

# VISUAL ART IN THE CHURCH: THE ARTIST AS A CO-PREACHER

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### **Abstract**

From medieval times through (the renaissance to the present, no work of art with a Christian theme in a church setting has just been there only for aesthetic purpose. The art work serves as a sermon. For such a work speaks to people, transmitting the messages that are encoded in it. But here in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, the church has not really appreciated the artist for the impact these messages have had on the faithful. The objective of this paper is to make the church or the congregation sees such an artist as a co-preacher. A few works of art have been used as a case-study to show their importance in the church. From the works discussed, it becomes obvious that any artist of such nature is truly a co-preacher.

### **Introduction**

The ecclesiastical authority of the church from the medieval times through the renaissance to the present day owes much to the paintings and sculptures of artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci (1452 - 1519), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 - 1564), Raphael Sanzio (1483 - 1520), Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598- 1680) and Rambrandt Van Rijn (1606- 1669) and a host of other biblical illustrators.

These works of art were imbued with power to hold human thoughts in Christian belief (Menyah, 2001). They are theatrical in nature. According to Ugiomoh (1986), their essence is to transport the faithful or worshippers who were gathered in the church or place of worship to heavenly ideas. It was then possible from the effects that these works exude for the worshippers to share in the agonies, ecstasies or inspiration of a character so depicted.

Even today, the church regards works of art with Christian themes as miraculous, for the effect they have on believers who come in contact with them. When a church Priest or Pastor assigns or commissions an artist to create a particular concept in an art work for the church, it is not just a sermon or message for the day's service. For the work of art speaks to people (the believers) at all times as long as it survives (de la Croix and Tansey, 1986).

But does the church understand and recognize this role the artist plays? To a greater extent, in the Western World. For their meritorious contributions, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and quite a number of artists were given befitting burials by the church. Raphael, was said to have been ordained a cardinal for his contributions. But in Africa and Nigeria particularly, we have not heard or read about any honour done an artist in the church for such contributions. They merely see them as artists: sculptors, painters, etc. They have not come to really appreciate the artists for the impact: the messages in these works have had on the faithfuls.

The implication of this, is that there is an urgent need to acknowledge this spiritual role the artist plays in the church, and to quicken the sense of appreciation in those who directly or indirectly have benefited from such works of art. The paper sees, and seeks the understanding of the public or congregation that the artist who does a work of art for the church, through his creative ability, is a co-preacher of the gospel in the church; whether or not he is a member of that congregation. We have discussed a few works of art by some artists. The intention is to show the contributions by the artists in the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is an effort made to portray the artist who works for the church as a partner in the spiritual revival efforts.

### **Works of Art and the Church in Africa**

As rightly stated by Fosu (1993), the creative expertise of artists was relied on in promulgating Christian concepts in Africa right from the colonial times. The Christian missionaries sought the assistance of the Neo-traditional African artists to help them preach the gospel to their brothers in the language they could understand. To this end, artworks were created on the walls, altars and portals of mission churches. (Mount, 1973). In creating these works, these artists - preachers expressed the messages in the familiar African visual form language - that formalized language of symbolic expression with its code of classical interpretation. But they have a few elements of synthesis with the aliens (Fosu, 1993).

The Cyrene mission, after it had been established in 1936 in Bulawayo, in former Rhodesia. the

Reverend Edward Paterson directed artists to execute paintings, which were hung on the walls of the mission. These biblical figures and narratives in the paintings were Africanized. A good example, is *The Good Samaritan* in which Jerusalem and Jericho are represented as African villages. The traveler is attacked by a band of tsotsis (young African hoodlums). He is then, carried by the Good Samaritan to an African Hotel "Hotel la Bantu". The priest who refused aid is an Obese African country preacher. The Levite becomes an African school teacher in a long white duster, as described by Mount (1973). Another example of such paintings in the Cyrene mission is the *Stoning of St. Stephen*.

In the Catholic churches in Dahomey, was a neo-traditional Fon brass worker from Abomey, named Etienne Honutondji, Honutondji, was given material assistance by Mile Marie Barranger, who also supplied the subject matter. An example is, the work entitled *St. Christopher* (sculpture) (plate 1). Even with this Christian theme the work still share the characteristics of the lively traditional brass Fon figures. These are in their elongation, and the large spatula-like hands and feet as well as familiar Dahomean facial features (Mount 1973).



Plate 1. Etienne Honutondji. *St. Christopher*, brass. Collection unknown. Courtesy: Marshall Ward Mount. *African Art: The years since 1920* (1973).

