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| **Christian Art in Africa** |
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| During the 20th century, the Christian demographic in Africa exploded from 9.5 million in 1900, to over 400 million by the year 2000. This historic four thousand percent increase largely resulted from widespread European missionary activity that began during the latter half of the 19th century. 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 religious art by and for this new and growing Christian populace. Rather, there was a widespread introduction of European late Romantic-era Christian imagery and materials for both educational and devotional use. Before the mid-century, a reformist Catholic-Christian discourse began to be transmitted by Vatican leaders. They promoted the adaptation (indigenisation) of Christian practices, including the visual arts, to local cultures. Advocates for this adaptation included the Archbishop (later Cardinal) Celso Costantini (1877-1958), Secretary of Propaganda Fide in the Church's ministry of missionary activity. In the 1930s, Costantini served as papal legate to China and personally witnessed the violence of Japanese imperialism there. According to Bridger, in 1940 Costantini began advising Catholic missionaries to refrain from imposing foreign culture on their converts, “Foreign feeling and Europeanism must stop at the threshold of our churches.”  The first institutional production of an indigenised Christian religious art in the recent modern era was initiated by Reverend Patrick Kelly (1911-1968?), provincial of Irish missionaries of the Society of African Missions (SMA). In addition, he 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 Carroll and this workshop included a number of wood sculptors: Catholic George Bandele Areogun (1911-1995), his father the Yoruba traditional practioner Areogun of Osi (1878-1954) and Muslim Lamidi Olonade Fakeye (1925-2009), who were all trained through a pre-modern 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), in addition to many other artists who were graduates of the early university fine-art programs in Nigeria.  The Oye-Ekiti Workshop's three purposes included, the development of a Yoruba Christian art genre for church use in southwest Nigeria, the 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, a modernist resistance to the imposition of European religious imagery. A common early strategy for Kevin Carroll, as the project's primary patron and collaborator, was to shape Christian pieces in the form of pre-existing Yoruba pieces and/or to present Christian subject matter in traditional Yoruba styles.  The indigenisation of Christianity faced considerable resistance from the local Church personnel and some of the church’s members, who complained that the earlier generation of missionaries had condemned 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 his work with various local artists for the next four decades of his life, but without the benefit of a centralised 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 had altered his carving style to produce smaller and more portable versions of his traditional carving subjects, a genre now referenced as Yoruba Neo-Traditional carving. Lamidi’s smaller carvings appealed to the new Nigerian middle-class and international clientele in Europe and the United States. Departing from both European and Nigerian traditional art, the Lagos church's ‘Stations of the Cross’ were painted by the young and still virtually unknown multimedia artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya in 1969. The set of fourteen large devotional images presented Christ's passion and death in a 20th century colonial setting with *adire* textile patterning on various surfaces.  Yoruba Christian art continues to be the best known of many of the 20th century's African Christian art developments due to the writing and publication of Kevin Carroll's *Yoruba Sacred Carving* in 1967, which addressed both traditional Yoruba religious art and its 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 for nearly fifty years until Nicholas Bridger's book, *Africanizing Christian Art, Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria*, was published in 2012, illustrating the reticence the academic world displayed in investigating this little known field of international significance. Beginning in 2012, and in conjunction with a Yoruba Christian art exhibition and the book's release, 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 burgeoning field of Christian art in 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. |
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