

Artistic Textile Representations and the Caressive Force of Iron in Contemporary Nigerian Art

Magaret Olugbemisola Areo Ph.D

Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology
Nigeria

Abstract

Though the actual date of the discovery of the technique of using iron ore to produce functional items is unknown, iron was probably one of the earliest metals produced in Africa with the evidence of iron smelting in Nok, Nigeria dating to fifth century B.C. Elegant and fine works of art have since been wrought through the hands of blacksmiths from Kuba, Dogon and Bamana. Scholarly works on iron smelting and its product in Nigeria is limited to its usage as farm implements, weapons and religious objects. However, with new techniques and technology, great contemporary artworks are bringing to the fore the creativity, versatility, and functionality of this strong metal. This paper thus examines the representation of textiles on contemporary artistic forms executed in this medium.

Keywords: Contemporary Nigerian art, iron, metal works, textile representation

Introduction

Africa has contributed to world artistic tradition with its array of metal works. Notable examples of this are found in the Ife bronze, Benin bronzes, gold pieces from Ivory Coast (the present day Ghana), iron from Taruga and other Nok sites, the great ironworks from among the Bamana, the Dogon and several other pieces forged in silver in Sudan, copper in Southern Niger and Mauritania, Benin brass and iron all over the continent. The richness of opulence of metal pieces made a scholar to remark:

Variety and virtuoso are two of the outstanding features of African metal work. Variety is clearly evident in the kinds of metals forged, in the techniques employed by traditional metal workers, and in the types of objects created. No matter the objects, a number of these objects display a high degree of artistic and technical virtuosity, a mastery of form and technology and aesthetic quality of which is a pointer to the fact that African metal workers had to be as artistically capable as they were technically skilled" (Fischel, 1982:13).

Technical skill and artistic virtuoso are therefore, the hallmark of African metal works. The exact date of the discovery of iron is not known. It is, however, assumed that its development occurred about 2000 B.C. (Wilson, 1978:12) with Bernard Fagg's excavations at Taruga and other Nok sites in Nigeria giving a conclusive evidence of iron smelting dating tentatively to the 5th Century B.C. (Fischel, 1982:15), while iron-making in Nubia is dated to about early 700 B.C. with Carthage also furnishing mankind an early date for iron smelting in this Phoenician site in North Africa. The date of iron discovery and smelting, notwithstanding the discovery of iron is so impactful to be called a revolution. With its discovery came a dramatic change in men's way of life. Farming became more productive as farmers now had better tools, instead of bones, stones and sticks tools employed hitherto. And with better tools also came settled farming, settled lifestyles, and on the heel of this, artistic creativity with iron also developed. Three factors have been observed to aid artistic creativity in man, availability of material to creatively express his experiences and inner feelings in the environment he finds himself, the opportunity of a settled way of life, and a peaceful conducive environment to put his experiences into form. All these have aided the forging of iron into forms wherever found. The discovery and smelting of iron and its resultant effect on people's way of life have resulted in the forging of the metal into various forms. African blacksmiths, through heat and hammering, have since forged iron into extraordinary, elegant and fragile forms, in spite of its malleability, ductility and intractable nature.

Because Africa is blessed with ferruginous soil, this makes iron ore readily available in many parts of the continent. Iron therefore, plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of many ethnic groups and is valued by many professionals such as traditional herbalists, healer, farmers, warriors, horse-riders, smiths and among the Yoruba farmers and all other professions that have iron or any metal as tools of their trade.

The significance of iron and its workers (the blacksmiths), however, does not stop at the professions but extends into the religious, spiritual and symbolic aspect of the people's life. So revered, valuable and significant is iron that its occurrence and smelting is associated with myths and mythological figures. Among the Dogon, the blacksmith is considered the intermediary between man and God. Among the Bamana, apart from fabricating tools and utilitarian objects, blacksmiths are caregivers in the cure of smallpox, circumcision, divination, grooming of the young, sustenance of the komo cult, and are believed to be descendants of the ancestral smith who taught men how to farm and fabricate things. They are feared, despised and respected.

And his ability to create things like the gods makes him to be viewed as intermediary between man and the spirits. Because iron is the most mysterious and the one requiring the greatest heat to forge, it is the most remarkable of the smith's material and most times, it is worked by him personally because of its intractable nature. The use of iron and many other metals in relation to textile have up till now been given little scholarly attention. Many scholars such as William Fagg (1963), Frank Willet (1967), Turstan Shaw (1977) who have worked on different metal artworks in Nigeria have only discussed their discovery, dating, stylistic and thematic categorization of the works. Not much have been done up till now on how the textile worn by these objects are capable of revealing the history and culture of the people in which they were found or produced.

