

THREE BRONZE SCULPTURES

by
Abayomi Barber



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The three sculptures were created at different periods by Abayomi Barber. 'Pam Bo To Riboto' was completed in London in 1965 using clay. 'The lady and her dreams' was done in Lagos in 1975 using cement, while 'Dr. Sugomu' was also sculpted in Lagos in 1971 in plaster.





THE ARTIST

Born in 1928, Barber is one of Nigeria's most significant artists. He is a painter, sculptor and art teacher. He began painting and sculpting at an early age and was inspired by nature and the Ife figurines that were all around him. He studied briefly in Nigeria, before he was sent to the UK by the Government, to study art under a unique government art scholarship.

From 1961 to 1971, he lived in the UK, occasionally attending art seminars, painting and working on Obafemi Awolowo's sculpture. In 1971, he returned to lecture at the University of Lagos and became the guiding light and mentor for an informal afro-surrealist school of art known as the Barber School.

Barber, in recent times, has been known more for his paintings than his sculptures. His surrealist artworks have become famous for their inventive hyperrealism, exploring the multi-dimensionality of life and rendering landscapes in new interesting ways.

Yet Barber was a sculptor first. Many of his early pieces were sculptures. His first commission by the government of the Western Region was for a sculpture. In England, in the 1960s he worked for many years as a sculptor.

While his canvases may have become more popular in recent years, in his sculptures one can discover Barber's exacting hand and mind, his ability to explore the contours of the human form and his storytelling. In his sculptures he tells stories about people and life in a way that's very different from what he is able to convey on canvas.

THE PROCESS



The original casts

In 2012 we decided to work with Barber to fully realize these sculptures in bronze as he'd originally envisioned them.

These three sculptures seemed to have one thing in common - they were, in a sense, diamonds in the rough, almost fully realized but not quite. They had been envisioned as proper bronze sculptures but somehow Barber kept hold of them through the years never quite taking them to the final stage.

In 2012 we decided to work with him to change this. Our job was to find the right foundry to convert these sculptures from cast to bronze in a way that would keep his original idea intact, create pieces that were of a very high quality and recreate these sculptures in the most interesting way.

We had a few false starts but eventually we decided to work with the famed UK foundry – Castle Art Bronze foundry in Wales. Castle Art has over the years done a wide variety of bronze work large and small for many UK artists and we were sure they would have the experience and expertise to fully realize these pieces.

Most of it was easy. We just let Castle Art bring their expertise to bear. Choosing the right patina was a bit more complicated though. We didn't want the traditional bronze-brown patina. Barber was never really a traditional artist. We wanted something that reflected this non-traditional bias of the artist. We also wanted a patina that would be unusual, interesting and would complement the forms.

In one case, for the sculpture 'The lady and her dreams' we had to change patinas midway, as the original choice didn't quite work. We went from an orange-brown to a more subtle white-grey tone that resembled the original cement hue.

We also decided to use a slate base instead of the traditional wood base. The idea was to create a base that would be solid yet elegant. We wanted the base to be neutral enough to not influence the artwork, yet strong enough to create the right framework.





At the foundry





Dr. Sugomu

On the face of it, the sculpture 'Dr. Sugomu' appears to show a well-built young man sitting on a rock. One might mistake it for a sculpture of a seated model, or a sculpture of a conquering African. It is neither of these. It's a man thinking... well, day-dreaming, really. It is a cautionary tale about sloth, vanity and waste.

It's the story of a man 'Dr. Sugomu' – an invented name – who while intelligent, strong and blessed, decides he'd rather dream about the things he would do someday than actually do them. So he remains mired in the rock he sits on, vainly counting his future accomplishments, encouraging everyone to refer to him as Doctor, since, no doubt, he would earn a doctorate in no time, once he gets to it.

It's a cautionary tale, yet for the artist a sort of encouragement to act, to create and to build rather than to dream about these things. It's also an interesting study of the human form showing Barber's eye for detail.

The sculpture was done as a plaster cast in 1971 shortly after Barber returned to Nigeria from the United Kingdom.

1971, 12" with base



1971, 12" with base



1971, 12" with base



1975, 14" with base

The lady and Her Dreams

The sculpture, 'The lady and her dreams' was done directly in cement in 1975, at the University of Lagos, where Barber taught at the time. This somewhat surrealistic artwork follows the same daydreaming theme as 'Dr. Sugomu' but explores it in a more positive light.

The artwork shows a young women, her hair done in the fashionable mode of the time, her hands on her chin, daydreaming about the life ahead for her - work, success, suitors, romance.

It's on one level reminiscent of a typical sculpture of a woman in repose. But this being Barber, it can't really be typical. He reconfigures this idea in his surrealistic way. The hands seem to have a life of their own emerging from the rock to hold up the head like a base of some sort holding up an object. While head and hand are intertwined, they seem to be two separate entities.

It's a sculpture about hope, beauty and youth.



1975, 14" with base



1975, 14" with base



1965, 14" width

Pam Bo To Riboto

This is one of Barber's early sculptures done in 1965 in London. It's essentially an African take on the Madonna and child theme, a common theme in renaissance art. In the end the work isn't really distinctly African. There are no strong African visual cues here. Yet in a strange sense it is African, but African in a cosmopolitan sort of way.

The work is architectural in structure – all straight lines, angles and simple forms. This isn't his usual style. He had decided to experiment with a more linear feel for this particular sculpture. The simplicity belies the deep thought that would have gone into its conception and the idea of simplifying the simplest and most enduring of bonds – the bond between mother and child.

The title 'Pam Bo To Riboto' comes from an old Yoruba lullaby that starts with 'Pam Bo To Riboto' (a no-meaning percussive sound) and continues with 'M'Ogbe omo jo' - I dance with my baby. Mothers would sing the song to their infants while swaying them gently to lull them to sleep. The song, like the artwork touches on an indefinable tie mothers have with their infants



1965, 14" width



1965, 14" width

THE SCULPTOR

In 1961, the young Barber got a scholarship that was, in part, based on a commission by the Government of the Western Region to create a large sculpture of Obafemi Awolowo. He was, at the time, first and foremost, a sculptor. He still is, at heart, a sculptor; as these artworks hope to prove.

