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Kwaku Ofori-Ansah

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# The Growth of African Contemporary Art:

## The Howard Connection

By Kwaku Ofori-Ansah

Way back when the upsurge of cultural nationalism inspired the opening up of new frontiers in African visual arts, Howard University was ready to make significant contribution. Its College of Fine Arts had by then built a firm Pan-African oriented academic and cultural base on which was mounted the effort to promote the study and practice of African contemporary visual arts. There was in place a politically stimulating environment conducive to the nurturing of a new breed of visual artists— young men and women in search of advanced training compatible with the spirit of the cultural renaissance then flowering in Africa.

The university's contribution was in line with its traditional commitment to the development of the Black world. It was a commitment set in place by pioneer advocates of Pan-African cultural orientations, notable among them, Alain Locke, who in the 1920s implored African-American artists to "look to the art of the ancestors" for creative inspiration.<sup>1</sup> By 1923, with the establishment of an autonomous Art Department (pioneered by James V. Herring), a strong foundation was laid for the study of African art. That effort was reinforced by the donation of Locke's collection of authentic African art to the Art Department. Interest was soon extended to the new forms of visual creativity that were taking shape in Africa.

The effort to stimulate the growth of [that] interest in Africa's new art was confronted with mitigating circumstances. In 1950, despite a high prevalence of negative public perception of Africa and of African contemporary art, Mordecai W. Johnson, then the President of Howard University, braved all odds and encouraged the Harmon Foundation to success-

fully mount what was perhaps the first institutionally supported exhibition of African contemporary art in the United States. Works of Ben Enwonwu, a pioneering contemporary artist from Nigeria, were exhibited at Howard University.<sup>2</sup> Although Enwonwu had been acclaimed as an excellent artist in Europe and Africa and had exhibited in major European galleries, the Harmon Foundation found it difficult to obtain an established gallery in the United States to accept the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> Misconceptions and ignorance on the part of the American art establishment thwarted efforts to introduce African art and artists into the American art consciousness. Connoisseurs of art saw African contemporary art "not as a serious creative effort but as a sociological commentary on Africa."<sup>4</sup>

The problem was exacerbated by the absence of adequate social mechanisms for contact between Africans and African-Americans. It was a period in which cultural exchanges between African artists on the continent and African-American artists occurred on a minimal level. Carroll Green recognized the problem when he wrote: "In this day, when most Afro-American artists went abroad, they, like their white counterparts, went to Europe, not, Africa."<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Brown, then the assistant director of the Harmon Foundation, assessed the situation thus: *Africa was to most of our people a far away place of adventure, Safari and mining interest. Only a small handful of cultural organizations in the U.S. were willing to work with the Foundation on Africa's contemporary art even from a sociological base.*<sup>6</sup>

The handful of African-American artists, among them Elton Fax, John Biggers, Larry Eskine Thomas and Louise Jefferson, who in the 1950s visited Africa, hardly made any significant impact on the perception of African-American art within the art circles in Africa. The cul-

tural communication gap posed a significant problem to the promotion of mutual awareness about new artistic developments in the Black world.

The problem, however, was surmountable. In 1960, Forrester B. Washington, then retired dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, set the pace for the intensification of American public interest in African contemporary art. It was his compilation of names of African contemporary artists, published by the Harmon Foundation, that triggered further interest in the visual arts of the emerging nations of Africa. And in 1962, the Harmon Foundation in cooperation with the Phelps-Stokes Fund, mounted an exhibition of nearly 200 pieces of various forms of contemporary visual art from Africa. In the words of Evelyn Brown, "It was a 'broadcast' viewing of African contemporary art. It showed art was alive and that the artist was making a fresh and sincere exploration in the society."<sup>7</sup>

Thus the living art of new Africa struggled to find its way into the hearts and minds of the American public. The way was paved for an increasing interest in the study and patronage of African art. And with the merger of Howard's School of Music and the Department of Art and Drama into a larger College of Fine Arts in 1960, the university became a choice training ground for young African contemporary artists.

Howard's commitment to the development of the Black world was further reinforced by the social currents of the 1960s. The resurgence of Black political and cultural consciousness during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and a corresponding political awakening in Africa generated a quest for the truth about Africa's cultural heritage. And the ensuing quest for African-American cultural heritage reinforced the artistic bond between Africans on the Continent and those in the African diaspora. Indeed, the cultural emancipation that followed opened the way for the development of positive attitudes towards Africa. James Porter, in 1969, wrote:

*Some Afro-American intellectuals have sought nurture in black Africa's incipient cultural upsurge. Fascinated by the glittering values of "negritude" and by the unveiling of a new "African Personality" they began to reassess their allegiance to the dynamic phases of the African Heritage of soul and culture.*<sup>8</sup>

