Author: Peter Probst

**WENGER, SUSANNE**

Susanne Wenger was an Austrian artist and an instrumental figure in the history of Nigerian modernism. Born on July 4th, 1915 in the city of Graz, Austria, Wenger first attended the local School of Applied Arts before she moved to Vienna to continue her art education, first at the School of Graphic Design and from 1933 to 1935 at the Academy of Art. Like other students Wenger’s interest was in contemporary post-secessionist movements. The few works remaining from Wenger’s Viennese phase exemplify different styles ranging from pencil studies of plants and animal bodies, executed with an almost photographic precision, to expressionistic and cubist paintings to surrealist crayon drawings. After the war she moved from Vienna to Paris where she met Ulli Beier. The encounter with Beier marked a profound and lasting shift in Wenger’s life. The two fell in love and decided to spend the next years in Nigeria where he got a job as a lecturer at the University of Ibandan. What was thought to be an adventure became a confrontation with the colonial reality. The colonial curriculum had an exclusive focus on Western history and culture. Interaction between Nigerians and members of the British faculty hardly existed. While Beier reacted to the colonial reality by seeking refuge in the newly established extramural department which allowed him to work outside the campus, Wenger’s response was more private and personal. After a severe illness she embarked on a both spiritual and artistic journey, which resulted in the so-called “Osogbo experiment.”

The “experiment” echoed the modernist convictions about the role of art in society. Both Wenger and Beier believed that it was incumbent upon art to leave the walls of the museum, to go out into the public and become integrated into everyday life. In view of the widespread opinion that African art was on the verge of collapse, their agenda was to reunite art and culture in order to effectively counter the alienating effects of colonialism and capitalism on Yoruba society in order to revitalize Yoruba/African art. Prior to their relocation to Osogbo, Beier had already organized conferences, launched literary and cultural journals, and initiated art projects like the Mbari club in Ibadan. However, the audiences for these undertakings had been composed mostly of academics. In Osogbo the focus was on the local population. Together with the Osogbo composer, playwright, and school teacher Duro Ladipo, Beier founded the Mbari Mbayo club, which became the incubator of the Osogbo art movement. Wenger contributed to its activities by building the screens at the club’s entrance, designing the posters, helping with the props for the theater performances and other tasks. Her own work though focused on the artistic reshaping of the Osun grove.

The creation of new shrines and sculptures in the Osun grove was Wenger’s most famous but also most difficult and contested project. Scattered throughout the grove, the style and design of the structures can be seen as extensions of her two-dimensional works in batik. In the mid-1950s, soon after her initiation into Yoruba religion, she had started to experiment with Adire, the Yoruba batik technique. In contrast to the traditional abstract designs, Wenger’s figurative designs depicted episodes from the Yoruba divination corpus, the Ifa. She also extended the use of color beyond the traditional indigo. The results were dense and dramatic compositions full of tension which prefigured the works in the grove.

Population growth and a growing intolerance of Yoruba religion among the Muslim majority had led to an increasing encroachment upon the Osun grove by farmers, businessmen and timber companies. This development reflected a growing lack of interest among the population at large in preserving the grove. A prime expression of this pervasive indifference was the state of the main Osun temple which was in danger of collapse due to an infestation of ants. It was in the midst of such adverse conditions that Wenger was initially asked by local Osun officials for help. Wenger accepted and gathered a number of carpenters and bricklayers around her with whom she started to repair the structure.

What had begun as a small and limited project soon expanded into a massive transformation of Osogbo’s ritual landscape. In terms of size, medium, and forms, the new works stood in marked contrast to traditional Yoruba art. Instead of the existing wood and adobe, Wenger used cement. While Yoruba art is distinguished by its balance, serenity, and restraint, Wenger’s forms are spontaneous and overflowing as if they are about to change into something else. Last but not least, whereas traditional Yoruba religious art is secret, the images in the grove are public.

The differences Wenger introduced were programmatic. It was the time of Nigeria’s independence; the past was buried under the effects of colonial rule so that any return to traditional aesthetics was deemed void. The only option was to move forward, to find new forms of artistic expression, “new images,” which mirrored the fluid, open, and indeterminate phase of Nigerian society itself. The project attracted considerable attention. Critical voices accused Wenger as being insensible to Yoruba aesthetics while her supporters praised her for being true to the deities and refusing to follow the Zeitgeist. Wenger herself opted not to engage in the debates about her work. Stubbornly, some say egocentrically, she brushed off the critique and pursued her rescue project.

In the 1970s the international interest in the Osogbo art movement faded and so did Wenger’s prominence as an artist. The batiks and paintings she did served mainly to generate income and finance the members of her large household. In the shadow of the limelight she and her co-collaborators – notably Adibisi Akanji and Buraimoh Gbadamosi – continued to work in the Osun grove. She also kept on working on her Batik, a technique in which one of her adopted sons – Sangodare Ajala – became a celebrated master.

Things changed in the 1990s when Wenger was rediscovered as an environmentalist and early representative of land art. A series of exhibitions, prizes, and awards followed. In 2005 UNESCO declared the Osun Grove a World Heritage Site. Wenger, who had just turned 90 by then, still worked in the Osun grove almost daily to repair old and begin new structures. She passed away in 2009 in Osogbo, Nigeria.

List of Works:

Wenger S. (1990), *The Sacred Groves of Osogbo*. Wien: Kontrapunkt

References

Beier, U. (1975), *The Return of the Gods. The Sacred Art of Susanne Wenger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Brockmann R. and Gerd Hötter (1994), *Adunni. A Portrait of Susanne Wenger.* Hamburg: Machart

Eisenhut, G. (2001). Susanne Wenger. In *Moderne in Dunkler Zei*t, ed. by G. Eisenhut & P. Weibel Graz: Verlag Groschl

Probst P. (2009) Modernism against Modernity. A Tribute to Susanne Wenger. *Critical Interventions, Journal of African art history and visual culture*. nos. 3-4, pages 245-255.