

Solomon Wangboje's Creative Work: The Romance of the Headload Series and Festival of the Gods

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Abstract

Solomon Wangboje has, without doubt, excelled in his artistic craftsmanship which reached a very advanced stage. He has contributed immensely to the development of printmaking in Nigeria through the application and exposure of various themes, techniques and media in his creative work. This paper will examine Wangboje's prints, namely "Romance of the Headload" (Series II, III, IV) and "Festival of the Gods", with a view to highlighting the socio-cultural and religious themes projected by the artist, among them the promotion of entrepreneurial development through artistic endeavours in "Romance of the Headload" series and religion and culture in "Festival of the Gods". The paper will also analyze the techniques applied by the artist to enhance and project these themes.

Keywords: romance, printmaking, headload techniques

Introduction

Solomon Irein Wangboje is a versatile artist whose artistic craftsmanship has greatly impacted the development of printmaking in Nigeria. An art educator, Wangboje taught in various Universities for about four decades: Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife (1968-1972), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (1972-1978) and, later, University of Benin (1978-1998).

Wangboje developed printmaking techniques such as relief, intaglio engraving, etching woodcut lino and, using his personalized style and techniques, created a series of themes drawn from events of everyday life. Through the themes geared towards the promotion of entrepreneurial development within our communities, Wangboje has exposed and promoted traditional African culture. The artist's in depth understanding of the printmaking process and his subjects, enhanced by the use of techniques such as the superimposition of vibrant colours and forms, has influenced many scholars and artists to emulate his work over the years. He asserted:

My objective has been to acquire different techniques of execution through experimentation. It is my belief that a student's best chance to do this is where he is still in school and free to experiment with new materials and thereby, discover new visual possibilities. (qtd. by Oransaye 2002, p. 2)

These different techniques have made his work meaningful and also motivated many artists to opt for careers in printmaking.

Wangboje has produced well over 35 prints between 1960 and the 1990s, making a great impact on modern Nigerian art. Onyema Offoedu-Okeke (2012) aptly acknowledged:

Wangboje's best known print is the Romance of the Headload Series, a visual narrative of economic subsistence and survival. The print showing women, adolescent and kids fetching water from the village springs was produced in the 1970's (p. 116)

This study will, therefore, focus on this print and, in addition, another significant print titled "Festival of the Gods" with a view to analyzing the artist's use of various printmaking media and techniques. Before proceeding with our analyses, however, it will be pertinent to delve a little further into the background of the artist.

Solomon Ona Irein Wangboje, a Professor of Art Education, was born on August 16, 1930, to the family of Irein and Emida Wangboje at Avbiosi in Owan Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. His parents were farmers and Solomon Wangboje was the first son of eight children.

Wangboje attended Edo College in Benin City, Nigeria, from 1946 to 1950 after which he gained admission to study Fine Art at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, from 1955 to 1959. He graduated with a Diploma in Fine Art, which was later upgraded to a Bachelor of Fine Art. In 1961, he was awarded a scholarship by Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, U.S.A to study printmaking; he graduated in 1963 having earned a Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA). Wangboje also bagged a doctorate degree in Art Education from the New York University in 1968 with the help of an African Graduate Fellowship Programme scholarship. He was married to Miss Florence Eliazogie Amadasun and their union produced eight children.

Wangboje was employed as a graphic artist by Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos; he also served as a designer and arts supervisor with the Nigerian Television Service also in Lagos. In 1968, after earning his doctorate degree, he was employed as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of

Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). He then started an art workshop, known as *Ori Olokun*, in conjunction with the Mbari Art Workshop in Ibadan and Oshogbo. The products of this workshop were enriched by Wangboje's knowledge in printmaking and general art. However, the individual participants of this workshop were not admitted into the regular degree programme.

In 1971, Wangboje was appointed as a lecturer in the Fine Arts Department, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he rose to the position of Professor of Art Education, the first in Nigeria. He retired in 1978 to establish the Department of Creative Arts in the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria where he subsequently served as the Head of Department, Dean of Faculties and Deputy Vice Chancellor.

Wangboje won several awards, among them the Men of Achievement Award of the International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, United Kingdom and the Zagfeld Award for Art Teaching of the United States Society for Education through Art (USSEA). He died in 1998 and will be remembered for his inspiring creative work and his role in the development Modern Art in Nigeria.

