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The Artist: Felix Idubor and Legacies

By

ESEBAMEH GEORGE OHIOGBONWAN

*Department of Graphics/Textile Technology,
School of Art and Industrial Design,
Auchi Polytechnic,
Auchi.*

And

NJOKU KENNETH IHEUKWUMERE

*N0. 1, Iyobosa Street,
Uzebu Benin City.*

Abstract

Felix Idubor was undoubtedly one of the most talented Nigerian artists. He was a teacher, a distinguished sculptor and philanthropist, one who used his art to promote the course of peace and beauty in his city. Felix Idubor's works stand out like a colossus in the world's Artistic Community. His works have created enormous impact and they exude extraordinary vigor and visual provocations. This paper therefore examines his life and significant contributions to mankind and the development of sculpture and Art in Nigeria. It also highlights the many firsts recorded by this first class artist of Benin extraction. The first Art Gallery in Nigeria, first to introduce the use of chicken mesh and iron rod in large sculpture in Nigeria, as well as plastic fillers, he was also reputed to have introduced the rough textured carving and a new method of casting bronze. Idubor was no doubt a first class Artist, not only in his mastery of carving techniques but also his influence in sculpting with cement.

Since February 1897 when the British punitive expedition sacked and looted vast quantities of bronze heads, wall plaques carved ivory works, etcetera, etcetera from Benin and when those over 5,00 Art objects got to museums and private collections around the world, they were acclaimed master pieces.

The sacking of Benin, opened up the world's knowledge of the existence of relatively unknown African Art, the production of which according to Roth (1972) will hold their own among some of the best specimens of antiquity or modern times. Since then, Benin has continued to dominate and produce great artists who have distinguished themselves and have contributed immensely to the growth and development of contemporary Nigeria Art. Felix Idubor stands out as one notable figure like a colossus. His works without doubt exude extraordinary vigor.

In the committee of Art in Nigeria and indeed the world sculptors, Idubor stands out clearly like a colossus, though an internationally recognized artist, who obviously was proud of his exploits, the old man of sculpture had no airs about him.

The burden of this paper therefore, is to clearly attempt an insight into his life, commissions, philanthropic gestures, creativity and above all, to make Idubor and his works "come alive", highlight his innumerable contributions to the development of the Art community of Nigeria and to the world at large and examine his place in the developmental history of Art in Nigeria.



Picture of Felix Idubor in his Traditional Outfit

The Artist – Felix Idubor

Idubor was born in Benin City, Edo State on March 17th, 1925 between 1935 and 1942; he attended St. Matthew Primary School, Benin. According to the “International Who -is -Who is of Intellectuals” (1978) Idubor began to train himself as a wood carver making his first chisel from a 6 inch nail beaten to shape to look like a chisel. In 1945, at the age of 23, the young man (Idubor) moved to Lagos where he combined attending evening lectures to improve his educational background with working privately and selling wood carvings to Hausa traders, before proceeding to the Prestigious Royal College of Art London, where he studied Art.

Domestic arts which included wood and ivory carvings is recorded to have started during the time of Ere. Dark (1973) expressed that Ere whose dynasty was before the present one introduced the wooden memorial heads, which are placed on ancestral shrines and also the royal throne (Ekete), the rectangular chiefs stool (Agba), the round box (Ekpokin). Gillon (1979) expressed that various guilds in Benin were organized in guilds and it was the practice of the earliest artists to introduce their male children to their guilds. Felix Idubor without doubt in this manner acquired some basic skills through this long established tradition of apprenticeship.

Between 1956 and 1957, he taught sculpture as an instructor in the then technical institute, Yaba, now Yaba College of Technology Lagos, and later Edo College Benin City. He is one of Africa’s most talented creative artists. The Nigerian Magazine (1967) described him as one of the best known sculptors. Idubor travelled extensively, teaching sculpture and wood carving and in 1961, he visited Germany twice on the invitation of the then Federal Republic of Germany. He represented Nigeria in an exhibition organized by the International Congress of African Culture held in Southern Rhodesia now Zimbabwe. He was awarded UNESCO traveling fellowship in 1957, this took him to Britain and other parts of Europe and was actively involved in the organization of the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) that held in Lagos in 1977. He was also in the forefront to ensure the establishment of a National Gallery of Art. Though, this did not come to reality until many years after his demise. Idubor is credited to have introduced the use of cement, Iron rods and chicken mesh in large sculptures as well as the use of plastic fitters in Nigeria; he is also reputed to have introduced in 1974 a new method of casting bronze sculptures and rough textured carvings. He is also reputed to have established the first official Art gallery in Nigeria. The Nigerian Magazine (1967) while commenting on the establishment of his gallery – The Idubor gallery of Arts, expressed that it is not surprising that he is one of the first pioneers of art galleries in Nigeria as his dream of a home for his many works of treasure came true in 1966.