A decade later, Jeff Donaldson, artist and art historian, described it as a period in

which African-American artists of all persuasions were influenced by "the expanded knowledge and understanding of Africa revealed by Black studies programs. Cultural Nationalism, Pan-African hegemony and Black unity became household, sound and studio words."<sup>9</sup>

In the spirit of this cultural revolution, Howard's College of Fine Arts provided the intellectual leadership for the reinterpretation and reaffirmation of the cultural unity among all African peoples. The liberating force inspired new ener-

scholars and practicing artists were appointed to the faculty. One of them, Kojo Fosu, a Ghanaian culturalist, became instrumental in giving the African Art History Program a new direction and new emphasis. The intensity of the program was further heightened by the presence on the faculty of the internationally acclaimed contemporary African artist, Skunder Boghassian of Ethiopia. His artistic philosophy and unique stylistic approach provided a practical evidence of the nature and direction of Africa's new visual arts.

art institutions in Africa did not have their own galleries to support the study of African art. Three significant examples can be cited:

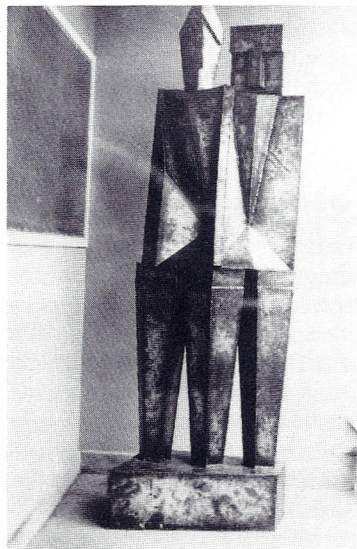
In Ghana, the Art Department of the Specialist Training College, one of the pioneering art teachers colleges in Africa, did not, (and still does not) own a gallery devoted to the study of African art. In its curriculum, the study of traditional African art was subordinated to a course on world art history.

Similarly, the College of Fine Arts of Ghana's prestigious University of Science and Technology, one of the oldest art institutions in Africa did not, (and still does not) have a permanent collection of authentic traditional African art to support any meaningful study of the subject.

In Nigeria, it was not until 1982 that the College of Fine Arts of Ahmadu Bello University (also a leading art institution) established its first gallery of African art. As for the study of contemporary visual arts from the Black world, it was almost non-existent in most art institutions in Africa.

With the absence of Pan-African oriented cultural education programs in their own institutions, many young African contemporary artists began to look beyond the borders of their countries for advanced training—particularly those artists who "had begun to show a critical sense of appreciation for the universal cultural links of Africans and a precise direction of African artistic thought."<sup>12</sup> For many such artists, the United States provided a more stimulating academic and cultural environment. Instead of Britain's Slade School of Art, Royal College of Art, or Goldsmith College of Art, they (especially those from English-speaking countries) headed for the U.S. where they found sources from which to search for artistic ideals compatible with the new spirit of cultural nationalism then flowering in Africa. And Howard University provided a fertile soil for the professional growth they were pursuing.

The University provided an environment that opened lines of communication among African artists on the continent and those in the African diaspora. In 1977, Howard hosted one of the largest and the most comprehensive exhibitions of African contemporary art ever held in the U.S. in recent times. Works of 47 outstanding artists from 15 African countries were exhibited at the gallery of the College of Fine Arts. The show rep-



**Brotherhood**  
— Agbo Folarin



**Portrait of Chief Delano**  
— Agbo Folarin

gies and artistic values. Staffed by a new crop of lecturers, technically skillful and politically aware, the Department of Art became a fertile ground for the nurturing of an artistic philosophy and an academic program distinctly Pan-African in substance yet universal in quality. The upsurge of African-American reaffirmation of the African heritage became, as a necessity, overtly manifested in the departments's academic and studio programs.

Indeed, Howard University was living up to its reputation as "the center radiating the special influence of leadership and enlightenment which a culturally organized people needs."<sup>10</sup> The process was given a new dimension when Jeff Donaldson became chairman of the Department of Art in the early 1970s. With support from Vada E. Butcher, then the dean of the College of Fine Arts, Donaldson intensified the Pan-African tone of the department's studio and academic programs. The African Art History program was strengthened and its scope widened to reflect changing social circumstances in the Black world. Through Donaldson's initiative, African

It was a period in which Howard reinforced its role as the facilitator and the intellectual source for the study of the new creative arts in the Black world. Thus the Department of Art became a pacesetter in the propagation of an artistic philosophy that became known as "Afrocentric" or more aptly termed "TransAfrican Art".<sup>11</sup> A practical manifestation of this artistic affinity with Africa became evident within the stylistic approaches of faculty members of the Department of Art.