Romance of the HeadLoad II (Fig. 1) (Serigraph; 48cm x 32cm; 1978)

Printmaking involves a complicated process comprising a variety of techniques whereby one can produce multiple copies of a single image. Patrick Frank (2006) identifies the four fundamental categories of traditional printmaking as relief, planographic (lithography) and stencil (screen printing) (p. 127-128). One of the techniques employed by Wangboje was serigraph process in printmaking. "Romance of the Headload II" is one of the most popular prints created by the artist, using this process.

The print, which shows a young girl hawking *Fura de nono* (locally fermented milk and millet) normally sold by young Hausa/Fulani girls and women of Northern, Nigeria, can evidently be discussed from different perspectives such as the promotion of entrepreneurship development and the northern Nigerian culture. Bruce Onobrakpeya (1992) has a similar print about which he reveals:

The main inspiration for the picture is not the meal which is very nourishing but the beauty of the girls and women who sell them in the street or in market places... This picture, done when I revisited Zaria and Kano several years after I left the art school is one of several prints which I made on the subject. (p51)

Like Onobrakpeya, Wangboje's "Romance of the Headload II" is very likely a reflection of the artist's days in Zaria. The picture depicts a young girl carrying a decorated calabash on her head which is believed to contain *Fura De Nono*. She supports her load with her right hand while in her left hand she carries a smaller bowl of calabash probably containing her serving spoons and smaller bowls in which she serves her prospective customers. Both calabashes are decorated with motifs based on the traditional culture of northern Nigeria. The Calabash on the young girl's head, used for carrying different types of loads, is decorated with the motifs of five human silhouetted figures. Her facial expression is aesthetically beautiful and her plaited hair is adorned with ornaments. There is a bold earring on each side of her face. The body of the girl is, however, depicted in black and brown colours while her neck is embellished with dark brown tattoos. Around her neck are three long strings of beads which fall all the way down to her stomach.

Under the beads, lies a blouse highly decorated with traditional African motifs of the Hausa/Fulani culture. The artist depicted the blouse in brown, yellow and patches of white. The stomach of the girl is black in colour, and beneath the stomach is draped a brown and black wrapper. The human figure is depicted by the artist in semi reality but stylized.

The second figure on the picture plane is a smaller silhouetted female carrying a load supported with both hands. This second figure expresses the element of design showing lines, shade, as well as light and shadow which form patterns and textures. This artistic work is enhanced by line qualities and variations, especially on calabash in the left hand.

In terms of colour, the picture plane is dominated by yellow ochre while the background shows patches of brown and red colours. This work generally highlights the high qualities of print and shows progressive proofs at various stages in the printmaking process.

Romance of the Headload III (Fig. 2) (Linocut; 43cm x 33cm; Private Collection; 1978)

In this work, one of the most prominent created by him, Wangboje explored the printmaking techniques that he acquired at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in the late 1950s and Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, USA in 1963, where he earned his Master's degree in printmaking. The medium of expression was based on deep etching, linocuts, woodcuts, and serigraphy. Wangboje evidently based this work on the African concept of dignity in labour, by showing women, men and children of various income groups exploring avenues of entrepreneurship to earn a living.

The artist created seven figures, all of them of the female gender. Three major figures depicted are a woman with a child strapped on her back, talking to two children with loads on their heads that are very likely her children. At the topmost part of the composition are four female figures, depicted in silhouetted forms, with loads on their heads; they are all wearing wrappers and the first woman among the four has a child on her back. Each of the four figures (especially the two at the far end of the picture) is obviously trying to balance the load on her head, while the other two appear to be having a conversation. In this composition, the artist's techniques appear to have reached an advanced stage.

Depicted is a brilliant background in hues of orange, yellow, yellow ochre, burnt amber, sienna, light blue and spots of blue mixed with patches of white which accentuate the entire work. These colours are also seen on the figures at the bottom of the composition which are superimpositions of black human forms created in highlights of yellow ochre, with patches of white and yellow ochre on their cloths.

Evidently, the colour scheme here consists of predominantly earth colours which play a vital role in creating the depth of the composition: the lighter colours used in the background against the solid human figures enhance their superimposition through the printmaking medium of serigraphy which enhances the overall effect of the finished work. The print also consists of lines that are active and aggressive and a strong movement of vertical and horizontal forms that reflect boundaries of shapes and space that depict forms of motion and emotion. Also interesting is the interaction between the figures while carrying the loads on their heads. The contrast in this work lies in the juxtaposition of strong individual human figures that are standing, but linked with one another in pairs. Without this contrast, the visual experience will tend to be monotonous. Dele Jegede (2002) asserted:

...the placement of the figures flout rules of perspective or physical relationship. It explores the power of positive or negative space and undulations in colour intensity to produce works which are mellowed not only by the finish but also by the silhouetted figures which stand against shades of tempered vermilion. (qtd. by Oransaye 2002, p. 39)

"Romance of the Headload III" also has elements of repetition which emphasize the silhouetted figures on the picture plane and enhance the essence of unity and continuity.

