

RELEASING A NEW AFRICA THROUGH ART: THE INSPIRATIONAL SOURCES AND VISION OF SKUNDER BOGHOSSIAN

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Abstract

Skunder Boghossian, an Ethiopian by nationality, is one of the foremost painters in the history of modern African art. A widely travelled artist who has been to many countries on the African continent and Europe. Quite a number of scholars have written about this artist, but only few have acknowledged the fact that his strive to reconceive the elements of our cultural unity in his paintings was not merely for its own sake, but a mission to release a new Africa with a new level of spiritual organic union. In this paper, an attempt has been made to look at the background of the artist as well as his sources of inspiration and vision. The iconographic and biographical approaches have been applied in this paper. The paper reveals that Skunder drew his inspiration mainly from the images of the African continent. He himself said several times that the best way he feels he "can present his vision is to go to Nok, to Egypt, to Ghana, to Ethiopia to find the visual answer and to blend (them together for the right image)".

Introduction

Skunder Boghossian, one of the most talented artists in Africa was born in Addis Ababa in 1937 (Mount, 1973), during Mussolini's occupation of Ethiopia and was barely a year old when his father was taken to Italy as a prisoner of war and repatriated until the boy was almost eight years old. Later on, Skunder's soldier father who had a reputation as a fine horseman, as narrated by Deressa (2001, p. 40), was not at all happy with his son's artistic inclinations, but an uncle provided the art materials that the boy needed. Skunder's career took off when he won a painting competition at the age of 17 at the 1955 National Exposition in Addis Ababa and was awarded an imperial scholarship to study art at the Slade in London.



Plate 1: Skunder Boghossian (b.1937)

After several frustrating years in London, where he decided in rapid succession that St Martin's School, the Central School, and the Slade were not to his liking, he moved to Paris. He found the Parisian atmosphere more stimulating and remained there, studying at the Academic de la Grande Chaumiere until his return to Ethiopia in 1966. He has been the recipient of Ethiopia's most prestigious art award, the Haile Selassie 1st prize for Fine Art (Mount, 1973, p 111-112). Between 1963 and 1995, aside from participating in several international touring shows such as UNESCO Artists of the World Against Apartheid in 1983, he has exhibited almost 70 times.

Inspirational Sources of the Artist

When I was a young student in Paris, I chased behind Cheikh Anta Diop like crazy. I learnt a great deal from him about African philosophy. He was a torch for me (Fosu, 1993, p.50).

This is the revelation by Skunder about his experiences. Who was Anta Diop? Anta Diop was the Senegalese cultural philosopher who tried to bring out the profound cultural unity still alive beneath the deceptive appearance of cultural heterogeneity in order to contribute to the strengthening of the feelings of goodwill which have always united Africans from one end of the continent to the other end, and thus, show, the organic cultural unity as stated by Fosu (1993).

It is the contention of Diop that because Africa is the "southern continent", it is the least changed by external influences. The reason for this continued adherence to the unity of this culture is simply because two centuries of foreign influence are not long enough to completely destroy a cohesive culture with over 5,000 years of historical dynamism. Cheikh Anta Diop, fomented in Skunder's mind the intellectual focus which has played a significant role in the inspirational content of his visual expression.

Skunder, himself, has marvelled at the similarities/differences within African culture during his first trip through many countries on the continent in 1976. When he arrived at Sudan, he wondered -in amazement ^L'I live just across from the other side of the river (Nile), and don't know the sameness of our culture, the food, the physical semblance, almost everything (Fosu, 1993, p.86). By the time he reached Burkina Faso, the relevance of his aesthetic orientation had all become too clear to him. In Ouagadougou, he asked a rhetorical question, do you know that we also arrived in Sudan with the moon and left with the moon?. Celestial symbols which he had used so often in his paintings became more meaningful to him. *Red Crescent* is an example of one his works, which indicates a possible inspiration drawn from the usual brightness of the moon as he observed it in Sudan and Burkina Faso. One evening in Ouagadougou, in one of his reflective moods Skunder, wondered why we Africans allowed ourselves to be deceived and separated from each other. He asked, rhetorically was it by accident or by design? (Fosu, 1993, pp. 80-81).

The years between 1966 and 1972 gave Skunder the opportunity to ground in his native soil everything he had learned during the previous eleven years in Europe. He had the opportunity to travel to the wonder that is the rock-hewn monolithic churches of Lillabela, and to the many monasteries. As he saw the funerary sculptures of Southern Ethiopia and the grottoes of Harrar, his mind was blown open.