The academic environment which Howard provided was not available in most art institutions in Africa. Though significant curriculum changes were made in many art institutions during the post-independence period, much was left to be done. It was a period when most African countries were going through a post-independence cultural withdrawal syndrome. The cultural education programs inherited from the colonial past still remained in their European molds and lacked a distinct African flavor. The study of African traditional art was not given serious attention. As a result, most

resented a true reflection of Howard's commitment to the promotion of the study and practice of African visual arts — past and present. It is this commitment that manifests itself in the hospitality often extended to African contemporary artists who come to Howard in search of advanced skills and knowledge.

Within a period of a little over a decade (from the late 1960s to the early 1980s) scores of contemporary artists from various African countries have successfully completed degree courses at Howard. They came from Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Zaire and Sierra Leone.

The unique training that Howard offered these young artists spurred them on to greater achievements in their respective areas. While some are now zealously pursuing their artistic careers abroad, others have assumed responsible positions in their home countries where they are infusing into the artistic consciousness of their societies a new spirit of creative expression. Their performance in their respective endeavors bears testimony to the unique cultural and academic experience Howard offered these young artists and continues to provide others who continue to come for professional advancement. The depth of that experience was eloquently expressed by [Ghanaian] Kwabena Ampofo-Anti, a 1982 (MFA) graduate:

[. . . I can say with conviction that when I entered Howard University interacting with the faculty began to have a very positive effect on me.] My presence at Howard allowed me an understanding which led to unequivocal definitions of my artistic principles. At Howard, I acquired a sensibility which emphasized an in-depth understanding of the origins and parameters of African culture.<sup>13</sup>

His statement, indeed, is an apt summary of the experiences of other African contemporary artists who received advanced training at Howard.

The works of some of these Howard-trained artists are presented and discussed here. While their individual creative expressions do not reflect a monolithic stylistic approach, these artists have something in common: A deeper understanding and respect for their rich African cultural heritage, and the ability to draw from it the inspiration for creative visual expressions. Ola M. Oloidi, a painter/art historian from Nigeria, for example, shows a notable transition from his earlier rigid representational style and mundane subject matter to a more flexible and expressive

style that depicts the richness of African culture and tradition. The same can be said of Alex Atta-Safo, a Ghanaian sculptor whose pre-Howard illustrative and imitative style gave way to a more expressive carving technique and subject matter more in tune with his traditional African social thought.

Exemplifying Oloidi's stylistic transition is his "Yoruba Festival" which still adorns the hallway of the College of Fine Arts. In this oil painting (which reflects the theme of his master's degree thesis), Oloidi skillfully uses Yoruba traditional color and figurative symbolism in projecting the serenity of the spiritual aspects of Yoruba ceremonies and at the same time succeeds in portraying the gaiety of the social aspects. This effect is achieved by an impressionistic application of various tones of blues and greens contrasted with patches of reds.

Working around a theme similar to Oloidi's, but with a different medium, Atta-Safo, interprets in wood the essence of African womanhood as enshrined in the unwritten code of social conduct in his traditional Akan society. With an improved carving technique acquired at Howard, Atta-Safo skillfully utilizes the delightful textures of wood grain as a design element. The message of this work "African Woman in Harmony," however, transcends aesthetic consideration.

The pre-Howard styles of Wosene Kosrof and Tesfaye Tessema were evidently inspired by their Ethiopian cultural heritage and history. Their presence at Howard, however, offered them the chance to step beyond the confines of their respective ethnic heritages and expand the parameters of their creative expressions.

Acclaimed as a master of design, Kosrof succeeds in blending his experiences in his traditional Ethiopian social setting with elements of his contemporary environment. Concepts and visual images from ancient Ethiopian calligraphy and his Copto-Christian artistic tradition are skillfully intermixed with such contemporary African-American cultural patterns as the rhythms of jazz. He follows in the footsteps of such earlier Sudanese masters as Ahmed Shibrian and Ibrahim Salahi (whose masterly use of Arabic calligraphy and geometric and floral patterns is well acclaimed) and is inspired by the style of his artistic mentor Skunder Boghassian. Kosrof conscientiously draws on traditional Geez and Ahmaric calligraphy to produce large-scale and miniature compositions on both canvas and goatskin. With this skillful blend of traditional and modern visual imagery,

he creates abstract illusions of depth with color and design. Kosrof considers himself having gone through a significant stylistic transition from a period in which he used the Geez and Ahmaric calligraphy as part of an overall design, as evidenced by his 1980 "Black Poem," to his present style in which the calligraphy becomes more of a narrative and a poetic component of his creation, as exemplified by his "The Train."

Kosrof, who currently lives in Washington, D.C., continues to work and exhibit both in the U.S. and other countries. His numerous exhibitions and works in international collections (National Museum of Ethiopia, Library of Congress, Rockefeller Collection) bear testimony to his reputation as an internationally acclaimed African contemporary artist whose visual messages have attracted universal acceptance.