While textile is flexible and easily arranged into folds, the phrase, "as hard as steel," often connotes a feeling of rigidity and intractability. But in comparison to gold and copper, iron still has the ability of ductility and malleability as it can be drawn into wires and can be adapted to other shapes through hammering. This paper will, therefore, concentrate on works that have human figure representation and the textiles on them.

Clothing worn at any particular period by a group of people is a reflection of the dynamism of that people's culture, as culture itself is not static. It is influenced by both internal development and external influences which are expressed in the fashion of the particular group of people.

Bearing this in mind, it is therefore, imperative to study the clothing and fashion on sculptural objects, as they tell the story of the group at a particular area. For instance, in a culture where at a time photography was non-existent, the artworks therefore. The sculptures also serve as a means of catching a glimpse of what obtained in the past, or as a reference point in resolving historical. For instance the dressing of the figures on the Benin bronze plaques had to be consulted in order to solve the riddle of where to place an item of regalia during the investiture and coronation ceremony of Oba Ereduwawa 1 of Benin Kingdom (Layiwole, 2008:87-88).

Though the discovery of iron boosted farming in Africa and as a result, many of the items smelted were rather utilitarian than aesthetic and there are found in a few case, iron aesthetic and religious objects. The limited occurrence of iron in visual art of the continent may probably be due to the intractable nature of the metal. However in contemporary times, visually aesthetic works are being produced in iron and many factors are responsible for this.

By the 16th Century A.D, iron was already being imported into Africa on a large scale from Europe. The sumptuous and ready availability of this metal served as inspiration to those with artistically-creative minds. Also, the introduction of western education led to art being studied in many schools all over Africa up to tertiary level. With this came the awareness of better techniques, materials and technology of smelting and forging of iron into artistic objects.

Form, Style and Content

Probably because of the intractable nature of iron, and its tendency to rust and disintegrate, a large percentage of figurative objects found particularly in Nigeria are made out of other materials. In a few cases, the figures though made in other metals such as brass, bronze or copper, are often mounted on iron stand. As a result, there is a dearth of scholarly material on the study of textile representation on iron. However, many bronze figures from Ile-Ife and Benin have textile representations, hairdo and body adornment on them, and as a result they have been studied.

However, the most notable iron figure is found among the Fon of Ghana. This figure, which incidentally represents Gou, the god of war and iron among the Fon, is the only one with a semblance of clothing among all the ironworks found on the continent(Figure 1, 2,and 3).

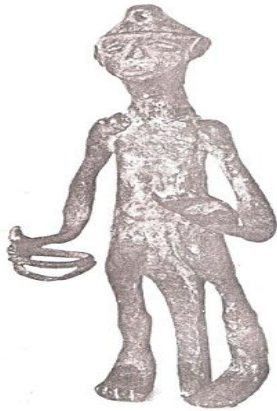


Figure 1
Standing Figure
Zaire, Kuba. Brincard,
1982



Figure 2
Finial Figure on staff. Mali
.Brincard 1982



Figure 3
Nommo Figure Mali.
Brincard 1982.

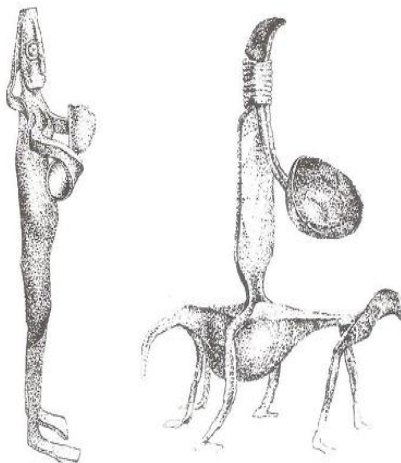


Figure: 4
Iron figurine in Ogun Shrine in Offa.
Oyelola, 2010



Figure: 5
Brass figure mounted
on iron staff. Yoruba.
Bascom 1973



Figure: 6
Iron figure of Gou
from Fon. Bascom
1982.

Quantities of iron and other metals were part of the items being imported from Europe by 16th Century A.D. (Fischel, 1982:15) and from this period onwards, blacksmiths supplemented the local iron with imported iron in bits and pieces and later in form of flat bars, 3mm long, 80cm wide and 1 cm thick (Oyelola, 2010:246). By the close of 19th Century, iron smelting was becoming not so widely practiced. By the 20th Century, there was a rejuvenation of iron smelting. Few factors were contributory to the enormous broadening and enrichment in the field of sculpture experienced in Nigeria at this time. First, the introduction of imported iron inspired those interested in iron working. The introduction of western education also broadened people’s knowledge about the enormous possibilities of iron. Introduction of new techniques such as welding and assemblage was a big inspiration. Finally, new materials resulting from advancement in technology was a plus to the field of sculpture.

