**NWOKO, DEMAS**

(1935 - )

Across the spectrum of fine art and design, Demas Nwanna Nwoko has made his mark as a central contributor to a neo-traditionalist philosophy at the foundation of Nigerian modern art. Nwoko began formal studies at Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria in 1957 and soon joined fellow art students Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya in founding the Zaria Arts Society (Zaria Rebels) in 1958. Forming an intellectual framework dubbed *Natural Synthesis*, the Rebels cultivated a deep knowledge of indigenous artistic forms, defining a culturally independent artistic practice that would accompany Nigeria’s impending independence from British colonialism. To this end, Nwoko’s earliest paintings, including *Ogboni Chief* (1960) and *Praise Singer* (1960) highlight the subjects of everyday Nigerian life. His sculptural works, like *Adam and Eve* (1965), draw studied inspiration from the Nok terracotta heads of 300 BC. The same philosophical approach remains central to Nwoko’s architectural work, for which he is most widely known. The first of his building projects, *The New Culture Studio and Residence* (1967-present) provides both an aesthetic example of Nigerian-centered design and an ideological home from which his theatrical works and *New Culture Magazine* (1978-9) were produced. His most renowned site, *Dominican Institute Ibadan* (1970-5), exemplifies innovation in the use of modern building methods grounded in indigenous expression.

Born in 1935 as the son of the Obi of Idumuje-Ugboko village, Demas Nwoko was exposed to the world of architecture at a young age while assisting his father in building the town from the ground up. Later, as an accomplished design professional, Nwoko placed emphasis on practical creativity. In 1967 he developed his own construction brick, *Lacrete*; made spontaneously from onsite materials*.* *Lacrete* was unique in color and surpassed the strength of available products at a fraction of the cost. Nwoko’s signature design solutions addressed challenges specific to Nigeria with both traditional and innovative choices, using impluvia for light and shade, double walls for natural cooling, and modern versions of traditional Igbo interior courtyards.

Nwoko formalized the theory behind this building practice, labeling it *Critical Design*, a concept that calls upon the designer to guard an independent aesthetic vision, consider the location specific needs of the building site, prioritize environmental sustainability, and give modern expression to indigenous artistic heritage.

While the output of Demas Nwoko’s career includes painting, sculpture, theatre production, writing, architecture and furniture design, the integrity of his philosophical vision has remained constant. Most recently presented in his manifesto*, The Impoverished Generation and the Poor Man’s Clean Rags* (1992), Nwoko’s life work continues to demonstrate the dictum that the political, aesthetic, intellectual and ideological remain inseparable.

List of works

1960 *Ogboni Chief. Painting.*

1960 *Praise Singer. Painting.*

1965 *Adam and Eve. Sculpture, terracotta.*

1967 - present *The New Culture Studio and Residence, Oremeji, Ibadan.*

1970 - 1975 *The Dominican Institute, Ibadan.*

1972 – 1995 *Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City.*

1976 *Children of Paradise. Play.*

1976 – present *Residence of Demas Nwoko, Idumuje-Ugboko.*

1987 – 2005 Benedictine Monestary, Ewu, Edo State.

1992 *The Impoverished Generation and the Poor Man’s Clean Rags.*

References and further reading

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*The Dominican Institute, Ibadan (1970 – 1975)*

*(obtained from http://memphiscaliproject.wordpress.com/2011/11/16/demas-nwoko/nwoko-ibadan-outdoors/)*