In the streets of Addis, and elsewhere, humble magical scrolls, whose pristine purpose was to ward off evil, showed him that surrealism is not a one-time European invention but an innate human urge to delve into the unconscious. And he painted it ail-not as a recapitulating exploiter might, but *as* a native son entrained by the poetic power of the vision of ancestors who can be honoured only by being subsumed, and he was welcomed as no Ethiopian visual artist had been welcomed in over 200 years (Deressa, 2001, p. 40).

Yin and Yang (Plate 2), a title inspired by the painting's phallic, oval and circular forms. The picture area is filled with the representation of an icon, or more precisely a diptych, obviously inspired by the traditional icons used in Ethiopia's Coptic religion. Topping the icon's frame is a series of semicircular forms recalling the numerous cupolars of a Coptic Church. Furthermore, the rich reds and deep browns of this work, as well as of his more recent productions, suggest similar colours used in traditional manuscripts and church wall paintings (Mount, 1973, p. 133).

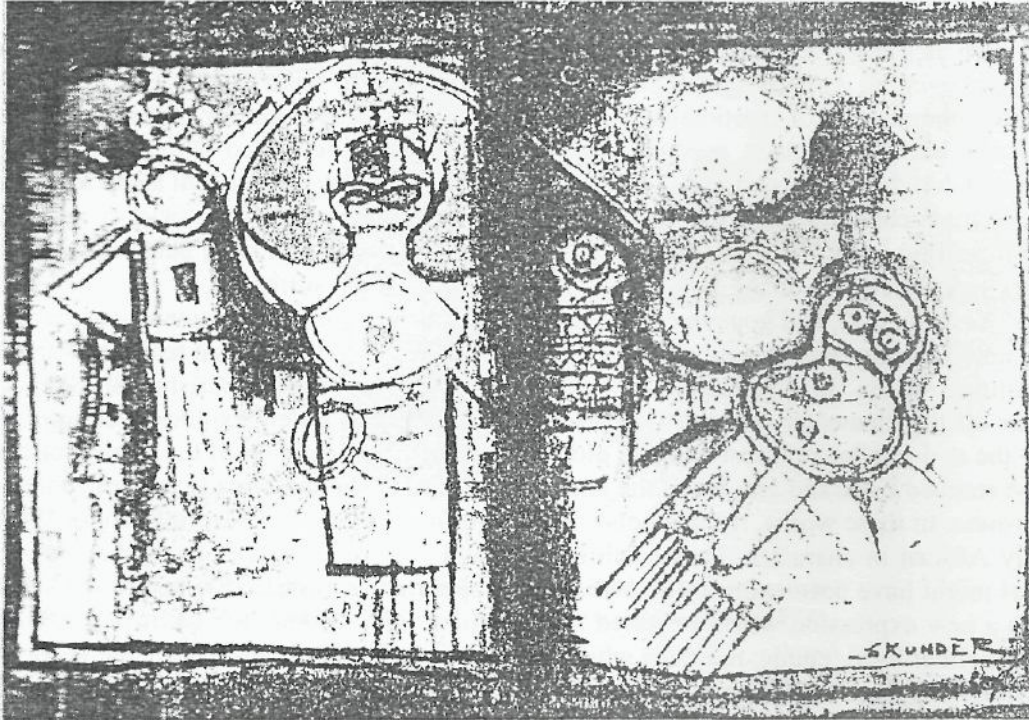


Plate 2: *Yin and Yang*, oil on hardboard. Mackenzie Collection. Courtesy: Marshall Ward Mount, *African Art: The Years since 1920 (1973)*

In works such as *The Nourishers* and the 1996 *Time Cycle*, Skunder harks back to the magical dignity and Para-Newtonian space-time of (he most inspired, "primitive" Ethiopian ritual arts without once repeating their vocabulary (Deressa, 2001).

The Artist's Presentation of his Vision for a New Africa Arriving in the United States, in 1969, Skunder experienced the "Black Power" phase of American political history. As a result of his association and interaction with Black American intellectuals of the African cultural survivals in Afro-American life, Skunder's vision of the African world also increased. This is confirmed in his recent works which revealed his view that there is a cultural alliance, which spiritually transcends the continent. The best way the artist felt he could present this vision is to go to Nok, to Egypt, to Ghana, to Ethiopia to find the visual answer and to blend them together for the right image. Thus, what he creates is an African image created by a self-assured Ethiopian. He refers to his creative works as my dreams, the dreams of my ancestors which are passed to me like the light of the day which comes shining through my heart. (Fosu, 1993, p. 85).