Joe Igbaro (2001) noted:

Motifs have been used sparsely by Wangboje and it would appear that this is because of visual agitations the (sic) bring about when they are combined with the broken patches of colours and effects of chipping associated with the lino technique. (p. 49)

However, Wangboje did not introduce motifs in "Romance of the Headload III" rather, he depended on the superimposition of silhouetted human forms using serigraphy as a printmaking technique as earlier observed. Igbaro (1995), citing Frank Willett observes that this technique is similar to "the dominant pictographic format of the Tassili 'N Ajjar frescos in the Sahara desert pictographic superimpositions that are similar to this technique" (p. 48-49).

Most of the human forms in Wangboje's creative works are gender sensitive and have cultural inclination; it was widely believed that women generally, in most Nigerian cultures, are domesticated and often carry their loads especially from the farm, stream, market place, or as hawkers. The artist was seemingly fascinated by the load-carrying women in different spheres of life within the various communities where he lived and worked as is evident in this particular work of art.

"Romance of the Headload IV" (Fig. 3) (Serigraph; 54cm x 40cm; 1978)

This print shows a very manly lady carrying a heavy load on her head in the form of a big bowl, created in white and yellow. Silhouetted figures are superimposed in this work, with two of the female figures carrying water pots on their heads; another female figure has a child on her back and a bowl on her head. The last of the female figures is carrying a heavy unidentified load. Interestingly, the last two figures are males carrying unidentified loads; one of them also has a bucket in his left hand.

"Romance of the Headload IV" has several connections with the others in the series, in terms of movement and the use of forms, shapes, light and dynamics. Oransaye (2002) citing Jegede, observed:

It is one the most successful of the master's print. In terms of conceptualization, composition and execution, it is undoubtedly one of the most balanced pieces. By placing the yellow ochre within a white spherical band, a contrast is attained which sets the ochre aglow. (p. 46)

The above statement justifies Wangboje's purposeful choice of colours used in the print. While the bowls created in yellow and white colours remain centre of attraction in the making of the print, the six silhouetted figures are prominent because of the white background colours used in the print. The female figure with the load is silhouetted in brown with patches of blue and white which give her prominence. Nics O. Ubogu

(2015) notes a similarity in a creative work by Buraimoh which was evidently influenced by Wangboje:

Buraimoh's creative work was largely influenced by his cultural background and the environment in which he grew up and studied. In [his] bead painting, the artist combines Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba cultures to depict what he refers to as "Romance of the Headload", a portrayal of a young maiden carrying a load on her head, rendered in abstraction form. (p. 26)

Apart from the similarity in title, further evidence of the influence of Wangboje's creativity on Buraimoh is evident in the choice of the abstract form in which both works are rendered.

Evidently, Wangboje's style and techniques are clearly and progressively projected in the development of the "Romance of the Headload" series. Bearing in mind the technical and complex nature of printmaking, his employment of this medium in this creative work greatly enhanced the quality of the series and impacted the development of printmaking and modern art in Nigeria.

Festival of the Gods (Fig. 4) (Etching; 47cm x 32cm; Private Collection)

This print, "Festival of the Gods", highlights the etching process which Patrick Frank (2006) explained thus:

The process of making an etching begins with the preparation of a metal plate with a ground - a protective coating of acid resistant material that covers the copper or zinc. The printmaker then draws easily through the ground with a pointed tool, exposing the metal. Finally, the plate is immersed in acid. Acid "bites" into the plate where the drawing has exposed the metal, making a groove that varies in depth according to the strength of the acid and the length of time the plate is in the acid bath. (p132)

Clearly, "Festival of the Gods" is an artistic work which displays Wangboje's creative prowess. The images depicted in this print have a bearing on the Yoruba culture of worshipping idols. It depicts various art forms portraying the ceremonial worshipping of gods, women carrying carved gods in human forms at different levels, about five men playing musical instruments and playing the talking drum, and what is very likely an Ifa priest, standing in front of the picture plane.