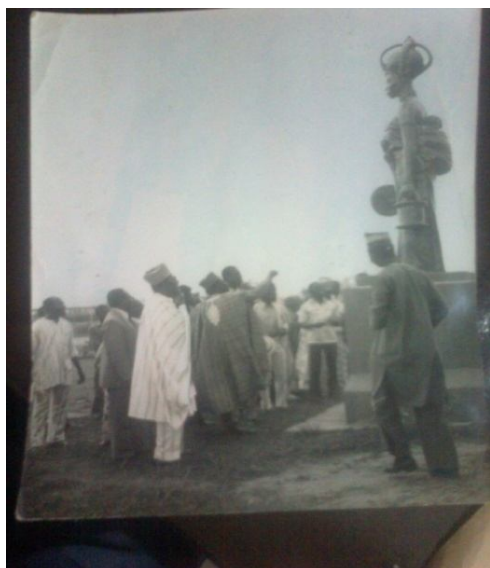
Commenting on Idubor's penchant for excellence, the Nigeria Magazine (1967:3) further expressed that:

Idubor gallery of Arts at Kakawa Street, Lagos, is an imposing house with an architecture which dates back to years. It is one of the very few houses of Brazilian architecture still left to grace old Lagos. Inside, Felix Idubor houses his valuable additions to Nigerian treasure... Since Felix Idubor moved into his Kakawa Gallery, he has not relaxed in his efforts to make this a full house.

In the words, of the master himself (Felix Idubor) while adducing reasons for the establishment of the gallery, noted thus

I have taken the plunge to run an art gallery befitting the city of Lagos in order to arouse in the authorities the need for building a National Art Gallery to revive our loss of artistic consciousness and to show art as an integral part of our life.

With his studio at Onikan, Lagos and bronze castings from his foundry in Benin, he ensured that the gallery was a full house; it also housed the works of some Nigerian's finest artists.



Mother Africa Donated to the Federal Government of Nigeria Sited at the National Theatre, Lagos



Felix Idubor at Work in the Studio

Idubor the Philanthropist

Idubor devoted his life to Art and philanthropy; he was one who understood the social responsibility of Art and the Artist to the society, by giving back to his society. He also saw the need to mentor other artist and young people. His gallery has been involved in training many Nigerian artists and students on industrial attachment without financial charges. Idubors contributions to the development of the visual Arts, are worthy of note. He donated a large statue “Mother Africa” to the then Federal Department of Arts and Culture; this statue presently adorns the front of the National Arts Theatre, Lagos, Nigeria.

While extolling the philanthropic nature of Felix Idubor four months before his death, when he donated two sets of giant statue to the Oredo Local Government, Alozie (1991) averred that the story of the beautification of Benin City would be incomplete without the contributions of the Master of Arts himself – Felix Idubor. The Olokun and Mermaid statue equipped with a fountain. The warrior statue of General Eboikimwin of Ovia. Eboikimwin took active part in the Bini defense of 1896, and the statue of the Unknown Soldier. These statues are at the city centre “Ring Road” now Oba Ovoramwen square, Benin City. Also in his characteristic manner, Idubor displays in his gallery the works of budding Nigerian Artists who have no other place to display their works.



Felix Idubor’s Piece at the White House USA



Felix Idubor in his Gallery with Gen. Buhari and other Visitors

His Commissions

Idubor though originally a souvenir carver achieved international fame especially for his carved wood doors. His first exhibition of wood carving was in 1953 when he was just 30 years and in 1954 and 1955, he exhibited in Enugu and Lagos respectively, under the auspices of the British Council.

His commission adorns important public and private places all over the world. In 1955, he was commissioned to carve panels for the entrance doors to the international telecommunication building in Geneva, Switzerland. The Nigerian government in 1956 commissioned him to make an ebony wood casket to contain photographs of the visit of the queen of England to Nigeria, this was to be presented to her majesty the Queen, Elizabeth II in 1957. The renowned British Architect, Maxwell Fry commissioned him to design and carve the entrance for a bank headquarters in Punjab-India. Other commissions include carved panels for the former senate building in Lagos (Tafawa Balewa Square), relief mural for the independence building in Lagos. He designed and executed the panel doors of the then co-operative bank, Ibadan. He also carved the entrance doors of the new extension to the “Iga Idumganran” the palace of the hereditary Obas of Lagos.



**Felix Idubor at Work on the Statue of Jereton Marierie
Presently Sited at the Edo State Government House Benin City**

He also made the statue in front of the National Library Lagos, doors to the entrance to the palace of the Oba of Benin, National hall Lagos, the statue in front of the Nigerian observer newspaper in Benin, the nurse statue in front of the administrative building in the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH). Idubor also designed and executed entrance doors, iron screens and gate for the Central Bank of Nigeria, Benin City, the cenotaphs for Edo, Ondo, Benue, Kwara and several other commissions. He also did such works as the statue of Osaigbovo Ogbemudia in academic gown. A Bini Village Chief. The status of the warlord, Ologbosere, who was reputed to have led the attack on commander Philips and his party in 1897, this was beautifully rendered in wood, and so many other works in private and public collections worldwide.

Conclusion

On the 23rd of April 1991, at the age of 68, Felix Idubor died at the University of Benin; Teaching Hospital (UBTH.) With his death, Nigeria lost one of her most accomplished artist and in many accounts, a huge loss to the art community.

Felix Idubor was a man of many parts, a sculptor of no mean repute. He was a great man of character, humility, integrity, one who had passion for excellence, one who did not allow his background to inhibit his mastery of art, one who extended the frontiers of sculpture practice by introducing various dimensions into the profession, no wonder his works are still standing tall and speaking volumes in almost every city in Nigeria and beyond, long after he is gone. His legacy to mankind will ever remain in our hearts and will continue to inspire many. To him, sculpting was a passion, it was a life style, and he was indeed a gift to his generation. No wonder Russell (1989) expressed that Art is our link with the past and our gift to the future.

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