works by enwonwu & other moderns

michael graham-stewart 2016
This publication, *11*, includes work by a series of significant 20th-century artists from across Sub-Saharan Africa: Ben Enwonwu, Kalifala Sidibé, Kofi Antubam, Malangatana Ngwenya, Sam Ntiro, and Thomas Mukarobgwa. While their works show considerable diversity in terms of style, their life stories include interesting points of commonality.

All had work shown outside Africa, and thus helped to raise awareness of African art beyond the continent. All but Sidibé, who died tragically young, became important artists within their respective countries, participating in the development of new national identities as the European powers that had dominated Africa for so long began to atrophy, to depart, and to be ejected.

The eleven works in this publication represent rich documents. They contain evidence of enduring cultural and artistic traditions, traces of colonial interference, and moments of fruitful cross-pollination. Above all, they testify to the inventiveness and vitality of their makers – individuals whose distinctive sensibilities served to texture the art of the modern era, and to shape the art of the present.
Benedict ‘Ben’ Chukwukadibia Enwonwu is perhaps the best known and most important African artist of the 20th century. Born into a noble Igbo family in the river city of Onitsha, he studied art at the Ibadan and Umuahia Government Colleges under Kenneth C. Murray, who became an important mentor, exhibiting Enwonwu’s work at the Zwemmer Gallery in London in 1937.

In the early 1940s, Enwonwu was employed as art master at a number of government educational institutions. In 1944, he travelled to the United Kingdom, attending the prestigious Goldsmiths’ College, University of London, for a short time. He subsequently studied at Ruskin College, University of Oxford, from 1944 to 1946, and took a First from the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, in 1948.

In the early 1950s, he exhibited widely, not only in Nigeria, but also in the United States, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe. Following a visit to Nigeria in 1956, Queen Elizabeth II commissioned and sat for a portrait bust, which was unveiled the following year at an exhibition of the Royal Society of British Artists. The Nigerian Government called on him to provide many works, both sculpted and painted.

A prolific and ever-experimenting artist, Enwonwu helped not only to bring the artistic traditions of Africa and the West closer together, but also to reinforce Nigerian identity in a period of great transformation. As Enwonwu scholar Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbiechie has observed, ‘He was caught up in the euphoria of national independence and envisaged a national culture based on a synthesis of indigenous aesthetics and modern art.’
The painting is one of a series of Niger River landscapes Enwonwu did for quite a while in his professional career... He was initially working on this as part of his general propensity towards landscapes. They are specific for their focus on the river, and when the civil war started, he made many of them, and the paintings got more violent.
2.

**ben enwonwu**

*Alusi Ogugu (Vision)*

1943

watercolour on paper

228mm × 566mm

Title inscribed on label on backboard, also with stamped receipt (dated 14 January 1944) detailing sale of painting.
3.

**ben enwonwu**

*Dancers*

c. 1950s

oil on canvas

910 x 180mm

provenance:

Gallery 43, London

4.

**ben enwonwu**

*Dancers*

c. 1950s

oil on canvas

910 x 180mm

provenance:

Gallery 43, London
5. **ben enwonwu**

*Dance of Onitsha – Called Ogulugu*

1949

ink and watercolour on paper

550 x 365mm

provenance: Bernard Fagg

Title inscribed on backboard. Also inscribed ‘Men impersonating a Mother Goddess and her daughters. The whole dance includes drummers, flutes + various masqueraders. This section is called “ITU ONYA” – the flute player calls the daughter goddesses in turn, paying compliments to them – they in turn as each is called leap onto the stage + dance gracefully, to the flute. The act finishes with the players “creeping” out –’
Kalifala Sidibé was a self-taught painter, who lived in the Malian village of Kankan. It is not known how his work came to be exhibited in Europe, but between 1929 and 1931, it featured in shows at prominent galleries there, including the Galerie Georges Bernheim in Paris, the Neue Gallerie in Vienna, Gummesons Konsthall in Stockholm, and the Galerie Alfred Flechtheim in Berlin.

Sidibé’s paintings were discussed and praised by prominent critics of the period. An extensive, illustrated review by French ethnographer and surrealist author Michel Leiris appeared in Documents 6 (1929), while Swiss modernist architect Le Corbusier authored an essay included in the catalogues for the Stockholm and Berlin shows, noting, ‘It seems he is responding to distant truths that are over the heads of all the academies.’

Though at least 42 paintings by Sidibé must have existed at some point (this number having been exhibited in Stockholm), Malian Women, is one of very few examples known extant – a consequence of the artist’s early death in 1930, and perhaps also of the fact that he signed his works in Arabic, meaning they may have more easily missed the attention of later generations.
The son of an Asante chief, Kofi Antubam grew up in an environment steeped in Akan culture. His talent for art eventually enabled him to study at the prestigious Achimota College in Accra, where he would later serve as art master. From 1948 to 1950, he studied at Goldsmiths’ College, during which time, he produced the remarkably evocative ink sketch *Akan Court Horn Players Rehearse*.