The characteristic vigour for adaptive creativity gives Skunder the courage to select his visual vocabulary from any of the valid symbols of the continent that best expresses his visions. With this view, the ritual symbols of Coptic illuminated manuscripts, Islamic calligraphic strokes, ancestral masks and sculptural images obtain the same meaningful function for him. He expresses them in a complicated series of symbologies derived from various iconographic sources in Africa. Not in the new realism of his predecessors, but in expressionist surrealism. The abstract patterns of concentric circles, crosses and half-moons in his works reveal characteristics which are also the symbols in the art of Yoruba, Axum, Nubia, Egypt, Baule, or Senufo. Yet they are not expressed in the specific character of any particular region (Fo.su, 1993).

Skunder creates his own unconscious symbols by which he reveals his own messages. Chojnacki (1973, p.89), describes the symbols which Skunder uses as inarticulate sounds from within a revelation, a message, a dream. They are not conscious. They come forth because they are there and (he viewer cannot help but charge them with the value they have had for other artists, other people, other times. Michael Welzenback, in *The Washington Post* on January 28, 1989: says Skunder is a seer who creates palimpsests wherein the world may read its origins.

Works such as *Time Cycle* and his colourful *Scrolls* look as if they belong in a temple. The splendor of another painting *Juju 's Flight of Delight and Terror* as aptly described by Deressa (2001,p.32), calls to mind the majesty of creation and destruction that Hindu myth knows as the face of

life. As terrifyingly vast births take place, space penetrates space, spaces are nested within spaces. The vision menaces and delights at the same time. Images both attack and play. Forms pull away from one another and yet remain connected. Subdued colours are exploded from within their dark nether until they become shimmering jewels. Everything is organically inter-linked in this large painting that is at once both matter and glossy — a dream to which an innocent child might surrender.

By 1965 he (Skunder), had gone to exploit the complex background of his own experiences to create a totally new fusion of expression, which has since exploded into the cosmic realm of African spiritual and political vision. In a series of themes dealing with re-birth and nourishment, Skunder brought together all the elemental forces of the African experience of a new explosion of spiritual revival to meet the new challenge thrust upon an old continent. As an indication of the totality of that commitment, he reached back and employed the ancient symbols which had already proven supreme in our consciousness. In these works, the symbols cannot be designated East or North, South or West. They are simply African in character. They seem familiar and yet far-fetched, because they are not simply stated, as might have been expected of a young Ethiopian artist. Instead, Skunder's work was an upset. It was a new expression which reflected the Ethiopian ideal within the continental cultural organism. It was neither local, ethnic, nor even wholly nationalistic. Rather it was purely the vision of an individual whose exposure had given him a sophisticated worldview to deal with the complications of the total African modern identity crisis.

Until then, no other artist on the continent, according to Fosu (1993, pp.82-85), had given visual interpretations to the universality of the modern African vision. The works of his predecessors, Antubam, Tekle, Enwonwu, Ntiro, and Alle Falake Salaam had inspired nationalist ideals based on the old ethnic glories. But Skunder insists that, we have passed the sentimental stage, we need not prove ourselves as super anything — patriotic, African, or Black. What is needed, he pleads, is that the elements of our cultural unity, which had already inspired the Pan-African concept of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), must be reconceived on the idealism of our cultural heritage to release a new Africa, and raise it to a new level of spiritual organic union.

How did Skunder approach it? His *Explosion of the World Egg* (plate 3) reveals the series of purification rites needed in order to rejuvenate this birth, which Spellman (1978, p.3), an African-American writer, refers to as, life - death - life, the unity of contradictions, the ends of beginnings. Skunder's purification rites are much in conformity with the traditional religion of many African groups. Considering the initiation rites leading to adulthood, Sieber (1977), narrated that the ceremonies could be weeks, months, or years. Essentially, what is involved is a series of events which are related to the achievement of sexual maturity and adult responsibility. Often, there is a death and rebirth symbolism. The initiates of the Poro Society In Liberia, Sieber states, is "eaten" by a bush monster, "lives" in the bush monster's belly, and is regurgitated - "born" - as an adult. At least, that is the story that is told to the women and uninitiated in the village. It was this kind of approach which Skunder applied in releasing the new Africa of his dream.

