

“Anonymous” Has a Name

African artists were far from anonymous. Known to patrons and the people living in their communities and nearby towns, few are known today because early ethnographers rarely asked “Who made this?” Consequently, African works of art are identified by an art style or the name of the ethnic group that produced them.

The focus of this exhibition is on a Yoruba sculptor whose fame extended far beyond Isẹ, the town in the Ekiti region of southwestern Nigeria in which he lived. A highly successful artist, he was active from the early 1900s until his death (circa 1938) carving objects commissioned by the

rulers and wealthy families from the Ekiti-Yoruba kingdoms. His art, if not his name, even reached Great Britain. In 1924 an elaborately carved and decorated door from the palace of the Ogògà (king) of Ikẹrẹ was displayed at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. In 1925, at the close of the exhibition and with the consent of the Ogògà, the British Museum acquired the door, which has since been seen by millions.

His name was Ọlówẹ̀rẹ̀. Better known as Ọlówẹ̀ of Isẹ (pronounced o-lo-way of ee-say), art historians and art collectors throughout the world today consider him the most important Yoruba artist of the 20th century. This exhibition, the first dedicated to Ọlówẹ̀ of Isẹ, demonstrates the sculptor’s unique style of carving and reveals his personal interpretation of the Yoruba canon. The exhibition is accompanied by a monograph that includes a catalogue raisonné of Ọlówẹ̀’s sculpture.

Ọlówẹ̀’s Unique Carving Style

Ọlówẹ̀’s distinct style of carving is apparent when compared with that of other Yoruba sculptors. Contrast, for example, a carved door attributed to Arẹ̀ògún of Osí-Ilọ́rín (fig. 1) with ones by Ọlówẹ̀ (figs. 2–3). Arẹ̀ògún’s door is composed of two rectangular panels divided into registers. As was the custom, the figures carved in shallow relief are raised only a few centimeters from the background and are contained within the overall thickness of the wood. Ọlówẹ̀’s figures, on the other hand, are carved in high and uneven relief. The upper portions of some of the figures, which project as much as 12.7 cm (5 in.) from the background, are carved completely in the round, free of the background. While other Yoruba sculptors typically carved short, static figures in frontal poses, Ọlówẹ̀ sculpted tall, animated figures—some of whose heads faced the viewer while their bodies were posed in profile with one leg crossing the other. Ọlówẹ̀ further energized



Fig. 1

Door (*ilẹkun*). Attributed to Arẹ̀ògún of Osí-Ilọ́rín (d. 1954). Early 20th century. Wood; H. 182.5 cm (71 in.). UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, museum purchase. Photo: Richard Todd

Unless otherwise indicated, all works illustrated are by Ọlówẹ̀ of Isẹ (c. 1875–c. 1938). Dimensions for height only are given.

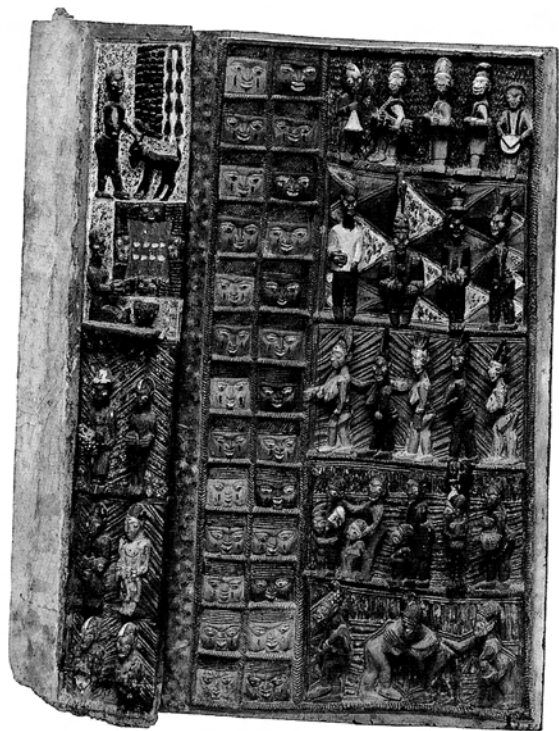


Fig. 2
Palace door (*ilèkun ààfin*). Palace of the Ogògà, Ikèrè, c. 1925.
Wood, pigment; H. 190.5 cm (74⁷/₈ in.). Detroit Institute of Arts,
gift of Bethea and Irwin Green in honor of the 20th anniversary of
the Department of African, Oceanic and New World Cultures.
Photo: © The Detroit Institute of Arts

his compositions by carving opposing geometric patterns in relief and applying bold polychromy.