Following independence in 1957, Antubam was called on to create state art for Ghana. Among his works are the throne-like Seat of State, the Ghana Mace, and a number of painted and carved murals for public buildings. Antubam thus played an important role in the formation of Ghanian national identity. In his book *Ghana’s Heritage of Culture* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1963), the artist wrote:

... the Africanness in the new African personality of the twentieth century cannot be expected to remain what it was from creation. It will have to be a new personality or distinctive identity which should be neither Eastern nor Western and yet a growth in the presence of both with its roots deeply entrenched in the soil of the indigenous past of Africa.

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**kofi antubam**

*Akra Court Horn Players Rehearse*

1949
ink and wash on paper
280mm x 380mm
provenance: Ernest Ohly

Title inscribed verso. Also inscribed ‘(Present) from Kofi Antubam to Mr. Ohly, Berkeley Gallery, 20 Davies Street, London, W.1.’
Better known mononymously as Malangatana, Valente Malangatana Ngwenya was one of Mozambique’s best known artists. A chance encounter as a young man with Augusto Cabral, a biologist and amateur painter, introduced him to painting. In the 1950s, he began taking night classes at the Núcleo de Arte, an art college dedicated to encouraging young black artists, and in late 1959, he found a sponsor in modernist architect Pancho Guedes.

Malangatana had his first solo exhibition in 1961. Included was his Juízo Final (‘Last Judgment’), a commentary on Portuguese oppression that showed the characteristics of much of his later art: political themes, exaggeration of facial expressions and body forms, and nightmarish invented creatures. The strength of Malangatana’s art was soon noticed, with noted proponent of African art Ulli Beier praising the artist’s great originality.

Throughout his life, Malangatana was a staunch advocate of Mozambican independence, being a long-time member of the liberation front, FRELIMO. In 1964, he was detained by the Portuguese secret police and sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment. In 1971, he travelled to Portugal, where he studied ceramics and printmaking. During his stay, the Portuguese regime collapsed, and he returned to Mozambique in time to witness independence in 1975.

However, civil war soon broke out. The conflict saw over a million people die of violence or starvation. Even after peace was achieved in the early 1990s, Malangatana’s art retained fearsome elements. Asked about these by a child in the 2007 documentary, Ngwenya, the Crocodile, the artist noted, ‘They are the things that appear to me here in my head. Some of these things I dream. And then I draw. It’s what I think, what comes to me.’
8. *malangatana ngwenya*

*Beira*

1970

ink on paper

430 x 305mm
9.
malangatana ngwenya

*Untitled*

1975
ink on card
694 x 503mm
Born in present-day Tanzania, Sam Joseph Ntiro moved to Uganda in 1944 to attend Makerere College (now University). Following graduation, he was appointed assistant to the founder of the College’s art school, Margaret Trowell, who would remain a significant influence on Ntiro and his art. From 1952, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art. In 1955, he exhibited at the Piccadilly Gallery, London, selling all but one of his 32 pictures.

Ntiro visited the United States on a Carnegie Corporation grant in 1960. He showed at the Merton D. Simpson Gallery in New York, and one of his paintings was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. From 1961 to 1964, he held the position of Tanganyikan High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He later held various government and academic positions, helping to found an arts department at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1973.

Ntiro’s early work frequently concentrates on bible scenes, as in his major painting, *Agony in the Garden*. The work is very much in-keeping with Trowell’s ideas about art, fusing African and Christian beliefs and imagery. While Ntiro’s later work shifted to concentrate on more everyday themes, he continued to eschew both traditional perspective and more radical modernist modes, in favour of his own simplified and powerful style.
Thomas Mukarobgwka worked for many years at what is now the National Gallery of Zimbabwe. He was an original member of an unofficial art school set up in the basement of the Gallery by Frank McEwen, the institution’s founding director, who was anxious to foster local art. Mukarobgwka was to become the best known painter of the so-called ‘Workshop School’.

Although McEwen encouraged his ‘students’ to focus on African examples, he described Mukarobgwka’s work as ‘Afro-German Expressionism’. The artist’s boldly-coloured painting, *When you live very good in the world you will be taken up to heaven when you die*, seems to incorporate abstract as well as expressionist elements, especially in the coral-like forms that frame the ascending central figure.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York appears to have recognised Mukarobgwka’s distinctly modernist flavour. The institution acquired four of his works in 1963, making him one of the first African artists to be represented in the collection. Mukarobgwka moved into sculpture in the 1960s, following the example of a number of his peers. He only returned to painting towards the end of his life.


ben enwonwu
Alusi Ogugu (Vision)
(label)

rear endpapers
malangatana
ngwenya
Untitled (detail)

back cover
ben enwonwu
Dancers (detail)

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