

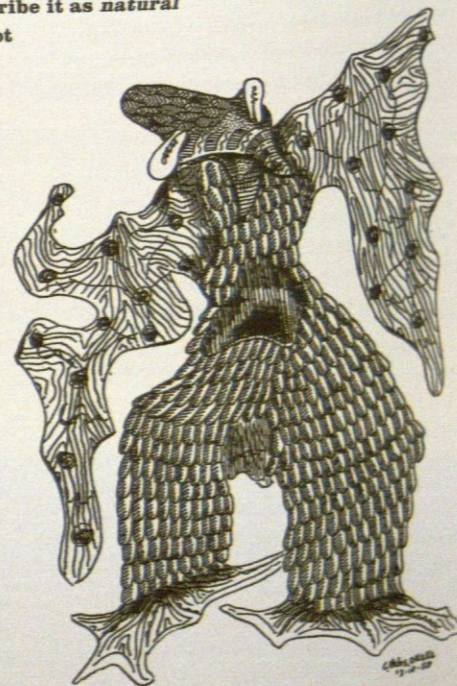
Natural Synthesis

Uche Okeke

Zaria, 1960

*Okolobia's sons shall learn to live
from father's failing;
blending diverse culture types,
the cream of native kind
adaptable alien type;
the dawn of an age -
the season of salvation.*

The artist is essentially an individual working within a particular social background and guided by the philosophy of life of his society. I do not agree with those who advocate international art philosophy; I disagree with those who live in Africa and ape European artists. Future generations of Africans will scorn their efforts. Our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake. That



Uche Okeke
Nza the Smart
1958
Pen and ink
29.5 x 25 cm

Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past. Our new nation places huge responsibilities upon men and women in all walks of life and places, much heavier burden on the shoulders of contemporary artists. I have strong belief that with dedication of our very beings to the cause of art and with hard work, we shall finally triumph. But the time of triumph is not near, for it demands great change of mind and attitude toward cultural and social problems that beset our entire continent today. The very fabric of our social life is deeply affected by this inevitable change. Therefore the great work of building up new art culture for a new society in the second half of this century must be tackled by us in a very realistic manner.

This is our age of enquiries and reassessment of our cultural values. This is our renaissance era! In our quest for truth we must be firm, confident and joyful because of our newly won freedom. We must not allow others to think for us in our artistic life, because art is life itself and our physical and spiritual experiences of the world. It is our work as artists to select and render in pictorial or plastic media our reactions to objects and events. The art of creation is not merely physical, it is also a solemn act. In our old special order the artist had a very important function to perform. Religious and social problems were masterly resolved by him with equal religious ardour. The artist was a special member of his community and in places performed priestly functions because his noble act of creation was looked upon as inspired.

Nigeria needs a virile school of art with new philosophy of the new age - our renaissance period. Whether our African writers call the new realisation Negritude, or our politicians talk about the African Personality, they both stand for the awareness and yearning for freedom of black people all over the world. Contemporary Nigerian artists could and should champion the cause of this movement. With great humility I beg to quote part of my verse, *Okolobia*, which essayed to resolve our present social and cultural chaos. The key work is synthesis, and I am often tempted to describe it as *natural synthesis*, for it should be unconscious not forced.

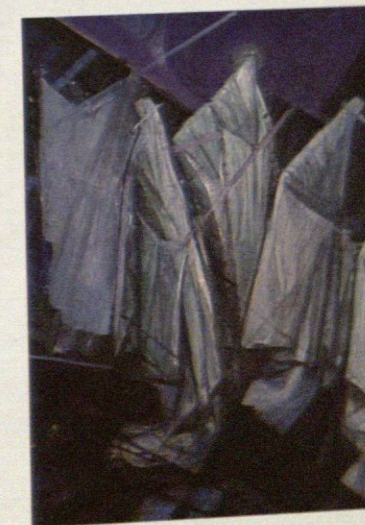


Uche Okeke
Fabled Brute
1959/60
From the collection
of Ulli Beier

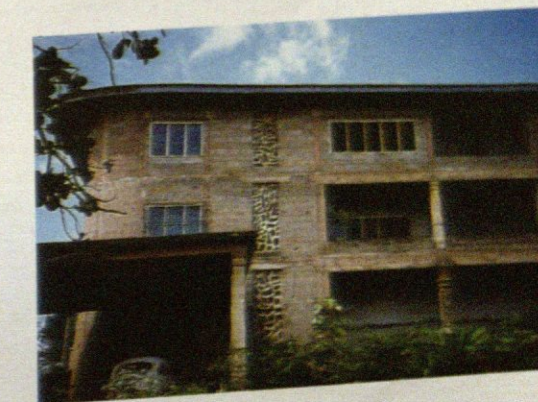
the greatest works of art ever fashioned by men were for their religious beliefs go a long way to prove that functionality could constitute the base line of most rewarding creative experience.

