

# REFLECTION ON THE WOOD SCULPTURE TRADITION OF THE NSUKKA ART DEPARTMENT

**Odoh, George C. and Anikpe, Ekene A.**

*DEPARTMENT OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA*

## **Abstract**

As an expressive creative medium, wood has been exploited by various art cultures. The sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department, has engaged this creative resource in diverse ways, to make profound artistic statements. This essay reflects on the wood sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department. It discusses the history and creative philosophy of the Nsukka Art Department. In addition to showing how this philosophy and other factors have impacted on the art department's sculpture tradition, it specifically examines the various ways in which wood has been appropriated in sculptural processes. Visual and textual materials were relied on and these, were analyzed, using historical and stylistic approaches. Results show that the creative philosophy of the Nsukka Art Department, which emphasizes exploration, experimentation and intellectualization, as important components of the creative process, has engendered a unique and radical approach to the use of wood in art creation. The immense creative possibilities that wood offers, account for its resilience in art creation.

## **Introduction**

Wood has prominently featured in the creative processes of various art cultures. The appraisal of traditional African art as well as contemporary African art, show that it has found extensive usage in the creation of various objects which satisfy aesthetic and utilitarian purposes. The centrality of wood to traditional African sculptural processes affirms its viability as an expressive medium. In acknowledging geographical zones where this medium is predominantly used in Africa, Tansey and De la Croix (1976) notes:

Although nearly all African peoples have produced artists and artworks, only those dwelling in the vast areas drained by the great Niger and Congo rivers, produced the great numbers of sculptures, primarily in wood, that has /sic/ become deservedly famous as "African Art. (p. 435)

The Nsukka Art Department, as used in this essay, to refer to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, thrives on a creative philosophy which lays emphasis on exploration, experimentation and intellectualization, as vital aspects of the creative process. This philosophy, which gained ascendancy in the Nsukka Art Department in 1970 when the university re-opened after the Nigerian civil war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, offered new pathways to art creation.



Guided by the three frameworks mentioned above, the creative culture of the art department, began to reflect unique stylistic traits which have set it apart from other art schools in Nigeria. This stylistic peculiarity cuts across the different areas of specialization such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, visual communication design, textile design and fashion design. Modulated by the domineering influence of this creative philosophy, the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department has witnessed artistic effervescence. It has produced artists, who have made giant strides in the global art stage. Among the various media employed by these artists, wood has played a significant role as an expressive medium of self expression.

In reflecting on the wood sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department, certain questions are raised which not only inquire into the various ways in which wood has been appropriated as a creative medium, but also probe into the various factors which moderate the formalistic and stylistic characteristics of works produced in wood in the art department. The consideration of these questions forms the thrust of this essay.

### **Overview of the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka art department**

The sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department is creatively vibrant and artistically fecund. It is hinged on a creative culture driven by constant experimentation. It also emphasizes the exploration of the environment as potent sources of ideas, materials and forms. In order to gain meaningful insight into the creative trajectory of the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department, appraisal of the history of the Art Department becomes expedient.

Founded in 1961, by the Right Honourable, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Enwonwu College of Art, as the art department was known then, was established to provide a creative platform for the teaching and propagation of indigenous African arts and culture. The artistic exploits of Chief Aina Onabolu, who is widely acknowledged as the progenitor of modern Nigerian art, formed an instrumental launching pad for the realization of this creative vision. According to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the philosophy of the department was to “make this torch of creativity which Aina Onabolu gave us at the dawn of this century brighter and more enlightening to Africa” (as cited in Oloidi, 2002, p. 244). In pursuance of this mandate, art training in the department during the pre-war era embraced instructional methodologies which Oloidi (2002) describes as “very pertinacious and doctrinal in its espousal of Onaboluism, with a very rigid and exultant subservience to and acceptance of naturalism, that is, the British academy tradition of art” (p. 244).

This art curriculum held sway until the onset of the Nigerian civil war in 1967. Propagators of this curriculum were the pioneer staff of the art department which comprised mainly European expatriates, in addition to Akinola Lasekan, a celebrated Nigerian artist, who had worked closely with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as a cartoonist in the *West African Pilot Newspaper* during the struggle for independence.



It is noteworthy that prior to the beginning of the Nigerian Civil war in 1967, John A. U. Nkememena was the only sculpture lecturer in the Enwonwu College of Fine Art.

