Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism

Contemporary African Christian Art

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Thumbnail (under 200 wds)

During the 20th century, though little noticed by most observers, the Christian demographic in Africa exploded from 9.5 million in 1900, to over 400 million by 2000, an historic increase of 4000%. Not surprisingly, the European colonial system, which had encouraged the efforts of European missionaries as a part of their own ostensibly 'civilizing' goal, saw little production, much less use, of indigenous, local religious art by and for this new and growing Christian populace, but, rather, saw widespread introduction of European late Romantic-era Christian imagery and materials (ref. French holy card) for both educational and devotional use. Before mid-century, a new, reformist Catholic Christian discourse began emanating from Vatican leaders, who promoted the adaptation (indigenization or inculturation) of Christian practices, including the visual arts, to local cultures, including prominently, Archbishop (later Cardinal) Celso Costantini (1877-1958), Secretary of Propaganda Fide, the Church's ministry of missionary activity.

The first institutional production of an indigenized Christian religious art introduced in the recent modern era was begun by Reverend Patrick Kelly (1911-1968?), provincial of Irish missionaries of the Society of African Missions (SMA), who founded an arts workshop in colonial Nigeria in 1947. This project, called the Oye-Ekiti Workshop (1947-1954), was managed primarily by Reverend Kevin F. Carroll, SMA (1920-1993), who recruited dozens of woodcarvers, bead workers and textile weavers from the local Yoruba speaking people of rural southwest Nigeria. Prominent artists associated with this workshop included wood sculptors George Bandele Areogun (1911-1995), his father Areogun of Osi (1878-1954) and Lamidi Olonade Fakeye (1925-2009), who were all trained through traditional apprenticeship in Yoruba carving methods. Also of note was a young, Lagos-based, multi-media Anglican artist of Urhobo background, Bruce O. Onobrakpeya (b. 1932).

The Oye-Ekiti Workshop's three purposes included, first, development of a Yoruba Christian art genre for church use in southwest Nigeria, seond, preservation and promotion of the customary art practices of Yorubaland, then under pressure from colonial imports and the breakdown of traditional art patronage, and, finally, resistance to the imposition of European religious imagery. A common strategy for Kevin Carroll, as the project's primary patron and collaborator, was shaping Christian pieces in the form of a pre-existing Yoruba piece and/or presenting Christian subject matter in traditional Yoruba styles. (Carroll's painting and Lamidi's Annunciation)

Inculturation faced considerable resistance from some local Church personnel and membership, who complained that the earlier generation of missionaries had condemned much of the local art as being the 'handmaiden of paganism'. The workshop's sponsor, the Irish province of the SMA, yielded to pressure and closed the workshop in 1954, but still encouraged Carroll to continue this work various local artists for the next four decades of his life, but without the benefit of a centralized workshop.

In the era of African Independence beginning in 1956 and after, Father Carroll continued collaborating with local artists and commissioning new work often in urban settings. For the new church, St. Paul's in cosmopolitan Lagos, Carroll recruited Lamidi Fakeye and other traditional artists to furnish its interior with pieces of the new Yoruba Christian genre. By this point, Lamidi was altering his carving style to produce smaller and more portable versions of his traditional carving subjects, a genre now referenced as Yoruba Neo-Traditional carving, which sought to appeal to the new Nigerian middle-class and international clientele in Europe and the United States. A striking departure from both European and Nigerian traditional art, the Lagos church's unique Stations of the Cross were painted by a young and virtually unknown multimedia artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya of the Uhrobo culture in 1969. This devotional set of fouteen large images presented Christ's passion and death in a 20th century colonial setting with *adire* textile patterning on various surfaces. (ref. B.O.'s 1st Sta.)

Yoruba Christian art continues to be the best known of many of the 20th century's African Christian art developments due the writing and publication of Kevin Carroll's significant contribution to the visual art history of the Yoruba people in 1967, *Yoruba Sacred Carving* (full citation) concerning both traditional Yoruba religious art and the new Christian genre. The widely read volume also became required academic reading for researchers and students of Yoruba visual culture, one of the first and best by a scholarly observer of the local arts for some twenty years. Surprisingly, Carroll's coverage of the new Yoruba Christian art genre was not followed up on for nearly fifty years (N. J. Bridger, *Africanizing Christian Art, Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria*, 2012) illustrating the reticence the academic world has displayed in investigating this continent-wide but little known field.

Beginning in 2012, also, a first international Conference of African Christian Art (sponsored by Carroll's SMA in Northern Ireland), and subsequent conferences, promoted fresh research and writing on the opening field of Christian art across Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the artists and patrons gaining attention include the Serima Mission of Fr. John Groeber of Zimbabwe, Zambian painter Emmanuel Nsama, Ugandan artist Francis Musangogwantamu and artist-clergyman Rev. Engelbert Mveng, S.J.of Cameroon.