

# BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA

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In the always lively and frequently flamboyant Lagos art scene there is one man whose quiet presence is pretty well taken for granted. His outward reserve is misleading. It conceals a resolute intent and an impressive record as a creative artist. In the seven years since his arrival in Lagos, Bruce Onobrakpeya has had seven one-man shows, taught art, executed murals and book illustrations and been a prolific painter and printmaker.

In the last few years he has won particular praise for his low relief sculpture, another aspect of his flexible talent. Working in this medium led him into other experiments as a printmaker and resulted in a series of deeply embossed linocuts and etchings. A collection of these etchings was recently shown in the United States in February and March of 1971 at American University, Washington, D.C.

Onobrakpeya is one of a number of talented Nigerians who were a part of an exciting epoch in Lagos. After independence and before the war there was a lively cultural exchange between artists in all fields, with reciprocal inspiration and participation in various artistic productions. In the midst of this largely urban phenomenon, Onobrakpeya was able to draw on his own Urhobo mythology and imagery from the area of the midwest Niger delta, using them as ingredients for a contemporary perspective. He describes his efforts as "an attempt to create a synthesis. I try to speak to the present about the future and in the process choose what I wish from the past... Nigerian legends, myths and religious philosophies powerfully imaginative and inspiring."

Born in Agbara-Oto near Ughelli in the Midwest, Onobrakpeya first went to school in Sapele and later in Benin. The four years following graduation he taught art in high schools in Ondo and Benin. In 1957 he went to Zaria and completed the four-year course at the then Nigerian College of Technology. A year later he was awarded the post-graduate art teacher's certificate and was appointed art master for St. Gregory's College.

His interest in etching began when he was invited to attend an etching workshop conducted by the Dutch artist, Ru van Rossem, at the Mbari Mbayo Club in Oshogbo. While many painters with academic training are quite naturally reluctant to admit that accomplished work can occur by way of workshop shortcuts, Onobrakpeya is one of those who sees the work of the self-trained artist objectively and as a source of inspiration. Working alongside previously

untrained participants in a stimulating atmosphere, some of his finest work emerged and the experience had a liberating effect. Eventually successful sales of his prints enabled him to import an etching press, and in 1967 he began producing color etchings. He is not only a meticulous craftsman, but he keeps a detailed and accurate record of each issue he produces. However, he says, "I do not produce prints just for the joy of getting many copies of an idea. Often I never go beyond three successful pulls. Concepts are sometimes enriched by accidental results. Print-making should not be dull routine. I like to improvise, to leave room for discoveries. This is why I run experimental series".

His latest, most imposing work is a series of twelve eight-by-four foot paintings for St. Paul's Church in Ebute Metta, Lagos. He spent months planning the project and completed it in eight weeks vacation time, a strenuous test of endurance. In these paintings he created a new African version of the stations of the cross, interpreting the passion of Christ as a drama of victorious sacrifice. He painted the cross not as a "tree of shame, but as a triumphant banner throughout" (*St. Paul's Church Bulletin*). He has recently been asked to illustrate the official Nigerian catechism.

Many sides of his nature are apparent in his works. His painting *Leopard in a Cornfield* (see cover) captivates children as well as adults with its colorful spontaneity and amusing combination of elements. As this painting suggests, he delights in the whimsical, the incongruous and the mysterious. This feeling of mystery—where are the *Travellers* going; what is the secret in *Have You Heard*—is enhanced by the richly textured surfaces and the exquisite sensitivity to detail.

His energetic search for uncharted forms and design directions and the high degree of craftsmanship he maintains are indicative of the kind of dedication he brings to his work. At its best it is expressionist in character and sets a mood that is almost melancholic. It should not come as a surprise that he claims another source of inspiration: "Nature is rich with many tiny beautiful things. Sometimes they are so tiny that the ordinary man propelled by the 'jet-age' spirit can hardly notice them. An artist has a duty to draw attention to them". This is certainly a part of his achievement. In addition and perhaps more significantly, Bruce Onobrakpeya has already resolved the conflict of identity, an inherent problem for an artist of contemporary vision, and is now building on his rich heritage. □