The re-opening of the Nsukka Art Department in 1970 after the civil war, saw the emergence of a new creative ideology which strongly deviated from the art training tradition of the pre-war era. The new ideology laid emphasis on exploration, experimentation and intellectualization of the creative process, and relied strongly on the appropriation of indigenous cultural resources as potent sources of ideas, materials and forms. In highlighting the break with the art tradition of the pre-war period, Ottenberg (2002), describes the creative attitudes which marked the post war period:

Following this period was a second one that drew heavily on indigenous styles and designs and colors to create images from indigenous life in a selective manner, taking from myths, rituals and other sacred matters, and generally employing European media, with some experimentation with native art materials (p. 21).

In essence, exploration and experimentation with ideas, materials and forms, found in the local environment, became the major focus of art activities in the art department. This, not only radically transformed the creative culture of the department, but continues to propel its course in the global art space.

The creative shift which marked the post-war period is largely attributable to the arrival of Uche Okeke in the art department in 1970. As the then head of department, he used this position to redirect the creative consciousness of both staff and students by implanting the natural synthesis philosophy which he, along with other members of the Zaria Art Society, advocated for between 1958 and 1961. The natural synthesis philosophy proposed a marriage between the best of Nigeria's indigenous culture with the best of foreign influences. His experiments with *uli*, an indigenous art form of body and wall decoration practiced by Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria, became the arrow point of this shift which provided the department with a viable creative alternative. In articulating the differences between the pre-war and post war periods, Oloidi (1985), highlights the significance of Uche Okeke's arrival to the art department:

the pre-war period in the department was saturated mainly with the stylistic and conceptual art philosophy of the Academy through Lasekan; himself a harbinger of Onabolu's naturalism. But the post-war period especially with the arrival of Uche Okeke saw this mode with utmost abhorrence. As the head of department, Uche Okeke rekindled the torch of his Zarianist philosophy and made the new students see the creative implication of what he saw as culturally and socially infertile to their situation. (p. 4)

With the help of other members of staff, the culture of appropriating indigenous cultural resources into modern artistic languages became firmly planted in



the art department where it broadened out to reflect individual responses to the use of basic *uli* forms and attributes as creative ingredients that not only fed the artistic imagination, but ultimately, coalesced into highly expressive and alluring visual imageries. Aniakor (1997) notes, "the central core areas of this transition was in drawing and painting from where it spread to other fields of specialization such as sculpture, graphics design, ceramics and textile designs" (C. Aniakor, personal communication, December 1, 1997). During the implantation stages of this new creative philosophy, the sculpture section, under Uche Okeke's influence, negotiated an interesting turn in so far as modern Nigerian art is concerned. Although Okeke's influence was felt in every other section, the sculpture students celebrated him more. Then, they had just one lecturer, Mr Uko Akpaide, who was employed in the department around 1971. His geometric style of shaping forms did not appeal to them as much as Uche Okeke's organic style did. Another factor which further boosted the creativity of the students was the introduction of a new curriculum which was designed to reflect the culture of the people and make up for lost ground after the civil war. (Onuorah, 2012, pp. 47-48)

In the 1970s, wood carving in the Nsukka art department relied heavily on traditional sculptural processes. The use of power tools was non-existent. Sculptures in wood were monolithic, carved out from blocks of wood and finished mainly with clean chisel marks and sometimes, with improvised abrasives like sand papers, metal scrapers, and broken bottles. Relief or intaglio works were also practiced. The sculpture, *Ekeama* (Plate 1), by Uche Okeke and Samson Uchendu's *Freedom* (Plate 2), created during this period exemplify this. The formalism of Uche Okeke's sculptures which is usually characterized by elongation and stylization of the human anatomy as well as decorative finishes which involve chiselled curvilinear motifs became a recurring artistic signature which was adopted by students throughout this period.

It was not until the mid 1970s, when El Anatsui took up teaching appointment in the department that everyone began to see, not just the explorative tendencies of wood, but the conceptual possibilities of the medium as well. A highly experimentalist artist, Anatsui's introduction of pyrography technique into the sculpture tradition of the art department in the 1980s was revolutionary and ushered in a new dawn in the erstwhile conceptual twilight the section was struggling to break out from. With more than three decades of art teaching experience in the Nsukka Art Department, Anatsui's art career has spawned numerous creative pathways which some of the students who studied under him have traversed in charting new creative frontiers. He stands out as one of the most influential fount and factor on the intellectual and experimentalist attitude of the Nsukka Art Department, more especially, on its sculpture tradition.





