

THE Current

February 18, 2009

[Andrea Estrada](#)

UCSB Art Historian Publishes Monograph on African Artist Ben Enwonwu

During the period from 1950 to 1965, Ben Enwonwu was the most famous artist of African ancestry anywhere in the world. He produced a sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II, traveled to the United States as a guest of the Harmon Foundation and the State Department, and exhibited his work alongside those of Pablo Picasso and other prominent modernists. More than 45 years later, however, Enwonwu has fallen into relative obscurity.

Now, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, an associate professor of art history at UC Santa Barbara, has written a monograph on the life and work of Enwonwu. Titled "Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist" (The University of Rochester Press, 2008), it is the first significant biography published about this modern African artist.

"His pedigree justifies the need to produce a coherent narrative of his life and career," said Ogbechie, who first began studying the artist 21 years ago and took advantage of historical data to document Enwonwu's life. "I have focused on evaluating the traces of Enwonwu in the primary records and using that to interpret his art. Let's look at what was said about him during his own lifetime and from that see what we can learn about his work."

Born in Nigeria in 1917, Enwonwu studied fine arts at Goldsmiths College and the Slade School of Fine Arts of the University of London. He was a premier African modernist and a pioneer whose career opened the way for the postcolonial proliferation and increased visibility of African art. A painter and sculptor, his work has been exhibited around the world, including such venues as London's Berkeley galleries, Howard University, the Goethe-Institut, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

In the decades between Enwonwu's birth and death, modernization produced new political structures and new forms of expression in African cultures, inspiring important developments in modern African art. Within this context, Ogbechie evaluates important issues such as the role of Anglo-Nigerian colonial culture in the development of modern Nigerian art, and Enwonwu's involvement with international discourses of modernism in Europe, Africa, and the United States over a period of 50 years.

A specialist in classical, modern, and contemporary African and African Diaspora arts, Ogbechie received his master's degree from the University of Nigeria and his doctorate degree from Northwestern University. His research evaluates alternative modernities, and the colonial and postcolonial conventions of representation in the arts and visual cultures of African and African Diaspora populations. His articles and reviews have appeared in *African Arts*, *Arts Journal*, *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *Revue Noire*, *Ijele*, *Farafina*, and several important art history anthologies.

A curator and consultant for many premier international exhibitions of modern and contemporary African art, Ogbechie has also published extensively on African art history, has lectured at major American and international venues, and has been cited by the Smithsonian Institution and the City of Philadelphia for his contributions to the 2004 Philadelphia Echoes of Africa cultural program.

Ogbechie is the founder and director of Achron Knowledge Systems, which includes the publishing imprint Achron Editions and *Critical Interventions*, a journal of African Art Theory and Criticism. He organized and coordinated the First International Nollywood Convention and Symposium in 2005, which evaluated new media in contemporary African visual culture from the perspective of the internationally acclaimed Nigerian Video Film Industry. He has also served as editor for *Nka*, *African Arts*, *Critical Interventions*, and *Ijele*, the principal journals of

contemporary African arts and visual culture.

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