

ISSUES IN  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
NIGERIAN ART

Conceived and compiled by Juliet Ezenwa Maja-Pearce

**ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART  
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## Innovative Workshop Experiments of Dr Bruce Onobrakpeya

By Ayo Eiebute

Bruce Onobrakpeya is Nigeria's master printmaker. In 1967, he developed a unique, epoxy-base etching technique called plastograph. Its origin has been traced to the Mbari-Mbayo workshop experiments in Osogbo in Osun State and involves engraving images on epoxy resin. Its discovery coincided with the search for a new orientation in contemporary Nigerian art. For decades, the method underwent transformation as a result of the collective efforts of Onobrakpeya himself and his disciples. For example, a similar technique called thermoplastograph was introduced in the 1980s by Nse-Abasi Inyang, a former apprentice at his regular workshop at Ovuomaroro Studio, Isolo, Lagos. The method involves engraving images on plastic resin. Two additional techniques – additive plastograph, in which epoxy resin is neither engraved nor cut with acid; and collagraph, where scraps of paper and other odds and ends are pasted with epoxy resin – were introduced at the annual Harmattan workshop experiments at Agbarha-Otor, his home village in Delta State.

The words 'workshop', 'experiment' and 'etching' need to be explained. The first refers to a shop or studio where a work is done, or to a group of people engaged in a creative or experimental project. In relation to this study, it means a course of study – especially experimental – or works for a group of artists on art projects which are encouraged and fossilized by the organizers. 'Experiment' means to make a trial or to do something in order to test a theory or to discover something unknown. It is also an attempt to try out new styles or techniques. In relation to this study, it means a test or trial carried out carefully by Onobrakpeya in order to derive a novel idea and gain new knowledge. 'Etching' is applied to an acid-base method of printmaking in which the design is bitten into the metal plate. It is given to a group of prints when images engraved or etched on a plate are inked and printed on paper with the aid of an intaglio machine.

Myers (1958) traced the origin of acid-base etching to the days of armour-makers, who used to etch designs on the surface of their products; Norwich (1990), to the early sixteenth century, when Rembrandt used it as a means of artistic expression. Lawrence (1979), however, said that the method, which Onobrakpeya uses, started by chance: 'When he produced a print from a plate that was spoilt subsequent to a "Hydrochloric Acid Accident", he noticed an interesting sculptural quality to it and he went about exploiting the feature in further experiments.' In relation to this study, the word etching refers to epoxy or plastic-base etchings, which are engravings printed in intaglio rather than the normal relief method. This method, according to Onobrakpeya, shows three depths which can be inked differently and printed at once to produce low relief with subtle colours comparable to those of a painting.

Since the discovery of these etching techniques, serious attention has not been paid to their origin and stylistic development. A few scholars such as Lawal (1963), Mount (1973), Jegede (1984), Fosu (1986) and Quel (1992), who have shown interest in the etching techniques, have not matched their interest with incisive analysis. These scholars have not used suitable and varied subjects; rather, they have focused mainly on printmaking as a generic name which covers all the methods of multiplying prints using an individualistic approach. There is, therefore, a dearth of information on the impact of workshop experiments on the origin and stylistic development of the etching techniques, and the mentoring strategy which Onobrakpeya adopted in transferring the etching skills and methods to his disciples. This is a gap in knowledge that this paper attempts to fill. The researcher, therefore, investigated the impact of workshop experiments on the origin and stylistic development of the unique etching techniques. More specifically, he has sought to examine how Onobrakpeya has been using symbolic images of an everyday genre to express his thoughts and feelings through the etching methods; to analyse how he has been able to develop the epoxy-base etching techniques into major art forms; and to enumerate how he has made efforts to mentor budding Nigerian artists through his workshop practice.



Bude Olatiran: Oya Gank, 95 x 70cm, Collagraph on Canvas, 2000

#### Theoretical framework

Both semiotics and archetypal theories were adopted as basic narrative structures to explain some of the symbolic images used by Onobrakpeya and his pupils in their etched

works, and to analyse the type of relationship that exists between the master printmaker and his disciples. Semiotics is a theory of signs and symbols, while archetypal theory is applied to fundamental patterns and models which serve as prototypes from which copies are made, or from which an idea is developed. One of the exponents of semiotics theory, Schutz, as recorded in *Webster's Dictionary* (1960-76), states that semiotics theory relates to the meaning of a sign or set of signs: 'It involves observing and interpreting signs; studying the relations of a sign to its referent and to other signs within a system; distinguishing between codes and messages and between denotation and connotation. Jung (1949) has proposed that archetypal theory is freely used in art criticism, especially in relation to motifs that recur in mythologies, folktales and in pervasive symbolic



Patrick Aghagbor Oshinwa at the leather section of the Harcourt Workshop

representation. Baynes (1923) also relates the theory to the latent primordial image of the goddess, which served as an archetypal soul image for most artists and writers in the Middle Ages.