**Plate 1: Uche Okeke**  
*Ekeama*, 1971, wood,  
unknown dimension  
© Uche Okeke



**Plate 2: Samson Uchendu**  
*Freedom*, 1979, wood relief,  
dimension unknown  
© Samson Uchendu

In response to present day realities, the art curriculum of the Nsukka Art Department is continually restructured to meet the demands of emergent global art trends. The Art department's *Undergraduate Academic Programme*, revised in 2011, sheds light on some of the courses offered by students specializing in sculpture:

- a) **Sculpture Theory I:** This course is taken by the sculpture students in their penultimate year. The students are introduced to forms of sculpture, types of sculpture and some sculpture processes. Principles of sculpture, materials and technical information on sculpture media are vital aspects of the course.
- b) **Utility Wood Sculpture:** This is another penultimate year course. The focus is on exploring different methods of wood joining, shaping, design and the production of utilitarian objects. Students are encouraged to move beyond the conventional ivory tower sculpture to produce objects like chairs, tables, shelves and other utilitarian objects.
- c) **Sculpture: Mixed Media:** The course is designed to guide students to attempt construction involving an assortment of media such as wood, plastic, metal, clay, rope as well as techniques such as gluing, joining, riveting, welding, soldering etc. Emphasis is placed on the different characteristics and how



they can work together harmoniously. This is a final year course.

- d) **Sculpture Processes: Carving II:** Apart from exposing students to artificial and natural stone, they are also encouraged to explore other media as wood, Styrofoam, among others. This is also a final year course.
- e) **Advanced Exploration of African Sculpture Ideas, Forms and Materials:** Students are directed to consider other possibilities of shaping forms using unconventional methods and materials. Emphasis is placed on the thinking process rather than the end product.
- f) **Sculpture Theory II:** This course involves the study of works of selected sculptors and issues in contemporary sculpture including the latest adventures into new areas of three dimensional arts.

From the above course descriptions, it is easy to understand, the underlying instructional framework of the sculpture section. They also provide useful insights into how art students are expected to relate to sculpture, both as process and product.

Creative responses to the demands of these courses have yielded plethora of innovative sculptural works, which, in their respective conventional and unconventional modes of presentation, show ingenuity, artistry and originality. They equally highlight the level of intellectual and conceptual depths, which have been brought to bear on the creative process. Among the various media used in the sculpture section, wood, occupies a prominent place. Artists, especially those associated with the sculpture tradition of the Art Department, have responded to the creative potentials of wood according to their individual artistic sensibilities. Notwithstanding individual creative idiosyncrasies, their works share a common life force instigated by factors which have shaped the art culture of the department.

Over the years, the Nsukka Art Department has produced sculptors who have made names for themselves at national and international levels. Some of these artists include: Gbugbemi Amanoritsewor, Okay Ikenegbu, Humphrey Onuzulike, Chijioke Onuora, Eva Obodo, Ikechukwu Okenyi, Uchechukwu Onyishi, Bright Eke, Ugochukwu Nzewi, and Ekenechukwu Anazor, just to mention a few. Following in the footsteps of El Anatsui, most of these artists have applied intellectuality, experimentation and exploration as essential creative frameworks. They have appropriated materials from the environment, including wood, as vehicles for processing ideas into visual realities. Some of them have equally taken up teaching



appointments in their alma mater, where they have applied their creative experiences towards the sustenance and growth of the sculpture tradition.

### **Styles, techniques and forms of wood sculptures in the Nsukka Art Department**

As earlier stated, wood plays a vital role in the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department. Various tools are used in producing works in wood. Apart from traditional tools like the African adze, mallet, chisel, and hammer, other tools, such as blow torch, router, gouge, drill, soldering iron, angle grinder, chainsaw and sanding machine, among others, have been used to explore, exploit and restructure its innate properties. Different varieties of wood are used in the Nsukka Art Department. These include oil bean, cam, mahogany, iroko, ebony and oak. Others are mansonina, *opepe* (yellow wood), *oke ofo* (brown wood) and *okpo ocha* (light cream wood). The natural colourations of these woods are easily manipulated to create painterly effects.

The homogeneous nature of wood sculptures created by artists associated with the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department, in terms of style, technique and formalism, has been noted earlier. The ethno-aesthetic grounding of some of these works indicates a conscious sharing from a common pool of indigenous creative resources. The influence of El Anatsui's radical and innovative processes of sculpture making is also a major factor. Though this may create room for mimicry or ventriloquized creative identities, it does not in any way negate the production of works which bear stamps of originality and ingenuity.

Of the various techniques used in sculpture making in the Nsukka Art Department, pyrography technique is extensively employed. This "refers to the technique of decorating wood or other materials with controlled heat from fire or any other heat-emitting tool" (Onuora, 2012, p. 1). Introduced by El Anatsui in the 1980s, this technique prominently features in sculptural works with two-dimensional and three-dimensional planar orientations. Traditional wood carving methods are equally used. The use of binding wire to stitch pieces of wood together to create interesting compositions is also practiced.