St. Christopher is seen holding a walking stick in his right hand. On his left shoulder rests a human figure supported by the Saint's hand which equally holds a pot-like object surmounted by a cross. The resting of the figure on St. Christopher's shoulder may be seen as a spiritual support given to the convert who obviously is a native.

In the western town of Oye-Ekiti in Yoruba land of Western Nigeria, was the Reverend Father P.M Kelly of the African Mission Society. With the support of Fathers Kevin Carroll and Sean O'Mahoney, Fr. Kelly, utilized the talents of artists from this area in the catholic churches in the 1940s. One of such artists was Areogun, under whose direction, according to Fosu (3993), provided the church with some of the best examples of Christian art in Africa at the time. Fosu, went further by quoting Fr. Carroll who comments on the style of (he artists thus: No matter what the church commissioned the artist to produce, they always produce them in the same manner and style as were used for the royal figures on the porch-doors of the chieftains' palaces (p.5}

That is, the usual visual form language their African brothers are familiar with. In Oye-Ekiti and Oke-Padi, after Areogun, is Lamidi Fakeye, who has made immense spiritual contributions

through "his wood relief sculptures for the church. Among the most memorable relief carvings of his, are the panels on the three sets of double doors for the church at Oke-Padi in Ondo. The work as a biblical narrative tells the story of the life of Jesus Christ, from the presentation in the Temple to the Entombment. Elaborately executed, it contains six carved panels separated by traditional Yoruba interlace designs. In one of the panels where Christ is depicted among the elders (see plate 2).

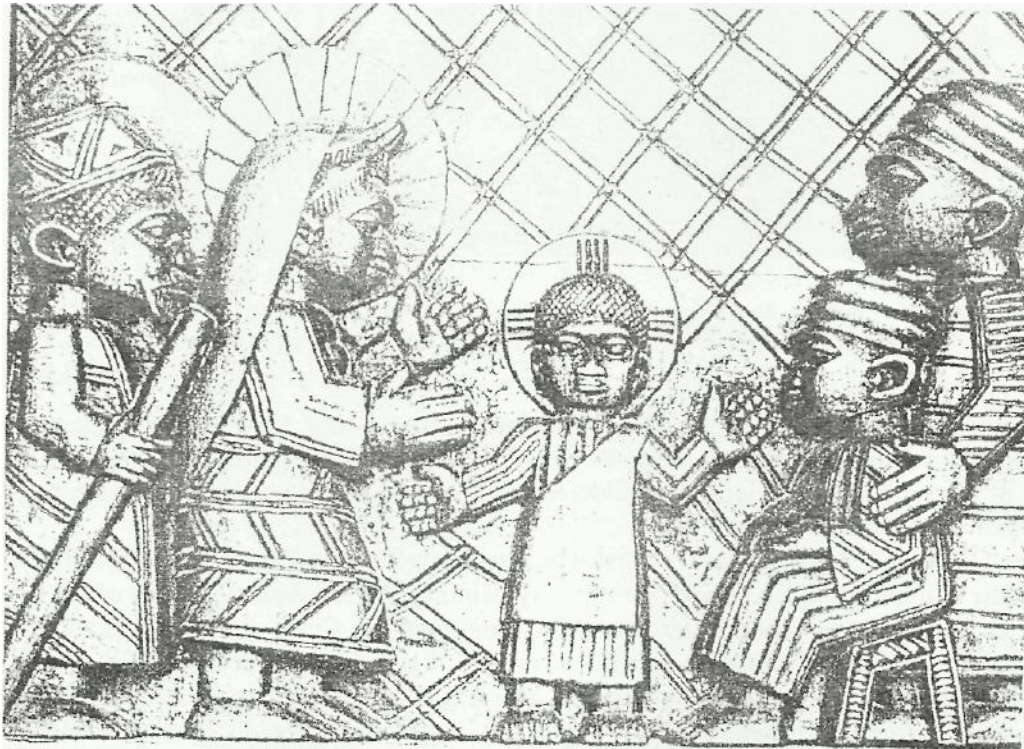


Plate 2. Lamidi Fakeye. *Christ among the Elders*. Doors for church in Oke-Padi, Ibadan, Nigeria, wood. Courtesy: Marshall Ward Mount. African Art: The years since 1920 (1973).-

The work, like the others-shows elements of synthesis e.g. The Halo and Mary's veil are European. But the facial features with bulging eyes, Joseph's slab-like beard, and receding chins are common traits in Yoruba traditional style. Mary's conical hair dress and the *agbada* or robes as well as the caps of the man are derived from fashion in vogue in the region. (Mount, 1973). Such elaborate depictions afford the local converts the opportunity to be in tune with the phenomena surrounding the characters so depicted.