The African signs and symbols used by Onobrakpeya and his disciples have served as a reservoir of ideas and events as well as cultural semiotics, which allow them to integrate into the orderly working of their environment. Onobrakpeya is an archetypal artist who serves as a model and a mentor to many budding artists who adopted his deep-etching techniques. In addition, the African artistic heritage and Urhobo shrines serve as

archetypes from where Onobrakpeya draws inspiration, while the acid-base etching serves as a prototype from which the idea of his epoxy-base etching developed.

**Methodology**

Data were collected through two basic sources: primary and secondary. The method employed to acquire primary data included in-depth interviews with 46 artists and art connoisseurs, focus group discussions involving 12 artists, and photographs of Onobrakpeya's and his pupils' works. The secondary data are culled from existing information in books, journals, magazines and catalogues. The data were collected based on responses to questions which elicited information about Onobrakpeya's and his disciples' backgrounds, the etching traditions and workshop practice. Onobrakpeya's disciples are many so there is a need to take samples from the large numbers. The stylistic tendencies inherent in the works of Onobrakpeya and the sampled disciples - David Dale, Moses Unokwah and Abiodun Okemakinde - were also investigated. Facts deduced from the investigation were analysed with descriptive tools such as biographical study, in which the historical antecedents of Onobrakpeya were given; idea study, where a new idea of epoxy-base etching method innovated by Onobrakpeya was discussed; iconography, in which the contents of photographs collected for the study were explained, and cryptography, where motifs used by Onobrakpeya and his disciples were encoded and decoded. The analyses were done to establish the impact that workshop experiments had on the origin and stylistic development of epoxy and plastic-base etching methods.



Head work and jewelry making in the Harcourt Workshop

**Data analysis: historical antecedents of onobrakpeya**

The impact of workshop experiments on the origin and stylistic development of Onobrakpeya's etching methods is incomplete without his biography. Born on 30 August, 1932 to the family of Obi Onobrakpeya Omonedo at Agharha-Otor in Urhoboland, Delta State, Onobrakpeya's gifts manifested early, not only in the arts but

also a tendency towards entrepreneurship. This is traceable to the type of training given him by his parents, who were also involved in both the arts and business. From all accounts, his first introduction to the arts was from them. His father was a professional farmer and sculptor who carved figures used for traditional worship. His maternal grandfather was a master flute player, while his mother specialised in male and female circumcision and body scarification.

According to Singletary (2002), Onobrakpeya's spare time as a schoolboy was spent in his father's atelier, where he carved different patterns on thorns and rubber pieces which were sold to friends and family members. Onobrakpeya has noted that it was from the proceeds of these items that he purchased his first fountain pen, which he used to produce his first pen-and-ink line drawings. He had his secondary education at Western Boys' High School, Benin between 1949 and 1953. He later taught fine arts (his main interest) at the same school between 1953 and 1957 before proceeding to Ondo town, where he was employed as an art teacher at Ondo Boys' High School in 1957. He gained admission to study painting at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria in 1957 and graduated with a diploma in 1961. His classmates included Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko and Simon Okeke, who all were awarded scholarships for higher studies overseas. Unfortunately, Onobrakpeya was not given such an opportunity. The incident inspired him to improve his artistic career and creative abilities. He apprenticed to Ben Enwoiwu in 1962 and enrolled for an art teachers' certificate course in 1963. After completing the course, he taught fine art at St. Gregory's College, Lagos between 1963 and 1980. He also participated in local workshops in Ibadan and Osogbo between 1962 and 1967, as well as in Maine in the United States in 1975.

#### Impact of workshop experiments on the origin of his etching techniques

Onobrakpeya was not content with the pictorial art techniques he acquired in formal art school. He delved into printmaking (at informal workshop trainings) until his efforts blossomed into an epoxy-base etching technique. Onobrakpeya (2007) noted that his conversion to etch-making as a means of artistic



Ben Onobrakpeya, *Oshun and Her Associates*,  
61 x 80cm, Photograph, 1973



While painting and sculpture started with naturalism in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts of artists such as Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan and Justus Akereleolu, the epoxy-base etching method developed by Onobrakpeya started with abstraction. The reasons for this difference are not far-fetched. Onobrakpeya's etching method started at a workshop experiment in which emphasis was not placed on representational ability while the motifs, patterns and imageries used by the participants were drawn from traditional African shrines, mythology, dreams, folktales and lore, all which were basically easy to render using abstract images. More so, the etching method is hard to manipulate for achieving realism and naturalism.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, therefore, began the epoxy-base etching technique in 1967 by printing only abstract images in works such as *Beauty in the Wild*, a 38cm x 23.5cm deep-etching produced in 1967, and *Eclipse*, a 38cm x 26.5cm deep-etching produced in 1968.



