

works by enwonwu  
& other moderns

**michael graham-stewart** 2016

## introduction

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.

### **kofi antubam**

*Akan Court Horn Players*  
Rehearse (detail)

cover

### **ben enwonwu**

*Dancers* (detail)

endpapers

### **sam ntiro**

*Agony in the Garden*  
(detail)

frontispiece

### **kalifala sidibé**

*Malian women* (detail)



## ben enwonwu

1917–1994

Nigeria

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 Ogbechie 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.’









BEN ENIKONWU



Sylvester Ogbechie has noted of this work:

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.

I.

**ben enwonwu**

*Niger River*

1965

oil on canvas

530 x 965mm



2.

**ben enwonwu**

*Alusi Ogu (Vision)*

1943

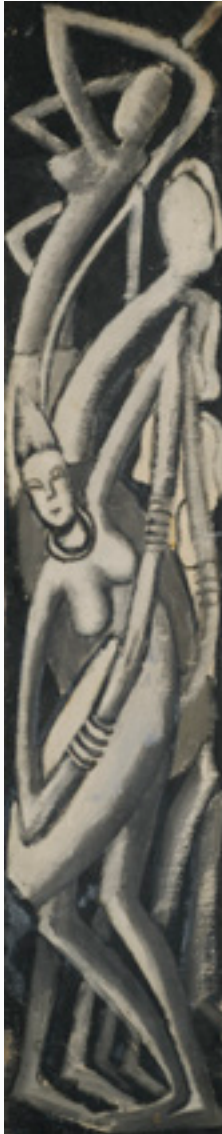
watercolour on paper  
228mm x 566mm

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





BEN-GHAST-NWONWU  
1943



3.

**ben enwonwu**

*Dancers*

c. 1950s

oil on canvas

910 × 180mm

provenance:

Gallery 43, London

4.

**ben enwonwu**

*Dancers*

c. 1950s

oil on canvas

910 × 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 –'







Ed. K. W. O. W. H.



کار قیل





## kalifala sidibé

c. 1900–1930

Mali

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.

6.

**kalifala sidibé**

*Malian women*

c. 1929

oil on linen

695 x 660mm



## kofi antubam

1922–1964

Ghana

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 Ghanaian 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.

7.