Stylistically, works produced in wood in the Art Department show various hybrids which usually spring out from a parent style. El Anatsui's creative explorations in wood are major stylistic founts. To a considerable degree, peculiar stylistic preferences seen in wood panel configurations, sculpture-in-the-round, mixed media explorations, and installations, attributable to the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art School, show traces of El Anatsui's influence. These are observable in compositional structuring and technical delivery. The degree of appropriating indigenous cultural resources as design elements also account for various stylistic traits.

Formalistically, abstraction and stylization are preferred creative modes which define the majority of sculptures emanating from the Nsukka Art Department. They are also predominantly organic in nature as a result of the use of curvilinear forms.



lines, geometric shapes, as well as negative and positive space manipulation. Texturing of surfaces and the use of motifs and symbols derived from indigenous design systems such as *uli*, *nsibidi*, as well as other culture-based resources, also direct the pictorial algorithm of these wood sculptures. These culture-based resources are deployed, either as thematic or decorative elements. Generally, the themes addressed in these works are humanistic and inquire into existential issues unless in cases, where the sculptures serve utilitarian purposes only.

To facilitate a better understanding of style, technique and formalism in the wood sculpture tradition of the Nsukka art department, it will be expedient to review the three major manifestations of wood sculptures in the Nsukka Art Department. These are: relief works, sculpture-in-the-round and utilitarian sculptures. Selected works produced between 1980 and 2013, have been used to highlight this.

### Relief works:

*Freedom* (Plate 2), illustrates the stylistic and formalistic nature of relief works produced during the 1970s. Influences of traditional wood carving methods are perceivable. In the 1980s, a radical wood panel configuration was introduced and popularized by El Anatsui. Anatsui, whose wood panel works also, drew from traditional sources as observed by Peri-Willis (1995):

A number of factors contributed to his decision to use vertical, hanging planks. Firstly, he felt that the format allowed him to work with the chainsaw in ways that he wanted to explore further. Secondly, such an arrangement of two-dimensional wooden planks was not unfamiliar to him. Wood carvers from the Awka area of southeastern Nigeria, for example, made doors, flanked by a series of side panels. These carvers, renowned for their expertise in the chip-carving technique, carved diagonal parallel lines, both straight and curved, as well as motifs, which were part of the *uli* painter's repertoire onto the doors and surrounding panels. (pp. 84-85)

El Anatsui's wood panels are linked conceptually and formalistically. Material and ideas are fused together to make a harmonious whole. Structurally, they are "separable, alternated formal verticalities and horizontalities which are organized in impermanent order to express personal and societal feelings" (Oloidi, 1987, p. 6).

Pyrography technique is used extensively in wood panel production. According to Onuora (2012), the technique follows a sequential process: To achieve his results, the artist first laid vertical strips of wood together on the floor and transferred his design on them using painting brush and ink before carving in linear incisions with the tip of power driven chainsaw shaft, or drilling holes into the panels with electric drilling machine. The marks on the wood, rough and hairy, were then