Bruce Onobrakpeya: *Rain and Cry at Otorogba*, 45.3 x 61cm, Photograph

By 1970, Onobrakpeya started to stylise forms in some of his works. Examples are *The Seven Hunters*, a 45cm x 60cm deep-etching produced in 1970; *Obioma and Reconstruction*, a 61cm x 46cm deep-etching produced in 1973; and *Ruin and Cry at Otorogba*, a 45.5cm x 61cm deep-etching produced in 1975. They all depict human figures in profile.

In *The Seven Hunters*, Onobrakpeya depicts hunters who, on the orders of their king, undertook a long journey to mount Langbodo. Portrayed in a fixed, almost squatting stance and with disproportionate small figures, they carry their guns on their shoulders.

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The artist placed more emphasis on the decorative quality and the element of forms than on the use of space. The pigments he applied on the human forms appear as decorations, and the one-directional movement of the hunters with the intervening distance between the background and foreground creates a quality of tense, restricted space. The print is derived from the Yoruba oral narrative, *Hunters in the Forest of Ten Thousand Demons*, by D O Fagunwa.

The print, *Obioma and Reconstruction*, was made as a special tribute to itinerant Igbo tailors who were noticed in large numbers in the south-western part of Nigeria soon after the end of the civil war. They carried their sewing machines on their shoulders as they moved from house to house patching clothes. Onobrakpeya depicted the highly stylised figures of the tailors against a yellow background in order to enhance the overall beauty of the print. The forms symbolize hard work, dignity, honesty of purpose



Rude Olumiran (O' Zaro), 125 x 85cm, Calligraphic on Canvas, 2008

and patience. This symbolic message has, however, won Onobrakpeya many commissions that border on the theme, *One People, One Destiny*. One of such commissions is the design of a postage stamp he made for the Federal Government of Nigeria in the 1970s.

The print *Rain and Cry at Otorogbo* portrays an actual incident showing mood, mysticism

and metaphysical aura, which precipitated the expression of grief and tragedy. The incident took place when Onobrakpeya was on a visit to his mother's village at Otorogba in August, 1973. In the print, he depicted the procession of a family mourning the death of one of their members. Onobrakpeya (2003) described the incident as follows:

We are roused from a welcome ceremony by a cry of Johni Gwura! In a drizzle, the dead body of Johni, which was supported on a bicycle ambulance by close relatives was being pushed from Oguu Ovie where he died. Johni's wives and mourners followed. They beat their breasts and flung their hands over their heads as a sign of deep grief.

The artist depicted the image of an owl, which he attached to an umbrella motif. In African society, the image of the owl symbolises witchcraft. Onobrakpeya introduced this motif probably to reinforce the African belief that witches, who are regarded as having supernatural or magical power and knowledge through contact with the devil or a minor evil spirit, are the cause of mysterious deaths.

Some of the artists who adopted his etching techniques through workshop experiments also printed abstract images before changing to realism, naturalism or stylized forms. A study of some of Onobrakpeya's disciples gave the researcher

sufficient knowledge of what obtained in the entire population. This enabled him to generalise after observing an adequate sample from the rest of the population. It enabled him to obtain quicker results in his study than if he had had to cover all his disciples. Subsequently, only three out of a myriad of etchers mentored by Onobrakpeya through teaching and workshop experiments are discussed in this study. The artists were randomly selected. They are: David Dale, his former student at



Moses Unokwah: Dada-Man's Inspiration, Aspirations and Fulfillment, 20 x 50cm, Plastergraph, 2006

St. Gregory's College; Moses Unokwah, a studio assistant at his regular workshop in Ovuomaroro Gallery; and Abiodun Okemakinde, a participant at his annual Harmattan workshop experiments.

It has been established that Onobrakpeya began the epoxy-base etching method in 1967 at a workshop experiment where freedom is given to participants to develop new ideas. However, he found it difficult to achieve naturalism or realism with the new

etching method. He, therefore, printed only abstract images but by 1979 he began to stylise forms in his prints. Later developments revealed the fact that those who adopted his etching methods occasionally oscillated between stylisation, naturalism and abstraction.

Despite different efforts made by some of these etchers to get out of the abstract tendency, most of the works produced by them still lean heavily on distorted forms, which seem to have derived from the workshop origin of the epoxy-base etching methods. Four epoxy-base etching techniques have been introduced. These are Plastography, in which images are engraved with epoxy resin; Thermoplastography, where images are engraved with plastic resin; Additive Plastography, in which images are drawn with epoxy resin before colours are added to enhance the beauty of the print; and Collagraphy, where paper and other odds and ends are pasted with epoxy resin. Onobrakpeya has used his workshop experiments at Agbarha-Otor to transfer the skills and techniques of his etching to budding artists. The workshop impartation approach has strengthened the popularity of these techniques within and outside Nigeria. The art tradition of Nigeria will be stronger if the same approach adopted by Onobrakpeya at his workshop experiments is utilized in the training of artists in both formal and informal art schools. Both art schools and the different arms of government need to partner with Onobrakpeya's workshop centres for cross-fertilisation of ideas and for further development of etching methods.

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