Ifa is a religion among the Yorubas which involves a system of divination and is believed to give worshippers the opportunity to communicate with the spiritual realm. This worship system is overseen by an Ifa priest who mediates between the people and the gods. In "Festival of the Gods" the Ifa priest looks like a dancing masquerade; he is wearing a head gear that makes him appear to be carrying a load on his head; he traditional Yoruba tribal marks and a very fearful facial expression. Also clearly depicted are the priest's eyes, nose, ears and mouth. The Ifa priest is dressed in flowing traditional regalia, decorated with traditional motifs, geometric forms, and lines interwoven vertically and horizontally. In his right hand, he holds a horsewhip tail. The immediate figure before the Ifa priest is playing the talking drum and dancing while the two figures behind the priest have talking drum in their hands.

To the right hand side of the picture is a woman standing and carrying a statue of what seems to be a demi god on her head, supported with her right hand. On the base of the demi god are images of animals. The woman is dressed in a blouse and wrapper, with her left hand on her stomach. The colours used in portraying the woman are light blue, yellow ochre, white and black; black and blue dominate the composition. Behind her is another woman kneeling and facing a different direction with a statue on her head supported with her right hand. The statue, believed to be a goddess, has its right had on its head and its bosom is exposed. At the far end of the composition is another figure, seemingly sitting, carrying a load supported with both hands.

The artistic elements in the composition are quite balanced in line with the following observation by Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Clayton:

Balance is so fundamental to unity that it is impossible to consider the principal of organization without it. At the simplest level, balance implies the gravitational equilibrium of a single mark on a picture plane (2002, p. 55)

The above statement aptly sums up the essence of Wangboje's "Festival of the Gods". The composition is rendered in bold lines as well as silhouetted, vibrant, black and blue flat forms. Also present are patches of white and sienna which make little impact but highlight vital areas of the print. In terms of forms and the use of colour, the entire composition is quite busy. However, in terms of the use of forms, growth, space and movement (all of which endow the work with high aesthetic value) Wangboje's "Festival of the Gods" is a highly impressive work of art.

Although there is a visual illusion of weight at the bottom of the composition, the technique employed is unique, making the work a masterpiece, evidence of Wangboje's understanding of abstract images or symbols and their effectiveness in enhancing the value of works of art.

Conclusion

Solomon Ona Irein Wangboje's "Romance of the Headload" series and "Festival of the Gods" are compositions rendered in similar styles and techniques. Both works project themes inherent in the Nigerian society which promote entrepreneurship, religion and culture, in recognition of their significance and value in relation to the traditional lifestyle of the people.

The artist's techniques are characterized by silhouetted forms that are superimposed in most of his creative work in printmaking. This technique is often emulated by young, upcoming Nigerian artists and artists from various parts of the world.

Wangboje, a master artist, teacher, and Professor of Art Education, has mentored many young artists within the University and in his private studio. He has contributed immensely to the development of modern art in Nigeria and promoted different Nigerian cultures and religion through creative work which cuts across the Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, Edo/Delta and the Igbo culture. He is also an advocate of the development of entrepreneurship among the Nigerian people: women, men, and youth in different spheres of the society.

The "Romance of the Headload" series and "Festival of the Gods" are two successful works by Wangboje that have, indeed, made meaningful contributions to artistic development in Nigeria.

LIST OF FIGURES



Fig. 1: Romance of the Hedload II
(Serigraph 48cm x 32cm 1978)
Source: African Studio



Fig. 2: Romance of the Hedload III
(Linocut 43cm x 33cm Private Collection 1978)
Source: Artist of Nigeria

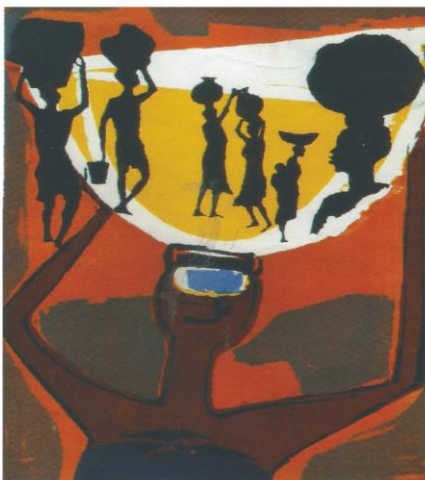


Fig. 3: Romance of the Hedload IV
(Serigraph 54cm x 40cm 1978)
Source: Artists of Nigeria



Fig. 4: Festival of the Gods
Etching 47cm x 32cm Private Collection 1987.
Source: Artists of Nigeria

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