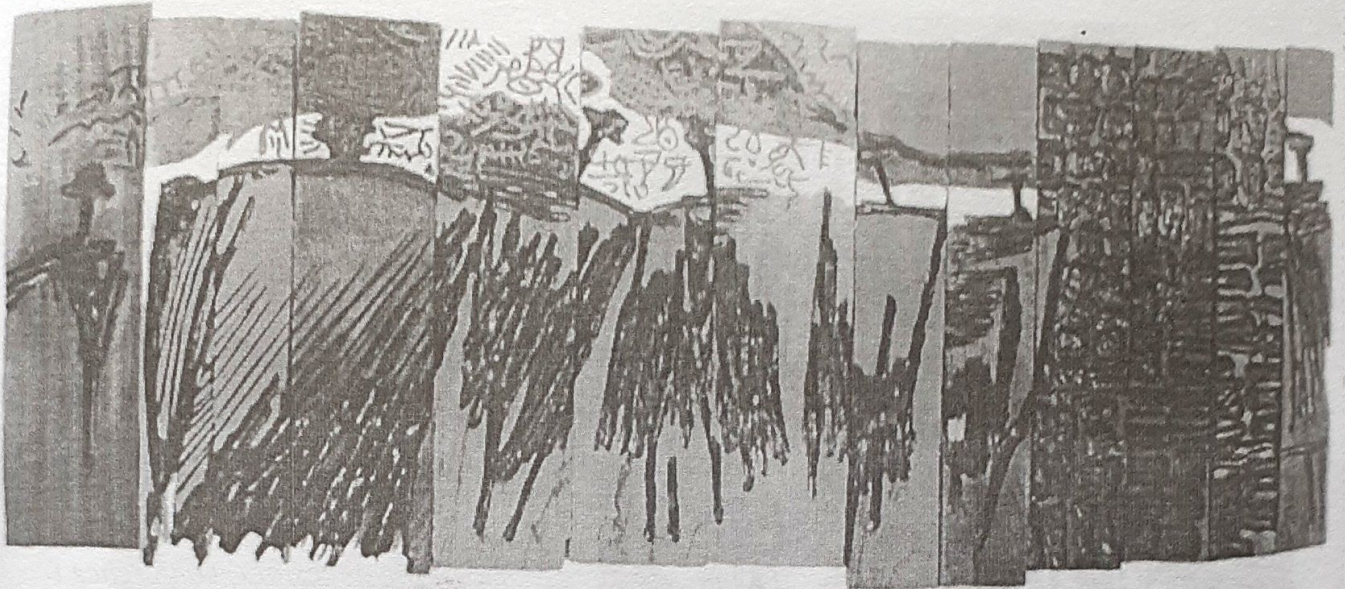


subjected to intense scorching of fire from a blow lamp and eventually cleaned with an angle grinder driven sand paper. (p. 53)

He also explains that when completed, the carved lines appear dark and contrasts strongly with the original colour of the wood. These panels are either re-arranged back to their original positions or placed differently to create new compositions (Ibid.). Employing this basic technique, various artists, produced numerous wood panels which showed individual responses to the wood panel culture of the Nsukka Art Department. Plates 3-5 are examples.

Though the structural framework of these wood panels remained basically the same, other technical and formal possibilities were equally explored. The various stylistic hybrids which emerged over time embody the spirit of experimentation and search for new artistic experiences. El Anatsui is a strong influence in this regard. He produced wood panel configurations using reshaped house posts. These house posts which supported homesteads for generations became for Anatsui, appropriate metaphors for 'ancestor figures'. Taken from derelict houses, he exploited their innate physical qualities by turning them into figures with the forked end acting as legs. Horizontal and vertical bands are cut into the torso region and painted with yellow, red, blue and white stripes. Facial features are represented in a highly schematized way. Individual posts are then hung side by side on the wall (Peri-willis, 1995, p. 85). *At the ancestors' conference II* (Plate 6), is an example. Eva Obodo's *Conversion of St Eva Obodo*, (Plate 7), also exemplifies another stylistic variant of wood panels produced by artists associated with the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department. Vertical plank formations, which in most cases, were usually incised on using power tools, give way to composite configurations of assorted woods of different sizes and shapes in panel-like formations, held together with binding wire. Each panel is densely packed with these structures. The interplay of the horizontal and vertical arrangement of the various pieces of woods creates a dynamic composition. Square, rectangular, and sometimes, circular shaped pieces of wood of varying sizes are creatively arranged to further agitate the pictorial surface. Within this busy assemblage, a peaceful and serene atmosphere is provided by the introduction of broad flat planes.

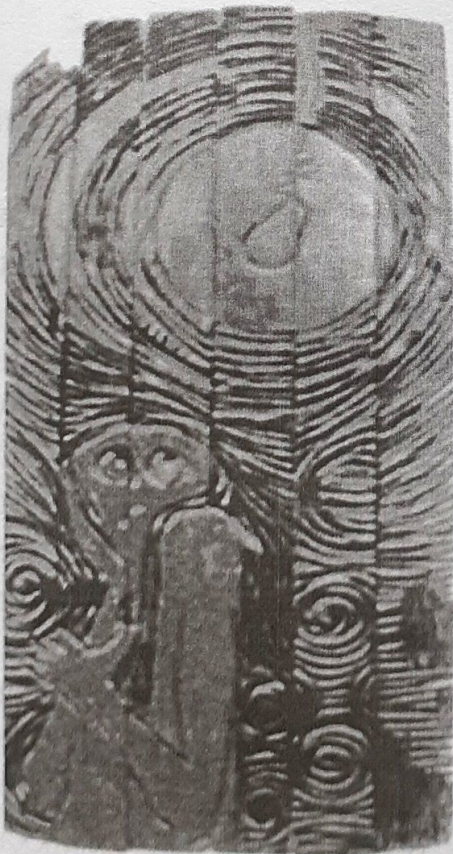




**Plate 3: El Anatsui**

*Untitled, 1989, wood relief, afara, oke ofo and other woods, acrylic.  
55.9 x 146.7 x 2.5 cm. Collection of Nkeiru Nzegwu*

*Source: Ottenberg, S. (1997). *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*.*