### kofi antubam

*Akan Court Horn Players  
Rehearse*

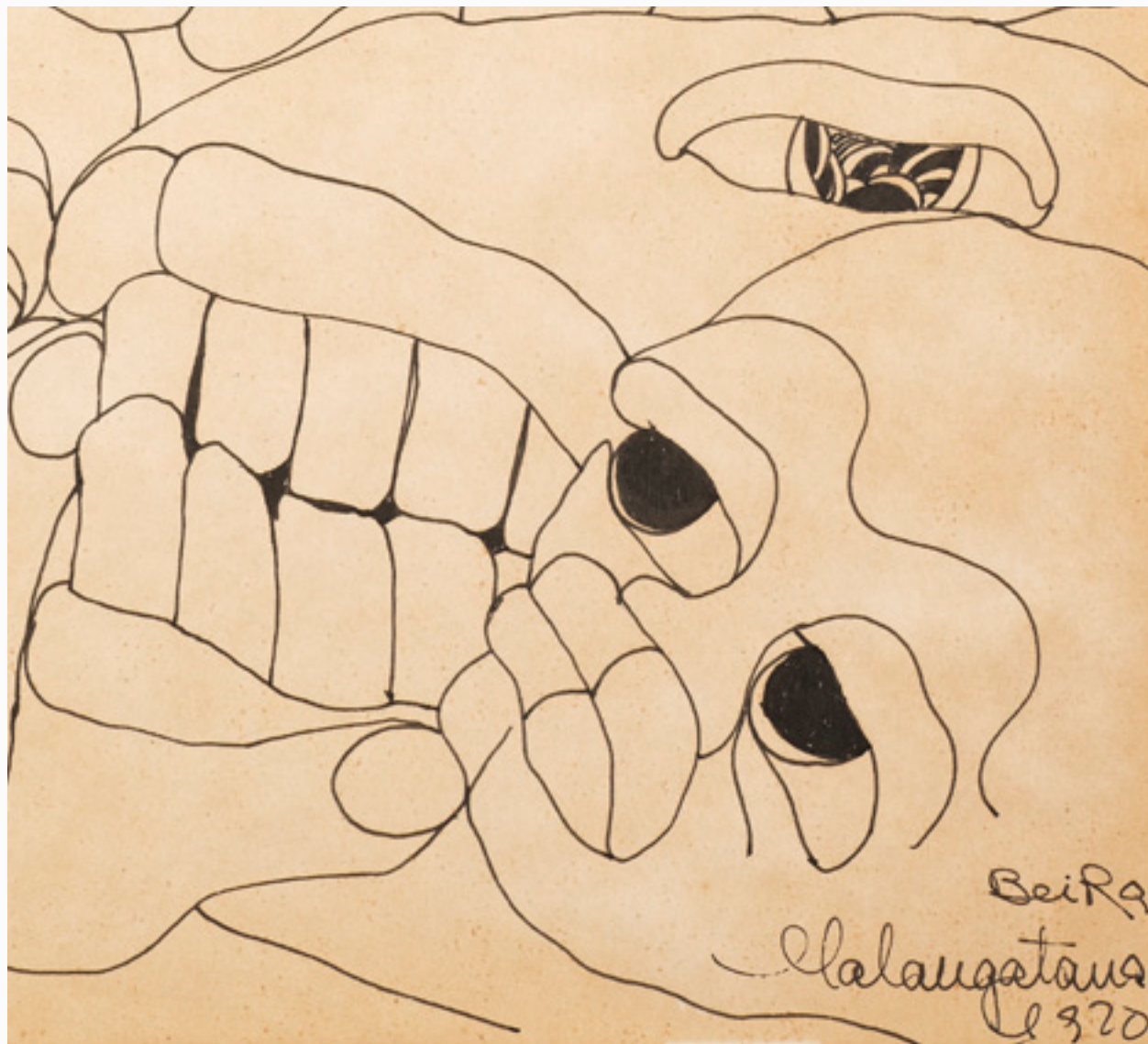
1949

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.'







## malangatana ngwenya

1936–2011

Mozambique

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



## sam ntiro

1923–1993

Tanzania

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.

10.

### sam ntiro

*Agony in the Garden*

c. 1950

oil on canvas

410 x 505mm

provenance: David Reid

exhibited: *Seven Stories*

*About Modern Art in*

*Africa*, Whitechapel,

London, 1995







## thomas mukarobgwa

1924–1999

Zimbabwe

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. Mukarobgwa 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 Mukarobgwa'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 Mukarobgwa'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. Mukarobgwa 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.

11.

### thomas mukarobgwa

*When you live very good  
in the world you will  
be taken up to heaven  
when you die*

1963  
oil on board  
915 x 760mm





## references

Deliss, Clémentine. 1995. *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*. London: Whitechapel.

Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield. 1999. *Contemporary African Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Kennedy, Jean. 1992. *New Currents, Ancient Rivers: Contemporary African Artists in a Generation of Change*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Labi, Kwame Amoah. 2013. 'Afro-Ghanaian Influences in Ghanaian Paintings'. *Journal of Art Historiography* 9.

Lentz, Carola. 2008. 'Travelling Emblems of Power: The Ghanaian "Seat of State"'. Working paper, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz.

Ogbechie, Sylvester Okwunodu. 2008. *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Okeke-Agulu, Chika. 2015. *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Stevenson, Michael, and Joost Bosland. 2008. *'Take Your Road and Travel Along': The Advent of the Modern Black Painter in Africa*. Cape Town / London: Michael Stevenson, Michael Graham-Stewart & Johans Borman.



**ben enwonwu**

*Alusi Ogugu (Vision)*  
(label)

rear endpapers

**malangatana**  
**ngwenya**

*Untitled (detail)*

back cover

**ben enwonwu**

*Dancers (detail)*

**michael graham-stewart**

38 Old Bond St  
London W1S 4QW  
m@mgsart.net

Text and design by Francis McWhannell.