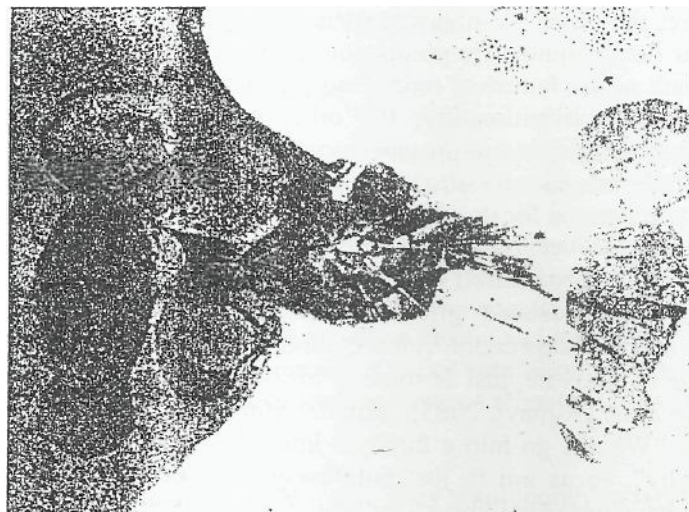


Plate 3: *Explosion of the World Egg*, oil on hardboard. Collection unknown.
Courtesy: Marshall Ward Mount, *African Art: The Years since 1920 (1973)*

Skunder's work has also been rightly interpreted by some art historians as a symbol of continuity of creation and potency. Examples of some of such works are *Vestiges* and *Fertility Bird* (plate 4). Nevertheless, what Skunder's paintings attempt to capture is the uninterrupted change in the character of the African cultural trait.

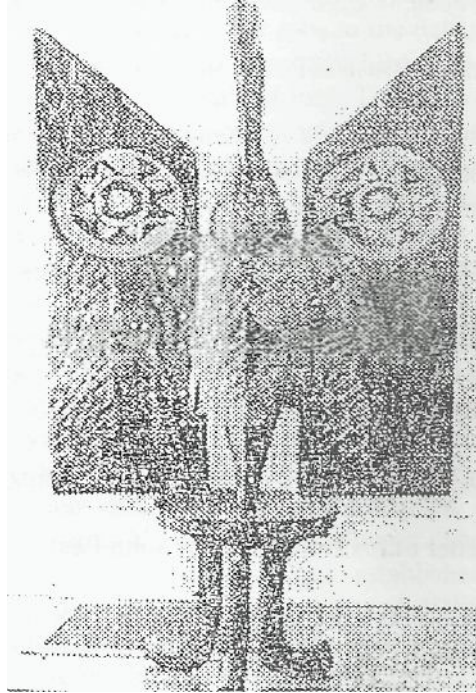


Plate 4: *Fertility Bird*. Mixed-Media. Artist Collection.
Courtesy: Kojo Fosu. 20th Century Art of Africa (1993)

Conclusion

One must agree with Gbaden (2001), that two extremes exist on the modern African art scene where the young and the bold are the key players. One group follows the mediocre pedigree of populist culture, the other the highway of creativity, embracing integrity and social commitment as creeds for their fertile minds. He points out that the choice belongs to the individual artist: the broad crowd-filled path or the famished road. One corrodes the cerebral faculties and drags the psyche into the quicksands of conventionality; the other encapsulates genuine artistry, which promulgates ideologies laced with a vision to provide succour for man. Again, he states, the options are the artist's to take. For while one assures instant fortune and, at times fame, the other requires perseverance, consistency and diligence for its enduring voice to be heard. Arid it does get heard. And when it does, it echoes through the very annals of human history having made his mark on the sands of time. Skunder chose to identify himself with the second group (or extreme).

Skunder Boghossian's gift to modern African art, and indeed Africans, is the gift of consciousness and self-expression (identity and self-assertion), the inspiration of a sense of freedom and the courage to innovate, just as some of his contemporaries, Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya of Nigeria have done (Agbayi, 2003). Skunder himself understands that his creative works go beyond the immediate. "When I go into a family home, he says, I want to do something for the children to remember me by", so as not to just fade away into oblivion. In the same sense, he observes, my paintings must have perpetual impact for now, for tomorrow, forever. (Fosu, 1993, p.85).

Finally, as asserted by His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in his letter to artists, cited in (Ugiomoh, 2003, p.23 1), Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture. Indeed, through Skunder's works, we have come to know his worth.

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