**Plate 4: Chijioke Onuorah**

*Hangman also die  
1993, Scorched wood panel, 102 x 57 cm  
© Chijioke Onuorah*



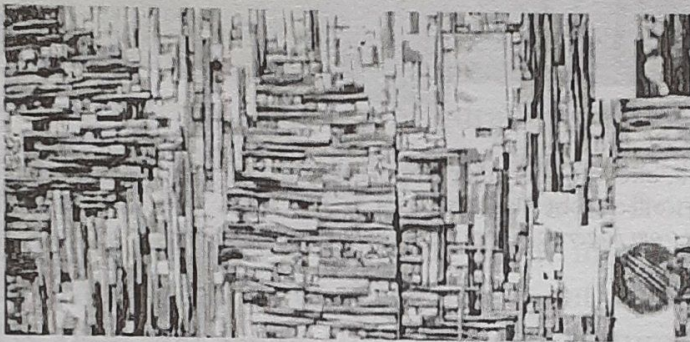
**Plate 5: Okay Ikenegbu**

*They came with a big cross  
1987, wood panel, unknown dimension  
© Okay Ikenegbu*





**Plate 7: Eva Obodo**  
*Conversion of St Eva Obodo*  
2003, assorted wood and fabric  
© Eva Obodo



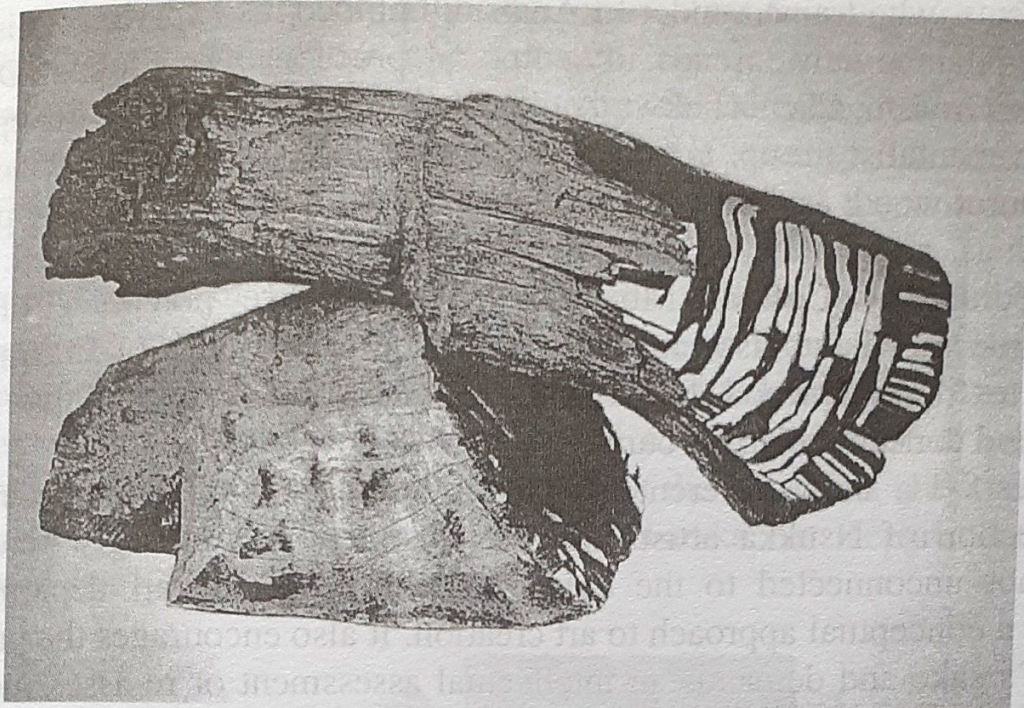
**Plate 6: El Anatsui**  
*At the ancestors' conference I*  
1995, okpeye wood, 100x220x100 cm  
(variable installation)  
© El Anatsui

### **Sculpture-in-the-round**

Wood sculptures in the round, manifest in various forms. They appear as solitary free standing pieces of sculpted wood, mixed media explorations, or installations. They range from highly organic structures to minimalist structures. Design elements frequently used include, linear, curvilinear and circular structures. Often times, they feature decorative elements comprising motifs and symbols derived from indigenous sources. Sensitivity to structural space is also considered and involves manipulation of positive and negative spaces which provide rhythm, elegance, balance and harmony. Sculptural density is also emphasized. Smooth and textured surface finishes are also created depending on creative intent. Traditional tools, as well as power driven tools are used. Different joining techniques are also employed to reinforce structural strength. Themes addressed are not restrictive, but embrace various aspects of life's experiences.