Tesfaye Tessema, like his colleague Kosrof, also came to Howard with a distinct style of expression rooted in his Ethiopian artistic tradition. His style was inspired by the Copto-Byzantine design traditions that characterized illuminated manuscripts of medieval Ethiopia. In his "Final Days" and "Prophet," painted in 1972, Tessema combines decorative abstract patterns with an impressive display of color imagery. An array of geometric shapes of varied sizes, forms and shapes are intermingled with abstracted human images rendered in various hues and tones of vibrant colors. Through this powerful imagery, Tessema transmits visual messages that are philosophical in content yet aesthetically remarkable. The artistic splendor of the ancient Axum civilization and 15th century Ethiopian rock-hewn churches continue to provide him with an abundant source of creative inspiration, [and philosophical thought.]. For him, the Howard experience provided an impetus for further exploration into his rich African cultural heritage. He says, "Howard opened my eyes and enhanced my consciousness about the depth and the richness of the roots of my art and the beauty of its branches."<sup>14</sup>

Tessema has gone through a significant stylistic transition since his graduation from Howard. His 1973 "The Ancestors" (which still adorns the corridors of Howard's College of Fine Arts) exemplifies his earlier style. His new style reflects a marriage between his traditional African artistic values and his current social experiences in an urban setting. He now lives and works in Washington, D.C. His "Famine," which in 1978 attracted a favorable review in the *Washington Post*,

and his "The God", painted in 1979, exemplify his present style and a shift from a heavy reliance on Copto-Byzantine images.

Imbued with the spirit of a Pan-African cultural consciousness, Tessema joined a team of muralists in using the architectural decorative symbolism of the Ndebele people of Southern Africa to give a unique African touch to the courtyard walls of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. With his outstanding artistic gift, he helps to bring African contemporary art closer to the American people.

Kwabena Ampofo-Anti's creative expressions have for a long time been identified with his Akan cultural heritage of Ghana. Before coming to Howard, he had a strong desire to develop an artistic style and content that would reflect a spiritual alliance with his African cultural past. The Howard program helped expand his artistic horizon and fulfill his goal. At Howard, he studied the interrelationship between ancient Egyptian artistic philosophy and that of other African societies. As an aspect of his master's degree thesis, he investigated the structural qualities and philosophical relations of the Akan "Akuaba" (fertility symbol) and the ancient Egyptian "Ankh" (symbol of life). This is represented by his three dimensional painting "Ankhuaba". The outcome of his study gave him a historical basis for his creative endeavor—a symbolic relationship between the Ankh and the Akuaba—a relationship that is very much evident in his current works.

Agbo Folarin, a versatile Nigerian painter/sculptor, demonstrates a deep respect and understanding of his Yoruba culture and traditional values. Before coming to Howard, Folarin had scored a remarkable artistic achievement in his home country. However, he was in search of something that transcends technical proficiency. At Howard, he was ushered into an academic and cultural environment that helped him broaden his artistic horizon. His resolute conviction about the sophistication of Africa's artistic heritage was further strengthened by his experiences in the U.S., particularly at Howard.

Folarin, in his works, combines the sculptural medium with painting characteristics and skillfully portrays traditional Yoruba religious and mythological imagery with modern materials and techniques. His interest in architectural and environmental sculpture

is very much evident in his creative expressions.

The professional development and stylistic characteristics of these Howard-trained African artists, though not monolithic, are bound together by a common thread. While they project different cultural experiences into their respective stylistic approaches, together they weave an artistic fabric that reflects distinct colors and texture that are characteristically Pan-African.

Indeed, the growth of African contemporary art would continue to show an evidence of Howard's nurturing—a nurturing rooted in the university's natural bond with Africa and in its traditional commitment to the development of the Black world. President James E. Cheek emphasized the essence of this commitment when he wrote:

... We see Howard as the crucible to formulate and bring creative and imaginative processes to bear on the problems of cities, the problems of human nations, the problems of educational disadvantage, the problems of economic insufficiency, the problems of inadequate health care, and the problems related to overcoming the lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Black Americans and Black people throughout the world.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, such "creative and imaginative processes" were brought to bear on the professional advancement of the young African contemporary artists who trained at Howard. The remarkable contribution they are making to the development of African modern art, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, owes a great deal to Howard's past and present nurturing. Today, African contemporary art has gained a respectable image in the U.S. In homes, offices, public buildings, major museums and galleries, African modern art is placed alongside the best from elsewhere. When, in 1950, President Mordecai W. Johnson braved all odds and supported the Harmon Foundation to mount at Howard University the first African contemporary art exhibition in the U.S., an invaluable service was done not only to the development of Pan-African cultural consciousness but also to the advancement of international cultural understanding. □

See color art on Cover 2.

Kwaku Ofori-Ansah, Ed.D. [MFA-Howard 1975] is a lecturer and graphic designer.

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