Western art today is generally in confusion. Most of the artists have failed to realise the artists' mission to mankind. Their art has ceased to be human. The machine, symbol of science, material wealth and of the space age has since been enthroned. What form of feelings, human feelings, can void space inspire in a machine artist? It is equally futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order. Culture lives by change. Today's social problems are different from yesterday's, and we shall be doing grave disservice to Africa and mankind by living in our fathers' achievements. For this is like living in an entirely alien cultural background.

Yusuf Grillo
Untitled



Demas Nwoko
Asele Institute,
Anambra State,
Nigeria, designed for
Uche Okeke



It is about a year ago, on 9 October 1958, that the inaugural meeting of the Art Society was held. Like all great organisations, its inception was as humble as it was stormy. And we, the inaugurators, breasted it all with indomitable courage, striving with all our might to have the Society well grounded, not minding the many and varied obstacles put in our way. In the face of all these initial difficulties I think and hope the Society will grow from strength to strength, preparing the way for what may yet be a great organisation of national significance.

Our discussions on art generally and on our culture, and our great devotion to the study of African art idioms and art forms, are all of immense value to us and have opened up new worlds of thought to us all. We now are aware of the fact that our art should be based on our past.



Growth of an Idea Uche Okeke

Zaria, 1959

Top left: Mbari Artists' and Writers' Club, Enugu, 1964.
Top right: members of the Zaria Art Society, 1960. Left to right, front row: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Simon Okeke, Uche Okeke; back row: Odechukwu Odita, Demas Nwoko, Oseloka Osadebe.
Bottom left: Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya at work in Lagos in preparation for the 1960 Independence Exhibition.
Bottom right: at the Symposium on Contemporary Nigerian Art, Continuing Education Centre, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1976.

present and possibly on our future ways of life in this country. In all, we are fully aware of our responsibilities as Nigerian artists. We know that art is a fallow field in this country and one that has unfortunately suffered from the hands of the shortsighted schemers of our inadequate educational system. The unfortunate position into which we are thrown calls for hard work, and we have right from the beginning dedicated ourselves - our very beings - to champion the cause of art in Nigeria and, indeed, in Africa. In our difficult work of building up truly modern African art to be cherished and appreciated for its own sake, not only for its functional values, we are inspired

by the struggle of such modern Mexican artists as Orozco and his compatriots. We must fight to free ourselves from mirroring foreign culture. This great work demands willpower, originality and, above all, love for our fatherland. We must have our own school of art independent of European and Oriental schools, but drawing as much as possible from what we consider in our clear judgement to be the cream of these influences, and wedding them to our native art culture. We shall be found out if we shirk the great responsibility of working out this experiment to the best of our ability.

It would appear as if the Society achieved nothing during its first year of existence. I personally hold the view that much was accomplished. The Society received wide recognition, governmental and otherwise; a number of the Society's members were recipients of prizes in art competitions - for example, the Gotstchalk Textile competition and the Esso National Art Competition for Independence Calendar; two member of the group held successful art shows in Jos Museum and at Ughelli; every member, I hope, carried art home to the people by explaining its importance to societies both old and new. Much research work was done by individual members and these were of immense benefit to us all. The Society was able to make plans for the exhibition of works of members and for the publication of its first magazine. All these and others I cannot now enumerate are achievements we must not overlook.

I am particularly happy about the spirit of comradeship which marks out our society - a spirit born of mutual trust and understanding of our common interest. I need not belabour you with sermons on the untiring efforts of executive members who spared time and labour for the general good. It is my wish that we continue wisely; that we hold fast to our noble ideas and ideals; that we get even closer together, pooling our experiences and financial resources together to attain our golden goal. In spite of financial setbacks, I am fully convinced that we shall rise supreme above this situation - we shall rise if we have the will and courage to dare.

The future, we must persuade ourselves to believe, is bright - it is not bleak. We have no reason to think otherwise, more so when national independence is fast coming. In future years, after October 1960, our firmament shall broaden. Foreign visitors and



Bruce Onobrakpeya
1961
Painting
Zaria

enlightened Nigerians alike shall increasingly wish to study and appreciate contemporary Nigerian art. We must not live always in the past - exhibiting Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Benin and so on, glorifying the past to the detriment of the future. We should love the past, if we may, and get our inspirations from it. Our present efforts shall, in the process of years, be looked back to as of the past.

We shall strive to play our parts creditably in the Nigeria Exhibition to be organised by the Federal Government to coincide with the independence celebrations next year. We shall have our first art show and work together to produce the first number of our society's magazine. When we put our thoughts into action and produce effects, when we toil for the cause of art, we must realise that we are making history. We must therefore have faith and trust in our ability to search for knowledge and truth.

Jimo Akolo
Horseman
1954
Zaria

