



*A toothless old man smiles
at Jesus and the children.
They're seated next to
a pretty young girl
whose friend's name is B'anu*

4 Sculptures by Abayomi Barber Part 2



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by
Abayomi Barber
Part 2

The
HourGlass
GALLERY

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The Idea

In 2013 we decided to 'complete' several sculptures that the great artist, Abayomi Barber, had created in the sixties and early seventies. He had created the moulds for these sculptures in clay and cement, hoping to eventually convert them into proper bronze sculptures. As with many things in life, other projects, time and distractions meant he never quite completed these pieces. They remained decaying in his studio. We felt it would be an egregious waste to have these fine sculptures crumble and disappear, so we worked with him to ultimately create a set of limited edition bronze sculptures. The four sculptures proved rather popular, and we thought it might be an excellent idea to finish another set of four. We have. And we are delighted with the result. Barber is delighted. And, hopefully, you will be as well.

Dozie Igweze



Ali Maigoro, 1972, Height 5.5" width 4"

The idea for 'Ali Maigoro' would not on the face of it have seemed like a certainty for a successful sculpture. It is, after all, the bust of a somewhat unattractive, weather beaten man with missing teeth. Probably not the most attractive notion for a sculpture. But then you add the infectious grin, the hint of mischief, the wrinkle around his eyes from years of laughter, and you get something entirely different; something charming, honest and endearing.

It's the sort of sculpture that means different things to different people. When the then President of Nigeria, Yakubu Gowon, saw a version of the sculpture at an exhibition organised by the National Gallery, he was fascinated by it, but also worried that it seemed to give the wrong impression of the North as illiterate and uncivilized. This, for him, was an uncomfortable dilemma. The wizened old Northern man evoked joy, but also at least, in his eyes, a certain crudeness.

For Barber, the idea of Ali Maigoro may have been like a blanket on a chilly night. Homesick in London in the early sixties, he fantasized about Nigeria - the peace, the simple life, the people, the warmth. He decided to create a sculpture to capture these feelings of warmth and simplicity. This became Ali Maigoro (an invented name). The old northern man with the missing teeth, the warm smile and the wise eyes became for him a symbol of the Nigeria he missed.

He would go on to do several versions of 'Ali Maigoro' over the years. This one, completed in 1972 upon his return to Nigeria, is the smallest version, capturing the charm of the old man's face in a calm, understated way.



Ali Maigoro, 1972, Height 5.5" width 4"



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Ali Maigoro, 1972, Height 5.5" width 4"

B'anu, 1967, Height 10" width 6.5"

Many artists find their inspiration in the people around them - children, wives, friends, lovers. Some of Barber's most remarkable sculptures and drawings from his time in London were inspired by the young women he associated with - his friends, his lovers and eventually, his wife.

Barber met B'anu in the late fifties, in Ife. He was fascinated by her beauty. And equally fascinated by the beauty of B'anu's mother, who he thought was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met. He developed a close relationship with B'anu and while he never got to create an artwork of her mother, he would create several artworks of B'anu.

This sculpture was created in England in 1967, where they met again as friends. The sculpture is on some level a combination of several things. There is the model, B'anu. it's a representation of her. There is also the homage to the British sculptor, Oscar Nemon, in whose studio Barber worked at the time. The sculpture mimicked Nemon's semi-cubist style of portraiture, with its affection for angular edges. It's also a tribute to Ife women in general, bearing an interesting resemblance to earlier examples of Ife female busts. It is part portraiture, part history, part homage, and in the same way as Ali Maigoro, part nostalgia.



B'anu, 1967, Height 10" width 6.5"



B'anu, 1967, Height 10" width 6.5"



B'au, 1967, Height 10" width 6.5"



B'anu, 1967, Height 10" width 6.5"

Jesus and the Children, 1995, Height 10” width 7”

Barber and Nemon seem to have an interesting similarity. Nemon in his lifetime was perhaps the truest artistic biographer of Winston Churchill, creating a wide variety of Churchill busts in all sorts of media. Barber would be the equivalent for Obafemi Awolowo.

His association with Awolowo started in the late fifties, when Awolowo arranged to have him employed by the Yoruba Historical Research Society as a means to nurture his artistic talent. He would go on to the UK on a scholarship, tasked with creating a life-size statue of Awolowo for the Government of Western Nigeria. This would necessitate various sittings and studies in his studio and in Awolowo's home. A relationship, along with many portraits and busts, would develop over the years.

In 1995, Awolowo was commissioning his home chapel and asked Barber to develop a statue that would be placed near the altar. Both men considered a variety of ideas before settling on the idea of “Jesus and the Children”, with the seated Jesus surrounded by children. This idea was from the bible passage where Jesus asks for the children to be allowed to come to him.

This sculpture was created as a miniature version of what would be a much larger sculpture. The exquisitely detailed sculpture stays true to the image of Christ, then uses African children in place of what would typically be Caucasian children. It's a subtle change, easy to miss if one doesn't pay close attention. It was his way of locating the idea of Christian faith firmly in our culture. It was also, in its own way, about the universality of Christ's warmth.