El Anatsui's influence is also palpably felt in this area especially, in the production of works with postmodernist tendencies. His ability to take the mundane and transform them into compelling works of art, describes a creative attitude which has become deeply entrenched in the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department. His experiments in the late 1980s with disused mortars and house post yielded interesting outcomes. His work, *Bright Underwear of a fallen god* (Plate 8), typifies this creative style. Conceptually, the work fuses literal formalism with metaphorical content.

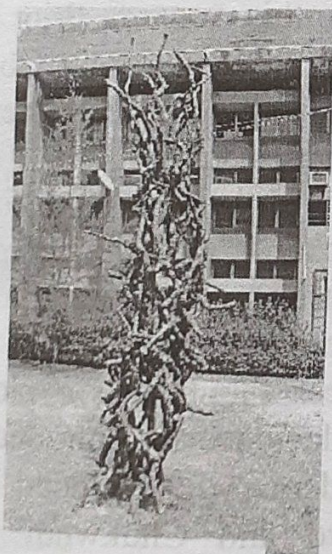




**Plate 8: El Anatsui**

*Bright underwear of a fallen god*, 1989, wood, unknown Dimension,  
© New York Studio Museum, Harlem.

Source: Ottenberg, S. (1997). *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*.



**Plate 9: Erasmus Onyishi**  
2013, wood and fabric,  
unknown dimension.  
© George Odoh



**Plate 10: Ikechukwu Okenyi**  
*Hopes and impediments*  
2004, wood.  
© Ikechukwu Okenyi



**Plate 11: Eva Obodo**  
*Ike dimkpa*, 1998, wood,  
unknown dimension.  
© Eva Obodo.



Students, who trained under El Anatsui, imbibed his experimentalist spirit and have pioneered innovative trends in sculptural processes. Ikechukwu Okenyi, Eva Obodo, Uche Onyishi, Ekenechukwu Anikpe and Erasmus Onyishi, are representative of this experimentalist group. For instance, Eva Obodo has explored charcoal, a by-product of burnt wood, as a medium and metaphor with immense artistic possibilities. Wood shavings, another by-product of wood, have also been explored as a viable creative medium by Cosmas Mbawuiké. The creative potentials of textile in sculptural processes have also engaged the artistic sensibilities of Erasmus Onyishi. Combining textile with wood, he has created interesting sculptures that are visually expressive and conceptually profound.

Plates 9-11, show different formalistic approaches to sculpture-in-the-round. The predilection of Nsukka artists towards abstraction is strongly perceived. The reason is not unconnected to the creative ideology of the art department which emphasizes a conceptual approach to art creation. It also encourages the production of art, for life's sake and demands an intellectual assessment or re-assessment of ideas and experiences as a more effective and qualitative approach to art creation.

### **Utilitarian Sculpture**

This form of sculptural production became an integral part of the Art Department's curriculum when it was introduced as a course in 1992. Ernest Okoli, a lecturer in the sculpture section played a vital role in this regard. Prior to its introduction, utilitarian sculpture was already popularized in Nsukka, by Gbubemi Amanoritsewor, a 1979 painting graduate of the Nsukka Art Department. El Anatsui's wood panels which he encountered in the late 1980s provided the stimulus to explore its technical possibilities in the production of utility objects. He opened Gamas Studio where he produced, among other items, chairs, tables, doors, wood pillars and flower stands. Amanoritsewor's artistic and entrepreneurial ability in this regard, struck a chord in Ernest Okoli. According to Onuora (2012):

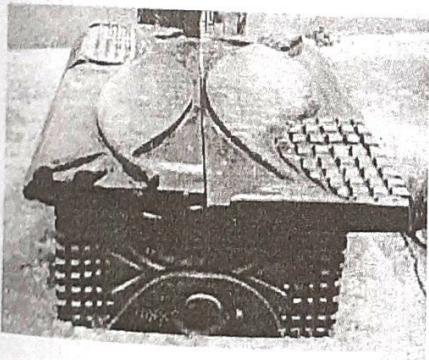
Ernest Okoli, having identified with interest, Gbubemi's exploit and his interest in entrepreneurial ideas, decided to introduce the production of utility sculptures to his students who included among others, Inameti Eyom, Izundu Nwankwo and Chukwudi Ugwu. Precisely, in the first semester of the 1992/93 academic session, he took these students on an educational tour of Gamas studio for them to imbibe his unique approach to wood sculpture. This became the beginning of utility sculpture as a major aspect of departmental sculpture programme. (p. 53)

Utility sculptures in the Nsukka Art Department cuts across two-dimensional and three-dimensional formats. Functionality is balanced by aesthetic consideration. These works are predominantly organic. Linear, curvilinear and circular lines are