In the modern artistic era, one artist who assists the church in the interpretation of the bible through his artistic creations was Ben Enwonwu (1921 - 1994). One of such works is, the *Risen Christ*" (plate 3), mounted in front of the Protestant Chapel at the University of Ibadan. A work often compared critically with the best in African sculpture (Fosu, 1993 p.27).

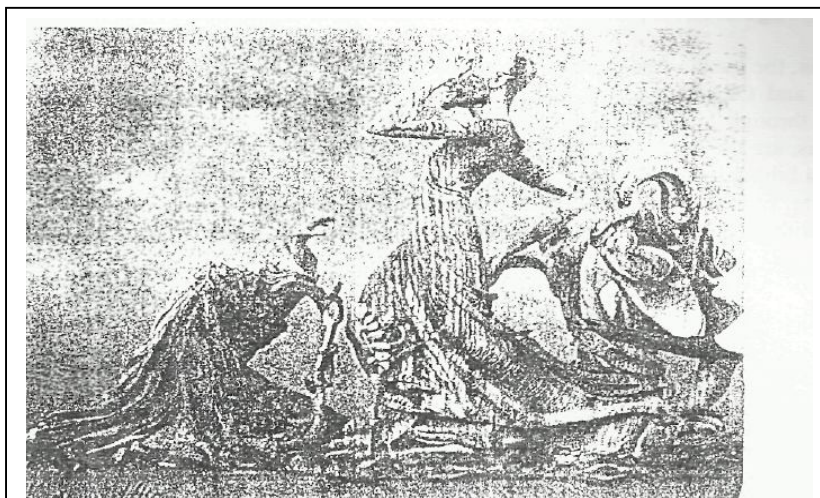


Plate 3. Ben. Enwonwu. *Risen-Christ*. Wood. Protestant Chapel, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Courtesy:

Africanized through the depiction of Jesus with shaved hair, the figure of Jesus Christ is represented with an element of gracefulness. Yet Enwonwu captures the emotional stress and intensity on the face of Mary, who is obviously Bewildered by Christ's sudden ascension. This enhances the spiritual content of the work.

Uche Okeke (b.1933), is another artist who has produced a lot of works for the church since his early artistic career. Though he had done so many paintings on the theme *Stations of the Cross*, he still created in 1975 fourteen wood relief panels on Stations of the Cross, for an Nsukka church, and in 1989 a gouache portrait of Father Iwene Tansi. From 1971 to 1974 he designed the Archbishop's wood throne and five portals for the Holy Trinity Cathedral, Onitsha; the portals depicted scenes such as Baptism, Trinity and Confirmation (Ottenberg, 2003). Typically, Uche's Christian art often draws on Ulli's linear styles, such as his Madonna (1960), Crucifixion (1974), Baptism (1974) and Resurrection (1962). Uche's works have that touch of drama... which opens a dynamic story line for the viewer as rightly observed by Afuba (2003).

Uche's artistic colleague Bruce Onobrakpeya, has produced art with Christian themes for the church as have Yusuf Grillo and Demas Nwoko. These are only a few among the numerous artists that have given support towards the growth of the Christian faith, both in the neo-traditional and modern era.

## Conclusion

An artwork is like a book on a sermon that can be read without the trouble of turning over the leaves. This opinion of Menyah (2001), which we also share, rightly points to the communicative power of an artwork. And the early missionaries and the church aware of the fact that emotions could be evoked through works of art, effectively utilized it. The artists then employed to create works of art for the church have indeed used that power in art to assist in building and consolidating the faith of worshippers.

It is on this basis, we consider such artists as co-preachers of the gospel. The only way the present day church in Africa and Nigeria in particular, who are utilizing the creativity of the artist, can show appreciation is by sponsoring art exhibitions on Christian themes, The Christian arts in Nigeria exhibition held in Onitsha in 1979 and that of the Christian religion art fairs in 1987 and 1989 which Ottenberg (2003), says the artist Uche Okeke was one of the major organizers, should not be the only experiences. Because after these, we have not heard any of such exhibitions. The present day church can follow the footsteps of the catholic and protestant missions in the past by establishing Christian art workshops or centres, where budding Christian artists could be groomed. They can also support older artists. With these, they would benefit more from these gifted ones in their desire for the salvation and revival of man.

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