official ages younger than their real ones, and since Ogbechie's attribution is confirmed by Enwonwu's family, I will keep the 1918 date. See Sylvester Ogbechie, "Ben Enwonwu in the Art Historical Account of Modern Nigerian Art," BA thesis, University of Nigeria, 1988.
- 8 Kenneth Murray's appointment had been secured by Aina Onabolu, who officially introduced formal art teaching upon his return from England in 1922. See Ola Oloidi, "Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria," in Clementine Deliss, ed., *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 192–4.
- 9 See Yacouba Konaté, *Christian Lattier: Le Sculpteur aux mains nues* (Saint-Maur: Edition Sépia, 1993), p. 27.
- 10 The South African government staved off potential embarrassment by encouraging Mancoba and Ferioz not to return to South Africa. See Miles, p. 41.
- 11 See Richard Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 36.
- 12 Algeria's Ecole des Beaux-Arts was founded in 1920, Morocco's Escuela de Bellas Artes, Tetouan, in 1945. But both, for decades, were colonial institutions catering to the expatriate populations. On the other hand, the School of Fine Art, Makerere, Uganda, was founded in 1939, but graduated its first four-year diplomas only in 1957. See Marshall Mount, *African Art: The Years since 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 95.
- 13 Skunder Boghossian, quoted in Louise Atcheson, "Skunder Boghossian," *Transition* (June 1963): 43.
- 14 See Sydney W. Head, "A Conversation with Gebre Kristos Desta," *African Arts* 2, no. 4 (1969): 20–5.