The introduction of western education into Nigeria in the late 19th Century brought in its wake foreign ideas, new techniques, new material and technology and this greatly influenced the people’s artistic expressions.

The first formal art school, the Fine Art Department of Ahmadu Bello University, was established in Ibadan in 1953 and moved to its permanent site in Zaria in 1955 (Adepegba, 1995:82). Since then, many other art schools have developed in tertiary institutions and spread across the country, most of which have units or sections for sculptural art. Students from these units have evolved styles unique to them in their figurative formation in iron and steel. Unlike what obtained in the indigenous setting in the past, most of these artists now go into detailed representation of textiles on their figurative iron and steel works.

Contemporary Artistic Representation of Textile in Steelworks

There are quite a number of artists whose works are in the medium of iron and steel. Their works can be grouped into four categories; Works that use iron as outline to define textile on figures, works that enclose the figure in welded pieces of iron and steel to suggest figure mass, works that represent the folds of textile in naturalistic form and works that weld found iron materials that function in other purposes together to represent textile. Only few works of three artists and an art school will be examined for the purpose of this paper.

Tolu Shobowale

Tolu Shobowale has his first (B.A) and second (MFA) degrees from Obafemi Awolowo University, where he is presently a doctoral student. His training is in sculpture. Most of his works are in iron and steel. With iron rods, flat bars and mesh, he creates remarkable figures. The representation of textiles on his figures is depicted by outlining the figure. This is done in such a way that whoever is familiar with the Nigerian culture can easily decipher which ethnic group is represented by merely looking at his works. While most of his works are in the round, some are made to be hung on the wall (figures 7, 8 and 13).



Figure 7: Tolu Shobowale. Itshekiri Man.
Iron wall hanging. Collection of the Author



Figure 8: Tolu Shobowale. Itshekiri Woman.
Iron wall hanging. Collection of the Author

Sokari Douglas Camp

Sokari Douglas is a university-trained sculptor. Using cutting and welding techniques, she creates life-sized figures that depict her kalabari culture. She suggests the shape of the figure by cutting, piercing, bending, twisting iron. All these are welded together and most times, painted to depict the colourful detail of the printed fabric for which her people is known.

Feathers, wood and other items are often added for details. The way and manner she enclosed space in her attempt to give form to the figure creates a sense for mass in the viewer (Figures, 9, 10, 11).



Figure: 9
Sokari Douglas.
Woman Cheering.
Oyelola 2010



Figure: 10
Sokari Douglas.
Woman Cheering.
Oyelola 2010



Figure :11
Sokari Douglas. *Bird Masquerade.*
Oyelola 2010

Matt Ehizele

Matt Ehizele holds BFA and MFA degrees from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He specializes in sculpture. According to him, “the simplicity and clarity of form is what I continue to search for, using the fluidity of lines and shapes at its barest minimum to make human, this inhuman, rigid, cold and intractable material Welded steel is a means to this end.”¹”



Figure: 12
 Matt Ehizele. *Philosopher*.
 Exhibition Catalogue. 2008



Figure :13
 Sisi Ologe. Tolu Shobowale 2005.
 Collection of the Author

The rigidity and intractability of iron, he has successfully conquered as seen in his work, The Philosopher (Figure 12), which depicts rich folds of textile in that medium in its real naturalistic form.

The LAUTECH Art School

Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso in Oyo State of Nigeria, is jointly owned by Oyo State and Osun State Governments. The university has a Fine and Applied Arts Department that offers sculpture as one of the areas of specialization. By welding bolts, nuts, flat bars, ball joints and other bits and pieces of iron and steel, the generations of students in this unit have successfully suggested textile on their sculptural figures (Figures 14 and 15).



Figure :14
Bike Riders.
 Student’s Work. 2007



Figure: 15
Night Hunter
 Student’s Work. 2008

Conclusion

Many scholars have attributed the scarcity of figural sculpture in iron to the intractable nature of the medium. Others believe that because iron disintegrates through rusting, so it is not as durable as works in other metals. This is believed to be responsible for the sparse nature of work in iron.

The obvious truth is that the material is truly intractable and requires specially-skilled iron workers to smelt and forge. These problems are seen to have been overcome with the introduction of new materials, techniques and technology. These changes have really enhanced the creativity of artists using iron and steel as their medium.

Iron and steel, which once was considered rigid, has been put to such a remarkable use to the extent of bringing to the fore the caressive force of this metal in textile representation in contemporary Nigerian art. Further research into the usage of iron and steel in representation of textiles on figures made of iron and steel.

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Footnote:

1 This was Ehizele's artist statement in the catalogue to "Images of Value," an art exhibition of the 3rd National Symposium on Art, organized by National Gallery of Art in Benin, from 29th to 31st July, 2008.