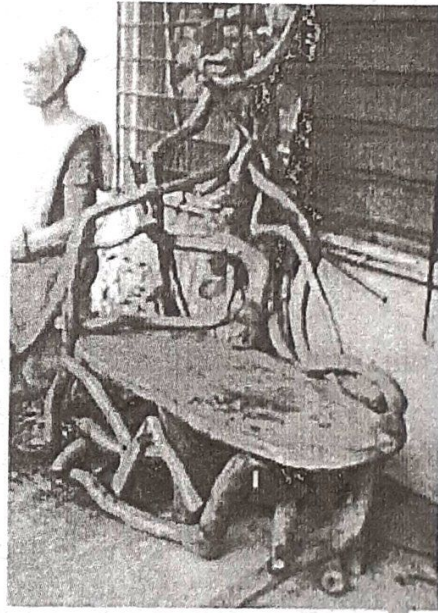


extensively used to decorate and delineate forms. The frequent use of motifs and symbols derived from indigenous culture-based resources, as decorative elements, imbue the works with an ethno-aesthetic flavour. The introduction of colour creates interesting contrasts which enhances the aesthetic quality of these utilitarian sculptures. Various stylistic traits exist and show individual responses to form and space.

The production of these objects, involves various techniques. Apart from traditional carving methods, pyrographic technique is extensively used. Different types of joining methods are employed to ensure structural strength. Also, the natural growth patterns of the wood are also exploited to achieve desired and accidental effects. Planks, hollow tree trunks and dry trunks of the ficus tree, are commonly used in the production of utilitarian sculptures in the Nsukka Art Department. Examples are shown in plates 12- 14.



**Plate 12:** Low table by Izundu Nwankwo, 1993, wood.  
© Chijioke Onuora



**Plate 13:** Seat produced from dry trunks of ficus tree by Sunday Odoh  
© George Odoh



**Plate 14:** Chair carved from hollow wood by Uche Onyishi  
© Uche Onyishi

### Conclusion

Wood offers immense creative possibilities. As a readily available local resource, it features prominently in the sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department. The intellectual, exploratory and experimental approach to art creation, which characterizes the creative culture of the Nsukka Art Department, has engendered new ways of appropriating wood as an expressive medium in art creation. The use of Indigenous design elements such as *uli*, *nsibidi*, foregrounds its ethno-aesthetic appeal. El Anatsui's influence on the sculpture tradition of the Art Department has also made for unique stylistic variants which have impacted significantly on its formalistic and aesthetic base. Experimentations with wood are



still on-going. Presented, either in relief or as sculpture-in-the-round, these works reveal individual responses to design challenges which involve domestication of media and mastery of technique. Understanding the innate properties of wood creates room for flexibility and maneuverability. Traditional tools, foreign and improvised ones, are employed in the production of wood sculptures. These tools create rooms for diverse creative methods and techniques. The art of Pyrography constitutes one of such techniques and accounts for a significant percentage of works produced in wood in the Nsukka Art Department.

The sculpture tradition of the Nsukka Art Department, readily embraces emergent global art trends and these have been affirmed in numerous conceptual wood sculptures with post modernist bent. The intellectual and experimental frameworks embedded in the creative philosophy of the Nsukka Art Department will continue to provoke radical thinking, and in the process, instigate more innovative ways of using wood as a medium for serious artistic enterprise. As more and more students graduate from the department and chart new creative frontiers, influences and sources of inspiration will continue to be established.

## REFERENCES

- Gardner, H. (1980). *Art through the Ages*, 7th edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Oloidi, O. (1985). "Introduction". *Echo: UNN Silver Jubilee Exhibition (Nsukka Students' Art 1970-1984)*. Ana Gallery, Department of Fine and Applied Arts U.N.N. 13-23 February, 1985. Nsukka: Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria.
- . (1987). "Instrumental messages, creative correspondencies." *Pieces of Wood*, exhibition catalogue. Enugu: SNAAP Press.
- . (2002). "Ilé Ola Ùlì: Nsukka art as fount and factor in modern Nigerian art." Ottenberg, S. (ed.). *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Arts* (239-252). Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Onuora, C. (2012). *Two Decades of Pyrography by Nsukka Artists, 1986-2006*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Ottenberg, S. (ed.). (2002). *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Arts*. Seattle: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in association with University of Washington Press.
- Peri-Willis, E. (1995). "Chambers of memory." *El Anatsui: A Sculpted History of Africa*, exhibition catalogue. London: Saffron Books.
- Undergraduate Academic Programme* (2011). Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.