An important element of Ọlówẹ's oeuvre included the posts he sculpted to support the roofs of the verandas surrounding the courtyards within the palaces (fig. 4). In addition, he carved figures, containers, musical instruments, and toys.

Ọlówẹ was an imaginative and highly skilled sculptor. A kneeling female figure holding an offering bowl that he carved around the turn of the century exemplifies these qualities (fig. 5). While the kneeling female is striking with her extraordinarily long neck and elaborate hairstyle that extend her height further, it is the large offering bowl that draws attention. Female figures circling the edge of the base support the container on their upraised and overlap-

ping arms, which form a lattice. The dome-shaped lid is decorated with a pair of birds facing one another and the entire surface of the bowl is carved with geometric patterns. The design and imagery are unique in Yoruba art.

With the exception of the lid, this complex sculpture was carved from a single piece of wood, as is usual in African art. Ọlówẹ, however, demonstrates further his superior skill and talent by carving a bearded human head within the "cage" created by the ring of kneeling caryatids. Although the head can be moved about, it cannot be removed from the cage.

Some time later, Ọlówẹ carved another version of the bowl with a kneeling figure (fig. 6). Equally complex in design, this one introduces new icons to Yoruba art. The four dancing girls holding each other by the shoulder on the lid, as well as the male and female figures supporting



Fig. 3
Palace door (*ilèkun ààfin*).
Palace of the Arínjalè, Isè,
c. 1904-10. Wood, pigment;
H. 221.3 cm (87³/₁₆ in.).
National Museum of African
Art, gift of Dr. and Mrs.
Robert H. Kuhn, 88-13-1.
Photo: Franko Khoury

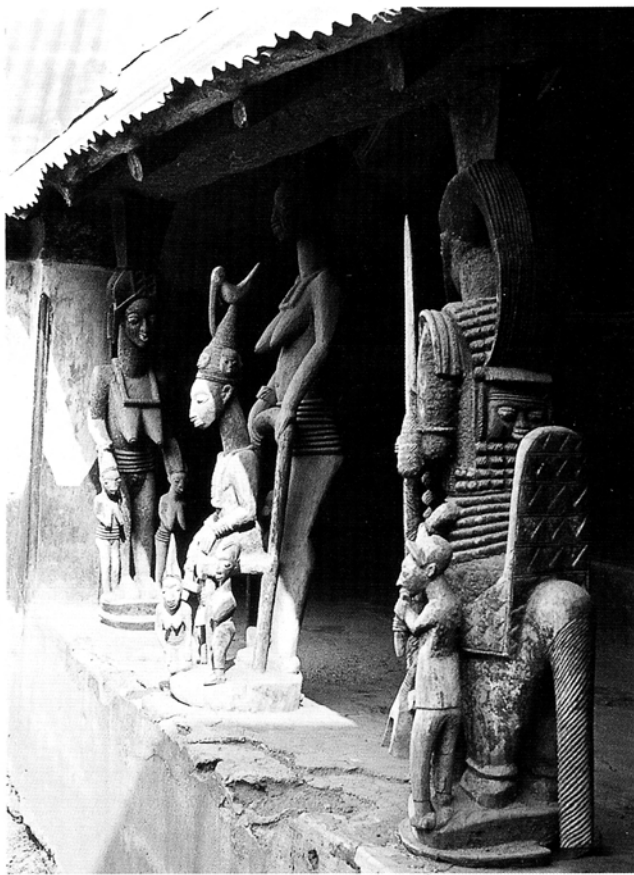


Fig. 4

Veranda posts that were carved c. 1910–14 and installed in the reception courtyard of the Palace of the Ogôgà in Ikêrê. Photo: John Picton 1964, reproduced with thanks to the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments

the offering bowl are Ọlówẹ's invention. Although male supports can be found in Yoruba art—they appear on bowls used to store palm nuts for Ifá divination—*nude* males *kneeling* challenge convention. In the Yoruba canon, fully clothed males are depicted standing and females kneeling, unless the latter represent royalty. If the context in which this bowl was used were precisely known, perhaps what seems to be a radical image of the male could be understood.