It's an elegant sculpture; beautiful in its attention to detail; restrained, yet warm and welcoming. The larger sculpture was never executed, but this one probably captures, in a way a bigger sculpture might not have achieved, the intimacy of faith.



Jesus and the Children, 1995, Height 10" width 7"



Jesus and the Children, 1995, Height 10" width 7"



Jesus and the Children, 1995, Height 10" width 7"



Jesus and the Children, 1995, Height 10" width 7"

Seated Girl, 1972, Height 7.5" width 5.5"

The sculpture 'Seated Girl' is probably a hybrid of two distinct pursuits. In the seventies and eighties, Barber, in his role as the main art teacher in the University of Lagos, would have had to create numerous studies of seated models in the course of teaching his students.

Over the years, he has also focused on paintings exploring the African woman, sometimes from myth — like Yemoja — and sometimes just everyday people — dancers, traders, mothers. The sculpture melds these traditions, to create a study of a girl that works both as a female study and as an exploration of African femininity.



Seated Girl, 1972, Height 7.5" width 5.5"



Seated Girl, 1972, Height 7.5" width 5.5"



Seated Girl, 1972, Height 7.5" width 5.5"

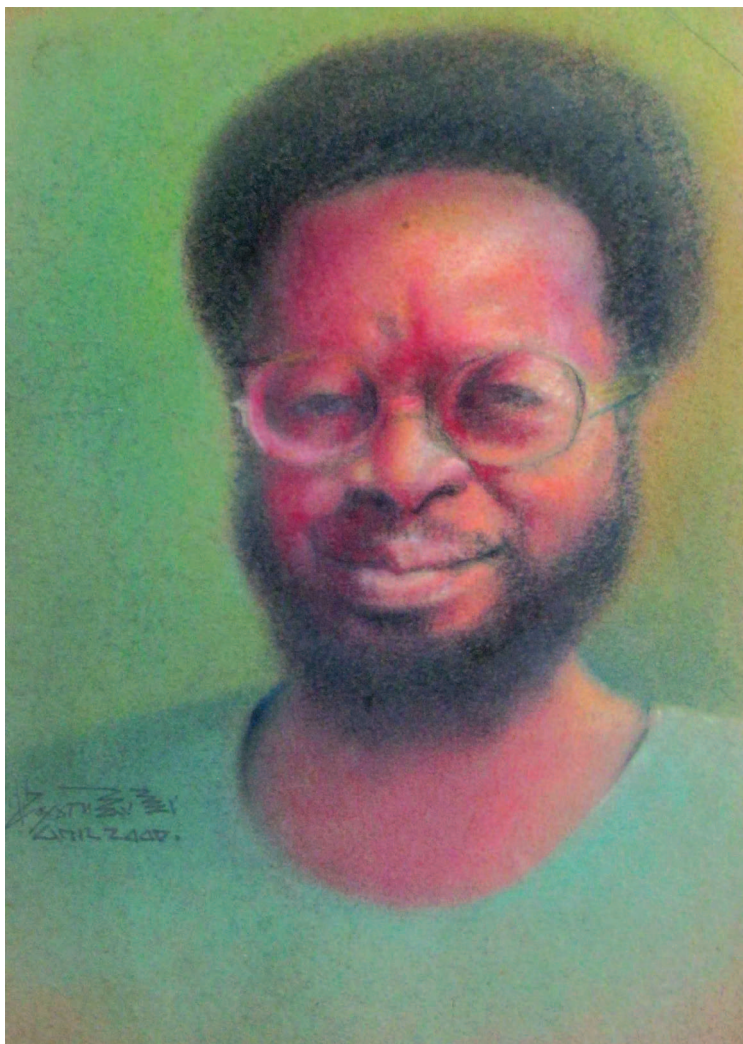


Seated Girl, 1972, Height 7.5" width 5.5"

Production

The bronze works were forged in a foundry in Gloucestershire, England. We could have produced them in Benin, where there are certainly many competent bronze casters. However, we wanted a different sort of patina – warm orange shades, dense green shades for instance. We didn't want the usual. We wanted to create these sculptures in the way Barber had earlier imagined them: as unusual, quirky, living embodiments of Nigerian life, executed with great attention to detail, right down to the quality of the slate stone bases.

We are happy to have brought the lovely Ife Princess B'anu, the laughing Ali Magoro, the peaceful Seated Girl, and the welcoming Jesus back to life. We hope you enjoy them.



The Artist

Born in 1928, Abayomi 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 life figurines that were all around him. He studied briefly in Nigeria, before he was sent to the UK by the Nigerian Government, to study art under a unique government art scholarship. From 1961 to 1971, he lived in the UK, occasionally attending art seminars and working on Obafemi Awolowo's sculpture and painting. 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 for his sculptures. His surrealistic artworks have become famous for their inventive hyperrealism, exploring as they do the multi-dimensionality of life and rendering landscapes in new interesting ways.

Yet, Barber was a sculptor first and foremost. 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.



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