Reconstructing the Artist's Biography

Ọlówẹ lived at a time before vital statistics were routinely recorded in Nigeria or interviewing artists was customary. Because he neither signed his work nor kept a diary or bills of sales, we cannot rely on the art historical sources that would typically provide information. Yet, we can retrieve valuable information about Ọlówẹ's life and art from other sources, including the written accounts of Europeans who encountered the artist and his work, photographs, memories preserved by Ọlówẹ's family, and the *oríkì*, an indigenous oral account recorded in the Yoruba language.

Ọlówẹ was born circa 1875 in the town of Èfọn-Alaiyẹ, once a major artistic center in Yorubaland. He spent most of his life in Isẹ where he was initially engaged as a messenger at the court of the Arínjalẹ (king) of Isẹ. It is not known when, where, and with whom he apprenticed to learn his craft or if he was self-taught, as his descendants claim. His career as a sculptor, however, seems to have begun at Isẹ and his fame spread throughout eastern Yorubaland. He was summoned by royal patrons living within a radius of 96.75 kilometers (60 miles) of Isẹ to carve veranda posts, doors, and other objects. Ọlówẹ's accomplishments are all the more remarkable when one considers how difficult it must have been to travel such distances before the advent of modern transportation.

Accounts of Ọlówẹ's physical appearance are contradictory, describing him as tall, short, dark, fair, handsome, and ugly! All accounts agree, however, that he was extraordinarily strong. Philip A. Allison (1907–91), a British forester and the only European who has left an account of meeting the artist, thought he was about 60 years old when they met accidentally in 1937. He recalled a very fit man, who was “strong like a hunter.”¹ Ọlówẹ's *oríkì* declares that he “carves the *irókò* tree with the ease of carving a calabash.”² A reference to *Chlorophora excelsa*, (also *Milicia excelsa*), *irókò* is an iron-hard wood often referred to as African oak that Ọlówẹ used for carving doors and veranda posts. Practically insect resistant, *irókò* is used in modern building construction and for furniture making.



Fig. 5
Bowl with figures, early 20th century. Wood, pigment; H. 54.5 cm (21 1/2 in.). Courtesy of the Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection. Photo: Jess Allen

Although Ọ́lówẹ's art was highly valued by his own people during his lifetime, times were changing in Nigeria, the result of contact with Western culture. In the new cultural era, royal residences were no longer the largest, most impressive buildings in the town or the "fountain of the culture of its kingdom."³ Members of foreign government bodies, corporations, and other institutions and indigent people who prospered in the new society built Western-style mansions. Modern building techniques and materials eliminated the need for sculpted wood posts to support the roof, and carpentry doors replaced those that would have been carved by a local sculptor. Ọ́lówẹ's art thus became old fashioned and unnecessary.

Ọ́lówẹ, however, was not forgotten. In 1946 Yoruba



Fig. 6
Bowl with figures, c. 1925. Wood, pigment; H. 63.7 cm (25 1/16 in.). National Museum of African Art, bequest of William A. McCarty-Cooper, 95-10-1. Photo: Franko Khoury

kings attending a conference at Ikẹrẹ, the site of one of his major commissions, honored Ọ́lówẹ's memory by sending a wreath to his grave. In his honor, Ọ́lówẹ's descendants in Isẹ annually celebrate the festival of Ogun, the "patron saint" of Yoruba sculptors and blacksmiths. His works have been acquired by museums and private collections in Europe, the United States, and Nigeria since the early 20th century, and individual sculptures have been featured in exhibitions since that time. An artist of universal appeal, Ọ́lówẹ of Isẹ was unique among Yoruba artists and remains without peer.

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